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# Liminal blankness : mixing race and space in monochrome's psychic surface

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**LIMINAL BLANKNESS:  
MIXING RACE & SPACE IN  
MONOCHROME'S PSYCHIC SURFACE.**

By

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A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
In partial fulfilment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Research Department  
Falmouth College of Arts

**2002**



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## ABSTRACT:

### LIMINAL BLANKNESS: MIXING RACE & SPACE IN MONOCHROME'S PSYCHIC SURFACE.

ANGELINE DAWN MORRISON.

Blank space in western Art History and visual culture is something that has tended to be either explained away, or ignored. Pictures that do not depict challenge the visual basis of the ego and its others, confronting what I call the 'Phallic reader' (who sees according to the logic and rules of the Phallogocentric system he inhabits) and potentially disturbing his sense of the visible. The Phallic reader, the visible and the seeing ego's sense of how to see, meet in what I call the 'psychic surface'. Deploying this notion of a 'psychic surface' allows for readings which move on from the potentially confining logic of the Phallus. Paradoxically, the psychic structure of monochrome's liminal blankness is homologous to the indeterminate Mixed Race subject, whose body transgresses not only the foundational historical binarism of 'Black/White', but also Lacanian psychoanalysis. This thesis aims to concentrate on exploring blank spaces, with particular reference to the monochrome within western Art History. Building on the considerable work since at least the 1960s that critiques the binary logocentrism of Eurocentric, Hegelian-originated Art History, this thesis aims to explore the specific ways monochrome evades, undermines and tricks commonly accepted 'groundrules' of Art History. The Phallic reader is severely restricted in understanding that which falls outside of the signifying logic of a particular system of Art History that follows a binary, teleological and Phallogocentric course. Both monochrome and the Mixed Race subject fall outside of this logic, as both contain the structure of the trick. In each case, the trick is activated in the tension between the *psychic* and the *optical* surfaces. I suggest that monochrome's psychic space is pre-Phallic, a space of eternal deferral of meaning, a space that playfully makes a nonsense of binary structures. Psychoanalysis is largely used here as an analytic tool, but also appears as an object of critique. Art History provides an anchor for the optical surfaces under discussion. Theories of 'radical superficiality' both contradict and complement these ways of theorising the psychic surface. The trick/ster is a significant/*signifiant* means of deploying interdisciplinary methodologies to negotiate this difficult terrain between Black, White and monochrome. An interdisciplinary approach also enacts the psychic structure of indeterminacy of my objects of study. I hope that by proposing a potential transgressive power for those indeterminate things that continue to confound the binary systems that aim to contextualise and confine them, I will contribute to the areas of Visual Culture and 'Race' Theory.

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At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award. This study was financed with the aid of a studentship from Falmouth College of Arts. A programme of advanced study was undertaken, with regular group tutorials and individual tutorials with members of the Supervisory Team. Relevant seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was presented; external individuals and institutions were visited for consultation purposes, and papers were prepared for publication.

### **Presentations and Conferences Attended:**

- 1999:** Irish Association of Art Historians Conference, Trinity College, Dublin. Paper: *Why Have There Been No Great Black Artists?*
- 2000:** Whiteness Study Day, Tate Modern. Paper: *White-ish: Mixed Race Identity & the Problem of Belonging.*  
Black History Month, Tate Gallery. Paper: *History of Afro Hair in the West.*  
Image Into Identity, University of Hull. Paper: *Black Skin, Big Hair: The Cultural Appropriation of the Natural 'Afro' Hair Style.*  
Complexity Conference, Dartington College of Arts. Paper: *Ooops – What if Art Isn't Really a Language? Monochrome and the Linguistic Space of Emptiness.*  
Co-organiser of CADE (Computers in Art & Design Education) 2000 Postgraduate Conference, held at Falmouth College of Arts.  
Guest Editor of a special PostGraduate Research issue of *Digital Creativity*, the journal of CADE.  
'The Black Gaze: International Perspectives in African-World Literature and Visual Culture', University of London, Dept. of English Studies.
- 2001:** Association of Art Historians Conference, Reading University. Paper: *The Psychic Space of Monochrome.*  
CADE 2001 (Computers in Art & Design Education), University of Glasgow.  
Article published in *make* magazine, on EV+A (Exhibition of Visual Arts), Limerick, Ireland.  
Article published in the Guardian newspaper about Black visual artists and the Turner Prize.
- 2002:** Paper presented at Hull 2000 accepted for inclusion in published version of conference proceedings.  
Research adviser for proposed television series on Black artists in Britain.

### **Presentation of Visual Art Work:**

- 2002:** *Carlton Johnson: my 'life'*. Falmouth College of Arts Gallery, Falmouth. Solo show, mixed media.

**External Contacts:** During the course of this work, I have corresponded and/or met with the following: Professor David Green, University of Brighton, David Batchelor, artist and theorist/critic, London, Willie McKeown, artist, Dublin, Yaari Pikke, artist, Finland, Jonathan Watkins, curator, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham.

Signed: .....  .....

Date...01.11.02.....



## INTRODUCTION

‘Lacan points out that there are two things that can never really be known but are always recognized: death and the father’s role in procreation. It is the place of the father, not the actual father, that is thus here significant, and it is to this acknowledgement or recognition that Lacan attaches such importance. The little boy cannot be the father, but he can be summoned for his future role in-the-name-of-the-father. The symbolic father, for whose prehistoric death the boy pays the debt due, is the law that institutes and constitutes human society, culture in the fullest sense of the term, the law of order which is to be confounded with language and which structures all human societies, which makes them, in fact, human.’ (Mitchell 1974:391).

‘In a historic passage Mallarmé describes the terror, the sense of Sterility, that the poet experiences when he sits down to his desk, confronts the sheet of paper on which his poem is supposed to be composed, and no words come to him [...] indeed, in support of this, could one imagine anything that was more expressive of, or would be held to exhibit more precisely the poet’s feelings of inner devastation than the virginal paper?’ (Wollheim in Battcock [ed] 1968:388)

The world we inhabit is stuffed full of blank spaces. Moments of blankness are everywhere, though frequently invisible – a pause in conversation for example, or the background in a picture. Whilst these ubiquitous blanknesses tend to be read as meaningless in themselves, they also tend to have meaning structured *around* them. Blank spaces thus remain invisible, contextualised as meaningless in the discourses that hide them. In the context of images that tell stories, mimic objects from real life or at least have some kind of logic of differentiation in their surface markings, blank or monochrome space stands out as resolutely, unashamedly illegible. The definition of monochrome that I use here is that it may be any colour or no colour (depending on one’s position about the status of black and white as colours, see Chapter One, note 48). If considered as a form of abstraction, monochrome is the least legible and most non-representational of all – it makes no attempt to tell a story, contains nothing that is visually recognisable from everyday life, confounds any pre-existing western notions of perspective, or figure/ground relations – in short, the least differentiated and most uniformly blank surface is the ‘most’ monochrome.

Within the context of western Art History, monochrome has become the accepted vehicle for the presentation of visual blankness. Monochrome is the picture that does not depict. As artist and theorist David Batchelor describes, the blank space of monochrome is as ubiquitous as the invisible blank spaces of everyday life, and sometimes shares with them more than we might realise;

‘Anyone can make a monochrome. Most of us probably have made one at some time or another, although we wouldn’t necessarily have recognised it. And we wouldn’t necessarily need to have made one, as most of the time we are already surrounded by ready-made monochromes of various shapes and sizes. The world is full of unintended, sometimes accidental, often temporary, and mostly unnoticed monochromes.’ (Batchelor 2000:151)

Like any blank space, monochrome confounds interpretation. Once blank space is *foregrounded* or actively presented as a separate entity in its own right, historically received notions of meaning are radically destabilised. When a spectator stands before a surface that appears to be presenting nothing, a sort of psychic panic often ensues – what if there really is nothing there? This fundamental and deep fear of nothingness – also a fear of meaninglessness – tends to result in frantic attempts to *not see* the blankness of monochrome. Many kinds of critical writing on monochrome attempt to ‘explain away’ the blank surface, or enact attempts to find the tiniest area of surface differentiation and cling to it resolutely. These attempts to fix meaning and re-order the chaos, to either ‘fill’ the blank space or to concentrate on anything *but* the surface blankness, are what I call ‘Phallic readings’. The Phallic spectator (or critic) is someone who is in thrall to the monarchy of fixed meaning, who inhabits the realm of that ultimate decider and fixer of meaning: the Lacanian Phallus. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so the Phallic reader abhors non-meaning, rejecting it outright and sometimes using elaborate strategies to refute its possibility. Phallic readings are characterised by an insistent avoidance of the fact that the optical surface of monochrome presents the spectator with something illegible. Monochrome confounds attempts to fix meaning in two main ways; first of all within its optical space (that is, the surface that we



both see and refuse to see), then more subtly in its psychic space (the invisible, notional space of psychic activity, which we don't see). This results in the Phallic spectator's increased determination to pin down something that is fundamentally slippery, or tricky. Monochrome's resistance to Phallic interpretation ensures that, '[t]he monochrome is the most enigmatic icon of modern art' (McEvelley 1988 [trans. Anson, 2001]:1)<sup>1</sup>; but it also, I think, begs the question of whether monochrome is involved in some kind of psychic trickery – or at least whether, in a Gothic spirit not usually associated with monochrome, it might conceal an unfathomable secret?

Mocking, confounding, recurring – the secret is something whose presence is perpetually as alluring as it is elusive. The reader of Wilkie Collins' story of the mysterious *Woman in White* has an experience of the 'Secret' that is comparable to the experience of the spectator in front of the blank monochrome. Collins' 'Secret' is, like the monochrome, highly visible from the outset, structuring the labyrinthine plot developments around itself – yet throughout it also remains maddeningly just out of reach.

'Was it possible that appearances in this case had pointed one way while the truth lay all the while unsuspected in another direction? [...] Here – if I could find it – here was the approach to The Secret, hidden deep under the surface of the apparently unpromising story which I had just heard.' (Collins 1994 [1868]:426).

The fugitive quality of 'The Secret' in Collins' novel – the destabilising effects of the mad desire-to-know that it creates, its simultaneous qualities of high visibility and total *illegibility*, its eternal trickery of the reader by eluding interpretation – make<sup>2</sup> it an apposite analogy for the blank space of the monochrome surface within the story of western Art History. The subject of *Mixed Race*, understood for the purposes of this argument as both Black and White<sup>2</sup>, who lives in a society structured by the foundational binary 'Black/White', can also be said to contain a 'Secret' in much the same way as she can be said to have been 'blanked' – (a)voided, rendered invisible and inaudible. In this case extreme measures to conceal this 'racial' secret are sometimes taken, especially in cases where the Mixed Race subject wishes to 'pass', usually for White<sup>3</sup>. Sara Jane

Johnson, the cold and strange protagonist of Douglas Sirk's melodramatic film *Imitation of Life*, (1959: Dir. Sirk) is an example of this. Rejecting her mother and erasing her background, she will go to any lengths to be considered White. The radical and ongoing *erasure* which she performs on herself is intended to cancel out the residual 'Black blood' which does not really show in her features; eventually allowing her to present herself as a *tabula rasa*, a blank, White woman. Instead, all she achieves is emotional weariness (the attempted erasure is endless, since the coveted 'real Whiteness' can never be anything more than a phantasy), loneliness and pain. In Sara Jane Johnson, the secret, the trickster and the trick find a meeting-ground. Whilst she delights in successfully 'tricking' those she meets about her 'racial' identity, the trick itself, (homologous to the secret) asserts itself and has the last laugh.

James Weldon Johnson's 1912 classic, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, shows a similar meeting-place of the secret, the trickster and the trick. The hero is a light-complexioned man who did not discover that he was 'a Nigger' until he was a schoolchild. In disclosing his 'secret' he writes,

'I know that I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society.' (Johnson 1912:1)

The laughter here has no joy; it is the laughter of mockery, or the ironic laughter of resigned acceptance. In both the above examples, the Mixed Race subject presents problems for the Phallic system of interpretation which would assign them a Black identity on the basis of a single drop of 'tainted' ancestral blood. Both characters play a trick on the system that wishes to classify them, the trick depending entirely on that system's commitment to reading the distinction Black/White as a binary opposition. The characters always *elude* classification – when identities are assigned them, they always exceed them at the same time as being unable to fill them. Successful 'passing' depends on tricking the classificatory system, which always operates from



outside of the subject. The success of this trick, in turn, depends upon how ‘convincing’ the physical appearance, phenotype or *optical surface*, looks to the outside system. In terms of a psychic structure, Mixed Race people are multiple with shifting identities, and such a structure cannot be accommodated by a system whose judgements are binary. In cases where a subject’s optical surface visibly confounds the structure’s foundational binary, the system is doubly confounded, its ego disturbed by the evidence of split subjectivity that is staring it in the face.

There are many different kinds of blank space within Art History, and many different ways of framing, conceptualising and ‘making’ blankness; just as there are many more ways of being Mixed Race than the ‘Black/ White’ model. The varieties of mixture are as endless as the varieties of life-experience that the Mixed subject may relate. This fact, combined with the lack of fixed geographical or cultural communities of Mixed Race people (with the exception of such communities as the ‘Cape Coloureds’ of South Africa, or the established Mixed Race community of Liverpool 1), makes it almost impossible for anyone to speak on behalf of all Mixed Race subjects. It is for this reason that the story of each Mixed Race *individual* becomes vitally important, as Mixed Race *identities* continually defy categorisation as a simple, single thing.

American artist Isa Dean, who is of Mixed Race, writes in her artists’ statement,

‘Who is the “tragic mulatto”? She is both “not Black enough” and “not White enough”. Her position lies in the middle, both undefined and ambiguous. As the product of Black/White miscegenation (rarely discussed and once outlawed), her story continues publicly unnoticed and seldom told. This is my story.’ (Dean 2001: [www.digitalid.8m.net/isa.html](http://www.digitalid.8m.net/isa.html))

Such stories are seldom told because they cause discomfort to a system that demands that someone be either Black, or White. I want to consider that the psychic indeterminacy of the monochrome surface causes a parallel discomfort to its own system, continually presenting that system with the possibility that the mastery and classificatory powers that the system wishes to believe it has, are nothing but an illusion. Just as the Mixed Race subject is not reducible to Black or White, so monochrome is not reducible to either side of the representational binary of

‘full/empty’, ‘meaning/non-meaning’ or ‘information/no information’. Just as the monochrome is simultaneously fetishised and illegible, so the subject of Mixed Race is also endlessly fetishised (as a sexual prize or object of obsessive classificatory legislation, for example) and illegible (she will always be something other than what a category can provide for her). In each case, the endless play of possibilities within mean that fixed meaning is always slipped out of.

Unique within Art History in its resistance to interpretation, monochrome cannot easily be seen as a ‘genre’ of painting in the usual sense. Although critics such as French Art Historian Denys Riout (1996) have made good cases for likening monochrome to a genre, I take the position that monochrome is nothing like a genre<sup>4</sup>. Showing none of the conceptual or chronological cohesion necessary to a genre, each time monochrome appears, it seems that it is called upon to represent a different cause. As Briony Fer points out, the *Black Square* of Malevich (often, as we shall see in Chapter One, cited as the proto-monochrome of western Art History), has been called upon as an eloquent recruit for various causes, such as, ‘the original “conceptual” idea, as an anti-art gesture akin to Duchamp’s, or as the exemplification of the purely aesthetic principle of form as such; [...] it could be pure Idea or material object, exalted or grounded in matter.’ (Fer 1997:10). We might add to these the other tried and tested readings of monochrome that present themselves with wearying regularity. These count among their number the ‘Spiritual’ discourses, traceable at least as far back as the Nineteenth Century movement of Theosophy, via Kandinsky’s musings on colour and composition. Blankness here has meaning, but the meaning is something utterly and inevitably cabalistic. This of course can be a good thing for Phallic writers with a penchant for conjecture; one can never really be proved wrong by that which is eternally esoteric. Writing about Malevich’s *White on White*, Carter Ratcliff provides an example of such conjecture masquerading as certainty;

‘[...] the Malevich who struggles here against selfhood has become an exemplar of Modernist individuality. His monochrome is the emblem of failed saintliness.’ (Ratcliff 1981:112)



Other common critical interpretations of monochrome include the categorisation of anything blank as being 'about' Minimalism (eg Fried 1998a:149). Equally popular but far more related to specific art historical doctrines are the various 'endist' discourses that monochrome invites (eg Rodchenko, 1921). The problem with the 'endist' discourses is, quite simply, that they don't work. 'Endist' writings have kept on coming back with a frequency and regularity as marked as those with which the monochrome itself continues its seductive dance of disappearance and re-appearance. Painting, like a rebellious revenant, carries on regardless of declarations of its death – which goes to prove that whatever it was that 'ended', it certainly wasn't painting.

Other tried, tested and (apparently) re-usable ways of approaching the monochrome surface include discourses about nothingness and emptiness, and that the monochrome represents a rejection of academic traditions such as perspective and narrative in painting. Less common is the discourse discussed closely in Chapter One, that of mocking laughter. These written discourses of monochrome share a Phallic avoidance of monochrome's complex surface illegibility, of the fact that what takes place in the surface *resists reading*. Perhaps this means that it is precisely this *resistance* to reading that we should *try to read*. This thesis aims to read these resistances in light of the possibility that Phallic readings of monochrome are structured by fear. Firstly there is the fear of meaninglessness – a fear that the Phallic ego could not stand to stare in the face, since it would present that ego with the reality of its powerlessness to decipher. Also, however, there is the fear that the Phallic system's phantasy of its own unified nature will be shown up by blank or illegible aesthetic space *as* a phantasy – which would in turn cause the system to fear the collapse of its dominance. I will argue in Chapter Three for a 'racing' of the Lacanian Phallus that should parallel way the way in which the Phallus has been gendered. I suggest that the characteristics, functions and attributes of the Phallus align it with Whiteness as well as patriarchy, so that the Phallic system of western Art History is exposed as a normatively White system. The capacity of the Phallus of western Art History to decide meaning is

destabilised, continually, by that which refuses to be decided. The Mixed Race subject in racialised society, who also cannot be 'decided' despite frantic attempts by the system, also poses a threat to the system's phantasies of mastery and intactness.

I have chosen to confine this study to monochromes that appear and re-appear in western visual culture, in the knowledge that non-western monochromes or blank spaces carry quite different meanings from their western counterparts. 'Art History' as a discipline has a specifically European provenance, traceable first to Italy with Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and his *Lives of the Artists* often understood as the first art historical text proper<sup>5</sup>. This text set the tone for the kind of linear, teleological historiography of style following on from style that characterises the kind of traditional western academic Art History that I refer to in this thesis as 'received'. The basis of Art Historical education is in western philosophical thought, specifically in the writings of Eighteenth century German historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), whose beliefs underscore much of what today is considered conventional Art History. Winckelmann's main area of study was the classical art of ancient Greece. Like his contemporaries, he believed in the godlike genius of the Greek mind. Winckelmann however made no mention of the African sources of ancient Greek and Roman art – that is, the art of the ancient Egyptian civilisation – and so his writings went a long way towards what has been, until very recently, Art History's passionate policing of its western, White parameters<sup>6</sup>. Traditional western Art History has been identified as a Phallogocentric discourse for some decades now – Linda Nochlin's essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (1971) is frequently used as a discussion aid for students on the patriarchal nature of the recording of art and its histories. Whilst the gender balance within western Art History is at least under discussion, the position of the Black artist within western Art History has remained – until comparatively recently with artists such as Chris Ofili, Isaac Julien or Kara Walker – one of almost total invisibility. I understand western Art History here as a kinship system, where rules of lineage and heritage apply. In this White family with its ancient



pedigree, monochrome is the 'black sheep' or more specifically, the embarrassing Mixed Race relative. Monochrome is a wild card whose unpredictability disturbs the system it occupies. Both the monochrome work and the Mixed Race subject exist in homologous conditions of liminality or in-between-ness (although the latter often wears this in-between-ness literally on her body, whilst the former disguises it with an optical surface that is apparently unified). In both cases, it is the relation of subject (or object) to the system that attempts to force it to conform that is important; and it is in this relationship, which happens in the psychic as well as the social space, that transgressive potential can be found. The Mixed Race subject confounds the fixed notion of 'either Black or White' by existing in liminality; the monochrome confounds fixed meaning by presenting unity optically, but existing in liminality psychically. In both cases, their respective binary systems cannot hold them and they continually cause friction at the edges of those systems. In order to explore this, I will consider monochromes whose blankness is that of erasure or subtraction (such as Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*), those that are about accumulation (such as the monochromes of Alan Charlton), and I will also consider monochromy as a principle at work in organised surface composition (Chapter Two). Each use of blankness activates different experiences of the blank, and I wish to show that what appears to be a lack of signification is in fact a complex and problematic signifiatory mode.

Within a tradition like 'Phallic' Art History that relies on the fixing of meaning, spaces which repeatedly *resist* interpretation act like mirrors to the system, reflecting the system back at itself and forcing it to question its authority. The binarist tradition that Art History resides in (a tradition identified by Derrida as the *Logocentrism* that dominates western metaphysics) is interrupted by the Derridean *undecidable*, which I suggest works in a similar way to both the monochrome and the Mixed Race subject. That which the ruling White Phallus does not recognise or cannot categorise, it will judge illegible, nonsensical, and sometimes of little or no value. Neither one thing nor another, neither everything nor nothing, the undecidable acts as a

perpetual thorn in the side of the Logocentric system, which will sometimes go to great lengths to disavow the presence of the undecidable.

One way of disavowing a problem is to absorb and claim it. Despite its initial shock-value, monochrome has for some time now been accepted as a signifier of 'high art'. This is partly to do with its profound illegibility, and the popular social equation of 'high art' with 'inscrutability' which has been attributed to White masculine bourgeois attempts to gain control over meaning. Yasmina Reza's 1994 play, *Art*, relies on this assumption as the carrier of the play's action (see Chapter One), and monochrome's popularity within the corporate sector also attests to this 'instant art' status<sup>7</sup>. This is all down to the radical illegibility of the surface, a quality that also means many people will simply write off monochrome as an example of the Emperor's New Clothes. Novelist Dave McKean writes,

'I think there's one of these blank canvases in every museum in the world. They must come with the building. "Here's the lease, here's the key, and here's the large matt-black painting with the free, incomprehensible title." ' (McKean 1998:370)

Monochrome introduces chaos into the system it inhabits primarily by foregrounding the blankness that is usually understood to signify background, thus disturbing the received optical logic – the 'solid ground' – of painting. Monochrome also introduces chaos into the stories the west tells itself about the origins of pictographic art. These largely seem to have representation, mirroring, resemblance, mimesis at their heart (though E.H Gombrich reminds us that these resemblances are always mediated, 'Nature reflected in art always reflects the artist's own mind' (Gombrich 1984[1950]:338), and monochrome puts mimesis in crisis<sup>8</sup>. As an organising principle, the value of mimesis is seemingly irrefutable; western epistemological systems have traditionally relied on notions of resemblance, mimesis and similarity as ways of weighing and measuring the world. Images have a powerful part to play in this organising of the world;



“The image is not simply a particular kind of sign but a fundamental principle of what Michel Foucault would call “the Order of Things”. The image is the general notion, ramified in various specific similitudes (convenientia, aemulatio, analogy, sympathy) that holds the world together with “figures of knowledge” ’. (Mitchell 1987:11)

The four main modes of analysing the world as pointed out by Michel Foucault in the story of western knowledge – convenience, emulation, analogy and sympathy – are all fundamentally mimetic<sup>9</sup>. One of the major ways in which the monochrome acts as a perpetually re-appearing embodiment of chaos is in the fact that it seems to resemble, mimic or represent *nothing*. Mimesis holds the meaningful world together, and monochrome is the nemesis of mimesis.

Monochrome has ‘turned up’ in western art history on numerous occasions, with an inevitability that is sometimes measured, sometimes surprising. From the imaginary monochromes of Nineteenth Century France<sup>10</sup>, through Malevich’s *Black Square* of 1915, Yves Klein’s iconic blue monochromes, Ad Reinhardt’s white monochromes and the minimalist traditions, and finally to the contemporary British monochromists like Zebedee Jones or David Batchelor – monochrome has persisted as a method of framing or presenting blankness. Maurice Besset, in <sup>the</sup> 1988 foreword to the Lyon monochrome retrospective, *Couleur Seule: L’Expérience du Monochrome* begins to suggest the transgressive nature of monochrome. Composition here is, ‘the supreme gift of the western traditions of visual art’, and the monochrome artist is involved in a conscious decision to ‘reject’ this gift (Besset 1988 [Trans. Anson 2001:2])<sup>11</sup>. An uncommon, and possibly highly productive way of considering these endless returns might be to suggest that perhaps monochrome also plays a trick, laughs at the expense of the Phallic system it occupies. In terms of the Freudian psychic economy, that which is condemned to endless return is un-symbolisable, un-assimilable to the ego. Monochrome as an art form has been ‘assimilated’ into the art world, but what monochrome actually *is* remains elusive. The ‘Secret’, of course, is not necessarily the thing which cannot be symbolised or assimilated, but may indeed be the fact that there is a persistent, niggling and ever-present concept that is continually trying to break the existing boundaries. The ‘Secret’

may even be the source of the mocking laughter, especially if the 'Secret' is the knowledge that what the System imagines as its own unity and mastery is nothing but an imagining<sup>12</sup>.

In aiming to exploit the blankness or illegibility of the monochrome surface, my approach is radically superficial. I want an epistemology of suspicion; I do not trust what is immediately visible on monochrome's optical surface, and suspect that monochrome is deeply involved in some kind of psychic trickery. Whether the trickery is harmless, impish fun or a more sinister kind of mockery remains to be seen. As with the Jamaican trickster figure of Anansi the Spider, or the Morris Fool of English folk traditions, it seems possible that all systems allow for a 'Wild Card'. I think, however, that differences exist between these Wild Cards. A figure such as the Morris Fool has his activities prescribed and confined to particular dates in the year, to specific social occasions and customs. Even his movements are mapped and socially agreed before he begins; the Fool's actual agency is severely limited. If he dresses up as a King to mock the power of Royalty, this mockery already has an imposed time limit, and everyone involved in the ritual knows that sooner or later the system they have just transgressed will get the better of them once again. Anansi the Spider is slightly different in that the common thread running through all his tales is his proficiency at being a *jinal*, or confidence trickster<sup>13</sup>. Anansi always manages to get the better of a range of other characters, from his superiors to his peers, even his own wife and children. In each case the spider satisfies his selfish aims, but in the majority of cases a horrible punishment befalls him. A punishment frequently associated with 'Trickster' figures from many different cultures is that of *castration*. This sets the trickster up in a perpetually adversarial relationship with the system (which, crucially, he is able to trick by virtue of his own doubleness; Jung for example describes the trickster archetype as having a divine/animal nature), but it also sets the trickster up in a perpetual relation to castration and disempowerment. Both the figure of Anansi and that of the Fool are examples of the way that tricksters can perform their functions in systems because the system, crucially, *allows it*. Since the trickster relies on the system's



permission, it is the system that ultimately has the power and the trickster, (like the 'Mulatto') is always already castrated. What the system can less easily control, however, is the *trick*, which exists independently of the body of the trickster. The figure of the trickster might be a useful way of examining what it is that the notion of the psychic surface allows us to read. A more productive view, however, might be to consider the monochrome and the Mixed Race subject as psychically homologous to the structure of the *trick*.

The undecidable condition of simultaneous illegibility and high visibility is a condition monochrome shares with the subject of Mixed Race in White western society; neither fully White nor fully Black but both at once and something else besides, a weird kind of monochrome, at once more than one colour and the absence of colour: indeterminate. Since indeterminate things refuse to be held down by single, fixed or Phallic interpretations, my methodology will be necessarily interdisciplinary. Neither Art History nor Cultural Studies, neither Visual Culture nor Psychoanalytic Studies nor Poststructuralism nor Semiotics, but a combination of all of these and some other things, this thesis aims to body forth the undecidable nature of monochrome in order to try and say something about its illegibility. I hope that a full reflexivity, or mirroring will take place – that this thesis will mirror the *psychic* surface effects of monochrome within western Art History, and the surface effects of the 'indeterminate' body of the Mixed Race subject in White western society<sup>14</sup>. If there is a methodological bias, it will be towards Psychoanalysis. This is because Psychoanalysis, in particular Freudian and Lacanian analysis, has traditionally concerned itself with the study of places where meaning *resists*. Psychoanalysis also recognises the importance of that which is either invisible, not immediately visible, or signalled and ignored. If monochrome uses psychic sleight-of-hand to perform its trickery, it is most likely that Psychoanalysis can help to expose its workings. For this reason, I will 'not simply apply psychoanalysis to a reading of cultural forms. The question is, how do you analyse the dynamics of culture differently once you recognise the centrality of the unconscious?' (Donald 1991:3). A

little like a symptom, the monochrome within western art history displays itself clearly and in direct contrast (if not opposition) to its context. Its apparent contempt for interpretation is the clearest sign of its difference and uncategorisability. I will look at the ways in which monochrome is a perpetual corrupter and confuser of received, normative notions that have previously provided structure, coherence, cohesion. I will argue that the surface illegibility of monochrome may have to do with its location in the prelinguistic space of the Lacanian Real, anterior to lack<sup>15</sup>. If monochrome exists in the Real, the Phallus cannot enter or stop the continual shifting play of signifiers, and cannot decide on any definite meaning. The apparent smooth, undifferentiated calm of monochrome's optical surface tricks the Phallic viewer into avoiding engagement with the uninterrupted shifting of signifying chains in its invisible psychic space. Similarly, the appearances of Mixed Race bodies, despite Phallic attempts to pin them down to a single fixed 'Black' identity, can conceal any variety of identities, endlessly slipping through identity-definitions and rendering them meaningless.

So as you can see, I have a story to tell. It is partly a story about a trickster, but more so the story of a successful trick. The trick's subtlety, ingenuity and success depended on the desire of its audience. Once the audience longed to be amazed and impressed – essentially, giving permission to be fooled – then the conjuror was free to pursue pretty much whatever she wanted. In this case, a demonic idea came to the conjuror. Supposing she conjured a space that appeared entirely blank and illegible, inserting this space into a discourse that demands a critical and theoretical response, thus causing thousands upon thousands of words to have been written in an attempt to understand it? Imagine, all those words, utterly wasted! But the conjuror realised that this was pure pantomime, the mere sequinned-and-feathered costume of the trick. This was not the trick itself, but concealed the sleight-of-hand in a remarkably successful way. The conjuror had enticed the desire of the audience into the heart of her trickery – a desire she needed for the successful operation of the trick – then proceeded to mock and to deride the very desire itself. The trick



was a skilful double-bluff. Of course there couldn't be nothing there, there had to be something – or at least, a special kind of nothing that is rich with meaning. Gradually, then with gathering momentum, more and more words began to be written about the conjuror's nothingness-trick, each more futile and wasteful than the last, because each missed the point of the secret of the trick. The *secret* was that the *trick* was in fact a message for the code, a mirror in which the code should examine itself. The code would not accept the challenge, and thus the tricky mirror returned...

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<sup>1</sup> 'La peinture monochrome est l'icône la plus énigmatique de l'art moderne' (McEvilley 1988:1). Please note that the original essay, published in the exhibition catalogue for the 1988 Lyon show, *Couleur Seule: L'Expérience du Monochrome*, was not available in an English translation. The catalogue itself has proved impossible to locate, with even the British Library unable to help. I am grateful to my Ph.D colleague Mary Anson for translating the original French catalogue essays, and to Véronique Fouilloux at the *Musée St. Pierre d'Art Moderne* in Lyon, for kindly sending me photocopies of these essays.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Mixed Race' is used here to describe a person who has one Black parent and one White parent; or who has one Mixed Race parent and one Black parent, or any other possible variation that can be conceived. I wish to stress that I lean towards the 'Black/White' model for the purposes of my argument in this thesis, and not because I believe that a person needs to have some White, or some Black in them in before they may be considered 'Mixed Race'. I very much wish to stress that I am mindful of the Mixed Race or Multiethnic people who express concern about what they see as the 'dominant' social stereotype of 'Mixed Race' as being 'Black/White' (see for example Mahtani, M & Moreno, A (2001) 'Same Difference: Towards A More Unified Discourse in 'Mixed Race' Theory' in Parker & Song [eds] (2001) London, Pluto Press). As regards the term 'Mixed Race', it is surrounded by much debate. The term is not readily accepted by some, and reviled by others. As far as I know, there does not yet exist any adequate terminology to describe, happily, the person whose skin colour, hair type and facial features show clearly that they are of a 'racially' mixed genetic inheritance. Many new terms are put forward, (eg Multiracial, Multiethnic, Mixed Heritage) all of which are intended to help fix the problem of definition that seems inescapable for the Mixed Race subject, but I wonder if it is really possible to find a term that is acceptable to everyone. For example, in the case of Black/White people, 'dual heritage' is intended to fix the problems that so many people have with the existing, often racist terminologies (eg, 'half caste'), but this term is still relatively new. Jayne Ifekwunigwe (1999) suggests the term *métis(e)* to describe a Mixed Race subject, since this term does not have automatic associations of 'Black/White' and its meaning is mutable. This term is traditionally used in Canada to describe people who are part First Nation and part White. The Hawaiian pidgin term 'Hapa' is also currently considered useful, especially since it has no negative connotations. Hawaii has a long cultural tradition of public acceptance and recognition of various Mixed Race groups and individuals. At the moment, 'Hapa' tends to be used to describe someone with Asian and White heritage.

<sup>3</sup> Although 'passing' for Black does occur (see Piper, Adrian (1992) 'Passing for White, Passing for Black' in *Transition* 58:4-32), the term 'passing' is usually only used to describe the actions of people of Mixed Race who wish to be considered White. 'Passing' is full of negative connotations of inauthenticity, of letting the side down, or of 'selling



out' for personal gain. It is interesting that there is a tendency for Mixed Race subjects who wish to identify as Black – Hollywood actress Halle Berry, for example, or British musician Ms. Dynamite – to experience an unproblematic acceptance of their wishes (though this does, of course, depend on how well the optical surface of this subject is deemed to fit). Such people are in the fortunate position of rarely, if ever, being accused of 'passing'. I suspect however that if such people were to express a wish that they be considered White, (which, theoretically, having one White parent they should be allowed to do), they would become objects of ridicule. I think that White Studies needs to consider the problem posed to it by the subject of Mixed Race who is White in as complex, problematic and potentially destabilising a way as she is Black. These issues will be discussed in more detail later on.

<sup>4</sup> Other examples of this school of thought include French artist Bernard Aubertin, allied to the 'Group Zero' art collective, who published an article in *Dynamo* in 1960 that also made a case for the monochrome as an actual school or genre within art history, similar to Cubism, and as important.

<sup>5</sup> During a dinner party in Rome in 1546, Cardinal Farnese asked Vasari to assemble 'a catalogue of artists and their works, listed in chronological order.' The result was *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, first published in Florence in 1550.

<sup>6</sup> My position about the automatic categorisation of non-western visual culture as 'art', is that it involves the application of a western historical paradigm that is not necessarily appropriate. As with the walk-on part played by African masks in the story of the development of the Modernist aesthetic, to refer unproblematically to non-western visual culture as 'art' is simply another instance of cultural colonialism. Applying the name of 'art' to non-western visual culture constitutes an insidious appropriation of culture by the western world, and an application of its own standards of excellence. One should always be vigilant about asking who is doing the categorising, and in this case, it is western Art Historians. African American artist David Hammons says, 'It all depends on who is seeing and we've been depending on someone else's sight [...] We need to look and decide.'

<sup>7</sup> Monochrome's apparent illegibility is a key factor in its corporate popularity – that which appears to be about nothing cannot be controversial.

<sup>8</sup> Plato's analogy of the cave, where the passage of dim shadows enchants the prisoner in the cave, is a good example of a story of the mimetic origins of drawing. Another 'origins of drawing' myth that is clearly concerned with the mimetic is the story of the Greek maiden Butades, who lovingly traced the outline of her banished lover's shadow on a wall. His likeness acted as a comfort to Butades, helping her to keep the image of his face alive in her heart. In some way, this kind of graven likeness may also work to the denial of absence, as the Egyptian mummy helped to keep the idea of the finality of death at bay (see Chapter Two).

<sup>9</sup> The impression is that here, Foucault's presentation of the story of western philosophy is a relentlessly teleological one, one that believes in the fundamental value of progress as a thing in itself, one that embraces the 'latest version' whatever the consequences.

<sup>10</sup> Here I am grateful to Professor David Cottington for translating the documents containing information about these 'pleasantries'. For more information, see Riout, Denys (1996) 'The History of the Monochrome: From Humour to High Art and Back Again'.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ce travail de qualification est évidemment orienté par l'intention même qui a dicté au peintre sa décision primordiale de rejeter la donnée maîtresse de la tradition occidentale des arts visuels: la composition.' (Besset 1988:ii)

<sup>12</sup> Deborah J. Haynes' 1995 book, *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge University Press), includes a discussion on Malevich's *Black Square* (pp144-155). However, her analysis does not include notions of 'carnival' or ritual as I wish to use them here.

<sup>13</sup> Anansi's origins are in the folklore of the Ashanti of Ghana. However, since my own knowledge of Anansi comes primarily from hearing my family tell the Jamaican versions of the Anansi stories, I tend to refer to this trickster character as 'Jamaican'. For Anansi stories, and studies on the Trickster figure in general, see for example: Hynes, William J. & Doty, William G. [eds] (1993) *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts and Criticisms* Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press. Of particular interest in this book are: Hynes & Doty's 'Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues: The Problem of the Trickster' (1993:13-32), and Robert Relton's essay, 'West African Tricksters: Web of Purpose, Dance of Delight' (Relton in Hynes & Doty [eds] 1993:122-140). Books of Anansi stories are easy to find and include the following; Temple, Frances (1998) *Tiger Soup: An Anansi Story from Jamaica* (New York, Orchard Books), or McDermott, Gerald (1987) *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti* (Henry Holt & Co.)

<sup>14</sup> Any attempt I might make to mimic the optical, rather than the psychical, effects of monochrome would result in a blank thesis.

<sup>15</sup> Please note the system I will use in this thesis to distinguish between words which could mean more than one thing. References to the Lacanian Phallus, Real, Imaginary and Symbolic will be capitalised, to distinguish them from the human phallus, reality, imagination and symbols. When White and Black are used to refer to human skin or 'race', they will be capitalised. Where white and black are seen with no capitals, they are to be taken to refer to paint, or to colour in general.

**Chapter One:**  
**NEITHER GENRE NOR COUNTER-GENRE:**  
**MONOCHROME & THE WILD CARD'S ETERNAL**  
**RETURNS**

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## 1:0 Introduction

This chapter aims to look at some of the (dis)guises of the monochrome as eternally returning wild card or trickster, bringer of chaos, transgressor of 'meaning'. I wish to explore the potential that monochrome has for being a painterly category of indeterminacy, a straddler of the Cartesian dyadic divide of *res cogitans* vs *res extensae*, and an outcast within a White Phallogocentric system. This suggestion of 'wild card' status would negate any attempt at a linear, teleological 'historical overview'. Instead I aim to isolate and discuss some prior moments within western Art History when blankness has appeared and, crucially, when it has appeared in the guise of 'art'. I also want to begin asking questions about the nature and circumstances of these different blanknesses, the kinds of illegibility they present and the potential they have for transgression within their system, and to set up this line of questioning for the following chapters. I also wish to show how monochrome and the Mixed Race subject both describe the movement of a perpetual oscillation, thus disturbing a system that expects a linear progression. I will allow for the possibility that the slippery, indeterminate blankness of monochrome is structured as a trick, and consider the ways in which the activities of both monochrome and the Mixed Race subject in their respective classificatory systems are, in some way, 'tricky'. In terms of the notion of 'family resemblances' mentioned in the Introduction, the monochromes in this section can be said to have White 'ancestral' status, appearing as 'art' at moments historically prior to those discussed later in the thesis. I am aware that this sounds suspiciously like a search for 'origins', and wish to make it clear that this study does not equate prior chronological appearance with greater worth, value or interest. If the monochromes *are* in some way White, their Whiteness is of the same troubled, unacknowledged and disruptive kind as the Whiteness that is worn, to varying degrees, on the body of the 'Black/White' Mixed Race subject of this thesis. Monochrome is understood here as a re-occurring concept within an established system which has its own applicable rules of kinship,

lineage and heredity. Within this system monochrome, in its continued and near-random appearances, can be read as counter-teleological.

Indeterminate things slip between the oppositional categories a Logocentric system sets up for the purposes of definition and pinning down; they make themselves impossible to catch. This is especially the case with monochrome because it is now unproblematically accepted as 'art'.

Innumerable exhibitions have been dedicated to the history of monochrome and to its various 'guises', perhaps the most important of which is *Monochrome Malerei (Monochrome Painting)*, Leverkusen, 1960. Denys Riout describes this as,

'[...] a landmark event[...] that marks a qualitative transition, the point at which the monochrome is seen as a unifying theme, a genre. A new situation arises in which no painter doing a monochrome can fail to be aware that he is working in a constituted tradition.' (Riout in Millet 1996:20)<sup>1</sup>

By 1960 then, according to Riout, it was impossible for a painter to make a blank space without an awareness that this could now be named: monochrome. *Monochrome Malerei* was the initial performative act of naming monochrome: afterwards it became easier for curators to frame monochrome as a genre with a history. Denys Riout published an article in 1989 called, *La Peinture Monochrome: Une Tradition Niée* (*Monochrome Painting: A Denied Tradition*), where he proposed that there was an identifiable tradition, if not exactly a history or 'genre', of monochrome painting. Maurice Besset also cites monochrome's near-impossibility to categorise (though here he seems to see it as painting only);

'Indeed, since the monochrome is neither a subject, nor a "genre", but a mode – the limit of the existence of painting and a tool, the use of which is inscribed in the logic of disparate approaches, of which it is never the point of departure and not necessarily the conclusion – its history develops in a discontinuous manner. Neither the traditional game of chrono-geological affiliations, nor that of a regrouping by way of thematic affinities, permit the bringing together of the diversity of its sporadic appearances to a coherent collection.' (Besset 1988 [Trans.Anson 2001:3])<sup>2</sup>.

It is interesting that Besset explicitly conceptualises monochrome as a 'tool'. I would prefer to suggest that monochrome is more of a lens through which to see. This approach, an alternative



to the more usual classification as an 'object' or part of a 'genre', suggests two important things. Firstly, it suggests an *agency* of some kind for monochrome. There is more to each of these diverse blank spaces than simple absence of figuration; these blanknesses can be deployed, activated in a variety of potential ways to provide unexpected readings. In allowing for the possibility of monochrome as something that can be an active lens, Besset's interpretation facilitates a radical departure from Phallic readings of monochrome. Secondly however, and unwittingly, Besset provides monochrome with a homologous structure to that of the Mixed Race subject within Whiteness. That which is 'never the point of departure and not necessarily the conclusion' can also be seen as the uncomfortable middle-ground which cannot be forced to stand unproblematically for one thing; which will never achieve the noble status original or final; which is understood to be endlessly and sporadically appearing. The 'discontinuous' history, the pointlessness of attempting to play 'chrono-geological affiliations', and the impossibility of putting together a 'coherent collection' are as true of the Mixed Race subject in the White west as they are of the blank space of monochrome. Both share the status of outsider, and both share the burden that, to the system they occupy, they make no 'coherent' sense. Both share the disruptive status of trickster or 'wild card'.

Besset also identified three 'key moments' in its history: early 1950s New York (all about a refusal of the iconography of archetypes, and of gestural abstraction), 1960s Europe (with Group Zero and their Malevich-inspired preoccupation with imageless painting), and finally back to New York in the 1980s, when 'radical painting' forged an interest in holistic approaches to the canvas. The important aspect of all this is *repetition*. I want to examine the phenomenon of monochrome's eternal returns, but to do this there first needs to be an engagement with some of the accepted definitions and discourses that surrounded monochrome at the times of its appearances. Some of these 'guises' will be examined here; others in later chapters where they can be more suitably aligned to other concerns inherent in monochrome. This will enable a concentration on the

phenomenon of repetition that so suffuses any attempted examination of the monochrome surface, its affects and effects.

A little like a thorn in an item of clothing, the wild card or trickster will make its presence felt continually (and not necessarily comfortably), and it won't stop until it is found and examined. Monochrome has never really been *examined*, palpated like a patient; it seems that instead it has been theorised *around*. This is particularly true of the *psychic space* I am proposing for monochrome, the notional space of its agency and interaction with its spectator, as opposed to its visible, optical surface. Maurice Besset is convinced that monochromes 'refuse all sideways approaches, such as the customary attitudes of comparison and juxtaposition, and they demand to be read face to face' (Besset 1988 [Trans. Anson 2001:1])<sup>3</sup>. I perceive that these 'sideways approaches' are the apparently conventional ones, 'received' or accepted ways that the observer is taught to 'read' the confoundingly blank surface of monochrome; ways that tend to evade monochrome's illegibility. In the context of a history of surfaces that depict, monochrome stands out as something which does *not* depict, and which therefore cannot be read. The blitheness with which many discourses on monochrome seem willing to pass this by suggests foreclosure. Refusal to engage in the confounding, unyielding mystery of the monochrome surface reads like the activity of a tricked ego, uncomfortable with something it does not understand, wounded because it has been tricked, and absolutely unwilling to endure any discomfort.

It is whilst rigged out in one of its official, approved guises 'as' something – whilst 'passing' as a genre – that the wild card of monochrome accomplishes its trickery so slickly. In a kind of psychic drag act, monochrome poses successfully as an approved 'moment' in the teleological western history of art; art which began in one style and, in a smooth succession of other, more *appropriate* styles, evolved in a complex but understandable way. Monochrome, however, did not



appear in any one set of historical, cultural, geographical or political circumstances. It did not stand for one particular thing. It did not unite one particular group of practitioners. It is not a genre, but then it is not quite a counter-genre. It reappears with great regularity although it would appear to have been done and dusted and explained away many times. This suggests that the main fallback theories that attempt to explain monochrome's various guises – eg, 'End-of-Painting', 'Minimalism', 'Objecthood', 'Sublime', 'Colour', 'Elimination of Composition', 'Pure Painting', and so on – all of these guises are exactly that, (dis)guises, imperfectly concealing something that is compelled to return, for the simple reason that it cannot fit into any of the conceptual garments provided. Monochrome is a neither-nor, an indeterminate, a Derridean undecideable, a Lacanian pre-genital, pre-linguistic 'Real' 'Thing'. Like the subject of Mixed Race who lives in a predominantly White (or sometimes Black) society founded on binarist oppositions, there is a strong possibility of never fitting in<sup>4</sup>. Until they can 'read' you – and they will never be able to do this until they *change the way they read* – you will always be in a slippery state of flux, always subject to definitions that never quite fit. Psychically the monochrome, like the Mixed Race subject, is not part of the system operated by a transcendental signified, and thus can never be a single specific 'thing'. So whilst monochrome has now been approved as 'art', it has never been fully 'symbolised' (and I use this in the psychoanalytic sense) into Art History. We only have to look at all those returns of monochrome for evidence of this. The question to ask is: what does the lack of a fit enable monochrome to perform? Can a misfit achieve what an insider cannot?

### **1:1 French Connections: Blank Satire vs. Blank Virtuosity**

'Evoking a system of thought that he judges too simplistic, Hegel rests on the metaphor of a "painting absolutely monochrome", in order to stigmatise its failure'. (Riout 1989:[Trans.Cottingham 2000:4])<sup>5</sup>.

'To most people the monochrome is perceived as an absurd form of art'. (Tan 1998:1)



Despite the common understanding that monochrome had its genesis in the heady atmosphere of the Russian Avant-Garde movements of the early Twentieth Century, an earlier, ludic tradition of fictive monochromes can be found in the intellectual culture of Nineteenth Century France, first appearing in the Satirical Salons of the 1840s<sup>6</sup>. Both literally and pictorially, the Nineteenth Century played host to the spectre of a tendency towards monochromy<sup>7</sup>. Conceptual monochromy in literature probably finds its most famous example in Mallarmé's poetic ideal of the blank white page, expressive of the paradoxical *vide* or emptiness which is as full of potential as it is a terrifying prospect of falling into nothing<sup>8</sup>. The Mallarméan word *phx*, proposed to exist in a condition of meaninglessness, Flaubert's project of a book about nothing and James Abbott McNeill Whistler's musically-titled series of representational paintings about a single colour all testify to this interconnected Nineteenth Century artistic-literary tendency towards the monochrome. If all this spectral blankness is the result of a fear of emptiness, this provides an interesting counterpoint to the manic clutter of Victorian interior decoration; the kind of *horror vacui* seen in such work as William Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1851-3), where riotous patterns fight for attention. Riout, who has suggested a parallel between monochrome and the poetry of Mallarmé, interprets the Nineteenth Century as pervaded by a threat of imminent collapse, which perhaps goes some way to explain the prevalence of 'voided' images. He says;

"The 19<sup>th</sup> Century is haunted by the idea of the sudden collapse, the "decrepitude" of art. Values were in turmoil. Democracy had shaken the old criteria and the crisis was leading art to disaster. One way to pin-point this debacle was to show painting void of content, painting more empty of images than full of colour. Later, in the 1860s, just before Impressionism, there was growing mockery of monomaniac painters of yellow, blue or purple. This obviously reinforced the feeling that painting was going to the dogs.' (Riout in Millet 1996:24)<sup>9</sup>





**Figure 1:** James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White No.1: The White Girl* 1862. Oil on canvas. 214.6 x 108cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington.

It should not be forgotten that the ‘democracy’ to which Riout refers was founded on Colonialism, and that for much of Europe, the Nineteenth Century was a period of swaggering Imperialism. Perhaps the threat that so troubled the Empires was that of the imminent collapse of their own systems of Phallic power, the awakening of knowledge that they wished would remain unconscious – that Colonial rule was a trick, doomed to be seen through. There is a sense in which Whistler’s *Symphony in White No.1* [Figure 1] can be read as nostalgic. The decorative quality of the surface attests to the influence that Japanese art had on Whistler’s painterly practice; at the same time, however, it passively inscribes the dominance of western painterly traditions over non-western – the nostalgia is thus for the structure of Empire that allows for unproblematic appropriation of ‘exotic’ cultures (cf. Said 1979). Whistler’s paintings could not, of course, be described as ‘void of content’ in terms of recognisable surface organisation. In terms of subject matter however, the accusation of ‘void’ would not be inappropriate. Whistler’s 1862 *The White Girl*<sup>10</sup>, was rejected in 1862 from the Royal Academy exhibition; the following year saw its rejection from the Paris Salon as well. It was finally exhibited in the Salon des Refusés, where it caused a major stir. The relentless whiteness of the painting, the blank, expressionless face of the



model and the fact that it didn't seem to be *about* anything caused a great deal of confusion for contemporary spectators – was the painting about virginity? A newly deflowered bride? A purely formal or decorative study? In terms of narrative or meaning (outside of simple portraiture, of course), there really seemed to be nothing there<sup>11</sup>.

In Whistler's defence, Castagnari proposed a psychological interpretation in his 'Salon des Refusés',

'I have proposed an interpretation of *The White Lady* which nobody else has accepted, so much repugnance is there to accord ideas to painters. "What have you wanted to show", I asked the strange artist [...] "a tour-de-force of your trade as a painter, consisting in putting whites on whites? Allow me not to believe it. Allow me to see in your work something more elevated. The morrow of the bride, this troubling minute, when the young woman asks herself, and is astonished to no longer recognise in herself the virginity of the day before". (Castagnari in Riout 1989 [trans. Cottington 2000]:3<sup>12</sup>)

Sean Cubitt interprets the blankness in Whistler as reflective of the emptiness within the society that gazes upon the paintings;

'The popular Orient might stand in for the Other of love rather than the Other of consumption. In the emptiness of its signification, there hung robed in indefinite sensuality, a returned image of the vacuum at the heart of the society of the spectacle.' (Cubitt 1998:68)

Cubitt's interpretation supports the notion of Nineteenth Century Europe's prescient mourning for the loss of its colonial power. His understanding of Whistler's *White Girl* suggests that the girl's 'exotic' setting reveals Whistler's (and, therefore, his society's?) reliance on the contrasting notion of a sensual, decorative Other to highlight the purity of the virgin White girl. However, I suspect that the Other – in this case, western society's construction of the 'Orient' – asserts its agency by playing a specular trick. It tricks the White west into believing the myth of its own superiority, whilst at the same time acting as a mirror that shows the White west, the Phallic system, the emptiness at its heart.

I want to suggest another, related interpretation. For a long time now, I have considered Whistler's *White Girl* paintings as imperfectly-veiled studies in the development of a White

supremacist aesthetic. The overriding, relentless whitenesses of the pieces – the chaste folds of dripping cloth of the girls' gowns, the drapes and spots of light, but most of all the Whiteness of their skins – all conspire to suggest an interpretation of whiteness (and therefore of Whiteness) where the varieties of white signify varieties of goodness. The kinds of white here, and the devotion to their exploration, all appear to equate the colour white, and White women, with associations of goodness, of aspiration<sup>13</sup>. Richard Dyer writes of Whiteness that,

'Though the power value of whiteness resides above all in its instabilities and apparent neutrality, the colour does carry the more explicit symbolic sense of moral and also aesthetic superiority. It is evidently the case that white people are not invariably represented as good and beautiful – therein lies our diversity, our all-encompassing particularity; yet the moral and aesthetic resonance of whiteness can and often has been mobilised in relation to white-skinned people [...] the particular way in which this superiority is conceived and expressed, with its emphasis on purity, cleanliness, virginity, in short, absence, inflects whiteness once again towards non-particularity, only this time in the sense of non-existence.' (Dyer 1997:70)

If applied to Whistler's girl and Castagnari's assumption of her virginity, Dyer's reading of Whiteness creates a double-blank. The girl is a sexual 'tabula rasa'; she has yet to be claimed by a man, and therefore has yet to come into being – her beauty and superiority depend on this. So if Whistler's painting is conceptually 'blank', the girl's unattainable White beauty is analogously blank, since 'the conceptualisation of white beauty and white virtue emphasises absence.' (Dyer 1997:45) The Nineteenth Century sense of impending loss of colonial power can be read analogously to the sense of impending loss of virginity that is implied in Whistler's surface. Perhaps this explains in some way why the painting provoked such heated reactions.

The notion of the White woman as a pure, virginal Madonna has been historically set up in the White racialised imagination in direct opposition to the notion of the Black man as a personification of brute id energy; a creature driven mad by his unnatural desire to sexually possess the White woman. This binary opposition is destabilised by the sexual desire of the White woman, something which was also deemed taboo. Whilst White men busied themselves protecting the White women whom they saw as their property against the rapacious advances of



the 'buck Nigger', their zeal suggests that whilst their professed fear was that the White woman should be sullied, their actual fear was that the White woman might actually desire such an encounter (cf Young 1995)<sup>14</sup>. Whilst the Phallic system of White racism desired that its foundational binaries (White/Black, Self/Other, Mind/Body, etc) be kept intact, the actual meanings of these binaries were far from clear. The construct of the sexually bestial Black male, for example, suggests a man with potency and agency. In reality, as Kobena Mercer discusses, the Black man's position was a highly complex one; a castrated masculinity where the Phallus would always be out of reach:

'Whereas prevailing definitions of masculinity imply power, control and authority, these aspects have been historically denied to black men since slavery. The centrally dominant role of the white male slave master in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plantation societies debarred black males from patriarchal privileges ascribed to the masculine role. For example, a slave could not fully assume the role of "father", as his children were the legal property of the slave owner. In racial terms, black men and women alike were subordinated to the power of the white master in the hierarchical social relations of slavery, and for black men, as *objects* of oppression, this also cancelled out their access to positions of power and prestige which in gender terms are regarded as the essence of masculinity in patriarchy. Shaped by this history, black masculinity is a highly contradictory formation of identity, as it is a *subordinated* masculinity.' (Mercer 1994b:142-143)<sup>15</sup>

Directly at the centre of the 'White female virgin/Black male rapist' dichotomy sits the 'Mulatto', or Mixed Race subject, the product of this unholy sexual union. The provenance of the derogatory term 'Mulatto', once used as a legitimate classification, is from the Spanish word for 'mule'. Just as the mule is the barren product of an unnatural union between species, so the 'Mulatto' was historically believed to be sterile and desireless<sup>16</sup>. In this sense, the Mixed Race subject is, like the Woman in Lacanian psychoanalysis, always already castrated. Perhaps, though, the Mixed Race subject here has more in common with the always-already-castrated figure of the trickster, whose purpose is to continually get inside the system in order to wreak confusion. The 'castrated' subject of Mixed Race, whose body is a living testimony to the fact that an 'unnatural' or unlawful sexual union has taken place, shows the system that the apparently clear and distinct



boundaries it sets up between Black and White are, in fact, a nonsense. In her liminal blankness, the Mixed Race subject confuses the system's exchange value.

Whistler's white paintings, as with his *Nocturnes*, solve the conceptual problem of painting a scene of distinct objects of essentially the same colour and hue with painterly virtuosity. A contemporary critic, Paul Mantz, wrote of Whistler's exhibition in the Salon of 1843 that anyone who viewed Whistler as an eccentric was in fact ignoring the history of painting. Mantz pointed out the precedence of a tradition that he stressed must not be misunderstood, especially not in France. This was the tradition of which the famed *Canard Blanc*, or *White Duck* of Jean-Baptiste Oudry is emblematic. Mantz wrote that he did not know whether Whistler had seen the *White Duck*, but suggested positioning Whistler's work within the context of Oudry, affirming that, 'these associations of analogous nuances were understood by everybody 100 years ago, and this difficulty which today would embarrass more than a master, passed then for a schoolboy's game' (Riout 1989 [Trans.Cottington 2000:2 n.10])<sup>17</sup>.



**Figure 2:** Jean-Baptiste Oudry, *Canard Blanc* 1753. Oil on canvas. Private collection.



Jean-Baptiste Oudry's *Canard Blanc* [Figure 2], exhibited in the Salon of 1753, is a pictorial tour-de-force of white on white. It was hailed by the critics at the time as a masterpiece of mimesis, testament to the painter's art of virtuoso sleight-of-hand and showing a white ground on which were depicted a series of all-white objects. In his drama of white-on-white, Oudry is also performing a critical investigation of mimesis – though in a vastly different way from Malevich, who made mimesis redundant and invisible. Denys Riout writes that,

‘Oudry, when he painted whiteness, found himself up against an immovable epistemological obstacle: mimesis, still triumphant. Constrained to pledge allegiance to it, he puts it in crisis; disposing in front of him an arrangement of objects whose relationship is paradoxical because, far from individualising the ones in relation to the others, it tends to confuse them. The consummate art of the painter consists in registering and containing this dissolution.’ (Riout 1989:[Trans.Cottingham 2000:2])<sup>18</sup>.

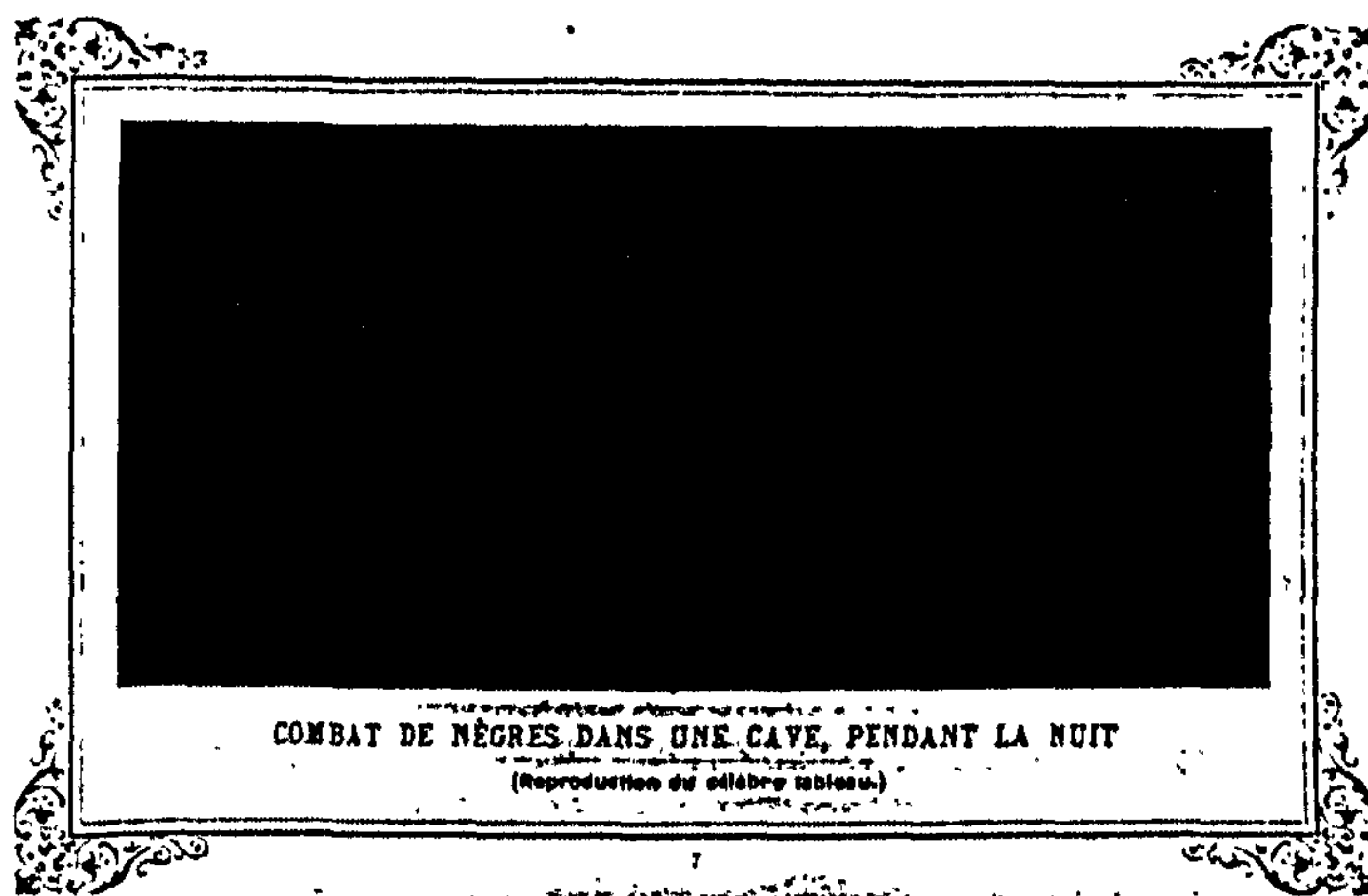
Since a complete repudiation of mimesis would have been unthinkable in 1753, Oudry does the next best thing and limits the conditions in which it can flourish. At the same time he is showing his painterly virtuosity; *look what I can make out of nothing*.

This kind of showy game, a game that demonstrates the artistic skills of the winner, belongs to a prior tradition. In Pliny's tale of Apelles and Protogenes, Apelles places a sort of ‘calling card’ on his absent friend by drawing a line on a wooden panel in Protogenes' studio, a line ‘of extreme fineness’. When Protogenes comes back he recognises the mark as his rival's, and puts his own line beside it, finer still. Apelles makes another visit later on, and, embarrassed that his friend has outshone him, draws another line, that leaves no room for anything finer. In his brilliant book *Stealing the Mona Lisa: What Art Stops us from Seeing*, Lacanian psychoanalyst Darian Leader observes that this fable has inherently to do with Art History as a story of competition between men. Using Pliny he foregrounds the surface ‘emptiness’ as exhibiting a fundamental pull on its audience;

‘Pliny adds that (the panel) was burned in the first fire to strike Caesar's palace on the Palatine: “It had been previously much admired by us, on its vast surface containing nothing else than the almost invisible lines, so that among

the outstanding works of many artists it looked like a blank space, and by that very fact attracted attention and was more esteemed than any masterpiece.” Thus Pliny gives an account not only of the birth of abstract art but also shows how the work takes on its peculiar power through the production of a central zone of emptiness.’ (Leader 2002:71)

This contest, it appears, was not solely one of evidence of practical skills, but also one of conceptual problem-solving. The finest line can be understood and appreciated for its minimalist beauty and the cunning it took to describe it. It can also, however, be said to represent an attempt to show the least essence of any thing possible, whilst still showing something; the essence, it might be said, of many latter-day monochrome paintings.



**Figure 3:** Alphonse Allais, *Combat des Nègres Dans Une Cave, Pendant La Nuit* (reproduction du célèbre tableau) 1884. Ex.Cat. *Exposition des Arts Incohérents*, 1884 (Riout 1989:90)

Social satirist Alphonse Allais’ *Combat des Nègres Dans Une Cave, Pendant la Nuit* [Figure 3] had, in fact, been common currency long before Whistler’s *Symphonies* and *Nocturnes*<sup>19</sup>. From the beginnings of the 1840s, the caricaturist ‘Salons’ began to develop so considerably that their specific style of absurdist humour eventually became mainstream. Situations imagined by the caricaturists would lead to the most limited representation possible, often with a litany of adjectives so excessive it would almost make one strain one’s eyes to ‘see’ the imaginary scene. The satirical or ‘false’ monochromes generally took the form of drawings in humorous journals or



books, accompanied by captions. The unifying factor of these monochromes was that they would exist only notionally, in the mind of the reader of their copious descriptive texts. The deployment of the 'comic' in these ludic monochromes took place at the nexus of the verbal and the visual; however, that binary was always further problematised by the fact that the 'visual' appeared to contain no information. What is most intriguing about these imaginary monochromes is that whilst they did not 'exist' in any tangible way – as drawings *of* imagined paintings, they were representations of representations of representations – they satirised a form of painting that also did not yet exist; one that could not even be imagined, *except as some horrible joke*<sup>20</sup>. Several dozen examples of these imaginary satirical monochromes have been found that bear dates subsequent to 1854, and whose excessively verbose joke-titles attest to the impossibility of imagining monochrome-as-art<sup>21</sup>. This type of joke has persisted in different ways up until the present day; the popular post card, entirely black but inscribed with text that reads, 'Falmouth (or wherever) By Night' is an example of the persistence of this comic tendency.

The fictive monochromes appear at first glance to completely prefigure (at least formally) the uninflected monochrome-as-'art' of the Twentieth Century. The key difference is that the Nineteenth Century 'pleasantries' have at their core the notion of satire or laughter. Whether or not it is actually funny is another question altogether, since the later, theoretically and historically quite serious monochromes have also been responded to with cynical laughter. This laughter does not occur because the joke is pleasing, rather the 'joke' status happens *after* understanding has been foreclosed. This laughter sets up a defence for the ego which wishes to avoid the shame of neither understanding nor being able to decipher what is placed before it<sup>22</sup>. With their presentation as intentional jokes, the 'pleasantries' set up a legitimate historical context for not having to take monochrome seriously<sup>23</sup>. The Surrealists sparked a revival of interest in Allais, whose earlier monochromatic jokes could be described as proto-Surrealist in their use of the absurd. André Breton elevated the earlier artist to a position of honour in the Surrealist movement in his *Anthologie de l'Humour Noir* ('Anthology of Black Humour'). It is partly the

timing of Breton's *Anthologie* that prompted the republication of Allais' works in paperback after the Second World War. On a conceptual level it is not difficult to see the precedent that Allais' original publication set for the work of Marcel Duchamp. The fictive monochromes of Allais, like the existing readymades of Duchamp (eg *Fountain*, 1917), both accomplished the similar confusions of Art History's system of exchange. Both, for instance, presented a radical challenge to traditional definitions of value in art; both rejected the fetishisation of the unique touch of the artist in favour of the mass-produced; both were intentionally enigmatic and had an air of indifference to 'readings'; both were disdainful of traditional notions of beauty.

In the above example of Allais' *Combat des Nègres*, however, the situation is more complex as the joke can also be read as fundamentally Phallic. The tacit associations of Black people with darkness, violence, 'nature' (as opposed to 'culture'), are all just as essential to the comedy as is the deployment of a blank surface accompanied by a specific verbal description. In order to 'get' it the audience must be inside of, or at least allied with, the Phallic system that relies on the prevalence of such essentialist caricatures as 'Blacks equal Caves' or 'Blacks equal Violence'. Allais' 'joke' can be read in a direct oppositional relation to Whistler's *White Girl*; the latter functioning on the premise that White girls equal purity, the former on the premise that the Black body is 'stained'. Black humanity has already been voided in White Phallic consciousness; a prior voiding that allows Allais' pictorial mimicry of the voided subject to work on a superficial level as a pleasing joke. Freud singles mimicry out as one of the functions of the comic, equating it specifically with caricature; 'As a rule, no doubt, mimicry is permeated with caricature – the exaggeration of traits that are not otherwise striking – and it also involves the characteristic of degradation.' (Freud SE viii:208). However, Freud in this case attributes to caricature the function of mocking someone who is 'superior'; 'Caricature, parody and travesty (as well as their practical counterpart, unmasking) are directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect' (SE viii:200). The Phallic system that the blank jokes inhabit uses caricature



in quite the opposite way. First it dehumanises a set of subjects, then it sets about continually reinforcing that dehumanisation.

Perhaps, as an 'insider' in his own Phallic system, Freud was unable or unwilling to see that caricature can function against those designated inferior as well as the superior. Freud makes some problematic remarks about 'race' and the comic in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which position him as an 'insider'. Freud writes that,

'[...] a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones; and it cannot be denied that in both these cases our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him.' (SE viii:195)

This brings to mind images such as the famous illustrations for the 1920s Paris *Revue Nègre*, starring a young Josephine Baker, which depicts a caricature of a rubber-limbed Black woman prancing, grinning and over-expendng bodily energy to 'comic' effect. However, Freud goes on to be more specific about the kind of person that the group he refers to as 'us' finds laughable, in a passage that relies on the racist positioning of Whites with intellect and 'the Negro' with the body;

'Direct observation shows that human beings are in the habit of expressing the attributes of largeness and smallness in the contents of their ideas by means of a varying expenditure in a kind of ideational mimetics. *If a child or a man from the common people, or a member of certain races*, narrates or describes something, it is easy to see that he is not content to make his ideas plain to the hearer by the choice of clear words, but that he also represents its subject-matter in his expressive movements: *he combines the mimetic and the verbal forms of representation*. (SE viii:192-193, my italics)<sup>24</sup>.

Whilst it is not explicitly stated that the 'certain races' are those with dark skins, I think it seems likely. Moreover, the equation of children, working class people and these 'certain races' is quite explicit, and would have been unquestioningly accepted by other 'insiders' in the Phallic order. What is also interesting is Freud's theory that the source of the comedy is in the fact that this figure straddles a binary, or 'combines the mimetic and the verbal forms of representation'.

Over-signification takes place, and again an excess of energy is expended. A similar combination of 'the mimetic and the verbal forms of representation' takes place in the fictive monochromes, except that the joke is a double one because the verbal is made to perform the function of the mimetic. In what I am assuming Freud understands as the 'comedy Nigger', another over-signification takes place. In what Freud would probably understand as the problematic 'Mulatto', again the joke is (at least) doubled. The 'Mulatto's inferiority relies on the prior voiding of the Black subject in the White imagination; but the 'joke' the 'Mulatto' is able to play on White society is that she contains that which White society would attempt to deny her – Whiteness. Her optical surface or phenotype is 'blanked' as unproblematically Black, but in her psychic surface, the binary of Black and (problematic) White meet. The 'Mulatto', like blank space, symbolises the slippery nature of the structural binary categories that Phallic society wishes to believe are immovable, and in this way poses a threat to that society's illusion of its own dominance. Any laughter on behalf of the system would be the uncertain laughter of the very nervous.

One of the more interesting features of the Nineteenth Century comic incarnations of monochrome is the ability to induce relays of different kinds of laughter, analogous to the relays of looks that 'serious' monochromes induce. From the guffaws of the person who wishes to disguise their bafflement at the apparently blank surface, to the smoothly superior sneer of the art aficionado; it seems that the monochrome painting produces in the spectator the kinds of laughter that protect. The laughter is necessary as a psychic shield from the terror of being presented with something that baffles the ego; that interrupts the conceptual foundations of a system, or that might be a representation of a great chasm of nothingness. The ludic monochromes of the Nineteenth Century are inaugural in a twisted sense. Whilst they deride the notion of monochrome-as-art, they nevertheless *disguise themselves*, or 'pass', as monochrome-as-art in order to play their trick. They contain the seed of their own destruction. When monochrome does disguise itself as art, however, gaining access to a particular set of discourses and demanding that it be read in certain new ways, it becomes more than just a joke. Maurice Besset suggests



that the ‘joke’ behind this playful tradition of satirical monochromes is a radical re-assessment of the circular exchange-values of the art world;

‘[...] it is [...] in a few drawings by satirical draughtsman of the second half of the Nineteenth Century and the beginning of the Twentieth Century, that the monochrome made its first concrete appearances: both to illustrate the shocking confrontation between the excesses of the Artist (who believed everything to be permitted) and the philistinism of the Bourgeois confronted by an object invisible to him and for which he was asked a price which he thought exorbitant considering the tiny amounts of material and work which had been invested in it’. (Besset 1988 [Trans. Anson 2001:5]).

The magic transition from everyday object to ‘Art’ object imbues the humble blank space with status and a new name: *monochrome*. This magic transformation is the subject of Yasmina Reza’s 1994 play, *Art*, whose very title acts as a concentrate of all the emotional and visceral responses elicited by something that does not ‘look like’ art. The play examines three male friends, Marc, Serge and Yvan, whose relationship is fractured almost irreparably when Serge, eager to appear cultured, spends two hundred thousand francs on a white painting (with a few barely-perceptible diagonal lines) by the fictitious artist, ‘Antrios’. The impossibility of imagining that something blank could be ‘*Art*’ is at the heart of the play’s comedy – the friends simply cannot comprehend the fact that any value, especially financial value, could be placed on a picture whose surface has nothing in it.

**Marc:** Serge, you haven’t bought this painting for two hundred thousand francs?

**Serge:** You don’t understand, that’s what it costs. It’s an Antrios.

**Marc:** You haven’t bought this painting for two hundred thousand francs?

**Serge:** I might have known you’d miss the point.

**Marc:** You paid two hundred thousand francs for this shit? (Reza 1996:2-3)

Each friend starts to question the other’s personal integrity and intellectual ability, and the friendship becomes dramatically strained. *Art*’s silent protagonist, the monochrome, introduces chaos and competition into this small circle of male friends within the first ten minutes of the play – the ‘passing’ is successfully accomplished, and the trickster is ‘in’. Monochrome’s trickery here is again located at the nexus of at least one foundational binary. In this case, what is at stake is the commodification system that the Phallic ego has set up – by ‘passing’ successfully enough ‘as

art' for someone to pay huge sums of money for it, the white monochrome in Reza's play makes a comic nonsense of the invisible division between what 'is' and 'is not' art; associating itself with the Freudian currency of abjected matter, or 'shit' as gold. In this case the optical surface is as divisive as the psychic surface is (playfully) divided, and the fundamental irony of the meaning of the word 'monochrome' is evident.

In the following exchange, nobody seems quite sure *why* they are laughing, and if anyone could be said to have the 'last laugh', it would have to be the silent monochrome surface:

**Yvan:** He laughed because he sensed I was about to laugh. If you like, he laughed to put me at my ease.

**Marc:** It doesn't count if he laughed first. If he laughed first, it was to defuse your laughter. It means it wasn't a genuine laugh.

**Yvan:** It was a genuine laugh.

**Marc:** It may have been a genuine laugh, but it wasn't for the right reason.

**Yvan:** What is the right reason? I'm confused.

**Marc:** He wasn't laughing because his painting is ridiculous, you and he weren't laughing for the same reasons, you were laughing at the painting and he was laughing to ingratiate himself, to put himself on your wavelength, to show you that on top of being an aesthete who can spend more on a painting than you can earn in a year, he's still your same old subversive mate who likes a good laugh. (1996:16-17)

The assured Serge acts out the part of a Phallic reader so certain of the superiority of his own intellect that he will not allow for the possibility of trickery. Marc, who doubts with equal certainty, is a near mirror-image of Phallic readership and can be read in symbolic 'opposition' to Serge. The problematic 'middle ground' between their opposing positions of certainty is illustrated near the end of the play (60-61), where Marc does the unthinkable. Disgusted with what he understands to be a worthless sham, he takes a marker pen and draws a diagonal line bisecting the surface of the 'Antrios', complete with a tiny ski-ing figure. He acts out the position that blank space requires figurative drawing to make sense of it. The humble Yvan, however, will not commit himself to any single position, refusing to acknowledge a finite end point to surface signification. So, although it comes from feelings of social inadequacy rather than a radical intellectual position, Yvan's ambivalent spectating attitude mirrors the psychic indeterminacy of



the monochrome surface – that which always slips around and comes between the fixed oppositions of the usual interpretative stances about monochrome. Perhaps he is the closest of all the three to ‘getting’ the message of monochrome’s trick; of seeing that ‘passing’ has taken place. Perhaps the whole of the play’s action, and the characters’ tissue of ‘Phallic’ readings, could also be read as manifestations of Phallogentrism’s horror of monochrome’s apparent blankness; a horror that requires figuration to ‘make sense’ of, or to cancel out that blankness.

Some of Freud’s observations on jokes could be used equally well for ‘passing’. Explaining first how parody and travesty work by ‘destroying the unity that exists between people’s characters as we know them and their speeches and actions’, (SE viii:201), Freud goes on to write that,

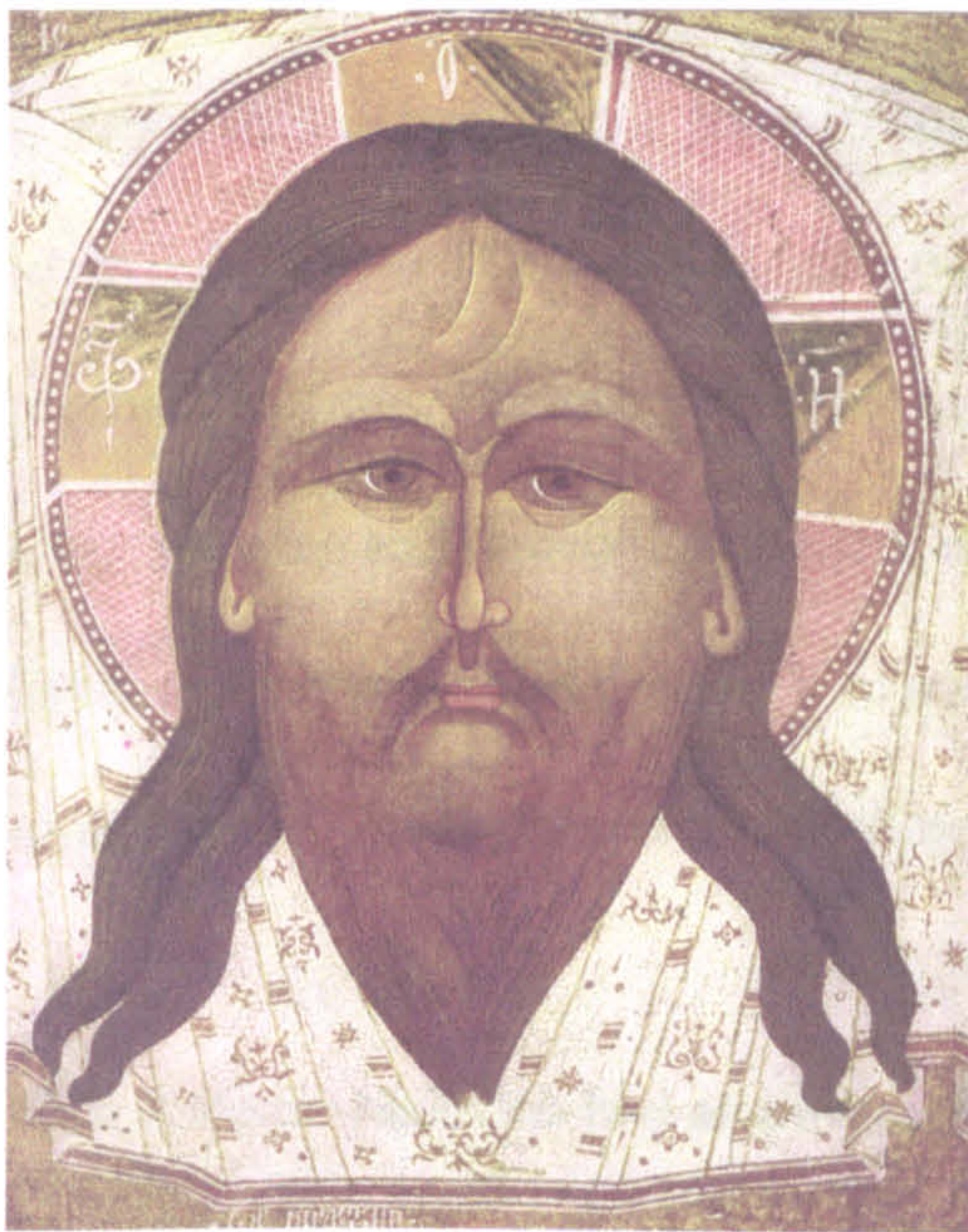
‘The same mechanism is also used for *unmasking*, which only applies where someone has seized dignity and authority by a deception and these have to be taken from him in reality.’ (SE viii:201)

Freud could almost be describing the ‘tragic Mulatto’ figure such as James Weldon Johnson’s *Ex Colored Man*, who, in popular narratives, is always already punished, or at least operates from the anxious condition of a subject perpetually awaiting punishment. Johnson’s character, in the final sentence of his story, manages to secure a White wife, who tragically dies after having borne him two beautiful White children. All of his former dreams of identifying as White come true, but the price he pays is a heaviness in his soul, and the feeling that he has traded his birthright ‘for a mess of pottage.’ Like the trickster figure in folk mythology, the ‘tragic Mulatto’, intent on ‘passing’ at all costs, has to bear the consequences of the successful trickery s/he has performed. Like the trickster, the subaltern power of this Mixed Race subject is bought at a high price; that of castration within the system that subject wishes to take a place in. However, once ‘passing’ has been successfully achieved, the trickster can really be said to have moved *inside* the system, and it is from this position that the paradoxical power can begin to be put to use, and the very foundations of the system’s exchange-value disturbed. Perhaps the overbearing psychic burden of inevitable punishment or ‘unmasking’ explains, in part, some of the more morbid associations



of monochrome (Chapter Four). Perhaps it is the notion inherent in ‘passing’ of having to ‘kill’ part of oneself that has a cataclysmic feeling-tone, the ever-present *tain* of the trickster’s trick. Either way, it seems that it is the imaginary ‘comic’ monochromes of the Nineteenth Century that inaugurate the trickster’s first successful move right inside Art History.

## 1:2 The Square, the Rectangles and the Nemesis of Mimesis



**Figure 4:** *Saviour Not Made By Human Hands*. Early 16<sup>th</sup> Century. School of Novgorod. Tretyakov Gallery.

‘A Twentieth Century Russian painter paints a painting. He paints it all black. A great Abuse and mutation, and a rendering sensible of itself as itself.’  
(<http://www.crosswinds.net/~ideoplastic/diss/blacksquare.html>)

The *Spas Nerukotvornyi*, or *The Saviour Not Made By Human Hands* is a Novgorodian Icon of the Twelfth Century, originally kept in the Cathedral of the Assumption but now residing in the Tretyakov Gallery [Figure 4]. Tradition holds that it is one of the earliest surviving examples of the particular type of icon that initiated the use of representation in Christian visual culture. In other words, *The Saviour Not Made By Human Hands*, though intended to please God, can also be read as representative of the moment in a culture when the Almighty’s command that His children must not make any copies or likenesses was ruptured. A moment of flagrant



disobedience of the Father, but veiled to resemble obedience. A moment of conflation of two apparently opposing positions. If this icon is read as embodied doubleness or indeterminacy (is it an act of obedience, disobedience, neither or both?), then Malevich's relationship with it can also be read as productive of a further, related and repetitive indeterminacy.

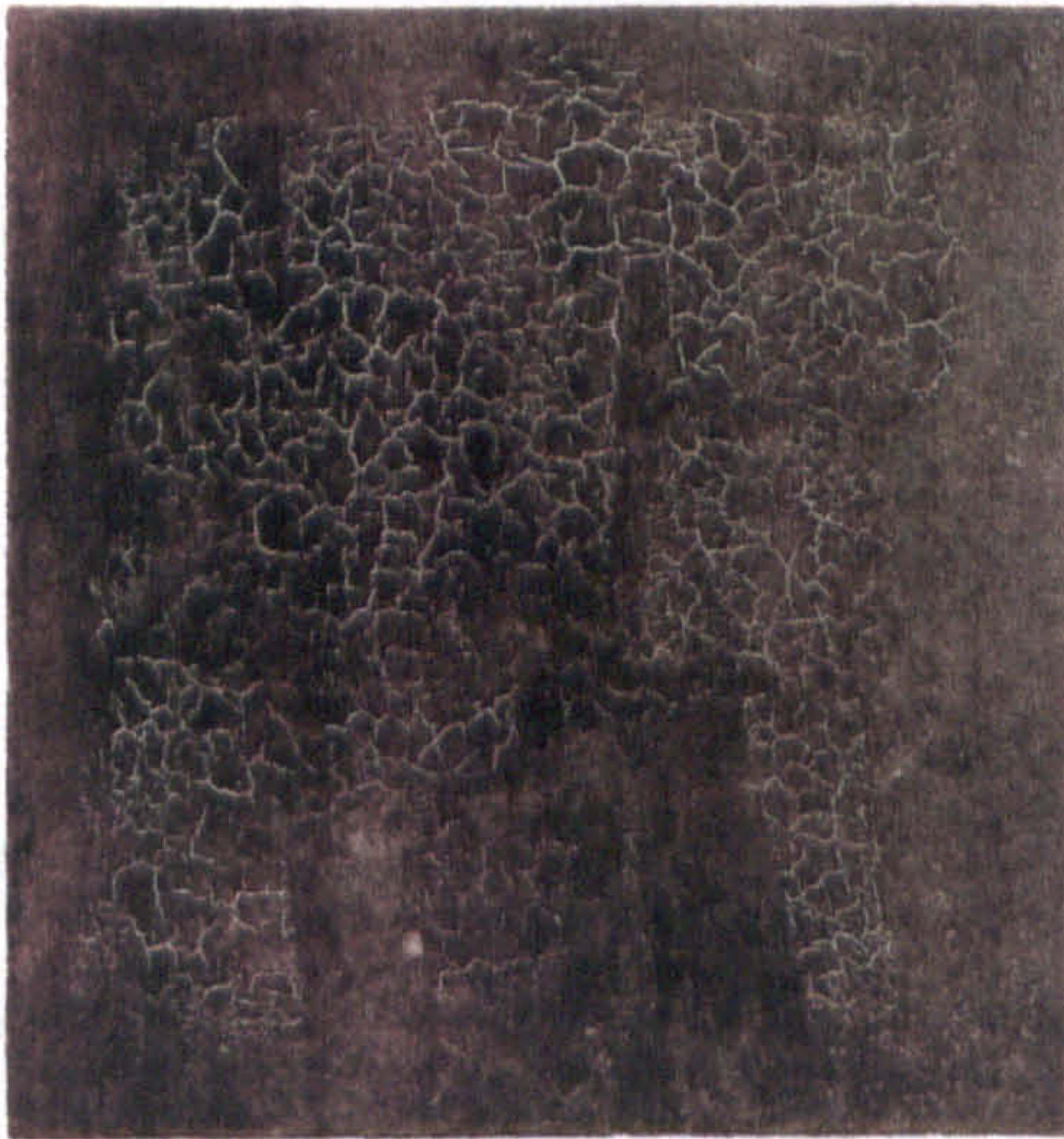
The legend that accompanies the Icon concerns the King of Odessa, Adgar IV the Black, who was suffering from leprosy. Having heard of the miracles of Jesus, the King sent his scribe Hannan with a letter asking Jesus to come to Odessa, heal the King and preach the Word. Jesus praised Adgar the Black for his faith, promising to send an apostle on His behalf. Whilst in the presence of Jesus, Hannan attempted to paint a portrait of Jesus. He found, however, that the ever-changing and radiant Divine face eluded capture. Seeing Hannan's frustration, Jesus bathed His face with water and pressed it to some linen, where a likeness was imprinted. When Hannan returned with the letter and the cloth bearing Jesus' image, the King was immediately healed<sup>25</sup>.

That Kazimir Malevich had an interest in this Icon is documented in a typewritten manuscript dated 1924 that was an appendix to the unpublished essay, *The World As Non-Objectivity*. As far as Malevich was concerned, representation and its confines only served to further the divisibility of the world, and artistic 'truth' could only be communicated in the form of paradox, or even of the lie. 'To speak of truth without lies we must know some other language. Our language is not suitable' ([www.crosswinds.net/~ideoplastic/diss/blacksquare.html](http://www.crosswinds.net/~ideoplastic/diss/blacksquare.html)).

The concept of the *Black Square* or *Black Quadrilateral* [Figure 5] had at its heart the notion of the possibility of lie, paradox or trick as container of meaning, as well as potential shifter of existing, stifling artistic paradigms. It also contains the counter-logical notion that the only way to tell the truth is through the form of the lie. From the outset, then, Malevich's relationship with meaning



is not straightforward. The choice of blackness for his square is significant, and this also problematises meaning. As the absence of all light, it represented the absence of all sight. As



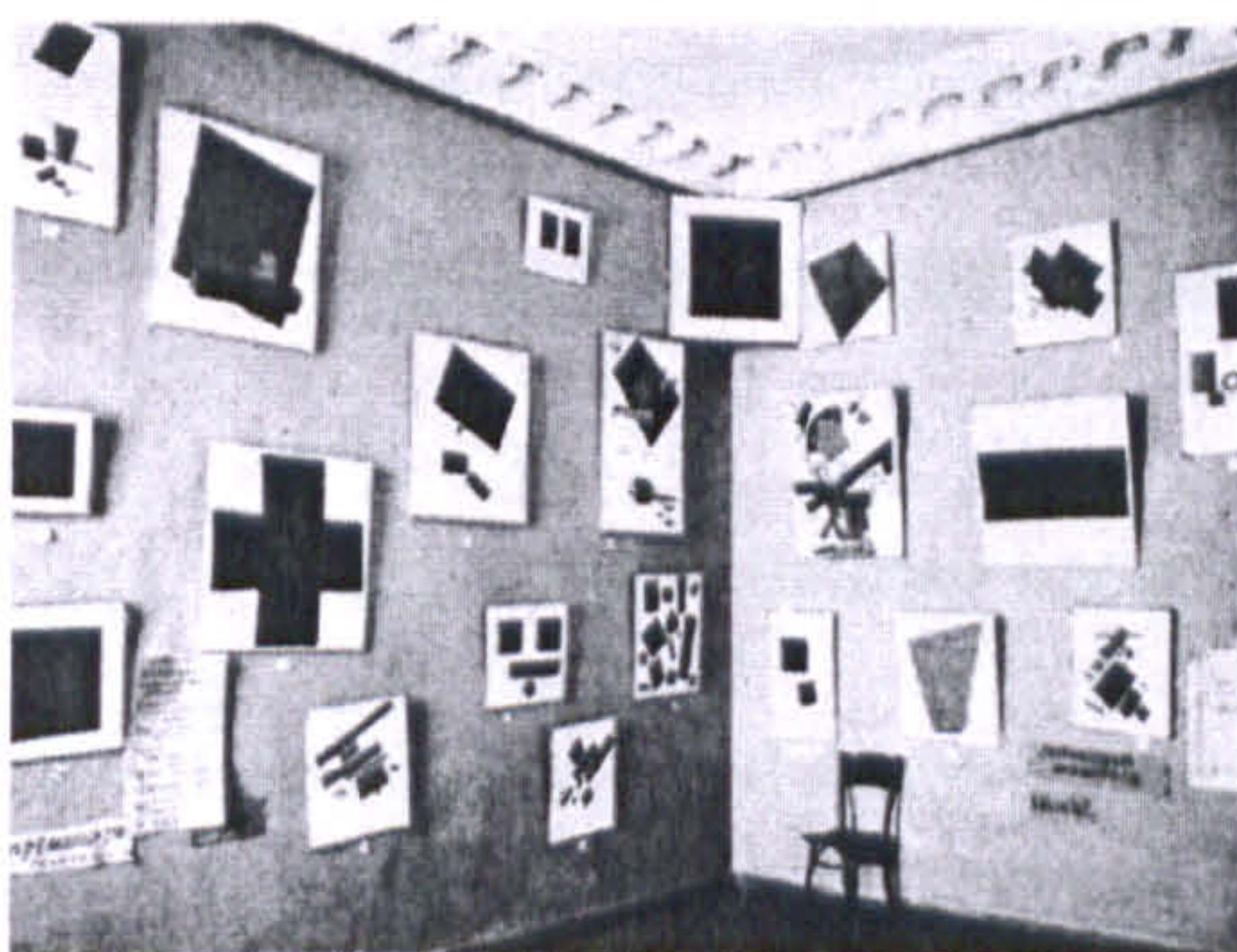
**Figure 5:** Malevich, *Black Square*, c.1915. Oil on canvas, 79.5x79.5cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

light is the condition through which the human eye is able to apprehend visually, when light is taken away it leaves no ‘element’, so to speak, and no possibility of seeing anything at all. The *Black Square* can then be read as the ultimate painterly paradox; a visual image that tells of the impossibility of seeing, embodied in an object whose very reason for existing is to be seen.

Malevich declared that his *Black Square* was not only the end of painting, but that it was painting’s absolute essence, its zero degree. It was essentially a meta-painting, a painting about painting, a painting whose subject matter was the investigation and laying bare of painting, and something that was to usher in a new order of painting. He presents nothing other than that which his painting presents and, perhaps most importantly, his painting has no apparent opposite in, say, representational painting – no ‘painting’ exists as the antitype to the *Black Square*’s ‘anti-painting’. Malevich’s painting was more than the final zero point (or the zero of limitless possibility) of painting; it was more than a confounding new void in the context of a vast system of recognisable



images. The *Black Square* was also *the final icon*. In the context of the Russian Orthodox Church's strong tradition of icon-painting, the *Black Square* is generally seen as an iconoclastic gesture. In the traditional Russian peasant home, pride of place would be given to the religious icon by placing it high on the wall, almost at ceiling level, in a corner. This positioning was considered an act of reverence, and the position itself became synonymous with Russian Christianity and the worship of 'graven images' forbidden by Yahweh. At the first showing of the *Black Square*, Malevich issued strict instructions that his icon-sized painting be hung high in this position [Figure 6].



**Figure 6:** Installation photograph of 'O.I.O: Last Futurist Exhibition', Petrograd, Dec.1915 – Jan.1916, showing position of Malevich's *Black Square*

This gesture was intended to shock; a direct usurpation of the spiritual with the secular seemed to be taking place, except that this usurpation acted out an insult. It equated the message of Christianity with a zero of meaning, and with the pointlessness of any kind of exegesis. The rational, legible image of Christ was replaced with the irrational, illegible image of Finality (or Nothingness). This finality is, however, in itself a paradox – the *Black Square* was intended as a political symbol of collectivity, to be endlessly repeated on walls, hands, posters, and every other conceivable surface<sup>26</sup>. From its very inception, this 'first' monochrome was to exist through perpetual repetition and return. If the acceptance of Malevich's *Black Square* 'as' art, and its positioning in a gallery at all (as well, of course, as the subversive nature of that positioning) is an early example of the trickster's move inside art history, then the kind of finality that the *Black Square* allegedly has is a further trick (or paradox). It is also a classic embodiment of doubleness or indeterminacy. The old tradition of religious icon-painting meets the new, radical sensibilities



of revolution in the *Black Square's* surface – it is literally made out of a confluence of incompatible notions.

Malevich's *Black Square* then is almost full to overflowing with apparent contradictions. The painting was intended to inaugurate a new socio-cultural order, the order of Revolution, as opposed to the 'order' of Christianity, stating that,

'The image is the final path [...] everything which has paths converges toward the image, all paths lead to the image particularly if it is holy, hence I see the justification and true significance of the Orthodox corner in which the image stands, the holy image as opposed to all other images [...] The corner symbolises that there is no other path to perfection except for the path into the corner.'

([www.crosswinds.net/-ideoplastic/diss/blacksqare.html](http://www.crosswinds.net/-ideoplastic/diss/blacksqare.html)).<sup>27</sup>

None of these contradictions are *optical* – the black square on white ground is simple enough for the eye to comprehend – but happen in the unseen *psychic space* of the picture. First of all, there is the doubleness of disobedience and devotion within the *Spas Nerukotvornyi*, the actual icon that directly inspired Malevich. Secondly (and more importantly) there is the fact of Malevich's creation of something that sits directly *in between* the ancient Russian Orthodox tradition of Iconography; and the profoundly new, revolutionary, secular and political concerns of Suprematism. There are more issues at play here, however, than the embodiment of a doubleness. Malevich had also made a definitive gesture against representation, which he wrote of with great disdain as belonging in, 'the rubbish-filled pool of academic art' (Malevich in Harrison & Wood [eds] 1992:166). With Suprematism, Malevich had 'dragged himself out' (166) of this foul swamp, working towards a paring down of visual images which would make visible the truth and purity he sought in an art that had severed all connections with representation;

'Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art [...] To reproduce beloved objects and little corners of nature is just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons.' (Malevich in Harrison & Wood [eds] 1992:166)



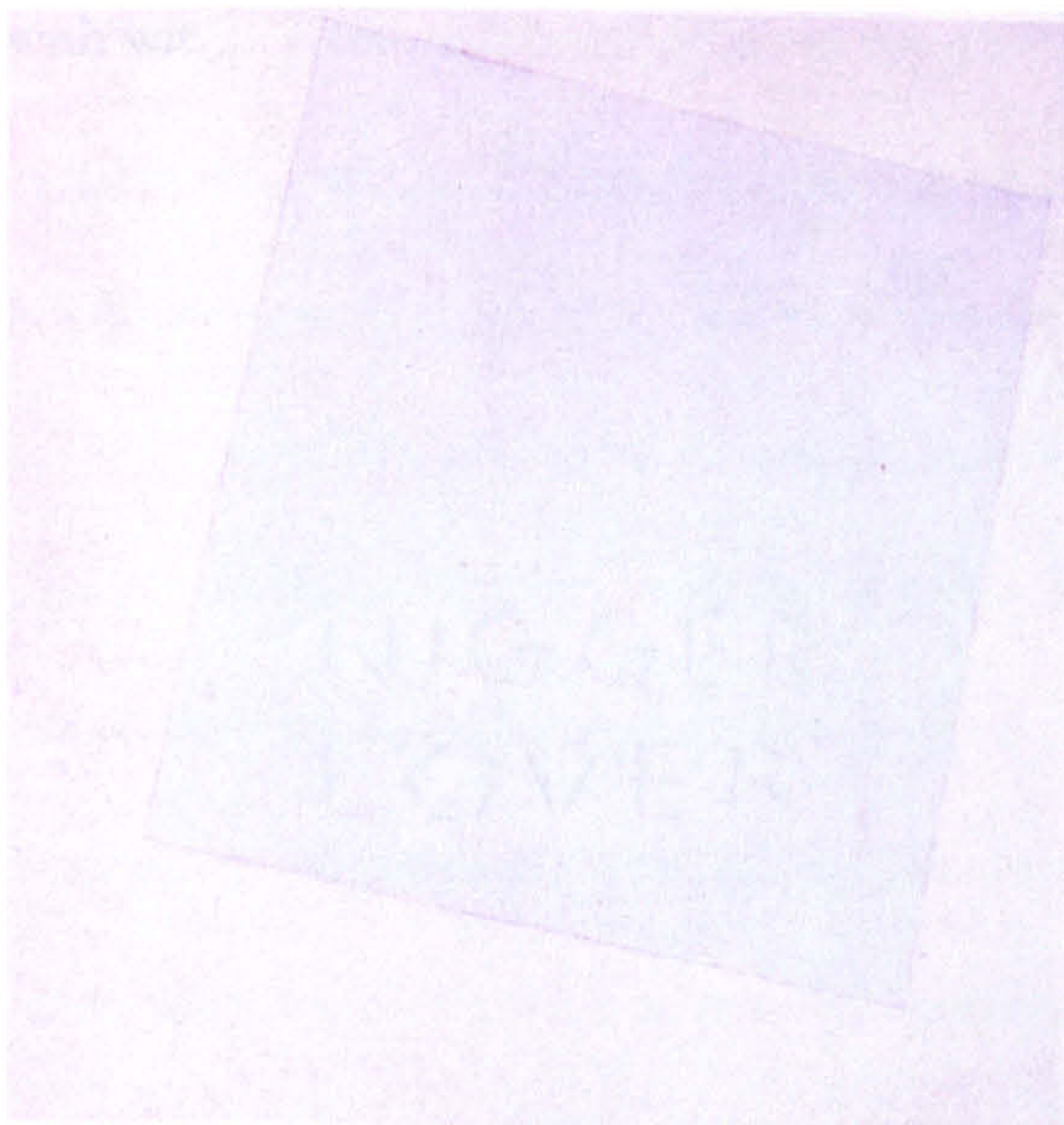
So whilst the *Black Square* is often casually cited as the first monochrome in western Art History (cf Ratcliff 1989), it can also be read as an early example of psychic indeterminacy played out on an optical surface, of the conjunction of at least two seemingly incompatible or diverse things. We might also read the *Black Square* as having a further psychic status, of which its optical image is symbolic. If the *Black Square* is in some way psychically symbolic of the overthrowing of an old order, an order which has had repressive functions, then it can be seen in a warped relation to such work as Whistler's *White Girl*, if we read the latter as psychically symbolic of the impending collapse of Colonialism in which the Phallic is so strongly implicated.

For the Suprematists, the square was the ideal shape. Its flawless system of equal fours was a reflection of the cosmic 'fourth dimension' that Suprematist philosophy embraced. The fourth dimension was the zone of transcendence of mere matter; a dimension of spiritual and perceptual possibilities existing beyond the quotidian limitations of the three dimensions ordering the physical world. The fourth dimension essentially tied in with Suprematist ideals and the 'beyond the mind language' that was Zaum (Douglas 1980:28), but had its roots in a direct challenge to Euclidean geometry. The whole notion of a 'fourth dimension' was exciting cultural currency in early Twentieth Century Russia, capturing the public's attention in a similar way to the concept of the Black Hole or Chaos Theory more recently<sup>28</sup>. James Billington suggests the term 'Prometheanism' to describe the cultural feeling-tone of early Twentieth Century Russian artistic circles, with their fashionable belief that, 'man – when fully aware of his true powers – is capable of totally transforming the world in which he lives.' (Billington 1968:478).

The proposed Suprematist being, a hyper-developed human who epitomised this psychic revolution, was thought to be already present in the world by some writers – most notably P.D Uspensky. His two seminal works, 1909's *The Fourth Dimension* and the later *Tertium Organum* of 1911 espoused the sum of Suprematist thinking<sup>29</sup>. Coming from a Theosophical background



(Madame Blavatsky herself had also written about the fourth dimension), Uspensky was most crucial as a philosopher in his fundamental belief that these new people with their new powers were most likely to be artists, and that the new consciousness would first be noticed in art. He wrote, 'In art we already have the first experience of the *language of the future*. Art is the avant-garde of psychological evolution' (Uspensky in Douglas 1980:30)<sup>30</sup>. Perhaps the most notable aspect of Uspenskian thinking in terms of his influence on Malevich is Uspensky's prophecy that a race of 'supermen', the equivalent of eastern yogis, would emerge from the loins of the western world. The mark of this White western 'superman' – and it is here that we begin to detect echoes of the Suprematist doctrines of Malevich – would be his ability to perceive beyond established Euclidean limits. The 'superman' would be fully able to perceive the world as a four-dimensional totality, and the events of the three-dimensional world will seem to him transparent, simplistic – like a child's view of the world. In fact, children's and so-called 'primitive' art began to be avidly studied by painters, in order to try and gain access to a space that was considered 'pure', untouched by rational logic.



**Figure 7:** Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White* c.1918 Oil on canvas. 79.4x79.4cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



The sense of a progressive erasure of objecthood found almost completely monochrome form in Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* c.1918 [Figure 7]. Apparently, Malevich was so certain about the birth of a new era of four-dimensional consciousness in art that he spoke of this painting as the limit of painting, existing among the last possible works of art in two dimensions (cf Henderson 1983). For Malevich the colour white stood for infinity, a perfect world where objects were no longer capable of strangling the will of the artist. For others, the colour white and notions of the strangling of individual wills have more sinister connotations. Contemporary painter Gordon Bennett, a Mixed Race Aboriginal/White Australian, takes on the kind of symbolic privileging of the colour white that Malevich exemplifies, and puts it in a position where it cannot win. Bennett's often harrowing images explore the complex historical position of the Aboriginal in the White Australian culture and imagination, and an identifiable trope in his work is his tendency to 'quote' passages from the 'canon' of western Art History. Sometimes Bennett will position these alongside illustrated events from Aboriginal history; at other times he will combine on a single canvas passages painted in a western academic style, with sections painted in an Aboriginal style. Bennett's acts of reverse cultural appropriation are accomplished neatly and with wit.



NIGGER  
LOVER

**Figure 8:** Gordon Bennett, *Suprematist Painting No. 1 (Nigger Lover)* 1993 Acrylic on canvas. 50x50cm. Acrylic on canvas. Bellas Gallery, Brisbane; Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.



Gordon Bennett's 1993 'cover version' of a Malevich, *Suprematist Painting No.1 (Nigger Lover)*

[Figure 8] is a rare example of near-monochromy in a body of work that is largely figurative. A barely-visible 'Suprematist' cross orders the composition of Bennett's white almost-monochrome, which 'passes' for art in a manner similar to the way the artist himself, who is light-skinned, 'passed' for White for many years before he began to think about his Aboriginal identity. As Bob Lingard and Fazal Rizvi write,

'Bennett's work is located at once within both European institutions and traditions of Aboriginality. It is both inside and outside the institutions of Western traditions of art. Thus ambivalence lies at the heart of Bennett's oppositional critical consciousness. He exploits this ambivalence, positioning himself in such a way as to disconcert and discomfort his audience. But his is not a realist representation of the history of European brutality toward Aboriginal people, but a political project that uses historical images to make the viewer uncomfortable, unsure of how to react.' (Lingard & Rizvi 1994:84)

With a strategy of what I call 'critical indeterminacy', Gordon Bennett reproduces an image which he knows has a specific cultural currency 'as' art, and which he can be sure will be familiar to gallery-goers. However he undermines that 'art' status with a palimpsest of tricks, all of which disturb the White western notion of the sanctity and purity of its art traditions. Bennett makes stylistic reference to Aboriginal painting, and places an enormous burden of signification on a single consonant in his title. When white Suprematism becomes White supremacism, the association of Malevich's ideal, enlightened White western subject with acts of horrific racist abuse is chilling. Bennett visits the domain of western traditions of academic painting in *his* way, unmasking the brutality and exclusionary nature of a system which considers itself enlightened, 'supreme'. If Bennett's word-play, mimicry and 'shifting of emphasis' (SE viii:51) are all techniques which Freud describes as comic, then this painting can be read as a joke of some kind at the expense of the White Phallus and his followers. The addition of text to Bennett's surface is, I think, the final and most successful 'trick'. The phrase 'Nigger Lover' is inscribed on to the near-monochrome surface, formally 'sully'ing' what could be described as surface 'purity' in the



same way as racist thinking would describe Bennett as having been ‘sullied’ and rendered valueless by his ‘Black blood’. However, the phrase was written with red paint straight from the tube and overlaid with white, which Bennett then cut with a knife so that the raised skin of the painted letters gives the effect of bleeding, cut flesh. This references both the ritual scarification performed by some Aboriginal peoples, but also the violent act of stabbing or cutting that often takes place in racist assault. Bennett’s *Suprematist Painting No. 1 (Nigger Lover)* performs a kind of tricky mirroring; it reflects to the system its own image, but that image also contains the unexpected and disturbing reflection of two subjects whose existence that system would rather not acknowledge – the ‘Nigger’, and the treacherous White ‘Nigger Lover’. Here, the colour white that for Malevich signified the ultimate creative freedom of the infinite void is redeployed; this time by one of the subjects at whose expense this freedom was bought. For Bennett and others like him, the associations of the colour white (and of white crosses) can never be quite so simple, or so idealistic<sup>31</sup>.

If Malevich’s white was purity, ‘truth’, and freedom from colour, his black is far more problematic. The intervention of X-Ray technology has enabled the discovery that the very blackness of *Black Square* is, if not strictly a lie or trick, at least a disguise. Irina Vikar of the Tretyakov Gallery says,

‘[...] the picture must have been a result of some complicated work. When we look at the *Black Square*, we see under its cracks the lower layers of paints – pink and green; evidently that was some colour composition, which was found unsatisfactory and painted over.’  
([http://www.vor.ru/culture/cultarch2\\_eng.html](http://www.vor.ru/culture/cultarch2_eng.html))

The presence of other colours under the now famously cracked surface of the *Black Square* seems at first almost like a cancellation of the painting’s resolute blackness. What else might that painting be concealing? Might there be some form of mimetic representation underneath? Did Malevich perhaps even paint a traditional Russian religious icon beneath, effectively pulling a dark symbolic cloak of invisibility over the centuries-old tradition of representative Christian painting?



No-one can look upon the face of the living God and survive, not even an epoch-making visual artist of the Twentieth Century.

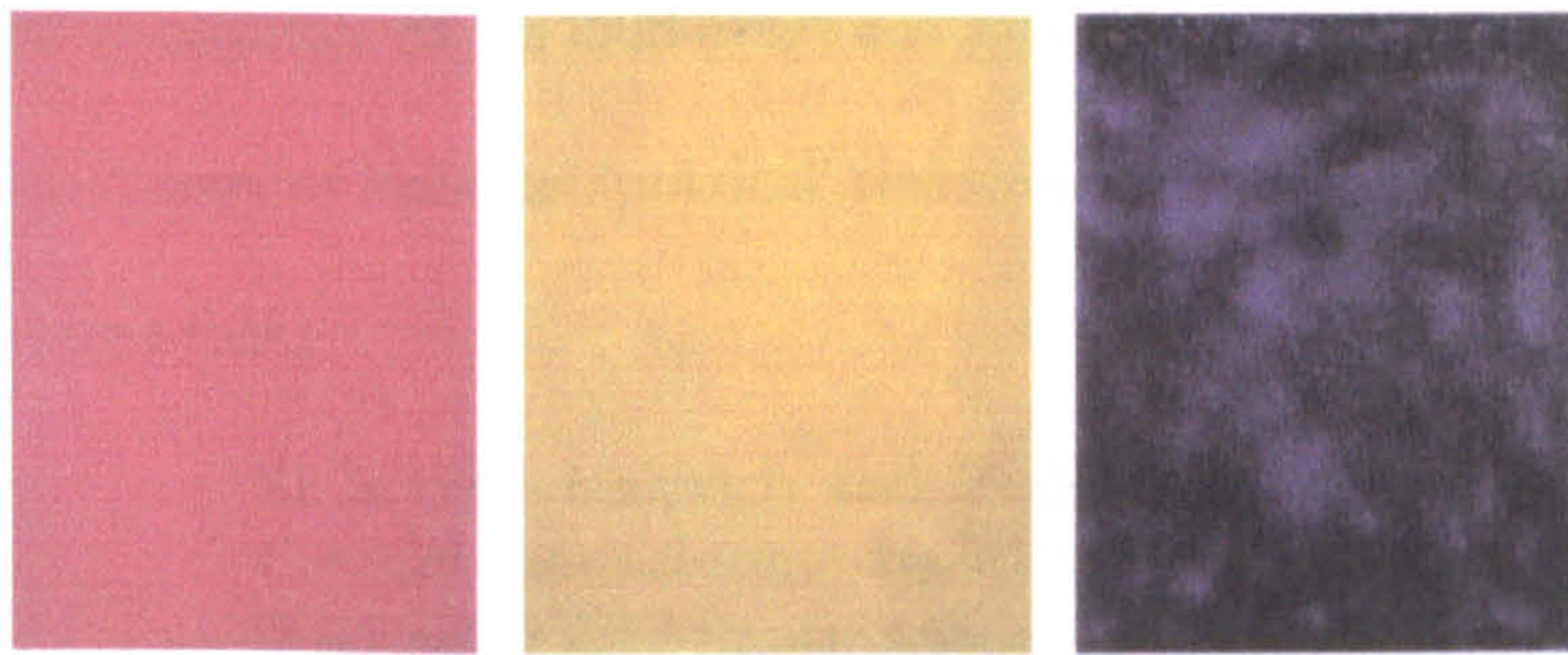
The blackness of Malevich's *Black Square* is essentially a paradox. Malevich could be read as blacking out authority in a completely literal way, by the act of painting over. The scene of the crime, as it were, is now veiled. However, in the confusion that surrounded the dating of Malevich's work, nobody discovered until after his death that the work's original title was simply, *Square*. The 'original', which everyone knew but no-one had seen, had a powerful notional existence (especially since Malevich painted a second version in 1920). If we were to read this as an act of trickery, the *Black Square* is brought into tension with the fictive monochromes of Nineteenth Century France. Both the 'original' of Malevich's *Black Square* and the Nineteenth Century joke monochromes share the status of existing 'notionally'. As good mimesis requires submission to the Logos, Malevich's painting, with its insistent non-mimetic quality, slips out from under Logocentric authority, beginning a deferral of meaning that could continue indefinitely. It is pregnant with possibilities, and therein lies its power. Like the Imaginary, it is on the threshold of meaning rather than the anti-meaning of the Nineteenth Century joke monochromes, which remain within the Symbolic because they are defined in opposition to meaning (in this case, figuration). Reading Malevich's blackness, which is underscored by colour (and maybe even representation, who knows), as a trick becomes easier when we remember that Malevich himself wondered whether the 'trick' could be the only way in which to present the 'truth'.

In 1913 Malevich joined the *Budelyabin*, or *Man of the Future* group. Along similar lines as Suprematism, *Budelyabin* espoused doctrines pertaining to the transcendent power of humankind, and the creation of new social and cultural values. The *Budelyabin* project was to create a new language; something which would be universal and, more importantly, would *transcend reason*. Uspensky (in Kantian mode), had proposed in the *Tertium Organum* that behind each phenomenon



lay the *noumenon*, the spiritual or multi-dimensional world or idea. This could not be expressed in words and was therefore *outside of logic*. The *Black Square*, though never quite achieving the ubiquity Malevich desired, retains its illegibility because it too is 'written' outside of logic. In fact, the metaphor of 'writing' is really wrong here, as Uspensky's formula does not allow for anything outside of logic to be inside any systems of reading or writing: that which is outside of logic is always illegible. The notion of the unreadable kickstarted Malevich's experiments in Zaum, a language that can be understood as proto-Semiotic. Charlotte Douglas writes that Malevich's painting style became 'alogical' at the height of his Zaum experiments (Douglas 1980:33); varying object size at will, for example, or obliterating notions of narrative cohesion. Douglas does, however, refer here to Malevich's figurative painting style. The *Black Square* or the *White Square on White Ground* can be seen as persistently 'alogical' amongst Malevich's works, balancing on the threshold of meaning, always threatening to obliterate the possibility of a full and final reading. As proto-blank spaces – spaces with potentially mobile and paradoxical meanings, spaces which are usually interpreted as 'unintelligible' – both these paintings exist in the tantalising, Imaginary state of almost (but never quite) touching anti-meaning, presenting meaning as an oscillation. Malevich, influenced by the ideas of Bogdanov and Lunarcharsky<sup>32</sup>, conceived the *Black Square* as an Icon (albeit, ironically, an anti-iconic icon) of common relation and common destiny. His anti-iconic Icon was to be a new way of visualising the creativity and intense energy of the state of continuous Revolution<sup>33</sup>. The *Black Square* is an attempt to revolutionise not only sensory experience, but also the way we communicate and 'read'. It is complicit in the 'trick' of the blank surface within a replete visual culture, it seeks the space between spectator, work and meaning – a space that the spectator's ego wishes to close – and then jams it perpetually open.





**Figure 9:** Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Yellow Colour*, *Pure Blue Colour* 1921. Oil on canvas. Each panel: 62.5 x 52.7cm. Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow.

Aleksandr Rodchenko's three rectangles, *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Yellow Colour* and *Pure Blue Colour*, 1921 [Figure 9] also shared in the Malevichian explosion of representation. More specifically however, Rodchenko was convinced that the advent of these three pictures indisputably spelled the death of painting. In 1921, Rodchenko was part of a group of five Constructivist artists (including Stepanova, Ekster, Popova and Vesnin<sup>34</sup>) who each contributed five pieces of work for the first part of a two part show in Moscow entitled, *5X5=25*. Years later and with a showy finality, Rodchenko claimed,

‘I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed; it’s all over. Basic colours. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation.’  
([www.moma.org/exhibitions/rodchenko/texts/death\\_of\\_painting.html](http://www.moma.org/exhibitions/rodchenko/texts/death_of_painting.html)).

Like Malevich just before him, Rodchenko enacted what he perceived as the death of old, outmoded forms. Like Malevich, he showed that he had seen through the suspensions of disbelief. He had reduced all the trickery of realist painting to its logical end, thus revealing it for what it really was: a show. Rodchenko's triptych has iconic status in terms of the story of Modernist art. For Rodchenko and the other Constructivists and leaders of the avant garde, the gesture of distilling the whole history of painting into the three primary colours from which all painting is generated was full of political as well as artistic significance. By ‘proving’ the death of the old forms, Rodchenko had forced the imperative of seeking out new ones.



In an example of the kind of art criticism that I describe as ‘Phallic’, Thomas McEvilley sets up the binary of ‘spiritual/political’ and situates Rodchenko and Malevich squarely on either side. He writes that,

‘It is with Malevich and Rodchenko that the two great axes of Twentieth Century monochrome traditions are defined – metaphysical and materialist’.  
(McEvilley 1988 [trans. Anson 2001:4])<sup>35</sup>

McEvilley’s radical polarisation of Malevich (spiritual, cerebral, sublime) and Rodchenko (political, sculptural, direct) attempts to ‘solve’ the problem of surface illegibility by ascribing symbolic significance to that illegibility. What this kind of reading does not do, however, is to allow for a close inspection of that illegibility. If we attempt to find common ground between the two painters, instead of seeing them as occupying opposing positions within a binary, we will see that both painters understood the blank vehicle of monochrome as a symbol of collectivity. What Rodchenko’s monochromes also share with the *Black Square*, however, is an essential understanding that in order to be truly revolutionary in image-making, the hegemony of representation must be shaken. Composition must be eliminated, for only then can anyone begin to ask questions about what the elimination of composition might reveal for painting. The blankness that is created by the erasure of something perceived as hegemonic (in this case figuration) is a generative blankness, full of potential (see Chapter Four). It is interesting to think about the recent fervent activity around the abolition of references to ‘race’ in a similar light. It is now commonly accepted that ‘race’ has no scientific credibility; that beneath the optical surface where variations in skin colour, eye shape, hair type and so on occur, there is in fact no provable difference. Nevertheless, in the words of pioneering ‘Mixed Race’ theorists Naomi Zack and Jayne O. Ifekunigwe, ‘race’ remains a ‘popular folk concept’ (Ifekwunigwe in Parker & Song [eds] 2001:42), and will not be erased so easily. If the terminology of ‘race’ is erased, though, what it would leave would be an area of blankness of enormous potential; a blankness that would be claimed and contested by many. It would leave a new notional space, but this space would be paradoxical for it would contain the traces of issues set adrift by the removal of foundations upon



which, previously, their discussion had rested. The removal of composition, similarly, creates a fertile instability. The nemesis of mimesis as shown in Rodchenko and Malevich allows for a questioning of that which was previously taken for granted; representation. I also read the erasure of the individual authorial mark as equally important for both artists – this may be inspired by Impressionism, the first movement where systematically the authorial mark begins to be erased. Blank space as represented by the monochrome has factored into it a fundamental duality; it is the place where the condition of fullness and the condition of emptiness are often mistaken for one another.

‘In order to perceive fullness, one must retain an acute sense of the emptiness which defines it. Conversely, in order to perceive emptiness one must apprehend other zones of the world as full [...] if only because the art work exists in a world furnished with many other things. The artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical; a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence.’ (Sontag in *Minimal Means* Ex.Cat.1989:10)

In a blank surface, conditions are interchangeable and can take advantage of this by swapping clothes, deliberately confusing the viewer. It is in this switching, this perpetual disguise, that attempts can be made to re-order the world. The cancelling activity of the blank space of monochrome can be read as a stamping-out or a covering over (as in Malevich’s *Black Square*), in a possible attempt to destroy or conceal something. However, this reading would need to take into account the possibility that, in order to perform the concealment, the surface would have to contain within itself the thing it wanted to destroy. In other words, it had to eat it up, to assimilate in order to manage the threat. The ‘crime’ would then be covered over with a veil of black paint, attention would be shifted neatly to the veil, (for it *is* all about the veil, after all) and the culprit would thus become invisible. In Malevich’s case, for example, what gets assimilated into the reading of his monochrome as the end of compositional relations is in fact a series of actual compositional relations; present but rendered invisible by the black monochrome.



### 1:3 Monochrome: Art or Object?

Monochrome is often positioned alongside such things as Duchamp's readymades; both are frequently seen as objects whose objectness puts the category of 'art' in crisis. Here, monochrome's psychic indeterminacy is concealed by a quite clear optical indeterminacy; the trickery acquires an extra layer and begins to perform the movement of an oscillation. Barbara Rose, in her 1965 essay *ABC Art*, cites Malevich in a relation to Duchamp as dual initiator of what is usually described as Minimalism;

'In 1913, Kasimir Malevich, placing a black square on a white ground that he identified as the 'void', created the first suprematist composition. A year later, Marcel Duchamp exhibited as an original work of art a standard metal bottle-rack, which he called a 'ready-made'. For half a century, these two works marked *the limits of visual art*. Now, however, it appears that a new generation of artists, who seem not so much inspired as impressed by Malevich and Duchamp [...] are examining in a new context the implications of their radical decisions. Often, the results are a curious synthesis of the two men's work.'

(Rose in Battcock [ed] 1968:275, my italics)

Rose raises two important points; first of all the concept of 'limits' for visual art; limits which monochrome, when decked out in the guise of art, always seems to float dangerously close to. Secondly, she positions the origins of the Minimalist aesthetic within which monochrome is so often located, as the result of a confluence of the work of two artists. Whilst the artists in question are not diametric opposites, this could still be read as a juncture of a Two which produces a tricky One (that is not really One, but Many). The practitioners of Minimalist art (also called 'ABC Art', (Rose) 'Literalist Art' (by Michael Fried, unconvinced of its value<sup>36</sup>), 'Primary Structures' and 'Specific Objects') generally had a developed awareness of the movements of western art, and of their place within these movements. Malevich, the second great influence that Rose mentions, was key to the Minimalists as a forerunner of an art that was free from service to the state and free from representation and all its concomitant ideological constraints<sup>37</sup>. Some Minimalist artists paid tribute to the Russian Constructivist sculptors who had helped pave this particular way, for example Dan Flavin's *Monument for V. Tatlin*, 1964. Flavin's *Monument*, an assembly of neon tubes, had not been carved, painted or even arranged by the artist – Flavin



issued instructions to electricians in the gallery space for its arrangement. Echoes of Duchamp resound in this kind of sculpture, echoes which are as evident in relation to chance as to the exploration of the 'non-art' aesthetic. The favouring of simple order over complex compositional relations resulted in what appeared to be an aesthetic of exclusion, a gradual paring down. Importantly, as surfaces (or appearances) closed down, the possibilities of what could count as art opened out quite radically. Even Clement Greenberg wrote that,

'The paradoxical outcome of this reduction has been [...] to expand the possibilities of the pictorial; much more than before lends itself now to being experienced pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial; all sorts of large and small items that used to belong entirely to the realm of the arbitrary and the visually meaningless.' (Greenberg in O'Brian [ed] 1993:132)<sup>38</sup>

A work of art's factuality or 'objectness' was understood, within the written discourses of Minimalism, to directly problematise meaning. Interestingly, Lawrence Alloway writes of this process as anti-significatory:

'When we view art as an object we view it in opposition to the process of signification. Meaning follows from the presence of the work of art, not from its capacity to signify absent events or values (a landscape, the Passion, or whatever). This does not mean we are faced with an art of nothingness or boredom as has been said with boring frequency. On the contrary, it suggests that the experience of meaning has to be sought in other ways.' (Alloway in Battcock [ed] 1968:55)

Alloway's vision of Minimalism is not a simple challenging of existing codes, it's a full-scale takeover. Alloway reads Minimal works as though they were a new language, each piece understandable in the context of another, similar piece, and changing the process of reading. The work does this in two ways, first of all by its objectness, and secondly by its chaotic relation to the concept 'work'. Monochrome has quite happily acted as a sign for both, as we will see.

To consider monochrome's 'objectness' first of all, some accounts write with a great deal of certainty, as though the objectness of monochrome were already a given. Yve-Alain Bois provides a classic example of this kind of 'Phallic' certainty when he writes, 'Priscilla Colt's sensitive article in *Art International* in 1964, warned against looking at Reinhardt's canvases as if



they were pure monochromes (hence objects).’ (Bois 1991:12). Lucy Lippard’s interpretation provides another example, ‘if a surface is not painted, it becomes ‘sculptural’, no matter how the edges are treated.’ (Lippard 1966:59). The Phallus has spoken and there is no room for argument: monochrome is an object. Only it isn’t, not completely. With its uncluttered clarity of surface, monochrome is often cited as the ideal figure for Modernism as well as Minimalism. Most importantly, it has been seen as the nearest thing to perfection in painting, with its exploration of the flatness intrinsic to the medium as posited by Greenberg;

‘The basic text in Greenberg-influenced criticism is an article, written after the publication of *Art and Culture*, but on which the essays in his book rest, called *Modernist Painting*. Here he argues for self-criticism within each art, “through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized”. Thus “flatness, two-dimensionality, was the only condition shared with no other art, and so modernist painting oriented itself to flatness”’. (Alloway in Battcock [ed] 1968:51)

In spite of his commitment to each medium exploring its own truth, defining characteristics and limit conditions, Greenberg also seemed to allow for the possibility that monochrome painting was not entirely what it seemed. He famously stated that, ‘a stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture (though not necessarily a successful one)’, (Greenberg in O’Brian [ed] 1993:131), contrasting with Motherwell who thought the empty canvas beautiful to begin with. In *Recentness of Sculpture*, Greenberg describes the ‘derision mixed with exasperation’ he felt on first seeing Rollin Crampton’s near-monochromatic pictures in 1951. Some time later, having seen other monochromes (by Yves Klein, Sally Hazlett, Ad Reinhardt), he was ready to admit that some ‘domestication’ had taken place, though what was domesticated was,

‘[...] emptiness, the look of the “void”. A monochromatic flatness that could be seen as limited in extension and different from a wall henceforth automatically declared itself to be a picture, to be art [...] Minimal works are readable as art, as almost anything is today – including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper.’ (Greenberg in Battcock [ed] 1968:181,183)

So monochrome, at first appearing to be non-art, eventually became ‘readable’ as art. Greenberg (wittingly or otherwise) is describing an oscillation, although it is an observable and optical one (as well as having to do with the oscillating tastes of the spectator), rather than a hidden and psychical



one. As aforesaid, monochrome also problematises the notion of ‘work’ – particularly in an industrial society that allows for the possibility of a ‘readymade’. Art was under threat, and as Bois writes, ‘Even at the outset, industrialisation meant much more for painting than the invention of photography and the incorporation of the mechanical into the artist’s process through the readymade tube of paint. It also meant a threat of the collapse of art’s special status into a fetish or a commodity.’ (Bois 1990:233) Could the artefact still stay special? The pared-down aesthetic of Minimalism privileged the mind of the artist, set creative genius above the formerly fetishised hand, or brushstroke. Ideas replaced ‘work’ (or at least became equally fetishised), and for Greenberg, this was the main problem with Minimalism. As early as 1924, El Lissitzky (who did not actually make a monochrome) satirised the notion that the privileging of the idea resulted in optically impoverished work,

‘Now the production of art has been simplified to such an extent that one can do no better than order one’s paintings by telephone from a house painter while one is lying in bed.’ (Lissitzky in Buchloh 1986:45)

In one sense this attitude is a direct descendant of the jocular digs at ‘modern art’ as practised by the imaginary monochromists of Nineteenth Century France. In both cases the comment (or the work) is predicated on a sense of the ridiculous – how can such a thing possibly expect to be read as art, especially when there is no evidence that the artist has actually *done* anything? David Batchelor suggests that this is, in fact, one of monochrome’s more mischievous roles.

‘For adults, getting up is usually the prelude to going to work. Lissitzky’s staying put marked a refusal to go to work, or, more to the point, a recognition that painting might have become largely a question of going to work [...] Now that anyone could make a monochrome, why not stay in bed and order it up? This is perhaps the greatest threat that the monochrome could whisper in the ear of painting: “Pssst, you’re not so special; there’s no difference anymore between painting and a paint-job.”’ (Batchelor in Osborne [ed] 2000:167)

Monochromes in the guise of the ‘readymade’ or that which puts ‘work’ into crisis, also perform a task akin to Barthes’ notion of the Death of the Author. Whilst such a notion does not seem to have a parallel founding moment in the visual arts, when such monochromes appear they challenge the idea of the artist as a uniquely gifted creator. Anyone could make one.



Monochrome's role here is as a democratising device; its mischievous mashing of equal parts wheat and chaff encourage all and sundry to practice 'art' because now it looks easy. Monochrome knocks the crown from the head of the Artist King.

The aesthetic of austerity, of course, had many critics. Peter Fuller writes,

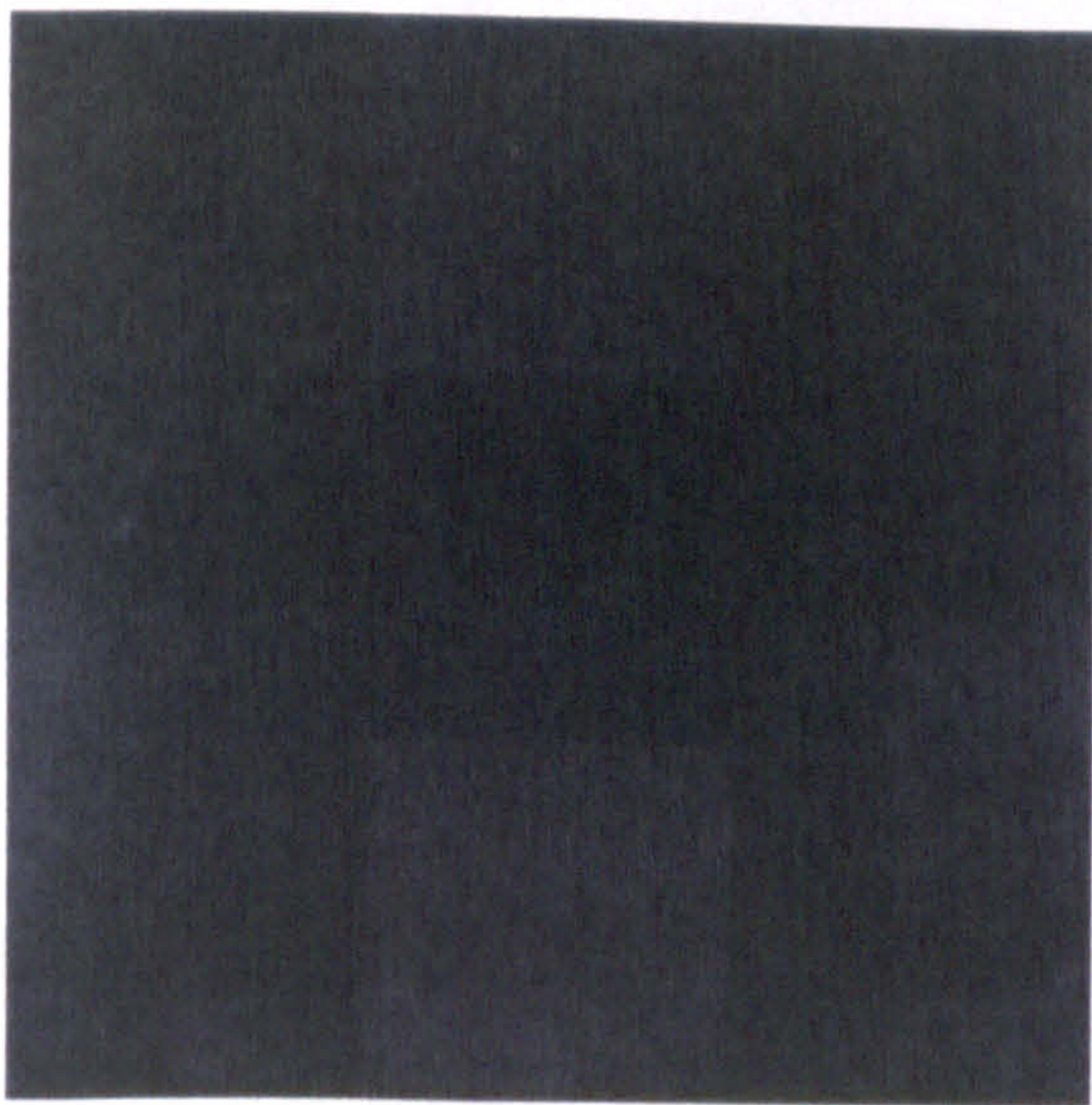
'[...] in 1969 an exhibition entitled, *The Art of the Real* was sent out of MOMA to the Tate Gallery in London. Characteristically, it was attempting to legitimise internationally vacuous, American Late Modernism. It contained coloured planks, bland monochromes, and cubes by a range of artists including André, Feeley, Judd, Kelly, McCracken, Noland, Stella etc. On the cover was the statement, "Today's real (sic) makes no direct appeal to the emotions, nor is it involved in uplift, but instead offers itself in the form of the simple, irreducible, irrefutable object" [...] Reinhardt's parody has come to life: the development of post-war American art is fixed in our minds as a great evolutionary tree which somehow manages to feed and fertilise itself, and from which all parasites fall. It was, however, an evolution towards – rather than away from – a grey expanse of primordial sludge'. (Fuller 1980: 87)

Fuller's disenchantment with the Modernist project is a disenchantment with what he sees as the constraints of 'objecthood'; he is unwilling to accept a message which has not enough 'medium' there for him to get hold of. Fuller's 'primordial sludge', of course, is another critic's 'pure painting', and monochrome is also often situated within traditions of pictorial purity. The monochrome becomes a figure for the exploration of the painter's work, and therefore resembles an experiment of some kind. With nothing superfluous allowed, monochrome is the perfect lightweight, unencumbered vehicle through which both the *act* and the *status* of painting can be explored.

The kind of monochrome that is made by a process of reduction, or that symbolises an aesthetic of exclusion, also troubles received notions of how to 'read' a painterly surface, and I wonder whether the 'exclusion' is symptomatic of some kind of Phallic activity. The White Phallus asserts its power to define, in order to exclude. The act of fetishisation (of the ethnic 'Other', for example) is a Phallic act, and one which simultaneously reinforces both the power of the Phallus,



and the perpetual ‘outsider’ status of the fetishised object. Through the optical surface of a monochrome whose blankness derives from exclusion, might it be possible to read in the psychic surface a *version* of Phallic activity, one that bears structural resemblance to the activities of the Phallus, but that is, in some way, re-appropriated? The fact that exclusion is a Phallic activity does not, of course, make all practices of exclusion Phallic. However, if we remember that the purpose of fetishism is to disavow the imagined sight of castration, this might help. If the subject of Mixed Race as ‘tragic Mulatto’ reads as castrated, then once the Phallic ego looked on such a creature, it would surely recognise in her optical/phenotypic surface the troubling reflection of his own castration. This could explain some of the sexual fetishising of Mixed Race subjects that can happen. However, what I really want to suggest here is that the kind of problematic and troubling Phallic activity in a structure that is outside of Phallic Law – in this case, monochromes whose aesthetic is one of exclusion – is in some way structurally homologous to the problematic and troubling Whiteness in the optical and psychic surfaces of the subject of Mixed Race.



**Figure 10:** Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting No. 5* 1962. Oil on canvas. 152.4 x 152.4cm. Tate Gallery, London.

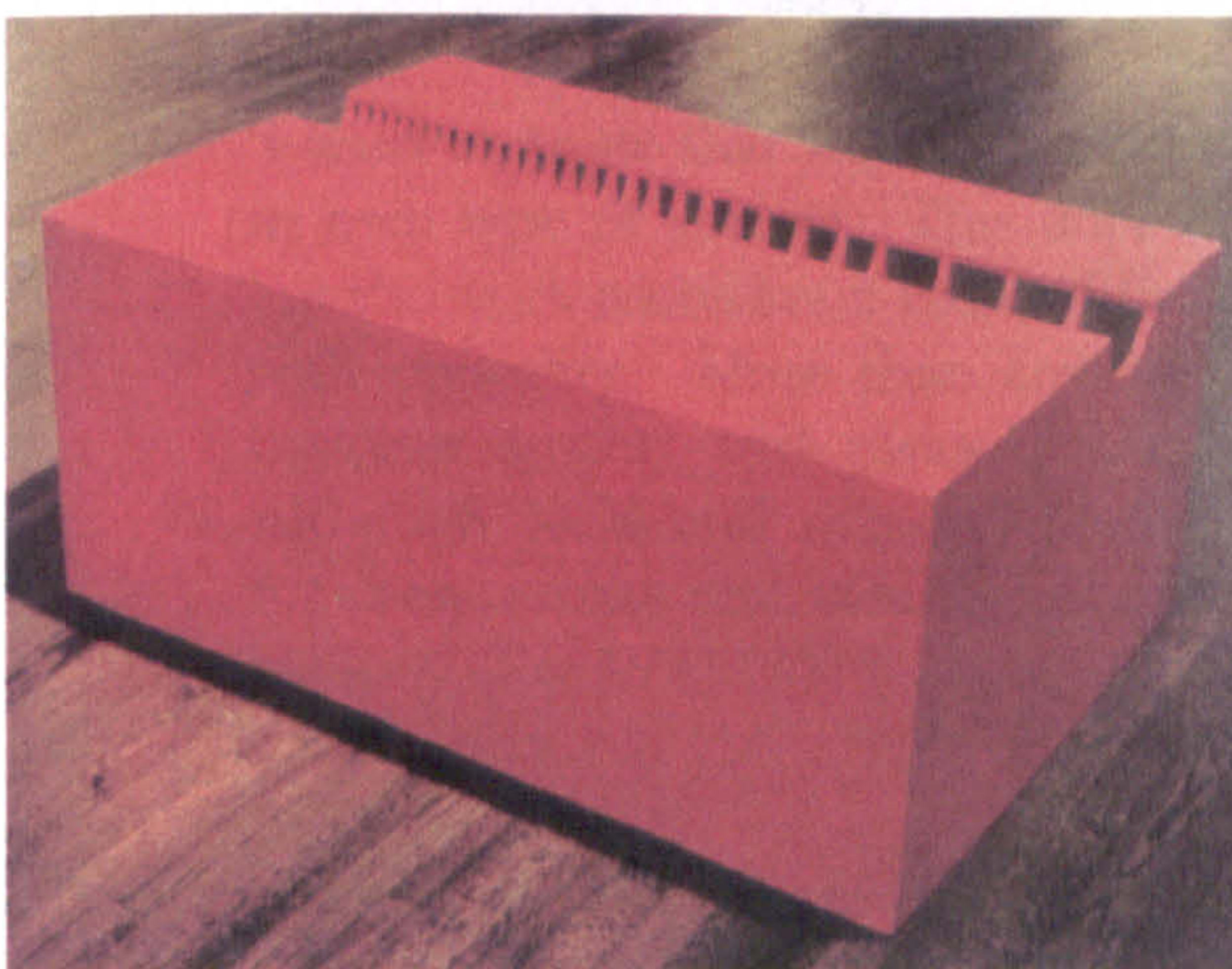
The surfaces of Ad Reinhardt (1913-1966) [Figure 10] explore the negative, through repetition. Reinhardt’s copious, fierce and profoundly confusing writings – what Yve-Alain Bois calls an ‘oxymoronic and asymptotic logic, always almost an illogic’ (1991:11) – make a strong case for the



exploration of doubt or negativity. Reinhardt stressed the intellectual power of asserting 'not'. For him denial was almost like an affirmation and he worked to a pictorial philosophy that what is *not* there is more important than what *is* there. Barbara Rose in *ABC Art* called him the 'father' of minimalism. As little as two years after his death, he was also hailed as the father of conceptual art. It seems as though everyone wanted a piece of Reinhardt's artistic pie. His earlier paintings from the 1940s have busy, almost figurative surfaces<sup>39</sup>. It is, however, for his black paintings that Reinhardt is best known. These works, which began to appear in 1955 and carried on until the end of his life, were as far as Reinhardt was concerned, both 'the first paintings that cannot be misunderstood', and 'the last paintings that anyone could make'<sup>40</sup>. These assertions show that there was nothing there, to either understand or misunderstand. Reinhardt's obsessive repetition of the black monochrome (from 1959 onwards he would only paint square 5'x5' black canvases), earned him the status of 'black monk' of the New York School, a maverick status he enjoyed. His black paintings differed only infinitesimally from one another in what Sam Hunter refers to as his, 'rather esoteric and severely reductionist art.' (Hunter 1991:27). Reinhardt was interested in Jungian analytical psychology and Eastern philosophies – he said he was attracted to Zen because it, 'goes over and over something until it disappears' – but he did not understand his laying-on of paint as a devotional act in the same way as, say, Yves Klein. What he does share with Klein is a strong objection to the idea of art as a kind of expressionistic autobiography. In many of his cartoons and satirical drawings he liked to ridicule critic Harold Rosenberg and his famous statement about Abstract Expressionism, that the canvas had become an 'arena' in which the artist must 'act', flashing a glimpse of bare human psyche. However, the interest in psychology and spirituality was definitely confined to his 'Life' as opposed to his 'Art'; Reinhardt repudiated any kind of supernatural content in pictures to be useless metaphysical baggage that detracted the viewer from the experience of the painting, from Reinhardt's own quest for an art of absolute purity.



Yve-Alain Bois (1991:11) directs attention to the fact that Reinhardt jotted down the phrase, ‘a sign which refuses to signify’, another oxymoron in the Reinhardtian tradition. Signification is not only what signs do, it is also what they are. It is in the ‘refusal’ that the importance resides; echoing Reinhardt’s own refusal to be categorised by critics of the time. He liked to collect lists of all the different schools his work had been fitted into, usually to disprove them. Some of these labels would include, ‘negativist’, ‘classicist’, ‘purist’, ‘avant-gardist’, ‘religious painter’ and so on (Bois 1991:11). Reinhardt’s puritanical stance towards the absolute separateness of art and life earned him another label; that of an artist with great integrity and ethical imperatives. All of this just goes to show, however, how elusive and resistant to categorisation were Reinhardt’s singular approaches to painting, and to life. Like Barthes’ notion of myth itself in his essay *Myth Today*, Reinhardt’s monochromes are a second-order semiological system, or meta-painting. A second-order semiological system is constructed from a semiotic chain that preceded its own existence (Barthes 1957:114), and obviously such a signifying system will not easily lend itself to categorisation. Reinhardt’s failure to gain the admiration of his own generation was to haunt him throughout his life, despite the fact that the new generation of young neo-conceptualists (particularly Stella who collected Reinhardt’s black paintings), was profoundly influenced by his stark form of non-objectivity. As signs that refuse to signify, Reinhardt’s almost identical black



**Figure 11:** Donald Judd, *Untitled* 1963. Cadmium red light oil on wood. 49.5 x 114.3 x 77.5cm. Collection of G. Locksley & G. Shea.



canvases continually repeat and rehearse a paradox – the creation of something that is not there.

Donald Judd, who began as an art critic, wrote with the kind of spare clarity that characterised the look of his ‘specific objects’. Neither painting nor sculpture but a three-dimensional object in between, the ‘specific object’ is by its very nature indeterminate. For Judd, the well of possibilities inherent in both painting and sculpture had run dry. Interestingly for an indeterminate thing, Judd drew attention to what he saw as the ‘singleness’ (Fer 1997:133) of the ‘specific object’.

Taking as an example Judd’s *Untitled* [Figure 11], it is possible to begin to see the conflation of a ‘single’ object with voided object<sup>41</sup>. *Untitled* was exhibited in 1963 at the Green Gallery, New York, as part of a series of sculptures, all painted the same colour to emphasise the unity of the whole. In the essay *Specific Objects*, Judd wrote that, ‘The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting’ (Judd in Harrison & Wood [eds] 1992:183). *Untitled* interests me because it shows its status as an empty object, an object filled with a void. Bryony Fer takes this fundamental duality and runs with it brilliantly, making observations about what is ‘repressed’ within Judd’s structures and his writing<sup>42</sup>. Whilst Judd’s lack of interest in the spectator was clear, and his work is often made to stand for logic and rationality, Fer makes an ingenious claim for a ‘repressed’ in his work, which shifts the status of Judd’s monochrome object from an optical (or physical) unity to a psychic duality;

‘I want to argue that Judd’s art expresses, even in the prohibitions it imposes, its own type of anxiety. This does not involve a simple negation of pleasure, but the work mobilises a rather different set of pleasures from those associated with opticality. More than anything else, it is an often uneasy relationship between anxiety and pleasure that characterises the effects of the work. Although Judd and others stressed the singleness of the object, this split between anxiety and pleasure occurs at the cost of the unity of the viewing subject.’ (Fer 1997:137)

Fer differs from previously-quoted Phallic readers in at least three ways. First of all she refuses to allow for a single, ‘simple’ reading of Judd’s blankness; instead she engages immediately with the possibility of duality and/or multiplicity. Secondly, Fer’s reading of the effects of the work as



mobilising in the spectator an 'uneasy relationship between anxiety and pleasure' performs a radical opening out of meaningful possibilities by deploying the *psychic* activities of both object and spectator. Thirdly, her acknowledgement that there is a 'cost' for the viewing subject's unity places her interpretation very much outside of the tradition of Phallic certainty whose aim is to preserve the unity of the (Phallic) spectating subject at all costs. In troubling that unity, or entertaining the possibility that that unity is unstable, Fer's criticism is refreshingly a-Phallic.

For Fer, the split is mirrored – the psychic duality of the object invokes an analogous reaction in the spectator (or, perhaps, a recognition of that spectator's own psychic duality?). The smooth, even nature of Judd's monochrome objects refuses the spectator the possibility of engaging in a reading of compositional elements or parts, confusing any tacit knowledge of how to approach such a surface. However, the deeper and more radical unsettling that Fer suggests Judd's objects perform is in, 'what I call the dual structure of anxiety and pleasure which underlies Judd's work [...] I do not want to reinforce conventional equations of colour with pleasure and industrial materials with rationality, which are precisely the kinds of opposition that Judd's "specific objects" put in question.' (1997:148). Again, Fer recognises Judd's problematic framing of a void as something that is troubling to established categories, that performs precisely the function of a question to those categories. In actively refusing to engage with such Phallic binaries as 'colour equals pleasure' versus 'industrial materials equal clarity', Fer frees her reader from the constraints of Phallic spectatorship, and is therefore able to actually read, rather than avoid the blankness. If a writer like McEvelley exemplifies, in some of his work, a tendency towards the kind of Phallic reading that disavows blankness, or forces it to 'mean' a single thing, then someone like Fer would provide the perfect example of a non-Phallic, or a-Phallic reading; a reading where blankness is perceived as something mobile, unfixed and ultimately worth examining.



The sheer scale of some Minimalist works, along with the radical positioning of others (for example, on floors or ceilings) meant that Minimalism was often seen as a direct and new challenge to the physical body of the spectator. We remember Michael Fried's dictum that 'presentness is grace' (Fried 1998:168). Whilst Judd's materials, and the large scale of some of his works are often read as belonging to the hard, 'masculine' surfaces of Minimalism, their flawlessly smooth surfaces could in fact be ruined by the tiniest oily fingerprint. Fer suggests that the anxiety inherent in Judd's object is, then, an anxiety about touch. Formally, *Untitled* of 1963 fudges the limits of the binary inside/outside. The object's edges are clearly seen, but so is its empty interior. The visibility of the void inside the structure emphasises the void space surrounding the structure, the space the spectator moves and sees in. Here, Fer draws the reader's attention to Lacan's version of the uncanny, which has explicitly to do with the concept of a psychic skin (1997:148). *L'extimité* reveals neither inside nor outside, but acts as a rupture in the continuous skin which reveals the 'empty' centre, the Real. Exposure of the Real generates anxiety and feelings of vulnerability, the ego's reaction to this is one of manic covering-over. Certain kinds of monochrome reveal the Real in a comparable way to Judd's structures. In Judd, the three-dimensionality of the work creates perceptible levels of Real (as well as real) depth, which I suggest are horrifying to a spectator who is determined not to see the Real. Drawing on Lacan's notion of *l'extimité*, a three-dimensional object such as Judd's box would at first appear to present the possibility of containing the Real. However the spectator's ensuing unconscious realisation that the Real *cannot* be contained – the box is not a closed object, and furthermore the void within it echoes the void the entire box occupies – is terrifying, and engenders a sustained effort in the spectator to cover over or disguise what they think they have just seen. This can take many forms, the most obvious of which is the kind of critical writing that denies uncertainty, indeterminacy, or the void (which is itself indeterminate).

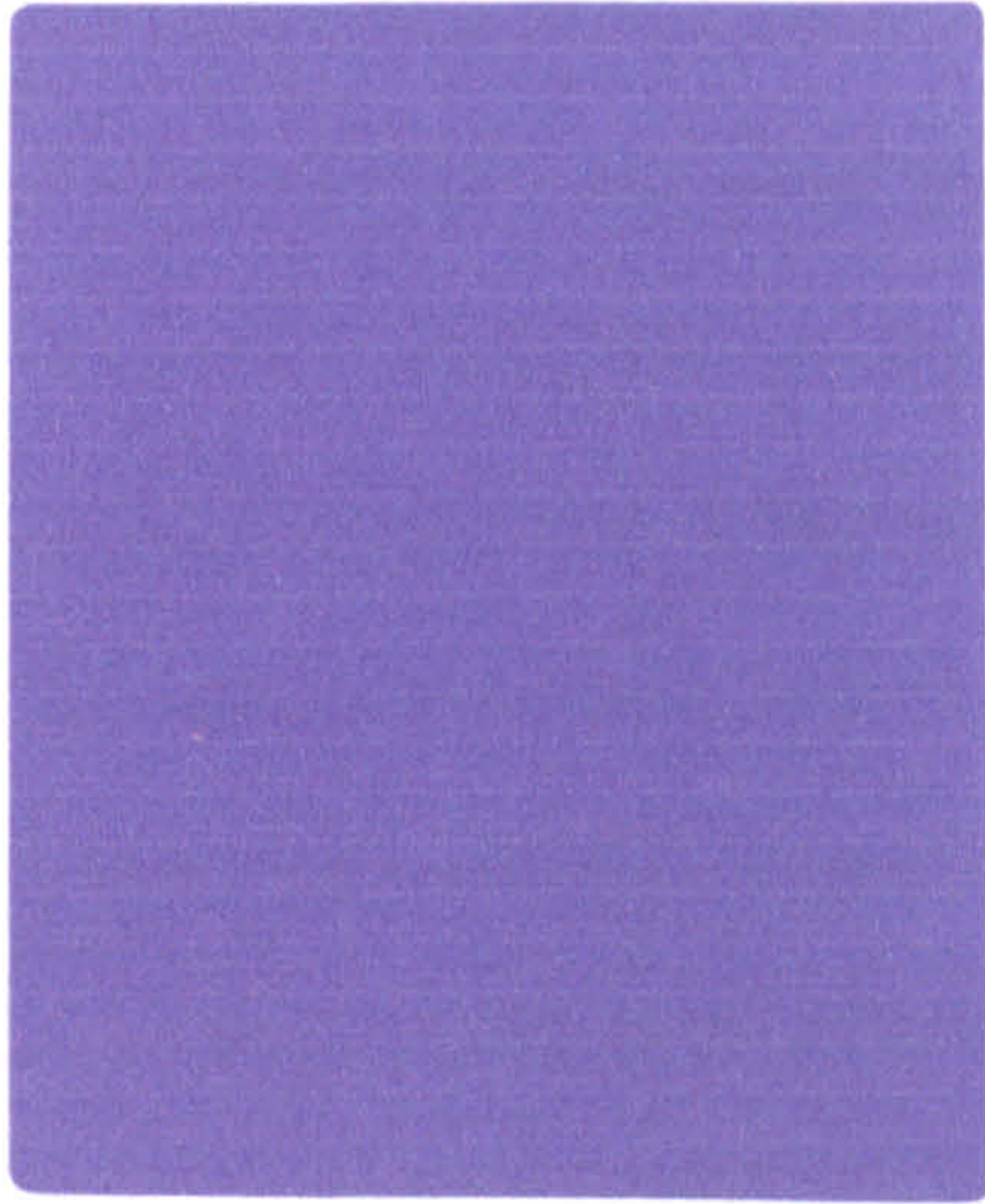


Anna C. Chave's reading of blankness in Minimalism can be understood as a determined attempt to pretend she hasn't seen the full horror of the Real – so determined, in fact, that she aligns it with the least indeterminate and most decisive thing of all; 'The blank face of Minimalism may come into focus as the face of capital, the face of authority, the face of the father.' (Chave 1990:44-63). Chave's interpretation of abstract art in this essay is quite contentious. Her reading tends towards a sort of arcane alphabet of forms, which David Batchelor describes as 'distinctly dodgy claims'<sup>43</sup>. I agree with Batchelor that the activity of forcing meaning on to abstract or blank forms via resemblance is 'dodgy', but I would rather describe that activity as 'Phallic', since it tacitly colludes with the idea that mimesis is meaning. However, I also think that Chave is perceptive in her reading of the *blankness* of Minimalism as in some way Phallic; though I would say that it is Phallic in a confounding way. The face of the father (and of capital) *appears* blank, in order to disguise its approach. Judd's objects appear powerful optically, because of their scale and their smoothness. Psychically, Judd's objects oscillate subtly between containing and presenting the empty horror of the Real, and evoke the duality of horror/pleasure in the Phallic spectator's ego. This, again, makes Judd's objects appear powerful – the evocation of anxiety is also a function of the deciding Phallus. If Judd's objects are Phallic, they are Phallic in the same way that the Mixed Race subject is White – in a troubling way that has to do with mockery and appropriation.

#### 1:4 The Monochrome World of Yves Klein

'There is another aspect of that dual character that is dramatised in the conjunction of Judd and Klein and that is the question of the relation between painting and sculpture, picture and object. The Minimalist critique of a modernist surface was not directed against painting on principle, yet sculpture became a way of thinking one's way out of the modernist paradigm of painting. If the boundaries between painting and sculpture had tended to blur in the idea of the 'specific object', then Klein's monochromes could be seen as objects, their literal presence enhanced by the rounded corners; as pictures, they approached a condition of objecthood almost akin to sculpture, or certainly the pictorial quality of the three-dimensional object Judd had in mind.' (Fer 1997:154)





**Figure 12:** Yves Klein, *Untitled Blue Monochrome (IKB 83)* 1960. Dry pigment and synthetic resin on canvas and wood. 92.7 x 73.7cm. Sidney Janis Gallery, New York.

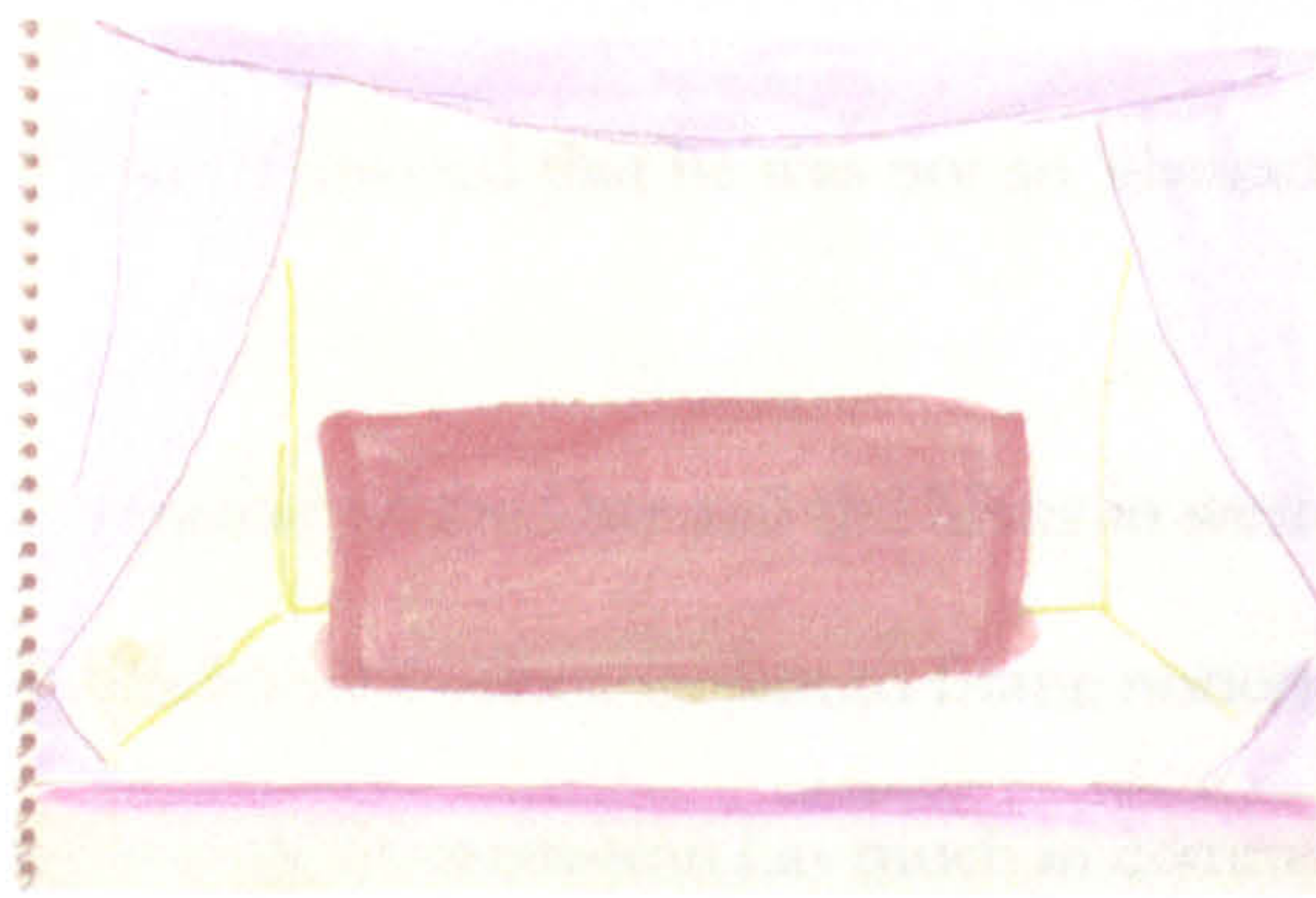
Judd famously admired the blue monochromes of Yves Klein [Figure 12]. Judd saw the abolition of figure-ground relationships as the only way to rid painting of spatial illusionism, and cited the paintings of Yves Klein as exemplary in this (Fer 1997:144-146). However, if Judd's work deliberately defied both depiction and representation, Klein's blue monochromes both depict and represent the expansive blue void of the sky. What I find most interesting about the monochromes of Klein is that they all have their genesis in a fundamental duality, or split-ness, in the artist. As we will see, Klein's dazzling personal showmanship was a deliberate feature (and sometimes the content) of his art – yet he also professed to despise Abstract Expressionism, which he interpreted as vulgar emotional incontinence. He was passionately involved in esoteric mysticism – yet certain features of his work, such as the misogyny of his *Anthropometries*, seem inconsistent with the behaviour of a spiritual being. Perhaps Klein's personal devotion to fighting – he was a champion judo fighter, a symbolic Knight of the Order of St. Sebastien and had a reputation at school as a *barrageur* – could be seen as a symptom of his inability to reconcile his warring inner self. Either way, I would like to read the uninterrupted calm of Klein's blue monochromes both in terms of their genesis in a psychic split, and in terms of Lacan's notion of *l'extimité*, and to see if this might reveal an activation of blankness that has its own defining characteristics.



First seeing Klein's work in New York in 1962 at the Alexandre Iolas Gallery, Judd weirdly described Klein's paintings as 'unspatial' (Judd in Fer 1997:144). Klein was highly vocal about his obsession with space, and so Judd's reading of Klein runs counter to Klein's reading of Klein. I do not want to engage with 'misreading' here, as this is only relevant if you first take the position that there is a single, correct interpretation, and that the author's word is final. What is interesting about this counter-reading is Klein's own counter-reading of Malevich, with whom his work and ideas share common ground. Both artists revere space, infinity and the hidden spiritual powers of humanity. Ad Reinhardt's mystical interests can be allied to Klein's own – the latter saw in monochrome the sign of a spiritual path. Reinhardt was influenced by Buddhist texts, in particular the manuals of classical Chinese and Japanese painters, based on Zen or Ch'an Buddhism. The Buddhist idea of *shunyata*, or emptiness, is itself a principle creator from which comes the space necessary for things to arrive into. At the same time, though, it is also the principle of extinction, a sort of black hole through which every entity that hopes to eventually be, must pass. In classical Buddhist painting this concept is often symbolised by pure sky, or areas of space. In Yves Klein, *shunyata* manifests itself in the form of his 'immaterial zones'. With its generative yet annihilatory power, *shunyata* shares aspects of the Kristevan and Platonic *chora* (see Chapter Four), at once generative and death-bearing. Both concepts are fundamentally indeterminate.

Klein criticised Malevich harshly for what he saw as his slavish devotion to representation, reading *Black Square* as a picture of a monochrome, rather than a monochrome itself. Malevich puts monochrome on stage, creating a background of infinite white space in which it could act or be seen<sup>44</sup>. Klein's monochromes on the other hand exist unfettered, staged only once in the gallery – but magnificently, with Klein's trademark showmanship. Klein's criticism of Malevich, however, is put into crisis when we consider the little-known drawings which show his own 'staging' of monochrome [Figure 13].





**Figure 13:** Yves Klein, *Red Monochrome on Stage* 1954. Watercolour, pastel, ink and pencil on page from a spiral-bound notebook. 13.5 x 21cm. Private collection.

Klein’s monochrome-on-stage is complete with proscenium arch and curtains, we almost expect it to burst into song and a soft-shoe shuffle. I think that Klein’s point here is to literally make monochrome take centre-stage, to foreground it as an active agent. Perhaps he felt that Malevich’s treatment was not literal enough; Klein gives a starring role to his monochrome, Malevich merely gives a ground. Whilst Klein’s extravagant gestures and his status as a ‘personality’ within the art world might ally him more with the Duchampian, they have also resulted in Klein being dismissed as a chancer,

‘Because Klein not only used blue but favoured monochromes devoid of expressionistic, representational, compositional or personalising elements, his art is often misunderstood as an extreme form of pure abstraction based on reductivist and formalist tenets. And because Klein presented his art in theatrical, unconventional displays, his work is often characterised as a burlesque, anti-art, anarchistic commentary’. (Stich 1994:9)

The awareness that he was not the first person to make a monochrome did not stop Klein from claiming he had invented monochrome. Denys Riout understands Klein’s obsession with monochrome as something profoundly new in art, and says, ‘strange as it may sound, I believe that we need to take him at his word and admit that he really did invent the monochrome. Painting a monochrome and inventing the notion of monochromy are two different realities.’ (Riout in Millet 1996:19) Klein’s devotion to monochrome was certainly unique, affecting even his identity – he officially changed his name to *Yves Le Monochrome*. Yves Klein was one of the



main post-war 'abstract' painters who attempted to give a reason and theory to the monochrome, although he himself insisted that he was not an 'abstract' painter, but a painter *of the void*<sup>45</sup>.

Fascinated by themes of the One and the Many in western and non-western esoteric philosophies, Klein used his beloved Rosicrucianism to frame notions of separateness and unity. The Rosicrucian theology of emanation has much in common with Plato's doctrine of the same. In Rosicrucian theology, the divided universe emanates from an original unity. The emanation has seven stages, the last and lowest of which is the level of the body where human life is lived out. In this plane of existence, the multiple boundaries of each individual thing are made rigid by their acquisition of material form. Out of this, logically, comes the notion that form in painting imprisons space. The understanding of 'form' and 'line' in painting as confining and reductive was something Klein was to concentrate his considerable combative energies towards eliminating throughout his artistic life<sup>46</sup>. Out of the desire to free colour from the tyranny of line, Klein developed the notion of blue as the ultimate signifier of free, infinite space inspired by Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, a book that was Klein's constant companion. Here he differs from Malevich, for whom infinity was white. Infinity was to play a key role in the 'new age', when:

'We will all become men 'of air', we will recognise the force of attraction towards that which is on high, towards space, towards emptiness [...] we will literally levitate towards physical and totally spiritual liberty.' (Klein in McEvelley 1982:234)

His blue monochromes were known as *Portraits of the Sky*, in fact he was later to declare the sky itself as his 'first and biggest monochrome', which immediately brings to mind the contemporary artist James Turrell, many of whose installations do in fact act as framing devices for the sky.

Where Klein differs from Turrell is in the apologetics for his work, Klein insisting that he had signed the sky-portraits during an act of levitation from the other side of the sky (Stich 1995:18-20), where space is indivisible<sup>47</sup>.



Yves Klein showed his first monochrome paintings informally in London in 1950 (later claiming that the paintings dated from three years earlier, an act that seems to align him more with ego-centred self promotion than with Zen doctrines of ego control). Following this, his vigorous attempts to establish himself as a part of the Paris art world met with some quite extraordinary rejections. In 1955 he received a rejection from the Paris Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, to which he had submitted an entirely orange monochrome. Their ridiculous letter of response exemplifies the total lack of comprehension of Klein's project. The Administrative Committee had advertised that the salon was open to all kinds of non-figurative art, yet one of their representatives had told Yves' mother in a telephone conversation that, 'You understand, it is really not enough – but if Yves would agree at least to add a small line, or a point, or even simply a touch of another colour, we would be able to hang it. But only one uniform colour, no, no. Truly, this is not enough, it is impossible' (Stich 1995:58). The following morning, Klein received a letter from the salon representatives exemplifying (in Klein's words) their 'totalitarian spirit'. He was told, 'We will be happy if [...] you decide to exhibit with us another year – to the extent that having seen our Salon, you will envision a way to bring your effort in agreement with ours' (Stich 1995:59).

The rigidity of the Salon's representative is characteristic of certain Phallic behaviour. When confronted with something that does not fit the established criteria, the system resorts to one of two tactics: either the work in question must submit to having its own nature altered to fit the nature of the system, otherwise it must be obliterated. It is interesting that something as tiny as 'a touch of another colour' is all that the Salon required to make Klein's work signify, for them, as 'art'. This totalitarian approach is reminiscent of the famous 'One Drop Rule', the historical and legal custom operational in certain States in America of classifying anyone with one Black ancestor, regardless of how far back the ancestor or how White the person's appearance, as Black. A single 'drop' of 'Black blood' was, according to this Phallic thinking, potent enough to destroy (socially, at least) even the Whitest of complexions. A single 'drop' was necessary for the system

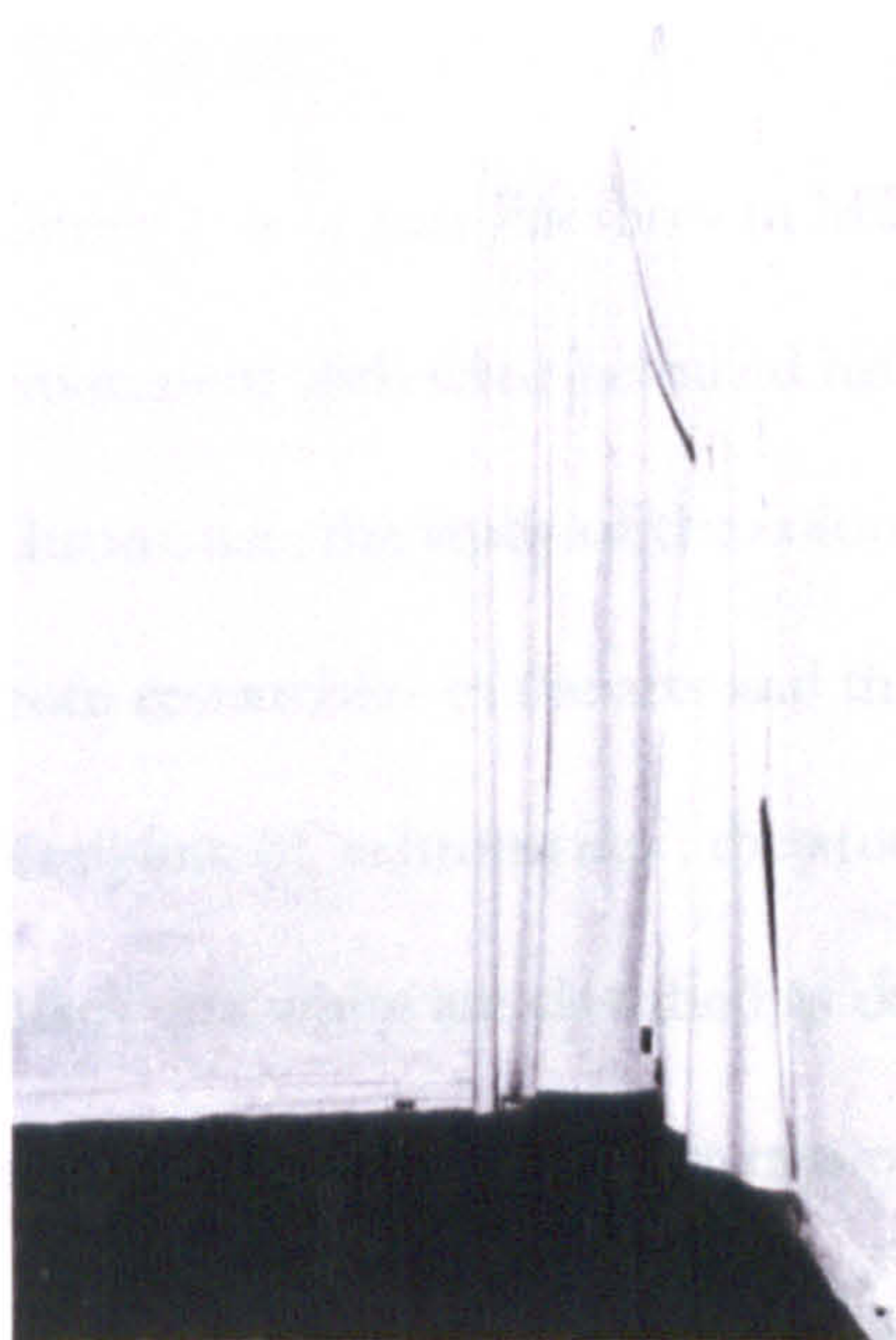


to practice its (exclusionary) definition, in a comparable way to the way the single touch of another colour would have allowed Klein's painting to be classified as 'art' by the salon. I think that the key point here concerns the Phallic tendency to seize the smallest area of differentiation, then use that to make classifications whose function is to maintain the Phallus' illusion of power. The subject with various degrees of 'racial' Mixing – in particular the subject with very White looks – or the painting that appears to be empty, both present the uncanny in their psychic *and* optical surfaces. Lacan's conceptualisation of the uncanny as a problematic skin (*l'extimité*) can be used as a metaphor for both. In the example of Klein's orange monochrome, its optical surface presents psychic panic to the Phallic spectators, since the blankness of the optical surface both reveals and conceals the terrifying emptiness of the Real. In the case of the White-looking subject of Mixed Race, the uncanny feeling she inspires in the Phallic spectator is more complex; her optical surface suggest to that spectator a single thing, but her psychic surface reveals the (Ph)allacy of thinking about 'race' or skin or identity as a single fixed thing.

By the time of his solo 1957 show *L'Época blu*, or *Blue Epoch/Era/Period*, in which he exhibited eleven identical blue monochromes, Klein really felt he had now established a new era for art. Thanks to some careful publicity, Klein's exhibition attracted phenomenal crowds, including the Parisian Fire Brigade (who were unable to get past the hordes of people packing the streets surrounding the Iris Clert Gallery). The total lack of anything recognisable in Klein's blue surfaces caused outrage, but this was consistent with his hatred of any sort of identifiable authorial imprint in the surface. Klein wrote in *The Monochrome Adventure*, 'I loathe artists who empty themselves into their painting, as is quite often the case today. Morbidism [sic], rather than thinking of the beautiful, the good, the true in their paintings: they express, they ejaculate, they spit out every horrible, rotten, and infectious complexity in their painting as if relieving themselves and putting the burden on others, "the readers of their works", all of their sorry failures' (Klein in Stich 1995:26-27). The fact that Klein-as-showman was so inseparable from



Klein's work does suggest that the strength of his denial and rejection may be a double bluff. Perhaps he attempts to render something in himself that makes him uncomfortable – his own revealing of himself in his work – invisible, by a process of covering-over and deflecting attention. The 'thing', of course, is still there, but imperfectly covered so that it will make unwelcome returns at unexpected times. Just when Klein's own ego censorship thinks it has established him as a still, calm Zen master, the repressed showmanship will erupt in often spectacular ways.



**Figure 14:** Yves Klein, *Le Vide* (detail from the interior of Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, April or May 1958). In Ex. Cat. Rice University, Houston, Texas 1982:305.

An example of this occurred in 1958, when Klein organised his famous exhibition of the 'immaterial zone' of an empty gallery, known as *Le Vide* or 'The Void' [Figure 14]. To prepare the gallery, Klein covered the walls with several coats of a special pure white pigment blended with his own varnish alcohol, acetone and vinyl resin. He then emptied the furniture out of the gallery (leaving some intact but whitened, so as not to shock). A white curtain covered the front door, long white drapes camouflaged the main entrance to the gallery – this was truly a monochrome environment. Klein's idea was to emphasise the progression from blue – a visible and tangible colour – to white, which Klein saw as immaterialised blue. However, all the spectacular elements – the presence of the French Republican Guard as security, the special blue



cocktail from *La Coupole* which gave all the guests blue urine for two days – all ensured that rather than an exhibition of ‘nothing’, this was a grand, theatrical event (Stich 1995). Klein’s paradoxical centrality in both his events and the understanding of his work problematises his own expressed hatred of ego-centred work. In this light, his monochromes can be read as having their genesis in a fundamental condition of confusion – or in the denial of a Phallic psyche which can produce this kind of contradiction.

Klein’s 1957 *Epoca Blu* show in Milan convinced the young painter Piero Manzoni to begin to experiment with what he called his ‘achromes’ [Figure 15], or paintings devoid of colour. Chromatics, the study of the colour spectrum, has traditionally received a great deal of attention from researchers in the arts and the sciences alike, but the same cannot be said for the related discipline of ‘achromatics’; the study of black, white and grey as isolated or independent colours. Black and white are classified as distinct from colours in the chromatic spectrum; white being the effulgent repository of light-rays of all possible colours, black being the absence of the same<sup>48</sup>.



**Figure 15:** Piero Manzoni, *Achrome* 1962-3. Polystyrene pellets on canvas. 31.5 x 25cm. Manzoni Archive, Milan.

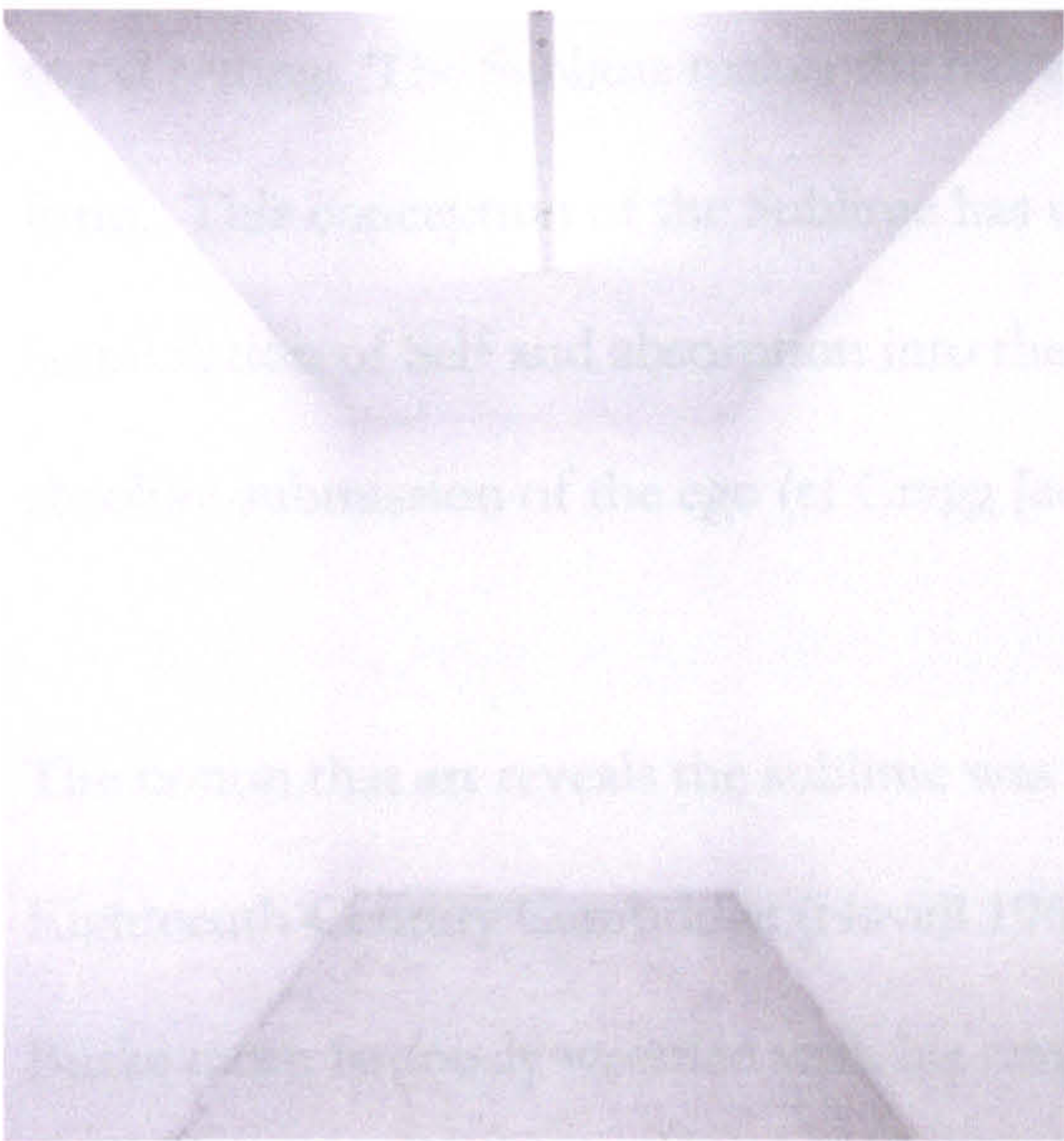


Manzoni's work shifted into the realm of neutral, unpainted canvases whose surfaces would, unlike Klein's, often be textured. His canvas (or other material) would be soaked in kaolin-and-paste or wet plaster, and left to dry without any intervention on behalf of the artist. Each 'achrome' was a discrete entity, unlike the group identity of Klein's monochromes. Manzoni would go on to produce achromes in different materials such as stitched cloth, adding definition and differentiation to the surfaces which would have appalled Klein. In the years following 1957, Manzoni frequently travelled to Paris to visit Klein and the Iris Clert gallery. Together with Klein he signed the 'Manifesto Against Style', a text that broke absolutely with the traditions of beauty and technique demanded by the 'School of Paris'. After this however, '[h]is *oeuvre* became a strange parody, or deliberate inversion, of Yves" (McEvilley 1982:44). Perhaps the most significant 'deliberate inversion' was Manzoni's re-interpretation of Klein's war between line and colour. Manzoni was to continue the battle, reversing the significance of Klein's symbolism. In Manzoni's universe, space and the universe of forms were symbolised by a rolling infinity of lines. In Klein, line was anathema, anti-space. Other ways in which Manzoni could be said to be continuing the Kleinian project by inverting (or even perverting) its central tenets include his use of breadcrumbs as sculptural or plastic elements in the achromes, or his exhibition of old shoes – such activities focussed attention on the material details of human existence in the physical world which Klein sought to disguise by focusing on the infinite.

The exhibition of Manzoni's own faeces can be read as a mischievous comment on the 'everything produced by the artist is art' thesis, or otherwise it can be seen as a direct and oppositional response to Klein's exhibition of gold. In the framework of the Freudian unconscious however, where gold and faeces as symbolic substances are interchangeable, Manzoni's gesture ceases to be 'oppositional' and can be read as a direct reinforcement of the understanding that whatever the artist produces is 'gold'. What Manzoni's work provides in formal or optical terms is a transition point between the metaphysical monochrome tradition and



the more strictly formalist, material traditions discussed below. In psychic terms it appears to support a reading of oppositionality just as well as it supports a reading of non-oppositionality, or insiderism. His version of blankness is perhaps more troubling than others, since it is able to ‘pass’ so easily as something that reflects and reinforces the system’s exchange-value.



**Figure 16:** Yves Klein, *Immaterial Room* at the Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany 1961. Photograph from the collection of Ed Kienholz.

**1:5 The Monochrome Sublime: Barnett Newman**

Western spiritual and philosophical traditions have historically had problems with the notion of unity or oneness; a problematic often played out in discourses of the ‘Sublime’. The universe is typically perceived as a fragmentary collection of pieces beyond which exists a superior, unified reality, impervious to the possibility of rupture. In Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism or Hinduism, notions of oneness are more common. Western philosophies tend to treat the notion of oneness as an esoteric matter, situating it in the marginal occultist schools such as Rosicrucianism or Theosophy. The philosophical roots of the ‘unity vs. dividedness’ problem are in the neo-Platonic writings of the Second Century scholar Plotinus. Plotinus’ central question was the problem of oneness and multiplicity, the contradiction between the universe’s evident



fragmentation and its equally evident coherence. For Plotinus and the neo-Platonists, access to higher realities than those of the everyday, realities closer to that of the infinite One, could be gained through *art*. The reality of the infinite or Sublime One erases all finite, fragmented realities, stripping them of all content. It makes no difference to the Sublime, or the infinite One, whether the finite reality in question is an individual figure or interactions between figures in a social setting. The Sublime makes the individual redundant and destroys the finite universe of form. This conception of the Sublime has clear echoes of the Buddhist doctrine of Nirvana (annihilation of Self and absorption into the Supreme Spirit), achievement of which requires absolute submission of the ego (cf Cragg [ed] 1968, Rogers, Vienne & Zarka [eds] 1997).

The notion that art reveals the sublime was to be revived in the neo-Platonic circles of Eighteenth-Century Cambridge (Havell 1963)<sup>49</sup>. Towards the middle of the century, Edmund Burke more famously wrestled with his own interpretations of Longinus' texts<sup>50</sup>. The Burkean sublime was a terrible thing; vast, gloomy, threatening, and predicated on the complete annihilation of the Self. Still later, Immanuel Kant wrote that by virtue of its immensity and irreducible alterity, the sublime also shrinks the individual. The Romantic conception of the heroic Self as something that surpasses mere individuality takes place in the confrontation with the Sublime. Coupled with the idea that the sole purpose of art is to reveal this ineffable, higher, unified reality, it is easy to see how the artist, creator of this revelatory thing, becomes the most exalted 'Self' of all. Peter Fuller writes,

[...] in the closing decades of the Eighteenth Century and the opening decades of the Nineteenth, the word "art" changed its meaning. When written with a capital "A" it came to stand not for just any human skill (as previously), but only for certain "imaginative" and "creative" skills; moreover, "Art" (with a capital "A") came also to signify a special kind of truth, "imaginative truth", and artist, a special kind of person, that is, a genius or purveyor of this truth'. (Fuller 1980:44)

There is, however, a danger in the Sublime, an uncanniness. It poses a direct threat to the fleshy body in its physical universe of forms; it can annihilate and kill. Fatal desire for the Sublime is



embodied in what is probably the most perfect example of Romantic literature, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), where the protagonist is eventually 'voided' by the Sublime<sup>51</sup>. Longinus, who affirms that, 'a lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself', (Longinus Trans. H.L Havell 1963:136) illustrates the same point using a poem by Sappho, in which the poet describes a fit of erotic passion which seizes her like a little death. Sappho writes, '[...] Whene'er I look on thee, my voice /Falters, and faints, and fails; /Paler than ashes grows my cheek; /And Death seems near at hand'.<sup>52</sup> It would seem, despite the androcentricity of the notions of the Romantic genius, the 'Self' (like Friedrich's *Wanderer*, or Coleridge's wild-haired poet in *Kubla Khan*), that the essential experience of rapture within the sublime is not gender specific. Both Sappho and Longinus are able to lose sight of their Selves, the Sublime does not discriminate<sup>53</sup>.

Fascinations with the Sublime gradually caused the figure to disappear in favour of a ground that took on greater and greater value<sup>54</sup>. The culmination of this process in the Twentieth Century could be said to be the monochrome surface. In terms of latter-day Western conceptions of the Sublime, Thomas McEvelley suggests that the problem of unity vs dividedness takes place in the space of Modernist Sublime, where the problem translates into the plastic reality of figure and ground:

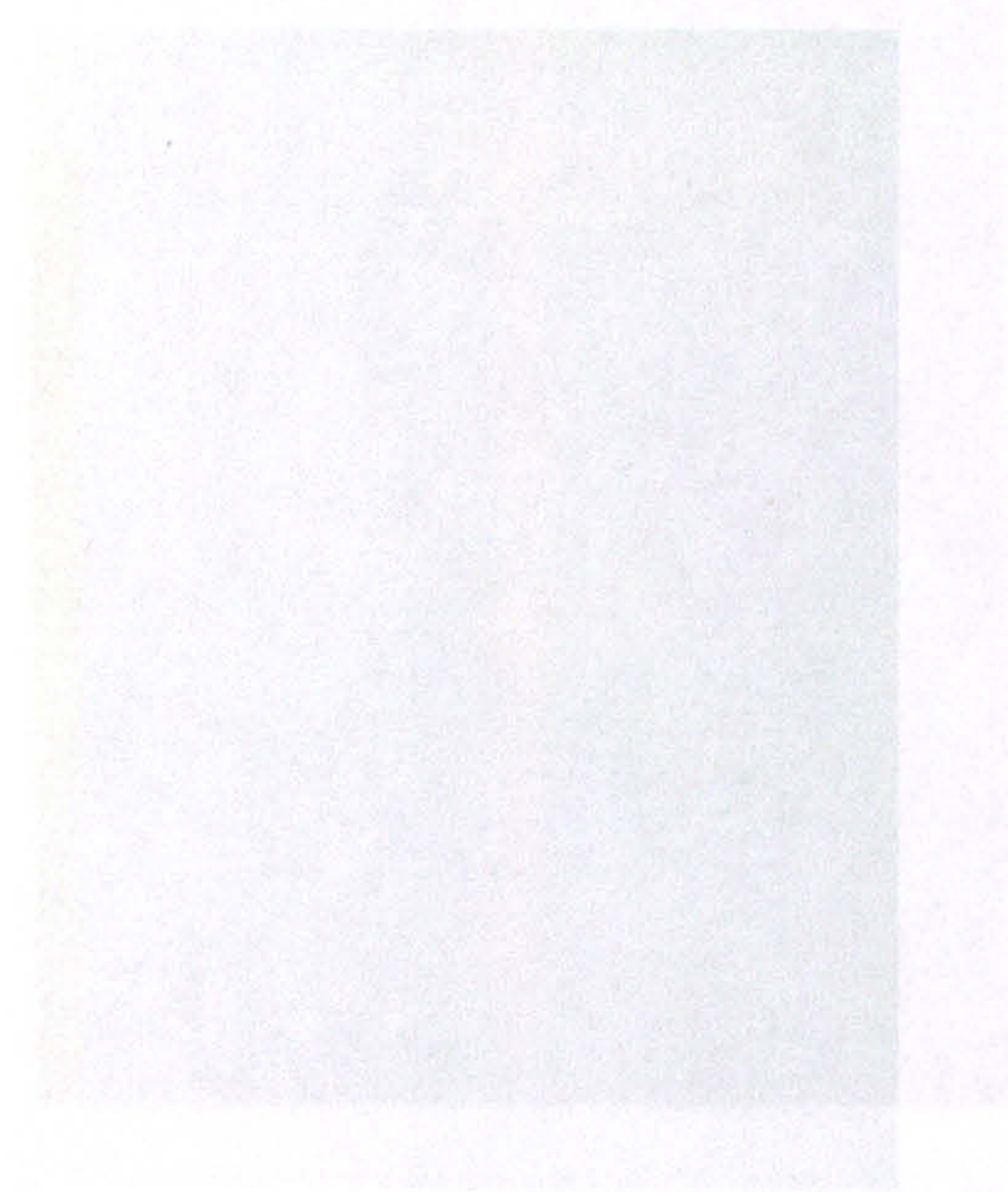
'The ground represents the unique ground of being, its potentiality; it serves as a support to the multiplicity of figures who, in a certain way, are detached from it in order to, in a certain way, ground themselves on it once more. Monochrome painting, without figure, which only 'figures' the ground, affirms the primacy of the One. This affirmation is characteristic of the Sublime'. (McEvelley 1988 [trans. Anson 2001:1]).

Monochrome affirms the primacy of the one – or so it would appear...

Although he only produced one actual monochrome (his 1966 all-white painting *Fourteenth Station*, [Figure 17]), American painter Barnett Newman (1905-1970), highly articulate scholar of all



things metaphysical, continually returned to notions of the Sublime in his extensive writings, most of which appear in the journal *The Tiger's Eye*. The concept of infinity, of vast cosmic unity,

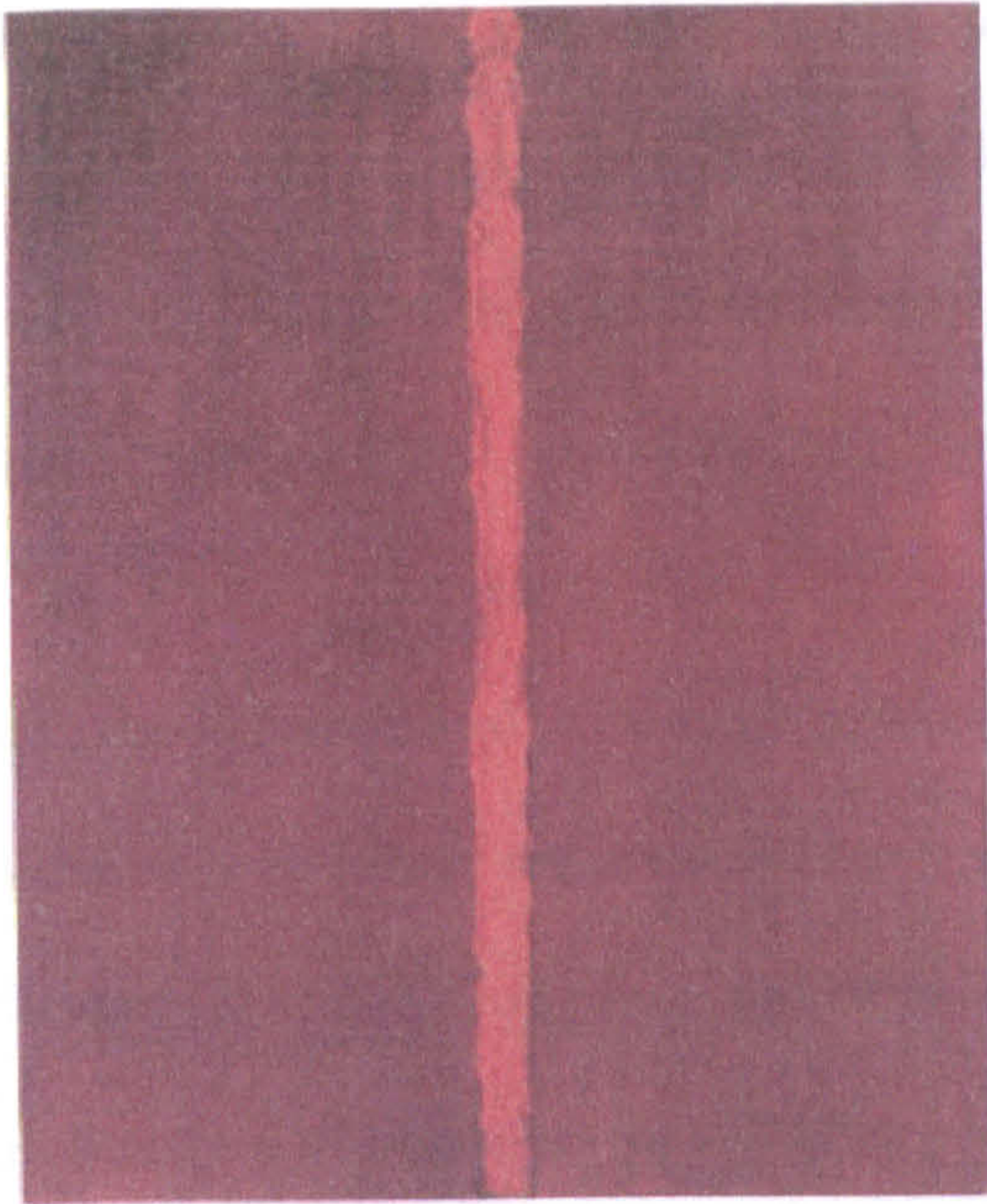


**Figure 17:** Barnett Newman, *Fourteenth Station*, 1966. Acrylic polymer on canvas. 195 x 150cm. Collection Annalee Newman, New York.

fascinated Newman, who studied Buddhist philosophy for many years and who believed (like the neo-Platonist philosophers before him), in art's potency to reveal the universal cosmic truth behind the deceptive veil of objects. The physical world was illusory for Newman, a mere obstacle course he must navigate in order to reach the great truths beyond. In 1940s and 1950s America, Newman's paintings with their characteristic 'zips', or painted-out single bands, sparked off debates about the nature of nothingness in artistic circles.

In the chronology of Newman's surfaces, the zips provide areas of silent repose. Conversely, however, the zips can also be seen as dynamic or vital – as optical as opposed to psychic phenomena, they enliven and create mobility in the surface. The sublime in Newman continually oscillates between the generative and the deathlike, so that whilst the optical surface gives the appearance of unity, the psychic surface, like the human psychic economy, plays host to a continuous oscillation between Eros and Thanatos.





**Figure 18:** Barnett Newman *Onement I*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 67.5 x 40cm. Collection of Annalee Newman, New York.

Newman's *Onement I* of 1948 [Figure 18], is a painting whose very title attests to a preoccupation with the theme of unity, integrity, the condition of being first, a primordial space of generative blankness. Yet it has a carefully controlled inner duality. Both the title, (twice, and tautologically) and the underlying concept of the painting ensure that all separateness, all isolated thing-ness, fades into insignificance when presented with the all-absorbing universal unity. The painting seems to me to combine the notion of the surface as mirror, or potential site of narcissistic activity, with the notion of the surface as a mirror that reveals a lack. This makes of the surface a psychic space for the reception, generation and movement of desire.

'The essentialising moves made by Newman to reduce the formal complexity of the elements in painting to large areas of a single color have an extraordinary importance. The paintings are a saddle-point between art predicated on expression and art as an object.' (Alloway in Battcock [ed] 1968:55)

The surface also contains, structured into the composition, a potential representation of lack itself. It is not that the zips interrupt the composition – in this case they *are* the composition; in *Onement I* the zip is described with heavy layers of thick impasto. Just as Lacan would posit lack



as a necessary condition of humanity, so Newman shows us the gap as a part of the reality of the 'whole' surface. The gap of Barnett Newman is psychically if not optically empty and invites filling – which is interesting, because what began as a compositional strategy to refute the autocracy of figuration became established in the repertoire of modern art as the epitome of so-called 'pure' painting.

Like the Lacanian Real, Newman's gap contains a vast configuration of possibilities – only in Newman's case these are predicated on a series of dualities. The horizontal space that divides *Onement I* is at once both mute and articulate, both static and dynamic. As a result of this proliferation of opposites (or at least separates) the gap or zip in Newman can be understood to be both overstuffed and empty; just like the Lacanian notion of desire-fuelled lack which, on filling, immediately stretches so as to lay bare yet more space. It is a space, receptacle, or hole within a mirror (the blank 'ground' of the painting), which itself represents lack. Newman's 'ground' (in fact the field of this painting was 'initially conceived as a "prepared ground" ' (Bois 1990:191-2), acts as a projective mirror, whilst the zip both actively represents and mirrors the lack. What spectators experience, therefore, is a layering, or doubling-up of the representation of lack, paradoxically so full that it is empty, so noisy with the clamour of desire's siren-call that it is silent. This notion of dynamism is extremely important in terms of the psychic space of the monochrome; the apparent unity of the surface is a trick, imperfectly concealing the playful erotic dance of signifiers, free to play because they are not under the shadow of the Phallus, which always interrupts to ensure specific signification. Psychically, Newman's surface is both indeterminate and mobile, it can slip through fixed Phallic categories;

'His strategy was to emphasise the intentional nature of the perceptual field by urging us to shift from our preconscious perceptual activity (or the "normal" preconscious level of perception) to a conscious one, and at the same time to prevent this consciousness from crystallising in any definite way [...] We cannot both fix the zip and look at the painting at the same time[...]' (Bois 1990:203)



Newman owed a great debt to Longinus' *Treatise on the Sublime*. In the same year as he painted *Onement I*, he wrote a piece on the conflict in art between the search for 'beauty', (an aspect of form), and the search for the 'sublime', (existing beyond form and having the power to extinguish it). Newman felt strongly that the only answer to this problem was to radically repudiate both form and beauty, leaving an art whose form 'is perhaps without form'; in other words, the relation between ground and figure (or form) is rejected in favour of the undifferentiated ground, which in turn affirms that the aim of art is identical with that of mysticism – arrival at the space of the One, rather than the Many. Newman's interest in 'oneness' and 'firstness' found its natural well of inspiration in cosmological traditions of the creation of the world; the moment where the first suggestions of form were produced out of absolute emptiness<sup>55</sup>. His abiding interest in the Kabbala, the esoteric tradition of Judaism, brought to his attention the concept of *Tsim-Tsoum*, which stayed with him throughout his painting career. In *Tsim-Tsoum*, God actually contracts Himself in order to leave a space in the universe – which is of course both distinct from Him and contained in Him – which He can fill. This 'first moment' for Newman is always a transposition of his interest in the present; the first moment in the perpetual mystery of being was, as he saw it, essentially a paradox – that which comes first is at the same time always being repeated.

## 1:6 Conclusion

'Gottlieb, Newman and Rothko jointly declared: "there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert simply the subject is crucial" '. (Fuller 1980: 75)

Fuller's observation was not an 'official' line on the monochromatic surface, it jostled with some of the others seen above. The various painterly manifestations of 'nothing' discussed here show a variety of possible ways in which blankness causes problems for a Phallic audience. We have seen monochrome 'dismissed as a joke', but also operating as the vehicle and subject of a series of elaborate, repeated jokes *against* the art establishment, which were *tolerated* by that establishment (which is a cunning way of castrating the joke). Whilst unintelligibility disturbs the ego, it is also



possible that some of the disturbance comes from monochrome's dual and oppositional conditions of finality and endlessness. Both optically and psychically, monochrome is the embodiment of indeterminacy. Its lack of stability makes it a force that introduces chaos into systems, and its apparently paradoxical status as receptacle for opposing paired values makes it the ultimate puzzle, the ultimate indeterminate.

In 1962 Umberto Eco wrote his highly influential text, *The Open Work*, in which he examined what he understood as the perpetual relationship throughout history between the arts and the sciences, frequently understood as incompatible or opposed categories. He suggested, for example, that 'formlessness' in the cultural sphere (which, as I read it, might take the form of a monochrome painting), had direct correspondence with the scientific application of the 'uncertainty principle'. For Eco, traditional forms of expression can only convey traditional meanings or conventional views, whereas the modern 'open work' implicitly denies them. Uncertainty itself, for example, is now no longer a lacuna in knowledge, but a legitimate category of knowledge in its own right. For Eco, new styles of expression are absolutely essential. However, there is more to this than meets the eyes, as Eco appears to allow for a fundamental challenge to the very nature of the sign itself:

'[...] whereas classical art introduced original elements within a linguistic system whose basic laws it substantially respected, contemporary art often manifests its originality by imposing a new linguistic system with its own inner laws [...] contemporary art constantly oscillates between the rejection of the traditional linguistic system and its preservation – for if contemporary art imposed a totally new linguistic system, then its discourse would cease to be communicable. The dialectic between form and the possibility of multiple meanings, which constitutes the very essence of the "open work", takes place in this oscillation'. (Eco 1962:60)

He could almost be describing the monochrome surface, whose illegibility speaks eloquently of its condition as 'new linguistic system' with its own inner laws. Since uncertainty is no longer simply a notion but a category of knowledge, there exists in the plastic arts no reason why the signifier



cannot now operate without any pre-existing notion, or tacit knowledge, of the signified. The sign can now quite legitimately refuse to signify – or refuse to own knowledge of that which it is meant to signify.

‘Through Impressionism, the “sign” had become increasingly imprecise, dissolving finally into a mist in Monet’s late works. Progressively, the relationship of form to substance had been overturned [...] the substance had become the true “subject” of the picture, and the beholder was obliged to choose his interpretation from within a complex configuration where a plurality of “signifieds” coexisted within the one signifier.’ (Daval 1989:97)

What is more interesting, however, is the importance Eco gives to ‘oscillation’. The unmarked space between two opposing certainties becomes a space of agency, a space where the ‘dialectic between form and the possibility of meanings’ is eternally worked out. The meaningful possibilities become endless, as the movement of oscillation is continuous. The oscillation that starts from the optical surface of one particular monochrome is, however, just the first in a series of oscillations. If we enlarge the analogy to include the various appearances of monochrome within the context of Art History, we can read each appearance as taking part in a larger oscillation between the ‘meaningful’ surface, made sense of by figuration, and the ‘meaningless’, understood as ‘empty’. This ‘emptiness’ is partly concealed and partly displayed by the uncanny psychic surface that is *l’extimité*, a surface which allows for a glimpse of the Real where the invisible signifiers in monochrome’s psychic surface exist in blissful, silent and invisible *jouissance*. These oscillations between spectator and surface allow the eternally deferred signifiers to gradually pass, with each oscillation, from the Real through the Imaginary and finally to the Symbolic or optical surface. Psychically indeterminate blank optical space actively resists reading and goes on playing. If its purpose is to dance across certainty and avoid finality of meaning, monochrome as bringer of chaos is unable to settle down. Perhaps this is its psychic or art historical ‘symptom’; to defy definition.

I think a potentially more fertile consideration, though, would be that the mischievous blank space is able to give the appearance of accepting Phallic authority whilst covertly continuing to



flout it – it does this with its psychically indefinite surface which appears, superficially or optically, to be definite. This is one amongst several types of blank indeterminacy that we have seen so far, some of which coexist in Newman's surface. First we have seen blank indeterminacy performing the role of trickster or playing a joke against the system of Phallic authority. This kind of blankness operates at the confluence of two distinct paths – in the case of the fictive monochromes, literature and visual art – and introduces chaos into both, blurring the margins that once distinguished them. This 'joke' relies on 'passing' successfully as something the Phallus will recognise as one of its own. Then there is the blankness whose indeterminacy has to do with covering over, and the indeterminacy whose blankness comes from a process of reduction. There is also the indeterminacy that presents the Phallus with a reflection of itself, but a tricky reflection that contains that which the Phallus is determined not to see. In each case the qualities of blankness and indeterminacy activate each other in a continuous psychic oscillation. In each case, also, the result for the Phallic spectator is a feeling of intense discomfort, momentary destabilising, and manic foreclosure of the possibility that his power is based on an illusion.

Homi Bhabha describes cultural hybridity as, 'liminal space, in between the designations of identity [...] the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither, this interstitial passage [...] that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.' (Bhabha 1994:4). In response, Paul Spickard signals concern at what he sees as an unproblematic privileging or esteeming of something, simply because it is indeterminate. He writes that, 'Like many of his colleagues, Bhabha is not very clear about what he means by hybridity and assumes that this amorphous mixedness is antihierarchical, revolutionary, and therefore good.' (Spickard in Parker & Song [eds] 2001:93). Robert Young's argument in 'Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race' is more cautious; he describes the ways in which Colonialism has appropriated the body of the Mixed Race subject in order to perpetuate the illusion of Colonial rule. In having to submit to preposterous legal



classifications ('Mulatto', 'Octoroon', 'Quadroon', etc), the Mixed Race subject's body can be (and has been) implicated in the continuation of Colonial hierarchies. I think that both approaches are, in some way, right, though I want to make a slightly different suggestion by nuancing both. In relation to Bhabha's comments, I would prefer to say that the culturally liminal thing has transgressive *potential*, rather than the 'power' that Bhabha suggests. Potential only becomes power when put to use, and it is difficult to think of Young's obsessively categorised and defined Mixed Race subject as having any of her own 'power'. If we deploy my notion of a psychic space in relation to the positions for the indeterminate subject that Bhabha and Young put forward, we can further nuance the argument. Psychic space allows for the consideration that it is precisely the inherently transgressive nature of someone whose existence points to an illicit union, that prompts the deciding Phallus to go on the categorising rampage described by Young. It is not a case of '*either* inherently transgressive *or* historically implicated'. Rather it is that the dominant system perceived its own reflection in the psychic surface of the indeterminate creature and, fearing the sight of itself 'contaminated', began to categorise more and more manically. The indeterminate body gives the lie to the 'either/or' binary of the 'race' thinking of the Coloniser, and in this way it is a threat. The reaction of Young's Colonisers is comparable to the reactions of the Phallic critics to the blank space of monochrome, which threatens to disrupt the genealogical lines which have been largely based on family resemblance. The disturbing blankness of the surface cannot be entertained, so meaning must be forced to 'fix', and possibilities shut down.

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<sup>1</sup> Other important exhibitions of monochrome painting include the 1988 Lyon show, *Couleur Seule: L'Épreuve du Monochrome* (Colour Alone/Only: the Monochrome Experience/Experiment), the 1998 *Monomania* show at the Rocket Gallery, Cork St, the earlier 1978 show in New York, curated by Michael Walls, *In the Realm of the Monochromatic*, or the 1989 show *Minimal Means* at the Showroom Gallery, curated by Jonathan Watkins and dedicated to only white or black paintings.



<sup>2</sup> 'En effet, comme le monochrome n'est ni un 'sujet', ni un 'genre' mais un mode – limite d'existence de la peinture et un instrument de l'emploi/le rejet s'inscrit dans la logique de démarches disparates dont il n'est jamais le point de départ et pas nécessairement la conclusion, son histoire se développe de façon discontinue. Ni le jeu traditionnel des filiations chrono-généalogiques, ni celui des regroupements par 'affinités thématiques' ne permettent de ramener la diversité de ses manifestations sporadiques à des ensembles cohérents.' (Besset 1988:ii)

<sup>3</sup> 'Elles refusent toute approche oblique, par le biais coutumier des rapprochements et des comparaisons, et exigent d'être regardées en face.' (Besset 1988:ii)

<sup>4</sup> Some Black societies, for example the Jamaican society, accept varying degrees of 'racial' mixing as largely unproblematic. However, whilst being informed by White society that they are Black, many Mixed Race people find themselves rejected by certain Black societies. For example, whilst living in Dublin in 1999 I visited one of the growing number of Black hairdressing salons in the city, one which was run by Nigerians. I was having my hair (which is unprocessed) corn-rowed, when my hairdresser called her friends over to come and look at my hair type, which they all seemed to find hysterically funny. I pretended to laugh along with them, though I did not enjoy being the butt of their jokes. Later, when the hairdresser and I were discussing our experiences of racism in Ireland, I was quite taken aback when she informed me categorically, 'but you are not Black'. This has happened many times before and since. For what is arguably the definitive essay on the issues surrounding Black hair, see Kobena Mercer's 'Black Hair/Style Politics' (Mercer 1994:97-130)

<sup>5</sup> 'Évoquant un système de pensée qu'il juge trop simpliste, Hegel recourt à la métaphore d'une 'peinture absolument monochrome' pour en stigmatiser la faillite.' (Riout 1989:88)

<sup>6</sup> Even Kierkegaard famously 'painted' a literary example of a notional monochrome entirely red, stating that, '[t]he rest of my life is null; it is a vague feeling; a greyness. It resembles a painting by that artist who, to represent the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea, covered the whole wall in red on the pretext that the Hebrews had already crossed and the Egyptians had been drowned.' (Kierkegaard in Millet 1996:24).

<sup>7</sup> Ellsworth Kelly attracted the attention of a number of critics and historians of art when he revealed that one of his green monochromes had been directly inspired by his recent visit to Giverny. Immediately there followed a feeding-frenzy of interest in what was perceived as the proto-monochromatic character of much of Monet's later work, particularly his *Nymphéas*. Interestingly, Kelly's work has been written of in terms that explore its inherent indeterminacy, or the confluence of ideas in his work which had previously been considered as dualisms (eg, line and colour). In his introduction to *Minimal Art*, Gregory Battcock writes that, '[P]aintings by Ellsworth Kelly also seem to allude to current critical ideas. For example, we know that the new Minimal style should not be considered a repudiation of the earlier Abstract-Expressionist aesthetic. Rather, modern artists, such as Ellsworth Kelly, emphasise the lingering vitality of certain Abstract-Expressionist discoveries, and at the same time acknowledge the legitimacy of that movement. In Kelly's new paintings (Sidney Janis Gallery, NY, 1967, my note) there is no formal distinction between line and edge – they are both the same. Nor is there the possibility of color as form because when a color ends, so does the edge of that particular pane [...] In addition, Kelly throws new light on various ideas in modern aesthetics, such as those proposed by Michael Fried, Barbara Rose, and Lawrence Alloway – including shape as form, color as shape, primacy of literal over depicted shape, illusion in art, image and theatricality, and system in art.' (Battcock 1968:31)

<sup>8</sup> Mallarmé's (and some of his contemporary painters') fascination with whiteness is interesting when considered alongside the Impressionists, who did not see white in nature. Van Gogh also allegedly asked himself if it were possible to paint a white wall using white paint, arriving at the conclusion that it was not.

<sup>9</sup> On the poetry of Mallarmé, see Penny Florence's *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'abolira le Hasard* (A Single Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance), Oxford, 2000. This is an interactive, multimedia version of Mallarmé's last poem (1898), the typography of which was revolutionary at the time, the words resembling in places the patterns of scattered dice. The multimedia presentation allows for a radical experience of reading, with lithographs by Odilon Redon, and music (Claude Debussy's *La Mer III: Dialogue du Vent et de la Mer*). See also Dee Reynolds' (1995) *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art: Sites of Imaginary Space* Cambridge University Press.

<sup>10</sup> This painting was re-titled by the artist six years later as *Symphony No. 1: The White Girl*, to fall into series with his other musically-titled white compositions. As well as showing an interest in music as an art form, Whistler's preoccupation with musical titles of his work recalls Walter Pater's dictum that the condition of music is what all art aspires to. For a further discussion of this, please see Florence (1986) *Mallarmé, Manet & Redon: Visual and Aural Signs and the Generation of Meaning* Cambridge University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Whistler was no stranger to artistic controversy throughout his career. In a response to his showing of *Nocture in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, John Ruskin famously wrote of Whistler's insolence, charging, 'two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.' Whistler responded by charging Ruskin with libel, and the ensuing court case involved some of the major figures of the Victorian art world. Testifying for Ruskin were the successful figures of Edward Burne-Jones and William Powell Frith. On Whistler's side were Albert Moore and William Michael Rossetti. The outcome was that Whistler won the case, and was awarded a farthing for damages.

<sup>12</sup> J'ai proposé une interprétation de la 'Dame Blanche', qui n'a eu de succès qu'aupres de moi, tant on répugne à accorder des idées aux peintres. Qu'avez-vous voulu faire? Demandai-je à l'étrange artiste dont je n'avais admiré



encore que les fantasques eaux-fortes. Un tour de force de votre métier de peintre, consistant à enlever des blancs sur des blancs? Permettez-moi de ne pas le croire. Laissez-moi voir dans votre oeuvre quelque chose de plus élevé, le lendemain de l'épousée, cette minute troublante où la jeune femme s'interroge et s'étonne de ne plus reconnaître en elle la virginité de la vieille.' (Riout 1989:84)

<sup>13</sup> Much current literature on 'Whiteness' owes a great deal to such scholars as Vron Ware, who has written on White women in particular. See Ware (1992) *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London, NY, Verso).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion on sexual stereotypes in the colonial imagination, also see Bhabha (1983), Hall (1997), or Suzanne Shaw of Duke University's paper, *The Hottentot/Hot-to-Trot Penis: the Pornotroping of the African Male*, presented in 2000 at 'The Black Gaze – International Perspectives on African-World Literature and Visual Culture', University of London, Dept. of English Studies.

<sup>15</sup> Kobena Mercer introduces another subject who poses problems for the fetishistic binary of 'Black man/White woman', that of the gay Black man. He writes that, 'As black men we are implicated in the same landscape of stereotypes which is dominated and organised around the needs, demands and desires of white males', and goes on to identify, 'a rigid set of racial roles and identities which rehearse scenarios of desire in a way which traces the cultural legacies of slavery, empire and imperialism.' (Mercer 1994b:131-2). Like the subject of Mixed Race, the gay Black man also confuses the exchange-value of the White Phallic system of racist stereotypes, rendering that system's desires visible and exposing its hypocrisy. This exposure is crucial, as it allows for an inspection of structures whose power has previously been predicated on their invisibility.

<sup>16</sup> The ability or otherwise of the so-called 'Mulatto' to bear children has been the subject of much pseudo-scientific and popular enquiry and mythmaking. See, for example, Ifekwunigwe 1999:1-10.

<sup>17</sup> 'Ces associations des nuances analogues étaient comprises par tout le monde il y a cent ans, et cette difficulté, qui embarrasserait aujourd'hui plus d'un maître, passait alors pour un jeu d'écolier' (Riout 1989:96, footnote 10).

<sup>18</sup> 'Oudry, lorsqu'il peint la blancheur, se trouve placé devant un obstacle épistémologique incontournable: la mimésis, encore triomphante. Contraint d'y faire allégeance, il la met en crise, disposant devant lui un arrangement d'objets dont le rapprochement est paradoxal puisque, loin de s'individuer les uns par rapport aux autres, ils tendent à se confondre. L'art consommé du peintre consiste à enregistrer et contenir cette frénésie de dissolution.' (Riout 1989:83)

<sup>19</sup> Bizarrely enough, in the catalogue accompanying the 1884 exhibition of *Arts Incohérents*, in which Alphonse Allais invents a painterly history for himself, he describes himself in an unintentionally premonitory way as a 'pupil of the masters of the Twentieth Century', reinforcing the impossibility of monochrome-as-art in the Nineteenth Century imagination. Retracing the genesis of his pictorial history, Allais gives homage to fictitious paintings (Riout 1989 [Trans. Cottington 2000:4]). The last exhibition but one of *Les Incohérents*, in 1889, presented a *Sky Without Clouds*, a *Cloud Without Sky* and a *Total Eclipse of the Sun in Central Africa*. It's not difficult to imagine the colours covering these canvases.

<sup>20</sup> Denys Riout (1996) believes that there is nothing innately funny about the blank image of the false monochrome's surface; he situates the humour specifically in the accompanying text. Other writers such as Eugene Tan or David Batchelor comment on the absurdity of monochrome, connecting its absurdity with humour. My observations of spectators' reactions to monochromes would encourage me to position myself alongside Tan and Batchelor; the illegibility of monochrome often produces the reaction of laughter. Whilst watching Yasmina Reza's play, *Art*, in May 2002, I was interested to note that the moment the white monochrome around which the action is structured was revealed, the audience responded with almost unanimous laughter. It was as though they had been primed to find a white monochrome painting funny, and also as though this were the most acceptable and understandable reaction in the world.

<sup>21</sup> Examples of these include, 'Vue d'Amsterdam au clair de lune. Le bateau à vapeur n'est pas encore arrivé assez près d'Amsterdam pour pouvoir distinguer cette ville à l'oeil nu.' (*View of Amsterdam in Moonlight*). The steamboat has not yet arrived close enough to Amsterdam to be able to distinguish this town with the naked eye).

'Un tableau mal éclairé' (*A Painting Badly Lit*).

'Étude de nuit, paysage à la manière noire.' (*Study of Night: Landscape in a Black Manner*).

'Jeunes albinos prenant leurs ébats sur des terrains albinos. Voués au blanc depuis leur enfance, les enfants et les terrains ont un air de candeur et d'innocence qui repose l'esprit.' (*Young Albinos Frolicking In Albino Landscapes*).

Devoted to white since their childhood, the children and the fields have an air of freshness and innocence that rests the spirit). (Riout 1989 [Trans. Cottington 2000:3-4]) I wonder if Whistler was ever shown the latter derisory joke. One can imagine a prankster showing Whistler the page where the 'Albinos' are described, disguising the fact that they in fact predate his own *Little White Girl*. Such a prankster could easily make Whistler believe that the comments were about his own work; after all, they are not so far removed in tone from Ruskin's memorable accusation that Whistler was, 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'.

<sup>22</sup> Joke monochromes that were actually exhibited, or existed as paintings, were a slightly different matter. Alphonse Allais has remained celebrated for his *First Communion of Young Chlorotic Girls in Snowy Weather*, which was exhibited in the context of the 1883 Exhibition of Incoherent Arts. By 1883, of course, the tradition of comic fictive monochromes was already a long one. The original, which was a piece of completely unmarked white paper, has since been lost, but the legend lives on, and reproductions can be found in his famous *April Fools' Day* book



(reprinted in 1962 and again in 1987). The humourist repeated the offence the following year, with his 1884, *A Harvest of Tomatoes on the Shores of the Red Sea by Apopleptic Cardinals: Effect of the Aurora Borealis*.

<sup>23</sup> By 1889, the year of the penultimate show of *Arts Incoherents*, comic fictive monochromy had lost much of its initial comic lustre, many in France found that the joke was no longer funny, simply a worn, repetitive cliché. In the 1880s in Belgium, however, the fast-fading patina of the comic monochrome received a final polish; it was put to use as a polemical device. In 1885 the members of the traditionalist group *L'Essor*, who were fundamentally opposed to the avant-gardism of *Les XX*, organised an exhibition whose profits were to go to 'the unemployed workers'. The journal *L'Art Moderne*, who supported *Les XX*, felt that this *Great Zwans Exhibition* was little more than a 'clownish' frontal attack, and flatly refused to publish any material about it (other than its statement of refusal to publish). In an admittedly far from subtle statement against what they perceived as the frivolous folly of avant-gardism, *L'Essor* included three monochromes in the show whose titles, again, both proved the existence of the monochrome as a 'proper' painting with 'real' subject matter – genre painting, history painting, and so on – and also explained that the monochromes were to be understood as a joke. Of the three monochromes exhibited by Lynen, the *Liberal* was blue, the *Clerical* red and the *Independent* green. The avant-garde's organised combat against the outmoded styles of academicism was not really countered by academicism's weak attempt to lampoon the avant-garde. What academicism's supporters failed to realise was that by moulding an established tradition of derision to their own ends, they risked a derisory response to their work.

<sup>24</sup> Freud does distinguish between 'jokes' and 'the comic', in SE viii Chapter VII, *Jokes and the Species of the Comic* (181-236).

<sup>25</sup> This seems to suggest, at least in the context of the Russian Orthodox Christian society on whose psyche this legend had such an effect, another dimension for understanding the monochrome. The inability to represent something like the Face of God, which no person may see and live, poses problems for any painter, not just the scribe Hannan. The light-filled radiance of Jesus' face, however, suggests that an attempt to re-capture that mutable light might be the most appropriate way to represent the Divine Face. One can only speculate about the contents of anybody's unconscious mind, but it is possible that in making what he conceived as the ultimate gesture against God, Malevich was unconsciously making a copy of the inscrutable Divine Face, a faithful non-representative image of the illegible Face of God.

<sup>26</sup> Many other examples exist of blankness used for political ends. In 1951, a political satire on the lack of freedom of the Argentine press was timed to coincide with the opening of a meeting of Latin American foreign ministers in Washington. The comment took the form of a cartoon edition of the Argentine Newspaper, *La Prensa*, which was entirely blank except for the words, *La Prensa* at the top of the title page, and the date (Mar 51) at the bottom. All this blank white paper was mockingly titled, *White Paper on the Peron Dictatorship*, which calls to mind the spirit of satire that accompanied the French imaginary monochromes of the Nineteenth Century. In both cases, the satire is intended to provoke awareness and discussion, even change. (Cf. *The Herblock Book*, 1952, Boston: Beacon Press).

<sup>27</sup> The 'path into the corner' which he speaks of is the path to the Cross; the path to the perfectability that Jesus Christ offered to mankind by His death. The 'Image' that all paths lead to is the *Black Square*, which he speaks of as though it were a religion or some kind of pathway. Malevich did, in fact, revere art, viewing it as almost like a deity. He believed that the stars in the sky had also been created by an artist.

<sup>28</sup> According to Linda Dalrymple Henderson, the first recorded use of the term 'fourth dimension' appears to be in Seventeenth Century England, in Henry More's circle of Cambridge Platonists. This was, however, less a geometric space, and more specifically the dwelling place of the Platonic Ideal. In this sense it can be said to have commonality with the Platonic, and subsequently Kristevan, *chora*, which is not a physical space either, but a notional space of transition. Eventually, the association of the fourth dimension with the Platonic Ideal was to become commonplace in hyperspace philosophy, a dimension of space, unlike the nebulous notion of Henry More's Cambridge Platonists, where the Kantian 'thing-in-itself' would be revealed (Henderson 1983:30). The fashion for fourth dimension mathematics took late Nineteenth Century England by storm; there are even short stories by Oxford mathematician Rev. Charles Dodgson (better known as *Alice* author Lewis Carroll), such as his 1865 tale *Dynamics of a Part-icle*, which poke fun at the 'fourth dimension students' (Henderson 1983: 21-22). The Nineteenth and early Twentieth century public held the popular notion of the fourth dimension as a spatial concept. By 1919, Einstein's interpretation of time alone as the fourth dimension in the space-time continuum had largely replaced this in popular consciousness (cf. Linda Dalrymple Henderson's article, 'The Merging of Time and Space', in *Soviet Union* 1978 5.2, pp171-203).

<sup>29</sup> Uspensky's writings were a syncretic mixture of mathematics, modern physics (see for example his notion of the space-time continuum in four dimensions), Kantian thought, Hinduism, Plotinus, Boehme, Spinoza and the writings of his contemporary R.M Bucke, a Canadian physician who was also a friend of Walt Whitman. The full title of Uspensky's 1911 volume is, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, a Key to the Enigmas of the World*.

<sup>30</sup> The full reference for this quote is: Peter Uspensky, 'Tertium Organum', as quoted by Matiushin in 'O Knige Metsanzhe-Gleza 'Du Cubisme'', *Soiuz Molodezhi* 3 (March 1913):25,28.

<sup>31</sup> For further discussions of the work of Gordon Bennett, see Rex Butler's brilliant essay, *Echo and Narcissus: Gordon Bennett and his Critics*. This can be found at: [http://www.uws.edu.au/arts/project\\_unit/publishing/postwest/pdf\\_files/Butler](http://www.uws.edu.au/arts/project_unit/publishing/postwest/pdf_files/Butler). Also see Terry Smith's essay, 'Australia's Anxiety' in *History and Memory in the Art of Gordon Bennett* (2000) Ikon Gallery, Birmingham [exhibition catalogue], Jeannette Hoorn's essay, 'Positioning the Post-Colonial



Subject: History and Memory in the Art of Gordon Bennett' in *Art and Australia* vol.31, no.2, summer 1993, and Ian McLean (1998) *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* London, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>32</sup> A.V Lunarcharsky, A.A Bogdanov and Maksim Gorky were principle members of a group who formed in opposition to the authority of Lenin, which by 1908 was already being challenged. Their philosophical positions came to be known as *bogostroitel'stov*, or God-building.

<sup>33</sup> Many theorists have considered Malevich's rejection of traditional notions of artistic beauty and so on as futile, as a direct result of the horrors of World War One. Thomas McEvilley writes for example that in Malevich's paintings, 'The contours of the objective world become more and more blurred, step by step, until, finally, the world is out of sight. This way of diverting the world of forms can be partly interpreted as a terrified and disgusted reaction to the First World War, and the desert which extends above forms was an involuntary description of Europe in ruins. The enthusiasm for the sublime seems bound to the aftermath of a devastating war. It played an important role just after the Napoleonic wars and after the First and Second World Wars. When Malevich denounces artistic knowledge, conventional beauty and all art bound to form, as futile and vulgar, perhaps we must see here the sign of a disillusionment as much as of the benefits of civilisation.' (McEvilley 1998 [trans. Anson 2001:8]). Teresa Brennan (1993) looks at the possibility of the 'ego's era', through which it would be interesting to look at the desire for cultural, psychical and personal revolution as a symptom of. Brennan examines Lacan's theory of the pathology of history, which states that a psychotic era began in the Seventeenth Century and is in a stage of near-culmination 'now'. She argues that psychical fantasies are microcosmic versions of macrocosmic processes that take place in the ego's era. See Brennan (1993) *History After Lacan* London, Routledge.

<sup>34</sup> The first three of this list were women. It is interesting to note the apparently equal importance of women artists in the Russian Constructivist movement compared to, say, Cubism or Impressionism.

<sup>35</sup> 'C'est toutefois avec Malévich et Rodchenko que sont définies les deux grands axes du monochrome du XXIème siècle – métaphysique et matérialiste.' (McEvilley 1988:4)

<sup>36</sup> See Michael Fried's recently republished *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* 1998, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>37</sup> Many sources give as reasons for the development of a Minimalist aesthetic the notion of a profound reaction against the frenzied gestures of Abstract Expressionism, and its apparent privileging of the ego of the Divine Creator Artist. Marcia Hafif writes concisely that, 'In Europe the reaction had been against the composition and signature touch of Tachisme and Informel, as in New York it had been against the sensitive brushstroke of Abstract Expressionism.' (Hafif 1989:138) Also see Strickland [ed] (1993) for a discussion of some of these issues of reaction. There is a large body of literature, much of it quite confusing or at least conflicting, on the relation between Abstract Expressionism and contemporary political and social realities. Whilst it cannot be said that Abstract Expressionism was 'in service to the state', it is nevertheless inescapably bound up with the facts of Stalinism's growth in the Soviet Union and Communist parties around the world, the tragic fate of the socialist revolution in the 1930s and '40s, and the nature of American society as it emerged from World War II. Abstract Expressionism is often written of as though it were a master-stroke for American identity; the post-war American media gleefully situating their country as a major player in contemporary art and culture and destabilising Paris (or Europe), who had formerly held this position. However, the matter is more complex than this – Trotsky had massive currency in New York's intellectual circles (Lee Krasner, for instance, sympathised with Trotskyan ideas, as did Gottlieb, Rothko, Greenberg and Rosenberg). Serge Guilbaut, in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War* (1983, University of Chicago Press), documents these complex events and attitudes, making it clear that the artists themselves quickly became disillusioned with some of the emerging aspects of McCarthyite, Cold War America. He writes, 'They were sick of politics and therefore thought they were sick of history as well. By using primitive imagery and myths to cut themselves off from the historical reality of their own time, they hoped to protect themselves from the manipulation and disillusionment they had suffered previously' (1983:77). Also see Peter Fuller's essay 'Jackson Pollock' in *Beyond the Crisis in Art* (1980). The general American panic about the encroaching threat of Communism also invoked some serious, converse panic about whether abstract painting of this nature (or abstract painting at all) counted as 'un-American activity'. In this atmosphere, Ellsworth Kelly lost his teaching job at the American School in Paris for the abominable crime of abstract painting. His paintings were confiscated and a humiliating FBI investigation followed. Also see George Dondero, United States Senator for Michigan, who in the 1940s became the mouthpiece of conservative America's attack on 'communistic' art. His speech, 'Communists Maneuver to Control Art in the United States' is published in Harrison & Wood [eds] (1992:654-658). Alfred H. Barr of MOMA wrote an article in defence of the American avant-garde entitled, 'Is Modern Art Communistic?' Originally published in the New York Times in 1952, this can also be found in Harrison & Wood [eds] (1992:660-663).

<sup>38</sup> Michael Fried would go on to use this quotation of his guru Greenberg's to illustrate his point, in relation to Stella, that the expansion of the 'realm of the pictorial' to include things that were not immediately recognisable as 'art' was as potentially problematic as it was freeing. He writes in *Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella* that, 'the expansion of the realm of the pictorial is at best a mixed blessing for the modernist painter: because at the same time that the spectator may have gained the ability to see a length of fabric as a potential painting, he may also have acquired the tendency to regard a modernist painting of the highest quality as nothing more than a length of coloured fabric. That is, because *all sorts of large and small items that used to belong in the realm of the arbitrary and visually*



*meaningless* may now be experienced pictorially or in meaningful relation to the pictorial, the risk is greatly increased that first-rate modernist paintings will appear arbitrary and visually meaningless. It is in this sense that modernist painting presents unique difficulties to the beholder.' (Fried 1965 in Fried [ed] 1998:259-260, my italics).

<sup>39</sup> Reinhardt did in fact embrace Abstract Expressionism for a brief period in the 1940s, though he is well known as one of its detractors.

<sup>40</sup> Reinhardt said this in 1966 in an interview with Bruce Glaser in *Art International* (Winter 1966-67:18). He was of course not the only artist to have made such an assertion about his work, but it is observable that critics have tended to pack his work together with others of the same period (particularly Rauschenberg, Manzoni, Fontana) because they have read them as being concerned with 'the end of painting'. I do not believe that any kind of 'ending' of painting was Reinhardt's major concern. I find it strange that, given Reinhardt's obsessive written, verbal and painted explorations of the possibilities of art, that anyone could think he might be concerned with its 'end'. Ad Reinhardt wanted to get inside painting, to get under the skin of Art (with a capital 'A', understood by him as entirely separate from 'Life') and expose Art. Perhaps 'expose' is not the right word; rather I should say that Reinhardt's desire for immersion into and understanding of painting was total. He wanted it undressed, not in front of him for the gratification of his consuming stare, but *with* him, for the closest communion possible.

<sup>41</sup> In terms of a 'zeitgeist' or a 'historical ego', it should be noted that Judd's presentation of a void coincided with the rise of Feminism and Black Power in the United States. Feminists and Civil Rights activists alike were concerned with ensuring that those subjects who had historically been 'voided' and rendered invisible could be allowed to speak and act freely, could be acknowledged and seen.

<sup>42</sup> Fer explains that, 'It has been claimed that phenomenology is the philosophy of Minimalism, because of the emphasis it places on the bodily encounter of the spectator and the work.' (Fer 1997:135), informing us that in *Three American Painters*, Fried 'invokes Merleau-Ponty', and that Merleau-Ponty is implicitly present in his later, *Art and Objecthood*. In 1966 Rosalind Krauss also offered a phenomenological reading of Judd. (Fer 1997:135)

<sup>43</sup> 'Chave has reduced abstract art to the condition of resemblance-based representation by treating it as cryptically iconic. This iconifying of the abstract is based in not much more than a combination of literalness and selectiveness in the matter of the artists' expressed interest and intentions, deconstructive redundancy, and a certain amount of screw-up-your-eyes-until-you-can-see-it methodology. Thus she is able to read a selection of work by Flavin, Andre, Noland and others as highly schematised *depictions* – of phalluses, military emblems, and so on.' (Batchelor 1991:49)

<sup>44</sup> The picture's entrance on to the 'stage' of the gallery constitutes, I think, yet another level of 'staging'.

<sup>45</sup> Klein's lack of interest in 'abstraction' comes from his understanding of abstraction's prior debt to realism, and thus to the trickery of the eye that he so despised. In any consideration of Klein it is important to remember that his development out of the 'School of Paris, the centre for modernism in visual art prior to New York' (Rosenthal 1982:91) was almost entirely self-directed. We cannot know for sure whether he had any formal contact with his contemporary American painters, though it is reasonable to assume he was aware of their work. It is this relentless self-propulsion of Klein, and his ferocious over-compensation for his failure to meet the demands of the French school system that led to his lifelong autodidactic project. Klein's pampered childhood as the only son of painter parents in idyllic Nice was ruptured by World War II. This had an adverse effect on his schooling. He acquired a reputation as a troublemaker or *barrageur* in class, and was asked to leave several schools. Ultimate failure to obtain his *Baccalaureat* infused the stubborn dreamer, whose head was filled with his favourite Tintin and 'Mandrake the Magician' stories, to ensure that his life was one long learning experience. Along with his two best friends Armand Fernandez (later 'Arman') and Claude Pascale (later 'Pascale Claude'), he embarked on a course in judo lessons at the local Police school. Klein was hooked. Discovery of the ancient philosophies underlying the Japanese martial art – that ability to overcome the strength of one's opponent could be achieved by the harmonious interaction of body, mind, spirit and force – fitted beautifully in with Klein and his friends' recent discovery of the esoteric mysteries of the Rosy Cross. Throughout his life Klein continued with his 'homework', a correspondence course in Rosicrucian philosophy based on Max Heindel's famous text, *'La Cosmogonie du Rose-Croix'* ('Rosicrucian Cosmogony'), which he sent away to California for.

<sup>46</sup> When Klein was later asked, to his delight, to join the chivalric order of the Knights of St. Sebastien, the young artist dedicated his life's work to the 'battle' against form and line, and the attempt to free space, and the void, from the confines of its prison. His noble 'cause' would be colour, 'the real and abstract medium of space, the sensibility that inhabits extradimensional space and impregnates both people and environments'. (Stich 1995:66) Also anathema to Klein was the juxtaposition of colours, interrupting the spatial purity of a single-colour expanse and therefore impeding the spirit in its journey towards the transcendent beyond. He famously stated that, 'Once there are two colours in a painting, a conflict begins', and followed Steiner's doctrine that, 'Colour is that thing which descends as far as the body's surface; it is also that which raises man from the material and leads him into the spiritual.' (Steiner 1991:146)

<sup>47</sup> Sidra Stich (1995:19) retells the story of the three friends; Yves, Arman and Pascal who were hanging out practising meditation on a beach one day. They made the decision to divide the world into three realms, taking one each to preside over. Klein chose the mineral world, but specifically appropriated the sky as his own by an act of signing. He marked space with his signature to claim it, thereafter seeing the sky not as a background, but an 'immaterial painting' (Stich 1995:19) through which access to the mysterious void beyond could be gained. Klein in fact later expressed a



hatred for all birds, since, 'they attempted to make holes in my greatest and most beautiful work. The birds must disappear!' (Klein in Stich 1995:253n.21). Bachelard also interpreted birds as untidy and destructive, though it is unclear whether Klein borrowed directly from Bachelard here. Certain Buddhist texts actually make the direct comparison of the healthy, light spirit to the vast, unlimited space of the open sky. This spirit that knows no division is that of Dharma, meaning transcendental truth. Klein's absolute is above and beyond forms, it does not underlie or inhere in them.

<sup>48</sup> Scientific theories of Chromatics that have greatly influenced Western perception of colour can be said to have begun in 1704 with the publication of Newton's *Opticks*, the first sustained research into the subject of colour. In 1666 Newton used a prism to observe refractions of light. This observation led him to conclude that white light was a complex mixture of rays which the prism then separated into seven hues, identical with the colours of the rainbow; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. He aligned these to seven planets, and the seven diatonic scales. In 1810 the German Romantic painter Philip Otto Runge advanced his contribution to colour theory in *Die Farbenkrugel*. His highly ordered system consisted of a colour sphere, a three-dimensional globe with black and white at its polar extremes, the lines of the spectrum at the equator, and a grand total of 3,405 hues. Goethe's slightly earlier *Farbenlehre* of 1808 took a more organic approach to colour, combining physical, psychological, historical and aesthetic aspects. Goethe is perhaps best known for disputing Newton's 'erroneous' theories. Ultimately, Newton's theories on colour have been proven by science to be correct and Goethe's incorrect, but Goethe's dispute with Newtonian *Opticks* constitutes a good example of the debate between scientific and organic/psychological theories on colour. For a helpful overview of the history of Chromatics, see Jennifer M. Jeffers' 'The Image of Thought : Achromatics in O'Keeffe and Beckett' in *Mosaic* vol.29, no.4 (1996)

<sup>49</sup> Early in the Eighteenth Century as part of the 'Cambridge Platonists', Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Count of Shaftesbury, wrote about and discussed the sublime at length. Direct links were made with the long-standing philosophical tradition of the sublime.

<sup>50</sup> The famous treatise *On The Sublime* (c. AD 213-73) was attributed for a long time to Longinus of Emesa, friend and minister to Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra. Generally the author of *On the Sublime* is referred to as Pseudo-Longinus, as the attribution was later proved false.

<sup>51</sup> The super-sensitive protagonist Werther catches sight of his 'ideal' woman cutting slices of bread-and-butter for some children, and immediately falls utterly in love with his image of the person he wishes her to be. His love is, literally, for the Sublime itself. To love the Sublime is to be cursed with certain death, for it is a force bigger than the imagined universe and will ultimately incorporate anything in its path, like a twister. The doomed young Werther commits suicide whilst in prey to the ecstasy of the Sublime; he is the archetype of Romantic artists who, from Shelley to Pollock, had for their muse the Sublime itself.

<sup>52</sup> To 'die', in fact, was a common euphemism in Elizabethan and Jacobean England for orgasm, a pleasure whose intensity can momentarily make one forget one's Self.

<sup>53</sup> There is much debate on this topic – see for example Christine Battersby (1998) *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* New York, Routledge.

<sup>54</sup> Towards the end of the Eighteenth Century and into the Nineteenth, landscape became a common figure for the Sublime. One of the most famous paintings in this 'Sublime landscape' tradition would be Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). The human figure with his stark, black back to us in this painting is alone above turgid waves, thrashing wind and the immeasurable greatness of nature all around him. His purpose is merely to show the insignificance of the human being in the face of the natural world. In 1810 Goethe predicted the logical progression of the Sublime in art from the figure of the landscape to a 'pure' surface of a single colour – a monochrome. His text *On the Theory of Colours* was an attempt to complement the existing diverse theories of optics, in which he brought the idea of unity into the experience of colours in a neo-platonically inspired cosmos. Goethe announced that the contemplation of a single colour expanse awakened to the individual conscience the concept of cosmic unity. This kind of contemplation would thus be healing to the spirit, situating the spectator in harmony with the fundamental connected Oneness of things. The single colour is like the religious icon, a pathway to the mystery of unity. We know that Turner had read Goethe's *On the Theory of Colours*, and made at least two painted attempts to work out some of its problems.

<sup>55</sup> His titles, for him metaphors for the emotional content of his paintings, attest to this. Many of them come directly from the Old Testament, in 1946 he painted *The Beginning* and *The Command, Abraham, The Covenant* and *By Twos* in 1949, *Eve* in 1950, *Adam* in 1951, and so on.



**Chapter Two:**  
**STAGED & MEDIATED MONOCHROMES: A NEW**  
**PROBLEMATIC OF THE PSYCHIC SURFACE**

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## 2:0 Introduction: The White Eye of Photography

'The aesthetic technology of photography, as it has been invented, refined and elaborated, and the dominant uses of that technology, as they have become fixed and naturalised, assume and privilege the white subject. They also construct that subject, that is, draw on and contribute to a perception of what it means to be white. They do this as part of a much more general culture of light [...] The culture of light is part of the still wider characterization of modern Western culture as one which privileges seeing above all other senses.' (Dyer 1997:103)

'To look is an act of perception, but it is an interrogation and an assumption of a place which yields itself as a metaphor for knowledge to which Michel Foucault has given the term, "The Eye of Power" '. (Pollock in Melville & Readings 1995:41)

As a 'metaphor for knowledge', the human look is heavy with possibilities. Acknowledging this, Griselda Pollock calls for an Art History which, rather than charting a chronology of seen objects, analyses the political history of the look (Pollock in Melville & Readings [eds] 1995: 38-65). The activity of the look involves so much more than mere seeing, even more than the presumed positioning of the seeing subject. The same can be said for the objecthood of the photograph or film; the technology of which is far from 'neutral', but is in fact engaged in the privileging of a particular visual economy. Richard Dyer reasons that,

'Just as perspective as an artistic technique has been argued to be implicated in an individualistic world view that privileges both men and the bourgeoisie, so I want to argue that photography and cinema, as media of light, at the very least lend themselves to privileging white people.' (Dyer 1997:83)

Dyer (1997) charts the relation between this White, bourgeois privileging of seeing and an inherent privileging of Whiteness. He writes that the media of photography and cinema are highly complicit in this; firstly techniques such as Hollywood 'movie lighting' (1997:84), technology and equipment, were developed around the capture and representation of the White face as 'normal'. As a result, in shots where all kinds of faces and 'races' are present, those that 'deviate' from Whiteness can look like indistinct blobs, making the scene look 'a bit down' (1997:82). Importantly, Dyer points out that there is no reason why the aesthetic technology of



film and photography has to *continue* privileging the White body, as it would now be entirely possible to create new ways of photographing a scene. Dyer gives interesting examples where Black and White subjects appear *together* in shot, as posing special problems for the White technology of the lens. It seems that there is less of a problem photographing a solo Black subject, or group of Black subjects – the problem arises when Black and White are ‘mixed’ in the shot; the White lens will apparently not tolerate this violation of binary racist codes. The fact that the photographic or cinematic image is composed entirely of light, and that lens-based technology is designed for light, is Dyer’s second point about the photographic privileging of Whiteness. Thus the association of lightness, glow, beauty, vision and so on are not only present in the appearance of the image on screen, but are the stuff of its very existence<sup>1</sup>. In these ways, film and photography can be read as ‘ideal’ media for the naturalisation of White ‘normality’.

I want to use this understanding of photographic technology as the basis for this chapter, asking questions about what the ‘staging’ or ‘mediation’ of blankness – that is, the positioning of blank space as a compositional figure within the legible context of surface organisation – means for the psychic surfaces of monochrome and of the Mixed Race subject. Beginning with the understanding that the insertion of the look of the lens into the existing, highly complex relays of looks that happen between artist, spectator and surface, I want to test the ways monochrome films and photographs, which are made of light but which cannot be ‘seen’, introduce chaos or uncertainty into the White economy of lens-based media. I also want to ask what issues are posed to a ‘racially’ indeterminate subject by a medium whose technology continually re-inscribes the dominance of a particular ‘race’.

Whether painted or photographed, monochrome always seems to contain something like Foucault’s ‘Eye of Power’, that is, it is the final place where the look must stop, confounded. The Eye of Power is indispensable to Phallic control, wielding the authority to stop the endless play of



signification. If we also consider Dyer's reading of photography and film, the Eye of Power is unmasked as a White eye. What problems occur when the White eye of photography or film gazes upon the psychically indeterminate and optically illegible monochrome? When psychical indeterminacy is paralleled with formal indeterminacy – in the case of the monochrome as a compositional 'figure', for example, where the binary of 'figure/ground' is problematised – what does this allow us to see? When 'racial' indeterminacy (and thus illegibility) is paralleled with optical indeterminacy (and thus, again, illegibility), what does *this* allow us to see, and what of the complex layers of seen and unseen, imagined and assumed audiences? Things that cannot be deciphered or immediately understood do sometimes inspire reverence as well as negation. However, there is always the possibility that the 'mastery' of the revered object is an illusion, or a trick. Shoshana Felman writes of the notoriously indecipherable nature of the Lacanian text, that, 'To fall for the illusion of Lacan's mastery is to be trapped in the imaginary of the text'. (Felman in Gallup 1985:72). Entrapment in the Imaginary register with neither language nor subjectivity is a terrifying possibility, and a difficult one to conceptualise. Without even subjectivity as a starting point, how does anyone begin the process of conceptualising at all? How would the subject without subjectivity (for example, the subject subjugated by 'race' thinking), even know they were trapped in the Imaginary register? Felman seems to suggest that the mechanics of Lacanian textual mastery operate in a similar way to the monochrome surface that subjugates the spectator's gaze. There comes a moment of passive acceptance, where the illegibility of the looked-at object prevents further deciphering. The subject reaches a dead end. Motionless and confounded by the illegible object, the subject without subjectivity fades back into the Imaginary register to be eluded by even language. The masterful roles of both the Lacanian text and the monochrome surface depend on the willing gaze of the spectating subject. Without this subject's initial desire to understand, to know and to be in on something, the mastery of the text or image ceases to be absolute. The spectating subject may seek a hidden trickery in the image or text, but it seems that the trickery is in the illegibility itself<sup>2</sup>.



In a culture where the visual is dominant, that which cannot be seen is a problem. Where visual representations of invisible things occur, the problem is compounded<sup>3</sup>. In the case of the blank film or photograph containing a blank passage, monochrome is effectively *staged* – in the photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto and John Hilliard, monochrome is part of the compositional organisation of the surface and can thus also be read as a *figure*, a protagonist around whom all action is organised. A sort of sitting in state takes place, as though the central monochrome were a living monarch or the corpse of someone so revered that their death cannot be conceptualised as a possibility. In Sugimoto's case the looks are complicated further by the fact that what he photographs is another photographic art form. Photography and film, mechanical extensions of the (White) human eye, imbue the monochrome surface with the significance of something already observed, which shifts the problem of looking on to another level. In the case of Derek Jarman's monochrome film, *Blue* (1992-3), where the entire visual cinematic experience is of a cyan monochrome, this monochrome performs three main functions. First of all it presents a monochrome that appears to be stationary but that is, through the trick of cinema, in fact in motion. Second and more importantly, it foregrounds the experience of the auditory, which I propose is interstitial, another layer of indeterminacy. It also enacts and rehearses Jarman's blindness, a portent of impending death/castration. British photographer Clement Cooper embeds blankness within narrative in a very different way. Of Mixed Race himself, Cooper spent time in 1995 and 1996 in some of the British cities where Mixed Race populations have been present, though generally ignored (blanked), for over two hundred years. Cooper made portraits of Mixed Race people of all different mixtures and all ages. What is also vital is that an audio CD accompanied the final show, which consisted of the subjects telling their own stories, crucially, *in their own words*. Cooper embeds psychic blankness into both visual and auditory narratives, and in his work we can see the White technological hegemony of the lens interrupted in a unique way – an undecidable Other appropriates White technology to capture the image of another undecidable



Other. Questions should be asked about vision itself, because, like the lens, it is often tacitly assumed that vision is a value-free neutral. Really this is also a trick, as Griselda Pollock reminds us,

‘Vision presents itself to us as a simple, primary, self-evident category, yet, through psychoanalytical studies of that complex formation we call human subjectivity, the visual is always already invested with meanings, potencies and effects in the organisation of the drives, the formation of psychic representatives, symbolisation, fantasy and hence sexuality and the unconscious’ (Pollock in Melville & Readings [ed] 1995:42)

## **2:1 The Deathlike in Photography**

Martin Jay places photography alongside the microscope, telescope and camera obscura in the category of ‘technological extensions’ of the human eye (Jay 1995:435). The camera obscura in particular has been theorised in terms of human society and subjectivity. Perhaps the most famous example is Marx’s theory that in all ideology, men and their relations appear as the image in a camera obscura – upside-down. The dominant beliefs, value systems and everyday assumptions that society takes for granted represent for Marx an inversion of the reality of social relations. Those with the most access to power are those most able to determine discourse and to shape systems of representation. Barthes followed this by positing the very process of mythology as one of inversion. The unveiling of this truth, Barthes claimed, constituted a subversive political act. In a similar way, I want to suggest that a refusal to signify in the terms dictated by the dominant scopic regimes can also be, if not an automatic act of transgression of the Law, at least an introduction of chaos into that Law. Things that are illegible in the terms of a particular signifying Law ‘unveil’ the fact of that Law’s (ph)allibility. Jonathan Crary suggests that the camera obscura has a specific function of individuation to perform, since its configuration necessarily

‘[d]efines an observer as isolated, enclosed and autonomous within its dark confines [...] the camera obscura is inseparable from a certain metaphysic of interiority: it is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatised subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from a public exterior world [...] Another related and equally decisive function of the camera was to sunder the act of seeing from the physical body of the



observer, to decorporealise vision. The monadic viewpoint of the individual is authenticated and legitimised by the camera obscura' (Crary in Mirzoeff [ed] 1998:245)

So not only do these new 'mechanical eyes' revolutionise vision, they also cement the monocular gaze of the biocular subject, seal the subject's sense of separation from the visible world, and, perhaps most importantly, lend an air of subjecthood or apartness to vision itself. The magical qualities of the sense of sight were foregrounded in these 'mechanical eyes', whose appeal was to the inherent nobility of vision. Of course, anything so noble as sight could not remain conceptually situated in the corporeal body for long, and this is what Crary refers to as the 'decorporealisation' of vision.

Jay also suggests that the popularity of such innovations had an active role to play in the dissemination of the Cartesian scopic regime, with its Albertian notions of perspective<sup>4</sup>. As a physical object, the photograph helped to democratise the image, destabilise notions of privilege with regard to portraiture, and pave the way for an image-fed society. Most importantly however, along with film, the photograph abetted the normalisation of apprehending the world in terms of a monocular (usually White, usually male) gaze. Luce Irigaray has argued in relation to the discourse of mastery, that a different relation to the look has specified feminine sexuality in modernism, 'Investment in the look is not as great in women as in men. More than any other sense it objectifies and masters. The moment the look dominates the body loses its materiality.' (Irigaray quoted in Pollock in Melville & Readings 1995: 56).

The advent of photography and film also introduces into society the concept of an eye that can be confused or misled – what you see is not your own vision but someone, or something, else's;

'[...] the observer within does not see his or her own vision but a disembodied picture of the world, emphasising the Enlightenment belief in a sharp distinction between the mind, which judges sensory perceptions, and the body, which merely registers them, just as the camera obscura admits light through its lens.' (Mirzoeff 1998:185)



1839 is usually cited as the key year for the introduction of photography into the public domain, and it induced an almost immediate public hysteria based on what was assumed to be its ability to reproduce images perfectly and impartially. At that time photography was also widely believed to be the death-knell for painting<sup>5</sup>. Much later, we find even Twentieth Century film critic André Bazin writing of photography in language redolent of the Kantian sublime,

‘[...] for the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man [...] photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature’. (Bazin 1967:13)<sup>6</sup>

The gaze of the camera at first appeared to be the perfect example of disinterested objectivity. Because of its supposed lack of ideological investment in any scene, its cool look approached flawless mimesis of the perceptual world. However, hostilities against the camera began to arise precisely as a result of this; because it mimicked monocular specularity, it appeared that the photograph validated what Noel Burch refers to in his discussion of cinema and its origins as, ‘the bourgeois ideology of representation [...] another step taken toward the “re-creation” of reality’’. (Burch 1979:21) This particular ideology of representation is consistent with the monocular, patriarchal White gaze that the photograph played a part in normalising in the Nineteenth Century.

However, the photograph was not quite so objective as it first appeared, and this ideological problem was one strand of a complex anti-photographic trend. Baudelaire was famously against the new invention and was quick to lament its popular triumph. Daumier was to use the very objectivity of the camera’s gaze to denounce its value, ‘photography imitates everything and expresses nothing. It is blind to the world of the spirit’. (Schwarz 1986:140) Faith in the reproductive verisimilitude offered by the camera began to shake with the discoveries of retouching, composite photography, double-exposure and so on. It could even be said that the new varieties of scopic instruments available could, ‘undermine confidence in the authority of the eyes’ (Jay in Melville & Readings [eds] 1995:350), as the mechanical ‘eye’ of the camera not only



mimicked the structure of the human eye, but also saw and recorded images in its place; usurping human memory with its mechanical capture of the same image through time<sup>7</sup>.

By 1900 the camera had achieved such familiarity in western culture that Freud was able to use its apparatus as a metaphor for the structure of the unconscious in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Rather than conceptualising the psyche as an undifferentiated, monolithic machine,

‘[...] we should picture the instrument which carries out our mental functions as resembling a compound microscope, or a photographic apparatus, or something of the kind. On that basis, psychical locality will correspond to a place inside the apparatus at which one of the preliminary stages of an image comes into being’. (Freud 1900 [1973]: 536)<sup>8</sup>.

This conception of the unconscious mind is curious but powerful, particularly the notion of an image ‘coming into being’. In much the same way as one would struggle, squinting up one’s eyes and peering in an attempt to see an image not yet fully formed, so the spectator in front of the monochrome painting mimics the struggle to see something whose ‘thereness’ is tacitly understood, but not actually decipherable. This sense of incompleteness or becoming also resonates with the idea of psychic ‘stages’ that must be passed through in progressive order of accruing subjectivity; perhaps he is referring (unconsciously) to his own series of topographies of mind. We can also find an echo with Lacan’s subsequent formulation of subjective registers, the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which the analysand passes through in that order. The Symbolic is the ego-ised realm of social activity, and we can assume that a fully-realised image would be concurrent with this order. Freud’s ‘preliminary stages of an image’, fuzzy and indecipherable, could be read as analogous to Lacan’s Imaginary<sup>9</sup>. The image could not be properly understood until actual lived experience in the Symbolic had given the subject opportunities to recognise the image. Through Freud’s analogy of an impaired optical device, we can approach the indecipherability of the monochrome surface in terms of the pre-linguistic, pre-subjective Lacanian Imaginary.



The notion of an unconscious that is blind, operating in hiding beneath a sighted consciousness is complicit with my conception of the monochrome as a bright, placid surface layer tricking the eye away from its invisible hubbub of psychic activity. The absence of differentiation in the monochrome surface makes the experience of looking one of enforced ocular mobility. After an initial, frantic race around the monochrome surface in search of something recognisable – even the evidence of a brushstroke, or the touch of colour that Yves Klein's gallerist needed – the spectating eye finds that it cannot come to a final standstill. For this confused eye, kinetic tensions are never reduced to zero. The Freudian Death Drive (or Thanatos) continually aims to reduce all tensions in the psychic economy to zero, returning the subject to the originary inorganic state. As such it is in constant conflict with Eros or the Life Drive, the subject existing in a state of conflict between two opposites. The notion of deathliness in the visual arts is not new, Andre Bazin's *Ontology of the Photographic Image* begins with the suggestion that the plastic arts be put 'under psychoanalysis' suggesting that underlying the origins of both painting and sculpture there is what he calls a 'mummy complex' (Bazin 1967:9), which he explains has nothing to do with Oedipal activity. Ancient Egyptian religion sought to outwit death by ensuring the continuing survival of the corporeal body. Their sophisticated techniques of embalming were developed to these ends, and as Bazin writes, 'to preserve, artificially, his bodily appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time' (Bazin 1967:9). The analogy of ancient Egyptian mummification is perhaps one of the clearest ways of demonstrating that a visual representation of life can guarantee a preservation of life. What Bazin identifies as, 'man's primitive need to have the last word in the argument with death' (Bazin 1967:10) firmly fixes photography, as ideal mimetic art, in a relationship with death itself. If placed over Freud's concept of Repetition Compulsion, the relation Bazin describes seems almost too perfect a fit.

Freud's concept of the Compulsion to Repeat originates from a 1914 paper entitled, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*<sup>10</sup>. Arguably the best known passage on this, however, is the famous 'Fort-Da' episode where Freud describes watching his eighteen-month-old grandson playing with



a cotton reel. The boy's symbolic re-enacting his mother's departure and return supposedly allowed him to feel some kind of control over his mother's movements; the repetition offered a way to domesticate and contain the anxiety he felt at his utter *lack* of control. Freud situated Repetition Compulsion in the domain of the Death Drive, and since this compulsion originates in the unconscious, it is 'ungovernable' (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973:78)<sup>11</sup>. The boy's Thanatic re-enactment or mimicking of his mother's actions can also be seen in tension with Bazin's 'mummy complex'. Ernst freezes his mother's movements into a single, perpetually repeated moment. He reduces a flesh and blood woman to a repetitive motion, symbolically (psychically) performing a 'murder' and an 'embalming' or preservation, so that he can retain her inside himself, retain the illusion of mastery.

Lacan's mirror stage, which leads the infant from the chaos of the Imaginary Order into the subjectivity of the Symbolic Order, takes place between the ages of six and eighteen months, so Freud's grandson was the right age for this. The repeated games with the cotton reel act as rehearsals of the condition of mastery that comes with the Symbolic. The particular exchange of gazes between subject and mirror, however, is where the acquisition of this mastery happens. It should be remembered that the Mirror Stage and the subsequent entry of the subject into the Symbolic are predicated on a *double misrecognition*. The infant looks in the mirror at a time when its motor functions lack co-ordination. What it recognises, however, is a false image of itself as a coherent and fully integrated being. The child is, also, often held up to the mirror by its mother, who will often articulate something like, 'that's me!' on the child's behalf. The result is the child's identification with what s/he thinks is the mother's ideal image of her/him – a further, more involved misrecognition. All these misrecognitions show that the Mirror Stage is, in fact, a trick; and that the self is '*an illusion done with mirrors*'. Foucault realises the specular confusion of the subject regarding him/herself in the mirror in *Of Other Spaces*,

'In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself



there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am, since I see myself over there.' (Foucault in Mirzoeff 1998:239-240)

In Barthes, the connection between photography and death is symbolised by the snapshot. The snapshot has the power to rob life of its fluid temporality, introducing what Martin Jay calls a 'kind of visual rigor mortis' (Jay in Melville & Readings 1995: 349)<sup>12</sup>. Unlike straightforward analogical representations of nature, photographic denotation, according to Barthes in *Rhetoric of the Image*, locates an absent reality. A photograph is a fragment of a whole that is, and will always be, invisible. It can only ever exist as a fragment, and for Barthes this is inherently traumatic.

'It establishes not a consciousness of the *being there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having been there*. What we have is a new space-time category, spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *here-then*.' (Barthes 1997:443).

Secondly and as a direct result of the 'inevitable aura of a lost past' (Jay 1995: 444) associated with all photography, Barthes posits that each photographic object presents an essential and unique opportunity for mourning<sup>13</sup>. Barthes final text, the famous *Camera Lucida*, could quite literally be said to be his final word on the essential union of death with photography, since it was published posthumously in 1981 (a year after Barthes' death).

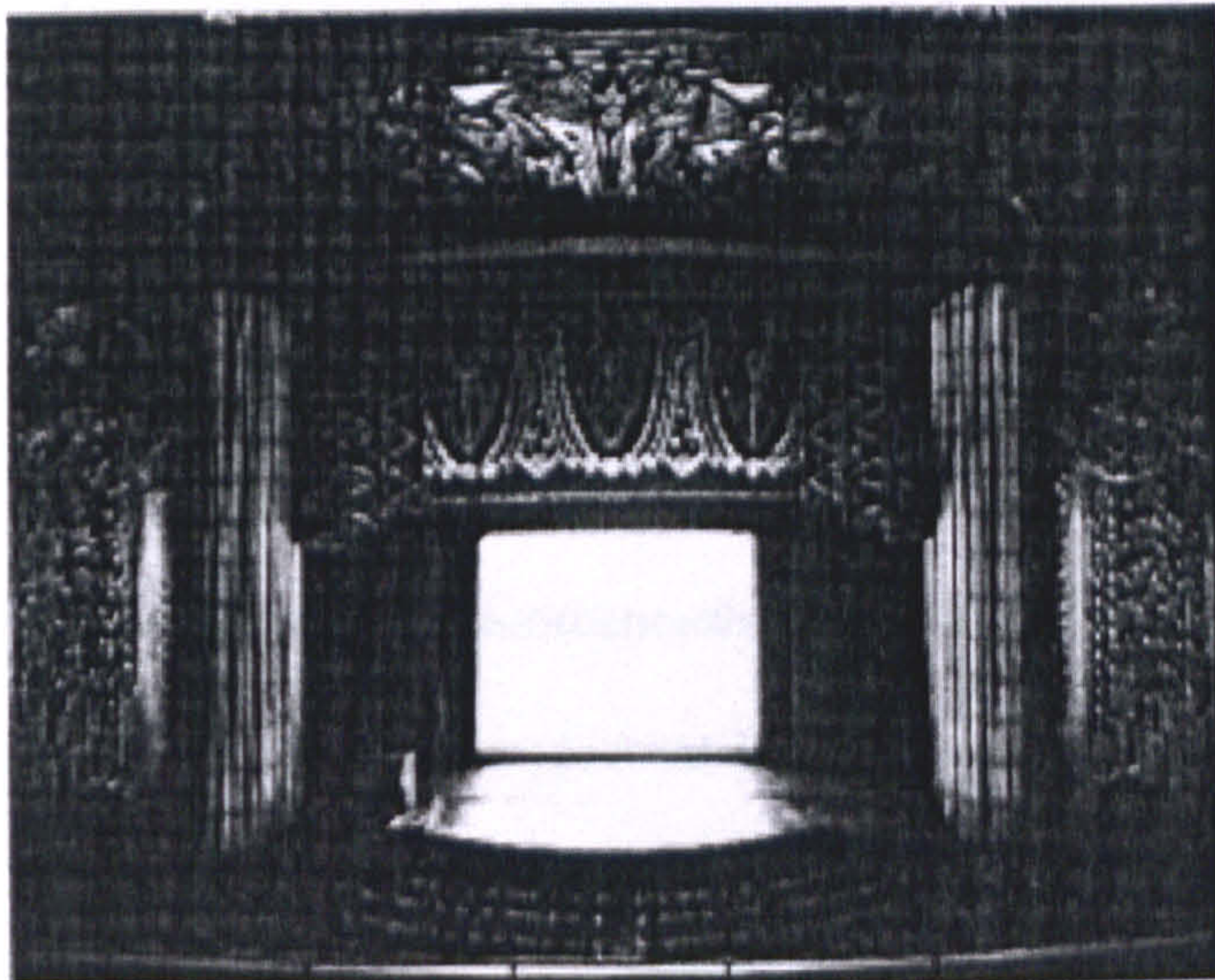
The photographs discussed in the following section can be read as foregrounding not only aspects of surface illegibility, but also of concealment. The fact of the fifteen-year gap between the start of Sugimoto's cinematic odyssey and the pictures under discussion here has an air of Thanatic activity about it – here the monochrome appears as compositional motif and returns, as does the repressed. Only this time the monochrome 'repressed' is disguised as part of a tightly organised surface structure. Paradoxically, at the same time it is also staged as the 'centre', in a way that troubles the established 'centre' of the White photographic lens. One centre is challenged by the



confronting gaze of an illegible, subjugated space that posits itself paradoxically as an alternative centre in a silent battle for the domain of the Symbolic.

## 2:2 Hiroshi Sugimoto & the Returns of Blankness

‘Why do you lie to me saying you’re going to Cracow so I should believe you’re going to Lemberg, when in reality you *are* going to Cracow?’ (Joke quoted by Lacan after Freud)



**Figure 19:** Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Paramount Theater, Oakland* 1994. Black and white photograph. Private collection.

Hiroshi Sugimoto's series *Theaters*, which began in 1978 with the unsettling *Sam Eric, Pennsylvania* (not illustrated), are prime examples of a serial 'staging' of monochrome. In each picture from this series, Sugimoto presents the cinema screen *as* monochrome; its glowing blank white surface the result of keeping the shutter open for the entire duration of the film. Sugimoto substitutes an eye for an eye. Not only does the eye of his camera present the spectator with an actual invisibility (the central 'monochrome'), but it also mediates the finished image so that, in order to come into being, it must pass through a series of eyes (of lens, photographer and spectator).

*Paramount Theater, Oakland* [Figure 19], whose screen nestles at the heart of a series of carved, pre-Art Deco proscenium arches and ornate baroque decorations, is one of the original cinema buildings from boom time 1920s and pre-Depression 1930s America. The gaudy overhead light-fitting directs attention to the bright, white cinema screen, a perfect glowing rectangle set within a



deep black border. A surplus of light from the screen in the form of an elongated crescent moon lies like a shadow in reverse on the floor of the orchestra pit. We are also shown the first three rows of seating, but the seats are unoccupied, suggesting an empty cinema. A general atmosphere of reverence or even worship is apparent, with any approaching eye's attention focused on the mysterious white glowing rectangle that occupies centre stage in surroundings as embellished as any Catholic or High Anglican Cathedral. If seen as an 'eye that presents', the monochrome cinema screen in *Paramount Theater, Oakland* plays a joke against the eye that one would expect to be doing the presenting; the White eye of photography. As an illegible undecidable in the centre of a narrative of definite and layered legibility (cinema's legible narrative, then the legibility of the *setting* as a cinema, then the legible narrative of the White lens of photography); Sugimoto's monochrome screen momentarily usurps the privileged position of mimetic representation. Rather than an 'eye that presents', perhaps it might be better understood as, or read concurrently as, an example of the 'subject presumed-to-know'<sup>14</sup>. It is presumed to know in ways that are problematic to the Phallic order, however, since what it knows is the same as what it presents – the 'secret' of its threatening indeterminacy.

Sugimoto has said, 'recently I've been experimenting with intentionally out-of-focus shots. I set up the position of the film and lens of my camera so that the focal point is twice the point of infinity.'<sup>15</sup> Sugimoto's surfaces attest to a preoccupation with infinity, optically similar to the infinity of Klein or Malevich. The blurring and deliberate playing with notions of 'correct', recognisable focus procedures crops up again and again, a gesture that is at once both repetitive (and therefore deathlike) and defiant. Infinity in Sugimoto appears to signify a place of free play, an opening up of possibilities. If we consider this in Lacanian terms we are faced with an intra-surface paradox. The indecipherable areas of monochrome provide endless potential for *différance* in Sugimoto's surface. The paradox is that the Phallus which casts its shadow over the signifiers to stop play and decide meaning, is also represented by the same monochrome passage in Sugimoto's surface. The monochrome in centre stage is godlike, regal – it invokes a sense of



subjection (if not abjection) in the spectator, it rules the composition. As the focal point of the surface, it could be said to be a stopping-place. If this monochrome has Phallic attributes, they are those of a damaged or incomplete or indeterminate Phallus, since the same monochrome also eternally defers. The Phallic attributes of this monochrome are rather like the White attributes of the Mixed Race subject, who exhibits and contains a 'deviant' kind of Whiteness that threatens the imagined purity of the White Phallus, and that has the potential to sentence the Mixed Race subject to a life of perpetual oscillation between the perceived Phallic binary of 'Black/White'. The playmates in Sugimoto's monochrome also oscillate, continually interrupting their own play as the very thing that creates endless potential for meaning is also involved in a perpetual act of legalistic paternal forbidding. It would seem that the gesture of putting monochrome on stage – a gesture foreshadowed by Klein's sketch in Chapter One – only increases its indeterminacy.

The glowing white screen positioned as subject or 'figure' in the composition guards the secret of what is contained in the film. This is especially the case when we consider that Sugimoto's technique here is to leave the shutter open throughout the entire length of the film. What we are actually seeing, although it is not possible to read, is the complete film, from opening scene to credits. This is an extraordinary film 'still' that shows us an eye that presents something invisible. Whilst the presenting eye keeps a tight guard on the secret, the Death Drive can be perceived at work within the surface. The concealment is murderous, for in order for the monochrome to hide the film and present the illusion of its own mastery, the film must be destroyed. All tensions are genuinely reduced to zero, the spectator sees the zero of white light, the usually invisible middle frequency at which light is emitted. The film dies as it is being run, each scene, or each cineme endlessly overwriting the preceding one. The internal monochrome, where the signifiers play, also commits a perpetual and repetitive suicide, under the murderous eyes of the camera lens, the screen and the devouring audience. Except that since we know it will be 'reborn' at the next screening, there exists a perpetual, conceptual oscillation. At the same time as it creates the

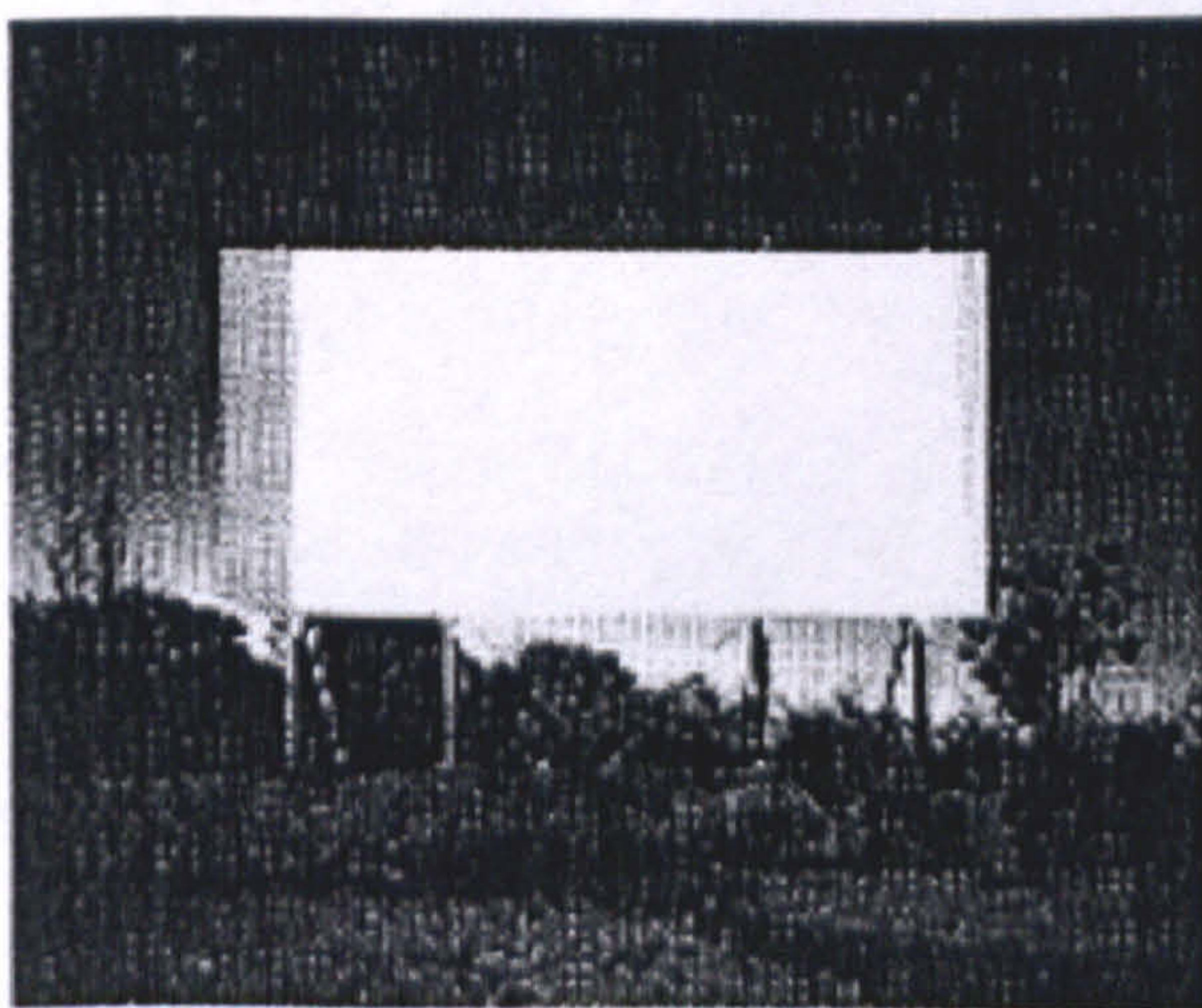


possibilities for free play, it also prevents any play at all through its intransigent untranslatability. The surface that cannot be read will always have the final word. The picture sees, knows and presents, but the mode of presentation is plain and simple trickery and the thing presented is 'hidden' or illegible. David Batchelor makes mention of a process of concealment when he describes cinema as 'one of the truly great monochromes of the twentieth century' (2000:174). He writes that the cinema screen is,

'So great and magnificent that it has to be kept in darkness and behind a ludicrously fenestered and often polychrome curtain. But so great that, like other monochromes of the city, it is almost always overlooked. The cinema screen: another palimpsest. Another covering over or erasure of a world, a world behind the screen, which in turn becomes the ground for another world to be poured onto the newly whitened expanse.' (Batchelor 200:174)

Sean Cubitt also reads a deathly and 'negative' quality into Sugimoto's blank spaces, but this time he aligns it with pain and longing, lived aspects of deathlikeness. Although the longing, like that of Narcissus, is for the thing that will devour one, still the longing persists, and the lack (from which stems the longing) hurts;

'But what for Sugimoto is the zen interpretation of internal and external voids becomes [...] the projection on screen of a vast, insatiable yearning for something beyond, something negative.' (Cubitt 1998:71)



**Figure 20:** Hiroshi Sugimoto *Stadium Drive-In, Orange County* 1993. Black and white photograph. Private collection.



Perhaps it is because of its situation out of doors, but the monochrome dominating the composition of *Stadium Drive-In, Orange County* [Figure 20] seems to command a different respect from the indoor, heavily contextualised monochrome of *Paramount Theater*. With *Stadium Drive-In*, an entirely different emphasis takes place in the relations between viewers. *Stadium Drive-In, Orange County* does, I think, provide a more subtle example of an act of concealment than *Paramount Theater* – it is not immediately obvious that what you are seeing is a film (albeit one captured in slow suicide). *Stadium Drive-In, Orange County* performs a cunning sleight-of-hand; in yet another paradox of blank double-dealing, it manages to thoroughly hide something by appearing to present it. As in Edgar Allan Poe’s mystery tale of *The Purloined Letter*, sometimes the best way to disguise something you wish to conceal is to place it in full view of everyone<sup>16</sup>. In Sugimoto’s photograph, what is hidden is concealment itself, effecting a kind of double-disguise. Presenting the concealment, Sugimoto draws suspicion away from the mute monochrome surface, away from the fact that it hides something and away from that which it hides.

*The Purloined Letter* tells a tale of paradoxical concealment which Lacan examined in his famous seminar on the story. Lacan used the metaphor of the letter to show how subjectivity is constituted in the Symbolic Order – the letter profoundly alters each Subject with which it has a relation, whether that relation is one of loss, searching or concealment. Poe’s letter is a metaphor for the signifying chain, and,

‘[...] in analysis, the chain of unconscious purposive ideas (or, in linguistic terms, the signifying chain) insists in being expressed and heard, beyond any attachment to a pleasure/unpleasure principle, or the ego’s attempts to stifle meaning.’ (Benvenuto & Kennedy 1986:93)

Thus the letter persistently shows up (no matter how carefully someone thinks they have hidden it), and the subject persistently speaks or asserts individuality (no matter how carefully the ego of the hegemonic system thinks it has voided that subject’s subjectivity, or right to speak). The point is that the Thanatic activity of Repetition Compulsion occurs, literally, beyond the pleasure principle – it is outside of the Freudian binary of ‘pleasure/unpleasure’. Perhaps Freud situates it



in the realm of the Death Drive because things that exist outside of structuring binaries are as unsymbolisable as death itself.

The incriminating 'letter' in Poe – stolen from the Queen's boudoir by a Minister, and in full view of the King – inspires a very particular kind of concealment that relies on the duping of the look itself. Lacan's Seminar on Poe's story makes much of the complex interchange of looks, and the relationship these looks have to concealment. Derrida's reading of Lacan's reading of Poe, *The Purveyor of Truth*, sets up yet more complex interchanges of glances and interpretations. Poe, Lacan and Derrida step around each other in a dance that mirrors the fantoula of glances taking place between King, Queen and Courtier. In Poe, the hiding of the letter actually takes place *twice* – once in the Queen's boudoir, once in the Minister's apartment. Lacan designates the whole structure of the two scenes as mimicking the subject's unconscious. The first scene of theft, taking place in the Queen's boudoir, is equivalent to the primal scene, 'Since the second may be considered its repetition in the very sense we are considering today' (Lacan 1972:48)<sup>17</sup>. It should be noted that it is not the repetition of events that constitutes the analogy of the Repetition Compulsion, but the overall structure of the tale which Lacan sees as parallel with the structure of a life's story. Lacan notes the striking similarities between the two thefts, as if the second one were necessary to bring the first to light. What is common to both theft/concealment situations is that each incident is predicated on a complex interchange of looks and misinterpretations, or misrecognitions. Whilst the two scenes do not have identical situations, mirroring does occur with respect to the 'three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters.' (1972:49)

Shoshana Felman identifies three repeated 'functional positions in a structure' (1987:41) standing for three different points of view, and three different ways in which to see the purloined letter:

'The first is a glance that sees nothing: the King and the Police. The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister. The third sees that the first two



glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin'. (Felman 1972:44)

Lacan insists on the importance of the position of the 'pure signifier' – that is, the purloined letter itself – in the trio, for it is the position of the pure signifier that decides on the relative positions of the subjects in the intersubjective relation structured around the letter's concealment. It is also this same pure signifier that becomes, according to Felman, a symbol of the unconscious. The necessity of the pure signifier to repress its own message means that like the unconscious desire which, upon repression, continually engages in repeated attempts to push itself up through the psychic economy; the pure signifier also survives in *displaced* symbolic media that end up taking over the subject's life. Lacan writes that the displacement of the signifier 'determines the subject'. The purloined letter itself appears first in the tale as a signifier of the repressed, returning later as a signifier of the unconscious.

We may see the Mixed Race body in much the same way as Lacan sees Poe's letter. This subject may find herself in a continual oscillation between the Symbolic, (for which she aims because she seeks to be recognised as a legitimate subject), and the Imaginary (which the White Phallic censorship attempts to push her back into, so that it can deny her subjectivity). This oscillation arises from the Mixed Race subject's refusal to accept the prohibitory and censoring action of the Phallus. She continues to assert her presence and identity (or push up through the censorship), but may have to find cunning or tricky ways to do this. We can also apply Lacan's reading of Poe to the interval between the two photographs by Sugimoto, and his repetition of them in the form of a series. In the first instance, *Paramount Theater, Oakland* shows the basic impossibility of ever reaching or comprehending what the unconscious holds within. The blank of glowing light that the screen emits does give some kind of tantalising, almost too obvious link to 'seeing the light', the type of word-play relished by the Freudian unconscious. The irony of seeing the light, but not 'seeing' the message is not lost on the conscious mind, either. When repetition comes in the shape of *Stadium Drive-In, Orange County*, the point of staging such a repetition could easily be read



in terms of the following; a return of the letter in the story, of the repressed in the unconscious, or indeed of the monochrome in the narrative of western Art History. In each case the motif which defies reading turns up again to prompt an analysis of its original appearance. As Lacan points out in his reading of Poe, this in itself can be read as an allegory of psychoanalysis.

What repeatedly calls out for analysis is the repeated appearance of the unreadable within the text. Sugimoto's repetition of blank spaces in legible compositions mimics the repeated returns of the illegible blank space of monochrome within a system of legible pictures. For Lacan, that which is repeated is always other. This means that the triangulated relationship of subject/look/letter relies on different characters taking up each position every time it is repeated, as illustrated in Poe. It is only in these differences that the significance of the structure of the game can be perceived. The insights into the unconscious that these repetitions provide for Lacan, then, prove the indelible fact of difference. The staged monochromes of Sugimoto's surfaces also show two other Lacanian notions; first that the subject is constructed in the Symbolic, second that what is repeated is always other. To take the latter point first, Sugimoto's repetition through at least one decade of similar monochrome areas within areas of mimetic representation is one way of asserting monochrome's Otherness. However, I think there is a more complex relation at work here. Sugimoto's monochromes, created from and suffused with light, glow purely and regally white. In this sense they are made of the same inherently Phallic White 'stuff' as other film, and at first glance they look like they are reinforcing this. What I see happening here, though, is a cunning inversion of the authority of the Phallic White lens; Sugimoto's monochromes appear to assert White Phallic authority, but are actually presenting that authority with an image of its workings. Sugimoto's cinemas are 'voided' of real audience members, and therefore we must assume that the 'audience' is the lens. In presenting a clear picture of the mechanics of that lens' power, Sugimoto does the forbidden and strips the 'veil' from the Phallus. This enforced unveiling, this revelation of the techniques of Phallic power, leaves the lens – and we, the



spectators – with an image of precisely nothing. In terms of subjectivity and the Symbolic, the central positioning of the monochromes is of great importance. This positioning enacts the central positioning of the empowered subject of traditional portraiture in representational painting and photography, except that now an indeterminate, Other subject has usurped that position of power (if only for a moment).

Another important insight from Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*, which I want to relate to the blank spaces in Sugimoto, is his notion of reading the signifier rather than the signified.

Lacan does not believe that the analyst's task is to find out the hidden content of the letter<sup>18</sup>. The fact that we, the readers, are left in ignorance of this makes no difference to his analysis of the unconscious as something that is exposed, rather than concealed, in language through displacement.

‘We shall find illumination in what at first seems to obscure matters: the fact that the tale leaves us in virtually total ignorance of the sender, no less than of the contents, of the letter’. (1972:56)

This model of paying attention to the disturbances in conscious meaning is also found throughout the work of Freud, in the *Interpretation of Dreams* for example, or in his work on parapraxis. This type of reading opens up another, newer approach to understanding a text than the traditional one that reading is an uncovering of meaning. What is read can now be precisely the thing that is *not* meaningful or logical, that significance can be found not only in what is conscious, but also in what *disrupts* that consciousness. The two photographs of Sugimoto's can both be read as conscious, logical and ordered compositions – in both cases recognisable scenes from everyday life – but compositions where, in each case, the conscious, structured logic is interrupted by something it is not possible to understand, order or file away. Consciousness is clearly disrupted in both photographs by an image that appears to be incomprehensible. This symbol of the unconscious reasserts itself in Sugimoto's series, demanding that questions be asked about the unconscious of photography, or that of painting. By clearly situating an area of non-

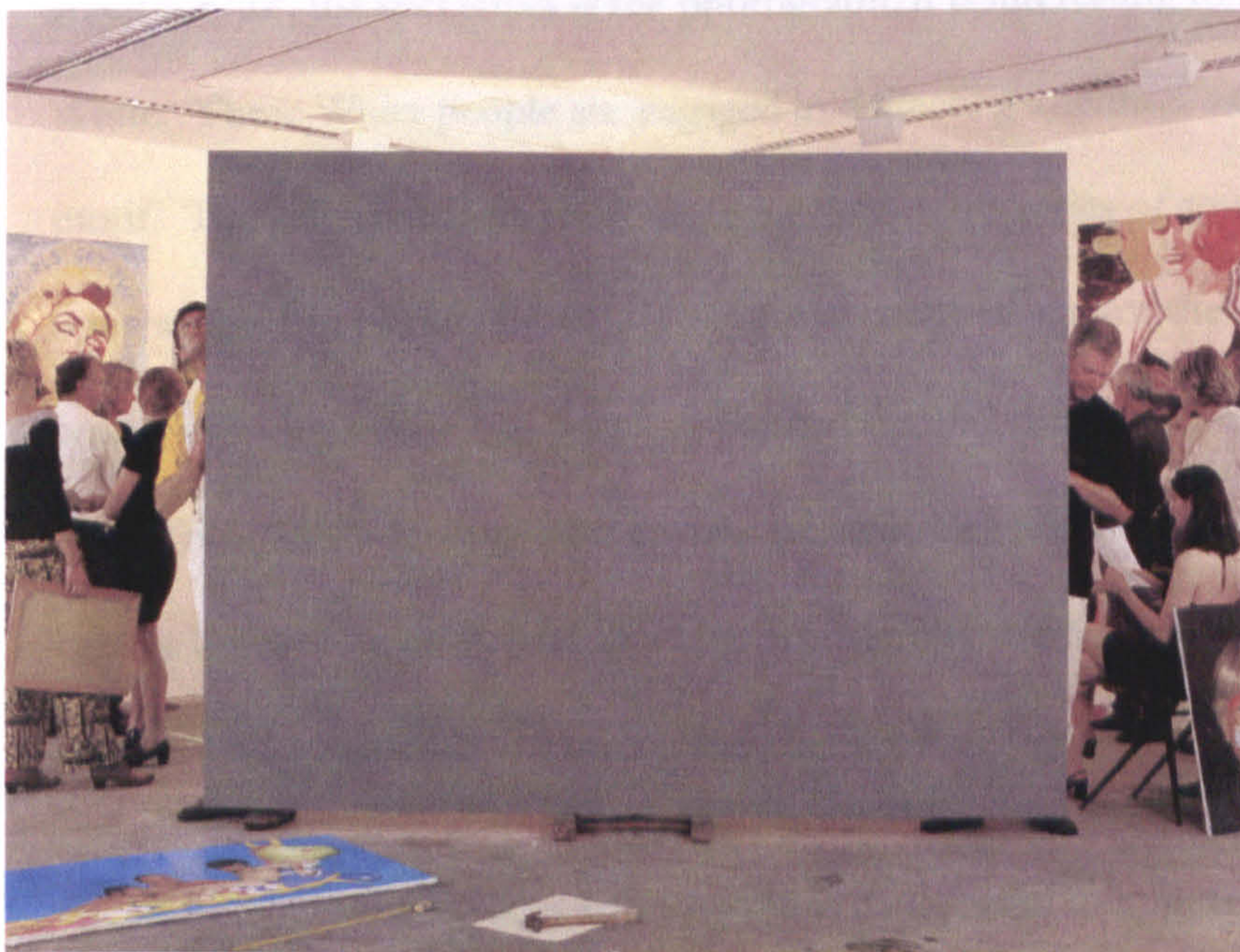


comprehension within a comprehensible structure, as Poe and Lacan have done, Sugimoto creates a disharmony within the surface, yet another within the spectating subject's unconscious mind. By repeating this structure, however, Sugimoto (along with Poe and Lacan) calls for a reading of the unconscious as something which can be seen pushing itself up through the areas where it has worn thin the logic of consciousness. Much like the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, the monochrome has been at once one of the most resisted and the most irresistible surfaces in the context of western art history. As Shoshana Felman writes on Poe, he is a,

‘[...] symptom of poetry to the extent that poetry is both what most resists a psychoanalytical interpretation and what most depends on psychoanalytic effects.’ (1987:51)

I want to argue that the monochrome, in this case the concealed, concealing monochrome within the ordered surface of Sugimoto's photographs, is a symptom of the unconscious of the visual image. Rather like the (un)intentional slip-up of a parapraxis, or the (un)intentional re-appearance of the purloined letter, the unconscious, though hidden, needs us to know that it is there.

## 2:3 John Hilliard & The Specular Monochrome



**Figure 21:** John Hilliard, *Debate (18% Reflectance)* 1996. Cibachrome on aluminium. 120 x 157cm. Private collection.



Whilst light in Sugimoto's surfaces represents agency, John Hilliard's surfaces display a 'preoccupation with light that both illuminates and extinguishes' (Wallace 1997:41). Hilliard's light has a weirdly indeterminate agency, it plays a part in the dramatics of cancelling that his work explores. Marina Wallace has called this the 'visual communication of denial and obliteration' (1997:41). Hilliard is involved in exhibitionistic activities of disguising and concealing; his surfaces foregrounding the 'text' of monochrome as a writing that is not to be read<sup>19</sup>. In the works by Hilliard discussed here, it is possible to see the development of an eye that first records and then presents, but whose presenting power is, again, mediated by the artist's own eye. Hilliard's recent photographs, bright cibachromes on aluminium, show scenes from what look like gallery openings, and in contrast to Sugimoto, Hilliard not only shows the audience, but implicates them in the drama of the surface. In *Debate (18% Reflectance)* of 1996 [Figure 21], a group of young White people stand around in a gallery. What is not apparent on initial looking, is that not one of the faces in the gallery is looking at the huge grey monochrome rectangle in the centre of the composition<sup>20</sup>. The people are peripheral to the upright 'painting' on the floor, the compositional subject that dominates the scene. If the spectators in the photograph are meant to stand for 'us', the spectators of the photograph, it is interesting to note that they all appear to be White. These White people are engaged in deflecting attention *away* from the huge, blank central motif. The gallery visitors seem more interested in a series of smaller, figurative canvases (the ones we can see portray heads). The canvas propped against the chair shows the face of a child with a little dog's nose and whiskers painted on, the visible wall-mounted canvases depict glamorous, 1950s-looking women, one of whom is identifiable as Marilyn Monroe. The 'Monroe' canvas has writing on it, part of which is cut off by the parameters of the painting, and thus made illegible and mysterious – it is a mystery we want to solve, to complete<sup>21</sup>.

As we look into the surface, two important clues begin to appear. First, the mad-trouserer woman is carrying her small canvas so that we can only see its *back*. Secondly, the heads and upper bodies of two men, who at first appeared to be part of the general audience, are now quite



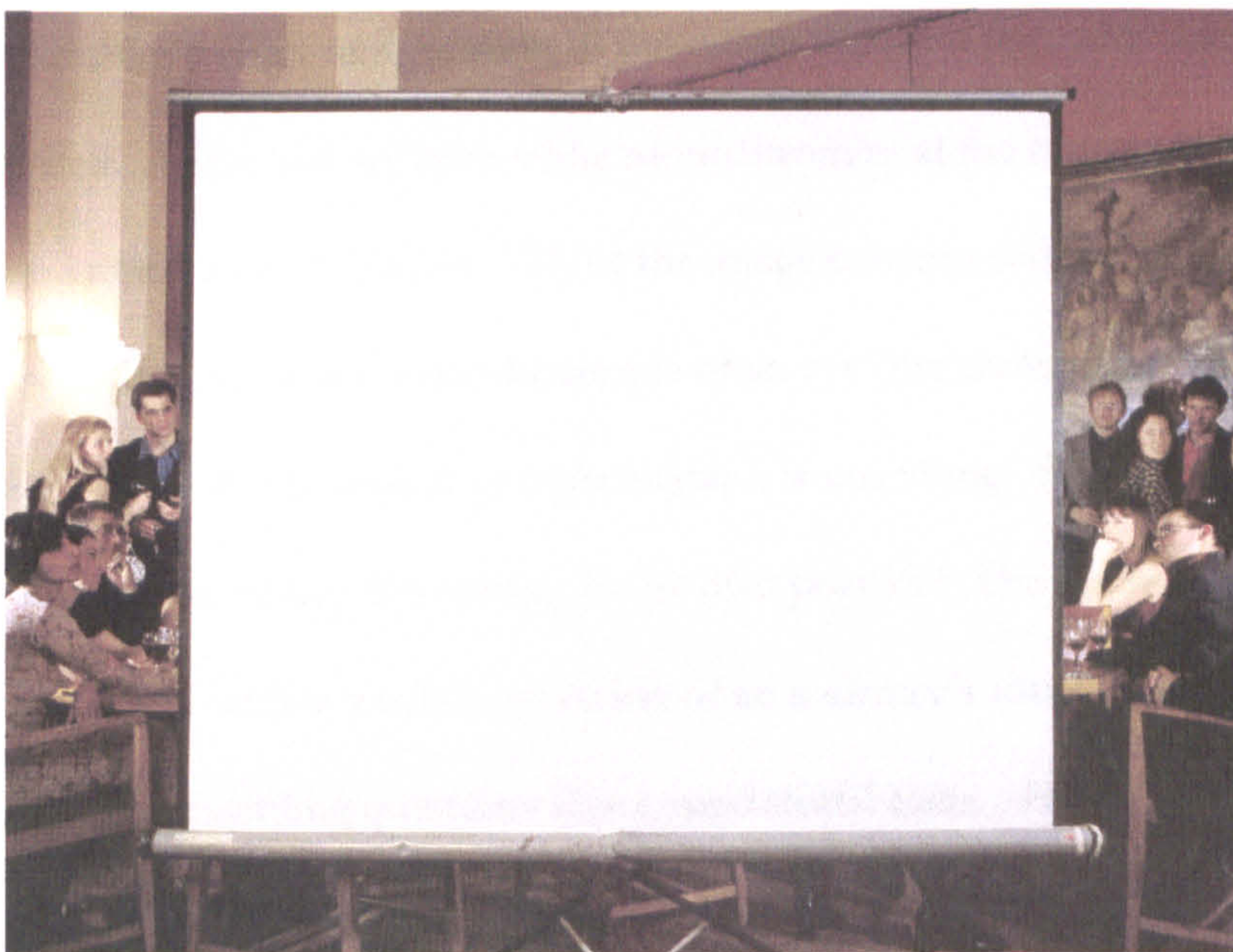
clearly holding the painting upright and moving it somewhere. Behind the painting (or rather in front of it if you are viewing it as a spectator in a gallery), are a selection of tools on the floor, such as tape measures and a hammer. It suddenly comes in a flash that maybe we are looking at the back of something; we are presented with the scene that the gallery walls, if they had sight, would see. The privileged position of the White spectator is shown as so much nonsense, and all at once we realise that this massive, central monochrome is either an oversized photographic test card (the clue is in the title, 18% reflectance is the optimum amount of light a photographer requires), or *the back side of a painting*. The ambiguity could be deliberate. If indeed this is a painting, its 'front' side could still be blank, but that side remains a mystery. On that side is inscribed the writing that is not to be read.

The position of seeing the back of the painting is not unlike positioning oneself before the illegibility of the monochrome. In both cases, something appears to be hiding. Both surfaces are filled with visual bait, both are approached as the powerful, all-knowing subject, and both surfaces remain invisible to the spectating eye. Hilliard has factored optical (as well as psychic) indeterminacies into his surface. As David Green points out,

'The large canvas has been so arranged that its evenly lit and uniform surface is exactly parallel to the picture plane of the photograph with the result that our reading of the grey rectangle continually oscillates between seeing it as set within the illusory space of the image and seeing it as coextensive with the surface of the photograph itself.' (Green 1999:18)

Another 'conceptual photograph' by Hilliard from the same series [Figure 22] depicts a similar scene, except that the bright young things striking contemplative poses with their glasses of wine are now almost certainly watching the back of a slide screen. The title, *Off-Screen*, again provides a clue – in this case the monochrome that dominates the picture is a white, light-filled screen, except this time 'we' the spectators see its front. The audience in the picture are grouped *behind* this monochrome. The group, which now includes a girl who looks Asian (left hand side), are





**Figure 22:** John Hilliard, *Off-Screen* 1999. Cibachrome on aluminium. 124 x 156cm. Private collection.

watching something we will never see, whilst we are looking at *nothing*, and in this sense are visually ‘castrated’. *Debate (18% Reflectance)* positions all spectators as excluded, subjugated. Importantly, Hilliard’s surface organisation allows a conceptual oscillation to take place. At the centre of his composition he places the paradox of the screen as it appears during a screening; highly visible and intently observed, but not actually *seen*, and therefore in a crucial way *invisible*. Like the blankness of monochrome, like the Whiteness of the Mixed Race subject, and the Whiteness of the Lacanian Phallus, all of which are observed – sometimes pathologically closely – but not *seen*, the invisibility is paradoxical and problematic.

Earlier works by Hilliard also seem to take on the idea of an eye that is capable of showing. His 1971 photograph, *A Camera Recording Its Own Condition (7 Apertures, 10 Speeds, 2 Mirrors)* arranges 70 photographs in the form of a grid. The camera looks back at itself in a mirror, except that of course it is not the camera’s image as it sees itself, but its image as the photographer, and afterwards the spectator, sees it. Hilliard alters the shutter-speed and aperture on each occasion, so that the resulting images swing between over- and under-exposure. The gridlike surface almost



resembles a chart or spectrum, in the centre the most ‘correctly’ exposed, or legible images are placed. At the top are pure white monochromes, at the bottom pure black ones, both of which are immediately ill/legible. Whilst the image contains monochromes, it is not a monochrome itself. It is, however, a good example of an eye (the camera), that presents. Hilliard’s treatment of the camera as the subject of a photograph is unsettling. Surely the camera is what creates the photograph, rather than sitting for its own portrait? The quasi-subjectivity that Hilliard imbues the camera with is a subtle inversion of an audience’s usual understanding of the role of the lens, and asks unsettling questions about spectatorial roles. However, if we use theories which expose the particular and non-objective nature of the lens (eg Mulvey, Dyer), it becomes possible to read Hilliard’s piece as the *Phallus Recording Its Own Condition*. This condition is paradoxical and mutable; the Phallus is well able to morph itself to whatever shape it needs to maintain the illusion of its dominance – even to appear ‘invisible’.



**Figure 23:** Velázquez, *Las Meninas* 1656. Oil on canvas. 3.21 x 2.81m. Prado, Madrid.

Michel Foucault discusses the problematic specular interrelationships that an inversion of visual norms can bring about in his well-known essay about Velázquez’s famous portrait from the classical ‘canon’ of Art History, *Las Meninas* (Foucault 1966:3) [Figure 23]. In using this painting as a stepping-stone to his work on human knowledge, Foucault immediately sets up the primacy



of vision as a way of apprehending the world. Beginning with a description of the Velázquez painting, Foucault has established a problematic of inter-visual relations within the first paragraph.

‘The skilled hand is suspended in mid-air, arrested in rapt attention on the painter’s gaze; and the gaze, in return, waits upon the arrested gesture.’  
(Foucault 1970:1)

Hilliard seems to have been inspired by *Las Meninas*, repeating many of Velázquez’s compositional gestures such as showing the back of a painting. What is interesting is that both pictures are records of occasions *that never actually took place*. The reluctant stance of the Infanta Dona Margarita in the Velázquez, the imploring attitudes of her handmaidens (known by the Portuguese title *Meninas*), the introduction of her court dwarves Maribarbola and Nicolasito – all are designed to humour her into posing for her portrait. Kenneth Clark (1972) informs us that the five-year-old Infanta would have posed regularly for portraits since birth, and, as one can imagine, would be thoroughly bored with the process by now. According to Clark, this sitting differed from the rest. It was to be an enormous official portrait, *so big that it had to stand on the floor*, of the Infanta with her parents King Philip IV and his wife, Queen Mariana. As far as we know, this big official portrait which Velázquez only shows the back of, was never finished. The enormous ‘canvas’ in Hilliard’s *Debate (18% Reflectance)*, is also so big it must rest on the floor, and also dominates the scene by showing us what looks like its back. Of course, in the latter we see only a section of the canvas, whilst Hilliard shows us the reverse of a ‘full frontal’ – but the effect is the same.

Similarly, Hilliard’s casual dispersal of carpentry tools on the floor in front of the canvas echoes Velázquez’s unobtrusive inclusion of the artist’s brush. That tool of the artist’s trade, sparking so much debate and reverence, hangs flaccid in the painter’s hand as the hammers and screwdrivers are discarded on Hilliard’s gallery floor. When not in use, the ‘tools’ lose some of their mystique. When positioned as one of many objects in a picture, the tools become strangely redundant, occupying the same conceptual space as a shadow on a fold of drapery, or a dog’s tail. Hilliard’s



tool, his camera, somehow escapes this loss of status. Rather than existing as an element within a compositional schema, the camera in *A Camera Recording Its Own Condition* is, through its relentless repetition, sole subject and occupant, many times over, of the picture space. As it returns and returns, the mythic status of the camera is raised yet higher until we are faced with the realisation that the camera is not in fact a tool, but an *eye*. The monochrome mediated by photography is under perpetual scrutiny from this eye.

In Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas*, the painter himself is described as having been caught in, 'a moment of stillness, at the neutral centre of this oscillation' (1970:1). Despite the fact that each passage of the composition seems to act as a springboard for specular relations, the wild reflections back and forth of the various glances in the picture are tamed by the presence of the painter, who acts as the eye of the storm. In Hilliard's picture, the eye of the looking-storm is not the painter but the *painting*, or worse, the dominant back of the painting. It seems as though Hilliard is making a point about the theoretical shift in importance from the Romantic notion of the artist as a genius endowed with God-given sight, to the more recent usurpation of the position of the artist by the work. Hilliard, however, is subtle. He presents us with something that cannot be seen, therefore alluding to two things at once. First he makes reference to the previous Romantic 'mystery' of what the artist puts into the canvas; secondly the fact that the current cultural significance that the surface enjoys can always succumb to the danger of the 'Emperor's New Clothes'. An audience can always get excited by a trick, and being shown nothing at all – provided the visual palate is adequately peppered with flavoursome theories – can induce great reverence and (misplaced) respect in the viewer. Following on from this, the court 'buffoons' in Velázquez, people with physical deformities or learning disabilities, become in Hilliard the gallery visitors. Whilst we have no idea about the content of the surface that dwarfs everyone but at which nobody bothers to look, we are clearly presented with something that appears to be a grey monochrome. One cannot help but wonder whether the blank, affectless



surface of the monochrome is somehow having a laugh at our expense. In a turn that belongs to the tradition of the monochrome sublime, we have all become buffoons and dwarves under the magnificently inscrutable presence of Hilliard's massive grey monochrome subject.

Like the cinema screen, the painting in both Velázquez and Hilliard is visible to the point of obtrusiveness, yet remains invisible to the characters. Foucault writes that a 'double invisibility' takes place in *Las Meninas*. He begins by pointing out that the painter's face is turned towards an invisible point – however, as spectators we can easily assign a place to this point. The place is ourselves, our bodies, our eyes. Foucault writes,

'The spectacle he is observing is thus doubly invisible: first, because it is not represented within the space of the painting, and, second, because it is situated precisely in that blind point, in that essential hiding-place into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of our actual looking. And, yet, how could we fail to see that invisibility, there in front of our eyes, since it has its own perceptible equivalent, its sealed-in figure, in the painting itself?' (1970:4)

So, first we have what Lacan refers to in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* as something that is always present in every picture because of the eye's very structure, and has to do with the inherent (Phallic) power of the (White) eye to separate (in so far as Lacan assumes a White, French, masculine subject, we can assume his 'eye' to be White, Phallic);

'Indeed, there is something whose absence can always be observed in a picture – which is not the case in perception. This is the central field, where the separating power of the eye is exercised to the maximum in vision. In every picture, this central field cannot but be absent, and replaced by a hole – a reflection, in short, of the pupil behind which is situated the gaze. Consequently, and in as much as the picture enters into a relation to desire, the place of a central screen is always marked, which is precisely that by which, in front of the picture, I am elided as the subject of the geometral plane'. (Lacan 1994 [1973]:108 )

Lacan elides the notions of 'hole' and 'mirror' here in a way that seems to belie his Phallogocentrism. This central field or blind spot, which is a hole (so that the gaze falls into it) and also simultaneously a reflection (so that the spectator sees him or herself reflected), performs an eradicating act on the subject. The blank central monochrome of Hilliard dwarfs us with its



size, but it also eliminates us with its blankness. The big, inscrutable tain of the picture, which Foucault would describe this as, 'The other side of a psyche' (1970:6), is the first sign of double invisibility. This works equally well for the Velásquez and the Hilliard. However, Velásquez supplies an important clue about the possible content of the front of his canvas, whereas Hilliard does not. In amongst the panels of oil paintings in the dark gallery, one panel in particular (featuring two figures in silhouette) glows improbably with a bright light. The source of this light is inexplicable, it appears as if the panel is glowing from within, or of its own accord. As it turns out, this isn't a picture but a *mirror*. Foucault writes that, 'Of all the representations represented in the picture this is the only one visible; but no one is looking at it' (1970:7). The mirror represents the content of the mysterious front of the canvas, a portrait of the King and Queen. In all this confusion of unstable looking, nobody is actually looking at either the representation of the Royal couple on the canvas, or at their reflection in the mirror, the reflected representation of their representation. Taken figuratively, Lacan's 'reflection [...] of the pupil behind which is situated the gaze' could refer to the mirror that Velásquez has placed, or hidden, in amongst the panels of paintings in the dark gallery. Of course, what Velásquez's mirror reflects is the King and Queen, whose position in the picture is roughly equivalent to that of the spectator and therefore erases the spectator the minute s/he realises her/his place is filled by powerful symbols of royalty. Lacan also writes, however, that he is 'elided as a subject of the geometral plane' by the marking out of the central screen. This reflective hole, this area where 'the nothing' resides, according to Lacan performs an act of erasure on the subject's subjectivity. It reflects the seer back into the Imaginary, before the initial subject-forming confrontation with the mirror, before the inception of the subject's subjectivity and passage into the Symbolic. This is what the White Phallic eye of photography would attempt to do with the subject of Mixed Race; to place her in the position where hole and mirror are elided, a position that oscillates between Imaginary and Symbolic. The White eye would then be able, at will, to reflect the Mixed Race subject back into the Imaginary, where she cannot reach subjectivity and therefore cannot pose a real threat. In her second



Doctoral Thesis, Luce Irigaray challenged the Phallogocentric economies of knowledge and representation that could be symbolised by the Lacanian mirror, and proposed the speculum as Woman's alternative. This visionary text, *Speculum: Of the Other Woman*, offered an embodied writing specifically by and for women. Predictably the Phallogocentric system that she criticized for silencing women did its best to silence Irigaray: she was dismissed from her post at the University of Vincennes. I wonder if another kind of 'speculum' could be suggested, this time for the Mixed Race subject; a 'speculum' which does not privilege the Phallic specularity of Lacan's mirror, and which does not erase the specularity of the Other? (I will come back to this in section 2:6, below.)

Hilliard does not appear to present an equivalent mirror in his composition, whilst his gallery walls are hung with figurative pictures, the presences they depict are carnivalesque (eg, the child with its face painted like a dog who is analogous with the Infanta in *Las Meninas*), or iconic. These are, of course, all representations of representations, as is the cunning mirror hidden in the Velázquez, but none of them appears to reflect. Has Hilliard, in making what appears to be a contemporary version of *Las Meninas*, left out one of Velázquez's most ingenious compositional devices? This question answers itself if we re-look at Lacan. It is the inevitable blind spot in a picture that acts as a reflection of the blind spot at the centre of all vision, the sightless pupil. Where Velázquez has ensured the double representation of this blind spot by his inclusion of the back of the painting *and* a mirror reflecting the thing that we cannot see; Hilliard relies on the relentless centrality of his grey monochrome (also the back of a picture?), to 'reflect' back to the spectator the blindness at the centre of their vision. In *Debate (18% Reflectance)*, the monochrome becomes a mirror reflecting the blind spot. Foucault goes on to write that what the mirror in *Las Meninas* actually reflects is the invisible, the thing that cannot be seen within the picture space,

'The mirror provides a metathesis of visibility that affects both the space represented in the picture and its nature as representation; it allows us to see, in the centre of the canvas, what in the painting is of necessity doubly invisible' (1970:8)



We therefore have two blind spots in *Las Meninas*, the blind back of the canvas, and the mirror on the far wall. The double-blind spot is a familiar position for the Mixed Race subject in White society, who is historically invisible as a Black subject, but whose 'Mixture' is also invisible, a horrific sight denied by the eye of White society's ego.

The concept of the gaze in Lacan and Foucault is fugitive. Apparently the only way we can apprehend such a gaze is in its reflection; paradoxically though, the reflection is always of this unavoidable blind spot. Hilliard has conceptualised this blind spot as a monochrome, which receives and hides all our gazes, something that is, quite literally, at the centre of all vision. Into the composition of *Debate (18% Reflectance)* Hilliard has figured a treatment of the monochrome which privileges it in the quite crude terms of its overpowering size and central positioning. However, if we are to read this as a strategy that also writes monochrome as the blind spot at the centre of all vision, it surely follows that this blind spot is, paradoxically, also accorded much privilege. But is a blind spot empty or full? Is it even possible to consider a blind spot in terms of innate volume? Foucault's analysis of the mirror as blind spot in Velázquez's picture presents this blind spot as replete, even layered.

'In the realm of the anecdote, this centre is symbolically sovereign, since it is occupied by King Philip IV and his wife. But it is so above all because of the triple function it fulfils in relation to the picture. For in it there occurs an exact superimposition of the model's gaze as it is being painted, of the spectator's as he contemplates the painting, and of the painter's as he is composing his picture (not the one represented, but the one in front of us which we are discussing). These three 'observing' functions come together in a point exterior to the picture: that is, an ideal point in relation to what is represented, but a perfectly real one too, since it is also the starting-point that makes the representation possible. Within that reality itself, it cannot not be invisible' (1970:14-15)

Full of gazes and reflections of gazes, this monochrome blind spot is the central organising point of the composition. The blind spot acts here like a benevolent monarch, 'A reflection that shows us quite simply, and in shadow, what all those in the foreground are looking at. It restores, as if by magic, what is lacking in every gaze' (1970:15). The spectator can thus fill the painter's



disturbingly empty gaze with the models, the king's gaze is filled with his own portrait, and so on. This action of desperately attempting to fill blank spaces is a typical activity of the Phallic gaze. But Foucault, tantalisingly, also allows for the possibility that this apparent reparative function of the mirror/blind spot could be a trick:

'But perhaps this generosity on the part of the mirror is feigned; perhaps it is hiding as much as and even more than it reveals [...] For the function of that reflection is to draw into the interior of the picture what is intimately foreign to it: the gaze which has organised it and the gaze for which it is displayed. But because they are present within the picture, to the right and to the left, the artist and the visitor cannot be given a place in the mirror: just as the king appears in the depths of the looking-glass precisely because he does not belong in the picture.' (1970:15).

In Hilliard, however, all the things that don't belong in the picture – the spectators represented by his gallery-goers, the artist represented by the tools on the floor and the mystique of the invisible canvas – are actually represented *in* the picture. This in itself could be read as Hilliard's trick, taking the form of the double-bluff. The mirror doesn't reflect any of the things that Velázquez's mirror reflects, because Hilliard's mirror functions as both mirror and hole, or blind spot. So the multiple gazes of the spectators are hiding behind the mysterious grey monochrome, whilst being represented by proxy by the figures of the gallery goers. We see what they see, but they can't see what we can't see – or rather, they don't appear interested. None of them are looking at the front of the painting, which is invisible to us, but then none of them are looking at the back of the painting either. So this means that Hilliard's mirror/hole/blind spot might pretend to give back that which is missing in the picture (the artist's gaze, the spectator's gazes), but in actual fact it only gives us back the reminder that we can't see what we want to see.

Foucault does go on to say that both the painter and the spectator 'compose' the picture whilst they look at it (1970:16), thus assigning authorial activities beyond the realm of the traditional author. Eventually it is the condition of invisibility, too, that becomes something that the painter



and the spectator share, and all artifice on the part of the painter counts for nothing in the face of the inevitable invisible;

‘[...] the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing – despite all mirrors, reflections, imitations and portraits.’ (1970:16).

The blind spot at the centre of Hilliard’s *Off Screen* is conceptualised slightly differently; its power to separate (figure from ground, seen from unseen) is just as great, but its size is smaller and the surrounding figures perform different actions. The main activity in *Off Screen* is to look avidly towards a central point, the ‘off screen’ side of the bright white monochrome which we cannot see. We can trace in the spatial and epistemological structure of the composition an orientation based on a play of light, similar to that found in the surface of *Las Meninas*. The main difference in each case is the *source* of the lighting. In *Las Meninas*, the light’s sources appear mysterious because they are illogical. However, logic isn’t important here, what really counts is the light’s ability to act as a clue to the oscillation of looks that the surface both contains and projects. In this interchange of looks, the object of vision (like Poe’s letter), becomes unstable, mobile and shifting. It cannot be contained, and endlessly moves off from where any gaze might attempt to fix it. In this case, the clue to the gaze is the *light*, a mimetic representation of the process that constructed the picture itself. In relation to the monochrome, the oscillations of light and gaze we see here can be used as metaphors to describe its slippery signifiatory indeterminacy. In relation to the subject of Mixed Race, the same is true, but with the added metaphor of an ‘origin’ that defies Phallic logic.

The well known second section of Lacan’s *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* is devoted to an analysis of the eye, the gaze and the problem of defining a picture. Entitled *Of the Gaze as Objet Petit-a*, the section implicitly conceptualises the gaze itself as the symbol of the fundamental condition of lack that Lacanian psychoanalysis relegates all living humans to, a lack that engenders an eternal cycle of desire. As the fugitive illusion of satisfaction fades, it ultimately exposes the



original emptiness – and again, more lack. Lack is a motivating force, as is desire (which is always unconscious), but it is never possible for the subject to arrive at a position where these forces can be controlled. The gaze originates from the subject's body but is simultaneously exterior to it:

'The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack [...]' (Lacan 1994[1977]:104)<sup>22</sup>

Like the weaned child, the gaze is never, satisfied; its desire to see and know, to re-look and re-consider even supposedly familiar sights is voracious throughout human life. The gaze itself provides a visual image of the relentless cycle of lack, desire, attempts at filling, more lack, more desire, and so on *ad infinitum*<sup>23</sup>. The gaze as *objet a* represents the Phallus-that-is-not-there, or that is imagined not to be there, or that is jealously guarded in case it should one day disappear. So: following the trail from the originary lack to its symbolisation as *objet a*, to the *objet a*'s symbolisation as gaze and, finally, to the unreadable monochrome in the photographs discussed above as symbol of the gaze oscillating optically between projection and reflection, and psychically between Imaginary and Symbolic; what we are left with is the possibility of monochrome as fetish – a symbol of the Phallic eye's potential visual castration.

Lacan does not explicitly mention the notion of *visual* castration in *Of The Gaze as Objet Petit-a*. However, his notion of the gaze carries with it the scent of deception and trickery. The subject needs the gaze in order to have subjectivity, 'In the scopic relation, the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze' (Lacan 1994[1977]:83) So perhaps it is possible to conceptualise the gaze as something that has its own type of subjectivity; that is able to conceal or play a trick. If this is the case, it follows that a reading of the 'evil eye' could expose it as a 'castrating eye', an eye that disempowers. The 'evil eye' causes milk to curdle and bad luck to rain down on anyone who falls foul of its gaze. In animals, Lacan states that the 'evil eye' causes the drying up of their milk (1994[1977]: 115-119).



The animal becomes, quite literally, full up with 'the nothing'. In terms of its previous ability to nourish its young and to be of use to humans, the animal can be said to be 'castrated' – although in Lacan, castration in the female (and the 'Mulatto') has already occurred, so perhaps this should be described as a double castration. The 'evil eye' has, symbolically, performed the function of the Name of the Father, separating the young from the mother's milk and preventing the bodily re-attachments to the mother that take place in breastfeeding. Visual castration could provide a useful way of reading the monochrome in terms of that other of the Phallic function, the eternally lost object or *objet a*<sup>4</sup>. The power that comes from owning the legend that cracks the code must necessarily be a Phallic power, since in Lacanian psycho-analysis the Symbolic Order is structured in relation to the Phallus. So the gaze is the missing Phallus, and the monochrome represents the space, hole or gap where the Phallus 'ought' to be. But at first sight this appears to be too straightforward, it also doesn't allow for the possibility of trickery or concealment. Is monochrome the absence of the Phallus, veiled?

Perhaps we should go back to the *Purloined Letter* for help in solving this puzzle. Assuming, as Poe's detective Dupin does, that the best place to hide something is in full view, monochrome can be said to be involved in a tricky double-bluff. In the examples from Hilliard and Sugimoto, each author places their monochrome at the centre of a scene or action. In other words, like the purloined letter, monochrome is stationed right where everyone can see it. Like the mother holding up the infant to the mirror, the compositions 'hold up' or present the central figure of the monochrome to our spectating gaze. Hilliard and Sugimoto even go so far as to draw attention to it, placing it within fancy settings in a sort of *mise-en-abîme*, which echoes the glance-saturated worlds in which the photographs are set. Sugimoto's pictures, for example, are composed as cinematic shots; Hilliard's pay attention to traditional, scholarly values of photographic composition. According to Susan Hayward, this kind of 'dressing up' is similar to that of the transvestite, who;



‘[...] articulates his desire for the phallus in that he identifies with the phallus-as-hidden under the mother’s dress. In other words, he identifies with a woman who has a hidden phallus. Fetishism is, as we know, a strategy of disavowal faced by the fear of castration: the fetishist ‘completes’ the female body and in doing so denies difference, denies the lack.’ (Hayward 1996:283)

So, in this alternative reading of the ‘staged’ or mediated monochrome, the absent Phallus in the guise of the monochrome is really the absent Phallus twice-veiled. The first disguise is in the fact that the absence is so clearly presented. The second veiling is a little more complex; the monochrome *disguises* the fact that it is presenting an absence, by pretending to *present* that very absence. An elaborate hiding-by-showing is going on in these monochrome surfaces, a conceptual game of dressing-up which makes a fetish out of fetishisation itself. The analogy of the transvestite should, then, ideally be replaced by the analogy of a woman dressed *as* a transvestite. That which is castrated veils itself with that which is obsessed with the castrated thing which possesses the Phallus, but which hides it. In the end, as Lacan would have us believe, it’s all about the gaze deceiving the eye. The legend of Zeuxis and Parrhasios which Lacan refers to (1994 [1977]:103) shows that whilst it is commendable to be able to paint so convincingly as to deceive birds, the real skill lies in managing to deceive a human. And what better way to deceive a human than to arouse curiosity, to paint a veil which is so realistic that the desire to *know*, to possess the Phallic knowledge associated with power, takes over. This is what Sugimoto and Hilliard have done in these monochromes, they have veiled both knowledge, and the Phallus itself. Like Parrhasios’ picture, all the spectator wants to do is to rip the mask off the monochrome, to draw back its veil; to find out what it is managing to get away with. The photographs of Hilliard and Sugimoto exist in a space between two definite categories. This unnameable space is what the inflexible binary categories leave over; it is their trace, their surplus, the symbol of their desire, another incarnation in the surface of the *objet petit-a*. Like the aural as discussed in the following section, and like the subject of Mixed Race within Whiteness, it is an interstitial thing.



## 2:4 The Interstitial Auditory

This section will consider what the ear in cinematic photography presents in relation to the previously discussed White eye. The audience for film is involved in a socially-inscribed ritual of silent sitting and rapt absorption; I want to begin to look here at the ways that silence (and sound) relate to the discussion. Cinema has been understood to function simultaneously for the Imaginary and the Symbolic Orders of existence, with the viewing subject in a continual flux between the two<sup>25</sup>. The cinematic apparatus has always already positioned the spectator as voyeuristically identified with the look, and effectively constructs the spectator as subject whilst, in Dyer's reading, it castrates the Black subject. If the projector is read as the omnipotent all-seeing eye, then the spectator's visual pleasure is tied in with issues of 'lawless seeing' (Hayward). The viewer watches, but from the position of power since s/he is not watched. Every time the subject goes to the cinema, then, a desire to repeat the experience of visual pleasure is enacted. However, the accompanying narcissistic Imaginary identification with the image also implies the subject's desire to repeat the orgasmic experience of *jouissance*<sup>26</sup>. This form of pleasure pays no regard to the Phallus, it is pre-linguistic and cannot be articulated in words (unlike Phallic pleasure, which takes place in the linguistic realm of the Symbolic)<sup>27</sup>.

The cinema provides an ideal repository for psychic desire, especially since it has always carried associations of dreams, escapism and fantasy. The cinema screen becomes the screen on to which the subject's unconscious fantasies and desires are projected and read: cinema positions the spectator as desiring subject (and, presumably, positions the Black spectator as existing in a condition of pathological desire and lack). As Kaja Silverman writes,

'We have seen that the object is definitively lost (and the subject definitively found) at the moment of linguistic access. Cinema replays that drama of phenomenal loss and cultural recovery.' (Silverman 1988:10)<sup>28</sup>

With its clear emphasis on vision, it is sometimes easy to forget that the experience of cinema can also be extra-ocular. The phenomenon of the monochrome or blank film really foregrounds this



issue, as we can see from the initial reception of Guy-Ernest (later Guy) Debord's situationist film, *Hurléments en Faveur de Sade*. On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 1952, Debord brought great perplexity to the Paris Musée de l'Homme when he presented this imageless film. Screening had to be stopped after just twenty minutes; actual physical violence broke out in response to this confusing film which oscillated between an entirely black and an entirely white screen, first accompanied by silence, then by 'a mélange of in-group dialogue, political proclamation, citation of philosophers and American western movies.' (Marcus 1989:331-339) The visual portion of Debord's film is credited as the inspiration behind some of the Minimal films that arose a decade later<sup>29</sup>.

The confusion of Debord's audience arises from the disturbing fact that both the audio *and* the visual elements of the film appeared meaningless. Finding themselves thwarted in their search for meaning on screen, the audience were forced to concentrate on the sound – in which they found no 'meaning' either. Bouncing between sound and image and back again, the spectator is forced into the centre of an oscillation which places them neither here, nor there – a place that Phallic thinking would probably call, 'nowhere'. In this case, the eye and ear are 'tricked' – Debord's monochrome cinema screen playfully dresses up for a moment as a representative of cinema's Phallic economy, appropriating the Phallic functions of exclusion and confusion, and playing them out in its own way with the assistance of sound. What is interesting here is that the sound-aspect of Debord's film is doubly indeterminate. Firstly, the nature of the voice in cinema is an interstitial thing, a go-between. It is a border condition, existing between the body and language (see Rosolato 1974). As such a border condition, it can be understood to have parity with the blank surface. Secondly (and specifically to Debord's film), the voice presents itself for the first few moments as something that can be understood. It sets up the expectation in the audience that it will provide the explanation for the film's blank visual aspect. When it becomes clear to the audience that the 'soundtrack' is nothing but a random collection of fragments, that expectation is dashed.



Kaja Silverman's seminal 1988 work, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, deals specifically with the problem of sound and the voice within classical narrative cinema, particularly of the voice of Woman. Silverman's thesis is that classic cinema generates castration anxiety at the site of male subjectivity. She goes on to write that the central lack that haunts all film theory is, in reality, a preoccupation with male subjectivity (1988:1). The reality of male lack is projected on to female characters in classic cinema, who embody the walking wounded or the lack lived, and so in a manner following Freudian fetishism, 'classic cinema [...] projects male lack on to female characters in the guise of anatomical deficiency and discursive inadequacy.' (1988:1). Interestingly, Silverman also democratises castration anxiety. She suggests that there is an initial castration that takes place *before* the founding Freudian split of the infant's discovery of sexual difference. This castration affects both male and female subjects, and it concerns the splitting from the world of objects and entry into the world of *language*, ie the Lacanian Symbolic Order (1988:1, 15). Whilst this enables a more realistic understanding of the male *and/or* female subject's horror at the idea of the loss of or threat to its perceived bodily integrity, it does also create conceptual problems. If stripped of its originary genital significance, the horror of castration then surely becomes a dread of subjectivity, of individuation, a dread of losing the direct connection to the mother. It is a dread of being set adrift, of having no anchor in a mother tongue or mother country. Perhaps the classifying White Phallus relies on this dread in order to wield its 'power'; when the Phallic eye views the subject who is not easily locatable in any one mother country or single mother tongue, what it sees is a mobile, potentially transgressive and potentially destabilising subject. To contain this perceived threat, the Phallic eye must convince that subject that she is really rootless, destabilised, wrong. Perhaps it would also be fair to say that the dread is less of subjectivity and more of the threat of deprivation of the *jouissance*, which as we have seen cannot take place in the realm of language.



Silverman quotes Freud's 1923 *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy* to indicate Freud's insistence that the term 'castration' should only be used in relation to the absence of the penis. Her purpose in this is to suggest that Freud's strategy serves to place the maximum distance possible between the male subject and the notion of lack.

'To admit that the loss of the object is also a castration would be to acknowledge that the male subject is already structured by absence prior to the moment at which he registers woman's anatomical difference – to concede that he, like the female subject, has already been deprived of being, and already been marked by the language and desires of the Other.' (1988:15).

She compounds this by going on to quote Freud's description of the revelation of female lack as being experienced by the male as 'uncanny and traumatic' – here, of course, Freud performs what appears to be a spectacular parapraxis. Freud's definition of the 'uncanny' or *unheimlich* is that it must be familiar, but with an eerie and frightening twist. For something to be uncanny, it must be recognisable and known 'of old' – so in order to experience female castration as 'uncanny', the male subject must necessarily have already undergone it himself.

'In other words, the recurrence of the word *uncanny* in the essay on fetishism reminds us that even before the so-called castration crisis, the male subject has an intimate knowledge of loss – that he undergoes numerous divisions and splittings prior to the moment at which he is made to fear the loss of his sexual organ. Thus, what seems to confront him from without, in the guise of the 'mutilated' female body, actually threatens him from within, in the form of his own history' (1988:17)

This is a key point, if, as Silverman suggests, all traumatic splittings off of things which were formerly assumed to be part of the subject's body are experienced as a 'castration', then the male and female subject are, in reality, equally castrated. What Silverman exposes is the founding 'trick' in cinema, that which dupes the woman into believing that her subject position is that of incomplete other. She also goes on to say, however, that the identification of woman with lack can only come about as a result of the identification of man with specular<sup>30</sup>. So therefore,

'[...] through an extraordinary sleight of hand, woman has been made the repository not only of lack but of specular<sup>30</sup>. She has also come to be identified with two other qualities, narcissism and exhibitionism, which would



seem more compatible with male subjectivity – qualities which are almost synonymous with organ display' (1988: 26).

In the final analysis, Silverman writes, 'it is the male viewer's own exclusion from the site of filmic production rather than the spectacle of woman's anatomical 'lack' which arouses such anxiety and fear in him' (1988: 30). In film, as well as in the subject, there exists an originary and fundamental splitting which corresponds with the splitting of the subject from the world of objects to enter into the world of language as outlined by Silverman. Film, she writes, 'is defined by the distance that separates it from the phenomenal order – by the absence of the object or referent' (1988:3). So the clear split between the thing represented and the referent, is one of the founding realities of the cinematic experience. Silverman goes on to trace the arguments of film critics such as André Bazin, who, despite his insistence on the inseparability of the object and the photographic image, 'occasionally concedes that lack is somehow intrinsic to the cinematic operation' (1988:3); and Lacanian Christian Metz; who takes great pains to elaborate on the absence at the heart of cinema. She concludes that, 'Despite their divergent theoretical positions, Munsterberg, Bazin and Metz all conceptualise the transition from referent to cinematic sign as a surgical incision' (1988:3). Cinematic experience then, or the 'film work', directly parallels the journey into subjectivity and acquisition of language. In each case there is a founding traumatic split which is fundamental to the organisation of the subject's subjectivity; and in both cases, 'all links with the object are severed' (1988:4). Most tellingly, Metz actually uses the term 'castration' when describing the lack he perceives as inherent in cinema; the use of this language personalising the sense of the individual's own stake in the loss of the object/world of objects.

Kaja Silverman (1988) tells us that *fetishisation* (that which protects the subject from the tragic horror of castration anxiety) often takes the form of *technical virtuosity*, or *formal brilliance*. In other words, it is the 'goodness' or effectiveness of the apparatus that protects the individual from the shock of castration, and keeps her/him whole. This is a trick: in terms of classic narrative cinema,



it is the creative use of the repertoire of ‘tricks’ available in directing, shooting and editing which safeguard the film’s ‘goodness’ or success. A little like a proud male child showing off the ‘wonder’ of his genital, the film-maker can make whole the castration prior to the discovery of sexual difference by simply being the best. It is interesting to read Oudry’s *White Duck* (Chapter One), and other paintings of that genre in this light; all the ‘tricks’ of *trompe l’oeil* painting are mobilised, and suddenly the stakes are raised in the notion of Art History as competition between men<sup>31</sup>. Importantly, though, the trick relies on the audience’s willingness to believe in the goodness and brilliance of the technology. If, as Silverman writes, ‘film communicates its illusions through other illusions; it is doubly simulated, the representation of a representation’ (1988:3), then monochrome film is far more illusory, more involved in trickery. It is the representation of a representation of a representation.

**2:5 Derek Jarman’s *Blue* : Fantasy of the Maternal Voice?**



**Figure 24:** Derek Jarman at the final mix of *Blue*, 1993. Photograph by Liam Longman. Courtesy of Basilisk Communications.

‘[...] we must realize that the cinema presents us with an incomplete world, shown only on one side; and it is just as well that the world should be set in its unfinished state because if, by some miracle, the objects thus photographed,



thus stratified on the screen, could move, we dare not think of the void, of the hole in appearances which they would create.' (Artaud 1972:77)

When Derek Jarman conceived the script and idea for his film *Blue*, he was already almost blind. Jarman had by this time developed full-blown AIDS, and his blindness was a direct result of the AIDS-related infection *toxoplasmosis*. Finding that his vision had become a uniform blue, he described the exact nature of the blue and requested it be replicated on screen. The loss of vision was, however, not his only physical worry. Jarman also experienced agonising pains, hallucinations, intermittent paralyses and other horrors. The film *Blue* was intended as a sort of final document of his life, and a homage to the cardinal of blue, Yves Klein, with whom Jarman had been obsessed for a long time<sup>32</sup>. In Jarman's Wittgensteinian book of musings on colour, *Chroma*, he describes Klein as, 'the great master of blue.' (Jarman in Wollen 1996:161).

Premiered in 1993 at the Venice Film Festival, *Blue* consists of a narrative, read by Jarman himself and other actors. The voices describe the horror of gradual loss of sight, and also document the tragic, also gradual loss of friends to HIV and AIDS. There are moments of intensely eerie vocal arrangements of specially commissioned original music, and frequently it is Jarman's words, recently spoken, which are repeated, repeated and harmonised. Michael O'Pray writes that in *Blue*, Jarman,

'[...] manages to bring together the collagist impulse – juxtaposing different kinds of voice from the personal to the philosophical with music, noises and sounds and the ominous abstraction of the saturated blue screen. It is as if a cacophony of sounds has supplanted the pandemonium of images' (O'Pray in Wollen [ed] 1996: 73)

It is certainly true that Jarman is famed for the lush, visual repleteness of films such as *Caravaggio* (1986), or *Sebastiane* (1976), films that replicate the Victorian aesthetic of *horror vacui*. In this context, *Blue* certainly reads as a surprise. One of the things that Jarman is trying to share with his viewer is the experience of being an intensely visually active being deprived of sight, and the sometimes unexpectedly lush 'visual' qualities in language, music and sound. The relentlessly blue



monochrome screen sings the eyes to sleep, soundlessly, so the actual perceived sounds become the ultimate focus. It is a film about sound, a film which envelops the audience in sound, which delivers the huge, thundering effects of visual cinema entirely in terms of sound, and which uses sound to lull, fascinate and frighten.

We remember that Kaja Silverman has written about the initial castration that applies to all subjects, that coinciding with, 'the separation from the world of objects, and the entry into language' (1988:1). We also remember that she goes on to write,

'[...] the entry into language is the juncture at which the object is definitively and irretrievably lost and the subject as definitively and irretrievably found'.  
(1988:8)

So language effectively ruins that sense of prelinguistic fascination enjoyed by the subjectless subject in the Real. In Jarman's case, his visual loss actually separates him from the 'world of objects' as he has known it since learning to see. The classical Freudian and Lacanian notion of the founding of subjectivity being entirely visual is clearly a problem here. Any implications that psychoanalysis might have for the founding of subjectivity of someone who is physically unable to see genital difference, or whose image in the surface of a mirror means nothing, are difficult (if not impossible) to find. Freud's writings on the castration crisis also state that an unwanted part of the self is moved to the outer register, where it can be mastered through vision. The projected image returns to trouble the masculine subject. However, in Jarman's case a double castration has occurred. Any 'mastery' by vision is denied him, and any projections must be done from the scene of blindness. His disempowerment, both as an artist and as a man, is doubly distressing and almost complete. We must not forget the Freudian conflation of the power of the eyes with the power of the testicles, likewise their forced removal. In Freudian as well as physical terms, Jarman is castrated. Silverman's liberating take on the founding of subjectivity offers some consolation; she proposes that it is not the look but the *voice* of the mother that surrounds the



intra- and extra-uterine infant, in a way not dissimilar to the ways in which the voices surround the cinema-bound subject in Jarman's *Blue*.

One way of conceptualising Jarman's *Blue* is in terms of the reality of his own visual castration (or at least a trauma which prefigures the horror of castration anxiety). Jarman's monochrome is a fetish, much like the monochrome passages inserted into the work of Sugimoto and Hilliard, whose purpose is to disavow the absent Real of the perceptible world. Monochrome, as a non-representative representation much like the signifier which takes the place of the Real in Silverman's account (1988:8), is another fetish. Jarman's lost object is his vision; the defence against this is first to deny it by appearing to admit to it – another cunning double-bluff performed by the film's monochrome surface – but secondly and more importantly, his finest defence is to surround himself with the fantasised enveloping warmth of the imagined maternal voice.

Silverman writes that the voice is in itself a division, and 'one of the most radical subject divisions' (1988:42), because it stands between meaning and materiality. The voice also demonstrates qualities of subversion, because classical subjectivity is predicated on notions of bodily limits, and the voice violates and transgresses these.

'[...] the sounds the voice makes always exceed signification to some degree [...] Because we hear before we see, the voice is also closely identified with the infantile scene. On the other hand [...] because it is through the voice that the subject normally accedes to language, and thereby sacrifices its life, it is associated as well with phenomenal loss, the birth of desire, and the aspiration toward discursive mastery.' (1988:42)

Beginning in the body and exceeding the body, the voice, unlike vision, has the ability to envelop the subject in its 'sonorous blanket'. The specifically maternal voice, however, can contain echoes of a blissful previous plenitude, or can seem like a soft cell. Silverman distinguishes between the fantasy of the maternal voice as 'sonorous envelope' as viewed from the position of the



unconscious, where it corresponds to the cornucopian fantasy of safety and richness, and the very different view from the preconscious/conscious system. The latter sees the warm quilt of the maternal voice as an emblem of entrapment and impotence, triggering deep panic and an anxiety. As a moving space that appears static, Jarman's *Blue* could be said to symbolise both the utopian and the dystopian versions of this maternal voice fantasy. The former relates to the aforementioned position of the spectating subject in the cinema, trapped (albeit wilfully, and with the perfect possibility of escape) within a warm, sonorous darkness. The images the darkness shows you, though, and the sounds the subject hears within it, can fix the spectator in a state of abject terror. At once the female space of the 'mother's voice', pre-linguistic and situated in the Lacanian Real, can also be a male space; the space of the male subject's dreaded lack. So, one could say that whilst Lacan's visual mirror creates subjectivity; the acoustic mirror (the reflection of the maternal voice) destabilises it. The cherished maternal voice of blissful fantasy can be understood as a lost object, (Lacan also included the voice of the mother in his definition of the *objet a*), whilst the monstrous mothervoice of the latter example functions as an incipient superego, speaking and listening, and feeding the paranoid fantasy of entrapment<sup>33</sup>.

The Barthesian notion of *jouissance* is distinguished from the understandable and symbolisable 'pleasure' in his 1973 text, *Pleasure of the Text*. Like *jouissance*, Barthes' notion of Third or Obtuse meaning, can be smoothly fitted over the monochrome surface. Martin Jay uses the metaphor of the film still to illustrate what Barthes meant by 'Third Meaning'. Jay describes 'Third or Obtuse Meaning' as,

'Resisting metalinguistic translation, outside of the circuit of semantic exchange, not a copy of anything in the real world, obtuse meaning was visual counter-narrative [...] it remains a fragment of a whole, which can never be reunited through the setting in motion of the cinematic apparatus' (Jay 1995:444)

If, like *jouissance*, Third/Obtuse meaning can also be said to reside in the Real (or at least in the area of the pre-linguistic) does this then mean that both are feminine conditions? Does it,



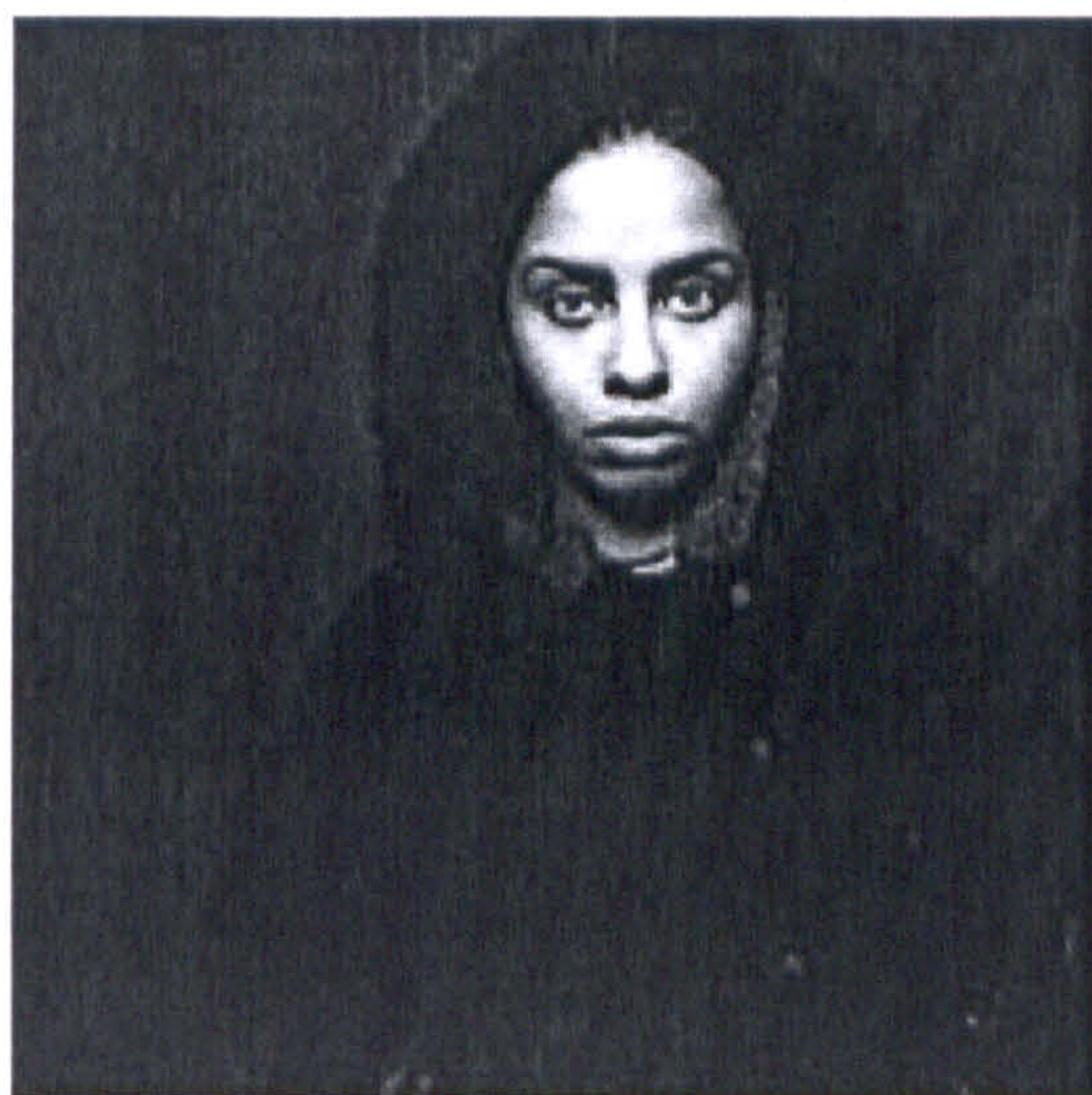
perhaps, mean that the monochrome itself is a feminine, because pre-linguistic, space? When Lacan writes that women derive this *jouissance*, this unspeakable jubilation, from heterosexual intercourse, he sounds suspiciously like the Freud who wrote of women as the 'dark continent', attesting to their notions of the unfathomability of female sexuality, and its subsequent relegation to the unspeakable or a-linguistic. Along with mastery and control, language also enables the achievement of Phallic enjoyment and the ability to symbolise. That which cannot be symbolised is, of course, expelled to the wilderness of the Real, where *jouissance*, death and female sexuality rub shoulders. What is forbidden to the speaking subject tends to be the surplus of desire, a leftover not unlike the *objet petit-a*.

In *Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes describes how any narrative mode that offers no closure gives the reader *jouissance* rather than pleasure. Because pleasure can be enunciated, it exists in the Symbolic Order. *Jouissance* however, which cannot be approached through language, belongs in the Real, or the Imaginary (the term 'Imaginary' actually refers to the moment when *jouissance* is first experienced as that moment of imaginary unity with the self as seen reflected in the mirror). Now, since the pre-linguistic *jouissance* cannot be spoken, upon the subject's entry into the Symbolic Order, *jouissance* joins the Real Order of subjectivity and becomes associated with other great unspeakables (ie death and desire). *Jouissance* stands then for the Imaginary moment when the narcissistic subject identifies with the ego ideal. *Jouissance* also, however, stands for another fusion, the desired fusion with the perpetually lost object, *objet petit-a* or (m)other. This fits the idea that the cinematic monochrome is a space that cannot be articulated or experienced through language. It is somehow beyond or before language, and its inaccessibility to 'reading' is perhaps the most concrete example of the monochrome's a-linguistic status. However, it also suggests that the space the monochrome inhabits is gendered feminine. The impossibility of coming to a conclusion about a monochrome surface should, if we follow Barthes, result in a wonderful experience of *jouissance*. However, this depends on who is doing the spectating. A Phallic



spectator would find *jouissance* and its location in the Real unacceptable. Such a reader will force conclusions on to monochrome, disavowing its positioning in a non or pre-linguistic space.

## 2:6 Conclusion: Mixed Mediation



**Figure 25:** Clement Cooper, from *Deep* 1997. 28.5 x 23.5cm. Duotone photograph.

If the light-based media of photography and film can be read convincingly as embodying an innate privileging of sight, and of Whiteness, Dyer reminds us that, ‘Such a stress on sight poses a problem, however, in relation to that which cannot be seen.’ (1997:104). Blank photographs or films (or, photographs or films that contain blankness) are, by their nature as photographs or films, part of a system which privileges Whiteness. However, in containing areas that radically refuse to signify, they confound the expectations of each even as they occupy them – they ‘cannot be seen’. I think that the important point here is the situation of blankness within the Phallic system. The blank space that is made of light but shows nothing, is an area of resistance, of rebellion. Blank photography or film causes unease to the apparently whole and complete system that rejects or cannot read it. It acts as a sort of mirror, holding up to the system the realities of that system’s arbitrary and nonsensical ‘rules’. It introduces instability and chaos into a system that considers itself stable and ordered. Using this notion of a tricky or fragmented



(fragmenting?) mirror as against a unified, totalising Phallic mirror, might it be possible to arrive at something like a 'speculum' of the Mixed Race Subject?

In the mid 1990s, photographer Clement Cooper spent time in the British cities of Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol and Cardiff, where the Mixed Race presence has a long history. Of Mixed Race himself, Cooper was interested in the history of these communities, and the fact that in such cities, Mixed Race people have been a part of British life for over two hundred years. This contrasts starkly with the better-known fact that until the last five to ten years, Mixed Race people have been overlooked, or silenced, or spoken about in embarrassed, hushed tones, or had their identities decided for them. In *Deep* [Figure 25] the subjects gaze out from the pictures with a variety of human looks and attitudes that show the deciding White Phallus that the single, simple categorisation 'Black' is not always enough. Cooper's work culminated in the show *Deep* of 1997, which comprised photographic portraits of Mixed Race people of all ages, shapes, sizes, mixtures and, importantly, optical appearances. Equally importantly the show also included a sound element; Cooper provided a much-needed vehicle for some of his photographic subjects to tell their stories. This work is very important because Cooper gives pictorial representation *and* voice to a historically under-represented community. But what he also does is to present his subjects *as* a community, something that does not always happen, since Mixed Race people can often live in isolation within family units and are rarely represented as, or have experiences as, a group. As David Parker and Miri Song write, 'Few social groups have evoked such dichotomous reactions, while simultaneously lacking a clearly articulated and self-defined social identity.' (Parker & Song 2001:3)

Mixed Race people, (particularly in port cities), have in fact played a part in British society for two hundred years, existing silently as a sort of guilty secret. As part of his tour of England in 1936, J.B Priestley stayed for longer than originally planned in Liverpool 1. He was fascinated and encouraged by the entire classrooms he saw full of Mixed Race children, and the concentration of



brown, yellow or other faces that weren't White. Priestley saw this as positive, and even suggested that the lives of these children would make an intriguing film. When Enoch Powell gave his famous *Rivers of Blood* speech in 1968, he showed a remarkable disavowal of the knowledge of this brown British presence. These port cities are unique, as existing Mixed Race 'communities' tend to occur as the result of pioneering individual or group efforts. We can find many virtual communities on the internet, for example (see [www.mixedfolks.com](http://www.mixedfolks.com), or internet zine *The Multicultural Activist*); or in Universities or Colleges (such as the well-known *Hapa Issues Forum*, Berkeley). Despite the best efforts of the White Phallic ego to silence them, or to conceal them under 'Blackness', the Mixed Race subject keeps pushing up through the censorship into the Symbolic. I see Clement Cooper's work as playing a key role in this becoming-subjectivity, and could be deployed in finding the elusive 'speculum'.

One of the most interesting features of *Deep* is how the work compromises the White eye of the lens, how the lens that mediates is itself mediated. First of all, the subject who has been denied the right to determine her own identity is presented as a confident and self-possessed subject of portraiture. Cooper makes a very clear, simple statement about long-overdue acknowledgement of presence and subjectivity. However, not all audience members read the gesture this way, as the following two extracts from the visitors' book for the 1998 show of *Deep* at the Drum Arts Centre, Birmingham, demonstrate:

'The children themselves will and do wonder where they belong [...] look deep into the eyes and expressions, you can almost feel their confusion.'

'People with attitude towards us had better get used to us being around; the way the world is integrating, mixed race people will run the world. We are beautiful people with beautiful features and believe it or not beautiful experiences and a lot to offer Britain.' (*Deep* visitors' statements, in Parker & Song 2001:3)

Despite the actual feelings of the 'children' in the photographs, Mixed Race people are historically and socially coded as 'confused', which means that readers with an investment in maintaining the Phallic dichotomy 'Black/White' will read the surface determinedly until they find what looks like



‘confusion’. This action of forced reading reminds us of the Phallic spectator in front of monochrome, reading determinedly until he finds whatever it is that he wished to find before he began to look.

With *Deep*, the act of positioning of the Mixed Race subject as compositional focus is completed with the presence of another Mixed Race subject as photographer. The White eye of the lens is bracketed on both sides by the kind of subject it would seek to render blank – except that in this case, it is trapped, and rendered powerless to perform this action. Whiteness is effectively forced into an enclosed hall of mirrors, where it sees its own reflection and recognises the existence of Whiteness ‘warped’. The (in)visible Whiteness of the Mixed Race subject is, for the White Phallus, uncanny in the truly Freudian sense. It is familiar, but with an affect of foreboding or discomfort. Here, the discomfort is worse because the Whiteness is about as familiar as anything can be – the Phallus recognises this brown Whiteness as its own, immediately realising the existence of a kind of Whiteness that it may not be able to control. Also, the Mixed Race subject will present as a ‘fragment’ to the Phallic eye, and as we remember from Barthes’ discussion in *Camera Lucida* (see section 2:1), the fragment has an inherent trauma about it.

So, in the midst of all this Phallic trauma, what of the search for the speculum? I want to suggest that the notional ‘speculum’ for the Mixed Race subject would take the form of a three hundred and sixty degree mirror – a continuous reflective surface which entraps the Phallic eye in its centre. This is a trick whereby the Phallus would ‘relax’ with what at first looks like its centrality in a system. However, the mirror or speculum would then begin to show images of the endless varieties of Mixed Race subjectivity, the varied identities that are possible – and the confused Phallic eye would cause the Phallic ego to begin to panic, as it realises it is being forced to acknowledge that its authority is nothing but an illusion done with mirrors.



<sup>1</sup> Dyer also shows how photography's inherent privileging of light and Whiteness has been used to 'race' White working-class subjects, or problematic White people that posed a threat of some kind to White 'normality' and 'goodness' (see Dyer 1997:48-70, esp.58)

<sup>2</sup> The 'mastery' referred to here relates to the individual spectating subject's own relationship to the gazed-at object. Other issues of 'mastery', such as the master status of individual writers within their intellectual fields – for example, Jacques Lacan as a master within psychoanalysis – or the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, will not be explored at this time.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Jay traces the history of this western tendency towards ocularcentrism (Jay 1995: 21-83), locating the 'golden age' of the human eye's absolute agency as beginning with Plato and reigning unchallenged until well after Descartes, with his faith in the monocular gaze. Jay believes that the modern era (as distinct from the pre- and post-modern), is characterised by the domination of the sense of sight, with the only real challenges to vision's predominance happening in French thought of the Twentieth Century. Western ocularcentrism began with the late mediaeval fascination with the spiritual and metaphysical possibilities of light (Divine *lux* as opposed to perceived *lumen*). Subsequent obsessions with linear perspective, with its harmonious regularities that corresponded to the perfect will of God also privileged the eye, and this was compounded, as in Marshall McLuhan's well-known argument, by the invention of the printing press. It is interesting to note that during the Middle Ages hearing was privileged as the first sense in the order of five. (Barthes 1967:55).

<sup>4</sup> Whilst mentioning the Cartesian scopic regime, it is also important to remember that Descartes actually challenged the notion that eyesight is the sole means by which the individual comes to know the world. In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes writes that, 'perception, or the action by which we perceive, is not a vision [...] but is solely an inspection by the mind', going on to say that the subject understands the world, 'uniquely by perception of the mind' (Descartes (Trans.1984) Volume 2:21). See René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (1984) 2 vols. (Trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff & Murdoch) Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> In this year, the techniques of permanently capturing an image which were simultaneously worked out during the 1830s by Fox Talbot, Daguerre and Nicephore-Niepce, were formally presented at a meeting of the French Academy of Sciences. Shortly afterwards the *Gazette de France* newspaper sensationalised the new medium as newspapers will, providing worrying future predictions about drawing. 'This discovery partakes of the prodigious. It upsets all scientific theories on light and optics, and it will revolutionise the art of drawing'. (Newhall 1980:17) No less sensational was the painter Paul Delaroche's famous Jeremiad that, 'From now on, painting is dead'. (Cromer 1930:114) Almost immediately, and as a direct result of photography, the issue of optical truth and illusion presented itself for urgent debate, along with the accompanying question of whether photography merited the status of an art form. Daguerre's camera was popularly known as the 'mirror of the world', Fox Talbot's the 'pencil of nature', and indeed the camera's inability to lie, or assumed fidelity to an actual experience of the world was its most lauded quality. On the history of photography, see Freund, G. 1980 *Photography and Society*, Newhall, B 1964, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day*, Nori, C 1979, *French Photography: From Its Origins To The Present*.

<sup>6</sup> Such a feeling of awe and wonderment in the face of a photograph was quite usual. Some reports state that early observers of the photographic miracle expressed great concern that the little faces in the pictures were so real, surely they must be able to look back at the spectator. Superstitious fears surrounding this new phenomenon also seemed common; Balzac's strange dread of the power of the photograph to destroy the outer 'aura' of the body, was reported by the early pioneer of both aerial photography and portraiture, Nadar, in *My Life as a Photographer*, October 5 (Summer, 1978: 9).

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff sees the fact that Louis Daguerre, inventor of photography's first practical method, the *daguerrotype*, was also the proprietor of the diorama, as 'no coincidence' (Mirzoeff 1998: 185).

<sup>8</sup> To imagine the unconscious, an unseen motivating force, as an apparatus designed for seeing gives an interesting understanding of the potency of the unconscious. It is an unsettling thought that we are oblivious, even blind to the thing that nudges us into action, and even more unsettling to think that this hidden force has a full potential view of us from inside. Perhaps Freud means us to understand the unconscious as a visual apparatus with an absent seeing eye, a bit like a camera without a lens or a sightless human eye. Freud's usually clear writing here, with repeated looking, reveals further meaningful possibilities. The unconscious sees and presents like a mechanical eye, and sees like an incomplete human eye. His suggestion is, however, of an emergent image rather than a fully formed one. We might see this as pertaining also to the enigma of the monochrome surface, whose 'image' presents itself to us as illegible or invisible. Derrida praised Freud's use of ocular or visual rather than textual metaphor in his essay, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in *Writing and Difference*, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago (1978).

<sup>9</sup> Lacan's use of the term 'Imaginary' is, as his readership might expect, idiosyncratic. What is most useful to us here in terms of the monochrome surface, though, is his understanding of all Imaginary behaviour and relationships as essentially *deceptive*. Lacan proposed that the image of the counterpart, or *specular ego* in the Mirror Stage is essential in the formation of the ego of the subject. Resemblance is of great importance in the Imaginary register of existence. It should be noted that Lacan insists on the oppositionality of the Imaginary with the Symbolic.

<sup>10</sup> *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through: Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II* originally appeared in 1914. It was not to be translated into English until 1924. This paper is notable for containing the first reference to Freud's Compulsion to Repeat (SE xii: 150), yet it is usually the later (and longer) *Beyond the Pleasure*



*Principle* of 1920 (SE xviii) that is quoted in English language texts as the source of this compulsion. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that the *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was the first to be translated into English, in 1922. The Compulsion to Repeat also appears in Freud's 1919 paper, *The Uncanny* (SE xvii: 238). In *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*, Freud writes that what is forgotten and repressed is *acted out* rather than remembered. The memory is reproduced continually as an action, 'For instance, the patient does not say that he remembers that he used to be defiant and critical towards his parents' authority; instead, he behaves in that way to the doctor.' (Freud, SE xii: 150) The account in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is more detailed, and follows on from his theory in *The Uncanny* that the Compulsion to Repeat is strong enough to disregard the pleasure principle, that regulator of mental events. Notably, Freud takes pains to point out the lack of 'precociousness' in the child's intellectual developments, but that he was unusually well behaved. The game with the cotton-reel was quite an obsession for him, but he would actually throw and retrieve almost any small object he could find on a daily basis. Freud's footnote on his 'further observation' that the child would crouch in front of a mirror to make himself disappear, saying 'Baby -ooooool' (SE xviii: 15) is the forerunner of Jacques Lacan's paper, *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I* (Lacan, 1949: 449-53).

<sup>11</sup> As a theory, the Death Drive is part of Freud's second topography of mind. In the first topography, Freud states that the instinctual impulses aim at pleasure, but sometimes the censorship intervenes and represses them, keeping them unconscious. The ego is therefore in constant conflict with the repressed. In his second theory, the instincts aim on the one hand at pleasure (Eros) and on the other at unpleasure (Thanatos). Wishes arising from the unconscious are now dualistic, having different aims and manifestations, but often using the same channels. Either way, there is some kind of internal battle going on.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes the Death Drive as mental energy whose aim is to regress to the earlier state of things, ie death, a return to the inorganic. The organism must be destroyed from within. This drive governed by Freud's Nirvana principle (which is not to be confused with the Buddhist principle of Nirvana, which is the negation of self and absorption into the supreme spirit). Freud's Nirvana principle is the reduction of all tensions to zero. In the Compulsion to Repeat, Freud sees an attempt to restore the earlier state of things. If the repeated material is entirely unpleasurable, it's another manifestation of the Death Drive, the masochistic trends of the ego. (NB, the instinct may also combine with the sadistic trends of the super-ego for a double dose of punishment.) The wish to cause pain and unpleasure by punishment can find its way into a dream – this is the Freudian punishment dream. Freud did not directly claim a connection between his early theory of punishment dreams and his later theory of the death instinct, but it does seem logical to connect the two, it certainly provides a clear explanation.

Punishment dreams happen in traumatic neuroses, to repeat the traumatic event. Freud says that these dreams arise, again, out of the Compulsion to Repeat, and fall outside of his general wish theory. (cf. *Interpretation of Dreams* PFL v.4, 520. At the beginning of his work, Freud described symptoms as mnemonic symbols, 'a thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unladen ghost it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken'. (*Analysis of a Phobia in a 5-year-old Boy*, 1909, SE x, 122).

<sup>11</sup> From an interview with Monty DiPietro, in 'Hiroshi Sugimoto at the Gallery Koyangi'. Found at [www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/Sugimoto.html](http://www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/Sugimoto.html).

<sup>12</sup> Jay goes on to say that this link was noted by Ralph Waldo Emerson as early as 1841, so this is not a new way of thinking about photography.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Mulvey (1975) notes that a similar process takes place within cinema. She writes that the illusion of reality that dominant cinema uses to compensate for the absent real, and therefore to cancel out its own status as discourse, relies upon continued re-stagings of the drama of loss. This is yet another example of the death drive working in the guise of the compulsion to repeat, or the return of the repressed.

<sup>14</sup> This term is often used with regard to the Psychoanalyst in the analytic situation, with the key word being 'presumed'. Regardless of how much the analyst really does or does not know, one of the requisites of a successful analysis is that the analysand truly believes in, or 'presumes' the powerful knowledge of the analyst. It is necessary for the analyst to occupy this position in terms of the transference.

<sup>15</sup> Sugimoto is also interested in original Nineteenth Century photographic techniques, often placing a 16 times neutral density filter on his camera, which reduces the film's sensitivity to below one ASA. He says, 'that's like the speed of 19<sup>th</sup> Century film, when photography was invented' ([www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/sugimoto.html](http://www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/sugimoto.html)) This apparent loyalty to photography's beginnings also serves to make tiny ripples of disquiet in the presumably clear boundaries that separate painting from photography. The other effect that he likes in his work, describing it as 'painterly', is the effect of blurred edges. It is an elusive effect, something Sugimoto describes as an ideal 'only the camera can see'. All of his images are black-and-white, which is an immediate signifier for 'photography', but which also carries traits of the kind of 'pure monochrome' painting that can be only black or white, as described by Lucy Lippard in her 1967 essay *The Silent Art*.

<sup>16</sup> As Shoshana Felman notes (1987:27-28), Jacques Lacan chose to open the 1966 *Écrits*, his first collection of published essays, with his *Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'* (*Le Séminaire sur La Lettre Volée*). This was a reworking of his 1955 seminar, *The Ego in Freudian Theory and Psychoanalytic Technique*. Lacan was also to devote an entire year's course to the exploration of this tale of Poe's. Felman's interpretation of these two significant placings of *The Purloined Letter* within Lacan's explanations of Psycho-Analysis is that the tale itself functions as an allegory of the psychoanalytic process, and also of the process of reading poetic writing (1987:48). Lacan also compares the



intervention of the detective Dupin to the intervention of the analyst. Dupin restores the letter to the Queen, the analyst restores the patient to a comfortable, symptom-free existence.

<sup>17</sup> Benvenuto & Kennedy (1986) point out the significance of the setting of the 'royal boudoir' for the Queen's receipt of the letter, linking the boudoir to the place of the Primal Scene.

<sup>18</sup> This is interesting in terms of the observable fact of the epistemological impulse. People do, overwhelmingly, tend to want to be 'in on' things, especially knowledge. In the case of Sugimoto's pictures, a commonly asked question is about what film was being shown. Sugimoto sometimes tells, and sometimes does not. This brings to mind Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, a burning question for many students when they first learn about this work is, 'What's underneath? What drawing did Rauschenberg erase?' (The erased drawing was actually part of De Kooning's famous *Women* series). See Chapter Four for a discussion of this.

<sup>19</sup> Hilliard's own essay for the Kunsthalle Exhibition, 1997, is tellingly entitled, *The Pleasures of Erasure*.

<sup>20</sup> David Green reads this space not as a gallery opening but as a 'crowded auction room', which, given the presence of the hammer, also seems valid. I think that the ambiguity of scene-setting is a deliberate authorial choice by Hilliard.

<sup>21</sup> We are able to read, '...owgirls Get The Blue...', which could be from the Tom Robbins novel *Even Cowgirls Get The Blues*, but somehow it seems more likely to be 'Showgirls Get The Blues'.

<sup>22</sup> The *objet a* is sometimes also symbolised by the breast, as the discarded object, 'the nothing', that the weaned child no longer needs but nevertheless remains fixed in a state of desire towards. 'At the oral level, it is the nothing, in so far as that from which the subject was weaned is no longer anything for him. In anorexia nervosa, what the child eats is the nothing. This will enable you to grasp obliquely how the object of weaning may come to function at the level of castration, as privation'. (Lacan 1994[1977]:103-104). It's also, as Kaja Silverman writes, the object with 'only a little otherness'; since it's familiarity to the infant is so great that until the mirror stage, the infant knows the breast, favourite blanket, or whatever, as a real part of its corporeal body (Silverman 1988:7).

<sup>23</sup> Lacan makes much of the notion of repetition in his chapter, *The Unconscious and Repetition*, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1997 [1973]:17-64). Mentioning Kierkegaard's essay on *Repetition* along with Freud's work on the same subject, Lacan insists that neither Kierkegaard nor Freud were dealing with the return of need, which is rather situated 'in the service of the appetite'(61). Lacan suggests that in the 'fort-da' game, the actual return of the boy's mother is of secondary importance. This is another trick, and one designed to foreground Lacan's 'mastery'. The activity as a whole symbolises repetition itself, rather than any action on the mother's part, and what the repetition actually repeats is the mother's departure as cause of the splitting in the subject. 'It is aimed at what, essentially, is not there'(63). So the boy is actually repeating repetition, but within this he is repeating the splitting of his own subjectivity.

<sup>24</sup> The little 'a' stands for *autre*, or 'other'. The 'other' – in this case the (m)other who holds up the infant to the mirror – is necessary to the formation of the subject and the acquisition of language. Identification is only possible in relation to an other, in the same way as the playful signifiers in the unconscious only make sense in relation to other signifiers.

<sup>25</sup> Whilst psychoanalysis and cinema appeared in western culture in approximately the same time-frame, it took until the middle of the Twentieth Century before psychoanalysis impacted on cinema studies in any serious way. It is easy to see how the cinema screen offers a near-perfect working analogy of the mirror stage. In fact French semiotician Christian Metz put forward the theory that each time the spectator watches the film, it marks an actual experience of re-entry into the mirror stage. Each screening represents a psychic re-enactment of the passage from the Imaginary into the Symbolic order, and the acquisition of language, subjectivity and sexual difference. See Metz, C (1975) *The Imaginary Signifier, Screen*, Vol.16, No. 3. See also Baudry, J-L (1970) *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus*, in: Rosen P. (ed.) (1986) *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, New York, Columbia University Press, and Mast, G., Cohen, M., and Baudry, J-L (eds.) (1992) *Film Theory and Criticism*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, also Bellour, R. (1975) *Le Blocage Symbolique, Communications*, No. 23. Also, Susan Hayward points out that the repetition of the mirror stage is equivalent to the repetition of the Freudian Oedipal stages (Hayward 1996: 289).

<sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes elaborates on the difference between *pleasure* and *jouissance* in his 1973 work, *The Pleasure of the Text*. *Pleasure*, he suggests, is the kind of satisfaction enjoyed by the closure offered by classical realist narrative texts. Conversely *jouissance* is experienced from narrative modes that offer no closure. It is experienced in the body, rather than through language. Barthes coined the term *corps de jouissance*, or 'enjoying body', to name the erotic, corporeal pleasure he encounters.

<sup>27</sup> Feminist film theorists were to pick up on this Phallocratic interpretation of seeing and pleasure, investigating the ways in which the patriarchal signifying system represents. Firstly and most famously Laura Mulvey in 1975 wrote, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, first appearing in *Screen*. In a similar way to the way Dyer and others have pointed out that the presumed cinematic spectator is always White, Mulvey pointed out the implied 'understanding' that the spectator was always male, effectively allowing for the spectator to oscillate between the masculine and the feminine. She questioned the implication that the spectator-screen relationship was one-way and identified the problem that filmic texts are organised to present a preferred reading. The debate surrounding the problems engendered by



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Phallogocentric cinema continued to enlarge throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and psychoanalytic theories – particularly those concerned with subjectivity and spectator positioning – gained much ground in the analysis of film as a result.

<sup>28</sup> Pollock (1995) identifies the look with the specifically male spectator. However, Kaja Silverman writing in 1988 in *The Aconstic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, makes the important historical point of 'revisualisation'. She writes that the 'insistent equation of women with spectacle and man with vision marks a shift in the general terms of cultural reference which occurred between 1750 and the present. This shift manifests itself in a variety of nineteenth-century discourses, from painting and the novel to psychoanalysis and photography. However, JC Flugel suggests that if we want to understand the stakes involved in that transformation, we might well look even earlier, at late-eighteenth-century fashion, which inaugurated a major change in clothing customs. That change, described by Flugel as 'the Great Masculine Renunciation', turned upon the despecularisation of the male subject, and, 'consequently [...] upon the hyperspecularisation of the female subject [...] Male clothing underwent a process of democratisation, becoming both simpler and more uniform; it [...] began to signify the solidarity between one male subject and all others [...] the whole relatively 'fixed' system of his clothing is, in fact, an outward sign of the strictness of his adherence to the social code.' (Silverman 1988: 25). One could say that a 're-speculariation' of the male subject was brought about via the figure of the Dandy in the 1890s.

<sup>29</sup> 'Not long after Kelly's return to Paris (in 1951-52), Guy-Ernest Debord premiered (or tried to) the first imageless film in the same city, and within two months and four thousand miles John Cage's silent sonata was debuted. The period from April 1951 through August 1952 may be the watershed in early Minimalism, on both sides of the Atlantic, the year not only of less is more but of nothing is most of all.' (Strickland 1993:25)

<sup>30</sup> Silverman notes that even Laura Mulvey identifies with the masculine spectatorial position. She writes that Metz, Comolli, Oudart and Dayan do not necessarily occupy this authorial position, identifying with the male spectator (1988: 29).

<sup>31</sup> The trick here is simply to display such dazzling virtuosity that a lack is the very last thing on one's mind, and thus on the mind of the audience. I have witnessed a similar thing, at a gallery lecture by the Belgian painter Luc Tuymans in Dublin in 1998. Tuymans took his audience around the show picture by picture, demonstrating his self-acclaimed virtuosity. At one point he became particularly excited, repeatedly rubbing a passage on the surface of one of his paintings faster and faster as his voice rose in excitement at describing his own genius. The afterimage of this has remained burned on my retina. Tuymans seemed entirely unaware of the onanistic auto-idolatry of his actions, and of the fact that for him, his paintings, as the embodiment of his exceptional talents, were the Phallus.

<sup>32</sup> Jarman's interest in Yves Klein is well documented, and it is widely suggested that the monochrome nature of the film *Blue* is also a tribute to the French painter. Jarman actually trained as a painter at the Slade School of Art, London, but ended up spending most of his time in the Department of Theatre Design where he experienced a relaxed attitude towards homosexuality. Many of his paintings, especially those from the 1980s, resemble the assemblages of Joseph Cornell or Jasper Johns. Jarman also made some paintings about his blindness such as *Toxov*, mostly in violent blood-reds and blacks.

<sup>33</sup> As Silverman notes (1988:98) Freud and Isakower point out that the superego is determined primarily by the act of listening. Isakower writes, 'We know that the child is not capable by itself of constructing new words, to say nothing of a language, but that he has to build up his speech from linguistic material which is presented to him ready made. But this very fact sets in motion the process of developing an observing and criticizing institution.

The following formula then suggests itself: just as the nucleus of the ego is the body-ego, so the human auditory sphere, as modified in the direction of language, is to be regarded as the nucleus of the super-ego'. Otto Isakower, On the Exceptional Position of the Auditory Sphere, *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* 20, nos 3-4 (1939): 345



**Chapter Three:**  
**(IN)VISIBLE WHITENESSES: THE PSYCHIC SPACE OF**  
**THE MIXED RACE SUBJECT**

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### 3:0 Introduction

'Jem,' I asked, 'what's a mixed child?'

'Half white, half coloured. You've seen 'em, Scout. You know the red-kinky-headed one that delivers for the drugstore. He's half white. They're real sad.'

'Sad, how come?'

'They don't belong anywhere. Coloured folks won't have 'em because they're half white; white folks won't have 'em 'cause they're coloured, so they're just inbetweens, don't belong anywhere.' (Lee 1997 [1960]:177-178).

The children in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* famously had more insight into the human condition as regards the mixing of 'races' than most of the adults in their town of Maycomb. Although set in the American Deep South of the 1930s, the condition of the person of Mixed Race, as regards 'fitting' or 'belonging' within a system that prescribes your identity, seems to have changed little. Importantly, there is not really such a thing as Mixed Race 'culture', and only recently have Mixed Race people actively begun forming 'communities'. This gives gravitas to the stories that each individual of Mixed Race has to tell, particularly when one considers that such stories have not been allowed to be told until very recently in this country. As a child in 1980s Britain, I remember almost verbatim a 'Problem Page' letter I read in a girls' magazine popular at the time. I remember it so well because I understood much of the girl's predicament, and because it was the first time I had heard another 'half caste' have the confidence to speak about her experiences. I think the author of the letter was writing from Manchester (I was reading in Birmingham). She asked,

'Dear Cathy and Claire,

What do you do if you're half black and half white and you can't mix with the black kids and you can't mix with the white kids? None of the white lads at my school will ask me out because I am coloured, and I don't like the black lads. I hate my Dad for making me black. My skin is a sort of dark tan colour, but I am white'.

The teenage scribe clearly identified herself as 'White', (whatever that means), but her brown skin guaranteed that however White she felt she actually was, nobody outside of her situation who had eyes and could see would ever accept her as such. She wasn't even a 'tainted' White, she simply wasn't one at all. This girl had had a Black identity decided *for her*, her Whiteness – which was



perfectly clear to her – was rendered invisible. As an indeterminate in a dyadic system, this girl (and others like her) threatens the maintenance of that system's illusion of power. To manage the threat, the system simply performs a Phallic act of decisive naming, or categorisation. At the same time it also performs a drastic foreclosure, pretending that it has not seen the Whiteness in the brown body of this Mixed Race subject. If White people in a White system have a huge investment in keeping Whiteness White, then a brown White person certainly cannot be allowed admission. She must wait on the borders, just outside (but ever so slightly inside, too).

This chapter looks at the psychic dimension of indeterminacy as lived human experience, and leads into the next chapter which will concentrate on indeterminacy in the monochrome surface. In this chapter I want to take the evidence of the preceding chapter a step further; to propose that the Lacanian Phallus be 'raced', and to read it as White. To my knowledge this has not been attempted, and I find this strange as it seems highly plausible to me that if the Phallus can be gendered then it can also be 'raced', and if it is gendered masculine because it represents the dominant social order, it should be 'raced' White for the same reason. Phallic and White activity share uncanny similarities; both, for example, wield their power best when the source of that power is invisible. Lacan tells us that the Phallus can only function when 'veiled', just as Richard Dyer writes that, 'The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity.' (Dyer 1997:3). In other words, in White western culture, Whiteness is silently equated with 'normality' in the same way that the Phallic order of patriarchy passes as normality – because nobody on the inside can actually *see* that the workings of each system are highly specific. I will look at some of the ways that the White Phallus creates and maintains the status of Other in people who might destabilise it, how it silences them and renders them invisible. I hope that by suggesting a 'racing' of the Phallus as White, some of its separating, naming and deciding power will be exposed and thus destabilised. In this I follow the example of Richard Dyer (1997), who exposes the specific, raced 'Whiteness'



of White people which, in their interests of maintaining the illusion of White dominance, they refuse to see.

I wish to look at the ways in which some of those whom the Naming Phallus has designated 'Other' have responded, and some of the strategies used against that which would silence the 'noise' of cultural and 'racial' multiplicity. These silences call for 'mixed mediations' or acts of 'critical indeterminacy' like those of Clement Cooper as discussed in the previous chapter. I will look at some examples of slippery or directly oppositional interventions around or against the classificatory system of Phallic Whiteness. The agency of the Mixed Race subject is unique, as her (in)visible Whiteness is a Whiteness of transgressive potential. Brown Whiteness shows how 'authentic' or 'racially pure' Whiteness is in fact a lie. The power of this hidden Whiteness is again predicated on its invisibility; only in this case the power is paradoxical. This becomes clearer if we ask the following important question: in each case, exactly who, what or whose system is doing the hiding? In the case of the Phallus or Logos, Whiteness and its corollary, power, are hidden *by* the Phallus or Logos. In the case of the Mixed Race subject, her Whiteness is, again, hidden *by the Phallus or Logos* – and for the exact same reasons, to keep its own power and system intact. This puts the indeterminate subject in a highly provocative position, always full of potential to destabilise the dyadic power of the Phallus; indeed her existence shows the emasculated and dependent nature of that 'power'. The downside to the transgressive potential, however, is that the Mixed Race subject is also always potentially available to the White Phallus to play a part in its phantasy of power. The 'racially' indeterminate subject who has been successfully subjugated may never have the opportunity to consider that her voice might be valid, or to question her marginal position.

As with the monochrome surface, the Mixed Race subject's body is horrific (but also quite fascinating) for White eyes to behold because it embodies a conceptual impossibility; the union of



binary opposites. On a psychoanalytic level this body also shows, optically, the split nature of the subject. This is horrific for the ego to behold, and the ego denies it furiously. In the case of the monochrome surface, this is problematised slightly by the illusory notion of one-ness, wholeness, completeness and unity that inheres in the very name of 'monochrome'. This unity is in fact conceptual sleight-of-hand. The 'mono' in monochrome, the singleness of the surface colour, disguises a buzzing kinetic hive of signifiatory activity which is pre-Phallic and thus pre-linguistic in nature, and therefore *will never fit* smoothly into any category of canonical western 'Art History', with its ruling binary Phallogocentrism. The indeterminacy of the Mixed Race subject's body is (usually) visible optically, but denied psychically. In monochrome the opposite is the case, the indeterminacy is invisible optically (the surface appears unified), but operates psychically, so it is really still invisible (outside of vision). It cannot be contained by the binary opposition which seeks to contain it (and which is, in fact, invoked by the very term 'mixed'.) Monochrome plays a trick by *being* indeterminate, but *looking* unified. The Mixed Race subject's body is involved in trickery of a slightly different nature, the Phallus is playing a trick by convincing the Mixed Race subject that her Whiteness does not exist, but at the same time she tricks the Phallus by defiantly wearing some of its coveted Whiteness. It seems *on the surface* – and it is the surface that is important here – that both the Mixed Race subject and the monochrome are 'rogue' categories in their respective neat, western systems. Each has enormous potential to introduce chaos into the tight warp and weft of each system.

To attempt to show this, my approach must be one of radical superficiality; my purpose is 'epidermalist'. As Elizabeth Grosz proposes in *Volatile Bodies* (1994), the book she describes as, 'an experiment in inversion'; the outside of the body can and should displace the supremacy of the psyche or interior in accounts of subjectivity. I am suggesting that the Phallogocentric, White, western system of canonical art history requires a knowledge of the Phallus and the Logos before it can be deciphered. Monochrome exists in a condition, or a Lacanian 'order' of existence



prior to the entry of the Phallus, and of language – this is the order of the Lacanian ‘Real’, where boundaries of signification have yet to be set; and signifiers are fully mobile, slippery and shifting in endless plays of potential signification. There is therefore no definite, full and final signified for the signifiers to aim towards; they simply dance about in endless *jouissance*. The concept of ‘aim’ is redundant, in fact, the signifiers simply ‘are’, since the Phallic shadow of the Law of the Father and of specific ‘meaning’ has yet to darken their playground of endless and indeterminate signification. However, as we will see, monochrome’s relationship to the Lacanian Real is not quite as clear and distinct as I might like. As an interrupter of a system, monochrome paradoxically still relies on the existence of that system, so that it has something to interrupt. This suggests the possibility of complicity at some level; that there is something invisibly (and again, paradoxically) Phallic about monochrome. Here the analogy of the Mixed Race body is helpful in reading monochrome. This subject’s Whiteness does not necessarily make her complicit with the system of Whiteness and its power. Quite the opposite is the case – her (in)visible Whiteness, as part of her indeterminacy, threatens the system. Perhaps, if monochrome has hidden Phallic power, this is just as threatening to the system as monochrome’s indeterminacy? And perhaps the Phallic attributes of monochrome are radically different to the Phallic attributes of the Lacanian Phallus, in the same way that Henry Louis Gates Jr proposes a Black version of Signification whose meaning is radically different, if not opposed, to Saussurean Signification? This sharing of a name is inherent to the ability to cause confusion, and it challenges the naming-power of the Phallus or the Father’s Law.

### 3:1 One: Two: Many

‘We are not ourselves; actually there is nothing we can call a ‘self’ anymore; we are manifold, we have as many selves as there are groups to which we belong [...] The neurotic has overtly a disease from which everybody is suffering.’  
J.H. Van Den Berg.

‘My aim is to bring about a psychic state in which my patient begins to experiment with his own nature – a state of fluidity, change and growth, in



which there is no longer anything eternally fixed and hopelessly petrified.' Carl Jung.

'Anybody can be anybody.' The Dice Man. (Van Den Berg and Jung in Rhinehart 1971:9)

Luke Rhinehart, or the infamous 'Dice Man' of the 1971 novel, was a maverick (and apparently insane) psychiatrist who advocated the total destruction of what conventional psychiatry conceived of as 'the personality', a unified, unbreakable whole that signified mental well being. The fundamental mistake that psychiatrists made, he felt, was the assumption that there was only *one* personality. Rhinehart understood this notion as damaging to human beings, keeping thousands unnecessarily incarcerated in mental institutions. He devised 'Diceliving', where any decision is made by giving a pair of dice six options, each one numbered, then seeing where they land. You might for example give the dice options on how to react to your boss when you are 'let go', what direction to walk, how to respond to a marriage proposal. The options were endless, and Rhinehart felt most liberated and 'well' when embodying a fresh personality, dice-chosen, every ten minutes. This is obviously extreme fiction, but there is something to be said for Rhinehart's suspicion of the overarching power of the unifying 'One'.

One of the functions of the ego, a little like that of the Phallus, is to unify and therefore make understandable and controllable the confusing multiplicity of *things* that exist in the world, and to foreclose the inherent knowledge of the fundamental split nature of the subject. As discussed in Chapter One, western philosophical traditions have always had trouble reconciling the problem of 'One' to the problem of 'Many': 'One' is Sublime, infinite, ultimately separate from and superior to the separated and disunified world below, in which the accursed human being is condemned to act. It seems paradoxical that despite western philosophy's traditional conferring of 'esoteric' status on the 'One/Many' problem, the system of binary pairs that Derrida identified as constitutive of western metaphysics is itself utterly dependent on the concept of 'One'. This



works in two ways: firstly the 'One' identifies the Logos itself, the Word or omnipotent end of all signification, and secondly, within the pairs themselves, one notion is usually dominant. It is possible to spot the favoured term in any society or time-pocket by its dominant position in the pair, most usually written or spoken first (for example on/off, masculine/feminine, high culture/low culture, etc.) All these binary pairs are authenticated by the 'One', the Logos which excludes anything that isn't clearly one thing or the other. Oppositionality keeps both the Logos and the Phallus intact. In the Mixed Race subject or indeterminate thing, the two (or more, for it is significant that there can be more) components are jointly embodied and both are altered as a result. The condition of the racially indeterminate subject means that is no longer possible for the two 'oppositional' components to reinforce the Logos, because the two are changed on becoming jointly embodied. What is more, the components continually shift – one may be more visible than another, but nevertheless, both (or all) exist. The Mixed Race subject literally fucks up the distinction, blurs it, sometimes laughing in the face of the Logos and defying definition – and since definition is the primary activity of both the Logos and the Phallus, the indeterminate (despite endless Phallic resistance to her innate uncategorisability) can also challenge the Phallus' power.

In her 'Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People' (1996), Maria Root sets out a series of basic human rights that Phallic thinking frequently denies to Mixed Race people. These are fundamental existential rights, and I suspect that many of those who have never considered Mixed Race subjectivity would be shocked to find that Mixed Race people do not automatically enjoy these rights. Root writes,

'I Have The Right:

Not to justify my existence to the world.

Not to keep the races separate within me.

Not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity.

Not to justify my ethnic legitimacy.

I Have The Right:



To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.  
To identify myself differently than how my parents identify me.  
To identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters.  
To identify myself differently in different situations.

I Have The Right:

To create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial.  
To change my identity over my lifetime – and more than once.  
To have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people.  
To freely choose whom I befriend and love.’ (Root in Root [ed] 1996:7)

To have to continually face intrusive questions from complete strangers such as, ‘What are you, exactly?’, or ‘Where are you from?’ and to be considered ill-mannered if you either choose not to tell them, or respond perfectly truthfully (whilst refusing to play their game) with something like, ‘I’m a Sagittarius’, or ‘I’m from Lancashire’, is quite tiring. As Root writes, it is a basic right to define oneself as one wishes, when one wishes, and not to have to justify the fact that one exists. It is our right not to feel that we must comply with a system which does not recognise ambiguity as a valid option for human existence. Despite this, Root does recognise that the influence of systems is powerful and that, ‘the system is also maintained by the oppressed’s internalization of the mechanics; for example, an insistence on singular ethnic or racial loyalties, colorism, and discrimination against multiracial people across all racial and ethnic groups [...] Paradoxically, this internalization of the mechanics of oppression is a version of the hostage syndrome observed in prisoners of war.’ (Root in Root [ed] 1996:5) Unity as an ideal is highly prized in Phallogocentric and racist thinking. It is sometimes difficult not to collude with this, especially if one attempts to do so from a position of isolation.

Unity also has a key role to play in psychoanalytic thinking. The notion of unity would seem to be essential for the survival of the organism living in a Phallogocentric society, helping the organism to understand its world by synthesising what it perceives there, or at least relating it to a unifying and understandable ‘One’. As Elizabeth Grosz writes in *Volatile Bodies*:



For Freud, the ego is what brings unity to the vast and overwhelming diversity of perceptions which, to begin with, overwhelm the child. The ego is a consequence of a perceptual surface; it is produced and grows only relative to this surface. In his initial formulations, Freud argues that the ego [...] is the result of a psychosocial intervention into the child's hitherto natural development. "We are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego has to be developed [...] there must be something added to auto-eroticism – a new psychical action – in order to bring about narcissism". (Freud 1914:77) This new action engenders primary narcissism (or what Lacan calls the mirror stage) at around six months of age. It consists in the relative stabilization of the circulation of libido in the child's body, so that the division between subject and object (even the subject's capacity to take itself as an object) becomes possible for the first time. (Grosz 1994:32)

The mirror, then, initiates a division: subject becomes separated from object, the split itself generating the binary pair of subject/object. Grosz develops an intriguing theory of the ego out of Lacanian and Freudian conceptions, which suggests that the ego as singular unified 'One' is not only formed out of a non-binary 'many', a plenitude of social interactions, but also suggests that the ego can be conceptualised as an external coating a little like the skin. For both the Mixed Race subject and the psychical indeterminate (and the woman, whom Lacan has said does not exist), who elude the rigidly fixed variations possible within the Phallogocentric frameworks, this notion of the 'skin ego' is full of fantastic possibilities for exercising the basic right to say you exist. Grosz's radical reconception of the ego, also explored by Guy Rosolato and Didier Anzieu (*The Skin-Ego* [1989], *Psychic Envelopes*, [1980]), aims to resituate the surface, site of social (or artistic) inscription, as the most important site for both interpretation and interaction. Importantly, Grosz's developments of 'classical' psychoanalysis offer a world of existential possibilities to the subject of Mixed Race, whose optical surface plays a disproportionately key role in their life-experience.

In *Volatile Bodies*, the superficial really does become absolutely radical. The lived, physical body is moved from the margins of psychoanalytic reading, previously seen as somehow less central than the interior, the psyche, the 'mind' – to the centre of analysis, to be understood as the very "‘stuff’ of subjectivity" (1994:ix). She twists the prior primacy of the 'inner' right around in order



to expose the 'outer', that which is always available to be seen, but has been rarely 'visible' in terms of its validation by scientific or philosophical enquiry. It can be seen, but remains unread, illegible. Psychical interiority is entirely dependent on corporeal exteriority, but not in a simple vehicular way. The body is a mobile, mutable surface, something that lives and can be read and inscribed, something which exerts its influences on the intra-psychic life. It is inscribed from without, it inscribes within. The body and its surface or boundary, the skin, help to make redundant the dualistic pairs outer/inner, psychic/corporeal, and more importantly, one/many. By fudging the clear distinguishing lines between each pair, the body offers an observable picture of one-ness and multiplicity, but of something that is both, and that is different from each.

What is perhaps most striking in Grosz's account is the way the ego and the skin become almost interchangeable as potent figures for the dissolving, confusing or sidestepping of boundaries. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud describes the ego as though it were a corporeal projection, positing that the subject only acquires a sense of wholeness or unity only after a series of multiple processes have taken place, constructing the ego as they go. The neonate's experience consists of a baffling, constant whirring of noises and colours, shapes and movements, and in the preobject stage (prior to primary narcissism or the mirror stage), the child has no control over these confusing experiences, because it does not understand them. Here we see the beginnings of the human organism's attempts to deal with its confusion by attempting to *control* whatever causes the confusion. For Freud, the ego is the, 'consequence of a perceptual surface; it is produced and grows only relative to this surface.' (1994:32). To illustrate his point Freud calls upon the figure of the cortical homunculus, a popular idea in Nineteenth Century medicine and neurology;

'The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego: it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface. If we wish to find an anatomical analogy for it we can best identify it with the "cortical homunculus" of the anatomists, which stands on its head in the cortex, sticks up its heels, faces backwards and as we know, has its speech-area on the left hand side.' (Freud 1923:26)



The ego thus does not map the perceivable, real body, but instead the areas of libidinal cathexis. The body is always meaningful because the subject is always libidinally attached to it in different ways, and the body-parts of the homunculus correlate in size with the importance accorded to each body part by its inhabiting subject<sup>1</sup>. A cortical homunculus for the subject of Mixed Race might be expected to have a disproportionate area of skin, or hair, or facial features. The Lacanian account of the mirror stage also supports this understanding, except that in this case the ego is a projection of the body *as read by others*<sup>2</sup>. In the examples of the monochrome and of the Mixed Race body, this reading-by-others, or definition-from-the-outside, is characteristic of their conditions of indeterminacy within a fixed and Phallic system.

Here we can see how the ego always wishes to seem whole and complete, a 'One' composed out of the disunity, fragmentariness and 'many' of human experience (therefore falsifying evidence suggesting the reality of the body in pieces). We also see how the ego is the projection of the corporeal body, its topography corresponding with the most intensely cathected areas on the body itself. It is positive and potentially liberating to acknowledge the ego in or as the skin, as this validates readings of the skin as meaningful, such as Grosz' or Anzieu's. Skin is only 'superficial' in that it is literally external; it is only 'shallow' in as much as it is a matter of millimeters thick. In terms of significance, it is huge and deep. Thirdly and most importantly of all here, the Freudian ego as developed by Lacan is clearly a result of the power of the gaze of the Other. Whoever decides the subjectivity of the subject, it is certainly not the subject, but the reading gaze of the one who looks. This deciding outside subject acts in the same way as the Phallus; like the Phallus, the outside subject makes a reading and decides on what the thing under its gaze will mean. Like the Phallus, the outside subject who makes these decisions about 'meaning' is the place where the play of signification stops. Like the Phallus, for non-White people in White society, the outside subject is White. As we will see, Grosz's feminist reading of



the Phallus offers the indeterminate and 'castrated' subject of Mixed Race a positive opportunity for self-identification.

Lacan would have us believe that everybody wants the Phallus, but that nobody can get it. The question of who *has* the Phallus is set in Lacan's writing against the question of who *is* the Phallus; the Phallus itself is involved in the classifying of male or female identity by the distinction of being or having. Put very simply, the male 'has' the Phallus, so therefore the female (who is always already castrated because she does not 'have' the Phallus) spends her life in various attempts to 'be' the Phallus. As Parveen Adams writes,

'I have argued earlier [...] that the phallus is a crucial category for psychoanalytic thought. Its scope covers both male and female psychic life. But that is not because the difference between male and female coincides with the distinction possession/non-possession. Rather, the phallus is the central reference-point because no one possesses the phallus.' (Adams 1996:124)

Lacan describes 'feminine' tendencies towards body-adornment, narcissism, and masquerade as some of these attempts to be the Phallus. For the mother, it is slightly different; the object of her *desire* is the Phallus, which is always beyond the infant. This is something that the infant can never quite understand or accept; therefore the child (or, for Freud, the neurotic) is also involved in an attempt to be the Phallus, this time for the mother. The form of Phallus that the infant will attempt to 'be' varies between individuals. So the question of what the Phallus might want becomes secondary in importance to the question of who wants the Phallus. The object of desire is always absent, and this absence, or inability to ever achieve satisfaction is what keeps the desire itself in place: 'desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*spaltung*)' (Lacan 1977:287).



So desire itself is a difference, a surplus. The question of who or what the Phallus is in Lacanian discourse – for it is Lacan who takes this concept (mentioned less frequently by Freud though with a similar level of apotheosis), and runs with it – becomes particularly vexed when we consider the notorious impenetrability of the writings of Jacques Lacan, and the possibility that his writings were never meant to be ‘understood’ in the first place<sup>3</sup>. The most salient paradox attending the Phallus is that despite its clear reference to the male reproductive organ, Lacanian fundamentalists will insist that it is written as a kind of attribute-free ‘neutral’. Unsurprisingly, this has forced a split, radical and ongoing, in feminist psychoanalytic debate. As a symbol of power; the Lacanian Phallus should not be confused or even connected with the human male penis. ‘The phallus is not the same thing as the penis: it is the penis plus the idea of lack’ (Leader 1995:89). Malcolm Bowie, however, suggests that, ‘Lacan’s use of the term *phallus* depends upon a conceit’ (1991:128). In embryology, the term ‘phallus’ is used to describe the foetal sex organ in its early stages, before male or female gender has developed. Having established this initial neutrality, though, Bowie goes on to write,

‘The phallus is [...] a primitive structure, but by now it has been elevated from anatomy to a universal semantics. Sexless it once was, and now, after passing for a time through the human body and creating sexual difference on the way, sexless it has again become. But this tale of a voyage beyond male and female is disingenuously told and often contradicted. For Freud and Lacan both seek the patronage of Priapus and write with unashamed enthusiasm of his magical powers’. (Bowie 1991:128)

My own position rests on an understanding of the Phallus as neither neutral nor attribute-free. I align myself with Elizabeth Grosz when she observes that,

‘[...] the phallic signifier is not a neutral ‘third’ term against which both sexes are analogously or symmetrically positioned. The relation between the penis and the phallus is not arbitrary, but socially and politically motivated [...] It is motivated by the already existing structure of patriarchal power, and its effects guarantee the reproduction of this particular form of social organization and no other’ (Grosz 1990:124).

If we take Grosz’ observations that the Phallic equation with the human penis are based on the existing power-structure of patriarchy, it becomes easier to deduce that the ‘veil’ that covers the



Phallus and assures its power, also disguises its Whiteness. My equation of Whiteness with the Lacanian Phallus here is not arbitrary either, but is based on the social and political realities that the western structure of power is White. In the binary 'Phallic/castrated', those subjects who problematise Phallic authority are 'castrated'. In terms of gender, this subject is Woman<sup>4</sup>. In terms of 'race', the White Phallus castrates the Black subject. For the subject of Mixed Race, in whom the Phallus recognises an uncanny, deviant version of its own Whiteness, the White Phallus makes special efforts to classify, categorise, contain and castrate. In *The Signification of the Phallus*, Lacan posits the Phallus as the contender for this role of boss signifier:

'The phallus reveals its function here. In Freudian doctrine, the phallus is not a phantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad etc.) in the sense that this term tends to accentuate the reality pertaining in a relation. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolises. And it is not without reason that Freud used the reference to the simulacrum that it represented for the Ancients. For the phallus is a signifier, a signifier whose function, in the intra-subjective economy of the analysis, lifts the veil perhaps from the function it performed in the mysteries. For it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier'.  
(Lacan 1977 [1958]:285)

We may deduce then that the Phallus functions as the primary signifier, chosen for its (limited) shape-shifting powers to act as the most powerful signifier of them all. The Phallus is the signifier whose significance is almost as conclusive as a signified; its presence effectively stops the motion of signification by assigning a definite meaning. The silent and invisible *jouissance* of the signifiers in the freedom of perpetual motion is split or interrupted by the *puissance* of the looming Phallic shadow overhead. Definition by the Phallus is never self-definition; and the conceptualisation of the defining Phallus as White allows us to see how the self-definition that is denied to Mixed Race subjects colludes with Phallic activity.

The perpetual motion of the Phallus also colludes with White activity towards the 'racially' indeterminate subject. The mother, although she is perceived to already have the Phallus (see



Melanie Klein, where the mother's body is perceived as filled with penises, babies and faeces – a veritable cornucopia of having (1988[1975], and 1988a[1975]), desires the Phallus because it is forever out of her reach, since she is castrated. The infant desires the mother and, in its games of seduction, continually attempts to 'be' the Phallus for the mother. The mother desires the Phallus of the father, who is perpetually terrified that it might be severed. The mother, already 'castrated', exists in mourning for her own lost Phallus. It is a little like a game of 'chase'; the Phallus perpetually moving, establishing itself, performing important tasks of signification, then running away. The most vexed and problematic element in Lacanian theory, that of his stance towards women, begins here. The alleged 'neutrality' of the Phallic signifier seems disingenuous in the light of the patriarchal nature of the society within which psychoanalysis had its genesis; but more gravely, such statements of Lacan as 'Woman does not exist' and such cases as Freud's treatment of 'Dora' – where he failed to recognize that Dora in fact desired a woman, Frau K – all suggest that the apotheosis of the Phallus should be aligned with an apotheosis of masculinity, or the male. Lacan refuses to ascribe signifying powers to the woman. Elizabeth Grosz (1990), explains that,

'The processes by which the phallus, a signifier, becomes associated with the penis, an organ, involves the procedures by which women are systematically excluded from positive self-definition and a potential autonomy. The relations each sex has to the phallus *qua* signifier map the position(s) each occupies as a feminine or masculine subject in the patriarchal symbolic order [...] Because the penis and the phallus are (albeit illusorily) identified, women are regarded as castrated. By its presence or absence, the penis becomes the defining characteristic of both sexes.' (Grosz 1990: 116)

Similarly, Whiteness as ultimate Signifier, ultimate decider of 'what' somebody is, or what their skins and features mean, is perpetually on the move; its perceived 'presence or absence' deciding someone's 'racial' fate, but always to its own advantage. Maria Root's observations on the classificatory systems of White authority echo Grosz' observations on the Lacanian deciding Phallus and who it excludes:



‘The purpose of the classification system, which insists on clean lines between groups, always remains the same: to establish and maintain a social hierarchy in which the creators and enforcers of the system occupy a superior berth. Consequently, members of the group are always ‘deserving’ of inferior status, until they are arbitrarily elevated to a higher status or a change in status provides economic advantages to those in power.’ (Root in Root [ed] 1996:5)

This similarity between White and Phallic activity can even be seen in terms of what Grosz describes as the Phallic determination of the structure ‘of romantic relationships’ – in 1967 in the famous and wonderfully named case of *Loving vs. Virginia*, Mildred Jeters and Perry Loving managed to overturn all remaining U.S state laws against interracial marriage. The Supreme Court invoked an interpretation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to repeal these laws, as they infringed the basic civil liberty of the pursuit of happiness. Of course, such Phallic deciding activity about relationships is not confined to Whiteness – the final right in Roots’ *Bill of Rights* states the right to ‘freely choose whom I befriend and love’ (1996:7). This means that the Mixed Race subject may choose her partner based on their compatibility and happiness together, and that in this she may be free from all accusations of being a race traitor, a ‘coconut’, a try-hard, an Uncle Tom, a wannabe-Black, or anything else.

### **3:2 When is a Signifier Not a Signifier? (When It’s a Monkey)**

‘Free of the white person’s gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms.’ (Gates Jr.1989:xxiv).

‘Jean Paul Sartre (trans. 1976) suggests that people define self in terms of the subjective experience of the *other*. In this case, multiracial people are the inkblot test for the *other’s* prejudices and fears.’ (Root in Root [ed] 1996:9)

In H.L Gates Jr’ account of the African-American notion of ‘signification’, meaning is anything but ‘meaning’, and creative appropriation by an oppressed group of some of the oppressor’s language opens up the possibilities for that group’s negotiation of their existence. Developing out of slavery, African-American ‘signification’ is simply the act of confusing someone, especially a White someone, by talking in complex, eloquent-sounding, interweaving circles. It is a difficult



skill to learn, a conspiratorial joke against the White plantocracy that required much practice to perfect. Gates Jr tells of an African-American proverb that attests to the prevalence of this form of communication; 'Signification is the nigger's occupation'. In my account of monochrome, would we see it as the 'nigger' of western art history? Or more specifically within that category of 'nigger' (as decided by the White Phallus), the problematic 'half-caste'; the indeterminate, undecidable Mixed Race subject, too horrible for the ego (which abhors a split), to behold?

'Lacan's human subject is not a "divided self" (R.D Laing) that in a different society could be made whole, but a self which is only actually and necessarily created within a split – a being that can only conceptualise itself when it is mirrored back to itself from the position of another's desire.' (Mitchell in Mitchell & Rose (eds) 1982:5)

There are other ways to signify than those of the western traditions of semiotics<sup>5</sup>. Derrida, for example, in some of his earlier work rejected the Saussurean understanding of signs as fixed, closed and (most importantly) binary systems. Crucially, Derrida's critique does not adopt a fixed position, neither does he use traditional terminology or systems of questioning. His problematic legibility is a deliberate and subversive strategy, causing questioning of the systems that 'pass' as 'normal'. What is interesting for me in terms of the doubleness I propose both for the psychic space of monochrome and the epidermal or optical space of the Mixed Race subject, is that Derrida factors doubleness deliberately into his work. The word *Déconstruction*, for example, has at least two meanings in French – to take apart (usually machinery), or to re-arrange the words or grammar in a sentence. Derrida also questions how meanings can be lost or undervalued if the systems reading those meanings do not understand them<sup>6</sup>.

However, the African-American figure of the Signifyin(g) Monkey, through whom final meaning is not only deferred but actively avoided in favour of witty suggestion and mischievous word play, confuses the signifying systems of the White west in more subversive ways<sup>7</sup>. This 'Black' mode of Signifyin(g) as favoured by the tricky Monkey has more in common with Derridean Deconstruction than it does with Saussurean signification. African-American Signifyin(g) does



not have ultimate meaning as its goal, or primordial meaning as its first referent. In this respect it shares common traits with 'code' speech formations that deliberately close off access to oppressive authority. To seek 'meaning' in the Signifyin(g) speech of the Monkey or the Signifyin(g) Nigger (*sic*) in the traditional way in which meaning is sought in the western text pre-Deconstruction, is to miss the point. More than this, however, the African-American speakerly mode of Signifyin(g) actually disrupts the dominant White systemic notions of meaning, *whilst remaining hidden*. In this way it 'means' in common with the Mixed Race subject's body, or any kind of cultural indeterminate. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. tells it,

'Some black genius or a community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier "Signification" of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts. By doing so, by supplanting the received, standard English concept associated by (white) convention with this particular signifier, they (un)wittingly disrupted the nature of the sign = *signifier/signified* equation itself [...] I wish to believe, that this guerrilla action occurred intentionally on this term, because of the very concept with which it is associated in standard English (Gates Jr.1989:46)

Signifyin(g) is, as Wittgenstein said of poetry, a rhetorical practice that does not involve itself in information-giving. Indeed, Signifyin(g), as opposed to Signifying, involves deliberately saying exactly the thing one does not mean, in order to confuse a possible White listener, and to indulge in witty wordplay with one's fellow Black conversation partner. This is not a 'master' trope. It deliberately ignores or bypasses the transcendent signified, the Logos or the Phallus, writing itself in the margins of spoken discourse;

'The ironic reversal of a received racist image of the black as simianlike, the Signifying Monkey [...] dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act. If Vico and Burke, or Nietzsche, de Man, and Bloom, are correct in identifying four and six 'master tropes,' then we might think of these as the 'master's tropes', and of Signifyin(g) as the slave's trope, the trope of tropes [...]' (Gates Jr. 1989:52).

The African-American trope of Signifyin(g) at first sight has no part in the dyadic decision-making of the Phallogocentric system. Not only does it confuse its homonym, it also makes



redundant any kind of attempt to 'understand' in the Phallic, Logocentric way. Signifyin(g) is the Slave's trope, as Gates Jr. suggests, and its deliberate confusion of White concepts allows for the exclusion of the White, Phallic plantocracy (or White racist whoever), and frees Black speakers to enjoy the meaning-games this secret method of communication involves. In classical Derridean terms, Signifyin(g) *defers meaning*,

'In opposition to the apparent transparency of speech, this poetry calls attention to itself as an extended linguistic sign, one composed of various forms of the signifiers peculiar to the black vernacular. Meaning, in these poems, is not proffered; it is deferred, and it is deferred because the relationship between intent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension, is skewed by the figures of rhetoric or signification of which these poems consist. This set of skewed relationships creates a measure of undecidability within the discourse, such that it must be interpreted or decoded by careful attention to its play of differences.' (Gates Jr. 1989:53)

Beneath the surface however, there is more to Signifyin(g) than meets the ear, as with the monochrome, as with the 'decided' body of the Mixed Race subject. Whilst its immediate signifiers suggest that it 'ought to' make sense as a picture, if we see the monochrome painting/installation/film/whatever as a psychic object rather than simply a visual or tangible one, we will be able to penetrate that surface. Beneath or beyond the surface, I suspect we will also find that in monochrome as in 'Black' Signifyin(g), the process of meaning-production that is actually taking place is radically different from the one we immediately assume is taking place from our reading of the name.

Tales of the Signifying Monkey's exploits are common in African-American communities. These tales, thought to have been brought over with the dreaded 'Middle Passage' from Africa's west coast to the shores of the New World, involve three principle characters: the Lion, the Monkey and the Elephant. Due to his immense size the latter is true king of the jungle, although the Lion believes himself to be the rightful occupant of this office. In the stories, the Monkey usually plays a trick on the Lion or Elephant, rousing one to extreme anger brought about by an 'insult' from



the other, which in reality came from the tricky Monkey. The Monkey figure is thought to share much in common with Esu-Elegbara, trickster figure found in the Yoruba cultures of Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti. Other names for Esu-Elegbara include *Legba*, also called the 'divine linguist' by the Fon of Dahomey (Benin), and *Papa La Bas* (Haiti). There are many versions of Esu, but in each version he is sole messenger of the gods to the humans, the go-between. In Yoruba mythology Esu-Elegbara's indeterminacy is worn on his body; he is said to walk with a limp because he is perpetually caught between two worlds. Esu's discourse is double-voiced, like that of the Monkey he would later become, and his tricks always involve a doubling or confusing of any expected notion of 'meaning' as an absolute, definite, decided end-point. Gates Jr. describes Esu as, 'the Yoruba figure of indeterminacy itself, *aseye*, *ayewi*, or *ailemo*, literally, 'that which we cannot know' '. (Gates Jr. 1989:11).

The Yoruba story of 'The Two Friends' demonstrates the trickster-god Esu-Elegbara's determined aim to confuse, but more importantly it demonstrates the (Ph)allacy of striving for a single definitive meaning. Esu-Elegbara makes himself a tricky cap, one side of which is jet black, the other dazzling white. He rides directly between two men who have angered him by making a friendship pact without his blessing, making sure he greets each man. Later on, a violent fist-fight ensues between these sworn friends, who are unable to agree on the colour of the 'pleasant stranger's headgear. Eventually Esu intervenes in the fight to tell them that they are both right, but they are also both wrong in their reading of his hat. The folly here is the insistence on one determinate meaning, (itself dependent on one's personal vantage point, and one's mode of seeing), which is particularly foolish when the observed thing is in fact indeterminate, double or multiple. Esu's rightful place is *between* the two, his anger stemmed from the fact that the two did not initially factor him as a third term into their two-way friendship. Esu thus suffered two insults; firstly he was not acknowledged as a god ought to be, but secondly and more importantly



he was not given his proper place as slider-in-between, as interruptor of restricting systems.

Gates goes on to tell us,

‘As anthropologists demonstrate, the Signifying Monkey is often called the Signifier, he who wreaks havoc upon the Signified. One is signified upon by the signifier. He is indeed the “signifier as such”, in Kristeva’s phrase, “a presence that precedes the signification of object or emotion”’. (Gates 1989:52-53)

The Signifyin(g) Monkey offers a glimmer of hope for an alternative to the established system, but it is clear throughout Gates Jr.’s work that he wishes to claim Signifyin(g) as an exclusively Black trope. Whilst Gates Jr. does not expressly state this, his writing implicitly elides ‘Black’ with African-American. This is a specific way of being Black that cannot necessarily include the African, the Caribbean or the Black British person – it is certainly a way of being Black that the Mixed Race person, especially a British one, cannot fit easily into. In this insistence on particularizing the Monkey’s or Esu-Elegbara’s indeterminate activity, Gates Jr. is taking part in something oppositional yet akin to Phallic activity; it is almost as though he perpetuates the same power-structure in reverse. His alternative invocation of the Signifyin(g) Monkey should be understood as a partially useful, partial alternative to the Phallogocentric. ‘Partial’ here is not meant entirely negatively, for it seems to me that any attempts at creating a straightforward counter-system to the great systems of White Phallogocentricity should be applauded. At the same time, however, such attempts might be always already doomed to failure as this would be a frontal attack and the system would literally ‘see’ you coming.

A more subtle and cunning way of disempowering the Phallogocentric, I think, is to attempt a synthesis of more than two (for two is the number of the sacred oppositional pair) distinct ways of thinking and to think this synthesis *into* the system. To find a way to be perpetually present in the system, and yet not quite of it; to slither and slip in and out of it, sometimes rhyming with it and sometimes creating dissonance. This kind of activity – an example of which is in the notions



of strata and the planes of immanence and organization in Deleuze – will be more effective than replacement, since it will present the Phallus with the absurd folly of its fixed categories. It seems that invoking the figure of Esu-Elegbara, with his structural indeterminacy (and particularly with the striking figure of his Black/White tricking cap), would be a more useful strategy for the subject of Mixed Race than would Gates Jr.'s more 'decided' Signifyin(g) Monkey. Like the Mixed Race subject, Esu-Elegbara is a figure that rehearses and performs the task of confusing 'fixed' categories, showing the system the historically-formed strata that it has mistaken for truth.

### **3:3 Diluted Nigger or Dirty Nigger? The 'Choice' is Never Yours**

'In Greece, the family insignia, which served to differentiate one class from another through the exclusion of slaves from access to the family name, functioned as the phallus' (Grosz 1990:121).

The authority of the Phallus is not open to question; it simply has to be accepted and lived under. The act of naming is a Phallic act that presupposes a structural dyad of power and subjugation. The family insignias that Grosz refers to above served to separate the noble family from the ignoble slaves in ancient Greece, thus the family name became a potent symbol of that family's authority. The acts of naming that the family performed were automatic symbols of their power, the choice of slave-names was never a choice made by the slaves themselves. More recently in the history of African slavery in the west, the European surnames of many Black diaspora people usually come from the surnames of the slave-owners who owned their ancestors, enabling any lost slaves to be traced and returned. It was a system of tagging. The knowledge of this real and symbolic persistence of this fundamental theft of identity, history and culture is what made Malcolm Little change his name to Malcolm X, setting up a tradition still adhered to by many devotees of the Nation of Islam. The giver of the name is also the decider, symbolically, of the identity. These people have reclaimed both the act of naming and the name itself, and have successfully outsmarted the Phallus – in this case is the White west. The Lacanian Name of the Father, which is also a prohibition, a 'No', both inscribes the child with the father's name and



provides the child with permission to speak. This is very important, for it suggests that anything non-Phallic or pre-Phallic has neither identity, place, nor voice. It also suggests that the subject who is named, classified or decided, is also dependent on the decider for the right to speak<sup>8</sup>.

The art of Gordon Bennett (see Chapter Two) is predicated on an examination of the speaking position of the subject. As Lingard & Rizvi write,

‘In the dominant colonial discourse, Aboriginal people are not provided a subject position; there is no space from which they can speak. In his work, Bennett is constantly putting forward and problematising his own speaking position. It is a position that is neither fixed nor unitary.’ (Lingard & Rizvi 1994:83)

As with all subjects of Mixed Race, Bennett’s own speaking position is complex and contradictory. By foregrounding this in his work, he challenges Phallic preconceptions about ‘Aboriginality’, about what White Australian authorities decide it means to be Aboriginal, and about the decisions about one’s Aboriginal ‘authenticity’, which are again made by White Phallic authority. He refuses to be spoken for, or spoken about, any longer. Bennett’s strategy is to confidently claim his own speaking position amongst all the apparent contradictions that create his identity. One of the strategies of his work is to implicitly suggest that subjects like him are not inherently fragmented, but are designated *as* fragmented by the Phallic system that constructs them as Other. His work returns the Phallic gaze back to the Phallic eye of Power in a move that Bhabha (1985) describes as ‘hybridisation’. ‘Hybridisation’ articulates indigenous and colonial knowledges, enabling ‘a strategic reversal of the process of domination’. In Bennett’s case, he not only shows the White Phallic eye some of its own Whiteness in ‘deviant’, Aboriginal form, but he also exposes the Phallic neo-colonialism of the art market that ‘decides’ when Aboriginal art should be considered fashionable and interesting, and what value should be placed upon it (Fry & Willis 1989).



It should be noted that the tendency to binarism usually referred to as Cartesian, Platonic, is not specifically western. Many cultures abhor a split, or anything that appears to threaten the clear-cut boundaries of a binarism; some even legislate against such aberrations. However, the west (or more specifically the Vienna/Paris axis) was the birthplace of the Phallus, and the context of the west is possibly the most appropriate one in which the Phallus can be said to be operational.

Malcolm Bowie points out that the concept of 'Europe' was irrelevant to Freud at the time he was conceptualising his version of the unconscious (a notion that is traceable in European thinking back to antiquity, and was quite fashionable during Freud's lifetime). The Freudian unconscious was to be understood as a grand universal, unaffected by cultural specificity:

'[...] if the general principles of mental functioning were at issue, Europe was too small to be worth studying; if, on the other hand, a suffering individual presented himself or herself, Europe was an unfocusable vastness.' (Bowie 1993:117-118)

Now, however, few would attempt to deny the high specificity of Freud's unconscious. Not only is it European, it is distinctly referential to the Viennese, Nineteenth Century, educated Judaeo-Christian-Atheist, and referential to a particular family structure and to the male and female subjects' becoming within patriarchy<sup>10</sup>. Bowie further describes the specifically gendered, socially 'removed' nature of this particular unconscious, further giving the lie to any idea of universality,

'Time and again during this 'advanced' age of sexual self-awareness, the unconscious became Woman, just as it had during the heyday of Romantic agony. But whichever woman it now became – the deranged heroine of *Erwartung*, Breuer's Anno O., Freud's Emmy von N., the Salome of Richard Strauss, the Lulu of Berg and Pabst, Klimt's Judith, or any one of the lesser hysterics, houris and earth spirits who crowd the annals of European culture at this time – she was wondrously removed from the complicating life of the social group'. (Bowie 1993:132)

Amina Mama in *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* (1995) asks key questions about the possibility of racism, or at least western-centrism, within psychology. Such questions are crucial because they beg further questions about whether a psychology of Black subjectivity is ever possible, given the 'Whiteness' of psychology and psychoanalysis. I would go further and add



that this Whiteness is inextricably tied in with the Phallic function of both psychoanalysis and the individual analyst in the analytic relationship. The Black psychoanalytic subject in the west is always first and foremost a subject factored into White western society *by* the White west; only situated there because of previous acts of White, Phallic authority such as the forced mass-movements of slavery. Mama writes,

‘It is worth pointing out that enslavement and colonisation did not only materially exploit and politically subordinate African resources and ways of life but at the same time transformed and subjected Africans to the imaginings and caprices of imperial culture and psychology [...] and cast them in the position of subjected Others, while it advanced the interests of European nations.’  
(Mama 1995:17)

White western colonisation was obviously not a mere matter of geographical intervention. The effects run far deeper, scars of enforced difference run deep in colonised people and societies. What Mama is particularly bringing to our attention here, however, is the propagation of White ideologies as universally correct. A Black subject is always a ‘wrong’, or failed White subject; but a Black psychoanalytic subject will pose more problems than ever because of enforced double consciousness. The identity of the Black subject warped by White colonialist intervention became in psychology and psychoanalysis – White western disciplines – something that Mama writes as the, ‘generalised and pathologised ‘Negro personality’ (1995:47), an understanding that reaffirms Black inferiority. Mama goes on to detail various social psychological projects which, through an attempt at scientific objectivity, manage to further subjugate the Black subject. One such example is the 1950 UNESCO Statement on Race, which despite an apparent commitment to anti-racism, nevertheless managed to come up with a ‘damaged Negro’ conclusion thanks to questionable research methods. Most of the Black subjects interviewed were already in mental institutions, for example (just like Charcot’s female hysterics); other participants living in extreme poverty were tempted by offers of payment for answering the questionnaires. A Black psychoanalytic subject is also, however, always a subject studied and theorised about from a White perspective, as Mama explains;



‘Until the 1920s, psychological research had been the exclusive preserve of white academics, with black people as their objects of study. In that year Francis Sumner became the first black person to obtain a Ph.D in psychology. Subsequently, he supported Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s research on ‘Negro identity’ during the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1950s there were still only fifty black Americans with doctorates in psychology, and although there has been a steady increase since the 1960s, black people are still grossly underrepresented in the discipline.’ (1995:44)

I would add that the Mixed Race psychoanalytic subject whom the White west has decided is Black, is at least once removed again from any kind of agency. She has been classified, named and decided twice over by the White Phallus. The mechanics of patriarchal oppression disguises embodied individuals, subsuming them into a huge, imaginary ‘rightness’ and power, ‘men [...] hide themselves and their specificities under the banner of some universal humanity’ (Grosz 1994:xi). The obviously masculine Phallus does the same, concealing its sexed nature under Lacan’s opaque veil of neutrality. Anything that does not fit into the male Phallus’ definition of ‘universal human being’, for example a female human being, is automatically positioned as subaltern. Whiteness does exactly the same thing: it disguises its racial specificity by propagating the myth of its universality, it names, decides and subjugates anything that is different from itself or threatens its power. Whiteness silently equates itself with the notion of what it is to be human. As John Tercier writes,

‘In Western culture, the fact that whiteness is the norm cloaks it with invisibility. It allows the white man to attain the Enlightenment intellectual ideal, the observing subject without properties [...]’ (Tercier 2000:20)

In the world of lived-in human bodies, Whiteness performs this subjugation mostly through vision. Donna Haraway cites vision as a system that should be useful for subaltern discourses, in her case, specifically feminism:

‘Vision can be good for avoiding binary oppositions. I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked



positions of Man and White, one of the many nasty tones of the word *objectivity* to feminist ears in scientific and technological, late industrial, militarised, racist and male dominant societies [...]’ (Haraway in Mirzoeff 1998:191)

Writing most specifically about a feminist reclamation of scientific study, Haraway proposes a variety of binary-busting alternatives to some of the fixed, Phallic ‘universals’ that we are conned into believing are transcendent truths (though she does admit that her ‘dichotomous chart’ is problematic as it makes reference to the system she is questioning). For instance, ‘universal rationality’ would ideally be replaced with ‘ethnophilosophies’, or ‘world system’ with ‘local knowledges’. Concepts such as resonance and tension are suggested, not because they are opposed to dichotomous pairs, but because they slither out from under them, they sidestep around them, they exceed them. There is movement, play and possibility in such mobile concepts, they elude Phallic systems and their dualisms. So whilst the White Phallus would designate the psychic space of the Mixed Race subject as damaged, deviant or a mistake, that subject can choose not to recognise the authority that makes this decision, and can engage in a positive process of self-identification that can change and fluctuate as many times as she likes.

If Phallic Whiteness is equated with humanity, anything that problematises that Whiteness is automatically dehumanised. This accounts for some of the pseudo-scientific theories which attempted to ‘prove’ the likeness of African and simian brains, etc. The Black subject poses no real threat to Phallic Whiteness, she is simply designated as outside of it. The subject of Mixed Race is so frequently and determinedly classified as ‘Black’ by the White Phallus because of the very fact that she contains some of that Whiteness, though (sometimes) imperceptibly. That invisible Whiteness, a little like the invisible spoken ‘a’ in Derrida’s *différance*, makes all the difference. Such problematic Whiteness shows that the system is not as impermeable as it wishes, and shows up the inside/outside boundary that the system supports as unstable and ultimately transgressible. Such Whiteness shows that the Mixed Race subject cannot properly and



unproblematically be said to be *outside* of Whiteness. The binary categories that the White Phallus sets up are inhabited, woven through and continually destabilised by the fluid and the boundless, and thus the White Phallus must work hard to maintain its oppositional pairs. The non-White, problematically White or non-Phallic subject need not necessarily be condemned to a life of 'passing' and tragedy, however. The position of marginality, where boundaries are continually open to transgression, can, paradoxically, be a position of the kind of power only available to the subaltern. As Haraway goes on to say, this position of having been 'located' can be a position of potential transgressive power, as 'location is about vulnerability; location resists the politics of closure, finality' (Haraway in Mirzoeff 1998:197)

### 3:4 Neither Fish Nor Fowl: Indeterminacy & (Ill)legibility

Elizabeth Grosz begins her journey towards new philosophical terrain by examining a few so-called 'anomalous philosophers', Vico, Nietzsche and most importantly the highly influential Spinoza, all of whom self-consciously question Cartesian dualism and its offshoots. Suggesting that Spinoza not only displaces Cartesian dualisms but also frees the body from the 'dominant mechanistic models with which the Cartesian tradition surrounded it' (1994:10), Grosz offers alternative figures, such as the flame, whose endless state of becoming and newness prevents it from ever being 'defined' into one or another category.

'As in a burning candle, the permanence of the flame is a permanence, not of substance but of process in which at each moment the "body" with its "structure" of inner and outer layers is reconstituted of materials different from the previous and following ones so the living organism exists as a constant exchange of its own constituents and has its permanence and identity in the continuity of this process.' (Jonas in Grosz 1994:11)<sup>11</sup>

There is too much inscribed on the brown skin of the Mixed Race subject that the ruling White Phallus does not want to see; the union of cultures, colours and 'races', and importantly, the evidence of the deviant sexual crime of interracial intercourse. By simply being alive, the Mixed Race subject bears testimony to the fact that an improper sexual union, one not sanctioned by



White society, has taken place. The mixing of 'races' has been the subject of precise legislation in certain areas because of this taboo. New Orleans and the surrounding areas, for example, had highly specific terminologies for the different degrees of mixing that occurred, and the State Laws set out clearly what entitlements each 'type' or colour of person had, depending on the degree of Black 'blood' that could be traced in their ancestry via their appearance combined with official records<sup>12</sup>. In Canada however, First Nation people with one White parent are referred to as 'Métis', and given the same rights as someone with two First Nation parents. Robert Young (1995) suggests that this manic and obsessive insistence on taxonomising the various 'types' of Mixed Race subject was really a futile attempt to disguise the Whites' prurient interest in what they considered the ultimate sexual perversion.

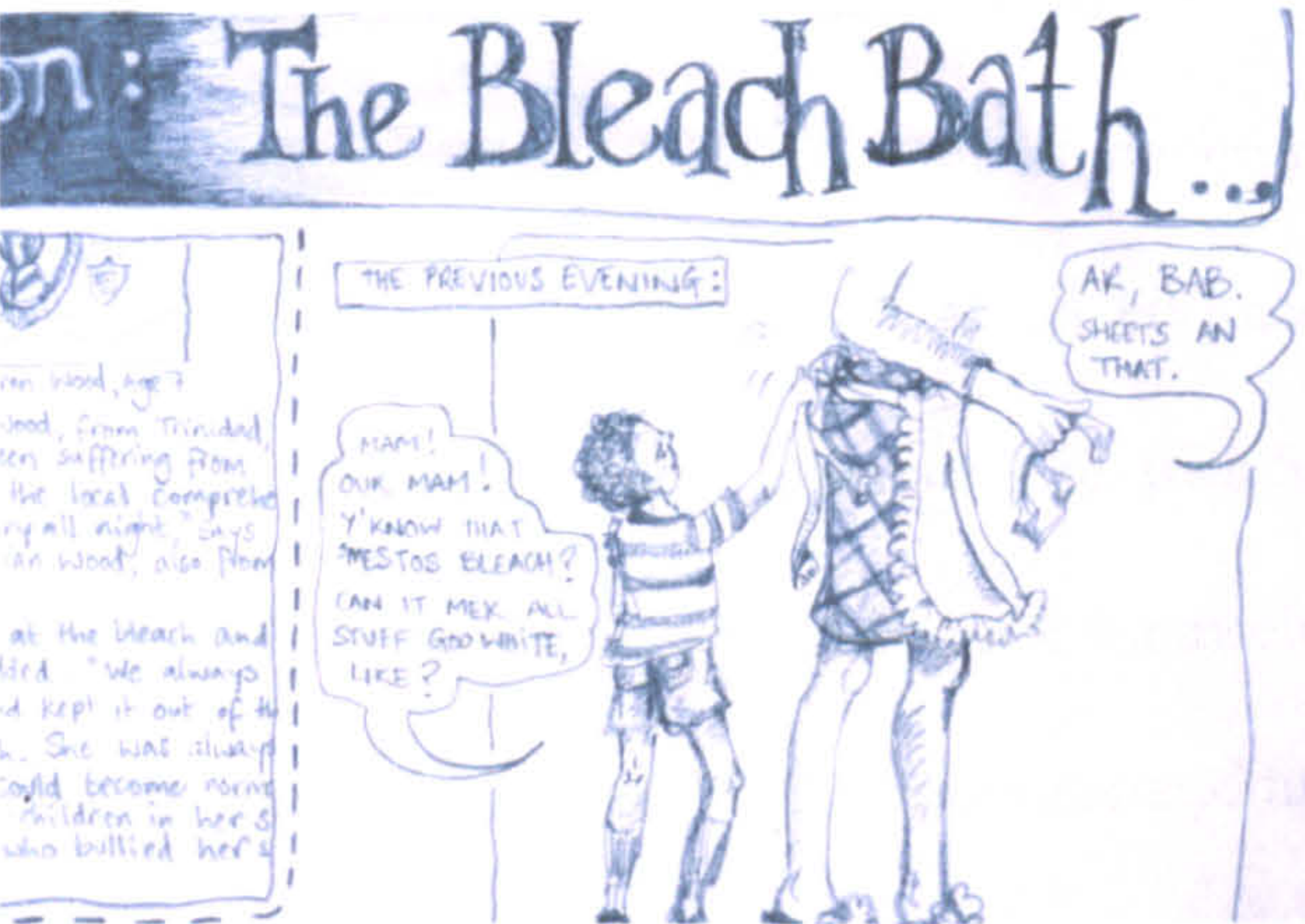
Monochrome occupies a similar place in Phallogocentric western Art History. Any attempts to make monochrome 'be' any one particular thing will always be doomed to failure, since monochrome is fundamentally *indeterminate*. Floating independent of definite signification, the Mixed Race subject and the monochrome can, like the Diceman, almost be anything. What is important to remember, however, is that this position of deviant agency is not always apparent at first, thanks to the pervasive power of the Phallic Logos that always presents itself in the guise of 'universal truth'. In order to explore these ideas as they relate to indeterminacy as a lived, human condition, I have made a body of visual art work surrounding the fictional character of 'Carlton Johnson' [Figs 26- 28]. The stories in the work are set in 1978 in Pelsall, West Midlands, a mostly White area that was mostly occupied by people who believed Enoch Powell was a 'visionary'. The action takes place ten years after Powell gave his famous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, igniting what was already a hotbed of racism in Britain. The installation includes cartoon drawings about Carlton's life, a short Super-8 Film, and a short video piece. The work also explores issues of cultural appropriation and appropriateness, class and family, the authorial voice,



and attempts to bring the importance of the individual human story to bear on the theoretical question of liminality.



**Figure 26:** Angeline Morrison, *Carlton Johnson: my 'life'* 2002. Ink drawing on paper. 12 x 8cm. Collection of the author.



**Figure 27:** Angeline Morrison, *Carlton Johnson: my 'life', 'The Bleach Bath'* (detail) 2000. Pencil drawing on paper. 20 x 27cm. Collection of the author.



**Figure 28:** Angeline Morrison, *Carlton Johnson: my 'life', 'The Band'* (detail) 2001. Ink drawing on paper. 15 x 10cm. Collection of the author.



Carlton's position as a Mixed Race subject is one of extreme isolation. He has no contact whatsoever with so-called 'Black culture', his White mother being a down to earth, working class Midlander who isn't bothered by such notions, and having no contact with his (Black, Jamaican) father or his father's family. He experiences racist abuse daily, but has no referents for it other than his face (which he curses), and his signature cloud of afro hair, of which he is 'perversely' proud. Carlton's solid friendship with Vikram, the only other brown face at the local comprehensive, makes Carlton feel jealous. Vikram's parents are Indian, so Vikram has a culture, he speaks a special language and can have secret conversations that nobody but 'his' people understand. Vikram knows who he is and where he comes from. When Vikram gets called a 'Paki', he is able to align this racist misnomer to the fact that the Indian culture from which he comes marks him out as different from the White kids. Conversely, when Carlton is called 'Nigger', 'Wog', 'Darkie', 'Sambo', or whatever, he has no notion of what this means outside of himself. Knowing no other Black or Mixed Race people, he is quite adrift in the all-pervasive 'normality' of Whiteness. Carlton has no idea 'what' he is supposed to be and longs to wake up White. White people never need to ask themselves who they are or how to be White, they are simply 'normal'. Carlton does not understand how to 'be' a nigger.

What is significant in the drawings is that Carlton changes colour [Figure 28]. When he is with his White mother, or with Vikram, his skin is indistinguishable in shading from theirs, since he feels indistinct from them. However, Carlton's skin becomes darker and darker depending on the level of racism he encounters in each story. One of the stories, *The Bleach Bath*, [Figures 27] illustrates a young Carlton's internalisation of the dominant idea of Whiteness as 'normality'. We see his mother reading a newspaper report of the tragic death of a little girl somewhere else in England who, like Carlton, bathed in bleach in an attempt to achieve the coveted Whiteness. Both the dead girl and Carlton longed to enter into the magical world where nobody called you names or thought you were dirty or hated you on sight. To a White individual in a White culture,



Whiteness would, of course, be invisible as Dyer points out. However, to a person living in a White culture who is not White – or worse, who is somewhat White, or deviantly White – Whiteness would not only be clearly visible, but could become intensely desirable. To someone like Carlton, his own Whiteness is ‘invisible’ to him in Dyer’s sense – that is, something that is passively equated with the condition of being human. However, his Whiteness is also invisible in the optical sense to almost everyone else around him. His appearance is different (brown), his features don’t make sense (African-ish), he might be half White, but that doesn’t really count. Carlton cannot be ‘read’ by his society; this makes him miserable and his society ever more determined to ‘name’ him.

The video piece takes the form of an imaginary television programme, also set in 1978, called ‘Folk Club’. The presenter, an ‘Oirish’ cliché of what a folk enthusiast is ‘expected’ to look and sound like, introduces ‘the MacDonald Sisters from Stornoway’ (played by my sister and myself), singing a traditional Scottish Rebel Song ‘of their ancestors’. We are clearly of Mixed Race, and our Scottish ‘blood’ (and the locataion of our immediate White family in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis), is ‘invisible’ to the naked eye. Carlton’s mother remarks casually, ‘what are them two half-caste girls doing singing that song?’ The message of the song, however, could refer to almost any colonised people; the last two lines in particular could almost be referring to slavery: ‘We are bought and sold for English gold/ Such a parcel of rogues in a nation!’<sup>13</sup>

In *Black Art and the Burden of Representation*, Kobena Mercer writes in reference to Paul Gilroy’s work, that Gilroy importantly shows how, ‘the simplistic dichotomies of margin and centre, left and right, or black and white, are no longer adequate (and probably never were) as a means of making ‘good sense’ of the bad times we find ourselves in ’ (Mercer 1994d:236-237). Mercer also explains Gilroy’s term ‘ethnic absolutism’ as, ‘an essentialising position which regards cultures as a fixed and final property of different ‘racial’ subjects or ethnicities.’ (Mercer 1994d:237) It is



precisely this 'ethnic absolutism' that, ludicrously, denies the reality of the mobile nature of popular culture which, like Grosz' flame, is perpetually re-molding itself. Nobody owns a song, but more importantly, nobody has the right to decide what someone may or may not say, do or sing.

### 3:5 'The New Colored People'

'When I was younger, I'd see talk shows on TV about someone who didn't like the fact that their white daughter was dating a black man. Invariably there was always someone who would stand up in the audience and say [to the couple], 'Don't you realize what you are doing? You're going to have kids and they're going to be ruined!', and stuff like that. And I would always wish that they had someone on those shows who's biracial who would say, 'Hey, that's not always true.'

Then I went on *Judge for Yourself* [...] when the host asked me what race I called myself, she said, 'He knows what race he is – he's black.'

I said, 'Well, no, I consider myself biracial.'

And she said, 'And so you're black.'

[...] I've had people tell me that before – you know, 'Regardless of what you think you are, you're black.' But it's not going to affect me because it's my personal choice what I want to call myself. So they can hate it, they can go to sleep crying about it, but it's not going to affect my choice. I mean, I know what I am.' (Brian Harris in Gaskins [ed] 1999:60-62)

The above extract is the voice of sixteen-year-old American Brian Harris. Other voices in Pearl Fuyo Gaskins' anthology, *What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People* (1999) describe various incidents of having their identities decided on their behalf; in each case the 'identity' always benefits the person who does the deciding. In each case there is a refusal to take into account the wishes of the Mixed Race subject.

Given the pervasiveness of Phallic investment in preserving a false notion of 'racial unity', it is not surprising that there has been a strong backlash against the recent explorations of self-identity by Mixed Race people. Some critics, in the USA in particular, are hostile to claims of a unique 'Mixed Race experience'. One such critic is the philosopher Lewis Gordon, who charges those who dare to describe themselves as Mixed Race with a wish to escape the 'taint' of Blackness, and



gain the 'privileges' of Whiteness. He writes that, 'offsprings who are biracial mixtures with blacks are pretty much excluded from most racial categories except for black.' (Gordon 1997:56) Gordon neglects to consult any of these actual 'offsprings', grudgingly nodding towards the existence of Mixed Race people whilst simultaneously denying their right to name themselves. Welcome contrast is provided in Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe's brilliant 1999 book *Scattered Belongings*, in which she conducts interviews over a period of two years with various subjects of Mixed Race in Britain. Her subjects all have different mixtures from different countries and cultures, all having some Black and some White. Ifekwunigwe allows for highly nuanced, highly complex analyses of these subjects' various experiences and naming-choices, her analysis giving implicit acceptance of the validity of each choice. One of Ifekwunigwe's interviewees is Akousa, a Mixed Race Rasta woman from Liverpool who chooses to be Black whilst also acknowledging her White parent. Ifekwunigwe writes,

'I reappropriate Adrienne Rich's theorizing on the political institution of 'compulsory heterosexuality' to describe what I call compulsory Blackness. Compulsory Blackness is a political institution wherein it is presumed that identification with Blackness is the implicit or explicit exclusive personal preference of most 'mixed race' women and men with one Black continental African or Black African Caribbean parent and one White British or White continental European parent [...] I define Akousa's reconciliation of these biracialised public forces and private influences as Additive Blackness. Additive Blackness is a cumulative process of 'racial' reconciliation, wherein a 'mixed race' individual starts with her or his familiar social foundation and builds forward without having to sever ties with her or his often White English or in this case Irish roots. This particular psychosocial process of becoming Black as an individual and collective response to racialised oppression does not compromise the specific allegiances and attachments 'mixed race' individuals may have to White identities, cultures and family.' (Ifekwunigwe in Parker & Song [ed] 2001:57-58)

The concept of Additive Blackness is a welcome strategic one, as it allows the Mixed Race subject to choose a Black identity without having to feel ashamed of part of herself, without feeling like she has to deny some of her family members, and without feeling oppressed by false notions of 'authenticity'. It also allows the Mixed Race subject to choose Blackness precisely because it is her choice, and not because someone outside of herself decides that she must do so.



Paul Spickard (2001) has observed that America cannot seem to get enough of 'Biracial Biography'. He remarks on fetishistic interest in Mixed Race celebrities such as Tiger Woods, Mariah Carey or Lenny Kravitz – but he notes that the interest is predicated on the Mixed individual's containing some Whiteness. Contesting that the notion of the 'tragic mulatto' is alive and well in contemporary culture, Spickard takes Henry Louis Gates Jr. to task for a piece he wrote for the *New Yorker* in 1996 on Anatole Broyard. Broyard, who was a prominent literary critic in New York from the 1950s to the 1980s, was a very light-skinned man of Mixed Race from a Black-identified family in New Orleans. Gates Jr. writes, 'Anatole Broyard wanted to be a writer, not a black writer. So he chose to live a lie rather than be trapped by the truth.' (Gates Jr. 1996:66). Spickard responds, logically,

'[...] why should Broyard's choice be construed as passing for something he was not? His appearance was White, his ancestry was mostly White, he functioned smoothly as a White man in the world without raising serious questions, his adult family and friends were White – in what meaningful sense was he not White? Why should some essentialist, one-drop notion of race, on Gates' part or ours, compel Broyard to identify himself as black?' (Spickard in Parker & Song [eds] 2001:80)

It might be useful to re-appropriate Ifekwunigwe's strategic elusion of the Phallic, and describe Broyard's experience and choice as one of Additive Whiteness. Perhaps it would be better, though, to accept Broyard's identity as simply 'White', and Akousa's as simply 'Black', and not ask any further questions. The area is tricky, and perhaps the most helpful thing that can be said is that one must always respect the wishes of the person doing the self-naming, no matter what their optical surface (or ancestry) appears to be telling us.

*The New Colored People* is the title of Jon Michael Spencer's 1997 'diatribe against the multiracial movement' (Spickard in Miri & Song [eds] 2001:82). Spickard moves on from his discussion of Gates Jr.'s appropriation of Broyard for his own ends to describe the insidious nature of this



publication. It seems that Spencer's problems with the multiracial movement are based on a double misunderstanding; first of all he seems to assume that if any Mixed Race person had the choice, they would choose to be White. For this reason he opposes the 'Multiracial' census category that some American multiracial activists have been petitioning for – Spencer somehow reads 'multiracial' as being 'closer' to White, and patronisingly assumes that this is why Mixed Race people, (whom he also patronisingly assumes are desperate to escape Blackness), would want it. He does not acknowledge the multiracial activists such as Maria Root and others, who are rightly supportive of the needs and concerns of America's monoracial communities of colour, and who are rightly proud to acknowledge their own descent from and involvement with these communities. In fact, such activists have been lobbying for the option to tick as many boxes as need apply. This strategy would avoid the creation of another 'category', and thus would not comply with the kind of Phallic thinking that seeks to categorise, circumscribe and confine.

Secondly, Spencer's,

'[...] argument depends on unthinking adherence to a misplaced analogy between the American multiracial movement and racial politics in South Africa [...] Whenever Spencer encounters a rough spot in his argument against the multiracial category, he hits the default button and starts talking about South Africa. Yet he never demonstrates that the formal intermediate position of the Coloured population in apartheid-era South Africa is in fact like the fluid, multi-faceted situation of multiracial people in the USA.' (Spickard in Parker & Song [eds] 2001:85)

It seems to me that Spencer's fundamental dread is a Phallic one of indeterminacy, liminality, in-between-ness. I suspect that along with those who fear or revile the notion of 'Mixed Race', what Spencer really dreads is the potential for a group of people to create their own identities and name themselves as they wish, as many times as they wish. Such a liminal would continually slip out from under any kind of fixed definition that Spencer might wish to place on them, thus questioning Spencer's Phallic power to name and decide. As aforementioned, that which the ego cannot control becomes confusing and potentially frightening.



### 3:6 Conclusion

‘In the white world the man of colour encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty.’ (Fanon 1952:111)

‘Many biracial and multiracial people identify themselves differently in different situations, depending on what aspects of identity are salient. This ‘situational ethnicity’ is often misinterpreted. In the novel, *The Crown of Columbus*, by Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris (1991), one of the main characters, Vivian, a mixed-blood Native American woman, describes this process as watering whatever set of her ethnic roots needs it most. This changing of foreground and background does not usually represent confusion, but it may confuse someone who insists that race is an imperturbable fact and synonymous with ethnicity. The essence of who one is as a person remains the same.’ (Root in Root [ed] 1996:11).

In *Tales of Dark Skinned Women: Race, Gender and Global Culture* (1998) Gargi Bhattacharyya tells the modern-day fable of ‘the Skin-Woman’. The tragic figure of the Skin-Woman is renowned in her village for her beautiful skin, and comes to be understood and related to solely in terms of her lovely fleshly envelope. Bhattacharyya makes it abundantly clear in her story how skin comes first. The subject’s skin is always subjected to a process of reading, it is therefore crucial to acknowledge the centrality of skin and its colour. Up until recently, White society (and sometimes Black society) has tended to situate the indeterminate, White-ish, Black-ish body of the Mixed Race subject firmly within Blackness. This definition-from-without is psychically uncomfortable for the subject who will never fully satisfy the ‘requirements’ of either Blackness *or* Whiteness, always failing within each because she contains and is made up of part of the other, traditionally having horrendous times at the fruitless, useless task of trying to ‘fit in’. The Critical Indeterminacy of the Mixed Race subject’s body creates perpetual social abrasions.

The fixing of the Mixed Race person within Blackness is, of course, the performative privilege of the ruling decider, the outside Phallic subject writ large; the differences between Black and White



naming only slight. When Black society claims the Mixed Race subject as Black, this act is strategic, political and sometimes Phallic. When White society designates the Mixed Race subject as Black, this act is always Phallic. Whilst the British media has – bizarrely only in the last four years or so – consciously recognised Mixed Race people and named them as such, before this the not-so-subtlety of their difference remained invisible. The often brutal realities of this difference were left for the Mixed Race subject to endure by herself, completely internally. The chaotic body of the Mixed Race subject has the potential for insurrection inscribed on its very skin. Simultaneously a Brown Blackwoman and a Brown Whitewoman, the Whiteness of the Mixed subject's body must be made invisible by White society to ensure its survival as first in the binary pair – this Whiteness must be disavowed. Disavowal in psychoanalysis is a traumatic, simultaneous acknowledgement *and* refusal to acknowledge the perceived 'absence' of genitals on the female. The imagined 'castration' is clearly seen, but the seeing subject is so horrified by it that he pretends he has *not* seen this sight, or *disavows* the vision. This may develop into fetishism in later life. Disavowal is predicated on the experience of really seeing something that is horrific for the ego to behold, and therefore dedicating one's psychic life to pretending it never happened. So: Mixed Race people cannot be allowed to be White, even though they are. They are always and only ever Black. They may be Black in a problematic and unfixed way, but since the problems are never encountered by White egos they have no cause to worry about them<sup>14</sup>.

On a wider level, the British person of Mixed Race is a type of indigenous 'British Black', living out her life as an immediately identifiable undecidable; 'from here' yet apparently 'foreign', neither fully Black nor fully White, both Black and White, the person of Mixed Race is subject to the wearying, inevitable and continually shifting process of definition *from the outside*. Sometimes there will be racist taunts or attacks; at other times admiration from White people because you look unthreateningly 'exotic', sometimes admiration or jealousy from Black people who wish they had lighter skin, or who consider light skin a sexual prize. Here we have the paradox of the Skin-



Woman, whose light skin was considered a good thing because it was both light and dark. At yet other times, both Black and White alike will openly criticise the person of Mixed Race for looking 'too White', or 'too Black/rooty', or for being a failed Black person, or 'not Black enough'. You will be considered beautiful because you are 'exotic', you will be considered ugly because your features don't make sense. Sometimes another, less easily identifiable kind of racism will take place. This is the racism of shame, where the colour of someone's skin is perfectly obvious, yet people will go out of their way not to mention it, to pretend that you are 'normal', that you are like them. Lorna Sage remembers a Mixed Race child in her class at the remote English village school she attended in the late 1940s,

'[...] a girl I watched narrowly because she was dangerously clever and would have done better at maths than me except that I slaved over my homework. She was called Jean Evans, her dad had been away in the army during the war, but afterwards went back to work for the railways [...] Jean was an only child. So far so unsurprising. But Jean was black. Well, dark yellow with a bloom of sooty down and hair that was frizzy where it wasn't painfully pulled flat. Her father must have been one of the GI's briefly stationed near Ellesmere. However, no one in Whitchurch, and certainly not at school, ever noticed or mentioned this interesting fact. Jean was her parents' child and attended the high school, and that was that. There were no black people living in Whitchurch then, of course, which in a way may have helped to make her difference invisible.' (Sage 2000:202)

It does seem that the person of apparent Mixed Race is seen as a legitimate target for the kind of 'deciding' of identity which is, at its most generous, patronising. Whilst she may well be a member of the African diaspora, may have the heritage of slavery deep within her and share formative experiences of racism with Black people in White societies, the diaspora subject is displaced yet again in the subject of Mixed Race, for she also has Whiteness in her. In terms of both culture and skin she will never be Black 'enough'; however long she sits in the sun, however political she makes herself, however much ackee and saltfish and fried plantain she nyam, she is always White as well as Black.



Now, the unconditional fixing of Mixed Race people within the binary category 'Black' is sometimes down to the agency of the Mixed Race subjects themselves, and this should not be forgotten. Many Mixed Race people have made invaluable contributions through their strong and conscious Black-identification; many have found personal peace within it. However, it should also be remembered that the dominant White society's interest in keeping that binary in place has meant that White society has never allowed for the possibility of an identity that is *both Black and White*. Until very, very recently it was rare to hear anyone in Britain speaking of themselves as Mixed Race, or in any terms that upset the dualism, simply because White, Phallogocentric discourse has seen to it that the only descriptive names for such a person are insulting. Half-caste. Half-breed. Diltued Nigger. Mulatto. White Nigger. The choice was never an option, as the White Phallus carefully guarded his authority both to rule and to name. To situate the Mixed Race subject forcibly and automatically within Blackness means that subject will, like the castrated Lacanian subject, always run the risk of being seen as lacking, failed and incomplete. Since Mixed Race identity is a no less problematic or troubled way of being 'Black' than it is of being 'White'; it should be considered as both, *and* as something different and new. The Mixed Race subject must first, however, be situated in 'White'. It is neither possible nor desirable to simply bypass this nonsensical injustice, as to do so would be to comply with the Phallogocentric order. Christine Battersby (1999) among others, has pointed out that Barthes' Author should not be allowed to die in peace until the traditionally masculine, heroic figure of the Author has been reclaimed for women, should they wish to occupy such a role. Similarly the Mixed Race subject needs to be allowed to be perceived as 'White', as a liminal or *brown* White person instead of a failed or messed up or ugly or wrong one, in just as equal a way as she is only now allowed to be perceived as a Black person (though sometimes she will be considered a failed or a messed up or an ugly or a wrong or a brown one). The area of White Studies could play a crucial part in this by considering the particular issues that the Mixed Race subject poses for Whiteness, how she interrupts and makes the psychic structure of Whiteness change shape. The Critically



Indeterminate body of the Mixed Race subject is both dual and multiple – the White and the Black origins within the subject are never ‘pure’, as there is no such thing as ‘racial’ purity – and I suspect that the failure in White society to acknowledge this has entirely to do with the desire to keep the ruling White Phallus in place. I wonder whether the fact that White Studies has yet to consider the possibility of brown White people (or yellow, or any other non-White colour) could also have this reason somewhere in its unconscious?

Elizabeth Grosz supports notions of bodily indeterminacy as, importantly, she never conceptualises the body as simply an abstract transcendental. These bodies are real, more importantly they are individual and specific. Their experiences make them, and they are made afresh as a result of their experiences. Throughout Grosz’s text are echoes of Donna Haraway’s 1991 notion of ‘situated knowledges’, where Haraway insists on the perspectively specific, embodied nature of all vision, and the power that the science of optics exerts in terms of positioning subjects and deciding what they are allowed to see. Grosz’s bodies, however are active and exert agency; these are bodies that can change things:

The bodies in which I am interested are culturally, sexually, racially specific bodies [...] If bodies are objects or things, they are like no others, for they are the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency [...] It is this ability of bodies to always extend the frameworks which attempt to contain them, to seep beyond their domains of control, which fascinates me [...]’ (Grosz 1994:x-xi).

The lived body, then, is something whose very nature is to confound both the ‘One’ and the dualisms that the ‘One’ supports and nourishes. How much more agency and potential to confound must the Mixed Race body then have, perpetually seeping beyond the boundaries that would attempt to control or define it. Place it in the category of ‘Black’ and it will slide out, always lacking and incomplete, always liminally White, yet also superabundant and overflowing. Place it in the category of ‘White’ and the same thing will take place. The point is that the Mixed Race body is *never* situated in the category of ‘White’, despite actually occupying and overflowing



this category, and such a situation is long overdue. I want to state that whilst Black and White societies alike may acknowledge that there are many possible ways to be Black, or to be White, experience tends to show that it is usual for the Mixed Race subject to be categorized as Black. This is no longer enough. The condition of liminal Whiteness, White-ish-ness, or (in)visible Whiteness that, like a deep stratum, cannot be perceived by the naked eye, needs to be examined in any study of Whiteness as one amongst all the forms that lived conditions of Whiteness, or Whitenesses, take.

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<sup>1</sup> Grosz gives a fascinating reading of anorexia, which she describes as, 'arguably the most stark and striking sexualisation of biological instincts: the anorexic may risk her very life in the attainment of a body image approximating her ideal'. She notes that 'ideal' should not be confused, as it is so regularly today, with the preferred physique du jour of the superwaif. Rather anorexia should be understood in the same way as the phenomenon of the phantom limb, as a protracted act of mourning for the pre-castrated or pre-Oedipal body, and connection with the body of the mother 'that women in patriarchy are required to abandon' (Grosz 1994:40).

<sup>2</sup> Grosz cites Caillois' famous paper, *Mimesis and Legendary Psychesthaenia*, where it is mentioned that the young female pigeon needs to see an adult female before the maturation of her gonads can take place. Lacan's ideas about the unitary image of the body being dictated by the readings and imaginings of others clearly goes to extremes in the animal kingdom. Crucially however, this shows that a man is not necessarily as central to the sexual to female sexual awakening as all the variations on the 'Sleeping Beauty' story would suggest.

<sup>3</sup> Re-reading this section subsequent to writing, I couldn't help but notice that I had described Lacan's writings as 'impenetrable'. I concluded that this would make the writings themselves Phallic, as the Lacanian Phallus is pretty much the one thing that it's impossible to penetrate. That which performs the act of penetration is, presumably, safe from the experience of penetration. In his 1973 seminar Lacan complains – immediately after he has stated that 'la' must be written crossed through (*barre*) – that each of his students has produced 'gibberish regarding the phallus' (Lacan in Gallop 1985:139). This insistence on Lacan's behalf that the Phallus can be read, understood and 'correctly' written about does more than suggest, it states quite clearly there is a single, right and proper way of reading and writing the phallus. A little later on though, Gallop conjectures that, 'it is nonetheless interesting to imagine how the problematic nature of his project might link up with the tenuousness of sexual identity, in short, to wonder how the difficulty of Lacan's enterprise, its (near) impossibility, might itself be an effect of the castration complex.' (Gallop 1985:143).

<sup>4</sup> Grosz goes on to explain that, since the Lacanian Real is the realm of completeness where no lack can indwell, and in the Real the vulva has the same ontological status as the male genitals, if woman is to be constituted as necessarily incomplete the Real must be displaced and recoded (Grosz 1990:117). The detachable penis (imagined as once belonging to the mother) becomes an imaginary object, a sort of hyphen or 'copula', a signifier standing for the 'bridge' between the two sexes, which should really mean that the Phallus itself is indeterminate and has no gender. As a signifier, it cannot be possessed. As far as the alleged and much disputed 'neutrality' of the Phallus-as-signifier goes, feminists are divided, sometimes bitterly. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan is well known as a supporter of Lacan and his Phallic signifier; she argues that the Phallus is 'meaningless in its own right' (Ragland-Sullivan 1982:10), and that all Lacan is doing is making a description of an existingly patriarchal Symbolic order. This argument is similar to that espoused by Juliet Mitchell in her 1974 work, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian*



*Psychoanalysis*. Jane Gallop gives a brief, if partial, overview of the Phallic argument in *Reading Lacan*, 1985. She writes that Ellie Ragland-Sullivan 'takes Irigaray to task for misreading the meaning of the phallus in Lacan' (Gallop 1985:134), emotive language redolent of that psychoanalytic sword of victory, the Symptom. One might be forgiven for thinking that any deviation from, or refusal to accept, classical psychoanalytic fare is, in fact, a 'symptom' or 'refusal' to read or engage; 'misreading', or worse, 'failure'. Whilst Ragland-Sullivan is busily exposing the 'failure' or 'misreading' of Lacan that Irigaray does, she also manages to mis-spell the name of Fredric Jameson (she adds a 'k' to his first name), whom she invokes in support of her argument. Gallop, ever the vigilant psychoanalyst, has her eyes trained to spot such parapraxes. She appears to be happy to show her own 'failures' or 'misreadings'; she points out that she herself mis-spelled Ragland-Sullivan's first name as 'Elie'. (Élie, as mentioned in *Memoirs of the Blind*, is Jacques Derrida's middle name. I wonder if Gallop knew this?) Either way, it is not difficult to imagine the Jacques Lacan as Phallic King of the Freudian Primal Horde feeling filled with a warm glowing sense of smug glee at the thought of all these women fighting over his Phallus.

<sup>5</sup> The words 'semiotics' and 'semiology', meaning simply 'the science of signs', come from the Greek *sema*, meaning sign. Usually the terms are associated with the early to mid-Twentieth Century bodies of theory spearheaded by Barthes and Saussure (1857-1913) in Europe, ('semiology' refers, strictly speaking, to the Francophone tradition) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914) in the States (again, 'semiotics' should strictly only refer to the Anglophone American tradition, but the terms tend to be used interchangeably). Proto-semiotic theories can be found in the writings of Husserl and of the Stoics. According to Bal and Bryson (1991) semiotics has at its very core, 'the definition of the factors involved in this permanent process of signmaking and interpreting and the development of conceptual tools that help us to grasp that process as it goes on in various arenas of cultural activity' (Bal and Bryson 1991: 107-208). The Twentieth Century western tradition of semiotics is part of the Structuralist movement, which emerged after 1950 in France as a response to intellectuals' growing disillusionment with Marxism and existentialism. Structuralism can be defined as an attempt to see, 'universal mental structures as these manifest themselves in kinship and larger social structures [...] and in the unconscious psychological patterns that motivate human behaviour' (Kurzweil, 1980:1). This search for universals meant the importance of the idea of an 'author' in conferring meaning on text or image became destabilised – thus laying the groundwork for Derrida and Barthes to metaphorically 'murder' the author.

<sup>6</sup> An example of this is *Plato's Pharmacy* (in *La Dissemination*, 1972). Derrida takes Plato's Phaedrus as a starting point, a text which has been considered as flawed, or disjointed. Derrida's argument is that instead of being flawed, Plato's text actually follows the graphic of *différance*, where meaning is eternally deferred. Following such a graphic shows Plato's suspicion of writing as a kind of mimesis. Note that Derrida substitutes the word 'graphic' where one would expect him to use 'logic', a word that would place Derrida in collusion with the western Logocentric discourse that he was critiquing. 'Graphic' as a word also privileges drawing over writing, both of which Derrida believes arise from a central blind-spot. Derrida reads Plato as, 'bent on presenting writing as an occult, and therefore suspect, power. Just like painting, to which he will later compare it, and like optical illusions and the techniques of mimesis in general.' (Derrida [1972] in Kamuf 1991:126) Plato could only partially control the level of textual play in his text, since writing should be defined (if it is to be defined at all) as fundamentally in motion, indeterminate, as a play of possibilities or continual movements in and out of and between the opposites that attempt to structure meaning. *Différance*, another Derridean neologism, as a word directly relates to the problem of opposing pairs in western philosophy. Meaning an eternal deferral of signification, Derrida's new word is deceptive; whilst it sounds like the French word for 'difference', the *petit-a* which he switches for the 'e' ensures that the difference of *différance* is inaudible in spoken French. *Différance* as a word becomes invisible unless written, thus problematising the division between speech and writing. A true indeterminate, *différance* is neither noun nor verb, and also both. As such an indeterminate, and as something arising out of a critique of western philosophy, this would seem like an ideal way to approach the indeterminates that I propose monochrome and the Mixed Race subject are.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Louis Gates (1989) brackets the 'g' in Signifyin(g) Monkey for two reasons. Firstly he intends to distinguish the 'black' vernacular notion of 'Signifying' from the European academic and theoretical notion of the same name. Secondly he is placing the stamp of what he calls 'blackness' – which is in fact African or African-American-ness – by echoing the pronunciation of 'Signifyin', which would usually not include the hard 'g' at the end. He writes that his choice of spelling and presentation of the word 'Signifyin(g)' is equivalent to Derrida's spelling of the word '*différance*'.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of the Name of the Father is, according to Jonathan Scott Lee, Lacan's 'most structuralist move', since it synthesizes the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss with classical Freudian psychoanalysis (Scott Lee 1990:62). Lacan has situated the human being in relation to a system of language, identifying this language with the 'background language' (1990:62) of structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss' understanding of the human system of kinship was that the incest taboo was intended for regulating the exchange of Woman as Gift in society. The prohibition of incest is the 'supreme rule of the Gift'. This is where the reconception of the Oedipus complex comes in; what Freud wrote as the struggle between the demands of instinct and the restricting demands of civilization, Lacan writes as an entry into the unconscious participation in the 'background language', making civilised and intelligible behaviour possible. The child learns the language and laws of familial relations by passing through the Oedipus complex, and is able to adopt a position within the culture of its family by taking on a name. So whilst Lévi-



Strauss first showed society's indebtedness to the structures of kinship, Lacan united these with the Oedipus complex by situating the complex at around two-and-a-half years, the period when the capacity for language-learning is at its most receptive. According to Jonathan Scott Lee, 'For Lacan, successful negotiation of oedipal conflicts is quite literally a matter of learning to speak properly.' (1990:64).

<sup>9</sup> Within current discourses on Mixed Race, the relation between 'race', hybridity and Mixed Race has yet to be clearly explored. Sometimes 'hybridity' is used in Bhabha's sense to refer to cultural practices of combining, intermingling and syncretism. At other times, 'hybridity' is used to refer to the intermingling of separate 'races' and the people this produces. Understandably the latter definition, with all the references to animal breeding and experiments that it implies, is considered very offensive by many people of Mixed Race.

<sup>10</sup> Whilst Freud did not write specifically on the unconscious and 'race' and colour, his former disciple Jung did. As well as travelling to Central 'Black' Africa to make studies, in 1912, Jung analysed fifteen African-American patients at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. Jung was reliant on his contact with these Black patients in order to prove that a 'racial' theory of the unconscious was not valid. Instead, Jung posited the unconscious as universal to humankind, culturally non-specific and un-raced. Interestingly, Jung identified a dream of one of these 'pure-blooded Negroes' (Jung CW 18:37), that of a man being crucified on a wheel, as representing a figure of Ixion. He concluded that this was evidence not of a specific 'Christian' unconscious, but of a universal, 'Greek' one: 'In the dream of the Negro, the man on the wheel is a repetition of the Greek mythological motif of Ixion, who, on account of his offence against men and gods, was fastened by Zeus upon an incessantly turning wheel. I give you this example of a mythological motif in a dream merely in order to convey to you the idea of the collective unconscious. One single example is of course no conclusive proof. But one cannot very well assume that this Negro had studied Greek mythology, and it is improbable that he had seen any representation of Greek mythological figures. Furthermore, figures of Ixion are pretty rare.' (Jung CW 18:40) Two things are worth mentioning here: first of all, the 'Negro' may well have either seen a picture or heard talk of Ixion on the wheel. Either way, Jung could have just asked him. Secondly, a 'Greek' unconscious is, of course, just as specific a notion as a Christian unconscious.

<sup>11</sup> The main reason why Spinoza seems most appropriate is that his work offers the possibility of posing the same questions, only in very different theoretical terms, enabling anything outside of the Cartesian dyad to be allowed examination. Spinoza assumes the existence of an infinite and indivisible substance (superficially like the Sublime) of which there is only one. Although this seems (superficially again, but then we should not scorn the superficial) like the Logos, such things as are finite are 'modifications or affections of the one substance' (1994:10), the substance being so powerful and all-enveloping that an infinite number of things can express its nature.

<sup>12</sup> In Haiti a sort of reverse version of the 'One Drop Rule' applied, where a person could lay claim to a 'White' identity if they had a single White ancestor, no matter how far back. The cultural feeling-tone of this inversion of the One-Drop Rule is that of a faith in the cleansing power of White blood.

<sup>13</sup> From Hogg's 'Jacobite Reliques', Arr.Hart/Johnson/Kemp/Knight/Prior. The tune used here can be traced to 1752, the words are by Robbie Burns, based on traditional Jacobite rebel themes. The rule of the Stuart dynasty, who ascended to the English throne in 1603, came to an end in 1714. James II had been forced to flee to France in 1688, and his daughters Mary II (1688-1694) and Anne (1702-1714) succeeded him. The Jacobite rebels made two attempts to reinstate their 'Kings across the water'. The first, in 1715, was never a real threat to George I who was then occupying the English throne. The second culminated in a horrific defeat on Culloden Moor in 1746. Rebel clans always believed that they had been betrayed by their own countrymen; first in Parliament, then on the battlefield. In 1962 Ewan MacColl wrote that this song represented the 'anti-Union feeling of Scotland during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The charge of corruption which is made here against the majority of the Scottish Parliament who 'treasonably sold us for English gold', is repeated again and again in the Jacobite songs.' MacColl (1962) *The Jacobite Rebellions* (sleeve notes).

<sup>14</sup> This kind of thinking explains some of the more ludicrous decisions made by adoption authorities, where mixed race babies and children are only placed with Black families so that they can have access to 'their' culture. In many cases, the exact geographical origins of the children's Black parent are unknown – 'African tradition' is a nonsense, as there are so many diverse countries, regions and traditions within the continent, and the same goes for notions of 'Caribbean tradition' – moreover, where is the mixed race child in the Black family going to get her 'White culture', whatever that is, from?



**Chapter Four:**  
**ART & ABJECTHOOD: THE PSYCHIC SPACE OF**  
**MONOCHROME**

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#### 4:0 Introduction

‘The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history; with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past, with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world [...] The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.’ (Foucault in Mirzoeff 1998:237)<sup>1</sup>

Foucault attributes some quite specific and radical, potentially transgressive qualities to the notion of space. He sets it against the western notion of time as linear and teleological, creating a tacit understanding of ‘space’ as something not necessarily subject to the same organising principles as time. In a way that is analogous to the way I propose we look at monochromes, Foucault’s spaces seem capable of appearing at whim, they seem mobile and unconstrained; ‘space’ becomes an alternative and less rigid lens through which we can examine the world. But is there really any truth in this apparent claim for space as firstly a more fluid category than time, and secondly as a defining notion for the epoch of the Twentieth Century? At the time of writing this thesis, (2002), the notion of space seems more contested than ever before, with ‘new’ spaces such as digital space (see Cubitt 1998) or non-western conceptions of space rubbing their edges against each other, often uncomfortably. Space might be more various than ever before, or more available, but it is also more potentially confusing. In terms of defining an epoch, then, Foucault may well be right.

This chapter suggests that the psychic space of monochrome is primarily an abject and deathlike one, and that the more humorous, light-hearted aspects of monochrome function as the flipside or the *tain* of narcissistically morbid affect. Some different kinds of space will be examined, as will the possible consequences of an understanding of monochrome as a space of mourning. The kind of sorrowful affect that accompanies monochrome would, it seems, have something to do



with the fear – a fear that seems to run like a deep vein through western culture – of ultimate meaninglessness, which is also a fear of death.

We really need to ask, along with Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Where do Pictures Come From?* (Gilbert-Rolfe 1995: 193-202). Firstly, however, it would be useful to examine Gilbert-Rolfe's conceptualization of *Blankness as a Signifier* (1997:159-175), and to the response of Penny Florence (1998), who develops the gender implications inherent in a discussion of the history of blankness. In a move that refuses to collude with Phallic attempts to evade the blankness of monochrome, Gilbert-Rolfe writes from the position that blankness is something that can always be read. The appearance or condition of blankness is never simply 'nothing' or 'absence', but instead,

'Blankness is a space of projection, where anything can happen or even be made to happen. In the contemporary context blankness is eloquent rather than the absence of a message, the condition of a subject whose fashionably blank expression, formerly known as a lack of expression, is neither communicative nor incommunicative but rather brings the two as close together as they can get.' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1997:166)

The point is that the condition of blankness is historically dependent, and readings of blankness therefore changeable. Penny Florence writes, 'Blankness, then, according to Gilbert-Rolfe, looks different now from the way it looked a hundred years ago' (Florence 1998:1). In terms of having what could be called a 'history', blankness, 'first appeared as the ground for a signification that it facilitated but that antedated it [...] Blankness, then, was a *response* to the pictographic rather than a precondition for it.' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1997:159, my italics) He gives the example of the Palaeolithic cave-painters, who 'did without, or felt no need for an uninterrupted field, but one later became necessary – the ground acquired the properties of a clear sky – in order that the image could operate unimpeded by any other presence'(159), making reference to Meyer Schapiro's observation that the uninterrupted white ground associated with much pictorialism was 'quite a late development' (159)<sup>2</sup>. The kind of blankness under discussion here is paradoxical. The signification that it is a response to predates it, yet also blankness as a concept must predate



signification. Herein lies the first indeterminacy of the blank monochrome space, an indeterminacy that can take the form of a question. Which came first, the blankness or the blank space that gave rise to the blankness? This is impossible to answer other than to say that blankness exists in a condition of perpetual doubleness, and is therefore resistant to categorisation. Blankness is at once both generative and responsive, only it has been read and understood in different ways throughout its history; ways that have striven to solve, or 'decide' the problematic indeterminacy of blankness by situating it firmly on one side or the other of the 'generative/responsive' divide. So, long before it has even begun to be a blank proper, blankness is already involved in signifying the space of signification.

'[...] blankness signifies from the start the place of signification [...] similarly, the blank rectangle is already figural before it is filled with figures or otherwise composed – during which process blankness disappears altogether [...] As the surface on which rows of pictograms are arranged, it is first encountered as analogous to silence (the background to stories)' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1997:160)

The 'silence' that Gilbert-Rolfe writes of, the kind that only exists as a support to the 'real' work of the story, is the same kind of silence that Lucy Lippard conferred on monochrome in her 1967 essay *The Silent Art*. Interestingly, Lippard uses the word *monotone* to describe monochrome paintings, invoking connections with notions of invisibility as comparable to the inaudibility of the silent musical compositions of John Cage or Yves Klein.

Silence, like its visual counterpart, invisibility, appears as a transgressive act when foregrounded as the main event, rather than as background to an image or punctuation within a symphony. This is because in both cases each signifies *a space of signification*; the viewer or listener has been conditioned for centuries that silence means a story is on its way. Blankness and silence mock these expectations of signification; a picture is *missing*. Alongside this, however, Lippard also introduces an interesting variant on the notion of painting's death or end. She observes a tendency towards an *emptying out* of form from the canvas, an inversion of the notion that a



picture (or story) is on its way. In this version, a picture once inhabited the screen but is now long gone. Lippard identifies this tendency as *suicidal* rather than merely deathlike. The notion of suicide implies choice and agency, which is a very different way of conceptualising painting than to assume that certain ideas run their course and become exhausted, having a time-limit programmed in so that they can make way for the next artistic development<sup>3</sup>.

‘The art for art’s sake, or formalist strain, of non-objective painting has an apparently suicidal tendency to narrow itself down, to zero in on specific problems to the exclusion of all others. Each time this happens, and it has happened periodically since 1912, *it looks as though* the much heralded End of Art has finally arrived.’ (Lippard 1967:58, my italics)

Like the letter in Poe and Lacan, the ‘End of Art’, *seems* to have arrived, it always *looks as though* it has arrived, but art goes on. This begs the question, what is it, if anything, that has *actually* arrived? Is it even appropriate to consider this in terms of an arrival? Has something arrived, or is this part of the trickery of monochrome? Here, what Lippard describes as ‘non-objective painting’, in its various investigations and guises, all share the surface blankness that is so easily interpreted as ‘empty’. The quality of blank emptiness equates with a deathlike affect, so that,

‘ “Empty” art is more wounding to the mass ego than “sloppy” art because the latter, no matter how drastic, is part of the esthetic that attempts to reconcile art and life, and thus can always be understood in terms of life. There is nothing lifelike about monotonal paintings.’ (Lippard 1967:58)

Lippard’s implied notion of monochrome-as-absence is, again, historically and culturally specific. It aligns itself with Minimalism’s detractors in the 1960s and 1970s like Greenberg and Fried, and it is an understanding of blankness as something incomplete, something containing a lack.

Lippard’s understanding is that since there is nothing there to read, the surface cannot be read. Gilbert-Rolfe and Florence’s understandings of blankness as something that is not only historically and culturally dependent but also legible, might encourage us to interpret Lippard’s essay as exemplifying what blankness looked like in the mid-nineteen-sixties. In her understanding, monochrome wears the robes that mark it out as emptiness, as death, as finality,



lack, or absence. Barnett Newman's contemporaneous *Fourteenth Station* [ **Figure 17**] from his *Stations of the Cross* series of 1966 is an all-over white-on-white acrylic painting, 'pure' in the sense often applied to monochrome's optical surface, meaning it is unmodulated and uniformly painted. *Fourteenth Station's* position as the final Station in the series has meant that it has unavoidably been interpreted as the Ascension of Christ, its unsullied whiteness signifying the purity of holiness; its position at the end of the series signifying finality; its blankness signifying the absence of Christ on earth. The context of this painting, and Newman's fondness for titles that invited any kind of symbolic interpretation makes it easy to see how this surface can be associated with absence and finality. Out of the three dominant strains or styles of *monotone* painting that Lippard identifies, 'the evocative, romantic or mystical; the formally rejective and wholly non-associative; and the gesture of defiance, absolution or comment' (1967:58), Newman's *Fourteenth Station* is of the lyrical and 'romantic' strain. Here again is another class of blankness, that which is far from empty but has echoes of the Sublime and the Beautiful.

'Blankness may be associated with the flawless, the completely adequate and complete, as well as with the unformed. Either association posits a close relationship with inscrutability, a condition often associated with both the beautiful and the sublime [...]' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1997:162-163)

This manner of blank space gives the impression of a silence that has a gestatory quality and that is very different from the resistant refusal to signify of Rauschenberg or Cage. In the latter case the transgressiveness of the surface is a conscious authorial choice; in the former, the authorial choice was in favour of a blank, silent space that was spiritually eloquent. We can surmise from what we know of Newman's artistic intentions that a reading of his white monochrome as transgressive was incidental to his aims for the piece. Some alternative historically specific monochrome spaces are those made by Ellsworth Kelly. Kelly is a classic example of someone who used monochrome as a way of avoiding the trace of his own hand in the work. Kelly was fascinated by detail, his shaped canvases often represented a minute detail from a scene, magnified so much as to render it unrecognizable. Paradoxically, the eschewing of authorial



marks became most recognisable as Kelly's authorial mark, and the particular kind of invisibility that he sought in his monochromes turned out to be elusive<sup>4</sup>.

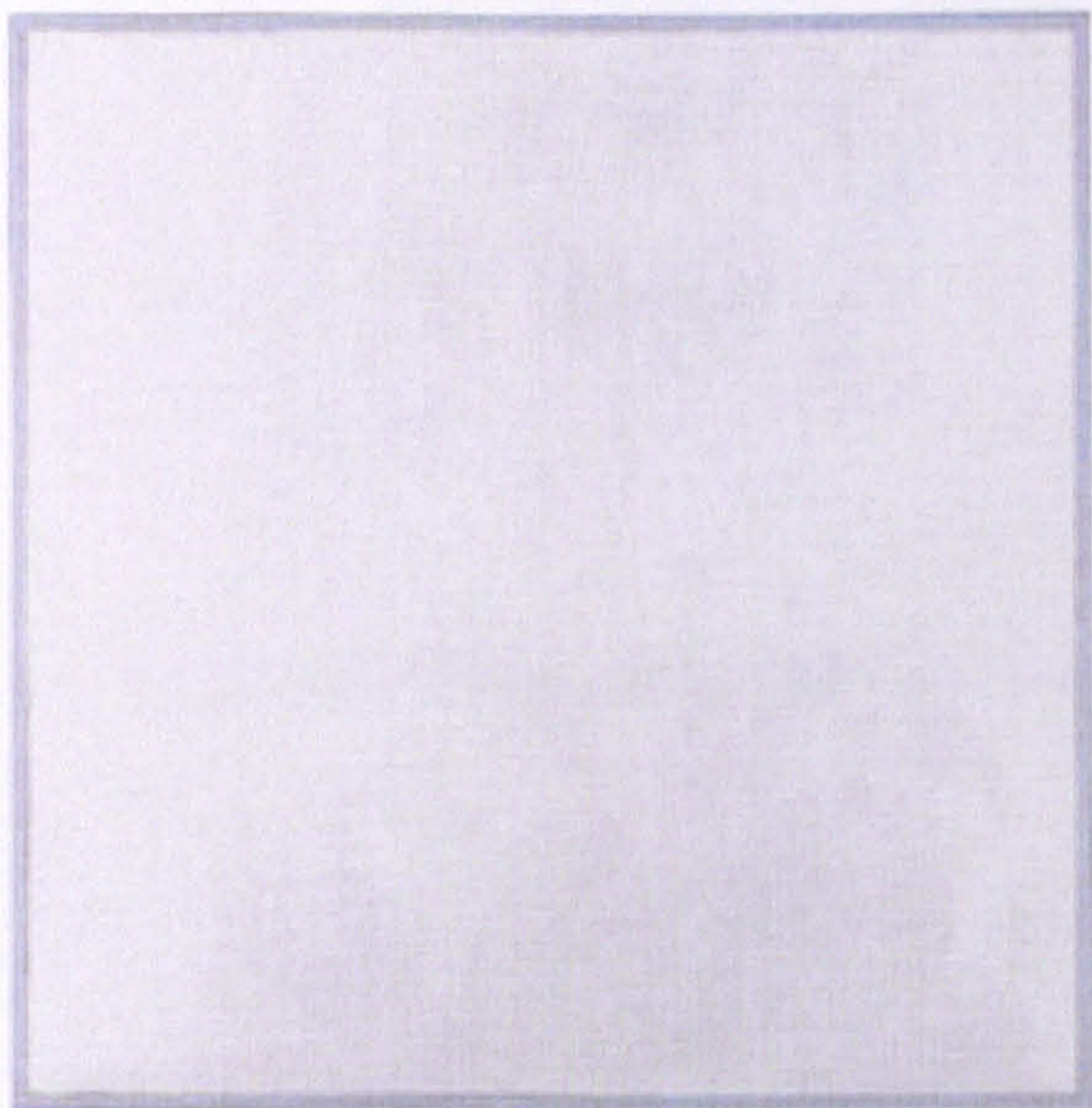
This chapter considers the hints of death as ultimate illegible and ultimate blank that inhere in monochrome, especially where monochrome is understood as the ultimate in nonrepresentation. Questions will also be asked about the ways in which a morbid or reductive affect is always present in the monochrome surface or environment. I want to consider monochromes here as spaces that inhabit and project death-drive activity, particularly narcissistic mourning as discussed in Kristeva's *The Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), and to posit this death-drive activity and the indeterminacy that is structured into it as a possible way in which monochrome continues to avoid the Logos. I want to ask how it is possible that the sorrow and mournfulness of monochrome might cohabit with the absurdist humour that monochrome also connotes. Finally, I also want to ask whether the abject feeling-tone of monochrome could be understood to be, in some way, gendered as well as raced.

#### 4:1 Silence: Castrated and Castrating

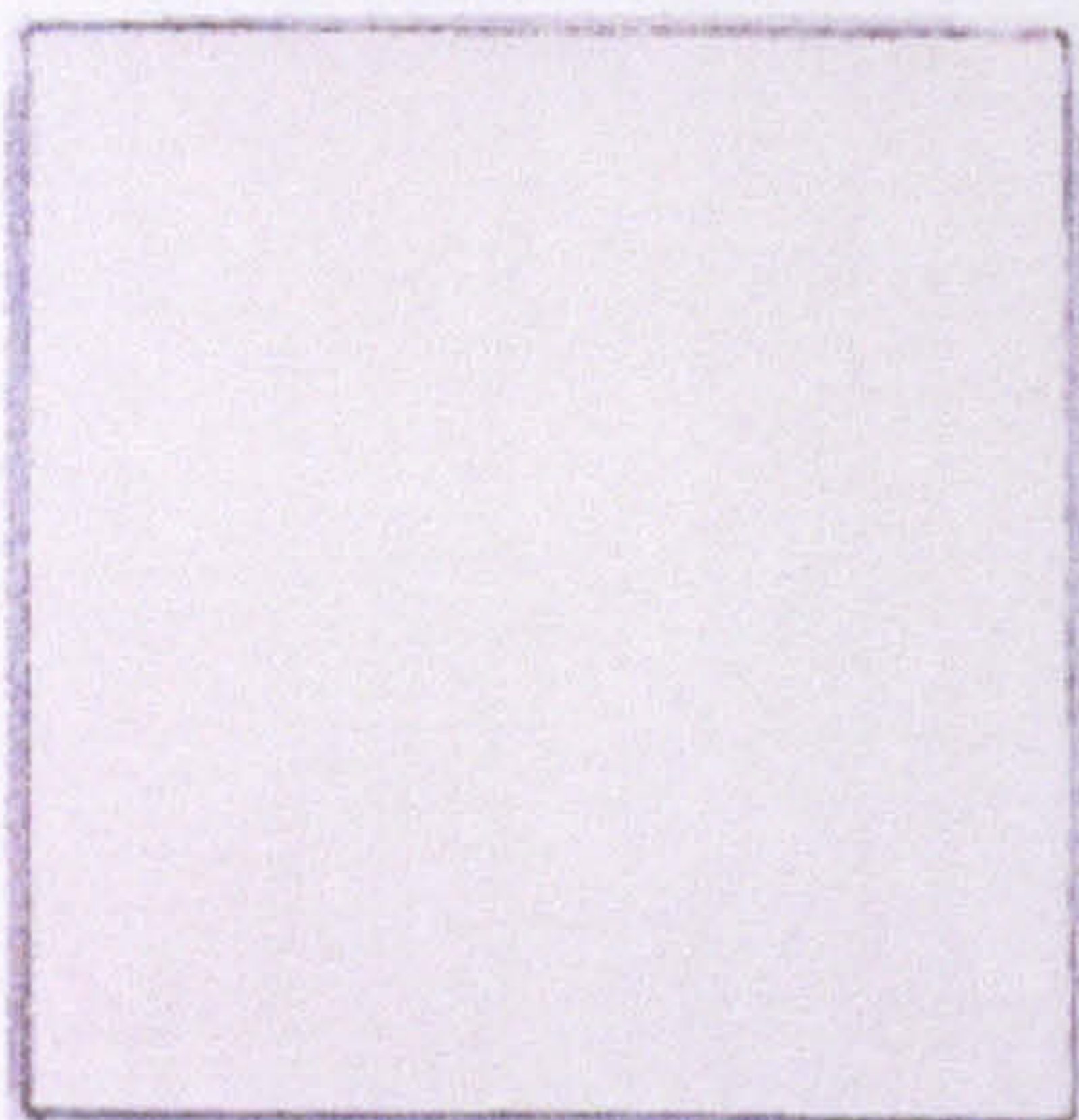
'There is nothing lifelike about monotonal paintings. They cannot be dismissed as anecdote or joke; their detachment and presence raise questions about what there is to be seen in an 'empty' surface.' (Lippard 1967:58)

Lippard's comments attempt to close down the endless signifiatory possibilities of the blank surface. Such readings of blankness confirm rather than challenge the suspicion that when one can see nothing, one can say nothing. Despite all the words of art theory and criticism that have been lavished on monochrome, its secretive blank surfaces do all too often leave the spectator in confounded silence. We *expect* the blank space of a picture plane to be there to present the action, the narrative, all of the great recognisables. Visibility is in the nuance, or in differentiation; so that between monochromes, differences in levels of visibility or legibility can be said to exist.





**Figure 29:** Ralph Humphrey, *Camden* 1965. Oil on canvas. 168 x 168cm (not to scale). Collection of the artist.



**Figure 30:** Robert Ryman, *Untitled* 1965. Enamel on linen. 29 x 29cm (not to scale). Collection of the artist.

Changes in rhythms of brushwork over a surface can at least be remarked upon or analysed, whereas a smooth, uniformly coloured surface presents untold problems. Compare, for example, Ralph Humphrey's tactile and modulated *Camden*, 1965 [Figure 29], with Robert Ryman's smoothly white *Untitled* of 1965 [Figure 30].

When a surface presented as a 'picture' is devoid of nuance or differentiation, not only does it appear 'silent' in communicative terms, but it can also silence the spectator. This is where WJT Mitchell's (1996:74,76) suggestion that images are less powerful than we might imagine can be



complicated slightly – if the power of the image is limited, perhaps the picture that contains no image – the monochrome, for example – could be said to have a different, or paradoxical power? In his earlier *Iconology*, Mitchell posits two alternative positions for a picture. It can either be, ‘the mute, castrated aesthetic object, or the phallic, loquacious idol’ (Mitchell 1987:10). If we approach monochrome in Lippard’s terms as ‘monotonal’ and silent – and when we consider that since she was writing about monochromes that appeared directly after the machismo noise and gestural frenzy of Abstract Expressionist painting, their silence would have seemed unquestionable, deafening – we must also acknowledge that despite Mitchell’s understanding of these silent paintings as ‘castrated’, they also have the power to silence. In the case of monochrome, it is worth considering that the power *of* silence might be equivalent to (or at least concomitant with) the power *to* silence, the latter being, like naming, both a function of the Lacanian Phallus and a political act. Here monochrome displays an apparently contradictory containment and mutation of yet another Phallic attribute, which would seem to ascribe to monochrome the transgressive, paradoxical power of the subaltern: denied speech and condemned to a condition of silence, but able to silence, to resist being read.

To go back to WJT Mitchell’s fascinating turning of the power-tables in *What do Pictures Really Want?* (1996), he asks questions about the loaded notion of desire by locating desire itself within the viewed, rather than the viewing subject – in this case, the picture. He writes,

‘[...] the picture is treated as an expression of the artist’s desire, or as a mechanism for eliciting the desires of the beholder [...] I’d like to shift the location of desire to the images themselves and ask what pictures want.’  
(Mitchell 1996:71)

The radical repositioning of desire that Mitchell proposes, along with his title, already go some way to suggest the potentially subaltern nature of images. The titular question echoes both Frantz Fanon’s ‘What does the black man want?’ (1967:8), which was in turn inspired by Freud’s (and Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s) questing as to ‘What does woman want?’ (Freud in Gay [ed] 1989:670).



Like the Black man, the woman, and the Mixed Race subject within racialised society, the Lacanian subject is always castrated, always disempowered, always looking for the Phallus; and therefore always full of desire. Mitchell rhetorically situates the picture in an analogous position, making interesting socio-cultural observations about the anthropomorphisation of pictures. He points out that the western premodern tendency towards animism has, like blankness as pointed out by Gilbert-Rolfe (1997) and Florence (1998), its own history. Nineteenth-century European novels (eg those of Poe, Balzac, James) abounded with images of magic pictures or animated objects, as they did in Gothic novels before, and Mitchell muses that, 'It's as if the encounter with and destruction of traditional or premodern 'fetishistic' societies produced a post-Enlightenment resurgence of subjectivised objects in Victorian domestic spaces' (1997:73)<sup>6</sup>. This suggests a fundamental desire to worship things (or at least to imbue them with some kind of life and personality) at work in the human psyche. In terms of the history within art history of anthropomorphising pictures, Mitchell is more specific:

'[...] the progressive and teleological narratives of Western art are not (as is so often suggested) focused primarily on the conquest of appearance and visual realism, but on the question of how, in Vasari's terms, 'liveliness' and 'animation' are to be infused into the object. Winckelmann (describes) the Apollo Belvedere as an object so full of divine animation that it turns the spectator into a sort of Pygmalion figure, a statue brought to life [...]' (Mitchell 1996:73)

In terms of this idolatrous power-relation, then, it seems that in order to be a success the picture is required to mimic the viewer in some fundamental way, to exhibit or project 'human' or 'lively' qualities. This 'success' relies on the picture's being seen and understood, made visible, worked out – which suggests that the power in this relation rests in the hands of the viewer. Pictures such as monochrome, that refuse to mimic human traits in any way, disrupt this established relation of power. An undifferentiated monochrome surface is able to silence, confound and exclude the Phallic viewer whose desire is to interpret, unmask, or decode. The Phallic viewer is assured success in such a position when it comes to illusionistic painting, or even some abstract



painting where there is something to recognise. Monochrome, as the ultimate unreadable, does not allow such ease of decoding. Its power is partly comic and partly castratory; it pulls the rug out from under the Phallic viewer.

What is interesting here is that Mitchell does not oppose the condition of power to disempowerment, but to *desire*, which he describes as the perpetual condition of the subaltern. In asking what pictures want, Mitchell not only anthropomorphises pictures, but also positions them as subaltern. This paves the way for one of the many paradoxes that I propose constitute the condition of monochrome as idea: monochromes are subaltern, but they also exert – even if as part of their desire – a kind of tricky ‘mastery’ over the Phallic viewer.

‘But above all they would want a kind of mastery over the beholder. Michael Fried summarises painting’s ‘primordial convention’ in precisely these terms: ‘[...] a painting had to call to someone, bring him to a halt in front of itself and hold him there as if spellbound and unable to move.’ The painting’s desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyse the beholder, turning him into an image for the gaze of the picture in what might be called ‘The Medusa Effect’. This effect is perhaps the clearest demonstration we have that the power of pictures and of women are modeled on one another and that this is a model of both pictures and women that is *abject*, mutilated, castrated. The power they want is manifested as *lack*, not as possession.’ (Mitchell 1996:76)<sup>7</sup>

I think that the notion of a ‘mastery’ over the viewer would be most markedly the case with a surface of extreme monochromy, the kind that introduces silence and bewilderment into the relation between the viewer and itself. Mitchell’s point is valuable as it pertains to the abject qualities inherent in monochrome. Mitchell’s suggestion is that the abjection has to do with castration, with lack, with the desire that is the perpetual condition of such a lack. In the case of the extreme monochrome surface, however, things are not so simple. Monochrome’s ability to silence is another *power*, so what we are presented with is a castrating gaze (that of the Phallic spectator) that, whilst it gazes, is itself castrated. Weirdly, then, the lack of the castrated subaltern exerts itself as a kind of paradoxical power,



‘The picture as subaltern makes an appeal or issues a command whose precise effect and power emerge in an intersubjective encounter compounded of signs of positive desire and traces of lack or impotence.’ (Mitchell 1996:79)

This notion of the paradoxically empowered subaltern is part of the paradoxical condition of monochrome. This paradoxical power depends on the paradox discussed above: that the possibility of reading requires the picture to mimic the viewer in some way. The paradox here is that monochrome *does* mimic the Phallic viewer, but it does this psychically, partially, invisibly and ironically. Herein lies the power of its perpetuity: monochrome’s ironic containment of *certain* Phallic attributes (the power to silence, hiding by showing), ensures the continued seduction of the Phallic viewer who, though unable to read the surface ‘successfully’, nevertheless recognises enough of himself to want to continue to *try*. The perpetual desire to decode is part of the creative power of monochrome, as is the impossibility of its satisfaction. It is interesting that Mitchell uses the figure of the Medusa, the terrifying Phallic woman with castratory powers, to describe the power of the picture. He writes with some certainty that all pictures are ‘marked’, whilst the ‘default position’ of pictures is feminine;

‘If pictures are persons, then, they are colored or marked persons, and the scandal of the purely white or purely black canvas, the blank, unmarked surface, presents quite a different face. As for the gender of pictures, it’s clear that the ‘default’ position of images is feminine, ‘constructing spectatorship’, in Norman Bryson’s words, ‘around an opposition between woman as image and man as the bearer of the look.’ (1996:75)

If pictures are coloured or marked, then, they can be marked out as ‘different’ in the same way as the Black or Mixed Race person in White society or the woman in patriarchal society automatically is; or they can be marked as Cain was marked, that all might know of his transgression from the Law. Of course, for the subject in Black skin the difference between styles of branding is hardly worth mentioning; that subject’s difference from Whiteness is already constructed as a transgression. As for the visibly ‘racially’ indeterminate subject, the ‘transgressions’ are further complicated and multiplied. Anti-miscegenation legislation has meant



that someone's existence as an identifiable person of Mixed Race can reduce that person to a mere signifier of 'crime'. The wages of sin is yellow skin<sup>8</sup>.

Taking this analogy back to the picture surface and developing Mitchell's argument, it could be said that within the realm of images – already transgressive and subaltern – the image that contains no image is, like the subject of Mixed Race, at least doubly transgressive within an existing category of transgression. Continuing on with the analogy of racist thinking, Mitchell points out that the vision-centred nature of racism is fundamentally split at its heart. 'The ocular violence of racism splits its object in two, rending and rendering it simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, an object of, in Fanon's words, 'abomination' and 'adoration.' (1996:75) In the case of the victim of racism, the complex relation between master and slave, violent racist and victim, is such that the perpetrator paradoxically needs the victim in order to confirm his own power and beliefs<sup>9</sup>. The desires of the idol and the subaltern under racism are not readily acknowledged, because of the apparently 'clear' nature of the power relation.

The power of the monochrome as image-without-an-image is like the power of the oppressed; it exists but in unusual and potentially disruptive forms. The essential paradox pertaining to monochrome here is that of the castrated object that also has the power to castrate the person who wishes to examine or explain it. The silence of monochrome is paradoxical too, but even more so when Mitchell's notions are brought to it. It ceases to be the pure silence whose visual equivalent is invisibility. Instead it becomes the enforced silence of someone or something who is perfectly capable of speaking, but whose speech is not acknowledged by the 'system' that surrounds it, reading it as silence. If monochromes appear time and again as silent or invisible passages in the narrative of the development of western visual culture, it is not necessarily because they are meaningless. Perhaps they are read as silent because they reject the rules of the system and are therefore illegible to it. And, as discussed in the previous chapter, anything that is



threatening to the system's order is marked like Cain as transgressive, and is outlawed. All this anthropomorphisation of the surface reconnects with the question of skin as analogy, something that can connect the picture surface, the Mixed Race subject's body, and the woman's body<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4:2 Other Kinds of Silence

'Our science has always desired to monitor, measure, abstract, and castrate meaning, forgetting that life is full of noise and that death alone is silent: work noise, noise of man, and noise of beast. Noise bought, sold, or prohibited. Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise.' (Attali 1985:3)

The kind of silence that Attali is referring to is rather like Lippard's visual 'silence'. It is a particular kind of blank space, and a bereft one; it is the gap that is left when something one is used to or expects, disappears. This is only one kind of silence. Just as there are different kinds of blank space, and blank spaces can mean different things, so it is with silence. The silence of the musical compositions of John Cage, 'the champion of indeterminacy' (Jones 1993:629), most notably his famous 1952 work, *4'33"*, is a silence that is ambiguous. First of all it makes clear reference to (and use of) the presence of actual musicians, instruments, musical notation, audience – the piece mimics the socially-agreed structure of the classical recital. However, it refuses to give up the understandable, audible and above all, expected treasure of performed music. Everything is silent. This is analogous to the effects of the monochrome painting situated on the gallery wall; all its references are to a long historical tradition of representational (or legible abstract) painting, but more importantly the presence in the gallery makes references to the equally long historical tradition of societal sanctioning of the image in its proper place. In the case of *4'33"*, everything was at first glance in its proper place. This explicit reference to 'order' works to foreground the refusal of the piece to conform to expected notions of order within systems. The little incidental noises of the audience – the shuffling of feet, the clearing of throats – become, as a result, the uncomfortable focus of the composition. During a regular recital, these sounds would be



rendered silent or invisible simply because they are not coded within the 'system' of musical performance.

Caroline A. Jones, in *Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego*, suggests that Cage's silences might be read, 'at the deeper level of a resistant gay/lesbian aesthetic' (Jones 1993:630). This is important in terms of the notion of an overarching system which rejects anything that does not fit by silencing it or rendering it invisible. Cage's refusal to provide the 'expected' music means firstly that the silence contains the ghosts of the music that might have been; thus there is bereavement in the silence. More importantly however, the silence is this time one of rebellion and empowered refusal to comply. There was no real place for a gay man in

'[...] what would come to appear hegemonic in American modernism of the 1950s: the cultural construction of the artist as a masculine solitary, his artwork as a pure statement of individual genius and autonomous will [...] whose staunchly heterosexual libido drove his brush.' (Jones 1993:630,639)

Cage's silence in 4'33" performs a classic comedic feature: a situation is set up that assumes specific expectations from the audience. At the final moment, the audience's expectation is not fulfilled – either the expected thing does not appear, or otherwise something completely incongruous is provided in its place. When read in terms of Cage's 'resistant gay [...] aesthetic', the silence acts as a trick, a joke at the expense of the Phallogocentric society whose Laws work to exclude Cage. Again, the Phallic viewer becomes the subject of the joke.

The blank space in the example of Cage's 4'33" exists between two signals – the complex signal of the start of the recital, and the related signal of its end – and thus, like any other signifier, this blank space finds its meaning in a relationship to the spaces around it. Cage's earlier *Lecture on Nothing* (1949), where he famously remarked, 'I have nothing to say/ and I am saying it'<sup>11</sup> sees Cage actively creating silences and inserting them conspicuously into sentences where they appear



not to belong, 'silence was actively, even maddeningly, inserted between words and phrases [...] a light snowfall of phonemes falling in empty space.' (Jones 1993:644)

Tacita Dean's *Berlin Project* also uses the silences between signals, but this time they are found silences. In 2002, Dean made a fifty-minute audio-collage of the silences of public spaces in Berlin (eg hospital lifts, alleys, or public toilets). When collected together, these silences form their own subtly nuanced and apparently meaningful 'language', a sort of blank vernacular. British sound artist Matt Rogalsky also collects silence. Using software commonly used by American commercial radio stations to edit out the spaces between spoken words, Rogalsky's method is to edit out the *words* that interrupt the silences<sup>12</sup>. Rogalsky describes his results not as true silence, but, 'the ghostly tail-ends and beginnings of words [...] some people hear an urgency suggesting something dark and sinister [...] several people have found this material erotic'<sup>13</sup>. The main difference between the work of Cage on the one hand and Rogalsky and Dean on the other, is that Cage has *created* a blank space by emptying something out of an existing space, and presented it. Dean and Rogalsky have, instead, isolated *pre-existing* blank spaces for presentation. The latter kind of space already exists in spoken communication and daily life, with its significance resting on its invisibility. Messages need blank spaces in order to secure their meaningfulness, just as blank spaces need messages to secure their blankness. Where these little invisibilities are isolated from that system and strung together, they acquire the invisibility of the transgressor of systems, whose silence is far from that of death or absence. It is instead a silence of agency, of a refusal to signify or be classified. As Foucault writes in Volume One of the *History of Sexuality*, silence is (like the monochrome), a multiple thing, necessary for communication;

'Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse [...] than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies' (Foucault 1978:27)



The silence in the musical compositions of John Cage is easy to compare with the silence of the monochrome canvases of Robert Rauschenberg, largely because of their association together at the legendary Black Mountain College, North Carolina. Their influences on one another are acknowledged, and Cage wrote a piece called *On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work*, published in his 1969 anthology of writing, *Silence*. Cage issues the instruction,

‘If you hear that Rauschenberg has painted a new painting, the wisest thing to do is to drop everything and manage one way or another to see it. That’s how to learn the way to use your eyes [...]’ (Cage in Harrison and Wood (eds) 1992:720)

Cage’s essay makes no mention of the tendency towards monochrome that, by 1949, Rauschenberg was already showing in his palette. Many interpreted the *White Paintings* as ‘empty stages open to chance events and all comers’ (Lippard 1967:61), though Rauschenberg reportedly said he only wanted to make a painting<sup>14</sup>. These all-white paintings were closely followed by all-black ones of 1951-1952, where he used newsprint as a ‘ground’. In the summer of 1952, Rauschenberg showed a series of apparently identical white canvases [Figure 31]. Cage saw these, and as a result was encouraged to proceed with his idea for *4’33’’*<sup>15</sup>. Rauschenberg understood these blank white rectangles as sentient organic skins<sup>16</sup>. He was fascinated by the endless possibilities for meaning-play that the mutable light on his white surfaces might provide. What is interesting here is that the image of a sensitive skin implies the hidden existence of a complex set of organs which, working together, enable sensate function. Unless of course Rauschenberg meant his skins to be ghost-membranes, disembodied, in which case the idea of his blankness changes from one of erasure to one of bereavement. Some of the *White Paintings* are made in panels; giving a sense of the surface as a whole made of many parts. It could be interesting to read this as a visual echo of a hidden aesthetic, that of the psychic trickery of the single-colour surface as it meticulously covers over its own multiplicity<sup>17</sup>.





**Figure 31:** Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [small White Lead Painting]* 1953. Oil on canvas. 25 x 20cm. Sonnabend Collection, New York.

Rauschenberg accorded status to his paintings by insisting that they were reactive, or interactive; they functioned in part as oblique mirrors. Jones does not explicitly make the point that the silences in Rauschenberg's blank paintings might function as part of a resistant gay aesthetic comparable to the silences in Cage. However, she does point out that,

‘As against Ginsberg's contemporaneous *Howl* (1956), with its exuberant homoeroticism and its savage outcry at the repression of Otherness in America, Rauschenberg and Johns allude only tangentially to their lives as gay artists in New York.’ (Jones 1993:652).

It would seem to me that a study of the silences in Rauschenberg, when compared with those in Cage, could yield some interesting observations about the use of blankness as the Other's refusal to signify in the terms of the master discourse. Jones, however, here analyses only the works of Rauschenberg that include identifiable subject matter (such as the 1955 combine-painting, *Bed*). She writes that, ‘[...] homosexuality is not some essentialist discourse based on bodily sex acts; it is discursively produced by ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ alike as a negativity within a dominant heterosexist culture.’ (Jones 1993:652-653). Whilst I am wary of the simplistic exercise of making comparisons between one Other and another, I would add that there is a parallel that can be



drawn between a gay aesthetic, a Black aesthetic and a feminist aesthetic when considered in the context of the Abstract Expressionist 'ego'. The ideal 'American' that Abstract Expressionism created and maintained was not only that of the lone genius, but also, more importantly because it was not explicitly spoken, an American who was invariably male, invariably heterosexual and invariably White. Photographic documentation of the Abstract Expressionists occasionally shows the face of Norman Lewis, an African-American painter who is seldom mentioned in the official histories of the movement, and who met with continual resistance from galleries who refused to show his work.



**Figure 32:** Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* 1953. Traces of ink and crayon on paper with mat and hand-lettered ink label in gold leaf frame. 63 x 53.5cm. Collection of the artist, New York.

The particular blankness of Rauschenberg's famous *Erased de Kooning Drawing* of 1953 [Figure 32] seems to invite a reading of rebellion or deliberate transgression into the surface. Apparently, Rauschenberg requested a drawing from de Kooning that he could rub out, asking specifically that de Kooning 'make it a good one'<sup>18</sup>. The piece of work that resulted is, as one would imagine, a piece of paper that is almost blank, but whose title eloquently clarifies not only that there was once something there, but that it was a thing of value. The obvious psychoanalytic reading would be that of wilful disobedience to the Law of the Father in the guise of the senior artist. The father's function is, after all, to establish the signifier, which this rebellious 'son' has quite literally



blanked. When we consider that what this 'son' also blanked was a drawing from de Kooning's *Women* series, the question of the erasure of an Other also comes into play, problematising the 'blank space as subaltern' suggested earlier, and raising the possibility of another level of (paradoxical) Phallic activity within the psychic surface. The blank space may perform its own erasure, and may symbolise Phallic choices about who gets rubbed out. What is interesting about Rauschenberg's monochrome is that he actively exhibits the fact that he has rubbed something out. Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is the zenith of the kind of exhibitionist erasure that he showed in a more restrained way in his *Black Paintings* (with their grounds of painted-out newsprint [Figure 33]), *White Paintings* and *Untitled (Gold Painting)* (with its collection of glue, fabric, wood and paper visible in the places where the gold leaf has flaked away [Figure 34]). David Batchelor observes on this covering-up that,

'[...] in each case the monochrome is such a *laboured* achievement of erasure or covering-over. In both instances there is a sense of their being something either physically beneath or temporally prior to the finished work [...] here the monochrome is a *corruption* of some other work. A palimpsest. Not a *tabula rasa*.' (Batchelor in Osborne [ed] 2000:158)

To consider first of all the idea of corruption: what I think is remarkable about the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is the way Rauschenberg holds his hands up, claiming authorship of this strange blankness that is like a reverse graffiti. There is no shame or secrecy in the act of his rubbing-out; he wishes his spectators to be aware of how the blank space came about, and what was there before. When we realise that some critics have read blankness as the subject of de Kooning's work, the blankness of the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is further problematised. It would be interesting to read Rauschenberg's erasure as the erasure of something which signified a void, ie *Woman*. The blank space represented by *Woman* is simultaneously erased and overwritten by another blank space, one whose purpose is to collude with the process of masculine competition. Rauschenberg also wishes to show his spectators that before this monochrome was made, in its place stood a visual artefact of great quality and desirability. His blank space is thus accorded the kind of genealogy, pedigree or patrilineage that, for example, the uniform blue of an Yves Klein



surface does not have. Before there was even a de Kooning drawing to erase, there was a blank sheet of paper; now the blank sheet of paper returns. Batchelor intriguingly describes the genesis of this picture as a mobile continuum of monochromes, 'the monochrome appears in a temporary and unstable state, a state which is in a constant process of being lost and recovered and lost again. Or painting here is a temporary state between monochromes.' (Batchelor in Osborne [ed] 2000:158-159)



**Figure 33:** Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [small Black Painting]* 1953. Oil on newspaper on canvas. 60 x 75cm (not to scale). Offentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel.



**Figure 34:** Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled [Gold Painting]* c.1953. Gold leaf on fabric and glue on masonite in wood and glass frame. 30.25 x 30.5cm (not to scale). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, bequest of Eve Clendenin, 1974.

Penny Florence describes a similar continual kinesis for writing, but implies that it is neither straightforward nor safe; '[w]riting is the perilous passage between blanks.' (Florence 1998:2) For



Rauschenberg, there was something there, but now a space has been cleared, and a particular kind of blankness created. This is comparable to the literary example of William Golding's 1956 novel, *Pincher Martin: The Two Deaths of Christopher Martin*, where in the last chapter the drowned body of the protagonist is found, wearing the seaboots he had struggled to remove after a shipwreck in the first chapter. Nothing can prepare this reader for final, dramatic act of erasure. Golding cancels out the entire novel, as we realise that the story was nothing but the vivid hallucination of a drowning man in the last few seconds of his life. In this case Golding erases his own work, though traces remain available to the eye. This kind of erasure creates an invisibility that is anamorphic; at the point of shift in the reader's understanding of what has taken place, an entire novel disappears and leaves in its wake a vast, blank space<sup>19</sup>.

This kind of dramatic rubbing-out, designed to be seen, has parallels with that most classic of palimpsests, Freud's *Mystic Writing Pad*. In 1925 Freud wrote a short paper about a child's toy, the *Wunderblock* or *Mystic Writing Pad*, a block of wax covered by a thin sheet of celluloid. Marks could be made on the celluloid with any instrument sharp enough to leave an impression in the wax, and renewed at will. A simple tug would release the celluloid from its contact with the wax, making it once more 'blank' and ready to receive inscriptions. The old inscriptions remained in the wax, but soon became illegible with the build-up of new inscriptions. Freud proposed this toy as a metaphor for the psychic apparatus he outlined in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. The way the *Mystic Writing Pad* worked was analogous to the manner in which the psychic economy remains unmarked by sensory impressions from the outside world. These impressions instead pass straight through to a deeper layer, where they are recorded and stored as unconscious 'memory'. Freud added that, 'The appearance and disappearance of writing,' is similar to, 'the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception.' (Freud SE xix:230). Derrida concluded in *Freud and the Scene of Writing* (1978) that Freud's reliance on writing-related metaphors to describe the psychological processes suggested that these were not in fact mere



metaphors – perception really *is* a kind of writing-machine. The ‘marks’ made on the system of perception are not visible; their visibility is acquired by contact with the wax on the *reverse side* of the plastic sheet. The same, says Derrida, is true with perception. We do not apprehend the world directly. Previous memories, traces and inscriptions create our sense of what is around us. In the sense that our own identities can be understood as constructed retrospectively, only ‘legible’ deep in the unconscious, Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* can be read as a diagram of the reverse of the celluloid; an anti-inscription that describes the psychic process of inscription itself, its role in constructing identity and experience<sup>20</sup>. The spaces between, around, and left behind by things are far from empty; they are filled with the resonances of the things themselves. The erased or covered-up blanknesses of Rauschenberg have little in common with the blank page of Mallarmé; these are calculated acts of the kind of destruction that, like graffiti, create at the same time as they damage. Whilst Briony Fer writes that, ‘[c]ancelling out is always a violent manoeuvre’ (Fer 1997:80), in the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* we have a kind of cancelling-out whose subversive qualities seem to rely on laughter or competition rather than violence. Rauschenberg, in an act of defiance, castrates the Phallic viewer and has the last laugh. His exhibitionistic erasure reveals the tain of the image, and in a gesture that recalls some of the comedic or satirical aspects of blankness, Rauschenberg literally shows the Phallic viewer his back side.

#### **4:3 Generative Blankness and Deathly Silence**

The purpose of this section is, primarily, to ask questions about monochrome space and gender, in a similar way to the way in which Chapter Three asked questions about space and ‘race’. I would like to use the Kristevan semiotic chora to help understand the gendered and paradoxically generative nature of blankness, to complicate the notion of castration within blankness, and to help provide an alternative structure to the Phallic. With the confounding and tricky

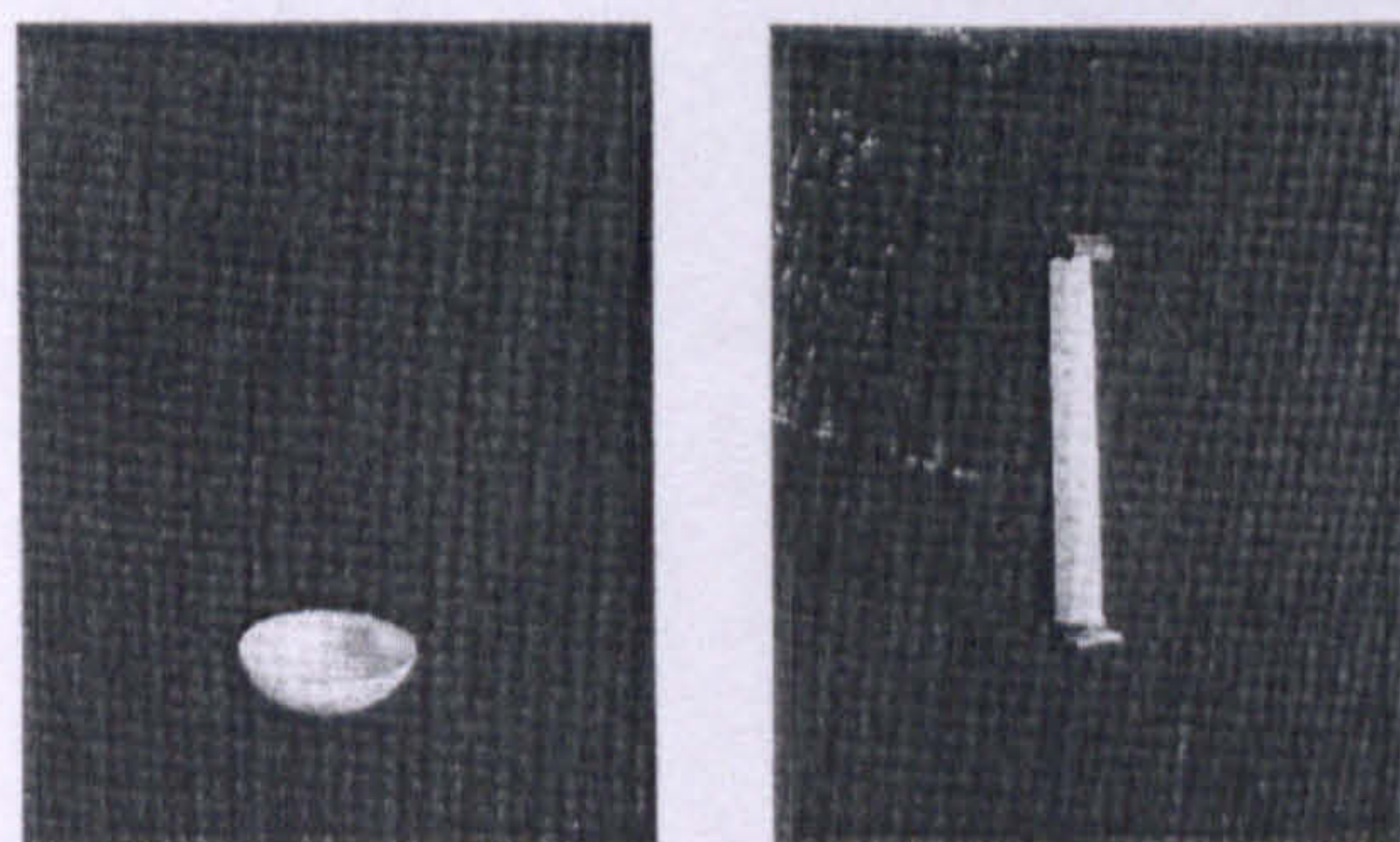


monochrome as object of desire, can the spectator ever expect to win the same kind of success as that expected by the Phallic spectator in front of a narrative or realistic image?

In *Where Do Pictures Come From?* (Gilbert-Rolfe 1995:193-202), Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe chooses two pictures by American artist Sarah Charlesworth to discuss notions of Oedipality and blank space. These are her *Snakegirl* triptych of 1985 [Figure 35] and her *Bowl, Column* diptych of 1986 [Figure 36].



**Figure 35:** Sarah Charlesworth, *Objects of Desire Part II: Snakegirl*, 1985. Framed, laminated Cibachrome print, lacquered frame, 100 x 210cm. Photo by Douglas M.Parker, L.A. Courtesy of Jay Gorney, Modern Art, New York.



**Figure 36:** Sarah Charlesworth, *Objects of Desire Part IV: Bowl, Column*, 1986. Framed, laminated Cibachrome print, lacquered frame, 100 x 210cm. Photo by Douglas M.Parker, L.A. Courtesy of Jay Gorney, Modern Art, New York.

Much of Charlesworth's work discusses notions of photography as cultural arbiter; the ways photographs affect the cultural consciousness. She has said that she prefers to;

‘[...] look at the photographs as something real and of my world, a strange and powerful thing [...] part of a language, a system of communications, an economy of signs.’ (Charlesworth in Linkler 1998:1)



This exemplifies the Barthesian influences evident in much of her work, including her writing<sup>21</sup>. These two works are part of a series called *Objects of Desire*, and are classic Charlesworth in their use of radically truncated or excised images from mass media sources. Charlesworth first appropriates images such as *Snakegirl* from media where an appropriation has already been performed; so that the 'theft' is problematised and, at least, doubled. Her strategy is a little like that of Ellsworth Kelly, only in reverse. Where Kelly's detail becomes an entire monochrome, Charlesworth relies on the monochrome as a self-sufficient 'ground' with (NB, not 'on') which to display her detail. What is special about the monochrome grounds of Charlesworth is that they seem to give the impression that they could fly out at any moment and take control of the picture plane. They continually vie for foreground-status with the images; so that the question of figure and ground, so problematic in monochrome anyway, is doubly problematised. Without the figures (which also seem complete and sufficient unto themselves) you get the impression that the 'grounds' would be replete and eloquent. These are not simply backgrounds, but empowered, (Phallic?) monochromes that flicker in a perpetual combat with the figures; monochromes cunningly disguised to look like backgrounds; and as Yve-Alain Bois has written, 'the figure/ground opposition[...] is the perceptual limitation at the base of our imprisoned vision, and of the whole enterprise of painting.' (Bois 1990:240)<sup>22</sup>

These works are obviously not 'monochromes', but they do deploy monochrome in a comparable way to Sugimoto and Hilliard (see Chapter Two). Through the application of multiple shiny laminations, Charlesworth creates a background which, excessively glossy and flawlessly unmodulated, can be read as supreme blankness. This particular blankness – the extraordinarily shiny one of a Cibachrome print which is laminated several times then placed in a lacquered frame – has something Phallic about it, though it is hard to pin down exactly what<sup>23</sup>. Perhaps it is the excessive surface sheen, reminiscent of the way the males of certain species, such as the



peacock, will preen and strut their surface beauty during mating season. Their language is radically superficial; the apparent urgent call to admire their beauty is really a far more urgent call to assure them of their virility. Perhaps this excessive glossiness is that of the Phallus in abject thrall to castration-anxiety; to such an extent that all its energies are consumed in showing off its alluring, shiny surface. Each monochrome, this time masquerading as a 'ground', gives such an air of repleteness that the images appear as 'cuts', or interruptions in the surface.

The series *Objects of Desire* series is organised into four parts. Part One concentrates on gender-coded messages, and includes such images as a disembodied shock of 'blonde bombshell' hair, again placed floating upon an articulate and replete monochrome surface. Part Two (which includes *Snakegirl*) explores notions of the natural, or nature as myth. Part Three is concerned with gods, icons, and figureheads. The dominant aesthetic here is iconic, much gold is used. Charlesworth continually keeps open the gap between the irresolution of meaning, and the desire of the Phallic viewer to achieve meaningful closure. Part Four (which includes *Bowl, Column*) explores the limits of this Phallic viewer. In a self-consciously appropriationist style, she chooses ethnographic images from the *National Geographic* in *Bowl, Column* – a kneeling girl from a Pacific culture plays a reed-recorder in the central panel, whilst cobras crouch in the side panels. This image of 'Otherness' is obviously neither Indian nor Arabic, yet calls to mind stories from India or 'The Mystic East' of snake-charmers in market bazaars. The power of the snake-catcher in India is uncontested. Such highly-skilled people travel from village to village earning a good living by ridding houses of dangerous creatures. However, the snake-charmer in the market-place is more of a showman. He will frequently use toothless, old or sick snakes in his show; and when you know this, his power is compromised. The analogy I wish to make here is that of the illusory sheen of Phallic power – like a gloss or finish, the power of the Phallus is not absolute, but relies on the presence of the subaltern (the castrated, or those who fear castration). Charlesworth's *Snakegirl* remains unspecifically exotic. This is necessary for the point Charlesworth makes about



the mediation of images in western culture, and it reads as exotic shorthand. All the cultural stereotypes that go with the notion of unspecific exoticness fall neatly into the person of the girl, and thus her 'realness', her personality, is rendered invisible. Unspecifically racialised and highly specifically sexualized, she is almost naked (apart from a loincloth and some jewellery), has power over the animals and, 'a reference to fellatio seems incontrovertible [...] in this image of a girl playing a phallus and in that simultaneously controlling animate phalli, snakes, at either side' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1995:197,198). The girl is not unproblematically 'feminine'; if anything, she exemplifies the psychoanalytic dilemma of the pregnant woman; simultaneously Phallic (because she contains the baby), and castrated (because she is Woman). Like her fellow 'unspecifically exotic' Mixed Race subject, *Snakegirl* is an indeterminate figure.

*Bowl, Column* contains similar complications of the picture plane. This time each panel is a glossy vivid blue depth with an image of a bowl floating at the bottom of one, and an Ionic column standing straight in the middle of the other. Again Charlesworth seems to be playing with the notion of western culture post-Freud's essentialist reading of such images as 'masculine' and 'feminine'; vessels for girls and towers for boys. However, this superficial code is deliberately deceptive; the Ionic capital in Vetruvian terms is a signifier of the feminine, 'so that the column is in effect an androgynised sign whose masculine function becomes a matter of emphasis imposed by Charlesworth.' (Gilbert-Rolfe) 1995:197), and the bowl, situated at the bottom of the picture plane, symbolises envelopment within another envelopment, so that the principle of envelopment becomes dominant.

So, in a system – that of the history of pictorial space in the west – that has been constructed mainly by and for men, Charlesworth's custom-made Oedipal space is already inherently transgressive because it is made by a woman. She then goes on to make this space resonate with further transgressions by stuffing it full of all kinds of apparent inconsistencies and tensions. Charlesworth reactivates the figure/ground problem by,



‘[...] causing a new jamming of pictorialism’s essentially androgynous – the space is both male and female, although as an alterity primarily invented by males it is in some degree more explicitly female than male: the space precedes the figure – codes.’ (1995:195)

This image of activism – jamming the codes of pictorialism – is an apt description for a work that transgresses the set boundaries of pictorial space, but does so by containing a transgressive thing (a monochrome ‘passing’ as a background) within the surface organisation. In this way another pair of binary opposites, figure and ground, are further complicated. The glossy and beautifully-coloured monochromes sit in equal authority to the photographic images, so that figure and ground become so impossible to disentangle from each other that both are rendered meaningless. Charlesworth deploys her monochromes to subversive ends – they are neither ‘ruined’ nor perfect monochromes, just as the photographic images, floating anchorless, have no visible ‘context’ other than the assumed one of western mass-media-consciousness. The images are neither wholly masculine nor wholly feminine, although they consciously invite the Phallic viewer to assign a gender to them. It is easy to see only the photographic images, but there again it is almost as easy (for myself, at least) to see only the potential monochrome, so that the edges of the photographic images seem to acquire profound importance as limits to signification. Charlesworth tricks the Phallic viewer by using images which that viewer immediately *thinks* he understands. Space is layered and confounded optically (layer upon layer of transparency) and psychically (layers of surface and ground, ever-mobile, layers of feminine and masculine space, also mobile and unfixable). Instead of the all-knowing I/eye, the Phallic viewer in front of Charlesworth’s *Objects of Desire* is turned into, ‘[a] viewer necessarily maintained, like the sign, in a persistent condition of sexual indecision and disquiet.’ (Gilbert-Rolfe 1995:201) The viewer that Charlesworth therefore affirms or creates a space for is the subaltern one, silenced by the Phallic order.

At the same time as these surfaces hold something fundamentally Phallic within them, they paradoxically also hold something originary. This is more than the mere fact that the images can



be seen to *come out of* the articulate blank 'ground'. It has explicitly to do with the glossiness of the object.

'Charlesworth's use of lamination leads to the notion that the field of meaning is not meaninglessness as blankness, the field which awaits the figure, but invisibility as depth, a precondition for the figure which will imply an origin for it.' (1995:210)

These works, like the monochromes they contain and rely on, seem to exist in a condition that is perpetually pre-something; in a state of becoming but one that is generative. Blankness here is profound and filled, it contains the potential to create and to fill as it is itself filled. The silences analogous to this blankness would be the 'pregnant' ones of John Cage, paradoxically deathlike in their generative potential;

'The/ acceptance/ of/ death/ is the source/ of/ all/ life./...Not one sound/ fears/ the silence/ that ex-tinguishes it./ And/ no silence/ exists/ that is not/ pregnant/ with/ sound.' (Cage 1967 [1952]:98)

Notions of generative potential connect with the Platonic Chora and Julia Kristeva's version of this, the Semiotic *chora*; a strange receptacle that is generative but has qualities of indeterminacy. It also has qualities of pre-ness; for Kristeva the Semiotic precedes the Semantic (the order of language), and thus the Kristevan *chora* is the realm of the prelinguistic, the pre-Phallic, of formlessness. The *chora* first appeared in Plato's *Timaues*, the first Greek written account of created nature. Timaues narrates this account of the heavenly ideals and their flawed, earthly copies. The *chora* is simultaneously space and non-space, a receptacle gendered feminine and made (paradoxically, for a non-space) of gold, where these flawed copies are created. It is a passing-through space, nothing gets to stay in the *chora*. In terms of the flawed nature of the *choric* creations, we see evidence of the notion of feminine as specifically lacking or damaged. Penny Florence points out that,

'The feminine was until recently the active blankness *par excellence*. Cultural commentators who take account of gender have made much of this idea that the feminine functions in various ways as blank. But that blank also looks different now.' (Florence 1998:1)



The *chora* is described in terms that specifically pertain to the feminine functions of maternity, birth and succour. But Kristeva tells us that, 'Plato emphasises that the receptacle, which is also called space [...] is not divine since it is unstable, uncertain, ever-changing and becoming; it is unnameable, improbable, bastard [...]' (Kristeva 1984:239 n.12). The 'bastard' of course is traditionally socially problematic because it is il-legitimate, outside of the Law. The space/non-space of the *chora*, moving, ever-changing, is outside of Phallic Law because, as Kristeva posits, it is pre-linguistic (which would make it pre-Phallic). She asks,

'There is a fundamental ambiguity: on the one hand, the receptacle is mobile and even contradictory, without unity, separable and divisible: pre-syllable, pre-word. Yet, on the other hand, because this separability and divisibility antecede numbers and forms, the space or receptacle is called *amorphous*.' (Kristeva 1984:239 n.13, n.14)

So: the space that is a non-space, that is named *chora* but is yet unnameable exists, like monochrome, *without unity*. The *chora* seems like a most perfect analogy to monochrome space; amorphous and kinetic, shifting and ambiguous, frequently named but ultimately unnameable. It is unsignifiable because it exists in a condition prior to language. It also provides what is, quite possibly, the perfect description of blank space as something that does not necessarily lack a figure:

'The *chora* is a modality of signifiante in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic.' (Kristeva 1984:26)

Yet whilst monochrome all the time presents a superficial front of unity and wholeness; the *chora* is not involved in any such trickery. It simply is, regardless of whether we can adequately say just what it is. The *chora* is a replete and generative mother, always outside of the organising principles of Phallic Law. Paradoxically however, the *chora* also lacks in some way since it produces flawed creations. Of the mother, Kristeva writes,

'As the addressee of every demand, the mother occupies the place of alterity. Her replete body, the receptacle and guarantor of demands, takes the place of all narcissistic, hence imaginary, effects and gratifications; she is, in other words, the phallus. The discovery of castration, however, detaches the subject



from his dependence on the mother, and the perception of this lack [*manque*] makes the phallic function a symbolic function' (Kristeva 1984:47).

Mother, then, is already Other. Mother is also already feminine, and femininity is also already

Other. In relation to a blank Other, Penny Florence has,

'[...] argued before that the eruption of that which was designated feminine, blankness here, into high culture reactivated the problem with perspective that has remained since its emergence in the Renaissance. In this restricted sense, those commentators who noted the 'effeminacy' of Impressionism were right.' (Florence 1998:4)<sup>24</sup>

The specific kind of gendered blankness that Florence describes erupts into culture in a manner analogous to the way the hysterical symptom erupts from the unconscious to the 'surface' of the (woman's) psyche. This kind of blankness is the blankness that is 'designated' feminine, the specific type of 'feminine' that is constructed in flawed and problematic opposition to the replete, and necessarily Phallic, 'masculine'. Florence refers to this as the 'old feminine', writing that, '[t]he last generation of feminist writings often worked with the notion of 'the feminine' as unspoken, as absence. The most interesting of the current explorations move towards what Gilbert-Rolfe calls the excess of contemporary blankness' (Florence 1998:2)

The feminine space of the *chora* is designated 'blank' because its pre-Phallic, pre-linguistic and indeterminate nature render it unintelligible to the Logos. The Logos will fail to understand anything that is non-mimetic (good mimesis requires submission to the Logos), and will therefore read it as absent or lacking. What Charlesworth's surfaces can be said to activate is ultimate confusion for the Logos: she deliberately includes passages of the most perfectly mimetic medium we know, photography. She then subverts this 'submission' to the Logos by her inclusion of adequate, complete and equivalent monochrome spaces. Her surfaces are almost perfect *chora* in their generative, subaltern indeterminacy. The series of gaps she creates and then jams open, means that meaning can never be a finished thing. Like Eco's *Open Work*, the *choric* space transgresses Phallic signifying Laws. In terms of the 'gendering' of space, then, the *chora* and



the monochrome space cannot properly be said to be one gender, but confoundingly contain elements of both. This double or multiple containing guarantees the deviancy of the blank space, and guarantees its subversive nature. And since we are still thinking about monochromes as 'persons',

'The question of what pictures want certainly does not eliminate the interpretation of signs. All it accomplishes is a subtle dislocation of the target of interpretation, a slight modification in the picture we have of pictures (and perhaps signs) themselves. The keys to this modification/dislocation are (1) assent to the constitutive fiction of pictures as 'animated' beings, quasi agents, mock persons; (2) *the construal of these persons, not as sovereign subjects or disembodied spirits, but as subalterns whose bodies are marked with the stigmata of difference and who function both as 'go-betweens' and scapegoats in the social field of human visibility.*' (Mitchell 1996:81, my italics).

Mitchell is not talking about monochromes here but about all painting. However, if you apply this model to all painting, it seems as though it would be even more strongly the case for monochrome, simply because monochrome doesn't fully belong in the category 'pictures', yet also it does. The blank space of monochrome is, at least, duplicitous. At the same time as it bears a resemblance to deadness, the blank space can also be read as generative, a little like the blank and silent darkness in the Book of Genesis that existed before the Creation of the world (Gen.1:1-2). This apparent opposition, death-within-regeneration, introduces characteristics of Foucault's heterotopia of deviancy into monochrome's existing dynamic of undecidability. Monochrome, like the heterotopia of deviancy, does not fit neatly or completely into any of the categories that Art History provides for it, containing elements of disruption in its multiplicity, its straddling of divides and its union of apparent oppositions. In a system that privileges meaning and relies on legibility, monochrome presents as deviant. Rosalind Krauss uses Fredric Jameson's notion of 'cultural revolution' to describe aspects of this kind of perpetually erupting, transgressive activity. She writes that Cultural Revolution,

'[...] is a way of understanding how upheavals in modes of production will demand the opening up of freshly wrought, imaginary spaces into which prospective subjects of the new cultural and social order might narratively (phantasmatically) project themselves.' (Krauss 1996:84)



So in returning to the question of the *choric* monochrome and its possible relation to deathliness; we should take into account the fact that illegibility is often read or seen as destructive, disturbing. Kristeva traces this back to Freud, situating the mother's body as central,

'The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity, and death [...] the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him.' (1984:27-28)

In terms of the notion of a generative space, or a space that will always be *pre*-something, monochrome shares another of the most important impulses of the Freudian Death Drive, or Thanatos<sup>25</sup>, in that the Death Drive forces the psychic economy into a dynamic motion *backwards*, to a state of being that is always *pre*-. The drive aims to return the organism to the inorganic state *before* life began, thus reducing all tensions to zero. The eternal conflict between Eros, the life-instinct, and the death-instincts, is yet another example of the splitness that inheres in the human subject. This time the split is dynamic and in constant motion, and,

'It is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating rhythm. One group of instincts rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey.' (Freud in Gay [ed] 1995 [1920]:615)

You could say that the monochrome surface performs this reduction to zero perfectly, but only on the surface – since the promise of life to come inheres in the deathlike (rather than dead) blankness that is understood to *precede* something. The powerfully generative maternal body is also abject, a go-between, and an essential part of the mysterious and ambiguous *choric* space. Furthermore, these spaces keep on erupting in society like symptoms, and each time they can be read as a fresh crisis.



#### 4:4 Kristeva's *Black Sun*: Monochrome as Narcissistic Mirror

The sorrowful affect which comes from the kind of regressive psychic motion discussed above can also be read as relative to a kind of cannibalistic narcissism – the blank surface perpetually ‘eats its heart out’ with grieving self-love, and shares commonalities with the kind of narcissistic depression that Kristeva discusses in *The Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Motifs to which Kristeva returns in this text are: a fundamental, archaic void (paradoxically also nutritive), and the cannibalistic motif of the introjection of what she calls the death-bearing mother<sup>26</sup>. Not only do these motifs make implicit and explicit references to the feminine and to death, but, as we shall see, they also suggest reflectivity. In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) Freud wrote that the condition of melancholia followed the pattern of mourning<sup>27</sup>. Such mourning, the result of the introjection of the simultaneously loved and hated maternal lost object, was impossible and doomed. As the Lacanian lost object, the *Objet petit-a* has no specular image, it does not seem unreasonable to associate this with the blank surface of a picture that does not depict.

Kristeva describes the depressed person (in the first person) like a blank surface, ‘Absent from other people’s meaning [...] On the frontiers of life and death’ (1984:4), thus establishing at once a sense of illegibility and indeterminacy. Writing of melancholia as the ‘Somber (sic) Lining of Amatory Passion’ (1984:5), Kristeva goes on to give a sense that this profound sadness is the *tain* or unseen but necessary side of *jouissance*, thus assuming a dual existence. More interesting is the description she goes on to give of Bellerophon,

‘[...] the first Greek melancholy hero [...] who is thus portrayed in the Iliad [VI, 200-3]: ‘Bellerophon gave offense to the gods and became a lonely wanderer on the Aleian plain, eating out his heart and shunning the paths of men.’ Self-devouring because forsaken by the gods, exiled by divine decree, this desperate man was condemned not to mania but to banishment, absence, void’ (1984:7)<sup>28</sup>



As well as having fundamentally to do with the backwards motion of the death drive (depressed longing is for something in the past), the sorrowful self-devouring, the ‘melancholy cannibalism’ (12), is fundamentally unrepresentable because it has no referent. There is no place for words or even meaning in this self-sufficient counter-*jouissance* of sorrowfully consuming one’s own heart. If monochrome pictures are persons, then they are depressed or wounded persons – persons perhaps who bear the weight of sorrow that comes with a life devoted to ‘passing’. The blank surface might also be read as a narcissistic mirror, showing blankness to itself and thus allowing it to mourn forever in a sorrowful circle of self-absorption. The mirror is a tricky one though, or smashed; for it does not show the future fantasy of wholeness or bodily integrity – a fantasy of the self ‘as’ something – like Lacan’s mirror, but rather a past fantasy that cannot be drawn or written, but creates an awareness of an empty space. The blank picture is a mirror that perpetually eats itself up with an internal psychic economy of mournful self-love<sup>29</sup>.

A very literal blank-surface-with-wound-that-is-also-a-mirror would be Rob Pruitt’s 1997 *Cocaine Buffet*. Pruitt’s reputation as an artist went downhill in the early 1990s, after a mistimed and, he claims, misinterpreted show about the commodification by White American capitalism of African-American culture and heroes, which many found racist and offensive. *Cocaine Buffet* was Pruitt’s passage back into art-stardom. First shown at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise Gallery, Chelsea, the piece consisted of a sixteen-foot long mirror placed on the floor, with a line of white powder running exactly down the middle. Organisationally, the ground bisected by a single stripe is reminiscent of Newman’s *Onement I*. *Cocaine Buffet* is also reminiscent of minimalist floor-sculpture as a whole, but more specifically of some of the shiny, manufactured works of Donald Judd (eg *Untitled*, 1970) that give the feeling of reflective incisions in space. To cut space is to achieve an apparent impossibility, and to embody a union of oppositions that is perfectly indeterminate<sup>30</sup>. *Untitled* does not, however, share quite the same properties of abjection that Pruitt’s *Cocaine Buffet* induces in the viewer<sup>31</sup>. At Pruitt’s opening, his *Buffet* quickly descended



into a hellish riot of gluttony once those present realised that the title was in fact quite literal. The reflective surface 'cut' by the stripe of cocaine (itself created by careful 'cutting' by Pruitt, using razor blades on the mirrored glass), which in turn cut into the space of the floor, now became a narcissistic mirror which showed people their own acts of devouring. In this case the devouring was of something outside the self; but if cocaine induces feelings of elated self-absorption in its users, it could be said that the mirror revealed an act of narcissistic devouring. Pruitt describes the scene with obvious mirth and relish, enjoying seeing respected art world figures grubbing for drugs on the floor, musing that, 'It was kind of satisfying to see all those people who had treated me badly down on their knees.' ([www.evansgallery.com](http://www.evansgallery.com))<sup>32</sup>. This mirror is literally showing 'the system', as personified by the critics, curators and so forth who devoured the buffet – its own reflection. However this mirror is, like Narcissus' pool, a trick mirror; for it shows the system its own face as something wounded or distorted, but the system chooses only to see its own fabulousness. Pruitt combines exposure of cuts or wounds, devouring, abjection and reflection with a dark, doomed *jouissance* in this work, whose abject edges just touch the sublime.

As David Batchelor points out, it is possible to map out a tradition of monochrome-as-mirror;

'[I]n the mid-1960s, at the age of about forty-five, the monochrome entered its mirror phase [...] the mirror has a double-value. First it is a manufactured surface: clean-sharp-polished-bright; and it is a ready-made: it can be ordered up by phone from bed. Second, the mirror is pure contingency: it does nothing but reflect its setting and the passing traffic; its content is all context; what's in it is all outside it. The mirror-monochrome pushes this particular relationship in painting to its limits: the relationship between painting and interiority' (Batchelor 2000:169).

Whilst I would disagree with the ludic diagnosis of a late mirror phase for monochrome (monochrome did not begin as something fragmented and then image itself as illusorily whole at this period, for example; the mirrors in question are not for monochrome to regard itself in, and finally if we use Mitchell's pictures-as-persons analogy, monochrome's 'subjecthood' is, like all



other pictures, already a given); Batchelor nevertheless raises the crucial point that the mirror is a perfect go-between and in-between. Its inherent indeterminacy (neither/both deep nor/shallow, neither/both empty nor/and full) makes it a common motif for liminal states or passings-through in literature – Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, for example. However, it is possible for a matt, non-reflective monochrome surface to act as a notional or psychical mirror. Some of Lucio Fontana's work can be directly compared to *Cocaine Buffet* in this way, presenting the horrible reality of a self-devouring void, and holding a double indeterminacy intact in their surfaces.

Best known for piercing or slashing the canvas, Fontana, a trained ceramicist, sculptor and master builder, refrained from using the term 'painting' to describe his canvases, preferring to use the term 'spatial concept'. His fascination with voids and nothingness is well documented, and he freely admitted, 'I am seeking to represent the void. Humanity, accepting the ideas of Infinity, has already accepted the idea of Nothingness.' (Fontana in Whitfield/Hayward Gallery 2000:148).

Fontana insisted,

['...] for me painting is a matter of ideas. The canvas served and still serves for the documentation of an idea. The things I am doing at the moment are just variations of my two fundamental ideas: the hole and the cut.' (Fontana in Whitfield/Hayward Gallery 2000:136)

It was important for Fontana that his holes were not merely read as destructive gestures; they were paths that could lead beyond the restrictive space of the canvas and into alternative, surrounding spaces. Fontana layered space. His pierced, gouged or slashed canvases might be left bare, or they might be covered in an unmodulated monochrome layer of paint of a particular colour. Earlier in his career, he sometimes layered near-transparent white paint over the canvas, or added glitter. The repeated gesture of piercing the canvas [Figure 37] created a series of actual lacunae in his surfaces, some of which resemble finely drawn stripes, others mouths, others vaginal openings.





**Figure 37:** Lucio Fontana photographed by Ugo Mulas, 1964. Private collection.



**Figure 38:** Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale* 1963. Oil on canvas. 146 x 114cm. Private collection, Venice. Water-based paint on canvas. 100 x 81 cm. Private collection, Turin.



**Figure 39:** Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale/La Fine di Dio (Spatial Concept/The End of God)* 1963. Detail, showing buchi. Oil on canvas. 178 x 123cm. Private collection, Milan.



It is impossible to ignore the explicitly sexual (rather than erotic) nature of the appearance of some of these holes, which Fontana referred to as *Buchi* (mouths) [Figure 39], and also some of the later slashes or cuts (ten years separate the appearance of his *Buchi* from that of his cuts). A series of well-known photographs by Ugo Mulas document Fontana's actual making of the holes in the canvas. Sarah Whitfield describes how,

'[...] a small puncture made with the point of an awl or a similar instrument, has now been enlarged, opened up by the artist's hands. The edges of the canvas surrounding the gouged-out orifices are gently pulled apart making the imagery as blatant a celebration of female sexuality as Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* [...] Some are painted in a colour fashionable at that period called 'shocking pink' [...] others are painted white [...] But even in white the associations with the vulva are no less flagrant.' (Whitfield/Hayward Gallery 2000:19)

Of course, Whitfield's assumption that all vulvae are pink is a lazy and inaccurate one based on the prior assumption that all flesh is White. It is also highly problematic to describe Fontana's holes as a 'celebration of female sexuality', since the violence of some of his methods is uncontested and, more importantly, visible in the canvas<sup>33</sup>. There is also violence in the 'revolutionary aesthetic' reading of the cuts (Alloway 1961, van der Marck 1974), where Fontana attacks what he considers an overstuffed aesthetic. In the photographs, which Mulas freely admits were posed (Fontana could not make the cuts unless he was alone), we see the artist posed with a knife, but we see neither the first nor the last stages of the hole-making. Prior to considering the cut, Fontana would soak the canvas in emulsion paint. Waiting until the paint had coagulated slightly but was still essentially wet, he would then make the cut, gouge or hole. Once the paint had dried, he would open the cut using his fingers, and finally, a strip of gauze is attached to the back of the canvas to secure the cut. Although a friend of Fontana's allegedly described this process as a 'caress', it reads rather more like an account of early surgery.<sup>34</sup> The violent connotations are, I think, quite clear – in the title of his 1988 review of the Fontana show at the Whitechapel Gallery, Andrew Graham-Dixon referred to the artist as 'Lucio the Ripper'<sup>35</sup>.



An image that is particularly explicitly vulval and woundlike is Fontana's 1963 *Concetto Spaziale* [Figure 38]. The literary and religious tradition of the generative potential of wounds is well established; the mediaeval Church believed the wound in Christ's side to be the symbolic womb that generated the Church. James Elkins has written of the total assimilation of Christ's body as 'Holy Wound' in mediaeval illuminated manuscripts, in which one might find, 'an entire page [...] occupied by a vulva-shaped scarlet ellipse.' (Elkins 1998:241) Violent rupture can sometimes also contain originary power. In the Old Testament, it is a break that originates the World. In Derrida, it is a break that originates Language. In Lacan, it is a break that originates the Subject. Fontana presents a mauve-pink monochrome space, which is scored so that it becomes a space within a space, doubling spatial confusion and opening up or problematising designated spaces (which was Fontana's intention). However, this slashed void appears to be devouring itself up from its very centre. At its heart is the sorrowful (though generative) void Kristeva writes about, and the conceptual and actual space of the 1963 *Concetto Spaziale* begins to look tantalisingly like an act of narcissistic self-devouring. This surface 'completes' the existing melancholy of monochrome; the death drive activity inherent in the blank surface pointing back to a presymbolic state is taken further backwards by the self-devouring of the surface.

If monochrome is an illusion done with mirrors, those mirrors are not always straightforwardly reflective. Monochrome can present 'trick' mirrors; mirrors that are notional, symbolic or psychical. The elision of hole and wound in Fontana's surface is reminiscent of Lacan's elision of hole and mirror in his consideration of the complex spectating relationship. Like the blind spot, Lacan's hole is also a mirror that reflects the spectator's absence and wears away that spectator's subjectivity. The disappearance down this hole is attended by sorrow, abjection and mourning as the picture negates its viewer. Rosalind Krauss seems to be referring to a similar process when she describes,



'[...] the idea that they are 'cutouts', lacunae, 'holes', ways of inscribing the viewing subject within the painting as coinciding with his or her own scopic object of desire, which is to say his or her own absence.' (Krauss 1996:95)

This desire, of course, is one of extremely mournful affect because at its heart are one's own absence and death. The surface that colludes with such a desire is, as Krauss writes, also indeterminate and undecideable:

'Jackson Pollock's painting is said to reach its most sublime achievement when it is no longer just a matter of the dripped line's having transcended the 'cut' – Clement Greenberg's expression for traditional drawing's isolation of figures from their backgrounds [...] Fried locates Pollock's accomplishment in the 'cutout', which is to say a figurative shape that has been literally excised from the linear skein [...] to create a hole or absence in the pictorial surface.' (Krauss 1996:94)

In *Snakegirl* and *Bowl, Column*, Sarah Charlesworth has performed a Greenbergian 'cut' in reverse – she has isolated figures from an unrelated and separate background, voiding the original background and placing her newly-voided 'cut' on to a surface already void. Fontana's achievement reads like a near perfect example of Fried's 'cutout', where a real hole or absence is created, negating received spectatorial notions of the continuity of the canvas surface. All this 'cutting' does not necessarily presuppose solidity, though, as a cut can take the place of a solid addition. It is possible to 'cut' space, like Pruitt, rather than to create a space by cutting a solid; and indeed, one of the binary pairs that monochrome continually disrupts is that of space/solid. Anish Kapoor's *Adam* of 1989 [Figure 40] is a classic example of this kind of worrying of boundaries.





**Figure 40:** Anish Kapoor, *Adam* 1988-1989. Sandstone and pigment. 119 x 102 x 236cm. Tate Gallery, London.

In front of this work, the spectator who is not allowed to touch can never be absolutely sure whether they are looking at a sculptural block with a monochrome panel, or gazing into a void<sup>36</sup>. The mirror that this work holds up to the spectator is a tricky one of abjection, it reveals the spectator's own incompleteness<sup>37</sup>. Presented with such a deathly mirror, what happens to the spectator when mimesis disappears from the surface and there is nothing to grasp? What happens to the 'I' during the narcissistic drama of the relation with the blank surface? For Michael Fried, notions of the literal and the theatrical were levelled as accusations to works that, he believed, impoverished art; 'Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre.' (Fried 1998 [1967]:164) Here, however, I understand the notion of theatre as a necessary and complex interaction between the spectator and the work. The interaction is complex because,

'My body, whether I like it or not, does not function in a single and particular type of space. It does its work in Euclidean space, but that is all it does within it. It sees in projective space, it touches, caresses and manipulates in a topological spatial type, suffers in another, hears and communicates in yet a different one [...] ' (Serres in Daval 1989:30-31)

The drama of the blank or monochrome work, then, is a multi-levelled one of seduction; you the spectator lose yourself in narcissistic contemplation of it, which then annihilates you – like death or *jouissance*. This is the (feminine) power of the siren or the medusa, except that the gaze is



coming back at you – your abjection is the result of seeing your reflection and realising your woundedness. This is not the same as the sense of smallness and physical enervation experienced in front of, say, one of Judd's Specific Objects as discussed in Chapter One, which has to do with the Sublime<sup>38</sup>. So when the surface devoid of mimetic representation accosts the viewer, that viewer is always in some way negated. If, as Elizabeth Grosz writes, 'the representation of space is thus a correlate of one's ability to locate oneself as the point of reference of space' (Grosz 1994:47), then when nothing is represented or presented *but* space, with no anchor or signpost, a viewer could easily become lost. Grosz is making reference to Roger Caillois's 1984 essay *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*<sup>39</sup>, and interestingly Rosalind Krauss elsewhere uses it to make a related point, that once the distinction between figure and ground is blurred, depersonalisation occurs, caused by assimilation into space.

'Animal mimicry is a kind of strange, shadow case of modernism's own drive to create an analytical pictorial language by suppressing the distinction between figure and ground, thus making all boundary conditions irremediably ambiguous.' (Krauss 1996:94-95)<sup>40</sup>

Psychasthenia is the term coined originally by Pierre Janet for the particular type of psychosis in which the patient loses all sense of location in space, or with relation to space. In her reading of Caillois' essay, Grosz explains that,

'Some psychotics are unable to locate themselves where they should be. They may look at themselves from outside, as another might; they may hear the voices of others in their heads. The subject is captivated and replaced by space, blurred with the positions of others.' (Grosz 1994:47)

It is hard for the psychotic because of the different kinds, layers and levels of represented space, which science acts to confuse:

'[I]t is remarkable that represented spaces are just what is multiplied by contemporary science: Finsler's spaces, Fermat's spaces, Riemann-Christoffel's hyperspace, abstract, generalized, open and closed spaces, spaces dense in themselves, thinned out and so on. The feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinctness from its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined [...]' (Caillois 1984:28)



The sense of absorption has echoes of Freud's *oceanic feeling*, but perhaps more with the Buddhist notion of Nirvana with its negation of self. The monochrome surface, presenting a representation of undifferentiated space, has some of this destructive and disorienting potential. However, how much more disorienting or dissolving to the subject would an entirely monochrome *environment* be? At least a canvas or a form is a recognisable thing with limits, it is outside of the subject, under the subject's vision and therefore its threat can be disregarded. The subject existing momentarily inside the monochrome environment has no such luxury, for that subject has their edges blurred as they become, even if only for a time, indistinguishable from their surroundings.

'The delineation of a limit concerns that which is outside as much as that which is within, particularly in any act of signification, for the dynamic of meaning – visual, linguistic – is always ex-centric or implosive, and implosion alters the in-outside as much as externally-directed motion. This integrality does indeed imply that blankness and the pictographic, meaninglessness and meaning, are inseparable. But what is interesting about this is what follows, because they are neither equal nor qualitatively alike. They are not oppositions.' (Florence 1998:2)

As well as gouging holes in his monochrome canvases, Lucio Fontana also made monochrome environments that work on the principle of envelopment. In 1949 in the Galleria del Naviglio, Milan, Fontana exhibited his first monochrome environment, *Ambiente Spaziale a Luce Nera (Spatial Environment in Black Light)* for a few days only. The spectator entered a small black room, and gradually, found that s/he could no longer judge distance or spatial relationships. Up above Fontana had hung some abstract forms that he had painted with a fluorescent paint, which gave some kind of sense of orientation (and disrupted the monochromy). A white monochrome environment was reconstructed for the 2000 Fontana retrospective at the Hayward Gallery, which I was fortunate enough to see at a time when there was nobody else about. After leaving my shoes with the attendant, (a compulsory act which was no doubt designed to preserve the surface's whiteness, but which also had connotations of sanctity), I entered what was a very long, very white labyrinth. There is no way to adequately describe the sense of utter envelopment by



‘white’ that this *Ambiente Spaziale* induced; it was as though as spectating subject, led from room to corridor to room, all white, I succumbed entirely to the sense of whiteness outside my body. The final small, white room, contained a white monochrome, slashed, that looked a little like an altar; the sensation was not quite one of being buried alive but was certainly almost one of zombification, or a living death, a death-within-life.

Envelopment is a principle which Gilbert-Rolfe describes as dominant in Charlesworth’s work, and which allows for the creation of a brand new kind of space. After proposing a Lacanian conceptualisation of pictorial space, ‘so that the history of pictorialism becomes a metonymic space somewhat like Mother, a space or cavity created, historically, primarily by boys, and created in part at least to play with’ (1995:193) he goes on to ask,

‘[...] whether Charlesworth, in privileging envelopment, may be said to have constructed a newly irresponsible pictorial practice, in which the Oedipality of the sign is permitted to run rampant by an author who feels no complicity in its production [...] An irresponsibility which is nonetheless responsive and responsible when it comes to rectifying that other irresponsibility which it conceives as dominant. A feminine irresponsibility, then, which plays with the terms to whose origin it is irresponsible in such a way as to render them newly ungovernable [...]’ (1995:202)

I think the environments of Fontana share with Charlesworth’s surfaces the formal quality of a cut that oscillates continually with a monochrome for attention as ‘figure’. Fontana’s environments share with the other surfaces discussed in this section a paradoxical, indeterminate quality of death-within-life.

Kristeva writes of the speech of the melancholy person as a ‘dead language’,

‘[t]hey have lost the meaning – the value – of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother. The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive. The latter, however, will not be translated in order that it not be betrayed; it shall remain walled up within the *crypt* of the inexpressible affect, anally harnessed, with no way out.’ (1984:53)



My proposal for monochrome as an apparent 'one' with disguised, shifting qualities of 'many' can also apply to the monochrome as apparent 'dead' thing concealing or suffocating 'life'; sorrowful receptacle of the thing-buried-alive. The living monochromes of German artist Wolfgang Laib are an almost literal illustrations of this. Laib is a former medical student who, since the late 1970s, has been exploring the role of artist as shaman and creating pieces that, formally, appear to be 'about' nature. Laib is best known for his monochromes of pollen. Living in a remote location in Germany's Black Forest, he spends each pollen season collecting the pollen of dandelion, pine, moss and hazelnut (mostly). Sometimes he will sift this through muslin directly on to the gallery floor, creating a dazzling yellow-orange monochrome area. [Figure 41]. More interesting here is his equally famous series of *Milchstein (Milkstone)* sculptures of white marble and milk [Figure 42] . Laib obtains rectangles of white marble – already shaped to 'resemble' a monochrome canvas – and places these on the floor of the gallery. He sands an



**Figure 41:** Wolfgang Laib, sifting pollen on detail of *Pollen from Pine* 1998. 230 x 260cm. Photograph courtesy of Installation Gallery Kenji Taki, Nagoya.





**Figure 42:** Wolfgang Laib, *Milchstein (Milkstone)* 1993. White marble and milk. 6 x 24 x 30cm. Collection of the artist.

almost imperceptible depression into the surface of the marble, which he then fills with milk. The end result is an apparently complete block of white marble. The block is involved in a complex act of layered concealment: first the depression or void, then the white liquid, then the teeming microscopic bacterial life within the milk. The disguises continue on and on, the result is an apparent unity that conceals a continually shifting diversity. In the case of the *Milchstein* though, it is possible to trace the ‘thing buried alive’ that Kristeva mentions; each day Laib refills the depression with fresh milk, thus engaging in a ritualistic act that has a sense of the Death Drive. At the same time as he refreshes, he also ‘kills’ the old quantity of milk, bringing a fresh quantity to its inevitable death and thus in some way acting as the ‘death-bearing-mother’. The fear of being buried alive is a strong and archaic one, and much of the ‘horror’ genre of film or literature is predicated on this fear. Edgar Allan Poe’s story *The Premature Burial* is a classic example of this, in which we are told,

‘To be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality [...] the boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague.’ (Poe in Whitley [ed] 1993:177)



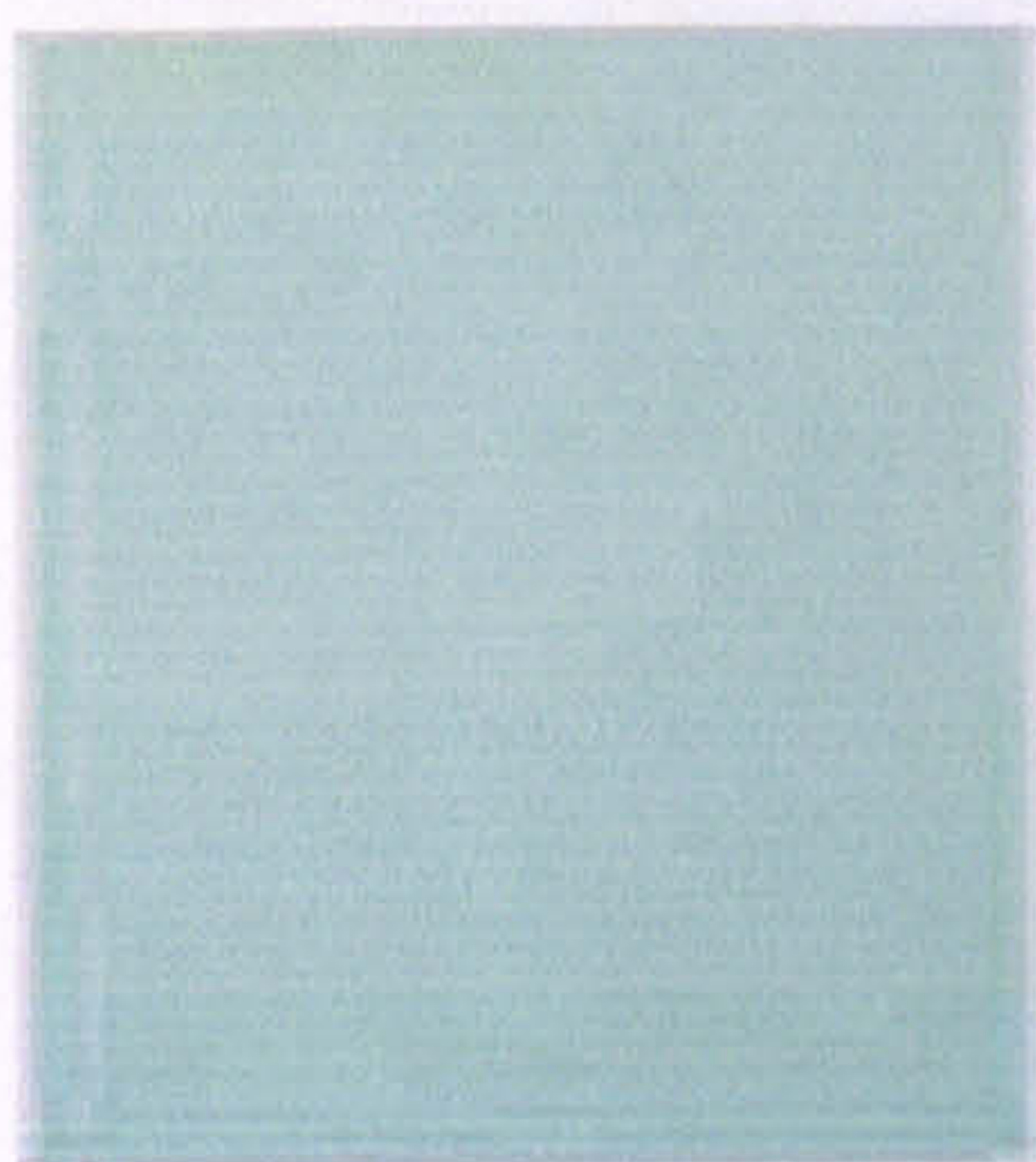
#### 4:5 Returns of the Repressed

‘But is the end ever to be gained? Duchamp (the imaginary), Rodchenko (the real), and Mondrian (the symbolic), among others, all believed in the end – they all had the final truth, all spoke apocalyptically. Yet has the end come? To say no (painting is still alive, just look at the galleries) is undoubtedly an act of denial [...] To say yes, however, that the end has come, is to give in to a historicist conception of history as both linear and total (ie, one cannot paint after Duchamp, Rodchenko, Mondrian; their work has rendered paintings unnecessary, or: one cannot paint anymore in the era of the mass media, computer games, and the simulacrum.’ (Bois 1990:241)

It is not unusual to find monochrome at any of the ‘End of Painting’s eternal returns. Briony Fer writes that, ‘[f]or Tarabukin, Rodchenko’s monochrome was the ‘last painting’ yet, despite repeated assertions that the monochrome marks the death of painting, it has remained one of abstract painting’s most resilient and most repeated strategies’. (Fer 1997:153) Yve-Alain Bois in his essay *Painting: The Task of Mourning* posits the analogy of the ‘game’ as a possible salve for the wound of inevitable and final decision-making that the ever-returning notions of the ‘end of painting’ seem to present: that is, an absolute denial or an absolute affirmation of its truth. Suggesting that a ‘game’ cannot be properly understood as having an end, Bois uses the ‘anti-historicist’ (241) notion of gaming used by Hubert Damisch that separates the actual, individual performance from the generic game itself. This leaves the question of a ‘death of painting’ open-ended and, therefore, eternally indeterminate – and whilst it is eternally indeterminate and ‘undecided’, I think it is safe to say that one will always expect it to reappear. It also provides an intriguing conceptual image of the artist as someone playing in a cemetery, or reopening old wounds ( cf Fontana). If the exploration of painting’s end or death is, as Bois goes on to propose, intrinsic to the pursuit of painting; then it should be possible to see explorations of seriality within painting as emblematic of the same Death Drive activity that causes artists to explore their work’s death. Jacques Attali reminds us that, ‘death, more generally, is present in the very structure of the repetitive economy.’ (Attali 1985:126). We are left with another visual image, an Escher-like *mise-en-abîme* of deadness with repetition at its heart. The death of painting is



always, however, simultaneously a beginning and an end, a death-bearing mother, something whose undecideability is inherently deathlike.



**Figure 43:** Marcia Hafif, *Green Lake Deep* 2000. Oil on linen. 90 x 65cm. Collection of the artist.

If all repetition is inherently deathlike, then Marcia Hafif's monochromes, which she has been repeating and refining for at least thirty years, can be understood as having something Thanatic about them [Figure 43]. Hafif is perhaps best known for her involvement with a group of monochrome painters including Ryman, who began meeting in late 1978 and had many group shows together<sup>41</sup>. Hafif uses the terms 'pure painting' or 'aniconic painting' to describe monochrome – aniconic is fairly self-explanatory and seems to fit well with my proposed definitions of monochrome; but 'pure painting' for her is painting which is, 'not at the service of other needs.' (Hafif 1981:133). Her focus is an essentialist one (in that she understands painting to have an essence, a purity or zero degree): the author of the work and the marks made by that author are all-important. She writes that,

'In a realist *or* in an abstract painting the strokes function (and have always functioned) at an underlying level, but in a one-color painting the strokes carry a major load of significance. Rather than serving another intention, they *are* that intention, a part of the subject matter of the painting as a whole.' (Hafif 1981:132)

Despite her attention to intention, the way she writes about her monochrome practice seems to invite parallels with kinds of unconscious activity, or even placement in a painterly unconscious. For Hafif painting becomes, 'a kind of thought which is closer to a state of mind' (1981:134).



Hafif's devotion to intentionality then is a curiously egalitarian one, as it also allows for the aleatory and the unconscious. What interests me here is her comparison of monochrome painting-as-thought to non-verbal thought, the sorts of thoughts that are more like powerful feelings that *have yet to be verbalised*. There is an inherent suggestion of process and, within this, the suggestion that non-verbal thought is so because it is *pre-verbal*. Hafif thus (unwittingly) gives her permission for me to situate her monochromes in the Kristevan semiotic *chora*, along with other monochrome surfaces. And though she is actually making a point about the surface of monochrome in terms of an Art Historical developmental chain, she can also be interpreted as describing some of the qualities of monochrome that make it analogous to the surface of the mirror when she writes, '[o]ne looks *at* the surface of this type of painting and not into it. This way of looking has been a goal in painting since Cubism.' (Hafif 1981:138).

The so-called End of Painting and its rebirth is also something Hafif has written about (1981, 1989), so it is safe to assume her concern is as an active participant in this ongoing process. The notion of artist as death-bearing-mother appears in her work in the continued repetition of a void. Monochrome acts simultaneously as vehicle for and access-provider to the void, 'Like the grid, monochrome presents a frontal, non-hierarchical compositional device – the grid locating form in space (if ambiguously), the one-colour field opening itself to the void.' (Hafif 1989:129) Void space that is filled with sorrowful affect is strongly reminiscent of the 'artistic' space as posited by Melanie Klein, who attached great importance to the death drive, via the melancholy Swedish painter Ruth Kjar (cited in Lacan as Ruth Weber)<sup>42</sup>. In Kjar's case, the depressive void that ate her up was successfully filled with her intuitive figurative paintings, which apparently sprang, untutored, from 'nowhere'. Darian Leader reminds us to, 'Note that this empty space wasn't there before the paintings: it is not something original, primary, but is produced by the change to the arrangement of objects. If it is a void, it is a manufactured void.' (Leader 2002:65) What is important here is that objects, like signs, can only produce meaning if their arrangement



corresponds to prior, socially-agreed arrangements. If re-arrangement disrupts the Phallogocentric signifying chain, it produces something which can only be read as a 'void'. In her manic filling of this void, Kjar could be said to be performing a Phallic act – she refused the sorrowful blank space all signifying possibilities, even before it even had a chance to signify as 'void'.

If we also remember that imagery of powerful women – including her own mother – predominated in Kjar's work, in terms of the artist-daughter's actual melancholy suffering (the tears at breakfast, inexplicable in language, the overwhelming sense of emptiness inside), the depicted mother can truly be said to have been 'death-bearing'. However, the Kleinian interpretation of melancholia would be the internalization of the imago of the bad object. Such internalization relies on the notion of splitting that Klein introduced in 1946, (a notion that relies on pairs of opposites; good breast/bad breast, for example); and, as Kristeva points out, it also includes a notion of backward motion.

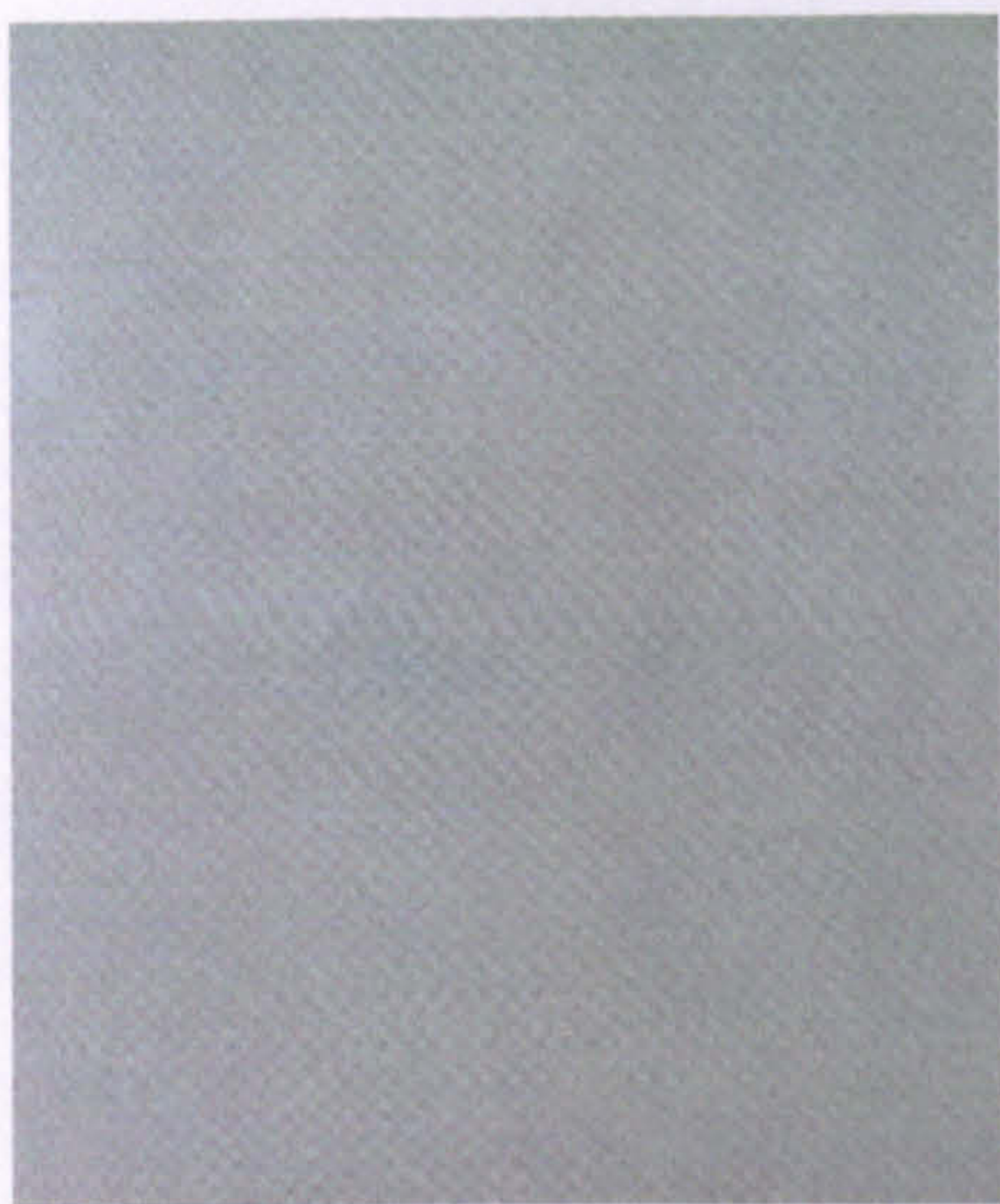
'On the one hand it moves backward from the depressive position toward a more archaic, paranoid, schizoid position. On the other, it distinguishes a binary splitting (the distinction between "good" and "bad" object insuring the unity of the self) and a parcellary splitting – the latter affecting not only the object but, in return, the very self, which literally "falls into pieces".' (Kristeva 1989:18)

Kristeva's interpretation of Kleinian splitting then itself harbours an inherent split; that between the originary infantile binary splitting and the latter 'parcellary' kind. The notion of unity, though, is still very much an illusion that the ego must maintain for its own comfort and safety. Klein's account of Kjar's activity reads very much like quite straightforward art therapy, and we see that in Kjar's case, what she painted very much stood for her own self.

The notion of a perpetual creation of voids, or the illustration or presentation of them, rather than an attempt to fill, disguise or 'correct' them with figuration, is very interesting. In both Hafif



and Kjar the void is inescapable; whether represented or disguised, it remains the pictorial subject. I would be hesitant to read the perpetual creation of voids as in some way indicative of melancholia in the artist. What I do propose is a reading of monochrome as a symbolic space of mourning within the context of western visual culture, harbouring hints of death because it is indeterminate and eternally repeated. The repeated revelation of voids is not necessarily so different to the filling of voids with obsessive figuration, since in both cases, void pictorial space is foregrounded in perpetuity.



**Figure 44:** Gerhard Richter, *Grau* 1976. Oil on canvas. 200 x 170cm. Collection of the artist.

The grey monochromes of Gerhard Richter, such as *Grau* of 1976 [Figure 44] have been described in explicitly abject ways by the artist, ways that make repetition clear as the source of the deadness and sorrow. He explains in 1975 that his greys came out of a blank cloud of unknowing,

‘At first (about eight years ago) when I painted a few canvases grey I did so because I did not know what I should paint or what there might be to paint, and it was clear to me when I did this that such a wretched starting point could only lead to nonsensical results. But in time I noticed differences in quality between the grey surfaces and also that these did not reveal anything of the destructive motivation [...] misery became a constructive statement, became relative perfection and beauty, in other words became painting.’ (Richter in Tate Gallery Ex.Cat. 1991:112)



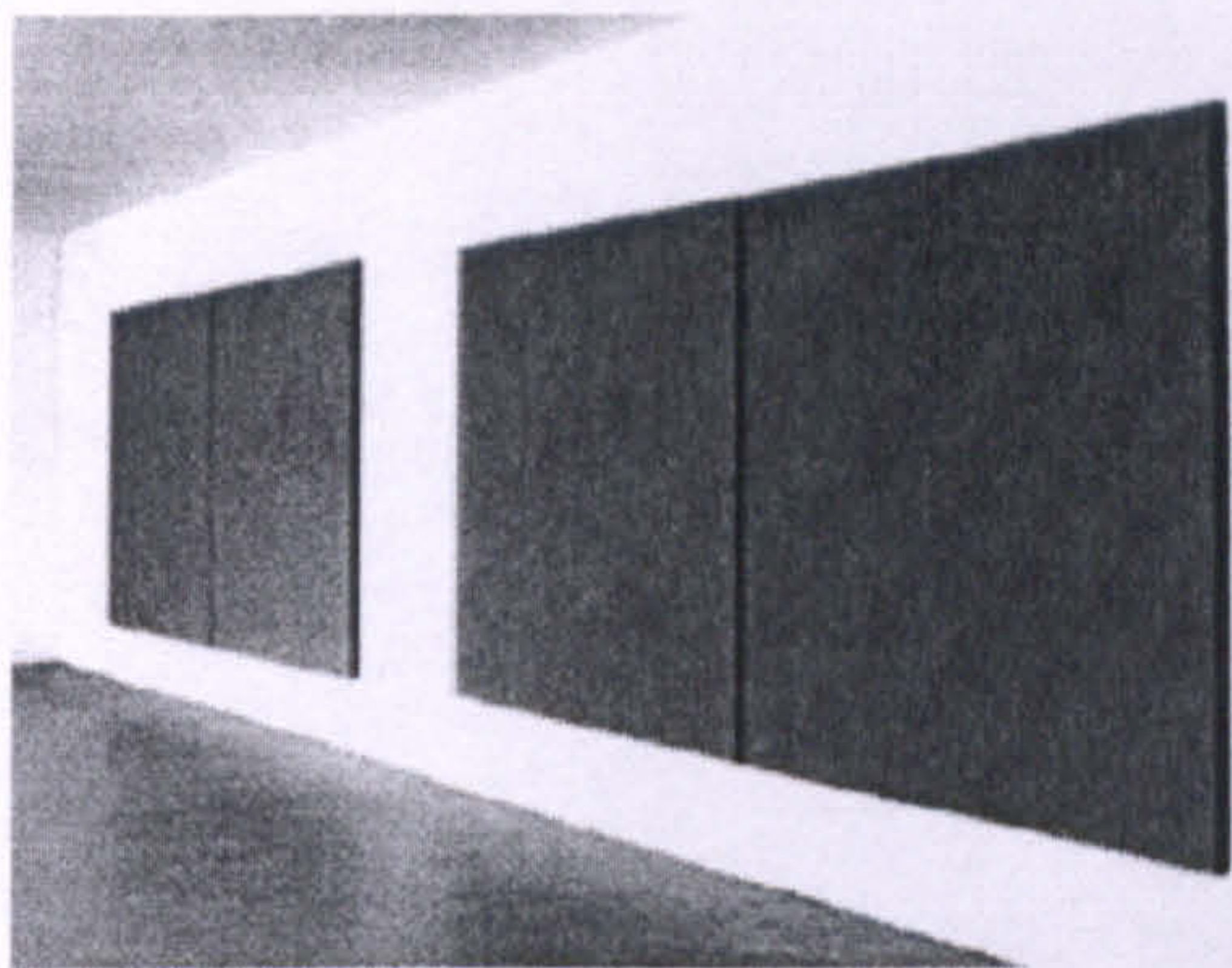
Richter's abject starting point is similar to Newman's famous, 'search for something to paint.' (Newman in Hess 1971:39) Except in Richter's case, the search is a profoundly sorrowful one, one which does not really expect to find an answer. Some of Richter's later monochromes did not start off as monochromes but as photographic depictions. The logic of the *Wunderblock* is active in such work, as superficial memory is erased (with the unspoken promise that it will be erased over and over), only to leave the impression of a memory so deep that it cannot be read. This kind of blankness is of a similar genre to Hiroshi Sugimoto's blanked out cinema screens (see Chapter Two); although in Richter's case the image and the fact of its former existence are not necessarily obvious from looking at the surface. In both the case of Richter's earlier grey monochromes and his later dissolved photographs, 'parcelled' into illegibility, he is involved in a deathlike activity embedded in another deathlike activity – repetition within repetition. At the very centre of this Russian doll of mourning lies the littlest doll of them all: blank space.

In conversation with Benjamin Buchloh, Richter has made reference to the presence of the unknown in his process. Elsewhere in his own notes, Richter writes about the necessity of destruction in his process:

'Any consideration that I make about the 'construction' of a picture is false and if the execution is successful then it is only because I partially destroy it or because it works anyway, because it is not disturbing and looks as though it is not planned.' (Richter in Harrison & Wood (eds) 1992:1047)

This really suggests that any Thanatic activity in his work is not entirely unconscious, but partly felt and understood by the artist. In particular, the idea of continually having to repeat something is quite conscious and quite readily associated with what Richter calls 'our normal misery' (1992:1043). Making eternal repetitions of grey monochromes becomes almost as mundane and





**Figure 45:** Alan Charlton, *Paintings with a Central Vertical Division* 1975. Oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of Conrad Fischer Gallery, Dusseldorf.

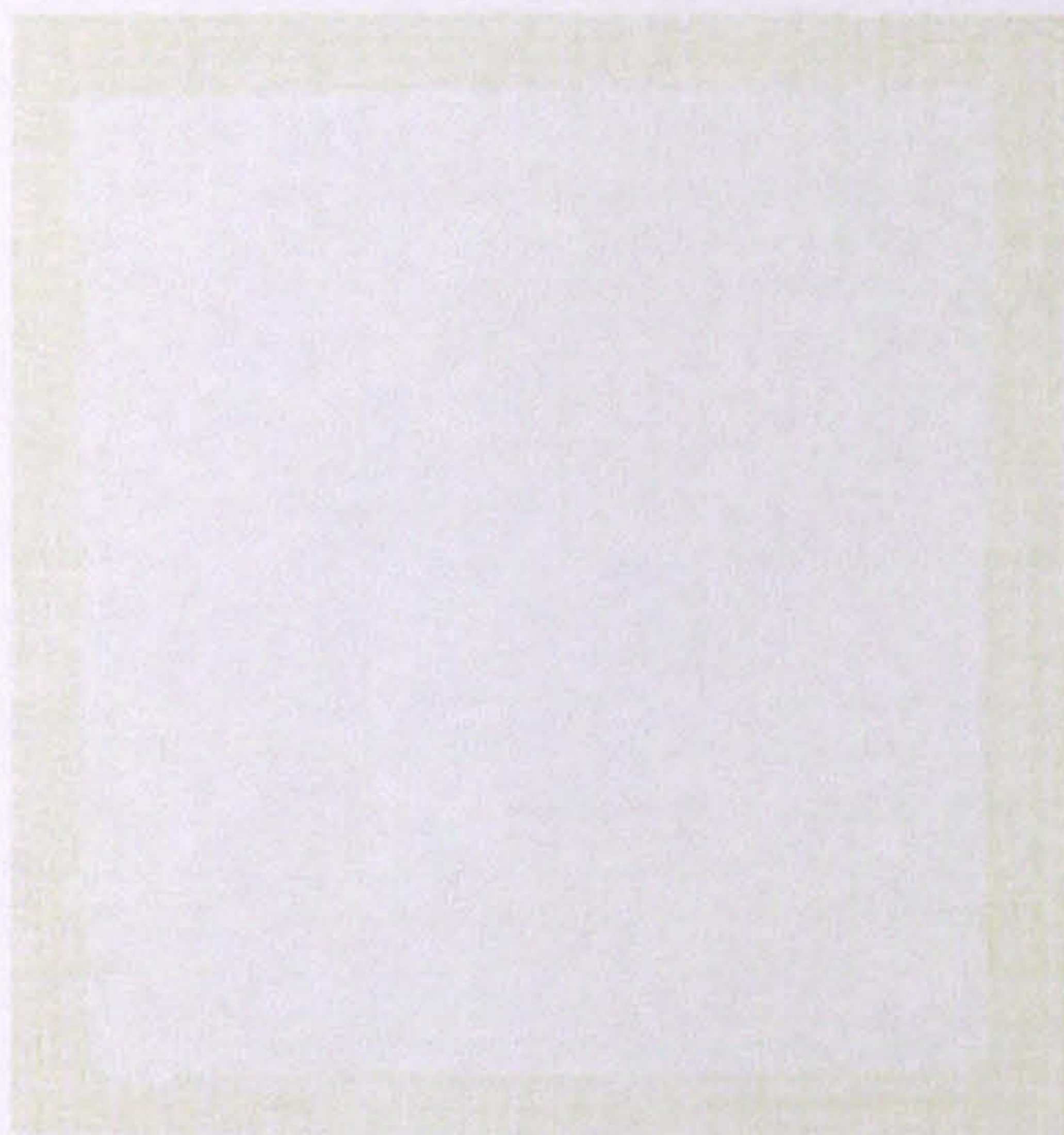
destructive to the spirit as, say, working the same night-security shift for twenty years. There is misery and sorrow in repetition. Alan Charlton is another artist who repeats the grey monochrome; but Charlton is more explicit about the associations with work and jobs [Figure 45]. He has worked for over thirty years in a set pattern: 9am to 5pm, five days a week, committed to an aesthetic of deliberate muteness. Andrew Wilson informs us that, like Cage, 'Charlton had once used Samuel Beckett's aphorism, 'I have nothing to say and I say so', in the context of his own work.' (Wilson 1997:35). Charlton is always at work on at least one grey surface, a pattern which reads like a forced continuation of beginnings, and a paradoxical foregrounding of ends. The grey monochromes of Alan Charlton do not bear the greatest 'family resemblance' to the ideal monochrome described at the beginning of this study, because they contain channels or slots that follow the edge of the canvas; nevertheless they are useful to consider as part of what Lawrence Alloway called 'abstract classicism' and what David Batchelor has described as an attempt to make monochrome – which elsewhere he has described as 'absurd' and funny because it can seem so 'dumb' – more serious-looking<sup>43</sup>. In his 1966 essay for the *Systemic Painting* show, Alloway wrote that the term Abstract Classicism was, 'to refer to the new development that combined economy of form and neatness of surface with fullness of colour, without continually raising memories of earlier geometric art.' (Alloway in Battcock [ed] 1969:45). The 'classicism' of black and white monochromes – and grey ones too, for that matter – can be



read as another disguise on the part of monochrome, this time an attempt for the tricky multiple to 'pass' as serious-looking.

The Wild Card is 'passing' again; this time disguising its joking trickery. The question to ask though, when considering a joke, is whether or not it is actually funny. Is monochrome seriously comic, or comically serious? As we know from Freud's work on jokes and the comic function, the joke-work and the dream-work have similar economic responsibilities in the organism, and in both cases the internal censorship seeks to avoid unpleasure. In the case of the masquerading monochrome though, its associations with the void, mourning and death-drive activity mean that its joking is profoundly abject. As an undecideable, the leaf of monochrome's *jouissance* can be turned over to reveal mourning, and vice versa, the two sides constituting one undecideable.

Sometimes pop music can surprise with the wisdom of its lyrics; in the case of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' *Tears of a Clown*, the reference to the inevitable conjoining of abjection and *jouissance* takes the form of a very poignant visual image where you can almost see the stage make-up running in a single sorrowful stripe; '[n]ow there's some sad things known to man, but there ain't too much sadder than the tears of a clown.' (Robinson/Wonder/Cosby: 1967 [copyright Motown Records])



**Figure 46:** Robert Ryman, *General* 1970. Enamel on enamelac on canvas. 124.5 x 124.5cm. Private collection.



The 'white' paintings of Robert Ryman [Figure 46] are also endlessly repeated, though they are not necessarily repetitions of the same thing:

'*Le blanc revient* [...] as the poet wrote in *Quant au Livre* in 1896, the blank-white returns, but not always in the same way. This is a blankness that is like and unlike 'le néant', the nothingness that haunts so much late nineteenth century literature.' (Florence 1998:2)

Ryman's 'white' paintings are masquerades or tricks in some ways, as the layer of white conceals many colours. The difference between a Ryman 'white' and, say, Malevich's *Black Square*, is that Ryman is quite open about the fact that he also uses colour. Ryman's 'white' paintings have been repeated seemingly endlessly, though with different variations which make the workings-out of various problematics more apparent. Dan Cameron makes reference to Ryman's paintings in the context of that great necessary of all vision: light,

'Ryman's ideal white paintings serve as the ideal conductor of light, stripping the spectrum down to a pure, blinding essence which is at the same time utterly transparent [...] Considered on the level of sheer ingenuity, one cannot help but be amazed at the number of ways Ryman has discovered to present the white painting to us, literally (re)inventing his definition of this same plastic/conceptual problem so many times that, rather than tire of the problem ourselves, we become further drawn into the complex vocabulary of changing supports, brushstrokes, paint densities, shades of white, and other presentational devices.' (Cameron 1991:91-92)

At the level of the surface, the 'invisible' in Ryman's painting is the colour, in an analogous way to the 'invisible' Whiteness in the Mixed Race subject; and probably both could function in comparably transgressive or destabilising ways. Ryman's white surfaces also change and mutate in a comparable way to the tricky White Phallus, mutating at will in order to fool those it wishes to subjugate.

Giving the example of Ryman's 1984 white monochrome *Resource* (which, with its structure of layered voids, fits nicely into the repetitive economy of a *mise-en-abîme* of deathlikeness), Gilbert-Rolfe writes that,

'[...] one is involved in the surface as a zone of nonproduction. Nothing happens there and everything happens there. It has nothing to do with



negligence, but, like negligence, it makes meaning by not doing rather than doing; it is not responsible to the cult of production. It is, instead, a deferral.' (1995:60)

Ryman's involvement in the eternal deferral of meaning is clear, his 'white' paintings and other white monochromes do what they do by refusing to act. The endless deferral of signifiers that precludes arrival at a fixed interpretation is continually being worked out in each new monochrome that Ryman produces. Their individual differences are thus, because of this generic and highly subversive family activity of deferral of meaning, sometimes overlooked, as is their (paradoxical) subaltern status. When something has subaltern status within a greater overarching system, its individualities and subtle nuances can often be overlooked, in rather the same way as the Mixed Race subject in White society is often automatically categorised as 'Black'. Penny Florence gives a parallel with another subaltern status, the feminine:

'Recall' can notoriously make things look different in a homogenising way – in other words, it can overlay difference with similarity, the recently unfamiliar masquerading as difference. The history of the feminine suggests another, parallel trajectory of recall, symptomatic of the disjunctions of the contemporary, and of its history since the accelerated movement of peoples at the dawn of colonialism in the Renaissance.' (Florence 1998:4)

There are of course schools of thought (such as racist thinking) that do not value these differences. David Batchelor writes that, 'Buchloh has argued that it is at best meaningless and at worst 'bordering on the grotesque' to make conventional discriminations of value and meaning between the monochrome works of Klein or Rauschenberg or others.' (Batchelor 2000:155)

Perhaps, as a result of all the painterly repetitions, Yve-Alain Bois would include Ryman as an example of the artist as 'manic' mourner. In his essay *Painting: The Task of Mourning*, Bois writes that, 'mourning has been the activity of painting throughout this century' (Bois 1990:243), and interestingly describes what he calls 'appropriation art' – and we could conceivably include



Charlesworth's examples discussed above in this – as 'the 'orgy of cannibalism' proper to manic mourning' (1990:243). Bois seems to wish to rid painting of the odour of death,

'Painting might not be dead. Its vitality will only be tested once we are cured of our mania and our melancholy, and we believe again in our ability to act in history: accepting our project of working through the end again, rather than evading it through increasingly elaborate mechanisms of defense (this is what mania and melancholy are about) and settling our historical task: the difficult task of mourning.' (1990:243)

I wonder about exactly who Bois means when he says 'our historical task', and would question whether different individuals or groups can be understood to mourn in the same way. I would also prefer to take the approach of Kristeva in *The Black Sun* who, rather than opting for a 'cure' like Bois, prefers to attend carefully to the language of mourning, and ask what it has to say.

#### 4:6 Conclusion: Mourning the Lost Object of Art History?

'All productions of the human mind are already marked with their death's head: fading, failing, falling short, falling apart, lapsing and expiring are their native domain. A wish can be fulfilled; desire cannot: it is insatiable, and its objects are perpetually in flight.' (Bowie 1991:10)

The concept of repetition is seen by some as reductive, by others as straightforward pathology, and by others still as renewal. David Batchelor gives a witty summary of some of these interpretations;

'In the red corner, Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which makes the argument for repetition as decadence. For Burger, the repetition in the post-war period of earlier avant-gardist devices (of which the monochrome would be one example), merely 'insitutionalises the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions' [...] And in the blue corner, *October* magazine's Buchloh-Krauss-Foster, who, between them, over a period of more than ten years, have set out to counter this 'evolutionary' version of avant-garde events [...] Here, repetition can be understood in terms of a recoding of an earlier, repressed, trauma; and, critically, it is *only* through the process of its repetition that the trauma may be fully analysed and understood.' (Batchelor 2000:154)



Monochrome's disruptive function within western art history can be likened to that of a tricky and deathlike mirror. In the relation between artist, surface, spectator, and writings or interpretations of the work, monochrome acts as a reflective surface. Meanings are deferred, or bounced backwards and forwards off one another, never being allowed to rest long enough to stick in any one place. This is the 'trick' of monochrome, a trick that it could not play if it were not indeterminate. This is one of the reasons why monochrome has never been successfully 'assimilated' as any one particular thing, and perpetually returns. This is less like a sentence, less like being 'doomed' to perpetual return, and more like creative play. Here is transgression with an eternal freedom from punitive action – since the system refuses to acknowledge that its boundaries are being transgressed, it cannot punish the 'crime'. Monochrome can be anything, and anything that can be anything is inherently a challenge.

'Pictures want equal rights [...] They want neither to be levelled into a 'history of images' nor elevated into a 'history of art' but to be seen as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities.' (Mitchell 1996:82)

In this sense, monochrome's 'wishes' echo those of the 'racially' indeterminate subject, whose ideal would be to be approached as a 'complex individual occupying multiple subject positions and identities', rather than someone who needs to continually explain their 'fractions', or else must submit to being explained. Monochrome may also have some of the qualities of the Return of the Repressed, but it is not simply and only this. It also may have qualities of the lost object that is forever mourned and lacked, and in some cases might be understood as a representation of that mourning and lack. But it is not simply and only this, either. Monochrome certainly seems to have something about it that concerns the fear of death or of, as Mallarmé put it, 'la neutralité identique du gouffre' (the undifferentiated nature of the abyss). (Florence 1998:2)

According to Jacques Attali, 'The absence of meaning [...] is nonsense; but it is also the possibility of any and all meanings.' (Attali 1985:122) Nonsense by definition works with a very



peculiar kind of empty space – the space between things that cannot be filled with anything that makes sense in the world we perceive. Nonsense, like monochrome, creates a space between things that is impossible to contemplate and thus baffles us. Like monochrome, nonsense is impossible to fix, and, like monochrome, nonsense persists in different guises. Parveen Adams writes that any pursuit of this object cannot ever possibly end in satisfaction due to the nature of the object, ‘The object of desire is not a possible object of satisfaction, of pleasure [...] Desire for it is founded upon its loss; it cannot fulfil desire.’ (Adams 1996:51) It is a matter of shifting focus: the pursuit itself will have to become its own reward. Monochrome as tricky, deathlike mirror performs an act of uncovering that is kin to that of deconstruction, which ‘demonstrates that any assertion of truth and any appeal to nature or first principles is a sham.’ (Heartney 2001:18)

Notions of space, like most other categories, often conform to systemic patterns; admitting those that seem to fit the patterns, rejecting those that do not. Within the greater organisational system of a type of ‘space’, it is usual to find problematic, chaotic spaces; spaces whose quirkiness the system will normally try to force into invisibility. In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault describes heterotopias as the sites that have,

‘[...] the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralise or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect’. (Foucault in Mirzoeff (ed) 1998:239)<sup>44</sup>

This is exactly how monochromes throw chaos into art history; they exist in relation to other paintings, defined by and defining, and so on. However, in the inevitable mirroring that takes place, monochrome casts suspicion on all other painting. Malevich’s *Black Square*, for example, casts suspicion on icons because it both is and is not an icon; yet is also a mirror, the dark counteractive mirror of representation. According to Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe (1995), spaces only ever exist as *versions* of themselves – perspectival space, for example, or deep space. Space should



not, however, be seen as an empty backdrop, but instead as a dynamic entity that varies from era to era, from place to place. Spaces, including apparently blank ones, have identifying characteristics and histories. Foucault describes how the space of the City has its own spatial subsets. 'Utopias' are spaces that have no concrete site, but a general relation 'of direct or inverted analogy' (Foucault in Mirzoeff 1998: 239) to the actual space of society where people live. They either present society in an idealised form or 'turned upside down' (239). Conversely, between the utopias there are 'heterotopias': concrete, actual sites, which Foucault describes as 'counter-sites'. These heterotopias, though real, are psychically dynamic. Within their spaces, all the other real sites that exist within the culture in question are simultaneously, 'represented, contested and inverted' (239). The category of the heterotopia includes the so-called 'crisis heterotopia', a space with totemic significance and oppressive psychical affect, places of sanctity or places with forbidden connotations. Such places are designed for those members of society who, when considered in relation to their society, are in a state of 'crisis', eg 'adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc' (240), and he confines these spaces to so-called 'primitive' societies. These kinds of 'heterotopias of crisis', Foucault writes, are being replaced by 'heterotopias of deviation'. He includes prisons, hospitals, senior citizens' homes, mental institutions and cemeteries as examples of these, explaining that whilst the situations which would put an individual into any of these spaces might be actual crises, in a society where leisure and order rule, they are also considered deviant.

What I find interesting about the heterotopia in terms of attempting to think about issues of space in the monochrome, is that it, 'is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (1998:241), in other words, Foucault's heterotopia is a classically uncategorisable undecidable. However, Foucault's notion of a heterotopia does something extra for my argument about monochrome by shifting it into the realm of the Death Drive. In embodying a clustering of 'antisocial' spaces that just don't fit,



Foucault's heterotopia of deviance is not a single unit but a multiple thing, and also has something deathlike about it. This is not to say that it is possible to identify Freud's Death Drive at work here, but it is to say that they might sit quite comfortably together. My aim here is to investigate monochrome as another space of plenty; but consider it as a psychic, as well as a physical reality whose mobile signifiers assure its dynamism as a surface. It is, however, also a space within a system of interconnected and related spaces, each of which is expected to form itself to its allotted niche of meaning. What is enervating about monochrome is the insistent surface blankness, a mocking, silent blankness that defies interpretation and is reminiscent of death. Rosalind Krauss (via Lacan) identifies this resistance to signification with the formlessness of that which is presymbolic, fitting with the Kristevan ideas discussed above (Krauss 1996:92-93)<sup>45</sup>

If western art history is a 'city', then, the unrepresentable, formless and presymbolic space of monochrome within it acts as a Foucaultian heterotopia of deviance, a self-sufficient 'necropolis' inside the city walls. A city that houses the dead is a city in backwards motion, going back to the originary lack that is the object of mourning. And if this city exists within a wider city or structure whose logic is linear and progressive – like that of the 'kinship' system of western Art History – then clearly it will stand out markedly as 'wrong', or as a problem. Its characteristics are those of the 'black sheep' who usually turns up somewhere in every family tree, accompanied by secrecy, shame and sorrowful affect. But monochrome also continues to do something confounding, each time it re-appears, to the Phallic viewer intent on fixity of meaning. Using the metaphor of the library as symbol of the colonisation of knowledge, Sean Cubitt presents what could be read as an analogy for the way in which monochrome jams the door of meaning open;

'The very architecture of the great libraries breathes with this ambition: to colonise knowledge, through order, in the image of imperial rule [...] The public reader is caught up in what Lacan, borrowing linguistic terms from Jakobson, took to be the syntagmatic dialectic in which the subject is condemned to pursue the object-world down endless shelves of signification in pursuit of that impossible object of desire, total knowledge, total control.' (Cubitt 1998:9)



The desire of the Phallic reader is impossible – total control, total knowledge, and total access to meaning are all impossibilities. In presenting the Phallic reader with the impossibility of ever satisfying his desire, monochrome is involved in an act of visual castration, so horrifying that it cannot be symbolised by the ego, and whose affect is of sorrow, grieving and loss. Perhaps it is this sense of loss and longing that appeals to monochrome's admirers, who might then be considered narcissistic mourners. Perhaps, though, those who love monochrome also somehow sense the endless play of possible signification. In this way monochromes perpetually re-enact the Malevichian scene of opening the possibilities for meaning...

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<sup>1</sup> *Of Other Spaces*, or *Des Espaces Autres*, published in French journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité* in 1984, was originally the basis of a lecture Foucault gave in 1967. Foucault himself did not review this text for publication, so it is not generally considered part of the official body of his work (although it did appear in the public domain shortly before his death, when it was used to accompany an art exhibition in Berlin).

<sup>2</sup> See Meyer Schapiro, 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs' *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, vol.4 of *Selected Papers* (New York, 1994:1-7)

<sup>3</sup> Lippard's choice of the word 'suicidal' is also suggestive of an investment in expressionism; she can be seen as reading monochrome or blank works as a response to New York School painting.

<sup>4</sup> This also connects with the undercurrent of comedy that runs through this attempt to think through the monochrome. This time, the notion of a microscopic image of something very small, enlarged so that it is too big to make out, is another comedic device that is sometimes used in conjunction with a joke monochrome 'painting'. This is a characteristic of the specific kind of comedy that is identifiable as 'Nonsense'. Nonsense has parallels with monochromy in terms of its transgressive function and the complex relationship it has with 'sense'. Nonsense can only function in an oppositional relationship to the societally-sanctioned, generally understood way of perceiving the thing in question. If nonsense were to fall in line with traditional ways of perceiving or understanding something, it would lose its transgressive function and become unrecognisable as nonsense. Monochromes also work as transgressive spaces because of their oppositional relationship to the way in which spectators expect to make 'sense' of visual imagery.

<sup>5</sup> The purpose of Mitchell's essay can be summed up in the following paragraph; 'My own position is that the subjectivised object in some form or other is an incurable symptom, and that Marx and Freud are better treated as guides to the understanding of this symptom, and perhaps to some transformation of it into less pathological, damaging forms. In short, we are stuck with our magical, premodern attitudes toward objects, especially pictures, and our task is not to overcome these attitudes but to understand them.' (1996:72)

<sup>6</sup> For a further discussion of this intriguing topic, Mitchell points us to Theodore Ziolkowski's *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> Some of Mitchell's remarks on women here are highly problematic. However, to maintain focus, I have chosen not to engage with a discussion of these problems at this time.

<sup>8</sup> Useful books that discuss such legislations and their cultural and personal effects include: Henriques, Fernando (1974) *The Children of Caliban: Miscegenation* (London, Secker & Warburg), Hyam, Ronald (1990) *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester, Manchester University Press), Macmillan, W.M. (1928) *The Cape Colour Question: A Historical Survey* (London, Faber & Gwyer), Rogers, J.A (1962) *Sex and Race: Negro-Caucasians Mixing in All Ages and All*



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*Lands Vol.I, The Old World* (NY, Helga M. Rogers). Rogers follows this early anti-racist work with another two volumes, also prefixed *Sex and Race*, Gist, N.P. & Dworkin, A.G (eds) (1972) *The Blending of Races: Marginality and Identity in World Perspective* (NY, John Wiley & Sons).

<sup>9</sup> On this subject, also see Homi Bhabha, (1994) 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism' in *The Location of Culture* (New York, Routledge).

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the analogy between the painted surface and the skin of Woman, see Rosemary Betterton's 1996 book, *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London: Routledge). Also see Christine Battersby's 1989 book, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women's Press).

<sup>11</sup> The slash should be understood as a caesura, a beat, a period of silence. This is Caroline A. Jones' notation, she uses the slash for ease and speed, rather than reprinting the complex columns that Cage used in his text to denote the gaps between words.

<sup>12</sup> In the satirical novel by Heinrich Boell, *Dr. Murke's Collected Silence*, something analogous takes place. The protagonist has a job at a radio station, and, fed up of listening to human chatter all day, begins to collect all the silent bits of tape that are edited out of the radio shows. He listens to these in private. For him, blankness is a welcome relief.

<sup>13</sup> From an interview with Stephen Poole in the Guardian newspaper, Saturday November 17<sup>th</sup> 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Rauschenberg's wish to 'make a painting' reads like a wish to collude with a particular system of signification. Whilst this may have been his intention, my position is that the intentions of the artist, whilst very interesting to study, lose their importance once the work is released into the public realm. To return to the intentions of the artist or author for a 'final' or 'correct' reading of the work would be, I think, to align oneself with the Phallic myth of an ultimate or fixed meaning.

<sup>15</sup> Cage was scrupulous about acknowledging his debt to Rauschenberg. In the preface in *Silence* to his piece on Rauschenberg, Cage wrote, 'To Whom it May Concern. The white paintings (by Rauschenberg) came first; my silent piece came later'. (Cage 1967:98)

<sup>16</sup> 'tender membranes registering the slightest phenomenon on their blanched white skins' (Jones 1993:648-649)

<sup>17</sup> The blankness and silence of Rauschenberg's white paintings was further complicated by their inclusion in a fabled happening, also in 1952, at Black Mountain College. *Theater Piece #1* included a dance piece by Cunningham (who famously included the stray dog who happened along and took an interest), Cage and others reading from the tops of ladders, the playing of some scratchy Edith Piaf 78's, film and slides projected upside down, a prepared piano and radio played by David Tudor, and coffee afterwards. It is easy to imagine the *White Paintings* being eclipsed by all the noise and activity; however, at the same time all the distraction and movement could have served to contrast the *White Paintings* as bracketed spaces of peace, silence and tranquillity. Rauschenberg's insistence that they were 'hypersensitive membranes' ensured that the paintings were not seen as mere backdrops, but that they reflected and 'commented', if passively, on the action.

<sup>18</sup> I would like to thank Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe for relating this story to me.

<sup>19</sup> The imagery of shipwrecks also appears in Mallarmé's poem, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais n'abolira le Hasard*, which is an important work in terms of a different kind of blankness. I wonder if Golding, when considering the specific erased blankness in his novel, was thinking about this connection.

<sup>20</sup> It is generally acknowledged that Freud's *Mystic Writing Pad* is a good analogy for short-term memory, but a poor one for long-term memory. For further discussions of this in terms of the theories of Hypertext – which seem to have adopted the *Mystic Writing Pad* with great gusto – see 'The Electronic Labyrinth' at [www.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0257.html](http://www.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfl0257.html), and also Michael Joyce (1995) *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

<sup>21</sup> In 1975-6, along with Joseph Kosuth (with whom Charlesworth was living at the time), and some colleagues from Art and Language/New York, Charlesworth founded and edited *The Fox*, a radical magazine of art theory. Unfortunately it only lasted for three issues, but it was the place that Charlesworth's well-known article, *A Declaration of Dependence* was first published, in which she insisted on art's dependence on culture, history and specific societal formations.

<sup>22</sup> Art historian and critic Yve-Alain Bois studied under Barthes and Hubert Damisch at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, and now is Professor of the History of Art at Johns Hopkins University. Perhaps best known for his involvement in *October* magazine, he is also known for arguing against the use of theoretical models simply because they are in fashion. His stance is that the specificity of the critical problem should dictate the theoretical approach.

<sup>23</sup> Kate Linkler (1998) includes herself amongst the various critics which she says have attempted to read these shiny backgrounds of Charlesworth's in Lacanian terms, referencing the Mirror Stage. Linkler decides that this is an incorrect reading, as Charlesworth herself claims only a scant knowledge of Lacanian theory. However, my thinking is that overt attention to the intentions or desires of the artist can lead to an impoverished reading. Such attention would, for instance, invalidate Gilbert-Rolfe's article *Where Do Pictures Come From?*, in which he writes, 'I believe it may be usefully provocative to think of these works in terms of, first, the Lacanian possibility that the Oedipal is a



metonymy, a construction of the male which completes the male' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1995:17). I would not exclude the Lacanian reading as a possible and provocative way of thinking about these works.

<sup>24</sup> Professor Florence has also suggested that Impressionism can be seen as a gradual move towards monochromy; a gradual dissolution of previously indissoluble sign. Fragmentation or disintegration of the object in painting is evidence of death drive activity, of splitting, just as much as a void would be. In fact, if Impressionism is seen as the beginning of the disintegration of the object, then perhaps it can also be read as the start of a backwards motion, a motion towards the originary lost object that is the source of mourning.

<sup>25</sup> Freud did not actually use the word 'Thanatos' in his writings, although according to Ernest Jones, he would occasionally use it in his conversation (see Volume III of Jones' *Sigmund Freud*, p.295). Use of the term 'Thanatos', as analogous to Freud's references to the life-instinct as 'Eros', could be seen as an example of anthropomorphising blankness.

<sup>26</sup> Interestingly in terms of the Kristevan notion of a choric space, she tells that the god Pluto was an, 'alchemist, who died celibate, whose deformity caused the goddesses to flee (hence he is bereft), and who figured the earth at the bottom of a cauldron where all alchemical processes have their source.' (1984:146-147) The word *chora* is not used here, but the association of a vessel in which the earth is fashioned by a god cannot, I think, go unnoticed. Pluto's celibacy, bereft-ness, melancholy, deformity and creative potential could also suggest that he has some qualities of the 'death-bearing mother'. (Again, Kristeva does not write about this). Kristeva also distinguishes between 'melancholia', which is a generic term, and 'depression', which is more specific and symptomatic (1984: 9-10)

<sup>27</sup> *Mourning and Melancholia*, though published in 1917, was written in 1915 along with the other metapsychological papers. At this time Freud is using the term 'ego-ideal' to refer to the self-punitive internal agent, which would later be named the 'super-ego'.

<sup>28</sup> Making clear the separation of Bellerophon from the gods, Kristeva reminds us that, 'there is nothing more dismal than a dead god.' (8).

<sup>29</sup> Freud documents examples of the dreams of depressives, concluding that 'melancholy cannibalism' is a common feature in such dreams. The motif of melancholy cannibalism acts for the depressed subject as a repudiation of the reality of loss, and of death. See *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917 SE xiv:237-258), *On Transience* (1917, SE xiv:305-7), and more generally, *On Narcissism* (1914, SE xiv)

<sup>30</sup> Carl André proved that it is possible to 'cut' space. David Bourdon writes, 'Later, he (Carl André) realised he was doing the Endless Column in negative with a cutout beam. 'Up to a certain time I was cutting into things. Then I realised that the thing I was cutting was the cut. Rather than cut into the material, I now use the material as the cut in space.' To expedite the cut in space, he began to stack readymade materials – aluminium channel, glass prisms, and honing stones – to form simple geometric shapes like cubes and pyramids [...] Each pyramid was self-sufficient, but like the Endless Column, all could have been stacked base-to-base to infinity.' (Bourdon in Battcock (ed) 1969:104) Interestingly, in this same essay can be found André's explicitly Phallic (or genital) remarks about his work, which are often quoted elsewhere: ' "All I'm doing," says Andre, "is putting Brancusi's *Endless Column* on the ground instead of in the sky. Most sculpture is priapic with the male organ in the air. In my work, Priapus is down on the floor". Rhetoric aside, he denies emphatically that his work has even implicit sexual connotations, coursing through the doorway like a 34-and-a-half-foot erection.' (Bourdon in Battcock [ed] 1968:104)

<sup>31</sup> Any abjection in Judd's work has more to do with his reading of the death-throes of painting and sculpture, and the necessarily indeterminate Specific Object which would be born out of this death, a three-dimensional object that could not be categorised as either painting or sculpture. This seeking of a 'third way' in the three-dimensional object follows Greenberg in *Modernism With a Vengeance*, who wrote that the three-dimensional was the only place to seek the 'borderline between art and non-art', since the category of the three-dimensional included both sculpture, and everything material that was not art.

<sup>32</sup> In conversation with Mia Fineman, Pruitt also reveals that, following the ingestion of the *Cocaine Buffet*, 'for about fifteen minutes afterward, people thought it was the best art they had ever seen in their lives'. ([www.evanswallgallery.com/galarjun24ed.html](http://www.evanswallgallery.com/galarjun24ed.html))

<sup>33</sup> Fontana's activity of cutting and enlarging an aperture, and the residual aural connection to 'slasher' murders such as Jack the Ripper, who famously targeted prostitutes as his victims, is reminiscent of a violently misogynistic character in the Anais Nin's story *Mathilde*. The last paragraph describes, 'the man who had so often slashed at the sexual openings of whores, and who for this reason had never touched his mistress there. He had been safe only when he lived with her, when the provocativeness of her breasts kept his attention diverted from the sex, the morbid attraction to what he called 'woman's little wound', which he was so violently tempted to enlarge'. (Nin, A. 1978 *Delta of Venus* London, Penguin Books).

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Whitfield tantalisingly points out that the 'friend' of Fontana's who gave her this description wishes to remain anonymous. (51n.65)

<sup>35</sup> In the Independent newspaper, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1988.

<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe does not believe in the notion of a blank form: 'There are no such things as blank forms, while there clearly is such a thing as a blank surface. A smooth surface can be blank, but a smooth form is still a shape, with a figural relationship to an at least implicit field and all that that implies. Blankness itself eludes the



tactile; Descartes' blind subject is always touching something or failing to find anything to touch.' (Gilbert-Rolfe 1997:167) I don't agree with the above: it all depends if you hold preconceptions about 'pictures', and whether you are of the position that a painting – especially a monochrome – is an 'object'. Greenberg famously believed that as long as it was 'stretched or tacked up', a blank canvas already existed as a painting. The Support-Surface group put 'blank' untouched canvases on gallery floors. I think you can have blank forms, though it seems to me that Gilbert-Rolfe is thinking about the fact that forms are not usually inscribed, whereas we expect the painted surface to be.

<sup>37</sup> Jones describes this very process taking place when Cage holds up his work as a mirror to the body-part-obsessed Abstract Expressionists: 'Cage, invited by Motherwell in 1949 to speak to the prestigious Artists Club, meeting in the space of the former Subjects of the Artists school, chose to give a 'Lecture on Nothing'. Among the listeners were aging dadaists such as Richard Huelsenbeck, who would not have blinked at Cage's nihilistic agenda, but the dominant abstract expressionists in the group may have recognised themselves as the bull's-eye in Cage's target. To that audience, obsessed with subjects, Cage offered subjectlessness; to men captivated like Narcissus with their own bodies' parts, a bodiless philosophy; to the protectively arrogant leaders of the New York school, an exercise in Zen discipline and discipleship.' (Jones 1993:643)

<sup>38</sup> As Briony Fer writes, 'exhaustion is already heavily implicated in those objects, not as an inherent property of their geometric form, but as the spectator's experience of the object, and the kind of subjectivity it presupposes.' (Fer 1997:133)

<sup>39</sup> Caillois uses as his analogy the manifestations of mimicry in nature. He considers mimicry an 'excess' in nature, as it does not have immediate survival value.

<sup>40</sup> In *Here I Stand: Perspective from Another Point of View*, (1994) Norris Kelly Smith makes the point that for the Renaissance painter, perspective was a political tool which positioned both himself and the spectators of his work in a quite specific relationship to the authority of the Church, State or Patron.

<sup>41</sup> The 'often-changing' group included the following artists: Olivier Mosset, Stephen Rosenthal, Jerry Zeniuk, Marcia Hafif, Doug Sanderson, Joe Marioni, Phil Sims, Frederic Thursz, Raimund Girke, Carmen Gloria Morales, Robert Ryman, Susanna Tanger, Anders Knutsson, Dale Henry, Merrill Wagner, Howard Smith. Some of their shows – for example the June 1979 show at Julian Preotto's Franklin Street space – were private, and for the purpose of group discussion.

<sup>42</sup> Klein's work on Kjar is found in her 1929 paper, *Infantile Anxiety Situations in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse*, where she suggests that these remembered anxiety-situations from childhood are actually rehearsed in the creation of a work of art. Klein's information is from a rather idealised and sensationalist newspaper account of the 'miraculous' genesis out of 'nothing' of Kjar's paintings, written by Kjar's journalist friend, Karen Michaelis. Neither Klein nor Lacan had seen Kjar's paintings, but Kjar's relatives confirm that the 'naked negress' that Kjar apparently painted from her imagination was, in fact, a representation of Josephine Baker. If the account of Kjar's sudden brilliance and cure seems suspect, it is because some of the details of the story were changed, presumably for the purposes of journalistic license. Kjar was, in fact, a tutored painter, having received lessons from her brother-in-law. She also did not paint directly on to the wall as the account suggests, but on to a prepared canvas.

<sup>43</sup> In a personal e-mail from David Batchelor dated 26<sup>th</sup> February 2002, he wrote, 'In some respects I regard it (monochrome) as a comic genre. Comic in the Bakhtinian or Baudelairian sense. There it is, the crowning glory of high abstraction, and at the same time it is as dumb as you can get.'

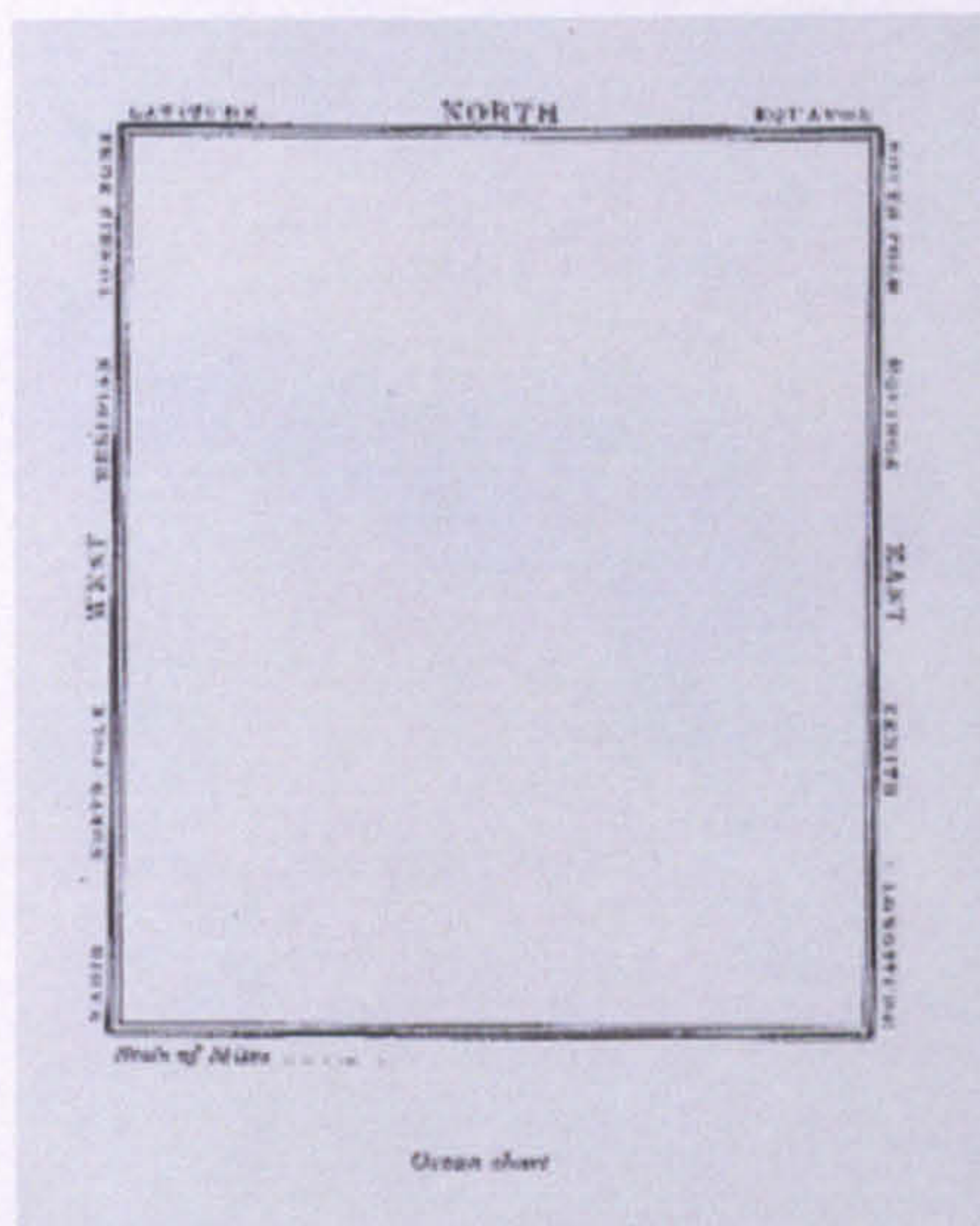
<sup>44</sup> In thinking about space, Foucault (like Klein) was inspired by Gaston Bachelard, who in his *Poetics of Space* wrote of the profound importance of space as our 'element', the thing that humans live within. Bachelard also added that space is the one thing that cannot ever be seen. Space is the one great, omnipresent, all-pervasive, profoundly invisible thing in the world; yet space also has a limited power on its own.

<sup>45</sup> (NB: internal quotes from: Zizek 1991:138)



## Chapter Five: CONCLUSION?

'[...] the map [...] is ultimately devoted to an internal logic of impossible completion.' (Cubitt 1998:55)

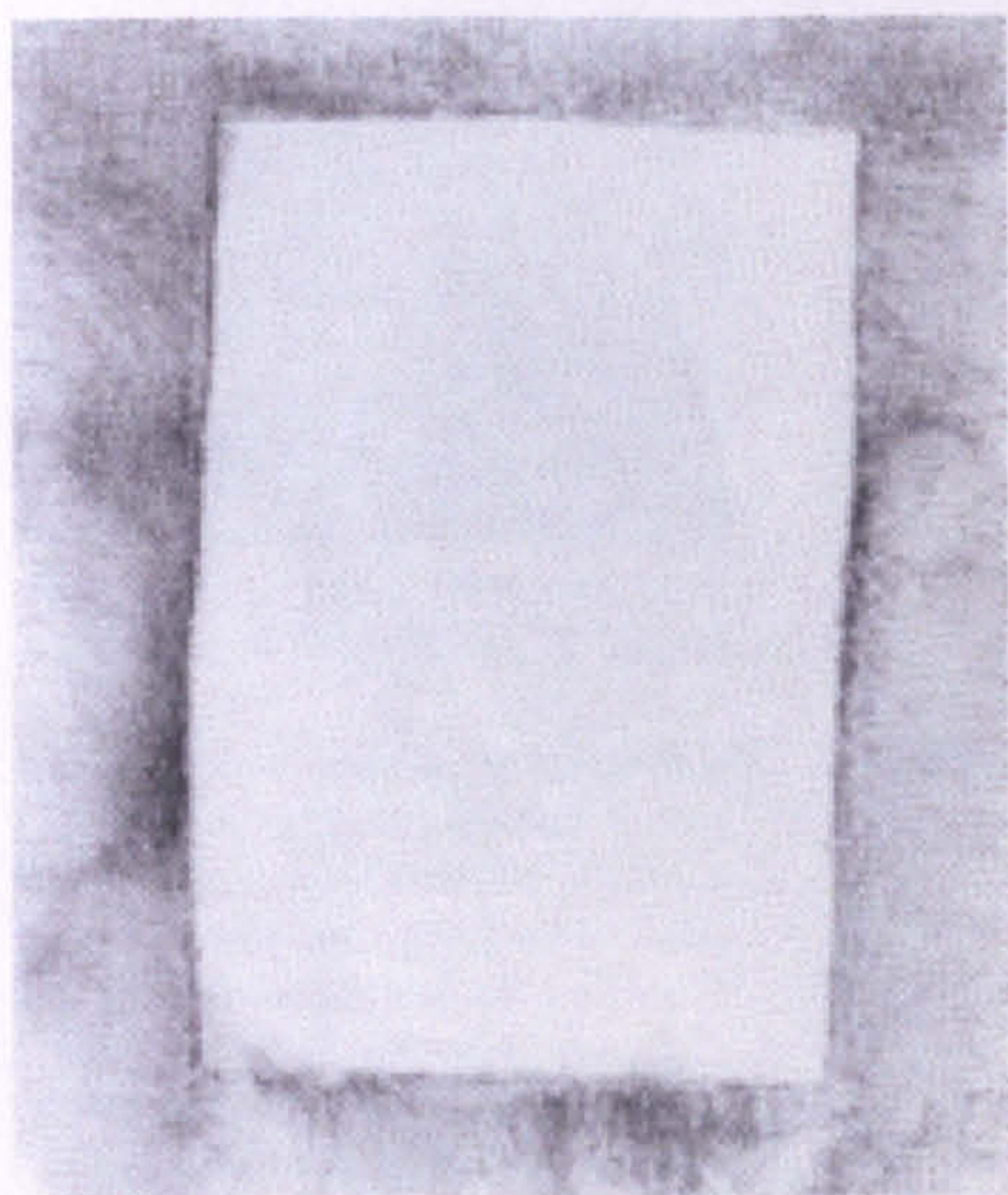


**Figure 47:** Lewis Carroll, *Ocean Chart* from *The Hunting of the Snark*. 1872. Illustration by Henry Holiday.

If we think about Cubitt's quote (above) with relation to the blank space of Lewis Carroll's famous map of the sea [**Figure 47**] it is possible to draw some interesting conclusions about the blank space of monochrome in visual culture. As the legitimised or sanctioned vehicle for blank visual space, monochrome seems to have more in common with the notion of the map (especially a map like Carroll's that mimics the structure suggested by Cubitt) than with the notion of the picture surface. A picture surface has, factored into it, the expectation of prior completion. Cubitt points out that the map does not, since both cartographer and map-user know that they must expect changes in landscape and topography which will render those maps useful only for a time. Structured into the map is a time-limit on any single 'fixed' meaning or Phallic interpretation. Structured into this same map is also, importantly, an *absence* of limit on new and different interpretations. The map, like the monochrome, holds meaning open. Lewis Carroll's map of the sea in the illustration works as a monochrome in some ways; initially these



commonalities might appear superficial. First, an area of blank space is demarcated and presented.



**Figure 48:** Eva Hesse, *Untitled* 1969. Gouache, watercolour and pencil on paper. 55.5 x 43.8cm. Collection of Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr.

This is the structure of monochrome canvases such as Eva Hesse's untitled drawing of 1969 [Figure 48]. Hesse is involved in the presentation of at least two kinds of blank space. The page or canvas was blank already, but rather than simply frame or hang the canvas in its raw state, she creates another layer of blank space on top of, or coexistent with the existing blank. Hesse *makes a blank space* on her virgin sheet of paper, whereas an artist like Klein *covers with a considered and created blankness* a canvas which was, again, originally blank. Carroll does the same with his map – the original, clear sheet of white paper, as simultaneously horrifying and full of potential as Mallarmé's *vide*, gathers complexity as a fresh blank rectangle is made within the existing blank page.

The addition of text in the map could be read as alluding to specific, ludic function of text in Allais' fictive satirical monochromes (Chapter One). The long and convoluted titles of his paintings, such as *Harvest of Tomatoes on the Shores of the Red Sea by Apopleptic Cardinals: Effect of the Aurora Borealis* (1884), first of all make an unnecessary reaffirmation of the joke monochrome's



colour. Secondly, within the context of an already-established game, the titles play dirty by warping the accepted 'rules' of the game and making a fool of the Phallic spectator. He is enticed into peering into the surface, just to ensure that those ripe tomatoes and florid cardinals aren't really, somehow, there. In a similar way, the text on Carroll's ocean chart points his reader to something that is only there in the reader's imagination; the spectator *makes* the work in the same way as Christian Metz's cinema-going subject *makes* the film, and Barthes' reader *makes* the text;

'[...] a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader.'  
(Barthes 1977:148)

I think, however, that this is where the similarity ends. Rather than performing the joke or trick function of defeating the Phallic viewer by appealing to his vanity, the text in Carroll's ocean chart performs the function of figurative drawing: it makes *sense*, rather than nonsense, of the blank space. The trick of monochrome appears to be, then, a multilayered, mercurial and ultimately elusive one, and one which the figure of the Mixed Race body can help unravel. As long as the Mixed Race body is read by Phallic racialised society as a blank space that requires 'reading', deciding or explaining, it will perpetually confound that society, refusing to make 'sense'. If Phallic society could shift its focus and perceive psychic as well as optical space, it would realise that the Mixed Race subject contains a logic of indeterminacy and radical incompleteness, and that these can be positive and creative things. Neither monochrome nor the racially indeterminate body should have to submit to external definitions that relate only to the spaces around them. There are multiple spaces within them that are mobile and potentially threatening to a system that wishes to maintain its dominance by insisting on fixity and stasis.

Darian Leader shows how Freud's theories of the Joke Work, and later Lacan's theories about jokes, enable commentary on the established codes of language that the joke relies on for its transmission, because;



‘To speak, we have to use codes that are imposed on us by our care-givers and their language. In this process, part of what we ‘mean’ to say is always lost, and jokes involve a privileging of this dimension of meaning ‘in between the lines’ that is actually sanctioned, recognised, by the code itself. The code scrambles our messages, but at the same time gives a place to this scrambling in the form of jokes. A joke, in this sense, is a message about the code.’ (Leader 2002:84-85)

Neither the joke nor the blank space of monochrome, then, can be understandable outside of the system each inhabits. However, whilst paradoxically relying on the system of Art History for its very appearance, monochrome continues to confound and make a fool of that same system and its subjects, retaining some power<sup>1</sup>. The situation for the subject of Mixed Race is slightly different; she still finds herself (perpetually, wearily) ‘made sense of’ in terms of those people who surround her. The extreme resistance to Mixed Race self-naming (see Chapter Three) might have something to do with an unconscious begrudging of the possible positivity, creativity and *jouissance* that the Mixed subject might find herself in were she to be ‘allowed’ to self-name.

Perhaps the creativity and mutability of her potential identities is a frightening prospect for a Phallic monoracist thinker who wishes everything to be neat and decided. So monochrome, as a blank space within a code of legible pictorial spaces, performs the function of messenger *to* the code, *about* the code. One of the first tricks that monochrome as messenger plays, is that the letter it is charged to deliver always manages to reach the system – monochrome is now accepted, read and written about as though its status as ‘art’ were unproblematic – but could it be playing a trick? Monochrome is ironically named as a single entity and presents as a unified surface.

However, deploying the notion of a psychic surface, we may discern that this veneer is a trick – monochrome is neither unitary nor fixed. Monochrome in its various appearances and guises is engaged in perpetually jamming open pictorial codes, eternally deferring meaning, and confounding and rendering impotent the Phallic reader. Monochrome does this by being indeterminate; it is neither one thing nor another thing but a multitude of things, and therefore blasts through the western metaphysical system of binary categories. In this sense, monochrome is again analogous to the body of the subject of Mixed Race in White western society. Such a



subject presents the White society with a sight whose meaning that society understands, but prefers not to 'see' – firstly, that of the horror of miscegenation. Secondly, and paradoxically, the Mixed Race subject gives the lie to the White Phallus' illusion of its own purity and mastery. The Phallic act of classifying someone of Mixed Race as 'Black' is a way in which White society can ignore that subject's [in]visible Whiteness, and therefore literally not see the uncomfortable fact of a Black-White sexual union that is staring them in the face. By her existence and continued reappearance, the Mixed Race subject performs a political function of challenging prejudicial and rigid structures and opinions, leaping across and in between these structures, and showing the Phallus that its notions of 'race' are illusions done with mirrors. Like the optical surface of monochrome, the Mixed Race subject's blankness is in this way, 'analogous to silence (the background to stories)' (Gilbert Rolfe 1997:160). As more and more Mixed Race people begin to vocalise their own stories, perhaps racialised society will begin to see that Mixed Race subjectivity is more than a 'background', something that doesn't quite fit that must be explained away.

Following on from Cubitt's analogy of the map, it might be useful to consider Minelle Mahtani's new spatial metaphor of 'mobile paradoxical spaces' (Mahtani in Parker & Song 2001:173).

Influenced by feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose who explore the notion that, 'all social relations are spatial, and take place within particular physical contexts', (Mahtani in Parker & Song 2001:174), Mahtani deploys her idea of a 'mobile paradoxical space' with reference to several multiethnic women (Mahtani chooses not to use the term 'Mixed Race') in Toronto, Canada, whom she interviewed for her study. The 'mobile paradoxical space' idea arises out of Gillian Rose's notion of the 'paradoxical space', which Rose uses to question the masculinism that has structured much geographic epistemology. Put simply, the 'paradoxical space' is Rose's imagining of a space beyond the territorial masculinist logic that confines the 'spaces' of women<sup>2</sup>. Mahtani's 'mobile paradoxical space' is a version of Rose's feminist space which allows for the multiethnic woman to shift, change and slip in and out of identities as she pleases, regardless of the Phallic



system she may live in which demands that she submit to its arbitrary classifications. In a 'mobile paradoxical space' it is possible to cut across 'traditional social cleavages' (2001:185) in a continual refashioning of identity. If we consider the notion of Psychic Space as mobile also, this allows for an investigation that goes beyond the distractions of the optical surface.

The paradoxical kind of power peculiar to monochrome as the blank space of western Art History and the Mixed Race subject as the blank space of the racialised west, is the power to remain indecipherable. This may have to do with the psychic surface *jouissance* which, by its very nature, renders any specific reading of the optical surface impossible, 'the self-centred solipsism of *jouissance* denies the communicability of material perceptions.' (Cubitt 1998:38) I think, however, that the paradoxical power of both the Critically Indeterminate monochrome and the Mixed Race subject also comes from the performance of specular trickery that is *at least* fourfold. First of all the failings of the system's codes are reflected back at the system itself, forcing the system to examine itself. Both monochrome and the racially indeterminate person achieve this by being indeterminate, undecidable, evoking a need in the Phallic viewer to decide that it is one thing when really it is so many things (or so few) that a single, 'fixed' knowledge of its surface is an impossibility. This is what Ad Reinhardt meant when he stated that his black monochrome paintings were the last paintings that could not be misunderstood. Reinhardt's philosophy that what was *not* there should be considered far more important than what *was*, meant that his black paintings simultaneously contained nothing that could be misunderstood, *or* understood. In other words, they were never intended for interpretation.

Interpretation is the function of the spectator who shares or obeys the codes of a system that is both Phallic and White, and as Kristeva points out, 'Ever since Freud [...] interpretation necessarily represents appropriation, and thus an act of desire and murder.' (Kristeva in Smith & Kerrigan 1987:33)<sup>3</sup> When anyone performs an interpretation, they (consciously or otherwise)



mark it with the stamp of their authority as a decider of meanings. Monochrome has the last laugh; as eternally-deferred insoluble, it tricks the Phallic system (and all its ambassadors) into thinking they can solve it, or write it into submission. Here, monochrome's second specular function is that of the mirror that tells lies to appease the vanity of the subject who consults its surface. It will show the Phallic critic or spectator to himself as the fairest (or most knowledgeable) of them all, assuring them that if nobody before them has managed to pin down monochrome's meaning, surely they can. For the subject of Mixed Race, the same can be observed in silently appearing to 'accept' the definition of the Phallic other who wishes to 'decide' you, whilst inside maintaining your right not to be 'read' in ways that only suit those outside of yourself.

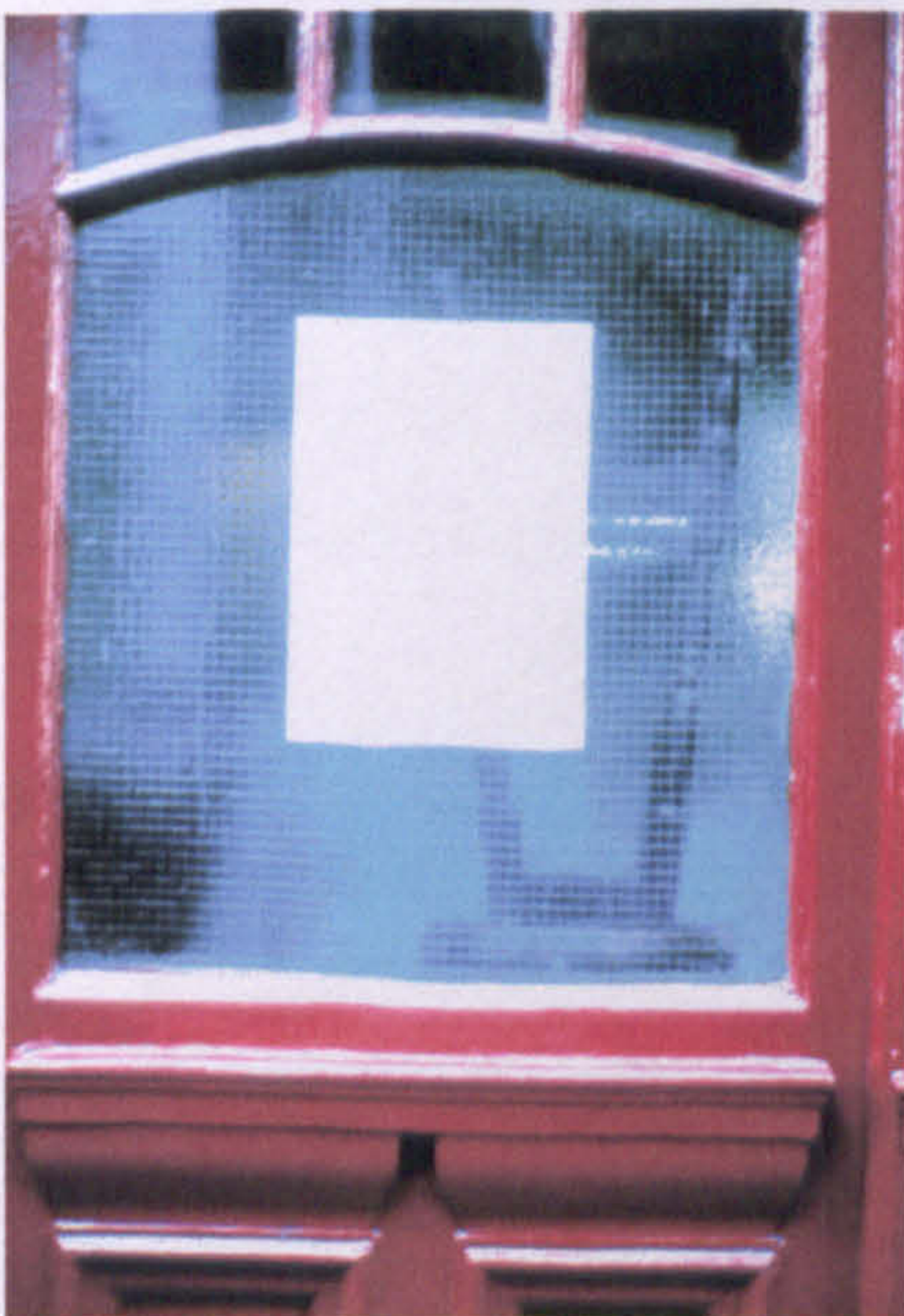
The third specular function or trick is that of a notional, highly effective series of strategically-positioned mirrors, a little like those used in Velasquez's *Las Meninas* as discussed in Chapter Two. Monochrome surfaces throughout art history here act all together, conceptually, like mirrors that reflect the various interpretations of monochrome forwards and back, forwards and back, perpetually; ensuring that no single meaning ever stays long enough to stick. In this sense, monochrome is an illusion done with mirrors that also *performs* an illusion, again done with mirrors. The Mixed Race subject does the same with all the various components of her 'racial', cultural and ethnic identities. In a continual dance of reflection, both in the mobile psychic space and in the visible optical space (in terms of dress, hair styling, etc); the deciding system can be confounded and fall into the trap of exhibiting the folly of its rigid categories. Fourth, but by no means finally, monochrome makes a mockery of the Phallic system by containing (in)visible Phallic elements, but remaining outside of that system. In this way it can be likened to the Mixed Race subject who, remaining outside of Whiteness, nevertheless contains elements of that Whiteness.



David Batchelor's monochrome aesthetic can be read as mimicking the eternal deferral of signification that I propose blankness performs in both monochrome and the Mixed Race body. His 1999 series, *Found Monochromes of London* [Figure 49-50] illustrates the principle that, '[t]he world is full of unintended, sometimes accidental, often temporary, and mostly unnoticed monochromes.' (Batchelor 2000:151). Combining elements of the Situationist notion of the *dérive*,



**Figure 49:** David Batchelor, *Found Monochromes of London* 2000. Photograph courtesy of the Anthony Wilkinson Gallery.



**Figure 50:** David Batchelor, *Found Monochromes of London* 2000. Photograph Courtesy of the Anthony Wilkinson Gallery.



Batchelor wandered around London during 1999 allowing chance to be his inspiration, taking photographs of unexpected, unintentional monochromes. These might take the form of a billboard temporarily emptied of its poster, or a framed sign, whose lettering had been gradually erased by the elements or of a simple blank sheet of white A4 paper sellotaped on to a car window. The fact that monochromes are understood to be 'everywhere' invokes Malevich's original wish that people would graffiti the whole of Russia with black squares in sympathy. Perhaps the continued reappearance of unintentional 'monochromes' in everyday life has something to do with an unconscious wish to hold meaning open, perhaps Batchelor's monochromes could be read as symbols of the areas in everyday life where meaning, however hard we try, continues to resist. Batchelor's use of photography as the medium for the display of these monochromes can be read as a reference to the traditions of thinking about monochrome as something that had the look of non-art, or that did not deserve the status of an art object. This of course happened in early debates about photography and about everyday found objects in the gallery space, and also about monochrome.

I think that the most important reading of Batchelor's *Found Monochromes of London*, however, is the reading that considers the photographs as illustrations of the perpetual instability of meaning that monochrome symbolises. Batchelor has no idea *where* he will find his next monochrome, and monochrome is thus implicitly illustrated as something that might pop up at any time, in any place; something with agency. Perhaps more symbolic of monochrome's logic of perpetual incompleteness are Batchelor's *Monochromobiles* [Figure 51]. These different-sized monochromes on wheels are full of impudent promise. Who knows when one might zoom off, in what direction and to what ends? Try to force something on wheels into any kind of fixed position, and it will simply roll away. These witty monochrome vehicles are truly 'mobile paradoxical spaces', and seem to provide a perfect embodied analogy to my proposition: if meaning cannot be fixed, then why attempt to fix location?





**Figure 51:** David Batchelor, *I Love Kings Cross and Kings Cross Loves Me 2* 1999. Found objects, acrylic sheet and enamel paint. 650 x 235 x 23cm. Photograph courtesy of the Anthony Wilkinson Gallery.

So: monochrome's illegible surface represents the Phallic subject's unavoidable castration in vision and knowledge, which the ego forecloses because it is both horrific and confounding. Anything the ego finds unassimilable can be guaranteed to return. If we understand monochrome as the return of the repressed, there is a case for the repressed as the Phallic subject's castration in vision. As an undecideable, though, monochrome will be bursting with what a Phallic system would understand as contradictions. So, as well as presenting visual castration (which would seem to be a definite function), monochrome is also incompatible with expected western binarist readings. In this way it introduces chaos and instability into Art and its History; critics and theorists cannot easily dominate monochrome. It is a wild card, an active unconscious whose function parallels the body of the Mixed Race subject in White western society. Monochrome is, in this reading, a subaltern space that cannot be deciphered in the contexts of the Phallogentric discourse of Art History.

Parveen Adams and Mark Cousins mention the necessity that some kind of understanding must take place before communication itself can:

'The space of communication and argument between different domains is a space of representation, the space in which one domain is represented, translated, for another. The 'freedom' or 'tyranny' of a society is in part to be measured by the capacity to tolerate or crush the difference between domains.' (Adams & Cousins in Adams 1996:57)



Monochrome presents differentiation (that of the inherent splitness of an undecideable, the split in the subject), but it does so in a veiled and tricky manner. Communication has to morph itself continually to the mutable demands of that constantly-moving multiple, monochrome; and so the undecidability in monochrome is a fundamentally creative act. It could certainly, I think, be said that monochrome's creative functions exceed its identity as a problem or inconsistency.

Monochrome, simply by being what it is, asks questions to the system about its own established assumptions, at the same time as the system tries to force it to conform. Monochrome laughingly presents us with the fact that attempts to find a 'source', or 'origin' are pointless tasks; pointless because of their impeccable collusion with the Logos. Playing by the Logos' rules reduces the possibilities of meaning, whilst monochrome's (ill)logic of trickery and radical incompleteness does nothing but increase them. The character of 'Miss Mattie' in Jamaican poet Louise Bennett's 1966 poem, *Back to Africa*, fervently wishes for a 'source', but in doing so she denies her identity as an undecidable, Mixed Race subject, or 'multiple'. In a total of nine stanzas that detail all Mattie's Jamaican heritage from African through French, Jewish, English and so on, Mattie's friend attempts to explain the folly of wishing for a single, in this case African source, just because one has Black features. (Please note that the italicised verses are my renderings of Bennett's poem into colloquial English, for those unfamiliar with Jamaican Patois).

'Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?  
You no know wha you dah seh?  
You haf fe come from somewhe fus  
Before you go back deh!

*Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?*  
*Do you realise what you've just said?*  
*You have to come from somewhere first*  
*Before you can go 'back' there!*

Me know say dat you great great great  
Granma was African,  
But Mattie, doan you great great great  
Granpa was Englishman?



*I know you said your Great Great Great  
Grandma was African,  
But Mattie, wasn't your great great great  
Grandpa an Englishman?*

What a debil of a bump-an-bore,  
Rig-jig an palam-pam  
Ef de whole worl start fe go back  
Whe dem great granpa come from!  
*There'd be one hell of a palaver,  
If everyone in the whole world started to go back  
To the place their great grandfather was born!*  
(Bennett in Burnett [ed] 1986:31-2)

The fear of meaninglessness runs very deep, and is deeply frightening. It is important to remember, however, that multiplicity is only coded as meaningless or problematic if it is considered from the Phallic standpoint of a 'One' which requires the subservience of the 'Two' or the 'Multiple' to keep its own 'Oneness' intact. As surely as the notion of oppositionality keeps binary structures in place, so an alternative slippery structure, coexisting within the binary, will destabilise it. This destabilising potential is the true transgressive power for any hidden indeterminate space within a specific discourse of authority like that of Phallic Whiteness. Spaces of indeterminacy pose new questions about the validity of the structure that has previously done all the naming; such spaces will begin to allow a rethinking of all notions of categorisation, their existence will question who is doing the categorising, and to what ends. The notion of colours having an adversarial or oppositional relationship to one another is a nonsense that only a disingenuous White Phallus would try to set up and maintain. As psychoanalyst Michael Vannoy Adams writes,

'Differences simply contrast. White and black are not opposites in any ontological sense. It is we who oppose them, we who unimaginatively perpetrate the white-black opposition.' (Vannoy Adams 1996:27)

Monochrome, like any other multiple – here, the subject of Mixed Race – suggests that the reader change focus. Instead of adhering to a system which gives the reader the choice of *either* reading *or* misreading, the multiple thing introduces the new possibility of continued, creative readings.



Presenting nothing in its surface, one would think that monochrome would make the spectator wonder whether they might see *something* if they simply shifted their focus. Such a shift of focus does not always occur, and, I suggest, it is the determination *not* to shift focus which is responsible for much of the 'Phallic writing' about monochrome, the writing that always seems so *sure* of its closed and final reading. The same refusal to shift focus is the source of automatic 'classification' of Mixed Race people without consideration of their own conception of self-identity. But possibly monochrome also asks of its spectator that the shift in perspective they undergo will make them more like the monochrome itself – in other words, that the spectator acknowledge his own indeterminacy. Monochrome and the Mixed Race subject can speak with many tongues, existing in a condition of Bakhtinian *heteroglossia* – and perhaps can lightheartedly make spectators acknowledge the complexity of their own subjectivity, questioning any certainty about identities or positions. There is a mutual relation between unstable object and unstable subject, and perhaps this is something that, through monochrome and the Mixed Race subject, can be acknowledged and explored. After all,

'The possibility of reading is premised on the reciprocal incompleteness and instability of the reader. The act of reading is a mutual surrender of text and reader to the tentative becoming of the book.' (Cubitt 1998:7)

Perhaps it can also be said that the 'racially' indeterminate subject of Mixed Race exhibits, to all 'races', a disturbing reality which they do not want to see – that of the split nature of every subject. Homi Bhabha, talking about possibility of any culture existing without melancholia, rethinks Benedict Anderson's influential account of the nation as 'imagined community' in ways that acknowledge a similar splitness or indeterminacy. Using Derridean and post-Lacanian-derived terms, he develops an alternative, performative view of the communality of 'the people' as an enunciation. This enunciation does not so much produce an imaginary identity as a positionality that is always split, and thus uncanny. Drawing on Fanon, Bhabha specifically suggests the skin of the colonised, the outside of the body, as a site for rebellion:



‘Th(e) inversion of meaning and address in the melancholic discourse, when it ‘incorporates’ the loss or lack in its own body – displaying its own weeping wounds – is also an act of ‘disincorporating’ the authority of the Master. Fanon again says something similar when he suggests that the native wears his psychic wounds on the surface of his skin like an open sore – an eyesore to the coloniser’. (Bhabha in Donald [ed] 1991:102)

The current dread in Britain that by 2020 everyone is going to end up brown, like the indeterminate colour that results from mixing up all the paints you can get your hands on, is another Phallogocentric myth. It is only actually frightening to someone who has a stake in the Phallogocentric world view that indeterminacy equals deviancy. Illegibility can be a simple yet potentially powerful refusal of Phallogocentricity.

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<sup>1</sup> Many jokes do this. I remember being told of an acquaintance’s trip to Ireland, where he and his fellow English tourists (who were all very obviously identifiable as English as they were wearing their Morris dancing kit) went into an Irish pub. The acquaintance immediately drew attention to himself by asking in a loud voice, ‘Why are Irish jokes so stupid?’ Understandably, the villagers in the pub bristled at this and all pricked up their ears, preparing to take some action if these turned out to be English troublemakers. However, the folk humourist continued, ‘So the English can understand them!’ and everyone laughed. I imagine that the laughter was not because they found the joke funny (I think this joke could quite reasonably be described as pathetic), but rather because an increase in tension had been created, based on the historical *codes* and structures of Anglo-Irish relations, and then, thankfully, dissipated. I think that the laughter was that of relief. Even so, the Englishman telling the joke was able to come out on top – he had fooled his audience into thinking he was about to say one thing, then actually said quite another, so they were symbolically caught in the bind of Anglo-Irish history to which he referred. He had made them laugh, and thus, as far as he was concerned, he had the last laugh, which is the laugh of power (although I am sure he was suitably downgraded in the conversation that followed his departure).

<sup>2</sup> See Rose, Gillian (1993) *Feminism and Geography* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>3</sup> I am interested that Smith and Kerrigan’s anthology is entitled, *Interpreting Lacan*, and wonder whether they considered that they might be performing an act of ‘desire and murder’ on the original Lacanian text?



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**PICTURES FROM ‘CARLTON JOHNSON: MY ‘LIFE’’, a mixed media installation about mixed race identity by Angeline Morrison.**

**Falmouth Arts Centre, 2 – 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2002.**

**All photographs by RyyA Bread©**

**(Please note that this body of work was not part of the submission for the degree of Ph.D.)**



Installation shot.

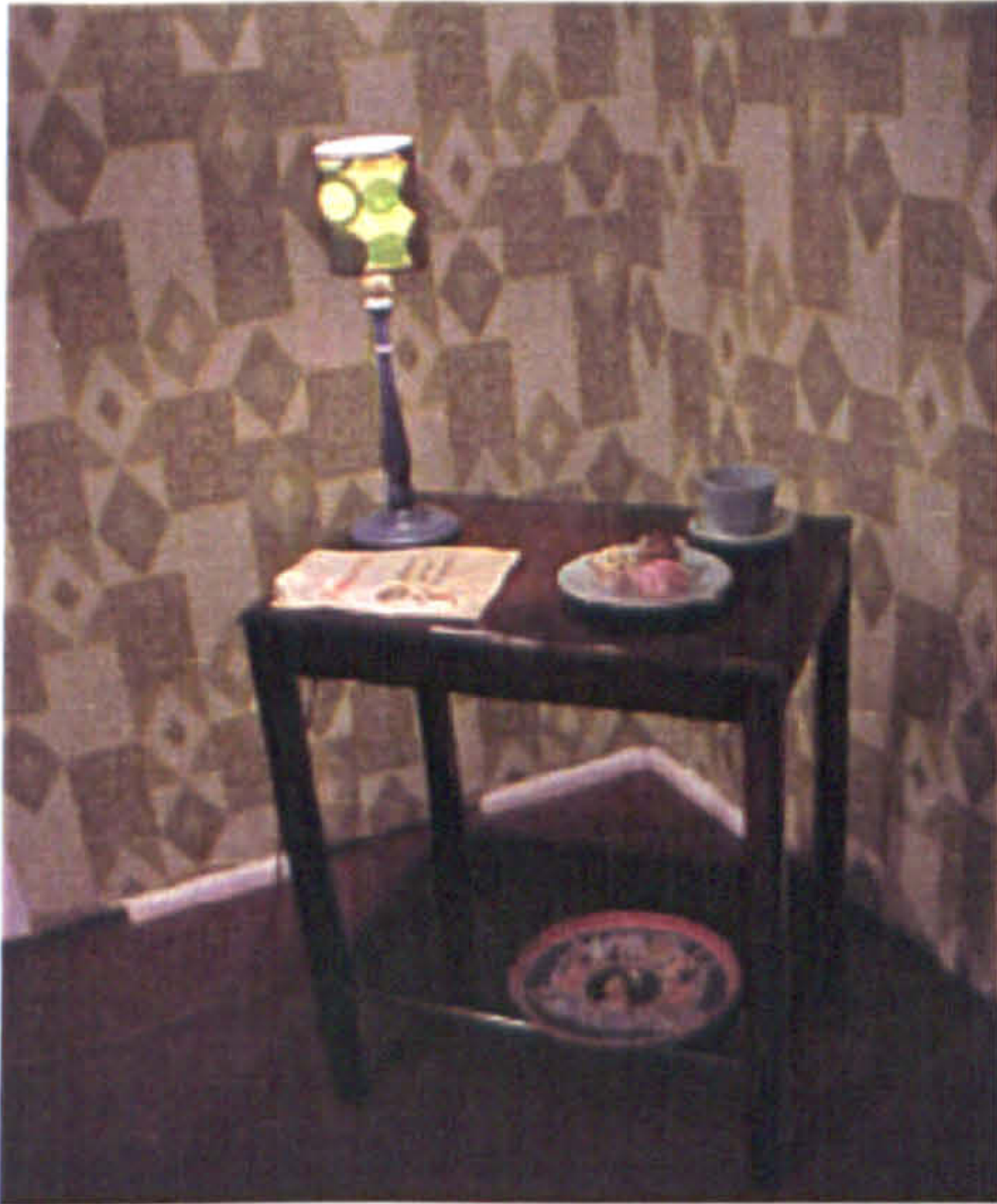


Installation shot.



*Fondant Fancies at Nan Mottram's, detail.*





*Fondant Fancies at Nan Mottram's, detail.*



*Bowl to Collect Tears for Neil, Who Went Missing, detail from Nobody To Weep For Him, glazed earthenware bowls by Angeline Morrison.*

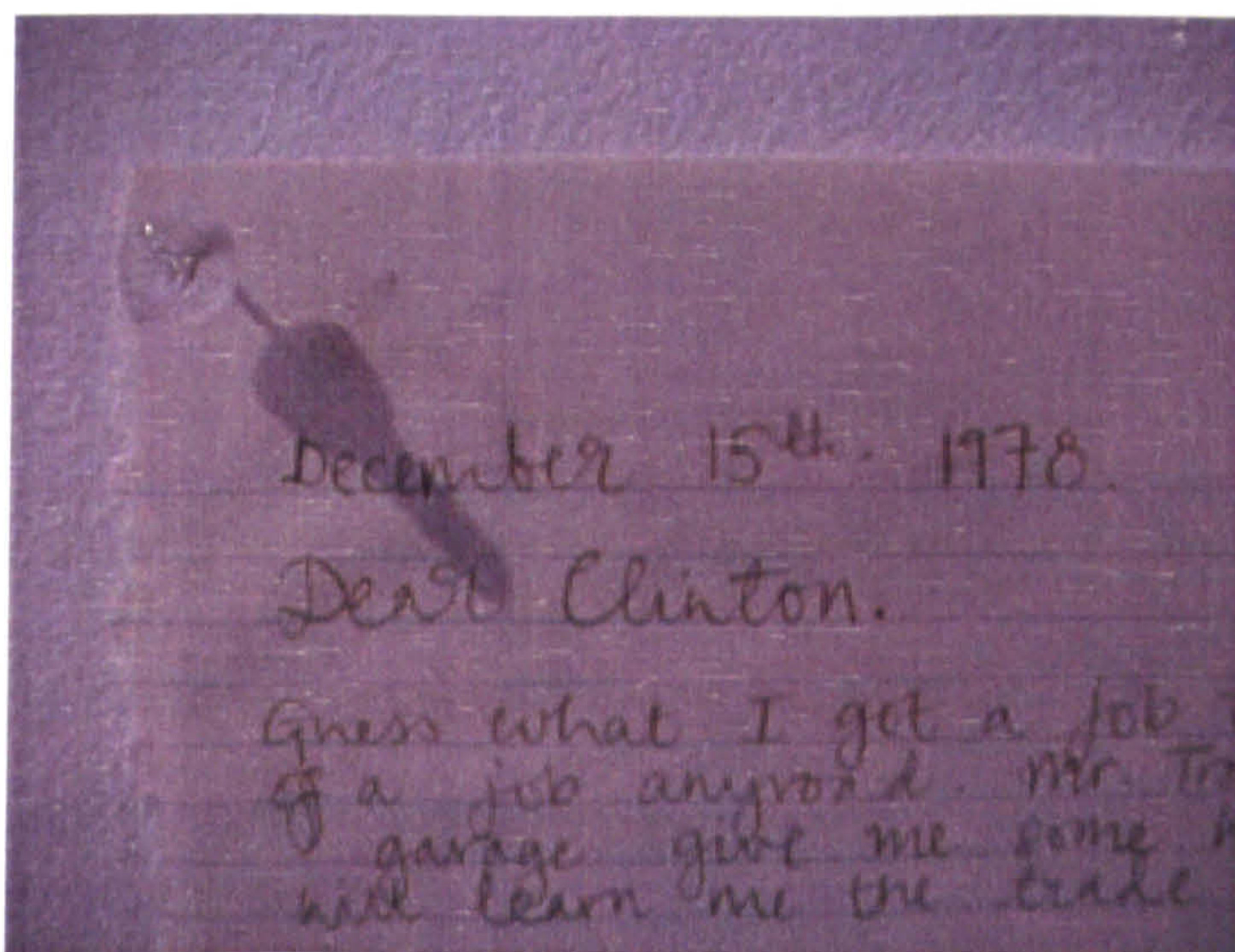


*Installation shot.*

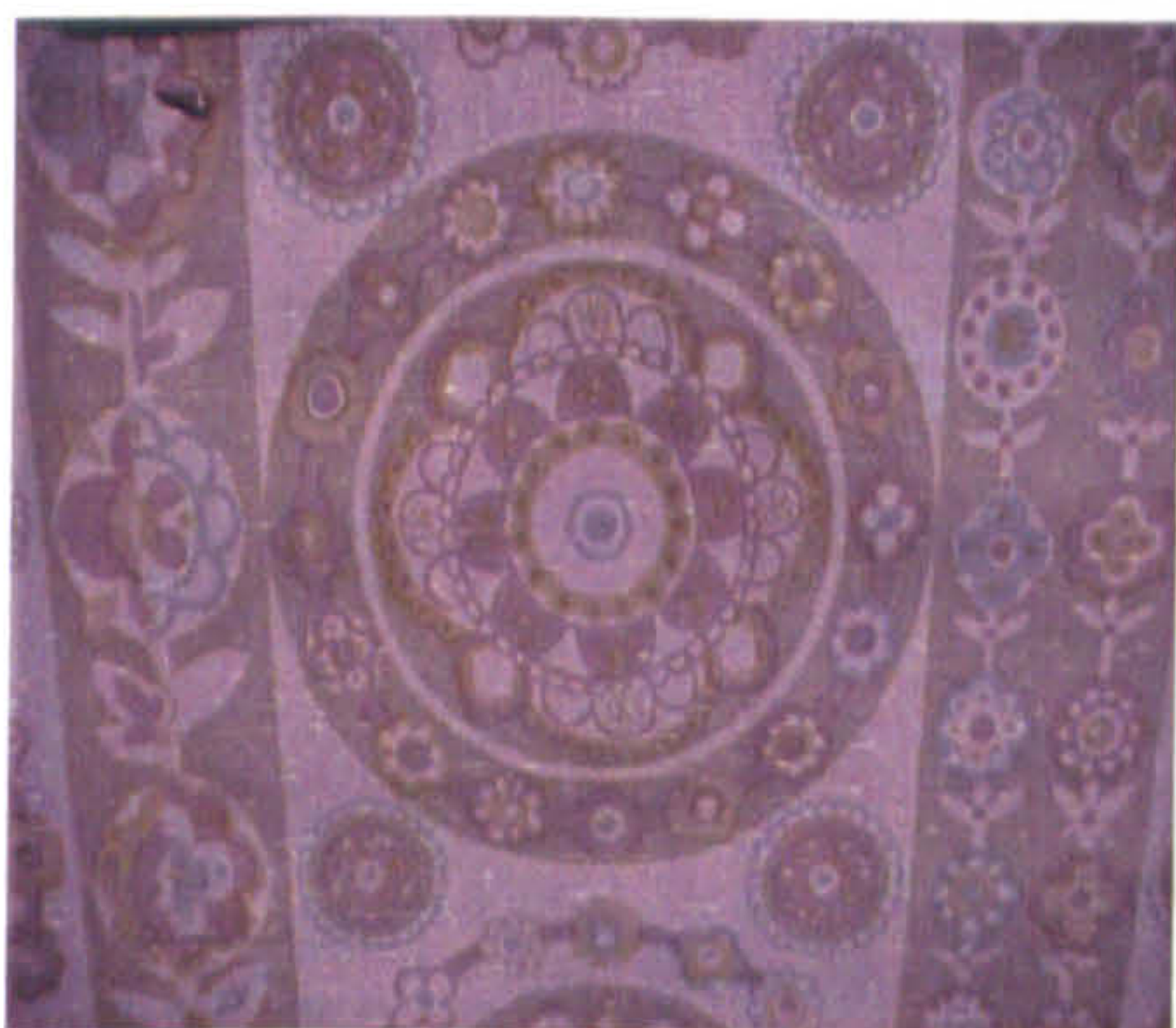




*Carlton and Clinton's Gym Kit, detail, showing letter from Headmaster.*

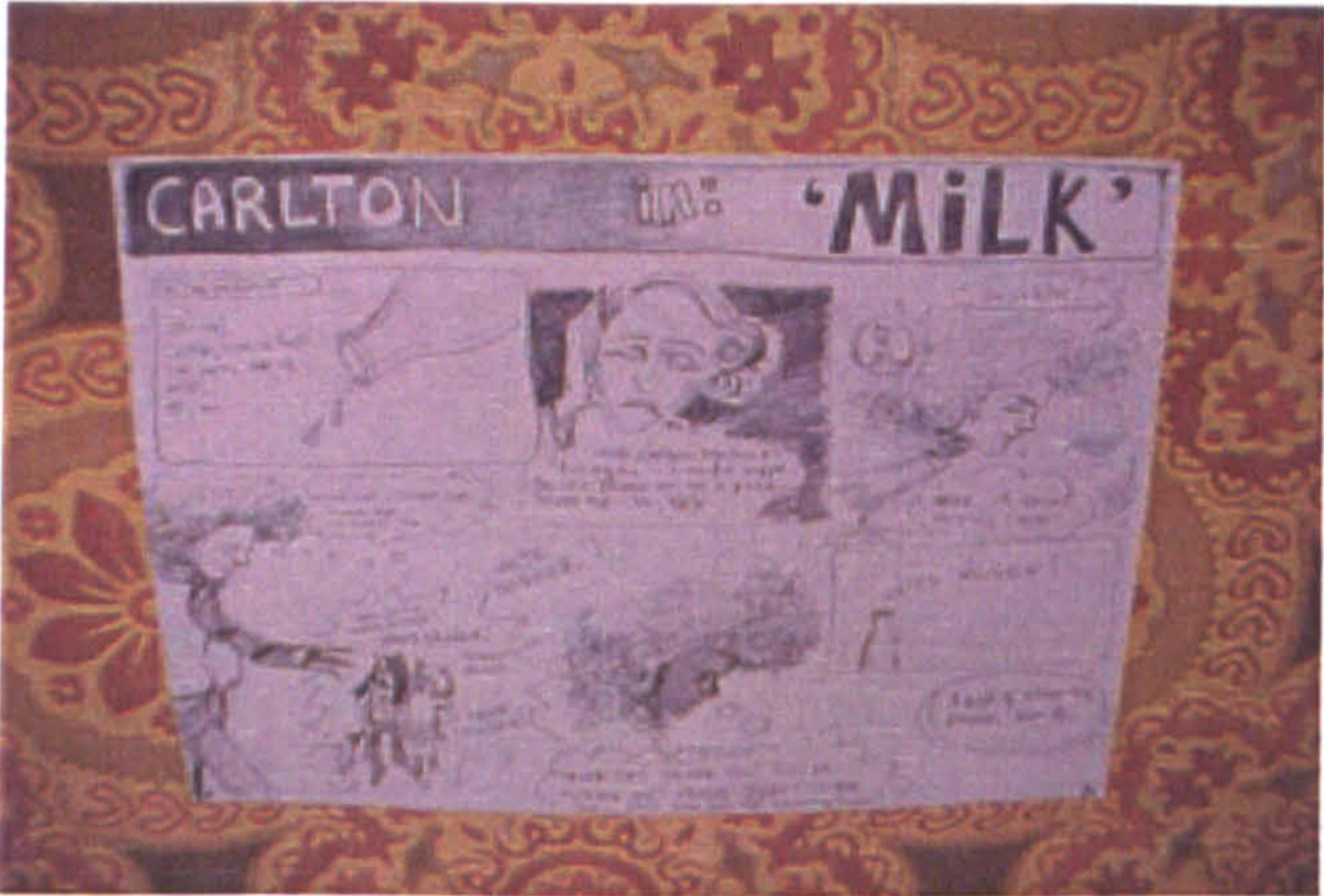


*Diary Entry, letter to Clinton, detail.*



*Wallpaper, detail.*

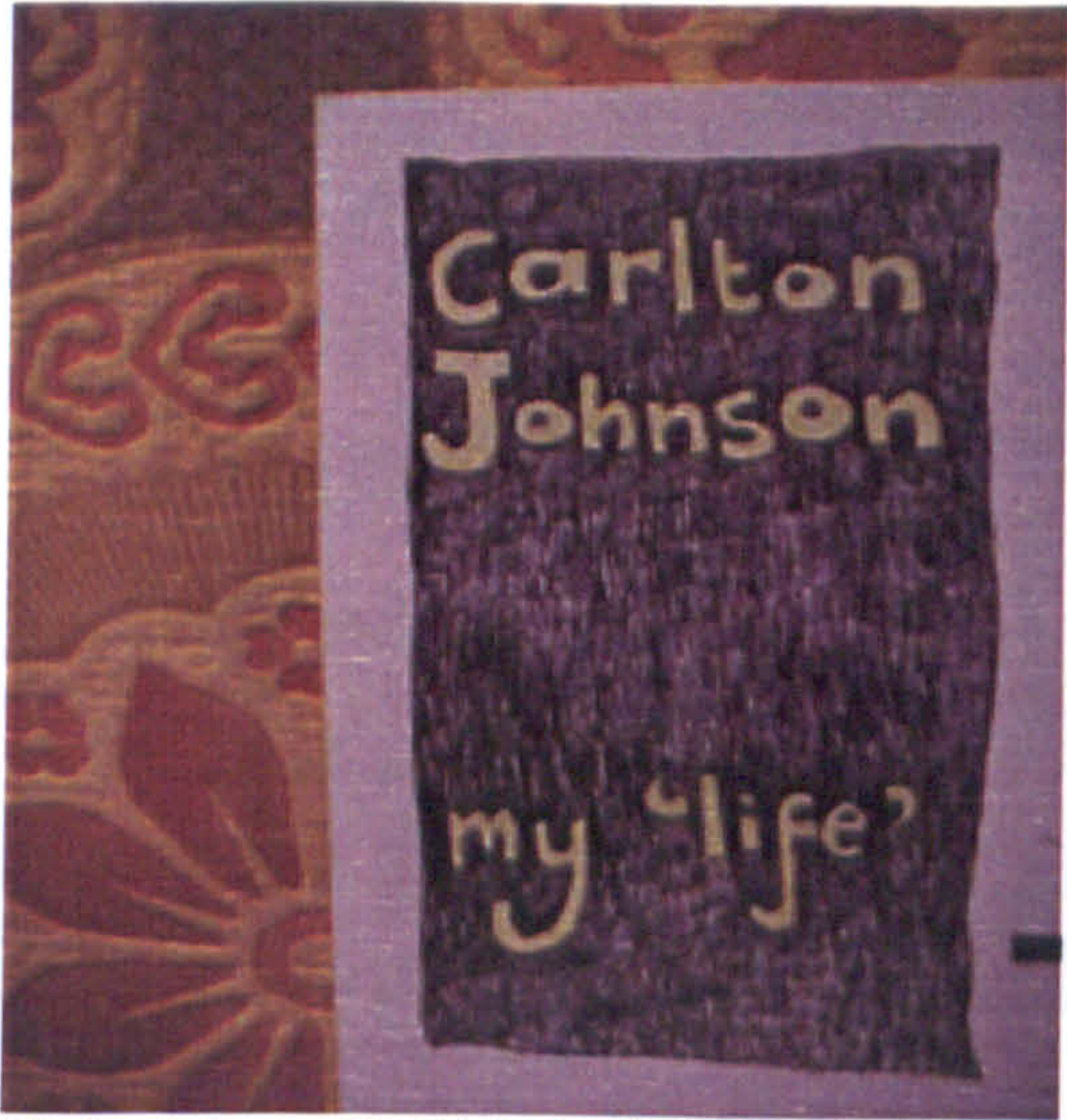




*Carlton in 'Milk', pencil drawing on paper mounted on wallpaper.*



*Carlton Johnson, My 'Life', detail.*

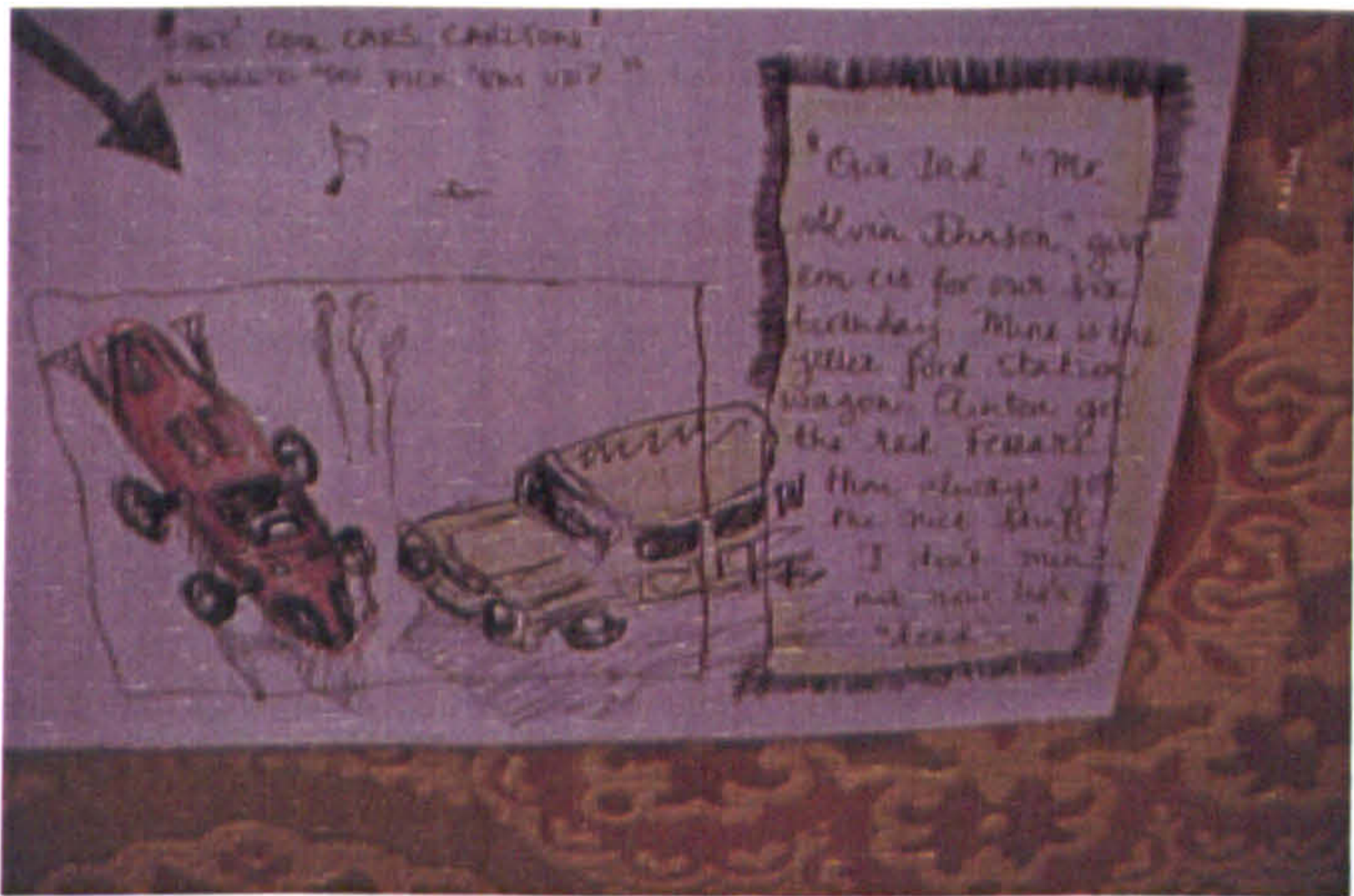


*Carlton Johnson, My 'Life', detail from title page.*





Carlton Johnson, *My 'Life'*, detail showing Julie Lee.



Carlton Johnson, *My 'Life'*, detail showing toy cars.



*Leave Me Alone*, detail.





*Carlton Johnson in: 'The Bleach Bath', installation shot.*

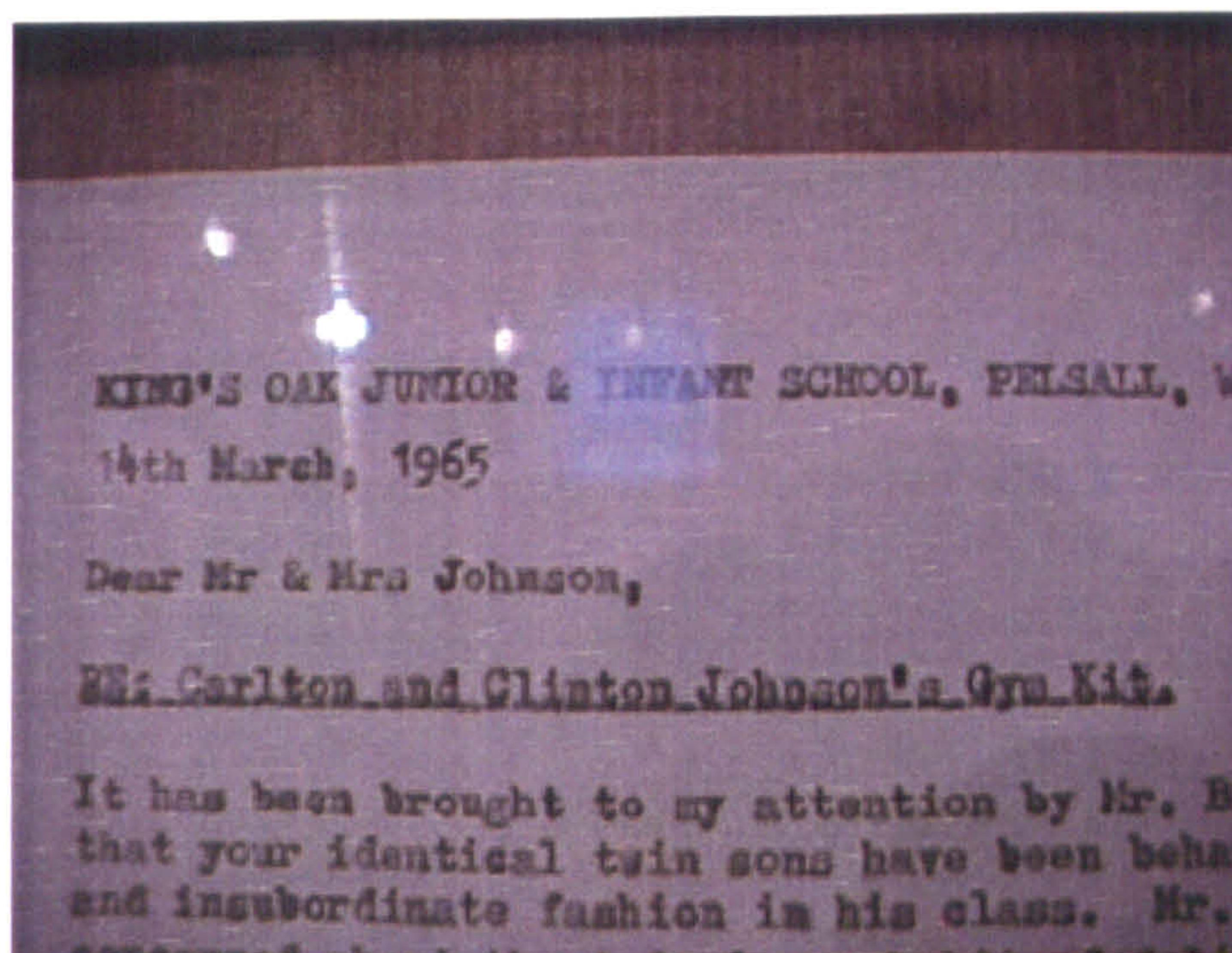


*Carlton's Gym Kit, detail.*

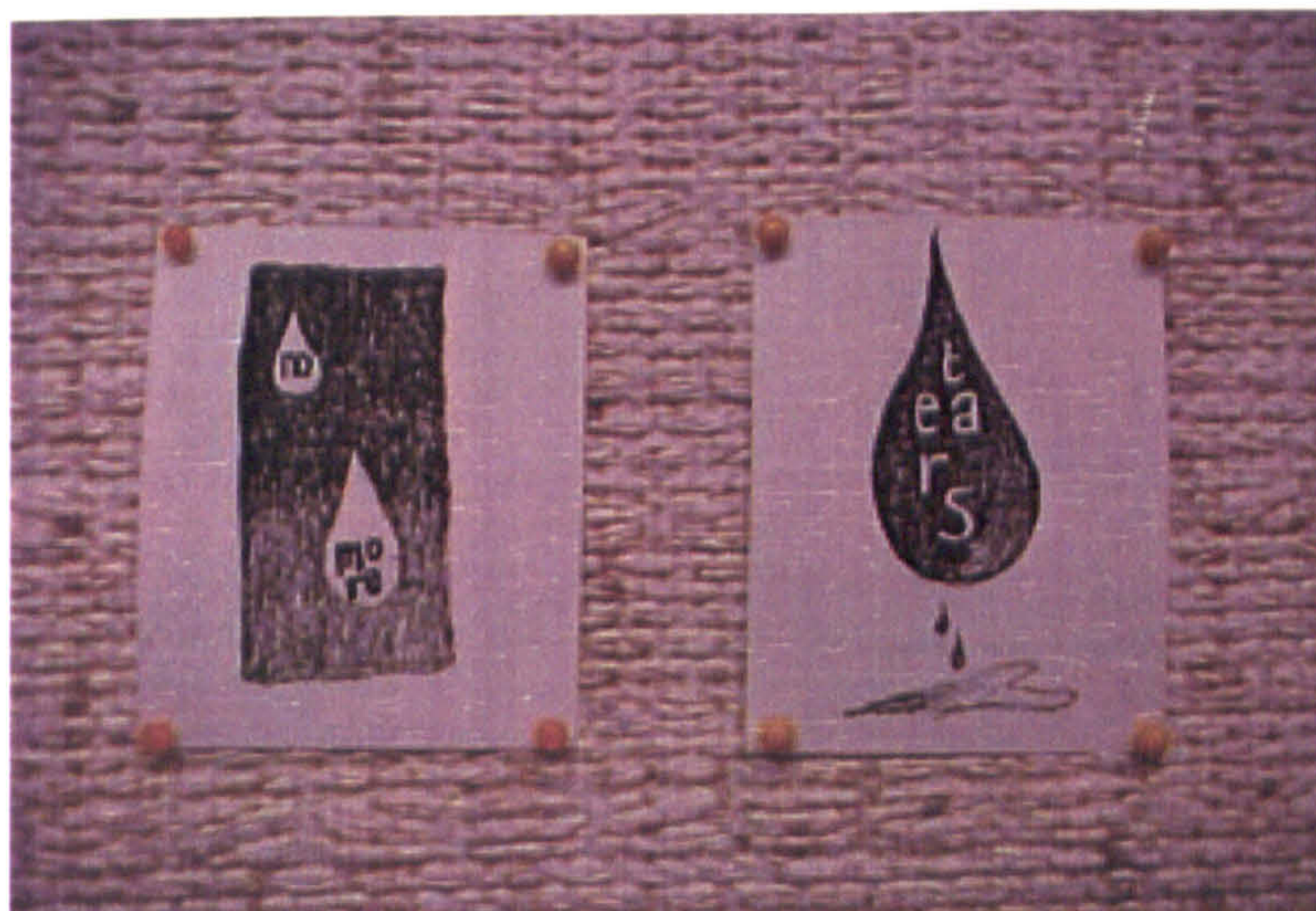


*Our Mam and the Crews, ink drawing on paper, detail.*





Detail showing letter from Headmaster.

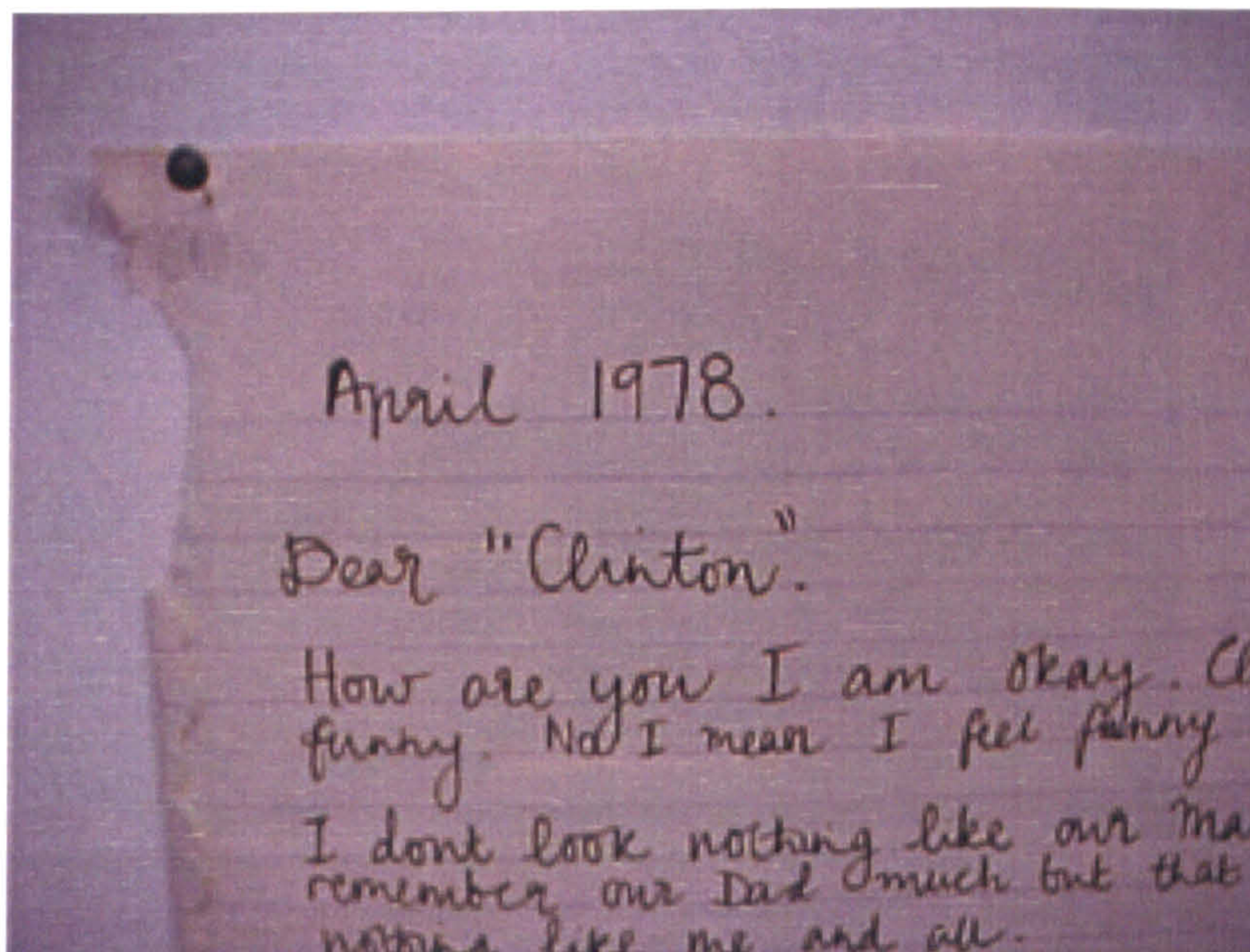


Carlton Johnson in 'Neil Dee Jay', detail.



Julie Lee is a Nosey Cow, pencil drawing on paper.





*Diary Entry, Letter to Clinton, detail.*

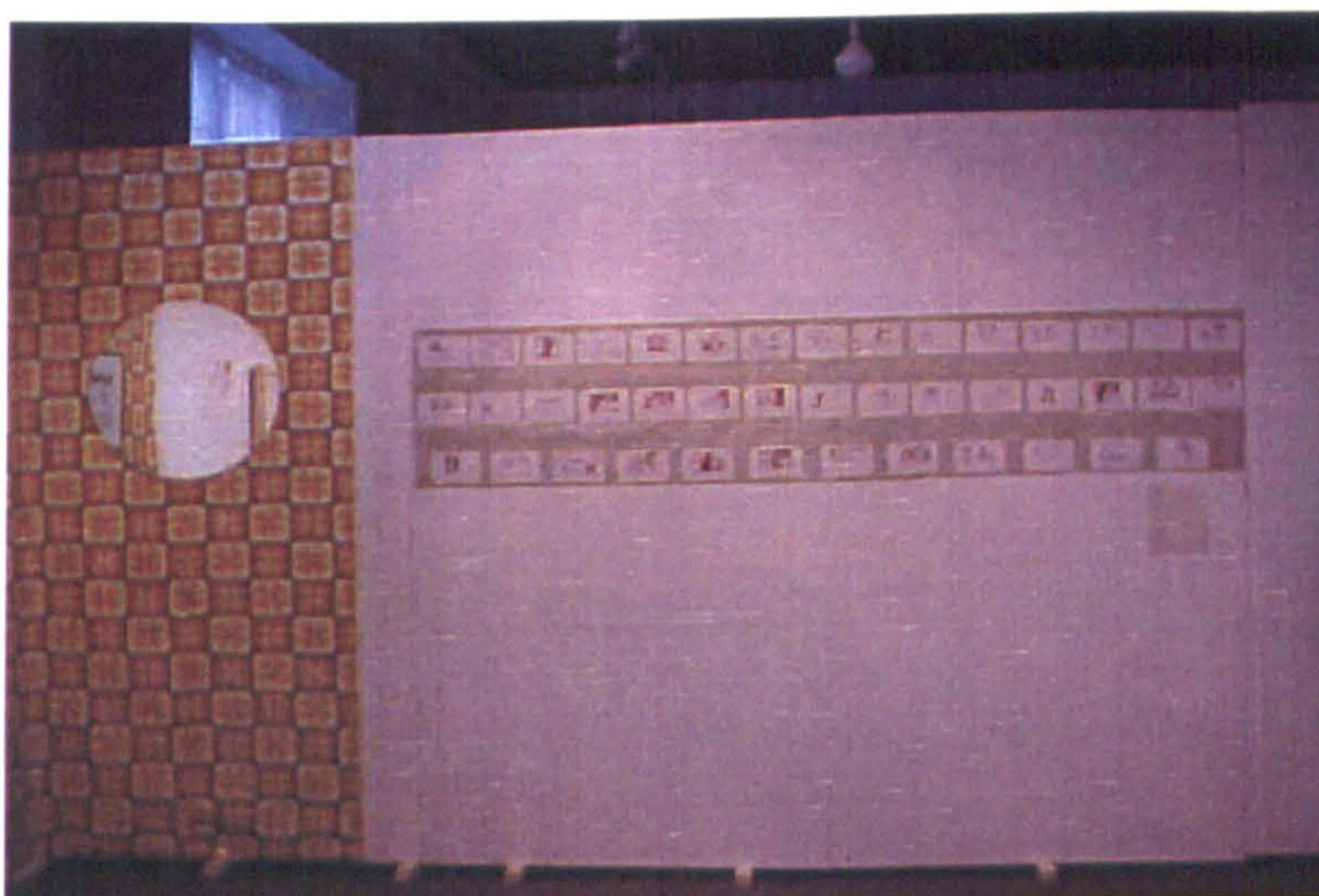


*Folk Club, still from short video piece, showing 'The Macdonald Sisters from Stornoway'.*



*Bad Tuesday, detail. Ink drawing on paper, mounted on wallpaper.*





Installation shot, showing *The Bleach Bath* (left) and *Bad Tuesday*.

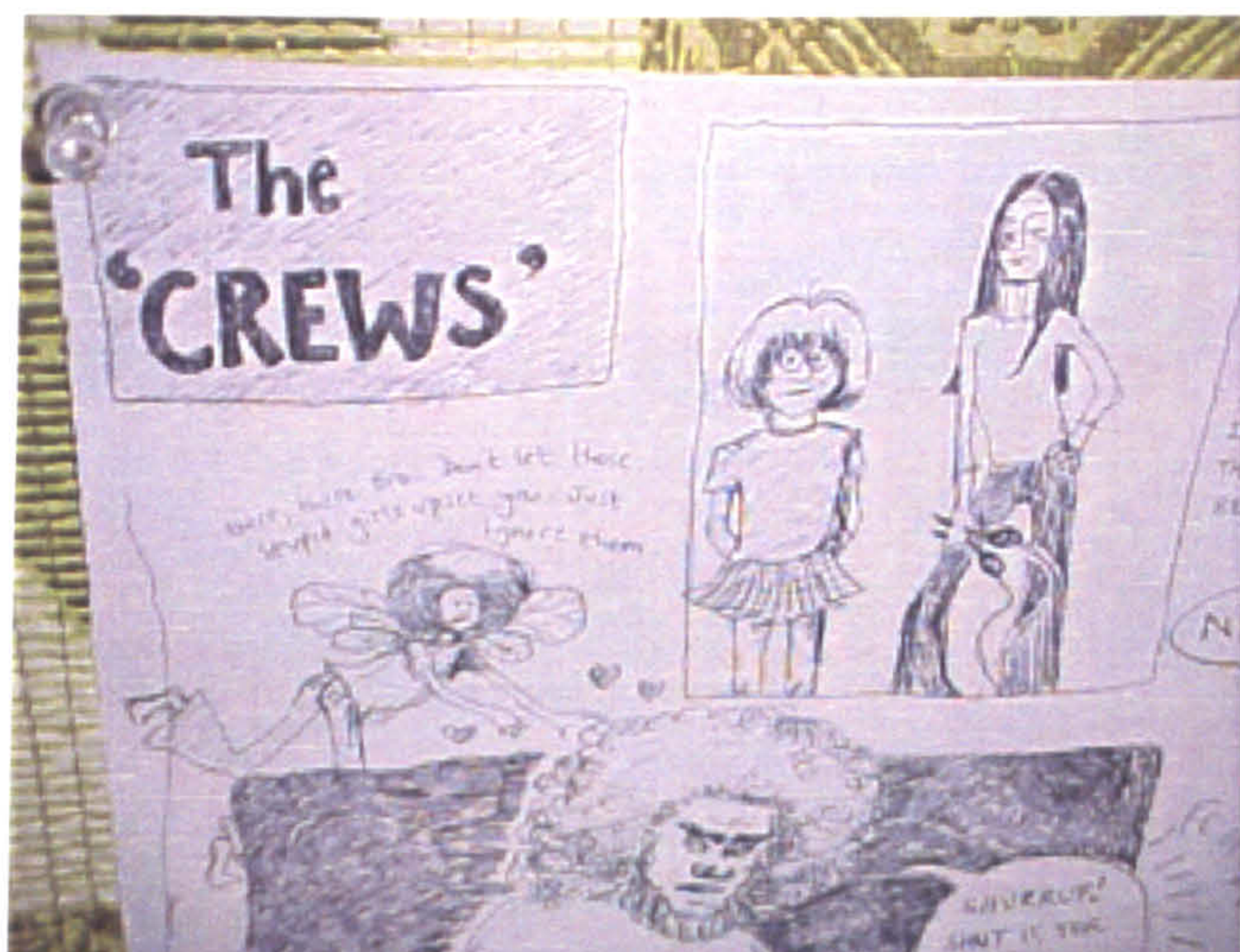


*Our Mam*, installation shot showing Carlton's Mum's silhouette, her wardrobe and the cartoon *Nan and Grandad Mottram* (framed biro drawing on wallpaper).

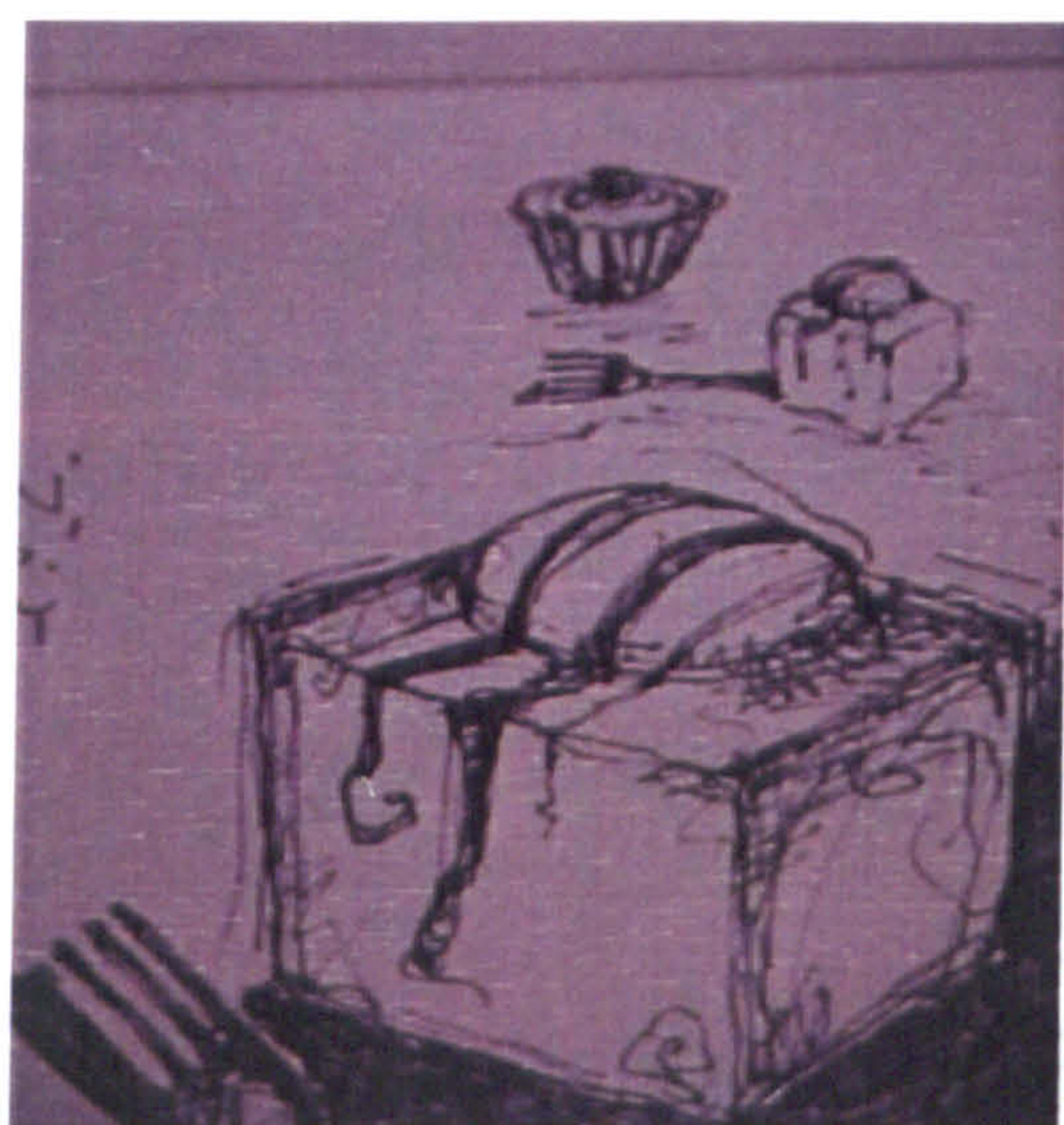


*Our Mam and Dad's Wedding Photo*, biro drawing on paper.





*Them Shitty Little Girls, biro drawing on paper, mounted on wallpaper, detail.*



*Fondant Fancies at Nan Mottram's, ink drawing on paper, detail.*



*Carlton's Mum's Wardrobe, detail.*