



EX NIHILO

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EX NIHILO: EMPTINESS AND ART

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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0.0 INTRODUCTION: IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS NOTHING

"In art it is hard to say anything as good as: saying nothing"
Wittgenstein (1980: 23e)

"I have no proposition...and therefore I have no fallacy"
Nagarjuna (Huntington 1989: 107)

The purpose of this document is the elaboration of a system of thought that sees art as an empty structure, in a way that is analogous to the conceptual mechanics of Buddhism. What is meant exactly by the term Buddhism will, I hope, become clearer as the reader moves through it. Likewise, it is hoped that a perspective on art that sees it as sharing certain conceptual tendencies with Buddhism will emerge. What must be borne in mind for the meantime is the following; firstly, that the concept of emptiness in Buddhism is not nihilism¹, and this holds true for the system that I describe; it is my position that much art is empty (in a way) and necessarily so. Secondly, that both systems (though not exclusively), are ways of relating, rather than bodies of text or specific images. Wittgenstein's view of philosophy is analogous to this last point in that he insisted on seeing philosophy as a method rather than a science (Perloff 1996: 46). This tendency of mode over product, or way of relating over the thing made, is a critical underlying component of what follows in this document and in my practical production.

Margolis describes artworks as "physically embodied, culturally emergent entities" (1999: 68). My view would adjust this definition for the works dealt with to: physically presenting, culturally emergent 'question-catalysts'. What this means is that, firstly, the works are shown to the viewer as some form of concrete object (equal to Margolis' physical embodiment above). Second, that they are the product of the overall context called culture (Margolis' cultural emergentism), and third, that this presentation triggers a response within the viewer which can be likened to the posing of a question. In this they function in a similar way to the Zen *koan*. There is the presentation of something that has imbedded within its structure, either materially or conceptually, the potential to create questions within the mind of the viewer, the most productive of which either lack an answer or engage in what I call showing rather than telling. This showing functions extra-linguistically, outside the realm of what can be told (explained in a logical, narrative, linear way).

Danto's discussion of the place of art in society portrays Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) as exemplary;

The painting was used as a fund-raiser for Spanish war relief but those who filed past it only used it as a mirror to reflect attitudes *already* in place, and in later years it required art historical knowledge to know what was going on: it stood as a handsome backdrop for pick-ups at the Museum of Modern Art, or a place to meet a date, like the clock at the Biltmore Hotel.... So in the end it did about as much for the ravaged villagers as Auden's poem did for dead Yeats or Yeats' poem did for his slaughtered patriots, making nothing relevant happen, simply memorializing, enshrining, spiritualizing, constituting a kind of cenotaph to house the fading memories, about at the level of a

¹ In that it is not an overall disavowal and dismissal of the world. This is not to say that the two do not have something of a common flavour by way of the fact that they both begin from the point of view of a negation and/or denial of some aspects of the world.

religious ceremony whose function it is to confess the extreme limitation of our power to make anything happen.
(Danto 1986: 3)

Danto goes on to explain this view of art as one sired by philosophy in a kind of over-arching conspiracy (Danto calls it a “neutralizing move” (1986: 4)), that goes all the way back to Plato, who believed that art was mere imitation - twice removed from reality - and that because of this shallow relationship to the real world, it becomes mere seeming. Just the appearance of appearance (Danto 1986: 5). The placement of religion and art on the same impotent platform may account for the fact that “Religion has become an unwelcome word in critical discourse about contemporary art” (Herbert 1998: 14). Both art and religion are seen as essentially outside the reality in which people live. To go by what Plato thinks of art is to fracture the world into segregated constituents, some of which are of use, some not. Art is posited as an empty space in the negative sense (in the sense of being useless). The principle purpose of this document will be to examine the presence of certain dispositions in art that easily and coherently lend themselves to a reading that could be described as Buddhist, because it (Buddhism) sees a different kind of emptiness than much traditional western thinking has so far allowed.

Allan Kaprow said once (a good thirty or more years ago) that “young artists of today need no longer say, ‘I am a painter,’ or ‘I am a poet’ or a ‘Dancer.’ They are simply ‘Artists.’” (Alberro 2003: 26). In a related way, I see the idea of art as having spread from the idea that the artist does certain things, to the idea that the artist is one who, most importantly, sees things a certain way. This way of seeing and resultant showing concerns what I have referred to as emptiness. It is the difference between being on holiday and being holiday itself. What this intimates is that working within this mode is not the product of art, but of being the art and of its being a by-product of the artist’s perspective on the world. In his introduction to Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*, D. T. Suzuki has comparable sentiments regarding Zen;

When a man reaches this stage of ‘spiritual’ development, he is the Zen artist of life. He does not need, like the painter, a canvas, brushes, and paints; nor does he require, like the archer, the bow and arrow and target, and other paraphernalia. He has his limbs, body, head, and other parts. His Zen-life expresses itself by means of all these ‘tools’ which are important to its manifestation. His hands and feet are the brushes and the whole universe is the canvas on which he depicts his life for seventy, eighty, or even ninety years. This picture is called ‘history.’ (Suzuki, cited in Herrigel 1989: ix)

The distinction between what one makes and what one is, is seen as an empty structure whether from the viewpoint of Zen or from the elaboration of emptiness that follows in subsequent chapters of this document.

1.1 ENTROPY: CIRCLING THE DRAIN

Though the concept of entropy has come to be examined from perspectives such as evolution, information theory (also known as Shannon entropy²), economics, statistical mechanics, and others, the emphasis of this section will be to give a rough sketch of the background and growth of the concept of entropy. I am largely excluding an exhaustive account of entropy in fields such as statistical mechanics because the central kernel of entropy that concerns my research is outlined in the classical thermodynamic view that appears below.

The history of entropy has its origins in the work of mathematician Lazare Carnot, who in his work *Fundamental Principles of Equilibrium and Movement* (1803) postulated that in any natural process there is a tendency towards the dissipation of useful energy. In 1824, Carnot's son, Sadi Carnot carried forward the work of his father in his *Reflections on the Motive Power of Fire*. As the title suggests, the work was one that concerned itself with the principle of heat, which was pertinent to the problems of the time because it was heat that was used to perform work in early steam engines. Sadi Carnot specified that heat moves from hot to cold with some heat always being lost. This loss also accounts for the energy efficiency of any given machine, maximising the efficiency of a machine entails making sure that as little heat as possible is lost to the surroundings so that it can be used for work. This lost caloric, as Carnot junior termed it, was an early formulation of what later came to be termed entropy.

Thirty years later Clausius coined the term entropy from the Greek *tropē*: transformation. Clausius defined entropy as "the measure of the mechanical unavailability of energy" (O'Neill 1990: 8). O'Neill informs us that "Though the quantity of energy remains constant, available energy, tends to become unavailable energy, a process that is unidirectional, irreversible, and leads inevitably to a 'heat death' or total unavailability of energy, complete inert uniformity and equilibrium" (O'Neill 1990: 8). This formulation is what came to be the core of the second law of thermodynamics, which, as it turns out, is the fine print in everyone, and everything's long term contract of existence. To clarify; the first law of thermodynamics assures us that there is a constancy of energy, that it cannot be created or destroyed, only converted from one form into another. The second law of thermodynamics writes in the proviso that while energy can be converted, its converted state will become less useful and unavailable for work. The end state of entropy (when entropy is at maximum) is a state of undifferentiated equilibrium. A simple example is a piece of heated metal in a box; as the metal cools the air inside the container will warm until the differentials in temperature between the metal and the air in the container equal zero (or close to it) and both metal and air are a uniform temperature throughout. Another commonly used example that demonstrates the irreversibility of entropy is a glass filled with liquid and ice. As the glass and its contents warm, the surrounding air in the room

² Also called Shannon's entropy. Claude Shannon was one of the pioneers of information theory. The initial research that led him to a concept of information entropy was centred on the attempt to eliminate noisy telephone connections (he was working at Bell Labs at the time). In information theory, the term entropy differs in meaning from the thermodynamic one; among other things, it can describe the randomness of a random variable, or the average number of yes/no questions that need to be asked about a given entity to resolve its value (think of the game twenty questions).

cools until they reach equilibrium, "A scotch on the rocks, left to sit, will degenerate from its original dual form of whisky on the one hand and ice-cubes on the other as the ice melts and the molecules of water mix randomly with the molecules of whisky. Moreover, if it is left to its own devices (that is, without the application of outside energy), the watery scotch will never revert spontaneously to scotch on the rocks" (O'Neill 1990: 8). The irreversibility that characterises entropy aligns with the concept of an arrow of time, in a sense verifying a direction of time; "at last a law was found which made it possible to distinguish in a scientific way the future from the past. The second law of thermodynamics permits us to explain, in a scientific way, the thus far only intuitive impression that the world tends towards the direction from yesterday to tomorrow" (Szumilewics 1975: 234- 235). In a way, what this boils down to is that one knows that it is today by observing the state of the world to be at a point where a greater degree of entropy is visible than yesterday. When I bought this bunch of bananas they were yellow, now they are black, thereby locking their yellowness to eight days ago and their blackness to today (bearing in mind that I know that bananas never revert from black to yellow).

Almost from its origin, the concept of entropy attracted philosophical attention, "the entropy concept was closely connected to the philosophical interpretation at the very moment of its birth. Clausius not only formulated this law for isolated frames, but enlarged it for the universe as a whole, putting forward his almost apocalyptic prognosis about the inexorable heat death of the world" (Szumilewics 1975: 234- 235). One would assume that the declaration of the decline of concrete reality would be a sizable piece of bait to philosophers of all descriptions. So the concept went from engineering, where it started with Sadi Carnot, to physics and mathematics (with Clausius), to neo-Thomistic³ philosophers who "assimilated Clausius' apocalyptic prognosis with great enthusiasm, in order to give new proof of God's existence" (Szumilewics 1975: 236). Mixed blessings all round.

One philosophical trend that emerged in the later half of the 19th century was Energetism (a form of neutral monism⁴ fathered by the scientist Wilhelm Ostwald⁵), which according to Szumilewics "may be considered as a critical reaction to the difficulties in which the discovery of the entropy law places physics" (Szumilewics 1975: 239). Szumilewics elaborates on Ostwald's view as follows:

mechanics was not consistent with the second law of thermodynamics. His diagnosis for this 'serious illness' of science was to throw out mechanism and its fundamental term 'mass' and replace it with the term 'energy'... Ostwald was fascinated by the new picture of the world. The irreversibility of processes contrary to the reversibility according to mechanics is very important for mankind, wrote Ostwald. Not only physics changed but philosophy as well. Ostwald proclaimed that by removing the term 'mass' he had destroyed the foundations of the materialistic trends in philosophy forever. Between 'energy' and 'spirit' there are no differences. (Szumilewics 1975: 240)

³ The late nineteenth century revival of the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Championed most notably by Pope Leo XIII. However, it has gathered endorsements from most Popes since, including Pope John Paul II.

⁴ Generally stated, monisms concern seeing the nature of reality as essentially one. Neutral monism is distinguished from other forms of monism by the belief that the nature of this oneness of reality is neither mental nor physical (Studenberg 2005: online)

⁵ One of the pioneers of physical chemistry. Ostwald was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1909.

In 1895, Ostwald declared, "we may eliminate at last the horrible gap between matter and spirit which remained from the times of Descartes" (Szumilewics 1975: 240). The "mechanism" (Szumilewics 1975: 240) which Ostwald took such issue with (among others such as Bergson), was a marker of Newtonian physics that was by this time, more and more under threat from the second law (Lewicki 1984: 71) which was at the sharp end of a cluster of disciplines that upset the Newtonian worldview which Duszenko characterizes as one that placed a lot of stock in the "solidity of matter and objective character of its existence" (Duszenko 1997, online). This is not a view reinforced by fields such as statistical thermodynamics, in which probability and a degree of uncertainty are integral and inherent.

The irreversibility of entropy was also valuable from a moral (not to mention spiritual) standpoint for Ostwald because "The responsibility for every act has sense only if the act cannot be repeated, if what is done is done forever" (Szumilewics 1975: 240). So here, the movement of a concept initially devised by an engineer to a place in a moral philosophy is in evidence. Setting aside the fact that Ostwald's concepts were almost surely scientifically flawed, which the physicist Ludwig Boltzmann took special pains to point out, Ostwald was essentially correct in his criticism of mechanism; "The reciprocal effect of his philosophy upon science was to show that mechanistic methods and stereotypes must be changed if the development of science was to continue" (Szumilewics 1975: 241). The fact that Ostwald tried to use the concept in ways that were not foreseen at the moment of its construction shows some kind of attraction towards the idea of entropy that reaches beyond its mathematical formulation. The extensive tendency of the concept has in fact led to an increase in its popularity since its formulation, leading to widespread effects in many fields.

1.2 ENTROPIC THINKING: TRANSIENCE AND UNCERTAINTY

When the great scientific revolution of the late nineteenth century shattered the foundations of Newtonian physics, based on certainty and the unfailing cause-and-effect chain, one of its indirect results was a drastic change in man's attitude toward his universe. His world was no longer reliable and safe. Statistical probability replaced neat causal relations, and other similarly disconcerting ideas abounded: neither Freud's discoveries in psychology nor Darwin's theory of evolution helped restore man's faith in nature... One such concept which originated in science and subsequently entered literature, was entropy. (Lewicki 1984: 71)

After having permeated the areas of engineering, physics, and left traces of itself in areas such as philosophy, entropy spread to fields such as history and literature. The primary focus of what follows will be the latter. Lewicki tells us that the move into literature was particularly strong in America where it took firm root (Lewicki 1984). According to Lewicki, one of the factors at play was the influence of another American literary phenomenon, naturalism. He points out that "naturalism can easily be found in almost all American fiction written through the 1940s, which is not the case anywhere else. This long-lasting fascination, related to an interest in the laws and processes of nature, made American writers more receptive to notions related to the natural sciences." Lewicki asserts that the other factor in popularising entropy (in America at least) was "a general knowledge of, and fascination with science" (Lewicki 1984: 76). One further factor attributed by Lewicki was a growing interest and concern with apocalypse in American culture. This fear of some form of impending doom was an essential factor in "determining the state of the American national consciousness, regardless of whether the destruction is to be brought by fire or ice" (Lewicki 1984: 77).

The concept of entropy was introduced to literature through history. Henry Adams' theory of historical development was an adaptation of the entropy law to historical process; "In the process of translating a physical term into a historiographical one, Adams established two crucial principles which greatly contributed to the term's subsequent popularity in twentieth-century American literature. First, he found it possible to treat what he called Vital Energy, and the form of it called Social Energy, in the same way as any other type of energy, and thus to submit them to the processes described by the second law of thermodynamics" (Lewicki 1984: 71-72). Norbert Wiener later applied the law of entropy to the theory of information. In *The Human Use of Human Beings*, he claimed "it is possible to treat sets of messages as having an entropy like sets of states of the external world" (cited in Lewicki 1984: 73). This then opened the door for literature to see entropy as not only a physical phenomenon, but one that was very close to the stuff of literature and fiction; communication between people (Lewicki 1984: 73). The publication of Norbert Wiener's book also contributed to this general awareness of scientific achievements. The second edition of *The Human Use of Human Beings*, published in 1954 provides, according to Lewicki, probably the best introduction to the general implications of the notion. Along with this, the book was probably widely read by many contemporary writers of the time, becoming "something of a modern American

classic" (Tanner, cited in Lewicki 1984: 76).

Even after the decline of naturalism in American literature, there was an increase of interest in the idea of entropy. Lewicki points out that Darwin's theory was more popular in America for almost a century, due to the fact that its "assumptions correspond to some basic American myths of social advancement and achievement. To substitute for it the second law was to vouch for a basically pessimistic Weltanschauung, to admit that while we can achieve temporary and local improvement, disintegration and decay cannot be escaped" (Lewicki 1984: 76). Lewicki seems here to be suggesting a sea change in the way that people perceived the world and their place in it, and that even the possibility that an entropic world view can be entertained is to concede, essentially, that one accepts it to be a valid picture of the state of affairs. The idea that entropy (accompanied by the notion of transience) had begun a widespread permeation of culture is evident in the passage that follows;

Entropic or entropy-related, concepts can be found in literature long before the notion was formulated by scientists, and Pope's *Dunciad* is frequently cited as an example. Such works were, however, neither numerous nor typical, and the real career of the concept (if not yet of the term itself) begins in the middle of the nineteenth century. The idea of a *Zeitgeist* is probably one of the most elusive and difficult to pin down, but we may consider the following concurrence in time. The second law of thermodynamics was enunciated by Clausius in a paper delivered in Berlin in 1850, the term *entropy* was proposed two years later. Almost simultaneously, in 1853, Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* dramatized the concept of the gradual but inescapable decay and dissolution of the physical world – and in the same year Herman Melville wrote *Bartleby the Scrivener*. It is most unlikely that Dickens or Melville was familiar with Clausius' work, yet the same philosophical assumption was shared by all three. (Lewicki 1984: 77)

Turning to Lewicki's case study of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the effect and presence of entropy within the story can be clearly identified. The story revolves around the unnamed narrator, who is a lawyer. The lawyer initially has in his employ three copyists, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut. Turkey can only work efficiently until noon, Nippers is irritable, unstable in the mornings, and mild in the afternoons. Ginger Nut, who is only twelve, has as his job the duty of providing the other two scriveners with ginger-nut cakes.

The law office seems to be self-sufficient; the 'stillness of the chambers' is stressed, and all descriptions center on the four people working together from early morning till late afternoon. Melville succeeds thus in creating what we call an effect of the closed system, which is strengthened with another idea entailed by the entropic situation – equilibrium. Equilibrium is one of the most fundamental notions in the theory of entropy, without which the process need not increase, and Melville achieves a similar effect by balancing Turkey's and Nipper's temperaments: 'Their fits relieved each other, like guards. When Nipper's was on, Turkey's was off; and *vice versa*.' (Lewicki 1984: 77)

Shortly after the lawyer hires Bartleby, he notes that the newly employed scrivener appears "pallidly neat" and "incurably forlorn" (Lewicki 1984: 78). Bartleby gradually becomes a closed system himself, staying in the office and surviving on ginger-nut cakes. He eventually begins to refuse to do any more work. "Just as the 'elementary disorder' is the source of the entropic process which subsequently expands, Bartleby's behavior begins to influence other people. They are annoyed

by him, but also seem to fall under his spell" (Lewicki 1984: 78). Eventually Bartleby becomes a collection of energy that cannot be converted into work, the maximum state of entropy. Towards the end, he flatly refuses to do the work that he is employed for and has to be forcefully removed from the premises and is sent to jail where he keeps refusing to eat or talk and dies "huddled at the base of the wall...wasted" (Melville, cited in Lewicki 1984: 79). While his employer feels that Bartleby's inertia is not caused by laziness, he cannot place what the real cause would be. Bartleby appears to know the cause, but does not care to explain it when challenged to by his employer:

'Why, how now? What next?' exclaimed I, 'do no more writing?'

'no more.'

'And what is the reason?'

'Do you not see the reason for your-self?' he indifferently replied." (Melville, cited in Lewicki 1984: 78-79)

Bartleby is disinterested, mechanical, uninteresting, he sees no point in existing. This psychological state has come about, I would argue, as the result of his seeing the world through entropy goggles. What I mean by this is that one of the psychological effects of embracing the concept of entropy is not a world view per se, but rather the implosion of a view of the world that posits a stable, lasting, predictable world. As Lewicki stresses, entropy in literature became a lens through which to view reality, it was "not so much a mode, or style, as a basically different way of perceiving one's *raison d'être*, teleology, and the meaning of the world around us" (Lewicki 1984: 80). The kind of thinking encased within the concept of entropy presents itself neatly in the words of Nathaniel West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*: "Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned G D A E. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature... the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction" (West, cited in Lewicki 1984: 81-82).

The concept of entropy moves from various fields⁶ to literature, from where it can make the final jump to popular consciousness. Concerning the influence of early entropic writing such as Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Lewicki tells us; "It would be difficult and indeed superfluous, to establish that *Bartleby the Scrivener* ...contributed directly to the themes popularity in contemporary writing, but they certainly constitute an important historical source of inspiration, without which the writings of Thomas Pynchon, Susan Sontag, or John Updike might not have been received with such readiness and understanding" (Lewicki 1984: 82).

The loss of certainty is also a key attribute of entropy, not directly by way of content, but rather by implication and consequence. Patrick O'Neill's conception of entropy hinges on the erosion of certainty as a central feature:

'give me a place to stand and I will move the earth' has been a rallying cry of Fausts since time immemorial. That Archemidian point of purchase has been looked for and discovered successively in nature worship, tribal gods, an omniscient personal God, the power of human reason and common sense, the power of human and natural

⁶ As was shown in the preceding section; from the sciences, to philosophy, to history, and finally infiltrating literature (the final step before popular consciousness)

creativity, the power of scientific, educational, and industrial progress. The certainty of one firm spot in a turbulent world has unfailingly enabled us to survive with ever renewed optimism the ravages of plague, famine, and war throughout the ages, even down to the refinements of our own day, in the name of God or king or country...It is a commonplace that the twentieth century, to the extent that its intellectual climate can be gauged from the discourse of its philosophers, artists, and intellectuals, has pervasively lost its ability to trust in that saving certainty. (O'Neill 1990: 4)

O'Neill uses the notion of entropy "as a metaphor for the crumbling of ordered systems, the breakdown of traditional perceptions of reality, the erosion of certainty" (O'Neill 1990: 8). O'Neill situates the beginnings of this tendency with Copernicus' discovery of the fact that the solar system where we live is heliocentric (contrary to the churches position at the time), to O'Neill, this discovery that we are not the centre of the universe was the first in a long line of certainty-shaking concepts and discoveries. Common sense is not as common as many would like, mathematics and physics are becoming less comprehensible not only to the layman but also to natives of those fields (O'Neill 1990: 14), Lacanian models of the individual are constructed which posit us as the mere loci of interrelationships (O'Neill 1990: 16). Reality itself, along with the attending issues of whether it can be known or trusted, has been under scrutiny since Descartes⁷ at least (O'Neill 1990: 15).

Many may be inclined to agree with O'Neill after observing the fluid world in which they currently live. One would have only to ask him/herself what it is that they (as individuals and otherwise) know to be certain, then consider whether and how many others will agree (and for how long). It is in all likelihood a short and shortening list. Certainly.

Entropic tendencies in the sense that O'Neill uses the concept are also visible in the broad fabric of postmodernism. The term postmodernism "appears in a range of contexts, from academic essays to clothing advertisements in the New York Times. Its meaning differs with context to such an extent that it seems to function like Levi-Strauss' 'floating signifier': not so much to express a value as to hold open a space for that which exceeds expression. This broad capacity of the term postmodernism testifies to the scope of the cultural changes it attempts to compass" (Ermarth 2000: 699).

It is doubtful that there has ever been to such an extent, a cultural/historical entity that had at its core such a tendency towards resisting definition (while at the same time applying to itself the synchronous label: postmodern), and as a result, being the cause of anxiety and uncertainty for those who would make the attempt. If the entropic mindset was a palpable thing when Melville wrote about *Bartleby*, I would argue that it has only strengthened in the interim. This radical instability and the paralyzing doubt that come with it, is I would argue, the functional mode of artists such as Martin Creed (1968) (to be dealt with later). On the point of how postmodernity has not helped stabilize our view of the world in the last three decades, Ermarth goes on to conclude; "From physics to philosophy, from politics to art, the description of the world has changed in ways that upset some basic beliefs of modernity" (Ermarth 2000: 700).

⁷ Seventeenth century philosopher "heralded as the first modern philosopher" (Smith 2003: online). Famous for (among other things) formulating a new way of accounting for physical phenomena via mechanical explanations (Smith 2003: online)

1.3 TRANSCIENCE AND BUDDHISM

While the phenomenon of entropy may have acquired its name fairly recently, it would probably be accurate to say that the naming did not coincide with the discovery. Though impossible to pin down the time, it is likewise probably not disputable that people have always had an inkling of the fact that things have a tendency of winding down, dying, lessening. The second law of thermodynamics merely constituted one of the scientific nails in the coffin lid for those who held on to a stable vision of reality and grasped on to science as the fountain of truth about the world, as something that would confirm the aforementioned (assumed) stability. Science no longer confirms this stability and neither does Buddhism, furthermore, Buddhism never has. Before engaging with Buddhism generally, I will briefly tie the concept of entropy to what may broadly be called its Buddhist equivalent: impermanence. The parallel between the two concepts leads on to the key concept of emptiness in Buddhism, which will be covered later.

Beginning at approximately the beginning, the founder of Buddhism (Buddha) was born between the seventh and fifth century BCE near the present-day border of India and Nepal, and was originally named Siddhattha Gotama, son of Suddhodana, the leader of a small group called the Sakka, and his wife Mahamaya (Gowans 2003: 17-18). At the time of his birth he was examined by religious authorities who found that he possessed the thirty-two marks that were particular to one who would become a great man (Gowans 2003: 18). The pronouncement of potential greatness came with two possibilities; he would become either a great ruler or an enlightened spiritual leader. Preferring the former rather than the latter, Suddhodana sheltered his son from all the unpleasantnesses of life, creating a stable world within the palace walls within which Siddhattha lived for a large part of his life, sealed off from reality. Though accounts vary somewhat, the gist of the events that led Siddhattha to pursue a spiritual life is the same. It goes something like this; "one day he left the palace and saw a decrepit, bent-over old man walking with a stick to support him. Thus Siddhattha realized that human beings are not forever young: we all age and grow old. On a second outing, he saw a man who was extremely ill. Thus Siddhattha realized that human beings are not forever healthy: we are all liable to sickness. On a third excursion, he saw a dead man in a funeral procession. Thus Siddhattha realized that human beings do not live forever: we all die eventually" (Gowans 2003: 18). It was after this that Siddhattha set out to find a solution to the problems of transience and suffering.

The result of the Buddha's experiences after leaving the palace on those occasions and seeing the trajectory of the arrow of time⁸, is that Buddhism developed three definitive statements concerning the nature of the world: "(1) all is impermanent, (2) all is suffering, and (3) all is without ego or self. Everything is impermanent" (Stambaugh 1990: 2). Here it could be concluded that the entropy concept and the concept of impermanence (anicca) relate to us the same content: that nothing survives or maintains indefinitely. Any satisfaction with transience is itself transient, which leads us

⁸The inexorable movement of time in a forward direction. See section 1.1

back towards dissatisfaction and the unsatisfactory (dukkha in Pali, duhkha, in Sanskrit) nature of reality (Kalupahana 1992: 69). The word dukkha translates literally as pain or anguish and is usually interpreted as suffering, though "In its religious and philosophical contexts dukkha is, however, suggestive of an underlying sense of unsatisfactoriness or unease that is felt to mar even apparently pleasant experiences" (Hinnells 1995: 142). This sense of unease can be situated within the realm of uncertainty and is equally valid to be seen as a characteristic of both the Buddhist's impermanence and the condition of living in an entropic world.

1.4 TRANSCIENCE ENACTED: WATCHING THE ARROW OF TIME

The aim of the following section is to further the exposition of what has been laid out thus far with regard to the entropic mindset and the concept of transience in Buddhism. This duo of concept clusters will be explained via a parallel that I see as analogous in the development of garden design in Europe as influenced by Buddhist concepts. Through the example of the production of Janine Antoni (1964-) (and to a lesser extent, Sanford Biggers (1970)) it is also hoped that the functioning of transience in art will become apparent as a strategy that dovetails with entropic and Buddhist thinking. What is essentially posited is that the introduction of transience into the very structure of an artwork rather than just the theme of transience represented by an artwork is a move that has deep sympathies with so called Buddhist thinking.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century the Chinese garden began to gain in popularity in England, introduced via the general interest in China that had recently come about as a result of the increase in contact between Europe and China (Baas 2005: 14). Baas accounts for the ready acceptance of Chinese Gardening principles by pointing out that Europe at the time was taking quite strongly to the idea of romanticism. Among the elements of this movement were a longing for the past (nostalgia), an increase in the popularity of the picturesque and the sublime, and the heightening of a sensibility that centred around the transitory nature of human life “newly understood as an expression of nature rather than of God” (Baas 2005: 13). This sense of the transitory and fleeting nature of life was also one of the central pillars of the Taoist-Buddhist perspective that came hand in hand with Chinese Garden design (Baas 2005: 13). Baas reinforces this with the Japanese term *wabi-sabi* which connotes a “simple [sometimes called rustic] beauty that evokes a sense of the transience of life” (Baas 2005: 4).

I use garden design as an example here because there may be a productive metaphor with art production; both gardens and art are contrived structures that are constructed according to deeper assumptions that exist within the culture that they are made in. Formal European gardens were intended to communicate a recognition of mans victory over nature (Baas 2005: 14-15) whereas Chinese gardens were “calculated to engender a spirit of humble, even melancholic, contemplation of our place in the natural cycle” (Baas 2005: 14-15). The idea of transience is brought out in the gardens by the conscious choice of trees that will either lose foliage or change colour with the seasons, or by the placement of buildings that appear to be susceptible to, or in the process of decay (Baas 2005: 15). The Chinese garden appears to be constructed from components that call to our attention the inexorable movement of time (What was termed in the section on entropy, the arrow of time). While there are many examples of art from both Asia and Europe that have impermanence as their content (as an easy example Dutch *Vanitas* theme paintings spring to mind), the work itself has, as a general rule survived rather well. Relatively recently, however, artists have constructed works that fuse more thoroughly with the concept of transience.

In 2001, Sanford Biggers made *Om*, a floor painting executed with coloured sand. With its bright colours and swirling arabesques, it looks like the work of many graffiti artists around the world. The sand painting also has a particular appeal to the Buddhists (predominantly of Tibet). Generally, sand paintings, or sand mandalas take a long time to make, and once made are usually what many people would refer to as beautiful and often, intricate, labours. The work exists for a brief time and then is swept away. No doubt it went much the same way when Biggers had finished; the sand was dispensed with and all that remained was the documentation, which in this case was a video. The way that I have come to experience this work however, is even further from the event itself than the video, I know of this work because I have seen a picture, a still culled from the video, which was culled from the artwork. The way that I first knew of Tibetan sand paintings is one stage further, by description. Transience necessitates documentation as an expedient, which may eventually supervene on the original work by functioning as a place-holder (cast your mind back to the usage of the term Tao mentioned earlier). Not only is the actual work ephemeral, but also its documentation can behave like an empty cipher, that provisionally represents the work (by pointing to it) but does not provide an exhaustive account. The strongest feeling that I have about a performative work that is presented to me as a picture and description is one of having missed it, leaving one with the task of re-remembering the work as a mental exercise.

In the context of short-lived performances and their photographic documentation, Martha Buskirk has this to say:

The specific issues raised by these images intersect with the challenge posed by a wide range of performance and other ephemeral manifestations. All too many works from the 1960s and 1970s can be only faintly apprehended through published and oral history accounts that have circulated after the fact, supplemented by sparse documentation often produced because someone just happened to be on hand with a camera. Even works that are well known may be represented by a single image or a small set that can convey little of a long and complex activity. (Buskirk 2003: 219)

Furthermore, the documentation that does exist provides a limited entry to somewhat distant manifestations (Buskirk 2003: 15).

Another example of a work that has ephemerality as one of its components is Janine Antoni's *Gnaw* (1991). *Gnaw* consists of two 600 pound cubes of chocolate and lard that the artist gnawed and bit until her mouth could no longer gain purchase on the blocks. The result of this activity was that the side and top corners of the blocks are carved (chewed) away, leaving the blocks looking eroded but still retaining the basic structure in which they started. To take an entropic standpoint, it could be asserted that there is a process at work that leads toward equilibrium; Antoni bites and spits chocolate until she is no longer able and the blocks yield until they reach a shape at which Antoni can no longer (or no longer has the will to) affect further change. Entropy has reached its maximum

and work is no longer possible given the parameters of the system. The work is also firmly fixed in terms of the arrow of time; from the moment of their making the blocks start to degrade. This is most visible in the lard cube, which eventually collapses. The nature of the work is such that it must be constantly remade, leading to a constant re-enactment that is cyclical in nature and could be characterised as both different and the same every time.

Gnaw is a work that speaks on many levels to issues of temporality. Its making required repetition and endurance, with Antoni biting off the chocolate and lard over many days, until her mouth was covered with blisters. The work then began to unmake itself as soon as it was complete, with the chocolate and the lard showing evidence of aging, if at different rates... Thus the experience of the work, including the relationship of its components to one another, changes depending on when and in what part of the cycle one sees it, and also diverges from photographic records of its appearance. (Buskirk 2003: 8)

Gnaw is neither entirely transient because it is remade, nor permanent, because it degrades, but exists in a state of flux and constant change. As Buskirk has brought to our attention, because of this flux it is difficult to fix via documentation, even in exhibited form one sees the work singularly every time it is viewed as a slice of the overall timeline. Thought of in this way seeing the work is much like seeing a still frame taken from a video piece.

Before Antoni, movements like Arte Povera and artists that influenced it such as Yves Klein (1928-1962) and Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) could be characterised as having a preoccupation with “a vision of continuous process and change, where energy flows through all elements, where past, present and future are related through memory and layering of meaning, where natural and artificial are not seen as distinct categories but as part of a complex and dynamic whole” (Christov-Bakargiev 1999: 206). While temporality cannot be said to be the entirety of what these artists were trying to convey, it is our focus now because the inclusion of the factor of impermanence as a part works of art goes some way towards weakening the boundary between art and life, as seeing it as an empty structure. The idea of sitting down in a garden and observing the colour of the leaves, and the idea of sitting down and looking at *Gnaw*, bear a strong similarity. In both cases, the viewer observes cyclical processes of decay / decline and regeneration against a general backdrop of slow, overall entropic breakdown.

In the following sections (2.1 to 2.4), I will deal more closely with Buddhism specifically focusing on other aspects of Buddhism, the most important of which being emptiness (which ties to transience and entropy), and the *koan*. Attendant to these concerns is an examination of what will be broadly referred to as Buddhism⁸, along with the concept of non-duality that is built in to this way of thinking, followed by a theoretical sketch of emptiness. This will then lead on to the Zen *koan* and an engagement with Buddhism’s view on language and its possible role as a means of showing rather than telling.

⁸ As I have stated before, a thoroughgoing differentiation of all the various camps of Buddhism would not be in the interests of expedience. The examination will focus on commonalities that are germane to my research.



(Cameron et al 2000: 26-27)



Janine Antoni
Case
Blocks of lard and chocolate
gnawed by the artist (600 lbs each)
1992
60.9 x 60.9 x 60.9 cm

University of Cape Town

2.1 BUDDHISM: SOME CALMING GENERALIZATIONS

The purpose of this section is to sketch roughly the Buddhist religion in a way that I will call broadly inclusive. It is not my aim to take on the task of discriminating thoroughly between differing camps of nuance within the Buddhist tradition. Such an approach, apart from its lack of pertinence to this paper and the work for which it attempts to lay a conceptual ground, would also be too large an undertaking for the scope of this document.

As far as doctrinal homogeneity goes, Buddhism does not rank highly on the list of world religions that exhibit self-enclosedness. A greater degree of doctrinal similarity can be found within Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Adherents.com 2005). This said, there are commonalities within Buddhism, and it is predominantly with these core concepts that I will concern myself in this and other sections of this document. I am personally not a Buddhist in most senses of the word. The use of so-called Buddhist concepts and thought systems within my work arises as a kind of necessity rather than as something prior in the sense that I do not work in the way in which I do because I feel the need to further the ends of Buddhism. It will hopefully be conveyed to the reader during the course of this document that my principle concern is not Buddhism, but rather certain unnamed and possibly unnameable ways of thinking the world that happen to bear much in common with Buddhism. As a concept cluster, Buddhism comes closer to the way of relating that is the core of my work than any other system I have yet encountered.

Interest in Buddhist teachings and practices is not as recent a phenomenon as it may seem (Baumann 2001: 29). Nevertheless, it is true that Buddhism has received more publicity in the relative present. Tiger Woods, Tina Turner, Richard Gere, Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys, even the character Lisa from the animated series *The Simpsons*, have all been called Buddhists of some form. This, along with the amount of so-called Zen, bric-a-brac that one can buy near a surprising number of till-points, have ensured that Buddhism, even if not understood to any great degree, is (and has been) a popular phenomenon in many societies.

Almost from its beginning, Buddhism has hybridised with other entities, for example, its introduction into Japan led to the development of a mixture of the indigenous Shinto belief system and Chan Buddhism, which migrated, from China via what is now Korea where it also grafted and intermingled with other systems (Lafleur, et al. 1992). Following this, one should put aside the notion of a unitary Buddhism. The Buddhism that developed in India changed when it was transplanted in China, (where it would fuse with the precepts of Confucius through his later followers), the Buddhism that was transplanted into Japanese soil, and the Buddhism that eventually grew out of European soil also had their own idiosyncrasies. As stated above, though the schools do differ in various ways, certain elements are taken as given. Concepts such as the emptiness (to which I will return in greater depth later) and the interdependence of all phenomena can be said to be at the core

of Buddhist thought. The way that this thought has been received, interpreted, and adapted has varied according to context.

Western converts had already adopted Theravada or Pāli Buddhism a century ago. However, it was not the traditionalist form that was taken up, a form that places emphasis on ritual and devotional acts of merit-making and holds specific cosmological worldviews. Rather, converts from the 1880s onward adopted a form that was refashioned by Western Orientalists and South Asian modernists alike. This modernist Buddhism, which characteristically departed from hitherto traditionalist Buddhism emphasized rational, scientific, and scriptural elements in Theravada Buddhism. In contrast, so-called 'popular' or traditionalist Buddhism was devalued and considered incompatible with modern times. (Baumann 2001: 25)

Early European contact with Buddhism can be seen as far back as 1592 when the Italian Mateo Ricci arrived in China with a mind to convert the locals to Christianity. He would remain in China until his death eighteen years later. Ricci's attempt to Christianize China was unsuccessful (Baas 2005: 6). A Chinese Buddhist monk wrote the following account regarding the disparities between his system of thought and that of Ricci and his colleagues;

They cling to the idea that the Master of Heaven is the Master of Heaven, that the Buddha is the Buddha, that beings are beings... they resort to distinctions between the self and others, this and that, yes and no.... If they were not so attached to the idea of a Master of Heaven, they would not be attached to the idea of a Buddha either... and then they would begin to understand the profound thought of our Buddhism and the meaning of the expression 'to save all beings.' (Baas 2005: 6)

The passage above makes clear that the trouble stemmed from the conflict of two systems of thinking, the Jesuits seeing things in terms of strictly regimented binaries and exhibiting a tendency towards what the Buddhists call grasping, and on the other hand the Buddhists who avoided binaristic world-views and saw the solution to the problem of living in the world as non-grasping. This grasping, known as trishna is what to the Buddhist, brings about Dukkha or the unsatisfactoriness that makes existing such a bothersome endeavour for those who insist on clutching.

In any case, misunderstandings aside, the Jesuits perceived tendency to clutch meant that they returned home with their luggage filled with artefacts and information from China, just in time for the age of reason typified by Descartes. Baas sees this as beneficial because "the age of reason created a climate of questioning and tolerance in which alternative religious and philosophical traditions could be studied and analyzed" (Baas 2005: 6). For the most part, not many took extensive notice of the philosophy, but one can imagine that they found the artefacts positively charming. One can imagine that in much the same way that book sales of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* skyrocketed when the Film was released, the introduction of the cultural paraphernalia of Buddhism into a society would lead people back to the source, so to speak, and result in some learning on their part (regarding the substance of Buddhism).

The spread of Buddhist ideas begins to accelerate after the beginning of the nineteenth century when the term Buddhism starts to appear in the English language (Baas 2005: 6). To begin with

there was the English missionary R. Spence Hardy who published a book entitled *A Manual of Buddhism*. Hardy's work was translated into French and German and as a result, new scholarship appeared. By the early 1870s a "more balanced, complex assessment of Buddhism was beginning to emerge in the West.... Among the admirers of Hardy's work was the German philosopher Schopenhauer. In Buddhism's focus on desire [referred to by me above as grasping] as the cause of suffering, Schopenhauer found a parallel for his own concept of will as the desire for existence, a desire that is not particularly responsive to our rational mind and is never satisfied" (Baas 2005: 7). Schopenhauer did not necessarily furnish a means to overcome this problem but did however cleave to the thought that the contemplation of great art could provide a way to "transcend the will and achieve an experience of reality beyond desire" (Baas 2005: 7). Schopenhauer and Buddhism also have in common the idea that "the world of experience is something in the construction of which the observer is actively involved; that it is of its nature permanently shifting and, this being so, evanescent and insubstantial" (Magee 1983: 342). And following from this that "There are no concepts or categories in terms of which this undifferentiated inner reality of everything can be described, so it cannot be an object of discursive knowledge, and cannot be talked about" (Magee 1983: 342). Furthermore, it is also possible to find links between the four noble truths of Buddhism and Schopenhauer's doctrines. Two links are particularly strong; these are between the two first noble truths and corresponding doctrines held by Schopenhauer. The first two noble truths are; that "life is permeated by suffering," and secondly, "the origin of suffering lies in craving [often translated as grasping]" (Nicholls 1999: 188). These correspond respectively to; "Schopenhauer's pessimistic world-view, which derives from his conviction that the world is a wretched place...permeated by endless suffering," and his doctrine that "suffering results from the endless and ultimately aimless striving of all beings, a striving that is inevitable because all beings are manifestations of the metaphysical will, whose essence is to strive endlessly" (Nicholls 1999: 189). Schopenhauer's world as idea also leads us to Wittgenstein, who was in agreement on this point at least, and to whom I will return later.

As Baumann explains below, Buddhism as it is practiced today has undergone considerable change in the last fifty years; "Whereas traditionalist Buddhists strive to acquire 'merit' and aim for good conditions in this and the next life, in contrast most Western modernist Buddhists have abandoned the idea of rebirth. They do not share concepts such as accruing 'merit,' but rather endeavour to reach 'enlightenment' or 'awakening' in this life. Western convert Buddhists have already started to shape a 'Buddhism without beliefs'.... Concepts such as karma and reincarnation are held to be 'beliefs' that need to be checked critically against a Buddhist, existential agnosticism" (Baumann 2001: 27). Along with this selectivity, Baumann also reminds us of the importance of bearing in mind that Zen Buddhism in Japan underwent significant reinterpretation at the hands of both Japanese Buddhist philosophers and others such as Nishida Kitaro and D. T. Suzuki who both had links to western modernist philosophical streams of thought. The result of this laicizing of Zen for western audiences was that Zen practice was rationalized "through minimizing the importance of

the pietistic, ritualistic, and sacramental dimensions of practice in favor of an instrumental or goal-directed approach” (Sharf, cited in Baumann 2001: 27-28). Following on from this point Baumann writes:

Zen Buddhism was purged of so-called ‘degenerate accretions’ of tradition and culture. Instead, notions of ‘inner’ or ‘universal experience’ to be achieved through meditation training were stressed. Again, as in the case of revival Buddhism in South Asia, only a minority took over this modernized Buddhism. However, it was this 5 to 10 percent that the elite and Western observers perceived to be representative for the Buddhist traditions practiced in South Asia and Japan. (Baumann 2001: 27-28)

As it did in past times, Buddhism has changed and melted into the context in which it finds itself. In the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, “The forms of Buddhism must change so that the essence of Buddhism remains unchanged. This essence consists of living principles that cannot bear any specific formulation” (Baas 2005: 1). As Baumann informs us, global Buddhism is now comprised of a broad “spectrum of understandings and...interpretations” (Baumann 2001: 32). It has, in places, become more secular or geared itself towards various non-religious goals such as psychological well-being and stress relief. It is this pluralism and diversity that makes it less self-enclosed and monolithic than the Bahai faith⁹ or Judaism, but it also makes it more useful as a conceptual tool that has the potential to be used as something other than a religion. This approach is neatly encapsulated in the following passage from Baumann; “as modernist Buddhists have demythologized and rationalized traditionalist Buddhism—in a related way certain post-modernist Buddhists secularize and psychologize modernist Buddhism. In whatever way the current period—following that of modernist Buddhism—might be labeled, an important part is constituted by approaches and understandings that no longer refer to themselves as Buddhist” (Baumann 2001: 32).

⁹ One of the world’s youngest religions, founded in 1863 by Bahá’u’lláh, a nobleman in what was then Persia. At the core of the religion is a belief in one God who has numerous messengers; this includes Jesus, Mohammad, Zoroaster, and others. All religions are seen as manifestations of one unity.

2.2 BUDDHISM AND EMPTINESS: DIVIDING BY INFINITY

“Religion, whatever it is, is a mans total reaction upon life”
(William James quoted in Herbert 1998: 15)

From about the time of Christ, “almost all forms of Buddhism, including those transmitted into Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, have taken emptiness as their most important basic idea. (Nagao 1991: 209)

If there is one teaching that is peculiar to Buddhism alone among all the worlds religions, I would say it is the principle of sunyata (voidness or emptiness). If I were to choose one doctrine among others that best represents the core of Buddhism, I would choose the principle of sunyata. If someone asked me what is the Buddhist doctrine that is the most difficult to explain and comprehend, most misunderstood and misrepresented, I would again say it is the principle of sunyata. The importance of sunyata in every field of Mahayana Buddhism cannot be overstressed. (Chang 1974: 60)

Before proceeding, it may be necessary to briefly examine the etymology of the word *Sunyata*. Emptiness or *sunyata* in the Sanskrit is a variant of *sunya*, meaning empty. *Sunya* derives from “the root svi ‘to swell,’ the connection apparently being that something which looks swollen from the outside is hollow inside. Indian Mathematicians called the zero, which they had invented, ‘sunya’ but ‘sunya’ in this usage did not merely signify non-being” (Nagao 1991: 209). This swollenness also fits with the concepts of emptiness and zero signifying a certain potentiality (or pregnancy). Within the void that these two concepts represent, an infinity of possibilities is suggested. These possibilities also manifest in the linguistic implosiveness of the concept of emptiness. What I mean by this is that it gathers towards itself from the peripheries of connotation, other concepts that are then compressed into the meaning of the concept of emptiness. Along these lines, Nagao elaborates that the Chinese word *k’ung* was used for the Sanskrit *sunya*. This is especially interesting because the word *k’ung* in Chinese can mean hollow, hole, vacant, or sky (Nagao 1991: 209). The concept also tends to have both a “negative and affirmative” character, often causing it to be rendered in English as “‘absolute’ rather than ‘emptiness’” (Nagao 1991: 210). *Sunyata* has even been translated as “relativity” by the Russian orientalist Stcherbatsky (Streng 1967: 167). It would appear that emptiness as it is represented within Buddhism could also function as a kind of cipher (in much the same way as the zero functions), so that it becomes a kind of placeholder for something that evades language. This view is supported by Richard Wilhelm, (probably one of the most well known translator of Chinese texts), who writes in his introduction to his translation of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*, “from the outset the correct translation of this word [Dao or Tao] has been the subject of a great deal of controversy. ‘God,’ ‘way,’ ‘reason,’ ‘word,’ ‘logos,’ – these are just a few of the translations that have been suggested; while a number of writers have introduced the word ‘Dao’ into European languages without translating it. In point of fact, the term matters little, since even for Lao Zi himself it was only a sort of algebraic symbol for something ineffable” (Wilhelm 1989: 12-13). Lopez (Lopez 1996) has a similar hypothesis regarding the Heart Sutra (more on this to follow). Lopez asserts that it is the very brevity and opacity of the

sutra¹⁰ that incites commentators to draw so much from it (Lopez 1996: 240).

As a central pillar of Buddhism the concept of *sunyata* informs us that everything is empty, "The phrase 'all things are empty' means that everything is non-existent, that all experienced phenomena are empty (*sunya*) and vain" (Lopez 1996: 240). All phenomena (with the exception of nirvana) are described as empty because they are classed as "conditioned" phenomena, meaning that they are contingent and transitory (Gunaratne 1991: 38). The nihilistic look of the phrase above at first glance can convey the impression that the Buddhists are bigger pessimists than Schopenhauer. This perceived dark outlook might also explain the attraction to Buddhism for many people, people like Schopenhauer, who make out in Buddhism a parallel to their own feeling that the world is an empty, farcical, decaying mess. The statement is not, however, as simple as saying that it's all circling the drain (to use the vernacular). Nagao clarifies that "this negation is not mere nothingness. It rather indicates an affirmative absolute being, freed from objectifications and qualifications" (Nagao 1991: 209).

The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (second century A.D, India, founder of the *Madhyamika*, or school of the middle way) asserts that the general human feeling of "incompleteness and frustration... is rectified by reconsidered views and appropriate action" (Streng 1967: 21). It must be stressed at this point that an understanding of the implications of emptiness does not result in "a definition of something conceived as an essence with attributes," but rather like the treatment of entropy earlier in this document, as "a term used to shift the mode of apprehending 'existence'" (Streng 1967: 21). One could probably agree that definitions are much easier to convey through language than are ways of seeing the world, which is why, I would argue, Buddhist explications of emptiness seem to us as rather circular or repetitive. One example of what some may describe as "a redundant litany of negations" (Lopez 1996: 239) is the Heart Sutra. The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom sutra (*prajnaparamitahrdayasutra* in Sanskrit) is said to contain the essence of the entire Buddhist teaching (Chang 1974: 64). This nutshell of Buddhism's principle concern is emptiness. As if this were not impressive enough, it is one of the shortest Buddhist sutras, being comprised of only two hundred and sixty-two words in its Chinese translation. It should also be noted that the word empty or void recurs frequently throughout the sutra, which narrows the explanative content even further. This extract may give some idea; "Form is voidness, and voidness verily is form, voidness is not different from form; form is not different from voidness. What is form, that is voidness; what is voidness, that is form. The same is the case with feelings, ideas, motivations, and perceptions" (Wayman 1977: 142).

The words form and voidness are repeated twelve times out of a total of forty three words in this passage alone, which is itself considered to be the key paragraph of the sutra (Chang 1974: 67). The basic point (which is what the sutra narrows down to after introductions, repetitions, and other peripherals), of the sutra seems to be that everything is empty and that it is this way because there is

¹⁰ In Buddhism a sutra usually applies to the canon of literature that pertains to The Buddha (Aka. Gotama Buddha). While there is some doubt as to whether it is possible that all the sutras are the recordings of the oral teachings of the Buddha, the religion (generally) considers them as the teachings of the Buddha himself.

no tenable difference between void and form. This is "tantamount to saying that being is non-being and non-being is being. To understand the meaning and rationale of this statement, one must first examine the preceding sentence: 'form is not *different* from Emptiness, and Emptiness is *not different* from form.' This statement clearly indicates that emptiness is not something outside of form, nor is it in any manner isolated or different from form. Form and emptiness should not be treated as two different entities... Buddhist emptiness is not static...it is dynamic" (Chang 1974: 68).

So, the concept of emptiness is used as an end toward the freedom of the individual from the empty structures to which he/she grasps, as Streng writes "this is a freedom which applies to the conflict and confusion arising from an attempt to follow an absolute norm. All particular things lost their claims to intrinsic value by means of the 'negative identity' to which the awareness of emptiness subjected them.... It was freedom from emotional compulsions which limited a full and complete appreciation of every condition which structures a choice. 'Dwelling in emptiness' meant living in an openness to experience" (Streng 1967: 164). The process of freeing the individual from grasping to illusory structures is one of coming to the realisation of the nature of reality. The internal nature of this realisation is brought out by Huntington, who tells us "the difference is one of attitude, for all else remains as it was" (1989: 122). As the Buddha explains to Kasyapa;

it is not [the concept of] emptiness that makes things empty; rather, they are simply empty. It is not [the concept of] the absence of any ultimate cause that makes things lack such a cause, rather, they simply lack an ultimate cause...emptiness is the exhaustion of all philosophical views. I call incurable anyone who holds emptiness as a philosophical view.... It is as if a physician were to give medicine to a sick man, and when the medicine had cured all the original problems it remained in the stomach and was not itself expelled. (Huntington 1989: 57-58)

There are two defining features in The Buddha's advice to Kasyapa. The first is that one uses the concept of emptiness to see that all is empty. The second, which uses the analogy of a medicine which remains after it has cured the disease, implies that even the concept of emptiness itself must not be held onto. Nagarjuna has also stressed as much by insisting that "when 'emptiness' is regarded as an absolute idea, it also takes on the form of an idol (in claiming self-existence) and must be dissipated. If 'emptiness' is regarded as an object to be 'seized,' it becomes something less than ultimate which perverts true freedom" (Streng 1967: 166). Seen in this way, the idea of emptiness exhibits a degree of reflexiveness because it is used to consume, as it were, everything, after which, it must consume itself; what Buddhists would refer to as the emptying of emptiness. After all, the statement that everything is empty must implicate itself obviously as a part of everything. This movement is mirrored in the basic structure of realisation, which takes place within the individual; "In summary, 'emptiness' is used...to express the religious insight that living beings are 'saved' from their own selves and the claims of existence by appreciating the interrelatedness of everything in existence" (Streng 1967:169).

In the same way that the operator called zero sits between (in the middle of) an infinity of positive

and negative numbers, Nagarjuna's Buddhist philosophy of the middle way places itself between the binaries that people hold on to, specifically between the absolutism that would crystallise and fix the concept of emptiness, and the pessimism of the nihilistically empty universe that I have posited as the effect of entropy. As was shown in the section on entropy, its effect on people is one of creating uncertainty and a feeling of instability. It is a way of seeing the world that is destabilising because there is a feeling that something is unnatural or unpleasant about instability and transience. Buddhist thinking, such as that of Nagarjuna (among others), takes as a starting point that everything is not fixed, unstable, but prone to decay, and that furthermore, the construction of systems that set themselves up as ultimate and stable, is an endeavour bound to failure. "There can be no universally valid ultimate human experience. There is, however, according to Nagarjuna, a universally valid means for avoiding all claims to ultimacy, and this is the awareness of their emptiness" (Streng 1967:169). Therefore, the emptiness that the Buddhists speak of is not fully the same as the entropic emptiness that comes about because of the collapse of certainty. Entropy eats away at concepts to which we have become accustomed to holding on to, our ground seems to give way under foot. This is perhaps the thing that is most similar in entropy and emptiness; they both have the effect of reduction, the reduction of what O'Neill called our "place to stand" (1990: 4). Buddhism takes as a starting assumption that we never really had a place to stand. Accordingly, "The attempt to hold onto any object or idea as though it could provide an enduring refuge will only result in more pain, and the insatiable desire to look for security in one or another cherished possession is the source of all misery" (Huntington 1989: 106).

2.3 KOANS: WHAT'S EGG ABOUT EGG?

"sometimes I take away the man but do not take away the circumstances. Sometimes I take away the circumstances but do not take away the man. Sometimes I take away both the man and the circumstances. Sometimes I take away neither the man nor the circumstance."

(Lin-chi, quoted in Watts 1990: 188)

As the previous section may have suggested, many Buddhist teachings are characterised by repetition, circularity, and obtuseness. There is no perceived problem with these contradictions and circularities from the Buddhist side because there is no perceived division between the concepts at hand. The act of partitioning off things like the self from the other, just for example, is seen as an empty structure. Even structures such as questions and answers are seen as redundant, "the goal of Zen is not to answer questions but to dissolve questioning" (Arntzen 1986: 38).

Another way that Buddhists have found to be obtuse is the *Koan*. "The koan...is an absurd dialogue, question and answer, or anecdote which opens a novice's experience to *satori* without direct teaching" (Bowers 1995: 116). The question is asked of a student by a master to aide the process of realisation. This realisation is known to Zen Buddhists as *satori*. As a point of clarification, *satori* does not necessarily designate a kind of grand enlightenment that results in glowing otherworldly lights and an ascension. Watts explains; "*satori* really designates the sudden and intuitive way of seeing into anything, whether it be remembering a forgotten name or seeing into the deepest principles of Buddhism. One seeks and seeks, but cannot find. One then gives up, and the answer comes by itself" (Watts 1990: 181). D. T Suzuki describes the process according to "a schema of accumulation, saturation, and explosion (Dumoulin 1992: 126). I however would describe it as accumulation, saturation, and simultaneously (and undecidably) explosion and implosion because the manner in which emptiness is applied to everything including emptiness and the individual seems to imply a conceptual movement towards the centre (the mind of the student), compressing the question into an ever denser singularity (*satori*).

The questions asked within the frameworks of *koans* are often what could be termed non-linear or illogical and are made so by design. A logical/intellectual solution cannot be found to a *koan* because: firstly, they are illogical and any conclusion drawn from them could not be logically valid;¹¹ and secondly, because the aim of the *koan* (a particular way of seeing the world) is not furthered by a logical approach that is firmly set on the "plain of subject-object duality" (Dumoulin 1992: 125). Dumoulin puts flesh on the bones of this as follows:

The practitioner, who has received the koan as an object, occupies himself with this object and seeks the corresponding answer. Some koan questions ('What is the Buddha?', 'What is the way?' or 'What is the meaning of the coming of the First Patriarch...from the West?') touch on what in the Zen view is the ultimate reality. The answers given to the examples are shockingly banal: 'Three pounds of flax,' 'A dried shit-stick,' or 'The tree in front of the garden.' One reason for the illogical character of these replies is the disparity in level between question and

¹¹ Discussed further in section 3.1 in relation to the principle of explosion

The primary purpose of the mode of interaction between master and pupil is to create pressure on the conceptual/logical/discursive mind "like flood tides rising behind an earthen dam. As tension and frustration build, the structural integrity of the dam of logical thinking begins to break down. When the pressure gets too great, the dam suddenly breaks, and striving for conceptual understanding ceases" (Bowers 1995: 116).

The student is instructed to put him/herself completely to the question, to the extent that the koan is the only thing in the students' life. It must be considered always, regardless of all else. This radical identification with the koan creates a blurring of the distinction between question and the mind of the questioner, as the question takes up all of the student's time and energy. "This state of consciousness is, as master Hui-k'ai says, a state of unity. The koan is given to the practitioner as an object of study and practice in order that he will so completely appropriate it that it no longer stands as a separate object. Solution of the koan means to become one with the koan" (Dumoulin 1992: 126). This view is endorsed by Taizan Maezumi Roshi who instructs; "Do not be fooled by words and ideas. When you practice with a koan, take the koan as your life. Koans are not something to evaluate apart from yourself. Make your life itself...[the] koan, the realisation of koan. This is what your life already is. Such a life is totally open and full, and one is not conscious of oneself" (Anderson 2004: 118).

Probably the most famous (now clichéd) *koan* is: the sound of one hand, in which the master of Kennin temple, Mokurai (whose name translates as silent thunder), asks of one of his students (named Toyo); "You can hear the sound of two hands when they clap together...now show me the sound of one hand" (Reps 1991: 34). Needless to say, a response that states the logicity of the question is not the correct understanding because the question at hand in a *koan*, the same as much art, is not primarily a logical exercise. As with art and games also, it would appear to be a matter of playing by the rules of the game, even, or perhaps especially, when the rule states that no rule must be followed. To fall back on claims of logicity is to grasp unnecessarily for a rule to follow.

The *Koan* has its roots in irrationality (Suzuki 1980: 31). It thrives on creating insoluble systems in much the same way as Zeno of Elia's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise produces a system in which the fastest runner in Greece is unable to outrun the slowest of land animals (granted that the intent was in all likelihood, not the same, but the conceptual mechanics and effects are identical). The *Koan* functions by showing rather than telling, a method which I will refer to as elliptical. A lesser known example is a *Koan* by Chinese Zen master Ch'ing yuan Wei-hsin, living in the time of the Tang dynasty;

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen. I said, 'mountains are mountains, waters are waters.' After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master. I said, 'mountains are not mountains,

waters are not waters.' But now, having attained the abode of final rest (that is, Awakening), I say, 'mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters.' [He then asks] 'do you think these three understandings are the same or different?' (Abe 1985: 4)

Masao Abe identifies three stages of realisation outlined within this *Koan*, each one overturning the last to arrive at a result that appears to come almost full circle. The first stage involves objectification and differentiation with mountains being seen as distinct and separate entities perceived by a distinct self, entailing the duality of subject and object. This separation also takes place within the self, with the self becoming the object of its own scrutiny with the accompanying questioning of what the self is and how it can be grasped. Once this questioning has sufficiently frustrated the student (because they cannot pin down this self) they eventually arrive at the juncture where there is no differentiation, "no duality of subject and object" ("waters are not waters"), "Here it must be said that everything is empty" (Abe 1985: 8). This emptiness must be further emptied (a function referred to earlier as reflexive) so that it does not become an object in the same way as an object or concept that can be held as a something, essentially, there must be nothing left to which the adherent can grasp. The value of the final realisation that "mountains are really mountains" lies in the fact that it comes after the negation of the second realisation, it is emptiness, emptied (Abe 1985: 14). The mechanics of the *Koan* above are mirrored in the words of Patrick O'Neill's writing on entropy; "The idea of non-significance has become a commonplace of entropic thinking: The world is neither meaningful nor meaningless, neither tragic nor, in the grimmer sense of the existentialists, absurd – it simply is," (O' Neill 1990: 22).

The Chan Masters of China and the Zen masters of Japan sought to dissolve dualistic thinking "by undercutting it at every moment: with a shout, a turning phrase, or simply a turn of the shoulder, leaving the student to ponder his error in solitude. The *koan* arises from this place of no-separation. So does the statement by Layman P'ang, the golden age adept who was reputedly as enlightened as any Zen master:

How supernatural!
I chop wood!
I carry water! (Larson 2004: 70)

There is humour in the preceding poem, though I am not sure how, it seems to affect me in a way similar to how humorous things do. No amount of explanation will suffice to make it funny again or to explain sufficiently why it is so. One more;

From the nose
Of the Great Buddha flew out
A swallow. (Basho, cited in Blyth 1960: 187)

The solution of a koan must be something like being asked to explain what is funny about funniness.

One must eventually conclude that any attempt at a conceptual breakdown of funny will only lead further from funniness. Finally, frustration may lead to laughter. With the koan, frustration, doubt, and uncertainty appear to be part of the process, “the student is at last brought to a point of feeling completely stupid – as if he were encased in a huge block of ice, unable to move or think. He just knows nothing; the whole world, including himself, is an enormous mass of pure doubt” (Watts 1990: 185-186).

An excellent example of the jamming/immobilising strategy that Watts has just described is the following *koan*: “When you meet a master in the street, do not speak, do not be silent. Then how will you greet him?” (Goso, in the 36th case of the *Mumonkan*. Quoted in Blyth 1960: 184).

2.4 KOANS, LANGUAGE, AND EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINABLE

“A lack of a satisfactory term for a concept does not mean that the concept has no psychological reality.”
(Kurzon 1998: 12)

“One of the most widespread problems found in the academic study of Buddhism is that of the explication of its fundamental insights or essence.” (Goodchild 1993: 1)

“What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.”
(Wittgenstein 1961: 151)

Nagarjuna, as I have written earlier, supports the view that emptiness must not be held on to as a concept. To reiterate; emptiness is the emptiness of emptiness. Huntington clarifies; “it may be that this concept seems particularly abstruse because it is associated not so much with a way of *knowing* as with a way of *being*” (Huntington 1989: 119). This brings us to the problem of how to communicate to people this way of seeing the world. As far as texts go, the Buddhists cannot be described as sparing explanation, for instance, the Heart Sutra that I have made reference to before has another variant, the *Satasahasrikaprajnaparamita, The Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Stanzas*. If one looks at just the Mahayana sutras, the Peking edition of the Tibetan tripitaka (canonical collection of or relating to the Buddha’s words and teachings) contains 326 sutras in thirty-four volumes, “Approximately 150 volumes would be required to translate these works into English” (Lopez 1988: 47). Therefore, it may appear safe to say that it seems like the Buddhists have enough literature. However, considering that the Buddhists class language as an empty structure along with everything else, perhaps they can never have enough literature. The fact that an enormous disparity exists between language’s role as an instrument for communicating the central tenets of Buddhism and simultaneously not being able to do so adequately has not gone unnoticed by Cabezon who explains:

Despite the repeated claims as to the ineffability of the ultimate truth in Buddhist texts, it is clear that even the least scholastic of Buddhist texts are reticent to give up the communicative abilities of language.... What is more, the fact that many Buddhist sources stress the inexpressibility of the Buddha’s most profound doctrines never hindered traditional scholars from composing and compiling a corpus of religious literature that can be described only as one of the most extensive in the world. (Cabezon 1994: 174)

One may be overcome with the temptation to assume that all that writing along with the *koan* was just circular, sugary fluff, smoke and mirrors designed to keep us distracted while the Buddhists ran back into the kitchen of meaning to whip up the real ultimate reality. The popular Buddhist saying that tells us that the Buddha himself never said a word may in fact momentarily augment such a temptation. This proverb is mirrored by Nagarjuna and others with similar sentiments:

The cessation of all objects,
The cessation of all elaborations is auspicious
The Buddha did not teach any doctrine

Vajrapani also states that the Buddha was silent throughout his life (Lopez 1988: 49). These views reinforce the notion of the Buddha and the teaching as a kind of cipher, "like a speaking prism; perfect, impassive, with no color of its own, it is touched by the faith, the development, the questions, the intentions of sentient beings and refracts the teaching that is appropriate to each" (Lopez 1988: 49).

Nagarjuna's statement that there is nothing for the Buddha to teach makes sense if one consider that in Nagarjuna's logic, if there is no self (because all things are empty), then there is nothing to teach, because there is no one to teach it to. Or as Lopez puts it, "all objects and elaborations cease in the understanding of the emptiness of self" (Lopez 1988: 49). One may agree that there is a similarity between the popular Buddhist saying that the Buddha never spoke, and the Zen *koan*; they both seem somewhat circular and illogical. In addition, in both the expansive canon of Buddhist literature and the Zen *koan*, there is a discernible tendency towards showing rather than telling. Buddhist scriptures and the *koan* do not present us with an explicitly spelled answer, this I will call telling, and correlates with straightforward answers that literally explain a concept or phenomenon. What I call showing, correlates to a kind of pointing towards, similar to a gesture that one may use to designate the location of objects in a room. When it comes down to the answering of a question, what most people prefer is to be told; if one person asks another what the object on the floor is, the preferred response is something along the lines of a verbal response that tells the questioner that the aforementioned object is a shoe. Simple, until the question becomes one like: what is this state of mind?, or why am I here? After this point, telling will no longer provide the requisite answer. Telling involves a degree of delivery on the part of the person who brings about answers; they present an answer to the questioner that comes ready made. Showing involves less delivery on the part of the one who facilitates the answer and more intensive thought for the person who possesses the question. To put it in room and shoe terms; it would be equivalent to getting the response of a pointing gesture towards the feet when one asked the question: what's this? (of a shoe).

Without relying on conventions
The ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the ultimate
Nirvana cannot be attained. (Nagarjuna in Lopez 1988: 63)

As Nagarjuna sets out above, the problem of how to explain the unexplainable is attacked with the nearest best tool, language. Apart from it there is nothing, yet the involvement of language fails to *tell* us what we need to know about certain things. "For Nagarjuna language is not divine in any way but is conventional. Nor is there a special category of language called scripture that can provide a revelation of reality that is otherwise unattainable," even the words of the Buddha, "like all of language, are infected with a subject-object duality that must be overcome if one is to be liberated"

(Coward 1990: 26). As was covered previously, the Zen *koan* works with language to dissolve questioning and the subject-object duality. Goodchild elaborates on the showing that is exhibited in Buddhist literature by saying that

it is possible to distinguish between the actual language used, which is characteristically negative and demonstrates an awareness of its limitations, and the usage made of such negative language, which has a positive role. Buddhism as a whole makes considerable use of its canonical and authoritative texts in order to communicate the dharma.... In spite of the apophatic language used in relation to the fundamental insights of Buddhism, some kind of sense is still communicated. (Goodchild 1993: 1)

Within the paradoxical questions of the *koan* a similar movement can be seen, the *koan* seems to “defy any possibility of intellectual study. The koans demonstrate an anti-intellectual stance by their characteristic rejection of rational answers to the profoundest questions of Zen. Nevertheless, koans are conserved and transmitted in a linguistic form. They are presented for use in meditation, and koan practice is productive of states of enlightenment. It would seem, therefore, that even the koans are able to communicate some form of sense” (Goodchild 1993: 1-2). The kinds of operations I see at work in the *koan* are used “reflexively to delimit the domain of the operation of language, and it is a realization of this limitation which allows the break-through to an alternative mode of experience to occur.... On the level of language itself, the reflexivity of the negation is also problematic: in pointing to an area outside of its operation, language surpasses its area of operation and hints at something unsayable, which has nevertheless allowed language to speak of it.” (Goodchild 1993: 3-4)

The difficulty of speaking of certain phenomena and attempting to discuss them is not an issue that only the Buddhists choose to be opaque about. As Pears remarks on possible readings of Wittgenstein:

Most recent accounts of Wittgenstein ... start from the assumption that there really ought to be a definite rule dictating the use of every word ... Others assume that statements must be based on observation. The account of Wittgenstein then consists in saving as much of these assumptions as one can. Or, if they cannot be saved at all, Wittgenstein appears as if he were concerned with what cannot be said, something “ineffable.” It seems that one cannot avoid beginning with assumptions he rejected, then trying to account for their rejection, always still in a discourse that assumes them. But this is not due to any oversight of ours. It is Wittgenstein who has made discussions about his work difficult if not impossible. He said he *could not say, only show*. He was convinced that what he showed could not be talked about. (Pears, cited in Gendlin 1997 online)

The production of art can also be seen in the same light, as is discernible in what Vija Celmins (1938-) says about painting; “Painting is very specific, but it is not specific to things that you can say” (Baas 2005: 231). Celmins has effectively delineated how she paints in apophatic terms, like so much Buddhist literature, it consists of a list of negations rather than simply telling us what her paintings are;

no composition
no gestures
no artificial color
no distortion
no angst or effort showing
no ego
(dead-pan paintings). (Baas 2005: 239)

The works that could be said to embody this approach most are Celmins' pencil drawings of patches of ocean and expanses of night sky (which the artist started producing in the late 60s and continued to produce obsessively until the late 90s). Large sectors of Celmins' corpus of work are repetitive; in this, they instance what one can see as the repetition and circularity in the Buddhist canon and the *koan*. There is the effect of a repeated pointing (showing) to something that is resistant to a linguistic expression. Celmins agreed to as much in an interview with Jeanne Silverthorne;

Silverthorne: "You were talking about trying to make something that wouldn't be easily consumable, and about muteness, resistance, silence, dumbness..."

Celmins: "Yes, well, those words all come to mind." (Silverthorne 1995: 40)



Vija Celmins
Untitled
Oil on canvas
38.7 x 47 inches

(Parker 1995: 43 (see Silverthorne in references))

While there is an agreement, it would appear from Celmins response that she is reticent with regard to pin-pointing what the works concern themselves with exactly. What can be said, is that both the night sky and ocean series deal with a depth that is curtailed by the shallowness of its representation in language. Fer has thoughts along similar lines in a discussion of the *Night Sky* (1973 continuing to present) group of pictures; "There is nothing ethereal about Vija Celmins' drawing of a night sky. It is not engulfing. Its surface remains impenetrable despite the constellation of starlight that it holds. A dense layer of charcoal lies on the surface like a blanket of dark. The associations of a night sky filled with showers of stars only increases this sense of there being something unyielding in infinity. Celmins' sense of the infinite is absolutely not transcendental or sublime but material and concrete" (Fer 2004: 102).

This so called Buddhist picture of language (particularly Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school) is not confined to eastern religions and philosophical systems, and can be seen as analogous to and functioning very similarly to Derrida's concept of the *Pharmakon*, which can bear the meaning of both a remedy and a poison (this persists in modern Greek). In Derrida's discussion of the *pharmakon*, he is examining Plato's view on language (specifically speech versus writing) in the *Phaedrus*. To compress an otherwise lengthy discussion, I will characterise the concept as one that does not sit easily as remedy or poison, though it can be turned, as if on a "pivot" (Derrida 1981: 97) to present the pole that is "the most reassuring" (Derrida 1981: 97). Derrida's treatment of the *pharmakon* would appear to be such that presents it as one, or whole, with the distinction between its remedy and poison components as radically unstable. To put this in a Buddhist perspective; language is insufficient to express the core of Buddhism and at the same time, the only medium with which to convey what is un conveyable. Language should not be, and simultaneously is, the only game in town.

Wittgenstein's now famous statement "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 1961: 115), comes to mind along with proposition 4.1212 of the *Tractatus*; "what can be shown, cannot be said" (Wittgenstein 1961: 51). The *Tractatus* has in common with the kind of art I discuss throughout this document the fact that it points in the manner of showing rather than attempting to say the unsayable. This is evident in Wittgenstein's letter to the publisher of the *Tractatus* (Ludwig Von Ficker) which includes the line " I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here [referring to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*], and of everything which I have not written" (Monk 2005: 22-23). There is within this declaration an attitude that aligns with emptiness (and the work of many artists) because it starts by admitting the existence of a limit to language, that there is a point at which language stops and is incapable of expressing. Perloff would assert that the same attitude was held by Samuel Beckett, who once wrote in a letter to friend Axel Kaun in 1937:



Vela-Columinae
Galaxy
(Cassiopeia)
Graphite on
acrylic ground
on paper
1973
30.3 x 39cm

(Perloff 1996: 98[see 50 for further references])

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. (Perloff 1996: 120)

Both the Wittgensteinian and Buddhist perspectives, along with Beckett see language as an expedient, which is necessary to a point, but is essentially an empty structure. There are metaphors from Buddhism and the Tractatus that are conceptually identical in this regard. This similarity has not escaped Danto who writes; "At one point the Buddha says that no one, having used a ferry to cross a river, will want to carry the ferry with him" (Danto 2004: 53). Danto pairs this with Wittgenstein's metaphor of a ladder. The ladder metaphor occurs late in the Tractatus, almost as a codicil to the rest of the book. Proposition 6.54 (second to last of the book) reads; "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright" (Wittgenstein 1961: 151).

3.1 THE ART OF KOAN

"The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem."

(Wittgenstein 1961: 149)

"There is no solution because there is no problem."

Duchamp (Baas 2005: 80)

As I hope to have already shown, one of the primary functions of the *koan* is to soften and make porous the conceptual structures that partition (arbitrarily) sectors of the world one from the other. The means by which it does this is similar in any cases to the functioning of paradox: by providing acceptable premises for an unacceptable conclusion. The resultant seizure of discursive thinking provides the stillness required to attain an understanding of emptiness. A simple example of this kind of freeze can be found in the statement: this statement is not true. The radical undecidability of the liar paradox has had logicians and philosophers pulling the hair from their heads for centuries. "To say I am lying is in part to say that I am making a false statement. This gives no problem if the statement I am referring to is some other statement. . . . But a problem arises if it is used self-referentially. The trouble is that the self-referential use gives rise to the contradiction that my statement is both true and false, since if it is true it is false and if it is false it is true" (Clark 2002: 99). This is not to say that we can now think of Epimenides¹² as a Buddhist in some way, the comparison merely serves to describe the effect of this kind of thinking. It is not possible to proceed in the direction of true or false, and with only two options in a strictly logical order, that leaves us nowhere with the liar paradox, with no play in either direction, effectively stuck.

Ex falso quodlibet, or the principle of explosion is a rule of logic that states that anything can follow from a contradiction. So from any proposition of the form: P and not P any arbitrary conclusion could follow. Explosion refers to the fact that the acceptance of a single contradiction into one's system makes the number of overall results 'explode'. The principle of explosion could also be seen as applying when we consider the functional mechanics of *koans*, which could be said to operate explosively in that any answer is potentially a tenable one. *Koans* are also arguably implosive in that they may constrict the total number of potentially justified responses to zero.

There are objects in art that function in the way outlined above; among them is the class of readymades. This aligns with my view of artworks as embodied questions or *koans* (depending on the level to which they tell or show). One may counter-argue that all artworks ask some form of question, something along the lines of: what am I about? Or, what am I trying to tell you? Correspondingly, one may take up the position that every work of art asks something of us and that this is nothing new, a redundant tautology. The response for this position would be that while they may all ask a question, some of them ask questions that are distinctly *koan*-like. These are the forms of showing rather than telling, and they are questions that have no answers to speak of, though they

¹² Credited with the first formulation of the liar paradox

can have responses in the way that *koans* do. In the same way as paradoxes, they must be occupied rather than solved, they can be lived in and worn like a burlap coat but they cannot allow resolution via explanation. Simply put, these works turn around a question that is similar to Wittgenstein's proposition that "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists" (Wittgenstein 1961: 149). Seen in this light it is not the *how* of these works that is of concern (things like what content the work communicates and in what ways), but that they are at all. The tendency of readymades to obscure or partially erase the boundary between art and everything else parallels the working of the *koan*, which aims at the dissolution of questioning by eroding the distinction between question and answer, the person asked and the question asked them. As with the work of Celmins cited previously, these are also objects that resist a simple answer in linguistic terms, which makes the task of extracting meaning from obtuse objects like Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) difficult. In cases like these, meaning is not to be extracted from, rather meaning is found around the object. Similarly, the sense of a *koan* is not extracted from it because the content of a *koan* explains nothing.

Danto sees Duchamp's *Fountain* as a question raised "*as an artwork*" (Danto 1986: 15). This work, according to Danto asks the question "why should this—referring to itself—be an artwork when something else exactly *like* this, namely *that*—referring now to the class of unredeemed urinals—are just pieces of industrial plumbing?" (Danto 1986: 15). The problem of reading the urinal does not arise from the *how* of Duchamp's *Fountain*, but from the *is* of it. So the question at play here (which goes above and beyond; what is art?) is one that calls into question the line between art that appears as plumbing and plumbing that is just plumbing. Furthermore, this question was only historically possible "when it was raised - it perhaps required something so antecedently resistant to absorption into the artworld as a urinal so as to call attention to the fact that it after all was already *in* the artworld... My view is that it could only come at a time when it no longer could be clear to anyone what art was while perfectly clear that none of the old answers would serve. To paraphrase Kant, it seemed to have an essence without having any particular essence" (Danto 1986: 14-15). Danto's examination of Duchamp's *Fountain* goes via Hegel towards the possible conclusion that a self-reflexive or recursive movement takes place with regard to how the work functions.

For Hegel, the world in its historical dimension is the dialectical revelation of consciousness to itself. In his curious idiom, the end of history comes when Spirit achieves awareness of its identity as Spirit, not, that is to say, alienated from itself by ignorance of its proper nature, but united *to itself through itself*: by recognizing that it is in this one instance of the same substance as its object, since consciousness of consciousness is consciousness. In the portentous jargon of the Continent, the subject/object dualism is overcome.... Duchamp's work... raises the question of the philosophical nature of art from *within* art. (Danto 1986: 15-16)

The resistance to straightforward explanation that is a feature of some works of art such as *Fountain* can create around the artwork an almost hermetic seal that disallows the viewers entrance or entry point into the piece. This has been characterised (by me) as a resistance to telling with an inherent bias towards showing. The trouble with showing is that it is not definitive and places some degree

of faith in the viewer to engage with the system of the work. A failure to engage on the part of the viewer results in the work remaining closed to them. Without a way in to works that resist in this way the viewers response will incline towards what will be discussed in the following section under the designation of boredom. The near collapse, or at least close proximity of art and life can bring about what may seem to be an undifferentiated state of affairs that empties art of justified meaning and almost by default moves art into the domain of the mundane world we see around us in our everyday lives. In this context boredom is then a failure to engage on the grounds that the object in question is not art enough to warrant engagement. The result of this is the unfocused gaze and state of mind that characterises the everyday. Along these lines, Morris quotes Ehrenzweig who advises that "Our attempt at focusing must give way to the vacant all-embracing stare" (Ehrenzweig, cited in Morris 1993: 57). This expansion of the concept of art into life (rather than the other way around) is also stressed by Morris himself when he describes it as "a shift from a figure-ground perceptual set to that of the visual field. Physically, it amounts to a shift from discrete, homogenous objects to accumulations of things or stuff, sometimes very heterogeneous" (Morris 1993: 57). This way of describing art also resonates with Buddhist meditation practice, which specifically stresses an unfocused but concentrated state of mind.¹³ This derives from the doctrines of non-grasping and non-duality, placing no particular emphasis on centre over periphery.

¹³ Again, contradictory, simultaneously existing conditions are in evidence

3.1.1 BOREDOM AND THE OBTUSE

The issue of "boring art" (Colpitt 1990: 116) was one that became of eminent concern surrounding the discourses on minimalism and conceptualism in the 1960s: "If, on seeing some of the new paintings, sculpture, dances or films, you are bored, probably you were intended to be. Boring the public is one way of testing its commitment" (Rose, cited in Colpitt 1990:117). As far as responses to art go, boredom probably aligns with emptiness more than most; there is neither an attraction nor a repulsion experienced in the presence of the object in question. Once again, we have a situation where the how of the work we are bored by is eclipsed by the vacuous open space of why it is at all, since being in its presence allows neither a plus nor minus reaction, we feel nothing. As Colpitt puts it, "Frequently a boring object is decried because 'there is nothing there'" (1990: 117). Obviously there is always something there, just as there is when I write a zero on a piece of paper, but as with zero one is unable to find within these artworks what it is that one should be seeing. For Goldin "Boredom means that you are waiting for something and you don't know what it is. It means the messages you are getting are irrelevant to your existence" (Goldin, cited in Colpitt 1990: 117). This seems a suitable statement when it comes to minimalism since it appears that one of its principle intents was to remove humanity, and with it, human interest, from its products. Colpitt also tells us "few artists escaped being called boring at least once or twice. Besides Judd, Morris, Andre, Mangold, LeWitt, and Agnes Martin, the list of the accused includes John Cage, William Burroughs, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, Merce Cunningham, Yvonne Rainer, and, especially, Andy Warhol" (Colpitt 1990: 117-118).

It would seem highly unlikely that all of the artists mentioned above purposefully strove at making boring art. Much more plausible would seem the explanation that they constructed systems that did not function according to expectation. On this point I refer to Sontag who has examined the issue from the point of view of the audience's lack of preparation to deal with new systems within art (the initial response to Duchamp's urinal springs to mind), she writes; "There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration" (Sontag, cited in Colpitt 1990: 118). It would appear then, that boredom and frustration arise from a degree of grasping (as the Buddhists would put it). The grasping is one in which the viewers of a work have certain expectations regarding the work which are held onto strongly, and when these expectations are resisted boredom and frustration come about. As Blok put it: "Whether he experiences an object as boring or not depends upon the viewer's expectations," so Cage's 4' 33" (1952) would be boring to "those who came in the expectation of hearing music" (Colpitt 1990: 119). So expectation also has a lot to do with it, as the first audiences of John Cage's 4' 33" would have discovered when they came in expecting a performance only to find David Tudor sitting at a piano for four minutes and thirty three seconds. They were simply not prepared to engage with the system that Cage (1912-1992) constructed and the general response was one of irritation, even anger. In an interview in 1982, Cage recounts the piece; "People began whispering to one another, and some people began to walk out.

They didn't laugh – they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it in thirty years: they're still angry" (Baas 2004: 170). The audience was expecting to be told, not shown, it was their unpreparedness that prevented their seeing. Cage understood this when he said "Art is everywhere; it's only seeing which stops now and then" (Baas 2004: 163). When viewing the kind of works under discussion, a certain state of emptiness would seem to be required in oneself so that some kind of resonance can occur with the work at hand.

So called boring or frustrating works like Cage's are characterised as such on first viewing because there exists in the viewer a rigid structure of expectation, the destabilisation of which leads to a vacuum of uncertainty, which matures into frustration (and sometimes anger if the variance between the expectation and what is presented is large enough). The disparity between the viewer's system of expectation and the system created by the artist brings about a situation where nothing about the work is seen as a viable object of experience by the viewer. An initial starting point of emptiness may not yield such a negative response.

3.2.1 NOODLES AND SHOE BOXES: ART AND THE EVERYDAY

“The awareness of ‘emptiness’ is not a blank loss of consciousness, an inanimate empty space; rather it is the cognition of daily life without the attachment to it. It is an awareness of distinct entities, of the self, of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and other practical determinations; but it is aware of these as empty structures.” (Streng 1967: 159-160)

Seeing the everyday is a matter of looking at the world in a specific way, as Wittgenstein tells us in *Culture and Value*:

Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks that he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes... We would be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage; life itself - But then we do see this every day without it making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from that point of view. (Wittgenstein 1980:4e)

The everyday is right in front of our eyes. So in front, that it in fact becomes invisible. “Every-day life entails a specific aesthetic, or the look and feel of a place, such as the contemporary western European city. Yet, this aesthetic remains invisible because, unlike the treasures of the Hermitage, it has no guide to explain it and no space to house and protect it” (Bal 2006: 87). Artists such as Gabriel Orozco (b. 1962), whose work partakes in the everyday, attempt, one could argue, to make visible the invisible. Weinhart would go a step further and argue; “In essence, it is the very objective of art, for there is scarcely anything more essential to the long history of the visual arts than the desire to make the invisible visible” (Weinhart 2006: 10). The invisibility of the everyday represents a lacuna in the field of vision of art that many artists are drawn to looking into/through. Even the readymade, at some level, evokes the everyday by reminding the viewer of where it came from. The injection of the everyday into art has the effect of inducing a movement towards a kind of equilibrium. Objects such as paintings and other media that have become expected in art contexts maintain what I will call for the sake of analogy, a certain ‘temperature’ within art. I will nominate ten degrees Celsius as the temperature of art. Beyond the gallery doors is the rest of the world from which art draws materials that are ‘cooled’ to ten degrees Celsius. Beyond the seal of the gallery doors the everyday has a temperature of, lets say, one hundred degrees Celsius. It is the differential between the two that allows art to distinguish itself as something apart from everything that is not art. The tendency in systems like these is that movement will be from hot to cold (outside of art to in). As with Buddhist explications of emptiness, what is being defined is defined in the kind apophatic terms that state something is that thing because it is not anything else. With art this is a necessary thing, there must never be a total identification of art and the everyday. If there were such an identification, this would imply that the differences in ‘temperature’ between what is art and what is not has become zero and that the two had attained a state of thermal equilibrium, a state at which it is no longer possible

for work (in the thermodynamic sense described early in this document) to take place. Art would disappear from view because there would be no difference of vision to separate it from everything else. This would account for the initial response to Duchamp's urinal when he first attempted to exhibit it.

So there would appear to be a fine balancing act where art and the everyday are concerned. There is no lack of everyday objects in contemporary art, which implies that they are and have been assimilated into the framework of art. To explain this allowance I must return to the temperature analogy. Bringing in these 'hot' objects into art requires that they be shielded from allowing their heat to transfer to the institution of art and rendering it a uniform temperature with the rest of reality. The foil applied as packaging to these practices is the simple label of art, and with it the accompaniment of explanation (text) that always follows. Largely, it is the fact that viewers are provided with a way of seeing everyday objects as art that prevents the collapse of the category of art. Nothing separates ordinary plumbing from *Fountain* except a way of seeing: what Wittgenstein refers to as a point of view above.

Paradoxically, the differential between art and the everyday is vital to the existence of art, yet artists continue to cross-pollinate the two. A possible reason for this is that art has the feature of presentation, of disclosing phenomena or concepts, while everyday life "is not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny; it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden" (Highmore 2002: 1). Art, seen in these terms functions as a void-space/vacuum and it is the 'coolness' of art that allows a movement towards (of hot being sucked in towards lower pressure, as it were). It is the emptiness of art that increases the pressure at its margins from the outside. From invisible to visible. There is always however, the threat that a kind of entropic maximum will be reached that reduces the difference between art and life to zero.

3.2.2 EVERYDAY ARTISTS AND THE NOSE ON YOUR FACE

So far, this document has occupied itself with sketching out a cluster of concepts that agglomerate around the phenomenon of art. This cluster consists of the metaphor of entropy with its accompaniment of uncertainty and instability, emptiness (as demonstrated best by Buddhist texts), language and inexpressibility, and impermanence. The purpose of this and the section to follow will be to present the work of artists that functions to greater or lesser degrees, in accordance with the cluster described.

Just lately, (by which I mean relatively lately in the grand historical schema) there seems to have been a conscious movement on the part of artists towards – to use employ a commonly used phrase – blurring the line between art and life with a greater emphasis on the everyday, the reasons for which I am sure there is a profusion of, though if there is finger pointing to be done, it would be most easily be levelled at certain tendencies within culture of late which lean towards plurality, relativism, and more open and inclusive systems of creating artworks (probably most strongly tied to the outlook of postmodernism).

The works that function with this openness in mind often manifest in small ways and could be described as existing in physically or conceptually liminal spaces with regard to the context in which they function. Also apparent at times is an economy of means whereby only small changes are made within a given system that produce remarkable results. This is in accord with advice one can receive from any competent judo coach; manipulate any object with consideration to its centre of gravity and the amount of energy required to produce maximal results will be minimal. Though it may not be completely germane to this paper, it may not be entirely amiss to mention the considerable effect of Zen on judo and more famously, archery. I am speaking here of *Zen in the art of archery* by Herrigel (published in 1953) which artists such as Jasper Johns (1930-), Yves Klein (1928-1962), and others would have read, a book that Baas has described as “key reading for artists in the fifties” (2005: 108). The small and liminal alterations I spoke of earlier can be seen in the work of artists such as Gabriel Orozco (1962-), Martin Creed (1968-), and Rirkrit Tiravanija (1961-) among others. A couple of examples from Orozco’s body of work are his *Empty Shoe Box* (1993), and *Parking Lot* (1995). *Empty Shoe Box* consists of – perhaps unsurprisingly – an empty shoebox, which, being what I call an obtuse object “caused considerable annoyance when it has been exhibited. Directors of busy public art museums despair of the consequences of insuring as an artwork a nondescript open box which Orozco insists on placing on the floor or in a corner where it could easily get kicked or thrown away” (Brett 1998: 105). *Parking Lot* involved Orozco opening up a gallery’s parking lot to the public for the duration of the exhibition which Guy Brett described along with *Empty Shoe Box* as “the application of a Zen, or guerrilla, tactic: turning to one’s own advantage already existing systems of energy and power” (Brett 1998: 105).

James Turrell's (1943-) work on/in Roden crater (ongoing) revolves around the idea of an empty place in more than one sense. Firstly, in spatial terms one of the reasons the site was chosen was that it is devoid of significant vegetation along with the fact that the crater forms an inverted bowl, raising the viewer above the desolate surface of the surroundings and into the sky. Being in the desert, the site does not have much artificial light from human habitation. Secondly, the kind of viewing that would take place at Roden crater would be of the sort that requires a specific journey to the place, for that specific point of view, for a piece of the most everyday of everyday things – the sky. The crater itself has also been characterised as a "big ready-made in the Arizona desert" (Iglioni 1992 (pages unnumbered)), which goes further towards reinforcing the idea that the space/point of view had to be found by Turrell for the purposes of what has earlier been referred to as showing. In this, as with other works of Turrell's there is no way of explaining (telling) what the piece is, because the principle material that the artist works with is light, to phrase it in a half-Buddhist, half-Christian way; one can only see the light with ones own eyes.



Roden Crater site

Iglioni 1992: 361



(Herbert 1986: 37)

(Rodden Crater site)

Photographs convey the effect a little better than a description but one may still have a feeling that there is something that escapes one that is definitely a part of the experience. As Turrell explains, also part of the experience is that the site bears signs of “geological time, time not of man’s construction... so that you felt the action of geology, or erosion, of time, time greater than the time our lives are lived in” (Igliori 1992 (pages unnumbered)). Clearly, time is a factor. By placing the work in a context of non-human time, the viewer is situated within a framework that renders their existence small to the point of non-existence. Following this, Turrell’s practice would appear to attempt to reduce, as much as possible, every variable within the work, including the viewers perceived magnitude of themselves. This reduction is illustrated in a project executed by Turrell in his Los Angeles studio where he closed off all light from entering and then gradually opened the space to light again. The artist’s reason for doing this are explained as follows:

This closing off was basically to burn out light...it’s like trying to make music when there is a lot of sound and noise around.... With the complete closing off you see the seeing; it’s possible to work like that. For example, when you close your eyes at night you obviously see color. In one of the pieces I made for the Museum of Contemporary Art, L. A., what you saw after sitting there for fifteen minutes was very much what you see when you close your eyes at night. (Igliori 1992 (pages unnumbered))

What Turrell describes as seeing the seeing also applies to objects such as Orozco’s *Empty Shoe Box*,

which retains as an artwork much of the invisibility that it had in the world (where it was just a shoe box), but brings about a situation where this invisibility becomes visible. The possibility of something moving from the realm of the invisible to the visible (into art) demonstrates the porous, soft nature of the boundary between the two and allows us to see this delineation as an empty structure.



James Turrell
Air Mass
1993

(Noever 1999: 100)

4.0 ART: SUSPICIOUS STRATEGIES OF BEING

"There is never nothing to see."

John Cage (Baas 2005: 180)

As well as artists that work in the area of the everyday and conventionally non-Buddhist forms of art (such as minimalism and conceptualism and their after-effects), artists who consciously work with some knowledge of Buddhism also participate in emptiness. To some extent, this can be seen as functioning within the same concern, which is seeing, or representing the world to oneself and the viewer, in a way that is Buddhist in its point of view (Buddhist according to what I have laid out under that field within this document).

The influx of Japanese prints and other objects associated with Buddhism into Europe and France at the time when the likes of Monet (1840-1926) were producing impressionist works is already well known.¹⁴ It is known that Monet had access not only to the visuals, but also, through his friendship with the Japanese art dealer Tadamasa Hayashi, Monet would have had some sense of the "Buddhist philosophy that lay behind these images" (Baas 2005: 23). This familiarity with Buddhist modes of thinking on Monet's part allows us room for a reading of some of the artists work that aligns strongly with certain threads in Buddhism. One such thread is transience. This is visible in Monet's *Haystacks* (1890), and the later *Water Lilies* (1914). Monet painted the same haystack over and over at various times of day, as if the act of seeing the haystack once was not as definitive as one would believe it to be. One could argue that the retinal mode of impressionism had imbedded within it the idea that looking was not in any way definitive. This aligns well with the Buddhist's sceptical distrust of the outward appearance of reality. When one looks at the haystacks one see a world made up/broken up of flecks of light/colour which, when viewed in its repetition presents us with an image of unstable transience. This is also noticeable in Monet's water lilies. Another item of Buddhist thought that Monet would have been familiar with is the place of the water Lilly or Lotus flower within Buddhism, where it stands for a movement from the mud of mundane ignorance (our everyday realities), to the "clarity of consciousness" (Baas 2005: 24) that accompanies the seeing of the world in the correct light (which is from the point of view of emptiness). Baas tells us that "With his water garden, Monet joined his theme of impermanence with the theme of regeneration" (Baas 2005: 24). The resultant image of flux and flow that is created points to the dissolution of the hard and fast lines between binaries like life/death, permanent/temporary, visible/invisible. Even if Monet painted the Haystacks from the same point in space, what looking at the works evokes is a change in point of view from the dimension of time rather than only space, and this interpenetration of space and time is what I would call most Buddhist about Monet's work.

None of what I have just described is directly *visible* in Monet's work, it is *inferred*, which alerts us to the vital piece of knowledge that what is visible is only part of the story, a great deal of what can be

¹⁴ Much of the following section draws extensively from Baas' exploration of the influence of Buddhism on art from the time-period that reaches from Monet to Tuttle. This area of research is one that, while it is beginning to receive attention, lacks an exhaustive repertoire.

read in a work comes from outside of it. Much of a response to a work of art is inferred rather than simply visible, even if the work is as overwhelmingly 'visible'. This viewpoint has similarities to what could be described as a cornerstone postulation of the conceptual movement of the 1960s; this is the belief that the retinal experience of an artwork must be overcome or resisted. Though it is not the position of this document, the process of inference that I have described (as something not from within the work), is often attributed to the realm of the spiritual. A major proponent of this so-called spiritual approach was Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) who wrote *On the Spiritual in Art* in 1912. "For Kandinsky, a 'true' work of art leads to a full inner life – good art has soul. Kandinsky's word for this life-force was *Klang*, spiritual reverberation" (Baas 2005: 53). On the point of a fuller inner life I would amend Kandinsky's view with the argument that while works of art do produce an internalised viewer response, the way that they make our lives in any way fuller is that they allow us to see the world, internally, from another point of view. I would further argue that this is not the function of soul or spirit but the acceptance of a form of emptiness in art which affects the viewer's picture of reality, even if almost imperceptibly. As with any cipher, the emptiness in art, due to its emptiness leaves it open to being named as any number of things, soul and spirit being just two examples (see the principle of explosion mentioned earlier).



(Gardner 2015: 11)

Marcel Duchamp
Tu m'
 Oil on canvas
 1918
 70 x 31 cm

As for the *Klang* of Kandinsky's formulation of art, it does bear signs of commonality with the system that I am describing. In terms of emptiness, *Klang* has associations with reverberation and resonance in that a clang (the noise that results when something large or empty is struck) requires a vacant vessel to produce the clang. Just as an echo requires empty space as a vital component (as much so as a sounding board). As I pointed out when discussing Cage's *4'33"*, much is placed in the hands of the viewer, whose uncluttering of his/her mind with expectation allows a resonance to occur. Similar to Kandinsky's *Klang* is Duchamp's "aesthetic echo" (Baas 2005: 55) which he explained to the Western Round Table on Modern Art in 1949 as follows: "art cannot be understood through the intellect, but is felt through an emotion presenting some analogy with a religious faith or a sexual attraction – an aesthetic echo" (Baas 2005: 55). The similarity of the two concepts is also carried into practical production via Duchamp's *Tu m'* (1918). The painting features a pointing hand signed: A. Klang,

which Baas sees as an obvious reference to Kandinsky's *Klang* (Baas 2005: 54). The pointing hand is a feature of what I would call showing, of being unable to convey in linguistic terms what one is dealing with. The title *Tu m'* also has the possible translation of something along the lines of "'you (missing verb) me,' a verbal version of the concept of interdependence" (Baas 2005: 54). The Buddhist concept of interdependence, as has been discussed already, pertains to the perception of boundaries as empty structures. With the title of *Tu m'* Duchamp collapsed the categories of you and me into one (the conglomerate: youme). Baas encapsulates Duchamp's approach in the following;

For Duchamp art was emptiness, a space wherein the viewer 'brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act'. The degree to which the artist fails to fully convey his intention creates a 'gap' that is energized by the potential of this encounter: 'what art is in reality is this missing link, not the links which exist. It's not what you see that is art, art is the gap.' In other words, art, like everything else, is empty of inherent self-existence. (Baas 2005: 55)

To support the reading of the title of *Tu m'* as one that collapses you and me, Baas finds a similarity between it and a passage from the Bodhicaryavatara (The Way of the Bodhisattva, written by Shantideva in the eighteenth century). According to Shantideva, "whoever wants quickly to attain salvation of himself and others should practice the supreme mystery: to interchange the terms 'I' and 'other.'" (Baas 2005: 83). This, according to Baas also stands as some evidence of Duchamp's interest and research in Buddhism, along with his "frequent assertions of his own laziness" coinciding with the fact that Shantideva was known as "the lazy one" (Baas 2005: 83). The topic of laziness or idleness will be dealt with shortly.

This proximity between the classes you and I can be understood as one that moves toward placing the experience of a work inside the viewer's mind by reducing the distance between not only the artist and viewer, but also between the viewer and the core content of the object. Inside this kind of system, where the work is constructed with the aim to be internal in some way, there is the construction of a way of relating, not to what is seen, but through what is seen. Isamu Noguchi's (1904-1988) view on sculpture is homologous with my reading, as he says; "By sculpture... we mean those plastic and spatial relationships which define a moment of personal existence and illuminate the environment of our existence" (Baas 2005: 116). One of Noguchi's works that falls in line with this approach is *Seen and Unseen* (1962). The work consists of two bronze objects that seem to emerge from the floor, one protruding upwards more than the other. Their shape and placement intentionally resembles the stones used in Japanese Zen gardens. As Noguchi explains, "In Japan the rocks in the garden are so planted as to suggest a protruberance from the primordial mass below... We are made aware of this 'floating world' through consciousness of sheer invisible mass" (Noguchi, cited in Baas 2005: 116). Here again I see emptiness as being used as an important component of the process of signification. What has been excluded is what does the most work in the work.

Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) wrote about some paintings he had made in the Virgin Islands that they “contain no sea-shells nor undersea caves, no blinding sand or wild winds or superstitions, no terror of the deep, no west-Indian magic, nor zombies, no sea-urchins. There is in them no trace or taste of lobster or turtle, mango or mongoose, no rum or coca-cola, no bamboo or barracuda or outboard motor” (Baas 2005: 125). The critic Lawrence Alloway’s comment on this was to label it as “an exuberant list of denials” (Alloway, cited in Baas 2005: 125). And rightly so, however, Reinhardt would still insist that all of the above “were in the paintings” (Baas 2005: 125). The similarity with the Heart Sutra (discussed earlier) is quite pronounced in that there is the same system in place of conveying something in apophatic terms, by telling us, extensively, what something is not but remaining entirely silent on what it is. This connects with what has been laid out so far along the lines of showing rather than telling. Even Reinhardt’s definition of art is set out in terms that would not raise much suspicion if inserted into the text of the Heart Sutra; “The one thing to say about art is its breathlessness, lifelessness, deathlessness, contentlessness, formlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness” (Reinhardt, cited in Baas 2005: 125). Correspondingly, Reinhardt’s Twelve Rules is striking in its similarity to the structure of the Heart Sutra. As with the Sutra, Reinhardt’s rules pile up, gradually reducing possibilities until everything (any concept that can be grasped) is crowded out by nothing.

1. No texture
 2. No brushwork or calligraphy
 3. No sketching or drawing
 4. No forms
 5. No design
 6. No colors
 7. No light
 8. No space
 9. No time
 10. No scale or size
 11. No movement
 12. No object, no subject, no matter. No symbols, images, or signs. Neither pleasure nor paint.
- (Reinhardt, cited in Baas 2005: 131)

Yves Klein has also made similar statements, for instance; “there is no inside, no outside, no objects, no eyes.... nothing there” (Baas 2005: 135). It is probably a safe assumption in light of this that Klein was primarily concerned with the void-space that this document takes on. Klein’s monochromes present us with a blank void of colour; most famous and commonly used was the colour blue, which channels connotation towards the idea of sky. “Klein also found in nature an appealing, evocative atmosphere. Not surprisingly, his attention was drawn to the limitless blue expanses of sea and sky that so dominate life on the Mediterranean coast. In addition to the rich color, he was captivated by

the freedom that he sensed within these unbounded, uninterrupted spatial fields" (Stich 1995: 18). As with Turrell's work, the sky is an available everyday medium of ostensive emptiness. It is known that Klein was influenced by so-called eastern philosophy, and it is possible that the reference to sky and voidness that is so prevalent in the artist's work was supported by the Tibetan poet-adept Milarepa (that Klein had read about in Bacot's book on the life of Milarepa (Baas 2005: 136)). Milarepa describes the awareness of the void in the following terms:

[the void] is like the feeling of staring
Into a vast and empty sky...
Thinking of the magnitude of the sky
Meditate on the vastness with no center and
No edge. (Baas 2005: 136-137)

Stich tells us that at one point Klein nominated the sky as his "first and biggest monochrome" (1995: 19). As with the sky, Klein's monochromes contain such "infinitesimal visual differences that any memory of them would be lost from one painting to the next. To focus his viewers' minds further, he gave these apparently identical paintings different prices" (Baas 2005:140-141). When one thinks about sky one rarely thinks of an individuated sky with features, what predominates is the overarching concept of sky. So therefore, the monochromes are both individualised and universal simultaneously, like the paradoxical statements: forever now, or full void. In 1957, Klein showed *Surfaces and Blocks of Invisible Pictorial Sensibility* at the Allendy Gallery. The piece consisted of an empty room on the second floor. In April of 1958 something similar took place at Galerie Iris Clert; in a show that came to be known as *The Void*, the gallery was presented completely empty and painted white, with the windows painted in Klein signature blue (IKB) on the outside. Klein described the operation as follows:

I seclude myself in the gallery alone forty-eight hours before the opening to repaint it entirely in white – on the one hand, to clean it of the impregnations from the last several exhibitions and, on the other, because the action of painting the walls white, the noncolor, temporarily turns it into my space of work and creation, that is, my studio. Thus, I believe that the pictorial space that I have already managed to stabilize in front of and around my monochrome paintings of previous years will be, from that moment well established in the gallery space. My active presence in the given space will create the climate and pictorial radiant ambience that normally dwells in the studio of every artist gifted with real power. A palpable, abstract, but real, density can exist and survive by itself and for itself solely in the empty spaces of appearance. (Carson 2004: 118)

One underlying theme that can be extracted from Klein's production and *The Void* show is the idea that the viewer needs help to see the plainly obvious, and that the seeing of/through emptiness is facilitated by the artist (in the case above this is Klein). This functions in line with Buddhism's emphasis that emptiness is right before our eyes, imbedded in the everyday. An example that illustrates this quite well is Duchamp's *Trap* (1917),¹⁴ which consisted of a piece of wood with four

¹⁴ Also known by the French title: *Trebuchet*

coat hooks attached to it that he nailed to the floor of his studio in order to stop tripping over it (paradoxically enough) (Baas 2005: 150). Baas concludes that this was a kind of device (aide-mémoire) constructed by Duchamp to make himself really see where he was going. Failing to pay attention and not be fully aware would result in his falling into a trap of his own making (Baas 2005: 150). The idea of a trap of one's own construction runs parallel to the Buddhist concepts of attachment and suffering; the responsibility for resolving the problem and at the same time, the only hindrance lies in oneself. Buddhism's strategy of non-grasping is implicated in (or at least can be read in) *Trap*. By making visible what was invisible (and hence being constantly tripped over), Duchamp fixed the nature of grasping in much the same way that seeing grasping as an empty structure fixes it (though not with nails to the floor as Duchamp did) and allows it to be overcome. Baas offers the additional evidence that "*Trap's* grasping hooks and the association of clothes with 'the man' – the ego – reinforce this interpretation of Duchamp's intention" (Baas 2005: 150).



Margot Ehrlich (ed.)
Duchamp's Trap
 First replica of assisted
 ready-made made 1917
 Cast Plink
 01 x 09 x 11 cm

(Wassenaar Jean Tinguely Base)
 2003: 107



Margot Ehrlich (ed.)
Duchamp's Trap
 First replica of ready-made
 originally made 1917
 Cast-plink
 11 x 9 x 11 cm

(Wassenaar Jean Tinguely Base)
 2002: 103

“Klein’s void rooms and zones of immateriality...evoke the memory of Marcel Duchamp’s presentation of air as the subject and medium of his readymade *Air de Paris* (1919)” (Stich 1995: 156). Apart from the obvious linkages between the two, there is also the factor of how little had to be done in terms of creating the works, in many cases all that was required was to simply point and say: art. This approach to making art leads to an epiphenomenon I call ‘lazy showmanship,’ which is a label all too easily placed on works that participate in some way or deal with emptiness. This is a position that acquires the label easily but is defended with great difficulty, so much difficulty in fact that most artists will not attempt a defence. Duchamp went along with it and purported his own laziness often. Klein would probably have preferred a word other than lazy. Though I could not specify what exactly this alternative word would be, I could characterise it as something associated with judo (though not exclusively), a sport I have always considered as the lazy man’s karate. As I have written earlier, the central mechanism in judo is the use of minimum effort for maximum results. Sidra Stich tells us that “The principles of judo, which enable an individual to conquer a more powerful adversary with a minimum of effort, greatly appealed to Klein, and he quickly became a committed student” (1995: 16). Therefore, laziness is close, but not quite an accurate description of the kinds of creative strategies used to construct works made by Duchamp, Klein and those that followed along similar lines. Among these is the production of Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) who was also “pursuing an interest in the void during the 1950s and 1960s” (Stich 1995: 156). One of Manzoni’s most famous pieces, *Merda d’Artista* (1961), required no more exertion than shitting into a can then signing and editioning the product.



Piero Manzoni
Merda d'Artista in tin container (shit)
 1961
 Edition
 1/100 (signed and numbered)

© Piero Manzoni

Emptiness and laziness can also naturally lend themselves to works that revolve around space (like the sky for instance), once the focus is taken off a singular produced object, the work can be anywhere, or as Klein would have us believe – everywhere. About those who followed after Duchamp, Klein and Manzoni, Stich says, “It is also significant that artists like Dan Flavin, Carl Andre and Daniel Buren embraced a concern with space by creating sculptures and paintings that call attention to the surrounding environment and the way that objects can shape space and our perception of it. The dynamics of space, as opposed the production of contained, autonomous, self-defined objects, thus came to be explored in various ways that compliment Klein’s creation of *The Void* and his conceptualization of immateriality” (1995: 157). Not to conflate emptiness and the advent of conceptualism, but it does appear that the production of artists like Robert Barry (1915-1988) spreads the concept of art ever further from a centralized instantiation towards an ever thinning precipice (over nothing). Barry’s *Inert Gas Series* (c.1969) springs to mind along with his statement in discussion with Carl Andre (1935-) and Lawrence Weiner (1942-) that “Nothing seems to me the most potent thing in the world” (Weinhart 2006: 38-39). He also used materials that were “invisible or at least not perceivable in a traditional way. He acknowledged that posed problems, but at the same time it opened up endless possibilities for him. It was ultimately this recognition that enabled him to discard the idea that art had to be something to look at” (Weinhart 2006: 38-39). Instead of being something to look at, art became, for more than just Barry, a way of seeing the world. This comes with the problem of perceived laziness; the shift is one that goes from a pattern of production at a physical level to a way of relating at a conceptual level (with action/product as an adjunct).

It is perhaps the act of nomination; the apparent power of artists to point and make the world otherwise, that is most prone to the label of lazy (perhaps even impertinent). McEvilley writes about Tom Marioni’s (1937-) *The Act of Drinking beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art* (1970)

[The work was Marioni’s] first ‘social’ artwork and has become...a signature work. The genre term is based on Beuys’s ‘social sculpture,’ but lightly spoofs its seriousness. After an evening spent in the exhibition space (the Oakland museum) drinking beer with friends, Marioni left the litter or detritus of the event in place as the art object. A network of cultural and artistic connections suggests itself, both in the tradition of designating detritus as art (especially Arman’s *Le Plein*, 1960) and in the tradition of designating convivial occasions as performative events.... As he and his friends bend their elbows and chat at the Wednesday salons, Hermann Nitsch’s OM Theater (1962 and after) lurks darkly in the background, while more recent parallels include the 1970s performances by the California feminist group The Waitresses, James Lee Byars’s works in which only red vodka was served, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s gallery meals, and other such works after 1970. The art exhibit as a kind of feast or social sacrament in which life was shared became a part of the expansive mood of the 1980s and after. (Marioni 2003: 14-15)

Here again there is this attitude at work that confronts boundaries with impertinence; blurring drinking beer with art. This seems dangerously close to believing that one could make art at any given place at any given time, even if this involved standing around and doing nothing. This what James Lee Byars (1932-1997) does in *I Do Nothing, Assisted By Grogel* (1975), which entails Byars in a

room with the floor painted gold (gold was also a preference in many of Klein's works), handing out spheres of gold covered Chinese funeral paper with the sentence: I do nothing, on them. These scraps were tossed to the floor where they merged with the gold of the floor, a gesture I read as adding nothing to nothing. The theme of laziness is carried further with the only other activity to take place in the room; Byars listening to Satie with his girlfriend Bibi Grogel.

To return to Duchamp's laziness; after pronouncing himself as exceedingly lazy in an interview with Pierre Cabanne, he goes on to say "I like living, breathing, better than working...my art [is] that of living: each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual or cerebral. It's a sort of constant euphoria" (Cabanne, cited in Jacob 2004: 229). Like the Buddhist rejection of the boundary between I and other, and subject and object as empty structures, Duchamp's statement regarding laziness collapses the distinction between making art with one's life and time and being art itself.¹⁵ The concept of work, then becomes untenable within such a system because there is nothing else other than the art/life monad. When asked about his assertions of laziness, the Taiwanese artist Lee Mingwei (1964-) replied; "I was recently lamenting to my good friend...about how lazy I am as an artist after doing studio visits with students.... She explained that the reason why I think I am lazy is because I do not consider doing my projects as work. People tend to associate work with hardship and effort" (Jacob 2004: 229). At the baseline this ostensible laziness is, I would argue, a form of non-grasping.

Bare awareness (also called mindfulness), is described by Epstein (2004: 31) as the *sine qua non* of Buddhist meditation in which a certain distance is maintained in relation to what "happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception" (*The Nyanaponika Thera*, cited in Epstein 2004: 31). Epstein goes on to link this peculiar form of awareness to art production and the artists "combination of focused concentration and open, non-discriminating awareness" (Epstein 2004: 31). It is further qualified as an essential part of the creative process. This working method is not alien to artists; if the doctrine of non-grasping is followed, ideas can be allowed to present themselves as options within the framework of the work without the apprehension that sometimes goes with completely discarding part or all of an artwork. It is this distance or non-grasping, along with an inclusive attitude that allows everything to be viewed as an alternative or possible component of a work. As Cage writes "From Suzuki's teachings I began to understand that a sober and quiet mind is one in which the ego does not obstruct the fluency of the things that come in through our senses and up through our dreams. Our business in living is to become fluent with the life we are living" (Epstein 2004: 33).

Tiravanija's practice could be said to function on a strategy of creating voids; which considering these voids are formed in the context of art (itself something of an empty space), adds up to putting a hole in a hole. Two such examples are *Community Cinema for a Quiet Intersection (After Oldenburg)*, (1999), which consists of the artist setting up kitchen in a gallery and feeding the visitors, and *The*

¹⁵ See Suzuki's paragraph on being the artist of life, linked to my statement about being holiday as opposed to being on holiday in the introduction.

Land (1999, ongoing), which consists of a plot of land in Thailand that Tiravanija and a Thai Artist named Kamin Lertchaiprasert (1964-) co-own and use as a free space. As Tiravanija says in one interview, the land is “an open space to cultivate ideas of social engagement” (Jacob 2004: 173). Both works have at their core “a desire not just to erode the distinction between institutional and social space, but between artist and viewer; the phrase ‘lots of people’ regularly appears on his lists of materials” (Bishop 2004: 56). Visitors to one of Tiravanija’s cooking pieces or his live-in pieces can just come in and have a meal and talk to people or just hang around inside an empty space (inside an empty space).

The Land is an ongoing project that involves other artists and collectives such as Atelier Van Lieshout in a kind of community based production (not so far removed from Tiravanija’s other works with the exception that the so-called art world is less present). The project also includes the Copenhagen based group Superflex who are involved in a project that aims to produce biogas for the complex. All this falls under Tiravanija’s aim of “finding people in other fields who think in very open, creative ways to deal with life” (Jacob 2004: 171). Tiravanija’s approach, by his own statement is one that holds emptiness as key; “it’s not even about being open or closed; it’s just about being blank. In a way, of course, you can receive more if you are empty.”¹⁶ Tiravanija has also responded in the affirmative when asked if he was “trying to make an open, ‘empty’ space in museums” (Jacob 2004: 173). The kinds of things that go on in a Tiravanija work function very much on the level of the ordinary, there are no sublime spiritualities, or linguistic cleverisms, you just sit down and have a curry. It shows rather than tells, and in this way is similar in its conceptual structure to the functioning of the *Zen koan*, as is the production of many artists; Tiravanija, Orozco, and Creed being a few examples. There is a correspondence between the puzzlement (and indeed frustration, as in Cage’s case) that some of these works elicit and the puzzlement brought out in us when one examines a *koan*. A work of Tiravanija’s that is exemplary in terms of approaching art as a way of seeing the world, is a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles (*Untitled*, 1995 (450/375)), which have words engraved on the lenses.



Barbed Tiravanija
Untitled (1995)
 1995.
 Gold-rimmed octagonal
 glasses with engraved
 lenses.

LEWIS RIVER
 A. 0.0000000000000000
 0.0000000000000000
 AT TWELVE 111
 QUARTER DUES 147000
 SILVERMOUNTAIN
 reformed.

¹⁶ This way of thinking is also evident in the following Zen anecdote: “Nan-in, a Japanese master...received a university professor who came to enquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. ‘it’s overfull, no more will go in.’ ‘Like this cup,’ Nan-in said ... ‘how can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup’” (Reps 1991:17).

Artworks of Martin Creed's such as *Work no. 227, The lights going on and off* (2001), (an empty room in which the lights switched on and off), also function at the edges of art practice while making minor changes to a given system. I characterise these works as liminal because, as with many of Creed's works, they are at the threshold of almost not being there. The nominal changes instituted by Creed in works such as *Work No. 142: A large piece of furniture partially obstructing a door* (1996-2002), encourage a reading of the artists production as lazy. In this and other works like *Work No. 396: Wood* (2005), which consists of lengths of wood piled up in a sort of pyramid, Creed adds the everyday to art contexts in a gesture that makes the division between the two seem as arbitrary and empty as many sectors of Buddhism would find the distinction between everyday life and enlightenment (Buddha mind). This (Buddhist) strategy of adding nothing to nothing is visible in another of Creed's pieces; *Work No. 143* (2000), which first appeared as a neon sign on the façade of the Tate, is the sentence/equation "the whole world + the work = the whole world" (Button & Esche 2000: 49). Creed's aim has been described as one that attempts to "simultaneously produce both something and nothing" (Button & Esche 2000: 49). The artist supports this by saying "I find it a lot easier if it [the work] negates itself at the same time as pushing itself forward. Given that I don't feel sure about it, I feel a lot more comfortable if I can make it and sort of unmake it at the same time" (Button & Esche 2000: 49). *Work No. 184: An intrusion and a protrusion from a wall* (1997), is perhaps one of the clearest examples of this approach, which pulls in opposite directions simultaneously.



Martin Creed,
Work No. 143
 2000
 Neon sign
 Dimensions variable

(Button & Esche 2000: 108)

Martin Creed is the poster boy for entropic uncertainty. The quasi-paralysis that marks Creed's production is discernible in *Work No. 200: Half the air in a given space* about which the artist says; "It's important to me to make a big nothing" (Buck 1998: 67). The same process of null-magnification is at work here, where a big nothing attempts to somehow compensate for the initial nothing of the work. *Half the air in a given space* really concerns all the air in a given space since there cannot be half a nothing. The room half filled with balloons only exhibits half the air by virtue of packaging. Creed elaborates on the work as follows; "I suppose that my interest in air is that it's everywhere and you can't see it. We don't have a choice about air – we need it, that's why I like it as a material – it's something I've been trying to use for ages and it was staring me in the face that really the best and simplest way of doing this is just to use balloons. They're commonplace and they're just a way of packaging air" (Buck 1998: 67). An examination of the preceding quotation would extract many of the issues that this document has dealt with so far. Language is the balloon around emptiness, an expedient of presentation. Emptiness can be seen everywhere if one looks emptily. The sentence regarding the fact that we have no choice about air is particularly interesting with regard to laziness and uncertainty; it is as if Creed wants to disavow the responsibility of having made his work. The end result is that Martin Creed never ends up having made a complete work, the responsibility is spread wider and thinner than just the simple statement: I made it. This is non-grasping with respect to the distinction between I and other (as Milarepa would have it) because the removal of the category of self causes the category of other to appear larger. A similar phenomenon is in evidence in Cage's engagement with randomness. Cage explains about his practice of using the *I Ching* in his work:

If you work with chance operations, you're basically shifting – from the responsibility to choose to the responsibility to ask. People frequently ask me if I'm faithful to the answers, or if I change them because I want to. I don't change them because I want to. When I find myself at that point, in the position of someone who would change something – at that point I don't change it. I change myself. It's for that reason I have said that instead of self-expression, I'm involved with self-alteration. (Baas 2005: 169)

The above quotation caused me to wonder to myself whether it was possible for the results of Cage's chance operations to be made more or less random, a little like shuffling the cards of a deck more or less. If the cards start off in a certain order, let's say, with most of the aces at the top, and I do not want my opponent to end up with all the aces, I would shuffle the deck more so that there was a greater probability that we would both have the same chances of getting good cards. Then I asked myself: how much randomness would be enough, how would I decide when to stop and so on. As with a number between two others: there are always other numbers between the numbers one started with. The numbers can divide endlessly from a half, to a quarter, to one eighth, to one sixteenth and so on. Much like the search for emptiness, or a perfectly shuffled deck of cards, Adorno tells us that art is "the possible, as promised by its impossibility" (Adorno, cited in Dickhoff 2000: 2).

5.0 CONCLUSION: AND IN THE END, THERE WAS NOTHING...

Ex nihilo nihil fit
(Nothing comes from nothing)¹⁷

One could just as easily assert that from nothing comes potentially everything. The relation between the category of nothing and everything is inversely proportional, the more truly empty the empty set, the greater the potential for any possible something or permutation of properties to exist in it. Like a *tabula rasa* or a Masters degree in Fine Art; in the beginning there is nothing. This nothing is what struck me as analogous to the response I have to *koans*, where there is a feeling of static, vacuous immobility as the mind attempts to formulate a resolution to a problem that has yet to come into existence (if this seems to lean towards the autobiographical the reader will excuse me and bear in mind besides that in an empty universe one can always think of oneself as being in the centre). What has been expounded thus far is the result of a question I asked myself more than three years ago; the question that asks if a concept very like Buddhist emptiness (the emptiest kind) and art could, have, or do exist in some relation to one another. This was in essence a self-posed *koan* and, as it goes with *koans*, the response is not as linear as: Yes, definitely and sometimes, in these instances. The answer that composes the substance of the written and practical research exhibits the same 'mental fragrance' as the difference between telling and showing, or between a deductive and an inductive argument.

Through section one of this document the concept of entropy is expatiated on, with an aim to tie it to the parallel notion of transience in Buddhism and to introduce entropy and uncertainty as a mindset that I believe to be generally widespread. As I have written, transience in the Buddhist tradition is attendant to the idea of emptiness or *sunyata* which, to repeat, is a mode of appreciation toward the world rather than a doctrine or set of procedural instructions. The latter part of section one begins to elaborate on the notion of transience in art which ties it to one of the major concerns of the research; that art production is not so much the thing made as the viewpoint that made it (a thread that perpetuates itself throughout). I am reminded here of Suzuki's sentiments on the "Zen artist of life" who "does not need, like the painter, a canvas, brushes, and paints; nor does he require, like the archer, the bow and arrow and target" (Suzuki, cited in Herrigel 1989: ix).

The body of work for which this dissertation acts as a frame of reference is not about anything, aboutness is for telling us something. The converse of aboutness (which lacks a name) is where showing is situated and why so very little can be said about the work and so very much (relatively) must be said around it. As close as I can come to relating what the work is about is to state that the works documented in the following section are a crystallization of my view of the world as a response to the question/*koan* of the concept of emptiness and how, if emptiness is empty, can it be represented. Much like staring at the sky, one cannot see the emptiness of the sky because its

¹⁷ Also interpreted as 'nothing is made from nothing.' Ehrlich (1987: 104) points out that there is some ambiguity in the modern English rendering of the phrase which allows it to be variously construed as "a dull mind cannot be expected to produce great thoughts, anything worth doing requires hard work, you can't get blood from a stone, and the like" (Ehrlich 1987: 104).

emptiness is seen through rather than seen proper as a thing in itself. Following this, it is hoped that the viewer will be able to see through the objects represented to the sensibility that led to their construction. This is not to say that nothing can be said of the physical products of the research or that the sensibility that I refer to has no markers to speak of. It should, however, be borne in mind that more of a *gestalt* approach is called for here. What this entails is that there is only one work to speak of here and it comprises of the totality of this document and the work seen as something more than the sum of its parts

Throughout, the central kernel of the argument could be described as follows: artworks are a request from the artist to the viewer to see the world a certain way (the word intuitive is close but inadequate). This does not mean to see certain things about the world, or even seeing things that are representations of the world. As with the *koan*, it is an entirely internal change of attitude. Along these lines, I would recommend the reader undertake a small thought experiment in aid of illumination and in preparation for the works section that follows. It goes like this (and only like this): imagine a smell, any smell; it does not matter, as long as you can imagine yourself smelling it. Now, having done this, add one step and imagine yourself, imagining that smell. What does that smell like?



WORKS



2004

Carat scales, found images,
antique gold pocket watch (c.1896),
magnifying glass, small electrical
fan, one drop of water, cigarette ash,
painted wooden cases.

34 X 104 X 22cm

This was the first work produced and exhibits a bias more towards the entropic thinking discussed in the early sections of the paper, which, theoretically was the position at which I began to examine emptiness. Entropy was, to me, the Western scientific sibling of Buddhist emptiness. Instruments of measurement placed in each case highlight this logical/scientific approach. The gold watch to measure time and the carat scales to measure gold. The magnifying glass serves to augment the notion of an observer (there is always an observing subjectivity in any scientific experiment).

The choice to use carat scales and a gold watch was motivated by the fact that gold is an inert, non-reactive metal: in essence, it remains as it is for a very long time because it is impervious to any form of oxidation. Gold also comes with the associations of commerce and with commerce, the balance sheet which tallies up money in and money out. This is mirrored in the middle and bottom cases,

which could be described as energy out and energy in: the pocket watch is an object that winds down (energy out) and the fan in the bottom case brings energy in to blow down on the one side of the scale.

The found images are digitally manipulated (not by me) to look like a famous pop star (supposedly Britney Spears). She is represented as the picture of youth and beauty (and if one includes the pop star connotations, then of money also). There is also a certain ambivalence to her presence: given the context, she could stand for the fragile transience of human or organic life as she is the only thing in the cases that directly references the human (specifically in corporeal form). In this reading she would stand in contrast to the gold, however, given that in the instances of both the top and bottom scales, what is substituted for gold in the balances is water and cigarette ash (polar opposites), and air respectively. The implication being that all will eventually yield to entropy and final equilibrium. Alternatively, she could function within the piece as a marker of a desire that diminishes over time, which fits with the Buddhist doctrine of the overcoming of grasping and desire.



Detail of bottom case.

The left side of the scale contains a one-carat weight, the right side has the fan above it. When the fan is on the force of the air pushing downward into the right-hand cup of the scale brings about (almost) equilibrium between the two sides.

Detail of middle case. The pocket watch suspended behind a magnifying glass.





Detail of top case.

The scale tips on the right side due to the drop of water that it holds. In the other cup is the cigarette ash. As the water droplet evaporates, the scales will tip towards balance and then as the water nears complete evaporation, the scale will tip all the way to the opposite side of the work's starting position (the ash wins). Cigarette ash also carries with it various associations, such as the deleterious effects to health, thereby bringing one closer to death, and the idea of an activity often undertaken while waiting for something to happen (something to fill the void). Cigarettes also link strongly with the concept of attachment that I employ because of their addictive properties. Within the context of this work, the ash aligns with the desire indexed by the found images.

ONE BUDDHA, NO SHIT: TWELVE STEP PROGRAM

2005

Twelve empty gluten cans (product of the Shin Yi Fa company of Taiwan)

7 (DIAMETER) X 74cm



Rear and top view (above and left)
The contents of all the cans have been consumed (by me) and stacked one on top of the other after each eating.



Detail of front with image of the Buddha on a lotus throne.

The stacking of the cans suggests the serial order in which the contents were consumed. It also is meant to suggest the image of the Buddha ascending, along with the association of a strip of film in which a centred image appears static within each individual frame. Following this, the notion of a singular or multiple Buddhas becomes undecidable and unstable. The cans along with part of the title reference Manzoni's *Merda De Artista* which functions on the level of making the art a by-product of the artist, a concept introduced in the early stages of this document. My process inverts the mechanics of Manzoni's piece in a way by emptying the by-product and displaying the process from the opposite end of the digestive tract (the mouth instead of the rectum). The association with excreta that arises from the tie to Manzoni's piece also works in line with the Buddhist connotations of the lotus flower which rises up from base material (mud/shit) and produces bright, beautiful flowers.

CUSHIONS FOR SCREAMING INTO (OR MEDITATING ON)



2005

Cushions constructed from canvas, stuffing.

160 X 100 X 160cm (cushion size decreases to 5 X 5cm at top cushion).

This piece had its beginnings as a side-effect of my readings on Buddhist religious practice which mentioned that many meditation halls employ cushions due to the long hours of seated meditation that are undertaken. I began to wonder just how much comfort was permissible while one was meditating. Would too much comfort (padding) make it too much like leisure? Would too little make it too much like penance? The idea of a perfect medium between the two would seem to suggest a middle way or balance of some kind.

The stack also references the pagoda in its shape and number of levels (always an odd number). The temple, like the art-gallery, is a place that is removed from the world of pragmatics to a certain degree. I believe that these structures of the art world act as cushions in a way: they are places that put a buffer between us and the world in the same way that a cushion provides a buffer between ones rear and the discomfort of the floor. The association of art with a comfortable (but not too comfortable) arena is brought forward by the use of canvas, which ties the cushions to the realm of art.

The view of art as a buffer or respite appeared in section 2.1 when I describe Schopenhauer's view on art as one that sees it as a space that allows a certain freedom from the tyranny of the will and allows for some form of respite from desire. The title incorporates screaming as well as meditating as it encompasses art and religion (canvas and pagoda shape). The screaming corresponds to the proposition of art that poses that it communicates and the meditating possibility references the idea of art as a buffer or empty space that, to reuse some of Cage's words (section 4.0), is a space to "sober and quiet the mind" (Cage, cited in Epstein 2004: 33). The phrase 'meditating on' in the title is also a play on the double meaning of meditating on something. Therefore, the title is readable in the sense of contemplating something, or in the sense of being physically on (sitting on) something.

GETTING THE ART KICKED OUT

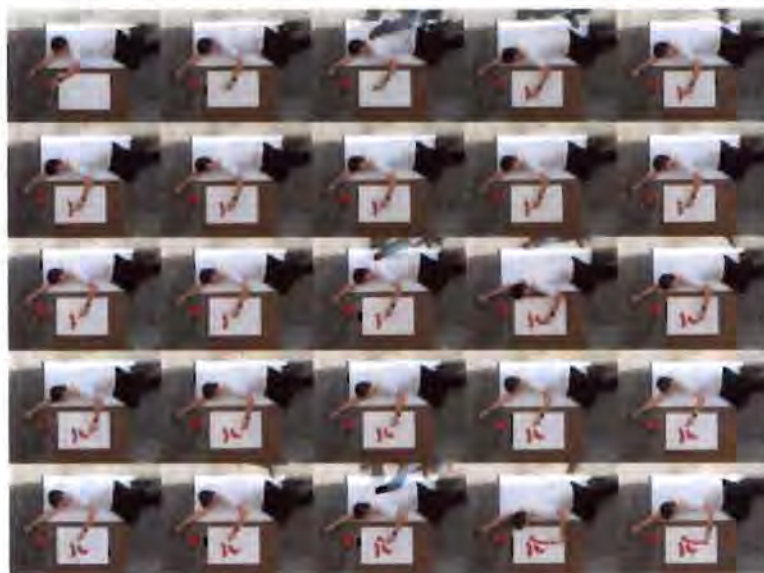


2006
Series of six. Oil on
paper.
Each: 53 X 73cm

This work is based on the Calligraphic works that one sees executed by various Chinese and Japanese Masters of Chan/Zen. The execution of such works involves a spontaneous gesture without thought being y recorded on the paper by the master/artist. It is also said that the mark made is a product of the artist's entire body, such that it expresses his whole being. Accordingly, this variant of the tradition (mine) has these things in common with its predecessors. As the title and documentation below suggest, this work involves me lying in front of a piece of paper with a loaded brush while an assistant takes a running start of a few paces and kicks me hard from behind. The resulting shock transfer (if the kick is hard enough), or my flinching (if the kick is painful enough) produces a brushstroke. The movement of the brushstroke is spontaneous as I am lying on the floor waiting for an assistant to kick me and cannot see when the blow will land. This gives me no time to stiffen up before the blow comes. My assistants were instructed to kick hard so as to ensure sufficient shock transfer through my body to the brush in my hand. This fulfils the other characteristic that I mention: the work being a result of the whole body.

The work is not only the result of my whole body, but also of two other people's bodies which spreads out the responsibility of having made the work. This is the conflation of you and I that was dealt with previously in relation to Buddhism and Duchamp (see discussion of T um' and Shantideva in section 4.0).

These works also relate strongly to what I have laid out as a concern of mine under the theme of laziness. One possible reading of the work is that artists are such lazy creatures that, like a recalcitrant mule, they must have their labours beaten out of them.



Process documentation
1 of 6

Detail of signature (my seals at top) and seal of the Buddha's hand holding a lotus. Attached to each image.



As with most calligraphic work of the type that this piece emulates, the seal of the artist is attached to the image. Often another seal is affixed that has links to the Buddhist visual lexicon. In this case I have used the lotus flower that, as I have written, symbolises a movement from the mundane to the enlightened spheres. Given the possible premise of the piece as one that situates the artist in a quasi-lazy realm (one of idleness, which associates with empty time and emptiness), the use of the lotus reinforces the movement just stated with regard to the lotus.



3 of 6

Documentation of first brushstroke. From 3 of 6 in the series. The kick is visible from the fourth panel (top right) to the eighth.



Documentation of second brushstroke. From 3 of 6 in the series. With kick visible in frames five to eleven.



Documentation of third brushstroke. From 3 of 6 in the series. See kick in frames two through to eight.

UNTITLED (imploding paintings)

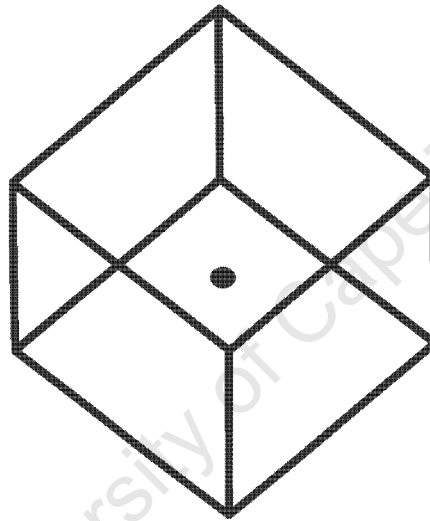


2004
Oil on canvas.
63 X 240 X 4cm

These canvasses were constructed by applying immense pressure over time to the sides of a stretcher that would then have the canvas stretched over it. The result is meant to seem as though the canvasses are collapsing on account of the pressure differential between outside and inside leaning heavily towards a greater outer force.

Executed on canvas in oil paint, the work contains the markers of a fine art tradition of painting that has a long history and has become, over time, synonymous with the overarching idea of art itself (as a generalized whole). A possible implication here is that owing to the emptiness of art any pressure from the outside causes an implosion (discussed in section 3.1). The application of actual pressure (rather than cutting a shape) in the execution of the work mirrors the collapse just described in that the collapse of an empty structure takes place first at its points of least resistance. In this case, these points of least resistance were the long vertical sides of the canvasses that I bent because they were

easier to bend (as opposed to the short sides at the top and bottom which, at the length that they are, are impossible to bend). The work also presents another possible picture at the same time. If one considers the negative space between these two emptinesses (reinforced by the sky blue), there appears to be an elliptical emptiness between the two canvasses that is growing outward. The work attempts to construct a visual paradox by supplying two images simultaneously. This is similar to the ambiguous figures publicized by pop psychology (known in psychology as multi unstable images) or the necker cube (see below) which allows one to see the image in one of two ways at a time, but not both simultaneously because two messages are imbedded in the same signal.



When viewing the cube, the location of the dot in the centre becomes ambiguous and unstable.

UNTITLED



2006

Wine glasses (varying sizes), glass sheets, water.

28 (diameter) X 63cm

Each wine glass is filled completely with water and then inverted in the manner that one places empty glasses. Therefore, while at first glance the glasses may seem empty (due to the viewer's expectations), closer inspection reveals that they are full. This references the Buddhist notion of the full void and functions in concert with the inversion of the wine glasses which are counter-intuitively full and upturned.



Detail of middle glass (with imploding canvasses in background).

Throughout the document, I have referred to Buddhism (specifically emptiness) and art as a way of seeing the world. This is evident in the present work in that the addition of water has altered the refractive properties of the piece. To clarify: when a glass is empty, one sees through to the other side and the image perceived is the right way up, but when water is added the image seen of what is behind the glass is inverted (as we have it in the image above where the floor is seen at the upper area of the glass). Thus, the wine glasses present us with an image of the same world but modified. The idea of enlightenment as a modification of the way one apprehends the world comes to mind here along with the phrase: to have one's world turned upside down. I have also stated in section 2.4 that the moment of enlightenment is the emptiness of emptiness, when emptiness as a concept has ceased to be an object to be grasped by a person. This double inversion is mirrored conceptually within this piece by the occurrence of upside down wine glasses that present images of an upside down world.

HALF TITLED



2005

Gourd, painted wood, acrylic, label.

24 X 19 X 7cm

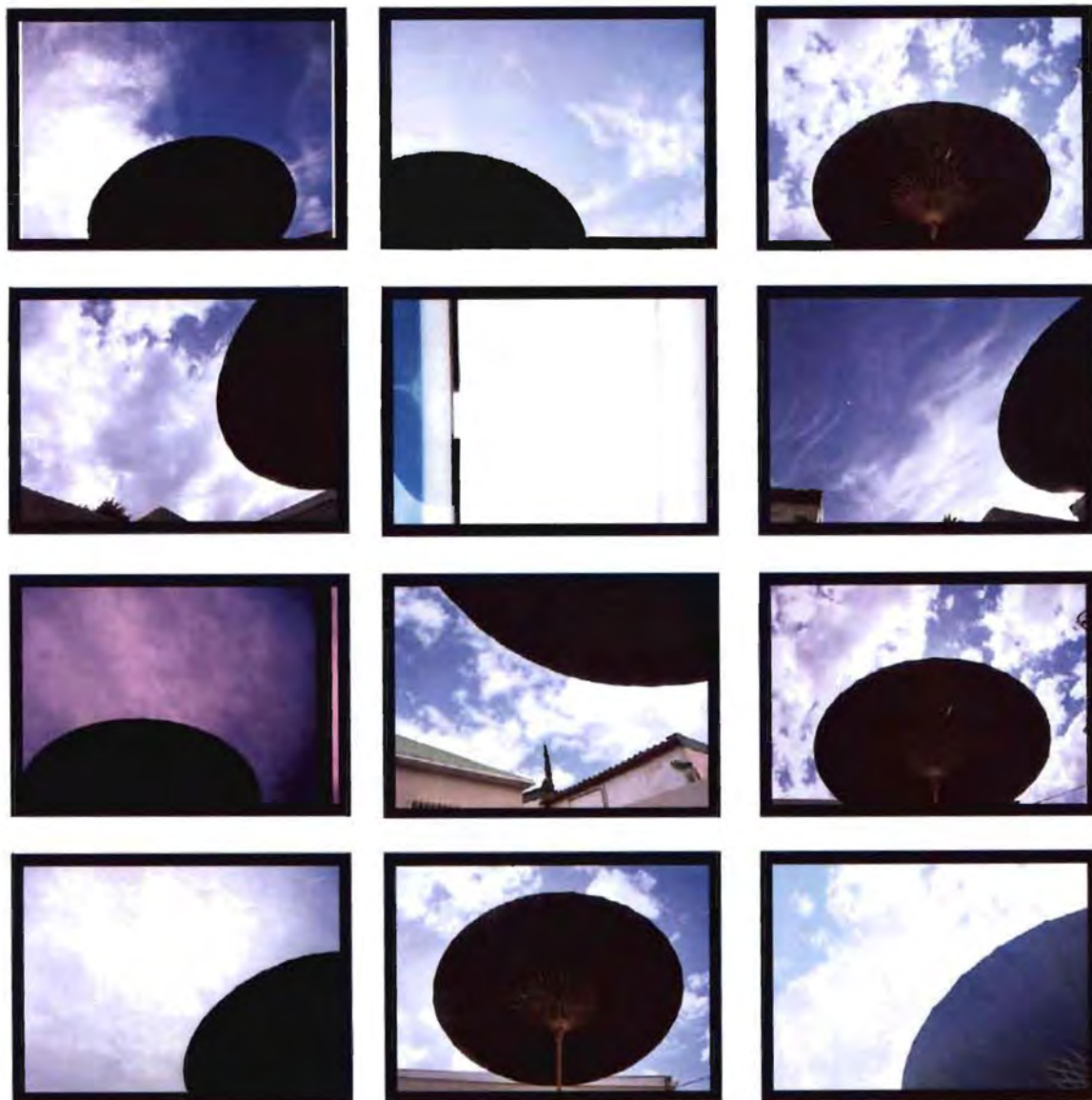
Part pregnant void, part fortune cookie, this work alludes to the Buddhist notions of the void covered in the beginning of section 2.2, with the pregnancy metaphor instantiated by the round swelling of the gourd. Along with the associations of pregnancy comes the idea of cell division that the halving points to, but the blue on the inside of each half associates it with voidness so that what is symbolically divided or doubled is nothing. This brings about a play between the concepts of half, full and empty.



Detail of left half. Label reads:
half an artwork by Monday

The idea of half full is carried forward by the one half of the gourd being filled with language (in the form of text), but this is also undercut by the fact that the text does not provide information but tautologously repeats an already apparent state of affairs (half an artwork in the literal sense of cleaving something in half). Another reading of the work is opened up by the text in the left half, which references the slips of paper inside fortune cookies in its appearance. The suggestion of time or a future is furthered by the phrase 'by Monday.' Coupling the concept of emptiness in the piece with this reading results in a view of the future that could be either full or empty but manifests in the moment as both.

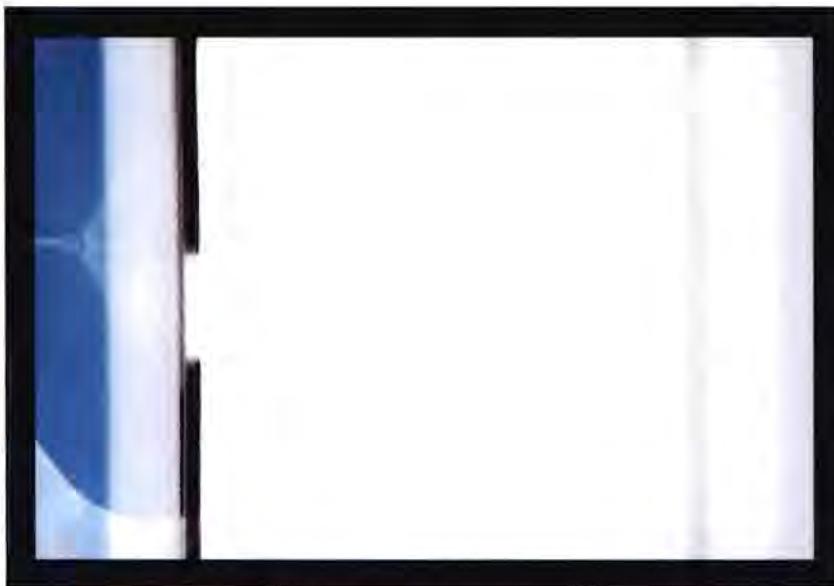
ONE DAY ON MY BACK UNDER A LARGE BLACK PARASOL



2006
Digital prints. Series of 12.
Each 38 X 29cm

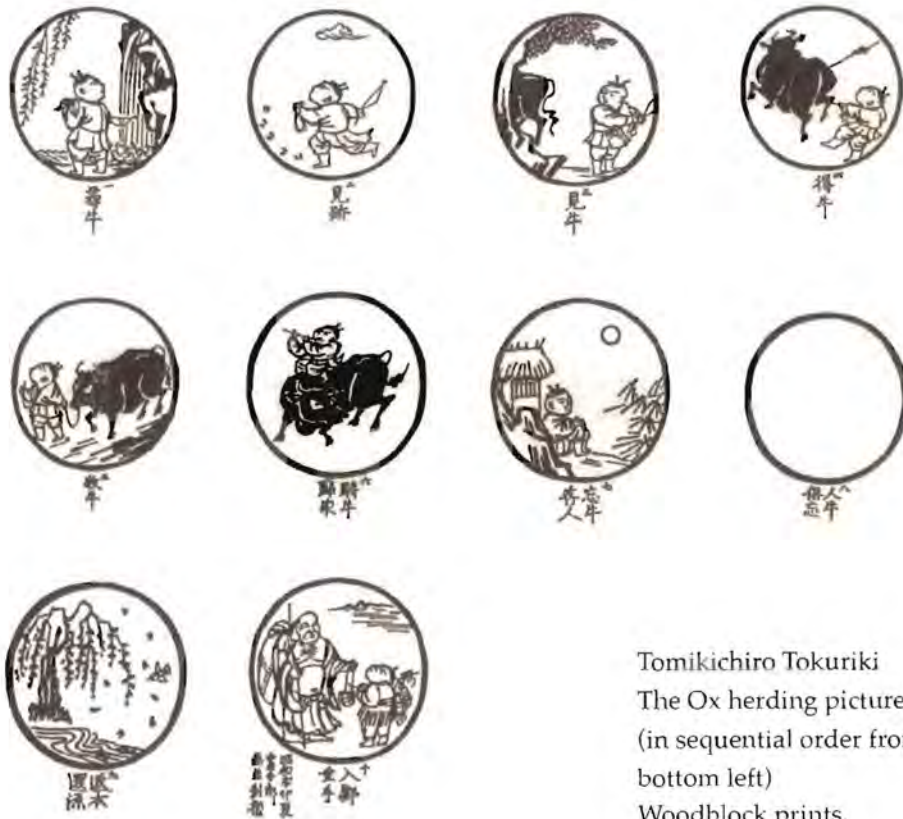
In this piece is incorporated my preoccupation with the sky (which along with the colour blue as a cipher for emptiness, recurs in several of the works), and the idea of the artist as being lazy in a way. This laziness is suggested by the parasol, which has links to leisure time and idleness. The parasol also represents a lacuna or blind spot within vision, a point at which one cannot look. Earlier in the document, laziness is characterized as finding the path of least resistance and of using existing systems to maximum advantage. Accordingly I attempted to produce something by expending as little energy as possible to come as close as possible to producing something out of nothing (see Buddhism and the lotus in the previous work's explication).

A close look at the prints reveals the presence of dust and other particles along with a certain graininess. This was a result of the scanning process and was discovered after the first scanning. The effect was retained even though it was an oversight on my part (forgetting to clean the dust off the scanner template) because the result looked very similar to the experience of staring at the sky for prolonged periods of time (approximately nine hours). It is an experience not unfamiliar to all of us: our vision becomes grainy, luminous dots begin to appear, and at times what can seem to be large specks float around in what we are looking at (unlike optical illusions which have their causes in the functioning of the brain, these entoptic phenomena occur within the eye). Through this accident of scanning, a picture more accurate to vision as vision (as it was experienced) was achieved. The final product is the seeing of vision. This seeing of seeing coincides with Buddhism's consciousness of consciousness (see Epstein in section 4.0)



Detail of emptying frame.

The series draws inspiration from a series of famous Buddhist images known as the ox herding pictures (see following image), originally made by the Twelfth century Chinese master Kakuan (though they have been remade and reinterpreted numerous times since). The ox herding pictures attempt to convey the journey towards enlightenment by using the bull to stand as a metaphor of the mind / self that must be overcome. Interestingly, one of the frames of the series is empty, portraying the state of emptiness or enlightenment that is arrived at, a state that defies representation. Most peculiar is that in some versions (like the one pictured here), the empty / enlightened state is not the final destination or telos of the story. This reiterates what I have stipulated regarding emptiness as a way of seeing the world, it is not at the end of my series or Takuan's because it is not an end in itself.



Tomikichiro Tokuriki
 The Ox herding pictures.
 (in sequential order from top right to
 bottom left)
 Woodblock prints.

(Reps 1991: 138-147)

SELF PORTRAIT



2006
Oil on canvas
300cm Diameter.



Sketch of basic concept design of the shadow portrait.

The final version of the shadow portrait is one that does not contain the subject of the portrait (myself); a self-portrait minus myself. The work still functions as a portrait in the sense that the sum total of the information provided by the shadows would constitute a resemblance of me. The shadows thus represent my absent and exploded presence simultaneously. This aligns with the Buddhist perspective that sees the self as an empty structure; the realisation of emptiness/enlightenment goes hand in hand with the realization of the self as empty.



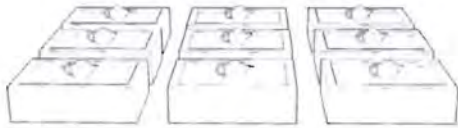
Details of process.

Execution took place outdoors in Cape Town around noon on the 2nd of October 2006.

As a result, the portrait bears the stamp of its location and the time of year and day on which the shadows were recorded. Total execution took less than half an hour, over this time the angle of the sun would have changed which means that as a whole, the portrait stands as a record of me for half an hour.

The eight directions and radial array of the shadows would be impossible with a normal day's worth of sun, so instead, as seen in the images above, I turned to face in eight directions in succession.

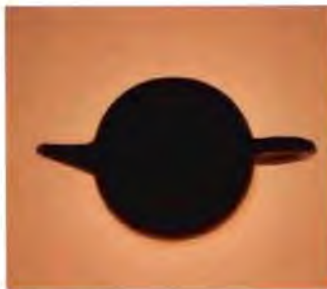
THE INDUSTRY OF BEES AND THE LONG QUIET OF SUNDAY AFTERNOON



2006

Heated lightboxes, beeswax teapots.

74 X 101 X 14cm

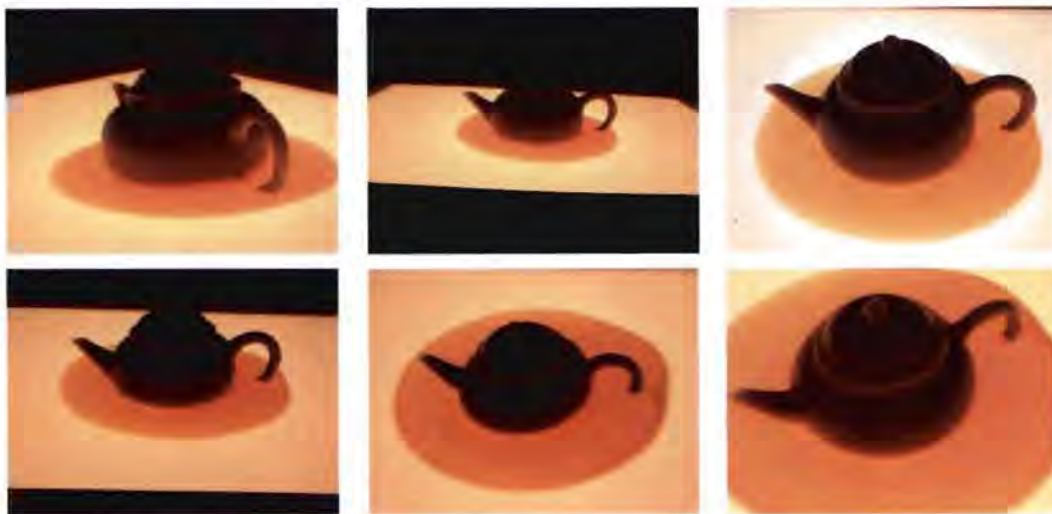


Process documentation.

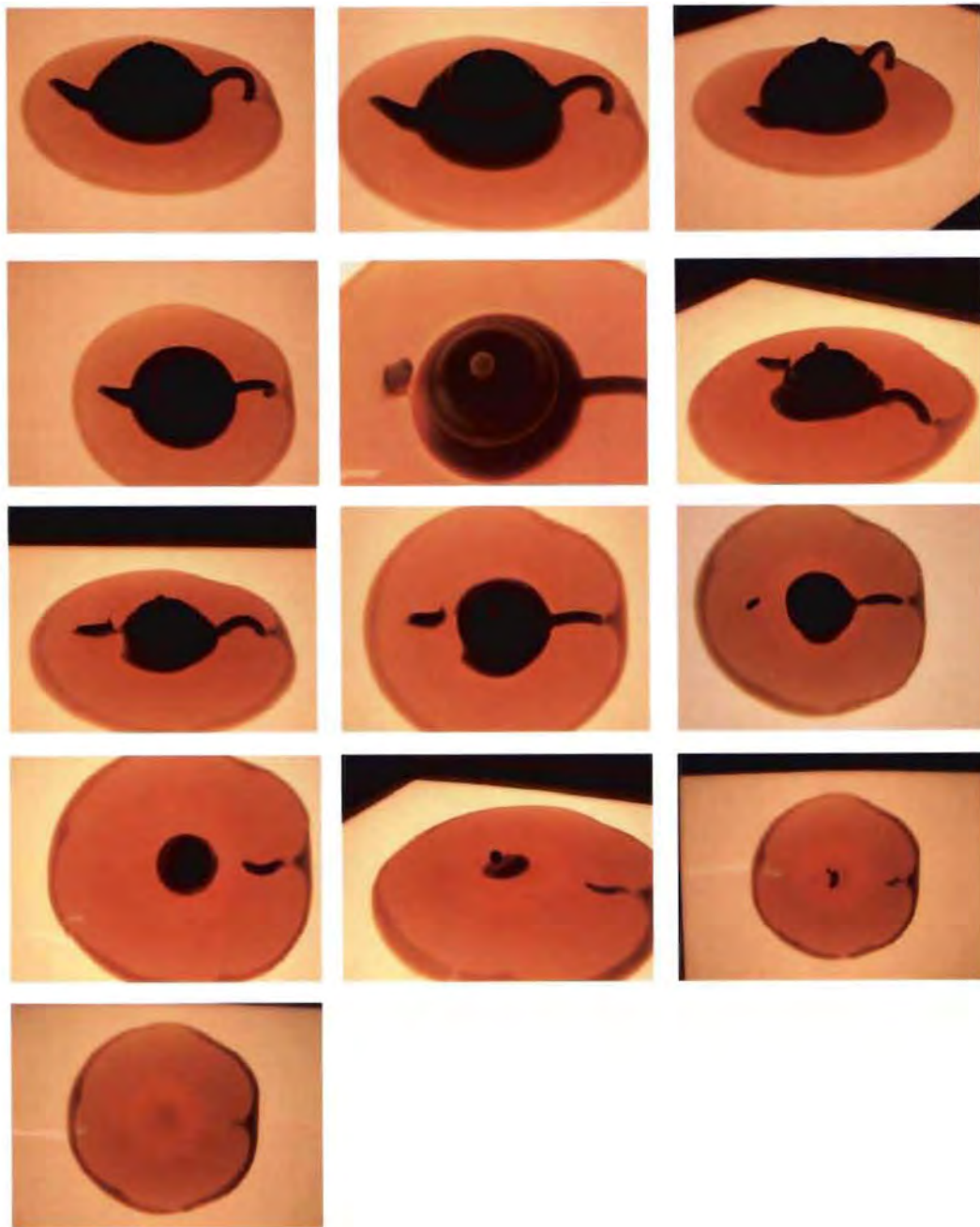
The light/heat source is positioned directly beneath the teapot. The teapots have been cast at various wall thicknesses so that the wax melts over a longer time frame. The image above shows the work at roughly three minutes, when the teapot begins to sink into the light

The phrase 'industry of bees' not only links to the work of the bees that provided the raw materials for the teapots but also to the more broad-ranging idea of industry, which stands in contrast to the activity of tea that is related to leisure, reflection, and contemplation as well as the phrase; 'long quiet of Sunday afternoon.' From an entropic point of view, the work describes a process of thermal equilibrium and the averaging of differences between the teapots and the glowing surface on which they rest. As the wax melts and spreads it alters the colour of the surface, and as the luminous slab heats the teapot it loses solidity and pools on the surface.

Part of the origin of this work is a memory I have of sitting outside in the shade on a particularly warm Sunday afternoon and hearing the drone of a nearby hive of bees. This image is one in which leisure and industry coincide in a moment of peace. The melting of the teapots inverts the procedure of the teapot being used to brew something else, in this work the teapot appears to brew itself. This corresponds to the Buddhist application of the concept of emptiness to itself to dissolve grasping and desire within the practitioner. This non-grasping is also a constituent of observing the work as the viewer must come to terms with the fact that the teapots will not last and that what was seen once is not likely to be seen again (at least not in exactly the same way). This has strong resonances with the aesthetic of wabi-sabi (mentioned in section 1.4), which is described as a "simple beauty that evokes a sense of the transience of life" (Baas 2005: 4). The mixture of loss and enjoyment is heightened by a sweet, pleasant smell as the melting wax gives off the characteristic odour of honey.



Documentation of works between five and twenty minutes.



The work between twenty-five and forty minutes. With an average wall thickness of 4mm (thickness of the wax), at room temperature, a teapot will take approximately thirty-eight to forty-two minutes to disappear completely.

LATE EVENING (KITES IN COLLABORATION WITH A DEAD FRENCHMAN)



2006

Tempera on canvas, wooden dowels.

52 X 85cm (larger two)

42 X 70cm (smaller three)

As the title and look of the work suggests, this piece was strongly influenced by Yves Klein's blue monochromes. Klein's preoccupation with the void led him to produce the blue monochromes as a representation of the void. Though it seemed to me when reading about the monochromes and seeing pictures of them that they lacked the ability to partake more completely in the void because they were fixed to a format that was weighed down, or tied to the gallery in which they were shown: the rectangle. The format of the rectangle did not suggest to me a unity with the void, which as was pointed out in section 4.0, is tied conceptually to connotations of sky. This coupling to the sky of emptiness is what led to the production of a Klein blue kite. Add to this the first part of the title (Late Evening) and the result is a kite that disappears into the sky. Functioning in a similar way to the empty gluten cans (One Buddha, No Shit), there is the addition of one emptiness to another.

A COLLAPSE PREVENTED BY THE ATTACHMENT OF A TOP-HEAVY BELIEF SYSTEM TO AN OBJECT WITH A LOWER CENTRE OF GRAVITY

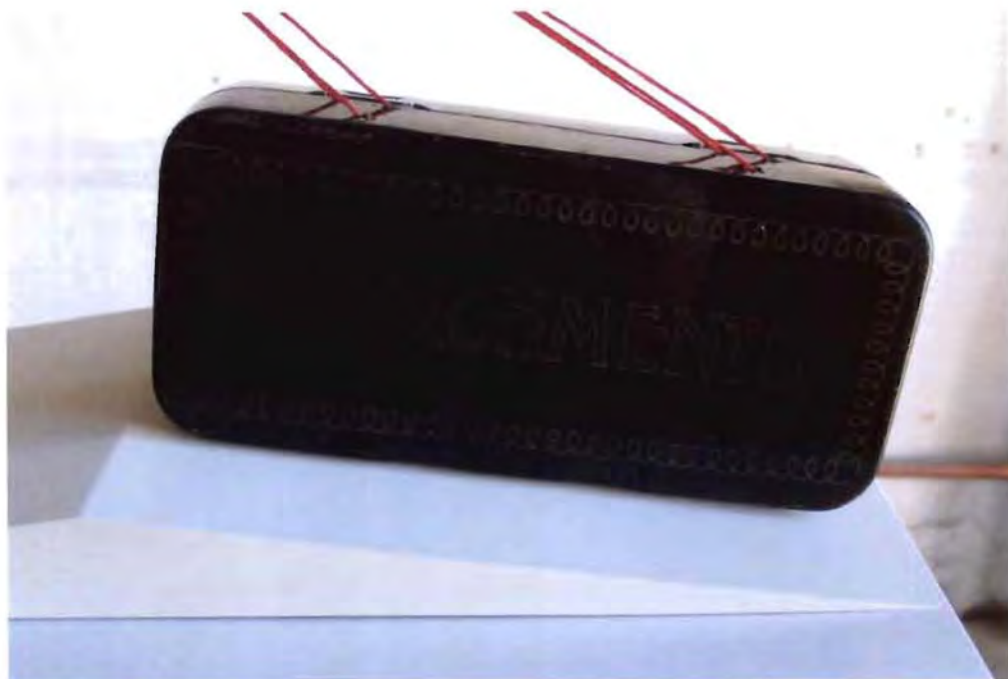


2006

Sandblasted plum wine bottle, sewing machine attachment box, silver-plated religious trinket, red embroidery thread (DMC no. 321).

35 X 31 X 12cm

This work speaks most to what I have written throughout the course of the preceding pages regarding grasping (from the Buddhist perspective). Attachment, as has already been elaborated, comes about because of the need to hold on to concepts as fixed, concrete mental objects. To restate: emptiness is "the cognition of daily life without the attachment to it. It is an awareness of distinct entities, of the self, of 'good' and 'bad' and other practical determinations; but it is aware of these as empty structures" (Streng 1967: 159-160). This work attempts to present the concept of grasping to belief as an empty structure (or an empty bottle, in this case).



Detail of attachments box



Detail of the front of the
bottle with religious trinket

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