

Voids, palimpsests, kitsch: Paris before Klein.

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Nihil ex nihilo fit... 'Nothing will come of nothing'. Nothing is made of nothing. To make *le vide*, *le plein* has to be forcibly evacuated, expelled, ejected, destroyed, rendered invisible, rendered silent. The void is a notion formed by subtraction - indeed unimaginable: *rien* (nothing) derives from *rem* (a thing), *nada*, *niente* from *nasci* to be born.¹ *Néant* is linked indissociably with existence; being itself as always subject to its other, extinction. *L'Être et le néant*, Jean-Paul Sartre's existential theory of being and nothingness, was published in a volume soon 'disappeared' by the French Communist Party; in its absence its title said all.²

April, 1945: *le trop plein*. The images of *les charniers*, pits full of innumerable tangled corpses, flickered on and off the screens of cinema newsreels. In an anxiety to close the gap, to cover the abyss, Paris launched into a frantic gait. Later the first *deportés* arrived at the Gare de l'Est, men of rag and bone, back from Buchenwald or Auschwitz; or they did not arrive, as loved-ones rushed to meet incoming trains. Physical bodies returning – or emptiness, *le néant*, *le vide*. Silences of the Occupation (Vercors' *Le silence de la mer*) were replaced with the silences of repressed, intolerable memories – or nothing.³

August 1945: *le vide*. Hiroshima and Nagasaki were obliterated by the atomic bomb. Japan became a theatre of ultimate destruction. France soon resumed her own theatre of war in the East, bombing Haiphong and burning villages as early as November 1946 in riposte to Ho-Chi Minh's declaration of independence; herein lay the genesis of escalation, of the massacres in Korea painted by Picasso in 1951, spreading to war in Indochina and ultimately Vietnam. What has been called 'reconstruction culture' - the Paris of the Dior-dressed 'New Look' (1947) - offered a new vision of a city whose elegant insouciance covered this *reprise* of violence. France's postwar politics reflected this East-West axis: Marshall Aid reconstruction, the contested NATO alliance, colonial war in the East and the antagonistic strategies of a strong Communist party linked to the USSR and its Eastern European satellites.

Yves Klein's gesture in showing *Le vide*, 1958, dialectically related to Arman's *Le plein*, crossed axes in time, geographies and histories well as physical space. A strange intersection exists between the voiding of an intolerable past - 'the dustbins of [Western] history' – *les poubelles de l'histoire* – and an engagement with the East, an orientalisating tradition which in France contained its own history of critique.

'We were never so free as during the German Occupation' said Sartre in 'The Republic of Silence'.⁴ André Zucca's Afgacolour world of clean streets and fashionable women, children playing, café terraces and German orchestras, recently showed Occupied Paris itself as an installation disguising the voiding of its inhabitants. After the quasi-biblical 'exodus' of citizens to the south – a pitiful episode - began the horror. Convoy after convoy went to Germany, men, women and children, via Pithiviers, via Drancy: poets such as Robert Desnos or Max Jacob, artists such as Otto Freundlich and so many other Jewish artists of the School of Paris, gassed in Poland.⁵ With the bodies, art. Almost twenty-two thousand works of art were voided from Paris to Germany; paintings were burned in bonfires beside the Jeu de Paume museum in 1943. The Louvre was emptied: only heavy Egyptian sarcophagi remained, commemorated later in the large joined feet of Giacometti's sculptures that Sartre would

compare with Buchenwald martyrs. The void was always filled; there was a bevy of painting Salons - loan exhibitions began with Monets from Berlin and Bremen for the Monet-Rodin retrospective (November 1940); later propaganda shows which attracted thousands, *La France Européene* in June; *Le Juif et la France* in September 1941. Shops with nothing to sell displayed not nothing – but a discreetly-signalled *étalages factices*, fake displays of wax fruits and foodstuffs. Behind the fake the void, and hunger in the bodies and the souls of those left behind. Counterfeit, deception, treachery. Strange thought: a world without soap.

Francis Ponge's *Things (Le parti pris des choses)*, 1942, invoked a tactile reality, a truth beyond the visual; his *Soap*, an extended paean to the existent and its absence (begun at this time) had a moral metaphysic.⁶ Paris as an installation hid the reality of deportation, torture and the collaboration that touched, that sullied, directly or indirectly every remaining citizen.⁷

Mathematics no longer dealt in equivalent propositions: *la loi du talion* – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. For one derailment, for one resistance shooting, reprisals proliferated in strange multiplications. Jews first then Communists; for example the hostage shootings Jean Fautrier witnessed in the night, a wall's thickness away from the corpses in the darkness of the Vallée aux Loups while conceiving his impasted *Otages* (*oter* – to take away). Erotic, terrifying; all figuration voided – except the scar.

After exodus and occupation, *épuration*, more voiding: the purge. Purge committees, purge shootings (the show execution of the young writer Rober Brasillach), the purging of sexual impropriety by branding, shaving, parading women: no longer proud and beautiful *françaises* – but 'an ugly carnival' – *un carnaval moche*....⁸ Private vendettas, murders, reprisal killings were cloaked by the purge. Conceptually the *retour des déportés*, the visible return of prisoners from the camps, their identities restored with new papers, belied the greater disappearance. The grand *hôtels particuliers* of the Marais, where entire communities of immigrants had been voided, abruptly filled with newcomers in a black and shrapnel-pocked Paris (no resemblance to the whitened cathedral and golden buildings of today). *Déportés* took up posts in government, in intellectual life; the void sealed over.⁹

Sartre's 'Reflections on the Jewish question' written in late 1944 (*Les Temps Modernes*, November 1945) made no reference to extermination camps and remained unpreluded, unrevised, when constantly republished.¹⁰ Yet Auschwitz had entered Louis Aragon's Resistance poetry ('Le Musée Grévin', 1943) – as it featured in Isidore Isou's 'Screams for 5,000,000 slaughtered Jews'. Exhalations, groans, the noises of death (*le râle de l'agonie*) were at the origin of Isou's desire to void words and sense altogether and his extended lettrist alphabet.¹¹ And a terrible literature of witness was accumulating, notably David Rousset's anatomy of the 'concentrationary universe' of 1946.¹²

And art? With its origins in Dada (*nada*) the European *informel*, premised upon annihilation and death, was born in the wake of the Holocaust. 'Liberty is the void' declared Georges Mathieu in the catalogue of 'HWPSMTB' (Hartung, Wols, Picabia, Stahly, Mathieu, Tapié, Bryen), his show of 1948, (a homage to *fmsbwtözäu*, Raoul Hausmann's Dada poster of 1918). He contrasted the possibility of a complete metaphysical liberation with the tragic actuality of choice in a contaminated world. 'Poetry, music, painting have just rid themselves of their ultimate servitudes: the word, tonality, figuration'.¹³ This new School of Paris was also Janus-faced, embracing American artists in the 1950s (notably Jackson Pollock) but increasingly *japoniste*: gestural painting on monochrome grounds with an eastern, calligraphic aesthetic characterised the work of Masson, Hartung, Alechinsky, Degottex, Mathieu himself.

Elegantly disincarnate, this work contrasted with an earlier *informel*, the more bloody, more corporeal work of Wols, for example – though the artist had quoted Lao-Tseu as well as Sartre in his first exhibition catalogue of 1945.¹⁴ This orientalised, neo-dada-inspired abstraction contested the living ‘modern masters’; yet even the work of a Picasso could offer intimations of the void: his contours, dissolved and trickling in the work of Bram van Velde, inspired Samuel Beckett to write ‘Painters of failure’, while the disappearance of Cézanne in the Provence-inspired crevasses and residual signs of Pierre Tal-Coat’s *tachiste* landscapes provoked Beckett’s classic statement: ‘The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.’¹⁵

Paris as a new installation disguised lacerated hearts: *un lacerateur, c’est quelqu’un qui est laceré*, said Jacques Villeglé, referring to his torn posters (*affiches lacerées*). *Ach, alma manetro* his first torn poster of 1949 with its mutilated black words, its browning papers, signified surface as palimpsest. Behind the layering of posters was always the wall, and with the wall the history of the walls during the Occupation period; instructions to assemble, to prove identity, Gestapo notices of reprisal hostage killings daringly scored with ‘V’s (for *Victoire*), urgent messages (parodied by Jean Dubuffet in his *Messages* series of 1943), the graffiti on the walls of torture chambers and, most movingly, the words *oeuvre d’art*, ‘work of art’, scratched on a wall of the Drancy deportation prison beside frantic words of farewell.¹⁶ The lacerated posters of Raymond Hains and Villeglé expressed the urban consciousness of a generation of survivors in new wars where politics became increasingly indivisible from a new propaganda of consumption.¹⁷ The torn posters anticipated the ideology of the ‘new realism’ that would group these artists together with Klein; yet their destruction of meaning, of the word, and relationship related directly to the *informel* – a world of printed sludge, glue, paste and decay – emphasised in the *dessous d’affiches* - glue-side-up torn poster works shown by François Dufrêne, or later, the sticky tape torn strips by Gil Wolman.¹⁸ Dufrêne and Wolman belonged to the *international lettriste*: whose work on the void was pioneered by Isidore Isou. After his angry lettrist poetry of survival and works rich with an ironic messianism, Isou turned to a cinema *discrépant* and *ciselant* with *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (1951) which dissociated sound and image, involved found fragments, the defacing of individual film frames and above all moments of blank black or white screens.¹⁹ Wolman’s film *L’Anticoncept, film cinématochrome*, 1952, consisted merely of two images, one white, one black, projected onto a *ballon-sonde* in front of curtains, to an accompaniment of syncopated sound poetry. Wolman then collaborated with Guy Debord for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* the same year, where a totally void white screen plus voice-off (initially Wolman’s poems, then fragments from the French Civil code etc.), alternated with one of total blackness (the final black, silent sequence was twenty four minutes long). It was a voiding of cinema, the death of spectacle – a monochrome projection preceding by five years Klein’s empty room above Colette Allendy’s gallery: ‘Surfaces et blocks of pictorial sensibility. Pictorial intentions’ - where Debord was a surprise visitor in 1957.

The ‘painting of failure’, ‘torn posters, the ‘anticoncept’, the blank screen: this formal experimentation in the years 1951-2 coincided with the most intense moment of war in Indochina and Korea, and from an alternative arena – the arena of history in representation - the political strategy of *décrochage*. The French Communist Party - the strongest in Europe and focus of Western Cominform operations after 1947, had a developed cultural policy. With its USSR-driven, but ‘nationalised’ socialist realism, it represented – literally - the bad conscience of France. Picasso’s controversial *Massacre in Korea*, (Salon de Mai) preceded

the Salon d'Automne scandal of 1951. Here six realist paintings, some with explicit anti-war content were taken off the walls by order of the Prefect of Police prior to the ritual visit of the President of the Republic. (Gérard Singer's Poussin-inspired *14 February, Nice*, showed dockers tipping a launching ramp for V2 rockets destined for Indochina into the sea; Georges Bauquier's Léger-like *The Dockers*, was inscribed 'Not one boat for Indochina'). The empty walls of the Salon articulated an absence rich with political content; but the void – as in Klein's later work – was framed via supplements: published photographs of the walls; visitors staring at the blanks; publicity around a rehang; exhibition of the banned canvases elsewhere, above all Louis Aragon's tract, 'The Autumn Salon Scandal'. The subtext became clear: the very day of the Presidential visit to the Salon, (6 November, 1951), marked the official foundation of the Association to defend the memory of maréchal Pétain, the President of France under German occupation. A mass had been held for the late Pétain at Notre-Dame in October. The police who had truncheoned ex-Resistance protesters outside the cathedral were the police of the *décrochage* claimed Aragon.²⁰ Once mastered as a strategy, the Party encouraged political paintings designed to provoke successive *décrochages*. Simultaneously with anti-colonial protest the voided wall signified not merely class conflict, but the *guerre franco-française* – an internecine war in France itself, its roots lying deep in the French revolution.²¹ These socialist realist paintings of the 1950s, the circumstances they depicted, the ambient discourses – have been literally condemned to the 'dustbins of history'.²² Retrieval is a dirty job; conceptual art is cleaner.

Klein's friend, Arman, would take neo-dada strategies into the world of flesh and objects. He expressed his anger with series: *Colères*, *Accumulations* and *Poubelles* (his partially Jewish origins were never evoked at the time despite overwhelmingly explicit Holocaust imagery in much work).²³ The repellent and dangerous mix of human waste and the trashed, printed word was expanded to the proportions of the gallery in *Le Plein* – at the moment when the crisis in French Algeria – the war of torture without a name – intensified. Arman's plunge into the abject anticipates Kristeva's celebrated essay 'The Powers of Horror' (itself a reflection upon the dirty antisemitism of Louis-Fernand Céline).²⁴ Arman is thus a significant precursor of late twentieth-century abject art or Ilya Kabakov's provocative theories of 'wet garbage and dry garbage'.²⁵

One might argue, then, that Klein appropriated the *décrochage* – the voided wall and the strategy of supplements – from the arena in the arts the most dense with political memory and violence. He harnessed it to the deconstructive potential of the Eastern void. Klein's monochromes demolished – with the very absence of a stroke – the antagonism between *abstraction géométrique* (with its new adepts in France such as Agam, Robert Beer or Ellsworth Kelly) – and the *japoniste* calligraphies of the gesturalists, which by 1957 reached histrionic, performative excesses with Mathieu. But Klein also linked up to a French Orientalist tradition stretching back to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (*Les Lettres Persanes*, 1721), where Eastern values are used as a critique of the west – a device of reversal revived with André Malraux's *The Temptation of the West*, 1926 (prior to his own militant engagement in French Indochina), and the poet-painter Henri Michaux's *A Barbarian in Asia* 1933. 'We are the barbarians in Asia', this tradition declared – a message implicit in *informel* / orientalist encounter throughout the postwar period.²⁶

Klein's personal experience of Japan – experienced visually, intellectually and through his body in *judoka*, was crucial for his East-West conceptual leverage and for elements of great formal beauty in his art.²⁷ With his *savant* and dazzling eclecticism these elements took on Western art and philosophy: Duchamp and Matisse, Rosicrucianism and Bachelard. Let us not

forget, however, his own baroque excesses, his affiliation with a Salvador Dali as well as a Georges Mathieu; the curious politics of his space-age Catholicism might also require retrieval. Klein, like Mathieu has been charged with charlatanism and kitsch.²⁸ Significantly, his *décrochage* of the ‘Salon Violet’ to create a ‘zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility’ in 1962 involved intensely second-rate works – and a special relationship with the police, as Villeglé recalls. At stake is the deconstructive power of kitsch – kitsch, too, as garbage – another element of the ‘dustbins of history’.

But let Klein symbolise here, like the Brussels *Atomium* sculpture of 1958, the new era of the atomic age – atomic power not as destruction, dead bodies but clean energy – and with it the reduction of art to an auratic economics, to the conceptual.

Less is more. All power to the void.

Notes

Fully-referenced coverage of this period may be found in my texts for *Paris Post War: art and existentialism*, London, Tate Gallery, 1993 and Paris, *Capital of the Arts, 1900-1968*, London, Royal Academy of Arts, 2002, together with the most recent monographical literature.

¹ As expounded by Robert Martin Adams, *NIL. Episodes in the literary conquest of the the Void during the nineteenth century*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 10-13, including the positive (Old French) use of *rien*: ‘Justice amez sor tote rien’ (Love justice above every other thing’, *Chronique des ducs de Normandie*), p. 12.

² ‘We have... no word which corresponds precisely to the French “néant”: “void,” “vacancy,” and “non-being” won’t do. “nought” means “zero” which doesn’t fit, and “nothing” is too expansive, indefinite, and unpsychological.’ Ibid., p. 11. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant, essai d’ontologie phénoménologique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1943; *Being and Nothingness*, Philosophical Library, 1956.

³ Vercors (Jean Bruller), *Le silence de la mer*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1942; *the Silence of the Sea*, New York, Macmillan, 1944.

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Jamais nous n’avons été plus libre que sous l’occupation allemande’, (‘La République du Silence’, *Les Lettres Françaises*, 1944), *Situations*, III. Paris, Gallimard, 1949, p. 13.

⁵ See Hersch Fenster’s *Undzere farpainikte Kinstler* (Our artist martyrs, in Yiddish) Paris, 1951, expanded by Nadine Nieszawer et al., *Peintres juifs de Paris, 1905-1939*, Paris, Denoël, 2000 – and of course Serge Klarsfeld’s lifetime *oeuvre* on deportation and Holocaust.

⁶ Francis Ponge, *Le parti pris des choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1942, *Le savon*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967 (*Soap*, New York: Grossman, 1969 and reprints; *Things*, New York: Grossman, 1971; *The Voice of Things*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972)

⁷ Jean Barronet éd., *Les Parisiens sous l'Occupation, Photographies en couleurs d'André Zucca*, Paris, Gallimard, 2008, Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, 2008, a hugely contentious show whose posters were officially withdrawn from the streets of Paris.

⁸ Alain Brossat, *Les tondues : un carnaval moche*, Paris, Manya, 1992.

⁹ Marcel Jean became minister of Industrial Production in the new postwar government; Julien Cain resumed a position at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Their portrait drawings featured in Boris Taslitzky's *III Dessins de Buchenwald*, 1946 and his show 'Témoignage', Gentilhommière, June 1st-25th, 1946.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, Paris, Morihion, 1946; see Jonathan Judaken, *Jean-Paul Sartre and the Jewish Question. Anti-antisemitism and the Politics of the French intellectual*, University of Nebraska Press, 2007.

¹¹ Isidore Isou: 'Cris pour 5,000,000 de juifs égorgés', *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique* Paris, Gallimard, 1947, p. 326.

¹² David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, Paris, Éditions du Pavois, 1946; *The Other Kingdom*, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947. Annette Wiewiorka's *Déportation et génocide, entre la mémoire et l'oubli*, Paris, Plon 1992, contains and appendix of French Holocaust survivor publications in the immediate postwar period.

¹³ 'La Liberté, c'est le vide.... La poésie, la musique, la peinture viennent en effet de se débarrasser des dernières servitudes : le mot, la tonalité, la figuration.' Georges Mathieu, HWPSMTB, April, 1948.

¹⁴ *Wols*, Galerie René Drouin, 1945. For an extensive discussion and bibliography extending from Georges Duthuit's *Chinese mysticism and Western Painting* (1936) to the Zen publications of of Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki and Eugen Herrigel in 1950s Paris, exhibitions of calligraphy, Eastern artists in Paris, etc., see F.J.R. Roberts, 'Japanese influence on the École de Paris, 1947-1967 (Masson, Alechinsky, Degottex)', Courtauld Institute, 1986.

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett, 'Peintres de l'empêchement, Bram et Geer van Velde' *Derrière le Miroir*, 11, 1948; 'Three dialogues : Tal Coat – Masson – Bram van Velde', *Transition*, 5, Paris, 1949 (with Georges Duthuit). See Ciaran Ross, *Aux frontières du vide. Beckett: une écrituresans mémoire ni désir*, New York, Rodopi, 2004.

¹⁶ Linguistic signs changed sides: the V for 'Victoire' was appropriated by the nazis, replacing the 'Sieg' (victory) emblazoned on the Eiffel Tower. See Henri Calet, *Les Murs de Fresnes*, Paris, Editions des Quatre Vents, 1945; Pierre Bourget, Charles Lacretelle, *Sur les murs de Paris, 1940-1944*, Paris, Hachette, 1969; Pierre Joly, Véra Cardot [photos, Ministry of the Interior, Paris, protected by decree, 1970] *Le graffiti des torturés*, Paris, Editions des

Nouvelles Images, 1971 and Suzanna Greeves, 'The Language of the Wall'; MA, Courtauld Institute, 1995, (Plate 3, *oeuvre d'art*, Drancy) for extensive bibliography.

¹⁷ See Serge Tchakotine's *Le viol des foules par la propagande politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1939; influential when reprinted in 1952, 1992.

¹⁸ Hains, Dufrière and Villeglé were shown with the *groupe d'informels* at the first, Biennale de Paris, 1959, with Dufrière's glue-side-up works on the ceiling.

¹⁹ Dufrière met Yves Klein in 1950. Klein's letter to his aunt of April 26th, 1952 mentions seeing films by Isou and Dufrière (*Tmabour du jugement premier*, 1952). See Frédérique Devaux, *Traité de Bave et d'éternité d'Isidore Isou*, Éditions Yellow Now, Crisnée, 1994.

²⁰ See Louis Aragon, *Le Scandale du Salon d'Automne 1951, L'Art et le Sentiment National*, Editions Les Lettres Françaises et Tous les Arts, 1951; Frédéric Le Moigne '1944-1951 : Les deux corps de Notre-Dame de Paris' *Vingtième siècle* 2003- 2 (78), pp. 75 à 88.

²¹ Louis-Dominique Girard, *La guerre franco-française. Le Maréchal Républicain*, Paris, André. Bonne, 1950. See Jean-Pierre Rioux, 'La Guerre franco-française' in *War and Society in Twentieth-Century France*, Berg Publications, Oxford, Munich, New York, 1992, and Henry Rousso's 'La légende du Maréchal' in *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, pp. 55-67.

²² French socialist realism was entirely excluded from *Les années 50*, (Centre Georges Pompidou, 1988); it was in this context that curator, Daniel Abadie spoke of *les poubelles de l'histoire...*

²³ Arman discussed his antecedents with Arianne Levene, see 'Le Deuil inachevé': *Art, Memory and the Holocaust*, MA, Courtauld Institute. 2000.

²⁴ See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur, essai sur l'abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980; *Powers of Horror, an essay on abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982 and its theoretical importance for *Abject Art, Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, Whitney Museum of Art, 1993.

²⁵ Thanks to Boris Groys for reflections upon 'dustbins of history' (Trotsky's term) in the context of *Cold War Modern*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum and for signalling Kabakov's text, confirmed as an early untranslated Russian manuscript 'Dust, dirt, garbage' by Matthew Jesse Jackson, October 2008,

²⁶ André Malraux, *La Tentation de l'Occident*, 1926; *Temptation of the West*, New York, Vintage Books, 1961; Henri Michaux, *Un Barbare en Asie*, 1933, *A Barbarian in Asia*, New York, New Directions, 1949.

²⁷ Ming Tiampo's full discussion, 'Empreintes de l'immateriel, Yves Klein au Japon' *Yves Klein, Corps, couleur, immatériel*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 2006, pp. 196-201 is central here.

²⁸ For Klein as charlatan, see Nan Rosenthal, 'Assisted Levitation', *Yves Klein*, Houston,

Texas, Rice Museum, 1982, pp. 91-135; for Mathieu, Patrick Granville, Gérard Xuriguera, *Mathieu*, Paris, Nouvelles éditions françaises, 1993 - *in toto*.