

Nothing In Its Place: The Blank Page

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The installation of Robert Ryman white paintings on white walls at Dia Beacon. Crisp, white sheets on a freshly made bed. Keith Smith's ruminations on a blank book in *Structure of the Visual Book*. The stare of the blank canvas confronting Lily Briscoe in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The tonal meditation of *In the White Silence* by composer John Luther Adams.

These are a few of my favorite (no)things, all instances in which emptiness is not nothing, or nothing is something.

Exploring the distinction between nothing and emptiness in a recent "Talk About Nothing," composer Philip Glass spoke about empty space in music as a place where "without emptiness nothing can happen, with it everything can happen."⁽¹⁾ This is a core tenet in the Buddhist philosophy of Śūnyatā, wherein all things arise from emptiness; fullness and emptiness are integral. Following these linkages further, the word *śūnyatā* comes from the Sanskrit *śūnya*: 'zero, nothing,' which in turn in Arabic is *as-sifr*, which means 'absence of anything'. This is the origin of the English word 'cipher'. Although cipher means zero, nothing of value, or someone who is a nonentity, it also means secret writing, symbolic encryptions or coded messages. Etymologically, nothing has become something.⁽²⁾

Absence and blankness are signposts of both modernity and post-modernity. This essay can't begin to account for the writing, art, music and philosophy developed around this theme in the 20th century and continuing to the next. For a succinct compilation of many of these modernist works, there is *All or Nothing: An anthology of blank books*,⁽³⁾ a three-volume slip-cased set by William Gibbs. It ranges from John Cage's 1952 composition *4'33"* and Richard Kostelanetz's 1978 book *Tabula Rasa* to Sonic Youth's recording of 63 seconds of silence. The works Gibbs describes, including many blank books, are illustrated with empty folios captioned with artist/author, title and date. A second version of the anthology is included, printed in white ink on white paper, as well as his revised 1982 writing, *Some volumes from the library of babel*.

This essay instead is a somewhat random selection of blank pages, each the same and entirely different from one another. The blank page can be read as a void that is missing something and as a thing with its own properties. The context of the book and the exploratory thinking of the reader determine the properties of each page. Clues are provided, but without determining texts. To understand the page is to project meaning onto it. Reading is deciphering.

This collapse and expansion of form and content is addressed by Stéphane Mallarmé in the 1897 preface to his poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A throw of the dice will never abolish chance*), "The 'blanks' indeed take on importance, at first glance;

the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beats, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper... The paper intervenes each time as an image, of itself, ends or begins once more, accepting a succession of others..."(4) The poem is a precursor to concrete poetry and artists' books. The white spaces around the words create a dynamic interchange between typography and page: the text is a place. Words are tossed across the page like the ship in the poem's stormy sea, and reading them is to sink down through the whiteness of the page.

Of course the books of Ed Ruscha are also fundamental to the field of artists' books. The occasional blank page invigorates the collection of photographs in each book. There are two books in particular where the empty page sharply emphasizes a sense of place. *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (5) has ten color plates, so most of the 64 pages are blank. At first the series of blue pools coolly sit in the white space with the empty pages between allowing for an afterimage affect. But soon the empty space is not just a paper substrate, but part of the images themselves. Without captions specifying addresses, the location of these pools is in the book, not an outside space, and the paper is the landscape. That causes a visual immersion: enter into the space of the pool, of the page, the surround of the page, the surround of the pool, the blank page landscape. And then the tenth image, the broken glass on a blue field. The first time I read *Nine Swimming Pools*, I was abruptly yanked out of the book by a kinesthetic reaction to slippery, wet, tiled surfaces, glass shards, and imagined bare feet. A predictable pattern of pool and white pages was forcefully jarred solely because those empty pages lulled my reading senses. Similarly, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (6) ends with a physical punctuation. It contains aerial views of parking lots around the city of Los Angeles, with addressed captions. The interspersed white pages are both negative spaces holding the images and extensions of the photographed landscape. The duality of the page being the thing and an image of thing comes into focus when one of the few two-page spreads folds out beyond the edge of the book. A flap of Santa Monica Boulevard reaches out into the reader's space, implying an infinite line of roadways breaking the boundaries of the book.

The popularity of Ruscha's books can be measured in the expanding production of (and market for) homages to his work. As the price of the original work and subsequent editions is beyond the reach of almost everyone, collectible knock-offs provide a frisson of the real thing. Generally these books repeat Ruscha's format and subject, filled with analogous photographs. Given the original banality of his topics and easy reproducibility, countless versions lie ahead.(7) One of the reasons Ruscha's work invites parody is its familiarity through artists' book classes and lectures in college art programs, and access to the originals in library special collections. One of the best known of these is the Flaxman Library/Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). Special collections librarian Doro Boehme collaborated with then MFA candidate Eric Baskauskas on *Various Blank Pages (and Ink)*, (8) an homage that is both less than the others and exponentially more. Less because it doesn't try to recreate the locations of the original. Rather, this is a collection of the blank pages scanned from *Nine Swimming Pools*, *Colored People*, *A Few Palm Tree*, and *Various Small Fires*. The multiple layers of self-reflexivity make this work more than a garden-variety knock-off. Images of flattened spreads are reduced in size so that with the added margins the book is same measurement as Ruscha's. Those margins are an acknowledgment that this-

Various Blank Pages- is a bookwork in its own right, with its own aesthetic decisions. The direct scans of empty pages carry residual memory of the originals even with no identifying marks. The subtitle, *and Ink*, carries a double reference. It is the ink of the printed pictures of blank pages and, like *Nine Swimming Pools, and broken glass* it is the visual punch line at the end: an inkpad and rubber stamp from SAIC. The inkpad calls attention to this being a library book, with the particular problems for artists' books. How are they to be shelved and catalogued without damaging the book, what to do with the call numbers? Without bar codes and security tags, the hand stamped due date referred to here is almost nostalgic, as if the documentation of these blank pages is for historical preservation as the book itself is dislocated by e-readers. An additional reference is the library use of the rubberstamp on damaged books, "Condition Noted." In fact, the image of *Nine Swimming Pools* in the Flasch digital catalog shows its cover rubberstamped SCHOOL LIBRARY in red ink and the handwritten "non-circ. Artists' Book File."(9)

With *You Just Open the Book*, (10) Jose Soler makes "condition noted" the underlying subject. It emphasizes reading as a physical act that leaves a trail of evidence. Eyes scan the page but thumbs and fingers leave marks on surfaces and fore edges, breaking the pristine white of the page. The second-person address of the text narrates, dictates and predicts the activity. It implies an intimacy between the reader and book as speaker. The blank pages are the locus of the stated activity: THE BOOK GETS HEAVIER AND THICKER ALL OF A SUDDEN. Nine empty pages follow for that to take place. The type in all caps makes it feel more true, more inevitable. Suddenly, a printed thumbprint appears. (Whose? How did it get there? Does it belong to the narrator? A usurper?) It becomes a third person in the mix, not just an interruption, but an intrusion. The clean white page is now used. There is a consciousness of someone else having been in this space before, as well as a sense of being both a reader and an observer watching oneself read. Some pages later, carbon paper is interleaved among the blanks. The reader leaves his or her own imprint as the mark of reading. It is visual/physical record of all the readers.

The Illustrated Dictionary of Received Ideas by Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan (11) is a series of editions that awaits the artists' own marks, not those of the readers. The books are an ongoing record of their collaborative project of systematically illustrating each of the 950 entries of Gustave Flaubert's *The Illustrated Dictionary of Received Ideas*, published 1911-1913. The contents pages, labeled "Sessions," list the time, place, and words illustrated in each individual drawing session. Sometimes they both draw the same thing, repeating a word twice; sometimes a page is left blank with no title as if waiting for inspiration. Pages are titled with a word from the dictionary, with the artists' charming, naïve, and clunky pencil renderings underneath. One volume covers the As ("Abelard") partway into the Cs ("Cannonball"). Successive volumes are additive, not contiguous. Each new edition includes all pages previously completed, with more blank pages added. As of fall 2010, the edition includes ABCDEF with 350 entries and eventually will cover all 950. The volumes get thicker, heavier, and more expensive to reproduce. The book is the size of an elementary school workbook or coloring book. Like those workbooks, there is no reason the reader couldn't also participate in this process and draw images to the awaiting captions. This dictionary is about the process, not the compendium. Will the final version make all others before it obsolete? The possibility of interaction, the incompleteness, and the successively expanding editions may be more interesting as process than the completed final work.

The empty page can be informational content, a pause in a visual narrative, or a sheet of compressed paper pulp. Or all three at the same time. Material, form and content remain distinct and collapse into each. *Sprickor och Andra Sprickor (Cracks and Other Cracks)* by Karl-Johan Stigmark (12) begins with a full-bleed close-up image of cracked paint on a wall. The following blank white pages read as a freshly painted wall. Alternating between page and the image, a crack on the photograph becomes a line on a page or a parallel gutter. Turning the page is like peeling back the paint. The paper starts to feel dry and scumbly. After many empty pages, a middle distance photograph of a cracked wall is contextualized by both its exterior location and as documentation in the book. The image is pushed back into space rather than sitting on the surface of the paper. It leads to a photo of a torn piece of paper, completing the equation: wall is to page as crack is to tear. A.L. Steiner's *STOP (onestar press)* (13) is a wordless narrative depicting the lifecycle of trees to pulp, paper product and recycling waste. A band of images is laid out like a horizontal film strip. Full-bleed images interrupt the narrative- tree bark or wood chips that force the reader's attention to the book itself. Those trees are compressed into the very product in the reader's hand. The texture of the paper's surface connects the fingers to substance and subject. This is critical to a final section that leads from pale halftone images of text on a page to gray shadows, printed texture of a piece of paper, ink dissolving on the surface, lighter and lighter until it is only the surface of the paper you are holding, blank after blank after blank. It comes full circle. No mention if printed on recycled paper.

With some works, positive and negative are conflated. Figure and ground switch back and forth, as do perception and interpretation. Mungo Thomson's *Negative Space* (14) borrows the yellow-bordered cover, font and format of National Geographic magazine, creating a reference to the magazine's aestheticized and romanticized exploration. The title page gives way to blank spreads of gloss white paper. Orange spatters across a spread, marks that are familiar but not yet identifiable. Is it ink or watercolor? Cross-hair star filters stand out like comic book exclamation points. A hazy shape reflects off the facing white blank page making a white shadow Rorschach test. Whorls of color and constellations of marks splash across the spreads, then are cropped into geometric fragments that dissolve into the white of the paper. The fragments are chunks of photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope mapping the universe. Positive, negative, and color have been reversed. Negative space is white, a reflective infinite surface rather than absorptive darkness. Stars are colored figures on the white ground of the page. Having established the connection of the page to outer space, the page gives way to bookness, with white corners, lower margins, borders between images, and various page layouts. About halfway through, a negative image of a planet floats in the white space. It somehow feels lighter, less protected, and more fragile as it sits on the surface of the page.

A blank page is not an empty page in Kurt Johannessen's *Shine*. (15) At first glance, thumbing the fore edges like a flipbook, the book appears empty. With a second look, there are marks like slight stains. Then, as light moves across the turning page, there is an eye, an ear. The images reveal themselves- fourteen photographic portraits printed with clear lacquer. The gloss provides a slight separation from the smooth matte of the paper. Depending on how the light hits the page, the white on white images are either positive or negative, as if they are X-rays seeing through these people. The slight strain

to see them forces a closer look, and makes one question who they are in a way that would not happen if they were printed full color. They are all smiling, familiar. The shine is not just the title and gloss of the ink, it is also the warmth expressed among this group of people. The cropped images are all placed on the bottom recto, with full-spread white space as a place of silent shared stories. The collection of images houses relationships between the artist and his family or neighbors, between the people in the images looking out at the reader, and by extension the reader with the artist. This is an intimate invitation, a private album that the reader is allowed into as a shared experience.

The final work is also an invitation to remember and to reflect. It is a manifestation of emptiness. That seems contradictory when picking up the two-pound object that is J. Meejin Yoon's, *Absence*.(16) It is a solid all-white form, made not of sheets of paper, but white paperboard. It is literally a book block. The die-cut cover reads ABSENCE. It seems that there is not much here. Pay attention to how the act of opening the cover causes the negative space of the die-cut word to go from dark (the shadow on the underlying page) to illuminated white (reflected backlighting). It is simple and elegant. The opening page has a small single hole, burrowing down nine otherwise empty folios. A pair of half-inch squares fills up the bulk of the book. Turning the one hundred twenty pages does not reveal more information, but expands the experience. The depth of the squares' negative space decreases as the pages are turned. You can see down into the space but not the bottom. The light and shadows move across the empty pages like a time-lapse motion sequence. The space diminishes on one side as it grows on the other, positive and negative reverse. Form gives way to nothingness. These are not just squares on a surface, but physical volumes, shafts of hollow space. Something is there, it is gone. Turning to the last page, the squares are no longer abstract, the key is provided: a die-cut map of the footprint of the World Trade Center block in downtown Manhattan. 120 pages, 120 stories of the towers and antenna mast. Page by page, floor by floor, fallen buildings, holes in the ground. The monumental is held in the hand, quiet, still, personal. This is ground zero, where memory and projection meet, the space of absence and silence even as new buildings grow out of the ground. Zero. The number that sits between all negative and all positive numbers, between nothing and infinity. The space above and below the ground plane. The emptiness that is not nothing.

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NOTES

1 "Talk About Nothing: Philip Glass and Sat Hon," Rubin Museum of Art, New York NY. November 24, 2010.

2 For detailed expositions on numerical zero, see John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing* (London: Vintage Paperback, Random House, 2001) and Charles Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

3 Michael Gibbs, *All or Nothing: An anthology of blank books* (Cromford, UK: RGAP) 2005

- 4 A.S. Kline "Poetry in Translation," 2007. <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/>
- 5 Ed Ruscha, *Nine Swimming Pools and a Broken Glass* (Los Angeles: E. Ruscha, 1968).
- 6 Ed Ruscha, *Thirtyfour Parking Lots* (Los Angeles: E. Ruscha, 1967).
- 7 As a starting point, see the bookwork/catalog *Various Homages to Ed Ruscha* (Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, 2009).
- 8 Doro Boehme and Eric Baskauskas, *Various Blank Pages* (Chicago, IL: D. Boehme, 2009).
- 9 <https://digital-libraries.saic.edu/>
- 10 Jose Soler, *You Just Open the Book* (Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1991).
- 11 Gareth Long and Derek Sullivan, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Received Ideas*. Volume 1: ABC, Galley 3 (New York, NY: G. Long and D. Sullivan, 2010).
- 12 Karl-Johan Stigmark, *Sprickor och Andra Sprickor (Cracks and Other Cracks)* (Stockholm, Sweden: OEI Editor, 2010).
- 13 A.L Steiner, *STOP (onestar press)* (Paris, France: One Star Press, 2003).
- 14 Mungo Thomson, *Negative Space* (Zurich, Switzerland: JRP Ringier, 2007).
- 15 Kurt Johannessen, *Shine* (Bergen Norway: Zeth Forlag, 2006).
- 16 J. Meejin Yoon, *Absence* (New York, NY: Co-published by Printer Matter, Inc and the Whitney Museum of Art, NY, 2003).