

Entering the Void: Representation and Experience in the Work of Yves Klein, With Some Implications for Education

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This paper discusses art as an artist’s intentional representation of something – a message, or particular values – that comes about through artistic expression. It does so by considering the work of Yves Klein, the French conceptual artist, and his efforts in creating a space in which art becomes a lived experience, mutually constituted by the artist, the audience and the space itself. Through exploring some of his most pivotal works, the paper will consider what art as an experience might look like, to what extent it goes against an idea of art as a fixed representation of something, and what implications this view might have for an understanding of education ‘in the void’.

INTRODUCTION

What is art?

This question has, perhaps, plagued humankind for some time, and it is often difficult to come up with a satisfactory answer. On a basic level, we might consider art to be a form of expression. The artist expresses a particular idea or message to an audience, who receives this message in the form of interpretation. This interpretation is complex, however, and does not necessarily follow a direct transmission of the intentions of the artist to those who receive it, since what the artist represents is inevitably open to misunderstanding and misrecognition, as well as re-interpretation and re-imagining.

Art, then, can be said to be both an expression of something as well as a representation of something, and these two aspects are often considered to be inextricably linked. That which is represented can be thought of as the executed artwork that is put on display. An interesting question, then, is how far this executed piece is tied to the artist’s expression. Indeed, is the expression of something different from its representation? Perhaps, if we consider how those two aspects do not always match, that that which is expressed by the artist and that which he manages to represent are not one and the same, given that these intended representations and the ways in which he expresses them are inevitably tainted by the interpretive powers of the viewing audience.

In considering the work of the French artist, Yves Klein, the question of artistic

expression and representation becomes even more complex. Through a discussion of his work, I will argue that it is the experience of art, rather than its representation, that makes the artwork what it is, without which the art itself would not exist. This experience of art is not a fixed object in time and space, like a painting on a wall or a photograph in a catalogue. Rather, it is a perpetually unfolding event, only later fixed as an object of representation either through the physical art piece that is produced, or in the memories of those who experience it. Through the creation of what I have called ‘non-representative’ art in the work of Klein i.e. art which represents nothing, and only comes to be through the direct and immediate experience of the art itself, this paper explores the idea of art as jointly constituted by the artist who creates the space, the audience who are in attendance, and the space itself. Some implications for education will be drawn towards the end of the paper.

YVES KLEIN: LE PEINTRE DE L’AVENIR

Yves Klein was a French artist working roughly between the years of 1955 and 1962, until his untimely death at the age of 34. He is generally considered to be a conceptual artist, insofar as the concepts underpinning his art were more important than the executed work itself (Banai, 2014). He is credited with influencing other conceptual art movements, such as the Zero Group in Germany, founded in 1957, as well as various figures in the fields of kinetic and performance art (Weitermeier, 2001; Brougher, 2010; Silverman, 2011).

Perhaps Klein’s most enduring legacy is the highly pigmented colour ‘International Klein Blue’ (herein referred to as IKB), which featured strongly (if not exclusively) in a number of his major works. Klein also contributed to ongoing debates around what it is that defines art and artistic expression, and many of his scandalous and often confusing pieces set out to explore the notion that art is, above all, an experience of the here and now (Stich, 1994; Weitermeier, 2001).

Klein is thought to have a number of somewhat eclectic influences. For one, both of his parents were quite well-established artists in their own right. Klein was also one of the only Frenchmen to achieve a black belt, 4th dan, in Judo, providing him not only with the ‘fighting spirit’ which he attributed to many of his bolder claims about the nature of art, but also with some knowledge of Buddhist teachings, particularly that which pertains to the idea of Nothingness (Brougher, 2010; Lévy-Keuntz, 2006). In a similar vein, the French philosopher Bachelard would prove to be immensely influential for his so-called ‘Blue Period’, particularly the following quote from his essay ‘Air and Dreams’:

In the realm of blue air more than elsewhere, we feel that the world may be permeated by the most indeterminate reverie. This is when reverie really has depth. The blue sky opens up in depth beneath the dream. Then dreams are not limited to one-dimensional images. Paradoxically, the aerial dream soon has

only a depth dimension... The world is then truly beyond the unsilvered mirror. There is an imaginary beyond, a pure beyond, open without a within. First there is nothing, then there is a deep nothing, then there is blue (Bachelard, 1988, p. 42)¹

This intrigue with the colour blue represents, on a practical level, Klein's earlier visit to the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Italy, which houses luminous blue frescoes on its ceiling. It inspired Klein to think of blue as the sky, in the sense that the sky is pure colour. Indeed, this pure colour of blue, which he attempted to capture with IKB, is the infinite space of the immaterial or the void, and not merely a representation of it (Lévy-Keuntz, 2006; Brougher 2010).

Klein self-proclaimed to be 'le peintre de l'avenir' which is thought to contain a twofold meaning. In one sense, Klein saw himself as the painter of the future. Well known for making bold statements, he put forth the claim that, in the future, all artists would also use only one colour in their artworks (Weitermeier, 2001). However, Klein also saw himself very much as the painter of the here and now, as we will see further below.

His works attracted both admonishment and admiration. Far from being fully accepted, he was sometimes labelled as a purveyor of hype, and he was often harshly mocked, most notably in the Jacopetti film 'Mondo Cane', which featured at the 15th Cannes Film Festival in 1961.² The level of debate around his work, however, was ultimately pleasing to Klein, who stated in an interview in 1957 that 'the passionate argument... proves the value of the phenomenon. It deeply disturbs men of good will who submit complacently and passively to the sclerosis of established concepts and rules' (Lévy-Keuntz, 2006; Calvocoressi, 2016).

Thus, one may be correct in assuming that Klein's primary aim was to create a 'hype' around his artworks – and, indeed, he did. This hype caused a variety of reactions amongst gallery goers, reactions which became a central tenet of his overall artistic expression. Such reactions, for Klein, are precisely what constituted the work as art itself.

Klein is often considered in association with an artistic movement in France during this time called 'Nouveau Réalisme'. Indeed, there is no denying this association, given that their manifesto was written on one of Klein's famous blue monochromes (Weitermeier, 2001). 'Nouveau Réalisme' artists focused on re-appropriating real-world objects representing various forms of social utility. These objects would often be destroyed, re-fashioned or re-modelled entirely, often with the aim of critiquing the superfluity or excessiveness of the then-current society.³⁴

Klein certainly applies tenets of 'Nouveau Réalisme' within his work, and yet began to distance himself from the movement in the latter parts of his life (Stich, 1994). One could argue that, ultimately, Klein did not want to represent something to his audience, at least in any clear-cut sense. Indeed, Klein was searching for something altogether more immaterialist – premised on the question of whether or not he could create an art piece that would be free from representation, an idea of

art as an unfolding event rather than a fixed object in time and space.

THE BLUE EPOCH: YVES LE MONOCHROME

Klein's first noteworthy art exhibition, 'Monochromes', initially consisted of a number of monochrome paintings in varying colours hung side by side. These were not easy artworks to exhibit. Indeed, a number of art galleries, most notably the 'Salon de la Egalite Nouvelle' rejected these pieces along the lines that Klein had gone beyond all bounds of non-figuration. Seemingly, however, this was exactly what Klein wanted to achieve.

Klein eventually managed to hang his art pieces, however, in the newly opened 'Gallerie Colette Allendy'. However, he was disappointed with the outcome, particularly the ways in which gallery goers had interpreted the pieces. According to him:

'I was attempting to show colour, and I realized at the opening of the exhibition that the public, enslaved by visual habit, when presented with all those surfaces of different colours on the walls, reassembled them as components of polychromatic decoration. The public could not enter into the contemplation of the colour of a single painting at a time, and that was very disappointing to me, because I precisely and categorically refuse to create on one surface even the interplay of two colours' (Klein, 1959).

Klein had not achieved the effect he wanted to, and from then on, he resolved to exhibit one colour only – his signature IKB. Thus, Klein had entered what is known as his 'Blue Epoch' (Weitermeier, 2001; Brougher 2010). For Klein (1974), blue, unlike other colours, had 'no dimensions' – 'it is beyond dimensions.' One of the earliest exhibitions during this period were eleven, almost identical 'Blue Monochromes', which he first presented at the 'Gallery Apollinaire in Milan' in 1957.

The difference in the effect of these pure blue monochromes from the usage of various colours in separate monochromes is, indeed, astounding. One is not so much left to wonder about the connections between the different art pieces, why each colour was positioned in that particular place, at such and such a distance from that particular monochrome. One may initially think about the intentions of the artist, what message he wished to convey, but becomes ultimately distracted by and drawn into the deep blue colour fully saturating their visual field. Each piece, highly pigmented and luminous, was mounted 20 cm from the wall in order to create a 'levitation' effect, and Klein also used roller brushes to apply paint to the canvas as to further eliminate any presence of clear lines. The blue itself 'appears to transmute the material substance of the painting into an incorporeal quality, tranquil and serene' (Weitermeier, 2001, p. 16). It also had an unnerving and somewhat destabilising effect, a feeling similar to when one is faced with the infinite and immaterial depth of the sky.

The 'Blue Monochromes' drew solely on the emotional sensibilities of the audience, who then became so much so immersed within the art that they, too, became the art itself. The purpose of this 'blue' art was not to represent something as such. The blue, for Klein, did not *represent* immaterial space – it *is* the immaterial in the sense that space is pure colour. The experience of the artwork was also, in a sense, immaterial, since no interpretation, close analysis or powers of description were necessary from audience members. This allowed for a greater freedom for the audience to be fully present in the art piece itself. Rather than acting as an objective observer who analyses the work from afar, Klein's work meant that the 'distinction between the beholder, or subject or vision, and its object begin to blur' (Weitermeier, 2001, p. 16).

Klein was on the cusp of something radically different in art – the idea that art is not the canvas mounted on the wall, nor the photograph in the frame, nor the sculpture on the pedestal. Rather, art is this experience of the audience, of a space created by an artist where such experiences are devoid of clear sense of artistic representation.

'WITH THE VOID, FULL POWERS'⁵

And yet, Klein wished to push this point further. It seemed he had not escaped what he would later call the 'cage' of representation. The 'Blue Monochromes', indeed, represented Klein's view that blue was something infinite and expansive, like the sky. It subtly conveyed his own personal sensibilities about the world, and indeed, of life itself. It was also an inevitable portrayal of what it was that Klein wanted to achieve in art, and of what he felt constituted pure art as an experience. The blue itself was material, or at the least representative of the immaterial. And although Klein, as with any other artist, had little control over the ways in which his art would be interpreted, his work still embodied an intended message which may very well act as this 'cage' he wanted to avoid. Indeed, Klein himself recognised this when he began to cryptically promote his new exhibition, which would feature in the 'Iris Clert Gallery' in 1958:

'Recently, my work with colour has led me, in spite of myself, to search little by little... for the realisation of matter, and I have decided to end the battle. My paintings are now invisible.' (Klein, 1958).

What came next was perhaps one of Klein's most radical exhibitions, namely, 'The Void.' Following an elaborate entrance consisting of the release of 1,001 blue balloons, guards dressed in full presidential regalia, guests being served with blue cocktails (which they later claimed turned their insides blue), Klein decided to exhibit *nothing*. He had stripped the gallery completely bare, painting the walls white, and removing, as far as humanly possible, anything which could be considered a display.

The work was met with mixed reactions, and yet, was widely appreciated by gallery goers who ‘accepted it as an opportunity to share in the experience of the here and now, as the manifestations of a young artist’s vision on a life liberated from the strictures of time and space’ (Weitermeier, 2001, p. 31). Like the ‘Blue Monochromes’, ‘The Void’ offered a space in which there existed a complete dissolution of boundaries – not only of lines, form and horizons, but also of the boundary between the observer and the object of observation, between the art ‘space’, the audience and indeed the artist himself.

It is undoubtable that each audience member experienced *something* during the exhibition – be it the sense of pure uninterrupted space and time, an appreciation for the opportunity to experience art unperturbed by a clearly represented message, or, indeed, feelings of bewilderment and frustration. The artwork was demanding. It required a radical change in the audience’s habitual perception, to disrupt the need to offer explanations and analyses, and to immobilise the drive towards certainty and understanding. The artist, embodied in the artwork in this way, becomes one with the audience, the audience too becoming embodied in the work of art. The dissolution of the dichotomies between audience members, the artist and the ‘art’ itself was jarring – and yet, even this experience of discomfort meant that Klein had achieved what he wished to achieve, that the art itself became a direct experience, an event fully present and immersed in the here and now.

ART AND THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

But what is the here and now? Is the here and now ever free from a kind of representation? What, indeed, is direct and present experience, when we consider that with any experience, once it is considered and named, it has already passed, and has thus already entered the realm of representation as memory? When an artist draws a line on the canvas, to what extent is that line (part of) the art? Strictly speaking, if art is purely an experience in the here and now, then that line, once drawn, is not art any longer. Rather, it is a representation of the experience of drawing a line, a representation of the art that has taken place.

When the audience members are directly experiencing something in the moment in which they interact with the space, any thoughts or reflections on that experience also becomes representations. They are, as with the art, always ‘becoming’ – never quite in the present moment, endlessly and inescapably oriented towards the future, and indeed, tethered to the past. Kierkegaard (1843) understood this when he stated that ‘life can never really be understood in time because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting-place from which to understand it.’ Sartre (1943, p. 142) also refers to the ‘instantaneous present’ as ‘nothing at all’ but a ‘dimensionless point’. In this sense, the ‘here and now’ is the void in Klein’s work – it is both absent and present, immaterial and infinite.

Art in the void may be considered as a kind of ‘non-representation’. Indeed, the function of art in the here and now is not to convey a particular message towards the

audience, but to inspire certain reactions, reactions which became an intimate part of the art itself, inescapable from what is happening within that space at that particular time.

At a lecture at the Sorbonne, Klein (1958) famously defended his decision to exclude, as much as possible, lines and forms, perhaps in the most extreme sense in 'The Void':

'...in front of any painting, figurative or non-figurative I felt more and more that the lines and all their consequences, the contours, the forms, the perspectives, the compositions, became exactly like the bars on the window of a prison. Far away, amidst colour, dwelt life and liberty. And in front of the picture I felt imprisoned, and I believe it is because of that same feeling of imprisonment that van Gogh exclaimed, 'I long to be freed from I know now what horrible cage!'"

Might this cage be the idea that when an artist represents something to us, something clear and overt, we become imprisoned by the message he wishes to convey? But it may be more than that. We often talk about art in relation to its historical context, to understanding the intentions of the artist, the political circumstances in which he painted, and all of the components that made that artwork become what it became. Indeed, as with many other art forms, this seems inescapable. How can one, for example, watch a film without encountering the often subtle ways in which the actor has portrayed the words of the script, the events that are unfolding, his character and their traits? How can the audience avoid the selectivity with which the director decides to focus on particular objects on the screen, using filming techniques to draw attention to the expressions of the actors and, in doing so, imposing a particular interpretation of the events on the viewers? Indeed, this subtle, and sometimes innocuous, forms of manipulation seem inescapable – rather, they are central to the work of art itself.

But all of this is to fail to draw the important distinction between the *performance* of an artwork and the *executed* artwork itself. The *executed* artwork – the room in 'The Void' with its walls painted white, the blue objects or monochrome paintings – are, as Klein (1960) would state, the 'the ashes of my art.' In other words, those pieces are purely representations of the artwork that has *already* unfolded. Pure art, rather, is in the *performance* of art – in the fleeting moment in which it is unfolding, witnessed by the audience who participate in the event. These moments are not fixed in time and space, such as their representations. Rather, they are perpetually becoming, immediately experienced and then lost in memory.

This implies, therefore, that, whilst the representation of art may be, in some sense, immortal and infinite, the art itself is momentary, both bound to and beyond a particular time and space. Each performance, therefore, is not mimicry – it is a new art piece entirely in its own right. The artist, too, only exists insofar that he is in the act of performing or producing art. Klein teaches us that what is important is not the canvas fixed on the wall but our encounter with it, our direct experience of it in

the here and now. Indeed, pure art is pure experience.

EDUCATION IN THE VOID

This way of thinking about art may have some indirect implications for how we understand education, if we accept that education is very much imbued with a sense of presentation and representation. However, it is important to distinguish two kinds of representation in education that, perhaps, do not fully align.

If we consider teachers as presenting content to students, it would be difficult to think of students as directly receiving what is presented without any level of (re)interpretation. Similarly, it may be difficult to consider a presentation of something devoid of representation. Inevitably, it seems, teachers represent certain values, affiliations, or perceived purposes of education through implicit and explicit selections around what to teach and how to teach it, or simply through deciding to be in that classroom in the first place, teaching that particular subject. At the same time, there are limits to what one can represent, and this is often met with frustration at one's inability to get a message across to students, to represent something clearly to them, not quite understanding why they have interpreted our words to mean something else. The teacher has little control over this, as one has little control over how others might interpret our words. Nevertheless, representation seems to be an inescapable part of what goes on in the classroom.

There is a second sense in which representation appears in education, however. This second sense of representation may take on a more static format when we consider such things as national assessment regimes. Often, this is underlined by an understanding of the representation of content in education as neutral, measurable, easily benchmarked and consistently assessed across contexts.

There is a clear distinction here that correlates somewhat with the separation between the *performance* of art and the *executed* art piece. It may seem obvious to some that the grade one receives as a student – the so-called 'output' of the education process - is not the process of education itself. In education, as in art, there is inevitably a process of unfolding, of suspension, of becoming and of encountering, where teachers and students work together (or sometimes against one another) in attempting to grapple with something that matters. Indeed, education centres on a particular 'content' in a way that, in some sense, Klein's work does not. And whilst examination results may reflect certain components of this, like the artworks on the gallery wall, they are but 'ashes' of the educational process.

Within that 'void', *during* the performance of education, representation in the former sense is inescapable. Rather than being lines or contours which serve to 'cage' particular interpretations, as Klein had attempted to avoid in his works, these subtle forms of representation are the very foundations upon which the education process is built.

But perhaps the two aspects of *performance* and *representation* need not be so distinct. Indeed, an 'education in the void' would lend itself to an understanding that

education, like art, is *performed*. It is not a product or an executed task. It is an experience in which the class can participate fully, in which they become immersed as participants in the unfolding of the moments of education, but also in which their interpretations, understandings, and experiences all become part of the educative process itself.

NOTES

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- ¹ Klein, like Bachalard, saw the blue sky as infinite space. Klein once commented on how the birds flying in the sky interrupted this sense of the infinite nothingness unfolding before him through the blue, and this would later serve as an influence for his creation of the blue monochrome paintings (Klein, 1960; Lévy-Keuntz, 2006).
- ² The film featured one of Klein's famous pieces, 'Antropometries', which consisted of models covering themselves in IKB and rolling around on a canvas in front of an audience, accompanied by Klein's 'Monotone Symphony.' One of the descriptions in the film stated that: 'As many of you might have guessed, blue is his favourite colour. His favourite shape is also blue: in fact, blue is his only shape and colour', before sarcastically stating that the paintings were a 'steal'. Klein suffered a minor heart attack after watching this, dying shortly thereafter. There is a working theory that the film was the cause of Klein's ultimate demise at the tender age of 34 (Jacopetti, 1962; Lévy-Keuntz, 2006, Banai, 2014).
- ³ Pierre Restany, the art critic who became one of the founders of this movement, defined the artist as follows: "The artist defines himself in relation to his expression. If he fulfils his expressive need by lacerating posters, covering panels with house-paints, or compressing metal, he has accomplished his goal of... taking a piece of the world and expressing himself within it." (Restany, as quoted in Lévy-Keuntz, 2006).
- ⁴ Some of the more famous 'Nouveau Réalisme' paintings and sculptures include 'Compression' by César Baldaccini (1960), consisting of a number of eating utensils crushed and compressed into a neat square or rectangle; 'Untitled' by François Dufrêne (1964), depicting lacerated propaganda posters; and 'Home Sweet Home II' by Raymond Armand (1960), which portrays heaps of gasmasks, presumably to shock viewers into considering the extent to which their time may be cut short by the ongoing threat of nuclear war (Walther, 2012).
- ⁵ The Nobel Laureate Albert Camus had attended one of Klein's first exhibitions of 'The Void' in Paris. Clearly impressed with the work, he left a note behind him addressed to Klein stating, 'With the void, full powers'.

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