

A Case for Nothing

By Tsohil Bhatia

Professional Diploma in Art and Design

Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, 2014

Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ART

in

ART

at Carnegie Mellon University

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Approved by:



Angela Washko, Project Advisory Committee Member



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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the alternative potentials and multiplicity of *nothing* as opposed to its common interpretation as invisibility, absence and the void. The contemplative as well as de-linear discussion is furthered to investigate other possible iterations of *nothing* as a result of language, loss of memory and naturalisation of thingness. The thesis conflates a thing and nothing, and absences and presences to co-exist, and elaborates on their dualism as opposed to a mutually exclusive being; in an attempt to generate visibility for the unseen and to privilege absences in a fast paced and image saturated culture. Resultantly I outline the motivations and pressing concerns of my practice through a meeting of art and life as well as derive from the practices of Mendieta, Torres and Neunschwander in order to lay out a lineage for minimal

practice that evades its relationship to the minimalists but embraces soft silences and addresses the absent bodies' relationship to space.

In Hymn CXXIX of the Rigveda, The Hymn of Creation, Nasadiya Sukta alludes to an emptiness that preceded creation and activity. It suggests nothingness to have existed before something and primal desire to be the seed that initiated creation. Many cultures across the globe allude to a similar phenomena and “ancient peoples believed that only emptiness and chaos were present before the universe came to be. The Greeks claimed that at first darkness was the mother of all things, and from darkness sprang chaos... The Hebrew creation myths say that the earth was chaotic and void before God showered it with light and formed its features.”¹ The metaphorical as well as physical seed is what disrupts the void (nothing). While it is lifeless, it is also life. While it is nothing, it holds a potential thing.

¹ Seife, Charles, and Matt Zimet. *Zero: the Biography of a Dangerous Idea*. NY, NY, U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 2014.

*The seed will sprout
 The sprout will flower
 The flower will fruit
 The fruit will decay
 And it will become,
 earth and seed.*

*Will the seed flower again?
 Will it become fruit again?
 Will it reach Earth again?
 Or did it become nothing?*

Creation is to be perceived not as an isolated event with a beginning and an end but a constant process that nurtures change. An object or subject never stops to *become*; from one to the other to another. The word *become* in itself has to be understood in a very fleeting, rather than a conclusive manner; to be understood always in its present progressive: *becoming*. The subject/object is always in flux and within that ever changing nature it finds its identity through language. It's identification is in its cumulative breadth of existence instead of the infinite individual altering presents that it inhabits. From an anthropocentric lens, it could be said that to come into existence, to be born is also the commencement of the process of decay, of death. Or inversely, decay only begins when a thing comes to exist in the first place.

When does a fruit stop to ripen and begin to rot?

Growth and decay occupy a position of dualism at every divisible present in the process of the subject/object's *becoming*; there is simultaneity of growth and decay, a consecutive procedure of being and not being. And we can only infer this based on historical memory accumulations of what composes being and what signifies unbeing. It is also possible to affirm that when a subject/object ceases to exist and when death and the consequent decay occurs, growth stops and not-being begins. This not being manifests itself by the disappearance of the subject/ object and the eventual absence replaces presence. This absence or unbeing generated post presence is however not empty, it encompasses the memory of presence, a ghost presence and even though this absence is perhaps an iteration/embodiment of nothing, what is this nothing made of ? What makes nothing? A study of nothing for the purposes of this thesis is a study of absence of form, a nothing that comes from the absence of language and a resultant ambiguity of identity. The thesis will also look into the performative dualism and transmorphism of a thing and nothing.

What comes after a loss of words?

What comes after loss of sight?

What comes after a loss of time and loss of sensation?

What comes after memory loss and loss of love?

What comes after loss of feeling?

What comes after loss of breath?

What can be found when everything is lost?

What do I still have when I have nothing?

And this is not melancholia

*but radical optimism,
for a new
that comes after.*

Was Rivane Neuenschwander revealing the density/composition of this emptiness when she built *Work Of Days*? *Work of Days* is a completely empty room built using contact sheets, covered in transparent vinyl adhesive on all of its surfaces. The adhesive in this white space catches dust over time of the installation, archiving traces of presence and the trace of the viewer. She notes that her work addresses “a wish to understand the fragility of life, the finite nature of things, our impermanence in the world; or the simple observation of the passing of time.”² Time, that causes decay of the *Work of Days*, also remains the same factor that makes the piece. Over time as the minute particles of dust, lint, hair and other foreign material find themselves covering this empty space, the space becomes a shrine for air, the space and emptiness within. The installation brings a *nothing*(air) from invisible to visible.

² “Rivane Neuenschwander ‘Work of Days’,” Art and Artists, MoMA, accessed Sep 20, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/164860>.



Fig.1. Rivane Neuenschwander, *Work of Days*, 1998, Gathered dust on adhesive vinyl

Neuenschwander does it with such poetic ease but it is a daunting task to talk about the composition of *nothing*; a thing that is nothing. Each attempt at trying to reveal it, reveals the paradoxical nature of the endeavor. Any possible iteration of an explanation starts to fill the emptiness of its structure leading to an ontological suicide. I'm interested in this very failure that remains inherent in the revealing of *nothing* and while remaining disruptive of the discourse, it also demands for a never-concluding discourse of saying and further unsaying to say again to unsay. Here, the nothing is the transcendent, the *aporia*, the unresolvable dilemma. Sells iterates the same difficulty of a linguistic regress he encounters in an attempt to state the aporia of transcendence and attends to the mystics in order for a solution to the speech act of the

unspeakable. “Each statement I make - positive or ‘negative’ - reveals itself as in need of correction. The correcting statement must then itself be corrected, ad infinitum. The authentic subject of discourse slips continually back beyond each effort to name it or even to deny its name-ability. The regress is harnessed and becomes the guiding semantic force, the *dynamis*, of a new kind of language. Apophasis is the common Greek designation for this language. Apophasis can mean “negation,” but its etymology suggests a meaning that more precisely characterizes the discourse in question: *apophasis* (un-saying or speaking away).”³ He further explains this by suggesting a distinction to be made between apophatic theory and apophatic discourse. While apophatic theory denies the effability of the transcendent, apophatic discourse offers a performative nature with a series of retractions to carry out a destabilised and dynamic discourse. Apophasis accepts the unsolvability as a resolution and facilitates a discussion of the same.

Any element of the visible world is primordially an abstraction. A series of rapid processes: cognition, memory, perception and semiotics result in language for the thing(it). While the thought, written and spoken word occupies our everyday, abstraction is not made very visible and so it lands itself on the periphery of language; at the point where language begins and where it collapses. Abstraction precedes language and exceeds it. It can be found at the birth of language and its decay; in the silence that exists before the spoken word and one that follows after. A thing without word is an abstraction and it becomes an abstraction again after loss of memory. Language bifurcates the ideas of birth and decay, abstraction is where they meet in

³ Sells, Michael Anthony. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

simultaneity. The nature of abstraction remains unstable and its unstable phenomenology assists as to how I address the multiplicity of nothing. *Nothing* exists liminally before and after language and apophatic discourse allows for a fluctuation in language that embraces and nurtures abstraction.

My impulse towards confusing abstraction, apophasis and nothing is an impulse of disidentification, a denial of suitable or accurate language, association and interpretation and of not wanting to *become* but to keep *becoming*. To think of identity as uncontainable motion rather than fixed identi-fication which is the peril of language and meaning and memory. However, I must acknowledge the rigidity of identity and the need to identify identity to dis-identify from it. A denial that comes with adequate preconception of it in the first place. I propose to identify with disidentification.

She had some horses.

She had horses who were bodies of sand.

She had horses who were maps drawn of blood.

She had horses who were skins of ocean water.

She had horses who were the blue air of sky.

She had horses who were fur and teeth.

She had horses who were clay and would break.

She had horses who were splintered red cliff.

She had some horses.

She had horses with eyes of trains.

She had horses with full, brown thighs.

She had horses who laughed too much.

She had horses who threw rocks at glass houses.

She had horses who licked razor blades.

...

She had some horses she loved.

She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses.⁴

For almost a decade now, I've been revisiting this poem by Joy Harjo and I still don't know much about it. I'm hesitant to study it. The text sets up an open field where I can run in directions along the x, y and z axes along the axis of time and I find that simulation extremely emancipating. Sometimes the horses are horses, sometimes they're objects, sometimes they're emotional states, sometimes they're anthropomorphized, sometimes they're drawing, sometimes they're amorphous- unidentifiable floating entities, sometimes they're just me myself and sometimes they're nothing, just an abstraction without words yet in words. The complex movement between being this, being that and being nothing and everything is what accommodates the breadth of their being and I'm hesitant to interrupt that dynamis by semantic comprehension. Eva Hessa talks about *Right After* (1969) claiming it to be "very very simple but very extreme" she adds "because it looked like a really nothing which is one of the things that I so much wanted to be able to do."⁵ I find an affinity to this desire of making a nothing-thing.

⁴ Harjo, Joy. *She Had Some Horses*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.

⁵ *Four Artists: Robert Ryman, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Susan Rothenberg*, directed by Michael Blackwood (Michael Blackwood Productions, 1988).

In some way, my task then is to escape memory, language and comprehension that have been polluted by their own historical accumulations. Their decay is a result of their assertive being. My task then is to escape the vanity of fixated knowledge and produce alternative models that cultivate a comfort with unknowing. Guillaume Désanges' essay on the work of Wilfredo Prieto is titled "A rose is a rose is a truck" after Gertude Stein's "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" To Désanges, Prieto's work is "an effect of maximal sensory leverage with minimal means - a sort of state of emergency of creation, practical and willful, that is instantly image making. But beyond the instantaneous experience, and despite appearances, what you see is not just what you see."⁶ He calls it the dehydrated metaphor. While it is something, it is also something else. While it is one thing, it is also another thing. While it is something it is also not that thing.

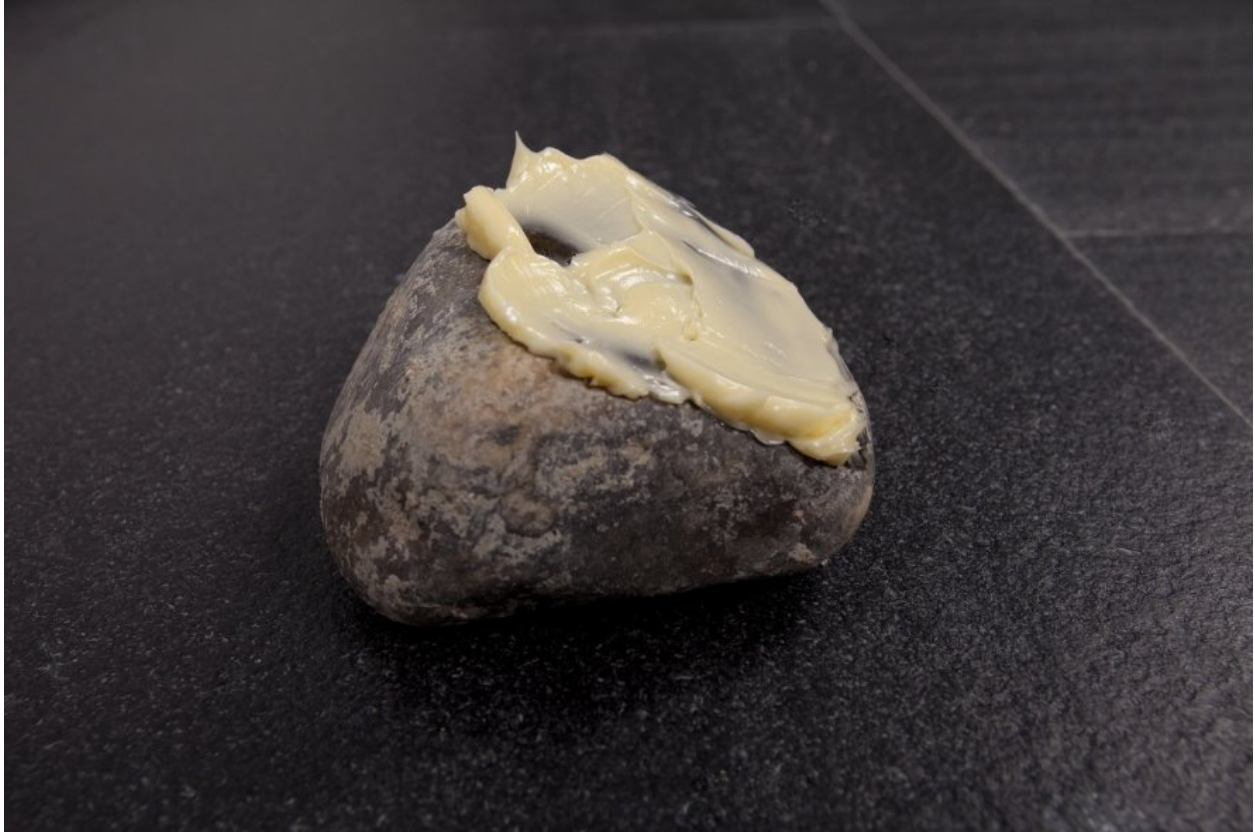


Fig.2. Wilfredo Prieto, *Stone with butter*, 2011, stone, butter.

I find this a good opportunity to make a dangerous proposition of conflating a thing and nothing and their qualities of being and not-being. A similar dangerous proposition like the zero, introduced as a placeholder character only gaining it's numeric value centuries later. "Zero is powerful because it is infinity's twin. They are equal and opposite, yin and yang. They are equally paradoxical and troubling. The biggest questions in science and religion are about nothingness and eternity, the void and the infinite, zero and infinity. The clashes over zero were the battles that shook the foundations of philosophy, of science, of mathematics, and of

religion”.⁷ While the zero in its isolated being is harmless, existing in absentia, its interaction with another number is what evokes its being. It is a digit, a number, a value and nothing at all; occupying a simultaneous multiplicity and none.

When speaking of the phenomenology of nothing; absence or invisibility becomes foundational for its primary conception. Thingness could be attributed by presence and its realisation in the realm of visibility and tactility. However those are not the only determinants for the ascription of nothing or a thing. Language and memory offer secondary attribution to their ontological nature. And the tertiary factors are value: social, economic, cultural.

“The fact that in economics, value is neither anchored in a naturalist metaphysics of need, nor in the labor necessary for production, but rather reflects the whims (or ephemeral codes) of desiring subjectivity (of society)...”⁸

A thing culturally valuable or relevant to one may mean nothing to the other, a thing of severe economic significance could find itself extremely invaluable when isolated from its primordial cultural context. I would argue that the parameters for qualification of thingness and nothingness are rather arbitrary and the same ‘something’ might qualify as either a thing or nothing. I have tried to lay out the possible complications in the being of things and nothing.

A thing is present and visible; identifiable within the structure of language.

⁷ Seife, Charles, and Matt Zimet. *Zero: the Biography of a Dangerous Idea*. NY, NY, U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 2014.

⁸Prieto, Wilfredo, and Désanges Guillaume. *Wilfredo Prieto*. Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2014.

A thing can also be absent yet made visible with the recollection of memory.

A thing can be present and invisible; dominated by other presences.

A thing can be absent and invisible; occurring only as an idea object.

Nothing is absent and invisible; and not precisely namable due to its formless expanse.

Nothing can be present and invisible; in its isness and being; yet unlocatable by the eye.

Nothing can be absent yet visible; the visibility generated within language, as an aporia.

Nothing can be present and visible; by its exhausted cultural significance or mundane nature.

I watch people's gestures, expressions and behavior so closely that it is inevitable for me to feel watched. On the walk to my apartment, I walk past a series of windows, making the inside of the homes visible. The impulse is not one of being a voyeur or surveillant of the other but one that stems out of a gentle impulse of watching.

I think of the window, the pane of glass on the window when thinking of nothing. The surface disappears at night, it exists only invisibly. It gets absorbed into the image beyond it. The pane of glass is nothing at night and is a screen in the day embodying itself fully, becoming surface for image, reflecting the outdoors. The glass is however more complicated than that, it starts to embody a mirror from the inside at night but still maintains the quality of glass. I never put my blinds down, the windows remain bare and I hope someone's watching. I can't see them but myself in the glass that is now a mirror. The glass on the window transforms from one to the

other; a mirror, a screen, nothing. A surface to look through finds its objectness in moments when I'm cleaning the window. I look at it, I see it when it's disrupted by a crack, a speck, a mark that makes it a thing again. My interest in nothing is this, the window pane is nothing. The window pane is sometimes nothing. The window pane then is present but absent. It's like the air in the room, unacknowledged and seen through. I think of Uta Barth's photographs of the air, the distance between the subject and object. She insists on wanting us to learn to see negative space, to see the empty volume in the room rather than the walls that contained it. The photographs try to photograph air.⁹

In terms of an object, when Heidegger talks about the jug and its thingness, he alludes to its jugness being a characteristic of the void inside that the potter sculpts than the clay itself.¹⁰ The jug is not a jug if deprived of its void. So, it's unbeing is what precipitates it's being.

⁹ David Horvitz. "Uta Barth." *ANP Quarterly* volume #2, no. 9, December, 2007, 21-32.

¹⁰ Reichert, Herbert W., Martin Heidegger, and Albert Hofstadter. "The Thing" In *Poetry, Language, Thought*. 1971



Fig. 3. Uta Barth, Field #20, 1997, Digital print with acrylic paint on canvas.

Once I leave this apartment, it will be completely empty here. An empty living room, an empty bedroom, an empty kitchen, an empty bathroom. But I will remember that here was a couch and here was the coffee table. Here, a small study and on that shelf were instruments, bells of different kinds and a coin jar here. Here were the art books, and here some random books that I never read. There were two lamps, here and here and one lamp on the bed stand. And next to the

bed stand was a bed. And another guest bed here. The light in the morning would come straight in from that window and make a polygon here obstructed by the fruits at the window. All the kitchen appliances were on that shelf, and the potatoes and onions in a basket here. The first light of the day hit right next to that shelf inlay. Here was the refrigerator and on top of it was the microwave. This cabinet had glasses and glassware and baking stuff and this one was plates and ceramics and silverware. And this one was lentils, beans and tea etc. There were spills on the carpet here, here, and here.

I think of death and the disappearance of bodies and their recurrence in objects, spaces, odors, words, sounds and everything sensory. What does it mean for the mind to retain memory of loss and absence? The memory of loss is a memory of a discernibly void however what filled that now empty space? A memory of disappearance and absence is rather the surrogate memory of presence. It is painful to remember loss and be reminded but I also fear forgetting. Maybe it's the fear of loss of images, a fear of loss of sight, a fear of loss that generates a pace of viewing and an excessive visual culture, to constantly strive towards stimulation and distraction from the anticipation of loss. In the physical world, memorials have become an important part of the culture of remembering, a physicality imparted to the fragility of memory. But the permanence of memorials work in opposition to the nature of memory itself. Memory and remembering are dynamic, fluid processes.¹¹ It is essential at this point to establish memory not as a permanent linearly accumulative storage bank but as a constantly layered accumulation and successive reorganisation of the perceived data. "Memorials need a certain flexibility to allow for this transformation than manifesting in a rigid materiality. Memorial design must allow for this

¹¹ Ware, Sue-Anne. "Anti-Memorials and the Art of Forgetting." *UTCePress* Vol 15 (2008), (Aug 22, 2008).

transformation as well as ultimately allowing us to forget.”¹² The sympathetically pragmatic response to that is not one against memorials but a reconfiguring of the memorial as an anti-memorial. Temporary, ephemeral memorials or anti-memorials accept that forgetting is integral to memorial design. Where the memorial is an expression of this normative positive attitude, the anti-memorial explores, affirms and celebrates a wider, inclusive and essentially subversive range of states within the diverse operations of memory. The act of remembering implies a transformation of memories.¹³ Anti-memorials remind the body to remember, for it to forget. The forgetting aided by remembering happens through a process of naturalisation which elucidates the transformative nature and decay of memory. This must not be confused with the dialectic of remembering as a result of selective forgetting, but remembering as a methodology to allow forgetting. “Forgetting then designates the unperceived character of the perseverance of memories, their removal from the vigilance of consciousness. On this conception forgetting can be understood not simply as an inexorable destruction, but as an immemorial resource.”¹⁴

I'm very amazed by the lack of awareness of my body sometimes. It's the sneeze, the fleeting glance in a mirror, a need to shower, an impulse to touch myself, my body next to another body that makes my body visible and whole again. The only way I know of my body is by the traces it leaves, or when it comes to contact with things in my surroundings. My body, very physical to the

¹² Ware, Sue-Anne. “Anti-Memorials and the Art of Forgetting.” *UTCePress* Vol 15 (2008), (Aug 22, 2008).

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 430–31.

other, is absent to myself. Its disappearance over time is the result of its persistence, and the realisation that I don't realise it, is what reminds me of my body again.

I spend a lot of time cleaning my apartment. I put things in their designated places because when they exist there, they disappear. Similar to my breath, their disappearance is caused by their constant appearance as static objects in the places that get assigned to them. The refrigerator has never moved from where it was when I got to this apartment. It has transcended its objectness and become architecture, so has the couch and the bed and the clock. Time has an integral role to play in this disappearance. With the passage of a sufficient amount of time the objects start to integrate into the architecture. They never arrive at complete invisibility but start to exhibit characteristics of absence in their presence. When they're moved from their place they sometimes leave a physical trace and sometimes a trace within episodic memory. I would presume, this displacement of the object causes a temporary doubling of the object itself; one in its initial placement and the other in the displaced position. The thing-object and the nothing-object.

I'm always the first one to fall in love and I forget no lovers. I still think of my first lover; we were young, stupid, impulsive and cinematically in love. I remember his body very well. I remember his neck and just where it tickles and his response to push my face off with a giggle, denying access by touching his shoulder to his cheek. I remember his nipples very well; if I were to make them, I'd need my fingers and my tongue. The tongue has retained more memory. My fingers however remember the warmth of his rectum. My knuckles remember the extent of the bend in the fingers and my wrist remembers its twist. I remember his hair very well. I could

sculpt his body to the negative space of mine accurately. My nose however fails me. I don't remember his smell anymore. I haven't met him in a few years and I'm afraid to meet him again. I'm amused by how much space he occupies in my memory.

Severin Fowles suggests “absences – no less than presences – also inhabit the material world on the far side of signification. They come both before and after human perception, and in this way gain a kind of independence from the perceiving human subject. Absences push back and resist. They prompt us into action. And like present things, absences also have their distinctive affordances and material consequences that are not only prior to meaning but can, of their own accord, direct the process of signification itself.”¹⁵ The absence of my ex-lover manifests itself bodily however a broken memory of his odour has left him un-whole. I wonder then if just odour by itself could be the whole.

I usually keep the hand soap on the left side of the faucet. Recently I have moved it to the right of it. The problem of memory has led to an interesting phenomena following that day. Everytime now that I reach for the soap, I first reach on the left side and then the right as if the absence exerts a presence. Fowles makes a compelling consideration for the agency of absences, he suggests that “When absences become object-like, when they (objects) seem to exist not merely as an afterthought of perception but rather as self-standing presences out there in the world, they begin to acquire powers and potentialities similar to things.”¹⁶ Could one speculate that now that the soap has been displaced to a new location, the object begins to exist in two places? One, as a

¹⁵ Fowles, Severin, and Severin Fowles. "People Without Things." An Anthropology of Absence. Accessed April 01, 2019. http://www.academia.edu/347654/People_Without_Things.

¹⁶ Fowles, Severin, and Severin Fowles. "People Without Things." An Anthropology of Absence. Accessed April 01, 2019. http://www.academia.edu/347654/People_Without_Things.

ghost object occupying the empty toothbrush holder and the other as the object itself. The ghost object, lacking physicality, only exists within the discipline of memory and may be short-lived; its trace/ memory can be removed in given time and as a result it may disappear but it does occupy a dualism for a brief time.

Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* series (begun in 1974) consistently generates a slightly different kind of absence as presence. The silhouettes often form a figure, a body devoid of gender, race, ethnicity and other social conditions. However, the absence of a body of the artist has allowed historians and scholars to constantly study her work sensitive to postmodern issues of race, gender and identity.¹⁷ The body in Mendieta's work claims itself and its relationship to land by generating negative space on earth. Her initial silhouettes that represented the body in the "goddess pose" eventually became more contained and composed to only produce a silhouette of presence. Irit Rogoff insists on the argument that Mendieta's *Siluetas* de-territorializes and re-territorializes identity and history using the Deleuzian notion of "*deteritorialization*" : a concept drawn from contemporary literary and feminist theory to describe "the displacement of identities, persons, or meanings that is endemic to the postmodern world system."¹⁸ Mendieta also employs another kind of disappearance in nature by using methods of camouflaging the body in the environments it occupies in *Imagen de Yagul*, 1973 *Untitled (Burial Pyramid)*, 1974 and *Untitled(Tree of Life series)*, 1976 amongst others. In one of her writings Mendieta notes

¹⁷ Mendieta, Ana, Olga M. Viso, and Audrey Walen. Ana Mendieta, Earth Body Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2004.

¹⁸ Rogoff, Irit: *Terra in rma: Geography's visual culture*. Routledge, London 2000

“My art is grounded on the primordial accumulations, the unconscious urges that animate the world, not in an attempt to redeem the past, but rather in confrontation with the void, the orphaned, the unbaptized earth of the beginning, the time that from within the earth looks upon us”¹⁹

In her work, it is the earth that makes the body, the silhouette is not only an imprint but also a reminder of being bodied. Mendieta’s body disappears in its body-ness, the earth disappears in its earth-ness and when they embrace each, they make each other visible in being and not being.

¹⁹ Ana Mendieta, Project proposal for Bard College



Fig. 4. Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Tree of Life)*, 1976, color coupler print.

Amidst a rapid consumption of visual culture, and the privilege given to sight, I'm curious about what's not visible and what is constantly made invisible. In times of censorship, erasure of information, altered historical tellings and 'disappearance' of bodies it is urgent for us to direct our attention to study the erased, concealed, non-existent and absent. Douglas Huebler writes, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer simply to state the existence of things in terms of time and place."²⁰ I find myself interested in the things and phenomena that have been disregarded as valuable information. I do not wish to generate any new information but instead reveal the unacknowledged by investing in seeing and remembering the body. The task at hand remains to identify what language, visual culture, economy have deemed nothing and bring that to the foreground.

Our understanding of the present world is often from this disappeared material. The closer we look, the more evidence we have on what the past entailed. Archaeology and anthropology in particular are the navigation of the past through oral, fossilized, concealed and absent information. Archival material frequently derives its insight from the marginalised material and trace.

"Christopher Hawkes (1954) proposed a form of collaboration that depended on the pursuit of common aims and objectives through complementary and distinctive forms of theory and methodology. Hawkes' famous 'ladder of inference' points to the paradox

²⁰ Douglas Huebler: November 1968. New York: S. Siegel, 1968.

that whilst archaeology is defined in terms of the study of people in the past, the ideas, beliefs and social and political arrangements of these people have to be inferred in their absence.”²¹

The undertaking then is a theoretically simple one, to look closely; similar to forensic work. To identify what might be nothing and study it, provide it language and through the exercise of interpretation, reinstate it as a thing. While I propose this, I also fear it.

Does nothing have to wear a visibility cloak or can we build conversation about nothing that can point at it without overt representation of it that relies on reproducing the vocabulary of a thing?

Any attempt at understanding nothing requires its hypothesis as a thing. Things and words are inevitably how we make sense of the visible world and owing to that, I only mean to compare nothing against the thing. “In the very act of asserting the nothingness (no-thingness) of the subject of discourse, apophasis cannot help but posit it as a “thing” or “being,” a being it must then unsay, while positing more entities that must be unsaid in turn.”²² The “nothing” I speak of therefore becomes the scaffold for a thing. There was nothing before there was a thing.

Scaffolding could be redundant when isolated from the body that succeeds it, it is understood only as scaffolding in anticipation of a form. It is a trace of presence that comes after it, a reassurance that there is presence. It is a preliminary framework and could become anything, could produce an array of form and meaning. Similarly, if we look at absences that occur post

²¹ Garrow, D. & Yarrow, T. “Not knowing as knowledge: asymmetry between archaeology and anthropology. In *Archaeology and Anthropology: understanding similarity, exploring difference*.” 2010. Oxford: Oxbow. 13-27.

²² Sells, Michael Anthony. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

presence or those that occur post the removal of a present object, absence can be studied as scaffolding to imagine or predict what presence looked like. The scaffolding in this situation generates a ghost object. With any kind of performance work, after the performance ends, there is only the residue or the document and that is the scaffolding to provide the viewer visual cues as to the performance itself. It becomes an interesting activity of predicting the past. In a constant attempt to make the work disappear and to preserve the ephemeral work that disappears, I like to bring attention to the conditions that surround the work, the trace, the residue and consequently the metaphysical scaffold becomes an important element in my work.

I have recently been making works that incorporate measurements in varied forms. On the 22nd day of September 2018, the autumnal equinox I made *The Length of Daylight- I*. I drew a straight line on a long piece of paper from sunrise to sunset. The length of the day in that sitting was measured to be 58,600 inches. The entire day is reduced to a numeric value, a paper scroll that begins to impersonate a clock and a container of time that has passed, now only contained. Similarly, when measuring the distance between two arbitrary points a and b, it becomes a mere number devoid of any other information that the physical distance may contain. The world of coordinates and axes is a very fascinating one. Measurement of any sort seems to allow a certain kind of forgetting and then generates an alternative presence of the thing that is measured. Measurement is synonymous to trace, measurement is evidence as well as optimism for a thing that comes after. An object can be distilled to its mere dimensions along the axes and starts to exist within the formal science of mathematics as facsimile to its thingness. So, it could be said that a measurement even with its missing body obtains a certain accuracy towards reproducing the absence. In *The Length of Daylight- I*, the graphite line on paper not only records time, it

simulates a body that drew it. The body, however absent, is emulated by the mark made by it.

Similar to Ana's silhouettes of the body; while disguising the body, they emulate the presence of one, creating a body in absentia.



Fig. 5. Tsohil Bhatia, *Length of Daylight- I*, 2018, graphite on paper.

I used to speak to a friend in New York very often. We used to get on a video call in the morning and would stay on call for almost the entire day until one went to sleep. We wouldn't talk a lot during the call, sometimes we didn't even stare at the camera or look at each other; sometimes the camera would just sit on the table, facing the ceiling. There'd be no body, only presence; a

presence generated through sound; sound of activity, breath and often only noise. The physical body was absent but manifested itself through the call. I remember I felt less lonely those days.

Felix Gonzalez Torres's *Untitled (a billboard of an empty bed)*, 1992. reproduces bodies in a very vivid manner and asserts an emptiness that constitutes the recently displaced bodies. The absence is reinforced by the rumpled sheets and the sunken pillows and becomes the rhetoric of the image. The bed, referred to as an un-made bed appears to be made of ghost-bodies. Torres's empty bed is so full of trace, of disappeared bodies and generates the absence of presence that simulates a presence itself. I would affirm that a well-made bed is less information than a bed slept on because of the absence of the body and its evidence. I'm often puzzled by the phrase 'making a bed' and disappointed that the instructions to make a bed never include sleeping in it. There's two ways to make a bed: one where the bed is put back in order and the other when the bed is disordered by the body. The former suggests that removal of information must also be read as an act of generating information, information that is anti-information. The latter suggests that the bed that is slept on, provides information about the body in many ways; odor, bodily fluids, rumple patterns, pressured areas of the mattress et cetera and this information can help generate the presence of a ghost body.



Fig. 6. Felix Gonzales Torres, Untitled (billboard of an empty bed), 1992, digital photograph.

I spend a lot of time cleaning my apartment. The act of cleaning is an act of making. It is also an act of unmaking, an act of doing and undoing and the undoing to in fact be an act of doing itself. It involves the removal of information and trace from a site and application of new information in the same place. The new removed information generates the space for an overlay. The overlaid information, reproduces itself over and over every time I clean. The removed information is always new. Over the last year I have been making *Household Forensics (Kitchen)*, an archive of the paper towels I use to clean the kitchen. The maintenance of these works has been a challenge as with time they catch more material on them, as well as lose some very valuable information as they're transported or shown making them almost impossible to preserve. The material used for the prints is often unidentifiable and undocumented due to the

complexity of the organic matter. An ongoing accumulation of accumulations, these monoprints preserve the removed information, the unwanted domestic nothings.



Fig. 7. Tsohil Bhatia, Household Forensics (Kitchen), 2019, monoprint.

As a teenage homosexual in India, I found myself spending time at multiple cruising spots in my hometown of New Delhi. I'd go and sit on a bench and wait for another to come sit next to me and fondle me. The Indian nation state is certainly not kind to its queers, I'm talking the time

when Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code²³, a law criminalizing homosexuality amongst many other barbaric implications was still imposed and even otherwise. Even though there were plenty of these spaces, a constant fear lingered, a fear of being seen by a distant relative, a friend, the cops or even a stranger. Public restrooms, alleys, after-school classrooms, bushes, construction sites, terraces, parking lots, public parks, pedestrian subways all became valuable spaces to become visible yet invisible. At a cruising spot in India one walks the tightrope of actively being a visible bait to another yet invisible, invisible, invisible.

I often think of active and intended invisibility as agency, invisibility as autonomy of how the body is seen and how the body is represented. Ayesha Siddiqui when talking of marginalised communities and their relationship to power asserts “visibility in a surveillance state is not power.”²⁴ I am not trying to suggest that invisibility is power but I certainly see performed invisibility as a denial of being seen. I often notice the visibility of my body or the lack thereof in a predominantly white city, at the gay club,. My body appears and disappears in a very complicated manner. The same color that generates the body’s visibility, also makes it invisible.

I’m made invisible when it comes to my voice, but very visible when addressing difference. I am used to being invisible, I would say I used to be very good at it and at some point I realised it and I asked for visibility, visible because I wanted to be heard and not because of my ethnicity or color or sexuality. I remember all those years of being a pseudonym in a chatroom, I remember

²³ Unnatural offences: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

²⁴ “Superscript 2015: Ayesha Siddiqui,” Art and Artists, Walker Art Centre, accessed Jan 18, 2020, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/superscript-2015-ayesha-siddiqui>

being invisible and I recall when I felt seen for the first time. It was in 2010, I found a lover on the Internet who made photographic self-portraits. He was pale skinned with a shaved chest and I could only imagine him unclothed. One of his photographs was called slow-motion suicide. He placed himself to the right of a portrait frame, it was only his torso in a black sleeveless shirt and his face looked down while he drew a circle around his right eye. The warm tonality of that photograph was etched in my memory. I used to revisit it often and then I wrote to him, without anticipating a response but I did hear back. A few months into talking he asked me if I'd like to get on a video call. Nervously, I agreed and was quite shy and contained the entire time. He asked me if I'd remove my shirt for him. I'd talked sex to people on Yahoo Messenger in the past but never unclothed for them. I'd been quite conscious of my scrawny, hairy body but I hesitantly agreed. There was a camera behind him, back in the distance that almost looked at the screen, I kept wondering what it was doing there. It didn't seem like he was filming me and I knew he was a photographer so it wasn't strange for him to have a camera in his room sitting on a tripod but I was slightly nervous the entire time that he might be filming me but I still went ahead with the undressing. He removed his pants, lowered his underwear and asked me if I'd go stand in a distance from the computer as he stroked his dick. "How long do you want me to stand here?" I asked from the distance. He said nothing and I stood there patiently. I was probably there for only a minute but it was long minute. He called me to come closer to the camera and turn around. He asked me if I'd spread my buttcheeks and move my butt closer to the camera. I did and to return the favor, he showed me his asshole. We both eventually masturbated on the video call while expressing our desires to touch, fondle and lick each other. This was the first time someone saw my asshole. I felt very seen. Very visible to him, visible to the camera on the computer, visible to the camera in his apartment.

While addressing the dualism of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, one must acknowledge that the role of memory becomes integral to this dualism. Invisibility/absence is only an aftermath of visibility/presence and is thus a privileged problem, a result of memory. I still think of the question “What do we lose when we don't see the invisible?” “What do we gain when we begin to identify *nothing*?” I have tried to unpack what I mean by the word ‘*nothing*’ and its constant reappearance in art practice over the past century. Brown’s Thing theory privileges the visible/tangible world, a world filled with constructed images and objects and forgets to address the imagined, the absent when he insists on the importance of a physical encounter. It conveniently neglects the physical encounters with nothing (absences) and their rhetoric. Going back to what Heidegger mentions about the jug, the potter always sculpts the negative space, the jug is what comes after.

I’m interested in making *nothing*; both a nothing-thing and a nothing at all. My work has frequently taken a reduced form to the most essential components, involves the physical disappearance of the body and sometimes addresses a visible emptiness. When making a representation of nothing, the mediation between the object and subject needs to be very direct. The material of the nothing is often elemental and its visibility subverted. A study of nothing is a spatial study, a study of form and formlessness; a study of things and the negative space around them and the space they occupy. It is a study of a mute object whose muteness becomes its body.

My affinity to the mute object is the recurring impulse of artists' silence but as a way to construct breaths between the process of speaking because each breath is word and has a sound of its own; like the writings of Dickinson with their measured breaks and gaps between words. When I think of *nothing*, I'm rarely thinking of absolute silence and absolute absence. The word to me, refers to a common, "worthless", silent, object/phenomena that is understood as meaningless and quotidian and supposes it unvalued and thus inscribed as "nothing". As I oscillate between the dilemma of being, unbeing, thing, nothing, absences and presences and try to conflate them I'm left thinking how can a thing ever predicate its unbeing? because "'silence' never ceases to imply its opposite and to demand on its presence."²⁵ When the silence is an administered one, *nothing* is an open ground to become anything.

"A genuine emptiness, a pure silence, are not feasible — either conceptually or in fact. If only because the art-work exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence. Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech (in many instances, of complaint or indictment) and an element in a dialogue."²⁶

Identification and language are key to stability. They stabilize us in the now, the very present by allowing us to be in the realm of vocabulary and the familiar. The *nothing* is the unfamiliar, the unresolvable and so we evade talking only in breath and use the word. The expanded field of things perhaps must open itself further to accommodate ghost things, *nothings* and the unsayable and in return persevere a fracture of the field itself.

²⁵ Sontag, Susan. "The Aesthetics of Silence" in *Styles of Radical Will*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.

²⁶ *ibid.*

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