

THE NOTHING HAS NO IMAGE

ABOUT MICHAEL MÜLLER'S FIGURATIONS OF DISAPPEARING

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Contrary to the common view that nothing is unthinkable, the very notion of “nothing” does pose a problem to most people. Concepts such as “nothing” and “void” rapidly lose their familiar discriminatory power, and anyone engaging in these abstract ideas beyond the everyday speech is all too easily captured by dizziness. Despite a further confusion of ideas with psychological and art historical terms: this is not necessarily connected to the *horror vacui*. As early as 1657, Otto von Guericke, at least, by means of the Magdeburg hemispheres,

refuted the physical hypothesis, according to which nature abhors voids. The experimental verification of the vacuum put an end to philosophical reflections on the issue of the “nothing”, by no means, however, to the occidental tradition in pertinent natural philosophical discussions about the void¹. Philosophy not only differentiated between both terms, but also took the cognitions of the natural sciences into consideration. The ancient question, whether – and if at all, how – “nothing” can be imagined or described as existential

experience, continued to be reflected upon from manifold philosophical perspectives.

Although the philosopher Rudolf Carnap was able to demonstrate in his essay on the Elimination of Metaphysics that the assumption of contents to the notion of “the nothing” rests upon a confusion of logical and grammatical structure of terms and sentences, there are nevertheless attempts, which view “nothing” as an entity. Following Richard Rorty, a decision between the two aspects about the “nothing” no longer seems possible, due to diverse vocabulary and basic concepts. Even the natural sciences offer no further orientation. For, unlike the time when the spectacular vacuum pump experiments were conducted and the mere absence of air was understood to be “nothing”, we know today that even a vacuum in outer space is not completely empty. And neither the natural sciences nor mathematics have a concept for the “nothing”. Ever since the so-called model of standard cosmology has asserted itself, relocating the genesis of space and time to the big bang, one can only speculate about a “nothing” behind that. As the properties postulated in the context of the theory of general relativity lose their validity at the approach to the big bang, the notion of the “nothing” in the sense of a “prior to the big bang” are viewed as physically inane. Mathematics, in turn, does indeed have the number zero and the empty set. The “invention” of the number zero and correspondingly of the decimal system can be traced back to the Buddhist concept of the void, *Shunyata* – in Hindi, “zero” is still called *Shunya*² today. But even though the number zero is “not nothing, just as little as the number one is an apple”

and the “empty set is a sort of repository that contains nothing”.³The natural sciences accordingly rather indirectly connect the notion of “nothing” to an absence, inaccessible to the human intellect, of any being (“*Sein*”), thus also of space and time.

At first glance the similarity of description to the perception of the lack of substance of all phenomena in the idea of *Shunyata* may baffle. This is one of the central concepts in Mahayana-Buddhism, to which Zen also belongs, and in Sanskrit signifies approximately void, emptiness or just that, lack of all substance. Derived directly from the Buddhist doctrine of the “non-Self”, it refers to the lack of substance of all phenomena owing to their subjection to the so-called Dependant Arising, the painful chain of reincarnation. “Void” therefore is a circumscription for the absence of a constant being, an innate character and constant “I” in the continuous change of existence. As highest wisdom, to appear only in nonverbal cognition and not to be willingly precipitated, the idea of *Shunyata* likewise includes the identity of *Nirvana* und of *Samsara*, the cycle of reincarnation. The religious historian Mircea Eliade states, indeed in a slightly smug tone, that he can understand it very well, “if a few natural science scholars, thirsting for religion, recently found that the Mahayana can be a valuable model for a better understanding of the paradoxes in modern physics, which will not deal with non-Euclidean geometry systems and multiple space dimensions in the future”.⁴ He even considers the two systems to be “congruent”, albeit only with regard to the principle of the “possible third”, the exclusion of the simple alternative (if A is not correct,

then not-A is) on the side of Buddhism and the abandonment of the Euclidean parallel axiom on the side of natural sciences. While one group devoted itself to “bold speculations”, the others got carried away by “fantastic topologies”. But ultimately a direct comparison of the religious, spiritual, epistemological and physical systems and models can only lead nowhere.⁵ With all disparity there is one issue that all the different concepts of the “nothing” and the “void” have in common. The nothing has no image. Any attempt of a representation has to fail in the paradoxical structure of the very undertaking. Conversely, an image can of course not be nothing, either. The possibilities of art here depend on the determination of its limits. And this is exactly what Michael Müller’s figurations of disappearance attempt to exhaust.

After the major script and drawing projects the artist intensively engaged in during the past years, he is now performing a change of media and, in numerous works of the current exhibition, returning to the sculpture and the installation. Irrespective of the choice of media, the material- and production-aesthetic examinations display the concentration characteristic for Müller’s mode of working. With an intensity known from works such as *Sunfish (Mola mola, Teil I (Mola mola, part I, 2003-2004)*, or *1 m² ins Schwarz hinein (1 sq. m into the Black, 2005)* Müller explores the limits of autopoietic form-formation (*Taking a Bath with Jackson, 2006*, and *Rotes Schwarz (Mental Map) (Red Black (Mental Map), 2005/06)*. Or else, he viscerally retraces and analyses design conventions of machine-made encodings, for

instance the blind printings created for data protection purposes in the postal mailing of PIN numbers (*Brief aus der Schweiz (Letter from Switzerland, 2005)*). *Blackbox (Bienengarten) (Black Box (Bee’s Garden), 2006)* also testifies Müller’s continuing thematic interest in media and techniques of cryptography, encoding and deciphering.

In comparison to earlier series of work, recent ones are however baffling with their very personal, narrative and at times almost anecdotic subjects and motives. Yet, these remain slightly obscured by Müller’s approach, which is often conceptual and hermetic and by the reduced, minimalist aesthetics of his work.

At a distance, *Beifang in 3600 Meter Tiefe (Bycatch 3600 Metres Under the Sea, 2005-2006)*, for instance, is first reminiscent of early minimalist sculptures. A detailed inspection however reveals the installation – despite its formal reduction – to be a vision of almost surrealistic dimensions with the central structure evolving to a sort of adapter for transporting a framed picture of clouds hanging on the wall.

The origin of many of the works are the experiences and travel notes from Müller’s first sojourn in Ladakh in 1993, which often appear as quotations in his text images. At a distance, *Framework (1993/2006)* seems to fulfill the promise of its tautological title: a dark, rectangular frame, mounted lengthwise on the wall, however not framing a picture, but only displaying the view of the bare wall behind – just like the pictorial joke of a negation. The title of the massive object of Indian Impala

Granite thus plays with a two-fold tautology. In the separate reading of the composite words frame and work it unites in itself or it directly declares the frame to be the work, precisely. Only a close-up discloses the chiseled text completely surrounding the inside of the frame and describing Müller's experience of absolute linguistic syncope in Ladakh: "BEGREIFEN IM DENKEN, INSOFFERN VERLOREN AN DIESEM GESCHLOSSENEN ORT" ("Comprehension in cerebration, thus lost in this closed place"). Bearing the inscription, the stone object corresponds to the intrinsic meaning of its English title and the literal translation to German. As the "framing piece" or the "basic structure" it points out the basic limits of communication and of comprehension as well as the question of cognition being linguistically conditioned. The inscription broaches the issue of the painful experience of difference in the midst of an unknown language. It is this "gap devoid of any full meaning", the "delicate shielding" of which provided Roland Barthes a "slight delirium" and the experience of "artificial emptiness" during his tour in Japan.⁶

This feeling of being excluded from language can only be guessed at from the two-piece work *Schmerz* (*Pain*, 2005-2006). Its title and formalistic approach indicate the artist's new biographical drift even more clearly than Framework does. The Tibetan translation of the travel notes, though, distances the intimate subject and closes the narrative density of the one textual image, the counterpart of which displays the pencil drawing of a starry sky full of shooting stars. Without explicitly specifying it, the text refers to the altitude sickness

Müller suffered from during his first trip to the Himalayas. He depicts the experience of a pain, which essentially, just like a person, seeks one out and then leaves again. The fact of the text being printed rather than handwritten formally intensifies this distancing moment of the translation. Müller applied it to the butcher's paper by using a rocking stamp. The black Indian ink is slightly smeared, the blurred application thus creating the material density of the surface characteristic for Müller's drawings. It, however, simultaneously also seems to describe the idea of a lingering pain, the trembling indecision, the substantial essential as well as the (hoped for) elusiveness of its appearance. In this context the lights of the tailed comets of the corresponding sheet also acquire an innate meaning. Although, at first glance, they appear to be lesions of the paper like William Turner's scratchings, they are actually gaps in the almost malleable composition of the lead-grey starry sky. Compared to the other sheet's maltreatment with the broad, dull pressure of the rocking stamp, reminiscent of the perception of dispersed, diffuse numbness, these gaps remind of icy, metallic stabs of pain.

Here, Müller is of course playing with the metaphor of the paper as skin, when he even reverts to the obvious butcher's paper. The sunfish drawings already revealed his interest in skin as a surface and as a border, with Müller not incidentally selecting as motive the animal with the thickest skin among all living beings (15 cm). He was not only interested in the sunfish because it is illuminated in the dark by numerous micro-organisms living on it nor because it has different names in different

languages: It is called bony fish, “moonfish” – “Mondfisch” in German, “poisson lune” in French. He was also interested because of its skin, which is jagged by seagulls and cleaner fish that regularly free its skin from parasites. But different from *Mola mola* Müller here is not concerned primarily with materiality of surfaces or the location of metaphorical borders bringing together this particular biocoenosis. In the picture of pain it rather appears to be meaningful that the paper precisely was not damaged. It is likewise decisive that Müller describes the symptoms of pain as essential but ephemeral appearances and has applied the text using a rocking stamp. This renders the work permeable to the idea of lingering pain and the possibility of release and interpretable in terms of the Buddhist understanding of liberation from suffering and the related idea of self-clinging.

Müller has dedicated many works to the aspect of the transitoriness, to the inconceivability of the fleeting moment. According to Buddhist thought, all existence is as transitory as the beauty of mandalas is. The insight that destruction forms part of the ritual is inherent to the fascination for the creation of these circular ornaments from coloured sand, which once took Müller on his first trip to Ladakh. *Jetzt, Teil 2 (Now, Part 2, 2005-2006)* is the second of a cycle of five intended works concerned with the moment of the ephemeral. While *Jetzt, Teil 4 (Now, Part 4, 2005)* broaches the issue of simultaneity of the non-simultaneous in the image of cloud formations that never would appear together in reality, the current work takes up the phenomenon that any attempt to hold on to the moment in the

process of writing must fail in the very act of doing so – no matter how quickly I manage to write down on paper or type into my computer the word “now”. The fact that the numbering of the works does not correspond to the chronology of their production is part of the preoccupation with the issue. Just like the ephemeral, absence is difficult to comprehend and not easy to endure. Müller obviously regards the double metaphor of a TV test pattern as conclusive in this regard. When first introduced, the purpose of these test pictures was to indicate to the viewers in front of their screens that their TV sets were still operative and that this was merely an intermission. Today, the test picture has all but disappeared, due to nearly incessant programmes on all channels. The artist is also interested in the change of media performed with the first test pictures and a further, almost forgotten function of the test picture: the optimisation of the TV picture adjustments. The test picture that Müller takes up in the drawing *Sendeschluss, 1933 (End of Broadcast, 1933, 2006)* belongs to the optically produced test pictures for which the BBC filmed a drawing. This one of two of the earliest, still known and conserved test pictures is based on the simple “circle and line chart”, with a horizontal line underneath the circle. It might have appealed to Müller for its incidental correspondence to his *K4* script. By grouping *End of Broadcast* with other drawings of letter charts – for instance those used in medical visual tests – and furthermore inscribing well-known quotations from Walter Benjamin and Herbert Marcuse, Müller not only reflects the transience of media and their forms, but also of the change of meaning ascribed to art. The observer may see for him-/herself, just how

Benjamin's relation of art and utopia is out of focus and how to adjust to Marcuse's permanent aesthetic subversion as the function of art.

Two works explicitly feature disappearing in their title: a three-piece installation and a paper work. They also demonstrate how differently disappearing figures in Michael Müller's art. It can be oriented towards the forms of design conventions and conveyed metaphorically on one side and it can be object-based and literal on the other. For the installation Müller proportionally blew up and copied as three-dimensional constructions of black varnished wood the bold black label, which since a few years has been framing the warning signs by the EU Health Ministers on the front, back and sides of each cigarette packet. This information gives access to new directions in the irritating reception-aesthetic play with the empty frame as already described in context with *Framework* above. The black frame can now be interpreted as a limit, set by legal standards between two levels of information. Rather than connecting it to a missing image it can be associated with the reciprocal annihilation of communicative functions or with varying graphic conventions. Müller himself does so, for instance in *Ich habe Angst (I am Scared, 2004–2005)*, with a glance at the discreet mourning border around obituaries. In *Indian Ocean (1993/2005)* he links the memory of an experience of mortal fear to the graphical composition of framed warning signs. He thus highlights that intricate rhetoric of self-reproach ("Had I only known before") typical of psychological, repetitive structures of traumatic experiences.

The frame of Müller's other work titled *Disappearing (UV)* has a completely different function. Proportional to the landscape format and set in the middle, the dark frame looms discreetly on a light-sensitive, pink blotting paper. Here, the sheet had obviously been covered when last exposed to intensive ultraviolet radiation. Now it is foreseeable and arguably only a matter of time, what will soon be detected upon it. This disappearing not only confronts with the effect of the trace of light. Just as the grammatical present tense of the continuous form of the gerund in the title already suggests, this work is concerned with an unconcluded process, with a continuous change of place and condition. The disappearing of the motive is however too slow a process to be immediately observable. But even though we can only indirectly witness the change and no matter if we only register the form at a quick glance as a trace of light or if we follow the change over a span of days or weeks: at the moment of observation, when the sheet is necessarily exposed to the light, we are inevitably involved in the obliteration of the motive.

Artistic strategies broaching the issue of absence in the work or making it disappear in order to reproduce it in another manner, do not necessarily have to be concerned about the paradox of the non-illustratability of the "void" or the "nothing" in the narrow sense. Many of the various attempts at aesthetic absence since modernity however address the role and definition of art (as such or of its institutions) or face up to the relevant question of Marcel Duchamp, whether it is possible to produce works that are not 'art'. Duchamp's

search for an art that is indifferent towards aesthetic categories focussed on this question. Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) testifies that he is also preoccupied with this issue. Rauschenberg attempted, in a month of hard work, to erase a drawing by Willem de Kooning, which the older and already famous colleague had provided him with especially for this project. Rauschenberg inserted the nearly blank sheet into a gilt frame and provided it with a passepartout, which framed the conventional label with the nameplate stating title, author and year below the drawing in a separate gap. In this manner he however not only upgraded his work. With the reference to de Kooning destroyed in the picture, but at the same time explicitly shown in the title, Rauschenberg promoted the framing to the subject of the work of art and in equal measure put the role of the hand-made drawing as well as the authorship for the art production into perspective. The oscillating, ambivalent relationship between recognition and rejection of the abstract expressionism of a de Kooning stood opposite to the distinctly positive reference to Michael Duchamp's idea of the ready-mades. Rauschenberg declared retrospectively that he had attempted "to produce a monochrome non-picture". With regard to the "nearly nothing", Michael Müller's work is surely by far more consistent. Not only will his sheet eventually appear emptier than Rauschenberg's, which ultimately still carries palimpsest-like ink and chalk traces of de Kooning's drawing. Müller in fact abandons the negation of a father figure and even lets the frame disappear. In order to experience silence and absence, framings are needed. The disappearing motive of Müller's sheet refers

to these framings precisely. It is placed in the centre and not, for instance, as the shadow of a real frame on the edge of the sheet. It thus highlights its metaphorical meaning, referring concretely to the work in a tautological relationship to its actual disappearing. The oscillation of the dual interpretation as a character and as a material trace of light is infinite. When the motive will finally have disappeared, the title will assume its assigned meaning, to provide the frame for the faded blotting to be perceived as a work of art. It will then however also have forfeited its (tautological) relationship to the object of the work.

Michael Müller here not only touches on the core of one of the most important problems of traditional aesthetics as identified by Jacques Derrida with respect to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* concerning the problem of the frame. It is precisely the question, what actually constitutes a work of art and what remains at its exterior, the very question, which, according to Derrida, is the fundamental structural characteristic of the aesthetic experience and must remain unanswered. According to "parergonal" logic, framing accessories – for instance the label of a title or the surrounding room – can move to the centre of meaning, but emerge as minor matter in the next moment. All aesthetic experience is generally characterised by this problem.⁷ *Disappearing*, however, notably insists on this problem – like virtually all minimalist and post minimalist art. Unlike the works of the great American minimalists of the 60s, who were explicitly interested in "works without meaning" (Walter de Maria) or precisely in "non-referential" art (Donald Judd), even Müller's objective art

works evince a distinct bias for embeddings referring to contents or to subject. In the context of his recently numerous and at times also biographically motivated adaptations of the subjects of the void and disintegration, of the limits of communication, comprehension and existence, perhaps *Disappearing* can be interpreted as a metaphorical play with the idea of the nothing and *Shunyata*. In this sense the work reveals many aspects as a counterpart to the extended hatching fields and material landscapes of the vast drawing projects of the previous years. This does not only hold true for the obvious, formal aspects of abundance and material substance on one side and of emptiness and insubstantiality on the other side. The production- and reception-aesthetic perspectives regarding the work are reversed in the even more conceptual approach. Müller's sceptical interest in established techniques of picturing in art, science and design, accurately described by Clemens Krümmel as superimposing the physically felt level of cognition on "visceral knowledge", here is directed at the limits of the image and of artistic experience in itself.⁸ Resounding from different directions are diverse pictorial examinations of the necessary abstractness and the spiritual function of the art of Malewitsch's suprematism up to the sublime of the abstract expressionism of the 50s just the same as the various tendencies of dematerialising art at the end of the 60s and in the beginning of the 70s. Facing the nearly inevitable disintegration processes of the motive, spiritual approaches of uninterest and unintent in the interpretation of *Disappearing* as metaphoric play with *Shunyata* are blended with artistic concepts for overcoming aesthetic categories and taste – as Duchamp's "beauty

of indifference" or John Cage's attempts to reduce intentionality in the process of musical formation. The enormous concentration characteristic of Michael Müller's graphic work methods has its counterpart in the observer's concentration, enwrapped in the sheet and in his or her own inner landscapes.

In view of the framings in Müller's exhibition, the association with André Malraux' "imaginary museum" is likewise possible. However, it remains vague. The interest for the dispositif of the exhibition or the museum, for its conventions of assembly, the material conditions of the exhibited picture and the private alternatives, as they were and still are examined in the setting and in the wake of the Institutional Critique, are not in the foreground of Müller's works. *Disappearing* is not a site-specific intervention. The object of the work is rather the material- and reception-aesthetic exploration of the elusive figure of disappearing, its transitory condition and exactly that performative contradiction entered by those wanting to observe the motive and at the same moment handing it over to further obliteration. In the end simply nothing will remain to be seen, and this is by all means only one aspect that is, at least not exclusively, restricted to its ironical message to the market.

- ¹ See Matthias Gatzemeier, „Leere, das“, in: Jürgen Mittelstraß (ed.), *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, Vol. 2, Stuttgart/Weimar 2002 (1995), pg. 560–561, here: 561.
- ² For the influence of Buddhist philosophy of the void (shunyata) on the „invention“ of the number zero and the decimal system see Anonymus, „Shunyata“, <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shunyata> (08/01/2006); for the Buddhist concept of the void: Mircea Eliade/ Ioan P. Culianu, *Handbuch der Religionen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1995, pg. 275, and Byung-Chul Han, „Leere“, in: *Philosophie des Zen-Buddhismus*, Stuttgart 2002, pg. 43–61.
- ³ Anonymus, „Nichts, Null und die leere Menge“, <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nichts> (08/01/2006).
- ⁴ Mircea Eliade/ Ioan P. Culianu, *Handbuch der Religionen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1995, S. 274.
- ⁵ Usually the narrowing of the notions of *Shunyata* and *Nihil* is avoided. The few comparative confrontations of the philosophical insights of Zen-Buddhism and Existentialism include those of the Kyoto doctrine (esp. Nishitani Keiji) or for instance Byung-Chul Han's descriptions of the philosophy of Zen-Buddhism. See Lydia Brüll, „Japanische Philosophie“ in: Jürgen Mittelstraß (ed.), *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, l.c., vol. 3, pg. 190–201, and Byung-Chul Han, *Philosophie des Zen-Buddhismus*, Stuttgart 2002.
- ⁶ Roland Barthes, „Ohne Sprache“, in: the same, *Das Reich der Zeichen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1981, pg. 22–23, here: pg. 22.
- ⁷ This was clarified by Juliane Rebentisch. See Rebentisch, „Die anti-objektivistische Wende – Kunst nach 1960“, in: Lars Blunck (ed.), *Werke im Wandel? Zeitgenössische Kunst zwischen Werk und Wirkung*, München 2005, pg. 23–38, here: pg. 29.
- ⁸ See Clemens Krümmel, „Eine Reise in den Staub, Michael Müllers grafische Tätigkeit“, in: Ausst.kat. Michael Müller; *Im2 ins Schwarz hinein*, ed. by Tobias Vogt, Galerie Ursula Walbröl, Düsseldorf 12. November 2005–14. January 2006, Klagenfurt 2005, pg. 8–13/ 14–19.