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Negative Space

In art, the negative space referred to in the title of this volume describes the space between and around objects that itself can become the object and focus of perception or contemplation. The phenomenon's most common illustration is Rubin's vase.[1] Developed by Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin around 1915, his picture is often also identified as an optical illusion and thereby seems to call for a certain degree of skepticism with regard to perception. Yet the image demonstrates a simple fact: that the figure does not exist without ground and vice versa, and typically we cannot recognize both at the same time. The illustration thus demonstrates the "yin-yang" cliché that posits the united division giving shape to things, rendering them intelligible. However, and perhaps most importantly as a shorthand framework for this reader, Rubin's vase describes a relationship, a correlation, a necessary interrelation of inside and outside: the face as subject, the vase as object. While both person and vessel have an inside and outside in themselves, they

1. "Rubin vase," Wikipedia, last modified February 7, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubin_vase. See Fig. 21 on page 14 of this publication.

are also inside and outside to each other, conveying that much depends on perspective and the ability to understand (spatial) relationships.

Setting aside Rubin's diagram, what does the term "negative" conjure? Nothing, blackness, something "bad"?[2] While imbued with attributes that on the surface read as, well, negative, "nothing"—as soon as it is named—becomes something. Furthermore, blackness does not just recall existentialist *angst*, but also inspires awe, as does the infinite night sky. Possibly because negative space—in the sense of blackness and emptiness—is so abstract and yet so powerfully present, so affectively charged, metaphors attempting to articulate it abound. Particularly evocative realia are the black mirror (or Claude glass) and the already mentioned image of the night sky. Both suggest a profound infinity that is empty, but could just as well read as full of potential. It is the very impenetrability of their blackness that acts as a screen onto which might be projected all manner of ideas, desires, fears, and even whole worlds. The fact that we also see ourselves reflected in them, either literally or by way of astrological symbolism and scientific prowess, makes them even more eloquent.

The first known black mirrors, crafted from obsidian, emerged in pre-Columbian, Meso-American cultures as symbolic objects. The so-called smoking mirror "had two sides, allowing one to see and be seen. It was thus a symbol of knowledge and of the union of opposites."[3] In late nineteenth- and

2. Of course, and as Daniel Colucciello Barber also points out in our conversation in this volume, the colour black has, in its role as the counterpart to white, been mobilized precisely to formulate and enact some of the most enduring, brutal, and debilitating distinctions between inside and outside (of education, privilege, etc.), establishing not mere division, but hierarchy.
3. Arnaud Maillet, The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 53.

early twentieth-century Europe, black mirrors were employed to conjure spirits as part of then-widespread occult practices. However, it was two centuries prior that the device reached its height of popularity in Europe. Named after its Western "inventor," Claude Lorrain, a seventeenth-century landscape painter, the Claude glass was a proto-photographic artist's aid. It was used primarily during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by painters of the picturesque, or pastoral, landscape tradition. The device consisted of a slightly convex mirror, usually made from black glass or obsidian. Its purpose was to provide an image of the landscape "cleansed" of excessive detail, colour, and contrast, as tonal integration was then considered crucial to a "pleasing" image. Effectively already framed, the artist would use the somewhat abstracted reflection to transform an actual vista into a picturesque landscape painting. Significantly, the Claude glass requires turning one's back onto the world to see it reflected. Today, it appears as though the Claude glass has returned to an urban landscape in the guise of handheld devices with their black reflective screens when in sleep mode. The contemporary sight of people gazing intently onto the screens of their smartphones or tablets signals perhaps a similar turning away from lived reality and toward representation, rendering the boundaries between inner and outer world difficult to discern. Is the person looking at the small screen "in their own little world," or in a world that is much more expansive than the physical space they presently find themselves in?

A similarly practical and symbolic locative motif surrounds the examination of the firmament. Nicolaus Copernicus's assertion that this universe is heliocentric may have literally lit up a darkness, signalled an Enlightenment triumph of reason

over superstition. Yet astrology (the telling of fortunes based on the position of the stars) and astronomy (the mathematical analysis of the position and movements of the heavenly bodies) were, during Copernicus's lifetime, generally considered one and the same discipline. Historically, astronomy and astrology share a close connection to myth, with their images of animals, gods, and objects—ranging from chisels, cups, and harps to microscopes and pendulum clocks—superimposed on a chaos of stars illuminating the night sky. Even serious contemporary astronomical research, such as that undertaken by NASA, is often suffused by desirous imagination. Naming an otherwise insignificant, potato-shaped asteroid, roughly thirty-four kilometers in length "433 Eros" and then enlisting the public to help assign each of the asteroid's craters the name of a lover from history, mythology, or fiction, may give an indication that even hard science is fuelled by the need to relate, not just to know.

"Cosmos" paradoxically describes both the chaos of an infinite universe *and* its ordering. In our respective conversations as part of this book, Ana Teixeira Pinto and Lisa Robertson both touch upon the central role that geometry plays in ideas about this cosmic order. Pythagoras is thought to first have applied the term *Kosmos* (to order, orderly arrangement) to the universe, and he is also credited with having first developed the notion of the Harmony of the Spheres. Having discovered that the pitch of a musical note is proportional to the length of the string that produces it, Pythagoras suggested that each heavenly body emits its own "orbital resonance" based on their mutual proportional relationship in space. And while perhaps fanciful from today's perspective, his idea was not entirely without substance. According to scientific

research, the Big Bang—still widely considered the origin of our universe—created a shockwave that now registers as cosmic microwave background radiation. Vastly simplified, the Big Bang's effect could be imagined similar to that of a rock being thrown into water. Waves radiate outward as time passes and waves become longer over time and distance. On a sound spectrum, this means that the tone produced by sound waves becomes lower in pitch and amplitude over time and the further they radiate out from the point of origin. In the case of the Big Bang, the initial waves created later transformed into variations in energy levels that can still be measured today. If humans wanted to listen to the universe today, this waveform variation in energy would have to be amplified one-hundred-septillion times. The sound of the universe is currently a B flat fifty-seven octaves below middle C.[4] Pythagoras's notion of a fundamental harmony—and above all, logic—structuring not only the physical world, but the world of sounds and moods was further elaborated in Plato's theories of the ideal Platonic solids, geometrical shapes that were each assigned an element and a humour. Johannes Kepler further developed the ancient Greek model by assigning each of the Platonic solids to one of the then-known planets and their orbits. His model of the universe consisting of nested polyhedrons demonstrates his conviction that it would be possible to uncover something like a divine plan of the cosmos.

While the conversations in this book rarely address astronomy and astrology directly, the invocation of the black

4. In the fall of 2014, SFU Gallery presented my performance work Sounding the Universe, involving six cellists and contra-bassists. In the performance, the chamber ensemble played a drone based on this sound of the Big Bang, consisting of a B flat transposed into the spectrum audible by humans.

infinity of space—negative space—nevertheless raises a number of questions: What does inside and outside mean in terms of perception? What are the affective correlatives of a negative space? How do we relate? And how do we articulate these relationships? Such questions have been the subject of philosophy, science, and art for eons, and these disciplines have each devised a panoply of methods, techniques, and tools geared toward somehow corralling and subduing an awe-inspiring nothingness. Those means intended to manage something quite incomprehensible are fascinating records and evidence of the way humans *are* in the world.

Clearly, the expanse of the topic I'm attempting to circumscribe here is ridiculously vast, and not only that, it is abstract. What to do if one still wants to engage it? The answer was to pick a few questions or phenomena that in their, often historical, concreteness allow at least an approach—certainly without claiming to be exhaustive and often relying on serendipity.

Begun in tandem with a body of work I first presented at SFU Gallery in the fall of 2014, this publication fed off casual or sustained dialogues with friends and colleagues, passages of their writing, or a long past, yet well remembered, lecture. The conversations attempt to capture some of the essence of these inspirations, and their tenor thus straddles a place somewhere between serious academic discourse and much more casual exchanges. They transformed my view onto a topic that I myself proposed. How I eventually framed the scope of this book and the many insights I have gained, I owe to my interlocutors.

Obviously, I approached my conversation partners because I deeply respect their point of view, their expertise, and their respective ways of considering what, in many instances, lies at the very core of their own practices. The fact that they agreed

to talk with me is proof of a certain recklessness: the conversational form, while often considered "easier" (i.e., less work) than the essay, is also less predictable and certainly less controllable. Conversations have a dynamic of their own; synergies and flights of fancy might lead to interesting ideas, or sometimes just to dead ends. Even if carefully framed and tightly focused, the questioner sometimes derails lines of arguments and sometimes states the obvious. Yet relieved from the obligation to answer their own questions, as in an essay format, the discussants occasionally will stumble upon new territory and dare to speculate in productive ways. (The German term "Querulant"—obviously related to the identical Latin root of *quaere*, "to ask, inquire," as the English "query"—describes a troublemaker.) The conversational form is more closely related to a studio practice, where proceeding axiomatically, questioningly, but subtended by trust and affect, delivers results quite distinct from a text intended to offer an author's singular, apodictic conviction. It is in its nature provisional. Intrinsic to the conversational form and absolutely required to tackle the topic at hand is therefore a heuristic approach and preliminary models.

Calling upon the notion of the black night and empty space, we often think of cosmologies as such models, and yet, cosmology actually means "the study of the world"—in other words, a cosmology is not a thing, it is a process. And what is this process other than the currently much-touted speculation? Yet in today's discussions about and by means of speculation, it seems to often get overlooked that the word originates from Latin *speculari*, to observe, and *specere*, to look at, to view. In the fourteenth century, the word began to indicate intelligent contemplation, and only from the late sixteenth century did it

connote the idea of mere conjecture. The buying and selling in the pursuit of profit relative to changing market value is first recorded from the late eighteenth century.[5] Related to the term scope,[6] this evolution in the meaning of the word speculation alone indicates a move from an activity closely related to sense experience—"intelligent contemplation"—to a conjuring with one's mind, a looking inward—"mere conjecture."

The relationship of the term to economic activity (i.e., speculation on the ups and downs of the market) seems to take on a cynical flavour were we to align it with this "mere conjecture," since it could suggest the quasi-fraudulent generation of surplus value through a re-packaging of the previously existent, potentially worthless. However, I propose another reading: economic transaction involving a process of abstraction is mirrored by the abstraction of perception, the transference of electrochemical signals into "meaning."

This evolution in the signification of the word speculation was likely an effect of the fact that through the centuries, the philosophical probing of sensorial input, perception, and contemplation itself, but also the scientific and technological advances that permitted looking much further outward, as well as much further inward (for example, at microscopic levels into the body), developed immensely. The emergence of technologies, perhaps particularly visual ones such as the camera, allowed those with political or economic interests as well as

5. "Speculation," Online Etymological Dictionary, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.etymonline.com.
6. Scope in turn refers to "extent," or "room to act." The word describes an "aim, target, object of attention; watcher, one who watches" as well as signifying instruments for viewing, such as the telescope, microscope, etc., and it appears as a different kind of "viewing device" in the horoscope. Online Etymological Dictionary, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.etymonline.com.

those in pursuit of leisure to lay claim to territory and time in previously unknown ways, creating immediate material facts and determining economic conditions. It is easy to forget that what today allows Google Maps and Google Earth to make space virtually accessible and economically exploitable, for example, through the dynamic mapping of services and resources, would not have been possible without the invention of that cumbersome device consisting of a wooden box requiring the subject-to-be-pictured to hold still for extended periods of time. The attendant habituation and acculturation of the perception of space, the very idea of inner and outer space, as well as their distinction, was rendered much more complex and also seeded new aesthetic regimes. As Jonathan Crary so poignantly asks, "How is the body, including the observing body, becoming a component of new machines, economies, apparatuses, whether social, libidinal, or technological? In what ways is subjectivity becoming a precarious condition of interface between rationalized systems of exchange and networks of information?"[7]

Again, relationality, interface, and medium become the focus. When we speak of "medium" we often mean technology that seems to carry the promise of ever-improving fidelity to what "actually" is. And yet, this fidelity is of secondary importance. More crucial, regardless of quantity or quality, is how knowledge is sorted and arrayed. As Olaf Nicolai and Wolfgang Winkler point out in our respective conversations, how we are able to perceive is determined by a dynamic cosmos that continually sorts, arranges, inflects, and evaluates input. The subject will not arise without the object, and

7. Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 2.

as such it is, paradoxically, the medium through which something is conveyed, its receptor, and object. In its dynamism, this transformation of "nothing" into "something" is a continuous process, accomplished by a *zoon politikon*. In his essay "The Distribution of the Sensible," Jacques Rancière posits this dynamic as a political and aesthetic process, subject to various regimes—by which Rancière describes ways of doing and making, the manner in which things emerge correspondingly as visible, and how these are conceptualized and ultimately structure society.[8]

This book begins with a conversation with Daniel Colucciello Barber, who, departing from current philosophical trends, specifically speculative realism, traces the trajectory of a philosophical tradition based on a narrative of overcoming and progression, paralleling a Christian logic of redemption. Calling upon Gilles Deleuze's and François Laruelle's writings, he probes notions of negativity and division. "Nothing," even though perhaps an undivided negative, has a certain romanticism attached to it: "nothing" is ostensibly free from power dynamics, rules, and constraints. In being "nothing," it appears to be uncontaminated. The modern creative genius supposedly generated "original" creations *ex nihilo*. This "nothing" points to that epitome of aesthetic experience: the sublime. The awe-inspiring, yet fecund abyss that opens within and without has consistently mobilized philosophical thought, and Arthur Schopenhauer cites the immensity of the universe as emblematic of what induces the fullest feeling of the sublime. Laruelle, on the other hand, mobilizes the image of blackness and the infinite universe as a metaphor for his notion of

8. Jacques Rancière, "The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics," The Politics of Aesthetics, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

Non-philosophy.[9] In his lyrical text, Laruelle unfurls his images of the black universe, opening an imaginary that insists on its own particular agency.

In a deft gesture, Lisa Robertson opens a semantic field between abstract forms, such as the ellipse and the polyhedron, and the research of historical figures, such as Aby Warburg and Johannes Kepler. Both thinkers sought to understand and describe the world by way of cosmologies. In our conversation, Robertson sketches out a cosmology of her own that stages and discards explanatory models by way of a speculative cognition. Ana Teixeira Pinto recalls in our exchange that "mind" originally meant the capacity to recognize patterns. Reviewing the moment when mathematics and philosophy, as systems to conceptualize the world, were still one and the same discipline, Pinto insists that any attempt to answer philosophical questions through mathematics is a fraught ideological enterprise. Probing the ideologies surrounding leisure and individual autonomy, Theodor W. Adorno's text, "Free Time," first published in 1969, departs from the observation that free time only exists in relation to its opposite—unfree time (i.e., time spent as labour under the conditions of capital). The text speculates—both clearly out-of-time and yet still surprisingly pertinent—whether the individual is capable of recognizing and critiquing its own submersion in a dominant heteronomy.

Boredom might appear as a failure to connect with the world, its impulses and necessities, as well as its charms, while nevertheless, the subject is fully aware of the world, caught in an affective no man's land. My conversation with Lorna Brown

9. See also Daniel Colucciello Barber, Alexander Galloway, Nicola Masciandaro, and Eugene Thacker, Dark Nights of the Universe (Novo Pan Klub Series) (Miami: [NAME] Publications, 2013).

looks at the historic emergence of boredom as a phenomenon, its evaluation, and its potential as a seedbed for critique. Emotional states are a core concern of psychoanalysis, and Wolfgang Winkler traces the shifting models that psychoanalysis has built in an attempt to understand the dynamics through which the self constitutes itself and delineates its "inner space" against an "outer." The "discovery" of the unconscious marked the inception of psychoanalysis as a science now more than a century ago. As a practice, it shares with art a methodology that reveals the object of one's attention through repetitive circumnavigation. Strategies of delay, circumscription, and deflection regarding the central object of attention play a central role in Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (1946–66), a work that the artist prepared in the inner sanctum of a secret studio for more than twenty years. Elena Filipovic and I depart from this specific example to discuss more generally what I term the inside and outside of artistic practice, with the studio and the gallery respectively marking such localization. Considering the celestographs of Swedish artist and playwright August Strindberg, Olaf Nicolai proposes that Strindberg inadvertently raised the problem of the medium.[10] Different from a concept of the medium as a mere conduit that at most inflects and at worst degrades a transmission, our conversation develops the perplexing reciprocity between viewer and viewed.

What looks back at us when we look out into the night sky? The recognition that, aside from what we know, we can only see what is foreign to us—in other words, something we know

10. Olaf Nicolai, "The Most Beautiful Sweater in the World" in Cerith Wyn Evans: The What If?... Scenario (after LG), eds. Eva Wilson and Daniela Zyman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).

as an unknown—is both fascinating and tiringly esoteric. It is a riddle that in abstraction seems banal, yet in its particular manifestations can develop a powerful dynamic: a riddle must always begin with a question, setting the stage for things to unfold, and so a conversation begins.