

THE VALUE OF NOTHING

Anna McMahon

I have a clearly preserved memory of the first time I really contemplated nothing. Having just listened to Ladytron's single Playgirl I had a discussion with a friend about the meaning of a specific lyric. My friend explained that rather than searching for meaning in the lyric, that perhaps the intention was that it didn't mean anything and that the value of the lyric was that it explained a very simple idea, a single thought – nothing. That moment of discovery was crisp. It was unclouded by thought, it wasn't trying to mean something specific, there was no code, it was just what it was.

The idea of nothing or nothingness has appeared in philosophical considerations since Parmenides proposed in the 5th Century BC that nothing did not exist. Parmenides suggested that if you were able to speak of a thing, it was something that existed.¹ Aristotle went on to develop Parmenides logical problem to the point where he concluded that nothing did exist when viewed in the context of matter and space.² In this context space was not nothing, but was a vessel in which matter could be placed, and matter could be constituted as nothing. In 1943 Jean-Paul Sartre in his text Being and Nothingness proposes that there are two kinds of being, one is the physical existence of things, and the second is consciousness.³ Sartre suggests that consciousness can be 'nothing' as it cannot be an object of itself and it does not possess essence.

The idea that a single thought, a clean and plain intention or action could constitute the conceptual premise for an artwork isn't something that is particularly new. Martin Creed's *Work No. 227: The light going on and off*, was the 2001 winner of the Turner Art Prize. The work, was as the title suggests a light going on for 5 seconds, and then going off for 5 seconds, each phase denying the next. By controlling the light in the gallery space Creed controls the viewers own visibility in the gallery context, redirecting the gaze and attention to the gallery walls. The central theme running through Creed's art is characterised by a sense of witty anti-materialism. In another work *Work No. 143* (2000), Creed presented the equation 'the whole world + the work = the whole world' in blue neon on the façade of the Tate Britain. Exploring the boundaries and intersections between art and life this equation questions the necessity of art, and suggests that perhaps art doesn't add anything to society, that art equates to nothing.⁴

When I Google the term 'nothing' the first hit I get is the wiki meaning – 'nothing is a pronoun denoting the absence of anything. Nothing is a pronoun associated with nothingness. In nontechnical uses, nothing denotes things lacking importance, interest, value, relevance, or significance.' Instantly the word that describes a lack of something, is imbued with meaning. In the context of the contemporary society, our lives lived through a pseudo personality and consciousness online, we are constantly dealing with nothing in an everyday. The projected image of ourselves, the way in which we live through the internet means that we interact with our contemporary nothingness on an daily basis.

Responding to the idea of nothing, the artists in this exhibition have made work which responds to these positions. In her work *Everything you do will come around again* (2014), Kate Beckingham serves the audience spring water from the Olfus Spring in Iceland. Having recently returned from a residency in Iceland, Beckingham intends to recreates the simple, daily act of drinking water as both a social gesture and physical phenomenon. Via the everyday act of drinking the water, the audience absorbs minerals from an Icelandic glacial spring as they stand in a gallery in Toowoomba, Australia. Likewise, Lucas Davidson's *It's in your hands* (2014) plays with the nothingness of light as it is refracted and moves through water. Created in the studio using white light and water Davidson has generated a work that doesn't focus on anything in particular except for ever-changing light waves. His intention is to highlight how quickly the brain creates value from things that don't necessarily have meaning.

The work *Visitors Book* (2014) by Carla Liesch documents the visitors to the exhibition and asks the audience to share their thoughts and reflections on the exhibition experience, recording their time within the space. The records documented in the visitor's book ultimately leave a trace and documentation behind for those who come after. In *White Squares* (2014), Hayley Megan French has created as a response to a collaborative work Abstract Narratives made with Stephanie Bridget Quirk in 2011. White Squares offers for its viewers a stack of hand cut raw canvas, painted titanium white sitting on top of a plinth. The core element of this work centered on minimalist arrangement asks the audience to consider the affect of painting, ideas of framing and their relationship with the work through different scale and format.

Luke Strevens, *Breakfast* (2014) was created to bring into light quite literally the idea of 'Breaking the Fast'. This installation work documents the everyday action of eating breakfast, something intrinsic to our species very survival. It was important for Strevens that he explore this everyday morning ritual through the lens of basic human, intending to highlight how such a simple act can have a large impact on our longevity and proliferation as humans. In his work *Gallery Closed* (2014), Ron Adams has created a painting that like Creed questions the position of the gallery and the artwork within it. By creating a sign that not only declares the gallery closed, but also represents a stopped clock, Adam's simulates through his painting everyday signage and objects. The nothingness of this sign and this copying of reality, coupled with its obvious contradiction lead to questions of context and space.

So what does this all mean in relation to art and to the presentation of ideas? While in the process of researching nothing I have learnt that nothing can mean a lack of importance, it can bring about life balance, it can lead to failure, and it can be a gift. In the context of contemporary life, it seems that nothing is also quite open for interpretation and implementation. That artwork created around this core idea, in its very ordinary distinctiveness, can result in output of more than ordinary significance. This is the moment when we see that nothing as a conceptual premise can potentially mean everything.

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¹ Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 50-51.

² Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione* / Translated with Notes by J.L. Ackrill (1966).

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, University Paperbacks (London: Methuen, 1969).

⁴ Tate Britain, "Turner Prize 2001 Artists: Martin Creed," <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/turner-prize-2001/turner-prize-2001-shortlisted-artists/turner-0>.