

Anthony Bond

IMAGINING THE VOID

From the earliest times humans have lifted their eye to the horizon where the knowable world ends and the void begins. The Earth beneath their feet however has provided a shelter from the vastness of the void. The uniquely vertical figure of a human defying gravity is at once an image of great vulnerability and a pointer to the heavens.

Thus the metaphors associated with “lift your eyes to the hills” and the great beyond or casting the eye down to “the rock of ages cleft for me” span the extremes of human experience from imagining the infinite journey to seeking security in the womb. The horizon is the point of disappearance at the outer limit of human sensibility. Combining this existential fact with the symbolic boundary of material earth and immaterial heavens ensures that it is always strongly identified with the undifferentiated absolute.

It is surprising how often art seeks to represent these ideas directly or indirectly. On the one hand there is the material earth, (from mater or mother) and on the other infinity, immaterial space and the void. In order to see how this works in practice I will look at how painting that is matter in the form of mineral rock (pigment) might function as a portal onto the immaterial. In his book **Courbet's Realism** Michael Fried describes the possibility of a viewer becoming absorbed in a painting to the point that a quasi-corporeal merger takes place. Fried is mostly interested in the way artists use iconography to achieve this but it is also possible to see how the material properties of an artwork might assist the viewer to enter the image imaginatively or even to have a corporeal experience of its apparent space. This experience may also be thought of as a passage from the material world that is accessible to our senses to the immaterial world that can only be imagined or as we will, see from consciousness to unconsciousness, where the permeable membrane of the painted surface acts like an event horizon that may open onto the void. The horizon in this case is rotated to become the pictorial plane.

For example, although the painted surface may be represented as a transparent window onto the world, it may also include literally transparent or broken brush work that reveals layers below and invites kinaesthetic penetration. When discussing Courbet's painting technique, Baudelaire and Michael Fried both suggest that placing emphasis on the surface and on the hand of the artist seems to deny transparency in terms of mimetic illusionism; we are constantly made aware of the painted surface and thus denied the fiction of the frame as a

window. I am going to suggest that imaginative and sensory absorption depends on this paradoxical situation where the surface appears as a veil between representation and the world. The transparency of this veil is invoked through our engagement with the materiality of the surface and the fact that the image conveyed by "the rough method" must always be completed in the imagination of the beholder. Hence the image is at once more present and yet forever illusive.

Many artists investigate the boundary between mind and matter that metaphorically replicates this veil. We are material beings and our consciousness arises from the clay and yet our minds seem to us to be free of material constraint. However our perception and understanding of the real is always contingent and partial; knowledge lies alongside the world more or less closely but it can never be equivalent to the thing itself. The nature of this separation between consciousness and its objects may also be thought of as a fragile membrane that occasionally parts to give us an illusionary sensation of having seen things as they really are — an epiphany perhaps. The painted surface sometimes mimics this theoretical membrane.

The experience of separation between consciousness and its objects may be experienced as a loss. Repairing this loss has, I suspect, consciously or intuitively driven many of the developments of modern art. Frank Auerbach, for example, claimed that it was first necessary for him as a painter to become the thing in order to be able to make its sensation in paint.

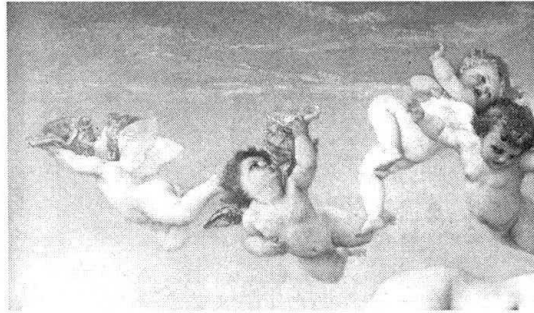
"What one hopes to do is somehow become the subject, and out of that identification to make a vivid memorial."

This transference to the inanimate implies a moment of occlusion or loss of consciousness that is in some way commensurate with the experience of absorption on the part of the viewer.

Auerbach emphasizes the materiality of the paint leaving every brush mark as a trace of the artist's body in front of the canvas. The viewer then experiences the mark that captures the artist's response to the subject and therefore may be thought of as coming very close to the act and the original experience. The mark may be frozen in time but it is a means by which the viewer may be transported to that moment. This way of thinking about an authentic experience of painting has been in circulation since the Renaissance. While this insistence on the surface and the emphasis on its facture might seem to work against the illusion of a window onto space beyond — I want to suggest that perversely it actually permits absorption kinesthetically and is more powerful than a purely illusionist image in which visual and intellectual projection might occur but affective participation is denied.

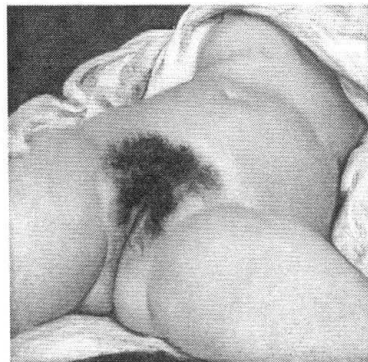
The intimacy engendered by artists from Courbet and Monet in the 19th century to Lucien Freud today is supported by brushwork that metaphorically and literally opens the figure for our engagement. Comparing the brushwork of these artists with Courbet's academic contemporaries dramatically illustrates this difference.

Alexandre Cabanel is typical of the salon style in Courbet's time, he not only projected his subjects into an exotic scenario, but he also brushed away any trace of his hand and the medium. It is as if he wishes to distance himself from the voyeurism facilitated by his art. While Courbet's painting of flesh is full of texture, broken colour and human incident the academic artist painted virtual monochrome skin removing every blemish and blush to create a smooth tonal modelling not unlike a Barbie doll. His painting is not realism but illusionism, a distinction that I hope becomes apparent as we look at works that I would characterise as realist in this context.



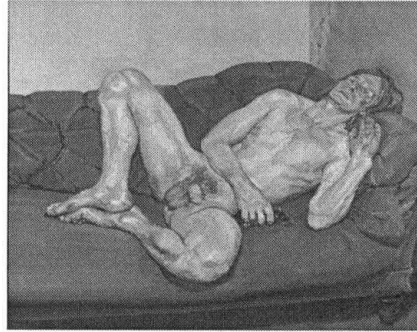
(photo of Alexandre Cabanel *Birth of Venus* 1863)

By contrast Courbet's paint seeks a material equivalence with flesh, water and stone. You could say Courbet evokes eidetic memory rather than the textual or semantic memory provided by visual illusion. The academic painters by contrast distance themselves from the flesh and blood world, allowing the voyeuristic viewer aesthetiscised fantasies of otherwise repressed subjects of lust and violence. I include this somewhat controversial example of Courbet's figure painting, *L'Origine du Monde* not just as an example of his paint handling which we will come back to but also because it anchors the idea of passage in a metaphor of the creative/productive body and associates this with the material world. This paper attempts to envision the void from within the world rather than as a purely immaterial imaginary. We will look at Anish Kapoor later as a contemporary manifestation of this approach.



(photo of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde* 1866)

Like Courbet and Auerbach, Freud gives us paint that insists on its own materiality: his brush marks almost seem to contradict the illusion of form. Experiencing the tactility of the Realist works, in contrast to the salon images, entails a full sensory engagement because in tracing the form, the viewer's eye follows the gesture of the artist. This is a process that brings the viewer very close to the artist and to the subject matter. In a way it is as if the viewer recreates the moment of production with



(photo of Lucien Freud's *Naked man with a rat* 1977)

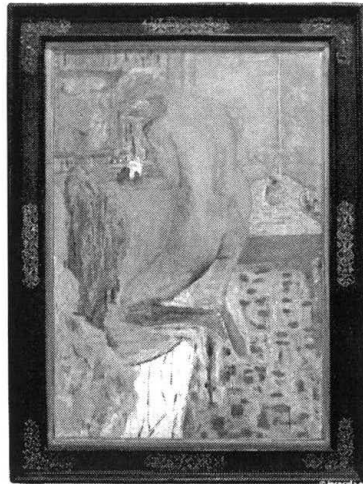
each glance. By replacing the objectifying and distancing conventions of academic painting with an emphasis on sensory and emotional engagement, certain works weaken the boundary between art and life.

Everyone will at one time or another have stood in front of one of Monet's waterlily paintings. Monet's loose brushwork in the late waterlily paintings from Giverny exemplifies the dual experience of surface and space. The openness of the layered brushwork is literally transparent although the many layers of colour make the surface quite crusted and materially assertive. In some of Monet's greatest paintings at the Orangerie and in Museum of Modern Art in New York the large scale of the paintings extends the surface beyond our cone of vision and this allied to the loss of horizon and ground sets us adrift in space. In order to see the whole work we must move our head or even our entire body as if we were in a landscape rather than looking at a framed image of one. This movement enhances our kinaesthetic experience of the work. Monet's marks resolve and dissolve into form as we move our gaze across the surface; they might simultaneously represent ripples in the water, reflected light and objects floating on the surface. At the same time they present us with a kind of veil through which we can imaginatively project.

Peter Fuller, in his discussion of paintings by Robert Natkin, invoked D.W. Winnicott's theories in which the painted surface is identified with a security blanket that allows the weaned child to maintain some tactile contact with the undifferentiated/oceanic world from which it has been ejected, I would suggest that this memory might be considered a precursor to our engagement with the void as the other to the material world. Winnicott suggests that like the security blanket the painted surface might act as an intermediary between internal and external. The painted surface is also associated with the metaphor of the veil that conceals yet reveals or, in the case of Veronica's veil, carries a trace or index of the subject it once covered. The significance of this veil is that it connects us

to the infinite and paradoxically describes a very practical mismatch between the material limit of things and the potentially unbounded nature of thoughts. Associating it with our embodied recollection of the trauma of weaning may give an added sense of urgency to our contemplation of it.

Bonnard is another artist who invites us to imaginatively project into the pictorial space. **Nu de Dos à la Toilette**, 1934 depicts his wife Marthe de Mélny in the privacy of their home. The brushwork is open, his loose dry strokes always transparent to our eye. For example the openness of the painted surface makes the flesh glow with an inner light. Not only is the surface open but also the boundary of the figure is very softly defined. The back of the figure virtually merges with the brightly lit wall behind her. Our visual comprehension of the figure is only possible when it is seen as a whole with the rest of the composition. If you were to isolate any portion of the figure it would become unreadable. By opening the figure to the passage of light and dissolving figure — ground distinctions Bonnard parallels aspects of Analytic Cubism. Like Picasso, Bonnard makes the figure merge with the painted field. The figure is quite literally opened up for our gaze.

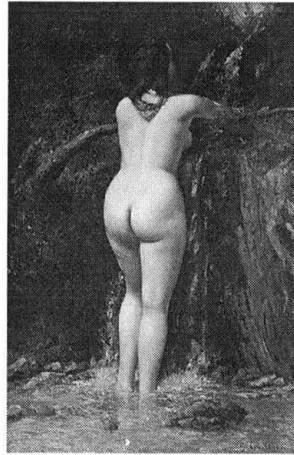


(photo of Bonnard *Nu de dos à la toilette* 1934)

The transparency that Bonnard creates by his use of paint seems largely intuitive even innocent. However other artists have gone to some lengths to construct allegories about absorption and to work with metaphors that associate nature and culture and the artistic transformation of matter into mind or spirit. Courbet's **La Source** from the Metropolitan museum is particularly relevant to this narrative. Here the model is pressed up against the waterfall, her arm moving through the surface as if she is about to slide through "Alice's mirror" or the veil. Her dark hair is already blending with the shadowy trees beyond. The woman faces away from us and in a sense is the first beholder of the scene and so she leads us into the landscape.

The luxurious paint that Courbet always applied for water, lubricates the implied merger of her figure with the landscape. Courbet mixed varnish and other thinners into his oils to make the paint more transparent and also more liquid. Applied with a palette knife this produced a fluid, buttery texture.

The drier brush marks that make up the figure enhance this lubricity by contrast. Courbet is not just absorbing the woman into the water and the land itself, he is equally drawing the viewer into an imaginative penetration, not of the woman as Linda Nochlin suggests but of the veil of representation that separates art from life. (Nochlin's critique of Michael Freid's analysis in her catalogue essay for the exhibition **Courbet Reconsidered** at the Brooklyn Museum 1988)



(photo of Gustave Courbet's *La Source* 1862
from the Metropolitan Museum)

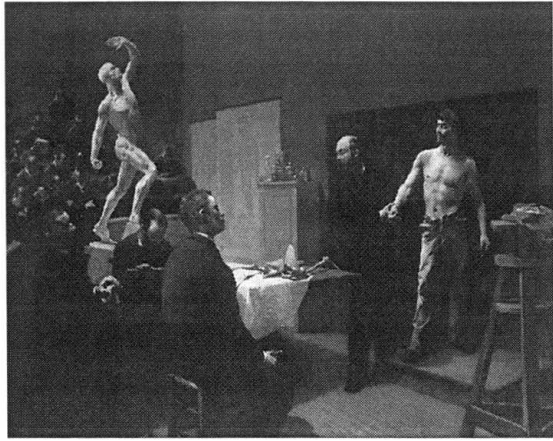
This tiny and atypical painting by Edward Hopper returns us to the main theme of passage or absorption. The intimate subject matter, the dark tonality and the broad-brush work are more typical of a study by Rembrandt. Hopper has brought the figure very close to the picture plane. The figure faces the same way as the viewer and moves into the space of the painting. This proximity to the viewer and the insistent quality of the painted surface makes for a strong kinaesthetic bond between the figure and the viewer.



(photo of Edward Hopper
Nude crawling into a bed 1903)

The room is divided by the play of light and shade, creating a screen of illumination parallel to the picture plane (and metaphorically reproducing it). The figure of a woman moves through this screen. Her buttocks and legs are brightly illuminated as is the near edge of the bed but all beyond is dark and mysterious. The woman passes into the dark recesses of the bed and the space beyond. This implied movement from the illuminated surface into the veiled interior evokes a movement from consciousness into unconsciousness or simply sleep. Because of the strong visual association between the viewer and the figure there is also an implied sense of embodiment or merger on the part of the viewer.

François Sallé's, ***The Anatomy Class at the École des Beaux Arts*** (1888) depicts a half naked male model being examined as if he were a piece of flesh. His sturdy muscled torso and rough trousers attest to his lower class status thus rendering him available for objectification by the gentlemen at the academy. The student in the foreground stares at the model with no hint of embarrassment. It was as if the man did not exist as a subject in his own right. His shirt is thrown over the stand and his trousers are already unfastened, it is as if he is being exposed bit by bit for the student's



(Francois Salle's *The anatomy Class at the École des Beaux Arts* 1888)

information. The uncovering process seems to be imaginatively extended by the juxtaposition of the flayed figure and the bones of the shoulder that Duval is demonstrating.

The man himself has his eyes closed. He is removing himself from the possibility of meeting the intrusive gaze of the students. He has withdrawn into himself, into a state of reverie perhaps. The blackboard that is behind them frames the figures of the doctor and the model. It is of course a literal depiction of the Academy as it still is today but the coincidence of the man's reverie and the black space behind him is striking. While Duval the anatomy lecturer leans out towards the students and the theatre lighting illuminates his baldpate, the model leans back, his dark hair merging with the black field. It seems that Duval's consciousness is deliberately invoked while it is the model's body that is emphasised while the blackboard appears as the void into which the model withdraws. Anecdotally I have had the experience of standing naked in front of an attentive crowd when I worked as an artist's model in the early 1960s. It was always necessary to find some degree of separation between your inner self and the gaze of others. I met many colleagues who practiced meditation and trance induction in order to get through the day.

While there is no direct evidence that Salle was in a position to make these connections about consciousness and absorption there is circumstantial information that demonstrates that the topic was in circulation at the time. For example an oblique connection to this discourse of consciousness lies in the

fact that we know Duval to have been an admirer and colleague of Dr Charcot and attended his public demonstrations of hysterical behaviour at the clinic in Saltpetrière. Here Charcot induced fainting and other extreme behaviour in women that he hired from the street or called on from the hospital wards. States of consciousness were the subject of much fascinated speculation in the mid 19th century.

The blackboard in Sallé's painting may also be taken as a metaphor for the same kind of occlusion that Michael Fried suggests Courbet is representing in the interior of the tarare or sifting machine shown in his painting of **The Grain Sifters**. The young boy peers into its interior which acts like a hole through the canvas into the void beyond the pictured space. In this painting Courbet also seems to be identifying artistic creation with feminine procreation.



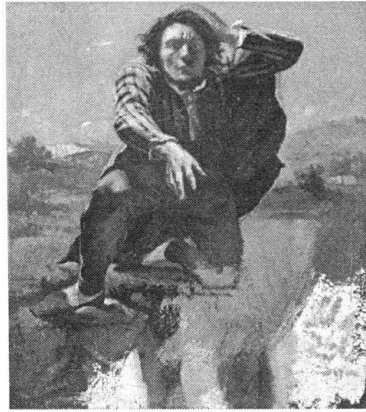
(photo of Gustave Courbet's *Grain Sifters* 1854)

For this reason Michael Fried sees this as an allegory about painting. The figure of the robust female sifter casts the red grain onto the white canvas as a metaphor of the artist's creative act. The grains of wheat are painted with an unusually red/brown and rather sticky textured paint; the pool of grain spreads out from the splayed thighs of the woman, staining the canvas in front of her. Fried points out that the projected image of the Trellis onto the wall at the left above the sifter is a classical trope for painting itself. It also suggests the stretcher of the canvas revealing the concealed structure of the painting, a little like Frank Stella's paintings in the late 1950's that take their structure from the geometry of the stretcher bars.

Fried describes a kind of quasi-corporeal merger that assists the viewer to enter the image imaginatively. Because the surface of the painting is already in metaphorical play through these strategies of referring to the structure of painting and the canvas itself, the black interior of the tarare in which the child is absorbed is more readily read as a hole in the surface that might represent a moment of occlusion of vision which must occur at the moment when a quasi corporeal incorporation of the beholder takes place. I tend to think of this in terms of a state of reverie through sensory experience of the painting. The membrane of the surface may be considered as permeable to imaginative projection facilitating our imaginary passage from the material world that is

accessible to our senses to the immaterial world that can only be imagined or from consciousness to unconsciousness.

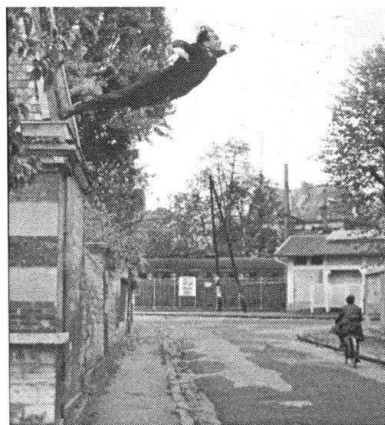
There is another side to imagining the passage from material to immaterial where merger or absorption is achieved so convincingly that a sense of entrapment can ensue. In Courbet's **Man Mad With Fear** (1843) he provides a graphic image of the potential terror of representation that is entrapment through merger, on the wrong side of the glass.



(image Courbet's **Man Mad with Fear** 1843)

In Courbet's self-portraits the artist is usually shown pressing up against the pictorial surface or the frame of the composition as if he was about to burst through the viewer's side of the canvas. In this painting the figure of the artist leaps into the pictorial void — signified by the cliff at the lower right hand side — and into the viewer's space. Michael Fried has argued that such voids at the margin of a composition are linking spaces that provide entry for the artist and the viewer. In **Man Mad With Fear** the void is "fortuitously" left unfinished: precisely at the point where the artist is about to leap through the pictorial surface the paint breaks down into an abstract scumble. Representation is seen dissolving in front of our eyes.

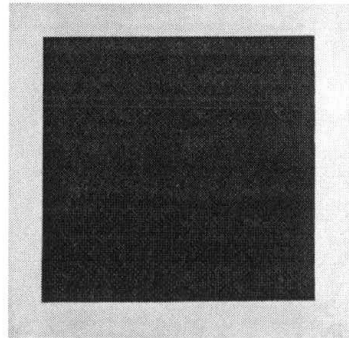
Yves Klein on the other hand also gives us an image of a leap into the void but in his case it was a way of realising his driving obsession to bring on the age of immateriality. Klein was a keen Rosicrucian and followed rigorous spiritual exercises combining this with his considerable expertise in judo to work towards a literal physical transcendence. In 1961, the year before his untimely death, he made a gesture that acted out this metaphysical aspiration by leaping into the void from a second floor window. He believed that the material world was approaching an end and that by diligent spiritual exercise mankind could break down the distinction between matter and spirit. This leap then is another form of slash in the metaphorical veil. This is



(Yves Klein **Leap into the void** 1961)

an image of extreme optimism — utopian — crazy, but an act of faith to demonstrate the truth of human longing that breaks through conscious suppression into our dreams.

Fried interprets certain pictorial black spaces as openings that invite passage to an imaginary space beyond — for example the tarare in **Grain Sifters**. The Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich went much further when he eliminated the representational context to deliver nothing but this opening onto the void in his **Black square** first painted in 1912 and later exhibited it in 1915. While it could be seen as a revolutionary gesture, or a negation of representation, it was also a kind of event horizon — a portal onto the infinite, and as such a space for contemplation of the void. The parallel between the "clean slate" of a revolutionary manifesto and the idea of the plenitude of the void is a striking one. It should also be noted that Malevich paid obsessive attention to the facture of his paintings, the black is layered and intimately touched by the artist: this is not only a conceptual statement it is intended as an experiential one.



(Kasimir Malevich **Black square** 1929)

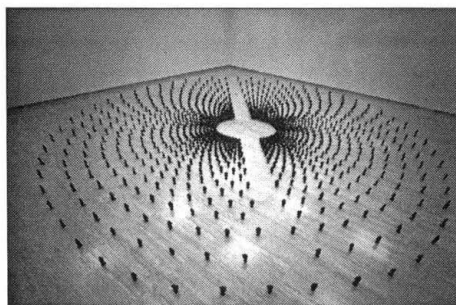
More recently and closer to home, the West Australian artist Brian Blanchflower has painted a series of near monochromes that attempt nothing less, I would suggest, than the void made implicit (I am almost ready to say manifest) in matter. I am thinking about the void in a Gnostic sense — something like the darkness before the word and the light. It may be easier just to think of the sky and infinity or what lies over the horizon, but the void is never an absence. It is the potential for everything, and as such, a space for meditation as well as terror. Human consciousness is utterly dependent on, and bound up with, material existence, and yet it too refuses definition or spatial coordinates — it is as if we have a void within that is the double of the void out there. How can mortals contemplate the infinite? Our sensory equipment is not intended for this quest and yet we desire to experience it and will try anything to get some inkling of its totality. The artist may just be the conduit through which matter is transformed, even if only momentarily, into a medium for joining these voids through sensation in consciousness.

In these paintings Blanchflower creates an extraordinary sense of space and intense, yet subdued, light that invite visual absorption. It is as if we could almost walk into their mist and emerge in Monet's garden or in some

unimaginable void. And yet they are intensely material objects. They are painted on coarse hessian sheets that have been stiffened with binder till they are like boards. The paint layers are then built up almost as if they were accidental accretions revealing the coarse support and successive layers of colour. The paint includes metallic and pearlescent media that glint like minerals in the soil but also contribute to the transparency and inner light that the surface radiates at certain viewing distances. As one approaches the paintings the surface comes to dominate the attention — they are like the rocky surface of the earth itself and yet as you retreat the colour transforms back into infinite space. For me this is the most marvellous manifestation of mud transformed into spirit.

Anthony Gormley is a sculptor who works with figure and landscape. He shows us humanity occupying the earth while lifting their eyes to the horizon and beyond. In his **Field** works, Gormley has manifested an image of consciousness emerging from the earth and returning to the earth, therefore in a way it is also an image of transcending boundaries or permeable membranes. It was to the earth that Gormley turned when, in 1989, he came to Australia to install **A Field for the Art Gallery of NSW** at the Art Gallery, and to locate a reciprocal work in the desert, **A Room for the great Australian desert**. He requested a site with 360 degrees of uninterrupted flat horizon and red dust underfoot. I located a spot where I knew that the clay pans were extensive and the horizon was terrifyingly flat and low. Standing up there you are the highest object this side of the horizon. It is a vertiginous experience — as if you could easily fall from the spinning globe. It was while camping out in this place that Gormley talked to me about Heidegger and the phenomenological problem of consciousness that always rests so lightly upon the material world out of which it has arisen, and yet is always constructed as it's other. There could be no more dramatic and appropriate place for such speculations and for an artwork that embodies them. It was probably these conversations that initiated the train of thought that has culminated in this essay.

The work Gormley made for the Art Gallery in Sydney was a field of 1,100 little clay figures made from the red bull dust we brought back from the centre. The figures were arranged as if caught in a magnetic field suggesting two hemispheres that mimic the plan of the brain. There is a pathway down the middle to a central lobe when you stand to view the work.

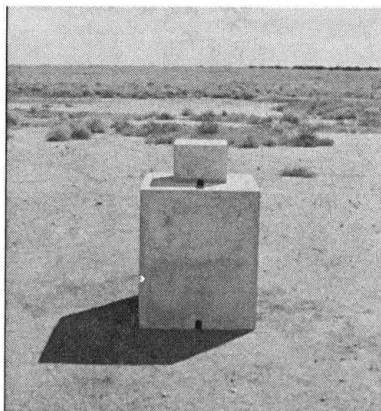


(photo of Anthony Gormley **Field**
for the Art Gallery of NSW 1989)

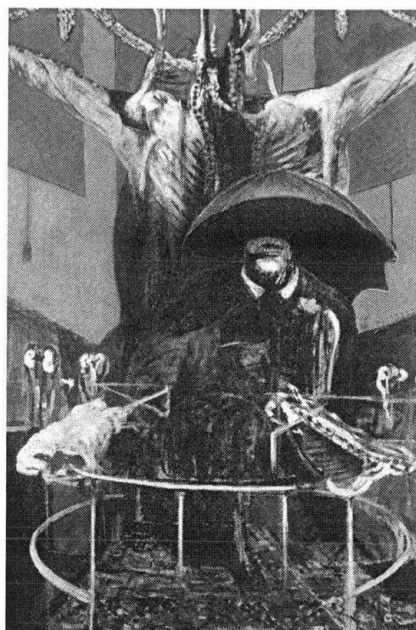
From this vantage point you become aware that all the figures have eyes focused directly on you. I immediately responded to this mass gaze with guilt felt on behalf of mankind that has so badly bruised the land out of which it arose. Others claim to feel godlike. Perhaps both are appropriate; to judge is to be judged after all.

Blanchflower creates images of infinite space out of mineral earth and Gormley has made earth into images of consciousness, but this process has its origins in painting of the 16th century. Oil painting is the exemplary medium to demonstrate the metaphorical transformation that occurs when an artist takes earth (pigment) and creates the image of a spiritual entity. This imagery of transformation has been at the heart of the creative process in painting since the Renaissance and it underlines the humanist project theorizing the artist as the agent of spiritual transformation, and not some heavenly intervention. Paradoxically it is this emphasis on materiality, including the trace of the artist's hand, that since the 16th century has separated the humanist image of the individual from the indexical or ontological communion that applies to the medieval icon. The trace of the artist is also indexical, but it is an index of the hand that strives for a kind of equivalence between perceived qualities in nature and the materials and physical responses of the artist. This transformation at the hand of the humanist artist in the 16th century finds a parallel in late 20th century thinking, that describes a kind of equivalence between the handling of paint and the quality of the object to be represented.

In the mid twentieth century Francis Bacon articulated the principle that paint should be made to function as



(photo of Anthony Gormley *Room for the great Australian outback* 1989)



(photo of Francis Bacon *Painting* 1946)
collection Museum of Modern Art N.Y.

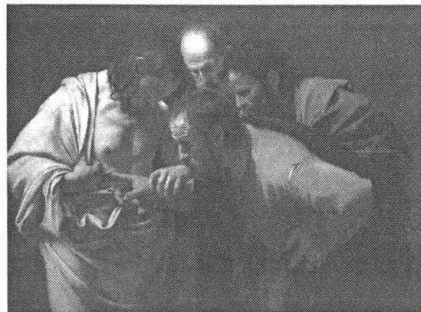
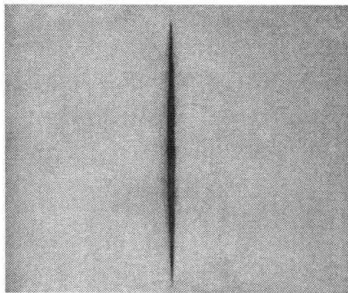
an equivalent to the sensations of the body rather than merely reproducing the body's appearance. In his last filmed interview, with Melvin Bragg, Bacon said, "I wanted to bring about the sensation of the thing without the boredom of its conveyance." This is, in part achieved by the direct response, which I am proposing between hand and eye that binds artist and viewer through the action of the body, and our bodily response to that action.

In the case of Arnulf Rainer he is not so concerned to make an image at all but to leave a trace of the artist in as dramatic a way as possible. In fact he takes a photograph of himself and then erases it with gestures in oil paint. In the painting, **Over painting-Totem** (1983/84) Rainer uses his fingers to smear the paint over the image, virtually obscuring his own likeness while replacing it with the index of his presence. On the other hand it also gives the impression that the artist has scabbled against the surface of representation as if it might actually part and allow passage, as if through Alice's mirror.



(photo of Arnulf Rainer,
Overpainting-Totem 1983/84)

Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases literally enact a kind of breaking through this boundary of representation. The crisis in representation that is often thought of, as a modern dilemma is however an ancient one that is a consequence of our condition — suspended between matter and consciousness. Fontana was born in Latin America and subsequently lived in Italy. The Catholic iconography of the wound can hardly have escaped his attention. It is an easy step to consider the slash in the pure skin of the monochrome canvas as a wound, and then to



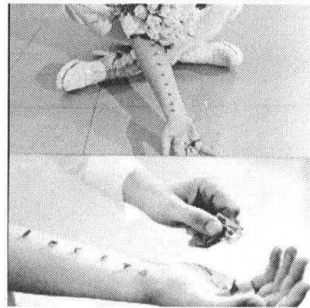
(photo of Lucio Fontana **Concetto Spaziale** 1959 & Caravaggio **Doubting Thomas** 1602-3)

associate it with the crisis Doubting Thomas resolved by plunging his hand into Christ's side.

The visual associations between these cuts and wounds rupture the veil or screen of representation at the brink of the void. Because this veil is metaphorically related to the skin that separates the body from its surroundings, the orifices created by Fontana naturally evoke the openings of the body itself. Thomas' doubt perfectly expresses our anxiety at living in a world that is only available to us through the mediation of visual appearances and the word.



(image of Mike Parr *Push tacks into your leg until a line of tacks is made up your leg* 1973)

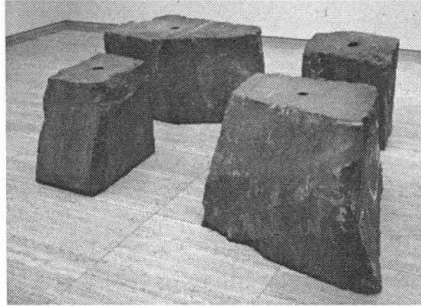


(image of Gina Pane *Aktione sentimentale* 1973)

The literal action of Fontana comes very close to performance art — as indeed did Pollock's painting contain this possibility. These images of Mike Parr and Gina Pane suggest exploring and rupturing the skin as border between the bounded self and the world. The work of Parr has always been at one level an attempt to define this boundary. The endurance works that follow instructions such as **Hold your finger in a candle flame as long as you can**, or **Hold your breath** are examples that test the limits of mind to control body, while at the same time extending that boundary. Parr also explores the unconscious mind trying to find those moments when it can be caught in the act of influencing apparently rational behaviour.

Finally we return to the void as such. Two contemporary artists whose work directly images the void are Anish Kapoor and James Turrell. In his homages to Yves Klein Anish Kapoor's greatest achievement has been to manifest the experience of the void in an extraordinarily concrete way. If Blanchflower creates the possibility of sensory merger Kapoor creates a literal and phenomenological void. Kapoor is an Indian artist living in London. He grew up in the state of Kerala but went to school in Bombay. His background incorporates Hindu, Jewish and European traditions. In 1989 Kapoor discovered a new way to

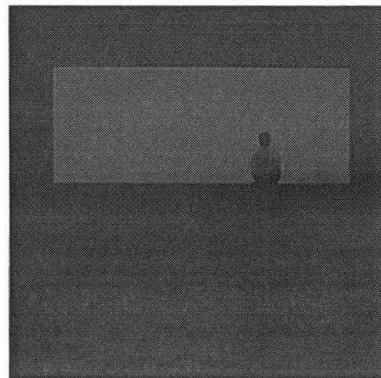
imagine the infinity of the void. He created a portal onto the void within blocks of incredibly dense and ancient Northumbrian sandstone, possibly the oldest sedimentary rock on earth. At first glance the spots on top of these great stones seem like applied black velvet but on closer inspection they are revealed as holes in the rock. There are no apparent sides to the holes and there is no visible end to the space. He has created the experience of a black hole within matter by hollowing out the stone leaving only a thin shell at the top at the brink of the void. The hollow has been lined with a dark blue pigment to give spatial depth to the darkness.



(image of Anish Kapoor *Void field* 1989)

The American critic Thomas McEvilley wrote for Kapoor's catalogue at the Venice Biennale in 1990. He played upon Kapoor's Indian background to characterise these black holes as the womb of Kali. More recent variations on the theme make it apparent however that this void is like **Black Square** 1915 by Kasimir Malevich. This painting of a black square has become a powerful symbol in modern art for a portal onto the infinite. It is a deep space for contemplation in which we project our imagination of the unknown.

James Turrell uses light to create a sensation of infinity but he also frames actual space. He has built houses to frame the sky producing a rectangle of literally endless and ever-changing blue. He has even modified a volcano to allow the viewer to lie and look up at a vast framed circle of infinity. Some are built into gallery walls and give the initial appearance of luminous blue paintings — however on closer inspection they begin to appear as space beyond the wall. The viewer experiences a degree of disorientation or of floating in space. In time it



(photo of James Turrell *Night passage*
1987 collection Guggenheim)

becomes a manifestly meditative experience realising the imaginative space of Yves Klein in concrete form. It is both an extreme abstraction and a concrete manifestation of pure sensation. Unlike the sublime, it does not depict grandeur or moralise on the power of the creator — it simply is.

Artists who explore the boundary between the material world and its other metaphorically and those who try to provide the viewer with an experience equivalent to what we may imagine to be the void all help us in some way to intuit something of the phenomenological quandary that is inextricably bound up in the nature of being conscious and self reflexive entities. I have described the painted surface as potentially inviting a kind of "quasi corporeal merger," to borrow Michael Fried's term, and implied that this form of passage might be thought of as a journey between material and immaterial realms of experience. Yves Klein associated the void with the immaterial and his **Leap into the void** was both a metaphor for transcendence and an attempt to manifest it literally. Kapoor and Turell, like Malevich, give us a portal through which to project our imaginary leap, and I suggest that painters who invite absorption into a space beyond the surface are also inviting passage from material constraint to boundless space.

I have avoided defining the void and allowed the term to vacillate in the text between a projection of our yearning for the oceanic as a psychological state and a Gnostic view of the original and ultimate state of creation without defining the boundary between these ideas. I have also loosely associated movement between consciousness of the material world and projections into imaginary spaces with a leap into the void. The portal of the artwork in this scenario functions like the horizon marking the limit of our sensory world and therefore the beginning of the imaginary and the abstract and on the other a mirror for an equally boundless internal world.

