Chapter 3
Presence/Absence in Blue
Art, Reception, and Transcendence

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1. Visual Arts and Religion in Modernity

In the first chapter, we discussed how the aesthetic reception and appreciation of an artwork can imply a spiritual experience, not because of symbolic references to a religious content situated outside of the work itself, but through the intimate participation in what the work expresses in its pure presence. We further developed this term with the help of Walter Benjamin and his concept of the aura, which, as we argue, finds a momentary resting place in the experience of presence in performance art in the second chapter. We exemplified this process in the first chapter through a discussion of the sculptural group *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–1652) by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. But while the statue of Teresa constructively challenges the definition of ›sacred‹ art, it is still a work with a religious subject. Is our argument about the spiritual experience in the encounter with an artwork that gives itself in its presence still valid when we talk about artworks that do not reference a religious context in their subject matter?

This is the question we pursue in this chapter, shifting our attention now to experiences of art in modernity and postmodernity, against the backdrop of a reflection about the theological and spiritual value of abstract art. In this discussion, we see a chance to recover the role of the aesthetic for the experience of transcendence. The theoretical framework for our reflections

is provided by the work of Paul Tillich, who has been one of the first theologians to substantially and positively discuss the questions posed to theology by visual arts in modernity. In the light of his reflections, further enriched by Wassily Kandinsky's thoughts on the spiritual in art, we then turn to the analysis of Yves Klein and his monochromatic paintings in order to show that the experience of the transcendent occurs through the play of presence and absence in the viewer's encounter with the work.

When in the early 20th century, the foundations were laid for a radical, irreversible renewal of the arts, in the religious context, figurative art kept following the traditional – and at this point, quite exhausted – formal schemata of academic taste, leading to the separation of modern (non-religious) art and religious art (as defined by its subject matter) both in form, content, and quality. As art historian James Elkins puts it quite bluntly: »Most religious art […] is just bad art.«[1] The distance between the works created for churches and those shown in museums and reaching a broad audience, also thanks to their reproduction through mass media, is paradigmatic for the difficult relationship between Christianity (perhaps especially Catholicism) and modernity.[2] While Christianity had learned to use modern rationality in order to argue its faith, it had remained deaf to the human need for emotion and sensation and thus to the aesthetic quality of its own testimony. However, both theologians and artists (as well as some art historians) have attempted to overcome this separation between art and faith, and they have made significant contributions to the theoretical reflection of the spiritual dimension of art and its reception that are still relevant today.

2. Tillich's Theology of Art

In 1959, Tillich was invited to give a lecture on art and religion at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in which he confessed that he always learned more from the works of artists than of theologians.[3] This statement might

1 James Elkins, On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art, London: Routledge, 2004, 20.

2 See also Chapters 2 (on the concept of the aura) and 6 (on the question of art and liturgical space) in this volume.

3 Paul Tillich, Art and Ultimate Reality [1960], in: Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (ed.), Art,

simply have been the rhetorical exaggeration of a famous scholar at the height of his career but Tillich was too interested in questions of visual arts to say something like this for mere *captatio benevolentiae*. Throughout his work, he makes frequent references to art, and these are not simply illustrations but closely related to the development of his theological thought. Thus Tillich can serve as an example that it might well be possible that a theologian would find more pleasure and meaning in a painted canvas than in printed books.

Tillich's ›confession‹ overturns the pedagogical argument for art in the Christian Occident which had followed Gregory the Great's view that images teach the masses of illiterates what the scriptures teach those who can read. This paradigm establishes the parallelism between text and image according to which the image is a code with a message that needs to be deciphered like a written text, with the difference that one does not need to be educated in order to understand the image. The ›content‹ of the image can be fully translated into a text, so that text and image say the same thing but in different ways and for different audiences. In contrast, Tillich implies in his statement that there is something in images that the written text cannot say, a surplus of meaning. In other words, the image does not coincide with, or is not exhausted by, its subject matter.

The question of what distinguishes the image from its subject, that is, what remains un-sayable of the image, has been posed again and again in reflections on art and philosophy. The ›image‹ is an ambivalent concept, in its apparent simplicity often misleading, for which a range of definitions have been proposed. For our reflections in this chapter, we draw on Jean-Jacques Wunenburger's description of the image as that which finds its meaning »in the specific mode of connecting the sensory and sense«.[4] The image offers the first access to sense and meaning not in what it represents but in the forms (lines, colors, textures) it traces, which are perceived through the senses, and consequently it is quite possible to find a meaning in the sensory perception of a canvas that could never be captured in the linguistic form of theological texts. Tillich's affirmation provides the basis of the aesthetic evaluation of an artwork, and with clear implications for theology, because

Creativity and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art, new rev. ed., New York: Crossroads, 1995, 219–235, here 233.

4 Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Philosophie des images, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, 52; in the original: »dans un mode spécifique de liaison du sensible et du sens«.

according to this understanding of the image as »connecting the sensory and sense«, the ultimate reality or meaning that manifests itself in art is not limited to the subject matter of what is usually called ›sacred‹ art, as we discussed in the first chapter.

The fact that the artwork offers a meaning that is not restricted to what it represents means that the distinction between sacred and profane art based on subject matter is no longer significant and needs to be overcome, as Tillich tried to do starting in the early 1920s, in particular through overturning the hierarchies between art and religion; thus he writes: »The religious art of bourgeois society pulls the religious symbols of tradition down to the level of bourgeois morality and takes away their transcendence and their sacramental character. […] And it is not saying too much when one attributes a greater quality of sacredness to a still life by Cézanne or a tree by van Gogh than an image of Jesus by Uhde.«[5]

Tillich develops his aesthetic project in the wake of World War I, drawing in particular on German Expressionism in which he finds the signs of a revolt against the self-sufficiency of 19th-century modernity and to which he attributes a quasi-religious mission. In its rupture of form, Expressionism opens a breach through which the spiritual dimension, which was repressed and banalized in modern society, can re-emerge. For Tillich, the naturalistic reproduction of traditional religious symbols in the religious art of his time has lost any vital tension and cannot express what he considers to be the truly moral and implicitly religious disposition which instead shows itself in works that reject the academic conventions of the representation of reality and expose the alienation of human existence through their rupture of form. This rupture is necessary in order to achieve distance from the immediacy of representation and to open up a space of meaning in the aesthetic sensation which is by its very nature open to the unconditioned.

Expressionism for Tillich thus is not just a historical artistic movement but a ›style‹ that can be found at various points in art history and that implies

5 Paul Tillich, Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart, Berlin: Ullstein, 1926, 51–52; in the original: »Die religiöse Kunst der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft drückt die religiösen Symbole der Tradition auf das Niveau der bürgerlichen Moralität herab und nimmt ihre Transzendenz und ihren sakramentalen Charakter. […] Und es ist nicht zuviel gesagt, wenn man einem Stilleben von Cézanne oder einem Baum von van Gogh mehr Heiligkeitsqualität zuspricht als einem Jesusbild von Uhde.«

the radical transformation of the represented reality. Consequently, the viewer's attention is not focused on the *Inhalt* (the subject matter) of the representation but reaches its *Gehalt* (the meaning-making power or substance). The expressionist style fractures the surface of reality and explores its depths in order to produce a meaning that is not established through the subject matter of the work. Thus the religious subject of an artwork does not guarantee its religious dimension because the form or subject matter is not in itself able to evoke the *Gehalt*. Through lines, colors, and textures, the work can express but never represent the *Gehalt*. Instead, a painting that forgoes any attempt to figuratively represent a (transcendent) world allows for the internal movement beyond itself, into the transcendent.[6] Real possibilities for the spiritual in visual arts can only emerge from this renunciation of form and its visibility.

Tillich's proposal certainly raises some critical questions. His approach is shaped by his desire to establish as normative for religious art a particular style, namely expressionism, which he understands in terms that are too general to serve as more than a subjective, perhaps even idiosyncratic, criterion for identifying artworks that are able to express the unconditioned *Gehalt*. Although he claims that the expressionist style (in his use of the term) is not limited to the art historical movement of Expressionism, he does not completely avoid the temptation to identify the two. Given his focus on a generalized style, the artwork in its singularity is dismissed, and Tillich rarely analyzes particular works in greater detail (with notable exceptions, such as Picasso's *Guernica*). Today, his analyses of artworks appear dated and are clearly influenced by his own presuppositions external to the sphere of art and its critique. Also, his ideas of what constitutes ›art‹ or an artwork that is worthwhile to be discussed from a theological perspective, are limited to the canon of ›high‹ culture as the only forms of culture capable of critically breaking through the ideological indoctrination of society by the mass media, echoing Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's critique of the culture industry.[7] Nevertheless, his insights can also helpfully be applied to

6 Tillich, Die religiöse Lage, 51.

7 Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno, The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception, in: Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 94–136.

other forms of culture he himself did not consider.[8] But in spite of these limitations, Tillich's contribution to theological aesthetics remains fundamental because he proposes an interpretative model that is able, first, to capture the centrality of the anthropological question, focusing on the existential relationship between the human being and the unconditioned ground of this existence and the ways in which this relationship is expressed and experienced in art, and second, to highlight the issue of meaning in its independence from the form or content of artworks. With this, he offers a new and constructive approach to the relationship between religion and modern art.

Before Tillich, this connection was openly denied or at the very least eyed with suspicion. Both theology and art history assumed the clear separation between spiritual sensibility and aesthetic taste. From the perspective of religion, modern art was bluntly accused of apostasy and of having deserted the themes and symbols of the great religious tradition,[9] whereas art historians emphasized the need to preserve the autonomy of modern art. Certainly, in that period of the emancipation of modern art in the late 19th and early 20th century, some – theologians, art historians, and artists alike – underline the continuity of a quasi-sacred or spiritual dimension at least in the reception of art, but their affirmations remain vague and unspecific and cannot serve as the basis for a substantial theological reflection. For example, the famous critic Octave Mirbeau writes about the exhibition of Claude Monet and Auguste Rodin in Paris in June 1889:

> When he [sic] enters this gallery, the visitor, even the most resistant to the pleasures of the mind, the most closed to higher understanding of art, experiences a kind of sensual power, a kind of physical agitation, in front of the dazzling light and sublime beauty of these forms. If he cannot account for the strange and powerful sensation that arises within him, analyze the nervous shocks that travel from his flesh to his brain, at least he knows that he is in the presence of something

8 Russell Re Manning, Tillich's Theology of Art, in: Russel Re Manning (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 152–172, here 166.

9 Tillich shares this critical attitude at least in part, as can be seen for example in his rather harsh judgement of Impressionist art which according to him remains limited to a self-referential naturalism.

> sacred, like a creation, of something that overpowers and violates his mental inertia and fills him with reverence, something that is none other than genius.[10]

The text shows an interesting combination of Romantic concepts (creation, genius) with a kind of cultural materialism that is attentive to biological and psychophysical reactions (physical agitation, nervous shock). In the experience of being physically jolted or shocked, which is a typical description of aesthetic experience in the late 19th century, the openness towards the religious does not disappear but is instead exalted, even though it remains without a specific object. But this »something sacred« – whose presence one perceives and which instills respect – »is none other than genius«, and once the discourse is stripped of its Romantic exuberance, nothing remains that would anchor the claim of the sacrality of art.

The idea of a physical, sensory, and even sensual participation in art and its »higher understanding«, even though promising for a theological development, is not sufficient in the absence of a coherent model that justifies the connection between the senses and sense. The Romantic exaltation of art shows that there is a need to recognize in the aesthetic experience of art the ability of consciousness to access the dimension of the spiritual. But in the theological reflections of its time, this exaltation did not find an adequate critical instrument able to engage with the challenges of modern thought.

Under these conditions, the misunderstandings could only increase between an art world that did not want to recognize other ›religions‹ next to itself and Christianity that was losing, together with its own faith, the ›religion‹ of aesthetic experience. The early 20th century represents the climax of this growing distance between art and Christianity.[11] In 1905, for exam-

10 Octave Mirbeau, Combats esthétiques, vol. 1 (1877–1892), edited by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, Paris: Séguier, 1993, 383; in the original: »Lorsqu'il entre dans cette galerie, le visiteur, même le plus réfractaire aux joies de l'esprit, le plus fermé aux supérieures compréhensions de L'Art, éprouve comme une puissance sensuelle, comme un trouble physique, devant l'éblouissement de cette lumière, et la sublime beauté de ces formes. S'il ne peut se rendre compte de la sensation étrange et forte qui naît en lui, analyser les secousses nerveuses qui remontent de sa chair à son cerveau, du moins, il sait qu'il est en présence de quelche chose de sacré comme une création, de quelche chose qui dompte et viole son inertie mentale et l'emplit de respect, de quelque chose qui n'est autre que le génie.«

11 Interestingly, even in the early 21st century, the situation does not seem to have funda-

ple, the Catholic novelist Léon Bloy denounces art as »an aboriginal parasite from the skin of the first Serpent«[12] from which one cannot expect submission to religion. The »extreme incompatibility of modern art with the demands of practical Catholicism«[13] shows for Bloy the ancient pagan foundations of art itself with which Christianity could not find a compromise apart from very brief moments of truce. In modernity, according to Bloy, it is useless to want to »*canonize* its rebellion«.[14] Even if »one can encounter exceptional unfortunates who are both artists and Christians«,[15] there is no longer any space for truly Christian art. Unsurprisingly, the arts answer back in much the same polemical tone. The painter and playwright Lothar Schreyer writes in the Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* in 1917: »The spiritual power of the artist is a reality. The spiritual power of the priest is a deception. […] The priest talks about the miracle. The artist creates the miracle.«[16]

Thus art and religion – in their antagonistic relationship – each assumes a sacredness that it denies the other and, while continuing to talk in the same language filled with references to Christian faith and spirituality, they alienate themselves from each other ever more. To resolve this situation, good will or patience are apparently not enough when the two sides of the conversation are not willing to listen to each other. Instead, in order to begin a real dialogue between modern art and religion, it is necessary to renounce one's

mentally changed. Art historians such as James Elkins and Charlene Spretnak note the absence of a robust reflection on the spiritual in contemporary art history, while aesthetic theology – although by now a well developed and more established discipline – remains marginal in theological discourse, and controversies over the religious possibilities given in contemporary art continue to arise, as we discuss in Chapter 6. See Elkins, On the Strange Place; Charlene Spretnak, The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

12 Léon Bloy, Belluaires et porchers [1905], Paris: Stock, 1922, 150; in the original: »un parasite aborigène de la peau du premier Serpent«.

13 Bloy, Belluaires et porchers, 152; in the original: »extrême incompatibilité de L'Art moderne avec les exigence d'un catholicisme pratique«.

14 Bloy, Belluaires et porchers, 152 (original emphasis); in the original: »*canonis[er]* sa rébellion«.

15 Bloy, Belluaires et porchers, 150; in the original: »il peut se rencontrer d'exceptionnels infortunés qui soient, en même temps, des artistes et des chrétiens«.

16 Lothar Schreiber, Das Bühnenkunstwerk, Der Sturm 8.2 (1917), 18–20, here 19; in the original: »Die geistige Macht des Künstlers ist eine Wirklichkeit. Die geistige Macht des Priesters ist eine Täuschung. […] Der Priester spricht vom Wunder. Der Künstler schafft das Wunder.«

own solidified expectations and to overturn presuppositions, for example by looking for the religious dimension of art precisely there where it seems *a priori* absent.

And the value of Tillich's proposal lies in its capacity to reorient the discussion and find a new point of departure. With a positive attitude towards modernity (for Tillich, theology has necessarily to be modern because it can realize itself as critical reflection of faith only in the current *kairós*) and free from the limitations of dialectical theology, Tillich overcomes the habitual opposition between religion and culture and in particular between religion and modern art. The implicit religious dimension that he discovers in Expressionism indicates for him the ways in which the spiritual quietly remains present in the forms of society and secular culture. It is in the aesthetic dimension of expressionist art that he finds the *Gehalt* that still speaks to the spirit. Thus neither form nor *Inhalt* on their own but style (the way in which form, subject matter, and underlying meaning are organized and brought together) is able to lead us beyond the naturally given appearance of things in order to express the ultimate, definitive value, that which orients our existence in its deepest dimensions and poses an unconditional challenge to it. Not the *what* but the *how* of representation motivates the appreciation of an artwork, its epistemological function, the intentional perceptive and imaginative processes that lead to an aesthetic experience that is open to the dimension of ultimate meaning, or, in Tillich's words, the ultimate concern. Distinguishing between a religious style that is dominated by *Gehalt* and an aesthetic style dominated by form, Tillich underlines that the religious value of an artwork cannot be recognized in its aesthetic qualities alone (although those do play an essential role) but in that depth dimension of the *Gehalt*.[17]

3. The *chiaroscuro* of Representation

Tillich's proposal regarding the relationship between visual arts and religion has been highly significant for theology. However, today it is clear that his theoretical foundation, the concept of *Gehalt*, is no longer sufficient to cap-

17 Manning, Tillich's Theology of Art, 159.

ture the developments in 20th-century art, in particular in abstract art. As has variously been noted, the reflection has to move forward in new directions.[18] Particularly problematic is the conception of the sacred as a preexistent content (*Gehalt*) that the work simply expresses. Even though in Tillich's theory, art is not just a window to the world or to the transcendent, he nevertheless continues to consider it as an opening towards something else that is ›out there‹ and independent of the work. Thus the underlying dynamic that requires the viewer to move away from the work in order to capture its meaning remains exactly the same as in those proposals that identify the religious dimension of a work with its subject matter's references to a religious tradition separate from the artwork. As we have shown in the first chapter in our reflections on Bernini's representation of Teresa, this view of art contradicts the insights of an aesthetic reflection that is attentive to the dynamics of reception and centers the artwork in its autonomy. In so far as it is an aesthetic object, the artwork does not evoke or refer to something else but presents a configuration of signs that stimulate the perception and solicit a feeling of aesthetic pleasure. Meaning is not added *a posteriori* to the sensory, affective relationship between viewer and work. Either meaning is already a part of perception in that relationship between senses and sense evoked by Wunenburger as quoted earlier, or it is simply an ideological construction with little or no relationship to the work and thus without any communicative effect once the socio-cultural coordinates change. But if that was the case, how would it then be possible that artworks from times long past or from other cultures are still able to address the viewers and enable experiences of meaning?

The signs traced on the surface of the canvas, the mixture and texture of colors do not ask to be deciphered like a code in order to reveal a secret message hidden underneath. In the case of avantgarde and abstract art, the visual signs programmatically reject any attempt at decoding which is considered abusive of the artwork in its autonomy, and thus artistic creation becomes an ultimate, even revolutionary practice, precisely because of its refusal to point towards a meaning beyond itself. And not only abstract art

18 Gesa E. Thiessen, Religious Art is Expressionistic: A Critical Appreciation of Paul Tillich's Theology of Art, Irish Theological Quarterly 59.4 (1993), 301–311. For a more critical reading of Tillich's conceptual system see Michael F. Palmer, Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Art, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984.

but all artworks nourish this claim to the degree that they are an expression of aesthetic elements. In the act of reception, the work demands to be perceived on its own terms in a live relationship but not ›read‹ in the sense that its interpretation refers to a meaning, real or imagined, external to the work.

What the work expresses does not belong to a different order than the one that is physically instituted by the lines, forms, and colors of which it is composed. The expressive disposition of the aesthetic object thus does not make of the artwork the signifier of a different reality signified in it. Such an understanding would mean to make an undue transfer between the work and meaning, and, although such a transfer might appear nearly automatic, it is one of the merits of abstract art to have challenged this automatism. Here, Roman Jakobson's theory of linguistic communication, and in particular his understanding of the poetic function of language, is helpful in order to understand the relationship between sensation and meaning. Jakobson notes that the definition of ›poetry‹ has changed over time, while the characteristics of the ›poetic‹ have remained the same. But where precisely does this specific element of the ›poetic‹ appear? According to Jakobson, »in this, that the word is perceived [*ressentir*] as a word and not simply as a substitute of the object it names nor as an explosion of emotion.«[19] The French verb used here, *ressentir*, means ›to sense‹, ›to perceive‹, ›to perceive again‹, and points thus again to the necessary convergence of senses and sense to which we have referred before. Jakobson's view can also be applied to visual arts, which can be considered a sign language that functions analogically to the poetic. Thus, the aesthetic value of a work appears only to the degree that its visible form is not ›sensed‹ as the imagining-of-something-else but simply for what it is: a material image, a configuration of lines and colors. The artwork is primarily that of which it is made, and this is what makes the work visible and present so that it can be encountered in an act of reception that involves the viewer as a sensory being. And this is what distinguishes the aesthetic object from an ordinary one, as the philosopher Maurice Blanchot observes: »For in the usual object (this much we know), matter itself is of no particular interest; and the more the matter that made it made it right

19 Roman Jakobson, Qu'est-ce que la poésie?, translated by Marguerite Derrida, in: Roman Jakobson, Questions de poétique, 2nd ed., Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973, 113–126, here 124; in the original: »En ceci, que le mot est ressenti comme mot et non comme simple substitut de l'objet nommé ni comme l'explosion d'émotion.«

for its use – the more the material is appropriate – the more it nears nothingness. And eventually, all objects become immaterial, a volatile force in the swift circuit of exchange, the evaporated support of action which is itself pure becoming.«[20]

The artwork makes appear what disappears in the ordinary object. The material that gives form and color to the canvas would remain hidden if it was not the material of this specific work. The truth of what can be perceived is precisely in its excess of the image that re-presents it. This does not mean that its material character is sufficient to define an artwork but that what it expresses is already affirmed in it. In other words, what finds form and shape in visual art, finds them in the elementary darkness of the material used which simultaneously shows and hides like the play of light and shadow. The aesthetic object gives the appearance of being to the raw material, and the revelation of the figure in the material is always in some way contained in the darkness of the material that is used. Thus, Tillich is right when he affirms that the expressivity of a work does not refer to the subject matter or the formal aspects of representation. But that does not mean that one has to stipulate an unconditioned *Gehalt* that underlies the work as an external, ultimate referent of meaning. The work has no need of any reality beyond itself in order to express itself;[21] it only needs an amount of workable material in which it hides what it wants to express.

The advantage of this perspective is twofold: first, it avoids an ontology of art that is too burdensome because grounded in the power of the work to reveal something else besides itself; second, it anchors the production and reception of art in the sensory dimension.

But what about the religious dimension of art? The guarantees that Tillich's proposal offers disappear together with the idea of *Gehalt*, but we do not see this as a reason to complain. In postmodernity, art is the exile of truth – and thus it is even »worth more than truth«, as Friedrich Nietzsche writes.[22] Its value, whether purely aesthetic or open towards the spiritu-

20 Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, translated, with an introduction, by Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, 223.

21 One might also ask whether a work needs an audience in order to express itself.

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachgelassene Fragmente Mai-Juni 1888, para. 4, Nietzsche Source: Critical Digital Edition, http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1888,17[3] [accessed 22 February 2025]; in the original: »mehr werth [sic] […] als die Wahrheit«.

al, is characterized by a *chiaroscuro*, a play of light and shadow because of which art is what escapes from the movement of the true and the process of meaning making at the same time as it seems to offer a contribution to it. The ›appearing‹ and ›signifying‹ of the work will never overcome its silence, and thus what Nietzsche writes about the tragedy is true also for the visual arts: »The brightest clarity of the image was not enough for us: because it seemed both to reveal and to veil Something; and while its allegorical revelation seemed to demand the tearing of the veil, the unveiling of the mysterious background, it was precisely that all-visibility that held the eye spellbound and prevented it from penetrating deeper.«[23]

Thus one should not expect an artwork to flaunt its religious significance – which art never has done in any case, not even when it claims to be ›sacred‹ or when people kneel in front of it. Byzantine icons are a good case in point. Marie-José Mondzain talks about the ›economy of the icon‹ not as a process of representation but on the contrary as the withdrawal of the figure and an emptiness of form that is analogous to the exile of the Son. According to Patriarch Nikephoros's refutations of the iconoclasts in the second *Antirrheticus* of the *Apologeticus Major*, the representation of the icon is legitimated by the kenosis of the incarnation. In the eyes of the faithful, the icon of Christ is empty of his real presence (unlike the consubstantiality of the eucharist), but it is full of his absence which is inscribed in visible traces. Thus Mondzain writes, the icon »does not refer to a higher reality, one that is more authentic; that would be the reality of an exterior model, invisible and distant. The distance is rather inside the icon itself«.[24] The light that emerges from the

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, Die Geburt der Tragödie, para. 24, Nietzsche Source: Critical Digital Edition, http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/GT-24 [accessed 24 February 2025]; in the original: »Die hellste Deutlichkeit des Bildes genügte uns nicht: denn dieses schien eben sowohl Etwas zu offenbaren als zu verhüllen; und während es mit seiner gleichnissartigen [sic] Offenbarung zum Zerreissen des Schleiers, zur Enthüllung des geheimnisvollen Hintergrundes aufzufordern schien, hielt wiederum gerade jene Allsichtbarkeit das Auge gebannt und wehrte ihm, tiefer zu dringen.«

24 Marie-José Mondzain, Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary, translated by Rico Franses, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005, 107. A little earlier, Mondzain writes: »The figure of Christ in the icon no more *resembles* the real Christ than did the lamb; on the contrary, it is more abstract. Losing all of its metaphoric and narrative character, its formal codification means that it participates not in the rhetoric of distances separating sign and signified (Old Testament writings), but in the new economy concerning the relationship of contemplator and contemplated who

icon, the richness of its colors and the use of brilliant materials must not be understood on a naively mimetic level. Instead, they serve as a reflective surface on which the gaze can never rest or find its object, and thus it can never »penetrat[e] deeper«, as Nietzsche said in the above quote. If the image has triumphed in the Christian context, it has done so as the image of a presence/absence that can never affirm its own status as representation without at the same time affirming the emptiness of the figure.

Since the Christian tradition has always been open to this ambivalent character of the image, it should have been well prepared for the arrival of abstract art. That this was not the case is less due to a real separation between Christianity and abstract art than because of contingent ideological rigidities that hindered the opening towards modern art in Christianity. While the spiritual dimension of abstract art was, at least for the first half of the 20th century, not acknowledged by theologians, it was instead affirmed by numerous artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and also Yves Klein, of whom more below. In spite of the differences between their respective artistic developments and formal decisions, the ›abstraction‹ they achieve veils the meaning of the work and thus protects it from banalizing associations or readings, raising the question of meaning in a new way. The effect produced by these painters does not eliminate distance – like the ›sacred‹ art of the past might have done – but instead acknowledges it and makes it »the motif of vision, in the double sense of motif: a motivation and a figurative theme«, as Jean-Luc Marion said.[25]

continually exchange gazes across the iconic space« (252, note 48, original emphasis). Mondzain's interpretation is echoed by Jean-Luc Marion who situates the problem of the icon in phenomenological thought. The icon opposes itself to the idolatric dimension of onto-theology by establishing a distance. It »constitutes a sort of negative theophany: the figure remains authentically insurpassable (norm, self-reference) only in that it opens in its depths upon an invisibility whose distance it does not abolish but reveals.« Jean-Luc Marion, The Idol, in: Jean-Luc Marion, The Idol and Distance: Five Studies [1977], translated and with an introduction by Thomas A. Carlson, New York: Fordham University Press, 2001, 1–9, here 9.

25 Marion, The Idol, 8.

4. ›Immediation‹ and ›Defiguration‹: Art without Codes

However, the distance required by abstraction does not imply the complete absence of representation, not only because abstract art always offers some kind of support for the imagination but also because of the programmatic continued presence and use of symbolic elements. In the careful codification that Kandinsky proposes, for example, although the forms and colors do not reproduce any ›thing‹ in the world, they still represent feelings and emotions and thus contribute to the formulation of a rich grammar of abstract art that creates access to the invisible and thus, at the same time, towards the interior and spiritual, according to Kandinsky.[26]

At a first glance, abstract art is thus non-objective art that nevertheless continues to draw on codes of representation: the line indicates the expansion of power or energy, the point represents absolute conciseness and restraint, and the variety of colors offers nuanced references to the sphere of emotions. Furthermore, this scheme of representation appears to attribute sole power to the artist who freely invents for themselves a syntax according to their own creative imagination through which they communicate with the recipient, presupposing, however, a model of one-way communication in which whatever the artist encodes in the work will be decoded according to their intention by the recipient.[27] Yet, the problem of a symbolic syntax is not exclusive to abstract art. In the tradition of the icon, the colors do not resemble any object that one could imagine in the world, either, but instead indicate the invisible to which one has to give space in the visible without reproducing it. The colors point towards the divine (red), transfiguration (yellow), humanity (blue), for example, but their symbolic meaning, drawn from the liturgical tradition, expresses itself purely on the level of perception.

This understanding of color as symbolic of the spiritual must have been familiar to Kandinsky given his familiarity with the Russian Orthodox tra-

26 Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art [1911], translated by Michael T.H. Sadler, Auckland: The Floating Press, 2008. For a more detailed discussion of Kandinsky and Henry's reading of him, see Chapter 4 in this volume.

27 On the possible gap between encoding and decoding and the resulting multiple reading positions, see Stuart Hall, Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse, in: Stuart Hall, Essential Essays, Band 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies, edited by David Morley, Durham: Duke University Press, 2019, 257–276.

dition. Yet, not content with what the tradition offers, he affirms that the meaning of form and colors is universal. For him, forms and colors are not tied to a given affective tonality in an extrinsic way that varies according to individuals and context, but instead they are identical with their affective meaning.[28] Color is not where it appears, namely on the surface of things, but where it can be sensed and perceived in its affective significance in the interior or spiritual dimension. Because it is not the objects that are colored, color does not belong to the phenomenological appearing of the world but is itself interiority. For Kandinsky, the way in which one attempts to express in words the affective tonality of every single color appears inevitably vague and relative, but this uncertainty is simply due to the limits of conceptual formulations and opens up the opportunity for different modes of expression in art.[29] The connection between color and affect precedes any cultural construction, or rather it is within, not prior to the cultural.

To think about abstract art in terms of representation (or its lack thereof) does not allow us to fully understand its novelty. Michel Henry writes in his study of Kandinsky, which is a proposal for an aesthetic theory along the lines of his phenomenology of life: »*Painting does not use language*. Abstract painting teaches us this, and this is what gives it its power of expression. If colour does not relate to the feelings of our soul through an external relation that finds its true being in them […] then it does not even need to translate through a means the abstract content of our invisible life. It coincides with our invisible life and is its pathos: its suffering, its boredom, its neglect or its joy.«[30] In this phenomenological perspective, Kandinsky's proposal is not so much a codification of colors, that is, the construction of a semantic based on fixed referents, like the theosophic theory of forms and colors. Instead, according to Henry, the novel element introduced by Kandinsky lies precisely in the elimination of the cultural and linguistic mediation that determines the symbolic or cognitive relationship between subject and object. The expressive capacity of abstract painting gains its strength from this ›immediation‹ which distances itself from representative codes in order to capture the immediate affective resonance of colors and forms. The question remains,

28 Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 79–89.

29 Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 90.

30 Michel Henry, Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky, translated by Scott Davidson, London: Continuum, 2009, 72 (original emphasis).

however, in how far this apparently immediate effect is also mediated and shaped by historical and cultural contexts that associate a particular affective tonality with particular colors or forms.[31]

As Mark C. Taylor underlines, the development of abstract art functions as a kind of purification ritual[32] so that works of abstract art are the result of a ›taking away‹ rather than an ›adding‹. The spiritual dimension can be approached only through subtraction, by removing all the mediated forms of expression until the viewers see in front of themselves only the pure, plastic presence of the work, sometimes even without a title, which offers itself to them without the support of denotations or connotations defined by the artist's or their own context or by conventions of representation. Thus the recipient is protected from an interpretation informed by external parameters that is not their own feeling of the presence of the work in its lines, colors, rhythm, format, and materials. As Jean-François Lyotard writes about a work by Barnett Newman, »[t]he picture presents, being offers itself up in the here and now. No one, and especially not Newman, makes *me* see it in the sense of recounting or interpreting what I see. I (the viewer) am no more than an ear open to the sound which comes to it from out of the silence; the painting is that sound, an accord.«[33] In the discussion of Yves Klein below, however, it becomes clear that the way in which the »picture presents« can never be completely free from references to the context of reception and the personal and socio-cultural conditions under which reception occurs. In this sense, abstract art is more like an attempt rather than the full realization of pure presence – and, in this sense, we find yet another analogy between art and the religious, in particular religious ritual, which is also always only the incomplete attempt at encountering the presence of the transcendent in the materiality of embodied existence.

What we are interested in here, however, is not so much abstraction itself; the controversy between figurative and abstract art is by now history.

31 See for a similar critique Richard J. White, Kandinsky: Thinking about the Spiritual in Art, Religion and the Arts 23 (2019), 26–49, here 35.

32 Mark C. Taylor, Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, 86.

33 Jean-François Lyotard, The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991, 83 (original emphasis).

The important aspect that remains from this discussion is the attention to artistic production as being able to incarnate in the visible the depth of life experiences, of the wounds that accompany them and of the meaning that we attempt to find in them. It is on this level that the religious dimension of art still has to be determined. Taylor attempts a somewhat unitarian reading, departing from his notion of ›a/theology‹. He describes with this term the postmodern encounter between classical theology and modern atheism in which it is possible to reunite the polarities that structure traditional religious thought. Taylor uses the concept of ›disfiguration‹ in order to understand the relationship between religion and visual arts. This complex term combines the significance of the loss and rejection of the figure (ornament, symbol, schema, human form) with what it means to renounce the urge to decipher, resolve, comprehend. The act of disfiguration means to signify through the removal of the figure, or rather of that which is already codified in the figure. This removal allows the perception of the pure aesthetic qualities of the object: »In the process of disfiguring, revelation and concealment as well as presence and absence are interwoven in such a way that every representation is both a re-presentation and a de-presentation.«[34] Disfiguring is then a function of figuration itself which is intimately connected to the dynamics of the sacred, manifesting the paradox of an unrealizable necessity. Disfiguring is sacralization in so far as it reveals the movement that ›takes away‹ from the artwork and paradoxically makes it the more powerful the less it is manifest, as if a secret law demanded that the work always remain hidden in what it shows, and show only what has to remain hidden, while at the same time concealing what is shown.[35]

5. Transcendence, for Just a Moment: Yves Klein's *Monochromes*

From the perspective of reception, we argue that it is necessary to remain in the presence of the work without being drawn into a vision of something beyond the work. Only then can the viewer experience the sensation of life,

34 Taylor, Disfiguring, 7.

35 See for this dialectic Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 230, here developed with reference to poetry.

self, and meaning that emerges only from the work itself. In the following, we will illustrate the possibility of such an experience through the analysis of the work of Yves Klein (1928–1962), in particular his blue *Monochromes*, first shown in Milan in 1957.[36]

5.1 Art as ›Impregnation‹

Klein's large, blue canvases are only one part of the artist's very productive although short career. It is worth noting, for example, his other monochromatic paintings in pink and gold which constitute a kind of trinity of color together with the ones in blue. Typical are also his sponge sculptures as paradigms of Klein's goal of ›impregnating‹ the viewers with meaning. In his cycle of fire paintings and the *Cosmogonies*, in which grass, rain, and air leave their traces on the colored canvas, the artist summons the four elements of nature; for the *Anthropometries*, he uses models (usually women) as ›living brushes‹ who ›paint‹ under his direction with their naked bodies covered in paint by leaving their prints on the canvas.[37] In his work, Klein is motivated by the will to transcend the material into the immaterial, the visible into the invisible, the physical into the spiritual – not in the sense of a replacement of one through the other, but in order to rediscover the unity of the two spheres in a purified materiality which he thinks to have found, for example, in the color blue.[38]

The methods Klein uses to achieve this goal are quite diverse: on the one hand, he uses female bodies to paint, underlining thus the material aspect of the work; on the other hand, he creates works that are literally invisible. In a 1958 solo exhibition in the gallery Iris Clert in Paris, he literally showed ›the void‹, entitled *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisé*. The work consisted of completely empty rooms

36 Some of these reflections on Yves Klein and the transcendence experienced in his works also appear in Natalie Fritz/Anna-Katharina Höpflinger/Stefanie Knauss/Marie-Therese Mäder/Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Sichtbare Religion: Eine Einführung in die Religionswissenschaft, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.

37 For a careful critique of the aspect of embodiment and the objectification of the female body in art see Anja Zimmermann, ›Sorry for Having to Make You Suffer‹: Body, Spectator, and the Gaze in the Performances of Yves Klein, Gina Pane, and Orlan, Discourse 24.3 (2002), 27–46.

38 Gilbert Perlein, Given a Monochrome…, in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 13–16, here 16.

painted white by Klein, while the decoration of the entrance to the gallery and the opening of the show highlighted his famous blue (including the stamps of the invitations and the cocktails).

With Klein, it is difficult to distinguish between the work and the artist because he presents himself as a kind of artwork through his texts and the image he creates of himself as the romantic genius who sacrifices himself for his art. At the same time, in the exaggerated mythologization of his own person, he parodies the myth of the artistic genius, the quasi-high priest of art. Not only historically but also because of this play with the figure of the artist and his creative role, Klein situates himself right at the edge between the modern and the postmodern, the serious, utopistic, and parodistic, the satirical and the exaggerated.

Thus it is understandable that many interpreters use Klein's biography and his texts as the primary framework for understanding his work.[39] His case is a good opportunity to reflect on the possible impact of the artist's intentions on the reception of a work because he always openly discussed in the media what he tried to realize in his art. Yet, focusing on the artist's intention also involves the risk of using the artist in order to subdue the expressive freedom of the work itself and its impact. Klein's writings further confirm that what we today consider his creative intent was in many cases developed *after* he had learned about the reactions caused by his works.[40] The problem is thus twofold: not only can we not completely trust Klein's comments because, as said before, it is never quite clear whether his statements are serious or parody the seriousness of the art world, but also because, in the light of the theory of reception, it is important to acknowledge the freedom of the viewers to move beyond the artist's intention (however interpreted), or even in completely different directions, in the process of reception.

The individual interaction between the work and the recipient always creates a space for something new to emerge. Like all artists, Klein was conscious

39 Often, the analysis of Klein's works follows his biography up the point that one wonders whether the text is art criticism or biography, two rather different approaches and literary genres. See for example Thomas McEvilley, Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void, in: Rice Museum, Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective, Houston/New York: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982, 19–87.

40 Nan Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein, in: Rice Museum, Yves Klein, 1928–1962: A Retrospective, Houston/New York: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982, 89–129, here 108.

of this and wanted to promote such an interaction, creating in and through his works the conditions for a profound, free, and thus necessarily personal and subjective experience.[41] Thus the relationship between the artist/sender and the audience/receiver is not a one-way street, with the ›message‹ passing from the former through the work as its medium to the latter, as in the model of communication presumed by those who insist on the primacy of the artist's intention in the analysis. Instead, the work is at the center of a complex network of mutual interactions between artist, work, and viewer (situated in their respective contexts) that are mostly free and unpredictable, and possibly even contradictory. These interrelationships are important to consider in our reflections on how the artwork can realize presence in the encounter with the viewer. On the background of our previous theoretical discussions, and drawing in particular on Klein's *Monochromes*, we will explore the ways in which a work can enable the experience of the pure presence of itself and of its viewers' existence once it is liberated from its biographical connections and social context – if that is completely possible at all.

5.2 Pictorial Sensibility and Transcendence

The *Monochromes* represent an extreme case of abstraction, as they reject any reference to an external meaning through their absolute reduction to pure monochromatic color and surface without even a line or a different color that could suggest relationship or hierarchy, and without any symbolic reference that could distract the viewer from the purely sensory reception that the work requires. Thus, the viewers have the total freedom to sense and experience without any obligation to decipher, ›read‹, or interpret what they see.[42] In the *Monochromes*, the color blue (patented by the artist under the name *International Klein Blue*, IKB) covers the whole canvas including the margins (fig. 1). Without a frame and with smooth angles, positioned so that the canvas is slightly lifted away from the wall, the rectangular surface of the painting appears to be without boundary and to open beyond itself so that the color seems to flow from the canvas, covering the distance between work and audience and filling the space normally reserved to the viewer.[43]

41 Sidra Stich, Yves Klein, Stuttgart: Cantz, 1994, 67.

42 Stich, Yves Klein, 67.

43 Perlein, Given a Monochrome…, 14.

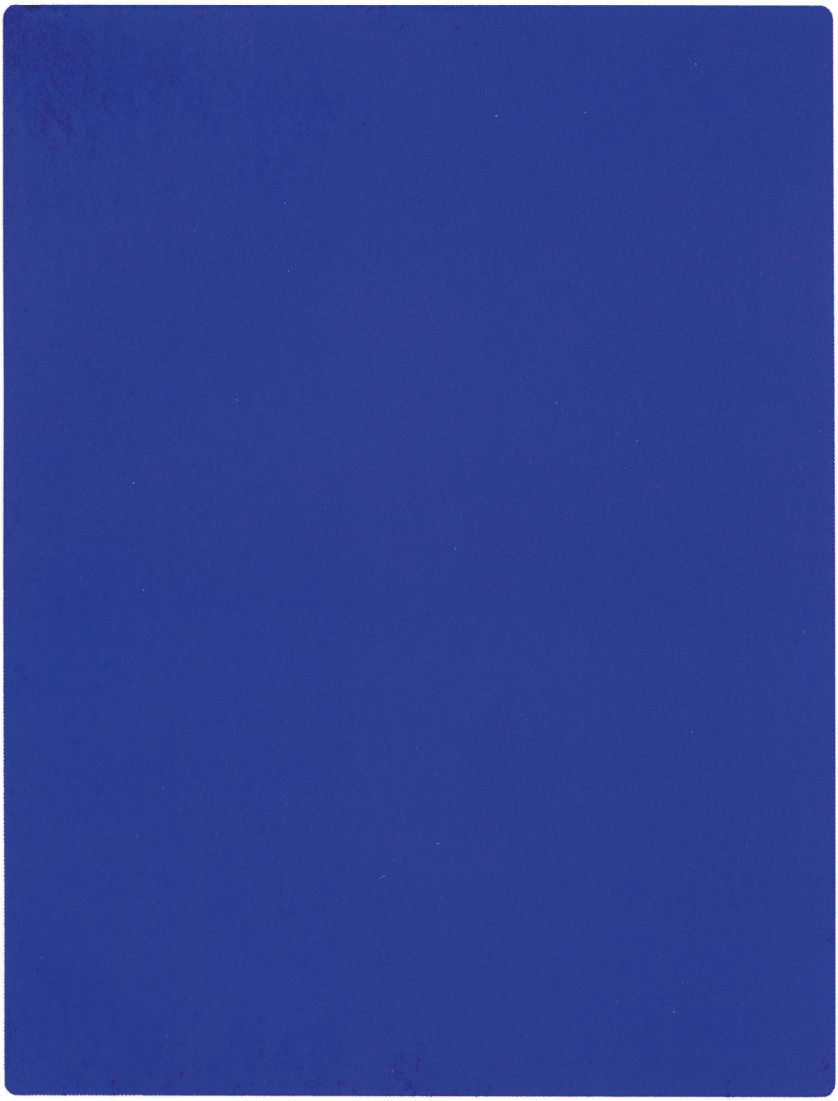

Fig. 1: Yves Klein, *Monochrome bleu* (IKB 191) (1962), pigment and raisin on canvas, 65.6 x 49 cm.[44]

44 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:IKB_191.jpg [accessed 22 February 2026].

The primary experience in the reception of a *Monochrome* is thus that of the color ultramarine with its particular depth, warmth, and richness, which at the same time seems to open a space reaching into the depth of the painting and a vastness that transcends the space of the painting outward, toward the viewer and beyond. In the moment of reception, the viewer becomes a part of these spaces that reach ›into‹ the painting and ›beyond‹ it in a moment of truth[45] – and nothing else – in the experience of the absolute presence of the work.[46]

As we said before, ›Yves le monochrome‹, as Klein liked to call himself, wanted to overcome the visible through pure color and to show the invisible in the deep blue, to achieve the immaterial, the infinite, through the purity of the material. In this sense the blue of the *Monochromes* represents a void like the one shown in the Iris Clert Gallery: an emptiness that, paradoxically, is not empty, a void that is filled and has something to offer because in its emptiness one can find a something of sense and experience.[47] The complete absence of structure and referentiality lends itself to the evocation of shere presence in the moment of reception: the presence of the work, of experience, and of one's own existence in the moment of perception.

Without referring to another reality, a *Monochrome bleu* is simply what it is:[48] the color blue that offers itself to reception, to the pure experience of

45 As Klein himself affirms, he did not want to achieve anything else with his works; see Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 102.

46 As we said above, a theory of reception that acknowledges the freedom of reception also recognizes that the experiences in front of an artwork may vary. Nevertheless, it is an experience in front of a given, particular artwork, in response to particular elements within the artwork and its material presence. What we describe here are dimensions of an experience we made and found confirmed in the experiences of others, such as published reviews and interpretations, but we do not claim that all viewers will feel the same.

47 Thomas McEvilley compares this sense of the void in Klein's works with the Buddhist concept of the void, a non-negative emptiness that is at the same time fullness; see Thomas McEvilley, Yves Klein and the Double-edged Sublime, in: Tracey R. Bashkoff (ed.), On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell, Berlin: Deutsche Guggenheim, 2001, 61–83, here 81.

48 The critical literature speaks even of a ›real presence‹ of color which represents only what it is. This use of theological terminology is certainly effective but also seems to be an example of a reference to a religious-theological context external of the image that does not allow the artwork its autonomy. See for example Jürgen Stöhr, Yves Klein und die ästhetische Erfahrung: Beiträge zu einer Theorie ästhetischer Erfahrung mit Rücksicht auf das Kunstschaffen Yves Kleins, Essen: Verlag Die blaue Eule, 1993, 170.

the work. The invisible character of color emerges here with the same affective power on the interiority of the viewer as described by Kandinsky. But it is also obvious that even pure color is not totally autonomous and free of cultural associations and thus external meaning. Most fundamentally, even though Klein's blue is not the color *of* something or represents something, it cannot defy the preconditions of visual reception: without being able to see and without knowing what color is, Klein's painting would remain not just without connotative meaning but also without its sensory effect. And while the *International Klein Blue* is a pure and a-referential color, it cannot separate itself from the everyday context of the viewer or the traditions of art history, nor from the fact that its inventor patented it as ›his‹ color. Klein's blue is necessarily integrated into a system of references and meanings, even if in a more limited and indetermined way than a figurative motif, a line, or one of Kandinsky's shapes.

And these relationships of meaning and association are numerous. As far as the sphere of nature is concerned, Klein's blue evokes the sky and sea, the spaces that are most closely associated with the infinite in Western culture. In the context of art history, Klein himself compares his blue to the blue of Giotto's frescoes, inserting himself into a historical context of artistic creation and meaning by referencing the symbolism of the color blue which for Giotto signified infinity, knowledge, spirituality, etc.[49] The web of significance of these cultural connotations of blue (in addition to whatever personal associations someone might have with the color) shows that the reception of a *Monochrome bleu* is not an encounter that occurs in complete isolation but refers to and participates in everyday experiences, the story of the viewers, perhaps their knowledge of art history or color symbolism in Western culture, and so on. A pure sensing of the work which does not even minimally take into account the context in which it is encountered is thus impossible; but what is possible, and what Klein does in the *Monochrome*, is to delimit and delay as much as possible the impact of this context and focus attention on the presence of the artwork itself.

The process of reception occurring – or potentially occurring – when standing in front of a *Monochrome* is characterized by an ambiguity due to a slight temporal offset and the twofold mode of experience made in it. In

49 Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 101.

a first, short moment, standing in front of the *Monochrome*, I experience a pure ›sensing of the blue‹ because of the complete lack of semantic reference points: I sense the space that opens under the pressure of color and the dissolution of the boundaries between the painting and the reality in front of it that leads me to the threshold of another reality. This sensation is in fact a synesthetic experience. I perceive the blue not only through my eyes in its tonality as a deep, dark ultramarine, but there is also a spatial perception as if the color extends from the painting, and in addition, it stimulates the sense of touch: the colored canvas seems to brush against me and transmit the tactile impression of a velvety surface.[50] Klein also wanted to integrate hearing into the experience of the *Monochromes*, creating thus already in 1947–1948 the project of a ›monotone‹ symphony (composed of one note followed by silence) as the auditive equivalent of the monochrome in painting.[51] This suggests that the experience of transcendence in the encounter with an artwork is possible only as a sensibility that transcends the limiting separation between the individual senses and unites the whole human being in this experience of reception. But this moment in which one captures the infinity of color and feels oneself in a multi-sensorial, bodily contact with it, is only a brief impression, volatile like infinity itself. Yet instead of constituting a deficit of the aesthetic experience of the transcendent, this transitory aspect of the experience appears as an essential element of what one experiences: any more permanent, and it would no longer be an experience of the unfathomable.

In the next moment, I move from pure sensation and feeling (of the image, and of myself sensing and feeling the image) to reflection, with the natural, and naturally suspicious, question: what exactly am I doing here? ›What‹ do I see and feel given that there is ›nothing‹ to see in »these rectangular chunks of color«?[52] And what was it I felt a moment ago when I was immersed in the open space of blue in and beyond the image? Why should

50 Kandinsky notes that some colors, such as dark ultramarine – as which one might describe Klein's blue – invite touch »so that one feels inclined to stroke them« (Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 60).

51 Biography (Michèle Brun and Archives Yves Klein), in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 211–236, here 212.

52 Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 104.

this blue canvas that has nothing distinctive apart from its particular color be an original, singular artwork, and why does it evoke these sensations in me?

This series of questions might also expand beyond my individual reception: why were people prepared to pay different prices for apparently identical paintings (even though each was painted individually, manually, and thus shows slight differences) during the first show of the *Monochromes* in Milan? What distinguishes this particular work from a mass-produced object? What is its ›aura‹ that causes people to stop in front of it?[53] These are questions that are fundamental to any discourse about art, and they emerge precisely in the experience of the process of reception of a *Monochrome*. In the void inhabited only by color and its affective tonality, a movement begins that leads from pure, synesthetic feeling to the reflection about the act of reception and back again, uniting the sensory, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions in the human being in the act of aesthetic (in all senses of the word) reception.[54]

For his part, Yves le monochrome would not have had any doubts about how to respond to the questions raised here. He would probably have explained that in the process of production, a process which emerges from the artist's sensations and experiences, he impregnated his works with what he called »pictorial sensibility«.[55] In the process of reception this sensibility is passed on from the work to the viewers and impregnates them in turn. Thus it is this pictorial sensibility that differentiates one canvas from the other, attributes originality to an artwork, and gives it the power to attract an audience to look at it, because it has something to give, because it offers itself as an occasion of experience.

Perhaps the blue of the *Monochromes* is an example of what Tillich could not find in the books of theologians, nor in any other book, and of which only art allowed him to intuit a trace. Given that the *Monochromes* reject any symbolic-discursive interpretation and evoke only a pure feeling in the

53 These questions have been raised by several critics of Klein, see for example Stich, Yves Klein, 87; Rosenthal, Assisted Levitation, 107–111. For the concept of the aura see Chapter 2 in this volume.

54 Stich, Yves Klein, 68.

55 Yves Klein, The Monochrome Adventure, in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 75–84, here 78. In his ›invisible‹ works, Klein tried to realize this sensibility in complete freedom from any form and to make it present where it exists most purely, in the void, in the absence; Klein, The Monochrome Adventure, 78–79.

first moment of their reception (whereas the meta-reflection occurs in a second step, already at the edge of the aesthetic experience and without adding anything to the primary sensory experience with its references to external discourses), one can understand that the blue paintings allow one to see and experience what books are not able to communicate, simply because as texts, they are always already integrated into an alphabetical, linguistic, and conceptual system that poses limits to what they can say. The excess, the expressive surplus of visual arts in which Tillich rediscovers the existential questions and anxieties of his time and which refuses the banalization of the religious and spiritual that he diagnoses in industrialized societies, is thus given in the presence of the work as it offers itself to the sensory experience of its audience, before and independently from its codification in signifiers.

Tillich identifies the ultimate or spiritual dimension of art as *Gehalt*, and the more profound it is, the more the *Gehalt* disappears from the work itself, whereas the experience of the *Monochromes* shows that it is necessary to stay in the presence of the work, to feel oneself feeling its presence in order to enter into the dynamic of transcendence. Along the same lines, the objects of so-called religious art detract from the pure aesthetic value of the presence of the work in the moment of reception because their legitimation as sacred art does not lie in themselves but in their reference to conventions and doctrines external to the image itself.

Critics and theorists continue to attempt to identify the connection between the aesthetic and religious in an external framework of references, be it in relation to the artist's intention or the subject matter and symbolic significance of the work,[56] and they do that with a certain success, even in the context of a work without any external reference points like the *Monochromes*. Numerous interpreters have attempted to include Klein's art in the traditional coordinates of sacred art by making reference to his Catholic socialization, his personal spiritual quest which led him to engage with various esoteric traditions, his use of Christian concepts such as incarnation, trinity, or transubstantiation. In particular, the theory of the icon has been used to explain the play between the visible and invisible in his works. Denys Riout, for example, compares the pictorial sensibility in the visibility

56 Thus for example Charlene Spretnak who identifies the spiritual »underground river« in contemporary art through the artist's religious or spiritual intentions; see Spretnak, The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art, 1–2.

of the work to the invisible divine that makes itself seen in the icon.[57] Thus interpreters attribute to Klein a search for the sacred that he ›captures‹ in the invisible void of his visible canvases and that then makes itself available for reception.[58] Such an interpretation has its use and legitimacy in so far as it provides us with information about the artist and the ways in which he has experienced the process of artistic production. But it is open to the risk, yet again, of diminishing the freedom of reception guaranteed by the self-referentiality of pure color and introducing a system of explicatory references to realities outside of the image.

Yet it is possible to find a relationship between Tillich's *Gehalt* and Klein's pictorial sensibility, at least in so far as both attempt to identify an element within or underneath the image that cannot be identified with its visible traces but is found in the space that the artwork opens up, and captured only in the process of aesthetic reception. Precisely because of this necessary sensory dimension, this element is connected for both Klein and Tillich with life, existence itself. Klein in particular affirms that he wants to paint »the pictorial moment which is born of an illumination by impregnation in life itself«.[59] Yet for Klein, in spite of the spiritual motivations of his artistic creativity, the pictorial sensibility is not an expression of a sacredness that would be in any way objectifiable and separable from the artwork, as it is the *Gehalt* for Tillich. The pictorial sensibility remains interior to the image, like an energy impressed in the elementary obscurity of matter and color that reveals itself only in the encounter between work and viewers who, in sensing the work, allow themselves to be impregnated with life in their own sensoriality.

6. Conclusion

As we said above, it is impossible to remove *all* external reference points from the process of reception of an artwork, but this is not even necessary, given that it would mean disregarding the contextuality and situatedness of human

57 Denys Riout, Yves Klein: Manifester l'immatériel, Paris: Gallimard, 2004, 34–35.

58 Alain Buisine, Blue, Gold, Pink: The Colors of the Icon, in: Bruno Corà/Gilbert Perlein (ed.), Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial!, New York: Delano Greenidge Editions, 2000, 21–34, here 30.

59 Klein, The Monochrome Adventure, 76.

embodied existence in general and of every single experience we make in particular. But the reduction to pure color and the lack of symbols or geometrical forms in Klein's *Monochromes* delimits these external references and makes it possible that the perception focuses on the singular presence of the work and the individual who encounters it. The meaning that emerges from this encounter is more existential than what Tillich identified as *Gehalt*: it is the experience of my own existence as a perceiving, bodily being, equipped with senses and a mind that can reflect upon what I perceive. It is the experience of being myself as a part of the world, of the space I inhabit. It can also, just for a moment, be the experience of infinity and immateriality, the consciousness of having perceived something that is not objectively given, that is absent and yet present in the (im)materiality of pure color.

Through the elimination of any objective representation, the painting allows me to see what has never been seen before by offering itself to the synesthetic intensification of sensory perception that involves the viewer's whole being and does not allow them to eliminate too quickly the *pathos* of aesthetic affects in order to focus on discursive meaning and interpretation. Between the two moments of reception, pure sensation and reflection, there remains a gap, a promise of connection when in the complete aesthetic experience senses and sense connect, liberated from their traditional separation.

It becomes clear that abstraction in painting cannot be a point of arrival but only of departure, a moment of tension that can never be resolved, a quasi-liturgical ritualization of the desire that art may respond to our need to incarnate the depth of our experiences, hopes, and anxieties in the sensory and visible. Like any ritual action, abstraction is a means and not the end. It aims at increasing and restoring our capacity to see, in an »overall movement of our being«.[60] On the one hand, this makes us again attentive to the aesthetic quality of all artistic productions that can never be reduced to the representative dimension. And on the other hand, even more importantly, it provides a moment of suspension in which the invisible and the transcendent brush against our capacities to perceive and sense. Nothing that we see in the work can reproduce or describe this experience but, in the perception of the work, a space has opened up between ourselves and the work in which the infinite can circulate and communicate. This is the

60 Henry, Seeing the Invisible, 124.

space when the aesthetic sensibility has returned to its depth and opened up for the unconditioned.

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