

The Unspeakable and the Imaginary Works of Klein and Craig

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The idea that contemporary art is a boundless field, where there are not anymore restrictive canons and even an enunciated simple idea can be considered a perfect work, before being a sign of decadence in arts, as it used to be recognized until the middle of last century, it is, perhaps, the most distinctive feature of its contemporaneity. Actually, this can be seen as a mannerist trace of it facing the Dada freshness and the wonders of the first conceptual art, or as an historical date, scar of our time. As suggested by Jeff Wall, it is the possibility of all the arts, usually before analyzed separately, as being considered as **contemporary art**, what makes the current works in many different fields and under the most distinguished supports, truly second appearances of their original nature. They could be seen now as **events forms** and reveal already a baroque phase of this trend consolidated in the last fifty years. The most remarkable feature of this contemporary art, evident in all its well-succeeded examples, it is the role of the spectator, at least as a decisive partner, and possibly as a real co-author of the works. Nowadays, perhaps more intensively than ever, we will all be artists and performers of our sensitivity, although only some will reveal the power of proposing effective "free plays between imagination and understanding", as suggested by Kantian definition of aesthetic experience (Kant, 2000, p. 102).

Among the artists who invented new ways of thinking and creating art works in the 20th century, two of them, Gordon Craig (1872-1966) and Ives Klein (1928-1962), one working in the field of theater and the other in the visual and plastic arts, have made from the imagination a powerful tool, creating intangible works,

sustained only in the imaginary field. The idea here is to discuss, from their invisible and immaterial works, the issue of the **unspeakable** in art appreciation, understood as the missing element in the enjoyment of it, whether literary or cinematographic, musical or choreographic, pictorial or scenic. The notion of the unspoken that it is worked here is borrowed from Richard Wagner, who used it in his theoretical texts on opera. For Wagner, the gesture (*gebärde*) allowed the viewer to see what the sung narrative and orchestra music only insinuate. The singer gesture would translate the unspeakable of his singing, as well as the gesture of the orchestra, the *leitmotiv*, would translate the unspeakable of the music produced by it (Wagner, 1964, p. 217). Our point extends the meaning of Wagner observation beyond the functional semantic and dramatic features that were required by his operas. Here, the unspeakable is taken into account in the context of the contemporary art – applicable to any example of the scenic and performing arts. It is, at the same time, everything that is latent in every work of art and that, in all these, would reveals visually, auditory or physically, those powers that remained secret in there. In a period in which the spectators, in their untransferable experiences with the works of art, are the ones who establishes the meanings, or confirms their impossibility, the unspeakable is both what each work denies, making it interesting, as what it delivers freely and turns it obvious and redundant. Thus, the own gesture of the actor, singer or performer, as their presence and the scene they establish, their ephemerality and the reverberations that provoke in the memory, are things said that bury, for revealing it, the unspoken. The unspeakable revealed, dies and depletes the works of their secrets. The emptiness, the immateriality and invisibility, are instances, however, where the works escape of revealing what it is unspoken on them, and guarantee the impossibility of saying it. To see the gesture, the body, the dance step, or listen to the music note generated by the orchestra and see the brushstrokes of the canvas or filmed images, it performs in the mind of the spectator, if absent, would have to be made by himself. The mere presence of the works already conceals, muffles and prevents their formation in the mind of the receiver. It steals from the assistants the prerogative of the view and adjustment, imposing protocols and paths, behaviors and attitudes, regulating the processes of reading, whether visual, auditory or intellectual. This, of course, relates to the limit issue, because any work can have in its constitution, plastic and architectural, visual or sound, a concrete, material

and visible existence, and still keep an unspeakable that will become provocative and instigate the spectator to collaborate with it. The best art, or the great art of any epoch of the art history, has always had its worth much more from its mysteries than from its evidences. This could indeed be a possible definition of **aura**. That would be what it is not shown or to be the unspeakable in itself.

Ives Klein and the invisible but radiant immateriality

The **theater of the void** and the **immaterial pictorial sensibility** in Ives Klein are perfect examples of the undoubted potentiality of the unspeakable, or in this case, even more, of areas not disclosable or viewable at all, and which can only be imagined. One has just to consider that the role of the verbal rhetoric mobilized by the artist's texts in the inciting of the imagination of his readers or listeners. Anyway, this radiant invisibility, or this invisible and immaterial irradiation, manifested in Klein in the performative field of his theatricality confused with life – the theater of the void – in the visual experience he offers – the immaterial pictorial sensibility – and even, in the economic value of his works – the transference receipts of immaterial pictorial sensibility zones.

After developing, in his early efforts as an artist, the monochrome canvas and radicalize them, already in 1957, with the exhibition *epoca blu* in the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan, where the mono chromatic approach deeply focused on the blue color, Klein made his boldest artistic gesture (among many radical gestures produced in a short trajectory of seven years), and the most anticipatory of the issues discussed here, with the exhibition known as *The Void*, in the Iris Gallery Clert in Paris. Launched on April 28, 1958, the exhibition had as subtitle: "The Specialization of the Sensibility in its Primordial State of Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility". The day before the exhibition, Klein literally emptied the gallery removing all the furniture and objects (including the telephones) and spent forty-eight hours alone, painting the gallery walls white. The artist remained focused on his **pictorial sensibility** for, as expected, magnetize the environment with a remaining aura, to be recognized/experienced by visitors when they were faced with that space emptied of objects and visible works, but full of a profuse white. In there, the work was already the environment and its enjoyment demanded the provision for an imaginary game of the observer, in which he was invested

with the condition of co-author. At that exhibition Klein announced his "Pneumatics Epoch", one that would succeed the blue one.¹

The same experiment was repeated in 1961, when the artist was invited to do a retrospective of his work at the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum in Krefeld, Germany. The exhibition actually happened in a villa next to the museum, built by Mies van der Rohe in 1920. Its owner Ulrich Lange released it to contemporary art exhibitions and it was there that Klein, not only exposed his monochrome canvases, as reissued the experiment of 1958. He requested that, besides displaying his canvas and sponges, a room should be booked for the "specialization and stabilization in the atmosphere of my 'void' volume of immaterial pictorial sensibility" (Riout, 2010, p. 76). In a small room, which was not part of the original building of der Rohe and it was included in an expansion of that space in 1950, Klein repeated the gesture he had made three years before and painted it all white, including the floors. Two white neon bulbs helped to intensify the neutral color in its irradiation. This time, Klein's installation, empty of works, but magnetized by the presence of the artist and impregnated with white paint would never be dismantled. The work is still there and became one of current attractions of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krefeld. It can be visited by a person a time, who enters the room and can remain there in solitude, experiencing the remaining radiation left by Ives Klein. The room was repainted in 1994, during an exhibition of Klein and the Argentinian-Italian artist, his contemporary and friend, Lucio Fontana (1899-1968), which makes the historian Denys Riout wonder if that work could still be considered Klein's. The response from Riout is negative, because the artist himself made a point of distinguishing between the functional aspects of painting in white – a precondition to remove residual emanations from previous uses of that environment – from the founder operation itself, invisible and unverifiable, of configuring the appropriate immaterial pictorial sensibility.

Even so, who could resist, if passing by Krefeld one of these days, visiting the white room of Klein, to see if it is possible to experience any objective sensation of this dense immateriality of sensory potentialities?

¹ The name refers to the Greek word *pneuma*, which would mean the contained air in the sense of breathing and the air that fills up the lungs.

In 1959, a year after the Void exposure in the Parisian gallery Iris Clert, at a conference in the Sorbonne, entitled "The evolution of art in the immaterial sense," Klein reported:

I tried to create an ambience, a pictorial climate that is invisible, but present, in spirit as Delacroix appointed in his diaries as "the indefinable", which he considered to be the true essence of painting. The pictorial state, invisible in the gallery space, should provide the best overall definition of painting these days, which would mean radiance. If the creative process is successful, this invisible and intangible non-materialization should act on sensitive vehicles, or bodies of the exhibition visitors, much more effectively than the visible usual paintings, either figurative, or non-figurative, or even monochromatic (Klein, 2007, p. 81).

Delacroix citing, a recurrence in Klein's writings, and the notion of indefinable as the most important value of a painting, can be approximated to the unspeakable that is here being elaborated. In these extreme conditions, the experiments of the **immaterial pictorial sensibility**, the indefinable becomes not a pictorial feature, but the own non-materialized work, suggestion only perceptible by the sensitivity and not by the five senses. In a way, Klein creates art for the "sixth sense", which does not have sense organs but reveals itself as an objective force operating in living beings. According to Klein, the sensitivity,

Is what exists beyond our being and yet, it always belongs to us. Life itself is not ours. It is with our own sensibility that we can acquire life. The sensitivity is the currency of the universe, the space, the nature. It enables us to acquire life in the first material state! The imagination is the vehicle of sensibility! When transported by the imagination, we get "Life" - life itself, which is absolute art (Klein, 2007, p. 76).

The same immateriality principle as a condition of the great art, echoing the metaphor of the hymen in Mallarmé, as Derrida reads, when the unsaid is not perpetrated, or, as Klein insists several times, the idea of Delacroix that "indefinable is precisely what goes beyond precision" (Apud Riout 2010, p. 127)² will prevail in other works and phases of the artist. But of all the non-materiality and the most invisible projections, the most ambitious was his performance in the Theatre of the Void, on November 27th, 1960. As a participant of the Paris Avant-Garde Art Festival, and highlighting that he did not identify with the vanguard – "that ages so fast from generation to generation" (KLEIN, 2007, p. p.101), Klein printed a tabloid titled *Dimanche*, emulating a Sunday supplement in the Parisian newspaper *France Soir* and bringing on the cover the famous

² Apud Riout, op.cit.p 127: Delacroix, E. *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, translated by Lucy Norton, London, Phaidon, 1995.

photo of Harry Shunk, which shows himself flying from a wall over the asphalt of a quiet street in Paris, under the title "A man in Space" and the caption "The painter of space launches himself in life!". In the four pages of this tabloid, distributed in Paris on that day, several texts configured the performance and reported on Klein's vision of theatricality.

The theater is in perpetual search: search for its lost beginnings. The Grand Theatre is, indeed, Eden; the important thing is to establish once for all, for our well-being, our static positions individually within the universe. [...] I seek, mainly, to do in my own creations, that "transparency", that immeasurable "void" in which lives the permanent and absolute liberated spirit of all sizes (Klein, 2007, p. 101).

In the main text, "void theater", besides proclaiming that day, "from midnight to midnight," he would present a "true spectacle of emptiness" and wishing that on this day "the pleasure and enchantment will would reign" and that all, "conscious and unconscious actors-spectators in this gigantic representation should have a good day". Then, Klein cites several theatrical artists of the first half of the 20th century, and mentions a manifesto of 1954 establishing the terms of a kind of "private theater" to be "effectively" frequented by subscription:

Each member shall receive, in exchange for their subscription, a seat with their names in the void theater auditorium, where a continuous spectacle without actors, spectators, etc. is offered. This representation not constant in the auditorium, where nobody enters after starting, should have more intense moments than others, communicated at first, to subscribers by a program that they receive in the mail ... or otherwise! (...) The theater will be closed; no one will be able to enter it, only the box office will be open, so that the latecomers can, at the last minute, make their subscription before each show. (...) Actors (...) will have nothing to do but to know that they are actors and remember to pick up their vouchers after each show, or "that time of hyper-intensity" indicated in the program of subscribers (Klein, 2007, p.101).

Again, and this time, in an art where the physical presence and the sharing between the work and the spectator is decisive, a sensitivity located, but expanded – either in the entire space of a city during a particular day, or in empty venues, unreachable by the eyes – it performs imaginatively autonomous of bodies and signs, languages and physical presence. In the view of the unspeakable that it is developed here, there is an infinite of imaginary possibilities for the inhabitants of the city in which this invisible scene is set, confused with life, or for the "subscribers" of this nonexistent programming, who obtain the right to imagine it. It is interesting that both the case of "immaterial

pictorial sensibility" that magnetizes chosen and prepared space with a radiation – "radiant pictorial ambience that usually inhabit the studio of any artist armed with real power; A sensual density that is abstract, but real, will exist and live by itself in empty seats in appearance only" (Klein, 2007, p. 82) – like this show interdicted to the assistants, but by which it pays and creates salaries to the actors, the invisible and intangible has a concrete existence, almost like a pure unspeakable and unapproachable. This "presence" is in contrast to the concreteness of the *Dada* readymade, whose aura arises from a displacement of the "object found" from its objective context, but that can be touched and seen; or with the deletion of any work or object at all, as in the work of the contemporary artist Tino Seghal, more interested in inter-personal relations. Seghal offers emptiness to the public without any other presence than the observers themselves faced with a void emptied of any potential effect or aura. In Klein, on the contrary, the void is a resonant and full presence of latent potentialities, even invisible and immaterial. In there, the unspeakable, much more than the possible random directions of the "relational aesthetics" of today, is a secret, at the same time objective and inviolable.

Drama for Fools by Gordon Craig: unspoken or impossible work?

The *Drama for fools* is a series of plays for puppets written by Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966), began in 1914 and never finished. In fact, Craig wrote most of his plays between 1916 and 1918, but has worked on them continuously until his last years of life. Among the 365 planned plays, Craig fully made around thirty-five. In a typewritten text in 1975, an anonymous editor has cataloged 56 items, but including second and third versions of some plays, and plenty of prologues, prefaces and explanatory notes. Marina Siniscalchi, in 1980, published the first scholarly article on the original manuscripts of the *Drama for Fools*, citing a work plan located between the original anticipating the creation of 119 plays.³ Bilingual recent edition of the International Institute of Marionette makes this dozen plays accessible in English and French, and confirms the findings of scholars who had already leaning on the theme: Craig wrote less than a tenth of

³ Siniscalchi, M.M., "E.G.Craig: the Drama for Marionettes", *Theatre Research International*, vol. 5, n.2, Spring 1980, pp.122-37. See also Siniscalchi, M.M., *Il Trionfo Della Marionetta: testi e materiali inediti di Edward Gordon Craig*, Roma, Oficina Edizioni, 1980.

what he had set out to do.⁴ Apart from the uncertainties of how many plays would have been written, it is clear today that "The Drama for Fools" was not a minor part of his work. Instead, it became the dominant shaft of his creative process in the rest of his life, watching him from the years 1920 until 1960. What may be asked from these evidences is the reason why Craig, the prophet of a non-literary theater, or of the anti-dramatic approach, has concentrated his best efforts in the mature age and throughout his old age in a project whose approach was clearly dramatic and literary? It was not contradictory to write dramas after having, for such a long time preached the theater autonomy as an art opposite to literature? Or, still, why a contingent project to an exceptional situation, the First World War, extends itself unfinished throughout its existence? What remained of this impossible, unfulfilled and challenging work, is enough to attest that, even though there is nothing extraordinary in the dramatic literature of Craig itself, irregular and imperfect by its inability to cope with the dramatic tradition against which he is programmatically positioned in his previous theoretical texts, more well known, it shows exemplary in its disposal how he was an artist who made of the virtual a principle and of the imaginary achievement a *modus operandi*. Mainly, through the initials and the parallel notes to his plays – a series of prefaces and introductions – we can not only reconstruct in our imaginary his spectacle of dreams, that he would never come to perform effectively, but to find another architecture in dialogue with that described in Ives Klein ("the architecture of air"), full of immaterial work and of unspeakable powers. In this case, unlike the previous, there is a prolific and abundant text that is perfectly speakable, but never actually comes to be said / staged. It is a text that intends to be precarious and unfinished, and which inconclusive condition becomes both its rationale as its alibi for a permanent postponement of this saying, maintained only in potency.⁵ To characterize this hesitation on acting, or better, to understand how this state of suspension that announces a pledge to say soon, but that never lasts and keeps hesitantly for four decades, it is worth trusting some of Craig's comments about *Drama for*

⁴ Craig, E.G., *Le Theatre Des Fous/The Drama for Fools*, Charleville-Mézières/ Montpellier, L'Entretemps/ Institut International de la Marionette, 2012. The original edition is based on the Paris National Library, the Library of the University of Austin, Texas and University Library of Eton, UK.

⁵ Four of the plays were published: *Mr. Fish and Mrs. Bonés*, *The Tune the old cow died of*, *The Gordian Knot* and *The Three Men of Gotham*. These four and a fifth, *Romeo and Juliet*, were released as brochures on issues twenty-five numbers copied.

Fools, whether subliminal arranged between the lines of the pieces themselves, or explicit, inserted in its various introductions and explanatory notes. It is noticed on them, directly or indirectly, the discourse on a negative work, or in case of not being, that does not want to be revealed.

The proposed hypothesis is that Craig refusal for closing, completing or submitting this work, fruit of a life labor, is proportional to the frustration of not having done his large and ambitious projects that were aborted or failed. These can be summarized in two revolutionary proposals, both unfulfilled: (i) the "uber-marionette", a non-human being who, ideally, would replace the actor, and the limitations that his own vanity you imposed, (ii) and "fifth scene", a new standard of theatricality in which canvas forming geometric volumes, architected in continuous movements in space as tridimensional music, would make it possible to visualize and materialize themselves in psychic states unthinkable in the previous theatrical tradition, anchored in the drama and literary fiction. Both projects have in *Drama for Fools*, puppet fair theater structured by a series of conventional dramatic plays, a kind of symmetrical opposite, or photographic negative. I mean the unfulfillment of the *Drama for Fools* would come from its root in the vocation to deny what was dreamed, but not reached. It remains a negative path, in which what is done is constantly undone, or that the undoing and pulling become the operating standard. Since this operation occurs in the second half of the productive life of the artist, when everything of most important that he made was already effectively done, it is not an exaggeration to suppose that this continuous doing and undoing, this project always revised and postponed, reveals a neurotic mechanism of repetition, which leads the artist to return obsessively to the same point: the impediment of the dreamed work, since his accomplishment would confirm the failures and frustrations in the experienced facts.

His change of perspective in the *Drama for Fools* can be explained as related to external factors. His personal situation had changed greatly, since that time in 1908, when he began to publish *The Mask* and was optimist to revolutionize the scene. Six years later, with the onset of World War I and the closure of his school in Florence, he should realize the impossibility of producing any theater at all. According to his son, Edward Craig, he surrounded himself with a huge

bibliography on puppets and decided to produce plays to be performed in his studio, in Rome. It could be said that the historical conditions and the cultural environment (the strong tradition of Puppet Theater in Italy) contributed to this change of route. But it is interesting to note that Craig, even never taken this as a capitulation, wrote extensively about the challenge he has set itself and did not fail to recognize its limitations to the task. In the *First Prologue* he acknowledged the difficulties in sight. "The attempt to build a drama strongly emotional without extensive conversations, without a climax, and without envy or discussions it is a problem (Craig, n/d, p. 37)."

The only part of the previously announced plays, which was fully realized, was *The Adventure of Rome*, a lovely set of children's texts for puppets. The first one, *Jupiter, Parrot, Pluto, Cockatrice and the Blind Boy* was revised five times between 1916 and 1949, and in the words of the editor's typewriter copy, "what started as a charming vignette in 1916, became a hypertrophied volume of 14,400 words in 1949, very distant from the simplicity and the charm of the two original versions".⁶

These constant revisions let the reader of *Drama for Fools* facing a real puzzle. Taking into account all that is known about these texts, especially after such a bilingual edition organized by Didier Plassard, Marion Chenetier-Alev and Marc Duvillier, it is possible to deal with them as a literature body, which represents, better than any of the theoretical writings of Craig, his abilities as a writer of fiction and playwright.

This legacy of Craig, this strange negative and impossible work, to which he clings with all energies over fifty years of artistic life, would have a dialogue with the contemporary art, as it was considered earlier, where it is often the no work, the no object and the pure virtual that stimulates the viewer to use his own imaginative powers to generate whatever would be to be enjoyed.

Besides the already mentioned frustrated project "uber-marionette", the other great impossibility, or dreamed projection made by Craig but not fulfilled, is recorded in a text in 1923, subsequent to the first forays into *Drama for Fools*,

⁶ Craig, E.G., "Editor's note about the play *Jupiter, Parrot, Pluto, Cockatrice and Blind Boy*", typewriter copy of the V & A Museum, London, p. 119. n.d.

and perhaps, his most original and prophetic theoretical reflection. This is about the text *Scene*, in which he presents the *fifth scene* and re-proposes the screens as raw materials of a spectacular new standard, or a new scene, fully autonomous from literature, fluent in matters like music architecture and scenic space. This idea, even if only fully realized after the Craig's death, by stage directors, for example, such as Robert Wilson, virtually opens the possibility of abstraction on the material plane of the theater. The screens had been developed in the studio in Florence in 1907, tested in Moscow (Moscow Art Theatre), in his acting of *Hamlet*, in a tense partnership with Stanislavski, and in Dublin at the Abbey Theatre by William Butler Yeats,. Shelved, after that, as dozens of pictures to illustrate the story of Craig until today, they are used as supports for virtual imaginative exercises about this scene, effectively, only glimpsed. In *Scene*, Craig describes verbally what his drawings only suggested. It is known that these "visions" and its detailed description conforms an important invention (he even got it patented in 1910) and dares to situate it as turning a page in the history of theater.

I call it the fifth scene, as it meets the requirements imposed by the modern spirit - the spirit of ceaseless change: the scenarios we have been using for the plays for centuries were just the old static scenarios meant to be exchanged. This is quite different from a scene that has a changing nature (Craig, 1923).

Craig's arrogant tone should not prevent us to recognize the relevance of his analysis, and, as indeed, it announces a revolution, only effective when technological developments happened in the scenography, in scenery technician and in the scenic light, that enabled it. It is important to recognize it to size the gap between the greatness of that project and the diminished scale of the *Drama for Fools*, where it would protect itself like a snail in its home. Somehow, the meticulous and constant postponement of the *Drama for Fools* project, constitutes an artistic *modus operandi* in which, working this impossible project, whose infinity ensured by the constancy with which it is applied, in never reaching an end, Craig sublimated the frustration and failure of his greatest work, a truly impossible one, only enunciated in words and in sketched drawings and models and which only existed in latency. The *Drama for Fools* appears in this context as a double negative, in a way that it implies in the negation of Craig's largest and most ambitious projects – a new scene and a new actor – and

that his nominated author, Tom Fool, can be seen as a buffoon alter ego of the artist who ironically and mockingly makes the chronicle of this failure.

Put this issue of Craig's virtual staging, either the one projecting a revolution in the theater, as the one who receives the shadow of this unfulfillment and repeats it in comic and ironic key, but not less imaginary, it is worthy to retake the previous considerations about the work of Ives Klein and, specially, the notion here worked of the unspeakable.

In Craig there is a research of the unspoken that, unlike that one proposed by Wagner, does not want to supply the drama and the music, visually reinforcing what had already been understood with verses and with the presence of the singers. There is, and this is their biggest asset, the ambition to build a scenic stuff no longer dramatic, but material and visible, that evokes the unspeakable, like the poetry and the theater dreamed by Mallarmé. Where he converges with Klein is in the research of that "less" to be shown in this evocation, without remarkable indexes, closer to the vibrating capacities of music energy and pure color than the cognition of dramatic myths and regular fictions. The unspeakable intangible of Klein, where he approaches the indefinable of Delacroix, wants to be a fulfilled power, present as absence. Craig's projective texts, raised or lowered, are objective presences, viewable images and narratives, but want themselves as absents while postponed presences, always waiting as latent powers.

These two limiting cases of playing with the unspoken have its internal logic and are independent of any analytical confirmation to be configured. What we tried here was, inspired by them, to speculate on the notion of the unspeakable, trying to design it in scenarios that may transcend the banality and cliché, and enlighten our contemporary art.

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