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The Mood of Nothing: Depictions of Extraordinary Banality

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The Mood of Nothing: Depictions of Extraordinary Banality

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to demonstrate modes of nothingness encountered in contemporary art. Nothingness has a concrete history that begins with abstraction and a formless aesthetic experience that derives from Modernism. Although contemporary art can be classified as a continuation of the anti-aesthetic properties of the Post-Modernist agenda, this thesis posits that nothingness continues to be reimagined and re-represented in contemporary art practices. This study offers two differentiating yet strikingly similar displays of nothingness in the works of James Turrell’s (b. 1943) *Live Oak Friends Meeting House* (2010) and Uta Barth’s (b.1958) *…and in time* (2007-2008). Turrell’s Quaker meetinghouse exhibits spiritual dimensions of nothingness, which deviates from the nihilistic renderings of nothingness found in Barth’s photographic representations of the everyday. However, the works are united in their resounding moods–the essence of nothing characterized by emptiness, plainness, banality, and absence. These seemingly unextraordinary characteristics are paradoxically capable of extraordinary beauty. It is the inherent plainness of the works that creates an erasure of imposed meanings, allowing works to be universally open to interpretation yet predicated on a singular aesthetic experience, which is highly invested in the act of looking. The invitational austerity of nothingness beckons viewers to explore and project meaning into the impending absence, delving into the ambiguous territory of *feeling* and how emotions are created, molded, and felt.
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INTRODUCTION

“Why is there something instead of nothing?”¹ Martin Heidegger unearths the duality between two concepts that are interlinked in this deceptively simple question. The history of nothingness is complex; its ever-changing forms are constantly in flux but always inherently something. Heidegger’s question situates nothingness as an existential subject of debate; however, I would like to redirect attention to the formal and conceptual properties of nothingness found in the linear trajectory of art history. Modernism marked the beginnings of non-representational art, which required an unmediated aesthetic experience predicated on abstraction or nothingness. However, with the postmodernist agenda came a shift in ideology, which was defined through the deconstruction of the modernist status quo and a critique of cultural politics of the time. Although anti-aestheticism is still seen at the forefront of the contemporary art canon, nothingness continues to be relevant and reimagined within the scope of contemporary art. It is through the works of James Turrell (b.1943) and Uta Barth (b.1958) that I will explore contemporary modes of nothingness in this thesis.

The subliminal properties of nothingness within the context of these two works can be characterized by emptiness, blankness, banality, and absence. Yet, these seemingly mundane characteristics inversely allow works to be capable of striking visibility. James Turrell’s Live Oak Friends Meeting House (2010) and Uta Barth’s …and in time (2007-08) have an invitational emptiness in their plain and unornamented design, which transforms unextraordinary encounters into uncanny displays of beauty. The reductive austerity allows works to possess a level of anonymity, devoid of the artists’ presence and open to a singular aesthetic experience.

The first chapter delves into how nothingness is conveyed through Turrell’s Quaker meetinghouse, which functions both as an active place of worship and work of art. Turrell deviates from a strict traditional rendering of a meetinghouse by adding his own structural intervention called a *Skyspace*—a square cutout of the ceiling that exposes the sky. The combination of this subversive structure and the modest design of the meetinghouse inspires stillness and contemplation, allowing the sky to be the focal point of the work. There are spiritual and romantic undertones present in Turrell’s display of nothingness, which is in opposition to Barth’s nihilistic rendering of nothingness, grounded in the quotidian. The second chapter explores Barth’s interest in perception, which is manifested through the systematic ritual of taking photographs of the interior of her home. Barth focuses on the act of taking photographs that allows her to re-encounter everyday scenes. The resulting photographs depict largely empty spaces that are free of Barth’s subjectivity, allowing viewers to project meaning onto her secluded spaces.

Given the vast complexities of nothingness I provide a short history of its changing forms that help contextualize the works addressed in this thesis within this historical timeline. Early depictions of nothingness or rather formlessness can be traced back to Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic judgment of beauty and the sublime found in his seminal text *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Beauty is dependent on reflection or what Kant calls the *sensus communis* (common sense)—a systematic process that takes account a collective view of judgment as a source of comparison that allows one to step outside the limitations of his or her own perspective and develop a more analytical sense of judgment. ² This account of beauty is relevant because both Turrell and Barth reconfigure unspectacular scenes that are of sentimental value into art objects that become worthy of examination. The subjective universality of beauty is linear to its aesthetic experience.

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The works are able to become universally open to interpretation through its inherent plainness, which also allows for a singularity of experience specific to each viewer.

Unlike beauty, Kant’s sublime relies on intuition and is rendered as a powerful emotional encounter that is capable of both immense pleasure and pain. The incomprehensible feelings of horror and awe are delegated through both the powerful forces of nature and the comfort of safety when no real danger is present. According to art historian Natalie Kosoi, we discover our superiority over the finite state of nature when our mortality is not jeopardized.³ Kosoi states, “The encounter with nothingness offers us no such redemption. On the contrary, it points to the impossibility of any salvation, as our impending nothingness is also what constitutes us.”⁴ Nothingness enables the finite to bleed into the realm of the infinite, which translates to the formlessness of aesthetic experience found in art history, specifically tied to post-1950’s abstraction.

Kirk Varnedoe in his book Pictures of Nothing (2006) describes Abstract Expressionism as being removed from figurative representation but reverts to a pure aesthetic experience that is entirely dependent on the moment of interaction between viewer and work of art. The formlessness of Abstract Expressionism neither has a prescribed meaning nor does it try to impose meaning onto the viewer. Abstraction is predicated on the viewer’s reflexivity and personal projection.⁵ Varnedoe states that modes of nothingness are found “on the edges of banality, familiarity, and the man-made world. It is the production of forms of order that are not recognizable as order, but vehicles of feeling that seem impersonal, vessels of intelligence that appear utterly dumb.”⁶ Abstract Expressionism subverts traditional notions of pictorial

⁴ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid., 271.
representation and provides possibilities of what art can be. Amidst its unmitigated formlessness, Varnedoe is interested in the nuances of abstraction, which invite for further examination and emphasizes the importance of careful observation when presented with less to look at because its simplicity allows the smallest of details to be accentuated.\(^7\) Both Turrell and Barth play with abstraction and radical simplicity that render subtle shifts in their work to be dramatic. The formless experience of Abstract Expressionism allows for a new kind of relationship between art and viewer that does not rely on representation or recognition but rather sensation.

The dynamic between art and viewer is further challenged with the postmodernist turn, which reacts against the aesthetic and formalist ideologies of Modernism. Hal Foster describes Postmodernism as a deconstruction of tradition that “…seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations.”\(^8\) Minimalism with its reductive three-dimensional qualities was amidst this theoretical shift. From an aesthetic and ideological standpoint, the understated nature of Minimalism goes against the need for validation in the arts. This sense of unease that critics were feeling at the time resulted from their need to see something that aggressively demanded importance.\(^9\) The idea of producing art that was religiously and intransigently unimportant, with no redeeming value, was collectively shared by those who were labeled minimalists.\(^10\) The term \textit{minimal art}, generally associated with East Coast Minimalism, was coined by art historian Richard Wollheim in his essay “Minimal Art” (1965) to critique the method of creation, specifically within the context of artists who had adopted unconventional methods of production.\(^11\) New methods of production allowed artists to

\(^7\) Ibid., 8.
\(^8\) Hal Foster, introduction to \textit{The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture; or, Postmodernism a Preface}, by Hal Foster (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1983), xii.
\(^9\) Varnedoe, 106.
\(^10\) Ibid.
integrate industrial materials into their artistic practice, requiring high levels of mechanical precision to create simple reductive forms. The unembellished straightforward nature of these sculptures were plain yet impactful.

It was the imposing presence of Minimalism that Michael Fried felt the works to be incredibly theatrical and lacking the autonomy to exist independent of the viewer. These sculptural works performed for the viewer through shape and scale, which could not be complete without an audience. It was not enough to simply look at the work but one had to physically engage with the space, allowing viewers to have highly individualized experiences. Fried describes the experience of minimalist or what he calls literalist art:

> Someone has merely to enter the room in which a literalist work has been placed to become that beholder, that audience of one – almost as though the work in question has been waiting for him. And inasmuch as literalist work depends on the beholder, is incomplete without him, it has been waiting for him.¹²

Like their east coast counterpart West Coast Minimalism was also invested in viewer interaction. Associated with the Los Angeles art scene, West Coast Minimalism had a sleeker and more vibrant aesthetic that more explicitly emphasized a disembodiment of experience. Reductive qualities did not lead toward the pragmatic concreteness that was associated with East Coast Minimalism but rather pointed toward uncertainty and more ambiguous notions of aesthetic experience.¹³ The West Coast minimalists in particular were interested in time and movement, which had a transcendental Emersonian search for the absolute and sublime.¹⁴ The ephemeral nature of these works is grounded in sensory experiences and perceptual illusions, which are contrary to the object-based physicality of East Coast Minimalism. Classified as a leading figure of West Coast Minimalism or the California Light and Space Movement, Turrell is explicitly

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¹³ Varnedoe, 114.
¹⁴ Ibid.
linked to the Los Angeles art scene. Uta Barth, whose studio practice is based in Los Angeles, is also deeply influenced by the California aesthetic. The works of Turrell and Barth are open to interpretation but nevertheless involve a level of interactivity where the viewer’s understanding of the work is highly dependent on forging personal meanings.

Going back to Heidegger’s question, forms of nothingness are constantly shifting and being challenged. In his essay “Blankness as Signifier” Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe discusses the potentiality of nothingness as a signifier of what is to come or what is possible.\textsuperscript{15} Gilbert-Rolfe addresses the shifting forms of nothingness and how its meanings have changed over time. Earlier models of nothingness are rooted in a more pictorial tradition, creating boundaries and limitations through absence. Cave paintings are cited as an early example of nothingness, the orientation of negative space in relation to cave drawings resulted in a contained form of blankness known as composition.\textsuperscript{16} However, contemporary models of nothingness have become progressively more ambiguous and fluid, where blankness is no longer a signifier for absence but a signifier for \textit{something}.\textsuperscript{17} Gilbert-Rolfe cites examples such as, the paradoxically communicative properties of a blank expression and the instantaneity of a blank computer screen. Nothingness has transcended into a space of projection, “where anything can happen or even be made to happen.”\textsuperscript{18}

The history of nothingness has many forms that still continue to be relevant within the scope of contemporary art. These evolving characteristics of nothingness are embodied and reinterpreted by Turrell and Barth. Both artists recontextualize concepts such as abstraction, theatricality, and ephemerality by integrating these methods into their practice. The simplicity of

\textsuperscript{15} Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, “Blankness as a Signifier,” In \textit{Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime}. (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 166.
\textsuperscript{16} Gilbert-Rolfe, 159.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Gilbert-Rolfe, 166.
the works allow viewers to be sensitive to the smallest shifts in movement, enabling otherwise uneventful occurrences to be capable of extraordinary properties. The impending absence beckons the viewer to explore and find meaning within their secluded spaces. The presence of nothingness in the works of Turrell and Barth results in a resounding mood that is the product of a singular aesthetic experience. Nothingness provokes exploration and projection on behalf of the viewer that delves into the ambiguous territory of feeling and how emotions are created, molded, and felt.
CHAPTER 1
The Unspectacular Void of James Turrell

Space and light are often the subjects of concern when considering the oeuvre of James Turrell (b.1943). Architectural renderings are reconfigured to warp perspective and create the illusion of liminal space where bright hues of artificial LED lights encompass and dominate perspective. These overtly saturated spaces are seductive and give viewers a mellow psychedelic experience where they are less frantically overwhelmed with space and atmosphere but rather in a state of contemplation where time and form are heavily abstracted. Although these artificial saturations are what initially come to mind when thinking of Turrell, it is his more subdued spaces that revert to the natural and possess an elevated sense of simplicity that I would like to address. The focus of this chapter is Live Oak Friends Meeting House (2010) and the complex tension between the underwhelming nature of plainness and its ability of evoking beauty (Fig.1). It is Turrell’s radical use of simplicity that renders his environment incredibly sensitive to the viewer’s experience of his Quaker meetinghouse, which enables the banal to be capable of extraordinary properties. It is in this aspect that Turrell is able to reaffirm aspects of nothingness and the spiritual in the context of the contemporary sublime.

In 1997 James Turrell (b.1943) first became acquainted with the Live Oak Friends (Quaker Community) and their building project through Hiram Butler, a gallery owner and representative of Turrell. The Live Oak Friends were amidst some financial difficulty and Butler felt that Turrell’s involvement would secure funding for the meetinghouse in lieu of integrating one of Turrell’s art pieces into the architectural plan. Turrell’s presence was initially met with unease, as “the public profile of a Quaker meetinghouse, conspicuous by virtue of the presence of major art, and the budget of its handsome building, paid for by wealthy patrons, deeply
divided the group.”\textsuperscript{19} However, Turrell’s own Quaker background and his commitment to constructing an authentic place of worship allowed the Live Oak Friends to become supportive of the artist and his vision.

Although \textit{Live Oak Friends Meeting House} was specifically commissioned to function as a place of worship, Turrell’s involvement generated enough interest for the meetinghouse to open to the general public in 2001.\textsuperscript{20} Despite the addition of the \textit{Skyspace}, which falls outside the traditional architectural elements of a Quaker meetinghouse, it was not intended to exist as a stand-alone piece of art but to heighten the spiritual environment of the meetinghouse itself. Apart from the \textit{Skyspace}, Turrell’s architectural rendering of the meetinghouse is indebt to the aesthetic traditions of Quakerism. Turrell looked to several existing Meeting Houses throughout the country as inspiration for his building plan, such as Villa Street Meeting House (1980) and Orange Grove Meeting House (1909) both of which are based in California and grounded in a more conservative aesthetic. However, the Third Haven Friends Meeting House located in Easton, Maryland (1682-1684) was the most significant source of inspiration for Turrell’s final design.\textsuperscript{21} The subtle integration of a building into an existing local environment as well as symmetry, simplicity, and partition walls are all uniquely specific to the tradition of Quaker Meeting Houses.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Lise Kjaer, “Awakening the Spiritual: James Turrell and Quaker Practice” (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 2008), 151.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid. 157.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. 54.
Plainness as Beauty

The Quaker philosophy of design is deeply invested in evoking a spiritual space that is accomplished by favoring simple and austere building plans.\(^\text{23}\) This standard of design perpetuates an identity that is distinct, practical, and reflective of the Quaker spiritual position.\(^\text{24}\) Despite appearing in opposition of aestheticism, the strict anti-aesthetic guidelines are conversely highly concerned with the way things should look. In the context of Quaker culture, outward appearance directly reflects the inward spirit. Plainness is equated to a dignified purity while embellishments symbolize worldly values, where peculiarities have the potential of drawing unwanted attention and reflecting a superficial spirit.\(^\text{25}\) These design principles are also applicable to architecture or more specifically the meetinghouse, which stresses importance on material, design, and surrounding environmental factors. They often serve as historical landmarks, embodying important aesthetic qualities that symbolize a vital social and historical heritage. The selection of materials and forms are based on the confrontation of a pre-existing space, which allows for a more seamless integration into its environment. “While the designs of other religious traditions are centered around their respective liturgical practices such as ritual or audience…the meeting demands a place for the resting spirit.”\(^\text{26}\) The simplicity of the design induces the silence and stillness needed to enhance the quality of worship and convey spiritual depth.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 120.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 143.
*Live Oak Friends Meeting House* was the first structure that unabashedly catered toward Turrell’s Quaker beliefs, functioning as both an active place of worship and work of art.\(^{27}\)

Located on a quiet residential road in a low-income Houston suburb, the meetinghouse conforms to its surroundings with earthy materials that garner towards modesty rather than the sleek neon allure that is usually associated with Turrell’s body of work (Fig. 2). The light blue exterior of the building is meant to subtly adapt to the changing conditions of the sky, while the entrance is paved in light gray cement and classically lined with black gravel. Although simple and modest in design, the meetinghouse is executed in a highly sophisticated manner that evokes an aesthetic purity that is counterintuitively highly aestheticized. More importantly at the crux of the worship space is a square cutout of the ceiling that exposes the sky called a *Skyspace*, both unique to Turrell’s artistic practice and most directly against the traditional form of a Quaker meetinghouse.

Despite the inherent plainness that is meant to neutralize the field of vision and eliminate any visual disturbances, the structure of *Live Oak Friends Meeting House* is nevertheless highly aestheticized and evokes beauty in its blandness. The purity of form and attention to detail contributes to an underline utopian idealism that is present in the simplicity of the meetinghouse. The inherently minimal and unornamented space manages to avoid the danger of becoming cold and uninviting by the use of wood, light, and earthy color palettes. The resulting convivial environment ultimately translates into a serene worship place that enables contemplation. The public gathering place becomes a self-reflexive act that results in a singular intimate mode of contemplation. This interaction with space that enables one to go beyond its physical boundaries is what Georges Didi-Huberman describes as the *supposition of place*.

\(^{27}\) Kjaer, “Awakening the Spiritual,” 147.
Didi-Huberman’s account of the supposition of space is credited to Barnett Newman’s (1905-1970) text “Ohio, 1949” which gives a detailed account of the theoretical stakes between phenomenology and private description that pertains to Newman’s paintings.28 His paintings can be characterized as bare blocks of color that are stripped of any ornamentation besides his signature “zips” – lines that run horizontally or vertically across the canvas as an indication of artistic presence (Fig. 3). The transition from pictorial representation to abstraction delves into the “specific” and “non-specific” dimensions of space and aesthetic experience. Didi-Huberman explains the duality between these two concepts in relation to Newman’s paintings:

To speak of that space made of crude patches is to speak contradictorily, to crystallize at least two contradictions: on the one hand, the experience was that of a here…and beyond; on the other, it was that of a visibility…and beyond. Here, there is ‘nothing that can be shown in a museum or even photographed; [it is] a work of art that cannot even be seen, so it is something that must be experienced there on the spot.”29

It is the all-encompassing nothingness that disrupts representation and frees viewers from prescribed meanings that creates a truly expansive experience. The erasure of signs renders the painting both universal but also very specific to an individual’s own search for meaning. The architectural plainness of the meetinghouse functions like Newman’s paintings, the ensuing blankness is beautiful, enigmatic, and temporally abstract. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has discussed blankness as continuous and uninterrupted, where “absolute silence, absolute depth, become conditions for all that does not so much replace them as occur in their place.”30 It is the presence of nothingness that obscures time, for example the modesty of the interior space in Live Oak Friends Meeting House sets an atmospheric tone where viewers feel inclined to be silent and

29 Ibid.
still. It is the simplicity of the interior that not only compliments the Skyspace but also redirects the viewer’s attention to the sky.

**Framing the Formless**

Turrell was associated with artists such as Robert Irwin (b.1938), Ed Ruscha (b.1937), Maria Nordman (b. 1943), and many others that were classified as a part of what critics dubbed West Coast Minimalism. These artist explored time, movement, and transcendental themes such as the sublime. It is in their pursuit of a pure aesthetic experience that yields work predicated on perceptual illusions and sensory experiences. Perception and contemplation are critical thematic components of Turrell’s art practice, art historian James Adcock states: “Turrell’s art operates within a considered attention to self, within a contemplative attitude. Viewers of his work, as they confront the basic mechanisms of vision, find the simple act of looking highly compelling.”31 The participatory and ephemeral qualities of Turrell’s work translate well into the context of the meetinghouse, which functions as a gathering place for worship.

Despite Turrell’s intention of conveying feelings of religious authenticity, he nevertheless disrupts this religious ambition with the imposition of his own artistic vision, specifically the added structural component of the Skyspace. William L. Hamilton, in his essay “Simple, Simply Beautiful” (2001) for the New York Times, provides a vivid description of the Skyspace as a feature of Live Oak Friends Meeting House:

At the center of the meetinghouse is a piece of his unearthly art: a finely cut, 12-foot-square hole in the roof, with a retractable shelter, that looks up from the Friends’ assembly to the open sky – like a window on the soul. A cove of cathode-tube lighting, which rings the room where the walls begin to barrel into a vaulted ceiling, strengthens the aperture’s ability to disembody the spectator. Grounded by interior light, the eye rises toward a heavenly view.32

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32 Hamilton, “Quaker Simple, Simply Beautiful.”
The addition of the *Skyspace* is neither specific to Turrell’s meetinghouse nor a new artistic concept for Turrell, considering that there are over 82 “Skyspaces” around the world. Turrell’s architectural design consists of ovular, circular, and square apertures in ceilings that both frame and emphasize the sky. The structures can either stand autonomously or supplement existing buildings. The cathode-tube lighting may be reminiscent to Turrell’s usual trope of using artificial light to enhance and manipulate optical perception. However, within the context of the meetinghouse the integration of artificial light has less to do with spectacular visual splendor but geared more towards functioning as a subtle visual guide to the open ceiling, where the sky is the main attraction. Turrell, an artist and a practicing Quaker, creates an interesting dynamic between the meetinghouse serving as both an art object and spiritual space. Turrell’s structural intervention allows for a formless aesthetic experience that also has spiritual undertones. Rodger Homan in regards to this structural intervention states, “To the extent that he is not operating by behavioral prescriptions but is seeking a focus upon ‘the Light without’, his work may be said to be theological rather than moral.”

Although Turrell’s *Skyspace* does not strictly adhere to the Quaker aesthetic philosophy, Homan believes that it still conveys a “restored sense of the holiness of beauty.”

The spiritual and sublime properties of the sky have been a reoccurring and ever-evolving motif that has been continuously represented within the arts. The sky is often grounded within the context of the landscape, however Turrell’s *Skyspace* deviates from the landscape and allows it to exist as an autonomous piece of work. Free of the landscape, the sky becomes abstracted through the act of framing. However, Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946) was the first to explore this concept through his series of cloud pictures called the *Equivalents* (1925-1931). Free of any

33 Homan, “The Inward and the Outward Eye,” 147.
34 Ibid.
accompanying landscapes, the viewer loses the sense of up or down almost to the point of vertigo (Fig. 4). Stieglitz is able to recontextualize cloud imagery through their complete isolation to the point of disorientation. It is in their isolation that the clouds are stripped down to their purest essence. There is a vital sense of presence due to the endless quality of the picture that can be attributed to the imposed blankness and abstraction of space through the act of framing.

Unlike Stieglitz, Turrell’s *Skyspace* is not representing the sky or displaying a variation of it but quite literally using the sky itself as a medium. The act of framing the sky not only demands the attention of the viewer but also radically allows non-art to become art. The term non-art is linked to Minimalism and is disapprovingly considered overindulgent and theatrical by art critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Minimalist works are characterized by their three-dimension and reductive geometric forms, which are large in scale. Greenberg takes issue with the size of minimalist works, feeling that they self-consciously impose their presence onto viewers. By taking up so much physical space the works confront the viewer, Fried states:

> Again, there is no clear or hard distinction between the two states of affairs: one is, after all, always surrounded by things. But the things that are literalist works of art must somehow confront the beholder – they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way.”

Greenberg feels that minimalist works (or what Fried refers to as literalist works) use scale to convince viewers of its importance and value. Fried finds this attribute to be highly theatrical because the work is dependent on the reception of an audience. Fried states, “It is as though objecthood alone can, in the present circumstances, secure something’s identity, if not as nonart, at least as neither painting nor sculpture; or as though a work of art – more accurately, a work of

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modernist painting or sculpture – were in some essential respect not an object.” It is in objecthood that art is reduced to an event. Unable to stand autonomously as work in itself, objecthood relies on the interaction between art and viewer to define its essence.

As a functioning spiritual place, Turrell’s Skyspace has a utilitarian function within the context of the meetinghouse. The holiness of natural light is provided by the Skyspace, however the act of framing the sky also allows it to become a work of art. The Skyspace is theatrical in the sense it emphasizes the importance of the sky and enables viewers to re-encounter and re-examine it in a new way. The abstraction of the sky allows for a formless aesthetic experience. The endless void of the framed sky temporally alters the environment of the meetinghouse. Time becomes abstracted as viewers are compelled to lose themselves in the process of looking by immersing themselves within the space. The stillness of the abstracted sky requires attention, which rewards viewers with the ability to see minute shifts in movement. This temporal languor is achieved through the obscurity of space, which is profoundly dependent on the abstraction of the sky. During the construction of the Skyspace in Live Oak Friends Meeting House, Turrell had to cut down eighteen trees that were in view of the frame. Despite going against Quaker beliefs, Turrell felt that this was necessary to provide the optimal perceptual experience. Fixed focal points of any kind would have been detrimental to the potential of achieving a truly vast and pure environment.

The modesty of the interior space in Live Oak Friends Meeting House sets an atmospheric tone where viewers feel inclined to be silent and still. Natural wood and lack of ornamentation allow viewers to fully embody the otherworldly atmosphere of the Skyspace enabling viewers to slowly acclimate themselves to the nuances of the sky. Climatic events are reduced to subtle changes in blue or minimal movements in the clouds. These muted moments

37 Ibid. 152
that are anticipated would otherwise be considered mundane and uneventful. These dull moments are conversely sublime. The everyday becomes elevated into something extraordinary, where viewers become engrossed in the process of looking. Art historian Lise Kjaer recalls her experience of the meetinghouse at dusk:

A viewing of the “Skyspace” at dusk affords an intensified experience of the natural world with the sounds from birds, chickadees, and other animals providing a “concert” outside the building. Halfway through the hour-long viewing, the sounds abruptly vanish. The sudden quiet only intensifies the impression of the sky, which has now turned from light to dark blue, and echoes the color of the cushions inside. Slowly turning darker, the color appears material, reminiscent of an Yves Klein blue. The experience gradually comes to an end with a black rectangular opening framed by a white ceiling.  

Turrell’s understated space allows for a heightened bodily experience of the smallest environmental changes. Here the sounds of birds seem to resemble a concert while the color changes in the sky are dramatic. The complexities of emotions derive from the awakening of the body’s sensorium that allows the viewer to become sensitive to the space, evoking Kantian notions of the sublime. Writer David Laurence captures the multi-sensory elements of the sublime describing it as a “feeling of exultation experienced when nature’s demonstrations of irresistible might, by exposing the self’s weakness and insignificance, remind us that we triumph only as sensibility sacrifices its attachment to nature and identifies itself wholly with the supersensible ideas of reason to which humanity is in any case already secretly directed.”

The formlessness of this aesthetic experience is aligned with a deeply sentimental history of American transcendental views, where nature is elevated into the realm of boundless possibilities.

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38 Kjaer, 156
The plainness of Turrell’s meetinghouse and the placid nature of gazing up at the sky are banal yet capable of intensity. The affective potential of unextraordinary encounters are what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls ordinary affects which relate to everyday occurrences and how they are able to produce intense and intimate experiences. Turrell’s meetinghouse allows spectators to silently participate by sitting and looking up at the sky. Although representations of the sky in art are considered sublime and romantic, the sky itself in an everyday context is ever-present. Unless there are dramatic changes in the sky, it otherwise goes unnoticed. However, Turrell is able to give the sky precedence through the act of framing which commands the viewer’s undivided attention. Incremental moments of change are marveled and coveted, allowing viewers to re-evaluate their relationship to the sky and allow intimacy through a singular and formless aesthetic experience. The banality of the space is meant to invoke a quotidian temporality and enables one to have an embodied experience of the sky.

However, art historian Clark Lunberry argues that it is impossible to truly submit to Turrell’s installation and be free of consciousness. Lunberry examines the tension between language and experience in Turrell’s body of work, specifically within the context of philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Martin Heidegger. Although Turrell’s work is carefully crafted to guide the viewer’s perceptual and sensory experience, Lunberry argues that it is nevertheless incapable of being free of language because experience in itself is articulated and processed through language. The experimentum linguae, according to Agamben is a fundamental aspect to redefining Heidegger’s concept of transcendentalism, both scholars claim that the “transcendental” requires language. “This is in direct opposition to the Kantian image of the transcendental that transcends language, or for which language is seen as an obstacle to

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transcendence." On the contrary the sublime is a kind of aesthetic judgment that caters to an abstract experience that has less to do with rationality.

Lunberry gives a detailed encounter of his own experience of Turrell’s installation Minami-dera (1999), located on the Japanese island of Naoshima, to subvert Turrell’s intention of creating ‘an experience of wordless thought.’ (Fig. 5) Completely submerged in darkness, Lunberry describes being perceptually disoriented and sensitive to his surroundings, a common theme explored within the discourse of Turrell’s body of work. However, the romantic notions of displacement and unease are interrupted when Lunberry discovers the mechanisms behind the optical illusions. It is precisely in the stillness of the space, in which Turrell attempts to create a disembodied experience that Lunberry finds impossible to submit totally to the installation because he finds a “more ambivalently felt experience that inevitably includes the language heard” within his own head. Lunberry finds the interference of his own inner thoughts, which desperately seek to articulate the experience of space that he finds difficult to truly free himself of his own consciousness. However, Live Oak Friends Meeting House does not rely on optical illusions but rather on banality. Turrell’s meetinghouse is plain and straightforward, the viewer is not inclined to “decode” their environment but to dwell in light that fills the room. The meetinghouse is unique to Turrell’s body of work because he moves away from perceptual illusions but rather focuses on the spirituality of light. Quakerism correlates light and experience as a divine mediation from God. Turrell’s affinity for light started at a young age and was

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43 Ibid., 42.
heavily influenced by his Quaker upbringing. It was during his youth that Turrell recalls his grandmother telling him to “Go inside and greet the light.”

Intimate contemplation with undertones of spiritual resonance is consciously evoked through specific design choices. The Quaker philosophy of design as well as Turrell’s integration of the *Skyspace* is imperative to articulating the phenomenological concerns of *Live Oak Friends Meeting House*. Turrell was conscious of the phenomenological aspects of his work and actively integrated his understanding of this theoretical concept into his art practice. It was specifically the book *The Poetics of Space* (1958) by French philosopher Gaston Bachelard that was influential to Turrell’s knowledge and undertaking of phenomenology. Bachelard was interested in the psychological and poetic exploration of the human experience of space. The mood that results in the exploration of space is particularly influenced by past experiences that resonate with the viewer, evoking either a sense of familiarity or sentimentality. As art historian Lise Kjaer delicately states, “Our awareness of the connotation of a place, the previous experiences we might have had in a similar space, all influence our present experience of a given space.” This self-reflexive act of viewing allows for viewers to go beyond the confines of spirituality and relate to the space on a more intimate level. More specifically, the viewer is able to forge a new relationship to the sky, which Turrell recontextualizes through his *Skyspace*.

Turrell’s art opens up a field of questions that regard how humans engage with their surroundings specifically in relation to vision and perception. His deceptively simple installations are enigmatic in their inviting appeal. They beckon you to participate, contemplate, and feel. In Richard Wollheim’s terms Turrell stretches the boundaries of art in a Duchampian way, incorporating traditionally non-artistic categories of experience, such as breathing,

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45 Kjaer, 97
46 Ibid.
listening, or seeing, into his art practice.\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Live Oak Friends Meeting House} is not an exception to the all-encompassing sensory experience that is ever-present in Turrell’s body of work. The natural use of light in this space may be counterintuitive to the sheen of brightly colored fluorescent lights that are usually employed. Nevertheless the work is still about perception and bodily experience. He challenges the act of looking, which moves in the realm of feeling and re-evaluating what we know. The subject of his work is so fundamentally integrated with perception that it becomes impossible to separate the works from the physiological and psychological processes they disclose.\textsuperscript{48} Turrell invites the viewer to reconsider the ordinary and banal as moments of immeasurable possibilities. Time is distorted and viewers are submerged in an atmosphere of complacent observation, where contemplation is key to transcending into the sublime. The sensations are simultaneously underwhelming and overwhelming. Turrell strikes a chord with our understanding of the world and allows for deeper intimacy. The effects of nothingness—simply sitting, gazing, and looking at the sky—become a profound experiential encounter where one becomes fully caught up in the moment.

Fig. 1: James Turrell’s Live Oak Friends Meeting House (2001). Houston, TX. https://hirambutlergallery.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/turrell-183.jpg

Fig. 4: Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalents* (1925). San Francisco, Museum of Modern Art
https://www.sfmoma.org/artist/Alfred_Stieglitz
Fig. 5: James Turrell’s *Minami-dera* (1999). Naoshima, Japan.
CHAPTER TWO
The Intimate Dwellings of Uta Barth

The nature of vision is an ever-present subject of dissemination in the photographic practice of Uta Barth (b.1958). Barth is concerned with investigating perception and how the act of looking can be revitalized through the camera. The possibilities of seeing things anew are provided by the camera’s ability to re-encounter and re-examine subject matter that may have receded into the backdrop of the artist’s conscious stream of visibility. Barth’s re-examination of her everyday encounters enables the seemingly invisible to enter the realm of striking visibility, forging new narratives and emotional attachments that render her representations of domestic space to be palpably familiar. It is through the series of photographs titled...and in time (2007-08) that this chapter will articulate how images of Barth’s home allows for a universal sense of intimacy beyond an implicit reference to Barth’s personal dwellings. Barth is able to subvert any indication of personality through the apparent absence of things, creating an inviting blankness that results in the phenomenon of personal resonance from a space not directly inhabited by viewers.

The aesthetic of Barth’s photographs consist of minimal planes of largely empty scenes that focus on un-extraordinary subjects such as windows, walls, and blurred landscapes that command attention through stillness. Visuality and perception are at the forefront of her work and light plays a major role in producing a dreamy yet trivial atmosphere. Barth explains her transitional use of light stating that “Light has been a theme throughout: in early instances it appears as invasive, interrogational and blinding. In more recent images it is atmospheric and all engulfing.” Barth has replaced confrontational harshness with a subdued resonance that creeps up on viewers as it provokes the sensorium, conjuring feelings of familiarity, sentimentality, and

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intimacy. It is through the excessive emptiness of Barth’s scenes that allows for a singular and universal experience. The duality of these two types of experiences are contingent on Barth’s own scientific approach to vision that frees the images of her own subjectivity and the abstraction of scenes that allows for new modes of interpretation specific to viewers.

The Act of Seeing

Barth’s systematic approach to photography can be traced to her youth. At twelve years of age Barth experienced a major transition in her life that would become the catalyst for her awareness and interest in perception. A chemist, Barth’s father moved to the United States to conduct a research project at Stanford University, uprooting his family to California. The transition from Cold War era West Berlin to the carefree California lifestyle of the 1970’s was a major culture shock. Barth had trouble acclimating herself to the American lifestyle yet felt homesick for a country she felt no desire to return to. As Matthew Higgs notes, her memories of Berlin were dark, austere, oppressive, and dreary as opposed to the bright and sunny disposition of California.50 This aesthetic difference was further indexed in Barth’s family photographs where there was a shift from black-and-white to color snapshots that marked this cultural transition.

Despite spending the remainder of her childhood and all of her adult life in California, Barth is acutely aware that she has a different set of cultural references and a way of seeing the world than her American peers.51 The sudden environmental change she had experienced as a child has given her an elevated sense of awareness that makes her conscious of seeing. Barth’s deep investment with perception has informed her art practice and continues to be a thematic concern in her body of work. Barth unconsciously began to take interest in photography during

51 Ibid.
her undergraduate studies where she employed photographs as a reference for painting. However, she found painting too limiting and lacking the quality of precision she sought from photography. What she once considered to be “disposable source material” became the origin of perceptual inquiry. The camera’s potential as a tool to explore visuality led her to pursue photography exclusively as a graduate student in the fine arts program at the University of California, Los Angeles. During her graduate studies Barth was influenced by Minimalism, Structuralism, and Conceptualism which inspired her to be concerned less with ascribing meaning and more focused on seeing as the subject in itself.

Sheryl Conkelton explains that it is through the photographic process that Barth explores visuality. Barth is less interested in representation but rather using the camera as an extension of the eye. The lens both mimics the physical functions of the eye and allows Barth to re-encounter subjects with a new level of attention. It is through the viewfinder and conversely the frame that declares the subject to be worthy of attention. The images that Barth presents are very spare and reveal banal subjects that are beyond the scope of everyday awareness. Conkelton states, “their subjects, truly peripheral and beneath notice, gather interest only in purely visual and cumulative terms, in a composite series rather than as discrete facts.” Barth challenges herself and the viewer to re-encounter subjects that are beneath the threshold of attention.

Barth’s *Ground Series* (1994–1995) is an early example of her thematic concern for nothingness—playing with spatial temporality and banal abstraction that implicates the viewer (Fig. 6). Although Barth is still concerned with perception and the scientific dwellings of the functioning eye, the images themselves are less sterile in their abstraction. The dramatic blur of the photographs simultaneously shrouds the referent yet creates a sense of familiarity, allowing

53 Higgs, “Matthew Higgs in Conversation with Uta Barth,” 12.
54 Sheryl Conkelton, “Ground and Field Before and After,” 68-69.
the viewer to impose a narrative onto the image. This abstraction also results in a durational languor where aesthetic experience is grounded in the moment of interaction between viewer and photograph. Matthew Higgs suggests that Barth’s thematic attention to insignificant subject matter and durational languor are attributed to a struggle between her split national identities. Autobiographical connotations and cultural sensibilities manifest themselves in Barth’s aesthetic decisions. The images in the *Ground Series* in particular were unconsciously inspired by a reproduction of a Vermeer painting that hung in her family apartment in Berlin. In relation to the European sensibilities present in her work Barth states:

This has to do with attention to the insignificant. They pay attention to the everyday to the mundane. Time, in the work, is slow. Duration is at play. One does not think of the stereotypical California lifestyle as one that embraces ideas about slowness, or attention to anything other than the spectacle or the event. I can connect with the quietness and attachment to the everyday of Vermeer and see as an echo of it in my own work…one could see that as an echo of Europe.

Barth culturally attributes her emphasis on slowness and trivial subjects as being grounded in a European mode of thinking, which I find is reminiscent to the neorealist film genre that came about in Europe after World War II. This type of cinema is characterized by its lack of narrative, emphasis on post-war destruction, and use of non-actors engaging in everyday activities. The quotidian temporality associated with Neorealism is tied to Gilles Deleuze and his term the *time-image* that focuses on what is seen on screen and how viewers explore images beyond the boundaries of the frame. Unlike the *movement-image* that propels a narrative forward, the *time-image* deals with self-awareness, memory, and thoughts that come with the unfolding of time. Deleuze states, “The more or less broad, always relative, circuits, between the present and the past, refer back, on the one hand, to a small internal circuit between a present

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55 Higgs, 11.
57 Higgs, 11.
and *its own* past, between an actual image and *its* virtual image; on the other hand, they refer to
deeper and deeper circuits which are themselves virtual, which each time mobilize the whole of
the past.”59 Deleuze links virtual images to dreams and recollections that are preserved in time.

The fragmentation of subjects in Barth’s banal photographs entices contemplation. The
blankness of the images leave them open to interpretation, which in relation to the *time-image*
allows the brain to act as a screen where the real and imaginary, virtual, and actual become
indistinguishable. The mundane qualities of Barth’s works invite participation and recognition on
behalf of the viewer, exceeding beyond the parameters of what is seen. Higg’s declares boredom
as intrinsically intertwined with the inviting and enigmatic aspects of Barth’s photographs:

Boredom has a certain kind of pejorative quality – but in terms of an interest…in
this total investment, emersion, in experiencing the non-event, ‘boredom’ sounds
like something you have to escape. I think that the work invests in ideas about
time, stillness, inactivity and non-event, not as something threatening or numbing,
but as something actually to be embraced. There is a certain desire to embrace
that which is completely incidental, peripheral, atmospheric and totally
unhinged.60

The so-called “boring” aspects of Barth’s photographs link to our understanding of everyday
encounters. The uneventful and quiet moments we experience on a daily basis may not
immediately grasp our attention but are always unconsciously lodged in our memories and felt.
The intimacies of these moments are recalled through the banality of Barth’s photographs.

The series *…and in time* (2000) in particular are unabashedly plain. Unspectacular
moments produce a lush laziness suspended in the languor of time, beckoning the gaze to linger.
The title itself *…and in time* plays with duration and suspension through its syntax, an apparent
emptiness is present as the ambiguity of the sentence beckons the viewer to contemplate its
meaning. In these photographs Barth is interested in capturing delicate changes in her

59 Ibid.
60 Matthew Higgs et. al., *Uta Barth* (London: Phaidon Press, 2010), 22.
environment. Each scene depicts Barth’s home at different times of the day. *Untitled* (Fig. 7) depicts an orange couch that is partially visible at the bottom of the frame; light that is cast from a paneled window is projected on the wall. Deep hues of oranges and ochers saturate the image creating a languid atmosphere. The second photograph, *Untitled* (Fig. 8) reveals the same scene but with minor differences that become visible only after the eye becomes acclimated to the space, requiring time and contemplation on the part of the viewer. Barth’s multiple renditions of the same scene are underwhelming yet effective in that the micro-changes become visible after the viewer invests time to consciously engage in the act of *looking*. In regards to the redundant quality of the images Conkelton remarks, “The repetition in them slows down their pace, denying any spectacularity…Barth’s repetitive, elliptical construction drains any drama and renders the ensemble virtually featureless. The images are almost identical in essence and they absorb time.” 61 These minute changes add to the blandness of the photographs.

It is the uncanny display of ordinary life that Barth explores in *...and in time* that exudes an emotional familiarity. Barth re-encounters the very surroundings that have become invisible to her by confronting a utilitarian space through a critical eye. The intimate dwellings of her home are in synch with the routine of everyday living that becomes a site of unspectacular occurrences. The resulting photographs are specific to Barth yet devoid of any overt personal details. The scenes are rendered in a highly ambiguous manner through the absence of objects and *things* that enables Barth’s home to transition into a space that is universally open to interpretation. This systematic approach to taking photographs challenges Barth’s own perception by forcing her to confront her surroundings. Barth’s subtle visual cues are only noticeable after consideration and make viewers equally conscious of *looking*. This conceptual

approach places emphasis the act of taking photographs as much as the photographs themselves. Barth’s visual encounters often take the form of architecture and interiors. The images are unnerving in their fragmentation, ambiguity, and familiarity.

In 1966 the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio commissioned Barth to create an installation based off the architectural floor plans of the building’s architect Peter Eisenmann (b.1932). The deconstructionist architectural designs of Eisenmann are far from the habitual environment of Barth’s home but nevertheless address perception. The softness of Barth’s photographs is in direct opposition to the aggressive architecture of Eisenmann that demands the attention of the viewer through its cold and problematic design. Barth wanted to find a way to articulate the confrontational space and to redirect the viewer’s attention. Like …in time, Barth systematically photographed the interior of the building—the final piece consists of three large photographs on two opposing walls. Two photographs depict an empty wall and a portion of glasswork, the third image on the opposing wall reveals a partial view of a pillar located in the center of the gallery in sharp focus. These photographs are in conversation with each other to direct the viewer’s attention to the center of the room. Both …and in time and the installation at the Wexner Center opens Barth’s work to careful observation by subtly redirecting or capturing the viewer’s gaze. Barth’s photographs invoke self-awareness in the viewer, which enables them to project meaning into the residing blankness.

**The Universal Singularity of Experience**

Barth has a borderline scientific interest in vision, which explains her adamant dismissal of mood. It is easy to deduce Barth’s photographs as moody but I must clarify that although Barth rejects mood in terms of her own theoretical understanding and construction of her work,

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62 Conkelton, 23
63 Ibid.
the possibilities of interpretation is not limited to her personal exploration of vision. However, the mood that radiates from Barth’s photographs is highly individual and entirely dependent on a viewer’s interaction with her work. Art historian Brian Dillon describes Barth’s disassociation with mood and her pursuit for perceptual objectivity as:

Taken for the most part as the sun set – thus conjuring, somewhat deceptively, the venerable photographic romance with the golden hour – they seem to suggest a mode of domestic subjectivity, a protracted exile...Barth, however, expressly rejects such melancholic associations: the series is rather to be read as part of her continued research into the nature of visual indifference.

Barth’s rejection of mood allows her photographs to be free of any prescribed meanings. Barth’s pursuit of serial objectivity when taking photographs eliminates her presence from the pictorial plane. Film scholar Robert Sinnerbrink proposes that mood is artificially constructed and results in an aesthetic of mood. Within a filmic context Sinnerbrink explains that mise-en-scène (the orientation of objects), lighting, and design is able to set a tone that helps situate the viewer within the imaginary world. However, there is an imposed absence in Barth’s photographs that provide only fragments of objects that are stripped of any personality. According to art historian Jonathan Crary it is through the apparent absence of things within the photographs of Barth that subverts traditional notions of representation. Barth’s interest in the nuances of perception and experience is played out through her depictions of the everyday. By critiquing the act of looking Barth forces viewers to look intently at her ambiguously rendered scenes. Crary believes that this form of contemplation leads to a disturbance rather than clarification. It is through phenomenology that disrupts a superficial analysis of what is seen and instead allows one to search for greater meaning. Barth’s quotidian subjects, “are remarkably

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interchangeable in their accumulated meanings: the notion of recurrence on a daily basis but also something that is ordinary, commonplace, or unexceptional,” that explores what Crary calls anonymous seeing.66 This form of seeing frees itself from the limitations of subjectivity allowing the photographs to be open for interpretation. It is through anonymous seeing that the viewer is able to self-identity with Barth’s home, which despite being incredibly specific to Barth lacks overt personal signifiers that create an inviting form of blankness.

This interplay between absence and presence is also tackled by the artist Rachel Whiteread’s (b.1963) Untitled (Sixteen Spaces) (1995). Whiteread’s sculptural depictions of domestic encounters and nothingness, unlike Barth’s more ephemeral renderings, materializes the empty space found beneath chairs through cast molds of sixteen individualized cubes of resin. Assembled in a grid-like formation the sculptures are displayed in rows of four creating a minimal and self-contained environment of meticulously arranged objects (Fig. 9). The translucent cubes are colored in various earthy tones of dusty pink, ochre, green, and lavender, giving them an almost candy-like appeal. The translucent quality of the cubes compliments the thematic duality of immaterial and material that Whiteread plays with through solidifying negative space.

Like Barth’s ...and in time, Whiteread utilizes both aesthetic softness through palatable colors and systematic repetition. Whiteread’s cubes are individualized through the impressions left on the resin from the array of chairs that were cast. Each chair has an index of former wear and use, it transcends the idea of functional object and in turn represents memory. Jean Baudrillard in his essay “Structures of Interior Design” attributes objects with the ability to preserve emotional bonds and the permanence of the family group.67 Objects become relics of

66 Ibid.
experience, memory, and an item of comfort. People project meaning onto objects that enable them to transcend basic utility. The fragmentation of objects in Barth’s photographs create a more universally recognizable space, where architectural details such as walls, corners and floors are still highly recognizable and embody the basic elements of a home. It is in the lack of details that Barth allows viewers to relate to the space.

However, Whiteread’s miniature monuments represent a combination of nothingness (empty space) and a thingness (index of chair) of an object that carries the marking of use and time. Memories that were once encapsulated in an object are now materialized through the markings of the empty space beneath the chairs, creating an eerie atmosphere of lost memories preserved in objects that were once there. Whiteread relies on a viewer’s intuitive understanding of space and the personal nature of objects. Both Barth and Whiteread are able to subvert the coldness associated with absence by grounding their work with personal experience, whether it is the artists’ personal experience that informs the work or the viewer’s ability to project their own experiences onto the work itself. The works also rely on the viewer’s intuitive recognition and understanding of space even when presented with an abstracted form of domesticity.

The abstraction of Barth’s home in …and in time creates a universally recognizable space that results in a singularity of experience. These void planes are free of ornamentation. Ambiguous architectural forms such as walls, corners, and floors disorient time and space but entice contemplation. These basic structural elements are the focal points that viewers are able to immediately recognize and pull meaning from. Gaston Bachelard writes explicitly about the poetic and phenomenological ways in which people experience and engage with space. Bachelard argues that our interaction with architecture is highly personal and the subsequent memories that are formed in relation to our environment unconsciously inform future
experiences to space. Bachelard states “The point of departure of my reflections is the following: every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house.”

The architectural mise-en-scène of Barth’s photographs have the ability to resonate with viewers, evoking either a sense of familiarity or sentimentality that are less inclined to orient the viewer within the world of her photographs but allow viewers to personally connect and prescribe meaning to the ambiguous spaces.

Art historian Holy Meyers equates Barth’s photographs to a collection of mental images that are “all imbedded in circumstance but also tinted by emotion and sensation.” The scenes are banal yet familiar in their depictions of the ordinary. The unnerving stillness of the images inspires deeper contemplation that Myers believes ignites memories, specifically personal connections to a particular time and place. The ability for Barth’s banal scenes to deeply resonate with viewers is linked to Kathleen Stewart’s ordinary affects that delve explicitly into the aesthetics of everyday encounters and how they manifest affective intimacies and intensities that accumulate in ordinary moments of living. Barth states, “My hope is that my work engages the ephemeral, the ambient, and the most subliminal information of everyday life.” Her attention to the banal allows for the uneventful to become extraordinary since everyday occurrences become elevated to art. This newfound position of art object allows the viewer to reflect on ordinary moments that would otherwise be overlooked in the context of everyday living. Due to the presence of nothingness in Barth’s photographs viewers are able to project their own lived

70 Stewart, 4.
71 Mirlesse, Bomb Magazine.
experiences of space into the blankness of Barth’s abstract interiors. Meyers summarizes the nothingness present in Barth’s photographs in the following passage:

Barth’s images, however, even more than most, are crafted in a spirit of profound silence; their eloquence lies in their fundamental wordlessness. Lodged in a place of anticipating rather than assigning meaning, in the moment before tactical conclusion are drawn, they do not resist analysis so much as they are impervious. ⁷²

The composition of Barth’s photographs emphasizes insignificance. The fragmented spaces veer away from clutter and any inclination of Barth’s life within the space. The emptiness in which Barth represents her home allows for contemplation precisely because the photograph is left open to personal reinterpretation. Bachelard correlates contemplation to phenomenological exploration, the mind providing an avenue for mobility to an otherwise static image. The couch and cast of light are specific to Barth’s home but they are rendered ambiguously enough for viewers to loosely identify with the space. The visual signifiers create broad yet specific domestic encounters that are recognized and felt. The habitually void planes of Barth’s photographic dwellings are amidst a deep tension between Barth’s intention for optical purity and the moody atmospheric tones that are imposed by the viewer. The blandness of the images creates intrigue and contemplation, beckoning viewers to fill the void with personal memories that are found in the backdrop of the quotidian.

⁷² Meyers, “Thinner than Air but Vivid,” 289.
Fig. 6: Uta Barth’s *Field #7* (1995)
http://utabarth.net/work/field/#image-3

Fig. 7 and Fig. 8: Uta Barth’s *...and in time* (2000)
http://utabarth.net/work/and-of-time/#image-3
Fig. 9: Rachel Whiteread’s *Untitled Sixteen Spaces* (1995)
https://whatistalent.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/009dbd87.jpg
CONCLUSION

In relation to Heidegger’s concept of nothing, Natalie Kosoi states, “That is, nothingness reveals beings because ‘they are beings and not nothing.’ And the more we are aware of the presence of a thing, the more we are made aware of its radical other: nothingness.” Nothingness is forever shifting in form and meaning, continuously reimagined and re-represented within the arts. The formlessness of Abstraction Expressionism and the reductive theatricality of Minimalism are not lost but contribute to the possibilities of how nothingness can be further appropriated within the scope of contemporary art. James Turrell’s Live Oak Friends Meeting House and Uta Barth’s ...and in time embody past models of nothingness which also take on new meanings and traits within the context of their works.

The abstraction of space is seen in the plainness of Turrell’s architectural design and the infinite qualities of his framed sky. While Barth’s fragmented domestic interiors are universally recognizable in its ambiguity despite being highly specific to the artist. These contemporary displays of abstraction are linked to Modernism and the formlessness of aesthetic experience. The modes of nothingness that are encountered in the secluded spaces of Turrell and Barth are characterized by a warm austerity that invites viewers to contemplate initially uneventful subject matters. The unmitigated banality that emanates from Turrell and Barth’s works paradoxically draws attention to its unspectacular characteristics. Kathleen Stewart in relation to the affective potential of unextraordinary moments states, “Something throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable.” Banality and radical simplicity allow viewers to become highly sensitive to the act of looking; subtle shifts in movement have the potential to produce palpable emotional responses.

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74 Stewart, 1.
Nothingness takes the form of emptiness, blankness, banality, and absence. These unextraordinary characteristics ubiquitously allow scenes to be free of prescribed meanings and open to interpretation. The inherent nothingness in the works of Turrell and Barth abstracts time and space. Kirk Varnedoe remarks, “Abstraction is precisely not grounded in any universal or grand generalities. It is tied to individual experience and to individual sensibility, as they are given greater scope and play.”

It is through the abstraction of space that Turrell and Barth are able to create a temporal languor that opens their work to interpretation and contemplation but is also predicated on a singular aesthetic experience. The overwhelming horror and awe inspiring notions of the Kantian sublime are manifested in a more subtle fashion that gently creeps up on the viewer and provokes a sense of familiarity, spirituality, or beauty that is still nevertheless powerful.

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