

The Strange Story of Mary Ellen Carroll and the Exhibition of Nothing

Mary Ellen Carroll is an American artist. She was born in Danville, Illinois in 1961 and her work has been exhibited in galleries around the world.

1961 was an interesting year for art. It saw Piero Manzoni create *Artist's Shit*, which consists of 90 tin cans, each apparently containing 30 grams of his own shit. At the time he made this work, Manzoni valued each tin according to its equivalent weight in gold, which in 1961 was \$37. They have subsequently sold for a lot more at auction, with one can selling at Christies in 2015 for \$281,761.

Other famous works of art made in 1961 include Yves Klein's *Blue Monochrome*, a canvas wholly painted in a uniform bright blue, which is now in the permanent collection of MoMA New York, Roy Lichtenstein's cartoon painting *I Can See the Whole Room...and There's Nobody in It!*, which sold in 2011 for \$43.2 million at Christie'sⁱ and Mark Rothko's abstract expressionist canvas *Orange, Red, Yellow* which sold in 2012 for a staggering \$86,882,500.ⁱⁱ

Let us think for a moment about this art world. It is a modernist art world. Carroll grew up and studied in this cultural environment. So it is perhaps not surprising that central to her work is "the investigation of a single, fundamental question: what do we consider a work of art?"ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, this is probably the only intelligent question a creative person could ask of art which has been produced in the 20th century.

Modernism is fundamentally a western intellectual movement which reached its peak following the horrors of economic depression, two world wars and the Holocaust. It presents a philosophy of optimism and offers a vision for a new society. One based on peace and equity where old divisions of race, class, education and political rivalry are replaced with a future of hope. This expressed itself with the building of tower blocks to replace slum dwellings, secondary modern schools and Polytechnics. In art it saw the rise of Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism, to name but a few.

In an interview with David Sylvester in October 1962, the painter Francis Bacon had said "...what is fascinating now is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all."^{iv}

This vision of modernity which is essentially creative and forward looking, eventually began to crumble. Its philosophical fall first crystallised on the 16 March 1972 when the Pruitt-Igoe urban housing projects in St. Louis, Missouri were demolished. The Pruitt-Igoe projects were part of the modernist dream to replace slum dwellings with futuristic homes for all. Built in 1954 as a series of 33 tower blocks, they quickly deteriorated and by the late 1960s had become internationally

infamous for high rates of poverty, crime and racial segregation. Where much of modernist high-rise planning and building had been constructed with the very best of intentions, the failure to execute the dream to a high standard led to a replacement of hope with despair. This despair fuelled by the perceived shortcomings of modernism became widespread. In academic circles it saw the growth of postmodernist theory which was being discussed and written about at the time by philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

Postmodernism presented the case to “de-construct”, to dismantle society’s grand narratives and challenge the established norms that had apparently failed so many. Postmodernism considers “reality” to be an intellectual construction. As such it rejects the idea of universal truths and instead focuses on the belief that truth is relative to each and every person.

By 1989, when Mary Ellen Carroll received her master’s degree in fine arts from the Art Institute of Chicago, postmodernism had begun to take centre stage. This timing places Carroll at the heart of a period of profound cultural shift. In this light her core question “What do we consider a work of art?” appears to be aimed specifically at how we make contemporary art in the postmodern era. Modernism, it seemed, had run out of ideas. As if to prove the point, the American composer John Cage had famously performed his 1949 *Lecture on Nothing* at the 8th Street Artists’ Club in New York stating: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.”^v This foretold his 1952 performance *4’33*, a composition, which lasts four minutes and thirty-three seconds. It is made for any instrument or combination of instruments where the score instructs the musicians not to play a single note. Whilst “performed”, the composition instead encourages listeners to focus on sounds in the surrounding environment.

As a fledgling artist, Carroll’s early response to this new artistic climate include her 1994 work *The Stone is More Stone Than Before*, which she describes as “The bibliography for a nonexistent book on architecture”^{vi} and her 1996 performance work entitled *Nothing*. Carroll was invited to perform *Nothing* in 2006 at an arts residency in Ostende, Argentina. To realise her piece she walked out of her New York home “with only her passport and the clothes on her back to spend six weeks in the country. By design there was no documentation of the performance.”^{vii}

As well as the performance piece itself, Carroll, or MEC as she is also known, acquired the registered trademark and copyright for *Nothing*.^{viii}

In 2012 Carroll, alongside other artists who included Gordon Matta-Clark, David Robbins and Marina Abramović, was invited to participate in the exhibition *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago. Carroll and Abramović both appear in a 5-minute video which was made for the exhibition where they “reflect on hospitality.”^{ix}

This hospitality appears to have been short lived though. As two years later Marina Abramović was invited by Hans Ulrich Obrist to produce a new work of art for the Serpentine Galleries in London. In a BBC interview, Abramović described the origin of the work she eventually offered Ulrich Obrist, saying: “I called Hans and I said, “I don’t know how you’re going to take this, but this is what I want to do: nothing ... there’s nothing.” No work, just me; the public is my live material, and that’s the

most radical, the most pure I can do.”^x She titled the performance piece *512 Hours*, after the exhibition’s duration, which took place in the gallery over the course of sixty-four days.

The Serpentine promoted Abramović’s piece as a “unique work”^{xi} created for the gallery. Subsequently, the Guardian newspaper reported that a group of historians and curators from the US had sent a letter to the Serpentine accusing Abramović of failing to acknowledge the influence of Mary Ellen Carroll. Among them were David Joselit, Frazer Ward and Yona Backer, who pointed out that Carroll and Abramović had exhibited alongside each other in Chicago.^{xii} Carroll, they observed, had been creating her on-going project *Nothing*, in which she addresses the concept of “nothing”, since the 1990s.^{xiii} The historians and curators explained how Abramović’s failure to cite this influence would be detrimental to Carroll’s ability to perform *Nothing* in the future. Their letter was signed by Joselit who told the Guardian that he felt it was important for Abramović to “acknowledge this genealogy” because, although the works were different, both addressed “the question of doing nothing”.

Following this, the Serpentine Galleries subsequently wrote of *512 Hours*, “The pared-down nature of this exhibition corresponds to Abramović’s interest in the historically well-established relationship between art and ‘nothingness’; visual artists including Robert Barry, John Cage, Mary Ellen Carroll, Robert Irwin, Yves Klein, Gustav Metzger and Yoko Ono, to name only a very few, have all explored the notion of material absence within their practice. The idea of emptiness—of minimalism, reduction, and simplicity—plays an intrinsic role in Abramović’s work, and has increasingly led to more and more of less and less.”^{xiv}

Let us reflect on the last part of this sentence for a moment, “more and more of less and less”. And then let us return to consider two artists the Serpentine Galleries refer in their response - John Cage and Yves Klein.

Cage’s performance of nothing, *4’33*, was conceived around 1947, almost 50 years before Carroll’s *Nothing*. For Cage, it became the epitome of his idea that sounds might constitute music, whilst simultaneously reflecting his interest in Zen Buddhism. Around the same time, in 1949, Yves Klein formulated his *Monotone Symphony* which comprises a 20-minute sustained chord followed by a 20-minute silence. Klein once described how age nineteen, while laying on a beach, he experienced a “realistic-imaginary” mental journey into the blue depths and, on reflection, declared “I have written my name on the far side of the sky!”^{xv} In his imaginary wandering, Klein sought an artistic engagement with the concept of an infinite nothingness, which became central to his practice. In 1958 he further expanded on this idea with an exhibition of emptiness titled *Le Vide (The Void)* at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris. The gallery was painted white and all its furniture was removed except for a large cabinet. Over 3,000 people attended the opening evening^{xvi}

How then, we might ask ourselves, are Cage, Klein, Carroll, Abramović and others able to produce similar works of art on the concept of nothing and for these to be considered different to one another? Let us picture for a moment a retrospective exhibition featuring the different works we are discussing. We might imagine a series of empty rooms, with each room presenting a different artist. On display a

wall text would outline the intentions of each and these different philosophical objectives. And provide the key to our conceiving how each room varies. In fact this very exhibition occurred at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, France in 2009. Titled *Voids, A Retrospective* it presented nine freshly whitewashed, empty spaces, with each one representing an historic “empty” art exhibition. Located firmly in the tradition of conceptual art, these presentations of empty rooms included Art & Language’s *The Air Conditioning Show*, Bethan Huws’ *Haus Esters Piece*, as well as projects by Laurie Parsons, Robert Barry, Roman Ondák, Robert Irwin and, naturally, Yves Klein’s *Void*.^{xvii}

Yet even where these intellectual underpinnings are different, the end results remain essentially the same, a presentation of nothing. This “nothing” or “empty art” though is not necessarily what it seems.

Forty years after they were flattened, the land once occupied by the Pruitt–Igoe projects remains vacant. The demolition of the Pruitt–Igoe projects, the empty gallery and postmodernist theory. They have deconstructed many of our old belief systems, and offered us something of value. They have created a void, a space for renewal and fresh growth.

Where there is nothing, perhaps there comes a time for “some-thing”. For art this will almost certainly necessitate a return to exploring why creativity has any meaning for us in the first place. And bring fresh relevance to Carroll’s core question, “what do we consider a work of art?”

When we look to the past we can see that where art appears to become interesting is when life, as it is experienced from the personal, subjective viewpoint, is applied to a meditation on universal mysteries. Where moral relativism meets moral absolutes. Examples of this from the past might include Caspar David Friedrich’s 1814 painting *The Chasseur in the Forest*, where a lonely figure stands before an opening in some trees. The hunter himself acts as a stand-in for ourselves and allows us to meditate on being at the threshold of the unknowingness of the future.

We might look at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, which was completed in 1971. While Mark Rothko who was commissioned to design the chapel was raised in the Jewish faith, the chapel itself is non-denominational. The building, is an octagon, inscribed in a Greek cross, inside, three walls display triptychs, while the other five walls exhibit single paintings. The fourteen works of art are painted in various shades of black, and, in number, recall the *Stations of the Cross*. They present us with a void, which appears to represent death in awe and warmth.

Or we may wish to consider Vija Celmins’s ‘Night Sky’ series which encompasses the truths which underpin the nature of our universe.

In 1986 Vija Celmins began work on her etching *Mount Holyoke* while in residency at the printmaking workshop of Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Her work depicts a black and white map of a star constellation and forms part of a larger body of work portraying the night sky. As with most of Celmins’s work it draws from found photography rather than direct observation and displays an obsessive interest in the treatment of the surface of the image. Whilst this is a realist depiction of the stars, the care she has taken in representing the blackness between the stars also

draws our attention to something else. Celmins has created a representation of the force of gravity. Gravity is precisely as strong as it needs to be, if it were slightly less powerful the universe would fly apart and there would be no stars or planets, and if it were slightly more powerful than it is the universe would collapse into a ball. Gravity is balanced in such a way as to enable the universe itself to exist.

Mount Holyoke offers us a depiction of a universal reality, but it is so much more than that, it is a meditation on a universal mystery.

Robert Priseman, 4 November 2022

ⁱ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-11-09/roy-lichtenstein-peephole-painting-sets-43-million-record-at-christie-s>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-mark-rothko-orange-red-yellow->

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.artspace.com/artist/mary_ellen_carroll

^{iv} David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, First published 1975, 2002 edition, p. 29

^v <https://ew.com/article/1993/02/05/john-cage-i-have-nothing-say-and-i-am-saying-it/>

^{vi} <http://mecarroll.com/the-stone-is-more-stone-than-before-1994/>

^{vii} Carroll, Mary Ellen, Flatley, Jonathan. Walker, Hamza. "MEC." Steidl, 2010, p179

^{viii} <https://www.howold.co/person/mary-ellen-carroll/biography>

^{ix} <https://blogs.uchicago.edu/feast/>

^x *Zeitgeisters: Marina Abramović* (radio programme) (London: BBC Radio 4, 17 July 2014).

^{xi} Serpentine Galleries, *Marina Abramović: 512 Hours*, August 2014.

^{xii} Dominic Rushe, 'Art star Marina Abramović caught up in row over "Nothing"', *Guardian*, 29 May 2014.

^{xiii} Dominic Rushe, 'Art star Marina Abramović caught up in row over "Nothing"', *Guardian*, 29 May 2014.

^{xiv} <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/marina-abramovic-512-hours/>

^{xv} Tate, *Yves Klein: 5 Things*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/yves-klein/five-things>

^{xvi} <https://www.littleartnecdotes.com/le-vide-1958/>

^{xvii} <https://www.frieze.com/article/voids-retrospective>