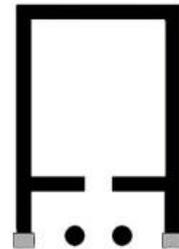


Towards a Sensibility of Infinity: the Abyss and Anish Kapoor

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Along the Path to Groundlessness

As one of the oldest metaphors known to human civilization, the abyss has always been a part of creative cultural thinking. Conceptions of the abyss have provided cultures with various abstract structures for maintaining a shared sense of place within an imagined universal meta-narrative, and it has been described as an original chaos, the infinite creative force featured in the Creation mythologies of the ancient worlds of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The primordial abyss features in their respective stories of the aquatic chaos of *Nun* and of the deities *Tiamat* and *Absu* featured in the Sumerian *Eridu Geneis*, dated to the 3rd millennium BCE.¹ Consider also the cosmology of pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander (c.610-c.546 BCE): his concept of *apeiron* denoted an atemporal and aspatial boundlessness and was central to understanding all that could be observed in the spatial and temporal present, however paradoxically.² In such contexts, the abyss marks a beginning, a potential space, reminiscent of the ‘great deep [that was] believed in the old cosmogony to lie beneath the earth; the primal chaos’.³ Alternatively, in the New Testament for example, the abyss evokes a mental image of hell, the abode of dead sinners and evil spirits, limbo, the bowels of the earth, a discomfoting fear of falling, and an infernal deterrent against the transgression of normalised social boundaries.⁴ In the modern and secular West, Martin Heidegger's ontology also places a notion of the abyss (*der Abgrund*, in German). For Heidegger, ‘Being “is” the Ab-grund inasmuch as Being and Grund are the same. For Being “is” to found [...] and only for this reason Being has no other Grund’.⁵

Time and again, whether for metaphysical or philosophical purposes, the abyss has reappeared as an infinitely vast emptiness, a bottomless void that, without any discernible foundation, somehow gives form and resolution to creative cultural thinking relating to space and identity. Yet it is these assumptions that make the abyss, also, one of the world's oldest cognitive puzzles. For, a limitless, unfathomable, and indeterminable abyss surely defies the limitations imposed upon it by the act of defining itself—and thus is forever deferred to a space beyond any adequate grasp by our faculties of determination.

¹ See, for instance, Thorkild Jacobsen, ‘The Eridu Genesis’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100 (1981), 513–29.

² See ‘Michael Forster: “to apeiron” in the Cosmology of Anaximander’, online video recording, *Internationales Zentrum für Philosophie NRW*, 22 January 2016. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ITXo6GtSb4>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

³ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 11.

⁴ Jude 1:7.

⁵ Renato Cristin, *Heidegger and Leibniz: Reason and the Path*, trans. by Gerald Parks (Dordrecht: Kulwer Academic Publishers, 1998), p. 47.

What, then, does it mean to “make” something of the abyss? If the abyss is at least in part a product of the mind then, whenever and wherever we might have an opportunity to view its representation, what might it mean to “speak” of it? What can be drawn from what we say? Does the communicator tread a fine line (along that precarious rim) between the propagation of empty rhetoric and something far more constructive, i.e. the “rhetoric of emptiness”? One possible pathway through this question can be found via two historical precedents. In the context of the Western philosophical tradition, we may consider Nietzsche’s insight with regard to the abyss, made manifest in the 146th aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil* and which reads: ‘And when you look long into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you’.⁶ For Nietzsche, showing the way into the abyss meant directing us to the individual. The “self-reflective”, or “self-reflecting”, abyss implies that to think of the abyss is to stare directly into our own indeterminacy—in short, to confront our own ignorance.

This sentiment is shared in the East, specifically in the Buddhist notion that material existence stems from the mind, i.e. that ‘we are what we think’.⁷ It is not confined to spirituality, however; we find this idea in keeping with the principle that underpins the practice of Cognitive Behavioural Psychology, where ‘changing the way we think can change the way we feel’.⁸ Thus, in a space between East and West, we find a consensus on how to proceed into the abyss (how to negotiate this abstract thought structure)—one that takes into account a paradoxical complex language of the abyss as well as the subsequent task of translating such language into creative visual communication. Overall, this means that the thought of the abyss represents a crucial doorway into an investigation of ‘[l]ife’s history [as] the evolution of indeterminacy’.⁹ More specifically, it provides us with a suitable point of departure for an examination of the artwork of Bombay-born London sculptor Anish Kapoor. An East/West consensus on the “self-reflective” abyss is again articulated in Kapoor’s observation that ‘Void is really a state within’ and, furthermore, that ‘there is nothing so black as the black within. No blackness is as black as that’.¹⁰ Because the abyss *per se* evades adequate determination, it becomes possible to identify Kapoor’s attitudes towards the unknown, the indeterminable and, to that extent, his own ignorance, in the artforms and rhetoric that define his work.

It is not unique that an art practice be used to promote public discussion; we can appreciate that this is an important part of any form of socially engaged expression. Kapoor’s significant experience as creator of public sculptures indicates that his art has social relevance. In this sense, an examination of the qualitative and aesthetic contexts of Kapoor’s creative responses to the abyss is grounded in a recognition that these art objects are value-laden artefacts that exist within the broader visual culture. Through this examination, it becomes possible to gain

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 98.

⁷ Steven Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 32.

⁸ Kathy Graham, ‘Buddhism and Happiness’, in *ABC Health and Wellbeing*, 11 October 2007, para. 9. <<https://www.abc.net.au/health/features/stories/2007/10/11/2054844.htm>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

⁹ *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, ed. by Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Windquist (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 189.

¹⁰ Germano Celant, ‘Artist as Sacerdos’, in *Anish Kapoor* (Milan: Charta, 1998), pp. xi-xli (p. xxx).

some understanding of Kapoor's creative disposition. But, as we seek to progress critical reflection on the spaces of appearances that we encounter, whether that be in person or via the media, a more vital focus is sustained. Kapoor's works, from the moment that they enter the public eye, are texts that may be culturally read. As Nicholas Mirzoeff says, 'visual culture is a tactic with which to study the genealogy, definition and functions of postmodern everyday life from the point of view of the consumer, rather than the producer'.¹¹ Thus, while insight into the creative personality might be interesting, what might be useful and sharable is a sense of what that artist's objects could offer in terms of how they promote thinking in their audience and what linkages the analyst might be able to uncover between a critical reading and the broader thoughtfulness of everyday life.

Just as industrial art might ride on the back of the measurable strength of its materials, aesthetic representations of the abyss may benefit from the added intrigue of a metaphysical paradox that traverses not only cognitive boundaries, but also the geographical regions and historical periods of human civilization. By drawing that past into the contemporary moment, it is as if Anish Kapoor's art practice keeps reminding its audience that contemplating the void is as relevant as ever for the way that it helps maintain a qualitative connection to ideas that enrich everyday life. It is the value of the abyss, derived from its contemplation, that this essay seeks to uncover.

Practicing the Void

At once grounded in a Western art-making tradition and influenced by the Indian cultural tradition into which he was born (where the gap, and in-between-ness, of the void offers an allusion to Kapoor's cultural hybridity), Kapoor makes literal the 'reflective power of art' to evoke a discourse on the groundlessness and indeterminacy of the human condition.¹² But how does one find a form for chaos, or determine the indeterminable without showcasing the inherent unreliability of the exercise? After all, as Morgan and Morgan point out, '[n]o rendition [...] can be relied on since it is a rare occasion indeed that a soul has been able to descend into the abyss, let alone return unscathed and willing to lend a description'.¹³ Such a return, it would seem, is only possible in myth; I have in mind the legendary Greek tale of Orpheus, the musician who sought to rescue his murdered wife Eurydice from the underworld. Art, it would seem, was the key that would have mobilised Eurydice's return to the world of the living, granted by Hades, and it would have worked out well had Orpheus not succumbed to the temptation to check to see if Eurydice was behind him, thus breaking the condition set by Hades and, as a result, losing Eurydice forever. Orpheus' music consoled him in his grief, as if art could fill the emotional and physical void created by Eurydice's

¹¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

¹² Celant, (p. xxx).

¹³ Tom Morgan and Genevieve Morgan, *The Devil: A Visual Guide to the Demonic, Evil, Scurrilous, and Bad* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), p. 65.

absence and which ultimately catalysed his own murder at the hands of the wild women known as Mēnads.¹⁴

This Greek myth contains an idea about the value of art as a coping mechanism that steers us in the direction of art therapy. Its idea about the power of art to overcome the physical limits of life is only speculative, for the confirmation that would be made manifest in Eurydice's return to the realm of the living never eventuates, as if such power can exist only in the imagination and in the wishful thinking of the artist, Orpheus. He remains anchored in a material reality, and so will we when considering the art of Anish Kapoor and bringing its insights into our own lived experience.

Given the illusory capacity of art, Kapoor's sensitivity to materials, colour, and process has remained paramount. The required attention to physical details has led Kapoor to identify his practice as having journeyed through 'three real moments of insight [...]. One of them was finding I could make objects of pigment'. The second was the discovery of the 'non-object', where substance was 'emptied out and replaced by colour itself', and the third was the 'mirrored object—another kind of non-object', he explains, that 'takes in all that is around it and exists as a less than fully present object'.¹⁵

Arguably, it is in the second phase of his practice that the play of the abyss gains prominence, that is, where Kapoor's fabrication of voids sees him make a step toward creating discrete illusory worlds, which are not lies, per se, but tactics by which to draw our attention to the borders of materiality, activating tensions between perception and conception, between ideal and reality. It is here that we find a relationship between the abyss and the creative act itself, where the instability and impossibility of the abyss nevertheless evokes the promise of unfolding potential, of either something or nothing taking place. As Kapoor says, the abyss is 'a transitional space, an in-between space'; it is 'a space of becoming', and his work is informed by the primary physical sensation of insignificance that elicits the sublime, a consciousness of 'the loss of self, of fear [...] as a condition of emptiness'.¹⁶

Let us address this notion of undecidability in more detail, by moving towards a thought regarding the binary category that Kapoor's disrupts. Firstly, Kapoor's works are more conducive to mass viewing, and so lack the guarantee of intimacy and an uninterrupted encounter. Nevertheless, each viewer can peer into one of Kapoor's void works, standing close enough to allow them to occupy their entire field of vision. But a vision of what, to what? Where are Kapoor's works intended to transport the viewer, the public en masse? Let us first consider the feeling to which an appeal is made. Kapoor says that these are sculptural 'attempt[s] to deal with the fear of oblivion. [...]. To be conscious of oblivion, of the loss of self, of fear. This cannot be theatrical. It needs to be real fear'.¹⁷ Characteristic examples of

¹⁴ See Cambridge School Classics Project, *Cambridge Latin Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 464-527.

¹⁵ Craig Burnett, 'Space Odyssey', *Art News*, (2005), 112-15 (p. 113).

¹⁶ Homi Bhaba and Anish Kapoor, 'Homi Bhaba and Anish Kapoor: A Conversation', 1st June 1993. <<http://anishkapoor.com/976/homi-bhaba-and-anish-kapoor-a-conversation>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

these works include *Untitled, 1994-5*, *Cloak, 1997*, and *Untitled, 1997*. Craig Burnett describes the series, of which these works are a part, as:

large structures of various materials, including stone, that were hollowed out and filled with pigment, creating seemingly fathomless voids. [...]. The concave cavities in each create a powerful illusion of infinite depth. Although viewers will try to convince themselves that the hole is shallow, their eyes perceive an endless void.¹⁸

Kapoor's concave forms and homogenous surfaces, along with his dark, dense pigments, are attempts to create impossible spaces—at once finite and seemingly infinite—that threaten to pull the viewer inwards and, in this way, to evoke a 'sensual uncertainty'.¹⁹ The concave contour carved into a block of granite as *Untitled (1997)* affords the void a shape. However, the surface of this curved area of stone has been polished in such a way that the interior darkness seems to extend beyond the confines of the material, alluding to the infinite. Kapoor says that his void sculptures 'have been an attempt to deal with the fear of oblivion [...], of the loss of self', and this is demonstrated in earlier works such as *I (1987)*, in reference to which Celant suggests that Kapoor 'reclaims the body as a vehicle of the unknown'.²⁰

Kapoor's sculptural forms address the mass audience in that they are produced and made available for open debate through their installation in publicly accessible venues. For example, a public viewer can encounter them in the Guggenheim, or in a book published by Phaidon found on a shelf in the Tate Modern gallery bookshop. Each void is almost like the representation of an escape hatch out of the immediate present, with all its material conditions and practical limitations, into a liminal zone of borderless speechless contemplation, a space beyond the symbolic order where the mind can rest. Given that Kapoor seeks to evoke feelings through his work, feeling at the threshold, what is the materiality beyond which we are invited to peer? The answer to this will depend on where the art is seen.

The contexts in which Kapoor's art are exhibited are embedded in an advanced industrial and capitalist society. From this perspective, which describes the daily lives of his mass audience, the escape hatch to the void presents our minds, via our eyes, with an imaginary space that seems infinitely clear of the characteristic clutter of industrialised societies, of the atmospheric pressures of an urban living arrangements, of the bodily regimes we perform when participating in the hustle and bustle of a busy metropolis, and of the claustrophobia of the daily commute. For many people, these are the normalised environmental conditions against which an abyss seems entirely incongruous but also incredibly important; the burden of knowledge means that, for those within this late modern world, the task of imagining some alternative and sufficiently complementary realm beyond it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine—and who has the spare time? There is a role here for an artist who can produce escape hatches that give the public eye a place to rest, if only for a moment, and not just when they sleep. Kapoor disrupts the binary of inside and outside by drawing our attention to

¹⁸ Burnett, (p. 13).

¹⁹ Celant, (p. xxxi).

²⁰ Ibid., (p. xxix).

the fact that the sculptural surface, representing the limits of material culture, is a construct, an illusion. By alluding to formless space, Kapoor's voids are illusions that prompt speculation as to the artifice of our tangible surroundings, which we may also call our built environment. By providing the viewer with an impression of there being a boundary to materiality, a suggestion is made that what we see is without foundation, and that the veneer of the visible world is thin enough to remain vulnerable to a breach—it can be penetrated. By considering the importance of this creative task we step closer to what Kapoor's work has to offer.

Kapoor's voids may well speak of a world beyond, a habitable breathing space outside the totalising grasp of capitalism, but this is his art; this outside is an illusion, though we might wish to believe it. As such, Kapoor's works also speak of something unattainable, a nothingness we have lost. This notion of loss, localised as self-loss, is worth keeping in mind when it comes to *Turning the World Inside Out* (1995), made from cast, highly polished aluminium. The reflective silvery surface of the orbic artwork reflects a panorama of the space around it. The shape of the form can be distinguished by what can be seen as a reflection, and the reflected space becomes animated as the viewer moves around the sculpture. The viewer is able to peer into the convex exterior and, as Celant explains, be confronted 'with an identity like a mirror'.²¹ This step into the void, contrary to what might be expected, is not a process of moving into a place of darkness; instead, it is one of a 'leap [...] into light'.²² One might think of this as a leap of faith into a conceivably higher consciousness, reflecting Kapoor's long term practice of Buddhism, though Kapoor denies any attempt to 'make Buddhist art'.²³ What is more, he makes it clear that the responsibility for communication rests squarely upon the artwork. 'I've said ad infinitum that I have nothing to say as an artist. [...]. What I can do, I think, is stumble on things that might feel as though they're relevant'.²⁴

There is a strong element of repetition that flows through Kapoor's practice, as if the abyss where at the centre of a habitual regime of contemplation, a veritable mantra that demands attention from the artist, and in this way from the viewer, again and again. Of his voids, Kapoor says: 'I seem to be making the same shape each time with a different purpose'.²⁵ The practice emerges as one through which Kapoor creates a constant reminder that, or meditation of how, with each visitation, the door opens to an experience of the void that builds upon the last one—as in the case of Zen Buddhism, wherein the aim is 'a total voiding of the Self, the acceptance that there is no Self, no "inner truth" to be discovered', adding to the 'basic Zen

²¹ Celant, (p. xxxvii).

²² Ibid.

²³ Matthew Sweet, 'Anish Kapoor: Smooth Operator', *The Independent*, 24 November 2003, para. 13. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/anish-kapoor-smooth-operator-79777.html>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

²⁴ Sholto Byrnes, 'Anish Kapoor: The prince and the artist', in *The Independent*, 20 November 2005, para. 21. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/anish-kapoor-the-prince-and-the-artist-327917.html>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

²⁵ Bina Sarkar Ellias, 'Being and Nothingness: Anish Kapoor Explores the In-between', *International Gallerie*, 7 (2004), 5-17 (p. 13).

message [that] liberation lies in losing one's Self, in immediately uniting with the primordial Void'.²⁶

The Unfathomable Abyss: Peering into the Unknown

'Space is as complex [as time]', says Kapoor, expressing his interest in the physicality of presence.²⁷ *Turning the World Inside Out* (1995) echoes the world around it, capturing the world in its surface only to return the gaze in the form of a reversed and distorted image. This artwork speaks of substance, but it is not a solid form. The interior of the artwork remains out of the sight of the viewer and of the rest of the world, kept as a secret and impenetrable space. What remains unseen is the containment of the void, an absent space that contrasts the absolute presence of the reflective surface. Kapoor says that he attempts to make this interior space seem 'bigger than the object that contains it'.²⁸ In this way, Kapoor invigorates a dialogue between the interior and the exterior as if to suggest that what lies behind the reflection, the reflected self, is an abyss, sheer groundlessness in which we sense a sublime tension. To use Spivak's words, '[t]he fall into the abyss [...] inspires us with as much pleasure as fear. We are intoxicated with the prospect of never hitting bottom'.²⁹

Celant observes how Kapoor's *Turning the World Inside Out II* (1995) articulates 'the eternal indeterminacy of the appearance of the unknown and the obscure. [...]. It is an abyss of light and energy sunk into the floor, emerging [...] and sucking in everything'.³⁰ What is implied is a veritable hollowing out of the self, an emptying of the self into the space akin to the emptying out of knowledge in to the unknown. The idea that an emptying of space somehow equates to an emptying of the self can be understood through the lens of cultural studies discourse; cultural identity, as social psychologist Henri Tajfel defines it, is part of one's self-concept derived from 'knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership'.³¹ In addition, for intercultural communications theorist Young Yun Kim, cultural identity comprises individual and social concepts, it is adaptive and negotiable, and expressible through creative and communicative practices.³² Whether communicative practices take place in the private or public sphere, they always take place somewhere, i.e. in a locality. Thus, self-identity and locality cannot be disentangled. For this reason, we can return to Kapoor and appreciate that his seemingly spaceless, world-consuming forms also tug at the identity of the viewer,

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 86.

²⁷ Heide Reitmaier, 'Descent into Limbo', in *Tate Modern*, 1 October 2002, para. 6.

²⁸ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/anish-kapoor-1384/descent-limbo> [accessed 1 December 2019].

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Celant, (p. xxxviii-ixxx).

³¹ Henri Tajfel, *Differentiation Between Social Groups* (London: Academic Press, 1978), p. 63.

³² See Young Yun Kim, 'Ideology, identity, and intercultural communication: An analysis of differing academic conceptions of cultural identity', *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36 (2007), 237-53

(especially pp. 240-47).

playfully troubling at the ego. Zdenka Badovinac draws our attention to Kapoor's description of 'the unknown; [as] the inexpressible and the non-depictable [...] with voids [...] illusory spaces with no form and no inner distinctions'.³³ A tension is achieved in the disjuncture between one's physical presence and the absence into which the gaze is drawn.

We can appreciate *Turning the World Inside Out* (1995) in these terms; the floor piece also threatens to consume the viewer, pulling them out of a consumer society. But, to where? Where might the viewer be directed if the void succeeds in its intimation? Kapoor's interest in physicality points us to the body in general and, in particular, the site of human creation. For him, to be lost in the void is to be 'consumed [...] in the womb'.³⁴ We arrive at a gendered abyss.

The Engendered Abyss: of Womb and Wound

Kapoor knows that the void 'can refer to the cosmos or to the human body [...]'. In the sense that a void may be apprehended by the senses'.³⁵ Thus, while his works speak to metaphysical notions of primordial chaos, we can also consider the metaphorical void in physiological terms, specifically physical feeling. Pier Luigi Tazzi observes that 'it is through the gaping lips of that wound that the void is visible, enticing and seductive in its pitilessness, promising peace and offering the incomparable gift of pleasure'.³⁶

As poetic as it might be, the alluring atmosphere of tranquillity and safety described contradicts Kapoor's own focus on a sense of pain and suffering. The idea that the edge of the void is a site of trauma that bears a wound is found in Kapoor's printed series entitled *Wounds and Absent Objects* (1998), as well as in *Blackness from Her Womb* (2001). The following prose prefaces the latter of these two series:

Valley of red

Wounded walls of tranquillity

Crows are calling

Blackness from her Womb.³⁷

This prose associates darkness and femininity, but let us first consider the symbolism of the crow. Juan Eduardo Cirlot explains how, due to 'its black colour, the crow is associated with the idea of beginning (as expressed in such symbols as the maternal night, primigenial

³³ Zdenka Badovinac, *Anish Kapoor* (Ljubljana: Modern Galerija, 1994), p. 8.

³⁴ Celant, (p. xxxv).

³⁵ Bhaba and Kapoor.

³⁶ Pier Luigi Tazzi, *Anish Kapoor* (Japan: Kohji Ogura Gallery, 1989). Unpaginated exhibition catalogue.

³⁷ Anish Kapoor, *Blackness from Her Womb* (2001). Unpaginated boxed portfolio of thirteen white ground aquatints with chine collé.

darkness, the fertilizing earth) [... and] is a symbol for creative [...] power'.³⁸ The crow announces the flow of blood from the womb that comes into view, i.e. where from its darkness can be seen. The crow is heard amid a vision of darkness, and its call is that of a 'messenger [...] of] cosmic significance'.³⁹ Something important is happening; new life, and thus new creative potential, draws nearer from an extent in space. The walls of the valley are red, they are wounded and bleeding but also tranquil. One is implored to think of the birth of a child, understanding the abyssal valley as the womb from which life can come. It echoes the Babylonian creation myth wherein Tiamat's carcass makes the universe, and her blood becomes the oceans.⁴⁰ This said, Cirlot confirms that the 'waters of the oceans are [...] seen not only as the source of life but also as its goal. "To return to the sea" is "to return to the mother," that is, to die'.⁴¹ Birth, therefore, sets another course in motion, that being of death, a space beyond determination into which every living creature peers.

The confrontational dimension of the abyss is familiar. For Tina Pippin, the abyss 'represents the ultimate threat, the ultimate dangerous female. The abyss is the ruptured female, the ruptured hymen, no longer virgin, nor virgin mother'.⁴² Then, why is it, as Celant asserts, that 'Kapoor's desire is to enter the thing itself'?⁴³ Surely it could not be to fill it, to make the hole whole again. As Pippin says, vital to the identity of the abyss is precisely 'what it *lacks*, which is the phallus'.⁴⁴ To fill the abyss would betray it. Consider Michael Marder's jug metaphor.

The jug is nothing to be filled or fulfilled. [...] [I]t is already full of itself in itself and beside itself. Full to the point of indifferent, unenjoyable pleasure. Full without measure, "at the bottom without bottom" of an abyss.⁴⁵

If the void sculptures represent a desire to enter the void, such desire is bound to frustration. At the least, Kapoor's void sculptures mark the presence of an unfathomable void and not an unfathomable phallus. His ongoing framing of the void as a symbol of femininity alerts us not only to a vision of human inadequacy (an inability to adequately determine the abyss) but, more specifically, a male failure to provide sexual satisfaction, i.e. to fulfil the promise of pleasure. Perhaps 'it is through the gaping lips of that wound' that the male may confront the physical realisation that the void cannot be filled. In contrast to the promise of 'peace and [...] the incomparable gift of pleasure', the void poses confrontationally before the male ego. To peer endlessly into the abyss, to stand at the edge of the void that overwhelms the senses of the viewer; this is all well and good, but it continually hails the viewer into a passive role.

³⁸ Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. by Jack Sage (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 2001), p. 71.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Samuel Noah Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 120-21.

⁴¹ Cirlot, p. 281.

⁴² Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 72-73.

⁴³ Celant, (p. xxi).

⁴⁴ Pippin, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Michael Marder, 'Sure Things? On Things and Objects in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida', *Postmodern Culture*, 15 (2005). <<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.505/15.3marder.html>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

What is the act of *staring* to achieve? What might be the goal of this context of passivity, that is, of the aestheticisation of inadequacy?

It is important to clarify that the sexualisation the abyss is not unique to Kapoor, as shown by two independent examples. Firstly, in the New Testament, the Christian hell is an abyss where sinners are sent. For 'giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, [such individuals] are set forth for an example, [in] suffering the vengeance of eternal fire'.⁴⁶ Sexual activity leads to punishment in the abyss. This does not necessarily make the abyss sexual, but the close correlation between sex and unfathomable torment renders any conceivable gap inconsequential. In any case, we see their explicit conflation in such renditions of the hellish abyss as a *vagina dentata*, which evokes a rather Freudian fear of castration.⁴⁷ The second example is the film *The Stratosphere Girl*.⁴⁸ The film's narrative follows the journey of Angela, an eighteen year old Belgian girl who flies to Tokyo to work as a hostess. One of her female room-mates also works as a hostess but provides some additional services for her clients, one of which she calls "staring into infinity". To educate Angela on what this means, the room-mate sits on the edge of the dining table with her legs parted and lifts her skirt to expose her genitals. By paying a fee, clients would be able to "lose themselves", for a time, in the vision of an externally located "inner-spaciousness", an alluring Other. The direct association between the female genitals and the abyss, as a fleshy gateway to infinity, not only reinforces the pleasure of the void but also its marketability. When it comes to the vision of a vulva, it would seem, for some, just sitting and staring is enough.

These cultural reference points help us piece together what it might mean to stare into one of Kapoor's sculptural voids, to solve the puzzle they pose from the point of view of the active art-viewing consumer rather than the creative producer. This is not to say that Kapoor wishes to dominate individual viewing experiences. Consider Ellias' description of *Turning the World Inside Out* (1995) as 'a conduit to a womb where "the imagination has the possibility of escape"'.⁴⁹ From this point of view, the Kapoor-esque void is less a psychological prison of Christian origin, but something closer to the "potential space" found in D.W. Winnicott's research into early childhood psychology. Winnicott's notion of potential space theorises the infant's use of toys and other transitional objects at such a time as he or she negotiates 'the move from omnipotence to a grasp of the reality principal'.⁵⁰ This potential space is a space of *becoming*—the symbolic order into which the infant moves as they begin to recognise themselves as a separate entity from the primary care-giver. Winnicott recognises that a 'total dependency on the mother [...] gives the infant the illusion of oneness, of total unity with the mother'.⁵¹ From this perspective, creativity signals the active generation of imagined space

⁴⁶ Jude 1:7

⁴⁷ See Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *Visual Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1999), pp. 324-26.

⁴⁸ *The Stratosphere Girl*, dir. by Matthias Oberg (TLA Releasing, 2004).

⁴⁹ Ellias, (p. 13).

⁵⁰ As understood in Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 38.

⁵¹ Derek Pigrum, *Teaching Creativity: Multi-mode Transitional Practices* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 28.

between the infant and the mother, i.e. a void that evolves as the child explores autonomy from the primary care-giver. This exploration is amorphous; distinct from both the ‘inner or personal psychic reality’ and the ‘actual world in which the individual lives’, potential space constitutes a imaginative third space that transgresses material reality.⁵² Imagination is liminal; ‘the result of the transformation phantasy undergoes when it is brought into “potential space”’.⁵³

This information helps us consider Kapoor’s void sculptures using the womb as a metonym for the mother. Winnicott’s concept of potential space is coherent with Kapoor’s interpretation of the abyss as ‘a transitional space, an in-between space’ and ‘a space of becoming’.⁵⁴ Thus, we continue to formulate an interpretation of the void sculpture’s: an alternative of how Kapoor arrives at the physical sensation of insignificance, what he means by a consciousness of ‘the loss of self, of fear [...] as a condition of emptiness’.

Kapoor’s void sculptures evoke potential space, as postulated by Winnicott. The threat of the void, therefore, is less the loss of self but, rather, the loss of an infantile notion of self, a transgression of the boundaries of an old ego linked to the primordial birth-giver, which we can accept in the form of a mother or motherland. In the case of the latter, we can extend this thought to consider Kapoor own migration experience, having left the borders of his birthplace (geographical, if not psychological) of Mumbai in the early 1970s.

The dialogue generated between exterior and interior, a tense memorialisation of the past, implies an ordeal of self-identification. Celant confirms that the ‘ordeal of the void, of limbo, is a necessary precondition to gaining mastery over nothingness and the self’.⁵⁵ Kapoor himself says that the “‘idea of being somehow consumed [...] in the womb [...] is a vision of darkness’; the ordeal, then, is one wherein “‘only the imagination has the possibility of escape”’. The imagination is interpreted as the only tool with which the individual’s submission to the void can find resolution, i.e. through a supreme act of (illusory) mastery found in the shaping of the abyss, in bringing its notions into a material reality.

Staring into Infinity and Beyond the Black Mirror

For Kapoor, the challenge of the abyss is of ‘reaching through’ the artifice towards immateriality.⁵⁶ According to Tazzi, Kapoor works the ‘rigid surface (of the world) upon that abyssal void that constitutes its substrata rather than its essence’—an illusory rigidity that characterises late modern life.⁵⁷ Kapoor’s sculptures deal with ‘experience that is outside of

⁵² Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1971), p. 103.

⁵³ Thomas Ogden, *The Matrix of the Mind: Object Relations and the Psychoanalytic Dialogue* (Maryland: Jason Aronson, 1993), p. 234.

⁵⁴ Bhaba and Kapoor.

⁵⁵ Celant, (p. xxxv).

⁵⁶ Sweet, para. 13.

⁵⁷ Pier Luigi Tazzi, as quoted in Homi Bhabha, *Anish Kapoor* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), p. 104.

material concern', and echo the Buddhist doctrine of the void as a positive space.⁵⁸ Each void provides a veritable window from which we might peer into the emptiness beyond appearances.

This relates to the problem of representation shown in Plato's allegory of the cave, and a strong connection exists between Plato's cave and Kapoor's voids.⁵⁹ Both problematise the aesthetic encounter, drawing the viewer's attention to its illusory nature, while taking this as a chance to reflect on our own existences. Plato's context is the cave; Kapoor's is the gallery or public art site. We could easily be confused by a wall-sized shadow with the indeterminate depths of *Untitled* (1994-95), *Cloak* (1997) or *Untitled* (1997). Like Plato, Kapoor plays on the spatiality of presence. Through the public presentation of his work, he tells us that something of value is available to be viewed, leaving it up to the viewer to find a language adequate enough to anchor interest, to somehow navigate the fragile boundary between the expectation of physicality and the illusion that moves through our eyes to our brain. His works counter the enlightenment principle that seeing is believing, harnessing a historical tension between conception and perception. We, however, are not entrapped in the vista, but remain free to walk away at any time.

Kapoor thus presents as neo-Platonic, and although he attempts to approach 'a sensibility of infinity [...] he never attains his ultimate goal'.⁶⁰ This is the game he enjoys—communicating a subject matter that finds him perched upon the rim of a pit. Kapoor claims to have nothing to say but tells us at least this much, sidestepping a critical conversation. Should we take his words literally, or does the presumed coherence between his ideas and his practice mean that we are dealing with a figurative expression (one that suits expressions of the abyss as metaphor)? That is, similarly to his play on presence and absence, it is as if the artist who says "nothing" of the abyss falls into the depths of a word game. It might be modesty that moves us to give voice to the abyss in this way, although I wonder how any glimmer of the infinite can claim total ignorance of a "grand vision."

It might all become clear in the blackness of nothingness, if only we had the capacity to extend beyond the preliminary rim and, even then, only once we have given our eyes enough time to adjust, enough time for our pupils to open up to the empty vista. The indeterminacy and obscurity of the abyss is not for the faint hearted, but that is no reason to avoid it. How we can do so remains unknown, for there is always something that we shall fail to adequately comprehend, always something dwelling in the unfathomable future that remains undetectable. But, while his work demands a kind of agnostic contemplation, Kapoor's voids do not simply recreate the conditions for a passive daydream. Rather, Kapoor provides the viewer with something of a mirror of blackness, through which one might gaze into the carefully crafted representation of an emptying self; an opportunity to imagine what is at stake in the absence of the materialistic behaviours through which, in the context of an

⁵⁸ Donald Kuspit, 'Anish Kapoor: Barbara Gladstone Gallery', *Artforum*, (1986), p. 129.

<https://gladstonegallery.com/sites/default/files/19_artforum_nov86_e.pdf> [accessed 1 December 2019].

⁵⁹ See Plato, *Republic*, trans. by Alexander Dunlop Lindsay (London and New York: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1954), p. 207.

⁶⁰ Celant, (p. xl).

advanced capitalist culture, personal and shared identities are invited to find meaningful validation. This is a noisy culture, wherein natural resources are processed and exploited for construction purposes and with our bustling cities and their environs undergoing continual expansion. By contrast, Kapoor's abyss invites quiet contemplation, and thus his work might best be experienced on one's own, with minimal distraction. Pulled in by our curiosity, we might gaze towards nothingness and glimpse a subtle oblivion or, we could say, a well-positioned counter-argument to an ocular-centric social space. There is a difference to be noted, here between the emptying self and the empty self, that is toyed with in Kapoor's practice; we are treated to, or perhaps teased by, an allusion to the hollowness of our object-filled realities and, not without irony, invited to consider what fullness might come from letting go of the physical and psychological attachment to the practices and artefacts that consume and contain us.

Kapoor's sculptures, these veritable escape-hatches into nothingness, bring to bear a counter-capitalist lesson not only in that our materiality is actually a form of emptiness, but that to know this is to step towards true fulfilment. While the socio-cultural landscapes to which we are habituated today differ from those of the past, a contemplation of the abyss today is nevertheless to participate in an ancient cultural practice. Though Kapoor's vertiginous art also shows this to be an inherently disorienting one, he nevertheless fosters curiosity for what we might view from the rim of the pit, beyond our own perceptual limitations, and this by artfully hollowing out the world of appearances through Kapoor's sculptures as ones that 'afford a lived experience of the void'.⁶¹

⁶¹ Kuspit, p. 129.

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