

The Careful Crafting of a Utopia:  
Yves Klein and the Anthropometric Event of March 9, 1960

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE.....</b>	<b>10</b>
“AN ATOMIC ERA”	
I.    RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: The Fall of Vichy France and the Rise of Consumer Culture	
II.   RELIGION AFTER WORLD WAR II: Questioning the Institutions of the Past	
III.  THE GLOBAL AVANT-GARDE: The Birth of Performance Art	
<b>CHAPTER TWO.....</b>	<b>27</b>
“COME WITH ME INTO THE VOID”	
I.    A BRIEF NOTE: Proper Terminology for Klein’s Performative Works	
II. <i>THE VOID</i> : April 28, 1958 – May 13, 1958	
III. <i>ZONES OF IMMATERIAL PICTORIAL SENSIBILITY</i> : 1959 – 1962	
IV. <i>DIMANCHE – Le journal d’un seul jour</i> : November 27, 1960	
V.    COMMODITY FETISHISM, CAPITALISM & THE POST-MODERN CONDITION: Klein’s Events Within the Context of Post-War France	
<b>CHAPTER THREE.....</b>	<b>42</b>
“BEYOND THE ART OF PAINTING”	
I.    “IMMATERIAL SENSIBILITY”: The Crossroads Between Religion and Art	
II.   “THE MEMORY OF NATURE”: The Anthropometry Defined	
III.  “AN AWARENESS OF LIFE”: Klein and Rosicrucianism	
IV.   “A NEW ATMOSPHERE OF HUMAN INTIMACY”: Klein’s Utopian Vision	
V.    MARCH 9, 1960: The Fleeting Realization of Utopia	
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>IMAGE APPENDIX</b>	

## INTRODUCTION

Just before nine o'clock PM on March 9, 1960, precisely one hundred individuals gathered before the unadorned front doors of the Galerie International d'Art Contemporain on the rue Saint Honoré in Paris (Fig. 1). All members of the French avant-garde, these men and women remained largely perplexed as to why they had been assembled.<sup>1</sup> The mystified crowd knew only that each handpicked guest had recently received a cryptically worded invitation from Parisian artist Yves Klein requesting his or her attendance at an event that would "run back through forty thousand years of modern art."<sup>2</sup> Preparations for the actual event remained veiled in utmost secrecy.

When the doors finally opened at precisely 9 PM, Klein himself appeared before the small group. Wearing a full tuxedo and somber expression, the artist silently ushered his guests into the gallery space towards four rows of ordinary chairs lined up against the back wall. A single blue monochrome hung on the adjacent wall behind a nine-person orchestra. A massive sheet of pristine white paper covered both the empty floor space and the length of the remaining gallery wall.

Once the initial clamor died down and all of his guests had been seated, Klein stood before the seated instrumentalists and raised his arms (Fig. 2). In unison, the orchestra members began to play his Monotone Symphony. For the next twenty minutes, the low hum of a single protracted D-major triad chord in second inversion reverberated throughout the room. Immediately following the start of the music, three nude women emerged from a back room carrying individual cans of bright blue paint (Fig. 3). Under the watchful eyes of Klein, these

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<sup>1</sup> Guests included Albert Camus, Pierre Restany, Claude Pascal and Armand, among others. A full handwritten list of invited guests can be found at the Yves Klein Archives.

<sup>2</sup> Found in Yves Klein Archives. See also: Pierre Restany, Yves Klein, translated by John Shepley, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982, 110.

women began to methodically coat their bodies in the vivid pigment. Once fully paint-laden, they carefully pressed themselves against the paper-covered floors and wall (Fig. 4). The models stood on white blocks and stamped their nude forms onto the blank canvas, and later dragged each other across the floor to create sweeping swaths of color (Fig. 5). The artist aided in the process, offering encouragement and guidance as together they slowly crafted the work of art (Fig. 6). The visitors sat in total silence for another twenty minutes after the orchestra finished playing and watched as the women continued to paint. Once this period of meditative silence ended, the women picked up their paint cans and vanished again into the back room of the gallery. Klein stood to dismiss his guests with a few short words, and then the audience was once again dispelled into the bustling streets of modern Paris (Fig. 7).<sup>3</sup>

## I. STATE OF THE FIELD

When I initially began my search through the existing literature and academic databases, I found myself overwhelmed by the amount of written work available on Yves Klein. Unique and edgy, Klein's work has proven popular among scholars and museumgoers alike. In much of the existing scholarship, however, the March 1960 event has been overlooked or even openly dismissed. It often has proven difficult for people to look beyond the disquieting male-female dynamic involved in the creation of these body paintings that the artist dubbed "Anthropometries." However, I have attempted to examine the Anthropometric event using a larger analytical framework – I have looked back to the artist's earlier works, placed the

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<sup>3</sup> A video of this performance has been made available on the website of the Yves Klein Archives. Please note that the aural aspect of the video has not been documented, although it is possible to find recordings of the Monotone Symphony from other events staged by the artist. Entitled "Anthropométrie d l'Époque Bleue," the video of the March 1960 event can be accessed at: [http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

performance within its socio-historical context, and prioritized Klein's vision for the event. After reading and analyzing much of the artist's immense written work, I became increasingly interested in the link between biography and Klein's Rosicrucian beliefs, the intellectual and philosophical atmosphere of post-war France, and the apparent dissimilarity between the anthropometric performance in March of 1960 and Klein's other performative events.

Nan Rosenthal began the first exhaustive study of Klein's work in 1976 as part of her doctoral dissertation at Harvard University.<sup>4</sup> The historian spent many months at the Yves Klein Archives in Paris, where she used the artist's handwritten notes and manuscripts to craft a larger narrative of a highly self-conscious and audience-focused artist who desperately sought approval from the French public. Klein biographer Nicolas Charlet also has placed an emphasis on the artist's writings, arguing that his tremendous interest in self-documentation serves as an integral lens through which to examine Klein's body of work. In his monograph, Charlet notes that the artist's constant revisions and backdating could cast doubt on interpretations of his work as sincerely reflective of his own belief system.<sup>5</sup>

The first definitive collection of Klein's writings, *Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art et autres écrits*, was released to the public in 2003 by the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts. Spring Publications published the English translation four years later – the volume is entitled *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*. The writings of Yves Klein have proven central to any discussion of the artist's work, although critics have interpreted his words in very different ways.

Any scholar interested in Klein's work must also turn to the writings of Pierre Restany. The influential French critic and curator coined the term "Nouveau Réalisme" and remained

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<sup>4</sup> Nan Rosenthal, "The Blue World of Yves Klein," (Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Charlet, *Yves Klein*, Paris: Adam Brio, 2000.

Klein's close friend until the artist's premature death in 1962. In his descriptions of the artist's work, Restany constructed Klein's identity as a mystical member of the avant-garde and lauded him as a spiritual luminary. Only three years after his death, the critic published a biography of the artist that emphasized Klein's Rosicrucian beliefs, philosophical explorations, and devotion to Saint Rita. The critic took all of the artist's writings very seriously and singlehandedly fashioned the lasting and immediately recognizable narrative of Klein's fantastic avant-garde personality.<sup>6</sup>

Today, the academic community remains clearly divided between those who accept Klein's outsized persona and fantastic philosophies and those who reject it all as a farce. Denys Riout and Sidra Stich, both leading biographers of Klein, accept Restany's narrative and place the artist in the tradition of the "artist-genius."<sup>7</sup> Religious scholar Thomas McEvelley, who began his work under the tutelage of Pierre Restany, also fails to reject the earlier critic's celebration of Klein's genius. He privileges Klein's Rosicrucian, Zen, and Catholic beliefs and treats the artist's work as a direct result of his spiritualist philosophy. Yet McEvelley also places Klein in his historical context. He has written a number of essays that denote the artist as the first in a long line of avant-garde artists who reject traditional artistic genres and begin the breakdown of the "boundaries between art and non-art."<sup>8</sup> More recently, French psychoanalyst Jean-Michel Ribettes published an extensive psychoanalysis of Klein in which he claims that the artist's entire public persona was a direct manifestation of his fervent religious beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Denys Riout, *Yves Klein: expressing the immaterial* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta), 2010, and Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein*, Ostfildern: Cantz, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas McEvelley, "Yves Klein: Messenger of the Age of Space," *ArtForum* 20 (January 1982): 39.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Michel Ribettes, *Yves Klein contre C.G. Jung: La grande Bataille de l'Incarnation contre la maree noire de l'occultisme*, Brussels: La Lettre Volee, 2003.

A number of skeptics have emerged within the past two decades who reject this outright acceptance of Klein's self-fashioned persona and stated beliefs – many of whom began publishing their critiques following the 2003 death of Pierre Restany. Didier Semin's monographic work *Le peintre et son modèle déposé* claims that Klein principally considered himself a businessman. Semin bases this argument on the fact that the artist patented every one of his works – including International Klein Blue, Air Architecture, and his later fire sculptures – laying claim to them as his “inventions.” Semin scoffs at Klein's mystic persona and states that the artist denied the fact that his artistic oeuvre was largely influenced by the work of Kasimir Malevich and Marcel Duchamp in order to more convincingly establish his own originality and artistic prowess.<sup>10</sup> David Galenson goes even further, claiming that Klein stole directly from Duchamp (“the prototype”) in a thesis entitled, “The Conceptual Innovator as Trickster.” He explicitly rejects all of Klein's writings and argues that his public persona served primarily as a comedic act.<sup>11</sup> Thierry de Duve examines Klein's work in relation to economics and Marxist theory, but also dismisses the artist as “childish” and a megalomaniac. By using an economic framework to study the artist's major exhibitions, he leaves no room for any interpretation of Klein as a serious mystic.<sup>12</sup>

The final wave of scholarship has emerged most recently, and focuses largely upon placing Klein within the specific social and economic culture of postwar France. In her 2006 doctoral dissertation, Meredith Malone argues that the Nouveau Réaliste artists demonstrated a clear preoccupation with the future and the eventual creation of a new post-war world. Klein, in particular, challenged the traditional role of the artist and experimented with the average

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<sup>10</sup> Didier Semin, *Le peintre et son modèle déposé* (Paris: Musée d'art moderne et contemporain), 2001.

<sup>11</sup> David W. Galenson, “You cannot be serious the conceptual innovator as trickster,” (Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research), 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Thierry De Duve, “Yves Klein, or the Dead Dealer,” *October* 49 (Summer 1989).



individual's perception of reality beginning with the "chromatic impregnation" of the monochrome. Malone looks specifically at *The Void* opening at the Iris Clert Gallery in 1958 and the series of writings in which the artist laid out his plan to create a new "pseudo-spiritual" world order with himself at its helm.<sup>13</sup> Noit Banai explores a similar concept in her 2007 dissertation, in which she argues that Klein's artwork can be viewed as a detailed blueprint for the development of a new social structure and a new humanity. Banai claims that Klein's anthropometries represent the artist's total break from physicality, in which he presented the human body purely as a tangible energy or spirit understood in relation to an audience. According to Banai, the Anthropometric performance exhibited the artist's new conception of humanity following the chaos of World War II.<sup>14</sup> Finally, both Benjamin Buchloh and Dore Ashton emphasize the artist's apparent preoccupation with the creation of spectacle in relation to the "spectacularization of experience" in the increasingly commercial post-war era. Both historians reject any sincere interpretation of Klein's public persona, claiming instead that he chose to experiment with mass culture and the rise of global capitalism in post-war France. For Ashton and Buchloh, Klein ushered in a new artistic era in which public spectacle and physical paintings might prove equally powerful to an artist's audience.<sup>15</sup>

I focused my attention primarily upon the works of Noit Banai, Meredith Malone, Ursula Szulakowska, and Thomas McEvelley. Although feminist analyses make up a large portion of the literature on the Anthropometric performance, I felt that I needed to broaden my scope beyond a feminist interpretation of the artist's event. I combed through Klein's writings in an attempt to present the artist's work on his own terms and discern his original intent. This original intent

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<sup>13</sup> Meredith Malone, "Nouveau Realisme: Performative Exhibition Strategies and the Everyday in Post-WWII France." Order No. 3211108, University of Pennsylvania, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Noit Banai, 2007, *Public (Dis)Order: Yves Klein, 1945-1962*.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, "Klein and Poses," *ArtForum* 33 (Summer 1995): 93-97, 130, 136, and Dore Ashton, "Art as Spectacle," *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 5 (March 1967): 44.

may very well have been problematic, as some feminist scholars have aptly elucidated.<sup>16</sup> But instead of focusing upon the possible shortcomings of the March 1960 event, I hoped to examine the Anthropometric event within the cultural and socio-historical context to which Klein was responding.

I would also like to suggest that the post-war analyses of Malone and Banai have recently eclipsed what I believe ultimately informed the artist's work: Klein's carefully defined belief system. Malone places the artist within the context of appropriation of the everyday and examines interactions between Klein and his fellow Nouveau Réalistes, while Banai argues that all of Klein's work stands as an overt response to the trauma of World War II and the world's subsequent need to rebuild. They look closely at the artist's own interpretations of his events, but prioritize specific historical events and the larger global artistic developments in the post-war era.

Ursula Szulakowska and Thomas McEvelley have each looked at Klein's work in relation to his significant interest in the belief system of the Rosicrucian Order. Szulakowska produced a monograph in which she examines modern art as it relates to alchemy, while McEvelley has published an essay in which he directly links Klein's work to Rosicrucian teachings. Both scholars have sifted through Klein's pieces and events in search of Rosicrucian symbols or forms – their respective studies of the artist's work prioritize the order's motifs to the point that their examinations become almost iconographic.<sup>17</sup>

## II. GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS & SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

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<sup>16</sup> This viewpoint is demonstrated by a number of scholars. For further information, see the work of Amelia Jones, "'Clothes Make the Man': The Male Artist as a Performative Function," *Oxford Art Journal* 18 (1995): 18-32; Heather Cassils, Clover Leary, and Julie Steinmetz, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31.3 (2006): 1-30.

<sup>17</sup> Urszula Szulakowska, *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* (London: Routledge, 2011).

When formulating my thesis, I chose to examine Klein's work on his own terms and used the published volume of his writings as well as documents drawn from the Yves Klein Archives in Paris. I dedicated much of my time to reviewing these essays and manuscripts. Over time, I became increasingly interested in the evolution of his personal belief system and the relationship between those beliefs and the artist's later body of work. I ultimately formulated four guiding research questions. First, how did Klein's Rosicrucian beliefs affect both his later writings and his artistic oeuvre? Did this interest in Rosicrucianism change over the course of the artist's life or affect his interest in a utopian future? How did the Anthropometric event fit into Klein's series of works concerned with this utopic vision? And finally, was the Anthropometric event markedly different from the artist's other performative events?

I want to separate myself from other scholars by recognizing that, throughout the course of my research, I have continually attempted to carefully consider Klein's work within the context of his stated beliefs and intentions. It is from Klein's own writings that I have drawn the majority of my inferences. All the terminology used throughout my thesis has been drawn directly from his written work. Through such an approach, I hope to document and interpret Klein's original inspiration and intent for the piece.

Ever since his premature death in 1962, scholars have reinterpreted Klein's works within the post-war context, dismissed the artist as a fraud, or simply accused him of crass misogyny. I, however, want to wipe the slate clean and prioritize Klein's stated vision. After studying his writings and performances, it became evident that the Anthropometric event in March of 1960 was deeply informed by the artist's utopian ideal. This vision for the future was shaped by his belief system, which developed initially based upon his interest in Rosicrucianism. Ultimately,

though, Klein's utopian vision for the future evolved beyond a simplistic replication of Max Heindel's Rosicrucian teachings. The artist was working within the chaos of post-war France and during a period in which the nation was undergoing a dramatic transformation. The economy was skyrocketing, while the very future of the French government remained in question. Across the nation, French citizens were abandoning the traditional religious and moral strictures of the pre-war period and looking to a new future. Klein's own belief system was continually responding to and evolving within this tumultuous socio-historical context. The artist was concerned with questions of materiality, spirituality, and the future, and his March 1960 event became clearly representative of this abiding philosophical interest.

During this Anthropometric event in March of 1960, Yves Klein combined the visual power of the nude female form with the meditative force of monotone music and the guidance of the all-powerful artist to realize, on a micro-cosmic scale, his utopic vision for a return to the "Garden of Eden" and a new way of life firmly rooted in his persistent and lifelong faith in the tenets of the Rosicrucian Order.

## CHAPTER ONE

## “AN ATOMIC ERA”

*“It was already hard to breathe in a tortured world... Humanity is being offered, no doubt, its last chance.”*

- Albert Camus<sup>18</sup>

### I. RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: The Fall of Vichy France and Rise of Consumer Culture

Despite the Allied victory in World War II, the post-war period was a time of deep reckoning and sorrow in Western Europe. By the time of Paris’s liberation in late August of 1944, nearly 1.2 million buildings had been destroyed or damaged throughout France.<sup>19</sup> Battles and bombings demolished bridges, factories, and railways, and the German army left mass devastation in its wake. The shell-shocked French population mourned the ragged remains of their nation, and the country’s war-weary citizens spent much of the next two decades reflecting upon the human capacity for destruction and violence. For most people, the rise of the Vichy government and the French acquiescence to the ruthless Nazi regime represented an overwhelming and irreversible rupture with the nation’s past. Following the signing of the Armistice by the Vichy government in the summer of 1940, poet Paul Valéry wrote, “There is no more France in yesterday’s meaning of the term.”<sup>20</sup>

The war left the French countryside in ruins, but it also destabilized the nation’s social and moral principles as artists, writers, and philosophers began to question the very foundations of Western civilization. Newly cynical thinkers developed alternative modes of thought that

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<sup>18</sup> Drawn from an essay published by Camus in the French Resistance newspaper *Combat* on August 8, 1945, one day after he received news of the destruction of Hiroshima by the atomic bomb. See: Albert Camus, *Between Reason and Hell: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944-1947*, translated by Alexandre de Gramont (New York: Wesleyan, 1991), 110.

<sup>19</sup> Banai, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Valéry, *Cahiers*, vol. 23 (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1960). p. 429.

rejected the formerly accepted Enlightenment and Humanist principles. Amidst the apocalyptic carnage, French post-war intellectual Dionys Mascolo wrote to a colleague that, “such a disruption of the general sensibility can only lead to new structures for thought.”<sup>21</sup> Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre emerged from the war with a new plan for the future and a desire to reinvent the very foundations of Western society. In his now-famous 1945 lecture at Paris’s Club Maintenant, Sartre insisted that the people of France must be willing to return to “zero,” to sweep away all pre-existing institutions and ultimately engage in “the search for the absolute.” As he declared, “No one can tell what the painting of tomorrow will be like.”<sup>22</sup>

Amidst this uncertainty and disillusionment, the citizens of France attempted to reconstruct their national identity within the new realities of the post-war world. Yet reality had changed dramatically by 1945, and the familiar pillars of the old French society had toppled along with the Third Republic. The end of World War II accelerated the process of decolonization, altered the French political framework, and signaled the rise of a new materialist culture reliant upon globalization and fast-paced consumption.

Although the French army withdrew from Indochina in 1954, the nation remained ensnared in an exhausting decade-long war in Algeria throughout the 1950s. The unrest and violence of the Algerian War led to extreme political instability back in France, and by 1958 the conflict incited a crisis of the Fourth Republic that ultimately ushered in a new era in French government. The Fourth Republic fell apart when faced with revolts and riots in both Algiers and the streets of Paris, and fear and paralysis left France in a state of emergency. By April, Prime Minister Félix Gaillard resigned under increasing pressure from both the public and the French

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<sup>21</sup> Cited by Noit Banai, can be found in a text by Gilles Deleuze, “Correspondence with Dionys Mascolo,” in *Two Regimes of Madness* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 327.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Is Existentialism a Humanism?” (lecture at the Club Maintenant, Paris, 29 October 1945) in Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1989), 345-369.

Parliament. Abandoned in a nation without a leader, General Jacques Massu declared that the army would openly revolt unless a new government was formed under the oversight of nationalist Resistance hero and former president General Charles de Gaulle. French citizens were caught in a vague and uncertain political situation, and it seemed entirely unclear what would become of the unstable post-war governmental system. Due largely to a well-orchestrated publicity campaign launched by his political and military supporters, de Gaulle appeared to be the only possible savior for the French Republic.

On May 29, 1958, the National Assembly voted to install de Gaulle as the new Prime Minister. Upon taking office on June 1st, de Gaulle and his aides immediately drew up a new constitution that centralized the government and significantly increased the power of the executive branch.<sup>23</sup> In the new constitution, de Gaulle's new position became that of "elective monarch" – he had the power to define national policy, dissolve the national assembly, appeal to the French public through referendum, appoint the Prime Minister of his choice, and assume full powers in the case of a national emergency. In a speech denouncing De Gaulle's presidency, Socialist politician Francois Mitterand stated, "His two companions in 1940 were honor and the nation. Today, they are violence and reaction."<sup>24</sup>

The last direct election of the President of the Republic had occurred in 1848, when Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte won by a wide margin. During his presidency, Bonaparte unilaterally ended the democratic Second Republic and declared himself Emperor Napoleon III. With a similarly dramatic increase in executive power under Charles De Gaulle, the future of the French Republic appeared precarious.

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<sup>23</sup> Banai, 93-96.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre-Olivier Lapie, *De Léon Blum à de Gaulle* (Paris: Fayard, 1971), 841.

Of course, lurking beneath France's political uncertainty rested the constant threat of nuclear war. The looming Cold War and rise of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization pitted Western Europe and North America against the increasingly powerful Soviet Union, and the horrors of Hiroshima remained etched in everyone's memory. Politicians, philosophers, artists, and even children felt the pressures of post-war apprehension and the menacing dawn of the nuclear era. First published in 1946, Belgian cartoonist E.P. Jacobs's *Blake et Mortimer* comic strip appeared in the wildly popular post-war French children's magazine *Tintin*. In one of the earliest comics, the two heroes found themselves forced to eke out an existence following a nuclear holocaust.<sup>25</sup> In 1958, Yves Klein wrote, "We live in an atomic era in which everything which is material and physical could disappear from one day to the next and leave in its place all that is abstract."<sup>26</sup> All European citizens had become acutely aware that, at any given moment, the world might simply cease to exist.

Ironically, this fear manifested itself during a time of unprecedented economic success later termed the "Thirty Glorious Years" by French demographer Jean Fourastié. The three decades of economic prosperity between 1945 and 1975 saw high productivity, high average wages, and high consumption. In his 1979 text, Fourastié referred to the period as an "invisible revolution" that Americanized and transformed all aspects of French society.<sup>27</sup>

This economic renewal was spurred along by the success of the Marshall Plan – the economic strategy developed by the United States to help ensure stability in Europe following World War II. Under the American program, France received nearly \$4.9 billion with no

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<sup>25</sup> E.P. Jacobs, "The Diabolical Trap," published in *Tintin* in 1946.

<sup>26</sup> "...Nous vivons à l'ère atomique, où tout ce qui est matériel et physique peut disparaître du jour au lendemain pour céder la place à tout ce que nous pouvons imaginer le plus abstrait." Yves Klein, *Ma position dans le combat entre la ligne et la couleur* in *Le dépassement de la problématique de l'art et autres écrits* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2003), 50-51.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979).



expected repayment until the 1970s. This influx of capital accelerated modernization and industrialization, and led to the development of an entirely new French society based largely on consumerism and materialism. This link between material consumption in France and American financial aid caused growing concern over the process of “Americanization,” as France’s pre-war boutiques lost space to big-box grocery stores and American chain restaurants serving Coca-Cola replaced family-owned cafés.<sup>28</sup> By the end of the 1950s, 7.5% of French families owned a refrigerator, 10% owned a washing machine, 26% a television, and 21% a car.<sup>29</sup>

This sudden societal transformation engendered an outpouring of philosophical and sociological inquiries into the perils of the consumerist culture. Intellectual figures like Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes wrote long treatises that criticized the rapidly developing commercial sphere and its intrusion into the public and private life of the individual. Cinematic legend Jean-Luc Godard created films set against the backdrop of ceaseless consumerism and advertising.<sup>30</sup> All three men scoffed at the spectacularization of modern culture and the lure of constant consumption. Peaceful pre-war France had been replaced with a society suddenly replete with advertisements, colorful magazines, and mindless American entertainment.

Sociologist Pierre Mendras has argued that the 1960s marked the “Second French Revolution” – a time in which the nation’s structures, morals, and institutions transformed at an

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<sup>28</sup> French Communists coined the term “Coca-colonization” to refer to the globalization of American culture and the forced spread of American products like Coca-Cola. The soda was viewed as a bottled version of American ideals, and spread fears that the United States would attempt to colonize a dramatically weakened Western Europe following World War II. See: Laurina Santi, “Coca-Cola in Paris: A Changing France,” *Americans in Paris* (Fall 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Banai, 39. She takes these statistics from Roger Price’s *A Concise History of France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>30</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991) and Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1957). For an example of one of Godard’s socially conscious films, see *Une Femme Mariée* (1964) – the film explores memory, commemoration of the Holocaust, and sexuality within the context of materialist 1960s France.

unprecedented pace.<sup>31</sup> As the 1960s began, France's political future remained uncertain. Its post-WWII government had dissolved after only a decade - replaced by a potentially tyrannical military-supported institution under the control of General Charles de Gaulle. From the ashes of former battlefields sprouted new cinemas and chain restaurants, and Coca-Cola and Hollywood films quickly replaced the former staples of French society. Nearly two decades of rapid industrialization and modernization left France spinning, and increasing globalization and worldwide social uproar brought even more change in the 1960s. The very institutions of French society were rapidly transforming, and the world of the average French citizen remained far from "normal." The stable home life and familiar institutions of pre-war France appeared to have vanished forever.

## II. RELIGION AFTER WORLD WAR II: Questioning the Institutions of the Past

When the Vichy regime was established in unoccupied Southern France under the control of the Nazi army, the new government quickly adopted the tenets of Roman Catholicism. The nation's 1905 Law on the Separation of the Churches and State was immediately revoked, and the Nazi regime worked closely with the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in France to encourage Catholic activities in public institutions including schools and local governing bodies.<sup>32</sup> Historian Norman Ravitch has written that the occupied government's enthusiastic embrace of Catholicism was widely applauded by members of the religious right in France. He claims that Catholics upset with the forced separation of church and state viewed this return to religion as "a final vindication of all the struggles of Catholics during the lifetime of the Third

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Mendras, *La seconde revolution française 1965-1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Ramazan Kilinc, "History, international norms and domestic institutional change: State-religion relations in France and Turkey," (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2008), 83-85.

Republic.”<sup>33</sup> Despite Nazi control of the regime, Ravitch writes that many priests and fervent churchgoers hoped the strict religiosity of the new government would usher in a new era of Christian morality in France.

Of course, this return to Catholicism was never fully realized. The eventual fall of the Vichy regime led to condemnation of the Church during the Fourth Republic following its close cooperation with Nazi leaders, and widespread post-war disillusionment resulted in a noticeable decline in attendance at the Roman Catholic Church. The 1944 constitution listed *laïcité* as one of the defining characteristics of the republic, and the rising swell of atheistic Communist sentiment led many formerly devout members to leave the church.<sup>34</sup> The 1958 constitution that established De Gaulle’s Fifth Republic included the following passage: “France is an indivisible, secular (laic), democratic, and social Republic. It insures equality to all of its citizens before the law without distinction of origin, race, and religion. It respects all beliefs.”<sup>35</sup> The law left no room for interpretation – the French nation fully divorced itself from the doctrine of religion.

The traditional parochial power of the Roman Catholic Church also began to decline when faced with widespread urbanization and modernization. The steeples that dotted the French countryside became increasingly obsolete, and hordes of young people moved to the nation’s metropolitan centers. Improved communication, transportation, and globalization led people to seek secular entertainment outside of the local village, and books and magazines from around the

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<sup>33</sup> Ravitch wrote that Catholics “were quick to locate the blame for the [French] defeat of 1940 in the spiritual and moral defects of a godless Republic and society.” See Norman Ravitch, *The Catholic Church and the French Nation, 1589-1989* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>34</sup> The literal English translation of the term is “secularity,” although the word has since evolved to represent the full principle of freedom of religion in France; Although it never became a dominant political party, the *Parti Communiste Français* had a formidable presence in the first years of the parliament of the Fourth Republic – the PCF won 26% of the seats in the governing body in 1946. Many French Communist groups explicitly forbade members from remaining members of the Roman Catholic Church; Kilinc, 87.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

world made their way to the most isolated corners of France. In 1948, 42,650 priests practiced in France; by 1975, only 36,000 remained. And since 1959, the number of priests ordained has been lower than the number of clerical deaths each year.<sup>36</sup>

In a paper written in conjunction with Françoise Champion, French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger argues that the mid-century process of modernization dissolved the traditional religious institutions but simultaneously altered the mindset of the average citizen. Modernity, he contends, abolished religion but also created the “spatial-temporal frame of utopia.”<sup>37</sup>

Modernization equates to progress, and this progress must ultimately culminate in the creation of earthly utopia. The never-ending push for technological and scientific innovation that proved so overwhelming in the post-war period promised eventual perfection. Because the world became so precarious amidst the horrors of war and the shortcomings of the fast-paced present, Hervieu-Léger argues that people sought solace in both alternative forms of religion and the belief that utopia must be attainable. This was certainly the case for Klein, who became increasingly infatuated with the optimistic and forward-thinking beliefs of the Rosicrucian Order in the post-war period. Although this interest began immediately following the end of World War II, Klein continued to broadcast his fantastic vision for the utopian future until the end of his life.

Although the artist eschewed the era’s fast-paced and materialist way of life, he wholeheartedly embraced the postwar interest in ultimate utopia.

Due to the mid-twentieth century’s increasingly sophisticated systems of communication and transportation, it became easier for individuals to explore other belief systems. While parochial Catholicism had dominated the French countryside for centuries, the abundance of newspapers

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<sup>36</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “Religion and Modernity in the French Context: For a New Approach to Secularization,” *Sociological Analysis* 51 (1990), S19.

<sup>37</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger and Françoise Champion, *Vers un nouveau christianisme? Introduction à la sociologie du christianisme occidental* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1986).

and televisions made people more aware of the world outside of their own small towns. When dissatisfied with the teachings of their local priests, it suddenly became possible for these individuals to learn more about the religions of East Asia or the Theosophical movement spearheaded by Helena Blavatsky. The Rosicrucian Order, of which Klein was a member, stemmed from this Theosophical movement. Although he demonstrated an interest in Eastern religion, Rosicrucian founder Max Heindel sought to combine the mystical elements of Theosophy with the teachings of a medieval German Catholic religious order.<sup>38</sup> Klein remained committed to the alternative sect's teachings until his death in 1962. In a world in which hope seemed lost, the order's promises of forthcoming earthly bliss allowed the artist to look beyond the horrors of the past and focus upon the potential for an enlightened and utopic future.

Disenchanted with the rapid progress of modernity and increasingly advanced technology, disillusioned with the frantically materialistic state of post-war France, and captivated by the possibility of earthly paradise, Klein and a significant portion of the French population turned away from the rational past and looked to alternative religions for answers to their present problems. This desperate desire to seek out immaterial solutions to earthly problems ultimately manifested itself in Klein's ambitious artistic, performative, and philosophical projects.

Widespread disillusionment demonstrated itself in a clean departure from the traditions of the past that inspired musicians, thinkers, and artists across the globe.

### III. THE GLOBAL AVANT-GARDE: The Birth of Performance Art

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<sup>38</sup> This medieval German Catholic religious movement was also called Rosicrucianism, although it is generally considered separate from the Rosicrucian Order founded in 1907 by Max Heindel in Oceanside, California. I will explore the roots of this organization more fully in Chapter Three.

Just as the tumultuous French political and economic atmosphere influenced the content of Klein's work, so too did the rapidly evolving post-war global artistic community. As the 1950s progressed, artists across the world increasingly prioritized process and performance over final product. These men and women rejected the rigid strictures of the pre-war period and engaged in a global exploration to redefine art. Surrounded by members of the French avant-garde from a young age, Klein fully embraced this burgeoning experimental movement and carefully incorporated the newfound artistic interest in action, process, and audience involvement into his body of work.

Representative of the most influential French artistic movement of the mid-twentieth century, Surrealist artists of the pre-war period were widely recognized as the most important avant-garde artists working in Paris for nearly two decades. Yet World War II and the flight of major Surrealist leaders brought an end to the movement's dominance. When war broke out, key Surrealists including André Breton, Max Ernst, and André Masson fled to New York City and took refuge in the burgeoning New York art scene. While their fellow French artists suffered through internment camps and fought on behalf of the French Résistance, these Surrealists enjoyed widespread publicity, collaborated with innovative American artists, and exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's influential Art of This Century gallery.<sup>39</sup>

Frustrated with the fame and fortune of the overseas Surrealists and Breton's insistence upon abstract themes of magic and esotericism, many French artists turned away from the Surrealist movement immediately following World War II and instead created darker works that commented on the horrors experienced in wartime France. While Surrealist artists were

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<sup>39</sup> Peggy Guggenheim's increased interest in Surrealism during this period was likely linked to her brief marriage to Paris-based Surrealist painter Max Ernst in 1941. When asked why she loved Ernst, Peggy responded: "Because he's so beautiful and because he's so famous." The couple divorced five years later. See Francine Prose's *Peggy Guggenheim: The Shock of the Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 16-35.

dismissed as inward looking and old-fashioned, these post-war artists attempted to create an art freed from all formal and ideological constraints. Their style explored gesture and texture, and they positioned themselves as the post-war successors to the French avant-garde spirit. This new artistic movement, coined “Informel” by post-war French critic Michel Tapié, is best represented by Jean Dubuffet’s *Volonté de puissance* [Fig. 8] or Jean Fautrier’s *Tête d’otage* [Fig. 9]. In a series of essays from the period, Tapié wrote that these artists prioritized tangible realities instead of the fantastical figuration of the Surrealists - they sought “rare, authentic Truth.”<sup>40</sup> Just as the American Abstract Expressionists attempted to explore the expressive possibilities of paint, the Informel painters rejected the immaterial focus of the Surrealist painters and focused instead upon the immediate concreteness of medium, texture, and gritty reality. The Informel movement also proved inherently political. It was an artistic trend born out of the specific post-war moment – the era’s intense destruction and disillusionment led the Informel painters to use their artwork to both reflect on the collective past and begin to rebuild.

Yves Klein’s mother, Marie Raymond, was an Informel painter of significant stature who exhibited regularly in Paris and remained close to Michel Tapié in the years following the war. Because of Raymond’s prominent role in the development of the post-war avant-garde, Klein grew up within an unusually artistic household. His mother held salons in the family’s apartment each Monday night where he was introduced to the artistic ideas, philosophical debates, and notable exhibitions of the period. By the time that he began to create his own works of art, Klein had spent years becoming well acquainted with the work of the Parisian avant-garde and personally familiar with many of its major figures.

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<sup>40</sup> Michel Tapié, “An Other Art” (1952), in Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood, *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (London: Blackwell Publishing), 630.

The rise of this new experimental group in Paris coincided with the increasing globalization of the art world. The Surrealists and other European artists who sought refuge in New York City collaborated frequently with American artists in the post-war period, and this exchange of ideas resulted in the development of entirely new movements including Clement Greenberg's Abstract Expressionism and Harold Rosenberg's Action Painting. More efficient communication and transportation made it possible to exchange ideas across the world, and Michel Tapié became increasingly interested in connecting French artists with the avant-garde artistic movements of both the United States and East Asia. In a 1958 essay, the critic proclaimed, "art today cannot be considered on a scale other than global."<sup>41</sup>

To aid in the development of this global artistic community, Tapié organized the first Jackson Pollock exhibition in Paris in March of 1952 at the Studio Paul Facchetti. He had long admired the artist's interest in process and movement, and hoped to bring the artist's work to the attention of the general public in France. A larger Pollock exhibition was later held at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in 1959 and entitled "Jackson Pollock et La Nouvelle Peinture Américaine."<sup>42</sup> Pollock, of course, became known for his freely dripping brush and dance-like application of paint. Hans Namuth's photographs of the artist's ritualistic method, published in *ARTnews* in May of 1951, inspired artists across the globe [Fig. 10].<sup>43</sup> Pollock appeared to prioritize action and ritual over the resulting paintings. In his work, process became equally as important as product.

French action painter Georges Mathieu cited Pollock as one of his main influences, building off of Pollock's insistence that abstraction could serve as an opportunity for psychological

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<sup>41</sup> Tapié, "The International Art of a New Era: U.S.A., Japan, Europe," *Gutai* 9 (April 1958).

<sup>42</sup> Ming Tiampo, *Gutai and Informel: Post-war art in Japan and France, 1945-1965* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2003), 57. See the catalogue written by Michel Tapié and Alfonso Ossorio, *Jackson Pollock* (Paris: Galerie Paul Facchetti, 1952).

<sup>43</sup> Robert Goodnough, "Pollock Paints a Picture," *ARTnews* 50 (May 1951): 38-41, 60-61.



release.<sup>44</sup> The fluid movements involved in Mathieu's gestural painting allowed the artist to release his emotions on the canvas – this dance-like process was coined “lyrical abstraction.” In a 1956 performance organized by Michel Tapié, Mathieu created his *Hommage aux poètes du monde entier* before an audience of 2000 people at the Théâtre Sarah Bernard [Fig. 11]. Despite the enormous crowd, Mathieu claimed that the intensely physical public act of creation allowed him to focus more intently upon his personal introspection. This method of painting before an audience, he later wrote, “works in a mediumistic way to heighten the concentration of the situation.”<sup>45</sup> According to Mathieu, the process of painting must always be inherently linked to the emotions and passions of the artist at the moment of creation. Although the audience observed the artist's method, their presence served only to enhance his emotion-driven process of creation.

Both Michel Tapié and Georges Mathieu were in close contact with members of the Japanese Gutai Group, formed in 1954 in Osaka by Yoshihara Jiro, Kanayama Akira, Murakami Saburo, Shiraga Kazuo, and Shimamoto Shozo.<sup>46</sup> Together, these Japanese artists emphasized the physicality of the artist's body and dedicated themselves to the active process of painting. The group acknowledged the artistic influence of their global contemporaries in their 1956 manifesto, stating:

...We highly regard the works of [Jackson] Pollock and [Georges] Mathieu. Their work reveals the scream of matter itself, the cries of the paint and enamel. These two artists confront matter in a way that aptly corresponds to their

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<sup>44</sup> In a letter to Betty Parsons, Mathieu wrote that Pollock was the “greatest living painter.” This letter can be found in the biography of Jackson Pollock written by B.H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995), 129.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Mathieu, *L'abstraction prophétique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 47.

<sup>46</sup> Malone, 163.

individual discoveries. Or rather, they even seem to serve matter. Astonishing effects of differentiation and integration take place.<sup>47</sup>

These Japanese artists prioritized the act of creation and used their bodies to turn art making into a dynamic and even aggressive process. In Kazuo's 1955 piece *Challenge to the Mud*, the artist hurled himself into a pile of mud and writhed around until his body left noticeable marks in the clay [Fig. 12]. At the Second Gutai exhibition a year later, the same artist suspended himself from the ceiling of his studio and painted using only his feet [Fig. 13]. He sold the resulting paintings as finished products.<sup>48</sup> The Gutai group focused on performative spectacle, and required the active employment of the artist's body in order to fulfill the work of art. The artists' performances differed, however, from Pollock's ritualistic processes in that the paintings produced were intelligible only in relation to their creation before an audience of witnesses. While Pollock's works resulted from a private encounter between himself and the art object, the Gutai group relied upon the presence of an audience in order to fully realize the production of their works of art. Klein would later draw upon this interest in painting as public performance when formulating the artistic processes involved in the creation of his *Anthropometries*. While these earlier action painters pioneered the artistic interest in movement-based painting, Klein's later works placed a greater emphasis upon the inclusion of the audience within the artistic process itself.

In his 1966 book *Assemblage, Environment and Happenings*, Allan Kaprow wrote that the Gutai Group's emphasis on the presence of an audience greatly influenced the development of

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<sup>47</sup> Translated by Reiko Tomii. Originally published as "Gutai bijutsu sengen," *Geijutsu Shincho* 7, no. 12 (December 1956), 202-204. Accessed on:

<http://www.web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/gutai/data/manifesto.html>

<sup>48</sup> Julie Baumgardner, "An Inventive Postwar Japanese Painter Has His Moment," *T* (January 2015).

his Happenings.<sup>49</sup> Like Yoshihara Jiro and Shiraga Kazuo, he was intrigued by the process-based work of Jackson Pollock. But Kaprow divorced himself from the meditative and ritualistic production of Pollock's artworks, and instead enabled the spectator to enter into and become part of his work. Rejecting the subjectivity of Pollock's approach, Kaprow took steps to change the relationship of the artist to the work of art. He penned an essay following Pollock's death that claimed the Abstract Expressionist's work represented the culmination of "the era of painting." From this point on, he proclaimed:

...We shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch...Not only will these bold creators show us, if for the first time, the world we have always had about us, but ignored, they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events.<sup>50</sup>

The artist staged his first Happening – *18 Happenings in Six Parts* – a year later at the Reuben Gallery in Manhattan [Fig. 14]. Kaprow's work presented a new approach to art in which collaboration between the audience and the artist created an ambiance in the gallery that ultimately became an integral part of the artwork. With Kaprow's Happenings, the artistic act moved beyond the physical body of the artist and began to involve the audience in a new and very visceral way.<sup>51</sup> Many art historians argue that Kaprow's Happenings initiated the development of modern performance art.

However, Dada artists Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, and Tristan Tzara had created a similarly performance-based art nearly fifty years earlier in Zurich amidst the chaos of World War I. Presented before an audience at the Cabaret Voltaire, these absurdist songs and speeches mocked

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<sup>49</sup> See *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1966). Discussion of the Gutai Group occurs on pages 210-225.

<sup>50</sup> Allan Kaprow, "Legacy of Jackson Pollock," (1958) in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, edited by Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1-9.

<sup>51</sup> Kaprow staged his first Happening in Paris only a year after Klein's death. The event took place in July of 1963 in the basement of the Bon Marché department store.

the nonsensical destruction of war-torn Europe [Fig. 15]. Tzara moved to Paris in 1919, where he collaborated with André Breton to produce the Dada magazine *Littérature*.<sup>52</sup> The outlandish performances of the early Dada period were largely transformed and subsumed into the new Surrealist movement as Europe began the slow process of recovery. It is very possible, however, that the performance genre that blossomed in the 1950s stemmed from the same disillusionment and desperate desire to experiment during a time of extreme uncertainty.

As the Gutai artists literally tore through paper with their bodies and Allan Kaprow invited his audience to join in the process of creation, choreographer Merce Cunningham began to experiment with the development of site-specific choreographic works that he termed “events.” Intensely interested in the connection between visual art, architecture, and music, Cunningham created multi-genre works that relied almost entirely upon chance. He scheduled performances with no rehearsals, and used unconventional music to force his dancers to improvise. Eventually, Cunningham would invite popular avant-garde artists including Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to create fantastical backdrops for his musical-choreographic events. [Fig. 16]<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the later part of his career, Klein was clearly interested in developing the same types of multi-faceted and improvisational spectacles. Although there is no evidence of direct contact between the two artists, both Cunningham and Klein found themselves leading the investigation into a new genre of art that incorporated movement, sound, and chance.

Marcel Duchamp endorsed this burgeoning global interest in process-based experimentation in a speech made at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston in April of 1957. Entitled “The Creative Act,” his speech discussed the performative aspect of the creation

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<sup>52</sup> Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 19-46.

<sup>53</sup> Carolyn Brown, Merce Cunningham, Laura Diane Kuhn, Joseph V. Melillo, Thecla Schiphorst, David Vaughan, “Four Key Discoveries: Merce Cunningham Dance Company at Fifty,” *Theater* 34 (Summer 2004), 104-111. For an example of one of his collaborative works, see one of his earliest pieces: *Minutaie* (1954) with sets designed by Robert Rauschenberg.

of any art object. Duchamp insisted that artist and spectator are equals in the collaborative process, and that the process of creation ultimately proves just as important as the final work of art. He argued, “The creative act is not to be performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work into contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”<sup>54</sup> With this speech, the French artistic icon officially ushered in a new era of unprecedented creative experimentation.

Amidst the chaos of the post-war period, the international avant-garde community devised fantastic investigations into anti-subjectivity, collaboration, and chance. Desperate to break from the staid paintings of the past, artists across the globe began to explore new creative and performative processes. By 1960, Klein found himself poised at the cusp of an entirely new art world – one in which Clement Greenberg’s strict formalism would give way to the outlandish experimentation of Yoko Ono, Joseph Beuys, and Andy Warhol. His work relied almost entirely upon the presence of an audience, and the act of artistic creation became paramount. Process proved equally as important as product, and he built off of the movement-based artistic procedures pioneered by the Gutai artists and promoted by Marcel Duchamp. However, Klein also chose to combine this newfound emphasis on action and audience with the searching philosophical questions arising in post-war Europe and his own utopian belief system in order to create a series of artistic experiments designed specifically for a new era in France.

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<sup>54</sup> Marcel Duchamp, “The Creative Act” (1957) in Robert Lebel, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 77-78.

## CHAPTER TWO

## “COME WITH ME INTO THE VOID”

## I. A BRIEF NOTE: Proper Terminology for Klein’s Performative Works

Throughout his writings, Pierre Restany pointedly refers to the performances of Yves Klein and the other Nouveaux Réalistes as “action-spectacles.” The critic first introduced the term in 1970 in an attempt to separate the work of the French artists from the increasingly popular Fluxus or Happenings movements. According to Restany’s description of these artistic performances, the “action-spectacles” served as “demonstrations in which the goal is to provoke the spontaneous and direct participation of the public, to integrate it into the process of unified communication.”<sup>55</sup> Notably, the critic placed a clear emphasis on the “tangible trace” that remained after the end of the creative spectacle.<sup>56</sup> While other artists solely prioritized the act of creation, Restany’s Nouveaux Réalistes also valued the resulting artistic product. Meredith Malone employs this term throughout her dissertation, and appropriately so, as she examines the work of Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, and Yves Klein when crafting her argument. Such a broad analysis clearly demands the use of Restany’s more inclusive term.

However, Yves Klein repeatedly refers to his artistic performances as “events” throughout his writings. Restany’s “action-spectacle” ultimately differentiates itself from other artistic performances due to the presence of a tangible artistic object left over after the performance has ended, and neither Klein’s *The Void* nor his *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* produced any remaining art objects. His pieces instead relied upon a continued exchange between the artist

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<sup>55</sup> See Meredith Malone’s thesis; Malone cites a 1970 text written by Restany as a catalogue essay for an exhibition at the Galerie Mathias Fels in Paris that celebrated the tenth anniversary of Nouveau Realisme.

<sup>56</sup> Pierre Restany, *Le Nouveau Realisme* (Paris: 10/18, 1978), 218.

and the audience and prioritized the experience of the artistic act. Neither tangible product nor physical interaction with the audience played a consistent role in his performative works. Use of the artist's term also prioritizes Klein's vision for his own work, focusing upon his stated intentions instead of viewing his work through Restany's interpretive lens.

I have chosen to employ Klein's term throughout my writing, as I believe it remains the most historically accurate phrase for the series of participatory performances that the artist staged between 1958 and his death in 1962. The following chapter will describe each of Klein's performative events: *The Void*, which took place between April 28, 1953 and May 13, 1953; *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*, which took place between 1959 and 1962; and *Dimanche*, which took place on November 27, 1960. In examining each of these events, I hope to clearly establish that the Anthropometric event was incongruent with Klein's other performative works. While the following three events clearly engaged in a global artistic dialogue and may have stemmed from Klein's own post-war disillusionment, the Anthropometric event was firmly rooted in his own deeply private belief system and transcendental vision for the future.

#### I. *THE VOID*: April 28, 1958 – May 13, 1958

On the eve of his thirtieth birthday, Yves Klein introduced the first in a series of events that he would continue to stage for the remainder of his short life. He had first introduced his infamous monochrome paintings in 1949, and by the end of the 1950s the artist enjoyed a reputation as an outlandish and unpredictable member of the French avant-garde. The event that

Klein staged on April 28, 1953 thus induced excitement among both the artistic elite and the ordinary citizens of Paris.

In the weeks leading up to the planned exhibition at the Galerie Iris Clert, the artist sent out 3500 invitations that he labeled free entrance tickets. Each invitation bore a blue stamp and read in neat cursive print:

Iris Clert invites you to honor, with all your affective presence, the lucid and positive advent of a certain reign of the sensitive. This manifestation of perceptive synthesis confirms Yves Klein's pictorial quest for an ecstatic and immediately communicable emotion. (Opening, 3 rue des Beaux-Arts, Monday, April 28, 9pm – 12:00) [Fig. 17]<sup>57</sup>

Those who did not receive the lavish invitations were welcome to pay 1500 francs to gain admission.

The work of art began days before the gallery doors opened, as the artist embarked upon a publicity campaign in both Paris and the United States. Klein placed advertisements in the Paris-based *Arts and Combat* magazine and New York's *Arts* magazine. The artist hung two enormous placards at the Place St-Germain-des-Pres that proclaimed "YVES LE MONOCHROME" in oversized blue letters with the gallery name, address, and dates listed below.<sup>58</sup> Even the gallery space itself remained shrouded in mystery. The windows of the Galeries Iris Clert were painted an opaque blue two days before the opening. A large blue canopy hung above the building's entrance, beneath which Klein was often spotted furtively entering and exiting the shrouded space.

Those who arrived early on the night of the 28<sup>th</sup> found the entrance to the gallery framed with a blue velvet theater curtain and flanked by two Republican guards in full presidential uniforms. When the doors first opened at 9 PM, a tuxedo-clad Klein appeared to guide the first

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<sup>57</sup> Ronald Green, *Nothing Matters: A Book About Nothing* (London: John Hunt Publishing, 2011), 88.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



group of curious visitors into *The Void*. Upon entering the space, each guest received a small blue napkin and a violently blue cocktail concocted of gin, Cointreau, and methylene blue. No more than ten people could enter the gallery at one time, and visitors were ushered out of the space after three minutes.<sup>59</sup>

Those who entered the gallery were largely perplexed by what they found. Klein had painted all of the gallery walls a stark white and left the room entirely empty except for a small table and an empty vitrine covered in the same opaque paint. A solitary neon light lit the room [Fig. 18].<sup>60</sup> The absurd emptiness of the space appears to have had a profound effect on some visitors. According to Iris Clert's written account of the opening, one visitor "trembled and couldn't hold back his tears."<sup>61</sup> Post-war existentialist Albert Camus wrote in the guest book, "With the void, full powers".<sup>62</sup>

Newspapers reported that more than 3000 people swarmed the gallery that night, and three wagons of police arrived around 10 PM in an attempt to control the crowd. Inside, the artist bargained with the visitors over the gallery's non-existent paintings. Clert reports that he closed two sales – the buyers reportedly departed the space both satisfied and empty-handed.<sup>63</sup> The exhibition went on to draw 200 visitors a day, and had to be extended for a week beyond the original May 6 closing date.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The record is unclear as to how many visitors were allowed to enter the gallery at a time. Klein states ten, Iris Clert three, and Claude Pascal five. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to cite Klein's number.

<sup>60</sup> Banai, 102.

<sup>61</sup> Iris Clert, *Iris-Time: L'Artventure* (Paris: Editions Denoel, 1978), 155.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Banai, 102.

Despite the grand spectacle of what later became known as “The Void,” no final product resulted from Klein’s work.<sup>65</sup> The physical remains of the exhibition can be found in the Yves Klein Archives, where it is still possible to view the discarded napkins, invitations, and advertisements proclaiming its wonder. The overwhelming experience that drove visitors to tears, however, proved entirely ephemeral. Its aura evaporated immediately following the closing of the gallery space on May 13, 1953.

The artist’s later comments on the exhibition seem to ignore the raucous popular uproar that it engendered. When describing the exhibition a year later during a lecture at the Sorbonne, the artist stated, “The object of this endeavor: to create, establish, and present to the public a palpable pictorial state in the limits of a picture gallery. In other words, creation of an ambience, a genuine pictorial climate, and therefore, an invisible one.”<sup>66</sup> Klein may have attempted to create an “invisible pictorial climate,” but it certainly proved a very public one. He flung open the doors of the gallery to the citizens of Paris and emphasized the spectacular nature of the event. The advertisements in magazines and the public square proclaimed the advent of a shocking must-see affair, and the targeted publicity campaign promised that the event would be both chaotic and over-the-top. The French public evidently responded to this shameless promotion, becoming so unruly that police and even firefighters arrived upon the scene.

It is important to note that this event also lasted a total of seventeen days. It is by far the longest continuous event staged by the artist, who did not remain within the gallery space throughout the entirety of the exhibition. Klein oversaw its careful construction, but ultimately the artist’s presence was not required for the realization of his work.

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<sup>65</sup> A few scholars have noted that those who drunk the cocktails found their urine was dyed blue for one or two days following the gallery opening. Although some have treated this fact with significance, it was most likely an unintentional consequence of the event.

<sup>66</sup> Yves Klein, Sorbonne Lecture (June 1959).

## II. *ZONES OF IMMATERIAL PICTORIAL SENSIBILITY: 1959 – 1962*

One of Klein's simplest performative works, *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* took place over three years in the form of seven separate small-scale artistic events. Between 1959 and 1962, the artist sold units of Parisian air that he labeled "zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility." He claimed that, in buying one of these pockets of air, it would be possible for the purchaser to "restore manifestations of the void to their original immaterial state." Klein insisted that these so-called immaterial zones could be purchased only with a weight of pure gold.<sup>67</sup>

The first recorded exchange took place on November 18, 1959. A buyer met the artist on the banks of the Seine, where Klein stood waiting in a bow tie and overcoat. The buyer then handed him a specific weight of pure gold.<sup>68</sup> Klein, in turn, handed the buyer a signed receipt. In arguably the most important component of the exchange, the buyer then proceeded to burn the receipt while Klein threw half of the gold into the river [Fig. 19]. When writing about this process, the artist insisted that half of the gold must be thrown into "the ocean, a river, or some other place in nature where this gold cannot be retrieved by anyone."<sup>69</sup> Only after this action would ownership of the Zone transfer permanently to the buyer.

The two material components of the transaction were Klein's receipts and the gold itself, and he attempted to destroy both during the process of exchange. The only documentation of the trade can be found in photographs of the events. In August of 1959, the artist wrote an essay

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<sup>67</sup> De Duve, 74.

<sup>68</sup> This weight varied according to which zone the buyer intended to purchase.

<sup>69</sup> Yves Klein, "Ritual for the Relinquishing of Immaterial Zones of Pictorial Sensibility, 1957-1959," quoted in full in Nan Rosenthal, "Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," *Yves Klein 1928-1962: A Retrospective* (Houston: Rice University, 1982), 111.

entitled, “Ritual for the Relinquishing of Immaterial Zones of Pictorial Sensibility, 1957-1959.”<sup>70</sup>

He declared his distaste for physical evidence of the artistic process, writing:

Every possible buyer of an immaterial zone of pictorial sensibility must realize that the fact that he accepts a receipt for the price which he has paid takes away all authentic immaterial value from the work, although it is in his possession. In order that the fundamental immaterial value of the zone belong to him and become a part of his life, he must solemnly burn his receipt.<sup>71</sup>

This process of exchange often proves somewhat difficult to describe, and even more difficult to situate within Klein’s larger body of work. It appears to combine the artist’s cheeky economic experiments within the art market (see his January 1957 show at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan) with his growing interest in spirituality and what he termed “immaterial pictorial sensibility.”<sup>72</sup> *Zones* have received very little critical attention over the years, perhaps because so little physical evidence remains of the individual events. Klein ensured that a series of photos were taken, and the events still received some news coverage. However, the receipts and the gold both disappeared at the end of the experiment. The only witnesses were Klein, the photographer, and the individual who participated in the exchange.

### III. *DIMANCHE – LE JOURNAL D’UN SEUL JOUR*: November 27, 1960

Yves Klein’s final event took place on November 27, 1960, and lasted exactly one day.

This event was composed of three parts: a newspaper, a short film, and a press conference held at

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<sup>70</sup> The artist was quite fond of backdating and/or improperly dating his writings.

<sup>71</sup> De Duve, 77.

<sup>72</sup> During Klein’s exhibition at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan (January 2-12, 1957), the artist displayed eleven identical unframed monochrome blue panels. He then sold each monochrome at a different price, writing the paintings were “recognized by the public as very different from one another.” For a more in-depth exploration of this exhibition, see Banai p. 72-74.

the Galerie Rive Droite at 11:00 AM. In his newspaper, the artist declared that he hoped to establish the 24-hour period as “a holiday, a veritable spectacle of the void.”<sup>73</sup>

This four-page newspaper could be found at newsstands throughout Paris for 0.35 francs, and the artist’s friends handed out copies during his morning press conference [Fig. 20]. The publication carefully followed the format of the popular Parisian *Journal du Dimanche*, although the dateline of the paper read instead: “Yves Klein presents Sunday, November 27, 1960.”<sup>74</sup> Within its pages, Klein presented a full description of his *Theatre du Vide*, several short articles, four photographs, and an announcement of the upcoming Paris Festival d’Art d’Avant-Garde.

These writings provide some evidence of the artist’s interests and mindset at this specific moment in his artistic career. The lead story proclaims his grandiose desire to appropriate all of space and all of the humans who occupy it in a single performative work. The artist wrote, “The theater which I propose is not only the city of Paris, but is also the countryside, the desert, the mountain, even the sky, in fact, the whole universe. Why not?”<sup>75</sup> His description of the *Theatre du Vide* stated that each individual must aspire to “live in a constant performance, know the permanence of being: to be everywhere, somewhere else, inside and outside, a sort of sublimity of desire, a material saturated, impregnated with ‘everywhere.’”<sup>76</sup> The paper is filled with references to an idealistic vision for the future. In one of the artist’s most explicitly romantic appeals to his audience, he wrote a poem that reads:

Suddenly there is no longer anything at all / We are at the end of the world / And then...do we turn back? / No...I know that you say no / Come with me into the void! / If you return someday / You who dream also / Of this marvelous void / Of this absolute love / I know that together / Without saying a word / We will leap /

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<sup>73</sup> Yves Klein, “Dimanche” in *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writing of Yves Klein* (New York: Spring Publications, 2013), 180.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas McEvelley, *Yves the Provocateur: Yves Klein and Twentieth-Century Art* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 2010), 57.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>76</sup> “Dimanche,” *Overcoming*, 181.

Into the reality of that void / Which awaits our love / As I wait for you each day: /  
Come with me into the void!<sup>77</sup>

Klein's famous *Leap Into the Void* also took up a large portion of the front page of this paper [Fig. 21]. Created from photographs taken on October 19, 1960 at 3 Rue Gentil Bernard, Fontenay-Aux-Roses, the photomontage shows the wild-haired artist suspended in midair with his gaze fixed towards the sky. The headline accompanying the large-scale photograph reads, "The Painter of Space Hurls Himself into the Void." An altered version of the photomontage appeared in Klein's next exhibition.<sup>78</sup>

The short film that Klein later released simply documented the happenings of that day. It began by capturing the ordinary meanderings of unidentified individuals in Paris, and then shifted to focus in on newsstands filled with copies of the newspaper. The film ends outside the doors of the Galerie Rive Droite, where the camera zooms in on another newsstand and captures an anonymous man as he purchases a copy of Klein's paper [Fig. 22]. This film remains a tangible reminder of the events that took place, clearly documenting the capitalistic exchange involved in the purchase of the papers. The artist later presented a copy of *Dimanche* at his 1961 retrospective in Krefeld. The newspaper was displayed within a glass wall vitrine, and hung alongside the artist's other canvases. The four-page document was given equal value as Klein's more "traditional" wall paintings.<sup>79</sup>

Notably, this is Klein's only event for which the audience members were not issued hand-written invitations. His appropriation of the day was not exclusive. Anyone who happened to be present in Paris during that time was involved in the creation of the artwork, and the performance was never advertised or announced. The event combined the artist's interest in

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<sup>77</sup> McEvelley, 57.

<sup>78</sup> Malone, 301

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 310.

appropriation, performance, action, and conceptual art, and allowed him to share both his writings and his photomontages with the citizens of Paris. It is most similar, I would argue, to his 1958 creation of *The Void*, in which the artist invited the same individuals to enter his carefully constructed gallery space. In both pieces, the participation of the Parisian public fulfilled the work of art. But instead of inviting the public to view this work in the gallery space, the artist chose to bring the artistic event to the citizens of France. In staging his appropriation of a Parisian day, the artist hoped to bring his ideas, writings, and theories to the world.

#### IV. COMMODITY FETISHISM, CAPITALISM AND THE POST-MODERN CONDITION: Klein's Events in the Context of Post-War France

In each of Klein's performative events, the artist clearly explores the idea of value and collaborative exchange between artist and viewer. In a 1907 essay, German sociologist Georg Simmel argued that value emerges from the act of exchange itself. He wrote, "Through exchange, economic process and economic values emerge simultaneously, because exchange is what sustains or produces the distance between subject and object which transmutes the subjective state of feeling into objective valuation."<sup>80</sup> Notably, Simmel also identified the process of exchange as a definitively creative one, stating:

Exchange is not merely the addition of the two processes of giving and receiving. It is, rather, something new. Exchange constitutes a third process, something that emerges when each of these two processes is simultaneously the cause and the effect of the other.<sup>81</sup>

This idea that exchange serves as both a generative and a creative process fits well with Klein's interest in performative transactions between viewer and artist. Each of the

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<sup>80</sup> Georg Simmel, "Exchange," (1907), 56.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 57.

aforementioned events relies upon the physical act of exchange. In *The Void*, the artist sets up a carefully constructed environment within a confined gallery space and then invites the audience to enter. The event is not complete without the audience, and the exchange that takes place between the viewer and his physical surroundings becomes an integral part of the artwork. Of course, it is important to note that the artist also required each attendee to purchase a ticket or to present his invitation prior to entrance – the physical capitalistic exchange thus must precede the immaterial creative exchange. *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* also relies upon this idea of exchange – and again, the artist requires a physical capitalistic exchange prior to the intangible benefits of the eventual immaterial one. The recipient of the unit of Parisian air must pay for the commodity in pure gold. Only after this payment does Klein claim that the buyer officially becomes the recipient of the intangible benefits of the exchange. *Dimanche*, of course, relies primarily upon the same consumerist transaction required to purchase Klein's published paper. As Simmel argues, the act of transaction between the artist and buyer "transmutes the subjective state of feeling into objective valuation." The unit of air or the newspaper suddenly becomes both a subjective and an objective commodity – due fundamentally to the act of exchange.

Klein clearly succeeds in convincing the viewer of the intangible benefits of each exchange, but he also manages to place the physical commodity at the center of each of his events. Although anthropologist Igor Kopytoff worked long after Klein's death, his ideas help to explain what Klein may have been exploring in terms of value and worth derived from exchange. Kopytoff examines the process of commoditization in his essay "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," where the anthropologist defines the commodity as "an item with use value that also has exchange value." Commodities must not only be "produced



materially as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing.”<sup>82</sup> The commodity becomes, for Klein, the gallery space, the “zone of immateriality,” and the four-page newspaper.

Klein responds to the intensely consumer-driven capitalist culture of post-war France by experimenting with commoditization and exchange value. He transforms an empty room, an imaginary unit of air, and a nonsensical four-page newspaper into items to be desired and collected by the Parisian public. Each of his events relies upon the proclivity of the French public to singularize the advertised event and/or performance – in *The Void*, he publicized his empty room to such a level that public authorities were required to control the crazed crowd. Klein distorted the worldview of those around him to the point that seven different people proved willing to part with pure gold in exchange for nothing, and the citizens of Paris paid 0.35 francs for a useless newspaper.

Kopytoff writes that, “Power asserts itself by insisting on its right to singularize an object or a class of objects,” and Klein intentionally plays with this notion of commoditization and power throughout each of his three events.<sup>83</sup> Karl Marx is well known for his insistence upon the futility of what he terms “commodity fetishism.” In this process, the market exchange value of the commodity masks the true economic value of the commodity and the human relations required to produce it. In his 1867 text *Capital*, Marx argues:

The commodity-form, and the vague-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as

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<sup>82</sup> Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands.<sup>84</sup>

Klein not only fabricates commodities, but also experiments with the creation of value. He singlehandedly contributes to the commodity fetishism so disdainfully described by Marx as symptomatic of a bloated capitalistic society. With his gallery exhibition, his units of air, and his newspaper, Klein creates and markets entirely new commodities. The artist progressively challenges regimes of value, transcending the traditional boundaries between commercial product and fine art.

Notably, the revolutionary Situationist International movement was founded around this time. Officially created in June 1957 in Italy and spearheaded by French Marxist theorist Guy Debord, the international organization was comprised of avant-garde artists and intellectuals who adhered to a strictly anti-capitalistic and anti-authoritarian philosophy that drew heavily from Marxism.<sup>85</sup> The organization's members believed that social alienation and commodity fetishism had spread to every aspect of life and culture by the mid-twentieth century, and that the capitalistic economy manufactured entirely false desires. This new version of society marketed the ephemeral experiences of authentic life as a commodity. Advanced capitalism created what Debord later termed the "Society of the Spectacle."<sup>86</sup> According to the capitalistic creed, true expression could only occur through the exchange or consumption of commodities.

The Situationists ultimately hoped to realize the creation of a communistic society bereft of money, commodity production, and private property. It was, at its heart, a utopian

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<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 165.

<sup>85</sup> See the group's founding manifesto: Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations" (1957).

<sup>86</sup> See Guy Debord's manifesto of the Situationist movement, published five years after Klein's death: *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Black & Red, 1970).

movement.<sup>87</sup> Although it is impossible to discern definitively whether or not Klein was directly influenced by the work of the Situationists, the group demonstrates the attraction of the utopian mindset during the 1950s and 1960s as well as the European avant-garde's extreme discomfort with flourishing capitalistic materialism. The explosive rise of capitalism, advertising, and mass production engendered serious concerns over the future of European society. In each of his events, Klein engages in a discourse that remains firmly rooted in the experiences of this time. He experiments with commoditization and the manufacturing of false desires, appealing to the French public in each of his artistic undertakings.

Klein also engages in a greater discourse with the international avant-garde community, moving outside of the exhibition space as a site of exchange after *The Void* and manipulating conventions of artistic display. It is often difficult to determine where his spectacle-driven events begin and end. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Klein worked at a moment when the definition of acceptable art expanded at a rapid pace. The Dada artists began by challenging traditional media categories with their journals and nonsensical performances in Zurich, and post-World War II artists such as the Gutai group inherited this tradition with their continued subversion of the accepted mediums of painting and sculpture. Art theorist Rosalind Krauss claims that artists working in the twentieth century fundamentally altered the traditional definition of artistic medium, writing, "The specificity of mediums... must be understood as differential, self-differing, and thus as a layering of conventions never simply collapsed into the physicality of their support."<sup>88</sup> Each of Klein's events plays with the invention of a new medium, and each of his works sets out to disorient and surprise his viewers by subverting their

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<sup>87</sup> Derya Ozkan, "Antinomy Perfected: Everyday Life and Utopia in Situationist Politics of Space," Vector 1 (March 2005).

<sup>88</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "*Voyage on the North Sea:*" *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 53.

expectations. Each event invites and requires the reader's interaction – Klein prioritizes the process of exchange outlined by Marcel Duchamp in “The Creative Act.” In the artist's performative works, the traditional gallery space is emptied, the artistic exchange is made clearly commercial, and the work of art is brought out of the gallery space and into the streets of Paris. Klein experiments with alternative approaches to exhibition space, medium, and engages in a continued dialogue with an ever-expanding international artistic community within the context of modernity's ever-growing and overwhelmingly pervasive capitalism.

After having explored each of these events, it is important to recognize that Klein's anthropometries developed from a very different and deeply personal artistic impulse. While the artist used his other events to comment upon the artistic process and the rabid consumerist exchanges of the post-war world, his Anthropometric event retreated to the quiet and clandestine gallery space. All reports indicate that the event proved a private and deeply emotional experience for both viewers and artist alike, and the processes of exchange involved were unlike any other performative work staged by the artist. The event itself was spectacular, but it was closed to the French public and relied upon the intimacy of the silent audience in the small gallery space. There was no exchange of money or gold – the experience was free to those handpicked by the artist. A tangible artistic product was later exhibited, but the artist clearly considered the process of creation equally important. Klein's writings about the performance consistently emphasize its relevance to his personal belief system, and the event can clearly be linked to the formulation of his utopian plan for the future. The “immaterial pictorial sensibility” that the artist attempts to create relies upon the intertwined and intangible experience of artist, model, and audience during the physical and action-oriented process of creation.

## CHAPTER THREE

## “BEYOND THE ART OF PAINTING”

## I. “IMMATERIAL SENSIBILITY”: The Crossroads Between Religion and Art

In this chapter, I will analyze the full meaning of the Anthropometric event and its unique elements in relation to Klein’s utopian vision – a vision that was deeply informed by his interest in the teachings of the Rosicrucian Order. Klein’s personal belief system played a critical role in his writings and the development of his later artistic works, but scholars have often treated the artist’s beliefs with discomfort or ignored his assertions as insincere. In my attempt to prioritize Klein’s own interests, I believe that it is absolutely necessary to consider the religious undertones of the artist’s works.

Art historian James Elkins argues that art has always been innately religious.<sup>89</sup> Today, however, few art historians feel comfortable considering the role that religion plays in the production of contemporary works of art and the mere mention of “spirituality” or “faith” can make even the most established scholars overtly distressed. Thierry de Duve claims audiences and scholars remain fearful of the subject due to a sincere concern that, “the mere willingness to let oneself be visually touched by a picture might be tantamount to an act of faith.”<sup>90</sup> The acceptance of religious significance in an image may be considered equivalent to idolatry. There remain, however, a few scholars who have bravely tackled the subject. Elkins has written widely on the religious in what is often considered purely secular art of the modern period, as has Sally

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<sup>89</sup> James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2.

<sup>90</sup> Thierry De Duve, *Look, One Hundred Years of Contemporary Art*, translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Brussels: Ludion, c. 2000), 14-15.

Promey and Robert Rosenblum.<sup>91</sup> Donald Kuspit's 2002 essay, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art," goes so far as to argue that the rise of modernism in art marked the simultaneous start of a contemporary societal spiritual crisis.<sup>92</sup>

This near-prohibition on religious analysis of modern and contemporary secular art has certainly affected how scholars have studied Klein's work. As stated in the introduction, only two scholars have fully considered Klein's religious writings and interest in Rosicrucianism. The artist's writings overtly connect his performative works and paintings to his belief system, and he directly asserts that he drew his inspiration primarily from his personal experiences of "space" and "immateriality."

The intellectual atmosphere of post-war France was charged with debate over the place of religion in society, and philosophers from Karl Barth to Jean-Paul Sartre demonstrated a clear interest in questions of human existence and materiality. As Klein engaged in frequent dialogue with the Parisian avant-garde and was closely linked to a variety of religious and philosophical figures, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he was similarly preoccupied with such pressing questions of religiosity. Religion played an important role in the artist's life, and he remained intimately connected with religious organizations throughout his life. At the time of his death, Klein remained deeply interested in Judo and East Asian religions and he wrote profusely about the impact of these belief systems on his art.

I thus contend that it would be improper to examine Klein's works without fully considering the artist's stated influences and beliefs. For this reason, I will spend much of this chapter exploring the religious and philosophical underpinnings of the Anthropometric event. I hope to

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<sup>91</sup> See James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sally Promey, "The 'Return' of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (2003): 581-603; Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York: Harper, 1975).

<sup>92</sup> Donald Kuspit, "Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art," *Art Criticism* 17, no. 2 (2002): 55-69.

gain insight into the artist's vision by closely reviewing his own writings and insights. I do my best to use Klein's own words when considering his artistic and philosophical theories. He most often refers to the existence of an otherworldly "immaterial pictorial sensibility" which he attempts to recreate within his art. It is this "sensibility" that inspired and motivated his work for the last five years of his life, and I believe that it is essential to recognize its role in the development of the Anthropometric event.

## II. "THE MEMORY OF NATURE": The Anthropometry Defined

On June 5, 1958, Yves Klein applied blue paint to a nude model and instructed her to roll across a large sheet of paper placed on the floor of friend and philosopher Robert Godet's apartment on Ile Saint-Louis in Paris. Lying down, she twisted her body around on the white surface until her movements left the paper fully saturated and the private small-scale performance resulted in the production of an unconventional blue monochrome.<sup>93</sup> Although Klein did not fully explore the possibilities of this creative process until a few years later, this moment in 1958 marks the first time that the artist began to experiment with the active and process-based creation of an artistic product. Although he unveiled this new method of painting to the public in his well-known event in March 1960, the artist continued to produce anthropometric works until his death in June of 1962. Today, a variety of Anthropometric art objects can be found in museums and private collections across the world.

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<sup>93</sup> Yves Klein Archive, "The Biography of Yves Klein (1928 – 1962)," [http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/bio\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/bio_us.html); Godet was a French intellectual who traveled often to the Far East and spent much of his life studying music and humanist philosophies. He was a disciple of Russian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff and a well-respected judo instructor. Klein and Godet were interested in similar occult and mystical theories.

The easily recognizable blue impressions on white paper, now nearly iconic, serve as but one of the many expressions of a larger category of images that Klein termed “Anthropometries.” Before delving more deeply into these works, it is necessary to recognize the differences between the distinct categories of Anthropometric paintings and to establish these tangible artistic products as separate from Klein’s performative event in March of 1960. As his practice developed, Klein tested a variety of artistic processes that produced very different works. The resulting art objects include canvases covered in imprints and bodily outlines, as well as the so-called “shroud anthropometries” – a diverse array of products all widely lumped together as anthropometries.

Generally his most well known anthropometric works, Klein’s series of imprints represent the artist’s initial experiments with the performative use of human bodies in the act of artistic creation. These canvases are primarily white, imprinted only with the bright blue outline of one or more female forms. At times, the indistinguishable figures are smeared across the canvas. *Anthropometry of the Blue Period (ANT 82)* clearly demonstrates the artist’s initial interest in a straightforward visual vocabulary [Fig. 23]. Five women’s bodies appear imprinted on the oversized canvas in blue paint. Their abstracted figures float against a blank white background.

To create his outlines, Klein experimented instead with the use of sprayed-on blue paint to create a very different visual effect. In his outline anthropometries, pure white figures fly through space on a blue canvas. The approach shifted the artist’s use of positive and negative space, and resulted in a much more dynamic composition. The images suddenly have an ethereal quality, and the outlined figures appear poised for action. The outlines overlap each other, and not one of the figures seems to be grounded in a naturalistic space. One of Klein’s 1961 canvases is, quite literally, entitled *People Begin to Fly* [Fig. 24].



The shroud anthropometries eschew the bold colors and paint-laden canvases of his earlier work in favor of a more delicate aesthetic. In Klein's *Mondo Cane Shroud*, seven female forms are subtly imprinted onto a diaphanous white fabric [Fig. 25]. This specific work was produced in conjunction with a performance that the artist staged for Italian filmmaker Gualtiero Jacopetti, although he went on to produce more than twenty-five so-called "shroud anthropometries."<sup>94</sup> Primarily produced on gauze, many of these works give the impression of floating evanescent bodies.

The broad category of Anthropometries, therefore, encompasses a diverse array of artistic products. The connection between these very distinct objects is the ritualistic process of exchange between artist and model involved in their creation – this physical performative aspect remains key to the production of each anthropometric work.<sup>95</sup>

The artist's series of anthropometries is often written about as a new technical and movement-based approach to the deliberate production of a single art object – akin to the action-based painting techniques of the Gutai group or Georges Mathieu. However, Klein himself wrote that the anthropometric process served primarily to create a specific ambiance that developed from the process of exchange. This assertion renders the active movements of the models on the

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<sup>94</sup> The director's documentary deeply hurt Klein's pride – it portrayed him as a lascivious fraud interested primarily in female eroticism. The footage was intentionally edited to create the pretense of a highly sexualized event. He was reportedly so deeply embarrassed by Jacopetti's film that an urban legend has even sprung up that the artist perished after suffering from a heart attack while attending the premier in Cannes; Eric Crosby has suggested that the term "shroud" may have been used to connect these anthropometries with the Shroud of Turin, the burial cloth which supposedly features the imprint of Christ's body. See Eric Crosby, "Painting on, or as, Film: Yves Klein's *Suivre de Mondo Cane* (Mondo Cane Shroud)," *Living Collections Catalogue – Walker Art Center 1* (2014).

<sup>95</sup> It is important to note that these anthropometric works are also very distinct from the artist's fire paintings. These works were produced in a single location – at the Centre d'Essai du Gaz de France at Plaine Saint Denis – so that Klein could use the gaswork laboratories' giant gas burners to burn the surface of his large-scale canvases with an open flame. He later experimented with spraying water and flame retardant on models in order to create a new kind of anthropometry.<sup>95</sup> Very few of these works were produced, and they never involved a performative aspect. The difference between the two lies in the production of the works – the anthropometric works relied upon meditative process and the presence of an audience.

canvas subordinate to the intangible interactions between artist, audience, and models. When describing his initial experiments with this new method, Klein claimed, “I felt myself in the ALL. I encountered or rather was seized by the presence of many inhabitants of space, but none was human in nature.”<sup>96</sup> While previous action-based artists might have focused upon the active method used to produce a specific art object, Klein was clearly preoccupied with the intangible process of production itself. He embraced chance and prioritized the interaction between himself and his models.

The women involved in the creation of Klein’s works write that they also shared this belief in the affective power of the Anthropometric process. Elena Palumbo-Mosca later wrote of the experience, “I had an intense, happy experience of reality, and I was even allowed to leave a mark of the brief presence of my body in the endless stream of life, a sign of beauty and cosmic energy passing through.”<sup>97</sup>

Klein later showcased the finished paintings as art objects, but the process of creation resulted in the true performance-based artwork that Klein titled “Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue.”<sup>98</sup> Despite the indisputable importance of the resulting object, the artist most highly valued the immaterial sensation created by the artistic act. It is this clearly defined performative process that I choose to concentrate on in this thesis. This process resulted in the birth of an experience that the artist claimed could “definitively free us of the few tyrannical aspects of nature toward our material, terrestrial existence.”<sup>99</sup> In his detailed descriptions of the anthropometric process and his artistic goals, Klein’s unorthodox terms and lofty objectives may

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<sup>96</sup> *Overcoming*, 34.

<sup>97</sup> Elena Palumbo-Mosca, “When someone asks me...,” *Yves Klein* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 113.

<sup>98</sup> Translated as “Anthropometry of the Blue Period”

<sup>99</sup> Klein, *Le vrai devient la réalité*, as found in Alain Busisine, “Blue, Gold, Pink: The Colors of the Icon” in *Yves Klein: Long Live the Immaterial* (Musée d’art modern et d’art contemporain Nice, 2000), 25-26.

appear absurd. But throughout his writings, the artist borrows heavily from the belief system professed by the unorthodox and little-known Rosicrucian Order.

### III. “AN AWARENESS OF LIFE”: Klein and Rosicrucianism

Scholarly works on the Rosicrucian Order or Theosophy are few and far between, and I have discovered throughout the course of my research that the academic world has largely ignored such occult religious movements. For this reason, much of the source material in this chapter comes directly from primary texts written by Max Heindel, Helena Blavatsky, and other minor religious leaders. I especially delve into Heindel’s work, as his writings provided the foundation for the establishment of the Rosicrucian Order. In taking a movement such as Rosicrucianism seriously, I hope to allow for a fuller understanding of Klein’s work and the desperate disillusionment the artist felt within the context of the post-World War II period.

Raised Roman Catholic, Yves Klein first obtained a copy of German theologian Max Heindel’s *La Cosmogénie des Rose-croix* during the summer of 1947. At the time, the nineteen-year old artist found himself wandering through the unfamiliar wreckage of post-World War II France. His parents had moved him to Nice while a devastated Paris attempted to rebuild itself, and Klein remained uncertain both of his own future and that of the nation. But within the pages of *La Cosmogénie*, the definitive manual of the Rosicrucian Society, Heindel promised the eventual dawn of earthly utopia and a new spiritual relationship with life.

Born Carl Louis von Grasshoff in Aarhus, Denmark in 1865, Max Heindel traveled the world working on passenger ships and moved to Los Angeles in 1903. A year later, the budding theologian joined the Theosophical Society of Los Angeles founded by New Age mystic Helena

Blavatsky.<sup>100</sup> On a later visit to Germany, Heindel claims to have been visited by a spiritual Elder Brother of the Rosicrucian Order. He returned to America with a newfound interest in the ancient sect, and founded the Rosicrucian Fellowship in Oceanside in 1908. The new order had few links to the medieval occult movement, but Heindel formulated many of his ideas using the older organization's writings. He looked also to early antique and global texts, incorporating teachings from the writings of Plato, the basic tenets of Eastern religions, traditional Egyptian magic, and shamanism.<sup>101</sup>

Heindel predicated his belief system on the idea that earthly utopia will ultimately occur when a synthesis is achieved between Life and Form. He defines life as pure spirit and equates it with empty space, while Form is spirit bound up in physical matter. Six invisible realms exist at a higher level than the current physical realm, and are accessible only through inner transformative processes. According to Heindel, today's humans fixate largely on the primacy of Form and physical matter. To advance to the next realm, humanity must instead become more in touch with the reality of Life and the existence of a pure Spirit here on Earth.<sup>102</sup> He writes, "[Modern science] does not recognize the...fact insisted upon by occult science...that the whole atmosphere around us, the space between the worlds, is Spirit."<sup>103</sup> Members of the Rosicrucian Society strive to advance through these realms and ultimately to reach utopia. In order to enter the next Epoch, Heindel writes, "We will begin to open up again to awareness of life."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Biographical information found in Ger Westenberg, "Max Heindel and the Rosicrucian Fellowship," trans. by Elizabeth Ray (Stichting Zeven: The Hague, 2009), 22-25.

<sup>101</sup> Szulakowska, 55.

<sup>102</sup> McEvelley, 201-203.

<sup>103</sup> Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* (Rosicrucian Fellowship: Oceanside, California, 1937), 249.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

Immediately attracted to the idealistic principles of the mystical Christian sect, Klein was intrigued by its emphasis on the “freedom and unity of pure spirit.”<sup>105</sup> Together with friends Claude Pascal and Armand Fernandez, the young artist began practicing the order’s teachings. Local Rosicrucian philosopher Louis Cadeux taught them the religion’s basic belief system and encouraged their burgeoning interest in astrology and meditation.<sup>106</sup> Klein officially joined the sect in June of 1948, and eagerly began to educate himself via the order’s correspondence courses. He received monthly lessons written by Max Heindel and sent back the worksheets for review for more than five years.<sup>107</sup> Although his official membership lapsed in 1953, Klein continued to read the *Cosmogonie* until his death a decade later. He earnestly adopted Heindel’s belief that the Age of Space would soon commence, and solemnly believed that he would personally be capable of ushering in the new era. Heindel had written that art could become a form of magic, and claimed that the artist could take on the role of messiah to teach others.<sup>108</sup> As a young artist, Klein attached significant value to his own role in the development of this new era.

Both Heindel and the Rosicrucian tradition describe this next Epoch as a return to an Edenic paradise. “Eden” was a term consistently used by Klein to describe his vision for the future – nudity, leisure, and unity were of the utmost importance in the writings that the artist produced, and the Garden of Eden was mentioned frequently in the “Manifesto of the Architecture of Air” that I address later in this chapter.<sup>109</sup> In Heindel’s description of the next world, he argues that man will soon reside primarily in the Desire World where art will become immaterial. Heindel

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<sup>105</sup> Thomas McEvelley, *Yves the Provocateur* (McPherson & Company: Kingston, NY, 2010), 196.

<sup>106</sup> Urszula Szulakowska, *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* (London: Routledge, 2011), 53.

<sup>107</sup> It is important to note that Heindel passed away in 1919. The worksheets and lessons used in the Rosicrucian Order’s correspondence courses were written before his death; *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 54-55.

<sup>109</sup> See Klein’s “Manifesto,” more fully explored later in this chapter and listed in the image appendix as Fig. 26.

describes the Desire World as a location in which “[f]orms levitate as easily as they gravitate. Distance and time are governing factors of existence in the Physical World but are almost nonexistent in the Desire World.”<sup>110</sup> It is important to recognize that this Desire World prioritizes the human form and its ability to achieve levitation, but exists separately from human sexuality. Heindel’s Rosicrucian philosophies highlight the transformative power of the female body, but separate the nude female form from its inherent sensuality. Heindel designated imagination as an explicitly female power, and wrote that the “female organ was the first to come into existence as a separate unit – and the first shall be last.”<sup>111</sup> It is very possible that Klein viewed the nude female form as one of the keys to accessing this transformative Desire World.

Klein also remained very clearly preoccupied with the possibility of levitation – he created an anthropometry entitled *People Begin to Fly*, and *Leap Into the Void* was one of his final artistic works. In a 1959 speech in Dusseldorf, the artist proclaimed, “We will all become aerial men, we will know the upward force of attraction toward space, toward nothing and everything at once: earthly gravity having been overcome, we will literally levitate in a total physical and spiritual freedom.”<sup>112</sup>

Notably, Heindel also wrote often of the power of music. He proclaimed that, “The World of Thought...is the sphere of Tone.”<sup>113</sup> In this second of the six higher realms, sound and color become inseparable. He specifically states:

If one note or chord after another be sounded upon a musical instrument – a piano, or preferably a violin, for from it more gradations of tone can be obtained – a tone will finally be reached which will cause the hearer to feel a distinct vibration in the back of the lower part of the head. Each time that note is struck, the vibration will be felt. That note is the “key-note” of the person whom it so affects. If it is struck slowly and

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>112</sup> *Le dépassement*, 22.

<sup>113</sup> Heindel, 119.

soothingly it will build and rest the body, tone the nerves, and restore health. If, on the other hand, it be sounded in a dominant way, loud and long enough, it will kill as surely as a bullet from a pistol.<sup>114</sup>

Heindel thus suggests that sound has the potential to reach beyond the physical realm – it wields power over both the human body and the immaterial world. Klein in turn demonstrated an interest in the transformative power of sound, and likely looked to Heindel’s religious philosophy when composing his *Monotone Symphony* in 1949. First performed during the Anthropometric event in March of 1960, the musical score accommodates any number of singers and instrumentalists. It calls for each musician to produce a single chord for a specific number of minutes, and then to sit in silence for the same amount of time.<sup>115</sup>

When considering his use of the Monotone Symphony in conjunction with the ritual processes involved in the creation of the anthropometric works, it is clear that Klein borrowed heavily from Heindel’s Rosicrucian philosophies to craft the performative process. The primitive female imprints resemble the abstracted, rounded feminine forms of ancient goddesses and fertility totems. They appear to occupy an undefined and ungrounded plane. It is very possible that these female forms are intended to exist in a utopian and unified Edenic world in which Klein exists as creator. The clear conductor of the artistic process, the artist acts as the conduit between the actions of the nude models and the seated audience. Heindel wrote, “At the end of our present Epoch the highest initiate will appear publicly when a sufficient number of ordinary humanity desire and will voluntarily subject themselves to such a leader...Humanity will form one spiritual fellowship.”<sup>116</sup> Klein clearly viewed himself as the “highest initiate” and leader of

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 369-370.

<sup>115</sup> The chord is a D-major triad in second inversion, consisting of the notes D, F-sharp, and A. Although initially pleasant, it can prove grating when held for Klein’s mandated twenty minutes; McEvelley, 216.

<sup>116</sup> Heindel, 250.

this new world. When creating the anthropometric process, he invited others to join in the ritual and experience the formation of his own utopian, Rosicrucian-based “spiritual fellowship.”

Klein’s writings combine Heindel’s teachings with Buddhist philosophy and the phenomenology made popular by Gaston Bachelard and other post-war French philosophers.<sup>117</sup> The artist ultimately created a belief system based primarily upon a mystical conception of powerful space, believing that eventually all of humanity might be able to recognize this “sensibility” and become one with space. In doing so, humans would discover the ability to “levitate” or eschew the materiality of their bodies. In Klein’s writings, this awareness of space would result in an Edenic state on earth and the surface of the earth would ultimately be “re-climatized” to adjust for the new immateriality of human existence.<sup>118</sup>

Klein wrote, “Life itself does not belong to us; it is through sensibility that we can achieve it...[Art] should be like an open channel for penetration by impregnation in the sensibility of the immaterial space of LIFE itself.”<sup>119</sup> He was clearly a true believer in the possibilities Heindel set forth, due both to his avid adoption of the tenets of the faith and later writings in which the artist envisioned a utopian future with unambiguous connections to Rosicrucianism. This return to the mythical Garden of Eden could only be attained through art. Heindel placed a clear value on the work of the artist, and Klein embraced his role as prophet and leader of the utopic future. To begin planning for the realization of his earthly paradise, Klein ultimately chose to enact this vision on a smaller scale – an attempt that I believe culminated in the development of the Anthropometric event.

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas McEvelley suggests that Klein ultimately viewed the label of “Rosicrucianism” as embarrassing after so few scholars and peers took his writings seriously. Klein later identified with the writings of Gaston Bachelard, but McEvelley argues that his written work and continued use of Rosicrucian terms suggests that he remained fully adherent to the Rosicrucian philosophy despite his outward claims to the contrary.

<sup>118</sup> *Le dépassement*, 112.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 19.



#### IV. “A NEW ATMOSPHERE OF HUMAN INTIMACY”: Klein’s Utopian Vision

By the end of his life, Klein devoted nearly all of his time to a series of artistic and architectural projects he hoped would usher in a new age on earth. Many scholars have focused their efforts on Klein’s seemingly quixotic obsession with the realization of earthly utopia, and both Meredith Malone and Noit Banai have argued that his fixation clearly stemmed from the devastation and uncertainty of the post-war period. The timing of his infatuation fits within the period of growing anxiety and ambivalence about the future, and the artist was likely encouraged by the political and cultural chaos. However, I would like to argue that his vision remained firmly rooted in the gradual evolution of his own forward-thinking belief system – a belief system that borrowed greatly from the philosophies of Rosicrucianism.

Pierre Restany wrote that Klein organized his work around his belief that, “To a new world corresponds a new man.”<sup>120</sup> In the ever-changing context of a newly consumerist and increasingly nihilistic France, Klein was captivated by the advent of the Space Age and the profusion of increasingly sophisticated technology. The artist hoped to recover a richness and creative energy that he believed had been lost in the chaos of modern life, and he viewed France as the starting point for a greater world revolution that would be both artistic and spiritual. Klein’s vision was two-fold: He designed whimsical architectural elements and artistic projects for the new world, but he also created a concrete plan for the new society’s government and

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<sup>120</sup> Philippe Vergne, “Earth, Wind, and Fire or to Overcome the Paradox of Yves Klein, the Molecular Child who Wrote to Fidel Castro on his Way to Disneyland,” *Walker Art Magazine* (2010).

economic system. The artist produced designs for fountains of fire and homes without walls in conjunction with an elaborate treatise on the “Economic System of the Blue Revolution.”<sup>121</sup>

Despite his wild proclamations and fantastic imagery, Klein’s effort proved an earnest one. In a 1958 lecture at the Sorbonne, the artist declared, “I speak seriously...my program is ready, it is idealist but also very realist and practical at the same time. I have the men that I need; I wait simply for the occasion to act.”<sup>122</sup> He envisioned a large-scale international effort championed by devotees of his belief system. In a 1958 radio interview, Klein stated that he hoped his work would “take on almost incommensurable dimensions, that it would spread out, that it would become saturated with the atmosphere, or even with a city, a country.”<sup>123</sup>

Over the last few years of his life, Klein wrote a series of letters to world leaders and international artists. In a letter dated May 20, 1958, the artist wrote to President Dwight Eisenhower requesting his aid in the overthrow of the French governmental system. He asked the President to replace the existing Fourth Republic with a Cabinet of French citizens. This cabinet, temporarily appointed only from members of the so-called “Blue Revolution,” would govern under the control of an International House of Representatives that would replace the French National Assembly. The header of the letter outlines the tenets of his movement, stating that the Blue Revolution is a “Movement aiming at the transformation of the French People’s thinking and acting in the name of their duty to their Nation and to all nations.” Atop this header, the letter reads: “STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. ULTRA SECRET.”<sup>124</sup> The artist sent a similar letter later that year to Cuban dictator Fidel Castro.

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<sup>121</sup> Banai, 192.

<sup>122</sup> Klein, “Le grande force de ce mouvement...” in *Le dépassement*, 396.

<sup>123</sup> Stich, 143.

<sup>124</sup> See Klein’s “Letter to President Eisenhower,” available via the Yves Klein Archives.

But he also appealed to the leaders of the global avant-garde. In a speech delivered in Dusseldorf in 1959, Klein urged his fellow artists to join his Blue Revolution and collaborate to “overcome art itself” and work on returning to a life in which “the thinking man is no longer the center of the universe, but the universe the center of man.” He insisted that, by joining together, “we will become aerial men...we shall literally escape into a complete physical and spiritual freedom!”<sup>125</sup>

Klein produced two manifestoes describing specific elements of his utopic future. He begins his 1960 manifesto with an elaborate description of his “architecture of air” – an architectural framework consisting of floors crafted of glass, fireproof and waterproof walls, and mattresses made of air [Fig. 26]. The artist then briefly outlines the social structure of this new society, where patriarchy has been abolished and the world is “perfect, free, individualistic, and impersonal.” Inhabitants are required to live in the nude, for he claims that “climatization” will only occur when “human sensibility has merged with the cosmos.”<sup>126</sup> Earthly and material possessions only hinder this atmospheric process.

The future that Klein envisioned was very clearly contingent upon the eradication of individuality in exchange for universal absolution and earthly paradise. Comparing society to artistic media, he called for unity via the:

Preservation and exaltation of total liberty of the individual (the grain of pigment) joined to others by a fixative medium that is no longer money, that which effectively joins like oil does with pigment in oil painting by altering its natural brilliance and autonomous radiance, and by mummifying it – but using a non-colored, stronger, fixative medium: ‘Quality.’<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Yves Klein, “Speech delivered on the occasion of the Tinguely Exhibition in Dusseldorf (January 1959),” in *Overcoming*.

<sup>126</sup> Yves Klein, “Project for an Architecture of Air,” in *Overcoming*, 174-175.

<sup>127</sup> *Overcoming*, 122.

Art served as both the pathway and the key to this utopic future. Klein repeatedly emphasized that it is only through artistic experimentation and the creative process that society will be able to fully realize the merging of the physical and immaterial sensibilities. Art, he wrote, serves as “this invisible link, this glue that holds the entire universe together through time, eternally.”<sup>128</sup> In stressing the importance of the artistic act, Klein also reveals his critical role in ushering in the utopic future: he claims that, as an artist, he becomes the “prophet of a peace that is deep and violent in intensity and stronger than a destructive war.”<sup>129</sup>

It is perhaps most important to note Klein’s conclusion to his initial manifesto, entitled “Project for an Architecture of Air”. He outlines his vision for the future and then ends the essay with this statement: “To want means to envision...Associated with this desire is the determination to experience what one envisions.”<sup>130</sup> Klein was not simply content day dreaming about fountains of fire and writing fantastical letters to international leaders. He wanted to experiment with the creation of a new reality – a reality contingent upon the development of an intensely introspective personal process that would ultimately result in the merging of physical and immaterial sensibilities. While he continued his other artistic exploits with *Dimanche* and the production of his monochromes, Klein remained deeply attached to this vision for a utopic future that stemmed from the optimistic philosophies put forth by Max Heindel. He produced multiple essays outlining the framework for this new world, and continued to write pointed letters to political leaders across the globe. The artist wanted to stop dreaming about the realization of another earthly realm and the advent of the Blue Revolution – Klein needed to experience it himself.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 174-175.

## V. MARCH 9, 1960: The Fleeting Realization of Utopia

It is not unusual for scholars to make the connection between Klein's Rosicrucian belief system and the subsequent development of his artistic oeuvre. Ursula Szulakowska conducted an exhaustive study examining the impact of alchemy on the work of a number of modern artists, and has intensively analyzed Klein's work as it relates to Rosicrucian ideas and forms. Thomas McEvelley has also written an essay in which he combs through Klein's body of work in search of Rosicrucian symbols or elements – his approach to the artist's work becomes almost iconographic. I have attempted to separate myself from this limited approach to Klein's art. Throughout the course of my research, I have become increasingly interested in a broader examination of the artist's philosophical shift from strict adherence to Rosicrucian thought toward a more open vision for the utopian future. Although clearly deeply informed by Rosicrucianism, Klein's vision does diverge from Heindel's religious description of the next earthly era.

His detailed utopian aspirations and sanguine philosophies developed initially based upon his interest in the teachings of *La Cosmogonie*, but his later philosophies ultimately evolved beyond a simplistic replication of Max Heindel's philosophies. Very few art historians have considered the artist's Anthropometric event in conjunction with the utopian oeuvre that consumed the latter half of his artistic career. The ostensibly bizarre ritualistic performance involved in the staging of the event in March of 1960 is largely rejected as representative of the artist's deep misogyny, or simply grouped together with Klein's other performance-based experiments. But to dismiss this event in such a manner is to do the artist a deep disservice. After carefully reading through his philosophical writings and comparing the event to Klein's larger body of work, I have come to

believe that the anthropometric performance was deeply personal to the artist and representative of a greater effort to realize his utopian vision here on Earth. In March of 1960, Klein found himself finally given the opportunity to carry out this utopian vision for a fleeting forty minutes in a small gallery in Paris.

Klein proved throughout his lifetime that he remained deeply dedicated to the teachings of Rosicrucianism – for years he subscribed to the order’s teachings, and I have already demonstrated that he borrowed heavily from Heindel’s writings when formulating his own plan for the future. During a time when it seemed as if the world faltered forever on the precipice of disaster, Rosicrucian teachings promised that the future would be bright. In the next realm, humanity could move beyond the fast-paced consumerism and flashing neon signs and eschew earthly belongings. Klein once expressed a desire to “raze everything on the surface of Earth, until it is flat and fill valleys with mountains and then pour concrete all over the continents.”<sup>131</sup> Only after shedding the complications of modernity could people could become one with space, and open to a new “awareness of Life.”<sup>132</sup>

Each of the events examined in the previous chapter dealt directly with the human experience in the post-war world. *The Void* was a spectacle designed to draw in the French public with intrigue and flashy advertisements, while *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* focused upon material exchange and *Dimanche* aimed to appropriate the daily experience of the French public. Widespread and open, each of these works dealt directly with the gritty realities and consumerist exchanges involved in post-war everyday life. On March 9, 1960, Yves Klein created a new and entirely different event. He handpicked one hundred enlightened individuals – members of the

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<sup>131</sup> Klein, *Classeur Mon Livre*, Yves Klein Archives.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 178.

French avant-garde – and invited them to share in an experience that remained veiled in secrecy. The event was carefully staged and fully orchestrated by the artist himself.

Klein spent much of his time in 1958 and 1959 traveling and outlining his plans for the future. In the texts he produced in 1959, Klein’s vision became very specific. The artist had already begun collaborating with the architect Werner Ruhnau to create his so-called “Architecture of Air,” but many of his written essays progressively focus less on the concrete structures of this future. In order to realize the eventual construction of fire fountains and the “climatization of the earth,” Klein claimed that it was necessary first for the world’s residents to reach a new earthly realm separate from the Hollywood stars, space satellites, and threats of nuclear destruction that made up daily life in the post-war era.<sup>133</sup> This realm was separate even from the artistic experimentation and collaboration that blossomed across the globe – the artist looked beyond the mechanized processes, blurring of lines between art and kitsch, and wild performative experimentation of the global avant-garde. The event was neither intended to make a political statement nor to further the artistic experimentation of the global artistic community. It was private, intimate, and deeply personal. Klein invited only those individuals that he believed would appreciate the “sensibility” that he attempted to create.<sup>134</sup> The Anthropometric event was, at its heart, a religious and philosophical experiment that gave the artist the opportunity to finally “experience what one envisions.”<sup>135</sup>

Klein’s basic philosophy stated that any individual could access a higher level of consciousness. Everyone possesses the ability to “literally levitate in a total physical and spiritual

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<sup>133</sup> “Project for an Architecture of Air,” in *Overcoming*, 174-175.

<sup>134</sup> The Yves Klein Archives possesses the artist’s handwritten list of invitees for the March 1960 anthropometric performance. The list is heavily edited, covered in scratch marks and including multiple names that have been crossed out or added. From this document, it is clear that Klein seriously deliberated over which individuals might be permitted to attend this secret event.

<sup>135</sup> “Project for an Architecture of Air,” in *Overcoming*, 174-175.

freedom.”<sup>136</sup> This so-called “levitation” stemmed from a new awareness of the “immaterial sensibility” found in atmospheric space, and depended upon the ability to separate oneself from the imperfections of modernity and modern life. In nearly all of his later performative events, Klein chose to move beyond the gallery space. The success of *The Void* relied upon advertisements and publicity stunts, while *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* and *Dimanche* literally took place on the streets of Paris. For the anthropometric performance, however, the artist returned to the contained and clandestine gallery wholly separate from the bustling commercialism outside its doors. The Galerie International d’Art Contemporain remained quiet and unstirred, and offered Klein an area of space within four blank white walls to appropriate as his own.

Klein’s “sensibility” was also firmly rooted in the raw, primal state of humanity. The Anthropometric event relied upon the methodical movements of nude, paint-covered women. Although Klein repeatedly insisted upon the purity of the event, the employment of women’s nude bodies clearly calls to mind the nakedness - and subsequent sin - of Eve. Heindel considered the female form sacred, and Klein employed only the female form when attempting to realize the experience of “immaterial pictorial sensibility.” The event’s invitations – written by Pierre Restany – proclaimed that the anthropometry would “run back through forty thousand years of modern art” to connect his works with the “necessary markings in that dawn of our world, which at Lascaux and Altamira signified man’s awakening to self-consciousness and the world.”<sup>137</sup> Klein hoped to, quite literally, return to the dawn of mankind and to link the

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<sup>136</sup> *Le dépassement*, 22.

<sup>137</sup> Found in Yves Klein Archives. Lascaux and Altamira are cave sites containing paintings thought to be more than 25,000 years old. Many scholars believe the first artists were often female. It is worth noting that the artists at Lascaux produced their paintings by blowing pigment around their hands, thus leaving outlines of these hands on the cave walls. See: Randall White, *Prehistoric Art: The Symbolic Journey of Humankind* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).



anthropometric performance to the “garden of Eden of the legend” to which he refers in his second manifesto. Produced in 1961, the artist scrawled this written description of his vision for the future atop a canvas covered in ghostly anthropometric outline figures [Fig. 27]. In Klein’s painting, these unearthly blue bodies witness the “advent of a new society.”<sup>138</sup>

And so, on March 9, 1960, Klein invited exactly one hundred men and women into an intimate gallery space. He said very little, and carefully instructed his orchestra to play a one-note symphony of his own composition. The audience sat silently and watched as nude women carefully created works of art under the clear direction of the artist. The meditative music, which Heindel wrote had immense power to send an individual beyond the physical realm, combined with the quiet rituals of the women and the thick atmosphere of the gallery space to create Klein’s sought-after “immaterial sensibility.” The stretched-out single chord erased all conception of time and space. And on a small scale, within the white walls of the gallery, Klein and his audience were able to access the realm that he so desperately sought – the world where commercialism and material goods fell behind, and man could suddenly levitate. In this space, Klein later wrote, humans “travel in immeasurable space, not by going through it, but by inhabiting it... Humans have strong and pure sensibilities, able to dissolve themselves in the infinite.”<sup>139</sup> He created a period of time that allowed for mindfulness, meditation, and recognition of the power of atmospheric space.

Klein participated in the creation of this “immaterial sensibility,” and inhabited it himself. But he also fulfilled his duty as “prophet.”<sup>140</sup> Heindel called for artists to usher in the new age, and Klein took his responsibility seriously. He considered art the key to the future. Acting as conductor of the orchestra, director of the artistic process, and host of the evening, the artist

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<sup>138</sup> “Project for an Architecture of Air,” in *Overcoming*, 174-175.

<sup>139</sup> Klein, “La Sensibilite c’est de l’Enthousiasme Pur,” *Classeur Mon Livre*, Yves Klein Archives.

<sup>140</sup> “Project for an Architecture of Air,” in *Overcoming*, 174-175.

became the master of ceremonies in the small-scale realization of his own utopic vision. And, with the anthropometries, Klein invited his audience to join him in his unflagging pursuit of the “Absolute.” Through the potent combination of music, the female body, the artistic act, and contemplative silence, he created the purest possible space in which his audience might fully understand the power of his vision for the future. Because, as the artist stated in his 1959 Dusseldorf speech, he fervently believed that soon, “we will know the upward force of attraction toward space, toward nothing and everything at once; and together, earthly gravity will finally be overcome.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> “Speech delivered on the occasion of the Tinguely Exhibition in Dusseldorf (January 1959),” *Overcoming*.

## CONCLUSION

The audience members who gathered at the Galerie Internationale d'Art Contemporain on the night of March 9, 1960 witnessed a moment that was both triumphant and deeply personal for the artist. Born out of his deep interest in alternative religions and shaped by his careful studies of Max Heindel's work, the Anthropometric event was unusual both within the context of Klein's current artistic oeuvre and when considered in conjunction with the artistic experimentation of the outside world.

Although World War II had ended almost exactly fifteen years before the performance of the Anthropometric event, the atrocities and devastation of war remained etched in the memories of the citizens of France. These men and women saw their homes reduced to rubble and their government toppled. They grappled with real moral and philosophical doubts concerning religion, human morality, and the very foundations of the Western world. Was it even acceptable to rebuild a society in which the atrocities of the Vichy government could again be possible? Was it possible to live happily within a world that could be wiped away at any moment with the push of a button?

But amidst this overwhelming sense of fear rose the rapid success of the post-war French economy. Propelled largely by loans from the United States, the French nation entered the second half of the twentieth century with a remarkably promising economic outlook. This sudden prosperity brought with it ubiquitous advertisements, American movie stars, and a society increasingly engrossed with material consumption. The slow-paced, leisurely life of pre-war France was replaced with the flashing neon lights and big-box supermarkets of modernity.

Along with many other artists across the globe, Klein borrowed directly from these changes when creating his artistic works. Three events that the artist staged later in life all commented directly upon the processes of exchange involved in the capitalistic system, and relied upon the creation of sensation for success. Klein used advertisements, billboards, and monetary exchanges to bring his works to the citizens of Paris. *The Void* whipped up such a frenzy that the police were required to restore order, *Zones of Immaterial Sensibility* was heavily advertised through photographs, and *Dimanche* literally forced the artist's work upon the streets of Paris. These events were large, brash, and clearly in conversation with the consumerist and capitalistic processes of modern France.

The Anthropometric event, however, took place in a quiet and closed gallery space. The work was not advertised, and only one hundred people were permitted to witness its creation. Although Klein had always been interested in alternative philosophies and remained dedicated to the teachings of the Rosicrucian Order, the artist had become increasingly preoccupied with the development of his own belief system by the end of the 1950s. Dissatisfied with the materialistic and frenzied state of life in modern France, he began to formulate a vision for the future. Klein envisioned a world in which space and atmosphere would take precedence over earthly matter. Humans would begin to move outside of their own bodies and become aware of the immaterial world – to the point that, ultimately, humanity would achieve the ability to fly. This ability, of course, was wholly dependent upon the abandonment of modern concerns. It required humans to eschew their earthly bodies and instead focus upon space, color, and sound.

With the realization of his Anthropometric event in March of 1960, Klein crafted the perfect environment in which this utopia might finally be realized. The artist placed the ancient figure of the female nude before his audience, both linking the performance to the teachings of Max

Heindel and suggesting a return to an Edenic paradise. He combined the careful movements of these women with the overwhelming power of the monotone vibration – and later, meditative silence. The artist moved slowly around the canvas, interacting quietly with his models and directing their movements to create swaths of bright blue paint that stood starkly against the pristine white paper. Klein created an ambiance that invited his guests to reach beyond the physical and material realities of earthly life, and encouraged these individuals to join him in his journey towards a new future. This future would not include Coca-Cola or color TV, but would instead allow for an immaterial freedom that existed outside of the physical body.

And, on March 9, 1960, Klein shared this vision with those he hoped would join him in his “Blue Revolution.” Borrowing from Heindel’s teachings and his own belief system, the artist carefully crafted an intimate and deeply personal work in which he invited these few members of the avant-garde to join him on a fifty-minute long journey away from their physical realities and into both the future and immaterial space. As Klein wrote in 1960, “What interests me is Man...the quality, the intensity, the concentration, of life in the universal life that he is a part of in spite of himself, despite the universe, this that is both the same and very different things.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Yves Klein: 3 mars – 23 mai 1983* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983), 221.

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IMAGE APPENDIX

Figure 1



"Anthropométrie de l'époque bleue"  
Silent black and white film (2'30")  
Yves Klein  
Available via the Yves Klein Archives  
[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

Figure 2



Screenshot – Klein signals for the orchestra to begin playing the Monotone Symphony

“Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue”

Silent black and white film (2’30”)

Yves Klein

Available via the Yves Klein Archives

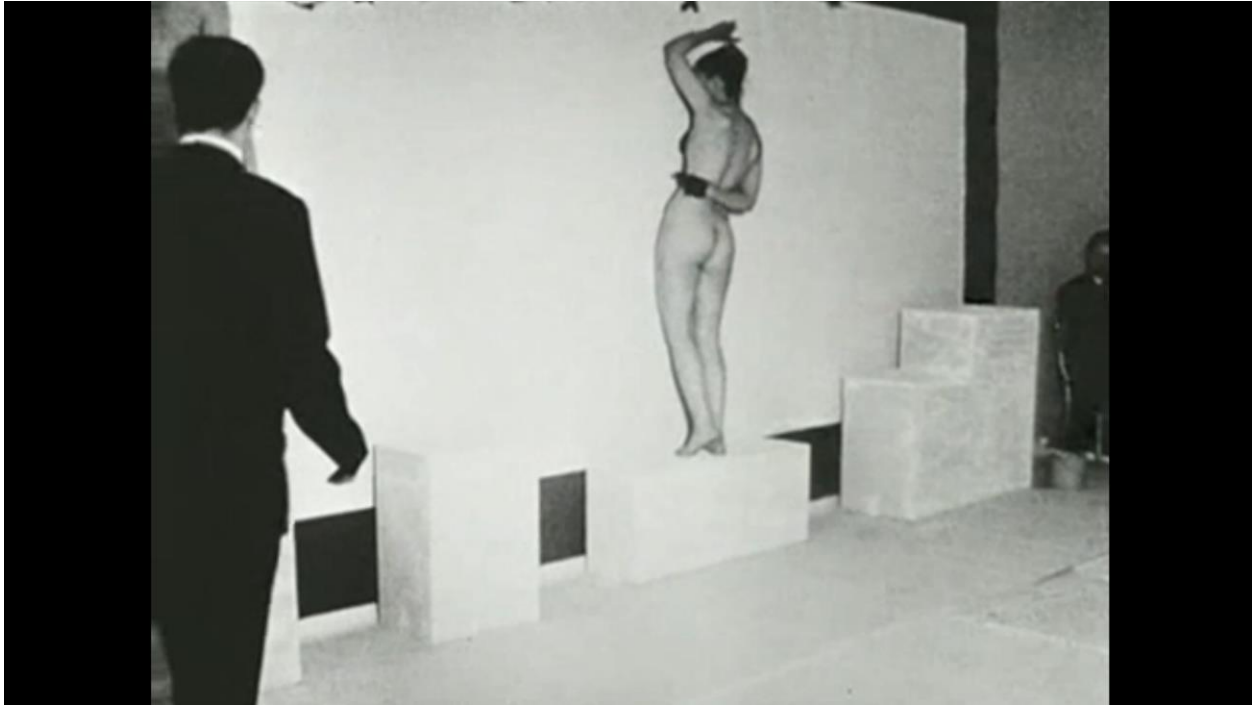
[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

Figure 3



Screenshot – Three models emerge carrying cans of blue paint  
“Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue”  
Silent black and white film (2’30”)  
Yves Klein  
Available via the Yves Klein Archives  
[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

Figure 4



Screenshot – A model presses her paint-covered body against the wall

“Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue”

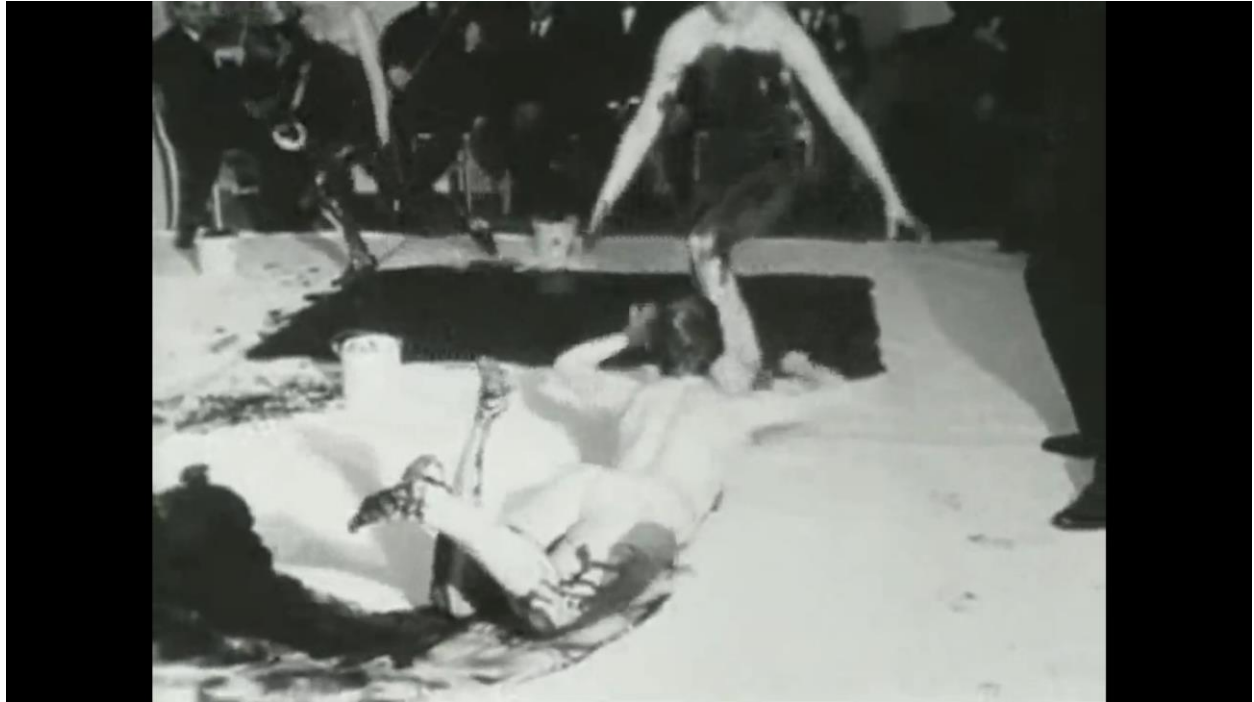
Silent black and white film (2’30”)

Yves Klein

Available via the Yves Klein Archives

[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

Figure 5



Screenshot – One model drags another woman across the paper-covered floor

“Anthropométrie de l’époque bleue”

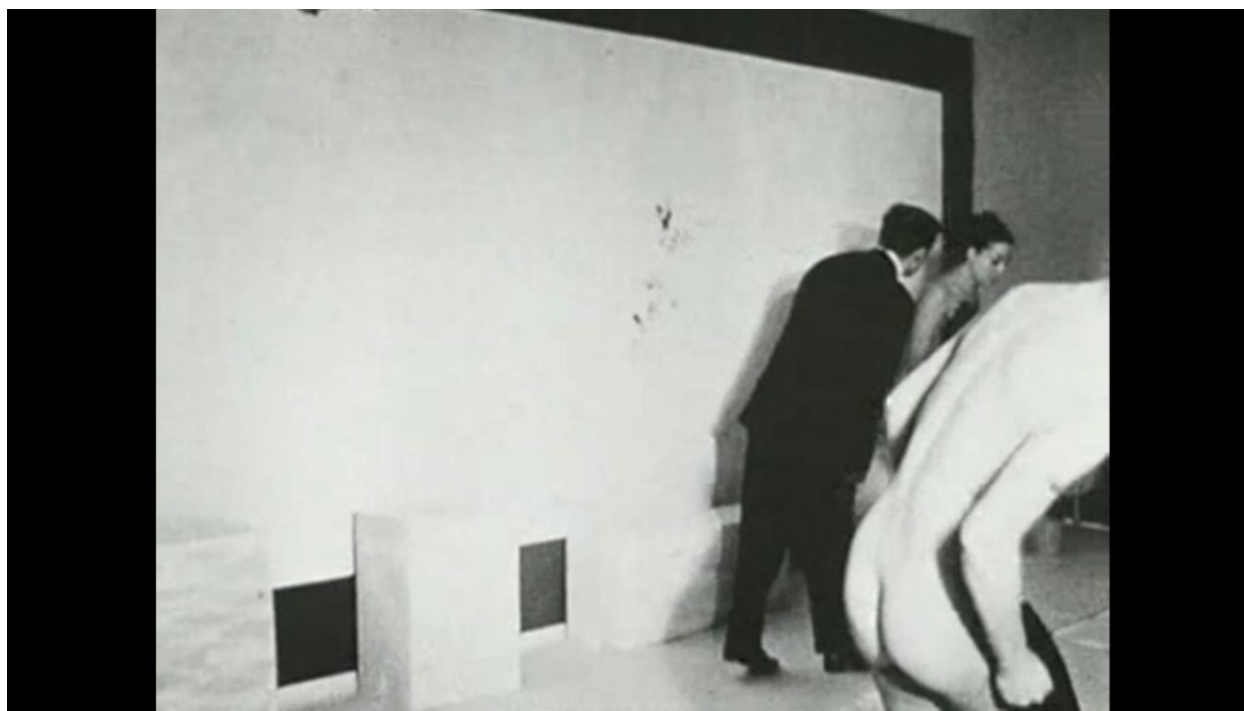
Silent black and white film (2’30”)

Yves Klein

Available via the Yves Klein Archives

[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

Figure 6



Screenshot – Yves Klein quietly directs one of the models  
“Anthropométrie de l'époque bleue”  
Silent black and white film (2'30")  
Yves Klein  
Available via the Yves Klein Archives  
[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)



Figure 7



Screenshot – Klein says a few parting words  
“Anthropométrie de l’*époque bleue*”  
Silent black and white film (2’30”)  
Yves Klein  
Available via the Yves Klein Archives  
[http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films\\_us.html](http://www.yveskleinarchives.org/documents/films_us.html)

Figure 8



*Volonté de puissance*

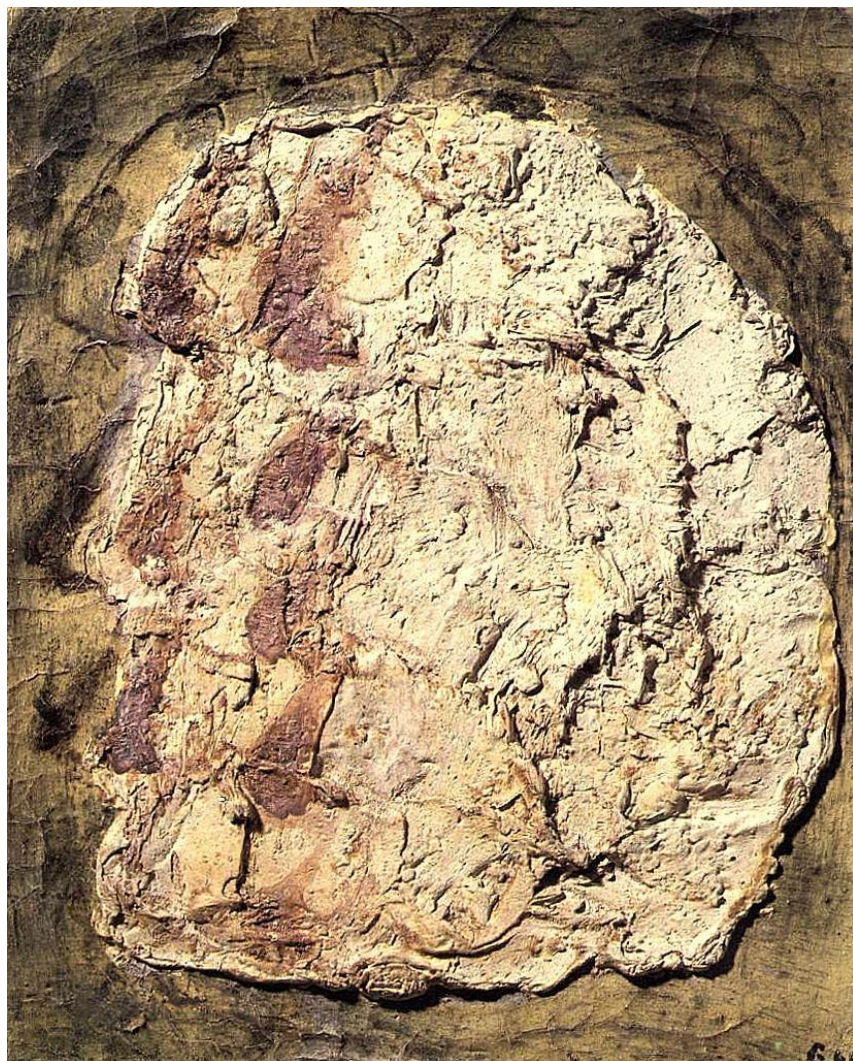
Jean Dubuffet

January 1946

Paris, France

Oil, pebbles, sand, glass and rope on canvas

Figure 9



*Tête d'otage*  
Jean Fautrier  
1945  
Paris, France  
Oil on paper mounted on canvas

Figure 10



Illustrations accompanying Robert Goodnough's "Pollock Paints a Picture"  
*ARTNews*  
May 1951  
Black-and-white photographic series

Figure 11



*Hommage aux poètes du monde entire*

Georges Mathieu

1956

Paris, France

Oil on canvas

4 x 12 meters

Figure 12



*Challenging Mud*  
Kazuo Shiraga  
Tokyo, Japan  
October 1955

Figure 13



Photograph of the artist's process  
Kazuo Shiraga  
Tokyo, Japan  
1956

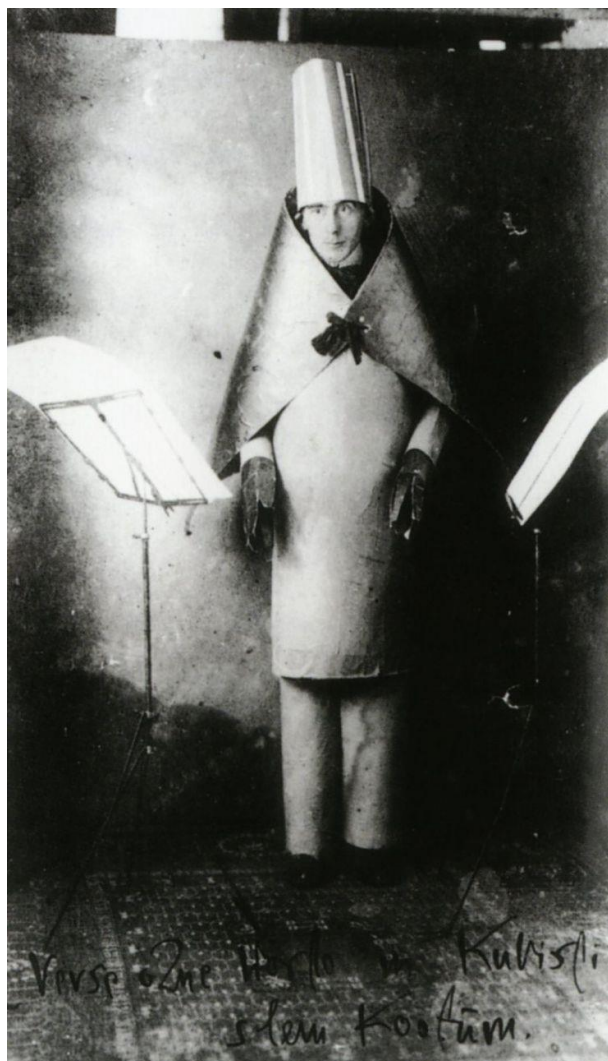
Figure 14



*18 Happenings in 6 Parts*  
Allan Kaprow  
Reuben Gallery (New York, NY)  
1959



Figure 15



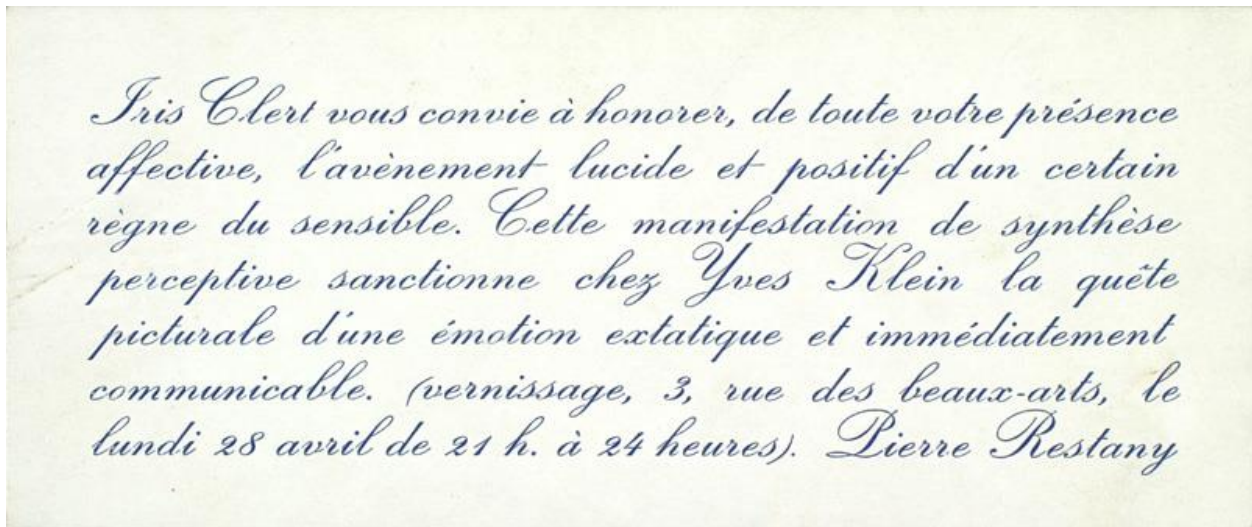
Recitation of the sound poem "Karawane"  
Hugo Ball  
Cabaret Voltaire (Zurich, Switzerland)  
1916

Figure 16



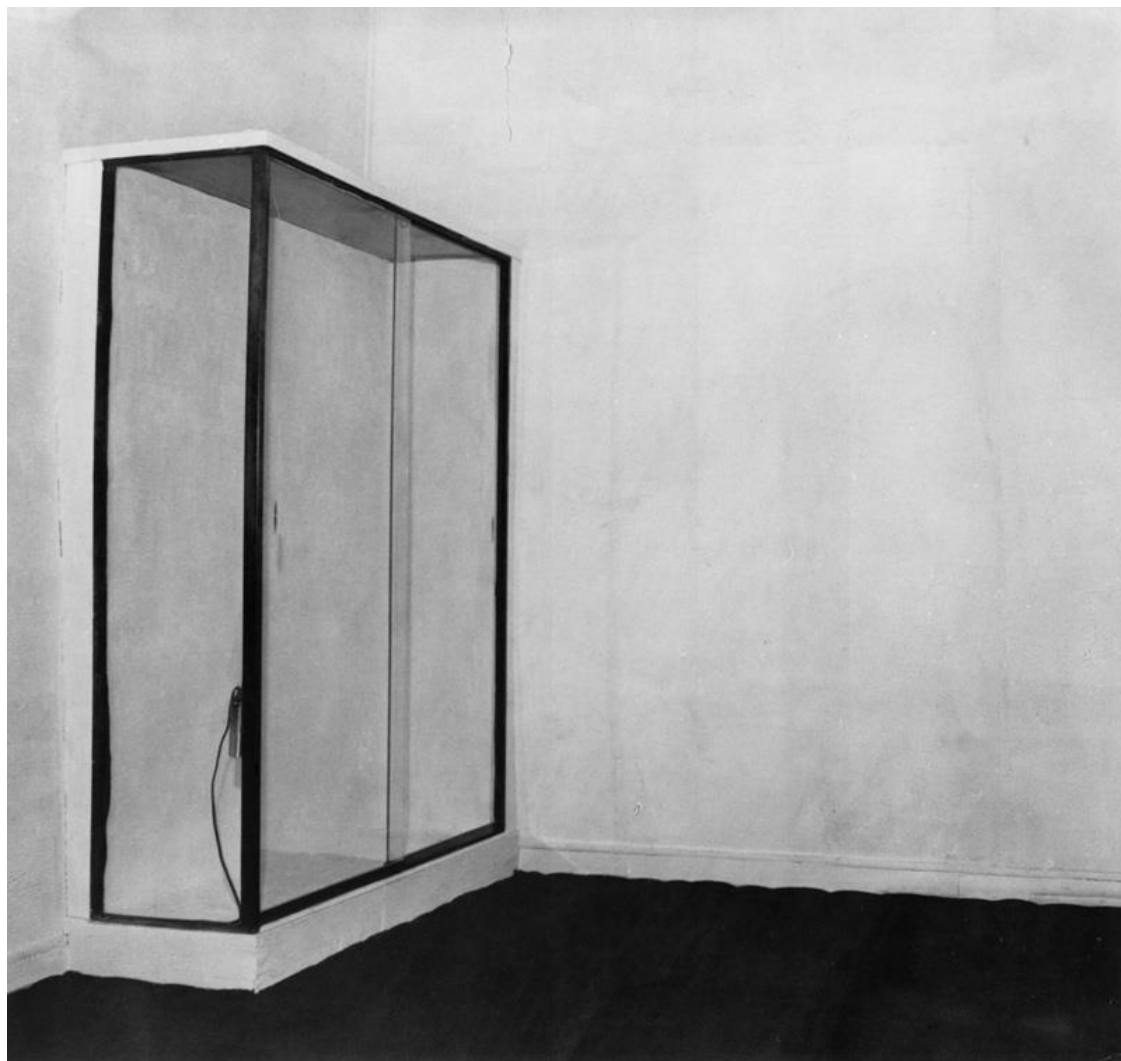
Members of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company perform before backdrop designed by Robert Rauschenberg  
Choreography: Merce Cunningham  
Set: Robert Rauschenberg & Remy Charlie  
Music: John Cage  
*Minutaie*  
1954

Figure 17



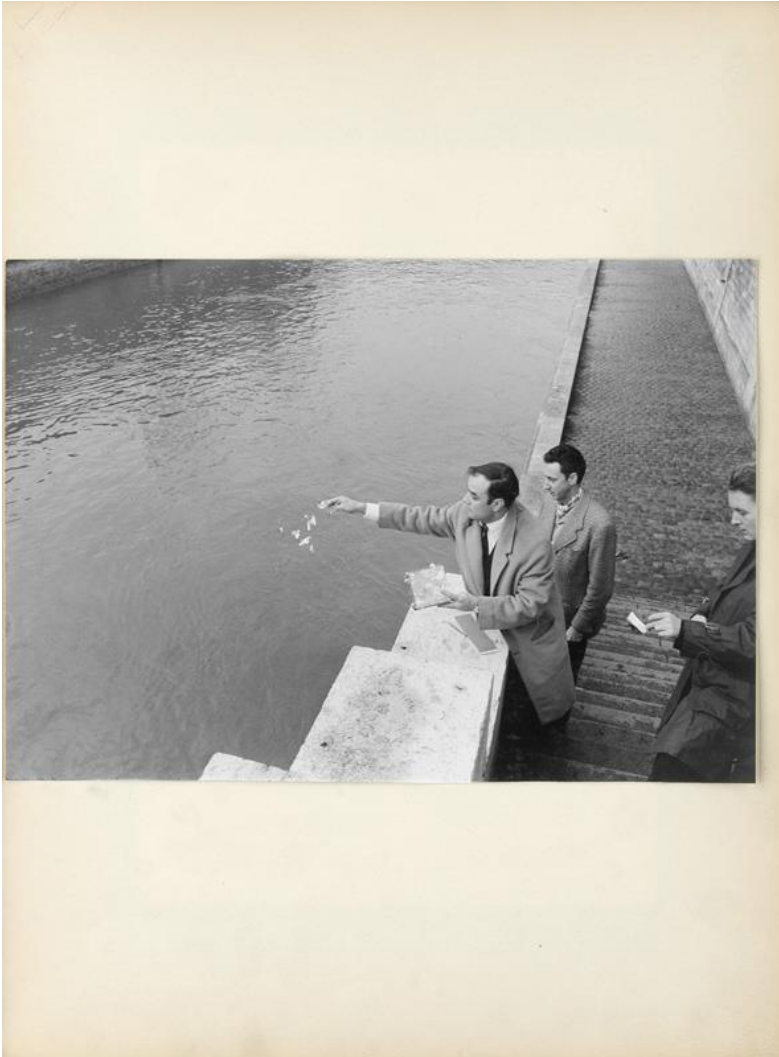
Invitation for *The Void*  
Yves Klein  
Galerie Iris Clert (Paris, France)  
1958

Figure 18



*The Void*  
Yves Klein  
Galerie Iris Clert (Paris, France)  
April 28 – May 12, 1958

Figure 19



Transfer of a *Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* to Claude Pascal  
Yves Klein  
Paris, France  
February 4, 1962

Figure 20





*Leap Into the Void*  
Yves Klein  
1960  
Black-and-white photograph

Figure 22



Still from Yves Klein's short film *Dimanche*  
Yves Klein  
Paris, France  
November 27, 1960



Figure 23



*ANT 82, Anthropométrie de l'époque bleue*

Yves Klein

Paris, France

1950

Pigment and synthetic resin on paper mounted on canvas

Figure 24



*ANT 96, People Begin to Fly*  
Yves Klein  
Paris, France  
1961  
Oil on paper mounted on canvas

Figure 25



*Suire de Mondo Cane (Mondo Cane Shroud)*

Yves Klein

Paris, France

1961

Pigment and synthetic resin on gauze

Figure 26

*(1960) Project for an Architecture of Air*

Yves Klein & Werner Ruhnau

The architecture of air has in our minds always been just a transitional stage, but today we present it as a means for the climatization of geographical spaces. The illustration shows a proposition for the protection of a city by means of a floating roof of air. A central expressway leading to the airport divides the city into a residential zone and an industrial and mechanical support zone.

The air roof regulates the temperature and, at the same time, protects that privileged area.

Ground surface of transparent glass.

Subterranean service zone (kitchens, bathrooms, storage and utility rooms).

The principle of privacy, still present in our world, has vanished in this city, which is bathed in light and completely open to the outside.

A new atmosphere of human intimacy prevails.

The inhabitants live in the nude.

The primitive patriarchal structure of the family no longer exists.

The community is perfect, free, individualistic, impersonal.

The principal activity of the inhabitants: leisure.

Obstacles formerly considered in architecture as tiresome necessities have become luxuries:

Fireproof walls

Waterproof walls

Airborne forms

Fountains of fire

Fountains of water

Swimming pools

Air mattresses, inflatable seats...

The true goal of immaterial architecture: air conditioning of vast geographic residential areas.

Rather than being accomplished by miracles of technology, this temperature will become reality when human sensibility has merged with the cosmos. The theory of immaterialization denies the spirit of science fiction.

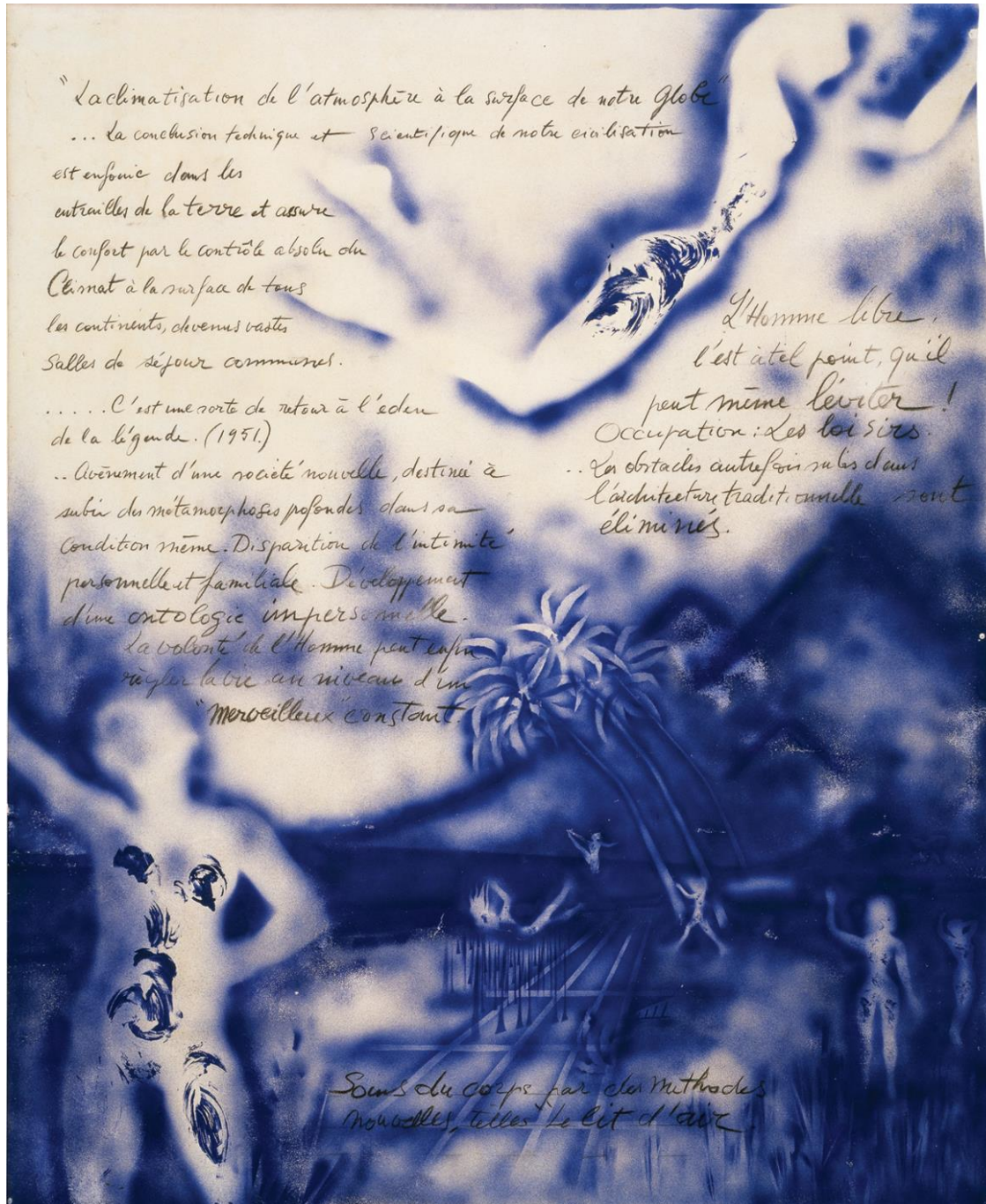
The newly developed sensibility, "a new human dimension, guided by the soul," will in the future transform the spiritual and climatic conditions on the surface of our earth.

To want means to envision... Associated with this desire is the determination to experience what one envisions, and the miracle occurs in all realms of nature.

*He who does not believe in miracles is not a realist.*

*- Ben-Gurion*

Figure 27



*Architecture de l'air (ANT 102)*

Yves Klein

1961

Pigment and ink on paper mounted on canvas