A Pedagogy of the Unrepresentable:

Encounters with Monochromatic Abstract Art

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ABSTRACT

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Reza Sedighiankashi

We use images in pedagogy as if they should always explain themselves. But what if they don't? What if they remain silent, resistant, opaque, or ambiguous? This thesis focuses on monochromatic abstract images, particularly those in black, as a means of interrupting dominant habits of perception and exploring how visual opacity can open new pedagogical possibilities. It examines how images that withhold meaning might invite presence, attention, and forms of learning that emerge in a more slow and affective way and without predetermined results. Rather than providing strategies for interpreting or decoding images, this study engages abstraction as a space of friction, where perception is slowed, disrupted, or suspended. Engaging works such as Malevich's *Black Square*, selected cinematic images, and past works from my own studio practice, alongside my experiences as an educator, I consider how images that resist comprehension can disrupt or disturb pedagogical habits and open space for learning that is based in unknowing. Pedagogical encounters with abstraction can also shift the role of the image, from something to interpret to something that exerts pressure and creates disorientation. In unravelling these gestures across the chapters, I consider black as a condition—something that unsettles perception, thought, and pedagogy, rather than something fixed or easily understood as colour. I explore this condition through the figure of the black hole, which is offered not merely as a metaphor for gravity, void, or disappearance, but as a diagram for thinking the unknowable within pedagogical experience. Drawing from post-qualitative and non-representational theories of education, I develop concepts and pedagogies of refusal, drift, delay, and disappearance—gestures that interrupt normative habits of perception and teaching. Through tracing these gestures, this thesis proposes a pedagogy of the unrepresentable: a pedagogy that does not aim for clarity and instead holds space for the unknown, the ineffable, and for the affective dimensions of learning.

Keywords: art education, abstraction, monochrome, opacity, ambiguity, non-representational pedagogy

RÉSUMÉ

Une pédagogie de l'imprésentable: Rencontres avec l'art abstrait monochrome

Reza Sedighiankashi

Nous utilisons les images en pédagogie comme si elles devaient toujours s'expliquer d'elles-mêmes. Mais que se passe-t-il si ce n'est pas le cas? Si elles restent silencieuses, résistantes, opaques ou ambiguës? Ce mémoire s'intéresse aux images abstraites monochromes, en particulier celles dominées par le noir, comme un moyen d'interrompre les habitudes dominantes de perception et d'explorer comment l'opacité visuelle peut ouvrir de nouvelles possibilités pédagogiques. Il examine comment des images qui retiennent leur sens peuvent inviter à la présence, à l'attention, et à des formes d'apprentissage qui émergent lentement, de manière affective, et sans résultats prédéterminés. Plutôt que de proposer des stratégies d'interprétation ou de décodage, ce mémoire explore l'abstraction comme un espace de friction, où la perception est ralentie, perturbée ou suspendue. À travers des œuvres telles que *Carré noir* de Malevitch, des images cinématographiques choisies, des œuvres issues de ma propre pratique artistique, ainsi que mon expérience en tant qu'enseignant, j'examine comment des images qui résistent à la compréhension peuvent troubler les habitudes pédagogiques et ouvrir un espace d'apprentissage fondé sur le non-savoir. Les rencontres pédagogiques avec l'abstraction peuvent aussi transformer le rôle de l'image : non plus comme un objet à interpréter, mais comme une force de pression et de désorientation. En traversant ces gestes au fil des chapitres, je considère le noir comme une condition—quelque chose qui déstabilise la perception, la pensée et la pédagogie, plutôt qu'un élément fixe ou aisément défini comme une couleur. J'explore cette condition à travers la figure du trou noir, proposée non comme une simple métaphore de la gravité, du vide ou de la disparition, mais comme un diagramme permettant de penser l'inconnaissable dans l'expérience pédagogique. En m'appuyant sur des théories post-qualitatives et non-représentationnelles de l'éducation, je développe des concepts et des pratiques pédagogiques du refus, de la dérive, du retard et de la disparition—des gestes qui perturbent les habitudes normatives de perception et d'enseignement. En suivant ces gestes, ce mémoire propose une pédagogie de l'imprésentable—non pas tournée vers la clarté, mais ouverte à l'inconnu, à l'ineffable, et aux dimensions affectives de l'apprentissage.

Mots-clé: éducation artistique, abstraction, monochrome, opacité, ambiguïté, pédagogie non-représentationnelle

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DEDICATION

To my first teachers, Baba Masoud and Maman Maryam.

To Mirab, my best friend, who introduced me to *Gerry*.

And to *Gerry*.

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PROLOGUE | ENTERING THE VOID

The flashing neon lights of *Enter the Void* (2009) by Gaspar Noé pulse in the dark, depicting an experience of dying, experiencing, and reincarnating. After a long title sequence, we see a nighttime perspective of Tokyo's sky witnessed from a first-person point of view of Oscar. He calls out to his sister, Linda, to come out to the balcony to see a plane.

"Oscar: I wonder what Tokyo looks like from up there.

Linda: I don't.

Oscar: Why not?

Linda: I'd be scared.

Oscar: Scared of what?

Linda: Of dying, I guess. Falling into the void.

Oscar: They say you fly when you die" (Noé, 2009).

He shows his sister the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*[1], and when she is gone, he turns the light off. Through the window, a large neon sign flashes: "ENTER." He smokes DMT, and from there falls into a hallucinogenic trip of floating, colorful, organic abstract forms, all in black space. His friend, Victor, asks him to come for a drug deal at "The Void" bar, and Oscar's journey takes a fatal turn when he is betrayed, gets trapped in a police raid, and is shot and dies. However, Oscar's consciousness exists. His spirit ascends, drifting through Tokyo, watching over his sister and friends, feeling and reliving moments of his life. Each interlude within his process of perception transition is characterized by an abstract sign/image. These signs visualize his passage beyond life.

The film collapses boundaries between the self and the unknown. It seduces us into the abyss when even a function of vision becomes unstable. The analogy is formed through Oscar and Linda's conversation around an unfamiliar experience, like death. Also, Oscar's entrance into "the void" through hallucination, where he tries to penetrate, witness, and comprehend an unknown realm by shutting down his rationality. Subjects like abstract art resist the comfort of

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[1] *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: Or the Great Liberation by Hearing in the Bardo* is a foundational 14th-century Tibetan Buddhist text traditionally attributed to Karma-gling-pa. It belongs to the terma (revealed teachings) lineage and is intended to guide consciousness through the intermediate states (bardo) between death and rebirth. The English edition edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz, first published in 1927, played a central role in introducing Tibetan esoteric teachings to Western audiences. Though influential, this edition is shaped by Theosophical and Jungian frameworks, which have been critiqued for obscuring the original doctrinal context (Karma-gling-pa, 1993).

interpretation—how they, too, ask us to surrender to uncertainty, release fixed meaning, and enter a void of meaning-making where even the act of seeing is transformed.

Abstraction in the film doesn't just look a certain way—it teaches in a certain way. There is also a way the film teaches by using disorienting point-of-view shots and psychedelic visual transitions to refuse a stable perspective where the viewer is contained within a state of perceptual confusion—a confusion mirroring moments of learning where previous frameworks collapse. It disrupts the viewing experience of linear narrative, clear interpretation, or fixed meaning. Yet, this is not simply a visual experience, but also a pedagogical one. Ask the viewer/learner not to arrive or decode. Ask them to stay, refuse, delay, drift, and disappear. This way, it becomes a method for unlearning a certain pattern of knowing through sensations, ambiguity, and presence[2].
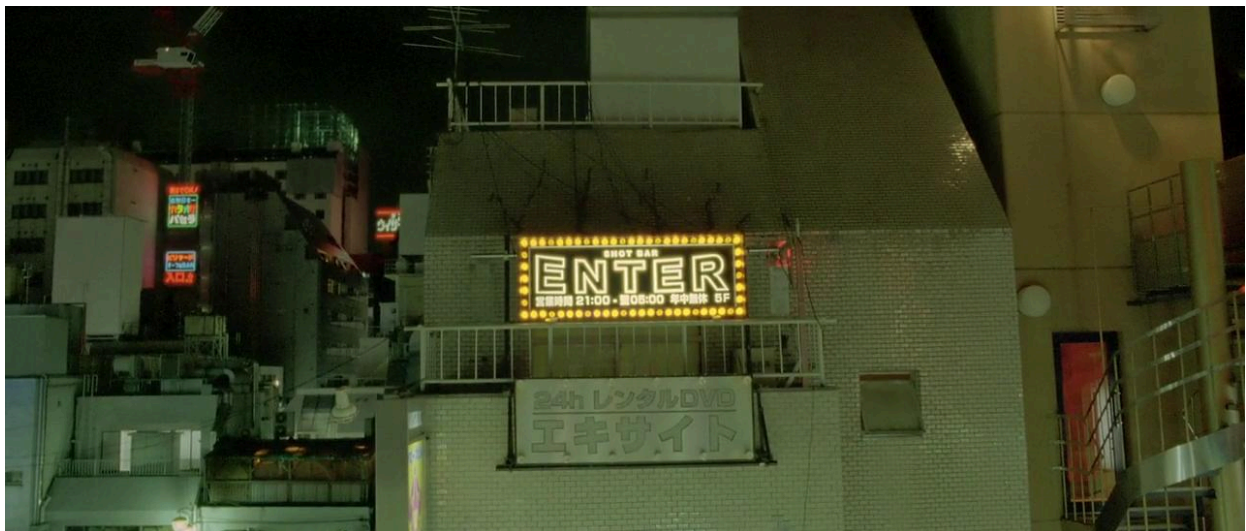
Figure 1. Still from *Enter the Void*, directed by Gaspar Noé, 2009. Cinematography by Benoît Debie.

For a moment, when Oscar turns off the light and the word "ENTER" flashes, it could be seen as a moment of learning (Figure 1). Perhaps, the void is a way of describing how we begin to learn by leaving. This is a pedagogy of the void. And I am not talking about the emptiness of the void but a space of possibilities: of feeling lost, of seeing differently, of breaking away from the familiar.

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[2] Drifting in this context, as I will explain, also reflects my own artistic process: the slow movement between opposing paths—representation and abstraction—without settling on either.

This relates to Hito Steyerl's notion of "free fall" as a condition of groundlessness, where disorientation becomes a style of knowing and understanding the unstable conditions of contemporary experience. She articulates, "While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people... Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise" (Steyerl, 2011). Within her discussion of groundlessness, we can read that the idea of learning no longer depends on stable grounds. If vision collapses and perspectives multiply, the learner is no longer a stable observer but rather becomes part of a disoriented scene in which meaning emerges and direction is uncertain. Disorientation, then, becomes a condition of possibility; a possibility of attending to instability as a form of knowing. For pedagogical experiences, as an example, this could mean inviting students to dwell in what is unresolved or even uncomfortable, rather than rushing to resolution. This kind of visual and experiential disorientation resonates with pedagogical moments where the ground beneath our usual ways of knowing is pulled away, and the absence remains a potential space of pedagogical possibility. Again, it is not just an image or nothing, but rather a spatial practice for pedagogical purposes, withholding clarity. The ground will not be stable, and we might think, "What's next?" This void might not be safe, but it might be generative, as it occurs in contrast to our excess thinking that learning is an accumulation process that occurs through drifting and letting go of our own disposal learning. The void becomes a place of surrender if there is nothing but encounter.

The motivation for this research comes from my own art practice, very much operating between two modalities of picture-making—abstraction and representational imagery. My abstraction works have been predominantly monochrome black paintings, where I have tried to articulate notions of emptiness/nothingness, including some ideas around time, and accumulation. I exhibit the results of this process every couple of years, and it is almost an experiment under the title *Limit* (حَد). The work began unexpectedly with a large T-shaped painting. After graduating in 2008, I was lost in the space of when and where to go with my art. There was pressure to define myself as either an abstract or figurative painter. I was creating different pieces without thinking about how they related. Without resolving what I was doing, I placed the works side by side on the wall and spent hours looking, trying to figure it out and make a connection.

And then one day, looking at these separate pieces, these works were together in a T shape—a discovery I made by accident. I just kept adding and layering materials to create a whole, and I didn't know where it was going. It was simply like making a whole that was made up of too many pieces. I had questions: Should I pursue my interest in representing nature or follow the path of abstraction? This conflict continues to shape my practice.

Figure 2. Reza Sedighian, *Untitled,* started in 2008 (unfinished), 170 x 235 cm, Mixed media on paper (paper on canvas).

Eventually, the work became physically thick due to all the layers. A few years later, I painted the entire surface in black, guided by intuition (Figure 2). I continued to build on, more or less, what I had started. In Malevich[3]'s words, it became "a construction of forms out of

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[3] Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1879–1935) was a Ukrainian-born (then Russian Empire) avant-garde artist, theorist, and teacher who founded Suprematism—an abstract movement focusing on basic geometric forms to evoke pure feeling and spiritual expression.He studied at the Stroganov School in Moscow and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, initially working in Impressionist, Symbolist, and Cubo-Futurist styles before debuting his radical non-objective work with *Black Square* in 1915. From 1919 onward, Malevich took on key pedagogical roles—first in Moscow at VKhUTEMAS, then at the Vitebsk Art School (where he led the UNOVIS collective), teaching Suprematist theory and practice alongside artists like Chagall and Lissitzky. He also authored manifestos including *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism* (1915) and *The Non-Objective World* (1926), which laid the philosophical foundations of abstract art. Despite official disfavor during the Stalinist era, Malevich continued to teach and create, returning to figuration n the late 1920s due to increasing political →

nothing... discovered by intuitive reason" (Ioffe & White, 2012). Layer by layer, I covered everything in black. It became like a black hole that swallowed everything from the prior images. It became an object, and one I keep returning to. I have painted it many times, similar to the way one paints a still life or model. It has become the center of this kind of work in my practice. Like a ritual, I make drawings and paintings of this thing over and over. It feels like a portal to something that I cannot fully describe. This image resists language, and painting becomes my only way to approach this thing.

I cannot always produce this kind of image quickly. These images don't come easily; Despite their simple, monochromatic appearance, they are difficult for me to make and thus for the viewer to interpret. They block vision, are dark, and difficult to see. They are difficult to photograph and even harder to describe. This is at the heart of their pedagogical role—they invoke a suspicion of seeing and understanding.

I have shown these paintings twice. The first show has stayed in my memory because some viewers left the gallery quickly and did not want to spend any time with the work. It seems to me that the painting operates as a kind of refusal itself. That is, it moves away from the visible, natural world, and I believe it resists being seen or understood—it is an ineffable image. Some viewers stayed to try to make sense of it, but many left. This may have been intensified by my decision not to include an artist statement. I wanted the silence of the work to remain intact, allowing it to speak through absence[4].

Looking back, I realize that abstraction in my practice has produced conditions not for resolution but for drifting. Not only drifting, but drifting between clarity and opacity, certainty and uncertainty. It is not passive drifting. It is a kind of thinking, and a mode of making, that refuses to give in to the pressure to determine meaning too quickly. These images delay the arrival and disappear from view, leaving behind only a trace or echo. Could this be its pedagogical power? Does it invite movement without destination, attention without conclusion?

It opens up a space for meaning not to be simply given over, but to hover, uncertainly, emergently, suspended. In this suspended space, meaning has to be dwelt in, not decoded. Also, drifting can mean choosing not to follow a clear or expected path. Delay, in this sense, means

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→ pressure and the rise of Socialist Realism, which condemned abstract art as ideologically unacceptable in the Soviet Union. (Shkandrij, 2002; Milner, 1996; Shatskikh, 2012)

[4] The gallery space itself contributed to this atmosphere—paintings hung alone on white walls, under soft light, with no interpretive text to guide the viewer. The silence in the room echoed the silence of the work.

slowing things down, giving time for something else to appear. Disappearing, in this sense, doesn't mean to no longer be there at all—it can mean stepping back, allowing other people to notice, feel, or respond in their own way. The act of embracing the unseen (whether as an artist or educator) is both a refusal and an invitation. It refuses to provide meaning that is ready-made, but invites you to wait, to linger, to look again. It requires presence, instead of answers. It makes space for knowledge not to be delivered, but to be approached indirectly, carefully, sometimes even awkwardly; and this may be the beginning of learning. When people exhibited frustration or rejection at my exhibitions, I began to view these sentiments not as a failure, but as a meaningful response. What if frustration is not a block to understanding, but its beginning? What if rejection is a first step in learning how to stay with the not-yet-known? The discomfort is now a part of the experience, not something to push past, but how to stay near the unresolved.

What the viewers were being asked, without perhaps knowing, was to adopt a certain position that involved waiting, projecting, or sitting with discomfort. These were small gestures that were even pedagogical in nature. They were in the spirit of doing something in teaching that requires slowness, compassion, and a willingness to allow something to reveal itself in its own time. The absence of an artist statement felt like not just a withholding of an explanation, but rather an offering of space. Space to not know, to feel confused. Space to begin again without direction. The absence I now think speaks in delay, not clarity, and in that delay I also see a pedagogical gesture—a refusal to tell you what to think, one invitation to dwell. The void between the viewer and the image is a space of living meaning, not delivered meaning.

In this study, I explore the inquiry into these experiences of abstraction, opacity, and visual resistance towards other philosophical and pedagogical questions. What does "entering the void" reveal about how we learn? How can abstraction often not only be a visual form, but a pedagogical condition that resists clarity, delays conclusion, and opens up alternative ways of knowing? I explore how moments of ambiguity, disorientation, or non-representation can become possibilities for meaningful educational experiences, especially during a time when the emphasis is often on efficacy, clarity, and outcomes in education systems and cultural institutions. I position my inquiry within a literature and field that assumes "visual literacy" is often thinking about decoding meaning, symbolism, and meaning-making in what we see. But what happens if we think about the converse instead, or what we cannot see, cannot name, or cannot resolve? This work intervenes in educational spaces that often give value to

representation, communication, and certainty. It attempts to offer another mode of pedagogical engagement that embraces not-knowing as a productive function.

  The problem this study is interested in is the discomfort we have with abstraction, ambiguities, and the ineffable in art education. Why is abstraction often erased or marginalized from educational spaces? What happens when we resist the call to explain, to define, to lead, or push interpretation? My own practice as an artist and educator comes into play here as a method—a way of thinking through those tensions. The works I make, the experiences I create for learners, and the questions I ask both in the studio and the classroom are not separate from the theory I explore. Instead, they form the ground from which this inquiry emerges.

| *CHAPTER ONE* |

Figure 3. *A 'found' black square* (Sedighian, 2023). Photograph taken by the author in Saint-Denis Street, Montreal.[5]

A PEDAGOGY OF THE UNSEEN

In art education, as it is in many fields of pedagogy, clarity is typically valued. There is an unstated presumption that what is being taught can be eventually understood (through assignments, recognized (through assessments), and reproduced (through lesson plans). But what happens when what is to be learned is not only not seen, but also resisted? Or further, when meaning is not only withheld, but is also actively troubled? This chapter speaks to this pedagogical space. It builds a theoretical foundation for a study that begins with ambiguity, opacity, and the pedagogical urgency of what is left unseen.

I approach this research as a student of art education, an educator, and a practicing artist, whose encounters with ambiguity are experienced from each of these positions. This research project investigates how ambiguity can be made a site of artistic and pedagogical engagement,

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[5] This approach was inspired by Andrew Spira's inclusion of a vernacular image resembling Black Square in *Foreshadowed: Malevich's Black Square and Its Precursors* (2022), which affirmed the conceptual grounding for collecting my own 'found' black squares.

with a focus on monochrome abstract images, especially black monochrome images, which might offer a site to explore pedagogies of the unrepresentable. The work of art most central to this intervention is Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, an image that exemplifies the tension between visibility and refusal, presence and opacity. What pedagogical potential lies in students engaging with monochromatic abstract images, particularly in cultivating meaning-making from ambiguity, expressing complex affect, and fostering critical agency?

At the heart of this project is a central assertion: that the dominance of representational paradigms in art education must be critically reexamined, and that alternative conceptual orientations are both possible and necessary. This chapter aims to take up the problem at the heart of this project: the domination of representational paradigms in art education, and to pose an alternative conceptual location. This chapter moves through three sections, wherein I offer a conceptual foundation that centres ambiguity, affect, and non-representation. First, I consider how dominant visual pedagogies have impacted notions of "seeing" and visual literacy; next, I consider uncertainty, delay, and emptiness within the learning experience. Finally, I discuss the nature of abstraction as both a focus of inquiry and also a methodological position, which is aligned with post-qualitative inquiry, which also pushes against the flattening impulse of representation.

The Weight of the Visible

What is made visible within a classroom? And who determines what is a "correct" image? These questions are more than considerations of aesthetics; they are also epistemological. These questions are about how art education—influenced by curricular models, disciplinary traditions, and cultural values—produces visibility as a method of and product of learning. These constructs are not ideologically natural but have been woven into broader regimes of power, shaped by, for instance, histories of coloniality, capitalist forms of accountability, and normative ideals of perception and intelligibility.

We encounter many images on a daily basis, and many of these images, as art educators have noted for decades (Duncum, 2007; Eagleton, 1990/2004; Mitchell, 2005; Elkins, 2009), are intended to "represent" particular subjects, narratives, stories, ideologies, or perspectives. This awareness has resulted in an emphasis on pedagogy that teaches learners how to "read" representational images, and the process of the image encounter becomes conceptually similar to

the process of reading in a broader sense (beier, 2012). The attention to "visual literacy" is valuable as a discipline of habits for the context of art education. However, Jon Simons (2009), while discussing James Elkins's concept of visual literacy, points out that this term is often used too casually, and we don't really know what it means and how it works. He continues, visual literacy is clearly an aspiration rather than a skill set, and lacks the shared vocabulary and institutional structures to reproduce the specific language of literacy. Indeed, the art encounter as a process of representational "reading" or decoding based on semiotic signs and meanings ultimately cannot live up to the potential of art as a pedagogical form.

The notion of reading images, particularly in the art education movements of Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE)[6] and Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE)[7], has long privileged visual clarity, interpretability, and representational honesty. Elliot Eisner, one of the architects of DBAE, defined visual literacy as "the skills used to decode and interpret visual images", similar to how one may read a language, in that they have legible signs, internal grammar, and correct and incorrect readings (Eisner, 2002). While visual literacy as a model for art education brought a rigidity to what was previously a highly marginalized field, it also reinforced a particular ideology of vision—one that aligns learning with comprehension and images with information.

In contrast, theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell have warned against equating images with forms of transparency. In *What Do Pictures Want?* Mitchell (2005) specifies that images are not passive vessels of meaning; they are active agents in the form of desire, effects, and resistance. Images do not always want to be read: rather, they may want to seduce, obscure, or even withhold. From this perspective, visual literacy needs to be rethought as attunement to the various ways that images trouble our assumptions about seeing, knowing, and feeling.

With a focus on the representational aspects of the art experience, all of the other aspects of art, that are affective, embodied, and non-representational, become marginalized, leaving less

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[6] Discipline-Based Art Education, developed during the 1980's in the United States, advocated for art education as a legitimate subject of study in the academic core. While DBAE was supported by Elliot Eisner and the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, it restructured art learning around four interrelated disciplines: art production, art criticism, history of art, and aesthetics. DBAE aimed at modelling the rigour of other school subjects and conceiving art as a body of knowledge to be transmitted and assessed (Winner, 2022).

[7] Visual Culture Art Education developed in the 1990's as a critique against a narrow conception of DBAE, intervening to address, expand, and emancipate the art education domain to include popular media, advertising, digital imagery and any other forms of visual culture. Originating from cultural studies and semiotics, VCAE accepts the ideological functions of images and assists students in solving through "reading" visual texts as they relate to power, identity and social meaning (Duncum, 2002).

room for the sensory, emotional, and intuitive responses that art might provoke. Further, when visual literacy practices are connected to wider discourses and demands of the 21st century learning perspective, specifically with the intention of building skills that prepare students for the fast paced world of work, we position art education as a discipline for building both portable skills, and subjective and engaged practice as experimental and transformative through narrative and experiment engagement (beier, 2012). Our prevailing systems of education still privilege clarity, legibility, and progress, but encounters with abstraction hold the potential to stand against the privileging of such terms. Abstraction, as I develop in this thesis, resists the act of knowing as acquisition or resolution. Instead, it offers another way of knowing that is more related to ambiguity, sensation, or delay. It stalls, distorts, and sometimes it just refuses to provide the normal forms of recognition. It offers a way of knowing that is felt rather than deciphered, emergent rather than declared. It stalls, warps, and sometimes refuses to know.

When we reduce the act of engaging with art to decoding or skills acquisition, —as is often the case in traditions such as Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE)—we can recall that DBAE we can remember that DBAE was an institutionally determined consequence of the post-Sputnik era that tried to justify art education by modelling it after the perceived rigor of the sciences. Although, as Ellen Winner (2022) points out, DBAE was inspired by attempts to legitimize art education and make it "academically defensible" by attempting to structure art around the four disciplines: art production, art criticism, art history, and aesthetics. Here, art education became founded on a kind of epistemology that sees the body of knowledge as that which can be passed on, evaluated, and mastered. Within this frame, the spontaneous, the affective, or whatever lacks certainty in artistic experience is not framed as part of the conversation. This historicization of artistic practice would later find significance when Eisner (2002) emphasized that teaching art successfully entailed improvisation in the face of uncertainty and not following a prescribed script—so that learning unfolded, not through formula, the aesthetic involved was directly linked to the situation. It affirms the lived experience of art in the classroom today in many of our curricula, where representational art remains a frame for excellence, technically (or pedagogically). The prominence of representational art within the art education canon could be found within many art education courses, such as DBAE and VCAE courses, as most of the images conceived in these areas function as representational.

Critiquing this visual ideology does not mean disagreeing with clarity or the representational. It means accommodating other ways to make and also encounter images that value intuition over explanation, ambiguity over completion, and presence over meaning. Monochromatic abstract images, as I develop here, are not easily decoded. They ask a different kind of seeing: one that remains in ambiguity and resists clarity.

Jacques Derrida also provides another way to think of the act of seeing through his reflections on drawing and blindness in *Memoirs of the Blind* (1993). He claims every drawing begins in blindness—not because the artist necessarily does not see what they are making, but because the act of marking is always a project into the unknown. The line is not a recording of something that is already evident. It is an act to come, a form of groping. He writes, "What happens when one writes without seeing? A hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected, in a poorly delimited space; it feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight" (Derrida, 1993, p. 3). The hand precedes the eye, and the mark precedes meaning.

This sense of blindness resonated with my creation of the T-shaped black painting in Limit (See Figure 2). I started without knowing what the final work would be. The brush moved through darkness—both literally and figuratively—less guided by intention than by sensation. In this way, the painting enacted the sense of blindness that Derrida speaks of: the work unfolded before comprehension, trusting the process to a greater extent than any outcome. The kind of teaching that has images emerge in this way also offers the same sense of trust—trusting as opposed to meaning or decipherable meaning. Ideally, these tensions prompt a reconsideration of some of the assumptions in the canon of art education. What kind of seeing is most regularly encouraged and rewarded? How do the dominant pedagogies of art education represent one mode, sideline abstraction, and the opaque? Importantly, does the institutional pressure to "see clearly"—to render meaning visible and fixed—become a burden that limits both expression and thought? It is possible to consider that abstract images—particularly monochromes—relieve thinking and learning through the refusal, delay, drift, failure, and unfinishedness that those images may demand. These questions are not simply for consideration and discussion topics; they are important to the imagining of pedagogy in ways that consider the slow, resistant, and unruly richness of the visual.

Between the Lines: Emptiness as a Learning Space

Within the realm that lies beyond visible form and felt meaning, there is a pedagogical potential that is often overlooked: the potential for learning through emptiness. The absence of content does not indicate loss; it means a latent field of perception—something that is waiting, rather than missing. The aim of my research is to address the pedagogical import of emptiness, which I see as a significant gap in art education, by exploring pedagogical contexts for working with monochrome abstract images as open-ended, affectively rich, and conceptually provocative sites of learning. In doing so, my research draws on philosophies of non-representation and alternative epistemologies to avoid the predetermined instrumentalization of the image toward a more process-based understanding of the art encounter.

The philosophy of experience put forth by John Dewey provides a foundation for these processes. In *Art as Experience*, he positions the aesthetic in the interaction between artwork and viewer, and not in the object itself. He puts forth that experience, and most importantly, aesthetic experience, is the rhythm of "doing and undergoing" (Dewey, 1980/2005), suggesting that meaning is given in advance. It emerges through encounter. Learning, here, is not a transfer of knowledge. It is a movement through the unknown—an emergent, affective process. Learning requires space to pause, slow down, and be indeterminate—qualities that abstraction, and monochrome abstraction especially, affords.

My research also takes up the concept of "deterritorialization" by Deleuze and Guattari to put forth the idea that abstract images can be sites where meaning is not imparted, but rather developed from exploration instead of explanation. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), they assert that deterritorialization is not the contrary of territory but rather its cutting edge. Abstract images have this function: they sever visual language from the representational codes that would ground them, and thus, they allow for a different kind of visual encounter. They present a process—a visual becoming—not an object. A monochrome does not represent; it suspends the viewer in a perceptual kind of limbo between that moment when form no longer functions as a means for content. This produces productive tension: the eye searches, the mind wanders, and affect begins to flow. While Dewey might call this the continuity of experience, it is instead the discontinuities—the gaps, the stutters, the ambiguities—that activate learning. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2005) remark, these moments are not an absence. They are "lines of flight," a departure from the known that moves toward the unknown.

This is a pedagogy of potential—a pedagogy of celebrating ambiguity instead of definitive answers. When students are given permission not to understand, to drift, to stay with the image, perhaps rather than come to know it, they are introduced to engaging differently—with the image, with themselves, and with each other. They can now articulate what is felt, not what is seen. These affective entanglements cannot exist outside this space—a space of not knowing with shared vulnerability in a way that all learners navigate uncertainty together and without the pressure of arriving at a confirmed meaning. Learning becomes progressively less about decoding and progressively more about attuning to the image, to each other, to the moment of encounter. As Paul Hackett puts it, abstract art, by its nature, departs from direct resemblance to the everyday world and is characterized by "reconfiguration and the breaking-down of the habitual practices of painters and sculptors" (Hackett, 2016, p. 6). He adds abstract art evokes neural and affective reactions that proceed "without verbal processing," instead fostering states of perceptual openness which support reflective, non-linear learning.

Figure 4. Still from *Gerry*, directed by Gus Van Sant, 2002. Cinematography by Harris Savides.

A scene from Gus Van Sant's film, *Gerry* (2002), serves as a potent metaphor for this type of learning. Two men wander through a vast, nondescript desert landscape without a destination (Figure 4). Their journey proceeds slowly, is uneventful, and devolves at points into maddeningly circular action. But this lack of narrative direction is precisely Deleuze and Guattari's point: film is an image dense with affect. The desert landscape is not simply a setting—it is a condition. Like the *Black Square*, it refuses to orient the viewer in any prescribed

way. It asks us to feel our way forward, to live in uncertainty. In this way, *Gerry* becomes an image of learning without outcome, of movement without arrival.

Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of "abstract machine" and "line of flight," in fact, are promising groundwork for theorizing the pedagogical potential of images. A monochrome image acts as an abstract machine in that it operates, not as a blueprint, but rather as a set of forces, sensations, and intensities that organize experience without prescribing it. It does not tell us what we can see; rather, with the monochrome, we have to see in a way that alters our very way of seeing things. This transformation in perception makes possible what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a "line of flight"—an escape from fixed meanings and fixed thoughts. The monochrome doesn't explain; it is a space for the beginning—something that hasn't been fully formed or named yet. This mode of seeing produces a shift, less in content than in how perception itself is activated. In this way, the concept of the abstract machine is aligned with my own inquiry into the ways that monochrome abstraction activates the educational experience, less through any direct instruction than through perceptual activation. As they write, "The abstract machine is pure Matter-Function—a diagram independent of the forms and substances, expressions and contents it will distribute" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 141). In the classroom, this becomes a turn from interpretive authority to open perceptivity. It means providing the students with space to respond before they need to interpret and explain. For instance, when I screened *Gerry* in the studio session, I asked students to simply notice how watching the film made them feel. Most students expressed feelings of boredom, confusion, or calmness—but that was part of the learning. This approach heightens the opportunity to not focus on finding the "right" answer, but to be open to what the experience offers.

The goal is a movement into the affective atmosphere of the image; to dwell with that which resonates rather than to clarify meaning and meaning-making. This will take a letting-go; a loosening of the conditioned reflex to assign meaning, to pinpoint clarity, to generate answers. It is to learn to sit with what is unresolved, to dwell in the in-between. As Dewey reminds us, "The act of expression that constitutes a work of art is a construction in time, not an instantaneous emission" (Dewey, 1980/2005, p. 65). To teach with monochromes is to create space for that construction—for duration, for hesitation, for emergence.

Dwelling in Refusal: Abstraction as Method

This study does not attempt to decipher the image; it aims, instead, at dwelling with its refusal to cohere. As such, I develop a method that remains with what is not yet thinkable, readable, or teachable. This position rejects the comfort of predefined outcomes by accepting what Elizabeth St. Pierre (2019) names "the refusal of method." St. Pierre, in her invitation to embrace post-qualitative inquiry[8] in educational research, explains that the apparatus of methods operates in a regime of representation that privileges clarity, structure, and epistemic closure for thought. Refusal is not a negation in this sense, but generative. It protects what cannot yet be thought within the limits of intelligibility. In her article, *The Lure of the New and the Hold of the Dogmatic* (2020), St. Pierre continues to reflect on the limits and potentials of method, explaining in more detail how prevailing methods "hold" thought in safe, often recognisable paradigms that render the new as unthinkable. To work with the abstract as pedagogy is to embrace this lure of the new—what escapes the dogmatic image of teaching as transmission. To teach from the space of refusal does not mean to leave behind rigorous thought, but to shift the very coordinates of what counts as rigorous. As such, rigor becomes attunement, not control.

Maggie MacLure also complicates the representational impulse that plays out in much educational research by framing a mode of "researching without representation." MacLure draws on Deleuze's *Logic of Sense,* which identifies something "wild in language" that "exceeds propositional meaning and resists the laws of representation". This is "sense," described as "non-representing, unrepresentable" and "forms of significance resistant to fact-based and meaning-based analysis" (MacLure, 2013). She suggests that what matters for post-qualitative inquiry is not the coding of data. The most important thing is the intensity of the "glow": a moment that glows, that interrupts, that affects. MacLure's description of a glow purposefully resists the enclosure of meanings, pushing towards affective ruptures that remain productively unresolved. In the educational environment, these moments come, for instance, in the form of a student staying with an image, without seeking a solution, a moment when something is felt

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[8] Post-qualitative inquiry is fundamentally different from the established research practices associated with humanist qualitative studies. It is based on poststructuralist philosophy and focuses on questions of being (ontology) rather than only on knowledge (epistemology). This appraoch values invention, experimentation, and the emergence of new ideas instead of following fixed procedures or seeking objective truths. According to St. Pierre, post-qualitative inquiry "does not begin with or use any preexisting social science research methodology" and cannot be understood using the same frameworks as traditional qualitative or quantitative research (St. Pierre, 2019). It creates a space for kinds of knowledge that are flexible, unpredictable, and interconnected to forms of art, philosophy, and ethics.

before it is grasped. Here, sensation is what matters, what stirs, what disturbs, what stays—a privilege accorded to the event, to the encounter, rather than to structure. MacLure's glow cannot settle into analysis. They are fragments, bursts, letters to inform us that some stirring is occurring underneath. To teach in this way is to cultivate a listening pedagogy that attends to non-representation. The monochrome image, like the *Black Square*, takes on a role of partnership in this kind of teaching—an event of intensity: something that simultaneously creates a presence, resists decoding, and invites a form of presence—of staying with what does not make sense.

       With these approaches to post-qualitative research in mind, this study positions abstraction not as an indifferent aesthetic category but rather as a methodological trope, a way of being with the world that is non-capturable. In other words, writing takes shape as a method. Writing becomes movement, a drifting, a delaying, not just a documenting. Patti Lather (2013) names this the "methodology-to-come", which is described as "becoming in the Deleuzian sense". It refers to an inquiry that cannot be tidily described in textbooks or handbooks. Unlike previous methodological schemas, there is no methodological instrumentality to be unproblematically learned with QUAL 4.0. Instead, it suggests a process of doing inquiry differently, "wherever we are in our projects". This is where the term "post-qualitative" begins to make sense—like MacLure's description of a "glow". We don't have to finish the lesson, get to the endpoint, or find a resolution. Often, teaching happens when we stop. In the moment of silence that follows, the student looks up from the *Black Square* and says nothing after failing to name what a painting feels like.

       This is where jessie beier's (2023) call for a "weird pedagogy" emerges and resonates. beier proposes an anti-curriculum that moves through drift, uncertainty, and speculative weirdness. Rather than designing education around fixed aims, she asks us to teach from the edges—from moments that disorient, unravel, or undo. Her pedagogy is not a detour. It is a deeper engagement with learning's unknowable terrain. In weird pedagogy, abstraction is not absence. It is atmospheric potential. It is an abstraction that positions teaching differently—in the refusal of arrival, in the making of space for the unfinished, uncertain, inarticulable, or strange moments. As beier explains, weird pedagogy is not simply a well-defined series of steps or lessons but, rather, a way of thinking that arises when encountering forces that are outside of

ourselves, or the "outside" as she refers to it. It is a form of teaching that opens the door to unpredictable, transformative encounters—those things that can change how thinking happens.

This section has argued that a non-representational pedagogy does not withdraw from the obligations of teaching—it reorders them. What emerges across the following chapters is a pedagogy that is shaped by the slow, affective work of staying with abstract images that do not resolve into meaning. This is an experimentation in pedagogy that shifts from transmission to emergence; from clarity to intensity, from knowing to sensing. As Gronemeyer has argued, abstraction's role extends far beyond its visual appearance, functioning as a critical tool to reveal and engage with the underlying economic, social, and political "abstractions" of our world, and resisting superficial co-optation by mainstream culture. She emphasizes that strategies of artistic abstraction should be recognized as "interventions" within the "elusive continuity between artistic, aesthetic, and social forces established by a politics that capitalizes on mental and bodily processes, the forces of sensation and affects" (Gronemeyer, 2016). This means that abstract works activate attention differently depending on their context, creating new perceptions within considerably larger political and economic structures

In this research, my aim is to develop an approach to pedagogy that is anchored in abstraction, ambiguity, and the unrepresentable—an approach that is inspired by post-qualitative inquiry and shaped by the engagement with images that are monochromatic. The chapters that follow in this study will explore the possibilities of this idea through theoretical exposition, artistic practice, and pedagogical experimentation. In *Chapter Two—Black: Colour, or Non-colour*—I focus on the colour black, as material and condition. Rather than treating black as a symbol or absence, I explore its historical, philosophical, and perceptual dimensions across art, science, and cosmology. Black inverts or disrupts the visual field, suspends clarity of meaning, and positions pressure on the act of meaning-making. In this chapter, I interrogate how the resistive qualities of black trigger questions about what is seen, what is not seen, and how these tensions might open up a moment of pedagogical potential. I argue for attending to black, as disturbance, as surface, as force, so we might reframe how we might consider visual learning, and contribute to an exploration of what it might mean to think and teach within visual and conceptual refusal. In *Chapter Three—Black Squares: Malevich, Abstraction, and the Limits of Vision*—I pause before Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* to think about how an iconic work like this painting might serve as a kind of pedagogical threshold. This chapter is not simply about

doing a traditional art historical reading. It engages with the square as a condition of seeing—an image which withholds, interrupts, and challenges a viewer's desire to interpret. I trace how *Black Square* marks a collapse in seeing and suggest that this collapse becomes a site of learning. I engage with Malevich's notion of "non-objectivity" as well as various critical theorists—Rose, Bois, Glissant, and others—to think about how abstraction becomes a mode of unlearning and how the refusal to resolve meaning might itself be a pedagogical event. I connect this to both my own artwork (*Limit*) and my teaching practice to think through what it means to teach beside an image that neither explains nor represents, but rather exerts pressure and demands a presence. In *Chapter Four—Toward a Black Hole Pedagogy: Abstraction, Gravity, and the Void*—I continue to explore abstraction, using the figure of the black hole, which I conceive as a conceptual model for collapse, pressure, and saturation in pedagogical encounters. In addition to invoking Deleuze and Guattari, I also employ the work of jessie beier, and astrophysical imagery to consider how the pull of abstraction may disrupt dominant modes of seeing and knowing. The chapter traces a movement from surface to implosion, and asks what kind of learning can emerge when meaning stalls, when the image folds inward, when clarity becomes opacity. In this way, Chapter Four movement connects the pedagogical event to the conditions of absence, blur, and collapse, and proposes a methodology that stays close to the edges of comprehension. *In Chapter Five—Building a Pedagogy of the Unrepresentable*—I take a turn from conceptual analysis to pedagogical practice. In this chapter, I elaborate on gestures—refusal, delay, drift, and disappearance—based on my own teaching experiences and what students experience when moving in and out of abstraction. The gestures are not used to produce or control learning outcomes. They are used to create a space of uncertainty, sensation, and ambiguity. The studio shifts to a place in which failure and openness become part of the learning experience. I characterize the educator's presence as attentive and responsive to being present and felt. Teaching in this sense is about creating a condition of shared vulnerability and sitting with, not easily resolvable thoughts.

| *CHAPTER TWO* |

Figure 5. *A 'found' black square* (Sedighian, 2014). Photograph taken by the author.

BLACK | COLOUR OR NON-COLOUR

What is black? And not in the normative sense of a definition, but importantly, the disturbance it causes—in the eye, in thought, in language. What is black if it will not settle into colour, nor behave as colour should? Is it even a colour? This is not a question that is fixed. It has resonance through history, through philosophy, through perception. Black unsettles, withholds, and resists conclusion. That very resistance is indeed its generative potential—not just to think of visually or pedagogically—especially since we have theorised about colour for so long, trying to fit black as shadow or as contrast, or into something outside the spectrum.

What follows is an engagement with black as a condition of thinking, seeing, and teaching, not as just colour or material. Across cosmology, science, art, and philosophy, in what ways does black challenge assumptions of visual order and pedagogical convention (thought and practice)? What kinds of learning can we pursue when we rest with what black will not show? This chapter crosses a few registers: historical, symbolic, perceptual, and artistic. Ultimately, it commits to black more as a question than a subject, a sort of substance that both holds and withdraws, disrupts and deepens.

Black Through Time | *Matter, Metaphor, Marginalization*

Historically, black is not a colour that has remained static. It appeared for the first time in the remains of Paleolithic cave paintings, where some of the earliest marks to line up the edges of animals and humans were made with black pigments made from charcoal or manganese dioxide. To this day, these markings in the cave art can still be seen tens of thousands of years later. These findings strongly suggest that black is not only the first material put onto a surface, but that it was, early on, a way humans had of making things stand out. But black was never strictly a visual phenomenon. It was also tactile, smoky, and material as well. John Gage (1999) describes that black was made from burning soot, lampblack, or even animal bones, which had been made into pigment. In this sense, black came from fire and death—traces of something that had combusted. The cave painter worked with residue, not just with colour; thus, in these moments, black was more than something visual—it was something that you touched, scraped, mixed, and embedded into the wall. This somatic relationship to black—its weight, grain, and origins—gave it a form of presence beyond illusion. In the early image, black shapes with strong lines and shadows gave it contrast and depth.

Similarly, however, Nizami Ganjavi's *Haft Peykar*[9] provides yet another rich layer to the history of black—one derived from Persian cosmology, as opposed to the European traditions of colour. In this poem a Sassanian king named Bahram Gur begins on a spiritual journey through seven domes of colour that are designated by planets, or a day of the week respectively; The colour of each dome—black, yellow, green, red, turquoise, sandalwood, and white—defines its visual and symbolic identity, and consequently, the narrative within the dome is structured around qualities of its planetary and day association. The domes become a site of spiritual and psychological transformation for the king. He begins his journey in the black dome, ruled by Saturn and associated with Saturday (Figure 6). While in the black dome, Bahram hears the tale of "unfulfilled love": a king who sees a suspended paradise, but loses it because he acts prematurely. He is thrown down and must wear black the rest of his life. In this narrative, black

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[9] *The Haft Peykar* (or Haft Paykar–هفت پیکر), is an important Iranian romantic epic poem from the 12th century, and it is one of Nizami Ganjavi's five major works, which are collectively titled the *Khamsa* (Quintet). *Haft Peykar* literally means "Seven Portraits", although the more popular and figurative translation is "Seven Beauties". In addition, the poem is also called بهرامنامه (Bahramnameh) or "The Book of Bahram," whih is the name of the main character and Sasanian emperor Bahram V Gur. Nizami Ganjavi had the dual meaning of "Seven Portraits" and "Seven Beauties" in mind when composing the work.

stands in, away from associations with evil or chaos, to represent suspension, reflection, and loss. The choice of black as the starting point has been purposeful. Black, and the planet Saturn, is associated, in Islamic and Persian astrology, not with pure evil. It is associated with limit, time, melancholy, and initiation. As Laura Michetti (2020) explains, in medieval Islamic astrology, Saturn was considered the furthest planet, associated with slowness, wisdom, mortality, and testing the soul spiritually. Thus giving it a position that contains both supremacy and opacity.

Figure 6. LEFT: Unknown artist, Folio from a *Khamsa* (Quintet) by Nizami (d. 1209); verso: illustration of Bahram Gur and the Indian princess in the Black Pavilion. Calligrapher: Murshid al-Shirazi; dated 1548 (955 AH). Ink, opaque watercolour, and gold on paper; 31.1 × 19.7 cm overall. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, accession F1908.271, gift of Charles Lang Freer. | RIGHT: detail

This symbolic structure is not limited to Persian cosmology; it is evident in other cultures as well. In their seminal text, *Saturn and Melancholy*, Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl (1964/2019) follow the image of Saturn through the classical and Renaissance visual and philosophical tradition. They argue that Saturn initiates melancholy, a disposition that aligns with deep thought, interior conflict, and a complicated relationship with knowledge. These attributes bring a certain ambiguity to Saturn and create both hindrance and slowdown, but at the same

time, self-reflection. The blackness of the dome, as well as what it houses or holds, suggests less an absence or lack than a productive space of negation; a space where meaning is obscured rather than erased. It indirectly means a place of depth where learning takes place through a slowing down, an encounter with limits, and an admission of mystery. This planetary darkness becomes a space for moral and existential initiation—a space echoing the cave darkness of the Paleolithic cave. This was similar to how Saturn was read, or imagined, in both Persian and Western traditions: as a sign of slowness, deep thought, and limits of knowledge.

As with the caves, the black (darkness) here operates as a condition, not simply as a backdrop or colour. It indicates a threshold: between seeing and not seeing (vision and blindness), knowledge and mystery. It indicates both in prehistoric and poetic architectures that black frames the image—and the self—through withdrawal rather than enlightenment.

Learning, too, perhaps begins in such blackness (darkness): in a space where we leave certainty to act unsteadily. What could it look like to think about the classroom as a sort of cave, not as a site of lack, but one of potential? The first painters, of whom we know, seem to have presented their ideas in the deepest, darkest parts of caves, which leads us to believe they chose to do so because those were perhaps the only spaces available. Might it not be that the caves were meaningful spaces, and certainly, artists were not primitive, because they weren't clear? Or, are we missing the sophistication in their choice of making images in the darkness?

These questions might provoke us, in contemporary education, to also ask: Must education always be something bright, clear, and knowing? Or does it unfold to some degree in hesitation and the dimness of uncertainty, and ambiguity, even in conditions that invite another kind of attention?

Why did early painters select more than pigments that were black—they selected the blackness of caves themselves, having dark, lightless interiors far from natural light? Perhaps black was not only a means of vision. It was, more importantly, a context: the all-consuming void which informed the image as much as the pigment did. Within those dark chambers, every mark seemed to vibrate with intensity and communion, where the shadow of the wall was not merely a place of representations. It was the edge of "seeing" and "not seeing". The cave, like the womb, was not just a shelter. It was a source of slow creation. The cave, as a site of a generative process, contrasts with Plato's well-known allegory of the cave, where darkness represents illusion and ignorance, and light signifies truth outside the cave. But, perhaps the early

painters are asking us to reconsider the relations of dark and light: a way of seeing darkness not merely as the absence of knowledge. It was a condition that slowly allows vision to take place: What if knowing begins in the shadows, because of the shadows? Eyes develop within, though they do not yet see until they enter light—the baby is born into the world for the eyes to open. The cave painter must also step into the black interior of the cave for the wall to be seen. The cave, like the womb, is a chamber of potential, where vision begins to exist.

In ancient and medieval Europe, black was full of contradictions. Black was present in monastic robes as a signal of humility, or in legal attire to signify authority, and in illustrated manuscripts where it carried both visual gravity and theological weight. Michel Pastoureau reminds us that Latin had, or seems to have had, different terms for different types of black: *ater*, a black that signifies darkness, grief, and the infernal; and *niger*, simply dark, or rich, formal, and solemn (Pastoureau, 2008, p. 28). These distinctions were not particularly valuable in linguistic terms. It does reveal the differing emotional, moral, or symbolic registers within which black seems to operate.

By the time of the 12th century, black had become entangled in the fall of religious and political shifts. Black was worn by Benedictine monks, and as austere as it might seem, it allowed the community to signify focus and rejection of all worldly matters and distractions. Black, in this context, may carry the meaning of humility, renunciation, or discipline. The black dress was collected among rich urban elites in Florence and Paris, as it was viewed as dignified and restrained. Meanwhile, in art, the palette of Gothic cathedrals darkened, with black glass and stone in shadow, and rich, deep blues deepened the divine interiors. The adoptive use of black cloaked the interior, with a kind of mystical aura as a kind of eschatology—it became sacred and severe—as a sign of reverence, gravity, or power (Pastoureau, 2008).

The Protestant Reformation further enhanced the cultural stature of black. Calvinist reformers sought to cleanse religious life from excess and ornament, and black became a vivid signifier of that process. In Geneva and Edinburgh, sumptuary laws and religious writings encouraged or mandated sober dress, frequently in black. The colour came to signify sobriety, inwardness, and moral rigor. As Pastoureau (2008) observes of this period, black takes on a moral clarity—it is stripped of ornament, which is ethically potent.

At that time, however, this symbolic richness began to unravel with the advance of scientific rationalism. In the seventeenth century, Newton's prism experiments provided a means

to comprehend colour as measurable decompositions of white light. Since black had no wavelength, it did not fit the model. Black, in scientific terms, became a non-colour, characterized by absence. As Pastoureau (2008) notes, "Now in this new chromatic order there was no longer a place for black or for white" (p. 114). Aaron Fine (2022), likewise, underscores the cultural transition that relegated black to a non-colour status in Western colour theory, noting the impact of the Enlightenment's emphasis on observation and measurement and privileging light over dark.

Later, in the Romantic period and into the nineteenth century, black would experience a revival in the symbolic status as a colour related to depth, solitude, and rebellion. It came to indicate the sublime, the unknowable, and the melancholic spirit of individualism. In literature, it was spoken of in the poetry of Byron and haunted atmospheres of Gothic fiction; in visual art, it was key in the dramatic chiaroscuro and shadowed landscapes connoting vastness, mortality, and disquietude. Pastoureau (2008) comments that, in this period, black shed much of its earlier permanence in strict moral order and instead began to signify emotional and philosophical uncertainty. Black went from morally condemned non-colour to the bearer of existential intensity, less absence and more mystery.

Black Against the Spectrum | *Scientific and Optical Limits*

From the perspective of physics, black is not categorized as a colour; it is defined as something entirely different. It does not reflect any light; it is the absorption of all wavelengths, or the absence of them. Yet perception fundamentally resists this definition. We see and designate it, we wear black and dread it, we worship this colour. Black is as much a part of our visual field as any colour, in its insistence. Black, then, is a contradiction—both void and presence, negation and intensity. Black interrogates binaries like colour and non-colour, light and dark, presence and absence. These tensions matter visibly and pedagogically.

As it relates to design and imaging systems, black plays an important role. In the CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) colour model for print, black (K) is not only a colour. It exists as a separate key pigment by which depth, clarity, and contrast can be achieved. In RGB (red, green, blue) colour systems, black is represented as (0, 0, 0), the absence of all three values of the pixel, confirming its status as a structural condition and subsequently a visual limit to screen-based media. In photography and other grayscale rendering systems, black constitutes the

field of vision always closest to the lens, and through this relationship, black helps create shadows and give shape. It is the terminology of black's central role and emphasis that contrasts against its marginal position in scientific investigation: it remains excluded from the spectrum, but absolutely necessary when representing (Fine, 2022). Black, perceptually, acts differently in relation to its contexts. A dark area of space appears more profound after we have observed a bright surface, and our eyes adjust accordingly to the light and the dark. As John Gage points out, colour is always contextual. "Since colour has a vivid life outside the realm of art, its problems even within that realm cannot be understood exclusively from within the history and theory of art itself; or rather that at least in respect of colour, that history and that theory must be seen to be part of a larger picture" (Gage, 1999, p. 9).

Black is not merely the conceptual opposite of white or the absence of light, but can be a rich, differentiated, and even emotionally or spatially significant percept. For some forms of colourblindness, one of the most differentiable tones is black, and in cases of certain synesthesia where low or no visibility occurs, black is qualified as a presence with different textures or sounds, rather than as an absence of representation. Again, as if black has a multi-sensory experience, somewhat reversed from a void (Cytowic, 2002). The history of colour theory brings even more divergences. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, writing against Newton, maintains colour as an experiential, embodied experience. In Goethe's context, black and white primarily reference not only physical extremes, but also conditions of appearance and affect. In this context, black has a presence with how black makes us feel and see, rather than through a wavelength (Gage, 1999).

Not to say that black has disappeared or receded; rather, it has reemerged in spectral form—questionable at the borders of representation—and has been invited again by artists embracing its refusal as a type of presence. Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) perhaps struggles with its reception as a void, rather categorically as a beginning epistemologically. In the historical sense and to abstract visual language, *Black Square* was purposefully constructed as a rupture from representational painting, presenting a visual grammar of pure form, and eventually leading to Suprematism, and later to monochrome practices, as ground zero. Pastoreau (2008) presents that black did exactly that through such artworks, where black reclaimed the status of colour, or reconsideration in this broad context of colour, as meaning-difficult, unresolved, and enduring, rather than about measurability.

The perception of black challenges how we know knowledge itself. When perception contradicts what is concrete, as we learn that black is visible and invisible, this disruption with this colour reminds us that knowing singularly comes not from the sensibility of clarity. *The Black Square,* as an abstract work, does not mark clarity either; yet, it opens a space where perception and thought can move toward another way, where it does not need to be resolved. Is this not another way of learning that embraces ambiguity, stays with intensity, and represents black's visuality? As abstraction presents an inquiry that offers suspended ways of knowing, rather than answers.

Black as Ontology | *Metaphysical Grounds*

Alain Badiou, French philosopher, approaches black as a metaphysical force, as a "non-colour" that resists inscription while underwriting all expression. "Everything in the world is the result of a creative and careful dosing of black as it is projected onto the formidable invariability of white. Anyone who hasn't experienced this, and sooner rather than later, will never learn anything" (Badiou, 2015/2017, "The Inkwell," para. 8). Black is the non-colour that makes other colors, or at least their meaningful manifestation, possible. Here, black becomes a logic of emergence—a ground zero to which formation, structure, and visibility may unfold. Jacques Derrida marks a similar sense of blackness as foundational, though he directs his attention away from a metaphysical condition toward a temporal trace. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, he notes that every drawing begins in blindness; blindness toward things that have yet to appear, rather than just the physical kind of blindness. He challenges the assumption that vision comes before creation. The "mark of the black line" for Derrida becomes a "mark of expectation". It signifies a gesture "moving forward before seeing and without certainty," a "groping of one who goes toward sight without seeing". The very act of drawing, of putting a line onto a surface, "must proceed in the night", suggesting that the blackness of the line is intimately tied to this venturing into the unseen, before the appearance of the complete image (Derrida, 1993, p. 45).

While Badiou and Derrida both characterize blackness as necessary for the visible to emerge, they construct this in different ways. Badiou's black operates as an ontological ground—an immaterial potency that permits the event of truth and expression; however, Derrida's black belongs to the moment of inscription, a phenomenological space of delay, trace, and becoming. For Badiou, black is prior to the image, while for Derrida, it remains occupied by

the gesture of its formation. The Paleolithic painter, for instance, enters into the dark of the cave to reveal something as visible, while the figure of the drawer for Derrida progresses forward through uncertainty, following touch more than sight. In this sense, black becomes the condition through which creation takes shape; less a source of light than a suspended potential.

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Black in Language | *Naming the Unseeable*

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While Badiou's analysis of black can be understood as a condition of emergence, Wittgenstein encourages consideration of how language itself constructs what we see. Their projects are methodologically different—one comes from ontology and the other from grammar—but both expose black as a space where vision and meaning remain unresolved. From a separate but entangled angle, Wittgenstein teaches us that colour is not only conditioned by sight. It is conditioned by language, too. He was "uncommonly exercised by problems posed by colour" precisely because he saw them as a "stimulus to philosophizing," leading him to clarify colour language and expose the ways it "ties our thinking in knots" (Lugg, 2021, "Preface," para. 2). Grammatical structures, for example, continue to contain black as a colour, and it travels through metaphorical language, classification systems, and aesthetic protocol—even when it's out of the formal structure of light.

Nelson Goodman (1968/1976) takes this thinking further along linguistic lines. In his book *Languages of Art*, he argues words like "black" are not stable signs, meaning they shift premises and variables under constructed systems of signs. In one way of classifying "black", it might be a colour. In another, "black" might refer to absence or boundary. Whatever system one might be using to classify, those systems will determine how black acts. Goodman is like Wittgenstein in rejecting essence, and he acknowledges that colour operates under systems—not nature, for example. Wittgenstein's colour octahedron, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* for example, does not represent physical qualities of light, but it arranges colour with rules under logic. "Black" does not come into the chromatic body; however, it is essential to define its edges. It becomes a condition of contrast and a structural component in the logic of differentiation (Wittgenstein, 1922/2001). Thus, black works internally to define and constrain other colours without residing within the same space.

This both structural and relational notion of black—shaping systems without fully belonging to them—opens up further extension into Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical view

of language. They rejected the notion of language as a mirror of reality. Instead, in *A Thousand Plateaus,* they describe language as an "assemblage": machinic and affective systems that produce meaning, desire, and force (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987) in which signs work less as visual labels. Language works as intensities, thresholds, and modulations. I might take the notion of black, then, to circulate across regimes of signs; as index, command, hesitation, and code, rather than to operate as a way to describe something seen. Black might intensify meaning in some semiotic "strata," suspend sense in others, or pull us toward silence still in another. Rather than being excluded, black can be construed as a pivot, a point of condensation or collapse in the signifying chain.

While they may not all be speaking the same language, these thinkers are unified in treating "black" as an irreducible point of complexity beyond surface perception. Black disturbs the limits of what language names and how meaning is produced, whether as a logical limit (Wittgenstein), symbolic position (Goodman), or affective force (Deleuze & Guattari). If we stop at the abstraction of language to use the word "black," we may also think about how black may cause us to reframe the limits of a visual literacy in pedagogy. If language organizes a lived experience, rather than reflects, and black occurs at the limits of that linear organization, then black functions, too, in a space of possibility for visual literacy. To think in this way means black is not a "thing" to read; it is an act that disrupts the conditions through which we read.

And, here we get to the deeper question: What might black teach us of how abstraction functions, not as simplification, but as a force that disturbs and opens? Abstraction, like black, does not resolve meaning. Abstraction is a holding of meaning in tension, and it can generate productive instability in both language and learning. It withholds a final form and closure, and produces opening, hesitation, experiment, and revision. Black also shows us how abstraction becomes generative precisely because it resists a reduction: it holds ambiguity, opens space for affect, and produces deferral. To consider this, black produces pedagogical utility: it models how learning might proceed through unlearning, pausing, and reconfiguring what we know.

Black Surfaces | *Monochrome and the Weight of Seeing*

In contemporary art, black functions more than pigment—it becomes a surface of thought. Craig Staff investigates how black returns as more than pigment—how it turns into a space of memory, protest, and refusal. In Mirosław Bałka's *How It Is* (2009-2010), a walk-in

black monolith, darkness is not decorative; it is immersive (Figure 7). As Staff describes it, the piece sculpts perception, not volume; affect, not form (Staff, 2015, pp. 16–17). The blackness asks for more than seeing. It demands a kind of surrender. This transformative application of black echoes in other contemporary examples, which, like Bałka's, wrap black around the being of affective or political density. One such example is Rachel Whiteread's *Closet* (1988), wherein a wardrobe is encased entirely within black felt. In Whiteread's work, the wardrobe is an ordinary thing made into a sealed-off volume of silence and memory. The felt absorbs sound and light—the sculpture has become an interior mute. In this instance, black is the colour of secrecy, grief, and insulation—intimate instead of monumental.
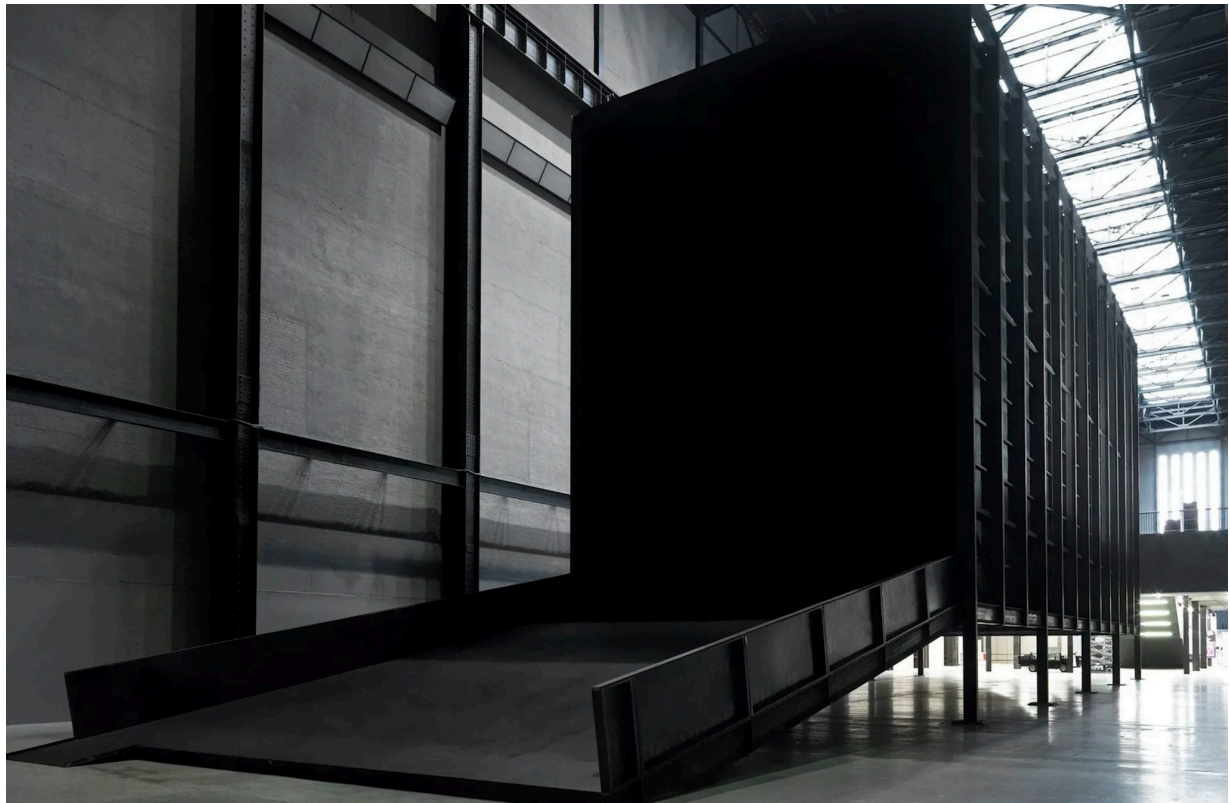
Figure 7. Mirosław Bałka, *How It Is* (Unilever Series), 2009–2010. Presented in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, London. A large-scale steel-lined container of around 30 m × 10 m × 13 m, elevated on stilts with flocked, light-absorbing surfaces covering the walls of the interior. Audiences are gradually immersed in absolute darkness, shifting focus onto sound, space, and the phenomenology of oblivion.

Wally Hedrick's *War Room* (1967/68–2002), by contrast, is a pointedly political gesture across its entirety in black. A room-sized installation conceived in response to the original protest of the Vietnam War, *War Room* is a darkened sanctuary of refusal. Its walls are dark for

tactical reasons instead of symbolic ones. *War Room* absorbs attention and collapses legibility. Staff notes that similar works tactically shift black from surface to environmental space, and these works reject the concept of surface toward an agency that denies interpretation.

These examples carry us further into an understanding of black as contemporary. They allow black to oscillate between the personal and the collective, the meditative and the confrontational. Whiteread's void is intended to be quiet, while Hedrick's blackout is intended to be military. Each carries different registers of opacity, with one mourning and the other militant. Each, however, extends what Bałka's piece begins: a confrontation with what one can see, and how to respond to it or not respond to it. Rather than asking what black means, these works ask what black does—on our bodies, our perception, and our ability or willingness to stay in the dark.

These immersive black conditions also extend—and to some ways unsettle—the legacy of Malevich's *Black Square*. Where Malevich proposed a sort of visual ground-zero, these works push that void into the space and sensation. The square remains an anchor, but it is no longer flat or autonomous. In works such as Bałka's monolith, Whiteread's felting, and Hedrick's blackened protest space, black is given architectural and political stature. In these works, abstraction has not become purified; it has become thick—full of memory, of affect, and of resistance.

The Fear of Black | *Aesthetic Refusals*

If Staff's analysis enables us to determine how black operates affectively, and spatially, in contemporary art, then David Batchelor helps us explain why such a form of black continues to be unsettling. In *Chromophobia* (2000/2011), Batchelor argues Western aesthetics historically have privileged light, clarity, and order, and designated colour—especially saturated or dark colour—as excessive, cosmetic, or irrational. In this context, black becomes a kind of anti-clarity, not merely a non-colour: it threatens reason through depth, emotion, and excess. Batchelor writes of "chromophobia" as a cultural condition—an anxiety about colour that finds expression in minimalist purifications and moral fears. While Batchelor pays more attention to bright-colour preferences, the logic applies equally to black—it too is displaced from the frame when clarity is sought. In stark contrast, artists like Bałka, Whiteread, and Hedrick reintroduce black into their works as a confrontation. Black here becomes what Batchelor calls a "fall into the colour" (Batchelor, 2000/2011, pp. 22–23). The monochrome doesn't comfort—it disrupts. It

draws the viewer into a space where seeing does not guarantee knowing. To that end, the fear of black is also a fear of what cannot be represented, categorized, or explained in regular terms.

This anxiety around black also attends a deeper pedagogical inheritance. The Enlightenment associated light with truth, visibility with knowledge, and reason with mastery. Such ideals continue to facilitate the discourse of education and learning as a linear movement from confusion to clarity, or darkness to light. In this conceptual frame, ambiguity, affect, and the unseen are articulated as barriers to overcome, rather than opportunities to engage with. Accordingly, the refusal in black—not to clarify, comfort, or resolve—disrupts not only the aesthetic field but is also troublesome to construct knowledge and our formulated sense of progress. The fear of black becomes the fear of learning that cannot be coded, measured, or contained.

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Black as Blur | *Fugitivity and the Refusal to Be Known*

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If Batchelor's chromophobia situates black as a cultural fear, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney radicalize that sense of fear into potential through their grounding it in the lived conditions of Blackness. In *The Undercommons*, they frame blackness not only as a racial or aesthetic category but also as a site of collective social life shaped by the continual resistance to capture. Blackness is a thing that we are in, not a thing we have (Harney & Moten, 2013). This understanding insists that blackness is not metaphor—blackness is a material condition formed through the afterlife of slavery, systemic violence, and community, blackness emerges in and through struggle, improvisation, and relation. Their use of "fugitivity" does not signal disappearance or escape. It is about a way of living otherwise, inside and outside the system of capture, which seeks to manage and/or erase Black life. Fugitivity disturbs static ideas of resistance; it proposes continual refusal through being defined, absorbed, or rendered legible.

Moten expands on these notions in *Black and Blur*, where blackness becomes both method and movement. Blur for him is not failure. It is a practice—a condition of life that refuses resolution. Blur is a way that blackness inhabits the world without being molded into the categories at hand, and this might be what Moten means when he discusses "paraontological" excess: blackness's inherent capacity to exceed, resist, and internally destabilize traditional philosophical categories of being, particularly the notion of fixed identity or stable existence, through its very mode of being and engagement; this is not an addition to ontology. It is a force

that interrupts ontology; blackness operates as blur, as a disturbance, and a refusal to settle into identity (Moten, 2017).

This understanding of blackness resonates with abstraction and ambiguity in pedagogy. While conditioning and traditional education typically uphold a value on clarity and coherence through mastery, the *Undercommons* argues for an understanding of study as a communal, open-ended process. "Study is what you do with other people". It's not the production of knowledge; it's the reproduction of the movement of the we (Harney & Moten, 2013, pp. 110–113). From this perspective, blackness, as blur, becomes a pedagogical gesture. It sustains, delays, multiplicity, and refusal to settle into a final form. Black surfaces in art—flat, opaque, and excessive—model this gesture.

Blackout Interface | *Screens, Signals, and the Digital Off*

This is particularly striking when we examine the role of black within a digital space. In many contemporary media, black is the default screen, the power-down state, and the waiting state; it does not simply occupy the function of a background. As Lev Manovich (2002) notes, the genealogy of the screen can be traced from cinema to computer to handheld device, yet it is a medium that remains organized by what it does not allow to be seen. The black screen, whether it is standby or erasure, interrupts the stream of images and offers a visible sign of refusal.

In Techniques of the Observer, Jonathan Crary outlines how vision in modernity is assembled and organized according to apparatuses that frame, isolate, and govern what can be seen (Crary, 1992). The black screen exposes the limit of this governance; it is a moment of silence that interrupts the system. Whereas Crary establishes the history of the observer through optical instruments and through institutional structures, Manovich is more interested in basic programmability and modularity implicated in the interface. In Crary's sense, the blackness is a collapse of the apparatus-driven vision; in Manovich's sense, it is a programmable silence—a digital pause coded into the interface. Eugene Thacker, in his book *In the Dust of This Planet*, connects the idea of blackness to ontology when he draws on Georges Bataille's idea: "It is nothing that exists in the last place: everything is in suspense, over the abyss, the ground itself is the illusion of an assurance" (Thacker, 2011, "Prologue, para. 27). This awareness of the "ungroundedness of the ground" and the disjunction of the planet from the human world evokes a "powerless horror" that is "ambiguous" because it highlights the planet's indifference to

humans. This suggests that when the illusion of human control or foundational understanding collapses, one faces this indifferent, ungrounded reality.

. Yet, black screens, or blackness, are rarely just metaphysical voids—they are, rather, infrastructural power for pause. To disappear from the screen is a form of "fugitivity" that is consistent with Moten's aesthetics of blur. If the screen generally demands legibility and some notion of interaction, the blackness refuses both. The black screen slows legibility and forces a kind of suspension of meaning. In glitch video, abstract cinema, or even simply during a power outage, the black screen becomes less an absence of image than a sign of interruption, or a moment of pause; it is also where representation stops and noise, latency, or refusal emerge. Here, we might think of Ryoji Ikeda's audiovisual works where data flickers into abstraction or Alfredo Jaar's *Lament of the Images*, where a white or black screen signifies what cannot or does not want to appear (Staff, 2015, pp. 110–113).

In this sense, then, black in digital media is more than the limit of vision; it is the conditions of vision/interface. Black and the undercommons of the interface; it is unsignal, it is off. The black screen, like a cave, a womb, or an underlit gallery, is not inert; it is pedagogical.

Cosmic Black | *Gravity, Vision, and the Unthinkable*

If we think of the black screen as the limit of digital visuality, then the black hole is the cosmological limit of that logic. A black hole, as Kip Thorne (1994) tells us, is more than a massive object; it is a point at which spacetime itself has collapsed—where light cannot escape—and where the known laws of physics seem to begin to disintegrate. We cannot see a black hole directly; we know a black hole only through its effects, through the bending of light and the disorientation of time that occurs around it. The black hole marks the outer limit of seeing—it is a gravitational opaqueness that draws in vision and possibility. This makes the black hole more than an astronomical object—it becomes an ontological object, the event where representation recedes into incomprehensibility. Eugene Thacker refers to this as the "blackness of the world"—a blackness not simply constituted of matter. It consists of thought and knowing. In Thacker's account, the black hole becomes emblematic of a universe indifferent to human meaning: the "world-in-itself," before thought, a space that is resistant to language and brings to light the contingency of perception (Thacker, 2011). In other words, the black hole is anything but absent—it is emblematic of that which we are structurally unprepared for. Others take up this

metaphor more intimately. In *All About Love*, bell hooks (2000) accounts for emotional absence as a black hole; as a longing resulting from abandonment, grief, or care unoffered. For hooks, black holes are not simply scientific or philosophical—they are lived. They are psychic voids that shape the ways we attempt, fail, and continue. Her language refashions the black hole as an emotional condition of gravity with stretch, pulls, and loss of meaning.

The black hole is also tactile. Karen Barad, in writing on quantum field theory and ontology, suggests that the black hole marks a moment when touch itself becomes strange—when boundaries are collapsed, and when the classical distinction between the observer and the object of observation breaks down. In this moment, she writes, facing "the inhuman" involves confronting "the indeterminate non/being non/becoming of mattering and not mattering" (Barad, 2012, p. 216). Here, blackness is less the void than the entangled limit of knowing—a knowing that is felt, not solved.

This cosmic figure aligns closely with pedagogy. It raises similar questions: What do we do with that which cannot be known? What kind of learning occurs when clarity is not the goal? The cosmic figure of the black hole stages this problem in terrifying beauty. Even within Deleuze and Guattari's semiotic cosmology, the black hole appears as a subjective capture point—a gravitational site wherein meaning collapses and faciality begins to form (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). The black hole is an event of signification and absorption.

Black in Practice | *Screen, Limit, Refusal*

TV (2009-2010)

In 2010, I exhibited nine diptych paintings in Tehran that deal with the aesthetics and memory of analog screen culture. Each diptych pairs a painted still from a given early animation or Atari video game with a kind of abstracted rendering of white noise or signal loss. Together, these pairings engage with the threshold between image and non-image, narrative and interruption, and memory and oblivion. Painted in black and white, with pops of color only in a bright green color from the On-Screen Display (OSD)—the digits and letters used to signify channel numbers, or input modes, on old television sets. These minimal inscriptions locate each work in a media history while being a subtle interference manifesting in the pictorial field.

Both panels of the diptychs are framed by two horizontal black elements along the top and bottom—a visual device drawn directly from the formatting of TV aspect ratios. These black

notch elements frame the painting like a cinematic screen, amplifying the image's artificiality, while reinforcing the conceptual project "grounded" in a curiosity about the aesthetics of old screen technologies.
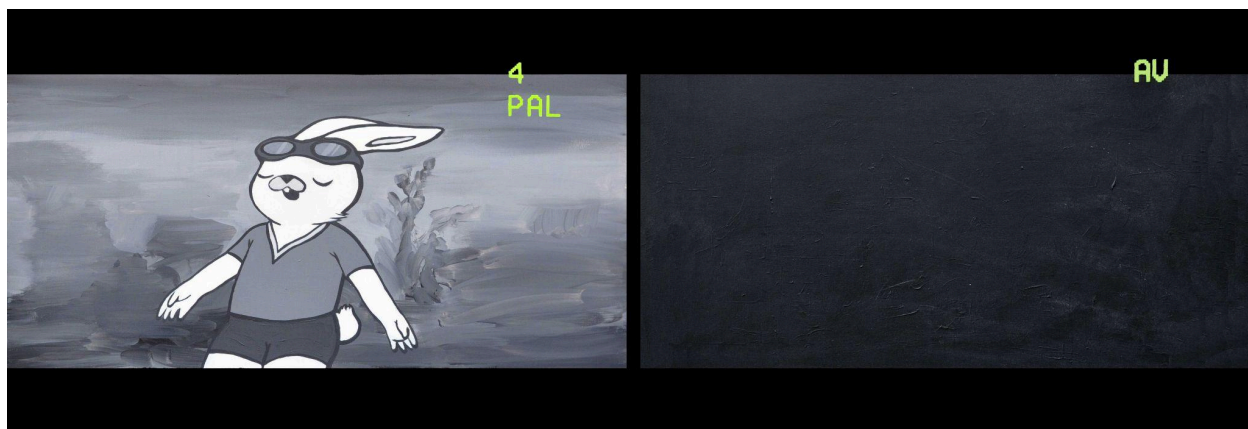
Figure 8. Reza Sedighian, *TV*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 70 × 200 cm (diptych).

For example, in this painting, the left panel depicts a hand-painted, cartoon-like rabbit character—eyes closed, wearing goggles and shorts—suspended or sleepwalking in a foggy, grayscale landscape (Figure 8). The up-close aesthetic draws from the early animation and game inspirations and employs painterly tones that evoke the flickering textures of a low-resolution screen. Upper right in the painting is the OSD fluorescent green text that reads "4 PAL[10]"—a designation for this work in the format of an old TV channel set. The right panel is an austere black surface defined as a field of dark matter with a surface texture, recalling the conceptual memory of television static or signal loss, or the implied blankness of an AV channel[11]. The only visible mark is the green "AV" in the top corner of the painting, also lifted directly from the OSD, which appears in the right panel. This pairing—a closed-eyed rabbit character alongside a taciturn black screen—became, for me, a quiet condensation of many themed memorial relations explored throughout this chapter. The aesthetic simultaneity of black and white not only

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[10] PAL (Phase Alternating Line): This is a color encoding system for analog television. It's one of three major analog color TV standards used worldwide, the others being NTSC (National Television System Committee) and SECAM (Sequential Color with Memory). PAL was primarily used in most of Europe, Australia, parts of Asia, Africa, and South America.

[11] AV (or Video 1, Input 1, etc.): This is for connecting things like VCRs, DVD players, Video game consoles. Camcorders These devices would send their own audio and video signals directly to the TV through cables. The "AV" display on the screen indicates that the TV is actively looking for and displaying those external signals.

functioned as an aesthetic constraint but also as a situationally conceived parameter: limiting yet also unfolding a conceptual set of philosophical reflections relating to visibility, erasure, and memory. The use of black and white helped strip the image to its tensions—between surface and signal, perception and refusal.

The black panel and the compositional black surface weren't painted as a conventional absence. They are a sense of presence, with density, saturation, and suggestion. In conversation with the adjacent image, it echoed the structure of a pedagogical diptych: a contention between image and its negation; for example, narrative and opacity. The closed eyes of the rabbit character became an emblem for types of internal seeing or refusal of seeing, connecting to a cosmic black, the refusal of philosophical seeing, and the effective weight of blackness recalled throughout this chapter. The presumption is that the painting didn't simply enact a memorial vestige of screen culture; rather, it enacted an experience of balance between slow looking and affecting and framing blackness as a moment of pause and an unreadable space of lingering attention. This panel, even though it is speechless, performs a potential engagement with reflecting absence, silence, and abstraction.

Limit | an ongoing practice

It is an ongoing series of work I began in 2008—a continuous open-ended practice which includes paintings, drawings, and artist's books. All the works, while materially diverse, orbit together around a shared concern with boundaries, opacity, and the perceptual and conceptual capacities of image. The materials—thick layers of pigment, cut and collaged pages, repetitive gestures of overpainting—indict the surface as both site and threshold. Within the series of paintings, black emerges not as a field, nor a gesture of black staining on top of everything. It is a kind of presence—a colour that carries the trace of what lies beneath, even as it obscures it (Figures 9 and 10).

Figure 9. Reza Sedighian, Installation view of *Limit*, 2022, O Gallery, Tehran, Iran, digital photograph.
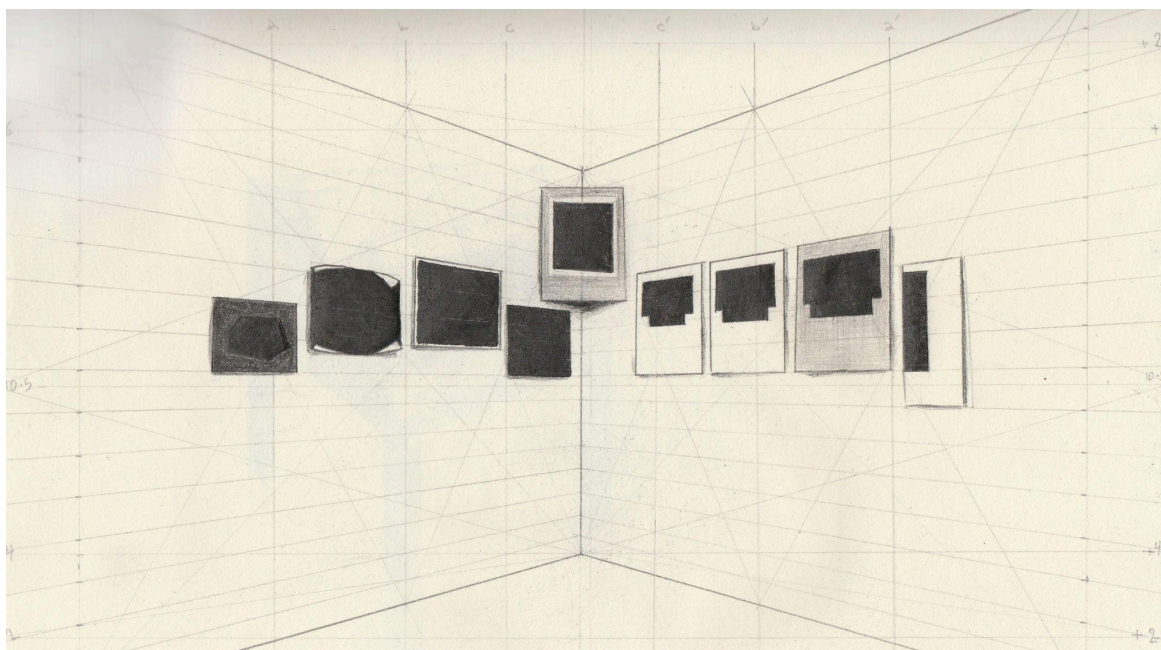
Figure 10. Reza Sedighian, Sketch for *Limit*, 2020, Pencil on paper.

The series began with a T-shaped painting. When I left a number of unresolved works on the wall. I had no plan until it happened, as I stood back to look at all the pieces together. The

works grew in thickness, layer upon layer. When I found my way to painting the entire surface in black. There was no erasure. It was a kind of gathering, or a gathering in condensed form.

This logic of layering, withholding, and returning repeats throughout *Limit*. In the paintings, black is an accumulation of a kind of sediment that has formed over time. In the drawings, elements are cut, moved, and re-placed. In the artist's books—one-of-a-kind, collaged, and painted—each page becomes a moment with the possibility of time being held, rather than narrated.

Figure 11. Reza Sedighian, *Limit*, 2019, Oil on paper, 50 × 35 cm (Triptych).

In my artistic practice, black serves as a methodology of action: a substance that I return to, encircle, and push against. Through this, abstraction emerges as a sort of pressure, slowing things down, disturbing form, and holding space open. The black surfaces do not erase what lies beneath. They contain and condense it. As a result, black comes to be a veil, both concealing and preserving (Figure 11). This occupation resonates with Malevich's *Black Square,* which, as art historians have shown, was painted over prior works. Unlike histories of art, which describe the *Black Square* as a zero-point of or an icon of spiritual transcendence, the blackness in *Limit* engages in the time-bound and sedimentary logic of practice. It is an accumulation. In this sense, black, as used in the *Limit* series, is neither colour nor pure absence. Rather, it is both a material

and a metaphor—an evocation of weight and silence, a surface that gathers time and feeling. It is the colour of "not yet" (Manning, 2016)[12] a potentiality held in suspension.

Black, in its many iterations—cave pigment, mourning robe, monochrome canvas, or collapsing star—marks a recurring threshold. It names the moment when vision fails, representation reaches its limit, and another kind of encounter begins. Throughout historical periods and cosmologies, black has signified rupture, refusal, and the gravitational pull of what cannot be seen. Black resists classification as a pigment, a metaphor, a signal, and a silence.

Throughout this chapter, I have approached "black" as a mode of abstraction that complicates seeing and suspends the demand for clarity. As a visual, philosophical, and pedagogical condition, black resists being pinned down. It holds and defers. In doing so, black offers a different kind of relation to knowing: the knowing of the unknown that contains delay, friction, and refusal. In the studio and the classroom, I return to black as a method: a way of working and thinking that does not strive to clarify the unknown, but remains alongside it. In this way, abstraction (in terms of form and its effect) becomes more than a visual strategy; it becomes a pedagogical condition for learning—a kind of attention oriented to the limits of representation and the possibility of transformation within it.

In the next chapter, I pause before an image that refuses to speak: Malevich's *Black Square*. The questions of a pedagogy of blackness will continue to unfold throughout this thesis. What does black—as colour, surface, and method—reveal about how we come to know? What happens when we shift our attention from representation to refusal, from mastery to movement, and from seeing to staying? In the following chapters, I explore blackness through a pedagogy of uncertainty: an uncertain thinking that conflicts with closure and remains attentive to the unknown.

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[12] While the phrase "not-yet" is not coined by Erin Manning, her use of it in *The Minor Gesture* (2016) plays a central role in describing the conditions of emergence and relationality within minor processes.

| *CHAPTER THREE* |

Figure 12. *A 'found' black square* (Sedighian, 2025). Photograph taken by the author in Saint-Hubert Street, Montreal.

BLACK SQUARES | MALEVICH, ABSTRACTION, AND THE LIMITS OF VISION

"Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art ... I have transformed myself in the zero of form and dragged myself out of the rubbish-filled pool of Academic art ... I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring which confines the artist and the forms of nature." (Malevich, 1968, p. 19)

      I have not seen *Black Square* in person. However, I have witnessed a painting that includes some of the characteristics of *Black Square* in the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, where I am from, by the American artist Ad Reinhardt, titled *Abstract Painting* (1962), from a series of works that Reinhardt made. One of the paintings from this series is held in that museum. At first glance, it appears to be a monochromatic black canvas. But a more careful look reveals a subtle three-by-three grid composed of squares in varying shades of black. If you look

closely, you will even notice something like a cross-shape that appears to unfold in the grid—an image that only reveals itself in time, through stillness, and with sustained looking.

Looking at Reinhardt's painting, there was a moment—surrounded by other, more visually immediate images—when I realized the limitations of my eyes. *Abstract Painting* reveals something that may not be possible to see all at once with one glance. I had to slow down. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, yet I still felt I needed to trust this experience. I had to tilt my head and lean into the canvas, as my body moved slowly closer in order to be able to process what I was experiencing with my eyes. I had to give myself a break and step back from how I was looking. Even if for a few seconds, I stepped back, looked around to see if anyone else was like me, pausing, squinting, absorbed in something so quiet, and even easy not to see at all. I remember a gentle smile appearing on my face. It felt like being in the middle of a play when you are so immersed in the plot that you find yourself crying or laughing along with the performer or audience. Then someone gently reminds you, either the actor or the person sitting beside you, that this is a performance. This is not "real life."

I felt that way standing in front of Reinhardt's painting. I was no longer just a spectator in a museum. Someone was telling me that my vision is not neutral, my eyes have limits, and that seeing is also a thing to be questioned.

Yes, it is true, I have never seen *Black Square* up close in real life, even as I write this research. I have only seen it in digital formats online and in printed reproductions in books. In some ways, the former could grant me a sort of superhuman vision—the ability to zoom into work easily in seconds, almost as if the screen were a 'window' into such intimacy (for example, *Google Arts & Culture* allows us to zoom into artworks at a resolution beyond what the naked eye can perceive). The very act, however—zooming in, moving a cursor to navigate with—is demonstrably not the same as approaching a painting with your body. The printed image, on the other hand, comes with its own limitations: the inks and materials dull the surface, obscure the subtleties, and one is reduced to a flat thing, a symbol, rather than an experience.

Neither experience simulated what it must have been to see *Black Square* at the *0,10* exhibition in Petrograd in 1915. They do not consider the impact of experiencing this work in a charged space, among other bodies, in a historical time when representation itself was collapsing.

Of course, there is something unique about the in-person viewing of any work. However, in the case of monochrome paintings, such as Malevich's *Black Square* or Reinhardt's *Abstract*

Painting, the embodied experience of that art as a physical object becomes more urgent and compelling. Something happens to our eyes, to our body, to our gestures. We lean forward and pause. We stare and gaze at the surface. We squint, peer, and strain to see through the blackness. Here, black is not passive. It acts and conceals by insistence. This blackness is not a color but pressure, something beyond that which can be seen, as I began to indicate in the previous chapter. This somatic, optical, and affective experience—this altered seeing—is what I am trying to make pedagogically thinkable. It is what I want to work with as an educator in the classroom. The encounter with Reinhardt's surface gave me a kind of prelude to what *Black Square* is demanding. A different kind of seeing and learning.

In this chapter, I explore how Malevich's *Black Square* functions as a pedagogical image—one that resists meaning and complicates perception. The chapter unfolds through six sections. In *Zero Point*, I begin with a close, reflective reading of *Black Square* as an encounter that interrupts vision and initiates a perceptual shift. In *Thresholds of Black*, I examine the perceptual and material tensions that black produces in the act of seeing. *The Birth of the Black Square* situates the work historically, attending to the conditions of its emergence and the mythology surrounding its origin. In *The Square That Refuses to Speak*, I engage Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the postsignifying regime to consider how the square disrupts visual and epistemological systems. *The Rupture and Its Racial Conditions* explores how the abstraction of the square intersects with histories of whiteness and exclusion. Finally, in *Teaching in the Friction*, I reflect on how this image—as an object of resistance—might inform a pedagogy that attends to opacity, interruption, and the limits of representation.

Zero Point | Introducing the Black Square

Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) is often referred to as the "zero point" of modern painting: an image that destroyed the pictorial horizon that erased the figure-ground distinction (Figure 13). But what does it mean to stand at the threshold of zero? What is it like when vision is no longer linked to representation and when painting no longer serves the task of showing?
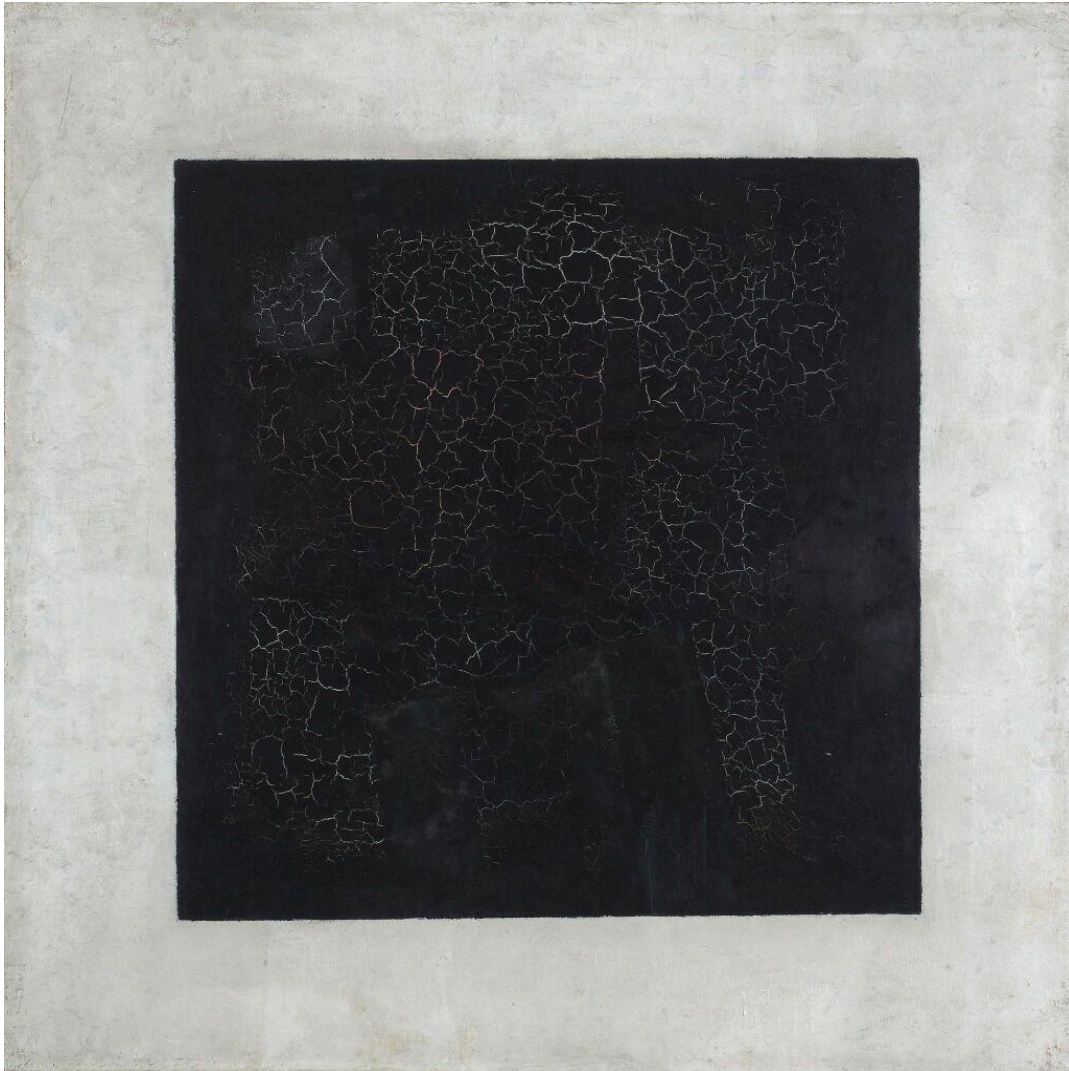
Figure 13. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Suprematist Square*, 1915. Oil on linen canvas, 79.5 × 79.5 cm. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. This was the first of several versions completed in 1915, with others made in the 1920s and 30s.

In critiques and conversations with students, I have observed a drive to decode, name, fix, and understand. When approaching abstraction, discomfort may lead to repudiation. And yet, sometimes, that discomfiting possibility becomes a pedagogical site for learning. This chapter does not provide an art historical account of *Black Square*. I neither aim to interpret, decode, nor historicize in any orthodox way. Instead, I think of the square as a pedagogical figure: a refusal, a silence, a threshold. What happens when the image stops representing and starts resisting? What kind of learning happens when the visual field becomes opaque? *Black Square*, I argue, teaches through subtraction. It performs a form of unlearning.

To engage with *Black Square* is to meet Malevich's "zero of form." Zero, not as nothingness, but as radical potential. As Charles Seife (2000) states in *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*, zero is not simply nothing—it is a rupture in logical thinking, a singularity in the history of ideas. It unravels systems, it destabilizes meaning, and opens space for new structures. In mathematics, division by zero renders all quantities undefined. In painting, *Black Square* divides image from meaning, leaving us with a surface that cannot be read. In this way, the "zero of form" is not absence. It reset—back to the surface, back to the beginning, and back to unknowing. Malevich described this as not an invention. It's a revelation: the square "appeared" to him. It was not composed—it emerged. This language of emergence—the painting arriving rather than being made—points us toward a kind of unsovereign authorship. It also invites us into a different temporality of viewing than cognition: a temporality closer to contemplation.

For Malevich, emergence in Suprematism is necessarily linked to "non-objectivity," a term Malevich used to distinguish his work from both abstraction and representation. Non-objective painting abstracts nothing; it begins with nothing. It expresses sensations, like gravity, pressure, levitation, and weightlessness, not objects. It withdraws from the world to reveal other forms of relation. In his writing, "non-objectivity" is also an ethic: a refusal of utility, ideology, or narrative. It is painting as pure perceptual intensity–the "world as non-objectivity." He writes, "To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth" (Malevich, 1927/2003, p. 67).

For Malevich, "non-objectivity" is not negation. It is an invitation: a way of seeing that is freed from resemblance, freed from the burden of things. It is not the absence of meaning. It is the opening of other perceptual logic. This shift initially toward sensation, toward unmoored seeing, has pedagogical implications with potential. What if teaching aimed to intensify, not to clarify? What if learning started with thresholds of perception, not with objects? I have recently seen this same tension in the classroom when students are faced with images that refuse to resolve. Their first instinct is often frustration and dismissal. Over time, that resistance can become a point of entry. I return to this in the final chapter, in which I want to look at those encounters as a way to think about a different pedagogy, not grounded in a premise of mastery, but one of presence.

To stand before *Black Square*, then, is to stand before what Malevich called the "destruction of the horizon." As Andrew Spira (2022) observes, to merely stand before this painting is about what is seen, but more importantly, what is given up. Malevich framed the Black Square as an act of giving up—subject matter, compositional structure, and even the artistic self. It was both an endpoint and an act of release: it was to sacrifice art's conventional purposes in order to create direct access to an experience of presence. In this way, Black Square does not erase meaning but instead disrupts the systems by which meaning has been assigned. The *Black Square* does not provide a recognizable object, and so it disturbs the position of the viewer as the subject of gaze. In Western painting, the horizon line organizes perspective, gives structure, separates the sky from the earth, and hooks the viewer onto a known legibility. But with *Black Square*, there is no horizon to hook onto or ground in, only surface and staggering foreground. No depth, no vanishing point. This image does not pull the eye inward. It pushes back toward the viewer. It teaches by confronting the gaze with its limits. This confrontation continues with the exploration I began in *Chapter Two*, where black refused to settle into a stable meaning. Here, that refusal becomes architectural—a geometry of resistance.

This chapter asks what the square withholds, but also what it might reveal in terms of the conditions of seeing itself. What kind of pedagogy is possible when vision collapses? What does it mean to teach with, or through, the square that does not speak? And how do we approach abstraction as an event, a blackened space of thinking, sensing, and unlearning, not as absence?

Thresholds of Black

This section traces the long visual and symbolic path toward Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, a work that ruptures the surface of modernist painting, absorbing meaning and centuries of meaning bound up in the dark of the image. To stand before this image is to be in a certain paradox: a sensation of utterly seeing something for the first time while simultaneously sensing the weight of everything else experienced that has come before (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Unknown photographer, Installation view of the exhibition of *Black Cross*, *Black Circle*, and *Black Square*, 1926, The Institute of Artistic Culture, Leningrad.

What does it mean to arrive at the threshold of black? And what was necessary to unlearn, peel away, or forget for the modernist monochrome to emerge as a singular, absolute form? In order to get to these questions, we will begin at the other end, with the visual and metaphysical functions of black throughout history, not with Suprematism. From religious icons to Baroque tenebrism to funerary rites and Enlightenment geometry, black has functioned as both a material and a metaphor: a ground of negation and a site of profound presence (Pastoureau, 2008; Packer & Sliwka, 2017). This chapter explores a specific moment of black and monochrome in Malevich's *Black Square*. It is important to understand that black, as a symbolic material and as a condition of reduction, resistance, and reinvention of the monochrome, is a much broader condition than what the term monochrome provides.

The monochrome image, particularly in black, has long been imbued with contradictory qualities: clarity and obscurity, sacredness and emptiness, rationality and mysticism (Staff, 2015). In this regard, the remark by Barbara Rose that "the monochrome is mute … an enigmatic presence … its silence is part of its durability" (Rose, 2006, p. 21) provides a more necessary connection. It resists meaning and communicates by withholding clarity, remaining as much a

provocation as an image. This connection between the Staff's constructs of contradiction transitions to the deeper sense of mystery articulated by Belting. While Staff establishes a tension between formal and mystical registers, Rose illustrates how that ambiguity becomes the basis of the lasting power of the monochrome. The absence of meaning, of resolving into representation through meaning, is not a vacuous failure, a deficit of act, but rather an act of strategy. In this way, the monochrome does not rest easily in history; it haunts it, pushing against the viewer's desire for explanation. This haunting prepares us to understand how black within iconography divine concealment did not represent absence.

To cite some examples of medieval and Byzantine iconography, darkness was not an absence but a mystery. As Hans Belting states, before the image became a representation, it was the presence of an object to be venerated, touched, and believed in, not simply decoded (Belting, 1994). The black grounds of early icons were not voids. It is veils that obscured the divine from the immediacy of vision while still promising its presence in potentials. This sense of black as a sacred threshold produces a shocking and potentially radical appearance in Malevich's work, where, though the monochrome icon does not depict the divine, it asserts the unrepresentable itself.

Similarly, the notion of darkness in the visual Baroque, exemplified by Caravaggio and later Goya, employed darkness to convey emotional intensity. The chiaroscuro of Caravaggio's canvases staged human drama against consuming shadows, while Goya's *Black Paintings* descended into an individual abyss. These images represent what they obscure, not just what they depict. This descent into darkness through emotional intensity prepares the way for a shift from the personal and psychological to the metaphysical and conceptual. In Malevich, black no longer dramatizes the visible world—it evacuates it. As indicated by Lelia Packer and Jennifer Sliwka in their book, *Monochrome: Painting in Black and White*, the absence of color signals a desire for truth, for essence, or a confrontation with mortality (Packer & Sliwka, 2017). In these instances, black becomes a distillation of vision and sometimes a failure of that vision.

Still, the idea of black as an abstraction predates the avant-garde. In his examination of the materiality of painting, James Elkins observes how the painter's encounter with pure darkness, even as a metaphor for their experience of matter—its thickness, resistance, and opacity (Elkins 2019). To paint black is to grapple with its surfaces. It is not to erase the world, but rather to obscure form; to paint black means to wrestle with the formless. Wilhelm

Worringer, writing in the early twentieth century, argued that abstraction emerged not from stylistic choice but from existential need—a will to negate the chaotic flux of the world and to seek stability in the geometrically pure (Worringer, 1908/1997). As a non-image, black becomes the architecture of that necessity. Barbara Rose points out that the monochrome has two key sources: mystical and concrete—the pursuit of transcendence, on one hand, and increased materiality on the other, residing within the unique geometry of Malevich's square (Rose, 2006).

These historical precedents bring us to Malevich, and rather than thinking of the *Black Square* as an isolated eruption in art history, we can examine it as a radical distillation of these various traditions: the icon, the wound, the refusal, and the cosmic diagram. Aleksandra Shatskikh, in her detailed account of the work's genesis, suggests that the painting emerged from a specific period of transformations, both cognitive and spiritual. She discusses its origin as a moment of metaphysical implications—a black form that contained theological ramifications and an avant-garde refusal, not as a stylistic rupture in time (Shatskikh 2012). Forgács believes Malevich's square can be understood as a portal to a new sensibility, rather than a reduction to abstraction or negation (Forgács 2022). It is an image that both ends and begins, that forgets to remember differently. As Malevich himself reflected on the *Black Square* in *The Non-Objective World*, it is "the face of new art"—an icon not of feeling, not of representation: "It is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins" (Malevich, 1927/2003). In this sense, this painting becomes less of an ending or an arrival but a threshold—a visible form of an ultimately invisible legacy. It is a constant threshold, not simply an end or arrival. It asks us to look again more for the conditions of seeing and less for representation.

The Birth of the Black Square

Context and Crisis (1913–1915)

The emergence of the *Black Square* in 1915 signified a profound artistic and philosophical crisis. The period from 1913 to 1915 witnessed Malevich's dramatic movement away from the dynamic forms of Cubo-Futurism toward a radically stripped aesthetic—what he would later call Suprematism. This movement signified a rupture and was again due to an inner necessity to abandon representation. According to art historian Aleksandra Shatskikh, whose research provided one of the most detailed accounts of Malevich's development, the seed of this painting was planted by Malevich's intense dissatisfaction with the representational potential of

painting, even in its avant-garde forms. Malevich's engagement with Alogism—an anti-rational poetics of nonsense—moved him beyond the limits of Cubism and Futurism, where there are early signs of reducing pictorial elements to geometrical simplicity and the rejection of mimetic space in his designs, in 1913, for the opera *Victory Over the Sun*[13] (Shatskikh, 2012). To contemporary scholar Taulant Salihi, this collaborative opera was not merely a set for radical ideas. It was a stage for Suprematism to enact—Malevich's curtain designs, the blackened sun, and the spatial logic of pure form (Figure 15). Now, looking back, Malevich recognized this as the time when "what had been done unconsciously is now beginning to bear extraordinary fruit" (Salihi, 2023). The works he created were not simply scenic pictorial backdrops. They were ideological experiments, as they attempted to imagine a new world outside of the tyranny of earthly light, narrative, and form.
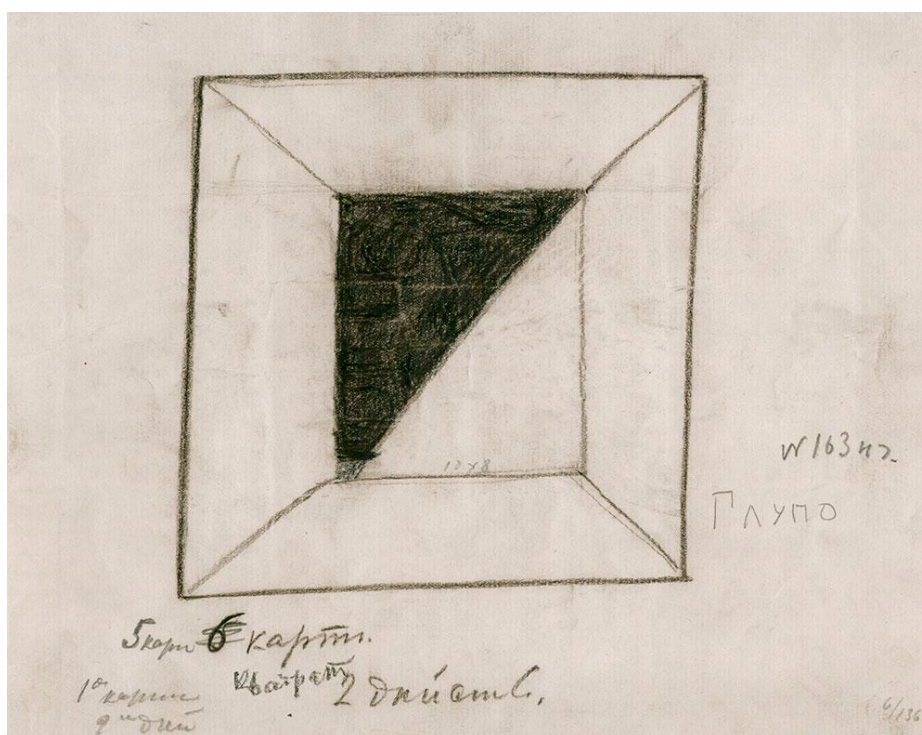
Figure 15: Kazimir Malevich, *Set design for Victory over the Sun*, 2nd Doing [Act], 5th Scene, 1913. Graphite on paper, sheet: 21 × 27 cm; drawing: 13.3 × 13.3 cm. State Theatrical Museum (now State Museum of Theatre and Musical Art), St Petersburg, Russia.

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[13]   *Victory Over the Sun* was a 1913 Futurist opera with a libretto by Aleksei Kruchenykh, music by Mikhail Matyushin, and stage designs by Malevich. The opera embodied Alogist principles—embracing absurdity, fragmentation, and anti-logic—and marked one of the first instances where Malevich used the *black square* as a scenic and conceptual device.

Malevich's progression toward geometric abstraction was as much spiritual as it was formal. For Malevich, the square became a universal form, not a reduction of visual language, but one that reveals an inner world. The crisis of form, therefore, was not a collapse but a clearing philosophically, a kind of visual asceticism to reach pure feeling. He was searching for a kind of ontological geometry—geometry as a fundamental aspect of reality, existence, or spiritual truth—where forms are not symbolic but actualized ways of being (Milner, 1996).

In his writings during this time, Malevich explicitly criticizes the illusionism of painting and stipulates the possibility of an art that does not mimic the external world. He was looking for something that enacts an interior, non-objective reality. As later summarized by *Malevich and the Liberation of Art* (Stupples, 2001), he sought to sever art from materialism and narrative and to open it to the "supremacy of pure artistic feeling." Within this ideological framework, the square does not emerge from prior forms; it intervenes. Therefore, this marks more than an aesthetic departure. It is also a metaphysical threshold. By 1915, *Black Square* emerged, and Malevich had already provided a theoretical foundation for a new artistic reality. He was not searching for a new style; he was declaring an ontological break. The monochrome square did not emerge as a stylistic endpoint; it arrived as a threshold—an icon of a world that you had to feel and no longer could be depicted.

0.10 Exhibition

The first public display of the Black Square was in the provocative, experimental context of the *0.10: Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*[14], staged in Petrograd in December 1915. The exhibition was a declaration of Suprematism as a new artistic language and served as a bold farewell to representational art. Of Malevich's thirty-nine canvases, the most provocative was the *Black Square*, which was presented high in the upper corner of the room (Figure 16). Its position was not neutral. As art historians Aleksandra Shatskikh (2012, pp. 91–92) and Christina Lodder (2007) point out, the significance of the upper corner in a Russian room is the icon corner for Orthodox religious icons. By installing the *Black Square* in this position, Malevich displaced the Orthodox icon with an image of non-objectivity—what he would later refer to as "the zero of

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[14]   Though originally conceived for ten artists, fourteen participated, including Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Olga Rozanova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, and Ivan Kliun. The exhibition marked the end of Russian Cubo-Futurism and the emergence of Suprematism. Malevich exhibited thirty-nine works, including *Black Square* (1915), which was famously hung in the "icon corner" of the room. The catalogue was published for the show, and the exhibition poster was designed by Puni (Taroutina, 2018).

form." This was not merely a formal gesture. It was a theological provocation; the *Black Square* demanded that viewers confront a completely new visual sacredness, one that was devoid of image, narrative, or referent.

Figure 16. Unknown photographer, *0,10 Exhibition* (The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting), organized by Ivan Puni and the Dobychina Art Bureau at Marsovo Pole (Field of Mars), Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg, Russia), 19 December 1915 – 17 January 1916.

The icon corner was a sacred threshold that you encounter in Russian residential architecture, usually as a decorated niche corner with an image of Christ or the Virgin in approximately the upper corner of the room. The placing of a black square, albeit brave, firmly positions the viewer as an aesthetic heretic, reorganizing the placement of vision, faith, and form. Peter Stupples (2001) notes that the placement of the *Black Square* in the icon corner did not intend to mock religion. It was there to liberate vision from its inherited symbolic burdens and offer instead a new metaphysical proposition grounded in pure feeling. As Douglas and Lodder

(2007) explain, the new proposition can be read equally as a desecration and a rebirth. Malevich was perhaps not pushing religion to ridicule, but instead, he was proposing a new one, that is, a mystical geometry without theology.

Ultimately, the response to the exhibition was dramatized, with some feeling it was absurd—nihilistic, while others felt the placement was simply audacious and radical. Even the viewer who critiqued the action could not deny or be persuaded by its gravity. The *Black Square* was not a picture in the typical sense of painting. Black Square was not a visual object; it was a proposition, a question that was posed in pigment. As Shatskikh (2012) summarized, Malevich created a new visual condition, not just a new object.

A Work that Appeared, Not Was Made

In later reflections, Malevich insisted that *Black Square* was the result of something closer to revelation than a process of composition. In *The Non-Objective World* (1927/2003), he wrote of the square as having "appeared" to him, as a visual fact, not as a constructed form—irreducible, necessary, and whole. It was not that he made the painting; it arrived. As he explained, it is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins (Malevich, 1927/2003).

Despite Malevich's rhetoric of singular revelation, he completed at least four versions of the *Black Square*—in 1915, 1923, 1929, and 1932 (Figure 17). While each is considered the same painting, they differ in dimensions, surface texture, and context. Each version complicates the trajectory of the square, viewing it as a once-given event, instead creating a temporal and conceptual sequence—circle or a visual meditation—of the square as a zero that is endlessly reapproached; a zero that is never fully exhausted. The later versions were not copies of the earlier; they were re-enactments, which further collapses the distance between origin and return. These subtle differences display that the square was not a closed, static icon. It was an open, evolving structure.
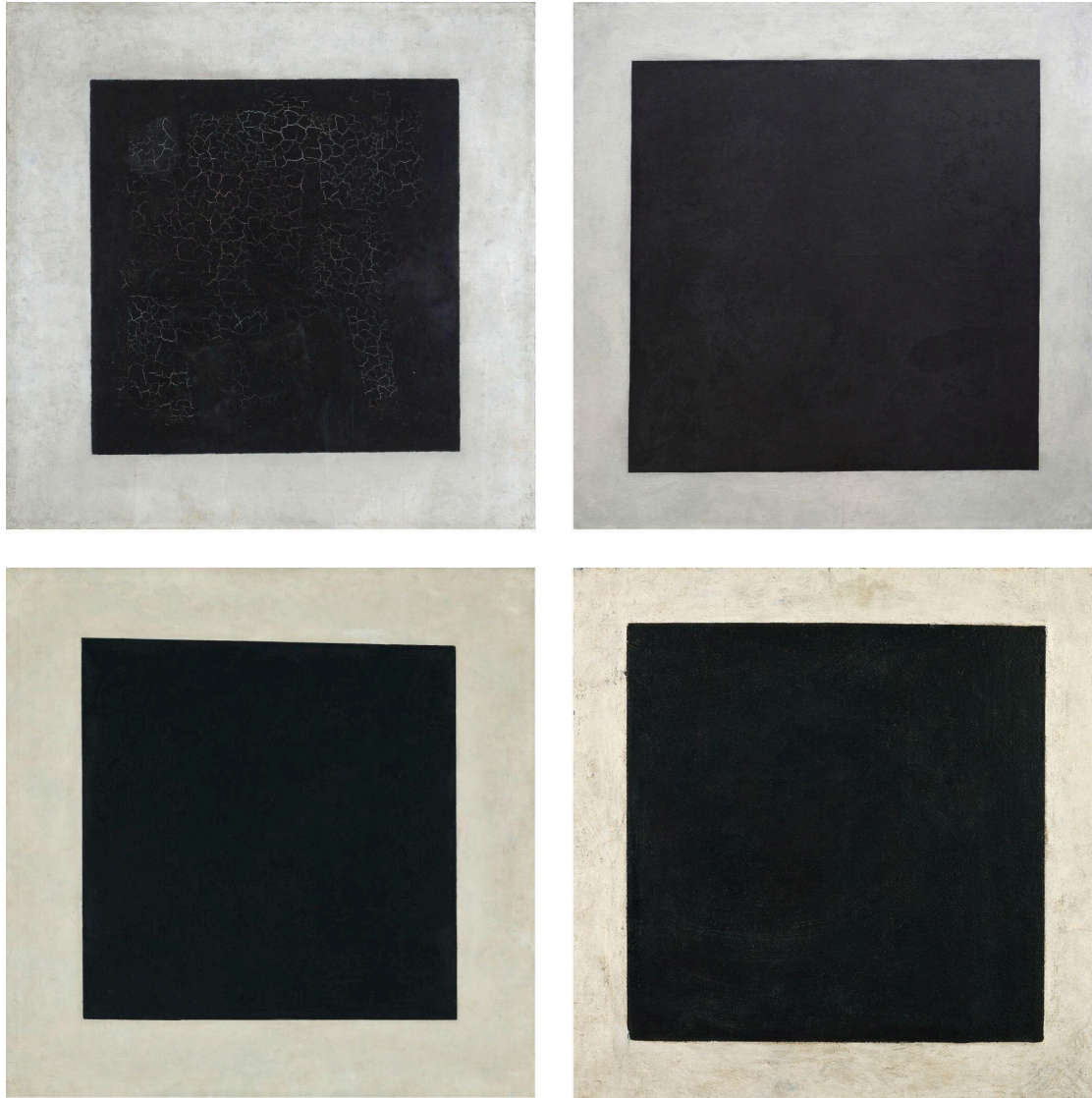
Figure 17. Kazimir Malevich, *Four Versions of Black Square*, 1915–1932. Image assembled by the author.
TOP LEFT: *Black Suprematist Square*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 79.5 × 79.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
TOP RIGHT: *Black Square*, 1923. Oil on canvas, 106 × 106 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.
BOTTOM LEFT: *Black Square*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 80 × 80 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
BOTTOM RIGHT: *Black Square*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 53.5 × 53.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

This language of appearance—almost mystical—positions the square as a threshold instead of an invention. To say something is an invention indicates an author, who is often thought to be in a line of continuation of some stylistic tradition, while to claim it is a threshold recognizes a crossing, which denotes a conceptual and perceptual shift. The *Black Square* does not simply belong to the history of modernist forms; it is at the very edge of it—it is an inflection or crossing to something fundamentally other: a space beyond representation, beyond narrative,

where seeing becomes sensing, a space where vision opens onto the unrepresentable. The work is neither a representation of the known world nor an abstraction of it. This image is an event in the history of perception. It exists as an icon of non-objectivity, and its blankness is a saturation of thought, possibility, and contradiction, not emptiness. The appearance of the square, as I went on to explain in Kasimir Malevich and the *Non-Objective World* (Stupples, 2001), was at the center of how Malevich wanted his work to be considered—as a metaphysical proposition, not some stylistic gesture. The square is silent, but not because it has nothing to say; it is silent because what it has to say cannot be said in language, like the encounter with Ad Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting* that I explained in the introduction of this chapter. This claim by Peter Stupples (2001), that Malevich sought a liberation of art from utilitarian and narrative functions, finds its strongest manifestation here. The square is more than the "zero of form"; it is the zero of referential obligation. It seeks a new way of seeing and a new ethic of reception. The square, in its appearance, also displaces the viewer: from interpreter to witness.

A New Ontology of the Image

If *Black Square* was not a painting in the conventional sense, what was it? This tension preoccupied its contemporaries and continues to trouble interpreters today. For art historian Éva Forgács (2022), the square signifies a rupture in its very ontology as an image, not only in its understanding as form. It does not show something; it indicates being. The painting is not a container of content. This image is an autonomous visual condition—an icon of pure presence that is not bound to representation. This shift demands a reconsideration of how the image works. The radicalism of the square is that it refuses to signify. It neither describes the world nor describes an allegory of the world. This painting is not a surface waiting for analysis; it is an edge that resists it. In this sense, as is discussed in *Unframe Malevich!* (Jakovljevic, 2004), the square becomes a site of ineffability and sublimity. The power of the square is not what it shows or represents—it is what it withholds. In this sense, the image shifts away from semiotic transparency and towards affective opacity.

This shift requires a different ontology of the image, based on relation and event, rather than recognition and content. The *Black Square* is an image demanding its own terms, inviting the viewer into an encounter with the image that is not resolvable. The square readies us for a new ethic of seeing. It demands patience, stillness, and an encounter that does not allow for a resolution. As art historian Yve-Alain Bois (1993/1998) will argue in the next section, the square

does not simply deny interpretation; it creates a condition of disorientation towards interpretation. The square's opacity, therefore, is not a weakness. It is a force that signifies the limit of signification.

The Square That Refuses to Speak

Reading Silence | Bois and the Logic of the Surface

The significance of Malevich's Black Square is not situated in the exposition. It is located in its silence. The painting does not signify what it is or what it intends to do. It provides no image to think through, no message to decipher. As Bois (1993/1998) writes in *Painting as Model*, some modernist paintings abandon the logic of the sign entirely. They do not seek to communicate; instead, they hold our gaze in suspension. Bois interprets this as surface logic. The material, paint, resists more than it represents. *Black Square*, in this respect, is not a symbol but a field that interrupts. It interrupts the eye, not to reveal meaning, but to mark its limit. Its refusal is not absent; it is full. What we face is not the absence of language; it is the failure of language.

This silence has weight. It is neither passive nor neutral. This image draws us in and holds us there. Bois calls this "pictorial silence": a kind of resistance enacted through the surface. In *Black Square*, the silence is dense—a feeling we get from the matte black surface, the flatness, the refusal of figural depth. Nothing gives here. These are not gaps to be filled—they are boundaries to be felt.

This image suspends interpretations, and this rejection/refusal creates a kind of impasse. The monochrome is described by art historian Barbara Rose (2006, p.22) as concentrated presence—a kind of visual intensity she refers to as "worldview" or "tabula rasa". Similarly, Éva Forgács (2022) denotes Malevich's abstraction in the same way, as "pure presence", independent of narration and representation. In this way, the square refuses meaning in the normal sense. It imposes a blockage on how to receive meaning. This blockage can be uncomfortable. The eye scans the surface to find no entry point. Yve-Alain Bois (1993/1998) refers to this condition as "pictorial silence," which means that meaning does not simply disappear. It is withheld, and the act of meaning breaks down. What remains is "looking".

Additionally, James Elkins (2019) notes that painting can often escape verbal treatment: Paintings are as mute as stones. He suggests that the experience of the image does not lend itself to language conventions. *Black Square* provides no spectacles. It holds its ground, and this

refusal directs the viewer's attention towards another mode of engagement, sustained in the absence of resolution.

Regimes of Signs | Subjectivity, Betrayal, and the Black Hole

Kazimir Malevich's placement of *Black Square* in the top corner of the room at the *0.10 exhibition* held in Petrograd, 1915—an area traditionally reserved for sacred icons—was a break with tradition. The square does not respect the divine and displaces it. In this gesture, this image committed a sort of betrayal: of representation, of figuration, of the long-standing ties between painting and religion, painting and nature, painting and the face.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "postsignifying regime of signs" (1980/1987, pp. 116–119) provides a framework for understanding this radical shift. Here, the subject emerges through rupture and a turning away from the dominant order, not through stable meaning. The face of power, whether God, the despot, or the symbolic Father, withdraws. Meaning collapses, and from this collapse, a new subject begins to form. This is what Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) refer to as the point of "subjectification"; the break generates a line, a movement, not a fixed identity. In terms of Malevich's *Black Square*, we could think of it not simply as an image but rather as a performative act of refusal and betrayal; the work materializes a moment where the painter has turned away from the icon, from the landscape, from the face, or existence as it has been represented.

This tension can never be resolved. Is the square a line of flight, an exit from the regime of representation, or is it instead a black hole—a site of collapse, repetition, and dogma? This is the ambiguity that Deleuze and Guattari note as the double pull of the post-signifying regime: on the one hand, it is a line of flight (escape); on the other, there is the threat of being ensnared in the black hole of the void. The *Black Square* does not resolve the dialectic of the post-signifying regime; it keeps us inside it. The viewer is suspended between abandonment and becoming, between a painting that will not speak and one that asks for presence. In this way, the square is not simply a historical object. It becomes an event in subjectivity: it names nothing, and in naming nothing, it makes space for a subject not yet formed.

In other semiotic regimes, the square might even be perceived as a "countersignifying" gesture—a tactical refusal, a nomadic mark that undoes inherited signality. However, under capitalism, the same gesture is commodified. The black square is no longer part of the painting. It transforms into a logo, a meme, or an icon of "radical" aesthetics. The refusal remains, but it is

now empty, circulating without danger. A striking example of this shift is the black square positioned above Malevich's coffin and, even later, his gravesite—a part of the Suprematist funeral ritual. Katerina Sidorova (2022) notes in her article, *Malevich and the Suprematist Funeral Ritual*. The icon of refusal becomes an icon of commemoration (Figure 18).
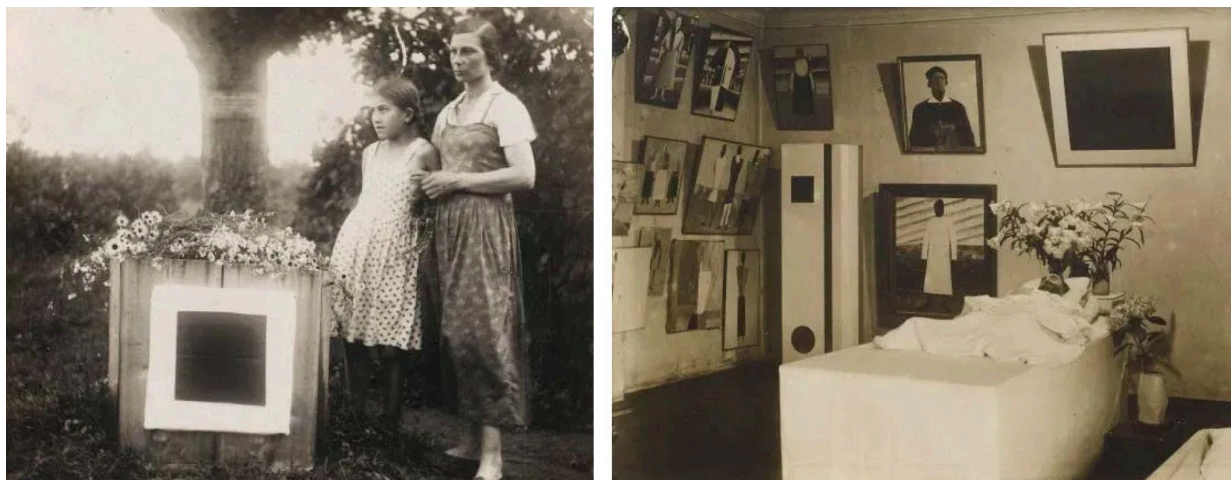
Figure 18. Unknown photographer, Photographs from Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist funeral, 1935.
LEFT: Malevich's grave, marked with an image of the black square.
RIGHT: Malevich in his coffin, with a version of Black Square hung above him. The coffin itself features a painted black square and black circle, reflecting the use of Suprematist symbols in the funeral ritual.

However, despite all of this, the painting still resists. It refuses to let itself become resolved and remains a puzzle or an annoying image, and it does not ask us for interpretation. When you show this image in a class, you can feel this resistance. The image invites a confrontation instead of being read and interpreted. We are left suspended like the subject of a postsignifying regime—in the break, silence, and in the possibility that something else may begin from the blackness.

The *Black Square* does not simply withhold meaning in its refusal to speak. It is, probably most profoundly, placing the viewer in an encounter that resists closure. And perhaps this is its radical gesture: to offer confrontation instead of comprehension or condition instead of resolution. In a class, this condition of not knowing may not be an obstacle to understanding. It is the beginning of another kind of relationship. One that requires attention, not answers. What it means to stay with such opacity, especially in pedagogic contexts, is a question I will return to.

The Rupture and Its Racial Conditions

The White Modernist Void

In the earlier episodes of *The Knick*, situated at the dawn of modern surgery in early 20th-century New York, we observe the emergence of a pattern of visual contrast. The operating theatre, saturated with a blinding white light and composed of rows of white coats, is the space of progress. Dr. John Thackery performs his medical miracles in the presence of his peers and admirers. In contrast, below the hospital, the dark, disorienting basement operates a different kind of healing, as Dr. Algernon C. Edwards, a Black surgeon who was trained in Europe and returned to a segregated America, operates a secret clinic for Black patients who have been turned away from the hospital upstairs. His work, which is equally revolutionary, is obscured, buried, and denied the light of legitimacy (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Stills from *The Knick* [TV series], directed by Steven Soderbergh, 2014-2015.
TOP: Dr. John Thackery (Clive Owen) performs surgery in the hospital's gleaming operating theatre.
BOTTOM: Dr. Algernon C. Edwards (André Holland) conducts secret operations for marginalized patients.

This spatial division between the luminous gallery and the unseen basement does not just complicate a narrative tension of binary oppositions; it dramatizes the racialized distribution of visibility and legitimacy within modern institutions and echoes the structural exclusions of their history within modernist abstraction. The upstairs gallery, aglow in light, represents a ritual of approval and celebration, and the basement signifies the spaces in which Black knowledge, practice, and survival are hidden, denied, or rendered illegible. The metaphor signals not simply literary narrative but, allegorically, an entry point into the modalities of abstraction itself. It stages the racial and epistemic logic of visibility; in the upstairs theatre, white knowledge is staged but sanctified, whilst below, Black knowledge takes shape with the burden of doing so in the margins. This vertical geography and its differential access to light, sight, and legitimacy might be read as an allegory for another space of abstraction: the modernist canvas.

Kazimir Malevich displayed the *Black Square* high in the corner of the space, as well, splitting the visual field. The space that once depicted the icon of divine presence now occupied a square of black. What once spoke the word of God now refused speech altogether; a non-objective, pure, zero ground. But what kind of zero? And for whom? To treat this gesture within a history of abstraction—an aesthetic or philosophical break with Malevich—as anything less than contextual risks overlooking the full expanse to which this gesture unfolds. For Malevich, black does not denote the color of embodiment or resistance and instead signifies transcendence, the non-objective world, and spiritual purity. The canvas can be stripped of its black referential content or material weight. But this gesture unfolds in a world already marked, surveilled, and excluded under blackness.

What does it mean for a white artist in imperial Russia to signify transcendence, emptiness, and universality with blackness within a world structured by anti-Blackness? What can be erased when black is not presented as historical in context but rather as metaphysical? What tensions emerge when black becomes a site of visual strategy for erasure, while Blackness is a site of overexposure, surveillance, and embodied resistance?

In this section, I explore these questions in contrast to the metaphysical blackness of Malevich and the fugitive Blackness theorized by Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Christina Sharpe, among others. It asks how abstraction—particularly monochromatic abstraction—has served to universalize whiteness while detaching black as a political historicity. It asks how abstraction makes it possible to universalize blackness in a world suffocated by anti-Blackness

and spectacle. And it begins, as we all do, and thus must do, at the high corner of the white cube of modernism, where a square of black was made to speak nothing—and in doing so, perhaps said too much.

Abstraction and Erasure

These questions are not merely theoretical; they are pedagogical in nature. What does it mean to teach abstract art without acknowledging the histories it ignores? How can a pedagogy of abstraction confront its own complicities and reframe black as a site of lived, resistant presence, not as absence?

Abstraction, as a construct that surfaced in the early twentieth century, is intertwined with notions of purity, detachment, and transcendence. In Malevich's writings, black was to be interpreted as the non-objective ground for a new kind of seeing, a seeing that would be disentangled from the burden of the material world. The idealization of black as a metaphysical void, however, returns to erasure—a detachment of history, embodiment, and politics. In Christina Sharpe's book, *In the Wake,* she reminds us that a Black life is imperiled and imperceptible within the prevailing conditions (2016). To make black stand for nothing, to make it universal, is to risk rendering Blackness invisible. What happens when black is used to stand for everything and nothing? In visual arts, this gesture often masks a deeper asymmetry: the denial of the Black body, Black experience, and Black thought. Abstraction, especially in relation to the delight at "pure" form, easily collapses back into whiteness as neutral grounds. Malevich's Black Square becomes not only a rupture. It becomes a form of aesthetic innocence, floating free of the world's weight. Yet that very floating is itself racialized.

Fred Moten insists that Blackness cannot be taken away from history—not without violence. Blackness is an anti-metaphysical blur, a being given in nothingness that is neither reducible to absence nor susceptible to clarity (2017, pp. 755–759), Moten writes in *Blackness and Nothingness*. This zero is not the clean zero Malevich is claiming, as I have suggested above. Rather, the blur interrupts every effort of purification or resolution. It is not that abstraction is politically neutral. It is that abstraction often renders the political blank by refusing to engage with its own conditions.

To read *Black Square* without a care for those conditions is to miss its involvement in a larger epistemological system that promotes disembodiment and erasure. In that light, abstraction doesn't exist outside of history; it works through history. It can be a means of shaping or even

hiding the histories from which it claims to escape. Claiming purity, it leaps over critique, but a black that is emptied of blackness is not neutrality. It is a form of forgetting that is masked as form. These questions press on those of us who engage with abstraction as educators, historians, and cultural workers, not just as viewers or spectators.

Moten and Harney | *Blackness as Excess*

Whereas Malevich's early work attempted to reduce painting to its zero degree—to the ground cleared of objectivity, narrative, and history—Fred Moten and Stefano Harney offer a radical counterpoint. In their work, Blackness is not an absence of meaning. It is rather an overpresence, a thick, irreducible surplus. As they write in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Blackness is the lawless, stateless, fugitive ensemble that is always in excess of every enclosure (Harney & Moten, 2013). This is not the purified silence of a metaphysical square. It is the sonic and social noise of resistance, relation, and refusal.

If Malevich's abstraction leans toward transcendence, Moten and Harney pull us back to entanglement. Blackness for them is historical but improvisational—a particular way of being together that is resistant to capture. Rather than aiming for a space outside of politics or time, "the undercommons" exists inside and against every institutional frame. It exists in the basement, not the gallery—regardless of Dr. Edwards' underground presence and actions at the clinic in *The Knick* and the polished apparent whiteness of purity instituted by the surgical amphitheater. That dark, hidden space becomes more than a place; it is a fugitive zone full of care, refusal, and invention. The undercommons, like the basement, refuse legitimacy as a spectacle while producing life below the thresholds of the spectacle upstairs. The gallery above performs innovation for some audiences; the basement does it without the permission of the white cube. It is not that Harney and Moten's concept is merely metaphorically associated with this scene—they exist within it. "The undercommons" does not desire being observed; it desires study, survival, and solidarity for its existence in the exclusionary frame of institutions. In this way, their writing is a re-description of Blackness as plenitude, not as lack—this is a different layer of "study" of collective life, of creating experiments in the cracks of hegemonic systems.

Moten's concept of the blur, thoroughly developed in *Black and Blur*, is also useful here. Moten positions the blur against the clean edges of formalist abstraction as a figure of fugitivity, a sonic and visual refusal. Blackness is a blur that escapes the very possibility of capture (Moten, 2017). The blur, in this sense, counters the clear, ordered, and stable, and not simply against a

type of modernist form. The blur is not a style of visual connection or optical effect, only a way of naming the uncontainable, in motion, or the incompatible. This is what cannot be pinned down and/or made legible in a system of dominant representation. This blur is a political ontology: the way of being that is not fully realized, that troubles the frame, that cannot be itemized or resolved, or as a conversation. The blur names the impossibility of total knowledge, of stable representation. It is what is unmasked in the purified frames of modernism.

To contrast this with Malevich is not to collapse all differences into a clear binary—transcendence versus immanence, white cube versus the undercommons. It is to hold them out in tension and ask what types of visibility are produced by abstraction, at what cost, and for whom. Who is made visible, and who remains blurred by intention, not by accident?

Katherine McKittrick and the Materiality of Black Life

If Moten and Harney focus our attention on the social and sonic textures of Blackness, Katherine McKittrick emphasizes spatial, geographic, and embodied dimensions of Blackness. In her recent book, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, McKittrick asserts that Black life is not only made invisible. It is purposefully displaced and disoriented. Her work asks us to pay attention to how Black life's materiality resists abstract frames that would try to erase or flatten it. She explains, Black life is always in relation to where it is not supposed to be, and this is what makes it knowable (McKittrick, 2021). In this sense, dislocation is framed as knowledge, and marginality is framed as a method.

That insight resonates especially in the metaphor of *The Knick* because Dr. Edwards' clinic is not just hidden—it's disallowed, illegitimate, yet it's necessary. It's a place where things that shouldn't exist, but they do. The architecture of the hospital—like modernity itself—is not neutral: it is intentionally designed in a way that excludes. McKittrick emphasizes how Black spaces—be they fugitive clinics, neighborhood organizing, or classroom resistance—not only adapt to exclusion but also theorize through it. They produce knowledge from the ground up. The refusal to disembbody the Black experience works directly against the predominant methods of abstraction that privilege detachment, formalism, and universality. For McKittrick, abstraction is not possible when we consider that the conditions of embodiment themselves are racialized. If Black life is rendered out of place, the abstraction that is devoid of place goes along with that denial. Temporalities and lived realities of race need to become a part of the analysis. So, McKittrick's critical work reorients our understanding of place. Rather than signifying

nothingness, elements like the underside, basement, or even the black square are reframed as significant sites. The basement—and black square—become spaces of impossible visibility and fugitive to know each other (and to produce knowledge) while against denial. This way of thinking is a way to encourage seeing abstracted knowledge from a place where abstraction displaces both the world's pressures within it and refuses also to be a method of slow deliberation, not from a position above the world. Rather than projecting and imagining a black square as a tabula rasa or an escape from context, McKittrick's lens captures a square that memorizes, holds, and pushes back, reframing abstraction as something entangled with a past, not outside of the world.

A Critical Tension | Void vs. Flesh

The previous subsections uncovered a pivotal tension: between "black" as a metaphysical void and "Blackness" as deeply corporeal, material, and historically situated. This is not a simple binary opposition. It is a location of unresolved friction, a place where the stakes of form and meaning, of both politics and aesthetics, are tangible. Malevich's *Black Square* stages a desire for purification: a move towards "non-objectivity" and a "zero degree of painting." And yet such an erasure, such a desire for a clean slate, brings the risk of historical forgetting. Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, Christina Sharpe, and Katherine McKittrick remind us that Blackness cannot be abstracted from its histories of displacement, survival, and resistance without violence. Black can only be stripped of its embodied and racial weight if we wish to enact a transfiguration to the zero degree. In other words, to displace black from its histories of existence in the name of its transcendence would be a repetition of the disavowal that structures modernity itself. The tension is not between art and politics. It is within abstraction itself that the metaphysical and the material struggle for meaning.

Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Abstraction

While the prior sections have attempted to map a tension between the metaphysical void and racial embodiment, this last part will address the pedagogical ramifications of that tension. What does it mean to teach abstraction without teaching the conditions under which it is made? What do we risk when we see the *Black Square* merely as a formal experiment and do not see the exclusions it encodes?

To think critically about abstraction does not mean to abandon it. It means to situate abstraction. It means rejecting a sanitized version of modernism that understands form to be separate from life. In practice, this may mean reading Malevich alongside Moten and Harney—to retrieve the contradictions, not to create equivalence. It may mean showing the simultaneous ways in which abstraction is a site of experimentation and a mechanism of erasure. And it means being aware of how particular lives, histories, and bodies get rendered invisible in the name of universality.

This idea is not a call for moral clarity or a new curricular correctness. It is an invitation to teach abstraction as a site of "friction," not resolution. To embrace the discomfort. To teach the *Black Square* not as a gesture of pure invention but instead as a contested image that comes steeped in histories of race, violence, and refusal. One that asks to respond, not simply to see. A critical pedagogy of abstraction might start, then, in the blur and in refusing to resolve. In recognizing that form is never neutral and that black is not just a color. It is a history, it is a strategy, a life. Blackness is not nothingness. It is flesh, blur, geography, and it is refusal. It is a fugitive presence, one that knows from a location.

The square, then, becomes unstable. It no longer attends to the silence of transcendence. The square resonates with the sounds of resistance and becomes a contested site—a surface in which metaphysical ambitions and racial realities wrestle. To teach the *Black Square* today is not only to trace the genealogy of modernist aesthetics. It is a teaching that confronts the tension between void and flesh, purity and politics, and makes decisions about the framing work of abstraction in the class.

Teaching in the Friction

Pedagogy as Friction, Not Clarity

Within a classroom shaped by modernist expectations of mastery and clarity, abstraction may become a nuisance—a question rather than a "solution." This section will engage with the pedagogical potential of "friction": the productive, often uncomfortable tension created in the absence of immediate meaning. In many ways, teaching abstraction, especially in the context of monochromatic works, requires teaching through that tension rather than around it.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks argues, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (hooks, 1994, p. 12), yet, for that possibility to exist, we

must fight the impulse to resolve indecision quickly. Teaching in friction necessitates staying in confusion, contradiction, and opacity as part of the educational experience. Gert Biesta, in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, writes that education should not be reduced to one method of control or responding to knowledge. It should rather be towards the *subjectification* of the learner through an unexpected process of encounter and interruption (Biesta, 2013/2016). In essence, the teacher is a moderating presence in exposing uncertainty, contradiction, and he limitations of representation itself, not a deliverer of content.

With this understanding, abstraction can exist pedagogically in the same way we think of it as a subject of study. Ariella Azoulay calls for a pedagogy of "unlearning" the imperial forms of seeing and knowing (Azoulay, 2019). The act of engaging abstract art is not merely to consider diaphanous form. It is to be critical about meaning itself—and ultimately to disturb and displace that structure. So, the teacher's job is to hold space for the tensions, not to clarify the abstraction.

Additionally, teaching in such a way assumes an awareness of the uneven distribution of friction. For some students, ambiguity or friction may feel liberating; for others, it may recall exclusion. The ethical, pedagogical question, then, is how to navigate the friction, perhaps with care, attentiveness, and an openness to be affected by the friction itself, not how to resolve it.

The Affective Dimension of Friction

Teaching abstraction involves teaching through affect as well. Feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, uncertainty, confusion, and even irritation emerge when students are asked to engage with work that has no clear narrative or recognizable form. These feelings do not need to be processed as issues to fix; instead, we can see them as an invitation to slow down, to reflect, and to remain in some uncertainty.

Sara Ahmed's work on the politics of emotion helps us here. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), she coins the term "stick" about how emotions stick to certain kinds of objects, bodies, concepts, etc., so we have affective orientations that shape how we move through the world. In the case of being in the classroom, abstraction may become "sticky": it may produce resistance, discomfort, and withdrawal exactly to the extent that abstraction does not offer the recognizable. The affective labor of educators is to stay with these things without the necessary need to express them.

In this sense, "affective friction" becomes more than a failure of pedagogy: it becomes a sign that something is happening that exceeds cognitive comprehension and the simplicity of what is being articulated. Affective friction marks the moment when the students are having an encounter with something irreducible, something that escapes the normal frames of understanding they have been socialized to depend on. Thinking about a work like *Black Square*, there will be a moment, often brief, where students (the best students) will attempt to find language and not see the possibility of language because of the lack of articulation, and this absence becomes, through timeliness, a site of pedagogy that draws upon the affective, bodily and often silent. It is in this silence, moment, or hesitation and pause that the work begins to work on them. In this section, teaching is no longer framed as an explanation, as the giving of knowledge. It is a relationship marked by co-existing uncertainty. To look together, to dwell with others in front of an image that is unwilling to yield immediate meaning, becomes an act of study in itself. Here, both student and teacher are invited into a shared engagement with the limits of language and the possibilities of perception.

This stance also asks for a kind of vulnerability on the teacher's part. To welcome affect as a mode of engagement is to cede authority and certainty. It is to put oneself at risk of being moved as well and to even admit that we, too, are learning within the friction.

In the *Prologue*, I suggested that abstraction doesn't merely look a certain way—it teaches a certain way. That sentence reappears here as a method, not as a metaphor. Abstraction teaches through the slow building of tension, through the refusal of resolution, and through its ability to unsettle our understanding of both perception and interpretation. The work of abstraction is thus to challenge, not to clarify, to turn education into an encounter, and the act of looking into a shared vulnerability. Abstraction teaches not by offering up answers. It teaches by holding open the space where language gives way and new kinds of thinking begin.

The Politics of Unlearning

To teach abstraction today is to teach against the grain of what is inherited: of habits of seeing, habits of knowledge, and habits of control. Abstraction refuses to offer immediate recognition as knowledge, and in doing so, it invites a different kind of pedagogical engagement: the unlearning of dominance, not the acquisition of mastery. As Ariella Azoulay argues in *Potential History*, what we need is not more information. It is a coordinated unlearning of the imperial modes of seeing that shape modern consciousness (Azoulay, 2019). For Azoulay,

imperialism is not just political or military— it is also visual and epistemic, whose modes of seeing are sustained through archives, museums, image regimes, and educational institutions that classify, possess, and hierarchize. Teaching abstraction in this context is then an unlearning: an undoing of the visual grammars that assert meaning is legible, ownable, and settled. It is an invitation to cultivate a mode of seeing that resists immediate comprehension, that instead lingers in the opaque opacity of what we cannot or should not know fully, a refusal to instrumentalize the image—a pedagogical commitment to keep forms of not-knowing intact rather than turning the image into a tool for predefined outcomes.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's conception of "study" in *The Undercommons* complicates this fundamentally pedagogical stance. "Study" does not prepare someone to engage in the dominant order. It is a fugitive thinking with and being with—the gift of a conjoined practice that takes place in the breaks, in the undercommons, outside sanctioned circuits of institutional learning. Study becomes informal improvisational, and the opacity becomes a maze that one enters rather than a readiness for the scaffolds of institutional learning. Rather than attempting to decode or solve what is presented, study resides in the friction, in the not-knowing, and resists the imperative to make things legible or useful in the usual ways.

Moten and Harney call the study "what you do with other people"—a way to be in common that is not officially legitimated or situated in curricular aims. It is "unpayable debt," rooted in relation as opposed to transaction. In the classroom, this introduces an alternate pedagogical ethic: one that honors collective sensing, not individual mastery; one that does not epistemologically conscribe not-knowing as somehow insufficient but engaged as a site of potentiality. They write, "We owe each other everything," which can dramatically re-position classroom dynamics of authority, responsibility, and participation; here, education is not about control or transmission. It is about entanglement, accompaniment, and shared risk.

That said, abstraction becomes a companion to a study because it does not offer clearly knowable answers, welcomes ambiguity, and has no instrumentalization. Abstract images, in particular, those that do not offer familiar symbols or signs, are strong sites for this kind of study. They ask to be accompanied, not to be engaged with consumption. To study, then, is to be in the presence of opacity, not to master or to possess. This resonates with the task of the educator in frictional pedagogy: to create ways of studying that are not about moving "upward" through a hierarchy. It is about how we live together in an unfinished, collective process of becoming.

Witnessing and Withholding

Frictional pedagogy also demands a reconsideration of witnessing, not as it has traditionally been described, simply as an act of observation, but as an engaged act that acknowledges what has been witnessed, what has been withheld, and what resists being witnessed altogether. In the context of abstraction, witnessing constitutes a form of ethical attention. It is not an act of interpretation or decoding. It is a way of being with what is not made clear or will not be made clear. Christina Sharpe, in *In the Wake*, talks about "wake work," a form of witnessing that attends to the afterlives of racial violence without being dissolved into narratives of resolution or redemptive visibility (Sharpe, 2016). This position can support ways of teaching abstract images that withhold representation. Rather than always pushing for closure or greater meaning, students can be invited to tune in—to remain with the quiet, the refusal, and what is left unsaid. Such work is an invitation to a parallel practice—withholding. Just like some histories resist a full narration, some images resist interpretation. This practice is not neutral. It requires acknowledging that some forms of abstraction have historically functioned to erase, distance, and obscure. To teach in the friction is to engage in learning when to look, when to listen, and when to step back. It is to contend with how witnessing is always mediated by positionality, history, and access.

Malevich's *Black Square* interrupts vision with a dense, pressurized edge, refusing resolution, direction, and depth. It does not guide the eye or represent the world; instead, it resists. This image teaches by refusal. It does not withhold or obscure. What else can painting do when it stops showing? What happens when we encounter not an image but a surface that stares back? If *Black Square* marks the collapse of pictorial certainty—the destruction of the horizon—the hole carries that rupture further. It is not a surface that refuses; it is a depth that consumes. In the next chapter, I follow this trajectory from the suprematist square to the gravitational singularity, from painting to spacetime, and refusal to implosion.

| *CHAPTER FOUR* |

Figure 20. *A 'found' square*, (Sedighian, 2023). A layered vent painted over in white, photograph taken by the author in Sainte-Catherine, Montreal.

TOWARD A BLACK HOLE PEDAGOGY | *ABSTRACTION, GRAVITY, AND THE VOID*

Introduction

This chapter extends the exploration of monochrome abstraction by examining the figure of a black hole as more than a metaphor for the disappearance or void. As I develop here, the black hole offers a conceptual diagram for thinking through the collapse of vision, knowledge, and pedagogy. The black hole, which I explore as both a cosmic phenomenon and a conceptual figure, points to a limit condition across visual culture, physics, and philosophy, when systems that ordinarily organize perception and understanding begin to collapse. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's work on "deterritorialization," "micro-fascism," and "collapse," I explore how the gravitational force of the black hole might help us understand pedagogical encounters with abstraction and their attendant conditions of saturation, confusion, and suspended resolution. This framing has developed in conversation with jessie beier's writing, particularly with her article, *Tracing a Black Hole: Probing Cosmic Darkness in Anthropocenic Times* (2022). In her writing on speculative pedagogy and collapse, jessie beier has substantially informed my

thinking about the black hole as a learning condition. In this context, abstraction and refusal are not isolated aesthetic gestures, but educational dynamics with material and affective stakes—where thought might stall, intensify, or pivot under pressure.

This inquiry is backgrounded by earlier chapters that question the promises of visibility and consider how ambiguities open pedagogical space. Here, I shift to a focus on collapse: those moments when seeing folds inward, when meaning begins to disappear, or when the image loses its capacity to orient. From the *Event Horizon Telescope*'s rendering of *M87* to the historical fate of Malevich's *Black Square*, I will unpack what it can mean to teach conditionally under gravity and loss, when certainties dissolve and sense-making slows. The black hole emerges as a threshold space where learning occurs through exposure and endurance, even when it appears that resolution is no longer possible.

Approaching the Event Horizon

Image, Memory, and Collapse

In Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), a man is pulled over and over again into one image: the image of a woman's face from an airport observation deck, just before an act of violence takes place (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Still from *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker, 1962. Black-and-white photo-roman (film composed almost entirely of still images). Runtime: 28 minutes. Produced by Argos Films, France.

The film is set in a post-apocalyptic future and is about a man who is selected for time-travel experiments because of his obsessive recollection of this one moment in time. The majority of the film is told through black and white still photographs—except for one haunting moving image of the woman who blinks her eyes—which makes it a meditation on the fragility of time, memory, and perception. While travelling back to the past, he becomes wrapped up in a memory of his childhood of the face of the woman he keeps remembering, only to come to understand that the moment of that memory is also, in fact, the moment of his death. The film freezes moments of a past time, all the while evoking a collapse and disintegration of time. The story moves in a loop: the trauma is cyclic, the protagonist is caught in a scene from childhood with no end, which extends purpose and ultimately cycles into a finality of death. There is no progression, only a looping motion. *La Jetée* offers a way of thinking about learning; a shifted purpose of time where seeing doesn't provide clarity to the experiential act of seeing, rather it captures us, and memory pulls us into an intense field of recall—in a similar way light is drawn into a black hole.

Teaching in the presence of a black hole is not a case of illuminating the unknown. It is about orbiting something powerful and unknowable. A black hole is not simply an empty space that awaits filling; it is a force, one that pulls and distorts. Time bends and vision becomes unreliable. There is no center, no possibility of a stabilized form, no exit. If abstraction, historically, was used to signal a move away from literal representation, then the black hole takes abstraction to its extreme, until it collapses in on itself. What is left is not a clearer understanding; it is a deep opacity, a kind of space, where teaching is not about giving the answers. Teaching is learning to remain with uncertainty.

This section is not using the black hole simply as a metaphor. Drawing from thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari and jessie beier, the black hole is considered a real condition of thought, a condition of existence. It is a structure where meaning disintegrates under incredible pressure; this is when the ideas that were meant to liberate move to a trap. So this is not an argument against thinking in terms of abstraction; it is taking thinking about the abstract to another level when abstraction stops becoming about moving away from form and becomes about disappearing into abstraction.

In the previous parts of this research, blackness appeared in the event of being complex, difficult to pin down, hard to interpret, and to simply be, visually, historically, and

philosophically. From Malevich's *Black Square*, to Christina Sharpe's idea of the wake, to Moten and Harney's idea of blur, to Pastoureau's history of black, we see blackness push against ideas of visibility. Now, in the final section of this chapter, we move from sentimentally visual experiences to philosophically and gravitationally thinking about blackness. We are coming to the black hole not as an image or an object but as a condition—a way of thinking about teaching characterized by disappearance, implosion, and refusal. To enter this space is to enter into a space of distortion, where time stretches, and outcomes dissolve.

What kind of teaching begins in a place where things can't really be seen? Can an educator somehow take students not into clarity, but rather into a kind of collapse? What happens when we center absence instead of presence—the willingness to let go, not mastery? These are the questions of the black hole as a serious structure of thought, not only as a dramatic metaphor. And so we start at the edge: the edge of the event horizon, where once you step across into it, there is no return to what you knew before.
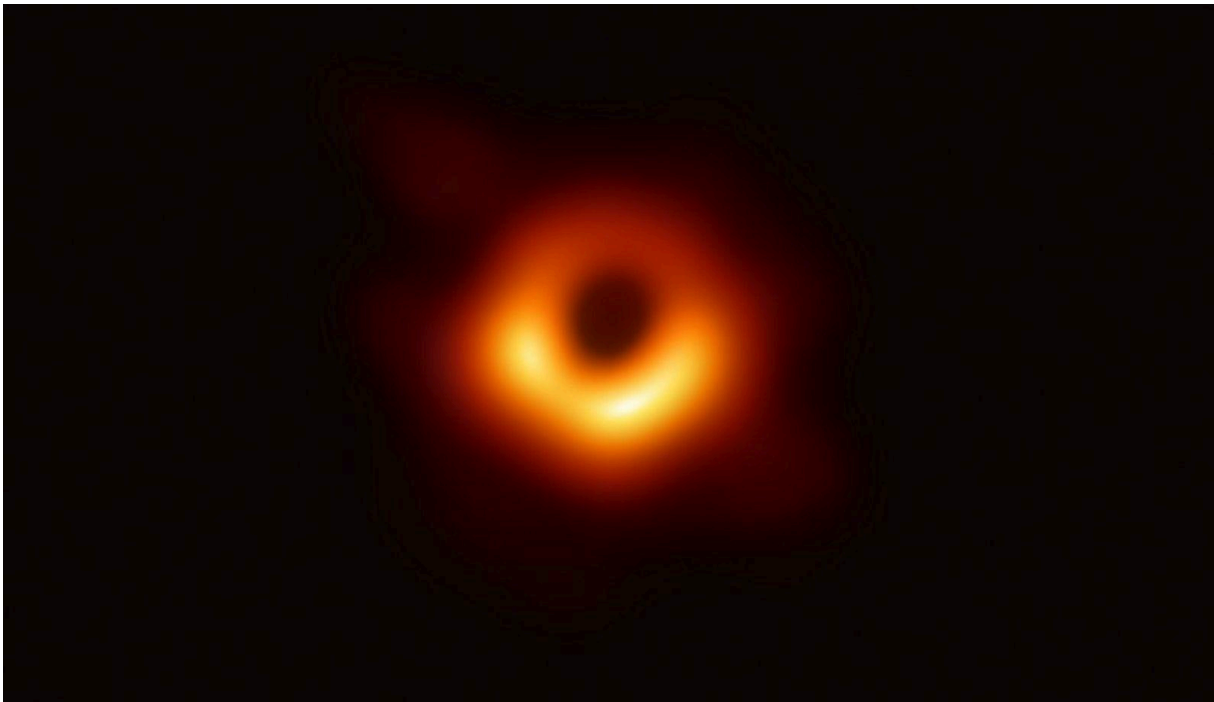

Figure 22. *The Event Horizon Telescope* image of the black hole located in *Messier 87* (2019), revealing the shadow of a black hole using 1.3 mm radio wavelengths. Source: European Southern Observatory (ESO 1907a). Reproduced under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

Gravity and the Collapse of Seeing

The unveiling of the black hole image in 2019—captured in the galaxy *M87* by the *Event Horizon Telescope* (EHT)—briefly drew public attention as a technological and scientific milestone (Figure 22). Designated "iconic" by scientists and journalists alike, the image reveals the shadow of the black hole—a luminous ring surrounding darkness, created by photons bent and trapped by gravitational forces at the edge of the event horizon. Produced using data collected through synchronized radio emissions from a global system of telescopes and rendered in algorithms, it is best considered a computational rendering of the unseeable. As noted by beier (2022) and others, the black hole's image, despite its brief visibility in society, has important implications: it validates concepts in physics, yet destabilizes common beliefs about seeing, knowing, and even representation. As Yanai Toister (2020) argues, the image is simultaneously a signifier of the collapse of representation as certainty and the emergence of visibility as distortion. The very means of visualizing the unseeable affirms the limits of our perception, knowingly telling us that rendering the unseeable is different from making it seen, which raises epistemological questions that extend beyond the immediate artistic implications.

More clearly, Kip Thorne, who, along with several other physicists, was instrumental in composing the EHT image, explains that the gravitational pull of a black hole bends space and time into such deep dimensional folds that light cannot escape once it crosses the event horizon—the point of no return. As light bends and curves into the swirling mass, it gives the illusion of a glowing ring, which is simply the data from photons spiraling endlessly inward (Thorne, 1994). Inside the mass is a singularity—a place where the laws of physics we rely on to make sense of the phenomena fall apart. Thus, another way to conceptualize the black hole image is as a visual articulation of spacetime collapse as opposed to relying on the image of a discrete object. The image does not quite function as a transparent window onto the physical object a black hole claims to be; it is perhaps easier to consider the image as a computational trace instead, meaning an inferential visualization created from data impressions, as opposed to one based on photons collected through a lens.

W.J.T. Mitchell might refer to this image as an image that does not want to be seen. In this framework, it's valid to think about an image that resists legibility, resists being consumed or interpreted, and instead functions as a threshold of thought (Mitchell, 2005). The black hole is

such an image: withdrawn, minimal, opaque. It does not invite understanding. It imposes limits and does not convey a meaning; it undermines one's confidence in looking at itself.

Toister also observes that this image signals the end of many preconceptions—and the beginning of many more—and remarks that the image of the black hole is situated within an epistemological crisis in relation to contemporary visual culture (Toister, 2020). He argues the image of the black hole disrupts the structure of seeing itself; the eye is dislodged as the arbiter of truth, and a visuality is mediated through non-human processes like radio waves, data algorithms, and computational projections. This image is a site where the observer and object are disarticulated; the object recedes from direct encounter, and the observer is stripped of epistemic authority in relation to the black hole image. The image disrupts visual structures that once defined the observer in a central role, or the image as transparent. James Elkins indicates that most definitional exercises of visual literacy have assumed images can be read like text—as objects that were stable, decodable, and determinable (Elkins, 2009). In contrast, the black hole image demands a literacy that articulates with indeterminacy, affect, and disorientation—a seeing that refuses mastery. Jonathan Crary (1992) similarly characterizes the shift from a vision based within the fixed observer onto an abstraction that is distributed amongst technical systems. Pedagogically, this shift calls for practices that embrace visual uncertainty, delay, and visual suspension as legitimate and generative conditions for learning.

Such a different picture generated will have implications beyond theory; it will enter the space of pedagogy, particularly with regard to our understanding of visual practices in studio learning. The context of destabilization is now being conceptualized in terms of picture making and teaching in studio-based art education. Pedagogies that privilege process over product, or provisionality over resolution, or ambiguity over fixed meaning, are already inhabiting a context of epistemic collapse. As Graeme Sullivan (2005) notes, studio inquiry builds knowledge through emergence and material thinking rather than hitting predetermined outcomes. Also, Dennis Atkinson (2008) calls for a pedagogy that resists regulation and embraces uncertainty and a pedagogy for forms of learning that are emerging rather than standardizations of clarity. In this frame, the image that withdraws or does not resolve is now a generative site, a site of unsettling readability, and instead suggests a space of interpretive tension. The black hole image reflects this challenge. When this process is incorporated into a practice, it may require a builder into a pedagogy that stays with confusion without resolution, and supports critique suspension over

coherence. Such a destabilization will have pedagogical implications. In numerous educational contexts, particularly those associated with visual arts and design, clarity and coherence are core values. Any image is taken to signify a meaning, and meanings are tied to what is visible. However, the black hole—like Malevich's *Black Square*—and its imagined representation destabilize these values. If the black hole signifies the collapse of seeing, what pedagogical practice initiates that collapse? And, in what ways of learning are made possible when images obscure instead of clarifying?

As jessie beier (2023) makes evident, black holes in pedagogical discourse are active zones of breakdown, rather than passive figures of unknowing—places where knowledge structures fold up under conceptual gravity and the imperative for productive learning is suspended. Drawing on the *Event Horizon Telescope*'s image of *M87*, beier poses the concept of an "apparent horizon"—a boundary that shifts in its signification according to the position of the observer. In pedagogical terms, the apparent horizon emerges as a figure for resituated thought: an invitation to rethink knowledge as orientation toward uncertainty as a movement away from finality. In this space, to learn is to be exposed, to drift, and to be pulled by other things gravitationally, rather than accumulate. Therefore, the black hole emerges as a figure of resistance to a pedagogy of visibility. It reveals the assumption that vision guarantees knowing, and challenges the thinking that learning takes shape through progressive illumination. A pedagogy shaped through gravitational collapse gives us permission to see that which distorts, to know that slows down time, and to understand something in a way that remains incomplete.

What takes shape in this encounter with a black hole image is a reframing of what we mean to teach and learn through uncertainty, rather than a simple critique of visual representation. Across visual theory, studio practice, and speculative pedagogy, an apparent gravitational through-line emerges: one that resists the clarity of vision and embraces the opacity of collapse. A black hole is a condition more than it is a metaphor, or an anomaly—it's a condition that disrupts the methodological basis of educational thought. Teaching through this event horizon means letting go of mastery, remaining in suspension, and opening up the possibility that not knowing something generates other possibilities.

Between Escape and Capture | Deleuze and Guattari on Black Holes

Abstraction in Motion | *Lines of Flight and Their Collapse*

In this section, I discuss the double nature of abstraction for the liberation of thought and sensibility, but also its tendency to harden into control. Using Deleuze and Guattari's idea on black holes, "faciality", and the "war machine", I investigate how pedagogical gestures of refusal can support either movement or collapse into capture. The tension of abstraction as a force for creative escape and a state of authoritarian ossification is key to understanding the risks of teaching at the edge of the void.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use the black hole not as a metaphor. They use it as a material and conceptual force—one that marks risk, inherent to every "line of flight". Eugene Holland (2013) describes deterritorialization, which refers to the act of breaking out of structured, coded forms of identity or meaning—but to break also always carries the risk of being "reterritorialized", being captured by new regimes. Deleuze and Guattari assert that deterritorialization must be undertaken with "precaution" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987); otherwise, the movement can fold back into "micro-fascisms" or the imploding of thought and philosophy. While they celebrate deterritorialization, movement, and escape as productive forces of "becoming", they also warn that "lines of flight" are not in themselves safe or liberatory. Each line contains the potential to fold back into itself (to intensify rather than disperse), producing a collapse rather than an opening. The black hole is the point at which escape velocity turns inward; at which creative movement is self-consumptive and no longer expansive. In this diagram, black holes name the moment where a system, idea, or subject becomes so dense with meaning, so saturated with affect or intensity, that it implodes. It operates at the site where difference is absorbed and no longer proliferated; where multiplicity is eaten by a singular logic. This paradox of movement becoming inertia, or flight becoming capture, is key to Deleuze and Guattari's ambiguous harnessing of black holes as a force both within politics and within thought.

Faciality and Collapse | *The Black Hole of Signification*

This is especially pronounced in the exploration of "faciality": as a surface of signification that takes multiplicity and reorganizes it into hierarchy. "The face is a politics" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 181), they warn, when the white, male, facialized subject

becomes a black hole of subjectification—a gravitational center pulling all meaning toward it. In this instance, the black hole is an excess, not a void: an excess of signification, of meaning-making, that eventually collapses into control.

Deleuze, conversing with Claire Parnet (1977/2007), discusses black holes as sites of microfascism. Black holes are not authoritarian regimes, but subtle, internalized forms of capture—where escape routes become hardened into dogma, where desire turns back on itself, where acts of refusal are reabsorbed into the very regimes and systems they were attempting to evade. In this way, the black hole is the danger of every revolutionary gesture, the implosive thread that turns disruption, once seized, more rigid in form.

Within pedagogy, we are met with urgent pedagogical questions. What happens when abstraction is no longer liberatory and becomes reductive? What happens when refusing representation becomes an orthodoxy? What happens when opacity, once a space of freedom, becomes a form of exclusion or elitism? What would be their students' response to an open-ended task of work, with no grounding? Would it be curiosity? Would it be disorientation, anxiety, or withdrawal? What happens when the institutional rhetoric of "radical learning" masks curricular rigidity or branded innovation? These are indeed the risks of the black hole—understood not simply as metaphoric, but as an instability diagram of capture. The paradox of abstraction is within this double movement, abstraction can provide freedom from the very limits of representation, while also being consolidated into doctrine—transforming an openness into a new form of closure. The dangers are in mistaking movement for escape, or, once again, refusing authority without a reckoning for institutional rendering.

As educators who are interrogating abstraction, ambiguity, and non-knowledge, it is imperative to keep a finger on the pulse of black holes: collapsing differences, freezing movement into form, transforming traces of escape into continuous structural logics.

The Pedagogical War Machine

Teaching near a black hole is to navigate a conceptual edge. Deleuze and Guattari are quite clear about this in the plateau of 1730: *Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible….* They say we must avoid getting sucked into a black hole and we must instead always be between two states, between two milieus, at the limit (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). The danger is not only an idea; it is structural. "Becoming-imperceptible" is not dissimilar to pedagogical abstraction as it necessitates a certain kind of mobility, a refusal

to settle, to become form. The black hole appears here as a warning figure: the site where movement stops and difference is absorbed.

Similarly, in another plateau, *Treatise on Nomadology*, they frame the tension between the "war machine" and the "State apparatus". The war machine, like pedagogical deterritorialization, wants to escape stratification, while the state tries to inherit the war machine—rerouting the nomad's energy back to stratified regimes. The relationship produces an analogy with the institutional co-optation of educational refusal: the latter typically results in the absorption of opacity, unlearning, or experimentation back into the curriculum, rubric, or brand. The pedagogical war machine goes the distance to avoid becoming a black hole when its lines of flight become frozen into structure or identity. The work of avoiding becoming is to maintain openness in abstraction—never collapsing an abstraction that appears as an end, always allowing the abstraction to drift away from a totalizing recognition. It is to sustain an awareness that there is always a potential to be captured within every pedagogical gesture, especially in gestures that are framed in refusal, opacity, and abstraction. The pedagogical war machine does not desire to overthrow the state; instead, it operates obliquely—improvising, veering, refusing capture. In those movements, it signals the impossible gestures toward nothings—assigning without outcomes, encouraging delay and failure through allowing affect to direct the inquiry. A nomadic curriculum will seem unsteady. However, it sustains motion by resisting assimilation. A teacher may choose to abandon a lesson plan altogether because a student asked something unexpected, or reject their original plan of assessment because the student produced work that came from within a crisis moment. Those are not heroic acts; they are minor acts (shifts) which persist in the timeline of the experiment. The distinction is not in the scale of the act. It is in the movement, in the difference of enacting the form of resistance.

A Studio Encounter | A Diagram of Deterritorialization

One studio exercise I have used to work with students exposes this danger of collapse. I ask them to put a large sheet of paper on the wall and begin to work on it—use any materials, any techniques of your choice, and any themes. The only condition is not to get yourselves locked into a fixed subject or narrative; the first idea is simply a reason to begin. Once they have worked on it until they feel it is "complete," they take a photo and then immediately continue working on it. This is very much where the shift happens. They must now alter, cut, erase, or obscure parts of what they had just confirmed was "finished". Some have a hard time preserving

pieces, while others destroy everything. I ask them to repeat this cycle a few times, documenting each moment of being finished and returning again.

The intent is not to make a "final image". They need to practice letting go, remaining in motion, and resisting attachment to a particular result. And yet, in all this, the danger of collapse can become real: sometimes the image loses all potential, once it has been worked over, over-saturated, or physically destroyed. What starts as motion can, in this instance, become stuck. The work becomes a dense surface that absorbs rather than produces motion—that is, more difficult to navigate. The studio becomes a diagram of deterritorialization and capture. It shows how pedagogy can drift toward collapse, how openness can turn into frustration and/or repetition, and how the work of teaching/making occupies a precariousness that can sense the thresholds that separate transformation from implosion. But it is also to testify and affirm that this risk can be, also, a condition for thinking otherwise, for remaining in motion, for refusing the comfort of fixed meaning.

From Black Square to Black Hole | *Resisting Capture*

This risk is not limited to systems or philosophies—it is also true of images. Even Malevich's *Black Square*, which was once a radical refusal of representation, can become a kind of visual black hole: Instead of remaining a site of mystery or openness, it can become a fixed historical monument. Indeed, when Malevich first painted it, the *Black Square* was specifically about rejecting the rules of traditional painting in order to make new ways of seeing and feeling—about creating a space of pure perception and emotion, rather than representing something. However, over time, this radicalism has become part of the official history of modern art. What was once an unsettling image has settled into an easily identifiable symbol of innovation. Or, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, using this image as a Suprematist symbol in Malevich's funeral and for marking his grave.

As educators, then, we must work to inject movement and uncertainty back into these images and to think of the monochrome as an unformulated question, not as an answer. Rather than thinking of the *Black Square* as an endpoint of abstraction, we can think of it as an event horizon—an unclear place where clarity disappears and something different emerges. Understanding the monochrome this way means that it is construed as an invitation for us to sit with discomfort, to question what we are seeing, and to remain open to what we might mean, if we must. In this sense, we resist the reterritorialization of the avant-garde: the process by which

the radical, unsettling, and full of potential turns into something legible as part of an institutionalized story. Teaching with the *Black Square*—or with any kind of image or work that is shaped by the experience of refusal—requires that educators pay attention to this kind of danger. In other words, it's about crafting pedagogical encounters that delay any kind of closure, create some sense of friction as an affective engagement when examining images, and allow images to remain unstable. It could mean asking students to make changes to or un-framing before re-making canonical work, or, when dealing with an image that doesn't yield to interpretation, encouraging students to sit with it. In this process, the teacher isn't trying to hand over or deliver meaning. They curate a story in which meaning remains unsettled and therefore alive. As beier states, "the black hole image offers a site wherein the promise of a 'new,' more 'sustainable' education after education, is dislodged and made vulnerable to revision" (2023, p. 98).

Grammars of Refusal and the Pressure of Opacity

Blackness as Refusal, Blur, and Nothingness

Thus far, Blackness has appeared in the chapter as a visual phenomenon, as a philosophical puzzle, and as a metaphor for gravity. And yet, to talk about Blackness without taking its historical and ontological weight in Black thought into account would leave this study incomplete. Sure, if the black hole asks us to consider collapse, invisibility, and knowledge, scholars of Black Studies have engaged these very conditions—materially, politically, and experientially, not purely abstractly.

While this section moves us away from a metaphysical and structural reading of the void into a specifically racialized and historical account of Blackness as refusal, scholars such as Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, Stefano Harney, and Christina Sharpe offer Blackness as a density and generative strategy, not simply as emptiness or nothingness—a site of non-identity, blur, and interruption. In this context, nothingness is not nihilism; rather, it is a refusal to the conditions of visibility, legibility, and coherence required by dominant regimes of knowledge.

To bring Blackness into Black Hole Pedagogy, then, is not to muddle metaphors. It is to bring in the lived dimensions of opacity—not as a failure of knowledge, but as a strategy of endurance and refusal. While the black hole allows for a cosmological metaphor for unseeability, Blackness has historically been positioned structurally as unseen and unseeable, because

structures of power have positioned Blackness as illegible, misrecognized, or erased, not just because it is unseeable. Such invisibility has been made through design, policy, and epistemic violence and is not accidental. But it has also become a site of resistance, where not to be seen, or fully known, becomes a way to preserve complexity, autonomy, and even life.

We saw this situation in *The Knick*, where Dr. Algernon Edwards, a Black surgeon, performs a series of groundbreaking surgeries in the shadows of a segregated hospital basement. Even though the work is no less brilliant than his white counterpart above ground, Dr. Edwards's labor is hidden, rendered invisible by unaddressed structural racism. Dr. Edwards uses this invisibility not only as something that has been imposed upon him, but he also uses it as something to wield. He takes the margins and creates a site of care, resistance, and quiet refusal. He is not working towards visibility or legitimacy as sanctioned by others in the institution that denies him those practices; rather, he is opening up another space of practice and knowing, all of which parallels the way that Black opacity is a way to survive and subvert. In this way, Blackness is not simply what is unseen; it is a modality of working, learning, and persisting otherwise.

To teach from this position means to shift the pedagogical discussion from revelation and comprehension, and towards space for witnessing, listening, and for what cannot or will not be rendered legible. In this way, and in this sense, Blackness is not only a subject of pedagogy, it becomes a method, in that Blackness is a poetics and politics of refusal—one that asserts the right not to be fully known or seen. We can ask: What might it mean to develop a pedagogy around refusal rather than articulation, opacity rather than clarity? How might teaching become an act of learning to stay with that which exceeds representation?

Black Negativity and the Refusal of Legibility

It is important here to clarify what is meant by "refusal." Refusal, in this context, is not simply resistance or denial, nor is it a reactive stance. It is an intentional and generative stance; a mode of inhabiting the world that does not submit to prevailing demands for visibility, coherence, or legibility. It is a mode of preserving complexity and of being in the world on one's own terms, often in ways of opacity, silence, or rupture. In Black studies, refusal functions both as a critical methodology and a strategy of survival; refusal of the grammar that determines what counts as knowledge or presence (Sexton & Barber, 2017; Harney & Moten, 2013; Sharpe, 2016).

In his interview *On Black Negativity, or the Affirmation of Nothing*, Jared Sexton pushes against the persistent frame of Blackness as lack or deficit. He argues that Blackness names a fundamental "refusal of normative visibility and coherence." The nothingness he describes is not a space to be filled, or a problem to be solved; it instead is a generative rupture in the very logic of representation itself. Sexton notes that Blackness is a kind of paraontological position that exists before the question of ontology can be posed (Sexton & Barber, 2017). Blackness, in this frame, is not simply left out of the knowable or visible world; Blackness occupies a position that reveals the limitations of that world.

This logic has particular implications for pedagogies. If Blackness names a refusal of a nothingness that cannot be accounted for through absence or erasure, then educators must reconsider their investments in visibility, legibility, and productivity. Rather than moving students toward clear articulation, outcome, or finished products, a pedagogy of Black negativity might emphasize hesitation, breakdown, and silence. In this sense, refusal to appear, be labelled, or be manifest in ways that conform to established bounds of knowledge can be a powerful act of pedagogy. Under these conditions, learning can be defined as an engagement with the limits of knowing, not as progress to mastery.

The Blur and The Undercommons

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, offer a vision of Black study not necessarily as an institutionalized form of education, but a fugitive, improvisational practice that dwells in the blur. The blur, here, is not a lack of focus or clarity; it is an aesthetic/political stance. Moten and Harney describe the study as "what you do with other people"—not in order to produce knowledge recognizable in forms. It is to share in the experience of unregulated thinking, feeling, and being (Harney & Moten, 2013). The blur, as they frame it, resists capture. It exists in the spaces legible and illegible. The ruins of authority—the spaces of refusal—are also sites of invention. The blur is where Black life and thought exceed the institutions that seek to define or contain it. This suggests, pedagogically, that not all learning needs to resolve, and not all thinking needs to stabilize. The undercommons becomes the space where students and educators alike practice disidentification—not aligning with dominant educational forms, but staying in motion, in opacity, in experimentation.

Teaching through the blur means allowing thought to stutter, thought to spill, thought to shimmer—It is honoring the fragment, the unfinished, the opaque, rather than succumbing to a

polished form, or fixed meaning. This disrupts the conventional shapes and outcomes of clarity and mastery. Instead of organizing knowledge into stable categories, the blur embraces multiplicity and movement—it lets knowledge be born from the space between certainty and confusion. It is a mode of study/value of a relation over resolution, drift over definition, and process over product. The blur opens up a space for something else to happen, something that can't be named in advance, something that may or may not be legible to dominant frameworks of evaluation. In this way, the blur functions as both a method and an ethic. It is a pedagogy, the blur, that honors indeterminacy as a presence, rather than absence, as a way of being that resists capture and insists on staying in motion.

Wake Work and the Grammar of Non-resolution

In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe proposes a concept she calls "wake work," which is a framework for working through history's ongoing presence as violence, loss, and survival that defines the possibility of Black life. For Sharpe, Black life is lived "in the wake" of slavery, in what we might call the afterlife of transatlantic displacement, and as it continues to be lived in the contemporary moment. The wake is not simply a metaphor about mourning; it is a material condition, a residue, a spatial and temporal zone where the past is never past. In other words, Sharpe's framework resists linear ways of thinking about healing and resolution, that you are done with the wake, the framework of being in the wake, not that you overcome transatlantic slaving history, but that becomes a kind of grammar of non-resolution, a way of tending to pain, absence, and survival without charging toward closure. This is incredibly pedagogical work. What does it mean to teach "in the wake"? To have a kind of witness of the past realities continuing to work on present possibilities, not as separate histories, or histories of the past, but very much in an unfinished way? In this way, Sharpe's text essentially advocates for a pedagogy that does not escape into neat narratives. It teaches us to stay with the difficulty and stay with the loss that cannot be overcome.

To teach in the wake is not about pointing toward a future free of violence or erasure; it is to dwell ethically in the space of non-closure. To dwell in the discomfort of an unresolved history and resist the urge to clean up loss or trauma too neatly would require some ways of witnessing that do not resolve into knowledge, or to listen to those who relate without forgiving or explaining one another's pains. For educators, this means that the pedagogy creates spaces for grief, for unknowns, where worries do not fix upon urgency to condense learning or feeling

wasted because learning cannot happen in a fixed time, and unhealthy ways to progress in ways that do not amount to learning. In this way, Sharpe's grammar of non-resolution presents not a lesson plan, but a posture; where an ethical orientation that holds space for the unfixable, the unnamable, and the unfinished, making room for the emotional and intellectual labor of dwelling with what cannot be neatly concluded.

Pedagogical Implications | Teaching from the Void

In the prior sections of this research, a throughline emerges: blackness, as framed by Sexton, Moten, Harney, and Sharpe, does not simply name a condition of invisibility or negation—it describes an active method of resistance, opacity, and alternative presence. Blackness is not void, or something to be overcome; it is a practice that reshapes the grammar of learning. What would it mean, then, to teach from a position of blackness—not as void—but as poetics of refusal, blur, and non-resolution?

Pedagogy that takes the void seriously must resist the urge to clarify, finalize, or resolve. This does not mean abandoning structure, but rethinking its purpose. Instead of guiding students toward answers or polished outputs, the educator becomes a facilitator of drift: holding open space for what exceeds comprehension. This includes refusing the pressures of legibility—letting silence, ambiguity, and contradiction stand as valid modes of expression.

This pedagogy is grounded in the pull of the black hole, not necessarily to erase learning, but to reorient learning from transmission to transformation, from accumulating knowledge to un-learning. The teacher is no longer positioned at the center, casting light on knowledge; instead, they are circling with students around some shared absence, leaving at a site of meaning that can never be completely accessed.

To teach from the void, then, is to teach otherwise. It is to sit with hesitation as a practice of inquiry, blur as a mode of inquiry, and non-resolution as an ethical stance. The challenge for educators is not to get students out of the dark. It is to stay with them there: to attend to some form of knowing that does not resolve, or displace.

Toward a Black Hole Pedagogy

If the previous sections have mapped a terrain of collapse, refusal, blur, and non-resolution, this section now turns toward a synthesis—A conceptual toolkit for imagining what a "black hole pedagogy" might be. Black hole pedagogy does not propose to fill the void. It

wants to move in relation to it. It recognizes that opacity is not something to be corrected, but rather a condition to be honored; that collapse is not failure. It is a gravitational force that rearranges thought. To teach from the black hole is to teach from the edge of knowing—where all that is known folds inside, and where the inclination toward clarity might well yield to more nuanced forms of sense.

Working from jesse beier's notion of "weird pedagogy," we might understand the black hole classroom as not an edifying space but rather a structure of suspended gravity. beier suggests weird pedagogy is the sort of space that resists normative logics of learning—linearity, progression, legibility—and instead generates a climate of epistemic hesitation; the teacher is not an expert illuminating knowledge, but a co-orbiter of the unknown, tasked with maintaining a space to allow learners to disorient, drift, and delay (beier, 2023).

This calls for a reimagining of curricular structures. Instead of the curriculum as a singular map, we might think of it as a gravitational field—shaped by intensities, distortions, and unpredictable movements, where the outcomes are not ruled out; They are decentered. Mastery is not the purpose; attunement is. The classroom is less a site of resolution than a site of recursive movement—one where learners are allowed to loop, return, or remain unfinished.

In this sense, black hole pedagogy offers a counter-model to the normative culture of accelerated, outcome-driven education. It proposes a pedagogy of delay, collapse in the name of depth, not in the name of obstruction. To dwell in this gravity is not to negate a learning process. It is to reshape it, to argue that real learning may happen precisely at the edge of the possible, in the folds of the not-knowing, in the dark matter of things that resist naming.

What this pedagogy is asking for is a different kind of rigor—a willingness to dwell with what is uncertain, to maintain opacity, and to teach without locking on a final meaning. It is a pedagogy that holds space for surrender as a practice of trust, a conscious letting go of control in the pursuit of shared exploration. In the presence of the black hole, the teacher's job is to accompany the student into it, not with a map but with intention, care, and the bravery to be untroubled.

This will also need a re-orientation of values in education: from product to process, from conclusion to continuation. It may prioritize attention to an ongoing engagement with what students engage with, experiment with, and reflect on, not their final products. Assignments may

be structured to invite an inquiry of drifting, non-linear development, or ambiguous results—with the intention to invite students to reside in a space of becoming rather than conducting a performance. Reflection, iterations, and the not-knowing should be valued as intellectual practices in their own right. Gravitational drift pedagogy values engagement as a significant practice over valuing outcomes as a final goal. I ask: What happens in the process of getting lost, of going back, of circling what cannot be named? Instead of measuring by arrival, this model accepts the value of movement, still, of how one stays with difficulty rather than solving it.

Circling the Void

What exists after gravity has caused collapse, abstraction folded into opacity, and pedagogy escaped its impulse towards clarity? We are left circling the void—not a destination, but a condition. In this last movement of Chapter Two, I return again to the *Black Square* to return to the orbit it produces.

As with the event horizon, this painting/image cannot be approached without being transformed. It absorbs certainty, resists resolution, and continues to pull meaning into its gravitational field. But unlike the singularity, it remains on the surface: an image, a painting, and a threshold, present and withheld. Its silence is not empty; it is full of potential energy, waiting to disrupt our known ways of seeing and knowing. To teach this image is not to clarify it; instead, it is to simply stay with its insistence of resistance. It is not a riddle to be solved. This is a presence to be endured. The square does not ground us. It asks us to simply stay rather than decipher. And through this act, it exemplifies the pedagogical stance we touched on throughout this chapter: teaching as circling, witnessing, and attending to the gravity of what cannot be resolved. This educational approach finds a strong resonance in this artwork. As previously discussed, the *Black Square* poses the risk of becoming monumental—something stable, a stop, and canonical. But, if we teach it not as an endpoint, but as a gravitational field, it can participate in this black hole pedagogy: not clarifying, but pulling thought inward. To sit with the *Black Square*—to allow it to be unknowable, unspeakable, and unresolved—is to model the pedagogical stance that we have traced in this chapter.

My own series, *Limit*, arises out of these same tensions. Often, viewers ask what it represents, where its meaning lies. *Limit* is not intended to be about anything; it is intended to

stand there, silent, dense, absorbing gaze and projecting alike. It is a threshold, or visual stop, a surface that gives nothing at all, and everything at once. Like the *Black Square*, it neither clarifies nor obscures; it simply resists.

The protagonist of *La Jetée* loops endlessly around a single image; not to master it, but because he is bound to it. His narrative is not linear; it is recursive. Returning again and again, only to arrive at the point he is searching for, is also the point of collapse. This narrative structure reflects the black hole pedagogy we have been tracing: a learning that spirals, repeats, and deepens; once again, not towards closure, but towards complexity. Chris Marker's cinematic attention to a recursive structure of narrative was influenced by his obsession with Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Marker apparently saw *Vertigo* countless times, fascinated by the depiction of repetition, fixation, and spectral power of an image. In *Vertigo*, Scottie's relentless pursuit of reconstructing Madeleine, in order to return memory to presence, endlessly intertwines into obsession (Figure 23). The past is never over; it demands recall, re-viewing, and collapse.

Figure 23. Still from *Vertigo*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1958. Cinematography by Robert Burks. Scottie (James Stewart) watches Madeleine (Kim Novak) at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco. Her spiraled hair echoes the hairstyle in the painting Portrait of Carlotta, reinforcing the film's recurring motif of the spiral as a symbol of obsession, doubling, and psychological entrapment.

This obsession with returning to the same image, whether it be *Vertigo*, *La Jetée*, or pedagogy, offers a provocative parallel to the educational practices considered in this chapter. As Marker's narrativity returns to *Vertigo* as a means of studying the impossible heart, black hole pedagogy does not invite you to return to difficult images to reconcile them. Still, it asks us to dwell beside them. The practice of attending to the same image, again and again, is a form of learning—one that is marked by repetition, affective residue, and unfinished relation. To teach this way is not to explain the image. It is to leave the gravity of the image just open—that is, to remain with the weight of the image's withholding.

In circling the void, we do not fall in. We linger and drift along its perimeter, testing what it means to teach and learn, without a destination. Pedagogy here is not a movement from ignorance into knowledge. It is a choreography of delay, return, and presence at the edge.

| CHAPTER FIVE |

Figure 24. *A 'found' black square* (Sedighian, 2012). Photograph taken by the author in Tehran.

BUILDING A PEDAGOGY OF THE UNREPRESENTABLE

The Studio as a Laboratory for the Unknown

To teach what resists representation is to enter into a space where the aims of teaching themselves begin to shift. This chapter does not provide a trail map or a method; instead, consider a question to begin: How do we begin teaching when what we are teaching cannot be pinned down or made visible? I will begin to outline within the threads of pedagogy, the visual, and concepts of this thesis towards a *pedagogy of the unrepresentable*. A pedagogy is not a fixed framework but instead a constellation of concepts—refusal, drift, opacity, delay, disappearance. These concepts are not simply abstractions in and of themselves; instead, they emerge from conditions of abstraction itself—most especially in its monochrome and minimalist forms— which disturb the viewer and demand attention differently. These works do not just present unfamiliar images; they open up unfamiliar versions of the self.

As discussed in prior chapters, abstraction is discursive, as it both interrupts what we see and what we know. This kind of image resists recognition and the comfort of resolution, qualities traditionally associated with representational art and with traditional pedagogies. I draw on thinkers such as Elizabeth St. Pierre (2019) and Gert Biesta (2013/2016), both of whom refuse the assumption that meaning has to be made legible and learning has to be outcome-driven. W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) also asks about the image: "What do pictures want?" The suggestion is to think of the image not as something to be decoded or understood through the idea of representation, but as something that acts. This alteration of view enables a re-conceptualization of pedagogy as something more akin to attunement than explanation. Like Bishop and Manghani's "zero degree" of seeing (2014), it asks us to linger in raw, unsettled, affective engagements—not to affect resolution, but rather to stay with it. What would it mean to teach from this space? To guide without resolution and dwell within ambiguity? St. Pierre (2019, 2020, 2024) describes it as working at the "edge of incompetence", while Biesta describes it as an "unpredictable situation of encounter" (2013/2016, p. 12). Lauren Berlant (2011) offers a different framing, as an "impasse", a space where movement freezes, clarity dissolves, and different kinds of attentiveness may begin to develop. Together, these notions extend an invitation: Stay in the "not-yet" (Manning, 2016) in order not to resolve it. This reorientation asks us to think differently about student and teaching identities, where students are not seen as a fixed identity waiting to be filled with knowledge. They are a shifting presence, a being-in-relation to the encounter. St. Pierre describes this as an "onto-epistemological immanence", where knowledge is not given, but rather composed in the act of being with. The positionality of teaching also shifts. The teacher, likewise, shifts from transmitter to facilitator, from one who explains to one who co-exists with opacity. As Édouard Glissant (1990/1997) has said, opacity is a quality to be protected, not a flaw to be overcome. Coming to honour this right is an ethical practice: one that resists the urge to clarify, to conclude, to make transparent.

During my own teaching practice, times of uncertainty frequently became times of intensity. When students confront an abstract image—in film, drawing, or painting—they often ask, "What does it mean?" or "Is this even art?" These questions, which can be spoken with exasperation, usher in spaces with pedagogical productivity. They are not questions to be answered; they are questions to be prolonged. These are affective intensities, to invoke Brian Massumi (2002/2021)—moments that are charged with potential, with movement, with the

not-yet. As bell hooks (1994) reminds us, educational engagements that matter are not about resolution, they are about engagement—an invitation to think otherwise, to feel otherwise. This chapter invites us to hold this invitation open.

Reframing the Studio Space

In many art education settings, the studio is described as a site of creativity, discovery, and self-expression. However, when viewed through a lens of *pedagogy of the unrepresentable*, the studio is another site of significance; it is more than a place to create, it is a productive site of disruption, uncertainty, and unknowing. According to Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005), the studio is a site of learning that will not allow easy representation, as the learning that happens is not linear, nor is it always visible. Instead of focusing on technical proficiency and aesthetic polish, the studio is a space of disorientation and emergence. The studio becomes another kind of laboratory for the unknown; a site where failure is not a mistake, but a route in, and where learning evolves from the messiness of practice. This reconsideration of how we approach teaching has implications for the teaching process. What if we were no longer asking students to express themselves clearly and encouraged students to become lost instead? I have witnessed this in my own classroom when students are faced with minimal or monochromatic works that seem to resist meaning. These moments usually lead to a state of silence, hesitation, and even frustration for learners. However, as Lauren Berlant (2011) emphasizes, an impasse is not where thinking stops. It is a moment for different types of attention. The studio becomes a state of stasis where you can allow learners to linger there, instead of requiring resolution.

Erin Manning's (2016) concept of the "minor gesture" further articulates this. When the studio is understood as a laboratory, it is a place not for grand transformations or intended outcomes, but for small shifts—hesitations, digressions, improvisations. These are not failures of education. Manning refers to them as gestures of "the not-yet": small movements which resist capture, don't settle into form, and gesture elsewhere. In this type of space, the teacher isn't a facilitator with answers; rather, they are a co-experimenter, someone who listens for what is still forming and stays with what hasn't taken shape.

Figure 25. Still from *Gerry*, directed by Gus Van Sant, 2002. Cinematography by Harris Savides.

This concept of the studio—as a site of perceptual and affective experimentation—extends beyond traditional modes of making. In one workshop, I invited students to watch Gus Van Sant's film, *Gerry* (2002), in the studio. The film follows two young men walking through a desert and is largely devoid of narrative, dialogue, or action (Figure 25). It's slow, unresolved, and atmospheric, similar to the monochromatic abstractions that students consistently resist. Once the film ended, I asked students not to respond to the film as an interpretation; rather, I asked them to attend to what they felt in their bodies: a sense of boredom, agitation, quiet, confusion, etc. These would enter into our inquiry of what it means to stay with not-knowing. The class shifted and became quiet, slow, and engaged. Similar to the desert landscape depicted in the film, the studio became a space of the unknown. Simon O'Sullivan (2006) proposes an additional approach in relation to this concept, through his notion of art as encounter. For O'Sullivan, art's power isn't in the delivery of a message; it is situated in the shifting of perception, the transformation of sensation, the disturbance of expectation. If this notion is brought to pedagogy, the studio ceases to function as a place to transmit content and is recast into a space of affective disruption. Teaching, in this case, becomes a way of staging encounters—encounters not with solutions or answers but with intensity, uncertainty, and the opaque. "The production of subjectivity, and of anything 'beyond' subjectivity," O'Sullivan writes, "is then, precisely an aesthetic business" (2006, p. 88). In other words, what is at a premium in art—and in the studio—is "how we are reoriented." Subjectivity, in this sense, does not exist before experience; it is created by it. To bring subjectivity and positioning into teaching

means to abandon content delivery and orientations toward what happens to the students, to the students' bodies: How are they moved, how are they shifted, how are they unsettled? The studio becomes a space in which the known is suspended, a space where something new begins to emerge: new orientations, affects, and sensitivities.

jessie beier's (2023) idea of a "weird pedagogy" takes this further. For beier, pedagogy isn't about guiding students or bringing them to a conclusion that is better than whatever the initial outcome was supposed to be. This touches further into the idea of interference, or unsettling what we think teaching and learning are. The studio becomes a speculative zone/ space, a ruin in formation—a place where assumptions crack, and new modes of relation briefly flicker. In beier's words, the aim is not toward a better future, but toward "unsettling the present".

What emerges through this reframing is a studio that does not promise stability or safety. It is generative in that it is an environment that allows for what can not be planned. Abstraction becomes a way of engaging with students through delay, ambiguity, and withholding. This is where a *pedagogy of the unrepresentable* begins with a willingness to persist in uncertainty, to gesture with opacity, and to wait with the not-yet, not based on how to use tools, nor on techniques.

Emphasizing Process Over Product

Reorienting the Studio as an Open System

In dominant frames of art education, the outcomes of learning are priorities: finished works are shown, graded, assessed, and interpreted. Yet when we return our attention to abstraction—and to the different kinds of pedagogical experiences it makes possible—we tend to value the process over the result, and duration over resolution. This valuation resituates the studio as a temporal and affective field, one in which learning occurs over time and with slow, and sometimes imperceptible, gestures of hesitation and return. Biesta (2013/2016) reminds us, as educators, that the most potent forms of education involve a risk-taking aspect: the risk of not knowing, not being in charge, and practicing a disposition to suspend our expectations for what learning should look like.

A *pedagogy of the unrepresentable* shifts towards this sense of risk. The studio does not serve as a predictable instructional structure or framework. The studio functions as an open and

dynamic system—one in which neither the teacher nor the student can (or should) fully determine the direction or outcome of learning. In this case, the unknowing is not something to fix. It is the condition we inhabit. Students are not required to work toward an end product. They are invited to stay in the unfolding process.

Learning is shaped by emergence—moments of hesitation, revision, re-orientation, or retreat. The focus shifts from generating a resolved image to remaining in the process of making: knowing and unknowing, and back again, between the material and the idea. As stated by Manning (2016), the minor gestures unfold "in the middle of experience, not at its end." These gestures—tentative, relational, incomplete—are the grammar of this pedagogy. They model for the students how to think and feel their way through ambiguity. To extend this orientation, we must also reconsider our relationship to failure.

Failure as Method

This shift in focus further requires a new consideration around failure. As I indicated in my research proposal, dominant representational practices—especially ones related to technical precision or clarity—often create performance anxiety. They can limit students' expressiveness and limit their engagement with abstraction, uncertainty, or making personal meaning. In this sense, failure cannot be considered a misstep. Failure becomes a decisive condition of learning. In many classrooms, failure indicates a breakdown. However, in the space not-knowing, it can indicate something else—a resistance to easy assimilation or that something unexpected is just beginning to take form.

Patti Lather (2007) and Elizabeth St. Pierre (2019) both speak to this space of generative failure. For Lather, it is what she calls "productive confusion"—where uncertainty is a condition of possibility, not a block. St. Pierre goes even further to suggest a refusal of method as a kind of resistance to closure. Both urge us to stay inside the discomfort of ambiguity, fragments, and not-knowing. In this framework, "getting lost" is thought of as a mode of operation, not as the end of a process: a strategy that simultaneously dislodges learners from stable expectations, while also asking them to navigate the complexities of thinking and making. It is in the work of mess and material that realization takes place.

In the studio, this may mean asking students to have permission to stay in unresolved moments of work, or even to stop before finishing. Rather than pushing for refinement, we ask students to pay attention to the movement that takes place in the process: the wrong turns, the

pauses, the small decisions. Learning becomes less about getting somewhere and more about staying with questions. In the language of Manning (2016), learning is valued in the "not-yet". What may be perceived as failure becomes an opportunity for inquiry. Something is happening because nothing is yet concluded.

Unfinishedness as Pedagogical Form

The idea of unfinishedness is closely tied to this idea of generative failure. As I argued earlier in the proposal, unfinishedness is not a sign of lack; it is a type of potential. In educational systems that value closure, deliverables, and outcomes, this feels counterintuitive, and I can support this process with the abstract artwork(s), particularly those that withhold content or form, exemplify another mode of working. These works instead expect us to stay, to dwell, and to wait, not to decode. The idea of unfinishedness leaves us with the works of art, not reducing attention, moving it away from representation, instead occupying feeling, time, and presence. They do not end. They hold space and reflect on the pedagogical benefit of unfinishedness, not as a lack, but about maintaining an open practice.

When we take this approach into the classroom, we create projects that remain open-ended. Projects that meander and do not tie all the loose ends together. In this space, students begin to feel that making and thinking are processes without closure. This orientation is derived from theorists like Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005), who has foregrounded learning as something impossible to fully plan or represent, and Erin Manning (2016), who describes "not-yet-formed" generative potential. Unfinishedness, in this sense, is not the counter to finishedness; it is a different relationship to time and possibility.

In my own curriculum, I often design assignments that invoke support for the potential for drift: projects that cross media, move between text and image, and resist easy categorization. These assignments are less about the final result and more about staying in relation to it. I ask students to follow an inquiry or line of thinking, not a stated prompt, that asks them to notice what remains open. This approach resonates with my own experience as both artist and educator. After I graduated from university, I entered a prolonged period of not knowing, suspended between thinking I could be producing something and the corollary to that, I had not yet found the language to name or understand. During that period, I was working on a large collage, a T-shaped canvas which I still have not finished, and I suspect I never will. This painting continues to speak, not as a product, but as a question.

This sensibility shapes how I now teach. My interest in artists' books stems from the sustained learning that they hold, gathering fragments and unresolved aspects. They allow learning to become tools and sites where students can collect ideas and thoughts without the need for explanation. They are cards inviting you to stay inside of something that is forming in the students' minds. I have also found that drawing, more than painting, invites this openness. There is less pressure, and it is improvisational and provisional. Students approach drawing with more freedom and fewer expectations. This looseness is generative and opens things up for risk, error, or failure as a method.

Pedagogical Moves | *Refusal, Delay, Drift, Disappearance*

Refusal

This concept in pedagogy should not be seen as purposeful obstinacy, although it can involve some performative transgressiveness in a classroom. Rather, it can be understood as a practical refusal to oversimplify or make complex things explicit for the sake of coherence or requisite straightforwardness. Édouard Glissant speaks to "the right to opacity," a refusal to simplify or expose complexity for the sake of easy understanding (1990/1997, p. 190). He describes opacity as a resistance to control and transparency, especially in terms of colonial epistemologies. What might that look like in the classroom? A student simply refuses to explain the work, or they would prefer confusion over clarity. Yet this certainly does not appear apathetic. In this setting, refusal includes a more engaged sense of valuing multiplicity and acceptance of unknowability. This gesture permits mystery to enter and interrupts the small, staunch drive towards mastery, and the more demanding, relational work of holding complexity—without flattening it—might happen. According to Derek Ford and Tyson Lewis (2017), Jean-François Lyotard's "pedagogy of the ineffable" invites educators to treat the "sublime" as a resource rather than seeing it as an obstacle. For Lyotard, the sublime indicates a moment where something exceeds our capacity to represent it—in other words, when we sense something before we can know or articulate it. In this moment, there is a rupture that occurs where thinking ceases, and meaning is left in suspension. Instead of demanding clarity or closure, the pedagogy is turned toward what cannot be said, toward interruptions, delays, and affective intensities that exceed language. In this way, the limits of expression and representation are no longer problematic failures. Instead, these limits become sites of ethical responsibility and

aesthetic experience. This resonates with my own exploration of abstraction and refusal as pedagogical conditions that teach through pressure, opacity, and the suspension of resolution. Students are invited to sit with different ways of knowing, to value something currently beyond all verifiable explanation, and, ultimately, both art and learning sometimes just must be illegible.

Thinking again about Malevich's *Black Square*—which was specifically discussed in Chapter Three—becomes all the more interesting here as the image refuses not only figuration, but narrative and the potential for interpretation (even one that includes continuity). *Black Square*'s blackness is opaque, not void or absence. Malevich declined to explain or name it precisely, or contextualize it in familiar terms. This introduces something radical. And, by leaning into a refusal process around this painting, students are invited to see how artworks—and by extension students themselves—are articulating, or actively withholding, knowing, and the impulse to share it. Refusal here is protection, not a retreat, and becomes a tactic in regard to articulating that which is unarticulable, or that which might, in fact, remain so.

Delay

This idea—which is an opening, not avoidance—is frequently misunderstood too. Lauren Berlant (2011) describes this as an "impasse"—an immediate moment that is thick with possibilities. In an impasse, all of the familiar spatial relations between movement and meaning, or movement and actions, weaken, and time thickens. Learning itself is slowed, and it might appear as though nothing is occurring or taking shape, yet something is registered, metabolized, and felt. Students who return to the same unresolved drawing for reasons that have little to do with indecision, but rather because they continue to feel something in it is in a delayed state. The same is true of the long silence after engaging with an artwork—moving through an experience, no words arrive, as the body is still catching up with the moment. Delay is a modality of care; it stretches the speed of learning and allows for something to unfold in a space without immediacy.

Again, Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) models this temporality: it appears that little is happening, the dialogue is sparse, and the landscape seems endless. I have screened this film in some of my classes and prompted students not to interpret the film, but rather to notice how it moved through their bodies. What did they feel during the long silences? How did the slow and long representation of desert space shift their attention? Many of them felt disoriented or frustrated in some way, but that feeling also became material for thought. Delay became

embodied. The film held them in Berlant's thickened present, asking them to linger in duration instead of meaning.

Drift

This notion is the next pedagogical gesture that is a value to purposive movement, without aim or direction. Brian Massumi (2002/2021) defines intensity as a consuming sensation or feeling that transcends logic. This sensation, which may or may not be named, propels us forward or backward. Drift arises from that intensity and arrives when a student begins with an idea but no longer cares about it, following a material, a rhythm, a mood (as when one is reading, for example) into uncharted territory. Drift is not adrift. It is a way of affective navigation.

Figure 26. Stills from *Enter the Void*, directed by Gaspar Noé, 2009. Cinematography by Benoît Debie. Image assembled by the author. A sequence of recurring circular motifs links disparate moments in Oscar's first-person journey.

Consider Gaspar Noé's *Enter the Void* (2009) as a cinematic equivalent. The film drifts through Tokyo, and its visual language is characterized by long, floating, exploratory shots, woven together through memory, mortality, and hallucination (Figure 26). It does not follow a traditional structure and linear delivery format. It immerses you rather than explains. When I have shown this film to students, there is initially a resistance to it. But instead of decoding, we trace what the film is doing: how it lingers, tracks, and pulls. The film explores the concept of time travel, which is central to its narrative, transitioning smoothly between scenes through

circular motifs that connect diverse settings, reflecting the film's hallucinatory approach to time, perception, and continuity. There is no clear narrative or defined goal in this journey, as experienced through Oscar's first-person viewpoint. All of these are good demonstrations of drifting, and they align with the *pedagogy of the unrepresentable*.

I would ask: What if you followed a 'thing' without knowing where it would take you? Drift is a way of attending differently—of letting sensation lead thought. In the studio, it could mean abandoning the plan and following an unexpected gesture, or allowing one artwork to respond to another artwork's pulse or vibration. Drift refuses clarity, and its privileges become more important than arrival.

Massumi reminds us that intensity does not travel in straight lines. It veers and multiples. Drift invites students to trust that veering and to let themselves be led, side tack, undone. It models making as sensing, as staying close to the energy charge of the work itself.

Disappearance

It is possibly the most subtle sign, on the other hand. It is a movement away from visibility, control, and explanation, and does not equal absence. In *Formless: A User's Guide*, Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1997) utilize the term "formless" to signify not the absence of form, but rather a collapse of aesthetic closure —a resistance to legibility. Disappearance within a pedagogical context may resemble a drawing that has been erased, an artwork that has been left untitled, or a teacher who has stepped back from the learning engagement. Disappearance is not apathy or neglect. It is an invitation to looseness, to relinquish control of meaning.

To teach through disappearance means to relinquish oneself from the centre. Trust that the potential for learning might happen in silence, confusion, and stillness. It is a shift from showing to hosting. Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), in which he intentionally erased a Willem de Kooning drawing as an act of artistic negation, exemplifies this (Figure 27). He didn't add—he erased. It might be perceived as an act of destruction or loss, as you see an artist erase another's achievement, but it is not. This situation will definitely be confusing for students. But what is left is a residue, a trace. It disappears while heightening perception, and its gesture holds space for meaning, not delivering it. Disappearance works in teaching in the very same way. In teaching, we are often asked: What if presence is awareness of something receding?

Figure 27. LEFT: Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953. Traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 64.14 cm × 55.25 cm. Collection SFMOMA.
RIGHT: Digitally enhanced infrared scan of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, showing traces of the original drawing by Willem de Kooning. Visible light scan: Ben Blackwell, 2010; Infrared scan and processing: Robin D. Myers, 2010.

There is another experience, one that was more extreme and painful yet also illustrative. In 2001, the Taliban demolished the monumental *Buddhas of Bamiyan*[15], a pair of sixth-century images carved into the cliffs of central Afghanistan. I want to condemn the violence of that act and its resulting erasure of cultural memory. But when I look at the photographs of what remained post-destruction—images of the empty reuse of the niches—there is a presence which has not fully dissipated. This absence has been inhabited. We can still feel the Buddha standing there, held by the void. Paradoxically, it is a presence made visible through absence. This aspect, too, resonates with the idea that the absence is not a space of emptiness, but of invitation.

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[15] The *Buddhas of Bamiyan* were two monumental statues carved into the cliffs of the Bamiyan Valley in central Afghanistan, dating from the 6th century CE. Standing approximately 38 and 55 meters tall, the statues represented Vairocana and Shakyamuni Buddhas and were central to a thriving Buddhist monastic complex along the Silk Road. The statues were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001, an act widely condemned as cultural iconoclasm and symbolic erasure.

Taken together, these gestures—refusal, delay, drift, and disappearance—are in themselves a resistance to the dominant logic of instruction, productivity, and mastery. They signal to go slowly, to sense, to stay. As Patti Lather (2007) acknowledges, learning is often uncertain, messy, unresolved—and that is not failure, it is a process. In the studio, these gestures don't feel like strategies. They feel the atmosphere they are the conditions that allow something real to begin. Drawing is a setting for this: low stakes, less pressure, more space to try. Within drawing, there is looseness that, in itself, creates opportunities for risk, for error, for staying in the unformed. It creates space for learning that doesn't need closure.

Student Responses to Abstraction

Encountering the Unfamiliar

When students first encounter abstract works of art, such as *Black Square*, they feel confused or frustrated. These works do not show anything they can identify with or associate a narrative structure with. Students may ask, *What is this? Why is this art? What am I supposed to say about something that seems empty?* Initial responses of confusion and frustration are not surprising. Most students are accustomed to looking at an image that represents something: their face, a landscape, a story, or even a symbol. Abstract, by its nature, does not readily provide answers.

Instead of framing this confusion and frustration as an impediment to learning, I see this as an important form of learning. Students' initial responses tell us a great deal about what a student may expect from an image and how they have learned to create meaning from images. W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) asks, "What do pictures want?" This is a clever question because it suggests that we must consider images as more than objects to interpret. They are agents acting upon us. We should not always assume that an image reflects meaning or is delivering a message to be decoded. We should consider the kind of relationship an image establishes with the viewer. What kind of attention does an image ask of the viewer? What feelings or responses does it provoke or take away? If we consider a relationship with the viewer instead of just interpreting the image itself, we can see that abstract images are not silent (or empty); They may be difficult, resistant, or strange, but they are not passive. Abstract images demand a response; they invite contemplation, ask viewers to linger through doubt, to slow down and look again.

An example of Mitchell's exemplification at work is the Rothko Chapel[16]. When visitors stand in front of large, almost black paintings by Mark Rothko, they frequently report that they start crying or are overwhelmed. James Elkins (2004) describes how people sometimes weep at "nothing but colors"—there is no figure, story, or clear meaning. The works are not doing something in the sense of doing something. They work manifestly to the viewer with some degree of force. These works seem to be asking something of us—not understanding, but presence; not explanation, but vulnerability. This is what Mitchell points out: abstract images are not passive. They push, pull, and draw out tension. Rothko's work doesn't tell you what you're supposed to feel. It frames a space in which feeling becomes unavoidable (Figure 28).

Figure 28. Rendering of the Rothko Chapel with renovated skylight and Rothko's paintings. Image published in The New York Times (Architecture Research Office, Rothko Prizel, & Rothko, 2019). © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Used without permission under fair dealing for educational purposes.

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[16] The Rothko Chapel, located in Houston, Texas, was founded in 1971 by John and Dominique de Menil as a non-denominational sacred space for contemplation and dialogue. Designed in close collaboration with the artist Mark Rothko and architect Philip Johnson (later revised by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry), the chapel houses 14 monumental dark-hued paintings by Rothko. Blending spiritual aspiration with abstract expressionism, the space functions as both a sanctuary and a site for civil rights discourse, interfaith gatherings, and artistic reflection.

Additionally, Krešimir Purgar (2019) offers an alternative perspective on this shift. He discusses the difference between representation—where we have something that we recognize—and "appearing", which is more open, unstable, and grounded in the viewer's perceptually affective experience. Representation acts by referring to something beyond itself, and appearing is concerned with how the image has become present before us, without the need to be symbolic/signify something else. This engagement with images emphasizes the act of seeing itself—how forms, surfaces, and space present themselves directly to perception.

Purgar stresses that "appearing" is not decoding symbols or revealing covert meaning. Rather, it asks for the image itself to be received, where attention is given to how the image appears in perception, without necessarily pointing beyond itself. Abstract images generally work in this way. They have no claim to be interpreted into verbal meaning, and instead, they call attention to their material presence, to color, texture, scale, weight, stillness, etc. They appear in front of us, not always in ways that are clarifying or even fully describable, yet still deeply affective. In this sense of appearing, looking asks for a slower, embodied kind of looking, one that invites ambiguity, delay, and presence, rather than fixed interpretation or judgment.

Another helpful notion from Purgar deepens this understanding in the idea of "absolute image". An absolute image, according to Purgar in *Pictorial Appearing: Image Theory After Representation* (2019), is an image that radically stakes its difference from the world rather than imitating it, meaning that it demands its existence as a visible, bounded, two-dimensional surface, and does not represent a thing or an idea. While immersive or mimetic images attempt to pull the viewer into a recognizable scene, "absolute image" stands its ground as an image and nothing more. It is defined by iconic difference from both text and text's reality.

Julije Knifer's black and white meander paintings are considered a strong instance of what Purgar calls absolute image. These works are not about telling a story, or representing another thing, but wholly repeat one form—the meander—over and over and over again (Figure 29). The form does not change and does not lead you to a final picture or ultimately deeper meaning. To students, looking at these paintings can feel odd or even frustrating, because there isn't anything to decipher or explain. But the lack of any noteworthy meaning is part of their strength. They hold the viewer's gaze through being still, silent, and unrelenting as an image. They do not attempt to mirror the real world or the viewer into another scene. Instead, they ask us to look, to notice that the image is simply itself, flat and whole. Knifer's paintings can also

help students think about moving away from "What does this mean" to "What does this do," or "What does it feel like to stay with this?" Thus, abstraction is no longer a problem to solve. It is a practice in experience.
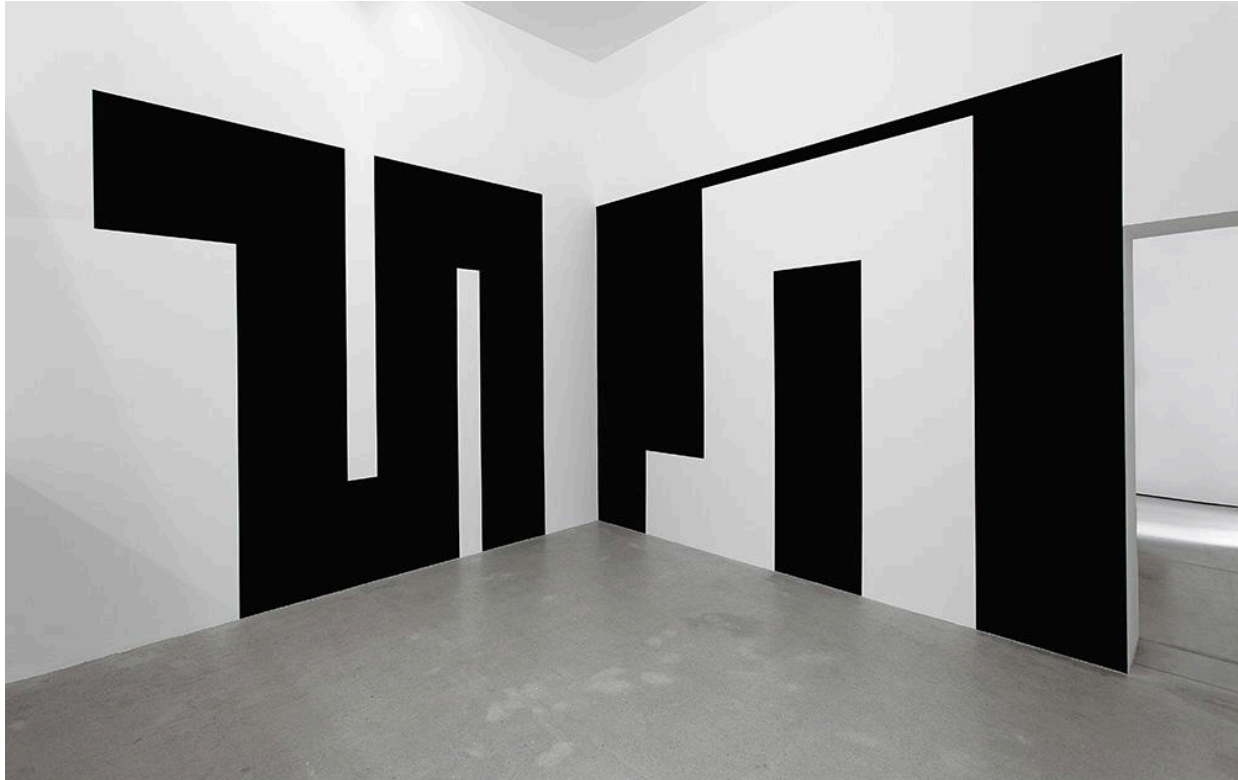

Figure 29. Julije Knifer, *Untitled* (first executed at Galerie Georges-Verney-Carron, Villeurbanne, Lyon, France), 2000/2018, Acrylic, Dimensions variable, Unique, Photo: Zarko Vijatovic, Courtesy of the Estate of Julije Knifer and Galerie Frank Elbaz.

What They Ask, What They Resist

Oftentimes, when students come across works that are abstract or monochromatic, they will ask, "What is it supposed to be?" or "Is this finished?" Surely these questions are rooted in a natural curiosity, but they are also representative of an ingrained habit of seeing. For many students, art is judged based on similarity or clarity of representation. When an artwork does not explain itself or anything recognizable, it is natural for the student to form their own judgment first, so that they can gain a knowledgeable understanding of the reference. Their discomfort is both a problem and an opportunity to explore a learned response that has emerged from the expectation that images can communicate something swiftly, clearly, and sufficiently.

James Elkins (2009) embraces this idea, with some degree of critical skepticism toward the notion of "visual literacy". He considers the term too vague, without clarification of its meaning, of how or when we might use it in an educational or theoretical context. Heightening something meant to clarify our engagement with images only serves to complicate the enterprise of visual experience. Within many practice settings, the tendency is to either increase the habitual patterns of seeing, place a high value on seeing clarity or recognizability, or assume there is a symbolic nature to images that has a specific meaning, so students will conclude that a good viewer is one who knows what it is and then can talk about it.

Elkins also questions this premise, arguing it is not always the case that the image will or should be read in the literary sense. To simply remind us that seeing is never a neutral, transparent activity, but one shaped by culture, habit, pedagogy, and power. When students encounter minimalist abstract paintings, such as Rothko's or Malevich's, and feel bereft, it is likely that they are experiencing the limits of the visual codes they have internalized. Their questions (What is this supposed to be? / Is this finished?) are not just about the painting. It is, rather, their uncertainty of not having access to a readily interpretable answer. Elkins invites educators to hold back from simply providing answers and to see the student's discomfort as an opening for inquiry: In what ways can students become accustomed to navigating ambiguity in their viewing? What other ways of seeing might happen if we do not rush to meaning?

Mitchell (2009) expands on this discussion by questioning the very idea of "visual literacy". From his viewpoint, readings of images that treat them as texts impose linguistic expectations onto visual experience. This model of pedagogy essentially posits that images should behave similarly to language, where the text has a meaning that can be identified. However, abstract artworks simply cannot be interpreted in textual ways. If our desire to read images as readable signs reflects our anxiety about their unruliness (Mitchell, 2009), what would happen if we decided to allow images to operate on us in ways that would not yield to reading? This reframes the student's discomfort; it is not a failure of comprehension, it is an encounter with a different way of knowing, which, by its nature, is resistant to clarity and invites presence. These questions/doubts are not barriers—they open things up. They allow us to ask, what are students really looking for in a work of art, and how might they begin to see if they do not try to name it.

Paul Hackett (2016) extends the inquiry further by drawing on neuroaesthetics to argue that perception is a layered, multisensory phenomenon that involves more than sight, but involves touch, emotion, memory, embodied sensations, and so on, for example. For Hackett, the experience of art—particularly abstract art—is a condition of some sort of interwoven matrix of cognitive and affective processes, and therefore, an art experience. It is important to note that 'what a work means' is much less important than 'how a work feels,' and, in this case, unfolds in real-time for the perceiver. In his view, perception is not passive reception. It is an active, interpretive, embodied engagement with form, space, and affective resonance.

This becomes immediately evident when students encounter a painting such as *Black Square*, where most or all of the elements we recognize are absent, and the work and viewer both resist an easy explanation. Hackett argues that when images elicit sensations that feel heavy, still, or uneasy rather than what they mean, we circumvent our habitual search for meaning at the same time. It is not second or third, and regards the validity of students' engagement with works of art in a sense. The student may not be able to "explain" the painting; however, they are moved, disoriented, or compelled. Acknowledging the act of smiling, being moved, or experiencing discomfort becomes vital and a good place for students to start reconfiguring their relationship to the image collaboratively. It is not about what the painting means or anything about whether it is good or bad; it is about having the student sit in it, how the work feels, having the student reflect, and allowing the experience to unfold in ways that are open-ended. Once students acknowledge and validate their emotional and sensory reactions, the initial experience of resistance that they described and enacted matures and turns into deeper experiences of engagement.

Staying With It | From Resistance to Reorientation

Although certain students may not be supportive of abstraction at first, over time, something begins to shift. As they spend more time with non-representational works, it is common for them to start slowing down, to notice carefully, and to respond more deeply. They will distance themselves from "solving" the work, meaning they no longer view it as a puzzle, and instead, they will start noticing its presence; how it sits in space, how it holds silence, how it offers mood, or how it presents time. This shift does not happen for every student, and it does not happen quickly, but when it does, it signifies a potent reorientation of perception.

The last discussion of Krešimir Purgar's distinction between "representation and appearing" is relevant in this instance. When students stop looking for meaning and rather begin noticing how the image appears—the scale, the weight, the stillness—this means the student is no longer requesting the image to speak to them in a language that it does not even use; they begin to receive the image on its own terms. Being with an abstract painting becomes an act of presence—a willingness to dwell with what does not easily attach to a name.

Typically, this process takes shape through things such as stillness or repetition. A student might begin saying, "I don't get it," only to later admit that the image "stuck" with them, or that it felt "heavy" or "calm", without knowing why. These types of responses, while subtle, showcase a shift in processing from interpretation to perception—from resistance to embodied attentiveness. This analysis is not about the purposeful development of understanding abstraction in the standard sense. This is about working to be in that space—to allow the work to unfold in the body and over time. Recognizing these affective responses as valid—and even valuable—has a role in orienting the students to relate differently to the images they experience.

One particular moment that clearly attests to this development was in a drawing class where I asked the students to watch *Gerry* (2002), a slow, minimalist, non-narrative form that neither builds a coherence of a story nor proceeds by any clear structure. When we finished the film, the students described their feelings of confusion, boredom, and even frustration. One of the students told me that the first thing he did after the film finished was delete it from their computer. Another told me that she watched it a second time immediately after, because she felt like she was supposed to. For a good portion of the class, students were asking famous questions of this research, like, "What does it mean? Why is it like that? I don't get it."

Rather than providing an explanation of the film, I invited the students to talk about their reactions. I asked them questions like "What did you notice that confused you or made you uncomfortable?" Then, asked them to describe to me what they saw and what they heard, without trying to make any of it an interpretation. For us to engage in conversation about this film, we would methodologically need to focus on a short, extended moment (and repeat it) of the film—approximately four minutes of two characters walking next to each other in profile, with silence other than their footsteps in the desert (Figure 30). In another part of the film, there is a long take of one character stuck on the top of a rock while the other character talks with him,

trying to convince him to jump—this is a long take (that lasts over eight minutes) that again has long stretches of silence without any music or dramatic action.
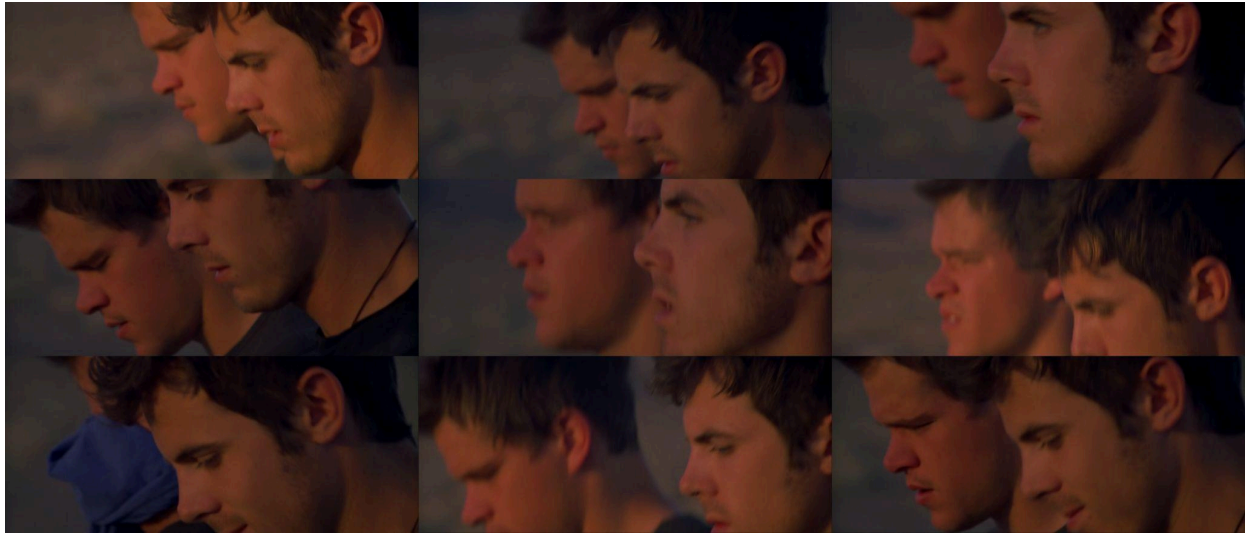

Figure 30. Stills from *Gerry*, directed by Gus Van Sant, 2002. Cinematography by Harris Savides. Image assembled by the author.

Through attending to these sequences of long 'boring moments', there became a space to slow down. I asked them, "What did you notice? What did you feel or hear that made you feel something? What was the effect of silence and slowness?" During our discussion, the conversation shifted toward the class realizing that the film wasn't about the plot. It was about time, rhythm, space, and attention. The realization began to sound like abstract paintings; it didn't ask to be understood—it asked to be experienced.

The mood in the room became a space where students were beginning to explain how the film was making them feel physically restless, calm, tense, and curious. What started to feel like confusion began to feel like an investigation. The class itself became a kind of lab for working with the unknown in the moment and the space where not knowing is part of a learning to look, listen, and feel more deeply. While much of the concern remains how students shift their relation to text, it becomes highly relevant to ask what role we as educators play in transforming the experience.

Responding to Response | Teaching in Relation

When students experience confusion and frustration in response to these images, the teacher is not there to solve the puzzle, but to hold space for it. Teaching becomes a relational practice in this scenario, less about providing answers and more about noticing the discomfort, curiosity, and emotional intensity.

Sharon Todd (2003) writes about "learning from the Other," which is based on the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For Todd, education is not about delivering knowledge. It is about developing an ethical relationship between the teacher and the learner—one that acknowledges the other's difference, vulnerability, and unknowability. She argues that learning requires one to be open to what we cannot fully know or master. In this framework, ambiguity is not something to be resolved; rather, it is a natural part of the process. It is merely a space for ethical learning. The teacher's role, in fact, is not to guide the student out of confusion. It is to be with them while present in confusion to provide presence over direction. This would entail listening deeply in order to resist the temptation to define and conclude too early, and for both the teacher and learner to accept that they are changed by the encounter. The teacher's job is to be present to offer a response, not a resolution.

This kind of teaching theoretically resists the traditional image of the educator as someone who explains or translates difficult material into clear meaning. The essence of this relationship resonates with Elizabeth St. Pierre's (2019) notion of the "refusal of method," which challenges the structure of how knowledge is sought, pursued, and disseminated in classrooms. St.Pierre advocates for a position that relinquishes established frameworks, outcomes, and processes—what she refers to as the grip of the "dogmatic image of thought"—to open up space for something unpredictable to occur. That is, instead of taking a step-by-step procedure towards clarity, teaching becomes a matter of trusting emergence and encountering the unforeseen.

In this sense, to teach without method is not to teach without care or intention. It is to create space where learning is not tied to comprehension. The student can dwell on something unfinished, opaque, or uncertain. It requires the teacher to defer to the pressure to make it "work", or be useful within an established way of conceiving knowledge, and instead ask: What kinds of thinking (or being) might emerge if we do hold space for what has not yet settled? When students say they do not understand, the invitation is not to fill the void of confusion with a clear

answer, but instead to ask: What does that confusion feel like? What does it make you notice? What does that confusion ask of you?

In terms of returning to Mitchell's (2005) question—What do pictures want?—We could also ask, What does the student's response want from us? Just as abstract images place demands on the viewer, student responses place demands on the educator. The shift is to offer a reaction without taking over, to guide without closing. Thus, teaching becomes a responsive and relational act, located not in mastery but in shared attention to things. The classroom becomes a space of resonance, not resolution.

In my teaching, I try to resist the urge to provide immediate answers. Whether I am screening *Gerry*, showing an image such as *Black Square*, or playing ambient music in class, like *Stars of the Lid* [17] or *Deathprod* [18], I try to create a ground—a space in which meaning is not required to be resolved. I ask more questions than I provide explanations. I also do not direct students to see things in any specific way and simply try to draw their attention to aspects that are not usually considered: a texture, a line, a pause, a flicker of light, the corner of an image, or even a tonal shift. I am asking them to take their own cues. I spend time first disrupting their confidence in their own visual habits. I ask: What if your eyes are not that trustworthy? I am not trying to throw their trust into doubt—I am simply opening up a space that might open a space where other ways of noticing can emerge. Teaching becomes less about directing the student toward a known place in the end, and more about holding open the conditions so that something unexpected may emerge: something neither one of us could have imagined ahead of time.

There are moments in teaching when this becomes really personal. To be a refusal method, as St. Pierre (2019) discusses, is not an abstract notion—it is the notion of standing in front of a classroom with no script and no certain place to arrive at, but still choosing to remain open. It is discomforting and vulnerable at times, while full of possibilities. I find that when I trust not knowing, I pay attention to something I might not have, if I had just jumped to a very quick response: a student's body language, a sudden pause, and an unplanned but strange connection. These little shifts become moments of learning that cannot be anticipated. It is the

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[17] Stars of the Lid is an American ambient music duo formed in the early 1990s by Brian McBride and Adam Wiltzie in Austin, Texas. They are known for their minimal, drone drone-based compositions. Their work deals with slow temporal unfolding, harmonic suspension, and perceptual limits in sound.

[18] Deathprod is the pseudonym of Norwegian composer and sound artist Helge Sten who has been active since the early 1990s. His work combines analog electronics, tape loops, reverb saturation, and homemade processors to create thick, immersive soundscapes. Often referred to as "dark ambient" or "audio noir," Deathprod's music is characterized by a sense of haunting stillness and sonic decay.

same as noticing small touches in Rothko's painting or edges in another artwork, which can be subtle but equally powerful as the rest of the image.

I have learned that teaching in this way requires a certain kind of listening more than talking—to dwell with the student's uncertainty as well as my own. It necessitates staying, not rushing or fixing, and being there. This can happen simply by allowing a silence to occur a little longer, or by asking a question and allowing the silence to hang, until a response appears, without providing an answer. Or it can mean acknowledging the discomfort in the room without trying to soothe it, while giving it intelligent attention. These gestures may seem small, yet they alter the feeling of the environment. The classroom becomes a space in which not knowing is a condition we share, not a failure. In this aspect, responding is what I consider it to be, not directing, but attending. If it is our job as educators to hold space for wonder, then the course itself should be designed with that openness in mind.

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