

# **The Empty Space in Abstract Photography: a psychoanalytical perspective**

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In my research I seek to explore the particular theoretical problems raised by dealing with the notion of abstraction in photography. Abstraction in photography is often considered to be inconceivable and to be antithetical to its very essence, which is built upon the imprint of the trace of a real object on the photosensitive surface and the creation of a strong bond between photography and reality. The theoretical problems associated with this consist in the relationship between the two semiotic categories of the photographic sign, whose status is challenged when it comes to discussion of the abstract image. The photographic sign oscillates between being an index in relation to the real, in terms of the objective world, and being an icon in relation to the representation of the real. Thus, an abstract image raises questions about the relationship between the formal elements of the pictorial space of the photograph as opposed to the relationship between the object-referents in the world. My research aims at examining and resolving, to a certain degree, the formal problem of abstraction as it emerges from the optical, abstract, empty photographic space in the images of my practice, leading to an understanding of the above more general problem of how the referent of photography as actual object shifts its meaning to become an abstract form.

Within this context I explore the relationship of the abstract photographic image to the inner world, and also notions of exteriority and interiority as these relate to the transition from the unconscious to conscious reality. This investigation draws mainly upon the

psychoanalytic theory of *transitional phenomena* as proposed by Donald W. Winnicott (1971), as well as other art theories (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, Ehrenzweig, 1967, Flusser, 1984, Greenberg, 1993, Joselit, 2000, Kuspit, 1993, Leider, 1992, Worringer, 1953) around abstraction. Winnicott positions the *transitional phenomena* in an intermediate area of experience between the internal and external reality. Within this area – *the potential space* or the *transitional space*, as I make use of the term -- creativity originates as a zone of fictive play and free mentation that facilitates the subject's journey from 'what is subjectively conceived of' to 'what is objectively perceived' throughout his/her development towards adaptation in the real world.

I suggest the concept of the *transitional space* as an aesthetic model of abstraction, which I apply both to the creative process during the making of the work and to the interpretation of the visual forms of the final photographs. This implies the use of Transitional Phenomena as a methodological tool, which helps in developing my practice and creating a framework for the understanding of my work. The creative process involves a kind of performative action of intervening in the construction of the abstract photographic space by placing pieces of thread on the wall and marking the space of reality that is being photographed. This action, seen through the prism of creative playing according to Winnicott's ideas around playing and reality, informs my practice and is essential in comprehending the context of the work in terms of reading the visual abstract forms through the idea of transition of the photographic sign between being the object of photography in the real world and being a formal abstract element in the pictorial space of the photograph.

My practice was developed during three different stages of photographic exploration. The creative process of making the work took place on the grounds of establishing the abstract space of the photograph as a space having a psychic dimension, which is better understood through Winnicott's approach based on the theory of *Object Relations* as proposed by Melanie Klein (1973a). The notion of *space* has a central role in my practice as it constitutes the reality world of objects and it is dealt as an external whole object in a broader sense throughout my engagement with it. My creative process is about a journey of seeking for a fusion of *spacescapes* with *mindscales*, during which the mode of encounter and interaction with my surrounding space is based on my perception of it as a place of exploration, adjustment and development of the subject and a place of creativity where the produced artworks, the photographs in this case, are products of projections and introjections of parts of the self. By the term *spacescapes* I mean the urbanscapes and landscapes as well as the interior domestic spaces I encountered with my lens throughout the practice during my research. I dealt with those spacescapes as spaces having a psychological impact on me, into which I projected my *phantasies* and unconscious desires and with which I came into fusion by internalizing them in the form of introjected part objects attempting to reach a state of oneness with them. Within this context of my particular encounter with the reality world, the notion of space is attributed the meaning of the concept of the *transitional object*, as it facilitates my adaptation in it. It functions in a parallel psychoanalytic context with the transitional object as employed by the infant, for whom the transitional object is a *possession* without being an internal object, neither an external one. It embodies the idea of *transition* as a psychoanalytic phenomenon that

facilitates the process towards integration from the inner world to the external world of objective perception. Out of this context my photographs emerge as the result of a creative play with the external world, a play that has a silent, unconsciously secret performative dimension, since the photographic space I create is a subjective interpretation of my objective reality. It is not a documentation of it.

The optical, abstract, empty space that I construct in my images shares similarities and differences with the flatness, emptiness and monochrome of abstract modernist and abstract expressionist paintings as well as with the minimalist character and inexhaustibility of pure objecthood of modernist works. To give two examples, I can refer to the black canvases of Mark Rothko's last paintings and the work of Eva Hesse as these are analysed through the psychoanalytic prism of Peter Fuller's (1980) and Briony Fer's (1997) criticism respectively. Both theorists draw upon the Kleinian (Klein, 1973b) analysis of the case study referred in an article by Karin Michaelis of Ruth Kjar's empty space as a feeling of something lacking in her body, which was finally filled up by drawing a life-sized figure of a naked negress in the empty wall space of a painting which had been removed. Kjar did the drawing without having any previous pronounced creative talent in painting. Both Fuller and Fer use this blank space as a metaphor, which comes to symbolize the internal psychic space before the entry into language and although it may seem unstructured in the metaphor, it is very well structured as Klein has argued. Through art Ruth Kjar became capable of reaching unity and oneness with the world and overcoming the trauma of loss and its sadistic repercussions she felt. Her need

and anxiety for reparation of that loss helped her to overcome her depressive position and fill the empty space inside her. The emptiness in Rothko's paintings is seen according to Fuller as a shift from the study of the objective world to the study of the internal objects in the unconscious mind, which is a transition that resulted in a regressive target – the nothingness in his paintings- and failed to preserve the interrelatedness between his internal and external reality. Rothko did not manage to reverse the trajectory his work was taking. Instead of travelling towards the positive direction of his transitional space to reach reality and achieve adaptation by studying the external objects, he withdrew deeper into his empty space of black nothingness, a space that he was not able to fill as Ruth Kjar did. On the contrary, my work makes constructive use of the concept of the *transitional space* by producing an optical emptiness that implies fullness rather than nothingness. It also has parallels with the emptiness of Eva Hesse's work, which according to Briony Fer embodies an economy of loss in the procedures it uses. By discussing Fried's view on the importance of the beholder's body distance from the minimalist work, which is not only physical but also psychical, Fer draws a parallel in Hesse's art in the discomfiting and bodily disorientating conditions under which the viewer is forced to look at her work. The distorted and discontinuous character of her work creates a distance between the spectator's body and the sculptural object, which reflects the psychic distance between the external and internal object (or internal body since the internal object is part of the body). This distance is translated into the existence of a gap in the body or else an empty space. Thus, although Hesse's work is associated with the pure objecthood of minimalist works, her objects, as in the case of my photographs, can be seen as a work with a psychoanalytic resonance and narrative, where

there is always something to exhaust in opposition to the pure minimalist works where the materiality of the objects dominates the whole work.

Abstraction as it emerges from the photographs of my practice is a journey about the real, a journey following the route of a circle; beginning in the real world, withdrawing to an inner world of unconscious processes and returning back to reality. The line that draws this abstract space is both abstract and concrete, both abstract and figurative. It is a transitional line that plays with the real in an intermediate space between the inner and the outside. That is between photography's object of reference and the photograph's pictorial space. This creates the effect of ambiguity in its formal result by presenting the paradox that the abstract images are about a seemingly empty pictorial space, which at the same time is full of references since that area of emptiness is ultimately a real wall surface full of paint marks, dust, scratches and pieces of thread.

The ambiguity of the images is what makes the work interesting in terms of creating tension in reading the photographic abstraction, an ambiguity that would be lacking in a painting, since during the aesthetic appreciation of a painting the gaze stops on its opaque surface, while it travels through the pictorial photographic surface to look at the object as its source of reference. Thus, their ambiguity constitutes a partial resolution of the problem of abstraction in photography, as it provides a redefinition of it seen within the psychoanalytic context of the construction of the images. The transitional or potential

space of the photographic abstraction is full of potentialities, which are waiting to be realised. A definite or absolute resolution to the problem would close the area of its investigation, while a redefinition of it as a space of tension between aspects of the sign opens up the space as one in which the relationship between inner and outer reality can be performed and can become a space of action and intervention.

Consequently, the *transitional space* as an aesthetic model of abstraction based on the theory of *Objects Relations* can help in understanding the particular mechanisms that are responsible for the making of the images as well as for the relations that determine the function of the empty space of their formal result. The final photographs confronted as transitional objects by the spectators cause both their physical interaction with them as minimalist object forms and their psychical association with them that makes them engage with the psychic dimension that this empty space of abstraction suggests and which results in being a contribution to the general discourse around the problem of abstraction in photography.

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