

Ulrich Nausner  
blank

by Séamus Kealy, 2017

The temptation to write about an exhibition called blank is to write very little, or indeed almost nothing. This was indeed the request of the artist for the invitation card; that is, to leave out all descriptions of the artwork, the artist and the events around the exhibition.

Instead of giving in to temptation, however, I proposed to Ulrich Nausner that I would attempt a sideways approach to writing this text: I would include the words of another author.

There are three passages:

#### ONE

*As he swam, he pursued a sort of reverie in which he confused himself with the sea. The intoxication of leaving himself, of slipping into the void, of dispersing himself in the thought of water, made him forget every discomfort. And even when this ideal sea which he was becoming ever more intimately had in turn become the real sea, in which he was virtually drowned, he was not moved as he should have been: of course, there was something intolerable about swimming this way, aimlessly, with a body which was of no use to him beyond thinking that he was swimming, but he also experienced a sense of relief, as if he had finally discovered the key to the situation, and, as far as he was concerned, it all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in an absence of sea.*

#### TWO

*The night was more somber and more painful than he could have expected. The darkness immersed everything; there was no hope of passing through its shadows, but one penetrated its reality in a relationship of overwhelming intimacy. His first observation was that he could still use his body, and particularly his eyes; it was not that he saw anything, but what he looked at eventually placed him in contact with a nocturnal mass which he vaguely perceived to be himself and in which he was bathed.*

#### THREE

*It was night itself. Images which constituted its darkness inundated him. He saw nothing, and, far from being distressed, he made this absence of vision the culmination of his sight. Useless for seeing, his eye took on extraordinary proportions, developed beyond measure, and, stretching out on the horizon, let the night penetrate its center in order to receive the day from it. And so, through this void, it was sight and object of sight which mingled together. Not only did this eye which saw nothing apprehend something, it apprehended the cause of its vision. It saw as object that which prevented it from seeing. Its own glance entered into it as an image, just when this glance seemed the death of all image.*

This author is Maurice Blanchot, the French philosopher and novelist. The passages are taken from his 1941 novel *Thomas The Obscure*.

Thus in a way, my temptation of avoiding a first person text, as I mention above, while responding to the artist's work, was partly fulfilled. In another sense, Blanchot's writing had an immense impact on later ideas written more elaborately within *The Death of the Author* by Roland Barthes, and especially in *Writing Degree Zero*, where Barthes champions the writing of Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose prose has eliminated sentimentality and even subjectivity. Parallel notions of erasure of self, immersion in a conceptual or visceral whiteness, and ponderings on the void all seem to have some resonance with the current body of work by Ulrich Nausner. The choice of Blanchot's texts was also, for me, when mulling over this artwork, intuitive. This, for me, has both a kinship with and a tension against some of these above musings. Then again, the artist's "Hypertext-drawings," which appear as illegible inscriptions upon small pieces of paper, all arise from intuitive decisions. The artist chooses particular texts online, after sampling countless others, based on their relation to particular words, such as, in this case, "manipulation" and "construction." The works seem to stem from a sort of void of everything – the vastness and dumbness of the endless data archive called the internet. Thus small, modest but tense inscriptions on small pieces of paper, arranged in fours, appear as appropriately obscure, even capricious messages.

The artist reminds us that the word blank has several meanings in German (out of money, polished, bright/shining, free/naked, clear/pure) and English (without content, unfilled, bare, void, missing, empty, white, pure).

One can also be blank that is, stupid or without personality, quite like an object. Thus the "Memory Objects," the more physical wall-works in this exhibition, strike us also in their physical blankness, their lack of much of anything really. They are literally industrial readymades. Identical in form and stature, these rails and blank panels are unused server racks. The black sections keep dust out of the machinery of information and processing firing away within these vast (and global) circuits and storage units of information. They are standardized, they are common units, and they are pure seriality. The artist writes, "The thought of a double 'negative space' – the absent 'memory' of the servers or data on the one hand, and the blank panels on the other – refers to questions of the information age and the contemporary culture of memory and forgetting."

We, like the artist, may draw a blank.

That absence (of thought, of emotion, of meaning, of color, of form, of sense, of light) refers in turn to what is lacking, which in this case, could be anything. Or more exactly, as Blanchot reminds us, from the absence is derived great gestures, or indeed, untenable discord. Either way, it is not exactly nothing that lingers.