

*I'm explaining myself. I'm talking to you with a drink in one hand. At the open bar in the lobby of the reception for what's-his-name. Except when I get to my point I pause. There's a name I'm missing. Maybe it's yours. What I've forgotten is perhaps more important than what I've said. And you're politely waiting. And I stutter some half-sentences that don't come close to what I meant. But you nod anyway. Later that night at home in bed in the dark I'll recall just what it was I wanted to say. I'll open my eyes and look at the ceiling and simultaneously congratulate and berate myself for such a statement.*

*Drawing a Blank* is a group show of works culled from various periods, modern and contemporary, in which the appearance of expressionless vacancy and equipoise may be seen as a foil for troubled thought.

Within the context of Psychoanalysis, the question that one cannot answer is seized as the key. The patient who draws a blank is not exactly oblivious; the language just is not forthcoming. That one gets stopped there in silence, rather than simply making something up and moving on, indicates a self-censoring block, and this in turn indicates to the sensitive nature of what now eludes articulation. To the analyst, the mind that goes blank is not barren, but pregnant with thought. This blank precisely marks out and delimits the space of withholding, and under prolonged scrutiny, it will begin to show through. The analyst's questions are prescriptive, designed to make something appear in the mind of the patient: words pull on other words, on thoughts and on images. These are the instruments of the psychic surgery that is the talking cure, but here in the context of art we are not talking cure, though we deploy these instruments nevertheless.

In art, drawing a blank has long been standard practice, and here as well one might want to probe a little bit further. Clement Greenberg placed the entire evolution of the avant-garde in service to blankness when he wrote that its first priority was to rid works of meaningful content, as this was "infecting the arts with the ideological struggles of society." Ostensibly, the course of radical reduction would lead to a succession of ever more evacuated objects that could be understood by anyone anywhere in the same way precisely because there was nothing left in them to understand. Yet even as we approach the zero-degree, and perhaps especially there, questions arise as to just what it is we are left with.

In hindsight, we can see that whatever it is that we most wanted to lose in the void of the emptied-out work has remained behind. The course of radical reduction would lead not only to the positive truth of a medium's irreducible essence, but to a condition of suggestive mediality, a haunted substrate or screen. The *Black Paintings* of Frank Stella and Richard Hamilton's cover design for the

Beatles' so-called "White Album" constitute two of this exhibition's thematic signposts, for in them the pursuit of the void is explicitly framed in terms of avoidance, and thereby also in terms of confrontation. Increasingly, in the works that follow their recalcitrant lead, this will become the whole point of the operation: to resume the subtractive process as a form of historical excavation, and to draw submerged contents up and out, as though through the blank that first called attention to their vague presence.

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