

Yves Klein: Overcoming the Problematics in his Writings

Yves Klein first painted his blue monochrome in the early 1950s. He further developed numerous monochromes in painting, film, and music. His paintings are void of form and composition, simply full with Klein's sparkling ultramarine dubbed "International Klein Blue" by the namesake inventor. The conceptual nature of his art demands a close examination of the artist's ideas, found in his *writing*. Klein was a prolific writer, lecturer, and even newspaper journalist. He released two manifestos detailing his vision of his "blue period." He wanted his "*Overcoming the Problematics in Art* as his ethics and *The Monochrome Adventure* as his aesthetics".¹ Klein's writings are far from straightforward in presentation, like many post-modern artists of the time.² Klein is also a trickster artist, selling identical paintings for different prices, selling 'immaterial space' and throwing the exchanged money into the Seine, and displaying empty white rooms to excited guests. It is not unusual for these tricksters to leave many riddles to be left as exercises for the reader. His writings have many threads of seemingly unrelated thought that bubble up and disappear, quotations sometimes attributed and other times stolen and hidden, and tone, tense, location, and address that appear to lack logical or emotional structure. How do we approach these problems? Are they problems? Perhaps Klein is hiding nothing, and his writings prompt a hero's journey of a discovery, where the *journey* is the reward. Or perhaps he himself is lost, and his writings are sketches of a treasure map he himself wishes to unearth. Regardless, we can look at his personal history, the repeated and clearer lines in his manifestos and lectures, and a few

¹ Ottmann, Klaus. Forward. Klein, Yves. *Overcoming the Problematics of Art: The Writings of Yves Klein*. Spring Publications, 2007. xxii.

² Ottmann, Klaus, and Yves Klein. *Yves Klein: Works and Writings*. Barcelona, Spain : New York, N.Y.: Polígrafa ; Available in USA and Canada through D.A.P./Distributed Art Pub., 2010. 4.

personal accounts to at least understand what he considers the treasure. Though stated within multiple contexts, his mission appears to be consistent and clear: a project of immaterialization, where all of France become collaborative artists, using pure imagination to finish art itself. With this as his ultimate goal, we can unravel many of the problematics in his writings and art, and understand the 'doing' of Klein's proposed project.

To even begin, we must solidify the definition of Klein's project. Klein has generously provided a number of explicit statements concerning his notion of artistic progress. Even before this, we must prove that Klein is even driven by any sort of mission. He considers himself as "a researcher of a current problem"³ and to be pursuing a "journey of further development...for myself and for art as a whole"⁴ toward a "vision."⁵ He spreads this term, "vision," freely across his writings, and understands himself as a "proposer of the sensible,"⁶ but also as a "leader"⁷ and "creator."⁸ His ideas on collaboration provide some sense to this schizophrenic self-identity. He states "in collaboration we shall then individually practice pure imagination and sensibility," going on to say, "I hope to then find quite natural...to learn some day that the members...have suddenly and spontaneously signed one of my paintings without even speaking of me nor even of COLLABORATION."⁹ This is repeated in various formats with various words removed, but with the core message intact. He can be both a 'proposer of sensibility' while achieving an active role because active roles are simply propositions echoed through all artists. One might ask, what is this

³ *The Monochrome Adventure*. 144.

⁴ *The Monochrome Adventure*. 147.

⁵ *The Monochrome Adventure*. 156.

⁶ *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*. 63.

⁷ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 78.

⁸ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 81.

⁹ *Overcoming the Problematics of Art*. 62-63.

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'sensibility' he speaks of? Klein himself defines it as "the immaterialization of art in order to rebound, in one prodigious leap, from the brink of the problems of art into an authentic immaterial reality."¹⁰ He deems "true artists" as "those whose are liberated from the dreamy and picturesque imagination of the psychological real - the counterspace, the space of the past."¹¹ This thread of thought culminates into a less philosophic and more practical statement, "two colors juxtaposed compel the observer to see the spectacle of this juxtaposition...rather than entering into the sensibility, the dominant color, the pictorial intention."¹² Perhaps his art is best defined through negation, wherein Klein finds his vision to have "nothing whatsoever to do with that of MALEVICH or even MONDRIAN"¹³ and also the actions painters, saying "moving around like fools does not mean that you're active!"¹⁴ His reality is not Mondrian's utopia, and his paint is not imbued with the emotions of the action painter. It is somewhere inbetween, in the immaterial reality offered by a communion with the single color plane, which dominates the viewer's senses and sensibilities. He wants the 'readers' of his works to "be impregnated" through this domination, a phrase he employs with surgical precision. This reality is not constrained to the single inner individual! In fact, his ultimate goal is to start the "Blue Revolution" with "the surface of ALL of France as the canvas" but importantly wrought through "each individual in my system," each as "a grain of pigment" but "all as artists and a refiner of sensibility without knowing it."¹⁵ He focuses on what artists should be in his public lectures, but extend this goal to economic, political, and

¹⁰ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959.* 70.

¹¹ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959.* 75.

¹² *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959.* 82.

¹³ *The Monochrome Adventure.* 156.

¹⁴ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959.* 92.

¹⁵ *La grande force de ce mouvement,* 24.

social relations in his published writings.¹⁶ Within this, his blue color planes make sense. A Constructivist view sees the paintings as reproducible by all, a Neo-Plastic extends the utopia for all, and the Action Painter reconfigures this utopia for personal and individual sensibility. His reasons for choosing the monochrome blue as his agent of change are mythological and historical and are unimportant to this argument. The important notion is that his goal is to transform all the French into artists of this immaterial reality through the monochrome.

Thus, we arrive at the first conceptual problems presented in his *Overcoming the Problematics in Art*. The manifesto is cut into many parts. The first begins “by Yves Klein // Artist and Painter // Fourth dan black belt in judo.”¹⁷ He consistently views himself as a painter despite his multi-disciplinary tendencies, composing monochord orchestra pieces and numerous monoscene films. His passion for judo emerges briefly here, for he was indeed acknowledged as a true genius of judo, going as far as to say “judo gave me much...one like the other has lived with me like I live with my physical body.”¹⁸ He goes on to tell the story of the preparation, execution, and aftermath of his famous event where he invited guests to enter a gallery that contained nothing but an empty white room, the ‘void.’ The telling of the story contains excruciating details, such as specifying his thoughts at each denoted hour (from 1:00pm to 3:00am). He offers many insights into his thought process and reactions to reactions, providing a deeply personal account of the events. Herein lies the first problem. He wants his art to be collaborative and philosophical, yet spends so much real estate in his manifesto practicing what seems to be factual history in the most personal format: a diary of stream of conscious. The next problem is how he plays with perspective

¹⁶ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959.* 92.

¹⁷ *Overcoming the Problematics of Art.* 54.

¹⁸ *On Judo.* 2.

and tenses. He switches from first person (I, me, my) to the third person (he, him, they), starts in the past (the invitation was...), darts to the present (I now design them...), and even comes to the future (the ink we use will be...). The third problem is a vital omission. Klein believes in the influence of judo on his philosophical foundation, yet never mentions judo outside of the first passage, a pattern that continues in all his subsequent writings. The preceding passage, where he describes his family history and personal journey, lacks any mention of an activity he greatly prided himself and spent much time on, for which he “went to Japan for the specific purpose of mastering judo.”¹⁹ The omission of judo reveals how Klein plays an active role in censoring, or perhaps preparing for exhibition, his story and philosophy. Thus, all these choices cannot be simply seen as stylistic flourishes or open musing; Klein is making conscious and direct choices to further some mission.

By applying Klein's ultimate goal, we can begin to understand the purpose behind these contradictions. Klein wanted everyone to be an artist, and telling deeply personal histories of seems to run against opening art up to everyone. He decries the “desire to preserve individuality at all cost” found in the “egocentric artwork” of his time²⁰ but builds up a bit of his own cult of personality through his first-person accounts. All this, and Klein still thought of himself as “neither a literary man, nor a man of sophistication.”²¹ In a future lecture, Klein opens by saying, “I shall attempt to lead you to this same immaterial through my personal experience, interspersed with reflections on successive operations that we shall review backwards through time.”²² He has

¹⁹ *On Judo*. 2.

²⁰ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 76.

²¹ *The Monochrome Adventure*. 137.

²² *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 71.

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genuinely decided that the arrival at the mission must be individual in nature and practice, but that does not preclude a little guidance by way of his own experience. So, his personal accounts are to open a window into his life, for others to emulate freely! He does use first person words (me, I, my) frequently, but he has already made peace with this when he called for a continued signing of one's own name on work. This is all well and good, but then why the glaring omission of judo? Klein himself says of judo: "in France...[judo] passes for simplemindedness in the eyes of the circle of artists..." and that "it is a deeply personal communion that I find in judo."²³ Though the physical process of organizing a display and the conceptual descriptions of his mission are thus opened to us as accessible, Klein hides his deepest layers out of fear of misrecognition and perhaps of even alienation. Judo is too personal and odd for him to expect others to understand and internalize in art. He does want to spread the practice of judo, evidenced in his judo films and book in judo entitled The Foundations of Judo. But, he sees it as having no possible place in others' art, and removes it from his exhaustive history meant to be used as a model by others. We can also understand the tone of the piece with this. He lays out his methodology and though process so openly, planting an obvious logical continuum of behavior, that it appears factual and procedural. He calls many sections "sketches" and uses frequent ALL CAPS to emphasize names and important concepts (COLLABORATION is a favorite). The tone is highly reminiscent of many French math textbooks, where proofs are sketched and important concepts bolded and italicized.²⁴ So it appears that Klein is developing an immaterial textbook of sorts, guiding the readers along a

²³ *On Judo*. 4.

²⁴ *LaGrange, Lectures on elementary mathematics*.

path. The reader then can have a sense of discovery, much like the undergraduate math student, even though these truths have already been realized by scholars since.

The tone and content is largely settled; let us return to the problem of the shifting tenses. Though textbooks freely choose tense and narrator, the oddities in Klein's text have a greater purpose. We look forward, to Klein's *The Monochrome Adventure* to understand both the aesthetic nature of the goal and his way of explaining himself. In a key passage, Klein confronts the similarity of his monochrome and those of Kasimir Malevich, the Supremacist who predated Klein by decades. He says

"I will not burst into space like that poor and yet great MALEVICH... and this is why I can say, at the age of 30 in 1958, that when MALEVICH burst into space as a tourist, around 1915, I was there already to welcome him and he visited me, for I was...the co-proprietor and co-inhabitant, already and always. The position of MALEVICH in relation to me makes it possible to leave by the static speed of the immeasurable spirit of the phenomenology of time and allows me to say honestly and calmly that MALEVICH painted a still life based on one of my monochrome paintings. In effect, MALEVICH had infinity before him, while I am within it."²⁵

A controversial statement full of nuance no doubt, but most interesting to us at this moment is his negotiation of his place in art history. Klein is a man who draws many of his explanations and words from the writings of others. He constantly quotes painters such as Delacroix, poets such as Blachelard, mathematicians such as Poincare, even economists such as Keynes. He himself does

²⁵ *The Monochrome Adventure*. 170.

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not explain his choice of blue, but defers to long Delacroix and Blachelard quotations to do the historical leg work.²⁶ At times, he even neglects to attribute his words, taking up his proposed free collaborative spirit seriously. He tries very hard to establish himself within a historical trajectory, saying things such as “I am completing the forward movement of art” and “one arrives at our own time by way of the impressionists, the pointillists, the fauves...surrealism, lyric abstraction, right up to the monochrome [now]”²⁷ (him being the son of two artists may have developed this). Yet he says “it is not important who created the first monochrome painting.”²⁸ By challenging the historical canon of art, he frees the common artist of the continuum of thought. He claims much earlier artwork “imprisoned the public” by providing them with a “learned way of seeing,” even citing a bit of Van Gogh to drive home his point.²⁹ As he is interested in creating the immaterial sensible reality “through all times, all places, and peoples”³⁰ he must ‘leave’ time itself. Perhaps a Hegelian taste vis-à-vis notions of progress, but more seeking to enter the ‘infinity.’ This what he means when he says “I have attempted to leave a space through my work of the past ten years.”³¹ Thus, the shift of tenses and perspectives make perfect sense. Klein removes himself from time and punches a hole in the artistic tradition to open a space where and other artists can inhabit without constraint, opening up paths to pursue the sensibility he so desires.

²⁶ *The Monochrome Adventure*.158.

²⁷ *The Monochrome Adventure*.165.

²⁸ *The Monochrome Adventure*.164.

²⁹ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 84.

³⁰ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 98.

³¹ *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959*. 71.

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“It is certainly not enough to say or to write or to proclaim ‘I have overcome the problematics of art!’ It must actually be done, as I think I have done...it possible for me to establish myself, me, a painter, in realms foreign to me.”³² – Yves Klein

Certainly, Yves Klein's writing is complicated and problematic, perhaps owing to the conceptual nature of his mission and artwork. His writing not only reinforces his project; it plays an active role in the 'doing.' The teacherly tone, the fluidity of tenses, the glaring omissions, the historical call backs and refutations, every aspect of his works are indeed works that act upon the audience. Many more crevices and mountains within his writing demand further inspection. The fabricated mythos of his realization of the 'blue,' the audience facing specificity of language, and his usage of repetition across his works are all possible extensions. Not to mention his later floating 'architectures of air,' the human female as blue medium, and his sponge works. However, it is clear that posing incisive questions and trying to understand the problematics of Klein's writings are fruitful endeavors that provide contextualization and a certain depth to his project. This exercise has shown how powerful yet subtle artist's writing can be, especially when focused and seen through a specific goal. Though Klein likely did not succeed in his mission, he at least crafted works and writings that harmonize together, a thing of beauty for this cross-discipline artist.

³² *The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial: Lecture at the Sorbonne, 1959.* 90.