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Sculpture of Nowhere: The Problem of Nothing in the work of Fred Sandback

A Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History and Criticism

Stony Brook University

May 2012

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

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2012

By simply letting the interior of sculpture empty and reconfiguring the correlation between an object and its contextual space, light, and spectators, Fred Sandback's work engages with the problem of nothing in sculpture in a double way. On the one hand, it concerns the Greenbergian formalism by investigating how the transcendently self-sufficient object is constituted. On the other hand, it concerns the Cagean anti-aesthetics by showing how an immanence of life is affirmed through a processional interaction between object and space. His sculpture of nothing is both about a determinate object in an ironically formalist mode and about indeterminable conditions of object. To look deeper the artistic value of this practice, this thesis examines another mode of aesthetic negativity, the literature of un-word in Beckett's *NOT I*. If Beckett calls his text as "a next next to nothing," *NOT I* is about nothing both as a process to indeterminably puncture the normative conventions of the language and an invention of a determinate method to capture this process. The similarities and differences between Sandback and Beckett will etch the further implications of Sandback's "sculpture of nowhere."

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Preface

In 1816, the English literary critic William Hazlitt reported a remark made by a disconcerted viewer of Turner's landscapes: "All is without form and void. Someone said of his landscapes that they were pictures of nothing, and very like."¹ That the landscapes are not exactly "pictures of nothing" is important. They are expressive and powerful to the extent that there seems to be something represented, but this something comes very close to a presentation of nothing, almost unrecognizable and unidentifiable. A surfeit of abstraction and indistinct representation through the extreme use of aerial perspective brings forth the coincidence of nothingness and likeness. In the conclusion of his study on minimalism, Edward Strickland wrote, "Minimalism conjured up (no)thingness in monochromes, theoretically infinite drones and open fifths, slabs and vacant plinths."² Importantly, this conclusion is supported by the appeal to a character in the works of the American poet Wallace Stevens, "who beholds both nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."³ The experience of minimal art does not lie in positivist literalness, as in Stella's "What you see is what you see," but in the strange amalgamation of something and nothing. Although devoid of illusion, emotion, content, personality, gesture, and expressiveness, minimalism grapples with a new articulation of the (non)aesthetic core or bare rock through an austere reduction.

These two cases show that when one addresses the problem of artistic nothingness, one is not dealing with a predetermined or off-the-peg opposition between something and nothing, but the way in which an interaction between something and nothing provokes a consequent nothing as a construct. Namely, the way one articulates nothing is subject to the way one's historical epoch and discursive conditions determine it. Although they lean toward a similar conclusion and employ the same notion of nothing, there is a gap between Turner's nothing and

¹ William Hazlitt, *Complete Works. Centenary Edition*. P. P. Howe, ed., (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1930), 18:95.

² Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 294.

³ Strickland, *Minimalism*, 294.

minimalist nothing. While the former concerns representation or proto-abstraction, the latter engages three-dimensional space or the definition of art. In this regard, to address artistic nothing means to examine the contexts of the concept of nothing, historically formed and discursively constituted. To ask about the possibility of, for example, a “sculpture of nothing,” means to analyze the concrete procedure of how nothing is organized and consider the contexts surrounding the notion of nothing as a theoretical formation.

In this regard, Adorno’s discussion of Beckett in his *Negative Dialectics* deserves attention. Adorno specifies his aesthetic concept of negativity as the processual and open-ended, which defers any final synthesis of dialectics. He writes, “To Beckett, the created world is radically evil, and its negation is the chance of another world that is not yet....consciousness would have to extricate from it [no man’s land between being and nothingness] what is not in the power of the alternative. The true nihilists are the ones who oppose nihilism with their more and more faded positivities...Thought honors itself by defending what is damned as nihilism.”⁴ Thus, Adorno champions negativity as chance of “another” or power of alternative. By elaborating this true nihilist gesture that removes any pseudo-positivity at a formal level—thereby contending with any traditional narrativity and expressivity—Beckett is in line with Adorno when he invokes his text as “nothing.” At the same time, Beckett formulates his own vision of literature when he states that one must puncture the language as a veil until what is hidden behind the language, be it something or nothing, starts to appear.⁵ In this context, Beckett’s *NOT I* can be read as a double movement with regard to nothing. Beckett abides in the late modern aesthetics championed by Adorno’s negativity by puncturing the language and keeping this experimentation as ever open-ended. At the same time, if Beckett’s text is considered as nothing, devoid of any traditional narrativity and expressivity, *NOT I* is an invention of method to articulate “literary nothing” in a singular way. It is about nothing both as an indeterminable process and as a determinate way to capture this process.

Reorganizing the relation between an object and its contextual space, light, and spectators, Sandback engages with nothing in sculpture through a double movement. Presenting an empty space achieves a negation of an object. Suggesting an expanded field that goes beyond a self-sufficient object affirms an interaction between object and space. As Michael Fried argues, while minimalism espouses objecthood by focusing on the specific materiality of an art object,

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Aesthetics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 381.

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 171.

modernist art suspends this objecthood, for it leads to a theatrical effect, which is incompatible with the arts.⁶ On the one hand, Sandback is involved with the modernist concern; his strategy is to let the interior of an object be void, thereby questioning the self-sufficient status of an object and asking for a new thinking about what constitutes an object. On the other hand, with the interior intermingled with the exterior, Sandback is engaged with what Robert Morris called a “complex and expanded” situation. Arguing against the judgment that minimalist sculpture is negative or nihilistic, Morris wrote, “These judgments arise from confronting the work with expectations structured by a Cubist esthetic in which what is to be had from the work is located strictly within the specific object. The situation is now more complex and expanded.”⁷ In this expanded field of sculpture, “The major esthetic terms exist as unfixed variables that find their specific definition in the particular space and light and physical viewpoint of the spectator.”⁸ Accepting the empty space between the lines as material and substantial as the lines, Sandback’s sculpture concerns how the unfixed variables of an object interact with that object. Ultimately, within this debate between Fried and Morris, Sandback’s place would be elusive and nuanced. His sculpture does not totally remove the modernist concern; instead, he recasts it by intervening in the problem of an interior and exterior of an object. At the same time, Sandback is in line with the expanded field by showing how the indeterminable conditions of the object are as equally important as a determinate object. His sculpture of nothing is both about an object in a paradoxically formalist mode and about an interaction between object and space.

⁶ Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), 125.

⁷ Robert Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

Chapter 1: Between Form and Presence

If there is such a thing as sculpture of nothing at all, it would stand to reason that the empty, negative, unoccupied space that encloses art objects with a specific spatio-temporality is primarily regarded as nothing. To push one step further, the dynamic interaction between an enclosed object and its contextual surroundings could be expansively regarded as nothing, since this process of interaction concerns what is visual and what is material. From a rigorous formalist or object-based perspective, this interaction belongs to the terrain of nothing. However, the exploration of this terrain has been a major concern of twentieth century sculpture. It would be possible to reconstruct a genealogy of paradigmatic articulations of nothing in sculpture, presumably starting with Picasso's *Guitar* where void is affirmed through the representational collage of a sound hole of a guitar, Aleksandr Archipenko's *Woman Combing Her Hair* where the figuration of the woman's face is replaced by empty space, or Julio González's "drawing in space" where welding as a new methodology of producing sculpture leads to an active interaction between form and surroundings. For our purpose, it suffices to note that Gregory Battcock, in the preface of his critical anthology, *Minimal Art*, pays attention to the status of negative space in minimalism: "One result of a sculptural pattern that expands the abstract, non-emotional and non-expressionistic discoveries of the ancient Greeks, is a greater awareness of the negative space within the interior."⁹ One consequence of this awareness is that minimalism does not confine itself to object, enclosed or occupied. Minimal artists equally acknowledge the viewer as well as the space wherein the object and the viewer are inseparable and intertwined. "They force the audience to an awareness of *existence* that goes beyond the *presence* of any particular art object."¹⁰

In an analogous way, Sandback once stated, "What really interests me is the concrete three-dimensional space in which we find ourselves. Furthermore, there is always a certain ambivalence in my work between an easily graspable *form* and the actual complex *presence* of

⁹ Battcock, *Minimal Art*, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

the realized work.”¹¹ While not totally abandoning the formalist concern, Sandback displaces Battcock’s opposition between existence and presence into the ambivalence between presence and form, defining the latter as his primary concern. This statement can be applied to his first work, *Untitled*, made with a piece of string, installed at Yale University in 1967. It is a three-dimensional form of a rectangular solid, but it is simultaneously related to the presence originating out of the interaction between the imaginary volume and the empty space. More precisely, the work rearticulates the conventional understanding of the relationship between volume as occupied with mass and space as unoccupied in emptiness, since there can be no clear-cut distinction between the former and the latter. The reason why this presence is necessarily “complex” is because it is unlocalizable yet still belongs to the concrete situation. While there is a definite, easily graspable, geometric form, this form is closely linked to the extra-formal, physical presence where the form, the space/volume, the viewer, light, movement, and the architectural condition are interconnected and overlapped. As the form starts to sculpt the space, the supernumerary sculptural presence as the ambivalence between form and presence comes out of somewhere near the concrete form, ultimately existing nowhere in particular, but proliferating everywhere in general. The operation of this presence is the same for the relationship between figure and ground. When one sees the outline of the form as figure, one simultaneously sees the open space as background. But starting to focus on this space as background leads back to the figure—resulting in a constant perceptual oscillation or reversal between figure and ground. Form and space, object and context, figure and ground are interchangeable in a split second. It is both the mobilization of negative space and the interaction between form and space. In Sandback’s words, the complexity of this sculptural presence comes from the fact that “it was unavoidable to perceive that the sculptures didn’t stop where the lines did, and that the situation had gotten more complex.”¹²

However, this volume, whether imaginary or virtual, was considered to be a major problem in the self-critique of Sandback himself as well as Yve-Alain Bois’ review on the artist. “The first construction was a *depiction* of the perimeter of an imaginary volume...A lot of the

¹¹ Fred Sandback, *Fred Sandback: Being in a Place*. Friedemann Malsch and Christian Meyer-Stoll ed., (Vaduz: Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, 2006), 102.

¹² Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 109.

early pieces had the quality of being a boundary of an *object*, more or less.”¹³ With the outline of a rectangular solid depicted, the earlier pieces did not get out of the traditional paradigms on art such as art as representation, art as self-contained object. Considering that many—but not exclusively—early works take on geometric forms, this self-critique seems to be straightforward and reliable. Commenting about his overall trajectory, Sandback states that “I have moved from a more contained, enclosed situation to one in which the sculpture turns outward, exists more on an equal footing with an observer in a pedestrian space.”¹⁴ Thus, there is a significant transition from, albeit virtually volumetric, the more discrete, enclosed, autonomous object to the more open situation where the object, the viewer, and the space are more closely interconnected, and sculptural presence is more explicitly elaborated. Yve-Alain Bois also notes that the true problem of the early works was that they still referred to as absent object. “They still belonged to the epistemological realm of representation which was... what he, like his Minimalist mentors, wanted fundamentally to question.”¹⁵ Therefore, the sculptural presence of his earlier pieces is not sufficiently literal, not purely non-referential, not devoid of illusionism, representation, and narrativity. By engaging with these problems such as illusion, the literal, purity, and reduction, the first comrade *and* opponent Sandback encounters is, beyond doubt, Clement Greenberg.

¹³ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 109.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

Chapter 2: Between Greenberg and Cage

The problem of illusion is closely related to the problem of the sculptural negativity. The more an object takes on an illusionistic quality, the less its surrounding space will be activated, rendering the interaction between form and space ineffectual. Illusion takes away the awareness of the space and prevents the interaction between form and space. The sculpture would turn inward, contrary to what Sandback would call the sculpture's turning "outward." Herein lies the necessity for Sandback to engage with illusion. In order for there to be a fully opened sculptural presence, the sculpture needs to be removed from any illusionistic value.

In "Sculpture in Our Time," Greenberg advances a nuanced position in his definition of modernist sculpture. He argues that contrary to modernist painting, whose essential norm is its two-dimensional literalness, sculpture is inherently so literal that reduction becomes an almost needless project. Yet, Greenberg still had something to gain from the modernist reduction. The modernist sculpture gained a new "flexibility," due to new methods (e.g., welding) and new industrial materials, starting with Brancusi, Arp, and construction-sculptures done by Picasso, Lipchitz, and González, opposed to the traditional sculpture that has been handicapped by the representation of animate forms. For Greenberg, this historical condition opened up a unique possibility that sculpture straddles between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space between sculptural literalness and pictorial illusion. Of course, the programmatic removal of illusion rejects "sculptural painting," yet it "allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases."¹⁶ Parallel to this interruption of the essentialist medium-specificity and the emergence of pictorial sculpture but not sculptural painting, postwar sculpture is endowed with illusion of intermediary modalities instead of illusion of literal things. Due to the conjunction of cubist painting, new methods, and new materials, sculpture attains a physical and conceptual independence and a self-sufficient literalness such that it fits well into the high standard of modernist visual art. However, this aesthetic autonomy came with a price. Now sculpture is split, determined both by the quasi-pictorial illusionism and sculptural literalness. Interestingly, it is in this context that Greenberg incorporates the idea of sculpture of nothing—the interaction between form and space—into his writing: "This kind of illusionism is stated in pictures whose paint surfaces and

¹⁶ Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticisms, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 59.

enclosing rectangles *vibrate into the space* around them; and in buildings that, apparently formed of lines alone, *seem woven into the air.*"¹⁷ Along with the autonomy of sculpture comes this vibration of form, or the interwoven situation of object and space.

Sandback tackles this historical, theoretical issue on multiple levels, refashioning Greenberg's definition of sculpture rather than simply abandoning it. Sandback's sculptural negativity is not simply an interaction between object and space, but a microscopic investigation and reconstruction of that interaction. Sandback adheres equally and impossibly both to the literal non-referentiality and the very non-substantial, consequent status of that non-referentiality. Contrary to Greenberg, Sandback states that even Gabo's constructivist sculpture had involved a narrative quality through its reliance on a scientific model. The temptation toward representation does not simply come from the external visual reality, but it can also come from mental, logical reality. Although the constructivist sculpture relinquishes the representation of visual reality, it still had the representation of an *a priori* mental system. Working against this narrativity, Sandback defined sculptural volume apart from any pictoriality. Greenberg's abstraction is pushed one step further—rescuing sculpture from a necessary division between pictoriality and literalness. If so, how could this rigorous non-referentiality and abstraction could be achieved? It is at this point that one needs to focus on what Sandback called "the later works," the works with less object-based enclosure and more open sculptural presence. A significant point of reference is in 1973 when Sandback composed U-shaped freestanding pieces and continued to use this form throughout his career. It is also in the same year that he wrote that "in no way is my work illusionistic. Illusionistic art refers you away from its factual existence towards something else. My work is full of illusions, but they don't refer to anything. Fact and illusions are equivalents."¹⁸

The most distinctive trait of this U-shaped piece lies in the coincidence of the greater non-referentiality and the greater interaction between form and space. Due to its formal incompleteness, it no longer refers to the imaginary or virtual volumes. It might still be geometric, but geometric with an inherent crack: resisting to and protruding out of a unitary, closed form. It becomes more non-referential than geometric figures. Sandback stated, "Illusionism is making a picture of something. Possibly the trapezoids and rectangles I made

¹⁷ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays*, 60–61.

¹⁸ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 88.

were pictures of something, but the open pieces aren't."¹⁹ Not related to the geometry of a space or any *a priori* system, "the lines aren't distillations of anything, but simple facts, products of my activity which don't represent anything beyond themselves."²⁰ However, to overemphasize the lines as substance, which could exist in and for themselves without any relation to any other entity, is to ignore the complex operation of his works. While the lines are not representative of anything, it is equally important to note that the sculptural presence offered by Sandback is fundamentally related to the indiscernibility of lines and multiple parameters of space, such as light, air, movement, architectural setting, authorial intuition, and spectatorial participation. Thus, Sandback writes that "the line is *a means to mediate* the quality or timbre of a situation, and has a structure which is quick and abstract and more or less thinkable, but it's the tonality or, if you want, wholeness of *a situation* that is what I'm trying to get at."²¹ The language is very clear. U-shaped pieces are composed of more than three independent, non-referential lines. One could name Sandback's pieces "lines" because it has an abstract, quick, semi-mental structure. Yet, the tonality or wholeness of a situation that comes from the interaction between line and space, namely, the complex sculptural presence, is a more fundamental concern. In a sense, the line is simultaneously non-referential and self-effacing. The identity of the line is decentered and anchorless in perpetual flickering of self-affirmation and self-negation. The lines are intrusions from the outside, but as Sandback nicely puts, they are "modest" intrusions.

In this regard, Greenberg's unease with self-sufficiency of sculpture is refashioned into the coexistence of autonomy and heteronomy of object in Sandback's project. While sticking to the rigorous non-referential abstraction, his work also allows for the interdependence between object and space. This is done with the radical equation of facts and illusions. Illusion, which had to be removed to secure the bare minimum in Greenberg's negativity, is redefined as something always contiguous to every object, whose status would be not far from the non-hypostatizable interaction between object and space. Once the status of illusion is transformed, the oppositional framework between the literal and the illusionistic is displaced into the sculptural presence that defies the opposition between object and space. The implication of Sandback's works in terms of abstract art is that the history of abstract art is not a teleological progression, or monolithic movement toward the ultimate irreducible. As Kirk Varnedoe argues,

¹⁹ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

a better model for abstraction is the hypertext where the multiple movements are possible; it is important to bear in mind that abstraction cannot be defined as a universal generality but as a malleable flexibility where the contingency of social circumstance and of individual sensibility are taken into account.²² Marking an alternative venue for abstraction, Sandback's work expands the terrain of sculpture of nothing into the non-referential autonomy and the situational heteronomy of sculptural object, provoking a complex sculptural presence.

It is by investigating the characteristic of the space that his lines reactivate that Sandback intervenes in the Greenbergian framework and addresses the sculpture of nothing at a deeper level: pedestrian space. Coined around 1968, the term pedestrian space was defined as literal, everyday space that fits neither into the painting nor sculpture. "It certainly wasn't painting's space that we were after, nor that of sculpture, for the most part. Pedestrian space was literal, flat-footed, and everyday."²³ In this sense, it was similar to Judd's "specific object," which goes beyond the conventional category of painting and sculpture based on medium-specificity. An important aspect of pedestrian space was that it upheld the de-aestheticization mentality that resists the aesthetic autonomy and transcendentalism of art for art's sake. As Sandback put it, "the idea was to have the work right there along with everything else in the world, not up on a spatial pedestal...it had utopian glimmerings of art and life happily cohabiting."²⁴ However, it is hard to clearly define this aspect of utopian glimmerings in Sandback's works, because, unlike the more politically charged or institutionally critical works, it does not have any politically programmatic vision or appeal to any practical social reformation. It is at this point that one needs to turn to the origin of Sandback's works. By "a casual act" or with "some perverse intentions," he wanted to "make something without an interior, at least in the sense of a conventional sculpture which has an interior, an invisible interior."²⁵ The context of this statement also deserves attention. After this statement, when he was asked whether "it is fair to say that he wanted to move away from the discrete object" his answer was "Yes, I did. I wanted to open the situation up more, and I wanted a more pedestrian situation. I wanted the art

²² Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Press, 2006), 244, 270–271.

²³ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 120.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.

situation to be more or less congruent with the everyday world.”²⁶

In examining the aforementioned remarks, it is notable that Greenberg deliberately censored what he regarded as a dangerous transgression of life into art or vice-versa in his earlier version of “Sculpture in Our Time.” In the context that champions the emergence of the new sculpture with modernist framework, Greenberg writes that “now it is free to invent an infinitude of new objects and to deploy a potential wealth of forms with a self-evident physical reality, as palpable and independent and present *as the houses we live in and the furniture we use.*”²⁷ The reason this passage had to be erased in a later version of the essay was that for Greenberg, art is eternally and transcendently defined by formal quality and good taste. Certainly, art could employ the everyday surroundings such as the houses and the furniture, but the final criteria must be predicated on the rightness of form. For Greenberg, any attempt to transcend the difference between good and bad and insert the haphazard or arbitrary into the jurisdiction of good taste as in Duchampian readymade or Cagean anti-aesthetics is ultimately futile. Greenberg asserts that both pop art and minimalism cannot escape formal quality, and that they are still tethered to the determination of aesthetic norms.

The manner in which Sandback intervenes in this theme of formal quality is double. On the one hand, although his first work was related to an intention of transversal between art and life, it was nevertheless very deeply involved in the problem of form. Sandback’s strategy was to simply leave the interior void. To question this interior, which has been filled and becomes invisible in traditional sculpture, was a very formalist concern, and it did not have any programmatically anarchic value. However, as soon as the interior is emptied, the form gets entangled with the new type of volume which is devoid of mass yet fully interconnected with form; this form or volume gets further entangled with everyday literal space. One notable point is that to reconstruct this chronology in a developmental linearity is not possible, and consequently, any attempt to categorically divide his career into two periods where the earlier was more object-based, and the later more open, is not possible. A more reasonable observation of the thread of his work is to affirm that, as soon as there is a radical indiscernibility between lines, space, or imaginary volume, even in its pictoriality, this indiscernibility automatically challenges the traditional aesthetics based on the autonomous object in a retrospective way. Every situated line, whether in actuality, virtuality, or phantasm, is indicative of, and embedded with, its disappearance, and every empty space, whether in imaginary volume, architectural setting, or natural atmosphere, is infiltrated with and full of line, provoking the tension between

²⁶ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 109.

²⁷ Clement Greenberg, “The New Sculpture,” *The Partisan Review* (New York, June 1949), 641.

the material and the immaterial. Thus, it is not too contentious for Sandback to state that, when he could assert a certain volume in its materiality without occupying it, his first attraction to this situation was to the way it allowed him to play with something both existing and not existing at the same time. The vacancy of the interior, which was composed by a delicate distortion of the traditional aesthetics, now opens up multiple possibilities for an alternative aesthetic, the most historically notable instance of which is the Cagean paradigm.

In his “Lecture on Something” and “Lecture on Nothing,” Cage argued that traditional aesthetics repressed the vitalist freedom or multiplicity of life: “It is almost impossible to remain a-live (sic) in the presence of a well-known masterpiece...this work is a thing separate from the rest of life...”²⁸ To redress this pathological condition, Cage employed nothing as the weapon with which to protest against traditional aesthetics: “Since everything’s changing, art’s now going in and it is of the utmost importance not to make a thing but rather to make nothing. And how is this done? Done by making something which then goes in and reminds us of nothing.”²⁹ A work of art, which transposes nothing onto something and thus affirms the ground of nothing, is related to the power of life. Such work is “not of a work of art which is a thing but of an action which is implicitly nothing...All somethings equally par-take (sic) of that life-giving nothing.”³⁰ Besides the monistic, all-encompassing perspective of nothing, the notable point is that this nothing does not facilitate totally nihilistic attitude. On the contrary, it gestures towards a production of art through a new structure endowed with life. He goes on to say, “Structure without life is dead. But Life without structure is un-seen. Pure life expresses itself within and through structure.”³¹ Thus, the simple binary between art and life breaks down, with this new structure still held within the coordinates of nothing: “A structure is like a bridge from nowhere to nowhere and anyone may go on it.”³²

²⁸ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 136.

²⁹ Cage, *Silence*, 129.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³² *Ibid.*, 124.

The movement from nothing to nothing or the multiplicity within nothing is presented as an open possibility. Traditional aesthetics had foregrounded the artist as the authoritarian creator of transcendental value, with the spectator as inevitably its passive viewer. Yet all-accessible life, which affirms every species of something involved with nothing, allows for a new model of subjectivity based on participatory spectatorship. Therefore, along with the immanence of life and the focus on process, the Cagean anti-aesthetic is a protest against a dogmatic distinction between artist, art object, and spectator by affirming an egalitarian, impersonal, permeable, and ever-renewing subjectivity. The following remark by Cage recapitulates all of these points in a nice way: “Everybody has a song which is no song at all: it is a process of singing, and when you sing, you are where you are.”³³

Sandback is deeply engaged with this anti-aesthetic immanence. It is not by inserting a predominant object with overwhelming presence but by paying attention to the given situation and mobilizing that situation almost imperceptibly that the complex sculptural presence is marked. “Awareness of existing local order is my interest, as opposed to the creation of a different order.”³⁴ The idea is not to control the space authoritatively, or to concede the situation passively, but rather to cooperate and coproduce with it. Moreover, engaging with the Cagean devolution from authorial control to spectatorial reconstitution, Sandback describes his marks as being “the gap between the spectator and the space that allow him to create his own conception of reality.”³⁵ Within Sandback’s sculptural situations, the spectator is allowed to move in, around and through the space between the discrete or combined lines, which reactivates and complicates the situation further, creating a singular perspective of the situation. It is also why Sandback likened his piece to a musical note, whose existence is constantly renewed by the performance of the spectator. Also, because he cannot be present at the reinstallation of his work every time, it is his interpreter who should be in charge. In this case, the re-animator has some “grace notes at her disposal.”³⁶ And given that the analogy of a musical note comes from the context where he talks about his U-shaped piece, which he himself has to perpetually modulate and singularly reactivate in accordance with the conditions of a situation, the artist does not monopolize the

³³ Cage, *Silence*, 126.

³⁴ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 95.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

piece. As a subvocalization rather than a total disenfranchisement of the authorial control, Sandback's authorship has an interdependent relationship with a spectator's reactivation of sculptural presence, and the ingrained incompleteness of the way in which the form and the context of his piece appears. If everybody has a song which is not ultimately exclusively his own, as in Sandback's piece, everybody or everything, as long as it keeps being in the place, will simultaneously win, lose, and retrieve the possession of the sculptural presence cued by Sandback. This strange type of possession is equal to the manner in which his piece finds its place or becomes placeless in a constantly evanescent way.

To summarize, Sandback's works let us rethink the sculptural negativity both as a rigorous non-referentiality and as an interaction between object and space by remodeling the Greenbergian paradigm fixated on the autonomy of art objects. They go beyond the Greenbergian modernism by exposing an alternative aesthetic that overlaps the formalist problem of form and volume with the Cagean affirmation of the ordinary, processional situation as immanence of life, expanding our understanding of the sculptural negativity in its microscopic investigation of object, space, and the interaction between the two.

Chapter 3: Literature of Un-word in *NOT I* and Sculpture of Nowhere

In a letter to A. J. Leventhal written in 1959, Beckett characterized each of his texts as “a next next to nothing.”³⁷ In a concise, aphoristic form, this remark deserves attention, especially when we juxtapose Beckett’s remark with Peter Boxall’s study on Beckettian negativity. Reading Beckett’s negativity as displayed in *Watt*, Boxall writes, “the problem...is how to calculate the value of the nothingness that Watt discovers with Mr. Knott, without either doing violence to such nothingness by translating it into somethingness, or falling into the silence and inarticulacy that is the only faithful response to the apprehension of ‘the being of nothing’.”³⁸ Beckett’s own aphorism requires a double obligation. On the one hand, the twice said “next” can be read as a rigorous “intensity” of his endeavor to write nothing, which short-circuits any dialectical movement between something and nothing. Nothing has to be encountered, engaged, and enunciated immediately without any secret smuggling of easy transition from nothing to something. On the other hand, this “next” can be read as a “distance” with which nothing has to be tackled, which frustrates any sublimated fusion with nothing and defies, consequently, any dissolute abandonment of literature. Although it is nothing that he would like to write and think through, which never guarantees any positive substance, this writing and thinking has to be continued without being reduced to negative theology, apophatic art, or cynical ethics. Embracing all the trials and tribulation of nothing, writing nothing is an interminable procedure with an ever unstable “distance.” As Beckett would have put it, “it is

³⁷ Dirk van Hulle, “‘Nichtsichtsundnichts’: Beckett’s and Joyce’s transtextual undoing” in *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative*, Colleen Jaurretche ed., (New York: Rodopi, 2005), 49.

³⁸ Peter Boxall, “Nothing of value: reading Beckett’s negativity” in *Beckett and Nothing*, Daniela Caselli ed., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 32.

better to write NOTHING than not write at all.”³⁹ This attempt to write nothing is reflected into the quasi-narrative structure of *NOT I*, a play whose narrator painstakingly attempts to articulate nothing. If Beckett’s literature can be compared to “a next next to nothing,” then the narrator of *NOT I* can be compared to someone endowed with an obligation to articulate nothing rather than not articulate at all.

The narrator begins (or recommences) with the context of a natal episode of a tiny little thing or girl, mouth, or narrator him– or herself. The first connection between this thing/girl or the narrator (whose dehumanized figure has been pared down into mouth) and nothing is described as a “godforsaken hole.” Against this background of indistinction between the narrator, mouth, tiny little thing, and nothing, the narrator concretizes her identity. At the end of the first movement in which “what, who, no, she” appears for the first time (the most definitive phrase in *NOT I*), the narrator notes that “she found herself in the dark.”⁴⁰ However, the focus is not on “finding herself,” but on “in the dark,” another variant of nothing, since her identity is simply a constellation of endless buzzing as a “dull roar” in her head, predominant speechlessness, and rare stream of words.

Hearing the buzzing, sustaining the predominant speechlessness, and bursting into streams are three primary occasions of her subjectivity. The world was entirely silent but for the buzzing that her brain begs, and this silence/buzzing situation is cracked with the emergence of streams of words. Around the end of the second movement, the narrator says, “all dead still but for the buzzing...when suddenly she realized...words were coming.”⁴¹ Her stream of words is an involuntary procedure, for she cannot recognize the words and does not know what she is saying. Nevertheless, she had to admit that it was her own. Still, these are “certain vowel sounds” that she had never encountered, a sonic automaton devoid of any meaning, context, and coherence. It is an uncontrollable force outside of, yet forced into, her identity. The non-linear, unbalanced intersection between buzzing, speechlessness and stream, which defies the opposition between silence and words, are formed. After all, buzzing is not the sole origin of the crack in silence, for the narrator has been pouring out a stream of words from the beginning. Yet,

³⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 171.

⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Not I* in *The Complete Dramatic works of Samuel Beckett* (Boston: Farber and Farber, 2006), 377.

⁴¹ Beckett, *Not I*, 379.

she remains “speechless all her days, practically speechless even to herself”⁴² while this speechlessness is abruptly interrupted by occasional stream of words. Silence is not some introspective solipsism, for there is no internal dialogue. A stream of words happens extremely rarely, “once or twice a year,” and it is an unpredictable event, which yet does not negate the ongoing operation of buzzing. The super-articulation of a stream of words, the inarticulateness of buzzing, the non-articulation of speechlessness are interwoven. Thus, the narrator’s remark on the intermixture of maddened stream and perpetual buzzing, even right after the introduction of a stream of words, “...like maddened...and can’t stop...no stopping it...something she had to—...what?...the buzzing?...yes...all the time the buzzing...something she had to tell.”⁴³ Against this background, just before the fourth movement, “nothing” appears extensively. For example, “nothing she could tell?...all right...nothing she could tell...try something else...think of something else...oh long after...sudden flash...not that either...all right...something else again...so on...hit on it in the end...nothing she could think?...all right...nothing she could think...nothing she—...tiny little thing.”⁴⁴ In the repetition of nothing as *failure*, all she can do is try to tell and think, and go on without knowing anything. If there is nothing there, ultimately it does not really matter what she tries. Her trials remind us of the predominant speechlessness, and yet the fact that “nothing” is recurrently articulated by the narrator, or the possibility that the narrator is lamenting her own failure to articulate proves that this failure is related to the ethics of ceaseless wagering upon a minimal possibility of rearticulation, beyond any prospect of reassuring guarantee. In Beckett’s own words, this ethics concerns an impossibly pared-down, yet heroically necessary, faith toward “the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.”⁴⁵ If the narrator invokes God as mercy, it reflects this Beckettian faith toward something that offers an indomitable obligation without any positive substance, namely, nothing as an intermixture of intensity and distance.

This chronological textural observation needs to be combined with the structure of *NOT I*, and Beckett’s general vision of language and literature. While there is no teleological

⁴² Beckett, *Not I*, 382.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁴⁵ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 139.

compositional principle in Beckett—Aristotelian consistency of beginning-middle-end—it is worth noting that it is around primary apparatuses of *NOT I* that “what, who, no, she” appears four times: finding herself, words, buzzing, failure. Thus, the intricacy of nothing is articulated through the constellation of identity, super-articulation, in-articulation, non-articulation or re-articulation. Namely, *NOT I* is a *mise-en-scène* of nothing that is punctuated by the constellation of I, excess, indistinction, absence, and failure or retrial. Here, we can turn to Beckett’s idea of literary language as a veil, and of creation as inscribing a hole within the normative conventions or established registers, as opposed to the Joycean apotheosis of the word: “More and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it...As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through.”⁴⁶ This is how Beckett disconnects any secret dialectical movement between something and nothing, and redefines nothing as the ceaseless procedure of inscribing a hole into language, thereby provoking unknown, eventful consequences. If the word is perforated and the unword oozes, this does not announce the pure other of language or the transcendence of language. Instead, as Laura Salisbury explains, “as with a hernia, something from within extrudes and is displaced from its proper shape, marking the very contingency of normative syntactical and lexical forms.”⁴⁷ What matters is not something or nothing in terms of any teleological substance which literature attains or to which it becomes reduced, but the process of making language works against itself by inserting a hole into the language, inscribing an intra-linguistic nothing. Since this process is ascetically indifferent to its own result, not pursuing any targeted substance, it has to be subjectively wagered upon, embracing any testing of contingency, haphazardness, or failure. It is here that Beckett’s straightforward formulation of literary nothing becomes clear. Nothing has to be directly engaged outside the dialectical lure for the translation of nothing into something. Simultaneously, any self-dissolute indulgence of simply appealing to the outside of language is not allowed. The mythical hermeticism toward silence is not a solution. Beckett has to remain within language, while making language perforated, barren, ineffectual, and exhausted, the consequence of which is unpredictable.

To achieve this, *NOT I* works through a quasi-narrative situation where a subject extorts language and inscribes a hole within it through a method consisting of four modes of articulation

⁴⁶ Beckett, *Disjecta*, 171–172.

⁴⁷ Laura Salisbury “‘Something or nothing’: Beckett and the matter of language” in *Beckett and Nothing*, Daniela Caselli ed., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 231.

as multiple ways of tackling intra-linguistic nothing. As Porter Abbott explains, the impact of *NOT I* as a tissue of aposiopeses—a rhetorical figure of an unexplained break into silence—lies in its ellipses.⁴⁸ The empty spaces between the narrator’s discontinuous words are not abortive but charged. Numerous pauses are not resistance but bedrock of her struggling with the articulation of nothing. The opposition between filling and emptying is denied, and something suspended between words and silences starts to activate itself. Thus the Beckettian nothing is not an opaque signifier as the interior of the language or the unrepresentable as the exterior of the language. Working through a highly precarious yet ascetically unremitting process of puncturing language, it is an elaboration of an unlocatable point in relation to the structure of preexisting language.

Despite the difference between sculpture and literature, Sandback shares some of the threads explored by Beckett. As another episode related to the origin of his first work, Sandback positioned himself at the opposite side of George Sugarman. The contrast between Sugarman and Sandback is analogous to the contrast between Joyce and Beckett. While Sugarman’s work is very “whole,” putting everything in his sculpture,⁴⁹ Sandback found his inspiration to move on to something else, especially emptying as much as one could. As discussed above, however, this emptying method is not attached to a teleological reductionist movement to the bare, the utmost, the minimum. For him, there was not only a sculptural motivation to work in a volumetric way within the domain of the sculpture that could be distinguished from dance or theater, but also the manner in which the coincidental coexistence of the formalist-transcendental concern and the de-aestheticized-immanent terrain is evoked. As soon as there is a sculpture without an inside, there is an incalculable interaction between object and space. This is why he stated that it was important for him “to find a vocabulary that allows one to do something, something different that may not really be sculpture but that might correspond more to my personal needs.”⁵⁰ This topological anomaly, both inside and outside, neither inside nor outside, is the common feature of Sandback and Beckett as a kind of placeless modernism. They redefine the frame of their medium and explore an uncharted terrain of possibilities, volume without interior and words perforated with ellipses.

Furthermore, while their common feature of subtracting or emptying could be

⁴⁸ Porter Abbott, “Narrative” in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, Lois Oppenheim ed., (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 15.

⁴⁹ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 127.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

nonetheless related to modernist reduction, both of them have their unique way of articulating the problem of reduction. For Beckett, it was the highly unpredictable yet ceaseless process of boring a hole in language that helped him evade the essentialist core. If language is regarded as a veil, there are two possibilities when we get behind the veil, something or nothing. The focus here lies in the indifference to the future product, namely, “be it something or nothing.” Regardless of the consequences, what matters is the process of tearing away this veil and the subjective wager to approach somewhere or nowhere, just as the narrator in *NOT I* invents a rigorous method, not on behalf of some hidden substance or teleological progression. In *NOT I*, the repetitive emergence of “God as mercy” is ultimately Beckett’s redeployment of Godot, where “nothing to be done” is repeated. For Sandback, the problem of reduction is addressed with a delicate visual metaphor. In relation to the way in which Giacometti’s sculpture has been read in terms of the essence stripped down, he makes reference to the episode of Charlie Chaplin, who was confounded by the heart of the artichoke.⁵¹ The artichoke, either full of multiple essential cores or devoid of any essential core, or both at the same time, necessarily frustrates any attempt to get at the bare minimum. There is only an endless continuum of almost homogenous layers, situated one after another, without any qualitative hierarchy. Peeling one layer would only lead to another covered layer. While it can be said that Sandback also makes a hole in the traditional logic of sculpture, Sandback’s strategy of reduction is much more paradoxical than it may appear. It testifies to how sculpture can be thought of in a new light by turning out the innermost layer of the artichoke and showing that this core layer can be indiscernible from the outermost layer. This is why Sandback would ultimately be opposed to naming his method “emptying,” outside the specific context of the comparison between Sugarman and himself. When a spectator asked him about his relationship to Giacometti in terms of “what is too much” and “what is too little,”⁵² for the degree of reduction, or the degree of the respective importance of object and space in his work, he stated, “too little or too much? That’s one of the continua, which I’m well aware of when I’m working.”⁵³ Emptying *is* filling or encountering the always-already filled, and vice versa. This massive indifference between the maximal and the minimal is possible by rendering every layer of the sculptural object, whether

⁵¹ Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 160.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 161.

inside or outside, deeply interwoven in the interaction with its surroundings. Sculpture is redefined as “a diffuse interface”⁵⁴ between artist, object, contextual space, and others peopling that space. Beyond the opposition between minimal object and maximal surroundings, minimization of the object *is* the maximization of the infinite coefficients of the object.

Other than the problem of reduction, it is through Giacometti’s statement that we can contrast Sandback and Greenberg again. When Giacometti wrote, “Space does not exist, you have to create it...Every sculpture made on the assumption that space exists is wrong. There is only an illusion of space,”⁵⁵ he was too preoccupied with the Greenbergian paradigm. In “‘The Crisis’ of Abstract Art,” Greenberg wrote that painterly abstraction relies on “a *created* (sic) flatness, a created absence, or positive negation so to speak, of illusion.”⁵⁶ Certainly, the underlying motivation for this statement is to negate the anti-aesthetic sensibility that invests with pictorial form almost any object that has a flat, circumscribed surface, including sidewalk squares, defaced walls, tattered posters, and empty canvases.⁵⁷ However, a more crucial point to be recognized here is that what Giacometti and Greenberg share is not only the authorial control but the dialectic between affirmation and negation. The illusion, after all, has to be accepted at first, and then it has to be reduced in favor of authorial transcendent creation. Recognizing the flatness of the canvas, the young chimpanzee literally affirms the flatness and creates pictorial form arbitrarily and accidentally, not qualitatively, thus getting at something similar to the anti-aesthetic works of art in the 1960s. In contrast, the modernist painting is related to a *created flatness*. When the illusion is negated, flatness is created. From Giacometti’s view, when the illusion of space is repressed, the real space emerges. In contrast, illusion and reality coincide for Sandback. Engaging the formalist abstraction and the Cagean anti-aesthetic immanence altogether, Sandback negates the dialectic between affirmation and negation and attempts to articulate a monistic position where transcendence and immanence, minimization and maximization, affirmation and negation are indistinguishable. Facts are illusions. There is

⁵⁴ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁵ Alberto Giacometti, “Notizen” in *Gestern, Flugsand*, Mary Lisa Palmer and François Chausse eds., (Dresden, 1998), 150.

⁵⁶ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays*, 181.

⁵⁷ Greenberg, *The Collected Essays*, 180.

nothing to be repressed, yet there is nothing to be conspicuously or overwhelmingly created. It is about imperceptibly complicating and reactivating a given situation. The dialectic between literal affirmation and transcendental negation is frustrated with the impossible gesture of remaining within the literal *and* reversed transcendental affirmation and pushing that affirmation into the further direction, marking a position where the distinction between affirmation and negation disappears.

This specifies the very impossibility implied in the manner in which Sandback overcomes the Greenbergian medium-specificity and questions the proper province of sculpture. In the same article, Greenberg continues writing that an unexplored domain of pictoriality comes to the fore by the hard-edged painting that blurs the difference between painterly and non-painterly at the end of the exhaustion of gestural abstraction, in a way that young apes cannot follow.⁵⁸ As Shane Weller observes in his study on the ethics of the subject in Beckett's oeuvre,⁵⁹ as early as his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett presents the paradigmatic figure who, for all their suffering from the violence of law, nonetheless is compelled to "go on:" a policeman. At the end of *The Unnamable*, this figure has been dismembered and disseminated: "you must go on...I'll go on."⁶⁰ By the time of *Worstward Ho*, this imperative, still sustaining or more intensifying its ruthlessness, becomes completely untied to any identifiable subject: "On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on."⁶¹ Marking somewhere within this trajectory, *NOT I* shows a subject who attempts to articulate nothing by puncturing language. It dares to present un-word (*un-wort*), which is neither the abnegation of words nor the apotheosis of words. Similarly, an unexplored domain of sculpture is disclosed when one stops retaining the dialectical movement between negation and creation, the distinction between abstraction and illusionism, and the distinction between the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 181.

⁵⁹ Shane Weller, "Beckett and Ethics" in *Beckett and Ethics*, Russell Smith ed., (New York: Continuum, 2008), 126.

⁶⁰ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume II, Novels* (New York: Grove Press), 407.

⁶¹ Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* in *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition. Volume IV, Poems, Short Fictions, and Criticism* (New York: Grove Press), 471.

sculpture of human and that of animal. Not only exemplifying the non-anthropomorphic abstraction, it also dares the presentation of sculpture of *anti-homo-sapiens*. The pivotal phrase in *NOT I*, “what, who, no, she” shows that while there are still remainders of subjectivity, whether existentially dehumanized, structurally self-differential, deconstructively spectral, intensively schizophrenic, the fundamental question made by Beckett’s un-word is “Who says what?” as “How does she articulate nothing?” It is not coincidental, then, that Sandback’s fundamental question is not whether any complex sculptural presence is, or whether such presence is possible at all, but, as in one of his interview’s title, “Where is the sculpture?” The sculpture of no-thing is, after all, the sculpture of no-where. This is why Sandback stated that he always thought about the possibility of the project where he works outdoors without any architectural confinement and deals with vast natural landscape, but he never did this. Going out to natural surroundings cannot be an easy way out. Sculpture of nowhere defies the categorization between mass and volume, object and space, interior and exterior, nature and culture. Due to this breakdown of the category of sculpture, however, a certain price is attendant upon taking up this sculptural presence. In Sandback’s words, “it is my good fortune and my bad fortune to have the boundaries not stop there [the exhibition space].”⁶² Without any determinate boundaries, Sandback’s sculpture is sculpture of nowhere rather than sculpture as something or nothing.

⁶² Sandback, *Fred Sandback*, 157.

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