

No Feeling Is Final

Chus Martinez

*Let everything happen to you
Beauty and terror
Just keep going
No feeling is final*

Rainer Maria Rilke

There is no single way to gain comprehension of what the void signifies in common language or in a particular artistic practice. Since art needs form to come up with an idea of perception, everything that defies or stays outside form may be called “the void.” In one of the numerous conversations that Marco Polo had with Kublai Khan, Polo talks about the wonders of his hometown, Venice, and takes particular pleasure in describing its bridges, stone by stone. Listening, Kublai Khan asks: “But which is the stone that supports the bridge?” “The bridge,” Polo answers, “is not supported by one stone or another, but by the line of the arch that they form.” Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting before adding: “Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.” Polo answers: “Without stones there is no arch.” We have no actual chronicle of such a conversation; it was given voice by the invention of writer Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities* (1972), but to tell the story here allows us to rename the void: the arch.

I once saw an image by Picasso, *Bacchanale au taureau noir* [Bacchanal with Black Bull] (fig. 1), a linocut on paper dated 1959. It made me think of Calder’s *Mountains and Clouds* (fig. 2), a site-specific sculpture made for the Hart Senate Office Building in Washington D.C., finalized in 1986, ten years after the Calder’s death. The two works have little in common, yet they both produce a sense of weather, a weather you cannot see in the forms, figures, or volumes. To think about clouds means to think about the above, about the void that separates us from all the forces that compose the illusionary ceiling.

I grew up with the narrative that Picasso’s transformation from pessimist to pacifist had no precedent in modern art. An unprecedented transformation... it allows me to imagine Picasso joining all the twentieth-century movements in favor of a different view on the species’ coexistence, to think differently about the possibility of interspecies communication, about nature not only as a subject of painting, or an object on which to project forces that surpass the human body. Even the site where critics mark this new political consciousness—*Guernica* (1937)—possesses something wild, an invocation of forces that relate not only to the violence of a human war but also to a violent dimension that is atomic, that may, in the future, destroy more than cities and their inhabitants, but planets and their inhabitants, humans, plants, animals, seas. The void here could be imagined as the lack of this radical condition needed for a contract to assure peace not only among us, but among all forms of life. The void that concerned both Picasso and Calder was not only a metaphysical image that influenced their work but also the perception of the limits of the cultural and intellectual constraints of their time. Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty



Fig. 1
Pablo Picasso
Bacchanale au taureau noir
 [Bacchanal with Black Bull],
 November 16, 1959
 Artist's proof on Arches wove
 paper, linoleum engraved
 with a gouge,
 52.5 × 64 cm
 Musée national Picasso-Paris.
 Pablo Picasso Acceptance
 in Lieu, 1979. MP3484

invites us to think about Picasso developing an argument against the era's communism—that it has destroyed the dialectic of individual and history, and hence the possibility of a humanistic society and individual freedom.

It is, of course, a fiction to turn the "void" into all the possible discourses that Picasso and Calder could have participated in. And yet it is interesting to imagine the void as all the gaps left in-between all the languages Picasso (and Calder) invented in his work, the void as the intuition of all the future ways of thinking, the future social movements and philosophical concerns that were ahead of him and may have revealed who he is, since he is always presented as a primal artistic individual capable of introducing a forceful political imagination into modern art, giving aesthetics to pacifism, or even embodying the very figure of the male artist forcing future discourses and narratives to deal with the contradictions that his time could not face.

I like the exercise of imagining a radical lack of a language—in Picasso's time—to address these fundamental questions, questions that constitute a void.

Can we capture the weather? Think of Calder thinking about this. Can we capture the moody skies and foreboding clouds? Can we only tend to a generalization of the elements that make up "the weather"? It seems impossible to depict every particular type of wind, every drop of water that inhabits the rain, every form of cloud, and, just as importantly, the light that makes observation possible. The weather is a transitory form, abstract, difficult to grasp. It introduces a sempiternal cinematic effect in our senses.

The weather is the biggest cinema and cinema would be impossible without it—that sense of looking far into a world of constant change that seems so different and remote from us. Every eye is a lens and every one of us a meteorologist, an observer, consciously

Fig. 2
Alexander Calder
Mountains and Clouds,
 1976/1986
 Painted steel and aluminum,
 1554.5 × 2286 cm
 Hart Senate Office Building,
 Washington



or unconsciously, of all the messages embodied in the tongue the light uses to convey a change in the conditions. Is there such a thing as bad weather, from the weather's point of view? This question may have no answer. We constantly perceive light as a messenger, creating darkness, converting to heat, signaling a pattern that we may recognize as danger, as the imminent coming of the atmosphere upon us.

Calder's mobiles are cosmologies, but also weathers, because they are clouds, and they are leaves trapped in winds, and suns and moons and small beginnings, drops connecting, forming a family, forming the rain. Calder participates in the idea that nature is constructed, not discovered—that truth is made, not found—a keynote of recent scholarship in the history of science. And because it is made, we have enormous responsibility, because it can also be unmade. Nature can emerge as the result of an exercise, of a practice that can show us how the specific human relations that we've established with "nature" can and must somehow—aesthetically, formally, theatrically, linguistically, ethically, scientifically, and epistemologically—be imagined as genuinely relational. And since the partners in this incredible, unavoidable relationship remain entirely unequal, the great void is the beauty and the violence created by us with the clouds, the bacteria, the light, the seas, the plants, the frogs...

It is the power that emerges from this unequal relationship—unequal because of the unchanged minds of humans who are unable to see themselves as one with all forms of life—that poisons, exterminates, and exhausts the futures ahead of us. It is vain to call it "climate change." We love to imply a will and the possibility of transformation. And yet movement, like all Calder's mobiles possessed by it, would be a much more sensitive way to describe the void of the dynamic unknown forces that create bond among life.