

**LEARNING TO MAKE NOTHING: An essay on the  
occasion of MAKING NOTHING, a collaborative project  
by Alex Rauch and Victor Maldonado.**

By Victor Maldonado



Paradox of Praxis 1 (Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing) 1997, Francis Alys  
Photographic documentation of an action, Mexico City - video, 5 minute loop



Museum visitors view Malevich's Black Square (1913)  
Hermitage in Amsterdam

## MAKING NOTHING: Paying lip service to *nothing*.

Making nothing was the thing to do in the 90's. It was so Green to make nothing. You didn't have to buy supplies; you didn't have to buy into commercial relationships that compromised your personal ethics. Making nothing was the greenest thing to do. You couldn't get more "Green" than *nothing*. *Nothing* was there at the start of the environmentalists' mantra, "reduce, reuse, and recycle." Before you re-imagine what to do with all the trinkets and kitsch and how to transform them, making nothing is the right call.

So what is a green artist to do? Making *nothing* is still making a gesture, a gesture against the status quo approach to art making, to the systems of production and distribution that condition us.

For artists, making is not only a means of production, but also of verification that necessitates planning on the front end and evaluation on the back end.

Making sense of making *nothing* is especially strange in this context. I am part of a tradition of artistic training that stretches from Italian Medieval guilds, versions of the German Bauhaus' and even the short lived and experimental Black Mountain College. All these schools are models centered around the authentic production of "permanent" objects, objects of ephemeral art, like performances, happenings and experiences that if documented persist for posterity.

Everything has not changed anything in the world. Yes, Steve Miller and his band were right, time does keep on slipping into the future. Keeping up with that slipping sense of time – the alliterative slip of temporal reality, that the Surrealists used as the hub of their cultural production in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to wield strange and mysterious monsters of desire and conflict on public consciousness, still imbues popular culture with its dark and twisted sense of humor.

It is in Surrealism's "slip" of language, in Steve Miller's "slipping" time and in the "privilege of absurdity" that is staking a claim to making *nothing* as an artist. Part comedic folly and part scientific experiment the philosophy of making *nothing* is, in geologic time, short lived and almost un-representable.

Understanding *nothing* and its dark intricacies is the work of the artist who makes no thing. A philosophy of living and dying is an important tool for delineating a contour around a topic and subject that resists easy categorization and articulation.

It is in the meandering and rumination of this essay that will constitute both a mind-full inquiry and creative resistance that I am interested in manifesting by making nothing.



The Pitch, third episode of the fourth season, Seinfeld (1990-1998)  
Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David

## MAKING NOTHING: Nada & zilch.

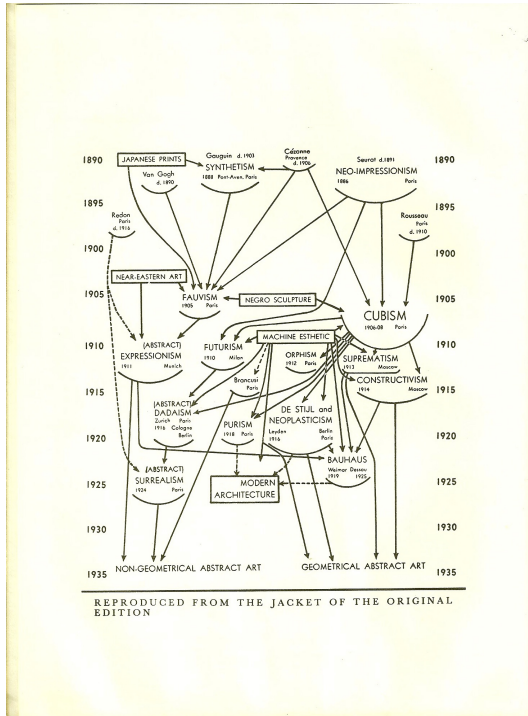
When the idea of **Making Nothing** for the Praxis series was conceived in conversation with artist Alex Rauch, I had no idea how it could be accomplished but I had many questions that I was interested in asking. I had never hazarded to make *nothing* and to try and capture my understanding of the topic that was, at once, aesthetic and, dare I say, Philosophic. With no experience to help guide my way I let the questions that made themselves manifest emerge dialectically between myself and my collaborator, and in an open manner, with a larger group of friends who influenced my way through the project.

The initial gesture cast by Alex to enact a collaboration, where one of us would fabricate the object and the other would write a paper, seemed fun and full of unknowns that I was interested in seeing develop with our combined attention. To create *nothing* and break a pattern or establish a new perspective seemed then a valuable opportunity and undertaking. I am thankful for the graciousness and mindfulness of our hosts and I look forward to the feedback this project brings.

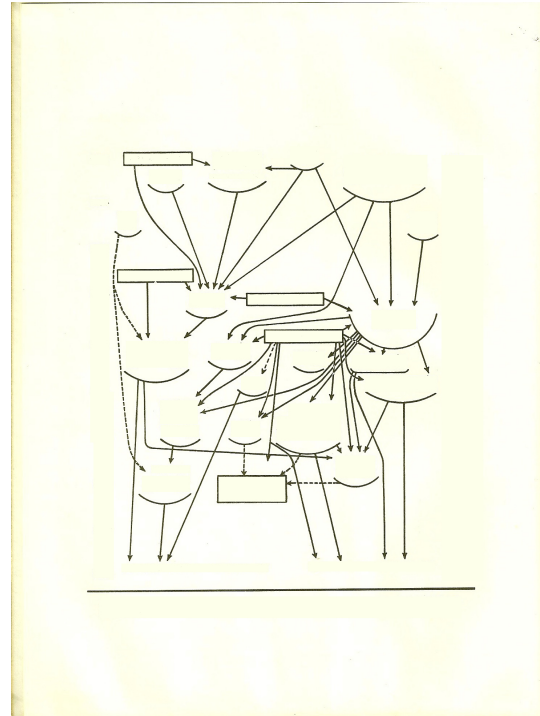
In the past, Alex and I have tried to collaborate, though without success. But, in the end it was precisely because we could replicate our working methods from our failed attempts, moving forward in this project in an ironic, joking and free-spirited manner, that I was confident in our paradoxical success. It seemed to me our pairing made perfect sense for making *nothing* together as the topic and product for pairing philosophy and art. Could we work together to do something neither of us had ever been trained to do or encouraged to seek out and accomplish?

As object or outcome based culture workers, both of us began questioning how each of us, independent of this project and art, could manage and control the production of *nothing* when all we are trained and expected to do is something. What does it take to make *nothing*? What is its matter... its form... and its function? Who are its makers? [\[1\]](#)

What did making *nothing* mean then and what does making *nothing* mean to us now both individually and as a collective?



Alfred H. Barr Reproduced From The Jacket Of The Original Edition  
Cubism and Abstract Art (1936)



Victor Maldonado, Ahistorical (2011)

## MAKING NOTHING: Making sport of *nothing*.

For me, **Making Nothing** provided an important opportunity to reflect and question the experiences that have shaped me as an artist. This project presented an opportunity to move with playful volition, not needing to be about anything and not needing for me to make anything by any means. It was a strange and paradoxical catharsis for my creative impulses, allowing either a presentation of reality as simply a material phenomenon, or as a reconditioned or prefabricated thing.

By making *nothing* I didn't have to push on anything or invest any of myself into an object. By making *nothing* I didn't have to cross any boundaries or break anything down. By making *nothing* I didn't have to work. The more I make *nothing* by not making anything the more I don't think about anything, and instead simply think about *nothing*. By making *nothing* I become present within myself and I become mindful of my environment.

Pursuing this collaboration presented me with an opportunity to define a creative practice. It has allowed a degree of flexibility and freedom from the art object itself that my practice has completely revolved around up until now.

When I was an undergraduate, Arthur Danto proclaimed the end of art<sup>[2]</sup>. I find that this proclamation wasn't only a total bummer, it also represented a kind of inevitable arc set up by ancient dynasties or modern robber barons to define the arts in negative and exclusionary terms, keeping art and the means of production away from those who have so far been marginalized by history and the marketplaces that shape our aesthetic value systems.





Hans Namuth, Jackson Pollock painting in his studio, Long Island, New York, 1950



Allan Kaprow, Yard (1961), Martha Jackson Gallery, New York

As artists of the post-war era pushed the conceptual production in their creative practices, the art object's traditional supremacy in the form of painting, typified by Picasso's prolific output, began to falter.

Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist canvases, set as stages for his gestural painting, and Allan Kaprow's guttural happenings were a juke and hustle that shook against the increased commercialization of art.

Since anything could be considered art, making something was no longer necessary all of the time. The work of artists transitioned from real labor, based in conception and execution, to a seemingly open authorship, an aesthetic speculation and delegated labor spurred on by conceptual art to transcend the objects that have either been tied to our systemic beliefs or individual self-design.

The idea of *nothing* seemed simple enough to approach both for us as writers, as artists, and as readers. *Nothing* as a philosophic pursuit seemed to both of us an extension of the possibilities of object-based aesthetics-driven pursuits of visual art that we are steeped in as cultural workers. This is not to say that the notion of nothing wholly lacks its own aesthetic. In many ways it captures our playful speculation and may only be apprehended through aesthetic means. [3]

NOTHING  
 WILL HAVE TAKEN PLACE  
 BUT THE PLACE  
 EXCEPT  
 PERHAPS  
 A CONSTELLATION

Throw Of The Dice (Edited Excerpt), Stéphane Mallarmé



Looney Tunes opening title (1940s-1950s)

## MAKING NOTHING: What is *nothing*?

Philosophically speaking there are two kinds of nothing that I am especially interested in. The first, the literal, *Nothing*, the void, is an almost unmentionable, complete, and total emptiness.

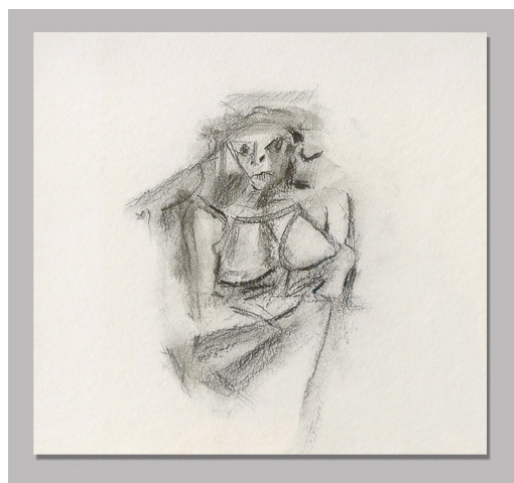
“‘Why are there beings at all instead of nothing’- this is obviously the first of all questions. Of course it is not the first question in the chronological sense [...] And yet, we are each touched once, maybe even every now and then, by the concealed power of this question, without properly grasping what is happening to us. In great despair, for example, when all weight tends to dwindle away from things and the sense of things grows dark, the question looms.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Its less literal cousin is the more subjective notion of *nothing* that exists rhetorically, in the vernacular of all people, to describe a variety of empty and valueless states.

“All roads are blocked to a philosophy which reduces everything to the word ‘no.’ To ‘no’ there is only one answer and that is ‘yes.’ Nihilism has no substance. There is no such thing as nothingness, and zero does not exist. Everything is something. Nothing is nothing. Man lives more by affirmation than by bread.”<sup>[5]</sup>



Erased Dekooning (1953), Robert Rauschenburg



Women (1950), Willem deKooning



### **MAKING NOTHING: Some transgressions.**

When I started thinking about how to pen this essay on *nothing* I had already been using writing as a creative practice to help me think through my experiences and as a means to organize my memories.

Writing a philosophic essay was something I had never attempted, let alone accomplished, so it seemed the form for making *nothing* while still writing something. It was requested that this essay about making *nothing* could not, in the end, be twenty-five blank pages.

*Nothing*, like the present moment, is perceivable only in relative terms. Our experiences and our attitudes form the transcendental underbelly of our working matter. It is only against the backdrop of our living and breathing, loving and hating, working and creating lives that the stage is set for making *nothing*. In our world, in the various contexts that we navigate, it is always in opposition to what is present and most readily available that the *Nothing* defines itself and makes itself known.

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day." begins the King James Bible.

So varied are the experiences of *nothing* and unfathomable is its being that one is tempted to call its bluff and cast it aside as a bad category.

Making *nothing* is a party.



Artist Damien Hirst with his sculpture *For the love of God* (2007)

## MAKING NOTHING: What is of the value of *nothing*?

Could *nothing* possibly have *some* value, or different values depending upon the context in which it is confronted? Perhaps our Western perspective clouds our perception of this, what seems like, the most basic of phenomena.

In the West *nothing* can, at its worst, wield the most destructive of powers of nihilism, from the chaos out of which the heavens and the earth were created, the primordial stew that inhabited the earth for millennia, to the evil that idle hands do. It is often thought of as the antithesis of order and productivity. Even in its cheeriest of manifestations, lasting no longer than a breath, it is simply a moment of weakness whereby one comes up for air.

In the East *nothing* and nothingness can represent transcendence and release from the attachments of life. Nirvana, the state of wanting nothing, is an alien act and no heaven for those who have everything.

Is doing *nothing* unethical? Perhaps we should reconsider *nothing* as healthy medicine for our overworked hippocampus. Doesn't everyone and everything deserve a break sometime?

In America there seems to be an unbalanced relationship between working to live and living to work. Working, doing, and making can become, not only the backbone of your identity, but such life affirming acts that leisure emerges, in opposition, as a privilege, or a stain, reserved only for the elite or the absurd.

When the body is tired, when the muscles are sore, when exhaustion sets in, recuperation is imperative, doing *nothing* means survival and making *nothing* is resilience.



David Tudor performs John Cage's 4'33", 1952 in 2006

## MAKING NOTHING: Phenomenology of *nothing*.

4'33" is considered one of John Cage's seminal compositions. For it the piano player plays no notes and generally engages the piano less as an instrument and much more as a sculpture.

Pianos are designed to need no accompaniment; so with the stillness of his hands, the performer can make four minutes and thirty-three seconds of *nothing* in the encompassing formlessness of silence. In the case of 4'33" the piano and piano player become equal collaborators in the production of no sound. Sometimes, under special conditions, making *nothing* can lead to anything and everything.

Time is still kept with a chronograph to follow the choreography of Cage's score. The piano player follows an articulate score, an object closer to a script, which simultaneously establishes and effectively appropriates the ambient aural landscape readymade by the site, the performance, its musicians, technicians, and audience members, along with whatever else snuck its way into the ears of those enchanted listeners. With Cage's silence we see a clear example of what Danto comes to describe as the dematerialization of the common place and the end of art as a fixed product transitioning into a philosophical construct.



John Cage at toy piano (date unknown)



What are you doing?

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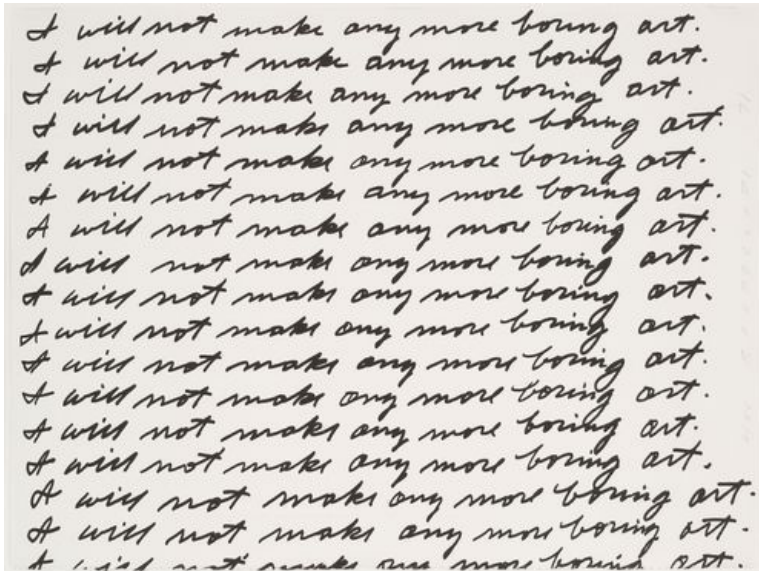
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## MAKING NOTHING: “What are you doing?” “Nothing.”

Remember, it is when we are hanging out, without care for product or outcome, with friends and loved ones wasting time away, making nothing, that we spend the best times of our lives.

Un-anxious about the chances of getting anything accomplished, workers make a sport of camouflaging recreation on the clock. When workers make *nothing* work becomes a situational comedy. To say that you are interested in “making *nothing*” becomes itself an affront on the ideals of our Western world, to Manifest Destiny and to progress, endlessly, into the future.

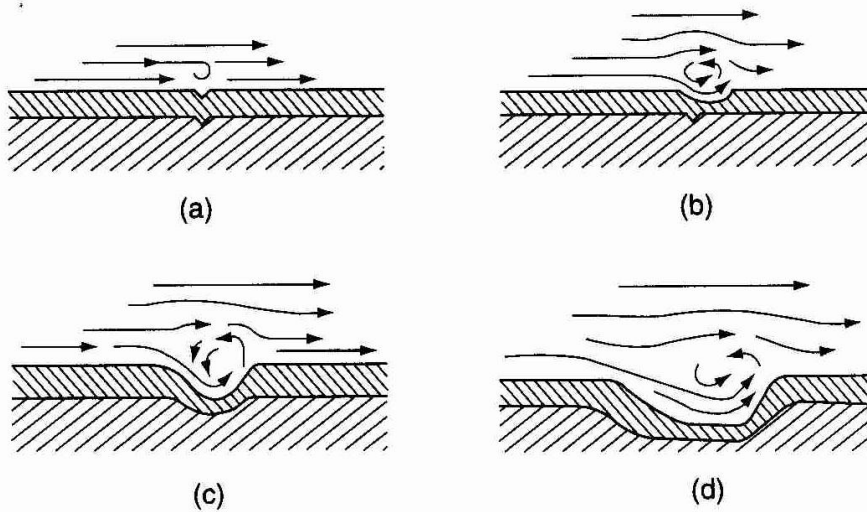
After all, only losers make nothing, of themselves, of their work, of their time. Leisure is the ultimate transgression to the order of the working world. It is a privilege that defines class lines and differentiates the qualities and values of social strata.



John Baldessari, I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art (1971),

## MAKING NOTHING: Learning how to make *nothing*.

Fine artists learn in a variety of autodidactic ways, as well as in the academy, a common form, language, and tradition of meaning. Would it be so far fetched to assume that art could manifest, amongst the monumental index of iconography, the skill set necessary to make nothing? After all, the masters of the fine arts have augured the age of surrealism, abstraction, and conceptualism. Could today's artists manifest the art of *nothing*?



Schematic: Erosion & Corrosion a, b, c and d.

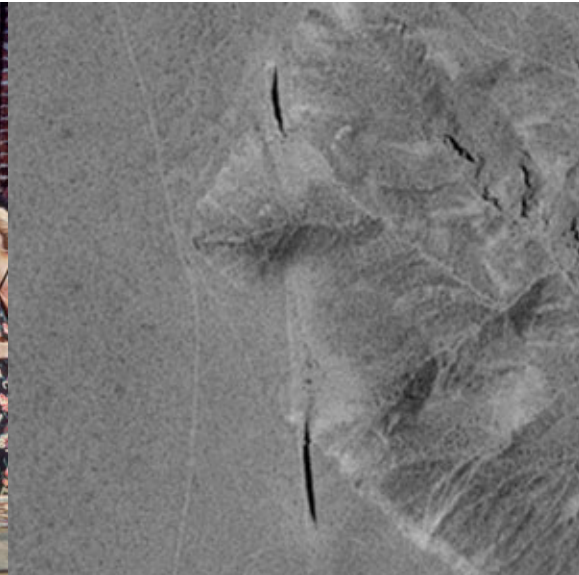
## MAKING NOTHING: Watching everything wear down, wear away and disappear into *nothing*.

Some people and objects are so important and valuable that they are worth the work and expense that go into keeping them alive in our memory or by conserving them in reliquaries.

Whether medieval fresco or post-modern shark tank, there is a persisting insistence on the static, unchanging body of what is destined to parish for eternity. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, *nothing* is the only thing we cannot help become.



At work or hanging out? Friends (1994-2004)  
Warner Bros. Television, Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions



Michael Heizer, Double Negative (1969-1970), earthwork, two  
trenches cut into the eastern edge of the Mormon Mesa Overton,  
Mormon Mesa Overton, Nevada, United States

## MAKING NOTHING: Open and incomplete the process continues...

Getting *nothing* done seems like such a waste of time. For those addicted to work, getting and actually taking advantage of a vacation can take on an oxymoronic dimension.

What could it mean to be actually hard at work and not getting anything done? Are you being paid for doing *nothing*? Does getting *nothing* accomplished actually make *nothing* or are you just doing your job? What can you do when you're getting nowhere?



There Is Nothing Left To Do (1994), Mark Mumford

## MAKING NOTHING: Joking & Not-so-funny.

If you don't want to spend your time reading anything with footnotes and a bibliography that's not worth anything to you it's best practices to start by reading the footnotes and the bibliography before the essay, for instance.

As the proverbial mother says to her children, "Garbage in, garbage out," I think.

And, so if you read all the way ahead to this page, or if you have been patient and kind enough with your time you can see that this "essay" about *nothing* isn't really anything worth reading for its ability to define the existential void or the privilege of absurdity. This essay is an empty shell of what profanely passes as an essay worth *nothing* to academic rigor.

Making nothing is poetics; shadow boxing at what conditions our sense of being. It springs from the natural forces within us, our being someone, our doing something—anything. But, this joke is not so funny, way off timing and not really about anything. This essay is about *nothing* in particular but is instead about the particulars that comprise the contexts where *nothing* can be made – gesturing aimlessly at everything, while making contact with *nothing*.

This essay is a counterfeit. This is no science. This is no art. This is no silence. This is no protest. This *nothing* is a party of strangers, acquaintances and intimates. This *nothing* is a poor simulation we can use to feel beyond our senses and far beyond the mapped world.

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[1] One might just as easily ask, as Heidegger does, What does Nothing do? "Das Nichts selbst nichtet", "The Nothing itself noths". Inwood 1999, p. 144

[2] Danto 1984.

[3] Drawing on simulation industries of gaming and entertainment.

[4] Heidegger 1927

[5] Hugo 1862, pt. 2, bk. 7, ch. 6.