

## Empty Boxes

Felipe Cussen

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## Note

This essay corresponds to one of the chapters of *La oficina de la nada. Poéticas negativas contemporáneas* [*The Office of Nothingness. Contemporary Negative Poetics*] (Siruela, 2022). The book analysed different representations of nothingness in literature and visual arts, especially from the second half of the twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first century. My aim was to prove that these artistic quests were not simply isolated eccentricities, but responded to a deep concern, whether it was a mystical impulse, a political critique or a provocation of the conventions of the art world. Although at first I thought there would only be a few pieces, the number of works quickly grew and, in order to cover them, I classified them into different typologies, such as catalogues of lost works, novels in which nothing happens, invisible books, blank books, blank pages and, of course, these empty boxes.

The proliferative nature of this research has continued after its publication, and I have received many recommendations for other works that could be part of these constellations. One of them is *500 Pounds of Common Earth 1 Metre Cubed, Transylvania to Los Angeles* by Roman Vasseur, which was suggested to me by Simon Morris. In his own words: 'If you are going to box up God, I'd like to know what is happening with the devil!' This essay was translated from Spanish by Vicente Menares.

Contemporary art is full of boxes. Perhaps the most famous is Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box*, an imitation of a supermarket box that was, in reality, a painted and silkscreened wooden cube that did not contain the soap pads it so conspicuously promised.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Joseph Cornell's numerous boxes lack covers and are presented as showcases or cabinets of curiosities where disparate objects coexist. In a spirit similar to Marcel Duchamp's *La Boîte-en-valise*, Fluxus members continually used boxes as devices that invited interaction and surprise. Robert Filliou's *Optimistic Box No. 1*, for example, ironically plays with expectations: its cover reads 'thank god for modern weapons', but lifting the latch reveals a stone and another label stating 'we don't throw stones at each other anymore.'<sup>2</sup> Other boxes unfold to show that there is nothing inside. This is exemplified by the cut sides of the *Caja vacía*, one of the 'metaphysical boxes' by Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza.<sup>3</sup> Fernanda Fragateiro's *Caixa para guardar o vazio*, on the other hand, is a performance-sculpture composed of a large wooden cube that two dancers open, turning it into a sort of prefabricated house where children then participate in a workshop.<sup>4</sup> Unlike

the more solemn void of Oteiza's work, Fragateiro's void appears playful and full of possibilities. There are simpler and more modest boxes, such as one by Joseph Beuys, made of wood and lacking a cover, with its title written in graphite pencil at the bottom: *Intuition*.<sup>5</sup> Others are completely transparent, like *Silence* by Margarita Paksa, a thick acrylic cube with steel finishes.<sup>6</sup> These two cases exemplify the intriguing tension achieved when presenting boxes that, either due to the absence of a cover or their transparency, allow viewers to see their emptiness. This space is symbolically charged not only by the boxes' container but also, in a special way, by the suggestive titles. Another quite controversial box, whose title is nothing exceptional, is Gabriel Orozco's *Empty Shoebox*. It is an open box displayed on the floor, with its lid placed under the base. It is often kicked by visitors or thrown in the trash, as happened at the 1993 Venice Biennale.<sup>7</sup>

These boxes showcase a variety of possibilities. However, except for the *Brillo Box*, they all share one common feature: they let viewers see what is inside (or not), whether by being openable, uncovered, or transparent. The boxes I want to discuss next are different, as defined by the Peruvian linguist Mario Montalbetti in a book that lies somewhere between poetry and essay, titled precisely *Cajas*:

¿Qué es una caja?

Una caja es un objeto tridimensional (3D) que distingue un adentro de afuera.

Una caja es un objeto que tiene un hueco adentro.

Una caja distingue adentro de afuera porque tiene un hueco adentro.

Un cubo sólido de madera no es una caja.  
Una escultura de cobre maciza no es una caja.  
Los dados de juego no son cajas.

[...]

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Roman Vasseur, *500 Pounds of Common Earth 1 Metre Cubed, Transylvania to Los Angeles*, 1999–2002, seen here at the Austrian Cultural Foundation, London, 1999.

1. Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*, <[www.moma.org/collection/works/81384](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/81384)> [accessed 1 May 2023].

2. The series of the four *Optimistic Boxes* is part of the Fondazione Bonotto collection, among others. <[www.fondazionebonotto.org/it/collection/fluxus/filliourobert/652.html](http://www.fondazionebonotto.org/it/collection/fluxus/filliourobert/652.html)> [accessed June 3 2022]. See also Robert Filliou, *Robert Filliou. The Secret of Permanent Creation*, ed. Anders Krueger and Irmeline Lebeer, (M HKA / Editions Lebeer Hossmann / Mousse Publishing, Antwerp, 2017), pp. 138–39.

3. Jorge Oteiza, *Caja vacía*, <[www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/caja-vacia](http://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/caja-vacia)> [accessed 1 May 2023].

4. Fernanda Fragateiro, *Caixa para guardar o vazio*, <[www.fernandafragateiro.com/caixa/index.htm](http://www.fernandafragateiro.com/caixa/index.htm)> [accessed 14 Feb 2023].

5. Joseph Beuys, *Intuition*, <[www.moma.org/collection/works/76830](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/76830)> [accessed 1 May 2023].

6. Margarita Paksa, *Silencio*, <[paksa.com.ar](http://paksa.com.ar)> [accessed 4 May 2023].

7. Gabriel Orozco, 'Empty Shoe Box', <[www.moma.org/collection/works/142596](http://www.moma.org/collection/works/142596)> [accessed 1 May 2023].

Una caja 3D puede esconder algo (un objeto) adentro.

Puede haber algo adentro o puede no haber nada adentro. Pero una caja cerrada siempre promete algo adentro.

[...]

Es indispensable que el objeto de la promesa no sea visible desde afuera. De lo contrario, el sujeto no puede suponer nada respecto del objeto de la promesa.

Por eso, una botella transparente no es una caja 3D.

[...]

La propiedad fundamental del objeto de la promesa es no ser visible.<sup>8</sup>

*What is a box?*

*A box is a three-dimensional (3D) object that distinguishes an inside from an outside.*

*A box is an object that has a hole inside.*

*A box distinguishes an inside from an outside because it has a hole inside.*

*A solid wooden cube is not a box. A sturdy copper sculpture is not a box. Game dice are not boxes.*

[...]

*A 3D box can hide something (an object) inside.*

*There may be something inside or there may be nothing inside. But a closed box always promises something inside.*

[...]

*It is essential that the object of the promise is not visible from the outside. Otherwise, nothing can be assumed regarding the object of the promise.*

*Thus, a transparent bottle is not a 3D box.*

[...]

*The fundamental property of the promised object is its invisibility.*

While the first type of box Montalbetti describes has no markings, he then mentions that others can verbally or visually indicate the promised contents. If opened, these promised contents may or may not coincide with the actual contents. Montalbetti then moves on to considerations regarding language ('Las palabras prometen algo. / En ese sentido son cajas. / Lo son también porque aquello que prometen no es visible' ['Words promise something. / In that sense, they are boxes. / They are also boxes because what they promise is not visible']).<sup>9</sup> What I am concerned with is that condition of promise, which will be examined later on.

This concept can also be linked to that of 'obra velada' [veiled work] as proposed by Galder Reguera:

A veiled work is one in which at least one of its parts (or the entire work) is consciously hidden from the viewer. However, the viewer will still become aware of its existence through words (via the title, a written document, etc.). For a work to be considered as veiled, it must meet two requirements. Firstly, the concealment of the work, or any part of it, must be intentional by the artist. Moreover, to the same extent, this act of concealment should be regarded as fundamental to the essence of the work. [...] Access to that hidden part of the work must partially remain in some way, not be definitively lost.<sup>10</sup>

Reguera insists that the presence of language is fundamental to the relationship he seeks to create with the spectators. Like Montalbetti, he argues that 'even what we are told or is insinuated to be behind the concealment could perfectly well be *something else*, it may not correspond to what we are told. In both cases – material non-existence of the veiled part or non-correspondence with what is indicated – the being of the work would not be affected at all'.<sup>11</sup> The boxes I am about to present will enable us to delve into the functioning of this type of artwork in detail, thanks to their rather peculiar contents.

8. Mario Montalbetti, *Cajas*, (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú Press, 2012).

9. Ibid.

10. Galder Reguera, *La cara oculta de la luna. En torno a la 'obra velada': idea y ocultación en la práctica artística*, (Murcia: Cendeac, 2008), pp. 35–36.

11. Ibid., p. 37.

12. Ben Vautier usually signs his works with his first name only. This essay follows his example by referring to him in that way.

13. Ben Vautier, *Tout Ben*, (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, Paris, 1974), pp. 54–55. I will cite some catalogs of Vautier's work (where both the images and textual descriptions of many of his works are often repeated), as well as works of his belonging to museums such as MoMA. For a more comprehensive view, please refer to his website at <www.ben-vautier.com> [accessed 2 May 2023].

14. *El libro de los veinticuatro filósofos*, ed. de Paolo Lucentini, trad. de Cristina Serna y Jaume Pórtulas, (Madrid: Siruela, 2000), pp. 117–18.

15. 'Pseudo Dionisio Areopagita', *Obras completas*, ed. de Teodoro H. Martín, (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2014), p. 81.

In 1962, at a beach in Nice, Ben Vautier took a box with large letters written on it saying 'Dieu', along with a smaller text: 'attention Dieu est dans cette boîte comme ailleurs et partout Ben' ['attention God is in this box as in any other place and everywhere Ben'], the measurements ('80 × 100 × 40'), and an arrow indicating that the box should be placed upright.<sup>12</sup> He then climbed a rock and threw the box into the sea. This performance or 'geste' (as Ben himself called it) was documented through photographs and a brief description: 'Ayant décidé que Dieu est partout, y compris dans sa boîte en carton, je le jette à la mer' ['Having decided that God is everywhere, even in his cardboard box, I throw him into the sea'], under the title 'Jeter Dieu à la mer' ['Throwing God into the sea'].<sup>13</sup>

Aside from the provocative nature of his action, it is necessary to consider that it may refer to long-standing theological discussions regarding the omnipresence and infinite dimension of God. According to Paolo Lucentini, the medieval philosopher Thomas Bradwardine

concludes that God is necessarily, eternally, and infinitely present everywhere, in the infinite imaginary space, *in the infinite imaginary place*; for this reason, indeed, he can be called omnipresent and omnipotent. God can also, for analogous reasons, be called infinite, infinitely great, or of infinite dimension, but in a metaphysical sense and not properly in relation to physical extension. 'Indeed, God extends infinitely, without dimension and extension'.<sup>14</sup>

Centuries earlier, in 'The Divine Names', Dionysius the Areopagite also addressed this issue in terms that transcend the opposition of characteristics such as large or small:

It is true that we call God 'Great' because of his own greatness, which makes all great things partake of himself. He is beyond all excessive greatness and extension, comprehends all space, surpasses all number, and transcends all infinity [...]. This Greatness is infinite, without quantity or number [...]. He is also called 'Small or subtle', lacking all mass and extension and diffusing freely throughout everything (Wisdom 7:24). Moreover, the small is the cause of everything, and indeed, there is nothing to be found anywhere that does not partake in the essence of the small. Hence, we must acknowledge the presence of the small within God in this manner.<sup>15</sup>

It is not only striking that Ben throws God into the sea but even more so that he decides to take a part of him and put it inside a box of such precise dimensions.

This is just one of many activities in which the artist used God. In his book *Ben Dieu – Art total sa revue* he recounts some previous *gestes*:

MOI BEN J'EXPOSE, JE SIGNE ET JE VENDS DIEU.

Durant l'été 1961, j'ai présenté à Yves Klein et à Arman une balle de ping-pong contenant Dieu.

Considérant que Dieu pourrait être quelque part ou partout, Dieu peut être localisé (Statues, Crucifix).



Ben Vautier, *Jeter Dieu à la mer*, 1962.

Je l'ai mis en boîtes noires où je l'ai signé (DIEU) en tant qu'œuvre d'art.

L'importance et le prix de la création sont évolués au cubage de son contenant.

Accompagné selon le désir du client d'hosties ou de pain, de vin et d'un certificat d'authenticité.

- Dieu en lettres 10 Dollars le cm<sup>3</sup>, 1961.
- Dieu en boîte, 1961.
- Dieu en sachet, 1961.
- Dieu c'est MOI, 1962.<sup>16</sup>

### I Ben, Display, Sign and Sell God.

In the summer of 1961, I presented Yves Klein and Arman with a ping-pong ball containing God.

Considering that God could be somewhere or everywhere, God could be located (Statues, Crucifixes).

I placed God in black boxes, where I signed (GOD) as a work of art.

The importance and price of the creation are adjusted to the size of the container.

Accompanied by hosts or bread, wine, and a certificate of authenticity, according to the customer's desires.

- God in letters \$10 per cm<sup>3</sup>, 1961.
- God in a box, 1961.
- God in a bag, 1961.
- God is ME, 1962.

As can be observed, the attempt to contain, represent, sign, and sell God, as well as to assign him a condition or value, is recurrent and eliminates any distance, ungraspability, or infinity of the divine figure. Thus, God becomes an everyday object like any other, manipulated by the artist at will. In fact, Ben will continue to do so in subsequent works. For example, a few years ago 'God(s) in a box' was sold in the Fluxshop online store, which is a version of this box more suitable for these times of inter-religiosity: 'Multireligious version of Ben Vautier's classic "God in a box". Playing with the notion that God is everywhere. Therefore, she/he/it is also in the box. Also available in large size.'<sup>17</sup> Here, size is quantified once again (as if there could be larger or smaller gods), but gender options for God are also offered (addressing long-standing discussions in various traditions), and, through the '(s)', its possible multiplicity is alluded to. The cardboard box includes a list to check off options from different religions (including 'other') to which this divinity could be attributed. A very practical box, no doubt.

16. Ben Vautier, *Ben Dieu – Art total sa revue*, (Niza, 1963), p. 8.

17. The original page is down, but a backup can be accessed here: <web.archive.org/web/20130123122424/fluxshop.se/shop/product.php?id\_product=31> [accessed 3 June 2024]. More than ten years ago, I ordered one of these boxes, but I never received it.

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18. *Mystery Box* (1964), <www.moma.org/collection/works/128134> [accessed 2 May 2024].

19. 'This box contains an idea so important that it could change art. I hid so that no one can pinch the idea from me' (1966), <www.moma.org/collection/works/130601> [accessed 3 May 2023].

20. *Boîte mystère* (1960), <www.moma.org/collection/works/130599> [accessed 3 May 2023].

Ben Vautier, *Fluxshop, God(s) in a box*, c.2010.



However, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Ben's work exclusively addresses God, given the extremely varied elements and concepts he employs with these same procedures. Other boxes serve to indicate equally vague or abstract contents, such as 'mystery'. His 'mystery boxes' or 'boîtes mystères' can take different forms, like a modest packaging box;<sup>18</sup> a small metal box that can only be opened with a key bearing the inscription, in his traditional calligraphy: 'This box contains an idea so important it could change art. I've hidden it so no one can take the idea from me';<sup>19</sup> and another black box that also warns: 'This box will lose all its aesthetic value if you open it', among many others, which are part of his obsession with enclosing things in a box.<sup>20</sup>



Ben Vautier, *Mystery Box*, 1964.

Like 'God', 'mystery' and 'aesthetic value' are certainly evanescent concepts, distinct from the tangible objects typically stored in boxes. However, in this particular type of box, what matters is the effect it produces, either by reading an indication and not being able to open it to check if its content is such, or, in case the box is destroyed, not finding anything inside. It is worth returning to the beginning of these artworks, as described

by Ben: 'One day I stumbled upon a rusty tin box firmly closed. Its content remained a mystery to me, as I couldn't open it. That day, I recognized the beauty of not knowing what lay within, inspiring me to create my mystery boxes. [...] The realm of mystery is immense, and each day brings new mysteries: codes, unlabeled bottles, packages, trunks, cabinets, etc.'<sup>21</sup> The essence of this process lies not in filling an open box, even metaphorically, but rather in encountering a sealed container and attributing a name or description to its contents, which remain inaccessible to the artist. As was perhaps the case in Barry, the intention is not to conceal a secret from the viewer, but rather to present a mystery or 'promise' that even the artist cannot unravel. As Ben explains, a box could be a trunk or a cabinet, but he also considers a bottle as a box – a transparent vessel that defies Montalbeti's definition or Reguera's concept of a 'veiled' condition. One of his works is an empty wine bottle without a cork, marked with a label bearing the inscription 'God'.<sup>22</sup> Another piece is a small, empty, transparent box, with 'empty box' written in white ink.<sup>23</sup> However, I believe that their functionality is equivalent, as they allude to immaterial and, therefore, transparent content. This renders it just as impossible to verify as if it were concealed in an opaque box. Consequently, we find ourselves in the same predicament: we can only speculate about the 'promise' that is extended to us.



Ben Vautier, *Boîte vide*, 1986.

This 'empty' quality is not literal either. In an interview with Mathieu Copeland included in *Voids*, Ben Vautier acknowledges the impossibility of achieving absolute emptiness. He comments: 'The void is physical. One of my friends is a scientist who spends his time trying to make a vacuum, emptying containers of their oxygen and everything. He thinks he's managed it. He made a box with nothing in, guaranteed free of air and oxygen – a complete vacuum, but there's still light in it'.<sup>24</sup> He later concludes: 'Nothing is one of the limits of art, as is the void. The void could be presented in formal terms as a box containing nothing, but for me, Nothing is theoretical',<sup>25</sup> ultimately aligning with his mother's perspective, who used to say, 'There is no such thing as nothing!'<sup>26</sup> This maternal assertion is not far from what science currently teaches us, as the laws of nature do not allow for conceiving an absolutely empty space.

21. Ben Vautier, *Ben, pour ou contre. Une rétrospective*. (Marseille: Musées de Marseille, 1995), p. 41.

22. Ben Vautier, *God* (1961), <www.moma.org/collection/works/128130> [accessed 3 May 2023].

23. Ben Vautier, *Boîte vide* (1986), <www.moma.org/collection/works/131280> [accessed 3 May 2023].

24. Ben Vautier, *Less is more, but I prefer nothing*, interview with Mathieu Copeland, in Copeland (ed.), *Voids*, pp. 253-57, p. 254.

25. Ibid., p. 256.

26. Ibid., p. 257.

27. Henning Genz, *Nothingness. The Science of Empty Space*, trad. de Karin Heusch, (Cambridge: Basic Books, 2001), p. viii.

28. Ibid.

29. John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 204. See also Karen Barad, *What Is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice*, (Kassel: documenta, 2012).

30. Vautier, 'Less is more ...', p. 253.

31. Ben Vautier, *Je cherche la vérité*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p. 167.

32. Ibid., p. 136.

At high temperatures, space at its emptiest will be filled with thermal radiation. At low temperatures, structures will form in the void. According to quantum mechanics – more specifically, to Heisenberg's uncertainty relation – we can never precisely fix the amount of energy that fills a certain region of space in a certain amount of time. The amount of energy will fluctuate. Consequently, we will never be able to define a zero-scale for energy.<sup>27</sup>

For this very reason, it is an active vacuum:

'The physical vacuum is not at all empty or devoid of characteristics. Rather, everything that can exist will oscillate and rotate in it in a random and disordered manner. Quantities will arise in this vacuum which, in an abstract space of particle properties, will define directions'.<sup>28</sup> Particularly pertinent to our concerns, John D. Barrow points out:

We can no longer sustain the simple idea that a vacuum is just an empty box. If we could say that there were no particles in a box that it was completely empty of all mass and energy, then we would have to violate the Uncertainty Principle because we would require perfect information about motion at every point and about the energy of the system at a given instant of time.<sup>29</sup>

Ben's intuition is then reinforced, even though his scope of action is not physical, but mental.

These gestures by Ben – precursors of the conceptual art that would emerge a few years later – are developed together with other artists, among them Yves Klein, mentioned earlier. As he recalls in his interview with Copeland, 'There's a well-known anecdote that's true. I am an envious person, I want to exist, to survive, to have an ego. Klein had already signed everything. He'd signed the Blue, the void ... so if all that's true, everything must be signed. If God is everywhere, then He's also in this ping-pong ball. I signed it, so I signed God'.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in 1959 Klein had signed and sold 'Zones of immaterial pictorial sensibility'. Ben, as we have already seen, follows the same game of appropriating anything: 'My art will be an art of appropriation. I systematically seek to sign everything that has not been signed. I believe that art is in the intention and that signing is enough. So I sign: holes, mysterious boxes, kicks, God, chickens'.<sup>31</sup> Also, of course, he signed the nothingness: 'In 1961, I signed nothing and then I forgot that I had signed the nothingness and did many other things but mostly I wanted to do nothing'.<sup>32</sup> Many years later, in 1993, he issued an invitation to the 'Fluxus International Niçois Festival du Rien (1963-1993)' with a very specific instruction:

For this festival you are asked to do **nothing**, you can stay at home and do **nothing**. NO PERFORMING. NO CONFERENCE. NO EXPOSITION. NO WORK, if such a program is too difficult for you to apply, and if you become conscious of the weight of your **'nothing'**, you can send us its description, for instance: 'I have no more time to do **nothing'** or 'this festival is worth **nothing**, I refuse to do **nothing'**, etc.

We are of course conscious and happy concerning the participation to the festival



Building on the insights of Montalbetti and Reguera discussed earlier, the allure of the empty boxes by Ben, Brüggeman, and Beaulieu lies in their capacity to contain, shield, and encapsulate a mystery. They simultaneously name this mystery (through texts inscribed on them or paratexts) and quantify it, both by their dimensions (a content cannot exceed its container) and by their economic value or equivalent in hours of work. This tension is particularly striking given that, to the best of our knowledge, the boxes are empty or nearly empty, suggesting their value should be negligible. However, they also allude to concepts such as 'God' or 'nothing', which transcend any tangible worth. Hence, Ben's attempt to confine and transport God in a box is as provocative as Beaulieu's desire to insure his empty box for 52,000 Canadian dollars. Below, I will further explore this aspect, as the considerable value of artwork has been a recurring concern in the art world, and from this perspective, these works are paradigmatic.<sup>45</sup>

Ever since Duchamp, if not before, there seems to be no direct relationship between the cost of materials, the level of effort (or other values such as technique, talent, genius) invested by the artist, and the price an artwork may acquire on the market. Many artists, several of whom have been referenced in this article, have made this issue one of their primary motivations and have extensively explored its complexities. One particularly remarkable project in this vein that invites further contemplation is *VALOR! site-specific performances sobre el valor patrimonial* [VALOR! site-specific performances on heritage value] directed by María José Contreras and Carolina Ihle. This project was funded by the Vice-Rectorate for Research at the Pontificia Universidad Católica of Chile and developed using a research methodology grounded in artistic practice. It was held at the Ex-Teatro Italia in Santiago, an abandoned venue cloaked in dust. Under these conditions, the project sought to investigate the construction and negotiation of heritage value. Eight performances or events were conducted, with the first being the 'Heritage Auction', described as follows:

Upon the slope of the former galleries of the Ex-Teatro Italia, a grid of 700 lots organized in numbered columns and rows marked with letters was outlined with blue chalk and twine [...]. Over a month, the dust from the slope was collected with brushes, akin to an archaeological site. The meticulously gathered dust was then stored in hand-screened polystyrene envelopes. Each sample was identified according to the quadrant from which it was extracted and labeled with a card with a description according to categories of quantity, quality, location, work hours, and poetics.<sup>46</sup>

The objectivity of the process clashes with aspects that are difficult to quantify, such as 'poetics'. Subsequently, the auction was conducted by 'Pabla Ugarte, an auctioneer who has worked at Christie's auction house in New York'. Champagne was served during the auction, and performers indicated each lot during the bidding with the reflection of a mirror.<sup>47</sup> The last event took place a few months later and consisted of a game in which participants earned points by sinking ping-pong

Items bought from the internet.



balls into boxes placed on the slope. They could then exchange these points for prizes, which consisted of 'the remains of each performance: bags of dust, coins found on the slope, drawings, posters with photographs from the artists' notebooks, costumes, and masks used in the process, among others'.<sup>48</sup> Just like bags of dust, these objects had a label detailing the cost of the materials and the work-hours involved. As Fernando Portal points out, this project combined different forms of valuation, such as 'auctions, common in the art world, but more frequently associated with the sale of goods stripped of their structure of legitimization of value [...], and chance, in the same way, we find it in casinos and other gambling houses based on betting as a mechanism of control and risk'.<sup>49</sup> What strikes me the most and seems almost moving is the rigor and thoroughness with which these different stages were carried out. Beyond the ironic or ambiguous tone, there seemed to be a genuine appreciation for the seemingly absurd materials and activities being undertaken. Initially, questions about the heritage value of a specific space arose, such as 'how is heritage value revealed?' and 'who participates in the construction of heritage value?'.<sup>50</sup> After this project, new questions emerge: What is the point of spending so many hours of work collecting dust? What kind of aesthetic experience do these performances offer? How can the resources spent be accounted for and justified in the university report? What kind of knowledge does this type of research generate, and how can it be applied?<sup>51</sup> Or to put it more bluntly: What is the point of all this? This project made me think that these same questions could be applied, by extension, to many other tasks of academia and creation, and perhaps they would be equally difficult to answer convincingly, or could only be answered with a 'just because'.

45. See Angela Vettese, *L'arte contemporanea*; Max Haiven, *Art after Money, Money after Art: Creative Strategies Against Financialization*, (London: Pluto, 2018); Georgina Adam, *Big Bucks. The Explosion of the Art Market in the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2014); Georgina Adam, *Dark Side of the Boom. The Excesses of the Art Market in the 21st Century*, (London: Lund Humphries, 2017); Noah Horowitz, *Art of the Deal. Contemporary Art in a Global Financial Market*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Princeton University Press, 2011), the documentary directed by Nathaniel Kahn, *The Price of Everything* (2018).

The way the value of artwork is typically discussed in the public sphere or in the press is often far removed from these inquiries. Sensationalism prevails, with emphasis placed on record prices achieved by painters at international auctions, akin to the excitement generated by speculating on a football player's transfer fee. Some, like the aforementioned Avelina Lésper, denounce this as nothing more than a conspiracy of speculators, gallerists, collectors, ministers of culture, curators, academics, and artists producing objects without artistic value. Along these lines, reports such as '9 Unbelievable Pieces of Art that Actually Sold' proliferate, motivated by the desire to laugh at those who have squandered their money.<sup>52</sup> The work that often tops such lists is the famous 'Merda d'artista', created by an artist quite close to Ben Vautier and Yves Klein: Piero Manzoni.<sup>53</sup>



Piero Manzoni, *Artist's Shit*, 1961.

In 1961, as is well known, Piero Manzoni filled 90 tins with a substance weighing 30 grams each. He meticulously sealed these tins to prevent any odor. Then, he signed and numbered them, and added labels indicating that they contained excrement produced by the artist himself. The value of each tin was equivalent to its weight in gold. According to Martin Engler, 'Manzoni was making reference to the capitalist value system on the one hand while offering a commentary on the state of affairs of the Western consumer society on the other. The absurd logic and attitude of expectation that distinguish the art market are mirrored in the double presence of *Merda d'artista* as waste product and artwork in one'.<sup>54</sup> But the fact that one could not discern whether or not there is excrement inside 'is not a mere side effect but a fundamental element of the work, testifying to its identity as an

46. María José Contreras and Carolina Ihle, *Valor! Site-Specific Performances sobre Valor Patrimonial*, (Santiago: Capital Books, 2016), p. 14. This catalogue was released alongside the exhibition of this research at the Galería Réplica in Valdivia. The authors also published the article 'La subasta patrimonial: construcción de valor en la ruina moderna a través de una intervención sitio específico', *Revista 180*, (38, January 2016), <www.revista180.udp.cl/index.php/revista180/article/view/319/306> [accessed 5 May 2024].

47. Contreras and Ihle, op. cit., p. 14.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

49. In Contreras and Ihle, op. cit., p. 8.

50. María José Contreras, in Contreras and Ihle, op. cit., p. 10.

51. These were some of the questions that arose when María José Contreras presented this project at a meeting of La oficina de la nada [The Office of Nothing] on June 17, 2016.

52. Grace Murano, '9 Unbelievable Pieces of Art that Actually Sold', *Oddee*, 20 November 2013, <www.oddee.com/item\_98781.aspx> [accessed 5 May 2024].

53. See Piero Manzoni, *When Bodies Became Art*, Ed. Martin Engler, (Frankfurt: Städel Museum, 2013), pp. 192-99.

54. En Manzoni, op. cit., p. 194.



artistic “magic box”.<sup>55</sup> The early death of Manzoni, the constant increase in the economic value of his work, and the passage of time have contributed to adding an ever-greater allure to these modest tins. For instance, in 1989, artist Bernard Bazile publicly opened one of these tins, thereby creating a new work: *Boîte ouverte de Piero Manzoni*, later included in his exhibition *It's OK to Say No!* The exhibition catalogue shows the tin from the side, preventing a view of the interior.<sup>56</sup> Bazile's obsession continued in the following years, and he interviewed many of the owners of this work by Manzoni. This material was featured in the 2004 exhibition 'Une mesure pour tous' and later compiled in the book *i proprietari \_ die besitzer \_ les propriétaires \_ the owners*. The variety of responses from Manzoni's acquaintances, collectors, and museum curators is fascinating. Walter Baldi considers the effect of this work as similar to that of a relic: 'When a saint dies, he does not think of his relics. It is we, the faithful, the believers, who create the relic.'<sup>57</sup> Libero Grande holds the opposite view: 'The meaning of the tin is a highly desacralizing one. [...] It is a very provocative gesture because it actually expresses the idea that art cannot be sold, but if you want, I can sell you a box telling you it contains an artist's excrement'.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond the numerous speculations that this tin has provoked and continues to provoke, alongside its detachment from the vast diversity of Manzoni's work, I would like to relate it to our boxes, because, like them, its activation depends on the relationship between a text indicating what could be inside and the impossibility of verifying it. For this reason, Galder Reguera also considers it a veiled work: 'Piero Manzoni was not properly selling his excrement, but rather tins in which it was claimed to contain that'.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, even if there was no excrement inside them, 'the true content of the work would remain the same, it would still be "artist's shit"'. The idea, here, is above the material realization of the work.<sup>60</sup> So far the comparison may work, but there is a very relevant difference: believing that God can be contained in a box like Ben's requires a much greater degree of imagination than thinking that someone has put excrement inside a tin. Or nothing, as Miguel Januário has done in a series of hermetically sealed tins as part of his project *±MaisMenos±*.<sup>61</sup>

55. *Ibid.*, pp.194–95.

56. Bernard Bazile, *It's OK to Say No!*, (Paris: Galeries contemporaines Centre Georges Pompidou, 1993), p. 9. The previous pages contain clippings from the Italian press when Manzoni produced this work (pp.6–7).

57. bazile \_ manzoni [Bernard Bazile], *i proprietari \_ die besitzer \_ les propriétaires \_ the owners*, (Villeurbanne: Institut d'art contemporain, 2004), p. 13. Nagel establishes an intriguing relationship between Duchamp's readymades and medieval relics, but notes that, unlike the latter, it is the artist and the gallery who 'consecrate' the work. (Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), pp. 238–39).

58. En Bazile, *i proprietari*, p. 17.

59. *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

61. Miguel Januário, *Nothing*, [www.under-dogs.net/products/nothing](http://www.under-dogs.net/products/nothing) [accessed 5 May 2024]. See also his project *±MaisMenos±*, <[www.maismenos.net](http://www.maismenos.net)>, in which this work appears along with the caption '±Nothing is essential±'.

62. Sebastián Errázuriz, *Nothing*, Sebastián Errázuriz Studio, <[sebastian.studio/object-nothing](http://sebastian.studio/object-nothing)> [accessed 5 May 2024].

Indeed, nothingness can also find its place within transparent containers. In a notable instance, Sebastián Errázuriz and Diego Almeida entered a Japanese ecological design competition with their creation, *Nada de nada*. Faced with financial constraints and the daunting task of competing against the elaborate models of their Japanese counterparts, they conceived what they deemed the most ecologically sound proposal: to abstain from designing anything tangible. Instead, they presented an empty concept packaged in vivid, pop-graphic wrapping. The inclusion of typical product recommendations on its packaging is quite amusing: 'Never before seen!', 'As seen on TV!', 'Tested on animals!', 'New formula!', alongside its instructions and information stating that by purchasing this 'nothing', one helps a child living in a hyperbaric bubble. A thousand copies of this provocative product were displayed and sold at the Trece art gallery, each priced at just US\$1.99.<sup>62</sup>



Sebastián Errázuriz, *Nothing*, 2002.



Similar 'nothings' can also be found on websites like Amazon, although they are not classified as works of art but rather as gifts, often presented in boxes or transparent plastic bags. These items serve as humorous solutions to evade the obligation of gift-giving, and customer comments on the webpage attest to their effectiveness. Some packages even include phrases such as 'You said you didn't want anything' or 'For the person who has everything'. Notably, one recommendation stands out: 'Open the package but be aware - nothing will happen. Allow nothing to flow through your mind and calm your soul. Enjoy the sensations. You too can discover that nothing really is better than something.'

An equally comforting promise is found in another empty bag, albeit one that does not sell anything. Instead, it offers 'art-free air' for a modest price of €29.90 (excluding shipping costs): 'This air is delicately and sustainably extracted from the atmosphere and carefully examined by experts to determine its artistic content. Only 100% genuine and unaltered air receives the 'art-free' certificate. This product is ideal for allergy and asthma sufferers'. This bag, along with other unlikely objects such as a credit card that cannot be used for purchases, is available for sale in the store of the prestigious No Show Museum and is part of the 'Cultural Accessories' collection of *Personal Artist*,<sup>63</sup> a brand created by Franzisca Becher. The ironic tone of Becher's collection is evident, and its critical nature is more clearly contextualized by noting its association with the NO!art collective, a movement founded in 1959 by Boris Lurie, Sam Goodman, and Stanley Fisher. In a 1970 manifesto, Lurie sharply criticized the art market for its speculations, its decorative nature, and especially pop art, which he saw as celebrating the superficial glories of consumer society.<sup>64</sup>

63. <[www.noshowmuseum.com](http://www.noshowmuseum.com)> [accessed 5 May 2024].

64. In Mathieu Copeland and Balthazar Lovay (eds.), *The anti-museum*, (Freiburg and London: Fri Art / Koenig Books, 2017), p. 257.

65. Lissane Skyler (dir.), *Brillo Box (3¢ off)*, 2016.

Therefore, I cannot conclude without revisiting Warhol and his Brillo Boxes. I recently watched the documentary *Brillo Box (3¢ off)* by Lissane Skyler, whose parents bought one of these famous boxes in 1969 for a mere \$1,000.<sup>65</sup> The film follows the life of this box, which a couple of years later was exchanged for a drawing by Peter Young and eventually auctioned at Christie's for \$3 million. Towards the end, the documentary features the installation *Babel* by sculptor Charles Lutz, who created and stacked cardboard replicas of Warhol's Brillo Box (a replica of the original box designed by James Harvey) so that exhibition attendees could freely take them home. After so many pages discussing prices and speculations, it is relieving to witness the happy and satisfied faces of the attendees as they carry away those large, free, and empty boxes.

