

SEPT. 17 - NOV. 13, 2021 - *THE SHAPE OF A HOLE IN THE GROUND*

Allyson Packer

birds+ Richard
611 Loma Linda Pl SE
Albuquerque, NM 87108

I read an op-ed recently by a theologian suggesting the utility of an altar to Agnostos Theos, the unknown god. These kinds of altars first appeared in ancient Greece when the polytheistic Greeks, fearing the existence, and therefore the wrath, of potential gods who had been forgotten or remained undiscovered, built empty stone pedestals in devotion to Agnostos Theos. These objects represented what the author termed a “sacred and beautiful nothingness”¹ that he wants to revive: if a subject is too vast, too fraught, we must bring its representation back closer to nothingness. Absence, in this logic, is unassailable.

This is a familiar move for the conceptual artist. Stop freighting an idea with material. Pull back and pull back until you are left with a single word, a sound, a gesture, and the rest of the work can exist in your viewer’s thoughts. You have elegantly evaded formal complications.

And now culture has caught up. Caught on. Existing is fraught, so you pay for experiences instead of things, try to minimize your footprint, and seek to be an example through your actions. Are we all conceptual artists now? Nearly obliterating your presence is an elegant solution to the formal complication of your existence. Dematerialize yourself as much as you can as you remain just-this-side of the void. Become Agnostos Theos.

But as we march the personal into alignment with the cosmic, we approach that unknown god who set our course here in the first place. We are confronted with the gnawing and irreducible condition of continuing to exist. We are heavy after all. Our relation to the things we don’t understand, won’t know, is distressingly somatic.

I went to an estate sale recently in a house set into the side of a treeless hill. Inside, blackout curtains covered the windows, so I had to navigate it all by lamplight, and through the darkness I could feel immense waves of heat from the sun beating down outside when I approached an exterior wall. Someone had removed any identifying pictures of the person who had lived there, but I could tell things: it was packed with the various ephemera of the homeowner’s personal interests, souvenirs and history books. I found a diploma for a PHD in Philosophy, but nothing else to indicate an interest in entertaining the theoretical. I left with a framed snapshot of two identical cats sitting on a bedspread I’d seen in the bedroom, their backs to a mirror, so that there were four. And then later I saw it, captured in the mirror, in the corner of the photo. A pair of legs, thin and dressed in old blue trousers. *There you are*, I thought. There you are.

¹ Simon, Ed. “We Need a Monument to the Unknown America: A memorial makes a statement about who is worth preserving. Why not a sacred and beautiful nothingness?” The New York Times, August 4, 2020.