

## ART MONTHLY

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This concise and yet complex exhibition revolves around a project by London Fieldworks, the artist collaborators Bruce Gilchrist and Jo Joelson, which resulted in a computer-produced sculpture of Gustav Metzger thinking about nothing. What we see, apart from the resulting 50cm cuboid of hollowed-out Portland Stone, is diagrams of the set-up used to obtain Metzger's thoughts, small-scale prototypes, and a film of its making. There's also an extensive accompanying publication by Black Dog Publishing. Unpacking Null Object requires consideration of London Fieldworks' overall practice, the idea of representing the mind, the nature of nothing, the involvement of Metzger and the combination of all that as an artwork. London Fieldworks' projects have often translated consciousness into physical forms which allow information to be sent across distances, for example by turning thoughts into musical notation to be played from computer monitors. Their 'Looking at Primitives' project, running since 1999, has compiled a database of EEG files taken from volunteer participants' bursts of brain activity at the exact moment of recognition as a 3D image of a primitive solid emerges out of the random dots of a stereogram. For Null Object, Metzger's 20-minute EEG recording was sampled every two seconds and compared with the wider database. The shapes associated with the 600 files so matched were then combined to make a complex shape, from which the robot was programmed to excavate the stone's interior. In short, a parallel was made between the idea of thinking about nothing and the perception of depth, rendered as a voidance carved into two pieces of ancient stone. They were then combined like the hemispheres of a brain: we are, I think, bound to link the vacancy to a brain, rather than a mind, given the difficulty of conceiving how the mind can be represented. Abstraction can be posited as equivalent to emotional states, or a stream of images associated with what is dreamed or thought, but neither can apply if Metzger was truly thinking about nothing. In that case, the appearance of an empty brain does seem as good a representation as we'll get. What is it, though, to think about nothing? If Metzger thought about that, of course, he wasn't thinking about nothing, he was thinking about 'nothing' – the concept. Is it, rather, a matter of emptying the mind out in Buddhist style, but somehow going beyond mindful concentration on the present moment to strip away all of its sensations? That sounds a difficult task, in line with the Japanese Zen philosopher Keiji Nishitani's injunction that nothingness has to be experienced, not merely 'thought', or else it loses its absolute character. It's quite something, then – if possible at all – actually to 'think about nothing'. And the whole project is shot through with that sort of paradoxical humour. How would we know that Metzger had succeeded? What would the sculpture have looked like had he been thinking about his lunch? That brings us to the veteran provocateur himself. What do Gilchrist and Joelson gain by choosing Metzger to trigger the null object? The three artists are near neighbours in Hackney and share "a passionate commitment to what has been termed 'deep ecology', where the human's right to manage the world in his own image is held open to question" (Bronac Ferran in 'Null Object', p35) – an approach which Metzger pushes so far as to say that "the best way out for nature as a whole is the self abolition of humanity" ('Null Object', p91). Beyond these common concerns, Metzger's own practice connects to the project in three ways. First, he's a pioneer of technology in art, and was the founding editor of the Computer Art Society's journal PAGE in 1969. Second, he's best known for his auto-destructive art, the automatism of which is at the heart of 'Null Object': Gilchrist and Joelson set things in motion then step back; Metzger thinks, and takes no further part. Third, he has a long-standing interest in nothingness and negation, including going on art strike in 1977-80 and co-curating the Pompidou's acclaimed 2009 retrospective 'Voids'. Metzger, then, gives 'Null Object' added connections and resonance. The whole project is fascinating as a process and a generator of themes. Moreover, there are neat touches of secondary negation: the film soundtrack is of the water washing away the drilled stone, but not of the drill; there's a positive version of the inner void which emerges as some sort of inverted Rachel Whiteread. And if the relational database aesthetic produces a central object which is somewhat grey and lacking in the flair of unmediated human agency – if the null fades to dull – that may also be to the point. Here's nothing, indeed, to think about.