What appears so striking in retrospect about the French artist Yves Klein's legendary Parisian debut performance of the Anthropometries in 1960 is how disparate were its short-successive waves of reception—and not without cause. The event was designed by Klein: to appeal to the beau monde invited; to expose the conceits of art world that this beau monde patronized; and to introduce Klein and his artistic project to a much larger audience. Only the art world was genuinely scandalized in the aftermath of the debut, refusing to recognize what Klein had created as art: Georges Mathieu, then the leading young French painter, dismissed it as "comportement," while the art critic Claude Rivière viewed it as "d'éléments d'exhibition" annexed à l'art. 1 Likewise, over the course of the next year, Klein would most often serve in the mass media as self-evident proof of the modern artist's depravity, which, it is worth emphasizing at the start, did not dissuade Klein from pursuing a project in late 1960 with Alain Bernardin, the king of Parisian striptease. 2 Even more, such a project arguably appeared as a logical next step, given Klein's ongoing interests and that the debut itself had featured three naked young women, sponging themselves with paint and, under Klein's direction, pressing their wet, colored bodies against white paper supports. Although there would be neither stripping nor teas ing at the debut, Klein deliberately invoked this contemporary fashion otherwise. Popular culture, especially its supposedly most vulgar varieties, had long provided modern artists with inherently contentious source material and the means with which to challenge the dominant conventions and institutions of art. 3 In contrast to the art world and the larger public, the beau monde applauded this debut performance as "l'art," viewing it as scandal in the tradition of the historic avant-garde. "Yves Klein est un des rares contemporains," wrote a journalist, delivering the verdict of the social set in the mainstream weekly magazine L'Express: "capables de concevoir un 'scandale' digne de la belle époque surréaliste, et de réussir son exécution, alors que Mathieu, avec ou sans jabot de dentelle, Dali, avec ou sans rhinocéros, s'essoufflent à vouloir estomaquer avec une pareille 'force de frappe'." 4 The French fin-de-siècle expression "succès de scandale" in 1960

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contains the beginnings of an explanation for the divergence of opinion that still structures the interpretation of Klein. Was Klein guilty, as Hal Foster has written, of turning “Dadaist provocation” into “bourgeois spectacle”? At stake in the answer is not only the critical judgment of Klein or the meaning of his best-known artwork but also the identity of what has come to be called the neo-avant-garde, of which Klein is a prime exponent. As it denotes in a single phrase both artwork and reception, the term “succès de scandale” emphasizes the profoundly social character of modern art. It has particular relevance to performance, in which people encounter art as a select group. In 1960, when the Anthropométries debuted, there was no medium by the name of performance within modern art. However, during the early postwar period, several long- and short-term factors had conspired to pressure modern artists, who were engaged in the fine arts, to effectively become performing artists; indeed, the adaptability of large-scale gestural abstraction to dramatic presentations of painting for the camera can largely account for this French and American period style’s success. Showmanship, which was encouraged in France and suppressed in the United States, would, over the course of the early postwar period, enter modern art—an historical process, in which Klein’s debut performance would be critical. Formally entitled “Anthropométries de l’Époque bleue” (Anthropométries of the Blue Period), Klein’s debut would parody the modern male artistic subjectivity, descending from Picasso, in which artistic virtuosity was demonstrated, increasingly ostentatiously during the postwar period, through physical virility. Depending upon much older, gendered stereotypes of artistic production, this male quality-cum-force would be emphasized in contrasts with its apparent opposite: namely, the gentle, obliging, malleable bodies of women, whether mimetically depicted or more indirectly invoked. Klein’s Blue Period was, of course, a mockery of Picasso’s famous, early, near monochromy. Klein’s ecstatic version not only recast Picasso’s bohemian origin story, stressing its religious elements, but also, in recalling Picasso’s origins, directed attention toward how far Picasso himself had come from the mythic, dilapidated Bateau-Lavoir of Montmartre. Almost sixty years later, in 1960, Picasso was still very much active, but by then a celebrity and a Communist, living in a storied castle in the south of France (in a contradiction not lost on contemporaries). Indeed, Picasso was painting for the cameras, as superlatively quickly and faultlessly as ever, oftentimes in nothing but shorts, with a new young female companion in attendance, serving the painter as muse, model and audience. At the same time, moreover, such rather primal chest thumping was also being taken to a new, almost caricatural extreme by Mathieu. During the 1950s, Mathieu’s live and televised performances of painting featured the young, slim, chic French painter excitedly squeezing tube after tube of paint directly onto the canvas in repeated explosions, whose ferocity simulated orgasm, a metaphor that Mathieu had employed as early as 1948 to describe painting as the transcendental experience of release, of losing control, after an intensely concentrated effort. The debut performance of the Anthropométries would be, on one hand, a burlesque of Mathieu’s presentations of painting, which by contrast left Mathieu spent and sweaty, his face and clothes covered with errant squirts and splatters of paint—and, on the other, a polemical refusal of the traditions of not only virtuoso painting but also art-object making and appreciation altogether. The second would be the true scandal of the debut: Klein would dramatize the early Christian origin story of icon painting and thus reveal contemporary art as idolatrous; the debut would be a proto-Conceptual call for iconoclasm.

When faced, as other modern artists of the postwar period, with the pressure of becoming a performing artist, Klein turned, as Picasso and Dalí did, to buffoonery, neither really transforming their working processes. Although Jackson Pollock and Mathieu had developed new metaphors for painting, Pollock as a Western or Native American shaman, with his ritualistic Navajo sand painting on the ground, and Mathieu as a French medieval knight, painting with brushes as long as swords, both remained beholden to these metaphors. For Klein, as for others, during the mid to late 1950s, Mathieu initially served as a model; an early alliance, however, as Klein adapted Mathieu’s model and challenged his supremacy, developed into a major rivalry, Mathieu and Klein becoming each other’s primary targets. This competition made Klein’s personal invitation of Mathieu to the debut performance of the Anthropométries all the more significant, a debut, furthermore, that would be taking place at the very gallery, the Galerie internationale d’art contemporain, in which the more senior artist was regularly exhibiting and with which he was very much identified.

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That members of the media and patrons of the gallery constituted the majority of the guests only raised the stakes of what would emerge as a decisive showdown. For his part, Mathieu took care to advertise his invitation in an article published on the morning of the event in the art-world’s main newspaper, Arts, making sure also to spoil the surprise of that evening’s program, featuring, as Mathieu revealed: “Des femmes nues trempées dans le bleu, projetées savamment contre les murs.” 10 Mathieu would fail, humiliatingly, in his attempt to publicly expose “cet enfant terrible, le jeune Klein,” as Mathieu referred to Klein, losing that night’s artistic and verbal jousts by all accounts. 11 Pure, mere parody, however, or the entertainment of watching an art star fail would not have persuaded the special social set invited to the debut of Klein’s significance. What deep existential need did the debut performance of the Anthropometries fulfill? Or, how did Klein suspend disbelief, managing to convince a sophisticated, socially self-conscious audience of nearly a hundred people that the three naked young women before them were “living paintbrushes”? The answer will lead us to the original ancient and Biblical meaning of scandal as the act that is dangerous, because it can be more disparate: the former sympathy of the contorted, adversarial logic of modernism, in which offense is enjoyed and rewarded, while the latter, between its Hebrew, Christian and Greek uses, describes an irresponsible, malicious or even cruel act that is dangerous, because it can potentially lead an entire community astray, away from the true religion. 14 The debut could accurately be called a succès de scandale, in that it was undoubtedly through the work’s scandalous character that Klein achieved fame. But, the expression also contains the implication—which is in this case misleading—that the work in question lacks inherent artistic merit or significance. In spite of the facts that both the critical and popular scandal that the Anthropometries generated ensured Klein’s success and that, especially after his premature death at age 34, much serious scholarly attention has been paid to Klein, the nature and value of his artistic achievement is still a subject of debate within art history. 15 The major objections to Klein’s project at the present already existed in more or less the same form in the art criticism that followed the Anthropometries. For this reason it is all the more essential to fully explain the scandal of the Anthropometries in its social and cultural context. 16 ...

10 Mathieu, “Le BloC-Notes de Georges Mathieu,” 2. According to Annette Kahn, Mathieu, as the hosting gallery’s most important artist, had approved of the event and even been invited to an informal rehearsal held two days before the debut, at which Mathieu reserved the right to respond in the discussion that would follow the performance. For a fascinating account, based on interviews, of the specific conversations that took place in the organization of this event, see Kahn, Yves Klein. Le Maître du Bleu (Paris: Editions Stock, 2000), 283-286. Kahn also reports that after the debut Mathieu forced the gallery’s director to choose between him and Klein. The article that Mathieu wrote and published in Arts certainly confirms that Mathieu knew the program’s content beforehand. That, if faced with such an ultimatum, the gallery chose Mathieu can be evidenced by the fact that Mathieu soon had another exhibition at the gallery, while Klein never showed at it again. In my interview with Rotrault Klein-Moquay, who was present at the rehearsal, Ms. Klein-Moquay could not recall if Mathieu had come to the rehearsal but did not believe so. Interview of Rotrault Klein-Moquay conducted by the author in Paris on June 16, 2011.


12 Klein’s interest in religion was not exceptional during this period. On both sides of the Atlantic, there was a religious revival, including in modern art, for instance, in the chromatic abstraction of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, whose works parallel Klein’s monochromes in many ways.

13 Thomas McEvilley has brilliantly documented Klein’s Catholic upbringing and epiphany upon his discovery of Rosicrucianism. See McEvilley, Yves the Provocateur: Yves Klein and Twentieth-Century Art (Kingston, N. Y.: McPherson & Co, 2010). Critics of Klein have long derided the debut’s salacious nature. Here, I argue that it was necessarily linked to its sacred aspect.


Klein would produce a jarring combination of exactly the kind of distinct class-specific activities, in which such an audience would have been engaged on any other late night of the week. One of the strategies of Klein’s defenders has been to attribute the organization of the Anthropometries to either the art critic Pierre Restany or to the owner and director of the gallery, Comte Maurice d’Arquian. It is a tactic that has been employed in Klein studies in general to outwardly resolve the aspects of his person and work that appear most problematic from the contemporary perspective, including notably his right-wing politics and his showmanship. While Restany did help to compose the text of the event’s invitations and introduced the debate following the performance, and while d’Arquian did host the event itself in his exhibition space, lending also his gravitas, this shifting of credit or blame only diminishes and obscures Klein’s project and achievement, starting with the artful mise-en-scène, which was both deliberately theatrical and churchy. Expressly denying that such work was motivated by the desire for publicity, Klein insisted, in an interview conducted by Restany in 1961, that he arranged every detail of his exhibitions in an effort to create an environment for the serious contemplation and discussion of his art. To disavow Klein’s showmanship is thus to refuse his project as he saw it, as well as his crucial role in a larger historical phenomenon. At the debut, Klein catered to the contemporary interests of his mondaine audience in mysticism and striptease. It should be no surprise that the only previous version of Klein’s Anthropometries was performed two years earlier in the home of Robert Godet, Klein’s mentor and also a mystic, or that Klein would later that year enter into discussions about a project with the French importer of American striptease, Bernardin, the creator of the famed, chic Crazy Horse Saloon. The common pursuits of the basest physical pleasure and loftiest spiritual awakening bonded the beau monde and differentiated it from the ascetic, intellectual middle-class—for whom entertainment was bread and circuses, and religion the opiate of the masses.

Given recent art-historical debates about Klein’s personal character and artistic intentions, it is important to note that Klein himself was not seduced or overcome by what is currently called, following its Situationist conception, spectacle: Situationist conception, spectacle: 18 Interview of Klein by Restany, Dec. 15, 1961, 14, Fonds Pierre Restany, Archives de la critique d’art, Rennes, France. In conversation with Restany, Klein states: “... ces mises en scènes, puisque nous parlons théâtre, remontent beaucoup plus loin puisque tu as toujours vu à quel point j’attache de l’importance à tous les détails des présentations de mes expositions et en particulier de la mise au point même de l’heure du vernissage. En tenant compte de la progression avec laquelle les gens arrivent. Je tenais compte des circonstances psychologiques formidables, je préparais une exposition depuis le début, avec une précision et une mise en climat très sérieuse. D’ailleurs on a toujours que je m’occupe d’exposition depuis le début, avec une précision et une mise en climat très sérieuse. D’ailleurs on a toujours que je faisais cela a titre publicitaire.” And further: “Cela vient de chez mes parents, qui ont créé les lundis soirs, et je voulais recréer cette atmosphère intime d’amis qui discutent dans le cadre de mes dernières œuvres.”

Text has been retyped, including the existing manual corrections on the typescript, without any modification on my part.

Klein did not frequent nightclubs (if personal preferences and habits can be submitted as evidence), and it was likely Klein’s former gallerist, Iris Clert, who suggested the collaboration with Bernardin, when Klein was seeking such a contact. As Clert explained, “Klein n’était pas mondain, il ne connaissait rien de tout ça.” Nonetheless, nor was Klein attempting to systematically decipher and undermine such popular entertainment, as Roland Barthes, for instance, in his famous essay on striptease, which was first published in 1955, and in his cultural criticism in general. Instead of feeling compelled to either celebrate or critique popular culture, to take, that is, a position either for or against, Klein regarded popular culture, without compunctions, without concerns, as an obvious, preexisting resource for modern art—rather than an emergent object of study.
With the Leaves: "November is hardly a month for birth: / The elusiveness of her initial impulse upon visiting the site: to create a significant and meaningful work of architecture that both resonated with her own desires for finding a place in a world that defined That she fails at this, and finds the house uncomfortable, and that "skirts fluttering behind trees," and visitors who "thumbed their way tirelessly aboard my distress" reveals a narrative far more complex over what is unattainable in any permanence. Needed to transcend their immediate experience," she writes, And perhaps here, Farnsworth reveals the ultimate architectural scandal, the one we know to be true: that our transcendence will require far more than glass, steel, and travertine.

Klein would produce an exacting evaluation of the kinetic, class-specific activities, which such an audience would have engaged on any other late week. One of the strategies that defenders has been to attribute organization of the Anthropol to either the art critic Pierre Res or to the owner and director of the gallery, Comte Maurice d’Arquian. It is a tactic that has been employed in Klein studies in general to outwardly resolve the aspects of his person and work that appear most problematic from the contemporary perspective, including notably his right-wing politics and his showmanship. While Restany did help to compose the text of the event’s invitations and introduced the debate following the performance, and while d’Arquian did host the event itself in his exhibition space, lending also his gravitas, this shifting of credit or blame only diminishes and obscures Klein’s project and achievement, starting with the artful mise-en-scène, which was both deliberately theatrical and churchy. Expressly denying that such work was motivated by the desire for publicity, Klein insisted, in an interview conducted by Restany in 1961, that he arranged every detail of his exhibitions in an effort to create an environment for the serious contemplation and discussion of his art. To disavow Klein’s showmanship is thus to refuse project as he saw it, as well as his emergence in a larger historical phenomenon of the time, Klein catered to the contemporary interests of his audience in mysticism and striptease, Bernardin, the creator of the famed, chic Crazy Horse Saloon. The common pursuits of the basest physical pleasure and loftiest spiritual awakening bonded the beau monde and differentiated it from the ascetic, intellectual middle-class—for whom entertainment was bread and circuses, and religion the opiate of the masses. Given recent art-historical debates about Klein’s personal character and artistic intentions, it is important to note that Klein himself was not seduced or overcome by what is currently called, following its Situationist conception, spectacle:

“César, Duchamp et les visions d’art,” Arts, Dec. 7, 1960, Press Albums of the Yves Klein Archives. Klein would be creating a project for Bernardin’s new nightclub. For more information, see work cited in footnote 6. The Crazy Horse Saloon was so chic that even Mathieu wrote an homage to Bernardin. Mathieu, ‘Alain Bernardin: Prince de l’imagination,’ Démonas seul en face de dieu Iaunanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1998, 153.

20 Eléna Palumbo-Mosca, a friend of Klein and a dancer at the debut, very kindly and generously agreed to complete my questionnaire in February 2014, including questions also about whether Klein visited nightclubs. In photographs of the event, Ms. Palumbo-Mosca is identifiable as the dancer who is wearing glasses.


22 The Situationist conception of the spectacle has arguably overdetermined and distorted our interpretation of the postwar period and should be treated as an historical object among others, not privileged as a theoretical lens. See work cited in footnote 6.


Klein did not frequent nightclubs (if personal preferences and habits can be submitted as evidence), and it was likely Klein’s former gallerist, Iris Clert, who suggested the collaboration with Bernardin, when Klein was seeking such a contact. As Clert explained, ‘Klein n’était pas mondain, il ne connaissait rien de tout ça.’ Nonetheless, nor was Klein attempting to systematically decipher and undermine such popular entertainment, as Roland Barthes, for instance, in his famous essay on striptease, which was first published in 1955, and in his cultural criticism in general. Instead of feeling compelled to either celebrate or critique popular culture, to take, that is, a position either for or against, Klein regarded popular culture, without compunctions, without concerns, as an obvious, preexisting resource for modern art—rather than as a newly emergent threat to it, or a potential source of, combined with its roots, made it, as for Picasso the magician or Dali the clown, a mode competition. Midcentury striptease was a revival of nineteenth-century burlesque. Its fashionability, its contemporaneity of showmanship to be engaged and exploited as part of a much larger artistic project that Klein had been pursuing, arduously, throughout the late 1950s, against the material, visual art object and for what Klein was calling the immaterial. Describing his earliest artistic epiphany in retrospect, Klein wrote in 1960: “Painting is no longer for me a function of the eye. My works are only the ashes of my art.”
By 1960, Klein had already managed, remarkably, to convince art collectors to throw gold (their money) into the Seine in exchange for immaterial pictorial sensitivity zones, which were nothing, no discrete thing materially but space, while being consequently everything else beyond the physical. From the perspective of the art world at the debut, what Klein proposed was Biblical scandal, leading its precious class of patrons astray, still further away from the hallowed art object.

At the debut, Klein took on the role of the master of ceremonies and compère, both in the original Catholic ritual and liturgical sense of the term and as a contemporary Parisian entertainer. The guests invited to the soirée were seated in rows, organized for maximum capacity and oriented toward a stage, as if in a miniature music hall or a formal cabaret, or as in the nave of a church, with the attention of the audience focused upon the altar ahead. Low benches, which were normally the only furniture in the bare gallery space, served as dividers—a de facto altar rail—demarcating and distinguishing the audience, sitting in darkness, and a brightly glowing makeshift stage, or sacred space. Spotlights illuminated the set from above, whose parameters were fixed on the floor and rear wall by large, white sheets of paper that, through their size, color and blankness relative to the overly crowded room, in turn reflected and magnified the lights’ visual impact. This arrangement was at once merely elementary scenic design, relying pragmatically upon the most basic of materials, and yet it physically produced, between the ceiling, floor, wall and audience, the undeniable perceptual effect of an otherworldly aura. It would be precisely the tension between fashionable entertainment and spiritual transcendence that would transfer the audience, as well as the fact that at the moment that the performance started, so did the filming and photography in all directions, including their own. As in the best kind of Parisian spectacle, the audience also felt themselves to be on show. At the debut, the audience members were throughout registering each other’s constantly changing and often audible reactions, which were thus not only mutually informing but also constituted part of the performance itself.

A few inches from the backdrop of the rear wall, similarly unornamented white pedestals of slightly varying heights and widths were positioned in a straight line. They were deliberately placed almost against the wall, and so appeared as sacrificial altars—rendering the backdrop behind them an altarpiece in the midst of creation. And yet they also recalled magician’s props or boxes, given firstly the presence of female assistants, secondly, Klein’s dramatic arm and hand gestures, as if he were holding a magic wand or conductor’s baton, and, thirdly, his costume. Klein presented himself at the debut in white-tie dress, wearing a black tuxedo with white gloves, a white winged collar and white bow tie. Around his neck, he also wore his cross of Saint Sebastian, the knightly order to which he belonged, a key connection that Klein would mention at the debut as proof of his moral and spiritual credibility and authority. Given the organization of the event and his role, the full evening dress made Klein comparable to a fashionable American magician like Channing Pollock, who performed for celebrities and royals, but also to a comic French magician like Mac Ronay, who wore an oversized and ill-fitting tuxedo and hobbled around onstage like Charlie Chaplin’s Tramp. Exaggerating the Tramp’s calamitous social descent, Mac Ronay would pin, as part of his costume, a knight’s insignia on his left breast. At the debut, Klein’s cross would likewise serve at once as a mark of social status, ingratiating him with the beau monde present, and equally as a prop: for a joke on Mathieu. Klein typically only wore his full knightly regalia for official gatherings of the Knights of the Order of Saint Sebastian. The partial exception that he made for the debut parodied Mathieu, ever the flamboyant dresser, appearing that evening also in a lace jabot, but often in more elaborate costume for his own gallery openings or performances of painting. Only two years earlier, Mathieu had held an exhibition of his paintings at the same Galerie internationale d’art contemporain, commemorating the 840th anniversary of the Foundation of the Order of the Templars. This exhibition functioned, simultaneously, as a celebration of the inauguration of the Galerie internationale d’art contemporain itself. The gallery then as an institution had announced its arrival on the Parisian scene with Mathieu, then France’s most exciting and controversial painter, who was thus identified with the gallery. Although Mathieu had never performed his painting for a live audience at this gallery, producing his paintings instead shortly before the exhibitions, those at the debut, especially the gallery’s most devoted patrons, would have recognized Klein’s sarcastic allusions to Mathieu and perhaps even sensed that the future direction of the gallery, if not of the art world at large, may be at stake in the debut. Certainly, it was being challenged from within its walls.

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25 J.-L. B., “Vernissage,” 39. This article, cited above and extensively below, constitutes the most complete independent witness account of the event. It also provides the gazette and dynamic immediacy to the audience in a spectacle.

26 Klein cultivated such comparisons, which were based upon childhood obsessions that persisted into adulthood and that occasionally found, with much effort and luck, splendid fulfillment—for instance, when Klein did join the Order of Saint Sebastian, or manipulated photographs to show that he could fly, disappear into light or conjure it in his palm. McEvilley documents Klein’s early obsessions with Mandrake the Magician and the knights of the Holy Grail, finding ample evidence for their surprisingly strong and unembarrassed continuity among the witness accounts of his family, friends and collaborators. See McEvilley, Yves the Provocateur: Yves Klein and Twentieth-Century Art.

27 On this exhibition and Mathieu’s larger project, see work cited in footnote 6.
Klein's show began with music. Appropriately sited against the wall, as in a choir, were the vocal and musical instrumentalists, nine in total, who, at Klein's imperious, conductorial signal, began to perform his Monotone Symphony, which consisted of twenty minutes of one continuous note. 28 It was monastic in its austerity. Once the music had begun, the three women entered the gallery space, carrying pails of paint, and began what the journalist called ‘leur lent ballet du seau au mur.’ 29 This was, on one hand, song-and-dance entertainment, and yet so bare, in the total simplicity of the music and the nakedness of the women, and so extraordinary that it left the audience members astounded: Nothing like this could be seen anywhere in Paris, not in Montmartre, not in Montparnasse, much less near the Louvre where the gallery was, for the simple reason that it was illegal in France to put on such a show of naked people in movement. Striptease, since the opening of Bernardin's nightclub Crazy Horse in the early fifties, had made burlesque trendy again and even mainstream, Brigitte Bardot, for example, performing one herself in the film Mademoiselle Striptease of 1956. 30 In striptease, however, which adhered to the law, a woman would dance until only her very last, hardly visible undergarments remained and then stop, after which the curtain would close. The combination of total nudity and movement, especially in public, was illegal. 31 It was forbidden by Article 350 of the old French penal code, in effect during the debut, condemning the crime of “l'outrage public à la pudeur” (public indecency), which was punishable by imprisonment and a fine. 32 The only place where total nudity in public was effectively allowed—although there the assumption was that the person would remain stationary—was in national art schools or artist's private studios, so that art students and artists could directly observe the human form. 33 The debut performance of the Anthropometries broke the law, and Klein could have been reported to the Prefecture of Police of Paris, although he was not. Had Klein been, he surely would have offered the explanation that he did to those present at the debut immediately after the conclusion of the performance: that, as the journalist of L'Express recorded it, mentioning also that Klein was smiling as he spoke, the audience members had been guests in his studio and surprised him at work. 34 As the artist's studio was in general being opened up to photography and film and collapsing increasingly with the exhibition space of the gallery, it would not have been an unreasonable claim. Klein was nevertheless exploiting the exceptionality and sacredness with which modern secular society regarded the artist's studio. 35 In its worship of individual talent, or genius—the endpoint of Renaissance humanism—society had replaced religion with art, a new, neo-pagan idolatry of man and especially of mannemade creations of female flesh, which were most problematic from a Christian perspective. In a paradox that had already reached its apex, with the French Salon-style nudes of the late nineteenth century, these female nudes, even if ostensibly erotic and exciting, had become very uninspiring and banal indeed, and only more so in an age of mainstream, middle-class striptease. At the debut, the nudes would serve as decoy: the most obvious incarnation of base visual pleasure, whose enjoyment would forestall the recognition and contemplation of the true art. Klein was abetted by the fact that the social set present would never have admitted such a pleasure, even if they had experienced it, or, conversely, still less, any shock or prudery.

28 While Klein's symphony in principle calls for 20 minutes of silence to follow the 20 minutes of music, accounts vary as to whether there was silence following the music at the debut. Contemporary accounts do not mention any silence. On the event, Klein writes of an “after-silence” after all sounds had ended in each of us who were present at that manifestation. “This silence, however, seems to have been speculative, individual and internal, rather than a coordinated part of the performance experienced as a group. Klein, ‘Truth becomes reality,’ 187.


30 For a contemporary interpretation of Bardot's influence as liberatory for women, see Simone de Beauvoir, Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome, trans. Bernard Fretchman (New York: Arno Press, 1972). (First published in 1959.) It should be mentioned here that striptease, even by as keen a critic as Barthes, was not perceived from the feminist perspective that it is today. The question of gender, or the objectification of female bodies for the male gaze, was not problematized. Although Barthes did note that the practice objectified women, his interest was elsewhere. See Barthes, “Striptease,” 84–87.


35 For a different set of reactions to the same problem in the United States, see Caroline A. Jones, Machine In The Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).


37 Ibid.

Religious rhetoric reigned in the performance, experientially, explicitly in Klein's speech and metaphorically, in an atmosphere saturated with symbolism. While it did not survive as clearly as Klein's showmanship in the visual reproductions of the event, the journalist from L'Express recorded his impressions, as well as Klein's words, in direct quotations of such detail that one imagines that he was taking notes as Klein spoke. Referring to the gallery space as “l'île choisie des élus,” “La Terre Promise,” the writer observed, even before the performance began, “une espèce de silence qui était déjà un silence d'église.” 38 Afterwards, the audience awoke from it, as if from a trance, themselves reaching toward religion for the vocabulary to explain what had happened: “Les gens paraissaient émerger d'un songe. Ils se secouaient. Il y eut des mots froissés: rituel, cérémonial, messe.” 37 When the women appeared, despite the gasps heard around the room, their nudity, according to the writer,
applied natural, holy, innocent: ‘On eut dit trois bonnes d’auberge malicieusement déshabillées par la foudre au moment où elles allaient laver les planchers—et qui ne se sont encore apercues de rien.’ 38 This contrasted with the worldly nakedness of the society women, whose formal dress made them look naked, the writer describing: ‘dames exposant toute la vaste peau qu’il faut pour qu’on puisse les dire très habillées.’ 39 Klein himself employed the terminology of religion to discuss the female models and body parts engaged as ‘outils de chair.’ 40 The journalist then quoted Klein directly, including his gestures: *Mais attention*: j’ai bien dit la *chair*, vous avez pu remarquer que jamais les mains ni les pieds ne sont intervenus (c’est vrai, j’avais remarqué), les mains et les pieds pensent, ce n’est pas de la *chair*. *La chair* (geste de Klein), c’est ça! Vous savez aussi (gentil sourire) que j’appartiens à un *ordre de chevalerie* relevant de la *chrétienté occidentale*. *En Bien!* (gentil sourire) devient un charmant *sourire* d’excuse, geste vers le mur: je *crois à la résurrection de la chair*. 41 Klein invoked Christian theology, employing his membership in an order of Knights in order to insist upon the authenticity of his faith, but he produced instead an esoteric initiation rite. Instead of hanging a crucifix with the male nude body of Jesus over the altar as in a church, Klein, acting nevertheless as a priest administering a mass, introduced three nude women into the sacred altar space. Their number was suggestive of the Trinity but also, because of their gender, youth, beauty and movement, the three graces of Greek mythology. Had there been one nude or four, the bodies would not have been made metaphorical and become divine. Within the traditions of painting, this was at once history painting, lofty in its religious and mythological subject matter, and yet belonged also to the always polemical genre of the nude. It also constituted a tableau vivant, which was a genre often used to morally and legally justify especially early burlesque, in which, however, there could legally be no movement. The selection and choreography of these bodies, which Klein chose for their similarly ideal sizes and shapes, must have presented the same challenge as the composition of such bodies in painting and sculpture for countless other artists in the Western tradition, or, it must be mentioned, for showmen of exotic entertainment, like Bernardin. At the debut, the female models moved fluently, with careful, coordinated and yet independent actions in a kind of dance that Klein had developed beforehand. While two of the ‘living paintbrushes’ pressed themselves against the wall, Elena Palumbo-Mosca, a professional dancer, was tasked with creating a ‘monochrome,’ the modernist form for which Klein was known, on the floor. 42 Because the actions were not improvised and were, on the contrary, heavily rehearsed, they had acquired the formalized and fixed quality of ritual. Whereas a priest would have performed the sacrament of the Eucharist, consecrating the bread and the wine, Klein displayed in life, making no demands upon the imagination, not a mutilated, crucified figure of Christ, but female flesh itself, healthy and perfect and covered in ultramarine blue paint, historically, the most precious pigment after gold. 43 Klein’s audience did not have to believe, as he declared that he did, in the resurrection of the flesh, for he had accomplished it, otherwise. Klein was using his signature color, which he had patented as international Klein Blue, but, in the context of the Anthropometries, the color also functioned as it had conventionally, from the Byzantine icon onward, as the blue mantle of the Virgin Mary, as a kind of clothing for the body.

At the debut, Klein was making icons, just as the first Christian icons had been made, according to the legends: as firsthand impressions of divine figures, the very procedure that had justified image-making in early Christianity, despite the fact that the Ten Commandments and the New Testament had expressly forbidden it as idolatry. Nan Rosenthal made the fundamental observation that the Anthropometries, in addition to some of Klein’s other works, constitute icon and index, noting also that Klein’s term for related works, “anthropométrie sauvage,” recalls the imprint of Christ’s face on the Veil of Veronica. 44 The Veil of Veronica is just one example of a class of sacred images, called acheiropoieta, which were miraculously made without human hands. These were created either directly by saints or angels, or, indirectly, through physical impressions. Through his invention of the ‘living paintbrushes,’ Klein was producing modern-day acheiropoieta, which he ironically called Anthropometries—as if he were applying the current techniques of anthropology, only not to primitive or exotic population groups, but rather, quite absurdly, to deities, or, ordinary European women. Klein was claiming to represent the world more faithfully than any modern social scientific method, which depended upon purely mechanical and statistical mathematical measurements. As with the first generation of abstract artists, like Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian, mysticism informed Klein’s artistic project and led him to reject representation in the quest for a higher, deeper reality. Klein’s paintings, as he wrote, “only ashes of this art,” were to be viewed like religious icons, not, that is, as objects of adulation in themselves, but rather as mere traces, suggestions or indications of a wholly other realm, or, at most, as special sites upon which the conceptual, the ideational could exceptionally rest inside the material world. 45 ‘With this rather technical...

38 Ibid. 39 Ibid. 40 Ibid. 41 Ibid., italics in original. 42 Author’s questionnaire completed by Elena Palumbo-Mosca, February 2014.

demonstration I wanted to, above all," wrote Klein on the debut, "tear away the veil from the temple of the studio." 46 The shreds," Klein continued, "of this torn veil of the temple/studio provides me with miraculous shrouds. All is useful to me." 47 By 1960, when abstract painting was already in deep crisis in France, Klein was seeking to destroy lowly art-object making, or at least displace it from its position of paramount importance, as it was similarly restricted to the world of appearances, in favor of another kind of more spiritual and cerebral immaterial or Conceptual art, which had not yet coalesced. 48 Witness accounts independently testify that the audience at the debut was upset after the performance, which supports the idea that the Baudelairean imperative to "épater le bourgeois" was upheld. 49 But the debut was much more than offensive.

It was dangerous, scandalous in the original Biblical sense: Klein was persuading the patrons and critics of the art world that modern art, as it stood, was idolatry: A vapid and mistaken visual delight, as his provocative equation of contemporary action painting with pedestrian nightclub entertainment contended. What Klein was offering instead was a truer, more spiritually and intellectually fulfilling art.