

Images That Are Not Images:  
Notes Toward an “Apofatic Theology”  
for the Twentieth Century

To what degree have the languages of negation contributed, in the twentieth century, to a better understanding of the experience of nothingness to which modern nihilism gave rise? The extent to which the indispensable nature of these languages in the world of art is part of their significance can only be ascertained through a morphology of these languages, both in terms of their theoretical constructs as well as their embodiments in the plastic arts. The overwhelming presence of negation in the order of twentieth century discourse is due in large measure to the growing experience of nothingness, which had its origins in two distinct theological and philosophical “God is dead” movements in the West, with the result that the speculative uses of the metaphysical were gradually displaced by a new poetic mode of thought. Twentieth-century poetry has greatly contributed to our understanding of the experience of nothingness as the fundamental experience of our time. Paradoxically, the spiritual poverty of this experience reveals a symbolic and sacramental capacity for openness to mystery, which has traditionally been the sole province of religious discourses. However, even if modern hermeneutics has described the decisive moments of this new aesthetic experience, it may be the case that linguistic modes of negation are mirrored by an entire hermeneutics of the image that takes as its starting point the study of configuration and disfiguration in the plastic arts.

In respect to the behaviour of images, the difficulties posed by a hermeneutics of the image for twentieth century art, and particularly abstract art as an expression of negation, evoke a time in which representational models were undergoing an acute crisis of significance. The demise of the mediating property of symbolic images by the absence of extra-sensible significance and the experience of nothingness gives rise to questions concerning the immediacy of aesthetic experience. To what extent can a hermeneutics of the image be elaborated that avoids the pitfalls of a self-referential and pensive representation? Given the lack of transcendent models of significance, what level of understanding should be attributed to images that are not images and that flee representational models? What level of significance do images possess when they claim to have shed the shackles of narrative?