ABSTRACT

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How to begin to talk about “nothing”? …

Space! The vast expanse of “empty space’ is not actually *empty*. It is not *nothing*. The distance between phenomena in space is a part of the phenomenon *of* space. This characteristic, the interconnectedness of, and the gaps between phenomena Timothy Morton calls “the Mesh” in defining “Hyperobjects”. Utilizing the phenomenology of the Hyperobject, which attempts to describe the invisible and visible threads of climate change, the visibility and invisibility of other systems can also be put into question. *Blackness*, as a phenomenon, is contingent upon, disrupts, and expands beyond the systems it is enmeshed with. Blackness is a Hyperobject. This work defines Blackness as a Hyperobject while allowing it to perform a dissolution of its own edges, in the manner of Hyperobjects. Recalling Morton, Moten, and Motown, this work seeks to decenter conventional methods of reading which render the systems invisible, a refusal that (re)performs the disappearance, making visible the reader/viewer, instead of defining the constraints of the subject. If ‘*Nothing’* is ‘*space’*, it requires a repositionable awareness to notice that the void is not empty, because *you* are in it.

DA VOID OF NOTHING

by

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Preface

"A beautiful girl once told me of a recurring nightmare in which she lay in the center of a large dark room and felt her face expand until it filled the whole room, becoming a formless mass while her eyes ran in bilious jelly up the chimney. And so it is with me. Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's own form is to live a death. I myself… did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" – Ralph Ellison from "*Invisible Man*" prologue.

"In order to get the plain sense of this, you have to use your imagination against the world, since in the world—-that dream, that nightmare of dominion, overview, and oversight—-blackness comes sharply into relief against its negation." - Fred Moten

"In the space of Afro-American Black expressivity we know that music occupies a privileged space. It's like the one space in which black people's potentiality is fully realized. So, if you start trying to imagine, particularly in the spaces of material expressivity… the power, beauty, and alienation of black music, that's just to try to define some of the complexity in which black music realizes." – Arthur Jafa

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Chapter 1: Make it Black.

We can use the following conceptual apparatus to understand how to make a project *'Black'*: Triple Layer Chocolate Cake.

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees to symbolize the 250 years of enslavement in the United States and the next 100 years of legal discrimination…

Okay, I can't even keep the bit going… But this is often what is expected of a conceptual project centering on "blackness"; a romantic metaphor that can be consumed sweetly[1]. And I have also made projects like this and watched institutional[2] audiences wipe the salivation from their lips as they applaud their success at understanding the content (note my focus on the reception, not the [humorous] metaphor itself). But they didn't really understand. The work was capitulating to the mediated image, the constructed image of black experience, using legible icons[3]; icons which perpetuate the systems the work intended to expose and/or dismantle. Paige Sarlin, Pooja Rangan, and Brett Story's conversation in *Humanitarian Ethics and Documentary Politics* makes clear the issue of this claim when presenting the "immediations" in proving the humanity of a subject in documentary as a symptom of the problem, rather than exploring why the subject was considered inhuman in the first place; a focus on the system (Rangan et al, p 197). Story's *The Prison in Twelve*

[1] Other artists such as Arthur Jafa's *Love is the Message the Message is Death* accomplish the opposite of sweet consumption, so this is not a totalizing criticism. But the extraction of black suffering as metaphor instead of real experience has also been criticized by the likes of Fred Moten and others including Jafa.
[2] Read: predominantly white
[3] Icons here is interchangeable with "dominant narratives".

Landscapes attempts to expose a similar system at play in a civic structural sense, by focusing on the byproducts and environs of prisons and their economic hold in those communities – the prison then is central to the survival of the place and yet the mechanisms to keep it running are often made invisible (Story). Artist Maria Gaspar draws attention to the proximity in Chicago by projecting artwork by incarcerated people right onto the prison wall facing the adjacent neighborhood where some children have never seen their parents who are incarcerated on the other side of the wall. Chicago is also the main destination for Dick Wolf's copaganda tv empire. Wolf's television enterprises are responsible for rerouting (or removing) public transportation from low income neighborhoods to build more production studios – perpetuating a lack of access[4] which directly contributes to increased crime, which contributes to increased policing of low income communities[5], which leads to more stories of police violence, which leads to a "public relations" problem, which leads to an impulse to create a hero narrative for cops, which leads to more Dick Wolf. If I've already lost you, have some cake and sit tight.

If the intellectualizing of Blackness (specifically in academic space) perpetuates its extraction, and keeps it beholden to those structures of extraction, how does one engaged in the arts continue to make expansive personal work, that wrestles with their (dis)placement, without centering themselves through the lens of those legible icons - as one who needs their humanity given to them? Humanity often given through intense violence; as Fred Moten demonstrates in *In the Break*, Frederick Douglass'

[4] To something else; to anything else.
[5] And more prison beds filled – re: Prison in Twelve Landscapes

Aunt Hester gains agentic humanity during a whipping session as her screams and the call and response music sung after mark them all human across the ears of those otherwise content with her remaining object (Moten, p19-22). The same way scholars gravitate to Jazz, the Blues, and hip-hop (particularly gangster rap) for giving voice to the Black struggle, and comic book creators surrogate the Civil Rights movement (mutants as a nonreal race stand-in), the performance of making human comes through expression of struggle or violence[6]. But Moten also describes Blackness and non-performance, or a refusal to participate, as inherent in generational modes of Black being (Moten). Then shouldn't the refusal to participate in the factory of human-making, the factory of suffering, that is, to participate in the qualifications to be made human, naturally direct us toward monster making? And yet, because "monster" is inherent to the definition of black, given as reason to be excluded from humanity, it is also then dangerous to accept that conditional term and proceed as if a non-performance is happening. Because we *would* be (re)performing the expectations set to constrain the identifiers of a black being in the first place[7]. Or it is possible that embracing the othering, creates a different being, outside of those parameters.

One strategy to address this ontological question and the possibility of refusal is to search for the beginning. But where to begin? The Bible? The Big Bang? The beginning of humanity? But we have just determined that in the phenomenon of Blackness, black humanness was not included in the beginning of the category of humanity, but a qualification bestowed; humanity as a condition, rather than inherent,

[6] The extraction for sake of humanization at work.
[7] The "other" is monster, beast, savage, dangerous, etc.…

delivered after suffering (and then only three fifths… of one drop… as long as the paper bag is darker…).

What if then, we look to material, to matter(ing). While Black bodies as material - a metaphor and reality of historical positioning - is not lost here, I'm thinking of matter as concerned with physics and, in another attempt to shift away from over intellectualization, *matter* as in feeling[8] or empathy (or affect?). One can argue that the ontology of anything constitutes its matter(ing) (like why does this matter matter?), that objects have histories, which help theorists (physicists in other cases) determine how it came to *be*. Up to now, we have been considering the society constructed (racial) 'black', constructed in service to empire and capital. If the weight of the metaphor is held in the material, or the formal engagement with the material, how then can we make the jump to consider a material *black*? With the task of a didactic representation removed from the artist's plate, with the assumption of the layer of history and metaphor intact or inherent in the material, the artist is then free; free to experiment with the material as material. In this situation I recognize we are still at risk of making metaphors (see the cake problem) because unless the material has actual historical connection: indigo dye, dogwood trees of the south, swamp water – Another project: cyanotype and indigo dyed images of old bark from southern trees all washed in southern swamp water, I'll call it "strange fruit"… you like that one too? It wraps up the evidence of trauma really nicely…

Let's look instead to physics, optics specifically, black is often described as absence, but absence and emptiness are not truly *nothing*, so looking deeper into physics we

[8] As in when something matters to you.

understand that black is the absorption of all wavelengths of light in the visible spectrum. Black is everything, all at the same time and must be understood in that context, rather than as absence. In [astro?]physics, black matter, or Dark Matter is invisible, undetectable (hypothetical) and makes up the majority of the universe, but it can be witnessed by its gravitational effect on other cosmic phenomena (NASA). Its presence is felt by the effect on the surrounding phenomena, just as darkness is enhanced by nearby light. Chemically, or as far as additive medium is concerned (paint, inks, etc), different material components yield different results in the hue, value, opacity and saturation of black pigment and dyes. Different brands of black paint, due to varying chemical composition will affect the appearance of the next black paint when placed adjacent to each other. A Mars Black paint may appear to be warmer than a Carbon Black paint. Whereas if placed in a colorful painting as the

only black color, each would just appear to be “standard” black.

Figure 1: Black Paper Bag, 30"x40", acrylic on canvas, 2021 by author.

The difficulty of a psychological examination of black mattering in this context of metaphors and meaning making, the empathy/affect/feeling of it, is its link to societal conditioning. We project feelings to the color *black* due to how our societies categorize (or sell) values – the meaning is already attached so trying to explain its effect is contingent upon a collective understanding. However, while some are afraid of the dark and associate black with fear (of the night), others embrace the nighttime as a site for communion with their deities and the stars, so blackness doesn't hold the same interpretation[9]. But regardless, here again, the nature of its being is enmeshed with surrounding circumstance. Blackness, whether examined culturally (a product of systemic racial categorization), socially (our feelings and emotions within a societal structure), or physically (the physics and composition), often refuses to be defined without awareness of other factors. As if to say, "I am here, and so are you", implicating the rest of the universe in its condition[10]. Or as Morton suggests with Hyperobjects, it includes itself, but is bigger than itself, but not more than itself - "physically bigger, but ontologically smaller" (Copelin, et al, p4). With this understanding, we can turn the lens to the surrounding phenomena, to highlight the conditions for blackness as a Hyperobject and its expansive relations.

[9] Tikkun Bambara's "Daunte Wright: A Billion Clusters of Starlight and Rebellion" dives into the nighttime as a space for Black resistance and care.
[10] The metaphor is baked in. Blackness is pre-loaded with contextual relationships.

Chapter 2: Morton's Hyperobject and Blackness

Timothy Morton gives us the term "Hyperobject" to consider things so "massively distributed in time and space" relative to humans (Morton, p1). According to Morton, (using the Hyperobject to describe climate change) we are already in the end-of-the-world. Nuclear residue has signaled an end whose effects we are already experiencing, the Anthropocene, a status of our own design which begins even before nuclear tampering. Morton also says, "cynicism is the worst hypocrisy" (Morton, p148), so my connecting Blackness to Hyperobjects, while engaging world-ending and monsters, is not so much about the hidden doom, in the sense of film noir and sci-fi Cthuluscene as warnings of the other[11], but to think philosophically about the impossibility of a container for blackness and the refusal of such container (Moten). But because, "there is no metalanguage", the context of Hyperobjects works specifically for describing blackness across all its tendrils, because "we never see the hyperobject directly, we infer it…" (Morton, p153) from its surroundings and effect – this simply means I am not attempting to define blackness as a category of being[12] but I am describing the edges of an indefinable through other language. Morton uses five conditions to define the hyperobject:

1. Viscosity – "Like an illusion, or small colored patch on a large dark surface… the shadow of the hyperobject announces the existence of the hyperobject" (Morton 32). Blackness is sticky, its embedded in the fabric of the global society – popular culture, music, fashion, technology and city design (even/especially

[11] See Footnote #7.
[12] The Cake is a Lie.

when configured against), etc. What we are seeing in these example areas are byproducts, sticky byproducts; it is the glue that survived through racist imperialisms capitalist capture. Morton's black hole demonstrates an astrophysics example.

> "From the center of the galaxy, a supermassive black hole impinges on my awareness, as if it were sitting in the car next to me at the traffic lights. Every day, global warming burns the skin on the back of my neck, making me itch with physical discomfort and inner anxiety… As I reach for the iPhone charger plugged into the dashboard, I reach into evolution, into the extended phenotype that doesn't stop at the edge of my skin but continues into all the spaces my humanness has colonized." (Morton p27)

2. Nonlocality – "Everything is enfolded in everything as "flowing movement". (Morton 43).

> Referencing *Hiroshima* by John Hersey, "The disorientation of scale – from "blood specimen" to "the blast ripp[ing] through the hospital" - and of physicality – from slippers to the energy flash – is immense." "… Doctor Sasaki does not see the bomb directly: instead, he sees it 'reflected … in the corridor'." "...Each storyteller gradually brings her story up to date, slowly showing us how the bomb affected her entire life from that moment on." (Morton p50-51).

The hyperobject touches beyond the geographic position, and its scale so immense as to be felt beyond the temporal moment. The extraction of black bodies across the globe, and the removal of a connection to home roots places Black folk in a displaced non-locality. And yet through music, dance, and other cultural production, the threads across locality repair. The byproducts of displacement (the legacy of the bomb), Jazz, Rock and Roll and Hip Hop, arrive

in Japan, one divorced from its origins in black music, the other embraced by young subculture, due in part to American empire, military operations with stationed African American soldiers, but also due to technological advances and signal sending across spacetime. Black music and fashion spread across the globe. Shadows are present beyond the light, the darkness moves across locality as the light shifts brightens or softens.

3. Temporal Undulation – "Occasionally time slows to accommodate the temporal perspective..." (Morton 56)

> "When you approach an object, more and more objects emerge. It's like being in a dream written by Zeno. Hyberobjects envelop us, yet they are so massively distributed in time that they seem to taper off, like a long street stretched into the distance. Time bends them and flattens them, the same way that an electromagnetic wave front shortens at its leading edge. Because we can't see the end of them, hyperobjects are necessarily uncanny." (Morton 55).

Black music, the stutter, the space between. When did hip-hop start? While the genre is popularly mapped to the 80's, its connection to disco, and jazz, suggest reverberations through time building up, and expanding. Bringing it down less broad, the music itself, sits in temporal changeups, the break, being a momentary pause in the instrumentation except the drums, the heartbeat, can be felt and mixed with other songs timing creating sampling on the break/ a new sound.

4. Phasing – "Hyper objects are phased: they occupy a high-dimensional phase space that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human scale basis. We can only see pieces of hyperobjects at a time." (Morton 70). Blackness is not a monolith. I've used music in the last three

conditions but that is just one lens to view the phenomenon. It helps us to see, but I will try to make sure we are not saying “Black music is the hyperobject”, even though we can connect black music to politic, art, technology and other spheres mentioned in its stickiness, even with respect to phasing, with hip hop specifically, the sound changes across geographic loci. So it becomes impossible to see the scope of it all from one dimension (trap, house, east coast, west coast, London, afrobeats all have distinctions – even rock n roll hall of fame has included the scope of hiphop, rightfully). And yet, Motown’s influence to get black music in spaces of white consumption demonstrates another phasing into another stickiness and non-locality (outside of specifically black lexicons; the spread and possibilities become immense). "[A] phase space is the set of all the possible states of a system" (Morton 71).

5. Interobjectivity – "The abyss in front of things is *interobjective*. It floats among objects, "between" them; though this between is not "in" spacetime – it *is* spacetime." (Morton 81). The Mesh (83). The space around the objects make the object apparent. The negative space is disappeared by focusing on the object. Brett Story’s The Prison in Twelve Landscapes, prison industrial complex, war on drugs, reconstruction, 13th amendment. The criminalization of blackness is part and parcel to the image/icon of blackness (the cake problem) that becomes expected. But the mesh includes the system that creates that image. With black as color, as mentioned earlier, physically is relative to the surrounding color, and light. The positive and negative space are interrelated tightly and cannot be considered separate. You cannot separate the phenomenological nor ontological

question of blackness from white capitalist imperialism (even though, the things that survived in spite of that state of capture extend to well beyond before that state – temporal undulation). If focused to hard on trying to see blackness, you may miss the dangers of the condition of whiteness left invisible. Therefore, Blackness as hyperobject directs us to look at the surrounding phenomenon: whiteness. Or to make it less scary (I buck and you flinch), to focus on you yourself, the viewer, and what you bring to the mesh.

Chapter 3: HyperBlack: Da Void of Nothing

If Blackness is a Hyperobject, then which form does a HyperBlack project take? Without metaphor, possibility lies in configuring formal attributes of a medium to stand in for the conditions of Hyperobjects. Yes, the material as stand-in is a metaphor in itself, but that impossibility of divorcing it is a condition of Hyperobjecthood anyway so let's not get too involved in semantics (insert fourth wall break here; look into camera, wink at the audience). Filming a person on 16mm film, a hyperobject can be demonstrated through manipulation of the film celluloid and image capture process. Viscosity can be referenced through manipulation of the emulsion; there is a layer of adhesive holding the emulsion to the plastic base that can be replaced with cyanotype solution through a fixing process, that keeps the adhesive but removes the emulsion. Nonlocality, through timed exposure; the figure's movement over time will record their positions, or rather burn the light reflecting against their form into the emulsion in multiple spaces as they move from one location to another. Using post processing and optical printing capabilities of analog film, we can hold on frames reprinting images, thereby changing the timing of the film; temporal undulation of a standard film recording/projection, frames per second in capture and projection language, can be manipulated this way. Phasing can be simulated through single frame exposures, or what is essentially taking photographs for each frame of a 16mm film strip; single framing timed exposures will not be noticeable at 24 frames per second. But as the film is paused or slowed, Peter Kubelka's insistence of the frame becomes more apparent, and the aggregate of individual images (Bazin) renders the space between frames visible – the distance

between what happens in each shot put together is the phasing, the whole sum of small particles. Lastly interobjectivity, and a focus on positive and negative space is most apparent in the film development process; film strips are developed negative and then exposed (or bleach processed for particular films) to get a positive – this is also the process for cyanotype which will reverse which part of the image is light or dark, making positive and negative space interchangeable. This project's material consideration of the chapters of Morton's Hyperobjects is free of racial metaphor (metaphor can be attached in the content of the formal experiment), and what is at the crux of this project that cannot be explained textually is the feeling[13], the texture of this project cannot be described fully except through experiencing the continually moving and growing, indescribable monster. The refusal, the non-performance produced through crafting a hyperobject through the medium, links us back to (intentionally and what seems inherently) to Blackness (the power, beauty, and alienation of black music as described by Arthur Jafa), and its embedding in every aspect of the material conditions of our society without the explicit nor exploitative mechanisms. The spectacle of the unrecognizable figure is redirected by the material expressive experimentation.

The feeling of refusal then, the withholding of blackness (the metaphor) to point at Blackness (the status of being black?), or rather to place an audience in the dark – with black objects[14] – with no bearings (low visibility and no context/metaphor) against the monster (the indescribable hyperobject created) centers not the monster

[13] The affect.

[14] Considering the body of work adjacent to this writing.

but the audience (that surrounding phenomenon which blackness is pressed against)[15].

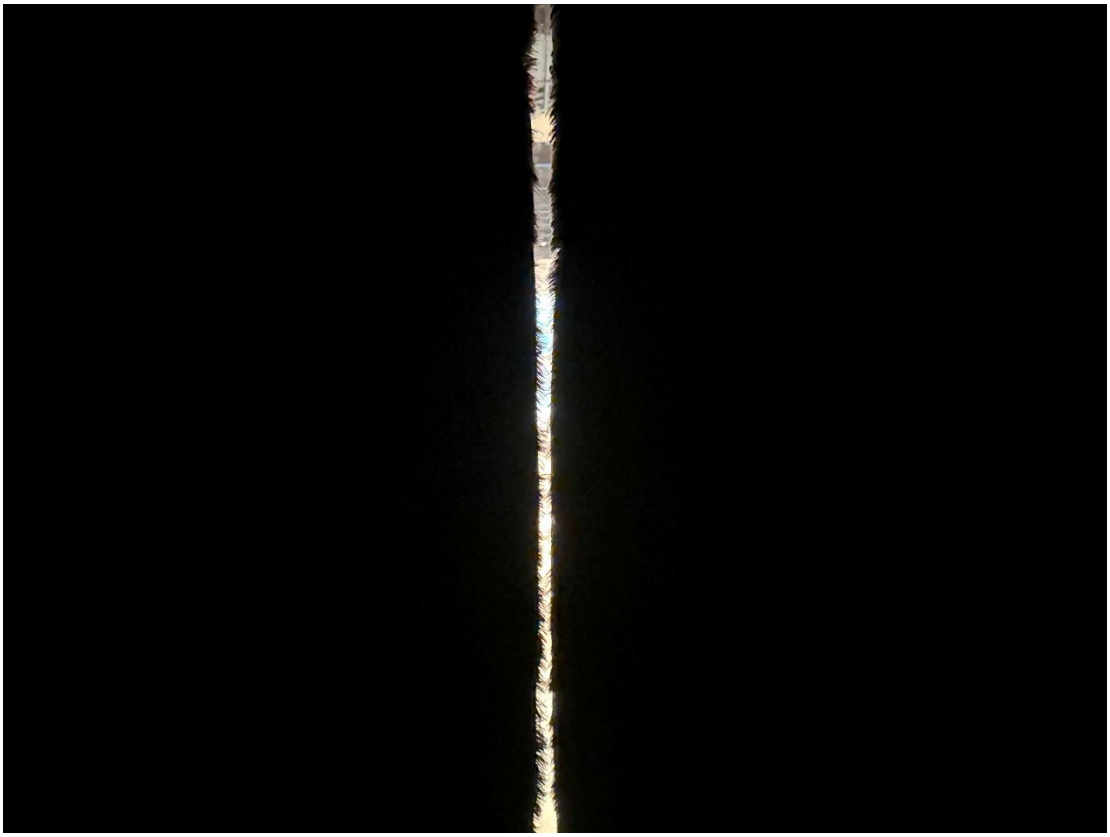

Figure 3: Da Void of Nothing, Interior Installation View, 2025 by author

In this refusal, this alienation[16], the audience must engage themselves and as a byproduct become re-enmeshed with the hyperobject which produces the empathic register of feeling. Even without a name, with remaining a hypothetical (like dark matter) the HyperBlack Hyperobject holds and brings with it (viscosity) a legacy that extends beyond the local and present (nonlocality), causing the audience to sit or linger with it (temporal undulation), and as the smaller threads come into view

[15] The only way to describe it is through its effect/affect on your being. Re: dark matter.
[16] See Bertolt Brecht

connecting larger weaves (phasing), they – the audience – identifies themselves implicated as a *part of* but *not* the object (interobjectivity); while their agency/humanity is maintained, in a non-violent (unless the Lacanian violence of seeing oneself is inevitable) care centered praxis. This eschews traditional conversations of empathy. Where the viewers' recognizability impact their ability to empathize. Where 99.9% of all subject position is centered around white men, a disruption to that requires the ability to project yourself into another subject position[17]. Here we play more with the affect, the feeling before knowing; and yet *affect* has never felt like the right realm to place this work in. What I am doing is creating a situation where the viewer must somatically become involved in the work, therefore still in their own subject position. The feeling, the impact then, is not before but during[18], even though the knowledge is still withheld – therefore not affect and not empathy, but still within an empathic register as they see themselves and others.

[17] Statistic and conversation about subject position and disadvantage of white men toward empathy from Arthur Jafa (Benhamou)

[18] Entering in the same space as the work is not enough to generate the feeling – Rothko? Turrell?– the feeling comes from participating. Therefore, not before but during.

Figure 3: Da Void of Nothing, Gallery Wall Installation View, 2025 by author

Chapter 4: After the End

The difficulty of an arts practice that engages Blackness as a hyperobject is immediate. Both of these "terms" are difficult to define alone, the container for them has exploded beyond a singular positionable understanding. How then to situate a reading of a work inside *nothing*[19] and *everything*[20] at the same time without the full didactic, metaphoric, academic explanation? Hope. Faith. Trust? If I let you go, let you sink to the bottom of the ocean, the black depth, how will anyone know when or where you have resurfaced, and how to measure or catalog the residue? What is the evidence of nothing? With dark matter the evidence is its effect on the surrounding phenomenon. Blackness has effected/affected the socio-political-industrial-popular culture of the entire globe. The residue is its own tendril of the hyperobject, iterative, open to additional interpretation and object-oriented ontology. It is future leaning, past holding, and while it may be invisible, it is felt and remembered as part of the experience of the whole. But the question remains, if the container is impossible, the definition impossible, the metaphor insufficient, the extraction exploitative and reperforming subjugation, how then, can Blackness be utilized in an arts practice? By positioning the idea of Blackness, the Mesh of it, and refusal of its categorization to point at you the viewer, to get you to see yourself, your implication in the system of human making, the structure of your expectation, can I ask you to consider how, when confronted with the massiveness of this "monster", you will respond. When

[19] I am not giving you Blackness, stop eating the cake!
[20] Everything is present, if you want to find it, you could.

there is nothing[21] "for you", or as Arthur Jafa corrects, when you are not being addressed, can you still connect to a universal? Or do you accept *nothing* as the only possibility[22]? Moten suggests that the "twoness" of Blackness, the subjecthood and rejection from subjectivity, is a state of or between nothingness and thingness, where the refusal to participate in being made subject (human – with the conditions aforementioned) thrives to create another expansion in ontological debate (Moten). I'm interested in that space between, Kubelka's insistence on between the frames, Moten's "studder", the void. The void of *nothing* that is *devoid of nothing*.

Figure 4: Da Void of Nothing, Gallery Installation View, 2025 by author

[21] Nothing: no answers, no recognizable moves, no light.
[22] A dismissal of the content because you are not (explicitly) centrally addressed.

Figure 5: Da Void of Nothing, Interior Installation View #2, 2025 by author

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