L'acclimatization de l'atmosphère à la surface de notre globe 
... la conscience technique et scientifique de notre colonisation 
est enfouie dans les entrailles de la terre et ouvre 
le confort par le contrôle à distance du 
Chromat à la surface de tous 
les continents, chasses sans 
salles de séjour communes.

... C'est une sorte de retour à l'âge 
de la légende. (1951)

... Avenir d'une société nouvelle, destinée à 
baisse du métamorphage profond et dans son 
condition même. Disparition de l'intimité 
personnelle et familiale. Développement 
d'une culture universelle. 
La volonté de l'homme peut être 
repétée par un suivi d'une 
Merveilleuse constante.
Untitled Blue Monochrome (IKB 67), 1959, Dry pigment and synthetic resin on gauze on panel, Private Collection. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris
In his short but prolific seven-year career, Yves Klein (French, b. Nice, 1928–1962) helped radically to reinvent the very definition and nature of what art could be. One of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, Klein was an innovator and visionary whose diverse practice included painting, sculpture, performance, photography, music, architecture, and writing as well as plans for projects in theater, dance, and cinema. Inspired by his study of judo, Eastern philosophies, and the mystical sect Rosicrucianism, he shifted the focus from the material object to an “inmaterial sensibility,” not only challenging existing notions of art, but injecting it with a new sense of spirituality.

The artist created what he considered his first artwork when he imagined signing the blue sky above Nice in 1947, making his initial attempt to capture the immaterial. Klein primarily sought to achieve immaterial sensibility through pure color, observing, “Through color I feel the sentiment of complete identification with space; I am truly liberated.” Although he initially painted monochromes in a range of colors, in 1956 Klein initiated his “Blue Period” and began to focus mostly on an ultramarine blue of his own invention: International Klein Blue (IKB). For him, it represented complete freedom, the “spirit and sensibility that the color of the sky and the sea alone can produce.”
Above: Installation view of *Bas-Reliefs dans une forêt d’éponges* [Bas-Reliefs in a Forest of Sponges] at Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, 1959. Photo by and © Louis Frédéric; Opposite page: *Untitled Anthropometry* (ANT 100), 1960, Dry pigment and synthetic resin on paper on canvas, from the Hirshhorn’s collection. Photo by Lee Stalsworth. Both © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris
But it was not merely in his choice to present blocks of pure color that Klein challenged traditional painting. Throughout his career he developed inventive means of applying pigment, increasingly distancing the artist from the artwork. He first used paint rollers and then sponges, which evolved from a tool to a medium in itself as he saturated them with IKB pigment and formed them into both wall-mounted and freestanding sculptures. Eventually Klein conceived the notion of “living brushes”; under the artist’s direction, nude female models were smeared with IKB and then made body prints on prepared sheets of paper. In these Anthropometries, which he began in 1958 and which became one of his best-known series, Klein attempted to record the body’s cosmic energy as well as its temporary physical presence.

Natural elements—including reeds, wind, and rain, which he used to create his Cosmogonies, and, most notably, fire, which he considered “the universal principle of expression”—also became an essential part of Klein’s work. In his renowned Fire Paintings, fire either replaced or was combined with pigment, embodying the concepts of process, transformation, creation, destruction, dissolution, and elemental cosmology that were so essential throughout his career.
In his most ambitious efforts to capture the immaterial, Klein moved beyond traditional mediums like painting and sculpture altogether. For his celebrated 1958 exhibition *The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State of Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility*, better known as “The Void,” at Galerie Iris Clert in Paris, he emptied the gallery of all artworks, leaving visitors in a white-walled space containing just the trace of the artist’s presence. He even sold the immaterial to patrons for gold ingots, which were then thrown into the River Seine before the receipts for the transaction were set on fire by their purchasers so that all that
remained was the experience of the event. And in his famous Leap into the Void image by Harry Shunk and Janos Kender, which was published November 27, 1960 in the faux newspaper Dimanche, which he created for the second Avant-Garde Art Festival, Klein is actually depicted leaping into space himself, with the artist asserting in the accompanying text, “...to paint space, I must be in position. I must be in space.”

Untitled Fire-Color Painting (FC 1), 1961, Dry pigment and synthetic resin on scorched cardboard on panel, Private Collection. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris
Beyond charting a new course for art, Klein also envisioned a different, utopian path for society. These ideas are applied directly in his experimental range of “air architecture” projects, in which he proposed public spaces, fountains, and walls constructed out of natural elements like air, water, and fire, elements not traditionally associated with architecture, and elaborated on his vision for cities and dwellings that will “at last be flexible, spiritual, and immaterial.”

An artist, a showman, a thinker, an innovator, and even a magician, Klein constantly blurred boundaries—between work and life, between painting and performance, between object and idea, between fact and fiction—and defied the common understanding and definition of art. His revolutionary aim was to rethink the world in spiritual and aesthetic terms, and his artworks, projects, and writings demonstrate his acute grasp of the contemporary moment, from the horror of the Second World War to the promise of space travel. Klein’s wide-ranging creative endeavors opened the door for much that followed in the 1960s and beyond, including Pop, conceptual art, Minimalism, monochromatic painting, perceptual experimentation, and performance. Although he died in 1962 of a heart attack at age 34, the artist’s foresight as well as his profound and lasting influence is clear and marks a pivotal transition in the course of twentieth-century art and culture.

Deborah Horowitz
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
“I seek, above all, to realize in my own creations that ‘transparence,’ that immeasurable ‘void’ in which lives the permanent and absolute spirit freed of all dimensions.”

—Yves Klein
RELATED PROGRAMS

Thursday, May 27, 6:30 pm
Event: The Many Faces of Yves
Yves Klein’s life and art were informed by a diverse body of subject matter, from judo to progressive philosophical and architectural concepts. Exhibition curator Kerry Brougher and experts in a range of fields explore multiple facets of Klein’s career in this gallery event.

Wednesday, June 9, 7:00 pm
In Conversation: Rotraut Klein-Moquay and Kerry Brougher
Rotraut Klein-Moquay, the artist’s wife, assistant, model, and muse, discusses Klein’s life and works with exhibition curator Kerry Brougher.

Friday, July 23, 12:30 pm
Friday Gallery Talk: Daniel Moquay
Daniel Moquay, head of the Yves Klein Archives in Paris, gives a tour of the exhibition and shares his extensive knowledge of the artist’s career and creative process.

Friday, July 23, 8:00 pm to midnight
After Hours
This summer, After Hours celebrates Yves Klein with gallery talks, live music, and special performances on the plaza.

Thursday, September 9, 7:00 pm
Lecture: Kaira Cabañas on Yves Klein
Kaira Cabañas, art historian at Columbia University and contributor to the exhibition catalogue, discusses Klein’s work with particular emphasis on his films and performances.

Friday Gallery Talks and Podcasts
Throughout the course of Yves Klein, gallery talks and podcasts offer visitors in-depth information about the exhibition.

For a complete listing of all programs, please visit our website at hirshhorn.si.edu