Unveiling the Void: Erasure, Latency, Potentiality

Proceedings of the 7th Postgraduate International Conference

edited by
Asia Benedetti, Marta Del Mutolo,
Ester Giachetti, Ilaria Grippa

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Quaderni di *Venezia Arti*

Serie diretta da
Matteo Bertelé, Angelo Maria Monaco, Simone Piazza

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Abstract

This volume presents the proceedings of the 7th Postgraduate International Conference organised by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (8-10 October 2025). The event gathered early-career researchers to explore the notion of the relative void in the visual arts, spanning performative gestures, portable altars, drawing practices, architectural spaces, exhibitions, and feminist reconfigurations of artistic agency. Traditionally conceived as 'empty space', the void has evolved from its Aristotelian definition as absence of matter, through empirical physics, to profound artistic and philosophical interpretations. Its meaning oscillates between Western dualisms of fullness and emptiness and the Eastern conception (e.g. Jullien) of the void as integral to existence. Within contemporary practices, particularly feminist theory (Irigaray, Butler), this oscillation becomes a political tool: reconsidering absence can dismantle hierarchies of form and subjectivity, creating alternative spaces for visibility and care. Moving beyond the idea of an absolute void, the conference addressed the relative void as a shifting, relational condition where meaning arises through communication, absence, and transformation. If the void remains a "scientific reserve not yet exploited" (Burini), it represents "not a lack but an opportunity" (DeLillo): a field capable of questioning the very conditions of artistic production and perception. The contributions assembled here demonstrate that analysing the void, rather than fullness, shifts the gaze towards the margins of artworks: the aftermath of gestures, sustaining intervals, and the disappearance of substantial bodies. This approach proposes an aesthetic and methodological turn attentive to traces, thresholds, and silences that shape perception. Crucially, it also addresses erasures in histories marked by trauma and genocide – absences that artistic gestures, curatorial, and architectural practices can interrogate and make visible. The papers are organised around three axes: Erasure, Latency, and Potentiality.

Keywords   Relative Void. Feminist Theory. Absence. Erasure. Latency. Potentiality. Phenomenology. Visual arts. Relational field. Architecture. Materiality.

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Introductory Remarks

Last month, on October 8th, 9th, and 10th, the Zattere campus of Ca' Foscari (CFZ), which overlooks the Giudecca Canal in the heart of Venice, hosted the seventh edition of the Postgraduate International Conference promoted by the PhD Programme in History of the Arts and self-managed by some of its PhD students. It was a great pleasure, in my capacity as Coordinator of the Doctoral Programme, to deliver the institutional opening remarks at the beginning of the proceedings, together with Professor Giovanni Maria Fara, Director of the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, the administrative headquarters of the PhD Programme, which co-finances this initiative.

For the seventh time, therefore, a dedicated group of our PhD students – this year an all-female team composed of Asia Benedetti, Marta Del Mutolo, Ester Giachetti, and Ilaria Grippa, and – organised, in full autonomy and with remarkable commitment, a three-day, internationally oriented conference on the history of the arts, conducted entirely in English.

This was an event of high scientific calibre and undeniable success, thanks to the excellent organisation of the programme, the quality and number of the papers selected from the call, the breadth of their temporal scope (from the Middle Ages to the present day), the multiplicity of interpretative approaches, and the variety of academic affiliations – both national and international – of the participating PhD students.

Moreover, the choice of the title, *Unveiling the Void: Erasure, Latency, Potentiality*, was particularly successful and engaging. The former clarifies the object of the doctoral meeting, which is the

invitation to focus attention on the topic of the void – a dimension that is never synonymous with absence in the world of the arts, as it is always charged with meaning, and stands in a relationship of mutual dependence with fullness, much like light and darkness in Parmenides (sixth-fifth century BC):

> Now that all things have been named light and night, and the names which belong to the power of each have been assigned to these things and to those, everything is *full at once* of light and dark night, both equal, since neither has aught to do with the other. (*On Nature*, fragment 9)

The three words accompanying the main concept, on the other hand, introduce three variations on the theme: the void as a result of removal, as a temporal interval, and as a space of unlimited possibilities.

Now, only one month later, the PhD students who organised the three days of study are curating the publication of the proceedings in a new issue of *Quaderni di Venezia Arti*, entirely dedicated to them, as was the case for the six previous conferences.

Congratulations, therefore, to all of them on the successful achievement of this important goal, which is sure to have an impact, and applause also to all the PhD students who took part in the initiative by contributing their original articles.

The Gold Open Access option provided by Edizioni Ca' Foscari will ensure the immediate global circulation of the volume. I therefore wish all the authors wide dissemination of their scientific results, and all interested readers an enjoyable and stimulating read.

Venice, 11 November 2025

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When Body Disappears

Representations of the Potentiated Void

Contemporary Artistic Examinations of Forced Absences and Disrupted Presences

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Abstract This paper analyses contemporary artistic practices dealing with specific forms of void caused by National Socialist 'Aryanizations'. By employing the methodological approaches of Rudolf Arnheim's 'visual gaps' and Ulrike Lehmann's 'aesthetics of absence' and combining them with the concept of 'potentiated void' – introduced here to grasp the absence of 'Aryanized' objects, their owners and contexts – the two artistic projects *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* (2013) by Anna Artaker and *Invent arisiert* (2000) by Arno Gisinger can be investigated as strategies of dealing with forced void and of making the lost visible (again).

Keywords National socialism. 'Aryanizations'. Restitution. Absence and void. (Post-)conceptual art and institutional critique.

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1   Introduction

This paper will analyze two projects conceived by contemporary artists dealing with specific forms of forced absence, disrupted presence, and lasting void: both *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* (2013) by Anna Artaker (b. 1976 in Vienna, lives and works in Vienna), and *Invent arisiert* (Inventoried, 2000) by Arno Gisinger (b. 1964 in Dornbirn, lives and works in Paris) address the historical evidences of so-called 'Aryanizations' – meaning the expropriation of the population defined and persecuted as 'Jewish' by the National Socialists – as well as their ongoing consequences (cf. Bajohr 1997, 9 fn. 2).[1]

In order to develop an apposite research perspective for this analysis, different methodological approaches to investigate categories of absence and void will be discussed: Rudolf Arnheim's concept of 'visual gaps' will allow to define the dialectical relations between the perception of a present absence and the simultaneous knowledge of the absent object's former presence. Subsequently, Ulrike Lehmann's 'aesthetics of absence' will offer an art-immanent and genealogically structured approach to absence and void intentionally generated or applied by artists. Following that, the National Socialist term 'Aryanization' as a specific form of expropriation resulting in coerced absence and continuing void will be defined. To understand and differentiate these complex states of absent objects, their owners, and their contexts, the concept of 'potentiated void' will be introduced to describe the interconnected levels of absence and void operating here.

Ultimately, and following a socio-historical approach as conceived by Clark (1973) and Nochlin (1989), two case studies will first investigate the historical events that Artaker and Gisinger address in their works and will then examine their artistic strategies dealing with 'potentiated void' caused by processes of 'Aryanization'. Both artistic positions will be contextualised in genealogies of (Post-)Conceptual Art and Institutional Critique, and will be analysed as artistic examples of trying to make the lost visible (again) as well as of questioning a specific potentiality of absence and resulting void exceeding perceptual or art-immanent approaches.

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1   Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author. Since the terms 'Jewish' and 'Aryan' were used by the National Socialist both as a discriminatory assignment to others as well as an antisemitic instrument to persecute and to deprive parts of the population of their rights, the terms are put in single quotation marks in this context.

2 'Visual Gaps' and 'Aesthetics of Absence'

Given the inherently transdisciplinary character of an analysis of *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* and *Invent arisiert*, combining a socio-historical investigation of the specific cases of 'Aryanizations' addressed in both projects with art-historical and art-theoretical perspectives on absence and void will prove to be a methodologically productive approach. Thus, first Arnheim's (1969) concept of 'visual gaps' – grounded in his dual foundation in both art history and perceptual psychology – will be linked with Lehmann's (1994) notion of an art-immanent 'aesthetics of absence'.

In his book *Visual Thinking*, Arnheim (1969, 13) states that visual perception and knowledge (or rather cognition) are inextricably linked – 'visual knowledge' is therefore formed by previous acts of visual perception and stored in turn in the perceiver's memory for future acts of perception. In the book's chapter *The Past in the Present*, he details the specific relations between this understanding of 'visual knowledge' and the perception of 'visual gaps': Arnheim (1969, 88) creates a temporally structured dialectic between the past and the present – the perceiver is able to visually perceive a former presence and a present absence simultaneously. Arnheim (1969, 89) explains respectively:

> To see emptiness means to place into a percept something that belongs there but is absent and to notice its absence as a property of the present. A setting in which lively action took place or is expected to take place looks strangely motionless; the emptiness may appear pregnant with events to burst forth.

This implies that only the 'visual knowledge' of an object which used to be there but is no longer, and stored in the memory of the perceiver makes the perception of 'visual gaps' possible. In this way, dialectic perceptual relations between past and present, presence and absence are set in motion and eventually, the past is able to penetrate and irritate the present through such 'visual gaps' (cf. Arnheim 1969, 88-9). In investigating contemporary artistic practices dealing with both the past presence and present absence as a consequence of the former, it is relevant to ask, if and how artists can consciously create such 'visual gaps' in their works and thereby activate the perceiver's 'visual knowledge' – stored in their individual, collective, and/or cultural memories.[2]

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2 In the context of National Socialism, the question of collective/cultural memory becomes especially relevant due to the need to reflect on current forms of cultures of remembrance, presupposed by the continuous disappearance of the contemporary witnesses of the Shoah, as well as ongoing restitution processes of 'Aryanized' property. For the concept of collective and cultural memory, see Assmann 1988, 9-19; 2006.

In her analysis of absence, the art historian Ulrike Lehmann offers a methodologically connected approach to Arnheim's: in her essay *Ästhetik der Absenz*, Lehmann creates an art-historical genealogy of art-immanent absence, grounded in discourses of (Post-)Conceptual Art and Institutional Critique.[3] Similar to Arnheim, Lehmann (1994, 58) also emphasizes the dialectical relations between presence and absence and defines her concept of 'aesthetics of absence' as following:

> Von einer Ästhetik der Absenz kann also nur gesprochen werden, wenn bewußte werkimmanente, gleichsam rituelle Handlungen der Verweigerung, der Zerstörung oder des Verbergens vorliegen, die ein Künstler selbst ausführt oder nach seinen Anweisungen ausführen läßt.

Eventually, Lehmann states eight categories of 'aesthetics of absence', of which *Das imaginäre Museum: Re-produzierte Bilder, Das von der Wand verschwundene Bild*, as well as *Das archivierte Bild* will prove to be productive categories to analyze and contextualize Artaker's and Gisinger's artistic strategies. Among her examples for the first are works such as Endre Tót's *Die abwesenden Bilder* (1971/1992): Tót plays with visual voids, evoking the presence of an absent image through the means of semiotic operations – as grounded in traditions of Conceptual Art (cf. Lehmann 1994, 62). The second category is illustrated through works such as Hans Hollein's *Imaginäres Museum* (1987), ironically performing the absence of an exhibited object – its presence is only evoked through a label stating the object information, thereby allegorising institutional conventions (cf. Lehmann 1994, 63; Buchloh 1982). For the third category, Lehmann (1994, 64) introduces Alex Hartley's *Stored* (1991) as an example, in which the artist uses the aesthetics of museum storages and archives to deliberately conceal the object's visual presence. All three of Lehmann's examples show strong influences of Conceptual Art in employing semiological operations by substituting the signified by a signifier, and of Institutional Critique by allegorizing forms and conventions of exhibiting, storing or archiving objects in museums or similar institutional contexts. Thus, the categories and examples offered by Lehmann can be used as an art-theoretical and art-historical framework for the investigation of both Artaker's and Gisinger's strategies.

In summary, the combination of both Arnheim's concept of dialectical 'visual gaps' and Lehmann's art-immanent genealogy as

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3 A critical genealogy of the transition from Conceptual Art to Institutional Critique was initially conceived by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, see Buchloh 1982, 43-56.

well as the corresponding categories of an 'aesthetics of absence' with the specific forms of absence and void caused by 'Aryanizations' will allow to examine the dialectics of past and present, presence and absence, as well as the art-theoretical references and contexts of *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* and *Invent arisiert* in the respective case studies.

3 'Potentiated Void': National Socialist 'Aryanizations' and Specific Forms of Absence and Void

The analysis of Artaker's and Gisinger's projects will additionally require a profound understanding of the specific forms of forced expropriation and resulting absence and void that both artists address – and that exceed both Arnheim's perceptual and Lehmann's art-immanent concepts. The term 'Aryanization' was coined by the National Socialists in the 1930s and means the initially unregulated, and from 1938 on systematised, juridically justified and thus legalised confiscation of property from members of the population defined and persecuted as 'Jewish' – according to the Nuremberg Laws in Germany, Austria, and the Nazi-occupied territories – as well as its subsequent reappropriation by owners defined by the same laws as 'Aryan' (cf. Bajohr 2001, 15). These processes of 'Aryanization' of both material and immaterial goods were intended to enrich the National Socialists as well as to displace and to initially eliminate the economic power of the population defined as 'Jewish'.[4] The National Socialists 'Aryanized' every form of 'Jewish' property – ranging from everyday objects such as cutlery or clothes, to unique objects of high financial value such as artworks or entire art collections, to economic entities such as companies, corporations or patents.[5] To grasp the specific and lasting forms of absence and resulting void caused by these 'Aryanizations', the concept of 'potentiated void' is introduced here.[6] These forced and forcibly acts of expropriation potentiate absence on three levels and thus create 'potentiated void': First, the confiscated objects themselves have stayed absent,

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[4] Some historians claimed a continuity from 'Aryanizations' to the physical elimination of the people persecuted as 'Jewish', see Hilberg 1961; Barkai 1988.

[5] Gisinger's *Invent arisiert* demonstrates that even items of low financial value were 'Aryanized' with the goal to expropriate the 'Jewish' owners fully, see Barta-Fliedl 2000, 44.

[6] This concept was initially introduced in the Author's doctoral thesis titled *Die Leere sehen. Darstellungsformen von 'Arisierungen' in zeitgenössischen künstlerischen Positionen* (Seeing the void. Forms of visual representation of so-called 'Aryanizations' in contemporary artistic positions, not yet published).

leaving permanent voids where objects used to be. To this day their location and/or present possessors have remained unknown, or they were destroyed after being 'Aryanized' during or after World War II. Given the decades lag between 'Aryanizations' and systematically dealing with these Nazi crimes, provenance research can only trace a fraction of all goods 'Aryanized' at this stage – and even then, the identification and localization of an object does not necessarily lead to its restitution to its rightful owners or their heirs. This factual absence of 'Aryanized' goods is then potentiated by the absence of their former owners, who were forced to emigrate or killed, or died before they could reclaim their property or receive compensation for the expropriation. Ultimately, the contexts and interrelations that had been created by the object's former owners – such as an art collection or an apartment's furnishing – were permanently destroyed by these acts of 'Aryanizations' and have resulted in a continuing void as well. For the analysis of artistic projects such as Artaker's or Gisinger's which are dealing with specific cases of 'Aryanizations' and their lasting consequences, 'potentiated void' will prove to be a productive concept to investigate what the artists can make visible and/or present again and what has to stay absent in their works in the form of voids.

4 Case Study: *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* (2013) by Anna Artaker

In her project *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG*, Artaker deals with a specific case of 'Aryanization' – that of the systematical expropriation of the two collections of paintings of the Viennese branch of the Rothschild family in Austria. These comprehensive collections were brought together by three generations of the Rothschild family – initiated by Anselm Salomon Rothschild (1803-1874), continued by his sons Nathaniel Mayer Rothschild (1836-1905) and Albert Salomon Anselm Rothschild (1844-1911), and completed by the sons of the latter, Alphonse Mayer Rothschild (1878-1942) and Louis Nathaniel Rothschild (1888-1955).[7] In total, both collections included over four hundred paintings, programmatically focusing on seventeenth and eighteenth century artists from Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Austria, Flanders, and the Netherlands (cf. Kunth

[7] The Rothschild family collected a multitude of objects, such as art, applied arts, scientific instruments, and weapons. Anselm Rothschild's eldest son Ferdinand James Rothschild also built a comprehensive art collection in his palace in Waddesdon, UK.

2006). The art historian Birgit Schwarz (2011, 239) described the significance of the two collections combined as "die bedeutendste private Kunstsammlung Österreichs" (the most important private art collection in Austria; Author's transl.). The collections were housed in two of Rothschild family's palaces in Vienna – the Palais Albert Rothschild, and the Palais Nathaniel Rothschild (cf. Nierhaus 2008).

Immediately after the so-called *Anschluss* of Austria by Nazi-Germany in March 1938, the process of 'Aryanizing' the entire property of the Rothschild family in Austria was set in motion by Nazi officials and executed by their administration – including the collections of paintings and the palaces (cf. Sandgruber 2018, 460). After the confiscation, the paintings were brought to the so-called *Zentraldepot* at the *Neue Burg* in Vienna, where they were photographed and catalogued by employees of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* (cf. Juncker 2021, 141). The art-historically most relevant paintings were intended for Hitler's *Führermuseum* in Linz, the rest should be divided between Austrian museums (cf. Kirchmayr 2005, 32-4). The 'Aryanized' Palais Albert Rothschild was used as the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* (Central Office for Jewish Emigration) from 1938 to 1943 under the direction of Adolf Eichmann, in the 'Aryanized' Palais Nathaniel Rothschild, offices of the *Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers-SS* were housed (cf. Anderl, Rupnow, Wenk 2004, 332-6). After the end of World War II, most of the 'Aryanized' paintings from the Rothschild collections were lost, destroyed or looted, or deliberately kept in Austrian Federal Museums: As Trenkler (1999) stated, Alphonse Rothschild's widow Clarice Rothschild (1894-1967) and her brother-in-law Louis Rothschild were forced to 'donate' the art-historically most relevant paintings to museums such as the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in exchange for export permits for their other artworks. After being damaged and repeatedly looted during and immediately after World War II, both palaces were eventually restituted to Clarice Rothschild and Louis Rothschild, who, in the early 1950s, ended up selling the buildings to the Republic of Austria. Then the *Arbeiterkammer Wien* bought them and had them demolished in 1951 and 1955 to make room for new buildings: Today, the headquarters of the *Arbeiterkammer Wien* is located where the Palais Albert Rothschild used to be, their education centre stands on the site of the former Palais Nathaniel Rothschild (cf. Nierhaus 2008, 80-2).

Artaker designed *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* as an installation under the auspices of the institution's art funding program *AK Kunstprojekte*. It is important to note that Artaker was not commissioned to investigate the history of both sites but chose the Rothschild's collections of paintings and the palaces as the theme for her project independently. From 13 November 2013 to 30 September 2014, *REKONSTRUKTION DER*

ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG was exhibited in the foyer of the headquarters, the same site where many of the paintings had been housed until 1938. The installation consisted of a six-part felt wallpaper, structured topographically by the artists' place of origin or activity. The wallpaper showed photographs of eighty paintings from the Rothschild's collections, reproduced at their original size – and depending on the availability of the images – in colour or black-and-white **[fig. 1]**.

Figure 1   Anna Artaker, *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* (detail). 2013. Six-part wallpaper, 289 × 560 cm. Arbeiterkammer Wien, Vienna. Courtesy of the artist, © Anna Artaker

Through extensive artistic research, Artaker gathered not only the available images, but also detailed provenance information about each of the eighty paintings – on this basis, she compiled captions for each image which she included in the wallpaper. The captions comprised the following data: artist, title of the painting, date of 'Aryanization', (intended) use by the National Socialists, place of discovery after the end of the war, and, if carried out, date of restitution. The exhibition was accompanied by an invitation card, including a short curatorial text by Kerstin Engholm about the project and its historical evidence and two photographs of the initial presentation of the artworks at the Palais Albert Rothschild and Nathaniel Rothschild before their 'Aryanization'. Since the titular 'reconstruction' of the collections only included paintings Artaker was able to find images of, the artist made the decision not to visually represent the absent artworks in the installation. Artaker reflected this consideration when speaking of only a "teilweise Rekonstruktion" (fragmentary reconstruction;

Author's transl.).[8] Thus, Artaker is not employing Arnheim's concept of 'visual gaps' to make the extent of absence and void visually perceptible, but her work either presupposes an extensive 'visual knowledge' of the former collections, or the text and photographs on the invitation card hint at the 'potentiated void' caused by the absence of most of the paintings, their owners, and the contexts of the collections – including both the collections in their entirety as well as the two palaces. Additionally, the captions in *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* indicate even the absence of most of the reproduced paintings on a textual level, stating that most of their locations have remained unknown after 1945.

Comparing Artaker's strategy with select examples for Lehmann's categories of an 'aesthetics of absence', it becomes clear that Artaker's work does not intend to address the levels of absence and void caused by the 'Aryanization' of the collections and the palaces visually but textually – the reproductions work as visual placeholders for eighty of the paintings and thereby try to keep them present. By contrast, Stephen Prina's series *Exquisite Corpse: The Complete Paintings of Manet* (since 1988), which Lehmann states as an example for her category 'The Imaginary Museum: Reproduced Images', and in which the artist uses scaled gray planes as placeholders for Manet's paintings to invoke a different form of *catalog raisonné* based on the visual absence of images, the paintings researched by Artaker remain visually present meditated by their reproductions (cf. Lehmann 1994, 62). Both Prina and Artaker use allegorized conventions of art books and collection catalogues, such as the specific layout and the relations of images and captions. One of Lehmann's (1994, 62) examples for the category 'The Image that Disappeared from the Wall' is Alex Hartley's *Untitled* (1991), which evokes a former presence of an exhibit via a label. While Hartley visually integrates absence in the conception of his work, Artaker deals with absence on a textual level, indicating absence in the provenance information of the paintings.

5 Case Study: *Invent arisiert* (2000) by Arno Gisinger

In his project *Invent arisiert*, Gisinger deals with the 'Aryanization' of the property of eight Austrian families from Greater Vienna defined by the National Socialists as 'Jewish' – namely of Hugo Breitner (1873-1946), Viktor Ephrussi (1860-1945), Wilhelm Goldenberg (1887-1943), Moritz König (1891-1944), Oskar Pöller (1883-1942), Hedwig Schwarz (1893-1966), Emil Stiaßny (1881-1956), and Paul

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8 In the course of the research for the Author's doctoral thesis, the Author interviewed Anna Artaker in Vienna on 17 October 2021. Information from this interview was used here.

Weiß (1901-1977) (cf. Posch 2000, 24). In contrast to Artaker, Gisinger was explicitly commissioned with an artistic work addressing the 'Aryanized' objects in the collection holdings of the *Hofmobiliendepot* in Vienna by the curators Ilsebill Barta-Fliedl and Herbert Posch for the exhibition *InventARISIERT*. The exhibition was on display at the *Hofmobiliendepot* from 7 September to 19 November 2000, and included – in addition to *Invent arisiert* – the results of the comprehensive provenance research, which had been initiated by Barta-Fliedl in 1993, and which was systematically carried out by her and the historian Posch from 1997 to 1999 (cf. Posch 2000, 12-13). Barta-Fliedl and Posch (2000, 9) stated that both the exhibition and the extensive exhibition catalogue were efforts to make these research results public. During their research process, it became clear to Barta-Fliedl and Posch that the institution's inventory still listed items such as everyday objects, furniture and artworks that had been 'Aryanized' in the first months after the 'Annexation' of Austria in 1938 and which had then been added to the institution's inventory in 1939 (cf. Posch 2000, 24). In the 1990s and only thanks to Barta-Fliedl's and Posch's continued efforts, the institution finally came to terms with its past, after having showed no interest in looking proactively for the former owners or in restituting these objects for decades (cf. Posch 2000, 29-30). Additionally, Barta-Fliedl's and Posch's research showed that some of these 'Aryanized' and inventoried objects could still be identified and actually found in the storage of the *Hofmobiliendepot*, while other items were still listed in the inventory but were no longer physically present in the depot – their locations have remained unknown until today.[9] It is also important to note that Barta-Fliedl and Posch commissioned Gisinger only after their provenance research had been completed, therefore provenance research was not part of Gisinger's artistic commission. The objects that could be located at the *Hofmobiliendepot* were restituted to their former owners or their heirs as recommended by the *Österreichischer Kunstrückgabebeirat* mostly in 1999 and 2000 – meaning before the opening of the exhibition.

For *Invent arisiert*, Gisinger used the results of Barta-Fliedl's and Posch's provenance research as his point of departure and subsequently conceived visual strategies to represent both the inventoried objects that were still present and those that were absent in the institution's depot (cf. Gisinger 2000, 64). Right from the start, both the curators as well as the artist agreed that they did not intend to include the original objects in the exhibition to avoid further

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9 In the course of the research for the Author's doctoral thesis, the Author interviewed Ilsebill Barta-Fliedl and Herbert Posch in Vienna on 4 February 2020 and Arno Gisinger in Paris on 11 March 2020. Information from these interviews was used here.

perpetuating their institutional appropriation – therefore, they were only partly visually present in the exhibition through Gisinger's *Invent arisiert* (cf. Barta-Fliedl; Posch 2000, 9). For the first category, Gisinger created a setting in one of the museum's storage rooms and photographed the items positioned on the floor and against the wall of the room. In a next step, he digitally included the inventory number, the designated use of the object by the National Socialists as well as an information about its current status **[fig. 2]**.

Figure 2
Arno Gisinger, *Ohne Titel* from the series *Invent arisiert*. 2000. Lambda print, 25 × 20 cm. Hofmobiliendepot, Vienna. Courtesy of the artist, © Arno Gisinger

Ölgemälde auf
Leinwand

MD 21.800
1954 aus dem Inventar gelöscht

Figure 3
Arno Gisinger, *Ohne Titel* from
the series *Invent arisiert*. 2000.
Lambda print, 25 × 20 cm.
Hofmobiliendepot, Vienna.
Courtesy of the artist,
© Arno Gisinger

For the second category, Gisinger took a photograph of the same setting without the object and added to the textual information the designation under which it had been inventoried in 1939 **[fig. 3]**. For objects that had been 'Aryanized' but had not been inventoried in 1939 due to their low financial value, and that had been subsequently sold or auctioned off, Gisinger designed lists including the item's institutional designation and quantity. At the *Hofmobiliendepot*, the installation *Invent arisiert* consisted of a total of 648 C-prints, each in the format of 25 × 20 cm. Gisinger structured the prints laminated on aluminium plates according to the eight families of the former owners, then to the order in which the objects had been inventoried, and finally, to the inventory numbers – always starting with *MD* (short for *Möbeldepot*) (cf. Gisinger 2000, 64). Since Gisinger conceived forms of visual representation of both the absent and the present objects, Arnheim's concept of 'visual gaps' can be applied here: in using the same photographic setting for both categories of objects, the different medialisations of presence and absence collide in *Invent arisiert*, creating 'visual gaps' in the installation through which the past penetrates the disrupted present. At the same time, Gisinger managed to keep the quantitatively predominant absence of the objects present in his installation – both on a visual level in the photographs of the absent objects and on a textual level in the lists of the objects that had not been inventoried.

In her examples for the category 'The Imaginary Museum: Reproduced Images', Lehmann (1994, 62) mentioned works such as Endre Tót's *Die abwesenden Bilder*, which share the conceptual representation of an absent object or image with Gisinger's form of representation of the inventoried but absent everyday objects in the *Hofmobiliendepot*. Both Tót and Gisinger employed the conventions of institutional information such as title, date, measurements, technique of an object instead of its visual reproduction. In addition, both artists address the void as a medialisation of absence, which Gisinger uses photographically for the inventoried but absent objects at the *Hofmobiliendepot*. As an example for her category 'The Archived Image' Lehmann (1994, 64) alludes to Hartley's *Stored*, in which a storage rack and crates evoke the depot of an (art) institution. Gisinger also applies this aesthetic of institutional custody, administration, and power of disposal, when he refers to the conventions of historical inventory photography in his photographic setting and includes the labels and markings attached to the objects from the *Hofmobiliendepot* in *Invent arisiert* (cf. Schwärzler 2000, 54-6). In comparison of those in Lehmann's examples with Gisinger's strategies, it becomes apparent that these different artistic explorations of absence and void demonstrate overlaps in the representation of an object through a concept of the past presence of an object, and the adoption of aesthetic conventions of institutional storage and presentation.

6 Conclusion

Both Artaker's *REKONSTRUKTION DER ROTHSCHILD'SCHEN GEMÄLDESAMMLUNG* and Gisinger's *Invent arisiert* were analyzed here as representations of specific forms of 'potentiated void' caused by National Socialist 'Aryanizations'. Through the methodological lens of Arnheim's 'visual gaps' and Lehmann's examples of 'aesthetics of absence', the strategies of both artists proved to exceed these perceptual and art-immanent concepts in addressing 'potentiated void' and therefore also forced absences and disrupted presences caused by 'Aryanizations'. While Artaker decided not to demonstrate this 'potentiated void' visually but textually through the captions and the invitation card, Gisinger applied 'visual gaps' by taking photographs of both the present and the absent objects at the *Hofmobiliendepot*. The importance of both artistic examinations of 'Aryanizations' and their consequences as new forms of reading recent history in times of the disappearance of the contemporary witnesses of the Shoah becomes apparent by keeping the absent objects, their owners and their contexts present meditated by the void by using artistic research, photographic media and installation to deal with the tension of former presence and present absence.

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Clothes Art and the Absent Body's Communicative Potential

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Abstract   This paper investigates the conceptual and aesthetic dialogue between 'Clothes Art' and 'Wearable Art', two intertwined practices that use garments as expressive media. While Wearable Art depends on the body's presence to animate the artwork, Clothes Art operates through absence, transforming the empty garment into a reflective space. Drawing on Trasforini, Barthes, Frers, and artists such as Kounellis, Boltanski, and Pistoletto, the article explores how clothing, once detached from fashion, transcends utility to become an existential medium. The absent body, evoked through garments, turns void and absence into meaning, revealing absence as a generative space of presence, memory, and the human condition.

Keywords   Clothes Art. Metonymy. Body. Absence. Relative void.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Clothes Art and Wearable Art: What Are They? – 3 Clothes Art as Metonymy. – 4 The Presence of Absence. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

In recent decades, the intersection between art and fashion has emerged as a fertile ground for theoretical and aesthetic investigation. As garments increasingly enter the space of contemporary art, either as sculptural forms, performative devices, or conceptual signifiers, the boundaries between artistic and sartorial practices have become progressively blurred. Within this hybrid territory, two key notions have gained prominence: 'Clothes Art' and 'Wearable Art'. Although often used interchangeably, these terms refer to distinct

yet overlapping modes of artistic expression that employ clothing as a medium. Their difference lies primarily in the role of the body, its presence, absence, or transformation into a symbolic trace, which in turn defines the ontological status of the garment as an artwork.

This study aims to clarify the conceptual and aesthetic distinctions between Clothes Art and Wearable Art, situating them within a broader discourse that includes philosophy, semiotics, and contemporary art theory. Drawing upon authors such as Maria Antonietta Trasforini, Roland Barthes, and Lars Frers, as well as artists like Jannis Kounellis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Christian Boltanski, the discussion explores how the garment can operate both as a medium of artistic production and as a signifying structure capable of expressing presence through absence.

By examining the garment's shift from utilitarian object to artistic device, the paper interrogates the ways in which clothing transcends its functional and fashion-related contexts to become a vessel of memory, identity, and emotion. In Clothes Art, the absence of the body transforms the empty garment into a metonymy of loss, an object through which the void itself becomes expressive. In Wearable Art, by contrast, the living body re-enters the artistic field as both participant and medium, animating the work and grounding it in the immediacy of the *hic et nunc*.

Ultimately, this analysis proposes that the dialogue between these two practices reveals not only new possibilities for interpreting clothing in artistic terms, but also deeper reflections on embodiment, temporality, and the semiotics of absence. Through the study of garments that oscillate between the visible and the invisible, between the material and the symbolic, this paper seeks to understand how art can articulate meaning precisely through what is missing.

2   Clothes Art and Wearable Art: What Are They?

First of all, in order to talk about Clothes Art, it is necessary to understand what it actually is. This term, together with Wearable Art, is very often used, or overused, to refer to a wide range of different things, both within the art world and the fashion world. For this reason, starting from an investigation into how clothes can engage with the art world as a medium of expression, among the many confusing ways of defining these interactions, I will try to bring some clarity to the definitions of Wearable Art and Clothes Art. As I mentioned, when it comes to the artistic use of garments, definitions are usually chaotic and overlapping. These clarifications regarding terminology are, of course, not meant to establish a rigid or impermeable boundary between the two concepts, but rather to

highlight their differences while keeping their borders intentionally blurred, precisely in order to allow for possible hybridizations.[1]

It is crucial to understand how a garment can be defined, from an artistic point of view, once it is decontextualized from the fashion system, when it no longer signifies as a meaningful product stemming from a designer's poetics, but rather as a medium that becomes meaningful within an artist's practice. The use of garments in this context can indeed be broadly categorized under 'Artwear', yet different modes of employing clothing within the art world can be identified. Two of these will be referred to here as Clothes Art and Wearable Art.

First and foremost, the key difference between Clothes Art and Wearable Art lies in the presence, or absence, of the body, which itself becomes one of the main signifiers, the element that can entirely shift the narrative. In the world of fashion, the body is an essential and inescapable component, typically required to complete the meaning of a garment. In the art world, however, that is not necessarily the case: the body may be present or absent, and while this doesn't add to or subtract from the artwork's meaning, it does fundamentally alter it.

In Clothes Art, there is a shift

> da un uso di materiali, (quali stoffe, tessuti) che pur sempre restavano nel circuito semantico dell'abito e del suo 'valore d'uso' sia funzionale sia distintivo (arte tessile appunto), a una creazione o uso di abiti i cui significati fuoriescono da qualsiasi tracciato tessile, in cui l'abito funziona come un pretest ed entra a far parte di quella vasta produzione di significato di cui l'arte contemporanea è ormai protagonista (la Clothes Art).[2] (Trasforini 2012, 171)

This alteration allows Clothes Art to align with a Kantian conception of art, which emphasizes the necessity of focusing aesthetic inquiry

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1 For example, the Viktor & Rolf Haute Couture Fall/Winter 2015 fashion show, aptly titled *Wearable Art*, is a clear example of a possible hybridization between the two fields. While Wearable Art usually requires a purely artistic perspective, referring to a work of art where the medium of clothing is worn, in this case, however, the perspective is that of fashion, and the clothes, which are literally works of art (complete with canvas and frame), are first worn (Wearable Art) and then hung on the wall (Clothes Art), creating an effective and very interesting short circuit between the two terms.

2 Transl.: "from the use of materials (such as fabrics and textiles) that still belonged to the semantic realm of clothing and its 'use value', both functional and distinctive (as in textile art), to the creation or use of garments whose meanings go beyond any textile framework. In this case, the garment functions as a pretext and becomes part of that vast production of meaning of which contemporary art has now become the main protagonist (Clothes Art)". Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

solely on those forms that serve no purpose beyond themselves. For a work to be defined as art, it was, by necessity, required to transcend reality rather than immerse itself in it or participate in it. Without the presence of a body, it becomes easier to elevate the discourse to a more transcendent level, a discourse that may still speak about reality, but from a distanced, more reflective vantage point.

On the other side there's Wearable Art. What immediately draws attention is, of course, the body: it is the body that, by wearing the dress, allows the artwork to fully realise its meaning and reach its expressive potential.

It's clear that, in this case, the use of garments is not aligned with the Kantian conception of art I mentioned before. By being worn, the artwork is drawn down from the artistic empyrean directly into reality, immersed in the *Zeitgeist*. It becomes, quite literally, a living artwork: one that interacts with space, moves through it, and belongs fully to that specific *hic et nunc*.

The discourse around Wearable Art, however, is somewhat complex. The term has already been used to describe a trend that emerged in the 1970s (Schwartz, Laky 2008, 275-6)[3] when certain designers sought to elevate their creations to the status of art. The point is, that this approach looks at clothing from the perspective of fashion, not of art, and the two are not the same.

Both art and fashion belong to the broader cultural sphere; both represent distinct 'artistic worlds'.[4] But they are not interchangeable. Just as a hat and a belt can both be accessories, yet be very different objects, the same applies to art and fashion. As Pedroni and Volonté state in their book, "nella realtà possono esistere

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[3] "The Wearable Art movement of the 1970s sparked an ongoing dialogue between the art world and the fashion industry that brings together the body, sculpture and social issues in the context of fashion. The San Francisco Bay Area served as the epicenter of the wearable art revolution during the late 1960s and early 1970s, as it teemed with young artists bent on expressing their individuality via clothing. The term wearable art is commonly interchanged with art-to-wear, artwear, and art couture. Melissa Leventon, author and curator of the exhibit Art to Wear: Fashion and Anti Fashion, defines wearable art as 'an art of materials and processes whose creators are passionate about making art with textiles... artwear can be said to exist at the intersection between art, craft, and fashion. It is all three, but is owned wholly by none of them'. Wearable art found a home in museums, in galleries, and on runways" (Schwartz, Laky in Hethorn, Ulasewicz 2008, 275).

[4] This term is used by Becker (Pedroni, Volontè 2012, 14) to indicate how fashion should not be equated with art but considered as belonging to one of the "worlds of art". Always an art form, but different worlds. Similarly, Ulisse (2018,32), again to indicate the multiplicity of artistic practices that cannot be categorized under a single term, uses: "world of the arts".

contemporaneamente mondi artistici distinti e persino in conflitto tra loro"[5] (Pedroni, Volonté 2012, 156).

This is precisely why, I believe, when we talk about fashion infused with artistic elements, the term Wearable Art may not be entirely appropriate. It implies an artistic point of view, which doesn't do justice to garments that originate from a designer rather than an artist. To understand them properly, we need to acknowledge their different frameworks, they may intersect, but they should not be treated as the same thing.

Wearable Art seems to merge Clothes Art with theatre, placing the clothing, now the central artwork, onto a body that must move, interact with the surrounding space, and establish a relationship with it in order to fully express its potential.

3   Clothes Art as Metonymy

As just explained, Clothes Art encompasses all those artworks that use clothing as a creative medium in the absence of the body that wears it. However, there exists a whole subcategory within Clothes Art in which the absence of the body within the garments becomes a representation of those very missing bodies. Here, the absent body, through wrinkled, empty fabrics, becomes a spotlight on the absence itself, turning into its spokesperson and metonymy.[6] As Maria Antonietta Trasforini explains:

> Nel corso del Novecento, nel suo passaggio da arte tessile a Clothes Art, l'abito d'arte prende le strade della metonimia con opere in cui 'l'abito è il corpo', ovvero l'abito-opera che contiene il corpo si sostituisce a esso, a partire da un nesso caratterizzato da forti connotazioni (di genere, per esempio, o di classe) e conseguenti nuovi significati.[7] (Trasforini 2012, 172)

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5   Transl.: "In the real world, multiple artistic realms may coexist simultaneously, at times even in tension or conflict with one another".

6   It's important to note that not every example of Clothes Art functions as a metonymy for the body. The *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags) made by Michelangelo Pistoletto in 1967, for instance, uses clothing to express a critique against the consumerist society and the environmental issues it causes, an aspect of his poetic which is still very present in his works.

7   Transl.: "During the twentieth century, in its transition from textile art to clothes art, the art garment took the path of metonymy, with works in which 'the garment is the body' – that is, the garment-as-artwork containing the body comes to replace it, starting from a connection characterized by strong connotations (of gender, for example, or of class) and by the emergence of new meanings".

For example, when discussing this aspect of Clothes Art, we can consider Kounellis's *Tragedia Civile* (Civil Tragedy) an artwork created in 1975 for an exhibition at the Lucio Amelio Gallery in Naples. In this installation, a black coat and a grey hat were hung on a coat rack positioned in front of a gilded wall. There was no sign of a body. As Nina Felshin observed, the "removal of the body calls attention to the artifice of clothes" (1993, 13), clothes that, as Maria Antonietta Trasforini argued, have lost their vestimentary function in order to become a medium, much like a canvas or a block of marble. The absence of the body becomes a metonymy for the body itself, turning that void into a more explicit and striking presence than presence itself could ever have achieved. That emptiness becomes charged with meaning.

And this is exactly what is seen in Kounellis's work. His coat, hanging alone against the wall, does not speak about itself, it speaks about the person who left it there and never returned to retrieve it. As Massimo Recalcati notes, "l'uomo – ecco forse la tragedia – ha deposto i propri abiti, di lui non resta nulla: solo la sua mancanza, la sua assenza"[8] (*Jannis Kounellis. I cappotti | The Coats* 2019, 9).

This metonymy can be seen also in the artwork that Kounellis presented at the former Oratorio San Lupo in Bergamo in 2009, where identical coats and shoes were laid out on the floor in parallel lines and dominated by an iron cross. The Oratorio has once been used as a cemetery, and Kounellis recalled that history: with each empty coat and each empty pair of shoes he recreated the same sacred and lonely atmosphere of a place full of presences that were not really there anymore, bodies that left their clothes behind. And those clothes are all the same, because in the face of death, we are all the same (Fondazione Alberto Peruzzo 2020).

The same ideas were also followed by Charles Boltanski, who realized *Personnes* in 2010 at the Grand Palais, where again the empty clothes became metonymy of absent bodies, but in this case the metaphor was intended as a memorial to the victims of the Shoah (and today it can resonate in every history of war, death or genocide). Boltanski, quoting Barthes, said that those objects were showing the absence of the subject (Trasforini 2012, 179). And even if the clothes are not the same, the spectators don't notice that. They're not seeing a yellow cotton t-shirt, or a brown linen skirt. They're just seeing clothes, and the people that are not wearing them anymore.

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8 Transl.: "the tragedy lies in this: a man has shed his garments, and nothing of him remains, only his lack, his absence".

4   The Presence of Absence

When examining these artworks, it becomes evident that the true protagonist, in this case, is the void, absence itself. The garments, lying on the ground, thrown across the floor, or hanging from a coat rack, do not function as objects generating meaning per se; rather, they serve as conduits directing attention toward what is unseen, yet here, what is unseen, is the primary signifier.

Absence, by its very nature, implies a distancing from the designated place. This is already embedded in the Latin origin of the term *absens*, the past participle of *abesse*, meaning to be away.[9] What characterizes absence in these contexts is its relativity: it is not the presence of an absolute void, but the awareness of a 'has been' that is no longer. In these works, it is the presupposition of presence that renders absence perceptible.

The bodies that were meant to inhabit those garments are no longer within them, where the viewer expects them to be. It is precisely for this reason that they are perceived as missing, allowing the viewer to experience their absence. As Anna Farennikova suggest:

> Experiences of absence are conscious perceptions that represent a particular object or a group of objects as missing from the perceived scene. (Farennikova 2013, 431)

Moreover, one could add that the experiential perception of the missing element is made possible because the absent object leaves behind what might be defined as a trace, a necessary but unfulfilled residue of its prior presence. As Lars Frers insightfully observes:

> The traces of presence of those absent are worked in such a way as to show, synchronously, the absence of presence and the presence of absence. [...] It's not the thing that is experienced as absent that is present, but the absence itself, the presence of absence, [...] [a void that] I fill with my own emotions and imaginations. (Frers 2007, 434)

This 'trace' that Frers describes offers an intriguing conceptual tool, allowing us to reflect on how the potentiality of a body's presence (or lack thereof) is crucial in shaping the perceptual differences between empty garments in various contexts. When one stands before a rack of clothes on hangers, or before the mass of discarded garments

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9 Even referring to Ancient Greek, although there is no assonance, the principle is always the same. Absence can be translated with ἀπουσία, which indicates, precisely, the absence from a place.

composing *Venere degli stracci*, there is no perception of a missing body; the 'trace' of absence is itself absent. In these cases, the garments are characterized by the intentionality of their solitude, they are yet to be purchased or have been deliberately discarded (producing waste). They do not presuppose a body, either past or future, and therefore it becomes impossible to experience its lack.

In contrast, with Boltanski, whose work often features indistinct heaps of clothing, the perception is entirely different. Before such a display, one encounters piles of folded garments resting on the ground, as if waiting to be gathered and worn by their owners, who will never return. These are clothes awaiting to be filled, visually narrating the absence of their missing bodies. The pile here does not evoke voluntary abandonment; it signifies forced absence.

Similarly, in *Tragedia Civile*, Kounellis's coat hanging from a coat rack carries a meaning distinct from the garments in Pistoletto's *Guardaroba* (Wardrobe) (1968-2023). In the latter, the clothes have not yet acquired their referent bodies, they have not yet been worn, and therefore speak of pause, not absence. Conversely, Kounellis's coat is orphaned; it once had a body and has lost it. Like in Boltanski, it awaits an improbable return, while serving as a vessel of memory for the flesh it once covered.

A revealing comparison may be drawn between the meanings of empty garments and those of casts, as presented by Uros Cvoro (2002, 57):

> The cast[10] of an object traps it in time; it is a surviving reminder of a memorial form. […] It is the supplement to the original, the coming of the mark of absence after the original has been removed (erased). […] [It is] literally the mark left by empty space.

The parallel may appear somewhat daring, yet it is thought-provoking. A garment is not, of course, a cast, indeed, it is almost its opposite, since it takes form through the body that inhabits it. However, once deprived of that body, it assumes a function analogous to that of a cast, "the mark of absence after the original has been removed".

From this point, a further reflection emerges. Roland Barthes notes that:

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10 On the casts, reference is also made to the film *The Cast* presented by Clemens von Wedemeyer at the MAXXI in 2013 where: "The reference is linked to the identity of the works: the cast and the body like the rib and the arch (the rib becomes useless, like the shape of the cast, once the keystone has been placed, but the construction of the figure of its void – materialized essence – becomes the primary element of what remains, is observed and persists)" (Ulisse 2018, 46).

> Il vestito è il momento in cui il corpo diventa significativo; in altre parole il vestito è ciò attraverso cui il corpo diventa significante, e dunque portatore di segni, o anche dei suoi stessi segni.[11] (Barthes [1993] 2006, 139)

The garment's capacity to render the body significant reaches a new dimension in the works discussed here. Normally, when speaking of the signifying power of dress, reference is made to clothing[12] as an individual act of signification by the wearer. Here, however, garments bear the meanings of the body in its absence, they signify not through adornment, but through loss. One might argue that the garment's semiotic capacity transcends the body's presence, signifying instead its absence, making the remaining void the allusive subject of meaning. Thus, the void[13] reveals itself to possess "una sua figura, seppur latente, ma di rimando ad una dimensione altra, parallela"[14] (Ulisse 2018, 46).

5   Conclusion

At the heart of this exploration lies the notion of absence, the void as both subject and medium of artistic expression. Through the empty garment, Clothes Art makes visible what is no longer there: it transforms the lack of the body into a tangible, meaningful presence. The coat without its wearer, the heap of folded clothes waiting for bodies that will never return, these are not mere symbols of loss, but rather manifestations of a paradoxical fullness. The void ceases to be an absence of meaning; it becomes the very condition of meaning itself.

In the works of artists such as Kounellis and Boltanski, the garment acts as a metonymy of the body, not replacing it, but recalling it through its trace, through the memory inscribed in its folds and textures. What we encounter in front of these pieces is

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11 Transl.: "The garment is the moment when the body becomes significant; in other words, clothing is that through which the body becomes signifying, and thus a bearer of signs, or even of its own signs".

12 Nicolaj Trubeckoj explored the concepts of *langue* and *parole*, as expounded by Ferdinand de Saussure. The former refers to a social institution external to the individual that defines and encompasses the customs of communication, while the latter involves the individual and subjective action of appropriating and using langue. Trubeckoj associates custom with *langue* as a set of conventions, and clothing with *parole*, as a field in which the individual can act. (Baldini 2005, 188)

13 I refer to Lucio Fontana and his holes as the first dimension of emptiness and freedom for artists and men to create art by any means.

14 Transl.: "its own figure, latent, yet pointing toward another, parallel dimension".

not the physical body, but its resonance: a 'presence of absence' to borrow Frers's formulation. The empty garment thus operates as a kind of threshold, a liminal space where visibility and invisibility, materiality and memory, converge.

This transformation of the void into presence challenges the traditional semiotics of dress. As Roland Barthes argued, the garment is the moment in which the body becomes significant; yet, in Clothes Art, this dynamic is reversed. Here, the garment signifies without the body, and precisely through its absence. It speaks of the body that once was, of its disappearance, of the impossibility of return. In doing so, it shifts from being a sign of identity or social belonging to becoming a vessel of mourning and remembrance, a site where the personal and the collective, the aesthetic and the existential, coincide.

The garment, deprived of function and body alike, turns into an echo, a silent testimony of existence through disappearance.

Ultimately, the study of these examples of Clothes Art reveals that emptiness is not an absence to be filled but a language to be read. The void is not the negation of presence; it is its extension, its shadow, its proof. These garments remind us that what has vanished can still speak, that the traces left behind by absence are often more eloquent than presence itself. In the end, the art of the empty garment teaches us that silence, too, can be a form of expression, and that in the folds of what remains we may still find the shape of what is gone.

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The Shell of an In-Essential Void: The Disappearance of the Body and Its Traces in Alina Szapocznikow's *Photosculptures*

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Abstract   In 1971, Alina Szapocznikow's *Photosculptures* series captured chewed gum, molded by her teeth, in stark black-and-white close-ups. These works evoke Bataille's *informe* and vanitas-like dissolution, tracing the body's internal motion while resisting symbolic reduction. Informed by her awareness of terminal illness and Holocaust survival, Szapocznikow transforms ephemeral matter into a clinical, anti-realist testimony, where disappearance is suspension rather than absence. This study examines the 'white' of these images as Warburg's 'Denkraum', a conceptual space where latent temporality and unfinished subjectivities emerge. Employing Mieke Bal's narratological framework, the series is approached as visual fiction that reconfigures the body as residue and potential.

Keywords   Body. Cast. Formless. Entropy. Still life.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Double Edged (Dis)Comfort. – 3 The Glyph of the Void. – 4 Feminine *malgré tout*. – 5 Conclusion.

Things without all remedy should be without regard: what's done is done
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 3, Scene 2, 1623)

1 Introduction

Works of art, in general, do not speak – and even if they did, they would speak even less. Claudio Zambianchi dedicates an article entitled "Senza parole" to Alina Szapocznikow, focusing in particular on *Photosculptures* (1971), a series of sculptures made with her mouth by chewing gum and subsequently photographed by Roman Cieslewicz, her second husband (Bonacina, Dziewańska 2018, 69). This series is connected to works such as Boiffard's *Bouche* (1929), where, as has been observed, "if Boiffard's mouth was a fragment of the entire face, here it is the mouth itself that appears in fragments" (Zambianchi 2015, 98).[1] These works convey pain in the absence of symbolisation and codification, where the very words needed to articulate suffering are quite literally missing.

The camera captures these ephemeral, plastic creations, shown frontally even though they tend to disrupt space and perspective, flattening them in a dissonant motion. Suffering portraits? Annihilated bodies? There is even a certain irony here… one that extends beyond the minimalist frame, which seems to reduce everything to a coldly documentary operation. In the text *The Other Saturday*, the artist describes an artistic practice rooted in the everyday, claiming that "Creation lies just between dreams and daily work".[2] This places the photographic series in direct dialogue with an openly ironic work, her Portuguese marble Rolls Royce, *My American Dream* (1971), a small-scale model – a kind of monument to American capitalism (Ammer in Jakubowska 2011, 156).

Photosculptures opens multiple lines of dialogue, formally and conceptually, above all with Bataille's notion of the formless (Bataille 1929, 382),[3] exposing the entropic drift it implies and its agency over the human figure (Pollock in Jakubowska 2011, 79). The subject resists framing: the camera oscillates from close-up to full figure, and one risks forgetting that what is captured is, after all, a 'thing'.

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1 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are by the Author.

2 "In 'The Other Saturday' the artist describes the chewing gum experience as a visual epiphany, a sudden realisation about the second nature of a substance she never before thought about twice. The French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman calls these phenomena phases (see Didi-Huberman 1998), a term derived from the Greek *phasma*, which means 'apparition', 'vision' or 'phantom'. Phasmes are small and sudden chance appearances, located somewhere between the real and the imaginary, that usually enter the picture when we are actually looking for something else" (Ammer in Jakubowska 2011, 154).

3 See Didi-Huberman 1995; Krauss, Bois 1997; d'Ammando, Spadoni 2014.

As a product tied to consumerist aesthetics, it entails a dialectical downgrading of the existential dimension, where the distinction between human and non-human collapses into degradation (Butler in Filipovich 2011, 42). What remains is a clinical, anti-realist testimony to mass culture, which reconfigures the body not as subject but as residue.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1969, Szapocznikow projects a fatalistic aura onto the spat-out gum, precariously suspended on a thin edge. Yet the precipice sustaining the trace of a body – its inner movement imprinted in the act of chewing – resists both pessimistic materialism and symbolic abstraction. The work is not merely an exercise in mourning or an attempt to pre-empt her own disappearance; it reconfigures the relation between art and life.[4] Here irony creates distance from tragedy, but so too does a formal research of echoes and unexpected returns. This meta-artistic gesture, in its semantic density, transposes the suffering of the perishable body onto the metamorphic plane of art and its virtual immortality. Szapocznikow's *Photosculptures* function not merely as aesthetic artefacts but as epistemic forms. Their iconographic and conceptual references are not dispersed; they are absorbed, like saliva into chewing gum, as though her art had 'digested' an entire artistic tradition, allowing it to be instinctively rewritten through contact with organic matter, unmediated by intellectual control. What emerges is a whole heritage of images and imaginaries set into play.

Theoretically, I propose to trace this movement backwards, drawing on Mieke Bal's narratology (see Bal 2021)[5] to show how contemporary works can reread the past and reshape our vision of art history. Szapocznikow's photographic sculpture thus appears as a theoretical object, for its capacity to generate questions and displacements of meaning across time, operating as a critical and anachronistic device. By breaking linear temporality, it reconfigures cultural genealogies through unexpected and performative connections. In this sense, it is

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4 "Photosculptures offers a telling allegory for the whole of Szapoznikow's work-imprinting that which is otherwise unrepresentable. Her insistent and repetitive casting of the body was her attempt to figure the reality of human vulnerability, struggling to present the body as unique and irreducible (i.e., utterly unreproducible) and its experiences as collectively shared (i.e., infinitely reproducible). Her work obstinately sits in this breach between the two, where photography played its ultimate role" (Filipovich in Filipovich 2011, 76).

5 Mieke Bal's narratology aims to investigate visual culture by moving beyond the division and hierarchy between text and image, emphasizing instead their dynamic and intermedial relationship. Her approach opens up interpretative possibilities that were not previously made visible within dominant frameworks, allowing us to recognise and critically engage with narratives belonging to the semantic universe of the visible that had remained unacknowledged or suppressed.

not simply an object of analysis but a catalyst for thought, activating processes of signification and theoretical transformation. Within this discursive space, a latent temporality emerges in the image – between material residue and psychic imprint – where disappearance signifies not absence but suspension, and the body endures as potential.

Much has been written about a desublimated impulse in her work – about a regression towards the processual formlessness of a mouth that, in uttering 'the word', debases itself by privileging the feral bite over the more domesticated act of manual creation.[6] When the artist speaks of creation, in relation to the artistic rewriting of the body, as the affirmation of a "total erogenous zone" (Jakubowska 2011, 13) extended across its entire surface, she does not situate it in the sexual organs – where desublimation would ordinarily channel the drives – nor in their substitutes within the fetishistic order.[7] Paradoxically, this process entails a sublimation of perversion, rewriting the polymorphous, perverse desire of childhood. This desire expands beyond the body, not to purge it of carnality, but toward the chimerical world of commodities, displayed as idols in the playful yet disquieting imagination of a spiritualised American capitalism, seeking in these objects a new mode of survival. In this way, the 'great' tradition of the past and the modernist aesthetic are refracted through a reimagined commercial and domestic imagery – through the negative imprint of a body.

2 Double Edged (Dis)Comfort

In *Double Edged Comfort. Domestic Life in Modern Italian Art and Visual Culture* (2021), Silvia Bottinelli observes: "Although the book is temporally and geographically specific, its subject – the representation of home cultures – has meaning for individuals and societies around the world" (Bottinelli 2021, 4). Taking this as a point of departure, I propose to read Szapocznikow's fascination with everyday objects – lamps, for instance – as a resemanticisation of the domestic sphere into "awkward objects" (Jakubowska

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6   "Obviously, chewing gum is inside a watery environment, namely the mouth, before being expectorated. In the case of the *Photosculptures*, the artist's mouth virtually became a tool, a 'blind assistant', in the creation of yet another version of the body imprints she had been making since 1962. Instead of passively lending its shape and texture to the material imprinted upon, however, the mouth took on the active role of the 'unconscious, gustatory, and sensual executor' of a process the hands no longer wished to be accountable for" (Ammer in Jakubowska 2011, 153).

7   "The word *Fétiche* – fetish – recurs in the titles, denoting an object to which magical power is attributed but, above all, in its psychoanalytic sense, as a substitute for the object of love. The breasts, in particular, appear disturbing and seem – since the *mise en place* is significant – like mastectomies in a pastry shop window" (Sylos Calò 2016, 328).

2011, 13):[8] bizarrely sensual, disturbingly pleasant creations. Her eccentric domain oscillates between the phallus transfigured into a flower – sublimated – and the reinvention of magical, totemic commodities, mocked and desublimated in both prestige and enjoyment, exposing narcissistic complacency in grotesque mania, yet trivialised within the consumerist boom and its spectacular waste. Ultimately, the mouth that produced the *Photosculptures* expels the matter, degrading it into excrement. Cast into the external world, it clings like a spider, worm, or insect: a figure of the formless (Bataille 1929, 382).

The sculpted gum, precariously displayed on a support suspended between academic table and modernist pedestal, recalls – in its resistance to figurative semantics – the compositional register of still life. Photographed, it appears almost as a decorative aliment, akin to canonical fruit, while its formal treatment betrays a 'study' character, comparable to academic drawing exercises. Its placement near the edge intensifies imminence: not only does the material decompose, it risks falling into a domestic precipice which, rendered in such abstraction, assumes a metaphysical resonance. This formal strategy reinforces the identification of the still life with vanitas, where the abyss doubles metaphorical decay. I argue that the *Photosculptures* perform a meta-pictorial function, reconfiguring the genre and its affective charge. As Victor Stoichita reminds us, the term "still life" is itself an oxymoron (Stoichita 1993, 35), and here the vital and deadly energies injected into the work collide, offering the inverse of an allegorical skull: an object that reflects on the fleeting nature of existence by exacerbating its conflict.

The emptiness of an insubstantial material and the flaw of its support do not neutralise the internal tension. In Szapocznikow's work, emptiness is not only the surface on which her rubbery sculptures are precariously displayed – evolving in space like a frayed dance – but also the void within them, which renders the matter ephemeral, airy, ethereal. The rhythmic syntax of these compositions reflects on entropic degradation, on life and its precarious testimony, establishing a condition of 'double edge': sublime vertigo, as a desperate assertion of vitality and survival, and desublimated fall, as a prefiguration of definitive de-subjectivation, the reduction of the body to thing.

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8   In a letter dated 1972, reflecting on her vocation as a sculptor, Szapocznikow states that: "As for me, I produce awkward objects. This absurd and convulsive mania proves the existence of an unknown, secret gland, necessary for life. Yes, this mania can be reduced to a single gesture, within the reach of us all. But this gesture is sufficient unto itself, it is the confirmation of our human presence. My gesture is addressed to the human body, 'that complete erogenous zone', to its most vague and ephemeral sensations" (Jakubowska 2011, 13).

Here the emptying of meaning does not unfold linearly but as a bleaching of signifiers, a drifting oblivion of meaning in a vortex of accelerations and decelerations – occurring, ultimately, in heterogeneous time. In this regard, Mieke Bal states that "heterochrony contributes to the temporal texture of our cultural world and thus, our understanding and experiencing it is a political necessity" (Bal 2021, 117). The montage of the photographic series is fragmented; no narrative markers suggest a 'before' or 'after', nor any thematic evolution. There is not even a metalinguistic frame to escape the absolute frontality of these deformed pseudo-subjects, which seem to glance at us obliquely. Without claustrophobia, the photographs tell a story of pure immanence. Yet this is not the triumph of modernist discourse – of asemantic formalism or the abstract domination of perception – but a lowered horizon of research, seeking purity in infinitely plastic materiality: whiteness vulnerable both to dirt and to the very fact of being spat out, trampled, degraded. Like an insect, precisely.

In Clarice Lispector's (1922-1977) *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964), the protagonist undergoes a metamorphosis as she witnesses the slow agony of a cockroach, inadvertently crushed while opening a wardrobe door. In that moment, her comfortable bourgeois life – her domestic space, her values, her very identity – suddenly becomes unrecognisable, or rather infernal.

> In hell, we fabricate our supreme exultation precisely with what should be punishment; with punishment in this desert, we create a further ecstasy of laughter and tears; we turn punishment in hell into a hope of enjoyment.
> Was this, then, the other side of humanisation and hope? (Lispector 1964, 92)

Just as Lispector acts as a counter-modernist within a still modernist context, post-minimalism seeks process through an "eccentric abstraction" that celebrates transformation and precariousness. Lispector's writing parallels this approach: it does not "represent" an event, but enacts metamorphosis as a lived experience. The white plasma seeping from the crushed insect – formless, soft, and eventually ingested by G.H. – evokes Szapocznikow's chewing-gum works. Here, the mouth becomes a threshold for an initiatory event that destabilizes the values of a woman who, until that moment, epitomised the bourgeois consumer, one who might purchase a modernist canvas merely to decorate her living room. This access to depersonalisation – in both the creation of the artwork and the reconfiguration of the self – emerges as a mode of transforming pain into desiring production and of contemplating its joyful acceptance.

3 The Glyph of the Void

Chewing gum is an inherently insubstantial material: it vanishes from sight only to return as a nuisance, the repressed that adheres to the sole of one's shoe. This simultaneity of presence and absence generates an iconic discourse on absence itself, an asemantic writing inscribed by the mouth. The rubbery, amorphous forms it produces do not resemble the letters of an alphabet but instead *play* at the very threshold of meaninglessness – an absence that paradoxically overflows with possible significations. They suggest, I argue, a regression of the modernist dream, revealing both its wealth and its misery in the proliferation of meanings. The utopia of the pure image, realised through an impure material par excellence, gives rise to a disorderly iconographic indigestion, regurgitating tradition in fragmentary form, and admitting the intrusive return of the psycho-biographical element in an anti-heroic, anti-mythical key – a lucid parody of itself.

Might Szapocznikow, then, be mourning not her own body – revived through laughter and tears – but rather an artistic language that has lost its symbolic potency? In the collective imagination, Egyptian culture epitomises a sophisticated negotiation with death, and such references permeate her sculptural imagery. In *Stèle* (1968), for instance, a body encased in black expanded polyurethane is transfigured into a living tomb. In *L'Apesanteur (Hommage à Komarow)* (1967), the cosmonaut's figure appears mummified, as though the immensity of outer space were itself a descent into death. Even her final works, such as *Tumors Personified* (1969), unfold as expanded funeral rituals, assembling an ideal reliquary or fragmented sepulchral monument. Crucially, this ritual is processual: enacted *in vita* by the artist herself, it resists codification into any stable canon. Her fascination with Egypt thus reactivates the enigmatic and deathly physiognomy of hieroglyphics, but projected into an age where symbols are increasingly void. The body – its repressed residues and opaque remains – emerges as a late-capitalist hieroglyph, at once indecipherable and inexhaustible.

From this perspective, Szapocznikow's artistic *corpus* – so closely intertwined with the physical body – can be read as a virtual foreshadowing of its own disappearance, producing a void that paradoxically resonates with life. This void stands in contrast to absence itself, which is continually sacralised through mournful artistic rituals. A striking example is *Alina's Funeral* (1970). The psychic virtuality at work here – recalling both the dreamlike dimension and the unconscious realm of desire – shapes the artist's creative investment and enables viewers and readers to enter her imaginative universe. Within it, the thread of her vitalistic yet mortiferous discourse is momentarily suspended. Ultimately, this

process allows us to 'dream' her work, to make it reverberate within contemporary meta-artistic discourses through sensations, thoughts, and emotions, thanks to the unconscious reserves that permeate it and surface as silhouettes. Confronted with the *Photoscultures*, we perceive not so much the predominance of grey as a whitening of the signifier, a luminosity that floods every fold and crevice: the final page, beyond death, is not black, but white.

4   Feminine *malgré tout*

The modernist formalism of the *Photoscultures*, rendered in sober black and white, acquires a desert-like quality, echoing the Egyptian imagery they evoke.[9] The desert signifies emptiness not only through its vast horizons, where the sky overwhelms the gaze, but also through the sense of sterility it embodies. After undergoing treatment for tuberculosis, Szapocznikow discovered she had become infertile. Within her artistic practice – dominated by the sexualised, feminine body – a strongly creative dimension assumes a procreative quality, multiplying the sensual potential of this body. Yet, when cancer struck and her left breast was surgically removed, she no longer portrayed or reproduced this body in drawings or casts. As the disease advanced, so too did her work, increasingly shifting the feminine element into the space of loss – beyond the self – since every artwork is destined, sooner or later, to detach from its creator (Sylos Calò 2016, 330).

If her earlier practice engaged seriality through bodily objects – such as her partial-object lamps, which evoked the production logics of the American economic and cultural model – later this theme of repetition was reconfigured as a mode of working through the trauma of loss. In this defensive process, the organic element, set against the coldness of the industrial or purely formal, but not against the 'thing' as such – hence the reinvention of an Art Nouveau decorativism – (Van Alphen in Jakubowska 2011, 114), generates a surplus that borders on kitsch, without ever fully succumbing to it. Like the casts of body parts, chewing gum evokes corporeality as an excessive experience, which – even in repetition – culminates in an eccentric movement that resists mere reproduction or compensation for a deferred event: the unintelligible trauma displaced from consciousness.

This line of inquiry has been situated theoretically in relation to Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of the imprint (see Didi-Huberman 2008), which concerns both the indexical mark of the body and the imprint's function as testimony to the body's disappearance

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[9]   The title of the paragraph is a clear reference to Didi-Huberman 2003.

(Mytkowska in Filipovich 2011, 132). Szapocznikow's creative response – whether involuntary or therapeutic – thus participates in a process irreducible to rational control or to the subject's body itself. Within this trajectory, the survival of the feminine element vital, *malgré tout*, seems transposed into the realm of objects, into possibilities tied to the domestic horizon of paintings and bedside lamps: forms of survival entwined with the relations of other corporealitie s. Like rubber that clings to surfaces when stepped on, Szapocznikow's cast objects remain inextricably attached to the bodies that generated them, enacting a form of bodily promiscuity and projecting vitality beyond their own material limits. To recall Mario Perniola (see Perniola 1994), one might speak of a "sex appeal of the inorganic" in her production, as a last recourse for sustaining an excessive vitality – at once life-affirming and deadly – of an inessential femininity that exceeds the mere shell of a body no longer able to sustain life.[10]

Her interest in a vision of pop culture that legitimised a kind of spiritualised materialism is evident in her reference to *Goldfinger* (1965) and its marble Rolls Royce crowned with a phallic *bouchon de radiateur*. In a letter, she even remarks that Julie Christie's mouth served as the model for the *Illuminated Lips* series (1966) (Jakubowska 2012, 342). The actress – celebrated for her role as Lara in David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1966) – embodied the Soviet drama refracted through a Western lens, the very perspective Szapocznikow embraced when she left Poland. The allusion to a film star, at a time when cinema had far greater cultural and media resonance than today, signals, in my view, an attempt to amplify her own voice through the borrowed glamour of an admired mouth.

The difficulties she faced in securing financial stability and artistic recognition are counterbalanced by such choices, which transmute the emptiness of separation and isolation into a productive distance, opening space for new identifications, alter egos, and idols within a renewed culture of the image. In her final years, explicitly religious

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10 The artist's production of objects participates in the sex appeal of the inorganic, as theorised by Walter Benjamin and further developed in Mario Perniola's eponymous study. Our artist, an outsider within the *Nouveau Réalisme* group, explores, from her personal perspective, an aspect that would become central in New Dada and Pop research: the relationship between humans and the products of cultural industry. In this sense, the metamorphic capacity of the inorganic's sex appeal to assume the guise of a "foreign garment", according to Perniola (1994), lays the foundation for a productive encounter between the corporeal and the intellectual, thereby dismantling yet another longstanding opposition.

motifs also appear: the *Madonna of Krużlowa (Motherhood)* (1969),[11] and references to Christ in *Piotr* (1972) and the *Herbarium* series (1971-72). As Elena Filipovic observes, the latter resemble ghostly shrouds, recalling the imprint of Christ's face on the Shroud of Turin (Filipovich in Filipovich 2011, 72). Without offering any facile aspiration to transcendence, these works reveal how, beyond the feminine, even the maternal can persist through the objectification of a feeling that – already artistic in itself by virtue of the power of Christian visual culture – refuses to be diminished in the virtual process of esthetic transformation.

5 Conclusion

Having survived the Holocaust and the concentration camps, Szapocznikow seems to give shape in her work to Paul Valéry's metaphor of the eye consumed in a furnace: faced with an intensity impossible to sustain, this exceptionality turns into a condition of burning invisibility. It dissolves into pure white, offering an image of perfect disorder (see Valéry 1934).

This proposal focuses on the 'whitening' of these images as a conceptual solution, taking the *Photoscultures* as a theoretical object through which to examine the paradoxical role of both artist and viewer when art confronts a sensory potential that anticipates the disappearance of the human subject – the before and after of the fatal event of death. A shared impossibility emerges: one remains on the threshold, and this watershed becomes a place of passage. This whiteness may thus be read in the sense of Warburg's *Denkraum* (see Ghelardi 2022; Ghelardi, Aby Warburg [1929] (2016): a space in which the emotional impulse crystallises within an elegant black-and-white shot, while thought is spatialised in the extension of a deferred disappearance – one that involves colour, matter, and subjectivity. In this way, disappearance is not treated as a universal drama but as a marginal note, a discursive smudge, becoming the spokesperson for another temporality: one that continues, one perpetually in transit.

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11   "The erotic body transformed into the language of art not only made transgression possible but also exposed to scrutiny that which had been hidden. This can be seen in her *Madonna of Kruzlowa (Motherhood)* from 1969, which she made for Father Józef Sadzik, a Pallottine from Paris, an enlightened humanst and philosopher, probably influenced by their conversations. Szapoznikow's is a personal take on the famous Madonna of Kruzlowa, a gothic sculpture from circa 1410 of Mary and child. Rather than show the full figure, the artist reproduced and multiplied the Madonna's face, sinking the images in plastic, and endowing them with breasts, reminiscent of teardrops" (Bonacina in Dziewańska 2018, 69).

Even if emptiness seems to seize every possibility of discourse, in fact – as if enveloped in a spiral of entropic annihilation – a distant echo restores what the interruption of life had seemingly paralysed forever. The disruptive force of the artist's oeuvre, which led to its rediscovery and subsequent critical and commercial success, appears implicitly in solidarity with his late research: an effort to redeem the shadow of death in a luminous reversal that does not erase it but makes it thinkable through art. The emptiness left by the *Photosculpture* is never absolute; it refracts through the remains and traces of the body in intervals: seriality (mortiferous or vitalistic), the critique of traditional artistic genres (portrait, still life…), and the deconstruction of modernist canons from within punctuate the layered plurality of this absence, making its singular void reverberate in a larger history, producing resonances and contrasts.

Today, her work is presented in a prestigious collection such as François Pinault's, represented by an important gallery like *Hauser & Wirth*, and placed alongside artists such as Louise Bourgeois[12] and Eva Hesse,[13] as if their inquiries had, in fact, touched each other. Although this dialogue now appears almost natural, the gap remains unbridged. What is compelling in this apparent reintegration of research into a feminist canon is the way in which, across shifting contexts, the suspended threads of art weave apparent symmetries between stories that are actually out of sync: everything seems to fit so seamlessly that one is led to believe it was meant to. This synchrony reveals the fullness of a void that is not an end, but a reserve, a latent charge – not to rewrite what has been, but to liberate the unexpressed possibilities still waiting to open the past, transforming it from a monolithic tombstone into a (dis)continuous flow of air, a breath for words and for the body.

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12 "Like Bourgeois, Szapoznikow was a thoughtful modernist, moving, however, from figuration into abstraction, while deeply engaged also with questions of equilibrium. In the late 1950s she began to work with malleable cement; in the 1960s she began carving in the most classic sculptural material, Italian marble from the quarries at Carrara, where her residency did not quite coincide with that of Bourgeois, who also came to Italy in the later 1960s to carve marble" (Pollock 2013, 185).

13 "Had the show at Bonino Gallery presented her most recent sculptural projects such as the steles made of black polyester foam with imbedded female torsos and legs made from fragmentary body casts [...] who knows if American art critic Lucy Lippard, who had curated an influential exhibition in 1966 on what she named Eccentric Abstraction (including work by Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse), might not have written Alina Szapoznikow into the emerging feminist history of women artists of the 1960s?" (Pollock 2013, 186).

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Material Surfaces: Erasures and Potentialities

Horror vacui in Early Modern Ceramics: Overall Approach to Covering Surfaces

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Abstract   In this paper, the concept of *horror vacui*, i.e. the fear of the void, is applied to early modern ceramics, where the artists decorated every part of their artworks so that no empty space is left. This overall approach in covering the surface is examined based on ceramic examples in the technique of incised slipware, which were produced in Venice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Different methods for covering the surface can be determined, like foliage, interlaced motifs, linear and cross-hatchings, and incised dots. These approaches show how the ceramic artists expressed the idea of *horror vacui* in their artworks.

Keywords   Horror vacui. Ceramics. Incised slipware. Venice. Istria. Early modern. Overall approach. Surface covering. Decorating methods.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Concept of *Horror Vacui*. – 3 Overall Approach in Ceramics. – 3.1 Antique Vases. – 3.2 Early Modern Incised Slipware. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

Emptiness is practically non-existent on certain early modern ceramics.[1] Their decoration and glaze cover the whole surface, which is abundantly filled with motifs and patterns to avoid empty spaces. There was not only an aesthetic, but also a practical choice behind the complete glazing, as the application of glaze makes the porous clay impermeable and more resistant to external factors. In such abundantly filled ceramic surfaces, there seems to be a fear of the void, also known as *horror vacui*. The idea of *horror vacui* is related to physics and philosophy and refers to the natural tendency of nature to avoid the void and aim for fulness (Michel 2024, 24). I will firsly discuss the concept of *horror vacui*, starting from the ancient understanding of the void put forward by Aristotle. I will then consider how a fear of empty space developed over the next centuries, especially as it concerns the Christian ideas set forth in Genesis. Building on this, I will trace the idea of the void and the aversion to it back to the early modern period and the physical experiments of Galileo Galilei and Evangelista Torricelli.

After briefly defining the concept of *horror vacui*, I will apply it to the medium of ceramics. Art and nature are intertwined terms in antiquity: according to Pliny the Elder, it is possible to determine a connection between *horror vacui* and artworks such as ceramics (Plin., *HN* 7.33-7; Platt 2018, 226).I will identify an overall approach to surface decoration on pottery as early as the ancient Greek Geometric style. I will argue that this is also the case with ceramics of the early modern period. Using examples from previously research on incised slipware[2] produced in fifteenth and sixteenth century Venice, I will show different methods used for covering surfaces on pottery and interpret them as an artistic response to ongoing endeavours to grapple with the concept of the void and the vacuum. The chosen ceramics are located today in museum collections in Istria, in the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula and the Museo della città di Rovinj-Rovigno, as well as in the MIC – Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza. The examples are richly decorated and show an aversion to leaving large spaces of the surface empty. They stand in contrast to other contemporary tendencies of ceramics, such as the *bianco sopra bianco*, with almost invisible decoration, or the *compendiario* style in sixteenth century Faenza, where a lot of space

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2 Incised slipware is a technique of ceramics, where the artists applied a slip, a white clay, to the formed, leather-hard clay and would then incise its surface with a sharp metal stick (Ferrari 1960, 9).

is purposely left white.[3] The artworks, which will be discussed in the following, display different strategies used for overcoming the typical whiteness of the background of ceramics. The decorations include foliage, hatchings, interlaced motifs and incised dots. I want to explore the question of what it means when emptiness and void are something to be avoided at all costs in the case of ceramics. Reflecting on the opposite, namely the intentional non-representation of emptiness, can help to unveil the void. Thus, by shedding light on ceramics and visualising the *horror vacui* in their surface painting, I want to draw attention to previously little-studied materials and their makers' strategies of dealing with the void.

2 The Concept of *Horror Vacui*

Scholarship has traditionally located the origin of the term *horror vacui* in Aristotle's *Physics* (Arist., *Ph*. 4.6-9; Schmidt 2021, 158). Aristotle (384-322 BC) dedicates one part of his book to the idea of the void (Arist., *Ph*. 4.8). He states explicitly that he does not believe in the existence of the void: Ὅτι μὲν τοίνυν οὐκ ἔστι κεχωρισμένον κενόν, ἐκ τούτων ἐστὶ δῆλον (Arist., *Ph*. 4.8.26b21) ("From all this it is clear that there is no such thing as a self-existing void"; transl. by Wicksteed, Cornford 1957, 361). Thus, for him, a true void does not occur in nature. Instead, Aristotle sees the world as full (Thorp 1990, 150). He even makes a joke against those who believe in the void, as classical philologist John Thorp (1990, 149) highlights: καὶ καθ᾽ αὐτὸ δὲ σκοποῦσι φανείη ἂν τὸ λεγόμενον κενὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς κενόν (Arist., *Ph*. 4.8.26a26-7) ("Even if we consider it on its own merits, the so-called vacuum will be found to be really vacuous"; transl. by Thorp 1990, 149). Therefore, Aristotle does not attack the people who contradict his idea directly but wraps it up as a joke and thereby shows the absurdity of the opinion that the void might exist.

Classical philologist Ernst A. Schmidt (2021, 157) disagrees with scholarship tracing *horror vacui* back to Aristotle. He argues that the term emerged in the thirteenth century and should not be projected onto classical antiquity, because Aristotle only disproved the existence of the void, but does not mention the avoidance or fear of the void (Schmidt 2021, 157-8). But Schmidt contradicts himself: he says that the denial that the vacuum does not exist is based on a fear of the void (Schmidt 2021, 163). The concept of *horror vacui* excludes

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3 See for example: Ceramic with arabesques in bianco sopra bianco. Ca. 1520, Faenza. Tin-glazed earthenware, diameter 21.7 cm. Inv. 1878,1230.413, British Museum, London; workshop of Virgiliotto Calamelli, Ceramic with putto in compendiario style. 1560-1600, Faenza. Tin-glazed earthenware, diameter: 23.50 cm. Inv. 1923,0611.15. CR, British Museum, London.

the void from the universe and nature. The void is unnatural and against nature, which consists only of things that exist. By denying the nothing/void, a fear emerges that it could still exist somewhere (Schmidt 2021, 163). This is exactly what Aristotle does, he denies the existence of the vacuum/void. It is plausible that Aristotle knew the emotion of *horror vacui*. Thorp, for example, proposes that Aristotle's real reason for not believing in the void is a phobia of the void (Thorp 1990, 150). Medievalist Edward Grant (1981, 67) agrees that only in the Middle Ages, expressions like *natura abhorret vacuum*, *fuga vacui* and *horror vacui*, started to appear. However, the exact origin of these terms remains unknown. The approach to trace the fear of the void back to antiquity and Aristotle's ideas makes sense. It might be true that the term *horror vacui* first appeared in the thirteenth century, but it does not mean that the Greek philosopher did not lay the foundations for *horror vacui* with his negation of the void, and introduced the concept without using the specific term.

The Dominican and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) takes up Aristotle's treatise, agreeing with him that a vacuum does not exist in nature, and connecting it to Christian thought (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Article 5. Objection 3). Aquinas believes that God is omnipotent and that "nothing is void in God's works" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Article 2-3). Therefore, God's omnipotence would be questioned if a void really existed. This opens up a new area, which moves the concept of *horror vacui* away from Aristotelian physics into Christian theology rooted in the Book of Genesis. Genesis treats God's creation of the cosmos, life and order, and does not end in an empty space or void (Gen 1). The question of what was before the Creation was fundamental for Medieval artists, who wanted to depict Genesis (Fricke 2025, 73). It is debated if first, there was chaos or void.[4] The latter would imply the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, Creation out of nothing, i.e. void (Fricke 2025, 73). The existence of the void in nature would mean that it would go back to a sort of pre-Creation state or that God was not influential enough to reach every part.

In the early modern period, physicists continued to discuss the concept of *horror vacui* (Michel 2024, 28). Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) writes that when two marble, metal or glass slabs are positioned onto each other and you want to separate them, for a short moment,

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4 Gen 1,2: Because there are different translations of the word *tōhū wā-bōhū* from Hebrew. It can be interpreted as did the Septuagint from Greek ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκατασκεύαστος "invisible and not yet shaped", which is connected to chaos. Another possibility is as *inanis et vacua*, "empty and void", seen in Vulgate Jerome. (Fricke 2025, 73). The passage Gen 1,2 is transl. in KJV as: "And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters". Therefore, it is in favour of the idea that there was a void before the Creation.

there is an empty space, a vacuum, which draws the other one with it, as if they stick to each other, before the air around fills the space between the slabs: "ci mostra l'orrore della natura nel dover ammettere, se ben per breve momento di tempo, lo spazio voto" (Galilei 1638, 12). According to Galilei, the empty space that occurred is a 'horror of nature', which again refers to the idea of *horror vacui*. The first person to achieve a real vacuum was Evangelista Torricelli (1608-1647), a student of Galilei, in the mid-seventeenth century. With an experiment of a quicksilver barometer, he shows that the cause not the fear of the void, but the resistance of air pressure (Michel 2024, 27-8). Thus, the existence of a vacuum in nature and the idea of the fear of the void bothered the scientists and philosophers in the early modern period. It shows that the term *horror vacui* was in use and it is likely that the ceramic artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries wanted to express this concept in their artworks.

3 Overall Approach in Ceramics

Some ceramics are so richly decorated that every area of the surface is covered. It seems that in those examples, the artists did not want any lacunae to be left, as if they had a fear of the empty space or wanted to express the idea of *horror vacui* in their artworks. I can identify an overall approach in their decoration to cover the entire surface. The artist dedicated the same attention and importance to every part of the artwork. There are some focal points of central motifs, but the interstices are not just left blank, but are decorated. The composition was carefully planned, and every part of the ceramic surface was considered in an all-encompassing sense. Examples of ceramics with the overall approach in their decoration will be shown in the following.

3.1 Antique Vases

As was discussed before, it is debatable if the concept of *horror vacui* existed already in antiquity. The overall approach in the surface decoration of antique vases gives evidence that it was the case. It can be found especially in vases of the Geometric style (1000-700 BC) (Bohen 1991, 59). Typical of this style are abstract, geometrical elements, which cover the whole surface, like circles, triangles, stars, swastikas, meanders, checkerboards and cross-hatchings (Bohen 1991, 59). These ornaments are arranged in a rhythmical way in bands, which run around the ceramic vessel. The artists also considered the shape and size of the vases to apply the decoration in a proportional way (Bohen 1991, 62). Thus, even if the vases in the

Geometrical style are richly covered with motifs, they are arranged in clear zones and are proportionate to the pottery, which results in a harmonious ensemble and the decoration does not feel overcrowded. Yet, an overall approach in the surface covering can be seen.

Pliny the Elder (23/4-79 A.D.) connects the making of ceramics and artworks in general to nature. He writes in his *Natural History* about the various discoveries of mankind (Plin., *HN* 7.56.191-215). Pliny mentions inventions like the production of metalwork, fabrics, the alphabet and poetry, just to name a few. Among them is also the discovery of pottery: "fabricum ferrariam invenerunt Cyclopes, figlinas Coroebus Atheniensis, in iis orbem Anacharsis Scythes, ut alii Hyperbius Corinthius" (Plin., *HN* 7.56.198) ("Working in iron was invented by the Cyclopes, potteries by Coroebus of Athens, the potter's wheel by the Scythian Anacharsis, or according to others by Hyperbius of Corinth"; transl. by Rackham 1961, 639). In consideration of the fact that Pliny intends not only humans, but also mythological creatures like Cyclops in his writings, the accuracy of who invented what should be regarded critically. Pliny further includes a section on the origins of arts, like painting and sculpture (Plin., *HN* 33-7). He also writes about the beginning of pottery (Plin., *HN* 35.43). Classicist Verity Platt (2018, 226) stresses that for Pliny the Elder, human interactions with their environment are fundamental for these discoveries. Thus, the human-nature relationship is closely connected and from this collaboration, the arts and crafts emerged. This again means that the arts, especially pottery, where natural materials like clay are used, are rooted in nature. As art and nature are intertwined terms in antiquity, according to Pliny the Elder, it is possible to determine a close connection between the concept of *horror vacui* and artworks such as ceramics.

3.2 Early Modern Incised Slipware

The idea of *horror vacui* in early modern ceramics is expressed not so much as geometrical patterns, like in antique vases, but in a more playful way of decoration. Artists used diverse methods to cover the surface of ceramics, including foliage decoration, hatching, interlacing elements and incised dots, which I propose to consider as an overall approach to decoration in the following examples.

3.2.1   Foliage and Hatching

Figure 1   Foliage decoration. Third quarter of the fifteenth century. Ceramic, incised slipware, fragment of a reconstructed plate, 11 × 13 cm. Produced in Venice or Ferrara (?). Study Collection, Muzej grada Rovinja-Rovigno – Museo della città di Rovinj-Rovigno. Photo by the Author

In this example of a ceramic piece, now held in the collection of the Museo della città di Rovinj-Rovigno, the surface is entirely covered with decoration **[fig. 1]**. The fragment belonged to the rim of a big plate, as can be seen in the reconstruction. Yet, the overall approach is clearly continued also in the centre of the vessel. The richly covered surface of the fragment is divided in different sections, which are arranged in a circular manner. In the inner part of the plate, two leaves and a twig can be identified. The second section, a ring closer to the border, shows squiggly foliage. Art historian Francesca Saccardo (2002, 106-7) sees the idea of *horror vacui* in early modern ceramics, which are densely decorated with shoots or tendrils of oak leaves in a late Gothic style. In the ceramic example, this is especially the case in the centre, where the leaves cover a large part. But there are more decorations: the two sections are differentiated by several small circles in a row. They are flanked by branches, out of which the botanical elements in the two registers grow. The outer part is accompanied by a similar chain of small circles, which forms the border together with two smaller lines on each side.

The background, i.e. the space between the leaves, is not left empty, but is filled with incised hatching. In this technique, parallel lines are positioned in proximity to each other. Since they all run in the same direction, they can be called linear hatchings. Hatching techniques were commonly used in other media as well, like drawing and printmaking, where their use achieves shadowing and chiaroscuro.[5] In the ceramic example, the background appears darker because of the hatching, against which the foliage stands out.

Moreover, the decorations are coloured. The artist painted the leaves with green (*verde ramina*) and yellow (*giallo ferraccia*) glazes. He applied manganese to the small circles as well as the twig in the middle part of the plate, which appear in a violet/brown colour. These glazes are typical for incised slipware (Saccardo 2002, 107). This colouring and overall approach of decoration and hatching emphasises that no area of the pottery should be left blank. The idea of *horror vacui* can be seen in this rich decoration of the ceramic surface, which does not leave any sections unattended.

3.2.2   Interlacing and Cross-Hatching

Figure 2   Interlaced motif. Fifteenth century. Ceramic, incised slipware, fragment of a bowl (obverse), 12 × 8 cm. Donation Prof. Luigi Conton, produced in Venice. Inv. no. 2822, MIC – Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza. Photo credit: MIC – Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza

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5   See for example: Raphael, Three standing nude men and the leg of a fourth. 1505-08. Pen and brown ink drawing, 2.43 × 1.48 cm. Inv. 1895,0915.628, British Museum, London.

The next ceramic, today held in the MIC – Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza, shows an interlaced floral motif **[fig. 2]**. The intertwined lines create a sensation of tridimensionality and depth on the planar ceramic surface. They are coloured with yellow glaze. It seems that these lines are tendrils, out of which green glazed leaves grow, positioned in the interspaces. In the middle of the vessel, the interlaced lines join to form the image of a flower decorated with linear hatchings. The artist fills the remaining interstices with cross-hatching, another technique used across media to achieve light/dark contrasts.[6]

This method of cross-hatching also appears in gold tooling, particularly with halos in panel paintings showing a rich decoration.[7] One way of tooling the halos is freehand with a stylus and the artist covered the interstices between the decorative forms with cross-hatchings (Skaug 2008, 571). I see the same approach in the ceramic example, where the interspaces between the interlaced decoration are filled with cross-hatchings. Since the artist removed the slip in the act of incising the lines, this part is set on a lower level and enhances the tridimensionality. It seems to be a suitable way to densely cover the background and to leave no lacuna.

Figure 3   Interlaced motif. Fifteenth century. Ceramic, incised slipware, fragment of a bowl (reverse), 12 × 8 cm. Donation Prof. Luigi Conton, produced in Venice. Inv. no. 2822, MIC – Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza. Photo credit: MIC – Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza

6   See for example: Amico Aspertini, *Virgin and Child*. 1490-1552. Red chalk drawing, 1.70 × 1.32 cm. Inv. 1946,0713.241, British Museum, London.

7   See for example: Masolino da Panicale, *The Archangel Gabriel*. Ca. 1430. Tempera on poplar panel, 76.6 × 57.8 cm. Inv. 1939.1.225, Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

The decorative scheme extends to the underside and foot of the bowl
[fig. 3]. There is a flower motif in the middle of the foot ring, partially
coloured with yellow and green glaze. Geometrical patterns ring
the rim of the vessel, alternating between seven linear hatchings,
coloured in yellow, and one zigzag line in green. Thus, the concept
of *horror vacui*, to leave not a single space empty, is evident in the
richly decorated obverse and the artist even included the reverse of
the ceramic bowl. The overall approach in covering the whole surface
was therefore carried to extremes in this example.

3.2.3 Incised Dots

Figure 4
Female figure. First half of the
sixteenth century. Ceramic,
incised slipware, fragment of a
plate, 15 × 10 cm. Produced in
Venice. Inv. no. A-2172, Muzej
grada Rovinja-Rovigno – Museo
della città di Rovinj-Rovigno.
Photo by the Author

The next example of a ceramic piece with an overall approach shows
the profile of a female [fig. 4]. This ceramic is held in the collection
of the Museo della città di Rovinj-Rovigno. The figure itself is not
decorated, because the artist used the white colour of the slip to
represent her skin. Her hair is executed with wavy incised lines and
coloured with yellow glaze to depict her curly blond hair. This is a
representation of the ideal beauty in a Petrarchan sense of white
skin colour and blondness (Hall 1996, 466). Since the female is
unidentifiable, it is likely a depiction of ideal beauty (Cropper 1986,

178). Whiteness is positively associated with virginal purity, grace and goodness (Hall 1996, 466). But Whiteness is also connected to white privilege and stands for the superiority of the white race in a colonial framework (Hall 1996, 462, 466). Beauty and Whiteness are related ideas in the early modern period, as can be seen with female portraits with these characteristics, which is also the case for the ceramic example.

In contrast to the white figure, the background of the pottery is richly covered. The surroundings around the female's head are treated with rows of small, incised dots and coloured with green glaze. The part below the green background, starting from the neck of the figure, is covered with horizontally incised lines, closely situated in parallel, and divided by two vertical lines. This and the green area cover the surface intensively.

On the one hand, the artist left the figure intentionally white, while on the other hand, he decorated the surroundings even more strongly. This gives a good contrast and lets the figure stand out against the agitated background. The concept of *horror vacui* can be seen especially in the background, where the decoration covers every part of it. But the overall approach also includes the female, which is the central part of the image. There, the artist plays with leaving one part of the surface white. This empty space can be regarded as part of the composition and translated into a figure, so that it is not considered a void anymore.

Art historian Richard Ettinghausen (1979, 16) noticed this as well: he comments on the negative character of an empty background in Islamic art, where the artists tried to eliminate it or turn it in a way that it has a decorative function itself and becomes positive. Ettinghausen sees the tendency of *horror vacui* to fill all the empty spaces represented in Islamic art beginning in the ninth century and stresses the void's negative connotation, by giving examples of *horror vacui* in diverse media, such as Iraqi wood carvings, Iranian ceramic bowls and Persian 'vase carpets' (Ettinghausen 1979, 16-18). The negative association with the void was not yet remarked so clearly in this paper, but it is a plausible way to express the fearful approach of the artists against the void. In turning the empty space, i.e. the negative, into a figure or decoration, as the artist did in the example with the female, it receives a positive association.

A similar example, today held in the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Istria in Pula, shows a figure in profile, framed by a lobed register of incised dots which pierce the white slip to reveal the dark clay body underneath **[fig. 5]**. The figure is executed with thick, incised lines. The facial features, headpiece and garment, with a detailed, decorative design, are clearly visible. Though we see only a fragment of the total composition, a comparable floral pattern appears in the upper half of the ceramic piece. Another botanical element is located

on the left part of the fragment, where the artist removed much white slip to elevate and accentuate this decorative element.

Figure 5   Figure. Second half of the fifteenth century. Ceramic, incised slipware, fragment of a plate or bowl, 8.5 × 10.1 cm. Produced in the Veneto or Emilia. Inv. no. AMI-S-10500, Archaeological Museum of Istria, Pula. Photo by the Author

The area around the figure's head and visible torso, consisting of many small, incised dots, represents a common technique used for covering the background in early modern ceramics. One I would argue is reminiscent of the granulation technique (*granare*) used for the decoration of gold grounds in panel paintings (Eclercy 2007, 546). During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, artists painting on panel used motif punches for tooling the halos (Skaug 2008, 571).[8] The interstices are often filled with stippling, i.e. granulation, achieved with a small ring punch (Skaug 2008, 571). I see a connection between the treatment of the ceramic surface and halos in panel painting.

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[8]   See for example: Masolino da Panicale, *The Annunciation*. Ca. 1423-24. Tempera (and possibly oil glazes) on panel, 148.8 × 115.1 cm. Inv. 1937.1.16, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Cennino Cennini (1370-1440) mentions this method for processing gold in his *Il libro dell'arte*: "Questo granare che io ti dico, è de' belli membri che abbiamo. E puossi granare a disteso, come ti ho detto; e puossi granare a rilievo" (Milanesi, Milanesi 1859, 93). Here, Cennini distinguishes between two procedures, the plane treatment and the relief technique of granulation. While the former is more relevant to the ceramic example, on which incised dots cover a swathe of surface area. The art conservator Erling Sigvard Skaug (2008, 572) explained 'granare a disteso' as: "the all-over filling of the surface with a texture or ornaments". Thus, I would argue that the granulation technique is applicable to the surface covering in ceramics and connects to the idea of *horror vacui* with the overall approach.

Furthermore, the small dots arranged in lines may relate to pouncing, a technique used in the fifteenth century to transfer drawings to another surface, also employed in maiolica decoration (Hess 1999, 5). Curator Catherine Hess describes the process of pouncing in the following way:

> It involves pricking small holes through the lines and contours of a cartoon's image with a needle, holding the pricked cartoon (*spolvero* or *spolverezzo*) against the surface to be decorated, and then tapping a cloth bag containing pounce (*spolverizzo*) – commonly pulverized chalk, graphite, or charcoal – against the cartoon. When the cartoon is pulled away, the design's outline remains on the surface in a series of small dots. (Hess 1999, 5)

The results are dotted lines in powder form, similar to those on the background of the ceramic example, which are also organised in lines. I propose that the pouncing and/or the granulation technique inspired the ceramic artists to use incised dots as decoration.

In the ceramic example, they are in combination with a green-orange glaze. This dark colouring, together with the small, incised dots, emphasises how the artists wanted to avoid the empty space. Apart from the face of the figure, there is another light part. These stand out against the dark background and incised parts. The contrast is even more extreme than in the previous example. Thus, the concept of *horror vacui* can be seen in the dark background with incised dots, counterbalanced by the lighter parts. The latter are not omitted, but included in the overall approach of the decoration to cover the surface.

4 Conclusion

In summation, I apply the concept of *horror vacui* to certain extant examples of early modern ceramics on which the artist decisively deployed multiple mark-making and glazing techniques to achieve an overall surface covering. These include foliage and interlaced motifs; the leaves and intertwined motifs richly covering the surface give a sensation of sculptural or pictorial depth. Linear and cross-hatching marks form patterns that fill space. Incised dots occur in combination with dark green glaze to form the background of a figure in contrasting white. The figure's Whiteness is not a void, I argue, but part of the whole decorative scheme and therefore something positive.

I began by outlining how the concept of *horror vacui* has occupied scientists and philosophers for centuries, though its origin in classical antiquity or medieval Christian theology remains a point of debate. Regardless, I trace the feeling and thus the essence of the fear of the void back to Aristotle's treatise on the vacuum. Also, the connection between void, nature, and art is an important factor that informed the early modern ceramics. This and the further discussion of the idea *horror vacui*, which continued until the early modern period with Galilei and his students, demonstrates that it is likely that the ceramic artists knew about these discussions and reinforces that the idea of *horror vacui* can be applied to ceramics, as I did in this paper. Not only with the discussions on the idea of the void, which were apparent in the early modern period, but also with the extremely rich covered surfaces of the ceramics, and therefore expressions of the artists' feelings and discussions through their artworks, the concept of *horror vacui* can be identified.

My focus on different decorative methods on early modern ceramics is an attempt to understand how these artists may have approached the fear of the void, and how they managed to express it in their artworks. The concept of *horror vacui* also says a lot about the idea of the void, which was to be avoided at all costs and seen as something negative. It thus helps to unveil the void. This could be expanded further with more examples of pottery, where the idea of *horror vacui* is embedded and may illuminate other approaches to the surface decoration. Another idea would be to identify ceramics on which the artist attempted to depict the void itself. It would then be interesting to compare them with the ceramic examples in this paper, to see how the methods in dealing with the idea of the void differ. Moreover, other media, like early modern drawings or panel paintings with gold decorations, that discuss the void or the fear of it, could be further compared to the ceramics.

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Erasing Language: An Analysis on Vincenzo Agnetti's *Axioms*

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Abstract   The present dissertation aims to highlight the process of language erasure that Vincenzo Agnetti employs in his artistic production, with a specific focus on the aesthetic features and the 'narrations' present in the *Axioms* series, related to absence and void. Throughout the study of these works, with reference to the poetic vision of the artist – for example, the concept of 'forgotten by heart' – it will be shown how the notion of void traverses the *Axioms*: meditations on memory, temporality and space are fundamental for a broader reflection on absence related to experience, in an existential and political sense.

Keywords   Axioms. Language. Memory. Erasure. Vincenzo Agnetti.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Process of 'Zeroing': Memory, Erasure and Void in Agnetti's Artistic Production. – 3 On Technical Aspects and Critique of Language in *Axioms*. – 4 A Path Through 'Narrations': From Time to Absence. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

Commenting on *Thesis*, written by Vincenzo Agnetti (1926-1981) and published with Giampaolo Prearo in 1972, Pierre Restany affirms that, for the author, "the zero is the Sanhedrin of […] inward-looking vision" (1973, 46). The systematic reflection on the value of zero, in terms of "dialectic neutralization of opposites" (46), is central to Agnetti's artistic production, starting from the first activities carried out in the Fifties, to the effective creative period that begins in 1967,

conventionally, with *Principia*, exhibition that takes place in Palazzo de' Diamanti in Ferrara.

In the prolific cultural Milanese scene of the Fifties, after few years spent exploring the informal painting and the theatrical practice, the young Agnetti begins to write some art-critical texts for Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani. One of these, *I°: Non commettere atti impuri*, published in 1959 in the newly launched magazine *Azimuth*, is an important statement that contains the poetic vision – in power – of the artist. By saying "il superamento fa paura a qualsiasi principio" (Agnetti 1959), Agnetti expresses his intention to overcome the informal mannerism, in order to take a new path in art. But it takes time to pursue this achievement: between 1962 and 1967, Agnetti decides to move to Argentina in order to work in the field of electronic automation, leaving the saturated and obsolete Milanese cultural salons[1] (Agnetti 2008, 38). To reach 'real freedom', Agnetti refuses any artistic practice – which implies his former activities –. This period, also known as 'no-art' is recorded only by the intellectualisation of the experience and the stream of ideas collected in several notebooks: almost two thousand pages, containing meditations and projects, elaborated and never re-read, are called by himself *Absence* (38). This title is the first reference to the 'forgotten by heart', the main concept present in the subsequent artistic production. By this expression, Agnetti reflects on the *ars oblivionalis*, the ability to leave behind the lived time in order to metabolize it and go further: the existence becomes a trace of countless past moments.

Projected before his departure from Italy in 1962, Agnetti begins writing *Obsoleto*, published in 1967: born as a story about love and hatred between a man and a woman, the writing becomes an attempt to demolish the logical mechanism of language and an example of admixture between image and text (Vettese 2008, 182); moreover, it's noteworthy that meditation on language is already a fundamental component in his earlier works.

These first attempts reflect the *leitmotif* of the subsequent production: by 1967, returning from his journeys, Agnetti begins to work on language and its zeroing, with a specific focus on political and cultural components, related to space, territory and power. In one of the main series produced between 1968 and 1977, that of the *Axioms*, this kind of meditation is prominent, not only in its formal aspects but also in its contents.

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1 His interest in technology and its influence on society was not unknown at that time. In fact, in 1958, he wrote three articles for the first issues of the new specialized magazine *L'Italia Industriale*, in which he navigated between the technical aspects and the philosophical implications of technology.

Giving first an overview on the process of 'zeroing' in selected works realized between 1967 and 1981, this essay will show how, in the series of the *Axioms*, Agnetti reflects on the erasure of the language until it results in void as a final act of freedom in art, with several references that traverse his philosophical apparatus.

2 The Process of 'Zeroing': Memory, Erasure and Void in Agnetti's Artistic Production

After his debut in the art world in 1967, the first attempts related to language and its erasure could be detected in the connection with other fields of Agnetti's research. In October 1969, Agnetti exposes at Galleria Cenobio-Visualità in Milan, an art space directed by Rina Majoli and Cesare Nova, whose aim concerns innovative solutions in art. In this context, Agnetti presents *La macchina drogata* (1968), a Divisumma 14 Olivetti calculator, modified in its components: numbers are replaced by letters of the Latin alphabet. The exhibition is conceived as a path through the machine's products – displayed on emulsified canvas and modified with watercolors and tempera – and the 'static theatre',[2] introduced by three black panels outlining the operation. At the end of this hallway, a narrow passage leads the public into the room in which the machine is contained (Agnetti 2021, 48). Visitors are encouraged to interact with the manipulated technology: the replacement of numbers with letters causes casual connections between typographic characters, producing "oggetti dotati di una propria autonomia estetica" (Sylos Calò 2016, 256). While the interest in new technologies is highlighted by the investigation of the status of the machine, which shifts from *medium* to *agens*, it is also noticeable how words and their meanings are at the center of this research. Reflecting on the uncertainty of the combinations, the semantic aspects are completely dissolved and the letters become merely aesthetic signs.

Derived from *La macchina drogata* is *Corfine* (1968), a canvas with a wooden frame on which traces of pantographed letters are scattered as a remembrance of the original work. As Agnetti affirms:

> Il circondario altera il circondato: giusto quindi escludere il circondario dal quadro; giusto che il circondario diventi l'opera

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2   The static theatre is, for Agnetti, "spettacolo senza movimento, senza personaggi e senza testo [...] Le motivazioni dell'opera (oggetto o non oggetto), l'ubicazione e la violenza per l'osservatore, perché cerchi qualcosa, saranno il testo. Il teatro invece si verificherà nella mente dell'osservatore" (quoted in Castelli 1974, 4-6). Agnetti derives this inclination to *phonè* – that we can find in performative actions – from his experience as actor at Piccolo Teatro (Corà 2017, 48).

> stessa. Questa volta è la pittura che è quasi dimenticata a memoria. Alcune parole traspaiono ai margini della tela rimasta. In tal modo la cornice si valorizza come confine e il vuoto interno diventa paradossalmente cornice. (Agnetti 1979, 28)

Thus, the traditional hierarchised structure of canvas and frame is overturned; the latter becomes a surrounding and the text of the inner part is completely dissolved, reducing itself to a void space. In this sense, dialectically, the frame is not the limit of the work but becomes the work itself.

In 1970, Agnetti has the opportunity to join *Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana 1960/70*, collective exhibition hosted at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome and curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. Moving through points of contact and differences between artists, new tendencies in art are presented in an institutional space: the main aim is to propose solutions to the "crisi dell'informazione attiva" (Sergio 2010, 28) in the contemporary art dissemination.

In this context, Agnetti carries out an operation of static theatre with *Apocalisse* (1969), product of *La macchina drogata*, a perspex book with seven red varnish seals. Located on a sand dune, in a gloomy environment, the book is accompanied by the sentence on the wall: "Quando l'agnello ruppe | il primo dei sette sigilli | uno dei quattro viventi disse | con voce di tuono: vieni" (Bignotti, Corà 2021, 50). The reference is the biblical *Apocalypse*, in which the mystery is mediated through scripture. But in this case, plates reporting casual texts of the machine are rendered illegible due to the overlapping: foregrounding the negation of sense, the mystery of the existence is conveyed by an obscure language, understandable only through intuition (Re 2021, 68).

Libro dimenticato a memoria (1969), exhibited on the same occasion, continues the discourse begun with *Corfine*. In the note on work, Agnetti affirms that:

> Il libro si presenta svuotato, fustellato al centro. Praticamente le pagine hanno perso lo spazio che di solito è occupato dalle parole [...] La cultura è l'apprendimento del dimenticare. (Agnetti 1979, 42)

A book without content, framed only by white borders, while the central part is a black void: absence is symptomatic of forgetfulness, a silent space in which words are completely eliminated, and thus the images. Agnetti shows how knowledge is not measurable and so is the culture and its origins: it's the negative of consciousness, a thought that remains as an absent presence and shapes every aspect of individual reality (Tedeschi 2019, 26-8).

The negative of reality is also investigated in *Vobulazione e Bieloquenza Neg* (1970), a collaborative work created with Gianni Colombo, presented at *Telemuseo* in 1970, exhibition promoted by Tommaso Trini and organised by *Domus* in Palazzo dell'Arte in Milan. Both artists operate with electronic instruments, to meditate on virtual images and sound. Colombo uses a vobulator to create and manipulate shapes, exploiting the frequencies of the machine; Agnetti, after creating *Neg*, records the 'negative' parts of a monologue, or rather, the silence produced by pauses. The visual support, created by Colombo, is accompanied by two different moments of the sound experiment: the first part is characterized by the oxymoronic sound of silence, while the real discourse follows (Comi 1970, 295-6). It's a research on the unpredictable, on information that couldn't be objectified; as Agnetti said "la figura geometrica [...] è il corposo nulla mentre le parole [...] sono il silenzio" (1972, 42).

Erasing the language also means annulling its sound: if *Neg* could be identified as a first proof of this research, another way to set the linguistic code to zero is to translate it into a universal alphabet. On this matter, the meditation on sound is pursued in *Pieces of sound* (1981), one of the tracks of *Revolutions per Minute (The Art Record)*, produced by Jeff Gordon for the exhibition-project promoted by the gallerist Ronald Feldman (Morgan 1982, 88). It's a rhythmic composition in which a vocal part – the artist plays a series of numbers with different tones – alternates with a primitive sound, composed through modified percussion instruments. The apparently illegible discourse is instead a proof of a new way to communicate, that eliminates the semantic ambiguity of the language, in order to achieve the universal comprehension through intonation.

The reflection on language is paralleled by the discourse on images and their connection with photography: in his last personal exhibition in 1981, in the art space of Bruna Soletti, Agnetti exposes *Photo-Graffie* (1979-81). Working on photographic papers, exposing them to light, Agnetti manipulates the process, leading to the blackening of the previously captured photos. Then, scratching on these surfaces, the artist interacts with the material and generates the final product: graphic signs of light emerge from the black. It could be read as a final act of zeroing, in which the artist regains control of the medium through its nullifying, because negating and forgetting are necessary to restore "la parte più preziosa e necessaria" (Re 2017, 90).

3   On Technical Aspects and Critique of Language in *Axioms*

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, reflection on language informs Agnetti's production before his return to Italy in 1967: *Axioms*, series realised between 1968 and 1977, constitute a direct derivation from this research. Agnetti works on black bakelite, engraving the surface with axiomatic propositions, diagrams and geometric entities: resulting grooves are treated with white tempera or nitro. The opaque material seems to translate the asepticity of the plate into the black mental space, while engraved postulates refer to thoughts or intuitions emerged in the consciousness.[3]

It's noticeable that Agnetti uses 'neutral panels', as most of conceptual artists did,[4] but, overcoming the aged and compromising notion of canvas, makes them 'zeroed surfaces', alignable, as stated by Barilli, "all'idea di una condizione anestetica, cioè di assenza di ogni invito sensoriale" (1973, 13). Furthermore, as noted by Mario Perazzi, in an interview from 1972, these formal components cause a certain aesthetic sense, against the avoidance of materiality typical of conceptual works; nonetheless, for Agnetti, it doesn't result from seeking beauty, but from strictness in execution (Perazzi 1972, 12).

In the series, concepts are conveyed through language: the title recalls a formal logical strictness, but the process to which Agnetti submits the linguistic code is oriented to reveal fallacy of its mechanism. In a note referring to the series, Agnetti affirms that:

> Assioma è il titolo di queste opere anche se solo raramente si tratta di proposizioni assiomatiche. Con diagrammi e frasi queste opere esprimono tautologie e contraddizioni. Gli 'Assiomi' rimangono la controprova di quanto enunciato in altre mie opere precedenti impostate sulla relatività del linguaggio scritto. (Agnetti 1979, 30)

Interest in the subject, related to the structures intrinsic to reality, confers a significant difference between Agnetti and other conceptual

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3   In a letter to Françoise Lambert, Agnetti shows the origins of these works. The artist explains that: "queste opere devono essere perfette perché rappresentano la matrice contenutistica di una analisi ridotta ai minimi termini" (Agnetti, *Definizione* 1971). After constructing a critical discourse on a theme, Agnetti synthesizes the concept with an axiom, creating a so-called 'cliché'.

4   An example of this tendency, with some formal points of contacts with *Axioms*, can be found in the earlier production of Bernar Venet. Between 1966 and 1976, the French artist works on "astrophysics, linguistics, the emerging information sciences, stock exchange prices and meteorological data" turning them into "objective signs, pictorial patterns, and photographic enlargements" (Guenin 2019, 7). As specified by Catherine Millet, Venet's objective, adopting monosemic codes, is to escape "any interpretation that is symbolic, metaphorical, subjective" (Millet 2019, 43).

artists who use language as their main instrument of research. If the subject, for many of them, is 'elided' from language – since statements are intended as monadic elements – for the Italian artist it is consubstantial to our communication code (Verzotti 2017, 96).

For Agnetti, investigating language means exploring the 'surrounding' and its fields, going beyond limited disciplines: the main focus is on "strutture che, costruendo un certo linguaggio e veicolandolo, con ciò fondano e legittimano un potere" (96).

This point reconnects with McLuhan's contributions to theory of media and their influences on societies. Starting from *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962) to *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), McLuhan demonstrates how media become an integral part of human senses, modifying perception and thought structures; as the term 'massage' suggests, mainstream media give apparent pleasure, but they actually:

> are so pervasive in […] personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences, they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. (McLuhan 1967, 26)

In Foucaultian terms, direct product of social and cultural environments, subject is 'subjected' by the authority[5] (Foucault 1976, 81). As Marcuse states in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964):

> As the substance of the various regimes no longer appears in alternative modes of life, it comes to rest in alternative techniques of manipulation and control. Language not only reflects these controls but becomes itself an instrument of control even where it does not transmit orders but information; where it demands, not obedience but choice, not submission but freedom. (2002, 106)

In this perspective, language erasure assumes a political undertone, compromising processes of knowledge and perceptions of reality. Going back to *Axioms*, overturned meanings and apparent nonsense, through paradoxes, tautologies and contradictions, negate their legibility. It's "un impegno etico e poetico" (Re 2017, 90), in order to reset everything to zero and to start from zero.

Introducing a process of 'reification' of ideas, Agnetti doesn't operate only a metalinguistic critique, but uses concepts as a vehicle

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5 On this matter, *Autotelefonata* (1972) could be mentioned: a sequence of photos shows the subject – Agnetti himself – that takes two telephone handsets, not communicating with anyone; in the last frame the two objects are juxtaposed: individual is subjected while information exists without them.

for themes from his theoretical apparatus, creating different kinds of 'narrations'.

4 A Path Through 'Narrations': From Time to Absence

Narrations are selected fields of Agnetti's research, from the writings to the artworks, thematic cores – not strictly categorical – that provide different levels of reading, giving a broader vision of the artist's *weltanschauung.*

The first written production is used as a source; in fact, as Agnetti states:

> I primi lavori partono da tentativi di trovare definizioni molto precise dalla geometria. Le frasi sono tutte mie: ricavate da precedenti scritti [...] altre inventate. (quoted in Boragina 2024, 154)

To the diachronic and linear time, typical of economic production, Agnetti opposes the Bergsonian temporality, linked to the imaginary and the subconscious. This antithetical relation is explored in *Axioms*: the former as a deposition of the effects of time on objects, the latter as a subjective interpretation of events through memory.

Diachronic time is strictly linked to work-instants axioms. *Dati due istanti-lavoro vi sarà sempre una durata-lavoro contenente gli istanti dati / Given two work-instants there will always be a work-duration containing these given instants* (1972) shows, in the structure, signs of the time through two broken corners, a 'proof' of the sentence engraved on the plate. Work, from a general concept, becomes an action grounded in time, capable of affecting reality. On this matter, Barilli affirms that this operation is a

> Riflessione bergsoniana che mette di fronte, anzi in scala gerarchica il tempo puro e quello pratico o degli eventi circoscritti [...] Agnetti ha preferito esemplificare 'esteticamente' i due interventi sbrecciando due angoli della superficie di bachelite, dando loro cioè una concretezza oggettiva imperdonabile agli occhi di ogni concettuale di stretta osservanza. (Barilli 1973, 13)

While time and space are analyzed in their symbiotic relationship, memory is explored as a possibility to recall events from mental space and to forget, through an exercise of assimilation and erasure. From the last point descends the concept of 'forgotten by heart', reported in some *Axioms* such as *Lavoro – Agnetti quasi dimenticato a memoria* (1972), in which little points of light underline the incomplete process of obsolescence, evident by traces still visible to eye.

From a 1968 axiom, *Memoria come primo punto nel nulla*, the black table is foregrounded as a manifest metaphorical form of mental space: the void enfolds the surface except for a white point in the center, a presence of consciousness in opposition to emptiness.

From 1974 until 1977, Agnetti worked on two groups of *Axioms*, *Sei villaggi differenti* and *Tre villaggi differenti*. On each surface, consonants and forgotten phonemes, without any meaning, are engraved: the same fate is destined to villages or societies from which they came and only dissolving traces attest the echo of their ancient languages. These communities are replaced by the standardised cities, conformed to alienating homologation (Verzotti 2018, 62).

At this point, it's clear how identity is something culturally determined: borders define territory and territorial areas create culture. Against this kind of limited environment, Agnetti proposes a

più ampio concetto di spazio, che si assume come trascendente, illimitato, che vale insomma come generalità rispetto a una particolarità [...] pronta ad accogliere (dialetticamente, certo) le istanze identitarie che ogni territorializzazione sembra destinata a porre. (56)

The violent aspect of this concept could be identified in *Misurare lo spazio è solo e solo un gesto di appropriazione territoriale* (1972), where the terms suggest the creation of physical or symbolic walls, while trapezoidal shapes in the upper part of the surface recall the divided space.

As can be seen in *La cultura persa nel tempo e dimenticata a memoria è la nostra eredità genetica* (1973), it's noteworthy how culture plays a major role in shaping identity, making it an essential part of genetic heritage. Moreover, culture and consequently language, taking suggestions from Marcuse, are instruments of established power; the system is

perennemente teso ad offrirci parole e oggetti dal significato duplice: uno vero ma omesso perché perturbante, ed uno falso da noi accettato perché indolore e capace di farci sentire del nostro tempo. (Bernardi, Corà 2015, 44)

In this way, the axiom *The system uses objects as vehicles and ideals as fuel* (1973) can be interpreted, in which Agnetti reports the idea of the 'reminder': objects are significant only relating to concepts they can convey, and these meanings are inevitably manipulated by power. They are historical products, comprehensible and understandable in a certain time; thus, *L'oggetto è una deposizione storica di conduzione utilitaristica e culturale* (1970) has on its surface a copy of *Obsoleto*:

made by a 'historical' individual, it indeed becomes the product of a spatial and temporal context.

Furthermore, it's important to highlight how, in *Axioms*, statements can be reconnected with other works: in *Il discorso si apre tra chiusura e chiusura* (1971), is present a direct reference to *Neg* and the research on the negative of sound. In this sense, theoretical practice itself becomes part of the statements. In *Quando le parole si elevano a valori di numeri i numeri valgono le parole* (1969), the black table features overturned letters at its apex and as in mathematical language, they have exponents. Words assume the role of numbers, while numbers become vehicles of concepts; thus, idioms lose meaning through their transformation in numerical signs, universally legible thanks to the tone.

The existential and mystical side intertwines, in *Axioms*, with the antinomic relationship between light (positive) and blackness (negative). Through *In principio era la negazione in attesa dello stupore* (1971),[6] Agnetti references the biblical verse while altering its meaning: in this case, it is necessary indeed to negate our known reality in order to attain the dimension of truth.

The final act of zeroing is evident in a group of *Axioms*, wherein words and numbers dissolve completely. On the opaque surfaces, only geometric traces and graphic signs remain, recalling the study conducted on *Photo-Graffie*. In *Le vecteur qui vient au devant de nous s'eloigne* (1972), bakelite is scratched and not engraved, for a more pictorial effect. But beyond barely visible flowers, the mathematical component is contained within the title: vector is the measure through which intensity and direction can be established. Vectors are legible through human schemes but

> senza rinunciare a quel senso misterioso dello spazio, di traiettorie immerse nel nero come nel vuoto cosmico, di contro alla presenza bianca, chiara della luce in cui si muovono persone e oggetti del nostro orizzonte. (Meneguzzo 2017, 62)

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6 This work is exposed at *Vincenzo Agnetti. Ridondanza: paesaggi e ritratti. Analisi: assiomi*, exhibition hosted – between February and March of 1971 – at Galleria Blu in Milan. It is centered on *Axioms* and *Felts*, constituting a path through the analytical and lyrical aspects of his first production.

5   Conclusion

This paper has explored the notion of void in Agnetti's *Axioms*, analyzing them on different levels. Starting from a brief overview of some cases from Agnetti's production (1967-81), it has been shown how processes of language erasure and research into the negative aspects of reality are constantly embraced with different solutions, interweaving with Agnetti's other interests, such as technology and photography.

In the examined series, erasure occurs on multiple levels encompassing formal aspects, narrations and metalinguistic research. Agnetti carries out two processes: on the one hand, he exposes, through paradoxical and tautological statements, a synthesis of his thought, expressed in writings and other works yet; on the other hand, he attempts to reveal the fallacy of linguistic code – through the compromised sense of phrases – in order to achieve its 'zeroing'.

Exploring *Axioms* through their 'narrations' – from time and memory to culture, power and territory, culminating in the absolute absence – it is evident how philosophical and sociological thought, from McLuhan to Marcuse, becomes increasingly relevant for understanding the political significance of the erasure in Agnetti. 'Forgetting by heart' leads to a zero point, an original and cosmic void in which utopian freedom and authenticity, without any cultural constraints, exist, beyond time and space.

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Experiencing the Void: On Other Spaces

Maria Rebecca Ballestra: Absence Between Nature and Human Being in *Echoes of the Void*

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Abstract   Maria Rebecca Ballestra (1974-2020) was an Italian artist whose work focused on ecology, climate change, and the Anthropocene. In *Echoes of the Void* (2015-20), one of her latest projects, the absence of humans is central: photographs of the world's largest deserts convey a sense of emptiness and highlight Nature's persistence. The work challenges conventional perceptions of deserts as empty, isolated spaces, instead presenting them as sites that disorient, test, and accompany the individual. This paper examines how her work explores the dynamics between Nature and Humanity.

Keywords   Deserts. Absence. Human-nature relationship. Ecology. Climate change.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Silence, Emptiness, and the Desert's Significance. – 3 Echoes of the Void: From Sonora to Gobi. – 4 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

This paper examines the path that leads Rebecca Ballestra to her engagement with the desert, a space that emerges as both a tangible and conceptual starting point in her artistic practice. Central to this analysis are the themes of void and absence, which in Ballestra's work are not merely spatial conditions but critical metaphors for the fragile balance between natural ecosystems and anthropic intervention. The desert – conceived as a locus of emptiness and temporality – emerges

as a privileged site for questioning the dynamics of human domination over nature. Here, the notion of time interacts with environmental transformation, revealing the profound interdependence between ecological processes and socio-economic forces. Through this lens, Ballestra's practice interrogates the disappearance of the desert and its substitution with artificial landscapes. It exposes the tensions between presence and erasure, permanence and change, that underpin contemporary debates on sustainability and territorial exploitation.

2 Silence, Emptiness, and the Desert's Significance

> Appartiene veramente al suo tempo, è veramente contemporaneo colui che non coincide perfettamente con esso né si adegua alle sue pretese ed è perciò, in questo senso, inattuale; ma, proprio per questo, proprio attraverso questo scarto e questo anacronismo, egli è capace più degli altri di percepire e afferrare il suo tempo.
>
> (Giorgio Agamben, *Cos'è il contemporaneo*, 2008)

As this notion of the 'untimely' figure, proposed by Agamben, suggests, distance from one's own time can enhance its perception. In this spirit, Maria Rebecca Ballestra (1974-2020) used her travels, site-specific installations, and environmental works to engage in a profound dialogue with nature, memory, and cultural identities, offering the audience a more intense and aware perception of present-day issues, from the environmental crisis to the human-nature relationship.[1]

Among her most significant works, *Journey into Fragility* (2012-15) is an artistic twelve-stage intervention. The project explores the relationship between humanity and nature, drawing on the key principles of the *Carta di Arenzano per la terra e per l'uomo* – a manifesto written by Massimo Morasso[2] to foster dialogue on the environmental crisis and the value of life on Earth. It unfolds across twelve stages in Ghana, Switzerland, Madagascar, the United Arab Emirates, China, Singapore, Costa Rica, Wales, Iceland, France,

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1 Most of the references come from unpublished material by the artist, donated for study to the Archivio di Arte Contemporanea (AdAC) of the University of Genoa by Gianni Renosi, the artist's husband, to whom I extend my gratitude for his dedication, attention to detail, and support throughout the research process.

2 Massimo Morasso (1964) is an Italian theorist, poet, and literary critic. In 2001, he wrote the *Charter for the Earth and for Humanity*, an environmental ethics document consisting of 12 key points, which was also endorsed by several Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize.

Brazil, and, at last, Nowhere, a place without any geographical coordinates and borders.[3]

One of the most remarkable works of Maria Rebecca Ballestra for the purposes of this paper is *Time to Leave*; a project developed in Iceland on glacial retreat and melting, a crucial issue for the future of the Arctic. In this artwork, the artist highlights the extinction of the *Pinguinus impennis* through an empty plexiglass box bearing only the species' name, drawing attention to the disappearance of natural resources and showing how void can be meaningful and full of significance. The absence of the animal functions as a powerful signifier, materializing loss while inviting the viewer to meditate on disappearance, fragility, and the impermanence of life. The void is not neutral; it is charged with ethical and existential implications, offering a silent critique of human actions and their irreversible consequences.

Echoes of the Void (2015-19) emerged as a natural continuation of *Journey into Fragility*. The artist chose to focus on ten representative deserts of the world.[4] The aim of the project was to identify new ways of interacting with the environment.

As explained by Camilla Boemio in ROAR (Greaves 2019, 12):

> Ongoing climate change and the new desertification will lead us to re-examine the world as we know it. A new natural order is starting in these inaccessible areas, forgotten by most and dismissed as marginal. Ballestra's practice provides an objective lesson on possibilities and artistic commitment, placing itself in a radical perspective through an exploration of the desert. It is this spirit that Ballestra seeks to channel, by juxtaposing works whose intellectual rigour and experimental ethos are inextricable from their physical expression. Her modus operandi is rich in concepts articulated via non-linguistic modes, and the research teems with intricate patterns and esoteric geometries.

The artist frames the desert as a harsh, hostile environment where life struggles to survive, and where desertification – driven by modern lifestyles – now increasingly affects people and ecosystems. Despite this, deserts have always held a unique fascination: since ancient times, humans have travelled and settled in them, developing complex cultural traditions.[5] Although conventionally conceived as

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3   For more details cf. Valenti 2015, 97-9.

4   The project was promoted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice in partnership with local institutions, with a particular focus on artist residencies.

5   Ballestra, M.R. *Maria Rebecca Ballestra: Waste Land* (2015b). AdAC, Archivio di Arte Contemporanea, digital document, n.p.

an empty place, it is in fact abundant in both physical and spiritual resources.

The desert, as the memory of our planet and a symbol of adaptation and regeneration, keeps seeds dormant beneath the soil for long periods, which sprout with the first moisture. It is also a place of altered perception, where one can lose orientation and see mirages.

Ballestra demonstrates how environmental issues are intrinsically linked to culture, both in the understanding of others and in the continuous creation of new forms of expression and an ever-expanding consciousness. Living in or retreating to the desert has long represented an ascetic choice, a way to overcome the ultimate physical barrier. Across many religions, the desert holds a profound symbolic role: it is a place of trial, temptation, and enlightenment; of wisdom, purity, and revelation. It is the land of prophets, where encounters with the inner self take place.

The two largest deserts, the Arctic and the Antarctic, are paradoxically our main water reservoirs, threatened by globalised modernity.

Among the most renowned deserts are the Kalahari, the Sahara, and the Gobi. Initiated in 2015 and completed in 2019, the project explored the human-nature relationship through contemporary art, examining deserts from multiple perspectives: geological, cultural, spiritual, environmental, and political. As stated by Mencarelli:

> *Echoes of the Void* rappresenta un passaggio successivo rispetto a *Journey into Fragility*, perché concretizza la struttura della metafisica del reale, in quanto possiede anche una dimensione profondamente spirituale, che non era presente nel Progetto ispirato alla Carta di Morasso. Echoes ruota attorno al rapporto paesaggio identità a livello simbiotico e spirituale. (2019, 161)

The artworks made at the end of each trip were created during art residencies, in collaboration with scientific and humanist researchers, as well as together with the participation of local artists. In Rebecca Ballestra's work, identity shifts from a cultural dimension to a personal one. It moves from elements rooted in a people's tradition to an intimate relationship with space and time, with Nature, and with the constant transformation of life. As she said in an interview with Arianna Testino:

> Vorrei utilizzare prevalentemente strumenti tecnologici (video e audio) e performativi per realizzare delle opere 'effimere'; vorrei che del progetto rimanessero soprattutto delle 'tracce' più che

delle 'opere'. Come evoca il titolo stesso del progetto, degli 'echi' dei paesaggi.[6]

We thus perceive a dimension in which, while the desert may be regarded as eternally unchanging, it is at the same time in constant motion shaped by human influence. She also explores a personal journey that navigates between inner emotion and external experience, blending introspection with physical travel. As Ballestra states:

> Pensiamo al viaggio come a un'azione fisica, ma il viaggio è molto più; il viaggio può essere sciamanico, spirituale, mentale. È per me molto importante lo spostamento fisico del viaggio rispetto al solo viaggio mentale, quello del corpo che si deve ri-collocare e ri-adattare a un nuovo ambiente, questa decontestualizzazione del corpo rappresenta l'inaspettato, il movimento verso l'ignoto. Normalmente si parla del viaggio con un tono positivo, si descrive come 'una bella esperienza', un'esperienza di crescita, migliorativa... Per me invece è fondamentale anche il lato 'negativo', diciamo, cioè, m'interessano anche le esperienze negative che possono accadere durante il viaggio, sensazioni come la paura, lo smarrimento, la fragilità. [...] Il continuo ridisegnarmi attraverso il viaggio fa di me una persona sempre nuova. (Mencarelli 2019, 168)[7]

Drawing on these concepts and references, the artist's practice and outcomes can be more clearly understood according to a development that will be examined in detail in the following section.

3 Echoes of the Void: From Sonora to Gobi

This section presents a *disamina* of Maria Rebecca Ballestra's *Echoes of the Void*, following the chronological sequence of her residencies. It examines how the artworks produced in each context engage with the human-nature relationship, oscillating between absence and

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6 Testino, A. (2016). "Ascoltare il deserto. Maria Rebecca Ballestra" in *Artribune*, 15 November 2016. https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2016/11/intervista-maria-rebecca-ballestra-deserto-ambiente-festival-venezia/.

7 For Ballestra, travel went beyond the physical, encompassing spiritual, mental, and shamanic dimensions. The body's displacement into new environments exposed it to the unknown, fear, and vulnerability, revealing instincts and capacities beyond thought. Travel became a solitary, inner challenge that continually reshaped and renewed the self.

presence.[8] Each stage of this journey also introduces a secondary theme, intrinsically linked to the overarching concept.

The first trip made by the artist was realized during the Signal Fire Artist Residency in the Sonora Desert in Arizona in 2015. The artwork is an homage to the American poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), an icon of the environmental movement. Jeffers' work focuses on the concepts of spirituality and the universe. According to Jeffers, human beings have placed too much importance on themselves and not enough on the "astonishing beauty of things" of nature (Jeffers 1965, 94). Many of his poems have celebrated the persistence of nature over the whims of humanity. In 2015, Rebecca Ballestra created an installation entitled *In-Humanism* **[fig. 1]**, inspired by the term coined by the poet. It consists of the poem *Carmel Point* (Jeffers 1965, 102), printed on paper.[9] On a white pedestal were exhibited ten dark stones polished by the sea, originating from the Ligurian coast, on which the artist engraved the title of the artwork. The experience conveyed nature as vast and overwhelming, completely indifferent to humanity, which, in turn, tends to place excessive importance on itself while neglecting nature's beauty.

Figure 1   Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *In-Humanism*. 2015. Poem on paper, stones.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

8   *Echoes of the Void Project* (2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVvLcMcoFKc.

9   In her Sonoran Desert journal, Ballestra transcribes specific passages from Jeffers's *Carmel Point*, engaging with his vision of nature. "It has all time. It knows the people are tide | That swells and in time will ebb, and all | Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty | Lives in the very grain of the granite, | Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff. – As for us: | We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; | We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident | As the rock and ocean that we were made from" (Ballestra 2017a).

As in other works by Ballestra, Leopardi's famous moral operetta *Dialogo della Natura con un islandese* seems to serve as a reference.[10] This perspective also resonates in Augé's reflections, where nature, far from being a passive backdrop, actively responds to human aggression:

> la natura, come dimostrano i fatti, è testarda: maltrattata, reagisce. Vi sono ghiacciai che si ritirano, mari che si prosciugano, deserti che avanzano, specie che scompaiono. [...] essa si incarica di moltiplicare e di diffondere gli effetti dell'imprudenza umana: l'uomo scopre di appartenere alla natura quando deve fuggire dai siti che aveva ideato per dominarla. (2017, 93)

By drawing on both Leopardi's philosophical intuition and Augé's contemporary critique, Ballestra's practice situates humanity within a broader cosmological framework, where the relationship with nature must be reconsidered in terms of humility, responsibility, and renewed attentiveness to the environment. This artwork could be read as an invitation to dehumanise one's gaze, to search for one's origin, understanding that human time is only a fraction of the earth's duration.

During the following stage of her journey in the Namibian desert, she developed and realised the installation *Earth* (2015). The work consisted of five jewellery boxes, with fossil wood inside, on each of which there is a letter plated in gold, to form the word EARTH [**fig. 2**]. Fossil wood is an organic material, which, buried, has changed conformation over time until it is petrified. The artist herself invites us to reflect on the work asking: "What's value mean? How and to what we attribute value?".[11]

The notion of value, evoked in the artist's work, can take on multiple dimensions, symbolic, emotional, and material, as suggested using gold in the letters. This raises a critical question: do we privilege the economic aspect over the intrinsic value of nature to such an extent

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10   This reference was previously suggested by Leo Lecci in Valenti 2015, 96. Leopardi's *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* (1824) – part of the *Operette Morali* – reflects the image of Iceland as a harsh and inhospitable land, marked by glaciers, volcanoes, and extreme climates. In the *operetta*, a man recounts his futile attempt to escape suffering by retreating into solitude, only to encounter Nature herself, depicted as magnificent and terrible. This text signals Leopardi's shift from a vision of nature as benevolent to one of nature as cruel. Today, this perspective is reversed: human actions threaten nature, and Iceland – with its glaciers at risk – stands as a warning of global warming.

11   @Echoes of the Void, Instagram, 13 September 2018. `https://www.instagram.com/p/BnrjPF0HvqP/?img_index=1`. In the case of Maria Rebecca Ballestra, social media has played a key role in shaping both her artistic career and her public image, serving as a space to share works, reflections, and social engagement, while strengthening her visibility within the digital art world.

that we can no longer discern what truly matters? Once again, the artist invites us to reflect on the meaning of the desert and whether it is truly an empty space.
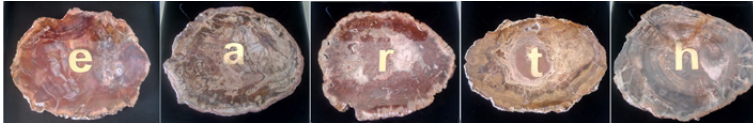
Figure 2   Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *EARTH*. 2015. Jewellery boxes, fossil wood, gold.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

The artist took also multiple meaningful photographs **[fig. 3]** which, with their bright, contrasting colours, ideally combined with the installation, generate astonishment and wonder, bringing out the feeling of disorientation even more. In each of these images, man is absent, while the power of nature emerges with overwhelming force.

Figure 3   Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Namibian Desert*. 2015. Digital photo.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

As her journey progressed, the next destination in 2016 was the Rub' al-Khali Desert, also known as the 'Empty Quarter,' o 'Fourth Void' in the United Arab Emirates, which is still largely unexplored and uninhabited. The installation created during the residency at the Maraya Art Centre, *Tabula Rasa* **[fig. 4]**, comprised three video projections. The first depicted the night sky as seen from Earth; the second presented satellite images of a sprawling city at night; and

the third featured the poet Farrah Chamma (b.1994) performing her poem *Tabula Rasa*.[12] Complementing the videos were two plexiglass boxes filled with desert sand, each engraved with the words TIME and SPACE. Placed between them were the astronomical coordinates and the certificate for the star named Tabula Rasa, adopted by the artist.

Figure 4   Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Tabula Rasa*. 2016-2017. 3D installation. Rub' Al- Khali.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

The multimedia installation explores the link between the mystical experience in the desert and technology. The starry sky guided nomads, uniting humanity to the universe in a boundless mystical connection. Today, cities are immense and lit by electricity, creating light pollution that obscures the vision of the stars. The night sky has reversed: it is the Earth that is illuminated by artificial lights. The way we travel and orient ourselves has changed: we no longer look towards the sky, but towards the Earth, observing it from satellites. The concept of the *tabula rasa* has been established in Western thought as a metaphor for both the primordial state of humanity and a 'blank page' from which renewal is possible, reflecting the enduring human preoccupation with erasure and re-creation throughout history. As already introduced in the previous paragraph, time has been a central theme in Ballestra's work.[13] Her exploration often emphasizes humanity's marginal presence within the vast chronology of the planet: if the Earth's history were compressed into a single

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12   A video of Farrah Chamma reciting her poem *Tabula Rasa* is available at *SAMAR Media – Farah Chamma – Table Rase (ENG)* (2014). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQho8304NiE; for a complete analysis of the poet cf. De Blasio 2021.

13   Time can be defined as one of the main topics of Maria Rebecca Ballestra's artwork, from early pieces such as *Suspended Time* (2008) to later projects like *Conversation on Time* (2019), including projects created during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as *L'uomo si ferma, Gaia respira* (2020) and *Respiro* (2020).

day, human existence would appear only at 23:59 (Cattaneo 2018),[14] remembering to ourselves to change our perspective.[15]

Time and space are like the sand in an hourglass: a changing substance in constant transformation. This perspective aligns with the artist's reflection on the fragile and disproportionate role of humankind in relation to nature, calling for a renewed awareness of our interconnectedness and responsibility.

The only stop in Europe, at the Agriate desert in Corsica, was realised in collaboration with FRAC Corse-Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain, in 2017. The territory bears a long history of human occupation, starting from the Neolithic period and continuing to the present day. The very etymology of the word Agriate (arable land) reminds us how it has been inhabited for a long time. The improper definition of "desert", is probably due to the abandonment of agricultural land.[16]

Figure 5   Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Ifana*. 2017. Print on rikbond, 30 × 40 cm. Agriate, Corsica.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

14   Cattaneo, M. (2018). "Cronistoria della Terra in 24 ore" in *National Geographic Italia*, March 2018.

15   In 2011, the artist proposed an exhibition entitled 'Changing Perspective' in Genoa, which can be used as a reference (Valenti 2011).

16   Through the digital archive, it was possible to identify the artist's primary sources of reference, Casta 1982; 1991; 2001.

In the Agriate desert, the artist presented *Ifana* **[fig. 5]** an art project inspired by a building constructed in the seventeenth century and ran by the Spinola family, part of Genoa's historic aristocracy.[17] The artistic project is based on a confrontation between nature as a creative force in the landscape and an imaginary dimension linked to life in the building. It addresses various themes related to identity, the concept of limits, and memory. It took the form of a video, a series of photographs and a site-specific installation to narrate the territory, and the identity of those who live it.

The installation features a large panel representing a window, on which moss has been superimposed. On the walls some photomontages depict the interior of the building on which some endemic plants are superimposed: nature regains its space after man's intervention.

In the same year, during the art residency Barda del Desierto, at Contralmirante Cordero in Patagonia, Rebecca Ballestra researched into the influence of the European colonial mentality on rural areas, such as the desert, and how the identity of the local populations was influenced by the exploitation of these lands for agriculture, water, mining and energy resources.[18] The village and its surrounding territory constitute an exemplary case for analysing both historical and contemporary processes, such as the Conquest of the Desert (1878-85), during which lands were taken from the Mapuche, Raquel, and Tehuelche peoples – who continue to claim them today – or the construction of the Ballester Dam on the Río Neuquén, an intervention that transformed the desert into an agricultural valley dominated by apple and pear monocultures intended for export. The substitution of the desert with an artificial agricultural landscape exemplifies the anthropocentric drive to dominate and reshape, which exposes the tensions between natural ecosystems and human-driven exploitation.

Furthermore, the artist decided to direct her observation towards the theme of double identity: in the landscape (*bard* and desert) and in the local culture. Through a relational project based on interviews with local habitants, she realised *Imaginary Atlas* **[fig. 6]**, a site-specific work consisting of portraits of individuals and photographs of the surrounding landscape. These visual elements are interconnected by coloured wool threads, which link them to two symbolic objects: stones and apples. The stones refer to the primordial geological substance of the territory and, by extension, to its indigenous community. The apples, instead, evoke both the region's principal agricultural product and a broader symbolic framework rooted in

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17 *"Ifana", le désert des Agriates en exposition au musée de Bastia* (2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5acTlvNpwGY.

18 *Artist Residency Barda del Desierto* (2017). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHOopWyqIDs

Western culture and colonial discourse: the biblical fruit of Adam and Eve, whose consumption precipitated their expulsion from Eden and signified the loss of innocence and the rupture of harmony between humankind and nature.
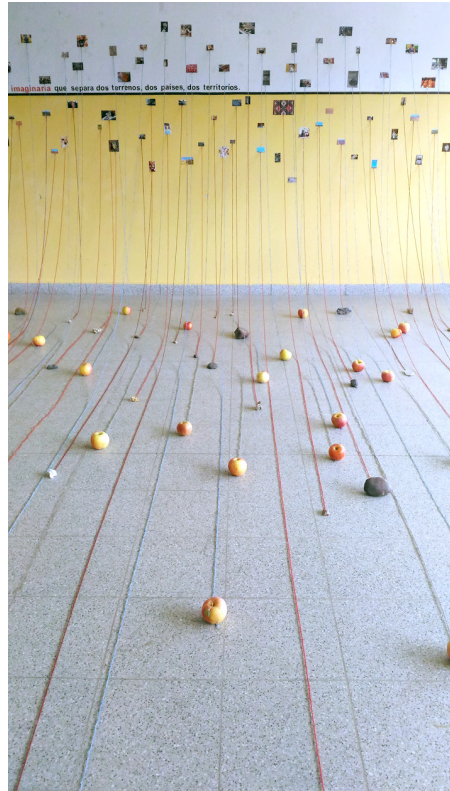
Figure 6
Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Imaginary Atlas*.
2017. Site specific installation, photos,
stones, apples, wool threads.
Colmirante Cordero, Patagonia.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

The fruit is a symbol of the country, but also of Western culture. For the artist, the apple represents the religious conquest that accompanied the colonisation of the New World, with the evangelisation and forced assimilation of the indigenous populations, and how colonisation imposed its presence and cultivation.

Chihuahuan Desert in New Mexico was the successive step, where she produced several works on the occupation, also focusing on the role of the desert as a borderland. *Cabinet Anthropologique* **[fig. 7]** consists of a box inside which there are objects related to the occupation of the Apache territories: photographs, stones, playing cards, and some gadgets, such as small resin drops with the words "route 66" or "trust". It is therefore again a reflection on dual identity. The New Mexico desert is deeply embedded with history and

traditions, once again revealing how a landscape that appears empty at first glance in fact embodies a complex totality and a multiplicity of identities.

Figure 7 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Cabinet Anthropologique*. 2017. Photographs, stones, playing cards, souvenir. Chihuahuan Desert, New Mexico. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

During the trip to Greenland, she made *ART-LIFE* **[fig. 8]**, in which she wanted to combine the creative power of nature and the shamanic power of art. The work is made of bone, wood, print on Tintoretto paper, nuummite. The last one is a very ancient type of stone, found only there, and dating back some three billion years. It is considered one of the oldest minerals on Earth and is believed to be a stone of ancestral magic and power, often associated with shamans. Nuummite completely surrounds the word *art*, while the word *life* is surrounded, as if in an embrace, by organic material such as bone and wood. Once again, a contrast emerges between nature and mankind, in which, notably, art aligns itself with nature rather than with human activity.

The photographs she took there depict the Arctic landscape **[fig. 9]**, undoubtedly the most characteristic of deserts, the only one along with Antarctica to be covered by ice. The place where climatic changes are most visible, given the constant reduction in the consistency of the glaciers. The photographs present only cold colour tones, which give more of a feeling of melancholy. The artist's engagement with environmental issues in her works can be likened to Olafur Eliasson's practice, which similarly interrogates ecological concerns through artistic intervention. For instance, Eliasson's work *Your Waste of Time*

(2006) reflects on temporality and climate change.[19] Some ice blocks from Vatnajokull, one of Iceland's largest glaciers, were removed and brought to the Berlin gallery Neugerriemschneider, where they were exhibited in a refrigerated space. He thus denounces the waste of man's time, who does not work hard enough to prevent the destruction of glaciers. Interestingly, in 2015, Rebecca Ballestra also travelled to the same glacier in Iceland, as part of *Journey into Fragility*.
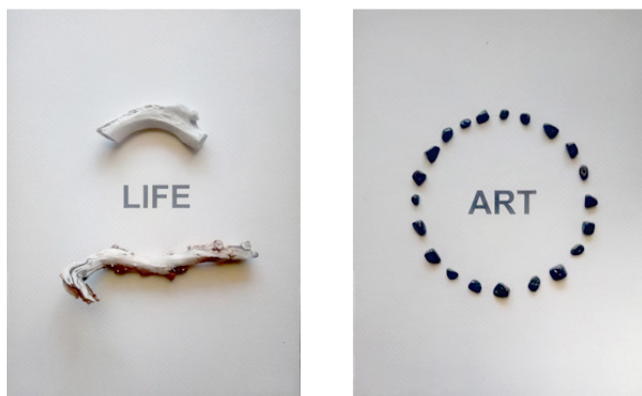

Figure 8 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *ART-LIFE*. 2017. Bone, wood, print on Tintoretto paper, nuummite. 21 × 29.7 cm. Greenland. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

Figure 9
Maria Rebecca Ballestra,
Greenland.
2017. Digital photo.
Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

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19 *Your Waste of Time. Artwork. Studio Olafur Eliasson.* https://olafureliasson. net/artwork/your-waste-of-time-2006/.

The artist's last journey took place in the Gobi Desert (Mongolia) in 2017. On that occasion, she created two works on perception of time-space, entitled *Skin* [figs 10-11]. One of them, dedicated to the Yolyn Am Valley, was then presented at the exhibition *Le latitudini dell'arte* in Genoa in 2019. It depicts macro-details of algae in a stream. The artist called skin as her moral testament, a permanent tribute and an act of gratitude. The skin of the earth encounters that of humanity, framing a dialogue in which absence and void become critical lenses to reflect on the impact of human intervention on natural landscapes.

As the artist said in one of her inedited archival documents:

> Un omaggio alla pelle della terra che mi ha accolta, alla vita che mi ha insegnato, accompagnata, piegata, gratificata, messo alla prova, risanata, che mi ha ricompensata, accolta, che si è rivelata e si è manifestata attraverso di me. Skin sarà un omaggio permanente, un gesto spirituale, un ringraziamento, una restituzione, un atto sciamanico di gratitudine, che farò alla Natura per il resto della mia vita. Un gesto ripetuto, ciclico, che accompagnerà il personale viaggio della mia anima su questa terra e in questo corpo, che segnerà il tempo del divenire personale, un tempo umano che incontra un tempo universale. Non realizzerò più altre opere per il mercato dell'arte a parte installazioni site specific con elementi naturali, e opere effimere (azioni performative, teatrali, video o suoni). Skin sarà un ciclo di opere che terminerà solo con la mia morte. L'osservatore o il collezionista potrà utilizzare le opere della serie Skin come un oggetto di consumo, come un prodotto estetico, come uno strumento di meditazione, una preghiera, un passaggio verso l'interiorità, come una finestra sull'immateriale, come un salto temporale verso l'eternità.[20]

In this artwork, the attention to temporality becomes particularly evident, evoking Aristotle's conception of the void (Arist., *Ph*. 4.1.208b26). The philosopher denies the existence of a void, emphasizing that time is inseparable from motion and material processes: the absence of matter entails the absence of measurable time, highlighting the intrinsic connection between temporality and the physical world.

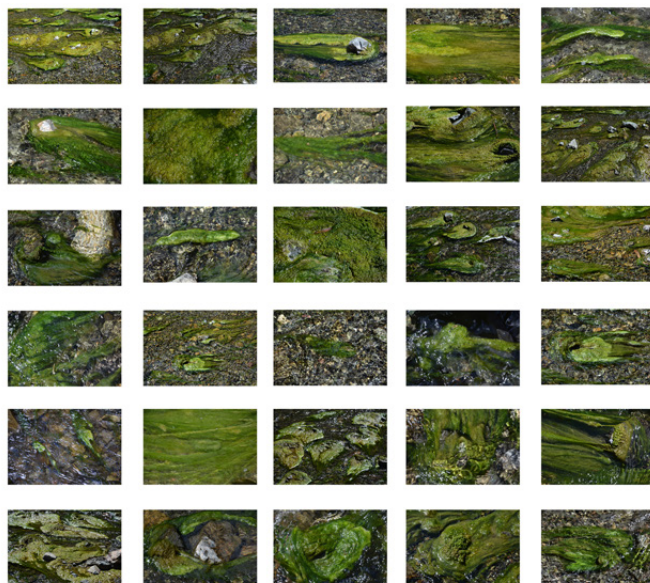**20** Ballestra, *Skin* 2017b.

Figure 10 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Skin #1 Tribute to Yolyn Am Valley*. 2017-19.
Digital photo. Mongolia. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

Figure 11 Maria Rebecca Ballestra, *Skin #2*. 2017-19.
Digital photo. Mongolia. Courtesy of Gianni Renosi

Time flows inevitably, and, in many respects, it has been one of the central themes of the past century. Since Kubler's seminal reflections (1976), art has assumed a new form, with time understood as split into two essential components: a personal, subjective dimension and a more rational, structured one. In the footsteps of many before her, Maria Rebecca Ballestra now turns toward works of greater introspection – a gradual shift in her practice that began well before the conception of this project.

The second work in the *Skin* series follows the same structure as the previous piece, but the green of the seaweed is replaced by the warm tones of the desert. Bones emerge from the sand alongside sparse plants; all set within the emptiness and profound silence of the natural landscape. As Ballestra said in one of her archival documents:

> Il viaggio è sempre stato parte fondamentale della mia vita di donna e di artista. Ho visitato luoghi e villaggi sperduti, dalla natura incontaminata e selvaggia; ho impiegato per raggiungere e conoscere le parti più remote del nostro pianeta. La mia arte è il risultato di quello che ho provato e vissuto fino a quando sono arrivata all'apice della mia ricerca. Ricordo il momento esatto, ero in Mongolia, nel deserto del Gobi, e dopo una salita impervia e faticosa, ho raggiunto la cima e ho provato l'esperienza assoluta, fino a sfiorare i limiti della conoscenza umana. Quell'attimo di benessere interiore, di estasi, mi ha resa capace di contemplare l'assoluta bellezza dell'universo e di comprendere che, sebbene l'uomo sia in grado di commettere le peggiori atrocità, non riuscirà mai a scalfire l'incanto dell'universo. In quel momento ho ripensato alla mia vita fino a quel momento e ho realizzato che, in fondo, non ho grandi meriti, se non quello di aver sempre accettato tutte le sfide che la vita mi ha posto davanti. Non mi sono mai tirata indietro, anche quando ho dovuto affrontare scelte radicali, sia nel campo dell'arte, sia nella vita privata, comprendendo che dovevo fidarmi di ciò che mi stava accadendo. La vita mi ha sempre ricompensata dinanzi a tutte le scelte, oltre quanto mi sarei mai aspettata e ho realizzato di non essere il frutto delle mie azioni, ma ciò che la Natura ha fatto su di me.[21]

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21 Ballestra, *Il mio testamento morale* 2020.

4 Conclusion

Maria Rebecca Ballestra invites us to rethink the idea of emptiness, showing that it is not mere absence but a space full of life, present even in the tiniest grain of desert sand. The desert is not a barren void, but a living archive of microscopic life, fragile ecosystems, and ancient traces that resist erasure. As in Augé:

> Un vuoto si inserisce fra le vie di circolazione e i luoghi di vita, o fra ricchezza e povertà, un vuoto che talvolta viene decorato, talvolta viene lasciato in abbandono, vuoto nel quale talvolta si rintanano i più poveri dei poveri. (Augé 2017, 90)

Ballestra creates ephemeral connections around environmental urgency while stressing the absence of humans and the persistence of nature, proposing a post-anthropocentric idea of belonging. This perspective represents a valuable avenue for further investigation, particularly by studying Ballestra's works through this interpretive lens, as they offer fertile ground for rethinking notions of community and belonging beyond anthropocentrism.

Echoes of the Void thus becomes both an act of revelation and of contemplation. By slowing the viewer's point of view, it invites a meditative awareness of space, where silence, distance, and light compose an invisible narrative. In doing so, Ballestra not only subverts the conventional notion of emptiness as absence but also transforms it into an active presence, that demands both attention and care.

In conclusion, this analysis of the most recent works should be further expanded through additional research, particularly by exploring the philosophical implications within the dimension of temporality, considering the influences that have undoubtedly impacted the artist. Just as the projects she initiated must continue to evolve, the concept itself transcends the artist and extends beyond time.

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**Absence Through Objects
and Architectural Spaces**

"Meditations on the Sense of Erasures": Berlin as a Mnemotope in the Architectural Projects of Oswald Mathias Ungers and John Hejduk

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Abstract   A mnemotope can be described as a territory or location that exists simultaneously in the physical world and in the realm of collective memory. A mnemotope, according to our hypothesis, can be used as a theoretical construct to study the influence of collective and personal memory, inextricably linked to a particular space, on architectural projects created for its territory. Using as examples two architectural projects created for the city of Berlin, in this article we argue that within the space of a mnemotope architecture can interact with, and be highly influenced by, urban areas of prior destruction.

Keywords   Mnemotope. Collective memory. Berlin. John Hejduk. Oswald Mathias Ungers. Berlin as a Green Archipelago.

Summary   1 Mnemotopes: Emergence and Existence Between Heaven and Earth. – 2 Berlin as a Green Archipelago. – 3 On the Natural History of Emptiness. – 4 *Victims*, 1984. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Mnemotopes: Emergence and Existence Between Heaven and Earth

> To take a site: present tracings, outlines, figments, apparitions,
> X-rays of thoughts. Meditations on the sense of erasures.
> To fabricate a construction of time.
> (John Hejduk, *Victims*, 1986)

Human memory tends to form deep connections with particular places and landscapes, so that it sometimes seems inseparable from specific sets of coordinates. Some territories and locations exist simultaneously in the physical world and in the realm of collective memory. These spaces can be defined as places of worship, landscapes where national tragedies or triumphs have occurred, points in space where the evidence of collective trauma is concentrated, or something else entirely. They are immovable, alluring parts of cultural and social memory.

In this article we call such places 'mnemotopes'. Interest in this cultural phenomenon and theoretical construct has been observed in literature since the mid-twentieth century, though the term 'mnemotope' was first used to describe it just over thirty years ago (Van Rookhuijzen 2019, 5-8).

Mnemotopes were first defined as a specific concept in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, a book by the German cultural historian Jan Assmann published in 1992. In the chapter titled "Memory Landscapes: The 'Mnemotope' of Palestine" Assmann, describing the universal importance of creating an imaginary space within the framework of mnemotechnics, which gave birth to palaces and theatres of memory, emphasizes the existence of real spaces, locations, and landscapes, which become "mediums for cultural memory" and move into a new mode of existence (Assmann 2011, 44). In this manner mnemotopes exist simultaneously in the physical world and in collective memory, as they acquire a meaning that is understood and shared by large groups of people, thus turning into a sign and becoming 'semiotized'.

Assmann (2011, 44) describes sacred landscapes such as Palestine and the city of Rome as, inter alia, "topographical texts of cultural memory, that is, 'mnemotopes' or places of memory". Here, however, it is important to emphasize the distinction between the concepts of 'mnemotope' and 'place of memory', *der Gedächtnisort* or *lieu de mémoire*, which may seem synonymous. The importance of distinguishing between these concepts is also identified in the definition of mnemotope in the interdisciplinary lexicon *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung*, published in 2001. There we find one of the first detailed descriptions of a mnemotope as a theoretical construct:

> Mnemotopes differ both from the concept of singular 'places of memory' and from spatially oriented models of mnemotechnics that posit their contents in an imaginary space. (Pethes, Ruchatz 2001, 383)[1]

An important characteristic of mnemotopes, which distinguishes them from places of memory in Pierre Nora's original understanding, is the fact that mnemotopes must exist in the physical world. Their integral part is a certain territory, location, place, with which they are connected and on which they are superimposed, as if "tracing papers", layers of memories and symbolic meaning (Vaneyan 2012, 329).

In ancient mnemotechnic places, *loci*, are compared to wax tablets that can be used to record an infinite number of things, provided that the old records are erased (Yates 1966, 7). In case of existing locations and landscapes on which memories are 'recorded' and with which they are associated this state of being imparts to the mnemotope the character of continuity and endurance.

This mode of existence also determines the intermedial position of a mnemotope "between Heaven and Earth" (Pethes, Ruchatz 2001, 383) and echoes Martin Heidegger's description of the bridge's capacity to be a place (*der Ort*) and simultaneously to create a place; both, the bridge and the created location, unite the Fourfold (*das Geviert*) of heaven, earth, mortals, and deities:

> In its own way, the bridge unites earth and heaven, the divine and the mortal. […] So the bridge does not simply arise in a place, but rather this place arises from the bridge itself. It is a thing that gathers the Fourfold, but gathers it in a way that creates a place for the Fourfold. (Heidegger 2000, 155-6)

The space of a mnemotope, acting as a sign, strives for homogeneity. At the same time, by its very nature, in consolidating in itself the 'real' landscape and the memories associated with it, as well as having the potential to act simultaneously as a place of hierophany and a reminder of it, the space of a mnemotope is heterogeneous and non-uniform. Thus, mnemotopes exist at the intersection of religious (heterogeneous) and profane (homogeneous) modes of perception of space, according to how they are described by the philosopher Mircea Eliade:

> When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. [...] For profane experience, on the contrary, space is homogeneous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass. (Eliade 1955, 21-2)

The emergence of sacred spaces that determine the heterogeneous nature of the world makes it possible to overcome the 'chaos of homogeneity', to fixate and orient oneself in space, which, as a consequence, ceases to be relative. It is with the emergence of these fixed spatial points that Eliade associates the possibility for a religious person to begin "living in a real sense" (Eliade 1955, 23). This conclusion echoes Heidegger's idea of the need for the emergence of a place (*der Ort*) where heaven and earth, mortals and deities will unite, and in harmony with which a person can begin to 'dwell'. In a similar way, it is possible to describe the nature of the emergence of mnemotopes as certain fixed spatial points that exist simultaneously in several dimensions, as well as being integral signs and keys to collective and personal memory.

Mnemotopes cannot be created intentionally as they "do not arise at the will of customers (*Auftraggebern*) or by decision of institutions – they are supposedly always already 'there', from the moment when the event occurred, which is remembered in this place" (Stein-Hölkeskamp, Hölkeskamp 2010, 135). However, along with the impossibility of a targeted creation or a cardinal alteration, it is also practically impossible to destroy a mnemotope. Maurice Halbwachs (1944, 162-5) writes that even in the case of a conscious attempt to erase a mnemotope from the face of the earth, its 'material frame' (*cadre matériel*) does not disappear. The destruction of architectural monuments and other such intrusions into the space of a mnemotope are 'recorded' in human memory associated with the place, which means that the mnemotope primarily only 'expands' due to attempts to invade the material plane of memory concentrated in its space.

Here we find ourselves facing a theoretical difficulty: by definition, the emergence and existence of mnemotopes does not depend on what is located on their territory, but at the same time, the natural and urban markers mapping and delineating the surface of a mnemotope are undoubtedly parts of its whole. A mnemotope has spatial characteristics in physical reality and it is difficult to characterize, without resorting to the features of the landscape or urban development, how it can leave an impression on a person visiting it. According to the hypothesis we propose, a mnemotope may serve as a theoretical construct for examining the influence of collective and personal memory inextricably linked to a particular space on architectural projects created for its territory.

2   Berlin as a Green Archipelago

Most places that are considered to be examples of mnemotopes hold sacred status within various religions. Jan Assmann (2011, 44) writes about the sacred landscape of Rome, the roads of the Ancient East along which ritual processions passed, the "totemic landscapes" of the indigenous peoples of Australia, and so on. However, in the literature devoted to memory studies we also find mentions of the existence of profane mnemotopes. The city of Berlin as a whole, as well as certain parts of it, most frequently serves as an example of such a space, regarded as a site of the highest concentration of events and collective trauma experienced in the twentieth century (Dünne, Mahler 2015, 199).

To illustrate the possible influence of mnemotopes on architectural design, in this article we will turn to the project by the German architect Oswald Matthias Ungers *Berlin as a Green Archipelago* **[fig. 1]**. The project was formally initiated at the Cornell University summer school, which took place in Berlin in 1977. The architect, theorist and teacher Oswald Matthias Ungers, with the participation of architects Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff and Arthur Ovaska, published the project manifesto, which, at Ungers's initiative, was originally released under the title *The City in the City* (*Die Stadt in der Stadt*) (Ungers 2013, 11).

The City in the City is a project of the radical replanning of West Berlin, a comprehensive intervention into its urban fabric, which was intended to be a response to the ongoing depopulation of the divided, half-ruined city (Aureli 2011, 177-8). The authors of the project envisaged the city's transformation into a network of 'islands', which in turn represented indivisible parts of the urban landscape, from entire districts, such as Spandau, to particular streets or buildings and their surrounding area, such as Schloßstraße or Görlitzer Bahnhof. The islands were to be united into an archipelago city, while the empty spaces between them were to be filled with parks, forests, public gardens, orchards, and hunting grounds (Ungers et al. 1977, 88). Some of these 'green interspaces' covered areas that were devastated by the bombings of the 1940s. However, the buildings and districts that were not destroyed during the war but were not considered as parts of the selected islands were supposed to be demolished:

A Green Archipelago' proposed a theoretical Berlin whose future was conceived through two diametrically opposed actions – the *reinforcement* of those parts of the city that deserved it and the *destruction* of those that did not. (Koolhaas 1995, 200)[2]
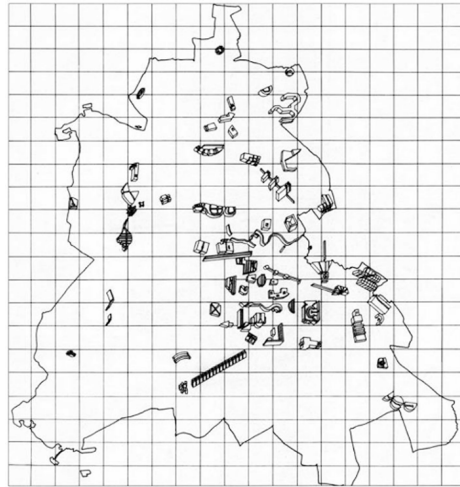
Figure 1
Oswald Matthias Ungers, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Riemann, Hans Kollhoff, Arthur Ovaska, *Berlin as a Green Archipelago*. 1977. Site plan. Image source: Ungers 1977

Describing the fortified, 'positive' (as opposed to empty, 'negative') parts of the archipelago city, Ungers (1977, 86-8) and his co-authors define them simultaneously as particularly important 'urban zones' that stand out from their surroundings, and as 'structures' that differ radically from one another in form and content. In the 1977 manifesto, Ungers also highlights the universality of the typological features of these urban structures that stand out in the space of Berlin, briefly describing the possibility of decomposing cities into typified fragments. Ungers cites such examples as the design of Central Park in New York, which can be superimposed without significant changes on the territory of the Görlitzer railway station. Another example is Ivan Leonidov's 'linear city' competition proposal for the town of Magnitogorsk, typologically similar to the development of Unter den Eichen street. The illustrated descriptions of such structures, which can be found repeated in cities and architectural projects of different periods around the world, is an example of Unger's turn to Gestalt theory. This allows one to identify patterns and reason about the embodiment of human thinking in architecture, the deliberate endowment of monuments with a *Gestalterische Idee* (Schrijver 2021, 100).

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2 Unless otherwise stated, italics are the Author's emphasis.

The universality of the structures that form the islands of the archipelago city coexists in the project's manifesto with the assertion of a high degree of their uniqueness. In order to decide which parts of the urban fabric are to be conserved, it is necessary to find and select a number of "so-called identity-spaces" whose immediate identity is to be preserved together with the history, social structure, and the ecological features of the place (Ungers et al. 1977, 88). It is worth noting that in the draught text of the manifesto *The City in the City*, written by Rem Koolhaas in June-July 1977, the islands of the archipelago city are defined not as "identity-spaces", but as "areas that already have a strong existing *entity*" (Ungers 2013, 12-23). However, the influence of the phenomenon of mnemotopes, primarily the mnemotope of West Berlin, should, in our opinion, be seen not in these islands (entities, 'identity-spaces'), but rather in the empty 'negative' green interspaces of the archipelago city, stretching between its islands.

3 On the Natural History of Emptiness

Berlin, as we mentioned earlier, at the time of the inception of *The City in the City* project, still bore tangible traces of the large-scale destruction of the Second World War. In the 1940s, primarily during aerial bombings, according to various sources, from a third to a half of the capital's urban area was destroyed, and a third of the apartments in the city were uninhabitable (Ladd 2005, 118). About twenty-two percent of the urban landscape in West Berlin was razed to the ground. After 1945, the entire city was covered with more than 55 million cubic meters of ruins (Diefendorf 1993, 14-15). The German writer W.G. Sebald begins his 1997 Zurich lectures *Air War and Literature*, included in the collection of essays titled *On the Natural History of Destruction*, with a description of the destruction of German cities:

> Today it is hard to form an even partly adequate idea of the extent of the devastation suffered by the cities of Germany in the last years of the Second World War, still harder to think about the horrors involved in that devastation. (Sebald 2003, 3)

Born in 1926 in Kaisersesch, Oswald Matthias Ungers' architectural training took place in a devastated Germany, which was choosing the path of its revival between two main directions: the restoration of local architectural and cultural traditions in the recovering cities, or an opposite path of rejection of any associations with the past, the almost any manifestations of which could be associatively or directly connected with the legacy of the Third Reich (Aureli 2011,

177-8). Ungers himself considered personal memories, his "places of memory", an important part of any architect's projects, which allows one to avoid an intellectual vacuum and confusion.[3]

In the 1977 manifesto of the project, Ungers criticizes the desire to restore the destroyed city to its former state, re-establishing "its former historic substance and configuration": the architect calls this approach to urban design illusory and a result of a misinterpreted wave of nostalgia (Ungers et al. 1977, 83). Thus, excluding all the most common restoration practices, we inevitably return to the idea of emptiness, which these projects try to fill in the shortest possible time.

Years after the war, having practically disappeared from the physical plane of the cities, the ruins remained in the minds of the population as one of the most illustrative pieces of evidence of the national tragedy. This evidence, however, was difficult to interpret. In the aforementioned Zurich lectures, W.G. Sebald discusses the paradoxical attitude of the Germans to the destruction that surrounded them, as if it did not leave a commensurate trace in the consciousness of the Germans (Sebald 2003, 4-11). Aleida Assmann (2006, 184-94), commenting, in particular, on Sebald's bewilderment about the lack of a worthy reflection in German literature of the "painful traces of the bomb-war" (*Schmerzensspur des Bombenkriegs*), points to the latent phase of experiencing trauma, which in Germany had a nationwide character. Gradually, the themes of deportations, the *Bombenkrieg* and the fragmentary existence of the country began to occupy more space in the memorial discourse: researchers attribute the main shifts in working with traumatic experience and changes in the public perception of the topic of German victims to the end of the twentieth – beginning of the twenty-first century (189-94).

As a result, in Germany, between the destruction and losses of incredible proportions and the moment of relative awareness of the violence experienced, a 'gap' was created that lasted for several decades. In order to avoid severe re-traumatising affects, contact with information about the traumatic events was avoided, and thus they were temporarily excluded from the collective memory (Liebsch, Rüsen 2001, 141). The German writer Hans Nossack in his 1948 text *Der Untergang. Hamburg 1943* describes such repression:

> Is it a difficulty? People try to act as if they were living as before. [...] They know it's only an illusion. They do not believe it. The backdrop is missing, the illusion of reality. (Nossack 1981 136-7)

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3 From the interview with O.M. Ungers by Chiara Visentin, filmed in 2004. `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELhWwgViMwU`.

As it was mentioned earlier mnemotopes as landscapes of memory of which the physical plane is an integral component are characterized by the ability to 'record' traces of destruction in their multidimensional space, prolonging in a new dimension the existence of features of the urban and natural landscape that have disappeared from their surface. Invasions into mnemotope's physical space, including violent acts, ultimately 'expands' the space it occupies in collective memory.

In this regard, the question should be raised about what influence spaces of large-scale destruction have on projects for the redevelopment of their territory, beyond attempts to block or displace traumatic memories and transform these spaces into places of forced national rebirth, where, in Sebald's words, "a new, faceless reality" is created (Sebald 2003, 7).

In our opinion, this 'expansion' of the mnemotope is reflected in the critical 'narrowing' of the urban fabric in Ungers's project. *Berlin as a Green Archipelago* in its idea of an undeveloped public green space on a territory marked by destruction creates a space for experiencing trauma, the symptoms of which may appear only after many years. Unlike Hans Scharoun's ideas of turning Berlin into an 'anti-city', where ruins will become scenery in a utopian pastoral (Aureli 2011, 191), Ungers's 'empty' green spaces exclude the possibility of an associative connection between the organic destruction of ruins by plants and animals and the original act of violent destruction.

It should be noted that the relative emptiness of the green interspaces in Ungers' project is not entirely neutral. Firstly, in order to clear these areas, according to the manifesto, it is necessary to demolish part of existing buildings, which is a radical continuation of previous destructive actions. Secondly, the very emphasized absence of familiar elements of the urban landscape can become a monument in itself: as an example of such use of emptiness, one can cite Christian Boltanski's 1990 Berlin project *The Missing House*, emotional impact of which relies on the piercing effect of the absence of something familiar.

In the development of *Berlin as a Green Archipelago* Oswald Matthias Ungers and his co-authors relied not on the aesthetic and historical characteristics of the city, but primarily on its social and spatial patterns. The project bears, in our opinion, traces of the influence of the mnemotope of West Berlin: in addition to the identification of the 'islands' as limited and self-sufficient urban structures, a significant part of the project is occupied by the work with their surroundings, with the emptiness. This emptiness in the space of the mnemotope outside its physical plane turns into a dense and emotionally difficult to comprehend and experience zone of dismantled ruins that have transitioned into a new mode of existence.

4   *Victims*, 1984

The interaction of an architectural project with destroyed, demolished, and no longer existing buildings, as well as with the invisible dimensions of a mnemotope, can be shown using the example of the 1984 project *Victims* by the American architect John Hejduk.

Until the end of the Second World War, the site where now the *Topography of Terror* complex is located, housed the headquarters of the Secret State Police (Gestapo) with its basement prison, the SS Security Service, and the Reich Security Main Office. Tens of thousands of political prisoners were interrogated and tortured in these buildings before being transferred to other prisons or sent to concentration camps (Bernardi 2023, 98). In 1983, several years before the site became known as *Topography of Terror*, the architectural competition for a memorial area and park for the residents of the Kreuzberg district was announced (the *Prinz-Albrecht-Palace Competition*). One hundred and ninety-four projects were submitted, including one by John Hejduk.

Victims is a *gesamtkunstwerk* comprised of architectural, pictorial and poetic elements. The peculiarities of their unification are related both to the special temporality of the project and to the complexities of architectural understanding of the heterogeneous space of mnemotope, that exists simultaneously in several dimensions.

The materials of the unrealised *Victims* project were presented at the Architectural Association exhibition of the same name in London in 1986. The Architectural Association also published an accompanying book with Hejduk's sketches, drawings, plans and explanatory texts, both prose and poetry.

In the introduction to the text published in 1986 Hejduk writes that the main part of the memorial area should be surrounded by two rows of hedges, between which a trolley would constantly move in a circle, and a single drawbridge would be thrown across the laid tracks into the main area (Hejduk 1986; the published text does not include pagination). The only way to enter the physical space of the mnemotope would be precisely through this bridge – a symbol that Martin Heidegger chooses to demonstrate how a 'place' can be 'created' (Heidegger 2000, 155-8).

Within the hedgerow surroundings, in the main space of the memorial zone, 67 small architectural forms, the 'characters' of this project, which Hejduk calls "structures", can be erected in no particular order. Although Hejduk delegates decisions about the construction and placement of structures to the local government and residents of Berlin, the plans for their placement on the site, which he submits to the competition and later publishes with other project materials, are fixed and unchangeable. In 2006 for the first time these plans were compared with the plans of the destroyed buildings that

belonged to the Gestapo and SS and were previously located on the site, as well as with the features of the landscape, which no longer existed at that time of the project's inception **[fig. 2].**[4]
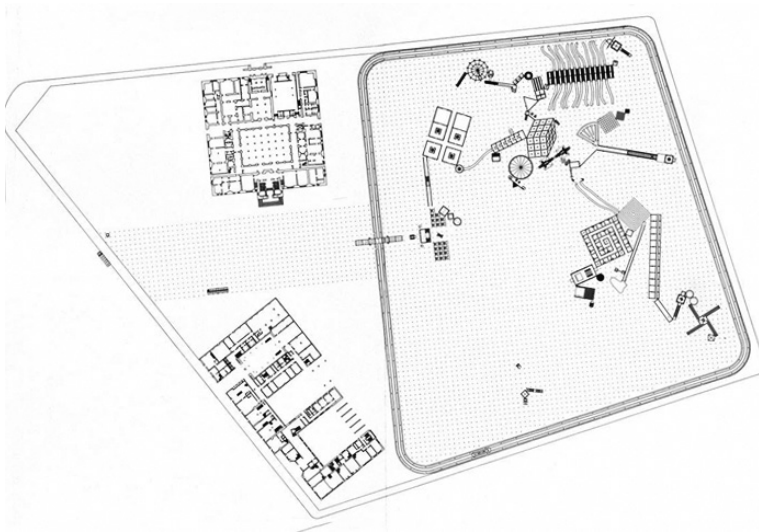
Figure 2   John Hejduk, *Victims*. 1984. Site plan. Image source: Hejduk 1986

When the plans are superimposed, it becomes clear that the placement of the structures is not random and does not follow any abstract compositional or narrative idea. Each object, each structure, has a specific spatial relationship with the now non-existent traces of the Nazi past and their surroundings – on the plans, Hejduk's structures touch the corners of destroyed buildings, cross since disappeared streams, and are placed in the voids between buildings, any traces of which were absent on the surface at that time. Hejduk dissects and reassembles a space that no longer exists, intervenes in 'layers' of the mnemotope with the help of his structures. Intervention in the physical reality of the past is no longer available, so accordingly, an intervention occurs in the plane of memory; Hejduk's project provides the tools for such an intervention.

John Hejduk's poem *Thoughts of an Architect*, published in 1986 along with other project materials, also contains imagery of attempts to study and understand a place and its mnemonic landscape on all

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4   See *John Hejduk: The Poetic Imagination as a Social Political Act* (19 November 2021), a lecture by David Gersten given at the Italian Virtual Pavilion of the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81-PgpBMiBo.

levels: "Erasures imply former existences. Drawings and tracings are like the hands of the blind touching the surfaces of the face in order to understand a sense of volume, depth and penetration". Hejduk perceived the space of the project and its intervention in the mnemotope as possible only in suspended time; suspended time he, in turn, called "solid space" (Hejduk 1986).

If we take into account our assumptions about its internal structure, *Victims* can be considered as an example of a potentially productive interconnection between an architectural project and a mnemotope. Initially announced as a competition project for a park and memorial area, Hejduk's *gesamtkunstwerk* provides options for interaction not only with collective memory, but also directly with the space-time of a mnemotope. The architecture of *Victims* does not try to directly convey the features and character of the place and the traumatic memories associated with it, like conventional monuments and memorials do – in our opinion, it has a significantly greater potential.

5 Conclusion

Ungers's 'islands' and Hejduk's 'structures' can be compared to each other primarily due to the presence in each of them of an indivisible internal structure, potentially active in relation to the space and the people in it. They embody a gestalt, implying the possibility of its reproduction and existence in another place and time. Independent and mobile structures are in a special relationship with the locality and site-specificity of both projects. In *Victims* they interact with layers of memories and archaeological layers of the mnemotope. In *Berlin as a Green Archipelago* the features of the structures (or 'entities') are inextricably linked to the urban landscape and history of the site, simultaneously determining its character and being determined by the environment.

The presence of architectural monuments or memorials on the surface of a mnemotope is not a mandatory condition for its existence, but the mnemotope, in our opinion, has the potential to invade architectural projects, change them, and resist them. This process can also be reversed: architecture can invade the space and time of a mnemotope and operate not only in its physical plane, but also in other dimensions. By examining architectural projects with the theoretical construct of a mnemotope in mind, we can see how empty spaces and disappeared buildings invade architectural drawings, plans, and manifestos, and how architects operate in these complex spaces that exist between Heaven and Earth.

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Elio Petri, *L'assassino* (1961): The Nemi Museum and the Ghost of the Ships

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Abstract   The recovery of the Roman ships from Lake Nemi (1928-33) was celebrated through films, photographs, and press as a symbol of technological progress and Fascist appropriation of the imperial past. The Museum of Roman Ships (1940) embodied this triumph until a 1944 fire turned it into a monument to loss rather than power. The essay explores Nemi as a visual laboratory, from interwar propaganda to Petri's *L'assassino* (1961), where the ruined museum turns absence into a cinematic device and a space for critical reflection on memory and history.

Keywords   Museum of Roman Ships. Void and memory. Propaganda visual culture. Elio Petri. L'assassino (1961).

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 The Image of a National Enterprise (1928-40). – 3 Fire and Reconstruction (1944-53). – 4 Elio Petri, *L'assassino* (1961): The Nemi Museum and the Ghost of the Ships. – 5 Conclusions: Languages of the Void Between Documentation and Memory.

1 Introduction

The case of the Nemi ships represents a privileged observatory for reflecting on the relationship between images, memory, and absence.[1] Between the late 1920s and the early 1940s, photographs, films, and publications in journals and monographic volumes contributed to the transformation of the recovery of the two ships into a mediatic and political event, a symbol of technical-scientific mastery and of appropriation of the past carried out by the regime. Yet the ships' destruction in the 1944 fire radically altered the scenario, turning the Museum of Roman Ships into an empty shell, devoid of its very contents.

It is precisely this void that constitutes the underlying thread of this essay. A void as the irreversible loss of material heritage; a void as the latency of an image surviving through photographic and film documentation; a void as the potential for new narratives, capable of transforming absence into memory.

From this perspective, the paper seeks to answer a question: in what ways did cinema and images recount and transform the void created by the ships' destruction? The analysis will unfold in two directions: on the one hand, the propagandistic and documentary uses of images in the 1920s and 1930s will be analysed; on the other hand, this contribution interprets Elio Petri's choice to set a sequence of his directorial debut *L'assassino* (1961) in the Museum of Roman Ships, transforming it into a stage for absence and a site of memory.

2 The Image of a National Enterprise (1928-40)

Located in the heart of the Alban Hills, in the Castelli Romani area, Lake Nemi has long preserved a landscape where nature, myth, and historical memory intertwine. Beside the sanctuary of Diana and the legend of the *rex Nemorensis* (Ucelli 1950, 5-6; Diosono 2014, 73-84), the lake has been, for centuries, the setting for tales and hypotheses about the presence of large imperial Roman ships submerged beneath its waters. Despite the scant evidence in ancient sources, occasional finds – often caught in fishermen's nets – and local traditions nurtured the conviction that an extraordinary heritage lay concealed below the water of the lake. From the Renaissance

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1 This paper forms part of a broader doctoral research project currently in progress, dedicated to the archival collections concerning the recovery of the Roman ships from Lake Nemi (1928-32) and the reconstruction and reinstallation of the Nemi Museum after the 1944 fire (1948-60). Some of the reflections developed here connect with related work already published in *La Rivista di Engramma* (no. 228, 2025) and with further research currently being prepared for *Schermi*.

to modern times, numerous attempts were made to recover them: from Leon Battista Alberti (1446) and Francesco De Marchi (1535), to Annesio Fusconi (1827) and Eliseo Borghi (1895), who brought to the surface artefacts of exceptional interest. Yet none of these ventures achieved a definitive result, serving instead to consolidate the legendary aura of the ships.[2]

A decisive step came in 1926, when the Ministry of Public Education established a first commission to draft a plan for the recovery of the legendary ships (Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione 1927). The following year, on the occasion of a speech to the Reale Società Patria in Rome, Mussolini publicly expressed his support for the enterprise (Mussolini 1927, 26-9), symbolically inscribing it within the regime's broader programme of re-appropriating the imperial past. Within this context emerged the initiative of Guido Ucelli (1885-1964), managing director of the *Costruzioni Meccaniche Riva* company in Milan. Ucelli proposed a project based on reopening the ancient emissary on the lakeshore to allow the waters to drain towards the sea, coupled with the installation of modern pumping systems, offered by his firm as a gift to the Government. The agreement of 15 June 1928 sealed the collaboration between the State, the Società Elettrica e Gas di Roma, the Società Laziale di Elettricità, and Riva of Milan (Ucelli 1950, 42-5). The official inauguration of the draining works was celebrated on 20 October 1928 in the presence of Mussolini.

Between 1928 and 1932, the lake level was lowered by around twenty-two metres, allowing the gradual emergence of the two ships: the first surfaced on 28 March 1929, and the second was fully recovered in 1932 (Ucelli 1950, 57-96). The enterprise was hailed as a triumph of science and technology, but above all it had an enormous media impact. From the very beginning, photographs and film footage did more than simply document operations: they helped to construct the enterprise's narrative. Images of the re-emerging ships travelled around the world, presenting the recovery as a spectacle of engineering and archaeology. Newsreels, documentaries, and press articles disseminated the image of Italy as a country capable of 'reclaiming' its past, transforming the site into an open-air museum visited by authorities, aristocrats, tourists, and scholars alike.[3]

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2   This passage has been contextualised in more detail in Grippa, c.d.s.; for a detailed account of the attempts to recover the ships between 1446 and 1895, see Ucelli 1950, 7-24.

3   This passage has been further expanded on in Grippa, c.d.s. and in Grippa, Redemagni 2025.

Figure 1   The second ship completely drained. 1932. Lake Nemi. Sepia-toned black and white photograph.
Photographic Archive, SABAP-MET-RM

Ucelli himself promoted the production of an educational film which, through approximately 1200 metres of footage entrusted to the Istituto Luce, was intended to document every phase of the venture, from the pumps' activation to the museum's opening. Conceived as a work in progress divided into four parts, only fragments survive now of the project. Part of the material was later incorporated into another film, *Das Geheimnis vom Nemi-See*, produced between 1931 and 1933 by the Istituto Luce in collaboration with Berlin's Ariete Film, and directed by Guido Parish and Fritz Puchstein. Released in Berlin in 1933 and screened the same year at the Planetarium in Rome, the film reworked the original sequences by accentuating their spectacular and mythical aspects. In contrast to Ucelli's preference for a technical and documentary register, the German version emphasised an aestheticising and symbolic dimension, in tune with the visual culture of the period (Pietrangeli, Redemagni 2023, 68-74; Grippa, Redemagni 2025, 167-82).

At the same time, as early as the 1926 Commission, provision had been made for the construction of a building to house the ships. After various proposals, it was the design by architect Vittorio Morpurgo (1890-1966), selected in the mid-1930s, that gave shape to this ambition: two large parallel naves connected by a central reinforced concrete gallery, conceived as a monumental shelter for the two ships. The innovative character of the project also lay in its attention to visitor's experience: the building, in dialogue with the

surrounding landscape, allowed the public to observe the ships both from close range, allowing to appreciate their details, and from an elevated balcony accessed via helical staircases positioned at the centre of the gallery (Ballio Morpurgo 1940, 371-6; see also Ucelli 1950, 103-13; Incutti, Porretta 2024, 40-50).
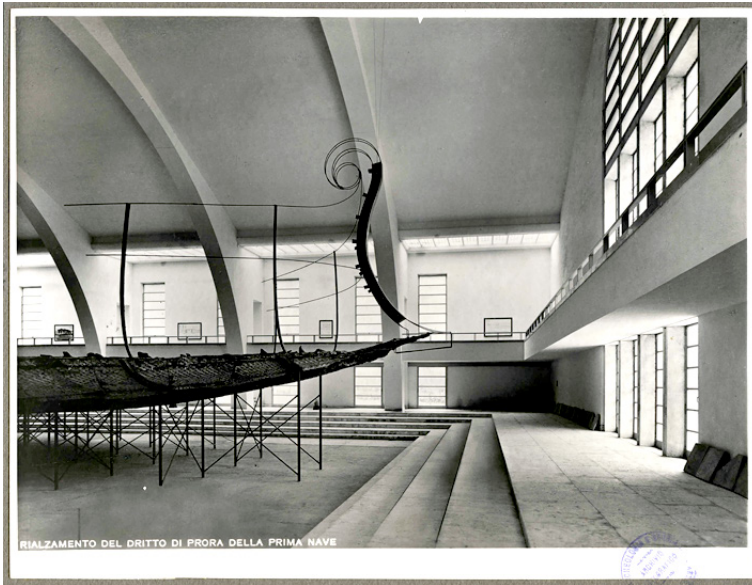
Figure 2 Installation of the right pavilion of the Museum of Roman Ships at Nemi, detail of the first ship. 1938-39. Sepia-toned black and white photograph. Photographic Archive, SABAP-MET-RM

On 21 April 1941, to mark the Natale di Roma, the Museum of Roman Ships was solemnly inaugurated (L.N. 1940, 398-407). With this event, a centuries-long trajectory of attempts and fragmentary memories seemed to culminate, ushering in the age of a monumental celebration, in which architecture, ships, artefacts, and images sanctioned the triumph of archaeological and technical modernity.

3 Fire and Reconstruction (1944-53)

The recovery of the Nemi ships is still regarded as one of the most significant archaeological undertakings of twentieth-century Italy. Yet this triumphant trajectory was abruptly interrupted on the night between 31 May and 1 June 1944, when fire reduced the ships to ashes, leaving the museum as a mere shell, deprived of its contents (Altamura Paolucci 2023a; Altamura Paolucci 2023b, 45-60). The

surviving building thus became the tangible testimony of a void: no longer the 'expectant' void filled by the recovery and the images of the ships, but a new and radical void, generated by the irreversible loss of heritage and destined to mark the museum's subsequent history.

From that moment on, the museum took shape as a suspended place, a liminal space scarred by the trauma of war, unable to perform the function for which it had been conceived.

Figure 3 The 1944 fire: the ashes of the ships and the traces of the bombings. Black and white photograph. Photographic Archive, SABAP-MET-RM, Fonds Guido Ucelli

In an attempt to restore meaning to the architectural space, a new commission – the Consiglio Superiore – was established in 1948. It brought together representatives of the competent ministries along with two key figures: Guido Ucelli and Naval Engineer Colonel Luigi Tursini (1938-1961). Both were entrusted, on an almost voluntary basis, with drawing up a project for reconstruction and reinstallation, with only travel and inspection expenses covered.[4]

Between 1948 and 1949, various proposals and design hypotheses emerged, following two distinct lines of thought: on one hand, the official programmes and proposals drafted by the ministerial bodies of the Consiglio (Ghini 1992, 3-20); on the other, a series of plans jointly developed by Ucelli and Tursini, where a particularly

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4 ASMUST, *Carla e Guido Ucelli di Nemi*, b. 47, f. 2; ASMUST, *C. e G. Ucelli di Nemi*, b. 49, f. 1.

innovative conception of the relationship between reconstruction and ruin took shape. On more than one occasion, they proposed that one of the pavilions should not be fully restored, but intentionally preserved in the ruined state in which it had been left after the fire and the bombings. The idea was to transform loss into an exhibition element, making the trauma of destruction tangible for visitors. From this perspective, the museum would not conceal the wartime scar but would inscribe it into its architectural and museographic language.[5]

This vision took form in Luigi Tursini's *Memorandum* of 20 March 1949, accompanied by drawings and scale plans. The document distinguished two lines of intervention: the complete reconstruction of one pavilion and the central gallery, destined to house the new display; and the partial reintegration of the right-hand pavilion, preserved and exhibited in its ruined state. Within the restored space were to be placed two 1:5 scale models of the ships, produced by the Italian Navy, together with the surviving artefacts and documentation on the recovery and destruction. Provision was also made for the installation of a 'simulacrum' of the first ship, a tubular steel structure evoking its original full-scale form.[6] The idea of making the ruin an integral part of the museum narrative introduced an innovative concept: the museum not only as a place of reconstruction and conservation, but also as a critical space in which the memory of loss would be rendered visible and permanent (see Grippa, Toson 2025, 67-92). However, when the museum reopened – on 25 November 1953 – the ruined pavilion was concealed behind a black panel: visitors could access only the restored and refitted left wing.

A subsequent document – a plan dated 21 May 1959, preserved in the Meschini Archive donated to the Museum of the Roman Ships of Nemi in 2022 by Tursini's family – appears to reopen the issue. Here, the ruin is conceived not as a provisional element but as part of a permanent display, with the charred structural remains of the ship left *in situ* and rearranged. Yet the closure of the museum in 1962, due to structural problems, interrupted any further development (see De Angelis 2025, 183-200).

The path of reconstruction, never fully realised, reveals how the void left by the ships was not only material but also memorial. The museum appeared as a container without an object, a place which, in its very incompleteness, displayed the trace of an irreparable loss. In this sense, the void ceased to be mere absence and opened up to

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5 For an in-depth analysis of the reconstruction of the museum, the proposals, the reconstruction programmes, and on the reflection on ruin as a new museum potential see Grippa, Toson 2025, 67-92.

6 Tursini, *Memorandum* 1949.

a further potential dimension: transformed into an exhibited ruin, it could become an integral part of the narrative.

It is precisely this condition – the void as absence but also as potential for new narratives – that, in the following decades, became a privileged ground for cinematic reinterpretations, which turned the museum into a palimpsest of memory and reflection. It is on this threshold, between loss and possibility, that the gaze of cinema took root in the 1960s: *L'assassino* (1961), Elio Petri's directorial debut, chose to traverse the Museum of Roman Ships as a place already imbued with absence and memory. The sequence set in the right-hand pavilion – the one that had housed the first ship and still bore the traces of ruin – reasserts the museum's liminal condition: the bodies, gazes, and dialogues of the protagonists transform their walk among the ruins into a visual device that makes the void into filmic matter, a palimpsest of memory and a critical space (Grippa, Toson 2023, 81-100; see also Grippa, c.d.s.).

4 Elio Petri, *L'assassino* (1961): The Nemi Museum and the Ghost of the Ships

With *L'assassino*, the museum shifts from monument to ruin, from a site of celebration to a critical device. The film was released in Italian cinemas in April 1961, as an Italian-French co-production (Titanus Rome and S.G.C. Paris), shot at the Titanus studios on Kodak film stock. The screenplay was written by Petri himself together with Pasquale Festa Campanile, Massimo Franciosa, and Tonino Guerra.

The choice of a protagonist was not immediate: Marcello Mastroianni, fresh from the international success of *La dolce vita* (1960), had first met Petri years earlier while collaborating with Giuseppe De Santis on *Giorni d'amore* (1954). From that moment on, a professional and personal bond developed between them and that would consolidate over the years (Procino 2014, 75). The actor himself later recalled the experience with enthusiasm, describing the script of *L'assassino* as "very intelligent and different"[7] and recounting his excitement at finding a poster of the film even in Martin Scorsese's home in Hollywood.[8]

The plot revolves around the antiquarian Alfredo Martelli (Marcello Mastroianni), arrested on suspicion of murdering his former lover Adalgisa De Matteis (Micheline Presle), a bourgeois Roman woman. Considered the last person to have seen her alive, Alfredo becomes the prime suspect; he is acquitted only at the

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[7] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

[8] Petri, *Miscellanea di interviste* s.d.

end of the film, when the real murderer is revealed. The narrative structure alternates between the present of the investigation and the protagonist's recollections: the flashbacks, far from clarifying the contours of the crime, instead sketch the moral portrait of an opportunistic, petty, and cowardly man. This intertwined structure, weaving together individual memory and judicial procedure, openly evokes a Kafkaesque atmosphere, recalling in several respects *The Trial* (see Grippa, Toson 2023, 83).

Flashbacks are a central feature of Petri's poetics from his very debut. In a 1961 questionnaire, the director observed:

> *L'assassino* è vecchio per tante altre ragioni, ma non per i flash-back. Semmai l'uso del flash-back avrebbe potuto essere più elettrizzante, più a frantumi, e l'incastro più audace; ma si è avuto paura di fare un film sperimentale. Si potrebbe persino fare un film in cui presente, passato e futuro si mescolino, e nello stesso Assassino c'è un rozzo tentativo di flash-in-avanti; spero che il cinema progredisca anche in questa direzione[9]

Revolutionary and visionary, Petri's style was not well received by critics. The film in fact suffered a particularly harsh act of censorship, with over a hundred cuts concerning references to the homosexuality of a secondary character, collective fears of the police, and the repressive methods of the security forces (Procino 2014, 76). Petri himself denounced the intervention, defining it as "an arbitrary act" and emphasising how censorship had acted "against the very law it is supposed to defend", without any real justification of public order or morality.[10]

If the film's production and distribution history reveals a complex trajectory, even more surprising was the decision to set one of the flashbacks in the Museum of the Roman Ships at Nemi. Roughly thirty minutes into the film, Alfredo, Adalgisa, and Cristina (Nicoletta Nogaro) descend from the village of Nemi towards the Sanctuary of Diana and arrive at the museum. Before entering, they encounter Morello (Andrea Checchi), a young man who refuses to join them, dismissing the ships as a disappointment: a line that foreshadows the sense of disorientation the viewer will feel before a space now emptied of its original function.

Inside, the three walk among the ruins of the damaged pavilion. The metal skeleton of the surviving ship is visible, together with the fire-blackened remains and the contrast between what had been reconstructed and what remained in ruins. Their dialogues, light

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9 Petri, *Risposta [dattiloscritto] a un questionario* 1961.

10 Petri, *Lettera dattiloscritta al critico Morandini* 1961.

and disengaged, conflict with the gravity of the place: "But why did the Germans destroy these beautiful Roman ships?" asks Cristina; "Because they are Germans!" replies Alfredo, with an air of flippant arrogance, bordering on the ridiculous. The character's superficial irony clashes with the symbolic weight of the building: a monument of Fascist architecture, destroyed by fire and resonant with the consequences of the Second World War (see Grippa, Toson 2023, 81-100).

Figure 4 Elio Petri, *L'assassino* (1961). Nicoletta (Cristina Gajoni) in the right pavilion, with the ruins of the ships in the background, still video (28'44")

A particularly interesting aspect concerns the evolution of the screenplay, now preserved in the National Cinema Archive in Turin, in the Elio Petri and Pasquale Festa Campanile collections, whose unpublished documents are made available here for the first time. The sequence of versions reveals significant variations. In the earliest draft, the museum sequence is entirely absent. In a second version, entitled *L'assassino seconda parte*, the action takes place in an "Trattoria all'aperto su un lago dei Castelli".[11] A third draft, dated 1960 and signed by all four screenwriters, relocates the action to the Museum of the Roman Ships – "Museo delle Navi romane. Nemi. Interno. Giorno"[12] – thus defining what would later become the final version.

Here the protagonists are described as "leaning against a balustrade on the first floor". The reference to the "raised floor"

[11] Festa Campanile, *L'assassino seconda parte, secondo tempo della sceneggiatura* s.d., 340-3.

[12] Festa Campanile et al., *L'assassino sceneggiatura* 1960, 79-87.

reflects the viewing logic conceived by Morpurgo in the 1930s, when, before the war, it was possible to observe the ships from above. The stage direction adds:

> Il museo è deserto. Al pianterreno al centro, lo scheletro metallico sul quale prima della guerra poggiava la nave romana ritrovata sul fondo del lago di Nemi.[13]

This note highlights the presence of the ship's mere material traces, transforming its residual image into a sort of ghost still inhabiting the cinematic space.

Petri's directorial choice turns the ruined museum space into a true dramaturgical device. The camera follows the characters among the charred beams and pillars of the ruined right-hand pavilion, while their frivolous dialogues heighten the contrast with the materiality of the ruins. The spectator is confronted with a short-circuit: the words seem to ignore the tragedy, yet the images of the ruins function as a mute but insistent language, contradicting the lightness of the dialogues (see Grippa, c.d.s.).

Figure 5 Elio Petri, *L'assassino* (1961). Adalgisa (Micheline Presle) in the restored central gallery of the museum, still video (30′)

In this light, the inclusion of the Nemi Museum is not simply a picturesque choice or one functional to the flashback, but a deliberate and partly subversive gesture. Petri appropriates a site conceived and celebrated as a monument of Fascist rhetoric in order to return it in inverted form: no longer a space of imperial and identitarian

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13 Festa Campanile et al., *L'assassino sceneggiatura* 1960, 79.

exaltation, but a scenario of ruin, an emptied place, an allegory of a past surviving only as a ghost. If in the 1930s the museum stood as a symbol of the regime's power and of its ability to recover the signs of the '*Romanitas*', in the 1961 film it becomes the ironic and bitter backdrop to a love triangle, the profile of a petty man, and the reflection of a post-war Italy marked by compromises and repression. In this sense, Petri's choice assumes a speculative and critical value concerning the memory of ruins: architectural space is reinscribed in cinema as a locus of void and conflict, where the memory of the regime fractures and reveals its deepest contradictions.

In this sequence the void manifests itself in diverse forms: as erasure (the irreversible absence of the ships), as latency (the traces retaining the memory of what once was), and as potentiality (the space reactivated by cinema and opened to new interpretations). The museum, emptied and incomplete, thus becomes the stage for a meditation on memory and oblivion: not a mere backdrop, but a place where the ghost of the ships survives through the cinematic image.

5 Conclusions: Languages of the Void Between Documentation and Memory

The trajectory reconstructed here shows how the case of the Nemi ships constitutes a genuine visual laboratory in which the tensions between images, memory, and absence are reflected in different ways. In the 1920s and 1930s, photographs, newsreels, and documentaries contributed to transforming the recovery enterprise into a major media event, heavily laden with political and propagandistic significance. The abundant images of the re-emerging ships did not merely document a technical-archaeological achievement, but became part of a narrative celebrating the so-called '*Romanitas*' and Fascist modernity, inscribing the enterprise within the regime's broader project of symbolic appropriation of the past.

The fire of 1944, which irreparably destroyed the ships, produced a radical fracture in this history: from then on, the Museum of Roman Ships no longer housed tangible artefacts, but the sign of a loss. It is precisely within this void – both material and memorial – that those new possibilities for narration opened up. The proposals advanced by Ucelli and Tursini, oriented towards preserving the ruins as an integral part of the display, reveal how, already in the immediate post-war years, there was an awareness of the need to transform destruction into a narrative device, inscribing the memory of trauma into the museum space.

In the 1960s, this very condition was re-elaborated by cinema. In *L'assassino* (1961), the museum is reinscribed in the film in an inverted form: no longer a symbol of power and restituted '*Romanitas*', but

rather a scenario of ruin and absence. The ruins become an ironic yet unsettling backdrop, transforming the museum into a critical device capable of fracturing the memory of the regime and exposing its contradictions.

The case of Nemi thus allows us to observe a trajectory that extends from the 'fullness' of images and monumental architecture of the 1930s to the evocative power of the 'void' in the 1960s. From fullness to void, from celebration to ruin, from images as propaganda to images as memorial speculation: the museum becomes the palimpsest of these transformations, a site in which the ships survive as ghosts, through traces and images rather than as material objects.

This reflection retains contemporary relevance. In the present context of studies on memory, images, and musealisation, the case of Nemi demonstrates how the representation of absence can itself become a tool of knowledge and critical interpretation. The Nemi ships, lost forever, continue to live on in photographs, films, and works. These documents finally recount their fate: a testimony to how the void can become memory, and how images can restore presence to what no longer exists.

Abbreviations of Archives Cited

ASMUST = Archivio Storico del Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia 'Leonardo Da Vinci', Milano.
MNCTO = Archivio Storico del Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino.

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Void and Residual Traces

Imperceptibility as Feminist Epistemology in the Work of Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman

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Abstract   Imperceptibility is not a lack but a feminist way of knowing. Focusing on works by three women artists – Eva Hesse, Ana Mendieta, and Francesca Woodman – produced amid the long 1970s, this essay shows how thresholds, traces, and blur redirect attention from what artworks display to how they withhold and delay legibility. Centring artist-material intra-action, it interrogates visibility-as-truth, the 'neutral' medium, the disembodied observer, and the premise of self-representation as self-restoration. It politicises attention, reframes absence as a mode of presence, and relocates evidence to process, relation, and duration. The essay moves beyond visibility-as-remedy towards conditions of appearance, withholding, and resonance.

Keywords   Imperceptibility. Feminist epistemology. Intra-action. Situated knowledges. Absence. Material-discursive practice.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 Literature Review. – 3 Thresholds of the Near-Form. – 4 Acts and Remainders: Index, Duration, Opacity. – 5 Conclusion.

1   Introduction

> To see from below is neither easily learned nor
> unproblematic: to see differently is to risk the
> blindness that also makes vision possible.
>   (Donna J. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 1988)

Donna Haraway's reminder frames the inquiry this essay explores: how imperceptible cues reorient ways of seeing and knowing that do not rely on frontal clarity (Haraway 1988, 583). In 1968, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler named a broader shift – 'dematerialisation' – in which conception and process displaced the finished object, giving abstraction a non-visual inflection (Lippard, Chandler 1968). The reception cliché of 'not enough to look at' registers a recalibration from visual plenitude to durational engagement, far from abolishing aesthetics, this moment exposed the assumptions of order, clarity, and unity, and integrated method into artistic procedure. Within the late-1960s-1970s milieu, and alongside Women's Liberation Movement (especially consciousness-raising), artists pushed toward voids, attenuations, and traces, staging corporeality as partial, deferred, or indexical. Art-viewing moved from instant recognition to negotiated encounter, where perception and interpretation unfold over time. As attention shifted from frontal presentation to procedures, withholding became legible as epistemic work – a way to know bodies without submitting them to full view.

This essay argues that imperceptible cues operate as a feminist epistemic strategy. Through close analyses of works by Eva Hesse (1936-1970), Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), and Francesca Woodman (1958-1981), it examines imperceptibility as both a material procedure and a phenomenological effect, interrogating visibility-as-truth and redistributing evidence across delay, relation, and situated encounter. Two threads structure this interleaved comparative reading: Thresholds and Time / Index / Documentation.

Methodologically, I draw on situated knowledges, diffractive reading, and close, practice-led "writing with" artworks (Rogoff 2002, 48). Here, epistemology names the historically produced rules that organise what counts as knowledge in art – who is authorised to know, how bodies become legible, and which criteria secure claims. I use Karen Barad's intra-action to denote that agencies and objects emerge through material-discursive apparatuses; medium and matter co-constitute procedures (Barad 2007). Against late-1960s-early-1980s Euro-American debates on 'female imagery', I argue that the perceptual and material procedures by which artworks stage imperceptibility remain under-specified as a cross-media feminist operation. Hesse, Mendieta, and Woodman rethink corporeal materiality and de-hierarchise artist-material relations. Read together, the chapters test how gendered bodies become knowable

without full disclosure, interrogate period assumptions about medium, visibility, and truth, and unsettle media hierarchies.

2 Literature Review

In "Notes on the Index", Rosalind Krauss characterises art of the long 1970s as "diversified, split, factionalised" and proposes the 'index' to grasp this dispersion. By 'index' she refers to a sign physically caused by and contiguous with its referent; its force is *thereness* rather than iconographic resemblance (Krauss 1977, 68, 78). Mary Ann Doane sharpens the point: the index's *thereness* loosens expressivity and unsettles a unified, authorial "I"; in the trace, "things speak themselves", and the artist pivots from delivering a finished image to selecting and framing conditions (Doane 2007, 3). Imperceptibility marks the 'intra-actions' at play and the interpretive routes they open. Barad defines 'intra-action' as the "mutual constitution of entangled agencies" through material-discursive apparatuses; agencies and objects emerge together – medium and matter co-constitute procedures (Barad 2007, 33, 139-41). In this shift toward dematerialisation, artists turned to voids, attenuations, and traces, staging corporeality as partial, deferred, or indexical (Lippard, Chandler 1968; 1999, 46-8).

Women artists have long worked with – and at times refused – the repertoire of cultural figuration. Within and around the Women's Liberation Movement, "the personal is political" and consciousness-raising positioned lived experience as method (Hanisch 1970). In art discourse, the 'female imagery' controversy crystallised with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's essay in *Womanspace Journal* (1973), advancing 'central-core' imagery – especially the vulvar motif – as a tactic against cultural loathing (Chicago, Schapiro 1973, 14). As the position travelled transatlantically, critics challenged essentialist accounts of female iconography. The polemic hardened into a binary that fixed the epistemic status of imagery either transparently affirmative or inherently suspect – inviting verdicts on 'essentialism' at the expense of attention to display and spectatorship (Jones 1996, 98). Michele Barrett traces the mixed reception to a structural risk of centralised imagery: visibility may operate as a situated tactic of recognition, but it does not guarantee empowering readings; effects remain contingent on reception (Barrett 1982, 46-7). This essay responds by shifting the analytic locus from icon to encounter: thresholds, traces, and temporal indices relocate evidentiary force to procedures and conditions of appearance.

Feminist epistemology asks how gendered assumptions shape inquiry and disadvantage subordinated groups. Haraway contests classical binaries by insisting that vision is embodied. Set against

Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (1986), she names disembodied sight the "god trick" (Haraway 1988, 581, 583): only situated, partial perspectives are objective; making one's stance, instruments, and limits explicit enables accountable seeing. Together with Barad's 'agential realism', this reframing centres material process and resists over-reliance on signification (Haraway 1988; Barad 2003, 815). Methodologically, it links lived experience to procedure and treats change as constitutive, revisiting accounts of 'woman' as a cultural sign.

Aligning with Marsha Meskimmon's account of how art thinks through matter, artworks function as *Gedankenexperimente* (thought experiments) – material thought that generates knowledge (Meskimmon 2019). I follow Alexandra Irimia in treating imperceptible cues as 'empty signifiers' that stage absence through their own rhetoric and topography (Irimia 2018). Extending this, I frame imperceptibility as an indexical operation within a rhetoric of absence, without collapsing it into ontological lack.

Across Hesse, Mendieta, and Woodman, imperceptibility foregrounds material-discursive practice and reorients how feminist art history locates appearance and evidence, shifting authority from the mastering gaze. Each tests her medium's evidentiary logics: Hesse's cavities specify space as negative measure; Mendieta's silhouettes index site as an after-the-fact condition; Woodman's blur makes visibility itself a parameter rather than a guarantee. All three artists keep the work's 'subject' open, loosening the seam between icon, essence, and material effect. Imperceptible cues organise attention, distribute evidentiary force over time, and dignify selective appearance. This widens what may count as 'female imagery' and unsettles habits that equate clarity with truth or self-imaging with self-restoration.

3   Thresholds of the Near-Form

Thresholds of the near-form keep visibility in reserve: cavities, coverings, and blurs hold form almost present and make attention itself the site of knowledge. In *Hang Up* (1966) **[fig. 1]**, German-born American sculptor Eva Hesse makes the cavity a measure, turning frame and interval into the work's subject and holding form at the edge of appearance. Secured to a blank wall, a wrapped, thickened rectangular frame encloses only the wall; from its lower edge a coated cord exits, arcs into the room, and yields to gravity. By presenting only the margins, Hesse converts frame and void into material presence, collapsing painting's perimeter into sculptural space (Potts 2000, 337). The frame behaves like a skin that encloses "nothing", while the cord literalises a measured leak – time made

visible. Hesse called this extremity an "unknown quality" in which the object "accedes to its non-logical self", later remarking that *Hang Up* was "the most important early statement" of that drive (Lippard 1976, 56, 67).
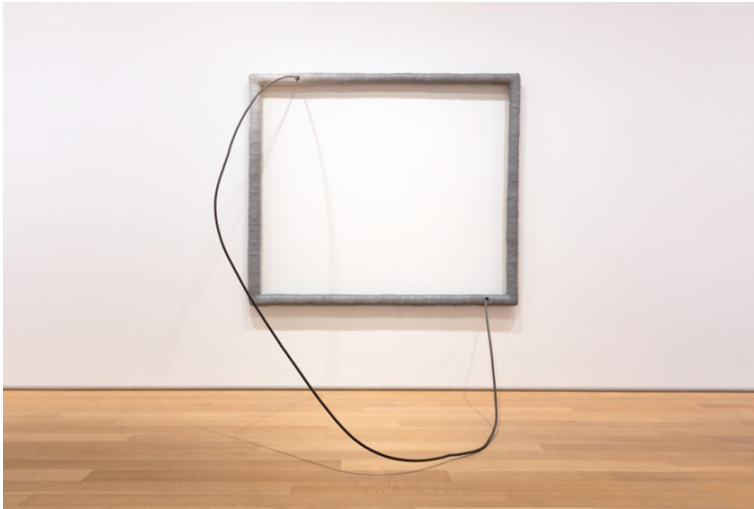

Figure 1   Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*. 1966. Acrylic paint on cloth over wood; acrylic paint on cord over steel tube, 182.9 × 213.4 × 198.1 cm. Art Institute of Chicago. © The Estate of Eva Hesse; Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Contrary to Minimalism's unitary clarity, Hesse uses materials as a mode of thinking. Rope, cord, latex, fibreglass, and rubber are tested at their limits of weight, elasticity, and tactility; wrapping and skinning produce surfaces that look sealed yet behave in time. Present effects – tension and measured descent – are read backward to prior operations (wrapping, piercing) and forward to ongoing forces (gravity). Hesse retains pared literalness yet lets matter exceed schema, keeping perceptual ambiguity active (Shapiro 1973, 77). This process, here termed 'rewinding materialisation', selects and handles matter so as to cue earlier states of making and ongoing forces.

Soft, permeable edges trouble the frame's right angles. Even as *Hang Up* aims at geometry, its friable skin pushes meaning toward experiential relation rather than fixed form (Lippard 1976, 56). Negative space, constructed by literal means, both affirms and dismantles pictorial limits. The work is at once pictorial and sculptural: as sculpture it exposes and defeats the picture's perimeter; as picture it remains tethered to literal presence – a "mutual cancellation" that Hesse turns into a challenge for perception (Fer 1999, 34). Attention shifts from image to proprioception; reception becomes

retroactive and durational rather than instantaneous. In this sense, *Hang Up* unsettles iconographic reading and Minimalist 'Gestalt' by distributing evidentiary force across materials, processes, and intervals instead of centring a coherent image and mastering gaze (Irigaray 1985, 29). Suspended between structure and reference, *Hang Up* functions as a tabula rasa whose surface is as vulnerable and provisional as its meanings. Its near-form keeps appearance selective, dignifying what remains withheld while insisting on presence through procedure.

In Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta's *Silueta* series (1973-80), imperceptible silhouettes operate as site-indexed thresholds: co-produced by body, place, and camera, and disclosed through documentation. Imperceptibility functions both as material procedure and as phenomenological effect, unsettling the assumption that stable form guarantees stable knowledge – or a coherent national identity (Blocker 1999; Kwon 1996). Here, *phenomenological* signals an analysis grounded in the material sensorium of time and process – weight, rhythm, seepage – and in how such cues reorganise attention. Following Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility, vision solicits tactile imagination; cavities, mud, and ash are felt as much as seen (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 66).

Figure 2
Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, from *Silueta Works in Mexico 1973-77*. 1973. Chromogenic print, 50.8 × 34 cm. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC; Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Source: Photo Don Ross, courtesy SFMOMA

Located in a Zapotec tomb at Yagul, *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) **[fig. 2]** shows Mendieta lying supine, arms close to the torso, legs pressed together. Small white flowers cover the body, softening contour and partially obscuring facial features. Photographed from overhead, the concavity acts as a soft container; low light reduces contrast. As the eye acclimatises, the sensorium – cool stone, soft petals, humid air – comes forward, soliciting tactile imagination. The image oscillates between two registrations: a literal body in a grave-like hollow and an emergent outline that hovers in perception. Rather than stabilising identity by iconic visibility, the work proposes a relational topology – concavity, cover, containment – that recurs across actions and sites as a procedure of appearance (Rosenthal 2013, 208, 244).

Figure 3
Ana Mendieta, *Untitled*: *Silueta Series, Mexico*. 1976. Chromogenic print, 33.7 × 50.5 cm. Richard Saltoun. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC; Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co

Indexically – through contact and displacement – the *Silueta* series stages absence while keeping it perceptible as trace, residue, and afterimage (Mourey 1987, 42-3). Its low-amplitude presence questions whether intact presentation secures identity or belonging, unsettling expectations of transparency. Mendieta's practice becomes one of making and unmaking identity through acts-in-place – igniting, eroding, imprinting – with sites that co-author the work. The choice of a pre-Columbian funerary site invokes histories of colonisation and

resistance without reducing the work to heritage display (Blocker 1999). *Imagen de Yagul* stages embodiment through reversible body-world relations, so presence and absence are co-implicated rather than opposed, preparing Mendieta's further procedures: processual recognition at the shoreline (1976) **[fig. 3]**, where foam and tide alternately make and unmake the silhouette, and act-based politics in *Ánima* (1976) **[fig. 4]**, where fire announces presence as event and remainder (Jones 1998, 41).

Figure 4   Ana Mendieta, *Ánima (Alma/Soul)*. 1976. Chromogenic print, 34.3 × 50.8 cm.
Smithsonian American Art Museum. © 1976 Estate of Ana Mendieta

4 Acts and Remainders: Index, Duration, Opacity

From blur to tide to skin, indexical time – exposure blur, tidal overwrite, material ageing – reframes what counts as evidentiary force and trains attention as an ethical practice. Centring on Woodman's self-portraits and bridging to Mendieta and Hesse, I treat 'documentation as disappearance' as an epistemic tactic that secures a right to opacity, shifting certainty from the iconography of the 'female image' to procedures of making. In this register, presence is relocated from image to procedure – acts, intervals, traces – so that opacity functions as a discipline of attention.

American photographer Francesca Woodman (1958-1981) suspends subject-certainty through temporal blur and framing cuts; imperceptibility functions as a selective, durational staging of appearance. Building on Harriet Riches's account of spectral effects,

this chapter identifies three operators – temporal blur, 'agential' framing cuts, and craft-coded making – through which Woodman shifts visibility's truth-claim from clarity to criteria (Riches 2004). Drawing on Camiel van Winkel's analysis of culture's pressure to visualise even the non-visual, Woodman's practice demonstrates that the regime is co-produced by camera, duration, and site; the 'self' does not precede representation but is constituted within it (van Winkel 2005, 15). This process is here termed 'spectral internalisation': the image folds time, cut, and site inward so that 'ghostliness' denotes an epistemic delay rather than disappearance or transcendence.

Figure 5
Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island. 1976. Gelatin silver print on paper, 13.9 × 13.9 cm. Tate. © Woodman Family Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London

Figure 6
Francesca Woodman, *Space²*, Providence, Rhode Island. 1976. Gelatin silver print on paper, 13.9 × 13.9 cm. Tate. © Woodman Family Foundation / ARS, New York and DACS, London

In *Space²* (1976) **[fig. 5]**, a small square print, Woodman stands in a bare corner; light enters from a right-hand window, only its inner frame visible. Her feet – firmly planted, the right slightly ahead – are crisp; pointed heels cast narrow shadows that pierce the floor, anchoring the gaze. Above the knees, the torso dissolves into motion blur, arms leaning forward as if moments from touching the ground. In another *Space²*, Providence (1976) **[fig. 6]**, she occupies the corner with feet hip-width apart; the torso is more legible, broad shadows fall behind, and the face blurs with head movement, resisting photographic clarity (Krauss 1999, 162). *Space²* foregrounds photographic temporality: what appears instantaneous is the record of an interval. Blur functions as an index of time; the figure is not a disappearance but a redistribution of 'self' across duration and exposure. Thus the image makes its own construction legible – time, cut, and site become subjects of the work, and 'ghostliness' signals epistemic delay.

In the *House* photographs (1975-76), dilapidated interiors recur as staged domesticities – laboratories for light, shadow, and the recording of movement. Rather than a space that devours the subject, peeling walls and seams operate as an apparatus of appearance, a domestic lab that tests visibility (Solomon-Godeau 1986). In *House #3* (1975-76) **[fig. 7]**, cracked plaster and placed debris lead the eye to a single shoe as the body whirls into blown-out window light; in *House #4* (1975-76) **[fig. 8]**, the figure slips behind a mantel into the *hors-champ* (off-screen space) remainder (Deleuze 1986, 30). These images are assembled with tripod, timer, calibrated daylight; taped paper, panes, and scraps act as working elements. Following Schapiro and Melissa Meyer, Woodman's procedures read as a camera-based 'femmage': layering, cutting, and assembling within a domestic register (Schapiro, Meyer 1977-78; Bryan-Wilson 2017, 13-14). She de-hierarchises the alignment of 'masculine mechanism' with 'culture' and 'feminine domesticity' with the 'decorative' (Auther 2010, xi). Through this, Woodman contests photography's myth of automaticity: her photographs result from chosen, crafted assembly rather than mechanical capture. The dilapidated house becomes an active surface into which the body can disappear – a macrocosm of Woodman's 'spectral internalisation'. "It's a matter of convenience; I am always available", she remarked – a wry acknowledgment of the self as material at hand, and a form of craft (Rankin 1998, 35). The prints' small scale fosters close looking, opening a self-reflexive space to consider how the self is constituted through procedures of making and seeing. Thus Woodman's ghostly blurs are crafted processes that make the conditions of selfhood's visibility palpable.

In the shoreline *Silueta* (1976) **[fig. 3]**, Mendieta excavates a body-sized cavity at the waterline and photographs from a fixed vantage as the tide advances. Small waves briefly complete the figure with foam; larger waves erase its edges, dispersing pigment and effacing the outline. Process becomes legible as holding, filling, and erasing – governed by porosity, grain size, wave interval, wind – and by framing and sequence. As Jane Blocker notes, Mendieta's representational modes mirror travel's departures and arrivals: the absent body suspends signifier-signified closure and substitutes cyclical return for narrative

finality (Blocker 1999). The silhouette functions as an apparatus of emplacement, visible only insofar as it momentarily holds water, foam, or pigment; presence is encountered as 'event' rather than as stable form.

In concert with Woodman – whose 'spectral internalisation' folds time into the image via long exposure so that the self is constituted within camera, duration, and site – Mendieta entrusts time to tide and shore; 'what counts' appears between element and image, and the document keeps that in-between open to view (van Winkel 2005, 15; Kwon 1996).

Figure 9 Eva Hesse, Contingent. 1969. Fibreglass, polyester resin, latex and cheesecloth, eight units, 350 × 630 × 109 cm. National Gallery of Australia. © The Estate of Eva Hesse; Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Extending this logic materially, Hesse's *Contingent* (1969) **[fig. 9]** behaves as a time-porous skin: making and unmaking are co-legible. The rigid bite of fibreglass abuts the fragility of latex; heavier attachments pull sheets taut while light seeps through thinned skins, staging a poised contrast between endurance and susceptibility (Lippard 1976; Potts 2000). Imperceptibility here is a managed delay – never fully pictorial, never mere 'material' – a 'non-' zone between formation and deterioration. Over the course of display, the banners embrittle and no longer tolerate strong light; altered by the same forces that formed them, unmaking becomes their mode of making. This 'rewinding materialisation' trains perception

retroactively: viewers read present effects (sag, glow, brittleness) back to prior procedures (impregnation, layering, suspension) and forward to forces still acting (Potts 2000).

The result is a durational, "anamorphic mode" of viewing: order appears in one sweep and dissolves in another, so that evidentiary force arises from intervals and thresholds rather than from a single, mastering glance (Krauss 1999, 99). Together with Woodman's temporal blur and Mendieta's tidal sequence, Hesse's installation confirms the chapter's claim: index and duration do the epistemic work. Opacity emerges not as withdrawal but as an ethics of attention that dignifies selective appearance and keeps knowledge answerable to time, site, and material change (Riches 2004; Kwon 1996; Potts 2000).

5 Conclusion

This dissertation argues that imperceptibility is not a lack but a feminist epistemological strategy: a way of knowing that unsettles the certainties of visibility, mastery, and presence. Through Hesse's 'rewinding materialisation', Mendieta's dispersing silhouettes, and Woodman's spectral blurs, I show that works are apprehended less by what they disclose than by how they withhold, delay, or elide their own conditions of legibility. As John Berger reminds us, perception is selective, organised by learned schemata; what falls outside dominant frames can remain unseen even when materially present (Berger 1973). Imperceptibility exposes this tension between the visible and the invisible by relocating attention to processes, intervals, and traces.

Two insights follow. First, phenomenological encounters with imperceptible procedures cultivate perception differently: they slow and politicise attention, aligning with feminist accounts that centre the material, affective, and sensory webs through which the world becomes meaningful (Haraway 1988; Barad 2003). Imperceptibility thereby enacts a politics of perception, making the unapparent a site of feminist force. Second, imperceptibility destabilises entrenched binaries – presence/absence, form/content – and reorients feminist art history from visibility-as-remedy toward conditions of appearance, withholding, and resonance.

Methodologically, a practice-led, 'writing with' approach allows attentional and material procedures to test theory *in situ* (Rogoff 2002). In dialogue with Meskimmon's account of art as material thought, I treat artworks as *Gedankenexperimente* that generate knowledge through handling, duration, and site (Meskimmon 2019). Reading Hesse, Mendieta, and Woodman together is not to fuse them

into a style but to let their divergences work diffractively, so that difference itself carries analytic and political force (Barad 2007).

This study has limits. Its Euro-American focus risks reproducing the frames it critiques, and its readings remain entangled with established receptions. Future research should widen the scope of imperceptibility across other geographies, media, and ecologies, and attend to how our disciplinary binaries – object/process, evidence/affect – quietly organise interpretation.

If absence is approached as surplus, this conclusion withholds closure. To attend to imperceptibility is to remain attuned to resonance, to think 'with' rather than only 'about' artworks. The urgent task may be less to 'discover' what was never acknowledged than to return to what has been sedimented in our habits of seeing and made imperceptible by repetition and selective forgetting. What appears absent may be what we once attended to and then allowed to recede. The epistemic payoff, then, is not only to open new objects of study but to reconfigure how we read the already-known: how might reading again through gaps, traces, and withholdings reorient what we thought we understood about feminist art strategies – and about art history itself?

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Reading the Void: Nil Yalter's Semiotics of the Body

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Abstract   This article examines Nil Yalter's seminal work *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974), reinterpreting the void not as a category of absence but as a semiotic strategy – a relational field in which body, text, and viewer converge. The analysis unfolds along three interrelated axes: erasure, latency, and potentiality. Yalter transforms her fragmented, headless body into a dynamic site of resistance and feminist self-inscription, destabilising the conventional gaze and opening new possibilities of meaning. Ultimately, the article demonstrates how the void operates as a performative and political force that actively reconfigures identity, turning absence into an act of emancipation.

Keywords   Void. Nil Yalter. Feminist art. Semiotics of the body. Relational aesthetics. Performance. Video art.

Summary   1 Introduction and Theoretical Framework. – 2 Literature Review. – 3 Spatial and Visual Void: Pre-Text and Relational Space. – 4 Synecdoche: Object/Subject of Desire. – 5 Erasure: Headless Body. – 6 Latency: Deferred Presence in Absence. – 7 Potentiality: Generative Force of the Void. – 8 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Nil Yalter's *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974) presents a critical paradox; it is an uncompromising act of feminist self-inscription that transforms corporeal presence and fragmentation into a site of embodied agency **[fig. 1]**. Using a Portapak camera,[1] Yalter isolates the abdomen as a surface of inscription while deliberately excluding the head from the frame. This partial visibility of the body and the absent head establish a 'visual void' as a semiotic strategy, to reconfigure the subject's presence. This compositional choice disrupts the organic perception of corporeality and unsettles conventional structures of representation. Circular ink patterns transition to vertical lines, tracing a rhythm that reflects women's long-term experience of violence. In this work, the void becomes a relational condition, expressive and generative, through which Yalter inscribes herself in a position of resistance. This approach is consistent with Yalter's own critical methodology, where she highlights the body as a site of social commentary:

> By using new media in the field of art, by working on cultural topography, I process the body of the artist aging in a degenerating society. The body of the artist is a vector for social topics [...] I am a female shaman on a knife's edge. The surface I write my message on is my own skin. (Yalter 2001, 1857-60)

In the following pages, the void is explored in semiotic terms, positioned as an aesthetic and feminist strategy that radically redefines the relationship between body, text, and viewer. This analysis is structured along three interrelated axes: erasure, understood as the strategic subtraction of dominant representational codes; latency, conceived as a temporal suspension in which meaning is deferred; and potentiality, interpreted as the opening towards alternative subjectivities and historical narratives.

Methodologically, this discussion synthesises diverse theoretical lenses: the semiotics of the void (Burini 2010); the aesthetics of emptiness in Eastern philosophy (Pasqualotto 2001); and feminist theory (Cixous 1975; Pollock 1996; Bal 1996; Kristeva 2009; Braidotti 1994). By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the article

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1 The arrival of the Portapak – a lightweight, portable camera – in Europe in 1967 opened the practice of videoart to feminist and militant discourse. Video thus becomes a medium to denounce, transmit, and create, giving visibility and voice to women's experiences. See the transcription of the podcast "Art et féminismes: episode 2. Nil Yalter, *La femme sans tête*, 1974", Centre Pompidou. https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Un_podcast__une_oeuvre_-_Art_et_feminisme_-_Ep._2_Nil_Yalter_-_transcription.pdf.

demonstrates how Yalter transforms absence and emptiness into a site of resistance and renegotiation.
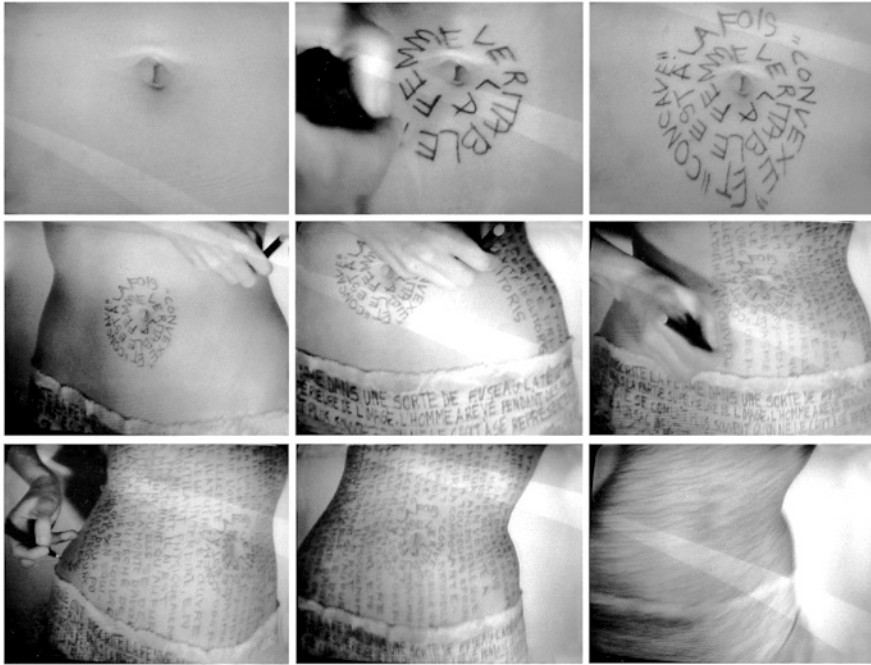
The void has been explored across diverse theoretical traditions relevant to Yalter's practice. Within feminist art history, Griselda Pollock (1996) and Mieke Bal (1996) demonstrated how visual culture inscribes yet contests gendered representations, framing the female body as a site of discursive struggle. Their analyses provide a framework to understand Yalter's performance as a negotiation with dominant cultural codes.[2] This study, therefore, offers a new interpretative framework, positioning the void not as a category of emptiness but as

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2   The main existing scholarship on Yalter's work includes: Dumont, *Nil Yalter*; MAC VAL, *Nil Yalter: TRANS/HUMANCE*; Smolik, "Nil Yalter"; ArtReview, *Nil Yalter: Exile Is a Hard Job*; Nil Yalter, *Temporary Dwellings* (1974-2005), Tate Collection. `https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/yalter-temporary-dwellings-t13652`; Museum Ludwig, *Nil Yalter*; ReactFeminism, "Nil Yalter – *La femme sans tête* (1974)"; Dumont, "Interview with Nil Yalter".

a productive field of relational aesthetics.[3] From a broader feminist theoretical perspective, Hélène Cixous's seminal essay *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975) introduced the notion of *écriture féminine*, where writing becomes an inscription of the female body and destabilises patriarchal language. Julia Kristeva (2009) further expands this view by emphasising the significance of absence in processes of subject formation. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti (1994) develops the concept of "nomadic subjectivity", a critical tool for reading Yalter's fragmented representations of the body and mobile identity.[4]

2 Literature Review

In semiotic theory, notably Lotman's (Burini 2010) concept of the void identifies emptiness as a fundamental problem in cultural semiotics, proposing that meaning emerges not only from signs but also from silences and unarticulated spaces.[5] This theoretical framework

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3 Nil Yalter's exploration of the void and fragmentation is consistent throughout her work. For example, Yalter has focused on immigration. In *Exile Is a Hard Job* (1983), the social invisibility of migrant women underscores displacement and marginality, while in the *Migrations/Passages* series (1973-75), fragmented and masked bodies operate as surfaces of inscription, reflecting on corporeality and relational identity. Across these works, the void functions as a generative semiotic and performative strategy, revealing also its significance as a feminist tactic of resistance and renegotiation.

4 Rosi Braidotti's notion of "nomadic subjectivity" (1994) emphasises the fluid, relational, and processual nature of identity, which is continuously produced through interactions with multiple forces, bodies, and discourses. In describing this figure, Braidotti engages in a dialogue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), particularly with the concept of the deterritorialisation of knowledge – a rhizomatic mode of thought which, rejecting the idea of a centre and of an authentic identity, traces networks of connections and transitions between experiences. As Braidotti states: "Nomadic shifts designate therefore a creative sort of becoming; a performative metaphor that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction of experience and of knowledge" (Braidotti 1994, 6). In dialogue with Deleuze's semiotics and diagrammatic understanding of substance and matter, subjectivity is not a pre-existing, autonomous center but emerges from assemblages of relations and differences. Considering also Foucault, as reread by Deleuze, the focus shifts from tracing a historical referent – such as the gendered, racialised, human, or natural body – to examining the regime of objects and power relations that constitute it. These include forms of domination and subordination that participate in processes of becoming (Demaria 2019). Yalter's performances, with their segmented and mobile representations of the body, exemplify this perspective by deterritorialising normative identities and foregrounding the semiotic-material processes through which subjectivity and alterity are produced, including attention to the women and their cultural figurations.

5 Lotman in 1993 dictated an article entitled "The Void as a Fundamental Problem" where he argues that it is only under the conditions of an empty space-time that the world gains the possibility of movement. This concept connects to Lotman's idea – previously expressed in other writings including *La cultura e l'esplosione* (1993) – that the path of the individual, and the humanity, is marked by unrealised possibilities and lost roads, often dismissed by Hegelian tradition (Burini 2010, 20-2).

enables us to reimagine emptiness as a space of possibility rather than negation.

Further contributions from performance studies and visual culture provide additional grounding. Peggy Phelan (1993) argues that performance is defined by disappearance and non-reproducibility, suggesting that invisibility itself may be a source of meaning. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1996) conceptualise the *Corps sans Organes* (CsO), thereby disrupting the unity of the organic body and opening a field of multiple becomings – a perspective resonant with Yalter's headless figure.

This synthesis suggests that the void should not be understood merely as absence, but as a dynamic site of negotiation, resistance, and potentiality. Against this backdrop, the article sets out to examine Yalter's *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* through the interrelated lenses of erasure, latency, and potentiality.

3 Spatial and Visual Void: Pre-Text and Relational Space

The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance (1974) is a twenty-four-minute video performance in which the camera frames the artist's abdomen in close-up. Yalter inscribes circular lines from the poet and anthropologist René Nelli's *Erotique et civilisations* (1972) in black ink on her skin.[6] The performance features Turkish music and Yalter's voice reading the text aloud:

> La femme est à la fois convexe and concave, mais encore faut-il qu'on ne l'ait point privée, moralement ou physiquement, du centre principal de sa convexité: le clitoris. (René Nelli 1972)[7]

The black handwriting on the light skin of her belly, amplified by the black-and-white contrast, thus denounces a specific form of violence

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[6] Nil Yalter left Turkey in the 1960s for Paris, just before the events of May 1968, a period of social and political upheaval. She navigates two realities: the contestatory atmosphere of France and the repressive political climate in Turkey, marked by the 1971 military coup. Her art and her body act as a medium to take a stance, with the camera functioning as a 'carrier pigeon' transmitting political and feminist messages. Nil Yalter experimented with video after initially working with Polaroid photography, which allowed her to capture the instant and exercise immediate control. She found video offered greater freedom because, through the principle of 'feedback', a gesture could be instantly replayed. Yalter described this as discovering a 'bodily writing' that led her toward a more politicised practice. The work was first presented in the international exhibition *ArtVidéo Confrontation* at Arc 2, Paris, at the end of 1974 (Dallier 1975).

[7] The English translation of the quotation inscribed on the abdomen reads: "The true woman is both convex and concave, but only if she has not been deprived, morally or physically, of the main centre of her convexity: the clitoris" (Author's transl.).

against women. Crucially, this gesture also refers to an ancestral Anatolian rite in which an imam writes verses from the Koran on the belly of an infertile or disobedient woman, at her husband's request, in a 'healing' gesture. Once she finishes writing, the artist begins to dance accompanied by traditional Turkish music.[8] Yalter reappropriates this ritual and the traditional dance, juxtaposing it with the text of René Nelli, thereby initiating an act of liberation for both her own body, as a Turkish-born female artist, and for women's body collectively.[9]

In this work, the belly operates as both a blank space and a palimpsest – a surface where text, memory, and discourse coexist in latent form, awaiting activation by the viewer. It is the erasure of the head that, generating a gap that disrupts conventional modes of recognition, elevates the abdomen to a primary site of semiotic focus. Meaning arises through the interplay of visibility and invisibility, of fragments that are revealed and those that are withheld. The performance never offers the viewer a complete body; rather, it stages a partial presence. The resulting fragmented body, composed of the exposed belly, the gesturing hands, and the voice, constructs a relational space in which interpretation requires the viewer's active participation.

4 Synecdoche: Object/Subject of Desire

At the core of Yalter's visual language lies absence and deferment. Yalter's performance transforms the figure into abstraction, by reducing it to a single bodily fragment.[10] This discourse on a body that we never see in its entirety leads us to the use of a specific rhetorical figure, that of the synecdoche. Against the authority of a masculine *logos*, Yalter deploys a form of repetition and mimesis that borders on subversion – a syntax in which the fragments destabilise the unity of the body while affirming its resistant specificity.

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8   Belly dance, originating from the Middle East and Arab countries, was introduced to France in the eighteenth century by Napoleon's soldiers in Egypt, often associated with sensuality. Nil Yalter reclaims this dance as a means of artistic and political expression. Her body becomes a medium for text and memory. In the video, the body is depicted headless, focusing attention on the belly and its movements, transforming the body into a space for narrative and protest. See the transcription of the podcast "Art et féminismes: episode 2. Nil Yalter, *La femme sans tête*, 1974", Centre Pompidou. https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Un_podcast__une_oeuvre_-_Art_et_feminisme_-_Ep._2_Nil_Yalter_-_transcription.pdf.

9   The work evokes Yalter's migration from Turkey to France in 1965, situating the performance within feminist and political contexts.

10   This visual strategy recalls cultural traditions in which women's bodies are revealed only in fragments – for instance, the Islamic practice of partial veiling – yet in this context acquires a critical dimension.

Through synecdoche, Yalter challenges the reduction of women to objects of desire and reclaims the fragment as a locus of agency, resistance, and embodied speech. The performance interrogates the ways in which the female body is produced through power relations, "mapped by phallic desire, and territorialised within oedipal discourse" (de Lauretis 1999, 37; Author's transl.).

Yalter's intervention aligns with feminist understanding of the body as a:

> libidinal surface which allows for the construction of subjectivity through the complex interplay of identifications, and consequently of language and alterity. (Braidotti 1991, 248)[11]

Language, therefore, gives voice to the body – the link between subjectivity and sexuality – through figures, namely the belly in this study, and through a syntax that mimics female desire as a transformative energy that reconfigures the boundary between self and other, subject and object. This metonymic language:

> suggests a continuous, non-hierarchical recontextualization of language and speech, where the metaphorical regime could not escape the patriarchal code of belonging. (Monticelli 1997, 211; Author's transl.)

Furthermore, the metonymic belly functions as a metaphor – a figure for desire that belongs to the realm of the unspoken (Demaria 2019).

This strategy resonates with Hélène Cixous's theorisation of *écriture feminine*, where writing is intimately bound to the female body. The link of body and writing – often figured as maternal milk and ink – expresses the necessity of inscribing feminine experience into discourse (Cixous 1977, 224). *Ècriture* challenges the supremacy of phallocentric language, enabling women to escape roles historically defined by emptiness and silence. In her work, the artist enacts such an inscription by transforming her own body into a site of textual and libidinal expression, a "counter-text, capable of decoding the blank spaces of language" (Demaria 2019, 87; Author's transl.).[12]

Yalter's headless figure, deprived of the traditional site of subjectivization – the face –, suspends recognisability and reconfigures the gaze. The body in the video is deliberately 'gazeless',

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11 Braidotti (1991) draws here on Luce Irigaray's (1987, 420-37) reflections on the relation between the body, subjectivity, and language.

12 This resonates with the libidinal tone of the post-1968 era, when art politics, and eroticism intersected as sites of liberation, and desire became a political and aesthetic tool to challenge systems of domination (Deleuze, Guattari 1972, 121).

a strategy that destabilises the viewer's position. The absence of the head does not suppress vision but rather decentralises it. The viewer is positioned in a displaced and non-neutral relationship to the body on screen, caught within a visual regime that Yalter herself constructs and controls. This shift renders the belly, once an object of male desire, an expressive resource and an operative device through which identity is articulated. This decentralised framing operates as an interface (*sutura*) that binds camera, artist and spectator in a dynamic regime of gazes, determining both the act of being seen and seeing.

The act of writing converges around the navel, transforming it into the focal point of the gaze. As Arasse (1983, 55-70; 2021, 320-7) observed in his analysis of the asymmetrical navel of *Saint Sebastian* (1476) by Antonello da Messina, the navel inscribes in the body the desire of someone who, when looked at, responds to the beholder.[13]

Reinforced by the presence of the circular written word around the same axis, the navel resembles an "eye" that looks back at viewers from within the woman's body, keeping them *nel mirino* – a meta-reflective response to the viewer's gaze (Arasse 1983, 60; Arasse 2021, 322-3; Migliore 2018, 398). This 'navel-eye' looks back from within itself, returns and absorbs the viewer's gaze (Arasse 1983, 60). This exchange of glances acts as a *catharsis* of the sexualised female body and desire. Yalter transforms herself into an embodied gaze and a locus of desire, reclaimed by the rhythm of the torso and the tremor of the text. From this centripetal focus on the navel, the dynamics of looking extend to the body as a whole, where Yalter's removal of the head further complicates the exchange of gazes.

5 Erasure: Headless Body

The erasure of the head constitutes the most radical and literal void in this visual economy. The absent head deprives the viewer of the conventional site of subjectivization, destabilising the logic of recognition. Yalter challenges conventions, shifting female identity construction from a place of recognition and submission to a place of 'becoming'.

By removing the head Yalter renders the body effectively 'gazeless', depriving it of the conventional site of identity and recognition. In eluding the reciprocal gaze, she dismantles the conventional hierarchy of looking, in which the subject on screen is possessed by the viewer. This absence not only decentralises visual authority but

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13 In Renaissance painting the navel functions almost as a fetishist detail that shifts attention from the wound to aesthetic and sensual pleasure (Arasse 2021, 320-7).

limits immediate access to the subject, opening the moving images to plural interpretation and makes the artist's gesture even more legible. In Yalter's system of enunciation, the headless body and the 'navel-eye' together orchestrate a complex regime of gazes in which identification and meaning are not imposed but negotiated. The viewer becomes conscious of their own positioning, while the body's subjectivity emerges as a site of potentiality rather than objectification.

The absence of the head also interrupts the hierarchy of bodily functions; speech, thought, and vision are displaced from their conventional locus. Instead, voice seems to emanate from an unseen source while writing and gesture dominate the field of representation. This redistribution of functions produces a disarticulated body, a corporeal fragment that defies the coherence of the organic whole.

The headless body further resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "Body without Organs" (1996, XX), a body stripped of its hierarchical organisation and open to new flows of desire and meaning. Erasure thus emerges as a semiotic strategy; by subtracting the head, Yalter destabilises the centrality of subjective presence and introduces a productive absence that compels the viewer to reimagine the identity as relational, fragmented, and open-ended. The figure's presence is filtered and dissociated from conventional forms of lexicalisation. The body is progressively veiled and revealed, either through its ungraspable complete form or by being alienated by the written words that invade the skin; yet presence is made all the more intense (Deleuze 2002). This form of 'effacement' transforms the body into an active plane of consistency, where new forms of subjectivity are constructed and destabilised.

The absent head resonates with Kristeva's reflections on the "economy of the invisible", which insists on the necessity of the gaze to attend both to what is represented and to what remains unrepresented – death, violence, castration – and illuminates how absence continues to act as a generative presence (Kristeva 1980, 3-35; 2009).[14] In this context, the body becomes an icon, an 'economy' of what remains unseen, prompting reflection on that very invisibility (Kristeva 1980, 3-35). The subject's head remains unseen, yet we observe parts of the body in motion and recognise the voice as emanating from the body. The headless woman thus transitions from an object of vision to a speaking subject who appropriates an

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14   Kristeva's (1980, 3-35) analysis of icons further enriches this interpretation. In Byzantine culture, the icon functioned not only as an image but also as a form of writing, where the visible surface pointed toward an invisible essence. This 'minimalist economy' corresponds to Yalter's use of the belly as a writing surface: an inscription that simultaneously reveals and conceals, generating meaning through the deliberate use of absence.

external text. This act of appropriation and translation functions as a strategy for departing from a subordinate position, making the abstract yet deeply embodied. The writing forms a labyrinthine pattern, demanding that the text be fully assimilated, ingested by the body. This gesture allows the body to become profoundly desiring, fully possessing its means and its desire.

Ultimately, the correlation between the narrated head and the absent body, between visibility and invisibility, opens a new theoretical space. In Yalter's work, the absence of the head is not a closure but an aperture – a void that engages the viewer and reconfigures the body as a site resistance, memory, and new subjectivities. Erasure, here, inaugurates a relational field where meaning is actively negotiated. Yalter transforms the fragmentary body into a productive writing surface, where absence is inscribed.

6 Latency: Deferred Presence in Absence

If erasure opens the space of meaning by subtraction, latency addresses the suspended dimension of this space, where what is absent simultaneously carries the potential of presence. While erasure operates spatially, latency unfolds temporally, holding the subject in an interval of indetermination. In Yalter's performance, the void is not merely a visual gap but a temporal suspension.

The writing inscribed on the belly is legible yet fleeting; it emerges, trembles with the dancer's movement, and threatens to dissolve. As the body is suspended between appearance and disappearance, meaning is deferred, postponed, compelling the viewer's gaze into an active, reconstructive state.

Latency thus denotes a form of potential energy, a state in which signification has not yet fully materialised. The viewer perceives the text and gesture in fragments, never achieving a stable or complete reading. This temporal gap reconfigures the relationship between performer and spectator; the work demands a patient, attentive gaze that reconstructs meaning through discontinuity. From a semiotic perspective, latency aligns with Lotman's conception of culture as a dynamic system, where meaning emerges not only through articulated forms but also through what remains unexpressed. The undulating movement of the belly and the cyclical repetition of the text evoke such a temporal rhythm, one that resists closure and instead affirms process, openness, and becoming.

The inscribed abdomen exemplifies the notion of the body as a site of textual latency, a concept centrally explored by Roland Barthes (1973) in *Le plaisir du texte*. He defines writing as inherently corporeal; an inscription that simultaneously represents presence and absence. The work operates on a "subtle energy", producing a

profound "sensual and visual effect" on the spectator that resists easy decomposition and settles an alternative logic of sense (Barthes 2016, 20). This technique places the medium itself – the video, the writing, and the dance – as active participants in meaning-making, highlighting the relational and generative potential of absence.

The cultural significance of the belly further anchors Yalter's work within historical narratives of gender and visibility. The woman whose headless condition is signalled in the first part of the title alludes to the invisibility and subalternity of women. The absence of the head (*tête*) and the face (*visage*) – as the machine of recognition, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1996, 37) – problematises the subject's identification, becoming an act of resistance to stereotype.[15] This strategy aligns with a feminist attempt to escape the paradigm of the gaze and the logics of visibility.

This video deliberately excludes the head and the face, suspending any idea of portrait or recognition, to allow the field of 'sensation' (Deleuze 2002) to speak instead of the fixation on identity. The figure is deprived of the *tête-flesh* – Deleuze and Guattari's terms (1996, 37) – which is part of the body. The second part of the title emphasizes the 'object' of our vision: the belly dance. While a synecdochic reading of the fragmented body frames her choice, it is more productive to analyse this body through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "Body without Organs" (1996, XX). This is a body animated by 'tensive movements' that determine its nature and position, marking it as a body undergoing various deterritorialisations.

The belly in the foreground thus emerges from the flat surface of the background and is inscribed into a *système-visage* (Deleuze, Guattari 1996, 37). I contend that the belly itself acts as the *visage*. The circular forms of the navel and the written word surrounding it delimit and delineate a new locus of *visagéification* (Deleuze, Guattari 1996, 37). By substituting the face (*visage*) with the abdomen, the work executes a crucial theoretical operation; it subjects the body – the *tête-flesh* included – to an 'overcoding', transforming the corporeal substrate into a new surface of signification.

Latency, therefore, foregrounds the temporal dimension of the void – a sense of suspension, expectation and deferred meaning that inhabits Yalter's performance.

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15   The face is produced only when the head ceases to be part of the body (Deleuze, Guattari 1996, 37).

7 Potentiality: Generative Force of the Void

If erasure functions spatially and latency temporally, potentiality operates as their synthesis. It is the dimension in which absence and suspension are reconfigured into new possibilities of meaning and subjectivity. In Yalter's performance, potentiality emerges through the transformation of the fragmented body into a site of becoming. It amplifies identity to be seen not as a fixed entity but as a field of possibilities.

The belly, as the surface of inscription, does not merely bear text but seems to generate it through the undulating movement. Writing and gesture converge to produce a space where the body is no longer a passive object of representation but an active agent of enunciation. The void created by the absent head and the partial visibility of the body thus opens towards alternative subjectivities. What appears incomplete or unfinished becomes the locus of potential transformation.

This conception resonates with Rosi Braidotti's notion of the "nomadic subject" (1994), a subjectivity defined not by fixed identity but by continuous movement, transition, and becoming. Yalter's body, partial and decentred, performs precisely such a nomadic identity: neither fully present nor entirely absent, suspended in a state of ongoing reconfiguration.

From a semiotic perspective, potentiality aligns with Lotman's (1993) idea that culture and art evolve through unpredictability and the creation of new codes. The void, in this sense, does not close meaning but rather multiplies its possible trajectories. The codified culture – the *semiosfera* (Lotman 1985) – must contain or generate an element of 'emptiness' or 'potential' to allow for dynamic, non-linear development. This highlights the revolutionary aspect of semiotic development; the unpredictable, the margins, and the non-systemic elements drive cultural innovation (Lotman 1993, 157).[16] This potentiality signifies the performative power of the void: its capacity to open beyond the given, to imagine what does not yet exist. In *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance*, the fragmented, inscribed body becomes a threshold – a liminal space where subjectivity is not erased but continually reinvented. Potentiality concerns the generative force of the void as such; a space where alternative subjectivities and historical trajectories may emerge.

The body can be understood as a palimpsest, where multiple discursive layers – power, narrative, and representation – coexist.

The body functions as the surface upon which the thresholds of exclusion and control are inscribed. While the analysis of power's

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16 On this topic see also Lotman 2022.

direct hold on the body entered feminism through Foucault, feminist discourse takes this inquiry a critical step further by pursuing the emancipation of that 'ambiguous fragment of space' that is the body (Foucault 1977, 37).

Foucault conceived the body as:

> a surface on which events are inscribed (distinguished by language and absolved by ideas), a place of dissociation of the self (where the chimera of a substantial unity is attempted), and a volume in constant disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, thus stands at the articulation of body and history: it must demonstrate how the body is entirely marked by history, and how history, conversely, devastates the body. (Foucault 1977, 37; Author's transl.)

Feminist attention to corporeality is not a mere application of Foucault's framework but an assertion of a primary political concern, contrasting female corporeality with the "dominant symbolism" that has instrumentalised it (Braidotti 1997, 50; Author's transl.).[17]

8 Conclusion

This article has examined *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* (1974) through the lens of the void, conceptualised not as absence but as a semiotic and performative force. By analysing the work along the axes of erasure, latency, and potentiality, I have argued that Yalter transforms the void into a space of resistance, relationality, and becoming.

Erasure disarticulates the body by removing its conventional site of identity and representation, destabilising the mechanisms of recognition and the authority of the gaze. Latency introduces temporality into the void, suspending meaning and opening a rhythm of appearance and disappearance. Potentiality then synthesises these dimensions, revealing the generative capacity of absence to reconfigure subjectivity and produce alternative forms of meaning.

Through this triadic framework, the body becomes a threshold between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, silence and speech. The void emerges as a performative horizon where identity is not erased but continually reimagined.

Yalter's work contributes to broader debates in feminist aesthetics, cultural semiotics, and performance studies by re-signifying absence, demonstrating how the void may function as a site of negotiation

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17 For further reference see Demaria 2019.

rather than negation, of becoming rather than lack. *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* thus exemplifies an art that refuses closure, unsettles fixed identities, and affirms the transformative power of the body.

The performance effectively destabilises conventional representations of the female body, opening possibilities for alternative subjectivities and feminist reconfigurations of identity. The centrality of the void as a semiotic and performative mechanism, evident across Yalter's oeuvre, interrogates power, marginality, and corporeal representation. Ultimately, Yalter's work illustrates that absence and fragmentation are sites of critical engagement, memory, and empowerment.

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Afterword

Voidness and Artistic Creation: Between Aesthetics and Ethics

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Abstract The notion of 'void' has assumed multiple meanings across traditions. The Western view generally opposed voidness to Being's fullness, whereas Taoism and Buddhism understood it not as lack, but as an active condition allowing phenomena to manifest. Void (*mu* in Japanese) or emptiness (*kū*) are not principles but the immanent experience of impermanence and interdependence. Emptiness and form, void and fullness, are complementary: the void is the infinite backdrop from which things arise. Artistic practices can express this coexistence, promoting an ethical exercise of self-transformation in understanding reality and acting in the world.

Keywords Voidness. Daoism. Buddhism. Art. Aesthetics. Ethics.

Summary 1 The Ambiguity of a Notion. – 2 Another Way to Deal with 'Voidness'. – 3 Artistry as Dealing with Void.

1   The Ambiguity of a Notion

The polyvalent nature of the term 'void' or 'emptiness' is undeniable. In modern Europe, after centuries in which the very possibility of its existence was excluded, it began to be thought of as an inert 'space' in which masses and energy move and interact. In art, emptiness as a 'spatial concept' has been present in important movements and works that marked a break with the artistic experiences of the eighteenth century. However, in the Western world, emptiness has always touched on the semantic sphere of 'nothingness', understood as 'non-being', as opposed to ontological fullness. Non-being is not

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(echoing Parmenides), emptiness is inert, it is the absence of power or effectiveness. Some fundamental traditions of thought in Central and Eastern Asia, on the other hand, have given emptiness a totally different meaning, understanding it as a highly active, welcoming dimension, as a condition of possibility for the occurrence of reality.

By sketching briefly some crucial moments in the conceptions of emptiness between the West and the East can help to clarify the many meanings attributed to 'emptiness', starting with the conception of ancient materialism, from Greece to Rome, from Democritus to Epicurus and Lucretius. Right from its early beginnings, Western philosophical speculation took form as ontology, a discourse on the nature of being – the One, that it is and that it is not possible for it not to be, according to Parmenides, who inaugurated the history of ontology. Being *is*; and being is a fullness, a presence. The first Western philosophers to give credence to the concept of the void were Leucippus and Democritus in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. Parting ways with other natural philosophers, they hypothesized atoms, invisible and eternal elementary particles, as the primal principle and compositional element of reality. With no means for physical experimentation, the hypothesis of these ancient atomists was based entirely on a theoretical construct. Democritus, in fact, refers to space with the names "void" (*kenon*), "nothing" (*me on*), and "infinite" (*apeiron*), while he gives to each of the substances the name of "entity" (*to on*) (Democr., DK 68 A 37). Reality thus is not rooted in any divine order, nor in an absolute and unitary being, but rather in the dizzying and unpredictable motion of atoms that collide and unite in the void. Nothing else is needed to explain the formation of physical reality, which is the only *de facto* reality. Every living formation, including people, is nothing more than a dynamic configuration of atoms and emptiness. Emptiness, a constituent of everything, makes possible the fullness of a being by assigning limits to it. According to this conception, fullness (*pleres*) is absolutely not the origin since it is completely inconceivable if not juxtaposed with the void (*kenon*), which makes it possible via the aggregation of atoms. Similarly, without the void, movement would not be conceivable. The elements that were traditionally included as being part of the Real, which were 'canonised' in the philosophical thought of Empedocles – earth, air, fire, water – are not at all 'elementary' to Democritus. They are generated like anything else on the basis of combinations of the atoms of matter. The fact that they are invisible to the naked eye does not mean they have no substance; quite the contrary, all of matter is composed of these minimal particles that aggregate and disaggregate, giving origin to forms that dissolve and reform into other structures. This never-ending process of aggregation and dissolution gives every entity (*to on*) its origin in the all-pervasive and all-encompassing infinity that embraces all manifestation of reality.

The void is not a transcendent source, nor it is an immanent law. It is space devoid of matter that allows the minimal, fundamental components of matter to create forms. After the atomists, the void as a philosophical framework, along with explicit argumentation in favor of its existence and its active and constituent function in reality, were largely abandoned, and even came under attack. Aristotle expressed himself clearly against the postulates of the atomists, considering their position to be untenable. In the fourth book of his *Physics* (IV, 7-9) he defines place as the boundary of the containing body at which it is in contact with the contained body. He thus excludes the possibility of the existence of a void. Every space coincides with the limits of the objects contained within it, with their boundaries; and at the edges of one body another body begins, perhaps just air. The void is a place that contains nothing, but this is a contradictory proposition. It would be a place deprived of its very essence because it is deprived of its capacity to contain, which is exactly what defines it. The existence of the void also generates another paradox for Aristotle: being empty, such a space would have no distinctions within it, no structure and no direction. And this lack would exclude the possibility of any movement of bodies within it.

Curiously, the same condition, i.e. movement, that was posited by the atomists as proof of the existence of the void is used by Aristotle to assert its impossibility. In the void everything would be immobile because there would be nothing to set a body into motion, and vice versa, there would be nothing to stop any movement that had begun (*Ph.*, IV, 215a18-22). This position would dominate Western thought until the modern era. The void cannot exist because it would negate the cosmic order, violating the laws of logic, the coordinates of human intellect: nature cannot be other than an orderly and continuous whole. The Aristotelian solution for explaining the movement of celestial bodies in space that is not empty, but also not disturbed by the presence of air, would enjoy a long afterlife. It involved the postulation of a fifth essence in addition to the four canonical ones: the ether, a diaphanous, intangible, and immutable substance (*De an.*, I, 3, 268b-70b). Western thought was characterized by a growing *horror vacui*: the void had to be excluded from physical conceptions in order to avoid the contradictions posited by Aristotle and to ensure that no discontinuity was introduced into Creation. Put simply, the work of God could tolerate no internal fractures. The void can only exist as a principle, the primal condition for the development of the created by means of divine will, which creates out of nothing. The void might coincide with all of space that accommodates the things of the world, but since God is everywhere at all times the presence of an 'active' void within the worldly horizon cannot be possible.

As opposed to the Greeks, Christian thinking introduces the active presence of the infinite – God is the infinite *par excellence*. The void

would have to await the modern era to witness the reaffirmation of its right to exist, and it would be neither theologians nor theorists to affirm its relevance, but rather scientists basing their convictions on empirical evidence. It was no coincidence that Cartesian rationalism, in reducing the uncertainty of the physical world to the two fundamental characters of extension and motion, again posits space and body. Extension constitutes both the nature of the body and the nature of space, and the two do not differ from one another. That which we commonly mean as 'void' is nothing other than a space in which matter is particularly rarefied. In the physical world, there are greater and lesser condensations of solid bodies, but it is to be excluded that there are places without bodies since space and bodies coincide.

2 Another Way to Deal with 'Voidness'

It is precisely the void that constitutes the nucleus of the philosophical and religious experiences that go by the names of Taoism and Buddhism. In what sense can we speak about 'void', in these contexts? At the basis of these cultural forms there is no intellectual framework, or complete theory of the void, but there are experiences of the void, generally fostered by an artistic or, even better, a meditative training or practice. In Taoism and Buddhism the void does not indicate in any way a reality that is defective with respect to a being conceived as full, immutable, and coherent. A well-known passage from the *Daodejing* 道德經 (The Classic of the Way and Virtue) underlines the efficacy of voidness, its capacity to promote "usefulness":

> Thirty spokes share one hub. Precisely in the empty space is the utility of the wheel. One kneads clay to make a vessel. Precisely in the empty space within is the utility of the vessel. One cuts out doors and windows to make a house. Precisely in the empty space within is the utility of the house. Thus, what is there profits us for the usefulness of what is not there. (Lao-tzu 2001, 45)[1]

Here 'void', or 'emptiness', translates the Chinese term *wu* 無 (in Japanese *mu*): not-being-there, absence, lack, void. Not only voidness lies at the heart of utility, but also – and here Taoism meets and intertwines with Buddhist thought – every entity is empty, both spatially and temporally. It has no autonomous, substantial nature but always exists in relation to something other than it; it is always

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[1] Martin Heidegger implicitly recalled this idea in his lecture on *das Ding* (the thing) (Heidegger 1954, 172-90).

penetrated and permeated by that which surrounds it. The world is structured as an infinite network of interdependent, non-self-sufficient elements. And this 'vacuity of essence', as already mentioned, is not a matter of theory, but a question of experience. Breathing, in its alternation between fullness and emptiness, is the prime instrument of meditation in bringing the practitioner closer to the substanceless and impermanent dimension of being.

We are far away from nihilism: the void is an infinite condition of possibility for the occurrence of any phenomenon, any physical, psychological, or metaphysical manifestation which, like a wave, rises from the great ocean and returns to it.

> Vacancy, stillness, placidity, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and non-action – this is the level of heaven and earth, and the perfection of the Tao and its characteristics. Therefore the [Emperors], Kings, and Sages found in this their resting-place. Resting here, they were vacant; from their vacancy came fullness; from their fullness came the nice distinctions of things. From their vacancy came stillness; that stillness was followed by movement; their movements were successful. [...]. Vacancy, stillness, placidity, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and [non-action] are the root of all things. (Legge 1962, 57)

And just like waves, events, phenomena, and the various activities of being human are processes, relations – not objects. Art is not a discipline exalted above all others; it is one of the different ways of coming into contact with the experience of the void, of making it an operating principle. In this dimension there is no longer a subject who performs the work; the work occurs, gratuitously, giving sensible body to the circulation of energy and interrelations. It is precisely the void that allows the circulation of the vital breath, the energetic exchange between subject and object, which are discovered to be one – distinct, but not separate – in the process of generation-dissolution, inspiration-exhalation emersion-immersion against the backdrop that animates and accommodates them. At the same time, however, the backdrop exists only in virtue of the phenomena played out against it. The backdrop is in no way a metaphysical foundation that exists 'before' and 'beyond' things, bodies, or events: backdrop and phenomena are one.

Artistic gesture is thus a function of the void: the power and efficacy of the void are brought back by the means of figuration, or the composition of a poem. Ink forms are deployed on paper over a white background: the fullness of determined presences emerges from the voidness, while revealing it by contrast. It shows the efficacy of the void the same way that the void contains the potentials for fullness, without there being a splitting of planes – here the visible, the

manifest, the tangible; there the latent, the invisible, the unutterable. The variation of fullness and emptiness confers dynamism and preserves the invisible within the visible; it is the only thing that can render the figuration in its totality (see Cheng 1991; Jullien 2003).

Void and fullness are *yin* and *yang*, complementary opposites that constitute the Tao. In Zen Buddhism, the void (*kū* 空) is the condition of freedom and fluidity that coincides with the realization of phenomena through their perpetual interplay. It is the horizon of acceptance, an infinite and indeterminate place that encompasses being and non-being, but not one given *a priori*, independent of the events that occur within it. Vacuity is a condition for the possibility of all material forms, but with them it shares a lack of self-fulfillment. It too is always relational. As written in the so called *Heart Sutra* (*Hannya shingyō* 般若心經 in Japanese, *Prajnaparamita sūtra* in the Sanskrit version) form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form (in Japanese: *Shiki fu i kū kū fu i shiki, shiki soku ze kū kū soku ze shiki* 色不異空空不異色,色即是空空即是色, "Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. Form as emptiness, emptiness as form"). Emptiness is also empty of itself. It is a backdrop that does not exist prior to the manifestations played out against it; it allows them to occur and comes into existence with them.

'Emptiness', or 'voidness', translates the Japanese *kū* (*kōng* in Chinese), which is the ideographic translations of the Sanskrit *śunyatā*, 'voidness' as a deflation, emptying, dissolution of substantiality and of any claim to ontological autonomy on the part of any reality. All forms are empty, that is, devoid of their own essence. They exist only as related to something other than themselves, they exist only as conditioned and conditioning aggregates. In Japanese, *kū* can also be read as *sora*, and in this case it indicates the celestial vault, therefore an infinite opening, a 'chaos' that envelops all phenomena, the total inclusiveness that is not susceptible to being encompassed by anything. Voidness is not a substance, literally it is no-thing: it is a continuous 'emptying', an 'evacuation' even if its hypothetical absolute substantiality. Above all, it must not be assumed as a principle, one must not cling to it as a stable dimension beneath the mobile and insubstantial multiplicity of phenomena. Every form, or phenomenon, cannot claim ontological solidity. It occurs as pure relationality, its mere presence is the relationship with itself and with something other than itself. But the reverse must also be said: emptiness is a form among forms, it cannot claim a status different from that of all the forms and names that can be invoked. One cannot cling to emptiness by turning it into a principle, otherwise it loses its function as an ethical indicator, its signaling a different way of relating to things and the names that denote them. Thus, fullness and voidness, both in nature and on paper, are never separated from one another, because they imply one another. The spiritual dimension (*shen* 神 in

Chinese) is realized precisely where fullness is crossed by emptiness, and vice versa: on paper, something apparently incomplete remains, but through that incompleteness the spiritual unfolds.

3 Artistry as Dealing with Void

The painter's or the poet's work reveals itself as an ethical exercise, because it is a form that trains one to experience the coexistence of opposites in the immanence of everyday life and translates into concrete gestures. Furthermore, painting is not a continuous addition of autonomous lines and strokes, but a progressive reduction of singular determinations to allow relationships to unfold – thanks both to the intervention of the viewer, who immerses themselves in the painting and imagines the details, the glimpses veiled by mists, and to the freedom of the image from any rigid determination. Painting is ultimately an ethical act because it encourages the vital breath that spreads among phenomena. The painter must not confine or block the ink strokes, but welcome and give rise to an indefiniteness as a sign of dynamic potentiality. The German verb *entbilden* is useful for expressing a similar de-imaginative, de-figurative exercise. *Entbilden* means to free oneself from representations still attached to the external senses; it is a purifying of form and imagination, a de-figuring, that is, an opening of the figure, making it available to transformation (see Ghilardi 2017, 280-371; 2024, 81-129).

The work can still be a place where the paradoxical unity of contact and distance is held together, as a condensed space-time that becomes formed matter, an event in which to try, test, and experience proximity to things, to oneself, to life – and at the same time measure and tolerate the inescapable distance. The work is a way to make 'otherness', the alterity that trespasses one's identity, fruitful. It translates absence into formed matter. In contemporary ink painting, artists like Zheng Chongbin have ventured into the territory of the informal, developing new paths in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy since the post-war period. In his pictorial series entitled *The Dimension of Ink* (2009) or *Six Canons* (2012), ink becomes a 'quasi-matter', a matter of absence. The support is an evanescent background that attracts and welcomes the gaze, and also returns to being a rock face on which graffiti are engraved in negative, white on black. An Italian artist like Claudio Parmiggiani has found in ephemeral and subtle substances the material capable of supporting new forms. Shadows, dust, and smoke translate absence into form, exposing to the gaze the residue of something that has been removed. Grey soot has settled on empty walls: in the spectral white, as in a negative photo, the 'icons of absence' of hundreds of ghostly books (*Sculture d'ombra*, 2003) are imprinted, forms that

were or perhaps will be again. The soot gives the walls, the empty spaces of rooms, and the air that fills them, the character of an elusive subjectivity. Between material and immaterial, neither form nor non-form, the soot allows itself to be imprinted and imbued with figures and meanings.

Contemporary art seems indeed to encounter the void in two main ways, *via* the discovery of Japanese and Chinese painting, of that dynamic relationship between the white of the paper and the black of the ink, or dealing with void as removal, lack, or limit of the visible. A third way could be that of conceiving of voidness as the, unavoidable yet burning, incandescent remnant of reality. The 'discovery of space' coincided, for Lucio Fontana, with a unique and continuous dimension that encompasses and absolves within itself all determination of form: fullness and emptiness end up dissolving into one another, and the pictorial space goes beyond the limits of this dichotomy. It is beyond, or short of, the fullness/void schism. Unexpectedly, it could mark a possible meeting point with the tradition of the Byzantine icon, where gold is used as a color/non-color to indicate the invisible, and also an attempt to get beyond the Suprematism of Malevič, of his white squares against a white background, black squares on white, or black on black. In music, we can find traces of the efficacy of void in the blank scores by authors like John Cage, Tōru Takemitsu, or Jonathan Harvey; silence also stretches time and space of one's psyche, or reveals the infinite space of the soul, whose limits are unknown. Or, again, void is the darkness, both disturbing and welcoming, in which the character in Bill Viola's video *Ascension* (2000) moves and ultimately dissolves. In all these cases, voidness should never be understood as a simple negation of fullness, as pure 'non-being'. Rather, it is the inner side of the fullness of being, its complement, the symbolic name of the unlimited openness to which every work ultimately alludes, and on which it depends at the same time.

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