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RETHINKING ABSENCE: ART PRACTICE AND THE CRITICAL METAPHYSICS OF JACQUES DERRIDA AND JACQUES LACAN

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University of Plymouth

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RETHINKING ABSENCE:
ART PRACTICE AND THE CRITICAL METAPHYSICS OF JACQUES DERRIDA AND JACQUES LACAN.

by

KAREN GEORGETTE ROULSTONE

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth
In partial fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Art and Performance
Faculty of Arts

July 2006

It is my intent, in this practice-based research, which includes painting, supporting video sketches and photomontages, to rethink the way in which absence might signify. This problematic comes out of questions arising in my own art practice. I contend that there is a disjunction between, on the one hand, what visual art can offer for the consideration of absence, and on the other, the way in which it is actually framed in extant art criticism where an a priori understanding of absence based on the metaphysics of presence is assumed. This disjunction gives rise to an excess which has an important critical force.

The nature of this possibility is considered in relation to two intersecting axes; how and why something is considered to be constitutive of absence, and how this gets structured through specific ways of knowing in the visual arts.

The research is approached through a series of encounters with different concepts of absence. Section one considers the discourses constructed around absence in the visual arts, with specific reference to the work of Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, Luc Tuymans and Klaus Scherübel. Section two explores Jacques Derrida’s proposition of différence and considers how it generates undecidability and provisionality of meaning, offering a way to rethink the way in which absence might signify. Section three explores Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic proposition of the real, which positions a certain kind of structuring around absence, informed by the psychical, and realised through the construction of the subject. Section four presents a critical framing for the visual engagement with the possibility of absence.

The methodology aims to demonstrate that absence is not reducible to one approach or another but plays on the incommensurabilities, commensurabilities and gaps between the different concepts presented. The ‘motions of absence’, which are textual insertions interspersed between the sections, directly articulate the methodology of the thesis by responding to and exploring the thinking in each section. The methodology therefore both produces and addresses the tensions and gaps available in visual and theoretical discourses to demonstrate absence. It thereby allows for the possibility of a re-inscription of signification for absence to occur.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

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Exhibitions:
2004 Max10, Exeter Phoenix Arts Centre, Exeter, Devon (November).
2004 Max10, Newlyn Gallery, Cornwall (October).
2003 New Aquisitions (Collection) University of Minnesota, Minnesota, U.S (June).
(Work acquired for the collection following on from solo show in April 2002)
University of Minnesota, Coffman Memorial Union, Minneapolis.
2003 New Aquisitions (Collection) University of Minnesota, Minnesota, U.S (June).
(Work acquired for the collection following on from solo show in April 2002)
University of Minnesota, Coffman Memorial Union, Minneapolis.

Research seminars and conferences were regularly attended at which work was presented including:

2005 “Negotiating the unrepresentable: Jacques Lacan’s real and concepts of absence” Glasgow School of Art, AAH summer school.
2005 University of Plymouth, Art History research seminar:
2004 University of Plymouth, Art History research seminar:
“Jacques Derrida and “concepts” of absence”.
2003 University of Plymouth, Art History research seminar:
“Absence and ‘place.’ ”
2003 University of Plymouth, Postgraduate Research Workshop:

“Writing into practice.”
2002 University of Plymouth, Postgraduate Research Workshop:
‘work in progress’.

Published articles/reviews:

Related
2005 Postgraduate Postcard Project, Bristol School of Art, University of the West of England (UWE).

Signed

Date

July 2006
INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING ABSENCE

My interest in rethinking how absence might signify surfaced initially out of questions arising from my own artistic practice and was later developed in the context of this practice-based doctoral research. The central research question: Rethinking Absence: art practice and the critical metaphysics of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, positions four main propositions relating to rethinking absence.

The four propositions are identified as follows:

Firstly, in section one, there is an exploration of absence and the visual arts in Absence and the visual arts: contextualization. This section considers some of the critical interpretive discourses constructed around absence and the visual arts which assume an a priori understanding of absence based on the metaphysics of presence. The metaphysics of presence sets up presence in hierarchical opposition to absence and this dynamic conditions the way in which absence might be seen to signify within the artworks. An exploration of the methodologies and strategies of artists Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, Luc Tuymans and Klaus Scherübel attempts to demonstrate that their artwork disrupts and complicates this oppositional interpretation offering instead the possibility of an excess of meaning (that which appears to exceed the discursive frames constructed around absence and the visual arts).

The second section, Jacques Derrida: absence and the proposition of difféance explores Derrida’s critical engagement with the “metaphysics of presence” through a consideration of his proposition of difféance. The proposition of difféance offers the possibility for a ‘re-inscription’ of the way in which absence might signify by...
demonstrating that the oppositions on which the precepts of the metaphysics of presence are founded are contested. Derrida proposes that meaning is provisional and differential rather than oppositional, full and present. Difference can not be described or understood according the conceptual paths metaphysics has to offer, consequently, it offers a different approach to the way in which absence might signify.

The third section Jacques Lacan: the problem of absence and the Lacanian “real,” explores Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic thought and his proposition of the real. The real describes a pre-subjective state, namely, the state before the ‘subject’ enters into the symbolic order (the order of culture and language) where it is constituted and situated through the complexities of language, sexuality and the social. Whilst his thinking engages with absence in a way that could be considered to be metaphysical (in Derridean terms) in that it contains and pins down a concept of absence, the real is not an absence that is subject to definition, but a complicated, multi-layered problematic.

The fourth section, Painting as a faulty vehicle for absence, explores the problem of rethinking absence through art practice. It considers the need for a critical position that recognises or acknowledges the limits constructed around and in painting practice. These limits are related to modernist precepts, and the interpretive and analytical approaches used to negotiate content. Importantly, through considering these limits, the section explores what is provoked by and goes beyond this modernist analysis and indeed the interpretive and analytical, namely, what might be seen to be the excess of art practice. The reconsideration of absence and an identification of this excess of art practice are inter-related.

These four propositions, whilst offering individual engagements with the way in which absence might signify, also introduce their own complexities relating to different orders of absence. They attempt to offer an insight into the irreducibility of the significance of absence to any singular engagement, indeed position the differences between ideas and a consideration of excess of meaning as components of a methodological approach.

METHODOLOGY.

The methodology for the research can be identified through four key points:

1. I approached the research in a way that explored the issues stated above and took into account the relationship between theory and practice. In order to achieve these aims, I approached the central research question of rethinking absence as a series of encounters with different concepts of absence. This strategy, which had been generated through thinking through my own painting practice and consideration of the discourses constructed around absence and the visual arts, suggested the idea of an excess. Importantly, this idea relates to Irí Rogoff’s description of the shift in understanding an artwork from the interpretive and analytical to that of interlocution. She neatly delineates the need to acknowledge the performative and active dimensions of thinking through art:

The shift from artwork to that of interlocution takes place in the demise of a perception of the artwork finished at its point of origination and going beyond the notion of reception in which meanings are completed through encounters with different subjectivities. In the processes of interlocution we may shift from the critical analysis which stands outside, to a participation in which we transform that which we are taking part in.1

Therefore, interlocution suggests a conversation which is participatory, involving thinking and speaking within and beyond an artwork rather than a purely external analysis of it. In my research concerning discourses of absence in the arts (namely, the extant art criticism), the critical interpretation of the artwork under consideration tended to be largely confined to the structuring of an opposition between presence and absence. I considered this approach to be inadequate to the task of describing the full complexities of what the artworks positioned and how absence might signify.

It was the reflection on the disjunction between what art practice can offer and the way in which it actually gets critically framed that gave rise to a consideration of the excess of the art work. I considered this disjunction to have an important critical force. Rather than focus solely on an interpretive analysis of absence, I took the question of this excess of art practice, (namely, that which appeared to be exceeding the discursive frames constructed around a customary understanding of absence) as a starting point for an approach to the research.

2. This methodology was necessary because my intent was for the disparities between the different approaches to absence to be understood within the same frame of engagement. Consequently, the tensions were to reside with the negotiation of how absence might signify which was expressed through the differences between the four sections and the distinct and respective handling of absence. In proposing the separate explorations: the engagements with art criticism, Jacques Derrida’s proposition of différence, Jacques Lacan’s real and the limits constructed around painting practice, there was a purposeful selection to reflect the tensions within art practice in relation to an understanding of absence. Consequently, each section works with different limits and approaches to the way in which absence might signify.

3. The consideration of concepts and of theoretical positioning included art practice itself and this was important. In order for the art practice to be lifted from the reductive approach of analysis and interpretation, the work had to be presented as what I refer to as a motion of absence. The motions of absence are textual insertions which present an artwork and a written text. They work within the thinking of the artwork and respond to the section or sections which precede it. They are interspersed between the sections and present a direct and important contribution to the methodology. The motions operate on a different level to the four sections but are invoked by the thinking in each section. From a methodological perspective, each motion attempts to work through one aspect of the complexities of each section by thinking through an artwork and the way in which absence is signifying within it. The motions act as a response to and an exploration of the propositions of each section and function in a performative way within the methodology. Performativity in the context of this research refers to the movement across propositions. Consequently, I wanted the artwork to be presented in its own right, positioning its own tensions.

4. I wanted the performativity and excess of art practice to be demonstrated in the research. I worked through concepts of absence in my painting practice, for example, and this demonstrational approach came out of and fed back into the different sections. My intent was for a rethinking of absence to occur through and between the different explorations of absence and how it might signify.

INTERRELATIONSHIP OF THE FOUR SECTIONS

Section I, Absence and the visual arts: contextualization, considers the tensions between interpretations of absence and the visual arts and the actual complexity of what the art works position through the artists’ methodologies and strategies. The artworks present a complication and disruption of the way in which absence might signify which is not simply reducible to the opposition of absence and presence. The different possibilities for absence are explored through the layered and nuanced engagements of artists Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, Luc Tuymans and Klaus Scherübel. Each artist’s work demonstrates an engagement with absence which disrupts and complicates what might be considered to be an a priori understanding of absence found in the interpretation of the works. This consideration sets up points...
of commonality and tension with the next section, section II, where part of what is proposed regarding the excess of the artworks and the disruption of the oppositional understanding of absence and presence has resonance with Jacques Derrida’s proposition of différence. The extant critical interpretation of the works could, in the light of the next section, be construed as metaphysical.

Section II, Jacques Derrida: absence and the proposition of différence, explores Derrida’s critical engagement with what he refers to as the “metaphysics of presence” through a consideration of his proposition of différence. This section purposefully presents a position which allows for a rethinking of the way in which absence might signify. The proposition of différence offers the possibility for a ‘re-inscription’ of absence by rethinking metaphysical precepts which are founded on the hierarchical opposition of presence and absence and the assumption of full and present meaning. This latter conceit is frequently found in the interpretation of artworks in section I, yet is confounded by the strategies and methodologies employed by the artists under consideration. Section II lies in critical tension with section III, Jacques Lacan and the real.

Section III, Jacques Lacan: the problem of absence and the Lacanian real, in contrast, submits absence to what could be considered to be thoroughly metaphysical notions by containing and defining it. However, through the idea of the real, Lacan positions a certain kind of structuring around absence which is informed by the psychical, and realised through the construction of the subject, but which remains outside of the social and cultural order. However, the tensions between the Derrida and Lacan sections are not reducible to oppositional positions because there are commensurabilities and gaps in their differences. These sections lie in a critical relationship to section IV.

Section IV, Painting as a faulty vehicle for absence, considers the problematic of understanding absence through painting practice. In light of the concepts of absence forwarded by Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, involving metaphysical thinking, challenges to metaphysical thinking, and spaces of indeterminacy of meaning, this section explores the specific issues that arise relating to painting and absence. These issues include modernist precepts of painting which condition many of the discourses around painting and how it might be understood. Also, there is consideration of how this approach to the artwork might be challenged by thinking through art practice which has been demonstrated in section I through consideration of absence and the visual arts.

The four main sections are to be considered as theoretically and visually concurrent but not necessarily fully reconcilable with each other. In other words, the ordering is set up to juxtapose ideas rather than present the line of a linear argument and the tensions are as important as the similarities between ideas.

INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF THE MOTIONS OF ABSENCE AND THE FOUR SECTIONS.

The first motion of absence is presented through the film clip: Two hands and a repeated confession: illusory positions. It explores a clip from a Douglas Gordon film: Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1995-1996) and follows on from the section on Derrida’s proposition of différence. Although the double screen format that Gordon sets up immediately positions the possibility of an oppositional and ‘metaphysical’ reading of the two images, the play of the two hands confounds the visual polarities suggested by the placement.

The second motion of absence: Self reflected, self doubled: flat against the mirror stage, looks at three photographs by Janietta Eyre. It follows the section on Jacques Lacan which explores the psychoanalytic encounter with the way in which absence might signify. The photographs explore the concept of the double, identical twins: The Fisherman’s Daughters (1996), Tweelings (1996) and Lost Persons (2000). The photographs are in fact fictional doubles as Eyre reproduces herself for every

The third motion of absence: Into the shadows: Woman of the Dunes, works through a scene from the film: Woman of the Dunes by Hiroshi Teshigahara (1964). This motion gestures towards the absence of one of the main protagonists, a man who goes missing and stays with the woman of the dunes. Initially, this motion would seem to propose an empirical or interpretive understanding of absence but, in fact, it offers different readings. The way in which the couple survive in the desert is by removing the continuous flow of sand into the hollow in which they live. A complicated engagement with the way in which absence is signifying is demonstrated by the performativity of their existence to preserve the ever-diminishing space in which they exist within the dunes; it is there and not there. The motion consequently links into section I, Absence and the visual arts and section II, Jacques Derrida: absence and the proposition of différence by challenging and confounding an oppositional reading of absence.

The fourth motion of absence: Spectrality and shadows: videowork Absence, follows on from Section IV, Painting as a faulty vehicle for absence? It explores the videowork Absence which works through the possibilities of spectral traces of meaning, the transposability of images and the possible slippage between visual ideas. These ideas have resonance with section IV, Painting as a faulty vehicle for absence? In terms of how ideas are framed, and also the proposition of différence in section II, Jacques Derrida, where meaning is understood in a differential way.

Finally, the fifth motion of absence: 20 paintings: beyond the frame, presents 20 paintings coming out of the research process. The paintings are presented in a way that is not chronological but represents the dialogical processes of studio practice and thinking. They attempt to explore the complexities of using painting as a research tool and the limits and possibilities it constructs. The paintings attempt to hit against these critical limits and explore the possibility for meaning exceeding these frames.

FORMAT OF THE RESEARCH.

In keeping with the rationale of this research, I have presented the format of the PhD in A3 layout so that the visual might be allowed to work alongside the written and be generative of another set of tensions or points of convergence. The intent here is not to achieve the containment of an idea but to work through it in a way that allows absence to signify within, across and between propositions. What might be considered to be the performativity, or movement across propositions, extends to the appendices where I have included some photographs of books checked out from libraries and cancelled during the process of the research. My intent was for the books to function on another register in terms of bodies of knowledge no longer in circulation. Each consideration of absence and the way it might signify points to both the fugitive stability and critical permeability of these spaces of meaning. I would suggest that there is a critical force residing in an idea of excess positioned by artworks and evidenced through the different registers of absence. I am aiming for a more unpredictable unfolding of the idea of absence, which also surfaces from the spaces between conceptual frames.
In my various theoretical engagements with the binary structures of absence/presence I had not found a way to exit them, only ways to refine the argument and to augment my critique of a condition I found too limiting for the requirements of living in a post-colonial, post-migratory culture, and looking back to its links with some originary European movements. The encounter with Body Missing became a possibility of exiting this structure and entertaining a completely different one in which the structure of 'cultural haunting' could act simultaneously as the marker of an absence, and of its creative possibility to produce a presence. It is not that these bodies of thought had not existed elsewhere in fiction and in other intellectual analyses, it was that their conjunction seemed impossible before this act of interlocution.\(^3\)

Everyone carries a room about inside him. This fact can be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If someone walks fast and one pricks up one's ears and listens, say in the night, when everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall.\(^4\)

My interest in thinking about absence in the visual arts has come out of a critical visual engagement with the ways in which it is normally understood and framed; namely through its visual articulation and interpretation and the respective limits associated with this framing. These limits are certainly not fixed but retain what might be seen as a residual 'weight of significance'. This significance is determined by what I would suggest to be the repetitive and normalised employment of interpretive models which might be seen to be constitutive of discourses of absence in the visual arts. These discourses include, but are not limited to, reference to degrees of materiality relating to the body/object/place. At times, they gesture towards the phenomenological, (where the meaning of objects, (phenomena), is constituted through our consciousness of what they are), or the psychical where a


visceral response exceeding an intellectual reasoning to absence is marked. These discourses are nuanced and complicated, certainly surfacing in different ways, but are largely conditioned by the metaphysics of presence whereby an understanding of absence is conditioned by an oppositional and subordinate relational dynamic to presence. In a direct sense, the limiting nature of this ‘oppositional’ approach to understanding is touched on in part, by Irini Rogoff in the introductory quotation. In reference to the international exhibition Trace, she posits ‘cultural haunting’ as a way of thinking outside of the structures set up around thinking through the absence/presence structure. Later, in reference to the work of artist Vera Frankel, she puts forward the possibility of ‘absence’ as a structure of difference. This proposition consequently draws on certain aspects of the problematic of absence that are central to this inquiry, specifically relating to rethinking the limits around the way in which absence is understood. However, although this is key, and a central concern, I would argue that through my research, there is a kind of excess which occurs when thinking about absence, the discourses constructed around it and artworks. It neither resides entirely with the nature of representation, nor with a contemplation of how absence is understood or positioned within this context. This marks the conceptual substance of the thesis and will be explored at length in the following sections relating to absence and the visual arts. Jacques Derrida’s proposition of différence Jacques Lacan’s concept of the ‘real’, painting as a faulty vehicle for absence and my own practice.

I would suggest that this ‘excess’ surfaces out of the dialogical relationship between all these things. This research attempts to grapple with some of these complexities and precarious threads, which I would suggest are specific to a negotiation of the visual. These considerations seek then, firstly, to consider how absence is woven into an understanding of the visual and how this might be rethought, and secondly, to think about how absence might also exceed this framework and function as a way of rethinking the way in which its meaning might be inscribed.

Certainly, it could be justifiably argued that any consideration of the problematic of absence and artworks is fraught with many difficulties right from the start. With the hierarchical, oppositional premise of presence and absence structuring the extant critical interpretation of artworks, part of the first main problem coming out of this is that absence tends to be understood in relationship to the economy of the absent(ed) object or subject. This is complicated by two issues, firstly, relating to the premise of working through an idea that perhaps has no object but is frequently evoked through objects employed as metaphorical conceits, and secondly, to the status of any art form, and how this might be reconciled with a rethinking of absence. Certainly, no visual form can possibly arise in a heterogeneous way and this inquiry takes this into account, having engaged with a variety of forms of exploration including photomontages, video sketches, and adjunct visual considerations, all of which have been integral to the process of working through these ideas. Moreover, visual ideas surface in a way that is not confined to one medium or source and what comes out of the art work might be seen to be a sort of synthesis of all these things.

However, as the body of the research has largely been negotiated through painting,

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1 See Section II Jacques Derrida for a detailed exploration of this proposition.

2 Trace was an international conference held at the Liverpool Biennial in 2003. The reference to ‘cultural haunting’ was made in relation to Vera Frankel’s touring exhibition Body Missing at the Freud Museum, London, March 19th – April 27th, 2003. Frankel presented a six channel video-photo-web work which took the Kunstraum (art theft) of the Third Reich as a point from which to explore a number of issues cited as ranging from ‘collective madness’ to the nature of memory. Critical issues arising from this were contextualized and discussed at the conference: Structures of memory: Structures of Information: From Theft to Virtuality: Considerations of the Meaning of Absence, organised by Professor Giselda Pollock, AHRB CentreCATH, University of Leeds, in conjunction with the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, March 21-22, 2003. Irini Rogoff suggests that Vera Frankel’s work presents ‘different orders of absence, with her work, edged by a “subject of cultural haunting”. In order to negotiate the “absence” relating to the Holocaust, Frankel formulates lists, “absence” somehow strangely articulated through a sort of systemic accountability. This tangibility is understood by Rogoff within the parameters of “cultural haunting” and consequently is noted as offering the possibility of both marking an absence and generating a presence. See See Rogoff, 2002., pp. 48-51.

7 See Section II Jacques Derrida, for an in-depth exploration of the implications of this hierarchical and oppositional structuring.

8 This is particularly evident in the work of Christian Boltanski, where he uses discarded shoes, clothing and objects as material metaphors for mourning and loss. See for example, The Clothes of François C., (1972), in Van Elphen E., Art in Mind, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p 41.

9 See especially, Françoise Pardal’s article “immobile movement and the speeds of emotion” in Relocating Victor Burgin, Amalfi, 2002, for an insightful consideration of video as an “evanescent ontology”. She suggests that video is situated between possessing the “visible and the invisible” and as a medium is constitutive of loss. ‘what it brings to light are the already turned forms of a visibility always incomplete’, p 123.
I shall later discuss the particular problems posed by painting as they offer a very specific and tangible point of departure in relation to the way in which we might consider a rethinking of absence. In a certain sense, it is these very difficulties around painting that have provided a certain kind of contradictory frame that has dis/configured thinking. In carrying out my research I initially hoped to get a sense of how this was working as a means of critically thinking through the parameters within which absence might normally be understood in relation to the visual arts. Therefore, it would not simply be a question of how absence was understood to be manifesting through or in relation to the visual, but also because of the interpretive limits this seemed to generate, as a result of, or through the discourses habitually constructed around it.

Consequently, this rethinking has not simply been confined to singular images but has depended on the spaces in between, thoughts and the dynamic between them. This dynamic has produced and addressed the gaps in available discourse allowing for a re-inscription of absence’s signification. In working through these discourses, I have found that meaning has come out of something that is beyond these parameters, beyond these conceptual lines. What has been missed by the established or normalised ways of interpreting or understanding absence is revealed through working through them, allowing for that which is inarticulable or rendered silent in this context to be understood as a shadow on thought and meaning, hovering strangely in indeterminate spaces.

I would add, as a qualification for this proposition, however, that what might be loosely seen to be the edges of understanding absence through the visual are certainly not clearly discernable, but rather moveable, elusive and uncertain. This has been a highly nuanced engagement, at times a speculative, precarious and somewhat contradictory encounter. However, what has been necessary, for purposes of clarity in this research, is to critically consider the possibility of edges in relation to two particular intersecting axes. These axes have related to, firstly, an understanding of how and why we might categorise something as being constitutive of, or generative of a visual absence or sense of absence. This consideration has involved a practical engagement with absence and its negotiation in the visual arts. And secondly, the axes have addressed the way in which we organise or structure this placement of absence through engaging with specific ways of “knowing”. I would argue that these considerations broadly organise our engagement and generally condition it through reference to a particular set of epistemological frameworks relating to materiality, the body and place, phenomenological and psychical dimensions and a specific kind of interpretation of absence, which in Derridean terms would be considered to be metaphysical.

With this in mind, I propose to firstly look at the way in which absence is seen to manifest in reference to the work of four artists employing a variety of artistic practices; Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, Klaus Scheröbel, and Luc Tuymans. I have chosen these artists for two specific reasons. Firstly, although they are individually cited as negotiating absence in recognised ways, I would argue that they all complicate an engagement with “absence” and problematise conventional interpretive frames. Secondly, through this complication, I would suggest that their work gives rise to a certain kind of rethinking of the way in which absence might be understood. My intent is that this consideration will serve as a means of contextualizing and negotiating some of the complexities associated with understanding how absence might be rethought in relation to the visual arts.
The conceptual frameworks relating to absence in the visual arts frequently carry the weight of discourses shoring the some repetitive assumptions of interpretation relating to the opposition of absence with presence. Critiques of artworks tend to focus on an a priori understanding of what constitutes absence in place of a critical engagement with the term and how it might signify. The methodologies and strategies used by artists frequently confound the opposition of presence and absence, presenting work which complicates and exceeds this understanding.

Discourses on absence are complex in that they are not easily discernible or expressed in the visual arts. Threads that can be pulled through seem, however, to be generally focused around very specific ideas in this context. These ideas normally involve, but are not restricted to, an engagement with absence that describes it as actually being marked or traced, or by leaving an imprint or mark. In this particular instance, absence is repeatedly drawn into an economy of the material form or body, which is no longer present. It presents an idea of absence in relation to a signifying framework that poses ‘materiality’ as a [past] possibility and through this, a relational sense of how absence might be understood. This is at times expressed through referencing the emptying or voiding of spaces normally inhabited by people. This proposition consequently creates a specific kind of engagement with ‘absence’ connected to the body and its ‘absence’. At times the suggestion of absence is pushed towards the idea of memory and loss and the possible articulation of ‘absence’ through abandoned buildings, possessions or objects serving as visual metaphors for that which is no longer present.

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10 See especially, Merewether C. “A Lasting Impression” in Bond, A., Trace, Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Tate Liverpool, 1999, (pp.164-171), where he discusses the possibility of the footprint, for example, as “the mark of absence” (167). The trace in this case is seen as having no originary state as it comes into being through the process of erasure and in so doing indicates an absent origin. This consideration of ‘trace’ does not engage with the idea of the remnant, but the idea that it is constituted through “erasure and division” (p.169). Merewether suggests that this takes the trace out of the polemic of absence and presence and delivers it into the terrain of “repetition and difference” (168).
This approach to an understanding of absence might be critically considered in relation to Rachel Whiteread’s work, for example, as it is frequently described as recording or marking ‘absence’ through everyday objects and sites. It offers a particularly interesting case of the way in which absence is understood as ‘materialised’ and categorised through the visual arts. This approach is reflected in the pamphlet accompanying Whiteread’s show at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 2001, in which her works are described as “records of absence”.  

This interpretation and ‘location’ of ‘absence’ is crucial because it would seem to be used to strangely delineate the unmarked, but familiar spaces of our day-to-day living in specific and contained ways, positioning absence with a possible tangibility. In this sense, at times, an acknowledgement of these ‘absences’ becomes enclosed and specific as they are made into material objects. The casts simultaneously represent the absence of the actual objects and are objects themselves. They are frequently referred to as ‘imprints’ or ‘records of absence’. So here, an interpretation of ‘absence’ would appear to be trading on two seemingly different registers. Firstly, there is an encounter with the possibility of materiality and its inverse, and secondly, with a specifically ‘human’ centred or corporeal approach to the conceptualization of absence where there is an allusion to a body, or to a space a ‘body’ has once used. Whilst both approaches interestingly trade on the basis of the opposition of absence and presence, and further to this, have recourse to a material register, I would argue that there is also something that comes out of these works that exceeds these frameworks of understanding. Something disrupts a neat and secure containment of ideas and seems inadequate to the task of visual reasoning in this context and it is to be found in part by exploring the strategies Whiteread deploys in her work and the context in which it is understood. Whiteread’s familiar three dimensional sculptures, which are frequently cast from the spaces everyday objects such as old mattresses and wash basins generate and occupy, might be said to also engage with the hollow inside space of the negative form. The outline of the object is followed and made material through the casting process. However, the strange imprints and forms that are left in this process are testament to the perceptual ambiguity and confusion engendered by the casting process and the way in which Whiteread deploys it. The ambiguity this generates is due to the fact that some sculptures are cast from objects, others from the space around them. Her use of materials in this process confounds a conventional notion of ‘presence’. In Amber bed (1991) (see: fig 1), the mattress rests inert, positioned halfway between the wall and floor. Its positioning is suggestive of a discarded mattress, a makeshift arrangement for living that might be found in an empty house occupied by squatters. However, the glowing orange hue of the bed unsettles the squallid implications of its placement. Its vibrant resin density makes the sculpture at once heavy and alive. (Whiteread’s work is politically informed, marked by living in London throughout the years of the Thatcher government. She uses second hand objects deliberately; mattresses are stained and worn.  

In spite of the compelling draw of the deep orange tones, Amber Bed offers a sophisticated play on specific cultural knowledge of homelessness, disaffection and poverty played out through a visual recognition of the abandoned mattress. "I use furniture as a metaphor for human beings". As Jan Debbaut and Selma Klein Essink point out, the symbolic significance of an object is determined by the memory of it rather than by its physical presence. However, this understanding is discursive as well.

Whiteread plays on the disparity between the simple recognisability of the object and the way it functions in her sculptures. This space of interpretive complexity is played out strategically by her through the casting process. For example, in Ghost (1990) (see: fig 3), a strange inverse materiality is presented. On first inspection, Ghost would appear to be the form of an overbearing tomb or building. However, she

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13 Rachel Whiteread quoted in the "foreword" by Jan Debbaut and Selma Klein Essink to Rachel Whiteread, 1992-3, p.3.

14 "Foreword" in Rachel Whiteread, 1992-3, p.3.
the sculpture reveals traces of an impression of a house interior. Oddly, the structures that would normally be protruding are impressions working their way inwards creating a strange inverse reality. This inverse materiality awkwardly slips past a complete match of the object cast, producing an unnerving mimetic jolt. Consequently, Whiteread’s work is often presented through the opposition of inferiority and exteriority which is suggested through an exploration of ‘voids’ and negative spaces. It is suggested that this kind of "materialization of space, of the void, the simultaneous absence and presence of a thing"15 is woven into her desire to hold onto, to “preserve the memory of the world of things” which are presented as “negatives” of a ‘positive’ space.”16 However, whilst Whiteread’s methodology might be seen to easily fit into an interpretive frame of inferiority and exteriority and is frequently described in terms of the oppositional of absence and presence, the strategies she employs complicate and disrupt this interpretation.

For example, in Untitled (Twenty Four Switches), 1998 (see fig.4), the sculpture elicits the desire to visually engage with the impossibility of the switchplate. The on/off function of the switch is apparent but the casting process achieves an inverse impression which confounds the possibility of it functioning. The switchplate presents as a visual puzzle playing on the disparity between what we think should be there and what is actually there. Moreover, like Ghost, it exceeds the oppositional propositions used to describe it. It is more than the materialization of a space or void, or the negative of a positive space. Whiteread’s strategies which are, in part, related to the disparity between a familiarity with the objects and their everydayness, and the way in which they occur, have an effect on our reception of the sculptures. Ivona Blazwick, for example, asks Whiteread whether Ghost acts as a monument, a suggestion which brings with it a complex set of propositions relating to cultural memory and loss.17 Rosalind Krauss describes her plaster casts as “announcing their own sufficiency, their status as ghosts.”18 The light plaster blocks of Ghost certainly have a funereal quality. Mausoleum-like in its appearance, Ghost retains an aura of finality and closure on first impression. Whiteread cleverly left gaps in the sculpture reminiscent of an old tomb.19 As with Amber Bed, the work benefits from specific cultural knowledge of the mausoleum, unkempt graveyards and monuments.20 Her strategies put the oppositions of presence/absence, interiority/exteriority into question whilst her practical methodology realised through the casting process, invokes the oppositions at every turn. The multi-layered readings of her processes is further demonstrated in Ghost of Ghost, 1990 (see fig. 2). Presented in relation to Ghost and its ‘disappearance’ the photograph of the shadowy outline of Ghosts’ physical impression adds another layer of complexity to an understanding of the work.

Rachel Whiteread

19 Whiteread comments that she spent some time working in Highgate cemetery in North London. She mentions that the graves were in a state of disrepair and some of the crypts were ajar. See Rachel Whiteread, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum catalogue, 1992-3.
20 See Sinclair, L., “The house in the park: a psychogeographical response” in Rachel Whiteread, House, Phaidon Press Ltd., 1995, p.18., where he suggests: “Ghost outranched pathos: it was crueler and brighter than that. The allusions are to Egyptian and Babylonian plunder in the British Museum and not to the sentiments of false memory, colonized domestic enclosures.”
To develop part of this thought further, I want to refer to the work of Doris Salcedo as her installation pieces are similarly recognised as offering a kind of 'haunting absence'. In ridding her work of any human presence, it is all the same implied by the use of 'abandoned' or 'discarded' domestic objects. She fills furniture, chairs, wardrobes and cupboards with plaster, rendering them visually opaque and divested of their normal uses around the home. Familiar pieces of domestic furniture are weighed down and anchored in their awkward and functionless states. The works serve as indicators of 'absence'.

21 See Best, S., "The Trace and the Body" in Bond, A., (ed). Traces: The Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Tate Liverpool 1999, where she argues for what she refers to as the "ontological slipperness" of Doris Salcedo's work claiming that Merleau Ponty's aesthetics, with its focus set neither squarely on inner nor on outer bodily experiences, offers an apposite context for consideration of Salcedo's work. She suggests that the 'objects' (Salcedo's sculptures) "read a slippage between building, furniture, and the body: between holding the body - its life, weight, touch - and being bodies themselves," p.177.

There is a sense of deathly permanence to the works yet also a refusal to participate, a finality to the possibility of use and abuse. In the absence of the owners, the house and its contents are forcibly there, the house widowed and mourning with the door permanently adhered to the cabinet.

Through Salcedo's methodology and visual strategies a set of critical questions are raised about the way in which absence is understood through the visual. Her processes go beyond, and problematize, a material description. Part of this

theoretical tension is connected to the impossibility of containment which appears to be attempted nonetheless. This dilemma leads into another facet of this problem, namely, the notion of suggesting and then negotiating what might be paradoxically regarded as 'embodied absence'. By this, I mean to suggest another negotiation of absence that attempts to parcel it up into a containable, manageable mass through conflating a projected (or imagined) absence with its material realisation. This proposition is distinct from that concerning the consideration of Whiteread and Salcedo as it attempts to negotiate something that has never existed. In this regard I want to consider the work of Klaus Scherübel, specifically his piece: Mallarmé, Le Livre (Reading Room), 1999-2005 presented at Optica, Montréal, Canada, 2005.

In the project Mallarmé, Le Livre (Reading Room), 1999-2005, artist Klaus Scherübel, constructed Le Livre [The Book], a project proposed by Mallarmé, which would supposedly uncover the relations that 'exist between all things', or to 'symbolically encompass all of literature'.23 Mallarmé's project never came to fruition, but Scherübel took the absence of this tome as the impetus to create what he imagined to be the form of the object. The work positions a complicated engagement with absence. The plain blue book is instantly recognisable and classifiable as an object. The book form communicates accessibility to knowledge through recognised codes of presentation; the book is given a dust jacket complete with synopsis on the back with ISBN number and numerical library assignation. Scherübel’s name is boldly on the front giving him the status of editor or author of “Mallarmé, Le Livre”. The placement of his name suggests a purposefully mediated approach. No words are typed or written on the pages as styrofoam is used to replace paper leaves and the volume of possible words is suggested by the width of a lightweight rectangular space. The work offers accessibility on the surface but this accessibility is confounded by the fact that the book cannot be opened or read; it remains a replica of a book.

Several complex issues are invoked by the work and the strategies employed by Scherübel. It awkwardly hovers on the edge of disrupting the conceptual worth of Mallarmé’s project. This awkwardness partly resides with the fact that the ‘absent’ book, which was imagined and projected as a possibility by Mallarmé was never actually produced by him. Scherübel, however, gives material form to Mallarmé’s project. In attempting its inception, Scherübel introduces the possibility of something unrealised being made physically tangible. In a sense, a recognition of its ‘absence’ is only made possible through Mallarmé’s expressed intent to produce the ‘object’. This is a suggestion which is marked by copious handwritten notes compiled by Mallarmé. His project explores the relations that exist ‘between all things’ but this practically involves describing its physicality and composition but not its actual

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23 See http://www.optica.ca/catalogue.html, publications page. See also Wright, S., Art Papers 29 no5 60-19/0 2009, Montréal, http://mweb.hawloonnenweb.com. Where he argues that Scherübel was attempting to address an “impending absence of an absence by making it present”, further, that the absence of presence
content. The omission of this information points towards the 'absence' of an imagined object being described by Scherübel through a material substitute for a conceptual proposition. Moreover, it is an imagined idea of what is actually 'absent' constructed in relation to a specific framework: strangely, the constructed absence displacing the 'imagined' absence. I would argue that this gestures towards a desire to contain an instability that conditions absence's possibility. Through negotiating the strange 'absence' of the book through its production, Scherübel has, to a certain extent, brought light to bear on its earlier status, the force of which, I would argue, was contingent on evading materiality.

With this in mind, however, the tension between Mallarmé's conceptual project and the paradoxical materialisation of the work disrupts the reception of the book as a book and as an artwork. It provokes a retracing of theoretical steps, a hesitancy concerning the reconciliation of the two facets of the work which reside with the imagined project and the later interpretation and materialisation by Scherübel.

Through his methodology, Scherübel draws the viewer reluctantly into the form of the book, the physicality of which seems to contradict Mallarmé's project. However, the omission of the written content and the inaccessibility of the work creates an impasse for the project to ever 'symbolically encompass all of literature'. It is not simply a question of embodied absence, the work repeats the impossibility of the theoretical project through its material approach.

Scherübel, Whiteread and Salcedo's works collectively complicate and disrupt the limitations conferred on an understanding of absence, and consequently invoke a reconsideration of the inadequacy of how absence is seen to function or signify within the visual arts. To complement these considerations, I want to consider another kind of frame relating specifically to the critical consideration of painting as a vehicle for absence. Again, as with the artists previously considered, the work of Luc Tuymans demands attention with regard to the discourses that arise around the work presented. I am interested in the spaces that his work opens up for rethinking the perceived limits of visual forms and the implications this might have for the construction of meaning with regard to absence.

Specifically, in relation to Tuymans' paintings I would isolate three main concerns that have relevance to my research and which open up possibilities for how absence might be understood. Firstly, I would suggest that his desire for the meaning of his work not to be limited to the frame of 'pictorial representation' arguably articulates a condition of all visual work, nonetheless, it reasserts a challenge to the perceived limitations of painting and this is crucial.24 Secondly, that this frame of expanded understanding is based, at times, on negotiating that which is 'unrepresentable' - which has resonance for a consideration of absence as a space of indeterminacy. Thirdly, the difficulties arising from his work demand a reconsideration of how meaning gets constructed through the work. When Ulrich Loock, for example, suggests that meaning in Tuymans's work is more important to the artist than the picture he is, in part, gesturing towards a decentring of pictorial privilege. This decentring is based on the premise that representations are 'missing' their object and...
meaning is gleaned through what he refers to as 'external discourse' such as titles.\textsuperscript{25} Further to this, through the use of these 'external discourses' his paintings might be seen to generate wider questions relating to what pictorial representation can actually achieve.\textsuperscript{26} This consideration has importance for understanding how we negotiate the limits of painting.

For him there is no autonomy of painting, no symbolic value of painting itself. It is deployed, used. Overall, however, his statements must be correctly understood. His works make it plain that it can only ever be a question of failed meaning.\textsuperscript{27}

Certainly, arguably, the meaning of any painting is never entirely confined to pictorial representation anyway, but of key importance here, I would suggest, is that an economy of understanding is founded on a gesture towards that which is not representable, in that it its full weight cannot be grasped by attempting to point it. Moreover, this gesture towards the unrepresentable moves some way towards destabilizing the normalized interpretive approach which prioritizes what is held within the frame. Of course, something gets 'presented' but there is a subtle slippage which is achieved, in part, through the fragmentary nature of the image which helps to disrupt the location of meaning. The possibilities for disruption of meaning reside at times in a psychical, and consequently, periodically, imagined physical domain because Tuyman's frequently tries to represent what is not representable. This approach to his work is specifically resonant in his paintings dealing with concentration camps and the Holocaust. For example, in Schwarzheide, 1986 (see fig 9) Tuyman's paints a haunting image of dark, truncated trees in a forest set against an oddly lined background. The verticalumber lines create a repetitive background to the dark treetops which form an apex on the canvas. As Loock points out, the painting appears truncated, "as though the image had slipped" suggesting a misjudged photograph where the content has been missed.\textsuperscript{28} It is a sombre, disturbing image. The dark treetops evoke a sense of hopelessness which is compounded by the title of the work, Schwarzheide. Schwarzheide was a concentration camp, the material evidence of which is no longer accessible. The sinister and tragic undercurrents of the work are exacerbated by Tuyman's conversation with Loock where he reveals that the camp inmates secretly made drawings and cut them up into sections. The underlying intent suggested by this process was that the different sections would, at some point in the future, be reassembled. The possibility of such a drawing (and the horrible truth of its almost certain lack of completion) reinforces the painting with greater depth of meaning. By bringing up the story Tuyman is establishing a relationship between it and our reading of the linearity of the painting. Furthermore, the tensions that both the title and this story create with the image presented before us are palpable in spite of Tuyman's suggestion that it is not based on an existing drawing. The strange view of the truncated treetops suggests a restricted view from within. Without the prior knowledge from Tuyman regarding the strips of the drawing, the vertical lines present a visual barrier, a sense of containment or imprisonment. With the knowledge of the possibility of the tragic reconstructed drawing our understanding of the image is stained by an awful anticipatory fear, a prior knowledge of the impossibility of this painting.

Tuyman's strategy allows the force of the painting to reside with the disconcerting disjunction between what is seen and what the title describes. The painting is awkwardly reconciled with its title, inadequate to the task it claims to take on. This awkwardness generates painful questions about the possibilities and inadequacies of representation which will always fall short of describing such horror. The methodology that Tuyman employs positions the viewer in a way that allows for a powerful questioning to occur. In this case, the viewer is left to construct an imagined position within the camp in relation to the trees which is suggestive of an awful, smothering psychical space.

Tuyman's mourning consists in creating, with pictures of empty rooms and isolated things, the incomensurable insufficiency of pictures, in order to do justice to
Horror hangs with the stark inadequacy of the image and its inability to describe what has occurred.

Similarly, the metaphor of the empty room in Gas Chamber 1986 (see fig 10) and the title given to the work to communicate the unspeakable horrors of the space seems wholly inadequate to the task. Tuymans paints a seemingly empty room bathed in a confusingly warm light. Held within this image is a “betrayal” Tuymans suggests, and this is where its meaning resides. The aesthetic pleasure gained from the deep warm colour deceptively lures us into the frame. If the image did not make an attempt at concealing that to which it alludes, Tuymans maintains that it would become “absolutely inaccessible” to us. Without the title the painting would appear to possibly depict the austere interior of an industrial space. The title Gas Chamber leaves no space for interpretive manoeuvre, the dark irregular shapes on the ceiling and the walls are murderous tools. We are reluctantly drawn into the deathly interior, to witness a distanced fragmentary flashback to an unspeakable evil. Tuymans painting, which is taken from a photograph of a gas chamber, binds us to a visual detachment which accentuates the painting’s failure. As Tuymans suggests, the “ungraspability” of “historical reality” is “preserved in pictures”.

The work can only gesture towards the horror of the Holocaust and our understanding of what is implied by the title Gas Chamber. The emptiness and austerity of the room pulls us into the horror of what has gone on there but there is a distancing from the reality of the situation through the inadequacy of the work to describe the tragedy. The failure of the pictorial to communicate tragedy and horror is used purposefully in Tuymans’ work. This strategy allows for the disjunction between what gets presented and what gets described through oblique references and implications, to vibrate with horrible intensity. In reference to Tuymans’ paintings that allude to the Holocaust, Gregory Salzman suggests that:

in being repressed, the ghastly secret the painting harbours continues to haunt the present. The effective dissolution of meaning in the work is the basis both of its horror and its weightlessness.

This disconcerting disjunction is evident in other works such as Body, 1990, where what appears to be a headless torso is presented as awkwardly stiff and doll-like (see fig 12). Tuymans’ advises that the painting is of a cloth doll with a zip fastener in the middle so it can be stuffed. He states that the lines on the torso “create the impression that the body is opening up”. However, this reading is not entirely clear. The rough mark making around the body in the painting is suggestive of a child-like engagement with materials. The flattened perspective and the crude rendition of a body with strangely rendered hands and no visible head is disconcerting in its detachment. The ‘body’ appears to be a child wearing a swimming suit but the body is marked with dark lines of paint on the rib cage which do not appear to be shadows or part of the costume design. The painful vulnerability of the ‘body’ in the painting and its title, lacking any specificity or personal features, alludes to subjection and violence and evokes fear in the viewer. The fragmented framing and sinister omission of information generates a deep felt unease regarding the well-being of the ‘body’ in spite of claims that it is an inert object.

The process of strange detachment is reiterated in Silence, 1991 (see fig 11) where a baby’s head with yellowed, closed eyes floats detached from its body in an ethereal, ghostly plane. The strangely disembodied head is reminiscent of a late Victorian photograph depicting a child laid out for mourning. The stains of dirty orange on the closed eyelids suggest illness resulting in death. The economical use of brushstrokes and the positioning of the head on a blank plane communicate a sense of loss. Loss is further outlined by the painting’s title Silence which could be


understood to articulate mourning and the inadequacy of words to describe the pain.

What comes out of this consideration is perhaps a sense of the inadequacy of painting in this extreme instance to negotiate an idea. Crucial to this thinking is the idea that these inadequacies reveal that meaning can seem to, or even needs to, fail in this instance. This understanding opens up a way to consider the visual process as a way of thinking through and around propositions. The meaning arising from what is depicted exceeds the pictorial limits presented. In other words, meaning is not solely derived from what is represented. Meaning also resides, in part, in the framing of a work by title and the ideas the artwork generates. In the case of Tuyman’s work, the disparity between what the title suggests and what is actually represented in the painting creates a particular kind of critical tension. However, this critical tension, I would argue, also comes out of the complex processes involved in producing an artwork. When the title provides a context for, or disrupts what is represented, it gestures towards the visual processes having a malleability where meaning is concerned.

With this in mind, I would suggest that the work of Whiteread, Salcedo, Scherübel, and Tuyman’s points up the limitations of the prevailing discourses constructed around absence. Interpretations of their work, based on an a priori understanding of absence and the opposition of absence and presence, tend to contain, categorise and silence certain aspects of it. Crucially, their work disrupts and challenges this categorisation and suggests an excess of meaning coming out of the discursive frames constructed around absence and the visual arts. With this in mind, I now want to turn to the thought of Jacques Derrida and specifically his proposition of différence.
But his word is "trace" (the French word carries strong implications of track, footprint, imprint), a word that cannot be a master-word, that presents itself as the mark of an anterior presence, origin, master. For "trace" one can substitute "archi-writing" ("archi-écriture"), or "difference," or in fact quite a few other words that Derrida uses in the same way.36

For Derrida, however, a text, as we recall, whether "literary," "psychic," "anthropological," or otherwise, is a play of presence and absence, a place of the effaced trace. (If it is to be radically conceived, the play must be thought of before the alternative of presence and absence.37

Some introductory thoughts.

This introductory sub-section will offer an overview of Section II. Jacques Derrida's particular strategies will be identified and laid out briefly, but will also be explored in more detail in the following sub-sections. Importantly, as Derrida's contribution to thinking about absence is bound up in his questioning of metaphysics, this will especially include the term/question of metaphysics in sub-section II and his position in relation to it.

Derrida suggests that Western metaphysics, the branch of philosophy concerned with the principles of being and knowing, confers primary importance on the significance of presence and indeed is dominated by it. He posits that metaphysics is

35 It is worth noting, and keeping in mind Paul de Man's point regarding the 'academization' of Derrida. He suggests that what might be seen to be "subversive and incisive" in Derrida's work is diminished or removed by the academic process, resulting in the danger of his thought being reduced to a methodology. This sort of reduction is certainly not what I am suggesting by referring to Derrida's thought in this way, rather more a consideration of what might be seen as 'strategic' approaches. A cautionary note, however, may be made. See Rosso, S., "An Interview with Paul de Man", pp.115-121, in De Man, P., The Resistance to Theory, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp.116-117.


structured by oppositional terms which are dependent on one position being set up against another. These binaries are structured in a hierarchical way allowing one to be cast as the inferior, negative term. For example, presence is set up against absence, speech against writing and interiority against exteriority. This understanding, he argues, is backed up by the authority of reason and is reflected in language. This connection of being with presence and critique of metaphysics may be said, to a certain extent, to be a development of Heidegger’s thought, specifically in the latter part of Being and Time. 38

Derrida picks up particular threads of Heidegger’s thinking, particularly relating to the importance of language. “Being” and presence, as he rethinks the way in which Being and presence might be understood. This thinking will be explored in subsection III. Derrida takes up elements of Heidegger’s thought and develops them in a distinctive way. This approach involves picking up some of his conceptual threads and developing them in a way that is commonly referred to as ‘deconstructive’. This term has evolved from Heidegger’s term “destruction”, but marks a distinct engagement with the interpretation of a text and its possible meanings. Rather than attempting to reconstruct a unified meaning through a particular interpretive stance, Derrida seeks to demonstrate the points at which this possibility fails. He makes no distinction in the category of works he explores and considers these complexities across any number of texts including the literary and philosophical. He argues that knowledge is always disrupted by the play of language and rhetoric, although metaphysics tries to repress this play. Deconstruction is, in part, the unravelling of these points of vulnerability, developed from Heidegger’s thought.

Derrida achieves a radical challenge to what he considers to be Western metaphysical assumptions relating to the status of being and its relationship to presence through his proposition of difference. Extraordinarily, difference is expressed by Derrida as something that would seem to name ‘nothing’, have ‘no weight’ and to exceed conventional linguistic definition. He completely refuses to confine it to one singular word or name. It is presented as one of many interchangeable terms, including (but not limited to), trace, supplement and pharmakon. These terms constitute a series of “non-synonymous substitutions” which articulate a repetition of meaning but displace it through slight differences.

Diffrerence presents as something that cannot be reduced down and contained. This process in the construction of meaning allows for conceptual openness to be maintained, indeed, exceeds a conventional notion of ‘concept’. If we were talking in any other terms, we might consider referring to ‘conceptuality’ to describe the possibilities of this proposition. However, as a concept generally functions as a method of containment, belonging to a particular and distinct set of ideas, this runs against the notion and ‘effects’ of différenciation which is neither a ‘concept’ as such, nor belongs to a set of applicable ideas in any conventional sense. I will go on to explore further facets of différence and its functioning in greater depth in subsection IV. Etymological considerations: différence.

Derrida’s use of language and rigorous textual engagement demonstrates that the oppositions on which the precepts of metaphysics are founded are contested. For the purposes of this inquiry, these ideas, coming out of a critique of metaphysics, have a bearing on how absence might be understood and be thought to signify. Whilst this challenge to metaphysics might be seen, on a general level, as being connected to a philosophical thread challenging certainties of thought reaching back to Descartes, the effects of différence produce their own, very particular, disruptive waves in thinking. 39 I would argue that through its effects, the proposition of différence forcefully articulates a challenge to the metaphysical idea of absence as an absolute, oppositional and subsidiary condition. Indeed, it demonstrates that

38 There is a problem with the capitalization of “Being” when writing about Heidegger’s propositions which are clearly delineated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt in the “Translator’s Introduction to Heidegger, M. Introduction to Metaphysics. Yale University Press, 2000. They suggest that many Heideggerian scholars use the lower case “being” to avoid the implication of a “Supreme Being” that stands above all others; “das Sein” must not be mistaken for a subject deserving the substantiation that capitalization can imply in English (in German, all nouns are capitalised so there is no such implication), p. xi. However, they suggest use of the capitalized term so that “being” (das Sein) is not confused with “beings” (das Seiende) (see p. xi). For clarity, I will observe this rule.

absence is not containable and can never be a complete proposition in spite of the fact that it is often presented as being so.

I propose that the importance of Derrida's thought in relation to the problematic of 'absence' lies, in part, in his proposition regarding the provisionality of meaning within thought which gets expressed through language, and how the possibility of this gets articulated through the effect of différences, the trace.' This crucially communicates a way of rethinking the way in which absence might signify. Further to this, the resistant tension that the play of différences creates is at times dynamic and active and at times passive. It plays across different registers, but is however, neither suggestive of a theoretical rubric nor does it lend itself to any sense of "taxonomical closure." It alludes to something that must be thought of as exceeding signification.

By definition the list has no taxonomical closure, and even less does not constitute a lexicon. First, because these are not atoms, but rather focal points of economic condensation, sites of passage necessary for a very large number of marks, slightly more effervescent crucibles. Further, their effects do not simply turn back on themselves by means of an auto-affection without opening. Rather they spread out in a chain over the practical and theoretical entirety of a text, and each time in a different way. 40

Consequently, what is suggested by this approach is a way of thinking that is non-deterministic and expansive. An understanding of the way in which meaning is rendered malleable and undecidable through this proposition has particular importance for a consideration of how absence might be re-inscribed and rethought in relation to the visual arts.

In order to get a purchase on what Derrida's thinking offers to the problematic of absence, there are some useful initial distinctions to be made.41 Firstly, it is worth pointing out that the question to be asked is not 'what is absence?' as this repeats the metaphysical premise of containment and authority.

What the thought of the trace has already taught us is that it could not be simply submitted to the onto-phenomenological question of essence. The trace is nothing, it is not an entity, it exceeds the question What is? And contingently makes it possible. Here one may no longer trust even the opposition of fact and principle, which, in all its metaphysical, ontological, and transcendental forms, has always functioned within the system of what is. 42

The proposition of différences consequently allows us to think outside of a particular kind of structured thinking that prioritizes an engagement with empirical worth relating to being and consciousness. Differance cannot be subjected to analysis that seeks to establish its inherent qualities. It is seen by Derrida as the "absolute origin of sense in general". As Derrida points out, this "amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general". 43 The methods of description or ways of understanding différences exceed the conceptual paths that metaphysics has to offer. Such an approach breaks down the conventional ways of understanding how ideas might signify. Consequently, it is neither a question of 'what is absence' nor is it a question of going back to attempt to locate an ‘originary absence'. Such an approach would not only conflate the idea of the anteriority of the trace (the proposition that the trace comes before presence and absence) with a palpable and definable space of meaning, but in so doing would haul thinking back into the metaphysics of presence. 44 This critical engagement with questions of ontology will be further explored in sub-sections II Towards the metaphysical, and III. Heidegger: being and presence.

What is of importance is to critically consider how différences effects and makes possible meaning in a way that allows us to reconsider how ‘absence' might signify.

41 This is not to overlook the direct implication of absence in the gesture of writing, where the addressee is absent. See Derrida, J., "Signature Event, Context" in Derrida, J., Margin of Philosophy, Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982, for an engagement with the concept of absence in relation to writing, especially, pp. 307-330.
42 Derrida, 1997, p. 75.
43 Derrida, 1997, p. 69.
44 See Derrida, 1997, where Derrida cautions against employing the notion of 'origin' or 'ground' when considering difference, as this enters into an 'onto-theological' framing which might be said to erase difference. Also see pp. 74-75 for a discussion of the problems of origin being inextricably linked to the metaphysics of presence.
In this regard, care needs to be taken not to confer différence with constitutive parts, but rather with 'effects'. Secondly, to be careful not to replace a consideration of 'presence' with 'absence' but to think about it in relation to the dynamic movement of the trace. (Here, too, a cautious and qualified use of terminology is in play, as 'effect' might be bound into 'cause', which is, again, antithetical to the proposition of différence).

This must be an engagement with the way in which Derrida's thought allows for a reconfiguring of theoretical spaces and their possible mutabilities in relation to an understanding of absence. This rethinking is achieved through a consideration of the 'conceptual effects' of différence. Différence might be viewed in a strategic sense, with its 'transformative' possibilities presented as residing in language, but with the implications of its possible 'conceptual' worth in a wider sense (in terms of the theoretical possibilities it might generate), going far beyond this partial delineation.

II

TOWARDS THE METAPHYSICAL.

In order to consider what Derrida's thinking might offer to a rethinking of the problematic of 'absence', it is important to consider the nature of the thought it challenges. Derrida's contribution to thinking about absence is bound up in his particular questioning of metaphysics. To understand his position in relation to metaphysics this sub-section will explore what it lays out and how Derrida stands in relation to it.

The term "metaphysics" is from the Greek "meta to phusika" - the thing after the physics, which is from Aristotle. It is used to refer to any exploration into dimensions of reality that reside outside of scientific methodologies. For example, what do we understand by reality or indeed God? Metaphysics as an inquiry has generated many questions including those relating to the nature of presence, the mind, knowing, the existence of God, truth and being. In response to these questions, metaphysics attempts to establish a basis on which these enquiries might be understood. Namely, there is a desire to find a single focal point of truth or origin on which to found these questions. Metaphysics is defined as:

That branch of speculative inquiry which treats of the first principles of things, including such concepts as being, substance, essence, time, space, cause, identity, etc.; theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of Being and Knowing.

This attempt to categorise in order to achieve an understanding is linked to ontological questions which seek to explore being in the world. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics which is concerned with being. It establishes different categories of being so that 'entities' (that which has a particular and distinct existence but is not necessarily understood in a material way), might be identified. It questions how something might 'be' and how entities might be understood in relation to each other and being in the world.

A critical engagement with metaphysics as an inquiry has a longstanding history. It has been viewed with ambivalence and scepticism by thinkers such as 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume, for example, and critiqued by Nietzsche in the 19th century and Heidegger in the 20th. Hume dismisses the claims of metaphysics suggesting that knowledge is derived through what he refers to as "perceptions" which are composed of ideas and impressions. He suggests that Hume: "degrades to the status of fictions everything that transcends impressions and ideas. On the other hand, he ascribes to the processes of mind the same sort of reality as the transcendent things that we would reach if we could somehow break out of the circle of immanence." P.18.

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46 OED, 1933.

47 See Norton, D., (ed) The Cambridge Companion to Hume. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. He suggests that Hume: "degrades to the status of fictions everything that transcends impressions and ideas. On the other hand, he ascribes to the processes of mind the same sort of reality as the transcendent things that we would reach if we could somehow break out of the circle of immanence." P.18.
expressed through experience may be falsified. This thinking has repercussions for the claims of science, for example. Moreover, he establishes that 'truths' about the world and the relations within it cannot be definitely verified. This critical engagement with metaphysics is also demonstrated in the thought of Nietzsche specifically in The Will to Power (1885), Beyond Good and Evil (1886) and in Heidegger's thought which I shall explore in section IV.49

III DERRIDA AND THE METAPHYSICAL.

Derrida views the metaphysical approach to understanding as logocentric.48 The term logocentric is derived from the Greek word logos which might be understood as the word, reason, unquestionable authority, God. Derrida engages critically with the tenets of Western metaphysics which he suggests seek to establish particular foundations or ideas of truth and origin, the logos. In particular, he posits that these foundations achieve an alleged 'truth' through establishing binary oppositions which privilege one term over the other. Importantly, the first term is given full presence and the second subordinated and is understood in relation to absence. Derrida maintains that the "matrix" of the history of metaphysics is always the "determination of presence in all senses of the word."50 As Spivak states: "Derrida uses the word "metaphysics" very simply as shorthand for any science of presence".51 Derrida refers to this "science of presence" as "the metaphysics of presence" throughout his thought. 52 Importantly, the connection of being to presence (the metaphysics of presence), is communicated through language.

According to Derrida, the ruling illusion of Western metaphysics - that reason can somehow dispense with language and achieve a knowledge ideally unaffected by such mere linguistic foubles.53 Derrida posits that in metaphysical thinking the central focus for meaning is on speech and ideas expressed through speech. This proposition places importance on the presence of both the person speaking and the person who is listening to the spoken word. Writing, which out of this logic is set up against speech, necessarily becomes cast as definitively inferior because it is consequently understood in relation to absence. With the written word the writer is no longer present and it therefore lacks the immediacy and presentness of the spoken word. Furthermore, rather than being understood for its own worth it is presented as that which represents the spoken word. Instead of bringing with it immediacy of meaning, in metaphysical terms, the written word brings with it the implication of distance. Consequently, the word, or logos is expressed in a phonocentric way. In other words, writing is seen as a shadow of speech because the spoken word has presence and writing implies absence. Moreover, through this proposition there is a suggested transparency between the spoken word and meaning which Derrida challenges.

Further to this, Derrida suggests that metaphysical thinking posits that there is a central truth which exists, a transcendental signified, namely one meaning that overshadows all others. 'Signs' conveying these authoritative meanings are presented as external to the movement of language. This idea notionally articulates a particular assumed condition for meanings to arise; namely, it follows the logocentric premise that meaning is internal to consciousness and needs no external interaction. It puts forward the proposition that there is an assumed ground of truth which gets established through language. So perhaps rather than the transcendental signified being interpreted as a signified (a meaning) that overshadows all others, it is seen by Derrida as a general, assumed, structural condition of meanings in metaphysical thought. This structural condition gets expressed through language, the spoken word. This premise, in turn, is based on an assumption of generalised truth. Meaning is seen to arise from ideas that defer to 'reason' where an overriding truth presides over and determines what is to be understood. The central focus is on meaning and/or ideas expressed through speech, then writing. This means that

49 See Derrida, 1981b, p.51, for a consideration of logocentrism. Derrida suggests that it may be seen in part as "the matrix of illusion", but it is complex and its architecture exceeds this frame.
in order to contemplate the complexities and impact of Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics, it is important to reflect on how some aspects of these conceptual possibilities find earlier resonance in Heidegger's thought. Derrida suggests that Heidegger questions the centrality of presence, and through this, consciousness as the locus of Being.

Thus one comes to posit presence—and specifically consciousness, the being beside itself of consciousness—no longer as the absolutely central form of Being but as a "determination" and as an "effect." A determination or an effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of difference, a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination, etc., such that in designating consciousness as an effect or a determination, one continues—for strategic reasons that can be more or less lucidly deliberated and systematically calculated—to operate according to the lexicon of that which one is de-limiting.56

However, this proposition demands some careful qualification. Derrida defends himself against the suggestion that his "grammatic" is based on what is referred to as a "Heideggerean metaphysics." "How does one model oneself after what one deconstructs? Can one speak so simply of Heideggerean metaphysics?" 57 Crucially, Derrida carefully positions himself in a way that acknowledges the immense importance of Heidegger's texts whilst distancing his work from the suggestion that it might "resemble a text of Heideggerean filiation." 58 His work always constitutes a movement away. With this in mind, it is important to consider Heidegger's thinking around 'presence' and 'Being' and how his thinking opens up conceptual and interpretive possibilities. Some of these points are later picked up and developed by Derrida through the effects of différencé, the trace.
HEIDEGGER: BEING AND PRESENCE

Specifically, from a ‘philosophical’ point of view, Derrida’s proposition of difference finds qualified conceptual threads in Heidegger’s thinking regarding his critical engagement with the concept of “being”. This consideration is important because Heidegger rethinks the way in which being and presence might be understood and this has a bearing on Derrida’s thinking.\(^5^9\)

Heidegger’s initial proposition of a fundamental ontology aims to uncover the structures of being. He attempts to rethink the way in which Being and presence might be understood.\(^6^0\) This inquiry, through its need to establish the basis or ‘foundation’ for his understanding, is held within the remit of Western metaphysical thinking. However, Heidegger later develops his thought in a way that opens up certain kinds of theoretical possibilities. By allowing presence and being to be drawn out of the presuppositions of metaphysical frames he offers an alternative approach to interpretation. Certain dimensions of this thinking impact and shed light on Derrida’s formulation of difference.

Heidegger’s initial engagement with Being is distinct from understandings formulated after 1927 when his thought went through some radical conceptual changes. In the initial phase, his concern with fundamental ontology and the revealing of the structures of being focuses on human centredness and conscious-centred philosophy. Central to his thinking at this stage is his proposition of ‘Dasein’, or ‘there-being’ (‘da-there’ and ‘sein-being’) which is connected to his own particular interpretation of ‘human modes of being’. Heidegger casts Dasein as the central site for disclosure for beings and confers on it primary importance and focus. Human beings are presented as central within this configuration.\(^6^1\) As Dasein is, at this time, presented by Heidegger as the focal point for the disclosure of beings, the idea of this space where beings come forth is formulated and referred to as the clearing by Heidegger.

The clearing (lichtung) is an enigmatic term, and etymologically speaking, it presents in an ambiguous and mysterious way. It offers both illumination, lighting and a space or opening.\(^6^2\) It is in the clearing that the presencing and absencing of being occurs; what is later described as the “concealing-unconcealment”, or “disclosure-undisclosure”. Here, entities come forth and are unconcealed (presencing), whilst others are concealed through this coming forth (absencing).

Importantly, when Heidegger made changes to this early formulation, he recast Dasein as one element amongst others. Consequently, human modes of being became part of a wider understanding of Being rather than human understanding providing its only frame.\(^6^3\) This distinction is of central importance because it allows for a re-conceptualization of the clearing to occur; Dasein is now in the clearing along with every other mode of being. His thought consequently moved away from human-centredness and conscious-centred philosophy. This thinking allows for a sense or understanding of ‘Being’ to be challenged. This change was specifically related to preconceived notions which linked Dasein to ideas of centrality and presence. If foundational presuppositions are made about ‘Being’ then there is an implication that a complete understanding might actually be attained, or as Heidegger puts it, these meanings point towards “a definite horizon by which the understanding is fulfilled”.\(^6^4\) It is in the process of unravelling these problems that Heidegger seeks to re-evaluate what we understand by ‘being’.

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59 As previously mentioned Heidegger asserts that he is not a ‘philosopher’ as such and prefers to refer to ‘thinking’.
60 Charles Guignon points out that the idea of a ‘fundamental ontology’, revealing the way in which or the structures through which ‘being’ exists, is later held to be problematic by Heidegger. He felt that perhaps it gestured towards metaphysical precepts, namely the revealing of something foundational. See Guignon, 1993, p. 68.
62 As Collins points out, clearing is Lichtung in German which means both an opening or space and lighting; a space of clarity or illumination. See Collins, 1999, p.118.
63 See Zimmerman, M., in Guignon, 1993, p.247, where he suggests that “human understanding” could now be conceived as “an aspect of being itself”, rather than being framed by human understanding.
Thus Being is understood within the realm of presentness (Gegenwartigkeit), which refers to ‘now’ and is therefore temporally informed, and presence (Anwesenheit). Part of this understanding of the limits of “Being” occurs through distinguishing between the ontic and ontological. In other words, Heidegger makes a distinction between how entities are defined and categorised on the one hand, and the way in which they might occur, or ‘be’ on the other. This distinction is crucial because, as Derrida points out, Heidegger wants to mark the difference “between Being and beings, the forgotten of metaphysics”, that which has “disappeared without a trace”. This delineates what he refers to as the “erasure of the early trace” (die frühe Spur).

The concept of care (Sorge) is bound into temporality and states of temporality are seen as integral to each other. Heidegger suggests that:

the formally existential totality of Dasein’s ontological structural whole must therefore be grasped in the following structure: the Being of Dasein means ahead-of itself Being-already-in-(the-world). This Being-alongside (entities encountered within the world). This Being fills in the signification of the term “care” (Sorge), which is used in a purely ontologico-existential manner.

Consequently, if modalities of being are connected to an integral temporal frame then being cannot be connected solely to the present. This means that being is equally connected to the past, future and present. The possibility of being then, cannot be tied into a notion of presence alone as it is inextricably linked to absence, which is written into all temporal states. As a consequence of this thinking, the dynamic of presencing is not simply reducible to an oppositional conceit of absence or presence. Integral to this is the idea that withdrawal and coming into presence are concepts that are difficult, if not impossible, to separate from each other. This complex idea of presencing serves to challenge the way in which we understand coming into being.

In the inceptive disclosure of the Being of beings, then becoming, as well as...

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65 Heidegger, 2000, p.96.
67 Derrida, 1982, p.23-25. Derrida quotes Heidegger: “However, the distinction between Being and beings, as something forgotten, can invade our experience only if it has already unveiled itself with the presencing of what is present (mit Anwesen des Andwesenden); only if it has left a trace (eine Spur gespannt hat) which remains preserved (gewahrt bleibt) in the language to which Being comes.”
seeming, must be opposed to Being. Yet becoming, as "arising" nevertheless belongs to phusis. If we understand both in a Greek manner, becoming as coming-into-presence and going-away out of presence, Being as emergent and appearing, coming to presence, not-Being as absence, then the reciprocal relation between emerging and decaying is appearance, Being itself. Just as becoming is the seeming of Being, seeming as appearing is the becoming of Being. 74

Paradoxically, as Being is presented as both definite and indefinite, Heidegger suggests that it cannot be delineated, it is not a tangible entity, and he warns against trying to secure its meaning, yet strangely, we have an assured sense of it. 75 Heidegger suggests Dasein is complicated by its inability to be compared to anything else: "its only other is Nothing, Das Nichts", and "here there is nothing to be compared". He also suggests that "no thing corresponds to the word and the meaning Being". However, even this state of 'nothingness' might be seen or interpreted as a state of Being, as it presents as a singular and loaded term. "Everything that is not simply nothing, is – and for us, even Nothing "belongs" to "Being". Crucially, too, he proposes that Being "must be indeterminate in order to be susceptible to determination". 76 This gestures towards the idea of anteriority; Being is beyond signification, it exceeds articulation. Moreover, the idea of presencing alludes to a sort of trace structure; withdrawal and coming into being. The slipperiness of these ideas works against the normalised 'constitutive parts' or definitive determinations of metaphysical precepts.

It is important to cautiously reassert that these points might be suggestive of conceptual possibilities. Perhaps we might glean from this that the mutual inscription described by Heidegger's 'being' might be suggestive of a reciprocity of state; that withdrawal and coming into presence could be seen to be part of the same dynamic thread, woven together. Where ever there is presence it is conditioned by absence and vice versa. The undulating quality of thought relating to withdrawal and coming into presence might have resonance with certain effects of différence as there is perhaps a sense of 'differencing' between what is there and what does not appear. Moreover, Heidegger's conceptualization of presence and its withdrawal confers a fluidity of matter and meaning, a vague dissolution of one idea into the other. Absences are presented as occurring in the clearing but there is a blurry, evanescent quality to this manifestation which is necessarily linked to presences. In this approach, one idea might be said to be implicated in the existence of the other but does not confine it. This way of thinking sets up the possibility of an engagement with the non-oppositional and in turn, throws the idea of a stable condition or reality of interpreting the world into question.

Thus, Heidegger's conception of being and presence and its complexities draws us back into rethinking the way in which the metaphysics of presence sets up oppositions. His thinking conditions certain ideas relating to signification and temporality. We are provided with a broad context of conceptual possibilities from which to consider how Derrida picks up and develops threads of this thinking through the play of différence. A fundamental part of this unfolds with a critical engagement with the opposition of terms.

V

OPPOSITIONS

In general what these hierarchical oppositions do is privilege unity, identity, immediacy, and temporal and spatial presentness over distance, difference, dissimulation, and deferment. 77 Derrida proposes that the oppositional and structured dynamic of metaphysical thinking is revealed through understanding what he refers to as the 'unmarked' status of the dominant term in language. In this instance, the dominant term denotes the term which is structured in language to be

74 Heidegger, 2000, p.121-122.
75 Heidegger, 2000, p.82.
76 See Heidegger, 2000, pp.63-95.
77 See Johnson, B., "Translator's Preface" in Derrida, Dissemination, Chicago: The Atheneum Press Ltd., 1981a, p.viii where she forwards the idea that Derrida's critique is not simply reducible to oppositional concepts, but that implied within this is that one term is less desirable than the other.
the more important, positive component of the opposition. For example, as presence is conveyed in metaphysical thinking as being connected to being, absence is seen as the negative shadow of presence. Presence is understood as being inextricably linked to Being and immediacy and absence is the inverse of this, connected to non-being and distance. The idea of ‘marking’ allows for a ‘natural’, marked position to be given to the subordinate term in relation to the ‘dominant’ term. Derrida attempts to demonstrate that this constructed opposition is an unfounded, unsubstantiated proposition because an understanding of the primacy of the first term is conditioned by the necessary subjugation of the ‘secondary’ one. The ‘primacy’ of one over the other consequently has to firstly involve the negotiation of an acceptance of the projected hierarchy. Secondly, it must also, through the very act of having established this order, have taken the ‘secondary’ into account in a specific way for its ‘authority’ to be established. Therefore, it can only be understood as a ‘primary’ term if positioned in relation to, or informed by another which is cast as a ‘secondary’ one. This contradiction immediately disrupts any notion of a ‘pure’ or ‘complete’ positioning being legitimised, as the terms are necessarily constitutive of each other. However, in recognising this dynamic, Derrida does not suggest that the oppositional conceit be abolished:

...but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the difference of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same (the intelligible as differing-deferring the sensible, as the sensible different and deferred; differing-deferring intuition; culture as nature different and deferred; differing-deferring: all the others of physis-tekhne, nomos, thesis, society, freedom, history, mind, etc. — as physis different and deferred, or as physis in difference.78

This proposition is crucial because, drawing from the conceptual frame of Heidegger relating to the circle of understanding and the disconnectedness between entities, it proposes that we rethink the way in which the oppositions are understood and validated.

Consequently, in proposing that terms are illuminated through their differences to each other, Derrida puts forward the idea of meaning being deferred and displaced rather than central and determining. This particular understanding of meaning disrupts any supposition that might guarantee it centrality or dominance. Meaning is actively decentralised in this approach. Instead, we are confronted with lacerated, shaken, and moving edges of meaning. This rethinking of the way in which meaning might be constructed has implications for the way in which the authority of ‘truth’, ‘logos’, (that which is seen to constitute meaning, ideas), is understood. Moreover, with regard to the metaphysical oppositional of presence and absence, this thinking presents a challenge to the authority and ‘truth’ of presence and being. This is key to understanding what the play of difference effects, as this assumption is integral to concepts of being pervading Western thought in disparate forms. As Derrida states:

...all names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center (sic) have always designated an invariable presence — ousia, arche, telos, eidos, ormos (essence, existence, substance, subject) altheia, transcendality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.79

However, although his project challenges and overturns the assumptions that are laid down by Western metaphysical thought there still remains a caveat: a residing understanding that whatever gets formulated in language is already laced with “presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics”.80

The task of undoing the history of logocentrism in order to disinter difference would thus appear to be a doubly impossible one: on the one hand, it can only be conducted by means of notions of revelation, representation, and rectification, which are the logocentric notions par excellence, and on the other hand, it can only dig up something that is really nothing — a difference, a gap, an interval, a trace. How then, can such a task be undertaken?81

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80 See Derrida, 1981, p.19, see also Spivak, G., "Translator's Preface" in Derrida, 1997, p.xix where she suggests that 'Derrida's philosopher' acknowledges that there is "no fact that does not belong to the metaphysical box".
VI AGAINST THE TRANSCENDENTAL SIGNIFIED:
A SIGN OF INAUDIBLE DISRUPTION

...They all amount, at one moment or another, to a subordination of the movement of difference in favor of the presence of a value or meaning supposedly antecedent to difference, more original than it, exceeding and governing it in the last analysis. This is still the presence of what we called above the "transcendental signified." 83

The idea of a central, present truth implicit in the metaphysical notion of a transcendental signified is put forward by Derrida as a containing and limiting principle. He proposes that it is an illusory premise that functions on denying or covering over difference. Moreover, the supposition of a central, overarching signified determines a specific kind of 'originary' meaning predicated on establishing a hierarchical structure. This structuring ensures that the play of signification is severely restricted and controlled. This restriction occurs through an assumption that the signifier has a direct descriptive relation to the 'original' signified and that this relationship might be followed and understood in a linear way. Derrida rethinks the way in which meaning might be understood without the assumption of a transcendental signified and this entails an engagement with the functioning of the sign and its conception.

In his rethinking of the way in which the sign might be understood, Derrida presents a qualified engagement with some of the possibilities held within Ferdinand de Saussure's thought. 84 Saussure's proposition of the 'signifier' presents a radical challenge to the idea of the sign as received meaning and through this, the functioning of the transcendental signified. Saussure introduces the concept of the divided sign, positing that meaning in language is constructed; it can only be generated in a differential way and is consequently contingent. The sign is divided into two parts comprising the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the visual marker for the word and the signified is seen as the concept for that word. The two parts are only distinguishable through phonetic difference and differences in relational meaning; they do not necessarily connect to each other nor enjoy a mutually logical relationship. The sign is therefore constituted of, and functions through difference and undecidability, it does not constitute a presence or absence. This radicalisation of how ideas might be understood as arising from the differential, uncertain qualities of the sign and the relational context in which it exists, marks a disruption to the logic of metaphysical thinking which presents a static, given description of an authoritative premise.

Derrida demonstrates how this play of difference, of undecidability at the level of the signifier, might be effected through his proposition of difference.

The order which resists this opposition, and resists it because it transports it, is announced in a movement of difference (with an a) between the two differences or two letters, a difference which belongs neither to the voice nor to the writing in the usual sense, and which is located, as the strange space that will keep us together here for an hour, between speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us to one and the other, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that

83 Derrida, 1981b, p.29, in discussion with Julia Kristeva.
Through the difference of one letter, namely 'a', Derrida transforms difference into differance. Perhaps this change might be considered initially to be a perceptible one if considering the written word, but, as Derrida points out, there is no phonetic writing, so this small, hidden element is instrumental in generating complexities of meaning as it slips through auditory registers. What emerges from this consideration of differance is the notion of an 'undecidable', an instability at the level of the signifier. This undecidability is expressed through writing, but its possibilities slip unnoticed into speech. The choice of writing to communicate this instability is linked to the idea that implicit in speech is some kind of received sense of an accessible 'presence'. There is the suggestion that perhaps through speech we can access a verifiable and complete entity, something graspable and whole, a genuine truth of presence. This assumption, as discussed earlier, has allowed speech to be privileged over writing, with speech seemingly offering the possibility of an engagement with 'real presence', and consequently, a run in with the existence of a supposed 'transcendental' signified. As Derrida suggests, the "formal essence" of the signified is presence and the "privilege of presence" is communicated through its closeness to the "logo" as "phoné".

Phoné, in effect, is the signifying substance given to consciousness as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept. From this point of view,

the voice is consciousness itself.  

In other words, logocentrism, which marks an engagement with the centrality of 'presence' in relation to being and consciousness, controls and restricts the movement of meaning by functioning around the notion of an originary meaning or signified. This thinking lays down structured hierarchies that negate and repress difference. Due to the structured nature of this thinking, presence is implicit in the composition of the 'transcendental' signified. Presence achieves dominance through its 'reasoned' relationship to speech.

To fracture this problem, Derrida takes an idea of differance as a point of entry from which to overturn these hierarchical presuppositions and foundational assumptions. The process or play of differance functions as a possibility for displacement of meaning, a subversive twist in the plot. As the sign is constituted of, and functions through difference, it presents the trace of that which is not present, and in so doing always precludes the possibility of "plenitude" and unity. This consideration consequently presents a particular field of vision for the possibility of meaning breaking down. It dissolves limits and thereby extends the scope of meaning's reach. As Derrida suggests, the play of meaning occurs because there is no centre as a grounding force; there is no "transcendental signified". In effect, what occurs then is the "movement of supplementarity". The sign 'replaces' the function of the centre, and acts as a supplement, accommodating the 'lack' on the part of the signified; it "represents the present in its absence" and marks a deferral of engagement.

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of absence and presence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the

85 Derrida, 1981a, p.4.
86 Derrida acknowledges Heidegger's engagement with the 'economy' of difference, where he describes a "system" in which presence and consciousness are understood as an "effect" or "determination" of Being. He also refers to Nietzsche and Freud's challenge to the stability of consciousness through an idea of difference. These engagements raise the sense of self presence being confounded with an understanding of 'consciousness'. See Derrida, 1982, pp.18-27.
87 It is important to point out here that an issue for Derrida in contemplating the 'transcendental signified', is to clarify that he is not positing a negative theology where 'emptiness' and the 'void' have positive currency. Derrida states that "... it has neither essence nor essence; it derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of difference which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies. Difference is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological-ontological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontology-philosophy-produces its system and its history, it includes ontology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return." Derrida, 1982, p.6. See also, Lathrop, A. and Mc Gloen, K, A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader, Open University Press, 1992, p.111, where they consider the issues raised by this dilemma. They suggest that whilst difference cannot be affirmatively stated, it also cannot be negatively stated, as this merely replaces the presence of being with the absence of being.
88 See Derrida, 1986b, p.20.
89 Derrida, 1981b, p.22.
This idea of ‘play disrupting presence’ ruptures the heart of metaphysical notions of being. Moreover, what Derrida proposes through this thinking goes beyond the conceptual challenges made to metaphysical thinking by Heidegger.

It might be said then, that différence marks out a space that can evade a certain kind of control, distinct from that marked out by metaphysical thinking. It floats around the “sensible and the intelligible”, evading the polarities of their remit, and in so doing it challenges their conceptual parameters. This means that as a term, différence’s ‘difference’ is neither audible nor discernable. Furthermore, différence is not answerable to a solely ‘intelligible’ or ‘sensible’ understanding. As Derrida suggests, what is at stake is not a consideration of a “constituted difference”, but something that exceeds consideration of content. What is being looked at here is what he refers to as “pure movement”, namely, that which gives rise to difference which is the “pure trace”. This set of complexities provides the conditions of possibility for understanding. The trace, which, by means of strange contrasts, necessarily does not actually exist, but would seem, however, conceptually to come before the possibility of the sign. That said, it does not answer to accusations of ‘originarity’ either as that, too, is under erasure.

... it should be recognized that it is in the specific zone of this imprint and this trace, in the temporalization of a lived experience which is neither in the world nor in “another world,” which is not more sonorous than luminous, not more in time than in space, that differences appear among the elements or rather produce them, make them emerge as such and constitute the texts, the chains, and the systems of traces. These chains and systems cannot be outlined except in the fabric of this trace and imprint. This unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance [l'apparaissant et l'apparaitre] (between the “world” and “lived experience”) is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and it is already a trace. This last concept is thus absolutely and by rights “anterior” to all physiological problematics concerning the nature of the engraving (the unit of engraving), or metaphysical problematics concerning the meaning of absolute presence whose trace is thus opened to deciphering. The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance [l'apparaissant] and signification.

This exteriority which manifests, or can only be recognised at the very point of signification, is presented by Derrida as the “opening of the first exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing”. This is a perplexing liminality to consider because it is conditioned by both the active nature of the proposition of the différence/trace and the fact that the trace is also under erasure. It cannot then be thought of as an ‘origin’ in the conventional sense of the word.

Differance is the nonfull, nonsimple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus the name origin no longer suits it.

Consequently, this other kind of ‘space’ or ‘locus’ enjoys a certain kind of theoretical delinquency (and by this I mean rigorous non conformity) because it would seem, in certain respects, to exceed what we might perceive as the ‘limits’ of language and our established understandings. More specifically, it cannot be contained by any metaphysical conceptualization. It suggests a theoretical space that must be considered before that of presence/absence, namely, that of différence, the trace. Through this, the proposition of the trace challenges and refuses assimilation into, as Derrida states, one of the ‘founding oppositions of philosophy’.

93 Derrida, 1976, p.290.
94 Perhaps it could be said in this instance that the interpretation of ‘sensible’ relies more heavily on the French weighting of sensory perception and sensitivity than the English sense of good judgement.
96 The term ‘originarity’ is frequently used in reference to Derrida’s thought. Derrida points out that différence must not be understood in relation to an origin (see footnote 29). Questions relating to origin are within the remit of metaphysical thinking as Derrida argues that there can be no “simple origin” (Derrida, 1997, p.74). In order to communicate these complexities the term ‘originarity’ is often used in reference to Derrida’s writings (see especially Bennington, G., and Spivak, G.). The term conflates ‘originary’ and ‘origin’ but playfully submits to neither in a complete sense.
98 Derrida, 1997, p.70.
Here, therefore, we must let ourselves refer to an order that resists the opposition, one of the founding oppositions of philosophy, between the sensible and the unintelligible.\textsuperscript{102}

This is a loaded philosophical opposition and one that depends on specific interpretations and suppositions. In order to further explore the way in which différance resists this assimilation and its implications for meaning, it is important to pick up two threads. These threads relate to the semantic resonances of différance and the general system or terrain in which they might be seen to be functioning.

VII ETYMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS: DIFFÉRANCE

Etymologically speaking, a negotiation of différance must accommodate the fact that it is not a word as such, but is suggestive of other words, that is, it makes reference to other meanings. This seemingly contradictory approach demands a movement around words which resonate with its apparent meaning. For example, différance might be said to be connected to the French verb différer (descendant from the Latin differre). Différer means to delay, implicating [retarder], to send back, discharge, or postpone, [renvoyer], to draw back, or put off [reculer] and to be different from something else [contr. : ressembler].\textsuperscript{103} Differre, from the Latin, promises both deferral, and difference. Held within this meaning is the idea of a postponement, a pushing away, a suspension, which implicates time and space. It suggests a kind of difference, an otherness to that which presents, something relationally distinct. Derrida describes Différence as combining the two senses of the French verb différer "to defer" and "to defer or postpone", into a noun "designating active non-self presence both in space and time".\textsuperscript{104} It consequently resists confinement to an active or passive role. With this in mind then, the complexities of différance, from a semantic perspective, might be understood to function in a way which motions towards a general combination of meanings and concepts and their ensuing possibilities. This is qualified by Derrida through reference to these configurations as "systematic and irreducible" and therefore suspended within a certain set of conditions. As différance, the trace, articulates the play of differences, and the fleeting spaces between parts, it is also, crucially, an active and passive proposition.\textsuperscript{105}

First différance refers to the [active and passive] movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement, reserving.\textsuperscript{106}

Consequently, Derrida refers to différance as a 'sheaf' and proposes that an engagement with its understanding must only be seen as part of what he refers to as "the general system of this economy".\textsuperscript{107}

The second facet of this understanding is formulated through the idea that différance is one of a number of terms that Derrida uses to describe the complexity of this meaning. It constitutes a sort of vibrant semantical locus. He does not restrict or limit the idea of différance, the trace, through one term because that would establish a "master term" and be the antithesis of his proposition. Further to this, to focus on one term would negate the movement and difference of exchange that the change and momentum of terms articulate. As Derrida states, différance cannot be assigned the status of a "master-word" or "master-concept."\textsuperscript{108} Consequently, trace, supplement, hymen, parergon, pharmakon, dissemination, are all terms which are presented as being interchangeable, but not synonymous with each other. Spacing, sans blanc, cent blancs, sens blanc, are further terms momentarily concentrating a point of meaning but simultaneously tearing open closure.\textsuperscript{109} They are 'quasi-

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{102} Derrida, 1981, p.8.
  \item \textsuperscript{103} Dubois et al., Larousse, Dictionnaire du français contemporain, Librairie Larousse, Paris: 1968, p.377.
  \item \textsuperscript{104} Derrida, 1981a, footnote 3, p.5.
  \item \textsuperscript{105} See: "Implications: Interview with Henri Ronse." in Derrida, 1981b, p.8.
  \item \textsuperscript{106} Derrida, 1981b, p.8.
  \item \textsuperscript{107} Derrida, 1982, p.3.
  \item \textsuperscript{108} Derrida, 1981b, p.40.
  \item \textsuperscript{109} Derrida, 1981b, p.40.
\end{itemize}
concepts', never completely functioning in a stable, knowable 'present' realm but float through and insinuate themselves in the gaps in between. They would seem to be curiously anchored by a thread of 'imagined' meaning but oscillate and vibrate with the possibility of deferral of that fleeting meaning. Such a proposition would seem to present the effect of conceptual disjunction in motion in that the terms align for a hesitant moment and then separate, caught in a process of repetitive displacement. They do not name anything specific so cannot be pinned down, contained or closed off. They are not concepts, nor do they belong to a class of ideas defining differance, as it too, is neither a concept nor an entity. This process manages to generate a conceptual unravelling and alertness resulting in the possibilities for the play of meaning to remain in motion.

Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, differance, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general. 110

As rigorously as possible we must permit to appear/disappear the trace of what exceeds the truth of Being. The trace of that which can never be presented, the trace which itself can never be presented: that is, appear and manifest itself, as such, in its phenomenon. The trace beyond that which profoundly links fundamental ontology and phenomenology. Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the a writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in differance. 111

This proposition would seem to open up the possibility for a slippage or slight shift or displacement of meaning. This process, also referred to as the 'movement' of the trace, carries with it an enigmatic quality, its journey or process described by Derrida as "necessarily occulted," strangely hidden from 'view'. 112 The movement of the 'trace', consequently, might be said to be produced as "self occultation" in that it allows for the de-situation of differance to occur in a spatial and temporal way. In other words, the movement of the trace precipitates a concealment of the same. Through this process, differance can never situate itself or be situated completely. As the trace moves it simultaneously conceals itself preventing it from being fixed in one place. As Derrida suggests, "erasure belongs to its structure". 113

Differance can then be said to give rise to a sense of undecidability, and through this, it prevents the idea of 'completeness' of meaning having currency. As Derrida suggests, the play of differences is generative of conditions, which prevent the eventuality that: "a simple element be present in and of itself, referring only to itself." 114 Differance, then, is presented by Derrida, as a 'ghostly shadow' held within any 'decision to be made'. Its possibility offers up a creeping uncertainty regarding what we might understand to be there and thus presents a challenge to the idea of a fixed or complete meaning. Therefore, it is between and through the malleable lines, the 'not quite there' of complete and full meaning, that undecidability can arise. It cannot simply be reducible to a question of 'either 'or', or a complete inhabitation of one position or another. 115 The 'undecidable' consequently resides at the very 'origin' of the structure of meaning.

In order to be what it is', a text is an essentially vitiated, impure, open, haunted thing, consisting of traces and traces of traces: no text is purely present, nor was there some purely present text in the past. 116

Therefore, in putting forward the possibility of difference/differance, the play of the trace already in action, Derrida forwards a subtle but persistent disruption to received thinking. We can no longer cling to the metaphysical notions of absence or presence that rely on an idea of completeness: "it is the determination of Being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of differance." 117

110 Derrida, 1982, p.11.
115 Collins, 2000, p.70. Collins suggests that the trace is: "neither simply present nor absent, the trace is an undecidable. The relay of differences (pig, big, bag, rag, rat, etc) depends upon a structural undecidability, a play of presence and absence at the origin of meaning. Undecidability at the 'origin', between absence and presence".
VIII SUPPLEMENTARY CLAUSE

We can say then, that meaning arising from the text, trace or writing is expressed with, and arises out of, the play of difference/différence. The production of meaning is consequently interminently threaded into and is constitutive of another meanings. This is expressed through the idea of the "law of the supplement" in that the supplement is presented as being neither inside nor outside, it neither belongs nor does not belong. As Derrida suggests, the supplement is actually neither a presence nor an absence, is "neither a plus nor a minus, neither an outside nor the complement of an inside" specifically, "no ontology can think its operation". There is no resolution to be had here. The supplement has an ethereal, pervasive spectrality that cannot be contained. Its ghostly nature, like the after glow of a light flicking on the retina of the eye, is there but not there.

Within language then, is the possibility of reconfiguration, accelerated formations that fold back on each other, offering a fragile structure that then breaks away and dissolves, floats off and reforms. If we can establish the 'space' between forms as being constitutive of their difference and the 'play of difference' as being expressed through the trace, text and writing, etc., then this assertion should be qualified by restating that the trace is always under erasure, 'sous rature'. The trace is an "already absent present, of the lock at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience". Language is already involved in a process of self concealment and/or self elimination and displacement. In coming into a sort of conceptual shape it is already disappearing into unfathomable dimensions and depths knocking everything into partial shadow. Here, the possibility of what constitutes absence surfaces as a ghostly shadow caught at once flickering but promising to disappear and reappear when we least expect it.

Consequently, Derrida's thought suggests critical possibilities for rethinking the way

in which absence might be understood. The importance of this thinking might be said to principally reside in absence not occurring as a containable or complete proposition. From this we can understanding absence as a supplemented term (in that it always bears the traces of something else). Absence might be said to possess a spectral undertone. This idea of spectrality is one which resurfaces repeatedly in Derrida's thought. It marks a ghostly shadowing, a haunting of one concept through another. This suggestion of spectrality, in turn, gives a 'conceptual' purchase to the way in which absences might function in this regard because it shakes the stability and completeness of meaning and vibrates with possibility. That is to say, absence, for example, as with any term under consideration, is already infused with, or complicated by relational considerations, which affect the way in which it might be understood. The idea of the supplement then again articulates the play of difference through which a term might be considered. It suggests both an addition to something and a replacement for something; it marks and erases possible meaning. Through generating undecidability this idea challenges the proposition of a 'fundamental identity' or 'pure concept'.

IX THE LIMITS OF KNOWLEDGE: mind the gap, textual spacing

Let us space. The art of this text is the air it causes to circulate between its screens. The chainings are invisible, everything seems improvised or juxtaposed.

The gap, in French l'écart which can also mean divergence, is that opening to difference, to an outside, to another - to absence and to death - which, in any theory based on fully present meaning, will have been covered over. Derrida's writing uncovers and remarks these gaps.

To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first to enter into the play of

118 Derrida, 1981b, p. 43.
121 See Wallfords, J., Deconstruction. Derrida, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998, where he specifically considers literary works in relation to what he refers to as the "hauntological example" of the city's identity as being always, already haunted. See also, artist Rachel Whiteread's House, ICA video "Excavating House- Uncanny Encounters", with Doreen Massey, James Lingwood, Mark Cousins and Joh Bird.
In considering these thoughts, it might be useful to question whether there exists a kind of translucent fold of the 'unknowable' produced through an effect of difference. This is a difficult idea which demands a cautious consideration. Part of the importance of this is related to how we might think of supposed gaps or absent spaces, namely, that which we don't know and that which floats as possibility. This possibility is shadowed and conditioned by the 'undecidability' of meaning effected by the trace. These strange absences float across this thought but do not remain long enough to be framed. They present as possible stumbling blocks to theoretical complacency. As long as this movement of undecidability of meaning persists, these spaces can hang tentatively from our thinking, evading our control. We are faced with acknowledging that which cannot be contained and with the possibility that there might be something at the very limits of our understanding gesturing towards 'the other'. That is to say, there is something that exists beyond our comfortable comprehension, something other than what we know.

From this, it might be said that différence makes possible a theoretical tumble with an idea of impossibility. It should not, however, be identified with it, as Derrida suggests, the 'quasi-origin'has no identity with that which it originates. In other words, différence can set into play a consideration of impossibility but should not be connected to it. There is absolutely no avoidance of the contradictions inherent in this strange proposition. Part of what is implied is something beyond our grasp, yet somehow, through the effects of the trace, we are open to its possibility. We are chasing after the idea of something that we cannot catch. But it is in our awkward stumblings that we consider how it might surface and function. In order to negotiate this it is necessary to think again around the effects of the trace to consider how a sense of limit is negotiated.

The trace effects a sophisticated slippage between ideas. Derrida argues that in metaphysical thinking these strange areas of possibility are concealed and erased as they disrupt the foundations built and stabilized on the idea of full present meaning. There is a need to paper over them, to contain and control their potential for movement. This containment is attempted because they rattle and destabilize the certainty that metaphysics erects. (As we have seen this normally translates as an unquestioned stability that provides a specific hierarchical structure for signification). These areas of possibility offer a dynamic space which is sometimes referred to as a gap or opening found in the movement of différence or the trace.

As a term of reference, this strange 'space' of thought communicates a hole (fouf), and crucially a weakness (faille), or a weak spot (point faible). However, this is complicated by our understanding of 'hole' which might imply something containable. In this context it is suggestive of an opening up onto a possibility which is not to be uncovered or contained. An immediate consideration would appear to be then how to negotiate an understanding of this space, coming as it does, out of an effect of différence. If qualified conditions of engagement were established, we might consider the gap to be a kind of opening, a malleable space. Perhaps it could be a space which might oscillate with possibilities. However, in all its complexities, the gap might also be a space that is difficult to describe, indeed riddled with impossibility because its dynamic changes and moves.

So what possibilities does this set into motion? This gap, though non tangible, would seem to offer up a critical space whose dynamic is precipitated on a lack of complete presence, unity or centre. The gap is an opening up, an opening onto the possibility of the 'emergence of the mark' which, in turn, is the possibility of the other. Importantly, this is an engagement with the possibility of an outside understood in relation to alterity.

127 Christina Howells considers the way in which Derrida engages with concepts of signification in order to ascertain whether an opening, a "faille" might occur that is beyond closure "outre-clôture". See Howells, 1998, p.45.

This spacing is not the simple negativity of a lack, but the emergence of the mark. However, it is not the work of the negative in the service of meaning, or of the living concept, the telos, which remains relevant and reducible in the Aufhebung of a dialectics.128

In other words, the possibility of this spacing is not to be confused with what is not there but rather relate to what might appear. Moreover, its meaning neither submits to the “negative” which would position full meaning against it, nor the telos, which is understood as the end or ultimate object. In a philosophical sense, telos refers to a “constructive reorganisation of all human knowledge in a synthesis, or correlation of parts”.129 Both propositions are conceptually inadequate if applied to understand the opening uncovered with the movement of the trace. The telos in this context may be understood in relation to the Aufhebung, which is a term originally from Hegel. It paradoxically both cancels out and preserves meaning. As Alan Bass suggests, it is frequently considered to be untranslatable due to its “double meaning of conservation and negation”.130 However, Spivak suggests that it:

is a relationship between two terms where the second at once annuls the first and lifts it up into a higher sphere of existence; it is a hierarchical concept generally translated “sublation” and now sometimes translated “sublimation”.131

Namely, the telos cannot account for the gap because it might be understood in relation to hierarchies that depend on sublimation.132

What hinges on this possibility of an ‘outside’ (understood as alterity) is how it might be bound into an effect of différence and what this might mean for an understanding of absence. Derrida points out that the concept of spacing and the concept of alterity are not synonymous with each other. They do not “signify exactly the same thing; that being said, I believe that they are absolutely dissociable from each other”.133 Différence, again, is not to be identified with the outside but precipitates thinking about the possibility of it. To think about this gap then, is to think about instability, something other than what we can know or contain. It throws up questions surrounding what is knowable and not knowable. It represents an opening up to the ‘other’ through a moment of contradiction, disjunction, an undecidability.

Spacing designates nothing, nothing that is, no presence at a distance, but it is the index of an irreducible exterior, and, simultaneously, of a movement, a displacement that indicates an absolute irreducible alterity.134

The possibility of absence may be linked to possibility, to an ‘exteriority’, outside what is ‘there’ and knowable. It trades on a kind of evanescence, a fading from what is graspable, what is removed from our knowing. But whether it is useful to consider the ‘gap’ as a kind of absence is problematic. The implication of absence might be there in that a disjunction has occurred, but the gap also might be seen to be the expression of a moment of contradiction within the way in which thought gets structured. As all concepts are put forward as being affected by, and derived from, other concepts, it would suggest that the gap generated in the differences between concepts cannot but be contextually determined. Inevitably, meaning can only arise from this idea of difference between forms and this ‘gap’ is circumstantial, dynamic and elusive rendering its nature singular and in a direct sense particular to a contextual moment.

The concept of the supplement is not Derrida’s, but neither is it simply Rousseau’s; the ‘pharmakon’ is not Derrida’s, but neither is it simply Plato’s; ‘hymen’ is not Derrida’s, but neither is it simply Malling’s. Of course, Derrida does things with these concepts, things that are not necessarily attributable to the authorial intentions

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129 OED, 1933.
132 See Derrida, 1982, footnote 23, pp.20-21 for an in depth consideration of the Aufhebung. The Aufhebung, as previously mentioned, has a double contradictory meaning. Derrida suggests that this double meaning can only be realised in writing where the play of the trace exists. In order to acknowledge this difference, Aufhebung must “write itself otherwise”. His solution to this problem is to consider a translation that would accommodate this dilemma. Derrida puts forward “to relive”, from the verb reliver because it communicates the lifting up of Aufhebung, but also has connotations of relaying and relieving.

133 Derrida, 1981b, p.81. Derrida also points out in this context that “spacing also signifies, precisely, the impossibility of reducing the chain to one of its limits or of absolutely privileging one or the other.” He states that “Difference, above all, is not a substance, an essence, a cause, etc. that could yield some ‘phenomenal deviation’”, Endnotes, p.107.
134 Houdebine to Derrida (July 1, 1971), in Derrida, 1981b, p.91.
This is a strange engagement with torn and fraying edges of meaning, a sort of shifting of traces. What happens in trying to negotiate the effects of this thought is an interesting repetitive gesture, a layering of one set of ideas on another. Traces of other traces, of marks and signification, are at once there and then covered over. The force of this thought is played out in the repetitive and inadequate motions used to scratch out the effects of the trace. Each motion diverges from the lost, it is generative and restated in a slightly different way. The proposition of stable meaning is understood as a fictional landscape, each retraced footstep attests to movement and change. Ideas push against and across each other. The gap cannot be pinned down. What absence might be is repetitively re-inscribed.

Returning to the second axis that positions this research, namely, the way in which we organise or structure an understanding of absence through specific ways of knowing, I would like to consider what Derrida’s contribution to this might be. His proposition of différence, the trace, “must also point beyond the field of the épistème”. The Greek épisteme, refers to “knowledge”, and logos, “explanation”. Epistemology, derived from this, is understood as the study of “the nature of knowledge and justification”. Derrida’s proposition of différence consequently hits against the epistemological frameworks governed by the metaphysics of presence. His thinking complicates and disrupts metaphysical precepts by demonstrating that the possibility of full and present meaning is illusory. Presence is always necessarily conditioned by absence and indeed surfaces in unexpected and ghostly ways. This dynamic is active and nuanced. The force of his contribution, in terms of this consideration, consequently resides in him taking on the problematic of a metaphysical concept of absence and refracting it through the prism of différence. This results in a notably transformed way of understanding the way in which absence might signify because it is written into every presence in a nuanced way.

In its enigmatic looseness in definitive terms, différence disrupts and destabilises meaning. This looseness is distinct from the rigor held within the core of the idea of the trace, which is consistently acute. Derrida’s ideas repeat in alternating refrains, generating slight slips of meaning between terms whilst holding onto an integral proposition of difference. As Derrida suggests, in conceiving of the “sheaf” of différence, the limitations of its framework of understanding are unravelled.

The “sheaf” which you recall is a historic and systematic crossroads; and it is above all the structural impossibility of limiting this network, of putting an edge on its weave, of tracing a margin that would not be a new mark. Since it cannot be elevated into a master-word or a master-concept, since it blocks every relationship to theology, différence finds itself enmeshed in the work that pulls it through a chain of other “concepts,” other “words,” other textual configurations.

Meaning is at once inscribed and effaced, moving away from any possibility of secure containment or definitive association. In a more general sense this pushes us to face the unknowable, to consider what is absent from our frameworks of knowledge. This possible disruption of meaning has direct implications for signifying
practices and specifically has an impact on what might be considered to be the epistemological frames governing an understanding of absence in the visual arts. This transformative and disruptive capacity of the play of différence may be understood not simply in terms of the possibilities of rethinking the assumption of 'full present' meaning, but more widely, in terms of conceptuality and critical concepts of signification. This consideration includes repercussions for, but is not restricted to, issues surrounding identity, gender and the way in which full 'presence' and the unified subject, has been 'normally' implicated in a sense of completeness, immediacy and the possibility of an accessible present and 'absolute truth'. The trace effects a flickering which gains momentum; small fragments escape our theoretical grasp and a disruption to conventional structures occurs through contradiction and difference. Meaning is conferred a provisionality because everything is already informed and infused with other traces.

SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Through his proposition of the play of différence, Derrida picks up this challenge to full and present meaning but forestalls it following the same pattern of inevitable closure by preventing a static, predictable repositioning of thought. This is achieved by setting an alternating movement into motion that would seem to have no possibility for finality and thus cannot be subject to containment on a theoretical or conceptual level. This movement occurs through différence, effecting a provisionality, an undecidability to meaning which functions on several levels. No sense of meaning can be completely full or self same and indeed depends on the instability suggested by the shadows cast by other meanings woven into a term. The movement of différence, the trace, disrupts metaphysical concepts through articulating a differential understanding between terms, which in turn, gives rise to the processes of deferral and displacement of meaning. This means that meaning is conditioned by the spaces or tensions of disparity and through this, the fulfilment of a so-called "complete", present understanding is postponed and repositioned. In this way, the play of différence, the trace, arrests the eventuality of 'completeness' of meaning and its dependence on a notion of 'presence' so clearly entrenched in metaphysical thought. Derrida suggests that meaning can never be fully 'present', as everything is already always haunted by the 'other' which is absent. This idea has far reaching implications as there is no possibility for a notion of interiority or a 'present' self-contained identity to be established. This premise gives rise to a notion of spectrality; there is the suggestion of ghostly shadows held within meaning. This consideration is of particular relevance as the proposition of spectrality quietly illuminates the way in which the possibilities of absence might be understood.
FIRST MOTION OF ABSENCE:

Two hands and a repeated confession: illusory positions
I've been haunted for a while by an image of two hands. The image in question is a still of two hands taken from Douglas Gordon's video work: Confessions of a Justified Sinner (detail) 1995-1996. I find this image compelling. I had already entered into a dialogue with the still before viewing the video from which it was taken. This was my first point of entry; a still engagement with what had been a moving form. I quite liked this coercive dislocation. The fragment was separated from one context and placed in another. I have returned to this double image repeatedly, in different ways, trying to fathom why I find it so intriguing. Perhaps the enigmatic title is a consideration. I have puzzled over its perceptual possibilities, the 'dialectic of the double' and the way in which meaning is being constructed at that particular moment. I decided to try to retain the integrity of the first reading whilst gradually negotiating newly uncovered fragments of information about the work. Apparently, there is a point in the video where the hand does reach for the neck. This is a double grasp played out on two screens.

The image (see: fig 13) presents a still of two hands set beside each other.\(^{141}\) It

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\(^{141}\) In Brown, K., Douglas Gordon, London: Tate Publishing, 2004. Katrina Brown suggests that Gordon's work solicits a dialogue between artist and viewer or what she refers to as 'opposing concepts'. This exchange is generative of what she describes as a 'less finite position' which incorporates the psychical.
could equally be two heads stopped and held in stasis from this work, but here, at this very moment, two hands are visually captured and frozen in time. Each hand is displayed and set up for notice. One hand, positioned on the right, appears in the positive, glowing, but not in a benevolent or reassuring way. It is strangely threatening at this moment, slightly clenched, suspended just before the base of the screen. A seemingly perfectly normal hand posed unnervingly, with an apparent intention to move. It would seem as if lowered slightly it might scramble across the black floor and then who knows what it might do. We might suppose, if we are to follow the title of the video, that these are the hands of a ‘Justified Sinner’ after all. Exoneration from guilt might on the cords, if we are to believe in such a thing. If we let the video play we already know the hands are framed, twice. The first framing occurs through reference to author James Hogg’s work The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner published in 1824 from which the work takes its title. The second framing takes place through Gordon’s use of footage from Rouben Mamoulian’s 1932 film version of The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, adapted from Robert Louis Stevenson’s The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, (1886). But I am going to keep the play button on pause and look again at the still before me.

Perhaps there is malevolent intent in that hand. It is hard to say whether a hand at this moment can have malevolent intent without a body appearing to be attached to it, but perhaps therein lies something more sinister, something looming. Is it still attached to the body or have the qualities of the whole now been projected onto the fragment, and what of the constructed dynamic between the hands? I know someone has sinned and it was apparently justified. This is a confession delivered right at this moment wavering over an earlier one, now being redelivered, the frame of religiosity reconfigured. The possibility of the separated, yet active hand seems to tap into something else. Perhaps it plays on the idea of the whole, yet right now, this appears to be a distinct impossibility, an imaginary state. The hand has now been called to centre stage, twice. The glowing positive hand is mirrored in form by a hand posed on the left presented in the photographic negative, consequently a darkened hand. What resides with this hand, this negative rush, standing like the after glow of a light flicking on the retina of an eye? It is strangely skeletal, a view as seen through imagined x-ray specs. Perhaps if there were a move sideways by the right hand to the position of the left, one hand might be subsumed into a void, into a shadow of itself. But then, that is not clear, which is the void or the shadow, and who could differentiate for that matter? I’ll move back to the two hands. Two hands are projected onto two adjoining, seemingly mirroring screens. This might be deceptive. The negative hand floats on a glowing background. Perhaps a movement left (of the right screen over the left) might render the positive right hand flat, strangely flattened by the intensity of the negative image. It is hard to say, let’s look again.

In their disembodied states the hands seemed to be filled with latent intent. Is it murderous? Will they make crime pay? There will be a confession and I think it is safe to say that it will be borne out of a justified sin. Right now, I think the positioning somehow demands a dialogue between the two hands and this threatens to come. Whilst the right positive hand hovers fleshy and replete I am strangely drawn to the left, I am visually drawn to the negative hand. Then, as if to check that it hasn’t moved, I move back to the right hand. The negative and positive hands are of/not of each other. They are initially set up as visual polarities but actually confound this interpretive path. Both seem to be inscribed into each other yet stand separate from one another, held back by the screens. When I pick up my reading of the dialogue of the hands again I see something else. This is a transformative moment. Press play. Jekyll is in the throes of becoming Hyde, and Hyde Jekyll, this metamorphosis is never fully completed but loops on indefinitely. Wind back to the hands now held in suspended animation.

space of the viewer in the interpretation of the work. Gordon’s double projections, sometimes employing mirroring techniques, problematize the authority of a single screen. Examples of this technique are commonly seen in his work; see Hystericlab 1995, and Film Noir (Twins) 1995. Although this seemingly oppositional dynamic is often the initial framing of many of his works, this proposition is frequently unravelled and thrown into doubt as meaning gets constructed.

142 In Nancy Spector’s essay “a.k.a” in Douglas Gordon The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The MIT Press, 2001, pp.112-149, she cites the date of release of the film to be 1931 (p.115).
Of key importance here for an understanding of the way in which absence might signify is the tension between the kinds of thinking implicated in Derrida's proposition of différence and that of Lacan's real. The real describes a pre-subjective state, namely, the state before the 'subject' enters into language and the symbolic order where it becomes constituted and situated through the complexities of language, sexuality and the social. A sense of the real comes out of the experience of differentiation. It occurs through the limits of what we can describe and know, but also through the apparent effects of its loss as the subject emerges into the signifying realm. Therefore a consideration of the construction of subjectivity is intricately intertwined with the fabric of absence and the positioning of the real.

In a sense, the propositions of différence and the real share the potential for generating indeterminacies of meaning, which are constructed through a critical dialogue with specific concepts. This includes an engagement with the signifier/signified, language, the construction of the subject, ideas of what constitutes truth, an engagement with the symbolic order, and notions of self-preservation and consciousness. These considerations function through disjunction, difference, effects of their 'play' of signification and a certain lack of quantifiability as propositions.

Derrida's proposition of différence throws up the possibility of 'reinscribing' the way in which absence might signify in that it precipitates a rethinking of, or knocking against metaphysical precepts. Lacan's real, on the other hand, submits absence to a certain kind of structuring engendered by what are considered to be thoroughly metaphysical notions.
For Derrida, Loncon’s “topology of castration,” which assigns the “hole” or lock to a place — “a hole with determinable borders” — repeats the metaphysical gesture (albeit a negative one) of making absence, the lock, the hole, a transcendental principle that can be pinned down as such, and can therefore govern a theoretical discourse. Consequently, at times, this kind of structuring is arguably informed by the very logocentric and phallocentric notions Derrida critiques. It crucially links the possibilities for absence to a specifically gendered construction of subjectivity organised around an over arching ‘signifier’, the phallus. However, his thought also gives rise to a space beyond this and importantly, like Derrida’s proposition of différance, precipitates an engagement with the possibility of uncertainty through language, albeit in a different way. These concurrent motions of divergence and convergence of thought are further reflected in their common recourse to the thought of Martin Heidegger. Their respective thinking intersects and overshadows each other in ways that are critically important for the way in which absence might be seen to signify. Indeed, at times, both thinkers intersect at the same prism only to then refract, resulting in areas of radical incommensurability and tension. This theoretical tension is dynamic and complex but allows for the spaces between the two propositions to both shadow and play off each other.

II THE PROBLEM OF ABSENCE AND THE LACANIAN REAL

In considering the way in which absence might be rethought in relation to the visual arts, I would suggest that Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic thought allows for several qualified possibilities to unfold. I feel that these possibilities partially reside in exploring that which would seem to exceed the visible or knowable. This entails an engagement with the “psychical” which is understood in this context as that which pertains to the mind and specifically the ‘uninscribed spaces’ of the unconscious described by Lacan. The possibility of these strange spaces hits against the edges of his psychoanalytical framework and shakes them. This would seem to be an elusive proposition but I would argue that a different order of absence is invoked which is distinctive and complex. Its particular nature, or aspects attributed to it (in other words, the complexion of absence) surfaces in an largely enigmatic way. This ‘emergence’ of a different kind of understanding of absence rises in adopting a critical engagement with what Lacan refers to as the real. I want to argue for a critical positioning in relation to an understanding of absence connected to Lacan’s thought. Although absence is ubiquitous and central in his formulations of the subject, surfaced in a radically inter-textual way, there is space for a consideration of a particular kind of absence connected to his proposition of the real that occurs in two important ways. Firstly, the real suggests a certain kind of absence that exceeds the frame of the social and cultural order and in so doing not only sheds light on the construction of this order but on its possible disruption. Therefore, the real’s relationship with the symbolic order both describes and offers the potential to unravel its legitimacy. Secondly, this ‘anteriority’ of the real is only realised through a certain kind of structured engagement with absence which is highlighted through the splitting and decentring of the subject, its foundation on sense of lack and subsequent sexualized placement within the symbolic order. The way in which the child ‘becomes’ a subject, in effect, informs and complicates the way in which we understand the absence of the real.

III LOCATING THE REAL: the imaginary, symbolic and the real

The Lacanian real is certainly a problematic idea. It is presented in an enigmatic, and frequently confounding way by Lacan. It is part of the three part configuration he sets out: the imaginary, symbolic and the real (imaginaire, symbolique, reel), which describes a psychoanalytic mapping of his understanding of the ‘subject in / and in relation to the world’. This includes the ‘pre-subjective’ state which describes the condition of the ‘subject’ before it signifies as such. In order to ascertain the
possibilities of the absence the real might effect, it is important to consider it in terms of this three part relationship. Lacan’s psychoanalytical construction of the subject is seen as engaging with these three distinct states, which are notably presented as heterogeneous, yet interdependent. This condition is articulated through Lacan’s conception of the Borromean Knot, which he visually describes thus:

The Borromean Knot, as a visual conceit, illustrates the simultaneous interconnection and interdependence, yet singularity of each of the orders in the construction of the subject. Taken from the mathematical configuration of the Borromean rings, it presents a topographical model of the real, symbolic and imaginary (RSI). To understand the functioning of the orders it must be seen in a holistic way. They structurally depend on each other for connection but if one is detached then the three cannot function and consequently fall apart. When connected, however, they exist in a state of interlocked tension with each other. Through this presentation of the Borromean Knot as a method of articulating the imaginary, symbolic and real, Lacan presents equivalent importance to all three ‘circles’ however convoluted the relationship might initially appear.

In setting out this three-part formation, Lacan positions the real in a way that links it through the overlapping symbolic and imaginary. In keeping with the visual conceit of the Borromean Knot, an understanding of the real necessarily oscillates around the imaginary and the symbolic but lies in tension with both. The real is necessarily part of the formation, but is conditioned by its anterior relation to the imaginary and symbolic and remains inaccessible to both. In this regard, Sheridan,


in his translation of Lacan’s work, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis refers to its status as ‘algebraic x’ this term paradoxically conferring it with a sense of unquantifiability and strange possibility in keeping with Lacan’s spatial and mathematical psychoanalytical schematics.145

The real marks a pre-subjective state, before the subject enters into language and signification, but is understood in relation to the mother’s body. In his earlier formulations of the real, Lacan identifies this state with the mother, the maternal. It is presented as pre-social and pre-linguistic as it precedes the imaginary and symbolic. This casts a certain light on the mother/woman as absence/lock, ‘other than’, and is articulated through a certain kind of structured absence from the authority of the signifying field. Although the real is to be understood in relation to these other categories it must not be mistaken, in spite of what its name might imply, for reality.146 Secondly, the state of the imaginary is presented as offering up the idea of the ‘world’ for the subject, the ‘visual register’ of the image residing in both the conscious and unconscious mind. Whilst the imaginary might incorporate the notion of the imagined, it is still bolstered by what is perceived as ‘reality’ and this conditions its possibilities. Thirdly, the symbolic is understood through the subject ‘becoming’, entering into language and the social order. The dynamic of the symbolic channels the subject into a specific kind of ordering, situating it through language and sexuality. The subject is therefore understood in relation to language and this is considered with reference to Ferdinand de Saussure’s thought.

As we have seen with Derrida’s engagement with Saussure, meaning arises through the differential relations between signifier and signified and relations between signifiers/signifiers, signifieds/signifieds. The dynamic between two signifiers on the same level (horizontal) presents metonymy, whereas the replacement of the original signifier for a new one (vertical movement - original retained underneath) becomes

Consequently, the combinations of differential signifiers/signifiers, signifieds/signifieds and signifiers/signifieds effect meaning within language in a particular way. The meanings that are generated are aligned with the symbolic relations that already exist. These symbolic relations are productive of subject relations produced in the wider discursive field. I explore this in more depth in subsection VI, Difference and language: the symbolic register. (It is important to mention that there are qualifications to this framework of meaning, which Lacan reworks in later texts). I shall discuss this further in relation to language in subsections VI, Difference and language, and V, Linguistic limits. In order to establish how the subject emerges into the imaginary and symbolic from the real, it is necessary to consider the way in which the subject ‘becomes’ by encountering what Lacan refers to as the mirror stage.

IV THE MIRROR STAGE

The first step away from the real, towards an entry into the symbolic order occurs when the child realises that the mother is separate from him/her. This sense of loss and lack motivates the child to find an (illusory) unified, stable image of self (within the imaginary) to fill this sense of lack. This need to fill the gap and profound sense of loss also extends into an engagement with language. This development marks a sense of the loss of the real and is articulated through what Lacan refers to as the mirror stage. A consideration of what is referred to as the mirror stage importantly positions and conditions this certain kind of absence which comes out of a sense of the loss of the real.

The mirror stage occurs when the child first recognises its own reflection. At this point, the child begins to negotiate the idea of the image of itself and the relationship of this image to the external world. This is referred to as the specular image, understood by the child as a reflection of self but crucially, in identifying with this image, or imago, he/she learns that that there is a fictional dimension to this presentation. The recognition of self is also then necessarily a misrecognition, or inability to recognise, méconnaissance, a term which Lacan identifies with the imaginary (and the paternal), and consequently the visual register. In this instance of misrecognition another ‘other’ self is understood although the subject is actually viewing a “fragmented body-image” rendering the idea of any apparent unified self as illusory.

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term imago.

In other words, the term imago denotes an idealised image of another person or self, which is taken into the unconscious.

Indeed, for the imagos – whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and in the penumbra of symbolic efficacy – the mirror image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world, if we go by the mirror disposition that the imago of one’s own body presents in hallucinations or dreams, whether it concerns its individual features, or even its infirmities, or its object-projections; or if we observe the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearances of the double, in which psychical realities, however heterogeneous, are manifested.

This erroneous perception of self gives rise to a disjunction which creates a split between the conscious speaking self, which recognises its reflection, and the self

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reflected in the mirror. Through this visual dynamic, the subject is paradoxically constituted; it becomes a subject through entering into the visual and linguistic world, and yet this recognition of self and 'other' establishes that the subject is decentered and divided at the same time. This configuration speaks of the broader relationship and development of the subject to the processes of inter-subjectivity. This process also marks the visual recognition of anatomical difference, and crucially, through this, the significance of the phallus which visually is the register of the penis, but symbolically the marker of power in Lacanian terms. The child recognises the difference between itself (if it is male) and the mother and this is communicated in terms of lack, absence. Broadly speaking, this is a dialectical relationship between self and other, internal and external, with the subject founded on the premise of a central lack. These spaces are articulated as gaps, absences and, although presented as a 'non-space' by Lacan, are also strangely, the locus of the unconscious which surfaces at this split.

The mirror stage consequently marks a stage of transition where the real in its organic state is lost to the emerging subject as it recognises its self in relation to other and enters into the signifying realm. A sense of the real consequently comes out of the effects of its loss (which is connected to the loss of the maternal) and the disjunction between the state of the real and the emerging subject entering into the symbolic order. The effects of the real paradoxically find form as ruptures in the signifying field and in so doing refer to the absence of the real for the subject.

Although we can take these initial propositions as an essential step on the way to unravelling the real, it is important to acknowledge that Lacan's formulation of it might be seen as part of an evolving and dynamic idea that changes course. This development poses certain problems for interpretation and contextualisation as his thinking does not follow a linear path. Although these issues are not specific only to the real, they form part of a wider concern flagged up by suggested changes of focus in Lacan's thinking (particularly from 1960 onwards) and have a direct impact on its possible conceptualization and relationship to an understanding of absence. For this reason, I wish to cautiously focus on Lacan's later formulations of the real, which are partially contextualised through a poststructuralist framing. This is a problematic framing because although it sets up a critical engagement with the normalised assumptions surrounding meaning, thought and language that humanist notions legitimise, parts of Lacan's thinking do not fit into its rubric. The humanist justification of a 'natural' or 'given' order, and the idea that any one source could be the centre of truth, is challenged by positing that everything is constructed discursively, is relational and specific to context in poststructuralist thought. However, and this constitutes a large qualification, whilst some aspects of this thinking connect to the poststructuralist framing, the formation of the real, notably, is not discursively constructed. Therefore, the development of Lacan's thinking around the real cannot be said to offer an exact parallel to the development of structuralist/poststructuralist thought, however, it is conditioned, at times, by parts of it.

Consequently, Lacan's later interpretation of the real confers on it uncertainty and difference and thereby allows it to enjoy a degree of disruptive ubiquity. It is

V REFORMULATIONS OF THE REAL

151 See "The signification of the phallus" in Lacan 2001, pp. 311-322, where he discusses this issue. 152 Elizabeth Grosz points out that Lacan, in fact, presents female sexuality as supplementary or excessive to male sexuality. She suggests that the idea of lack versus excess is destabilized by Jacques Derrida in "Melancholia" 1981, through his proposition of supplementarity. She argues that Lacan's use of the notion of supplementarity cannot, however, be extricated from the central point of reference, the phallus, which organises and structures subsequent relations. See Grosz, 1990, p. 292.
negotiated as a space that is radically elusive and through this elusiveness, is
generative of a dynamic, fraught and resistant status. It is therefore conditioned by
an idea of difference and this is in stark contrast to what has been suggested to be
his 'structuralist' engagement with the real which contains it as an absence and
therefore renders it a knowable or manageable space.\footnote{155}

The real, I have told you, is that which is in the same place. You will see this in the
history of science and thought.\footnote{156}

This transition from structuralist to poststructuralist is not definitively mapped out but
it could be said that the development of his conception of the real is marked by a
change of

a relational limit but
an idea of difference and this is in stark contrast to what has been suggested to be
entry into language and consequently the symbolic order. As a result, this describes
generative of a dynamic, fraught and resistant status.

The shadowy location of the real is amorphously presented as residing outside the
symbolic order. In order to signify the subject must enter into language. Only then
this entry occurs can the subject wield meaning and power and this is informed and
located by its newly realised sexual identity. This identity is structured by a
positioning in relation to a visual recognition of the signifier, the phallus, which is
either present or absent in the child. The logic of this demands that women are
perceived as castrated and the recognition of this possibility gives rise to a sense of
loss or lack; an unconscious acknowledgement that castration is possible. However,
Lacan presents this as a symbolic castration, a subjugation to what he refers to as
the Name of The Father, which is a symbolic appellation.\footnote{160} The symbolic father
governs as the locus of authority and power and this status is established through
language. Through this process, the phallus becomes the object of desire and
manifests through desire for the other which is repressed in the unconscious. It sets
the ground for the advent of the desired object of the drive, objet a, which is the

engagement with the real and the sense of absence it precipitates. This version of
the real allows it to manifest in a strangely uncontained and evanescent way. It
retains a pervasive dimension yet can only be understood in relation to the
structured space of the symbolic. As Lacan suggests, this positioning constitutes an
engagement with praxis "which places man in a position to treat the real by the
symbolic".\footnote{159} It is the topological dynamic of the symbolic in relation to the real
which consequently determines possibilities and is constitutive of our grounding in
relation to the elusive form of this real. To get a sense of how this topological
dynamic functions and the way in which the absence of the real might be
understood, it is important to consider the way in which the symbolic functions and
constructs this relational 'absence'.

VI

DIFFERENCE AND LANGUAGE: the symbolic register

to Slavoj Zizek's interpretation of Lacan's writings, suggest that his 'modernist' engagement is marked by a
negotiation with the real as an absence "around which the text/object circulates", whereas his 'postmodernist'
position is: "distinguished by its preoccupation with an excess of the Real" (sic), p.155. See also p.11, and
p.13 where they suggest that the seminar on Ethics of Psychoanalysis (1959-60) marks a break in Lacan's
thought which they note as not being entirely negated in the English interpretation of Lacan.


157 See Wright, E., & Wright, E., The Zizek Reader, 1999, p.12 and Bellesey, 2005, p.47 where she posits that the object of the drive
gets placed "more firmly at the level of demand:"


signifier of what is absent and hence marks the subject’s recognition of what has been lost, namely, the real.

Crucially, from the perspective of language, Lacan casts the phallus as signifier. However, the phallus functions essentially as a signified and in a metaphysical sense, a transcendentaled signified because it effectively governs the Lacanian psychoanalytical discourse. Lacan takes Sigmund Freud’s idea of the unconscious being structured like a language and develops it through the prism of Saussurean thought. He refers to the unconscious as a ‘conceptual elaboration’, conferring on it the form of a linguistic structure. Although he suggests that this linguistic quality allows us to quantify what might exist under the term ‘unconscious’, in that we can grasp an understanding through the workings of language and semiology, his interpretation might also be said to produce its own set of problems. As we have seen, Saussure proposes that the sign is composed of the signifier and the signified. The signifier marks the sign in a visual way and the signified presents the conceptual part of the sign. Meaning is derived from the differences between the two parts of the sign and between signs. If we go back to the Saussure’s terms, it is evident that the signifiers are normally seen to ‘slide’ over the signifieds to achieve meaning. As meaning is never fixed in this process of slippage, this motion denotes an absence of a concrete interpretation within language. In the case of the unconscious, Lacan posits that the signifiers are seen as becoming unattached from the signifieds. Therefore, the process through which difference and consequently meaning is understood, is held in stasis. The signifiers become then, that which cannot enter into consciousness in a conventional way as they are seen as registering “below the bar”. The signified becomes separated from the signifier and as a result, the signifiers fail to gain signification. The unconscious resorts to gaining signification through metaphor and metonymy, namely, in non literal ways, including the qualities of something being presented as a verbal or written substitute for the actual word being described. These processes become the voice of the unconscious.

Consequently, rather than take on the signified/signifier dynamic posed by Saussure, Lacan prioritises the signifier, viewing both parts of the sign as signifiers in the unconscious. The language of the unconscious is consequently comprised of signifiers disconnected from their signifieds. The language of the unconscious remains separate from the language of the conscious but as we shall see, emerges as ruptures into signifying practices. This idea would seem to precipitate the need for a cautious engagement in relation to a dynamic with the real. For Freud, the unconscious is to be found in the clumsy stumblings of language. It is presented as residing in gaps and fissures, surfacing momentarily through splits and ruptures of form.

Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles. Freud is attracted by these phenomena, and it is there that he seeks the unconscious.

Lacan views the problematic of the unconscious as being a question of “...an ‘absorption’ fraught with false trails, (une récupération larvée).” The term ‘absorption’ allows for an unpredictability and uncertainty of possibility that suggests the unconscious to be vulnerable and elusive, yet simultaneously open to interacting with a registering framework. This positions a dependency upon the discourses of the conscious mind for expression. According to Freud’s later theories, the contents...
of the unconscious are seen as a series of "ideational representatives". These "ideational representatives", which are, in fact, presented as the signs that facilitate the 'drive' taking up a position within the unconscious, are interpreted as signifiers by Lacan. The unconscious is consequently expressed as functioning through the metaphorical and metonymical and these forms are seen as being constitutive of the "psychical primary processes".

VII LINGUISTIC LIMITS

However, Lacan also suggests that the meaning we might ascribe to something through language is not necessarily the meaning we might think it to have. This differential articulates a space that might be described as an uneasy gap between what we know to exist and what might exist. It points to the complex uncertainty of language and its referents. Catherine Belsey calls this gap, this space in between "a terrain of unmapped alterity". This unmapped alterity marks an area that exists outside of the subject's grasp because it is not accessible through language. This is important for a consideration of the real and the problematic of absence, because, from this, language falters at the task of describing the real. The real cannot be represented through words and fails to be answerable to the symbolic. This articulates an edge of understanding and present an idea of the threshold of the limits of symbolic interaction and consequently the seeping edges of the real.

As the real remains inaccessible to us as subjects, and it evades the symbolic order through failing to signify in language, language might, in this sense, be seen to be a condition of its inaccessibility. If we consider this relationship of the real to such modes of signification then it is important to clarify more aspects of the shadow the real casts. As we have seen, Lacan's interpretation of the real presents it as constituting what is lacking in the symbolic order. Sheridan refers to it as:

the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic.

The latter part of this assertion would seem, however, to both lie in tension with the idea of heterogeneity (which marks Lacan's engagement with the imaginary, symbolic and real) whilst perhaps holding onto and articulating its seepage. The idea of an umbilical cord denotes an organic dependency on the symbolic whilst the notion of 'foreclosure' would seem, to a large extent, to indicate a shutting off, a condition of absolute inaccessibility. This perhaps goes some way to articulating some of complex paradoxes of Lacan's formulation of the real.

Therefore, the real is presented as an ethereal condition, existing as a pre-subjective state which floats outside our positioning as subjects. There is the suggestion that it ultimately looms in the shadows of and beyond ourselves. However, the real remains invisible and inaccessible to us in a conventional signifying sense through language. This uncomfortable sense of the real forms a sort

168 Grosz, 1990, p.82.
169 Grosz, 1990, p.87.
167 Belsey, 2005, p.4.
166 Sheridan, 1977, p.280. For example, where she states that the real has "no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of 'raw materials'. "Our understanding of it can only be relational, through the reconstructive or inferential work of the imaginary and symbolic orders". 171 See Lacan's reference to the biomembrane Knot in Seminaire 1974-75.
of residual unease in the subject. This unease resides both in the inadequacy of the signifying system of language and the impossibility of understanding the sense of loss engendered by our consideration of our [past] relationship to the real. The real manifests in ways that exceed language. Through this positioning a sense of its loss is found in the space between the pre-subjective and that which might be described in language for the subject in relation to the symbolic order. Consequently, the real cannot be discerned via the symbolic because it can never register there. Although this describes the apparent condition of the real in relation to its incapacity to manifest through symbolic articulation, it does not fully negotiate the undulating nature or possibilities of the real in a wider sense. To explore this further, it is crucial to consider the wider conceptual basis on which aspects of Lacan’s real might be founded.

VIII

HEIDEGGER AND LACAN

Like Derrida, Lacan’s recourse to Martin Heidegger’s thought is notably related to the exploration of conceptual possibilities, albeit resulting in very different ideas. Specifically, in relation to the consideration of the real and absence, I want to go back briefly to Heidegger’s consideration of the clearing and then his proposition of das ding. Threads of these ideas have some conceptual resonance for the development of Lacan’s ideas surrounding the conscious/unconscious and the way in which the loss of the real might manifest.

As we have seen, Heidegger puts forward the clearing as a strange space of illumination where beings/being mysteriously come forth in the concealing/unconcealment. What comes out of this in terms of considering Lacan’s real is, firstly, the possibility that there is a disparity between what might be described in the clearing and what actually emerges into consciousness. Consequently, ‘reality’ is not given in language but understood according to specific conceptual frameworks and certain ways of entities being disclosed. Additionally, these ideas relating to presencing, coming into consciousness, and emerging, are not empirically quantifiable. Held within the idea of the bringing forth or going away of presencing, is the sense that in coming forth into consciousness absences are necessarily also present. This importantly sets up the idea of a space that is elusive, evading categorisation and has no definitive limits. It oscillates in its relationship to what constitutes absence. This idea of presencing challenges the oppositional premise of spaces of absence and presence because it renders it non reducible to this structuring through indeterminacy. These ideas position an uncertain uneasy relationship between what emerges into consciousness and what gets described in language.

Whilst it might be said that the real is an indeterminate, uncontained space, I am not suggesting that the idea of beings disclosed in the clearing acts as a conceptual blueprint for the real. It is important to recognise that the clearing and the real present the possibility for different orders of absence, which are contingent on the conceptual frameworks in which they exist and are not necessarily reconcilable. Moreover, the real arises out of what is seen as a pre-subjective state, before the subject signifies and enters into the symbolic order. Everything is seen by Lacan to be held within the real in fact, he asserts that there is absolutely nothing lacking in the real. It is within the symbolic order that absences are felt and, indeed, these surface as reminders of the loss of the real. In order to consider how these reminders surface I want to explore the unconscious in a little more depth.

172 See Belsey, C., Poststructuralism, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 58-59. See also Wright & Wright, 1999, who suggest that Zizek employs the Lacanian real as a vehicle to describe how reference in language fails. They also posit that the real is only revealed through the "structural effects it produces in mundane reality" See p.3.

173 Interestingly, Lacan maintains that although it has been suggested that at one time he was considered to be “obessed with some kind of language, even a Heideggerian one", it was never more than a “proaedeutic reference”. See Lacan, 1977, p.18. Nevertheless, a number of Heidegger’s ideas would appear to surface in Lacan’s work in relation to the real and would seem to have resonance with a concept of it in a way, perhaps, that might be said to exceed his evaluation at this point.
We have established that once the mirror stage has occurred the subject tries to placate its sense of loss through identification with an imaginary unified self. However, the subject is not a unified, fixed entity but split through recognition of self and other. The ego of the subject is consequently destabilized as it falsely presumes that it recognizes the reality of a whole, but this is, as mentioned, a méconnaissance, a misrecognition. At this point of disjunction the unconscious is seen to surface. The unconscious is presented by Lacan as that which cannot be integrated into conscious thought. He confers on it the qualities of loss and other. The ego of the subject is consequently destabilized as it demonstrates the 'need to disappear' and this is conveyed as on integral and lost.

Lacan describes the unconscious as having a "pulsative function" which demonstrates the 'need to disappear,' and this is conveyed as an integral and important part of its make up. He suggests that the absence of the real emerges out of these ruptures, and in so doing, the unconscious "presents you with its enigma, and speaks". Consequently, the division of the subject at the point of the mirror stage provides an opening for the unconscious to manifest and erupt into the conscious space of the symbolic. This, in turn, facilitates the idea of "another locality, another space, another scene, the between perception and consciousness." This strange space describes a dimension of the possibility of the real. The unconscious surfaces through this enigmatic gap and reminds us of what we have lost. It would seem to formulate a sort of tentative space, "a non temporal locus" according to Lacan, elusive, and defying articulation. This expresses, perhaps, stains left by suggestion, a retreating and advancing absence marked through a certain kind of differencing. This differencing relates to the 'becoming of the subject', the difference between signifying as a subject by entering into language in a way that is conditioned by absence, and remaining in a pre-subjective state. In effect, this differencing is occasioned by eruptions of the unconscious at the point of the split of the subject, reminding the subject what has been lost.

In considering these other apparent flashes of the effect of the loss of real, intermittent rays of light might be shed on its possibilities. For example, the unconscious, Lacan suggests, is situated "in the dimension of a synchrony", in other words, it occurs simultaneously with other states. The unconscious surfaces through ruptures in the conscious, into the signifying realm and alludes to the absence of the real. Through this, Lacan introduces the idea of the gap serving what he refers to as an "ontological function". This positions a certain kind of relationship to being that is articulated through the "structure of a gap" and locates it within the realm of the pre-ontological as an unrealized entity. As a consequence of this, the unconscious enjoys a slippery status when it comes to registering but finds expression nonetheless. In this sense, the unconscious does not gain general synonymity with the real, but is threaded into an understanding of it. Wright suggests that:

Yet although the real cannot be written, there is one place where it does establish
itself as writing, where its traumatic effects are inscribed—namely, in the unconscious. 182

In this regard, the effects of the real importantly mark out the possibility for a resistance to conceptual closure, as this ill-defined possibility for absence might be articulated as uncertainty.

The broad complexion of the real in relation to the problematic of absence has so far been considered in terms of possible theoretical and philosophical shadows positioning the real and its relationship to signifying processes. One last consideration of the absence of the real relates to the shadows cast by what might be seen to lie in the wake of the real, the expression or by-products of its apparent loss. 183 As we have seen, what might be understood as expressions of the loss of the real are articulated in two ways. The loss of the real is expressed in an amorphous manifestation through the unconscious and it is also expressed through signifiers of desire. In the latter instance, signifiers of desire replace the lost real articulated at the level of the drive through mediating object, objet a.

X

DRIVING TOWARDS ABSENCE: from DAS DING to OBJET A

Lacan initially retains the term das Ding to refer to the object around which the drive moves. He takes the term from Heidegger's use of das Ding, where he proposes that Heidegger develops a "dialectic around a vase" and gives das Ding the role of "uniting celestial and terrestrial powers around it in an essential human process". 184

In other words, in his discussion of a vase which is seen to encircle emptiness, Heidegger gives das Ding quite monumental unifying properties that reach upwards and below. However, Lacan wishes to reduce this complexity and see das Ding in terms of it being simply a signifier and a signifier of "nothing other than of signifying as such" at that. 185

Lacan locates das Ding within the psyche, marking the place in the speaking being of the lost real. It is perceived as the signifying form which creates the void or the emptiness at the centre of the real. He suggests that das Ding is beyond the capacity of our imagination and consequently we attempt to attribute an object with the "value of representing the Thing". 186 This is interpreted as a form of sublimation by Lacan and this idea of 'emptiness' he refers to as being highly "determinative" in this context. 187

This Thing, all forms of which created by man belong to the sphere of sublimation, this Thing will always be represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else—or, more exactly, because it can only be represented by something else. But in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative. 188

At this point in his thinking, Lacan argues that das Ding is 'veiled' and this condition determines our relationship to it. He puts forward the idea that it is the part of the real (or what he refers to as the primordial real) that is connected to the signifier. Das Ding is strangely articulated through the 'refound object' and comes to be represented by something else. The processes of understanding das Ding and its placement, he suggests, are located beyond the pleasure principle. He suggests that the creation of an artistic object serves to represent das Ding as signifier, in fact that "all art is characterised by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness" 189

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182 Wright & Wright, 1999, p.4
183 In the process of attempting to negotiate an encounter with the real, Lacan refers to the buech which he interprets as being 'the encounter with the real', citing it as "the object of concern" with which Freud engaged. This encounter never comes to fruition and presents as anything from the trauma to the phantasy [sic]. See also, Lacan, 1977, pp. 52-54, where he acknowledges his reference to the buech as being taken from Aristotle. (See also p. 60.)
184 See Lacan, 1992, p.120.
185 See "Seminar IX" in Lacan, 1992, especially pp. 120-122
which is seen as the catalyst for desire.\textsuperscript{190}

He later develops and expands this idea and das Ding evolves into what he refers to as objet a. In their inception, both das Ding and objet a are elusive and enigmatic terms. Lacan locates das Ding within the psyche in the speaking being to mark the place of the lost real. Objet a is located at the level of demand and describes that which is perceived as being able to fill the gap created by the loss of the real. Sheridan points out that Lacan wants objet a to remain untranslated which adds to its mystery.\textsuperscript{191} It incorporates a notion of 'the other' through the 'a' which is 'autre' and is distinguished from the 'Autre' (the Other).\textsuperscript{192}

...the interest that the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it — namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal repression, from some self-multilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the objet a.\textsuperscript{192}

The way in which objet a is seen to function is understood through the expression of desire is at the level of the drive. Lacan rejects the distinction made by Freud between the sex and the death drive. He combines the two, consequently giving the drive a paradoxical quality of pleasure and finality, a strange but compelling complexion of death and desire. As objet a can be a signifier for this drive, it can signify and therefore be expressed as a symptom of our loss. The movement of the drive would appear to be fundamentally a negotiation of desire and pleasure in search of the lost real. The movement of the drive towards the compensation for this absence is consequently expressed around objet a. Objet a does not exist in the real but is constitutive of its loss.\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{190} Of interest here, also, is the point Lacan makes about Freud's consideration of religious practices and the "obscenial traits" surrounding them. He argues that religion, regardless of its manifestations, attempts to avoid emptiness, however, it still presents as a central concern.


\textsuperscript{192} Belsey points out that Lacan marks objet a from the Autre, (the big Other), which she describes as "language itself", p.47. Belsey refers to the real as a "psychic remainder" which is presented as a forbidden maternal object, with the suggestion that it marks the place in the speaking being of the lost real. However, she suggests that it appears to be there in (at) a sort of void. See Belsey, 2005, p.70.


\textsuperscript{194} Wright suggests that Zizek interprets Lacan's objet a as covering over the gap of the loss of the real and Objet a, then, might be said to provide a provisional marker for the real, to be productive of an indicator for the subject that can be read on a signifying level. The advent of Objet a signals a strange sort of temporary fill in for the absence that is the loss of the real. It marks desire for what has been lost, coupled with the impossibility of this desire ever being fulfilled, as it exists beyond the pleasure (motivated by the drive).\textsuperscript{193} This would seem to be a manifestation of the absence of the real expressed through objet a as the object of the drive and mediated through the production of signifiers alluding to this loss. The point of signification introduces an entry into culture and need for the production of cultural objects. This need is driven by the desire for jouissance, which is seen as a move or gesture made towards to the lost real.\textsuperscript{194} This strange absence, created by the loss of the real, motivates desire and through this (crucially for the visual arts) the production of cultural objects.

This consideration of absence demands then, a critical engagement with the limits and possibilities of Lacan's psychoanalytical frame. If we can make a distinction between the complexion of the absence connected to the loss of real and the effects it precipitates, then we are dealing with an idea that makes a mark on our psychical spaces. The only tangible aspects of it are articulated through the effects of its loss which surface as ruptures into signifying structures. In other words, the effects of the
real surface as expressions of desire, to fill the loss of the real.

There can be absolutely no doubt that there is a real. That the subject has a constructive relation with this real only within the narrow confines of the pleasure principle, of the pleasure principle unforced by the drive... the point of emergence of the love object. 197

The real cannot be quantified in any tenable way so a consideration of it is, in part, like running after moving shadows. As a consequence, we can sift through what the real would seem to present as an effect of its passing, but its nature cannot be pinned down for classification. It is easy to critique what might be said to hinge on an engagement with the real in relation to the problematic of absence, but the resolution is not one with well-defined edges. Perhaps this peculiar elusiveness is the point. The real delivers a strange question that can only be answered in part, and at that, only with critical hesitation. I would suggest that what is at stake here is something that goes beyond interpreting the real as an empty void. It offers a particular kind of absence that is contingent, throwing up questions surrounding what might be determinable. In considering the real in relation to a concept of absence, a space of possibility arises that has wider resonance and application for considering absence and the visual arts. Ultimately, considering the real as a particular kind of absence is to think about spaces of meaning, of mediation and possibility, and therefore, to think about the limits of our knowledge in relation to signifying practices. 198 Lacan’s real lies at the edges of the knowable and as such is a proposition that challenges the way in which we might understand the effects of absence in cultural production.

198 Catherine Belsey cites the real as the point at which culture fails. See Belsey, 2005, p.14.

Lacan is principally concerned with what happens when a desire for knowledge uncovers not a presence but an absence – a discovery that unmasks all processes of signification. 199

If we are to consider the way in which absence signifies in relation to Lacan’s psychoanalytic frame, then several concurrent but paradoxical organising principles appear to be in action. Going back to the axes set up in Section I, I would suggest that the way in which Lacan puts forward the how and why of understanding what constitutes absence is structured in a very specific way. We can pull through certain very obvious threads such as the ‘becoming’ of the subject, when the subject splits at the mirror phase and an identification between self and other is established as a gap. The entry of the subject into signification and language is founded on a central lack in the subject which represents the lost (absent) real and the decentring of the subject. The subject is then positioned according to a symbolic order, which is structured around sexuality and therefore lack or possession of the phallus, and this determines absence from the authority of the signifying field. These strange gaps and absences constitute the limits established around the subject in relation to the signifying field. However, it is in the strange proposition of the real that these epistemological limits get challenged. The organisation, or structuring of these ‘absences’ occurs through Lacan’s particular psychoanalytic framework. The real, however, although conditioned by the very structured absences Lacan formulates, importantly leaves shadows within the spaces of our knowledge. In many senses, attempting to consider the way in which absence signifies necessarily involves floating outside the structures presented by Lacan. This allows us to think about meaning that is not dependent on accepting structures as they might seem. 200 In other words, a critical consideration of his thought has to both engage critically with some parts and disengage with others.

200 Grosz suggests that a “critical ambivalence” is almost certainly the most productive positioning for an analyst and engagement with Lacan’s thought. See Grosz, 1990, p.190.
Heidegger's premise that we must question how we understand Being has resonance for this consideration. If we understand Being to be based on preconceived, established parameters, then an acceptance of these foundational ideas will have repercussions for the limits of our understanding. Furthermore, these assumptions can erroneously point towards a definite horizon by which, as Heidegger puts it, the understanding "of to be" is "fulfilled". The real should similarly be seen to offer no hope of attainment or resolution if it is to position a critical absence.

The real is not an absence that is subject to definition, but a complicated, multi-layered problematic which moves in and out of focus and inevitably throws up increasing numbers of related questions. The idea of the real facilitates a qualified theoretical manoeuvrability, its effects sometimes mitigated, sometimes enhanced by the friction existing between the ideas it presents. As it can hold no intrinsic meaning in itself, its complexion is understood in relation to the signifying structures we understand. The idea of this strange absence, I would argue, is not a negative one because it surreptitiously reveals what is contingent on our understanding as subjects and through this our relation to what might be seen to be 'other'. It refuses symbolic containment and this has repercussions for us trying to grapple with our own limitations. It offers up the possibility of a disjunction in our conceptualization regarding what we can know and control. This has specific resonance for the placement of the subject and the idea of its fixed placement.

I would suggest that if we make a distinction between the complexion of this absence and the effects it precipitates we are dealing with an idea that stains our psychical spaces with a sense of difference. Although we can make a tentative gesture towards the latter (its effects), through considering its tangible ruptures into signifying structures, the former (its complexion) must remain as an absence outside our grasp. We are confronted with something that can never be fulfilled in a signifying sense, and consequently marks a resistance to conceptual closure. With the proposition of the real there is no definitive resolution, only a suspension. As an absence the real is articulated, crucially, as uncertainty, and this is a critical tension which is qualified by contingency.

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201 Heidegger, 2000, p.96.
SECOND: MOTION OF ABSENCE:
Self reflected, self doubled: flat against the mirror stage
SECOND MOTION OF ABSENCE:
Self reflected, self doubled: flat against the mirror stage

The strange double figures presented in Janieta Eyre’s photographs appear at first glance to be rather odd sets of twins. Each figure is duplicated, identically dressed, standing up right and facing forward, as if to attention. In spite of the theatricality of the backgrounds set up, the staid positioning of the figures creates a sort of visual compression, faced flat and front-wards. This visual foreshortening holds each pair still and posed as if they were bizarre human figurines on a shelf waiting to be moved. This is quite strange because the pairs are somehow rendered partially inanimate through structured body composure. With arrested wooden limb gestures and fixed body positions, the figures are held tight to the spat as if in a line up for identification. And here, identity would seem to be at stake. The figures could be twins, not fraternal, but possibly identical, their features so similar to one another. But looking closely at them they could also be intriguing doubles of one, self replicated and re-presented as two. This is, in fact, what they are.

In this thought of doubling the subject is reflected back to itself, a recognition that is visually repeated and reflected back to the viewer. In this strange doubling back The Fish Merchant’s Daughters (see: fig. 14) and Tweeling, 1996 (see: fig. 15) each stand side-by-side forming different poses as if to complicate the fact that they are each, in reality, analogically sound. The Fish Merchant’s Daughter is duplicated to create a fictional return.
In *Lost Persons* (see: fig. 16) a small black and white photograph of a single, upright body floats between the two figures as if to suggest the source of a now split self, the single whole body located somewhere distant and irretrievable, a paper pin up of something lost.

There would seem to be something odd about the reflection of a ‘self’ in the mirror; one person in a visual dialogue with her/himself. Something jarring occurs that makes me look again at these photographs. The placement of these human ‘figurines’ invokes a deliberate halt, which in turn, is expressed flatly in their address. The figures hit hard against what seems to be a physical limit and this could be a mirror. It is as if the camera lens is a mirror. Of course, in a reflective sense, it is. The self-conscious visual relationship between the fictional twins and the lens replicates the relationship of self to the mirror.

But there is something more than an immediate, but confused, visual analogy to Lacan’s mirror stage that comes to mind. The double image certainly reflects the conceit of a split self. In recognising that it is the same person I could go further and suggest that through the peculiar replication of self, a visual alteration occurs which could articulate a misrecognition, a méconnaissance of self. But it is in the compelling condition of these fictional doubles at the point of recognition, which causes the most profound disruption. These are fully developed characters from a surreal theatrical production. Oddly constructed historical moments are brought into focus. The subject is decentred and divided at the same time but with the weight of experience already established. This is very strange. Remarkably, the artist manages to communicate the gap between self and other through a complicated illusory conceit. The forceful sophistication of the elaborately dressed ‘selves’ holds the relation to the signifying field in tension. In filling the gaps, more absences appear.

Jonieta Eyre
15 *Tweelings*, 1996.
THIRD MOTION OF ABSENCE:
Into the shadows. Woman of the Dunes.
THIRD MOTION OF ABSENCE:

Into the shadows: Woman of the Dunes.203

Consider the space in between, the flickering space where thoughts are forming along an oscillating theoretical edge. This is a darkened space cast from something discernible, something at this very moment of engagement. This space has mobility and fluidity of form. Forms chase other forms in no particular direction but the possibility of depth is there, waiting in the shadows, repeating its possibility at every turn.

A man climbs a hill of sand in a vast expanse of desert. It appears to be a truly arduous task. His footsteps are heavy, each step at once a partial ascent and descent. His journey is marked by a weary, but determined pace. Soon he will be in the depths of a dune trapped with the woman of the dunes.

Resigned to the task of removing sand from the steadily filling dune cavity where her home resides, the woman of the dunes carries out the same action of removal again and again. The sand slides back into the vacated form frustrating the possibility of keeping the shape of her home surround stable and contained. Each repeated movement creates an incremental change of depth. She can never know how much sand will move during the day or night, nor what quantities of sand will slide or be swept downwards into the void by the wind. Each repeated motion acts out the possibility of being submerged, partially or completely by the drifting sand. Each heavy pail of sand dragged across the pit of the dune speaks of a desire to prevent the dune cavity from being filled in and the house being covered with layers of sand.

203 Woman of the Dunes (Suna no Onna) directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara, Japan 1964 (b/w), 119 minutes.
Right now she appears complicit in this Sisyphean task. Soon another person, a man, will unknowingly be drawn into the pattern of the sand's removal in the depth of the dune. The sand will drift down, its course undeterred. Two people will then be forced to intervene in the sand redistribution, the path of its movement adjusting around two bodies in motion pushed on by external landscape tremors and the ferocity of the wind.

This task is sometimes played out in partial light, and frequently in the darkness, illuminated only by a gas lamp. Motivated, as the woman says, by "love of one's own place", this is a task she habitually carries out until dawn. Her time is measured in repetitious acts. Time renders the dunes fluid. Radiating structures appear choreographed in the sand.

When the man attempts to scale the wall of the dune to escape, it crumbles away offering him no firm footing. He struggles up the descending slope and frustringly, slides back to his starting position. With the slightest seismic movement the sand floats down, liquid now it would appear. The sand threatens to bury the house and the people within it.

The man asks for the woman to call someone in authority. He is a Professor of Entomology carrying out field research. Someone will soon realize he is missing. He has left his room with research books open and money in his jacket pocket. Someone will be looking for him now.

The sand cascades down as if liquid, the vulnerable edge flitting away. Plateaux of sand break away and a staggered waterfall of sand cascades down, paradoxically simulating at once sliding planes of water and ice.

The man desperately wants to escape from the pit where he is imprisoned, but he has no means of escape.

The woman comments that if there were no sand, then no one would notice her, and the same would apply to him too.

He comments that he collected insects because he thought they were useless.

He tries to escape and in his flight falls down another hole, this time it is in a swamp area. He is pulled out by the villagers and is made to return to the pit of the dune. He discovers that his experiment to trap a crow in a covered bucket has revealed a process that allows water to collect. He leaves the pit of the dune and returns voluntarily, excited by his discovery.

Seven years later, the Court of Family Affairs announces a verdict on the disappearance of the man Junpei Niki, born 7th March, 1926. The Court acknowledges his absence for the last seven years and consider him to be a missing person.

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204 The myth of Sisyphus is described in Albert Camus' seminal text *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (1942) pp. 107-111 (originally published in France by Gallimard, 1942). This particular text offers a consideration of literary works including the work of Franz Kafka and Fyodor Dostoevsky in relation to Absurdity.
SECTION FOUR

PAINTING AS A FAULTY VEHICLE FOR ABSENCE?

My belief is that the colour of today, right now is the colour of transparency - of the gleam or brilliance of metal. And then perhaps in the future, in the very near future it will be the colour of the stealth bomber; that is: an absorbent colour that has no reflection, a colour that traps all radiation, the colour of a crater, a black hole colour, a colour like the coating on an aircraft that absorbs those waves trying to detect its presence from far away, this will be the colour of the future, a colour in reverse.205

Certainly, it might be justifiably argued, from a socially and historically informed position, that painting would seem to be an ironic and somewhat misplaced choice as a vehicle for a critical engagement with absence, offering a rather flawed, contradictory, theoretical alignment.206 This is largely due to the fact that painting has been historically weighted with commanding a specific authority and has been conferred with establishing a certain type of ‘presence’ as an act and an object.207 This status has inevitably, in part, been due to inherited connections to the well-established, modernist rubric of ‘the primacy of the visual’ and the specificity of medium.208 The relationship of painting to certain dimensions of ‘presence’ is well

205 Virilio, P. interviewed in 1993, cited in Residual Hope exhibition pamphlet, to accompany exhibition (November 4 - November 30, 1993), with Michel Dupuy, Lawrence Carroll, Michel Dector and Eric Cameron, curated by Sharon Brooks at S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Interestingly, Brooks also cites a quote from Janine Marchessault in the film Possession, 1988: “White is not the absence of colour, it is the colour of absence” to contextualize the exhibition. She posits that to consider the idea of residual colour is to position painting in a positive forward looking position that resides somewhere between “the colour of absence” and “a black hole colour” as this, she argues, creates another space. This, again, might be seen to be positioning absence in terms of visual conceits, however, the idea of the ‘residual’ opens up uncertainties relating to this positioning.

206 See David Green, "Painting as Aporia" in Harris, J., Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting, where he points out that painting is still largely considered in relation to “the precepts of theories of modernist art” as it tends to be understood in relation to “singularity, specificity and autonomy” (pp. 81-107).

207 In Derrida, J., The Truth in Painting, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, Derrida posits that “discourses on paintings are perhaps destined to reproduce the limit which constitutes them, whatever they do and whatever they say; there is for them an inside and an outside of the work as soon as there is work,” p.11.

208 Rosalind Krauss, for example, in her preface to A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition, London: Thames and Hudson, 1999, pp.5-7, expresses her desire to bury the term ‘medium’ “like so much critical toxic waste”, so heavily weighted it has become with its inextricable links to Greenberg and a reductive interpretive model. She removes herself from the reach of these past shadows by
worn territory in that it is largely marked out by taking Clement Greenberg's formalist concerns relating to shape, support and the flatness of the surface of work (which might be said to be prescriptive in terms of the authoritative presence of painting) and Michael Fried's positioning of the 'presentness' in modernist art into account.209 Fried, in his oft cited 'seminal text' "Art and Objecthood" (Artforum 5, 10th June 1967) posits that the mediums of painting (and sculpture, for that matter) provide the possibility for what he refers to as a "continuous and perpetual present" through its constitutive parts, declaring that "presentness is grace".210 This critical framing accounts for a specific kind of containment or positioning of ideas focused on the 'purely visual' with a sense of immediate presence and which is, in turn, informed by a certain kind of temporality. Although it has come under repeated challenges, this thinking has surely left a rather deep residual impression on the possibilities of painting. In fact, these frames of thinking might be said to have some impact on a contemporary engagement with it, albeit, for the most part, one which is critically and often purposefully distanced from its precepts. Consequently, it could be said that whether critically positioned in relation to it or not, this scholarship has become a part of interpreting painting's lexical possibilities and limitations because it holds and retains a certain kind of theoretical shadow over proceedings. Further to this, I would argue, that in a wider sense this shadow has affected the status of painting as a contemporary critical inquiry because it is now arguably located

arguing for the acknowledgement of a critical distance from the received meaning of the term whilst justifying retention of it because it 'opens up' onto the 'discursive field' she is considering.209 See Greenberg, C. "Modernist Painting" in Frascina, F., and Harrison, C., (Eds), Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology. London: Harper and Row and Open University 1982. See also Pollock, G., and Rowley, A. "Painting in a Hybrid Moment" in Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting, Liverpool University Press, 2003, pp. 37-79, where, in reference to this, they discuss the idea of painting being seen as the 'salvation' of self presence which has relevance for both the artist and the person viewing the work. 210 See "Art and Objecthood" in Fried, M., Art and Objecthood, pp. 167-168. The problematic of 'presentness' is also described and explored by Catrou, Roberto in the catalogue Presentness is Grace: Experiencing the Suspended Moment, Amalfi, Expo, 2001. With reference to Michael Fried's text "Art and Objecthood" in Artforum, 5 (10th June 1967), which was viewed as positioning 'presentness' as a term to Minimalism, Roberts considers its connection to the sublime and transcendent. See especially in this publication: 'The Absolute Present of Things'. See also in this regard, Robinson, D. The Materiality of Text and Body in Painting and Darkroom Processes: An Investigation Through Practice, University of Plymouth, 2003, p. 130, where she suggests that Fried attempts to 'ground metaphysical thinking concerning the concept of presence in the material facticity of painting'. See also Fried, M. "Art and Objecthood" in Art and Objecthood, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 165-172.

For an excellent consideration of 'blankness' in relation to the symbolic worth of Eva Hesse's art work, with specific reference to the psychoanalytic thought of Melanie Klein, see Fer, R., "Bonneroom on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism" in Nixon, M., (ed), October Files 3: Eva Hesse, MIT Press, London, 2002, pp. 56-85. See also Gilbert-Rolle, J., "Blankness as Signifier" in Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime, pp 108-123.

Consequently, I was initially faced with some particular problems which included; firstly, how was I to approach rethinking absence through painting practice, negotiating painting’s problematic strands, and secondly, how might this be undertaken without falling under the weight of previous conceptualisations of 'absence'. My approach involved trying to think through problems in terms of pushing against boundaries, which were both lexical and pragmatic. In other words, my engagement has been with the discursive and linguistic limits constructed around absence and how this might inform an understanding of how absence might be rethought in the visual arts. Therefore, it has not been my intent to take on the status of painting, moreover, to be held by the limitations of inherited critical discourses. However, most certainly, any contemporary engagement with painting necessarily inherits the weight of these problems (and perhaps the way in which they have been understood, or in some cases, reduced). What I wish to suggest is that painting is not somehow devoid of possibility for thinking through this idea of absence. In fact, to be habitually drawn back into these models of thinking relating to a modernist engagement with presence and authority creates a certain kind of impasse. To what extent any of these shackles may be cast away is debatable. However, I would suggest that the extent to which these particular frames of thinking might be pushed

211 Additionally, through this, there are the practical and seemingly contradictory considerations of how the image might function through the presence of the mark and how this might be reconciled with a notion of absence. This particular question has not been my concern as it sets the 'presence' of the mark up against blankness. For a consideration of blankness’s possibilities, however, see Gilbert-Rolle, J., where he discusses it relation to what he refers to as the contemporary visual world at large. He suggests that the so-called function of blankness has, from a recent historical perspective, been set within the framing of a space or, either offering 'absence' or potentiality'. This kind of positioning marks a specific oppositional engaged with the possibilities of the absence of the sign, however, Rolfe suggests, this has now changed. He argues that blankness must not be thought as absence or lack, indeed, discusses it relation to what he suggests is its 'heterology' in that he suggests that it is conditioned by a connection to all things in an immediate way.

...if blankness originated as a necessary absence, a condition of erasure, clearing, which makes possible a level of clarification—the maximum mobility of the sign—imaginary (as it were, literarily) without it, humanism and the traditions to which it gave rise seem to have maintained it in that condition, allowing it to be no more than a precondition for the emergence of the pure and unimpeded idea, which is to say, a necessary absence (a contemporary version of which would be an approach to formlessness that only wanted to see it in terms of the unlimited). He posits that blankness at one time marked "the absence of the sign by being a sign for absence", however, he suggests that it now functions as "the sign of an invisible and ubiquitous technological presence".

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or understood provides an insight into the very points of strain, of possible failure of
anticipated meaning that moves towards seeing how discourses are functioning.
These have been cautionary steps to attempt to understand how painting might
have an awkward reconciliation with a rethinking of absence. What has come out of
this process, to a certain extent, has gone beyond what is containable, namely, the
excess of the artworks, and this has been pivotal for a rethinking of the edges
associated with painting. What painting might be has also to be rethought.

II REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

What I found necessary then, in light of this, was to establish first how ‘absence’
might be negotiated through the practical research so that a sense of how it might
be normally understood would be gained. This consideration was critically
positioned in relation to some of the discourses I perceived to be constructed
around absence in the visual arts. The intent was certainly not, however, to chose
‘absence’ as a constructed image or conceit, as previously discussed in Section
I, as this was part of the problematic I was trying to unravel. This consideration
constituted part of the first axis of my research. This axis positioned
how and why we
might categorise something as being visually generative of a sense of absence
according to the discourses constructed around absence.

My initial research into the discourses constructed around absence and the visual
arts revealed there to be a limited number of common and repeated conceits used
to describe approaches to absence. Absence was frequently understood in relation
to concepts of materiality referencing object/body/place. These references
incorporated the phenomenological (where the meaning of objects (phenomena),
was constituted through our consciousness of what they are), or the psychical where
a visceral reaction was marked. Moreover, artworks were always described
according to the oppositional framework of presence and absence which did not

take into account the strategic and methodological complexities employed by the
artists and demonstrated in the works at hand. I was interested in exploring the limits
constructed around absence and the visual arts. Coming out of this initial research,
I took the idea of the psychical and place as a broad starting point for my practical
investigations. I wanted to explore the limits of this particular discursive thread to see
how absence might signify in this context.

My explorations began firstly with the compilation of a photographic resource of
different buildings (see attached appendices pp. 86-87). The photographs were
then used to make up a series of photomontages. I subjected the works to a sort of
visual erasure, hollowing out buildings and filling windows with oversized gestural
marks. The works were conical shells of buildings with exaggerated graffiti, marks
and textures. I considered how far the interior and exterior of the building could be
visually confused. I attempted to explore how absence was signifying in relation to
ideas of absence and place. The photomontages presented a specific kind of
understanding of absence which was characterised by a phenomenological and
psychical undercurrent. In other words, the photomontages were still bound into the
identified discourses around absence and place. Furthermore, the process was
conditioned by the construction of absence in that I was attempting to work through
a specific conceit that related to the connection of absence and place. I wanted to
explore this idea further and thought that the movement of video would add a more
experimental and performative dimension to the process.

I began work on a series of video sketches at night. The clips produced included
footage following the movement of light flashing across empty buildings at night,
walking down deserted corridors in institutional buildings, and panning across the
interiors of abandoned buildings. This approach carried on from the
photomontages but was distinct from it in that it offered the possibility of movement
and therefore perhaps a more sophisticated visual exchange of ideas in the edit. I

212 I refer to the video work as "video sketches" because they were experimenting with ideas rather than
attemping to present a narrative or finished work that might be seen to represent absence.
wanted to take advantage of this process and to present the images in a way that
allowed them to work actively together. In order to facilitate this approach, I created
a split screen and edited clips to work alongside each other in a way that
couraged a visual exchange across the two screens. In effect, I edited two parallel
sections to work alongside each other. Through this approach I was also able to
explore what was suggested by the transposabilities of images. In other words, the
dialogue that could be constructed across the movement of the two screens was
productive of another level of interpretation. When the double channel screen
played, the two parallel images worked alongside each other and allowed for other
meanings to emerge. Occasionally, I was able to orchestrate the images in a way
that they played off each other such as in the movement of light flashing across both
screens in independent shots. Sometimes I was able to edit the images so that they
appeared to be connected to each other. The movement of the video had a visual
dynamic which allowed for absence to signify in several different ways within the
framework of absence and place. At times the images had a strange spectrality
about them appearing as ghostly shadows flitting across the double screens.

The video work was a collection of experimental pieces with some parallel images
achieving a greater degree of success than others in terms of exploring the way in
which absence might signify. Importantly, however, these explorations allowed two
distinct and at times contradictory engagements with absence to occur. Firstly, one
engagement was related to the difference between the sets of images on the double
screen which was suggestive of a differential register. Secondly, the other
engagement was related to the way in which absence signified through the
psychical; in other words what arose unconsciously and imaginatively from the
interplay between the screens. What surfaced out of this consideration was an
understanding of absence arising from the two engagements.

Consequently, in considering the video work and photomontages, in tandem with a
critical engagement with the discourses constructed around absence and the visual
arts, I decided to have two separate theoretical propositions. I wanted these
propositions to deal critically with the some of the problems coming out of this
exploration but to also play on the differences in the way in which absence might
signify. This thinking resulted in section II Jacques Derrida: absence and the
proposition of différence, which offers a critical engagement with the way in which
absence might be rethought through Derrida's proposition of différence. The
proposition of différence allows for a re-inscription of the way in which absence
might signify by rethinking metaphysical precepts which are founded on the
hierarchical opposition of absence and presence and the assumption of full and
present meaning. Section III Jacques Lacan: the problem of absence and the
Lacanian real, presents a structured psychoanalytical engagement with a concept of
absence that is reflective of what might be considered, in Derridean terms, to be a
metaphysical engagement with absence in that it is contained and defined.

However, Lacan's proposition of the real suggests an absence which cannot be
contained or defined. Whilst the differences between Derrida and Lacan's concepts
of absence reflect the nuanced and complex interweaving of understandings
possible in art practice regarding absence, importantly, this also flags up areas of
indeterminacy and the advantage of provisionality of meaning in this project.

The first stages of the next body of work, carried out through painting practice, went
back to the discourses constructed around absence and place. The paintings were
carried out with an idea of absence and place and the conceit of the empty room
in mind. I wanted to see how far the suggestion of this construction of absence and the
room could be pushed. Whilst not wanting to literally paint a room, I experimented
with the linearity of the room enclosure and the suggestion of spatial forms. I
wanted to play with the way in which absence might be understood in this context. I
found this metaphorical engagement frustrating and limiting. It immediately
generated questions relating to conceptual frames. An understanding of absence
appeared to be working on the edges of the phenomenological. I found that I
couldn't push the edges of this engagement very far without hitting against very
definite limitations relating to pictorial conventions and an empirical understanding
of absence. Crucially, there seemed to be a disjunction between working through
established discourses constructed around absence and the possibilities of thinking through art practice. This disjunction seemed more acute when working through painting practice due to the very particular limits imposed on the possibilities of painting (as mentioned, these limits relate to the precepts of modernist thinking and the interpretive and analytical approaches to content outlined by Rogoff). Further to this, the disjunction was reflective of the dialectic of theory and practice in that the paintings presented a possibility for thinking that could not be contained by a conventional use of theory.

I found the process of exploring absence in a programmatic way was useful for practical analysis but it did not account for what actually happens in art practice where the exchange between ideas occurs over time and is not predictable. The processes I employed in my studio practice involved a continuous contemplation of ideas that were reworked and rethought between the works in progress and those completed. Further to this, the discourses constructed around absence didn’t account for the spaces of indeterminacy and incommensurability that art practice can offer. I had discovered this disparity reflected in my contemplation of artists’ works and through my own painting practice. I found that the artworks, through the strategies and methodologies of the artists, always positioned an intellectual wildness that exceeded the discourse constructed around them. This excess was realised through the inadequacies of a single frame of reference to contain the complexities of the artworks, which in turn positioned my methodological strategy.

Rethinking absence through art practice did not function entirely on the epistemological procedures customarily outlined by doctoral research because it also worked through and against edges, limits and flaws generating a sense of excess. Working through the normalised ways of interpreting absence enabled me to consider the limits of engagement and the points of failure. Acknowledging the conceits normally connected with the way in which absence was seen to signify allowed me to push through and against edges. This recognition allowed me to go back to what thinking through art could offer that moved beyond the discourses normally used to contain absence. At times this consideration hinged on accepting that there are limits to what we can know and describe. Whilst an understanding of, and a working through, the interpretive and analytical frames constructed around art works by extant art criticism was a necessary stage in the development of the practical research, I found the movement away from these approaches to be liberating. This movement away resulted in paintings which were concerned with erasure, mark making and working through processes which both had resonance with, yet challenged, the different registers of absence. My painting practice produced works that I considered to be the synthesis of the research. The paintings as a body of work, in working through the limits constructed around absence and painting as a practice, reflected the highly nuanced and complicated relationship of theory to practice. Although the paintings that dealt with the spatiality of an empty room could be said to evoke a sense of absence, this was quantifiably distinct from the work which arose from exploring the different concepts of absence because it could not be contained in the same way.

III

REFLECTION ON THE METHODOLOGY

The methodological structure for this research was determined by the evidence of gaps between the different ways of handling absence. In exploring the different interpretations of absence and the visual arts and working through the discourses constructed around absence in my painting practice, I identified an excess (that which appeared to exceed the extant art critical discursive frames). This excess was exemplified in section I Absence and the visual arts, in the work of Rachel Whiteread, Doris Salcedo, Luc Tuymans and Klaus Scherübel and in the Fifth motion of absence: 20 paintings beyond the frame. The complexity of the artworks pointed to a disjunction between what the extant art critical writings proposed in relation to an understanding of absence and the arts and what was actually realised through the artworks. This disjunction was also evident in my own painting practice where I
established a critical position in relation to the limits constructed in and around painting.

In identifying and selecting the separate explorations of absence which included: the engagements with interpretive art critical analysis of absence and the arts, Jacques Derrida’s proposition of différence, Jacques Lacan’s real and the limits of painting practice, I was able to set up a map of conceptual possibilities to address this disjunction.

Importantly, as I thought that art practice in a research context is normally presented in a way that evaluates its contribution only in an interpretive and analytical way (as identified by Rogoff), I wanted my art practice to be understood within the same frame of engagement as the rest of the sections of the thesis. I wanted the art to position its own thinking and concept of absence. In this way, the art practice could function in a performative way rather than being only understood as a visual illustration of absence. In this regard, the motions of absence function as important facets of the methodological strategy. The motions of absence arise from the thinking in each section, with the fifth motion of absence presenting my 20 paintings. The fifth motion of absence is a visual working through of the limits of painting and the way in which absence might signify.

This particular methodology both produced and addressed the tensions and gaps in available visual and theoretical discourses to also demonstrate absence. Through this structuring, the methodology was able to retain provisionality and through this, was able to demonstrate a critical response to limits imposed on thinking.

IV CONTRIBUTION TO THE SIGNIFICATION OF ABSENCE

Although I found the discourses constructed around absence and the visual arts to be characterised by particular conceits including place, degrees of materiality relating to the body/object/place, the physical and loss, I found there to be no extended critical discourse on absence in the arts. Therefore, this research supplies an enquiry which incorporates approaches, knowledges and proposals on a topic which has been much ‘spoken’ but which has very noticeably lacked extended critical attention.

In exploring the various models of absence presented I was able pull through certain threads which typified the way in which absence was considered to signify according to the identified discourses. Interpretive critiques or what might be considered to be the ‘usual’ or ‘common’ critiques of artwork started from the assumption of an a priori concept of absence. This concept is based on the metaphysics of presence, setting up absence in an oppositional way to presence. This research into rethinking absence has attempted to demonstrate the need for an acknowledgment of the limits constructed in and around the discourses connected to absence and the visual arts. The strategies and methodologies employed by artists in their art works disrupt this a priori approach to absence used to describe the works. Going back to what the artwork can offer, I have worked through the limits constructed around painting practice and an exploration of absence. I have carried out a critical consideration of different concepts of absence which are conditioned by a metaphysical understanding of absence as expressed in aspects of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical thought. I have also considered challenges to this thinking specifically in reference to Jacques Derrida’s proposition of différence. These considerations have contributed to my critical rethinking of the way in which absence might signify.

The methodology also crucially attempts to offer the re-inscription of the way in which absence might signify through the motions of absence. These textual
insertions, incorporating written and visual works, explore and comment on rethinking absence through art in a way that is not covered by the other components of the research or the usual discourses. The motions come out of the thinking in each section and work through the way in which absence is signifying. Through their performativity, the motions reflect on the discourses constructed around absence and the embodiment of rethinking absence through art practice.

As the sections of this research have demonstrated, absence is not reducible to one approach or another but plays on the commensurabilities and gaps or differences between the different concepts presented. Therefore, the methodology ensures that absence is rethought within and between the different visual and written sections. Of crucial importance to the signification of absence is the point that the methodology has both produced and addressed the tensions and gaps in available visual and theoretical discourses to also demonstrate absence. The methodology consequently carries out and demonstrates the performativity engendered by the artworks. Namely, the artworks invoke an approach to rethinking absence which is not containable by a singular frame of reference but is understood in the differences between approaches. Furthermore, through this methodology, the question of excess (positioned by the idea that the artworks suggest something that exceeds the discourses constructed around absence and the visual arts) is demonstrated across the different registers.
FOURTH MOTION OF ABSENCE:
Spectrality and shadows: video work absence.
The abandoned building is not completely empty, but it is void of people. A section of an internal corner is revealed like feint on a page by a passing car light. The car provides a definite light source, but is a moving object that passes quickly. The revealing light is gone in a lightning flash. The covered windows of the building offer a thin viewing strip which lets in a blade of light to sever the darkened wall. If you stand up close you can discern vague forms. A slow diffusion of light to the building lets shadows move and flicker across battered internal structures. Juxtaposed, sometimes fused, traces of light and dark explore forms in an undulating movement. You can sit here in the darkness and wait to see what is at once revealed, then concealed. Each pass of a car light casts a variable shadow throwing the form of the building into question. Each passing illumination suggests something that is there and then gone, but the structural form remains waiting in the darkness, intermittently revealed.
The initial movement of the darkened shape is slow, sometimes faltering. It is as if the images were coming to terms with the possibility of concurrent movement, an awkward coupling and evening out, but not for long. Spaces unfold at that instant, shadows converge and disperse. The darkness suddenly holds a frame of light which moves eerily, shuddering across one window, at once floating and insinuating itself across to the adjoining window. Shadows move across the interior form, and passing lights flicker suddenly across both frames at once, as if orchestrated only to be illuminated in tandem. At that very moment both images visually connect through a movement of light as if part of the same possibility. In momentarily appearing to be part of the same space, the images present a connection strangely residing within the realm of the psychical. Then, held for only a couple of seconds, there is a momentary flickering of light and a visual transposition occurs. The glowing interior of the night hut strangely flickers and moves. Its luminous form visually slips into the light of a passing car as it flashes across a derelict interior. Then the tandem images start to slip apart. Held within this illuminated motion is a residual shadowing which resonates visually and psychically with the reflected image. A shadow caught gliding from one set of circumstances to another is held for a moment and then dissipates, leaving an incomplete visual impression. The form on the left has gone, but it has already implicated itself in the reading of what is to come and what has been. Perhaps it is all of these things. It can be seen everywhere in already unfolding spaces beyond the immediate possibility of a specific location. Doubling back on itself, it is held within the suggestion of movement. The transposability of one image onto another leaves a visual imprint fused with spectral flickers in the darkened corner of the night.
What came out of the practical work was a consideration of the nature of the dialogical exchange between visual elements. Something surfaced out of this exploration of the edges of the discourses constructed around absence, relating to place and ghostly shadows, that put another set of questions into motion. There was something that exceeded this consideration relating to rethinking the way in which absence might signify. The spaces of the visual offered up a distinctly different proposition. Whilst necessarily being constitutive of a constructed sense of absence, they also held the possibility of creating a space of indeterminacy; a non containable, non resolvable set of ideas emerging out of what was known. 213

In pursuing this idea, I hit against the limits of what could be understood in epistemological terms, namely, what is seen as knowable in relation to discourses around absence. Through this, I would suggest that the engagement with the visual precipitated something that went beyond the limits of the knowable. 214 It allowed for the positioning of an approach that came at the problem another way. This offered, a way of rethinking of what absence might be in relation to the visual. Although the understanding of how absence might signify is certainly, in part, understood through an engagement with recognised discourses constructed around it, and these are governed by particular ways of knowing that are largely structured by the metaphysics of presence, I want to suggest that it is in the very nature of what the visual positions, through its dialogical tensions, that a particularly forceful possibility for signification relating to rethinking absence might lie. I would suggest that the

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213 For an excellent consideration of the problematic issues surrounding the fine art doctorate within research culture, see Macleod, K & Holdridge, L., Thinking Through Art. Reflections on art as research. London: Routledge, 2006. See Barfield, N., "Spatial ontology in fine art practice", p.107, where he discusses the tensions between the demands of research and the characteristics of practice.

214 See Ettinger, B., ‘Metamorphic Borderlinks and Material Borderspace’, p.125 in J. C. Welchman (Ed) Rethinking Borders, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. She also Bertelsen. L., “Material Refrains” where she posits that painting allows for an engagement with what she refers to as the ‘invisible’ which is deemed to be ‘beyond appearance’. This notion of something being ‘beyond appearance’ might, she suggests, have a connection to Lacan’s work but also cites Deleuze and Guattari’s work in relation to the idea of thinking beyond representation. Although Bertelsen argues that what comes forth in Ettinger’s work, (what is ‘rendered visible’) is the feminine, I would position my argument in a different way. I am not necessarily arguing for a ‘making visible’, (although that can be part of it), what has come out of my research is a space of intelligible visual reasoning that is generated through the dialogical relationship of pieces of work.
visual positions something which always exceeds the discourses constructed around it. In the explication of the visual, the workings of particular epistemological frames are revealed. However, it is in the adequacies of these frames to contain that something else slips through the gaps and points towards that which we don’t know.

I would argue that we need this awkward coupling of that which is discernible and that which is not, as it marks something that is beyond this, namely what I see as the intellectual wildness of the visual. It provides an unfolding space of intelligibility that is contingent on the complex process of visually thinking through an idea. It allows for the description of thought between ideas to surface that is subject to a fugitive stability, occurring on the edges of what can be controlled. These limits are simultaneously, curiously bound, yet strangely outside of the specific frames of knowing that govern the reception of visual language in this context.\(^{215}\)

The paintings produced have been both the condition and synthesis of all these tensions. In thinking through the dynamic and fraught collisions of meaning surfacing out of the considerations of this research, spaces have arisen that are strangely inarticulable. In pushing against containment, these spaces are constitutive of an absence of sorts, held in tension with what we think we know. A critical, concurrent engagement with the intersecting axes of how and why we might describe something as suggestive of absence in the visual arts, and how this understanding might be structured or organised through ways of knowing, has helped to sketch out the inadequacies and limitations, but also the possibilities of the discourses constructed around absence. Derrida and Locon offer very different ways to rethink the way in which absence might be understood, provoking a reappraisal of the processes of signification and what motivates cultural production. These considerations have infused the two axes with uncertainty and critical tension. In putting forward the proposition of rethinking absence through a series of dialogical tensions, which are, in effect, different orders of absence answering to, or refusing, different epistemological demands, I have attempted to suggest that a possibility for re-inscription resonates with and across all these ideas. It is in the tensions and disjunctions of signification that the critical force of absence is rethought.

With that in mind, I want to move onto the fifth motion of absence: 20 Paintings: beyond the frame.

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\(^{215}\) Certainly, part of this consideration may be said to be on the edges of what David Green has flagged up as the inadequacy of the terms used to critically establish painting, for example. See especially, Green, D., "Painting as Aporia" in Harris, J. (Ed.), Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting, pp. 81-107.
FIFTH MOTION OF ABSENCE:
20 Paintings: beyond the frame
FIFTH MOTION OF ABSENCE:
20 paintings: beyond the frame.
APPENDIX I

Freud et après
GALEN STRAWSON considers the career of Jacques Lacan, one of France’s most famous psychoanalysts, who died earlier this month.

If THE amount of attention devoted to a writer or thinker is a reliable guide to his or her true worth, then Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst who died early this month, is one of the great thinkers of this century. Not many years ago, things were different. One doesn’t have to be a brilliant or original thinker to cause a stir and controversy—though brilliant thoughts and theories can cause both.

What then of Jacques Lacan? He has not yet been judged that time has left him, and that his influence conceals its originality. But he achieved a not yet clearly visible, as a publisher of books he still has his years of posthumous life ahead of him, as the edited transcripts of his seminars continue to appear.

Born in 1901 near the Parisian suburb of Drancy, where he lived with his parents, a neurologist and a nurse, Lacan studied medicine and then psychiatry, completing his doctoral thesis in psychology in 1928. In 1929 he joined the Paris Psychoanalytic Society (SPP), and in 1936—when he was teaching formalized psychoanalysis to medical students and medical students to psychoanalysis—joined the Société des Études Psychanalytiques (SEP), and continued his work as a psychoanalyst and a psychoanalyst. As an early recipient of his paper on the use of psychoanalysis in the treatment of children, Lacan was one of the founders of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP), and the first psychoanalyst to be elected to the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP). In 1939 he was chosen by the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) to represent the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) in the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA).

The paper he was already developing in 1939, when the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) was formed, was concerned with the concept of the unconscious and the concept of the conscious. As the unconscious and the conscious are the two poles of the psyche, the concepts of the unconscious and the conscious are the two poles of the psyche. In the unconscious, the mind is in a state of confusion, in the conscious, the mind is in a state of clarity. Lacan was 85 years old when he died in 1981, but his work was cut short by a sudden stroke. Lacan was 85 years old when he died in 1981, but his work was cut short by a sudden stroke. In his last years, Lacan was a member of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP), and the first psychoanalyst to be elected to the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP). In 1939 he was chosen by the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) to represent the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) in the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA).

But at the same time he was the most distinguished of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) and the most distinguished of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP). At the same time he was the most distinguished of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) and the most distinguished of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP), and at the same time he was the most distinguished of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) and the most distinguished of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP).

Jacques Lacan. £100 for less than a minute.

Theoretical as it was, the paper was groundbreaking for the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP). Lacan was 85 years old when he died in 1981, but his work was cut short by a sudden stroke. Lacan was 85 years old when he died in 1981, but his work was cut short by a sudden stroke. In his last years, Lacan was a member of the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP), and the first psychoanalyst to be elected to the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP). In 1939 he was chosen by the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) to represent the French Psychoanalytic Society (SPP) in the International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA).

From today, this section of The Observer will go back to its former name; Sunday Plus. It will include a wider range of general articles as well as its usual features on fashion and food, home and health.

INSIDE: P.36 Rachel Trickett on mixed colleges; Paul Levy on scholar-sooks; P.37 Sally Brampton—fashion; P.38 Janet Watts on a Regency sketchbook

SUNDAY PLUS is edited by Michael Gross
APPENDIX II Selected photomontages from sketch book (2002)
APPENDIX III Studio shot of hotel montages 2003.
APPENDIX IV  Date stamped library books withdrawn from the library, July 2006

Date stamped library books from Rolle College, 2006.
Conferences attended:
2006 Art and Trauma, ICIA University of Bath.
2005 AAH Summer School, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow (paper presented).
2005 Reception - Conception, AAH conference, Bristol.
2005 Critical Spaces, (Phoenix Arts Centre), University of Plymouth (Feb.).
2004 Land Water Symposium, University of Plymouth
2004 Critical Spaces, University of Plymouth.
2003 Land Water Symposium, University of Plymouth.

All research workshops held at the University of Plymouth 2002 – 2005 (including)
David Cross (Cornford & Cross).
Modes of Presentation,
Landscape Research Group
Writing into Practice.

Exhibitions visited (selected)
2006 Ori Gersht, Spacex Gallery, Exeter.
2006 Rachel Whiteread, Tate Modern, London.
2005 Barbara Kruger, ICA Glasgow.
2005 Kerlin Gallery, Dublin.
2005 Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin.
2005 Dorothy Cross, IMMA, Dublin.
2004 The Atlas Group, 401 Richmond, Toronto.
2004 Archive Gallery, Toronto.

2004 Andre Stitt, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff.
2003 Paul McCarthy, Tate Modern, London.
2003 Chila Burman, Institute for Contemporary Arts, University of Bath.
2002 Richard Long, Kosho Ito, Tate St Ives, Cornwall.
2002 Darrin Martin, New York based artist, Queen Street.
2002 Videothéque, contemporary video, St Ives, Cornwall.
BIBLIOGRAPHY.


Massey, D., Lingwood, J., Cousins, M., Bird, J. Excavating House, "Uncanny Encounters". London, ICA.


**WEBITES CONSULTED:**


Wright, S. Art Papers 29 no 56015/0 2005, Montreal, [on line].
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