

Tracing Absence

Whitechapel Gallery

20 Aug 22 – 02 Jan 23

Introduction

'Tracing Absence' is the culmination of a year-long programme of discussion and exploration, curated by the 2022 cohort of the MA Curating Art and Public Programmes, jointly run by the Whitechapel Gallery and London South Bank University.

The exhibition explores notions of absence through a selection of works from the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation, encouraging confrontation with discomfort and reflection in apparent emptiness.

This publication provides an insight into our research and process; a look at archival ephemera from the Whitechapel Gallery's collection; and thoughts from our peers on the theme of absence, and what it means to them.

Reflections

We invited our tutors to reflect with us on the compelling nature of absence; the paradox of a fleeting concept and the emotions they connect to void. We found the responses insightful and enlightening, and we have included a selection of their answers.

"THREE THINGS THAT NEVER WERE

A truth without a claimant,
a debt without a payment
and silence in a moment.

THREE THINGS THAT WILL NEVER BE

A past when all is known,
a now where all is shown,
and a future when all is gone."

- *Tanya Harrod*

"The thing that is absent often relates to our desire for completion or wholeness. It can take many forms. When a loved one is absent from a family dinner, the event can feel incomplete and unsatisfactory; when an assumption or idea is unstated in an argument, the argument will be tripped up on what it doesn't address rather than its positive content. Freud would have us believe that our mental health depends upon recovering what we have unconsciously made absent. The longing for completion is endemic and impossible to fulfil, but it gives absence a huge role in our lives."

- *Richard Noble*

"There's no such thing as empty space or a silent room or a blank canvas – John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg taught us that. But different kinds of absence require different formal responses, depending on historical or political conditions. The philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote about 'the void which has to be made visible' – which can be read as an absence so compelling that it is a catalyst, an absence which generates its own momentum or force. Here, the creative possibilities of representing absence, as well as the ethical responsibilities, seem clear."

"While it's easy for absence to provoke anxious thoughts – perhaps even terror when considering the limitless emptiness of the void – it's valuable, I think, to develop a sense of comfort or familiarity with absence, enjoy its uncertainty, and get lost in its infinite potential."

- Richard Martin

"Knowing but not seeing. Knowing what we refuse to see. Refusing to see, and yet knowing it. One walks into the office in the morning. The office is clean and the desk tidy, but no one heard the vacuum or saw the cleaning. It is not the case that, here, things will carry on happening regardless of our perception, as if offices get cleaned anyway. But it feels like that. Realism meets fatalism according to certain regimes of invisibility that make absent things present – knowledge, or at least a persistent suspicion – through the absence of the image. According to this crude empiricism, the lack of the image justifies the erasure of knowledge. It is not the case that we only believe when we see it; rather, the absence of the image becomes the royal path to voluntary ignorance."

- Nuno Rodrigues

Research Extracts

*Absence and the Void: a stream of
collective consciousness*

Working collectively presented some unexpected advantages; allowing us to collate a range of theories and concepts relating to space, based on what moved us individually. By compiling them we noticed how the fascination with absence is long-standing, interdisciplinary and borderless. From physics to art and East to West, space and void has captivated thinkers' desire to give it meaning and significance:

We contemplated ideas of liminal spaces and portals, fluid spaces that allow movement. A void can be considered as a "space-between"; it is the distance that exists between objects and time that holds tension and meaning.

Space can be described as a multitude of atoms attracting and repelling each other while creating energy. The universe rests on the premise of this atomic interaction, on that which lies in the "invisible" distance between objects, atoms and time.

The unifying properties of space can be seen in horror vacui, which applies both to physics and art. In Ancient Greek physics, the postulate claims that "nature abhors a vacuum". In visual art, it communicates the "fear of empty space" and refers to detailed, densely filled and ornate visual art from ancient Persian carpets to psychedelic art of the 1960s. While in physics horror vacui was debunked – in visual art it is contemporary.

Looking beyond the West, our curiosity led us to pursue a more philosophical approach to the idea of empty spaces. The Japanese concept of Ma explores the perception of negative space and is reflected in the aesthetics of artistic expression in Japan.

Our reflections on emptiness evolved into considering the speed and fullness of our contemporary life. In 1980, Paul Virilio recognised the concept of the "cult of speed", referring to the effects of the Industrial Revolution. As technology evolves, we strive to be more efficient, cramming as much into our days in fear of unproductivity. Maybe, we could all benefit from slowing down and embracing the value of less.



From: Speed – Visions of an Accelerated Age, eds. Jeremy Miller and Michiel Schwarz (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1998) 35.

"Absence and the void can be synonymous with emptiness, nothingness, vacancy.

But what if we decide to see this space of absence as full of potential?"

Featured Artists

The collection of the Christen Sveaas Art Foundation contains a range of painting, sculpture and photography, and is made up of more than 2000 works of art by over 300 artists. Our selection considers the artworks through the lens of the many research avenues we pursued; considering physics, philosophy, literature, religion, performance and industry. The ways in which the artworks speak to one other is as much a part of interpreting absence as the works themselves. To consider these works is to consider the space between them.



Mikkel McAlinden, Landek Mine Last Shift August 21, 1991, 2015, 180 x 300 cm.
© Mikkel McAlinden. Courtesy Galleri K, Oslo

Sophie Calle's *Degas, Drawing*, recalls one of the world's most spectacular art thefts, asking curators and supervisory staff about their memories of the stolen artworks. Ola Kolehmainen's *The Music is About to Begin* produces feelings of anticipation through the closed red curtains.

Andreas Gursky's *Symex Singapore* depicts the hectic hedonism of a working stock market, while Mikkel McAlinden's *Landek Mine Last Shift August 21, 1991* considers the implications of a disappearing industry.

The artwork of visual activist Zanele Muholi presents a powerful statement on identity, alongside Wolfgang Tillmans' reference to truth, information and television/media censorship. Nan Goldin presents intimate scenes of the LGBTQIA+ community in the 1980s, a generation largely lost to the ravages of the AIDS epidemic.

Francesca Woodman's early self-portrait encourages reflection on the materiality of the body in relation to space, and where we draw lines of absence and presence. Ken Matsubara leads us into the realm of dreams, memories, and subconscious emotions, while photorealist painter James White confronts the mundanity of an empty space.

The presence of photography in the collection posed a challenge as much as a source of inspiration. The very nature of the medium pushed and pulled us towards touching on a variety of overlooked histories, evoking topics of identity politics, censorship, the human condition, culture and the realm of the subconscious.

At the core of our curatorial process is communicating absence through abstract ideas and forms. We wanted to explore sound as the absence of something physical. Outside the collection, Yiskāh and Joseph Sergi are two emerging sound artists who further explore notions of grief and the passing of time. Our selection and research generates an open dialogue on absence through this exhibition, highlighting the potential for regenerative futures. Following a two year enforced pause, as we return to our frenetic lives, it is necessary for us to reflect on the power of emptiness.



James White, *Mirrored*, 2012, 69.9 x 71.8 cm (with frame: 72.4 x 74.3 x 5.1 cm). Courtesy Galerie Thomas Zander, Cologne and Galerie Greta Meert, Brussels

From the Whitechapel Gallery Archive

The Whitechapel Gallery, “The artists gallery for everyone”, seeks to “increase the enjoyment and understanding of contemporary art” for its multiple and diverse audiences; by documenting its work, it has amassed an extensive archive. With this archive, we are able to trace the history of progressive thinking from the visionary artists displayed along the years to the behind the scenes thinkings, work and labour that lead to the realisation of their exhibitions.

This called for us to investigate the Gallery's history with our concept and pay tribute to those whose work graced the spaces before us, tacit and seminal. By looking through the archive we were able to note some of the Gallery's catalysts connected to moments of absence.

The original Whitechapel Gallery building, as well as the now adjoining Passmore Library, were united by the common purpose of enriching the lives of the underserved local community. When the Gallery was built in 1901, it was responding to the absence of art in East London. 121 years later, our exhibition addresses absence as a generative theme and an ongoing force.

A Blank Space

Harrison Townsend was the architect of the Gallery and a founding member of The Art Workers' Guild. His original plan included a façade meant to serve as a blank canvas for Walter Crane to create an Arts and Crafts mosaic frieze. Deemed to be too expensive, the façade was left empty for 111 years.

Former Gallery director Iwona Blazwick (2001-2022) commissioned a frieze from the first female winner of the Turner Prize, Rachel Whiteread, in 2012: the permanent public commission elegantly referenced the absence of the original Secessionist frieze by Crane, while acknowledging the prevalence of what the artist called "Hackney weeds", urban plants found in the unexpected East London location of the Gallery. This absence of the original frieze made space for a pioneering female artist ascending in the art world.



Walter Crane, design for the never executed Whitechapel Gallery mosaic, 1899
from: Christopher Wilson, Richard Hollis Designs for the Whitechapel, London
2017, p. 19

An Opening of Minds, Doors, Eyes

As an institution, the Whitechapel Gallery has a notable absence of a permanent collection. The Gallery operates as a Kunsthalle, with constantly rotating contemporary exhibitions and public programmes, benefiting from freedoms that ownership can hinder. The absence of an owned collection creates the need to populate the walls and opens up the perspective of the institution to emerging artists and younger talent (the gallery famously displayed the then unknown Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti in 1982, enabling female artists to be seen by a responsive public).



Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, 26 March–2 May 1982, Whitechapel Gallery Archive

Absence Reveals

The absence of people in installation shots reminds us that these photographs are meant to record a display, and reveal the work of the curator, rather than document the individual works. The absence of spectatorship reminds us of the work of the curator and the installation team, which are usually invisible to the everyday visitor. With the absence of certain elements, we are able to pull back the curtain on the implicit work that can be overshadowed by a more apparent presence.



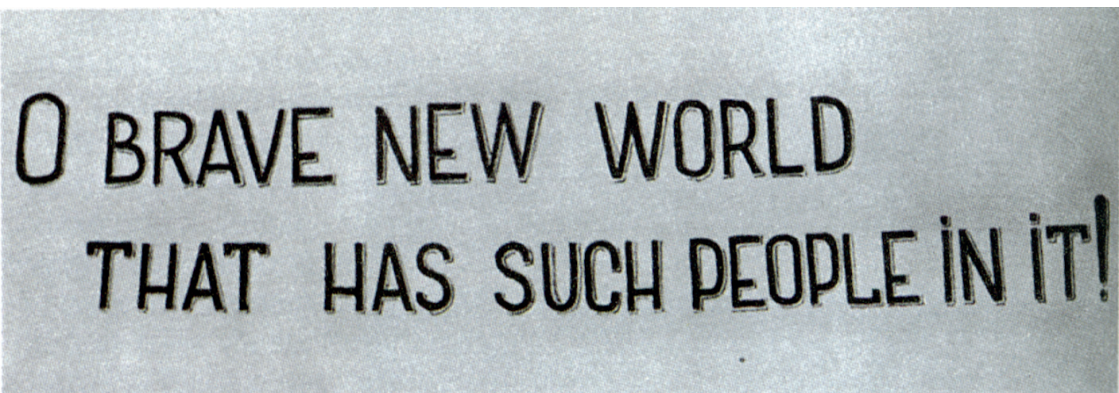
Barbara Hepworth, installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, 8 April–6 June 1954. Photography by The Manor Studio, Whitechapel Gallery Archive

Conjuring Discovery

Looking back, the gallery has responded to absence by forging, exploring and pushing boundaries into unknown new spaces, both physically and conceptually. In the process of tracing absence, an amorphous spectre emerges, a creative life force or spirit. Absence implies something rather than nothing. Perhaps that something is an opportunity, a potential, a freedom, a discussion, a new beginning, or something incomplete, maybe forever. The eternal incompleteness acts as a motor and a driving force, which pushes us to seek, make and create.

John Barlow reminds us in his *Book on Nothing*: “Christianity suggested that creation came from nothing (creatio ex nihilo), creation was created itself by something - God the creator.”

In parallel: “Indian tradition accepted non-being and being as equals in much more fluid terms - with nothing as a state from which we came and may return.”



From: *Speed – Visions of an Accelerated Age*, eds. Jeremy Miller and Michiel Schwarz (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 1998) 142.

While absence can be associated with missing, sorrow or loss, looking back at its many other forms we can see it as a driver of human creativity. As we reflect on a time of collective suffering and longing, we are more able to notice how the pain of absence caused over the last few years transmutes into energy. That power moves us to create, to understand ourselves, to improve our lives and the lives of others, to make the foreign familiar and attempt to tame the unknown. While we make peace with absence as a creative life force rather than a source of pain, we allow ourselves to embrace its powerful properties.

Podcast

Please listen to our podcast with Lou Mensa and Sunil Shah to explore themes of absence further, produced as part of Hear, Now. A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery. We address the gaping absences of representation for minority artists as well as the concept of absence as portrayed through photography.

Scan the QR code below for links to the podcast and the works produced by both of our featured sound artists, as well as a link to the MA Curating Art and Public Programmes course.



Acknowledgements

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Whitechapel Gallery

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The Whitechapel Gallery
77-82 Whitechapel High St,
London E1 7QX

Monday	Closed
Tuesday	11am–6pm
Wednesday	11am–6pm
Thursday	11am–9pm
Friday	11am–6pm
Saturday	11am–6pm
Sunday	11am–6pm