

Dissertation proposal:

**How can artists embody a sense of loss and grief
through the presence of absence?**

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The presence of absence directly triggers the feeling of vacancy or distortion. The act of making invisible space visible, lacking something that was once/usually there, grieved or lost. Each artwork due to be discussed delineates a hyper object “collections, systems or assemblages” that “have already had a significant impact on human social and psychic space” (Morton, 2013). How individuals respond to works of this nature brings into question the empiricism versus rationalism debate “concern the extent to which we are dependent upon experience in our effort to gain knowledge of the external world.” (Markie, 2004).

Presence and absence in visual art touches on the thematic of loss. Columbian artist (Birskirk, et al, 2004 p.28) Doris Salcedo uses domestic furniture imbued with concrete to signify grief and the disruption of normal everyday lives.



Figure 1: Salcedo (1989+) *Untitled*

Transforming space into a tangible presence, that would normally be vacant. Defying the scientific viewpoint of absence.

The illusion of a transparent, 'pure' and neutral space - which, though philosophical in origin, has permeated Western culture...Social space embodies distinct and distinctive 'traits' which attach to the 'pure' mental form of space, without, however, achieving a separate existence as its external superadded content. Their analysis tells us what it is that confers a concrete (practical) existence upon space instead of leaving it confined within (mental) abstraction. (Lefebvre, 1991)

There is both a physical and mental aspect to space. Janine Antoni, performance and sculpture artist, symbolises absence through the physical presence of her body.

The artist exemplifies physical presence, and spiritual presence. Separating the mind from the body.

Janine Antoni is an American artist born in 1964 (Artnet, 2015). *Saddle* is defined “a leather seat that you put on a horse’s back when you ride it” (Macmillan English Dictionary, 2020) directly relating to the act of riding. Does she wish the viewer to



Figure 2: Antoni (2000) *Saddle*

interact with the work? “Like a ghost, the cowhide holds the memory of the artist’s body.” (Antoni, 2000) referring to the use of the cow’s skin. As if shared “reminiscent of the bodies—both the artist’s and the cow’s” (Lindner, 2006) combined into one living being. This performative act of morphing herself with the cow, using the animal’s skin is “sensuous, physical, visceral” (Antoni, 2009) suggesting a non-

anthropocentric outlook. The work imitates two beings, when the work is physically neither Antoni nor the cow in their purest form.

The extremity of the act is what makes the art real, the material speaks. Antoni is submersing herself; it becomes difficult to separate her from her work. The artist often uses her body within her art “Antoni’s primary tool for making sculpture has always been her own body.” (Harcombe, 2015) blurring the line between sculpture and performance. Displaying absence through herself, feasibly contradictory. Antoni is the solitary being that will always be present from her perspective, until death “to acknowledge the animal in me just as I do my own death.” (Princenthal, 2021) illustrating her connection to the non-human, empathising with the cow.



Figure 3: Antoni (2000) *Saddle*

The absence of Antoni’s body is empty, implying fragility. This space could be described as a “non-place” (Augé, 1995) which is a place that has not been seen before, from individual perspective. A theory formed by Anthropologist Marc Augé.

On the one hand, the cow's skin, weak and breakable without the artists presence, the human presence. Or the reality of when humans are finished with an animal, they get left, moulded to the shape of humanity. The violence needed to retrieve cows' skin, leaves many questions for the viewer.

The visual of the cowhide is striking, the brown stained colour emphasises an animalistic quality "something tactile, mortal skin, a sort of yellowish-brown and luminous rind," (Pappas-Kelley, 2018) visualising the subjugation of animals and



Figure 4: Guerrilla Girls (1989) *Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum?*

women in our society "clearly a submissive pose" (Antoni, 2019). Antoni's all fours stance attains a cross over between animalism and the sexualisation of women "leaves behind her aestheticized negative space." (Vivash, 2014) arguably, in some retrospect, society can be seen to cultivate a coinciding disrespect of both animals and women. This work influenced me to explore the theme of absence, perusing the notion of owning my own female form, through recreating it myself rather than a male artist.



Figure 5: Henson (2022) *Untitled*

Absence: what isn't present. In this competitive society, people constantly focus on what they don't have. A glass half empty narrative. The artwork could be described as a catharsis from this conditioned vision. The viewer's mind is more likely to conceptualise the shape of Antoni's body before understanding the cowhide depicting her. Identifying the material allows the viewer to understand the gesture of a cow, the only physical material present. Opposing the empiricist view "Experience is, thus, our only source of ideas." (Markie, 2004) in the sense that Antoni has not experienced animal brutality. However, Empiricists may argue that Antoni does experience a cow's standpoint through motherhood and the subjugation of women. Many of Antonis works refers to motherhood, paternity and care "reminiscent of the womb and being surrounded by the body of the mother." (Princenthal, 2021) the work takes on this quality by using a bodily material.



Figure 6: Antoni (2000) 2038

I cast my body using material dipped in plaster, grounding myself in the physical world. To understand my place of belonging, similarly to Antonis' *Saddle* "Working serves as a way to locate myself both physically and emotionally" (Burskirk, et al, 2004 p.28). The feeling of a work depicting the presence of a living being can only be truly felt in the flesh. The awareness of the human inheritance is alerting for our natural instincts.



Figure 7: Henson (2022) *Untitled*

The artist brushes on the idea that a human figure has an emotional presence compared to a cast of an object “emanating a deep sense of spirituality and loss.” (Hendrickson, 2019) the bridge between the body and the soul. This work highlights how the physicality of Antoni is separate to her spirit. The sculptural outline of her body conveying the presence of a being, without an entity.



Figure 8: Antoni (2000) *Saddle*

Doris Salcedo born in 1958, Bogotá (Museum of contemporary art Chicago, 2015).

Uses Concrete to replete domestic furniture, a relevant material to work with because it fills and blocks space efficiently.



Figure 9: Salcedo (1989+) *Untitled*

I believe the works are untitled to play into this idea of absence. Salcedo's sculptures are in response to the Columbian civil war, witnessed by her.

A bloody and vicious civil war has torn apart the nation of Colombia for nearly half a century.² On a daily basis, seven warring factions³ murder, kidnap, and massacre⁴ Colombian citizens. (Posnanski, 2005)

Highlighting a loss of peace, demonstrating a hyper object.

The solemn mourning atmosphere surrounding the furniture and the compressed clothes “commemorates individual victims of the protracted violence and civil war in her native Colombia” (MoMA, 2019) when a large-scale catastrophe takes place it becomes difficult to see the statistics as individuals, real people. Salcedo depicts a



Figure 10: Salcedo (2015) *Photos: Speak, Memory*

shared loss, a communal grieving. Juxtaposing Antoni's *Saddle* which depicts a loss she hasn't experienced. Only by placing herself in the position of the animal, is she present within the work. Whereas Salcedo insinuates a loss which is creatively, entirely separate from her body. Although, directly affects her life. The subject matter

sentimental, which returns to the understanding of empiricism, which classifies knowledge as purely from experience (Markie, 2004).

The mixture of concrete and clothes symbolising layers of mud underground, compressed together as though buried memories or even people. The materiality of these works conjures a strong urge to interact.



Figure 11: Salcedo (1989+) *Untitled*

The old owners of these belongings (victims of war) are present as the clothes have been captured and paused throughout time “permeated with concrete. This substance seems to suffocate or muffle the objects...muted and weighed down by the burden of grief.” (Guggenheim, 2015) suggests the furniture has been frozen by concrete. The viewer can sense the weight of the material through the impact it’s having on the clothes and the domestic furniture. The nature of concrete is suffocating “The weight of the cement on your chest would inhibit breathing to the point...your brain would starve of oxygen.” (SeniorCare2Share, 2021)

Another artist who applies concrete to indicate loss is Teresa Margolles, Mexican artist “adopting human remains —parts of corpses, blood, skin, small pieces of flesh, and the water used to wash corpses— as her media. Considering...violence and impunity of the Mexican state” (Salazar, 2018) revealing the catalyst of the concrete



Figure 12: Margolles (2013) *Mesa y Dos Bancos*

used within her works. The existence of the materials Margolles uses, and the performative act of gathering and preparing these materials, could alone depict her concept.

Concrete would not naturally be found paired with these objects “Salcedo used only those materials that would be readily available to these victims, the majority of whom live in rural, impoverished areas of Colombia.” (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2015) the unusual juxtaposition personifies the damaging disruption of the poverty and violence inflicted on the Columbian civilians. The disfigured unmatched

combination of objects has their functionality stripped, and their use within the world voided. Does this equate that the functionality is absent? “Rendered dysfunctional...



Figure 13: Salcedo (1989+) *Untitled*

a disruption of the domestic sphere and the bonds fostered there” (Guggenheim, 2015) deemed obsolete. The old fashioned, wartime children’s clothes supplicate a feeling of the past and the forgotten.

The amalgamation of objects, forms a 3-dimensional collage “remaking of furniture that is alternately found, hand-constructed, or from victims.” (Herzberg, 2015) which implies a breeding of domestic furniture which carries the memories of the tortured.

Comparable to a wardrobe a chair is more interactive with its owner, it's a place to sit, to contemplate. An alien material disrupting the functionality of the chair. The man-made cold concrete used in Salcedo's work contrasts with the domestic object. Rendering an industrial tone, compared to the animal fat used in Joseph Beuys' *Fat chair*

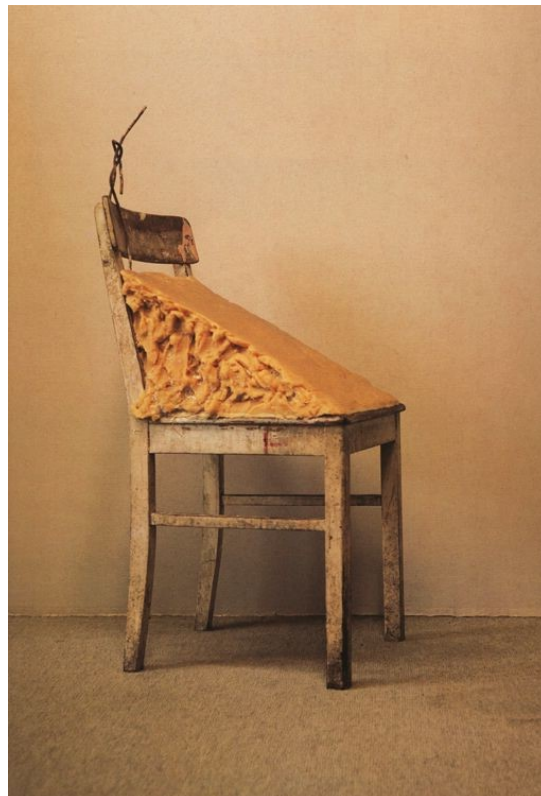


Figure 14: Beuys (1964) *Fat chair*

The direct presentation of simple objects and materials in his work effectively throws into question an idea central to traditional understandings of medium – the idea that the process of making a work of art endows some unformed, relatively inchoate material or medium with a compelling structure that operates in harmony with the physical qualities of the medium being used (Potts, 2004).

Materials and objects that work against each other, placed together. Salcedo took inspiration from Beuys' spatial understanding

the influence of Beuys might have been a way to approach the monumental, but my interest in the space of sculpture was in the way it can represent a crossroad, a meeting point. (Salcedo, et al, 2000)

Christoph Büchel born in 1966 (Ocula, 2022), Switzerland. The work *Barca Nostra* is moreover minimalist compared to the previous works.

Büchel salvaged a refugee boat from the ocean “The sunken fishing ship upon which more than 1,000 African migrants died in 2015” (Dafoe, 2021) and controversially displayed as a ready-made object at the Venice Biennale, on a lifted platform.



Figure 15: Büchel (2019) *Barca Nostra*

The presence of the refugees is absent through the boat itself. Büchel cut holes in the sides of the boat to show the dentures from the ocean and the struggle of the dead. The individuals have been made visible again through the boat being salvaged from the “Mediterranean” (Rea and Pes, 2019) and displayed.

This work expresses the lack of space accessible for refugees undergoing this infamous, cramped, anxiety filled journey. Fleeing the war and poverty of their native country “in the absence of dramatic contrast between open and closed spaces,

would rid metropolitan populations of any spatial anxiety they might have felt” (Vidler, 2000) which is incomprehensible to those who have never experienced it.



Figure 16: Büchel (2019) *Barca Nostra*¹

There is much controversy around this piece as many believe the context of a rich, white man displaying an object not linked to him, may be using these tragedies to his benefit. Especially considering the fame and financial advance of a piece in a high-class art environment. Büchel's thought process behind this work conveys rationalism compared to Salcedo's *untitled* which is experience led empiricism.

The artist has not witnessed this tragedy, nor does he attain any link to this crisis. The process of retrieving *Barca Nostra* would have provided the artist with a physical “certainty...scientia (which is a type of absolute knowledge of the necessary connections that would explain why certain things are a certain way)” (Markie, 2004).

¹ Büchel taking a selfie in front of Barca Nostra

Losing a loved one, has a psychological affect “the brain has a problem to solve when a loved one has died.” describing these individuals as psychologically equally needed as “food” and “water” (O’Connor, 2022). This remapping of losing someone is unfathomable on a large scale. Therefore, is it right of Büchel to depict this event, even though he has not experienced loss on this scale?

Some believe the lack of explanation of the origin of the boat and the refugee crisis is disrespectful “This is a hyper-spectacle! “Barca Nostra” serves to artwash all of the complex political, social and environmental issues that created and maintain the falsity of a “migrant crisis”.” (Pritchard, 2019) which feeds into the exploitative Capitalist side of the art world. Where did Büchel cross the line? Perhaps it was the lack of information. Would the agency of a family member of the departed displaying this barge, receive a less controversial response? However, would they have been listened to?

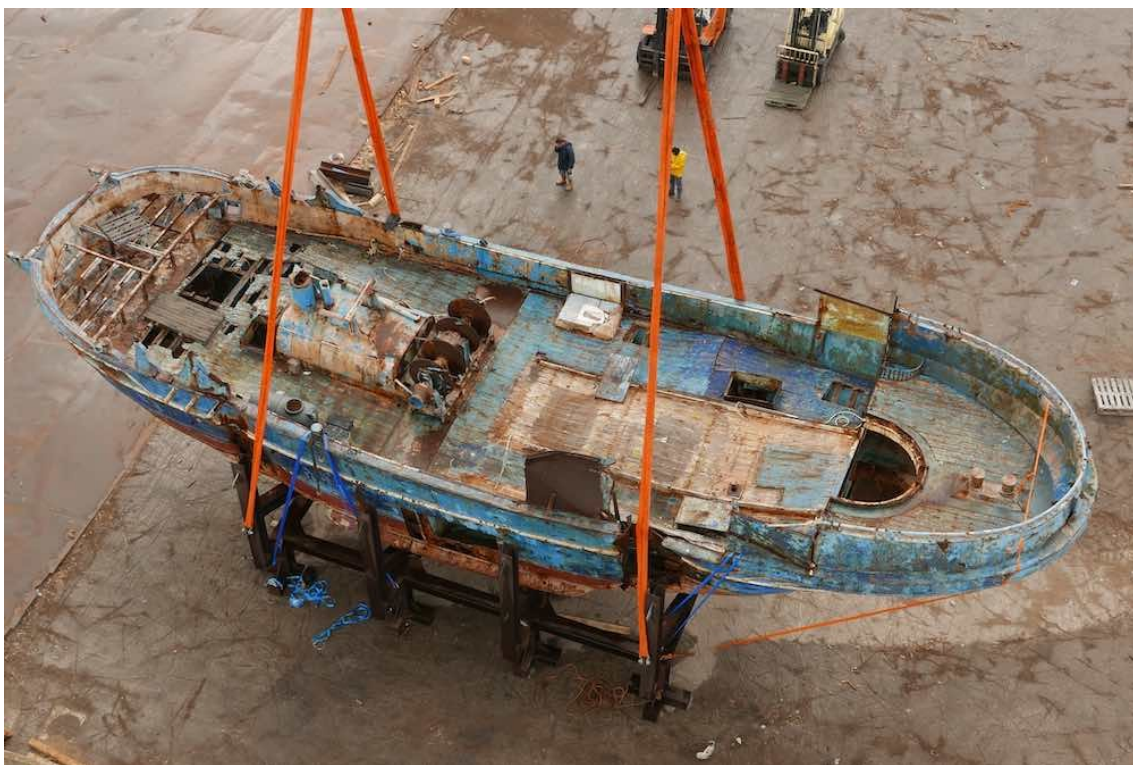


Figure 17: Büchel (2019) *Barca Nostra*

It is arguable that the way Büchel went about the process of cleaning and exhibiting the boat was careful and considerate ““No one was the official owner of the boat,” curator and collaborator...told the Guardian.” (Ma, 2019).

Some may believe he has brought to light, the individual experiences of people that would otherwise be forgotten. These global catastrophes are difficult to depict as the trauma has been endured by so many. Humans’ nature involves a struggle to

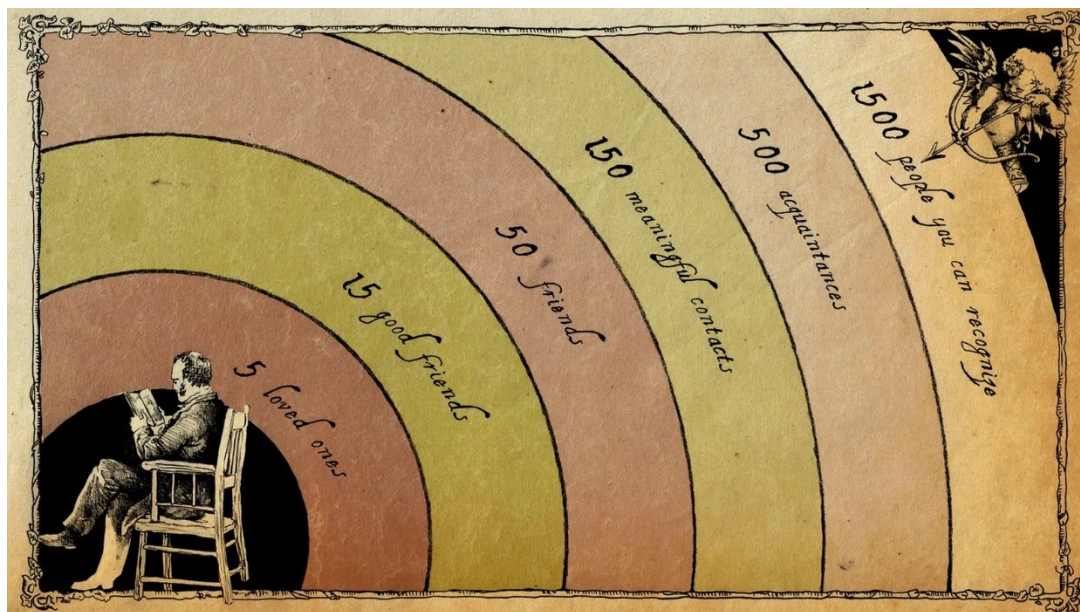


Figure 18: Ro (2019) *The most intimate circle is just five loved ones, reaching a maximum of 1500 people you can recognise*

sympathise with a large group of people, according to Dunbar’s theory “we can only remember 150 individuals, or only keep track of...a community of 150” (Dunbar, 2010) hinting that *Barca Nostra* humanises the refugees' experiences and allows the public to see the reality of people's lives who flee poverty and war, the work communicates a form of hyper object. I would imagine that this recognition and care could bring closure to families who are left with the grief of a body lost at sea.

Each artist has expressed a differing form of trauma “the very nature of their trauma- that something could happen for which there was no way to prepare ahead of time” (Krauss, 2016) utilising the timeless effect of trauma, to visualise their message using their interpretations of space.

The artists work’s establish the impact of presence and absence in art practise, and how this can be used to demonstrate real world hyper objects such as war, poverty and animal cruelty “the perception of space is a primary natural sense which belongs to the basic senses of our psychology” (Lodder & Barassi, 2004).



Figure 19: FPIF (2014) *Colombian negotiators have reached a potential breakthrough in their ongoing talks to bring the country's civil war to a close. But achieving it will require Washington to give up its drug war delusions.*

Through my research and physical practise, I have reached the consideration of a dissertation along the lines of – How visual artists depict hyper objects in a way that supplicates empathy within the viewer, towards the victim/s, to whatever or whoever they may be?

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