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Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art
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Citation

Vekony, D. (2017, April 11). *Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47798>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art

Issue Date: 2017-04-11

Chapter 3 - From presence to absence

In the next chapter I take the reader from the concept of presence to that of absence. There is a need to ponder upon these two concepts, as it is argued, and already touched upon in Chapter Two, that contemporary art might be able to draw us into much needed empty spaces. To put it another way, the art experience that I propose to call the 'transitional space of contemporary art', is characterized and conditioned by absence. However, in order to understand how and why the concept of *absence* is essential for grasping the space that the contemporary art experience opens up, there is a need to explore the shift from presence to absence.

3.1 Outline

This chapter starts with the elaboration of the art experience as a particular sensation of presence. A 'meaningful encounter' with the work of art, or in other words, when art works on the beholder, is characterized and conditioned by 'being present'. It is argued that many people seek the art experience because they identify it with the sensation of presence. Therefore, in the first part of this chapter, the relationship of art and presence is explored through the works of various theorists.

Further on, I argue that if contemporary art can indeed draw the beholder into this empty space of potentials, the phenomenon of presence does not cover the complexity of the experience. Therefore, the second part of the chapter suggests looking elsewhere to comprehend the contemporary art experience relevant for the 21st century: not in presence but rather in absence.

3.2 The concept of presence

When looking at a work of art, one is immersed in the experience and is carried away by the visual impression. According to some theorists, people seek the art experience because they identify it with the sensation of presence which brings them closer to their non-rational, bodily self. For them, the art experience can be understood as a kind of *flow* in which they exist above the troubles of work and the constraints of the superego. Furthermore, as art is thought to stand above the everyday life of work, there is a promise that it can make the viewer connect with larger-than-life issues. In literature, the concept of presence is treated as a unifying term which includes all kinds of engaging activities from mountain climbing and dancing, to reading and working or engaging with art. In order to understand the art experience associated with presence, the complexity of this sensation needs to be explored.

What is presence? For me, 'being present' means the sensation of being fully engaged in the moment with the object/activity of one's concentration, blocking out all other activities that might disturb that complete immersion. The actual experience feels as if one is being pulled into an eternal moment, 'taken over' by the object/activity, losing one's ego-boundaries, with the complex nature of the object/activity taking over the self. Given that such states are ecstatic, some argue that people live their lives towards experiencing this loss of ego-consciousness that takes place due to a complete immersion in the moment.

Various scholars have researched and defined presence; one of the most popular definitions comes from psychology. In his book *Flow. The psychology of the optimal experience* (1991), Mihály Csíkszentmihályi studies the question of happiness which he identifies with the experience of flow, namely being fully present and completely immersed in an activity or particular situation we find ourselves in. We can think of activities such as dancing, mountain-climbing, sports, playing a game, making love, working and so on. When one really engages with these activities, time stops, everything else other than the activity stops existing and one unites with the sensation inspired by the activity. This is what Csíkszentmihályi calls 'flow' and defines it as: "... the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is *so enjoyable* that

people will do it even at great costs, for the sheer sake of doing it" (1991:4, italics, DV). Why do people put themselves at great risk in order to experience flow? Philosopher John Gray, in his book on human nature, *Straw dogs. Thoughts on humans and other animals* (2002:113) argues that this urge comes from the irresistible desire to return effortlessly to our animal nature without feeling guilty. According to Gray, living without a sense of guilt is a state people strive for. Gray explains that there is a constant voice in our head that evaluates and supervises, telling us what we did wrong and sometimes complementing us on our performance. This is the mind, and, within that, the superego talking, whether we are conscious or unconscious of it. In everyday life we do not let ourselves get out of the grip of the superego to live truly within our animal nature. Yet we all desire to live 'lightly', less burdened by morality, which Gray calls pure hypocrisy. States of presence or flow overcome the always surveilling master, the superego, and allow the person to exist – even if only momentarily - without shame.

What is flow exactly? Although Csíkszentmihályi tries to restrict all types of experience of immersion, including the art experience, to the sensation of a blessed state of oceanic unity, of *flow*, I argue that this state of mind is far more complex. When looking at art for example, a viewer is faced with an unsettling encounter with the aesthetic: "...like being hit in the stomach. Feeling a little nauseous. ... overwhelming feeling... I have to... calm myself down"(Csíkszentmihályi 1991:107). Although Csíkszentmihályi sticks this one sentence into his argument on flow, this is where he leaves it and unsettling experiences of immersion do not reappear in his argument for the explanation of flow. As I see it, presence, or what Csíkszentmihályi understands as flow, can also be unsettling and disturbing; it does not always have to be ecstatic and harmonious. What is common to all aspects of flow or presence is 'oneness', or in other words, a coming together of subject and object, but there is no guarantee that this immersion will be a pleasing sensation. If this is the case, the state of presence or flow is better approached, not as a feeling, but rather as a particular *state of consciousness* that is a different dimension from feelings. In order to explain what I mean by this distinctive state of consciousness, from now on I will only use the term 'presence' instead of flow, as the latter is often generally connoted – mistakenly, I think – only with harmony and beauty. In order to grasp what presence might represent and what relevance it has for the arts, I will dedicate a few paragraphs to the German scholar, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and his take on the topic.

In his seminal book, *Production of presence. What meaning cannot convey* (2004), Gumbrecht sheds light on the complex experience and potentials of presence. Although he describes the state of presence as self-contentment, ecstasy, peace, unity and security, immersion or sometimes as a blessed state of emptiness (2004:97-102), he takes the focus off the sensation and presents it as a *state of consciousness*. To better understand presence as a state, he introduces the expression 'presence-culture'. Unlike Csíkszentmihályi, Gumbrecht does not argue that it 'feels good' to be in presence-culture. He argues that it is a distinctive 'way of being' in the world, which includes the art experience.

What exactly does Gumbrecht understand by presence and what does he mean by presence-culture? It is important to go deeper into the exploration of these concepts in order to understand the relationship between art and presence and how it relates to art in the 21st century. Gumbrecht describes presence-culture through an analysis of the "cultures of the past". On the one hand, he reaches back to medieval culture and compares it to our current (then end of the 20th century) society. He makes a distinction between now and then, and explains that today we live in a meaning-culture that is characterized by the mind, including phenomena such as human eccentricity, a structuralist interpretation of knowledge, the importance of action, the concept of a linear time dictated by the clock, the significance of innovation, a dualist differentiation of self, etc. On the other hand, he sees medieval (presence) culture as centered around ideas such as inherent meaning, body-mind-soul unity, body that is part of cosmology, revelatory knowledge, magic and space (as opposed to time) (2004:79-86).

If one wanted to contrast these two cultures in two symbols, one could say that in the meaning-culture of the West, psychoanalysis is used in order to deal with larger-than-us issues. However, in Afro-Brazilian cults, in which the 'presence' element is stronger, *pai do santo*, the state of being possessed by a god, in order to resolve any type of inner or outer conflict is evoked (Gumbrecht 2004:88-90). In other words, Gumbrecht implies that our society is that of the world of meaning, whereas pre-Enlightenment cultures or some non-European cultures even today are characterized by the concept of presence. The two focuses result in very different solutions when conducting our lives. Gumbrecht argues that by excluding aspects of presence-culture we lose synchronicity and peace with ourselves. Of course he acknowledges that in our world obsessed with meaning there is a presence-side to things but we tend to bracket it and push the meaning aspect to the foreground. Practices in

the service of the making of meaning are privileged over practices of presence, so for instance when it comes to the treatment of depression, psychotherapy combined with antidepressants is considered more effective than meditation or healing with energy.

Yet, Gumbrecht (2004) argues that late 20th century society also acknowledged that meaning is a one-way street that only addresses a very limited segment of how people are in the world. In *The birth to presence*, quoting philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, he argues there is “nothing we find more tiresome today than the production of yet another nuance of meaning” (Nancy in Gumbrecht, 2004:105). Therefore, with the age of post-structuralism and deconstruction, the era of meaning is mourned, but no alternative has been established, philosophers have shied away from reinventing a new alternative after ‘the age of sign’.

What is to be done? When asking which direction philosophy should take after the post-structuralist turn, Gumbrecht detects a general disillusionment regarding the establishment of yet another variety of discourse for the understanding of meaning. Gumbrecht is neither a new-ager nor a nostalgic idealist. He does not call for the reconstruction of some long-gone Golden Age myth of a perfect traditional social model based on faith. Nonetheless, he realizes that in order to make any sense of the world and not make the mistake of constructing yet another world-view that will later be considered as a useless, outdated theory, we, as society, have to look beyond meaning. He proposes that we move our focus away from a quest for meaning, suggesting that we reestablish our contact with the things-of-the-world outside interpretation. He does so by reintroducing the concept of presence in its extreme temporality contrasted to meaning bound by time.¹

¹ This attitude corresponds with the one outlined in Chapter One. Indeed, what if in academic disciplines, too, we tried to understand existence and ways of being in the world outside structure, the framework of language and the relationship of signifier-signified? As a close friend, psychoanalyst Eric Harper, puts it: “... what if man and women were a poem and not a signifier, following the beat of the drum and rhythm that is both in and outside language?” (Harper 2014). Eric Harper continues with a powerful thought that draws our attention to the physicality (as opposed to the rationality) of existence: “Working in the tradition of Nietzsche the signifier, as with Apollo’s name which etymologically means ‘the shining one, the deity of light’ does not bring illumination to what happens between the man and the woman, or love between men. Instead one finds oneself in a force field, becoming a love poem, Dionysian state, an intensive state, effect, even compulsion to frenzy, intensification. A dancing body, a rhythmic frenzy of movement across the lips, throat, trunk, arms, legs not confined by the genital zone, phallus, a passage from self to anonymity through the dissolving, annihilating of the weight and burden of signifier into being nothing more than a voluptuous ecstasy, pleasure. It is to enjoy, be over-come with your Dionysian becoming” (Harper 2014).

3.3 Presence and art

Gumbrecht sees art as a possible 'practice of presence' in our culture that he understands as being bound by meaning. He explains how practices of presence in art operate through the example of the Japanese theatre of *No* and *Kabuki*. "No pieces, in particular, and their music is breathtakingly slow and repetitive. But if you... resist the wish to leave the theatre after the first half hour or so, if you have enough patience to let the slowness of emerging and vanishing of form and unformed presence grow on you, then, after three or four hours, *No* can make you realize how your rapport to the things of the world has changed" (2004:151). This "rapport to the things of the world" is a different state of mind through which one does not only reevaluate, but senses the things of the world differently, as Gumbrecht puts it, "the things of the world" come "close to our skin" (2004:106).

Gumbrecht also applies this state of mind as characteristic of the aesthetic experience in visual art in general, when time somehow disappears and the artwork hits the viewer with its temporality whilst s/he welcomes the risk of losing him/herself. In this shattering of the ego-consciousness, there is a loss of self that Gumbrecht - using Heidegger - calls the "unconcealment of Being" that appears in "Dionysian rupture" with "Apollonian clarity" – (a Nietzsche-ian coming together of the two drives that make up the 'good work of art')² (2004:118).

Gumbrecht understands the aesthetic experience as one that can take the beholder to the state of presence: "I believe that we are always... referring to epiphanies when, in our specific cultural situation, we use the word 'aesthetic'. We are referring to... epiphanies that, for moments at least, make us dream, make us long for, and make us perhaps even remember, with our bodies as well as with our minds, how good it would be to live in sync with the things of the world" (2004:118).

The state of consciousness can best be articulated through the example of the *Madonna of the Meadows* (1505) by Raphael, referred to in Chapter Two. When recalling the experience of seeing this picture straight after looking at the Kunsthistorisches' Lucian Freud exhibition, it is easy to see what this space of presence might represent. In the case of

² See *The birth of tragedy* (1995) by Nietzsche for his distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian.

the *Madonna*, there is a manifestation of bliss, a stopping of time, being drawn into harmony, a state of eternal calm and order. However, it must be noted that the Lucian Freud exhibition was also of pure presence, as the artworks were so powerful that they felt almost invasive. Therefore, this 'sync', that Gumbrecht refers to, is not identified with pleasant feelings, joy or other, it is rather a state of consciousness in which everything is in place, both the good and the bad. Gumbrecht feels that in today's culture it is art that is able to point us toward this state of consciousness. The separation that we experience with the 'things-of-the-world' in our world of work when our hunt for meaning disappears and we just 'are'.

Gumbrecht is not the only one who argues that art can take us back to this world of 'oneness', whether comfortable or not. The 'sync' Gumbrecht talks about evokes the kind of nostalgia described by Heidegger, who would argue that the bodily sensation of presence is able to drive us back to our authentic *Dasein*, and show us a path out of our unauthentic 'they-self', bound by technology and utilitarianism. In the following paragraphs I propose to explore Martin Heidegger's concept of presence and art. Although the philosopher of *Being and Time* articulated these ideas in 1928, Gumbrecht was relying on them in 2004, and we shall see how we are able to use them today, for contemporary art in the 21st century.

Heidegger - Presence-at-hand

Gumbrecht touches upon a very physical identification with the artwork in which the bodily intensity of the experience is dependent on a *rupture* in time. This rupture can lead to the artwork, with its all immersing presence, overpowering the beholder, and enabling a union between subject and object to take place. The ego-boundaries shatter and there is a coming together of viewer and art. Just what special quality might art have in order to be able to draw us into this timeless zone of 'being there'? Heidegger's view on the subject can help us to understand this special force of art.

Presence can be seen as a rupture in time, in other words, time stopping, a timeless zone and it is from here that Heidegger's concept of *presence-at-hand* departs, and yet takes us to, art. Let me explain his concept of *presence-at-hand* first. The *presence-at-hand Dasein* of things refers to their own existence without being defined by and bound to context or purpose. They just 'are' for and in themselves. This is in contrast with the *readiness-to-hand*

type of existence through which the phenomena of the things of the world appear as relational. A hammer is there to hammer with, an image is there to represent, or a partner is there to love us; we treat and think of the things of the world as equipmental and relational. So can anything be seen for itself alone? Heidegger argues that this is where art can help. He believes artworks can be experienced as *presence-at-hand* beings, given that they are not born with a utilitarian goal in mind. Artworks can or cannot have (different kinds of) impact, however this impact is not predefined, but emerges from the nature of the encounter (Heidegger 1962).

Let us stay with *presence-at-hand* for a moment. How can a landscape or a portrait of somebody be a *presence-at-hand* entity? It is easier to see what Heidegger means by the sensation of presence when it comes to (pre)modern art. When standing in front of the Raphael *Madonna*, one is struck by the perfect, ideal beauty, peace, majesty and immobility of the figure. The geometric structuring of the figures juxtaposed by an imaginary landscape takes the viewer into a heavenly moment of immobility, out of the course of time. A similar sensation can be experienced when standing in front of Mark Rothko's *No 61. (Rust and Blue)* (1953). One is overwhelmed by the depth of the blue, the hazy edges and finds an oceanic comfort both in the texture and in the colors of the painting. In both cases, the presence of the artwork overpowers the observer and draws them into a state of union by overstepping ego-boundaries. This immersion with the artwork might even become a physical sensation. This would be one way of understanding Heidegger's idea of presence.

The other way (and the two are related) is a process in which we actually experience the transformation from *readiness-to-hand* to *presence-at-hand*. Let me explain. The way a work of art is able to transform different modes of being-in-the-world into presence-at-hand existence is best understood by Dada and post-Dada artistic practices. Heidegger argues: "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling... It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise'" (Heidegger 1962:34:207).

This "complicated frame of mind" is clearly visible in the case of artists such as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage and others. This is what John Cage does when he uses the sounds of equipment in his performances (e.g. *Water walk*, 1965) or Marcel Duchamp with his ready-mades (e.g. *In advance of the broken arm*, 1914). With other artists this is also the

case, although less visibly. A portrait by Lucian Freud is not only the portrait of that particular sitter, but also the expression of the 'human condition' through the lines and colors of the face presented to us. This revelation of the 'presence' of a particular phenomenon (in this case what existentialist philosophers like to call 'the human condition', or what Lucian Freud referred to with very Heideggerian terminology as the "honest revelation of truth" [Lucian Freud exhibition, Kunsthistorisches, Vienna] appears in most successful artworks.

Both Duchamp and Cage take objects or sounds out of their original context. Cage takes noises out of their ordinary context and encourages us to listen to them as music. The splash of water or the noise of an electric mixer become part of a musical performance. Duchamp's snow shovel extended from the ceiling will be seen as an object in its own right, without a teleological purpose and we are asked to contemplate its existence detached from its function. What actually breaks here – as I argued in Chapter Two – is the line of representation. When presence arrives, *readiness-to-hand* disappears. As Gumbrecht quotes Jean-Luc Nancy: "The delight of presence is the mystical formula par excellence ... and such presence that escapes the dimension of meaning has to be in tension with the principle of representation" (2004:57).

One can argue that this rupture of relational being, or the transformation of *readiness-to-hand* Dasein (meaning, objects to be used) to *presence-at-hand* Dasein (things that exist without any teleological goal) is one tool that some artistic practices use. Why is all this important? Heidegger does not see art as being created for fun only. Art has a responsibility, namely that it should show us the path back to ourselves. As he puts it, art should lead us back to our authentic *Dasein*, that is in tension with our unauthentic *Dasein* defined by the 'I-they' relationship.

With the 'I-they' relationship Heidegger refers precisely to the aforementioned equipmental existence. 'I-They' relationship is the connection with the things-of-the-world in a way that we become part of a larger than us system defined by power in which we also become dutiful workers. We do not realize to what extent the world 'out there' (that we are also responsible for shaping) is taking over our 'authentic' existence in the world. Heidegger writes:

In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another

dissolves one's own *Dasein* completely into a kind of Being of 'the Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness (Heidegger 1962: 27: 164).

If - with the aid of art – one can step out of our inauthentic *Dasein* defined by the I-They relationship and find the way back to one's authentic self as Heidegger seems to suggest, the lesson one can learn from his understanding of art is far reaching. *Presence-at-hand* experiences such as art might offer a path back to ourselves from the world of technology that creates the I-they, inauthentic way of being-in-the-world.³ "The art work opens up in its own way the being of beings. This opening up, i.e., this revealing, i.e., the truth of beings happen in the work. In the art work the truth of being has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work" (Heidegger 1978:166). Creating means to let something emerge as a *thing*, as a *being in itself*, to bring being out of its concealment (1978:180).⁴ Art, according to Heidegger, can help to reestablish the bond and reveal the *presence-at-hand* being of entities. In order 'to save' us from the technological existence circumscribed in *The question concerning technology* (1977), there is a need to re-establish something that has been lost. In my understanding, Heidegger is implying that art is able to reveal the *presence-at-hand Dasein* of things that might have a great impact on how one conducts one's life and makes other than meaning-based decisions.

I would like to conclude this section with a quote from Heidegger that demonstrates the level of importance he attributes to art. In his impressive and sensitive summary on the works of Heidegger, philosopher Michael Wheeler (2011) writes: "In so

³ Heidegger's critique of a technology-driven society is long and complex. Therefore I will summarize using an insightful analysis by Michael Wheeler: Heidegger was of the conviction that a technological way of being is ruthless, reductive and instrumental, treating nature and people as objects to be used for other instrumental purposes. Rivers exist therefore for us to build hydroelectric plants on, chats in the bar among buddies turn into 'networking'. Heidegger argues that this can be escaped through poetry (Wheeler 2011).

⁴ Although greatly fond of art, Heidegger is very critical of the art world. He thinks the art world puts a constraint on the emergence of truth, therefore it disables the work of art. The art world conceals the true nature of the artwork and it cannot shine through the technology the art world imposes upon the piece.

doing such artworks succeed in bringing us into contact with the mystery through their expression of dwelling (poetic habitation). In listening attentively and gratefully to how Being announces itself in such artworks, humankind will prepare themselves for the task of *safeguarding*".

What Wheeler notes here refers to the responsibility of art as seen by Heidegger, and it is indeed major. To Heidegger, art is able to guide us back to 'Being' that is beyond technicity, beyond relationality and dualism. Heidegger's understanding of art can be likened to some type of almost mystical experience.⁵ However, if we listen to Gumbrecht, we understand that this state of mind is actually far from being mystical and doubtlessly many (pre)modern or even contemporary artworks are able to generate the sensation Heidegger refers to. As Gumbrecht puts it, art is able to "bring the things of the world close to our skin". What is meant by presence and this remarkable force of art to drag the viewer out of everyday, profane concerns as explained by Heidegger and Gumbrecht, meet 'being' in a secession of time. One can argue that indeed, art has a force that it is most important and valuable to engage with. However, although it is crucial to accept this special force of art, I argue that the specificity of contemporary art lies in something else, namely not simply in presence, but in creating space that I call *absence*. In the subsequent paragraphs I explore this potential opening up of a space that is beyond presence.

3.4 From presence to absence

One can understand how (pre)modern art draws the viewer into a state of presence and how, often through a particular statement, it leads the viewer into some kind of union with 'larger than us' issues, and even into a connection with the core of being. As Heidegger and Gumbrecht demonstrated, during such encounters, pleasant or unpleasant, as, a kind of 'sync' may occur with the artwork and with the things-of-the-world.

⁵ Indeed, we find a lot of commonalities between these thoughts and Zen practices for instance. It is interesting to note that John Cage was a Zen practitioner and Dada is the art form that many Zen practitioners appreciate, Zen koans are also very much like Dada poetry and mentality. Cage demarcates the exact time, questioning the whole notion of sound production.

Presence becomes especially tangible in the case of artworks with a statement. When looking at Impressionist artworks for instance we are invited back to nature, while when looking at Madonna paintings we are embracing Beauty and Virtue. When confronting the German Expressionist, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's depressing soldier portraits and war scenes, we lament the terror of war and the aggressive nature of the human being. For instance, in the case of Emil Nolde's religious paintings and etchings, we are reminded of a communion, a type of closure we would all expect to see from religion and would be glad to embrace with fellow human beings. So in many artworks presence comes intertwined with statement. However, I think that for the contemporary art that is of interest for this research, the strategy might be different. Contemporary art does not invite the viewer into anticipated states of consciousness that appear to be inherent to the artwork. There is not a state of consciousness beyond the ego-boundaries into which the viewer can immerse. How, then, does such contemporary art work?

As referred to earlier, Ziarek, in his book, *The force of art* (2004), argues that contemporary artworks have an ability "to let be". I have borrowed this expression in order to explain the strategy that contemporary art may use. But first, to build up the argument, there is a need to place this concept in context.

Ziarek, along with Heidegger, sees the force of art in taking us outside the power game we are subjected to by society. In this game, the individual is seen and looks upon themselves in terms of how much good and gain s/he produces for society, its organizations and members. One is enframed by a utilitarian mindset through which one thinks of the things-of-the-world (including oneself) as beings with a specific goal and use in mind. In modern society, the power that defines how we are in the world can be called technological. Ziarek (2004:40), following Heidegger, argues that art has the ability to "figure force otherwise than technologically". This means that art can point outside and onto the social structure we are bound by in everyday life, which is a technological, therefore always an equipmental, type of existence.

In order to outline the force (and not the power) of art, Ziarek introduces the term 'letting be', in other words *aphesis*, which denotes "a releasing, a letting be or a letting go, deliverance, and even liberty" (2004:22). He sees the working of art in terms of its ability to introduce a force that is not pre-determined according to society's laws of production. Instead, "...aphesis' denotes a reorienting of forces that frees them from their confinement

within the operations of power. ... When conceived as a physis, art's force can be understood beyond the dialectic of power, that is, a field of nonpower, where forces are no longer tethered by the logic of production or formed by the momentum toward increase of power" (2004:23).

Simply put, Ziarek believes that contemporary art can free us from the operation of power, a structured social order in which we are bound by laws and rules. Nothing radically new has been said so far. A parallel has been drawn here with the ideas of Heidegger who understands this liberating aspect of art as a release from the inauthentic *Dasein*, from the I-they self. As discussed previously, an analogy can also be seen with how Gumbrecht understands 'sync'. Art is able to overcome this structure through a force that is unlike power, as it does not point towards any particular thing or process to be achieved or embraced. It is through this "poetic", rather than technological type of existence, that art is able to draw us in.

This argument has already been presented when discussing Heidegger. However, where the unique nature of contemporary art comes into the picture is with the concept of 'letting be'. To me, this letting be, allowing, opening up of a space in which, as Ziarek argues, the things-of-the-world can come to us "otherwise", namely differently, not predefined by laws of society and production, sounds like a space into which the observer, although drawn into the present, is not invited into any *specific*, predefined kind of engagement. 'Letting be' in the case of contemporary art is unlike the 'sync' Gumbrecht and Heidegger suggest. This letting be is not 'truth manifest', it is rather a space, a non-place, a lack into which the observer of contemporary art can welcome all types of random associations. Ziarek attributes the ability of 'letting be' to all artworks of the 20th century avant-garde and those of today. I personally do not agree with this analysis, and it is my disagreement with Ziarek that stands at the core of my argument for absence. Let me explain.

Ziarek tries to convince the reader that Futurist paintings, for instance, aim to point beyond the social structure they are critiquing by highlighting the essential power beyond technology. In my opinion, Futurism does not present or critique the power structure of technology driven-society, but highlights the force of technology that is not, as Ziarek claims different from, but *is* the core of the power structure it eventually works within. In other words, in Futurist paintings it is the very being of the power (behind technology) that is presented, and is grasped as an entity in the artwork. There is a tangible statement on a

phenomenological basis. This ability to *present the force* (of technology) is very different from 'letting be' and allowing the emergence of space. Drawing into the 'force of being' which is beyond technology is still the evocation of that force; it is still a directed engagement with the 'things-of-the-world'. I argue that contemporary art operates differently. Unlike modern art, contemporary art is not opening up towards the engagement with any kind of specific existence. (Pre)modern artworks such as Kirchner's paintings or Nolde's can be seen as equally tormenting, traumatic and traumatized. They come with a tangible 'world' beyond the world as we know it; nonetheless, there is something 'there' for us to engage with. In the transitional space of contemporary art, as in the case of *Uncle R*, there is nothing, or probably too many things, beyond the image. The artwork demands a multi-layered reinterpretation of who we thought we were. Once beyond the image, the viewer develops a dialogue with themselves through which yet unknown depths of what s/he possibly can be, surface. The artwork opens up an empty space, an absence, a 'ground zero' that allows all kinds of past and present fantasies, memories, sensations to emerge without control, direction or structure. Surely this is a very different kind of engagement from the immersion with Raphael's *Madonna* where presence, which also takes one beyond dualism, is there with its tangible force.

In the case of *Muster*, the artwork 'lets' an undetermined, non-teleological way of being in the world emerge in which one can 'feel' that the various layers of one's personality – cognitive, emotive, unconscious etc. – have no structure and they all float within us, interrelated, constantly suggesting different constellations of who we think we are. The contemporary artwork does not necessarily presuppose any emergence of 'sync' with the world. Instead, once beyond the ego-boundaries there is a deconstruction of one's personality.

3.5 Absence is the case

This deconstruction and reworking of ourselves through the artwork in the case of some contemporary art can happen in its extreme complexity. In order to demonstrate just how absence emerges and characterizes the transitional space of contemporary art, I will revisit the film *Muster/Rushes* (2012) by Clemens von Wedemeyer.

As indicated in the previous chapter, short snapshots of this film can evoke complex streams of associations. In this sub-chapter I highlight how *Muster* is not only able to open up space in which we can engage with the complexity of free associations, but also grasp the impossibility of representation, thus addressing what cannot be represented. In this sense, *Muster* gives a clear example of absence as something that *is not*, in *Muster* it becomes the case.⁶

Muster and absence

What takes place in *Muster* is the encounter with two kinds of absences; one is *space* in which we are able to engage with our associations, the other is absence itself, a *void*, in this case the void of trauma. The way this void manifests in *Muster* is unique and is particular to the transitional space of contemporary art in works that are able to open up a space of absence. Before I concentrate on the exploration of absence, it is important to mention that *Muster* can be positioned as a Holocaust film adding a new voice to the understanding of Holocaust as collective trauma. Although the identification with trauma in general is touched upon, I should emphasize that I am not looking at this piece from the perspective of Holocaust studies which has a vast literature in itself. Authors such as Marianna Hirsch, Ernst Van Alphen, James E Young or Didi-Huberman have contributed to this field with significant studies, notably to the question of the Holocaust and contemporary art.⁷ However, this is not the approach I intend to follow, although the subject-matter of the work would demand the addressing of such issues. Instead, I aim to focus on the *strategy* used by *Muster*, and many contemporary artworks, in order to see how and what kind of impact they possibly make on the observer which I expect has an impact beyond the representative realm of the artwork.

⁶ I purposefully do not use expressions such as 'shows' or 'demonstrates' because this is not how it happens.

⁷ Their important works include: Hirsch, M. (2012), *The generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. New York, Columbia University Press., Van Alphen, E. (1997). *Caught by history. Holocaust effects in contemporary art, literature and theory*. Stanford, Stanford University Press., Young, J.E. (2000). *At memory's edge: after-images of the Holocaust in contemporary art and architecture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press., Didi-Huberman, G. (2008). *Images in spite of all: four photographs from Auschwitz*. Translated by Shane B. Lillis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Let us now explore what strategies *Muster* uses from the point of view of absence. I will show that the representative elements of the film are nothing more than a surface narrative. The reason why this film is able to make a unique impact is that it directs one beyond representation not to presence but to absence. The background to the film was already explained in the previous chapter, so let us focus now on the scenes of the 1945 episode. The liberating American troops bring along with them not only a cameraman, but a woman photographer a reference to such emblematic photographers as Lee Miller and Margaret Bourke-White, people who first set foot in the former concentration camps during and after the liberation, photographing and filming the scenes (Kékesi 2015). Kékesi describes this encounter as a first (almost anthropological) contact with the unknown. The camera keeps on changing angle; sometimes we see what the cameraman is filming and at other times the camera changes to what the camera of the woman filming might have recorded (fig. 13. and fig. 14.). As one looks at the images of the detainees and soldiers, one understands that sometimes one is watching an actual film and at other times the camera's lens is that of the female photographer. I would like to draw attention to one interesting part of the film.



Fig. 13. Screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1945



Fig. 14. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1945

When we look at the soldiers and prisoners through the eyes of the woman photographer we are shocked to notice that they are posing. At one point she says: “They are acting, we need to stop this.” They are acting to the point that some of them, like the young soldier kicked to the ground, want to look good on camera, and one man even decides to smile for the camera, aware of being recorded. This therefore goes back to the problem of representation elaborated upon in the previous chapter. We are reminded again that representation can never be the thing represented, it is always something else, essentially different in its nature and what happened cannot be reproduced, cannot be brought back to life. Instead, a strange new entity emerges that has ties to representation but is radically different in nature.

The entire 1945 part gives us the unpleasant feeling that we are looking at a half-professional, half-amateur reconstruction of the liberation of Breitenau. It might be that this part is intentionally amateur as the stumbling prisoners with their exaggerated gestures, played by well-fed actors, and the surreal-looking man called René B. with *alopecia universalis* (complete hair loss) look anything but convincing. Nonetheless, we realize that any kind of representation – professional or not – would fall short. Representation – in the sense of ‘re-presentation’ of what had happened - is not only impossible because we are seeing fiction, but in this sense even the documentary would be fiction, too, because what had happened can never be recreated.



Fig. 15. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1945



Fig. 16. Still from *Muster* (2012) part 1945

The ambiguous relationship towards representation characterizes the rest of the 1945 part. Later on in the episode, the bald French prisoner asks the woman photographer to accompany him because “You have to know what has happened here.... Come on it’s important.” So he drags the lady to the yard of the monastery and tells the story of how

prisoners were taken away and shot dead. He explains the tragedy through gestures, imitating the movements, pointing to the ground where graves had been dug (fig. 15.). However, *there is nothing there*. The prisoner is pointing to an empty field and all we see is that a strange looking man is trying to explain a story by pointing around and into the air. What the woman records is actually just thin air. This frustration that comes from 'not-being-able-to-tell' is a constant issue throughout the film. There is a dire desire to show, to reconstruct, demonstrate, but it all remains impossible. Some things can be told, some stories can be shared. But in its essence, how these events actually happened can never be brought back to life. This void, another kind of absence in the form of an inability, emerges in the film and it is *because of this lack* that the artistic statement becomes so powerful. *Instead of wanting to represent* trauma (non)figuratively, the space of trauma, of void, emerges and becomes tangible for us through absence.

In order to clarify what is meant by these two intertwining absences, the absence of representation and the void of trauma, let me show how trauma as void can be grasped, in order to make this 'void' tangible for the reader. Eric Harper is a trauma expert psychoanalyst and psychotherapist who has done extensive work with the homeless, torture survivors and sex-workers. He writes the following about trauma:

... even if the torture is remembered in detail, the hole remains. These gaps in representation place *the person outside of the community of speech*, due to a break in the social bond. The result is that the person is unable to continue to reconstitute him/herself in existence through his/her traditional identifications. Put another way, there is nothing to ground the person, as there is a loss of sanctuary....

To close down space, *to create a 'non-space'*, is to place somebody, a body, in an impossible situation, a double bind in which that person is alive but somehow dead at the same time. Analogous with a caged animal in a zoo, it is a body that is alive and dead at the same time.... This is an experience ... of being unable to represent (re-present) oneself to oneself (through having space to speak, dream, play and create) brings about a loss in the capacity for self-representation (2011, italics, DV).⁸

⁸ Personal email exchange, 2011.

Harper sees trauma as an inability to represent, to claim one's body as one's own, a person without agency. When healing starts taking place, the person is able to represent, imagine and plan again. S/he gains back his or her ability to create signifiers, namely a (Lacan-ian) Symbolic order (see further Ch.4.).



Fig. 17. Still from *Muster* (2012) part 1970

Let me substantiate this argument from the second part of the film, *Muster*, that takes place in 1970, as this part continues the dilemma (fig.17.). This episode is a reference to Ulrike Meinhof's film, *Bambule* that the famous left-wing journalist and later Red Army Faction (RAF) member wrote and directed in order to show the power structure and the living conditions endured by young women who were sent into reformatory institutions because of bad family conditions.⁹

⁹ *Bambule* itself is about an adolescent girl's detention home in which adolescents of deviant behavior were kept locked away from society under prison-like conditions. During this time the Breitenau cloister functioned as one of the many detention houses in Germany. Meinhof wanted to draw attention to the inhumanity of the capitalist system and initiate the closing down of such places of imprisonment. Initially the film was intended be a comment and a critique of the coercive normalizing policies of the capitalist state, but later on – given that it was not finished by Meinhof but by fellow colleague Eberhard Itzenplitz in 1971 – it turned out to be an affirmation of the power structure. In its final version, the film acknowledges the inability of the girls to live a proper life outside the confines of the institution. *Bambule* had a long controversial story in terms of public screening as the authorities banned it, and it finally appeared on television only in 1994. In the meantime the script started to circulate in residential artistic circles; it was read widely and enacted in theatres. In fact, the script became more famous than the film, and it is claimed to be better than the film itself (<http://www.baader-meinhof.com/bambule/>).

This part of the Wedemeyer film is intended to look like the remaking of the shooting of *Bambule*, focusing on the last scene of the film when the girls break out of the reformatory. Wedemeyer, rather than creating a scene of a girl's detention home historically reenacted, takes a film-crew on screen. We are in the 1970s, seeing a crew making a film about the girl's home. The film they are shooting is not a documentary, but fiction based on the site and on the lives of the girls, enacted by actors. We see actresses rehearsing the part of the girls and simultaneously the 'real' girls (enacted by the same protagonists) are also there.



Fig. 18. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1970

The impossibility of representation is obvious from the dialogue of the two Amélie's taking a walk side-by-side (fig. 18.). Inmate Amélie explains to the actress Amélie that no matter what you do, you will not be able to reconstruct my life. No matter how hard you try, the representation is impossible. As detainee Amélie explains: "What's said and done is convincing enough. But the way you do it, isn't our way. You can't speak the way we do in custody. And vica versa. So it sounds wrong. ... Daily life in detention can't be reproduced in film."

So what remains is the frustrating paralysis of not being able to do it. The actress is there to help, to offer a way out, but the initiative dies off just before it can materialize.

Furthermore, actress Amélie is also trapped in the system that defines her, the system of mediatized reality. As Kékesi (2015:196) writes:

In *Rushes (Muster)*, the failure of the shooting lies not only in the aesthetic (“daily life in detention can’t be reproduced in film”) and political (“I thought the film aims to tell people outside about conditions in here”) dilemmas, but in the functioning of the filmic apparatus as well and its inherent power relations: it reproduces the power relations against which it ought to (make others) revolt, because it places the workers (that is, the actresses) into a subordinated position (“I don't get who we're doing this for.” / “Don't think! Just do it.”). This is why one of the actresses can use a sentence from Meinhof's script, originally referring to the girl's reformatory itself, to oppose the apparatus: “Television, get it? They'll be glad to break you in.”

There is indeed a strong analogy between the power structure of capitalist normalization and the surveillance exercised in institutions of power, and between today's mediatized society. What is paralyzing in both cases is the inability to act, the impossibility to break out. Or is there a way out to tear down the walls of this (invisible) prison? What can unite detainees with actors, reality with fiction? It is destruction. We are seeing the scene of two girls busting up one of the rooms. They destroy the bed and the bench with such joyful aggression that we want to join in. They also start kicking the walls of the building and – surprise – the walls start falling down (fig.19.). This is when the viewer realizes that what they are actually breaking up is a studio-remake of one of the rooms of the house, and we are still watching actresses playing their part. Finally, the walls come down, they break out and they find themselves in their own Breitenau, namely in the middle of the film studio, blinded by the light.



Fig. 19. screenshot *Muster* (2012) part 1970

So how does all this lead to absence? The tormenting element in both parts is the confrontation with the impossibility of telling, and therefore making a difference. What actually happened can never become the case again. I cannot feel your pain and you can never reconstruct what you have gone through. The tragedy that took place has either vanished or it is impossible to articulate. It has gone missing, it is impossible to recollect. Therefore, it is *absence that stands as a statement*, it is *absence that is the case*; a haunting void is made tangible. But this void (of trauma) can only emerge *because there is space/absence* for it to do so. The reason why the film is so frustrating to watch is not because of the actual representation the trauma, of pain. Pain is not presented as we usually see it in art, particularly in monuments. The viewer becomes frustrated because it is trauma itself; it is *the void that becomes the case*, not through representation, but through the impossibility of representation, and therefore the lack of it. It is *the emergence of this lack that we realize that trauma is indeed a frozen void*, non-existence, something that is too much to articulate, too painful to face. So the way victims react is through freezing trauma in silence. It is silence and void that can emerge through the confrontation with not being able to tell.

Here, I would like to jump back to the initial dichotomy of presence and absence in order to explain how and why the film that uses absence as a strategy is able to give rise to a very different state of consciousness compared to artworks that act with presence.

Absence in the art of remembering

The reason why trauma can emerge so strongly is because Wedemeyer chooses a different strategy from other, mostly modernism-inspired artists. In order to '(re)present' this tragedy, Wedemeyer does not picture terror or horror. We do not see distorted bodies in horrible positions, gassed Jews and skeletal bodies; in other words, he does not want to overwhelm us with presence. Nor does he use maltreated, traumatized young vagabonds kept as animals to portray the inhuman conditions of the detention home. He does not create a monument out of these terrible phases of history that afflicted this particular location. There is no dramatization, nor sentimentalization. A short comparative analysis will help to further clarify what I mean.

The usual modernist monuments and interpretation of trauma can be likened to Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)¹⁰ with the desperate angel, dead baby and frustrated horse. The *Monument against war and Fascism* (1988-91)¹¹ by Alfred Hrdlicka in Albertina Platz, Vienna, is also an exemplary case of modernist representations of such terrors. In these and other pieces (fig.20. 21.) one is directly confronted with the tragedy of war and mass-execution. The drama of the event appears (more or less) successfully in these pieces. One looks at them, saddened by the effect and the memories these pieces bring back, even adding a few comments such as "how could this happen?! Those were really terrible times", etc. and then one moves on. After the initial empathy, the artwork does not stay with us, and the distance between the past trauma and life in the present is not overcome. As Krzysztof Wodiczko argues, most of these monuments are characterized by the 'myth of victimization' (Wodiczko cited in Ziarek, 2004:132-39). The myth of victimization is like any other; it constructs a story overloaded with emotions and morals, and it ignores pluralism, complexity, particularity, therefore disabling deep personal identification and attachment. Furthermore, because of its direct reference to history, it creates a distance between the event and the contemporary observer. Contemporary times demand a new attitude to remembering. In contemporary art, this new approach could appear with a different understanding of memory and a new-found humility towards remembering, inspired by the acknowledgement that no matter how hard we try, we cannot reconstruct the past. Maybe

¹⁰ Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937). Oil on canvas, 349 cm × 776 cm. Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain.

¹¹ Alfred Hrdlicka, *Monument Against War and Fascism* (1988-91). Mixed media. Public sculptural installation at Albertina Platz, Vienna, Austria.

it is not even our job to do so. As Aleida Assmann, in her book *Cultural memory and western civilization. Arts of memory* (2013:8), explains:

Many explanations have been offered for the new predominance and enduring fascination of the memory paradigm. They include the decline of modernization theory, with its emphasis on progress and grand expectations for the future; the end of a philosophy of the subject, which focuses on the rational, self-contained individual; the end of one-track disciplines in the humanities, with their ever narrowing range of specialization. Against this background, the subject of memory emerges both as a new field of interdisciplinary approaches and as a problem that impinges directly on many different areas of society in a rapidly changing world.

Studies of memory, therefore, cannot be understood in terms of the modernist paradigm. Modernist type of memory culture can be said to ignore the very nature of remembering and that of memory. As Assman (2013:149) argues, memory is not linear or logically structured, therefore to decode the methods of its operation is a far more complex business than expected:

Parts of our memory can be systematically structured to act as a store, but other parts, which record our sensual perceptions and biographical experiences, generally remain in a productive or destructive state of unmastered disorder. In contrast to our learning (or 'semantic') memory, that of experience (known as 'episodic') remains unsystematic, contingent, and incoherent. What holds it together is the magic web of variable, individual associations.

This intertwined web of associations that surface spontaneously sheds light on the fact that memory is not an organized storage from which we pull out whatever data we choose for a specific situation to aid us in reconstructing the past. Memory, especially personal and biographical memory, cannot be "...viewed as trace or storage, but as a malleable substance that is constantly being reshaped under the changing pressures and perspectives of the present" (Assmann 2013:146).

Assmann suggests that memory always emerges in the light of, and as an inspiration from, the present. She claims that we always start remembering because of a present experience. What we remember and the way we remember is influenced and

defined by the present situation. Therefore, what is remembered (or reconstructed), as the Wedemeyer film also points out, can never be what actually took place in the past. “There is... an unbridgeable gap between current and remembered experience... (Assmann 2013: 155).



Fig. 20. Michael Alfano, *Holocaust Monument* (2001). Jericho Jewish Center, NY



Fig. 21. Holocaust monument, Père Lachaise cemetery

Therefore, Wedemeyer does not present a particular narrative, the emphasis is not on wanting to tell what happened. Instead, as Assmann refers to in works similar to Wedemeyer's, he creates 'new memory art' that "... does not come before but after forgetfulness, and it is neither a technique not a preventive measure but at best a therapy, a careful collecting of scattered remnants, an inventory of losses" (Assmann 2013:345). This is precisely what Wedemeyer is doing; an inventory, as we could tell from the 'cataloguing' of objects in the previous chapter, and he chooses a different strategy for making the body of the trauma emerge that is not tied to history and that can be accessed through the present.

Instead of overwhelming the viewer with a direct, figurative narrative of the horror of historical events, Wedemeyer decided to show it through not showing. Therefore the trauma of being subject to any oppression of power emerges through absence. The void of trauma, a murderous silence, is felt on our skin *not through the means of effect-driven representation, but through the absence of representation*. The most brutal and heaviest silence, the silence of trauma is channeled to us through lack. And indeed, it is through absence that absence, which is void and silence, can emerge in a way that it does not

become tied to any historical event and narrative. It is through absence that absence can manifest itself, and it is through absence that trauma does not remain tied to a particular story, but becomes a universal issue all of us can engage with. Whether we experienced the hardships of World War Two or the cruelty of detention houses, it becomes irrelevant, as surely many of us have traumas that have silenced us in a way that made it too hard to tell, too cruel to face. Through absence, we can engage with the trauma of these historical events because we bring back our own personal traumatic experience and memory. These may have no narrative connection with the story of the historical event that is in front of us. It is through absence that the observer, no matter what background they come from, can find a link to the tragedy of the event.

Wedemeyer has not invented anything radically new. What he does also appears in various contemporary artworks. This type of remembering strategy has been and is being realized by artists, and has been the subject of art historical research and cultural memory studies since the 1980s. Postmodern and post-structuralist thinking about narrative, truth claims, universal and individual memory have been reconsidered by seminal thinkers from Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze through Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Gianni Vattimo to Aleida Assmann and many others. It is not the purpose of this book to introduce the vast field of this new discipline of cultural memory, suffice it to say that many artists discover that by making a particular statement about historical events - be they tragedy or victory - a generalized truth claim is created around that particular event. Instead of allowing the viewer to come up with their own experience, a narrative is given that the viewer is expected to follow, no matter if they can relate to it or not. Nor does it matter if the artwork is doing justice or not to the complexity and manifold nature of that particular event. This is why artworks, especially monuments that are created in the spirit of contemporary art, closely influenced by post-structuralism, evoke a very different state of consciousness, and, in spite of the usual initial resistance, invite more visitors than monuments made in the “modernist” spirit.

This might be the reason why Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial* (1982)¹² in Washington, is far more popular than the figurative heroic piece standing next to it by

¹² Maya Lin, *Vietnam veteran’s memorial* (1982). 8000sqm triangular installation of inscribed granit. Washington DC, USA.

Frederick Hart, entitled *Three soldiers* (1984)¹³. The *Three soldiers* was designed to be a 'counter-monument' to the Lin design, but interestingly Lin's 'cut' in the ground invites far more visitors. The piece is nothing more than a triangular pit in the ground, paved by black granite panels engraved with the names of those who fell in the Vietnam War. One has to descend to read the names and while looking for the names one's reflection appears on the shiny black surface. Absence might also be an explanation for the popularity of the Peter Eisenman *Memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe* (2005)¹⁴ in Berlin, where the large concrete slabs become an overwhelming yet private place of contemplation. The gigantic grey blocks that change in size in the wavy landscape create a labyrinth, making the viewer disappear, but, significantly, leaving places where we can be alone, tightly enclosed by big blocks.

Spaces constructed in the name of absence evoke a very different type of remembering. They bring up memories in connection with the event but not by creating a narrative or symbolism; instead there is space for free associations, such as, in the case of the Berlin memorial, pain, power, loss, being lost, not being able to get out and so on. As one can see, all these associations may be connected to, yet they remain independent from, the actual WWII trauma. Yet, it is through these personal associations that the contemporary observer can find a path to the horror that was endured by the victims of that particular event.

In the same way, in the transitional space of *Muster*, the communication of void (trauma) takes place through absence, namely by *not* telling or articulating, by not showcasing dead bodies for everybody to look at in horror. It is because of this *not* showing, through this absence, that one can engage with the trauma, project one's own inner world and find a path to the actual historical event. As space is given, the trauma becomes everybody's trauma, not just a trauma of a particular group of people in the past who happened to suffer such terror. It is through such artistic strategy that the contemporary observer can make the past present, feel the horror on their own skin and make a past tragedy a present, universal experience.

¹³ Frederick Hart, *The three soldiers* (1984). Bronze statue of three armed men, 1.5 times lifesize, Washington DC, USA.

¹⁴ Peter Eisenman, Büro Happold, *Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe* (2005). 19,000 m² (4.7-acre) site covered with 2,711 concrete slabs or "stelae", arranged in a grid pattern on a sloping field. Pls visit the link for precise material and measurements as well as date of planning and execution: <http://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/field-of-stelae.html>.

In the case of viewing contemporary art that has gone beyond representation, the act of 'letting be' can emerge. One is not immersed in 'truth' or presence, or with a statement, but instead one finds oneself in an empty space of absence which can allow non-teleological ways of existing in the world to surface. It may cause a revisiting of the complex layers of one's personality, and through a non-directional flow of associations, new alternatives might arise about how one can be in the world. Therefore, it is suggested that although presence has remarkable potentials, absence might be just as important for us now, in the 21st century, when there is a need for the potential empty spaces of 'ground zero'.

The question to be answered is just how contemporary art is able to generate absence. The next chapter, *Rupture*, argues that absence does not arise by accident and that contemporary art has a special strategy, or one can say 'force' that opens this space of absence. The chapter theorizes what this force might be and how it works.