

Presenting Absences : Abstention and Renunciation as windows to the Void.

Absences, Abstention, Renunciation, Void. Four terms we, as a society, have a common understanding of. If one were to question for example the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the results would be mainly expected and unsurprising, such as:

Absence : noun. a state or condition in which something expected, wanted, or looked for is not present or does not exist : a state or condition in which something is absent.

Abstention : noun. The act or practice of abstaining: such as a. the act or practice of choosing not to do or have something

Renunciation : the act or practice of renouncing (to give up, refuse, or or resign usually by formal declaration)

Void : noun. Empty space (VACUUM, EMPTINESS), the quality of state of being without something (LACK, ABSENCE)

. Further than those definitions, this essay will attempt to explain how artists and Men have used Abstention and Renunciation, albeit opposite actions when thought of out of a dictionary, as a common way to cope, rise above, or at least present absences.

To do so, the essay will begin with questioning what absences are, and how we experience them. As the essay progresses we will attempt the same with both Abstention and Renunciation, along with examples of them in practice; after which it will be due time to reflect on the Void, and how it is being made accessible when presenting absences. Once those main questions have been understood, the essay will conclude in an explanation of my own relationship to all four key points, and how I make use of it in my practice of Arts.

This essay will therefore focus on the abstract idea of things, rather than their concrete presence. It would be foolish to pretend that once things stop *being* in reality and get replaced by absence they also stop being noticeable, for humans can very much experience the feeling of loss. Forgetting an object in a train/bus/any other common area where it's unlikely to be found again is one example of the effects of absence on ones psyche. Experiencing the loss of a family member, a loved one or a relationship is another obvious example of Mans capacity to be affected by absences and lacks. Those absences are often represented in the realm of the Arts, as shown by the 22 months exhibition "*What absence is made of*" at the Hirshhorn museum located in Washington.

Other forms of lacks can also highlight the existence of occurrences that stem from an absence. In Roy Sorensen's *Seeing Dark Things* (1.4 Hearing Silence p.267-297), he defines silence as a "successful perception of an absence of sound" rather than a failure to hear sound, arguing that a deaf person does not have the ability to hear silence. He talks similarly about darkness, shadows and holes, saying that despite being "immaterial beings", they don't sit more comfortably as either being or not being. Those things exist solely because of their surrounding. A hole in a rock can only be when surrounded by a rock, a shadow created by the absence of light can only be created by partial obstruction of the light source. Although you can look through a hole, the idea of looking "at" a hole seems unlikely, same idea for a shadow. Although I can see it and interact with it, it is impossible to "touch" a shadow, the same way you cannot grab a sun ray.

Culturally speaking, Man usually understands those instances of absence as the presence of something hidden : In the wild, silence means a predator is actively and knowingly not creating sounds, in horror movies, shadows are usually understood as something negative, that usually means harm. The French edition of the encyclopedia of symbols (Based on Hans Biederman's *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole*) starts the definition of the word "Obscurity" with an analogy to the "original chaos before the Creator infused his light", along with other examples of civilizations understanding the obscurity of an eclipse for example as a terrible omen. In the same way, their definition of "Shadow" evokes "hidden light", "man's mystery double", along with the idea that a man loses his shadow once he has dealt with the devil. In this example as well, not having any physical value does not prevent something as mundane as the shadows to hold an impressive amount of power over Mankind. Since the dawn of time, Man has been burdened with the weight of what isn't materialistically there, and especially what could hide behind it.

So how do artists represent this feeling of discomfort, how do they offer us the experience of instinctive fear? The same way as nature does with holes and shadows, much of the representations rely heavily on its surrounding, along with a certain idea of abstention.

One of the most widely accessible example of it is censorship. In order to protect ones identity, it isn't rare to abstain from showing identifying features on a person : voice changers during interviews, camera framing from the neck down, aliases and of course the infamous black lines over ones eyes. Probably due to the strong relation to identity, the concept of hiding in plain sight often brings up uneasy feelings for it is much harder to relate and connect to people having been robbed of their identity. On a much more political and Human level, maybe censorship awakens our natural instinctive fear from knowing not all information are being given.

In music, additions such as a sudden bout of silence or a fading effect into silence have a direct consequence on the listener. If one were to look up an analysis of such pieces as Goodbye Cruel World or Comfortably Numb both from the band Pink Floyd, the silence will -with no doubt- be at least mentioned. On fan directed websites such as www.thewallanalysis.com, all the uses of silence in the album are duly noticed and considered as presences themselves, all carrying different feeling to the audience. In a similar fashion, some horror movies opt out of giving the audience a clear vision of the supposed object of fear. By doing this, they allow for the creation of a feeling not so different from the uncanny that a visible "creature" would have brought on. However this time the feeling does not relate to the familiarity amongst the different, but moreso by the instinctive fear of a hidden predator, and our human tendency to make sense of the things we see. Always looking for a more terrifying possibility, it allows the viewer to experience a personalized version of the

scene. By means of abstention, we could say Man has ways to represent what is hidden and uncommon by using the environment around it.

As I was researching information on abstention, one theme that usually came interlinked with the materials was religion. In most religions, it is common to practice abstinence on different occasions. From fasting to the practice of what is considered “sinful”, it is not rare to hear about the activities one does not partake in in a religious cycle. A refusal to partake in an event then becomes an event in itself, similarly to what happens when one refuses to vote in an upcoming election, creating a stance from the refusal to take one.

After reflecting on Abstention both in and outside of the art world, it becomes obvious that it is not the only existing way to present absences. As mentioned in the introduction, there are two sorts of refusal : abstention, which we discussed already, and renunciation. Unlike the religiously charged idea of abstention, renunciation tends to give off a different feeling, not being as welcomed or understood. Where abstention aims to use concrete absences to give a rational representation of ideas that belong to the Void, renunciators tend to embrace the void and its absurdity to rationalise absences.

Renunciation when faced with on daily occurrences leaves behind an uncomfortable feeling. For the sake of this essay, I will use one of Jentsch’s example of an uncanny event. He talks about clinical seizures, and the effects it has on one to witness it happen. The body then tenses up, and the victim falls to the floor, having lost all control of their bodies. This triggers in the witness an uneasy feeling because of the unfamiliar and unexplainable movements of the body along with the loss of consciousness. He argues, however, that a person faking a seizure is unlikely to produce the same emotional response as their bodies will not fully give out, and they are more likely to instinctively fall in a safer way than a person without consciousness. This difference -in my understanding, is a somewhat similar concept as this of renunciation, albeit the lack of choice when talking about clinical renunciations. Similarly, renunciations through hunger strikes -or other physically sacrificial methods, also mostly leave the viewer with an uncomfortable feeling, having the knowledge of the repercussion those actions can have on someone’s health and overall livelihood. In more extreme cases of renunciation such as the subjects of suicide and death, Humanity as a whole has a strong adverse reaction, as can be seen with the low number of countries legally authorizing euthanasia still to this day. If we were to use a common philosophical reference, when Schopenhauer talks about happiness and satisfaction in *The world as Will and Idea*, he claims satisfaction can never have a lasting effect, and the suppression of suffering would be of no use for “all human life is tossed backwards and forwards between pain and ennui.”. In those excerpts, Schopenhauer in a way describes a renunciation to the pursuit of joy in order for a more rational acceptance of pain.

When talking about renunciation in the context of the arts, it is complicated to find a clear example to such an abstract idea. Through my research, I have found that most of the fitting artists I discovered had embraced an idea of existential renunciation as a way of living as well as using it for their art. Lee Lozano, for example, with her piece “DECIDE TO BOYCOTT WOMEN”, she renounced having any interactions with her female peers. This project- supposed to only last a few months, ended up as something she carried with her until the end of her life. Her way of living and creating also showed a renunciation following her throughout her life : she often acted in self-destructive ways as can show her diaries, she would also work on a piece multiple days at a time, not allowing herself to stop until she found it finished.

The book *Metamorphosis* from Kafka can be argued as a piece touching on renunciation as well in my opinion. Although the metamorphosis is not a conscious choice, the character doesn't present a desire to get back to his human form. Perhaps it is a manifestation of a shared feeling between the writer and the character, this of inadequacy. The fact that in the original German text Kafka uses *ungeheures Ungeziefer* ("**monstrous/huge**" and **a derivation of "non sacrificial animal"**)- which are both very specific in their vagueness and are of themselves heavy symbolically, to define the creature he has become instead of a generic bug also hint at the idea of Inadequacy as having "no place in the family" or in "Gods order". The metamorphosis into something unclean and unfit for sacrifice could therefore represent the separation between Man once he has renounced anything that isn't the Self and the world he inhabitates.

Another writer who wrote on renunciation is Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran. He often deals in his writings with a certain idea of renunciation, burdened with heavy existential despair all the while embracing suffering and celebrating all of life's absurdities and uncertainty. For example, quoting "the trouble with being Born": "I was walking late one night along a tree-lined path; a chestnut fell at my feet. The noise it made as it burst, the resonance it provoked in me, and an upheaval out of all proportion to this insignificant event thrust me into miracle, into the rapture of the definitive, as if there were no more questions—only answers. I was drunk on a thousand unexpected discoveries, none of which I could make use of.[...]This is how I nearly reached the Supreme. But instead I went on with my walk." This -albeit anecdotal, quote represents with almost humorous undertones the idea of renunciation. Here, Cioran talks about reaching the Supreme, a supposedly enlightening experience, as a simple occurrence, and almost a bother to his walk. He seems disinterested in the "conventionally attractive" experiences, while in texts like "Nothing Matters" from "On the Height of Despair", he embraces the idea that "Everything is both real and unreal, normal and absurd, splendid and insipid[...]What does it matter whether our tears come from pleasure or pain? Love your unhappiness, hate your happiness, scramble it all!" highlighting once again the absurdity of the human experience.

Earlier in the essay, I mentioned abstentionists and renunciators relationships to the Void, and their use of it. It is therefore mandatory at this point to attempt as clear of a description by what is meant by this expression. Now the question of the Void, or Nothingness, has been worrying philosophers for centuries-if not millenniums, and it would be outrageously irrational to pretend I hold the answers to this constant search, so for the sake of this essay I will use my own understanding of it.

To be simple and concise, the Void in itself as a concept is majorly indescribable, it is devoid of a purpose, a function, or a precise description. It encompasses everything that wasn't, isn't and will not exist on any other realms or possibility. In a way, it is the immaterial root from which stems all absences, and in certain instances it is a haven for all the irrational and ethereal casualties brought forward by those occurrences of lack. Because of societal and cultural differences, it is unlikely that Humanity as a whole carries the same definition of Nothingness, as religion for example holds the idea of another life after Death so on behalf of clarity I will be leaving out the theory of reincarnation. In that aspect, it would not be wrong to consider the existence of a stillborn-or any other types of "not creation", as belonging with the Void. Similarly, ones consciousness after passing inherently starts to reside in the Void as well. All those occurrences that align on non-being tend to leave us uneasy and uncomfortable, for we struggle to rationalize abstract concepts.

Despite its abstract and immaterial properties, it is not impossible for our daily lives to be affected by the Void. We experience it for example when faced with hints or traces that another Being has been where we stand : passing by old footsteps in dried mud in a deserted area when one is alone for example would bring an uneasy feeling, although the only person still physically there is the one experiencing the Void. A more widely understandable occurrence when one sees garbage laying in the street, some may get upset and bothered. Those affected by the occurrence will most likely remain bothered even after having put said object in the trash bin, which fixes the direct upsetting sequence. However, most would argue that the action of littering is more irritating than the physical exercise that is to bend down, pick it up and discard of it. Because the littering culprit is long gone, their actions-or lack thereof, and their consequences linger, directing the persons anger towards the void, as it cannot reach the one responsible for it.

When I affiliate the Void with abstention and renunciation, I think both not only allow the potential audience to get a metaphorical window into what resides within the Void, and is usually out of reach, but I strongly believe both those behaviours when used outside of the realm of the Arts stem from a lack themselves. By abstaining from using concrete visuals and opting for ambiguous shadows in a horror movie, the brain is triggered to imagine the most terrifying-and usually unlikely, figures, recorded silence through a song pushes the listener to imagine what could have been and so on. Alternately, when being faced with a title the likes of "On the heights of despair"- from Emil Cioran, the reader has no choice but to get carried to the outskirts of the void alongside a write who longs to be "desperately free, free as the stillborn are free."

Now that all concepts have been defined and their link to each other been made apparent, I wish to conclude this essay by mentioning my own use of the aforementioned subjects in my way of making Arts. As explained earlier in the essay, ones interactions with the Void rest mainly on their sensitivity to it. Because of my surroundings, my upbringing and probably a big part of my personality I consider myself highly sensitive-perhaps even burdened at times, with those occurrences happening either around or within myself. However, although the Void is a lonely companion to have, its presence can be under certain circumstances quite comforting.

In my own practice of Arts, I aspire to represent the "hidden" things : failures, rejections, shame and death. I try to abstain from having a clear subject or visual representation, aiming more for atmospheric pieces as I would like the work as a whole to express the uneasiness of cohabiting with Nothingness. Metaphorically speaking, I like to capture snapshots of real life that give me a physical or emotional reaction, and present it to the audience as a single page from a never-ending book, leaving the audience to ponder what happened before the snapshot as well as what goes after. By turning the audience themselves into storytellers, my hopes are for the endless possibilities to grow, and allow for the Void to install itself once the audience has connected with what isn't represented, or what probably did not happen, but might have.

Consequently, I want my work to be about myself without having to include me. I want it to be as a diary of the things I experience, only hollowed out of my experience and understanding of them. By abstaining from directly interacting with the work, or ever be present in it, I want to forcefully connect people to Nothingness, and share a feeling of existential inadequacy from a lack of connection to one another.

Although I visually express myself most through abstention, I would position myself more alongside the renunciators on a personal aspect. In a way, I have given up the overly romantic idea of “fixing” oneself, of healing through artistic means. I instead try to look at art as a processing of emotions in order to make space for more to come. I therefore renounced the idea of Me as anyone else than who I am now, uneasy feelings and sadness included.

Sources :

Ernst Jentsch *“On the Philosophy of the Uncanny”*, 1906

Roy Sorensen *“Seeing dark things”*, 2008 (I3. *We see in the dark* and I4. *Hearing silence*)

Additional reading :

Selected passages from Schopenhauer *“The World as Will and Idea”*; Emil Cioran *“The trouble with Being Born”* (1973), *“On the Heights of Despair”* (1934); Helen Molesworth *“Tune in, Turn on, Drop Out : The rejection of Lee Lozano”* (Art journal, Vol. 61, 2002); Hamedreza Kohzadi, Fatemeh Azizmohammadi, Mahboubeh Nouri *“A Study of Franz Kafka’s The Metamorphosis”*(2012)