

THE ABSENT ABSENCE. REMARKS ON THE DISCOURSE ON ABSENCE, LOSS, AND GAPS IN CONSERVATION, PHILOSOPHY, AND LITERATURE*

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Abstract: The subject of this paper is the concept of *absence*, firstly in philosophy and literature, and then in conservation theory. The concept of *absence* is analysed together with the ones of *loss* and *gap* by selecting texts and thinkers who meditated on these concepts, and via a brief critique, with the aim of framing and naming the identified qualities, functions or specifics of *absence*. In the last part I shall focus on the concepts of *absence* and *loss* in the conservation discourse, on which grounds I shall draw the conclusions.

Rezumat: Tema articolului este conceptul de *absență* în, mai întâi, filosofie și literatură și apoi în conservare. Conceptul de *absență* este analizat împreună cu cele de *pierdere* și *lacună* prin selectarea de texte și gânditori, care s-a(u) aplecat asupra acestor concepte și printr-o critică sumară, realizată cu scopul de a încadra și de a denumi calitățile, funcțiunile și specificul găsit de fiecare dată pentru *absență*. În ultima parte mă voi concentra pe conceptele de *absență* și *pierdere* în discursul conservării și voi trage concluziile pe baza acestei ultime analize.

Conservation¹ gives little thought to the concept of *absence*, and makes seldom use of it. *Absence* is, however, that which “bothers” the restorer’s everyday life. How should he treat the lacunae in a Comnenian byzantine fresco? Or in a precious 18th Century pearl necklace, where one bead is missing? How should he stop the corrosion phenomenon of an ancient coin – or, at least, slow it down? How does he handle the portraits of one burnt wall painting, after one water molecule from the yellow Goethite is gone? What does he do when the whole painting is destroyed, like Caravaggio’s “Saint Matthew and the Angel”, or Kaulbach’s wall paintings in Neues Museum in Berlin, both burnt during the Second World War? What to do with frescoes, when the building has been demolished? What to do when the blue in one of Yves Klein’s works has changed and does not correspond to the prescribed colour parameters anymore? Or if the candies from Gonzalez-Torres’ installations, which should be periodically replaced by the museum, are not sold either in the same package or in the same flavour by the factory anymore? How do you exhibit a noblewoman’s dress found in an ancient tomb, when there is only 30% cloth left from the original gown? What kind of gas should an exhibition box contain, in order to prevent the decay of a sensitive object? The list of difficult questions a restorer deals with can be expanded generously over the next pages. Whether he is aware of that or not, *absence* is the restorer’s main concern, whether it be called *loss* or *lacunae*.

This research belongs to the broader area of study on loss, destruction, decay, and philosophy of absence, with the aim of exploring the aesthetic and epistemic potential of loss or absence, the starting point being loss as material reality.

In this paper, I shall gather references on the notion of absence in conservation theory, philosophy and literature and analyse one particularity of the conservation discourse in matters of absence, loss, and lacunae. I shall begin with explaining the two notions of loss and absence and advance the discussion to the field of conservation, where I shall summarize the general tendencies of the preoccupation for lacunae and loss, and then reflect on several theoretical writings.

* This article is basically a selection of meditations, theories and thoughts on absence – a small part of a broader “florilegium”, a collection of diverse and heterogeneous materials on absence comprising texts (philosophy, literature, scientific literature), acoustic media and images.

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¹ For reasons of text economy, I use the terms *conservation*, restoration and the German *Denkmalpflege* as synonymous, as for this current article differences are less relevant.