



Aesthetic Absence and Interpretation

David Fenner
University of North Florida, US

SPECIAL ISSUE
RESEARCH ARTICLE

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

ABSTRACT

At least within the last century, artists have produced works that seem to have something missing. Salvatore Garau's sculpture *Io Sono* is (apparently) composed of empty space; the original drawing at the heart of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is essentially gone; Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* are primarily just white canvases. In this paper, I examine this 'something missing' – which I call an 'aesthetic absence'. These absences are aesthetically relevant to the identities, meaning, and value of the works of art where audiences find such absences, but such relevance can only fully be ascertained and assessed once the absence is resolved, and this resolution comes through an act of interpretation.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

David Fenner

University of North Florida,
US

dfenner@unf.edu

KEYWORDS:

absence; interpretation;
emptiness; form;
anticipation

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Fenner, David.

'Aesthetic Absence and
Interpretation.' *Estetika:
The European Journal of
Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2
(2023): pp. 162–175. DOI:
[https://doi.org/10.33134/
eeja.315](https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.315)

At least within the last century, artists have produced works that seem to have something missing. In May 2021, Salvatore Garau made world news when his sculpture *Io Sono (I Am)* sold. The sculpture occupies a five-foot-square area; it is (apparently) composed of empty space. (Garau's description of his work is included later in the paper.) In 1953, Robert Rauschenberg meticulously erased a Willem de Kooning drawing – after securing de Kooning's permission. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* has attracted a good deal of attention since that time, despite the fact that the original drawing is essentially gone. In 1951, Rauschenberg created, or directed the creation, of a series of paintings known as his *White Paintings*. The *White Paintings* are multi-panelled canvases that have been painted white and, while they are said to have a slight reflective quality, they are physically primarily just white canvases.¹

In this paper, I want to examine this 'something missing' – which I will call an 'aesthetic absence'. These absences are aesthetically relevant to the identities, meaning, and value of the works of art where audiences find such absences. Such relevance can only fully be ascertained and assessed once the absence is resolved, and this resolution – and so the aesthetic relevance of the absence – comes through an act of interpretation, or potentially a plurality of such acts. That is, not only do we understand the meaning, or possible meanings, of the artwork through interpretation; in the case of works that include aesthetic absences we also come to understand their aesthetic identity and worth.

I. WHAT IS AN 'AESTHETIC ABSENCE'?

First, an aesthetic absence is not an emptiness. 'Something missing' is an absence, but 'absence' does not mean 'space', 'empty space', or 'emptiness'.² An aesthetic absence must have an 'otherwise-content' – something that is actually missing. An architectural object typically does not possess absence, no matter how cavernous the internal space it encloses. Minimalist work, if of high quality, is not lacking anything. When we watch scenes of the vast desert in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), our appreciation of the scope of the desert is not interrupted by a sense of absence. The same is true as we listen to the breathing of astronaut Frank Poole as he traverses the emptiness of outer space in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or experience the enormity of the ocean as depicted in Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012). Empty space or empty time, no matter how large, does not normally involve absence.

A similar claim could be made of works of art that traditionally use emptiness to underwrite an aesthetic feature. An example is the *karesansui* dry landscape garden found at the Ryoan-ji Buddhist temple complex in Kyoto. This famous garden, created in the mid-1400s, is composed of 15 standing stones, each surrounded by a small 'island' of moss and set in a field (or 'sea') of gravel. Some stones are placed in proximity to one another but the groupings are, in general, placed at some distance from one another. One might read the arrangement as missing some of the stones one might

1 Ad Reinhardt's 1963 *Abstract Painting*, a canvas that appears to be painted entirely black, has some variation of colour, but Reinhardt's work might also serve as a good example here as the casual viewer likely will read the work as simply entirely black.

2 In 'Art: A Brief History of Absence', *Filozofija i Društvo* 26 (2015): 652–76, Davor Džalto uses 'absence' to refer, in the unfolding of modern art, to the 'vanishing' of the traditional aesthetic features that we came to expect in pre-modern art: 'the result was "emptiness" or "nothingness" as art'.

expect. Yet this is not a case of absence; understood in the historical, religious, and cultural context of *karesansui*, this is a case of purposed and purposeful emptiness.

Aesthetic absences involve a certain sort of expectation. Each of my examples for this paper is of a ‘static’ autographic work of art. ‘Static’ seems an apt descriptor since change is not endemic or an identifying feature of these works. Static works typically include paintings, drawings (even erased ones), photographs,³ prints, sculptures, tapestries, mosaics, calligraphy, and works of architecture. Certainly, some of these objects change – an example is Richard Serra’s outdoor sculpture *Tilted Arc* (1981), the metal of which was prone to rust and showed signs of rust before it was removed from its site – but, while there are sure to be outliers and while everything experiences the effects of time, in general change is not a defining characteristic of these works. ‘Dynamic’ works of art involve some temporal duration through which aspects of them change and where this change is important to their identities as works of art. Dynamic artforms typically include music, opera, plays, literature, poetry, film, dance, performance art, and gardens.

Dynamic works of art typically involve internally focused expectation. For example, the plot of a ‘classic Hollywood cinema’ film typically moves forward as the protagonist’s psychology unfolds as discoveries are made. Alfred Hitchcock films are all of this sort: suspense is built on anticipation, where the audience either knows or suspects that something is about to happen, but the film’s protagonist is yet to make the discovery that changes not only the trajectory of the plot but also the protagonist. We find the same in music. In music, expectation is typically about the sounds and our anticipation of what arrangements of sounds will follow others and follow patterns. Jenny Judge and Bence Nanay write:

[A]lmost all aspects of musical experience – pitch, rhythm, melody, harmony and the emotional experience of music, for instance – are now thought to be shaped by expectations, which arise both from general perceptual organization processes and also learned stylistic patterns. [...] Expectation is also believed to be central to rhythmic experience. Entrainment is the process by which a psychological rhythm can become synchronized with some regularly occurring event in the environment. We can tap our foot to a beat with ease; that we can do so is thought to show that we accurately predict or expect the timing of events in a regular pattern, and then coordinate our behavior with that pattern.⁴

Aesthetic absences involve expectation in a different way. Consider John Cage’s 4’33” (1952). This work consists physically of four minutes and 33 seconds of a group of musicians sitting quietly on a stage. While one may hear the ambient sounds in the venue where the work is performed, it is commonly thought that the primary point is the silence of the musicians. Erik Anderson, in his paper ‘Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence’, discusses the nature of silence as a focus of aesthetic appreciation, and

3 For an in-depth discussion of photographing absences, see Mikael Pettersson, ‘Seeing What Is Not There: Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-localization’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (2011): 279–94, and ‘Capturing Shadows: On Photography, Causation, and Absences’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95 (2017): 256–69.

4 Jenny Judge and Bence Nanay, ‘Expectations in Music’, in *Oxford Handbook of Music and Philosophy*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 997–98. See also David Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Elisa Negretto, ‘Expectation and Anticipation as Key Elements for the Constitution of Meaning in Music’, *Teorema* 31 (2012): 149–63.

he uses Cage's work as a central example.⁵ Julian Dodd, in 'What 4'33" Is', argues the same – that the work is essentially a work of silence – though Dodd takes the work not to be one of music but rather of conceptual performance art.⁶ (These views contrast with the view that 4'33" has something to do the sound left in the auditorium despite the musicians not playing.)⁷ One might claim, in step with Dodd's view, that, if 4'33" is a conceptual work of performance art, it is not subject to the same sorts of expectations commonly found in musical works. But, since performance art is just as dynamic as music, this point is not relevant here. 4'33" would seem a great example of aesthetic absence – where audiences, especially ones unfamiliar with what 4'33" will entail, experience frustration with the absence of the music they expect the musicians to produce. Aesthetic absence is not about a prediction of a filmic or musical development not coming to pass. In cases of dynamic works, it would rather better be illustrated by a film where nothing was displayed on the screen or a work of music where no sounds were produced. The sort of expectation at issue in this paper has a particular phenomenology, to be discussed next.

Aesthetic absences induce a disequilibrium that calls for resolution. The architecture and Lean/Kubrick/Lee film cases discussed above are of expected emptiness, and, while the awesome and sublime character of those spaces and spans still contribute to the depth and thrill of aesthetic experiences of them, emptiness in those cases does not excite the same phenomenological flavour as experiences of aesthetic absence. 'Something missing' is an itch. 'Something missing' is a potential distraction. It commands attention the way a problem requires a solution. What I call 'itchiness' is described as *frustration* by André Abath.⁸ Whatever we term it, the negative affective response we typically have to aesthetic absences is a defining element of its phenomenology, and it is this response that motivates us to seek a resolution.

Not all absences are like this. Jean-Rémy Martin and Jérôme Dokic's article 'Seeing Absence or Absence of Seeing?' offers an account of absence (absence in general) – an account they refer to as metacognitive – that focuses on the feeling of surprise rather than, as Abath's view does, frustration.⁹ Surprise is not necessarily negative. Surprise in some aesthetic contexts can be positive. On occasion, a thwarted expectation is welcome, as we find in humour (that is, if humour theories of incongruity are in play) or as a sign of the creativity or cleverness of a dynamic artwork that takes an unexpected turn. Judge and Nanay write:

However, it is not only when events are successfully predicted that I can experience satisfaction: I can also experience pleasure when my expectations are thwarted. After all, it is often when the music seems

5 Erik Anderson, 'Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence', *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020), https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol18/iss1/15/.

6 Julian Dodd, 'What 4'33" Is', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2018): 629–41.

7 Stephen Davies, 'John Cage's 4'33": Is It Music?', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997): 448–62.

8 André J. Abath, 'Frustrating Absences', *Disputatio* 11 (2019): 45–62.

9 Jean-Rémy Martin and Jérôme Dokic, 'Seeing Absence or Absence of Seeing?', *Thought* 2 (2013): 117–25. For a contrasting view to both the perception view and the metacognitive view, see Dan Cavedon-Taylor, 'Touching Voids: On the Varieties of Absence Perception', *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 8 (2017): 355–66.

These are cases of thwarted expectation, but the expectation here is of the sort discussed in the section immediately above, the sort associated with the internal developments in narrative forms and in music. Part of the reason Garau's and Rauschenberg's works form the depth of challenge that its reception evidences is because each is a case not only of expectation that is thwarted; each is a case of catalyzing an arresting disequilibrium in audiences that is typically met with trying to ascertain whether they are experiencing an act of art or an act of fraud. Aesthetic absence ultimately may be cognitively or psychologically satisfying, but that result is typically only after the absence has gone through enough consideration to reach meaningful resolution. The initial phenomenological quality of aesthetic absences is first and foremost a concerning pattern break.

'Expectation thwarted' might be serviceable as a close analogue to 'something missing', but perhaps 'unresolved anticipation' is a closer analogue. 'Unresolved anticipation' evokes a feeling of disequilibrium or discomfort that typically accompanies the sense of absence.¹¹ If we are engaged in trainspotting, and trains we expect to appear do not, nothing of consequence results and the feeling of loss is short-lived. If we are waiting for a train to arrive so we can get to an important meeting or catch a flight – and we know, and perhaps have double-checked, the time the arrival is meant to occur – and the train does not appear, we are likely to express our frustration in visibly or audibly apparent ways, and then we are likely to begin (perhaps animatedly) asking those who might have answers for a solution to the mystery of the non-appearance.

Aesthetic absences are form-focused. In the Garau and Rauschenberg examples, we experience 'something missing' as a thwarting of the expectation of a form that seems to us complete and 'right'. While one may argue that the perfect simplicity of empty air, blank paper, and purely white canvases present to us opportunities to experience pure form, uncorrupted by any content that might distract us from that form, the result is the opposite. We are left with the itchy sensation of 'something missing'. This may be resolvable through an interpretation that highlights the artistic expression of pure form, but this is a cognitive step removed from the initial phenomenological feel of absence. The 'something missing' is known to be missing because the form of the object seems incomplete. While on occasion we may guess what that missing content is, in many cases – perhaps most – we only know that some content seems

10 Judge and Nanay, 'Expectations in Music', 998.

11 The disequilibrium or discomfort that accompanies the sensation of 'something missing' is captured in Batkin's discussion of Richard Wollheim's treatment, in his *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), of the identification of subjects present in Édouard Manet's single-subject paintings: 'The problem posed by Manet's paintings is how we are discomforted by the presence of their subjects. Wollheim argues that since we cannot enter the "represented" or "virtual" space of a painting, we must imagine a spectator in that space with whom we identify and through this identification become discomforted.' Norton Batkin, '... A Presence of Absence...', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 24 (1990): 17. Batkin's discussion is a critique of Wollheim's view, but what is noteworthy for our purpose is that the discomfort experienced is caused by the 'absence' of the subject of the painting: 'The last phrase ["a presence of absence"] refers to [the subject Berthe] Morisot's abstracted gaze. She has turned her head slightly so that she nearly faces us, yet she appears to look at nothing. But the phrase "a presence of absence" not only refers to an expression, to the intense absentness of this woman's gaze. It also declares the enduring presence which the painting has given its sitter, Berthe Morisot [...] who no longer is alive [...].' Ibid., 15–16.

missing because the form does not strike us as 'right'. The aesthetic nature of the Garau and Rauschenberg absences does not come from the nature of the missing content; the aesthetic character comes from the form.

Anna Farennikova's perceptual approach to absence (again, absence in general), as discussed in her paper 'Seeing Absence', has both a content-focused component and a formal component. She argues that the absence of objects may be perceived not merely as a negative – that there is emptiness where there should be something, and we visually perceive the emptiness – but rather as a mismatch between two visual templates, the one present to our senses and one of our expectations of what we thought we would see. In this, Farennikova believes we can actually perceive absences, as the template we bring to our perception is a perceptual template, just one that does not match the perceptions as we find them:

On prevailing theories of perception, we see only present objects and scenes [...]. So we cannot literally see something that is not present. This suggests that we never actually perceive absences; instead, we come to believe that something is absent on the basis of what we perceive. But this cognitive explanation does not do justice to the phenomenology. Experiences of absence possess immediate perceptual qualities.

[...]

When we expect something, we represent what is possible or likely in the environment. This advance information is coded as conditional on contextual cues. For instance, seeing a kitchen will cause you to expect to see a fridge and an oven. When the visual system detects these cues, it activates *templates* of objects predicted to be at the scene. [...] Once activated, the templates are projected and matched against the incoming sensory information: probable locations of the expected objects. If the environment is incongruent with the expectation, the visual system registers predictive error. [...] predictive error is resolved as a *mismatch* between the predicted state of the world and what is actually observed.¹²

Farennikova's theory importantly focuses on the nature of expectation that is at issue in all cases of absence. Applied to cases of aesthetic absences, the expectations of audience members to see more than air, (virtually) blank paper, and white canvases is grounded in patterns they will have experienced (likely first- but perhaps second-hand) when attending to works of art – in museums, galleries, books, classroom slides; adorning the walls of the places they live and work; on movie, television, computer, and phone screens, and so forth. And we cannot successfully suggest this simply is a case of such expectations being based in pre-modernity and exclusive familiarity with art that includes a pronounced traditional aesthetic dimension, because the evidence suggests that most works of modern art come with a perceptible content that is more perceptually engaging than air and blankness. This may be why aesthetically focused theories of art live on despite the occasional presence of works like Piero Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (1961). And this may be why challenges such as Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) and Marcel Duchamp's readymades (such as *Fountain*,

12 Anna Farennikova, 'Seeing Absence', *Philosophical Studies* 166 (2013): 429, 441–42. David Hommen describes an absence as a 'latent potentiality', a something that could be there but happens not to be; this seems somewhat akin to the perceptual view of Farennikova; see his 'Absences as Latent Potentialities', *Philosophical Papers* 45 (2016): 401–35.

1917) inspire (at least originally) the reactions they do. The patterns of art including traditional aesthetic elements, guided in significant measure even today by the production of beauty, are by far the norm. To claim that Garau's and Rauschenberg's works present us with challenges – art-theoretical challenges that are as popular as they are academic – is to reinforce the idea that the expectations we are discussing are deep and wide.

Yet still more important for the task of exploring the nature of aesthetic absences is the point that Farennikova's account has both a content-focused aspect and a form-formed one. Farennikova's account holds that the template of what we expected to see – but did not – has a perceptual content. Yet in cases of aesthetic absences we commonly are not in a position to say what that content is. After all, we are not the artists who created the works in question, and we do not know with what these artists might have filled in the perceived absences in their works.

In aesthetic absences, all I have is that my aesthetic sensibilities tell me something does not look quite right. The 'does not look quite right' is the primary experience, and I can sense that something is missing without necessarily being in a position to say what it is that is missing. This is in concert with the perspectives of those theorists who specify some formula for the presence of aesthetic quality in an object,¹³ those theorists who talk about 'significant form',¹⁴ and those theorists who specify an experiential content that focuses on possession of certain kinds of relationships among the object's properties.¹⁵ A clear example comes from David Hume, who writes:

It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ.¹⁶

An orderliness to form is commonplace in aesthetic discourse and aesthetic expectation, not only theoretically but practically. When that form – objective or experienced – is missing something, a sensitive aesthetic sensibility will feel it, regardless of whether the person possessing that sensibility will be able to specify what it is that is missing. While this may pose a problem for ontologists or epistemologists working through accounting for absences, it should pose no problem for aestheticians for whom the orderliness of form, to invoke Farennikova again, functions as a 'contentless structural template', a template with a logic but in possession of a content only possibly created from extrapolation from what is already present in the composition.

Farennikova's account requires us to know the contents of the template of our expectations, but we may think about the structure of the template abstracted from the contents to recognize that, in aesthetic absences, the 'contentless structural

13 Such as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Lord Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, and G. E. Moore.

14 Such as Clive Bell and Susanne Langer.

15 Such as Immanuel Kant and Monroe Beardsley – and arguably George Santayana and John Dewey.

16 David Hume, 'On the Standard of Taste' (1757), in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 233.

template' is enough to establish the nature of the registration of the aesthetic absence. My observation is in contrast with the specifics of Farennikova's theory, as her claim is that we actually perceive what is absent. If we perceive it, we can identify it. Yet this seems commonly not to be the case with aesthetic absences, so here either my view parts with hers or, as a modification of her view for aesthetic purposes, I must invoke this notion of a 'contentless structural template' to account for aesthetic sensibility.

On the other hand, the expectation that the missing contents are *perceptual* is important here. Aesthetic absences are aesthetic, and, while we may find all manner of relations that a work of art bears to other objects and events relevant to the identity, meaning, and worth of that artwork, we begin all acquaintance with aesthetic objects (and events) perceptually, with those properties that we sense in an unmediated way and with the aesthetic properties that rely on them. What we find missing in cases of aesthetic absence is some content that is expected to be perceivable.

Another area where Farennikova and I may differ is on the role of cognition: her view is that we literally see the absence, and this perception is unmediated cognitively. I believe this is the case when our aesthetic sensibilities are responsible for the phenomenon of 'does not look quite right'. This phenomenon need not involve cognition. We see it in the same way we see the object's formal aesthetic properties. However, aesthetic absence is resolvable, and that does involve cognition.

II. RESOLVING ANTICIPATION THROUGH INTERPRETATION

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* are described in the Museum of Modern Art's website in the following way (they are described similarly in multiple venues):

Leah Dickerman: These 'White Paintings' may not be prepossessing, but they're among the most radical statements about painting made in the middle of the 20th century. They are blank canvases stretched in units of various combinations. And the paint is basic house paint applied with a roller. And the result is a canvas that acts as a screen, is sensitive to the ambient effects of a room, to the flickering qualities of light, and shadow, and weather.

[...]

Rauschenberg: I called them clocks. If one were sensitive enough that you could read it, that you would know how many people were in the room, what time it was, and what the weather was like outside.¹⁷

If we accept what Rauschenberg says at face value, the resolution to the absence of visual content in this case is a perceptual one. That is, Rauschenberg does not explain why the absence is present (so to speak). Instead, he denies that there is an absence, and he lands this denial by pointing to the reflective aspect of the white canvas as the visual context. We do not find mirrors to contain absences, and, in describing the white canvases as means of reflecting, he fills in what seems a perceptual absence with a perceptual 'something' – just a 'something' that is incidental to the reflective nature of the shiny surface of the paintings. This is indeed a resolution to the thwarted

17 <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/40/639>.

expectation to see a visual content when looking at the paintings, but the resolution is simply to say that there was never an absence in the first place. This is less interesting, as a philosophical puzzle, than the case where the absence endures and calls for an explanation rather than a denial.

It is entirely possible that Rauschenberg's explanation fails to ring true for an audience member. That viewer might look within or to people other than Rauschenberg for a more satisfying explanation. In that case, we would typically understand the explanation to constitute an interpretation. Perhaps, as was the case with Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, the *White Paintings* draw attention to the 'flatness' of the canvas, drawing attention away from the content and towards the medium itself. The *White Paintings* are essentially just canvas and paint, both in their simplest, elemental forms. Whether this particular interpretation of the paintings works is less of an issue than is the possibility that an interpretation of the *White Paintings* can be fashioned that is less a denial of the presence of an absence (so to speak) and more an explanation of why the absence is present. The absence itself is thought by many to be the point of the *White Paintings*, and this is even more the case with *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. To imagine that Rauschenberg's intention did not include posing a conceptual puzzle at a time when that puzzle would have been arresting for audience members strains credulity. Given the centrality of the puzzle of the absence to these works, audience members are motivated to ponder them, to ask why the absence is present. In exploring answers to the question, interpretations commonly result.

Garau is reported to have said about *Io Sono*:

The vacuum is nothing more than a space full of energy, and even if we empty it and there is nothing left, according to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, that 'nothing' has a weight. [...] Therefore, it has energy that is condensed and transformed into particles, that is, into us. [...] When I decide to 'exhibit' an immaterial sculpture in a given space, that space will concentrate a certain amount and density of thoughts at a precise point, creating a sculpture that, from my title, will only take the most varied forms. [...] After all, don't we shape a God we've never seen?¹⁸

In this case, the anticipation of there being something where there is nothing is resolved with the artist's interpretation of the work. It is not a case of there being something missing; what is there is sufficient for grounding in a *conceptual way* a content fit for aesthetic attention and ultimately appreciation. Once the absence is explained, and the matter concluded in a way the hearer/reader of the explanation finds satisfactory (both in a psychological way and in a justificatory way where the content described by the artist holds up to cognitive consideration), absence is no longer relevant. What is then of aesthetic interest, or what then is the focus of aesthetic consideration, is the described content. In the case of a perceptual content, the audience member simply can focus their sensory attention on those presumably subtle and originally missed perceptual elements. In the case of a conceptual content, the audience member can focus their interpretative attention there.

The resolution of the absence is not something that should be taken as the sort of task one ticks off a list. Appreciation of the absence, appreciation of the character of

18 Taylor Dafoe, 'An Italian Artist Auctioned Off an "Invisible Sculpture" for \$18,300. It's Made Literally of Nothing', *artnet*, 3 June 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/italian-artist-auctioned-off-invisible-sculpture-18300-literally-made-nothing-1976181>.

the audience member's response to the absence, and pondering a variety of possible ways to address the absence may take a good deal of time and focus. The audience member may try out a plurality of candidate interpretations in seeking the one (or ones) they find most satisfying, and they may not engage in this resolution exercise until they have first come to grips with the absence itself, with its nature as an absence and with the introduction of the absence in *this* work at *this* time by *this* artist. As the audience member cognitively focuses on candidate interpretations, they are at the same time implicitly – or perhaps explicitly, on occasion – working out criteria for what would make an interpretative resolution satisfying.

Once an interpretation is advanced that the audience member finds psychologically and epistemically satisfying, the absence – as an absence – is no longer relevant. This dynamic works with any interpretation; the interpretation need not come from the artist. There are a variety of heuristic approaches. Each focuses on offering explanation for how the various elements of an artwork cohere together or why the artist (real, implied, or imagined) might have chosen to include the things they did and exclude other things. And each provides a lens through which a work of art may be viewed; some offer the means to adjudicate among competing interpretations for correct/incorrect or better/worse. In addition, the Sibleyan exercise of taste necessary for manifesting aesthetic properties from perceived base properties may be an interpretative activity, since the former is value-bearing and the latter is not.¹⁹ Heuristic approaches might be categorized in terms of the locus of focus (forgive the rhyme): (1) should an interpretation be object-focused and consist of reading the presented properties of the object conventionally,²⁰ with or without the addition of contextually relevant facts?²¹ (2) Should an interpretation be audience-focused, about audience responses individually,²² about audience responses collectively and typically organized thematically,²³ or about the maximization of the value of aesthetic experience, either without the inclusion of context²⁴ or with it?²⁵ (3) Should an interpretation be artist-focused and an employment of the stated intentions of

19 Aesthetic properties, following Monroe Beardsley, are all value-bearing insofar as they are used as reasons in cases for arguing the aesthetic merit or merits of an object. Each does not have a single stable value, such that an object that exhibits balance is always better for it – first, 'balance' must be culturally contextualized; second, 'balance' could lead to one finding a work dull or predictable. But, relative to context, aesthetic properties are all value-bearing. Monroe Beardsley, 'What Is an Aesthetic Quality?', *Theoria* 39 (1973): 50–70. Whether there is such a thing as an entirely value-free description or account of the base properties of an object is a matter of contention; the argument that even selecting the elements for such an account involves preference – selecting some over others – many find convincing.

20 As we find in the anti-intentionalism of William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley ('The Intentional Fallacy', *Sewanee Review* 54 [1946]: 468–88), new criticism (I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren), and formalism (Eduard Hanslick, Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Nick Zangwill).

21 See Stephen Davies, 'Beardsley and the Autonomy of the Work of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 179–83.

22 As we find in individually focused reader-response theories and in the deconstructionist work of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.

23 As we find in the focus on interpretative communities in Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

24 Alan Goldman, 'Interpreting Art and Literature', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (1990): 205–14; *Philosophy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

25 Stephen Davies, *Philosophical Perspectives on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the artist or a recreation of those intentions, either absolutely²⁶ or in a mixture with object-focused conventionalism,²⁷ or be a construction of a hypothetical or implied artist?²⁸ Or (4) should an interpretation be a mixture of approaches?²⁹ The resolving of absence is really the replacing of it – or, to continue with the description from the top of the paper, finding a something to put in the place of the thing missing.

A persistent aesthetic absence, one not yet resolved through interpretation, entails that the identity of the work of art that includes that absence is not yet stabilized in a way that allows us to say exactly what the work in question is. (This works as well with aesthetic objects that are not art objects, but art examples are easier to consider.) *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is less interesting – if at all interesting – without both the title and the history that title communicates. Once we appreciate that title and the history, we can begin to formulate explanations for why one – or why Rauschenberg – would have done such a thing and why such a thing should be artistically significant. This development of interpretation allows us to know what it is we are contemplating – it is not merely a frame with an ageing piece of blank paper, perhaps one with a few stray perceptual marks on it. It is an ‘erased drawing originally drawn by Willem de Kooning’ and erased with purpose by another artist, Robert Rauschenberg. Now we know what it is that we are standing before.

The interpretative resolution allows for the stabilization that in turn allows for identification, but we must be mindful that as the work in question may be interpreted in a variety of ways, there may be a plurality of identities. Are the *White Paintings* clocks? Are they conceptual statements about the nature of pure form illustrated through focus on the elements of plain canvas and plain white paint? Are they conceptual statements about the role of traditional aesthetic responses to works of art? For works of art that do not possess absences requiring resolution, interpretation of them may lead to an understanding of their meanings and that may lead to enhanced experiences of them. But for works that possess absences, the interpretation serves a much more exigent role: to know what the object is. This is clearly the case with Garau’s *Io Sono*, where the description of ‘it’s just air’ seems wholly unsatisfying as a way to describe the work or identify it.

The same sort of situation is the case for understanding the value of the work. ‘It’s just air’ possesses only the value of air; *Io Sono* sold in 2021 for 15,000 euros, and, while equating a monetary value to either the aesthetic value or the artistic value of a work of art is fraught, it still suggests that what was valued (and purchased) was not ‘just air’. Conceptual works of art that do not possess absences – like Duchamp’s readymades – possess a material catalyst for inspiring cognitive engagement, even when we think this material catalyst is not meant for formal (perceptually based)

26 E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967); Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

27 Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003); Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

28 William Tolhurst, ‘On What a Text Is and How It Means’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 3–14; Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Jenefer Robinson, ‘Style and Personality in the Literary Work’, *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 227–47.

29 Berys Gaut, ‘Interpreting the Arts: The Patchwork Theory’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 597–609.

aesthetic appreciation or when we think the material catalyst is insufficient for stabilizing the work's identity or constraining the range of possibilities of warranted interpretations. Yet Duchamp's readymades can be appreciated formally, if one chooses to do so.³⁰ That option is not open to those viewing *Io Sono*.

It is only through Garau's explanation or the interpretation of one whom a potential purchaser of the work respects that the 'just air' becomes more than 'just air', and it begins to be seen as a bearer of its value as a work of art (although to call *Io Sono* an aesthetic object, given its lack of perceptual properties, may be pushing things too far). When asked 'what occupies this five-foot-square space required for exhibition of the work?' one may answer by offering an interpretation of *Io Sono* – this is to identify the work – and when asked what the value of the work is, one may answer by offering the same interpretation (or perhaps another), the point being that both the identity and the worth of the work are dependent on interpretation.

Where absence can both inform aesthetic attention and underwrite aesthetic value is where it is left as anticipation unresolved, where there is no conclusion that allows its dissipation, and where the itch of its presence continues. Farennikova writes that the perception of absence quickly fades, as the mismatched template dissipates from the subject's attention and resolves itself either in action geared towards addressing the absence or in the acceptance of what is actually now perceived is accepted as the reality of the situation. Happily, in art appreciation, there is no reason for the absence to fade quickly. An applied mismatched template that might be involved in the sort of pattern recognition necessary for survival or at least for efficient functioning might need to lead to action or to 'reality resolution', but not so in art. Rather the reverse. As we consider a work, the puzzle of the absence in itself can be the basis for extended engagement with the object. And, in complement, this sort of engagement can be rewarding and can last beyond the time under which the object is directly perceived. Working out puzzles can take as long as we like, and the 'as we like' is shorthand for 'as long as we continue to experience value in thinking about it'.

It is the value in thinking about it, the value in working out the meaning puzzle of just why the object under our consideration is lacking what we expected it to contain, that makes the absence in question aesthetically relevant. This cognitively-dealt-with puzzle is an interpretative activity – which we know because it can be shut down (concluded, resolved, dissolved) by the results of competing interpretative activities. Absence – the unresolved anticipation, the itchy sense that something is missing – may ultimately be resolved by the audience member developing or finding an interpretation that solves the puzzle, but, for the time period in which ambiguity reigns, absence can be aesthetically arresting, and so, while for some the absences in my examples are reason for the sort of frustration that leads to dismissal or accusation of fraud, the challenges these instances of absence may occasion may end up being some of the most aesthetically memorable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to reviewers for this journal for excellent guidance.

30 Apparently, George Dickie chose this; see his *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 42.

REFERENCES

- Abath, André J. 'Frustrating Absences.' *Disputatio* 11 (2019): 45–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/disp-2019-0011>
- Anderson, Erik. 'Aesthetic Appreciation of Silence.' *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020). https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol18/iss1/15/.
- Batkin, Norton. '...A Presence of Absence...' *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 24 (1990): 14–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3332780>
- Beardsley, Monroe. 'What Is an Aesthetic Quality?' *Theoria* 39 (1973): 50–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.1973.tb00630.x>
- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Cavedon-Taylor, Dan. 'Touching Voids: On the Varieties of Absence Perception.' *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 8 (2017): 355–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-016-0302-7>
- Dafoe, Taylor. 'An Italian Artist Auctioned Off an "Invisible Sculpture" for \$18,300. It's Made Literally of Nothing.' *artnet*, 3 June 2021. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/italian-artist-auctioned-off-invisible-sculpture-18300-literally-made-nothing-1976181>.
- Davies, Stephen. 'Beardsley and the Autonomy of the Work of Art.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 63 (2005): 179–83. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-8529.2005.00195.x>
- , 'John Cage's 4'33": Is It Music?' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997): 448–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048409712348031>
- , *Philosophical Perspectives on Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Dickie, George. *Art and the Aesthetic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Dodd, Julian. 'What 4'33" Is.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 96 (2018): 629–41. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2017.1408664>
- Džalto, Davor. 'Art: A Brief History of Absence.' *Filozofija i Društvo* 26 (2015): 652–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/FID1503652D>
- Farennikova, Anna. 'Seeing Absence.' *Philosophical Studies* 166 (2013): 429–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-012-0045-y>
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Gaut, Berys. 'Interpreting the Arts: The Patchwork Theory.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 597–609. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/431892>
- Goldman, Alan. 'Interpreting Art and Literature.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 (1990): 205–14. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac48.3.0205
- Goldman, Alan. *Philosophy and the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003879>
- Hirsch, E. D. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350928510>
- Hommen, David. 'Absences as Latent Potentialities.' *Philosophical Papers* 45 (2016): 401–35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2016.1245829>

- Hume, David. 'On the Standard of Taste.' 1757. In *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, 226–49. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987.
- Huron, David. *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/6575.001.0001>
- Judge, Jenny, and Nanay, Bence. 'Expectations in Music.' In *Oxford Handbook of Music and Philosophy*, edited by Jerrold Levinson, 997–1018. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199367313.013.55>
- Livingston, Paisley. *Art and Intention*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199278067.001.0001>
- Martin, Jean-Rémy, and Dokic, Jérôme. 'Seeing Absence or Absence of Seeing?' *Thought* 2 (2013): 117–25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/tht3.72>
- Negretto, Elisa. 'Expectation and Anticipation as Key Elements for the Constitution of Meaning in Music.' *Teorema* 31 (2012): 149–63.
- Pettersson, Mikael. 'Capturing Shadows: On Photography, Causation, and Absences.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95 (2017): 256–69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2016.1197957>
- , 'Seeing What Is Not There: Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-localization.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (2011): 279–94. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayr014>
- Robinson, Jenefer. 'Style and Personality in the Literary Work.' *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 227–47. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2185429>
- Stecker, Robert. *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776186>
- Stock, Kathleen. *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198798347.001.0001>
- Tolhurst, William. 'On What a Test Is and How It Means.' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 3–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/19.1.3>
- Wimsatt, William, and Beardsley, Monroe. 'The Intentional Fallacy.' *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468–88.
- Wollheim, Richard. *Painting as an Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Fenner, David.
 'Aesthetic Absence and Interpretation.' *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* LX/XVI, no. 2 (2023): pp. 162–175. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/eeja.315>

Submitted: 31 December 2021
 Accepted: 08 January 2023
 Published: 14 September 2023

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 The Author(s).
 This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press in cooperation with the Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague.