



Speaking Absence. Art Museums, Representation and Knowledge Creation
M. Tali

Summary “Speaking Absence. Art Museums, Representation and Knowledge Creation”

Presence is a state, which is often taken for granted in museums. When visiting a museum we are taught to appreciate what we encounter. Museums explain in great detail how we as viewers should read the artworks that we come across during our visit. We are hardly ever told about what is missing. My aim in this dissertation has been to address namely what is not tangible, and render visible the multiple absences that art museums create and sustain. I theorize museal absence in great detail and while doing so my focus remains on the relationships surrounding art, including: the ways in which communities are constructed by museums; the dominant presences and visibilities for which musealized art is employed; and the ways in which ownership and political legitimacies influence museums and the art world. My central argument in this dissertation is that art museums consciously create not only presence but also absence which often remains unaddressed.

Museal absence has different spectres and forms with which I engage throughout my readings of museum spaces, archiving and exhibition politics. My understanding of absence is informed by postcolonial theory (Derrida, Bhabha, Taylor), gender studies (Pollock, Abu-Hanna) and memory studies (Huyssen, Nora). Museal absence involves material and immaterial sides that are respectively based on excluded objects and certain unwanted social identities. Through the absencing of identities and positioning them as mute Others particular local communities are deprived a memory and a chance for self-identification in the representative realm of museums. Through my readings I trace the way in which absence affects knowledge creation in museums and the particular ways in which museums consciously create both material and immaterial forms of absence.

My case studies involve four museums of modern and contemporary art: the Ludwig Museum in Budapest, the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, the Kiasma Museum in Helsinki, and the Kumu Museum in Tallinn. I interrogate the techniques of creating and mediating absence in and by those museums in great detail through taking into account the narrative, spatial and archival realms of museum work. The history of these museums

also leads me to theorize the growing role of the private collector and to search for new methodological approaches to analyse their influence in museum spaces and collection politics.

In order to analyse absence in this thesis, I began with monumental presence. By analysing Beuys' figure in my first chapter, I traced how the artist was used to articulate a particular dominant form of national belonging. This belonging has both spatial and narrative effects on identity formation that the Hamburger Bahnhof promotes and circulates. Especially when superimposed onto the contemporary social landscape, this belonging competes with the memories and identities of migrant communities populating contemporary Germany. By celebrating Beuys in the form of grand narratives, other forms of belonging can however be implicitly left absent. By comparing two Beuys retrospectives in Berlin and Düsseldorf, I further pointed out that museal narratives in the contemporary memory market are shaped by agents that are involved in their construction.

In my second chapter I distinguished between acts of presencing and absencing that are enacted by museums as a part of the identity construction process transmitted by storytelling. My object in this chapter was the distinction that was drawn in museal narratives between an imaginary 'us' and 'them'. I have treated these acts of identity ascription as political, since through identifying a 'we' and articulating particular Others, viewers are either allowed or denied access to identity and often to respective knowledge. By ascribing identities in storytelling, museums actively mould audience experiences and fix individual positions as a part of communities. I also argued that acts of absencing are purposeful, and although absencing of information about artistic identities and artworks may serve different purposes, promoting locally dominant positions towards memory and belonging was a recurrent practice in the acts of ascribing meaning.

Spatial experiences are specific. Since the four museums under discussion in this study offer not only considerably different ways of addressing their collections but also a wide variety of spatial experiences, this led me to trace further the creation of their spaces. Through my readings into the spatial histories of the four museums in chapter three, I investigated the ways in which spaces are occupied and linked with memory and knowledge. Although in the course of a museum's construction, meanings and

relationships are embedded in structures and they are gradually effaced; I argued, that the influences embedded in spatial frameworks continue to inform museal processes of knowledge construction. I distinguished between four different agents: states, cities, corporations, and private collectors. While the role of the state has decreased in the neoliberal era since the 1990s, collectors and corporations have gained a growing impact in the new power dynamics surrounding the museums. The particularly prominent role of collectors in the example of the Hamburger Bahnhof lead me to theorize further an appearance of a new type of space within the museum that I termed the 'collector's space'. The term 'collector's space' allowed me to further characterise the dominant presence of collectors in the art museum spaces. Collector's spaces add to the creation of absence spatially, through asserting the influence of the collectors influence, memory and experience become dominant compared to other experiences. By prominently reproducing networks and affinities of the local economic elite, collector's spaces produce the absence of subaltern and migrant community identities in a particularly lucid manner. These spaces distribute and solidify hierarchies by simultaneously embedding both structures and narratives. Furthermore, 'collector's spaces' can hinder open discussion, transparency within the museum and its engagement with visitors.

In chapter four I opened the contingencies between nation building and neoliberalism further through focusing on the example of Western German collector Peter Ludwig (1925-1996). The example of his donation to Hungary lead me to problematize the traditional forms of analysing private collector's influence and roles, and suggest that structural changes in the museum organisations need to be considered in understanding these new forms of privatisation. The new museum structure that Ludwig created within the Hungarian National Gallery served as an example for instigating an early form of privatization and a withdrawal of the nation state from the realm of public heritage. What has made Ludwig's collection an important resource and site of ongoing struggle are the historical legacies informed by the absence of collections of Eastern European art that would represent the region and allow it to narrate its history. It is the absence of ownership in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries that has hindered the formation of these collections. Ludwig's collection in Hungary presented an

exception to this, but the politics of identification it produced under director Barnabás Bencsik was not tolerated by the Orbán regime.

By interrogating collection politics and practices in chapter five, I argued that one of the important continuous legacies that private collections bring into the archival logic is the dominance of the upper class white male gaze. This is a dominant gaze that in the museal politics of collecting based on traditions, simultaneously excludes minority gazes and cultural practices, upholds ocularcentrism and constructs gender roles in favour of male artists. Constructing absence within the collection is a way of actively disclaiming certain heritages and memories expressed in art and images that are uncollected. These positions are thus turned into ones that lack sense and are either naïve or primitive, when seen from the perspective of the dominant museal gaze. Absence in this context in other words becomes a non-sensical ab-sense. The exceptional practice of private donations shapes the museal realm of representation by turning it into a privileged site where a certain kind of “quality” is consolidated. This realm recreates Western centeredness in the archival rationale of museums, which is often naturalised and taken for granted by traditional art historical language.

In my last chapter I used five examples of policed (Rancière) artworks and artistic positions in order to understand how they reveal the archival rationale. By analyzing the work of Kiba Lumberg, Kristina Norman, Renata Stih, Frieder Schnock, Andrea Geyer as specific examples of museal absence, allowed me to articulate the micro-politics of museal absence that consists of particular positions of memory and identity, as well as of their expression through artworks. My aim, through engaging excluded artworks and artistic identities in my analysis, was to theorize further representational practices that the national galleries enact without their articulation. These examples facilitated my articulation of the micro-politics of absence that unfold in the biased museal representation and bring to the forefront particular sexualised and gendered forms dominating museal knowledge-creation processes. Discourses of economy and politics actively mingled in these artistic practices with discourses of memory and belonging that their authors challenged by claiming their place in public narratives and by offering counter-positions to absence. Their particular positions and work that were policed from museal archives function in my dissertation as examples of speaking absences. I

consequently suggest that as audience members, theorists and art historians we ought to break away from solely focusing on visibility and presence in museums, and learn to read the positions of memory that are absented and left missing from museums as well.