

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2025XXXX>

Evoking the Unpresentable: Phenomenological and Socially Mediated Strategies in Contemporary Sculpture

* ¹Lester Korzilius, FAIA, RIBA, PhD Candidate

^{1,2,&3} School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom

¹ E-mail: lk@lesterkorzilius.com

¹ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2929-1297>

Abstract

Received: xx xx 2026
Revised: xx xx 2026
Accepted: xx xx 2026
Available online: xx xx 2026

Copyright © 2026 by the author(s).
All rights reserved.

This article is published under an open-access model and is made available in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY).



The publisher maintains a neutral stance concerning jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This article has been selected and peer-reviewed for publication in this journal as part of the 9th International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism, held on 7–8 May 2026 in Istanbul, Türkiye.

Contemporary sculpture frequently engages themes—such as absence, historical memory, and trauma—that resist straightforward representation through conventional figurative imagery. This paper examines how sculptural form may evoke what is here described as the unpresentable. Drawing on Immanuel Kant’s account of the sublime and later developments in the philosophies of perception and affect (Bergson, Deleuze, Massumi, and Nancy), the paper argues that the unpresentable emerges where presentation encounters its limits rather than referring to an invisible object beyond experience. An analytical framework is introduced that maps sculptural works across two registers—phenomenological perception and socially mediated meaning—and across two spatial conditions: spatial field and discrete object. Reference works by Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa, Carl Andre, Doris Salcedo, Maya Lin, and Rachel Whiteread are examined alongside the author’s practice-based sculptures to demonstrate how repetition, spatial immersion, and negative form can generate perceptual conditions in which the limits of presentation become perceptible and absence can be experienced without direct representation.

Keywords: Unpresentable; Sculptural Sublime; Phenomenology; Absence; Memory.

1. Introduction

Contemporary sculpture frequently addresses themes of absence, historical memory, and trauma that resist straightforward representation through conventional figurative imagery. In response, many contemporary artists employ indirect sculptural strategies—repetition, spatial immersion, negative form, and material traces—to evoke experiences that approach the limits of presentation. These strategies do not depict absence directly; rather, they establish perceptual conditions in which absence becomes felt or sensed without being fully representable.

This paper examines how sculptural form may evoke what this research describes as the unpresentable. The term does not refer to an invisible object or to a transcendental realm beyond experience. The unpresentable emerges where presentation falters—where perception encounters forms that exceed the mind’s capacity to organise or fully comprehend them. What appears in such moments is not a hidden object but a tension between appearance and the faculties that attempt to grasp it. The unpresentable thus designates a structural limit internal to perception, presentation, and thought rather than a domain that lies beyond them. For the purposes of this paper, the unpresentable is used as an operative term to describe those experiences in which presentation reaches its limit without thereby disclosing a hidden object beyond experience. It draws on post-Kantian accounts of the sublime and of presentation at the limit, but is used here specifically to analyse how sculpture may make such limits perceptible in material and spatial form.

The philosophical foundation for this concept lies in Immanuel Kant’s account of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement*. Kant argues that the sublime does not reside in objects themselves but arises through a movement of the faculties when the imagination fails to provide an adequate sensible presentation for what reason demands. In the mathematical sublime this occurs through magnitude that exceeds comprehension; in the dynamical sublime it arises through overwhelming force. In both cases the experience discloses a limit internal to presentation rather than revealing a supersensible object. Subsequent philosophical developments have extended this structural insight beyond Kant’s original analysis of nature to consider how artistic practices may evoke comparable limits within aesthetic experience.

Building on this philosophical foundation, the paper proposes that sculptural experiences approaching the unrepresentable arise through two principal modes of perception. The first is phenomenological, grounded in embodied spatial experience in which scale, movement, material presence, and perceptual intensity shape how the viewer experiences the work. The second is socially mediated, where perception is informed by cultural frameworks, historical memory, and shared symbolic structures through which meaning emerges. These two modes are not mutually exclusive; rather, they frequently operate together within individual works. Both arise from the same structural condition in which perception approaches the limits of conceptual comprehension. This paper therefore proposes an analytical framework through which sculptural strategies that evoke experiences approaching the unrepresentable can be systematically examined.

The paper first outlines the theoretical framework informing this analysis, drawing on Kant's account of the sublime alongside later developments in the philosophies of perception, affect, and presentation. It then examines a series of reference works by artists including Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa, Carl Andre, Doris Salcedo, Maya Lin, and Rachel Whiteread. These works demonstrate how contemporary sculpture may generate experiences approaching the limits of presentation through spatial immersion, repetition, material accumulation, and the articulation of absence. The final section considers the author's own practice-based works, which investigate three related sculptural strategies: spatial fields of repeated elements, negative sculptural form, and relational configurations in which absence becomes the primary structuring element.

Through these examples, the paper argues that sculpture does not present the unrepresentable directly but establishes perceptual and spatial conditions in which the limits of presentation become perceptible. By combining philosophical analysis with practice-based case studies, it proposes a conceptual framework for understanding how contemporary sculpture can evoke experiences approaching the unrepresentable without relying on representational imagery.

2. Theoretical Framework: Perception, Affect, and the Limits of Presentation

The following theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding how sculpture can generate experiences that approach the limits of presentation.

Immanuel Kant's account of the sublime provides a critical foundation. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant distinguishes between the mathematical sublime, associated with magnitude, and the dynamical sublime, associated with overwhelming power (Kant, 2008, p. 78). In both cases the sublime does not reside in the object itself but arises as a movement between the faculties of imagination and reason. It emerges when the imagination fails to provide an adequate sensible presentation of what reason demands.

In considering how artworks may evoke experiences that approach the limits of presentation, Kant's distinction between determinative and aesthetic judgement becomes particularly relevant. Determinative judgement subsumes intuition under a concept and thereby produces cognition, whereas aesthetic judgement reflects on the relation between representation and the subject's feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The sublime belongs to this latter category and is therefore not a property of objects but a reflective experience that occurs when the faculties encounter their own limits.

In the mathematical sublime the imagination attempts to comprehend magnitude as a totality but fails, revealing the structural limits of sensible presentation. What is encountered is not a supersensible object but the boundary internal to appearance itself. The sublime therefore marks a limit condition in which presentation becomes inadequate to what is sensed or thought. As later commentators such as Rodolphe Gasché have argued, this produces a form of negative presentation: not the presentation of a hidden or absent object, but a presentation in which the inadequacy of presentation itself becomes perceptible as a limit internal to appearance (Gasché, 2007, p. 319). Understood in this way, the sublime provides a conceptual foundation for thinking how artworks may evoke experiences that approach the limits of presentation without presenting a determinate object. The use of negative presentation as a strategy of evoking the unrepresentable will be explored later in this paper.

While Kant identifies a structural limit within presentation, Henri Bergson shifts attention from this limit toward the movement of perception itself. Rather than focusing on the failure of presentation, Bergson examines the conditions under which perceptual experience takes shape. In *Matter and Memory*, perception unfolds within a durational field of images rather than through representations formed in the mind (Bergson, 1988, p. 20). Matter is described as an "aggregate of images," where an image is "more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing" (Bergson, 1988, p. 9). The perceiving body is itself one image within this field and functions as what Bergson calls a "centre of indetermination," meaning that it selectively filters and responds to those aspects of the world relevant to possible action. Perception is therefore not a mental reconstruction of reality but a selective participation within a field of images oriented toward action.

Bergson further develops this account through the concept of duration, by which he means lived time rather than measurable clock time, and in which past and present interpenetrate rather than appearing as discrete moments (Bergson,

1988, pp. 70, 135). Experience unfolds as a qualitative process rather than a sequence of measurable instants. This leads to Bergson's distinction between differences in degree and differences in kind: whereas the former concerns quantitative variation, the latter describes qualitative transformation between distinct orders of experience. As Gilles Deleuze later emphasises, this distinction becomes central to understanding how perceptual experience may undergo qualitative change rather than merely intensifying in magnitude (Deleuze, 2011, pp. 20–21).

Building on Bergson's account of qualitative difference, Gilles Deleuze develops a philosophy in which difference is understood as primary rather than derivative of representation. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze argues that difference precedes representation and that intensity may be understood as "difference in itself," that is, as a differential force that conditions what becomes perceptible while remaining only partly available to ordinary perception (Deleuze, 2014, pp. 189, 293–294). Deleuze develops the aesthetic implications of this position in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, where art is understood not as the representation of forms but as the capture of forces that produce sensation. As Deleuze writes, art seeks "not to reproduce forms but to capture forces" and make them perceptible (Deleuze, 2003, p. 56). What emerges from this process is sensation: a sensible form related to forces that act directly upon the nervous system (Deleuze, 2003, p. 34). Sensation therefore operates as an intensive phenomenon: not the depiction of an object, but the immediate registration of force in perception, which Deleuze describes as vibration passing through the body and moving between different levels of perception (Deleuze, 2003, pp. 45, 72). Sculptural repetition, scale, and spatial configuration may therefore generate shifts in intensity that affect the body directly, producing experiences that move perception toward the limits of presentation.

Brian Massumi develops this Deleuzian account through the concept of affect, describing affect as intensity that operates prior to the qualification of experience as emotion or meaning. As Massumi writes, "intensity will be equated with affect," distinguishing affect from emotion, which he describes as "qualified intensity" organised within narrative and signification (Massumi, 2002, pp. 27–28). Affect therefore refers to pre-personal or pre-conscious intensities that register in the body before they are organised into recognised emotional, narrative, or symbolic forms.

Jean-Luc Nancy develops the implications of these limits by reconsidering the nature of presentation itself. For Nancy, art does not primarily represent objects or meanings but exposes what he calls *sense*, which he distinguishes from truth and from signification (Heikkilä, 2008, p. 16). Presence for Nancy is "coming into presence of a presence, which is neither presentable nor unpresentable, but presentation before signification" (Nancy, 2003, p. 104). The sublime therefore concerns not the representation of the infinite but the movement of what Nancy calls the unlimitation that occurs at the border of presentation itself (Nancy, 2003, pp. 222–223). As Heikkilä explains, presentation in Nancy's philosophy functions as an exposition at the limits of signification rather than as the representation of a determinate meaning (Heikkilä, 2008, p. 301). Art therefore does not reveal a hidden content behind appearance but exposes the event of presentation itself, where, as Nancy suggests, presentation may occur without presenting anything determinate (Nancy, 2003, p. 237). In this sense, what art presents is not an object beyond appearance but the limit at which appearance, sense, and meaning begin to withdraw.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a conceptual framework for understanding how sculptural form may generate experiences approaching the limits of presentation. They move from the structural limit of presentation, through the dynamics of perception and intensity, to the exposure of absence at the threshold of signification. In the works discussed below, strategies such as repetition, scale, absence, and spatial tension are examined as means through which sculpture may expose these limits and evoke the unpresentable.

The case studies that follow do not illustrate these concepts in a secondary way; rather, they test how different sculptural configurations make these theoretical limits materially and spatially perceptible.

3. Analytical Framework

The theoretical framework outlined above informs the analytical model used in this paper. Rather than treating sculptural works as belonging to fixed categories, the model maps them across two intersecting axes: phenomenological perception versus socially mediated meaning, and spatial field versus discrete object. This framework provides a means of comparing how different sculptural strategies organise perception, material presence, and cultural meaning in relation to the unpresentable.

The distinction between phenomenological experience and socially mediated meaning provides a useful framework for analysing how sculpture produces experiences that exceed stable representation. Rather than functioning as mutually exclusive categories, these registers frequently overlap within individual works. To clarify these relationships, the following analytical diagram maps selected sculptural works across two intersecting axes: phenomenological perception versus socially mediated meaning, and spatial field versus discrete object. The diagram serves as a conceptual and analytical tool that visualises how different sculptural strategies operate within this field and how they may generate experiences that approach the limits of presentation. It also situates the author's practice-based works within this shared analytical framework.

The first (vertical) axis distinguishes between phenomenological and socially mediated registers of perception. By phenomenological perception, this research refers to modes of experience grounded primarily in embodied sensation, spatial perception, and material presence. These forms of experience emerge through the viewer's bodily relation to scale, movement, texture, and spatial orientation. By contrast, socially mediated meaning refers to forms of perception shaped by cultural frameworks, historical memory, and shared symbolic systems through which artworks are interpreted. In practice, most works operate across both registers, but one dimension often predominates in shaping how the work is experienced.

The second (horizontal) axis distinguishes between sculptural works that operate as spatial fields and those that function primarily as discrete objects. Spatial field works unfold through movement across an environment in which perception emerges sequentially through duration and bodily navigation. By contrast, discrete sculptural objects concentrate experience within a bounded form encountered from the outside. This distinction does not imply rigid categories; many works occupy intermediate positions. Rather, the axis provides a simplified means of identifying how different sculptural strategies organise spatial experience.

The purpose of this analytical framework is not to categorise artworks rigidly but to clarify how different sculptural strategies produce experiences that approach the limits of presentation. Experiences with what this research describes as the unrepresentable may arise through multiple pathways: through the intensification of embodied perception, through the accumulation of culturally mediated meaning, or through the interaction between the two. These registers should therefore be understood not as separate models, but as different ways in which the limit of presentation becomes experienceable. The diagram therefore serves as a conceptual method that allows these different strategies to be understood and compared. In the analyses that follow, works are understood to approach the unrepresentable where they do not simply signify absence or trauma, but generate perceptual conditions in which presentation becomes unstable or inadequate: for example, where totality cannot be grasped, where meaning is disclosed through absence, or where what is sensed exceeds stable conceptual closure.

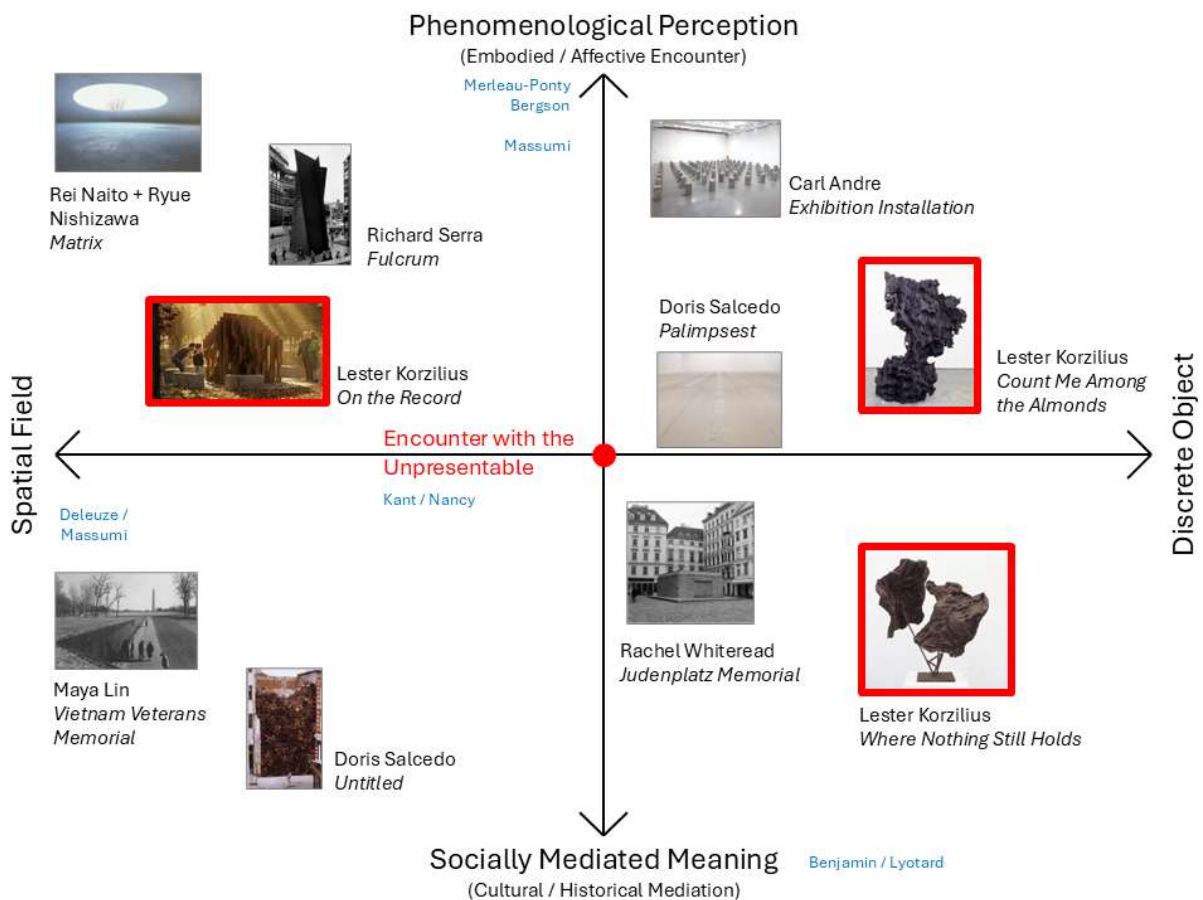


Fig 1 - Conceptual diagram mapping sculptural strategies across phenomenological and socially mediated registers.

Selected sculptural works are positioned across two axes: phenomenological perception, grounded in embodied spatial and sensory experience, and socially mediated meaning, structured through cultural and historical frameworks; and

spatial field versus discrete object. The author's works are highlighted to indicate their position within this broader field.

The diagram should not be understood as suggesting that the unrepresentable emerges only at a single point within the field. Rather, experiences with the unrepresentable may arise within either phenomenological or socially mediated registers. In many instances, however, the interaction of embodied perception and cultural mediation appears to intensify this experience.

The following reference works illustrate how these different positions within the analytical field operate in practice.

4. Reference Works

The analytical framework introduced above can be clarified through a number of reference works positioned across the diagram. These examples illustrate how contemporary sculpture operates between phenomenological perception and socially mediated meaning, and between spatial field and discrete object.

Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa's installation *Matrix* (2010) (Fig. 2), located within the Teshima Art Museum in Japan, offers a clear example of sculpture operating within a phenomenological register. The work consists of a thin concrete shell approximately 40 by 60 metres in plan and rising to a maximum height of around 4.5 metres. Two circular apertures puncture the roof, allowing light, air, and rain to enter the space. Water emerging from a natural spring gathers into small moving droplets and shallow pools that slowly traverse the gently sloping concrete floor before disappearing into discreet drainage points. Fine threads suspended from the roof openings oscillate with subtle air currents. Visitors are invited to sit or move freely within the space, encountering the installation not as a discrete object but as an environment that unfolds through duration and bodily presence.

Rather than presenting symbolic imagery or narrative content, *Matrix* directs attention to ephemeral phenomena—light, water, air, and movement. In this sense the installation operates through a mode of perception that precedes conceptual interpretation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes perception as an embodied relation in which the body encounters the world prior to reflective judgement (Merleau-Ponty, 2015, p. 162). Within *Matrix*, the viewer does not decode meaning but experiences shifting perceptual intensities: the brightness of light entering through the apertures, the movement of water across the floor, and the subtle oscillation of threads in the air. The work thus exemplifies what Henri Bergson describes as perception emerging within a field of images rather than through representational distance. Experience unfolds through duration, and perception becomes a lived relation between body and environment (Bergson, 1988, p. 219).

The installation therefore occupies the phenomenological–spatial quadrant of the analytical diagram presented earlier. Its minimal material presence does not represent the unrepresentable directly; rather, it creates conditions in which perception becomes heightened and intensified. In Brian Massumi's terms, the work operates through affect—subtle modulations of bodily sensation that precede cognitive interpretation. While the installation is inevitably framed by the institutional context of the museum, which shapes expectations of aesthetic contemplation, its primary operation remains grounded in embodied encounter. *Matrix* thus demonstrates how sculptural environments can generate experiences approaching the limits of presentation through the modulation of perceptual intensity rather than through symbolic representation.



Fig 2 - Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa. *Matrix*, 2010. Teshima Art Museum, Teshima, Japan. Available at: <https://benesse-artsite.jp/en/art/teshima-artmuseum.html> (Accessed 22 August 2025).

If *Matrix* demonstrates how sculpture can operate as a phenomenological environment, Carl Andre's serial sculptures show how comparable perceptual effects may arise through the repetition of discrete material units. Carl Andre's installation at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (Fig 3) demonstrates how repetition and seriality can produce a

perceptual encounter that approaches the limits of presentation. The exhibition *Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place, 1958–2010* brought together a series of the artist’s characteristic floor-based sculptures composed of repeated industrial units—arranged in simple rectilinear formations across the gallery floor. Rather than presenting a discrete sculptural object elevated on a pedestal, Andre’s works extend horizontally across the ground plane, inviting viewers to walk around or across them. Sculpture is thus experienced less as an isolated object than as a condition of spatial presence encountered through bodily movement.

Andre’s use of modular repetition retains clarity of individual elements while the total configuration exceeds immediate visual comprehension. Each unit is materially simple and recognisable, yet the accumulation of elements produces a field that resists being grasped as a single image. In this sense, the work may be read through Immanuel Kant’s account of the mathematical sublime (Kant, 2008, p. 78), insofar as the imagination can apprehend individual units while the total configuration resists immediate grasp as a whole.

Situated within the phenomenological–object quadrant of the previous analytical diagram, Andre’s sculpture operates primarily through the viewer’s embodied relation to material and space. The work does not represent the unrepresentable directly; instead it creates conditions in which perception confronts its own limits. As the viewer moves across the installation, attention shifts between individual units and the expanding field they collectively produce. This oscillation between part and whole generates a perceptual tension that cannot be fully resolved within a single act of representation. Through the disciplined repetition of ordinary materials, Andre’s sculpture thus demonstrates how minimal form can evoke experiences that approach the limits of presentation.



Fig 3 – Carl Andre. *Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place, 1958–2010*, installation view, Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris, 2016. Photograph © Connaissance des Arts / Anne-Sophie Lesage-Münch. Available at: <https://www.connaissancedesarts.com/arts-expositions/art-contemporain/mort-de-lartiste-carl-andre-pionnier-de-lart-minimal-les-mots-en-isme-cest-de-la-connerie-la-seule-chose-qui-compte-cest-lart-11188904/> (Accessed: 4 January 2026).

While Andre’s work foregrounds the viewer’s perceptual encounter with material and spatial order, other sculptural practices operate primarily through socially mediated meaning. Doris Salcedo’s installation *Untitled* for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial (2003) (Fig 4) consists of approximately 1,550 wooden chairs densely stacked within a narrow void between two buildings in central Istanbul. The chairs appear wedged precariously between the walls, forming an irregular vertical mass that rises through the urban gap. Although the materials are ordinary and familiar, their accumulation produces a striking spatial presence. The work evokes the traces of lives disrupted by conflict without depicting specific events or figures. Salcedo has described the installation as “a topography of war, so deeply inscribed in everyday life that the point at which the normal conditions of life end and war begin can no longer be clearly discerned” (Salcedo, 2023, p. 114). The chairs—objects ordinarily associated with domestic space and everyday use—become markers of absence when gathered in such overwhelming number. Their chaotic arrangement suggests the accumulation of individual stories that cannot be fully reconstructed. Rather than presenting a narrative representation of violence, the installation produces an affective encounter in which absence is felt through the material residue of ordinary objects.

A related strategy appears in Salcedo’s installation *Palimpsest* (2017) (Fig 5), in which the names of migrants who died attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea gradually emerge as droplets of water that appear briefly on the floor before evaporating. The names surface momentarily before fading, only to reappear elsewhere in a slow and continuous cycle. (Schneider Enriquez et al., 2016, p. 180). This process creates a fragile register of memory in which the act of naming simultaneously reveals and erases the individuals it commemorates. The vanishing names are a palimpsest where traces remain visible on a surface while never fully stabilising as permanent inscription. In contrast to conventional memorials that fix names in stone, *Palimpsest* renders remembrance ephemeral and unstable. The viewer encounters the names

through a temporal process of appearance and disappearance, experiencing loss as something that can be sensed but never fully grasped.

Together these works occupy the socially mediated register of the analytical diagram. Their meaning emerges through historical reference—war, displacement, migration—yet they avoid direct representation. Instead, Salcedo employs material traces and spatial accumulation to evoke absence without representing it directly. Through these strategies the works approach what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as the presentation of the unrepresentable: not the depiction of loss itself, but the exposure of the limits through which loss can be made perceptible (Nancy, 2003, p. 237).



Fig 4 - Doris Salcedo. *Untitled (Installation for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial)*, 2003. Installation view, Istanbul. Available at: <https://www.whitecube.com/artists/doris-salcedo> (Accessed: 4 January 2026).



Fig 5 – Doris Salcedo. *Palimpsest*, 2017. Installation view, White Cube, London. Available at: <https://www.whitecube.com/gallery-exhibitions/doris-salcedo-2018> (Accessed: 4 January 2026).

Salcedo's installations evoke absence through material traces and accumulated objects. A related engagement with collective memory appears in Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (1982) (Fig 6 & Fig 7), where historical loss is articulated through a large-scale spatial intervention. The memorial has been examined in greater detail in a previous conference paper by the author (Korzilius, 2022). Located in Washington, D.C., the memorial exemplifies a sculptural work that operates simultaneously through socially mediated meaning and embodied spatial experience. The memorial consists of two polished black granite walls that cut into the earth in a shallow V-shaped form approximately 150 metres in length, rising to a height of about 3.1 metres at their centre before tapering toward ground level at either end. The walls are engraved with the names of more than 58,000 U.S. servicemen and women who died or went missing during the Vietnam War. Situated on the National Mall between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, the memorial occupies a site of considerable symbolic and historical significance within the civic landscape of the United States.

The memorial's cultural resonance operates primarily through socially mediated meaning. Its location within the monumental axis of the Mall situates the work within a broader national narrative of memory and political history. The engraved names transform the memorial from an abstract monument into an archive of individual lives, linking collective history with personal loss. In this sense the work can be understood through Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image, in which the past becomes present within a moment of encounter (Pensky, 2004, p. 177). As visitors move along the wall, the act of reading names activates a shifting relationship between historical events and lived experience, producing a space in which memory and perception intersect.

At the same time, the memorial generates a powerful phenomenological experience. Visitors descend gradually into the earth as the walls rise around them, before ascending again as the memorial tapers toward its endpoints. This movement produces an embodied encounter in which the scale of the engraved names unfolds through duration rather than immediate visual comprehension. The viewer encounters individual names at close proximity while sensing the vast accumulation that exceeds direct apprehension. In this respect the memorial approaches what Kant describes as the mathematical sublime: a magnitude that can be perceived in its parts but resists being grasped as a totality (Kant, 2008, pp. 78–81). The

reflective surface of the granite further implicates the viewer within the memorial, merging the reflection of the living with the inscribed names of the dead.

Within the analytical diagram, the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* therefore occupies the socially mediated–spatial quadrant. Its power derives from the interplay between cultural symbolism and bodily movement through space, demonstrating how sculptural environments can produce encounters with historical loss that remain perceptible yet cannot be fully represented.



Fig 6 – Maya Lin. *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 1982. Washington, D.C. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343434> (Accessed: 17 January 2023).

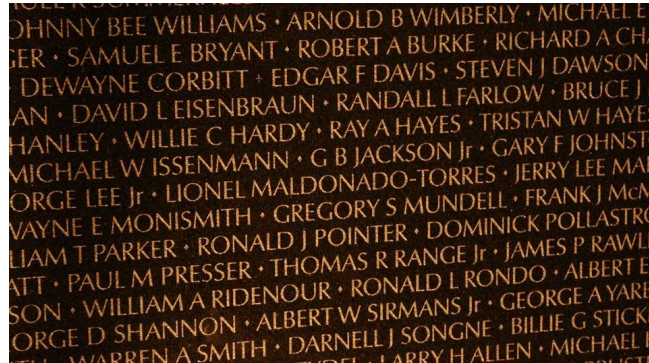


Fig 7 - Maya Lin. *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, detail, 1982. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government photograph. Available at: <https://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm> (Accessed: 2 April 2022).

Whereas Lin's memorial unfolds through movement across a landscape, Rachel Whiteread's *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* (2000) (Fig 8) condenses a similar engagement with memory into the form of a single architectural object, where absence itself becomes the primary material of the work. The memorial, located in Vienna's Judenplatz, commemorates approximately 65,000 Austrian Jews murdered during the Holocaust. The monument takes the form of a concrete cast of a library whose books are turned inward, their spines hidden from view. The exterior surfaces therefore appear as rows of sealed pages, while the structure is punctuated by doors that lack visible handles or openings. Elevated slightly on a plinth within the square, the memorial presents itself as a closed and inaccessible structure. An inscription surrounding the base records the number of Austrian Jewish victims and lists the concentration camps in which they were killed.

The work operates primarily through socially mediated historical meaning. Its location in Judenplatz—a site layered with Jewish history, including the remains of a medieval synagogue destroyed during the Vienna Gesera of 1421—situates the memorial within a dense field of historical memory. The inward-facing books evoke the loss of cultural knowledge and the silencing of voices extinguished by the Holocaust. Familiar objects are rendered strange: books, typically associated with learning and transmission, appear sealed and unreadable. Through this inversion Whiteread transforms an everyday object into a material sign of absence.

At the same time the memorial produces a powerful phenomenological perception. The scale of the structure and the uniform repetition of its cast volumes create a surface that can be perceived but not easily interpreted. The viewer confronts a monument that appears legible yet remains fundamentally closed. In this sense the work approaches the limits of presentation. The Holocaust itself resists direct depiction; the enormity of historical trauma exceeds the capacity of language or image to convey it fully. Whiteread therefore avoids figurative representation and instead employs negative casting to produce presence through absence.

This strategy resonates with Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of presentation at the limits (Nancy, 2003, pp. 222–223), in which what appears does not present a determinate object but exposes the limits of appearance itself. The memorial's sealed volumes and inaccessible doors emphasise this tension between presence and absence. Within the analytical diagram, the *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* therefore occupies the socially mediated–object register. Its affective force arises from the convergence of historical memory, architectural form, and the viewer's bodily encounter with a monument that gestures toward a loss that cannot be fully represented.

Whiteread's memorial thus demonstrates how sculptural form can evoke historical loss not through representation, but through the careful articulation of absence, positioning the work at the limits of what can be made present in material form.



Fig 8 - Rachel Whiteread. *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial*, 2000. Vienna. Available at: <https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/designing-for-typologies/a2623-judenplatz-holocaust-memorial-by-rachel-whiteread-a-plethora-of-signs/> (Accessed: 17 January 2023).

The works discussed above illustrate how contemporary sculpture operates across different registers of perception and cultural meaning. The following section examines how these strategies inform the author's own practice. The practice-based research investigates three related sculptural strategies: spatial fields of repeated elements, negative sculptural form, and relational configurations in which absence becomes the primary structuring element.

5. Practice Case Studies

The following practice-based case studies situate the author's work within the analytical framework outlined above and examine these questions through a series of sculptural strategies, each emphasising a distinct relationship between material presence, spatial experience, and cultural reference.

On the Record (Fig 9) is a memorial to British journalists killed while reporting in war zones. It investigates how repetition, materiality, negative form, and the sequential arrangement of elements generate experiences that approaching the limits of presentation. The installation consists of a field of weathering steel plates organised within an architectural framework, producing a spatial field rather than a single discrete object. Each plate contains silhouetted fragments of war correspondents derived from archival photographs. The silhouettes are positioned in varying orientations, introducing an element of visual disorder that echoes the disorientation and instability experienced in war reporting. As viewers move through the installation, perception shifts between individual silhouettes and the larger spatial configuration they collectively produce.

The work operates initially through phenomenological experience. The repeated plates establish a rhythmic spatial order that structures bodily movement and attention. Each silhouette can be perceived individually, yet the overall configuration resists immediate visual comprehension. The installation therefore unfolds sequentially rather than as a single image. In this respect the work resonates with Immanuel Kant's account of the mathematical sublime, in which magnitude exceeds the imagination's capacity for totalisation. The silhouettes function as negative spaces: absent bodies that evoke the presence of journalists who have been killed while documenting conflict.

Materially, the installation is constructed from Corten (weathering) steel, whose oxidising surface gradually develops a layer of rust. This slow transformation introduces a temporal dimension, suggesting erosion and the passage of time. The plates are further engraved with fragments of quotations drawn from war correspondents' writings. These inscriptions appear across the surfaces as partial testimonies, forming a palimpsest of journalistic witnessing that accumulates across the installation. In this respect the work resonates with Doris Salcedo's use of inscription and erasure in *Palimpsest*, where language appears only temporarily before fading. In *On the Record*, however, the engraved texts remain materially fixed even as the weathering steel continues to transform around them, producing a tension between permanence and gradual decay.

Through the interaction of spatial repetition, negative form, and textual inscription, *On the Record* operates across both phenomenological experience and socially mediated meaning. Rather than representing conflict directly, the installation

establishes perceptual conditions in which absence, scale, and temporal transformation intensify awareness of historical memory. In this sense the work approaches what Jean-Luc Nancy describes as presentation at the limit where there is “no longer either figure, figuration, or form” (Nancy, 2003, p. 229). What emerges is not the presentation of a determinate meaning, but the exposure of a limit at which meaning cannot be fully grasped or stabilised as representation.



Fig 9 - Lester Korzilius. *On the Record*, 2026. Corten (weathering) steel, limestone, 2.4 x 5.5 x 5.5m. Staffordshire, UK. CGI visualisation by the author.

While *On the Record* occupies the phenomenological and spatial field region of the conceptual framework outlined earlier, *Count Me Among the Almonds* (Fig 10) operates within the phenomenological and discrete object register. Rather than unfolding through movement within a spatial field, the work concentrates its investigation within a single sculptural form. The sculpture explores presence through the language of the negative.

The work is constructed from the negative imprint of hundreds of fragmented human heads and faces. Using digital modelling techniques, a three-dimensional scan of a human head was employed as a cutting tool against a solid volume approximately three-quarters the height of a human body. The resulting negatively carved form was then translated into a series of 6 mm slices, which served as templates for laser-cut wooden sheets. These layers were subsequently assembled to reconstruct the digital model physically, producing a contoured structure in which the layered fabrication process remains visible across the surface. Through this process the human figure operates not as an image but as a generative absence embedded within the sculpture.

Although the work is produced through the repeated use of the human head as a forming agent, the resulting form is sufficiently abstracted that its origin is not immediately recognisable. Instead, the viewer encounters a dense topography of cavities and recesses whose contours subtly echo human physiognomy without resolving into identifiable portraits. Perception oscillates between recognition and abstraction: the presence of the human body is sensed, yet never fully presented. The viewer is first confronted by a dense abstract form, gradually picks up hints of familiar features, before losing them again into the overall mass. The work therefore withholds stable recognition even as it repeatedly invites it. In this respect the work resonates with Henri Bergson's account of perception as a selective process within a broader field of images, in which forms emerge gradually through the viewer's engagement rather than appearing as fully determined representations (Bergson, 1988, p. 9).

The title references Paul Celan's poem "*Zähle die Mandeln*" ("Count the Almonds") (Celan, 2002, pp. 44–45), whose imagery of almond blossoms evokes fragility, persistence, and remembrance. Celan's poetry repeatedly confronts the difficulty of speaking after historical catastrophe, where language must bear witness while acknowledging its own insufficiency. The repeated voids carved into the form function as traces rather than portraits, suggesting a multiplicity of human presences that are registered but never fully revealed.

Negative form therefore becomes the central sculptural strategy. The absent heads do not appear as images but as cavities carved into the body of the sculpture. In this sense the work engages what Kant describes as the presentation of something that cannot be fully grasped by imagination, and what later commentators identify as a negative presentation of the unrepresentable. As Rodolphe Gasché notes in his discussion of Kant via Lyotard, avant-garde works may testify to the existence of the absolute not by presenting it directly but through what Kant called a “negative presentation” (Gasché, 2007, p. 319). Through these negatively carved traces, the sculpture evokes the presence of human figures while simultaneously refusing their direct representation.

The work therefore operates through absence rather than depiction. The human form functions as a generative void within the sculpture’s structure, producing an experience in which presence emerges only through what has been removed. In this way the sculpture approaches what this paper describes as the unrepresentable: not through the representation of loss, but through the sculptural articulation of absence as form.



Fig 10- Lester Korzilius. *Count Me Among the Almonds*, 2024–25. MDF and acrylic paint, 136 × 98 × 110 cm. Photograph by the author.



Fig 11- Lester Korzilius. *Count Me Among the Almonds* (detail), 2024–25. MDF and acrylic paint, 136 × 98 × 110 cm. Photograph by the author.

While *Count Me Among the Almonds* explores absence through negative sculptural form, the following work extends this investigation by structuring absence relationally within space.

Where Nothing Still Holds (Fig 12) shifts toward the socially mediated register of the conceptual framework outlined earlier. The work presents three negative castings of the human form suspended in space so that their arrangement generates a further negative volume between them. This produces a double absence: the voids created by each casting are intensified by the empty space between them. The viewer does not encounter a complete body, but a set of suspended traces whose intervals become as significant as their material surfaces. Perception moves between the forms and the void they delimit, so that absence is experienced relationally rather than simply observed as lack.

The missing figures become a presence of their own—a trace of someone or something no longer here, yet profoundly felt. The title derives from the closing line of an early English translation of Paul Celan’s poem *Tenebrae*, which evokes the aftermath of trauma and loss and indirectly recalls the historical context of the Holocaust. In the poem, absence functions as a means of signalling presence indirectly, a strategy that is echoed in the sculpture. The title is not used illustratively, but to reference the work’s concern with presence sustained only through loss, residue, and relational absence.

Materially, the work is formed from fabric soaked in Jesmonite and shaped over the contours of a human body before being coated with iron oxide. The surface has developed a deep rusted patina, introducing a temporal dimension of erosion and decay. This gradual process of oxidation reinforces the work’s meditation on fragility and impermanence, while also introducing what Henri Bergson would describe as a durational dimension, in which form is understood not as a fixed object but as something that unfolds through time (Bergson, 1988, p. 70).

The spatial relation between the suspended forms underscores the role of interval and exposure. Rather than presenting a complete body, the sculpture articulates presence through the void between fragments. In this way the work approaches what this paper describes as the unrepresentable: not through the direct representation of loss, but through the sculptural articulation of absence itself.



Fig 12 - Lester Korzilius. *Where Nothing Still Holds*, 2025. Jesmonite, fabric, iron oxide, and steel, 83 x 84 x 66 cm. Photograph by the author.



Fig 13 - Lester Korzilius. *Where Nothing Still Holds* (detail), 2025. Jesmonite, fabric, iron oxide, and steel, 83 x 84 x 66 cm. Photograph by the author.

Taken together, these works demonstrate how different sculptural strategies engage absence as both a perceptual and cultural condition. Placed alongside the preceding works discussed in this section, *Where Nothing Still Holds* extends the investigation from spatial field (*On the Record*), through negative sculptural form (*Count Me Among the Almonds*), toward a relational configuration in which absence itself becomes the primary structuring element of the work. Across these works, sculptural form evokes the unrepresentable not through representation but through spatial structure, absence, and the limits of perceptual comprehension.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how contemporary sculpture can evoke experiences that approach what this paper describes as the unrepresentable. Drawing on Kant's account of the sublime and subsequent philosophical developments in the work of Bergson, Deleuze, Massumi, Nancy, and Gasché, the paper has argued that the unrepresentable does not refer to an invisible object or transcendental realm beyond experience. Rather, it emerges where presentation encounters its own limits—where perception confronts forms that exceed the imagination's capacity to organise them.

The theoretical framework outlined earlier identifies three interrelated dimensions through which such experiences may arise: the structural limits of presentation identified by Kant, the dynamic structure of perception described by Bergson and developed by Deleuze through intensity and sensation, and the exposure of absence within presentation articulated in the work of Nancy and Gasché.

The analytical diagram introduced in this paper offered a conceptual method for situating sculptural works across two intersecting registers: phenomenological perception and socially mediated meaning, and spatial field and discrete object. The reference works examined demonstrate how different sculptural strategies operate within this framework. Installations such as Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa's *Matrix* emphasise embodied perception and durational experience, generating heightened sensitivity to light, water, and movement. Carl Andre's serial sculptures demonstrate how repetition and accumulation can produce perceptual tension between part and whole, approaching the limits of visual comprehension. By contrast, works by Doris Salcedo, Maya Lin, and Rachel Whiteread operate primarily through socially mediated registers of memory and historical meaning, where absence and loss are articulated through material traces, spatial interventions, and the transformation of familiar objects.

The practice-based works discussed in the final section extend these strategies through sculptural investigations of repetition, negative form, and relational spatial configurations. *On the Record* explores how serial spatial structures and material transformation generate a durational experience of absence and memory. *Count Me Among the Almonds* investigates negative sculptural form, where the human figure appears only through cavities and traces embedded within the object. *Where Nothing Still Holds* further develops this investigation by structuring absence relationally in space, allowing the void between suspended forms to become the primary site of perceptual experience.

Taken together, these works demonstrate that sculpture does not present the unrepresentable directly. Instead, it establishes perceptual, spatial, and material conditions in which the limits of presentation become perceptible. Through strategies such as repetition, absence, scale, and spatial interval, sculptural form can generate experiences in which presentation exposes its own limits and meaning remains partially withdrawn, resisting closure within representation or signification.

Rather than depicting what cannot be shown, sculptural practice exposes the conditions under which perception encounters its own limits. In doing so, contemporary sculpture reveals how material form can establish perceptual conditions in which absence, memory, and historical experience become perceptible while remaining resistant to full representation, demonstrating how sculpture can operate as a medium in which the limits of presentation are not overcome, but made perceptible.

Acknowledgements

This paper forms part of the author's practice-based PhD at the University of Leeds, UK. The author thanks Professor Joanne Crawford and Dr Cesar Cornejo for their supervision and guidance.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No datasets were generated or analysed during this study. The research is based on published theoretical sources and documented artworks, all of which are cited in the text. Images of the author's artworks are provided by the author.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

CRediT Author Statement

Lester Korzilius: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Visualization; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing.

Reference list

- Bergson, H. (1988). *Matter and Memory* (N. M. Paul & W. S. Palmer, Trans.). Zone Books.
- Celan, P. (2002). *Poems of Paul Celan* (M. Hamburger, Trans.; Revised and expanded). Persea Books.
- Deleuze, G. (2003). *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (D. W. Smith, Trans.). Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. (2011). *Bergsonism* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.; 7th pr). Zone Books.
- Deleuze, G. (2014). *Difference and Repetition* (2nd ed). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Gasché, R. (2007). *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Philosophy*. Stanford University Press.
- Heikkilä, M. (2008). *At the Limits of Presentation: Coming-into-Presence and its Aesthetic Relevance in Jean-Luc Nancy's Philosophy*. Peter Lang.
- Kant, I. (2008). *Critique of Judgement* (N. Walker, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Korzilius, L. (2022). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial – Presenting the Unpresentable. *Proceedings of the International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism-ICCAUA*, 5(1), 523–541. <https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2022EN0014>
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2015). *Phenomenology of Perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). Forgotten Books.
- Nancy, J.-L. (2003). *A Finite Thinking* (S. Sparks, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Pensky, M. (2004). Method and time: Benjamin's dialectical images. In D. S. Ferris (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (pp. 177–198). Cambridge University Press.
- Salcedo, D. (with Fondation Beyeler). (2023). *Doris Salcedo* (F. Hesse & S. Keller, Eds). Hatje Cantz.
- Schneider Enriquez, M., Salcedo, D., & Khandekar, N. (with Harvard Art Museums). (2016). *Doris Salcedo: The Materiality of Mourning*. Harvard Art Museums.