

Chapter 16

Evoking the Unpresentable: Strategies in Contemporary Sculpture

Lester Korzilius, FAIA, RIBA

School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom

Corresponding author's e-mail: lk@lesterkorzilius.com

Corresponding Author: Lester Korzilius

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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 chapter examines how sculptural form may evoke what is here described 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.

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 (Kant, 2008, p. 78). 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 foundation, the chapter draws on later developments in the philosophies of perception, affect, and presentation, particularly the work of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Rodolphe Gasché. These perspectives allow the unpresentable to be considered not as a hidden content waiting to be revealed, but as an experience in which the limits of presentation become perceptible through material, spatial, and affective conditions.

The chapter proposes that sculptural experiences approaching the unpresentable 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.

Because sculpture operates through material form, spatial organisation, and bodily movement, these questions also bear on broader discussions of spatial narrative. Sculptural works can unfold sequentially through movement, accumulate meaning across a field of elements, or condense historical and cultural memory within a discrete object. In each case, space does not merely contain the work but participates actively in shaping how it is perceived and interpreted.

To examine these relationships, the chapter introduces an analytical framework that maps selected sculptural works across two intersecting axes: phenomenological perception versus socially mediated meaning, and

spatial field versus discrete object. The framework is not intended to categorise artworks rigidly. Rather, it provides a means of comparing how different sculptural strategies organise perception, material presence, and cultural meaning in relation to the unpresentable.

The chapter 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 reference works by 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, negative form, 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 chapter argues that sculpture does not present the unpresentable directly. Rather, it establishes perceptual, material, and spatial conditions in which the limits of presentation become perceptible. By combining philosophical analysis with practice-based case studies, the chapter proposes a conceptual framework for understanding how contemporary sculpture can evoke experiences approaching the unpresentable without relying on representational imagery.

The chapter adopts a conceptual and practice-based methodology, using comparative analysis of selected sculptural works and an analytical diagram to examine how different material and spatial strategies make the limits of presentation perceptible.

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. They also establish a basis for considering how sculptural meaning unfolds spatially: through bodily movement, material presence, temporal duration, and the relation between what is presented and what remains withdrawn.

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. This distinction is important for sculpture because a work need not depict an overwhelming or absent object in order to evoke the sublime. Its material and spatial organisation may instead establish conditions in which the viewer experiences the inadequacy of presentation itself.

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 unpresentable will be explored later in this chapter.

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. The viewer does not stand outside the sculptural work as a detached observer. Rather, perception emerges relationally as the body moves through, around, or in proximity to material form.

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 has particular relevance to spatial art. A sculpture encountered through movement does not disclose itself instantaneously as a single image. Its form is apprehended successively, through changing viewpoints, bodily orientation, memory, and anticipation. 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).

In this context, force should not be understood only as literal physical pressure. It may also refer to rhythm, tension, weight, interval, repetition, gravity, or the relation between material elements and the body that perceives them. Sculpture can render such forces perceptible through their effects, even when the forces themselves remain invisible. 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.

This does not mean that affect exists wholly outside history, culture, or social context. Massumi describes affect as "asocial, but not presocial": it may include social elements while operating according to a logic that cannot be reduced to established meaning or representation (Massumi, 2002, p. 30). This qualification is important for the present chapter because phenomenological and socially mediated experiences should not be treated as mutually exclusive categories. A sculptural work may register first as a bodily intensity while also accumulating historical, cultural, or symbolic resonance.

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 not a stable condition or a completed object. Rather, what comes into presence "does not become present"; it continues to arrive at a limit (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). Sense is not a hidden content lying behind the work. It occurs through an opening or spacing in which presence remains incomplete and continually in the process of arriving. Heikkilä describes this as *espacement*, or "spacing": the opening of spaces in which presence comes into being without becoming fixed as a stable meaning (Heikkilä, 2008, p. 75). 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).

This account has a particular relevance to sculpture. The intervals between forms, the voids within objects, and the movement of the viewer through space may all become active elements of presentation. Space is not simply a neutral container for a sculptural object; it becomes the medium through which presence and withdrawal are articulated. 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. They also clarify how sculptural meaning may unfold spatially and temporally: through movement, interval, repetition, material trace, and the interplay between embodied perception and cultural memory. 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.

Analytical Framework

The theoretical framework outlined above informs the analytical model used in this chapter. 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 provides a comparative method for examining how different sculptural strategies organise perception, material presence, spatial experience, and cultural meaning in relation to the unpresentable.

The distinction between phenomenological perception and socially mediated meaning does not imply that these are mutually exclusive categories. Most works operate across both registers, although one may predominate in shaping how the work is experienced. The purpose of the framework is therefore not to impose rigid classifications, but to identify tendencies within individual works and to compare the different ways in which sculpture may approach the limits of presentation.

The first, vertical axis distinguishes between phenomenological and socially mediated registers of perception. By phenomenological perception, this chapter refers to modes of experience grounded primarily in embodied sensation, bodily movement, spatial orientation, and material presence. Such experiences arise through the viewer's relation to scale, texture, weight, repetition, light, and interval. This reflects Henri Bergson's account of perception as a selective participation within a field of images rather than as a mental reconstruction of reality (Bergson, 1988, pp. 9, 20). It also aligns with Brian Massumi's account of affect as intensity that registers before it is fully qualified as emotion or meaning (Massumi, 2002, pp. 27–28).

By contrast, socially mediated meaning refers to forms of perception shaped by cultural frameworks, historical memory, and shared symbolic structures through which artworks are interpreted. In these instances, meaning does not arise only through immediate sensory experience but also through the viewer's recognition of historical references, memorial forms, inscriptions, familiar materials, or culturally embedded associations. Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image is relevant here: the past becomes legible through its sudden constellation with the present, allowing memory and contemporary perception to intersect within the experience of the work (Pensky, 2004, p. 177).

The second, horizontal axis distinguishes between sculptural works that operate primarily as spatial fields and those that function principally as discrete objects. Spatial-field works unfold through movement across or within an environment. Perception emerges sequentially through duration, bodily navigation, changing viewpoints, and the accumulation of sensory impressions. In such works, spatial narrative is produced through the viewer's movement: the experience cannot be reduced to a single viewpoint or grasped instantaneously as one image. This reflects Bergson's account of duration as lived time, in which successive moments interpenetrate rather than appearing as isolated units (Bergson, 1988, pp. 70, 135).

Discrete sculptural objects, by contrast, concentrate experience within a bounded material form encountered from the outside. Although the viewer may still move around the work, the sculpture presents itself as an identifiable object rather than as an environmental field. This distinction is not absolute. Some works occupy intermediate positions, particularly where a discrete object reorganises the surrounding space or where an installation retains the visual concentration of an object. The axis therefore provides a simplified means of analysing how sculptural form structures spatial experience.

The framework also draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's account of presentation at its limit. For Nancy, art does not simply represent objects or meanings but exposes the event of presentation itself, where sense appears at the threshold of signification (Nancy, 2003, pp. 222–223, 237). This has particular relevance to sculpture because material form, interval, void, and spatial relation may all contribute to the experience of presence and withdrawal. A work may approach the unpresentable where totality cannot be grasped, where meaning is disclosed indirectly through absence, or where what is sensed exceeds stable conceptual closure.

The diagram should therefore not be understood as suggesting that the unpresentable emerges only at a single point within the field. Experiences approaching the unpresentable may arise through predominantly phenomenological means, through socially mediated meaning, or through an interaction between the two. In many cases, the combination of embodied perception and cultural mediation intensifies the experience. Similarly, both spatial fields and discrete objects may evoke the unpresentable through different strategies: accumulation, repetition, negative form, material trace, duration, interval, or the articulation of absence.

The analytical model serves as a conceptual and methodological tool rather than as a fixed taxonomy. It allows the selected reference works and practice-based sculptures to be situated within a shared field of comparison while preserving their individual complexity. The following section applies this framework to a series of reference

works, examining how each establishes material and spatial conditions in which the limits of presentation become perceptible.

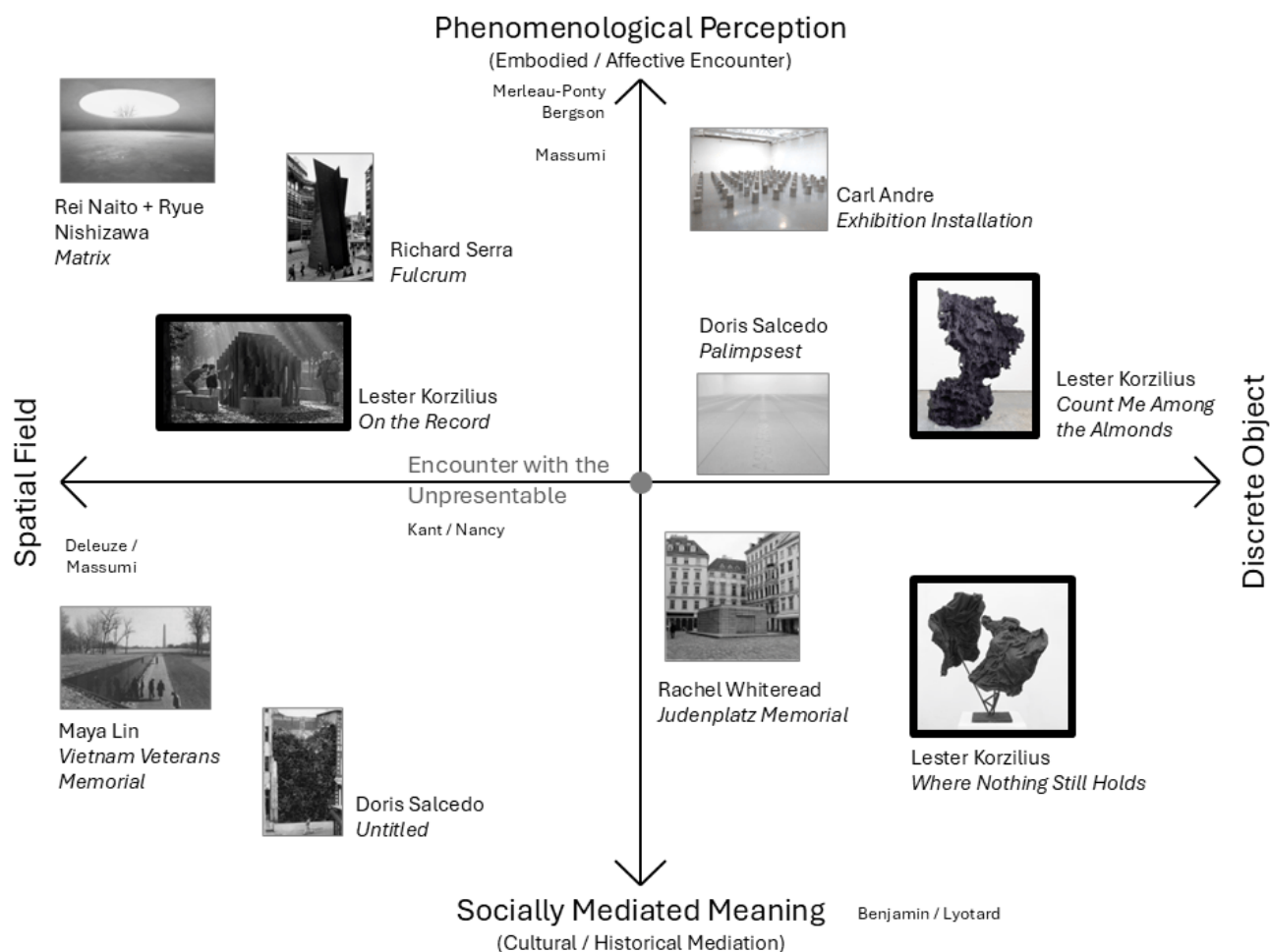


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram mapping selected sculptural works across two axes.

The diagram maps selected works across two intersecting axes: phenomenological perception versus socially mediated meaning, and spatial field versus discrete object. It should not be understood as suggesting that the unpresentable emerges only at a single point within the field. Rather, experiences approaching the unpresentable may arise through either predominantly phenomenological or socially mediated registers, and through both spatial fields and discrete objects. In many instances, however, the interaction of embodied perception and cultural mediation appears to intensify the experience. The diagram therefore identifies tendencies rather than fixed categories. It allows different sculptural strategies—including repetition, accumulation, negative form, duration, interval, material trace, and the articulation of absence—to be compared within a shared analytical framework.

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 may operate between phenomenological perception and socially mediated meaning, and between spatial field and discrete object. They also demonstrate how sculptural works can produce spatial narratives: not necessarily through linear storytelling, but through movement, accumulation, material trace, embodied perception, and the gradual disclosure of absence.



Figure 2. Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa. *Matrix*, 2010. Teshima Art Museum, Teshima, Japan. Image source: Benesse Art Site Naoshima

Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa's installation *Matrix* (2010) (Figure 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. Its minimal material presence does not represent the unpresentable 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 (Massumi, 2002, pp. 27–28). 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 experience. *Matrix* thus demonstrates how a sculptural environment can generate experiences approaching the limits of presentation through the modulation of perceptual intensity rather than through symbolic representation.



Figure 3. Carl Andre. *Carl Andre: Sculpture as Place*, 1958–2010, installation view, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, 2016. Image source: Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris / exhibition documentation.

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. Andre's installation at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris (Figure 3), shown as part of *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 the clarity of individual elements while allowing the total configuration to exceed 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, insofar as the imagination can apprehend individual units while the total configuration resists immediate comprehension as a whole (Kant, 2008, p. 78).

Situated within the phenomenological-object quadrant of the 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 demonstrates how minimal form can evoke experiences that approach the limits of presentation.



Figure 4. Doris Salcedo: (a) *Untitled* installation for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial, 2003. Installation view, Istanbul. Image source: Doris Salcedo / 8th International Istanbul Biennial documentation; (b) *Palimpsest*, 2017. Installation view. Image source: exhibition documentation.

While Andre's work foregrounds the viewer's perceptual experience of material and spatial order, other sculptural practices operate primarily through socially mediated meaning. Doris Salcedo's *Untitled* installation for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial (2003) (Figure 4a) 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 spatial experience in which absence is felt through the material residue of ordinary objects. The work therefore establishes a spatial narrative of loss without relying on figurative depiction: the viewer confronts an urban void transformed into a dense accumulation of displaced domestic traces.

A related strategy appears in Salcedo's *Palimpsest* (2017) (Figure 4b), 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 form 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 unpresentable: not the depiction of loss itself, but the exposure of the limits through which loss can be made perceptible (Nancy, 2003, p. 237).



Figure 5. Maya Lin, *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, 1982: (a) view towards the Washington Monument. Image source: Susanne Griswold, 1986 / JSTOR source record; (b) detail of engraved names. Image source: United States Government / National Park Service.

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) (Figure 5), 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 experience (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 spatial narrative 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 experiences of historical loss that remain perceptible yet cannot be fully represented.



Figure 6. Rachel Whiteread, *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial*, 2000. Vienna. Overall view and detail. Image source: Rethinking the Future.

Whereas Lin's memorial unfolds through movement across a landscape, Rachel Whiteread's *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* (2000) (Figure 6) condenses a related 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, 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 experience. 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 limit, in which what appears does not present a determinate object but exposes the limits of appearance itself (Nancy, 2003, pp. 222–223). 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 experience of a monument that gestures toward a loss that cannot be fully represented.

Whiteread's memorial 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.

The works discussed above illustrate how contemporary sculpture operates across different registers of perception and cultural meaning. They also demonstrate that the unpresentable may be approached through several distinct but related sculptural strategies: phenomenological intensification, spatial movement, serial

repetition, material accumulation, negative form, and the articulation of absence. The following section examines how these strategies inform the author's own practice-based research.

Practice Case Studies

The reference works discussed above establish a field of sculptural strategies through which the unrepresentable may be approached: spatial immersion, repetition, accumulation, negative form, material trace, inscription, and the articulation of absence. The following case studies examine how these strategies are developed within the author's own practice. The three works discussed here—*On the Record*, *Count Me Among the Almonds*, and *Where Nothing Still Holds*—occupy different positions within the analytical framework. Together they move from a large-scale public memorial proposal to a discrete object structured through negative form, to a relational sculpture in which absence is produced between suspended material traces.



Figure 7. Lester Korzilius, *On the Record*, 2026. Corten steel and limestone, 2.4 × 5.5 × 5.5 m. Staffordshire, UK. CGI visualisation by the author.

On the Record (Figure 7) is a public art proposal conceived as a memorial to British journalists killed while reporting in war zones. The work consists of a field of weathering steel plates arranged within a landscape setting. Each plate contains cut-out silhouettes derived from archival photographs of war correspondents. These silhouettes are partial, fragmented, and differently oriented, so that the human figure appears not as a complete representation but as an absence cut into the material. The viewer experiences the work by moving around the field of plates, encountering successive fragments that accumulate across space.

The work operates through both phenomenological and socially mediated registers. Phenomenologically, the viewer experiences the plates through scale, repetition, bodily movement, and changing orientation. The work is not apprehended from a single viewpoint; rather, it unfolds sequentially as the viewer moves around and between the elements. The repetition of plates produces a tension between individual unit and collective field, recalling Kant's account of the mathematical sublime, where magnitude is apprehended through parts but resists complete imaginative synthesis (Kant, 2008, pp. 78–81). In *On the Record*, this tension is not produced by vast natural scale, but by the accumulation of repeated forms and absences within a spatial sequence.

At the same time, the work is strongly socially mediated. The cut-out figures refer to journalists whose deaths are understood through historical, political, and ethical contexts. Their absence is not generic; it is shaped

by the cultural meaning of journalism, witness, conflict, and public memory. The silhouettes are drawn from photographs, but the transformation from photographic image to negative void prevents the work from becoming portraiture. The journalist is not represented as a stable image; rather, the body becomes a missing presence within the steel plate. This approach aligns with Nancy's account of presentation at its limit, where art does not simply present an object but exposes the threshold at which presence and absence remain unresolved (Nancy, 2003, pp. 222–223, 237).

Materiality is central to this operation. Weathering steel introduces time into the work through oxidation, staining, and gradual surface change. The rusted surface does not merely provide colour or texture; it gives the work a temporal register, linking memorialisation to erosion, exposure, and duration. This material process resonates with Bergson's account of duration as lived time rather than measurable sequence (Bergson, 1988, pp. 70, 135). As the steel changes over time, the memorial resists the fixed permanence conventionally associated with monumental commemoration. It remains materially present while registering processes of weathering and loss.

The engraved quotations further complicate the relation between presence and absence. They introduce language as a trace of testimony, yet the quotations do not restore the absent figures to presence. Instead, they form a palimpsest across the weathering surface, adding another layer of memory that must be read fragment by fragment. In Benjaminian terms, the work can be understood as bringing past and present into constellation: the historical deaths of journalists become legible in the viewer's present movement through the work (Pensky, 2004, p. 177). On the Record therefore occupies a position between socially mediated meaning and spatial field. Its approach to the unpresentable depends on the interaction of material trace, bodily movement, historical memory, and negative form.



Figure 8. Lester Korzilius, *Count Me Among the Almonds*, 2024–25. MDF and acrylic paint, 136 × 98 × 110 cm. Overall view and detail. Photographs by the author.

Count Me Among the Almonds (Figure 8) develops the strategy of negative form within a discrete sculptural object. The work is made from layered MDF and acrylic paint and measures approximately 136 × 98 × 110 cm. Its form is generated through a digital process in which a 3D scan of a human head is used as a cutting tool. Rather than producing a positive representation of the head, the process removes material from a solid mass. The resulting sculpture contains hundreds of cavities and fragments that retain traces of the human form while preventing it from being directly recognised.

This use of negative form is central to the work's relation to the unpresentable. The sculpture does not depict a face or head; it presents the trace of a form that has been removed. The viewer senses that the work derives from the human figure, but that origin remains partially withheld. The human presence is therefore registered as absence, through the voids and interruptions that structure the object. This recalls Gasché's account of negative presentation, in which what matters is not the presentation of an absent object, but the presentation of the limit or withdrawal that conditions appearance (Gasché, 2007, p. 319).

The layered fabrication process intensifies this effect. Because the object is built from many laser-cut strata, the cavities appear as accumulated sections rather than continuous volumes. The contouring both reveals and obscures the original source. From one viewpoint, the viewer may perceive a formal abstraction; from another, the memory of a face or head begins to emerge. The work therefore stages a perceptual oscillation between recognition and non-recognition. It does not provide a complete image, but invites the viewer to infer what is missing.

The title refers to Paul Celan's poem "Count the Almonds", whose language evokes memory, bitterness, counting, and the persistence of address in the aftermath of loss (Celan, 2002). This reference does not function as a simple explanatory key. Rather, it gives the work a socially mediated resonance that exists alongside its phenomenological operation. The viewer may experience the object first through material form, surface, scale, and void; the title then opens the work toward questions of memory, absence, and historical trauma. The work therefore occupies a position between discrete object and socially mediated meaning, while retaining a strong phenomenological dimension through its material and spatial structure.

The black acrylic surface also contributes to the work's operation. It visually unifies the layered construction while pushing the form toward shadow and recession. The cavities become difficult to stabilise visually: they appear at once as cuts, traces, voids, and partial presences. This instability resonates with Kant's account of the sublime as involving a failure of adequate presentation (Kant, 2008, pp. 78–81), but here that failure is produced through the material logic of the object rather than through natural magnitude. *Count Me Among the Almonds* approaches the unrepresentable by making absence materially present, while withholding the source that would allow the viewer to resolve the work into representation.



Figure 9. Lester Korzilius, *Where Nothing Still Holds*, 2025. Jesmonite, fabric, iron oxide, and steel, 83 × 84 × 66 cm. Overall view and detail. Photographs by the author.

Where Nothing Still Holds (Figure 9) continues the investigation of absence and negative form, but shifts the emphasis from a single bounded object to a relational configuration of suspended material traces. The work is composed of Jesmonite, fabric, iron oxide, and steel, and measures approximately 83 × 84 × 66 cm. It consists of three negative castings derived from the human torso. These forms are not solid representations of bodies; they are hollowed remnants produced from the absence of bodies. Their suspended arrangement creates a further negative space between them, so that absence operates both within each form and in the interval that separates them.

The work therefore produces what might be described as a double absence. First, each torso is a negative cast: the body is implied through the space it no longer occupies. Second, the three suspended forms generate a relational void between themselves, making the interval an active part of the sculpture. This has a close relation to Nancy's concept of spacing, or *espacement*, in which sense emerges through the opening between presences rather than through a closed or self-contained form (Heikkilä, 2008, p. 75; Nancy, 2003, pp. 222–223). In *Where Nothing Still Holds*, meaning is not located solely in the objects but in the relation between them, and in the viewer's bodily awareness of the space they hold open.

Materially, the rusted surface gives the work a temporal and corporeal charge. Iron oxide suggests decay, mortality, exposure, and the passage of time. Yet the rust also gives the fragile Jesmonite and fabric forms the

appearance of corroded metal, creating an ambiguity between bodily trace and industrial material. The viewer perceives the sculpture as both delicate and resistant, both skin-like and mineral. This material ambiguity contributes to an affective experience that cannot be reduced to symbolic meaning. In Massumi's terms, the work operates through intensity before it resolves into emotion or interpretation (Massumi, 2002, pp. 27–28).

The title, *Where Nothing Still Holds*, derives from an early English translation of Paul Celan's "Tenebrae", linking the work to a poetic language of loss, address, and absence (Celan, 2002). As with *Count Me Among the Almonds*, the Celan reference does not provide an illustrative subject. Instead, it deepens the work's relation to absence by placing the sculptural void in dialogue with a poetic articulation of what cannot be fully spoken. The title directs attention to holding and non-holding: the forms appear to retain the trace of bodies, yet what they hold is precisely an absence.

Within the analytical framework, *Where Nothing Still Holds* occupies an intermediate position. It is not an environmental field in the same sense as *On the Record*, but neither is it a wholly discrete object. Its meaning depends on spatial relation, suspension, interval, and the viewer's movement around the work. It also operates between phenomenological and socially mediated registers. The viewer may first experience the work through bodily recognition, scale, surface, and material tension; the title, rusted materiality, and Celan reference then extend that experience toward cultural memory, mortality, and loss.

The work therefore demonstrates how the unpresentable may be approached not through representation, but through a sculptural configuration in which absence becomes spatially and materially active. The negative castings, rusted surfaces, and suspended intervals do not disclose a determinate meaning. Instead, they establish conditions in which presence is continually accompanied by withdrawal. In this sense, *Where Nothing Still Holds* extends the logic of negative presentation from the bounded object into a relational spatial structure.

Taken together, these three practice case studies show how sculptural strategies can be combined to evoke the unpresentable across different registers. *On the Record* operates through public scale, spatial sequence, inscription, and socially mediated memory. *Count Me Among the Almonds* condenses absence into a discrete object structured by negative form and partial recognition. *Where Nothing Still Holds* extends the negative into a relational field of suspended traces and intervals. Across the three works, the unpresentable is not treated as a subject to be represented. It is approached through the conditions of sculptural experience: material trace, bodily movement, temporal change, negative space, and the unstable relation between presence and absence.

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter has examined how contemporary sculpture may evoke the unpresentable by establishing conditions in which perception, materiality, spatial experience, and cultural memory meet their limits. The unpresentable has not been treated as a hidden object beyond experience, nor as a transcendent content that sculpture attempts to depict. Rather, it has been understood as a limit internal to presentation: a point at which what is sensed, remembered, or culturally recognised cannot be fully stabilised as representation.

The theoretical framework began with Kant's account of the sublime as a failure of adequate sensible presentation, particularly in relation to the mathematical sublime, where magnitude exceeds the imagination's capacity for totalisation (Kant, 2008, pp. 78–81). This was extended through Bergson's account of perception, memory, and duration; Deleuze's understanding of intensity and the capture of forces; Massumi's account of affect as pre-personal intensity; Nancy's concept of presentation at the limit; and Gasché's account of negative presentation. Together, these thinkers allow sculpture to be understood not simply as a representational object, but as a material and spatial practice capable of producing experiences in which the limits of presentation become perceptible.

The analytical framework proposed in this chapter mapped sculptural works across two intersecting axes: phenomenological perception versus socially mediated meaning, and spatial field versus discrete object. This model is not intended as a rigid taxonomy. Its purpose is to clarify how different works tend to operate and how different sculptural strategies may be compared. The unpresentable does not emerge only at the centre of this diagram, nor only through works that combine all registers equally. It may arise through a primarily phenomenological experience, through socially mediated memory, or through the interaction of both. In many cases, however, the convergence of embodied perception and cultural mediation intensifies the experience.

The reference works demonstrated the range of these strategies. Rei Naito and Ryue Nishizawa's *Matrix* operates primarily through phenomenological and spatial experience, heightening perception through light, water, air, and duration. Carl Andre's serial floor-based works use repetition, material units, and part-whole tension to produce a perceptual experience that approaches the mathematical sublime. Doris Salcedo's installations use accumulation, material trace, and disappearance to make historical trauma perceptible without representing it directly. Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* combines bodily movement through landscape with engraved names and collective memory, while Rachel Whiteread's *Judenplatz Holocaust Memorial* condenses historical absence into a sealed architectural object. These works demonstrate that sculpture can approach the unpresentable not by illustrating what cannot be represented, but by structuring the conditions through which absence, memory, duration, and material presence are experienced.

The three practice case studies then tested these strategies within the author's own sculptural practice. *On the Record* operates as a spatial field in which weathering steel plates, negative silhouettes, inscription, and bodily movement combine to evoke the absence of journalists killed while reporting in war zones. Its force lies in the interaction between public memory and phenomenological experience: the viewer moves through a repeated field of material absences while encountering the socially mediated meanings of journalism, witness, conflict, and memorialisation.

Count Me Among the Almonds condenses the strategy of absence into a discrete sculptural object. Generated through a digital process in which a 3D scan of a human head is used as a cutting tool, the work presents the trace of a human form that has been removed rather than represented. The viewer senses the absent body without being able to reconstruct it fully. The work therefore approaches the unrepresentable through negative form, partial recognition, material layering, and the poetic resonance of Paul Celan.

Where Nothing Still Holds extends this investigation into a relational spatial configuration. The three suspended negative casts imply absent bodies while producing a further void between themselves. In this work, absence is not only contained within the object; it is produced through interval, suspension, and relation. The rusted surface introduces associations of decay, mortality, and duration, while the title opens the work toward Celan's poetic language of loss and address. The work therefore demonstrates how negative form can move beyond the bounded object into a spatial relation in which presence and withdrawal remain inseparable.

Across these examples, several strategies recur: repetition, accumulation, negative form, material trace, duration, inscription, weathering, and spatial interval. Each strategy offers a different means of approaching the unrepresentable. Repetition and accumulation can exceed immediate comprehension. Negative form can make absence materially present. Weathering and decay can register time as part of the work. Inscription can evoke memory while also exposing the inadequacy of language. Spatial interval can make withdrawal an active element of experience. These strategies do not operate in isolation. Their significance lies in how they interact, overlap, and amplify one another within a specific sculptural situation.

The chapter therefore argues that sculpture can evoke the unrepresentable most effectively when it does not attempt to represent an absent or overwhelming subject directly. Instead, sculpture can establish a field of experience in which the viewer becomes aware of the insufficiency of representation itself. This may occur through bodily movement, through the failure to grasp a totality, through the recognition of historical loss, through the perception of material decay, or through the encounter with a negative form that withholds its source. In such cases, the unrepresentable is not depicted; it is approached through the limits of perception, memory, and material presentation.

This has particular relevance for practice-based sculptural research. The works discussed in this chapter suggest that the unrepresentable can be explored through materially specific operations rather than through abstract theoretical assertion alone. The contribution of the chapter lies in identifying how phenomenological and socially mediated strategies may be brought together within sculptural practice, and how this convergence can produce intensified experiences of absence, memory, and withdrawal. Sculpture becomes a means of testing how the unrepresentable can be sensed, situated, and materially articulated without being resolved into representation.

The argument remains deliberately selective. The works examined here do not exhaust the possible sculptural strategies through which the unrepresentable may be evoked. Further research could extend the framework through additional attention to colour, impermanence, material agency, site-specificity, and public memorialisation. Nevertheless, the chapter establishes a working model for understanding how sculptural practice can engage what resists direct representation. The unrepresentable, in this account, is not outside sculpture. It emerges through sculpture's material, spatial, temporal, and affective conditions: through what appears, what withdraws, and what remains unresolved at the limits of presentation.

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