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Portrait of Absence

The Aisthetic Mediality of Empty Chairs[1]

Tomáš Jirsa

> »He looked at me as if I was a cigarette stub, or an empty chair.«
> (Raymond Chandler: *The Long Goodbye,* 1953)

Is it possible to capture a subject in its absence by means of a portrait? Or is it even necessary, since the presence of absence, as claimed by Hans Belting, is both a prerequisite and a paradox of an image?[2] Over the past decades, the voices of art historians were heard, saying that classical portrait died in the 20th century.[3] It is no wonder; one only has to take a fleeting glance at the drawings by Alberto Giacometti, watercolours by Wols, canvases by Francis Bacon and Frank Auerbach or the repainted photographic projections by Gerhard Richter to understand that the concept of a portrait in which a copy should correspond to a live model, representing it both iconically and mimetically, is long gone. The scratched, smudged or blurred faces do not make the subject present, rather capturing its identity in the process between appearing and disappearing. According to Linda Nochlin, a portrait shows »the meeting of two subjectivities«[4] rather than the likeness of a subject. Or, one might say, rather three subjectivities, since the modality of depiction is co-created by the spectator as well. The strength of the portrait thus does not consist in rendering someone's likeness but in the art of encounter.

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2 Cf. Hans Belting: An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body (2001), trans. Thomas Dunlap, Princeton and Oxford 2011.

3 This cultural diagnosis was made already at the turn of the 19th century by Jacob Burckhardt in his lecture *Die Anfänge der neueren Porträtmalerei* (The Beginnings of New Portraiture, 1885). Further on this topic, see Judith Elisabeth Weiss: Before and After the Portrait. Faces between Hidden Likeness and Anti-portrait, in: Mona Körte, Ruben Rebmann, Judith Elisabeth Weiss and Stefan Weppelmann (eds.): Inventing Faces: Rhetorics of Portraiture between Renaissance and Modernism, Munich 2013, p. 139.

4 Linda Nochlin: Some Women Realists: Painters of the Figure, in: Arts Magazine 48/8 (1974), p. 29.

However, what happens if a disappearing subject is replaced by an object; does it become its mere substitute? Does the object left after the subject embody its invisibility, its absence, or a desire for it? One of the figures that not only embodies but also *mediates* and *materializes* this absence in a remarkable way is an empty chair which has mostly served as a mere device, an apparatus designed to support the body, in the history of the portrait. Since the beginning of modern art, empty chairs have appeared with increasing frequency, becoming emancipated not only in images but also in texts and on the stage. Vincent van Gogh, Richard Weiner, Egon Schiele, Joseph Kosuth and Eugène Ionesco: these are but a few of those who have not only filled the empty chair in an inventive way but also turned it into a significant media-theoretical gesture. This study will thus focus on these empty chairs that will be examined as aisthetic-affective figures pervading historical periods and cultural boundaries while constituting a specific portrait capable of mediating the subject in its physical absence.

1. The Narrative and Conceptual Dispositif of an Empty Chair: Richard Weiner and Joseph Kosuth

Let me begin with the least known chair whose aesthetic and epistemological force exceeds its language territory as well as the modernist context by far: the one from the short story by Czech author Richard Weiner entitled *The Empty Chair* (*Prázdná židle,* 1916). If there was a genre of ›literary conceptualism‹, this radically innovative text, subtitled *An Analysis of an Unwritten Short Story*, would represent its main reference. Weiner's text is doing much more than is apparent at first glance, and it does so for three reasons. Firstly, it feigns its own failure which is in fact a masterful, highly calculated composition; secondly, it lets its main figure and theme of an ›empty chair‹ enter the form and motion of its literary language; and thirdly but most importantly, it constitutes a paradoxical *portrait of absence* making the subject present through its physical non-presence.

The story of *The Empty Chair* is seemingly simple: a young man living in Paris moves to a neighbourhood where he knows no one in a desire for solitude. Several months later, he chances to meet his faithful friend on the street, they are both very happy about the encounter and arrange an immediate visit. The friend is asked to bring a little refreshment from a nearby shop while the man hurries to his apartment to clean it up and make some tea. He puts two chairs and a table to the fireplace and waits: »He waits and waits. Moment after moment, hour after hour pass by and the prepared chair is still empty and waiting.«[5] The friend never

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[5] Richard Weiner: Prázdná židle, in: Spisy 1. Netečný divák a jiné prózy. Lítice. Škleb,

comes and the protagonist is facing an empty chair, brooding about why the longed-for visit turned into an even deeper loneliness.

However, the story is not what really matters; the narrator rather wants to depict why it was never written. The failure of the project is explained at the very beginning:

»The aim I have set myself in discussing the circumstances why this story was never actually written is senseless and is hardly excused even if, as I believe, the following lines introduce an element of the fantastic, which would be far better used on some more suitable occasion, and of the eccentric, which would perhaps be more appropriate in a real story, whereas in the arguments presented here these will most likely serve only to lead the reader astray or to dead ends; there may also perhaps be found a degree of emotion or excitement (perhaps even agitation), which will most likely often confound my plan to present a pragmatic account of the demise of a literary work.«[6]

Right after the first sentence, the text enters a field of remarkable negative self-affirmation, or anti-phrase, which shows a certain thing by means of fake negation. This strategy corresponds to the rhetorical figure of *meiosis* known since antiquity which uses an intentional weakening, underestimation or euphemisation of a statement to strengthen its meaning.[7] In other words: the text constitutes and affirms itself through and during its own self-negation. Naturally, this play could also be explained in narratological terms, in the sense of an asymmetry between the discourse of the narrator, depicting a virtual story, and the discourse of the implied author, commenting on the failure of the short story. Similarly, the whole thing could be summarized by the dominance of exegesis over diegesis or the dominance of metatext over text; after all, that is exactly what most of Weiner's interpreters do.[8] However, there is a catch with the former option, since the demiurgic voice of the implied author turns out to be an involved protagonist based on an inconspicuous change of person: into an ›I‹ gazing at the empty chair. The latter option,

Praha 1996, p. 180. For a German translation, see Richard Weiner: Der Leere Stuhl. Analyse einer ungeschriebenen Erzählung, in: Id.: Der leere Stuhl und andere Prosa, trans. Franz Peter Künzel, Frankfurt am Main 1969, pp. 53–83. Translated to English by Tereza Chocholová.

[6]   Weiner: Prázdná židle (as note 5), p. 170. The translation of the fragment is taken over from Peter Zusi (see note 9).

[7]   Cf. Quentin Skinner: »Paradiastole: Redescribing the Vices as Virtues«, in: In Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander and Katrin Ettenhuber (eds.): Renaissance Figures of Speech, Cambridge 2007, p. 149.

[8]   Cf. Petr Málek: Melancholie moderny: alegorie, vypravěč, smrt, Praha 2008, p. 83; Steffi Widera: Richard Weiner. Identität und Polarität im Prosafrühwerk, München 2001, p. 73.

then, overlooks the media operation of the discourse blurring the line between fiction and meta-fiction.[9]

As a matter of fact, when the text presents a variety of alternately suggested and immediately denied scenarios of how the story *could have*—*if* it would have—taken place, coming up with various alternatives of what could have happened so the friend would not show up, it does nothing less than prove that it *was* and *is* ›actually written‹. The pretended handicap thus rather reveals sophistication and brilliancy. In the depiction of the plan of writing a story, an ingenious camouflage is being disclosed: the commented and intended story takes place at this very moment, at the time of reading, literally in front of the reader's eyes. When the narrator plans the fictitious mise-en-scène of his short story, as well as its affective effect (»The story I was going to write was supposed to deal with the terror which seized the host when the guest, whom he awaited and who promised that he would certainly come, did not show up.«),[10] he is doing nothing but narrating the short story *right now*. The core of the narrative of the ›unwritten‹ short story lies in the text's feigning strategy and operational caesura between utterance and performance; between what the text *says* and what it *does*.

Until now, the reader-spectator has been sitting on the silent chair, following the authorial demiurge entrusting him with his detailed plan of the unwritten story, revealing its emptiness[11] in the manner of the Gestalt therapy method called the ›empty chair technique‹ (*Leerer Stuhl-Technik*).[12] That, however, is but one, hermeneutic possibility of interpretation, in which the piece of furniture around which the whole text revolves and which works as a medium of narration, affectivity and language, barely got a word in. And yet it is this very piece of furniture that embodies the empty place, left both on the chair and in the text as a trace of the subject that never came; a trace of absence and lack, sticking out just like the emptiness of the chair. It is now therefore necessary to focus on the empty chair as a medial figure, both exceeding and preceding Weiner's text by far while plac-

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[9] The only one to notice these contradictions was Peter Zusi: »This is the paradoxical conclusion of *The Empty Chair*, the story—the friend—arrives; the chair does not remain empty.« Peter Zusi: States of Shock: Kafka and Richard Weiner, in: Manfred Engel and Ritchie Robertson (eds.): Kafka, Prag und der Erste Weltkrieg / Kafka, Prague and the First World War, Würzburg 2011, p. 142.

[10] Weiner: Prázdná židle (as note 5), p. 378.

[11] Cf. Zusi: States of Shock (as note 9), p. 128: »*The Empty Chair* does not depict a void; rather it fills a void through the compulsive proliferation of an explanatory structure.«

[12] An experimental technique based on the dialogue between the patient and an imagined person sitting on a chair that is to help the patient understand his or her suppressed emotion. It was pioneered by Jakub Levy Moreno who introduced it in the field of psychodrama already in the 1920s. Cf. Hubert J. M. Hermans and Giancarlo Dimaggio (eds): The Dialogical Self in Psychotherapy, London 2004, pp. 156–170.

ing it in essential aesthetic constellations. In other words, one must disconnect the narrative cables and connect the ›black box‹ of *The Empty Chair* to other empty chairs.

The specific mediality of Weiner's empty chair, drawing on the creative contradiction between *doing* and *telling*, the present absence, self-referential variation and an interplay of communication and concealing, prefigures one of the founding works of conceptual art: Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Kosuth's ternary work consists of an object: a wooden folding chair, its photograph hung on the wall, and a text including a lexical definition of the term chair consisting of several lines placed on the gallery wall next to the real chair. The installation illustrates the ambivalent relation between the signifier and the signified as it presents a single chair in three forms: a physical artefact (object), a photographic image (picture) and a dictionary entry (word). It thus shows that the same chair, when expressed by several means of expression, will never be the same chair; the same object acquires a different identity by its media transformation.

At the same time, this heterogeneous constellation suggests how various forms latently carry their various renditions and what essential role absence can play for the presenting, performative force of the work. According to Cary Wolfe, Kosuth's chairs show that »language is just as important by what it does *not* communicate as by what it does communicate«.[13] It is this very non-communication aspect that constitutes the central effect of the composition: everything is so revealed and at the same time so silent that even the spectator, when facing this multimediality, becomes one of its realizations. It is not merely, as Belting puts it, a tricky juxtaposition of picture and description, »wiping out the traditional distinctions: the picture here is also reduced to mere definition. Seen as a whole, the commentary triumphs over the work, which it causes to disappear.«[14] The juxtaposition thus comprises both the empty chair and the spectator, with the subject becoming both a carrier and a medium.[15] Like Kosuth, Weiner, too, reverses the so far clear distinction between commentary and the commented work, between exegesis and diegesis, substituting it by a performative narrative act. Like Weiner, Kosuth has elevated an ordinary chair to an object of endless questioning and reflection; an object responding to the spectator's questions by silent multiplication.

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[13] Cary Wolfe: Language, in: J. W. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (eds.): Critical Terms for Media Studies, Chicago 2010, p. 242.

[14] Hans Belting: Art History after Modernism, trans. Caroline Saltzwedel, Mitch Cohen and Kenneth Nortcott. Chicago 2003, p. 20.

[15] Cf. Christiane Voss: Film Experience and the Formation of Illusion: The Spectator as »Surrogate Body« for the Cinema, trans. Inga Pollmann, in: Cinema Journal 50/4 (2011), p. 139. Voss sees the film spectator as »the illusionforming medium of cinema« in her concept of *Leihkörper.*

2. The Semiotics of Desire:
   Vincent van Gogh and His Metonymic (Self)Portraits

When the author of *The Empty Chair* was four years old, France saw what was perhaps the most dramatic event in the history of 19th century painting. After a period of longing expectation of the host filled with dozens of letters sent to his friend and his brother Theo, Paul Gauguin finally arrived in Arles to visit Vincent van Gogh on October 23, 1888. However, as proved by Gauguin's memoir *Avant et après* (Before and After, 1903) and his rich correspondence, the atmosphere at the yellow house could soon be cut with the knife. During November and December, their arguments escalated, accompanied by the tormenting mistral and constant sleets. After one such dramatic quarrel, Gauguin went for an evening walk and suddenly heard steps behind him. He looked back and saw Vincent rushing at him with an open razor in his hand. When Gauguin boldly stepped towards him, Vincent turned away and ran back. That night, Gauguin rather put up at a hotel while Vincent ran home and cut a piece of his ear in a fit of visual and auditory hallucinations, wrapped it up in a sheet of paper and delivered this piece of his own flesh to his favourite prostitute Rachel as »a gesture reminiscent of the matador who awards the ear of the bull he has killed to a favored lady.«[16]

The legendary story is significant for the present argument only to the degree in which the conflicted relationship of the two irreconcilable artists was reflected in their work. In this respect, Van Gogh's biographers have aptly asked: »Why did Van Gogh, who so relished the encounter of painter and sitter, not do a portrait of Gauguin? Why did Gauguin, by contrast, deign to paint a portrait of Van Gogh, even though he did not especially value direct confrontation with a motif and indeed detested that quality of the palpably physical which linked the work to the subject?«[17] The paradox of the absence of a portrait culminates with the coming quarrel giving rise to two paintings of empty and yet occupied chairs.[18] In those November days, Van Gogh painted lonely symbol-laden chairs; rather than a still life, they represent a melancholic and, in terms of their mediality, entirely radical portrait of absence. On the one hand, these chairs, different in style and colour, organically fit into his repertoire of material imagination imbuing lonely objects with life and symbolism. On the other hand, however, they fulfil a considerably *substitutive* role: whereas Gauguin's chair is a metonymic portrait of the still present

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16 Naomi Margolis Maurer: The Pursuit of Spiritual Wisdom. The Thought and Art of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, London 1998, p. 81.
17 Rainer Metzger and Ingo F. Walther: Vincent van Gogh: The Complete Paintings. Cologne/New York 1997, p. 458.
18 *Vincent's Chair with his Pipe* (November 1888; London, National Gallery); *Gauguin's chair* (November 1888, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh).

but already disappearing Paul, Vincent's chair represents a metonymic self-portrait.[19]

These substitutes symbolize loneliness, emptiness and silence; or, in Freud's terms, the work of mourning after the departure of a close person. At the same time, they function as certain traces alluding to the absent being; to the attributes that make it unique in the eyes of the painter. With its two novels and burning candle, Gauguin's Chair represents an affective portrait of desire. It is no longer occupied by Van Gogh's irritable friend Paul but rather by his arriving faithful companion: a spectre of loneliness. Despite the homely atmosphere of the painting, the scene does not induce calm, contemplation or relief, rather arousing an emotion that could be called tense expectation in a paraphrase of Françoise Minkowska.[20] The two chairs are not pictured as silent companions but rather in a challenging position and through a vacillating perspective, evoking a gaze shrouded by vertigo. The chair is present in its materiality while the subject is not; however, it has imprinted its absence into the image in the form of a present trace. As Sibylle Krämer argues: »While the trace is visible, what produces it remains withdrawn and invisible.«[21] Despite—and yet due to—the absence of the subject, the two chairs are bursting at the seams both semiotically and affectively: as a metaphor, they represent the material strength of things living their own, dehumanized lives; as an *index,* they refer to the ongoing conflict and the disappearing subject; as a *trace*, they »visualize the non-presence of what is left behind. The trace«, Krämer continues, »embodies not the absent thing itself, but rather its absence.«[22] This absence, however, is not and cannot be definitive, rather being in a state of oscillation between presence and absence, between appearing and disappearing.

In a portrait of absence, man is removed, literally unseated, while the subject takes their place—an invisible, disappearing and missing subject is present despite its physical absence, and perhaps even more insistently than if it was portrayed according to its real live model. Gogh and Weiner thus make a double creative gesture in their work: they intensify the presence of the subject by its physical absence while saving the subject, by its very (non)depiction, from the status of a mere object, from its objectification.[23] I would therefore suggest that the works by the two artists represent a unique paroxysm of a portrait which consists neither in a

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19 The phrase »(displaced or metonymic) self-portrait« has been used by Craig Owens for Van Gogh's painting *A Pair of Shoes* (1886) in reference to Meyer Schapiro, in: Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture, edited by Scott Bryson, Berkeley, p. 94.

20 Françoise Minkowska: Van Gogh. Sa vie, sa maladie et son œuvre, Paris 2007, p. 70.

21 Sybille Krämer: Medium, Messenger, Transmission. An Approach to Media Philosophy, trans. Anthony Enns, Amsterdam 2015, p. 174.

22 Ibid.

23 For more on loss and objectification in the modern portrait, cf. Ernst van Alphen: Por-

deformation of the human body nor in its transformation into a simulacrum, rather proving that the subject can never vanish, despite it being physically absent.

3. Performance of Absence:
   Between Appearing, Disappearing and Supplementarity

The portrait as a distinctive genre has been redefined in Gogh's and Weiner's work, both by its emphasis on objectality fulfilling a wide range of symbolic roles and by its exploration of the subject in the situation of invisibility and absence. What is important is not what the empty chairs depict but primarily what they do: they *perform* the absence of the subject. In his brilliant study about chairs–monuments interconnecting the past and the future, Pietro Conte argues that »the pathos of the empty chair consists both in the memory of loss and in the announcement of the return of the newcomer.«[24] However, this very announcement can be confusing. The way in which the absent, never coming friend is present in Weiner's text corresponds precisely to the modality of the »non-depicting portrait« which Judith E. Weiss considers crucial both for modern and postmodern art: »Presence in the portrait occurs under the condition of an inerasable difference between the seen and the imagined.«[25] It is in this very difference from the portrayed that Weiss sees a specific feature of the modern portrait which resigns from referential fidelity: »Human individuality can only be pictured in a non-depicting portrait whose indeterminate nature stimulates the individual imagination of the viewer.«[26] A portrait which does not depict the subject and does not represent it mimetically, rather figuring it on the basis of its lack and presenting it in its absence and latent presence, represents the central media operation of Weiner's and Van Gogh's empty chair.

An even more radical position is maintained by Jean-Luc Nancy who sees the direct effect of a portrait not in the state of absence but rather in the process of disappearing. Drawing on the etymology of the Italian polysemous term *ritratto,* marking a portrait, Nancy accentuates another, less obvious meaning of the contemporary portrait: that of the act of retiring (It. *il ritiro*; Fr. *le retirement*).[27] The

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trait's Dispersal; in: Id.: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought, Chicago/London 2005, pp. 21–47.

[24] Pietro Conte: Prenez une chaise, monsieur Kantor! Théorie et histoire d'un »monument impossible«, in: Id.: Une absence présente. Figures de l'image mémorielle, Paris 2013, pp. 127–128.

[25] Weiss: Before and After the Portrait (as note 3), p. 141.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Jean-Luc Nancy: L'Autre Portrait, Paris 2014, pp. 13–15.

ontology of the portrayed subject lies in the dialectic between presence and ab-sence, or rather between appearing and disappearing.[28] According to Nancy, the portrayed figure »is showing itself while retreating, retiring within its visibility.«[29] This tension between the visible and the hidden gives rise to the fictional nature of the portrait; not only due to the etymological affinity of the terms—derived from the Latin *fingere*—of fiction and figuration in the sense of a mimetic repre-sentation of the human figure but also in the sense of a figure, emblem or role which is created, modelled (*fingo, fictum*) but also staged in the portrait.[30] In the context of contemporary artworks (e.g. David Hockney, Jacques Monory), Nancy postulates his concept of »a different portrait« which differs from a »portrait which is based on an expected identity whose appearance is to be reproduced. On the contrary, this kind of portrait,« Nancy continues, »works with an identity that is barely assumed, rather evoked in its retirement.«[31] This definition proves that Weiner's little known and Van Gogh's renowned portrait of absence heralded sev-eral radical aesthetic positions of a subject in a state of gradual dis/appearing almost a century ahead of their time.

Another impulse to a better understanding of the dialectic of absence and pres-ence can be found not only in contemporary art but also in antiquity. What I mean is Jean-Pierre Vernant's research of Greek mythology, particularly the phenome-non of the *kolossos*, i.e. an idol connected to an archaic burial ritual.[32] Vernant draws on the archaeological findings of a cenotaph coming approximately from the 13th century AD where two stone blocks of various size, whose upper parts indicated the outline of the shoulders and heads of a male and a female figure, were found lying on the ground instead of human skeletons. The research of the ritual functions of these idols shows several fundamental affinities with the symbolical and figural status of the object around which the representation and narrative of the empty chair revolves. The first affinity, I would like to argue, can be seen in the substitutive role of both tangible objects which represent and embody someone that is not present on the one hand while alluding to his fatal absence on the other hand. »Buried in a tomb alongside the objects belonging to the dead person, the *kolossos* functioned as a substitute for the absent corpse.«[33]

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[28] Cf. George Didi-Huberman: La grammaire, le chahut, le silence: pour une anthropolo-gie du visage, in: Id. (ed.): À visage découvert, Paris 1992, p. 52.

[29] Nancy: L'Autre Portrait (as note 27), p. 18.

[30] Ibid., p. 27.

[31] Ibid., p. 93.

[32] Jean Pierre Vernant: The Figuration of the Invisible and the Psychological Category of the Double: The Kolossos, in: Id.: Myth and Thought among the Greeks (1965), New York 2006, p. 321–332.

[33] Ibid., p. 322.

However, how can a none too mimetic piece of stone take the place of the deceased? Vernant does not see the principle of this substitution in the representing function of the image but rather in the symbolical status of the double, since the double »exists simultaneously on two contrasting planes: just when it shows itself to be present, it also reveals itself as not of this world and as belonging to some other, inaccessible sphere«.[34] Through the stone double, the kolossos not only represents the physically absent subject but also provides »the figuration of the invisible« or someone who—to use a Deleuzian distinction—is actually missing but virtually still present. The sign of absence, oscillating between visibility and the invisible activity of the missing subject, delineates a space in which the empty chair merges with the archaic symbol. They also share their mediality. The kolossos aims »to establish real contact with the beyond and to bring about its presence in this earthly world. Yet in the very attempt to do this it emphasizes all the elements of the inaccessible, the mysterious, and the fundamentally foreign that the world beyond death holds for the living«.[35] Similarly, the effectiveness of the empty chair consists in bringing the presence of something that speaks in a different language; a language that reveals messages while obscuring them and covering them with its own materiality at the same time. Instead of a transparent mediation, its mediality consists in condensing the message, moving from the known to the unknown, accentuating the different order and language of the world to which it alludes while becoming more apparent and perceptible itself. If, according to Krämer, aistheticization »constitutes the very nucleus of all transmission processes«,[36] the empty chair is an aisthetic medium *par excellence*.

Although the subject is permanently present in the portrait of absence due to the fact that it is missing, the empty chair is indeed devoid of its fictional figure and remains de-figured all the time. The history of these objects is not anthropocentric but rather anthropo*de*centric. The empty chairs thus represent a specific portrait that is brought not *ad absurdum* but rather *ad fontes*, returning before the arrival of the subject, before its tangible presence and firmly situated position. Or, analogously, it anticipates its departure. This invites the following question: what is the actual relation between the two constituents of such an uncanny portrait? It seems that between the constantly circumscribed chair, occupied by the phantasm of the presence of another on the one hand, and the permanently escaping subject on the other hand, there is a bond that Jacques Derrida has called the logic of supplementarity.[37] The supplement embraces two mutually opposed and yet com-

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[34]   Ibid., p. 325.

[35]   Ibid., p. 332.

[36]   Krämer: Medium, Messenger, Transmission (as note 21), p. 165.

[37]   Jacques Derrida: »…That Dangerous Supplement…«, in: Id.: Of Grammatology (1967),
       trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore 2016, pp. 153–178.

plementary meanings: as an *addition*, it »adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude«,[38] and at the same time, as a *substitute,* it replaces something missing, »it does not simply add itself to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness.«[39]

The empty chair is lacking a subject, yet without this lacking, it would not be an empty chair; it is the very lacking that constitutes it as a substitute for the subject and an addition that disturbingly points out that the presence of the other does exist, yet it occurs somewhere else than it should. At the same time, this supplement points out the fact that the always already presence of the subject is the very media condition of an empty chair. The subject thus represents an element coming from the outside, joining in and filling an empty place assigned by the trace of emptiness on a solitary chair. Nevertheless, the subject is not coming, its supplementary role is thus completely latent. As a result, it plays the role of a supplement primarily *for* the subject that is waiting—and thus also for the spectator. The subject did appear for a moment—coming from the outside and joining the internal world of the protagonist—but it suddenly left the scene. The empty chair thus keeps playing a role of an index of defiguration, pointing out the absence of the sitter and completing the emptiness by their absence.

4. »That Crowd of Present Absences«: Eugène Ionesco and an Open Void on the Stage

Van Gogh's and Weiner's portraits of absence share many aspects with Eugène Ionesco's absurd drama *The Chairs* (Les Chaises, 1952). All of these works deal with the theme of feverish waiting for a guest, the invisibility of the subject, the motifs of emptiness which gradually acquires an oppressive physical form; and all of them make a maximum use of the poetics of absence and concept. The two protagonists of the drama, the Old Man and the Old Woman, are frantically running across the stage, preparing chairs for invisible guests who are coming to hear an Orator who is to deliver the Old Man's crucial discovery and reveal the great mystery of life to all who are present. After the suicide of the two protagonists, it becomes clear that the expected speaker is a deaf-mute. As the chairs accumulate, gradually piling up to all sides, the communication and behaviour of the two protagonists fall apart. Since the beginning, the empty chair plays the role of a pure substitute, which, however, becomes autonomous with its gradual multiplication. At the be-

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38   Ibid., p. 157
39   Ibid.

ginning, the invisible presence of the guests is represented mimetically; however, later on, their accumulation can only be captured by language.

The role of the chair as a material and symbolical substitute of the guests becomes emptied in the course of the act, turning into its opposite; for as these pieces of furniture congest the space of the stage, the invisibility of the subjects develops into an impossibility of their presence. The substitute of a subject thus turns into an index of absence: »*The Old Woman puts the chair behind the four others, then exits by door No.8 and re-enters by door No.5, after a few moments, with another chair that she places beside the one she has just brought in.*«[40] It is this very absence of guests that is further represented and dramatized by the mise-en-scène through stage effects and paradoxically accentuated by the way in which language names the invisible guests—phantoms—and puts them in their seats. The jerking and rattling of the chairs on the stage pervades the language of the protagonists as well, definitively pushing the absent persons away by means of a fast juxtaposition of subject and object: »Old Man: my wife… Mr. … Mrs. … my wife… Mr. … Mrs. … my wife… / Old Woman: Who are all these people, my darling? […] / Old Man: More people! More chairs! More people! More chairs! Come in, come in, ladies and gentlemen… Semiramis, faster… We'll give you a hand soon!«[41]

The initial illusion of the invisibility of the present guests definitively dissolves by the frenetic accumulation of chairs, with absence accumulating in front of the spectators instead. This absence is intensified by the increasing ramming of the two protagonists into the piling chairs, with which they try to communicate at the same time. »The absence« of identity is thus literally materialized«, says Thomas Edeling, specifying that »the weight of the protagonists in a metaphorical sense is substituted by a counterweight materialized by the objects«.[42] It follows that Ionesco, too, uses empty chairs to conceptualize absence as a certain paradoxical form of presence. The latter is realized not only on the basis of the mimetic act but also with full explicitness in the form of a stage direction: »There must be very many chairs on the stage: at least forty, even more if possible. They are accumulating very quickly, ever quicker. It is an accumulation. The stage is buried under chairs, that crowd of present absences«.[43] Here the principle of the presence of absence, which was determined as the fundamental condition of an image by Belting, is realized by means of a theatre performance which, similarly to Weiner's

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[40]   Eugène Ionesco: The Chairs, in: Id.: Four Plays: The Bald Soprano, The Lesson, Jack; or, The Submission, The Chairs, trans. Donald M. Allen, New York 1958, p. 130.

[41]   Ionesco: The Chairs (as note 40), p. 143.

[42]   Thomas Edeling: L'univers théâtral d'Eugène Ionesco dans l'univers essayiste et politique de François Bondy, Bern 2009, p. 36.

[43]   Eugène Ionesco: Théâtre complet, Paris 1991, p. 167. The English translation does not include this stage direction. Translated to English by Tereza Chocholová.

text, turns the object of an empty chair into an enigmatic figure, whose role consists both in the substitution of the subject on the verge of its erasure, and in its representation through physical absence and emptiness.

However, what is the actual nature of this emptiness? The very end of the performance proceeds exactly in the spirit of the subtitle of the play: a »tragic farce«. The awaited orator is deaf-mute, the two protagonists commit suicide, the planned celebration is thwarted and the main message is not delivered.[44] The spectators are only faced by heaps of empty chairs, littered with confetti in a melancholy manner and without any pomp. This negativity, however, is far from hopelessness; it is deconstructive rather than existential. Drawing on Heidegger's thoughts in *Art and Space* (Die Kunst und der Raum, 1969), Edeling aptly labels this stage shortage as an »emptiness that is not completely *empty*«; neither lack nor failure.[45] Let me call this non-presence an open void. A void that is filled and open in this way is always ironic, as shown by the very end of the play when indistinct human voices are heard from under the piled empty chairs. The irony of Ionesco's empty chairs consists in the fact that they are occupied by a loud absence. The guests did arrive in the end since the hosts brought them in themselves.

5. The Figure of Mourning and a Portrait of Sitting: Egon Schiele

Ionesco's play shows the magnetism with which the object, whose materiality is no less powerful than its symbolical level, attracts paradox, inversion and irony—always in relation to the subject. However, the empty chair can also deform the subject, or even get rid of it. At a time strikingly close to the origination of Weiner's short story, a similar portrait of absence was created: the poster of the exhibition of the Vienna Secession (*Secession 49. Ausstellung*) made by Egon Schiele in 1918. It captures a melancholy scene rendered in a distinctively expressionist style. Sitting around an angular table, readers are immersed in the books in front of them, while the lower part of the painting depicts two unoccupied chairs from the back with open books in front of them. The more noticeable one represents an empty space left after Gustav Klimt, one of the founders of the Vienna Secession who died shortly before Schiele painted the poster. As Carla Carmona Escalera observed on the symbolism of the poster, the »two opened books join the scream of the chairs that demand to be used. Their cry is so powerful that enough pres-

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44   For a careful analysis of the analogy between the absent subjects and the absence of language, see Elizabeth Klaver: On the Use of Language in the Play, in: Harold Bloom (ed.): Eugène Ionesco, Philadelphia 2009, pp. 93–98.

45   Edeling: L'univers théâtral d'Eugène Ionesco (as note 42), p. 43.

ence is conferred upon the chairs to use themselves«.[46] The poster with an empty chair in the foreground thus represents a visual pavane for the deceased artist, a portrait of absence embodying the figure of mourning.

Empty chairs are not a random motif in Schiele's work though. Not only did they constitute a significant »compositional device of his pictorial language«[47] but they also functioned as a substitute of the subject and an index of loneliness. This is clearly visible in a series of watercolours produced by Schiele during his three-week imprisonment,[48] primarily three depictions of empty chairs dated April 21 and 22, 1912, which, similarly to Van Gogh's chairs, represent a metonymic portrait and a self-portrait. The painting of two chairs carrying the aphoristic title *Kunst kann nicht modern sein; Kunst ist urewig* (Art Cannot Be Modern; Art Is Eternal) as well as the painting of a chair with multicoloured handkerchiefs *Zwei meiner Taschentücher* (Two of My Handkerchiefs) almost instantly evoke Van Gogh's poetics of silent companions. Clothing, flung over the back of the chair, is what makes this piece of furniture into a symbol of loneliness and at the same time an index of its own presence. The third chair, depicted on the painting *Organische Bewegung des Sessels und Kruges* (Organic Movement of the Chair and Jug), is lying around in a specific, almost levitating perspective. This, however, is where the connection with the portraits of absence, figuring the subject in its absence, ends; the carelessly dropped chair, as well as the two other chairs, one partially ›clothed‹ and the other completely bare, are not objects calling for comfortable sitting and meditation. Schiele's chairs are unwelcoming, alluding to the prisoner's duty to ›sit through one's sentence‹ (die Strafe *absitzen*) rather than to contemplative sitting.

However, even this portrait of sitting has its predecessor in Schiele's work, where the figure of an empty chair makes a completely unforeseen manoeuvre. On Schiele's self-portrait from 1910 entitled simply *Sitzender männlicher Akt (Selbstbildnis)* (Seated Male Nude, Self-Portrait), the chair does not dispose of man, neither does it allude to his absence; it simply disappears to leave the subject in its strangely distorted sitting position—exactly in the shape and anatomy of a chair.[49] The removal of the chair corresponds with the process of *disfiguration*:[50] the legs

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[46] Carla Carmona Escalera: Chairs as Structures in Egon Schiele's Aesthetics. Egon Schiele's Place in Wittgenstein's Vienna, in: Nómadas. Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas 29/1 (2011), p. 161.

[47] Ibid., p. 155.

[48] Cf. Reinhard Steiner: Egon Schiele, 1890–1918: The Midnight Soul of the Artist, Cologne 1994, p. 41.

[49] I have borrowed the term of the anatomy of a chair from Conte: »with its back(rest), arm(rests), legs and feet, the chair reveals its anthropomorphic character«. Conte: Prenez une chaise, monsieur Kantor! (as note 24), p. 126.

[50] Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman: Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art, trans. John Goodman, Philadelphia 2005, p. 209.

have the form of mere stumps and the artist is depicted as a torso in a position as if somebody just pulled the chair out from under him. The physically impossible position, mutilation as well as the obscene nudity with which the open thighs literally clench the viewer and with which the orange eyes, nipples and belly stare at him reinforce the paradoxicality of the whole scene. Although it is a self-portrait, the depicted figure is captured in an ecstatic state, immersed in itself, without any sign of communication with its surroundings. The viewer thus observes a strange combination of formal and physical excess, pure asocial ecstasy and affective eccentricity, which, however, casts the subject outside the stable centre just for its own aesthetic amusement. The portrait of sitting without a chair also stages the nudity of the absent object.[51] The absent and yet shaping object thus constitutes an essential counterpoint to the presence of the absent subject filling the void in Van Gogh's and Weiner's portraits. Following Derrida's logic of supplementarity, one can state that their place is determined in the structure of the works by a trace of emptiness.

6. Coda: The Intensity of the Decentred Subject

Beside the library of the Bauhaus University in Weimar, a giant wooden chair rises 7,5 metres high. It was made by sculptor Hermann Bigelmayr and is called *Lehrstuhl—leerer Stuhl* (2005). Its title is not a mere pun, as one can read in the artist's web portfolio, linking the university meaning of an ›academic chair‹ on the one hand and a place waiting for the listener or reader to sit down on the other hand. Nor is it a seat for an imaginary creature that could make the library into a mere ruin by waving its hand. The oak construction rather refers to sitting as a cultural technique which »reveal[s] the extent to which the human actor has always already been decentred *by* the technical object«,[52] to the operationality and mediality of an emancipated plastic portrait. The emptiness of a chair, be it an academic or a different one, also refers to the substitutability of the subject that can sit on it, speak and make gestures, while the dispositif remains the same. Reading it slightly against the grain, the wooden object can be seen as a manifestation of a posthermeneutic view, understanding the human as, in Krämer's words, a »link« which »is virtually inconceivable without transmission«.[53]

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51   Cf. Escalera: Chairs as Structures in Egon Schiele's Aesthetics (as note 46), p. 162.
52   Bernhard Siegert: Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, New York 2015, p. 193.
53   Krämer: Medium, Messenger, Transmission (as note 21), p. 220.

Nevertheless, the fact that the subject is de-centred does not imply that it becomes de-activated. On the contrary, the repertory of empty chairs in cultural history shows that the subject can operate in a much more inventive way as long as it remains either absent or in the state of dis/appearing. The portraits of absence as rendered by Weiner, Van Gogh and others have proved that the physical absence of the subject can remarkably intensify its presence, as well as that however physically absent or invisible the subject can be, it can never vanish. The empty chair represents an aisthetic medium of absence that will always be present and active, its emptiness is open and it can never consistently dispose of the subject, as it becomes its supplement, emerging as an always already present element. In the end, one might wonder if there is such a thing as an empty chair at all.

Translation from Czech by Tereza Chocholová