

Vanished Art Recalled and Reinterpreted

In this exhibition contemporary artworks are paired with works that have been destroyed or lost to the annals of art history.



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A Void begins with true to size representations of specific destroyed and lost works. Emil Nolde, “The Wise and Foolish Virgins” (1910); Raphael, “Portrait of a Young Man” (1514); Henrich Pforr, “My Parents” (1929); Joshua Reynolds, “Self Portrait” (1637); Vincent van Gogh, “The painter on the way to Tarascon” (1888); Gustave Courbet, “The Stone Breakers” (1849); Wassily Kandinsky, “Composition” (1910); Vincent van Gogh, “Still Life: Vase with Five Sunflowers” (1888); Marco Palmezzano, “Resurrected Chris” (1525) (all photos by Stan Narten)

Georges Perec’s notorious 1969 novel *La Disparition*, translated into English by Gilbert Adair as *A Void* (1995), addresses traumatic violence in a peculiar, indirect fashion. Perec wrote the novel, and Adair translated it, without using any word containing the letter “e,” a literary constraint known as the lipogram. The constraint not only determines the novel’s self-reflexive plot — in which a group of characters search for their missing companion, Anton Vowl — but also

allegorizes the disappearance of Perec's Jewish parents during the Second World War. As a meditation on loss, it represents trauma's impact by omitting direct representation of the trauma.

Perec's novel serves as the lodestar for *A Void*, a smart and compelling group exhibition about traumatic violence at 601Artspace, curated by artist Paul Ramirez Jonas. In his own acclaimed practice, Ramirez Jonas has sometimes used pre-existing texts as "scores" to create new, related work. The exhibition adopts this method, also drawing on Ramirez Jonas's experience of Gustave Courbet's painting *The Stone Breakers* (1849). Though the painting was destroyed in World War II, in the February 1945 Allied bombings of Dresden, Ramirez Jonas was moved half a century later by a lecture slide image of it. This personal origin story, which he recounts in a detailed exhibition essay, demonstrates one way absences make their presence felt long after the disappearance of the actual person or thing.

This formative experience of absence inspired the exhibition's organizational premise, whereby contemporary artworks are associatively paired with works that have been destroyed or lost to the annals of art history, for instance, Oscar Muñoz's *Re/trato (Portrait)* (2004) and Joshua Reynolds's *Self Portrait* (1637). Nine variously-sized black rectangles, each in the dimensions of the lost artwork, have been painted onto 601Artspace's entryway wall as memorial placeholders. Like nuclear shadows on a Hiroshima wall, this consummately Perecian gallery of black rectangles traces loss's funereal contours.



Emily Jacir, "Untitled (fragment from ex libris)" (2010–12), 6 c-prints and shelf, 20 5/8 x 115 3/8 inches

Ramirez Jonas's nimble curation explores the overlaps between the loss of art historical objects and the loss of human life, without collapsing or trivializing them. Michael Rakowitz's sculpture series *May the Obdurate Foe Not Be in Good Health* (2017–18), for example, uses Middle Eastern newspapers and packaging to craft evocative but deliberately implausible replicas of objects looted from Iraq's National Museum in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. Emily Jacir's *Untitled (fragment from ex libris)* (2010–12) captures, in grainy camera phone images, the human traces — marginalia, stamps, inserts, stains — left on the pages of books abandoned by displaced Palestinians during the 1948 creation of the Israeli state. Writer Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010) — a copy of Polish Jewish writer Bruno Schultz's novel, *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934), with sepulchral rectangles cut out of its pages — similarly invests the book with human pathos.



Michael Rakowitz, "May The Obdurate Foe Not Be In Good Health: White limestone Corinthian capital with two rows of acanthileaves, Harem, Byzantine period (5th-6th centuries AD)" (2017), Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, 24 x 5 1/2 inches; Michael Rakowitz, "May The Obdurate Foe Not Be In Good Health (new piece for A Void exhibition)" (2018), Middle Eastern packaging and newspaper, 24 x 18 x 6 inches

Though in many ways concerned with books, *A Void* doesn't get bogged down by wordiness. Jacir's and Safran Foer's contributions both emphasize the texts' visual and material over their linguistic qualities. Even Suzanne Lacy's *De tu puño y letra* (2015), a video that depicts Ecuadorian men reading letters documenting Ecuadorian women's experiences with domestic violence, incorporates the linguistic content as one element in a larger aesthetic whole that also

includes visuals and sounds. Like Perec's novel, the exhibition's artworks employ tactics of redaction, refusal, avoidance, understatement, substitution, omission, erasure, and disappearance.

De tu puño y letra incorporates such tactics in complex ways. The video depicts a performance that Lacy staged in Quito, Ecuador on November 25, 2015, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Inside an amphitheater arena resembling a bullring, hundreds of men read aloud, individually and simultaneously, testimonials about violence from the 2011 "Cartas de Mujeres" (Letters from Women) project. At a time when aesthetic questions of who can speak on behalf of whom are especially prominent, the performance's conceit is doubly loaded: a white, female American artist has a large group of men in an Ecuadorian community ventriloquize the words of women who are the victims of male violence. But the video remains sensitive to such concerns in part because its visual and sonic elements — a candlelight vigil; a soulful folk song performed by a female singer — focus it less on the male voices and more on the general atmosphere of ritualistic mourning.

Lacy's video clarifies the importance and trickiness of tone when it comes to representing trauma. Recent artistic controversies about the cultural appropriation of trauma, as in Sam Durant's *Scaffold* (2012) and Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016), are often framed as big picture questions about free speech and identity, but they pivot on subtle questions of tone. How does one represent trauma — our own and, especially, that of others — in a way that respects the magnitude and severity of its ongoing pain? The Perecian tack of dramatizing silence and absence maintains the gravitas, decorum, and restraint common to human grieving rituals and to public memorials such as Berlin's Holocaust Memorial, Washington D.C.'s Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and New York City's 9/11 Memorial. When done well, this aesthetic register acknowledges, even honors, trauma's impact without reproducing its pain more than necessary.

In this context, Aida Šehović's *Family Album (Što Te Nema): Wall 6 and 7, 2018* stands out for its stark tonal difference. Along a corner wall, the artist has affixed two Self Adhesive Vinyl wallpaper rectangles, each over 10 feet long and containing a dense, uneven grid of yearbook-esque headshots of Muslim men killed in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre during the Bosnian War. The implied intimacy of the work's title is unsettling, as are the album's irregularities in coloration, focus, camera angle, and pose, all of which exacerbate the pathos of the numerous victims' portraits, which directly confronts viewers. Where Muñoz used water on hot pavement to paint and repaint a vanishing portrait in memory of those who died in the Colombian Civil War, and where Jacir, Lacy, and Rakowitz depict traumatic loss by means of supplements and traces, Šehović depicts such loss with unnerving visual immediacy.

Shaun Leonardo's two large charcoal drawings, "Attica" and "Stephon Clark" (both 2018), incorporate direct and indirect approaches in unique and thoughtful ways. The drawings' shadowy surfaces, which partially obscure the depicted scenes, maintain a Perecian reserve that's in

keeping with the mood of the black rectangles they hang alongside. But layered on each drawing's glass frame is a dark, mirrored tint that implicates viewers in the scene by confronting them with their own reflections. In particular, the tinted foreground silhouettes of "Attica"'s rioting prisoners makes it seem as though the figures are charging at the viewer.

In an exhibition themed around absence, such moments of presence feel almost accusatory. Whereas black rectangles and other gestures of omission can make the viewer acutely aware of missing objects or people, *Family Album*'s many depicted faces and "Attica"'s mirrored surface can make the viewer uncomfortably aware of his or her own gaze. The point is not that looking back at trauma is inherently complicit with the atrocities observed, but that omission's tonal modesty is also a form of self-preservation. It hurts to bear witness to trauma, even second- or third-hand; it hurts, in different ways, to ignore or repress it. For Perec and others, art affords a way to thread the emotional and ethical needle of having to bear witness to what they'd rather not have to.

A Void, curated by Paul Ramirez Jonas, is on view at 601Artspace (88 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through November 18.