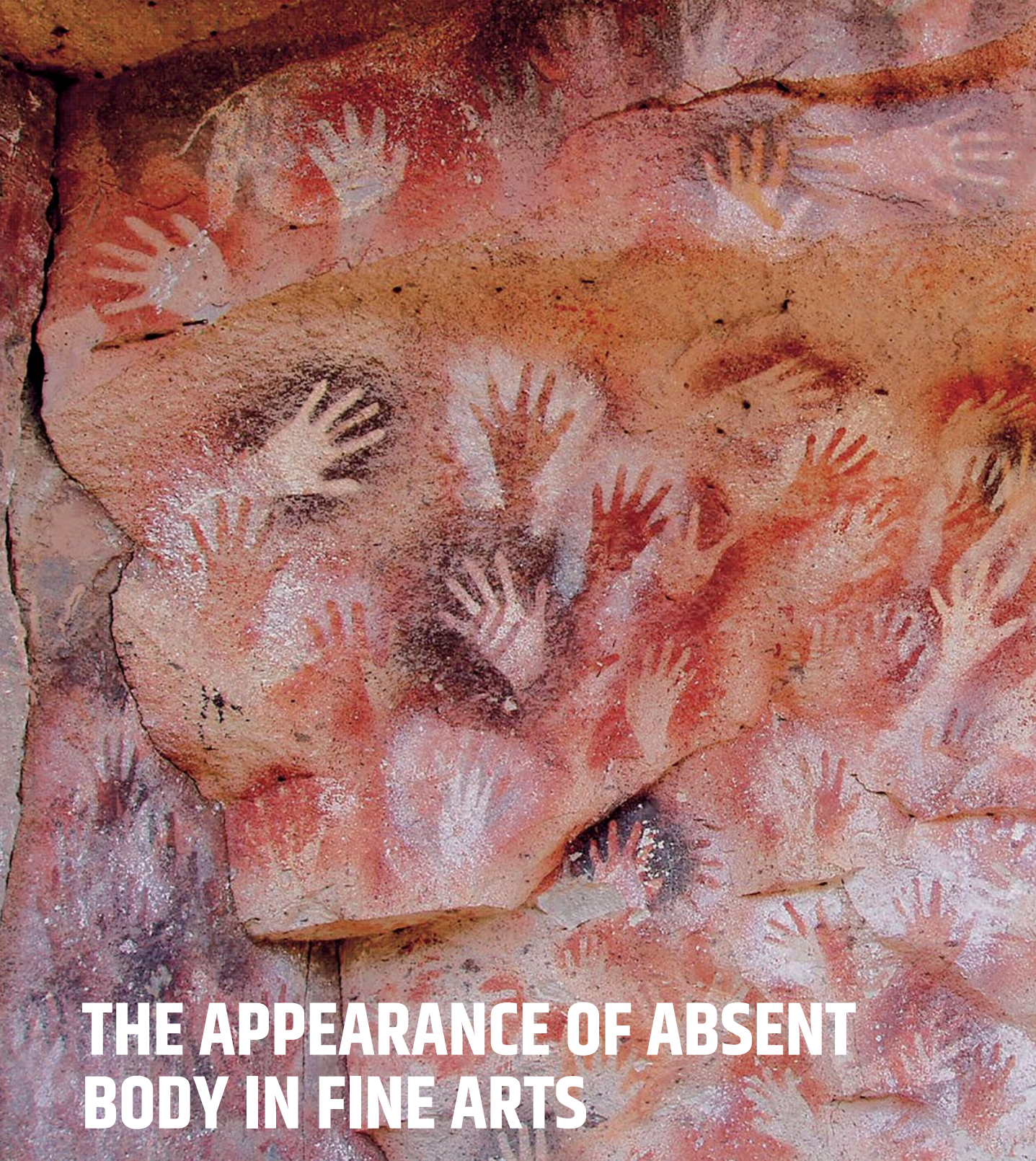




THE APPEARANCE OF ABSENT BODY IN FINE ARTS

#absent body #fine arts #phenomenology #semiotics



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Abstract

The article examines the concept of the Absent body in fine art, based on semiotic, phenomenological and imaginative theories. The Absent body is defined as one that is not represented directly, but is experienced through signs, traces or the context of personal experience. The works of artists are discussed, in which the body becomes an invisible but tangible presence. The role of the viewer in the creation of meanings and the “filling in” of the imaginary body through the mechanisms of interpretation and imagination is emphasized. In this way, the imaginary body emerges as a phenomenal case in the context of visual art, based on the hypotheses and concepts of artists, significant philosophers, and theorists.

The phenomenon of the Absent body in fine arts emerges as an interesting and multi-layered question in the field of art, connecting aesthetic perception, reflection of physicality and the imagination of the viewer. Although the body as a representational or visual object has existed in art since the earliest historical periods, this article examines precisely that form of the body that is not directly depicted, but is experienced through hints, signs, traces, appearances of Absent body.

Fig. 1 Cueva de la Manos (Argentina) was created in several waves between 7,300 BC and 700 AD. Ancient example of Absent body in Patagonian region. Cueva de las Manos – is named for the hundreds of hand paintings stenciled into multiple collages on the rock walls. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cueva_de_las_Manos#/media/File:SantaCruz-Cueva-Manos-P2210651b.jpg

This concept, closely related to the mechanisms of imagination, suggests reconsidering the boundaries of artistic perception – what is seen but not depicted, what is experienced without a direct image of the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that “Our body is our perspective on the world, and the incomplete intentional and horizontal structure of perception is not a limitation to our access to the world and truth; it is the very possibility of this access.” [1]. Thus, the phenomenon of the Absent body allows the artist and the viewer to meet in a common space of imagination.

The aim of this article is to analyze the concept of the Absent body through examples of visual art, based on contemporary philosophical and aesthetic theories, highlighting the role of the viewer in the “filling” of the body and the experience of the work.

Methods

The appearance of the Absent body in Fine arts is studied using the case study method, which aims to thoroughly analyze the phenomenon of the Absent body in the context of visual art, to explain the phenomenon under study using artistic research. The article does not cover a very wide field of the Absent body as an object of research and is mainly focused on the definition of the phenomenon, the results of artistic research, interactions with other artistic cases, known examples in artistic field as well as in some theories and philosophies of art.

Results

The Absent body, as a case of artistic expression in the visual arts, expands the boundaries of body perception and emphasizes the conceptual possibilities of the body. The artistic experiments carried out have highlighted the diversity of possibilities and recognition of transferred idea, the implemented artwork *no(BODY)* marks one of the ca-

ses of the Absent body, which uses the method of imprint, trace. *No(BODY)* works as a signifier as a communicative terms, and the extracted signified maintains the “openness” of the work. By keeping the artwork “open”, it can be interpreted and rethought, otherwise the work becomes an interpretation of the artist’s thought.

This artistic research is relevant due to the topic of body representation, based on art history, and focused on the conceptual possessions of the imaginary body. The research identifies cases of the imaginary body in visual art as an important phenomenon. It also defines its concept and theoretical and philosophical meanings. As the research reveals, manifestations of the imaginary body have been found since prehistoric times, but the number of works with the imaginary body has increased significantly with the rise of postmodernism and conceptual art.

The phenomenon of the imaginary body has not received enough attention and has not been extensively studied yet. The artistic research conducted proves that only an artist can do what theorists and philosophers talk about in the case of the imaginary body, i.e. create the final version of the work in the viewer’s mind, convincing them that it is more real than what is seen in pictures – when the body is depicted directly.

The research “The appearance of Absent Body in Fine arts” is limited to a rather narrow and niche case of body representation. The research used notable works and artistic experiments that could be associated with the methodology of the sign or imprint.

Discussion

Human Body in Traditional Art

The human body is one of the oldest and most widely recurring motifs in the history of art. However, its representations, functions, and symbolic meanings have shifted considerably depending on the era, culture, and ideolo-



Fig. 2 Tamara Pathak. No(BODY) 2023-2025. The print of the body was made on lithography stones to inscribe the meaning of connection of artist's body and stone. Source: author's own artwork..

gical or aesthetic transformations. In many historical contexts, the body was not primarily a vehicle of emotional expression, but rather a bearer of ideas, spirituality, and symbolic order. For instance, in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the human form was stylized according to strict canons, serving religious and political functions by expressing hierarchy, divinity, and cosmic order rather than individuality or naturalism [2, 3]. Similarly, in Early Christian and Byzantine art, corporeality was subordinated to spiritual meaning: the body of Christ or the saints was often depicted frontally and hieratically, with symbolic rather than naturalistic proportions, emphasizing transcendence and conveying theological truths [4]. By contrast, Islamic art generally avoided figural representation of the human body altogether, privileging the abstract, the ornamental, and the calligraphic sign as vehicles of divine presence [5]. Thus, the body in traditional art often functioned less as expression of individuality or emotion, and more as a codified sign through which ideas, beliefs, and hierarchies were articulated.

From Antiquity's idealized bodies to the Renaissance celebration of proportion and harmony, and into the Baroque period, the role of the body shifted again. In the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens, for example, the baroque concept of corporeality is expressed through fleshy, dynamic, and monumental figures, which are not merely eroticized nudes but carriers of mythological, religious, and political narratives. Yet it would be misleading to separate Rubens's depictions entirely from sensuality: in the Baroque, eroticism and cultural narrative

were intertwined, and the vitality of the body was itself part of the symbolic force [6]. In modernity, Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) radically destabilized the passive image of the female nude by presenting a confrontational gaze, whereby the body became an active subject of social and artistic discourse [7]. Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) pushes this further: while often interpreted as a symbol of birth and the source of life, the work cannot be detached from sexuality and erotic provocation. Its realism challenges the idealized beauty of tradition, yet the intimate depiction of female anatomy simultaneously invokes erotic desire—hence its enduring controversy and ambiguous status between philosophical sign and sensual image [8].

In contemporary art, the body assumes even more diverse forms: fragmented, transformed, sometimes disappearing altogether to leave only traces or



Fig. 3 É. Manet's "*Olympia*" (1863). As highly controversial and revolutionary oil painting mainly because of woman's direct and challenging gaze at the viewer was seen as confrontational and disrespectful of traditional artistic conventions. Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Olympia-painting-by-Manet>

Fig. 4 Elena Antanavičiūtė. "Dewlap" 2021. While depicting the body artist see interesting abstract forms, she portrays body parts what are not much exploited in the media. As a part of Elena's approach to the body is determined not only by her debate with beauty standards, but also by individual aesthetic pursuits. Source: author's own artwork..



signs. The “absence” of the body becomes a conceptual form of expression tied not only to materiality, but also to memory, experience, and social context. As Herschdorfer observes, “the body is

no longer only an image to be seen but an idea to be performed or evoked” [9]. This tendency is also visible in the current practices of Lithuanian artists: for instance, in Elena Antanavičiūtė’s exhibition *In the Body*, the corporeal form becomes both an object of research and a subjective material of experience, while in Tamara Pathak’s work, the body often withdraws from direct representation, transforming into systems of signs and traces that articulate relationships with space, time, and emotion. In this way, the human body in art continues to function not only as a motif of representation, but as an active medium for generating meaning.



Absent body: definition and theoretical justification

The concept of the Absent body in contemporary art emerges as an interdisciplinary phenomenon, connecting aesthetics, semiotics, phenomenology and the philosophy of imagination. The Absent body is not a body that is visible or physically recognizable, but one that “appears” through experience, signs, personal interpretation. It exists as a possibility, as a potential activation of imagination. Expanding the definition of Absent body, the word “absent” can be

associated with “conceptual” or “imagined body”. As Lisa Blackman writes, “Although the sense in sense-making might make us think of a more sentient body, it is generally linked to interpretation, to judgment and ultimately to the work of thought. We are back with culture from the neck up, as a famous scholar once said, and the body or what it means to have and be a body seems to have disappeared again, or at least to merely be an absent presence.” [10]. All of these terms refer to that which exists in experience, but not in material form. This tension between presence and absence is the main principle of the imagined body.

In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological philosophy, the body is not only an object, but also a means of perception: “We have a world only by having a body: “the body is our anchorage in a world” [11]. The Absent body here becomes “I am” that interacts with the world not the words, but through sensory experience, gaze, imagination. Lithuanian philosopher Kristupas Sabolius, speaking about the power of imagination, puts forward the idea that it is not only a means of representation, but also a creator of reality: “Imagination is not what creates illusions, it creates the possibilities of reality” [12]. Thus, the Absent body is not a fiction – it is the potential to exist, to be recognized, to be “filled” in the viewer’s imagination. Such Body can also be understood as a sign in a semiotic structure. According to F. de Saussure, a sign always consists of a signifier (material expression) and a signifié (meaning). “The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and sound-image” [13]. The imaginary body is precisely that space between them – a sign without a clear form, but with a strong meaning. J. Derrida would add: “meaning is always deferred” (*différance*) – meaning is not fixed, it is constantly postponed, spreading through the system of signs, never fully realized [14].

In this way, the absent body functions as an open structure – it does not

exist without a viewer, without a context. Its boundaries are not drawn, it emerges through active viewing, thought, feeling. In Umberto Eco’s theory of the “open work”, this principle is emphasized as one of the essential characteristics of contemporary art: “Every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it” [15]. Marina Abramović’s work “The Artist is Present” perfectly reflects the case when the body becomes a field of experience, although it is almost inactive physically – the viewer “fills” the invisible body. Thus, the imaginary body is perceived more as a process than an object. It is a body that is born from vision, from a cultural code, from sensory memory. A body that isn’t there, yet it exists.

Cases of Absent body occur not only in the visual arts, it is a widely used practice in design and commercial activities. The imaginary body provides an opportunity to present the desired image more expressively, without emphasizing human intervention in the image itself, but providing an understanding, a feeling of how it is related to the person, that the person is or was in that image. For example, in the field of fashion design, costumes are depicted without the person itself. Or interior design examples with a human “footprint” – the images with a long exposure and a blurred silhouette of the human body. So if we observe it more broadly, we find plenty of examples of the Absent body in the field of design and advertising, which indicates how acceptable and understandable the meaning of Absent body is, how often it is used, but not clearly named as a phenomenal way of expressing a concept.

Semiological and viewing aspects: the body as a sign and a field of interpretation

The Absent body in visual art often functions as a sign – not a direct representation, but a meaningful struc-



Fig. 5 Kamilė Jadevičiūtė. From the serie "Future Fossils". Kamilė Jadevičiūtė talk about traces left by humans in the layers of the Earth and draw a parallel between the print and fossils.
Source: author's own artwork..

ture rooted in systems of language and culture. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is composed of a signifier (a form of expression) and a signified (a concept) [16]. The imagined body performs this dual function – it is not a fixed form, but invites the process of meaning-making in the consciousness of the viewer. Yves Klein series of works "Anthropometries" is an example where absent body is a central paradox – the artworks are made by bodies, but in fi-



Fig. 6 Tamara Pathak. No(BODY) 2023-2025. A video installation allows viewers to identify with the projected image, questioning the interaction of connection with themselves, the environment and the work. An individual narrative is created based on the viewer's imagination and experience. The lithographic stones become witnesses and mediators of the body's interaction with the cold stone, reflecting the questions and hesitations that lie within. Source: author's own artwork.

nal works there is only traces remains. The absence of body becomes a part of the experience. This aligns with Klein's interest in impersonality – art not as personal expression, but as an imprint of being [17].

Roland Barthes, while developing the analysis of signs, claims that signs can be decoded at various levels [18]. The imaginary body thus becomes a part of the cultural text – it is not so much represented as constantly re-formed in interpretations. Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards proposed the “meaningful triangle” and explained that meaning is born from the relationship between sign, thought and referent [19]. The Absent body often does not have a clear material referent – its “presence” is created at the junction

of thought and cultural context. This is especially evident in contemporary art practice, where the body perceived as an incomplete field of signs. Jacques Lacan's theory of the “mirror stage” propose the identification that occurs through visual recognition, which forms the concept of the “I”. The Absent body in this paradigm becomes the “other” that encourages the viewer to reflect on themselves and create meanings through projection [20].

The body is not only observed – it transcends its physical contour and becomes a tool for the formation of psychological identity. Based on the previously mentioned Umberto Eco's theory of the “open work”, the Absent body acquires with another dimension. U. Eco writes that every work of art allows for “infinite

interpretations”, because the generation of meanings is the responsibility of the viewer [21]. The Absent body in this case is not presented as a final image, but as an open space of meaningful possibilities, belonging to the viewer’s imagination and cultural experience. In this way, the combination of semiotic and psychoanalytic theory allows us to understand the Absent body as a dynamic, interpretive phenomenon that operates not through representation, but through an active mechanism of vision, personal experience and imagination.

The artwork *no(BODY)* arises from the creative searches and the artist’s intuition regarding the possibilities of conceptual body expression, which is confirmed by art theory and philosophical ideas. The case of a body print is used, when the trace of the body performs the meaning of a sign and/or signifier. A conscious distance is maintained from the creator’s body, in order to support the viewer’s ability to identify with the work through a personal prism. Meanwhile, graphic artist Kamilė Jadvickiūtė has been researching the geological origin of limestone and nature’s imprints – fossils – and has shared her results and observations on the subject. She claims that as the lithographic ink dries, it forms a pattern in which the water leaves its drying trace, like a time diagram. Repeated pressing, grinding, drawing, pressing and grinding again on the same stone layers are separating the experienced time.

The act of touching sedimentary rock evokes thoughts about the long scales of geological time, which encourages us to reconsider our place in it [22]. Both the imprints of nature and the imprint of the *no(BODY)* work inextricably speak of time and meaning. The Absent body is, in part, determined by time – especially in the case of an imprint/trace. Therefore, we can say that the body that was here (past time) becomes imaginary.

The lithography stones in *no(BODY)* perform the function of contact in both a direct (physiological) and a me-

taphorical (communication or understanding) sense. The stone accepts the body itself and preserves information (time, pattern, movement, feeling, etc.). In classical lithography, drawings made on stone are printed on paper, but when it comes to the imaginary body and the relationship between the stone and the body, their important contact becomes evident. Not the contact of contact, which would have been the case if the image had been transferred to paper, but of a living body and a relatively living stone. Paint is used to create a signifier that acts as a leap of thought. No less important is the temperature difference between these elements, which, in essence, acts as a physical plus and minus relationship, evoking an important question: will the body warm the stone, or will the stone cool down the body?

Conclusion

The Absent body in contemporary art emerges as a specific form of expression of physicality, which does not exist through image, but is born through experience, interpretation and imagination. The concept of this body is not related to physical presence, but to aesthetic, cultural and semiotic potential. It becomes a sign that invites the viewer to an active process of creating meanings.

While analyzing a work through the prism of the Absent body, the position of the viewer also changes – he is no longer just an observer, but becomes a creator. The body acquires meanings not through its representation, but through its absence, emptiness, signs, impressions. Such an understanding of the body is based on the poststructuralist theory of language and signs and the phenomenology of imagination, which reveals the importance of the body as a subjective experience. The article examines how contemporary art uses the strategies of the imaginary body, which allow expanding the concept of the body beyond the boundaries of visibility. This tendency shows that contem-

porary art based less on representation, but more on practice of experience, where the viewer's consciousness and sensations become part of the work. ■

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Fig. 7 Tamara Pathak. From photography serie "Body-scape" 2024. Fragmented photographs of the artist's body gives an impression of scape. Not a landscape, not a city scape, but bodyscape. Author's own artwork

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