



A PRESENT ABSENCE

The terms *absence* and *presence* describe fundamental states of being. The first is described as "the state of being absent or away", in opposition, the second as "the fact or condition of being present; to have or occupy a place, somewhere, expressing the most general relation of a thing to its place." At the heart of this issue is the question of whether *truth* and *presence* are absolutely linked and if forms of *representation*, are, in fact, linked to *fallacy*. The discussion centred on the terms *absence* and *presence* is fundamentally engaged with the assessment of images and representations. Starting with ancient philosophy, Plato and Aristotle began to question the valuation of the proximate imitation or the mimesis of representations. Plato personified this question in his text "Allegory of the Cave" where he points out the false quality of appearances. For Plato, the illusion of appearances would draw the mind from the "contemplation of true being" described as the ultimate form of *presence*. Aristotle, on the other hand, engages this world of illusions by denouncing pure being. He sets forth the belief that there can be no unmediated forms and that being can somehow be extracted from representations. Therefore, Aristotle affirms representation: absence can be thought of as a kind of *presence* and presence as a kind of *absence*. For instance, the medium of photography is typically thought of as having a direct connection to some form of reality, *presence* and/or *truth*. In Roland Barthes' book, "Camera Lucida" he is struck by the connection between absent forms of photographic representation and the presence of *truth*: "what the photograph produces to infinity has occurred only once; the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially ... it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency".² According to Barthes, representations refer to someone or something real, but that event no longer exists, except in the photograph. Therefore, the photograph is a kind of *absent presence*, which, for Barthes, still holds subjective significance, but not absolute truth. Another example is Jacques Derrida who thought of writing as a form of *truth*; a functional necessity of absence within a *presence* affirming that "representational absence becomes a form of *presence*. And this absence is not a continuous modification of *presence*, it is a rupture in *presence*, the death or the possibility of death."¹

This line of thought can be applied to architecture and to the theme around its petrification through preservation. What if preservation would mean to destroy in order to create? Just like a photograph, it would "reproduce to infinity what has occurred only once" – a memory, a previous being. And what if this memory would be a mere echo, a deconstruction of a previous meaning? And what if this same meaning would become nothing? The representation of death itself. A reminiscence of life, not truth neither absolute being. Through this thought, the strategy is to cast a shell of concrete around each building in order to create a statement of a former presence. This shell is an abstraction of a space, it has no roof and serves no protection. It becomes an object, a landmark of life where a superimposition of reality and past is defined. A body that is simultaneously living and dead.

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context" in Glyph 1, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mohrman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977)

² Barthes, Roland, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, Trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

