

Collective Abyss: Social Identities of Silence, Void, and Resistance

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Collective Abyss: Social Identities of Silence, Void, and Resistance

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Societies and social policies are defined by myriads of factors. Once set, written down, and enacted, they define those who fall under their rule in turn—assigning a social value to people, processes, and results. Said value is never zero and is never singular; it is fluid, assessed on a scale that fluctuates between a single interpretation and an abyss of possible values. Laws of men and the Universe are the easiest to evaluate and assign a value to, while empty spaces, silences, and idleness are the hardest. Since they are undefined entities, they might as well be entireties. The latter pose maximum threat to the value of non-empty spaces—the pillar of governance and control. Consequently, the social and especially political machine has invented a separate system

of assigning value to voids and silences. The regulatory spectrum of this system tends towards punishment, towards precluding an abyss—a complete plurality of choice and a lack of control. Chaos. This system of punishment is especially ruthless towards the arts, activism, and independent communities. This visual essay analyzes two extremes within the above-mentioned system of evaluating negative spaces: a void and an abyss. The text draws on different case studies to propose the definitions (values) of voids and abysses at different points on this punishment timeline from the perspective of silent, idle, and resting activists and artists who found themselves under the scorching heat of looming gore.

Preface: Absence. See presence

Maurice Blanchot's index to *The Infinite Conversation* (1993, 465) opens with the line 'absence. See presence.' If we were to alter this line to reflect its value for the reader, the full stop should be replaced with a comma (an abyss), and if we were to alter it for an institution, the full stop should be replaced with a dash (a set value, an accusation). Punctuation in a language is the closest relative of policies in a society. Words can be identified, often with the aid of commas, full stops, and exclamation marks, but also on their own. Their meaning can be spotted as early as the preparatory stage—an opened mouth, a blank page, a gesture.

These pre-verbal statements are specimens of silence, the essence

of which lies in the ability to be seen. It is disguised as a question of existence and a means for continuity. Upon perception, absences acquire social identities akin to human ones. Absence is the topos where a void turns into an abyss.

Void: a state of being without something, a pause, a state of intentional lacking

Abyss: a bottomless gulf, pit, or chaos; a state of complete non-being

VOIDS offer temporary vessels for the mind to rest, be idle, or fill itself with conscious deductions, subconscious floods, or trauma responses.

A procrastination, a pause between two acts of a play, elevator music, an empty train platform, next slide, please wait.

The socio-political significance of a void is that of the first breath taken after a contest of 'who can hold their breath the longest.' It is an invaluable tool in all fiction: TV shows, elections, books.

An abyss is a prosecutable offense in all types of dictatorships from abusive relationships to police states. This is because an abyss of space, be it physical or imaginary, offers an abyss of identities to be figured out in their full plurality. This tug of war between potentiality and abandonment moves those on the receiving end of silence—witnesses—to speculate outside of the usual spectrum of logic, pushing organizing bodies into radical censorship of empty spaces.

This censorship is aimed at a usual suspect—the individual singularity, found and manifested through 'the work of meditation' (Blanchot, 1993). Institutional enforcers strongly fear the unanswered question, the empty page; hence, they tend to replace it with a suitable singularity—a tool of oppression, a set value.

An empty plot of land is turned into a shopping mall (a tool), an abandoned building covered in emerald green netting (a tool), a wall decorated with a mural or multi-colored lights (a tool), a page, with the inscription 'Page left intentionally blank' (a tool).

If not occupied by a tool, a void is idle and yet potent. It is a happening in waiting, open to all possible events. Be it the spontaneous environment of São Paulo's Parque Minhocão or Vsevolod Lisovsky's silent play, emptiness invites free and even forbidden speculation—a freedom that is hard to take back once provided. A void occupied by a tool is space free from speculation, and hence safe for the hierarchical lords.

The double lives of silent spaces: scenarios

1. A theater of extraction

You enter a theater space and sit down in the embrace of the red velvet cushions and stale breaths of fellow spectators. The director Vsevolod Lisovsky announces, 'Over the course of 60 minutes, the spectators and the

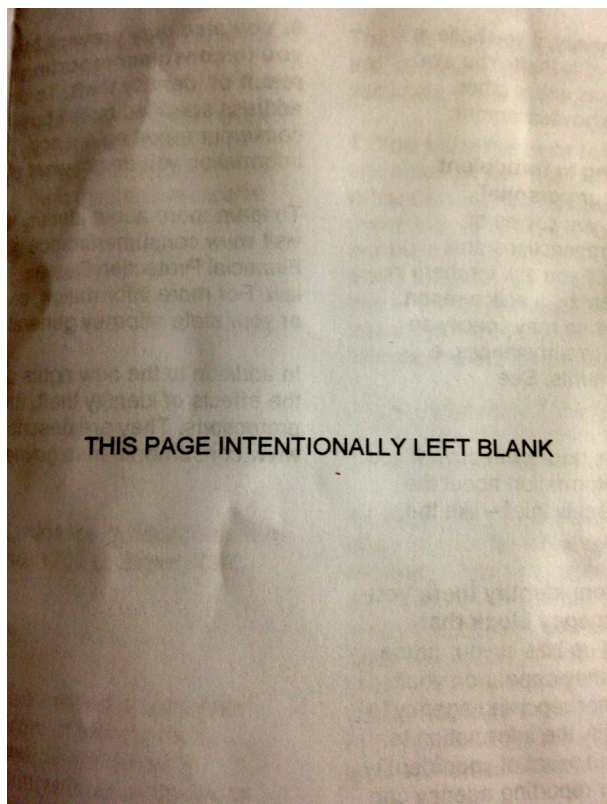


Figure 1. Book page with 'This Page Intentionally Left Blank' inscription, 2022. © Dr. Rob Bell, all rights reserved, used with permission.

performer in the theater will remain silent together. This is not a meditation. It is entertainment, a paid service: we provide the public with that most sought-after item—silence.' After the room goes dark, an actor proceeds to enter the stage and sit down on the chair, as if waiting for a train. The spectators, in turn, wait for the actor to break character, to make a mistake, to fulfill their theatrical duty. The void is filled with anticipation of the familiar, which grows more distant with each minute. The identity of the void here is indeed human. An excitement of waiting for the unexpected

Here, anticipation is not used as a tool, as one would assume, but a trigger for an impulse (collective or personal). The difference between a trigger and a tool is in their continuation. A tool, socially, means death, while a trigger has an afterlife.

This kind of (human) silence, if executed in the presence of a tool, is rooted in expectation management, lazy and predictable in its outcome, hence, often used by governing bodies. When President of Russia Vladimir Putin waited to announce the partial mobilization of Russian residents for the army in September of 2022, he utilized precisely this tactic. He announced a special address and then postponed it time and time again, filling the void of the public mind with anticipation, speculation, anxiety, and economic distress. In short, he executed it.



Figure 2. *A Silence on a Specified Topic*, a play directed by Vsevolod Lisovsky, 2016. © Teatr. post and Teatr.doc, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Tool—a death.

Trigger—a life.

2. The abyss of free will

The abyss launched by a trigger requires a space to develop and grow. However, not just any space can serve this purpose. Such a space must facilitate a collective abyss—the displacement of tools.

The experiment of Minhocão Park (Parque Minhocão) commenced in 1977 with the decision to close this large and busy urban highway from 12 am to 5 am. In the end, thanks to the efforts of a group of urban activists and area residents, it was decided that the overpass will be completely shut to traffic on Sundays. Currently, every weekend, the space is taken over by all manner of social events, festivities, open-air markets, and sporting activities. One of the key voices in the discussion is an NGO, Association of the Friends of Minhocão Park. Its members, all people who live nearby, are keen to turn it into a municipal park that would be open to cyclists as well as pedestrians. In 2019, the city authorities announced that a 900-meter section of the overpass will be permanently closed to traffic, but the fate of the rest of the highway is undecided.

Minhocão residents seized this opening in the discourse of possibility to reclaim and repurpose a piece of city infrastructure into a topos of civilian action. Nowadays, artists use the site for their interventions, children and teens, for sports, and residents, for regular gatherings. This void has evolved into an abyss of self-organized community potency: this case proves that functional dis-purposing allows spaces to become 'clean slates' and cease to be tools.



Figure 3. Parque Minhocão, highway hours, 2020. © Elena Kilina, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Figure 4. Parque Minhocão, pedestrian hours, 2020. © Elena Kilina, all rights reserved, used with permission.



Figure 5. Parque Minhocão, pedestrian hours, 2020. © Elena Kilina, all rights reserved, used with permission.



Figure 6. Photographer Anastasia Nikolaeva holding an empty piece of paper being detained by a police officer, Russia, 28 Feb 2022 (Nu etot ryzhyi via YouTube, 'zaderzhanie Anastasii Nikolaevoi 25.02'). © Aleksandr Chetviortyi, all rights reserved, used with permission.

3. A stage for speculation

Activist Anastasia Nikolaeva was detained by a police officer while holding an empty piece of paper on the 28th of February 2022, four days after the start of Russia's so-called 'special military operation' in Ukraine. Later that year, a group of protestors was arrested for holding 'imaginary posters;' then, journalists were punished for blanking out letters in taboo words (an attempt at avoiding censure). Russian society was already characterized by social inequality and lack of security for those who practice freedom of thought ('Constitution of the Russian Federation' 2020, Article 29), but these cases have proven that even the ideas of silent resistance have been banned altogether. Moreover, such silences have been weaponized and criminalized.

These successful attempts by the Russian Government to turn empty spaces (abysses of interpretations) into clearly identified values of criminal activity have materialized in a set of new articles of the Criminal Code and the Administrative Offences Code of the Russian Federation, such as 'Discrediting the Russian Army' (Federal Law No. 63-FZ, 2022).

To discredit—to cause a loss of belief, credit, or value.

The process of stripping an institution of its value opens the door to the freedom of individual speculation—an abyss of possible meanings. On the contrary, the process of discrediting an individual action implies a 'diagnosis' and a lack of speculation whatsoever. This difference prompts an interesting conclusion: discreditation that is performed by a single member of society

is a process of asserting a personal right to humanity, freedom of thought and of speech (an abyss); discreditation that is performed by an institution or an organization is a process of eliminating humanity (a void). Might discreditation be one of the many social identities of silence, void, and resistance?



Figure 7. Invisible posters with anti-government statements, 6 April 2014. © Vitaly Ragulin, all rights reserved, used with permission.

Afterword (for the unwillingly silent witness): *Under the Scorching Heat of Looming Gore*, a poem by Sofya Chibisguleva

A well is only void
when rain is clear and the soil
lies on the rock of the retired terror
from which the people did inadvertently evolve
yet memory is clear, thoughts are sore

A well is only an abyss
when seeping through the soil are boiling winds
of unavenged injustices and burns
which fill the well, yet do not overflow.
A comfortable shame of future lore

A void turns into an abyss
so slowly yet so swiftly, you can see
its waters pierced with strings of signal colors
unusual for wells, yet home to the chaos of
anything and everything you thought impossible

Under the scorching heat of looming gore

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Authors' bios:

The Mainline Group is an artery that pumps histories of people, machines, spaces, and places between its two lungs: Dr. Elena Kilina and Sofya Chibisguleva. Both separately and together, we create stories about the fusion between people and their cultural past and collective future via contemporary forms of narration: sound, audiobooks, art therapy, and printed media.

Dr. Elena Kilina (PhD, UNICAMP, Brazil) is an anthropologist working in the social sciences with a focus on urbanism, visual anthropology, and Asian studies. Elena is a PhD fellow at Tongji University (Shanghai) affiliated with its College of Design and Innovation's DESIS LAB, as well as the recipient of a fellowship from the Social Science Faculty of Fudan University (Shanghai). She is also an ambassador of World Music School and performing sound artist for the Creative Systemic Research Platform (CSRP).

Sofya Chibisguleva (MA, Royal College of Art, UK), also known as Sofya Seeree, is a sculptor who works with words and an independent educator. She specializes in site-specific science fiction, political mythology, immigration psycholinguistics, and post-literary discourse. She has been a resident writer and exhibiting artist at FACT Gallery (Liverpool, UK), Science Museum (London, UK), Arthill Gallery (London, UK), Bidston Observatory (Liverpool, UK), Zengården (Finnaker, Sweden), and London Art Book Fair 2018 (Whitechapel Gallery, London).