A Space Without Memory: Time and the Sublime in the Work of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller

Margherita N. Papadatos
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Professor Joy James
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Art History
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts
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A SPACE WITHOUT MEMORY: TIME AND THE SUBLIME IN THE WORK OF JANET CARDIFF AND GEORGE BURES MILLER

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Margherita Papadatos

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art History

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

The central question of my investigation is: how do artists present the unpresentable when presentation itself is impossible? Concentrating solely on Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s artworks Opera For a Small Room (2005) and The Killing Machine (2007), I redevelop Jean François Lyotard’s concept of the sublime as put forth in his The Inhuman: Reflections on Time, in order to ask how Cardiff and Miller give shape to the unpresentable in their work. Opera and Killing are works that dynamically problematize and play with ideas of presentation, subjectivity, memory, and time. Thus, I explore my central question of presentation or present/presence outlined in my first chapter through three key themes: memory, time, and subjectivity, which correspond to chapters two, three, and four. I argue that Opera For a Small Room and The Killing Machine by Canadian installation artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller answer this question of presentation by provoking us to experience the sensation of present/presence and enabling us to rethink the sublime as space without memory.

Keywords

Janet Cardiff, George Bures Miller, Lyotard, Kant, Sublime, Present, Presence, Memory, Temporality, Time, Subjectivity, Ontology.
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\textit{CPR} = Immanuel Kant’s \textit{Critique of Pure Reason} 

\textit{Opera} = \textit{Opera For a Small Room} (2005) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller

\textit{Killing} = \textit{The Killing Machine} (2007) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller
Chapter 1

Introduction: The Sublime and the Present/Presence

*Opera For a Small Room* (fig.1) and *The Killing Machine* (fig.2) by Canadian installation artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are works that dynamically problematize and play with ideas of presentation, subjectivity, memory, and the despatialization of time. Concentrating solely on Cardiff and Miller’s 2013 exhibition *Lost in the Memory Palace*, which featured the two above works, I redevelop Jean François Lyotard’s concept of the sublime as presented in his *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, in order to ask how Cardiff and Miller give shape to the unpresentable in their work. If the postmodern paradigm represents a retreat from the notion of traditional metaphysics, where does this leave the sublime? As Lyotard frames the question: “As every presentation consists in the ‘forming’ of the matter of data, the disaster suffered by the imagination can be understood as the sign that the forms are not relevant to the sublime sentiment. But in that case, where does matter stand, if the forms are no longer there to make it presentable? How is it with presence?”¹ In other words, following Lyotard, the question of this investigation becomes: how can we create an aesthetics of the sublime through material means when presentation itself is impossible? Cardiff and Miller’s artworks *Opera for a Small Room* and *The Killing Machine* answer this question by provoking us to experience the sensation of present/presence and enabling us to rethink the sublime as a space without memory.

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Figure 1: “Opera For a Small Room,” *Lost in the Memory Place*, 2013, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Art Gallery of Ontario.

Figure 2: “The Killing Machine,” *Lost in the Memory Place*, 2013, Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Art Gallery of Ontario.
Configuring the aesthetics of memory through what I will discuss as a present-absence and an absent-presence, Opera and Killing will be shown to expose slippages between that which can be presented but not represented. Investigating these slippages as an element of the sublime, resurrects questions of human experience in relation to the art object. The stakes of my enquiry are three-fold: i) to problematize the evocation of the sublime through memory as a (re)presentation of the unpresentable; ii) to examine the role of temporality in the sublime; and iii) to consider the consequences of the Cardiff/Miller works for subjective understandings of time and space.

There has been ample academic scholarship describing Janet Cardiff’s solo works as well as her early collaborations with her partner Bures Miller—particularly The Paradise Institute, which was presented at the 2001 Venice Biennale. Currently, however, there is little academic writing that focuses on either The Killing Machine or Opera for a Small Room. The significance of the way in which these two Cardiff/Miller collaborations shift the illusionary experience for the viewer from one that relies on spatiality to one that functions in the realm of the temporal has yet to be explored. Of no less importance is the manner in which these multi-sensory works effect a destabilization of the viewing subject’s sense of self.

When considered in terms of the Cardiff/Miller works, Lyotard’s notion of the inhuman undoes the ways in which the self has been traditionally situated in time and space. By introducing the inhuman as a new category, Lyotard attempts to put the historical in conversation with the aesthetic, using the sublime in order to articulate a space that exists outside of or beyond thought. The difficulty with this effort is systemic as the sublime is always already embedded within myths of origin and is therefore, always already historical. Consequently, Lyotard states, “…what if human beings, in humanism’s sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman (that’s the first part)? And (the second part), what if what is ‘proper’ to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?”² This harkening back to established, habitual notions of

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² Ibid., 2.
origins and beginnings is what prevents the sublime from passing into the outside spaces Lyotard initially describes. In order to re-think the sublime as a mechanism, which can mobilize thought differently, we must re-think its possibilities in the contemporary aesthetic context. While Lyotard does look at examples of visual art, he focuses entirely on examples of a two-dimensional medium: painting. In looking at three-dimensional, multi-media and multi-sensory constructions, like those of Cardiff and Miller, Lyotard’s notion can be revived to invite an enquiry into how artists might begin to materially structure that which is deemed unrepresentable. This wider interest deals with an expanded artistic and aesthetic context through which to look at the sublime. Central to this new context for the sublime is the notion of present/presence and absence.

In her essay “How to Define Presence Effects: The Work of Janet Cardiff,” Josette Féral discusses presence in the work of this artist. Féral defines absent-presence as the “presence effect” a “feeling that the audience has that the bodies or objects they perceive are really there within the same space and timeframe,” even though “the spectators know they are not there. [emphasis added]” Féral’s investigation of presence looks at Cardiff’s solo works *Forest Walk* (1991) and *Forty-part Motet* (2001) as well as the Miller collaboration *Paradise Institute*. In order to bring her ideas into the context of *The Killing Machine* and *Opera for a Small Room*, we must re-evaluate Féral’s notion in terms of its implications for the sublime. Instead of the illusion of physically occupying space, *Opera* and *Killing* offer the understanding of presence through the notion of absence.

Absent subjects occupy the time of the viewer without sharing their space because they are not materially present but set apart from the viewer through physical distance. It is important that in both works an objective distance is preserved: the viewer is presented with structures that allow access only at a distance. The result is that both *Opera* and *Killing* present visibly absent subjects. In *Killing* the victim strapped in the dental chair is missing in bodily form (fig.3) as is the man who is, according to the disjointed narrative

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of Opera’s soundscape, supposed to be sitting in a vacant chair in the center of the structure (fig.4 and fig.5). While the physical presence of both subjects is relayed through absence, their presence can be sensed as viewers identify with the man in Opera and feel the pain of the subject in the dental chair with Killing. They are spatial lies (phantoms), as they do not appear in physical space and thus present viewers with a temporally distorted construction of the subject. How can this spatial lie in Cardiff and Miller’s work be put in conversation with the sublime in Lyotard’s text? And to what end?

Figure 3: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Dental chair.
Figure 4: "Opera For a Small Room." Interior view.

Figure 5: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. Interior with spotlighted chair.
In *The Inhuman* Lyotard discusses the idea of presence in relation to time through the paintings of Barnett Newman. In contrast to Féral’s idea of presence, Lyotard focuses on the temporal. He maintains that Newman’s work confronts viewers with the experience of time, which appears as a kind of instantaneous presence. He states, “Presence is the instant which interrupts the chaos of history and which recalls, or simply calls out that ‘there is’, even before that which is has any signification.” By maintaining the objective distance of the work, *Opera* and *Killing* engender moments of time wherein sublime difference occurs: they are events that exist between the delay in which an unstructured instant becomes a contemplated and integrated experience. One of the many ways *Opera* and *Killing* produce this delay is through the ways in which they constantly overload the viewer’s senses postponing their ability to unify and cognize this data. Here signification and recognition cannot account for the sheer amount of sensory overload and thus come too late (this idea of reason arriving too late will be further explored in chapter four).

For Lyotard, this brief fragment of time between complete immersion in the event and an awareness of its functionality as such—the moment before the instant is integrated and becomes meaningful—is the space of the Kantian sublime. Here Lyotard uses Kant’s notion in order to illustrate the shift attributed to the postmodern that characterizes a difference in the perception of time: this is what he understands as the shift towards the inhuman. Lyotard’s use of Kant’s notion of the sublime in this paradigm largely functions as a means to capture something that he sees changing in progress, something that constantly eludes his grasp, much like the sublime or the present. This interplay between occurrence and signification is precisely what *Opera* and *Killing* play with. In describing Aristotle’s concept of time in Book IV of the *Physics* Lyotard states, “It is impossible to determine the difference between what has taken place (the *proteron*, the anterior) and what comes along (the *husterion*, the ulterior) without situating the flux of events with respect to a now. But it is no less impossible to grasp any such ‘now’ since, because it is

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dragged away by what we call the flow of consciousness..." This particular passage highlights Lyotard’s acknowledgement of two things: 1) the fear of adhering to prescriptive and fixed meaning when delineating the difference between past, present and future, particularly in the historical sense, and 2) the sheer impossibility of such an endeavour as the task of grasping the “now” alludes to the ability to catch hold of something which consciousness prohibits. The first admission highlights the importance of Lyotard’s mobilization of Kant’s notion of the sublime as a characterization of a kind of middle ground, or non-prescriptive place, which denies myths of origin and teleological progress in historical discourse. While this first admission will be important in the discussion of temporality in regard to the issue of presence/present in Cardiff and Miller’s work, Lyotard’s second admission is our initial concern.

This second admission, regarding the delay between the beginning of an event and its recognition as such, can be further elucidated by examining Brian Massumi’s characterization of the means by which the present is perceived in Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. In this text Massumi looks towards the missing half-second which exists between the beginning of an event, as it presents itself in brain activity, and its manifestation as an expression in the body. This half-second delay between event and recognition can also be seen as the pure present/presence of which Lyotard speaks. Massumi asserts that in the opening of an event, “Its newness means that [its] incipience cannot just be a conservation and reactivation of the past. They are tendencies – in other words, pastnesses opening directly onto a future, but with no present to speak of. For the present is lost with the missing half second, passing too quickly to be perceived, too quickly, actually, to have happened.” What Massumi points out in this example is that human perception functions as a constant jump between past and future: the moment that the present is recognized it becomes (re)cognized and thus becomes consumed in the past. This understanding of time indicates that the present cannot be

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5 Ibid., 24.
7 Ibid., 30.
situated within experience but must lie just outside of it. As we will explore in what follows, in prompting the encounter of multiple, overlapping, and continuously changing times, *Opera* and *Killing* play with this structure of occurrence and recognition by inviting the viewer to dwell in the present—the in-between now-ness of the event.

As Lyotard maintains, a permanent presence outside of thought presupposes the impossibility of this existence for more than mere fragments of time, which is why the sublime itself is so ephemeral. In this way, the notion of pure presence/present through the perceptive mode of the sublime becomes limited in terms of what it can provide by way of the discourse of restructuring thought itself because it still very much relies on normative modes of spatiotemporal perception. This means that the inhuman is already implied within the human much as Lyotard argues that the postmodern is already implied within the modern. He asserts: “When this argument is applied to modernity, the result is identified and defined as clearly circumscribed historical entities, of which the latter would always come ‘after’ the former. Rather we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity, modern temporality, comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state other than itself.” 8 Like the postmodern and modern, humanity and inhumanity both reject and rely on each other in order to exist as categories of historical and aesthetic understanding. It is important to note that this push/pull relationship is one which Cardiff and Miller use in their work to affect difference through the absent-presence of the sublime. The in-between time and space of the inhuman or the sublime becomes problematic because the necessity to occupy the middle is undermined by the necessity to turn back towards experience. Massumi states, “Something happening out of mind in a body directly absorbing its outside cannot exactly said to be experienced.” 9 In this way, thought can never turn towards an entirely outside space, and while this is very much central to Lyotard’s project, it is limiting in terms of being able to restructure notions of the perception of time; seeing or perceiving differently can only occur in temporal fragments. However, perhaps this mode of brevity is the only means by which we can experience difference. If

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the mode of difference is pure presence—the now—then it can only be experienced as something that exists outside for this fleeting moment before it becomes reinterpreted within experience. This is precisely why the Cardiff/Miller artworks constantly pull the viewer into the work, immersing them in a present/presence and then bringing them back into signification: in order that they might effect a mode of difference. I identify that this particular aesthetic technique of immersion and recuperation constitutes the sublime.

As previously outlined, the illustration of the sublime as an absent-presence in terms of the suspension of space and time indicates that it can only ever be used as a temporary reprieve that at once rejects and simultaneously relies on the structure from whence it came. This notion seems to be inconsistent with Lyotard’s claim in the introduction of his text: “I am not making this hypothesis about development my own, because it is a way, the way, for metaphysics, henceforth ruled out for thinking, to re-establish its rights over it. To re-establish them not within thinking (if I make an exception of the thinking which still calls itself philosophical, which is to say metaphysical), but from the outside of thinking.”

It is the case that the nature of the sublime as an absent-presence or pure presence/present in terms of the suspension of space and time indicates that it operates outside of experience. However, in order for an event to be characterized as sublime it must re-enter the realm of experience simultaneously operating both within and outside of thought. Lyotard’s inconsistency is intentional as it highlights the failure of the permanence of this state of difference. The very nature and mode of difference is that it can only be maintained for mere fragments of time before it is re-consumed within normative modes of experience.

The fleeting quality of difference is exactly why Opera and Killing must constantly move the viewer through various states of subjectivity and various times, preventing the viewer from remaining in any one place: this constant movement and unsettling causes one to continually be confronted with instances of the present/presence or instances of difference. Thus, the category of the inhuman re-establishes the outside spaces of thought from within thinking rather than outside of it as Lyotard initially

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10 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 6.
suggests. This attempt to enter into the realm of the ungraspable through the sublime from the inside rather than outside of thought is seemingly very much in line with the rest of his subsequent arguments. However, the categories of within and outside rely, once again, on each other to exist and thus limit the ability of the sublime to reconfigure structures of narrative-based thought. Which is why in order to effect this difference, Opera and Killing must prevent the viewer from resolving and reconciling the aesthetic mode thus produced.

Looking at these two works in the overall context of the show Lost in the Memory Palace the theme of absent-presence also converges with the aesthetic of memory as an overall consideration of this curatorial project. The stories that Killing and Opera (as well as all the other works in the exhibition) tell are stories that hinge on memory: memories that both belong to the viewer and are simultaneously external to them. They are memories of a fictive past that become an affective reality as the spectator engages with the work: their own memories converge with the fictitious ones, opening onto a unique and nonlinear future.

Turning back to Féral’s essay will further elucidate this point as she states that experience is constituted both of “thought and memory.”¹¹ She outlines the difference between the apparition of an object, as it appears in space, and the “idea of this object,” as it presents itself in the subject’s thought.¹² This distinction is outlined by Kant in the Critique of Pure Reason as the difference between an intuition, as it appears to the senses, and the corresponding concept in the mind. He states, “Neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition.”¹³ Neither sensory intuitions nor concepts can operate independently of the other as neither alone is enough to produce understanding. Opera and Killing point out this dependence through absence-presence by presenting sensory intuitions, which are

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¹¹ Féral, “How to Define Presence Effects…”, 33.
¹² Ibid., 33.
discontinuous with each other. For example, in Killing viewers are confronted by a non-present subject whose presence is sensed through the affective ritual killing that it undergoes. Here, the mind can conceptualize the absence of the subject through what is intuited by sense; however, viewers are still wont to feel bodily distress and empathy at the killing of another subject—even an absent-present one. This sensation is no doubt tied to the function of memory. While one may not have witnessed the torture of another being first-hand, the experience of pain is well known to most. These experiences of mundane acts, such as having dental work done, are the kinds of memories that are being conceptually evoked. This evocation in the mind of the viewer is what leads this work to have such a powerful, impact, and horrifying resonance.

Lyotard synthesizes the function of memory nicely in his essay “Logos and Teche, or Telegraphy” from The Inhuman: “The synthesis of remembering implies not only the retention of the past in the present as present, but the synthesis of the past as such and its reactualization as past in the present (of consciousness).” The reactualization of the past in the present and its synthesis with the past as present is precisely the perpetual state in which viewers are placed with a work such as Opera. Viewers are pulled into the present of the work in Opera and Killing, but also into its fictitious past, while simultaneously being reminded of their own past and existing in their own present as a body in a physical space. Never allowing them to remain in any one time for more than moments, Opera and Killing once again shuttle the viewer back from recognition and integration into the now.

In order to understand the inclusion of the sublime in Lyotard’s project and its function in Cardiff and Miller’s work as a confrontation with the present or the now, it is first necessary to explore the notion of the sublime as pure presence/present through Kant’s transcendental categories of space and time and their relationship to appearance. Kant’s system in CPR attempts to account for the means by which the external world appears to, and is cognized by, humans in the particular way that it is. Thus, the question

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of the first critique is: *How is Nature Possible?*\(^\text{15}\) Kant’s project in the *CPR* aims to bridge together notions of empiricism and rationalism through the doubleness of subjective (inner sense) in cognition and objective (outer sense) in experience, both of which are understood through the transcendental categories of space and time. The introduction of the transcendental categories of space and time allow for the situation of the subject’s very mode of perception in the realm of the spatiotemporal. Thus, all experience and understanding is then thought through the co-ordinates of space and time and these must exist *a priori*.\(^\text{16}\) This is why Kant wants to “detach from the latter everything that belongs to sensation, so that nothing remains except pure intuition and the mere form of appearances, which is the only thing that sensibility can make available *a priori*. In this investigation it will be found that there are two pure forms of sensible intuition as principles of *a priori* cognition, namely space and time.”\(^\text{17}\) In labeling space and time the only two pure forms of sensible intuition Kant grounds the physical world in the transcendental, positioning all cognition, sensory or otherwise, in the transcendental categories. By demonstrating the malleability of these categories and highlighting their constructed nature with respect to the system of recognition and integration outlined earlier, *Opera* and *Killing* raise questions about issues of representation.

Later in the *CPR* Kant outlines the issue with representation in regard to the transcendental category of time. He repeats that:

> Space itself, however, together with time, and, with both, all appearances, are **not things**, but rather nothing but representations, and they cannot exist at all outside our mind; and even the inner and sensible intuition of our mind (as an object of consciousness), the determination of which through the succession of different states is represented in time, is not the real self as it exists in itself, or the transcendental subject, but only an appearance of this to us unknown being, which was given to sensibility (bolded in the original).\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^\text{15}\) This is the question that appears as the title of Daniel N. Robinson’s book *How is Nature Possible?: Kant’s project in the First Critique* (New York: Continuum Books, 2012).

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 35.

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., *Critique of Pure Reason*, A22.

\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., A492.
The suggestion here is that space and time as categories are not *things* but make themselves apparent through processes of representation or appearance. In regard to the self specifically, and all *noumena*, the reason Kant gives for the knowledge of *phenomena* (this distinction will be explored in depth momentarily) only follows in the second half of the above passage: “The existence of this inner appearance as a thing thus existing in itself, cannot be admitted, because its condition is time, which cannot be a determination of any thing in itself. In space and time, however, the empirical truth of appearances is satisfactorily secured, and sufficiently distinguished.”¹⁹ The self as it exists in-itself, as with other *noumena*, is conditioned as a product of time. Therefore, in a world of constant flux and perpetual change the subject must ground experience *in* time, through the co-ordinate of space. As Daniel N. Robinson author of *How is Nature Possible? Kant’s Problem in the First Critique* suggests, “experiences could only be mine if space is granted as a necessary *a priori* intuition through which the permanent in outer space stand as the necessary condition for recognizing myself as an enduring subject of experience. Absent this, there is ‘experience’ but not known by me to be *my* experience, for there is no known enduring ‘I’ in which the appearance inheres.”²⁰ In order for the subject or consciousness to operate, there must be the coherence of appearance in a self or an “I”, which must see itself *in* time as an object of its own perception, as well as a subject, in order for it to appear to function as a particular and distinct human entity to itself. In regard to the Cardiff/Miller artworks, this powerfully demonstrates why they effect a confusion of various subjective states (observer, witness, participant and eavesdropper, as will be explained further in chapter four) so that they might point to the constructed nature of the subject. Absent is the viewer’s ability to ground her/himself in a particular time or a particular state; the distinction between subject and object, viewer and artwork, is seemingly collapsed.

Kant’s endeavour in the *CPR* is to account for the *how* of human experience and cognition. In contrast, Lyotard uses the sublime to bridge together a shift he observes in his historical moment between the human and inhuman: a tending towards a state of

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¹⁹ Ibid., A492.
inhumanity, an attempt to account for the when and where. In troubling these notions of when (time) and where (space), Opera and Killing preserve the objective distance of the work and, in doing so, pull the viewer into the time of work: pushing them into present, past, future and non-existent experiences in order to engage this time of difference. Rather than presenting viewers with an environment that impinges on their own space, Opera and Killing are closed-off structures through which viewers are granted access to the work at a physical distance only. Even with Killing where viewers participate, initiating the mechanism by pressing a button, they are still set at a physical distance from the structure itself (fig.6). This technique is reversed in Cardiff/Miller’s earlier work Paradise Institute, which draws the viewer into a physically immersive space by producing an environmentally accurate and familiar experience of theatre.

Figure 6: "The Killing Machine." View from the gallery entrance.
In drawing out the difference between distance and immersion as visual techniques, Lyotard demarcates a helpful shift that captures a change in the aesthetic experience of the sublime historically. The shift I am referring to speaks to the reversal of distance in Cardiff/Miller’s work and rests on Lyotard’s emphasis on the concept of event-bound time. Here, Lyotard describes a shift in Baroque and Renaissance art from understanding the sublime as a transgression of space, to the contemporary moment, which presents an event-bound time of the sublime.\textsuperscript{21} With a work like \textit{Paradise Institute} (fig.7 and fig.8) viewers are drawn into the sublime experience through total immersion, which transgresses space from the inside out. While the viewer may be confused or disoriented in terms of where certain sounds or voices are coming from in space, they maintain their autonomy as a subject throughout the duration of the piece because Cardiff’s whispering voice often addresses them directly. Spatially, the viewer may lose a sense of their whereabouts as they are engulfed in the environment but temporally they remain an unchanged “I”. Conversely, with \textit{Opera} and \textit{Killing} viewers are distanced physically but temporally engaged as a spectator of events, which are at once their own and also apart from them. This confuses the viewer’s own subjective experience with the subject’s experience in the work—confronting them with an event-bound time.

\textsuperscript{21} Lyotard, \textit{The Inhuman}, 85.

Figure 8: "The Paradise Institute." Interior view. From http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/inst/paradise_institute.html#
Thus, the nature of Lyotard’s endeavor is not a question of reflecting on time or even in time, but becomes a question of the very nature of time itself as a category of human understanding and a mode of maintaining difference. The suggestion of reflections on or in time in his subtitle relies on the assumption that space and time are always necessarily connected as mechanisms structuring knowledge and experience. Rather, to perceive in a mode of pure presence/present is to deny the relationship of time and space in order to perceive time itself as a constant passing, which is why it can only persist for mere fragments. The Cardiff/Miller artworks, Killing and Opera, offer an opportunity to engage perception so as to maintain this time of difference in multiple short intervals. Although these artworks are both durational (Killing is five minutes and Opera twenty) Cardiff and Miller pre-empt this experience of duration through instances of the sublime, which carry the viewer away from signification and into present/presence and vice versa. Thus, these artworks open up the present time and historical modes of narrating understanding through linear time (i.e. past, present, and future) questioning not where the human is but when they are. In looking back to Lyotard’s work in order to perceive or aestheticize time differently, Opera and Killing allow for a revisioning of historical modes of understanding in terms of the way the subject sees and is seen.

In order to further elucidate the dissolution of subjective modes in Opera and Killing, it will be helpful to work from Lyotard’s concept of the inhuman as the entity that bears witness to a space without memory. To begin to wrestle with Lyotard’s position on subjectivity entails a return to Kant, whose traditional notion of the subject relies on the distinction between the world as it appears (phenomena) and the world as it is (noumena). Here, Kant poses his solution to the problem of representation. What Kant makes clear is that although things-in-themselves or noumena exist, all that the subject has access to is what can be perceived through the senses—the phenomena or that which appears. As Arthur Collins explains in his book Possible Experience: Understanding Kant’s “Critique of Pure Reason”:

> Although Kant thinks that philosophers suffer from the illusion that they can make defensible judgments that characterize things-in-themselves, the very existence of things-in-themselves is no illusion according to him. On the contrary, he says there are certainly such things, and that the existence
of appearances entails the existence of things-in-themselves, although we can attain knowledge of only the appearances.\(^{22}\)

According to Collins’ reading, although the thing-in-itself or phenomena is most certainly contained in the noumena, it is not something that the perceiver can intuit or have access to through the senses or through reason. Rather, all that is available are things as they appear, regardless of the fact that thinking through things as they appear necessitates the existence of things-in-themselves. The connection between noumena, or things-in-themselves, and phenomena, the realm of appearances, also characterizes the relationship between the subject and self-understanding in Kant’s terms. The Cardiff/Miller artworks trouble this relationship through the ways in which they allow the subject to perceive itself as a product of time or present/presence.

Therefore as one might expect this particular distinction between noumena and phenomena and its relationship to the subject and the self becomes important in chapters three and four for the manner in which it will allow me to work through the specific kinds of perception activated by *Opera* and *Killing*. In Kant’s critique, a purely empirical model for understanding accounts for neither: 1) the means by which experiences can be unified together as a continuity in consciousness, and 2) how these experiences can be unified as belonging to a particular self.\(^{23}\) According to Robinson, Kant must establish how particular thoughts can be that of a *someone* without adopting Cartesianism, for, bereft of the unity of various representations, the subject would have no way of harmonizing sensible intuitions into a concept at all.\(^{24}\) This unifying force is, of course, self-consciousness and must exist *a priori* in order for thought itself to be possible. Kant sets out the problem:

But how the I that I think is to differ from the I that intuits itself (for I can represent other kinds of intuition as at least possible) and yet be identical with the latter as the same subject, how therefore I can say that I as intelligence and *thinking* subject cognize my self as an object that is *thought*, insofar as I am also

\(^{23}\) Robinson, *How is Nature Possible*, 151.
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 152.
given to myself in intuition, only, like other phenomena, not as I am for the understanding but rather as I appear to myself, this is no more or less difficult than how I can be an object for myself in general and indeed one of intuition and inner perceptions (bolded in the original).  

What is made clear in this passage is that in order for the subject to be able to think itself, the subject must also appear to itself as an object. Due to the relationship between self and the objects of the external world—in that all that can be known by the subject is appearances or phenomena, not things-in-themselves or noumena—the self as an object of its own perception cannot be known to the self as it is, but rather as it appears. The separation of realms (noumenal and phenomenal) in this model presupposes a kind of dichotomy between the subject and the world of objects or appearances.

In creating an intrusion on the subject/object dichotomy, which operates such that it is fundamental to the subject’s experience of self and self-consciousness, Cardiff and Miller’s works call into question Kant’s link between representation, or appearance, and the self. In regard to consciousness, unless the subject can perceive itself as an object of appearance, the subject will have no means by which to unite experience. In the words of Robinson, “What is clear is that knowledge of oneself is not different from knowledge of objects, for in both instances knowledge requires representations of what is present in the form of appearances.” Separating empiricism from a rationalist framework necessarily means that “nothing about objects could be known a priori, not even their externality. There would be no basis on which to separate successive events in time nor could such objects be located in space, for neither time nor space is a “given” property of stimuli.”

So, not only would there be no verification of the world as external in the first place, but there would be no way to grant understanding of this world because it does not provide a mode of discovering the relationality of such a world: enter solipsism. This also functions at the level of the self: the independent perception of the self as both an object and a subject allows self-consciousness to operate as the means by which experience can be united.

26 Robinson, *How is Nature Possible?*, 163.
27 Robinson, *How is Nature Possible?*, 35.
The irresolvability of the Cardiff/Miller works and ways in which they play with the subjective modes of eavesdropper, witness, and participant—often allowing the viewer to occupy all three positions simultaneously—is a means to circumvent the subject/object dichotomy that is created in Kant’s system. First, the viewer can be seen as taking on the role of the eavesdropper; as Tina Rigby Hanssen asserts about *The Paradise Institute*, “Eavesdropping, then, has much in common with the invasion of privacy.”\(^{28}\) In both *Opera* and *Killing* the audience takes part in this eavesdropping process as they get the impression that they are privy to events they are not meant to see, or which are private in nature. Christy Lange, author of the essay “Opera For a Small Room, 2005: The Impossibilists,” describes the space of *Opera* “as an elaborate amplifier for the albums…they composed the opera to provide the room’s soundtrack: a twenty-minute opus of samples from the records, narrated and mixed by a man we never see.”\(^{29}\) In this way, viewers are given entry into a space, which is personal and private, and they become eavesdroppers on a situation that is, and is not, meant for their witnessing. The audience peers into the sides of *Opera’s* wooden structure as though peering into a neighbor’s wooden shed, watching a scene in which a man privately listens to records and reminisces about his life (fig.9). Yet, the stage-like setup of the window in the front and the spectacular sound and light show that follows suggests that the viewer’s position as a subject eavesdropping on an object has been compromised. The viewer is an eavesdropper, a witness, and most importantly, a participant (as will be discussed in further detail in chapter four).


In *The Killing Machine* viewers are also confronted with an event that is not meant for public viewing. Approaching this makeshift wooden and mechanical torture structure with robotic arms poised above a dental-chair-like apparatus and a spectator’s chair in front, the audience recognizes the privacy of this scene (fig.10). Playing the role of an accidental infiltrator on a basement torture scene or underground government operation, the viewer in *Killing* becomes an eavesdropper but also a witness and a direct participant. Paige McGinley begins to address this interplay in her essay on the Cardiff/Miller work *Cabin Fever* (2004) (fig.11 and fig.12), in which the audience, looking onto a miniature diorama of a house, is privy to a scene of domestic violence through an audio track. McGinley argues:

What is most striking about *Cabin Fever* is that, to this day, I am unable to determine whether or not the visual image of the diorama changed before my eyes with the unfolding of the narrative…On an intellectual level, I feel certain that the answer to these questions is “no”…But the synesthesia of my experience begs the
question: what did I see here? In fact, I saw nothing. Which makes me somehow, not a witness to a crime. Not a witness, nor a voyeur, I am an eavesdropper only…

In *The Killing Machine* the viewer is an eavesdropper but they are also a witness to a crime, which although felt, has no actuality. Additionally, because *Killing* requires an individual to switch on the mechanism, the viewer is also a participant—directly implicated in this fictional crime. Rather than maintaining a static relationship between the viewing subject and the work as an object, the viewer is moved through various subjective conditions that reveal the constructed nature of traditional notions of subjectivity and objectivity, as discussed by Kant.

![Figure 10: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Desk and spectator’s chair with dental chair and robotic arms in the background.](image)

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Figure 12: "Cabin Fever," Cardiff and Miller. From http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/smaller_works/cabinfever.html#.
As stated earlier in what follows I will explore the evocation of the sublime through the notion of absent-presence/present-absence in regard to three themes: memory, temporality, and subjectivity, thereby allowing us to rethink the sublime as a space without memory. In chapter two I explore the evocation of the sublime through the use of memory in *Opera* and *Killing* and its consequences in terms of representation and presentation. In order to do this I focus on the discontinuity between auditory and visual sensations in the work of *Opera* and *Killing* as well as their evocation of cultural memory. In chapter three I examine how, in challenging traditional notions of subjectivity and objectivity through present/presence, *Opera* and *Killing* allow us to see subjectivity as a temporal construction. By producing the effect of the despatialization of time, these works present viewers with a space without memory. Then, in chapter four, I consider how in allowing the viewer to become the inhuman, or the entity that bears witness to a space without memory, Cardiff and Miller’s works explore the ontological significance of the contemporary sublime.
Chapter 2

Presenting the Unpresentable: Memory, Representation, and Presentation

In this chapter I explore the relationship between representation and presentation through memory and the postmodern sublime as put forth by Lyotard. Looking at the ways in which memory functions with (re)presentation in terms of the imagination, I demonstrate how, in offering us memory without history, *The Killing Machine* and *Opera for a Small Room* circumvent the nostalgic return of the modern Kantian sublime to figure as spaces without memory (an idea that I develop further as we move through this chapter).

As we saw in chapter one, due to the irreconcilable and ineffable quality of the sublime, twentieth century scholars have taken up the Kantian sublime as that which operates outside of thought—as a gesture towards the ungraspable. This particular reading of the Kantian sublime, which is also taken up by Lyotard, understands that the sublime can only be present, or become apparent, through its very inability to be presented. Thus, if the sublime can only be presented as an absence, it can only be spoken of in the negative: as an absent-presence or a present-absence. As already noted Lyotard defines the sublime as that which is unpresentable. To further elaborate Lyotard’s ideas, although, the sublime cannot be positively presented as possible itself (represented), it can be negatively presented as an absent possibility or a pure present/presence.

The nature of this negative is not a kind of nothingness or nihilism but “merely the demonstration of inanity of the demand that the absolute be presented.” In other words, the desire to present the sublime is ultimately foolish; the sublime is something which cannot be presented but which is arrived at and comes into being through the acknowledgement that there is something not given or is absent in presentation. The absent-presence of the sublime can be further illustrated through an example given by

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Philip Shaw in *The Sublime: the New Critical Idiom* wherein contemplating the stars, the mind understands the universe as infinitely great.\(^{32}\) This concept of infinity\(^{33}\) is one that the mind fails to represent and as such this moment becomes sublime.\(^{34}\) The absolute or the infinite, as with the example of the stars, present themselves to us as a kind of absence as they are not present spatially, but temporally, in the mind of the perceiver who recognizes the possibility of their existence. As we looked at in chapter one, Cardiff/Miller’s *Opera* and *Killing* provide us with a place to stand in contemplation. Like the stars their possibility is infinitely great and as I will go on to show it is intimately tied to human memory and its limitations.

When thinking about the place of the imagination it must be said that normally in observing an object, the imagination serves the function of synthesis: it joins together sensory intuitions and concepts in order to produce understanding.\(^{35}\) However, in order to engender the sublime, *Opera* and *Killing* are works which, rather than a synthesis, produce a conflict between the imagination and reason. Rather than an agreement between the imagination and understanding, the judgment of the sublime articulates an agreement between the imagination and reason.\(^{36}\) Confronted with its own limitations in the wake of the Idea, the imagination fails to present its intended content to the faculty of understanding: “In excluding itself from its own limits of presentation, the imagination suggests the presence of what it cannot present.”\(^{37}\) Thus, the accordance or agreement between reason and the imagination is an accordance of discord that reveals something outside of, or beyond thought. Lyotard explains further that this threat to self-preservation or normative structures of thought such as language, subject/object etc. produces a terror


\(^{33}\) Kant distinguishes between two forms of the sublime: dynamic and mathematical. In Giles Deleuze’s reading put forth in *Kant’s Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*, the mathematical sublime has to do with immensity and the dynamic sublime has to do with power. This would make the concept of infinity related to the mathematical sublime rather than the dynamic.

\(^{34}\) Shaw, *The Sublime*, 80.


that devoid of these structures one will be consumed in a chasm of nothingness.\textsuperscript{38} However, the sublime experience does not subject one to complete nihilism but takes them to the brink before returning them: “What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take ‘place’ and will announce that everything is not over. That place is mere ‘here’, the most minimal occurrence.”\textsuperscript{39} Presenting us first with a threat to normalcy through difference, the sublime also manifests itself as a kind of recovery from the void, bringing one back into cognition. Here, the loss or violence that the imagination undergoes in failing to represent its object to reason, becomes sublime and also ceases to be sublime at the moment of recuperation; thus, the sublime is both \textit{within} and \textit{outside} experience. The Cardiff/Miller works rehearse this movement from the sublime to recuperation and back again.

In the \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgment} Kant is clear that the sublime represents not a harmonious agreement between reason and the imagination but rather relies on a paradoxical tension produced by the discovery of the imagination’s limit: pain to produce pleasure.\textsuperscript{40} This confrontation figures as painful pleasure as reason forces the imagination to unleash itself from its own constraints and encounter what it is incapable of reconciling. The question for us here is: how can this painful pleasure, created through the imagination’s limit, relate to the notion of memory?

While Kant does not write about it specifically, memory is implied in two of the syntheses of the imagination: the synthesis of apprehension, and the synthesis of recognition. In order to arrange experience, whose condition is that of inner sense or time, into a narrativized sequence, one would have to rely on memory, implying this as a function of the imagination whose purpose is to represent objects of thought to the understanding. Like the sublime, memory (as tied to the process of remembering) involves the evocation of an event, thought, object, sensation etc. that is present

\textsuperscript{38} Lyotard, \textit{The Inhuman}, 84.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 84.
\textsuperscript{40} Deleuze, “The Idea of Genesis in Kant’s Esthetics”, 61-62.
temporally but *not* spatially. Simply put, memory is often seen as a representation of the unpresentable or a representation of that, which is not present. The problematic nature of this idea of the relationship between memory and the sublime can be brought to light in the distinction between the sublime’s modern and postmodern forms. According to Seth Kim-Cohen, author of *In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Noncochlear Sound Art*, the distinction between the modern and the postmodern sublime can be drawn out through the idea of nostalgia. He states, “For Lyotard, this modern sublime is nostalgic because it yearns for something missing: something lost or not yet attained.” Kim-Cohen argues that the modern sublime occupies this space of loss with that which has been deemed unpresentable. By contrast, Kim-Cohen quotes Lyotard who states that the postmodern sublime “puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself.” This distinction between the modern and the postmodern forms of the sublime is therefore a question of representation versus presentation. If the modern period characterizes the sublime as always desiring something lost, then in the modern sublime memory is a representation of the unpresentable. Considering this, how would it be possible to look at artworks that deal with memory in the context of the postmodern sublime? In order to effect this shift the postmodern sublime would need to see memory as a presentation of the unpresentable. Cardiff and Miller create works which rely on memory. However, rather than falling into the modernist trap that Kim-Cohen outlines, their works *Opera for a Small Room* and *The Killing Machine* “present the unpresentable in presentation” through the way in which they present memories that do not carry forward their history, hence memories without a history or space without a memory. In doing so, they present that which is unpresentable as they constantly pull the viewer back and forth between the present/presence (the now) and processes of cognition/signification.

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42 Ibid., 220.
43 Ibid., 220.
44 Although this is awkward phrasing, this understanding is adapted from Lyotard (see n.43) and is crucial to understanding the distinction between the modern and postmodern sublime.
*Opera* and *Killing* illustrate the disconnect between memory and consciousness (train of thought) by presenting viewers with an experience that appears to both of these faculties in a discontinuous way. Both of these works present events without memories, or more properly, events without *actual* memories. The memories that *Opera* and *Killing* engage are ones that belong to the viewer, as well as to the absent-present fictional subjects in the works, and as such, hinge on both fiction and actuality. However, rather than allowing the viewer to get swept up into their storyline completely, *Opera* and *Killing* provide moments wherein the viewer is pulled back from the present/presence into a recuperation of sublime experience. Entering the environment of *Opera* viewers approach a wooden cube structure with a window (or stage) that opens onto a room in which an empty chair sits spotlighted and surrounded by old records, three turntables, and various speakers/radios; a chandelier hangs from the ceiling and a giant red rug covers the floor (fig.13). The piece, which is on loop, begins with a man’s voice, projected from the central megaphone speaker (positioned above the chair), telling the story of a man who sits in a room surrounded by records (fig.14). As viewers listen, the turntables become engaged and play what are presumably records in the room. These audio tracks are layered on top of one another and mixed according to a disjointed narrative—as told by this male voice. The songs are then projected from different speakers around the room and synchronized with colored lights to create a moving light and sound orchestra (fig.15 and fig.16). In this way, viewers are given entry into a space, which is personal and private, and they become eavesdroppers on a situation that is, and is not, meant for their witnessing. The audience peers into the sides of *Opera’s* wooden structure as though peering into a neighbor’s wooden shed, watching a scene in which a man privately listens to records and reminisces about his life.
Figure 13: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. First turntable and records.

Figure 14: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. Megaphone close-up.
Figure 16: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. Sound and moving lights, frame one.

Figure 15: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. Sound and moving lights, frame two.
One of the ways Opera avoids the tendency towards nostalgia of the modern sublime is by presenting auditory and visual perceptions that are discontinuous with each other. As previously mentioned, for Kant, in perception the imagination normally functions as a synthesizer between that which appears before the senses and that which is developed as a concept a priori. As Deleuze explains, “Synthesis has two aspects: apprehension, by means of which we pose the manifold as occupying a certain space and a certain time, by means of which we ‘produce’ different parts in space and time; reproduction, by means of which we reproduce the preceding parts as we arrive at the ones following….This synthesis, as both apprehension and reproduction, is always defined by Kant as an act of the imagination.” In the imagination remembered concepts and previous sensory intuitions are combined with current sense data to produce perception. Once again, in the judgment of the sublime this mechanism of reproduction and synthesis fails to function. What happens instead is that “the imagination, although it certainly finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can attach itself, nevertheless feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of this elimination of the limits of sensibility; and that separation is thus a presentation of the infinite, which for that very reason can never be anything other than a merely negative presentation.” Thus, in the sublime, confronted with its own limitations by reason, the imagination cannot present the Idea to the faculty of understanding. This is why Deleuze argues that the sublime forces the subject to project: because it is unable to internally present the object to itself, it can do nothing but extend outwards.

In Opera the imagination tries to mediate between auditory and visual perceptions, however, since these are presented discontinuously, the viewer cannot synthesize them, presenting viewers with the unpresentable. For example, at one point during Opera, the loudspeaker describes itself: “He waits in his room playing his records

over and over. ‘Is that all you do?’ She says.”

In this moment the audience recognizes the structure in front of them, while imagining the dialogue between the main speaker and the female character. The speaker recounts a story happening in the present of its time, but occurring in the absent-present of the viewer’s time. So that what is actually happening, as in what appears to transpire in the physical environment of *Opera*, and what is perceived to be happening, become unified into a singular experience. As Féral explains: “On the one hand, the mind absorbs the real, thereby becoming sensitive to it; on the other hand, the subject locates within himself the remembered objects or beings, recognizes them, and associates them with other features, other ‘mental images.’” In *Opera*, memory operates as a means to fill the gaps between sensory impression and the idea of imagined experience, using the viewer’s recollection of actual events which blur with the events of the work they are experiencing as well as the affective, virtual reality it creates—past, affective present or the there that is not *there*, literal present, and future cannot be synthesized.

Another example will perhaps be helpful in further illustrating the disconnect between auditory and visual sensations. At a certain point this absent-present subject narrates through the anthropomorphic speaker: “I was walking down the road that night, the cows were in the field watching me as I passed by. I could see the train coming slowly towards me, lighting up the trees.” After this line viewers hear a train coming from speakers behind them; the sound grows louder as the train seems to come closer. Here the experience of the subject of the story and the experience of the viewer in the room come into conflict. As he relays this tale, the narrator’s past converges with the viewer’s present—as well as the viewer’s own past and the narrator’s present—all opening onto a future that operates as a collapse of both past and present time. The auditory experience of *Opera* that creates a specific time-based present encompasses the viewer but only by relying on their memory to conjure an experience similar to what they are hearing. As Henri Bergson notes in *Matter and Memory*, “Perception is never a mere

48 Lange, “‘Opera For a Small Room, 2005: The Impossibilists,’” 176.
50 Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller, *Opera For a Small Room*, 2005.
contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it.”

Thus, hearing the noise of the train combines with images of the viewer’s past experiences with trains. Here, the visual and auditory senses receive different information and memory serves the function of filling this gap. However, rather than allowing this nostalgic return to come full circle by letting the viewer indulge in the absorptive nature of their memory, *Opera* makes it apparent that what the viewer hears is not present physically but is present temporally, through memory, drawing them out of their reverie. As the train gets to its loudest point, the room in the wooden structure appears to shake—the chandelier on the ceiling trembling back and forth—signaling that the train is passing through (fig.17). This physical action brings the viewer back into recognition, as a body standing in a room, enabling a sublime moment to occur as the viewer acknowledges the illusion.

Figure 17: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. Chandelier.

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A similar event, which creates a comparable sense of disorientation, occurs in *The Killing Machine* using a disco ball. In *Killing* viewers walk into a space where they are confronted with a wooden structure that contains a machine comprised of what resembles an empty dental chair with robotic arms poised over it. Above the chair hangs a disco ball (fig.18) and on a wooden shelf at the side of the structure lies a guitar (fig.19). Around the back and side of the wooden structure are old television monitors (fig.20). At the back on the floor there is a drum and hanging to the left of the drum is a metal sheet with a mallet that strikes it. Positioned directly in front of the mechanism is a desk with a chair and to the left of the desk is a small table on which sits a lamp with a button underneath that when pressed, engages the mechanism. Once started, the robotic arms, with lights on their ends, perform a kind of dance to a violin symphony that plays in the background and which culminates in the torture and killing of the absent-present victim strapped in the chair. As articulated in chapter one, in *Killing* viewers play the role of accidental infiltrator on what appears to be some kind corrupt or immoral apparatus. Here viewers are confronted by a subject who is not physically present in space but whose presence is felt, through the torture that it undergoes. The viewer’s mind obviously conceptualizes the absence of the subject through what is intuited by visual sense data however, feelings of concern and anguish at the harm of another being, even an absent-present one, are temporally evoked. This forged sense of distress, which is felt in a very real way, is linked to the use of memory that *Killing* calls upon. Memories of torture or the killing of another being, human or animal, may be foreign to most but experiences of physical pain are certainly not. It is the memories of these experiences, things like a broken arm and stitches or blood work, that are being conceptually evoked. These recalled experiences in the mind of the viewer are what cause *Killing* to provide an intensely powerful resonance for the viewer—I can only infer that this is the reason many observers walk out mid-action. However, in order for the sublime to take full effect, once again Cardiff and Miller prevent the viewer from being caught up in an experience of empathetic pain or terror.
Figure 18: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Disco ball close-up.

Figure 19: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Guitar close-up.
Once the torture scene has ended, the robotic arms complete their dance by swinging around as they admire their handiwork. In doing so, one of the arms knocks the disco ball suspended from the top of the wooden structure, sending mirrored reflections wobbling across the entirety of the room as the drum and metal sheet are repeatedly struck (fig.21). These wobbling beams of light disorient the viewer, bringing them back from the action of the machine (the now) and into an identification that allows them to acknowledge their body in relation to space (fig.22). Féral describes the relationship of presence to the body: “This involvement of the body is twofold: it is connected to thought which is activated by sensory organs, but also with the field of awareness and with the reactions, sensations and perceptions connected to the physical body. In effect, by recognizing a presence (of a being or an object), the intellect is focused, and thus becomes sensitive to reality, a reality that inhabits it even as it inhabits reality.” In recognizing the existence of their body, the viewer is brought back into their own reality.

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52 Josette Féral, “How to Define Presence Effects…”, 34.
The disco ball’s wayward motion prevents the viewer from being engrossed in the action and allows for a recuperation of the sublime without providing a reconciliation of a lost origin.

Figure 21: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Rear view showing drum on the bottom right and metal sheet at the top left.
This function operates in the reverse during the actual torture scene where, instead of being brought back to their body, the viewer is brought back into recognition through the punctuation of sound. In *Killing*, after the mechanism is engaged, the robotic arms begin to dance around and flex over the dental chair; midway through this sequence a male voice projected through the megaphone, which is attached to an arm hanging down from the right side of the apparatus, begins a countdown (fig.23). When the countdown reaches the number three the chair is thrust back, a red light comes on, and the robotic arms begin to puncture the subject in the chair with needles that shoot out of their heads (fig.24). While this particular horrific gesture is something foreign to most as noted earlier the experience of pain generally is something we are all familiar with, even if it is something routine. The presentation of torture in *Killing* in this particular fashion recalls previous memories and, in their re-communication and re-saturation with new meanings,
they produce the possibility of alternative cognition through “using all the aesthetic cues that have come down to us as cultural signifiers of intensity which we learn from infancy on. In turn, the audiences react to their own processes of emotional learning, playing these corporal ‘memories’ back in their body and very often amplifying them.”\(^{53}\) During this sequence cultural signifiers of pain are recalled and re-invested with a new kind of intensity. However, rather than letting the viewer be completely occupied with their own recollected engagement with pain, the punctuated noise of the stabbing needles and the distinct sound of the metal sheet being hit shocks them into self-awareness, bringing them outside of their body. Kim-Cohen describes this process of immersion and recognition followed by recuperation in sound: “Sound-in-itself similarly tries to objectify the auditory, ignoring its inexorable entanglement with time. But there is no such thing as a sonic freeze-frame. With audio recordings, if the playback is paused, the sound occurring at the moment of interruption does not hang, object-like, in the air but evaporates, recuperable only in memory... It shuttles in time, constituted by a cascade of *befores* and *afters*, but lacking any positively identifiable *now*.\(^{54}\) Applying this to *Killing*, just as the punctuated sound of the needle signals the stabbing of the absent-present subject in the chair, a sound event occurs that simultaneously brings the viewer into the fragmentary space of the sublime and then allows them to re-enter the narrative they’ve produced through memory, only to bring them out again through the next sharp noise. This constant rupturing of memory followed by recuperation and rupture again, prohibits *Killing’s* fulfillment of the nostalgic return triggered through memory, eliminating any hope of synthesis the viewer might wish for.


\(^{54}\) Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 223-224.
Figure 23: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Megaphone close-up.
Figure 24: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Robotic arm head with light and needle.
One could argue that both *Killing* and *Opera* rely on remembered cultural signifiers in order to produce their effect; although this is true, these works function as monuments to events that never happened, producing a space without memory, thus undermining any tendency towards an authentic lost origin. In “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that every work of art possesses a proclivity for commemoration of the past, but this commemoration cannot be so: “It is true that every work is a *monument*, but here the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument’s action is not memory but fabulation.”55 In this passage Deleuze and Guattari point out that the work of art, rather than evoke or preserve the past, preserves something of its own accord through its own eventfulness. Cardiff and Miller’s artworks make this apparent through the ways in which they preserve events of a fictitious nature. *Opera* and *Killing* oppose historical experience by forcing the viewer to witness the event as performance, a fiction in process, despite the fact that they perform the inauthentic events they reference in a way that feels authentic.

The task of *re-*presenting an authentic event is necessarily undermined by the very nature of authenticity as a mode of experience. This is due to the fact that the historical event, embedded in memory, is always something that exceeds the ability to be represented: the act of remembering is caught in the interim between the event, which occurred in the past, and the process of representation, which occurs in the present. Speaking to the difficulties of recollection in his essay “Emotional Performances as Dramas of Authenticity,” E. Doyle McCarthy defines authenticity as a “means to feel *something* with honesty, integrity, and vitality and to express in one’s life the truth of one’s personal insights and discoveries.”56 For McCarthy, authenticity is always double headed in that it involves both feeling and expression of the past/passed. However, this

idea of the authentic, the representation of historical events, will always already be incomplete: memory unavoidably eludes all representations. In this sense, the act of representing memory exists between a mimesis, or a showing, and a diegesis, or a recounting via narrative of the individual experience. The very nature of this action presents a dichotomy between the experience of the individual and the record of that experience which will never coalesce. The past and the passed are always split: there is no present to speak of. Dominic LaCapra, in his text History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence, illustrates this split as: “the collapse, via the sublime and its excess, of any distinction between event and experience, both of which exceed knowledge and representation to the point of becoming ineffable, yet paradoxically demanding impossible testimony (the double bind).”

Cardiff/Miller present viewers with this paradox in Opera and Killing by producing works that have some loose basis in reality, but have no memory to speak of.

The records contained in Opera belonged to a man who lived in rural Canada and were purchased at a rummage sale. According to Lange, the concept for the piece was to recreate “a diagram of their owner’s chaotic mind,” the space itself resembling a loner’s personal retreat. The records themselves are attached to an actual person for whom Cardiff and Miller fabricate a character. A similar effect is produced with Killing, which is tied to Franz Kafka’s In the Penal Colony (first published in 1919), and is also reminiscent of the American justice system, which employs capital punishment. Once again, this object is loosely based on some elements from reality (the novel and the U.S. justice system); however, it is largely a construct of the artists’ imagination. So, while both Opera and Killing contain some actual, common, culturally constructed markers that constitute social life, and which rely directly on memory for evocation, because they do have an actual history behind them they are “immune to the lure of nostalgia for the lost

59 Ibid., 175.
60 Beil, Ralf and Bartomeu Mari, The Killing Machine and Other Stories (Darmstadt: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2007), 189.
origin or the promise of an imminent telos.”^61 Although these works hinge on memory, 
*Opera* and *Killing* provide “a transformation from the *it*-centrality of the Kantian, modern, sublime, to the discursive and dispersive Lyotardian, postmodern sublime”, opening the way to an understanding that the past is always re-actualized in the present.\(^62\) While it is true, as Brian Massumi points out, that perception is always a transfer between that which *happened* and that which *is*, memory does not exist as something that represents a lost past that is separate from the present.\(^63\) Rather, as Deleuze explains through Bergson: “Recollection is not the representation of something that was; the past is that in which we put ourselves from the outset in order to recollect ourselves…[The past] has not ceased to be, it has only ceased to be useful – it is; it survives in itself…The past is not constituted *after* it has been present; it *coexists with itself as present.*\(^64\)

Deleuze’s argument here demonstrates that the past is contemporary with the present; in the process of recall the past is not only refashioned in the present, it comes into being in the present. In creating artworks whose very history comes into existence through their presentation, Cardiff and Miller highlight this notion and avoid the tendency towards the lost authentic origin of the modern Kantian sublime. As Lyotard notes: “One wants to get hold of the past, grasp what has gone away, master, exhibit the initial crime, the lost crime of the origin, show it as such as though it could be disentangled from its affective context, the connotations of fault, of shame, of pride, of anguish in which we are still plunged at present, and which are precisely what motivate the idea of an origin.”^65 What becomes sublime then about the Cardiff/Miller artworks is the ways in which they put forward this origin in presentation as the unpresentable itself. By showing us that memory is not a representation of the unpresentable because this origin itself is a fallacy, Cardiff and Miller reclaim memory as a vital function of the postmodern sublime by using it as a presentation of the unpresentable, creating a space without memory.

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^61^ Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 222.
^62^ Ibid., 222.
Chapter 3

Time: the Sublime and the Event

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant puts forth an argument that seeks to ground all experience in two faculties: inner and outer sense. Inner sense, corresponding to time, and outer sense, corresponding to space, together make up the transcendental faculties of pure reason. Kant’s project in the first critique serves as an investigation into how the external world appears. Consequently, Kant argues that the grounding of time in space is what makes all appearance possible. As we have already covered in some detail *Opera for a Small Room* and *The Killing Machine* are two artworks that challenge the traditional conception of time and space through the ways in which they pose questions for presentation in terms of present/presence. In this chapter I examine how *Opera* and *Killing* challenge the traditional relationship between subject and object through the ways in which they allow us to see subjectivity as a temporal construction. As works where there is a physical distance between the work and the viewer, *Opera* and *Killing* demonstrate that the subject/object dichotomy can be dissolved through an engagement with perception in the realm of the temporal. By altering traditional conceptions of time and space, and by troubling notions of representation and appearance, Cardiff and Miller revive questions of time. Achieved largely through the use of sound, the aesthetics of *Opera* and *Killing* present an event-bound time—a time that is not grounded in space. The sound events of *Opera* and *Killing* are present temporally but not spatially, which produces an effect that can be characterized as avisual. I argue that, by confronting the viewer with works that are events, *Opera* and *Killing* allow us to acknowledge that time cannot be objectified. Instead, *Opera* and *Killing* place one in the present/presence—the now—a space without memory. This despatialization of time through the unpresentability of sound grants the viewer a sublime experience through the ways in which they are led to understand differently.

In order to understand the manipulation of space and time in Cardiff and Miller’s work, which decenters the subject thereby giving rise to the sublime, it is first necessary to examine the ways in which space and time are traditionally understood. First it is
important to note that Kant’s conception of time and space is integral to his overall project in the *CPR*. As briefly mentioned in chapter one, in the *CPR* Kant considers the question of how the world appears to humans in the particular way that it does. In order to avoid falling into either solipsism or skepticism in his enquiry, Kant draws together empiricism and rationalism: that which is intuited through sense—*a posteriori*, and that which is brought to bear on experience through concepts—*a priori*. Thus, Kant separates sensible experience from reasonable understanding: where knowledge requires empirical data, *a posteriori*, understanding entails the combination of sensible data with reason. By allowing knowledge domain over the sensible, Kant is able to preserve epistemology while avoiding having to reduce empirical knowledge to either relativism or solipsism. While one can gain sensible knowledge through observation, one can only gain understanding through the combination of these physical sensible perceptions with the nonsensible ordered relations, *a priori*.

Recall that for Kant the categories exist as two forms of sense: inner and outer. Time corresponds to the former and space to the latter. In Kantian terms, the only way subjects can come to understanding is through the situation of the external world in the outer sense of space and inner sense of time. Kant states:

> Space is a necessary representation, *a priori*, which is the ground of all outer intuitions. One can never represent that there is no space, although one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it. It is therefore to be regarded as the condition of the possibility of appearances, not as a determination dependent on them, and is an *a priori* representation that necessarily grounds outer appearances.  

Here Kant maintains that space cannot be separated from objects; there can never be no space. Thus, space is the very possibility of the appearance of the external world to the subject; however, space is not contained in the external world itself. In this way, as Roberto Torretti suggests in his essay “On the Subjectivity of Objective Space,” the Kantian concept of space is both subjectively understood as the real physical space of the external world, but also as a transcendentally ideal space. This allows Kant to “[maintain]

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the subjectivity of objective space."67 Space grounds the appearance of the external world as an objective principle while also allowing the subject to perceive objects in space.

Similarly, time as inner sense functions as the second co-ordinate, which allows for the possibility of all experience. Kant writes:

1) Time is not an empirical concept that is somehow drawn from an experience. For simultaneity or succession would not themselves come into perception if the representation of time did not ground them a priori. Only under its presupposition can one represent that several things exist at one and the same time (simultaneously) or in different times (successively). 2) Time is a necessary representation that grounds all intuitions. In regard to appearances in general one cannot remove time, though one can very well take the appearances away from time. Time is therefore given a priori. In it alone is all actuality of appearances possible. The latter could all disappear, but time itself, as the universal condition of their possibility, cannot be removed.68

Time, like space, is here seen as both subjective in its existence in inner sense, but objective in its operation as the “universal condition” of the possibility of our understanding of the external world as situated within time. As with space, time is both phenomenally real, in that its passage is acknowledged within the external world, and transcendentally ideal, in that its operation is purely a product of subjective (inner) measurement. Both the concepts of time and space have the ability to function as bridges between the empirical (observable, a posteriori) and rational (subjective, a priori) understandings that, in Kantian terms, constitute the entirety of experience.

Adhering to these traditional conceptions of space and time as co-ordinates that allow us to bridge together subjective (self) experience and the objective (outside) world has led to a highly problematic dichotomy between subject and object. In order to challenge this construction, many contemporary artists have begun to create works that involve physically immersive spaces that dissolve the division between the active perceiving subject and the passive object. However, Cardiff and Miller’s works Opera and Killing provide situations where, even though this division is physically maintained,

68 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B46-A31.
it is temporally dissolved. Janet Cardiff’s solo work and her early collaboration with Miller, *The Paradise Institute* from 2001, are examples of works that attempt to challenge the subject/object dichotomy through immersive environments, creating an intimacy in which the viewer’s subjective space bleeds into the objective space of the work, and vice versa. Conversely, in *Opera* and *Killing* the viewer is set back from the work and is able to observe it from a physical distance only. Rather than producing a physically immersive space that tries to reproduce an accurate experience of environment, for example being in a theatre as with *The Paradise Institute, Opera* and *Killing* set viewers apart from the work while still dissolving the traditional relationship between subject and object.

In order to demonstrate how this dissolve operates in spite of the fact that *Opera* and *Killing* still appear to adhere to traditional artistic conventions, it will be worthwhile to explore Cardiff and Miller’s earlier creations. In Janet Cardiff’s solo works, specifically her “audio walks,” viewers put on a headset and are narrated on a set path, like a walking tour. Here, Cardiff uses binaural sound to overlap and create, in real-time, the effect of walking through the space that the viewer hears on the headset, while actually walking through the space. The real sounds overlap with the virtual sounds and with Cardiff’s own voice as she presents disjointed narratives and speaks to the viewer. In terms of their collaborative efforts, *The Paradise Institute*, which was presented at the 2001 Venice Biennale, attempts to reproduce an environmentally accurate experience of theatre. In this work viewers step inside a recreated theatre and take a seat in a movie theatre chair, which overlooks a miniature screen and more seats, on what is fabricated to look like the second floor balcony. Putting a set of headphones on, the viewer will hear and watch a disjointed film with the sounds of a theatre unfolding around them and Cardiff’s voice beside them whispering as if in their ear—all once again with the use of binaural sound. In both of these examples (Cardiff’s audio walks and *The Paradise Institute*) the use of binaural sound is what creates the reality of the environmental space. Hanssen describes the effect of binaural technology as an auditory deception or *trompe l’orielle* effect. She argues that, more so than its visual counterpart, the *trompe l’oeil*,
*trompe l’orielle* is more convincingly ‘real’ because there is no objective/spatial distance. Conversely, Cardiff and Miller’s later works *The Killing Machine* and *Opera for a Small Room* manipulate this previously rejected objective distance to create an illusionary experience that, rather than relying on spatiality, plays with perception in the realm of the temporal. Because *Opera* and *Killing* do not recreate immersive environments, but produce dispositions as part of the presentation of events, they manipulate and challenge the dichotomy between subject and object, even more so than Cardiff/Miller’s earlier works, by acknowledging the extent to which this category is a temporal or cognitive structure rather than a spatial one.

To further illustrate the effect created by distancing the viewer in *Opera* and *Killing*, it is necessary to examine the tension created between intimacy, or a kind of privileged access afforded to the viewer, and this physical distance. In *Killing* viewers are drawn into a scene through the intimate or private nature of its subject matter, but are also set apart from the work through its performative qualities. As with the sublime or present/presence, the viewer is simultaneously drawn in, and set apart from, or rejected by, the work. What we witness with *Killing* has the appearance of a very private and confidential act: viewers get the impression that they have stumbled onto a basement torture scene or secret government operation and the work seduces the viewer by making them privy to information or actions that they are not meant to see. While this may be true, the ways in which the act of torture is performed would suggest otherwise. As the robotic arms dance around and prepare for the killing ritual that will take place, the viewer becomes acutely aware of this act as a production. As one of the arms strains itself across the chair, elegantly stretching in preparation for the performance, the viewer is drawn wholly into their body and becomes mere spectator.

This effect repeats in *Opera* where viewers come upon a walled structure with openings or windows through which they can peer. When the piece begins, viewers hear Miller’s voice emanating from the central speaker: “In the middle of the stage a man sits

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70 Ibid., 42.
alone in a room surrounded by speakers, turntables and records. (fig.26)”71 Even in this first piece of narration the tension between intimacy and distance—similar to rejection and recuperation in the sublime—is already produced. In one breath the male voice tells us that a man sits on a stage—setting up the performance that will follow and highlighting the objective distance between performer and observer. However, in this line the male voice also tells us that a man sits alone in a room, granting a kind of intimacy to the scene that is reinforced by the story that follows as the man reminisces about his past. The effect of intimacy is also amplified by the use of the male voice, played by Miller, whose voice, like Cardiff’s in the Paradise Institute, “triggers self-consciousness rather than identification” producing an authenticity that, instead of fabricating an illusion, makes the viewer more aware of themselves.72 So although the viewer, through the use of Miller’s voice, is drawn into a scene that is quite intimate in nature, they are also distanced from the work though the maintenance of the objective boundary between spectator and performance/performer. This push/pull relationship that exists in Opera and Killing between intimacy and physical distance preserves but also shatters the expected relationship between subject and object, once again, granting viewers the realization that this dichotomy is a temporal creation, not a spatial one.

The realization of the primacy of the temporal in breaking down the divide between subject and object is where Opera and Killing can be considered, in relation to the sublime, as the ungrounding of time in space. Typically, in order for time to be apprehended it is seen as grounded in space. The problem, in Kant’s words, is that “space alone persistently determines, while time, however, and thus everything that is in inner sense, constantly flows.”73 As a result “time, although it is not itself an object of outer intuition at all, cannot be made representable to us except under the image of a line…we must always derive the determination of the length of time or also of the positions of time

71 Cardiff and Miller, Opera for a Small Room.
73 Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, B291.
for all inner perceptions from that which presents external things to us as alterable…”\textsuperscript{74}

Reading these two passages together we recognize that there is a subtle distinction to be made between measurable time and observable time. While Kant acknowledges time as an observable force, he understands that the human conception of time is a mere representation, a measurement, of something whose presence is felt through its sensible affects and effects only. Because time itself is an absent-presence it can only be understood through its representation or measurement in space. Due to the fact that the passage of time is an absent-presentation, “Knowledge of an enduring self” and, for that matter, the external world “requires something permanent, and this, in turn, requires the permanent in outer sense.”\textsuperscript{75} As such, the grounding of the external world and the self in time is the predicate for all knowledge including that of the subjective self. Thus, to despatialize time or to understand time as present/presence—an experience which the Cardiff/Miller works engender—completely dismantles the notion of subjectivity through the inability of the self-conscious to represent the self to itself. What does this mean then in terms of the sublime? How does time function in the sublime?

\textbf{Figure 25: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. Turntable.}

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., B156.

\textsuperscript{75} Robinson, \textit{How is Nature Possible?}, 160.
The sublime as pure presence/present can be further elucidated in terms of the Kantian conception of space and time and their relationship to the imagination. As discussed at length in chapter two, at the sublime moment reason confronts the imagination with its limit: the imagination fails to present the Idea of reason to the understanding. As Lyotard notes in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, in terms of space and time the imagination “must give up synthesizing [them] (which are thus no longer space and time as forms of intuition)” instead the imagination “[signals] the unpresentable “presence” of an object of thought that is not an object of experience, but which cannot be sentimentally deciphered anywhere except upon the object of experience.”76 In the experience of the sublime the imagination ceases to synthesize time and space so that they no longer function as co-ordinates. Rather, in the sublime time becomes despatialized producing a pure present/presence or space without memory: it is an event, a temporal happening with no spatial or material referent. How does the idea of despatialized time in the sublime, as a space without memory, relate to the notion of time and the event in Lyotard, and how does this relate to the work of Cardiff and Miller?

The nature of Opera and Killing as durational and performative artworks means they function as experiences lending themselves to the discourse of the event. In *The Image in French Philosophy* Temenuga Trifonova describes Lyotard’s notion of the event as a “phenomenon without a past.”77 Meaning that the event, rather than being a spatial category, is actually a temporal one, or a space without memory. The event is a mode of being that cannot be objectified or represented.78 Rather than being a question of cause and effect, the event is irreducible to origins and merely *is* or occurs.79 More broadly, the notion of the event in Lyotard’s work describes his critique of the phenomenology of time.80 As noted in chapter one, Lyotard describes a shift in the visual arts historically: from attempting to present the sublime through the transgression of 

78 Ibid., 124.
79 Ibid., 124.
80 Ibid., 130.
space, to the contemporary moment, which presents the sublime through an engagement with the event—producing an event-bound time. With works like *Opera* and *Killing* viewers are not drawn into the sublime experience through total immersion, transgressing space from the inside out, rather they are events and thus participate in event-bound time.

The use of sound throughout *Opera* and *Killing* is vital to the presentation, in these works, of the event through event-bound time. The symphony is responsible for producing the story in *Killing*. From the moment the spectator presses the button, engaging the mechanism, the violins narrate the action of the sequence. Without the distinct melody of the violins, the work would not be able to create such affective resonances. Sound in *Killing* also initiates the actual torture, which follows a countdown from the megaphone speaker that hangs from the ceiling of the structure. It also adds weight and intensity to the act of killing in the work—the stabbing of the robotic arms is punctuated by sharp hydraulic snaps. As was mentioned earlier, in *Opera* Miller’s voice becomes a character. Heard through the megaphone speaker, which takes on an anthropomorphic quality as a result, Miller’s voice is what gives the male subject the feeling of presence even though, in actuality, there is no subject in the work. As Janet Cardiff explains,

> The way we use audio makes you much more aware of your own body, and makes you much more aware of your place within the world, of your body as a “real” construction…If you give someone hyper-reality, then they have more of a perspective on what’s really real. You are hearing the sound behind you, and you know it’s not real, but you want to turn around to look for it. It relates to our primordial defense mechanisms.

The ways in which Cardiff and Miller use sound in *Opera* and *Killing* creates an illusion that brings the viewer back to the reality of their own body once the deception becomes apparent. This absorption in illusion, and subsequent recognition of this illusion, is most certainly tied to the idea of event-bound time and the sublime in Lyotard.

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As Cardiff has described, sound in *Opera* and *Killing* plays with conceptions of reality by staging elements which are absent spatially, but present temporally, endowing the work with a kind of absent-presence. Thinking through this perpetually absent presence/present necessitates thinking through the failure of presentation. As Lyotard makes clear in this passage, the very unthinkability or incomprehensibility of the sublime is rooted in the failure of the imagination, as considered at length in chapter two: “In the sublime ‘situation’, something like an Absolute, either of magnitude or of power, is made quasi-perceptible (the word is Kant’s) due to the very failing of the faculty of presentation.” Once again, this failure refers back to the inability of the imagination to present the Idea to the faculty of reason, which is why the sublime is unpresentable. Thus, to endow something with absent-presence is the only way one can present the unpresentable: by making apparent that there is something not present in presentation itself. With regard to the event, the sublime presents one with the image that Trifonova defines “negatively as an event, as the mere possibility of something happening despite the threat of nothing else happening.” Here, Trifonova’s argument is similar to Lyotard’s suggestion (as touched on in chapter one) that the sublime takes place between an instant, or an occurrence, and a moment in which a cognitive understanding is developed about that occurrence. Thus, the sublime can be characterized by a tension between immersion and recognition or self-awareness. This brief fragment is event-bound time.

The use of sound, in *Opera* and *Killing*, to present that which is not present functions to present the unpresentable, or a space without memory. As Lyotard understands it with the perception of sound:

> The ear is given over to something incomparable (and therefore something unrepeatable) in what is called the performance, i.e. to the here and now of the sound, in their singularity, in their one-offness, in the aspect by which they are, by virtue of their position, not subjected to any spatio-temporal transfer. This transfer can consist in no more than the maintenance of the ‘same’ sound in memory for even a short duration – this does not alter the fact that it immediately changes the

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84 Trifonova, *The Image in French Philosophy*, 128.
here into the there, the now into the then. And so present nuance changes into a nuance reported, retained, deferred, so that it becomes a different nuance.\textsuperscript{85}

Due to the fact that sound rejects synthesis, \textit{Opera} and \textit{Killing}'s use of sound to produce events that are not there points to the unrepeatability of the event itself. This is echoed by the fact that although one may try to replicate the sound event, “this matter, so tenuous that it is as though immaterial, is not repeatable, this is because by being subjected to its seizure by that matter, the mind is stripped of its faculty – both aesthetic and intelligent – to bind it, associate it, I’d like to say narrativize it, and therefore, in one way or another (metaphysical or ontological) to repeat it.”\textsuperscript{86} Thus, even though many of the sounds used in \textit{Opera} and \textit{Killing} have the appearance of familiarity—the intimacy of Miller’s voice, the violin symphony, and the punctures of the robotic arms all enter the space of the foreign and indescribable, and thus the sublime; they cannot be repeated, meaning they cannot be represented. These sound events cannot be reduced or objectified spatially, instead, they present themselves through time. Kim-Cohen refers to the unpresentability of sound as “non-cochlear sound.”\textsuperscript{87} This condition of sound is akin to the aesthetics of avisuality,\textsuperscript{88} which produces a kind of distancing or non-recognition—that which cannot be visualized, cannot be presented—aptly describing that which is perpetually present, yet always absent. Sound cannot be objectified and therefore cannot be grounded in space; sound itself is space without memory.

Another key way that Cardiff and Miller’s work disrupts the viewer’s sense of time as grounded in space is by presenting forms of nonlinear time that deny historical progression, telos, and origins. Linear time, represented in narrative, orders events, placing them in a particular trajectory usually seen as a result of certain causes and effects. In the words of Lyotard: “More precisely, narratives are like temporal filters whose function is to transform the emotive charge linked to the event into sequences of

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\textsuperscript{85} Lyotard, \textit{The Inhuman}, 155-156.  \\
\textsuperscript{86} Lyotard, \textit{The Inhuman}, 156.  \\
\textsuperscript{87} Seth Kim-Cohen, \textit{In the Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art} (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 223.  \\
\textsuperscript{88} A term borrowed from Akira Mizuta Lippit, \textit{Atomic Light: Shadow Optics} (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
\end{flushright}
units of information capable of giving rise to something like meaning.” In this way, narratives take event(s) and string them together to grant them meaning. This is not to say that bereft of narrative we would be unable to produce meaning, but rather that meaning itself would be understood non-chronologically. In *Opera* viewers are presented with a discontinuous non-teleological story, demonstrating a case where past, present, and future converge.

For example, at one point near the beginning of the piece the male voice tells us in a singsong drawl: “She was walking down the road. She was walking down the road with her shoes in her hand. Where the f**k is she going?” Even in this moment past, present, and future are not where they typically would be. Viewers are taken away from the initial narrative of the man in the room with his records and into another story about a female character walking down a road without shoes. While this could be a memory from the male character’s past, it could also be happening in the present for two reasons: 1) he finishes the thought by asking in present tense where she is going; and 2) relying on their memory to create this image, the viewer is compelled by the narration to imagine a woman walking down a road. However, we do not remain with this story for long as, once again, the viewer is pulled back into the room with the absent-present male character as he hums along to the background music. Before the viewer gets too comfortable here, a rainstorm can be heard coming from the speakers on the surrounding walls of the exhibition space. Is this rain happening in viewer’s present, or the male character’s, or perhaps even to the in female character’s as she walks down the road? One cannot be sure and, just as the viewer is immersed in their memory of rain, the storm culminates in thunder and dies off. The male voice, bringing the viewer back into another story, says: “This place is falling apart. The animals are taking over. The weasels ate the mice and the squirrels. The mice are chewing on the wires in the walls; if they start on the records I’ll have to poison them.” Again, as viewers we are unable to locate ourselves in time: are the animals in the gallery? In the room with the man or, do they exist in the

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89 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 63.
90 Cardiff and Miller, *Opera for a Small Room*.
91 Ibid.
fictional story the male voice narrates? The answer is: all of the above. The story that *Opera* tells is one that hinges on memory, or the past, and this past belongs to the viewer, but is also external to them, pointing to the events of *Opera* as an image: “a phenomenon without a past” or a space without a memory.92

Narrative is a cognitive device that allows us to order and make sense of the present, which we are incapable of grasping:

Because it is an absolute, the presenting present cannot be grasped: it is *not yet* or *no longer* present. It is always too soon or too late to grasp presentation itself and present it. Such is the specific and paradoxical constitution of the event. That something happens, the occurrence, means that the mind is disappropriated…The event makes the self incapable of taking possession and control of what it is. It testifies that the self is essentially passible to a recurrent alterity.93

Cardiff and Miller’s work, through the presentation of events that testify to the absence of the present, demonstrate the failure of linear time. This failure of linear time in *Opera* points to the failure of the subjective lie: the viewer is unable to locate themselves *in* time, indicating that much of what we perceive and think is predicated upon a fictitious structure in the mind of the viewer, and that this gesture is sublime.94

In *Opera* and *Killing* the sublime failure of linear time is further amplified by the looping of the works which, according to Megha Rajguru’s analysis of Cardiff’s *Forty-part Motet*, can be seen as “[eliciting] an overall experience of nonlinearity and a phenomenon rather than a narrative with a beginning, middle and an end.”95 The Cardiff/Miller works engage in this process by presenting stories that are not linear but cyclical. *Opera* is a looped work; so although the symphony ends and applause resounds from the speakers, this end is not really an end in the typical sense because the work almost immediately begins again. A similar technique occurs in *Killing* where, although the piece seems to come to a logical conclusion, this is not entirely the case. *Killing*

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92 Trifonova, *The Image in French Philosophy*, 123.
94 Ellis, “Sound, Space and Selfhood”, 40.
presumably ends when the torture of the subject culminates in its death, coming to a precise end as the robotic arms dance around. During this sequence the machine turns off rather abruptly (almost mid-action), cutting off the symphony track and the lights, the action coming to a dead stop. However, cyclical time is subtly implied as the light on the table over the start button slowly turns back on and ominously readjusts to the precise level of brightness at which it was found (fig.25). This action implies a cyclicality to the event at hand, rather than linearity as it would initially seem. The cyclicality of both *Opera* and *Killing* implies an infinite repeatability that can never be realized. As Lyotard states: “Here is the story I would like to tell you: that repetition escapes from repetition in order to repeat. That in trying to have itself forgotten, it fixes its forgetting, and thus repeats its absence.”\textsuperscript{96} If we see the sublime as the failure of presentation, or repeatability, this will always mean that an event will repeat its own absence. The repeatability of *Opera* and *Killing* can never be achieved, despite the fact that their repetition is implied, because the event itself cannot be repeated. Just as the man who sits alone in the room in *Opera* continuously reliving his memories, destined to witness their absence, the event itself cannot be represented. This unrepeatability of the event lends itself to the despatialization of time in the event as, once again, we are confronted with the acknowledgement that time cannot be contained or objectified—it cannot be spatialized.

\textsuperscript{96} Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 153.
By altering traditional notions of spatiality and temporality, Cardiff and Miller’s work decenters the subject—giving rise to a sublime experience. Despite the fact that both *Opera* and *Killing* seemingly maintain the boundary between subject and object, by maintaining this distinction in space they are able to problematize it through temporality. In presenting the viewer with sound events, or actions that are given entirely through sound, *Opera* and *Killing* confront the viewer with the event-bound time of the sublime, demonstrating that time cannot be objectified. In its use of nonlinear or nonsequential time *Opera* takes this one step further by challenging the objectification of time to produce telos through narrative. The looping of both *Opera* and *Killing*, which points out the unrepeatability, or unpresentability of the event, further amplifies the despatialization
of time, presenting viewers with the absent-presence of the sublime, space without memory.
Chapter 4

Subjectivity: the Ontology of the Sublime

This chapter explores the ontological significance of the sublime in the works of Cardiff and Miller. Opera and Killing allow us to ask what it means to have presence as a being in the moment of the sublime, and what happens to the subject at the moment of sublime encounter. Due to the fact that the sublime happens, or is an event, that which operates as present/presence, it resists totalization—making the sublime bereft of consciousness. Thus, the subject of sublime experience is a very different kind of being than the human; they are the inhuman. Like the postmodern, which marks the death of grand narrative, the inhuman for Lyotard is the narrative that marks the death of the human. Using the Kantian notion of the sublime as the failure of presentation or the acknowledgement of the unrepresentable, Lyotard argues for the disruption of narrative through the recognition of the sublime as the ever present and yet, always absent: the that that experience cannot account for. As such, in Lyotard’s view the sublime requires a simultaneous rejection and reliance on understanding in order to exist both within and outside the narrative of experience. Thus, the inhuman as the subject of this that is not a nonhuman, an unhuman, or the inhumane: it is the human becoming other through the event. I argue that Opera and Killing force a confrontation or disruption of the human as the subject of experience, allowing us to see the inhuman as the entity which bears witness to a space without memory or an event—the sublime.

Opera and Killing can be used as critiques that show the limitations of viewing the sublime through the transcendental categories. Rather than a suspension of time and space, this thesis sees the sublime as the unrepresentable presence of pure time, a time past/passed space. Reintroducing the sublime as a spaceless time allows for the development of a vocabulary with which to speak about experience without a subject. Consequently, the inhuman may be seen as that which allows Lyotard to write the story of the subject without positing a subject. In doing so, the inhuman becomes a mask that, just as it conceals, reveals itself as a mask hiding nothing. Thus, Lyotard’s inhuman can be seen as inviting the question of being in time: where does the human lie? In this
reading the sublime is the climate of disruption that highlights this lie and, in doing so, forces the posthuman question: when am I? It is with this question that we can begin to examine *Opera* and *Killing* as works that allow us to conduct an ontological investigation of the nature of time and its relationship to subjective thought or story (memory).

As discussed in chapter two and three, the sublime presents a moment of failure. This failure presents us with a moment in which all normative cognitive devices fall short: consciousness ceases to function. Cardiff and Miller’s works *Opera* and *Killing* present viewers with circumstances through which they can experience the sublime loss of subjectivity. While Kant’s conception of the sublime points to a failure of the imagination to represent an Idea, in his view reason is still something that can fill the void left by this lack. In the words of Trifonova, “Reason is something we can fall back on after we have stripped ourselves of the sensible and feel vulnerable because of the failure of the imagination.” Thus, in the failure of other faculties, reason prevails, defining the human as a rational animal and giving the sublime ontological significance. In what follows, I investigate how thinking of the sublime through the concept of presence/present—space without memory—preserves this ontological enquiry while yielding a very different result. This particular idea of human as rational is very much in line with Enlightenment thinking however Lyotard’s project and our investigation here attempts to revise this understanding. While Lyotard argues that what is most central to the human is reflective thought, the sublime as failure operates as a two-fold failure. The sublime, while a failure of the imagination, is also a failure of reason. The failure of reason in the sublime points to a distinctive conception of the human—one that Lyotard calls *inhuman*.

*Opera* and *Killing* present the sublime as the loss of self. This condition is *inhuman* because, just as the sublime rejects subjectivity, it also requires recuperation. The sublime operates both within and outside narratives of experience. In this way the

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97 Temenuga Trifonova, *The Image in French Philosophy*, 149.
98 Ibid., 149.
99 Ibid., 149-159.
sublime’s threat to subjectivity poses a question for ontology. If the sublime presents a failure of reason, as well as a failure of the imagination—a failure of subjectivity, then it necessarily forces us to question the very meaning of the human. As Trifonova states, “The postmodern sublime, on the other hand, has an ontological significance for it (supposedly) restores the reality of the world by eliminating the tyranny of totalizing subjectivity.” By eliminating totalizing subjectivity, the sublime exposes the constructed nature of the human. If reason is what is proper to the human, then what happens when reason fails, and what does this failure present? Because the failure of the sublime occurs when the imagination is confronted with its own limit and reason cannot totalize a narrative, the sublime—the limit itself—possesses a dual nature. As Lyotard notes: “It is the limit itself that understanding cannot conceive of as its object. The limit is only conceivable with an outside and an inside. The limit, that is, immediately implies both the limited and the unlimited.” Thus, the sublime, or the limit, exists simultaneously within and outside of experience: in order to exist outside, as the unpresentable, the sublime presupposes the inside to which it must always return. Lyotard argues that, just as the sublime oscillates between the inside and outside of thought, so too does the inhuman: “We should first remember that if the name of human can and must oscillate between native indetermination and instituted or self-instituting reason, it is the same for the name of inhuman. All education is inhuman because it does not happen without constraint and terror…” The inhuman, like the sublime, must oscillate between the ungraspable and that which can be situated within reason; it depends both on the inside and outside of thought.

In order to first affect the idea of subjectivity as a temporal category Opera and Killing move the viewer through various subjective conditions that highlight the lie of the subject as something that exists not in physical space but temporally. The viewer takes on the function of eavesdropper, witness, participant, and observer, often moving through these various subjective roles or occupying multiple positions at once. Coming upon

100 Ibid., 151.
102 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 4.
Opera or Killing viewers initially play the role of the eavesdropper: an individual who happens upon events that are not meant for their witnessing. McGinley, in considering the relationship between eavesdropping and performance, asserts that “the etymology of the term “eavesdropping” delineates a relationship between listening in and domestic architectures: the eavesdropper is one who hangs out under the eaves of the house in order to listen in. Domestic architecture, then, creates the conditions of possibility for eavesdropping.”103 This idea—the domestic setting creating an opportunity for eavesdropping—is certainly true of Opera where the structure that viewers are presented with resembles a garage or a shed in which viewers are subsequently told that a man sits alone inside, listening to his records. Peering through the sides or the back of the structure, one feels as though they are watching and listening to events that are private in nature: the subject of the work (the absent-present man in the chair) is unaware of the presence of an outsider, he is unaware that he is being watched. However, as McGinley also points out, there is a historical connection between performance and eavesdropping that can also be applied here.104 In Opera the performative elements of the work (as discussed in chapter three) undercut the construction of privacy so that the viewer becomes implicated in the scene. A similar effect occurs in Killing where viewers also come upon a scene where they feel like intruders. Approaching the structure of Killing one feels as though they are observing a psychopath’s torture contraption from a horror film, or some kind of secret mechanism not meant for the public eye. Of course, as was discussed in chapter three in regard to Opera, this effect in Killing is circumvented by the presence of the desk and chair sitting directly in front of the machine. This vacant chair subtly implies that what is being conducted in the scene is meant for a witness, giving Killing a performative quality and, once again, implicating the viewer in the event. However, because this witness is, in fact, part of the performance, they become the inhuman, bearing witness to a space without memory.

In Opera viewers become implicated because of the multiple perspectives from which they can observe the work. By observing Opera from the cutout at the back of the

104 Ibid, 54.
structure, the effect of being on stage is produced. From the vantage point of the performer, indicated by the spotlighted chair, one looks out onto the audience via the large front window (fig.27). This effect of implication is further increased by the ways in which the viewer is called to participate in creating the work: piecing together and filling in the gaps provided by the audio portion of the work. As stated in chapter one, and further argued in chapter two, Opera calls upon the viewer to participate in the creation of the work by relying on their memory to provide a visual impression of the corresponding audio. This is important when we think about Lyotard’s reworking of the sublime. In the words of Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “We are constantly being made aware of events in which we are not participating. We worry about those that occur elsewhere, and we live them in a surrogate manner…Our bodies can be in one place while our minds are somewhere else.”¹⁰⁵ However, Opera allows viewers to participate not only in a surrogate manner but directly—they are responsible for producing the images triggered by the audio and for piecing together the discontinuous and nonteleological narrative according to their individual formation.

In order to further explore the problematization of teleology and narrative in Opera and Killing as they relate to the formation of new ideas about subjectivity, let us first consider the inhuman in the context of its discursive foils: the human and the posthuman. “The truth about stories is that’s all we are.”¹⁰⁶ Thomas King’s quote from The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative highlights the relationship between anthropology, storytelling, and narrative and their role in cultivating/informing the human. Historically speaking the question of the human was the central concern of the philosophy of humanism.¹⁰⁷ In her book The Posthuman, Rosie Braidotti defines

¹⁰⁷ While I refer to humanism, the purpose of this thesis is not to engage with the tenants of humanism itself in any in-depth way. Rather, in order to arrive at an explanation of the posthuman and the inhuman I trace the historical lineage of these terms in their involvement as responses to the difficulties of humanism as defined by Rosi Braidotti.
humanism as: “a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress.”108 This secular approach to humanism has been in development since the enlightenment period and can also be seen operating in the project of modernity, which seeks to unify various forms of human knowledge (epistemology) into grand universal narratives or mythologies.

The reaction to the paradigm of the human was the development of an anti-humanist tradition, which came historically at a time when the Eurocentric and imperialist tendencies of humanism were being challenged.109 Braidotti traces the 1960s and 1970s anti-humanism tendencies to feminist, anti-racist, anti-nuclear, and pacifist political/social/cultural movements that arose around this time.110 In arguing for a more inclusive vision, these reactionary movements exposed the normative hegemony of the enlightenment-based ideals of humanism by revealing the exclusivity of the modern narrative. In giving voice to the excluded, these anti-humanist movements posited themselves as more representative of the whole. Despite its spirit of inclusion anti-humanism falls prey to the same set of issues it problematizes: the replacement of a narrative is still a narrative. This is precisely why Opera does not provide an overarching narrative but instead calls upon the audience to piece together the events of the story. For story, as with the event, opposes assimilation by resisting totalization. As Christov-Bakargiev continues: “[Cardiff’s work] evokes “personal” memories and narratives that are vague or sketchy enough to be anyone’s. The audience can partly create their own stories and project their own personal history onto the experience.”111 By requiring the viewer to participate directly in the creation of the work, without allowing them to narrativize this process, the viewer, in effect, becomes the subject of the work. This process of participation aids in evading the kinds of totalizing narratives produced by

109 Ibid, 16.
110 Ibid, 16.
111 Bakargiev, “An Intimate Distance,” 33.
humanism and instead produces a different kind of epistemological framework—one that operates around story.

Figure 27: "Opera For a Small Room." Detail. View from rear window showing back of chair and megaphone.
In *Killing*, the viewer passes from the role of eavesdropper to participant the moment they press the button that engages the mechanism. However, this participation also implicates them in a crime: the torture and killing of the absent-present subject in the dental chair. But, once again, this implication is not straightforward because the killing itself is something that relies on the viewer in order to come into actuality or be present (fig.28 and fig.29). As McGinley describes her experience with another viewer during *Cabin Fever*: “We make eye contact but do not speak, a pair of guilty witnesses assuring mutual silence with a glance. But, we can say, quite honestly: *I didn’t see anything.*”

With *Killing* the viewer becomes implicated in a crime in which no one is actually harmed, as there is no subject in the dental chair. Thus, they didn’t *see* anything per se—the event of the killing itself is not present spatially. Rather, viewers must attempt to present it to themselves temporally, which of course makes it unpresentable. Once again the viewer becomes the subject of the work, forcing their own demise. Viewers who are not directly responsible for pressing the button and act as bystanders are not exempt as they are implicated through in-action—they do nothing to stop the massacre. Even those who would attempt to turn the machine off are implicated because, in order to arrive at the decision to halt the mechanism, they would already had to have felt the impact of the killing, and thus would have already begun to present the demise of the subject in the chair to themselves. Reaching out to disengage the work, viewers realize that, once started, the mechanism is unresponsive. Drawing on their own memory to fill in the gaps and ultimately failing to present the unpresentable, the killing of a subject in the chair, the viewer must acknowledge their status as observer—a body watching on. This return to signification or cognition highlights that the sublime cannot be sustained. In this way, *Killing* and *Opera* demonstrate the temporal nature of subjectivity through the ways in which they shift the viewer through the roles of eavesdropper, participant, and observer, and point to the nature of these categories as temporal rather than spatial thus presenting viewers with the spatial lie of the subject through the loss of self in the sublime.

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Figure 28: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Torture scene and stabbing of the absent-present subject.

Figure 29: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Torture scene wall shadow effect.
This spatial lie of the subjects in *Opera* and *Killing* also points out that their presence is fabricated temporally through the event. Because the man in the room in *Opera* and the subject in the dental chair in *Killing* both attain presence through their absence (they come into being through absence) they indicate that the viewer, as the subject of the work, also comes into being through absence. Connecting this back to the troubling of humanist notions in the Cardiff/Miller works, let us return to the response to the humanism–anti-humanism binary: posthumanism. Posthumanism is “the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards new alternatives.”¹¹³ In other words, the posthuman can be seen as aligning itself with the postmodern project which, rather than creating grand universal narratives (mythos), aims to produce a different kind of epistemology along non-teleological lines. In rejecting the universality of an all-encompassing mythos, the postmodern marks the birth of the death of grand narratives. By using nonteleological stories the postmodern project presents itself as a singularity in a multiplicity, thereby repurposing narrative and metanarrative. The posthuman as the subject of the postmodern story marks a shift away from the purposive to the nonteleological. Rather than asking the modernist-humanist ontological questions: Where are we? Who are we? Why are we? the posthuman forces the more relevant question: When am I?—an ontological question of the subject as time-based. Thus, just as Cardiff and Miller’s works allow us to acknowledge the relationship of being to absent-presence and present-absence, so too does the question of the posthuman. Lyotard’s notion of the inhuman allows us to interrogate this line of thinking even further.

As described earlier, the inhuman is the entity that bears witness to a space without memory or an event. The events of *Opera* and *Killing* are events without a memory for two reasons: First, as discussed in detail in chapter two, because the events of *Opera* and *Killing* are fictitious and come into being through their performance they become events without a memory; Second, and more importantly for our investigation in

this chapter, the viewer bears witness to a space without memory or an event by becoming the subject of the work. As the subject of the work, viewers effectively relinquish their subjectivity and give themselves over to objecthood—becoming matter. Trifonova maintains that “Lyotard’s idea of art making man present is based on his identification of presence with matter.”

She continues by suggesting that this idea is in line with Bergson’s distinction between mind and matter: “Mind differs from matter thanks to its greater capacity for retention i.e. its capacity for memory. Matter does not retain any memories, it cannot experience repetition, and is free of inscription. In terms of time matter is the instant: matter does not exist in time for it is the very sensation of time. Thus, to be present, for Lyotard, is to be ‘matter’.”

Rather than being a question of taking up space in an inert manner, matter is an event. Matter is present; it is the product of time itself. Opera and Killing, by making the viewer the subject of the work; by compelling the viewer to actively create the work through the use of memory; and by allowing one to be confronted with the fact that no memory is adequate, cause the viewer to become matter. By becoming matter the viewer then becomes the inhuman or the unpresentable as they are presented to themselves as matter—an event without a memory. In other words: “sublime art can hope to make man sense his being by reducing the human to the being of a material point, whose uniqueness does not endure.”

By reducing the human to the inhuman, or the event, Cardiff and Miller’s work allows us to question what it means to be present, or have presence, as a subject or being.

To further illustrate this process with an example from Opera it will be necessary to return to the idea of the re-actualization of the past in the present and its synthesis with the past as present, as put forth in chapter two. The perpetual remodification of the past in Opera occurs as the male voice recounts events from his present, or possibly his past, which converge with both the viewer’s present, and with their past. In an interview with David Balzer for Canadian Art magazine, Cardiff confirms that Opera is an allusion to

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114 Trifonova, The Image in French Philosophy, 160.
115 Ibid., 160.
116 Ibid., 161.
Samuel Beckett’s play, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, 1958. \(^{117}\) In Beckett’s work an elderly man sits alone in a room playing a tape recording created on his thirty-ninth birthday, of himself recounting various thoughts and memories. This scene is similar to the experience of looking at an old photograph of oneself, and knowing that this is a representation of the “I”, but not being able to locate or identify with this “I” in the present: you at once identify with and reject this representation as yourself. Krapp’s present is confused with his past and his future. He becomes matter with no memory to speak of. The effect that is created in *Krapp* is no doubt similar to that in *Opera*, where the anthropomorphic speaker narrates a story of a man who sits in a room (presumably the one in front of the viewer) reminiscing as he listens to old records. Towards the end of the piece, this absent-present man states, “He picks up his guitar and walks to the center of the stage. The audience waits anxiously. A voice is heard calling from the wings.” \(^{118}\) Here, viewers envision a man walking out into the center of the cluttered room holding a guitar, but can also envision themselves walking to the center of a stage watching the audience before them waiting anxiously. The experience of the subject of the story, and the experience of the viewer in the room, become one. As the narrator relays this action the past converges with the viewer’s present, the viewer past and the narrator’s present—all of which open onto a future that is a synthesis of these different times. What the viewer sees in front of them, in the wooden room with the records and the chandelier, is the affective resonance of a space that is not present physically but is present temporally. This time is part of the viewer’s present that relies on related memories to conjure an experience in the mind that is similar to what is being described. This memory is a time that is present temporally for both the viewer and the narrator, but is absent spatially. The viewer undergoes the same connection and disconnection that Krapp feels as he listens to the recording, but with an increased level of dislocation since these converging experiences, at once belong to the viewer but remain other. Both subjects, the viewer and the male subject of the narrative, undergo the ultimate loss of

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\(^{118}\) Cardiff and Miller, *Opera for a Small Room.*
self in this sublime separation of time from space—they become matter without memory, pure presence/present.

In order to be fully presented with a sublime experience, once the viewer becomes inhuman, bearing witness to a space without memory, a pure presence/present, they must be drawn back into their role as an observer of the work. *Opera* does this through the use of sound that brings the viewer out of the story of the man on stage. After the male voice says: “A voice is heard calling from the wings,” a violin symphony loudly punctuates the silence and the viewer withdraws from their unconscious subliminal preoccupation and returns to consciousness.  

This instant demonstrates the dismantling of subjectivity at the moment of the sublime. As Kim-Cohen states: “The self-certainty of self-presence finds no purchase in this multiplication of time and identity because it relies on the impossibility of a return to the already impossible now.” In this passage, Kim-Cohen stresses that the unpres- entable, or the sublime, is ungraspable as it exists beyond rational thought. The sublime presents a space without self-certainty or subjectivity—a space that is unpresentable because it is temporal. Since the sublime both rejects and relies on cognitive structures it can only be maintained for an instant, meaning that the sublime necessarily avoids totalization. In the example from *Opera*, just as the viewer loses their sense of consciousness as they take on the role of the man on stage in the narration, bearing witness to an event, they are brought back from the sublime through the use of music.

Due to the time-sensitive nature of the event, it resists unification, prohibiting consciousness from being able to account for it within experience. Trifonova sets out the problem as such: “Our consciousness has the capacity for synthesis because it is time-consciousness: only that which is distended can be synthesized or totalized.” Given that the event itself happens in the instant, or the now, it resists totalization. *Killing* produces a similar effect that, as discussed earlier, is a result of the viewer becoming the

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119 Ibid.
120 Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 228.
121 Trifonova, *The Image in French Philosophy*, 149.
subject of the work, or the subject in the dental chair. Here, as discussed in greater detail in chapter two, the viewer identifies with the pain of the absent-present subject in the chair and, in doing so, takes on their role. However, just as the viewer is drawn into the sublime through their affective engagement with pain, assuming the position of the subject in the work, they are pulled back into their body through the punctuated sounds of the needles on the robotic arms, and the violin symphony that plays in the background, both of which trigger awareness. The push and pull relationship that the viewer maintains with their own subjective experience throughout both *Opera* and *Killing* emphasizes not only the failure of the imagination to present the event to the understanding, but also the failure of reason itself: “reason, too, fails to apprehend the occurrence: reason comes ‘too late’.”

Reason arrives post-event as an attempt to comprehend what it cannot. Not only can the sublime not be totalized because it is not extended but, as with the case of *Opera* and *Killing*, there is no subject to totalize since the viewer, in coming to occupy the work itself, has become object. This notion of subject becoming object in the face of the sublime is why the sublime raises questions of ontological significance for Lyotard. The inhuman asks one to consider how “the opposition subject-object loses relevance as it dissolves into the pre-ethical and pre-rational command: *Be*.”

As the subject becomes object, exposing itself to the event “the postmodern sublime, by problematizing the very possibility of linking, establishes a necessity even more originary than the Kantian one. Linking to the aesthetic object and, in general, to what the mind is *not*, becomes an ontological law.” Thus, the inhuman, as produced by *Opera* and *Killing*, is presented as the entity that bears witness to a space without memory, or event, becoming an ontological category that allows us to interrogate the nature of the human as a rational animal.

Considering the ways in which the viewer becomes matter, or the subject, in *Opera* and *Killing*, and the ways that both works effectively kill this subject at the end, why does the viewer endure? Given the ways in which the viewer becomes inhuman,

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122 Ibid., 149-150.
123 Ibid., 161.
124 Ibid., 161.
why does their subjectivity also endure? *Killing* comes to an end as the robotic arms have run their course of torture. After the subject in the dental chair has been stabbed sufficiently, the robotic arms begin to dance around in triumph (fig.30). As the violin music, which has served as the driving force of this act, comes to a close, the viewer becomes acutely aware that the absent-present subject has been killed. In *Opera* a similar outcome transpires. Toward the end of the work the narrator tells us: “The music doesn’t really change anything but it helps him in some way he doesn’t understand.” A short pause as the piano plays in the background and the voice continues: “It’s an opera after all, everyone dies in the end.” It is at this point that the narrator describes picking up his guitar and walking onto the stage, after which he returns to the story of the woman walking down the road with the shoes in her hands. As the music builds to a crescendo he sings to the guitar: “She was walking down the road with a dazed look on her face. They found her in the ditch. The car burst into flames.” At this line the viewer ascertains that there was some kind of car crash and, as the music gets more violent and the lights synchronize to the powerful climax of the rock orchestra, the accident and the wreckage really come alive. The narrator speaks, barely audible over the instruments, the music finally fading as he states: “Smudge marks on her face and the wind blew back her hair.” At this point the sound and lights slowly conclude followed by a brief silence and the subsequent sound of cheering and applause; this leaves the viewer with a number of questions. First, was it the male character that crashed the car, or perhaps the female? Has the male character died because the female character is described as walking? Or has she died and the man lives on to tell the tale of his regret and remorse? Perhaps it is both. One cannot be certain. However, since the viewer has inserted themselves into the roles of both subjects, they should also be dead but, of course, they are not; although it is an opera everyone does not die in the end, begging the question: Why?

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125 Cardiff and Miller, *Opera for a Small Room.*
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
Despite the acts of violence to subjectivity in *Opera* and *Killing*, the viewer endures due to the recuperation mechanism of the sublime. Lyotard’s concept of the inhuman allows us to explore this notion of recuperation in *Opera* and *Killing* further as it points to the idea that we never completely lose our subjectivity; we are not capable of getting past the subject entirely—even with the sublime, where subjectivity is suspended, there is a recuperation that always follows. Lyotard outlines the problem as follows: “All absolutes can only be thought, without any sensible/sensory intuition, as an Idea of reason, the faculty of presentation, the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this Idea. This failure of expression gives rise to a pain, a kind of

Figure 30: "The Killing Machine." Detail. Robotic arms dancing in triumph.
cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented” which is why he later states that “the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening.” Thus, in order for the sublime to function as the unpresentable, self-awareness must occur after the moment of loss or failure; something must come to announce that everything is not over. However, at this moment of self-awareness the sublime ceases to be. This is why, instead of positing itself after the human as with the posthuman, the inhuman is neither before nor after. Like the sublime it is a part of the now, thereby pointing to the nature of subjectivity as a temporal rather than spatial category. Even though Opera and Killing effect the death of the subject, the sublime fights back responding by preventing its complete demise. Kant’s notion of recuperation in the sublime, as considered in chapter two, is taken up by Lyotard in the form of his question: “is it happening?” In compelling viewers to ask themselves this question, Opera and Killing also allow us to acknowledge the impossibility of this consideration. As Lyotard maintains, “the mark of the question is ‘now’, now like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness is now.” The now, of course, will always already elude our grasp—it is the unpresentable and as such, something must come in, something must happen. This is precisely why Lyotard continues: “Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that’s what is sublime. Letting go of all grasping intelligence and of its power, disarming it, recognizing that this occurrence of painting was not necessary and is scarcely foreseeable, a privation in the face of Is it happening?”. The sublime response to the attempt towards the annihilation of the subject, presented in Opera and Killing, is to prevent this from happening by ultimately preserving subjectivity—arriving to announce that everything is not over.

Opera and Killing bring the viewer to the brink, encouraging them to look out over the ledge. Right before the moment of death, however, they are brought back into signification, seemingly restored. Taking into consideration the nature of consciousness

130 Trifonova, The Image in French Philosophy, 138.
131 Lyotard, The Inhuman, 92.
132 Ibid., 93.
as the vital component for human experience, eliminating it is unpresentable. The unpresentable according to Lyotard is:

A ‘negative’ (Kant also says ‘abstract’) presentation…The sublime is not a pleasure, it is a pleasure of pain: we fail to present the absolute, and that is a displeasure, but we know that we have to present it, that the faculty of feeling or imagining is called on to bring about the sensible (the image). To present what reason can conceive, and even if it cannot manage to do this, and we suffer from this, a pure pleasure is felt from this tension.\(^{133}\)

*Opera* and *Killing*, in inviting the viewer to become inhuman by bearing witness to a space without memory, attempt to present the unpresentable, which of course is impossible. Rather, both of these works end up demonstrating the existence of a pre-cognitive, pre-rational form of being. In order to show the existence of such a being, they must also allow us to return to what we have always known: the unlimited is always a product of the limited, and vice versa.

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\(^{133}\) Ibid., 126.
Concluding Remarks on Insides and Outsides

Like Lyotard, and Kant before him, much of what I discuss in this thesis has constantly eluded my grasp. My ultimate challenge in trying to write about *Opera* and *Killing* has been that, in attempting to put forth a presentation of the sublime as present/presence that does not adhere to the tenants of either a modern or postmodern sublime, the *now* has ultimately confronted reason with its limitations: language. As Lyotard himself states, “Language is simply the most complex form of the (living and dead) ‘memories’ that regulate all living things and make them technical objects better adjusted to their surroundings.”\(^{134}\) Although we might valiantly try, language is something that is difficult to forget; for it persists in the simplest of places. Perhaps, however, forgetting language entirely is not the point that the sublime makes. At this point I would like to refer back to a passage from *The Inhuman* quoted in the first chapter: “I am not making this hypothesis about development my own, because it is a way, the way, for metaphysics, henceforth ruled out for thinking, to re-establish its rights over it. To re-establish them not within thinking (if I make an expectation of the thinking that still calls itself philosophical, which is to say metaphysical), but from the outside of thinking.”\(^{135}\) As was argued in this earlier chapter, and throughout the subsequent chapters, the sublime is simultaneously both within and outside experience as it both relies on and rejects normative structures: the failure of both the imagination and reason, or the function of the sublime as beyond reason, means that it is always followed by a higher form of recuperation. Thus, although the sublime is incomprehensible or unpresentable, something must happen, something must occur to announce that everything is not over. So the sublime is not just outside of language, it is also within.

This last point opens up Lyotard’s discussion of metaphysics in the above passage, which is of interest here in our consideration of the vocabulary of *inside* and *outside*. While the use of these terms seemingly negates the argument regarding the despatialization of time that I have put forth in this thesis (they are of course spatial

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\(^{134}\) Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 13.

\(^{135}\) Ibid., 6.
metaphors), this terminology highlights two necessary points: 1) the sublime both rejects and relies on normative modes including language, thus it both rejects and relies on the spatialization of time; and 2) perhaps the more important point for our overall investigation: the vocabulary inside and outside relates to the question of metaphysics from Lyotard’s passage and underlies the very nature of my investigation. As outlined in the first chapter, the question central to my investigation here has been: How do artists present the unpresentable when presentation itself is impossible? This question has been answered historically in a variety of ways but most commonly, and in the Kantian context, the solution has been to separate the noumenal realm from the phenomenal. However, my investigation here, unlike Lyotard’s before me, attempts to get away from this distinction by asking how one can put forth the unpresentable in presentation itself without solving it by relying on something outside of the physical. I argue that the sublime answers this question by being both within and outside.

Reading Cardiff and Miller’s works The Killing Machine and Opera for a Small Room as spaces without memory enables us to rethink the question of the sublime in terms of time, or present/presence, rather than spatiality. Thus, the sublime lies both inside and outside—meaning it is not a question of space but one of time. As Trifonova argues: “The attempt to redeem time from its subordination to space by traditional metaphysics is not the end of metaphysics but the beginning of a new kind of metaphysics, the metaphysics of immanence.”¹³⁶ I would argue that Trifonova’s argument regarding time, and the re-opening of a new kind of metaphysics of immanence is perhaps even more complicated. The sublime exists both within and outside and neither because “time seems to be always already beyond the limits of comprehension and imagination: it is not even limited by the very category of ‘limit’ (itself a spatial category).”¹³⁷ Trifonova uses Lyotard’s diction of the “limit” here, which as she points out is also a spatial metaphor. As Opera and Killing aptly show us, our ability to suspend these metaphors, to go beyond structures of thought, can only persist for mere moments of time.

¹³⁶ Trifonova, The Image in French Philosophy, 261.
¹³⁷ Ibid., 262.
What this investigation invites in terms of art historical potential, is of the utmost importance, especially for artists like Cardiff and Miller whose work deals with these very questions. My secondary objective in writing this thesis has been to show that the inquiry into issues of representation is one that has not yet ended. Historically, the sublime has been used as a placeholder for that which is not given within experience. The primacy of the sublime has not changed but it takes a different shape in the contemporary context with artworks like Cardiff and Miller’s. Works such as *Opera* and *Killing*, with their dynamic focus on the present, demonstrate the significance of the sublime. This reworking of Lyotard’s sublime highlights the notion that, “Lyotard’s sublime, as objectivist as it claims to be, rests on the premise that one can eclipse signification (the work of art should not signify or represent) by signifying existence as such (the work is sublime in the sense that it just ‘is’ and it also allows us to ‘be’).”

*Opera* and *Killing* invite us to rethink the sublime as a space without memory precisely because, in bringing us into the present/presence, these works allow us to become matter, to be matter without memory. In so doing, they provide a means for us to understand that in order to enter the pre-cognitive and the pre-subjective we don’t need to forget, we simply need to acknowledge that there was never anything there in the first place.

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138 Ibid., 263.


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# Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Margherita Papadatos  
**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:**  
York University  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
2006-2011 B.F.A.  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2012-2014 M.A.  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2014-2018 Ph.D.  

**Honours and Awards:**  
Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2013-2014  

**Related Work Experience:**  
Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2012-2014  

**Conferences:**  
"Between Abstraction and Banality: Affectively Witnessing Threads," Fail Again, Fake Better,  
York University Graduate Symposium  
March 2014