THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE
CONCEPTUALISING ABSENCE IN THE CITY THROUGH
CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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CONCEPTUALISING ABSENCE IN THE CITY THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

ELIZABETH WALLACE
This project is dedicated to
my brother, Ian Wallace (1972-2011) and my father, Bill Wallace (1942-2014).
DECLARATION

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

ELIZABETH WALLACE
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Master of Research in Creative Practices
(1st Cl) Glasgow School of Art

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ABSTRACT

This practice-led research project investigates sites of absence in three cities: New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China). The ‘presence of absence’ is examined in these sites by means of the overarching philosophical and organizational framework ‘deconstruction’, as articulated by Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction as a methodology and approach offers a way of displacing the conceptualization and representation of a city through ‘presence’. Presence manifests in two distinct ways: firstly, through focusing on the physical structures or objects, content, systems or rituals informing and constituting the dominant discourses in each city; secondly a privileging of the ocular over other senses both when experiencing, and subsequently representing, each city. By focusing on absence as the research site, this project problematizes the dominant discourses and ways of conceptualizing urban space. Fieldwork in each city identifies sites of absence, which are then investigated through art practice. Both the fieldwork and practice employ haptic methods to access a broader multi-sensory experience of the urban environment.

The identification of absences is achieved through a medical process of biopsy, a procedural method that structures the fieldwork in each city. The biopsy method of extracting data, conceptually and materially, has enabled a consideration of the city ‘as body’: this, in turn, enables the foregrounding of an embodied experience of each city. It also creates a connection with the selected haptic method of walking the city. The project employs the haptic methods and the procedural biopsy specifically to intervene in normative ways of investigating and perceiving a city.

In this research, the fieldwork has revealed a diversity of absences identified through the biopsies of, for example, death, air quality, gender, minority groups, ritual, pilgrimage, mapping, transient structures and historical uses of site. In the resulting artworks, new understandings of absence are highlighted through the examination of power dynamics, social exclusion, cultural rituals, haptic qualities of landscape, and the role and materiality of everyday structures and objects. Through the process of making and exhibiting these artworks, and through an investigation of absence as both subject and site, the research offers new knowledge and understandings of absence in and of each city.

Keywords
absence, art, city, biopsy, haptic, deconstruction
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This practice-led research project investigates sites of absence in three cities: New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China). The aim of the research is to understand how, through contemporary art practice, new perceptions and understandings of absence could be identified and investigated in each city. With the intention of intervening in normative ways of conceptualising and representing each city, absences are identified in fieldwork through the embodied method of walking and investigated in studio practice with consideration of the multisensory, rather than purely ocular encounter, which I have termed the haptic. Through the application of philosopher Jacques Derrida’s ideas of deconstruction, the process of making and exhibiting these artworks, and the investigation of absence as both subject and site, the research offers new knowledge and understandings of absence in and of each city.

1.1  Background / Context
The following section introduces the research by briefly describing the origination of the project focus arising from personal travel experience and previous postgraduate research.

1.1.1  Previous Experience and Research
My PhD journey could be said to have started almost fifteen years ago, after a particular travel experience that, despite lasting all of 20 minutes, made a lasting impression. In 2001 I travelled to India with a female friend for a three-month holiday, starting in Mumbai. A few days after acclimatizing to the intense crowds and unfamiliar environs of tourist areas we were eager to broaden our experience of the city and headed to the crowded bazaar. With no set route, taking confidence from the fact that we were in close proximity to a main road that connected directly to
particularly when it had such capacity to be responsive to current social concerns and in most of urban spaces. Within the framework of a design honours project, I undertook research into it was this observation that initiated my interest in the impermanent and often overlooked details at all at that site had permanently changed the value of that site. My subjective perception of these days or in some cases a few hours to exist only in memory. However, the fact that they had existed within minutes. Even before my brain and eyes registered this change, my body had sensed it. Their sudden absence had altered the structure of the space to such an extent that I no longer felt safe. What was absent appeared to be a defining structural aspect of that environment and it had been identified through the body. However the relevance of this experience was not evident until five or so years later with the identification of a second type of absence in the city. I had always been interested in public art, particularly its capacity to change the dynamic of urban sites by challenging normative conditions. During a six month backpacking trip starting in Asia, through Europe and to South America it was the temporary artistic interventions in particular – either sanctioned or unsanctioned – that were most memorable and affective. They seemed to be more unusual and/or unique than permanent public artworks in both location and content. They were often subversive, employing less traditional public art methods such as spray-paint, fly-posters, performance and projections. Arguably such content and method came from operating outside a conventional commissioning process. Many of these works were located in what might be termed ‘marginal’ locations such as car parks, underpasses, vacant blocks of land, junctions between buildings and laneways of inner city Glasgow. I identified these spaces by walking the city and investigating each of them in and through art practice, ‘making visible’ seven voids in the city for contemplation. Drawing on the theories of Henri Lefebvre (1974), Marc Augé (1995) and Nicholas Bourriaud (1998), I was able to articulate a vision of the city where the methods of documentation and exhibition reflected the physical, perceptual and social relations observed onsite. These qualities permitted space between the physical and perceptual comprehension of the artwork and supplied the requisite gaps for the viewer to interpret and fill with significance: to imagine a particular ‘city-ness’ that was grounded in their personal experience. Through this practice-led research I recognised that there was more to discover. Questions arose, such as, other than physical voids, what other types of absence might manifest in a city environment? How might engaging with these sites through studio practice build new knowledge of a city? What might be revealed if I looked at multiple cities and multiple absences and undertook research with consideration of the multisensory urban encounter?

1.1.2 Current Research
Many conceptualizations and representations of the contemporary city are through ‘presence’. Presence manifests in two distinct ways: firstly, through focusing on the physical structures or objects, content, systems or rituals informing and constituting the dominant discourses in each city; secondly a privileging of the ocular over other senses both when experiencing, and subsequently representing, each city. Jacques Derrida argues that presence is impossible without absence; each defines the other making the other comprehensible (Derrida 1967). Articulating...
a deconstructive approach to analysing a text, Derrida comprehends absence as basic to the functioning of linguistic signs. No ‘thing’ ever exists in isolation but is part of a complex network of signs, in which each is defined by what it is not. Absence has been proposed as a structuring principle of urban space where it has a functional and, perhaps, even redemptive role (Shusterman 1997). However few artists have investigated absence in urban space beyond the physical or pictorial void.

There is an increasing attachment, both literally and culturally, to devices that ‘extend our range of vision’ (Jay 1993, p. 5) and cities are documented, represented and circulated through predominantly ocular means. The rise of technology, the circulation of imagery and the dominance of photography to depict the modern city, particularly through tourist imagery, is a contributing and on-going factor sustaining this dominance. Historically artists have played a key role in making meaning of the urban environment by describing, representing, imagining, evaluating, negotiating or ordering the metropolitan landscape through art practice. This engagement with the city continues through contemporary art practice, generating work of either a temporary or permanent nature, in a wide range of media that is exhibited in galleries, and also practiced in public spaces and other urban sites.

However, the majority of artworks in the history of Western art that represent urban space tend to the ocular, conceptualising the city through presence. For example paintings and photography represent major landmarks, streetscapes, the built environment, panoramas or aerial views with social or historical content. Large-scale panoramas and aerial photography in particular, have proved popular with modern and contemporary artists as method of capturing the scale, density and spectacle of the city. These representations contribute significantly in shaping the perception of particular cities, and urban space generally, as visual spectacles. These methods have their limitations in so far as they communicate only one aspect of the city – presence, and one sensory quality – sight. This outcome minimises both the contribution of absence as a structuring principle of city space and the multisensory aspects of the urban encounter. Geographer John Rennie Short writes, ‘Things not spoken about, images not presented and discourses not raised are as much a part of urban reimagining as the images and debates actively promoted’ (Rennie Short 2004, p. 85). This suggests that, though both absence and the multisensory encounter shape urban space, they are marginalised in the discourse of urban representations generated through contemporary art and are, therefore, under explored in art practice.

Cities are constantly evolving and government, urban planners and architects draw on single sense focused typologies for models of development and quality benchmarking. This reliance on and shaping of our cities through a predominantly ocular, rather than multisensory approach, has been suggested as the cause of social detachment and isolation (Pallasmaa 2005) and a reason for ‘the dullness, the monotony, and the tactile sterility which afflicts the urban environment’ (Sennett 1994). It has been argued by a number of architects, geographers, anthropologists and ethnographers that a sensorial, rather than a purely visual mediation of the city, provides a different way of talking about, describing and planning our cities (Zardini 2005). Such an approach
increases our understanding of the physical and built environment (Howes 2005) and helps us understand other people and the way they live (Pink 2009).

In the past decade, there has been a ‘sensory turn’ in humanities and social sciences (Howes 2003). This is reflected in, and to some extent driven by, texts such as Richard Sennett’s *Flesh and Stone. The Body and the City in Western Civilisation* (1994) that responded to an ocular bias in existing literature on the urban. Texts by Porteous (1990), Classen (1993), Tuan (1994), Rodaway (1994), Urry (2000), Howes, (2005) and Corbin (2005) each communicates and contributes to a greater sensory awareness and understanding of the city experience. Each author considers in depth the role and impact of the senses in the city’s development through a variety of disciplinary frameworks such as urban theory, geography, anthropology, architecture and history.

Geographer Paul Rodaway writes, ‘The body is an essential part of sensuous experience…our primary tool for movement and exploration of the human environment. Geographical experience is fundamentally mediated by the human body, it begins and ends with the body’ (Rodaway 1994, p. 31). He argues ‘paying too much attention to the identification of distinct senses can lead us to overlook the important inter-relationships between the senses and the multi-sensual nature of geographical experiences’ (Rodaway 2004, p. 25). This suggests that, not only are there aspects of the city experience being overlooked in the discourse, but the aspects that are being considered are skewed towards a single sense perpetuating a one dimensional, over simplified perception of the city.

Jacques Derrida was unwilling to reject the ocular outright. He fought against any hierarchy of the senses seeking instead to explore their interdependence (Jay 1993, p. 1994). Building on the view, based on medical evidence, of anthropologist Ashley Montagu, Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, author of *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture of the Senses* (2005) argues, ‘All the senses, including vision, are extensions of the tactile sense; the senses are specializations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching and thus related to tactility’ (Pallasmaa 2005, p. 10). This ‘whole body’ engagement is therefore essential to, and inseparable from, how we perceive urban space. This suggests that there are sensory aspects of the urban encounter that remain under explored and which might offer new territory for consideration through art practice.

Jacques Derrida writes that a deconstructive reading of the (city) text, which involves focusing on the marginal or supplementary term, both disrupts normative ways of comprehending said text and ‘makes visible’ forces already at play (but not often discussed) in shaping that text (Derrida 1967). Through a deconstructive reading we can know more about the text and the forces that shape it; in this research, these texts are absence and the multisensory encounter.

There is a history of artists investigating absence in Conceptual art such as Man Ray (1890-1976), Yves Klein (1928-1962) and John Cage (1912-1992) and in Land art, such as Michael Heizer (b.1944), Contemporary artists such as Rachel Whiteread (b.1963) and Christo (b.1935) and...
Jeanne Claude (1935-2009) have intervened in urban environments activating absence, casting and wrapping buildings respectively, to reveal qualities of place. However, the majority of artists do not engage with absences identified in cities nor do they approach absence as supplement to presence. Rather, they explore absence as a conceptual or philosophical notion embedded and/or implicated in the making, viewing and exhibition of artworks.

Though absence in the city is not their thematic focus, many artists investigate the urban in multisensory ways. For example, the city interventions of Francis Alÿs (b.1959), in the cities of Mexico, London and Copenhagen, the audio walks of Janet Cardiff (b.1957) in Sydney, New York, and Chicago and the ‘Bodily Configurations Series’ (1972-1982) by artist Valie Export (b.1940). These three artists, of the many to be discussed throughout this research, engage in a ‘whole body’, site specific art practice in urban space.

Art practice, with its capacity to exceed the limitations of the image, provides an opportunity to generate new perceptions and understandings of urban space. Many artists have investigated absence in and through art practice and others the multisensory qualities of the city, however, few have meditated the city experience through an art practice that focuses specifically on absence in the city through haptic methods. Employing Derrida’s deconstructive approach to frame such an investigation provides the means to disrupt entrenched ways of investigating and representing the city through presence and predominantly ocular means.

A deconstructive approach establishes the marginal term – absence – as the primary criteria for the identification and selection of city sites suitable for such research. It also indicates in addition to, or instead of, dominant or high profile cities in the contemporary art discourse, the selection of an under-explored city might offer something new to the field.

The terms ‘haptic methods’ and ‘multisensory’ are quite broad, therefore, the research employs an overarching method from medicine to foreground the body in the investigation process. Through the literature review, my early research indicated that the interplay of absence and presence in the urban environment was interwoven with urban planning concepts of the city as living organism and the urbanist as ‘doctor’ (Shusterman 1997; Boyer 1994; Periton 2006). The role of the human body in the spatial formation of the city and the analogy of ‘city as living body’ has been an important component in both Western and Eastern philosophies of urban space. In urban theory, the city has been described as a ‘living’ city, a condition in flux, and often analogies with the human body are adopted to explain its particular qualities (Porteous 1990; Sennett 1996; Highmore 2005; Kostof 1999). As this research employs an overarching deconstructive framework, the application of a method from another discipline, in this case medicine, again suggested a way to intervene in entrenched ways of investigating the city. Creative practitioners have often initiated interdisciplinary practices in an effort to introduce an alternative framework from within which to analyse particular issues. Therefore the medical process of biopsy was selected as a method to foreground the body and the embodied encounter of each city throughout the research process.

1.2 Research questions
The three main questions underpinning this PhD research are:

In what ways does absence manifest in the cities of New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China)?

In what ways can contemporary art practice investigate these identified absences to generate new perceptions of absence in each city?

Drawing from haptic encounters in the city and engaging with methodological metaphor of biopsy, how can this research identify new understandings of absence in urban space?
1.3 Rationale for selection of three cities

The focus and fieldwork of the research is based in three selected cities: New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China). Prior to site visits, absence was perceived as an absence of physical mass (New York), absence linked to ritual and belief (Varanasi) and absence as on-going process both physical and cultural (Shanghai). Based on previous travel experience and exposure to various media representing each city, this perception of absence in each supplied the basic criteria for their selection. However, the process of criteria setting, elimination and selection took many months.

The first site selected is within Manhattan - one of the five boroughs in the city of New York. An island with streets laid out to a grid design, Manhattan has a population of approximately 1.62 million (New York City 8.4 million in 2013, NYC Planning) and is a cultural and economic hub of North America. This site in Lower Manhattan was selected because it contains a now infamous site of absence, the so-called ‘Ground Zero’, the site of the collapsed World Trade Towers. The 9/11 memorial, named ‘Reflecting Absence’, appeared to encapsulate the paradox at the centre of my research: that something can be a dominant presence, despite being physically and visually absent.

Located in the north east of the world’s largest democracy and on the banks of the River Ganges, Varanasi, population estimated at 1.2 million in 2011 (Singh 2012, p. 3), is a sacred Hindu pilgrimage site, an auspicious place. Hindus come from all over India to die there. It is estimated that every year anywhere between 30000 (Singh 2002) to 90000 corpses, up to 250 per day (Fernandez 2010, p. 22), are cremated at the burning ghats, or stairs, on the banks of the river. From a Western, non-Hindu perspective, death was identified as an initial absence. Death can be understood as supplement to life and Varanasi is a city that celebrates death, which is for many non-Hindus the definitive absence.

A city of spectacle, Shanghai has undergone ‘accelerated urbanisation’ in the past 30 years, particularly since joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001. This is evidenced in ‘the expansion of Shanghai’s city scale, changes in population structure, improvements in the urban environment, and pronounced progress in municipal administration’ (Wu 2008). It is the fastest growing city in the People’s Republic of China and is home to a population of over 23 million at present (Chubarov 2013, p.185). It is also the economic and trading hub of one of the world’s fastest-growing economies (BBC News, December 2014). This growth fuels the constant demolition and construction of the physical structures of the city. The material presence in architecture is based on absence, evidenced in the trace of the demolished historical buildings, relocation of communities and construction of new buildings by the unregistered workers. Shanghai is geopolitically positioned between historical and spiritual Varanasi and iconic New York, redefining itself on a daily basis through its rapid urban development. Rennie Short explains

2 Varanasi is an ancient name. In both Muslim and British India, the city was ‘Benares’, but in independent India, Varanasi has been revived as the official name of the city (Eck 1999, p. 26).
Globalisation involves the creation of a global system of signs and meanings. One of the most recognizable global languages is architecture, a commercial art form that turns visions into concrete realities and solidifies messages of power and prestige (Rennie Short 2004, p. 73). Throughout the expansion in Shanghai, the Chinese have looked towards the west for architectural archetypes, while remaining conscious of expressing their own cultural traditions, as well as their economic and political strength, through the built environment. In this, Shanghai can be defined as a ‘liminal city’ – a city engaged in a transitional or initial stage of a process.1

Significantly, my ‘home’ city of Melbourne was not included. I needed to be a ‘stranger’ in each to ensure equal ‘newness’ in each city. In his painting practice, German artist Franz Ackermann ‘seeks the foreign experience - the rush of disorientation - of cities he’s unacquainted with in order to map his response to them’ (Moreno 2000). In this research, ‘newness’ offers that same rush of disorientation, a displacement of the familiar with the unfamiliar, as a way to destabilise entrenched ways of perceiving each urban site. However, my tourist/foreigner status raised further issues that are discussed later in this document and in fact contributed to the identification of another type of absence: that which occurs across time, through the journey itself. As more artists travel the globe making artwork in response to site, this absence-presence exchange became increasingly pertinent to the research.

1.4 Research methodology

This project problematizes the dominant discourses and ways of conceptualizing urban space by employing haptic methods firstly to identify sites of absence in the city through walking and secondly, to investigate these absences through art practice. ‘The paradox of the presence of absence’ has required an overarching philosophical and organizational framework. Deconstruction, as articulated by Derrida, assists in understanding the philosophical principles of the presence-absence equation. Derrida employed a series of radical critiques on the epistemology of presence. That is, on the belief that in Western epistemology meaning is found primarily in the presence of sign or signifier (word or image) in the symbolic system of knowledge. Derrida shows that presence is never present to itself as it already contains traces of other signs and is in constant deferral to the sign of absence as its supplement.

3 Chubarov and Brookes observe that much of the Chinese language ‘global city’ research generally rejects the Western-centric views of a ‘global city’ hierarchy but does draw upon Western theorisations to try to understand the Chinese context. Lin (2004) argues that much of this literature has been preoccupied with how Chinese cities can restructure and upgrade to join the elite hierarchy of global cities. A great deal of energy has been spent by researchers to analyse how Chinese cities can further globalize to elevate them to the level of London, New York and Tokyo (Chubarov 2013, p. 183).

4 The Oxford Dictionary defines liminal as ‘Characterized by being on a boundary or threshold, esp. by being transitional or intermediate between two states, situations, etc.’
The primary focus of this research is how absence manifests in each of the three selected cities. A deconstructive methodology draws out the play of difference in the sign. Therefore, a study focused on the supplement, absence/haptic, is not to the exclusion of presence/sight, because a supplement necessarily needs the dominant ‘other’ for existence. Though drawing from haptic encounters, this research is not concerned with conceptualizing each city through ‘tactile’ art, nor about an art practice that is limited to the sense of touch to the exclusion of other senses. Rather this research engages with the senses in a way that ‘takes into consideration the full spectrum of perceptual phenomena that make up the sensorial dimension beyond the realm of the visual (Zardini 2005, p. 19). I am not ‘hostile to vision’ or ‘visual primacy’ (Jay 1993, p. 14), nor do I intend to ‘put the body against the eye’ (Jay 1993, p. 161). As such, I am not concerned with eradicating sight entirely (though this is a Derridean impossibility) from this research. Nor am I narrowing the focus to individual senses, as this would not only not reflect the multisensory (though ocular dominated) way humans experience the city, it would also involve creating a hierarchy, the very thing this research is seeking to destabilise. If the main focus of the research was the sensory city, then perhaps this might be an appropriate direction to take. However, to limit the study of absence in each city through a single sense before I even know why, what or how absence manifests in each city, would be a propositional position altogether too limiting. Instead I employ the term ‘haptic’ to allow for the interdependence of the senses to reveal absences within each site throughout the research.

1.5 Research methods

This PhD research is undertaken through two key methods: investigative fieldwork in each city and studio-based practice. Each is realized through the medical process of biopsy and haptic methods.

1.5.1 Biopsy

A biopsy, as defined in this study, can be considered an extraction of data, conceptually and materially, from the living city. The method creates a strong connection with the selected haptic method of walking the city in fieldwork and the emphasis on multi-sensory engagement within the artworks, as an embodiment and manifestation of the key concepts and themes under enquiry. The biopsy process required the articulation of an area under investigation on the body (the city), the extraction of a ‘sample’ for further investigation, the examination and evaluation of said sample ‘under a microscope’ in the studio, and the drawing of a conclusion from knowledge gleaned not only from the sample, but also from an analysis of the surrounding body. The ‘biopsies of absence’ obtained during these walks are diverse in nature: they consist of either physical samples obtained at the site or conditions of site recorded through photography, video, audio or textual observations recorded via journal entries. To challenge the ocularcentric dominance, the ‘modern western five-sense sensorium’ (Pink 2009, p. 126), touch, hearing, taste, smell as well as sight informed biopsy content. In this research, the content of the biopsies of absence are not limited to the physical or pictorial, but are those that address qualities of the social, political, historical and imagined city identified through the haptic encounter.

I am not pathologising the city by identifying areas of ‘sickness’ or ‘disease’, but (metaphorically) applying this medical procedure to facilitate an investigation that identifies and analyses absence in the city. The literal application of a medical method in art practice is not the focus of the research and, therefore, the aesthetic and tools of medicine are not incorporated into the studio work.

1.5.2 Haptic, walking and the body

The dictionary definition of haptic reads, ‘relating to the sense of touch, in particular relating to the perception and manipulation of objects using the senses of touch and proprioception’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2010). In this research, I adopt a broader definition beyond that of haptic as only ‘skin contact’ or ‘cutaneous touch’ and reference definitions articulated by Pallasmaa, as noted earlier, and Paul Rodaway. In his text, Sensuous Geographies. Body, Sense and Place (2004) Rodaway considers the haptic a whole body engagement with site, through which both body and site are affected (Rodaway 2004, p. 42).

Walking is a haptic method; it is active, locomotive, embodied and quite literally ‘in touch’ with the city. Walking is an ‘everyday practice’ that produces the city (De Certeau 1984). The very nature of walking as a practice of whole body engagement became seminal in problematising the dominant ocular approach to representing the city and became the primary method of mapping sites of absence and gathering data in each city. Walking, a method borrowed from ethnography, emerged as an integral part of artistic practice in Surrealist wanderings (1920s) and the Situationist dérive (1950s and 1960s). This embodied experience has proved a rich resource for contemporary artists because it provides new ways of perceptually accessing conditions of site and in turn shaping place through art practice.

In ethnographic practice, an ethnographer’s or researcher’s experience of walking a site with participants provides an immersive experience of place. A greater understanding of both site, and research participants, is achieved through this embodied awareness (Pink 2009, p. 151). Though this PhD research is not intended as an ethnographic study, the method of walking in each city places the researcher in direct contact with both site and ‘city bodies’. My Western sensory and cultural background, gender and foreign / tourist status has therefore had a significant impact on how, where and when I walked each site and, in turn, what I perceive as ‘absence’ as an embodied experience.
Fig. 7  New York, Varanasi & Shanghai
Fig. 8  New York, Varanasi & Shanghai
1.5.3 Fieldwork and Studio Practice

In order to identify sites of absence in urban space, I travelled to New York in October 2011, to Varanasi in March/April 2012, and to Shanghai in April/May 2012 and August 2014. On the first day in each city, I demarcated the approximate 1km radius focus area to be walked and where the biopsies were to be gathered, on the ‘city body’. Over the following 12 days a diversity of ‘biopsies of absence’ were identified by walking each site and considering the city through Derrida’s concepts of supplement and trace. I processed these ‘biopsies of absence’ through haptic, practice-led investigations using the methods of video, sound recordings, photography, drawing and sculptural installation. The artworks employ a variety of media to investigate a diversity of absences revealed through haptic encounters in each city. The aim of employing this deconstructive methodology and these haptic methods is to intervene in normative ways of representing each city and through doing so generate new perceptions of each city in artworks.

1.6 Research outcomes

In addition to the main research outcome – a body of artworks exploring absence in each city – the deconstructive methodology offered a new investigative approach in art practice, through focus on marginal aspects of each city not often investigated by artists. For example, trace on the surfaces of the city, quotidian buildings and objects and ephemeral qualities of site have been minimized in the discourse to date but are considered in this research.

A deconstructive methodology also determined the selection of cities and the application of the medical process of biopsy within a practice-led research project. As a result, research was undertaken in three cities not often related and an alternative procedural process informed the gathering of data. Both approaches disrupt normative ways of identifying content for artwork. Through fieldwork, this attention to the overlooked, deemphasized or suppressed aspects in three diverse cities, revealed a diversity of sites of absence offering new content/subject matter to the discourse and to art practice that investigates the urban. The range of these absences extended the perception of what constitutes absence in urban space because, in addition to physical voids, they included absences such as death, air quality, gender, minority groups, ritual, pilgrimage, mapping, skylines, surveillance, transient structures and historical uses of site. Through the process of making and exhibiting artworks, new understandings of absence in the city are highlighted. This occurred through the examination of power dynamics, social exclusion, cultural rituals, haptic qualities of landscape, and the role and materiality of everyday structures and objects. These were revealed in the research process through engagement with materials and installation, through focus on the performative gesture and locomotive body, and through methods emergent from the embodied experience of site.

1.7 Exegesis outline

In Thinking Through Practice (2007) Lesley Duxbury and Elizabeth Grierson observe ‘All artists have reasons for the ways they go about their practice but the artist-researcher is a conscious practitioner who sets out to realise an objective that has been defined in accordance with the question to be answered, for as with all research, the research question is central to the creative project’ (Duxbury & Grierson 2007, p. 11). So, with the three aforementioned questions in my backpack I set out on my PhD journey and the following exegesis and Appropriate Durable Record (ADR) contextualises this journey. In some respect this documentation can be considered a guidebook to the terrain I navigated, both theoretical and practical. The research is presented from its origination, through fieldwork and studio investigations, navigating to the public exhibition as a demonstrable conclusion.

This first chapter provides an introduction to the research, briefly describing the origination of the project focus arising from previous postgraduate research and personal travel experience. I then outline the gap in the current research that informed the three research questions, and the methodology and methods for both fieldwork and studio. Each of the selected cities is introduced, the first three biopsies of absence identified in each city prior to undertaking fieldwork are noted and I provide a brief outline of the research outcomes.

The second chapter draws on Derrida’s practice of deconstruction to firstly locate and then intervene in presence as the dominant way of looking at the world. Derrida’s concepts of difference, supplement and trace, methods drawn from deconstruction, provide both a theoretical framework and reference point for my studio work. I briefly outline other artists who mediate the multisensory city through their art practice. In order to understand what types of absence have already been defined and investigated in the field and to locate my own research, I review how different types of absence have been explored in contemporary art as a broad field. I then focus specifically on creative practices that feature the cities of New York, Varanasi and Shanghai. Chapter Three outlines my experience and skills as an artist and designer and demonstrates how these have informed the research and shaped the studio practice process and outcomes. I provide further detail on the methodology of biopsy, its relevance and functional application within the research. I then outline walking as a method, and haptic methods particular to art practice, to explain their appropriateness in addressing the three research questions.
In Chapter Four, I outline how the fieldwork was undertaken and documented. This includes how data was gathered through the action of biopsy and walking each city. A total of thirty ‘biopsies of absence’ were gathered, ten from each city. I present the primary source material gathered and review biopsies of absence identified during these walks.

In Chapter Five, I describe the studio-based experimentations and investigations of the biopsies, explaining how aspects of the city were revealed, and how this process suggested new directions for exploration in studio work. I chart the creative idea development, documenting the progression of the research through the various stages of practice-based experimentation and investigation.

Chapter Six, the final stage of the process outlines the curation strategy for the exhibition in the School of Art Gallery at RMIT University, Melbourne, and summarises the final outcomes of the research demonstrated through a series of artworks. This exhibition is accompanied by this dissertation document, which includes a visual record of the research.

In the final chapter I reflect on each of the three research questions, outlining the key findings from each stage of the research process. I consider how the practical outcomes of both fieldwork and studio practice have provided and provoked new ways of experiencing the urban condition and I demonstrate how the research has revealed new understandings of absence in the urban environment.

The accompanying Appropriate Durable Record (ADR) contains select documentation of the research in visual format. It may be read in conjunction with the exegesis, or as a standalone document that provides further detail on the artworks in the exegesis and information on the making process.
Moulding clay into a vessel, we find the utility in its hollowness; Cutting doors and windows for a house, we find the utility in its empty space. Therefore the being of things is profitable, the non-being of things is serviceable. 

(Lao-tzu in Chang 1956, p. 7)

We do not think right away of the distances that separate objects from one another. For space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning. The perception of gaps itself brings the whole body into play. 

(Lefebvre 1991, p. 154)

The aim of this Chapter is to establish deconstruction as the methodology and theoretical framework of the project and then position the research subject of ‘absence in the city’ in the field of contemporary art. Firstly, I outline Jacques Derrida’s strategy of deconstruction to establish an existing Western way of perceiving the world through (primary, fundamental) ‘presence’ and to provide a conceptual way of examining or intervening in those dominant perceptions. To establish the gap in the field, I provide examples of absence as both subject and creative device in contemporary art practice. I briefly outline the ‘sensory turn’ in humanities and social sciences and demonstrate how haptic methods have been utilised by artists to investigate and conceptualise the urban environment. Then, to locate my own (deconstructive) practice within discourses of representation of each city, I briefly review how, and through what methods, New York, Varanasi and Shanghai have been conceptualized within the fields of art, design, cartography and film.
2.1 Absence

2.1.1 Absence as structuring knowledge


utilization is a very difficult, elusive concept with a very long and complex philosophical history. Even its etymology (ab-esse—‘away from being’) reveals its link to the ancient philosophical puzzle of nonbeing, the paradoxical nature of ‘things’ that don’t exist or simply fail to be ‘here and now’ (that is, present). Yet absence has also been regarded as something at the core of all being, as the crucial ground for whatever exists or is present (Shusterman 1997).

In his essay, Shusterman considers absence, ‘its complex variety of forms and functions in the more limited context of the city’ (Shusterman 1997). Similarly, in this research project my consideration of absence is limited to the context of three cities. As an overarching philosophical and organisational framework, this research employs a deconstructive approach informed by Jacques Derrida to both fieldwork and studio practice to challenge the dominance in art practice of conceptualising a city through ‘presence’. The ‘main target’ of deconstruction is the ‘metaphysics of presence…Metaphysics creates dualistic oppositions and installs a hierarchy that unfortunately privileges one term of each dichotomy (presence before absence, speech before writing, and so on)’ (Reynolds n.d.).

Absences identified in each city are already, and always, ‘at play’ in their traces of difference or their ‘differential interrelations with other elements … what anything is, is essentially a function of what it is not’ (Shusterman 1992, p. 71). Derrida writes:

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around (Derrida 1967, p. 369).

In this research, the play of presence and absence through which understanding is formed, both in our experience of the city and in art practice that conceptualises the city, is the ‘text’ to be deconstructed. A deconstructive strategy ‘…seeks to expose, and then subvert the various binary oppositions that undergird our dominant ways of thinking - presence/absence, speech writing…’ (Reynolds n.d.). It aims to ‘unmask these too-sedimented ways of thinking and it operates on them especially through two steps - reversing dichotomies and attempting to corrupt the dichotomies themselves’ (Reynolds n.d).

Applying a deconstructive approach in fieldwork involves challenging or destabilising the dominant approach of privileging presence (that which is visible) when walking the city. Instead of focusing on objects present to sight, the aim is to seek out ‘absence’ as a conditional site of (dis)appearance. This requires being sensorially aware and open to any ‘thing’, ‘state’, ‘experience’ or ‘concept’ that might be open to consideration as an absence. Derrida speaks of a deconstructive reading of the text where the structure can be ‘methodically threatened in order to be comprehended more clearly…’ (Derrida, 1967, p. 4). This operation is termed soliciting, a shaking related to the whole. In Jacques Derrida (2003) Nicholas Royle extends the metaphor, ‘The earthquake can show up in the smallest crack, the slightest tremor. Deconstruction involves a seismological attentiveness to the tiniest details. It happens in relation to a specific context, even if the crack or fissure detected opens up a far more general effect’ (Royle 2003, p. 25). Identifying biopsies of absence in each city is similar because it involves identifying details and traces (or supplements, absence as supplement to presence) with a view to opening new ways of thinking about each city. An intervention such as this offers the potential of unsettling or ‘shaking’ the dominant ways of thinking about each city.

Applying deconstructive strategies in art practice has necessitated a way of focusing on the marginal term of absence as both subject and device. Such an approach posed a specific challenge. How does one inscribe absence without merely presenting it? (Celant 1997. p. 13). Regarding Derrida’s deconstructive process, Christopher Norris writes:

For the fact that certain terms may be absent yet present - inscribed through a different, ‘supplementary’ order of necessity - requires that one look beyond the lexical system to the various ‘sub-units’ (the phonemes or minimal distinctive components of meaning) that enter the chain of substitutions (Norris 1987, p. 44).

In order to address the paradox of presenting absence, my research looks to the supplement and draws on Derrida’s concepts of difference and trace, both integral to his overarching approach of deconstruction. Derrida comprehends absence as basic to the functioning of linguistic signs. He derives his understanding from Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiotics, where meaning is derived from difference between signs rather than from a binary relationship between signifier and signified.

Difference is the continuous deferral of any full presence due to the infinite play of differences in which a sign engages. Coined by Derrida, the word difference is a combination of verbs meaning to differ and to defer. The sign both differs from and defers to an opposite and is therefore inseparable from it. There are no borders in this intertextual movement. In the process of differening and deferring meaning is never fixed or final, it changes and shifts with context, usage and historical circumstances (Hall 1997, p. 9). Derrida’s theory of trace, a ‘double gesture of erasure and inscription’ in the sign, posits that the manifestation of presence is a differential movement and presence is not possible apart from absence (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014). Conversely, the manifestation of absence is a differential movement and is not possible apart from
presence. It is therefore impossible to generate studio work about absence without some form of presence, but the artwork will be speaking of, or deferring to, its condition of absence via an intertextual presence. It thus holds the traces of absence.

In an artwork, exchange depends on signs embedded in content, composition, materials and form. In an attempt to inscribe absences, the artist is required to manipulate the signs of the city. The signifier (spoken word, text or in this research, aspects of the artwork such as content, material, form etc.) evokes a sign that is ‘signified of absence’ which in the process is deferring to and differing from presence. My research is not concerned with a binary dynamic of absence-presence. Rather it problematizes such a hierarchical condition by applying the Derridean impossibility of totalising presence. Each sign defers to the other as it differs from the other, with the ‘double gesture’ between them (particularly as a device in studio work) and the revealing potential of that gesture.

Daoism and Deconstruction

The teachings of the Dao or ‘the way’ have similarities with a deconstructivist approach and in light of my focus on China it is useful to review, however briefly, these teachings as they have been applied to the built environment. Despite the suppression of religious practice in China since the 1949 Communist Revolution, Daoism remains one of China’s major religions founded on the teachings of the philosopher Lao-tzu / Laozi (604BC-531BC). ‘Daoism’ is both a philosophical tradition and an organized religion, dating from sixth century BC. Daoism values the interdependence of things and posits that such recognition is critical to their comprehension.

In The Tao of Architecture (1956), architect and Professor Amos Ilh Tiao Chang applies the philosophy of Lao-tzu to the discipline and practical realisation of architecture. Chang writes, ‘I am inclined to believe that it is the existence of intangible elements, the negative, in architectonic forms which makes them come alive, become human, naturally harmonize with one another, and enable us to experience them with human sensibility (Chang 1956, p. 9). Chang’s analogical application of the Dao is useful for my research as it establishes a precedent of the application of the Dao to the built environment. The following extract reveals the complex dynamic of absence-presence and the inseparability of the two in the comprehension of each. Chang observes:

Lao-tzu never strays from his idea of insufficiency in individual things. Again and again, he tries to emphasize the organic relationships between things, not the things themselves. Obviously, in relation to our mind, the being of one thing is always made possible by the non-being of another thing. Within the dimension of time, independent ideas cannot exist concurrently unless they are generalized and become synthetic abstraction. The meaning of a whole and a part will concurrently exist in our mind only when we think about the relationship between them instead of about the things themselves (Chang 1956, p. 59).

Chang writes, ‘The meaning as well as the vitality of “things” in biological, physical, and psychological aspects exists in the combining of a pair of obvious opposite beings, each not having the attributes of the other and each needing the other’ (Chang 1956, p. 7). In this aspect Daoism has parallels with Derrida’s terms of difference, where each ‘thing’ is indefinitely differing from and deferring to the other, and trace where each ‘thing’ carries a trace of what it is not. This approach is useful in its application in fieldwork and studio work because it encourages the recognition of relationships between things, rather than the perception that things exist in isolation. For example, Chang notes that ‘…a part is lively primarily due to the power of its intangible content. Without its relation with the sources of supply, a city is not a city. Without its relation with the surfaces which receive its light, a lamp is not a lamp’ (Chang 1956, p. 60). Similarly in artwork, an investigation of the supplement is, simultaneously and necessarily, an investigation of presence.

Summarily, a deconstructive process requires not simply destabilising two terms, absence-presence, but a restructuring or ‘displacement’ of the opposition or hierarchy to show that neither term is primary. Through this research I propose that this restructuring occurs in and through studio work, in the differential movement between absence and presence as identified and identifiable in the artworks, as evidential outcomes of the research.

2.1.2 Absence in art practice

Over the past seventy years, the thematic concern of absence has been explored in Conceptual Art by, for example, Robert Barry, Bruno Jakob, Joseph Kosuth, Yoko Ono, Yves Klein; in Abstract Art by Willem de Kooning, Pier Mondrian, Ellsworth Kelly, Kazimir Malevich, Frank Stella; in Land art by Michael Heizer and in Installation Sculpture by Gordon Matta-Clark, Rachel Whiteread, Jeppe Hein and Anish Kapoor. In addition to ‘absence’, a number of other terms have been employed in art practice to describe similar thematic concerns such as ‘void’, ‘invisible’, ‘emptiness’, ‘silence’ and ‘negation’. In the past five years two group exhibitions in Europe demonstrate the breadth and variety of interpretation of the theme: Invisible - Art about the Unseen, 1957-2012, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London and Voids: A retrospective. Centre Pompidou,
In these exhibitions, absence is presented as an empty gallery, an invisible object, something erased, cut or edited from an object/image/text/space, an ‘emptied canvas’ or plinth, or the use of invisible material (air, airwaves and lasers). These examples do not address absences identified in cities nor do they approach absence as supplement to presence. Rather, these artists explore absence as a conceptual or philosophical notion embedded and/or implicated in the making, viewing and exhibition of artworks.

The specifics of this research, focused on the supplement and pertaining to absences identified in particular cities and sites, addresses this gap. Instead of the ‘immaterial void’ investigations of French artist Yves Klein, the ‘negative space’ intervention in the Nevada desert by Michael Heizer or the image based conceptual absences in the paintings of Kazimir Malevich or Frank Stella, my research has more in common with the practices of artists engaging with a specific site and then presenting output in the gallery.

My reference to the following artists demonstrates that absence in contemporary art practice is employed by artists for a variety of aims and assumes diverse forms, both of which speak to Derrida’s concepts of difference and trace. The practice of undertaking an investigation onsite then presenting evidence of said action inside a gallery has underpinned the practice of many artists, but particularly American, Robert Smithson and Englishman, Richard Long. The action of extracting a sample from a landscape is a feature of both artists method and establishes a material relationship between a particular site and how it is represented. Smithson articulated the Site/Non-Site dynamic in the series Non-Sites of 1968, and in doing so facilitated new conceptualisations and representations of the landscape within a gallery context (Flam 1996; Hobbs 1981; Reynolds 2003). Rather than describe the site as a ‘given topology or geography’ Smithson describes the gallery work as an attempt to give ‘evidence’ of a particular kind of encounter, a certain perceptual exposure to site (Flam 1996, p. 104). Smithson states, ‘As the term itself suggest, the Non-Site asserts first of all that the site against which it claims definition is elsewhere. In the face of these ‘large abstract maps made into three dimensions’ (Flam 1996, p. 181) Smithson argues, ‘[w]hat you are really confronted with […] is the absence of the site […] a very ponderous, weighty absence’ (Flam 1996, p. 193). The Site/Non-Site dynamic, establishes an absence-presence dynamic between the experience of site and the resulting artwork, exhibited in the gallery.

Richard Long walks the landscape bringing material fragments of the landscape into the gallery. The documentation of his walking of site ‘feeds the imagination’, whereas the work made specifically for the gallery ‘feeds the senses’ as a result of having an immediate, tangible presence (Moorhouse 2005, p. 39). Long evokes the sensory experience of the landscape, first and foremost through materials and subsequently through arrangement. There exists an absence-presence dynamic between the experience of site and the resulting artwork, exhibited in the gallery.

dynamic between the site / subject of the work located remotely and its presentation in the gallery through materials and form. Similarly, I engage with documentary methods and the materiality of the urban landscape, to address the objectives of this research.

There are a number of artists who, though unconcerned with the city, engage with absence through the body or materiality. The most conventional and perhaps normative manifestation of absence is a physical void. In art practice, the casting of that void has been undertaken as a way to activate or reveal the supplement. Following on from Bruce Nauman (b.1941) and Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), English sculptor Rachel Whiteread (b.1963) is synonymous with the casting of a void in both object and environment. A ‘sculptor of negative spaces’ (Potts 2001, p. 360) she generates a physical manifestation of an absence through casting a void and by doing so, reveals aspects of that absence, such as the trace of human occupation. Whiteread has cast household and everyday objects and largest and, most controversially, the interiors of an entire house in London’s East End (House, 1993). Susan Lawson writes that linking Derrida’s concept of deconstruction to Whiteread’s work is a common practice. ‘Her work, simply put, destabilizes the classic dichotomy of presence and absence in which presence is the privileged term and, bringing both to mind at once, holds them in the balance’ (Lawson 2004, p. 69). Whiteread makes visible the trace of the body in everyday objects and structures.


‘…what may at first seem to be an act of self-revelation - the placing of one’s bed on public display - ultimately gives nothing away. Rather than being confronted, as we might anticipate, with intimate clues to the artist’s presence, we are instead presented with overwhelming absence (Umland 1992).

Exhibited in both gallery and public space environments, Untitled (1991) is a relatable and accessible image, yet it is also an intensely private image. Amongst the cacophony of Manhattan billboards and urban infrastructure, it communicates a particular domesticity and moment in time. Gonzales-Torres’ lover died the same year this work was made and, as such, it can be understood as a meditation on death, the absence of two figures being a palpable absence. Through displaying a private image in the public space, Gonzales-Torres could be said to be using the supplement (private as supplement to public) to disrupt the dominant presence. In the work Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA) (1991), Gonzales-Torres supplies a pile of candy in the corner of the gallery that is the same weight as his partner was when healthy.

Viewers are invited to take away a candy until the mound gradually disappears; it is then replenished, and the cycle of life and death continues…. In the moment that the candy dissolves in the viewer’s mouth, the participant also receives a shock of recognition at his or her complicity in Ross’s demise (Brooklyn Museum, Exhibition, 2011).

Gonzales-Torres generates a connection between the viewer’s body and the absent body via the taste sense. As well as the body, intervening in architecture is a method of activating and signing absence. American artist Gordon Matta-Clark cut through abandoned buildings in his ‘Anarchitecture’ works of the 1970s, and then displayed remnants in the gallery setting. These remnants and the accompanying images communicate the physical absence-presence dynamic, not only between the site and the gallery, but also between the object and an image of the site of removal. The extracted material is supplement or trace to the remotely located urban site. Matta-Clark draws on the supplement to reveal relationships between built structures, location and representational methods. In the image-based documentation of these interventions, he composes and exhibits the images in such a way that he communicates a phenomenological encounter with site. In the work Wrapped Reichstag (1971, 1995) artists Christo (b.1935) and Jeanne Claude (1935-2020) literally wrap the Reichstag building in Berlin, in white fabric. The identity and form of the building is familiar. Through its wrapping and concealment one engages with the history and politics of site, activated through a reassessment of its physical form and function. Of this artwork, Richard Shusterman writes, ‘concealing shrouds rendered the building (and its symbolic history) infinitely more visible in Berlin life’ (Shusterman 1997). The paradox lies in the displacement of presence: the concealment of a building, in fact, can reveal knowledge of site and structure.

John Cage (1912-1992), in his sound piece 4’33” (1952), composes ‘music’ from an absence of music. This artwork/composition consists of the, pianist sitting quietly at the piano without touching the keys for four minutes and thirty-three seconds so that incidental sounds in the surrounding environment - such as the wind in the trees outside or the whispering of audience members - determined the content of the piece’ (Guggenheim Museum, Exhibition, 2004). The staging of the work (absent composer) deconstructs normative ways of listening and playing music. Cage performs 4’33” (or four minutes and 33 seconds) of the ‘play of différence - presence (music) with the supplement (silence’).

A review of the practice of Indian artist Anish Kapoor (b.1954) is useful to illustrate the creation of absence through activating the sign. A conversation between Kapoor and post-colonial theorist Homi. K Bhabha is recounted in Bhabha’s essay, Making Emptiness (1998). Bhabha conceives of two manifestations of emptiness as evidenced in the sculptures of the artist, making a distinction between the ‘look of the void’ and the ‘truly made void’, termed the making of emptiness. The ‘look of the void’ is a physicality of void space, a pictorial manifestation where signals are understood for what they mean. Bhabha explains, ‘To see the void as a contained negative space.
Bhabha suggests the practice of ‘true making’ occurs only when the material and non-material tangentially touch. In turning away from the look of the void, the ‘truly made void’ is generated from the ‘sign of emptiness’ (Bhabha 1998). In this instance a ‘third dimension’ is generated, where apparent binary oppositions bear a liminal relationship to each other, occurring through a process of doubling and displacement. This can be understood as the focus of this research project. Bhabha states that the ‘truly made void’ finds its balance in the fragility of vacillation (Bhabha 2008). He observes, “The “sign of emptiness” can neither be fixed as form, nor preserved as image or an idea. It is “true” to the making and the materiality of the object but after its own fashion…It emerges… when the “signals” of figuration or technique are prevented from articulating what they want to mean’ (Bhabha 2008). This never-ending vacillation is Derrida’s *différance* where the sign cannot ever be complete or fully articulated. There is no completeness, no boundary as the text is in constant deferral to its supplement.

Summarily, absence manifests as physical site that is signaled as remote or ‘elsewhere’, as physical or pictorial void, through concealment, as absence of ‘something’ rather than the ‘expected’ presence, and as a normative way of seeing and interpreting meaning. Absence is engaged as thematic concern, as well as device, to generate knowledge of site: a knowledge coinciding with a deferral of meaning-making strategies. In each instance, absence activates in and through its differential relationship with presence. The artist inscribes absence as activated in the artwork through signaling the ‘presence of absence’ in the artwork: through content, composition, material, form and other ‘textual’ properties of art. Each of these examples of contemporary art practice illustrates the different ways the supplement can be engaged to achieve new understandings of or reveal (marginal) relationships, as well as prompting the viewer to think in new and critical ways. Though a number of these examples are based in the urban, and others draw on absence as subject and device, none address sites of absence in the city as the primary subject and site of investigation. It is at this intersection – art, city, absence – that this research finds its focus.
2.2 Mediating the multisensory city

2.2.1 Theory

In art practice that investigates the urban, I argue for a shift to the multisensory in order to deconstruct the dominant single sense perception of the city generated through presence and the ocular. Geographer Mark Paterson observes, ‘that “returning to our senses in fieldwork” identifies a more general “return to the senses” within social research, most notably within anthropology, architecture, cultural history and sociology’ (Paterson 2009, p. 767). This turn meant ‘rethinking the processes of research through the senses and in doing so problematizing traditional Greco-Roman hierarchies of the senses that privilege vision and consider touch and taste as bestial and base (Paterson 2009, p. 767).

This sensory turn is evident in the formation of university based research centres such as the Centre for Sensory Studies (formed 2010 at Concordia University in Montreal Canada, building on an existing Concordia Sensoria Research Team formed in 1988) and the Sensory Ethnography Lab (at Harvard University, Massachusetts). Both organisations undertake multisensory focused fieldwork in urban spaces, intervening in normative ways of researching and representing cities. They both also host online journals, *The Senses and Society* and the *Sensate: A Journal for Experiments in Critical Media Practice* respectively. The founding of the journal *The Senses and Society* (founded 2006) provides some indication of the resurgence of sensory studies evident in dialogue between the academic, ethnographic and anthropological disciplines (amongst others).

In addition to these publications, symposiums such as *Skin of the City* (Vienna, 2008), *Olfaction of the City* (Vienna, 2009 and Symposium of the Senses (Montreal, 2010) unite diverse disciplines under the umbrella of sensory studies. Exhibitions such as *Sense of the City. An Alternate Approach to Urbanism* (2005) at the Canadian Centre for Architecture and Sensorium, *Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (2007) at MIT Visual Arts Centre, illustrate the diversity and potential of different media, material and sites for activation within art practice.

Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa (b.1936) claims, ‘the contemporary city is increasingly the city of the eye, detached from the body by rapid motorised movement, or through the overall aerial grasp from an aeroplane (Pallasmaa 2005, p. 29). The exhibition *Sense of the City. An Alternate Approach to Urbanism* (2005) gathered together ‘modes of experiencing the urban environment that challenge the dominance of the eye’ (Zardini 2005, p. 14). In the exhibition catalogue, curator Mirko Zardini argues the value of a multisensory mediation of the city. He proposes that sensory mediations reintroduce the body into urban space and,

![Fig.18](Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

![Fig.19](Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

![Fig.20](Image removed due to copyright restrictions)

...pose a different way of talking about, describing, and planning our cities; they suggest thinking of them as places for our bodies...they remind us how mutable is our way of perceiving the urban environment; they offer us a history of the changes in the Western city from new points of view that have been hitherto neglected; in addition, they reveal to us...
the possibilities provided by the urban environment in its various aspects - those of sound, smell, touch, vision … and invite us to look at them in new ways (Zardini 2005, p. 24).

Each of these examples - research centres, publications, exhibitions and symposiums - acknowledges the value in a multisensory approach in fieldwork, research and art practice. This suggested the appropriateness of haptic methods in this research to investigate sites of absence identified in each city as a way to understand more about urban sites.

2.2.2  Art practice

In this section I briefly outline a number of works by artists that mediate the multisensory urban. By doing so, I argue the effectiveness of haptic methods to disrupt normative ways of representing absence as only physical or pictorial void and the potential of such methods to reveal new understandings of absence in the urban environment. The standard (western) ranking of senses historically places sight in the highest position followed by hearing, smell, taste and then touch (Clasen 1994, p. 3). Arguably the senses of sight, then sound are engaged most often in art practice, followed to a lesser degree by smell, taste and touch.

The art practice of artists, such as Francis Alÿs (Magnetic Shoes, La Habana, 1994) and Valie Export (Body Configurations, 1972-1982) relies quite literally on them being ‘in touch’ with the city surfaces. Both these artists use their own body to highlight qualities of the built environment and they do so through walking over, and lying on, its surface. Conversely artists such as Shaun Gladwell and TV Moore use video as a medium to record others navigating the city. Gladwell’s work Midnight Tracer (2011) films an anonymous figure, a ‘parkour practitioner’ as he moves through the city, propelling forward through bodily contact with the surrounding physical structures. TV Moore’s (b.1974), two-channel video installation, The Dead Zone (2003), films a figure running through the city streets. The two screen installation locates the viewer between the two images, one moving forward and one moving backward, heightening their haptic and kinesthetic encounter with the content. Chinese artist Zhu Jia (b.1963) brings the viewer along on his exploration of the city in the video work Forever (1994). Securing a camera to the wheel of his bicycle, he rides through the streets of Beijing filming the passing streetscape. The rotation, content and speed of the footage are in direct relation to the location and locomotion of his body in the street. Each of these artists uses direct contact and locomotion through the city and video as documentation of an intervention in the city street. Though the works are primarily visual, the content prompts a whole body engagement from the viewer. In doing so they make visible relationships between the city’s physical form and surface, and the moving body.

Sound can be engaged as ‘soundtrack’ to the city experience. Building on the traditions of the Futurists who investigated ‘noise’ in the city in the early 20th century, Canadian artist Janet Cardiff devises sound walks for a variety of geographically diverse urban environments. The viewer is directed through the city guided by the artist voice heard in an audio headset. In Lowlands
(2008/2010) Scottish artist Susan Phillipsz (1965-) displaces the day-to-day sounds of the city with a lament or historical trace broadcast under a bridge over the River Clyde in Glasgow’s East End. In both instances, the insertion of sound highlights aspects already at play but overlooked within a conventional encounter with site.

The smell and taste senses are rarely engaged in investigations and representations of the urban. However, a number of artists practice demonstrate the potential of these senses to engage the viewer in a multisensory capacity when signing absence. German artist Wolfgang Laib (1950-) work, Wax Room (Where have you gone – where are you going?) (2013), consists of an entire room lined with beeswax to create an immersive textural and aromatic installation. Thai artist Montien Boonma (1953-2000) created perfumed paintings from compacted herbs, the wall mounted installation requiring the viewer stand unusually close (a whole body engagement) to the work in order to fully experience it sensorially. Swiss artist Dieter Roth (1930-1998) utilised aromatic spices in his sculptural installations such as Spice Window (1971) and Große Gewürzquadrate (1971). Each artist engages aromatic materials in conjunction with methods of display to elicit a whole body engagement.

A number of artists draw on particular materials, the multiple and scale to create gallery located sculptural installations that address the city encounter. For example in the sculptural installation Dream a wish, wish a dream (2008), Indian artist Hema Upadhyay (b.1972) uses scraps and detritus from the city to create city skylines and landscapes that can be understood as a form of haptic mapping. In Silk Road (2007) Indian artist Subodh Gupta (b.1964) uses silver tiffin tins, their reflective surfaces hinting at the materiality of contemporary city whilst simultaneously communicating something of the multitude of people that live in the city. Similarly Urban Landscape (2005-10) by Chinese artist Zhan Wang (b.1962) uses everyday objects such as stainless steel pots, pans and utensils to map the urban landscape, thereby supplying an intertextual link between daily living practices and city spaces.

These artistic examples demonstrate the capacity and value of a multisensory approach in art practice. However, they do not specifically explore sites of absence in urban space. There is, therefore, an opportunity for greater material and sensory engagement in the process of first identifying absence in the urban environment and then investigating it through art practice.

2.3 Conceptualising the city

Think of the city, whose existence is inseparable from its own image, for cities practically live in images. (Bruno in Clark 2009, p. 38)

We don’t go to cities. Cities come to us, stream towards us. To occupy a city today is to surf a dense array of overlapping media streams. The limit of the city is not its physical terrain but the limit of its packaging. Cities compete with each other, packaging themselves like any other product, and it is in this self-promotion that the territorial limits are drawn. (Wigley 1991, p. 103)

2.3.1 City representations

Historically cartography and landscape painting shaped the identity of many cities, with literature also providing a comprehensive and detailed description of city life. In City Images. Perspectives from Literature. Philosophy and Film (1991) Mary Ann Caws observes that we come to know many cities through seminal works of literature by authors such as Walter Benjamin (Berlin, Paris), Charles Dickens and Virginia Woolf (London), James Joyce (Dublin) and Charles Baudelaire (Paris). She writes, ‘Whatever they expose, and whatever they hide even in their address, these acts of the words and the imagination make a grid through which to look at the literary, artistic, and philosophical seeing of the city, always only on the way to knowing what that is’ (Caws 1991, p. 4). This partial ‘knowing’ might include particular qualities of the city’s geography and/or built environment, its life/energy and dynamism, its social life and its broader identity in the world.

Artists, designers, filmmakers, anthropologists, ethnographers, archaeologists, geographers, cartographers have also contributed to and shaped the perception and dissemination of these cities through a predominantly visual output. For example: historically artists were employed to document architecture or living conditions in the city; traditionally through the methods of watercolour painting, etching and sketching, plein air painting and more recently photography and film. Each city has been conceptualised and imagined in diverse ways by culturally diverse groups, with each conceptualisation a product of the times within which it was created. This documentation forms the backbone of a city’s identity, provides culturally specific ways of coming to know place and shapes the broader perception of what constitutes ‘the city’. In addition to the particular cultural conditions of each city, the local population, religion, history of foreign occupation, politics, tourism and technology are among the many influences on the chosen methods and tools of representation.
The democratic circulation of imagery via the Internet has contributed significantly to the ocular dominance in the way the city is both documented and experienced by consumers of ideas and places. Even before visiting firsthand, we may believe we ‘know’ the city and even that we have been there before, as a result of exposure to a proliferation of visual imagery. Sociologist John Urry observes, ‘Rather than mirroring or representing geographies, photographs partly create them, culturally, socially and materially’ (Urry 2011, p. 167). Such imagery activates one’s visual imaginary and frames expectations of experiences to come. However it also ‘flattens’ and simplifies the complexity of the sensory experience of each site by virtue of being a ‘single sense’ form of representation.

The built environment is a dominant feature and presence in the content of such imagery. Geographer John Rennie Short writes ‘High profile building projects spectacularise the urban and raise the value of the city in commodified images of place that flood the world’ (Rennie Short 2004, p. 77). This is evident of Shanghai, specifically the district of Pudong that was developed from farmland to skyscrapers in under two decades. Through the circulation of images of this dramatic skyline, or ‘spectacle’, the Chinese have crafted a particular city identity and repositioned Shanghai throughout the world as a global city, ‘open for trade’. Due to competitiveness for tourist dollars and an increasing reliance of the domestic economy on such revenue the ‘packaging’ or ‘branding’ of cities has become a dominant means by which we experience cities. Hubbard writes, ‘contemporary forms of place promotion are not simply attempts to advertise the city. Rather, the intention is to reinvent or rewrite the city, weaving myths which are designed to position the city within global flows of urban images and representational practices’ (Hubbard 2006, p. 87).

Rennie Short writes that ‘urban imagineering’ and ‘place promotion’ via such positive images is a key factor in how cities compete to position themselves in neo liberal economies (Rennie Short 2004, p. 23). Social-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defines these ‘global flows of culture’ shaping and reshaping the world through images as ‘mediascapes’ (Rennie Short 2004, p. 25). The creation and circulation of images is informed by an agenda that seeks to position the city in a favorable light to attract investment and tourism and such imagery and ideas come to dominate the public imaginary. In The City (2006) Hubbard observes, ‘…guidebooks, postcards and brochures which are the stock-in-trade of the tourism industry can be read as texts which are implicated in the making of particular subjectivities and urban identities’ (Hubbard 2006, p. 79). Perhaps the most famous city brand is the globally recognised ‘I Love New York’ (1977), the logo of which was designed by graphic designer Milton Glaser and originally commissioned to bring tourism to the city. Similarly, the promotional lines, ‘Shanghai 2010, More Discovery, More to see’ and ‘Incredible India’ establish particular expectations of experience. New York and Shanghai have both invested heavily in visually focused museums in the city centres. These are dedicated to the history, development and future vision of their urban landscape and their exhibitions cater for tourists, supplementing the ‘real’ experience on the street. Tellingly Varanasi does not have a museum dedicated to the city’s urban design or future development strategy, arguably an indication that it is not ‘global’ enough to do so or perhaps that its focus is on the development of the spiritual, rather than physical world.

Summarily, the predominantly image based conceptualisation of each city is tied to global flows of information, which are in turn driven by economic, political and cultural positioning strategies. Digital and online circulations of information offer some challenge to the aforementioned ‘official’ city identities through virtue of being fluid and diverse. However, there remain marginalized aspects of city experience, and ways of representing that experience beyond the image, to be explored in art practice.

Because my research is located in and contributes to the field of art, it was important to consider how each city had been investigated and documented through art practice. New York City is an iconic city that has been comprehensively mapped and investigated through art, particularly photography but also painting and film. The Irish famine (1845-1850) and World War II (1939-1945) created an influx of European immigrants, contributing to and shaping the aesthetic of the New York built environment and its image. Broadly speaking New York’s physicality has played a key role in shaping the aesthetic of a modern Western city. The emergence of this modern city in the early 20th century captured the imagination of artists and filmmakers. In his seminal essay Walking the City, Michel De Certeau posits the World Trade Centre as ‘only the most monumental figure of Western Urban development’ (De Certeau 1984, p. 46) and, prior to the two towers collapse in 2001, their presence defined the iconic New York skyline.

In addition to its political and social stability, Varanasi was selected because it is one of the oldest continually occupied cities in the world. This, in combination with Varanasi’s sacred status for Hindus, offers the research an urban typology contrasting with Shanghai and New York. Mark Twain observed, ‘Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend and looks twice as old as all of them put together’ (Eck 1999, p. 5). The city is focused on the spiritual significance of site, rather that its physical manifestations, and this influences how city representations are formed and through what means they are disseminated. India, broadly speaking, is also a country of sensory overload and this suggests that a study engaging with the haptic might uncover rich source material.

In the 21st century, Shanghai and its high density, vertical architecture is a new model of urban development that could be said to capture the imagination of the world’s population in a similar way. As outlined in the previous Chapter, representations of Shanghai are predominantly digital video and photographic, engaging with the recent Padong development and urban and architectural modernisation. Similar to New York, the city experience of Shanghai is shaped by its overly commercial focus as well as the political and cultural conditions. Relevant to this research, is the nonstop destruction and subsequent rapid development in China’s major cities informing many artists practice. This phenomenon was recognised and considered thematically in two contemporary art shows in China: the 2002 Shanghai Biennale theme Urban Creation, ‘proving
artists to respond to the city in both conceptual and physical terms’, and the 2008 Biennale theme ‘Translocal Motion’ focusing on ‘city, rapid change and dislocated people’ (Andrews & Shen 2012, p. 283).

The following section will briefly outline a number of predominantly visual representations that form a ‘grid’ through which the general populace come to know and understand the three selected cities of New York, Varanasi and Shanghai. I provide this foundation to establish discourses within which my own practice is embedded and also to establish factors that may shape viewer understanding and response to my own works.

2.3.2 New York

Of the three cities in this study, the city of New York, specifically Manhattan, has been documented through contemporary art practice considerably more than Varanasi and Shanghai. Manhattan, (as well as Chicago), was a centre of innovation for engineering through its building of skyscrapers. This ‘spectacle’ was captured through photography and cinema, the technological development of both visual practices influencing the way the city was represented and disseminated. Scott McQuire writes that this ‘architectural revolution’ shifted the primary axis of urban development from the horizontal to the vertical, this verticality challenging the very act of seeing (McQuire 1998, p. 209).

Shaping a perception of Manhattan that was unique and directly inspired by the city, were the architectural photographers Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) and Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946), photojournalists such as Weegee (1899-1968), sociologist and photographer Lewis Hine (1874-1940) social and ‘underground’ photographers Nan Goldin (1953-) and Diane Arbus (1923-1971). Each contributes to the documentation and visual archive of New York that continues to be circulated throughout the world. This same built environment has been utilized as a backdrop to many iconic TV series and films. Native New York filmmakers Woody Allen (b.1935) and Martin Scorsese (b.1942) have defined and fuelled the city’s mythical status through their images and storylines. Both directors have shaped not only the image and ethos of the city but also the identity of its inhabitants, as a particular type of person labelled the ‘New Yorker’.

The most influential artists connected to the city are The New York School or ‘Abstract Expressionists’ who emerged from the urban and cultural life of Lower Manhattan during the 1940s and 50s. Artists such as Jasper Johns (1930-), Claes Oldenberg (1929-), Robert Rauschenberg, Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) contributed to positioning New York as the centre of the artworld and shaping the evolution of painting throughout the world. In *New Art, New City. Manhattan at Mid Century* (2007) writer Jed Perl observes, ‘The life that an artist awakened within the dimensions of a sheet of paper was all mixed up with the awakening of mid-century New York’ (Perl 2007, p. 9). He continues, ‘New York pushed artists in certain directions; the city’s pressure cooker atmosphere had a way of making you feel that all traditions were in extremis’ (Perl 2007, p. 62). Joseph Cornell (1903-1972), Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Rauschenberg each transported elements of the city into the gallery through the materials they scavenged or extracted from the landscape. Therefore Manhattan was not only the subject of many artist works, but the very reason why some artistic styles evolved as they did.

Due to the regular street grid across the island, the cartographic imagery of Manhattan is readily identifiable as being iconic of that city. The Manhattan skyline is also identifiable because of its dramatic location, built up to the edge of the island and ‘crowned’ in 1973 by the World Trade Centre landmark ‘twin towers’. The skyline of the city changed dramatically with the destruction of both towers on September 11, 2001. Arguably current images of the skyline contain the absence (or trace) of the two towers, as well as the presence of the existing skyline. The skyline is iconic for the ‘presence of an absence’.

Though the built environment remains fairly static and settled, particularly compared to Shanghai though perhaps less than Varanasi, changing cultural patterns and migrations redefine the (cultural) landscape daily. The city shifts and evolves over time and is imagined and filtered through the aforementioned creative, and predominantly visual mediums.
appears to be enacted as much to entertain tourists, as for its religious significance. Regardless, the 'Ganga Aarti', enacted by Brahmins to honor Lord Shiva and the river Ganges, at times this ritual of Varanasi derive from its dominant localized cultural activity, the nightly puja performance is deliberately shaped by residents of that city (Freitag 2008, p. 234). For example many images through images of the city reported and held by others – yet this process of cultural production Freitag states, 'Local understandings of what it means to belong to Banaras are constructed dominated by 'sacred' Varanasi – puja rituals and portraits of 'exotic' sadhus. However, Sandra today, as well as the proliferation of Hindu iconography, the content of tourist postcards is

In contrast to New York, Varanasi is documented less by contemporary artists and filmmakers and more comprehensively through historical, geographical (cartographic) and tourist imagery. Though, it is most thoroughly documented in 'eulogistic literature' called mahatmya (Eck 1999, p. 373), the puranas the many 'ancient stories which preserve traditions of myth, legend and rite' (Eck 1999, p. 376) and in descriptions by the city priests (Eck 1999, p. 299).

During the 1820s, Varanasi was thoroughly mapped by the British scholar James Prinsep (1799-1840). Prinsep also recorded the architecture of the Ghats, the pilgrims and festivals in detailed etchings published as 'Benares Illustrated, in a Series of Drawings' (1831). Diana Eck, American scholar and writer of Banaras, City of Life (1982) argues that the maps created by James Prinsep in the late 1820s as part of a city census, are, even today, unsurpassed (Eck 1999, p. 49). This, to some extent, communicates the absence of development and / or major physical change in the old city.

Due to the value placed on its spiritual and cultural life, visual output has tended to focus on activity along the Ganges River and the Hindu rituals that are performed on its banks. Even today, as well as the proliferation of Hindu iconography, the content of tourist postcards is dominated by 'sacred' Varanasi – puja rituals and portraits of 'exotic' sadhus. However, Sandra Freitag states, 'Local understandings of what it means to belong to Banaras are constructed through images of the city reported and held by others – yet this process of cultural production is deliberately shaped by residents of that city' (Freitag 2008, p. 234). For example many images of Varanasi derive from its dominant localized cultural activity, the nightly puja performance 'Ganga Aarti', enacted by Brahmins to honor Lord Shiva and the river Ganges. At times this ritual appears to be enacted as much to entertain tourists, as for its religious significance. Regardless, the resulting visual documentation is widely circulated and what once was a modest ritual has become a defining feature of city life.

Varanasi has proved a popular location for Bollywood films because of the dramatic appearance of the ghats and the city's significance and profile as a spiritual site. Deepa Mehta's film Water (2005) about Varanasi widows is perhaps the most well known film in a Western context. Though, due to protests regarding the subject matter, this was filmed in Sri Lanka. In contrast to Bollywood films, seminal film on Varanasi, Forest of Bliss (1986) by American anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Robert Gardner (1925-2014) employs a sensory ethnographic approach. Completely devoid of dialogue, the film relies on sound and visuals to drive the narrative, which plays out through the city rituals.

Contemporary Indian artists conceptualising Varanasi are predominantly landscape painters. One of India's foremost abstract painters Ram Kumar (1924-) was drawn to the city's extremes of life and death and has conducted numerous studies of the city over fifty years. Other artists who have painted Varanasi include Manu Parekh (b.1939) MF Husain (1915-2011), Binode Behari Mukherjee (1904-1980) and FN Souza (1924-2002).

For Hindus, because the perception of the city is so intertwined and dominated by myth and religious significance, the physical environment is arguably of secondary importance. Eck observes 'The Hindu tradition has entrusted the senses, especially the eyes, with apprehension of the holy' (Eck 1999, p. 19). This attitude feeds into contemporary representations of the city which tend more to religious iconography. Or, rather than skylines or landmarks, if a structure is depicted it is due to its spiritual significance, not a value assigned to its physicality. Conversely, more unusual or extreme aspects capture the imagination of foreigners. Scott McQuire writes 'Photography became a lynchpin in the trade in foreignness and fuelled new discourses of the other – from anthropology and ethnography to popular accounts of travel and colonial life – which blossomed in the second half of the nineteenth century' (McQuire 1998, p. 193). Eck observes that because the city has become 'a symbol of traditional Hindu India that Western visitors have often found this city the most strikingly "foreign" of India's cities' (Eck 1999, p. 9). Such narrow Western curated depictions of the 'East' even now contribute significantly to the representational discourse of Varanasi in the global stream of images. For example, the very 'foreignness' of Varanasi, means extreme (from a western perspective) activities or rituals, such as the of burning bodies, or unconventional aspects, such as the naked sadhus, come to define the city's cultural life through being disproportionately dominant in the global visual discourse. These orientalist ocular representations simplify the richness of cultural practice, shaping a perception of the city based on its difference to a dominant western urban typology.
2.3.4 Shanghai

The political history and contemporary status of Shanghai has influenced the content and availability of images and artwork conceptualising the city. The presence of international trade in the early century and the division of the city into specific settlements (French, American, International etc.) meant that the city was thoroughly mapped and circulated. Much of the recent historical imagery of Shanghai focuses on the glamour and internationalism of the 1930s, when Shanghai was considered ‘the Paris of the Orient’. Liang observes that visual experience was a key component of modernity in Shanghai (Liang 2010, p. 6). ‘Marvelous visual attractions seemed to have dominated everyday life in the city and marked a departure from the old lifestyle in which the unity of multisensory pleasures was more important than merely visual gratification’ (Liang 2010, p. 6). However, such ‘gratification’ continues to be a driving force in shaping contemporary Shanghai.

Shanghai is most often photographed from the aerial view or at night, the scale and illumination reinforcing the sense of spectacle. Tourism imagery of the city is overwhelmingly focused on the Pudong skyline and perhaps, to a slightly lesser degree, the Bund. These images are a form of cultural branding and dominate the representations of Shanghai circulated in the global flow of images.

German photographer Thomas Struth (b.1954) captured the emerging Pudong district over twenty-five years ago in his work Pudong, Shanghai (1999) and the rapid demolition of areas of the city still provides rich subject matter for photographers. Photo series by German photographer Peter Bialobrzeski (Nail Houses, 2013) and Canadian photographer Greg Girard (Phantom of Shanghai, 2007) contrasts the traditional shikumen houses against the modern skyscrapers, featuring traces of the old city.

German photographer Thomas Struth, Pudong, Shanghai (1999)

In conclusion, though many artists have explored absence in art practice, the gap at the intersection of the thematic areas of absence, art, the city and the haptic provides new territory for exploration. A deconstructive overarching methodology is employed to address the objectives of the research and this required attention to what is already ‘at play’, but marginalized, in the discourse. This includes absence as supplement to presence, the multisensory as supplement to the ocular, and haptic outputs in practice as supplement to the predominantly ocular or image based outputs of art of each city. The practice outcomes of artists engaging with absence as either subject or device, reveals the capacity of the supplement to disrupt normative ways of investigating and representing the city. The sensory turn in humanities and social sciences and the existing ‘whole body engagement’ of art practices undertaken in situ, both demonstrate that a multisensory mediation of the urban also has potential to reveal new knowledge of each city. Through this research I argue that, if both methods are applied to a study of absence in the city, there is potential to disrupt the dominant discourse which currently consists of photographic, filmic, and cartographic outputs representing the physical structures or objects, content, systems or rituals informing and constituting each city.

The two Shanghai Biennales, Urban Creation (2002) and Translocal Motion (2008) position the rapid urbanization and development of the city as a concern for artists. Contemporary Chinese artists that feature Shanghai as a thematic concern in their practice include Chen Shaoshong (b.1962), Yang Fudong (b.1971), Yang Zhicheng (b.1960), Shi Guori (b.1964), Hu Yang (b.1969) and Tamen Artist Collective (b.1978-1979). Their artworks focus on the built environment of Shanghai and take the form of large photographic images or video. The skyline of Pudong features heavily as both the focus of a work and/or a backdrop.

Each city inspires a diversity of representations and conceptualisations that in turn shape our perceptions. Each artefact or artwork, through its making and content, tells much about the city’s historical and contemporary position and the social, political and cultural concerns engaging artists. By focusing on absence, and investigating through haptic methods, this research seeks to disrupt these predominantly ocular representations.

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The aim of this Chapter is to contextualize the selected research methods and demonstrate their appropriateness to address the objectives of the project. Firstly, I outline the method of practice led research and in what ways an interdisciplinary approach has shaped both the research focus and methods. I then revisit the three cities and provide a more extensive rationale for their selection and potential to answer the research questions. In order to contextualize the methodological metaphor of biopsy within an existing way of thinking about the city I firstly describe how geographers, urbanists, artists and archivists have borrowed terminology from medicine and science to navigate and extract meaning from the urban landscape and then introduce the ‘city as body’ analogy. And, in order to demonstrate how a process borrowed from medicine can be utilized as a method in art practice, I provide examples of how artists have undertaken ‘biopsy like’ actions in urban space. Finally I explain how walking, a haptic method borrowed from ethnography, has been utilised by artists for such diverse purposes as political gesture, mapping, narrative or as method to reveal qualities of space and place.

3.1 An interdisciplinary approach

3.1.1 Practice as research
Within the scholarly practice of research, art practice by virtue of being responsive, associative and typically non-verbal provides a unique method to generate new perspectives on familiar terrain (Dean & Millar, 2005). The primary research method of practice-led involves ‘developing and making creative work as an explicit and intentional method for specific research purposes for example gathering and/or generating data, evaluation, analysis, synthesis, presentation, communication of research findings’ (Gray & Malins 2004, p. 104). The overarching purpose of
this research has been to ‘develop and make creative work’ to generate new perceptions of absence in and of each city.

Through this research, it was my objective to employ haptic methods to create a body of work focused on the supplement – absence. The application of such methods required conscious attention to multiple senses, during fieldwork and practice, in an effort to access trace. Walking was selected because it is an immersive, phenomenological method that engages with the urban experience through multiple senses. As outlined in the introduction, the methods employed in this study are not unique to a creative arts-based study but have a history in the disciplines of ethnography and anthropology. In addition to walking these methods include observation, visualization, photography, audio and video recordings, sketchbook and journal notes taken during fieldwork and reflections during studio investigations. In the processing of each biopsy in the studio, I draw on materials, objects, tourist artefacts and symbolic forms particular to each city. These practice-led investigations are contextualized by a historical, theoretical and contextual survey (textual) of contemporary art that explores the thematic concerns of city/body/absence underpinning the enquiry. This secondary research enabled me to locate my own work in a community of practice.

This study can be understood as a heuristic enquiry which by its very definition requires progression of hypothesis through theoretical and creative investigations each informing the other, spurring the researcher forward by raising new questions and requiring responsive action through creative practice. This process is evidenced in the ADR section of this document, where the chronological mapping of practice led investigation illustrates the reflexive nature of enquiry.

3.1.2 Interdisciplinary trace

Artist researcher Lesley Duxbury observes that artist researchers ‘bring highly personal aspects to their research activities’ and ‘accumulated life information may influence the direction of the thinking and in due course shape the intentions and outcomes of the research (Duxbury in Grierson & Brearley 2009, p. 55). As outlined in Chapter 1.0, my previous travel experience has been a consideration and part impetus for the thematic direction of this research. Also, the selected methods and interdisciplinary nature of my research is informed by my previous educational and professional experience as a designer. This can be considered a trace within the practice-led arts-based approach and this is evident in the diversity of data collected during fieldwork that traverses the disciplines of architecture, urban planning and design as well as art. This trace has shaped the content and making of the artwork as well as the tools I instinctively use to work through practical problems and make studio work.

Similar to artist Robert Smithson, my approach is interdisciplinary and engaged with site. Smithson, to convey spatial ideas in his work and writings, employed ‘perspective, photography and mapping but also….use of plans and occasionally sections’ (Linder in Smithson 2004, p. 189). In order to address the research questions, I also engage with ‘site, scale, interior space, building elements and processes, and basic conventions of architectural representation’ (Linder in Smithson 2004, p. 189). The process of undertaking site analysis, and working through the many influences (external and internal factors) on a site and how it functions in a broader context is an important aspect of the fieldwork process. My eye is attuned to the more graphic qualities and materials of the city and I draw on found / pre-made materials and objects for their inherent qualities as particular objects. This interdisciplinary approach is a form of deconstruction, challenging and destabilising normative ways of looking and making within the disciplines.

Schneider and Wright (2011) write ‘...in the encounter between the disciplines of art and anthropology, difference can be used as productive resource’ (Schneider & Wright 2011, 5). In addition to design, my research also borrows methods from anthropology and ethnography. This is evident in the practices of walking, sampling and documenting each city site. It is also evident in my focus on how people live and in what ways this impacts the conceptualisation and representation of each city. The borrowing of methods from the social sciences is not uncommon in contemporary art practice (Pink 2009; Schneider & Wright 2011; Zardini 2005). However a key difference is that, rather than a social science project or focus, this research is concerned with a re-imagining and creative interpretation of absence.
3.2 City selection rationale

Further to the introductions of each city provided in Chapter 1.0, there are number of additional attributes that determined each city’s selection and its capacity to further the aims of the research.

China and India have been described as ‘emerging giants of the world’ and ‘major forces in the global economy’ (Paul 2012). In 2004, Bruce Vaughn observed, Both China and India are ancient civilisations that take great pride in their history and culture. Both have exerted influence over much of Asia over the centuries. Both are looking forward to once again playing a role of great powers in Asia as well as on the world stage (Vaughn 2004, p. 448).

Over ten years later their roles are still constantly shifting and being defined, with each forging partnerships in the region to protect their interests. The relations between India and China are shaped by military jostling on their common North eastern border, increasing competition for energy resources, protection against possible conflicts through direct trade competition, securing of existing trade routes and prevention of ‘strategic encircling’ in an effort to protect national interests in the region (Vaughn 2004; Scott 2008). The United States interest in the region stems from its desire to prevent the major powers of Asia from joining a coalition that opposes US interests (Vaughn 2004, p. 451). As such they negotiated a global ‘strategic agreement’ with India in 2006. In case of an increasingly assertive China, this will likely increase India’s value as a strategic partner to the United States (Vaughn 2004, p. 456). In turn, India also feels ‘supported’ against the increasing might of China through its partnership with the US. As an Australian-based researcher these three countries are also major trading partners who all feature significantly in local and national popular media and news.

The three selected cities contribute to the aforementioned relationships by virtue of being dominant within these three geopolitically connected countries. It is important to state that Shanghai and New York can be considered ‘global’ cities, whereas Varanasi cannot. Rennie Short explains ‘Global cities are networked into circuits of transnational movements, cultural diffusions and planetary economics. Global Cities are command centres of a global economy, the connecting points of a global society and important sites of social and economic transformation’ (Rennie Short 2004, p. 3). However Varanasi, in conjunction with the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, is of symbolic political importance because of its status as a sacred Hindu site. Therefore, the geopolitical concepts (rather than global or globalizing concepts) of place, space, scale, region, territory and networks suggested a starting point for consideration of the data gathered in fieldwork.1

While each city is culturally, politically, socially and economically unique, New York, Varanasi and Shanghai also share similarities. Each city has been subject to colonial influence - the British have

1 Colin Flint draws on these concepts to provide insights into the interaction between power relations and geography (Flint 2012, p. 3).

been a foreign presence in each of the three selected cities - Manhattan (1665-1947), Shanghai (from1842 Nanking Treaty to WWII) and India (1858-1947). Each city can be considered a geographic hub, as each has a dominant status within the broader identity of their nation whether it is for economic, political or spiritual reasons. Each is located on significant waterways and has a history of trade and as such has long been a hub for both domestic and international trade and immigration. Each is a gateway of sorts either ‘coming to’ or ‘going from’. New York has been a gateway or ‘front door’ to the United States’ for Irish (1830s), Jewish (1930s) and Latino (1980s and 90s) immigrants arriving in the United States. Shanghai is a gateway for foreign investors, one of the original treaty ports opened to foreigners and emerging as China’s new ‘mercantile hub’ by the end of the 19th century (Andrews & Shen 2012, p. 2). Currently, Shanghai is the first stop in accessing a recently opened Chinese economy and the busiest port in the world (Chubarov & Brooker 2013). Varanasi is (mythologically/believed to be) a tirtha or crossing place, attracting Hindu pilgrims who believe in the transcendence and liberation from life if death occurs within the city limits (Eck 1999). Each city can also be considered a pilgrimage destination: New York attracting the best talent in the finance and creative professions, Shanghai attracting the rural poor in search of employment opportunities and Varanasi the Hindu pilgrim, and often the foreigner, in search of enlightenment. Each city is also a dominant tourist destination for both domestic and foreign tourists engaging the imagination of the local and international population.

In addition to the cultural, political, social and religious influences on each city, the following functional aspects are considered in this research because of their contribution to the lived experience of each city. Access to fresh food and water, modern sanitation, clean air, adequate and sustainable transportation, development, modernisation of infrastructure and effective enforcement of law and order are on-going challenges for each city. Each is also under pressure to maintain basic standards of living through the provision of shelter, food/water, equality, safety and freedoms such as free speech, right to worship and the right to protest. In this research, whilst the three selected cities are considered objectively against the aforementioned factors, they are also investigated subjectively through my own fieldwork and art practice. Undertaking research in three cities, rather than just one or two, permits the triangulation of data and supplies a range of absences to review and process in the studio. A deconstructive approach suggests selecting three cities to sidestep the ‘east versus west’ binary and the ‘old versus new’ binary. The inclusion of Varanasi, a city not typically investigated in contemporary Western art, and the combination of three cities not normally related to each other offers the potential for fresh perspectives on each. The cities should be read both individually and relationally, rather than comparatively. I am not undertaking, nor encouraging a ‘quality’ judgement of each city but rather consideration of how they might be connected and the potential of those connections to reveal new knowledge.

This research is focused on three specific cities and, though occasional comparisons might be drawn with cities other than these three, I am not ‘staking a claim’ in that respect. Any given city will have sites of absence and by following the methodological procedures as indicated they may be
identified and mapped in ways that open to a more cogent understanding of urban space. The data was gathered through walking each city and I can discuss only those cities I have physically visited and more specifically, only my observations from the area where I gathered data. Whilst these are relatively small physical areas they, like a biopsy, contain a great deal of information with potential to shed light on ‘absence’ as supplement to the present and general qualities of the city, the body and the haptic.

3.3 City as body: biopsy methodology

3.3.1 City and human body analogy

The theoretical and historical contextualisation of ‘city as body’, knowledge of historical urban planning principles based on human anatomy and the adoption of scientific analogy to describe rapid urban developments suggested the medical process of biopsy as a method to deconstruct each city. The term ‘biopsy of absence’ has been developed for this project and, to my knowledge, has no precedent in the field to date.

Geographer J. Douglas Porteous writes that physiological analogies between body and landscape are common. Geographers ‘speak of the anatomy of a metropolis, together with its circulation (transportation system), its nervous system (communications), and its metabolism’ (Porteous 1990, p. 75). Parks can be compared to lungs, veins and arteries to transport routes, circulation to roads, capillaries to laneways, expulsion of waste to drains and sewers and the nervous system to the city’s communication and information networks. In New York and Shanghai, the city’s main parks are often referred to as the city’s ‘lungs’ and more general terms such as ‘transportation systems as arteries’ and people in circulation as ‘blood’ and ‘oxygen’ (Aitken 2007, p. 110). A city body analogy informs the entire urban planning foundations of Varanasi, integrating Hindu religious belief with sites throughout the city. There are many and varied mythical associations which reference the city to the human anatomy (Singh 2002; Eck 1999). For example often the whole of Varanasi is said to be the mystical body of Shiva (Eck 1999, p. 299) and the five layers of sacred territory in the city reference a ‘microcosm of the body’, correlating with the head, legs, face, blood and heart (Singh 2002, p. 46).

However the use of metaphor to describe the city is not limited to the human body. Ann Reynolds, in her writings on the work of artist, Robert Smithson, argues that the use of metaphors to describe the city temper the newness and strangeness of the landscape by revealing its ordering logic in familiar terms or connections. Some individuals used biological metaphors to describe the metropolis as a living organism that grows according to cell or plant-like logic. Others
borrowed structures from the physical sciences, particularly grids or regularized crystalline structures (Reynolds 2003, p. 84).

The concept of city ‘as life’ is evident through these biological analogies and metaphors. During his cataloguing of the urban life of Paris during the early 1900s, French historian and archivist Marcel Poète (1866-1950) applied scientific analogy, when likening the urban environment to an organism that evolves in both space and time. He adopted biological analogies and scientific methodologies to both document and categorise the historical and on-going development of urban Paris (Periton 2006, p. 430) and attempted to ‘understand the city as an urban organism, and the processes by which that organism evolves’ (Periton 2006, p. 425). Significantly, within this predominantly historical, archival effort he sourced art, as well as the traditional statistics and maps, in an effort to create a cohesive understanding of the interrelated influences shaping the urban environment. Approaching the city as a living entity, ‘city as body’, has provided an alternative way of describing, understanding and imagining an always changing urban environment.

3.3.2 Biopsy as metaphor, research tool and process
The method of biopsy extends the anatomical metaphor as way to further deconstruct the city and open new areas for consideration. The adoption of medical procedures within a creative discipline may seem unlikely, but art has investigated and intersected with many areas of science, not limited to the metaphorical. Without dwelling on the multitude of ways that science and art have referenced and influenced each other, we know that arts engagement embrace not only procedures but also equipment, materials, technology, categorisation and display methods.

Biopsy is a highly evocative term most commonly heard in medical practice. Many artists have quite literally embraced the qualities of medical practice and procedure in their practice, for example: Australian artist Stelarc (b.1946) and Chinese artists Cao Hui (b.1968) and Yang Zichao (b.1963).

However, this research employs biopsy as a procedural method, a way of gathering and organising information from a fluid research site. In the medical dictionary definition, a biopsy involves ‘the removal of a small piece of living tissue from an organ or part of the body for microscopic

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2 In 1903, Poete became the Head Librarian of the Bibliotheque historique de la Ville de Paris. By 1917, this had become the Institut d’histoire, de geographie et d’ecconomie urbaines de la Ville de Paris and by 1919 it was the base of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines at which he taught for the next seventeen years (Periton 2006).

3 The term ‘science’ encapsulates a diverse range of practices including ‘physics (theoretical and experimental, for example), the medical sciences, neuroscience, biochemistry, molecular biology, genetics, the environmental sciences, chemistry and geology, and also includes those which though more open to interpretation still rely on scientific methodology, such as anthropology, archaeology, psychology and many more.’ (Ede 2000, p. 25).

4 Arts and science organisations that support the collaboration in art-science include ARTLab at the Imperial College London, Wellcome Trust London, Interlateral Centre Bristol, and Symbiotica in Perth, Western Australia. Hundreds of projects have been supported including those related to psychology, anatomy, embalming, dementia, anarchia and heart imaging to name a few.
examination’ (Oxford Concise Medical Dictionary, 2010). This dictionary definition raises the predominantly optic (microscopic) examination of the process of undertaking a biopsy. As mentioned earlier, ‘Deconstruction involves a seismological attentiveness to the tiniest details’ (Royle 2003, p. 25). To put something ‘under the microscope’, typically implies ‘looking’ through an instrument at something small or invisible to the naked eye. However in this research, this is not necessarily the case. The metaphor is employed more broadly and beyond the process of looking at something in close detail, to include ‘listening’ closer, or ‘smelling’ or simply ‘sensing’ with greater attention and deliberateness. This process of ‘sensing in detail’ is a process of intervening in the dominant ways of thinking about and perceiving the subject or site under investigation. ‘Dominant’ is meant here as the normative ways of Western propositional logic upon which productionist metaphysics is founded. Undertaking a biopsy of the city body involves not only close examination of the ‘tissue’ that has been removed, but also examination of the site as it exists post-removal.

Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project (1927-1940) exhibits several parallels with the process of biopsy. Benjamin investigated nineteenth century city life in Paris via a strategy of micrology, ‘…the close-up focus on specific phenomenon the nineteenth-century arcades, but with a view to uncovering a more general social and cultural logic’ (Prendergast in Caws 1991, p. 181). These city/body ecologies signal networked systems, the interdependence of things, their intertextual dimension rather than objects that exist in isolation. Reviewing art practice that explored the city, it became evident that often artworks were like samples, only ever capable of communicating a partial aspect of the city. In this they resembled biopsies taken from a living body – able to be viewed independently but inevitably perceived within constantly changing, interdependent networks. Paradoxically each ‘biopsy of absence’ is perceived as a type of presence, purely by being identified and necessarily named through language. This paradox evidences the interconnected (sometimes problematic), always existing (inter)play between absence and presence, a dynamic resulting from the differential movement between signs. This exchange is aptly described by Lao Tzu, ‘…the being of one thing is always made possible by the non-being of another thing’ (Chang 1956, p. 59) and aligns with Derrida’s neverending differential movement in a chain of signifiers.

Challenges of the biopsy methodology

Though a biopsy is typically undertaken when there is concern of disease or abnormality in the body, it is important to state that this is not the criteria for its application in my research. Others have considered the urban environment may have qualities of, or be an expression of, ‘sickness’ that requires healing or curing, this is not what I am suggesting. Nor am I pathologising the city by identifying areas of ‘sickness’ or ‘disease’.

I acknowledge that medical tools, steel implements, cutting and stitching - associated with biopsy - may bring to mind sterilised environments, hard surfaces and coldly impersonal, perhaps physically painful experiences. As a result of these associations, those outside the medical profession may negatively perceive the biopsy process. However, I am not applying the aesthetic and tools of the process in studio work. Therefore, it has proved unnecessary to actively manage this perception during the project other than to specify in this text that I am applying biopsy purely as a procedural, methodological research tool to facilitate the identification and analyses of absence in the city.

Through employing the methodology of a biopsy I have highlighted the hierarchical term embedded in the knowledge system of the city – healthy/diseased. Consideration of the supplement in these hierarchies plays a role in my process, disrupting entrenched perceptions of each city as well as my own personal pre-conceptions and perceptions. This approach contrasts with the adoption of the medical analogy in urban planning that extends into more analytical and diagnostic territory, often with a more literal application of the term.

The term ‘organism’, though widely used in urban theory and related discourse, has also at times proved problematic. It has been argued that the city is not organic or self-regulating and is therefore the descriptive term ‘organism’ is misleading (Lynch 1960, Kostof 1999, Rykwert 2002). In this research, regardless of whether the city is technically an organism, it is useful in establishing the city as a living entity, as a process, always in flux.

Throughout the research the methodological metaphor of biopsy has been further challenged by the paradox of taking a ‘sample’ of ‘absence’. How can one undertake a biopsy of something that is ‘non-existent’? Derrida’s concept of the supplement addresses this paradox - every present contains the trace of an absence and the biopsy is extracted from a chain of signifiers that sign absence.
3.3.3 Biopsies of the city in art practice

The following artists practice demonstrates the action of biopsy as it can be applied to content, materiality and analysis of the urban. A number of artists could be said to undertake some or all of these actions in their work, some more literally than others. I include these artists to demonstrate that the biopsy process has much to offer as a procedural method in an art based practice-led research project.

In his Dialogue and Demolition series (ongoing since 1993), Chinese artist Zhang Dali (b.1963) intervenes in the urban landscape of Beijing in an attempt to generate dialogue around the rapid urbanization of the city. He spray paints a silhouette of a head on buildings marked for demolition. He then undertakes his own demolition process by removing sections of the building within the head shape creating a vignette to reveal and frame the adjacent buildings and landscape. In doing so Dali inserts his own trace into the city through his identifiable line work and through the creation of an absence. In doing so he makes visible relationships at play in the urban environment.

Similarly, in works such as Conical Intersect (1975) and Days End (Pier 52) (1952), Gordon Matta-Clark critiqued the urban environment through physical interventions of cutting and removing sections of buildings. Whilst his work was also a social/political comment on urban space, his relevance to this research lie in both the making and the display of the artwork. Employing a deconstructive strategy, Matta-Clark intervenes in the existing hierarchy by making the supplement explicit.

Conversely, French artists Jacques de la Villeglé (b.1926) and Raymond Hains (1926-2005) and Americans Robert Rauschenberg and Joseph Cornell extract from the urban environment to display in the gallery. De la Villeglé and Hains cut and removed layers of advertising material from the surfaces of Paris. Subsequently displayed in the gallery as artwork, their content is inseparable from the street. The trace or contribution of multiple authors or city dwellers in the works has been termed ‘collaborations after the fact’ (Museum of Modern Art New York, Exhibition 2011). In these works, time and place are in deferral. Both artists apply a deconstructive strategy in their practice. They displace the normative viewing environment of the street, by exhibiting media and content from the street in the ‘white cube’ gallery space. The works, as supplement and trace, bring the street into the gallery and the gallery into the street.

Rauschenberg’s investigations and representations of Lower Manhattan urban environment during the 1960s and 70s are relevant for the content of the biopsy rather than the action of cutting. Rauschenberg undertakes what could be considered a biopsy, isolating aspects of the urban environment within his Combine series (beginning 1954) for further viewer contemplation. Through re-contextualising materials and forms gathered in the urban environment he generates a secondary site within the work, a site that activates a space between art and life yet is at one with both. The underlying compositional strategy in this artwork exhibits a trace of the city’s architecture and street grid. This, in combination with the materiality of the city evidenced...
through found objects and detritus, supplies a haptic experience for the viewer.

The practice of American artist Joseph Cornell draws on similar themes to this research - walking and flaneurie, science and art. Arguably each of Cornell’s ‘box’ assemblages can be considered a kind of ‘biopsy from the city body’ and can be deciphered and contextualised in relation to the living city of New York. Jodi Hauptman explains:

…Cornell, whose historical research took place in New York City’s streets. Like the landscape painter who goes out into the country to make sketches for paintings, for Cornell, wandering or flaneurie itself was very much part of the artistic process. Ambling through squares and down avenues, Cornell collected scraps, placing them into small vials. To commemorate the moment of discovery, he would add a note indicating the date and location, sometimes also scrawling a short impression of the place or time. This glass enclosed trace is the result of Cornell’s multifaceted efforts, as artist, natural scientist, archivist, and flaneur (Hauptman 1999, p. 58).

Each selected object carries traces of the city and through the composition of each assemblage Cornell establishes new connections between objects, site and objects, and in turn a new conceptualization of New York. Considering the city as body has foregrounded the notion of the city as a fluid research site, from which one can ‘extract’ biopsies of absence. The biopsy process is not limited to sight, but prompts one to ‘sense’ something in close detail, with greater attention and deliberateness. Each of the aforementioned artists has undertaken ‘biopsy like’ actions and made visible relationships already at play in the urban environment. In this research I argue that the process of biopsy therefore offers potential to identify sites of absence in each city and then closely analyse those samples through investigations in studio practice.

3.4 Experiencing the city through the body: an embodied methodology

I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the façade of the cathedral, where it roams over mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.

(Pallasmaa 2005, p. 40)

When ‘Ego’ arrives in an unknown country or city, he first experiences it through every part of his body – through his senses of smell and taste, as (provided he does not limit this by remaining in his car) through his legs and feet. His hearing picks up new voices, and the quality of the voices; his eyes are assailed by new impressions. For it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived – and produced.

(Lefebvre 1974, p. 162)

3.4.1 The Body in the City

This research values knowledge gathered not only through what is perceived through sight, but what is perceived through the body. A perceptual encounter with the city is complex, multisensory and locomotive. Amongst many things – scale, mass, touch, motion, atmosphere, ambience, bodily consciousness in response to positive and negative space and awareness of relationships between body and space – each contribute to the city/body exchange shaping our perceptions.

The phenomenological philosophical approach (after Husserl and Heidegger) articulated by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, encourages us to ‘rediscover and articulate’ ordinary experience in a way that is conscious of the role of the senses in perception (Baldwin 2007). However, this approach does not mean that the senses operate in isolation, or that the body is separate from or dominant over the mind. Merleau-Ponty claims ‘that the mind is inseparable from our bodily situated and physical nature’. He argues ‘that to be realised sensation needs to be “overlaid by a body of knowledge”: it cannot exist in a pure form’ (Pink 2009, p. 26). Of Merleau-Ponty, Jay writes

[H]e frequently emphasised the imbrication of the senses, each of which creates its own perceived world and at the same time contributes to an integrated world experience…. He refused to degrade vision and connect it with allegedly base human functions, but he certainly sought to level the traditional sensual hierarchy and question the elevation of site above all other senses. In particular, the role of touch needed emphasis…” (Jay 1993, p. 510)
The relevance of an immersive methodology rests in its capacity to identify a diversity of sensory data so we know more, experience more and understand more about a particular city environment.

A phenomenological approach is incompatible with this study’s overarching philosophical framework of deconstruction, which aims to displace the conceptualization and representation of a city through ‘presence’. Jay writes, ‘According to Derrida, phenomenology’s reliance on the primacy of perception led it to posit the possibility of immediacy, which privileged presence over other temporal modes’ (Jay 1993, p. 499). He explains, ‘Phenomenology’s fatal implication in the metaphysical tradition was reinforced by another fallacy besides reliance on visual presence: its equally problematic faith in the primacy of the voice over writing’ (Jay 1993, p. 501). Nevertheless, addressing this contradiction, Merleau-Ponty posits that a phenomenological approach is not constrained by the binary of mind/body. He insists on ambiguity, since ‘the body-subject is never entirely present-to-itself’ (Reynolds n.d). Jack Reynolds argues that ‘Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on ambiguity, if consistently adhered to, would seem capable of refuting various readings of him that assert that he is overly preoccupied with presence (Reynolds n.d). These textual comments draw attention to the problematics of certainty with regard to any philosophical approach, and indeed Derrida never saw his theoretical ideas as ‘objects’ that could be taken up and used indiscriminately. Thus in terms of my research any methodological approach calls for my acknowledgement of its capacity for problematisation.

3.4.2 Walking; method, art practice and mapping

Walking shares with making and working that crucial element of engagement of the body and the mind with the world, of knowing the world through the body and the body through the world (Solnit 2001, p. 29).

…these trips established the expedition as one of [Robert]Smithson’s fundamental artistic methods (Roberts 2004).

Walking as method

Walking is an inescapable part of our everyday life world, an active mode of perceiving assisted by the senses, a mode of experiencing place, is an embodied practice with lived qualities, a purposeful activity, a temporal and rhythmical practice, a creative and critical spatial practice (Matos Wunderlich 2008, p. 125). Walking is a way to trace a line across the landscape, it is form of expression, an instrument of phenomenological knowledge and a form of psychogeographical reading (Careri 2002, p. 11). Through the act of walking new connections are made and remade, physically and conceptually, over time and through space (Rendell 2006, p. 190).

Walking features in and contributes to, amongst others, the disciplines of ethnography, sociology, religious studies and the creative fields of literature and art. In this research, walking has been employed as a method specifically because it offers these qualities. Walking is also haptic, a ‘literal grounding of perception through the feet as a muscular consciousness’ (Middleton 2004). The very nature of walking, relatively slow and in contact with the ground, challenges the normative experience of the (globalized) city shaped by speed and spectacle. Artists employing walking as a method have articulated the figure of the flâneur and practice of psychogeography, of which the dérive is a key feature.

As a way of experiencing the urban, the flâneur is the defining practice (and character) emerging from the poetry and cultural criticism of Charles Baudelaire (Kramer & Rennie Scott 2011). The original flâneur ‘was an iconic figure apparently wandering at leisure through the passages of rapidly growing, industrializing cities of the 19th century’ (Kramer & Rennie Scott 2011). Kramer & Rennie Scott state ‘The prevalent scholarly construction of the artist-flâneur for most of the 20th century’ was ocular. The flâneur possessed a ‘mobility of the gaze’ epitomizing the modern consumers eye and action and gaze of both the camera and cinema (Kramer & Rennie Scott 2011, p. 324).
An urban walk, as phenomenological experience, was one of the key tactical methods of the Situationist International. Their method of psychogeography involved ‘the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals’ (Knabb 2007). Such walks are concerned not only with looking, but a conscious and total engagement of the body with the environment. Guy Debord (1931-1954) developed the practice of dérive to navigate the urban environment. ‘Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll’ (Knabb 2007). Psychogeography and the practice of dérive have inspired innumerable groups and walking-based activities in the contemporary urban environment. For example, the Centre for Sensory Studies at Canada's Concordia University hosted a walking focused workshop entitled *The Sensory City Workshop: Sensing the City through Taste and Touch*. Rome based architectural walking group 'Stalker' walk the city to 'bring spaces into being'. They view the action as 'a collective mode of expression and a tool for mapping the city and its transformations, of gathering stories, evoking memories and experiences, and immersing themselves with others in a place'.

The most obvious is perhaps a leisurely stroll, but there is also walking as a form of protest, as a tourist itinerary, as pilgrimage and as commute. Again, these diverse and everyday ways of moving through the 'living' city also produce it.

The nature of my research/walking being based in three culturally diverse cities, raised two additional considerations: the *flâneur* as a gender based concept and the *flâneur* in the globalized city. Of the three cities it was only in New York that I was truly anonymous. In Shanghai, my Western appearance, rather than my gender separated me from the crowd. In Varanasi, because walking the streets is (still) a predominantly male activity, it was both my foreignness and gender that attracted attention. It is for this very reason - limited access to the public life of the city - that the *flâneur* has tended to be a male figure (Wolff 1985; Wilson 2001; Wolff 2013). However this does not mean that women are excluded from the 'writing of the city text', despite their absence they are a trace that writes the city in its own way. In addition to the economic, political and cultural influences of globalisation, Kramer and Rennie Scott (2011) suggest that 'globalisations inherent interurban quality facilitate another form of *flâneurie* - that of the global nomad - as a process that also serves the conferring of 'globalising' to a city (Kramer & Rennie Scott 2011, p. 337). Nicholas Bourriaud's notion of artist as a semionaut, gathering signs from diverse cultures and locations across the globe to make artworks, could be considered such a practice (Bourriaud 2009, p. 39). Kramer and Rennie Scott (2011) observe that contemporary scholarship prefers the term 'walking practice' than *flâneur* (Kramer & Rennie Scott, 2011, p. 333). I too prefer this term because, though there are commonalities with *flâneur*, my research is attentive to the multisensory city experience and therefore different to the primarily visual practice of the *flâneur* and dérive.

Though not an ethnographic study, this study does draw on ethnographic methods. It has been observed that walking in the company of others, and/or directed by others, opens ways
of perceiving site beyond the standard ethnographic observation and/or interview methods. In *Sensory Ethnography* (2009) Sarah Pink observes, ‘The idea that walking with others - sharing their step, style and rhythm - creates an affinity, empathy, sense of belonging with them has long been acknowledged by ethnographers’ (Pink 2009, p. 77). The action of walking engages both the ethnographer / researcher and participants in a multisensory experience of place and through this embodied awareness a greater understanding, of both site and research participants, is made possible.

Walking in art practice

Careri reflects, ‘Only in the last century has the journey-path freed itself to the constraints of religion and literature to assume the status of a pure aesthetic act’ (Careri 2002, p. 20).

These are the passages from Dada to Surrealism (1921-1924), from the Lettrist International to the Situationist International (1956-1957), and from Minimal Art to Land Art (1966-1967). By analyzing these episodes we simultaneously obtain a history of the roamed city that goes from the banal city of Dada to the entropic city of Robert Smithson, passing through the unconscious and onietic city of the Surrealists and the playful and nomadic city of the Situationists (Careri 2002, p. 21).

The creative practice that engages with walking embraces diverse approaches and documentation, engaging with the real time experience, its materiality and its curation and exhibition in the gallery. Belgian Francis Alÿs both delineates and expresses a haptic experience of the city by undertaking such actions such as pushing a block of ice through the streets until it melts into nothing (Paradox of Praxis (Sometimes making something leads to nothing) (Mexico City 1997) and trailing a stick across the metal fences dividing public and private space (Railings, 2004). In *Passing Through: New York* (1996) and *Passing Through: Beijing* (2000), Chinese artist Wang Peng conceals a ball of string in his jacket and literally ‘takes the line for a walk’. Through making the bodily trace tangible, Peng highlights the connection between the body and its path through the city.

Rather than immersion, Chinese artist Yang Fudong (b.1971) in *Citylight (Chengshi Zhiguang)* (2000) and American artist Doug Aitken (b.1968) in *Sleepwalkers* (2007) have based artworks on the filming of others daily walking routines and rhythms in a ‘generic’ city, and in New York, respectively.

Following the walking route of others has taken both touristic and political forms, sometimes both. For example, performance artists, Marina Abramovic and Ulay in *The Lovers – The Great Wall Walk* (1988) and Francis Alÿs walking a length of the ‘green Line’ in Jerusalem, a political gesture that was the content for the artwork, *The Green Line* (2004). Mona Hatoum’s *Performance Still* (1985,1995) of the artist walking the streets of Brixton with Doc Marten boots tied to her feet is a symbol of the police and skinheads domination of those streets. Vito Acconci’s *Following*
because it is a practice of whole body engagement and a way of producing or writing the city, is an alternative mapping technique and therefore a method to deconstruct normative ways of representing the urban.

In this Chapter my aim was to contextualise the selected research methods - practice-led research, biopsy and the embodied method of walking. The overall deconstructive methodology, informs their selection. An interdisciplinary trace in the arts based approach supplies an intertextual exchange between methods applied to gather and analyse data in the studio. The application of a procedural method from medicine foregrounds the ‘city as body’ and encourages an awareness of the interconnectedness of each biopsy of absence to that city body. This process of ‘sensing in detail’ is one way of disrupting the dominant approach of conceptualizing the city only through the ‘spectacle’ and the image. Walking was selected as a way to gather these biopsies because it is a ‘whole body engagement’ with site. These methods are selected to maximise the potential of a deconstructive approach at each stage of the project and through that process address the objectives of the research; to identify new understandings of absence in urban space and understand how contemporary art practice can facilitate that process.

Walkers such as Police (1969) and Sophie Calle’s Suite Vénitienne (1980-96) employ detective-like strategies to track strangers through the city streets. Solnit observes, ‘these pieces explored the cities potential for suspicion, curiosity and surveillance arising from the connections and disconnections between strangers on the street (Solnit 2001, p. 273). In this process both artists surrender their own navigational decision-making and instead navigate by following others. When the viewer engages with the work of Janet Cardiff it is participatory in nature. In her ‘artist sound walks’ she guides the participant through urban spaces such as the Kassel (Country) train station, Central Park, NY, and The Rocks, in Sydney city through video and sound. Each of these practices demonstrates the capacity of walking to activate and reveal qualities of place through haptic methods and beyond what is visible to sight.

In my research, walking is a method in making the artwork. Because the action of walking is not the subject or purpose of the artwork, it is not documented and presented as such. Instead, the action of walking permits the experiencing/immersion of site and the gathering and recording of data with relatively minimal engagement with other city inhabitants.

Walking as a form of mapping
In The Production of Space (1974) Henri Lefebvre asks, ‘How many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meanings and contents? Lefebvre observes that complexity and multisensory aspects of social space are commonly reduced to a two-dimensional representation. In this process all the impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing, are displaced by the visual realm (Lefebvre 1974, p. 286).

Many artists could be said to map the city into being through their practice. Cardiff’s audio walks through major cities ‘ground the listeners body physically’ in the landscape (O’Rourke 2013, p. 40). They are ‘immersive and engage vision, smell, and proprioception as much as listening (O’Rourke 2013, p. 39). Both Richard Long and Hamish Fulton undertake walks where the resulting gallery work can be considered a map that exceeds the two dimensional limitations. Fulton undertakes walks and documents his journey through textual works or single images, rather than gallery installs of material. Fulton claims, ‘Facts for the walker, fictions for the viewer’ (Cumming 2012) and this articulates an absence – both literal and conceptual – between site and gallery. Similar to Longs practice, there is space ‘left’ in the presentation of these walks to imagine the landscape walked. ‘This absence in the presentation engages the viewer through the body and one imagines not only a visual of the landscape but movement through the landscape. The aforementioned artists to some extent rectify a tendency to reduce a multisensory encounter to a 2d map (as described by Lefebvre) by foregrounding the body and communicating the multisensory possibilities of site. Each also intervenes in its rhythms which serves to destabilise existing ways of perceiving site. These artists use their own body, the viewer’s body or focus on the bodies of others, and by doing so broaden the discourse of representations of the city. Walking,
CHAPTER 4.0
STAGE 1: FIELDWORK AND BIOPSIES

4.1 Walking each city and identifying biopsies

I travelled to New York in October 2011 and October 2013, to Varanasi in March/April 2012, and to Shanghai in April/May 2012 and August 2014. Prior to embarking on fieldwork, I researched each city’s historical background and current situation (political, economic, social, cultural) and tentatively decided the geographical locale I might focus on during fieldwork. In designating the site areas I attempted to include a cross section of what contributed to each city’s unique identity - landmarks, geographical features, but also qualities that spoke to the focus of the research - the absence-presence dynamic. It is important to disclose that I had already been to two of the three selected cities – Varanasi in 2003, New York every two years over the past decade. I had not yet travelled to China.

In Sensuous Geographies. Bodies, Sense and Place (1994), Paul Rodaway breaks down a ‘haptic experience’ into a ‘haptic system’ that can be used to identify ‘particular features of the environment and experience a geography of spaces and places distinct character’ (Rodaway 2004, p. 48). These prompts proved useful in my own ‘haptic focused’ fieldwork. They included considerations of surface (texture, details), geometry (shape, dimension, proportion, arrangement), material (mass, weight), location (distance from us and relative to our body), energy (temperature, relative humidity) and dynamic (vibration, locomotion within objects and in relation to our own body) (Rodaway 1994, p. 48). Building on this structure and prior to departure, I assembled a ‘sense chart’ as a tool to prompt awareness of the multisensory during the walking of each city. Referencing this chart permitted an examination of each city across the spectrum of senses, revealing particular sensorial qualities significant in their contribution to the overall ambience of the city, but sometimes absent from our awareness in a visually dominated experience of the physical environment.

Fig.39 Walking (New York, 2011) Video stills.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGHT</th>
<th>SMELL</th>
<th>HEARING</th>
<th>TOUCH</th>
<th>TASTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ocular</td>
<td>Olfactory</td>
<td>Auditory</td>
<td>Haptic</td>
<td>Taste buds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Traffic</td>
<td>Temperature</td>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Petrol</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>Taste 'materials'</td>
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<td>Pattern</td>
<td>Markets</td>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Texture</td>
<td>Smell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colour</td>
<td>Spices</td>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>Shadow / light</td>
<td>Materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Dirt</td>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Gravity / weight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contour</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Streets</td>
<td>Density</td>
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<tr>
<td>Profile</td>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>Architectural</td>
<td>Weather</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shape</td>
<td>Plants</td>
<td>Day / night</td>
<td>Vibration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface</td>
<td>Architectural space</td>
<td>Voice</td>
<td>Locomotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light / Dark</td>
<td>Song</td>
<td>Energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solid / Transparency</td>
<td>Distance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aerial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>Order / Disorder</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*These subjects are prompts only and are indicative of the types of biopsy content one may encounter and choose to record during walks of the city. Each subject is not exclusive to one sense but may embody some or all of the senses.*
Sarah Pink writes ‘[The] modern western five-sense sensorium can offer useful analytical categories that might lead us to understand embodied knowledge and practice’ (Pink 2009, p. 126). Pink argues that when an ethnographic researcher walks a particular site, undertaking a form of participatory exchange, they should reject ‘the assumptions that the visual would be the most dominant or most important sense in either everyday life or research practice’ (Pink 2009, p. 79). One should not be limited to ‘western sensory categories’ but instead be open to the ‘sensory categories that are in play in the culturally specific context in which one is researching’ (Pink 2009, p. 80). This approach underpins my own walking and gathering of data in each city.

Rodaway identifies four kinds of touch ‘where each give access to this detailed information – global touch, reach-touch, extended touch and imagined touch’ (Rodaway 2004, p. 48). ‘Global’ touch is the presence of the body in context, a sense of itself within the world – this is related to Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject concept. ‘Reach’ touch is the everyday, touch of the hands and arms, fingers and toes. Active and grounded in intention. ‘Extended’ touch is the touch mediated or enhanced by technology and ‘imagined’ touch is the haptic experience rooted in memory and expectation (Rodaway 2004, p. 49). These definitions proved useful in articulating the different types of touch and absence identified in each city.

In Stage One, I travelled to the cities of New York, Varanasi and Shanghai assuming the role of artist-researcher-tourist, gathering data through the action of biopsy. I drew a one kilometre radius on ‘the body’, the city, demarcating the focus area to be walked and where the biopsies were to be gathered. The one kilometre limit of the site was determined by an area that was achievable to walk in entirety within the allocated timeframe and to be (approximately) replicable in each city. The action of walking permitted exposure to sites of absence suitable for biopsies and each city site required, on average, twelve days walking. On arrival in each city it was essential to simply walk with no set parameters in order to orientate myself and calibrate the official map representation with first-hand experience. Significantly, the walk itself is not a premeditated action to articulate qualities of site, nor is it a way to activate the site through leaving a permanent physical mark or work.

During the process I marked each day’s walk on an individual dated and highlighted map. I made journal notes and recorded video and audio during the walk in response to the criteria in the sense chart, as well as to gather material for direct use in the studio.

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Due to the project methods and parameters and my own cultural background, the sensory focus of this research is limited to the five-sense sensorium underpinning Western theories of the senses. I acknowledge Indian culture in particular has a complex, unified and expanded theory of the senses (six or eleven base senses) shaping environments and cultural practices. Though beyond the scope of this project, the subject appears particularly pertinent in the face of increasing globalization and the impact of Western sensory theories on both (Indian) urban environments and methods of representation in art practice. For a comparison between Indian and Western theories of the senses see Michaels and Wulf (2014).
In addition to the limit of one kilometer, the limit of ten biopsies per city was set as the quantity to be gathered in each city. This limit was tentatively based on the notion of two biopsies per sense. Though it quickly became apparent on the first day of walking New York that such a neat or balanced allocation was unrealistic. The quantity however remained ‘as is’ because it allowed for the inclusion of a diversity of biopsies and was an adequate quantity for investigation in the studio within the timeframe of the project. It however, must be noted that these are pragmatic limitations and that the notion of a complete or comprehensive quality is a Derridean impossibility.

The cross-cultural nature of my research across three different locations means the data gathered is diverse. In *The Radicant* (2009) Nicholas Bourriaud discusses artists who reference multiple cultures in their practice emphasising the role of the sign in the creation of artwork. He states:

> [W]hat these artists aim for is not to accumulate heterogeneous elements, but to make meaningful connections in the infinite text of world culture. In a word, to produce itineraries in the landscape of signs by taking on the role of semionauts, inventors of pathways within the cultural landscape, nomadic sign gatherers (Bourriaud 2009, p. 39).

On return from each fieldwork trip, I assembled the primary source material gathered of the site (journal notes, maps, images, audio and film) and revisited each of the identified biopsies, in an effort to finalise ten for each site. I found the journals an incredibly useful resource because of their detail, reflecting on the broader sensory experience, prompted by categories in the sense chart. Without the journals, I believe the images and video may have overwhelmed, and eventually replaced, the memory of this experiential quality of the city. Details, which at the time seemed inconsequential, took on greater importance through consideration and reflection back in the studio. Without these journals I would have struggled to retrieve this level of detail and information. Throughout the entire research process – both making and writing – I revisited this material, mining for information that might inform my process, or redirect the work. While the journal notes for New York are mostly only about New York, I occasionally project on what the same observation / event / object might manifest (if at all) in the other two city’s. In contrast, in the Varanasi journal, there are often comparisons to New York. In this respect, New York has to some extent laid the groundwork for how the other two cities were reflected on and analysed. Conversely, the New York journal notes were later reviewed in light of observations in Varanasi and Shanghai. As such, the cities were constantly differing and deferring to each other in my thoughts and perceptions, as well as through the documentary materials.

At the beginning of the research process, I imagined that each of the 30 biopsies would result in a related artwork. However, whilst this was a starting point, the process proved much narrower and deeper. That is, rather than artworks for every biopsy, instead, a number of biopsies have been investigated in depth. These were the biopsies that resonated most with me as an artist, but their final number was also shaped by what was achievable within the time constraints of the project. I consider each of the biopsies a rich resource for further art practice, which could be pursued beyond the temporal limitations of this doctorate project. As such, the fieldwork, the methodology
and methods, and the biopsies ‘stand alone’ as an outcome of the research process, addressing my first research question - *In what ways does absence manifest in the cities of New York, Varanasi and Shanghai?* By ‘stand alone’ I am not denying them inevitable supplementarity to the other research questions, merely acknowledging that, though many are not pursued further in studio practice, they still contain key findings of the research project.

4.2 Biopsies in each city

The aim of this section is to communicate in what ways absence manifest in the cities of New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China). The identification of biopsies of sites of absence can be understood as the first step in a deconstructive strategy. Prior to undertaking fieldwork, absence was perceived as an absence of physical mass (New York), absence linked to ritual and belief (Varanasi) and absence as on-going process both physical and cultural (Shanghai). The following is a brief outline of how absence manifest in each city, however, each biopsy is outlined in greater detail in Appendix A.

As mentioned in the introduction, the 9/11 memorial in New York, named ‘Reflecting Absence’, appeared to encapsulate the paradox at the centre of my research: that something can be a dominant presence, despite being physically and visually absent. And though a powerful experience, the commercialisation of 9/11 event via the experience of the memorial and museum, means that absence is predominantly expressed through an on going process of memorial messaging. Navigating the site with an awareness of the toxic dust still affecting survivors of 9/11 introduced atmosphere as a manifestation of absence at the site. Traces of the 9/11 event around the perimeter of the site, in the adjacent Trinity Chapel and in smaller impromptu memorials, supplied a more intimate manifestation of absence. This Chapel, and the Trinity Church located close by, provided a calm and restful space in the more chaotic city. These sites contain sites of absence through their ‘official’ graveyards. Perhaps because death had been identified as an absence in Varanasi, I was more conscious of its manifestation across the New York site. This biopsy drew attention to other unmarked graves throughout the rest of the city site, particularly the recently discovered African Burial Ground that holds over 15000 free and enslaved African graves. Historical traces are evident along the waters edge, where the legacy of the waterfront industry manifests through the sawn timber pylons projecting from the water. The wear and tear of these materials drew attention to the material slickness of the surrounding architectural environment. These buildings exhibit minimal trace of time or history in their materials and conceal their occupants from view. This observation revealed two additional biopsies of absence - reflection and surveillance. The latter is pervasive across the site, particularly at Zucotti Park, the site of the Wall Street Protests that occurred during my visit. Due to related security concerns Wall Street was ‘shut down’ during my stay and the unnatural quiet and the absence of people presented as another
biopsy. Physical absences such as the underpass of FDR drive and the ‘above’ and ‘below’ experience of the subway provided two very different manifestations of absence, identified through the body. The many vending carts throughout the city highlighted how transient structures are a functional and necessary supplement to the city’s permanent infrastructure. Finally shadows, considered ephemeral traces across the ‘urban skin’, highlighted again how atmosphere is a significant factor in our haptic encounter in New York.

Death can be understood as supplement to life and Varanasi is a city that celebrates death, which is for many non-Hindus the definitive absence. This biopsy of absence proved to be a particularly rich resource for studio investigations. It is inseparable from the haptic experience of this city and was the reason for the identification of other sites of absence identified during fieldwork. For example; pilgrimage routes throughout the city are invisible to me yet they structure daily city social cycles and the physical absences that manifest through the transient religious structures littering the rivers edge. The city walls exhibit traces of past celebratory festivals and they are marked with signs of religious devotion via the many iconographic Hindu paintings. These walls are a canvas for spiritual expression but also for the city’s main commercial focus - the retailing of related souvenirs and silks. In contrast to the photographically driven retail advertising of New York (and most modern cities), the retailers in Varanasi hand paint the city walls with their sales pitch. As a result, the haptic experience of the city is incredibly different. This observation led to the absence of photography (absent from a western perspective) being identified as a biopsy of absence. The women and the widows of Varanasi are social biopsies of absence identified through walking the site. Both can be considered marginalised within the broader city population for a variety of reasons. For example women are absent from many everyday rituals such as freely walking and socialising on the street and widows are absent from all celebratory or religious rituals due to their social status. The maps of the city also reveal and exhibit absences through their selective marking of sites throughout the city. Though the city has a long history of Muslim presence and supports an active and visible contemporary Muslim community, a number of maps portray the city as overwhelmingly Hindu. The biopsies of absence identified in Varanasi tended to focus on what might be considered absences in the social sphere. This observation was a key shift in extending the perception of what constitutes absence in urban space.

In Shanghai the constant demolition and construction of the physical structures of the city was the biopsy of absence identified prior to undertaking fieldwork. This architectural trace was common to a number of absences identified across the site. For example: the proliferation of massive construction sites, the trace of the ‘old city’ wall which impacts current urban planning, the historical trace of the international racecourse now the Peoples Park and the trace of the foreigner manifest in the buildings of the Bund. The material presence in architecture is based on absence, is also evident in the trace of the demolished historical buildings, relocation of communities and construction of new buildings by the unregistered workers. These workers are made up of the floating population, a marginalised social group identified as a site of absence. These itinerant workers comprise the main labour force driving the rapid building of the city’s architecture. Though this social group contributes significantly to shaping the city, they are undocumented in the city population registered statistics. The modern compounds being developed, though perceived as modern and progressive, supply a form of ‘silo living’ that manifests an absence of social interaction at street level. The clotheslines spanning the narrow laneways in older parts of the city contribute to a distinctive city aesthetic and display clothes that are supplement to the human body, deferring to an absent presence. The air pollution, a biopsy of absence often dominating the haptic experience of the site, had a significant impact on the way the city was revealed to me. Despite the Pudong skyline often being concealed by pollution, one could still sense its presence across the water despite its visual absence. This skyline can also be considered a site of absence. Arguably, it is the consummate experience of Shanghai, but in order to experience it, one is necessarily absent, located on the opposite riverbank.

Through fieldwork, attention to the overlooked, deemphasized or suppressed aspects in three diverse cities, revealed a diversity of sites of absence. The range of these absences extended the perception of what constitutes absence in urban space because, in addition to physical voids, they included absences such as death, air quality, gender, minority groups, ritual, pilgrimage, mapping, skylines, surveillance, transient structures and historical uses of site.
CHAPTER 5.0
STAGE 2: STUDIO INVESTIGATIONS

This chapter is set out in the order the fieldwork was undertaken with sections dedicated to New York, Varanasi and then Shanghai. Within each section, in order to answer the second research question, In what ways can contemporary art practice investigate these identified absences to generate new perceptions of absence in each city, I contextualize and discuss the artworks created in response to specific biopsies of absence and/or the data collection process itself. The artworks, though city specific (except for one), were not necessarily completed before another begun. A number of works were processed simultaneously. This process was not undertaken in a linear sequence, but a series of forward steps, side steps and double backs, to achieve the final work. The works should be read relationally, rather than comparatively, as there is potential for new knowledge in the connections (rather than judgments) between the different absences identified in each city. There is also potential in understanding the different applications of a deconstructive approach in both the fieldwork and studio practice. Though images of each work are referenced in the text, the ADR provides evidence of the process and acts as a necessary supplement to a textual reading of the following chapter.

5.1 New York
The biopsies identified in New York offer a diversity of absence - physical, historical, social and sensory. The World Trade Centre (WTC) site, the absence identified prior to travelling has over time, become ‘One WTC.’ This complex comprises two new towers on the original site and a 9/11 memorial within the building footprints of the original towers. During each daily walk I utilised the aforementioned sense chart to identify those multisensory aspects of site that might be at play. Surprisingly, this revealed a fairly limited range of both smells and sounds across the
designated site. Smells consist mainly of garbage and petrol and sounds, mainly of road traffic and the ambient noise of air conditioning units. The city street ‘concrete canyons’ and the ‘above’ and ‘below’ ground experience of the subway, are distinctive ‘whole body’ engagements.

The following artworks, by focusing on the supplement, reveal absences already at play on the ‘urban skin’. By undertaking a personal and haptic mapping of the site, new ways of reading the city text and, in turn, new ways of mapping the city beyond normative cartographic conventions, became possible.

Walking series (2012)

During my fieldwork in New York I used an iPhone to record a number of ‘walking videos’ of many sites across the city. I recorded the first ‘walking video’ by accident. Walking down Barclay Street in Lower Manhattan I heard the sound of sirens and jack hammering and it struck me as ‘typically’ New York, what Arkette might describe as the New York community's unique ‘sonic profile’ (Arkette 2004, p. 162). In response to hearing what I believed was a ‘typical’ New York sound, I had immediately reached for my phone to record, holding it at waist height as I walked. Because I was not concerned about capturing a visual, only sound, I was not thinking about what was being recorded or framed by the screen. I recorded until it became relatively quiet again, stopping when I thought I had adequately captured these sounds. I did not listen to the audio recording immediately, and it was only later, when I listened in the quiet of the apartment that I realised I had recorded in the movie mode - sound and moving image. The position of the screen, facing down to the pavement had recorded aspects of the city that I could not see during each walk. The city contained a multitude of surfaces and intersecting gradients. I viewed the footage and was struck by the rhythm and contact of my feet on these different surfaces and the traces of others archived on the pavement surface. Rather than the sound, the rhythm of my walk suggested a greater potential to deconstruct normative ways of representing the city. Inverting the plane and viewing the footage on the wall opens the ground surface of the city to an experience of a moving landscape.

Though I was the one walking, the qualities and content in the frame were absent from my immediate experience, because, necessarily, I was always looking ahead to see where I was going. In a Derridean sense, the footage is evidence of a supplementary aspect of my experience and through it I am able to access an extra dimension of my experience, one that could not have been captured through any other means. I am both in the moment and supplementary to it.

Walking (2012) focuses on the urban skin - the quotidian traces and overlooked surfaces of the city where one can recover a history of the ‘lived’ city currently absent from the discourse. Madalina Diaconu writes of the ‘skin of the city’, the haptic and thermal qualities of materials in the urban environments and our tactile and kinesthetic perception of them (Diaconu 2011, p. 8). My feet on
Walking (New York, 2012) Still 1, 2.

Walking (New York, 2012) Video. Installation view Building 50 RMIT.
the footpath formed a haptic connection with the city of New York, what Rodaway would classify an instance of both ‘global touch’ and ‘reach touch’. Rebecca Solnit writes, ‘If the body is the register of the real, then reading with one’s feet is real in a way reading with ones eyes alone is not’ (Solnit 2001, p. 70). This ‘urban skin’ became a feature of subsequent videos, where walking the ‘skin of the city’ is akin to a caress (Dianaconu 2011, p. 14). The rhythm of my walk, the stopping and starting, the gradient and terrain, proposes a haptic connection with the viewer, bringing them along in a ‘bodily sense’, rather than just visually. Henri Lefebvre defined the term *rhythmanalysis* as an attempt to attend to the experiential side of urban life recruiting all the senses for doing this (Highmore 2005, p. 12). The absence of any editing or alteration on speed of the footage maintains a ‘real time’ rhythm.

David Howes observes that if we think of the city as a body, then we can scan and skim the surfaces of the city to learn about its past (Howes et al, 2012-13, part 1). Whilst the surfaces of city contain traces of the past, they are also marked for future action and access. Dianaconu observes, ‘no sooner do we switch our perceptive mindset to a “tactile look” that we discover innumerable examples of tactile features, such as textures, fissures or membraneous surfaces’ (Dianaconu 2011, p. 17). Similarly, I discovered this method of recording and projection served to isolate previously unnoticed surfaces of the city within the frame - not dissimilar to the process of a biopsy - zoomed in and focused. One must imagine the city space outside the frame, based on the trace. Through focusing on the supplement, this work goes some way to deconstructing the dominance (presence) of aerial views and built environments featured in artwork of and about New York.

In his essay *Walking in the City* (1984) Michel De Certeau describes that to be ‘lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center’ is to be ‘lifted out of the city’s grasp’. It is to be removed from the city, to be ‘at a distance’, to see the city with the eye rather than experience it with the body. The city becomes a text that can be read. Conversely, the pedestrian subject read/writes the city as an everyday user of place (Collie 2013, p. 3) and *Walking* (2012) could be said to capture this production of urban space.

Though the work is primarily visual, its media – video - introduces both sound and movement engaging the viewer’s body. Martin Jay argues ‘movement [in films] can be tactile, aural, even kinaesthetic as well as visual (Jay 1993, p. 466). Similar to the flyposter extractions of Hains and de Villeglé, the surfaces visible in this work contains various markings by absent individuals, ‘collaborations after the fact’. The footage in *Walking* (2012) made me hyper aware of the surfaces of each city from the remainder of my fieldwork. By focusing on ‘the skin of the city’, and reflecting on the content, I gained a greater understanding of the texture of New York City’s skin and the many ‘tattoos’ on its surface that tell of its past and current status. Here was another form of urban textuality. I also became aware of the shadows of the city and how they provided a graphic overlay or veil over these surfaces. The trace of an absent presence on the urban skin introduced the ‘cycle of the day’, a durational quality for consideration in fieldwork and in the identification of absences in the city.

**Shadow series (2013)**

Drawing on the identification of the shadow as a biopsy of absence, the *Shadow series* (2013) investigates a temporal dimension of absence: that is, ephemeral qualities of the city made possible through the city’s air and atmosphere. In these works, I extract the graphic line work from the video footage, lines made from ‘nothing’, just light and shadow, to generate the composition. This is what Jed Perl describes as the ‘filling of space without filling it’ (Perl 2007, p. 320). The repetitive nature of shadows first became visible in the aforementioned iPhone ‘walking videos’. Through viewing and analyzing the material it became evident there were three, if not four, levels of information available in the captured footage. The ground-surface itself, the line work or spray-painted markings in its construction and then the shadow layered over both these. My own body walking through these shadows provides the final interaction.

These works capture the ‘touch point’ between light and surface, an ephemeral and intertextual relationship. Shadows are the ‘presence of an absence’, a trace on the urban skin. Walking in the city we pass through them and fleetingly, our bodies become integrated and intertwined in the adjacent physical structures. This ‘locomotive ability of the body’ (Rodaway 2004, p. 42) and change of temperature facilitated the haptic experience. These shadows catalogue the miscellany of objects that contribute to the street aesthetic. In the viewing of these works, there is interplay...
Shadows (Chinatown, New York, 2013) Transparency, 30 x 180 cm. Wall mounted.

Shadows (Seaport, East River, New York, 2013) Transparency, 30 x 180 cm. Wall mounted.
between what we see and what is alluded to through the form. The lines exhibit the Derridean play of différance, the shadow as supplement to the adjacent physical structures. The strength and clarity of the forms is determined not only by the strength of the sun but the clarity of the air. This became more evident when I recognized that such shadows were all but absent during my walks in Shanghai.

In a number of the still images the source is decipherable. For example, the twisted wire crisscross of a fence is a relatively generic and recognizable pattern, whereas other lines and shapes could be any number of objects. An existing perception of New York is destabilised through the ambiguous and always unresolved movements between shadowed absence and presence. These works map the atmospheric and durational qualities of the city through a deconstruction of its static, permanent physical forms and surfaces. Amongst others, this intertextual movement has been the thematic focus of artists Uta Barth and Andy Warhol. In works such as *... and to draw a bright white line* with light (Untitled 11.3) (2011), Barth’s subject is light and shadow, her photographic-based practice isolating atmospheric qualities as they manifest in the domestic interior space. In *Shadows* (1978-1979), Warhol abstracts the shadow concealing both the source of, and the surface on, which the shadow rests. Creating 83 screen-printed and painted panels spanning the gallery space, Warhol abstracts the shadow to such an extent that the source of the shadow is unrecoverable. The shadow, an autonomous impossibility, is in play with some ‘thing’ absent and outside the frame. In his art practice, American artist Ellsworth Kelly draws on the shapes and lines of shadows falling across a wall or staircase, with the aim of focusing viewer attention on the relationships between places and objects (Matthew Marks Gallery n.d). In *La Combe II* (1950-51) Kelly abstracts a shadow from the urban landscape, processing this graphic image into an artwork that is evocative of the haptic experience of the site. Perl writes:

Kelly’s abstractions are based on the urban or suburban scene, they’re abstractions of man-made forms, which are abstract to begin with… *La Combe II*, derives from a drawing of shadows on a staircase. Those shadows register as the ghost of the flâneur – the record of a journey up those stairs (Perl 2007, p. 327).

Similarly, in my own work, because the final compositions are constructed from video stills they maintain a feeling of duration and movement, of things absent outside the frame and of the relationship between place, object and the mobile pedestrian.

Kelly believed in the potential of shadows to reveal ‘the relationships between places and objects’. This suggested further investigation of the form and pattern of shadows throughout the contemporary city in an attempt to reveal particular cultural or topographical influences on these traces. In the *Shadow* Series (2013) whilst the shape and pattern of shadows could reasonably be from many cities, through its composition and clarity it is uniquely of this city. New York’s particular atmosphere determines this clarity and whether shadow is possible. Many shadows are generated through temporary structures, such as scaffolding and fencing, and are therefore no longer a feature of the site. This is a secondary play between presence and absence, a trace of a trace.

Gold Paths (2013)

The map of a city can be understood as supplement to the lived experience. In the work, *Gold Paths* (2013), I aimed to displace the purely optical mapping of the city of New York with a personal and haptic mapping. This approach developed not from a particular biopsy, but from the process of documenting the walking routes undertaken in Lower Manhattan. During the fieldwork, I had printed a map on which I would highlight the route that I had taken that day. I also had a ‘master’ page that I would shade in at the end of the day, an image that grew daily, eventually becoming full. At the conclusion of the fieldwork, I generated two sketches. On the left are the streets walked, on the right the streets not walked.
These organic lines displayed a resistance to and destabilisation of the grid, in turn suggesting a line could exhibit traces of an experience. Artist Richard Long’s documentary style of practice provides, ‘not a walk, or even a representation of a walk, only the idea of a walk and an evocation of its location (the map) or one of its views (the photograph)’ (Solnit 2001, p. 271). Similarly, this work displaces the cartographic conventions of orientation and scale and abstracted line opened the viewer to the possibility of imagining the specifics of that walking route.

The streets of New York are intertwined with the ‘myth’ of New York, a place where anything is possible. The familiar immigrant remark provided inspiration for an intertextual material connection:

> I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got here, I found out three things: First, the streets weren’t paved with gold; second, they weren’t paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them (Eye Witness to History 2000).

In response to this idea, I embossed the abstracted paths on brass metallic sheet. I then cut out each of the ten routes and went through various processes testing to see what emerged from the compositions. These include lineal, chronological, cyclical and the material juxtaposition. Initially, similar to the shadow investigations, I was interested in how readily these lines could be identified as being from one city location or another. I progressed to a greater material integration of the routes, referencing the experience of walking and the surfaces of this city by embedding the daily routes in concrete tiles. These partial material signs become traces of a haptic mapping process.

*Gold Paths* (2013) present a line as evidence of my path across the city, to ‘imagine the unseen’ based on what is presented in the gallery (Solnit 2001, p. 271). This lineal, floor-based work was influenced by the aesthetic and haptic qualities in American artist Carl Andre’s modular floor works. Of Andre’s work, Alex Potts observes, ‘This negating of a conventional frontal viewing forces one to engage with the work at a kinaesthetic as well as purely visual level’ (Potts 2001, p. 313). In my work, the viewer engages haptically through the use of materials, gold and concrete. This opens the possibility of interacting in a particular way - that is, undertake the same action that I did - walking and looking. Alex Potts suggests that Andre work is ‘not just about horizontality. It makes its impact through the tension it generates between the flat expanse or horizontal axis it defines and the vertical axis of the viewer’s body’ (Potts 2001, p. 320). Similarly, the linearity of the piece invites the viewer to walk alongside, looking at each pathway embedded in the material. In an effort to maintain a connection to conventional map presentation, the work was to be walked alongside, rather than ‘on top’.

The daily shading of the maps formed an integral part of the daily fieldwork documentation process and suggested a way to disrupt normative ways of mapping the city. These sketches are supplementary to the official map’s city grid and supplementary to the lived experience of the city. Though visual, the installation materially engages the body. The final work deconstructs traditional mapping conventions by mapping a personal, rather than generic, experience (personal as
Goldpaths (New York, 2013) Detail

supplement to official) and displacing normative conventions of directional orientation and scale. The materials offer a trace of the haptic navigation of the city, the materiality tracing the presence of street.

Lefebvre suggests each and every map in some way erases aspects of the lived experience by reducing it to a purely visual impression (Lefebvre 1991, p. 286). Though this work maintains a predominantly visual quality, it is not to the exclusion of the haptic. Sarah Pink writes,

"Regarding the potential of photographs to represent walking, we can therefore start to understand such images not as visual objectifications of experiential realities, but as texts that suggest or invite routes through, which other peoples ways of knowing in movement might be imagined or imaginable (Pink et al 2010, p. 5)."

I argue that through its materials and installation, this work encourages a multisensory and imaginary exchange with site. The work presents the city as ‘space directly lived’ rather than as the space of planners and urbanists (Lefebvre 1991, p. 38), though it draws on this intertextual connection. Rather than a purely visual experience, the act of deconstructing the grid and mapping this lived experience, offers a new conceptualisation of New York.

Many buildings within the designated New York site feature reflective and repelling surfaces, conditions that Pallasmaa would describe as denying the reality of time and the traces of use (Pallasmaa, 2000, p. 324). Walking (2012) focuses instead on the horizontal rather than vertical surfaces of the city, on the urban skin tattooed with quotidian traces. The recording action utilised the limitations of the frame to create a ‘temporal biopsy’, scanning the surface of the urban skin to focus attention on a small part of a larger site. These videos make visible overlooked qualities of the site and in doing so recover a history of the ‘lived’ city currently absent from the discourse. Shadows are a durational trace on the urban skin. Shadows (2013) features the ‘touch point’ between light and surface, capturing an ephemeral relationship between them. Though these impermanent, transient qualities of the city contribute to our experience however, they are not often considered in contemporary art practice. Gold Paths (2013) present a line as evidence of my path across the city, an alternative mapping. Rather than the line signing a physical street, it signs the trace of an encounter. Maps are conventionally created to orientate and navigate. However, these lines displace such conventions and invite the viewer to ‘imagine the unseen’ without boundaries.

These artworks communicate an encounter with New York, displacing normative ways of representing the city through landmarks, skylines or vertical skyscrapers and instead, investigating overlooked spaces, durational qualities of site and the potential of alternative mapping methods. Though the works are primarily visual, it is not to the exclusion of other senses or an overall bodily engagement elicited through the rhythm of my steps and formal qualities of installation. These discoveries highlighted durational qualities of the city, atmosphere and surfaces – an awareness which subsequently informed the fieldwork in Varanasi. These different ways of recording encounters within the city suggested possibilities of ‘mapping’, unconstrained by cartographic conventions.
5.2 Varanasi

The biopsies identified in Varanasi differ from those gathered in New York. They are focused on what might be considered absences in the social sphere of public and private lives: for example widows, gender, and death. Varanasi, though the most challenging for the process of walking, offered particularly engaging and inspirational possibilities, even palpable indicators, of absences. Due to the chaotic and overwhelming experience of the city, initially it was quite difficult to identify these absences during fieldwork. However, such sensory overload supplied rich source material for studio investigations.

Philosopher and teacher Ivan Illich writes,

Many people today have lost the ability to imagine the geographic variety that once could be perceived through the nose. Because increasingly the whole world has come to smell alike; gasoline, detergents, plumbing and junk food coalesce into the catholic smog of our age (Illich 1986, p. 250).

Contributing to its distinctive smellscape, Varanasi faces greater challenges than New York and Shanghai in the supply and maintenance of everyday infrastructure such as sewerage, waste disposal and electricity supply (thus refrigeration). However, the smells, sounds and tastes enacted through cultural practices and religious rituals also play a major part in shaping the multisensory experience of the site, for example: incense, smoke, bells, chanting and the pungent aroma of street food. From my personal Western perspective, objects, food, built environments, burial rites, clothes and taxis amongst many things, seem more overpowering, brighter and more sense driven in Varanasi. Though only one of my works has included smell as it relates to Varanasi, this sensory overload highlighted the limited range of smells in New York and Shanghai. This heightened awareness has informed the following works that engage with the supplement in diverse ways: through a quotidian object, a trace of a body on fabric, a performative gesture and an embodied experience of site translated into a method of mark-making. The initial identification of death as a biopsy of absence, proved to be a dominant factor in both fieldwork and studio practice.

Chai Mandala (2013)

In Varanasi, the drinking of chai is a communal activity that often occurs on the street, in street stalls and perched on ledges outside homes. As in New York, the drinking of coffee and cafes is integral to the social life of the city contributing significantly to its ambience. However, different to the disposable paper or Styrofoam take-away coffee cups that we carry around in Western cities; the traditional cup for chai is a small clay cup. This cup is disposable and as it is made from clay it is, after use, smashed on the ground. This is a sustainable practice because the material is organic. The substitution of this system across India to a coated paper cup has only exacerbated existing challenges to waste disposal.
Chai Mandala (2013) emerged from the identification of social cycles embedded in the city, and the recognition that the cycle of the cup mirrored the communal rituals, the cycle of life and death that plays out across the city and on the bank of the Ganges river. It is an aromatic sculptural installation created from Indian chai cups, sometimes called ‘pi-ke phut’, and masala chai Indian spices. The gradation from whole cups to crushed clay powder mirrors the actual life cycle of the chai cup – created from the earth to a functional life, then smashed on the ground after use. In Chai Mandala (2013) the trace of life/death cycles throughout the city are made visible through engaging an everyday object embedded in the social rituals of the city. The cup could be perceived as embodying the birth-death-life cycle that is intrinsic to the city. Pilgrimage routes are also an identified absence and though they shape the layout and daily life of the city, they are invisible to me. The installation maintains its engagement with the viewer across all the senses. The aroma of spices transports the viewer to a foreign environment whilst the smashing of the cup, the ‘pi-ke phut’ noise that gives the cup its name, is a trace that engages the aural sense.

Juhani Pallasmaa writes of the ‘taste of stone’, that there is a ‘subtle transference between tactile and taste experiences. Vision becomes transferred to taste as well; certain colours and delicate details evoke oral sensations’ (Pallasmaa 2005, p. 59). ‘The cup is a quotidian object, supplement to the drinking of tea. Encountering the cups, there is an evocation of the subtle taste of the clay mixed with the hot sweet tea. The chai cup is an evocative object; its form and materiality encourages being held in the hand and touched to the lips. The handmade aspect of the vessel and the fingerprints on the clay surface provide a trace of the absent maker. The mandala, or circular setout engages the body, encouraging the viewer to walk around the work referencing the circular pilgrimage route throughout the city. This (never-ending) cycle balances the static (the cups are already smashed), silent quality of the work that suggests the conclusion of one process and the beginning of another (life) cycle.

This work displaces a representation of Varanasi that is purely visual, employing an object that connects the viewer to site through a somatic experience. The work recovers site through object, ritual and senses of sight, taste, smell and touch. Andrew Causey, in discussing Richard Long’s practice of bringing objects (rocks, stones, sticks, mud) from the landscape into the gallery, writes, ‘What it does do is to represent a personal experience of landscape in a way that brings back into an art gallery something of landscapes commonality, of its meaning for other people as well as Long himself’ (Causey 1998, p. 182). Employing an object that is both a social and aesthetic feature of the city allows a haptic expression of the cycles of the city through the smell, taste and colours of the city.

It has been observed of the art practice of American Ann Hamilton, ‘The non art materials and diverse scope of man made objects…trigger personal associations and visceral responses. She simultaneously activates multiple meanings of perception, encouraging us to experience ways of knowing through the body as well as the mind…’ (Heartney 2013, p. 225). Displacing normative ways of conceptualising Varanasi through images, Chai Mandala (2013) facilitates a haptic encounter with the absent site. The materiality of the city is embodied in the cup and they supply a sensual link between day-to-day rituals and those undertaken, both individually and communally, as part of a larger spiritual/life journey.

Widows (2013)

There are an estimated 40 million widows in India - 10% of the female population (Sujan, 2009). Many Hindu women, when banished from their family home on the death of their husbands, migrate to Varanasi and Vrindivan (the ‘City of Widows’) because they are auspicious places to die. As the majority have limited financial means, many widows live on the streets or in widow ashrams, and squat for alms at the entrance to the temples throughout the city.

Widows (2013) is a sculptural piece that, though referencing the presence of widows on the streets of the city, is primarily about their absence from the rituals and participation in community. Though absence is the subject of the piece, through it the widow becomes visible and present. The dominant existing representations of Varanasi are dominated by Hindu iconography, though, when a human being is featured it is most likely a male ‘face’. Though presenting a marginalized section of society, social and gendered, I displace entrenched hierarchies of representation in the city discourse, providing an alternative for consideration.
Chai Mandala (Varanasi, 2013) Clay chai cups, cinnamon, cardamom, black tea leaves. 180cm diameter.
These widows are a dominant memory of my stay in Varanasi. The plight of these women and their day-to-day hardships was in stark contrast to my privileged existence – as a woman in Australia, the respect and rights that afford on the most basic level, but also in light of my unmarried status and physical and financial freedoms. These women are not considered citizens of the city and in itself this is a legal absence of basic rights and protection.

The explicitly gendered installation of *Widows* (2013) consists of a number of hessian sacks folded and arranged in a row. This basic material is the only protection for these women from the hard, often cold ground that they sit on for hours at a time. The tin / stainless steel bowls are containers used by the women to collect spare change and donations from passers-by or those exiting the temples. Placed on top of the hessian is white muslin, similar to the white saris that the widows traditionally wear. The saris are arranged to suggest the woman has simply disrobed and stepped out, leaving her sole material protection at her feet: a trace of her absent presence. In order to achieve this shape, I wrapped my own body in the sari muslin, leaving a trace of my own identity in the discarded fabric. In a Derridean sense this fabric is haunted. The widows are consigned a ‘living death’ and the material suggestive of a trace of the white shroud used to wrap dead bodies to be placed on the pyre.

American artist Ann Hamilton has utilised fabric and embodied processes to explore particular social groups related to site. Exhibited in Charleston South Carolina, Hamilton’s installation *Indigo Blue* (1991) consisted of over 14,000 pounds (or 48,000 articles) of blue clothing - worn work shirts and trousers - piled in the centre of the large industrial space. Their colour references the natural dye obtained from the indigo plant, a valued part of Charleston’s early economy, and the clothing the uniform of blue-collar workers (Heartney 2013, p. 230). Helen Posner observes:

> From a distance, the physical presence of this enormous mound of layered shirts and pants suggested a large body, while up close discretely folded items bought to mind the individual lives of their unknown owners. The many acts of folding by unseen hands further suggested the repetitive yet necessary task regularly and anonymously performed by blue-collar workers (Heartney 2013, p. 230).

In this instance, fabric retains not only trace of the human body, but also of the social issues embedded in both the colour and design of particular items of clothing. In a similar way, *Widows* (2013) references specific colour and fabrics as a way to sign the presence of a marginalized social group.

In this piece, I aimed to communicate the perceived interchangeability of these women. In a society that assigns colours to celebration and adornment as symbols of respect and marriage – these women are in stark contrast in their physicality and uniformity. They are all dressed the same, have the same props and are assigned the same fate, operating in a liminal space between life and death. The walking sticks, one leaning against the wall and one laying on the ground, are a supplementary reminder that these ‘creatures’ are human, they suffer and feel pain.1 The crudity of these aids is also a reminder of the level of care that these women can afford.

The layout in a single row, low and against the wall is similar to the way the widows position themselves on the street. Hunched against the wall or crouched on the ground, these women are below the eye height of the passer by, they blend into the streetscape. The installation is such that the viewer’s experience mimics that of the passer by; but it is in some respect, a coerced form of recognition. This haptic interaction, perhaps standing still and direct facing, would rarely (if ever) occur on the street, as this would require acknowledgement and even a form of regard. In Varanasi there is no regard, no legal identity, no rights for these women: they exist as non-persons in spite of their physical presence.

Sourcing the materials in Melbourne – the hessian from a landscaping shop, the bamboo - was difficult and reinforced the broad gap in care, duties and rights between our societies. These materials are used for completely different functions in Australia: hessian for day beds for dogs, bamboo for staking a plant or screening a garden. Their use in Varanasi as protection from the street surface or as a walking aid for an elderly woman seems remote, albeit impossible, if not unbelievable. However widows are not necessarily only older women. The practice of marrying very poor and young girls to older men creates situations where, if that man passes away when the bride is still very young, she may have to live another fifty or more years on the streets. The absent truth is that younger women are more likely to be coerced into prostitution and are therefore

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1 ‘A widow is sometimes called “pram” or creature, because it was only her husband’s presence that gave her human status. In some Indian languages, a widow is referred to as “it” rather than “she”; in others, the word doubles as an abuse or is barely differentiated from the word for prostitute’ (Sujan 2009).
not begging on the streets. Dheera Sujan observes, that in some cases even a widow’s shadow is considered polluting or offensive to ‘cleaner’ members of society (Sujan 2009). This belief has implications for how the widows move through the city, where they stop or sit to beg and their interaction with other members of the community. While not explicit, the unwritten social and cultural rules dictate their urban habitation.

The interplay of absence-presence occurs firstly on the street, where the women are physically present but treated as invisible and secondly, within the gallery space. Deconstructing the city through the supplement meant acknowledging these women through an artwork that conceptualises a rarely publicised aspect of the city. Despite their absence in the gallery, through this work, these women become present and the viewer engages with their plight.

Embodiment (2014)

In Hamilton’s Indigo Blue (1991), the actual making of the work, the act of folding, is an integral part of the work. In the action of making Widows (2013), the haptic or embodied feeling of wrapping myself in the sari muslin and stepping out of it left a trace of my own presence. Through this act I was able to access the empathy I felt about the situation. The action was quite unsettling, like momentarily stepping into another’s shoes, and this suggested an opportunity for a work that explored the embodiment of the experience.

I began by filming the linen on the wall, stepping up, wrapping the material around my body, removing it by releasing it to the floor and stepping out of the fabric. Through this action and through the body, I felt I was able to incorporate traces of their absent identity with my own identity, reflecting on my own gendered situation in contrast with these women. This action provided access to an embodied experience and introduced performativity as a way to access and investigate absence as identified in the city of Varanasi. However, my identity seemed to dominate the footage. The intention in the work was not to position widows as equal to myself, nor to suggest my own status is equal to that of a widow. Instead it was, through a process of substitution, to destabilize entrenched ways of perceiving the status of these women. The work, at this stage, had become less about this action and the widows (the identified absence) and instead more about me as substantive subject. In an effort to redress the balance, I made Widows (subsumed) (2013), extracting stills from the footage and concealing my identity with a narrow metallic strip. I then made Widows (embodied) (2013), increasing the scale to approximately 1:1 and using a mirrored disc to conceal my face whilst reflecting the viewer’s gaze. Engaging the viewer through this reflection implicates them in the image whilst introducing an quality of witnessing.

As mentioned, the shadow of a widow is perceived as polluting to higher castes, though it involves, no physical touch, only what might be considered ‘contact’ through sight. There is a distinction between ‘contact’ and touch in Indian culture:

contact does not only mean touching but also includes senses such as seeing, hearing and smelling, or emotions. The ‘contact’ even with a shadow of a distiller could, for instance, make a traditional Brahmin immediately take a ritual bath. Seeing, therefore, is strongly believed to be a sensuous physical contact (Michaels & Wulf 2014, p. 8). Michaels and Wulf (2014) propose, ‘physical and sensuous contact is caused by seeing’, which is why most women avoid meeting the gaze of others and conceal their faces when they go in public. They observe, ‘Sight is contact, in both good and bad senses; on the other hand, anyone who looks away avoids contact’ (Michels & Wulf 2014, p. 8). Widows embodied (2013) therefore, predominantly encountered through the haptic gaze, facilitates an exchange that might be considered a form of contact.
Widows (Varanasi, 2013). Muslin, hessian, bamboo, stainless steel bowls. Site specific 10m length. Design Hub, RMIT.

Widows (embodied, Varanasi, 2014) 300 gsm paper, digital print, mirror strip.

Widows (reflection, Varanasi, 2014) 300 gsm paper, digital print, mirror, 42 x 28 cm. 3.
This work emerged from the shared perception that the whole of Varanasi is a cremation ground (Eck 1999, p. 1) and responds to the biopsy absence of death. As discussed earlier, to die within the city limits of Varanasi is sacred and said to liberate one from the cycle of life and death, which is why many people make pilgrimage to the city and choose to live and die there. There are over 100 bodies burned in a 24-hour period at the two cremation ghats on the banks of river.

I originally considered the biopsy of death through two concepts: the overwhelming statistic of up to 90000 bodies cremated per year (Fernandez 2010, p. 22) and the concept that ‘death is celebration’ (Singh 2002, p. 30). The latter is investigated in later studio investigations. Due to my own spiritual framework and familiarity with specific symbolism attached to death and commemoration, I considered marking death through the sign/symbol of the cross. *Pink Cross* (2013) is a maquette for a proposed installation that engaged with these ideas. The pink screen with the crosses is backlit, casting a vibrant hue onto the floor of the gallery. The crosses are white, a cut out from the screen, casting ‘absence’ on the ground. As you walk through the space, your body would be covered with crosses - in the same way that in Varanasi the smoke clings to your lungs and the experience of witnessing a burning pyre becomes a somatic memory. Each cross signs a death, a body burnt in the city that day.

However, the symbolism of the cross was too dominant and confusing, distancing the work from cultural and site specifics in Varanasi. In an effort to locate more appropriate symbols and materials I returned to my journal and documentation, as well as revisiting the culturally specific way that Hindu death rituals are described in literature. I considered connections between death and the concept of death as a never-ending journey. In Varanasi however, this journey allegedly ends through achieving *moksha* – liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. I foregrounded the perception of Varanasi as a ground and reflected on the thousands of people who ‘journey’ to the river, both literally and metaphorically every day of every year.

It has been observed that the German artist, Wolfgang Laib (b.1950) has used ‘the open form of the little boats to symbolize inaccessible conveyances into another world’ (Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac 2012). In Varanasi, the riverbank is lined with ghats that offer high vantage points of the length of the river. Boats are a striking visual aspect of the city as well as an essential transportation method. The aerial view of the boats, their pattern and multiplicity is a distinctive aspect of experiencing the city. Significantly, a boat is called a ‘taraka’ and is intertwined with ‘crossing over’ at the release of death, when Shiva whispers the ‘taraka mantra’ into the body of the dying man (Eck 1999, p. 332). These two ideas combined, suggested the form of the boat as a symbol for the individual.

I began exploring the biopsy of death through the materials of charcoal and timber. The sketching with charcoal, led to the making of a number of small pyres. These engage with the multiple, the statistic, but in a more sensory way, drawing on the timber stacks throughout the city. The charcoal ash and stacking of the wood might be considered a supplement to the burning pyre. The concept of the whole city as a cremation ground informed the work *Boats* (2013). This work engages with scale and the multiple and relates to the topography of the site itself. The ash is a somatic connection, a trace of the cremated body and of timber that fuels the fire. The boats supply an intertextual connection to the bodies burned over a day. The absence-presence dynamic manifests in the traces of the journeys taken to and from, and within this city – whether due to pilgrimage, mourning or transitioning from life to death.

*Boats* (2013) conceptualises a site of absence via materiality and a form of multisensory/haptic mapping. An absence-presence dynamic also exists in the perception of the landscape held by foreigner and local, between Hindu and tourist. The patterns on the boats, the many, many marks on the surface are reminiscent of the metalwork treatment on the carriage of the cyclos throughout the city. Through this material surface treatment, I am supplying a haptic connection to other transport methods of the city suggesting that these boats might be considered a form of transportation through the ‘cremation ground’. In *Boats* (2013) the identified absence of death is made visible through the myth of landscape in materials, the boats and ash encourage/access a somatic experience of site that is, to some extent, an experience of death.

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Fig.55  Pink Cross (maquette, 2013) Detail.
Untitled (Boats, 2013) Detail.

Untitled (Boats, 2013)  Plywood, ash, brass embossed metal, 60 x 240cm.
The presence of timber throughout the city, fuel for the pyre, was referenced in the base of this work. I originally burned the surface of the ply to mark the location of each boat, and whilst this treatment is not visible in the final piece it did provide the impetus for other works, specifically Smoke series (2014) of drawings. Utilising materials that engage the body, I signed (the cycle of) death through the burning of timber in a circular pattern. I undertook a series of test on timber and different types of paper. In the work, fire is used to mark the paper. Gaston Bachelard describes fire as the ‘ultra living element’ (Bachelard 1968, p. 7) and in this work there is a paradox, in that flame is being used to sign death. Though these works could be considered as a type of haptic mapping, these pieces were not successful as artworks. They were however, critical to the discovery of smoke and fire to access an embodied quality of landscape.

Smoke series (2014)

Translating an embodied experience into a method was a key discovery in my research. The city of Varanasi has been described as a cremation ground and smoke and ash are a significant aspect of the haptic experience of Varanasi. Walking the city is a ‘smokey’ experience. The air is polluted by smoke from the burning of bodies at the main cremation ghats and compounded by the smoke generated through the burning of cow dung for cooking and the burning off of household rubbish.

It was this dominant haptic experience of Varanasi that led me to experiment with markings from the smoke of a single flame. I had previously employed fire, in direct contact with timber, to create other works. The marks that emerged on the timber through this process suggested that similar marks on paper might communicate a quality of landscape that engages our somatic memory of site. Smoke itself is ephemeral and transient, leaving only a residue or trace. Using smoke as a method and tool of mark making I undertook a number of test works varying in scale and density. These were created using a different intensity of flame sources such as candles, lighters and a blowtorch and on papers varying in weight and material composition. In an effort to displace the ocular with the experiential, I was also exploring how a work on paper might be inhabited in a phenomenological sense. A second mark was made through a process of erasure, the ‘scraping back’ of the smoke residue from the surface of the paper. These works exhibit, through their temporality and fragility, qualities of the biopsy of death.

In their abstract composition and method of making, these works communicate a ‘quality of being in’ the landscape, the experience rather than merely a representation of it. English painter Ben Nicholson writes:

One of the main differences between a representational and an abstract painting is that the former can transport you to Greece by a representation of blue skies and seas, olive trees and marble columns, but in order that you may take part in this you will have to concentrate on the painting, whereas the abstract version by its free use of form and colour will be able to give you the actual quality of Greece itself and this will become a part of the
Smoke 3 (Varanasi, 2014) 300gsm paper, smoke. 2000 x 500mm.
Smoke 14 (2014) 300gsm paper, smoke, gouache. 700mm x 1100mm.
light and space and life in the room – there is no need to concentrate, it becomes a part of living (Lymton 1998, p. 178).

This could be perceived as the embodiment or the phenomenological experience of site – death becomes ‘part of living’. The identified absence of death was investigated in *Smoke* (2013), by translating such an embodied experience of that absence into a method. Varanasi is depicted, not as you see it but how you breathe it and feel it on your skin.

**Pink Smoke series (2014)**

As previously mentioned, in Varanasi ‘death is a festival’ (Singh 2002, p. 30). The incongruity of this position stayed with me throughout my walking of the city. However, it is only incongruous in terms of Western epistemologies in logical orders of reason, which separate ‘death’ and ‘celebration’. My own reaction and interpretation is culturally conditioned. Through deconstructing the concept of ‘death as celebration’ in studio practice I undertook a questioning process, challenging my own response to death. As a way for me to personally come to terms with the paradox, I introduced colour into the smoke drawings - a hot, pure pink that, I argue, hums with energy. This colour was applied with the intention of generating a haptic, sensual impact - an immersive experience. I began by laying down dense pink hue at the centre and, while the paper was still drying, using a flame to burn the perimeter and joining colour with ash - celebration with death. Removing all literal or identifiable representations of the city and relying on smoke and the vibrancy of colour, I sought to deconstruct the concept of ‘death as celebration’, by engaging experiential qualities of the city. The scale and installation of the work encourages an immersive bodily encounter.

In *Chai Mandala* (2013) the latent life/death cycles in the city are made visible through engaging an everyday object embedded in the everyday life and social rituals of the city. The *Widows* series (2013) makes visible a marginal group, highlighting the absence of human rights and prompting a consideration of the city through gender. These works, through ‘substitution’, deconstruct entrenched perceptions of the status of women in this city. In *Boats* (2013) the identified absence of death is made visible through the boats and ash, a somatic rather than an ocular mapping. The identified absence of death was investigated in *Smoke* (2013), by translating an embodied experience of that absence (death manifests as ash and smoke) into a method. The city is depicted, not how one ‘sees’ it but how one haptically experiences it.

The process of deconstructing the city of Varanasi through the supplement of absence and directing attention to a multisensory experience revealed rich source material for studio investigations. The artworks are more materially focused than New York because the source material supported this approach. Overall, I argue these works are more successful than the New York works because, as well as deconstructing the city through the supplement, they open ways of experiencing the city that are beyond the image. They, therefore, go further in destabilising both the hierarchy of presence and the dominance of the ocular in the discourse. This awareness, of the marginalized group and latent social cycles of the city, fed into the fieldwork for Shanghai. The overwhelming focus on religious rituals and death in Varanasi prompted consideration of both in Shanghai, and retrospectively, New York.
5.3 Shanghai

The fieldwork in Shanghai was undertaken over two trips. The first trip was a month long, the second a week. Of the three cities I found Shanghai the most challenging in terms of identifying biopsies and investigating them through practice in order to answer the research questions. The city seems partly familiar in its building typology and through the presence of global retail brands and outlets, but in most other respects, such as signage, language and food, it is entirely foreign.

Urry remarks that ‘becoming a tourist destination is part of a reflexive process by which societies and places come to enter the global order, or to “re-enter” as in the case of China after 1978…’ (Urry 2011, p. 28). As in many global cities, the tourist experience of Shanghai is carefully orchestrated and arranged around hyped tourist attractions, to which one can be guided by the double decker ‘hop on, hop off’ tourist bus service. By circumstance of being a foreigner and tourist, one may rarely go beyond the well-trodden tourist trail and main city thoroughfares. Navigating a city through the standard guidebook and suggested map itineraries produces prescribed experiences and photo opportunities. However in this research, through the walking of each and every street in my designated site area, I deviated from the tourist trail. This confirmed my impression of the city as a liminal space, looking to the future whilst simultaneously enacting ancient cultural traditions, sometimes within the same city block.

The first fieldwork trip to Shanghai identified the necessary biopsies of absence but these proved particularly challenging to pursue in studio practice. I am still undecided whether this was because, after Varanasi, the city ‘appeared’ overwhelmingly ocular focused and limited in sensory variety or because the identified absences did not lend themselves to haptic investigation in the studio. Over half the biopsies identified were instances of physical absence. Compared to the social and material richness of the identified biopsies in Varanasi, the scale and (predominantly ocular) materiality of the biopsies from Shanghai proved challenging to explore in art practice with the particular objectives of the research in mind.

I decided however, to undertake a second fieldwork trip to Shanghai in an attempt to gain a greater knowledge of the city and, either further contextualise the existing biopsies, or identify replacements. I walked most of the same routes, revisiting a number of the biopsies I considered problematic or that had potential to meet the objectives of the research with further analyses. During this second trip, the weather was much warmer and the city was overcrowded with domestic tourists. The site experience was different, though not necessarily in a ‘more sensory’ or revelatory way. For example, because the site was now more familiar, it was less overwhelming. My attentions and therefore my experiences were dominated less by the spectacle and more by the everyday activities that bring the city into being. As a result, the following artworks engage with the supplement through trace present in the image, the signing of a social absence through materials and, within a conventional tourist artifact, the displacement of an ocular ‘message’ with a haptic message.
Old City absence (Shanghai, 2012)

Old City absence (Shanghai, 2014)
The huge construction sites throughout Shanghai are one of the biopsies of absence in this research. They offer an open expanse, a physical absence or void that is remarkable for its existence in such a densely crowded and populated city. During my first visit in 2012, there was one site in particular that stood out as much for its vastness as its capacity to highlight the density of the surrounding living conditions and ambition of the government to develop the city. Located within the parameters of the old city wall and most visible from the vantage point of an adjacent temple, at the time this site was a concrete slab, opening up the sightlines across the city for at least four blocks. Prior to my second visit some two years later, I envisaged skyscrapers occupying the site, similar to the how other sites around the city had been developed. However, I was surprised to find much smaller scale buildings, only partially completed. The development was less dramatic than I expected, modest rather than a ‘spectacle’. On my first visit there were a number of sites that were also at ‘slab stage’ and nearing completion some 24 months later. Some were quite small in square meterage and their progress was impressive for its verticality, rather than expansive footprint. Building Sites (2014) consists of two images side by side, the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of a site of absence in Shanghai. The subject of both images is the trace. The first image contains a trace of the recently demolished buildings and a trace of the potential of the new buildings. The second image contains a trace of the vacant lot and of the city’s aspirations for a new way of living.

Revisiting this site required walking along the street adjacent to the temple, where demolition works are in full progress. The houses were marked with a number of ‘demolition’ or demolish characters, some already partially demolished. An intertextual site is revealed in the form of the small demolished houses juxtaposed against the large towers in the background. Modest dwellings being replaced by ‘the spectacle’ and the history of site is erased for a vision of ‘future’ Shanghai. However total replacement is unachievable, because the new dwellings are always physically haunted by the trace of the previous buildings, with a human trace of the previous inhabitants. The new dwellings might also be considered haunted by the aspirations of the emerging middle class underpinning Shanghai’s ‘accelerated urbanisation’. Crang argues, tourism works as interplay of movement and fixity, absence and presence. That is, the tourist seeks to be present at a place, but as we examine those places we find that they are shot through by absences, where distant others, removed in space and time, haunt the sites’ (Urry 2013, p. 17).

As mentioned earlier, photographers such as Peter Bialobrzeski and Greg Girard document this intertextual exchange, juxtaposing the old shikumen dwellings (traditional local housing compounds) and new skyscrapers in a way that suggests the tensions implicit in such rapid urban development. Pink argues:

Photographs have the capacity to bring textures, surfaces and the sensory experiences they evoke right up close to the reader: they both invoke embodied reactions and offer routes by which, via our own memories and subjectivities, we might anticipate what it feels like to be in another place (Pink 2009, p. 136).

When so much of the city seems to be looking to the future, there is value in returning to record the trace in what is arguably an unremarkable site, similar to many throughout the city. Speed and spectacle are two words often used to describe urban Shanghai, however in this instance, the results at this site do not reflect or support this perception. Over two years later, these buildings are still not completed. They are far from spectacular, and even unremarkable in their architectural design. Building Sites (2014) intervenes in the dominant representations of Shanghai that typically features the spectacle of high-rise iconic buildings and lighting. Perhaps the location of the site within the old city wall affects the height of the new dwellings, however, this outcome challenges the widespread perception that Shanghai is obsessed with skyscrapers and density. It also suggests the ‘uncontrolled’ growth is not as prevalent as the media would have one believe. ‘This contradiction, led me to consider how the city was being packaged for visual consumption, rather than experienced in reality.'
This work addresses the biopsy of the ‘floating population’ and the expansive building development program that is one of the defining features of Shanghai. The ‘floating population’ (those migrants without a residential permit) - estimated to be about 10 million out of a 24 million population in Shanghai comprises of the migrant worker drawn to the city by possible economic opportunities, often to work on these massive building projects. These workers can be considered an absence in that they are essential to, yet invisible in the building process and undocumented in the city population registered statistics. Though their access to basic services is slowing improving, particularly in Shanghai, their absence of citizenship and in turn legal status makes them particularly vulnerable. Weiping Wu writes, ‘For many migrants, urban life is precarious - lack of shelter, low and uncertain earnings, and increased threat of violence’ (Wu in Logan 2008, p. 212) compounded by economic exploitation and social exclusion.

As outlined earlier, there are a number of artists who investigate the rapid urbanisation of Shanghai but these tend to be photographic or video artworks. In this work, in an effort to deconstruct that which is limited to sight, I focus on what drives Shanghai’s rapid building program - labour. Highlighting a marginalized section of society provides new ways to consider Shanghai, in relation to the dominant discourse. In *Chopsticks* (2014), I utilize scale, materials and the multiple to sign the social absence of the floating population and make visible social aspects of the process.

Homi K. Bhabha writes, ‘materials are there to make something else possible…the non-physical things, the intellectual things, the possibilities that are available through the material. Material, then, is like living tissue, a contingent and relational medium’ (Bhabha 1996). In this work the materials of bamboo and concrete exhibit traces of both history and function. The disposable chopsticks - in material and quantity - sign that these workers are a seemingly inexhaustible supply of manpower. The sensual poverty of the sculptural installation, by denying the spectacle, deconstructs normative ways of viewing the city.

*Haptic Postcards* (2014)

The ocular representation of Shanghai is focused on the ‘spectacle’. Guy Debord in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) observes that implicit in this condition of the spectacle is the dominance of sight and in turn a ‘distancing from the real world accessed most immediately through touch’ (Lane 2008, p. 97). Throughout the research process the role of tourism and the images that are circulated for and through this industry became increasingly important because of their singularity and dominance. *Haptic Postcards* (2014) explores a perceived absence between the fictional city, presented in the tourism images and brochures, and my first-hand experience.

Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal contextualizes the circulated imagery of Shanghai. The images not only prime the viewer for a particular experience prior to travel, but displace the ‘real’ and multisensory experience. Baudrillard’s ‘postmodern universe is one of hyperreality in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life’ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014b). In a Derridean sense, the real and hyperreal are inseparable, each needing the other in order to be defined.

Emerging at the second half of the nineteenth century from the world fairs and international expositions, Scott McQuire describes the postcard as a ‘cheap, disposable, collectible sign of the global horizons of modernity (McQuire 1998, p. 194). Its current usage has morphed into a signing of the city as a hyperreal space, sent or collected for novelty, rather than messaging. Rather than a discourse being anchored in the ‘real’, it ‘moved into the play of textuality, of discourse, which allegedly referred only to other texts or discourses in which “the real” or an “outside” were banished to the realm of nostalgia’ (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2014b).

Traditionally, content on the front face of a postcard communicates a location of importance, of historical or cultural significance all within the broader context of its location and within a hierarchy of other significant tourist locations. The postcard contains a number of dynamic opposites: public image and private message, mass-produced object and specific cultural artefact,

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2 In 2010 census the estimate was 9 million non-permanent residents from an estimated city population of 23 million, viewed January, 2015, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/000187-shanghai-torrid-population-growth>.
Chopsticks (sketch, 2014) Besar blocks, bamboo. Test configuration 2, Building 50, RMIT.
shaping of city perception through proliferation of carefully curated images but surrender control of message content. The typical content of the postcard is an image of a major landmark - an ocular centric positioning of the city to be sent around the world. In the case of Shanghai, the feature is the ‘spectacle’ of the Pudong district: the rapidly developed suburb is on the opposite bank of the Huangpu river from the historic Bund boulevard.

The postcard, as object and image, became increasingly interesting as a way of signing the city. When a friend returns from holidays, often there is no need to ask where they went or what they did, because you already know through following their holiday updates online. This led me to question what the postcard is used for nowadays and how it functions in a process of signifying, now that it is functionally obsolete. A deconstructive approach suggested a substitution, and therefore destabilisation, of the ocular and hyperreal Shanghai presented in postcards, by employing multisensory and personal content.

I became interested in introducing a haptic experience, rather than a mimetic visual one, within an established system of circulating images and tourism associations. During my second visit the temperature was incredibly high, in the mid to high thirties Celsius. In preparation for my walking the city, the practice of checking the weather forecast for the day and the rest of the week became part of the day's routine. Displacing the existing postcard typology and hierarchy, I made my own postcard size templates. I printed the temperature figure and the detailed descriptive information, fixing the information to the front and back of the card. I then posted each card at the beginning of the following day, posting home a record or account of embodied experience of my day in Shanghai. The cards arrived at my house after I had returned as a record of my stay. In the Melbourne winter weather it was strange to think I had recently experienced a day that ‘feels like 43 degrees’. The finished piece involved the postcards wall mounted as a physical record of the haptic experience of the city. Other than noting the atmospheric qualities, the absence of any other locational reference other than the name of the city plays on the idea articulated by Mark Augé that often we identify with a place primarily through the words that evoke them (Augé 1995, p. 95).

There is an absence / presence dynamic in the very act of writing and sending a postcard. Robert Smithson’s observations sum up such a dynamic so accurately as to quote him in full:

Postcards themselves challenge the usual sequence of travelling and returning to tell by blurring the distinctions between the two. One tells while travelling; the postcard often arrives after one has returned home or one sends an image that has nothing to do with where one is. Yet postcards do possess one indisputable index of the moment of sending, both in terms of time and place – the postmark. This mark of stamp connects the sender to a precise place and time and of an indisputable present tense that then is immediately and necessarily detached from all three (Reynolds 2003, p. 169).

As previously mentioned, this form of documenting site requires the viewer imagine a remote site and the postcard fixes that place in time. In Haptic Postcards (2014), the viewer is prompted to imagine place through the body. Presenting this haptic information exposes and deconstructs normative ways of viewing the city.

In response to the disconnection I discovered between the represented hypereal city and my haptic experience of it, the ‘official’ or ‘store bought’ postcard has formed the basis of the following work. Urry writes:

By considering the typical objects of the tourist gaze one can use these to make sense of the elements of the wider society with which they are contrasted. In other words, to consider how social groups construct their tourist gaze is a good way of getting just what is happening in the “normal society”. We can use the fact of difference to interrogate the normal through investigating typical forms of tourism’ (Urry 2011, p. 5).

This process has much in common with a deconstructive strategy, where a consideration of the supplement offers potential to disrupt dominant ways of conceptualising the city. The absence investigated the experience of site and the depiction of that experience in a generic way through a postcard. The shortfall, this gap in experience was never more strongly experienced than when I purchased a postcard of the Pudong Skyline and it could not have been more different
from the reality that I was experiencing that very day. Drawing on Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal, Urry observes:

With hyper-reality the sense of vision is said to be reduced to a limited array of visible features. It is then exaggerated and dominates the other senses. Hyper-real places are characterized by surface appearances. The sense of sight is condensed to the most immediate and visible aspects of the scene, such as the seductive facades…” (Urry 2011, p. 21).

During my stay, I bought a variety of postcards that were available across the city varying from packs of 25 of the Pudong skyline, the City at night, a variety of sites across the city and the Bund. All together over 100 different postcards and in excess of 30 ‘unique’ views of the Pudong skyline were collected. Each skyline view had only a slight variation in colour, location or perspective from the other. The featured image consists of a blue and sunny sky, most often cloudless and, certainly no pollution.

As outlined earlier, in my first visit to the city the pollution was so intense that it actually qualified as a biopsy. The pollution shaped my experience of the city by determining how the city was concealed and then revealed across the day. My second visit, though hot in temperature, was grey and rainy and this was also in stark contrast to the idyllic city featured in the postcards. In 20 Postcards (2013), I deconstruct the postcard format by contrasting the hyperreal skyline view with an image recorded during my fieldwork, from the same location.

McQuire writes that ‘the picture postcard became a key discursive space in the construction of national identity’ (McQuire 1998, p. 194). In this instance, the Pudong skyline becomes a symbol of Shanghai’s (and China’s) global aspirations, integral to and inseparable from, its newly minted ‘identity’ on the global stage.

Building Sites (2013) deconstructs images of Shanghai through the trace. The work is unapologetically ocular, however the subject of the work is what is absent from the image. The trace in the work - of history and of future building works - is the subject. The image is a biopsy of the city body because it is a small extraction from the body, put ‘under the microscope’ and isolated for the purposes of closer consideration. The site could be any number of sites throughout the city. By virtue of being nondescribed, contrasts with the images of spectacle that dominates the discourse. Chopsticks (2014) deconstructs the perception of the city via the supplement of Shanghai’s unregistered workforce. I draw on haptic qualities of material and scale to make visible the social and power dynamic on site. Similar to Ann Hamilton’s folding of blue work uniforms, the making of the chopstick ladders speaks to the subject of the piece – labour. In this piece, over a thousand ladders were made to communicate the scale and seemingly inexhaustible labour supply of Shanghai’s never ending development program. Haptic Postcards (2013) and 20 Postcards (2013) operate within the perceptual framework of tourism practices, deconstructing the format and content of the postcard to intervene in the dominance of the ocular and hyperreal in signing the city experience.

As explained in the introduction to this section, utilising haptic methods to investigate the identified biopsies of absence has proved challenging arguably because the city itself, in my experience, is particularly ocular focused. Though each of these artworks deconstructs the city through the supplement of absence, three of the four works maintain a predominantly ocular format.
5.4 Three cities combined

The *Flyposter series* (2014) involved undertaking studio investigations that apply the same methods of making and display to each city. This approach encourages an intertextual reading, where (partial) meaning is derived from the way the works stand in relation to each other and to the discourse that informs their content. Though each of the cities had been explored individually, there was an absence identified in the process of travelling to and from each city. In the following works my aim was to test what conceptualisations would emerge by adopting the same procedural process as a method of making work.

It became apparent through my research that there were three stages of experiencing a city and that each stage was, to some extent, always under erasure. The first stage, 'before you go imaginings' was experienced through images that we seek out and are exposed to prior to travelling. These include images that communicate the history of site or the major tourist attractions and iconic images that seem to define that city such as skylines, aerial views and maps. My physical absence from site was haunted by the trace of possible future experiences of site. The second stage is immersion, and consists of the images and journal notes recorded on site. This content documents my personal experience, which is partly shaped by the expectations formed in stage one and their calibration with reality. The third stage includes images and stills from video recordings compiled on my return, as well as such physical records as ticket stubs and airline tickets. Absence manifests once again in a physical absence from site, the present being haunted by the recent experience. This is an example of ‘imagined touch’, where the haptic experience is rooted in memory and expectation (Rodaway 2004, p. 49). Each stage therefore contains a trace of the other two stages that can be re-interpreted through studio work.

The fly-poster, ‘an advertising poster put up in an unauthorized place’ (Oxford Dictionary) is common feature of many urban environments. Found most often on the vertical surfaces of the city, such as facades of buildings and site hoardings, they contribute to an evolving city aesthetic. The ongoing process of the layering up of these large paper advertisements, and their subsequent stripping out and replacement, is a process that expresses Derrida’s concept of sous rature, or ‘under erasure’ (Derrida, 1967, p. 60). Sous rature is considered a key aspect of a deconstructive process.

To place a word under erasure is to first write the word and then cross it out, leaving both the word and its crossed out version. This procedure indicates that the word is inaccurate or unstable but is nevertheless necessary. The use of accustomed and known concepts “under erasure” is intended to destabilise the familiar as at one and the same time useful, necessary, inaccurate and mistaken (Barker 2004, p. 204).

This process was employed in the work *Flyposter* (2014) in an effort to explore the durational aspect of my experience in and to each city, as well as destabilize the dominance of representing each city in a ‘present’ and single moment.
Investigating the intertextual movement between ‘there’ and ‘not there’, I employed the materials and method of making in art practice similar to that of the fly-poster. Drawing on the same making process by utilizing flour glue and paper, I gathered ‘evidence’ from each stage with the aim of co-opting this process from the street to express my own personal experience of the city over time. I layered up the images, then stripped back layers, randomly tearing the paper away to reveal the concealed content beneath. The process was arbitrary.

Typically fly poster advertising content relies on large font, few words and eye-catching blocks of colour to communicate message. However, in these larger compositions, the fine detailed content and randomness of the composition had overwhelmed the content/message. I therefore employed the dimensions of the postcard with the aim of framing the content in a way that was appropriate to scale. This was also a process of displacement of the normative way of engaging with site through images of major city landmarks, with a personal record of site.

I created a template window, scanning the surface of the main piece to identify appropriate extracts. I then photographed these areas, isolating these postcard size extracts - akin to a biopsy from a larger body. The finished works became a conceptualisation of each individual city through images of major city landmarks, with a personal record of site.

In contrast, I am sourcing images circulated in the public domain and generating my own content, then combining and overlaying them.

As mentioned earlier, the postcard is an artefact that communicates an absent location and, embedded in its form and content, is a ‘representation’ of that location and the sending of a message from that location. Reframing the content within this scale facilitated an intertextual relationship, a connection with a remotely located – absent – site. Placing the original text under erasure means the tear action remains not only visible but also active. The experience of each city, rather than being presented as a single ‘present’ moment in time, is instead fragmented and haunted by the trace. The finished piece embodies the absence-presence dynamic between ‘there’ and ‘here’, deconstructing the representation of site in the present.

In my research, engaging with three cities requires my assuming the role of a ‘semionaut’ (Bourriaud 2009, p. 39), gathering signs in an effort to communicate qualities of place, in and through studio work. Focusing on the identified absences necessarily required a deconstruction of a ‘landscape of signs’ to generate, not only new understandings of each city in broad terms, but also new understandings of what might constitute absence in each.

I identified four additional absence/presence interplays in the research process that materialize in different ways through the studio outcomes. These include absence which exists at the site of extraction (the biopsy of absence itself), the interplay within the work itself (that which is visible and that which is ‘outside the frame’), that between the site of the biopsy and the newly created site within the studio/gallery (Site/Non-Site) and the absence created through being remotely located from site (tourist-researcher-foreigner returning home). Each ‘interplay’ presents as an opportunity to disrupt the hierarchy of city representations privileging presence.
Flyposter (2014) Studio process.


The exhibition includes six works, four from Varanasi (Widows, Widows (embodied), Smoke and Chai Mandala) and one each from New York (Walking) and Shanghai (Chopsticks). The exhibition was not designed to explicitly manifest the absence-presence exchange. Instead, new understandings of absence, and of each city are demonstrated through the individual artworks.

Though there are four works from a single city, this is not an indication that Varanasi contains ‘more’ absence. Rather, the artworks presented in this exhibition are arguably the most successful in answering the research questions. They best demonstrate the diversity of absences investigated and the variety of methods that best disrupt normative ways of representing each city.

As this project is concerned with a whole body engagement, ideally all the works made throughout the research process would be experienced first hand rather than through image documentation. In particular, the works that feature sound and smell are most compromised by being reduced to an image. In some respects this is the very situation that occurs when the experiential qualities of the urban encounter are reduced to ocular representations. However, the exhibition and examination process is necessarily a curated selection of the many works generated through the research process and their display in the gallery was determined by the following considerations.

Located on the East wall, Walking (2012) is the work most visible from the entry doors to the gallery and was selected for this location to draw the viewer deep into the gallery space from the outset. The moving image mirrors the viewer’s locomotive approach and the sound component completes the experience when the viewer stops. Much of the city is encountered through ‘extended touch’, what Rodaway defines as ‘touch mediated or enhanced by technology’ (Rodaway 2004, p. 49). A projection, rather than TV screen, was selected as the display method in an effort
to erase (as much as it is possible to erase) the visual limits of the frame. Other than this initial directive device of the moving image (which is ultimately only a prompt), there is no designated or prescribed way to navigate the exhibition, though there is logic and reason to the location of each work.

The column in the centre of the gallery spaces poses a restriction for the viewing of works located in the intersection of the North and East walls. In this instance rather than a wall mounted work being visually interrupted or intersected by this column on view from entry, I have installed the work *Chai Mandala* (2013). I ensured adequate space was left around the work to encourage its circumnavigation by the viewer. Paradoxically, the partial concealment of the work behind the column may be a factor drawing the viewer to the back of the gallery space. This location means, rather than bring immediately noticeable on entering the space, the smell of the work is a process of discovery. It also means that the scent of this work does not overly impact the viewing experience of the entire exhibition.

In the two works *Walking* (2012) and *Chai Mandala* (2013), the sound and smell qualities are deliberately minimised to be trace. That is, they are in balance with rather than dominant to, other senses in the work. Though sound and smell are limited (in as much as they can be) to the specific work, their differing and deferring to each other inevitably supplies a sensory trace within the broader viewing experience.

The macro and micro experiences of *Smoke* (2014) are two different, though equally important aspects of the work. The north wall was selected for *Smoke* (2014) to take advantage of the furthest distance from the entry to the gallery allowing a view of the entire work. The delicacy of the piece is counterpoint to the mass of the besar blocks on the south wall. From a distance the drawing appears as an impression, rather than a definite image. This references the experience of site, where an impression of the city is gained through a distant view (deliberate ocular reference) from a boat on the water followed by a closer encounter on land through the body. The drawing, because of its fragility, was made onsite. The current state of the content is therefore temporary because, despite a fixative being applied to the surface, even the slightest brush with another object erases the delicate markings on its surface. This (temporal) situation speaks to the ephemerality of not only the subject matter but also the ephemeral quality that has defined a number of the biopsies of absence throughout the research.

On the south wall, encountered in side profile on entering the gallery, is the work *Chopsticks* (2014). The interdependence and contact point of the chopsticks to the block wall is a critical aspect of this work and is most effectively experienced from the initial side encounter. The work was therefore installed in such a way that the viewers first encounter with the work is from the side. The massing of the 50 besar blocks could quite easily have been the most dominant aspect of the exhibition, so this location was also selected to minimise the perception of the blocks as a barrier, both literally and figuratively. Whilst this ‘barrier’ quality is an important aspect of the work, it is not so important that it should be the focus of the exhibition, nor dominate the surrounding works.

The final works, *Widows* (2013) and *Widows (empathy)* (2013) are located on the West wall. Though two separate works, they should be read in relation to each other. The installation of muslin along the length of the wall means the viewer interaction is sustained for the time it takes to walk the length of the room. The work is therefore, more than a ‘glance’. It engages the body, prompting an exchange between the absent body of the widow and the viewer over time. This durational aspect is important, because it generates a situation where the typically overlooked marginalised group cannot easily be dismissed with a glance.

The exhibition as a whole is a combination of wall mounted and/or fixed works and floor based works. These alternate around the space, creating a rhythm in the viewing experience. In light of the deconstructive framework, I aimed to achieve a balanced installation, both sensorially and visually, where no work is significantly more dominant that another. I aimed to encourage the process of differing and deferring by minimising the hierarchy. I also wanted the viewer to experience the diversity of absences and ways of making, through a series of encounters that, though diverse, express a common thread of absence and whole body engagement.

The outcome is an exhibition that demonstrates the research outcomes in such a way that viewer gains a greater understanding of the ‘presence of absence’ identified in each city and the capacity of art practice to communicate new understandings of absence in and of each city.
Examination Exhibition
School of Art Gallery, RMIT Melbourne, March 2015.
Walking (New York, 2012)

Video projection, two files: LHS duration 14 min, 09 secs, RHS duration 18 min 05 sec.

Continuous loop, visual area 2780 w x 750 h mm, central overlap 350mm.
Chai Mandala (Varanasi, 2013)
Clay chai cups, cinnamon, cardamom, star anise, black tea leaves. 1800mm diameter.
Smoke (Varanasi, 2014)

Smoke, Hahnemühle 300gsm paper, 4800mm x 800mm.
Examination Exhibition
School of Art Gallery, RMIT Melbourne, March 2015.
Chopsticks (Shanghai, 2014)

50 concrete blocks (390 x 190 x 190mm), bamboo chopsticks, (3000 w x 950 h x 800mm d approx).
Widows (Varanasi, 2013)
Duratran, 1800mm x 300mm.

Widows (empathy) (Varanasi, 2013)
Muslin, hessian, bamboo, stainless steel bowls. Site specific length 7500mm.
"The Presence of Absence: Conceptualising Absence in the City through Contemporary Art Practice" is a practice led PhD project investigating absence in the three cities of New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China).

The research outcome is a body of artworks investigating sites of absence in each city. These artworks were created with the aim of problematising the dominant discourses and ways of conceptualizing urban space through presence and contain a number of key findings contributing original knowledge to contemporary art practice. The selected deconstructive methodology facilitated the identification a number of sites of absence extending the perception of what absences are at play in the urban environment. The following Chapter discusses the research outcomes in relation to the three main research questions.

The first research question, In what ways does absence manifest in the cities of New York (USA), Varanasi (India) and Shanghai (China), aimed to identify the marginal or suppressed aspects of the text, in Derridean terms the supplement, for investigation in art practice. In addition to physical voids, other types of absences that manifest in the city were identified as the traces of historical events, transient architectural and mobile vending structures, forms of surveillance, durational aspects such material parina and surface shadows, atmospheric qualities such as pollution and ash, death and social absences including women, widows and the floating population. The immersive method of walking proved instrumental in gathering the data and supplying a haptic connection to each city.

Through walking in Varanasi, I became aware of specific gendered spaces of the city. This revealed gender as a critical factor in shaping Varanasi city spaces. Women’s absence from the street, as well as being a gauge for my personal safety, had directed my attention to their presence on the
rooftops. The city streets are the domain of men and the city rooftops the domain of women. The open space of the rooftop operates as a physical release from the density of living at street level and appeared to be perceived as a private space. Though removed from the street, these supplementary spaces play a critical function in structuring life at a street level.

Attention to overlooked, often marginalized social groups, such as the widows in Varanasi and the floating population in Shanghai, furthered awareness of the cultural practices underpinning the social and spatial arrangements of the city. These groups are excluded from the dominant social cycles of the city, yet they shape the city through their movements. They are also minimized in the discourse of these cities and in art practice that represents each city. Their inclusion in this research through artworks disrupts the dominant ‘face’ of the city presenting an alternative representation that encourages a more inclusive discourse.

The biopsy absence of death highlighted the diversity of rituals and spaces of commemoration between cities. In New York, sites such as churches and memorials are sensorially separate, tending to act as spaces of refuge in the chaotic city. Conversely, the spiritually significant sites in Varanasi are often the most chaotic. The chanting and smoke from the rituals around death permeated the streets, mixing life and death, quite literally. In Shanghai the absence of any signs of death was a source of knowledge about the city and a structuring principle in itself.

Acknowledgement of transient and quotidian aspects of city living identified a new type of absence – the mobile vending cart. The movement and location of these carts is as supplement to the dominant infrastructure. A ‘lack’ is addressed through their supplementary presence. Vending carts often (re)introduce taste and smell into city spaces, thus highlighting the existing poverty of sensory experience in the city’s permanent infrastructure. Identification of this dynamic opened up ways of thinking about the city in terms of ‘things’ that are reasonably static compared to ‘things’ that are, or have potential to be, responsive. Arguably, the latter has potential in each city as a way of supplementing existing structures.

Through the physical traces on the surfaces of the city - human, material, historical - we can learn much of a city’s past. Individuals leave a trace of their presence and the trace of past celebrations or religious devotion on the city surfaces. The construction of much of the contemporary city from materials that repel the trace of touch and time, denies a history of site and, arguably, this limits the potential of space to become place. An acknowledgement of the importance of patina or material trace therefore has implications for the selection of materials and maintenance of new urban structures.

Air quality or atmosphere affects how the city is revealed to people throughout the day, as well as when and how, they navigate the city. Pollution and shadows reveal relationships between objects, between people or between people’s actions. For example activities such manufacturing, traffic and the burning of bodies and cow dung determines the physical and atmospheric qualities of site.

Such durational qualities of site are often overlooked in representations of the city despite the fact, like trace, they contribute significantly to the haptic experience of site.

Silences, not only auditory, were identified in each city, opening up ways of thinking about what is already at play in urban space, but supplementary in the discourse. For example, ‘silences’ in maps indicate what might be overlooked or suppressed in the history of the city and hinting at what might be driving the contemporary formation of the city and, in turn, its representation. Spatial silences are often spaces of commemoration or religious structures. This suggests that practitioners looking to create spaces of refuge in a contemporary city might look to these existing spaces for direction. For example, in addition to a reduction in noise, these sites feature planting that softens harsh light and lowers temperature. These sites are also constructed from materials that are pleasantly tactile and exhibit trace. In a different way, the historical silences of a city such as mass burial sites (New York) or an erasure of historical waterfront structures (Shanghai) can communicate much of the city social history or perhaps its aspirations.

The range of absences identified in the three cities extended the perception of what constitutes absence in urban space because, as well as the physical, they encompass the social, political and historical absences. These sites of absence therefore provided new content for exploration in art practice and challenge the dominance of ocularcentric conceptualisations and representations of each city in the contemporary art discourse.

As the selected deconstructive methodology sought to identify absence that exceeded the pictorial or physical void, it therefore offered a new approach to investigating absence in the urban environment and subsequently in art practice. The selection of cities was determined by a perceived ‘presence of absence’ in each and this resulted in research in and of three cities not typically related. These cities presented a cross-section of contemporary typologies of urban space, which in turn, demonstrated the cultural specificity of each identified site of absence. The design of the research, to encompass three cities, meant that absences identified in one could be related to the other, thus raising new points for consideration. Each city is in a constant process of differing and deferring to the other. For example, the dominance of death in Varanasi highlighted the noticeable absence of death in the other two cities and the dominance of photographic imagery and reflective building materials in New York and Shanghai highlighted the absence of both in Varanasi. These absences stem directly from specific cultural conditions identified through a deconstructive methodological framework.

These sites of absence identified during the fieldwork informed the next stage of the research, during which I endeavored to answer the second research question, ‘In what ways can contemporary art practice investigate these identified absences to generate new perceptions of absence in each city?’ New understandings of absence were discovered through content and methods in art practice. The resulting artworks examined power dynamics, social exclusion, cultural rituals, haptic qualities of space, and the role and materiality of everyday structures and objects. Materials and installation,
the performative gesture and locomotive body, and methods emergent from the embodied experience of site were ways of generating these perceptions.

In *Walking* (2012), absence manifest as trace on the urban skin. The footage records the supplement experience of my walking the city, details of which I was unaware. Rather than the normative way of viewing New York - as distant skyline, vertical skyscraper or linear canyons - this work draws the eye down and engages the viewer in a whole body experience via the rhythm of my feet on the pavement. The sculptural installation *Windows* (2013) signs the absent body. The use of my own body to generate the installation incorporate traces of the widows absent/denied identity with my own identity, prompting a reflection on my own situation in contrast with these women. The installation makes visible inhabitants of the city that are socially excluded and marginalized. This introduces issues such as human rights and cultural prejudice into the discourse of Varanasi representations. Social absence as trace in construction of city sites was highlighted through the materiality of the sculpture *Chopsticks* (2014). Through its exploration of social absence, additional aspects shaping the city space are highlighted such as power dynamics and social exclusion. A perceptions of absence as ephemeral and transient is introduced through the *Smoke* series (2014).

To conceptualise an aspect of the city I draw not only on what is visible to sight but what is experienced through the lungs and the skin. Translating this embodied experience into a method was a critical development in my research because, instead of images of the rituals of death in Varanasi, materials such as smoke, fire and ash were used to haptically access those qualities of the site. In *Chai Cups* (2013), the remotely located site is accessed through taste, touch and smell as well as sight. Rather than focus on landmarks, the works draws on a quotidian object to explore cycles of the city. In response to the absence/presence dynamic embedded in the process journey itself a number of artworks the studio practice addressed the experience of travelling to and from each city site as artist/researcher/tourist. *Haptic Postcards* (2014) deconstructs the devices used to document, message from or recall the remotely located city site. In doing so, the shortfall between each city site as artist /researcher/tourist.

City identities, in an effort to attract tourism and investment, are constructed to depict the city in its most favorable light. The identified biopsies of absence, such as death and marginalized social groups, have for this reason been suppressed in such representations of the city. Art practice can play a role in highlighting these aspects, acknowledging marginalised social groups and opening discussion around the ways urban space and city representations might be designed to be more inclusive. For example, spaces may be made safe and accessible for women or perhaps greater diversity will be integrated in the representations of the populations of each city.

The artwork speaks or defers to its condition of absence through a number of means. A key finding was the importance of materials to access and extend by haptic means the understanding of each identified absence and activate *différance* in the artwork. Homi Bhabha writes, material is like living tissue, a contingent and relational medium (Bhabha 1998) and in this research the use of bamboo, clay, muslin, ash, smoke and concrete haptically connects the viewer to a specific city. Juhani Pallasmaa observes that an embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or place. We transfer all the cities and towns we have visited, all the places we have recognized into the incarnate memory of our body (Pallasma 2009, p. 72). Drawing on particular materials to make these artworks was a way of triggering the embodied memories and past experiences of each city, both in the making process and the viewer interaction. Through this process, the experiences that have been put under erasure in a Derridean sense, become available as present conditions of absence therefore supplying new conceptualisations and representations of each city.

The third and final research question is, *Drawing from haptic encounters in the city and engaging with methodological metaphor of biopsy, how can this research identify new understandings of absence in urban space?* As demonstrated, both the fieldwork and practice employed haptic methods to access a broader multi-sensory experience of the urban environment. In doing so, possibilities were revealed in the content and process of art works that addressed the ‘lived’ experience of the city, rather than the single present moment captured through the image. When image was utilized, it was through engagement with the trace or in the creation of an image expressing a phenomenological experience of site. Arguably, the communication of an experience of each city beyond what is normally available to sight has, in some small way, contributed to a greater awareness of how people live in urban space. That is, beyond that which features in ocular representations such as landscape and tourist imagery. By focusing on the ‘whole body encounter’, this disruption to normative ways of representing the city occurred across multiple levels. For example, metaphorically describing the city as body focused on city as process, awareness to bodies circulating in city space focused attention on rituals and social cycles, knowledge gathered through my own body encountering city space provided new methods for making and finally, my body and others bodies in the gallery space offered an alternative to the ocular dominated experience of viewing the city in a gallery context.

As my research is based in two global cities, the outcomes also contribute to the discourse of globalization and the role of the body is shaping cities that are defined as global. John Rennie Short writes, While the recent discourses of the body tend to ignore the cultural weight and economic impact of globalization, the debates on globalisation fail to mention the importance of the body. One is so concentrated on the micro that it ignores the macro while the other, in focusing on the global, loses sight of the embodied local (Rennie Short, 2004, 123).

The methodological process of biopsy attempts to address such a dynamic of micro and macro by extracting a sample from the city body and analyzing it with an awareness of how macro forces shape and sustain that sample. This focus on ‘micro’ also goes someway to disrupt the dominance on the ‘spectacle’. Such an approach is unique in its adoption and application of a medical process to the study of the urban environment, and I argue it is a model of investigation that has potential for application in the research of other cities.
Through its application, the disciplines of art and medicine were brought together as intertextual processes, thereby in part dismantling the boundaries of the disciplines themselves. This is demonstrated through the application of anatomical analogies to describe city features and systems, as well as in an analysis of the city using terms such as pathology, sickness and organism. These alternative frameworks disrupt normative ways of understanding the city suggesting causal connection between a city function and a living entity. The biopsy methodology proved useful as a procedural device, however it did at times create confusion around the main thematic focus of the research. This meant clearly stating its function as a procedural device rather than a determining or influential factor in the aesthetic and material choices made in studio practice. However, this highlighted an opportunity for further research on the potential of medical processes to conceptualise aspects of the urban environment.

The notion of absence as a structural principle of city spaces has been explored throughout the research and biopsies of absence demonstrate the different ways this occurs. For example, on a purely functional level, marginalized social groups structure not only where people live and work in each city, but in the case of the widows of Varanasi how people move and interact on the street. Surveillance influences movements across sites and transient structures such as vending carts attract people to otherwise unremarkable sites. Sites of historical trace, often sites of commemoration or memorial, supply spaces of respite in a chaotic city and are examples of how absence may play a restorative or redemptive function.

Though this research has considered the whole body encounter, it acknowledges there is value in isolating individual senses whilst remaining cognisant of their interrelationships. For example, the audio component of the walking videos demonstrates the unique sound profiles of specific city blocks in the New York site. This suggests an alternative ‘aural way’ of mapping lower Manhattan that had potential to disrupt the ocular dominance of representations of the city as well as of mapping conventions.

The exhibition was not designed to manifest the absence-presence exchange. Instead, new understandings of absence, and of each city are demonstrated through the individual artworks and then through the intertextual references between these works. The selected works demonstrate the diversity of the identified sites of absence as well as providing connections between the three cities. For example, connections are activated materially, through the contrast between the tactile chai cups of Varanasi and the sensual poverty of the beser blocks in Shanghai.

In conclusion, the research generates new perceptions of New York through attention to the details of the city. Rather than ‘looking up’ or into the distance, the research focused on the ‘urban skin’, the surfaces that were under the feet, in contact with the body and which carry the trace. Varanasi is conceptualised and represented through a focus on contemporary issues and everyday encounters, rather than the mythical or spiritual content that normally informs and dominates the discourse. An absence of colour in the artworks challenges the colour and visual spectacle that typically dominates representation of India circulated through artworks and tourist imagery. Instead of the visual spectacle or futuristic aspects that currently dominate the discourse of Shanghai, the artworks in this research reference materials and quotidian places and focus on the process and social issues influencing the built environment rather than the completed architectural outcome or the highly constructed image of the ‘spectacle’.

A deconstructive approach and methodology has proved invaluable in uncovering new content for art practice. Through this process – the ‘shaking’ of the whole – it has been possible to articulate new ways of thinking about each city beyond presence and the ocular perspective. Through their thematic focus and formal qualities, each artwork prompts discussion around marginalized aspects of site, disrupting the stream of images that currently dominate the visual discourse of each city. These knowledge outcomes extend the thematic focus and methods conventionally employed by artists to conceptualise and represent urban space. They may also have potential to disrupt the normative approach of other disciplines, such as urban planning and architecture, currently shaping our urban realities.

The value of this research lies in its challenge to entrenched ways of both encountering and communicating the urban experience through art practice. Through a deconstructive reading of the city text one can gain a greater understanding of the forces that shape and contribute to its ongoing existence. The research outcomes, a series of artworks that conceptualise absence in the city, embody tangible proof of this process.
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Figures (all others by author)

Fig.16 Gordon Matta-Clark, Office Baroque (1977), source Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, viewed November 2014, <http://www.mcoca.org/pc/view/ArtWork.php?id=42>.
Fig.21 Zhu Jia, Forever (1994), source ShangArt gallery, viewed November 2014 <http://www.shangartgallery.com/galleryimage/image/16964_slider.jpg>.
Fig.25 James Prinsep, Rajajeevanee Ghat (1832) source British Library, part of James Prinseps ‘Benares Illustrated’ lithograph series, viewed November 2014, <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ onlineimage1apac/other/19zz000007512u00005000.html>.
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