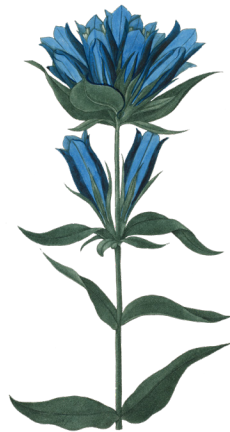


# House Letters

*Absence and Presence*

August 20



## A note

Since publishing the first issue in May 2020, *House Letters* has experienced an enormous growth. In June, I decided to post an open call for issue two. The response was overwhelming – I received nearly 180 submissions. 35 of these were selected, comprising 20 artists and 15 writers who responded to the theme of absence and presence. I feel extremely lucky to have connected with such brilliant contributors, based all over the world.

The terms absence and presence have been used to describe essential states of 'being'. Through reassessments by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, however, these terms have gone beyond their once binary, hierarchical distinctions. Absence can now be seen as a form of presence, and vice versa, displacing the importance of absolute truths and focusing attention to forms of mediation, including images, representations and language [1].

The pieces that follow offer international, wide-ranging interpretations of these two terms, and the meanings, tensions and contradictions that arise from them. Several pieces reflect the tumultuous historical moment we have been living through: from the effects of absence of physical presence, to the confrontation with one's own presence during lockdown, and the absence and presence of both certainty and uncertainty.

In recent months, lockdown restrictions have been eased in some countries, while new coronavirus cases and death tolls are rising exponentially in others. Equally, both the pandemic and the explosion of conversations around racial justice have exposed social division on a global scale, raising urgent questions around visibility and invisibility. As the world moves towards a new normal, what do we want to see present? And what do we wish to leave behind?

- Bethany Holmes, Editor

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### Harpwell Tides, by Caro Dranow

Caro is a New England-based artist who paints landscapes and portraiture. She is inspired by her love of people and the environment, and considers her work to be part of the fourth wave ecofeminist movement.  
carodranow.com  
IG @caro\_dranow

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### Orifice Moon, by Teddy McDonald

Teddy is a poet and photographer from the Wirral, based in Forest Hill and working for the Society of Authors. His poetry questions heightened experiences, often through Gnosticism.  
IG @teddymcdonald93

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### En Masse: Epidemics, a Feature of Humankind, by Anja Rohner

Anja is a writer from Germany, with a background in plant biology.

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### Be Touching, by Elizaveta Zalieva

Elizaveta is an artist and illustrator from St. Petersburg, Russia. Her work considers subtle matters invisible to the eye, the beauty of details, the fleeting and the simple.  
zalieva.ru  
IG @liza.zalieva

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### Remember These, by Lizzie Ballagher

Lizzie's first collection of poetry, for a UK charity, was published in April. Her work has been featured in magazines and webzines on either side of the Atlantic.  
lizzieballagherpoetry.wordpress.com

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### Paris5avril2020, by Pooya Abbasian

Pooya is an Iranian artist based in Paris. Working with photography, video and drawing, he is interested in ambiguities and transitional states. Through material and technical experimentation, he seeks out poetic flaws.  
p-abbasian.com

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### Stillness, by Inês Miguel Oliveira

Inês is a Portuguese artist, currently living and working in Guimarães. Her work deals with intimacy and the poetry of the mundane.  
cargocollective.com/inesmigueloliveira  
IG @inesmoliv

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### Less is Moor, by Claudia Platzer

Claudia is from Sydney, Australia. She utilises performance, paint and found objects to discuss ideas surrounding labour and existential thoughts.  
claudeplatzer.com  
IG @clauud.e

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When Death Isn't Elsewhere, and Neither Are We, by Yizhuo Irina Li  
Yizhuo is a researcher and curator of contemporary art, in particular digital media and social practice. Yizhuo also directs the New York-based art organisation FRESCO Collective.  
yz-li.xyz

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### Expansion, by Anna Mays

Anna is an artist from Dublin, currently based in Brighton. Her practice looks at how the human body is perceived in contemporary western society and technology, and the influence of medicine on this.  
IG @nnamays

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### The Local, by Martina Morger

Martina is a performance artist who also works with multimedia. She reflects on femininity as a device, and claiming space as a political body.  
martinamorger.com

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### Out of Reach, by Ally Zlatar

Ally explores art making as a methodology that suggests the human condition is more complex than it is understood to be. Currently, she is pursuing her Doctorate of Creative Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. She has been involved in many exhibition creations and her work has been shown globally.  
ally.pb.studio/cv  
society6.com/allyzlatar

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### I am Not Freda, by Rowenna Mortimer

Rowenna is a playwright, inspired by the boundaries between humans and animals, the metaphorical and the real, to create stories of hope and possibility.  
Twitter @FurtherThanEdge

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### Flor de Placebo, by Manuel Delgado and Lara Crespo

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Manuel is a Spanish visual poet, currently based in Brussels. He aims to develop innovative modes of writing, with and as art, taking advantage of his studies in law, political science and philosophy.  
manuel-delgado-art.com  
IG @manuel.delgado.art

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Lara is a Spanish photographer and audio-visual artist. Her work explores nature and the environmental impact of plastic products in our lives. Pastel colours comprise Lara's aesthetic.  
IG @laracrespoh97

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### A Short Story From a Non-Writer, by Manwah Siu

Manwah was born in Stockton-on-Tees and currently resides in London, where he continues to try to write.

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### Orderly Refrigerator (Vanitas), by Andrew Leventis

Andrew is a painter of objects, miniatures, collections, and still life. He has a BFA in Painting from the American Academy of Art in Chicago and an MFA in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, University of London. He is an Assistant Professor of Painting at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte.  
andrewleventispainting.com  
IG @andrewleventisstudio

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### Still Life, by Luis Elvira

Luis is a painter and writer born in Spain and based in London. He studied BA Philosophy and writes poetry in English and Spanish. As a painter he has exhibited work in Spain and the UK.  
luiselvira.blogspot.com  
IG @luis\_elvira\_s

## When Death Isn't Elsewhere, and Neither Are We

Would you be remiss to chant 'death is elsewhere' when the global death toll of this pandemic is more than 670,000 and the infections have risen over 17 million? The unsettling tune from Ragnar Kjartansson's video installation, nonetheless, continues to haunt you. That encounter at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with the many revisits that followed, was already a reminiscence of last summer, while you and countless other college students were graduating blissfully, mindlessly. In line with the mood, the title of this work sounded jubilant and inviting at first; soon it grinned with a senile smile. In the seven-channel video, two couples walk and sing with guitars in hands, backdropped by the idyllic Icelandic landscape, as the wind interweaves with a song that keeps telling you, 'death is elsewhere'.

Yet the performance has no intention to land with a convincing relief. Instead, it coils, twists, resists your effort to see. Behind the mask of the lens where the performance took place, you imagine a stage that extends beyond the stage. The camera restrings a passive viewer to confront the force of death and the chilling draught between the screens where visitors loiter in and out of the half-enclosed field.

The artist views his video as a 'kinetic sculpture', encouraging exploration from different physical angles that complement each other. Viewers are moved, indeed, but only to be barred from the illusion created on the screen. It is fairly rare to see a contemporary Icelandic artist premier their work at the Met, rendering the idyll otherworldly from its homecoming nature.

You are awed and subdued by this escape from the Met, until you see a visitor approaching the circular screens. Dressed in a bright orange T-shirt, unseemly as those alerting roadblocks on a hot summer day, he appears to be both reaching for the landscape and playfully shadowing himself onto the projected image. The singing couples, of course, do not respond. They are

well protected in a world without cause and consequence – the world is folded into a loop, allowing no accidental bifurcation or deviation – and death is kept away with no passing of time.

You take out the phone when a message rings through – connecting you to your world where, unlike here on the lower floor of the Lehman Wing, the signals are robust and constantly flooding you with information and direction – and you realise 45 minutes have passed since you trapped yourself in this loop. When watches often become badges of class, rather than keepers of time, is time freed to elapse in a frivolous manner? You begin to picture a tuxedoed man waltz this way, as if weaving across the seven screens around you, and blindfold you against any passageway.

So where do you stand? Which world, if there is any self-contained world, are you breathing in? You cannot tolerate an ambivalence as such, risking your life on a dangling cliff. Yet now, on a long summer day in an inscrutable year, you miss the anguish of ambivalence, rather than the dilemma of to contain or to live, and perhaps, breathe.

Yizhuo Irina Li

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My article reflects on – and at this time, yearns for – a video installation by Ragnar Kjartansson that disconcertingly brings forth death beneath a surface of serenity and comfort. Its escapism and nihilism feel particularly relevant now.