

# Elements

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Undoing Art

Quodlibet

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*This is a book written in short, brisk bursts involving showing and telling of the story and history of undoing. It is about the chunking and stitching together of ideas ... And therefore it wants to show its seams, most earnestly desiring not to be seamless – we believe in the showing as it energizes the telling.*

*Acts of Undoing and How We Care*

M.A.C.: What best undoes something to make it something else? Undoing to do better? Here's a model case: Mallarmé striking out every other word from his sentences to make the prose unjournalistic, enigmatic, to make it the poetry of a sentence.

Acts of undoing can be drama in style, without any apparent reason. Or they can be quite simply, in very low key indeed, the refusal to accept or answer to one's own name, a pseudonym. And then there is the high style: the poet Pierre Reverdy, contemporary with Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire, to mark – apparently – his separation from the worldly life and Coco Chanel, with whom he had been closely associating for years, sets fire to a pile of papers on the corner of the rue Bonaparte in the 6ème arrondissement. Are these some of his poems or his other manuscripts, with the publication of which Coco has helped, or then her letters to him, or others, from others? We will not be knowing, but we will – really, really – be caring. When Henry James sets afire his correspondence, is that to avoid his identification as a

gay guy, as many of us assume, or some deep cultivation of privacy?

Here is, we think, the point. It doesn't matter for what reason the writer or painter or lover destroys the creation: the real point is that destruction itself, like a gigantic statement. It is, in fact, something of an excitation, a stimulation to further thought: what is this ACTION about?

It is always a marking of a before (whatever it might have been) and an afterwards, a time of post-action, so that the mark itself is the moment on which we might well want to concentrate. We could imagine hovering over it, delectating in it, were we only to be witnesses, as of course we are usually not.

### *Not Doing*

M.A.C.: Of more interest, perhaps are two other kinds of cases. One is the not doing what one has been asked to do, or what one has indeed promised to do, so that the act itself perseveres, along with its undoing. Here I am thinking of Rainer Maria Rilke, asked, invited, to edit the letters and journal entries of the great German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, and refusing, alleging that it would do her reputation no good:

For even at the moment that the greatest images of her comes alive within me, how in that very moment am I to bring myself to put together and then promote an inferior and tentative image? ... After much thought and hesitation I finally decided last winter not to edit the written remains of Paula Becker; indeed, I advised Frau Becker to abandon altogether the idea of such an edition ... My principal argument against their publication is this: that they depreciate rather than enhance the already tenuous image and understanding of her art ... Quite apart from her development as a human being, how is one supposed to gather from [these documents] that we are dealing with the painter, the artist, who ...<sup>1</sup>

And so on. Right, but still he wrote the extraordinary *Requiem for a Friend*, about the same painter, and in response to this we have the equally (and perhaps more) extraordinary poem of Adrienne Rich, for Clara and Paula, as it were, another requiem, saying what cannot be – and so is – said.

Perhaps, on the other hand, these are absolutely the high points of what Paula left, which have of course now been restituted to their prominence. But the point is really the arrogance (oh, alas, Rilke's) of rejecting the writings of another creator, as if one were the person to decide what is and is not worth it. And as we now read what she left, the journals and the letters, as well as viewing her art, we might find our-

1. Günter Busch and Liselotte von Reinken (eds.), *Paula Modersohn-Becker; The Letters and Journals*, Taplinger Publishing Company, New York 1983, pp. 539-540.

selves saying with her, as she remarked to Clara her friend about her early death after childbirth, «what a pity», and meaning, this time, how sorry we are that the great poet mistook what was at stake, beyond the corporeal loss: a truly moving corpus of writing.

How remarkable which myths of refusal persist. Think what this seemingly trivial anecdote undoes ... It is a case of final judgment. And it is our judgment that gets worked on, willy-nilly.

Another crucial example is that of Marianne Moore not writing the preface she said she would for Marsden Hartley's poem. Interesting about the non-generosity of spirit in those you might think the most likely to praise, to confer beneficence: but I well remember her grudging acknowledgment on a recommendation for a Guggenheim Fellowship for Joseph Cornell, that he was perhaps an interesting artist but lacked the «finish»<sup>2</sup> of more accomplished artists.

### *Disownings*

M.A.C.: Ken Russell, working with Derek Jarman, disowns his film with Nureyev; years before, An-

2. Ellen Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 104.

tonin Artaud, angry with the way in which his film *La Coquille et le clergyman* (*The Shell and the Clergyman*) had been directed by Germaine Dulac, disowned it as a badly-interpreted product of his mind. Of course group disownings go even further: Artaud, and then later Salvador Dalí were disowned, as was even the best surrealist poet of them all, Robert Desnos, by the surrealist group. Group disownings remain celebrated, exclusions, just as celebrated as are inclusions.

We would be hard put to it to figure out if a work of art said to be by one person by that artist was then akin to another work by that same artist but claiming to have been produced by another name. Does a name have everything to do with the product? These elements so capital in commerce enter into the world of art as conundrums, interesting to some of us, a big yawn to others.

### *Refusals*

M.A.C.: Sadly, the Whitney Museum has just turned down, for the public plaza in front of its new building, Charles Ray's statue of *Huck and Jim*, remembering *Huck Finn*. «The runaway slave, Jim, is nine feet tall, in the prime of life», as Calvin Tomkins puts it in his article «Meaning Machines:

The Sculptures of Charles Ray»<sup>3</sup>. Jim is reaching out with his right hand protectively over Huck's body, as the fourteen-year old bends over and scoops out something below him. It relates to the story in which they are looking at the stars, Huck is saying they were always there, but Jim says perhaps the moon laid them, to which Huck responds: «sure, because I've seen a frog lay most as many»<sup>4</sup>. Ray points out that this story is about our Homer, and that Huck Finn is our American Ulysses. He reflects on the statue of the Kouros (590-580 B.C.) in the Metropolitan Museum as the statue steps forward: «He is a meaning machine»<sup>5</sup>.

And the Huck Finn statue cannot be shown, because – as Adam Weinberg, director of the Whitney says – it is too disturbing right there. They are, of course, naked (Huck says: «We had no use for clothes no-how»<sup>6</sup>). And when he reckons he is stealing the property of his Aunt Polly, whose slave Jim is, he says: «All right, I'll go to Hell, but I won't turn him in»<sup>7</sup>. A heart-gripping moment, and the controversy is about the Whitney's declining the sculpture ...

3. Calvin Tomkins, *Meaning Machines: The Sculptures of Charles Ray*, «The New Yorker», May 11, 2015, unpag., <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/11/meaning-machines>.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

### *Obliterations and Deviations*

M.D.: And then, of course, there are acts of disowning, refusal and obliteration perpetrated by artists upon the works of other artists. Among these, the success story of erasure poetics deserves our attention, if only because it has been ignored or relegated to the margins of literary and art history. Erasure is rooted as much in contemporary philosophy's deconstructionist turn as in Duchampian found objects and Situationist détournements, of which many of the examples examined below constitute both an extension and a critique. Recent and current developments in erasure art are closely associated with visual artists and writers (many of them poets) appropriating already existing texts with a view to modulating their meaningfulness and legibility.

This says a lot about the relevance of erasure to today's culture which, by and large, values concepts over technique, rewriting over originality, self-reflection over aesthetic norms and values. Poised between effacement and defacement, erasure pursues a logic which considers the artwork as an unfinished object that awaits future readings and negotiations to be provisionally refashioned, recycled and reconsumed. As the source text becomes the model for the artists and the victim of their transgressions and violations, the bound-



aries between creator and creature, process and product, producer and consumer, are dimmed in a haze of colliding gestures and interpretations. In an age of uncertainty that does not cease to proclaim the «death of the avant-garde» and in which «suspicious readings» have become the norm, the disfiguration of found texts has been an important part of experimental literary and artistic production since the 1960s (which, incidentally, is when the failure of the «historical», self-critical avant-garde reached its apex, at least according to Peter Bürger's canonical thesis<sup>8</sup>).

To some, erasure art will appear a belated revisitation or, worse, a depoliticized rip-off of the familiar collagist, plagiarist and other foundist methods of modernism and/or a mere epiphenomenon of the much-celebrated cut-up method, the writing-through experiments of John Cage or Jackson MacLow, or what Kenneth Goldsmith recently theorized and promoted as «uncreative writing»<sup>9</sup>. Others will regard it as an interventionist trend which seeks to rescue the critical and revolutionary potential of experimentalism from the aporias of postmodern pastiche and quotationism.

8. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984.

9. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011.

The critical narrative of the avant-garde's loss of revolutionary potential and its gradual assimilation into the world of commodities is another story of «undoing» which this short book does not purport to describe or resolve. Instead, our intention is to focus on a limited number of examples enacting forms of poetic appropriation which are geared towards a different understanding of how art can be undone and, in turn, potentially undo its creators: in such works, the author, far from being abolished in the Barthesian sense, is understood and redefined against the materiality of text, book and body. M.A.C.: Furthermore, such appropriation incites and includes the readerly participation so urgently required for a true ongoing sense of what matters. It is about being there, even as the undoing is enacted. We are, from whatever distance or intimacy, involved. Otherwise, it is a lost venture. And we don't have a hell of a lot of time to lose.

### *Erasurism*

M.D.: Paul Ricoeur memorably identified Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the father-founders of a «school of suspicion»<sup>10</sup> which urges readers, crit-

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven 1970, p. 32.

ics and artists to unveil the strategies by which art conceals its own constructedness and disguises its ideological complicity with dominant structures of power. Should erasure art be considered as a casualty of the «terminal case of irony» in which the humanities find themselves at the present time, driven as they are by an «uncontrollable urge to put everything in scare quotes»<sup>11</sup>? Even though erasurism does not necessarily set out to destroy the artwork per se (and thus can be seen as a relatively benign manifestation of undoing than what this book has discussed so far) it is often prompted by a desire to revisit familiar, predominantly canonical texts with a view to foregrounding and/or correcting their limitations and deficiencies.

The outcome does not merely remediate the source document in order to purge it of its undesirable qualities, the way a censor would work, deleting stuff that is deemed unwanted or unsafe. In the best of cases the erasure artist works as a sculptor, chipping off bits of textual or visual material in order to give shape to new semiotic patterns which take it to a different level of appreciation, sometimes to the effect of overpowering its predecessor (as is the case in Tom Phillips's *A Humument*, of which more will be said later). In

11. Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*, Wiley-Blackwell, New York 2008, p. 2.

short, «erasurism» is as much about adding and creating as it is about erasing and subtracting and, as Rita Felski reminds us, we should «all heed Ricoeur's advice to combine a willingness to suspect with an eagerness to listen; there is no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love»<sup>12</sup>.

As stated before, the «revisionist» act that underlies art erasure can be usefully related to the poetics of found art made famous by Duchamp's ready-mades. But where Duchamp elevated ordinary objects to the level of art by separating them from their context and use value, erasure artists have pursued rather different goals over the last 50-odd years as their main referent remains the original artwork itself, which is subjected to diverse forms of physical manipulations whose function and significance can only emerge from the tension between the found and the revised, the original and its «effaced» avatar.

What matters here is that even the most radical form of erasure is essentially a kind of rewriting. As with other, more familiar forms of rewritings (Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargossa Sea* and countless other postmodern, perspectival neo-Victorian novels come to mind) the ghost of the foundational text is bound to continue to haunt its «treated»

12. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

version. Its obliterated content is always likely to return with a vengeance as its previous vectors of meaning must leak through, in a more or less explicit and visible fashion, whether or not readers or viewers are familiar with the original text prior to their confrontation with its treated version.

That said, erasure poetics differs from postmodern rewritings insofar as its act of undoing affects not only the content of the text but also (and primarily) textual matter as such. It is this concretist attention to the physical and material properties of language which unites all the diverse forms of deletion, obliteration, covering-up, canceling, scratching, rubbing out, blotting, etc., which are grouped here under the umbrella term «erasure».

### *Pseudonyms and De/Retitlings*

M.A.C.: Among the varied coverups, the art of the pseudonym works a kind of subterfuge. Blaise Pascal wrote as five different persons, depending what he was writing: mathematics, imagined letters, and so on, and the major othering writer is without any doubt Fernando Pessoa, who had at least seventy-five other characters, known as «heteronyms»: among them Alberto Caeiro, and Ricardo Reis, each of which had a different character, history, and style.

As for an amusing material coverup, try the cover of Frederic Tuten's autobiography, which is over-pictured by a gigantic Roy Lichtenstein cheese: obviously, the Big Cheese whose writing lurks behind. It has always seemed a kind of new venture, the idea of a work retitled, by its author or by the publishers or gallerists ... *Transformations* indeed, like Hawthorne's last completed romance, called *Transformation* before it was retitled and published as *The Marble Faun*. An interesting case, going from the general idea to the detail. We might want to include in this kind of renaming the celebrated example (on which his/her *Conundrum* is based) the change of James Morris into Jan Morris, both of whom so many read with such delight. One's students are first mystified and then entranced, in this age of fluid sexuality, by the necessity of two bibliographies, for him and then for her, both of which proliferate in superbly crafter and imagined writing.

### *Canceling (out)*

M.D.: Whether we are dealing with textual or beyond-textual subterfuges, Mallarmé appears as the presiding consciousness of a constellation of poeticians of the blank exploring the alternance of absence in presence and for whom the spac-

es and silences between words matter at least as much as words themselves or the things they designate. Mallarmé's poetry is geared towards the creation of paradoxical objects which cancel themselves as soon as they are named (one is reminded of his «absent tomb», his «flights which have not fled» and the «abolished bauble of sonorous uselessness» of his aptly de-titled «Sonnet allégorique de lui-même»<sup>13</sup>). Besides unsettling traditional notions of authorial closure and controlled authorship in a space effecting the reciprocal annihilation of negativity and positivity («confronting [the] existence [of chance], negation and affirmation fail»<sup>14</sup>, the poet writes in *Igitur*), the scattered spatial layout of Mallarmé's textual roll of the dice in his 1897 *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* would seem to afford endless readerly combinations and permutations multiplied by the «eternal circumstances» of the dice throw («All Thought emits a Throw of the Dice»<sup>15</sup>).

Marcel Broodthaers's 1969 version of *Un coup de dés* resubtitles the Gallimard edition of Mal-

larmé's poem into an «IMAGE», obliterating the entire text of Mallarmé's text and replacing it with black typographical rectangles on the book's double spreads. In doing so Broodthaers foregrounds the sheer spatial arrangement of the words in the book to the detriment of its referential potentialities. (Man Ray's 1924 visually similar «Lautgedicht» is an important precursor with the essential difference that its main emphasis is on sound rather than space, as evidenced in the silent, residual musicality of its regular metrical patterns.) «IMAGE» parenthesizes Mallarmé's prefacing claim that the page should be opened up as a canvas inviting a «simultaneous vision»<sup>16</sup> and upon which «the paper intervenes each time an image ceases or withdraws of its own accord»<sup>17</sup>. It represents a literal extension of the poet's famous pronouncement that «verse should not consist of words but of intentions, and all words should efface themselves before sensation»<sup>18</sup>.

Mallarmé's insistence on the (self-)effacement of words and the importance of «sensation» reflects his more general commitment to «painti[ing] not

13. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 68.

14. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, New Directions, New York 1982.

15. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur, Divagations, Un Coup de dés*, my trans., Gallimard, Paris 1976, p. 429.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 406.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

18. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance Tome 1 (1862-1871)*, my trans., Gallimard, Paris 1959, p. 137.

the thing itself, but the effect it produces»<sup>19</sup>. Born out of a recognition that artist can work «by elimination ... all acquired truth being born only from the loss of an impression»<sup>20</sup>, Mallarmean poetics ultimately suggests that poets themselves are «merely empty forms of matter» in the face of «the Void which is the truth»<sup>21</sup>. The first edition of Broodthaers's «IMAGE» further emphasizes this notion by printing the obliterated text on translucent paper conveying the depth as well as the two-dimensional plasticity of Mallarmé's verbo-visual experiments. The artistic and philosophical implications of this gesture are perhaps best-summarized by Jacques Rancière when he writes that «IMAGE» «accomplishe[s] Mallarmé in his refutation»<sup>22</sup>, opposing several forms of artistic self-suppression resolved in an «indifferent spatiality» ruled by «the power of blankness». In Broodthaers's «IMAGE», Mallarmé becomes both the victim and the perpetrator of a radical poetry of (self-)erasure.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

21. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Letters*, trans. Rosemary Lloyd, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1988, p. 60.

22. Jacques Rancière, *The Space of Words: from Mallarmé to Broodthaers*, in Jérôme Game (ed.), *Porous Boundaries: Texts and Images in Twentieth-century French Culture*, Peter Lang, Bern 2007, p. 61.

## *Rubouts*

M.A.C.: And speaking of self-erasures, «self-kleptomaniac, the normal state of man is Dada»<sup>23</sup>. What could be more deliciously Dada than the self-interest of self-stealing: why of course, from whom else could one steal so generously? And in any case, self-proclamation as the rubbing out of the self («we are all presidents of Dada» says the Papa-Dada, Tristan Tzara, who proclaims the manifesto as a non-manifesto: «In principle, I am against manifestoes, as I am also against principles»)<sup>24</sup>. Of course, and this is always the Dada point: you state something to unstate it, you state the self as delighting in the self in order to rub it out as self. As Artaud said, he was absent from himself, neither speaking nor thinking. He erased himself, in a dramatic verbal act of «gestural erasure, in the same way that, in Artaud's meticulously created spells of 1937-39, their impact needed to be sealed with the destructive presence of fire, so that they remain permanently poised an instant short of terminal conflagration»<sup>25</sup>.

23. Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology, Second Edition*, The Belknap Press, New York 1989, p. 92.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

25. Stephen Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Terminal Curses: The Notebooks 1945-1948*, Solar, London 2008, p. 139.

And also, about rubbing out, Breton, in this Dada skit in Paris in 1920 – he didn't need the Cabaret Voltaire of Tzara and the others, like the double-Hans, Hans/Jean Arp and Hans Richter, no indeed, he was in Paris and anyway, he was his own Dada as long as he was Dada, saying you have to leave everything behind – he would write an insult by Francis Picabia on his suddenly-shown blackboard, and then, after a moment, would erase it: so he gave it and took it back. This is definitely gestural erasure.

We could say, erasure with a difference, only Dada was «creative indifference» (thanks to the German philosopher Mynona [as in Anonym]: whatever we do with where we got what we got where). This is indeed the «the Dada strategy of giving and revoking in a single gesture»<sup>26</sup>.

M.D.: Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1953 *The Erasers* sets another interesting precedent for an understanding of how erasurism operates at the level of form and content. Robbe-Grillet's anti-nouveau murder story sets out to erase the conventions of the detective novel, freeing it from «realist ideology where everything is meaningful»<sup>27</sup>, preferring

«lacunary structures»<sup>28</sup> to the patterns of narrative closure of the whodunnit, and pursuing the trajectories of meaning trickling through the «holes»<sup>29</sup> of the real. This process results in the pulverization of the plot in the traditional sense, a consequence captured by Wallace's quest for a «crumbly gum eraser that friction does not twist but reduces to dust»<sup>30</sup>, a «perfect» eraser which may not even exist but which, in the context of the detective story, symbolically connects erasure and death. The murder of the plot is the perfect crime that only the watchful reader can hope to witness, a crime which, incidentally, is as perfect as Wallace's perfect eraser since no actual murder actually takes place in Robbe-Grillet's text.

David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) is another story which erases itself while being told, gradually rubbing out its past, present and future actualizations. The film gives a rather disturbing feeling, to say the least, when Henry Spencer imagines his disembodied head taken to the pencil factory where samples of his brain are manufactured into erasers. Whatever we make of Lynch's multi-layered metaphors (Henry is clearly afraid that he is going to be physically erased, but the film is also

26. Jed Rasula, *Destruction Was My Beatrice: Dada and the Unmaking of the Twentieth Century*, Basic Books, New York 2015, p. xi.

27. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Entretien*, «Littérature», 49/1, 1983, p. 16.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers*, Grove Press, New York 1964, p. 123.

about the possibility of seeing the entire universe in a cloud of eraser dust), the focus is on writing *as* matter as well as on the grotesque plasticity of a body converted into a erasing commodity. Here is an example of erasure art turning back upon itself, like a serpent biting its own tail.

M.A.C.: Looking at Vija Celmins' portrayal of an *Eraser* of 1967, we could see, posits Linda Nochlin in her essay on «some women realists» – if we wanted – a «sly reference» to Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommés* (and we can translate it as *The Erasers* or then *The Rubbers*, should we be desirous of a bit of erotic play – such are the joys of translation, among others) or then we could see it simply as a «self-evident Pink Pearl by Eberhard Faber and nothing more»<sup>31</sup>.

Now so many things are in play here, beyond anything delightfully erotic: take the way the Robbe-Grillet novel gets rid of everything previous to it, wiping out the whole thing, as we have said. But then, every reference, sly or obvious or mistaken (what might a mistaken reference be?) is only posited by the reader ... and, on top of that, in reading Nochlin's sly reference made obvious, how about the Pink Pearl and how about the Eberhard Faber? What if the reader had no idea

31. Maura Reilly (ed.), *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader*, Thames and Hudson, London 2015, p. 84.

that Eberhard Faber was a producer of pencils and thought he was perhaps a painter of whom, by overlooking something or other, one had not heard? So is it that every reference is always or at least often positing another, and we have more and more to erase. Every time we erase, we add.

M.D.: The eraser as a concrete and aesthetic object reemerges in Jérémy Bennequin's ongoing *Om-mage*, in which the French artist proceeds to rub out the pages of the Gallimard edition of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The outcome of this process is a series of performances and photographs showing not only the blotted out pages of the book but also the residues of the performance itself, with worn-out erasers and mounds of blue-gray eraser dust and crumbs being displayed as a miniature *arte povera* installation on the artist's desk. The title's pun on «gommage» and «homage» is symptomatic of the ambivalent status of erasure as a poetic practice capitalizing upon the urge to undo and destroy while paying an ambivalent tribute to the object under attack.

M.A.C.: And thinking of the erasing of Proust, we might remember, with a certain embarrassment, the erasing of the entire passage of the Sperm-Drinkers (and what a great passage it is, many pages thereof) in the Gallimard edition of Robert Desnos' *La Liberté ou l'amour!* As in give me liberty or give me death, and the publishing

house erased all those pages, 20 or so, so we had blank pages instead of life-giving sperm. How is that for freedom, those empty pages? So Malarmé of them ...

On top of that reflection on Proust, how about the French translation of Edmund de Waal's brilliant and moving *The Hare with Amber Eyes* as *La Mémoire retrouvée*? Give me a break, we might say, or as the Canadians say, «Donnez-moi une casure», or in the French: «Lâchez-moi les baskets» ...

M.D.: Bennequin's erasurist obsession knows no bound, and one suspects that he will never finish rubbing out Proust, even though he is rumored to work on a different page of the Gallimard printed text every day for about an hour. By forcing us to look at (rather than read) the fading words, *Ommage* foregrounds their physical vulnerability on the page. As for the volume's creased and wrinkled leaves, they bear witness to the fact that any artwork carries the structural and material seeds of its own destruction. Perhaps more importantly, they also breathe a peculiar kind of nostalgia, albeit veiled with irony, which we associate with the dog-eared pages of well-loved books: only a worn-out book can become an object of affection which is the measure of its fading physical integrity.

M.A.C.: So these seeds send us back to that sperm so effaced so unsubtly from those pages.

M.D.: They also evoke other abject cover-ups such as Duchamp's «Paysage fautif» or the «Veronese cumshot» in *A Humument*, where the painter's uncontrolled verbo-sexual ejaculation gives Phillips's «speaking bubbles» a rather different slant. Today there is no dearth of obscene, scatological and coprophiliac works by the likes of Damien Hirst, Paul McCarthy, Andres Serrano and Wim Delvoye. Speaking of body secretions, I can't help thinking about the «dirty protest» undertaken by prisoners during the war in Northern Ireland. The walls of their cells smeared with faeces, producing figurative shit paintings which were later recreated in Steve McQueen's film *Hunger*. Or of David Nebreda's self-portraits, his face smeared with excrement. Or of Karen Finley's breast-milk paintings and her «The Chocolate-Smeared Woman» performance «erasing» the whiteness of her body under layers of chocolate to protest against sexual violence inflicted upon black women. Or of the erection of Kara Walker's «sugar woman», a giant white nude African-American sphinx placed inside the old Domino sugar factory in Williamsburg to pay tribute to the slaves laborers whose work in the cane fields and endurance in the face of humiliation and of sexual abuse made the sugar trade (and the Domino empire) possible.



## *Clinamen*

M.D.: Walker's installation is about how art seeks to remediate history's tragic flaws by revisiting some of its cardinal sins and canonical objects. Likewise, the canonical status enjoyed by Mallarmé and Proust looms large in Broodthaers's and Bennequin's erasure experiments. Like Broodthaers's «IMAGE», *Omage* suggests that such acts of undoing – whether affectionate, ironic or both – often originate in an attempt to deal with the pressure of influence. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom famously argued that poets since Milton have sought to escape from their predecessors' haunting importance. In view of the examples seen so far the (post-)postmodern antidote to the danger of being derivative or of producing inferior work would seem to lie in deconstructive attempts to undo the past altogether through the correction or disfiguration of past texts. In many of the works mentioned and analyzed above and below, the word «correction» carries an element of punishment as well as improvement: one is reminded here of Bloom's notion of the «clinamen», which designates a creative misreading which is likely to remedy the deficiencies and limitations of the source text. Appropriately enough in the context of Bloom's model, one of the earliest examples of textual erasure in contemporary poetry is Ronald Johnson's *RADI OS* (1977), a partial obliteration of the first four

books of John Milton's arch-canonical *Paradise Lost*, preserving only a few words from each page of the original poem. That Johnson reduces Milton's 17<sup>th</sup> century epic to sparse free verse lyrics whose lexicon generally expresses the presence of natural and elemental forces is significant of how *RADI OS* exposes and unsettles generic hierarchies while undermining the very foundations of the text's logic and episteme (a few years later Johnson published *PALMS*, a similar experiment based on the *Psalms* from which the author claims to have taken out the snake by «taking out the “S”») <sup>32</sup>.

In his introductory note to the book, Johnson claims to have «composed» the blanks, comparing the crossed-out words to the inaudible notes of Handel's *Concerto Grosso*, «the inaudible moments leaving holes in Handel's music» <sup>33</sup>. Beside the reference to sound waves, the word «RADI OS» (especially to a French or etymologically-trained ear) also indirectly evokes medical radiographies: the caesura between RADI and OS in Johnson's title implicitly strips *Paradise Lost* to the bone so as to lay bare its *ossature*. (Here, we could extend the discussion to contemporary music from Cage to wiping analog tapes and digital ProTooled remixes.)

32. Ronald Johnson interviewed by Peter O'Leary in 1995, web document, [www.trifectapress.com/johnson/interview.html](http://www.trifectapress.com/johnson/interview.html).

33. Ronald Johnson, *RADI OS*, Flood Editions, Chicago 2005, unpag.



Ronald Johnson, cover of *\_RADIOS\_*.

Jean Clair has claimed that Röntgen's discovery of x-rays in 1895 affected the whole history of art, dividing contemporary painters into two categories according to their ways of representing the body, and the skull in particular: the «traditionals», such as Ensor and Cézanne, who continue to use the calvarium as a symbol of worldly vanities and the «moderns», such as Munch or Duchamp, who are interested in exploring the inside mechanics of the body, unencumbered by metaphorical concerns<sup>34</sup>. Marjorie Perloff also evokes radiography in her analysis of the uses of “arthrography” (an x-ray examination of the structure of a joint)

34. Jean Clair and Manlio Brusatin (eds.), *Identity and Alterity: Figures of the Body 1895–1995*, Marsilio, Venice 1995, p. xxvii.

in Johnson's later collection, *ARK*, arguing that Johnson's lettrist manipulation of textual material allows him to examine and diagnose «what lies beneath the surface» and the plural conditions in which meaning arises from the combination of neighboring words.<sup>35</sup> Johnson's x-rayed version subjects Milton's *Paradise Lost* to a similar treatment, revealing the lyrical backbone of the epic while isolating some of its vital semantic «organs». M.A.C.: Meret Oppenheim's skull as she sees it xrayed and in the future, is a thing of beauty, forever.



Meret Oppenheim, *X-Ray of M.O.'s Skull*.

35. Marjorie Perloff, *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2004, p. 197.

M.D.: And, more recently, Wim Delvoye's stained glass windows made from x-rays (which include a fair amount of erotically-charged and scatological images) added their stone to the growing edifice of ambivalent avant/post-religious art.

### Art

M.D.: The poems in *RADIO S* result from the complete deletion of the «unwanted» words, leaving no trace of the original text except for the layout of the page (the surviving words still appear where they belong in Milton's poem). Other erasure poets have opted for a format which allows the reader total or partial access to the original work. Jen Bervin's *Nets*, a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, relegates Shakespeare's poems to a faded background text «upon which» the selected words appear in bold ink. Unlike Johnson's, Bervin's «reduction» does not stress the elemental and the natural but, rather, tends to strip the Bard's sonnets to abstract, self-reflexive musings bearing the mark of post-Language writing («In singleness the parts / Strike / each in each / speechless song, being many, seeming one»<sup>36</sup>), occasionally venturing into Bervin's

36. Jen Bervin, *Nets*, Ugly Duckling Presse, New York 2003, unpag.

personal memory («I have seen / towers / down-razed / loss / loss»<sup>37</sup>).

8

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?  
Sweets with sweets war not, joy delights in joy;  
Why lov'st thou that which thou receiv'st not gladly,  
Or else receiv'st with pleasure thine annoy?  
4 If the true concord of well-tuned sounds,  
By unions married, do offend thine ear,  
They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds  
8 **In singleness the parts** that thou shouldst bear.  
Mark how one string, sweet husband to another,  
**Strike: each in each** by mutual ordering;  
Resembling sire, and child, and happy mother,  
12 Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing:  
Whose **speechless song, being many, seeming one.**  
Sings this to thee: 'Thou single wilt prove none.'

Jen Bervin, «Sonnet 8» from *Nets*.

Likewise, the crossed-out parts of the following page from Travis Macdonald's *The O Mission Repo* (an erasure of the *9/11 Commission Report*) can still be deciphered by readers interested in exploring the original document and in understanding the nature of the erasurist's adjustments and manipulations. Like Bervin, Macdonald allows the reader to return to the full textual source while simultaneously or alternately reading the new text that emerges from the partially obliterated text.

37. *Ibid.*



Page 4 of Travis Macdonald's *The O Mission Repo*.

In such works, the canceled words, instead of being deleted or rendered illegible by other means, are placed «under erasure» (*sous rature*) in a gesture reminiscent of Heidegger's and Derrida's typographical gestures signaling the presence of inadequate yet necessary words. In different but related ways, Heidegger's anti-metaphysical approach to language and Derrida's anti-logocentric *ratures* offer a useful model for an understanding of how erasure art «works», in theory as well as

in practice. What get undone or «deconstructed» here is less the meaning of words – or, more generally, the relationship between signifier and signified – than the familiar deconstructive aporia that follows from the fact that the question of whether words can actually mean something can only be asked through language itself.

### *Slashes and Burnings*

M.A.C.: As for harmings and undoings of the other, Antonin Artaud really took the cookie. In his celebrated spell-castings, he outdid every performative act in his visual leavings, with the destruction of multiple readable traces. When we read Stephen Barber's remarkable *Antonin Artaud: Terminal Curses: The Notebooks 1945-1948*, we see how obsession never had it so good. Terminal. Absolutely terminal. We call this apocalyptic erasure, conflagration, tearing up, a destruction willed by a genius of a madman. Artaud-le-Momo, that other, the late other of Antonin Artaud the actor, whose face as the priest holding up the bible for that other conflagration of Joan of Arc at the Stake, the faces of Artaud and Falconetti equally unforgettable, holds up or out or beyond himself these 406 notebooks pictured and commented on by Stephen Barber, mirroring Artaud's own obsession. These pages are

indeed «livid and alive»<sup>38</sup>, as Barber says, and reach beyond his planned spectacles of the Theatre of Cruelty of the 1930s. They cast spells of protection and damnation, beyond the printed page, in their overwriting and layering of destructions and desecrations. Like religious documents hurled by a Savanorola into a mental and physical bonfire far beyond any human vanities imaginable. The paper on which they were written is torn and punctured and burned: you have to read through the perforated and damaged surface.



Excerpts from Artaud's Notebooks.

38. Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Terminal Curses* cit., p. 8.

The spells he cast in 1935-1937 were protective, against those who would harm his beloved friend Jacqueline Lamba, the second wife of the surrealist leader André Breton (the recipient of his *Amour fou* or *Mad Love*<sup>39</sup>) or then vituperative, in one instance against anyone who would stand in the way of those who were summoned to bring Artaud his necessary heroin:

I will  
 impale them alive  
 in a square in  
 PARIS and I will  
 cause them to be perforated and  
 burn their bone-marrow<sup>40</sup>

These spells and the drawings in the notebooks do not appear in the collected works of Artaud, edited by Paule Thévenin, but were kept aside. So many examples abound of the wilful destruction of the works of art about which we most radically care: say, the slashing of Sargent's portrait

39. André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1988. It recounts the meeting of André and Jacqueline, predicted by his poem «The Night of the Sunflower», and recounted by him in a letter, given to the author 30 years later by Jacqueline Lamba, and published in *The London Review of Books*.

40. Cited in Luc Sante, «Mad as Hell» Antonin Artaud's pictures form a psychiatric institution, «Slate», Oct. 16, 1996, unpag. web document, [www.slate.com/articles/arts/art/1996/10/mad\\_as\\_hell.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/art/1996/10/mad_as_hell.html).

of Henry James in the Whitney Museum of New York a few years ago ... or the delightful smashup of the unoriginal form of Marcel Duchamp's famed and infamous Urinal in all its wet and un-wet importance ... or the case of the big slash of the central object in so many shows ... Does not Fontana's slashed red canvas count as art? And Burri's burlap bags – they are art despite their ROUGHNESS, and then they perform their own suspension, becoming even more so. In these attacks, the work of art becomes a martyred stuff. It is elevated by the action taken upon it.

### *Performative Undoings*

M.A.C.: So when the undoing is built into the work of art, is it not still art? Think of the slashes of Fontana into his canvasses, think of Serrano's «Piss Christ» with the scandal of the title and the figuration, even simply imagined, built right in. Yes, I would say, it is art. Some of the most spectacular spectacles of undoing in recent times are the work of Jay Critchley, both in his home performances, at 7 Carnes Lane, off Pleasant Street, in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and also all over the town. For example, the demolition of a bathhouse which caused an uproar such as

the destructions of artworks generally, and desirably, cause. Provincetown proper (think of the irony in that phrase), is the scene of many of Critchley's undoings as actions. He has as I write a full-scale exhibition curated by Bailey Bob Bailey ... He undoes the entire ritual of the Christmas tree and its lights by pulling one out to sea every New Year, on January 7, and setting it aflame. Or then, he would, and does, refuse to remove a sand-encrusted car from its parking lot, in his Sand Series: this Sand Car simply stays there, undoing the parking space for any other car.

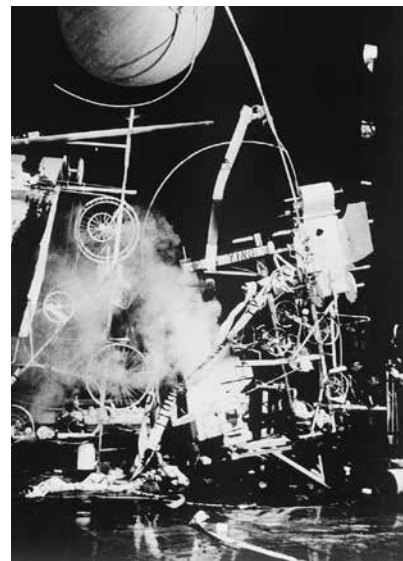
Most engaging to my mind and most energetic in its performance is the small septic space he has dug out for an entire septic opera and performance, in its round walls. This is in a sense the undoing of the very idea of a theatrical space as we know it, but of course much undoing leads to rethinking of the initial doing. Critchley has small chairs to sit on, the flowers on the stage are plastic, and the performances are of scenes like Diamond Lil. I haven't actually seen it happen, but I know it certainly happens in the imagination, where much undoing leads to doing.



Jay Critchley's «Sand Car».

Yoko Ono's own performances are right up there with the limits of undoing. Take the one about the audience cutting off pieces of her clothing, of which there is now a video in the Museum of Modern Art. It fits right into the issue of performativity (as Judith Butler describes it) and into the undoing as a true piece of art. As do Antonin Artaud's cast spells, in which the paper is cut and burned and no less, in fact, more effective. The magic has to do with the destruction as construction of a magical performative space.

And there also is Tinguely's machine («Homage to New York») in the Museum of Modern Art in New York was programmed to destroy itself, and so it did. This is the most notable ritual of all, and it certainly worked. THE END of THIS ART. But that too is a celebration.



Jean Tinguely, «Fragment from Homage to New York».

M.D.: And now we have «Fragment from Homage to New York», a piece of Tinguely's original installation on display at MoMA. What happens when a fragment of a work of art becomes a new work in its own right? Or when the resulting impact becomes even more urgent and moving, in a Winged Victory of Samothrace kind of way.

M.A.C.: Among the most celebrated cases of undoing, a truly psychologically complicated case in its various installments is Man Ray's picture of Lee Miller's EYE, when she had left him and gone off to Egypt with her lover. Entitled «Object to Be De-

stroyed», it was attached to a metronome, so that the ticking would coincide (at least imaginatively) with the potential blinking of the beloved's eye. The just one eye is part of the point, and then it continued as an «Indestructible Object», and so on. Where it continues is in our minds, right up there with his *Gift*, the iron to press a garment with, delicately studded with nails to undo the said garment.



Man Ray, «Object to be Destroyed».

M.D.: Still on the subject of clothing and undoing, Lady Gaga recently revived Jana Sterbak's *vanitas* «Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic»: when the oxidation of the flesh begins the dress becomes a statement on how what we call disgust often has to do with the confusion of what is inside and what is outside the body. And then there is the unbearable smell of rotting cow bones in Abramovic's «Balkan Baroque» which prevented the exhibition from lasting longer than four days at the 47<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

As for Andres Serrano's «Immersion (Piss Christ)», it was not meant to self-destroy itself but was vandalized on several occasions. An uncanny synthesis of the abject and the beautiful, Serrano's photograph is one of the most aesthetically, morally and theologically ambivalent art objects of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whereas Christian conservatives protest against its blasphemous character, Serrano claims that it is an earnest statement by a religious artist on the political misuses and commercial exploitation of organized religion. One of the ironies behind this debate is that there is a long tradition of abjection in the history of Christian culture (reliquaries come to mind as do countless extreme stories of abject behavior by saintly figures such as Catherine of Siena) and that there are supporters of abject art amongst Church authorities. I wouldn't be surprised if some of Serrano's



works were exhibited in the Vatican in the near future. Arthur Danto thinks abject artists may be moralists and that disgust may be «a means to edificatory ends», a hypothesis which does not «erase the disgusting»<sup>41</sup>.

M.A.C.: Damien Hirst's shark so delightfully dissected has to be renewed from time to time, for of course the Thing Rots. And then it gets to be green, not the lovely originally grey color. This is reminiscent of the Ship Argo, for you can change the parts but the ship will be the same ship: that is the principle of it. Maggie Nelson's recent book *The Argonauts*, takes up the same issue, as the genders shift, and the appearances, and the reality. But the lovers remain the same.

### *Attacks*

M.A.C.: October 8, 2012, there was a great deal of excitement about a man who scrawled stuff on a Rothko painting over the weekend at the Tate Modern Museum, and led to someone's listing previous defacements of works of art. Let me meditate first on the idea of defacement: is it not also bestowing a new face on the work of art how-

41. Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art*, Open Court, New York 2003, p. 55.

ever celebrated the latter might be? A new face, as in Monument Valley, or Easter Island, something unexpected? Might we not in some moments prefer the unexpected to the ho-hum expected? Not that a Rothko is ever boringly expected, but all the same, let us occasionally think renewing, as in re-facing a building (or a person ...).

Why not, then, pee a bit in Marcel Duchamp's urinal called, as we so very well know in this and last century, *Fountain*? Why not give a Cy Twombly canvas a great smacker if you are wearing red lipstick, or in fact, any color of that adornment?

Do we want to leap upon Tracey Emin's unmade bed or snuggle into it? Do we want to mark the word and so the thought of "Occupy" on the thigh of an anatomical dummy by Damien Hirst as a comeon outside an exhibition of his work at the Tate Britain in 1910, just so we can make our mark? Someone vomited, it seems, on a Mondrian (you wouldn't think this purity of line and color would make you sick?), and someone else, by mistake (we assume) put an elbow through a 1904 Picasso of *The Actor* in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and it took years to restore...

How wonderful that it was a seventy-ish year old performance artist, not just a young prankster, Pierre Pinoncelli – who had already urinated into the *Fountain*, in 1993, and why not? He was doing what one had been meant to do surely, since

it was a urinal after all. And the wonderful thing about it is that this time, when he hit it with his hammer, it chipped. A chip off the very not old block of marble, and how wonderful that he had his hammer with him. I mean, so many times, we might long to give something (or then someone) a little whack, and find that we just do not have the right instrument along with us.

As for the Urinal, it seems to us that Marcel Duchamp might well have enjoyed its being a bit used in both ways. The whole point, apart from the desire to display it and the refusal of the authorities first to display it, was about display, and who but a PERFORMANCE ARTIST doing his performativity thing, could have, would have, done it with such noisy publicity. Sounds great to us, and anything to Call Attention to a Work of Art, for that was what it was intending to be, works as a performative scene.

And then later, in 1996 a 22-year-old Toronto art student vomited over Piet Mondrian's *Composition in Red, White and Blue* which was hanging in New York's Museum of Modern Art. Oh, what a mistake and it bedecked in the national colors and all. But it was no «unfortunate incident», as the gallery officials had stated. Nope nope. Jubal Brown, at least fifty years younger than Pierre Pinoncelli, had wanted to damage the painting. So later, substituting red coloring for the vomit material, he repeat-

ed this performance, this time paying homage to Raoul Dufy at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

It is like the dog returning to his vomit, the thief returning to the place of his crime where he left a turd on the carpet, the performer returning to his performance, but elsewhere with new stage props and materials. We can only salute this double undoing, in its proper national coloring.

And still later, in 2006, but this time by mistake, a visitor to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, slipped down a stairs and broke a set of Qing vases more than 3000 years old, right off a shelf. Perhaps a shoelace? Perhaps on purpose? We can vote for the loose shoelace in good conscience, because this visitor was not MARKED as a performance artist. So really it is often about marking: you leave a mark or you chip away to leave a mark or then, whoops, you just trip. In every case, the damaged object is itself performed.

### *Redoing as Rethinking*

M.A.C.: The year 1985 finds another attack on a work of art, and this one on a piece celebrating an exchange between the heavens and a bed. This inadmissible work celebrates an ultimately provocative display of a woman, not just naked but with her delicate slippers tossed to the ground,

her ultra-luxurious thick and gold-bordered rug thrown over a bedside table, and the bestowing angel in the heavens: against Rembrandt's *Danae* a man hurled acid, and destroyed about 30 per cent of the canvas. The conceptual artist Kathleen Gilje in her series of *Restorings*, this one called *Danaë: Restored (after Rembrandt)* paints a white blotch looking like ectoplasm on the upper left, and comments about her restoration: «By replacing the painting's 'golden semen' here with the acid that literally and figuratively takes its place, we are also forced to ask whether the arm Danaë raises – and which historically has been seen as welcoming the god – has not from the outset been raised rather to ward off an assault?<sup>42</sup>» And Nochlin comments: «Shower of god or acid, ancient god or modern madman: they are all equivalent in the kingdom of violence toward women»<sup>43</sup>. What seems to me especially fruitful, well, richly-laden, is the layering of interpretations here: Rembrandt on Danaë, Gilje's on Rembrandt's work, Nochlin on Gilje's work. This is the richness, finally, of the work of art wrought by human mind and hand, in response to a mythical god=shower. So here the undoing redoes, grandly bizarre to the onlooker until the wall text is itself absorbed.

42. Reilly (ed.), *Women Artists* cit., p. 239.

43. *Ibid.*

Each of Gilje's *Restorings* can be seen to undo the original masterpiece so that a Memling Portrait of a *Young Lady Restored (Love) of 2001* has been «attacked» or really «improved», depending on the point of view, by the word «Love» rimmed in blood-red and carved into her left arm. For those familiar with the work of Catherine Opie, says Nochlin, «the reference helps emphasize the latent androgyny of the original as well as the restoration, the boyishness of the homely face with its pulled-back hair and protruding ear»<sup>44</sup>. Here the layering is still more intense: Gilje on Memling, Gilje on Opie, Nochlin on Gilje on Opie, and the last two layers imposed on the arm of the sitter and the mind of the observer.

In such fashion, the attack as restoration leads to further mindwork: so the undoing as redoing is a rethinking as well.

#### *More Cover-Ups, Overpaintings, Blackouts and Cutting-Outs*

M.D.: An exhaustive list of early 21<sup>st</sup> century erasurist texts would have to include Stephen Ratcliffe's [*where late the sweet*] *BIRDS SANG* (another text cut out of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*), Mary Ruefle's correc-

44. *Ibid.*

tion fluid covered *A Little White Shadow* (based on a late, anonymous 19th century manual published «for the Benefit of a Summer Home for Working Girls»), Austin Kleon's self-explanatory *Newspaper Blackout*, Janet Holmes's further reduction of Emily Dickinson's already elliptical verse in *The ms of my kin*, David Dodd Lee's Ashbery-erasing *Skybooths in the Breath Somewhere*, Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (an erasure of Kurt Waldheim's memoirs), my own truncated Carrollian tale, *Ali e t o l o s s* (in collaboration with photographer Elisabeth Waltregny), and Jonathan Safran Foer's artist's book *Tree of Codes* (2010), which die-cuts holes in Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, revealing «future» events and allowing the reader to read several pages at once in a way not unlike B.S. Johnson's 1964 *Albert Angelo*. The lacunary structure of Foer's narrative tragically evokes Schulz's murder by the Gestapo and the loss of many of his unpublished works during WWII. (One cannot help being reminded of the famous Oulipian precedent set by Georges Perec's lettrist representation of genocide in *La disparition*, where the disappearance of the letter *e* commemorates the erasure of an entire people.)

Erasurism designates different but related modes of undoing. There are, however, two basic ways of practising art erasure: the first consists in a partial or total crossing, blanking or rubbing-out of the source text; the second involves covering up the text with

extra textual or graphic material which can be credited with an added aesthetic value in and of itself, beyond its capacity to veil or conceal. Among recent literary examples, Crispin Glover's collagist *Rat Catching* (a humorous treatment of Henry C. Barkley's 1896 *Studies in the Art of Rat-Catching* characterized by the use of old prints and other found artwork) clearly falls into the second category, as do Will Ashford's *Recycled Words* (a rather undistinguished rehash of Tom Phillips's *A Humument*) and Matthea Harvey's *Of Lamb*, which is carved out of a biography of Charles Lamb, traversed by the nursery rhyme «Mary had a little lamb» and enriched by Amy Jean Porter's illustrations.

In the visual arts, a strange dialectics of subtraction and addition opposes Robert Rauschenberg's radical *gommage* «Erased De Kooning Drawing» (1953) to Asger Jorn's «Le canard inquiétant» («The Disquieting Duck»; 1959), which defaces a thrift-store landscape painting depicting a peaceful cottage by a pond, painting a giant duck upon it whose huge proportions, thick brush strokes and bold colors render the original idyllic subject uncanny and potentially threatening. Amongst other CoBrA artists, such cover-ups (the term suggests both the physicality and the illicitness of the gesture) also abound in the work of Pierre Alechinsky, whose «Dispaint, Describe» (1979) displays a series of small acrylic paintings executed on pages from old

registers and whose linear succession mimics the sequential logic of a comic strip.

M.A.C.: And so the Humuments of Tom Phillips in their various shapes and colors and their ongoing narrative with the words blocked out and covered up and veiled over undo our conception of a page, even as they persistently engage the reader: this is what W.H. Mallock's three-volume *A Human Document* led to ...

And here's another overpainting: in the Fletcher Allen Hospital in Burlington, Vermont, March 8, 2010, Sauerwein's *Ale and Oysters* has an underpainting with a face just visible: all these over and underdoings are grand to observe, not much less so than all those works of the great master painters and how they are transformed by what goes over and under them. Picasso's «The Blue Room», seen with infrared, shows another painting under it, which happens, of course, with some frequency in the works of painters without the funds at one point in their careers to always purchase new canvases. This is true of painters as celebrated as Pablo Picasso and of photographic performers like Francesca Woodman, who wrote over the photographs she printed on Italian children's notebooks, with messages to Deborah Turbeville, the famous fashion photographer, with whom Francesca longed to work: «phone me at ...» And all this is overprinting, calling over the lines in textual truth.

## *Turnarounds*

M.A.C.: What a wonderful turnaround, fooling everyone in sight, because that is exactly where it isn't, in sight! In the Florence Griswold Museum, in Lyme, Connecticut, there is a painting you might know about, but no way can you see it unless you ask. Robert Fullonton's painting in the dining room? Oh, well, it is on the back of another panel, because the Lyme Colony artists flipped over his panel when he left and didn't pay his room and board. It sounds grand, but I didn't see it: it is, evidently, a «Rocky Seacoast», with dabs of green paint for a tree blown to the horizon, while an emerald stream flows off the canvas. So it pictures the Carmel, California coastline, but is only describable. This must have been some kind of retributive justice, for Fullonton died completely broke. It seems to me to say: please pay your bills, even in an artist colony<sup>45</sup>.

M.D.: When Jacques Lacan bought «L'Origine du monde» in 1955 he asked his brother-in-law André Masson to paint a Surrealist variation on Courbet's panting on a wooden screen concealing the obscenity of Courbet's painting (which was also revisited, though not undone, in Duchamp's «Etant Donnés»).

45. This wonderful recounting is the work of Alexander Castro (*Secrets of the Museum*, «Art/New England», May/June 2015, p. 24).

## Ex-humings

M.D.: Despite the exponential popularity of erasure techniques amongst contemporary experimental artists, the most important and successful avatar of overpainting erasurism to this day remains Tom Phillips's ongoing *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (1966-). By «ex-huming» the corpse of an obscure late 19<sup>th</sup> century novel (W.H. Mallock's now forgotten three-decker *A Human Document* [1892]) *A Humument* eludes Bloom's logic of influence and constitutes a singular case of a rewriting whose achievements clearly outdo those of its (non-canonical) predecessor. For Phillips erasure is as much about covering and adding as it is about canceling and subtracting: the book is filled with visual poems and poetic paintings which emerge as so many creative misreadings, extending rather than short-circuiting the process of interpretation.

The «Unauthor»<sup>46</sup> describes the genesis of his project as follows: «When I started to work on the book in late 1966, I merely scored unwanted words with pen and ink. It was not long though before the possibility became apparent of making a better unity of word and image, intertwined as in a mediaeval

46. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, Fourth edition, Thames and Hudson, London 2005, p. 113.

miniature»<sup>47</sup>. (Phillips mentions elsewhere Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and comic books as two other foundational blueprints for his project.) «Thus painting (in water-colour or gouache)», he continues, «became the basic technique, with some pages still executed in pen and ink only, some involving typing and some using collaged fragments from other parts of the book (since a rule had grown up that no extraneous material should be imported into the work)»<sup>48</sup>.

Even though the collection (for want of a better word) displays a huge diversity of modes and styles of overpainting, the common denominator between the treated pages of *A Humument* is the presence of comic-strip like «balloons» containing the words which Phillips preserved from Mallock's novel and which the author terms «rivers», a word which is to be understood in a metaphorical as well as a typographical sense. The coherence and consistency of Phillips's work-in-progress throughout its successive editions is grounded in a number of conceptual continuities. These include the representation of bourgeois interiors (the painted backgrounds of the treated pages often evoke the inside walls, wallpapers, curtains, windows, tapestries and carpets of a room and a sense of

47. *Ibid.*, unpag.

48. *Ibid.*, unpag.

domestic intimacy nicely undermined by the humorous content of the «rivers»), the appearance of recurrent fictional or «textual» characters such as Bill Toge (whose last name is a contraction of the words «together» or «altogether» as they appear on the pages of Mallock's novel), the emergence of thematic threads related to various aspects of Mallock's Victorianism, and a language- and medium-oriented practice reflecting and exposing the author's goals, methods and aspirations.

*A Humument* generally posits and foregrounds the materiality of text prior to signification. But its concretist aspects should not obscure the fact that the poetic rivulets that traverse his treated pages are deeply rooted in a critique of the underlying ideologies and representational strategies of Mallock's novel. As the opening page of the 4th edition of *A Humument* suggests («The following / sing / I / a / book / a / book of / art / of / mind art / and / that / which / he / hid / reveal / I»<sup>49</sup>) the real purpose of Phillips's obliteration techniques is precisely to hide in order to reveal what the source text was trying to disguise.

A full-length political reading of Phillips's book would have to stress its attempts to «doctor» Mallock's novel and purge it of its conservative, anti-semitic and misogynous tendencies («we / doctor /

49. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

books / we / doctor / novels»<sup>50</sup>) while «unearthing» its repressed latent content. In the light of the sexually-charged overtones of Phillips's poetic «bubbles», it would not be far-fetched to argue that *A Humument* sets out to psychoanalyse *A Human Document*, bringing out the symptoms of psycho-sexual frustration that lurk beneath the varnish of Victorian respectability that covers Mallock's fictional world. Phillips has claimed that his innuendo-ridden rewriting is meant to «tease the odd joke out of a novel which contains almost none»<sup>51</sup>. Page 76 of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition, for example, shows a «shy» incarnation of Bill «Toge» trying to look up a lady's dress and finds himself «arrested» by the sight (or the smell) of «anemones» before considering the woman's inscrutable «small / well-poised / eagerness»<sup>52</sup>. A confrontation with the source text produces its share of ironies and paradoxes as the original page of Mallock's novel relates the «mirror story» of Phillips's text, that of the novel's protagonist, Robert Grenville, who retires into his room to meditate on the traditional virtues of simplicity, modesty and «shyness» characterizing Victorian representations of womanhood while examining «the photograph

50. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

51. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, Fifth edition, Thames and Hudson, London 2012, unpag.

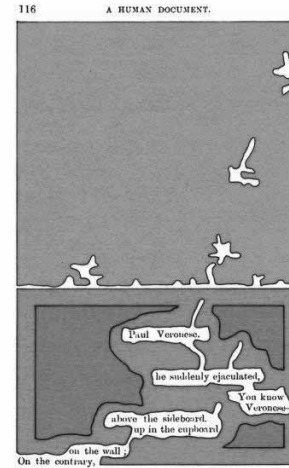
52. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

of a young girl, with a well-poised head, and eyes that looked with a sort of composed eagerness»<sup>53</sup>. Phillips's book – which is currently in its fifth and penultimate edition (with the publication of the sixth and last version every single page of the first edition will have been re-treated at least once, bringing the project to its full completion) – is unlikely to be superseded as an example of how erasure can be experienced simultaneously as the negation of *and* the prelude to the emergence of art. It is also a text which crafts a different, decentered kind of lyricism which surfaces from its saturated novelistic textual matrix («Join / written / breath / to / written heart / to / the nerves / talking / in a / shirt / to / record / all physical maladies / and yet no / pains of the soul»<sup>54</sup>). The sheer textural richness and depth of *A Humument* is not answerable to the shock tactics of any previous of found art tradition. Its complexities and singularities suffice to show that erasure poetics cannot be reduced to a literal version of Eliot's pronouncement that «immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different»<sup>55</sup>.

53. W.H. Mallock, *A Human Document*, Vol. 1, Chapman and Hall, London 1892, p. 182.

54. Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, Third edition, Thames and Hudson, London 1998, p. 246.

55. T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, Waking Lion Press, West Valley 2011, p. 81.



Page 76 of Tom Phillips's *A Humument*.

### *Oubapian and Filmic Undoings*

M.D.: One of the most interesting and innovative successors to Phillips's *A Humument*, Jochen Gerner's oubapian blackout *TNT en Amérique* (2002), obliterates the pages of Hergé's 1932 *Tintin en Amérique* with black ink, substituting pictograms and isolated one-word balloons to the original panels. The selected bits of plot and dialogue become the main focus of attention in the absence of a visible whole by which to contextualize them. On a superficial level, Gerner's reduction of «TIN-





Gerner's *TNT en Amérique* was published eight years before Martin Arnold's *Shadow Cuts* (2010), which undertakes a similar blacking out experiment through the medium of cartoon, taking found film to a different level. Besides their use of different media, one of the main differences between the two lies in the ambivalent nature of the buried narrative «exhumed» by Arnold's film. *Shadow Cuts* stretches and scratches (in the musical, deejaying sense) the happy ending scene of a Disney short to an intense several minute-long narrative performed on a black background which constantly threatens to fade it out of existence. The scene, which features Mickey and Pluto laughing out loud in a friendly embrace, becomes destabilized through multiple repetitions and rewinds affecting both sound and image. Arnold's ruthlessly analytical eye erases parts of the characters' bodies, forces us to contemplate isolated body parts, gestures, looks and facial expressions severed from their original context (this technique is also deployed in Arnold's equally disturbing Disney-based «Soft Palate» and «Haunted House»). Arnold's repetition-with-variation technique spotlights micro-events and visual lapsus which remain unnoticed in the original version and generate a feeling of unease and discomfort as to what the rewriting actually «means». The hysterical jerks and panting cadences generated by Arnold's gri-

macing turntablism balance Disney's sentimental narrative of friendship against the neurotic, possibly erotically-charged content of an endlessly rehearsed (and reversed) flickering choreography which also amounts to a mise en abyme of our incapacity to watch a film without interrupting the performance by blinking our eyes.



Still from Martin Arnold's *Shadow Cuts*.

### *RE-doings and Doing Both: Foamy Stuff*

M.A.C.: So here is also what amuses me: think of molecular, what do you call it? molecular magic? that Ferran Adrià led the world in doing, like you make a thing with FOAM and here are the elements all drowned in the magic, and people gasp WOW and is that art or undoing the original elements or both? I think both.

### *And How About Meta-Stuff?*

M.A.C.: «Katz, a détournement of Maus, has opened to a new interpretation of Art Spiegelman's work, basically by changing every animal-faced character into a cat-faced one. Then, as Spiegelman published MetaMaus, METAKATZ was realised as a collective essai about copyright and his exceptions, like détournement, collage and sampling»<sup>58</sup>.

In a sense, parody undoes art by taking the mick out of it. So when the publishing house Flammarion destroyed the copies of Ilan Manouach's *Katz* book, the incineration – think Savonarola, think chopping of the heads of statues during var-

58. Bambi Kramer, *METAKATZ*, web document, <https://bambikramer.wordpress.com/2013/07/13/metakatz/>.

ious revolutions, think Fahrenheit 451 (check), this undoing on purpose is a willful destruction of something built on something else, built atop it, with it, alongside it. Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus*, and then *Metamaus*, to which Katz and Metakatz so clearly and delightfully refer, did not raise objections to the catty buildup around his initial graphic novel. But to see the copies going down the chute in flame gives another dimension to the cat/chat/Katz affair. There exists a video of it, and that could be construed as a sort of witness to the execution, a celebration of the volumes sliding down to their fiery fate.

### *Fading*

M.A.C.: Van Gogh, according to the astounding exhibition in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, knew that the red lake pigment he was using for his still lifes – such as in the irises and the roses he gathered in bunches from the garden in St. Remy to paint, three months before his suicide – might fade. He took that risk because he wanted to see how the purple (blue and red, of course) of the irises would look against the yellow of the sunflowers, and how the pink of the roses (white and red) would look against the verdant green. But, now as we look, we see the red has almost

gone, and so the irises have become blue, and the roses, once white with red stripes, have gone totally white. That is the way we see them now, whether in Washington, Amsterdam, or New York. But, and there are postcards from long ago to show the difference, there was once a startling difference of color, and the screaming brightness is now a dignified lightness. This art is still art, but it is definitely subdued in its presentation.

M.D.: Don Van Vliet's disarmingly enunciative painting «Pig Erases a Statue in Passing» (1985) establishes erasure as a phenomenological category present everywhere as soon as one object blocks the view of another. Van Vliet's vision is as much about the perceiving eye as it is about the distortions of parallax. It also reminds us that erasure is a fundamental stage in the genesis and development of visual works, a process which necessarily proceeds by selection, arrangement and superimposition.

One and a half century before Van Vliet's painting, Louis Daguerre's ever-astonishing 1838 «Boulevard du Temple» encapsulates the process by which erasure is inscribed in the very medium of photography. The story is well-known: only the (vague shape of) the bootblack and the legs and torso of his customer were spared and captured by Daguerre's silvered copper plate because they remained relatively motionless during the length of exposure. The other passers-by and the traffic

were «erased» from the picture, which earned Daguerre's anonymous model the title of first photographed person in history.

### *States of Decay*

M.D.: If we are looking for artworks which foreground the potential for self-erasure or self-destruction of the image we have to turn to experimental photography and film. In many ways, Stan Brakhage's 1963 «Mothlight» bridges the conceptual gap between erasure techniques and (self-) destruction per se. «Mothlight» differs from Brakhage trademark hand painted films in that it incorporates insects wings, petals, leaves and blades of grass pasted upon the strips of celluloid. The director's account of how «Mothlight» originates in personal suffering deserves to be quoted in full: «Here is a film that I made out of a deep grief. The grief is my business in a way, but the grief was helpful in squeezing the little film out of me, that I said "these crazy moths are flying into the candlelight, and burning themselves to death, and that's what's happening to me. I don't have enough money to make these films, and ... I'm not feeding my children properly, because of these damn films, you know. And I'm burning up here ... What can I do?" I'm feeling the full horror of some kind of immola-

tion, in a way»<sup>59</sup>. The moth's suicidal flight towards light thus represents the agony of the starving artist whose personal life is sacrificed on the altar of his creation. As for the dead moths wings stuck on Brakhage's filmstrip, they are paradoxically «reanimated» after being fed into the projector. Whereas the murmur of the silent film can be likened that that of the fluttering of wings or the sound of the wind blowing through leaves, Brakhage's close inspection of the veined textures of the flickering fragments of nature which appear on the screen progressively cohere into a single organic environment of shrouded, unreadable shapes.

In Paul Sharits's «Bad Burns» (1982), a film recycling some of the artist's own outtakes, burning is not so much a cathartic or sacrificial ritual as a meditation on how the film medium itself confronts its inevitable decay, making the physical corruption of celluloid its main subject matter. In order to document the different steps of their degradation, Sharits proceeds to refilm strips of film until some of them become corroded and dissolve into abstract shapes, unidentifiable forms blurred into formlessness.

Sharits's «Bad Burns» documents cinematic death itself at the same time as it depicts the agony of the sub-

ject captured by film (a human face seems to emerge from the decomposing celluloid at one point before disappearing into a haze). The flicker effects created by the vertical strips traversing the screen convey the acceleration of the film's erosion, whereas the rare frozen images capture the most «tragic» moments occurring when the stillness of celluloid exposes it further to forces of acidic degradation.

Twenty years later Bill Morrison's haunting 67-minute *Decasia* took its viewers on a different but related kind of decaying found footage roller coaster ride jiggling to the ragged and fractured cadences of Michael Gordon's soundtrack. One brief but memorable scene shows a dancing couple who seem to be struggling with their fading environment while keeping a smile on their faces as they try to brush away the blots and blemishes which threaten to liquefy them. The film uncorks strange hysterical outbreaks as the tragic, materiological slapstick plays out in an riotous celebration of distorted and dissolving forms.

Eric Rondepierre's recent appropriations of film images have done a lot to redefine the practical and aesthetic modalities of erasurism beyond the by now familiar strategies of obliteration, disfiguration and destruction. His early 1990s series «Excédents» (the French for «surplus» or «extra» as in «extra luggage») consists of frames taken from black and white films with French sub-titles. The stills are photographed

59. Stan Brakhage, Interview with Bruce Kawin, in *By Brakhage: An Anthology*, The Criterion Collection, 2003 (DVD).

on a TV screen and captured on VHS video player by using the freeze button. Only the subtitles are apparent on an entirely black, interstitial background which is impossible to perceive while watching a movie in normal circumstances since they only last for a fraction of a second: «Excédents» thus predicates the persistence of meaning upon the disappearance of the image blurring the line which separates the seen and the unseen (or the subliminal), the significant from the insignificant.

Rondepierre's later series comprise photographs of frames selected from various cinematic archives. His «Précis de décomposition» (1993-1995) departs from his monochromatic obsessions and concentrates on silent film stills eroded by time and the circumstances of their stocking conditions. It also prefigures the equally arresting and convulsive beauty of his «Moières» (1998) series, based on carefully selected images from colorized films. The resulting images are always moving and often tragic, the actor's faces and bodies morphing into monstrous, ghostly shapes not unlike Francis Bacon's deformed portraits. Lastly, Rondepierre's «DSL» (2010-2013) project does not explore the perishability of celluloid but the pixellized textures of digital film. «DSL» (an acronym for «Digital Subscriber Line») is composed of unretouched screenshots of classic movies by the likes of Ophüls, Hitchcock, Truffaut, Godard and Lynch broadcast on the television by means of

a computer connection. «This passage by the web», Rondepierre explains, «can provoke dysfunctions in the relation between the flow of lines and the decoding»<sup>60</sup>. The scattered and dislocated pixellisations of «DSL» yield startling results. «DSL is a work anchored in contemporary technology, and at the same time it sends back to older practices as painting, the art of stained glass or mosaic»<sup>61</sup>. This aspect of his work is apparent in the retrospective illusion which at a distance makes us mistake the blurred, divisionist textures of a still of Tippi Hedren in Hitchcock's *Marnie* for an impressionistic portrait à la Manet («No 4, 2011»).



«No 4, 2011» from Eric Rondepierre's *DSL* series.

60. Eric Rondepierre, Artist's statement, [http://www.ericrondepierre.com/pages/en\\_dsl.html](http://www.ericrondepierre.com/pages/en_dsl.html).

61. *Ibid.*

## More Burnings

In book Twenty-six of Herman Melville's *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*, the destruction of a painting figures as the metaphor of a ridding-self of anything former, of past resemblance, to person and to past, and the revivifying of what has been, not irremediably however, lost, leaving only «certain shadowy traces». Two paintings face each other in a gallery, above the heads of the visitors: and mystifyingly, they set the scene for a crisis of non-revelation and future pain. Pierre has destroyed the key to past events, in which his father sired a daughter with a French woman, now present as a dark-haired Isabel. Incestuous delight and entorturing pain will doom them finally, already presaged by this destruction of a resemblance of the half-sister to the Foreign Other, that Stranger:

«The Stranger» was a dark, comely, youthful man's head, portentously looking out of a dark, shaded ground, and ambiguously smiling. There was no discoverable drapery; the dark head, with its crisp, curly, jetty hair, seemed just disentangling itself from out of curtains and clouds. But to Isabel, in the eye and on the brow, were certain shadowy traces of her own unmistakable likeness; while to Pierre, this face was in part as the resurrection of the one he had burnt at the Inn. Not that the separate features were the same; but the pervading look of it, the subtler interior keeping of the entirety, was

almost identical; still, for all this, there was an unequivocal aspect of foreignness, of Europeanism, about both the face itself and the general painting.

«Is it? Is it? Can it be?» whispered Isabel, intensely.

Now, Isabel knew nothing of the painting which Pierre had destroyed.<sup>62</sup>

The non-knowing is itself an attempt at undoing, in part by the author, Melville, of what Isabel might have been warned by, before the final scene, in which she and Pierre take poison from the vial she carries, before her dark hair falls over him in a curtain so magnificently opposed to the suicide of the so blonde Lucy, Pierre's erstwhile fiancée. They all self-destroy, are undone, as the painted resemblances have been done in.

And Artaud carried folded in his pocket his notebooks, as Pierre carries a crumpled manuscript left strangely that he finds and adds to his first version of *Pierre*, stuck in, like undoing the primary structure.

## *Undoings of the Self*

M.A.C.: Human and ritualistic self-destruction works the same way: when you are an artist, and

62. Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*, Penguin, London 1996, pp. 351-52.

you jump of a bridge into water, it is surely undoing your art. So Robert Schumann trying to drown himself in the Rhine in 1854 before he was taken to an asylum where he stopped composing altogether, Paul Celan going off the Pont Mirabeau in Paris – of all bridges, given Apollinaire’s famous poem about its remaining! – and Ghérasim Luca off the same bridge, and then John Berryman in 1972 in Minnesota (see *The New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015 for the recounting of the Berryman end ...). Spalding Grey, nearer to us in time, simply did himself in after many threats, and we don’t really know about RAY JOHNSON, founder of Mail Art: did he jump in or was he pushed – one’s friends are likely to take different viewpoints on this one. Any suicide of any artist, Rothko included, works to undo that art. However, in an ironic aftermath, the art will turn out to worth more, with the dramatic factor supplying some excitement ...

### *Undoing the Mind*

M.A.C.: What does madness undo? I have been wondering about suicidal madness, or rather, terminal madness, as in Virginia Woolf, on whom so many of us write and keep writing, and as in Unica Zürn, who – this brilliant artist who jabbed her pencil into her paper as Antonin Artaud jabbed

his into his flesh, always on one particular part, to make a point, but finally a fatal one – after being in various mental hospitals, continuing to make her art with the materials brought her by Henri Michaux («the man of Jasmine»), she was released, spent the night with her companion, Hans Bellmer, and jumped to her death from their Paris balcony. This she had predicted in an early novel, at the end of which she falls to her death, hoping she made a lovely corpse. I expect she did.

Just how do we contemplate these last moments of words, as in Virginia Woolf’s suicide note about not wanting to ruin her adored Leonard’s life and preventing him from working by her needs, with its final expression of love, of not believing any two people could be happier than they had been? It seems, as in Patti Smith’s presentation called «Wave» as a salute to Woolf on the 67th anniversary of her suicide, to be an occasion not so much of sadness as of realization of necessity: the undoing of your own days to permit the continual doing by your beloved of his, even as you express your happiness as it has been, was, should be remembered by anyone reading the text, hearing and understanding the message.

Unforgettable, the presentation during the 7 pm to 7 am «Night of Philosophy» in New York in April 24, 2015, by Simon Critchley at 4:20 a.m. Entitled «Suicide», it was also or mostly about not the ending but what joy preceded it. Critchley read a



passage from *To the Lighthouse* about a day of happiness, something like (and I am remembering rather than quoting, thinking this approximation more important as a signal than an exact rendering could be): ah, how happy I am. Let this moment last forever. And she ends: «It is enough». This passage, said Critchley, is why I am giving this talk. And we were all of us there, and I hope we were speaking for the 5000 people who came to this night, enjoined to say together, at this ungodly and so very godly hour in the morning: «It is enough».

And so it was, of course. This is something crucial about a certain undoing of, say, art as life and life as art, in the way that it does the opposite of what you might have thought: it in fact salutes a kind of ongoing hope about what has sufficed and always will, something then, about what living was and can be, depending on the vision of it – not its meaning, but its essence. In this context of undoing as ongoing being, the idea of meaning is reduced to just that: an idea. Vision, by which we might imagine art itself, is occasionally wider than meaning.

### *Self-Undoing Performed*

M.D.: David Nebreda's life and work have pushed the boundaries of undoing (and of abject, ster-coral hunger art) to unprecedented extremes.

The artist's emaciated body was born out of a strict vegetarian diet consisting exclusively of small quantities of boiled or raw vegetables. Nebreda's early artistic career began with a period of total silence which marked his first psychiatric internment at the age of eighteen, a period during which he began to develop his art of the self-portrait, a genre he has been practicing exclusively to this day. Typically, silence and starvation, verbal and alimentary abstinence participate in a movement towards self-abnegation and sheer disembodiment.

Nebreda's anorectic self-portraits further extend the sacrificial logic of erasure to the body itself. His fast is a form of undoing. It is also a visceral means to an aesthetic end: the gradual carving of the artist's body into a living sculpture. Nebreda's lacerated body and bony face bear the stigmata of an abject theology which leads to an equally abject experience of self-effacement or de-creation, accelerated by lengthy sessions of intense self-flaying. When it is not buried under heaps of filth and excrement, Nebreda's naked skeleton-body cannot but evoke the photographs and footage of Nazi extermination camps. Nebreda's self-inflicted martyrdom bears the mark of private forms of suffering, the pangs of a schizophrenic virtuoso converting his body into a theater of cruelty and pain.

M.A.C.: This of course returns us, as much does, to Artaud's self-dramatizing self-undoing in its high performativity quotient.

### *Undoings of the Other*

M.A.C.: Madeleine Gide, André Gide's deservedly angry, disappointed and deeply frustrated wife, given his well-documented and self-documented affection for others, such as Marc Allégret, destroyed his letters, which sent him into major anger. How not, to both reactions? We are talking major jealousy, for major-good reasons.

To say nothing, but I'd like to say something, about the woman who so adored him, who so brilliantly translated his work, and who helped him with his English, that is Dorothy Strachey Bussy, the sister of Lytton Strachey. She tore nothing up, set fire to nothing, but spent a good part of her life in hopeless adoration. Many will say, ah, a wasted life, but I think not. This is not self-destruction nor is it the destruction of a work of art such as those that André Gide created. He, on the other hand, was sufficiently negative about HER work, that is, the short novel *Olivia* (itself about a hopeless love, of a student for a teacher), to keep her from publishing it for years. Nothing lost, luckily, nothing undone – but the story could have gone otherwise.

### *Scissoring the Sister*

M.A.C.: Here's a tale: Florine Stettheimer's sister Ettie, she of the pseudonym – how delicious it is! – “Henrie Waste,” published two novels under that rather extraordinary name: *Philosophy/An Autobiographical Fragment*, in 1917, and *Love Days* in 1923. She seems to have written her doctoral dissertation for Freiburg University in 1907 on William James' *The Will to Believe*, which was translated into English and published with those two novels and a few short stories.<sup>63</sup> And, to top it off, she also painted, like her famous sister Florine. BUT, and this seems a bit beyond the pale, to understate the case, she also scissored out parts of Florine's diary,<sup>64</sup> and we are set to wondering much.

In part, about the name: Henrie appears a magnificently regendered form of Henry, and the Waste does seem a tiny bit negative, altogether appropriate for our undoing theme. How we would like to know What Items were scissored out of the sister's diary! The entire story sets one to thinking one should perhaps do more thinking about

63. Ettie Stettheimer, *Memorial Volume of and by Ettie Stettheimer*, Knopf, New York 1951.

64. Preserved in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University. This information from Reilly (ed.), *Women Artists* cit., p. 150.

Stettheimer-family thinking, beyond Florine's *Cathedrals*, including the *Cathedrals of Broadway* of 1929 and the *Cathedrals of Wall Street* of 1939. I can just picture a further text on «undoing cathedrals», and beyond that even.

### *Loathing*

M.A.C.: So how does your individual loathing undo the art against which it is (and you are) directed? You won't be alone in our detestation of Jeff Koons, we think, but why? Is it kitsch and we never loved kitsch? Or is it overblownness and we like small? That can't be it, since we really love large Motherwells and don't find the massive black ovals overpowering, just persuasive. It is something that is crystallized, well, blown up into the balloons and stuck there, like idiocy itself.

But our particular loathing goes nowhere because the Things Sell. So numbers count, and smallness is just that, smallness. It won't get undone that way, and so the protest is in vain, the loathing is wasted, and naturally in series it promulgates itself.

M.D.: Is it because we, like Kundera, consider kitsch as whatever «excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in

human existence»<sup>65</sup>? Is it because Koons's art reflects the depthless unreality that surrounds us? And if so why don't we feel quite the same about the equally depthless Warhol? Are we naturally attracted to the depressing, the negative and the antagonistic to the point of being sickened by the banality of cuteness, or whatever is in «categorical agreement with being»<sup>66</sup> (Kundera again)? Do we loathe Koons because he is apolitical and hypericonic? (Carol Bove admits to liking Koons the way many Americans admired Ronald Reagan.) Is it because we expect art to actually mean something? And are Koons's fans, who grew up with Warhol, Disney and Popeye, resistant to art forms that mean too much?

Broch thought kitsch was evil operating in an imitation system. And Musil wrote that the whole point of creating art was to «strip life bare». Is our contempt for Koons et alii just another way of venting our frustration with the disintegration (or the uncoolness) of value judgments?

M.A.C.: We only wish our own impatience and loathing had an impact on artists. Every attempt to undo them feeds the hype machine and thus our loathing is wasted.

65. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, Faber & Faber, London 1984, p. 248.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

Yes, we would love to have our loathing count: but then we would love to have our loving count too ...

### *No Longer Art*

M.A.C.: A thought-provoking exhibition of artwork deemed, by insurance companies, no longer art, which is the title of the show, documented by John Reed, at the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery at Columbia University in December of 2012. The first work he saw displayed was a 19<sup>th</sup> century painting of French country life, called *The Harvest (La Moisson)*, by Alexandre Dubuisson. The large gash in its surface meant that it could not be insured, which was the point of the show: thus its title «No Longer Art».

Elka Krajewska first had the notion for «No Longer Art» in May of 2009. It seems, says Reed, that sometimes «the cost of restoring a work of art exceeds the value of the work, in which case the insurer declares a total loss, and the work is declared no longer art – that is, of no market value. The damage can range from obvious to subtle – from a ripped painting or shattered sculpture to a wrinkle in a photographic print, or mold damage which can't be seen at all. As it wouldn't do to send the not-artwork to the crematorium – the work might be of scholarly value, or might one

day be worth repairing, or might one day be more easily repaired – the work is stored, not dead, but in a state of indefinite coma. The Salvage Art Institute, Elka's curatorial brainchild, collects and exhibits not-art»<sup>67</sup>.

He points out that the works, no longer art indeed, were accompanied by their appraisals, as he says, «their death warrants, or at least their DNRs». The pieces of non-art were soiled, and what could not be photographed (which fascinates us immeasurably, I would measure), was the appraisals! One of the works was a porcelain Jeff Koons dog balloon, which had been dropped and shattered, so the pieces were there in a «padded envelope»<sup>68</sup>. You could take a picture of the envelope ...

And there there was a warrant: «By accepting this opinion, you agree that it will never be used for any other purpose, nor will anyone ever show a copy of it to anyone who is not associated with the Property under consideration». What is fascinating, apart from what you cannot photograph, is what turns out to be valuable.

Not the art any longer, but the thinking, commercial-type, not ours, about the art.

67. John Reed, *This is Not an Artwork*, web document, [www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/11/what\\_happens\\_to\\_art\\_that\\_gets\\_damaged\\_no\\_longer\\_art\\_at\\_columbia\\_reviewed.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2012/11/what_happens_to_art_that_gets_damaged_no_longer_art_at_columbia_reviewed.html).

68. *Ibid.*

M.A.C.: «I never say anything», says Artaud (46) and as if to underscore that statement, he uses only school-children's notebooks to write in, in these last years. He chooses to be infuriating – in writing his *Henchmen and Torturings* of 1947, he says about it:

an infuriating book that is absolutely impossible to read  
that nobody has ever read from end to end,  
not even its own author,  
because he doesn't exist<sup>69</sup>

That rather takes care of that.

69. Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Terminal Curses* cit., p. 8.

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## ABSTRACT

What do Stéphane Mallarmé, Antonin Artaud, Meret Oppenheim, Asger Jorn, Yoko Ono, Tom Phillips and Martin Arnold have in common? Whereas a wealth of critics have diagnosed contemporary art's preoccupations with madness, depression and self-abuse as well as its tendency to cultivate an (anti-)aesthetics of the negative, the excremental and the abject (say, from the Vienna Action Group to Serrano, McCarthy or Delvoye), much less attention has been paid to how modern and contemporary artists and public have thrived on the destruction, disfiguration and obliteration of work by the artists and/or by that of others. From Artaud's «terminal» notebooks to the recent upsurge in «erasure poetics», the history of «undoing» art deserves to be recounted in a positive mode and rescued from popular narratives of the decline and death of the avant-garde.

Che cosa hanno in comune Stéphane Mallarmé, Antonin Artaud, Meret Oppenheim, Asger Jorn, Yoko Ono, Tom Phillips e Martin Arnold? Mentre tantissimi critici hanno diagnosticato le preoccupazioni dell'arte contemporanea sia con la follia, la depressione e l'abuso di sé, sia con la sua tendenza a coltivare un'(anti-)estetica del negativo, dell'escrementizio e dell'abiezione (diciamo, ad esempio, dal Gruppo d'azione di Vienna al «Piss Christ» di Andres Serrano), un'attenzione decisamente inferiore è stata invece rivolta al modo in cui gli artisti e il pubblico moderni e contemporanei hanno prosperato sulla distruzione, deformazione e oblitterazione del proprio lavoro o di quello di altri artisti. Dai taccuini «terminali» di Artaud alla recente recrudescenza della «poetica» della cancellatura, la storia dell'arte «disfatta» merita di essere raccontata in un modo positivo e salvata dalla vulgata del declino e della morte dell'avanguardia.

## BIOGRAPHIES

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