

## Ghosted Forms

Sean Lowry

**‘OVERPAINTING’ IS A TERM** used by painters to describe working in layers. Traditionally, overpainted layers do not entirely conceal underpainted layers, instead functioning as a contrasting or nuancing mechanism. The term is also used in archival restoration, where X-rays help identify preparatory elements or layers added by restorers. The now infamous 2012 incident, in which elderly Spanish amateur Cecilia Gimenez ‘restored’ the 1930s fresco *Ecce Homo* by Elías García Martínez, provides a farcical example of erasure through overpainting. Yet once we expand these traditional conceptions, together with a broad suite of other methods for erasing literal content, we enter an aesthetic realm in which opacity, obliteration and invisibility demand interpreters look into, beyond or outside a work. What does it mean to perform acts of erasure or concealment through artistic practice? How do these expressions differ from the idea of erasure as it is understood in other areas of human discourse? Tracing a partly invisible line from Kazimir Malevich’s seminal *Black Square* (1915), via Robert Rauschenberg’s *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), to the role of erasure and concealment in post-conceptual practices in the digital age, this chapter will explore art’s ongoing evasion of literal interpretation. Although some of the approaches presented in this chapter concern interactions between a gesture and its partial erasure, our discussion will focus primarily upon works, that, in operating at the outermost limits of visibility, problematise tensions between the vehicular functions of artistic mediums and immaterial projections of thought. Considered together with the reductive elimination of subject matter, the metaphysical qualities of blankness, the obfuscation of history, and the way in which erasure and concealment can simultaneously constitute forms of addition and subtraction, this

chapter will demonstrate that strategies for deliberately establishing referential ambiguity remain a key mechanism within the ongoing deferment of literal meaning and interpretation in post-conceptual practices.

Without recourse to art history, it is initially difficult to accept that erasure, concealment, invisibility and blankness can convey extraordinarily varied content. Historically, these themes have been presented in multiple (re)configurations of material and phenomenological elements set against the boundless networked complexities of context. Yet as this chapter will demonstrate, these themes can also illuminate the way that we think more generally about the requisite nature of art histories and the continuum of reality upon which they depend. As Thierry de Duve put it in 1996, even the blank canvas “belongs to the tradition of painting” well “before it is touched by the painter’s hand”.<sup>1</sup> On a similar vein, as Gilles Deleuze declared in 1981, it is a “mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface,” for that “surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés, which the painter will have to break with”.<sup>2</sup> With the influence of these complexities in mind, and before introducing the potential for repurposing the idea of overpainting in the present, it is instructive to retrace selectively the history of artistic erasure and concealment.

With the public exhibition of his *Black Square* in 1915, Malevich now famously introduced invisibility and erasure as possible grounds for aesthetic contemplation. With *Black Square*, Malevich had created a modern artefact of erasure – in time ironically becoming a deteriorating example, for as Amelia Groom has eloquently noted, the *Black Square* is “undergoing auto-erasure... its solid opaque surface is giving way, reluctantly opening up to what X-rays confirm are other geometric shapes behind it.”<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, notes Groom, “The twentieth century’s most remembered radical gesture against the image is revealing the images it has always contained within itself.”<sup>4</sup> Various interpretations range from “a voided representation of the sun”<sup>5</sup> to “an absolute representational refusal,”<sup>6</sup> Malevich saw *Black Square* as the simplest possible declaration of non-objectivity. Although it remains manifestly unclear whether Malevich’s overpainting of the geometric layers under the square was intended for discovery or simply a result of recycled canvas, he did later declare that he had placed a “millennia of signs” behind his act.<sup>7</sup> Materially and immaterially, Malevich had formed a palimpsest – from which Craig Dworkin draws the analogy: “a palimpsest always enacts a double play of concealment and revelation, erasing one text to inscribe another.”<sup>8</sup> As with the palimpsest, that which is erased still lingers in traces.

In 1918, Malevich introduced another innovatory gesture with *White on White*. Where *Black Square* represented a revelatory erasure, the opaque blankness of *White on White* was a definitive creation. Despite some precedents in late-nineteenth-century Paris, monochrome painting as it is now understood began in Moscow with Malevich’s Suprematist composition, and a few years later in 1921, with Alexander Rodchenko’s Constructivist exhibition of three monochromes in primary colours. Thenceforth

establishing a paradoxical dynamic with enormous implications, with Rodchenko's evocation of the 'end of painting' (in time becoming the first last painting) staked against Malevich's preference for a meditation on 'pure feeling', a monochrome could then be potentially interpreted as either a flatness purporting to represent nothing but itself or a gateway to infinite space. Either way, this zero-degree of painting and the dichotomy that it instantiated between the visible and the invisible remains reliant upon the contextual apparatus of art history. Moving beyond painting, the tropes of invisibility, negation, blankness and erasure played out in multiple guises during the twentieth century. From John Cage's 1952 framing of *4'33"* in three movements in which no notes are performed, to Yves Klein's seminal display of invisible art in 1958 in the form of an empty white-walled room, to conceptualists such as Yoko Ono, with her instructions for invisible paintings, numerous strategies were pitched toward revealing the play of presence and absence. Significantly, such approaches helped underscore conceptual art's attempted dematerialisation of the art object. In drawing attention to the limits of visual perception, and the invisible structures that underpin life and art, conceptual art would demonstrate that art could also be abstract in a cerebral sense. For Jeffrey Strayer, this sense of cerebral abstraction is no better illustrated than in the moment of 1.36 pm on 15 June 1969 in which Robert Barry nominated *All The Things I Know But Of Which I Am Not At The Moment Thinking* with a view to framing that of which not even the artist could be aware.<sup>9</sup>

Once art had met these zero points in its own essence and definition, room was potentially availed for subtler engagements at the frontiers of reference and meaning. Accordingly, as Hal Foster has put it, art underwent a general pattern of movement from 'radical disruptions' and 'grand oppositions' to 'subtle displacements'.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, it was becoming clear that indeterminacy of meaning did not necessarily imply its absence. As Douglas Crimp noted on the incoming tide of postmodernism in 1977, absence of specific meaning can provide "a stimulant to the invention of a whole structure of narrative".<sup>11</sup> Once it became clearer that artworks are at least substantially created in their interpretation, artists became accordingly cognisant of the importance of not limiting potential interpretation. This realisation has broadly motivated, to repurpose the words of Howard Singerman from 1989, art's ongoing "flight from interpretation",<sup>12</sup> and by extension, its perennial deferment and evasion of the limitations of specifically anchored meaning. For Chris McAuliffe in 1989, avoidance ensures that meaning is not "reduced to recognition – either of intention or of source – for this would anchor meaning".<sup>13</sup>

Having broadly set the stage for the play of artistic erasure and concealment, we will now turn our attention to an examination of certain specifically nuanced and illuminating trajectories within these intertwined histories that are perhaps more closely linked to contemporary practices. In 1950, Robert Rauschenberg produced *Mother of God*, one of his earliest surviving paintings, by layering thick paint over fragments of maps. Although all of the North American cities contained in these found fragments are partly recognisable, their collaged presentation became a somewhat abstracted

backdrop for the addition of a white-painted circular form at the centre. Here, Rauschenberg detected a curious dialectic through his emphasis upon that which was concealed. Moving beyond a 1950s evocation of nuclear destruction over city maps or the title's symbolic association with the Virgin Mary, the fact that the white void had become the subject of the work and the negative space its content introduces the important question as to whether a void can represent what a map could not.

From this starting point, Rauschenberg moved to explore more explicitly the emptying of content through a series of all-white and all-black paintings. In particular, Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951), by virtue of their apparent lack of subject, potentially invited viewers to note minute details such as their own shadows, the ghosts of ambient reflection, and the detritus of accumulated dust. In the words of Rauschenberg's close friend John Cage, "even the smallest adjustments in lighting and atmosphere might be registered on their surface."<sup>14</sup> Soon, Cage would famously invoke silence as a structural device with which to invite chance to play upon a blank aural canvas. The *White Paintings*, produced via the inexpressive application of standard white house paint with a roller, with instructions for repainting if the lustre dulled, replayed Malevich's metaphysical and Rodchenko's endgame-oriented monochromes of the early twentieth century with an important conceptual distinction. Picking up on a trajectory already set by Duchamp,<sup>15</sup> Rauschenberg's absence, like Cage's, invited happenstance to generate content. Consequently, these works *performed* the infection of context.

Moving on from his monochromes in search of alternative strategies for evading the fetters of literal representation, Rauschenberg turned to the idea of erasing, in the words of Groom, "something great, something that existed independently of himself."<sup>16</sup> After persuading the initially hesitant New York giant William de Kooning to provide a drawing he could erase, Rauschenberg produced *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953), an innovatory gesture in underscoring the liminality of obliteration and formation. Effectively uniting Duchamp's foregrounding of artistic selection with reductive art's elimination of subject matter, this work represents an important intersection in art historical trajectories. Laboriously erased, yet leaving, as Benjamin Buchloh has put it, "vestiges of pencil and the imprint of the drawn lines visible as clues of visual recognisability",<sup>17</sup> Rauschenberg's indexical erasure of de Kooning's drawn gesture, as Dworkin recently argued, paradoxically produced new markings, for "there are no real absences, only replacements: of one layer by another".<sup>18</sup> Significantly, the liminal interconnectedness of creativity and destruction was presented as an idea potentially analogised with consumption and excretion. To consume is to destroy. To excrete is to produce. Just as to erase is to make anew, to create is therefore an act of erasure.

Between 1953 and 1965, Arnulf Rainer developed a series of *Overpaintings* in which he obliterated his own drawings and pictures by friends to produce almost monochromic

paintings. In building up the surface, Rainer gradually asserted his overpainting over the eventually virtually invisible image beneath. Rainer had arrived at his *Overpaintings* via an interest in disintegration and destruction that had begun in his series of *Blind Drawings* (1951–4) and would continue thereafter in his better-known overpainted photographs. Yet perhaps the most evocative tension between photography and overpainting is found in Gerhard Richter's ongoing twenty-five-year series in which his personal accumulation of 10 x 15 cm commercially printed photographs are partly obscured with the addition of paint left over from a day in the studio. Completed in seconds with a palette knife or scalpel, any unsuccessful overpaintings are discarded. Although often substantially obscured, as with Rauschenberg's *Mother of God*, the viewer is invited to look closely into the background. Once again, concealment is demonstrated to be paradoxically revelatory.

Importantly, concealment and erasure work to highlight the way in which aesthetic interpretation is also dependent upon invisible content and an informational backstory. Understood this way, elements obscured from view can become an ontological support for denoting relational or contextual meaning. By extension, obscured content reminds the viewer that artworks are finally formed in the imagination (albeit with sensory information). Many conceptual artworks have functioned to illustrate this relationship. Mel Ramsden's *Secret Painting* (1967–8), for example, comprises a small square canvas painted black and accompanied with a message on a considerably larger indexical signage reading: "The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimension of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist." Here, a presumably imagined act of erasure obstructs access to imagined content underneath. This denial of access, communicated via the connotative linguistic support of a visually larger supplemental caption, not only demonstrates that supplemental information plays an enormous part in crafting meaning but that a significant part of this instantiation is nonetheless communicated visually via the comparably larger textual presentation. Another work that epitomises the way in which invisible content is communicated aesthetically through simple connotative indexical support (in this case a title and material list that included a 'stare on paper') is Tom Friedman's *1,000 Hours of Staring* (1992–7), a single sheet of blank paper which, when coupled with *a priori* knowledge of five years of purposeful staring, instantiates the tension between doubt and hope in which artistic process is stalled as mere potential.

Once we are prepared to accept that elements obscured from view can also constitute vehicles for aesthetically communicating relational or contextual meanings, other forms of seeming absence or invisibility can be understood as functioning in similar ways. From Klein onwards, many artists have made use of 'empty' exhibition spaces in which both the physical qualities of a room and the connotative impact of its institutional function produce meaning. Accordingly, empty space might be interpreted as anything from a metaphysical void indebted to Malevich, to more pointed forms of institutional critique problematising the way in which both conspicuous visibility

and the invisible mechanisms of status and commodification imbue authority and presence. In 1973, for example, Michael Asher completely sanded the walls and ceiling of the Franco Toselli gallery in Milan to expose the assumed neutrality of white paint. In another exhibition at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1974, Asher made no direct modifications to the gallery. Walls were left as they were following the last exhibition, floors were swept but not sanded, lights were left off, and no staff inhabited the space for the duration. Consequently, viewer, architecture and institutional context became the content, subject and medium. Meanwhile, other artists at this time were also working to frame elements concealed from view. In a New York gallery in 1975, for example, Chris Burden concealed his body on a raised platform. Viewers, unable to see the artist, resorted to inferring his presence. This experience of inferred presence was also exemplified in Vito Acconci's infamous *Seedbed* (1972), a work that revealed the invisible sexual subjectivity of the artist.

Considered broadly, such works demonstrate the idea that art can connect the beholder to extra-perceptual networks of meanings and associations beyond the phenomenological relationships expected of canonical modernism. As Art & Language declared in 1968, "things are noticed and attended to not in virtue of some 'naturally' obvious assertiveness but in respect of culturally, instrumentally, and materially conditioned discursive activity".<sup>19</sup> Such 'activities' can, however, be extremely subtle. Once mindful of such subtleties, the stage was now set for invisibility as a medium for expressing a range of other themes. Consequently, in the words of Mark Shorter, we can now contrast a "positive invisibility" in which "the mind can productively project and create a space for the imagination to flourish" with the potentially destructive invisibility produced by projected forces such as nationalism, which possess a power to "evacuate a real space of its content and leaves a desolation, which ostensibly denies a culture its past, present and future."<sup>20</sup>

There is an illustrative moment in Artur Żmijewski's *Them* (2007), a recorded social experiment in which ideologically divergent groups are invited to respond artistically to each other's painted symbols, where one of the participants becomes particularly incredulous: "How can you paint over history?"<sup>21</sup> Although the blank slate was a central part of modernism and its mythological projections of new beginnings leading to radical originality and direct authentic expression, we have since realised that the *tabula rasa* collapses precisely because we possess memory – albeit in a fragmentary and fictional form. Being a formation paradoxically dependent upon that which is concealed in order to meet its own definition, erasure can invoke tensions between memory and destruction, for as Marc Augé recently argued, memory and oblivion are mutually dependent conceptions.<sup>22</sup> Many artists and writers have explored relationships between memory and erasure, often working with archives, examining misinterpretations and revealing conspicuous blankness. Historical exemplars, such as Claes Oldenburg's 'counter-monuments' of the mid-1960s, demonstrated the value of indirectly addressing trauma and tragedy by conjuring conspicuous absence in voided space. Such works would portend later

counter-memorial projects to events such as the Vietnam War and the Holocaust. Considered together, such gestures demonstrate the way in which conspicuous absence can performatively analogise forces of erasure operating more generally within the continuum of reality. In this sense, erasure can be seen as just another form of aesthetic expression attempting to reconcile boundless reality with a discursively nominated specificity. Yet unless somehow made contextually conspicuous, invisible elements invariably remain undetected. Tom Friedman's *Erased Playboy Centrefold, 11 x 22 x .005* (1992), for example, appears as a blank white page, only functioning to communicate its passage from image to erasure through the connotative support of the title. Nonetheless, as Groom noted after 'viewing' the work: "I couldn't help but see flashes of fleshy airbrushed voluptuousness, even though there was absolutely nothing there."<sup>23</sup>

In some instances, traces of artistic erasure are displayed alongside physical evidence of their original form. In the late 1960s, as part of his seminal work investigating image degradation through multiple photocopying, Ian Burn placed tourist postcards of 'readymade Australiana'<sup>24</sup> alongside substantially erased copies of the same image.<sup>25</sup> "To live," noted Walter Benjamin, is "to leave traces."<sup>26</sup> Yet traces are eventually erased by the marks of other individuals, collectively summing to become the waste and detritus of histories. In this way, a trace is ephemeral, representing the erratic dynamic of creation and destruction, presence and absence. Although an individual trace is often almost indiscernible and therefore *inframince*,<sup>27</sup> at the same time, as exemplified in the work of Gabriel Orozco, it instantiates an 'index of life'.<sup>28</sup> Once again, the requisite value of the narrative behind the trace underscores the fact that interpretation is dependent upon information outside of the physical medium.<sup>29</sup> The impossibility of self-contained interpretation (as sought by canonical modernism) is further underscored by the challenge of meaningfully delineating the inside and outside of a work.<sup>30</sup> The problem of defining a work's intersection with the boundlessness of context is nicely illustrated by Matthew Deleget's various contextual adaptations of the monochrome's ability to convey the intangible. Deleget's *Monochrome (Sleeper Cells)* (2007), for example, features a triptych of panels all coated roughly short of their perimeters with white paint the same colour as the gallery wall. Where the reflective surfaces of Deleget's paintings amplify shadows and vary accordingly in different light conditions, the rough edges resemble hastily overpainted graffiti in public spaces.<sup>31</sup> In another work of the same year, *War Monochrome (Sleeper Cells)*, Deleget repurposes the trope of overpainting again by placing an unpainted canvas on a cream-coloured wall and then spraying white spray paint across the face to create "a kind of blurry aura".<sup>32</sup>

In painting beyond the edges of the frame onto the gallery wall itself, artists such as Deleget blur the distinction between the gallery wall as medium (wall painting formed part of conceptualism's assault upon the canvas stretcher as epitomising the distributable commodified art object) and thinking about wall painting as context (where this critique can be extended to the problem of artistic labour as commodity).

With Sol LeWitt as a central figure, wall painting and drawing already contains a layered history; and in adding the idea of overpainting to the mix, an additional suite of contextual parameters are introduced. Consider the following two examples: Nedko Solakov's 1998 work *A Life (Black & White)*, in which two rotating workers constantly paint the walls of the exhibition space in black and white every day for the duration of the exhibition; and Nina Beier, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of Wet Paint* (2010), which consists of a patch of test paint from the host museum's stock repeatedly painted over and over in different colours directly onto the wall. Both demonstrate that reiterative wall painting can provide another vehicle with which to perform the deferral of meaning. Like erasure, overpainting can be described, both materially and philosophically, as simultaneously constituting a form of addition and subtraction. Also, being 'painting' as both a verb and a noun, overpainted wall paintings serve as another historical example of the way in which the idea of painting has lived on through its simultaneous affirmation and negation in symbolic repetition. Like erasure's dependence upon that which it erases, overpainting has no independent essence, for it depends upon painting as both medium and as idea. We will return to this conception of the idea of the overpainted wall painting later in this chapter.

For reasons that will also become apparent later in this chapter, it is worth pausing for a moment to re-examine the complex and contradictory tensions between experiences of art mediated by what is already known, and any immediate experience linked to perceptual rather than cognitive experience. To this end, as has already been indicated, what we are really talking about is the value of directly *experiencing* the presence of conspicuous absence – for as Susan Sontag put it, looking at something that is 'empty' is still an act of looking and therefore "seeing something – if only the ghosts of one's expectations".<sup>33</sup> Consequently, 'looking' becomes an investigation. In any case, an overpainted painting (in the sense presented within the context of this chapter) is at least partially constructed in the mind of the interpreter, who, as a direct consequence of *knowing* that it is overpainted, is availed *a priori* knowledge. Yet even without access to direct sense-based information, interpretation of imagined or invisible objects as framed within the constructed sphere of art is necessarily dependent upon *aesthetic* comprehension (as distinct from a theoretically philosophical understanding). Importantly, even a traditional understanding of aesthetics need not be restricted to sense perception, for we all know that the beautiful can be as mean spirited as the ugly can be virtuous. This dependence upon aesthetic comprehension is an unavoidable consequence of the fact that the idea is being presented and experienced within the structural idiosyncrasies of the art condition, something that invariably relies upon a consensually recognised symbolic language, experientially discernible (extra)sensory information and recognition of a material and/or contextual transformation. Without this complex cultural construction of projected felt imagining, art cannot be perceived. For as Ian Burn put it in 1969, "a structure is the (only) mirror of any non-structure".<sup>34</sup>



Before returning to the idea of overpainted wall painting, an additional layer in the story of artistic erasure is required – the influence of postmodern attitudes to appropriation. Yet the part of this story of specific interest to our investigation into art's evasion of specific interpretation is not what occurred on the incoming tide of postmodernism and its oft-discussed clustering of critical developments, but rather what unfolded on its outgoing tide – that is, once explicitly foregrounded strategies of appropriation started falling from fashionable parlance. Once artists were unable to shrug the inextricable legacies of appropriation, yet at the same time became aware that the now critically exhausted strategy of appropriation had become a complicit and omnipresent tool rather than a proudly paraded critical *raison d'être*, concealment was all but inevitable. For a generation of artists schooled in postmodern appropriation suddenly looking for alternative ways to frame their work, the influence of shifting critical fashions, the illumination of ethical deficiencies in cross-cultural 'borrowing', the threat of copyright infringement, the sudden collapse of an appropriation-art-centred art market at the end of the 1980s and the capabilities of digital reproduction technologies to mask specific paternities were all contributing motives for a general move toward the 'concealment of appropriation'. Although appropriation was utilised throughout the twentieth century as a critically explicit and historically conscious tool for contextually implicating difference, within the expanding girth of multiplicitous cultural activity that characterises the 'contemporary' period, historical clarity is dwarfed – giving rise to ghostly echoes and disconnected familiarities. With the narrative organisation of histories increasingly swallowed up in a new emphasis upon connectivity across time, new forms of amnesia usurp meaningful contextual understanding. This movement away from a specific recognition of the prototype(s) as something required to instantiate an ironic or critical distance – an idea that Rex Butler also explores in this volume – can be distinguished from previous forms of appropriation art, by virtue of a now more prevalent emphasis upon effects generated without specific recognition of the prototype(s). No longer explicitly framed in terms of ironic or critical distancing, appropriation was broadly repurposed for making low-frequency emotional connections. In a society now more obsessed with updating live *across* time, and by extension relatively disinterested in distinguishing paternal forms, appropriation would default to a convenient and often deliberately obscured tool for remixing the ghosts of erased histories into instantaneous experiences.

Although artists continue to sample, remix, repurpose, quote, transcode, remediate, reformat, adapt, transform and so on, many artists appear to have actively distanced themselves from the now-dated category of appropriation, either by concealing quoted elements or by more expressly engaging with other more fashionable thematic categories. As a former champion of critical postmodernism, Foster recently noted, it is "interesting" that so many artists now "shy away from the term".<sup>35</sup> Perhaps, he wonders, given that "sampling is now just so pervasive," the term seems "too brutal".<sup>36</sup> For Jan Verwoert, to employ the trope of appropriation means something

very different in the twenty-first century.<sup>37</sup> For Verwoert, we can now “rethink” its meaning “in relation to a reality constituted by a multiplicity of spatialised temporalities”.<sup>38</sup> For Claire Bishop, twenty-first-century approaches to “repurposing differ from appropriation art of the 1980s,” in the sense that the “act of repurposing aligns with procedures of reformatting and transcoding – the perpetual modulation of pre-existing files”.<sup>39</sup> Curator Sara Krajewski employs the term “image transfer”<sup>40</sup> to differentiate artists who freely sample, download or scan imagery without being burdened by the material necessity and critical agendas of iconoclastic appropriators such as Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince. Miranda Lichtenstein, for example, sees appropriation as only one of many tools: “because everything is so up for grabs and circulated endlessly, it has a lot less to do with any kind of questioning of originality... It is more about the dispersion of images and the dispersion of meaning”.<sup>41</sup> No longer a critically potent ‘anti-aesthetic’ device, resuscitated appropriation seems characterised by style, décor or erasure, and, in the words of Biljana Jancic, the “overlaying of new context onto existing texts”.<sup>42</sup> Where it once attacked the canon, announcing the end of the modernism and the final conquest of context over content, in the fragmented eternal present tense of the early twenty-first century, this function seems farcical and trivial. Consequently, some of the more resonate forms of ‘repurposing’ that appeared on the outgoing tide of postmodern appropriation were *about* these processes of obfuscation.

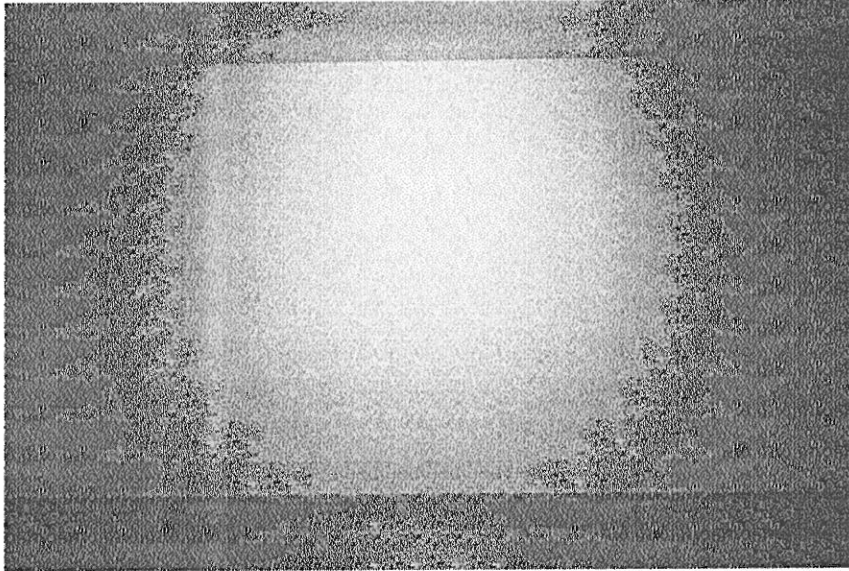
Compiled into what Dworkin has described as a “ghostly demographic blur”<sup>43</sup>, Jason Salavon’s 2002 photographic series *Every Playboy Centerfold, The Decades (normalized)* represents a digitised mean average of every Playboy centrefold from January 1960 to December 1999. In amassing and amalgamating these enormous collections of images, Salavon emphasised their formulaic nature and, in doing so, hyperbolically realised the obliteration of each woman’s individuality. At this time of millennial transition, artists were also increasingly using images sourced from the Internet. Thomas Ruff, for example, produced his series *Nudes* (2000) from pornographic thumbnails. In transforming that which was already a small and heavily pixelated second-, third- or fourth-generation image into a large photographic print, Ruff further disengaged the subject from its source. In an emerging infinitude of digital images, specific recognition of a prototype becomes absurd. Being obscure, Ruff’s images could “freely absorb the multitudes of subjective visual assumptions, associations, and memories which the viewer brings to them”, whilst at the same time standing “alone, without easy ironic distance or obvious meaning”.<sup>44</sup> Other artists, such as Jörg Sasse, adopted a similar approach to the subjective aestheticisation of appropriated imagery, scanning and then altering found images until the original was barely identifiable. In any case, appropriated imagery had never directly provided the viewer with verifiable information, for interpretation of a recontextualised image invariably calls for information beyond what is visible. Once again, without access to *a priori* knowledge, concealment is inevitable.

In another variation that emerged on the outgoing tide of appropriation, Kelley Walker inserted 'unheroic' materials such as coloured dots or toothpaste in between the image and the scanner bed. In one well-known example, Walker partly obscured a widely circulated photograph of a 1988 aircraft crash in Maui (which had already controversially reappeared on a 1995 cover of Benetton's *Colours* magazine) with a mesh of candy-coloured dots. The result, *Maui* (2001), playfully illuminated tensions between branding, fashion, trauma and erasure – in short, it was *about* the reduction of appropriation to style. Walker later reused this image (ironically for a work published on the April 2005 cover of *Artforum*), this time obscuring it with farcically masculine gestures in toothpaste. In scanning the gesture, Walker replaced it with its image and, in marking the distance between the crash scene and the present as increasingly resistant to interpretation, added another layer of erasure. In another series from 2006, Kelley 'squirted' toothpaste over images of girls on African-American men's magazine covers in a lewd reiteration of Pollock's masculinity. Epitomising the congenial open-source (rather than antagonistic) culture of a new generation of appropriators, Walker's 'unlimited-edition posters' and digital copies are available cheaply for reproduction and distribution, and are accompanied with an invitation to alter his 'unfinished' works.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, as Tim Griffin notes, Walker echoes Nicolas Bourriaud's model of 'postproduction', in which pre-existing materials are continuously remixed into freely circulating samples.<sup>46</sup> Emblematic of this open-source attitude is Jogging, a US-based collective mediated exhibition vehicle in the form of a blog founded in 2009 by Brad Troemel and Lauren Christiansen, which now features dozens of regular contributors.<sup>47</sup> Initially based on postings of absurd temporary combinations of discarded art materials, Jogging grew to incorporate collaged eclectic Google search images, consequently blurring distinctions between mediated physical objects and digital reflections of the Internet's horizontality. With no sense of origin, in this hall of mirrors, erasure and concealment are a given, and authorship is simply an act of provisional framing.

It is worth noting that some precedents for obfuscating the overfamiliarity of 'textbook' appropriation were also played by its central figures. One of its chief protagonists, Sherrie Levine, exemplified this trajectory. With her work already described as a "ghost of a ghost"<sup>48</sup> in the early 1980s, Levine soon moved from rephotography to hand copying, to producing generic simulations of key moments in abstraction. By the late 1980s, as Rex Butler has noted, Levine appeared neither overly defiant nor enthusiastic in her attitude toward her prototypes.<sup>49</sup> For Butler, Levine's *Meltdowns* (1989–90) emanated "a kind of ambience or décor within",<sup>50</sup> the sources were "not so obvious", and there was "nothing polemically at stake – either for or against their prototypes".<sup>51</sup> Levine's *Melt Downs* were based upon all-over computerised colour averages of works by Monet, Mondrian, Duchamp and Kirchner which were then digitally quantised and transformed into woodblock prints. For Levine, the value of concealment was underscored by the fact that "the unconscious is often what makes art compelling".<sup>52</sup>

Given that, without *a priori* knowledge, this alleged obfuscation of appropriation is difficult to identify, especially wherever artists fearing copyright infringement or critical recrimination might prefer to 'cover their tracks', we now direct our attention to the author's own overpainted wall paintings with a view to illustrating more systematically the processes and implications of deliberately obscuring highly recognisable forms. As discussed earlier, the idea of overpainted wall painting is an extension of wall painting, which the author has adapted to an experiential illustration of the concealment of appropriation that epitomises creative production in the digital age – an approach perhaps most apparent in commercial music production and advertising. 'Subliminal appropriation' is a term used by the author for describing the way in which (often digital) processes of manipulation are deliberately used to disguise the paternity of otherwise highly recognisable materials, whilst at the same time potentially maintaining something of their *qualities* in the form of 'ghostly familiarities'. Within the context of commercial music production, the author has long employed this strategy to demonstrate that an unbeknownst listener can be drawn toward a song without realising why it *feels* familiar. Yet when utilised within the more critically reflective context of contemporary art, the way in which this strategy functions is somewhat different. In the case of the author's overpainted wall paintings, the near invisibility emanating from a concealed image is designed to enact an uncertain tension between phenomenological experience and the suspected presence of a critical strategy. Through a process of marrying the readymade opacity of commercially available white trade paint (typically used to restore wall space following an exhibition) with a strategy of almost entirely concealing highly recognisable appropriated imagery, the author's overpainted wall paintings aim to shift wall painting beyond the wall's surface – to a location literally *inside* the wall. After all, to repurpose the words of Amelia Groom: "Whiteness can be obliteration that facilitates; a ground cleared for a new set of relations. To erase an image is always to make another image, but to make any image is in the first place already an act of erasure."<sup>53</sup>

As part of a 2012 exhibition in Sydney,<sup>54</sup> which opened on the eve of Australia Day (a celebration of Australia's nationhood sometimes colloquially referred to as 'invasion day' due to an alleged whitewashing of Indigenous histories), the author exhibited *Silent Republic* (2012), an overpainted wall painting that concealed the Australian flag. To produce this work, a commercial sign writer was first commissioned to reproduce a large Australian Flag directly upon the wall, at the standard museum height of 150cm from floor to centre. Then, via the systematic addition of layers with a roller, the otherwise immediately recognisable image was transported to the very outer limits of visibility. With nothing but its ghostly presence remaining, an unprepared viewer would most likely perceive an empty wall. A strategy that is both material and philosophical, this strategy aims to unite the physical properties of paint with the invisible functions of thought, resulting in *almost* invisible physical evidence of a conceptual exercise. Given that this overpainted wall painting is partially constructed



**Figure 1.** Sean Lowry, *UNAUSTRALIA* (overpainted wall painting) (2013), acrylic sign writing and gallery stock paint, 1,800 cm x 1,990 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo credit David Lawry.

in the mind of the *a priori* interpreter and, if she looks hard enough, *also* literally visible, neither a conceptual nor phenomenological reading is wholly sufficient.

For another exhibition in Sydney in 2013,<sup>55</sup> the author repeated the above process using a block map of the Australian continent and Tasmania. Significantly, the physical geographical shape of the Australian landmass and the constructed cultural object that constitutes its sovereign nationhood share the same recognisable shape. The result, *UNAUSTRALIA* (2013), was an almost-invisible overpainted wall painting of Australia. With nothing but the faintest possible echo of an otherwise highly recognisable image remaining, an unbeknownst viewer would once again almost certainly perceive an 'empty' wall, followed by the remotest possibility of partial recognition or an uncertain feeling of familiarity. In concealing explicit reference to the appropriated image underneath four coats of stock white paint, the tacit absorption of the formerly critical strategy of appropriation as a convenient tool of production is *quietly* implicated and, by extension, the incontrovertibly paradoxical destination of critical intervention *within* the institution is also *quietly* implicated. For Mark Shorter, once armed with foreknowledge of this aforementioned strategy, the viewer is ultimately circumvented from the blankness resonating in such a way "that we can only imagine

the void of contemplation" – instead experiencing "an anticipation for the blankness."<sup>56</sup> Here, Shorter's observation appears to echo Yve-Alain Bois's 1981 response to Robert Rauschenberg's post-abstract-expressionist approach to all-white painting, in which "the narrative of process establishes a primary meaning, an ultimate originating referent that cuts off the interpretive chain."<sup>57</sup>

The fact that these aforementioned overpainted wall paintings are *potentially* visible to the privy (or alert) viewer aims to instantiate a tension between the phenomenological experience of physically beholding something and the *a priori* construction in the mind (built through knowledge of art history and the specific idea articulated). If isolated from the contextual support from which its art meaning is derived, they certainly go unnoticed. Only once directed, and sometimes redirected, do ghosted forms appear. Nonetheless, the fact that this tension is framed as art, and by extension experienced aesthetically, is in itself an argument against this text as a primary tool for adequately comprehending this tension. The value of this tension being presented as 'art', underscored by what Elisabeth Schellekens has called "experiencing the idea,"<sup>58</sup> is demonstrative of the way in which aesthetics can unlock insight and understanding otherwise elusive in a theoretical proposition alone. Consequently, given that these overpainted wall paintings consist of images that are locked *inside* the wall and *almost* invisible, and given that the discursive apparatus of art must be consulted for them to be *meaningful*, comprehension is at least as related to the experience of looking at a painting as it is to reading these words. Although the lion's share of their meaning must be deferred to a supplemental linguistic support to exceed arbitrariness, the physical vehicle for communicating this idea is nonetheless paint on paint.

Since Duchamp, the foregrounding of the supplemental necessities of art history and the networked complexities of cultural context has seemingly indicated that a work of art needs to be recognised in order to be.<sup>59</sup> But such an assumption, echoing George Berkeley's advancement of immaterialism, invariably begs the question that Daniel Birnbaum, recently posed: "What happens to a work without anyone to see it? Without an audience, the work would seem to exist in a diminished and wanting state of expectancy, waiting for posterity's deliverance like a tree falling in the forest."<sup>60</sup> Interestingly, this is precisely what happened in the case of conceptual architecture, the author's aforementioned application of 'subliminal appropriation' within the context of commercial music production. In this case, the author found himself in the curious position of producing music that was 'successful' in two senses: first, as a *visibly* commercially successful pop music enterprise<sup>61</sup>; and, second, as an *invisible* conceptual work. This 'work', constituting a secret strategy in which thousands of systematically data-based samples of #1 hit songs were sliced and layered in multiple iterations and 'concealed' at a point just beyond recognition, was ultimately consumed by a mass listenership and industry that remained manifestly unaware as to why they were drawn to these 'new' songs. Significantly, this *invisible* strategy resulted in multiple chart successes<sup>62</sup> and international touring, incurred no copyright infringements across over twenty commercial releases, and was even verified through

commercial failure of songs that did not employ the aforementioned strategy. Precisely because the 'ghosted' materials remained beyond specific recognition, and by extension the strategy a secret, its conceptual architecture remained invisible. Like the proverbial aforementioned 'tree falling in the forest', the author was placed in the paradoxically solipsistic position of creating something that was only 'successful' as a consequence of being invisible.

Acknowledging the paradoxical implications of reapplying what were once anti-aesthetic strategies to the evasive spectacle of a *faux newness*, and given the inextricable fact, as Scott Redford recently noted, that "anything truly 'new' would be invisible to us",<sup>63</sup> provisionally continuing *after* the once projected "end of history" (that never actually arrived) is only temporarily facilitated by making certain historical relations *invisible*. Unlike the modernist, the contemporary artist realises that traces of erased histories are always still there as *ghosts* – even if deliberately erased or concealed. Although, as Boris Groys has put it, we might be "glad to be free at last from the burden of history, from the necessity to take the next step, and from the obligation to conform to the historical laws and requirements of that which is historically new", we are still driven by a desire to somehow "be politically and culturally engaged".<sup>64</sup> Consequently, given that many artists appear to be 'carrying on' *as if* original and authentic art is somehow still possible, models of art criticism that neither entirely accept nor negate the now-deflated posturing of the modern and postmodern era are potentially useful. Using the metaphor of a belief–disbelief dichotomy, the author offers an 'agnostic model' as a potential register of the complex dilemmas that exist in the multiplicitous realm of an 'after' that already contains more new beginnings than any scholar could meaningfully acknowledge. Perhaps once again portending the conditions of our contemporary moment, Duchamp declared in 1959 that he was "against the word 'anti' because it's a bit like atheist, as compared to believer. And the atheist is just as much of a religious man as the believer is, and an anti-artist is just as much of an artist as the other artist. Anartist would be much better."<sup>65</sup>

With chronological precedence (diachronic value) horizontally collapsed in favour of symbolic origination within a specific cultural context (synchronic value), the catchall non-specificity of the 'contemporary' has effectively superseded postmodernism and modernism. Meanwhile, a range of terms all attempting to describe this extended contemporary moment ('metamodernism', 'altermodernism', 'off-modernism', 'post-post modernism' etc.) compete for attention. In some ways, the fact that none have gained broad traction paradoxically exemplifies the theses of multiplicitous chronology they broadly offer. If nothing else, an erasure is enacted in an accumulative abundance in which the nomination of meaningful specificity becomes absurd. With too much information to *meaningfully* 'bear in mind', feelings of optimism or pessimism are perhaps more likely the consequence of selective editing and informational organisation, as opposed to any solid grasp of the vast realities of these accumulating 'past–presents'. Jörg Heiser has described a phenomenon he calls 'super-hybridity', in which hybridised forms of production move "beyond the point

where it's about a fixed set of cultural genealogies and instead has turned into a kind of computational aggregate of multiple influences and sources".<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Edward Colless describes a "superabundance"<sup>67</sup>, whilst 'virtual composer' Ilmar Taimre describes obscure quotations or hidden allusions, and as fleeting "crystallizations... of an infinite set of potential variations" in a vast realm that even exceeds the tracts of accumulated cultural history.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, with an allusion of universal access underpinned by the potential ephemerality of the virtual eclipsing earlier notions of stability and certainty, new threats of erasure are supposedly unfolding. Fears of digital erasure are underscored by the ease with which the digital gesture is deleted from view. By comparison, material erasures, such as Rauschenberg's seminal act, still offered a tangible trace. Yet digital expressions, especially if registered online, also potentially leave traceable 'footprints'. Consequently, as more activity is registered online, ghosts from our pasts will continue to haunt us.

Where do things go when they are erased? Do we imagine some enormous fabricated void of erased narratives and amnesias? What happens when a culture or history is erased? To what extent can we still access their echoes, traces and ghosts? Although historical European avant-gardes were effectively erased mid-century, they not only staged a return in the 1960s: they were retrospectively accorded greater critical significance. Why, then, does the figure of the autonomous artist raised in the image of global capital seem to fear erasure? With the decline of Western cultural supremacy, is the real issue that we don't want to accept that other cultural forces might be capable of inventing avant-gardes in their own image (not that we should reasonably expect such projects to be recognisably 'avant-garde' in an irretrievably Romantic and Western sense)? Many have pondered whether this age of instant access exacerbates forgetting and the erasure of cultural specificity and identity. Some theorists point to the transformative ways that social media technologies are altering the ways in which we communicate. To this end, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman sees a 'liquid' society without permanent bonds, yet underpinned by conflicting longing both to tighten and to loosen bonds.<sup>69</sup>

As much as we feel that we can see individual stories and collective histories moving, they invariably remain opaque. Meanwhile, assimilations of past disappointments are projected in unpromising visions of the future whilst we simultaneously continue to mythologise the past and see the present as being in supposed decline. Although the idea of progress had long historical roots, modernism represented an unprecedented erasure of the past in favour of imagined utopian and dystopian futures. This shift, in turn, produced antithetical artforms that relinquished the quest for the timeless in favour of the ephemeral. In turn, this provisional antidote undid a fallacy of artistic progress whose logical end point was abstract paintings made by white men. By contrast, artworks are now more likely understood as transitional modules linked within larger networks in which they invariably both pick up and inflect histories. Although, when discussing artworks, we still default to information pertaining to the circumstances and paternity of their production (such as the artist's



identity and the historical period and cultural context to which they belong), some artists have managed successfully to illustrate the distorting influence of such 'readings' by deliberately omitting information that might otherwise inflect interpretation. In countering, for example, those that saw Troy Brauntuch's reproductions of Hitler's drawings as meaningless simply because they excluded captions to specifically illuminate their origins, Craig Owens eloquently argued that the opacity that they demonstrate is actually their strength.<sup>70</sup>

One of the difficulties of discussing the conceptual basis of works that deal with erasure is the problem of finding adequate language. For Hal Foster, the impact of mid-century atrocities in particular created more than "a historical divide in art": they "induced a cultural blockage" and "failure to mourn" that persisted to a point that they have produced "a compensatory imperative to remember in the form of new museums and trauma studies of all sorts."<sup>71</sup> Do we see trauma as reducible to a stylistic and ritualistic obligation? How should we appropriately mourn the stories of the erased? More specifically, in what kinds of ways are these concerns exacerbated by the conditions of digital culture? Conceptions of the cultural implications of erasure can be crudely divided into two camps. On the one hand, we have those that pessimistically warn of the consequences of an algorithmically sorted popularity contest for the relative importance of information, essentially arguing that digital culture is accelerating late capitalism's tendency to privilege certain information – in other words, if it isn't 'Googleable', it doesn't exist. Within this model, we are losing information and meaningful perspective on historical relationships within the new hierarchies of searchable databases that erase specificity and leave information floating unanchored in virtual realms. By contrast, optimists point to the way in which former historical hierarchies and privileged relationships are radically unsettled in the relocation of all activity within an infinite present reset to zero. Consequently, we might transcend canonical cultural constructions and find new means with which to construct individually circumscribable fictions. Yet even within this optimistic model, we are losing information (which is not necessarily the same thing as losing knowledge). Either way, the way in which we selectively edit a collective culture that has expanded in girth beyond anything that can be borne in mind is creating new ambivalences. Clearly, none of the questions posed in this chapter are new, exist in isolation or ever entirely disappear. Instead, emphasis is recalibrated in each instance they are put to the task of analysing something that is simply a culturally constructed projection in the first place. Whether or not 'art' actually exists (as a noun), it is produced and discussed (as a verb). This is its provisional value, as a transitory and performed response framed in dialectical relationship with the continuum of lived reality – a reality in which conflicts and the unavoidable finality of death enact erasures that make the culturally constructed fabrication we call *art* farcical in comparison. Yet it is precisely in creative expression that we also find provisional redemption – for as Friedrich Nietzsche put it, "*error*" has made us "so deep, delicate, inventive as to bring forth such blossoms as religions and arts."<sup>72</sup>

## Notes

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- 14 John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 102
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- 19 Art & Language statement, 1968, quoted in Ralph Rogoff, 'Touched by Your Presence: Invisibility in Art', *Frieze*, no. 50 (January–February 2000), accessed 30 September 2013, [https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/touched\\_by\\_your\\_presence/](https://www.frieze.com/issue/article/touched_by_your_presence/)
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- 21 'Artur Żmijewski: *Them*, 2007', Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, accessed 20 September 2013, <http://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/zmijewski-artur-oni> Artur Żmijewski's *Them* (presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> Documenta in Kassel) is a video recording a social experiment in which conflicting cultural groups are invited to form responses to each other's painted symbols.
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- 46 *Ibid.*
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- 49 Rex Butler (ed.), *What is Appropriation?* (Sydney: Power, 1996), 39
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