

The Creative Act of Effacement: Erasing in the Art of Robert Rauschenberg and William Kentridge

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In the rhetoric of art-making, drawings are conceptualized in terms of creation—they are produced, generated, built, shaped, and materialized. In opposition, the typical definition of erasure is formulated in the language of subtraction. It connotes mistakes, deletion, and the dissimulations of imperfections. This binary understanding functions on the assumption that if drawing is an act of creation then the reverse, erasing, must be an act of destruction. Such a narrow outlook negates the creative potential of erasing and stubbornly distances two complementary actions. In fact, many connections can be found between drawing and erasing: both are the physical results of gestures and in this way they echo the hand of the artist, record the passing of time and alter the material surface of paper. Both require dexterity and specific tools and play pivotal roles in the shaping of a work of art. Perhaps the misconception of erasing can be attributed to the fact that the cumulative effort of the artist is referred to as a ‘drawing’—an appellation that acknowledges only the additive aspect of the process. This essay aims to redefine erasing as an action that has the possibility to create rather than just destroy. Two examples are particularly apt at illustrating this: the groundbreaking *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) by Robert Rauschenberg and William Kentridge’s *Mine* (1991), an animated film from a series which he refers to as “drawings for projection.”¹

Rauschenberg’s controversial *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (fig. 1) is inextricably tied to the myth of its conception, which is essential to the proper understanding of the piece. The tale begins in 1953 when Rauschenberg returned to New York City after a lengthy sojourn in Europe and Africa.² There he reunited with an art scene that was under the sway of Abstract Expressionism—a movement, spearheaded by Willem de Kooning and heavily rooted in the demonstration of emotion through gestural painting,

(Opposite) Fig. 1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, traces of ink and crayon on paper, mat, label and gilded frame, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo reproduced with permission from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



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which Rauschenberg didn't personally identify with. At the time, the young artist had just had his *White Paintings* (1951)—a series of seemingly blank canvases which hinge on the idea of visual silence—shown at the Stable Gallery.³ Pleased with the results, Rauschenberg sought to extend the concept behind the *White Paintings* to drawing.⁴ He began by erasing his own pieces, but found this to be unsatisfactory because the works he was creating had not authoritatively been declared art yet. “I realized,” Rauschenberg later explained to Calvin Tomkins, “that it had to be something by someone who everybody agreed was great, and the most logical person for that was de Kooning.”⁵ Despite the fact that de Kooning was at the apex of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Rauschenberg had tremendous respect for him and it is with great trepidation that he approached his elder. De Kooning initially disapproved of Rauschenberg's idea, but he finally accepted halfheartedly on the principle that he didn't want to stand in the way of another artist's idea.⁶ He provided Rauschenberg with a multi-media drawing that would present a challenge to erase and that he would miss, thus adding sentimental value to its eventual loss. According to Rauschenberg's account, he approached the effacement of the de Kooning as if it were a delicate surgery. The process took several weeks, required numerous erasers and gentility so as not to tear the paper. In the end, Rauschenberg was left with an artwork which he had produced solely by “[using] the eraser as a drawing tool”⁷—that is, a tool that had a physical impact on the page.

This seemingly simple deed sent a shockwave through the art world. Several reacted in outrage, declaring Rauschenberg's gesture an act of vandalism. Others, in light of Rauschenberg's aversion to Abstract Expressionism, the generational gap between the two artists, and de Kooning's prominent status, psycho-analyzed the gesture as an oedipal patricide.⁸ However, to see this act of erasure as pure destruction is to understand it solely through the negative connotations associated with erasing. Rauschenberg's piece calls for a more complex interpretation than that. Those who deem *Erased de Kooning* a violent eradication do not even take the artist's word into account. Although the maker does not have monopoly on his artwork's interpretation, due to the psychological and personal nature of the *Erased de Kooning*, Rauschenberg's opinion deserves careful consideration.

Rauschenberg repeated several times that he never intended his action to be an aggressive one and constantly deplored the fact that it was perceived as an attack on de Kooning and Abstract Expressionism:

“It’s not a negation,” he stated in an interview with San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Director David A. Ross, “its a celebration.”⁹ This idea is emphasized by the fact that Rauschenberg only thought the piece would be successful if he erased an artwork that was not only good, but great. In this way, he seems to be paying de Kooning a compliment, if not a tribute. Furthermore, Rauschenberg has mentioned that he would never have erased an Andrew Wyeth artwork, because he could not relate to him.¹⁰ He felt that, in order for his piece to be successful, for it to generate meaning and resound with significance, a certain connection needed to exist between him and the artist whose work he was to erase. De Kooning and Rauschenberg were not only contemporaries, but they evolved in the same artistic circles. Even though their aesthetics were radically different, there was a basic understanding between the two. It is also significant that de Kooning was a living artist who was still producing drawings at the time. Had Rauschenberg selected a Rembrandt or another long-dead master, “the factor of vandalism would [have been] so overwhelming that nothing else, no other motive, would count for much.”¹¹ This is not to suggest that the effaced de Kooning drawing can be retrieved, but that Rauschenberg was not taking away from something fixed; de Kooning’s career was still developing. If anything, the young artist was incorporating the master’s work into a new form of art-making, including it in avant-garde history. Indeed, no other drawing by de Kooning has gained as much fame and attention as the one Rauschenberg erased. As David Fenner argues: “[T]hat the drawing was erased is itself more culturally significant than the original drawing.”¹²

Another element that begs consideration in Rauschenberg’s choice of de Kooning is the master’s continuous use of erasure in his own practice. According to Tom Hess, de Kooning made heavy use of the eraser “not to rub out the lines, but to move them, push them across the paper, turn them into planes.”¹³ Thus, de Kooning, often working in charcoal or pencil—media which are particularly suited to erasing—also understood the eraser as tool which could be used constructively in the context of drawing. Perhaps Rauschenberg, seeing this, sought to further de Kooning’s process by pushing erasing to its extreme. Viewed this way, the project can be interpreted as a partnership or even an artistic collaboration in which the first step is the drawing and the second the erasure. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that Rauschenberg insisted upon de Kooning’s conscious participation in the work.¹⁴ According to the story, de Kooning knowingly handed over one of his drawings to be erased.

Inspired by Duchamps’ readymades, the *Erased de Kooning* is unquestionably a conceptual work. This is made evident by the fact that the object

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itself is so devoid of information that, to properly understand the piece, the viewer must rely on its narrative.¹⁵ The aim of a conceptual piece is to illustrate the idea or creative event that brought about its making: in this case, the act of erasing. In this sense, the creative output of the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is a performance, not a drawing. Because it refers to an event, Rauschenberg's project draws attention to the temporal nature of erasing and its historical significance. It specifically references the moment of erasure as well as the zenith of de Kooning's career and Rauschenberg's forays into conceptuality. In the same SFMOMA interview, Ross brings the question of memory into the discussion by asking Rauschenberg: "[D]o you have the [pre-erased de Kooning] image burned into your head?"¹⁶ Rauschenberg responds that he had a general idea, but gives no indication of remembering details. What is erased has largely been forgotten, but the action itself is documented. However, Ross's question, which is emblematic of the art historical desire to archive every detail, misses the point. The appearance of the original drawing is irrelevant to this conceptual piece; what is at the core of this work is the action of erasing. In the physical record of the erasure, de Kooning's presence is felt even in the absence of his drawing, because Rauschenberg's erasure, like all erasures, is essentially an unsuccessful one. Indeed, "every rubbing away, every pressure on the paper can only drive the drawing media deeper into the paper's fibers."¹⁷ Traces of de Kooning's hand can still be detected in the final result. What is left is a ghostly imprint, a testament to de Kooning's draftsmanship and Rauschenberg's unrelenting gestural efforts.

The constructive potential of erasure is also central to the aesthetics of William Kentridge's rudimentary stop-motion technique. The politically-charged narratives of oppression and apartheid presented in Kentridge's animations are extremely complex. This essay does not seek to analyze the intricacies of the films' content, but will focus on the artist's practice and his use of erasure. Kentridge's painstaking process begins by positioning a Bolex camera at one end of his studio so that it faces a charcoal drawing that he has pinned to the wall.¹⁸ The artist then makes marginal changes to the drawing by erasing or redrawing, then walks back to the camera, takes a few shots, and returns to the drawing to make more modifications.¹⁹ Kentridge continues, creating the illusion of movement, until he deems that it is time to move onto the next sequence. Contrary to traditional or modern animations which are the product of the overlaying of several drawings, Kentridge's films are made up of a few drawings which have been altered innumerable times. Without erasure, there would be no animation

of this sort. Because Kentridge is constantly reworking one drawing, the chronicling of movement requires the effacement of past positions in order to be comprehensible. There is a performative aspect, both in the artist's ritual pacing and in the action of the animations themselves. After all, here are drawings that undergo several transformations in order to transcend their static qualities and move. Much like the *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, the final object that Kentridge is left with is a tired drawing—battered by all the erasure and redrawing it has undergone. In this way, the act of erasing is central to the creation of what the artist himself terms “Stone Age Film-Making.”²⁰ Rather than detracting from the viewer's experience, the act of erasing provides them with a document of the artist's actions and the drawing's evolution.

The importance of erasure to Kentridge's animations is also evident in his choice of medium, which he justifies as “the ease with which charcoal can be erased, with an eraser, with a cloth, even with a breath.”²¹ Although it is true that charcoal is easily altered, reshaped, it does not make for clean erasures; smears are left behind, smoky clouds appear. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe charcoal as being a malleable medium, its transformation achievable by the use of an eraser. Because charcoal can easily be modeled, “you can kind of change it as quickly as you can think.”²² This characteristic of charcoal is extremely appealing to Kentridge because it is conducive to what he terms ‘fortuna’—“the contingent and transformative agency that guides him [...] enabling the development of visual ideas that were not (and perhaps could not have been) planned in advance.”²³ Erasure thus plays a key role in Kentridge's creative process, which unfolds slowly and steadily in the time it takes to walk to and from the camera.

A good example of Kentridge's animation technique can be found in his 1991 film *Mine* which recounts a day in the life of both African gold miners and Kentridge's fictional character Soho Eckstein, a wealthy White mine owner. The animation brilliantly transitions between Soho's private space and the darkness of the mine. Kentridge makes use of simple aesthetics to enhance the binaries of above and below ground, light and dark, Blacks and Whites, drawing and erasing. In Soho's space, Kentridge has left the background the whiteness of the paper, but in the mines, the surface has been darkened and forms appear only when their contours are erased. This is particularly visible in the drilling sequence from the 3:30-3:55 mark (fig. 2, panels 7-9). In this section of the animation, Kentridge makes sharp strokes with his eraser to indicate the blinding light of sparks. As the miner digs deeper, the erasure unveils an *Ife* head, buried in the rock, which the

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William Kentridge, *Image
stills from Mine, 1991,
charcoal on paper, Tate
Museum*



worker then blasts to pieces with his drill. The scene changes to a wider shot of the dark mining tunnel. At first, only one figure is discernible, but as the sequence plays out, others come into being, shaped by precise erasure. These vigorous marks work in tandem with the soundtrack to convey the frenetic, staccato motion of jackhammers. In this way, Kentridge uses the eraser as a subtractive drawing tool, eliminating the excess to reveal shapes.

Towards the end of the film, Kentridge's erasures become increasingly noticeable in the Soho scenes (fig. 2, panels 10-12), because they leave visible smudges on the white background. After its transformation from bed, to desk, to bed again, Soho's space is cluttered with marks. By the time a rhinoceros makes an appearance, the paper is too exhausted to support any more erasing and a dark shadow follows the animal as it moves across the page. In doing so, these smears track "the history of those changes, as each erasure leaves a snail-trail of what has been."²⁴ This demonstrates how Kentridge's drawings have their history built into them. The passing of time

is chronicled by the marks left behind through imperfect erasures which give Kentridge's images the allure of a palimpsest—an ancient manuscript which has been wiped clean in an effort to be reused, but which still retains traces of its original content. In relation to Kentridge's practice, Rosalind Krauss has suggested that “the palimpsest [...] is the emblematic form of the temporal and as such it is the abstraction of narrative, of history, of biography.”²⁵ Indeed, as the Soho scenes in *Mine* exemplify, Kentridge's drawings are tattooed with the traces of their past which, despite several erasures, are still visible for the eye to pick out. These ghost-like traces generate a multilayered appearance that implies a sense of memory. In Kentridge's art, this is the painful memory of apartheid; a thing of the past whose haunting shadow can never be fully erased from history. “All that you see at each moment is the present,”²⁶ says Kentridge referring to his animations. But this is a present that is deeply informed by its past. Beyond being a mode of animation, erasure serves as metaphor in Kentridge's films to visually embody past scars.

As the art practices of Rauschenberg and Kentridge illustrate, the action of erasing contains as much creative potential as that of drawing. This is especially evident in Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* which at first glance, appears to be an act of destruction. Upon further analysis, this work can be interpreted as a conceptual homage to de Kooning in which the master himself played a role. For his part, Kentridge uses erasure in conjuncture with ‘fortuna’ as a means to animate his drawings. This results in intricate films characterized by a palimpsestic appearance that compliments the themes of history and memory that Kentridge addresses in his content. Contrary to the destructive characteristics that have traditionally been assigned to the eraser, both artists demonstrate a deeper understanding of this tool and harness its creative potential to produce truly unique artworks.

Endnotes

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| <p>2 Sarah Roberts, “Erased de Kooning Drawing,”</p> | <p>3 Ibid.</p> <p>4 svsgvcarter, “Robert Rauschenberg: Erased</p> |

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- 6 Roberts, “Erased de Kooning Drawing.”
- 7 Catherine Craft, “‘Cut, Tear, Scrape, Erase’: Notes on Paper in Twentieth-century Drawing,” *Master Drawings* 50.2 (2012): 178.
- 8 Roberts, “Erased de Kooning Drawing.”
- 9 “Robert Rauschenberg Discusses *Erased de Kooning Drawing* at the SFMOMOA, May 6, 1999,” videoclip ed. Richard Robertson, SFMOMA. accessed Dec. 9, 2013. http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/collection/artwork/25846/research_materials/video/EDeK_98.298_031.
- 10 Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg: (a Lavishly Illustrated Lecture)*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Houston: Menil Collection, 2000), 18.
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- 13 Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg*, 19.
- 14 Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, 210.
- 15 Sarah Roberts, “Erased de Kooning Drawing.”
- 16 “Robert Rauschenberg Discusses *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.”
- 17 Craft, “‘Cut, Tear, Scrape, Erase,’” 183.
- 18 Christov-Bakargiev and Kentridge, *William Kentridge*, 61-64.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid, 61.
- 21 Ibid, 64.
- 22 “William Kentridge on his Process,” SFMOMA, accessed Dec. 10, 2013.
- 23 <http://www.sfmoma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/356>.
- 24 Ed Krčma, “Cinematic Drawing in a Digital Age,” accessed Dec. 8, 2013. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/cinematic-drawing-digital-age>.
- 25 Christov-Bakargiev and Kentridge, *William Kentridge*, 64.
- 26 Rosalind Krauss, “‘The Rock’: William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection,” *October* 92 (2000): 24.
- 27 “William Kentridge on his Process.”

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