

# *Under Erasure*

by William Corwin

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Installation view of *Under Erasure*, Pierogi Gallery, 2018. Courtesy Pierogi Gallery.

*Under Erasure* is a timely, wise, and expansive exploration of the idea of erasure from all angles in visual art and textual practice, particularly poetry. It soberly examines the aesthetic aspects of the practice of erasure, but doesn't refrain from teetering on the edge of absolute calamity and human tragedy either. This all-encompassing approach insulates this exhibition from the dangers of being both too flippant in addressing erasure in the world, or employing too much gravitas in analyzing erasure in an art context. Erasure in art and writing is an abstract affair: words and images can be

obscured but their presence is felt, and this newly formed hybrid phantom presence acts as a type of creative and artistic production in its own right. Much is made of Jean-Michel Basquiat's statement "I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them." This is all well and good in the safe confines, conceptually speaking, of the artist's studio, the art gallery, or museum. But the exhibition strives to be more than an academic exercise, and so while not hitting us over the head with excessive hand-wringing or falling into dramatic postures, the curators, Heather and Raphael Rubinstein (who also have work included in the exhibition), present works that indicate erasure has a much wider reach: such as Kim Jones's *Untitled (War Drawing)* (2007-2008-2012-2013) where the erasure of signs and symbols is in fact a surrogate for erasure of things: of people, objects and places. Basquiat's words (he features in the show with a scrap of poetry *Untitled (text)*, circa 1982) explain only a fraction of erasure—most of the time—IRL—erasure is total and absolute: it's poetic to think of traces, but usually the aim is to leave nothing at all.



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While it would be nice to see an exhibition of this scope and import at a museum, the cross-fertilization between text analysis and visual practice, and the equal weight placed on both disciplines is progressive and experimental, and it relies on an intuitive discovery of similarities between works. This open-endedness works well in a politically

activated space such as Pierogi. In terms of the politically minded pieces, the broader implications outweigh the modesty of the presentation. A work as apparently art world-specific as *The Advantageous of Being a Lesbian Woman Artist* (2006) by Ridykeulous with A.L. Steiner and Nicole Eisenman is a consideration of the oppression of women in general, though it accomplishes this monumental message with a series of bitter cross-outs and substitutions of an earlier work by the Guerrilla Girls from 1988. The Guerrilla Girls themselves are represented by the work *President Trump Announces New Commemorative Months* (2016), which sardonically alludes to the erasing of whole groups of people, physically and conceptually. “Latino Heritage Month,” becomes “Mass Deportation Month.” Jenny Holzer’s oil on linen *As requested blue* (2006) presents the imprint of a heavily redacted investigative document from Guantanamo Bay, alluding to erasure as a means of hiding one’s tracks in the case of a possible war crime. The aforementioned Kim Jones drawing *Untitled (War Drawing)* is a diagram/game of the retreats and feints of battle lines. Each of Jones’s erasures and emendations represents the lives and deaths of both friendly and enemy soldiers in the dreadful zero-sum equation of on-the-ground hand-to-hand warfare.

There is a no man’s land between erasure and writing that is the ambiguous gesture, sometimes a word, sometimes a scribble, and often an obscured text which can just be made out or guessed-at—the curators summon the idea of Twombly as a master of this medium (though he is not included in the show): Bruce Nauman’s print *Raw – War* (1971) offers a perfectly legible but palindromic example. Across the readability spectrum we move through Mira Schor’s crusty ochre text *Writing* (2002), Dana Frankfort’s painterly monochromatic *Written Word* (2018), landing on Sam Jablon’s backwards scrawled *Half Destroyed* (2018) and Joe Amrhein’s (Amrhein is the co-director of Pierogi) *Scroll 2* (2009). Schor plays with dismembering text while Amrhein’s colorful and precisely painted text on vellum would be perfectly easy to read (we think), if only we could unroll the medium on which it’s written. On one level these pieces intensify the richness of the encyclopedic nature of *Under Erasure* as an exploration of linguistic potential in art, but simultaneously, they expand the possible readings too far afield. Cross-outs, burned away letters, redactions, and removal by Pink Pearl hold to one set of interpretations: mirrored text and the implications of script, font, symbols, and semi-recognizable forms cue ideas of unrequited desire, misunderstanding and vagueness, such as in the lovely collaboration of wife and husband Mónica de le Torre and Bruce Pearson, *Silence* (2018), but they distract from the avowed aims of the show.



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The pieces that eschew direct political confrontation seem to hover between Derrida's proposition of crossing out and the act of sublime destruction contained within Rauschenberg's erasure of a drawing by de Kooning. Here is a safe space to investigate and the Rubensteins provide a wonderful selection. A large segment of Joseph Kosuth's gargantuan installation *Zero and Not* (1986) greets the visitor and inculcates them into the Derridean philosophy that is the curators' primary interpretation of erasure (and from whence the title is drawn). In Kosuth's piece, the oversize text is solidly and mechanically crossed out, but almost entirely still readable. Anne Hamilton's *Tropos* (1993 - 94) is the remains of a performance at DIA (of which photographic documentation is also presented) in which all the words have been lightly burned, but still allowed readability; almost a scourging of the text. It is an additive process which interacts with the original words—destroying the text would simply have necessitated burning the book. With *In-Visible* (2018), Jane Hammond “quotes” a panicked Minnie Mouse with a mangled word balloon—re-phrasing and taking other's words out of context in the literal iconography of the comic strip. Tony Lewis plays with this trope as well in *Fool! Tomorrow* (2018). A simple “X” activates the negation in both Antoni Tapies's *X i ulls* (1995) and David Scher's *Pluto Neptune*, (N.d.), framing the concept of the anti-image.

The wholesale removal of large segments of text in *The Ms of My Kin*, (published 2009) allowed Janet Holmes to source words from Emily Dickinson's poetry written during the civil war, offering the contemporary poet a comfortable glossary with which to voice her own wartime anxieties. Did it need to be Emily Dickenson? In the same vein, did Ronald Johnson need to use Paradise Lost in order to craft *Radi Os* (published 1977)? If Robert Rauschenberg's explanation of *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) is a guidepost, the destruction or erasure of a work by another, acknowledged, artist is a key element. Rauschenberg's work is not on view, but is referenced prominently in Rubenstein's text. The act of undoing another's effort, and the fact that its destruction by a foreign party makes it impossible to recreate, even by the original artist, lends incredible power. A main point of *Under Erasure* is the authenticity of the gesture, whether obscuring the image or text, or erasing it: the ripple effect of the resulting removal—either through absence or the rearrangement of the remaining fabric, creates a sense of moral incomprehensibility and incites investigation into the destruction of the artist's image or the poet's word. *Noiseless Blackboard Eraser* (1974) by Joseph Beuys, is a small and literal instrument of this process which sits in a case in the first room of the exhibition: in its reference to childhood and early education and the concomitant innocence associated with those referents (as well as Beuys's own practice), this object embodies the potential of the remover to remove. The curators guide us up to the edge of the precipice of complete erasure, from which there is no return, but up until that limit there are the traces, remnants, and substitutions which form the context of this exhibition.

#### **CONTRIBUTOR**

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William Corwin is a sculptor and curator based in New York City. His work has been reviewed in the Brooklyn Rail, ARTnews, Sculpture Magazine, Artcritical, and Art Monthly. In 2016, he organized I Cyborg at the Gazelli Art House in London. He currently teaches with the Meet the Met program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and hosts a program on Clocktower Radio.