

## TILL THE LIMITS OF THE VISIBLE

*Erasure*, which seems a completely neutral term on the face of it, describing the removal of something written or drawn, acquired a new sense in twentieth-century social practice. What had been known before ceased to be clearly recognisable. No doubt the earlier scope of significance ascribed to erasure had remained, yet in the previous century the desire to wield power over the perfectly known or totally unknown assumed ominous proportions. It became a tool of social manipulation. It is by no means an accident that erasure was willingly adopted in literature and the arts. With respect to literature, suffice it to mention in this context the names of Milan Kundera and Thomas Bernhard. The former, in *The Book of Laughter and Oblivion* describes in this perspective the history of Vladislav Clementis's hat, and the latter in *Erasure*, his last novel, unmasks the concealment of the historical past of his compatriots. No doubt, however, erasure was the most vociferous in George Orwell's *1984*.

### Erasing, retouching

He recognised the Ministry of Truth as an (indispensable) institution that guarantees the proper functioning of the totalitarian system. One could very easily think about the corresponding authorities in Soviet Russia. Just like the Ministry of Truth made sure that information correctness responded to the political demands of the day, the

social database in Stalin's state was adjusted in a similar manner: all the data related to particular people who fell into disfavour with the regime were removed. This applied to both texts mentioning their names and their images. Their removal from social life went hand in hand with the condemnation of their memory. Such measures were applied to, e.g. Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev and Nikolai Yezhov, who were retouched in the photographs featuring Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin. The removal or erasure of an image was to be tantamount to the erasure of the person himself. For political reasons, similar practices were by all means desirable elsewhere, like in Czechoslovakia after 1948. However, those who would see the condemnation of memory as a characteristic feature of the time, one more transgression of the normal, would be very much mistaken. *Domnatio memoriae* existed as early as in ancient Egypt and later in Greece and Rome. This is not our concern here, though. In the 20th century we witnessed the retouching of photographs which served a political purpose. The photograph no doubt occupies a special role among historical documents. It moreover occupies a unique position among the other media, not only visual. A question arises what in this case the erasure of memory is and what its consequences are.

Some time ago, for instance in the 1930s, retouching photographs required a special technical skill and not everyone could do it. A well-erased figure did not undermine the foundation myth of photography, i.e. what the photograph represents corresponds to reality. In other words, an image in the photograph must have appeared in front of the camera lens the moment the shutter was released. Someone's absence in a photograph might, then, testify that this person had never been in the picture in the first place. One other thing was that many vividly remembered the photographs as including the erased individuals. This is the problem of representation in classical photography: does it really depict what is absent? Retouching is disturbing and compounds the problem. After all, not only what is in the picture has existed, but what is not in the photograph may have been there. The erased figures conveyed a very important message. Their disappearance was tantamount to the disappearance of the old world, which was to replace the world as of that moment given to a permanent revolution. To my mind, the absence of Trotsky, Kamenev and Yezhov in photographs was meant to be recognised by their contemporaries. These men belonged to the old world and had to go together

with it. The empty space indicated, then, what existed on the outside and was not directly present in the photograph.

The following is another event which is somehow linked with the above procedure. "Somehow", as these are events from two different worlds, and therefore there are as many similarities as there are differences here. The latter in fact dominate. There is one detail, however, that is an evident link between them. First things first, however. In 1953 Robert Rauschenberg erased a Willem de Kooning drawing. The resultant nearly blank page bore the inscription *Erased de Kooning Drawing. Robert Rauschenberg 1953*; the artist framed it in a golden frame. This gave the work its autonomy; it became an object of art to which a particular meaning was hard to ascribe. As a result, various contexts emerged which were to legitimise interpretation. Points of reference could include both Rauschenberg's white paintings made at that time, or his assemblages, exposing the objective character of a work of art. Other significant references included the activities of the Dadaists, who permanently destroyed all meaning ascribed to conventionalised actions of conventional artists. Most probably it is because of this last reference that the circumstances of the making of the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* are invoked.

Namely, de Kooning was an artist uniquely admired by Rauschenberg. In the early 1950s, he was seen as a seminal representative of action art, one of the two currents of Abstract Expressionism appreciated at that time in the United States. The artist enjoyed tremendous popularity among the New York bohemians. It is most probably because of this reason that Rauschenberg approached him for a drawing which he intended to erase later. De Kooning obliged but, to spice up the matter a bit, asked for a bottle of whisky in return for the favour. In order not to make things easier for Rauschenberg, he chose a work which would not be easily or completely erased. This led to the creation of a work which intended to be a blank sheet of paper yet cannot be erased completely as it bears traces of the earlier presence of a drawing.

What, then, is this blank sheet of paper? A lot of relevant questions were posed, or rather put in order, by Tony Godfrey. It would be worthwhile to list them here: Was the allegedly erased drawing really de Kooning's work? Was the entire endeavour motivated by the desire to mock action painting, or rather by avant-garde zeal? Was the placement of the erased drawing within a golden frame only a joke?

If not, whose work is it really: de Kooning's or Rauschenberg's? Finally, is this an act of destruction or creation? (Godfrey 63–64)

It is undoubtedly hard to come up with unambiguous answers to the above questions. This is not the right time and place to discuss the issue, albeit cursorily. Still, interesting in this respect is a remark made by Arthur C. Danto who, accounting for the modernist narrative concerning monochromatic paintings, noticed that the white monochromatic square should be appreciated as the effect of the removal of colour, the removal of form other than its own and shapes other than the simple shape of the ideal square. In this case, according to Danto, the white square would mark the end of the road, leaving to the painting little, if any, room for manoeuvre (Cf. Danto 233)

The modernist narrative could be easily linked to Rauschenberg's creation. After all, at Black Mountain he himself made white paintings. He stripped them of colour and shape other than their own. The erased drawing might, then, be a simple consequence of similar thinking. Apart from similarities, one should be aware of a crucial difference, though. What is at stake here is not the crowning of all that has taken place in painting and the completion of all, but rather the clearing of space for further action. Urszula Czartoryska wrote in pretty much the same manner about the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (Czartoryska 71). It is not the end, but a new beginning. Let us reiterate: not the end, but a new beginning.

Here we might see a similarity between retouched photographs and the erased drawing: simultaneously a closure and an opening. In both cases this is a political gesture, even if the politics concerned are very different.

## The theology of Malevich's squares

The proclamation of ends and new beginnings in the modern era was not rare. Modernity itself was underpinned by the same assumption. A closure and a simultaneous opening can be seen as the foundations of the era, in fact. Later this idea was repeatedly revisited. In art, this was the ultimate departure from all kinds of illusionism and mimeticism. An idea emerged that art itself should be the object of art. While the onset of this idea was ascribed to the threshold of the last three decades of the nineteenth century, in the works of the Im-

pressionists, it was much more spectacular in abstract painting. A special place here no doubt belongs to Kazimir Malevich. His *Black Square* was acclaimed by Danto as a “symbol of erasing the art of the past” (Danto). This comes as no surprise really, as Malevich himself indicated that the generation of the 20th century are the sum total and a page of a new book. He stressed that he and his contemporaries divide time by a clear-cut boundary and place on the first page a plane in the shape of a square, black as mystery. For the artist, this plane was to become a sign of its time (Cf. Malevich 2004).

As we can see, the idea of erasure definitely preceded Rauschenberg’s idea. A black square, like a tombstone, slammed shut all the past things in art. At the same time, it opened up space to new, unknown horizons. This is what revolutionaries would often claim. Malevich can no doubt be called a revolutionary in art, yet we cannot lose sight of the fact that he was radically opposed to linking art with any figures of social policy. Art was to be an area of freedom. He stressed this fact, reminding that at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th one, art rejected the burden of superimposed religious and state ideas. It thus reached out towards itself, to a form expressive of its own essence. It became a third autonomous and equitable “point of view” (Cf. Malevich 2006: 92). Exactly: a third equitable point of view ... Free from any historical obligations at that! Starting from scratch! Thus, we found ourselves, as eremites, in a desert: “No ‘images of reality’ – no imaginary objects – nothing besides the desert!”, Malevich will add (Malevich 2006: 66). He himself is a priest of a new faith, Suprematism. Not only because he defended the purity of the doctrine. The religious context was set up by Malevich at the show where he first exhibited *The Black Square*. He placed in a room in a manner typical of exhibiting icons. The link between the square and the icon should not be seen as abuse.

There are many similarities here. Since “the icon helps experience the invisible, the ‘inner form’ of being, this inner character (...) is born of enlightenment, of the category of Tabor” (Evdokimov 163), the black square which brings out form from an object (Poprzęcka 197) also wants to get down to what is essential. It is patently obvious that the invisible is understood in a Platonic way. Today, what is invisible will one day be apparent to the eye. It is a precondition for existence. Only the visible exists (Markowski 21). Still, what is often at stake is the capacity of the inner eye. In order to master this skill of experien-

cing an inner form, a transformation is necessary. What is of essence in the Orthodox Church is the *transformation* taking place in liturgy (the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body of Christ), in Malevich what is at stake is the erasure of all the established canons of creation, not excluding the Creator. The founder of Suprematism wrote about the defeat of the one to whom creation is ascribed. He moreover foreshadowed the **transformation** of everything, ourselves and the world. This was to crush forever the shell of time, and ever new **transformations** were to be taking place (underline - R.K.P) (Cf. Malevich 2004).

One can have the impression that the road taken by icon-makers can be found close to that walked by Malevich. Naturally, I mean here the transcendent objective which they wanted to achieve as a result of their actions. There is, however, a fundamental difference in this field. Irrespective of the significance we ascribe to the images represented in the icons, Malevich's black square is not meant to represent anything visually. As he himself writes, "square = impression, white background = nothingness" (Malevich 2006: 74). Impression is linked with abstraction. It is not, then, a reflection of the impression comparable to the image of an object. Neither is this a world of emotions, but an autonomous manner of their representation. The square seems to glide in the surrounding nothingness and in this perspective the entire representation sublimates the existence of the energy which the painting encapsulates.

How close it is from here to the old contention between the iconophiles and the iconoclasts. It is in order to point out, however, that Malevich does not unequivocally side with either party. One can actually get the impression that he is playing a game where both positions have their rightful place. One might say that he plays like a recluse: "Leaving civilisation, an eremite believed that he was on the verge of some crazy game a man can start, a game to earn eternity outside of time" (Przybylski 35). Trying to reach the transcendent, Malevich no doubt plays for eternity outside time. At the same time, let us add immediately, he does not escape civilisation but wishes to overtake it and place himself in a realised utopia, in the world where history, as the Spirit in Hegel, has come to its end. In this new reality, an overcoming of the epoch-making contention could take place. After all, Malevich does not get rid of an image but wants to overcome its constraints. Definitely, he is a far cry from accepting early

medieval philosophy of the image practiced by iconophiles, according to which the image was to be transparent with respect to the original (Belting 152), but he most probably comes closer to a similar way of thinking than to any figure from the world of arts copying nature.

We can then say that the fact the Malevich saved the painting itself points to his siding with the iconophiles. The painting reached transcendence, which is what theologians require of the icon. This transcendence is encapsulated in an impression rather than in objective mediation. The black square is a representation of the supra-sensory, and if so, we are getting close to the position of the iconoclasts. In his black square Malevich, as if in line with their demands, erases any and all images of divinity. Or perhaps he paints them over? Screens them? The curtain screens from view but does not obliterate. We cannot see, yet we do not question the existence of what for the time being is invisible since it will become visible in the future. Would this, then, be proof of the existence of God? If we assume a similar interpretation of meaning, then we should conclude that only in a similar way can deity be represented. As a result, we will not deal with copies of copies, with a multiplication of images which increasingly reify the original.

However, in the case of Malevich the thing does not end here. He seems to be asking: What if God exists outside of creation? Would it not be better, then, to erase his image rather than lead astray and only screen God? Perhaps *White on White* will be precisely a response to a similar question? The painting is a conundrum, for which Malevich himself is to blame. This was observed by Aaron Scharf, who highlighted that a white square at an angle on a white field had been variously interpreted. In fact, we do not know what Malevich wished to represent. Yet as the art historian observed, in the context of his other work and in light of his own statements, it was not too audacious to believe that *White on White* was to capture something close to the state of ultimate freedom, a state of nirvana, the last word of a Suprematist consciousness (Cf. Scharf 226).

In the context of the confrontation of iconophiles with iconoclasts one can also interpret *White on White* in line with apophatic theology. A white square on a white field shows *nothing*, since anything that was *something* has been erased from it. One whiteness, despite its tonal and textural differentiation, creates a tautology with the other whiteness, its background. If we assume that the way the artist

applies paint on the surface is linked to tracing, a differentiation process, then we should conclude that it is hard to follow the traces left. The traces constantly put off the possibility of recognising meaning, or else: lead us to nothing, to the invisible and thus the non-existent. This is Malevich's attitude to paintings originating in the position adopted by the iconoclasts. One other thing is whether the iconoclasts themselves would be able to accept this proposal. One thing is certain: "the visible has ceased to matter" (Danto 45).

## Disappearance of reality

So far, we have been interested in the erasure of an image. At present, our concern will be the disappearance of reality. Apparently, the two phenomena are oceans apart. Ultimately, annihilation of representation, a copy of nature as Malevich saw it, should in fact help recreate reality. The entry into art of many objects, including ready-mades, might lead to a similar suspicion. Yet objects in art, although they were to be replaced by their copies, never exhibited their material hardness. It was more important to answer the question what happens to the object when it becomes a work of art (Danto 194). As befitting modernism, the reality of art proved more important than reality itself.

The avowed enemy of modernism, Jean Baudrillard, observed that all the modernist paintings, focused on themselves, "images where there is nothing to see"<sup>1</sup>, lead directly to the disappearance of the world. The ready-made objects and their various equivalents cease to be objects. They only simulate them. The monochromatic paintings by Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Marc Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Ryman aspire to being an abstract reality and simulate true reality. Baudrillard has therefore a ready answer:

we live in a world of simulation, a world where the highest function of a sign is to make reality disappear and to this disappearance at the same time. Art does nothing else. The media today does nothing else. That is why they are condemned to the same fate. (Baudrillard 2005: 110)

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<sup>1</sup> "Paintings with nothing to see in them" is the title of a subchapter of J. Baudrillard, *Spisek sztuki. Iluzje i deziluzje estetyczne z dodatkiem wywiadów o Spisku sztuki*. Transl. S. Królak, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2006, p. 50.



Realist art has always been seen as recreating the visibility of the visible and therefore doubles the visible (Evdokimov 168). This was accompanied by a sensation that in effect there is more and more of the world and there is more and more existence in it. Modernist art, while critical of copyists, did not produce any significant change according to Baudrillard. What is more, it merged with the mass media. It was, then, part and parcel of the world where images began to multiply in a haphazard and uncontrolled manner. Baudrillard saw in this process a mechanism which he compared to modern iconoclasm as follows: "Modern iconoclasm no longer consists in destroying images, but in manufacturing a profusion of images where there is nothing to see" (Baudrillard 2005: 109). The author of *The Conspiracy of Art* juxtaposed contemporary visual culture and the attendant processes with the war fought by iconoclasts with iconophiles. The conclusion was not surprising. In the Middle Ages images simulated the existence of God, and thus concealed the fact of his non-existence. Similarly, in contemporary visual culture, we may say that images, by simulating reality, lead to its disappearance and in general annihilate questions about the existence of reality (Baudrillard 2005). Just like God disappeared in the epiphanies of his own representations, which meant that there was nothing save for images (Baudrillard 10), the contemporary world has been replaced by various multiplying visualisations.

All that occurred after the end of art, i.e. after the crossing of the Rubicon of modernism, does not change the essence of things, says Baudrillard. Not only are simulation and virtualisation strong, but they wreak more and more havoc. It is hard to question the above statement since it looks at the experience of the present day from the modernist perspective. Yet even an inattentive observer of the arts would recognise that over the past thirty years, if not earlier, various attempts have been made to extend the sensory experience of art. If the visible has ceased to matter, it could be extended with the audial and the tactile. No doubt a major element of the shift is the transformation of the sacrosanct relation between the author and recipient of the work. The unidirectional flow of the stream of impressions is replaced by interactivity<sup>2</sup>. What are the consequences,

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<sup>2</sup> This shift was discussed e.g. by R. Kluszczyński in his book *Sztuka interaktywna. Od dzieła-instrumentu do interaktywnego spektaklu*. Warszawa 2010.

however? Maybe it is a question of a regained reality? Since the visible no longer plays the role ascribed to it in modernity, i.e. is not the most significant source of cognition, other senses should come to the rescue. The sense of touch will be the first of them. It is not a question of the dominance of one sense over another. Touch is not a cut above the rest of the senses but rather encompasses all the other ones.

In the early twentieth century, Bernard Berenson tried to extend the analysis of painting with tactile features. Naturally, he was after moving beyond purely visual perception. Leaving aside the question of usability and usefulness of the method from the perspective of art history, we should say that this is not the tactility that we have in mind with respect to contemporary art. Touch is not to be an addition which merely expands the experience of art. It should organise the perception of art and the experience of the world. It is easy to imagine that we do not mean here touching anything with one's fingers. Modern tactility indicates rather individuals entering a network of relations with other actors of the network (Latour). Such tactility boils down to experiencing the world by means of the end-bits of our nervous system. This was summed up in no ambiguous terms by Marshall McLuhan, observing that the communications media as prolongations of our senses set new proportions, not only among the senses but also between themselves, when they impact one another (Cf. McLuhan).

To tell the truth, it was Malevich himself who had written about the new communications media, the driving force of the changes taking place in modern society. It was he who noticed that to some extent, the human being was like a complex radio, receiving a number of waves of differing length, and the sum total of all of them was the worldview, surprising through evolutions (Cf. Malevich 2006).

Derrick de Kerckhove calls this interrelation of the sense a secondary tactility; it does not exclude images but supplements them (Kerckhove 46). At the same time, it redefines the notion of the image and ties it with the body. This is not, however, the approach of Hans Belting, namely that each image has its body, or a medium it cannot exist without; images seen with the inner eye will have the human body as such a medium. Kerckhove refers the notion of an image to digital devices. He observes that the icon in a computer does not play the role of a noun, or simple representation, but that of a verb. When you click on an icon and it does something for you; it performs an

action. Kerckhove maintains that in the image there is a body (our cursor, our avatar), but also a body corresponding to an image – a body of traces left in everyday motion by a physical actor (Cf. Kerckhove 46). Interactivity is not only in this perspective a form of dealing with the media, with the world. It is also an action which leaves a trace. This trace, then, is the beginning of a search for meaning in a network of interrelations. As in digital photography, where all which can be translated into the zero-one system becomes according to Kerckhove a single tangle of mutually correlated data. Therefore, the scholar could say that today, when something was a picture, it was at the same time interface (Cf. Kerckhove 47).

This is how we cross the line separating the perspective mapped out by classical humanism and open up to post-humanism. A consequence is the redefinition not only of the human body, but also of the various related forms of perception. As Rosi Braidotti observed:

Present-day information and communication technologies exteriorise and duplicate electronically the human nervous system. This has promoted a shift in our field of perception: the visual modes of representation have been replaced by sensorial-neuronal modes of simulation. (Braidotti 90)

Did not Malevich start going in this direction, followed by all those who crossed the boundary of an illusionist image? They did not predict the digital technologies of today, yet the avant-garde concepts of art radically liberated one from the image of the world inherited from the past. Not always concrete in their authors' intuitions, they nevertheless often remained open to (compatible with?) future revolutions in technology and communications. Lev Manovich is on target saying that "the avant-garde vision became materialized in the computer." (Manovich 5)

One thing remains certain in the digital reality: erasure has grown in significance and gained an additional meaning.

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