

ARIANA KELLY & BILL JEFFRIES / An Introduction to Less is More...

The exhibition *Less is More: The Poetics of Erasure* and the issue of *The Capilano Review* published on the occasion of the show, emerged from three or four sources. Back in 2006, at the time when the SFU Gallery was already considering an exhibition organized around Tom Phillips's erasure project *A Humument*, erasure practice in both Vancouver and Seattle was expanding to the point where it seemed more interesting to explore these local practices along with what Phillips had done. Then, while considering an expanded show, several key parts of Kristin Lucas's exhibition *IF lost THEN found* at the OR Gallery in late 2006 served as another reminder that artists were erasing almost as frequently as poets. These catalysts suggested that the time was right to introduce erasure to a wider audience through an exhibition and a book. *The Less is More...* project stakes out a claim for erasure methodologies as an apposite cultural critique at the current political and ecological juncture. Erasure exists in a wide range of forms and it is the purpose of this publication, and the exhibition on which it is based, to explore some of the modes of creative removal undertaken by poets, writers, and artists living and working in the age of information overload.

There were erasure projects before Tom Phillips first embarked on his treatments of the book *A Human Document* in 1966. If erasure didn't actually begin with Mallarmé, Alain Robbe-Grillet's cathartic 1953 novel *The Erasers* (*Les Gommages*) set some of the tone for the nascent movement. The same year in the US saw Robert Rauschenberg's infamous *Erased de Kooning*. Roland Barthes' 1964 essay on time and memory, "Cayrol and Erasure," states that "the narrator does not try to rub out what exists, to invoke oblivion of what has been, but quite the contrary, to repaint the void of time with bright colours, to paper the holes in his memory with an invented memory" (188).

Those precursors notwithstanding, Tom Phillips's *A Humument* is generally credited with marking out erasure as both a territory and a practice. The history of Phillips's project is available on his website and is summarized by Bill Hurrell in this book. *A Humument*—miniature in size but monumental in scope—was begun in 1966 and has continued through several iterations, selling to date 15,000 copies of what is essentially an artist's book. It was published initially by Hansjorg Meyer in 1970 and

since 1980 by Thames & Hudson. The 2005 version of the project is shown in its entirety in the *Less is More: The Poetics of Erasure* exhibition at the SFU Gallery. The poems Phillips creates on the pages of W.H. Mallock's 1892 novel *A Human Document* occupy word-cells, alimentary word-rivers, or mitochondria-units emerging from fields of paint. Often reacting to the Victorian text from which they have been "salvaged," the results can be funny and beautiful, surprisingly poignant, or simply mysterious.

In *A Humument*, we see erasure simultaneously combining subtractive and additive processes that reveal this now famous, once obscure, Victorian novel. The additive elements, Phillips's paintings, often explode off the page in a burst of graphic exploration that expands into a massive 368-piece "solo exhibition" that requires hours to view and read. Phillips's process allows him something very similar to the opera composer's score created in reaction to the text inherited from the librettist. Each page becomes a painting and each page may, or may not, react to the largely obliterated text content that forms the support for these paintings. Some erasure practitioners have realized that the obliteration—the loss of the original text—is a true loss, so books, including parts of *A Humument*, are now created with the erased text revealed either as a facing page, or as a ghosted text floating behind the main text, as in James Arthur's pieces in this exhibition.

As Phillips says in his afternotes to *A Humument*, the project began life "as idle play at the fringe of my work and preoccupations" (371) and then occupied him for forty-two years, and counting. There is an Oulipian quality to this project, deriving mainly from the various constraints and rules that Phillips has imposed on himself: the source book had to be for sale for three pence or less; almost no extraneous material could be imported (a rule that has been broken), but elements from other parts of the book were fair game. His methodology devotes vast amounts of time to selecting the text on any given page—up to a year—during which he considers many variants. The result is a single-handed expansion of painting into a contemporary version of Medieval manuscript illumination.

Ever since Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* in the late 1960s, Canadian texts have been probing states of formal dissolution, and hence, greater discoveries regarding the syntactic possibilities of words on a page. One prong of the history of Canadian experimental literature can be pictured as a sequential errata exercise with more than one detour. Louis Cabri's Oulipian methodology, for example, results in texts resembling

a form of proto-English, like an extinct, unknown Celtic language variant that can be deciphered, like a text message, back into modern English, if the procedural rule is known to the reader. The birds of the woods appear more than once in these projects, specifically the northern woods in Angela Rawlings's Schubertian owl stories with their referent-free definite articles, the missing words having been "profiled" prior to being expunged. Erin Moure's word clusters, linked by thread and separated, as she says, by sutures and wounds, with borrowed words floating above the text-like kites, are reminders of the sewn nature of language, especially at places where language poetry and erasure overlap. It is not only words that can be erased, as witnessed in Jamie Hilder's erased maps of his walks, in which only his routes remain—a reduction of a universal finding aid to a personal record.

Additive processes are at work in Oana Avasilichioaei's application of the same vinyl lettering used in museum signage to create a site-specific erased text. Addition can be formal as well as semantic. Derek Beaulieu's erasure of all words except those naming colours and the substitution of colours for words is akin to using erasure techniques to mathematically create a Larry Poons-like painting. Yet another variant is Steve Collis's sonnet writing—one a day for 365 days, each one destroyed by obliteration. Sarah Dowling and Susan Schuppli both mine the news for erased stories, whether it be Canadian murders or Richard Nixon's audio tape gaps.

Erasure is not to be taken lightly, but it usually brings lightness to the seriousness of cultural production. For word people, the words take precedence, for some visual art people, the picture that emerges from the act of removal counts as much as the resulting new text. The philosophical implications are complex, if only because there are so many ways to erase. Michael Maranda's Parasitic Ventures Press, now based in Toronto, is one Canadian project that expands the scope of erasure into publishing. His piece in the show, *Wittgenstein's Corrections*, is a 128 page book project premised on a Wittgenstein manuscript, with each page reproduced as a facsimile, the text removed, leaving only corrections and notations. His press has published, for instance, a book titled *Four Per Cent of Moby Dick*. Others undertake their removals in ways that mine visual art practices more directly. Kristina Lee Podesva and Aaron Vidaver both look closely at the form that freedom of information requests and the ways that those freedoms often result in no conventional information at all, just black out, which means, in another context, loss of consciousness.

Erasure has had a public presence in Seattle since Wave Books, an independent

poetry press, opened in 2005. Co-edited by Joshua Beckman and Matthew Zapruder, Wave uses its website to invite people to erase texts such as *The Khaki Boys Over the Top Doing and Daring for Uncle Sam* by Gordon Bates or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. They post the results, so you can, for instance, read 100 erasure variants on a text from *Moby Dick*, or twenty other source texts. This makes the erasing process very public in Seattle, and part of a potentially very large shared community in which the multiple erasures of the same text echo Marcel Duchamp's claim early in the twentieth century that art is a series of choices. Have five people erase the same page from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and you will have five radically different outcomes. Erasure has flourished in Seattle as an opportunity for collaboration—between author and text, author and author, words and space. It has also challenged traditional notions of authorship, persuasively suggesting that all writing is a form of erasure. In the collaborative spirit of, for example, the open source computer software project, erasure suggests a participatory and communal practice as much available to those who don't identify as poets and artists as to those who do. Also, Seattle poets have gone off on erasure weekends, erasing all day and comparing results at night.

Echoing Tom Phillips's project, Jennifer Borges Foster's treatment of the 1894 novel *A Young Girl's Wooing* by E.P. Roe, creates a new piece of art and rescues an older text from oblivion. Vermont-based poet Mary Ruefle has been steadily engaged in the practice of erasure. In April of 2006, she concluded her performance for the Seattle Arts and Lectures series by reading her latest book *A Little White Shadow*. "I can do this," she said, "because it will only take me about three minutes." *A Little White Shadow*, published by Wave Books, erases ninety-nine percent of a largely unknown Victorian book, initially published in 1889 "for the Benefit of a Summer Home for Working Girls." While some erasure artists choose to emphasize the visual element of their work by including pictures and coloured paper, making it closer to collage—Ruefle's work is relatively austere, relying on text and white paint, buff-out, paper, ink, pencil, gouache, carbon, and marker, drawing attention to how white space indicates both presence and emptiness, Wallace Stevens's the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

Erasure artists are less prophets than they are gleaners, salvaging the treasures from the wreck, dumpster-diving for objects containing value. In an age in which universal and constant access to information threatens to make information so much

white noise, erasure provides a way to find what we need, to glean bits of understanding from a world in which nature's erasures—rising sea levels, rolling blackouts—threaten to eradicate all distinctions.

Pauses or blanks on the page are nowhere more disconcerting than on blacked-out government documents. These may prevent information from seeing the light of day, but as is the case with any withholding of information, the concealment adds to the compelling quality of the remaining text. The more that is missing, the more we want to know. Paradoxically, only since “freedom of information” legislation has been introduced have so many blacked out documents been released. On the surface, this says that “more is less”—more access to information actually yields less information.

Government texts often become a measure of bureaucratic bungling when received as a result of freedom of information requests. Bureaucratic fear, combined with legal advice, end in virtually complete eradications of the information sought. Aaron Vidaver has seen this happen with his FOI requests to the City of Vancouver that resulted in the return of *completely* whited-out documents, containing no words, yet still stamped “confidential.” In one of her works, Alex Dipple has deleted everything but the dots and periods from the U.K.'s Freedom of Information Act, thereby condensing it into a claustrophobic score of deep breaths.

“Less is more” is probably not the most important message that practitioners of erasure wish to send their readers, but it is the aspect of erasure that resonates with the global environmental crisis. The proliferation of texts and words offers an informational parallel to one of the key effects of eutrophication: the extinction of all organisms that cannot survive in the oxygen-reduced environment that the process creates, normally in a pond. On the upside, ecologies that are fully diversified are those that are assumed to be the healthiest. Erasure breathes semantic oxygen into the increasingly eutrophied text-pond by adding unexpected forms of diversity; it thus opens up areas of practice that will catalyze further experimentation.

In some ways, erasure is a young area of practice, in others, especially phenomenologically, it goes back for several billion years at least. Cosmological erasure methods are the ancient ground from which contemporary procedures may draw their legitimacy, in case anyone feels a need for legitimation. The word erase appears in many places, and may be more ubiquitous than we know, for instance, in financial reports when billions are “erased” from the value of the Toronto Stock exchange. The cultural or poetical resonance with what is a universal procedure of change and evolu-

tion, is not just a procedural means to effect something new in an existing art form, it relates to the historical notion of editing, to any method of bringing greater focus to any project. Its resonance with source material relies not only on something being “less,” but on a substitution of one set of meanings with another, in a context of making do with less. Tom Phillips’s term for his painting on the page of a novel is “treatment”—existing artifacts are being “treated.” Whether they deserve such treatment has to be beside the point—what does matter is that this mysteriously simple process creates cultural territory that didn’t previously exist, even though it was “there.”

Works cited

Barthes, Roland. “Cayrol and Erasure.” *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

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