

## Drawing Away

‘It has always been rather difficult for anyone to dislike Rauschenberg personally. His exuberance, energy, and high spirits are infectious, and his spontaneous enthusiasm for work by other artists, even when it is very different from his own, is especially winning.’ These words by Calvin Tomkins in an article in the *New Yorker* in 1964 expressed a widely held view that the young American painter was both gregarious and entertaining, and as such was rather uniquely able to move easily between the different (and generally fractious) groupings that made up the American art scene. There were differences in outlook and beliefs but, Tomkins went on, ‘Abstract Expressionists who welcomed his company got around the aesthetic problem posed by his work by writing him down as essentially non-serious.’

In autumn 1953 Rauschenberg, then twenty-eight, was very serious about his idea for a work that would involve erasing a drawing by one of the most respected artists associated with abstract expressionism. Tomkins reported him as saying:

*I had been working for some time at erasing, with the idea that I wanted to create a work of art by that method ... Not just by deleting certain lines, you understand, but by erasing the whole thing. If it was my own work being erased, then the erasing would only be half the process, and I wanted it to be the whole. Anyway, I realized that it had to be something by someone who everybody agreed was great, and the most logical person for that was de Kooning.*

Nearly fifty, Willem de Kooning was then one of the better known artists working in New York, at least among fellow artists. He had studied fine art in Rotterdam in The Netherlands before coming to New York immediately before the Second World War and during the 1940s he became increasingly seen as one of the leaders of the abstract expressionist group of painters that included such figures as Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Although artists and critics in New York held De Kooning in highest esteem, he had struggled to support himself. All this was to change radically in 1953. In March *ArtNews* published an article by Thomas Hess, ‘De Kooning Paints a Picture’, chronicling and romanticising the artist’s struggle to complete *Woman I*, a disturbing depiction of woman as a grinning, grotesque creature, over a period of more than three years. A few weeks later de Kooning showed this painting, as well as six other large oil paintings and sixteen drawings on the same theme, at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. The Hess article and the Janis exhibition brought him much needed public recognition and commercial success.

With de Kooning’s star rising, Rauschenberg approached the older artist with his request. In fact, Rauschenberg had known de Kooning for a couple of years and rather

idolised him: a year previously he had sneaked a visit to the Dutch artist's studio, photographed *Woman II* in progress and stole a drawing from a wastebasket. Aiming to do things correctly for the intended work, however, Rauschenberg went to de Kooning's studio armed with a bottle of whisky and settled down to explain what he had in mind:

*I remember that the idea of destruction kept coming into the conversation, and I kept trying to show that it wouldn't be destruction, although there was always the chance that if it didn't work out there would be a terrible waste. At first, he didn't like the notion much, but he understood, and after a while he agreed. He took out a portfolio of drawings and began thumbing through it. He pulled out one drawing, looked at it and said, 'No, I'm not going to make it easy for you. It has to be something that I'd miss.' Then he took out another portfolio, and looked through that, and finally gave me a drawing, and I took it home.*

At this point in his career Rauschenberg was seeking to test the limits and definition of art. With a series of plain, all-white canvases called *White Paintings*, Rauschenberg pared painting down to an absolute minimum: a plain, thin layer of rolled-on paint with no colour, image, trace of the artist's brush or personal expression. The *White Paintings* were displayed at the Stable Gallery in autumn 1953, about the same time Rauschenberg approached de Kooning for a drawing. For Rauschenberg, the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was an extension of the *White Paintings*: the idea of the erasure of a drawing paralleled the preparation and exhibition of his recent monochrome canvases. He later said that the *White Paintings* were an attempt to 'see how far ... you could push an object and yet it still mean something'. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* asked whether a drawing could still mean something if utterly effaced by a third party.

The act of erasure was not easy. Rauschenberg said it required several weeks of work and many different types of eraser to rub out the crayon, ink, charcoal and pencil of the original drawing. The effort, however, was part of the process of imbuing the final object with meaning: 'in the end it really worked. I *liked* the result. I felt it was a legitimate work of art, created by the technique of erasing.' The question had been answered: as far as he was concerned, erasure could create a new work of art, and he never felt the need to repeat the trial.

Rauschenberg did not exhibit *Erased de Kooning Drawing* until 1963, but news spread through the New York art world by word of mouth and the artist often showed the work to visitors to his studio. In 1957 art critic Leo Steinberg telephoned Rauschenberg to inquire about *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Steinberg had never seen the work, but was intrigued by the concept and wanted an explanation. (When Steinberg asked whether his understanding would be enhanced by seeing the artwork in person, Rauschenberg responded, 'Probably not'.) The work became much talked about in art circles in part because of consternation about the loss of a potentially significant (and commercially valuable) artwork by a painter widely acknowledged as an accomplished draughtsman. To some, it seemed a shocking act of vandalism. Others were more acutely aware of the implied erasure of the achievements of one generation by the conceptual practice of

younger artists such as Rauschenberg himself, and were either dismayed or impressed by the efficacy of the gesture.

Part of the appeal of Rauschenberg's work was of course the mystery surrounding the lost drawing by de Kooning: after all, not knowing is a powerful inducement to attempt to know. Some ghostly shadows of lines are all that are visible to the eye, with a neat, official looking inscription in the mat framing the drawing, with details of title, authorship and date penned by Rauschenberg's friend, the artist Jasper Johns. Until recently, there was no way of visualising what the de Kooning drawing looked like (there were no photographs of the work). In 2009, however, the San Francisco Museum of Art created an infrared digital partial reconstruction of the lost image. This reveals that the drawing had several different elements: quasi-abstract mammiferous creatures at the centre and top, and a schematic female figure, with eyes and teeth, breasts and haunches, at the bottom left. And, if further proof that Rauschenberg did indeed work on a de Kooning drawing was needed, the backboard that had been applied to support the paper has been removed, revealing a drawing of a single figure in de Kooning's characteristic style – though it, too, is in effect 'lost' by being on the back of the work that Rauschenberg appropriated and made his own.

For Rauschenberg, the loss involved in erasing de Kooning's drawing was neither destructive nor tragic; if anything, the creation of a new work was a cause for celebration. And the element of material and aesthetic loss embodied in this new work were ultimately less important than the vindication of his idea that erasure – the simple act of rubbing out a drawing by someone else – could create a meaningful work of art.

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Jennifer Mundy