

Erased de Kooning Drawing

By [Sarah Roberts](#) July 2013

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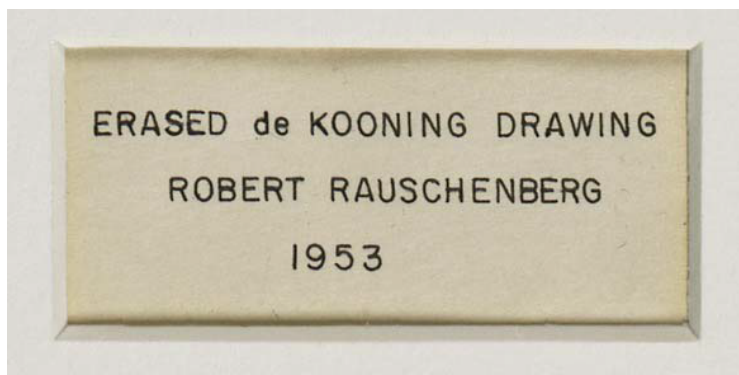
1 A simple composition comprising a single sheet of smudged paper, a thin gold frame with a plain window mat, and a machine-precise inscription, Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* blankly addresses the viewer. At first inspection, its meaning and import are utterly opaque, impossible even to speculate upon. The inscription, "ERASED DE KOONING DRAWING BY ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG 1953," is the only toehold offered to those unfamiliar with this enigmatic artwork. The story of how *Erased de Kooning Drawing* came into being is central to its reception and reputation, and cannot be separated from the work itself. As Walter Hopps noted, a basic understanding of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* "is inextricably embedded in the viewer's explicit knowledge of the process of making."¹ This essay offers a perspective on the interrelatedness of the work's creation story and its material conditions, and it reflects on the roles both factors played in establishing the drawing as a progenitor of Conceptualism. Though it is often discussed as a bombshell that detonated in the art world in 1953, the drawing in fact gained its reputation much more slowly, as critics and artists considered and reconsidered the implications of the odd, nearly unfathomable artistic choice central to its making.



1. Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953; traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 25 1/4 in. x 21 3/4 in. x 1/2 in. (64.14 cm x 55.25 cm x 1.27 cm); Collection SFMOMA, Purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

2 Rauschenberg's usual account of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*'s origins begins with a simple challenge: he wanted to discover a way to make a drawing with an eraser. He had tried erasing one of his own drawings but found the results lacking. He became convinced that the only way to create a work of art through erasure would be to start with a drawing by an artist of universally recognized significance. His first and only choice was Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), a painter at the apex of his powers who had recently reached the highest echelons of the New York art world. With great respect and trepidation, Rauschenberg approached de Kooning to ask for a drawing to erase; with some reluctance and consternation, de Kooning consented. According to Rauschenberg, de Kooning agreed to participate because he understood the concept behind the request and did not want to impede another artist's work. Back in his studio, Rauschenberg set to work reversing de Kooning's masterful draftsmanship, a process that took considerable time and numerous erasers. Rauschenberg had a penchant for storytelling, and some of the finer details of his account were embellished over the decades (de Kooning's demeanor grew more intimidating, the number of erasers increased). However, the central plot points, present in the first major public airing of the tale in Calvin Tomkins's February 1964 *New Yorker* profile of Rauschenberg, remained remarkably stable in the artist's many retellings of the story and in the published accounts that appeared throughout the last four decades of his life.²

3 For Rauschenberg, the story always ended with the laborious erasure process and his satisfaction with the result; he made no mention of the inscription or the work's gold frame. In the early literature on *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, the inscription rarely draws more than a passing mention. It is not treated as an integral or significant aspect of the piece, and when it is referred to, Rauschenberg or his chroniclers simply state the wording and sometimes note that it was hand-lettered. Late in his life, Rauschenberg began to relate that it was fellow artist Jasper Johns (b. 1930) who executed the inscription, a fact later confirmed by Johns.³ In research conducted in preparation for exhibitions presented in 1991 and 1997, Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson dated the erasure of de Kooning's drawing to fall 1953 and established that Rauschenberg and Johns first met during the 1953–54 holiday season, a chronology that begs the question of when the inscription and frame were added. Rauschenberg never addressed the timing directly, but Johns states that the catalyst was an exhibition opportunity late in 1955. Both artists had been invited to participate in a group drawings show at Elinor Poindexter Gallery, New York,⁴ but Rauschenberg, who rarely produced finished drawings, had nothing he considered suitable to present. Johns suggested that he show the erased drawing, and they began to prepare the inscription. Because the two had been producing displays for department store windows and a women's garment distribution warehouse around that time, they had access to a device akin to a pantograph, a mechanical instrument used for duplication. Once they had decided on the details of the inscription and arranged the letters in a metal template, Johns ran a stylus through the guides and an attached pen precisely reproduced the inscription on an adjacent sheet of paper. The drawing was then sent to a framer to be mounted with a mat that included a small window revealing the inscription⁵ (fig. 2).



2. Detail of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) showing the inscription made by Jasper Johns

- 4 Though no record of Rauschenberg's early attitude toward the frame survives, his omission of the inscription and framing of the work from its creation story suggests that, for him, the narrative had initially gelled before these elements attained their current centrality. After a 1988 conservation treatment, however, the artist instructed a studio assistant to add a note on the back of the work: "DO NOT REMOVE DRAWING FROM FRAME FRAME IS PART OF DRAWING" (fig. 3). This effort to indelibly and definitively declare the frame an integral part of the work suggests that the question of its relationship to the drawing had arisen more than once.⁶ Early photographs of *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, commissioned by the artist for the clear purpose of publication, do not include the frame, indicating that he did not initially consider it essential to the artwork. Accordingly, the frame is absent from early reproductions in journals and books; it appears for the first time in Hopps's 1976 retrospective catalogue, where it is also included in the medium description for the work.⁷ Following that exhibition, the work continued to be illustrated inconsistently, often without either the inscription or the frame visible.⁸ In recent years, however, illustrations in studies of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* have tended toward the inclusion of both elements, with interest in the inscription and frame growing in direct proportion to increasing scholarly attention on the drawing's connection to Conceptual art. Rauschenberg's own shift in attitude toward the inscription and frame may have paralleled this arc in the critical discourse.
- 5 The current frame is the original: a slender, very traditional gilded wood construction with a simple profile. The mat was replaced in 1988 after an [extensive conservation treatment](#) to remove a paperboard mount to which the drawing had been adhered. Rauschenberg likely mounted the drawing to reinforce it prior to the erasure process. Removal of the paperboard backing revealed an additional drawing by de Kooning on the back of the sheet—an unfinished female figure rendered in graphite (fig. 4). The presence of this drawing was unknown (except to Rauschenberg and de Kooning) prior to 1988, and Rauschenberg later cited it as proof that he had indeed erased an original de Kooning.⁹ The mounting has an old-fashioned air, echoing both Royal Academy-style frames (which often feature attached labels) and the monogramming seen on Renaissance drawings and prints, which presents the artist's name and the artwork's title and date inside an ornate hand-drawn medallion below the image. The framing choices add gravitas to *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, providing confirmation that one is looking at an erased drawing by a master artist. The effaced drawing itself does not convey enough visual information to establish its own identity or consequence. The complete physical package—erased drawing, mat, inscription, and frame—brings to mind a religious reliquary, which depends on an ornate presentation and associated narrative to create an aura of significance around the remains it houses. It was the addition of the inscription and frame that actualized *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Once it was literally and textually framed, the smudgy piece of paper—and the act of erasure it represents—became something more.
- 6 *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is both a product of its artistic moment and a marker of an extraordinary time in Rauschenberg's biography. It was produced in late 1953, just months after the artist had returned to New York that April following an eight-month trip with fellow artist Cy Twombly (1928–2011) through Italy and North Africa. Significantly, upon his return he chose to locate far downtown on Fulton Street, well away from the cluster of artists' studios around Tenth Street but quite near the building where John Cage (1912–1992) and Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) lived. Rauschenberg had met Cage and Cunningham in 1951, and their friendship had cohered in summer 1952, when they were all in residence at Black Mountain College.¹⁰ Cage had experienced a deep transformation between 1951 and 1952 through the teachings of Zen, and he was actively putting forward Zen principles in lectures and conversations during this period.¹¹ In spring 1953, the fertile exchange of ideas between Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg intensified, as each of them energized the others. It was that spring that



3. View of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (verso, framed) showing handwritten note about the frame and exhibition labels



4. View of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (verso, unframed) showing an untitled drawing by Willem de Kooning, ca. 1953. Graphite on paper, 16 1/2 x 14 1/8 in. (41.9 x 35.9 cm). Collection SFMOMA, purchase through a gift of Phyllis Wattis; © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Rauschenberg showed his *White Paintings* (1951), *Black paintings* (1951–53), and *Elemental Sculptures* (ca. 1953) in a two-person exhibition with Twombly at the Stable Gallery, New York.¹² Cage responded to these works with a chant-like poem about the *White Paintings* that was added to a gallery wall during the exhibition. Effluent from the concept of nothingness so central to Zen, the poem begins “To Whom / No subject / No image / No taste / No object / No beauty”¹³

- 7 More than two decades later, beginning in the 1970s, Rauschenberg firmly linked *Erased de Kooning Drawing* to the [White Paintings](#), saying that he had been working with “the monochrome no-image” and wanted to find a way to draw as part of the series.¹⁴ He also described having conceived of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as a problem to be solved: “I had been working for some time at erasing, with the idea that I wanted to create a work of art by that method.”¹⁵ In a sense, the impulse explored in *Erased de Kooning Drawing* does indeed begin with the *White Paintings* that Rauschenberg made at Black Mountain in summer 1951. With the *White Paintings*, he tested the boundaries of painting by exhibiting seemingly blank, all-white canvases, some of which had been painted not by Rauschenberg but rather by Twombly.¹⁶ For reviewers of Rauschenberg’s Stable Gallery exhibition in May 1953, there was no question that these works took aim directly at the definition of art.¹⁷ Yet tying the drawing to that point of origin does not capture the full story. Since the early 1950s Rauschenberg had been interested in testing the boundaries of what qualified as a work of art, a line of inquiry initiated by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the 1950s Rauschenberg became familiar with Duchamp’s work and Dada practices, and he was certainly aware of Duchamp’s readymades, such as *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) and *Fountain* (1917), which overturned the fundamental premise that an artist must have a hand in the physical making of an artwork.¹⁸ Rauschenberg was clearly intrigued by Duchamp’s challenge to prevailing notions of artistic originality and authenticity, and developed his own interest in identifying, interrogating, and breaching the boundaries of art. The Duchampian impulse is central to Rauschenberg’s narrative for the work, which charts his quest to produce a drawing without drawing at all (knowing that the end result would be essentially an empty page) and still have it be considered art.
- 8 On another level, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* can also be read as evidence of an action or a recording of an event, and, as such, is aligned with the precepts of action painting or gestural abstraction that dominated the New York art scene in the early 1950s. This approach was famously codified by critic Harold Rosenberg in his seminal article “The American Action Painters,” which was published in *ARTnews* in December 1952 and became a hot topic of conversation in New York art circles the following year.¹⁹ Rosenberg identified a revolution in recent approaches to painting that conceptualized works of art as the result of a process that was begun in complete uncertainty and unfolded over time. As he famously noted: “What was to go on in the canvas was not a picture but an event.”²⁰ To be sure, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* reverses the physical, additive process of action painting, but it hinges entirely on the concept of an artwork as a performative act.²¹ In fact, the work is so event-based as to have required the development of the explanatory background story as a sort of pendant that testifies to the actions of its creation, completed in the privacy of the artist’s studio.
- 9 Ultimately, one reading cannot be extricated from the other, as both were central to the artistic and intellectual atmosphere in which *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was created. Rauschenberg’s decision to erase his own drawings was likewise shaped by a number of personal factors. Having just returned from abroad and immersed himself in the New York art scene, he found himself in a cauldron of ideas about action, process, concept, and nothingness, navigating an artistic landscape that was being redefined through influences such as Cage’s intellectual Zen advances, Rosenberg’s painting as an action, the Janis Gallery Dada show, and the Stable Gallery exhibition of his very own *White Paintings*. Notably, 1953 was also a pivotal year for de Kooning, who finally found staunch critical support and solid financial success following the exhibition of paintings and drawings from his *Woman* series at the Janis Gallery that spring.²² By then, Rauschenberg had known de Kooning for a year or more and had seen him on occasion, often through their mutual friend Jack Tworkov (1900–1982), who sublet studio space from de Kooning.²³ Even as other details of the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* story changed, Rauschenberg always insisted that he chose de Kooning out of deep respect for his work and because there was no question that a drawing of his would be considered art—and this was more true than ever in 1953.²⁴ Critic Leo Steinberg later reported asking Rauschenberg whether he would have erased a drawing by Rembrandt, to which he replied no. To Steinberg’s mind, Rauschenberg drew this distinction because erasing a Rembrandt would have bordered on criminal—an act of vandalism, an indefensible waste of an irreplaceable work by a long-dead master rather than the loss of a drawing by a living artist still producing works by the armload.²⁵ Steinberg astutely notes that Rauschenberg might have gravitated toward erasing a de Kooning because of the latter’s own heavy use of erasure to break, move, blur, and modulate lines and forms in his drawings.²⁶ Rauschenberg’s comments in the 1964 Tomkins interview about wanting to produce a drawing entirely through erasure resonate with this interpretation. Interestingly, Rauschenberg later acquired a de Kooning pencil drawing that is heavily worked by erasers (fig. 5). This drawing frequently hung in proximity to *Erased de Kooning Drawing* on Rauschenberg’s studio wall (fig. 6).



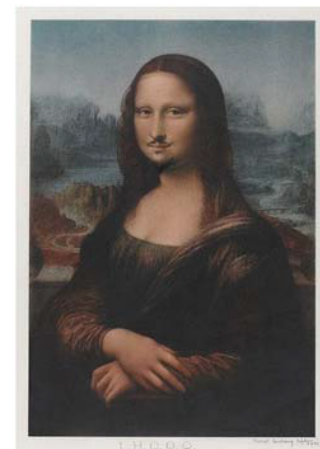
5. Willem de Kooning, *Untitled*, ca. 1947–49. Graphite on paper, 11 3/4 x 15 in. (29.8 x 38.1 cm). Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



6. Robert Rauschenberg with Gloria McDarrah at his Front Street studio, January 15, 1961. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) hangs in the top row at far left. Willem de Kooning's *Untitled* (ca. 1947–49) is in the same row, two works over. Photo: Fred W. McDarrah; © Fred W. McDarrah / Getty Images

10 Another possible explanation for Rauschenberg's choice of de Kooning could be that the latter's contemporaneity allowed Rauschenberg to explore the temporal implications of erasing the work of a celebrated artist in his moment of greatness. Rauschenberg frequently evoked measures of temporality in his work, especially during this period. The *White Paintings* (1951) change in appearance as the light in the room where they are displayed shifts throughout the day; the grass in *Growing Painting* (1953) took time to grow; and *Automobile Tire Print* (1953) records the slow roll of a tire and can only be fully viewed if one strolls its length.²⁷ Rauschenberg suggests temporality in *Erased de Kooning Drawing* on two levels: the actual span of time required for him to complete the erasure, and the notion of generational time reflected in his choice of a de Kooning drawing as the basis for the work. Although he was twenty-one years older, de Kooning was not quite a full artistic generation ahead of Rauschenberg, particularly when considered in terms of the recognition and success each had achieved. As Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan note in their biography of de Kooning, "Wasn't he, de Kooning, the emerging artist? . . . His moment having just arrived, he found a young artist at his door anxious to announce the death of the old man."²⁸ Indeed, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is frequently interpreted as an oedipal act, the young upstart killing off the master. But this generational distinction was not so clear in 1953, when a de Kooning drawing was something entirely of the moment. By choosing de Kooning drawing, Rauschenberg was declaring himself a contemporary of de Kooning as surely as he was invoking a generational distinction. Freshly drawn, freshly erased, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* compresses the time of making and unmaking and points out the messiness of intergenerational overlap in the evolution of art.

11 An inscrutable testimonial to Rauschenberg's request and his subsequent unthinkable deed, as well as to de Kooning's psychologically freighted decision to participate, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* has little in common with Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919/1930, fig. 7), a work to which it is often compared.²⁹ Duchamp began not with an original work of art but rather with a cheap reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503–6), drawing a mustache and goatee on his famous subject's face and adding the inscription that gives the work its title. Spoken one at a time, the letters "LHOOQ" sound like the French phrase "*Elle a chaud au cul*," which translates loosely as "She has a hot ass." With an act of subversive humor, Duchamp injected Leonardo's masterpiece with ribald, gender-bending layers of meaning, and dealt a blow to the sanctity of an iconic artwork. Late in his life, Duchamp himself compared *L.H.O.O.Q.* and *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, noting: "These are very close to one another. These two ideas have the same background. All these things have a background that is not visible." Asked if *L.H.O.O.Q.* was the more humorous of the two works, he replied, "Yes, but it's the same conceptual consideration of a thing, of an action."³⁰ Duchamp's "action" was largely rooted in the idea of altering the *Mona Lisa*. The execution is almost an afterthought. Duchamp made many editions of *L.H.O.O.Q.* over a period of decades—a 1930 version appears here—a practice indicative of his conviction that the "original" (both his own and Leonardo's) was unimportant, and that the work could be duplicated without changing or losing what mattered most: the artwork's conceptual core. By contrast, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* plays on the power of the original—through the representation of its loss—and draws strength from the act of transgression. An original de Kooning drawing cannot be replicated or replaced, and Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* could never be duplicated and editioned in the manner of *L.H.O.O.Q.*



7. Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, 1930. Graphite on photogravure, 25 1/4 x 19 1/2 in. (61.5 x 49.5 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo: Philippe Migeat; © Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

12 And what of de Kooning's stake in this transaction? As is frequently noted in the literature, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* implicitly pays homage to de Kooning while simultaneously expunging his artistic and physical presence. He knew the terms of the exchange and could not have been blind to the implications of letting a brash young artist erase his work. Stevens and Swan note that de Kooning became angry when *Erased de Kooning Drawing* began to be publicly shown, because he "believed the murder should have remained private, a personal affair between artists."³¹ The only other recorded comment by de Kooning on this subject appears in Tomkins's typewritten notes for his book *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time*:

"(question relayed by Fourcade 5/78) De Kooning says he gave Bob the drawing but doesn't remember if Bob told him what he wanted to do with it (!). Also said it was 'sort of a corny idea.'" ³² De Kooning's near silence on the matter—his responses were generally not available to a wide audience—effectively left the storytelling up to Rauschenberg.

- 13 One aspect of Rauschenberg's account changed substantially over the years. In most of his retellings, including the story recorded in Tomkins's *New Yorker* interview, he stated that de Kooning had deliberately selected a drawing that he would miss, presumably to increase the significance of the loss enacted by Rauschenberg's erasure. But when Tomkins interviewed Rauschenberg afresh in 1977 as he researched material for *Off the Wall*, Rauschenberg said the exact opposite: "He had several portfolios of his drawings, and he went to the first one and looked through it, and said, 'No, I'd miss one of these too much.'" ³³ This could have been a slip of the tongue or an offhand mistake, and he did not repeat the assertion in later versions of the story. But the reversal does raise the question of whether or not de Kooning chose to give Rauschenberg a significant drawing.

- 14 In 2010, SFMOMA's Elise S. Haas Conservation Studio worked with an imaging consultant to produce digitally enhanced infrared images that highlight traces of the original de Kooning drawing (fig. 8). It is primarily the heavier lines, likely made in charcoal and graphite, that are visible. Because the imaging technology was not able to capture shading subtleties, fainter lines, or the full range of drawing media, the digital reconstruction can at best only offer clues as to what Rauschenberg erased. De Kooning used the eraser heavily in his work, and it is possible that some of the lines visible in the reconstruction were originally removed as part of his own process, before he gave the finished drawing to Rauschenberg. We are left at risk of considering too many of the markings, or not enough. ³⁴



8. Digitally enhanced infrared scan of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) showing traces of the original drawing by Willem de Kooning. Visible light scan: Ben Blackwell, 2010; infrared scan and processing: Robin D. Myers, 2010

- 15 The digitally enhanced image shows a drawing worked from two orientations, 180 degrees in opposition. Seen in its proper orientation (within Rauschenberg's frame), four figures emerge: a female nude at the lower right; another nude upside down, top center; a third, smaller figure with arms raised, upside down and just off-center on the sheet; and an upright, abstracted Shmoo-like ³⁵ figure toward the right side of the composition. De Kooning sometimes rotated his paper and worked drawings from multiple orientations before settling on one, so some variation in direction and spatial relationships is not unusual. However, the relatively whole figures, the varying scales, and the scattering of forms across this page suggest that we are looking not at a single composition but rather at a page of working sketches—the beginnings of ideas and roughly recorded details, not fully executed thoughts or even finished studies. Moreover, there is no indication of de Kooning's signature. Ultimately, the exact nature of the drawing that was erased cannot be determined; however, it has little bearing here, because the effect of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* relies much more on the weight of de Kooning's reputation than it does on the specifics or relative significance of the original artwork he contributed. ³⁶
- 16 To speak of the work's impact we must also consider its reception by critics and other artists. Here, too, the details have often been lost in the shadows of the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* story. Recent research has revealed that the drawing was shown publicly much earlier than previously known, appearing for the first time at the aforementioned Poindexter Gallery exhibition in 1955, along with Johns's graphite and lighter-fluid drawing *Flag* (1955). ³⁷ The Poindexter show was held nine years before the Wadsworth Atheneum's celebrated exhibition *Black, White and Grey: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* of early 1964, which has been recorded for decades as the first entry in the work's [exhibition history](#). ³⁸ Having been lost to history for nearly sixty years, the Poindexter show was by no means a major event, and there is no record of anyone (other than Johns) seeing *Erased de Kooning Drawing* there. Most early viewers likely encountered the work in Rauschenberg's New York studio, where it hung on the wall, visible to anyone who stopped in on the gregarious artist. The story behind the work was certainly filtering through the city's art circles in the mid- to late 1950s, as Rauschenberg began telling people that he had erased a de Kooning drawing almost immediately. ³⁹ Passed on by word of mouth, the basic plot points of the story had become known among art insiders by 1957, the year Steinberg later reported hearing about the work and being so perplexed that he picked up the phone to call the artist for clarification. ⁴⁰ Recent accounts suggest that many of those who heard about the drawing soon after its completion did not consider it especially shocking. ⁴¹ To most, it was simply Bob being Bob. The perception of scandal surrounding what Rauschenberg had done developed after the fact: as *Erased de Kooning Drawing* began to be canonized, it retroactively became more of a collective shock.
- 17 Prior to 1964 *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was nearly invisible within the Rauschenberg literature, with its first mention emerging in a 1960 article by Japanese artist and critic Yoshiaki Tono. ⁴² Offering his observations about American art as a relative outsider, Tono notes, without comment, that Rauschenberg had recently created a work by rubbing out a drawing by de Kooning. Though the reference is brief, Tono singles out the drawing as an example of the most interesting work going on in the United States, suggesting that it is emblematic of a group of artists working with the concept of "crossing-off" without implying negation or resistance. ⁴³ A year later, Cage penned an article on Rauschenberg that also fleetingly (and obliquely) mentions the drawing, framing it as a moment of slate-cleaning: "It's a joy in fact to begin over again. In preparation he erases a De Kooning." ⁴⁴ Cage's reference, while barely more extensive than Tono's, has established an enduring framework for understanding *Erased de Kooning Drawing* not only as a turning point for Rauschenberg but also as a necessary decalcification of art itself that made possible everything that came after.

- 18 *Erased de Kooning Drawing* essentially remained an underground, art world phenomenon for more than ten years after it was completed.⁴⁵ Significantly, it was excluded from numerous important solo and group exhibitions in the late 1950s and early 1960s, crucial years when Rauschenberg's reputation was becoming established internationally.⁴⁶ The tide turned with the opening of *Black, White and Grey* in January 1964,⁴⁷ and momentum built with the work's breakout appearance in Tomkins's appealing February 1964 *New Yorker* profile on the artist. The extent to which Tomkins's airing of the work and its story has influenced contemporary understandings of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* cannot be overstated. He set the stage by noting the artist's outsider status within the "main current of Abstract Expressionist painting" and underscored the seriousness of the endeavor; he then handed the narrative over to Rauschenberg by quoting his first-person account at length. In September of that year, the drawing was used as the opener for a *Time* magazine feature.⁴⁸ It was through such publications—and the persistence of the artist's creation story—that *Erased de Kooning Drawing* cemented its place in the Rauschenberg canon. Although the work did not garner much attention in reviews of *Black, White and Grey*,⁴⁹ it was subsequently included in two nationally circulating exhibitions and traveled to fourteen cities between late 1964 and early 1968.⁵⁰
- 19 The number of published references and the frequency of the work's inclusion in exhibitions increased dramatically in the following decades. Between 1966 and 1990, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* appeared at more than thirty-three venues in six countries. The back of its frame is now cluttered with [exhibition labels](#) (see fig. 3), a testament to the worldwide demand to see this work of art. The drawing was mentioned in more than fifty-three [publications](#) between 1964 and 1976, the year it debuted in Walter Hopps's major Rauschenberg retrospective. By that time, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* had achieved its current standing as a defining work in the development of conceptual art. This position had its beginnings in Allan Kaprow's 1966 article "Experimental Art," which posited *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as the ultimate example of Kaprow's ideal—a kind of art that identifies conventional boundaries and then finds creative ways to subvert them.⁵¹ In 1968, Harold Rosenberg referred to *Erased de Kooning Drawing* as "the most significant creative gesture of the last two decades,"⁵² and Lucy Lippard and John Chandler's seminal article "The Dematerialization of Art" listed it as a prime example of ultra-Conceptualism.⁵³ Indeed, by the time of the Hopps show in 1976, the drawing had come to be seen as a preeminent piece in both Rauschenberg's body of work and the history of twentieth-century art at large. Rosenberg acknowledged its place as "the cornerstone of a new academy, dedicated to replacing the arbitrary self of the artist with predefined processes and objectives—that is to say, Minimalism and Conceptualism."⁵⁴ It was cited in nearly every review of the 1976 Hopps retrospective and has since accumulated a vast history of exhibitions and publications.
- 20 As this essay has shown, there is more than one story behind *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, and trying to place it within a single narrative risks obscuring the complexity of its history and potential. It is too simplistic to characterize the gesture of erasing de Kooning's work as an act of oedipal insurrection, or an attempt to erase the past to create a new present. Rauschenberg as an artist and as a person was never so unilaterally inclined. It also is an oversimplification to place the work in a straight lineage from Duchamp to Conceptualism. The act *Erased de Kooning Drawing* embodies was far more complex, and the artwork is far more subtle and far-reaching. Yes, the erasure was an act of destruction, but as a creative gesture it was also an act of reverence or even devotion—to de Kooning, to drawing, to art history, and to the idea of taking a risk and being open to whatever comes as a result. For now, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* has settled into place as a progenitor of Conceptual art, but its curious beginnings and blank-slate nature ensure that it remains open to future reinterpretations.

Notes

1. Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s* (Houston: Menil Foundation and Houston Fine Art Press, 1991), 160.
2. As will be discussed in detail in the essay, Calvin Tomkins's 1964 profile of the artist is the seminal account of this story. See Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Moving Out," *New Yorker*, February 29, 1964, 66, 71. Other significant published accounts by Rauschenberg appear in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 210–11; *Painters Painting: A Candid History of the New York Art Scene, 1940–1970*, directed by Emile de Antonio (New York: Turin Film, 1972), begins at minute 52:00; Maxime de la Falaise McKendry, "Robert Rauschenberg Talks to Maxime de la Falaise McKendry," *Andy Warhol's Interview* 6, no. 5 (May 1976): 34–36; Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 96–97 (this version is very similar to those offered in the *New Yorker* profile and *The Bride and the Bachelors*); *Robert Rauschenberg: Man at Work*, directed by Chris Granlund (London: BBC and RM ARTS, 1997), excerpted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpCWh3lftDQ> (accessed January 2, 2013), begins at minute 00:48; and Robert Rauschenberg, video interview by David A. Ross, Walter Hopps, Gary Garrels, and Peter Samis, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 6, 1999. *Unpublished transcript* at the SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, N 6537 .R27 A35 1999a, 20–24.
3. David A. Ross, then director of SFMOMA, related Johns's recollections about the inscription during the 1999 SFMOMA interview with Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg, interview by Ross, Hopps, et al., May 6, 1999, 22. Johns also confirmed this in a conversation with SFMOMA curator Gary Garrels, August 2010, Sharon, CT.
4. Jasper Johns, letter to the author, January 10, 2011. Johns states that the exhibition was a group drawings show held from December 19, 1955, to January 4, 1956. See Kirk Varnedoe, *Jasper Johns: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 125, 140. Elinor Poindexter took over the Charles Egan Gallery in mid-1955, and definitely by October of that year. The Archives of American Art holds an announcement for the Poindexter Gallery's first exhibition, which opened in October 1955, but no documentation of the group exhibition that included Johns's *Flag* and *Erased de Kooning Drawing* has been located to date. Poindexter Gallery records, 1956–1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
5. Johns recalls coming up with the title in conversation with Rauschenberg and using a framer located on Fulton Street. He had recently used the same shop to frame a small Rauschenberg Combine. Johns, conversation with Garrels, August 2010.
6. Charles Yoder, former studio assistant to Rauschenberg, confirmed that he wrote the note at Rauschenberg's request to ensure that the drawing would not be removed from the frame. Yoder believes the note was likely added before the drawing was shipped for the 1976 retrospective. Charles Yoder, telephone conversation with the author, December 13, 2012.
7. Perhaps because there was so little to see, the erased drawing was much discussed but not reproduced until 1968 in *Artworks and Packages*, which shows neither inscription nor frame. See Harold Rosenberg, *Artworks and Packages* (New York: Horizon Press, 1968), 25. *Pop Art Redefined* shows the inscription but not the frame, as does the 1974 *Poets of the Cities* catalogue. See John Russell and Suzi Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 11; and Neil A. Chassman, Robert M. Murock, Lana Davis, et al., *Poets of the Cities: New York and San Francisco 1950–1965* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1974), 76. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, omits both inscription and frame from its

- Drawing Now* catalogue. See Bernice Rose, *Drawing Now* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 8. Likely as a result of his close conversations with the artist, Walter Hopps reproduced the drawing, frame, and inscription in the catalogue for the 1976 retrospective. Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg* (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1976), 75.
8. For instance, the following post-1976 publications reproduced *Erased de Kooning Drawing* without the inscription and/or frame: Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, *Art About Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978), 147; Dieter Ruckhaberle, ed., *Rauschenberg: Werke 1950–1980*, trans. Janni Müller-Hauck and Vincent Thomas (Berlin: Staatliche Kunstthale Berlin, 1980), 263; and Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 269.
 9. Rauschenberg, interview by Ross, Hopps, et al., May 6, 1999, 21.
 10. Rauschenberg was enrolled in the summer session, but did not study under Cage or Cunningham, who were teaching there.
 11. Many of these presentations took place at the Club, the legendary downtown space where artists associated with the New York School gathered for discussion and debate beginning in 1948. Cage lectured, moderated panels, and brought in speakers to discuss Zen topics several times a year from 1950 until 1955, the year the Club ceased operation. See Natalie Edgar, ed., *Club Without Walls: Selections from the Journals of Philip Pavia* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2007): 158–78. See also Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012). Larson discusses Cage's involvement with the Club throughout the book.
 12. The exhibition, titled *Rauschenberg: Paintings and Sculpture*; Cy Twombly: *Paintings and Drawings*, ran from September 15 to October 3, 1953.
 13. Cage's poem was posted on the gallery wall midway through the Stable Gallery exhibition (see note 12 above), and it was published with Emily Genauer's review after the exhibition closed. See Emily Genauer, "Art and Artists: Musings on Miscellany," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1953.
 14. See de la Falaise McKendry, "Robert Rauschenberg Talks to Maxime de la Falaise McKendry," 36. A brief reference also appears in Barbara Rose, *An Interview with Robert Rauschenberg* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 51. By 1997, Rauschenberg was more explicit: "I was trying to figure out a way to bring drawing into the all-whites." See Granlund's 1997 film *Robert Rauschenberg: Man at Work*. See also Rauschenberg, interview by Ross, Hopps, et al., May 6, 1999, 20. Rauschenberg did not mention the *White Paintings* in earlier accounts. See Tomkins, "Profiles: Moving Out," 66; and Calvin Tomkins Papers, IV.C.10. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York (hereafter MoMA Archives, NY). The *White Paintings* also are never mentioned by Rauschenberg in de Antonio's 1972 film *Painters Painting*.
 15. Tomkins, "Profiles: Moving Out," 66.
 16. Rauschenberg conceived of the *White Paintings* as absolutely pristine surfaces. Recognizing that they could be easily scuffed and become yellow with age, he decided that they could be repainted whenever necessary to maintain their purity. Cy Twombly, Brice Marden (b. 1938), and Darryl Pottorf (b. 1952), among others, have all repainted *White Paintings*. Rauschenberg, interview by Ross, Hopps, et al., May 6, 1999, 16–17.
 17. See especially Hubert Crehan, "The See Change: Raw Duck," *Art Digest* 27, no. 20 (September 1953): 25. Lawrence Campbell and Dore Ashton also recognized the *White Paintings* challenge to precepts of painting. See Lawrence Campbell, "Reviews and Previews: Rauschenberg and Twombly," *ARTnews* 52, no. 5 (September 1953): 50; and Dore Ashton, "Fifty-Seventh Street: Robert Rauschenberg," *Art Digest* 27, no. 20 (September 1953): 21, 25.
 18. In 1950 and 1951, the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, showed replicas of *Fountain* and *Bicycle Wheel* in group exhibitions that marked the first public appearance of these works in the United States. *Fountain* appeared in *Challenge and Defy*, September 25–October 21, 1950; *Bicycle Wheel* was in *1913: Climax in 20th Century Art*, January 2–February 3, 1951. Rauschenberg saw the latter show. Of course, Duchamp also figured prominently in Robert Motherwell's (1915–1991) groundbreaking anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets*, published in 1951. Motherwell taught Rauschenberg in a painting tutorial at Black Mountain College in summer 1951. Given his connection to Motherwell and others in the New York art world it seems likely that Rauschenberg was fully cognizant of Duchamp's ideas and their import by late 1951. He furthered his knowledge of Duchamp and Dada in spring 1953 when he attended an influential Dada exhibition organized by Duchamp: *Dada 1916–1923*, Sidney Janis Gallery, April 15–May 9, 1953.
 19. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ARTnews* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22–23, 48–50. The January 16, 1953, meeting at the Club centered on Rosenberg's article. Edgar, *Club Without Walls*, 172. Rauschenberg frequented the Club when he returned to New York from Italy in April 1953. He would have missed this January meeting, but Rosenberg's ideas had legs well into 1953 and beyond.
 20. Rosenberg's existentialist take on American postwar art established a framework for criticism and interpretation that still surrounds many of the painters he championed, including de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Franz Kline (1910–1962). It is worth noting that Rosenberg's language in this article resonates with many of Rauschenberg's most celebrated statements about his work, though Rauschenberg was always at a slight intellectual remove from Rosenberg's intended meaning. For instance, Rosenberg writes: "The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life." Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 23. Rauschenberg has been quoted as stating: "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" See Dorothy C. Miller, ed., *Sixteen Americans* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 58. In another example, Rosenberg asserts: "It's not a picture of a thing, it's the thing itself." Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 48. Rauschenberg quipped: "I don't want a picture to look like something it isn't . . . I want it to look like something it is. And I think a picture is more like the real world when it's made out of the real world." Tomkins, "Profiles: Moving Out," 40.
 21. Although Rosenberg specifically declared that the use of drawings as studies for paintings was obsolete, he did allow for the possibility that a drawing could begin an act that continued into painting. In this instance, Rauschenberg's act was fully contained and executed within the drawing itself, going beyond Rosenberg's conception. Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," 22–23.
 22. *Willem de Kooning: Paintings on the Theme of the Woman*, Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, March 16–April 11, 1953. See John Elderfield, *de Kooning: A Retrospective* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 243–44. It is unknown if Rauschenberg saw this show, and the exact date of his return to New York in April 1953 is unclear. If he missed the show itself, he undoubtedly would have heard of de Kooning's triumph from friends.
 23. The exact date of Rauschenberg and de Kooning's meeting is unknown. They both participated in *Today's Self-Styled School of New York*, also known as the *Ninth Street Show*, May 21–June 10, 1951, and both attended events at the Club between 1951 and 1953. Rauschenberg was close to Tworikov by mid-1950, and Tworikov sublet studio space from de Kooning from 1948 to 1953. Rauschenberg photographed de Kooning's studio in early spring 1952. See Elderfield, *de Kooning: A Retrospective*, 190, 256.
 24. Jackson Pollock also could have served Rauschenberg's need for an artist who would undeniably be considered great, but by late 1953 Pollock was in ill health, mired in alcoholism, and far less accessible since he spent most of his time on Long Island.
 25. Leo Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg* (Houston: Menil Foundation, 2000), 18.
 26. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
 27. See Brandon W. Joseph's consideration of Rauschenberg's concerns with temporality in chapter 1 of Brandon W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
 28. Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 359.
 29. *L.H.O.O.Q.* appeared in the Janis exhibition in April 1953, so Rauschenberg would have been familiar with it. For further discussion of parallels between *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and *L.H.O.O.Q.*, see Russell and Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined*, 11; and Lipman and Marshall, *Art About Art*, 147. Brandon W. Joseph notes that Rauschenberg started with an original, versus Duchamp starting with a reproduction, but does not elaborate on the ramifications of this difference. Joseph, *Random Order*, 91.
 30. Marcel Duchamp, "Some Late Thoughts of Marcel Duchamp," in Jeanne Siegel, *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 18.
 31. Stevens and Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master*, 360.
 32. "Fourcade" is Xavier Fourcade, de Kooning's primary dealer from 1976 to 1987. The "I" of emphasis is Tomkins's, directed at the possibility that Rauschenberg had not told de Kooning of his intent to erase the drawing; a shocking prospect indeed, but one that seems highly unlikely. Tomkins, IV.C.10. MoMA Archives, NY.
 33. Tomkins, *Off the Wall*, 96. The published quote is also captured verbatim in Tomkins's interview notes dated October 27, 1977. Tomkins, II.B.4. MoMA Archives, NY.
 34. I am indebted to Amy Schichtel, executive director of the Willem de Kooning Foundation, for sharing her thoughts on the information revealed in this digitally enhanced image.
 35. Schichtel noted the resemblance of this figure to the Shmoo-like female forms in de Kooning's paintings *Carole Lombard* (1947) and *Study for "Stenographer"* (1948).
 36. In 1999, Rauschenberg joked that when de Kooning stated he was going to choose something he would really miss, he responded, "It doesn't have to be something you'll miss!" Though he made the remark decades after the fact, the choice of words implicitly acknowledges the relative lack of importance that the original drawing would have once it was erased.
 37. Johns confirmed the inclusion of both *Erased de Kooning Drawing* and his *Flag* drawing in the Poindexter exhibition in a letter to the author, January 10, 2011.

38. As mentioned above in note 4, there is no documentation of this particular exhibition in the records of the Elinor Poindexter Gallery at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The show was one of the first Poindexter mounted after taking over the space (and essentially taking over operations of the Charles Egan Gallery). However, Johns's recollections of events in this timeframe carry great weight with most scholars, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation has accepted this presentation as part of the exhibition history for *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.
39. Tomkins's notes cite Eleanor Ward (owner of the Stable Gallery) relating a story of Rauschenberg coming into the gallery after hours one evening and nervously announcing, "I've just destroyed a de Kooning drawing." Though possibly apocryphal, Ward's story suggests he began telling colleagues about the erasure immediately. Tomkins, IV.C.10. MoMA Archives, NY.
40. Considering that Steinberg did not hear of it until 1957, the story does not seem to have circulated especially vigorously in the mid-1950s. Calvin Tomkins does not recall hearing of the work before he began interviewing Rauschenberg in 1963 for the February 1964 *New Yorker* profile. Tomkins, telephone conversation with the author, June 9, 2012. Neither Leo Castelli nor Ileana Sonnabend discussed the work with Tomkins when he interviewed them about Rauschenberg in 1963. Tomkins, IV.C.10. MoMA Archives, NY.
41. Johns has stated that *Erased de Kooning Drawing* did not seem astonishing at the time (he met Rauschenberg at the end of 1953); it was simply something Rauschenberg had done, an example of his contrariness. Johns, conversation with Garrels, August 2010. Tomkins's notes from a 1978 conversation with Harold Rosenberg include this reference: "The *Erased de Kooning* was 'a bright idea.' Nobody was offended. De Kooning cooperated fully." Tomkins, IV.C.17. MoMA Archives, NY. Susan Weil noted t hat it was a challenge for people at the time, but that there was no big buzz about it. Susan Weil, conversation with the author, February 21, 2012, New York.
42. Yoshiaki Tono, "From a Gulliver's Point of View," *Art in America* 48, no. 2 (Summer 1960): 54–59.
43. Ibid., 58.
44. John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work," *Metro* 2 (May 1961): 41.
45. In another example of delayed critical response, Max Kozloff's article for the 1964 *Arts Yearbook* misdates *Erased de Kooning Drawing* to 1959. This simple mistake, easy enough for an author to make and an editor to miss, does suggest that the drawing felt more recent than 1953 to Kozloff, or that it had come into his critical thinking closer to the end of the decade. Max Kozloff, "The Impact of de Kooning," *Arts Yearbook: New York, the Art World* 7 (1964): 76–88.
46. The [Leo Castelli Gallery's early registry](#) indicates that the work was received on March 19, 1958, and was returned to the artist on October 27, 1958. But while the gallery showed Rauschenberg's work numerous times between 1958 and 1964, *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was never presented. Castelli likely held the work in inventory in case of a potential sale (it was listed at \$500). Leo Castelli Gallery records, ca. 1880–2000, bulk 1957–1999. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Ileana Sonnabend did not show the work in her Paris gallery, and it was not presented in the Moderna Museet's 1962 *4 Amerikanare* show. Alan Solomon did not include it in his Rauschenberg retrospective at The Jewish Museum in 1963, or mention it in the catalogue. It was also absent from the 1964 exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery, London, and from Rauschenberg's prizewinning showing at the Venice Biennale of that year. The drawing was also excluded from significant exhibitions organized by the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1968; Kunstverein Hanover, in 1970; and the Museo d'Arte Moderna Ca'Pesaro, Venice, in 1975, all of which traveled to two or more additional venues. These early exhibitions focused exclusively on Rauschenberg's Combines and subsequent series, and rarely reached back before 1954. Walter Hopps's 1976 retrospective was the first major exhibition to include *Erased de Kooning Drawing*.
47. Organized by Samuel Wagstaff (then curator for the Wadsworth Atheneum), the exhibition identified a cool, impersonal approach as the unifying characteristic of post-abstract expressionist painting and sculpture. Wagstaff wrote an article about the impetus behind the show but did not mention *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., "Paintings to Think About," *ARTnews* 62, no. 9 (January 1964): 38, 62.
48. "Most Happy Fella," *Time*, September 18, 1964, 84.
49. The *Hartford Times* noted: "Perhaps the most unusual work is one called 'Erased Drawing' in which two leading artists, Willem de Kooning and Robert Rauschenberg, are involved. Mr. Rauschenberg erases a deKooning [sic] drawing, leaving enough of the design so that it can be seen in a strong light." Florence Berkman, "[Pop Art on Exhibition Free, Far Out.](#)" *Hartford Times*, January 11, 1964. Significantly, reviewer Barbara Rose did not mention the drawing. Barbara Rose, "New York Letter," *Art International* 8, no. 1 (February 15, 1964): 40–41.
50. *American Drawings*, organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, circulated to eight cities in the United States from September 1964 to December 1965. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* then quickly went on tour again, this time with *Art in the Mirror*, organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where it opened in November 1966. This exhibition traveled to another six cities through March 1968. These two exhibitions conflicted with the major European exhibitions of 1964 to 1968 mentioned in note 48 above, which may be the reason that *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was not included. However, it seems likely that if an important venue had requested the drawing for a significant solo exhibition, Rauschenberg would have withdrawn it from these smaller traveling shows for that purpose.
51. Allan Kaprow, "Experimental Art," *ARTnews*, 65, no. 1 (March 1966): 63.
52. Rosenberg, *Artworks and Packages*, 24. It should be noted that Rosenberg's acknowledgment of the exalted status of *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was not an endorsement; he saw the work as emblematic of the strategies of an avant-garde that was over-invested in the subversion and renunciation of art history.
53. Lucy R. Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art International* 12, no. 2 (February 20, 1968): 23.
54. Rosenberg, "The Art World: American Drawing and the Academy of the *Erased de Kooning*," *New Yorker*, March 22, 1976, 107–8. As noted above, Rosenberg recognized the *Erased de Kooning Drawing*'s status among working artist as a progenitor of process art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism, but he explicitly rejected what he saw as the self-referential, overly philosophical nature of this line of artistic practice.

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