

Myndlistardeild

Dead Wall of Paint

*Honoré de Balzac's Unknown Masterpiece in Relation to
My Own Work*

Lokaritgerð til BA-gráðu í myndlist

Melanie Ubaldo

Vorönn 2016

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Abstract

This essay explores the communicative relationship between Honoré de Balzac's short story, *The Unknown Masterpiece* and how it is analogous to the author's own artistic practice, mainly, in relation to erasure and abstraction while also discussing themes of deconstruction and textual use within her oeuvre. The focal point of discussion is her solo exhibition "*litla sæta asíska stelpan*" and how the above narratives of erasure, deconstruction and textual use are rendered through the said exhibition. Erasure is discussed synonymously with the works of Cy Twombly, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Robert Rauschenberg and how the act of cancelling and negations ultimately leads to abstraction within her work. Conflict between style and content is discussed in relation with the deconstructionist thread characteristic in her work. Finally, the mutuality of art and life is explored through the revelation and use of autobiographical appropriated text addressed to the artist herself in their crass, unapologetic, idiosyncratic rudeness.

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Introduction

The Unknown Masterpiece (*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*) is the title of Honoré de Balzac's enigmatic 1831 Pygmalion tale on artistic frustration, which tells of how Frenhofer, the book's obsessive painter hero, in a futile search for vague and elusive perfection, has succeeded only in obscuring his idea and erasing from the canvas any human form, annihilating it into a chaos of colors, tones, hesitating nuances; a kind of nebulous fog. All meaning has been erased; all content has vanished except the tip of a foot that stands out from the rest of the canvas "like the Parian marble torso of some Venus emerging from the ashes of a ruined town".¹ As the young Nicolas Poussin of the story notes, "I can see nothing there but confused masses of color and a multitude of fantastical lines that go to make a dead wall of paint."²

Erasure, defacement and destruction are central to the daunting image of the supposed masterpiece by Frenhofer. On the canvas of Frenhofer's unknown masterpiece, one would imagine a kind of shapeless fog, amid a confusion of brushstrokes and colors, along with a jumble of indecipherable lines and marks devoid of meaning. In the spirit of Balzac's painter hero, Frenhofer's supposed masterpiece, I had created my own envisioned "unknown masterpieces." These are paintings from my solo exhibition, "*litla sæta asíska stelpán*" shown in Kubburinn in December 2015. This essay will therefore examine the communicative relationship between Balzac's tale and my own artistic practice mainly in relation to erasure while also discussing themes of deconstruction and textual use within the works from the said exhibition.

¹Honore de Balzac. *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Project Gutenberg (webpage). last modified April 3, 2013. accessed Dec. 6, 2015. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23060/23060-h/23060-h.htm>

² Ibid.

Chapter One: Erasure

Balzac's story begins in 1612, when a young man, who is none other than Nicolas Poussin, as yet unknown, visits Francois Porbus in his studio. There he meets another visitor, a strange old man named Frenhofer, who, we later learn, was the last pupil of the Renaissance painter Jan Mabuse. Frenhofer comments menacingly upon Porbus' newly finished painting of Mary of Egypt: "life and death are at strife in every detail; here you see a woman, there a statue, there again a corpse. Your creation is incomplete."³ Frenhofer's verdict is merciless: "What is lacking? A nothing, but that nothing is everything."⁴ These words we later learn foreshadows Frenhofer's inherent doom and failure.

Frenhofer, whom the Renaissance ideals still lives on has been toiling on an unfinished painting for ten years however he "fails" to realize his masterpiece because he was obsessed with an unattainable idea of perfection, one that can rival that of nature. Art is allegorized as the "undiscoverable Venus of the older time,"⁵ the perfection he vainly searches for. In an oracular reverie he declares that like Orpheus he will even search for her in the depths of hell for "to behold once and for one moment, nature grown perfect and divine, the ideal at last, I would give all that I possess."⁶ Ironically this idea of perfection is irretrievably lost for instead of the painting being the woman, as Frenhofer believed, he had obliterated, or more precisely buried her under the abstract surface of art.

All the paintings I've been doing for the last three years culminated into my solo exhibition "*litla sæta asíska stelpan*". Shown in Kubburinn, the exhibition was thought out early on, on my part as a mini retrospective of sorts. The exhibition consists of three large paintings; *GRJÓN*⁷, *STELPURNAR KALLA ÞIG LITLU SÆTU ASÍSKU STELPUNA EN ÉG SAGÐI ÞEIM AÐ HÆTTA ÞESSU ÞVÍ HÚN HEITIR ALVEG EITTHVAÐ*⁸ and *ICELAND? ARE YOU SURE BUT YOU SERIOUSLY LOOK ORIENTAL. I'M GUESSING THAI*.⁹ To be read as a triptych, arranged chronologically, the exhibition encompassed all the paintings and canvases I've done

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See Appendix A

⁸ See Appendix B

⁹ See Appendix C

during the last three years in the school while the text on the paintings come from various stages in my life. The works are a puzzle of stitched together collection of canvases and pieces from previous paintings, reworked and repainted anew. A basic kind of mark making, I erase as a means to make a mark and accordingly my work represent variations on the theme of erasure. The act of erasing is confrontation against the spoiled surface. A nonchalant erasure characterizes the paintings. The childlike scribbles and doodles often erase as much as they structure. The quality of line in the works is quite unruly, even when it amounts to repetitive looping. It recalls the memory of the surrealist automatic writing with its importance on an unselfconscious creative process, while the dispersing of marks and smudges across the surface of the canvas are reminiscent of abstract expressionism; Pollock's all over approach and Rothko's monochromatic pallet in their expansive and monumental scale.

Essentially my paintings are monochromatic with a limited palette of black, white and gray with pinches of colors dispersed all-over the canvas. The surface of the canvas feature multiple strata of paint and overlaid tangles of lines. The multiple quick strokes of black, whites, salmon pink emphasize movement and color orchestration as shown in *STELPURNAR KALLA ÞIG LITLU SÆTU ASÍSKU STELPUNA EN ÉG SAGÐI ÞEIM AÐ HÆTTA ÞESSU ÞVÍ HÚN HEITIR ALVEG EITTHVAÐ*¹⁰ and *ICELAND? ARE YOU SURE BUT YOU SERIOUSLY LOOK ORIENTAL. I'M GUESSING THAI.*¹¹ The black seems to function as a primeval sea from which the text originates. The multi layering of paint and lines, the smudges, smears, blotches, blurs, negations, cancelling, traces and remains on the spoiled surface creates an ambiguity that becomes a suggestion to what may be buried underneath, concealing more than it reveals.

Such painterly mode of expression is evident in the works of Cy Twombly and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Inspired by graffiti, with the latter starting as a street artist, both artists approached the canvas with graffiti like vandalism in an infantile and primitive way by using basic kinds of mark making such as scratches, smudges, doodles and tags, "recording the mark itself as a form of graffiti, which to say, the anonymous trace of a kind of criminal violation of the unspoiled surface, like so many

¹⁰ See Appendix B

¹¹ See Appendix C

declarations of the fact that “Kilroy was here”.¹² Both men erase to make a mark. Twombly utilized an elegant dirtying of the canvas while Basquiat exploited the illicitness and archaism of the medium into a raw kind of self-expression.

Basquiat’s oeuvre brought together various practices and style to create a unique kind of visual language where expression is partnered with the cacophony of the urban experience deriving in part from his graffiti origins. Basquiat’s childlike scribbles and doodles often erase and deface as much as they structure as can be seen in *Charles the First*¹³. He had a proclivity for cancelling out words and phrases saying: “I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them.”¹⁴ Basquiat’s art, often described as gritty held important connections to expressive predecessors, such as Jean Dubuffet, Willem de Kooning and Cy Twombly. Art critics often liked to describe Basquiat by mentioning his precursors and comparing them with the much younger artist. Writing about his first large group exhibition, a critic singled out his contribution as a “knock-out combination of de Kooning and the gruff poignancy of subway paint scribbles,”¹⁵ while the art critic René Ricard in his much celebrated article “The Radiant Child” published in the December 1981 issue of *Artforum* placed Basquiat’s work in a larger tradition of art history:

If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel. The elegance of Twombly is there...and so is the brut of the young Dubuffet. Except the politics of Dubuffet needed a lecture to show, needed a separate text, where as in Jean-Michel they are integrated by the picture’s necessity.¹⁶

Basquiat cited Twombly as an influence in a 1983 interview.¹⁷ Twombly crosses as a way of “making the surface work, his rubbing is a process of adding as well as subtracting: a build up of cancellation when the connection has broken,

¹² Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. “1953: Return of the Index.” *Art Since 1900*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011). p. 371-2.

¹³ See Appendix D

¹⁴ Rudy Chiappini. ed. *Basquiat* (Italy: Skira, 2005). p. 87.

¹⁵ Leonhard Emmerling. *Basquiat* (Germany: Taschen, 2003). p. 16.

¹⁶ René Ricard. “The Radiant Child”, *Artforum* (webpage). accessed Dec. 6, 2015.

<http://artforum.com/inprintarchive/id=35643>

¹⁷ Emmerling. *Basquiat*, p. 29.

marking to say then not to say: retraction that leaves a trace,”¹⁸ as seen in *Untitled (Bolsena)*.¹⁹ His elegant dirtying of the canvas with graffiti like scratches, scribbles and frenetic lines that envelop his works from the mid 1950s referred to and subverted the then dominant calligraphic painterly mode of Abstract Expressionism. The dense surface of the works feature multiple strata of paint and tangles of letters and words, half surfacing and partly concealed. The titles of such works were chosen at random from a list drawn in collaboration with Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, and were ascribed arbitrarily after they had been painted, mirroring Surrealist practices that emphasize on chance and spontaneity.

Twombly’s “writing” Pierre Restany stated in 1961, playing on the link between graphic, pictorial style and ordinary handwriting, “has neither syntax nor logic, but quivers with life,”²⁰ as seen in the graffiti-like scratches and scribbles in *Criticism*²¹ and *Olympia*²² where the surface of the canvas feature multiple strata of paint and overlaid tangles and lines, letters and words. Roland Barthes argued that Twombly’s gesture was “gauche” or “left handed”, substituted his dominant right hand in favor of an unskilled and deficient left hand. As Barthes noted:

Anything that vacillates in its movements or that can’t keep a straight line or that is clumsy or embarrassed is generally called gauche; and even though the word gauche is moral notion, a concept of judgment, the French language has turned it into a physical and purely denominational term that has defenestrated the archaic word sinister and that now simply means left.²³

The importance of the hand Twombly noticed during his trips to North Africa with Rauschenberg, where he was exposed on the division of the use of the left hand against the right hand, with the right hand used for eating and shaking hands while the left hand is reserved for unsavory functions such as wiping extremities. This division between the right and the left, cleanliness and dirtiness proved pivotal in the artist’s work where the right hand holds the paintbrush and guides the pencil, while the left

¹⁸ Nicholas Cullinan, Tacita Dean, Nicholas Serota and Richard Shiff. *Cy Twombly – Cycles and Seasons* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008). p. 35.

¹⁹ See Appendix E

²⁰ Cullinan, Dean, Serota and Shiff. *Cy Twombly – Cycles and Seasons*. p. 19.

²¹ See Appendix F

²² See Appendix G

²³ Cullinan, Dean, Serota and Shiff. *Cy Twombly – Cycles and Seasons*. p. 99.

hand dirties, smears and erases with childlike spontaneity. The *Ferragosto*²⁴ paintings each one gradually more bruised than the last are essentially and occasionally in execution, distinctly left-handed.²⁵

Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece* returned in a new variant in Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing*²⁶ from 1953. In a gesture that has since acquired legendary status in the history of art, Rauschenberg deployed a sophisticated understanding of Duchampian strategies in the creation of his *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. In a manner similar to Duchamp's use of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in the ready-made *L.H.O.O.Q.*²⁷ Rauschenberg began by appropriating an existing work of art although an original in this case rather than a reproduction. He then proceeded to reverse Duchamp's addition of a mustache and goatee to Leonardo's masterpiece by erasing the de Kooning almost entirely. He then framed the erased sheet of paper together with the addition of a new authorial credit, title and date. The drawing's creation and destruction is at once a collaboration between both artist and its deconstruction is a certain kind of traitorous collaborative labor.²⁸ Some critics have since interpreted the gesture as a blatant Freudian symbolic patricide, Rauschenberg has consistently denied any motivation of critique for his provocative action. For him it was poetry, as he stated:

They think it was a gesture, a protest against Abstract Expressionism, because it's a very complicated story, and I don't think most people would think this way. So it is hard for them to think of that or as a pure act of destruction. Vandalism is the other alternative.²⁹

As the scene of a performative undoing, the *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, an erased drawing, such as the one presented by Rauschenberg presents absence, and absence is an abandoned existence. However, the *Erased de Kooning Drawing* is not erased and entirely empty. There are still traces with varying clarity in the surface of the sheet of paper marking a memory of a now-absent presence, a ghostly trace.

²⁴ See Appendix H

²⁵ Cullinan, Dean, Serota and Shiff. *Cy Twombly – Cycles and Seasons*. p. 99.

²⁶ See Appendix I

²⁷ See Appendix J

²⁸ John Paul Ricco. *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). p. 37.

²⁹ svsgycarter. "Robert Rauschenberg- Erased De Kooning." Video. 4:26. Accessed Oct 9, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpCWh3IFtDQ>

Frenhofer's own words soon rings true when he says upon revealing his masterpiece: "Where is art? Art has vanished, it is invisible!"³⁰

Chapter Two: Deconstruction

A deconstructionist vein can then be traced in my artistic process that rings true in an older work; *SÉRDU TEXTÍLVERK Í ÞESSU?*.³¹ My paintings are characteristically deconstructed, reworked, recycled, hand sewn and re-sewn into a new painting. This impoverish aesthetic alludes to the memories that triggered the creation of the paintings to begin with and to the tradition of Japanese Boro textiles. I feel like all my early experience with art in the Philippines, where I was born were quiet formative and influence the kind of art that I enjoy making until this day. These first "artworks" (precisely two pieces) were; this tattered lion imaged, brown tapestry nailed on the wall of the second floor landing of my maternal grandparents' old house, and secondly, the round rags³² that my mom sew during my childhood, just one of her countless money making schemes to make ends meet. From rags to paintings.

The paintings are essentially big and enormous canvases, never a compact, straight edged, four-cornered rectangular canvas as they normally come, primed, and ready, but a stitched together collection of canvases and pieces. The literal dismantling of canvas materials and previous painting to give birth to a new one is a construction technique I usually exploit in order to lift the previous works from their abandoned existence and to capture a seamless insouciant composition, an attempt at an aided serendipity, a manipulation of chance, because the painting could easily go into the dimensions of design, more precisely, of the de Stijl-ist kind; or in the words of the Swedish artist Andreas Eriksson whilst talking to him: "It's cool, but it's like design", which I'm guilty of in regards of the earlier works I've done that he'd seen and commented upon, *SHE'S MORE ASIAN THAN ME*³³. Or maybe there is the underlying sadism almost in how I choose to treat older works that I feel is subpar or inferior, for I avoid re-using a painting I'm content with. However later on the process of working on the exhibition I decided to dismantle all the previous paintings I've ever done and re-make them into new paintings. The antidote was simply to view and

³⁰ Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece*

³¹ See Appendix K

³² See Appendix L

³³ See Appendix M

work (sew) the pieces behind the seams the entire time, leaving the process entirely on chance alone for I can't stomach to let it go blandly in one direction so I have to constantly contradict and disrupt it.

Adjustments are then made when the seams are unfolded with more erasures, smears, blurs and smudges of paint and color where it's gravely needed and finished with unapologetic serendipitous texts. In return the paintings confronts questions regarding the conceptual foundations of the medium of painting and pertains to painting's fragile perishability. This is emphasized in *GJÓN*,³⁴ where the architectural element and materiality of the paintings' creation is unearthed. The work is distinctly minimalistic in comparison to the other two paintings in regards to color execution, but still not lacking the expressive rendering characterized by my works where the actions and gestures of the painting's creation is recorded through the dust, soil, and shoeprints gradually accumulated on the surface of the puzzle of canvases, making up for its distinct lack of color.

There is conflict between style and content, conflict between the innocence and decorativeness of the medium in its unavoidable affinity to quilts and the explicitness of the graffiti-like statements. The juxtaposition between the painstakingly time consuming and detailed procedure of sewing the canvas together with the crudely rendered painting with equally crass autobiographical text is characteristic of my work. Additionally, to use a timely traditional practice such as quilting and divert it into contemporary expressionist paintings is a sophisticated aesthetic strategy while simultaneously referring to my own childhood nostalgia. Consequently the promotional material linked to the exhibition, the posters and the catalog³⁵ devised similar strategy by featuring a photo of the artist as young girl in a blue dress with the title of the exhibition scrawled in pink similar to the strokes found on the paintings. The works are aggressive, raw and expressive juxtaposed with the poster which is deliberately girlish and winsome to deliver the punch more brutally.

Similar juxtaposition between style and content can be found in Tracey Emin's quilts. The decorative feminine tendencies of the quilted blankets in *Helter Fucking Skelter*³⁶ and all of these trademark banners, embroidered with violent outbursts and inventories of sexual and emotional outrage all amount to a modus operandi. "Helter

³⁴ See Appendix A

³⁵ See Appendix N

³⁶ See Appendix O

Fucking Skelter” and “Total Paranoia” appear in black lettering at the top and the center of the blanket, surrounded with other comments and threats: “I find your attitude a little bit negative; Burn in hell you bitch.” The crassness of the text is at odds with the painstakingly detailed procedure of sewing the letters, similarly the grittiness of the statements is juxtaposed with the inherent warmth and security the blanket provides.

Chapter Three: Use of Text

Text serves a major conceptual foundation in my oeuvre. Painting is expression. It comes from within. People say something to me and it becomes text. It comes from outside. Text and image are inextricably linked. Text is sometimes the raw material for making art. Twombly, Basquiat and Tracey Emin are undoubtedly inspirations in regards to my use of text. Twombly used references from mythology and literature incorporating graffiti like calligraphic touch to his often vast canvases with manic traces of abstract scribbles, text and poetry awkwardly written in stark contrast to their meaning, unfolding the visual power of language beyond its verbal use. Throughout his career Twombly showcased boundless poetic awareness by using reference from mythology and literature, from the writings of Marquis de Sade to John Keats and Goethe, the “European influenced “primitive of a new path” exemplifies the dominant themes of Eros and death, sexuality and violence, in an allusive graphic-painterly code which tends to conceal more than it reveals.”³⁷

By incorporating these text borrowed from poetry, mythology and history, he was often able to suggest subtle narrative that lay beneath the surface of the paintings. Twombly’s use of text represents both simultaneous yearning for and rejection of meaning, constructing an associative openness, ephemerality and ambivalence. This calligraphic touch ties the loose weave of the composition into a unity. His use of text also “gives relief to something else than the usual meaning of words. The practice unfolds the visual power of language lingering beyond its verbal use and turns it into a new dimension of painting.”³⁸ In *Academy*³⁹ the word “fuck” surfaces three times with

³⁷ Ingo F. Walther. ed. *Art of the 20th Century*. (Taschen:Köln, 2000). p. 285.

³⁸ Andrea Bontea, “Cy Twombly: Painting as an Art of Thinking.” *Cy Twombly Bild, Text, Paratext*, Thierry Greub ed. (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014). p. 45.

³⁹ See Appendix P

varying clarity and intensity and simultaneously turns into a new dimension in the painting. Other examples are *Apollo and the Artist*⁴⁰ and *Mars and the Artist*.⁴¹

In an interview the artist stressed the close link between the poetic use of language and visual art: “I never really separated painting and literature because I’ve always used reference.”⁴² Reference he meant as a kind of electric shock: “I need, I like emphasis... I like something to jumpstart me – usually a place or literary reference or an event that took place, to start me off. To give me clarity or energy.”⁴³ In *Roses*⁴⁴ almost the entirety of Rilke’s *Poem XV* is transcribed and it reads:

*All alone
O abundant flower
you create your own space
you stare at yourself in mirror
of odoe
your fragrance swirls
more petals
around your teeming
calyx*

In reference to literature, Twombly stated that he “likes poets because I can find a condensed phrase... My greatest one to use was Rilke, because of his narrative, he’s talking about the essence of something. I always look for that phrase.”⁴⁵ In each painting made out of four panels, the first three showed roses in full bloom while the last panel contains a scribbled stanza showcasing yet again in true Twombly fashion that image and text are inextricably linked.

While Basquiat’s work overflows with references and obscurata just as much as Twombly’s “these are not presented in an open structure accessible from all directions, as by Twombly, but as simultaneous dynamic among differing and in themselves hermetic statements.”⁴⁶ Tar, Oil, Feet, Gold, Milk, Thor are among the words scrawled throughout Basquiat’s paintings. The childlike scribbles of words are

⁴⁰ See Appendix Q

⁴¹ See Appendix R

⁴² Bontea. “Cy Twombly: Painting as an Art of Thinking” p. 45.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See Appendix S

⁴⁵ Bontea. “Cy Twombly: Painting as an Art of Thinking”. p. 45.

⁴⁶ Emmerling. *Basquiat*. p. 29.

apparently misbehaving but they impart a profound truth. Basquiat's style and the fierceness of his expression overflow with rudimental urban reality. The writer of *The Radiant Child* asks:

I'm always amazed by how people come up with things. Like Jean-Michel. How did he come up with those words he puts all over everything? Their aggressively handmade look fits his peculiarly political sensibility. He seems to have become the gutter and his world view very much that of the downtrodden and dispossessed. Here the possession of almost anything of even marginal value becomes a token of corrupt materialism.⁴⁷

Basquiat once said that he used words like brushstrokes. Treating words like visual elements in a composition, he masterfully arranged words and phrases despite their literal meanings, juxtaposing seemingly unrelated, discordant images and texts, collaging together a wide range of subjects in one composition. Strategies such as inverted spelling, crossing out words, and the serial repetition of text are explored throughout his notebook writings and large-scale works. Much like Twombly, Basquiat also used language poetically, choosing words for their descriptive as well as their lyric qualities and combining his own words with texts appropriated from his surroundings. Basquiat emphasized repetition and experimentation, using letters and words for both their sounds and the multitude of meanings associated to them. The prominent use of words in his paintings and drawings reveals his wide-ranging interest and the diversity of books he read or consulted, additionally a special attachment to *Gray's Anatomy*. There is a tendency to see Basquiat's use of words as simply an extension of his earlier activities as SAMO, the street artist, thus failing to realize that his preoccupation with words is an obvious sign of his precocious intellect and his passionate pursuit of knowledge, ranging from anatomy like *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits*,⁴⁸ to jazz history and great moments in sports, reflected in images linked with words and words inextricably tied to images.

The distinct but mutually influential realms of words and images in Rauschenberg's works form more unstable relationships where image incite the sematic equivalents of language, and the words take on the multidimensionality of images. "When you see an image" Rauschenberg commented, "it almost doesn't exist

⁴⁷ Ricard. "The Radiant Child"

⁴⁸ See Appendix T

until you can turn it into language. When you read something, if you can't see it, you almost can't remember it too, so the words, become the images and the images become the words."⁴⁹ Rauschenberg's 1963 "*Note on Painting*" attempted to translate his visual strategy into text. In it Rauschenberg interrupted his sentences with words glimpsed from the windows of a touring van. It went:

I find it nearly impossible FREE ICE to write about JEEPAXLE my work. The concept I PLANTATARIUM struggle to deal with KETCHUP is opposed to the logical continuity LIFT TAB inherent in language HORSE and communication. My fascination with images OPEN 24 HRS. is based on the complex interlocking of disparate visual facts HEATED POOL that have no respect for grammar.⁵⁰

Rauschenberg's use of text is as spontaneous as the complex juxtaposition of images in his works. The rawness of the city with its ceaseless inflow of urban message, stimulus and impediment asserts itself strongly in his Combines. Traffic signs and plate numbers found their way into *Black Market*⁵¹ while the word "police" appear in *Coexistence*.⁵² The multiple instances where letters and text in their varying intensity appears in his works provides a confrontation of sorts between Rauschenberg's reflections and the anonymous, impersonal language of the contemporary environment. In this manner language is encountered as an archive, known to be there and available for access anytime.

The Autobiographical

As for Tracey Emin, she has her whole life as an archive. The overall consensus on Emin's art is that it is confessional, that it is personal, unapologetically autobiographical, where scenes of intimacy and crude experiences are spaces of sharing. This has become her reputation in the art world, built on a familiar strategy in art history and criticism: the mutuality of art and life. She is her art and art is her, confessional, provocative, explicitly critical, narcissistic, and unrestrained by honesty

⁴⁹ Brandon W. Joseph. *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*. (Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 2003). p. 138.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 163.

⁵¹ See Appendix U

⁵² See Appendix V

or shame. Emin “tells all. All the truths, both awful and wonderful, but mostly awful, about her life.”⁵³ Emin’s work invites us to take it personally. The sensationalism of her self-representation invites an audience ready to pry on her fuck ups for their intellectual entertainment. The sensationalism of her self-representation paints her somewhat as the modern-day embodiment of Hamlet’s tragic Ophelia, “incapable of her own distress,” in need of salvation and love. The exhibitionism of intimacy and its invitation into the melodrama of her existence, the deep narcissism and the mawkish pity party described by her oeuvre makes us question if it is for mere aesthetic strategy, to attract spectatorship, acknowledging the emotional interest that underpin the business of art consumption or maybe it simply points out to a masturbatory level of self-regard.

The texts found on my paintings are inherently immediate and explicitly autobiographical. My works thrive on the use of these serendipitous text addressed to me by people in their gruff, idiosyncratic, unapologetic unabashed crudeness. It was of the most serendipitous happenstance when a friend shouted at my direction whilst talking to someone else that apparently I was “more Asian” than her. This comment of hers instantly found its place in the center of my painting *SHE’S MORE ASIAN THAN ME*.⁵⁴ This moment proved consequential in shaping the kind of work that I make until this day.

The text found on the paintings comes from various periods in my life. In grade school I was called *GRJÓN*, the longest text: *STELPURNAR KALLA ÞIG LITLU SÆTU ASÍSKU STELPUNA EN ÉG SAGÐI ÞEIM AÐ HÆTTA ÞESSU ÞVÍ HÚN HEITIR ALVEG EITTHVAÐ* came from a friend during high school, while the last one: and *ICELAND? ARE YOU SURE BUT YOU SERIOUSLY LOOK ORIENTAL. I’M GUESSING THAI* is a fairly recent one. Through these paintings I’m monumentally throwing shade, a confrontation against the ignorance, irony, rudeness and racism inherent in the texts and the individuals who said them albeit with attempts on my part at being bilingual in both irony and sincerity in their execution. The text islands in a sea of blacks and indecipherable lines, interrupting the blankness of the canvas except in *GRJÓN*. A raw kind of expression or self-declaration, devoid of sentimental lyricism, the texts are crudely rendered assaulting the reader with

⁵³ Deborah Cherry. “On the Move- My Bed, 1998 to 1999”. *The Art of Tracey Emin*, Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, eds. p. 134-154. (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002). p. 141.

⁵⁴ See Appendix M

autobiographical appropriation. My works are unproblematically autobiographical but it is also universal and open to interpretation, thus can be interpreted from cultural and social politics. And again as always its always a struggle working with text. The ambiguity between the connection between painting and text and vice versa is a major struggle. To create a seamless conversation between the two mediums that would be both visually and conceptually fitting. Or maybe in the grander scheme of things it will remain a confrontation.

Conclusion

In this essay I have showcased how Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece* is analogous to my own artistic practice in regards to its theme of erasure and abstraction. Through a hint at a fragment, what remains from Frenhofer's masterpiece is the tip of a foot that had "escaped an incomprehensible, slow, and gradual destruction"⁵⁵ by the artist himself in his quest for perfection. For Frenhofer, Pygmalion's miracle did not happen. He was deluded when he confused his canvas with a living woman whose lover he felt himself to be. In Balzac the foot can never again become part of the whole, for that is irretrievably lost. The kind of sculptural fragment that could be seen in museums was easily turned into a metaphor for an idea of art that was no longer possible. The failure of figurative painting could therefore be another interpretation of Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece*. Abstract art, as we know it emerged from the systematic deconstruction of the episteme of iconic figurative representation of the Renaissance through Cezanne, Malevich, Kandinsky down to Rothko and Pollock, and it was this labor of negation of historical traditions that gave it intensity and a sense of direction.

Unlike Frenhofer what interest me is the "dead wall of paint" his masterpiece has become. Even the single foot that remains of his "Venus of the older time" as if "emerging from the ruins of a ruined town" is not at a loss after all. Analogous to Frenhofer's "unknown masterpiece" the autobiographical appropriated text found on my paintings could be an uncanny representation and reimagining of the woman's foot. For similarly the texts in varying clarity protrude from the rest of the canvas of deconstructed previous paintings amidst all the cancelling and negations of color and paint through erasure making a "dead wall of paint." In the words of Basquiat written in *Leonardo da Vinci's Greastest Hits*,⁵⁶ it might not be a "bad foot" after all.

⁵⁵ Balzac. *The Unknown Masterpiece*

⁵⁶ See Appendix T

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Appendix

A.



Melanie Ubaldo, *GRJÓN*, oil, oil stick, ink, acrylic, dust, soil on canvas, 4.8 x 3.85 m, 2015

B.



Melanie Ubaldo, *STELPUÐ KALLA ÞIG LITLU SÆTU AÐÍSKU STELPUNA EN ÉG SAGÐI ÞEIM AÐ HÆTTA ÞESSU ÞVÍ HÚN HEITIR ALVEG EITTHVAÐ*, oil, oil stick, ink, acrylic, spray paint, dust, soil on canvas, 3.8 x 6 m, 2015

C.



Melanie Ubaldo, *ICELAND? ARE YOU SURE? BUT YOU SERIOUSLY LOOK ORIENTAL. I'M GUESSING THAI*, oil, oil stick, ink, acrylic, spray paint, dust, soil on canvas, 3.8 x 4 m, 2015

D.



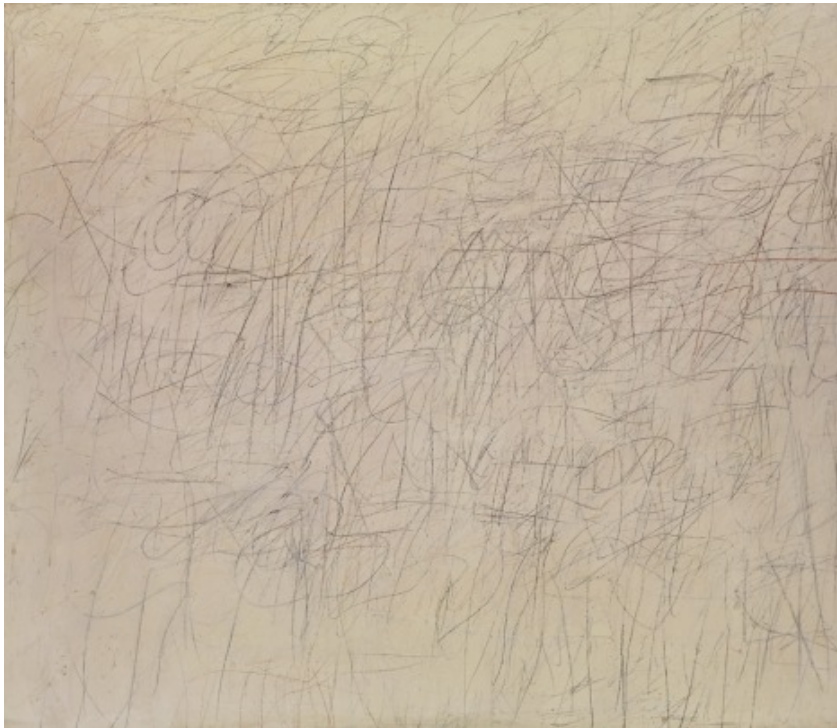
Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Charles the First*, acrylic and oilstick on canvas, 1.98 x 1.58 m, 1982

E.



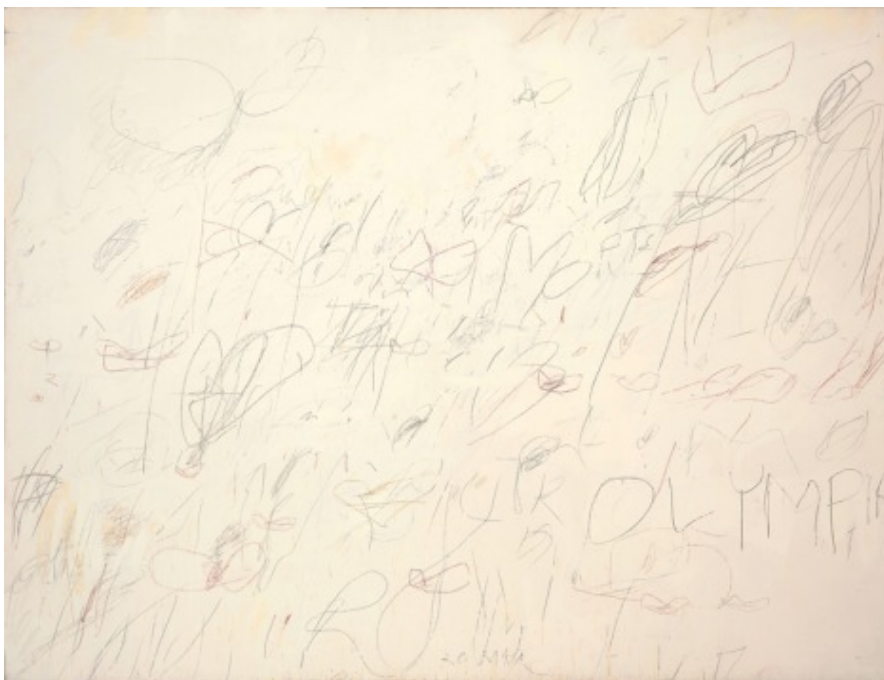
Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Bolsena)*, oil-based house paint, oil crayon and pencil on canvas, 2 x 2.5 m, Saatchi Gallery, 1969

F.



Cy Twombly, *Criticism*, oil-based house paint, wax crayon, coloured pencil, lead pencil and pastel on canvas, 1.27 x 1.47 m, Gagosian Gallery, 1955

G.



Cy Twombly, *Olympia*, oil-based house paint, wax crayon, coloured pencil, lead pencil and pastel on canvas, Gagosian Gallery, 1957

H.



Cy Twombly, *Ferragosto I*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 166 x 200 cm, Gagosian Gallery, 1961



Cy Twombly, *Ferragosto III*, oil paint, wax crayon and lead pencil on canvas, 165 x 200 cm, Gagosian Gallery, 1961

I.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 64.14 cm x 55.25 cm x 1.27 cm, Collection SFMOMA, 1953

J.



Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, post card reproduction with added moustache, goatee and title in pencil, 19.7 x 12.4 cm, 1919

K.



Melanie Ubaldo, *SÉRÐU TEXTÍLVERK Í ÞESSU?*, oil, oil stick, acrylic, ink, dust, soil on canvas, 2014

L.



Rags sold in the Philippines

M.



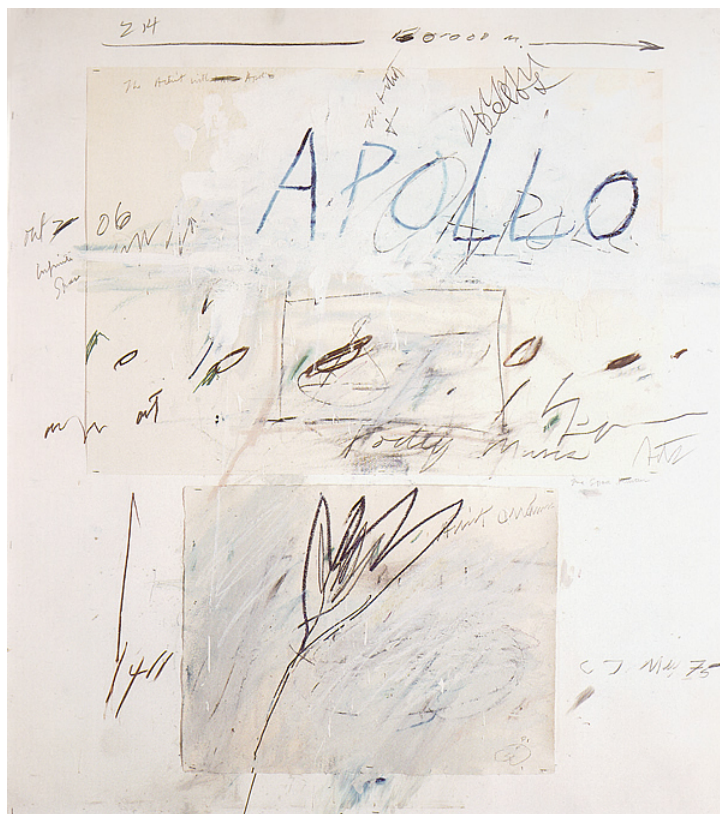
Melanie Ubaldo, *SHE'S MORE ASIAN THAN ME*, acrylic, oil, ink, oil stick, house paint, dust, soil on canvas, approx. 3 x 5.5 m, 2014

N.



Poster for the exhibition "*litla sæta asíska stelpa*"

Q.



Cy Twombly, *Apollo and the Artist*, oil paint, wax crayon, pencil and collage, 142 x 128 cm, Gagosian Gallery, 1975

R.



Cy Twombly, *Mars and the Artist*, oil paint, wax crayon, pencil and collage, 142 x 127.5 cm, Gagosian Gallery, 1975

S.



Cy Twombly, *The Rose (II)*, acrylic on plywood, 252 x 740 cm, Gagosian Gallery, 2008

T.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Leonardo da Vinci's Greatest Hits*, acrylic, crayon, paper on wooden panel, 213.4 x 198 cm, 1982

U.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Black Market*, Combine, 125.7 x 149.9 x 10.2 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 1961

V.



Robert Rauschenberg, *Coexistence*, Combine: oil, fabric, metal, wood on canvas, 169.55 x 126.68 x 36.20 cm, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1961