



## Erosion and illegibility of images: 'beyond the immediacy of the present'<sup>\*</sup>

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### Introduction

Everything has been slowly experimented against and smashed to pieces, from mimetic representation, through image making, canvas, colour, artwork, all the way to the artist herself, her signature, the role of museums, of the patrons, of critics[...]. (Latour and Weibel 2002, 22)

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The focus of this special journal issue 'Erosion and Illegibility of Images' is to explore the relationship of erosion and visibility through contemporary artistic practices at a moment when everything, as Latour suggests, is smashed to pieces. The essays in this issue deploy the notion of erosion as a conceptual tool in order to explore the shifting and depositing of materials, which is observed both on a formal visual level (the breaking up of the image surface) and a critical revaluation of memory, visibility and artistic tools. From an instrumentalist understanding of tools and material, I set out to explore the impact of a radical restriction and limitation of traditional skills and craftsmanship on the artistic process. While recent research has focused predominantly on art theoretical understandings of ruins, the articles collected here aim to interrogate the relationship between artists, artistic tools and the materials of production in contemporary artistic practice by putting them in conversation with each other and scrutinizing interventions such as 'preservation', remaking, retro-recuperations and nostalgia work of several kinds.

The essays included in this issue have been written by leading art scholars and by artistic practitioners with the aim of encouraging a dialogue between them from a wide range of perspectives. In so doing, this issue opens up new modes of criticism on the shifting and depositing of materials as a critical re-evaluation of memory or visibility. It builds on the findings of a symposium organized at the New Art Gallery Walsall (UK) on 31 October 2014 with contributions by academics and renowned artists including Jane and Louise Wilson, Idris Khan and Maria Chevaska.

### Ruins, erosion, theory

In recent years, the classical trope of ruins has attracted much attention in art theoretical debates (see Edensor 2005; Huyssen 2006; Hell and Schönle 2010; Dillon 2011, amongst others) and featured in recent exhibitions, most prominently in 2013 in *Ruin Lust*, Tate London and in numerous conferences. While ruins 'retain a suggestive, unstable semantic potential' (Hell and Schönle 2010, 6), the understanding of the materiality of images, its

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<sup>\*</sup>Buck-Morss (1989, x).

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remediation and the ‘circulation in heterogeneous networks’ has been somewhat overlooked (Joselit 2013, XIV).

Erosion as a critique of a transparent and homogenous image and the notion of clear vision departs from what has been described as a ‘visual model of modernity’ (Jay 1993, 5). Recent research in this has conceptualized the breakdown of the image in its coherent form in the context of, for example, ‘precariousness’ (Asselin, Lamoureux, and Ross AQ3 2008), ‘Potential Image’ (Gamboni 2002), the ‘undoing’ of the image (Alliez 2011), ‘Art of the Possible’ (Rancière 2007) or the conceptualization of ‘potentiality’ (Agamben, see AQ4 Balskus 2010 ). All these approaches manifest attempts to disenfranchise ourselves from the immediate object, as a departure from concepts such as pureness, close-up and favouring instead ‘dissensus’ and the need to reconstruct our relationship to the external world.

The distancing manifests itself in different ways: forms of inoperativeness and decreation and its potentiality in which the ‘potential image’ critically revisits instability and dynamic understandings of the visual information and tests the relation between indeterminacy and intelligibility (Gamboni 2002, 221); Alliez takes the fragmented vestiges of the image as ‘identity crisis’ of contemporary art and a ‘breakdown’ of language more generally (2011, 67); while in the ‘Art of the Possible’ Rancière suggests we ‘loosen the bonds’ to objects that seem evident or unquestionable (Rancière 2007, 261). The concept of precariousness proclaims the collapse of the interface between viewer, object and artwork resulting in a restriction of visual access (see Asselin, Lamoureux, and Ross 2008, 8).

All of the approaches arguably decompose, fragmentize and uncouple the visual sign in a manner that Alliez identifies as the Western breakdown of the image:

... a ruin of the image, which is de-posed through the bizarre planar character of its insensible range. This is an image that becomes empty after having been overloaded and saturated with object-subject devoid and any principle of relations. (2011, 69)

### **Making/not making: ‘Either you make or you are made’<sup>1</sup>**

One of the main objectives of this issue is to explore aspects of destruction and its impact on contemporary artistic practice. While some of the recent critique of the transparent image has been outlined above, it is important to consider the complex processes of both *making* in the context of erosion and on *seeing* in the context of illegibility. Has the idea of erosion had an impact on artistic practices? While creation and erosion are commonly seen as opposites, the latter challenges traditional notions of authorship and agency and blurs the binary opposition of making/being made.

Of course, it has always been the case that art movements have called for the destruction of previous artefacts, under the belief that ‘destruction could open the path to true, living AQ5 art’ or under the spell of iconoclasm itself (Grois 2008, 26).<sup>2</sup> This special issue is more interested in ‘erosion of modern form of belief’, what Hal Foster has described as ‘shattering’ of a ‘non-synchronous’ sign-system (1985, 178). The need to debunk assumptions of the transparent, neutral, coherent image offers a way of testing the trope of the ruin in current artistic practices.

Recent art theoretical research traces the significant shift from an object-based to a network aesthetics beyond the critique of the transparent, cohesive image (Joselit 2013, 43). The object is no longer perceived as a fixed entity. Instead, it is seen as undergoing constant transformations. Meanwhile, contemporary practice-led approaches also tend

to question profoundly the reliance on our visual sensory perception in the art-making process. Those approaches significantly join sight, hand and material thinking, and not only question vision, but ‘shock or put the viewer in crisis’ (Bolt 2007, 30).

The departure from a ‘fixed’ object and somewhat outdated claims of visibility indicates what Walter Benjamin has coined the ‘destruction of the mythic immediacy of the present’ (Buck-Morss 1989, x). Destruction or erosion of images does not lead necessarily to the creation of new images, as some have argued, but it clarifies our relationship with objects (Grois 2008, 70). Erosion not only does *not* restrict our sensory perception, but it expands our sensory awareness: ruins require alternative ways of seeing and making. Drawing here on Benjamin’s notion of ‘Fortleben’ (afterlife), we can see how our perception of objects has radically changed. As Benjamin outlines in his essay ‘The task of the Translator’ artistic production, as a form of translation, needs to refrain from being transparent and identical to the object itself:

The traditional concepts in any discussion of translation are fidelity and license—the freedom to give a faithful reproduction of the sense and, in its service, fidelity to the word. These ideas seem to be no longer serviceable to a theory that strives to find, in a translation, something other than reproduction of meaning. To be sure, traditional usage makes these terms appear as if in constant conflict with each other. What can fidelity really do for the rendering of meaning? Fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the sense they have in the original. (Benjamin [1921] 2002, 259)

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The departure from claims of pure language, visually or literary, shows a new understanding of image-making as part of a wider ‘apparatus’ that questions ‘the integrity’ of image as a closed-off area of aesthetic activity. While this might lead into ‘hybrid genres’ of painting/installation/sculpture, the image sign itself becomes more dynamic and transitive (see, for example, Draxler 2010; Joselit 2015). What all these approaches have in common is a revaluation of the everyday and a particular focus on the ordinary object and its materiality. Notwithstanding, the notion of authenticity in the discussion of ruin and erosion has been radically contested. While traditionally authenticity has been associated with ideas of authorship, originality, selfhood, etc., in the case of the trope of the ruin, the ‘authentic ruin’ has been linked to precisely the opposite, to notions of decay and erosion, ‘moments of decay, falling apart, or ruination’ (Huyssen 2010, 18).

So how do artistic practices approach aspects of absence and invisibility and account for authenticity when, as Huyssen argues, ‘what is allegedly present and transparent whenever authenticity is claimed is present only as an absence’? As he adds, ‘any ruins posit the problem of double exposure to the past and the present’ (20). Yet, this notion of ‘double exposure’, asynchronous temporalities and the demystification of the present then raises the question: are we in ‘now denial’? (Lomax 2016, 3).<sup>3</sup> Postmodern notions of multiplicity, modelling and simulation may seem at first at odds with the concept of the ruin and claims of absence. Indeed, as Boym argues, the trope of the ruin as ‘reminders and reminders’ sheds light on the paradoxical relationship between of ‘vanishing physicality’ and ‘the tensions between models and practices’ (2010, 80). By highlighting the precise gap between model and practice, ‘ruinophilia signals a return of a certain existential perspective, a human horizon that is superimposed upon intellectual and technological axiologies’ (Boym 2010, 80). The complex temporalities between ‘double exposure’ of ruins, and a Modernist setting, versus the Postmodern temporalities of multiples are

complex and need further unpacking. Of course, this fascination for the ruin, for a troubling of the optics of modernism, brings its own challenges. The limitations of the paradoxical fixation on the overlapping of visibility/invisibility, for example, become evident in the context of decay and erosion as incomplete representations, as fragmented images, as something that has a certain characteristic, yet is in parts remaining undetectable. This is another reminder that representations are fixed against material decay (Savile 1993, 464). However, while modernism seems very comfortable with illegibility and the reliance on materiality in itself, the notion of transparency seems a very postmodern claim.<sup>4</sup>

While destruction, incompleteness and fragmentation therefore have become a common feature in contemporary art (Latour and Weibel 2002), the account of increasingly useless, outsourced visual elements gives a clear sense of dysfunctionality, both in visual and in concrete terms. However, contemporary art shows a constant fascination with debris and dysfunctional elements making artists key agents in the transformation of the discarded (Picon and Bates 2000, 77). Hence, these transformations have become a growing field for artists, by reusing waste material, what can be described as possible 're-enchantment of the world' (77).<sup>5</sup>

### Seeing/not seeing: the transparent image

The Western breakdown of the image, as Alliez argues, is a result of the oversaturation and overload of visual information that reflects the increase of the amount of images that we are exposed to (2011, 67). (Jecu's discussion of Idris Khan's work in this issue reflects this point poignantly.) It also demonstrates, as Doane points out, that images stand for an excess in itself by showing a spatial continuum and temporalities associated with 'assault, acceleration, speed' (Doane 1996, 314).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, despite the general function of

the art work to preserve time, the apparent excess of information results in the collapse of the representation and its illegibility. Despite the claims of transparency and completeness, which become unattainable, artists strive precisely for the illegibility and non-differentiation (Doane 1996, 335). The conscious limiting of legibility appears as a critique of the 'over-automatization' of perception, allowing the perceptive effort that registers only 'proper features' or nothing at all. Russian Formalist critic Victor Shklovsky argued that, '[t]he technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to "prolong" the perception process' (Shklovsky 1965, 2). He was in favour of distancing from and deaffirmation of images:

An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it, its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object — it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it (1965, 5).

The abandoning of 'permanent referent' of an object, that is available and complete, resonates with recent conceptualizations of withdrawal from the immediacy of the image. The notion of 'imageless truth' of 'slow mimeticism' and the deceleration of the perception process debunks modes of iconicity in order to experiment new ways of perception (Roberts 2015, 27). Roberts interprets 'slow mimeticism' and the deceleration of the perception process as 'indebted to a Novalian labour of empathy, as a slow education of the senses and intellect', adding that 'we don't live in an image-world in which the slow

education of the senses and intellect is able to make room for such empathy with any degree of conviction' (2015, 28).

The concept of the 'image-apart' and increased claims of the autonomy of the image take a clear investment in the 1960s practices where the '[d]istance, disaffirmation and abstraction' becomes part of Avant-Garde practices (30). However, here I am less concerned about the total autonomy and abstraction. The attention to the invisible and 'strange lacunae', i.e. gaps omissions and restrictions in the image goes beyond any abstraction (2005, 15). The concept of the 'virtual', as suggested by French art theorist Didi-Huberman, is understood as transgressing binaries of visibility/invisibility and aims to 'loosen our grip on the "normal"' (2005, 18). Accordingly, the perception as 'event' instead of instance, deflates categorizations of empty/full, presence/absence, legible/illegible (18). The 'virtual' becomes a way to broaden the notion of the visual that lies beyond the visible realm. As Didi-Huberman claims: 'It is the phenomenon of something that does not appear clearly and distinctly. It is not an articulated sign; it is not legible as such. It just offers itself: a pure "appearance of something"' (2005, 18).

Equally, in the concept of the 'Pensive Image', as another conceptualization of limited legibility, Rancière identifies 'features of indeterminacy' (2009, 107).<sup>7</sup> He proposes an active disruption and interference of the image creation, where invisible and visible entities overlap. For him the potential of the image originates from the fact that it 'derives from art's effort to make itself invisible' (Rancière 2009, 119). To paraphrase literary critic Craig Dworkin, to take art to be efficient in the narrow sense is not so much a naïveté about what art cannot do, but an inattention to what it actually can do (2013a, 4). By focusing on the divergent aspect of art and looking, as discussed in the notions of *slow mimeticism*, or the 'Pensive Image', or on the ability to translate into something different, we can see the potential of images.

### Reading: 'nothing can be right, till it is unintelligible.'<sup>8</sup>

As we have seen, we are left with material devoid of any meaning. The resulting 'unformed, intense matter' (Joselit 2014, 72) triggers a range of artistic responses dealing with the instability of elements and forms. This might happen in an almost archaeological manner when the visual information is converted, in a rejection of the coherent image, into 'active devices for configuring flows of images' (Joselit 2014, 95).

The concept of erosion and the encounter with unformed matter encourages artistic practices that focus explicitly or metaphorically on 'excavating and unearthing' archives and objects, showing a particular interest in re-enacting and reconstructing the past as 'another type of storytelling' (Roelstraete 2009, 3). Crucially in this context, what has been termed as 'meta-historical mode' feeds into artistic approaches that create meaning through reconstruction, based on what Roelstraete describes as spare 'traces preserved in sediments of fossilized meaning' (2009, 3).<sup>9</sup> The lack of 'attachment' to a particular meaning, arguably legibility, not unlike archaeological finds confronted with erosion, demonstrates a dilemma which could be described as an erosion of meaning that goes beyond factual, physical decay. The material found in archives or 'excavation sites' is equally resistant to interpretation, deciphering and reading.

Indeed, references to Situationist strategies, where the strategic misuse or 'detournement' of the text advocates again a loosening of the bond with the iconic image suggest,

in line with Benjamin, a ‘playful infidelity’ and transgression’ as essential for the artistic creation (Dworkin 2003, 5). As Dworkin argues from a radical Formalist perspective, then, the artwork ‘involves the rigors of formal celebration, a playful infidelity, a certain illegibility within the legible: an infinitizing, a wide-open exuberance, a perpetual motion machine, a transgression’ (Dworkin 2003, 5).

This, of course, can be tracked back to a variety of artists in their search for unmediated content ‘as not standing for something else’ and the emphasis on self-reflexivity.<sup>10</sup> Instances such as Barthes’ ‘unintelligibility of the real’ or the Modernist’s fascination with ‘non- descriptive facture’ only express what Victorian Artist John Ruskin already coined: precisely that ‘all distinct drawing must be bad drawing, and that nothing can be right, till it is unintelligible’ (Ruskin quoted in Prince 2014, 6). Indeed, as Prince argues, this paradoxical overlap of figuration and abstraction has led to unintelligibility:

these painters took primary experience as the basis for painting which paradoxically sought representational specificity from methods deriving from mid-20th-century modernist abstraction. If a picture is laid against reality like a measure [...] the measuring impulse remains while the measure’s notation has become unintelligible. (Prince 2014, 7)

In the end, a broad range of artistic responses deals with the putative void of meaning and instability of form. Any advances of a conceptualization of the decomposition of the visual sign define it as ‘producing a theatre of meaning’s ruin; its collapse into compost’ (Joselit 2014, 95). This special issue focuses on the erosion of material that brings with it a breakdown of meaning, or at least a collapse of a coherent or logically structured image and the re-emerging of alternative modes of visibility.

## Contributions

The articles in this edition explore a wide scope of strategies that deal with the idea of erosion and illegibility through a broad range of media, including painting, drawing installations, writing and photography. This journal issue is the result of a highly dynamic and interdisciplinary collaboration between artists and art theorists. The focus on erosion allows an exploration of the silenced but palpable entropy of images that goes beyond the paradigm of visibility/invisibility. The concept of erosion is particularly relevant in a digital age, as it offers ways of coming to terms with notions of remediation and the circulation of images. One of the shared aims of the essays included here is that of defining what we understand by ‘erosion’ in visual art. More specifically, the essays query commonplace characterizations of visibility by exploring in detail new materialist and practice-led approaches and argue that erosion can provide an accurate understanding of these processes.

The journal issue starts off by exploring the radical restriction and limitation of traditional skills and craftsmanship by exploring the 1950s American Avant-Garde practices as a significant framework for the intersection of writing, painting and drawing. Rinaldo demonstrates that illegibility can become a key tool to analyse the overlap of interdisciplinary approaches. The essay focuses in particular on ‘mute language’ or ‘pseudomutilations’ where illegibility and erosion of the image go precisely beyond mere cancellation.

In the next essay, Jecu offers a case study of the work of Idris Khan. In the amalgamation of layers of photographs and the interwoven texture of images, Khan’s work seems to

result in a collapse of categories such as past and present, abstraction and figuration. As a consequence, the eclipse of legible and illegible parts become a pattern, where the depicted can no longer be seen as mere annihilation or erasure of information. Khan's layered images lead into Jecu's discussion on blurring and repetition as a pivotal point in the exploration of illegible signs and ruins. By focusing on the concept of the meta-image as distinctive feature in Khan's work, Jecu alludes to the fact that Kahn's images themselves have the power to contest and to refuse to witness or to document. The visual distancing between viewer and represented object can be understood further as an erosion of traditionally perceived boundaries between the visible/invisible, tangible/intangible.

In his analysis of painter Lee Ufan, Morely argues that the liminal and paradoxical understanding of form and formlessness becomes a cultural marker, testing assumptions about how the mobile and transitory quality of visual remnants may have become part of Western and Eastern traditions. The concept of the 'indistinct', which implies something perceptually ambiguous or indistinguishable, offers another aspect on the illegible.

The unstable semantic potential of ruination and formlessness is scrutinized further in the photographic and video work by Jane and Louise Wilson. The presence of urban abandonment and decay in the two installations analysed by Guerin reveal forms of disruption on both social and political levels. By looking at dereliction as highly contested field, Guerin explores the disruptive potential of erosion in *Stasi City* (1997) and *A Free and Anonymous Monument* (2003), where erosion becomes a cypher for utopian visions as well as an 'intellectual point of emergency'.

In the essay that closes the issue, I use the work of Idris Khan, Maria Chevska and Jane and Louise Wilson as a combined case study to interrogate established hierarchies in our perception of visual referents. I test the extent to which 'pictorial art' resists legibility, transparency and coherence by using erosion, veiling and dissemblance as ways to critique dominant assumptions of the homogeneity of the image. These artists cast a view on the external world by diverting it, defacing it and distancing themselves from their surrounding environment. However, the distancing is never disconnected from the everyday and never succumbs to abstraction.

## Notes

1. Latour and Weibel (2002, 23).
2. Boris Grois sees iconoclasm not principally directed towards the 'truth in images' but as a result of power relations and an antagonism between different artistic media. Film in his analysis has been exposed to iconoclastic gesture 'been halted midstream and dissected' (2008, 67).
3. This notion of atemporality, as reflected in the trope of the ruin, can be equally applied to the current situation of artistic practice and the wilful appropriation and decontextualization of images and styles in contemporary painting (see Hoptman 2014).
4. Frampton argues that Postmodernism appears often as 'casually transparent' in contrast to the Modernist affinity with illegibility (Frampton 2009, 292). The fascination in our society with transparency reflects the understanding of transparency as honesty and being entirely integrated in the flow of communication in a capitalist society (see e.g. *The Transparency Society* by Byung-Chul Han (2015)).
5. Nostalgia, as closely associated with the trope of the ruin, needs a gap, as Susan Stewart has argued. Any attempts to close the gap will be refuted by the incommensurability of lived and imagined experience. As Stewart argues:



Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss. The nostalgic to reach his or her goal of closing the gap between resemblance and identity, lived experience would have to take place, an erasure of the gap between sign and signified, an experience which would cancel out the desire that is nostalgia's reason for existence. (1996, 36)

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8. John Ruskin quoted in Prince (2014, 6).  
9. The exhibition 'The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art' (9 November 2013–9 March 2014 Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, curated by Dieter Roelstraete) investigates the role of the historical, archival research in contemporary artistic practices (see also Roelstraete 2009).  
325 10. Peter Geimer identifies a lack of 'a palpable legibility' in contemporary art, with a tendency to 'change between perceptibility and retreat to the indefinable' (2012, 22/23). The aspect of 'impenetrability' leads to a perception of illegibility of painting and 'failure' of the picture to represent to subject, consequently heightens the self-reflexivity of the painting (Geimer 2012, 34).  
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### Disclosure statement

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