

Marc Scheps
September 2003

George Pusenkoff: Erased Paintings

This year, George Pusenkoff created a series of works, which he calls „erased paintings“ and which are now, for the first time, exhibited here under the provocative title „ERASED OR NOT ERASED“.

As early as 1997, Pusenkoff had already painted a key work with the enigmatic title „Twice Erased Drawing De Kooning / Erased Rauschenberg“. This painting refers to an iconic work by the young Robert Rauschenberg, who, in 1953 (coincidentally, the same year in which George Pusenkoff was born), erased a drawing by Willem De Kooning, which the great Abstract Expressionist painter had given him for precisely this purpose. This work follows a series of white paintings, which he created in 1951, and precedes his famous „Combine Paintings“ of the mid 1950s, with which he achieved his critical breakthrough. The white paintings represent his first attempt to develop a new form of painting in response to Abstract Expressionism. When he came to the conclusion, however, that this break was not radical enough, he came up with the idea of the act of erasing, an idea that is closely in tune with the Dadaist iconoclasm of Marcel Duchamp. In the Combine Paintings that followed, he picked up on the Duchampian tradition of the „Ready Made“ and integrated this into a new pictorial concept, a concept that would greatly influence the development of art in the years to come. In addition to the integrated „Ready Mades“, Rauschenberg employed a painterly gesture appropriated from the Abstract Expressionists, and fused these two seemingly contradictory elements in order to create a new pictorial reality.

It was then only a question of time before Rauschenberg became as famous as De Kooning was before him and thus himself became a target of negation for an even younger generation. In 1997, Pusenkoff erased the work of Rauschenberg and thus presented a chain reaction over three artistic generations, each of which took place within the context of a new self-determination of reverence and negation. In doing so, Pusenkoff did not concern himself with the mature work of Rauschenberg, but rather set his mark on the unique and unrepeatable, negating gesture of erasing the De Koonings drawing, which symbolically placed the entire school of abstract painting at the time in question. By erasing an erasure, Pusenkoff achieved the „ground zero“ of the tradition of painting since the Renaissance. His goal was to achieve the „tabula rasa“ of painting, so that he could attempt to create his own, newly formulated foundations for a post-modern painting in the digital age. We will come back to these foundations in greater detail later.

Before continuing on his path, however, Pusenkoff had to make a further step in order to free himself from the past. He had to confront the father figure of the Russian Avant-garde of the early 20th century, namely Kazimir Malevich himself. Although Malevich did not belong to the „father generation“ that immediately preceded Pusenkoff and his contemporaries, he could - as a result of the historical vacuum between these two generations, and also because this earlier epoch had been repressed and forgotten for so long - once again become a point of reference for a new and innovative Russian art. In the year 2000, Pusenkoff decided to erase the „Black Square“ of Malevich on his computer screen. This avant-garde work had for him an iconoclastic significance similar to that which the work of De Kooning had had for Rauschenberg. The act of erasing was for him an act of liberation. The negation of the Western pictorial tradition, which had found its most extreme and insurmountable expression

in the „Black Square“ of 1915, must now itself be negated in order to pave the way for a completely new form of painting. „Erased“ refers to the radical criticism of painting by Malevich. The erasing undertaken by Pusenkoff is not an act of destruction, and it is not an attempt to forget the art of the past, but is rather a positive attempt to overcome this in order to be able to formulate his own art in a new way.

One can characterise the 1990s as the era of the return to painting. During these years, numerous artists had reached back to an established tradition of painting; in some cases, they also paved their own new paths. Pusenkoff is not interested in the return to a painting that he never abandoned, but is rather in search of a new beginning - the possibility to add to the history of the pictorial tradition, perhaps even to discover something that would give painting a new life with a vitality never before experienced. With these works, Pusenkoff questions the significance, the meaning, of painting, its appearance and disappearance between reverence and iconoclasm, between tradition and negation. In doing so, Pusenkoff is fully aware that the new is always embedded in the old, and that art history is always characterised by both breaks and continuity.

The theme of „art about art“ had already found expression in the early works of George Pusenkoff. In the 1990s, he became known for his painterly confrontations with iconic works by Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, both of whom themselves referred back to artworks by Leonardo, Manet or Picasso. In addition, he also conducted a fruitful dialogue with innovative strategies with seminal works by Leonardo, van Gogh, Matisse, Kirchner and others, in order to view and understand them in light of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, to free them from the dust of time with his own emotions and his own new-born artistic language, and in doing so to breathe new life into them. The view of the artist is bold and cool: for him, the masterpieces of the past are „Ready Mades“, with which he experiments without reservation in order to delve into their inner energies. To achieve this, he required a new means of expression and his own pictorial language, since without these a fruitful dialogue would have been impossible.

In 1995, Pusenkoff introduced a significant innovation to his art by developing a „digital painting“ conceived on the computer screen. To make this visible and recognisable, he employed several strategies, which, in the end, lead to an unmistakably unique series of paintings. On the one hand, he enlarged the pixel, the building block of all digital images, thus making its quadratic structure visible to the human eye; on the other hand, he also painted the „tool bars“ that frame the digital screen. In addition, he also included the parallel lines of the computer screen into the composition of some of his paintings. After visually representing the digital source of his paintings, he took the finished sketches and brought them back to painting by transposing them onto the canvas with numerous layers of paint on an appropriate scale through a highly complex process. With these means, new and fascinating pictorial worlds were created. Pusenkoff's painting was thus embellished with a number of innovative possibilities of expression and, in the last few years, he has painted numerous pictures, in which he continued to discover new ways to follow his painterly temperament. Throughout this process of discovery, the sheer endless possibilities of technology and the unbound fantasy of the artist strengthened and complimented each other. Digital technology opened the door to further conceptual and visual expansions of painting, which would have otherwise been unthinkable and unattainable. Pusenkoff has developed a digital aesthetic that corresponds completely with the post-modern sensibility. The series of works that were created as a result of this have become for us, through their contents as well as their visual attractiveness, moments rich in experience.

In the beginning of this year, Pusenkoff created a 6 x 12 metre wall painting for a public space in Geneva. With „Art River“, he achieved an indisputable climax within his oeuvre, within which he quotes masterpieces of European, American, Asian and African art and interprets these within a combination of abstract grid structures and various script motifs. This painted collage brings art together across the borders of time and space and can thus be understood as a homage to the creative spirit of humankind. The artist brings this artistic dialogue of the continents within his own post-modern artistic language together to reveal their common denominator.

With the series „Erased or Not Erased“, we experience a further development within the work of the artist. The singular erasing of a work by Rauschenberg and a painting by Malevich should be called to mind as an expansion of the digital art of George Pusenkoff. What fascinated Pusenkoff during the process of erasing on the computer screen was the possibility of free gesture, which, although actually possible in any form of painting, reached its climax in the works of the Abstract Expressionists. In this new series of paintings, Pusenkoff calls upon the ingenious invention of „Drip Painting“ by Jackson Pollock and paints analogue pictures full of colour and expressive energy, in most cases employing the technique of „dripping“. Parallel with this, he draws a gestured „erasure“ on the computer screen, which results in a white digital image as a negative „form“. In combination with the analogue drip painting, this digital erasure brings about a work that consists of two seemingly contradictory actions, which nevertheless complement each other and engage in an exciting dialogue before our eyes. With the abstract „dripping“ technique, Pollock liberated painting from the paintbrush. Today, Pusenkoff liberates it even further through his digital technique - liberated from colour and matter. The gestured nature of Pusenkoff's paintings has no resistance. It can be either intuitively or intellectually conceived. It appears as a white light, which stands in contrast to the coloured background world of „drips“ and the „all-over“ character of the work.

„Erased or Not Erased“, yes or no, „to be or not to be“ - that is the question. And the answer lies of course in the work of Pusenkoff itself. Rauschenberg had erased De Kooning so long until the drawing of the older master was no longer recognisable. Pusenkoff now erases what he painted himself; and his goal is to bring these two contradictory actions into dialogue with each other, similar to the dialogue between „Ready Mades“ and painting in the „Combine Paintings“ of Rauschenberg, but this time in a play between digital and analogue painting. We are confronted here with, on the one hand, controlled erasing, which allows only particular parts of the painting to disappear, and on the other hand with a free and gestured action, which in some cases has a highly intuitive character. Even the painted „dripping“ is controlled, although a great deal of spontaneity is indeed at play. We are led to understand that the artist is conducting a dialogue with himself, during which he attempts to preserve the balance between the dripped and the erased, between the positive and the negative, between the covered and uncovered surface of the painting, between the intuitive and the planned, between movement and immobility. In some paintings, the erasing and its gestures appear to be stronger than the painted background; sometimes it is the other way around. But one thing is certain: the painting is, for our eyes, always a play between these energies. We automatically experience the confrontation of these two worlds. Duality is the dominant principle here; the canvas is the battlefield, on which the two polarised powers confront each other and will perhaps, in the end, be reconciled. In some of the paintings, the two worlds appear to have dissolved into a peaceful symbiosis, while in others we find erased structures with static surfaces, which owe their visual power to the multicoloured background.

The „Erased Paintings“ are nourished by these tensions. Our eyes roam from one level to the other; the interpretation is never straightforward. Pusenkoff has re-evaluated the act of erasing

and transformed the negative energy into something positive and creative. The dematerialization of the gesture of erasing has taken on an intellectual significance, which results in a sensual form of painting that has achieved new levels of freedom and will move on to new, as yet unknown territories of art.

George Pusenkoff's „Erased Paintings“ transport abstract painting into the digital age. At the same time, the artist pays reverence to the liberating powers of the pioneers of a new abstraction in the 1940s and early 1950s.

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Geneva, 24 September 2003

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Translated from the German by Gérard A. Goodrow, Cologne.