

DATA browser 06  
EXECUTING PRACTICES

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Established in 2004, the DATA browser book series explores new thinking and practice at the intersection of contemporary art, digital culture and politics.

The series takes theory or criticism not as a fixed set of tools or practices, but rather as an evolving chain of ideas that recognise the conditions of their own making. The term “browser” is useful in pointing to the framing device through which data is delivered over information networks and processed by algorithms. A conventional understanding of browsing may suggest surface readings and cursory engagement with the material. In contrast, the series celebrates the potential of browsing for dynamic rearrangement and interpretation of existing material into new configurations that are open to reinvention.

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ISBN 9781570273216

 2017 the authors

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DATA browser series published  
by AUTONOMEDIA

P.O. Box 568  
Williamsburgh Station  
Brooklyn, NY 11211-0568

<http://www.autonomeia.org/>

The DATA browser editorial group are  
Geoff Cox, Joasia Krysa, Anya Lewin.

<http://www.data-browser.net/>

This volume produced by  
Critical Software Thing with support  
from Participatory IT Research Centre,  
Aarhus University

DATA browser series template  
designed by Stuart Bertolotti-Bailey.

Book layout and typesetting by  
Esther Yarnold, Studio Fold.

The cover image is derived from Multi  
by David Reinfurt, a software app that  
updates the idea of the multiple from  
industrial production to the dynamics  
of the information age. Each cover  
presents an iteration of a possible  
1,728 arrangements, each a face built  
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[www.o-r-g.com/apps/multi](http://www.o-r-g.com/apps/multi)

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Linda Hilfling Ritasdatter

# Erasure

Audrey Samson

*What has been conquered for all has been redefined by categories that are addressed to whoever, categories that produced amnesia and which are then vulnerable to the infernal alternatives concocted by capitalism.*

– Isabelle Stengers in *Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*

How does erasure *execute* knowledge production? The following is a tour through a collection of *erasure* that provides a glimpse into the many directions that this question may take us, through the lens of a series of artistic interventions, academic research, experiments and artefacts.

I present these items from a collector's point of view. For achieving completion of this collection of erasures would be, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, like *death*. That is to say that the desire to complete the series, to achieve the perfection of its imaginary ending, is that which creates the elusive object of desire. As such, in the same way that a collection can always extend itself laterally, or spark a new one ([1968] 1996, 113), I am presenting it as an object of desire, fuelled by the impetus of neoliberal growth, which can never be complete and will forever expand into new meanings of execution, always towards the elusive erasure of death.

The collection begins with the archetypal storyteller: memory. Human memory is a careful curation of erasure. Most of what is experienced is not actualised in long term memory (Kandel 2007). It is neither forgotten, nor is it remembered in the first place. Amongst the select few moments that are retained, that we call memory, the parsimonious organ intently and iteratively erases (Hadziselimovic et al. 2014). The work of Estefanía Peñafiel Loaiza repeats this gesture in *Sans titre (figurants)*. She deliberately effaces certain *personnages* from newspapers with an eraser. The perseverance of this task, the cadavers of erasure, are *collected* and categorised (Figure 1). This play on history, or what is remembered, emphasises the relation to how an individual defines herself and acts in the world, namely because we think of our future as anticipated memories. According to psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011), one of the major motivations for global tourism, for example, is the desire to collect memories. Execution as collection.



Figure 1. *Sans titre (figurants)* (2009–2011) by Estefanía Peñafiel Loaiza.  
Photo: © Marc Damage, courtesy of the artist.

The authoring power of memory is a notion that has been historically capitalised upon by various regimes. The systematic erasure of peoples, national archives and artefacts have been used to strengthen specific notions of national (or religious) identity. In the same vein, such powers as the Chinese People's Party, Facebook and Google use erasure to obfuscate events that do not fit a certain political narrative or a set of private interests (Lim 2014; Travis 2013; Shaker 2006). Winnie Soon's *How to Get Mao Experience Through Internet...* (2014–15) is a monumentalising loop of obfuscations (Figure 2). The repeating, centred portrait of Mao blinds us from the surrounding landscape changes, itself a reminder of the vision curated by search engines such as Google, Flickr and Baidu. Obfuscation through repetition.

The politics of the archive are a powerful force driving knowledge production (Steyerl 2008; Brown & Davis-Brown 1998; Bowker & Star 1999; Derrida 1995). The Internet's inherent data transfer and storage redundancy model facilitates a sort of hyperthymesia<sup>1</sup> where the *execution* of social network sharing can construct fallacies or stain reputations. An emblematic case of this being that of the pepper spray incident at the University of California Davis (Figure 3). The university's strategic communications office was later found to have employed "reputation management firms" to *delete* an incriminating photo from the Internet to avoid negative coverage of the events that took place in November 2011 (Jardin 2016). Brute force execution.





Figure 2. *How to get the Mao experience through Internet...* (2014–15) by Winnie Soon. The above are 9 collated screenshots of the animated GIF sequence.



Figure 3. University of California Davis protest picture (2011).

As dissemination channels multiply, ecologies of power adapt by attempting to directly manage how representatives are perceived and evaluated by those they represent. Daniel Mayrit produced a series of photographs, *Imágenes Autorizadas* (Authorised Images), of Spanish police following the implementation of the Law on Protection of Public Safety (Ley Orgánica 4/2015). Nicknamed “Gag Law”, this legislation makes it illegal to publish any images of forces of state security (Figures 4 and 5) (Miró 2016). In Mayrit’s artwork the police are portrayed with pixelated faces, or without faces at all. The photographs exploit a legal loophole by making the police anonymous in the images. Nonetheless, Mayrit’s exploit through anonymisation drew unexpected attention from the protagonists. Two police officers were noticed in the exhibition, engaged in trying to recognise their colleagues in the images. What has been erased in this instance is the visible and symbolic disagreement with the state (Urbinati 2000). *Pics or it didn’t happen...*



Figure 4. Authorised Images (*Imágenes Autorizadas*), Untitled, by Daniel Mayrit (2016), courtesy of the artist.

Such censorship has also masked the effacement of ecosystems for the extraction of raw material, such as the Alberta tar sands, under the guise of *national sacrifice zones* (Thomas-Muller 2010). These terraformed landscapes paradoxically become fodder to fuel the cultural machinery manufacturing hegemonic consent of the oil sands as *sustainable development* (Black et al. 2014). Species extinction results from the extensive landforming, a radical form of erasure that is both a material reality and a cultural discourse that legitimises inegalitarian social order (Dawson 2016). Such systems may in turn produce

devastated landscapes of violence and trauma, such as the aerial photography of the Negev desert, depicted in Fazal Sheikh's *Memory Trace* (2015). Execution of epistemic and violent erasure.



Figure 5. *Authorized Images (Imágenes Autorizadas)*, Untitled, by Daniel Mayrit (2016), courtesy of the artist.

Meanwhile, deserts and forests are also making way for data centres. The materiality of data is terraforming the planet through extraction of resources and infrastructures to house data servers. *Crystal Computing (Google Inc., St. Ghislain)* is a video-based investigation by Ivar Veermäe into Google's data centre in Saint-Ghislain, Belgium, which in 2013 housed 296,960 servers (the second largest in the world). In his quest to visit the physical location of this monument, what might aptly be described by Shannon Mattern (2013) as *infrastructural tourism*, Veermäe finds that the location itself is blurred out of Google maps, and wrongly identified to be in Mons (Figure 6).<sup>2</sup> This means of erasure is reminiscent of "whiting out" (Weizman and Sheikh 2015), white spots left on maps by colonial cartographers that led to the wiping out of entire native cultures.

The awe inspiring *technological sublime* (Nye 1996), monoliths that once attracted crowds, are now hidden away, fortresses of secrecy archiving our every move. Traces of these infrastructures are revealed through vestigial Internet lore, such as *Ghost Sites of the Web*, a collection of abandoned "Web 1.0 history" (Figure 7). Itself a

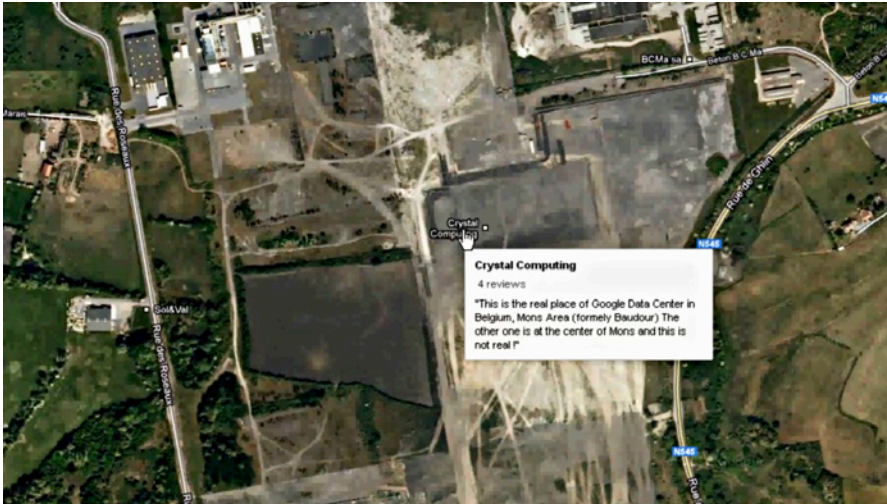


Figure 6. Still from *Crystal Computing* (Google Inc., St. Ghislain) (2014) by Ivar Veermäe, courtesy of the artist.

**FOUND A ROTTEN  
OR ABANDONED  
WEB SITE?**

**Send Email to  
Steve\_Baldwin at  
hotmail dot com.** Has your  
own site been online (dead  
or alive) for more than a  
decade? We need to talk!

Figure 7. Screen capture from the *Ghost Sites of the Web* (n.d.).  
<http://www.disobey.com/ghostsites/>

deserted platform (its last post issued in 2008), *Ghost Sites of the Web* is described as a site for “forgotten web celebrities, old web sites, commentary, and news by Steve Baldwin. Published erratically since 1996.”<sup>3</sup> Execution as haunting.

Erasure of data, or lack thereof, has important socio-political implications, ranging from refused entry to a country based on the grounds of decontextualised data that lives on in the network, to mass surveillance (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). *DEL?No, wait!REW* is an installation that prompts the visitor to make a decision about whether to *forever* delete or to publish a file publicly online (Figure 8). The files are recovered from hard drives “without the consent or the knowledge of the previous owners, who presume their content has been forever deleted”.<sup>4</sup> The viewer literally initiates the execution of scripts that will either propagate or terminate an information set. Personal data is treated as an objet *trouvé*, fodder for junk art. Executing valuation.



Figure 8. *DEL?No, wait!REW* (2014) by Michaela Lakova. (Photo: Michaela Lakova). Courtesy of the artist.

One of the proposed ethical solutions amidst this data amassing megalomania is “privacy sensitive” surveillance. An example of this is the Secure Erase Module (SEM), developed as part of an automated “suspicious” behaviour detection system, which deletes 95–99% of the footage collected (Neyland and Möllers 2016). The design includes auto-deletion algorithms that follow a similar logic as the detection algorithms. Moving objects are detected from the usual background

and classified according to potentially suspicious parameters (i.e. if an object splits it might designate luggage left behind) (Figure 9). In practice, however, not all frames were gathered. Some frames were left behind undeleted, and the tool produced a continual output of partial failure. In addition, the deletion log generator, a sub-module of SEM, creates and records metadata, such as filenames of deleted objects. Privacy here is equated to the automated (failure prone) recognition and deletion of non-relevant data. Privacy as defective erasure.



Figure 9. The image shows the failure of the software detection system, mistaking a body for the floor, a bag separated from its owner (though it is not), or the wall as a moving entity. Permission from Daniel Neyland.

The datafication of everything, which facilitates surveillance, is re-writing the landscape with ever expanding server farms and the extraction of resources to fuel data transfer and storage. My obsession with erasure was originally inspired by my desire to gain agency within these iterative inscription processes. I began by exploring the use of *blanking*, a term I borrow from Russell Thomsen (2015), which designates a form of withholding that transforms apprehension and communicates the presence of an absence. Thomsen coins this term in his description of a memorial design proposal for Auschwitz, an emergent ritual that is created through the experience of the absence of the site. Similarly, *ne.me.quitte(s).pas* is a digital data funeral that I originally developed with Jonathan Kemp that involves the degradation of memory chips with highly corrosive acid, of which the remains

evoke the absence of the erased data (Figure 10). The material “data remnants” were given back to participants like cremation ashes. Erasure as memorialisation.

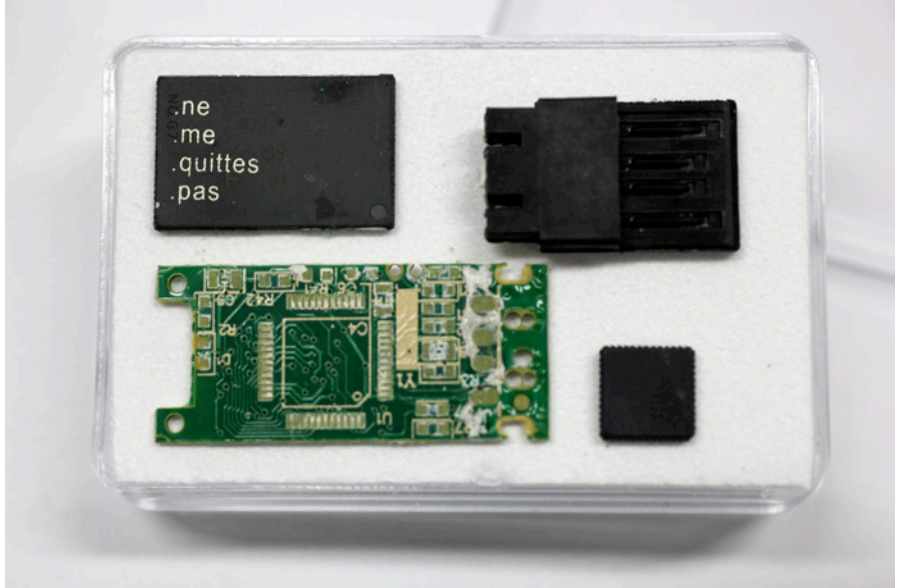


Figure 10. *ne.me.quitte(s).pas* (2014). The remains of the digital data funeral. All metal is corroded by the acid during a 90 min immersion in Aqua Regia ( $\text{HNO}_3 + 3\text{HCl}$ ).

The ruins of the erased data represent an agential force of erasure within the datafied landscape. Not unlike *subtraction*, which is defined by Keller Easterling (2014) as the disappearance of building that is itself a form of growth, a productive force managed by citizens, as opposed to the violent gentrification dictated by global financial industries.

From the public executions endemic to revolutionary propaganda to the use of erasure as an imaginative agency, this thought experiment acts as a tool for *thinking through* different forms of erasure and their relationship to knowledge production. It is through this survey of instantiations of *execution* portrayed by various practitioners that I hope to establish an ecology of practices of erasure that considers its potential for both destruction and cultural re-imaginings. A collection of *erasures* that embodies how execution, or the act of erasing, can categorise, divide, kill, heal and re-build systems such as memory, national identity, ideological frameworks, economy, ecology, networks and architecture.

## Notes

1. A very rare condition also called Superior Autobiographical Memory, characterised by the ability to remember the events of any given day with accurate detail.
2. These statistics are dated from 2013. Interestingly, what was then blurred out has now been made visible. Tactics of erasure are shifting. See Crystal Computing (Google Inc., St. Ghislain) by Ivar Veermäe <http://www.ivarveermäe.com/CRYSTAL-COMPUTING/>.
3. *Ghost Sites of the Web*. <http://www.disobey.com/ghostsites>.
4. See <http://www.mlakova.org/works.html>.

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