Vija Celmins, Strategies of Negation, and the Trauma of Representation

Dustin Chad Alligood

To translate into words Vija Celmins's pictures is to do them no small disservice: in their expansive and immutable grisaille, they invite a certain silence—even as they point to words left unsaid. Perhaps due to this mandated quietude, writers have been reticent in interpreting Celmins: most have chosen instead to mince and ginger their way through her biography to contextualize the imagery in her work.[1] Such a method is not unwarranted. Celmins fled her native Latvia with her family in advance of the Soviet army at the formative age of six. Some twenty-five years later, in her adopted home of late-1960s America, she made a series of finely realized graphite drawings of war-plane photographs, which she ripped from books and magazines. An attempt to analyze this work in the context of her biography, then, presents a connect-the-dots parlor game for the erstwhile catalogue essayist.

This sort of reading readily presents itself when looking, for instance, at *Plane* (1968, Figure 1). The work is a typical example of her oeuvre in that it expressly takes as its subject a photograph: her drawings, paintings, and prints nearly all depict a photograph, which in turn depicts something else. This drawing articulates its seemingly noncommittal subject: a torn photo of an airplane, along with the sea of static grayness on which it seems to float. On closer inspection, we discover that the photograph as represented does not float at all. In fact, three staples affix (or affix*ed*, in the case of one) the photograph to the gray ground: a pair secures the top two corners of the photograph, while the shadow of the photograph partially obscures the third staple at the bottom right. In quoting a sign of fixity just to undermine it, the photograph is in the process of tearing away from its ground, in danger of revealing the "something behind what you see" intimated in interviews by the artist herself.[2] In the reading we have sketched here, this "something" would be the lived, experiential trauma inherent to the biography of the artist.

Her successive work, however, remains somewhat more resistant to this sort of one-to-one interpretive framework, since overtly object-based references fall out of her images almost entirely by 1970. What remains after the airplanes nosedive out of them is that other kind of plane—the two-dimensional one. The gently lapping surface of an expansive sea, the glow of galaxies against a black and distant curtain, the fragile intersections of a spider web: these are her subjects from the 1970s through today. All of these, like *Untitled (Ocean)* of 1968 (Figure 2), are mediated by the conceit of the photograph, and all are stretched nearly end-to-end over the picture plane, evincing an all-over aesthetic. They predominantly maintain a modest and manageable size; at 36 x 48 cm, *Untitled (Ocean)* typifies this aspect. What then, of these? Such pictures, in their collective nod towards flatness, seem everywhere indicative of an art historical moment saturated with the ideal of medium specificity; indeed, the first of these works appears less than a decade after Clement Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" in 1960. Following such an observation, we might go on to find in these drawings a formal critique of the picture plane and its properties, a rational extension of the formal medium to its logical ends; to a certain extent, the pictures themselves bear out such an exegesis.

To traffic in the muddied art historical binary of content versus form seems an egregious error at this late stage. Thankfully, signposts in Celmins's work deliver us from such hoary constructions. Yes, Celmins's images point to a certain formalist inquiry. To be sure, the work also bespeaks a certain personal trauma, an endeavor at both reliving and repressing which is by turns intensely stirring and extraordinarily distant. But I will attempt to argue that this oscillation between depictive modes is a necessary function of an additional, more expansive, and entirely related trauma: the trauma of representation.

Such a melodramatic claim bears some parsing.[3] In Celmins's images there is an arduousness, a belabored intensity (her small drawings can take upwards of a year to produce) that betrays an effort at fixing the subject—that is, "fixing" in the sense of making stable, but also in the sense of mending. Her rhythmic, persistent attempts at such a goal suggest to me a reaction to, and more specifically a visual representation of, some underlying trauma. Celmins is entirely forthcoming about the resolute obsession marked in her images—and her unwillingness to stop working over them. In an interview with her close friend and fellow artist Chuck Close, she explains this obsession: "I think I often stop because I can't stand the trauma of having to look at my own work in a show. The worst part of it is that I think if I keep on working I might break through to some other kind of plane that's past the mind."[4] In this kind of construction, an apparently austere, straightforward image somehow intimates a further unsettling "reality"—a trauma, I would say—beyond the image itself, as apparent in *Untitled (Ocean)*. At this juncture it will have become clear that an understanding of Celmins's work might be informed by Sigmund Freud and his explorations of the fetish. For Freud, the originary and ultimate trauma is the child's confrontation with his mother's lack of a penis.[5] The fetish object, it follows, serves as the apotropaic object of desire in the face of the castration anxiety caused by such an event. We might understand the image, therefore, as operating rather like a screen—a suppression against the encroachment of something beyond its surface. The screen as a metaphor for the function of these images is apt; it connotes a two-dimensional plane which seems to permit access to an infinite beyond—while the very stuff of the screen itself explicitly disallows such access. This screen is, as a matter of course, insufficient because its very existence points to the traumatic reality without explicitly figuring it—a situation which becomes recursively traumatic in its own right.

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[1] E.g., Douglas Blau, "Solid Air," in *Vija Celmins,* ed. Judith Tannenbaum (Philadelphia: ICA, 1992). See also Susan Larsen, *Vija Celmins: A Survey Exhibition* (Los Angeles: Fellows of Contemporary Art, 1979); and James Lingwood, *Vija Celmins* (London: ICA, 1996).

[2] Vija Celmins, Chuck Close, and William S. Bartman, *Vija Celmins* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1992), 16.

[3] My exploration of "trauma-as-representation" and Celmins owes much to the work of Isabelle Loring Wallace, who has treated similar themes with respect to Jasper Johns and Edouard Manet. See Isabelle Loring Wallace, "From Painting's Death to the Death in Painting: Or, What Jasper Johns Found in Marcel Duchamp's *Tu m'/Tomb*," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 7, no. 1 (2002): 133-156; see also Isabelle Loring Wallace, "From the Garden of Eden and Back Again: Pictures, People, and the Problem of the Perfect Copy," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 9, no. 3 (2004): 137-155.

Such a relational system in Celmins's work, I would argue, is undergirded by Jacques Derrida's understanding of the deferral of meaning in sign systems, where the originary absence of the signifier in the written sign necessitates its iteration *sous rature*, or under erasure. Following Martin Heidegger, Derrida denoted this condition by writing the word in question (plane) and then crossing it out (~~plane~~); even in this effacement, the word remains legible, underscoring its dynamic oscillation between presence and absence. For Derrida, the written sign was "inadequate yet necessary" to use; inadequate because of its inability to call forth that which it signifies, but necessary because of the broken system of signification to which we are all bound in our communication.[6]

I contend that such an effacement finds a visual manifestation in the work of Vija Celmins—a correspondence informed by her historical contemporaneity with Derrida. Her *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)* from 1971 depicts, with selfsame assuredness, the radical expanse of an ocean surface as represented in a black-and-white photograph (Figure 3). In this aspect, it is hardly distinguishable from her *Untitled (Ocean)* of the year before, but even as the viewer's eye traverses irregular crests and troughs, it is caught by a minute absence: a finely articulated, almost invisible line, literally erased from the buildup of graphite that forms the waves, which leads from the lower edge diagonally upwards to intersect with a second line. These two form a cross in the center of the drawing. Such a Derridean function attempts to underscore the inadequacy of the signifier (the drawing) to call forth the supposed referent of the image (the photograph) even as it allows the representation to continue to function as a screen. At once, the drawing stages a showdown between presence and threatening absence: the image remains unequivocally present, in all of its layered charcoal-on-acrylic-on-paper materiality, and yet seems on the verge of negation, falling out of existence altogether. Indeed, some of that well-worked materiality is lost already to the ominous rub of the eraser. Much as *Plane* earlier threatened to flutter away and out of our realm of perception, so, too, does *Untitled* (*Ocean with Cross #1*) tenuously toe the boundary between presence and absence.

It will not do, however, to merely consider Celmins's images in a visual vacuum powered by psychoanalytical and semiological readings (however compelling they may be on their own). After all, the image in question belongs to that oft-maligned but solidly entrenched genre—the landscape—and deploys some of the traditional devices of two-dimensional representation: cropping, framing, and the (admittedly attenuated) illusion of depth. While a comparison of Celmins and, for example, Canaletto is perhaps best left for another discussion, there are some visual and structural parallels that have yet to be drawn with Celmins that hold particular currency for the argument here. For example, in its limited palette of expansive yet contained subject matter, and rhetorics of presence and absence, we might find a compelling antecedent for *Untitled* (*Ocean with Cross #1*) in Piet Mondrian's *Pier and Ocean* series from around 1915. Consider, for instance, *Composition No. 10, Pier and Ocean* (1915, Figure 4), a typical example from this series in its regimented juxtaposition of intersecting line segments of varying length. Like *Untitled* (*Ocean with Cross #1*), *Composition No. 10* remains resolutely planar, even as its title intimates a vast and unknowable depth. Mondrian's individual marks punctuate the sober expanse of the canvas, inviting the viewer to consider their formal independence from the rest of the composition. Just as forcefully, and simultaneously, in their rigid adherence to horizontal and vertical axes they

[4] Celmins, Close, and Bartman, *Vija Celmins,* 49.

[5] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962).

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 45.

reiterate their relationship to the harmonious elliptical whole. *Untitled* (*Ocean with Cross #1*) likewise arduously insists on the overall unity of the charcoal marks, masterfully concealing the gestures of its own making, but just as insistently, the erased "X" denotes the "composed" quality of these individual marks and their relationship to one another.

Mondrian recognized the thematic importance of his underlying oppositional structure: he claimed that the "vertical and horizontal lines are the expression of two opposing forces."[7] The opposition finds further visual expression in the pluses and minuses that inherently result from the intermittent intersection of Mondrian's truncated strokes: on the one hand, a sign of intersection communicating presence, and on the other, a non-intersection representing absence. In a sense, we might provisionally understand these two works, *Untitled* (*Ocean with Cross #1*) and *Composition No. 10*, to be concerned with the viability of the intersection—the cross—to adequately structure the picture in such a manner as to figure forth the idea of presence. Of course, in the history of Western images since Christ, the cross has been deployed as a visual symbol of Christ's bodily persecution and suffering, and therefore his (now expired) corporeal presence. Unlike Mondrian's cross, Celmins's consists not of the presence of the stroke, but the pronounced and intended lack thereof. As such, her act of erasure casts doubt on the viability of the image—all images—to sufficiently communicate bodily presence.

Celmins's strategy of radical negation by erasure further extends a line of post-World War II American artists who were interested in similar modes of effacement. Robert Rauchenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953, Figure 5), illustrates this technique to drastic effect. For this piece, Rauschenberg requested a drawing from Abstract Expressionist master Willem de Kooning, who provided Rauschenberg with a dense mixed-media image that Rauschenberg then proceeded to methodically and purposefully erase over the next two months. Gone are the gestural marks, the sensuous colors, the spatial illusion inherent to the Abstract Expressionist idiom—and in its place? Mere shadows of what once was: a fleeting incidence of yellow ochre, spectral remnants of rendered light and shade. Yes, for Rauschenberg, these formal elements were up for examination, but, more importantly for this argument, their very viability as signs communicating intention, expression, and meaning was resolutely and irrevocably indicted.

The viability of the sign to deliver its supposed referent was also interrogated by Ed Ruscha, Celmins's contemporary in the L.A. Pop scene. Ruscha's drawing *Lisp* (1966, Figure 6) for instance, takes as its target not the pictorial sign but the linguistic one. Its title-subject flows in florid script across the top half of the drawing, drifting and lilting along a line of curlicues reminiscent of a signature. This line terminates abruptly in a trompe-l'oeil representation of liquid spittle showered on the surface of the drawing. In a startling juxtaposition, Ruscha presents the linguistic sign of a speech impediment alongside its effective physical result: if the word "lisp" was spoken instead of written by a person who has one, this would be the visual sign and not the scripted letters before us. In such a construction, Ruscha uncovers the inherent inability of the written signifier to stand-in for—to successfully and completely communicate—its proposed signified. Along the way, he also manages a deft visual pun at the expense of the Abstract Expressionists: not only are your supposedly unique, aqueous gestures eminently reproducible, he seems to say, but they are also the result of an infantile and effeminate linguistic patois.

All of this is to contextualize Celmins's (*Untitled Ocean With Cross #1*) within the crosshairs of a profound cultural debate about representation and what it meant to make an image in the late 60s and early 70s. Photography, in truth Celmins's only subject, constitutes one of the central battlefields of this debate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the traditional associations of the medium, Celmins has claimed that the photograph for her presented "an alternate subject, another layer that creates distance…."[8] Ostensibly, then, Celmins cashes in on the documentary status of photography accorded by the Western tradition, which has lionized photography's supposed claims to objectivity and indexicality. Rather than Celmins occupying the subject position, she allows the camera to become the "alternate subject," affording her the safe distance the objective camera lens offers from the traumatic object. Just as the integrity of sign systems was questioned at this critical juncture, so, too, was the province of photography under scrutiny. Indeed, her own ambivalence towards the medium is reflected later in that same interview when Celmins commented that she "treats the photograph as an object, an object to scan."[9] While on the one hand Celmins is displaced from her subject position by the supposed authority of the camera, she is, as a matter of course, radically reinstated when she is called upon to mimic that authority as a scanner of objects. Her use of the strategy of incomplete erasure denotes the insufficiency of the photograph to call forth the subject, and therefore its intrinsic value as a screen against some underlying trauma. The irony here, of course, is that representation itself is always already a traumatic enterprise, one which relentlessly, but fruitlessly, attempts to make the absent present.

To return to where we started, and by way of conclusion, we revisit *Plane* in light of such considerations. The quiet drama inherent to this picture lies in its dynamic oscillation between presence and impending absence—it threatens to tear away before our very eyes. In her relentlessly serial explorations of such themes, Celmins seems at once frustrated by her inability to finally and conclusively "fix" the image, yet still somehow compelled to revisit it time and again. The continuous failure of the photograph to deliver its subject becomes obsessively mediated by Celmins, for whom the process of representation seems likewise a continuously frustrating enterprise: a primordially necessary but ultimately unfulfilling venture.

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[7] Piet Mondrian, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art* (New York: Wittenborn, 1951), 15.

[8] Lane Relyea, ed., *Vija Celmins* (London: Phaidon, 2004), 125.

[9] Ibid.

The "trauma of representation," turns on this construction, where the originary trauma lies in the impassable gulf between the artist and the viewer. In a very basic sense, Vija Celmins's work illustrates a principal feature of the work of art: in the moment after it is iterated, it instantly transmogrifies into a monument to the moment that preceded it (and, by extension, the body that created it). In this way, these images take as their subject the infinite and infinitesimal lacuna between artist and viewer, subject and object, sender and recipient. Roland Barthes, writing on the experience of the photograph and rhyming very much with Celmins's own words, called such a space as we have just described "that very subtle moment when .... I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object ... I then experience a micro-version of death: I am truly becoming a specter."[10] In her simulacral use of the photograph, then, Celmins seems to hold the experience of such a death at bay, even as she pictures it. In attempting to *fix* such an experience within her drawings of photographs, Celmins also seeks to negate the distance inherent to their function—as though by suspending in time the moment pictured in the same way that the photograph has already done, she might somehow reunite the disparate entities it inherently created: artist and viewer, subject and object. Her drawings may be a talisman against death, but in such a disavowal, the images necessarily return with a vengeance, and so, too, their disquieting silence, and all the words left unsaid.

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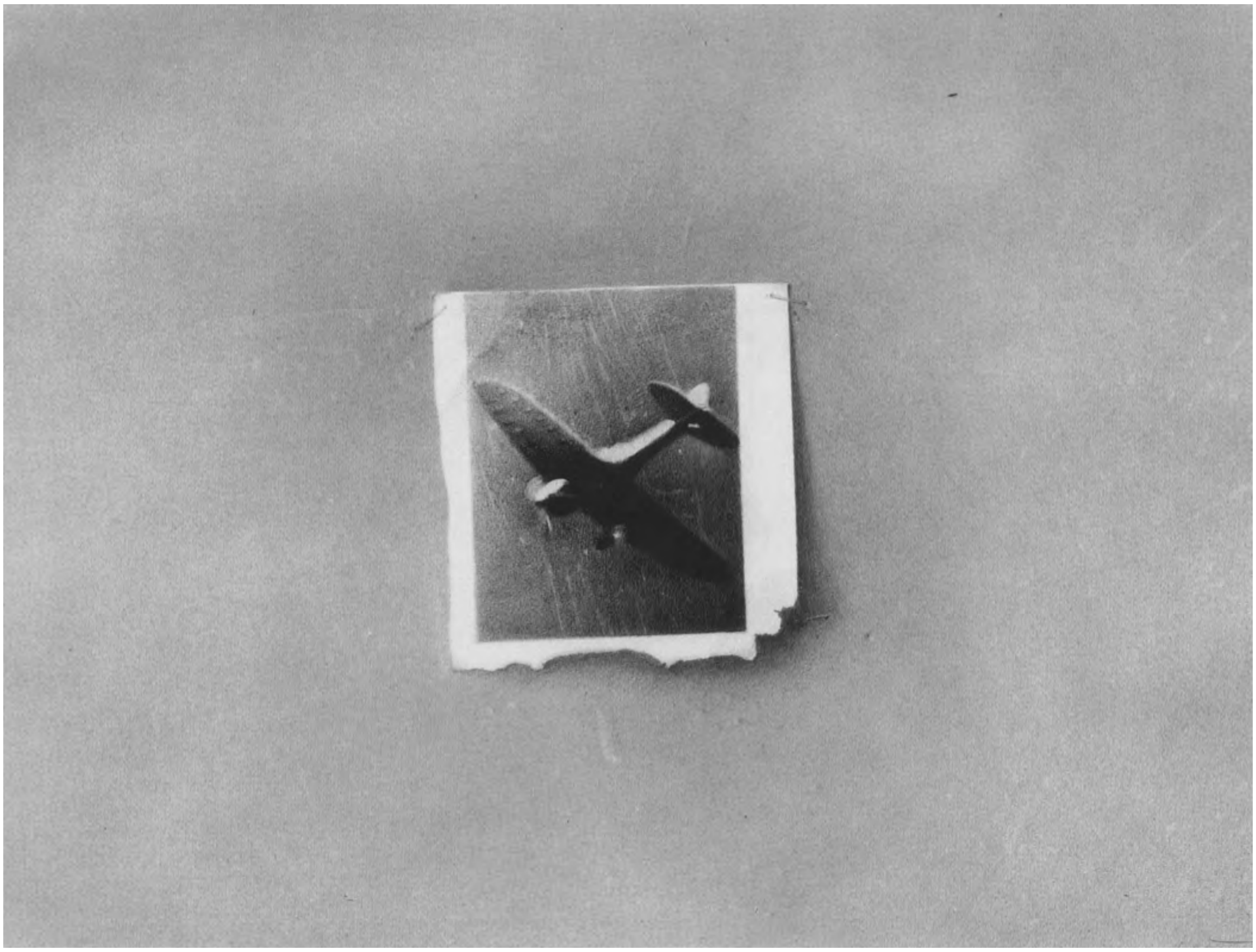
[10] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 13-14.



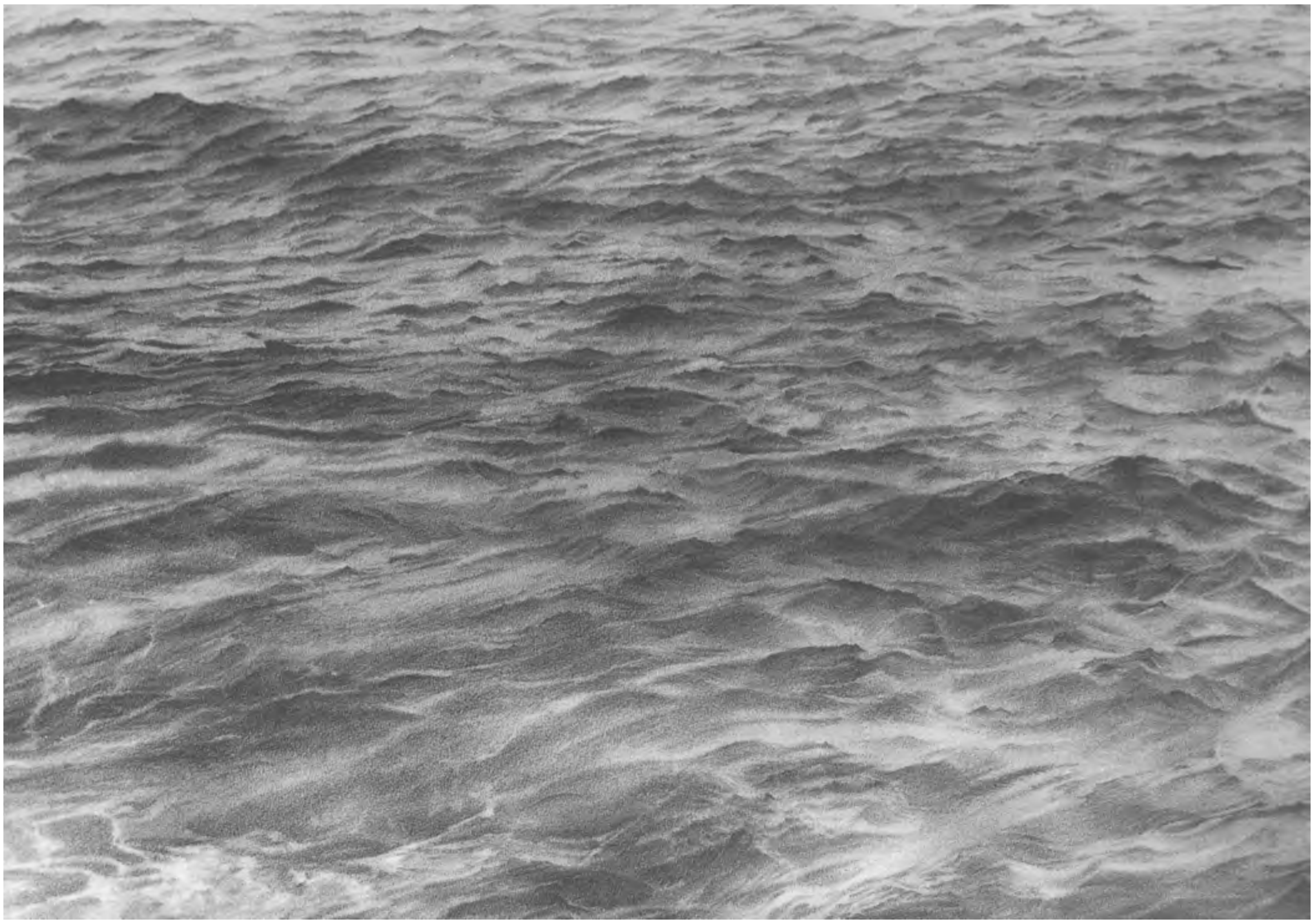


Figure 2. Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Ocean)*, 1968, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 35 x 47 cm, Collection of Tony and Helen Berlant, Santa Monica, California.

[*facing page*] Figure 1. Vija Celmins, *Plane*, 1968, graphite on acrylic ground on white wove paper, 34.9 x 47.2 cm, Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Margaret Fisher Fund and Joseph A. Baird Jr. Purchase Fund, 1996.112, photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

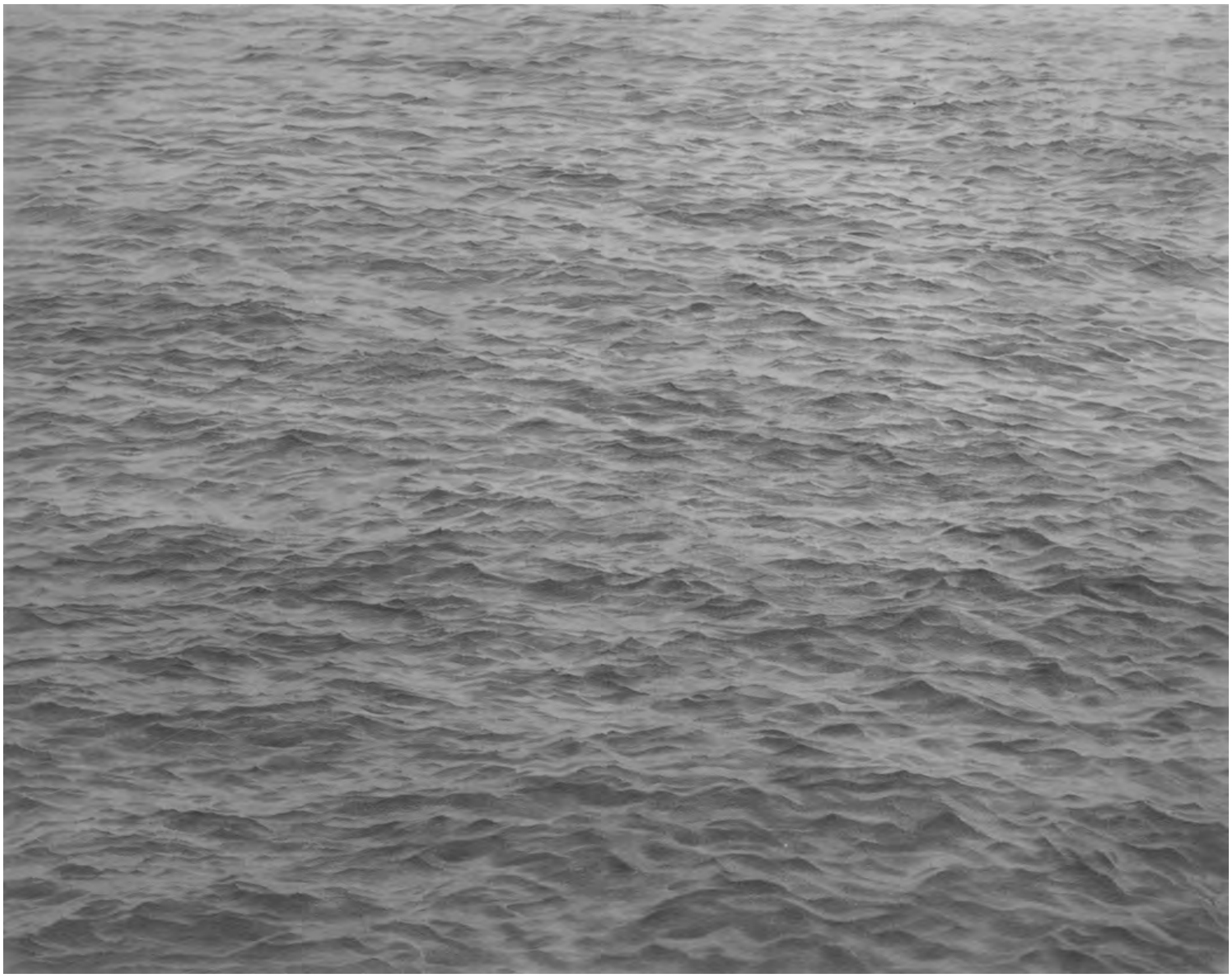


Figure 3. Vija Celmins, *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)*, 1971, graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 45.1 x 57.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Edward R. Broida.

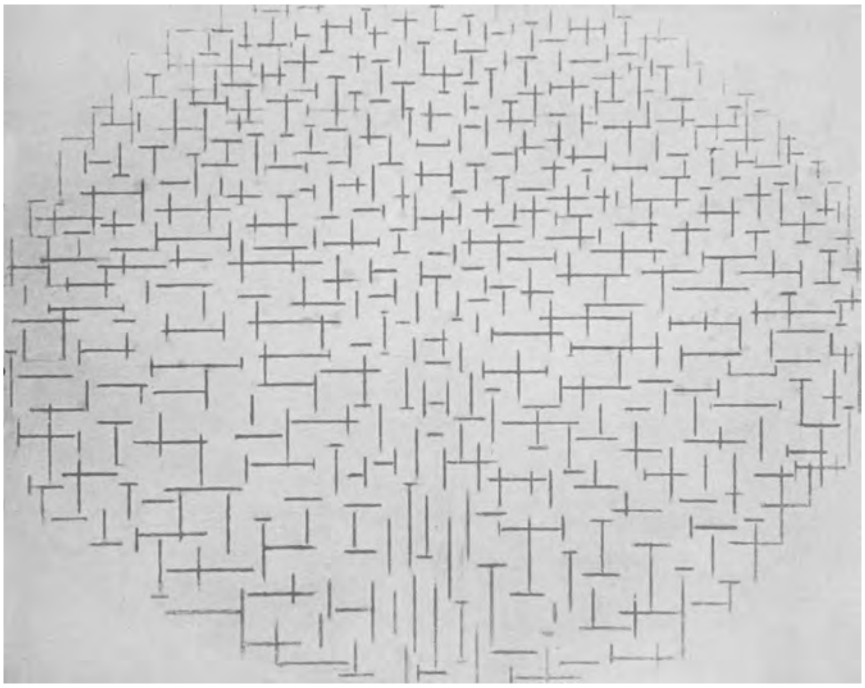


Figure 4. Piet Mondrian, *Composition No. 10, Pier and Ocean*, 1915, oil on canvas, 85 x 108 cm, Otterlo, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller.

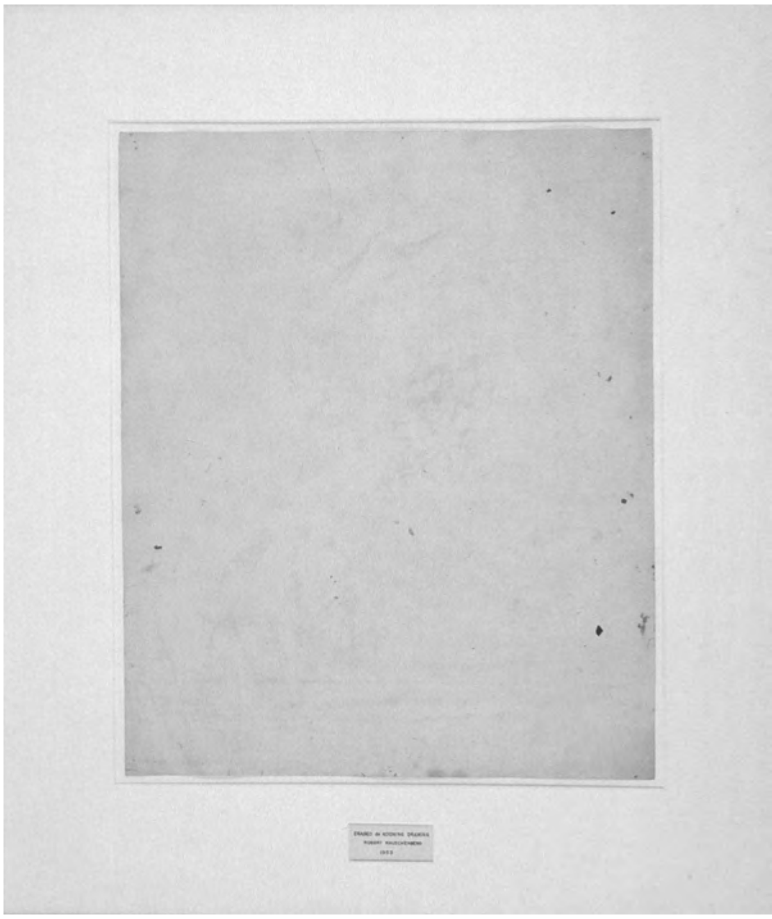


Figure 5. Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953, traces of ink and crayon on paper, mat, label, and gilded frame, 64.14 x 55.25 x 1.27 cm, San Francisco, Museum of Modern Art, Purchased through a gift of Phyllis Wattis.

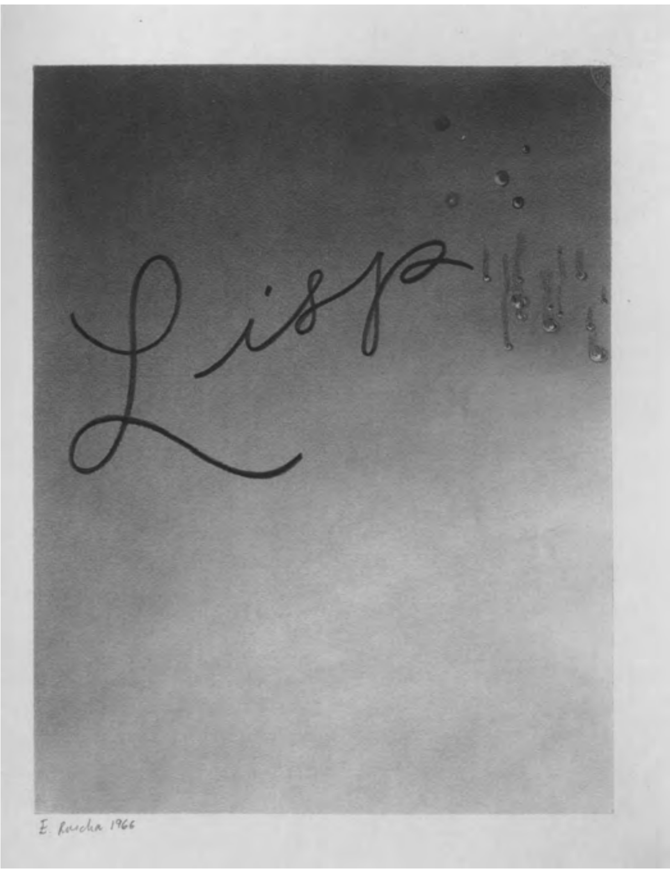


Figure 6. Ed Ruscha, *Lisp*, 1966, powdered graphite and pencil on paper, 26 x 20.8 cm, Collection of Dawn and Kevin Longe.