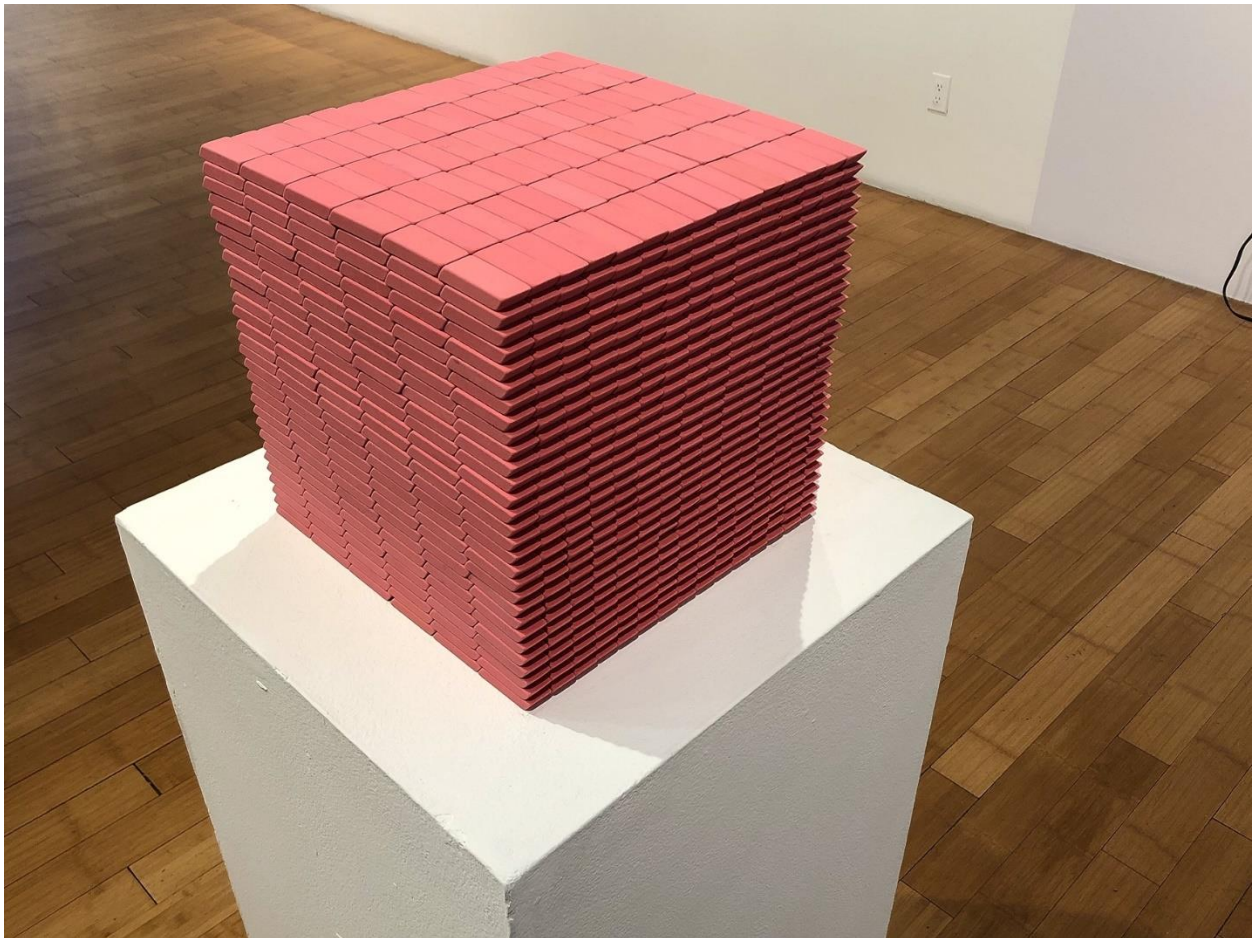




In Absence of the Word, the Word Remains: On Joel Swanson's Pink Erasers

Atop a white pedestal near the rear of [David B. Smith Gallery](#)'s main exhibition space sits a pink 13" x 13" x 13" cube. The artwork, titled "How many Pinkie erasers would it take to create a perfect cube?" ("Pinkie," henceforth, for brevity's sake) is part of [Joel Swanson](#)'s solo show *Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven* currently on view in downtown Denver.



As the title of the piece suggests, Swanson constructed the sculpture from [Pink Pearl erasers](#). To be exact, 2,610 erasers: 29 layers, each arranged in 6 by 15 fashion.



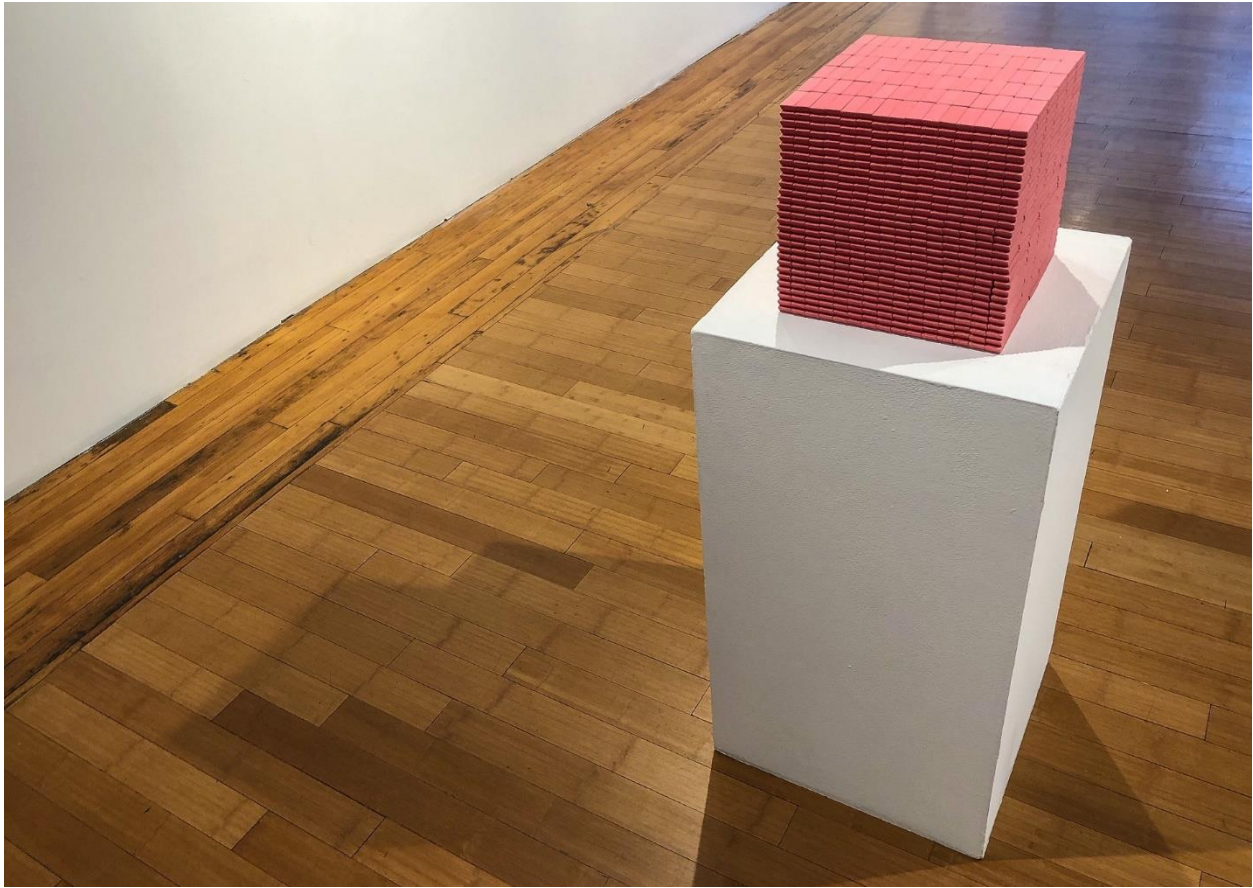
“Pinkie” pleases as a material-aesthetic creation in that it is both familiar and foreign: a ubiquitous object transformed into something novel through systematic repetition. But more than just offering a pleasurable minimalist, visual experience, “Pinkie” challenges us to consider the tension found within the presence-absence binary. Or, perhaps better stated, “Pinkie” asks us to consider the presence-absence dyad as a fluid continuum that never situates us at one terminus or the other; rather, we move dynamically through and from various, contradictory states of presence and absence.

Swanson’s sculpture displays this fluidity of presence-absence well. To begin with, the pink eraser, as a tool, enacts a double disappearance. Not only does the object remove graphite from a surface, but it also diminishes in size with every use as friction sloughs off rubber from its body. Indeed, the eraser not only removes unwanted marks, but it obliterates itself by fulfilling its primary purpose.



Of course, to view “Pinkie” solely as an emblem of absence evacuates the artwork of its nuance and dynamism. For, indeed, what makes the sculpture striking as both a material and conceptual object is the manner in which it creates space and develops density by accumulating and ordering a tool of/for disappearance. The idea of erasure *becomes* present through an aggregate assemblage of erasers.

Absence acknowledged through presence. Thus, presence and absence manifest themselves simultaneously: the former as a material-aesthetic object, and the latter in its latent use-value/purpose.



Likewise, the artwork's stated objective of perfection gestures toward this contradiction as well. The "perfect" cube, in this case, results in a mass of erasers that's just over one cubic-foot. The intent of an eraser, similarly, is also perfection; but it attains this perfection, conversely, through deletion. The "perfect" sculpture and the "perfect" text created from the same object but through oppositional modes of use.

Moreover, one might assume that language, as a visible and material presence, *does* exist in "Pinkie" in the form of branded text printed on the topside of each eraser.

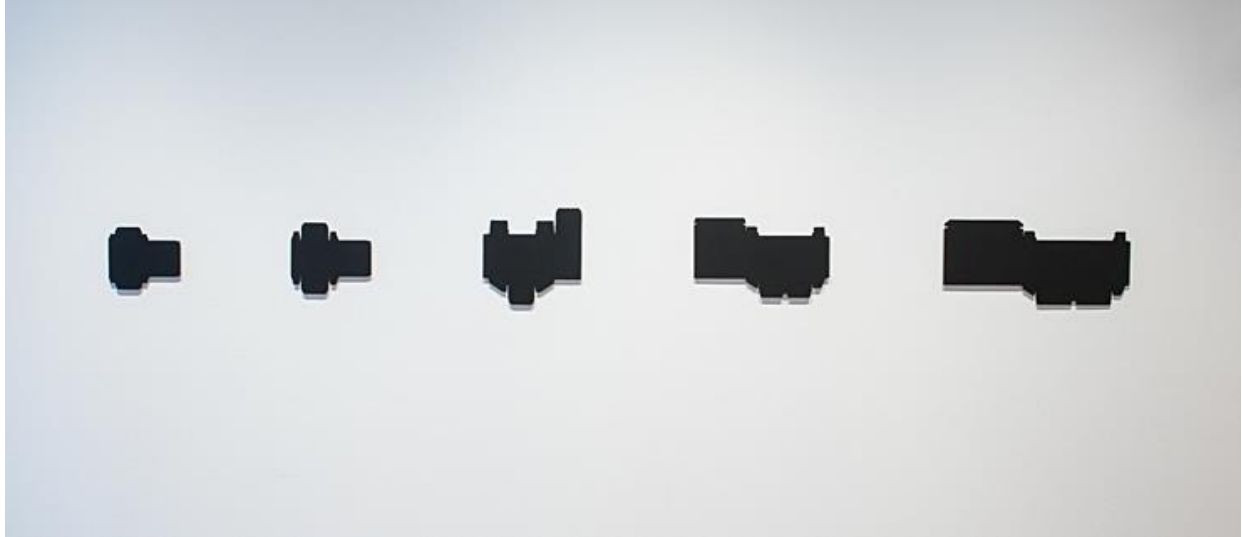


The assumption, here, is that Swanson overturned each eraser for aesthetic purposes, effecting a de facto disappearance of text. Of course, without physically interacting with the art object, one cannot be sure. Perhaps the artist used off-brand objects absent of printed material on their faces. Point of fact: we cannot know for sure. But, regardless, there is an intimation of language: a gestalt that asks us to presume the existence of an unseen but banal ghost text haunting the non-viewable layers of the object.

In these ways, “Pinkie” elicits absence and presence within the selfsame object. Its beauty, then, resides *not* from a reconciliation of binary tensions; rather, the artwork succeeds in that it allows for both presence and absence to exist concurrently and fluidly in a material-conceptual interplay.

But “Pinkie” invokes presence-absence in a broader, cultural register as well. Specifically, the artwork highlights the manner in which technological epochs dictate the tools which we use. To wit, the ascendance of digital and computing devices has foregrounded the Delete, Cntrl-X, and Backspace keys as our primary means of editing and revising. Concomitantly, the pink eraser, once a staple for amending a document, finds itself a less significant tool. The physical presence of “Pinkie,” then, brings into stark relief the absence of the pink eraser as a necessary technology in our digital age. When we look at Swanson’s sculpture in this context, then, we view an assemblage whose component parts are experiencing a rapid obsolescence.

To some extent, though, every object found within Swanson’s *Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven* serves the purpose of critically examining tensions between presence and absence. For, in fact, the exhibition copy notes that the artist does not employ “a single alphanumeric character, [as he] delves into the psychology of language.” Whether deconstructed crayon boxes fabricated from powder-coated aluminum or wall-sized vinyl prints that mimic college and wide ruled paper, all of the works in the exhibit contain a suggestion of language without actually employing it.



Swanson's gesture toward language without its direct implementation engages a broader, historical conversation about the nature of presence and absence that has consumed the arts since, at very latest, the dawn of postmodernity.

In his monograph [Picture Theory](#), for instance, theorist [W.J.T. Mitchell](#) counters the [modernist belief](#) that abstract "art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse" enabled it to create a "barrier" between visual art and language. He argues, instead, that "the wall erected against language and literature by the grid of abstraction only kept out a certain kind of verbal communication, but it absolutely depended...on the collaboration of painting with...the discourse of theory." As such, "the entire anti-verbal ideology of abstraction, its depiction as a rigorous 'barrier' between vision and language, is a myth." For Mitchell and other postmodern theorists, any pronouncements of linguistic absence proved to be apocryphal. Rather, he suggests that abstract art highlights the visual medium's inevitable engagement with language by altering the *type* of language needed to encounter it intellectually.

As a final example of the unresolvable but productive tensions between presence and absence in the world of art, [John Cage](#)'s anecdote regarding his search for silence (i.e. the absence of sound) serves as a poetic dénouement. Toward the beginning of his essay "[Experimental Music](#)," he recalls his first visit to an anechoic chamber:

For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music.

In search of silence, Cage heard the subttones of his circulation and nervous system. The anechoic chamber silenced the world, but amplified his body. What Cage discovered of sound is also true of language: in absence of the word, the word remains. In short, we forever and at once experience presence and absence. Thus, one need not fear about the future of language.

Joel Swanson's solo exhibit Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven runs through January 18, 2020 at David B. Smith Gallery in downtown Denver at 1543 Wazee Street. Visit www.davidbsmithgallery.com for more information.