

The Museum of Chalkboards Never Erased

Liza Wieland

Einstein's chalkboard lives on in the Oxford University History of Science Museum. The lecture captured in chalk was on cosmology, and the measurements on the blackboard estimate the density of matter in the universe, its radius, and the time span of its expansion.

Recently (ten years ago—is that recent? Or has the universe expanded enough already to elongate time?), another scientist discovered a statistical error in Einstein's measurements. That the error is now preserved makes the chalkboard seem less like science and more like art.

In museum terms, the blackboard is called a *mutant*, because it no longer serves the philosophical purpose of a blackboard. It can only regain its original purpose by being wiped clean. There was in fact a second chalkboard used by Einstein, but a museum custodian accidentally cleaned it, thus returning its purpose.

Objects can exist in one of two ways. They can function or they can be possessed.

Which would you prefer? To be used or to be owned?

Use is beauty. That is all ye know. That's what the custodian thought. Also, *my job is to clean*.

Is a job an object? Maybe.

Every few years the Oxford University History of Science Museum mounts an exhibit they call *Bye Bye Blackboard*. They invite ten or twelve famous Britons "to chalk" on blackboards exactly the same dimensions as Einstein's. Last year, Brian Eno drew a map of the world and on it charted the history of music, proving nearly every last note we hear or play descended from Arab song. Glenda Jackson invented and wrote out an equation for how women got the vote. A pianist, Joanna McGregor, illustrated a connection between the bass line of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Bach's

contemporaries, and modern musicians. Cornelia Parker, an installation artist, wrote something unsolvable and impenetrable while blindfolded, and called it *Navigating a Cliff Edge in Darkness*. The Chancellor of Oxford University bemoaned in chalk the squeaks the chalk makes on the board. A footballer, Bobby Robson, illustrated the anatomy of a corner kick.

Jon Snow, a journalist, chalked on a black globe the words GLOBAL WARMING OUR GRAVEST RESPONSIBILITY. Another visual artist, Richard Wentworth, gave a statement: “The physicality of the blackboards of my childhood sprang to mind immediately – their sense of landscape, as if text were a horizon, their sounds, their beautiful receptive surfaces, and their fog of palimpsests,” and imagined the blackboard as a kind of landscape, chalking the alchemists’ epithet: *as above so below*.

The blackboards of my childhood. My mother installed a blackboard in the kitchen, on the door leading to the basement, which stood at right angles to the door through which we entered the kitchen from the rest of the house. The purpose of this blackboard was to remind: appointments, chores, where some or sometimes all of us needed to be, and when. I don’t remember writing on it, though I’m fairly sure I did.

On the other side of this door was a life-sized poster of Mr. Hudson, the butler from the BBC drama *Upstairs Downstairs*, here forever caught in the act of greeting your ascension from the basement. My mother and I loved the show. I was the one who bought the poster and chose where to hang it.

She wanted to like *Downton Abbey* in the same way, but by that time she was starting to go deaf, and the speed of the conversations and the accents made watching depressing and finally unbearable.

Now I live in a renovated red brick schoolhouse. For atmosphere, or to appease the ghosts, the design team left two artifacts: a chalkboard and a globe. My chalkboard functions in some of the same ways as my mother’s, a repository for tasks and reminders, my daughter’s class schedule for her last semester in college, a future dentist appointment. I look forward to erasing all of it: I want my daughter to graduate, I want to be done with writing letters of recommendation for my students, I will remember to take the feta to my husband’s house. The goal of the chalkboard is emptiness. That’s

its use. But I also like owning it. I enjoyed the amusement of others during Zoom meetings, until my boss told me she knew I was going to quit when she saw my approaching appointment with HR. My husband suggested green screen, but I didn't like the way it erased parts of people's heads and torsos without their knowledge or consent.

I once saw an exhibit of paintings by Rita Ackerman called *The Coronation and Massacre of Love*. Gigantic canvases primed with chalkboard paint had been washed with white chalk and pigment and smeared to give the impression of erasures and deletions of vague figurative drawings and landscapes. These emerge out of the background as ghosts, caught between construction and destruction, emotional and actual. Ackerman's process struck me as a step away from madness: drawing the figure or the scene, erasing it, as if the artist had changed her mind or become disillusioned. Then she draws it back, more or less the same, and erases again. Again, the drawing. Again, erasing. After some time, it becomes clear that the original scene can't be completely erased or obscured; in fact, it seems to emerge more vividly, with more force.

After our mother died, I asked my brother about the chalkboard in the kitchen. Did he remember anything our mother had written there? Did he ever write on it? Were we forbidden to do so?

I don't know what you're talking about, he said at first, cautiously, after a long pause. There wasn't any chalkboard. There was a poster, I think, in a blue frame. Something soothing. Monet's water lilies maybe.

I felt as if I were drowning, a whirlpool, a vortex, all the breath spun out of me. What about the other side of the door? What about Mr. Hudson? Remember? When you came up from the basement?

I don't know, he said. Maybe that was after I went away to school.

Truthfully, I can't remember a single date or list written on the chalkboard in the kitchen of my childhood home. In my mind's eye, I can see every other wall and corner of that room, the white Parsons table, the shelf of cookbooks, the radio, the eight-inch television, even the last thing I watched on it, Muhammad Ali lighting the Olympic torch

in Atlanta, trying to coax coherent speech from the blank, beaten, erased places in his brain.



Liza Wieland has published five novels, *Paris, 7 A.M.*, *Land of Enchantment*, *A Watch of Nightingales*, *Bombshell*, and *The Names of the Lost*, and three collections of short fiction, *Quickening*, *You Can Sleep While I Drive*, and *Discovering America*, as well as a book of poems, *Near Alcatraz*. She has won two Pushcart Prizes and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has recently retired from teaching and lives in eastern North Carolina.