



**Erica Baum**  
**«Harpoon the Monster: Blackboards Blanks and Viewmasters»**  
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Erica Baum creates series of photographs, wherein language is one of her central subject matters. She photographs text passages, words and fragments of words wherever she comes across them: libraries, card catalogue drawers, books and newspapers. Afterwards she selects only a detail. Thus the «Blackboards Series» shows boards on which has been written with chalk and on which the writing has been partly wiped away after the students have left the lecture. After cropping the photograph a single word, a letter or dusty swaths of chalk suddenly appear without any context. Baum displaces parts of already existing reality and situates them within new representations in order to call attention to the fact that we are completely shaped by our own word- and image-based culture, which has become natural to us right up to the extent of invisibility.

The recontextualization Baum applies here not only changes the former function of the words and letters that are still legible in her photographs, but also spotlights the current transition from analogue media to digital media, from paper to display, so to speak. Written culture increasingly switches into the digital mode. Because of the frenzied digitization of printed matter and the rise of digital photography, text and image are mainly received digitally by now. In the first place, nevertheless, our culture is based on paper, it thinks, negotiates and speaks on paper. Therefore, in the «Blanks Series» Baum entirely focusses on the consistency of the kind of paper, that has been printed on until the 1970s, its distinctive features being the yellowing color, the dyed edges and the imperfect typeset of the pages.

Up to now the «Blanks Series» represents Baum's most abstract works. Here, Baum has scanned and blown up corners of old book pages. One of the pages was carefully dog-eared, so that a geometrical composition of two facing pages running horizontally and vertically emerges, meeting in a lighter line of a diagonal crease. In her preceding series (named «Dog Ear») Baum also included the text that was printed on the pages and folded them in the same way, so that the lines of one page met at 90 degrees the lines on the next page. With these found pieces of text Baum experimented till such time as she could select concrete poems. One could say that Erica Baum has chosen a photographic investigation in literate culture as a starting point for her artistic work process to arrive at a Hommage to the Square by Josef Albers. Probably the «Blanks» could be connected to the tradition of Constructivism and non-objective art.

In the «Viewmaster Series» Baum creates a situation, in which visibility and legibility begin to vacillate, that means, it remains undecided if the viewer reads or looks at the image. One can see the flat reels used in the stereoscopic children's toy «View-Master». They can be inserted into the instrument to then function as a picture story. Actually, the black spaces would show the corresponding images. But Baum deliberately leaves them out here. Thus, the text becomes more prominent and also works in terms of a visual experience. The recipient sways back and forth between both the cultural technique of reading and viewing. As Erica Baum puts it: «I often work with found text and I'm interested in the way context, text and poetic narrative can operate in a visual field.»



Considering Baum's photographs being both readable as image *and* text respectively piece of art *and* historical document, makes clear that the artist demands from us another way of seeing, a reconsideration of our former viewing and reading habits. Baum finds it quite exciting that her work is visible in so many various ways, also with respect to the current exhibition: as an object, a photograph, within the gallery space or online - there are several parallel forms of access to text and image. Hence the following recommendation: after visiting the exhibition click the homepage of the gallery once more to have a look on Erica Baum's oeuvre on screen as well.

Janne Noll