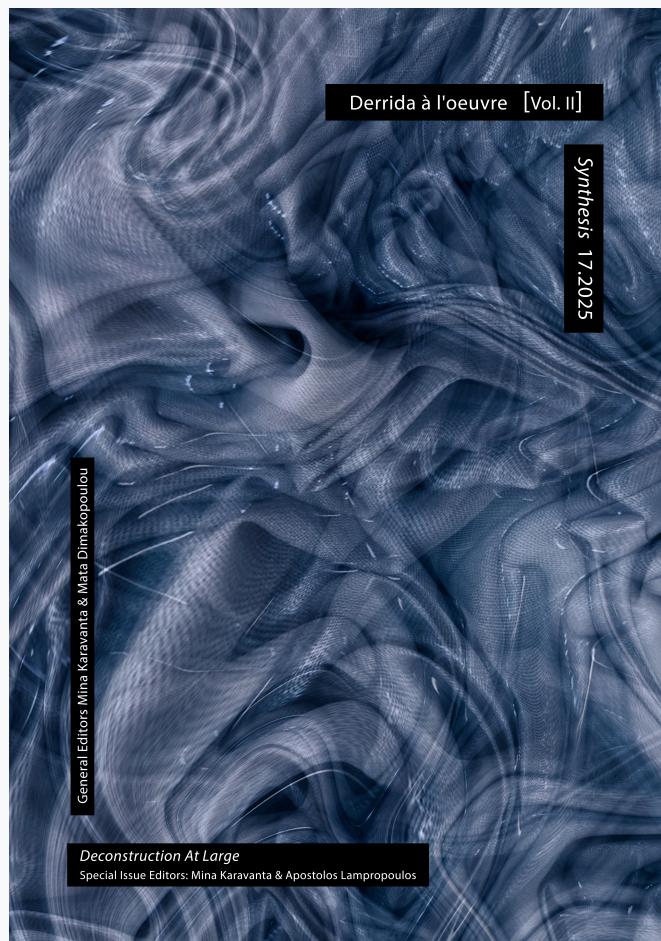


# Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 17 (2025)

Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at Large



**“To be repeatable is by the same token to be alterable”: A Return to the Moment of Différence**

*Stamatina Dimakopoulou*

doi: [10.12681/syn.44017](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.44017)

Copyright © 2025, Mata Dimakopoulou



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

**“To be repeatable is by the same token to be  
alterable”:<sup>1</sup>  
A return to the moment of *différance***

Stamatina Dimakopoulou

**Abstract**

This essay maps a range of responses and contexts of the reception of deconstruction in the US, as markers for the mediations of deconstruction, in order to revisit how deconstruction can be re-situated in its moment. Integral and defining for the time of poststructuralism, Derrida's early thought not only expresses concerns about history and about the history of forms in ways that converge with similar critical interrogations in the US. These synchronicities also invite us to reflect on the demarcations of Derrida's own thought: as it transpires, deconstructive impulses that were incommensurable or unreciprocated come, in retrospect, to attest to engendering potentialities that, perhaps, sometimes emerge despite or against the grain of Derrida's own thought.

Mark Cousins, who was more of a thinker of the spoken rather than the written word—as evidenced by the recently digitised recordings of his nearly thirty year-long public lecture series at the Architectural Association in London—put down on paper his reflections on the “logic of deconstruction” in a 1978 “derrida” special issue of the *Oxford Literary Review*. Cousins credited Derridean deconstruction for “unstabilizing theoretical discourses which necessitate a use of classical conceptions of representation” (70). In keeping with the European tradition that Derrida himself was drawing from, Cousins speaks of the

work of deconstruction in terms that were largely attuned to Derrida’s own: by bringing to the fore how aesthetics, metaphysics and the discourse of European philosophy were sustaining and sustained by a logocentrism founded on the dichotomy and complementarity between presence and absence, deconstruction unfolds, Cousins writes, through the “interruption” of the “claims” of a “text” (71). He sees deconstruction not as attempting to substitute a philosophical discourse for another, but rather as a strategy invested in a generative im-possibility. And he writes:

Philosophical concepts are evaluated by means of concepts that have the same conditions of existence. A circularity operates which protects the concepts from an examination of those conditions of existence. The effect of Derrida’s work is to make that paradox accessible to analysis and to force the effects of its impossibility to register in readings of various texts. (70)

Implicit misgivings aside, the question of interruption, as well as the specific conditions of existence of any one claim or gesture that seeks to trigger what the editors of this special issue call radical potentialities—or otherwise, deconstructive impulses, then and now—within language, as well as within any form of thought or practice, seem to be informed by the fraught tension between what Peter Osborne called from within the field of art theory, a “theoretical formalism” (6) and the urgencies posed by history, in other words, the messiness of worldly contexts.

Through an assemblage of early responses to deconstruction in the US at the time of the linguistic and subsequently the poststructuralist turn in American art and its theories, I want to revisit the ‘*at large*’ through unreciprocated impulses that also allow us to revisit the consistently demarcated, intellectual contexts of Derrida’s early work at the tail-end of the 1960s and at the onset of the more disaffected decade of the 1970s, a climate most wryly and even poignantly expressed by none other than Andy Warhol in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol : from A to B and back again*: “The 60s were Clutter. The 70s are very empty” (26). In what follows and against the backdrop of that shift, I will focus on singular moments of reception and response as markers for the mediations of deconstruction at the time of its troubled political alliances at home and beyond, in order to revisit how deconstruction can be re-situated in its moment. In other words, I want to briefly reflect on this blind-spot of the otherwise well-documented impact of ‘French theory’ in the US,<sup>2</sup> by thinking about uneven or missed dialogues that allow us to shift the ‘*at*

*large*’ beyond or perhaps even despite Derrida. While Derrida himself and to an extent most of his French contemporaries were somewhat at a remove from, or selectively receptive to concurrent deconstructive impulses, these synchronicities merit to be rethought as they respond to similar anxieties, concerns and visions. How do such impulses converge or diverge? And what insights such a re-contextualisation may yield, if instead of thinking the American interest in ‘French theory’ as informing the outlook of conceptualist practices, or determining the emerging critical idioms of journals like *October*, we proceed the other way around: what these mediations may yield for the historicity and the demarcations of the moment of deconstruction?

Coming out of the climate that led to the events of 1968, and briefly associated with the *Tel Quel* group, Jacques Derrida’s early writings emerged at a time when political alliances were forcibly fraught and tied up to strained European inflections of a polarised Cold War climate in which intellectuals in France were still entertaining the dream of bridging the gap between intellectual life and revolutionary, anti-capitalist impulses, also tinged with a certain bourgeois guilt vis-à-vis France’s colonial past. Hence, the attraction of China, and the appeal of Maoism. The anti-colonial theatres of war, US involvement in Vietnam, and the consolidation of the cultural revolution constitute the backdrop of the poststructuralist turn and of the inaugural moment of deconstruction, both perceived, at the time, as linguistic turns of a more troubling and troubled kind vis-à-vis their structuralist precedent. Yet, the questions that underpinned that moment were as troubling then as they are now: how is the work of literature, or art practice, a piece of criticism, or the discourse of philosophy –all more and more capacious defined– to become part of the world that they seek to engage with and within them? Which forms would be more adequate than others? Or even, how would the incommensurability between these forms and the porousness of their boundaries come to reflect the disassociation between writing and the world in ways that gesture beyond the drama and the trauma of disidentification? It is on the level of such pressing questions that Derridean *différance* not only spoke *to* but also *of* a moment that was marked by an anxiety that paved the way for the disaffectedness of the early 1970s. Derridean *différance* took shape in a specific intellectual climate that was marked by an intense self-consciousness about the constructedness and overdetermination of forms and discourses; in other words, the excessive structuralist concern with form became an anti-formalist concern about form, about how forms come into being, unfold, become undone, and get transformed. This is perhaps the reason why in “Deconstructions: The Impossible,” a text that appeared in Lotringer’s and Cohen’s *French Theory in*

*America*, Derrida, he returns to 1966 as the pivotal year of “the famous autumnal conference in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University that some have interpreted as the end of structuralism and the birth of post-structuralism, a purely American notion...which I do not care for” (2001: 16).

The moment of deconstruction more or less coincided with the moment of conceptual art in the United States wherein the critique of opticality and presence was elaborated at around the same time as Derrida’s early critique of logocentrism. Conceptual art, as critics never tire to stress, was not only intended as “Art After Philosophy” as Joseph Kosuth’s foundational text of 1969 claimed, but also ‘art’ that absorbed the lessons of structuralism while gesturing beyond it, as was indeed also the case with the *Tel Quel* group in the late 1960s. The ‘after’ of conceptual art was akin to the ‘post’ of the poststructuralist turn. Jean-François Lyotard’s “Foreword” to Kosuth’s *Collected Writings* is a document that brings it all back through its resonances of the deconstructive rhetorical textures of the late 1960s: “the visual” in Kosuth’s writings, Lyotard states, “is employed to ‘manifest’ the unreadable of writing, to advance an absent ‘presence’” while “the absence of the visual from the visible evokes the absence of meaning from the readable signification” (xvi). Suffice it to remember here iconic, inaugural conceptual works such as Joseph Kosuth’s series on *Art as Idea as Idea*, consisting of large photostats of dictionary definitions in white fonts against a black background, confronting us with the irony of the found object, yet not by way of Surrealist objective chance, but rather by way of Duchampian choice, gesturing towards the gap between the readable, the visible and the outside. Or, Mel Bochner’s employing of minimal—and potentially indexical—deictic prepositions (at/in) in his *Theory of Boundaries* (1969-1970) and in his series on *Language* (1996-2006), well-established standard material of art history textbooks since the 1990s. The concern with the meta-linguistic nature of language was not only driven by a discontent vis-à-vis the painterly and intensely visual tradition of the Abstract Expressionists or the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg but also by a discontent about the embedded discursiveness of the visual, the inevitable enmeshment of art in discourse, the cultural overdetermination of art and the metaphysical underpinnings of aesthetics. The self-reflexiveness about the limits and the logic of the medium itself in American conceptual art triggered a philosophically-informed critique that run parallel to that of logocentrism that was concurrently under way in Derrida’s thought. The institutional critique of conceptual art was staked on a similarly self-reflexive stance whose politics were at a remove from the hands-on politics of feminist or black artists at the time. Hence the gap between the conceptual artists’ institutional critique and the

emergence of the different politics of black and feminist art at the time: as noted earlier, *Tel Quel*’s political and cultural alliances were equally strained vis-à-vis Maoism and China. Derrida, as we know, parted ways with the group, and was dismissed, as Mary Ann Caws stressed in a review essay to which I will return, in *Tel Quel* columns with titles such as “Derrida or the yellow anti-peril” (1973: 3).

It took artists like Adrian Piper to absorb conceptualism, the scientific predispositions of structuralism, the deconstructive philosophical concerns of the early Derrida, and a systematic engagement with Kantian aesthetics, and take them to the streets with her iconic *Mythic Being* (1973-1975), deconstructing race while aligning herself with and also troubling the boundaries of conceptual art.<sup>3</sup> Like Derrida and the conceptualists, Piper is driven by a sense of the exhaustion of discourses on art and language, and sees herself as voicing a shared concern: “the well-sealed, self-enclosed closet of formalist aesthetics is stifling us all” (41). Through inscriptions of a different kind, and by turning her own presence into a site for the incongruencies between the sign, the signifier and the signified, opacity and transparency on which the constructedness of race is also founded, Piper’s body of work also takes up and unsettles even the most capacious notions of textuality and its writerliness. This is just one instance among many, that one would wonder why French poststructuralism and Derridean thought did not take up. How are we to reckon in retrospect with the resistance of deconstruction to make its own ground more permeable?

Closer to this moment, I want to bring a more circumstantial evidence of what seemed to be a missed dialogue, from the correspondence archive of Vito Acconci’s and Bernadette Mayer’s *o to 9* magazine: in a hand-written short note on *Tel Quel* letter-headed paper, Marcelin Pleynet writes to Vito Acconci, to thank him for sending him the first number of the mimeographed *o to 9*; in response to most likely Acconci’s request for a contribution to a forthcoming number, Pleynet proposes a piece titled “La fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et l’Art Moderne”.<sup>4</sup> There is no mention or remark about the contents of the first number of Acconci’s and Mayer’s eclectic magazine which before it folded also published Sol Le Witt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art.” The way in which Acconci revisits *o to 9*, in the opening lines of “10 (A Late Introduction To *o To 9*)” could not have been more playfully and earnestly Derridean when he remembers how he and Mayer came up with a title for the magazine that would reflect that their “own work tried to expose language, showcase language”; with a feigned and genuine frivolity, he says that they chose “to” instead of “through”, for the sake of “sound over sense”:

[...] saying “o To 9,” you need only a hint of “t,” you skip over “o” as your tongue shifts from one number to the other – whereas, saying “o Through 9,” your tongue sticks to your palate on “th,” the “oo” of “ough” has an overtone, too much reverb, you can’t slip between numbers (n.p.).

None of the intent behind *o to 9* is taken up by Pleynet whose rather perfunctory tone may had to do with the fact that his interests in American art certainly did not take in experiments with the meta-linguistic guises of language that Acconci and his circle were experimenting with at the time and which found their way in the pages of *o to 9*. Pleynet’s penchants were rather limited to painting, and in resonance with the formalist criticism and the abstraction that Acconci’s generation and the conceptual artists were leaving behind. Same goes for the art that found its way into Derrida’s 1978 *The Truth in Painting*.

Such incommensurabilities were defining the times and travails of theory across France and the US: yet, both contexts were insisting on seeing themselves as substantially of their own time. As Philippe Sollers wrote in a short preface to the reedition of the collection *Théorie d’Ensemble* in 1980 in which Derrida’s *La différence* first appeared in 1968, the volume was “the witness of a certain time” (8) in which the discourses and politics of structuralism were being reconfigured. Let’s remember that Derrida stated in the 1963 “Force et Signification” that the critical consciousness of structuralist critique bears a reflective consciousness of the past and is by default a historian (“historienne”), eschatic (“eschatique”) and crepuscular (“crépusculaire”) (1967: 12). Often the rhetorical textures of Derrida’s poetic inflections, his encompassing visions, and exigencies bring to mind more the lingering modernist overtones of the American Abstract Expressionists than the Cagean-Duchampian detachment of his contemporary conceptualists with whom, however, he shared the persistent return to the nature of the linguistic sign, a return that was a sign of the times: the moment of deconstruction and the moment of conceptual art expressed and were symptomatic of a time in which the signifying validity and radical possibilities of language seemed as yet to be fathomed but also increasingly tenuous and uncertain, and no radical dream could redeem that political but also largely philosophically-inflected anxiety. Was, after all, the slippage of the letter of *différence*, at first a matter of form, a displacement in the form of a letter, intended to initiate a politicisation of reading in ways beyond the pragmatic? Be that as it may, *La différence*, was a pivotal moment in the “time of theory” which, as Patrick ffrench wrote in 1995 was also indissociable from a certain “experience of literature” (3): the

conceptualist concern with the optical finds its counterpart in Derrida’s concern with the verbal. As ffrench goes on to say, this was “not simply,” “a historical moment but a trans-historical temporality, bringing to life a procession of literary ghosts from the past and projecting itself into a future” (3). The ghosts that were summoned to this procession stepped out of a rather circumscribed French classical canon in Derrida’s case: his procession traversed Rousseau, Corneille, Montaigne, Flaubert and Paul Valéry, and onwards to the French nouveau roman, and the counter-canonical Surrealists—Sade, Lautréamont, Rimbaud—and most prominently Artaud and the dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille. As for the Surrealists themselves, they are nonetheless virtually absent from Derrida’s writings.

I now want to turn to another most striking instance of what I call unreciprocated impulses: the concurrent interest of Derrida and Nancy Spero in Antonin Artaud. Spero’s mixed-media scrolls and paintings movingly and hauntingly engage with Artaud to express emotions both autobiographical and political and historical at large, through a visual and verbal repertoire that absorbs and reckons with despair, violence, anger, suffering and pain; for Spero, Artaud also offers a prism to the troubled violent decade of the 1960s. In “*La parole soufflée*,” what Derrida seems to be after in Artaud, is what he calls “savage singularity” (1967: 255) which a little later seems to lie in Artaud’s “[attempt] to forbid that his speech be spirited away [*soufflé*] from his body” (175).<sup>5</sup> Further on and recurring in the text, Derrida, in Deleuzian folds, as it were, returns to the anguish of separation and differentiation as an irreparable “expropriation.” The proximity that Derrida establishes with the ‘spirit-breath’ of Artaud is informed by his own deconstructive impulses towards metaphysics which seem to be foreclosed or held in suspension by Artaud’s “cruel law” of “difference” (1967: 291).

For one and the same reason, through a single gesture, Artaud is as fearful of the articulated body as he is of articulated language, as fearful of the member as of the word. For articulation is the structure of my body, and structure is always a structure of expropriation (186).<sup>6</sup>

In a powerfully idiosyncratic account of Nancy Spero’s work, published on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona in 2008, Hélène Cixous writes about Spero’s Artaud in terms more reminiscent of *différance* than of the metaphysical anguish of “*La Parole soufflée*”:

*What will Artaud have bequeathed her? First* the paradox of the letter: language has left, *the letters remain*. Strokes of genius, the *Codex Artaud* set out on a grammatic revolution. The task is to resurrect the Deadword [*Mômort*], to rewrite Artaud, to help him up by seeding him again with his own letters. Dying letters, letters nearing death. *Skeletters*. Dead letters. Remains. Codices are the becoming drawing of the letters of Artaud’s name. *Spero* operates, *s, p, o, re*, one decomposes the name and rebuilds the world by paronomasia on the name of the world, from name to world. (26-27)

A little earlier, Lucy Bradnock has approached Spero’s Artaud by addressing “the divide between America and Europe during the 1960s” (1), and attempts to think Artaud also through a dialogue with both Spero and Derrida and to set them in a mutually enlightening relation, as it were. The art historian sees Spero drawn predominantly to Artaud for a “glimpse of that primal nothingness which exists before the codification of language and of visual symbol” (6), and therefore as more akin to Kristeva’s reading of Artaud’s transgressive language as the violent and pain-ridden journey away from a primal maternal womb. The process of *différance* and the undoing of the metaphysics of presence and absence is transfigured in Spero’s work on and with the ‘tongue’ as body and language. As Bradnock writes: Spero turns against “a phallic language, which, if we are to play Jacques Derrida’s linguistic game, prays, pries and preys upon [...] fighting to express the female in a visual and textual field dominated by phallogocentrism” (7). One could object that Bradnock’s reading has a Lacanian resonance that yearns for an investment in whatever there may exist beyond or before the Symbolic, thereby undoing somewhat the deconstructive work of Spero with and beyond her own feminist politics. Yet, the yearning for a *beyond* the symbolic would seem to rhyme with Derrida’s claims about Artaud as darkly plighted by the “cruel” im-possibility to keep his speech within his body. As Bradnock makes a case for how Spero’s scrolls bespeak the “vulnerability of language in its purest sense” (12), a case can also be made about the vulnerability of the deconstructive process itself as it unfolds in texts such as Derrida’s “*La parole soufflée*.” Although the “American feminist artist” and “the wordy French philosopher,” as Bradnock writes, draw Artaud “in opposite directions” (13), just as Spero’s works are “unwittingly Derridean” (13), perhaps Artaud’s im/possibility takes the “wordy French philosopher” in directions that are “unwittingly” other to his own intentions. More quandaries like this one would emerge, if we persist in revisiting Derrida’s early thought in proximity with its immediate contexts.

In a 1973 review article of recent writings by *Tel Quel* thinkers, Mary Ann Caws formulated strains that also run through the essays of *L'écriture et la différence*. Caws makes a case for a revolutionary dream patterned on “a materialistic and pluralistic semantics” (2) that is focused on the practice of the text and stresses that the notion of ‘text’ which was conceptualised on the basis of reading a certain body of texts by writers such as “Sade, Lautreamont, Mallarmé, Artaud, Bataille” (2) was “a *translinguistic productive process*, operating within another space at once self-constituting and self-exhausting, an inscription traversing language (thus the term ‘translinguistic’) rather than enclosed within it” (2). Such “translinguistic processes” have been productively explored in the verbal experiments that appeared in, for instance, *o to 9* that showcased artists and writers, intent on pushing back the limits of language. In Vito Acconci’s own early work, for instance, a poetic quality blended with a theoretical reflection is refracted through the actual or feigned meta-language of the dictionary in notations about realised and unrealised variations of performances where the insistent notation of time, place and “circumstances” for his pieces confers an experiential quality to linguistic play. Similar processes were at work in the writing of the *o to 9* co-editor, Bernadette Mayer.

Also in 1973, a year before the first issue of *Semiotext(e)*, Sylvère Lotringer published a review of *Les Anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* in which he makes a case about “two Saussures”—that later on became the subject of a *Semiotext(e)* symposium at Columbia University—as being “historically, systematically and philosophically opposed” since “the ‘first’ lays the scientific grounds for a discipline which constitutes the most indisputable fruition of our culture, the ‘second’ inaugurates a practice of the text, the theory of which is at present attempting to constitute itself” (2). The terms with which Lotringer assesses the significance of the Saussurean theory of language and its implications for the metaphysics of the text certainly apply to the mediations and refigurations of deconstruction: “Saussure’s discovery will proceed in disguise,” Lotringer writes, and will be “metaphorized by the recourse to the very letter whose return it prohibits” (3). Derrida already had had recourse to the first letter of the alphabet in *Différence* in order to unleash the generative potentiality of substitution as a viable course of action with and against the anguish and concern about language which he posited in the opening of the 1963 “Force et Signification” with Rimbaudian overtones:

the fact that universal thought, in all its domains, by all its pathways and despite all differences, should be receiving a formidable impulse from an anxiety about language—which

can only be an anxiety of language, within language itself—is a strangely concerted development [...]. (1978: 3)<sup>8</sup>

And it is through a worldly “astonishment” (1978, 4) that, a little further, he goes on to claim the need for a world-wide, or should we also say *world-wise*, “activation” of the so-called Western thought to take place. I called the aphoristic and anticipatory tone and the dream of “activation” Rimbaudian, yet the early work of Derrida may also seem as driven by a push-and-pull not dissimilar to the “twoness” that Lotringer sees in Saussure.

A year after his book review of Saussure’s *Anagrammes*, Lotringer received a letter from Roland Barthes in which Barthes politely regrets not being able to accept Lotringer’s invitation to the Saussure symposium. Barring delays, he says, he is about to leave for China where, as we know he did go as a member of a distinguished delegation. Had he been able to participate he would have given his own twist to the “two Saussures”; Barthes, in that letter, writes that there are two subjects within the linguist even: a “learned man” and an “anguished democrat.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the lexical field of anguish, anxiety, and disquiet significantly informed Derrida’s mappings of a Franco-European intellectual history in the essays of *L’écriture et la différence*; and in “Force et signification” this anxiety also passes through Derrida’s signposting his text through the work of Jean Rousset, a prominent cultural historian of the baroque. The momentum of *différance* was, it seems, intertwined with anticipation and an anxiety-ridden disposition towards form: “*Form* fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself” (1978, 4).

As mentioned earlier, the moment of deconstruction informed practices of reading in which the boundaries between formalism and anti-formalism collapse, as is the case with the early days of *October* journal, the platform that metabolised the lessons of poststructuralism alongside the legacies of structuralism, semiotics, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Established in 1976, *October* was a journal geared towards avant-garde and modernist legacies as well as towards a revisionism vis-à-vis US art: Dada and Surrealism, the Russian avant-garde, American minimalism, video and performance take pride of place in *October*, as well as by now well-established iconic figures of American postmodernism like Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman and others. *October* established influential practices of reading that refigured the tradition of the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg who was Rosalind Krauss’—one the founding editors—mentor, mainly through post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. The urge to repoliticise and historicise the discourse on the forms and discourses of art that was programmatically stated in the founding statement

of the journal was somewhat fraught from the outset by what Peter Osborne has called “theoretical” formalism.

Rosalind Krauss’s “Notes on the Index,” a signature piece for the early days of *October*, is a case in point. In the opening of “Part 2,” she states: “I am not so much concerned here with the genesis of this condition within the arts, its historical process, as I am with its internal structure as one now confronts it in a variety of work” (58). It is such attitudes that led Peter Osborne to see Krauss’s critical idiom as a narrative of “domestication” (12) of ‘French theory’ in the US. The indexical sign for Krauss is a means for establishing presence, a connection to a referent, which however compels us to ask, which absence exactly would this connection, intended as viable alternative, counter? Krauss’s early writings seem to oscillate between a structuralist-derived immersion in form and a distrust of structure, of what she calls “uncoded” messages (59). Yet even if “structuralism’s old problem” is the “exclusion of history” (Osborne, 11), structuralism and poststructuralism are, as all thought is, after all, historical.

Derrida’s “The Parergon” first appeared in 1979 in the ninth volume of *October* in a translation by Craig Owens, Rosalind Krauss’s student. In his afterword titled “Detachment from the Parergon,” Owens returns to the foundations of structuralist semiotics in order to address the trouble with history, and writes:

Mukarovsky even claimed that only semiology—frequently criticised as ahistorical because of its emphasis on synchronic analysis—could account both for the structure of works of art and for the history of art: “Only the semiotic point of view allows theorists to recognize the autonomous existence and essential dynamism of artistic structure and to understand the evolution of art as an immanent process but one in constant relationship with other domains of culture. (42)

This resonates more or less with Cousins’s and Caws’s accounts and with Derrida’s own early concern for the historicity of critique. In Owens’ terms the turn to language has homed in on us in an uncompromising way that the “visual arts have continually been subordinated to language, and that every hierarchy of the arts is based on linguistic criteria” (43). And, he credits Derrida for formulating the complicity of western aesthetics with a certain theory of the sign. On the level of writing about art, Derrida, in Owens’s eyes, salvages the concern with form: as Derrida makes the case, writes Owens, in Rousseau’s eyes, formalism is also a materialism and a sensationalism. Owen’s

conclusion is important: The ‘parergon’ does not signal a necessity for a “renovated aesthetics”, but rather the necessity for “transforming the object, in this case, the work of art, beyond recognition” (49). And the parergon which has been kept outside of the aesthetic field becomes a ground for such transformations. And to see both writing and speech as contingent, particular, and indeterminate, as not having a fixed and stable relation to reality was both a predicament and a freedom at the time. In essence, Owens makes a case for how Derrida’s early thought was indeed emancipatory for art theory in the US, and for criticism at large. With and despite Derrida, deconstructive critical strategies were certainly proliferative, recuperative and parergonic to Derrida’s own idioms, as it were.

In the 1983 “The object of post-criticism,” Gregory L. Ulmer called Derrida the “‘Aristotle’ of montage,” providing both a “‘theory’ of montage (grammatology) and a method (deconstruction)” (87). Ulmer reads Derrida through the legacies of the historical avant-gardes and in relation to the range of experiments that came to be identified as postmodernist in American art, as well as in terms of the relation of criticism to its objects, in the wake of an antimimetic impulse which marked the avant-garde and modernist break. What the reception of Derrida and of poststructuralism at large also pressed on art and literary critics was the consciousness of the peril entailed in the convergence between a theoretical apparatus and the object of the critic’s enquiry, a perilous convergence indeed often propelled by the performative, yet vulnerable at its best, unfolding of Derrida’s own writings on literature, philosophy and art.

In their introduction to the *Tel Quel Reader*, ffrench and Lack speak of “the fixation on personality” as “an effect of the time, a quality of the French intellectual context wherein ‘master-discourses’ are precisely, those of a master.” This was a time marked by a “peculiarly authoritative activism that defines the moment of Althusser, Lacan and Derrida” (4). What cultural and other hierarchies are still in place and in what way the authoritative status of the dauntingly large Derridean body of work gets in the way of us recognising other movements of thought and forms of practice alongside his own, or rather, as I suggested in the opening of this piece, how can we read Derrida through dis/affiliated contexts, instead of starting from Derrida and looking out? Or, as I suggested above, one would wonder what Derrida would have written about conceptual art, or about the Artaud of the Surrealists, or had he encountered the verbal *jouissance* of the mongrelised and hybrid language of artists like Guillermo Gómez-Peña in pieces like *The New World Border* of 1996? Such misgivings paradoxically do not compromise but rather

corroborate the ‘*at large*’ of deconstruction, in that, even by thinking about blind-spots and omissions what one does is to make the field continually more permeable and porous.

It is perhaps in that spirit that a certain uneasiness that Charles Bernstein expresses to Lotringer vis-à-vis *Semiotext(e)*’s affinities can be read. In a letter to Sylvère Lotringer dated 17 March 1980,<sup>10</sup> Charles Bernstein, one of the leading voices of the then emerging L-AN-G-U-A-G-E poetry, expresses a certain uneasiness with *Semiotext(e)* which, in Bernstein’s view, is missing out on experimental work in the US. Bernstein expresses concern about the risk of sensationalism and sensationalisation of the poststructuralist critique, and specifically as it appeared in the “Schizo-culture” issue of Lotringer’s magazine. Although Bernstein seems unwilling to acknowledge the radicalism of Kathy Acker or William Burroughs, he makes a case about the pitfalls of reception, and asks whether the proto-post-structuralist, reflexively deconstructive experiments of Zukofsky would perhaps be more meaningful than Sollers, as Ginsberg might be against Baudrillard:

It seems to me indeed that *Semiotexte* has not really tried to find the work in the US comparable to the work of the European figures it puts fwd, but instead picks up in the US on various cultural phenomena & pretty much –along with the academic press in general– ignores work whose significance does not lie in its being a product of economic & social forces that . . . How often are we to see a Triquarterly feature Philippe Sollers as if A Zukofsky had never existed here;<sup>11</sup>

Similar claims for oversights, unwitting or not omissions, and I voiced a few, can be made for the early writings of Derrida, and the case for Artaud, as I suggested is a case in point. However, such is also the proliferative and engendering power of deconstruction as a generative modality that engenders its own omissions and subversions, while belonging to its cultural moment, being firmly an expression of its/ our own time. Bernstein in his letter to Lotringer expresses unease not only about how critique can be co-opted, or even “glamorized,” but also about the perils of decontextualisation and “neutralisation.” Therefore, deconstructive impulses are still timely for the critic who is on the lookout for forms that complicate the binaries of negation and affirmation, inclusion and exclusion, and gesture towards yet to be imagined radical potentialities within forms that are driven by the necessity of finding words and worlds in order to transform them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark Cousins. “The Logic of Deconstruction.” *Oxford Literary Review* 3: 2 (1978): 72

<sup>2</sup> Most notable works are *French Theory in America* (Routledge, 2001), edited by Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen; in the introduction the editors posit Derrida’s participation in the 1966 colloquium at Johns Hopkins as “the real beginning of French theory in America” (3); François Cusset’s (2003) *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Trans. Jeff Fort. University of Minnesota Press. 2008, mounts a defense, as it were, of the relevance of ‘theory’ in the present, which he aligns with the work of the text, and reads reception predominantly on the level of “domestication” (xiv); the chapter titled “Deconstruction sites” offers a mapping of Derrida’s reception and time in the US. Cusset’s work was followed by a collection of essays on *French Theory and American Art* edited by Anaël Lejeune, Olivier Mignon, Raphaël Pirenne (Sternberg Press. 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, the first section of John P. Bowles’ monograph on Piper is titled “The Paradox of the Black Woman Conceptual Artist.” Bowles also take Fred Moten to task for arguing in his *In the Break* that Piper “seems to deny the implications of what is, for Kant, an enabling paradox: the objective – transcendental ground of humanity seems inseparable from a certain subjective condition of its possibility– the ideality of space-time is always conditioned, *made possible*, by a specific experience of space-time” (244). (285). On Piper’s work with and on Kant see Jörg Heiser’s “Adventures in Reasonland” and Diarmuid Costello’s “Xenophobia, Stereotypes, and Empirical Acculturation: Neo-Kantianism in Adrian Piper’s Performance-Based Conceptual Art” in *Adrian Piper: A Reader*. Eds. The Museum of Modern Art New York, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The letter is dated 13 June 1967. o to 9 Archive; MSS 026; Series I, Box I, Folder 8; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries. On how Pleynet’s writings on art, and the same goes for the *Tel Quel* group, persisted in the painterly tradition and prolonged the Greenbergian vein, see Molly Warnock, “*Tel Quel and the Subject of American Painting: Marcelin Pleynet and James Bishop*,” *Tate Papers*, 32, 2019 (online, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/tel-quel-american-painting>). Certainly not Greenbergian but intent on painting as art object, and engaging with a definitely idiosyncratic corpus, were also Derrida’s writings on art.

<sup>5</sup> “Artaud a voulu interdire que sa parole loin de son corps lui fut soufflée” (1967 : 261).

<sup>6</sup> “Artaud redoute le corps articulé comme il redoute le langage articulé, le membre comme le mot, d’un seul et même trait, pour une seule et même raison. Car l’articulation est la structure de mon corps et la structure est toujours structure d’expatriation” (1967 : 279).

<sup>7</sup> See Schwarz, H. & Balsamo (1996) for a critical overview of *Semiotext(e)*, supplemented by an interview with Lotringer and Krauss.

<sup>8</sup> “[...] que, dans tous ses domaines, par tous ses chemins et malgré toutes les différences, la réflexion universelle reçoive aujourd’hui un formidable mouvement d’une inquiétude sur le langage – qui ne peut être qu’une inquiétude du langage et dans le langage lui-même —, c’est là un étrange concert” (1967, 9).

<sup>9</sup> Barthes’s letter is dated 31 April 1974. The text reads : “Les deux Saussures, ce n’est pas seulement le linguiste et l’anagrammatiste : dans le linguiste même, il y a deux sujets : un “savant” et un “démocrate” très angoissé.” In Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Series IA; Box 1; Folder 51 Correspondence; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>10</sup> Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Series IA; Box 1, Folder 83 Correspondence; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (quoted as in the source).

## Works Cited

o to 9 Archive; MSS 026; Series I, Box I, Folder 8; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

Acconci, Vito. (2006). “10 (A Late Introduction To o To 9).” In o To 9: The Complete Magazine, 1967-1969. Ugly Duckling Presse. 2006.

Bradnock, Lucy. “Lost in Translation? Nancy Spero / Antonin Artaud / Jacques Derrida.” *Papers of Surrealism*. 3 : Spring 2005. [https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/63517387/surrealism\\_issue\\_3.pdf](https://pure.manchester.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/63517387/surrealism_issue_3.pdf). Accessed 29 December 2025.

Bowles, John P. *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Caws, Mary Ann. “Tel Quel & Revolution.” *Diacritics* 3: 1 (1973): 2-8.

Cixous, Hélène. “Spero’s Dissidances.” Trans. Beverley Bie Brahic. In Hélène Cixous, *Poetry in Painting: Writings on Contemporary Arts and Aesthetics*. Eds. Martha Segarra and Joana Masó. Edinburgh University Press, 2012 : 21-36.

Cohen, Sande and Sylvère Lotringer. Eds. *French Theory in America*. Routledge, 2001.

Cousins, Mark. “The Logic of Deconstruction.” *Oxford Literary Review* 3: 2 (1978): 70-77.

Cusset, Francois. (2003) *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*. Trans. Jeff Fort. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Derrida, Jacques. *La différence*. In (1968) *Tel Quel, Théorie d'ensemble*. Seuil. 1980.

- . *L'écriture et la différence*. Seul. 1967.
- . *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. The University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- . “The Parergon.” Trans. Craig Owens. *October* 9 (1979), pp. 3-41.
- . “Deconstructions: The Im-possible.” In Cohen, Sande and Sylvère Lotringer. Eds. *French Theory in America*. Routledge, 2001: 13-32.

ffrench, Patrick. *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel (1960-1983)*. Clarendon Press. 1995.

- . And Roland François Lack. Eds. *The Tel Quel Reader*. Routledge, 1998.

Krauss, Rosalind. “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2.” *October* 4 (1977) : 58-67.

Kosuth, Joseph. “Art after Philosophy.” In *Joseph Kosuth, Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. Gabriele Guercio. Ed. The MIT Press, 1993: 13-32.

Lejeune, Anaël, Olivier Mignon and Raphaël Pirenne. Eds. *French Theory and American Art*. Sternberg Press. 2013.

Lotringer, Sylvère. “The Game of the Name.” *Diacritics* 3: 2 (1973): 2-9.

Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221; Series IA; Box 1; Folder 51 Correspondence; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

- . Series IA; Box 1; Folder 83 Correspondence; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

Lyotard, Jean-François. “Foreword: After the Words.” In *Joseph Kosuth, Art after Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. Gabriele Guercio. Ed. The MIT Press, 1993: xv-xviii.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

Osborne, Peter. *October and the Problem of Formalism*. MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona. 2013. [https://img.macba.cat/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/QP\\_28\\_PeterOsborne.pdf](https://img.macba.cat/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/QP_28_PeterOsborne.pdf). Accessed 29 December 2025.

Stamatina Dimakopoulou, “To be repeatable is by the same token to be alterable”: A return to the moment of différance

Owens, Craig. “Detachment from the “Parergon.” *October* 9 (1979): 42-29.

Piper, Adrian. “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object.” In Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992*. The MIT Press, 1996: 29-53.

Schwarz, H. & Balsamo, A. “Under the Sign of *Semiotext(e)*: The Story according to Sylvère Lotringer and Chris Kraus. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 37: 3 (1996): 205-220.

Ulmer, Gregory L. “The Object of Post-Criticism.” In Hal Foster. Ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Bay Press, 1983: 83-110.

Warhol, Andy. *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1975.