



# THE SPATIAL ARTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUES DERRIDA

PETER BRUNETTE AND DAVID WILLS

WILLS: We shall start with an indiscreet question, a question on competence. You have mentioned more than once what you call your "incompetence" in various areas of your work. For example, in your interview with Christopher Norris on architecture' you declare yourself "technically incompetent" in that field; in our discussions on cinema you have said the same thing, but none of that has stopped you from writing in a number of areas outside of your training. It is as if you would like to define the limits of what you contribute to each domain without knowing exactly where to place those limits.

DERRIDA: I shall try to make my responses as straightforward as possible. In the first place, when I say that I am incompetent I say it frankly, sincerely, because it is true, because I don't know a lot about architecture, and as far as film goes my knowledge is only of the most average and general kind. I like cinema very much; I have seen many films, but in comparison with those who know the history of cinema and the theory of film, I am, and I say this without being coy, incompetent. The same holds true for painting, and it is even more true for music. With respect to other domains I could say the same thing with as much sincerity. I feel very incompetent also in the literary and philosophical fields, even though the nature of my incompetence is different. My training is in philosophy, so I can't seriously say that I am incompetent in that domain. However, I feel quite unequipped when confronted by a philosopher's work, even the work of those philosophers I have studied at length. But that is another order of incompetence.

Now, in terms of my competence in philosophy, I have been able to devise a certain program, a certain matrix of inquiry that permits me to begin by asking the question of competence in general terms – that is to say, to inquire into how competence is formed, the processes of legitimization, of institutionalization, and so on, in all domains, then to advance in different domains not only by admitting my incompetence very sincerely but also by asking the question of competence, that is to say, what defines the limits of my domain, the limits of a corpus, the legitimacy of the questions, and so on. Each time that I confront a

"Jacques Derrida, in Discussion with Christopher Norris," in *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, ed. A. Papadakis, C. Cooke, and A. Benjamin (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), p. 72.

domain that is foreign to me, one of my interests or investments concerns precisely the legitimacy of the discourse, with what right one speaks, how the object is constituted – questions that are actually philosophical in origin and style. Even if, within the field of philosophy, I have worked to elaborate deconstructive questions concerning it, that deconstruction of philosophy carries with it a certain number of questions that can be asked in different fields. Moreover, each time I was trying to discover what in a determined field liberates it from philosophical authority. That is to say, I have learned from philosophy that it is a hegemonic discourse, structurally hegemonic, considering all discursive regions to be dependent upon it. And by means of a deconstruction of this hegemonic gesture we can begin to see in each field, whether it be what we call psychology, logic, politics, or the arts, the possibility of emancipation from the hegemony and authority of philosophical discourse.

So, each time I approach a literary work, or a pictorial or architectural work, what interests me is this same deconstructive force with regard to philosophical hegemony. It's as if that is what carries my analysis along. As a result, one can always find the same gesture on my part, even though each time I try to respect the singularity of the work. That gesture consists of finding, or in any case looking for, whatever in the work represents its force of resistance to philosophical authority, and to philosophical discourse on it. The same operation can be found or recognized in the different discourses I have developed concerning particular works; yet I have always tried to do it by respecting the individual signature of an Artaud, say, or an Eisenman.

Obviously, because we are starting an interview on the "visual arts," the general question of the spatial arts is given prominence, for it is within a certain experience of spacing, of space, that resistance to philosophical authority can be produced. In other words, resistance to logocentrism has a better chance of appearing in these types of art. (Of course, we would need to ask the question of what art is, also.) So much for competence: It is an incompetence that gives or tries to give itself a certain prerogative, that of speaking within the space of its own incompetence.

Now, it is also necessary to say – maybe as a sort of general precaution for everything that will follow – that I have never personally taken the initiative to speak about anything in these domains. Each time I do, it is because I have been invited to do so; because of my incompetence, I would never have taken the initiative to write about architecture or drawing unless the occasion or invitation had originated elsewhere. That goes for everything I have done; I don't think that I would have ever written anything if I hadn't in some way been provoked to do it. Of course, you may then ask: What is a provocation? Who is the other? So, it's a mixture, an intersection of chance and necessity.

BRUNETTE: In relation to that, how do you feel now that your work has begun to move out to the law, to film, to architecture? Do you have any misgivings about the way your thought – deconstruction, whatever – has been changed, molded in different ways?

DERRIDA: It is very difficult to determine; there is feedback, but each time it comes back in a different form. I can't find a general rule for it;

in a certain way it surprises me. I am, for example, a little surprised by the extent to which deconstructive schemas can be put into play or invested in problematics that are foreign to me, whether we are speaking about architecture, cinema, or legal theory. But my surprise is only a half-surprise, because at the same time the program as I perceived or conceived it made that necessary. If someone had asked me twenty years ago whether I thought deconstruction should interest people in domains that were foreign to me, such as architecture and law, as a matter of principle my response would have been yes, it is absolutely indispensable, but at the same time I never would have believed it could happen. Thus, when faced with this I experience a mixture of surprise and nonsurprise. Obviously, I am obliged, up to a certain point, not to transform, but rather to adjust or deform my discourse, in any case to respond, to comprehend what is happening. That isn't always easy. For example, in the case of legal theory, I read some texts, people tell me things, but at the same time I don't know it from the inside; I see something of what is happening in "critical legal studies," I can follow the conceptual outline of what is happening in that field. And when I read your work on film, I understand, but at the same time only passively; I can't reproduce it or write about it in turn.

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I always feel on the edge of such things, and this frustrates me – it really isn't possible for me to appropriate such work – but at the same time what gratifies me is that such work is being done by people who are themselves competent and who speak from within a specific field, with its own givens, and its own relations to the nature of the field, to the political-institutional situation. Thus, what you do is determined for the most part by the specific givens of your intellectual field and also by all sorts of things pertaining to the American scene, to your institutional profile, and so on. All of that is foreign to me, and it keeps me on the edge of things, but at the same time it is extremely reassuring and gratifying, for real work is being done. I am a part of that work, but it is being done in other places.

WILLS: To extend that still further, let me ask you about one of your texts that I admire the most, *The Post Card*,<sup>2</sup> and its relation to technology; less the relation between technology and the thought of Heidegger, and more about what you say in "Envois" and elsewhere, for example, about high technology. For example, every time I hear talk of a computer virus and read how more and more programs are written to defend against such attacks, it seems to me we have an example of logocentrism in all its obstinacy being confronted by what we might call the unavoidability of adestination. That is a very basic question and one that is central to your work. But although scholars have now seen, for example, the fundamentally "architectural" side to your work, I think there remains this whole area of relations between thought and communication, in the most basic sense, where your ideas have hardly even begun to be taken up. Would you comment on that?

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<sup>2</sup>*The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

DERRIDA: Yes, you're right, and paradoxically the question is more intimately connected with my work. I often tell myself, and I must have written it somewhere - I am sure I wrote it somewhere - that all I have done, to summarize it very reductively, is dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a virology, the virus being many things. I have written about this in a recent text on drugs.<sup>3</sup> The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication. Even from the biological standpoint, this is what happens with a virus; it derails a mechanism of the communicational type, its coding and decoding. On the other hand, it is something that is neither living nor nonliving; the virus is not a microbe. And if you follow these two threads, that of a parasite which disrupts destination from the communicative point of view - disrupting writing, inscription, and the coding and decoding of inscription - and which on the other hand is neither alive nor dead, you have the matrix of all that I have done since I began writing. In the text just referred to I allude to the possible intersection between AIDS and the computer virus as two forces capable of disrupting destination. Where they are concerned, one can no longer follow the tracks, neither those of subjects, nor those of desire, nor the sexual, and so on. If we follow the intersection between AIDS and the computer virus as we now know it, we have the means to comprehend, not only from a theoretical point of view but also from the sociohistorical point of view, what amounts to a disruption of absolutely everything on the planet, including police agencies, commerce, the army, questions of strategy. All those things encounter the limits on their control, as well as the extraordinary force of those limits. It is as if all that I have been suggesting for the past twenty-five years is prescribed by the idea of desterrance . . . the supplement, the pharmakon, all the undecidables - it's the same thing. It also gets translated, not only technologically but also technologicopoetically.

BRUNETTE: Let's talk about the idea of the "thereness" of the visual object, in painting, sculpture, and architecture, what might be called a feeling of presence. In "+R" you refer to a painting "taking the breath away, a stranger to all discourse doomed to the presumed mutism of the thing itself, [it] restores in authoritarian silence an order of presence."<sup>4</sup> > Is there some kind of phenomenological presence that words don't have, that has to be dealt with in the visual object? Is film perhaps an intermediate area because it is sort of present like a visual object, yet it has to be read through like words?

DERRIDA: These are profound and difficult questions. Obviously the spatial work of art presents itself as silent, but its mutism, which produces an effect of full presence, can as always be interpreted in a contradictory fashion. But first let me distinguish between mutism and, let's say, taciturnity. Taciturnity is the silence of something that can speak, whereas we call mutism the silence of a thing that can't speak. Now, the fact

<sup>3</sup>"Rhétorique de la drogue," in *Points de suspension: Entretiens* (Paris: Galilée, 1992), pp. 241-67.

<sup>4</sup>"+R (Into the Bargain)," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 156.

that a spatial work of art doesn't speak can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, there is the idea of its absolute mutism, the idea that it is completely foreign or heterogeneous to words, and one can see in this a limit on the basis of which resistance is mounted against the authority of discourse, against discursive hegemony. There exists, on the side of such a mute work of art, a place, a real place from the perspective of which, and in which, words find their limit. And thus, by going to this place, we can, in effect, observe at the same time a weakness and a desire for authority or hegemony on the part of the discourse, notably when it comes to classifying the arts - for example, in terms of the hierarchy that makes the visual arts subordinate to the discursive or musical arts.

But on the other hand, and this is the other side of the same experience, we can always refer to the experience that we as speaking beings - I don't say "subjects" - have of these silent works, for we can always receive them, read them, or interpret them as potential discourse. That is to say, these silent works are in fact already talkative, full of virtual discourses, and from that point of view the silent work becomes an even more authoritarian discourse - it becomes the very place of a word that is all the more powerful because it is silent, and that carries within it, as does an aphorism, a discursive virtuality that is infinitely authoritarian, in a sense theological authoritarian. Thus it can be said that the greatest logocentric power resides in a work's silence, and liberation from this authority resides on the side of discourse, a discourse that is going to relativize things, emancipate itself, refuse to kneel in front of the authority represented by sculpture, or architecture. It is that very authority that will try in some way to capitalize on, in the first place, the infinite power of a virtual discourse - there is always more to say, and it is we who make it speak more and more - and, in the second place, the effect of an untouchable, monumental, inaccessible presence - in the case of architecture this presence is almost indestructible, or in any case mimes indestructibility, giving the overpowering effect of a speaking presence. Thus there are two interpretations - one is always between the two, whether it is a question of sculpture, architecture, or painting.

Now, film is a very particular case: first, because this effect of presence is complicated by the fact of movement, of mobility, of sequentiality, of temporality; second, because the relation to discourse is very complicated, without even speaking about the difference between silent film and sound film, for even in silent film the relation to the word is very complicated. Obviously, if there is a specificity to the cinematic medium, it is foreign to the word. That is to say that even the most talkative cinema supposes a reinscription of the word within a specific cinematic element not governed by the word. If there is something specific in cinema or in video - without speaking of the differences between video and television - it is the form in which discourse is put into play, inscribed or situated, without in principle governing the work. So from that point of view we can find in film the means to rethink or refound all the relations between the word and silent art, such as they came to be stabilized before the appearance of cinema. Before the advent of cinema there was painting, architecture, sculpture, and within them one

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could find structures that had institutionalized the relation between discourse and nondiscourse in art. If the advent of cinema allowed for something completely new, it was the possibility of another way of playing with the hierarchies. Now here I am not speaking of cinema in general, for I would say that there are cinematic practices that reconstitute the authority of the discourse, while others try to do things more closely resembling photography or painting – still others that play differently with the relations among discourse, discursivity, and nondiscursivity. I would hesitate to speak of any art, but in particular of cinema, from that point of view. I think that there is probably more difference among different works, different styles of cinematic work, with respect to the point just made about discourse and nondiscourse, than there is between cinema and photography. In that case it is probable that we are dealing with many very different arts within the same technological medium – if we define the cinema on the basis of its technical apparatus – and thus perhaps there is no unity in the cinematic art. I don't know what you think, but a given cinematic method may be closer to a certain type of literature than to another cinematic method. And thus we need to ask whether or not identifying an art – presuming we can speak of cinema as though we knew what art was – proceeds from the technical medium, that is to say, whether it proceeds from an apparatus such as a camera that is able to do things that can't be done by writing or painting. Does that suffice to identify art, or in fact does the specificity of a given film depend in the end less on the technical medium and more on its affinity with a given literary work rather than with another film? I don't know. These are, for me, questions that have no answers. But at the same time, I feel strongly that one should not reduce the importance of the film apparatus.

BRUNETTE: What would you reply to somebody who was recalcitrant about the application of deconstruction to the visual arts, somebody who would say deconstruction is fine for words, the written, because what is there is never what is signified, whereas in a painting everything is always there, and thus deconstruction is not applicable?

DERRIDA: For me that is a complete misreading. I would almost take the opposite stance. I would say that the most effective deconstruction is that which is not limited to discursive texts and certainly not to philosophical texts, even though personally – I speak of myself as one agent among others of deconstructive work – and for reasons related to my own history, I feel more at ease with philosophical and literary texts. And it may be that a certain general theoretical formalization of the deconstructive possibility has more affinity with discourse. But the most effective deconstruction, and I have said this often, is one that deals with the nondiscursive, or with discursive institutions that don't have the form of a written discourse. Deconstructing an institution obviously involves discourse, but it also concerns something quite other than what are called texts, books, someone's signed discourse, someone's teachings. And beyond an institution, the academic institution, for example, deconstruction is operating, whether we like it or know it or not, in fields that have nothing to do with what is specifically philosophical or discursive,

whether it be politics, the army, the economy, or all the practices said to be artistic and which are, at least in appearance, nondiscursive or foreign to discourse.

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Now, because there cannot be anything, and in particular any art, that isn't textualized in the sense I give to the word "text" – which goes beyond the purely discursive – there is text as soon as deconstruction is engaged in fields said to be artistic, visual or spatial. There is text because there is always a little discourse somewhere in the visual arts, and also because even if there is no discourse, the effect of spacing already implies a textualization. For this reason, the expansion of the concept of text is strategically decisive here. So the works of art that are the most overwhelmingly silent cannot help but be caught within a network of differences and references that give them a textual structure. And as soon as there is a textual structure, although I wouldn't go as far as to say that deconstruction is within it, on the other hand it isn't outside of it either – it isn't elsewhere. In any case, to be quite categorical, I would say that the idea that deconstruction should confine itself to the analysis of the discursive text – I know that the idea is widespread – is really either a gross misunderstanding or a political strategy designed to limit deconstruction to matters of language. Deconstruction starts with the deconstruction of logocentrism, and thus to want to confine it to linguistic phenomena is the most suspect of operations.

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BRUNETTE: The effect of presence that always strikes me, and this is perhaps totally idiosyncratic, is the presence of the artist's body – for example, in the impasto in Van Gogh. When I see a Van Gogh I immediately feel his body somehow in a way that I don't with writing. In any "trait," any brushstroke, there is a certain presence of the artist. No?

DERRIDA: I understand what you mean and share your feeling completely. As a matter of fact, for me the body is not absent when I read Plato or Descartes. Having said that, clearly it is there in a different manner, whereas when we look at a painting by Van Gogh, the manner in which the work is, I would say, haunted by the body of Van Gogh is irrefutable, and I think that this reference to what you call the body makes up part of the work, and the experience of the work. But obviously I wouldn't translate that as you have just done. I would say that there is an undeniable provocation we can identify in what is painted and signed Van Gogh, and that it is all the more violent and undeniable by virtue of not being present. That is to say that the very body of Van Gogh that haunts his paintings is all the more violently implicated and involved in the act of painting to the extent that it was not present during the act, for the body itself is ruptured, or, let's say, riven by nonpresence, by the impossibility of identifying with itself, of being simply Van Gogh. So what I would call the body – I am happy to talk about the body from that point of view – isn't a presence. The body is, how should I say, an experience in the most unstable [*voyageur*] sense of the term; it is an experience of frames, of dehiscence, of dislocations. So I see a dislocated Van Gogh, one who is dislocated in the process of performing something. I relate to Van Gogh in terms of his signature – I don't mean signature in the sense of attaching his name, but in the

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his body

sense that he signs while painting – and my relation to or experience of the signature of Van Gogh is all the more violent both for him and for me because it also involves my own body – I suppose that when you speak of the body you are speaking also of your own – and all the more ineluctable, undeniable, and passionate. I am given over to the body of Van Gogh as he was given over to the experience. Even more so because those bodies are not present. Presence would mean death. If presence were possible, in the full sense of a being that is there where it is, that gathers [se rassemble] there where it is, if that were possible, there would be neither Van Gogh nor the work of Van Gogh, nor the experience we can have of the work of Van Gogh. If all these experiences, works, or signatures are possible, it is to the extent that presence hasn't succeeded in being there and in assembling there. Or, if you wish, the thereness, the being there [l'être-là], only exists on the basis of this work of traces that dislocates itself.

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Given that the work is defined by his signature, my experience of the signature of Van Gogh is possible only if I myself countersign, that is to say, if in turn my body becomes involved with it. This doesn't happen in an instant; it is a thing that can last, that can start again; there is the enigma of the remainder, namely, that the work remains, but where? What does it mean to remain in this case? The work is in a museum; it waits for me. What is the relation between the original and the nonoriginal? There is no question that is more topical or more serious, despite appearances. But I can't take it up here. In any case, the question is different for each "art." And this structural specificity of the relation original-reproduction could – at least this is the hypothesis I'm advancing – provide the principle of a new classification of the arts. These questions, as you well know, disrupt the category of presence as it is normally understood. We imagine that the body of Van Gogh is present, and that the work is present, but these are only provisional and insecure attempts to stabilize things; they represent an anxiety, an inability to make things cohere.

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But if you were to ask me the same question regarding cinema, how would you formulate it? In the case of Van Gogh we can say there is a work that is apparently immobile, that hangs in a museum, waiting for me, that the body of Van Gogh was there, et cetera. But in the case of a film, the work is essentially kinetic, cinematic, and thus mobile; the signatory is mediated by a considerable number of persons, machines, and actors (which also sign the work), and it is difficult to know whose body we are dealing with when we look at it. For Van Gogh we can say that he was an individual with his brush, but in the case of film, what is the equivalent, where is the body in that case?

BRUNETTE: What would be the equivalent in a painting for the types of signature effect that you explore, say, in terms of Francis Ponge's poetry in *Signsponge*?

DERRIDA: Obviously, what seems at first glance to distinguish the problematic of the signature for discursive or literary works is that in such works what we currently call the signature is a discursive act, a name in

<sup>5</sup> *Signsponge/Signsponge*, trans. Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).



the general sense of the word "signature," a name belonging to discourse, even though I have shown that in fact the name no longer belongs to language. It does function in the linguistic system as one of its elements, but as a foreign body. Nevertheless, it is something that is pronounced, that can be transcribed into phonetic writing, and which thus seems to have privileged relations with elements of discourse. On the other hand, in a pictorial work, for example, or a sculptural or musical one, the signature cannot be both inside and outside of the work. Ponge can play with his name inside and outside of a poem, but in a sculpture the signature is foreign to the work, as it is in painting. In music it is more complicated, because one can also play with the signature, one can inscribe it as, for example, Bach did. One can transcribe the equivalent of the name in the work, as when Bach wrote his name with letters representing the notes. So one can sign the musical work from the inside just as Ponge can sign his name within a poem. In the case of painting, it isn't possible. There are cases in which painters inscribed their names in their work, but not in a place where one normally signs, thus playing with the outside. But one still has the impression that the body is foreign, that it is an element of discursivity or textuality within the work. It is apparently heterogeneous; we can't transpose the problematic of the literary signature into the field of the visual arts.

However, for me the effect of the signature can't be reduced to the effect of the patronym. We can say that there is a signature every time a particular work isn't limited to its semantic content. Let's return to the literary work and to the signature as an act of commission. One needs to do more than write one's name to sign. On an immigration form you write your name and then you sign. Thus the signature is something other than merely writing down one's own name. It is an act, a performative by which one commits to something, by which one confirms in a performative way that one has done something - that it is done, that it is I who has done it. Such a performativity is absolutely heterogeneous; it is an exterior remainder to whatever in the work signifies something. There is a work there - I affirm it, I countersign. There is a "thereness" [être-là] to the work which is more or less the set of analyzable semantic elements. An event has taken place.

Thus there will be a signature every time that an event occurs, every time there is the production of a work, whose occurrence is not limited to what can be semantically analyzed. That is its significance: a work which is more than what it signifies, that is there, that remains there. So, from this point of view, the work then has a name. It receives its name. In the same way that the signature of the author isn't limited to the name of the author, so the identity of the work isn't necessarily identified with the title it receives in its catalogue. It is given a name, and that naming takes place once only, and thus there is a signature for every spatial or visual work of art, which is finally nothing other than its own existence, its "thereness," its nonpresent existence, that of the work as remainder. This means that one can repeat it, review it, walk around it: It's there. It's there, and even if it doesn't mean anything, even if it isn't exhausted by the analysis of its meaning, by its thematics and semantics, it is there in addition to all that it means. And this excess

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obviously provokes discourse ad infinitum; that is what critical discourse consists of. A work is always inexhaustible from that point of view.

So the signature is not to be confused either with the name of the author, with the patronym of the author, or with the type of work, it is nothing other than the event of the work in itself, inasmuch as it attests in a certain way – here I come back to what I was saying about the body of the author – to the fact that someone did that, and that what it remains. The author is dead – we don't even know who she he is – but it remains. Nevertheless, and here the entire political problem is involved, it cannot be countersigned, that is to say, attested to as signature, unless there is an institutional space in which it can be received, legitimized, and so on. There needs to be a social "community" that says this thing has been done – we don't even know by whom, we don't know what it means – however, we are going to put it in a museum or in some archive; we are going to consider it a work of art. Without that political and social countersignature it would not be a work of art; there wouldn't be a signature. In my opinion, the signature doesn't exist before the countersignature, which relies on society, conventions, institutions, processes of legitimization. Thus, there is no signed work before the countersignature. That goes for even the most extraordinary masterpieces, Michelangelo, for example. If there is no countersignature, the signature doesn't exist. That means that the countersignature precedes the signature. The signature does not exist before the countersignature.

WILLS: Are there any nonsigned works, then?

DERRIDA: No.

WILLS: The idea of a work represents a type of countersignature?

DERRIDA: Absolutely. There are nonsigned works in the ordinary or conventional sense, that is to say, works produced by anonymous authorship. The Society recognizes that the patronym of the author is sometimes unknown; it doesn't know which social subject has produced the work. That is true. But such a work exists only to the extent that it is signed to the extent that one says there is a work. There is a signature – we don't know which one, we don't know the name of the person who produced it – but the work itself is the attestation of a signature. But the signature is only the attestation of a signature on the basis of that countersignature; that is, that people come and say there we have something interesting; there's a temple, a painting, a film.

BRUNETTE: Yes. Medieval and Renaissance art historians spend a lot of time just trying to establish the corpus in terms of authorship, and it is only to be countersigned by the institution of art history before one can even establish what it is, what the "oeuvre" of Michelangelo is.

DERRIDA: But that task of attributing a work can start only after the receivers or addressees have identified the work as a work that may be being attributed, and thus it is considered to be already signed. We don't know by whom, but it is already signed because we have countersigned it. Otherwise, if we don't recognize it, if we say that it is not interesting and we toss it – that can happen, that must have happened – at

S. painting etc. is signed

moment it's all over, there is no signature. Thus it all starts with the countersignature, with the receiver, with what we call the receiver. The origin of the work ultimately resides with the addressee, who doesn't yet exist, but that is where the signature starts. In other words, when someone signs a work, we have the impression that the signature is her or his initiative. It is there that it starts; she or he produces this thing and then signs. But that signature is already produced by the future perfect of the countersignature, which will have come to sign that signature. When I sign for the first time, that means that I am writing something that I know will have been signed only if the addressees come to countersign it. Thus the temporality of the signature is always this future perfect that naturally politicizes the work, gives it over to someone else, that is to say, to society, to an institution, to the possibility of the signature. And I think that it is necessary here to say "political" and "institution" and not simply "someone else," because if there is only a single one, if there is hypothetically only one countersignatory, there is no signature. And with that we move from the private to the public. A work is only public; there is no private work. Supposing I sign something, a letter, for example; it will be received and countersigned by a possible addressee, but it won't be a work unless a third person, "society" as a whole, will have countersigned it in a virtual sense. It doesn't work with only two. I don't know if you would agree with me here, but for me there is no private work of art, and what we have just finished analyzing in terms of the signature must occur in a public and thus in a political space. But it is perhaps true that this concept of "publicness" [*publicité*] no longer belongs to a rigorous opposition between the public and the private.

WILLS: What you write about photographs, painting, and architecture often relies on the word, or, let's say, on a word. For example, at the beginning of "Right of Inspection"<sup>6</sup> there is a voice which affirms that "only the words interest me," and later on, another voice which objects, that you — granted, we don't know who "you" is — "you only develop a lexicon." We can easily establish this lexicon: There are the plays on "(de)part(ed)" in that text, for example; there is "now" [*maintenant*] in the piece on Bernard Tschumi;<sup>7</sup> there is "subjectile" for Artaud.<sup>8</sup> So, what is the place of the nonverbal in your discourse? I have the impression, in view of what you have said, that it has a lot to do with the idea of mutism, but by the same token you speak in your text on Laporte<sup>9</sup> of a musical effect as "a remainder that cannot be assimilated by any discourse." How does all that fit together?

DERRIDA: It is necessary to respond on two levels. It is true that only words interest me. It is true, for reasons that have to do in part with my own history and archaeology, that my investment in language is stronger, older, and gives me more enjoyment than my investment in the plastic,

<sup>6</sup>"Right of Inspection," trans. David Wills, *Art & Text* 32(1989):19-97.

<sup>7</sup>"Point de folie — Maintenant l'architecture," trans. Kate Linker, *Architectural Association Files* 12(1986):4-19.

<sup>8</sup>"Forcener le subjectile," in Paule Thévenin and Jacques Derrida, *Antonin Artaud: Dessins et portraits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 55-105.

<sup>9</sup>"Ce qui reste à force de musique," in *Psyché*, p. 101.

only the words

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visual, or spatial arts. You know that I love words. I have the greatest desire to express myself in words. For me it involves desire and the body; in my case the relation of the body to words is as important as it is with painting. That is my story, the history of my investments and drives. I am often reproached: "You only like words, it is only your lexicon that interests you." What I do with words is make them explode so that the nonverbal appears in the verbal. That is to say that I make the words function in such a way that at a certain moment they no longer belong to discourse, to what regulates discourse – hence the homonyms, the fragmented words, the proper names that do not essentially belong to language. By treating words as proper names, one disrupts the usual order of discourse, the authority of discursivity. And if I love words it is also because of their ability to escape their proper form, whether they interest me as visible things, letters representing the spatial visibility of the word, or as something musical or audible. That is to say, I am also interested in words, paradoxically, to the extent that they are nondiscursive, for that's how they can be used to explode discourse. That is what happens in the texts to which you allude: Not always, but in most of my texts there is a point at which the word functions in a nondiscursive manner. All of a sudden it disrupts the order and rules, but not thanks to me. I pay attention to the power that words, and sometimes the syntactical possibilities as well, have to disrupt the normal usage of discourse, the lexicon and syntax.

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So, naturally, all this works through the body of a language. It is obvious that with a word like "subjectile" I can only produce or rather recognize the effects of destabilization within the French language, or at least I give French priority. On the one hand, I really like French and have a great investment in it, while on the other hand I mistreat it in a certain manner in order to make it come out of itself. Thus, I explain myself with the bodies of words – here I think that one can truly speak of "the body of a word," with the reservations mentioned earlier, that it is a body that is not present to itself – and it is the body of a word that interests me to the extent that it doesn't belong to discourse.

So I am very much in love with words, and as someone who is in love with words I treat them as bodies that contain their own perversity – a word I don't like too much because it is too conventional – let's say the regulated disorder of words. As soon as that occurs, language is opened to the nonverbal arts. For this reason it is especially in dealing with painting and photography, for example, that I take risks with such verbal adventures as "subjectile" or with a number of other words in "Right of Inspection." It is when words start to go crazy in that way and no longer behave properly in regard to discourse that they have more rapport with the other arts, and conversely this reveals how the apparently nondiscursive arts such as photography and painting correspond to a linguistic scene. But such words are related to the matter of their signatory – this is evident in the case of Artaud, even in the case of the photographer Plissart. There are words that work on them whether they know it or not; they are in the process of letting themselves be constructed by words.

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WILLS: To take the matter a little further, let's discuss music, which is predominantly nonverbal. I note that you haven't as yet written anything on music, but I have the impression that the word "come" [*viens*], discussed in "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," has a thoroughly musical resonance.<sup>10</sup> I can't think of any other way to describe it and so wonder if there isn't a musical force [*une force de musique*] in that word.

DERRIDA: In a certain manner – and here my response will be a little naïve – one can say the same thing about it. The most naïve response is that music is the object of my strongest desire, and yet at the same time it remains completely forbidden. I don't have the competence, I don't have any truly presentable musical culture. Thus my desire remains completely paralyzed. I am even more afraid of speaking nonsense in this area than in any other. Having said that, the tension in what I read and what I write, and in the treatment of the words I just spoke about, probably has something to do with a nondiscursive sonority, although I don't know whether I would call it musical. It has something to do with tone, timbre, voice, something to do with the voice – because contrary to the nonsense that circulates in this regard, nothing interests me more than the voice, more precisely the nondiscursive voice, but the voice all the same.

So, since you mention the word "come" [*viens*], it seems to me that I was trying to say that what counted was not the word "come," the semantics, the concept of "to come," but that the thought of "to come" or the event itself depended on the uttering [*profération*], on the performative call of "come," and that this is not exhausted by its meaning. Addressing the other, I say the "coming" to the other. I say "come," but I mean an event that is not to be confused with the word "come" as it is said in language. It is something that can be replaced by a sign, by an "Ah," by a cry, that means "come." It is not itself a full presence; it is differential, that is to say, it is relayed through the tone and the gradations or gaps of tonality. So, these gaps, this tonal differential, is evidently there, and that is what interests me.

To return to the naïveté of my response, when I write, the most difficult thing, what causes me the most anguish, mostly in the beginning, is to find the right tone. Ultimately, my most serious problem is not deciding what I want to say. Each time I begin a text, the anguish, the sense of failure, comes from the fact that I am unable to establish a voice. I ask myself whom I am talking to, how I am going to play with the tone, the tone being precisely that which informs and establishes the relation. It isn't the content, it's the tone, and since the tone is never present to itself, it is always written differentially; the question is always this differentiability of tone. Within each note there is a differential, but when one writes a text designed to last, whether it be a discursive text, a cinematic text, or whatever, the question is one of tone, of changes in tone. So I imagine that when I write I settle my problems of tone by looking for an economy – I can't find another word – an economy that consists in always pluralizing the tone, in writing in many tones, so as

<sup>10</sup>"Of an apocalyptic tone recently adopted in philosophy," trans. J. P. Leavey, *Semeia* 23(1982):63–97.

not to allow myself to be confined to a single interlocutor or a single moment. I think in the end that what interests me the most in the texts I read and in the texts I write is precisely that. All of this merits further analysis, but that's it, how it shifts, moves from one phrase to another, from one tone to another. Such analyses are rarely performed - I haven't read a lot of work on the subject - but it remains an important question. And it would be an analysis of the pragmatic type, one that doesn't consist of determining what something means, what its thesis, theme, or theorem is, for that is not so interesting nor so essential; what is more important is the tone, and to know to whom it is addressed in order to produce what effect. Obviously that can change from one sentence to the next or from one page to the next.

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And since you are asking about my texts, I would say that what they have in the final analysis that is most analogous to spatial, architectural, and theatrical works is their acoustics and their voices. I have written many texts with several voices, and in them the spacing is visible. There are several people speaking, and this necessarily implies a dispersion of voices, of tones that space themselves, that automatically spatialize themselves. But even when it isn't marked in the text by new paragraphs, by grammatical or grammatically determined shifts from one person to another, such effects are evident in many of my texts: All of a sudden, the person changes, the voice changes, and it all gets spatialized. People's reactions, their libidinal investments, positive or negative, their rejection or hatred, can probably be best explained in terms of tone and voice more than in terms of the content of what I actually say. They can put up with the fact that I take this or that position, but what really upsets them is this spatialization, the fact that one no longer knows whom one is dealing with, who signs, how it all comes together [see *rassembler*]; that is what disturbs them, what scares them. And this effect of spatialization - in my texts as well as in others' texts - sometimes scares them even more than do spatial works themselves, because even spatial works that should produce this effect still give the impression of a kind of gathering [*rassemblement*]. We can say the work is there, it's a terrible thing, it's unbearable, it's menacing, but in fact it's within a frame, or it's made of stone, or it's in a film that begins and ends; there is a simulacrum of gathering and thus the possibility of mastery, the possibility of protection for spectator or addressee. But there are types of texts which don't end or begin, or disperse their voices, which say different things, and which as a result hinder this gathering. One can listen but can't manage to objectify the thing. So, with my work, there are those who like it and those who don't. But I think that it is always a question of space, of the nonmastery of spacing, and not only of the voice or something in the voices.

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WILLS: Could the idea of tone be related to something more pertinent to the visual arts, the question of beauty?

DERRIDA: The question of beauty is very difficult. I don't know. Naturally we could evoke the canonical discourses on beauty and speak of Kant, and so forth, but that wouldn't be interesting here. Personally, I can't treat beauty as a separate effect, although I'm sensitive to it, whether it's a mat-

ter of beauty within art or outside of art. In neither case can I separate it from the experience of the body we spoke of earlier, and thus from the experience of desire; naturally, it is libidinalized. For the reasons I just mentioned, I am probably more sensitive to what works through the voice, the beauty of tonalities. It is for that reason finally that I must say – still in the naïve register – that I am rarely overwhelmed by the beauty of pictorial or architectural works; that is to say, they don't excite me. I rarely have my breath taken away by a painting. On the other hand, that does sometimes happen with music or when I hear the spoken word or read texts – by listening to the voice, that is – and it often happens in the cinema, but only to the extent that it comes from what works through the voice as desire [*ce qui dans le désir travaille la voix*]. It can happen with silent film, but only because silent film is never silent.

Thus, I would say that for me the experience of beauty, if there is one, is inseparable from the relations to and the desire for the other, to the extent that it works through the voice, through something of a tonal differential – to be more specific, through the voice as something that intensifies desire all the more because it separates it from the body. There is an effect of interruption, of suspension. One can make love with a voice but without making love. The voice separates. And thus it is a matter of whatever there is in the voice that provokes desire; it is a differential vibration that at the same time interrupts, hinders, prevents access, maintains a distance. For me, that is beauty. We speak of beauty in front of something that is at once desirable and inaccessible, something that speaks to me, that calls me, but at the same time tells me it is inaccessible. Then I can say it is beautiful, it exists beyond, has an effect of transcendence, is inaccessible. Thus I can't consume it – it isn't consumable; it's a work of art. That is the definition of a work of art, that it is not consumable. Beauty is something that awakens my desire by saying "you will not consume me." It is a joyful work of mourning, although neither work nor mourning. On the other hand, if I can consume it, I say it isn't beautiful. That's why I would have more trouble saying that a painting or piece of architecture was beautiful. I could say it was, but I wouldn't be captured by it, I wouldn't be moved by the same feeling of beauty. However, I can be moved in the case of a finite discourse, where there are beings who speak, or even in the case of texts, a poem for instance, where there are effects of the voice that call and give themselves by refusing themselves. All you can say is that it's beautiful, and that you are not responsible. It can happen only with you – as is the case with the signature we discussed earlier – and at the same time you have nothing to do with it. Thus you are dead; it does without you [*se passe de toi*]. There is a voice that says that that can happen only with you [*ne peut se passer qu'avec toi*], but it happens without you [*se passe de toi*]. That is beauty; it's sad, mourning. We could in another context have a more scholarly discussion on beauty, but I am trying to say something else here.

BRUNETTE: In the "Fifty-two Aphorisms"<sup>11</sup> you talk a lot about the relation of architecture to thinking or thought, the analogue between dis-

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<sup>11</sup>"Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword," in *Omnibus*, p. 69.

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course and all the spatial arts. What about the relation of line, form, and color to thinking? When you say the "spatial arts" rather than the visual arts, does that change anything? Is the logocentric predominance of the I (eye) in vision denied when you put these works in the realm of the spatial?

DERRIDA: There is an element of chance in my use of the word "visual" - I don't know how to adjust my discourse to your expectations - but if in fact I do say "spatial" more readily than "visual," I would give the following reason: It is because I am not sure that space is essentially mastered by [livré à] the look. Obviously, when I say spatial arts, that permits me in an economic and strategic fashion to link these arts with a general set of ideas on spacing, in painting (speech), and so on, and also because space is not necessarily that which is seen, as it is for a sculptor or architect, for example. Space isn't only the visible, and moreover the invisible - this takes us back to the text I mentioned before we got started, on blindness" - the invisible, for me, is not simply the opposite of vision. This is difficult to explain, but in that text I tried to show that the painter or the drawer is blind, that she or he writes, draws, or paints as a blind person, that the hand that paints and draws is the hand of a blind person - it is an experience of blindness. Thus the visual arts are also arts of the blind. For that reason I would speak of the spatial arts. It more conveniently allows me to link it with the notions of text, spacing, and so on.

Now for the second part of your question. Obviously, the word "thought" doesn't work for me in that context, except to the extent that I can, as a matter of usage, count on a distinction made elsewhere between thought and philosophy. Thought is not exhausted by philosophy. Philosophy is only a mode of thought, and thus it is the extent to which thought exceeds philosophy that interests us here. This presumes that there are practical arts of space that exceed philosophy, that some would call them, animal activities - are not simply natural, or, as instant needs. At this point it is necessary to say that there is thought, something that produces sense without belonging to the order of sense, that exceeds philosophical discourse and questions philosophy, that potentially contains a questioning of philosophy, that goes beyond philosophy. This does not mean that a painter or filmmaker has the means of questioning philosophy, but what she or he creates becomes the bearer of something that cannot be mastered by philosophy. Thus, there is thought there. So, every time there is an advance, an architectural or pictorial event, whether it be a particular work or a new school or architectural style or a new type of artistic event, thought is involved, and not only in the sense I have just described. It involves thought in the sense of the memory of the history and tradition of the work, or of art in general. But that does not mean that artists know history, or that filmmakers must know the history of film, but the fact that they inaugurate something, that they produce a type of work that was not possible,

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"Memoirs of the Blind, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, in press).



let's say, twenty years earlier, assumes that in their work the memory of the history of film is nevertheless recorded, and therefore that it is interpreted, it is thought. What I call thought is just that; it is interpreted. Hence when I speak of thought at work in architecture, as could also be said with respect to painting or the fine arts, I am making a distinction between thought and philosophy. I am referring to something in excess of the philosophical, something not only of the order of an earthquake, or an animal instinct, as well as to self-interpretation [*auto-interprétation*], interpretation of one's own memory.

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What I call thought is a polemical gesture with respect to current interpretations according to which the production of an architectural or a cinematic work is, if not natural, at least naïve in terms of critical or theoretical discourses, which are always essentially philosophical, as if thought had nothing to do with the work, as if it didn't think, whereas elsewhere the theoretician or interpreter or philosopher does think. So the idea is to indicate in a polemical fashion that thinking is going on in the experience of the work, that is to say, that thought is incorporated in it - there is a provocation to think on the part of the work, and this provocation to think is irreducible. Obviously, this is charged with meaning because it assumes a lot of things, such as the Heideggerian distinction between philosophy and thought. It is Heidegger's words I am using when I say that philosophy is only a mode of thought - it is almost a direct quotation from Heidegger that I have appropriated - but at the same time I use it in a way that is anti-Heideggerian. In order to really interpret what I say about architectural thought, it is necessary first to understand the reference to Heidegger, and second to understand that the entire text about architecture is anti-Heideggerian. It is an argument against the Heideggerian notion of habitation, of the work of art as habitation. My objection to Heidegger, in fact, often begins with the spatial arts. That is because I think that the hierarchization of the arts he practices in his discourse on art and painting, or on poetry, repeats a classical philosophical gesture, and that is exactly what I argue against. Thus it is not only an argument against Heidegger that I then apply to the domain of art; it is in fact on the basis of the spatial arts, or starting with the question of space, that I question Heidegger, in particular in the domain of the architectural and what he says about habitation.

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WILLS: Can we come back to your text on photography, "Right of Inspection," with Marie-Françoise Plissart? I am referring to what you told me once concerning the problem of its translation, the fact that the piece was not accepted by an American publisher.

DERRIDA: The question of that translation is complicated. First, it is a very difficult book to translate, notably in terms of the problematic we discussed earlier, the way it plays on French words, but more than that, because I try to show that the photographs themselves proceed from a kind of implicit play in French that is untranslatable, that it is as if this photographic work could be produced only in the French language - as if not only my text but also the photographs were untranslatable. I am reminded of what happened in the case of the Japanese translation of the text. Because of the differences between the left-to-right linearity of

Western writing and the right-to-left, vertical progression of Japanese, and the fact that a similar linearity of gazes occurs both within a photograph and from one photograph to the next, it was not possible to reproduce the photographs in the "correct" order in the Japanese text. In fact, the publisher reversed the original order of the photographs, but that only confused Japanese readers, because the gazes still failed to match from one photograph to the other. What I called the text's untranslatability therefore became a fact in Japanese.

So, first of all, it is very difficult to translate for reasons that are given in the text itself. Having said that, however, if it appeared in English only in Australia, I imagine that was also for other reasons - I don't know which, I have only hypotheses formed after speaking with various people. It seems that in spite of everything, in the field of American academic publishing the "obscenity" of the photographs became an issue. That is to say that my American publishers, respectable university presses, either did not want to publish it or did not want to associate my name with photographs of lesbian lovemaking, and so forth, and thus said it didn't interest them. For instance, I was informed by one of them, through the intermediary of an editor who claimed to know something about photography, that the photographs weren't interesting. I don't know what his evaluation is worth, if it was sincere or not. I am not able to judge, I don't know what to think of it. Maybe he was right, but the work consisted of more than just the photographs. In this case there was a reluctance that I can't explain. I can only conjecture that resistance to this type of image in the field of academic publishing is greater than I thought. I was very naïve, because in my confused evaluation of what is happening in the United States I did not think it was possible that this sort of prudishness would be so prevalent. From that point of view this country remains very enigmatic to me. An almost unfettered sort of freedom coexists closely with the most ridiculous of prohibitive moralities; the proximity of the two is very difficult to comprehend.

BRUNETTE: I want now to ask something concerning the so-called negativity of deconstruction. At the end of the "Fifty-two Aphorisms" you make a call for not destroying things, for finding something affirmative: "The baseless ground [le sans-fond] of a 'deconstructive' and affirmative architecture can cause vertigo, but it is not the void [le vide], it is not the gaping and chaotic remainder, the hiatus of destruction." You point to this affirmative place in your work, but you never name it. Can this place be named?

DERRIDA: It's not a place; it's not a place that really exists. It's a "come" [viens]; it is what I call an affirmation that is not positive. It doesn't exist, it isn't present. I always distinguish affirmation from the position of a positivity. Thus it is an affirmation that is very risky, uncertain, improbable; it entirely escapes the space of certainty.

Before coming back to that, since you quoted that passage, I can say that I insist on this point in the text on architecture for two reasons: first, because in fact people can say that deconstructive architecture is absurd because architecture constructs. So it is necessary to explain what

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the term means in the text, that "deconstructive architecture" refers precisely to what happens in terms of "gathering" [in English], the being together [*être ensemble*], the assembly, the now [*maintenant*], the maintaining. Deconstruction does not consist simply of dissociating or disarticulating or destroying, but of affirming a certain "being together," a certain *maintenant*; construction is possible only to the extent that the foundations themselves have been deconstructed. Affirmation, decision, invention, the coming about of the *constructum* is not possible unless the philosophy of architecture, the history of architecture, the foundations themselves have been questioned. If the foundations are assured, there is no construction; neither is there any invention. Invention assumes an undecidability; it assumes that at a given moment there is nothing. We found on the basis of nonfoundation. Thus deconstruction is the condition of construction, of true invention, of a real affirmation that holds something together, that constructs. From this point of view, only deconstruction, only a certain appeal to or call by [*appel de*] deconstruction, can really invent architecture.

So the passage you cite was meant to respond to those who are frightened by the idea of a deconstructive architecture, those who think it ridiculous, but in the second place it was also meant to respond to discourses within the architectural field that are a little negative, discourses such as Eisenman's, for example. A letter I wrote to him on that subject was recently published.<sup>11</sup> In his theoretical discussion of his work he often presents a discourse of negativity that is very facile — he speaks of the architecture of absence, the architecture of nothing [*du rien*], and I am skeptical about discourses of absence and negativity. This also applies to certain other architects like Libeskind. I understand what motivates their remarks, but they are not careful enough. In speaking of their own work they are too easily inclined to speak of the void, negativity, absence, with theological overtones also, and sometimes Judeo-theological overtones. No architecture can be called Judaic, of course, but they resort to a kind of Judaic discourse, a negative theology on the subject of architecture. Thus my allusion is to be understood in that sense.

Now what is this call? I don't know. If I knew, nothing would ever happen. The fact is, in order for what we conveniently call deconstruction to get off the ground [*se mettre en mouvement*], that call is necessary. It says "come," but come where, I don't know. Where this call comes from, and from whom, I don't know. That doesn't simply mean that I am ignorant; it is heterogeneous to knowledge. In order for that call to exist, the order of knowledge must be breached. If we can identify, objectify, recognize the place, from that moment on there is no call. In order for there to be a call, and for the beauty we spoke of earlier to exist, the orders of determination and of knowledge must be exceeded. It is in relation to nonknowledge that the call is made. Thus I do not have a response. I can't tell you "this is it." I truly don't know, but this "I don't know" doesn't just result from ignorance, or skepticism, or nihilism, or obscurantism. This nonknowledge is the necessary condition

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<sup>11</sup>"A Letter to Peter Eisenman," *Assemblage*, no. 12 (August 1990):7-13.

for something to happen, for responsibility to be taken, for a decision to be made, for an event to take place.

It is necessary that we be unable to respond to that question, and each event – whether it consist of an event in someone’s life or an event such as a work of art – each event takes place there where there was no place, where we didn’t know the place was, takes (the) place where there was no place. It provides the venue and in doing so prescribes that the venue not be known in advance, that it not be programmable. Afterward we can imagine or determine the programs, we can do the analysis. If an art form appears at such and such a moment, it is because the historical, ideological, and technical conditions render it possible, and thus after the fact we can determine the place of waiting, as it were, “the expectation,” the structure of waiting, the structure of reception [structure d’accueil]. If we could do this in an exhaustive fashion, it would mean that nothing had happened. I believe that it is always necessary to take the analysis of the historical, political, economic, and ideological conditions, to take that analysis as far as possible, including the history of the specific art form. But if the analysis of all those conditions is exhaustive, to the point where the work is ultimately only there to fill a hole, then there is no work. If there is a work, it is because, even when all the conditions that could become the object of analysis have been met, something still happens, something we call the signature, the work, if you wish. If all the conditions necessary to produce, let’s say, *A la recherche du temps perdu* have been met, and we can analyze those conditions in general and in the specific case, and if that analysis in fact no longer needs the work, then it is because nothing has happened. If there is a work, it means that the analysis of all the conditions only served to, how shall I say, make room [laisser la place] in an absolutely undetermined place, for something that is at once useless, supplementary, and finally irreducible to those conditions.

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BRUNETTE: Let me ask you a question about the future of what might be called an alternative deconstructive critical practice. It seems that if people write in a more conventional deconstructive mode, they say that it’s already been done. But if it’s more autobiographical and self-foregrounding, or relies more on chance and puns, they become hostile. It’s too narcissistic, they say, or it’s okay when Derrida does it or when Barthes used to do it, because they’re Derrida and Barthes, but when others do it, it’s self-indulgent. Given the enormous institutional constraints on discourse, do you think there is any future for that kind of practice?

DERRIDA: If it is “that kind of practice” then it won’t have a chance. Its chance is that it will be transformed, that it will be disfigured. It’s obvious that if it were an identifiable and regulated practice, the same thing being recognized each time, then it would not have a chance. It would be stillborn, dead from the start. If it has a chance, it is to the extent that it moves on, that it gets transformed, that it is not immediately recognized, that it is recognized without being recognized. We must be able to recognize it, but it is also necessary that in the process of this recognition, something else happens in the form of a contraband [en contre-

bande]. People must be able to recognize it and at the same time recognize that they are dealing with something they can't identify, something they don't know. So it takes or it doesn't; there's no general rule. To put it in rather formalist terms, I would posit the paradox as follows: The chances that X – let's call it deconstruction, but it could be anything – will proliferate and last are inversely proportional to the fact of its being recognized as X, that is to say, directly proportional to the possibility of its producing effects that cannot be continuously reproduced in deconstruction. Thus it needs to be transformed, to move elsewhere.

BRUNETTE: Do you have any comment on Gregory Ulmer's attempt, in his recent book *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*,<sup>14</sup> to develop an alternative critical practice, what he calls "mystory"?

DERRIDA: With respect to Greg Ulmer, his work seems to me to be very interesting, very necessary; it opens another space that we can evaluate in a different manner. We can evaluate it with regard to deconstruction – I am personally unable to do that – or with regard to what I do, and people may or may not be in agreement about it. But there needs to be discussion about these objects – television, telepedagogy, and so forth – and such questions will produce a new discourse that a lot of people, myself included, won't understand. Already I am not sure that I understand Greg Ulmer very well, or not sure I have worked enough on him to know what he means. I see it from afar, I see it in outline, but it's already beyond me. That means that the object called deconstruction has moved elsewhere and that under its name something is happening that has no relation to the word. And so it gets displaced and deformed. That is the condition for the future. If there is to be a future, it is on the condition that it not be "that," that it be elsewhere. It is clear that the production of new technological capabilities – in communications, for instance – such as I could never possibly have imagined, will displace things completely. The political situation is changing radically; the same goes for computers, for biology, and all of that will necessarily produce discourses that are not totally translatable in the code or language of the deconstruction of twenty years ago, or ten years ago, or of the present time. That is the future, by definition. If there is a future, we can say nothing about it.

In terms of what I can predict from what is close at hand, during the coming years the war over deconstruction will probably continue to rage in the American academy. In my opinion the war reserves are far from depleted. I don't know how much longer it will go on, but the political argument will continue to fuel the debate. It is not only the affairs of the past, those of Heidegger or de Man, that are raising the stakes. For a certain time the temperature will remain fairly high, and for political reasons, but that doesn't only relate to things that are difficult to interpret, such as the case of de Man, but to the whole framework that the detractors of deconstruction operate within. There will be a great deal of uncertainty that will increase the tension, especially because of what is now happening in the geopolitical sphere, notably what we call the

<sup>14</sup>Gregory Ulmer, *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

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democratization process in the Eastern countries; all that will make the interpretive machines very restive. And, as always, the polarization will increase the tension, for there definitely is polarization around deconstruction – those who say it is reactionary and those who say it is revolutionary, conservative or not conservative.

WILLS: Do you think it works in the same way in France?

DERRIDA: No, in France it is more complicated. There are always similarities, but in France there exist different milieus. In the United States, deconstruction is restricted to the academic milieu, even though that milieu is not a homogeneous field. As it happens, these things are starting to overflow the academic field. Someone told me that a colloquium that involved deconstruction recently took place in the army or navy. The other day Hillis Miller told me he had received a call from Phyllis Franklin at the MLA, who had had a request from a senator for information on deconstruction. So it is clear they want to know what is going on. In general, though, American intellectual culture is restricted to the academic field. Things are different in France. The university milieu is not the same as the cultural milieu or the literary milieu.

BRUNETTE: I was thinking of the university milieu, because when French university professors come here and we tell them we are interested in your work, they have a tendency to say that, yes, deconstruction was something important that happened fifteen or twenty years ago, but they claim not to understand why it still interests us.

DERRIDA: That is both true and false. It is true that deconstruction appeared in a certain form at a certain time in France, and that there was a delay in its transmission. There was a process of assimilation and thus apparently of digestion and evacuation that occurred in France between 1966-7 and 1972-3, and from that point of view it is said to be finished. At the same time, it often amounts to disavowal or resentment in terms of something that, in my opinion, has *not yet* arrived in France. I can say that in many respects it has not yet arrived in France. So it is true and false, and deserves a detailed analysis. It is also necessary to bear in mind the subject position of French intellectuals who come here, who have their interests, who have a certain background, who want to see things in a certain way. In general it makes them nervous, for obvious reasons, that deconstruction interests people here. That concerns me a lot, because I'm right in the middle of it, and it often comes home to me that way.

BRUNETTE: I have a related question that is a bit more difficult, perhaps because it's more fundamental, but it's a question that is very important to me in my own intellectual life. The problem is that I find that I am unable to listen to a lecture on almost any subject, no matter how expert, since I've been "ruined" by deconstruction.

DERRIDA: So am I.

BRUNETTE: All thinking, at least at present, seems to depend upon the making of distinctions, the ordering of hierarchies. As soon as someone giving a lecture divides his or her topic into three parts, say, I immediately see how number one could really be considered part of number

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three, or that number two and number one actually overlap. So, given the fact that deconstruction seems to threaten the production of knowledge in such a fundamental way, I wonder if you were not being a little naïve when at the end of the *Limited Inc.*<sup>15</sup> interview you did with Gerald Graff you said that what bothered you the most was that people seem to deliberately misread your work and seem to be so irresponsible when they discuss it. But since your ideas are so threatening to the production of knowledge as it is presently constituted, isn't their response in some ways understandable? And if it *is* true that deconstruction blocks the production of knowledge, where can we go next? This is perhaps a very naïve question, but I feel I have to ask it: What's next?

The second part of the question is what you think the outlook is, institutionally speaking, for the future of deconstruction in America. Will it continue to exist, and if so, will it begin to take different forms beyond what might be called the "Yale school" undecidability, the finding of aporia in texts? I'm thinking, for example, of *Glas*, the performative text that tries to "go beyond" logocentrism. Do you think there is any future for that in the American academy?

DERRIDA: There are a lot of questions there. To come back to what we were discussing before we started the interview, it just so happens that yesterday and the day before I was at a colloquium on the Holocaust, and I spoke for two and a half hours on a text by Benjamin, dealing with the 1, 2, 3 distinctions, and so forth. I spent my time demonstrating how this text of Benjamin's, "Critique of Violence,"<sup>16</sup> which produces a series of distinctions like that between "founding violence" and "conserving violence," itself constantly deconstructs its own conceptual oppositions. So I spent my time delineating Benjamin's distinctions, then questioning them. For me, a reading is bearable only when it does that work. That said, I don't believe that deconstruction is essentially or solely that which, as you said, destroys the production of knowledge. No. Or rather, it does and it doesn't. On the one hand it can in fact disturb or block a certain type of work; on the other hand it indirectly produces knowledge – indirectly it provokes work. Those who consider themselves deconstructionists and those who are opposed to it all work in their own manner, and I think this accelerates the production of knowledge. For example, the New Historicism, which presents itself as a producer of knowledge, appears in a field that is all the same marked by deconstruction. While being sensitive to the fact that deconstruction can paralyze the tranquil, positive accumulation of knowledge, on the other hand it's also productive.

Then you ask what's next. Frankly, I don't know. I'm not here to sing the praises of deconstruction; nevertheless, I believe that the fact that deconstruction is not limited to what you call the "Yale school" effect has already been confirmed. In saying that, I am not speaking of my own work. What is happening in architecture, in law schools, and

<sup>15</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. S. Weber and J. Mehlman (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

<sup>16</sup>Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 277–300.

so on, shows that deconstruction has not been limited to that context. Even supposing that at a given moment – though that was never true – it came together in the so-called Yale group, that's over. And it always was, even at Yale. So it can't remain there. But it is necessary to distinguish between the fate of the word "deconstruction," or deconstructionist theory, or a so-called school – which never existed – and other things that, without the name or without reference to the theory, are able to develop as deconstruction. For me, deconstruction does not limit itself to a discourse on the theme of deconstruction; for me, deconstruction is to be found at work [il y a la déconstruction à l'oeuvre]. It is at work in Plato, it is at work in the American and Soviet military commands [les états-majors], it is at work in the economic crisis. Thus deconstruction does not need deconstruction, it does not need a theory or a word. Now if we restrict the thing, if we limit it to the discursive and institutional effect that has developed throughout the world, but mostly in the United States, and in the academy, and we ask "What's next?", then I don't know. We're used to changes in fashions and schools and theories and hegemonies. We are not going to use the *word* indefinitely. One day we will think back that during the sixties, seventies, and eighties there was a thing [*un truc*] called deconstruction that was represented by . . . I don't have any illusions about that, no more than about our own longevity. We know that, generally speaking, we live for sixty to seventy years and then we die. In that sense, "deconstruction," as a word, or a theme, will disappear. What will happen before its disappearance, or what will happen after, I don't know. I really don't know. I find that it has already had a rather long life, precisely because it was never a theory able to be contained within a discipline, neither philosophical nor literary, and so forth. It follows a different temporal rhythm and hence takes more time to move into architecture and other fields. And it gets deformed; it is a rather monstrous phenomenon, each time different and thus unidentifiable. Obviously, if certain people want to identify it by the type of literary theory that was developed at Yale, which is a reductive gesture, then it is easier to find its limits. But it is more like a virus; it is a form of virus, of which we will lose the trace. It is inevitable that at a given moment the trace identifiable within the name "deconstruction" will be lost; that is obvious. The word will wear itself out. Beyond the word "deconstruction" or other words associated with it, this process will be a little different; it may take longer. There will continue to be little organisms with their independent lives, whose trajectories we may be able to follow, but that is true for anything that happens in a culture. How does one follow the trace of philosophy through history? I don't know.

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Translated by Laurie Volpe