

Art Criticism and Deconstruction: Rosalind Krauss and Jacques Derrida

By Matthew Biro

A Hegemonic Model of Meaning

Has there ever been a "deconstructive" art criticism—that is, an art criticism which does more than simply hide its own agenda beneath this popular and all-too-little-examined theoretical label? For the past ten years, the term "deconstruction" has become increasingly used in a wide variety of aesthetic contexts, for a number of different purposes, by critics, curators, and artists alike. It has gained a certain currency in artistic circles—a sort of "official" status as it were—which suggests its user's familiarity with notions of meaning and signification currently in vogue in both America and Europe. Unfortunately, deconstruction's emerging popularity as a term to be rather loosely bandied about in art critical writings has far outstripped research on the part of art critics into its meaning. As even a brief survey of the field reveals, art critics have a poor understanding of deconstruction. Content to receive their information from secondary sources and an occasional, hastily excised essay-fragment, many an art critic has sold short Derrida's insights into the nature of "writing" (*l'écriture*) and the production of meaning.¹ As this paper shall reveal, too often do

we discover in art critical writings a point of view which claims deconstruction for its own and yet is entirely antithetical to deconstructive practice. This point of view entails a theory of meaning too fully subordinate to categories of stasis, taxonomy, and structure; as well as an “unconscious” yet seemingly overwhelming compulsion to separate the meaning it structurally dominates into a good type which it valorizes and a bad type which it suppresses. As we shall see, this critical position is radically at odds with the theory of meaning as movement or play—a hallmark of Derrida’s work.²

A case in point is Rosalind Krauss, professor of art history at Hunter College and curator of major shows at the Guggenheim, the Whitney, the Corcoran, and the Museum of Modern Art. Krauss is perhaps the most powerful and well-known advocate of structuralism and post-structuralism in art criticism today, and, hence, a powerful authority on Derrida’s behalf in the field. In addition to being a founder and editor of *October*, a leading art journal associated with the writings of this loose collection of thinkers,³ Krauss has actively promulgated their theories in her own widely-read and influential publications. Thus, for someone interested in the possible applications of deconstruction to works of art, Krauss’s power as a (willing or unwilling) representative of Derrida’s thought cannot be underestimated. Still less, however, can it be trusted. As an examination of Krauss’s book, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1985), will show, Krauss is in places a truly deconstructive art critic. Yet the essays in Krauss’s book also reveal a theory of meaning radically different than that of Derrida. To anticipate, this model of signification implies that Krauss is ultimately *not* a deconstructive art critic. By interpreting art according to an understanding of the sign which suppresses notions of objective reference and of the development of a sign’s meaning over time, Krauss radically limits the range of meaning that a work of art may potentially possess, thereby falling into a trap that Derrida’s model of meaning easily avoids. Although Derrida, too, attacks traditional notions of objective reference, he does this not to deny that it exists, but to show that this type of reference is far more complex and perplexing than traditional theories supposed.

Krauss, Deconstruction, and Signification

Krauss’s 1981 essay, “In the Name of Picasso,” presents a good example of the deconstructive aspects of her methodology as well as her restricted notion of signification. The essay falls into two parts. In the first, Krauss attacks a critical viewpoint she finds prevalent in contemporary Picasso scholarship—a viewpoint she calls “the art history of the proper name,” and which she attributes to William Rubin, John Richardson, Mary Mathews Gedo, Linda Nochlin, Robert Rosenblum and Pierre Daix.⁴ In the second part, Krauss elaborates her own theory of pictorial representation and makes a case for its being explicitly thematized in Picasso’s collage. Krauss’s essay thus seems similar in structure to Derrida’s deconstructive writings, which also articulate a “positive doctrine” via a conceptual overturning of a

strategically selected group of texts.⁵ Like Derrida, Krauss works parasitically, developing her own thought by showing what another paradigm excludes.

Another affinity Krauss's essay shares with those of Derrida is that her "deconstruction" is of a theory of the sign. According to Krauss, the art historians of the proper name embrace a theory of the sign which assumes that all reference is to single objects in the real world. In other words, signs serve only as "proper names;" they refer to one and only one referent and thereby use themselves up in the act of signification. The critics Krauss attacks allegedly operate with the underlying belief that a work by Picasso is "about" the real world objects that it represents. Thus for William Rubin, Picasso's *Seated Bather* (1930) and *Bather with Beach Ball* (1932) evince two different universes because "behind each picture there lay a real-world model, each model with a different name: Olga Picasso; Marie-Therese Walter."⁶ Similarly, in an analysis of Picasso's cubist collages, Robert Rosenblum "proposes to read the names printed on the labels introduced into cubist collage, and thus to identify the objects so labeled."⁷ These many printed JOUs JOURs, and URNALS serve primarily to label a newspaper, *Le Journal*, in Rosenblum's scheme. The complex jokes that the word fragments perform are radically de-emphasized by Rosenblum who interprets them simply as working in the service of indicating a real world object.⁸

In contrast to this "extensional" theory, Krauss suggests that there is an "intensional or sense view" theory of the sign which is nearer to the one she will use in her own reading of Picasso's collage.⁹ This model assumes that all reference is to sense or meaning. The sign, in other words, refers to other signs and does not "name" or indicate objects in the real world. According to this view, "Moses" indicates not the man but a set of descriptions: the leader of the Israelites, the child who was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, and so on.¹⁰

In order to apply this "intensional" theory of signification to Picasso's collage, Krauss draws explicitly on a model of the linguistic sign borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1915). This choice of the Saussurian model for the theoretical basis of her analysis is highly ironic, because by so choosing, Krauss both embodies and radically undermines the deconstructive side of her criticism. For, at the same time as she makes a classically deconstructive move, namely the conceptual overturning of a traditional opposition, intension-extension, Krauss reapplies a theory of the sign to Picasso, which Derrida, in his deconstructions of structuralist theory, has explicitly set out to overcome.

However, before turning to an analysis of the deconstructive theory of signification which subtends Derrida's critical writings, it is first necessary to briefly characterize the Saussurian theory of meaning and its functioning in Krauss's analysis of Picasso's collage. Saussure's notions of signification and language rely on two primary oppositions: the distinction between synchronic and diachronic and the distinction between *langue* and *parole*. The first of these distinctions provides Saussure with his critical approach

to language. Radically limiting the historical, or diachronic, model which determined the treatment of language in his early writing where he studied the development of words, Saussure came to assert that linguistics could most profitably approach its subject by treating it synchronically—that is, as an atemporal structure.¹¹ Instead of tracing the development of isolated elements over time, the linguist would attempt to disclose a system or code which he postulates to underlie and determine his empirical data.¹² Saussure calls this atemporal system which the linguist seeks to reveal *langue*.

Langue is the product of a people—a social construct. It is the intersubjective system of correlations between words and meanings which every speaker uses when he or she communicates a particular message. *Parole*, on the other hand, is an individual speech act. Unlike *langue*, which is communal and abstract, *parole* is actual and, hence, context-specific. *Parole* is contingent, whereas *langue*, for Saussure, is necessary. For this reason, the focus of the structural linguist is *langue* and not *parole*, the system rather than the message. The speech act is secondary, a mere means of getting at the larger whole.¹³

Every instance of *parole* consists of one or more signs. Saussure divides the sign into a signifier (a material element such as a sound or a mark on paper) and a signified (an immaterial idea or concept to which the signifier refers).¹⁴ The relationship between the signifier and the signified is “arbitrary.”¹⁵ This means that there is only a conventional bond between the sign’s material element and its meaning or content. In addition, the signified is not understood to be real object as it is in the “extensional” model which Krauss attacks. Rather, according to Saussure’s structural model, the signified is simply the sign’s place in the network of differences which constitutes the language as a whole.¹⁶ The sign, in other words, refers to other signs so that the meaning of a word, say, “ocean,” is constituted by its relation to, as well as difference from, a host of possible alternatives or substitutions, such as “sea,” “pond,” “bay,” “strait,” “lake,” and “stream.” The Saussurian model of the sign implies that meaning is a function of the interplay of presence and absence. As Saussure notes, “in language there are only differences *without positive terms*.¹⁷ The material signifier thus signifies not some presence but, rather, an absence: a position in a network of oppositions.¹⁸

Krauss applies the “intensional” Saussurian model of the sign to Picasso’s cubist collages, revealing how much more richly significant Picasso’s collages become when interpreted structurally. Relating the Saussurian notion of the sign as a function of the interplay of presence and absence to the various, partially analogous presence-absence pairings which occur in Picasso’s collage, Krauss suggests that the “extraordinary contribution of [Picasso’s] collage is that it is the first instance within the pictorial arts of anything like a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign.”¹⁹

The examples that Krauss gives to support her contention that Picasso explicitly thematizes the signifying processes of his art (i.e., its processes of representation) are convincing. For example, Krauss plausibly interprets

the “f” shaped violin frets in some of Picasso’s 1912-1914 works as signifiers of rotation into depth.

And because the inscription of the *f*s takes place within the collage assembly and thus on the most rigidly flattened and frontalized of planes, ‘depth’ is thus written on the very place from which it is—with the presence of the collage—most absent.²⁰

Furthermore, as Krauss notes, with his wine bottles made out of cut newsprint, Picasso juxtaposes cues which imply a spatial reading with cues which negate depth. Here again Picasso seems to emphasize the interplay of presence and absence in connection with the representation of everyday objects, giving further support to Krauss’s thesis that Picasso comments self-reflexively on his medium. Thus, *contra* Rosenblum, the work fragment “JOUR” does not represent a real world referent but rather marks “the name itself with that condition of incompleteness or absence which secures for the sign its status as *representation*.²¹

Picasso’s collages also problematize the reference of the individual collage elements. As Krauss notes, a “single collage element can function simultaneously to compose a sign of atmosphere or luminosity or of closure or edge.”²² As such, Picasso’s art seems to present the viewer with a second structural similarity to Saussure’s theory of signification. For Saussure, as we saw, meaning is the sign’s position in a system. Thus Saussure’s sign is always related to a multitude of other meanings, other positions in the system not chosen. For this reason, signs are often polysemic; that is, they possess two or more distinct, sometimes even contradictory meanings. In a similar fashion, Krauss’s Picasso makes his collage elements semantically multivalent by suggesting that each element could signify differently in a different context, and draws the viewer’s attention away from the particular forms of the collage elements to the *langue* or system of forms which subtends them. As Krauss puts it,

In the great, complex cubist collages, each element is fully diacritical instantiating both line and color, closure and openness, plane and recession. Each signifier thus yields a matched pair of formal signifieds. Thus if the elements of cubist collage do establish sets of predicates, these are not limited to the properties of objects. They extend to the differential calculus at the very heart of the formal code of painting. What is systematized in collage is not so much the forms of a set of studio paraphernalia, but the very system of form.²³

As Krauss concludes, it is intrinsic to the very nature of collage that Picasso’s collages should be about—or represent—representation. According to Krauss, every glued collage element “represents” (in the sense that it *represents*) the picture field as a whole. Thus, every collage element literally both occludes and indicates the ground which allows it to function as a representation. Picasso thereby shows representation, on its most basic level in his collage, to once again be a function of both presence (figure) and absence (occluded ground). The collage element represents the collage as a whole—but only by making part of it absent.²⁴ Picasso’s collage thus reveals,

a metalanguage of the visual. It can talk about space without employing it; it can figure the figure through the constant superimposition of grounds; it can speak in turn of light and shade through the subterfuge of a written text. This capacity of ‘speaking about’ depends on the ability of each collage element to function as the material signifier for a signified that is its opposite: a presence whose referent is an absent meaning, meaningful only in its absence. As a system, collage inaugurates a play of differences which is both about and sustained by an absent origin: the forced absence of the original plane by the superimposition of another plane, effacing the first in order to represent it. Collage’s very fullness of form is grounded in this forced impoverishment of the ground—a ground both supplemented and supplanted.²⁵

Krauss’s interpretation of Picasso’s collage as giving us “a metalanguage of the visual” is both provocative and compelling. Picasso’s collage does seem reflexive, it does seem to problematize and bring to the viewers attention conventions of visual representation. However—and despite Krauss’s tendency to read them this way—Picasso’s collages do not simply exemplify the *langue* which subtends them. What is often richest about a work of art is the way it breaks with rather than follows the code. For this reason, art criticism cannot leave the realm of *parole* for the realm of *langue* as easily as structural linguistics.

To treat works of art as *parole* is to recognize them as particular messages, communicated by particular individuals and influenced by particular historical situations. As such, Picasso’s collages refer not only to the formal system and to the interplay of presence and absence which allows them to function as representations, but also to objects in the world, particular social and historical situations, real people, and the like. They refer back not only to a system of form but to Picasso’s biography, as well as the cultural tradition out of which he springs. Because Krauss ignores these various “extensional,” psychoanalytic, and context-specific references of the visual sign, her interpretation of Picasso becomes almost as reductive as the so-called “art history of the proper name” which she denigrates. She deserves both praise and censure for her findings. By arguing for Picasso’s reflexivity, his concern with problems of pictorial representation, Krauss sets out a conceptual framework in which we can productively think Picasso’s art. But by ignoring all interpretive paradigms other than her own linguistic one, Krauss radically restricts the range of meaning of Picasso’s collage. Moreover, Krauss does more than simply ignore other interpretive frameworks. Her models of both the verbal and the visual sign positively preclude them. The acceptance of Krauss’s model of signification, therefore, commits the art critic to the predetermined and clearly untenable position that there are whole areas of meaning which works of art, by definition, cannot represent.

There are further difficulties to Krauss’s approach. First, Krauss’s emphasis on the formal code at the expense of the particular work of art obscures a work’s new or transgressive elements. The structural critic’s object is always what is conventional, and not what is innovative, in a sign’s meaning. Thus, by employing a purely structural approach, Krauss obscures many of the more innovative and idiosyncratic levels of meaning which surround the

work of art. Second, Krauss's denial of objective reference—her denial that art can be “about” objects and people in the world—keeps critics from seeking to disclose a psychological or existential meaning surrounding the work of art.²⁶ Third, and perhaps most damaging to the semantic fullness of the work of art, is Krauss's total suppression of time in her model of meaning. For Krauss, meaning can be fully described according to a purely synchronic or structural model. All historical interpretations—of which the “profoundly historicist” formalism of her teacher Clement Greenberg is the prime example—are to be rejected from the start.²⁷ Krauss's model can thus provide no idea of how the meaning of a work of art can change over time. Nor can it explain how a work of art can reconfigure the system—alter the formal code which makes its meaning possible. For Krauss, works of art are always constructed out of previously existing, culturally-coded meanings—meanings which Krauss, following Barthes, calls the “always already-known, already-experienced, already-given-within-a-culture.”²⁸ All force, all possibility of change and development of meaning, is drained from the picture.

What makes Krauss's failure to do justice to the semantic richness of the art object all the more ironic is the fact that the shifts in her criticism, first to phenomenology in the late sixties and then to structuralism and post-structuralism in the early seventies, were motivated by the need to throw off the set of concepts she inherited from Greenberg²⁹—concepts which were unable to explain, or rather which devalued, certain newer styles of artistic production: namely, Pop and Minimalism. Krauss's recourse to structuralist and post-structuralist theory was thus intended to counter the notion that there is a single, institutionalized critical discourse within which all works of art can be profitably discussed—a move to open up the field of art to a multitude of new interpretive frameworks.³⁰ Unfortunately, because of her violent antipathy toward what she calls Greenberg's “historicism,” his method of interpreting the work of art as embedded in a socio-cultural and, later, in a formal history, Krauss denies the validity of all diachronic models.³¹ Because of her complete rejection of “depth” models as well as her very restricted notions of meaning and reference, Krauss ends up being just as doctrinaire as Greenberg. Krauss is therefore *not* a truly deconstructive art critic. Despite certain deconstructive aspects, the methodology Krauss adopts to break open critical concepts ends up being the means by which she institutes a new orthodoxy. Past critical positions are “deconstructed” solely to show the greater applicability of Krauss's own critical concepts; that Krauss's concepts should themselves be deconstructed is an issue that is never raised in her writings.³²

Derrida's Theory of Signification

As practiced by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction avoids the errors which result from Krauss's critical methodology. First and foremost, deconstruction constantly problematizes its own status. Derrida's “concepts” are unstable—his statements on the sign, meaning, and signification are open to reinterpretation and possible reconfiguration.³³ This is the case because

Derrida's terms, such as "*différance*," "blind origin," "*anguistia*," and "force," have multiple and often conflicting strands of reference. Second, Derrida suppresses neither history nor the real world as possible places of reference.³⁴ Finally, Derrida assumes an excess or radical alterity which always eludes theoretical grasp—i.e., he assumes that the meaning of any sign is always far greater than its explicit meaning on any one occasion. Therefore there is always an unrealizable "outside" to any discourse—an outside which appears only through its effects and which can never be brought into that discourse. Derrida thus avoids the dangerous, totalizing and hegemonic aspects of Krauss's art criticism. He avoids closing off possible interpretive frameworks in which the texts and concepts he deconstructs might profitably function. Derrida's success in avoiding the errors into which Krauss falls stems from the model of signification he employs. In his 1963 essay, "Force and Signification," Derrida deconstructs a structuralist model of meaning similar to the one employed by Krauss—a model which emphasizes the preexisting system over the unique and contingent message, and which radically de-emphasizes the notion of time. An examination of this essay will show that Derrida's major criticism of the structuralist approach of Jean Rousset, author of *Forme et Signification: Essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (1962), applies to Krauss as well.

Not surprisingly, Derrida's deconstruction of Rousset's text centers around the model of the sign or meaning which underlies and guides Rousset's analyses. According to Derrida, Rousset conceives of meaning as form or structure.³⁵ Force, which Derrida identifies with the creativity, movement, and energy inherent in meaning,³⁶ is almost completely neutralized by Rousset's approach. Thus, despite Rousset's best efforts to the contrary, "and although he calls structure the union of the formal structure and intention, Rousset, in his analyses, grants an absolute privilege to spatial models, mathematical functions, lines, and forms."³⁷ For example, Rousset interprets Corneille's works and development "teleologically on the basis of what is considered to be its destination, its final structure."³⁸ *Polyeucte*, a late work of Corneille, is understood to embody a completed structure—a structure towards which Corneille's earlier works all aim but which they are only partially able to realize. In this way, Rousset "geometricizes" Corneille's entire development.³⁹ Differences of time, context, and intention are reduced to differences that can be measured spatially—i.e., as more or less perfectly embodying the ideal structure represented by *Polyeucte*.

Derrida questions the validity of Rousset's assumption of an "interior design" existing prior to the work—a structure which Corneille would attempt to actualize, with greater and less success, in all his writings.⁴⁰ For Derrida, the model of meaning with which Rousset operates includes an implicit distinction between actualized and non-actualized meaning. By assuming that non-actualized meaning has a certain pure systematicity or absolutely ordered interconnectedness which may some day be captured in language, Rousset creates an ideal entity which is completely static. Derrida calls Rousset's model of static, non-actualized meaning awaiting inscription "pure speech" or "pure thought" and compares it to the one great Book

in Leibniz's *Theodicy* (1710). This Book, which Theodorus is shown by the daughter of Jupiter, is the book of the fates of the world. In it everyone and everything is completely represented and given their proper place. Since it is written by God, there is no anguish of choice during its inscription or actualization in language; God, in his infinite perfection, only actualizes the "best" choice.⁴¹ For Derrida, the notion of a pure speech seems to be the product of a kind of theological optimism which haunts Rousset's paradigm. There is no reason for pure speech to exist other than the hope that everything has an order and a place. But, as Derrida notes, hope is no guarantee of existence—especially since the interpretation put forward seems to contradict the experience of writing or "inscription."

Against the notions of pre-actualized meaning as pure speech and the act of writing as free from anxiety, Derrida suggests that pre-actualized meaning more closely resembles a "blind origin," and that the moment when the writer attempts to inscribe his words is fraught with anguish. According to Derrida, the blind origin can never be made directly manifest in language. It is "that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced in language."⁴² As such, the blind origin is a pure absence; but an absence which, nevertheless, effects everything that is present within language and which "is the very possibility of writing and of literary *inspiration* in general."⁴³ Unlike pure speech, the blind origin is not a system awaiting actualization. Aware of this fact, the writer is consumed by anguish, knowing that "through writing, through the extremities of style, the best will not necessarily transpire."⁴⁴

The anguish of writing is a result of *angustia*, the necessary contingency of everything that is inscribed in either speech or writing. *Angustia* is the Latin term for both narrowness and distress. It is used by Derrida to signify:

the necessarily restricted passageway of speech against which all possible meanings push each other, preventing each other's emergence. Preventing, but calling upon each other, provoking each other too, unforseeably and as if despite oneself, in a kind of autonomous overassemblage of meanings, a power of pure equivocality that makes the creativity of the classical God appear all too poor.⁴⁵

The writer's anxiety at the moment when he attempts to write is thus the result of his knowledge of the "pure equivocality" of meaning which subtends his endeavors—the knowledge that what he inscribes could always have turned out differently. Thus the experience of writing suggests that, *contra* Rousset, meaning is not a preexisting static structure but rather a process which begins with the act of inscription. As Derrida puts it,

To write is to know what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place, does not await us as prescription in some *topos ouranios*, or some divine understanding. Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning.⁴⁶

By rejecting Rousset's vision of pre-actualized meaning as an absolute system awaiting inscription, Derrida recovers a notion of meaning as force. Inscription, for Derrida, begins a play or movement wherein what is inscribed gives rise to multiple and differing interpretations depending on the audience and context in which it is received. Thus, as Derrida says,

It is because writing is *inaugural* in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future.⁴⁷

It is important to note, however, that Derrida does not emphasize the notion of meaning as force to such an extent as to suppress a notion of meaning as structure.

Our intention here is not, through the simple motions of balancing, equilibration or overturning, to oppose duration to space, quality to quantity, force to form, the depth of meaning or value to the surface of figures. Quite to the contrary. To counter this simple alternative, to counter the simple choice of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an *economy* escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions. This economy would not be an energetics of pure, shapeless force. The differences examined *simultaneously* would be differences of site and differences of force.⁴⁸

Derrida's model of meaning thus attempts to unite the diachronic and synchronic aspects of meaning divided by Saussure's structural approach to language. Rousset—and, by implication, Krauss—fail in Derrida's eyes because they too quickly accept the structuralist elevation of the communal code over the particular message. The deconstructionist accepts the fact that meaning is partially predetermined—of course, there is some form of *langue*. But what the deconstructionist cannot grant is that the code is unchanging and perfect. Rather, the meaning constituted by the code changes as individuals use it to communicate their specific messages. The failure of the structuralists lies in their mistaken hope that meaning can be fully articulated. Because the system of signs must always remain incomplete, the writer cannot represent *langue*. Derrida's theory of signification reminds us that all interpretation must take account of the radically multiple nature of signification, that the reference of any sign is always complex, and that the things, meanings, and experiences signified are often conflicting. By recognizing one's limits, one's inability to "say it all," one avoids closing off other possible interpretations.

Meaning, as Derrida reminds us, happens in the unstable and shifting space between sender and receiver, author and reader, artist and viewer. As such, it neither preexists the act of its inscription, nor, once inscribed, is it static. Rather, meaning works, changes, and develops long after the one who has articulated it is dead. It is imperative that the deconstructionist understand this. To read art, as does Krauss, as if it were simply about its own systems of representation, its own *langue*, its own differential structure, its own intermingling of presence and absence, is to deny art its basic fecundity. Art

is never simply “about” its own form. In addition, it is also potentially “about” what can be experienced—*anything* that can be experienced. For this reason, art may also discharge its meaning back into experience, thereby helping to determine and change our world. To deny art its personal and historical context, to deny it its applicability to human existence, is to radically undermine one’s role as an art critic. A good art critic will always remember that art *works*—that art sets itself to work—in many contexts. When we regard something as art we assume that it means many things to many viewers over a long period of time. To deny the validity of certain interpretations, to deny that certain contexts even exist, to attempt to reduce the work of art to the level of a mere illustration of one’s own theoretical viewpoint, is a danger which a truly deconstructive art critic would, and *must*, avoid.

Notes

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¹For example, in a review of Hal Foster’s *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Michèle Cone makes the following claim: “Originally a method for ‘reading’ literary texts introduced by Jacques Derrida and popularized by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, deconstruction is also helpful in exposing expressions loaded with objectionable connotations which can then be used against intellectual (and political) rivals.” Not only does Cone incorrectly locate deconstruction’s genesis in the analysis of literary texts (seemingly in ignorance of the fact that Derrida’s first two books are on phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and that the abiding context of almost all of Derrida’s early deconstructions is philosophical), but she also conflates Barthes’s still essentially structuralist analysis with Derrida’s decidedly post-structuralist methodology (an error Krauss also makes). Both these mistakes are deadly for a truly deconstructive art critical practice. *Flash Art* #120, Jan. ‘85, pp. 38-9. For an interesting account of the problems surrounding the introduction of deconstruction into literary criticism see Rodolphe Gasché’s excellent book on deconstruction, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 255 ff.

²In *Positions*, Derrida describes “a kind of *general strategy of deconstruction*” as a “double science” of the metaphysical text. This double science begins with a phase of overturning wherein the deconstructionist ferrets out important conceptual oppositions operative in the text under consideration, and destabilizes (but does not simply invert) the concepts’ hierarchical order (Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 41). Antecedent to this phase of overturning comes a phase wherein the deconstructionist “marks the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime” (*Ibid.*, p. 42). “Marking the interval” is the activity of inscribing site specific conceptual oppositions within a shifting matrix of alternative conceptual oppositions by means of terms Derrida calls “undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, ‘false’ verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it, *without ever constituting a third term...*” (*Ibid.*, p. 43). The general strategy of deconstruction is thus geared towards the opening up of a text’s meaning at careful

chosen sites—and not toward closing it down. The attempt to stifle the endless play and tracing out of meaning is a pitfall into which Derrida would never tumble.

³My point is obviously *not* that there is nothing insightful in Krauss's work. Indeed, the brilliance of many of the individual analyses contained in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* stands in clear contradiction to such a position. Nor do I contest Krauss's recourse to different theoretical frameworks in different interpretive situations. This, again, is a very positive aspect of Krauss's work and should be hailed as exemplary rather than destructive to the practice of art criticism. However, I do claim that Krauss is not sensitive enough to the differences between structuralist and post-structuralist thought. Even though she notes that there are differences between the two—"On the one hand, structuralism rejected the historicist model as the means to understand the generation of meaning. On the other, within the work of poststructuralism, those timeless, transhistorical forms, which had been seen as the indestructible categories wherein aesthetic development took place, were themselves opened to historical analysis and placement" (Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, p.2)—she too easily glosses over these differences in her general statements about signification. By mentioning Derrida and post-structuralism *and*, in one and the same breath, uncritically taking over the Saussurian model of sign criticized and displaced by Derrida, Krauss radically undermines her own best insights. I am thinking in particular here of Krauss's use of the term "absent origin," and the cluster of insights she derives from it, in "In the Name of Picasso," an essay whose theoretical base is primarily Saussurian (*Ibid.*, p. 38). "Absent origin," as we shall discover in the third part of this paper, strongly recalls Derrida's "blind origin" (later "*pharmakon*," "*différance*," and "supplementarity"), which represents, among other things, a thorough criticism and reconceptualization of the Saussurian concept of the sign. Krauss is therefore a perfect example of the danger we all potentially run when we separate too far our theory from our practice.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵The expression "positive doctrine" is perhaps something of a misnomer as applied to Derrida's writings. The reason for this is that all of Derrida's concepts are "undecidable" and, hence, not really concepts because they signify a shifting and unstable nexus of meanings. For this reason Derrida does not articulate a "doctrine" in the traditional sense of the word. However, in as much as Derrida does not simply take apart other texts but rather, in addition, makes a number of important statements as to the general nature of meaning or signification, "positive doctrine" is perhaps not as misleading as it might initially seem.

⁶Krauss, p. 24.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 26-8. Krauss uses "intension" to indicate a sign's reference to sense or meaning, and "extension" to indicate a sign's reference to real objects. Here we can see a parallel with Husserl's distinction between the expressive and indicative function of the sign in *Logical Investigations*. "Expression," for Husserl, means reference to sense; "indication," reference to real objects or states of affairs. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay, 2 vols., (New York: Humanities Press, 1977), pp. 269-98. It is interesting to note that Krauss never questions this

distinction in her essay, thereby ignoring Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl's separation of indication and expression in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Furthermore, although Krauss claims to take over the distinction between intension and extension from Frege and Russell, a closer look at the theories of Frege, Russell, and Krauss reveals great differences in the meaning signified by these terms. For example, as mentioned above, Krauss uses "extension" to signify the unitary reference of the proper name and carefully separates it from any reference to meaning. Frege, on the other hand, holds that a term can have both meaning and extension; and, furthermore, that the extension of a concept does not have to be singular. As Frege says in his review of Husserl's *Philosophie der Arithmetik*, "A concept under which just one object falls has a definite extension; so has a concept under which no object falls; so has a concept under which infinitely many objects fall..." *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, 3rd. ed., Peter Geach and Max Black, eds. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), p. 82. Finally, for a very interesting and polemical account of the dangers of "postmodern" art theories which reject all reference to reality, see Linda Andre, "The Politics of Postmodern Photography," *the minnesota review*, no. 16 (Fall 1984), pp. 17-35.

¹⁰This example of a sense model of reference is borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein; see Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), sec. 79, pp. 36-8.

¹¹For a short account of Saussure's career, see Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Sciences of Language*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 14-19. For a short account of Saussure's structural linguistics, see Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), pp. 2-6.

¹²Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), pp. 79 ff.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸See Derrida's excellent explication of this point in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 12-13.

¹⁹Krauss, p. 34.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 33.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 34.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 35.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 37-8. By using expressions such as “absent origin,” Krauss appears to intentionally link her thought with that of Derrida (see footnote 3 above). However, as the third part of this essay will show, the mere use of Derrida’s terminology does not a deconstructive art critic make.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 294.

²⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 2.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

³²As Krauss says in the final essay of *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, “instead of a work’s being ‘about’ the July Monarchy or death or money, it is ‘about’ its own strategies of construction, its own linguistic operations, its own revelation of convention, its own surface.” Krauss, p. 293. It is this either/or attitude necessitated by Krauss’s notion of meaning which is ultimately the cause of her undoing. By insisting that art is simply about its own mechanisms of representation, Krauss sets up precisely the same type of hegemonic discourse her post-1976 writing allegedly sets out to deconstruct.

³³Thus, as Derrida says of his own “anti-concept” “*difference*,” a later term for what shall be studied below as the “blind origin,” “This unnameable is the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names, the chains of substitutions of names in which, for example, the nominal effect *difference* is itself *enmeshed*, carried off, reinscribed, just as a false entry or a false exit is still part of the game, a function of the system.” Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 27.

³⁴Derrida does not deny authorial intention; he merely asserts that such intention cannot exist unmediated by the effects of language and *difference*. Nor does Derrida deny objective reference. As he says in a 1981 interview with Richard Kearney: “It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the ‘other’ of language. I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the ‘other’ and the ‘other of language.’ Every week I receive critical commentaries and studies on deconstruction which operate on the assumption that what they call ‘post-structuralism’ amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words—and other stupidities of that sort. Certainly, deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. It even asks whether our term ‘reference’ is entirely adequate for designating the ‘other.’ The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a ‘referent’ in the normal sense which linguists have attached to this term. But to distance oneself thus from habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is *nothing* beyond language.” Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (New Hampshire: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 123-24.

³⁵Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 4, 15-16.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 8; see also footnotes 3 and 25 above.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.