



The Power of Deconstruction in Artistic Research
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As a comparatively recent academic trend, artistic research has no coherent methodological definition. Only a few people would agree that 'artistic research' is, in fact, the correct name for this phenomenon. In the UK it is often referred to as 'practice-based research' while in 2006 Michael A R Biggs claimed that: 'the AHRC [the Arts and Humanities Research Council] currently prefers the term 'practice-led research'. (Biggs 2006, p.185) This term, perhaps more than any of the others, reflects the AHRC's position, according to which it 'expect[s] ... practice to be accompanied by some form of documentation of the research process, as well as some form of textual analysis or explanation to support its position and to demonstrate critical reflection'. Without such support, it claims, artists 'would be ineligible for funding from the Council'. (AHRC 2004) With these sentences, the AHRC provides a pragmatic definition for 'artistic research', the more general term used in this paper for research that involves artistic practice. The definition given by the AHRC is, however, also an elaborate construction, which while solving some problems creates others.

As far as research methodology is concerned, the most pressing problem that has been created is the lack of an identifiable site for research in the arts. In fact, it appears that the definition has been set in place precisely to avoid such a site, since it claims that neither practice on its own nor the written part, which is there only to 'support' and to 'demonstrate', should be seen as research. Research thus requires a studio-practice supplemented by writing. The site for research is as a consequence always double, with one aspect referring to the other. Naturally, such a deferral can be perceived as a problem, because no clear instruction can be given to a researcher as to how he is supposed to orchestrate the relationship between theory and practice. On the other hand, deferring the site for research also offers an opportunity to a researcher, who has to do much ground work in order to explain a project's particular methodological position between theory and practice.

Moreover, looking at artistic research from outside the particular, supplemental relationship of the two non-sites of research - i.e. from the perspective of either art or writing - one will find surprisingly little evidence for a desire for artistic research. For both art and science - if

we understand 'science' as the 'classic' way of developing knowledge - something like 'artistic research' seems to come out of the blue. Focussing on art, one surely would have expected artistic research to have developed from a critique of art such as, for instance, that exercised in Conceptual art. Art & Language, for example, state in their book *Provisional History* of 1982 that '[d]efensible work must first and foremost entail a critique of [the fraudulent] conceptualisations ... by means of which normal art was supported and entrenched'. (Harrison & Orton 1982, p.21) In other words, Art & Language demand that works of art should not only to be defensible, but also believe that this defence needs to provide a critique that can demonstrate such work as defensible in the first place. According to their position, art is already supported by conceptual (read institutional) structures outside of which it cannot be viewed, let alone made. On the other hand - and this is perhaps the reason why no coherent history connects Conceptual art with artistic research - Art & Language do not challenge the primacy of the work of art, despite their critique. That is, with art - albeit critiqued - the site for their critical engagement remains in place.

This paper looks at the role that deconstruction can play in the context of artistic research, since deconstruction makes apparent and potentially undoes supplemental relationships within given discourses that defer truth to an origin - in this case, art. Part 1 of this paper will briefly introduce deconstruction by discussing some aspects of Jacques Derrida's and Jean-François Lyotard's philosophies. Part 2, entitled 'The Limits of Deconstruction', will examine important limitations that arise within a theory of deconstruction by looking at Lyotard's shift to a philosophy of the sublime. Part 3 will apply the findings of parts 1 and 2 to the question of artistic research and indicate how it can compliment deconstructive procedures.

1 Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida established deconstructive philosophy with *Of Grammatology* (1997), first published in 1967. The word 'grammatology' refers to a science of writing systems with 'grammè' (or 'grapheme') translated as 'written mark'. (Derrida 1997, p.9) A study of writing is, however, not as simple as it first seems. The chief problem in the conceptualisation of writing is, according to Derrida, writing's assumed secondary status, due to Western philosophy's preference for speech. As a consequence, the traditional understanding of language is 'phonocentric', i.e. centred on the spoken word. (Derrida 1997, p.11) This was evident as early as in Plato, where in the *Phaedrus* Socrates says:

I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of speeches. You would imagine that they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker always gives one unvarying answer. And when they have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.' (Plato 2005, 275d)

Ironically, however, despite Plato's reservations regarding writing, it was through writing down his ideas that he became the founding father of Western philosophy. For this reason, Derrida sees philosophy as having been from the outset caught up in its own inner conflict. If Derrida, in his 'science of writing', wants to avoid repeating a similar essential imbalance at the core of his understanding, he needs to attempt to explain what writing is on its own

grounds, i.e. not in relation to the spoken word. This is, however, not directly possible, because even an extreme understanding of writing, such as that used in cybernetics or information technology, may be dependent on such an initial imbalance. (Derrida 1997, p. 9) This difficulty requires the introduction of a procedure that can free writing from its dependency on speech.

Speech, as one pole of language, is in extremis pure presence of meaning, which is guaranteed by the speaker. Writing, which forms the other pole, is able to capture and represent the original presence, making it possible to achieve the presence of meaning in the absence of the speaker. Both presentation and representation thus essentially rely in their different ways on a notion of 'presence' that is metaphysically guaranteed. Moreover, it is not only that they rely on a metaphysics of presence; their interdependence in effect creates and assures presence within knowledge. To explain this, Derrida uses the somewhat paradoxical notion of 'supplementation'. (Derrida 1997, p.144f.) A supplement is in one sense understood as an addition to something that is already complete, while it may in another sense be understood as that which is required for the completion of that thing. Christopher Norris gives the frequent supplements to the Oxford English Dictionary as an example. Here, the supplements can be understood as efforts to complete the complete dictionary. (Norris 1988, p.9)

It is because we are caught within a constant process of supplementation that we can claim to know what something is. Derrida has given a number of names to the supplemental binding together of speech and writing. What he calls 'arch-writing', (Derrida 1997, p.60) i.e. chief or principal writing, for example, indicates the necessary first essential supplementation that produces both speech and writing. He also calls this the 'trace' (Derrida 1997, p.70f.), insofar as in any sentence, written or spoken, the supplemental interdependency of speech and writing is at play, although being a trace, the 'player' is strictly speaking not there, having escaped the act of representation. The most famous notion, however, that Derrida introduces is that of 'différance', (Derrida 1997, p.23) a neologism that plays with precisely this act of representation, because it can only be understood when read: when pronounced, it sounds exactly like 'difference'. Différance indicates a split (difference) between two 'identical' elements, which in the context of Derrida's thoughts produce presence in both speech and writing. The notion also carries a temporal element, since it not only alludes to 'difference' but also to 'deference' and the act of making something stand in for something else.

As far as the everyday practice of writing (and that of philosophy) is concerned, such theory may open up whole areas of sub-texts, which on the other hand escape writing's representational structure. Having to move into notions such as 'différance' illustrates the fact that complicated stylistic procedures become necessary, often including the typeface and the layout of the page (such as in Glas; Derrida 1986). Stylistically, all such texts have been called 'deconstructive', although such a style makes sense only if related to a deconstructive 'method', particularly today, when such styles seem to have fallen out of fashion, while the concern certainly has not. Can deconstruction, however, really be called a 'method'?

Rodolphe Gasché argues in his book *The Tain of the Mirror* (1986) that deconstruction cannot rightfully be called a 'method', since methods, as he says, are 'roads to knowledge'. (Rodolphe Gasché 1986, p.121) If through deconstruction the representational structure of knowledge is questioned, deconstruction cannot strictly speaking be a method. Nonetheless, Gasché also maintains that deconstruction is not a 'nonmethod, an invitation to wild and private lucubrations', because it is systematic and rigorous. (Rodolphe Gasché

1986, p.121f.) As long as we keep in mind the fact that deconstruction does not claim to produce knowledge, we can in the context of this paper refer to the deconstructive 'operation' or 'procedure', to use some of Gasché's terms, as 'method'. The limits of deconstruction as method will be further discussed in part 2.

So, what is the methodological structure used in deconstruction? Deconstruction is the method that Derrida employs to bring into a discourse what that same discourse expels in its formation. He requires, though, an operation that can induce into the discourse its own necessary shortcomings. In *Margins of Philosophy* (1999), he is quite clear how this can be achieved. 'Deconstruction', according to Derrida, 'cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system'. (Derrida 1999, p.329) What does this mean in relation to his argument concerning writing?

The first element of the deconstructive procedure is the inversion of a given system. If the dominant model of language is phonocentric, Derrida must first of all declare the opposite - i.e., the primacy of writing. In the second stage of deconstruction, Derrida displaces the now overturned opposition between writing and speech with a theory of the trace, *différance* or arch-writing. Deconstruction thus allows an escape from a system composed of a binary opposition (speech/writing) by offering an opposition to the opposition. It cannot operate in one step only, since first it has to establish the oppositional system, which is done by radically opposing the traditional position. Once the opposition is fully established, however, deconstruction can offer a new perspective on what it means to speak or write. As a consequence, such a deconstructive text is, according to Derrida, 'no more 'spoken' than it is 'written', no more against speech than for writing, in the metaphysical sense of these words'. (Quoted in: Carroll 1989, p.82)

Given that deconstruction can in a certain sense be understood as a method, it can be used in different contexts. In *Discours/Figure* (2002) originally published in 1971, Lyotard looks at a different, albeit not unrelated, opposition: that between art and discourse. The book starts with the bold desire to defend the eye (J.-F. Lyotard 2002, p.11), because art and the visual in general, he says, are dominated by discourse. Following the deconstructive method's first step, Lyotard overturns the opposition between the visual and discourse by claiming that no discourse is possible without spatial - that is, visual - arrangement. He arrives at this claim through an analysis of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2008), in which a 'dream-work' is conceived as a process shielded by the 'dream-thought', the content of the dream. Understanding discourse in general as equally layered, Lyotard concludes that we only resort to discourse as opposed to the visual because discourse is generally reduced into a single content-layer. If we accept layers in a text, however, we must accept with it the visual; while we can imagine a single flow of meaning without recourse to the visual, we need the visual to imagine textual elements on top of each other, comparable perhaps to a palimpsest. The balance between the visual and discourse has, following the first deconstructive step, been turned on its head. It is now the visual that dominates discourse. In the second stage of deconstruction, however, the visual is displaced by a theory of figuration.

Lyotard conceptualises three different types of 'figures': (1) The 'image-figure' as figurative representation, such as when opposed to a ground - the most conventional use of the notion of the 'figure' in art theory; (2) the 'form-figure' as the constitutive principle, such as the constellation or the gestalt of a image-figure; it 'is present in the perceptible, it may even be visible, but is in general not seen' (Jean-François Lyotard 1984, p.57); (3) the

'matrix-figure', which is 'invisible in principle', (Jean-François Lyotard 1984, p.57) since it disrupts the binary relation of the visible and invisible and indeed any binary relation. The matrix-figure's 'formal condition', as Rosalind Krauss says, is a 'rhythm or pulse'. (Krauss 1988, p.88) Writing about the artists of the 'optical unconscious', such as Max Ernst or Marcel Duchamp, she states: 'the pulse they employ is not understood to be structurally distinct from vision but to be at work from deep inside it'. (Krauss 1996, p.217)

When in Discours/Figure 'discourse' reappears as the result of such a double operation, it is a positive term, but it is not the same term it was before undergoing the deconstructive procedure. It has, so to speak, 'experienced' its dependence on the figure as its dependent other. 'Discourse, in this way, appears surrounded and undercut by the figural' (Rodolphe Gasché 1979, p.184), questioning with linearity the idea of 'progress' in discourse. The notion of the 'figure', on the other hand, also had to be effected in order to be able to occupy a place within discourse, which Lyotard emphasises by shifting the term 'figure' to the notion of the 'figural' in order to indicate the 'figure-matrix's' disruptive work. The figural functions in a similar way to Derrida's notion of *différance*, as 'the principle of disruption that prevents any order from crystallizing into full coherence' (Jay 1994, p.564), except that the figural carries in its name a closer relation to the visual and ultimately to art.

2 The Limits of Deconstruction

Deconstructive philosophy is attractive in the context of art, because by showing the limits of discourse, space can be created for an experience hitherto caught up in discourse's supplemental play. At the same time, however, deconstruction can only have limited credibility in the context of philosophy, because credibility is what deconstruction questions when a discourse's ability to truly represent is put into doubt. It thus comes as no surprise that what may be called 'traditional philosophy' criticises deconstructive philosophy for abandoning rational discourse that can credibly lead to knowledge. Jürgen Habermas, for example, says of Derrida's position: 'What is first and last is not the history of Being, but a picture-puzzle: The labyrinthine mirror-effects of old texts, each of which points to another, yet older text without fostering any hope of ever attaining the archwriting.' (Habermas 1987, p.179) Arch-writing, or *différance*, is in short a speculation unable ever to prove its actuality. On the other hand, it is also not surprising that deconstructive philosophy questions such a challenge and that, as David Couzens Hoy says, 'Habermas's account would be easy to deconstruct, if a Derridean wanted to turn the tables on Habermas's critique.' (Hoy 1997, p.126)

Assuming that this is true, and a 'Derridean' can indeed 'turn the tables' on Habermas, the limitations of a Habermasian quest for knowledge would be apparent. Demonstrating these limitations, however, would not help in positively defining a mode of thinking, due to the fact that deconstruction as described above questions and does not extend the 'road to knowledge'. Deconstruction offers an insight into the essential limitedness of understanding, but this insight is the only thought that counts. Telling as it may be to analyse hidden limitations in 'old texts' (Habermas), the writing of new texts that do not deconstruct others may be impaired, since what would be the point of writing them?

Indeed, if deconstructive discourse is understood solely as negative discourse - that is, a discourse that outlines its limits - there would be no difference between discourses, which would all say the same thing: namely that discourse is limited. The outlining of the limit, however, happens differently in different processes of deconstruction and is as such a figural movement and not a proposition. Inscribed into the deconstructive discourse is, one

may say, a 'figural subtext' or a 'discursive experience', which may show itself in extreme cases in precisely those 'stylistic', i.e. visual, moves of which the work of Derrida is so full.

However, because the deconstructive method is there only to expose supplemental relationships, it cannot appropriately account for the figural occurrences it implies. To be sure, deconstruction must certainly happen within the horizon of the figural, *différance* or arch-writing, but the more successful the deconstructive discourse is, the more removed this horizon is from any sustainable handle that philosophy can offer. The figural is as a consequence exercised but not attended to in deconstruction. Habermas' critique, which seems to demand philosophical progress towards arch-writing or the figural, cannot, of course, be sustained if the limits exposed by deconstruction are accepted; what can be sustained, however, is a certain disappointment with what deconstruction delivers. Is it enough to expose supplemental structures in existing discourses, or does something 'other' than discourse need comparable attention? How is this 'other' voiced?

With the notion of 'the figural' that is part of a 'defence of the eye', Lyotard certainly approaches art as discourse's possible other. In an interview he even says that 'theorists have everything to learn from the artists' (Jean-François Lyotard 1984, p.30) and it is perhaps in this spirit that, when responding to Barnett Newman's *The Sublime is Now* (1992), he proposes a theory of the avant-garde where figural practice is identified with the concept of the sublime. This is certainly in keeping with Immanuel Kant, who associates in his *Critique of Judgement* (1987) the sublime with the failure of the imagination to present 'indeterminate concepts of reason'. (Kant 1987, p.98) Since the sublime is, as Lyotard says, 'the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterize the modern' (J.-F. Lyotard 1992, p.93), modern, i.e. avant-gardist, art is not defined through experience and, in Kantian terms, successful imagination. Rather, it is defined by concepts of reason and thus goes beyond what Newman calls European art's 'blind desire to exist within the reality of sensation'. (Newman 1992) Because the figural can be found in the imagination despite the fact that it is not given through experience, it must be, as a consequence, the inner principle by which imagination imagines. As Jean-Luc Nancy says: 'Such is the essential characteristic of imagination, of *Einbildung* operating without a concept: imagination is unity that precedes itself, anticipates itself, and manifests itself, free figure prior to any further determination.' (Nancy 2003, p.216)

Such a description is in close proximity to the movement inherent in the 'figural' that Krauss called 'a pulse', or the deferral at work in Derrida's *différance*. However, when art is given the function of presenting what cannot be presented through what Kant calls the 'negative presentation' (Kant 1987, p.135) of the sublime, a positive definition seems to be achieved at the end of the deconstructive process. Identifying art in relation to the sublime is beyond the deconstructive method not so much because it introduces a concept different from the figural, but because it finds a form capable of producing a presentation even if it presents the unrepresentability of the figural. Thus, at the limit of deconstruction the possibility arises that what delimits deconstruction becomes a finding capable of being reabsorbed into philosophy through art. This perhaps proves true what Derrida observes when he says that deconstruction 'constantly risks ... falling back within what is being deconstructed.' (Derrida 1997, p.14) As Jacques Rancière says in relation to Lyotard: 'The post-modern reversal [of Modernism] had as its theoretical foundation Lyotard's analysis of the Kantian sublime, which was reinterpreted as the scene of a founding distance separating the idea from any sensible presentation. From this moment onward ... the scene of sublime distance came to epitomize all sorts of scenes of original distance or original sin.' (Rancière 2004, p.29)

Moreover, leaving experience aside makes it difficult to maintain the figural as a 'defence of the eye'. Martin Jay's book *Downcast Eyes* (1994), which is subtitled, *The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, although making a somewhat different case concludes that 'Lyotard's identification of postmodernism with the sublime foreclosure of the visual' (Jay 1994, p.588) is as much part of the 'denigration of vision' as Derrida's temporal understanding of *différance* as 'deferral' that 'never leads to spatial simultaneity and full visibility'. (Jay 1994, p.506) As far as Lyotard is concerned, his statement, cited above, that the 'figure-matrix' is 'invisible in principle' supports such a position, risking the separation of the figural from the figure along the lines of visibility. David Carroll's point seems to be more appropriate, according to which 'each of [the three aspects of the 'figure'] is a complication of the visual nature of the figure' (Carroll 1989, p.39), although it is difficult not to follow Jay in thinking that Lyotard has moved away from such a position in his later philosophy.

It is, however, not necessary for the present argument to decide this question, nor to give an exhaustive account of Derrida's or Lyotard's philosophies; it is sufficient to indicate that deconstructive philosophy, which is successful when it comes to addressing supplemental structures in discourse, struggles when asked for an explanation of alternative modes of knowledge. Something similar is the case when practice is called 'deconstructive'. It is of course true that art opens itself towards discourse through a deconstruction of the supplemental relationship, but once it is re-identified as 'deconstructive practice' in art criticism it defies the deconstructive method. In other words, deconstructive art practice may use a deconstructive method, but this method cannot be used to identify the artistic practice at hand. For example, the domination of the visual by discourse, which can be seen as the first step of the deconstructive procedure, may be said to happen equally in works as diverse as Joseph Kosuth's *Zero and Not* (1985), much of Cy Tombly's work recently exhibited at Tate Modern, Idris Khan's multi-layered images of texts or photographs, Peter Halley's *Prison* paintings or Mark Tansey's allegorical work.

The deconstructive aspect of all of these examples comes from the textual or visual discourse that the work is deconstructively referencing. At the same time, looking at the second step of the deconstructive operation - that is, the transformed reappearance of the visual - the works are hardly comparable, let alone identifiable in anything like a 'deconstructive visuality'. When Tombly uses particular movements and colours that form an 'image' or a 'figure' in its own right, or when Khan pushes forward an aestheticised surface, we have a very different experience. Providing a different experience is the very important outcome of the deconstructive method, which cannot determine how artistic practice will behave without supplemental determination. Lacking in both the philosophical and the art-critical account is an artistic perspective at the moment when a deconstructive method has succeeded in limiting discourse; that is, when space exists for art to put forward its own contribution.

A possible perspective could be developed from Winfried Menninghaus' analysis of Walter Benjamin's dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (2004), which Menninghaus sees as pre-dating much of Derrida's assessment of difference. In fact, Menninghaus states, perhaps surprisingly, that 'Derrida offers nothing substantially new'. (Menninghaus 1987, p.131) However, once 'the figures of *différance*', according to Menninghaus, were understood beyond their supplemental function, they could also make tangible the particular way in which identity is produced through works of art. Seen from such an artistic perspective, the figural could not only be used to challenge supplemental, make-believe identities, but also to support the reflective identity in art that defers discourse. It would be possible to explain what Lyotard has in mind when he says that 'the

important thing is not to produce a consistent discourse, but rather to produce 'figures' within reality'. (Jean-François Lyotard 1984, p.79) However, when he later says in *The Postmodern Condition* that the conclusion is to produce 'not the known, but the unknown' (J.-F. Lyotard 2001, p.60), he perhaps re-identifies these figures, albeit negatively, in relation to a traditional understanding of knowledge.

3 Artistic Research

A deconstructive method as described in part 1 can have its benefits in the context of artistic research, since it can be an important tool for the transformation of the relationship between theory and practice. As a consequence, theory and practice appear highly dependent on each other, making it possible to imagine a form of research that encompasses both. On the other hand, deconstruction cannot be used as a method that can deliver a finding, and, as part 2 makes clear, neither can it be used as a substitute for such a finding. If it is, theories such as an original deference of presence, or *différance*, will dominate and ultimately define artistic practice, which will as a consequence cease to be artistic. Lyotard's understanding of the sublime as well as a deconstructive style in art was used to illustrate this point. Thus, the method of deconstruction needs to be complemented by an alternative, artistic practice that can be used to develop art's contribution to knowledge and understanding on its own grounds.

As a consequence, one may say that in artistic research as much as in philosophy, a way of thinking - that is, a practice - must be attempted that complements the deconstructive method. In his book *The Honor of Thinking*, Gasché calls thinking 'the highest form of doing' (R. Gasché 2007, p.9) that 'derives from conflicting demands of reason' (R. Gasché 2007, p.4) Crucially, he roots the practice of such thinking in 'the unconditional and the incalculable', a region absolutely distinct from a 'calculating rationality', within which, I would argue, deconstruction still operates. Deconstruction, one may say, is a method, because it 'calculates' that a case can be made for an 'honour of thinking' even in such 'calculating rationality'. The practice of such thinking emerges from deconstruction, although being practice it remains what it always has been - that is, practice withdrawn from discursive identification.

When the AHRC defines research through the supplemental relationship between theory and practice, it admits that practice cannot easily be integrated into the traditional forms of knowledge development. To make the integration possible, however, the supplemental relationship within knowledge is admitted and posed as a question of methodology to the researcher. Although ultimately discourse has to be entered into, making the supplementation explicit through a deconstructive method pushes forward a practice beyond identification. Such practice must be original, since it is unidentified, fulfilling a key requirement for the definition of research. At the same time, since supplementation is still required, the way in which research practice is supported is equally open to interpretation, allowing for practice-cum-thinking to penetrate discursive forms, where other ways of arguing can be tested. The AHRC's definition thus understood within a deconstructive framework challenges research to be original both practically and theoretically, allowing perhaps for each practice to develop its own 'science'.

It is as such that I understand Stephen Melville's text *Counting / As / Painting* (2001), which is heavily referenced in the introduction to Katy MacLeod's and Lin Holdridge's reader *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research* (2006). Melville attempts a description of what works of art are by saying that 'theory is ... at work within them, a constitutive part of what or how they are'. (Melville 2001, p.8) Such theory is unfolded in

the work, but can be further unfolded, according to Melville, by writing, which 'would belong to such work as part of its unfolding, a continuation of the condition of its appearance'. (Melville 2001, p.19) As he writes: '[T]he work itself appears as interpreting.' (Melville 2001, p.11) What he in effect says is that practice, if addressed through deconstruction and not as discourse's supplementary other, has its own mode of thinking, which moves from the work to the text. What MacLeod and Holdrige say is that all the examples of research they have collected in their book fit such a description, which may signal the coming of an age of artistic research. Artistic research now operates in a region beyond the practice/theory divide, a region that can only be properly proposed but not explored through a deconstructive approach.

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