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**Art History After Deconstruction: Is There Any Future For a Deconstructive
Attention to Art Historical Discourse?**

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Abstract

Art History After Deconstruction: Is There Any Future For a Deconstructive Attention to Art Historical Discourse?

Over the past two decades institutionally dominant art history has been strongly influenced by the theory and practice of deconstruction. While many art historians have embraced deconstruction as a productive means of unsettling and remotivating standard forms of art historical discourse, others have raised concerns over what they see as a widespread departure from the most basic tenets of art historical discourse; that is to say, not only the belief that there is a circumscribed category of aesthetic experience (art), but also that it is possible to arrive at a truthful representation of the relationship between works of art and the circumstances of their production and initial reception (history). Moreover, many of those same commentators have railed against the way in which this departure can be understood to have suspended any sense of a stable, structural connection between a historical *is* and a present *ought*; in other words, the notion that a truthful understanding of past events has the potential to inform ethico-political activity in the here and now. Our intention here is to problematize this apparent schism by demonstrating that art historical discourse has drawn the very possibility of its continuing conceptuality since Antiquity from a chronic and, for the most part, unconscious deconstructive interaction between the signifying 'texts' of art history and what might be seen as the various material, social and intellectual forces pertaining to the wider historical 'contexts' of their production and reception. Thus, we will have attempted to show that deconstruction is indivisible from continuing discursive attempts to arrive at a 'truthful' understanding of the past. In addition to this we will also attempt to show - with reference both to the writings of Jacques Derrida and a Duchampian inheritance in the visual arts - that it is possible to develop deconstructive forms of historical narrative through which we might engage critically with questions of 'ethico-political' value.

Some Notes on the Use of the Term ‘Disciplinary Art History’

In this dissertation the term ‘disciplinary art history’ is used to denote the academic practices associated with the development of our understanding of the history of the visual arts and architecture as they have developed within the Western academic tradition. Its frame of reference therefore relates largely to writings emerging from within Western or Westernized cultural contexts. Indeed, while this dissertation cites texts first written in a variety of languages other than English under the collective title of ‘disciplinary art history’ its principal focus is in practice limited still further to a consideration of art history as it has developed in relation to an anglophone academic milieu. Consequently, while the term ‘disciplinary art history’ is used here without any consistent form of qualification it should be read throughout as referring to a somewhat limited, though not impermeable, set of cultural/linguistic circumstances. This dissertation’s field of vision is then, despite the wide-ranging nature of its contents, a fragmentary one whose associated conclusions are far from being claimed as definitive. Nevertheless it is, one hopes, a considered attempt to imagine an art historical discourse chronically enmeshed with the profoundly challenging dynamics of deconstructive play.

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'Past'

The Dying Language

The names of minerals and the minerals themselves do not differ from each other, because at the bottom of both the material and the print is the beginning of an abysmal number of fissures. Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any *word* long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void.

The Wreck of Former Boundaries

The Strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the earth's crust. When one scans the ruined sites of prehistory one sees a heap of wrecked maps that upsets our present art historical limits. A rubble of logic confronts the viewer as he looks into the levels of the sedimentations. The abstract grids containing the raw matter are observed as something incomplete broken and shattered.

- *Robert Smithson*¹

¹ From "A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects" by Robert Smithson, first published in *Artforum*, New York, September 1968, reprinted in N. Holt ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, New York, 1979, pp. 82-91.

‘Present’

Working from life is working from memory: the artist can only put down what remains in his head after looking. And the time between the instant when he looks at the model and the instant later when he looks at the paper or canvas or clay to copy what he has just seen might as well be an eternity. The model can go on standing still for ever, but the work will none the less be the product of an accumulation of memories none of which is quite the same as any other, because each of them is affected by what has gone before, by the continually changing relation between all that has already been put down and the next glance at the model.

And it is not merely because of the necessity to look away from the model to look at the paper, canvas, clay that, as soon as we try to copy what is seen, it was seen: it is also because our mind has to get outside the sensation before we can copy it, our very awareness of having a sensation pushes it into the past, for we cannot think about our present thought, it slips away as we try and grasp. The artist can never get there, whether he works from nature and builds up an accumulation of memories modifying and contradicting one another, or whether he works from memory and constructs a synthesis of what he remembers having seen. Giacometti's work lays naked the despair known to every artist who has tried to copy what he sees. At the time it is an affirmation that there is a hard core which remains from all that has been seen and that this can be stabilised, this can be saved, this can be rendered as if indestructible.

- *David Sylvester*²

² From *Looking at Giacometti* by David Sylvester, Chatto and Windus, London, 1994. This extract reprinted in "The Sunday Review" of *The Independent* newspaper, London, 9th October 1994, p.18.

'Future'

The Pictures I contemplate painting would constitute a halfway state, and an attempt to point out the direction of the future, without arriving there completely.

- Jackson Pollock³

I think that great work...is chameleon. That it's chameleon for whatever cultures come after it. If its going to sustain itself or be beneficial to people, it has to be able to adapt somehow and have meaning for them. I've tried to put things of interest in my work for *this* cultural climate, *this* society, but I hope that somehow I can hit into archetypes that continue to have meaning to people. I think that meanings change, but there's something at the core of the archetype that remains very important to the survival of humankind.

- Jeff Koons⁴

³ From Jackson Pollock's 1947 "Application for a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship", reprinted in Francis V. O' Connor and Eugene V. Thaw, *Jackson Pollock: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Drawings and Other Works*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1978.

⁴ From the transcript of an interview with David Sylvester published in the exhibition catalogue, *Jeff Koons: Easyfun-Ethereal*, Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York and Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin, 2000, p.36.

Introduction: Art History Before and After Deconstruction

And all is said and done, that is the sort of reader I would hope for. A reader who would fasten upon my mistranslations, and with that leverage deconstruct Derrida's text beyond what Derrida as controlling subject has directed in it.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁵

Over the past three decades there has been a significant shift within disciplinary art history. From its inception as a discrete branch of academic discourse during the mid-nineteenth century through to the end of the nineteen-seventies it was usual to think of art history as a unitary field with clearly defined aims and limits. Since the early nineteen-eighties, however, there has been a marked expansion and diversification of art historical theory and practice. As a consequence, disciplinary art history is no longer generally considered to be a sharply circumscribed focus for objective research. Rather, it is seen as a place where often highly divergent perspectives come together loosely within permeable and constantly shifting administrative boundaries.

As Jonathan Harris indicates in his introductory essay to *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (2001), the beginnings of this shift can be traced back to the emergence of what has come to be known as a 'radical' or 'critical' art history. During the period from the end of the Second World War up until the late nineteen-sixties, institutional art history was almost totally dominated - despite the development of 'cultural'⁶ and 'social'⁷ forms of art historical discourse prior to that time - by a supposedly objective approach to reading, often associated with the term 'connoisseurship'⁸, through which formal analysis and iconographical 'symbol hunting' took precedence over any searching

⁵ J. Derrida, Spivak trans., *Of Grammatology*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1976, p.lxxxvii.

⁶ As Eric Fernie points out in the introduction to *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (1995) the emergence of a 'cultural' art history, that is to say a history which uses "all relevant sources of information to place the arts in the context of the cultures which produced them", can be traced back to the middle part of the eighteenth century and the writings of Johann Joachim Wincklemann. See Fernie ed., 1995, p. 12.

⁷ As John Roberts makes clear in his introduction to *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art* (1994), the emergence of specialized 'social' histories of art can be traced back at least as far as the nineteen-thirties to the writings of the art historian Max Raphael. See Roberts ed., 1994, pp. 4-5.

⁸ For a working definition of 'connoisseurship', see Fernie, 1995, pp. 330-331.

enquiry into art's relationship with society. As the nineteen-sixties came to a close, however, two related groups of art historians - both of which can be seen to have coalesced around the margins of institutional art history in the wake of the social and political unrest of May 1968 as well as the concomitant rise of the 'Women's Movement' and the 'New Left'⁹ - began to challenge this 'institutionally dominant'¹⁰ viewpoint: firstly, 'social' art historians, including Kurt Foster in West Germany and T.J. Clark in the United Kingdom¹¹, who looked towards a Marxist critique of capitalism - often refracted through Louis Althusser's structuralist and psychoanalytic rereading of Marx - both as a precise, 'scientific', means of analysing art's role within historical and contemporary societies and as the intellectual foundation for a revolutionary overturning of the existing social and political order; and secondly, 'feminist' art historians, such as Laura Mulvey¹², who began, in a number of cases through the combination of radical Marxist and psychoanalytic (Freudian and Lacanian) thinking, to reveal the patriarchal assumptions underlying conventional forms of artistic practice and, on the basis of that exposé, to mount a broader critique of male-dominated society's chronic subordination of women. As a result, a supposedly disinterested, 'institutionally dominant' art history found itself challenged not just by an upholding of socially orientated approaches to study over formalistic ones - something which, as A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello indicate in their introduction to *The New Art History* (1986), can be understood as having been a persistent, if often marginalized, strain of art historical discourse at least since the campaign against art historical formalism led by Edgar Wind and Erwin Panofsky during the nineteen-twenties [Rees and Borzello eds., 1986: 7] - but also by attempts to bring art historical discourse within the ambit of a wider-reaching political activism.

⁹ As A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello point out in *The New Art History*, it is possible to see the rise of a 'radical' intelligentsia within art history against the background of Perry Anderson's essay "Components of the National Culture", first published in the influential journal *New Left Review* during 1968, which calls for a move away from what the author sees as the piecemeal eclecticism of the British positivist tradition towards an engagement with the general Marxist or Sociological theories of society then employed by 'continental' thinkers. See Rees and Borzello, 1986, p. 5.

¹⁰ As Harris makes clear in his introductory essay to *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, this term was first used retrospectively by Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996. See Harris, 2001, p. 8.

¹¹ See, in the case of Foster, Kurt Foster, "Critical Art History, or a Transfiguration of Values?" in *New Literary History*, vol.3, no. 3, 1972, pp.459-470, and in the case of Clark, T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1973 and *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848-1851*, Thames and Hudson London, 1973.

¹² See Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen*, 16, no.3, London, Autumn 1975, pp.6-18.

In institutional terms at least, this two-pronged critical challenge to the ‘institutionally dominant’ art history of the post-war period was not without success. During the nineteen-seventies – undoubtedly supported by a then widespread liberalization of society which had from the early nineteen-sixties enabled significant numbers of women, non-white, lower-middle class and working class students to study at undergraduate and graduate level for the first time - ‘radical’ art history became an increasingly conspicuous and influential aspect of institutionalized art historical discourse. Indeed, by the end of the decade, with the opening of the first specialized post-graduate degree programme in The Social History of Art at Leeds Polytechnic under the leadership of T.J. Clark in 1978 [Tagg in Rees and Borzello eds., 1986: 164], it had established itself as a discrete branch of art historical research with the ability to attract its own public funding.

However, despite these distinct institutional gains, the rise of ‘radical’ art history did not contribute to the revolutionary overturning of the established social and political order that many of its adherents had hoped for. During the nineteen-eighties many parts of the capitalist world began to retreat from the social liberalization of the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies to embrace the free-market politics of Thatcherism/Reaganism; a move which brought with it an increasing intolerance towards activism on the left - in relation to the United Kingdom, one looks here in particular towards the events surrounding the miner’s strike of 1984 as well as significant cuts in public sector funding. As a consequence, just as ‘radical’ art history was beginning to gain a significant foothold within the Academy it found that its progress had been impaired by a marked change in the political climate.

At the same time, any sense of coherence which ‘radical’ art history might have derived from its opposition to ‘institutionally dominant’ art history was beginning to look distinctly questionable. Not only did ‘social’ art history, as it developed through programmes such as the Leeds Polytechnic master of art’s degree, start to advance an increasingly fragmented analysis of what it saw – in the light of Althusser’s rereading of Marx - as the “complexly overdetermined nature of cultural production” [Tagg in Rees and Borzello eds., 1986: 165-166], but it was also dogged by inconclusive arguments between those of its adherents who wished to further a ‘sophisticated’ sense of art’s relative autonomy as a superstructural element within a Marxist system of thought and those who wished to defend an ‘orthodox’ Marxist belief in the material base as the ultimate determinant of artistic production and reception [Roberts, 1994: 13-14]. Furthermore, ‘social’ art history was also subjected to an increasingly forceful ‘feminist’ critique, first voiced during the early nineteen-seventies, which saw its insistence on

class asymmetry as *the* principal mover of historical events over and above interrelations of class and, gender, and its attempts to adjust rather than to radically rewrite art history's traditional canon as little more than a continuation of the patriarchalism of 'institutionally dominant' art history by other means (one thinks here in particular of the work of the 'social' art historian T.J. Clark, who's publications *Image of the People* (1973) and *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985) can be understood as having aligned some of the underlying values of the Western painterly tradition with the concerns of radical left wing and feminist politics while at the same time failing to criticise what might be seen as that tradition's "essentially masculinist logic" [Roberts, 1994: 11-14]). Indeed, some 'feminist' art historians came to see the Marxist rubric of 'social' art history, with its doctrinal subordination of gender relations to those of class and its effective concentration on masculinist forms of labour, as thoroughly incompatible with their overall aims and beliefs. Here, then, not only did 'radical' art history find that the political climate had turned against it, but also that it was becoming more and more obviously divided from within.

As one might expect, this moment of increased resistance from the political right and of intensified division from within was an extremely critical one for many 'radical' art historians, frustrating as it did their desire for concerted revolutionary change both at an institutional and at a societal level. However, those on the 'radical' left of art history were not alone in developing a sense of crisis over their discipline's increasingly conspicuous ideological fragmentation. As Donald Preziosi points out in *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (1989), from art history's inception as a discrete focus for academic research during the latter half of the nineteenth century right up until the early nineteen-eighties the overwhelming majority of art historians from all sides of the political spectrum continued to uphold three key assumptions: firstly, that it is the principal business of the art historian - even during his/her discipline's most "formalistic or idealistic moments" - to plot "the developmental progress(ion) of the visual arts" and their "differential articulations over time, space biography and ethnicity" against the "broader social and cultural changes accruing diachronically in different places"; secondly, that there exists a clearly defined category of aesthetic experience which manifests itself, as Preziosi puts it, "in transfinite articulations and changes over time and place" and which, therefore, distinguishes 'art' history from other specialized areas of historical study; and thirdly, that works of art and other related 'texts' provide - if only, for some on the 'radical' left, via the detour of their standing as ideological expressions of false consciousness - objective evidence of the wider

historical context within which they were first produced and received [Preziosi, 1989:11-12]. In other words, it was usual for academic art historians to predicate their researches on an underlying conceptual order which not only accepted the ontological reality of 'art' and the wider events of 'history', but also a binding structural relationship between the two through which the past might be represented truthfully to the present. Consider here in this regard the empirical connoisseurship associated with the 'institutionally dominant' art history of the post-war period, which seeks to reflect the development of the visual arts and architecture through various kinds of formal analysis. Consider here also the scientific Marxism of its 'radical' counterpart, which ultimately sustains a belief in the potential of academic research to arrive at a true consciousness of the discursive and practical conditions pertaining to the production, distribution and reception of works of art. Furthermore, as Preziosi also indicates, during that same period many art historians continued to uphold the view that the visual arts had developed according to a single underlying pattern or purpose determining the overall shape of historical events [Preziosi, 1989: 13]. Consider here, for example, the adherence of many traditionalist, antiquarian art historians to narratives of historicity, first developed fully in the writings of Giorgio Vasari during in the sixteenth century and subsequently elaborated on by art historians such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Heinrich Wölfflin in later centuries, in which the history of art is seen either as a straightforward progression or as a cycle of progression and regression made in relation to some assumed peak of aesthetic or technical perfection. Consider here also the essentially Hegelian understanding of history, upheld during the mid to late twentieth-century by an ever-diminishing rump of institutional art historians working in the idealist tradition of Alois Riegl and Erwin Panofsky, in which art's development over time is construed as a progression towards the *telos* of an absolute self-consciousness - a notion which Hegel himself can be seen to have derived, in part at least, from the writings of Winckelmann. Moreover, consider the alignment of 'radical' art historians, and, to some extent at least, those working in relation to a Greenbergian tradition of modernist art criticism, with Marx's 'righting' of Hegelian idealism in the *Grundrisse* (written in 1857-58 and first published in 1939-41), which posits the view that a full consciousness of the category of art can only be arrived at both through an analysis of its historical unfolding as a distinct object of cognition and through a searching critique of the material workings of art as an institutional entity seen in relation to continuing class struggle as the primary engine of a teleological progression towards the overcoming of capitalism. Clearly, the increasingly conspicuous perspectivism of art historical discourse during the

nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties involved a significant divergence from these commonly held articles of faith and their upholding of the representational potential of narratives of historicity. As a result, both 'radical' and 'institutionally dominant' art historians began to experience a sense of crisis over the growing divisions within their discipline.

To compound this widespread sense of crisis still further, during the early nineteen-eighties art history was also beginning to come under the influence of what Harris refers to as 'theory' [Harris, 2001: 6-7]. Here, the divergent agendas which had informed the split between 'radical' and 'institutionally dominant' art history, and the coming apart of the newly institutionalised 'radical' art history into differing factions, began to be seen alongside others associated with the terms 'semiosis', 'structuralism' and 'poststructuralism'. As a result, disciplinary art history was, in practice, placed at an even greater distance from its founding belief in ontological certainty and the possibility of objective representation. This contribution to the increasingly conspicuous divisions within art historical discourse was, however, not the only way in which 'theory' can be understood to have undermined the standing tenets of disciplinary art history. As Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey point out in their joint introduction to the anthology *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives* (1998) - with specific reference to Norman Bryson's text *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (1983) - up until the early nineteen-eighties most of the diverse, and often conflicting, strands of thought associated with 'radical' art history and with 'theory' - strands which by that time had already begun to undermine the hegemony of established thinking elsewhere within the Academy, both through their collective heterogeneity and in a number of individual cases their explicitly irrationalist or counter-modernist content - remained very much at or beyond the margins of established art historical discourse [Cheetham, Holly and Moxey eds., 1998: 1]. By the early nineteen-eighties, however, as contemporaneous texts such as A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello's *The New Art History* make clear, these strands of thought had begun to occupy an increasingly influential position in relation to art history's mainstream. Consequently, a number of art historians started to take the view that the hegemonic position hitherto occupied by the 'institutionally dominant' art history was in the process of being challenged not just by a 'radical' art history and the ideological differences associated with it, but also by the prospect of a 'New Art History' - a term first used in a formal setting, according to Rees and Borzello, during a conference at Middlesex University in 1982 [Rees and Borzello, 1986: 3] - which would embrace theoretical and methodological diversity as a

necessary condition of art historical enquiry. As such, the prospect of this 'New Art History' can therefore be understood to have complicated the threat posed to art historical orthodoxy by the increasing fragmentation of disciplinary art history during the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties, since within its purview that fragmentation would cease to be a problematic aberration and become instead an indicator of the need for a radical departure from the underlying conceptual order of conventional, academic art historical discourse.

As numerous publications, including Preziosi's *Rethinking Art History*, Harris's *The New Art History* and Cheetham, Holly and Moxey's *The Subjects of Art History* make clear, over the past two decades, increasing numbers of art historians have aligned themselves with the notion of a 'New Art History', many seeing it as the focus for a productive dismantling of the constraints imposed by post-Enlightenment academic convention. Consider here, for example, the view put forward by Cheetham, Holly and Moxey in their joint introduction to *The Subjects of Art History*, that the "intellectual excitement" of contemporary art history stems precisely from the fact that it promises "neither a unified field of study nor a time-tested methodology for analysing visual images" [Cheetham, Holly and Moxey eds, 1998: 1]. Indeed, to all intents and purposes the 'New Art History' can now be understood as having taken the place of 'institutionally dominant' art history at the centre of art historical discourse. One would therefore be forgiven for assuming that since the early nineteen-eighties disciplinary art history has undergone a seismic and all-pervading paradigm shift away from what might be seen as a 'modernist' towards a 'postmodernist' understanding of the conditions of art historical research. However, as a great deal of recently published art history writing shows, while many art historians have long since abandoned the traditional academic quest to arrive at some form of all-encompassing art historical meta-narrative in favour of the writing of more focused 'micro' histories, a significant number have sustained what appears to be a lingering faith both in the operational standing of a categorical aesthetic and in some form of persistent, transitive relationship between works of art and their wider historical setting. Consider here, for example, a number of the synopses contained in *Body and Soul: Exploring Objects – Making Myths*, the guide to the annual conference of the British Association of Art historians held in Edinburgh between the sixth and ninth of April 2000. Synopses such as that of John Gifford's conference paper "The National Monument of Scotland", which announces a relatively straightforward and apparently unreflexive narration of events surrounding the partial construction of a monument to Scotland on Edinburgh's Calton Hill, and that of

Bridget Heal's paper "Images of the Virgin Mary in Post-Reformation Germany", where we find the outlines of focussed empirical research into possible reasons for the somewhat anomalous preservation of Marian imagery in sixteenth century, Lutheran Nuremberg¹³. On the basis of this textual evidence, one might therefore characterise the art history of the last two decades not just in terms of an increasingly dominant perspectivism, but also in terms of a persistent dualism - similar to that usually associated with the late seventeenth century 'Querelle des Anciens et Modernes' - with 'traditionalists' on one side of the equation squarely facing 'modernisers' on the other; or, perhaps more accurately in this case, with 'modernists' on one side facing 'postmodernists' on the other.

It could also be averred with some justification, however, that a clear-cut dialectical opposition of this sort does not in fact exist. Not only might one argue the point that the establishment of art history as an independent academic discipline in the German speaking countries of Europe during the mid-nineteenth century was based, in part at least, on a post-Enlightenment belief in the potential disinterestedness of academic enquiry, and that a traditional academic approach to art historical research therefore incorporates a modernist demand for rigorous self-reflexivity in relation to which a later postmodernist hyper-criticality of modernist principles (a kind of supreme self-consciousness over the irrevocable immanence of partisanship, if you will) can be understood to have emerged, but also, as Donald Preziosi points out in "Art History: Making the Visible Legible", his introductory essay to *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (1998), that from its inception right up to the onset of the pronounced theoretical and methodological diversification of the last twenty years or so an institutionalized art history had already been subject to significant variations in thought and method only notionally contained by its perceived standing as an independent academic discipline [Preziosi, 1998: 13-18]. Consider here with regard to this latter point not only the numerous 'idealist', 'materialist' and 'cultural' visions of history which were advanced by art historians throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the key to a universal understanding of the development of the visual arts, and differing views during that same period of where the proper limits of, to use Preziosi's terminology, art history's 'object-domain' should lie, but also disagreements regarding the extent and nature of the historical context to which an individual art object should properly be seen to relate. Moreover, one might also venture the assertion, recently put forward by a number of commentators,

¹³ The present author was in attendance at the Edinburgh conference and listened 'first hand' to the papers discussed here.

that the theoretical concerns of contemporary art historical discourse are not simply confined to the present, but were anticipated, *avant la lettre*, by art historians writing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Take here, for example, Robert Carrier's contention at the end of his essay "Art History", chapter ten of Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff's anthology *Critical Terms for Art History* (1995), that the work of the late nineteenth-century writer on the visual arts, Walter Pater, involves both "proto-structuralist" and "proto-poststructuralist" approaches to reading [Carrier in Nelson and Schiff, 1995: 140-141]¹⁴.

In addition to all of this, it is also possible to discern as part of the perspectivism associated with the 'New Art History' a number of overlaps, inconsistencies, slippages and contradictions that undermine the notion of a dualistic stand-off between a 'postmodernist' art history and the conventions of post-Enlightenment academicism. As has already been suggested, over the past two decades the 'New Art History' has become the nexus for various, often conflicting intellectual forces. During the early to mid-nineteen eighties, as A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello's *The New Art History* makes clear, the 'New Art History' was largely (though not exclusively) associated with three 'movements'; firstly, the 'social' history of art's continuing attempt to rethink art history along revolutionary socialist lines; secondly, a 'feminist' art history's continuing attempt to place the hitherto overlooked work of women artists and designers within an interpretative framework based on the notion that historical events are influenced by a complex interrelationship between differences not only of class, but also of gender; and thirdly, an attempt by a number of art historians - which can be understood to have grown, to some extent at least, out of 'radical' art history's debt to Althusserian Marxism - to establish a linguistic framework for art historical interpretation based on the rigorous application of 'structuralist' principles to the reading of art works as 'texts'. Not only can these 'movements' be understood, as we have seen in the case of a 'social' history of art and its 'feminist' counterpart, to simultaneously resist and overlap one another at a number of crucial points, but they can also be thought of as converging with certain aspects of the 'institutionally dominant' art history and its reliance on a modernist faith in the epistemological nature of art historical research. With regard to this latter point consider here, for example, an orthodox 'social' art history's continuing insistence on the centrality of class asymmetry as the principal mover of historical events. To summarise then, any notion of a persistent opposition between a 'modernist' and a 'postmodernist' understanding of art history within contemporary art

¹⁴ For further examples, see "note 14." In "Notes to Pages 7-8"; Preziosi, 1989, p.183.

historical discourse would appear to be qualified by the lack of any definitive, categorical distinction of one from the other.

To complicate matters still further, since the mid-nineteen-eighties the 'New Art History' has come increasingly under the influence of thinking associated with the term 'poststructuralism'. Here, art historians have appropriated critical thinking and interpretative methods from a number of writers, including Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Hayden White and Jacques Derrida, whose work seeks, in different ways and from different starting points, to challenge the conventional view that there are given structural relationships both within language and between language and its referents which ultimately underwrite the stability of meaning. As a result, the 'New Art History' has become a meeting place for various kinds of writing that seek to actively undermine standard, modernist claims to art historical universality and objectivity. Some instances of which can be understood to invoke interpretative undecideability as a form of immanent critique, and others to involve an extension of radical art history's politicised attempts to overturn the existing art historical order in favour of new, more open-ended, interpretative models. Consider here, for example, with regard to the former David Phillips' essay "Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction", published in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey's *The Subjects of Art History*, which seeks in a somewhat formalistic manner to question the iconic sense of presence traditionally associated with the practice of photography, and with regard to the latter Griselda Pollock's essay "The Gaze and the Look: *Women With Binoculars – A Question of Difference*", published in Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock's *Dealing With Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision* (1992), which deploys a "poststructuralist" reading of psychoanalytic theory as a means of unsettling the underlying order of conventional art historical discourse – in particular assumptions about the immanence of the male-dominated gaze to traditional forms of western painting – and, thereby, of carving out an alternative space for women's painting within the history of art [Pollock in Kendall and Pollock eds., 1992: 106-130].

On the face of it, such thinking would appear to have a strong affinity with the ostensible 'postmodernism' of the 'New Art History'. However, the notion of a direct alignment between 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism' should be viewed with a certain degree of scepticism. For one thing, poststructuralist theory and practice, as François Lyotard points out in his essay "Note on the

Meaning of 'Post'", published in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985* (1992), can be understood to call explicitly into question any sense of a clean breaking between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' by casting the latter ultimately as a demonstration of the illusory nature of the former's adherence to notions of a progressive diachrony. Moreover, as John Roberts has rightly pointed out in *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of modern Art* (1994), many instances of poststructuralist reading within art history have, in undermining any sense of a single, fixed relationship between a 'text' and 'context', tended to focus simply on close readings of the art work as 'text', thereby resurrecting something of the formalism previously exhibited by an 'institutionally dominant' art history [Roberts, 1994: 3]. Consequently, while a great deal of writing associated with the 'New Art History' has been supported by an underlying adherence to poststructuralist theory, it would nevertheless be an over-hasty move simply to identify one directly with the other.

To add still further to this complexity, since the end of the nineteen-eighties the 'New Art History' has fallen strongly under the influence of critical attitudes associated with notions of 'identity formation'. Here, the postmodernized remnants of 'radical' art history, and most particularly its now well-established 'feminist' wing, have moved on in conjunction with at least two other strands of critical thinking; one associated with the term 'postcolonialism' and the other with 'gay' or 'queer' studies. In the case of 'postcolonialist' criticism the assumptions of inferiority and exoticism which had often surrounded 'institutionally dominant' art history's reading of non-Western art works have been called sharply into question, and an attempt made not only to identify alternative measures for artistic success outside Western culture, but also to rethink the historical lines of influence between Western and non-Western art. In the case of 'gay' or 'queer' criticism an enquiry has been launched into the ways in which differences of sexuality - differences that had hitherto been overlooked or indeed suppressed by patriarchal Western culture - might be understood to have influenced artistic production and reception, thereby opening the way, yet again, for alternative measures of artistic success and for a rethinking of historical lines of influence. Clearly, it is possible to think of this expansion into territory associated with notions of 'identity formation' as a further contribution to the theoretical and methodological diversification of art historical discourse over the past three decades and, therefore, as an integral part of the 'New Art History' and its supposed secession from disciplinary art history's founding principles. At the same time, however, it can also be understood to have contributed to the phenomenon known as 'political correctness'. That is to say, the tendency - exhibited most sharply

perhaps by institutions in the United States of America - to challenge any language or behaviour that might be considered prejudicial to minorities or the disadvantaged. Arguably, by demanding certain kinds of 'acceptable' language and behaviour this tendency has introduced into art historical discourse a pressure towards conformity somewhat at odds with the apparent openness of the 'New Art History'. Furthermore, 'feminist', 'postcolonialist' and 'gay' art histories can also be understood to have a certain resonance with the growing conservatism of society throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century and what Fredric Jameson, writing in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), has suggested is a concomitant shrinking of political vision down from the level of society as a whole to that of the special interest group and indeed the individual [Jameson, 1991: 1-54]; or, in other words, from 'modernist' notions of social inclusivity to 'postmodernist' notions of social pluralism and alterity. As Rasheed Araeen points out in his essay "A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics", published in the journal *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture* (Spring 2000), while this move can be understood to have supported a positive challenge to the universal applicability of Western culture through the upholding of the notion of multi-culturalism it can also be seen to have led both to the downplaying of the contribution made by non-Westerners to a progressive Western tradition and to a sometimes embarrassing continuation of the West's long-standing obsession with exotic otherness. As a result, while notions of 'identity formation' might be viewed as having opened up art history usefully in the interests of cultural diversity and social justice, their introduction can also be thought of, somewhat paradoxically, as having introduced a form of panoptical censorship contrary, in formal terms at least, to the conceptual openness seemingly offered by the 'New Art History' and, what is more, as having contributed to a divisive sense of social disintegration at odds with a desire to effect concerted social and political change.

Here, then, it is possible to see the 'New Art History' not as a coherent movement diametrically opposed to an 'institutionally dominant' art history and an orthodox 'social' history of art, but as a divided 'body' that has variously attempted (consciously or otherwise) to sustain, reform and profoundly unsettle the academic *status quo*. Indeed, when we look closely at the recent work of what might be seen as 'new' art historians it can be viewed as something of a methodological and theoretical patchwork, which, despite the highly problematic intervention of poststructuralist theory in recent years, nevertheless continues, almost certainly for want of any obvious alternative, to make

continued use of many of the standard conventions of established art history writing. Consider here, once more, some of the synopses contained in *Body and Soul: Exploring Objects – Making Myths*, including Anne C. B. Hamlyn's conference paper "A Trajectory Between Figure and Ground: Tracing the 'That has been' in Warhol's 1947 *White*" which announces an activation of "the discussion of the 'punctum' by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*" as a means of uncovering the "hidden history" behind one of Andy Warhol's suicide paintings of the nineteen sixties, and that of Debbie Lewer's paper "Presence, Absence and Taboo in Post-war German Art" where a poststructuralist theorization of presence and absence is advanced as a way to "reveal significant changes in the debate over post-war German artists". Here, in both of the cases cited above, there are, we would argue, semantic traces, given by the respective use of the words "hidden" and "reveal", of a lingering adherence to standard forms of historical narrative as a vehicle for the hermeneutic exposition of causal links between text and context. Consider here also Cheetham, Holly and Moxey's enthusiastic embracing of art history's recent diversification as an exciting and productive way forward for the discipline after the supposedly stultifying rigidity of the past, something which, it could be argued, simply sustains an old-style art historical homogeneity by continuing to gloss over the more challenging aspects of discursive plurality.

However, despite this lack of overall certainty with regard to the precise standings of the 'institutionally dominant' art history, 'radical' art history and the 'New Art History', there is at least one line of thinking closely associated with the emergence of the latter which can nevertheless be viewed as a profound challenge to the continuation of all existing forms of art historical discourse, namely that which arises out of the writings of Jacques Derrida and his development of the theory and practice of deconstruction. As Eric Fernie indicates in *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (1995), while it has been relatively easy for disciplinary art history to assimilate the 'poststructuralism' of Foucauldian 'discourse analysis' because its use of (Nietzschean) genealogies to chart the chronic instability of discursive signification can be seen to retain some of the standard tropes of history writing such as 'authorship' and 'periodicity' – a retention that arguably resonates with the conspicuous undecideability of contemporary art historical discourse described above - a rigorously applied Derridean deconstruction has not been so easy to deal with. This is because, as Fernie points out, its deployment of various kinds of performative textual dislocation and remotivation not only relentlessly calls into question the capacity of language to place clear and sustainable limits on meaning, but also, by extension, the existence of fixed states of being to which language might, in any

final analysis, be seen to refer [Fernie ed, 1995: 335]. As a consequence, the theory and practice of deconstruction can be understood to problematize art history in a fundamental way by thoroughly undermining the basic representational assumptions upon which all standard forms of art historical discourse can ultimately be seen to rest; to such an extent, indeed, that it becomes difficult to envisage any sort of practical reconciliation between deconstruction and conventional forms of art history writing.

Further to all of which, as Fernie also indicates, it is also not at all clear what, if anything, a rigorously applied deconstruction offers up as an alternative to established ways of conceiving the history of art beyond the pursuit of its own performative criticality [Fernie ed, 1995: 353], since any attempt to fully articulate such an alternative could be understood simply to return art historical discourse against the grain of the theory and practice of deconstruction to a faith in already existing forms of signification. It could be argued, therefore, as Paul Wood would appear to suggest in his essay “Truth and Beauty: The Ruined Abstraction of Gerhard Richter”, published in Roberts’ anthology *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art*, that a deconstructive attention to art history involves a form of ‘double-bind’ which not only brings into doubt the stability of the underlying conceptual order and narrative superstructure of art historical discourse, but which also closes off any currently conceivable line of historical enquiry beyond that position of doubt [Wood in Roberts ed., 1994: 190-191]. Consequently, it would seem to be impossible, without overlooking the fundamental ‘tenets’ of deconstructive theory and practice, to think of a deconstructive attention to art history as anything other than a profound obstacle both to the progress of art historical discourse as we currently understand it and to the development of some readily conceivable alternative.

As David Carrier indicates writing in his essay “Art History”, published in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff’s anthology *Critical Terms for Art History* (1996), it could of course be argued in response to this notion of a ‘double-bind’ that deconstruction leads, through its performative breaking with the structuralist notion of a definite relationship between the work of art and a given contextual setting, to the possibility of an open-ended process of historical interpretation and critique and therefore to a continuation of art historical discourse by other means [Carrier in Nelson and Schiff eds., 1996: 134-135]. However, it could also be averred by way of a riposte to this assertion that such interpretative openness – which could be seen to have an affinity with Walter Benjamin’s notion of a substitution of the idea of historical ‘progress’ by one of historical ‘actualization’ - does not, in fact, amount to an

extension of art historical discourse in any workable sense, but is instead a detour into territory normally occupied by certain forms of avant-garde artistic practice – specifically, that associated with the linguistically unsettling use of collage-montage by Dada and Surrealism [Waldman, 1992: 100-193] - since it promotes attempts to multiply the significances of works of art through creative juxtaposition over and above attempts to frame their meaning in precise structural relationship to a particular historical context. Consequently, one might argue here that even where an art historian has chosen to adopt an open-ended form of deconstructive analysis s/he will not have transcended the double-bind placed in the way of disciplinary art history by deconstruction, but will instead have taken up an undecidable position straddling the boundary between two fundamentally incompatible practices.

In addition to this, as numerous commentators including Roberts have suggested [Roberts, 1994: 20-22], the theory and practice of deconstruction can also be understood to overwrite any sense of the human subject as a site of authentic knowledge with the potential for decisive thought and action, positing in its place a vision of the self – to use terminology culled from Jacques Lacan’s ‘poststructuralist’ re-reading of Freud – as an unstable act of (mis)recognition activated only by our developmental entry into the symbolic realm of language and the constantly shifting semiological relationships to be found therein. As Roberts indicates, this sense of a constitutionally unstable subjectivity is a highly problematic one from the point of view of conventional art historical discourse, given that it would appear to suspend the hitherto crucial notion of a conscious human agency through which art historians have often sought to explain not only epochal changes in the development of the visual arts, but also art’s potential and the potential of their own discipline to act as a form of evaluative or critical, ethico-political practice. Here, then, as Harris indicates in *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*, it is possible to view deconstruction’s apparent refusal of an *is* as something which is also bound up with the deferral of any sort of *ought*; that is to say of a commitment on the part of the art historian to a value structure or set of moral imperatives which can be worked through in practical political terms. Consequently, argues Harris, deconstruction can be seen to pave the way for a ‘postepistemological’ or ‘radically relativist’ art history in which success is measured not by analytical rigour and the constant revision of ideas through “experience, argument and reflection” – as in conventional forms of art historical discourse - but instead simply by the capacity of each individual to find his or her ‘own voice’ and to distribute that voice within a wholly deregulated economy of art historical debate [Harris, 2001: 25].

Given this perceived state of affairs, it is perhaps unsurprising to find continuing attempts over recent years to exorcise the influence of deconstructive theory and practice and to return art history to more obviously constructive lines of enquiry. Consider here, for example, the neo-Hegelian line of argument put forward by Arthur C. Danto in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1987). According to Danto, Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* of 1964 involves a perfect synthesis of art and *praxis* that has brought all the practical and conceptual possibilities of visual art to an end. As a consequence, Danto avers, the structural relationship between works of art and their wider historical setting is now complete, thereby allowing for the possibility of a wholly unambiguous interpretation of art's history. Consider here also John Roberts' relatively orthodox Marxist assertion in *Art Has No History!: The Making and Unmaking of Modern Art* that a deconstructive attention to art history writing simply overlooks the historical relationship between art and the basic 'common sense' reality of class asymmetry as the principal mover of historical events and, therefore, the consequent need for a truly radical critique of art's institutional relationship to society. Clearly, in both of these cases there is a bid to extract art history from what might be seen as the theoretical and methodological confusion of recent years and to return it directly to the apparent certainties of modernist/rationalist thought

Not all objections to a deconstructive attention to art history have involved such direct reversions to modernist thinking, however. For some art historians, sympathetic to the theoretical developments of the past two decades, it has become necessary to leave certain aspects of modernist thought behind in order to affect some sort of *rapprochement* between conventional art historical discourse and poststructuralist thought. Consider, for example, in this regard the position advanced by Harris in the introduction to *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*. Here, Harris avers - following a line of argument previously put forward by Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983)¹⁵ - that while we should in the light of poststructuralist theory and practice dispense with the notion of truth as an "unquestionable objective knowledge", we should not be tempted simply to detach ourselves from all notions of 'truthfulness'. Rather, he suggests we should adopt a somewhat *heuristic* understanding through which truth is to be seen "as an account of the world...based on certain assumptions, ideas and values that can be stated, backed up with evidence as

¹⁵ See Eagleton, 1983, p.150, where Eagleton argues that "[w]ithin post-structuralism as a 'whole', real conflicts and differences exist whose future history cannot be predicted. There are forms of post-structuralism which represent a hedonist withdrawal from history, a cult of ambiguity or irresponsible anarchism; there are other forms, as with the formidably rich researches of the French historian Michel

part of an argument, and that therefore remain subject to dispute” and in which values are to be thought of as ‘unprovable’ through experience, but nevertheless as “essentially...connected to a sense of their efficacy within the world” [Harris, 2001: 25]. On which basis, Harris goes on to argue, we should now strive to think beyond the radical, ‘postepistemological’, perspectivism, which, he contends, has grown up in the wake of an extreme form of deconstructive attention to art historical discourse, in order to re-establish not only “historical materialist principles concerned to explain the rootedness of all art and art historical ideas and values in material social life”, but also a concomitant political activism [Harris, 2001 p.12]. Harris can, therefore, be seen to argue here that we should look towards a return to ‘historical materialism’ as a means of circumventing the complete collapse of ‘truth’ and ‘value’ apparently threatened by a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse, but one that takes into account a poststructuralist critique of the historical ‘givenness’ of disciplinary art history’s underlying modernist principles. Consequently, he can be understood to have mounted an objection to deconstruction’s apparent dereliction of ‘truth’ and ‘value’ based on a strategic alignment between certain aspects of poststructuralist thought and historical materialism.

In the light of such objections, what then is the future for a deconstructive attention to art history? Is it, as its (neo)‘modernist’ detractors would have it, simply a misguided act of intellectual vandalism that unjustifiably undermines the standing tenets of conventional art historical discourse, thereby forcing us to move on, or perhaps back, to more obviously constructive lines of art historical enquiry? Or is it, as commentators more sympathetic to poststructuralist thought would suggest, possible to arrive at some sort of progressive reconciliation between art historical discourse and the theory and practice of deconstruction? Moreover, does a rigorous deconstructive attention to art historical discourse force us to give up totally not only on a conventional epistemological enquiry into art and its history, but also, by extension, any sort of associated political and/or ethical commitment? Or, is it possible to arrive at a productive relationship between a rigorous adherence to the theory and practice of deconstruction and a continuing desire both to understand the history of art and to commit oneself ethically and/or politically in relation to that understanding? In this dissertation we intend to explore some possible responses to these questions.

In doing so, however, it should be noted that we do not intend to proceed from an assumed position of neutrality and disinterestedness. Rather, it is accepted right from the outset that the theory

Foucault, which while not without their severe problems point in a more positive direction” [our square

and practice of deconstruction has brought the metaphysical *weltanschauung* of our existing linguistic order squarely into doubt and that we must therefore suspend any notion of a straightforward adherence to the underlying principles of conventional art historical discourse. By the same token it is also accepted here that, while the theory and practice of deconstruction could be said to point toward some sort of ultra-metaphysical realm of thought beyond conventional forms of signification, its 'logic' does not in fact give us direct, unalloyed access to that realm, as this would simply constitute a return to the absolutism of a standard metaphysical world-view. Consequently, the view is taken here that we can neither retreat from nor, as yet, move entirely beyond a continuing deconstructive attention to art historical discourse.

At the same time, in aligning ourselves with the theory and practice of deconstruction, we also hold in doubt here the possibility of a straightforward reconciliation between conventional art historical discourse and the theory and practice of deconstruction, since any such reconciliation would, we would aver, involve two ultimately incompatible 'perspectives'. We therefore take the view that if we are to pursue some sort of continuing relationship between art history and the theory and practice deconstruction then it will have become necessary to look beyond the kind of synthetic arrangement which would appear to have been suggested by Harris towards a more precise and and still problematic understanding of deconstruction's relationship to the workings of conventional discourse.

Furthermore, it is also accepted here, as John Griffiths puts it in his essay "Deconstruction Deconstructed", published in Academy Editions' *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume* (1989), that an adherence to the theory and practice deconstruction should not in itself involve a rejection of "all certainty and privilege" while operating "as if an overwhelming certainty [its own] were in the offing" [Griffiths in Papadkis ed, 1989: 18 – our square brackets]. In other words, it is assumed here that deconstruction should not be thought of as something with a given, permanently fixed or purely authoritative identity. Indeed, running throughout this dissertation will be a line of argument that a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse has some twenty years after its impact was first widely felt (and despite the destabilising effect it has had on our traditional understanding of language as a mediator of recoverable meaning) acquired something of a 'history', and that as a consequence of this it has now become possible to reassess its significance in relation to an extended series of events, both 'textual' and 'contextual', whose unfolding, according to Derrida's theorization of *différance* in

Margins of Philosophy (1982)¹⁶ [Derrida, 1982: 1-27], will have exposed that attention to the possibility of interpretation beyond the definitions that have hitherto been placed upon it. Moreover, by the same token, the view is taken here that our understanding of the theory and practice of deconstruction cannot be disassociated from a consideration of a wider set of 'events'.

Further to all of this, it is also assumed here from the outset that while the theory and practice of deconstruction can be used to demonstrate the inherent instability and arbitrariness of conventional art historical discourse, it has the capacity to do so - in a manner broadly analogous to art works in the 'conceptualist' tradition of the Duchampian readymade - through a close (or, as Derrida himself might put it, a closely choreographed) relationship between itself and its host field's continuing involvement in the production of meanings; not least that of its own identity as a discrete form of discourse. That is to say - to borrow from John Roberts reading of conceptualist art in "Photography, Iconophobia and the Ruins of Conceptual Art", published in *The Impossible Document: Photography and Conceptual Art in Britain 1966-1976* (1997) - in a manner that not only undermines a conventional understanding of what its host field's proper limits and functions should be, but that also acts out its own 'propositional' content as a text within that field [Roberts ed, 1997: 7-45]. Here, then, there is a working hypothesis that the discursive 'double-bind' apparently arrived at by a rigorously applied deconstructive attention to art historical discourse is not a final limit and that there is the potential for a continuing deconstructive attention to art historical discourse that does not simply involve an abandonment of all attempts to write histories of art.

At this point, we would also like to insert some comments on the sources referred to in the researching of this dissertation. At the outset, the research for this dissertation was carried out almost exclusively with reference to the published writings of art historians and others who felt they had something to contribute on the subject of the history of art. In this way, we began to view art history as a chronically unstable series of discursive formations whose underlying conceptual orders were riddled with inconsistency and contradiction. As time went on, however, we began to realise that we were in danger of overlooking the role of the academic conference as a forum for the formation and dissemination of contemporary art historical discourse. Consequently, we began to supplement our reading by attending a number of art history conferences, where we were able to listen directly to a number of art historians whose work we had known previously only through their published writings.

¹⁶ First published in French as *Marges de la Philosophie*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, France, 1972.

If we had held out an unconscious desire that this somewhat anthropological encounter with the living human voice would cut through and clarify the tangled skein of meanings which we had uncovered through our researches into the written word, then, unconsciously at least, we were to be sorely disappointed, as what we discovered on the conference circuit served only to complicate our understanding of art history further. Not only did we find it impossible to fully reconcile the views expressed about art history through published writings with what art historians say and do on the conference platform, but we also began to understand how each conference proceeds on the basis of its theme and of its chosen speakers to impose a set of tacitly held restrictions on what will be allowed to count within that particular forum as a legitimate contribution to debate; something which, more often than not, pushes any challenge to the attitudes and prejudices at work in a conference's main arena into the informal gatherings at its margins. Moreover, it also became clear that in immersing ourselves within this milieu, to the point where we began to be accepted, at least to some extent, as a *bona fide* art historian, we could no longer consider ourselves to be in the position of an outside observer standing entirely at a distance from our object of study (even though, as an ex-fine art practitioner turned critical theorist, the present author has received little in the way of a formal art historical training). Through our researches we have therefore come to see art history not just as a chronically unstable discursive formation riven at any one time with internal theoretical and methodological differences, but also as one whose motley and fraying fabric is interwoven inextricably with that of the various sites within which it is formed and disseminated and, if you will, the 'power/knowledge' relations at work there. Moreover, in attempting to gain a clear view of contemporary art historical discourse, we have also been forcefully reminded that there is no wholly isolated vantage point from which we might stand and observe, nor any position of critical attention that does not implicate us in an entanglement with our object of study. As a consequence we would aver here that it is impossible for us to divorce our writing entirely from the structural choices and exclusions that inevitably take place as part of established art historical discourse. This dissertation is, therefore, not to be seen as a detached theorizing of a deconstructive attention to established art historical discourse. Rather, it should be understood as one that acknowledges the present inescapability of the decision making demanded by existing discursive practices while attempting to work through, with and as part of their relationship to the world, and while pointing critically towards the possibility of some less nakedly prejudicial or indeed violent alternative.

Part I:

Crossing Over The Boundaries of a 'De(con)structionist' Art History

Philosophy easily triumphs over past ills and ills to come, but present ills triumph over philosophy.

-François, duc de la Rochefoucauld¹⁷

Part one of this dissertation is divided into four chapters. In chapter one we discuss the early development of the theory and practice of deconstruction as a critique of the Western philosophical tradition and how that critique was subsequently brought to bear on a range other fields and disciplines 'outside' philosophy. In chapter two we discuss the emergence of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse and assess its implications for disciplinary art history. In chapter three we consider arguments against a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse. And in chapter four we begin to explore the possibility of a continuing relationship between disciplinary art history and the theory and practice of deconstruction beyond the objections discussed in chapter three. It is intended that part one of this dissertation will then act as a form of 'scene setting' for larger scale deconstructive genealogies put forward in parts two and three

Chapter I: The Early Development and Dissemination of The Theory and Practice of Deconstruction

Any attempt to write a history of deconstruction from a rigorously deconstructive 'standpoint' faces immediate difficulties. Not only does the theory and practice of deconstruction undermine the notions of presence and representation upon which all conventional narratives of historicity ultimately rest, but it also sees deconstructive play as something without origin, duration or end. Consequently there is no single, given point in time and space from which one might begin. These difficulties notwithstanding, it is nevertheless possible to state without serious fear of contradiction that our present usage of the term

¹⁷ La Rochefoucauld, trans. Leonard Tancock, *Maxims*, Penguin, London and New York, 1959, p.40. Originally published under the title *Réflexions ou sentences et maximes morales* in Paris in 1665.

'deconstruction' stems principally from the writings of the French-Algerian academic, Jacques Derrida (b.1930). As Christopher Norris indicates in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (1982), Derrida's early professional training was as a student of philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris between 1952 and 1956 [Norris, 1982: 18], following which he went on to teach in the philosophy departments of a number of higher education institutions, including the Sorbonne (1960-64) and the École Normale Supérieure (1964-1984) in France and, from 1972, Yale and John Hopkins Universities in the United States of America [Collins and Mayblin, 1996: 13]. However, despite this long-standing professional association with philosophy, Derrida has in his lectures and published writings from the early nineteen-sixties consistently advocated a departure from the standing conventions of Western philosophical thought. In these lectures and writings, as Norris makes clear, we find a sustained critique of Western philosophy's self-appointed status as "the sovereign dispenser of reason" which not only puts forward the view "that philosophers have been able to impose their various systems of thought only by ignoring, or suppressing, the disruptive effects of language", but which also attempts to "draw out these effects by a critical reading which fastens on, and skilfully unpicks, the elements of metaphor and other figurative devices at work in the texts of philosophy" [Norris, 1982: 18-19]¹⁸. As the neologism coined by Derrida to denote the latter, practical aspect of this critique, the term 'deconstruction' therefore emerges as the signifier of an active demonstration of Western philosophy's ultimate inability to control meaning through language.

Ostensibly, deconstruction would therefore appear to stand squarely outside the conventional limits of Western philosophy. Indeed, as a number of commentators have pointed out, the interpretative methods associated with it have a strong resemblance to various forms of non-philosophical procedure. Consider here, for example, similarities between Derridean deconstruction and those modes of rhetorical analysis habitually used by literary critics; modes which, as Norris points out in "Jacques Derrida: Language Against Itself", Chapter two of *Deconstruction Theory and Practice*, often seek to confound notions of unitary meaning by working to extend the possibilities of linguistic signification [Norris, 1982: 19]. Consider here also the parallels which Gregory L. Ulmer has drawn between deconstruction and the collage/montage techniques habitually deployed by the artistic avant-garde in his essay "The Object of Post-Criticism", published in Hal Foster's anthology *Postmodern Culture*

¹⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the main interpretative strategies used by Derrida see the introduction to Martin McQuillan, *Deconstruction: A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 1-43.

(1985), both of which can be understood to open up the possibilities of signification by mounting fragments of a ‘host text’ within unfamiliar settings wherein they take on new and unexpected meanings [Ulmer in Foster ed., 1985: 83-110].

However, despite these evident affinities with procedures ostensibly at variance with those traditionally deployed within philosophy, it would be a mistake to think of deconstruction simply as an outsider to the Western philosophical tradition. As numerous commentators, including Christopher Norris, have pointed out, Derrida’s thinking has much in common with ideas first put forward by the philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) [Norris, 1982: 56-73]. Here, Derrida can be understood to share with both of these thinkers, not only a profound scepticism with regard to the conventional truth claims of Western philosophy, but also a desire to undo the rhetorical tropes of language which have been used to uphold those claims. Moreover, in the case of Heidegger he can also be seen to share an understanding, that in seeking to expose Western philosophy’s shortcomings, one must nevertheless continue – for want of any ready alternative – to work with and through its existing linguistic order. Consequently, while both Nietzsche and Heidegger can ultimately be understood to depart from the unwavering scepticism of Derridean deconstruction by looking beyond conventional philosophical rationalism towards some alternative ground on which to base truthful expression¹⁹ – in the case of Nietzsche to the liberation of thought from the falsehood of its existing conceptual boundaries, and in the case of Heidegger to an original state of ‘being’ as the foundation of authentic thought – they can nevertheless be thought of as contributors to a persistent strain of irrationalist dissent within the Western philosophical tradition to which Derrida can also be seen to have contributed. As Donald Preziosi suggests in his introduction to “Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation”, chapter eight of *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, deconstruction should therefore be viewed not simply as an antithesis to Western philosophy, but rather, as a “situation of reading philosophy in which practising it and confounding [are] inseparable” [Preziosi ed. 1998: 397, our square brackets].

To sum up, then, Derridean deconstruction can be understood to occupy a highly unconventional position in relation to philosophical discourse. On the one hand, its active undoing of philosophical rhetoric involves techniques more usually associated with the work of the literary critic

¹⁹ As Norris points out in “Nietzsche: Philosophy and Deconstruction”, chapter four of *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, this deconstructive critique of Nietzsche and Heidegger is one that has been put forward by Derrida himself. See Norris, 1982, pp. 56-73.

and the artistic avant-garde than with that of the philosopher. On the other, its closeness to the rigorous self-reflexivity of both Nietzsche and Heidegger make it very much part of a continuing philosophical inheritance. There is therefore a sense in which deconstruction can be viewed, to paraphrase Fred Orton writing on the work of the painter Jasper Johns, simultaneously as both philosophy and non-philosophy and as neither philosophy nor non-philosophy [Orton, 1994:146].

Given this highly undecidable state of affairs, it is therefore unsurprising that from a very early stage in its development Derrida began to reverse the polarities of his critique by applying deconstructive theory and practice to texts usually considered to be outside the conventional Western philosophical canon. Consider here, for example, Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", first published in French in the anthology *L'écriture et la différence* (1967), which deconstructs a perceived privileging of the human voice over writing in the work of the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Consider also Derrida's early engagement with literary criticism in the publication *Glas* (1974), where the writings of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and those of the novelist poet and playwright Jean Genet are, as Christopher Norris puts it, "brought face to face in a kind of perverse interlinear gloss which exposes philosophic reason to the lures and obsessions of a homosexual thief-turned-writer" [Norris, 1982: 166]. Indeed, it is equally unsurprising that from the early nineteen-seventies scholars working in the fields of literary criticism and the visual arts began to look towards Derridean deconstruction as a searching 'philosophical' re-orientation of some of their existing theories and methodologies. Consider here, for example, the work of the 'Yale School' scholars Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartman, who during the nineteen-seventies began to deploy deconstructive forms of reading against the grain of established hermeneutics to reveal the inherent and illimitable polysemy of works of literature²⁰. Furthermore, consider Derrida's collaboration with the architect Peter Eisenman, where from 1983 an abortive attempt was made to contribute a 'deconstructive' building to the *Parc de la Villette* project in Paris (one of French president François Mitterand's *Grands Projets d'urbanisme parisien* of the nineteen-eighties)²¹.

²⁰ For a full discussion of 'Yale School' criticism, see "The American Connection", chapter six of Christopher Norris's revised version of *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London, 1991, pp. 90-125.

²¹ For a discussion of the Derrida-Eisenman collaboration, see Andreas Papadakis ed. *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*, Academy Editions, London, 1989.

From a conventional, rationalist perspective, it might of course be argued that this dissemination of deconstruction to fields other than philosophy simply places Derrida's project firmly on the side of non-philosophy. However, as Derrida has pointed out in an interview published in Peter Brunette and David Wills' *Deconstruction in the Visual Arts* (1993), it is important to see the importation of the theory and practice of deconstruction into fields and disciplines other than philosophy not just as a contribution to non-philosophical thought, but as part of a continuing deconstructive attention to the Western philosophical tradition, since within that tradition the conceptual order upon which any field or discipline is based is usually understood to have been underwritten by philosophical thought [Derrida in Brunette and Wills, 1993: 10]. Consequently, the application of the theory and practice of deconstruction to fields and disciplines other than philosophy can be understood to 'place' the theory and practice of deconstruction once more both within and beyond the confines of the Western philosophical tradition.

Here, then, we are faced by the prospect of a highly problematic interpretative practice that not only demonstrates the susceptibility of all philosophically legitimised truth claims to the unsettling play of linguistic rhetoric, but also the continual possibility of its own deconstruction; that is to say, to the continual possibility of an unresolved shuttling between differing, though not entirely distinct, identities. The implications of this are, of course, extremely profound. If deconstruction is indeed immanent to all discursive practices, including its own, then there can be no privileged ground of any sort upon which to base an authentic understanding. Consequently, the existence of a given category of 'reality' to which language might, despite its own rhetorical shortcomings, be understood to relate is brought squarely into doubt. Moreover, faith in the conventionally assumed capacity of the individual to act with authority as a self-present human subject on the basis of factual knowledge is also to be suspended.

Numerous commentators, including Christopher Norris, writing in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, writing in her introduction to the English translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) and Martin McQuillan, writing in his anthology, *Deconstruction: A Reader* (2000), have of course already worked through many of the unsettling consequences of Derrida's development of the theory and practice of deconstruction for the ways in which we think about and act within the world. There is therefore little need to repeat them in full here. Suffice it to say that deconstruction can be understood to have problematized all of our most basic - and not so basic -

metaphysical assumptions. There are, however, a number of key points that are germane to our present discussion. The first is, as Norris points out in “Between Marx and Nietzsche: the politics of deconstruction”, chapter five of *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, that the deconstructive play of textuality confounds the Hegelian belief that history and human consciousness are able to unite in “a plenitude of intelligible meaning” [Norris, 1982: 76]. That is to say, the belief that human consciousness can “take hold of its own understanding and the stages of historical thought which led up to it” [Norris, 1982: 76]. Clearly, from a deconstructive standpoint such notions of historical omniscience can only be upheld if one overlooks the rhetorical workings of language. The second point to be made here is that, in undermining this faith in an emerging historical consciousness, deconstruction can also be understood to unsettle Marx’s inversion of Hegel whereby transcendental spirit is replaced by materiality as the defining ground of a dialectical progress towards a final state of self-presence. Here, as Norris makes clear, there is no longer a sense in which the false consciousness of ideology might be overcome by a form of scientific understanding immune to the rhetorical play of textuality – as orthodox Marxist thought would have it - but instead a far-reaching scepticism over the truth claims of all narratives of historicity [Norris, 1982: 78-83]. The third point is that this problematization of history also unsettles the ethico/political imperatives which, according to Marxist thought, arise in relation to a consciousness of the asymmetrical class relations which lie at the heart of dialectical materialism; imperatives which point towards the overthrow of an essentially exploitative capitalist system. The fourth point is that, by extension, deconstruction can be understood to unsettle all other beliefs in the possibility of a totalizing historical consciousness and in categorical imperatives flowing from that consciousness. Or to put it another way, all conceivable stable relationships between a historical *is* and a historical *ought*. In short, deconstruction can be understood to have unsettled the very bedrock of traditional (modernist) thinking on the subjects of history and of historicity.

Little surprise then that as deconstruction has been disseminated throughout the nineteen-eighties and nineteen-nineties still further beyond the boundaries of philosophical discourse to disciplines such as the political and social sciences, art history and legal studies, it has attracted severe criticism from detractors right across the political spectrum protective of the necessity for some form of politicised historical consciousness; many of whom have indicted deconstruction as an irresponsible act of intellectual vandalism with worrying tendencies towards the ideological pragmatism, anti-humanism and historical revisionism exhibited both by the far right and the far left. Consider here, for

example Terry Eagleton who has argued, writing in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, that while deconstruction has the capacity to support a politically motivated, historicizing critique “of Language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices” in actuality it has often remained immured to the concept of discourse as a practical rather than as a literary/academic activity [Eagleton, 1983: 147-148].

However, as Norris points out in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, despite this criticism, for many years Derrida resisted a direct engagement with the intellectual consequences of a deconstructive attention to history writing and its relationship to political thought [Norris, 1982: 75]. The reasons for this are perhaps understandable. Derrida would almost certainly have wished to avoid giving the impression that deconstruction was simply opposed to considered political thought; especially that associated with the writings of Marx, which can be understood, despite its materialist inversion of Hegel, to posit its own telling ‘deconstruction’ of the exploitative practices of international capitalism. More recently, though, Derrida has, in texts such as *Specters of Marx* (1993) begun to work through the implications of a deconstructive attention to political thought more directly. Here, he makes a number of key points. One is that the codes we use to mediate our understanding of the world are – as in the case of linguistic meaning - subject to continual remotivation in the face of changing circumstances of time and place. Consequently, he avers, the development of consciousness, like linguistic meaning, can have no given origin or end and therefore no *teleology*. It follows, then, that while a Marxist faith in the possibility of a historical consciousness beyond the play of language can never be fully realised, it is also impossible to claim, as Francis Fukuyama has in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), that with the fall of second-world Communism at the end of the nineteen-eighties liberal Capitalism had in fact triumphed over the ideas of Marx. Another key point made by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* is that the development of the theory and practice of deconstruction must be seen in relation a wider network of events. Here, Derrida avers most strongly that his initial formation of the theory and practice of deconstruction constituted an attempt to go beyond the *impasse* brought about by the opposing political *blocs* of communism and capitalism at the centre of the Cold War, and the somewhat apocalyptic, or ‘endist’, tone set by the philosophical literature which can be understood to have fuelled that *impasse* [Derrida, 1994: 14-15]. On this account it is, therefore, possible to see the spread of the theory and practice of deconstruction beyond the confines of philosophy in relation to the rise of postmodernism and the eventual ‘deposing’ of the dualistic politics

of the Cold War. Moreover, it is also possible to align the apparent triumph of liberal capitalism at the end of the Cold War, and the strategic political return to modernist rationality which has followed in its wake, as the context within which we have also seen an increasing disquiet – on the part of both the political right and the left - over the unsettling effects of Postmodernism and its close association with the theory and practice of deconstruction. Here, then, the theory and practice of deconstruction can be understood not just as a challenge to Western philosophy's self-image as the underwriter of all truth claims, but also as something intimately bound up with the ways in which we have constructed our understanding of the world over the past forty years or so and, what is more with the ways in which we have acted politically and ethically in relation to that understanding. For Derrida at least, deconstruction is therefore not to be seen just as the enactment of an extreme intellectual scepticism. Rather, it is something that may yet help us to engage in a productive, ethico-politically committed 'historicization' of our existing modes of discourse.

As anyone familiar with Derrida's work will recognise this sense of an historicizing 'ethical turn' is now one of the most hotly debated aspects of contemporary deconstructive thought, problematizing as it does a great deal of the negative criticism aimed at deconstruction over the four decades since its active inception. However, it is not clear that such considerations have as yet impacted on some of the fields and disciplines to which deconstruction has been disseminated. One prime example of this can be found, we would aver, in relation to disciplinary art history where there is now an established tradition of deconstructive practice, but one that appears – certainly at the point at which we started to research this dissertation - to have drawn up somewhat short of some of the more 'progressive' developments in deconstructive theory. Indeed, in recent years disciplinary art history has arguably shown signs, particularly in relation to a British art historical milieu, of a departure from its established deconstructive ways and a return to practices grounded in historical materialism and the aesthetic. And it is to a more detailed consideration of the arguments and counter arguments underlying this present state of affairs that we now turn.

Chapter II: The Emergence of a Deconstructive Attention to Art Historical Discourse

The beginnings of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse can be traced back to writings first published in a Francophone context during the nineteen-seventies. Here we find the earliest

examples of the theory and practice of deconstruction having been brought into close proximity with the concerns of the professional art historian. Consider here, in this regard, Jean Clay's *De L'impressionisme A L'Art Moderne* (1975), which, despite the essentially structuralist approach to reading adopted by its author throughout the main body of the text, incorporates explicit references to the theory and practice of deconstruction in its "Glossary of Semeiological Terms" [Clay, 1975: 319]. Consider also Derrida's own *La Vérité En Peinture* (1978), which - as we shall see in more detail below - sets out to deconstruct the philosophically underwritten concepts of 'art' and 'history' upon which all forms of art historical discourse can ultimately be understood to rest.

Following on from this, we then encounter instances of art history writing from the late nineteen-seventies onwards that make little or no reference to the theory and practice of deconstruction, but which would nevertheless appear to have been influenced by or have an affinity with Derridean thinking. Consider here, for example Craig Owens' well-known essay "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism", first published as a two-part article in *October*, no.12 (Spring 1980) and no.13 (Summer 1980), which draws in part upon the writings of literary deconstructionist Paul de Man in an attempt to impute to the diverse practices of a 'postmodernist' art an underlying tendency towards the open signification of allegorical discourse. Consider also Giuliano Gresleri's much less well-known text, *Josef Hoffmann* (1981), which makes no explicit theoretical assertions, but which nevertheless seeks to problematise conventional art historical notions of stylistic coherence in relation to the early history of modernist architecture in a manner consonant with deconstructive analysis.

The first signs of a deconstructive attention to art history can therefore be seen to have emerged not long after (and to some extent in relation to) the initial development of an openly acknowledged deconstructive attention to literary studies. However, despite these vanguardist beginnings, it is only during the early to mid nineteen-eighties that overt applications of the theory and practice of deconstruction to the reading of works of art and their history by practising art historians begin to appear for the first time. Consider here, for example, Fredric Jameson's seminal essay "Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", first published in *New Left Review*, 146 (July/August, 1984), which famously deploys aspects of deconstructive thinking to enunciate the properties of a non-expressive 'postmodernist' art. Consider here also Victor Burgin's seminal essay "The Absence of Presence: Conceptualism and Postmodernisms", first published in the catalogue for

the Kettle's Yard Gallery exhibition, *1965 To 1972 - When Attitudes became Form* (1984), in which the author argues that British 'conceptualist' art of the nineteen-sixties and seventies can be understood to involve a radical deconstruction of the representational tradition within Western art.

Despite this explicit showing, deconstruction's influence on art historical discourse of the early to mid nineteen-eighties as a whole nevertheless remained relatively indistinct. As A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello indicate in their introduction to *The New Art History*, deconstruction was at that time regarded as just one of the 'aims' of a much wider trend towards theoretical self-reflexivity within disciplinary art history; a trend which had by then started to bring various forms of 'structuralist' and 'poststructuralist' thinking to bear on art history's mainstream as part of a continuing critical response to the formalism of 'institutionally dominant' art history first initiated by the 'radical' art history of the early nineteen-seventies [Rees and Borzello, 1986: 8-9]. From the mid-nineteen eighties, however, deconstruction's standing in relation to art historical discourse underwent something of a transformation. At this time theoretical self-reflexivity, as embodied by the notion of a 'New Art History', began to exert an ever-greater influence on art history's mainstream; so much so, in fact, that during the latter half of the nineteen-eighties the 'New Art History' became the dominant force within disciplinary art history. In relation to this, instances of an overt deconstructive attention to works of art and their history started to multiply considerably. Consider here, for example, two relevant publications by Derrida: "To Unsense the Subjectile", an essay relating to an obscure series of paintings by the dramatist Antonin Artaud, first published in *Antonin Artaud* (1986), which reflects on the highly complex and unorthodox nature of Artaud's visual language; and *Mémoires d'aveugle: l'autoportrait et autres ruines* (1990)²², the catalogue for an exhibition curated by Derrida at the Louvre in Paris which involves an attempt to deconstruct visual art's traditional embodiment of an omniscient, God-like gaze. Consider also the following works by professional art historians: Donald Preziosi's, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on A Coy Science*; Andreas Papadakis's, *Deconstruction: Omnibus Volume*; Peter Brunette and David Wills', *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*; Mark Wigley's, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (1993); Fred Orton's book, *Figuring Jasper Johns* (1994) and the associated television lecture for the Open

²² This essay was first published in 1990 by Éditions de la Reunion des Musées Nationaux, France as *Mémoires d'Aveugle: L'autoportrait et autres ruines*, on the occasion of an exhibition held at the Louvre Museum, Paris between October 26, 1990 and January 21, 1991. The English translation by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas was published in 1993, under the title *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* by the University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

University in the United Kingdom, *Flag* (1994); Sarat Maharaj's essay, "A Monster of Veracity, A Crystalline Transubstantiation: Typotranslating the Green Box" (1996)²³; and David Green and Joanna Lowry's lecture, "From Presence to the Performative: Conceptual Art and Photography"²⁴, all of which make explicit use of the theory and practice of deconstruction as means of remotivating our historical understanding of works of art beyond traditional conceptual limits.

In addition to this, there was also at this time a marked increase in relatively indirect or unacknowledged applications of the theory and practice of deconstruction by writers on the history of art. Consider here, for example, Griselda Pollock's essay, "The Gaze and The Look: *Women With Binoculars* - A Question of Difference" in which a "post-structuralist" perspective is called upon to challenge the notion that the structural distinction between "masculinity and femininity" - which Pollock perceives to be at the heart of late nineteenth century French painting and a standard feminist opposition to the existing patriarchal order - is in fact "the reflection of a given difference" [Pollock in Kendall and Pollock eds. 1992: 107]. Consider also Alex Defert's essay, "In-Between Schools: A Translation", published in the journal, *Act 1, Art Criticism and Theory: Writing Art* (1995), which weaves into a meditation on the works of the sculptor Medardo Rosso (who is noted for a series of highly impressionistic portraits in wax) an attempt to "melt down" distinctions between writing and sculpture inherited from what Defert refers to as "The 'School of Oppositions'" [Defert in Juliet Steyn ed., 1995: 48-59].

From the mid nineteen-eighties onwards deconstruction can therefore be seen to have played an increasingly significant role in supporting a widespread departure from established ways of thinking about the visual arts and their history. Indeed, so pronounced was its influence from the end of the nineteen-eighties numerous commentators started to allude to the existence of a 'deconstructionist' movement at work within disciplinary art history. Consider here, in this regard, Donald Preziosi's contention in "A Crisis in, or of, Art History", chapter one of *Rethinking Art History: Meditations On a Coy Science*, that a crisis had arisen within art history which stemmed, in part at least, from the

²³ Published in Martha Buskirk and Hignon Nixon eds. *The Duchamp effect – essays, Interviews, Round Table*, October Books/MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1996, pp. 61-91.

²⁴ For a synopsis of Green and Lowry's paper, see the conference guide to *Body and Soul: Exploring Objects – Making Myths*, the Oxford university Press, 2000, section X, "Presence Absence and Their stand-Ins: 20th Century Art and Photography", no page numbers given.

opposition of conventional, “humanist” art historians to the importation of “deconstructionism” into their discipline from elsewhere within the humanities [Preziosi, 1989: 1-20]. Consider also, John Roberts’ assertion, in the introduction to *Art Has No History!* “[t]he remnants of post-Althusserianism have dovetailed with an intellectually dominant post-structuralism and supportive Derridean deconstructionism to create, as I write, a widely anti-Marxist climate in the humanities not seen since the fifties” [Roberts, 1994: 18, our square brackets].

However, as Preziosi has since gone on to indicate in his introduction to “Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation”, chapter eight of *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, such allusions can only be upheld if one overlooks the fundamental consequences of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse. Here, Preziosi points out, with direct reference to Derrida’s *La vérité en peinture*²⁵, that a deconstructive attention of this sort can be seen, when worked through to its (il)logical conclusions, to undermine the two most basic assumptions underlying disciplinary art history [Preziosi ed. 1998: 398]. Firstly, the idea of ‘art’ as a categorical aesthetic, which we have inherited principally from writings of the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant²⁶ and which can be understood to underwrite art history’s differentiation from other academic fields and disciplines with different objects of study. And secondly, the belief that it is possible to arrive at a totalizing consciousness of past events, which, as Stephen Melville points out in his essay “The Temptation of New Perspectives”, first published in the journal *October*, 52 (Spring 1990), derives much of its weight in modern times from the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* of the eighteen-twenties²⁷; a text where, as Melville puts it, the view is put forward that a now explicit and detached artistic impulse has, in passing over “into the still greater explicitness of philosophy”, come “to presence and explicitness precisely as historical, as already overcome”

²⁵ In *The Truth in Painting*, first published in French as *La vérité en peinture*, Flammarion, Paris, 1978, Derrida acknowledges the importance to art history of both Kant’s aesthetics and Hegel’s historicisation of art. For Derrida’s deconstructive engagement with Kant’s aesthetics, see “Parergon”, part one of Derrida, G Bennington and I McLeod trans, *The Truth in Painting*, The University of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1987, pp.15-147. For his engagement with Hegel’s historicism, see Derrida’s comments on pp.20-21 and p.26. Here, in the latter passage Derrida argues that art historical discourse proceeds, in part at least, from Hegel’s framing of art as “one of the circles in the great circle of the *Geist* or the revenant”, within the bounds of which “[t]he end of art, and its truth, is religion, that other circle of which the end, the truth will have been philosophy”, and that “[t]he fact remains that here art is studied from the point of view of its end” its “pastness” being its “truth” See Derrida, Bennington and McLeod trans, 1987, p.26, our square brackets.

²⁶ See Kant, James Creed Meredith trans, *The Critique of Judgement*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1952, p.68.

[Melville, Preziosi ed. 1998: 404] and which therefore underscores disciplinary art history's conventionally held faith in the potential objectivity of academic research. Consequently, if we accept a conventional definition of the art historical 'movement' as a concerted attempt to further art history writing on the basis of a given set of conceptual premises - consider here, for example, a 'social' history of art based on Marxist principles - then a rigorously applied deconstructive attention to art history can be understood to resist such a definition by undermining the very cornerstones of art historical thought.

The growing 'presence' of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse since the early nineteen-eighties can therefore be seen to involve a somewhat paradoxical state of affairs. While, numerous art historians have over the past two decades deployed deconstruction as a productive means of thinking outside their discipline's existing conceptual limits, thereby giving rise to many novel instances of art historical interpretation, that self-same practice can, when taken to extremes, be understood to undermine the basis of that productivity by bringing the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse - that is to say a philosophical faith in the ontological givenness of both 'art' and 'history' - squarely into doubt. It is unsurprising then, that deconstruction has been one of the most hotly contested aspects of disciplinary art history over the past two decades. Indeed, while the recent ascendancy of the 'New Art History' has ushered in a general acceptance within mainstream art history that art historical discourse is irrevocably pluralistic, many professional art historians from both the centre and the margins of disciplinary art history have nevertheless raised objections to a continuing deconstructive attention to their discipline. And it is to some of these dissenting voices that we now turn.

Chapter III: Dissenting Voices

Objections to a continuing deconstructive attention to art historical discourse can be understood to fall into one of two overlapping categories. For some deconstruction is simply antithetical to the meaningful progress of art history. While for others it is important to uphold a 'poststructuralist' valorization of difference while rejecting the extreme relativism of deconstructive theory and practice.

²⁷ See, G.W.F. Hegel, M. Inwood ed, B. Bosanquet trans, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Penguin, London, 1993.

One of the most consistent and intelligent exponents of the view that deconstruction is simply antithetical to art historical discourse is the Marxist writer and art historian John Roberts. Over recent years Roberts has published numerous polemical works that chart an increasingly sophisticated critical response to the hegemony of poststructuralist thought within contemporary culture. To grasp something of this developing critique we will look here towards two texts: firstly, Roberts' introduction to the anthology *Art has No History!*; and secondly, his essay "The Labour of Subjectivity/The Subjectivity of Labour: Reflections on Contemporary Political Theory and Culture", published in the journal *Third Text*, 61 (December 2002). In his introduction to *Art Has No History!* Roberts mounts a critique of deconstruction from a relatively orthodox Marxist standpoint. His first significant point is that "Derridean deconstructionism" has supported "a downgrading of dialectical knowledge" and a "derogation of 'totalizing' forms of knowledge" throughout the humanities in recent years which has not only "extracted an almost adamant provisionalism from writing history", but which also now sees the complexity of historical relations "in terms of interrelations of difference, rather than in terms of relations of hierarchy and difference". Consequently, he goes on to aver, this has installed "a quite extraordinary collapse of 'common sense' on matters of explanation and determination" through which we have lost sight of the central role played by class asymmetry in the unfolding of historical events [Roberts, 1994: 18]. Furthermore, continues Roberts, deconstruction has, through its figuring of a linguistically fractured human subject, also engendered a disregard for authorial intention as a determining factor in the production of artistic meaning ('the death of the author'). As result, he argues, it can be understood to overlook the crucial role played by "contradictions in thought and the crises of socio-economic life" in generating the complex relations "between artistic intention and social agency [and] between meaning and the failure to control meaning" [Roberts, 1994: 20-21, our square brackets].

Here, then, Roberts can be understood to uphold a relatively standard Marxist belief both in the possibility of a totalizing historical consciousness and in the materiality of class struggle as the prime mover of historical events against what he sees as the rampant 'anti-foundationalism' of deconstructive thought. Moreover, he can also be understood to have buttressed his position by maintaining an equally standard Marxist belief in the possibility of a radical human subject, which, in arriving at a totalizing historical consciousness, is consequently empowered to act negatively against the supposed 'objectivity' of prevailing material conditions. In *Art Has No History!* Roberts is therefore

not only concerned to counter deconstruction's problematization of epistemological certainty, but also the implications of that problematization for our ability to act individually and/or collectively as ethico-politically motivated subjects. That is to say, he is concerned to retain through his upholding of Marxist principles a direct structural link between a consciousness of what *is* and an ethical/political *ought*. Here, then, we have a telling indictment of the theory and practice of deconstruction - and one that may be understood to carry added weight in the wake of the David Irving libel case²⁸ - that its invocations of linguistic undecideability in relation to the epistemological notion of a historical reality can be understood as having the potential to lead, by extension, both on to a lack of interpretative rigour and to a constant deferral of decisive ethical/political action.

In his later essay "The Labour of Subjectivity/ The Subjectivity of Labour", Roberts can be understood to develop this relatively orthodox position along more sophisticated – and arguably more poststructurally influenced - lines. Here, in a dense and wide ranging text, he advances a number of key points. The first is that, as a consequence of the widespread move towards social democracy and consensus politics after the fall of historical communism at the end of the nineteen-eighties, we now live in a society dominated by a "normative diffusion of conflict under the sign of 'difference'" in which there is not only a radical depoliticization of culture, but also "an unembarrassed disinclination to practice any of the skills of historical interpretation and critical attentiveness" [Roberts in David Beech ed., 2002: 369]. According to Roberts this state of affairs has been very much supported by the ascendancy in recent years of thinking associated with postmodernism/poststructuralism. For Roberts, postmodernism/poststructuralism has helped to install within our collective psyche a belief that the presently prevailing socio-economic conditions of late capitalism are a binding 'reality' which cannot be transcended but only railed against at a "micrological" level by an irrevocably fractured and ultimately ineffectual human subjectivity.

²⁸ In 2000 the self-styled historian of the Third Reich, David Irving, brought a libel case against the American writer Deborah Lipstadt and Penguin Books, who, Irving claimed, had wrongly accused him of denying the reality of the Holocaust. In court, Irving argued that his questioning of the ways in which the Holocaust had come to be perceived were based on an objective reading of the available evidence. As witness testimony showed, however, Irving's position was in fact based on a somewhat pedantic reading of marginal inconsistencies, lacunae and other omissions within the available documentary record that were simply outweighed by the critical mass of the body of evidence pertaining to the facts of the Holocaust. The presiding judge, therefore, rejected Irving's submission, branding him as a racist, an anti-Semite and a perverter of historical facts about the Nazi's attempt to liquidate European Jewry and other groups during the Second World-War. For some background on this case, see the article "A Second World War of Words" in *The Times Higher Educational Supplement*, January 21st, 2000, p.19.

As one might expect from a reading of *Art has No History!*, this is not a situation to which the Marxist Roberts feels he can accede. Consequently, he draws on a number of texts including Michael Hardt and Toni Negri's *Empire* (2000), Jacques Rancière's "De Pelloutiers à Hitler: Syndicalisme et Collaboration" (1977) and Slavoj Žižek's *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999), to support what he sees as the "fundamental truth" of the "interdependence of agency and class consciousness" [Roberts in Beech ed., 2002: 372]. Here Roberts' line of argument is complex and drawn out. However, the central point he makes is that we should go beyond any simplistic opposition between the notion of "modernity as an iron cage of reason" and what he sees as poststructuralism/postmodernism's "reified opposition in the idea of the deterritorialized subject" to uphold the notion of a persistent "radical subjectivity" whose powers of imagination are always irreconcilably at odds with the synthesizing powers of understanding and, therefore, always potentially 'out of joint' with any prevailing sense of 'reality' [Roberts in Beech ed., 2002: 373-377]. As Roberts concedes, this understanding is arguably in danger of becoming abstract and ungrounded given its disentanglement of "the irreconcilable negativity of the subject from the forces of social reduction". However, Roberts counters with the argument that by returning to familiar Marxian questions of "structure and agency, class subjectivity and collective class consciousness" we can see that the possibilities of human action are not simply opposed to social practice but "based on and embedded within the structural capacities and resources possessed by agents" [Roberts in Beech, 2002: 377]. Consequently, avers Roberts, while the subject is therefore only "ever partially a subject" (in any conventional post-Cartesian sense), it can nevertheless be understood to have a direct interrelationship with the apparent 'objectivity' of any given situation. Moreover, in being able to think imaginatively beyond the limits of that 'objectivity', suggests Roberts, it also has the capacity to seize the moment and break its logic in favour of "a new logic and a new objectivity".

According to Roberts this theorization of negation as a constitutive experiential category has enormous implications for historical debates surrounding the status of the artistic avant-garde. Here Roberts acknowledges recent attempts by Hal Foster and Andrew Benjamin, writing in their respective texts *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (1996) and *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde* (1991), to extricate our historical understanding of the artistic avant-garde from Peter Bürger's assertion in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) that the work of the post-Second World War 'neo-avant-garde' is simply a failed repetition of that of its 'historical', early twentieth century

counterpart. However, he ultimately dismisses their visions of an open-ended history of constant revisions and anticipations as being without a sufficient, materially grounded, rationale for persistent artistic renewal. On this basis, he then returns to arguments first put forward by Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), to support the notion that ‘radical subjectivity’, as he sees it, has enabled the avant-garde not simply to reconstitute itself on a regular basis, but to maintain ‘the impossible trick’ of a persistently negative, and unpredictable state of ‘non-identity’ with “the place in which it finds itself” [Roberts in Beech Ed., 2002: 378-381]. For Roberts, as evidenced by groupings such as the artistic avant-garde, we therefore have the capacity to think through the currently prevailing rubric of postmodernism/poststructuralism, and what he regards as its all-enveloping council of political despair, in order to reengage with a genuinely eventful form of political struggle.

As previously suggested, this is not the only form of objection to be raised against a deconstructive attention to art history. In Jonathan Harris’s introduction to *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* we find a considerably less Manichean variation on this general theme. Here Harris, who evidently has a much greater sympathy for poststructuralist thinking than Roberts, begins by positing the notion that the perspectival approach to historical analysis supported by poststructuralism and the theory and practice of deconstruction has had the necessary and desirable effect of “pushing radical art history further away from the once normative belief in finding the correct, single answer to what was held to be the most important single question” [Harris, 2001: 24]. That is to say, he departs from the view sustained consistently by Roberts that there can be a single, totalizing form of historical consciousness, upholding in its place a ‘history’ of varying perspectives. However, despite this acceptance of poststructuralist ‘difference’, Harris does not declare himself an outright supporter of poststructuralist ‘relativism’. According to Harris, while poststructuralism has revealed the need for a history of what he terms ‘relative relativism’, it also brings with it the risk of a ‘radical relativism’ or, as he puts it, “the idea that *all* perspectives should be held to have equal weight, validity, and value”. Harris contends that “[s]uch relativism, if shorn of connections to social values and interests outside the Academy, arguably constitutes another form of academicism – an innocuous game-playing with ideas” [Harris, 2001: 24-25]. Consequently, he suggests, “[a]ll one does, and can possibly do, in this anarchic market of equivalently valuable perspectives...is simply compete to find your own ‘theoretical voice’, in an academic individualist world parallel to that of the ‘free market’ for commodities outside of the universities” [Harris, 2001: 25].

Here, Harris's objection to poststructuralism and the theory and practice of deconstruction can therefore be understood to coincide to some extent with that of Roberts in that both insist on the need to maintain a sense of hierarchy *and* difference with regard to the weight, validity or value placed on the interpretative outcomes of art historical research. Moreover, Harris's argument can also be understood to overlap with Roberts' in arguing that poststructuralism ultimately has the potential to sever works of art from a careful consideration of their relationship to society, thereby leaving them open to unrigorous, ethically neutral or depoliticized acts of interpretation. In contrast to Roberts, however, Harris clearly refuses a Marxian insistence on the capacity of art history to arrive at a unitary consciousness of historical events. Indeed, Harris also rejects an orthodox Marxist belief in the centrality of class relations as the underlying determinant of historical events, upholding in its place – as is also the case with regard to other 'poststructuralist' art historians such as Griselda Pollock – a more complex set of interactive relations between class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality [Harris, 2001: 24]. In the case of Harris we therefore have an objection to poststructuralism that does not emerge from a markedly oppositional stance of the sort taken up by Roberts in *Art Has No History!* and "The Labour of Subjectivity/The Subjectivity of Labour", but from one that seeks to openly assimilate 'necessary and desirable' aspects of its critical target while rejecting that target's politically undesirable potential for a loss of discrimination over matters of historical interpretation. In other words, Harris seeks to uphold difference when it comes to the writing of history, while maintaining a co-ordination of hierarchy and difference when it comes to questions of interpretative value.

For Harris, there is therefore a necessity to find some sort of *rapprochement* between a 'social' history of art and the 'insights' of poststructuralism. This, he suggests, can be achieved if we retain some sense of the "notion and value of truth". According to Harris, while we must in the light of poststructuralist thought dispense with the long-standing belief that truth is an unquestionable objective knowledge", we must nevertheless retain an understanding of truth "as an account of the world, and of artworks within it, that is based on certain assumptions ideas and values that can be stated, backed up with evidence as part of an argument, and that therefore remain subject to dispute" [Harris, 2001, p.25]. As Harris goes on to claim, "[t]ruth or knowledge in this sense" can be understood to have "a crucial *heuristic* aspect to it, which opens the claims made to potential revision through experience, argument, and reflection". Consequently, he suggests, "[s]uch a notion remains based on principles of value that can't themselves finally be 'proved' ...but which are still essentially rooted in ethical and social values,

that is, connected to a sense of their efficacy within the world – actual, and possible – inside and outside of the Academy” [Harris, 2001: 25 – our square brackets].

To summarise, then, we have here two critical models: one that seeks to uphold a structural relationship between a unitary historical consciousness and a subjective capacity (no matter how ostensibly fragmented) to act ethically and or politically on the basis of that consciousness; and another that seeks to uphold that same relationship but with an acceptance that there will always be more than one valid perspective on historical events. Consequently, while they differ in their views on the nature of historical consciousness, both can be understood to share a common belief. Namely, that an extreme form of poststructuralism/deconstruction ultimately blocks a meaningful, ethico/politically engaged furtherance of art historical discourse by refusing the existence of any sort of ‘truthful’ relationship between history writing and social context.

For others, however, deconstruction is not as inimical to the writing of a socially contextualised history as both Roberts and Harris would suggest. And it is to a consideration of these views that we now turn.

Chapter IV: Towards a Continuing Deconstructive Attention To Art Historical Discourse

In their joint essay ‘Semiotics and Art History: A Discussion of Context and Senders’, first published in *Art Bulletin*, 73:2 (1991) and reprinted in Preziosi’s anthology *The Art of Art History*, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson set out not only to examine how semiotics, as defined by the cumulative insights of structuralism and poststructuralism (and here it seems clear that we are meant to see a poststructuralist view of language as coextensive with Derridean deconstruction), “challenges some fundamental tenets and practices of art history”, but also to demonstrate how that same semiotics can be used to “further the analyses that art historians pursue” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 244]. According to Bal and Bryson, this proposed furtherance of art historical analysis can be justified in relation to a number of key points pertaining to poststructuralism’s unsettling of a conventional understanding of language. The first of these points is that a poststructuralist critique of language as a purveyor of stable meaning involves a shift away from the structuralist understanding of semiosis as a product of the “internal operations” of synchronic language systems, to one which sees meaning as something arising “from the

movement from one sign or signifier to the next, in a *perpetuum mobile* where there could be found neither a starting point for semiosis, nor a concluding moment in which semiosis terminated and the meanings of signs fully ‘arrived’” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 247]. In relation to which Bal and Bryson proceed to draw the conclusion that “poststructuralist semiotics argues that ‘context’ is in fact unable to arrest the fundamental mobility of semiosis for the reason that it harbors [sic] exactly the same principle of interminability itself” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 247 – our square brackets]. On the back of this insight Bal and Bryson then go on to argue that the distinction or “bar”, as they put it, between *art* as ‘text’ and *history* as ‘context’, which, they suggest, constitutes “the fundamental rhetorical move of self-construction in art history” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 250], can no longer be seen to support a straightforward causal relationship between the work of art and its setting, where historical ‘context’ is understood to be a stable and ultimately comprehensible set of surroundings that generates what may be viewed as otherwise semiotically unstable artistic ‘texts’. Instead, as Bal and Bryson would have it, both ‘context’ and ‘text’ are in a perpetual state of dynamic interaction in which each anticipates and generates the other through a circular action of *metalepsis* or chronological reversal wherein, as they put it, “elements of visual text migrate from text to context and back” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 250].

Further to all of this, Bal and Bryson then go on to argue that under the rubric of a poststructuralist semiotics the history of art is not just implicated in a perpetual interaction between artistic ‘text’ and historical ‘context’, but also, because of the iterability of the artwork as a ‘sign’, in an interaction between the artistic ‘text’ (or for that matter the art historical ‘text’) as a focus for study and the ‘context’ within which it is received [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 251]. The conclusion which Bal and Bryson then draw from this is that - contrary to opinions held elsewhere - a poststructuralist semiotics is “averse neither to the idea of history nor to the idea of historical determination” implicated in the dual referent of the term ‘context’ as “the context of the production of works of art and the context of their commentary” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 252]. Indeed, as they would have it, a poststructuralist semiotics argues both “that meanings are always determined in specific sites in a historical and material world” and that “[e]ven though factors of determination necessarily elude the logic of totality, ‘determination’ is recognized and indeed insisted upon” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 252, our square brackets]. Moreover, they argue that even in “recommending that the present context be included within the analysis of ‘context’” poststructuralist

semiotics “does not work to avoid the concept of historicity” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 252]. Rather, Bal and Bryson suggest, “its reservations concern forms of historiography that would present themselves in an exclusively aoristic or constative mode, eliding the determinations of historiography as a performative discourse active in the present” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 252]. To all of which Bal and Bryson then add the contention that “[t]he same historiographic scruple that requires us to draw a distinguishing line between ‘us’ and the historical ‘them’ – in order to see how they are different from us – should, in the semiotic view, by the same token urge us to see how ‘we’ are different from ‘them’ and to use ‘context’ not as a legislative idea but as a means that helps us locate ourselves instead of bracketing out our own personalities from the accounts we make” [Bal and Bryson in Preziosi ed. 1998: 252].

What Bal and Bryson seem to be suggesting here is that a deconstructive attention to art history could be interpreted not just as an attempt to unsettle the discipline at the level of its underlying conceptual order, but also as a practical means through which we might extend art historical discourse by subjecting our understanding of the artwork as ‘text’, seen in its relationship to differing historical ‘contexts’, to a persistent and rigorous semiological enquiry. One, which would challenge a conventional historiography by revealing to us an open-ended ‘history’ of endless multi-directional causalities, continual recontextualisations and constant remotivations, wherein meanings are not so much to be arrived at as ‘traced’ provisionally from the position of an ever changing, historicizing point of view. And, moreover, which would appear, as David Carrier indicates in the layout of his essay “Art History”, chapter ten of Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff’s anthology *Critical Terms for Art History*, to ‘place’ a deconstructive attention to art history in an indeterminate position somewhere between the polar opposites of an ‘aesthetic’ or ‘connoisseurial’ art history, where the artwork’s relationship to context is occluded by a close concentration upon the formal significance of the artwork alone, and a ‘structuralist’ or ‘social’ art history, where the artwork is understood only through a precise reading of its relationship to a wider set of historical circumstances [Carrier in Nelson and Schiff eds. 1996: 129-141].

A similar view of a deconstructive attention to art history can also be found in Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real*. Here, Foster sets out to pay what is ultimately a deconstructive attention to the practical and theoretical problems raised by the avant-garde art of the twentieth century. As Foster points out, the seminal text relating to the identification of the problems in question is Peter Bürger’s

Theory of the Avant-Garde. In this text, Bürger famously suggests that the critically virulent work of the “historical avant-garde” of the early twentieth century is negated by its repetition at the hands of the “neo-avant-garde” of the mid to late twentieth century and what Bürger sees as the consequent sublimation of art into *praxis*. As Foster, suggests this theorization of the relationship between the ‘historical’ and the ‘neo’ avant-gardes is dependent upon a somewhat Hegelian/Marxist view of history in which each new historical ‘unit’ accrues upon its established historical forbears, and in which the latter subsumes the former lifting it up into some greater synthetic whole (an action referred to by the Hegelian term, *Aufhebung*). For Foster, however, things are not so clear-cut. According to him, it is possible to identify two theoretical figures that can be used to undermine the cumulative, teleological vision of history underpinning Bürger’s theorisation of the avant-garde. The first of these is *parallax*, which, as Foster suggests, relates to an optical phenomenon “involving the apparent displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of its observer”. Here, Foster argues that this figure not only “underscores both that our framings of the past depend on our positions in the present and that these positions are defined through such framings”, but also “shifts the terms of these definitions away from a logic of avant-gardist transgression towards a model of deconstructive (dis)placement, which is far more appropriate to contemporary practices (where the turn from the interstitial “text” to institutional “frame” is pronounced)” [Foster, 1996: xii]. The second figure identified by Foster is *deferred action*, which, he suggests, can be derived from the Freudian notion that “an event is registered as traumatic only through a later event that recodes it retroactively, in deferred action”. Here, Foster argues that the “significance of avant-garde events is produced in an analogous way, through a complex relay of anticipation and reconstruction” [Foster, 1996: xii]. When taken together, Foster then goes on to argue, these figures “refashion the cliché not only of the neo-avant-garde as merely redundant of the historical avant-garde, but also of the postmodern as only belated in relation to the modern” [Foster, 1996: xii-xiii]. Here, then, Foster would have us depart from conventional views of history by thinking of historical events and their associated meanings not as things which, when they are understood to be over, accrue one upon the other to be read as a sedimentary narrative text, nor, indeed, as things whose static historical identity can simply be repeated, as Bürger would have it, to the point of their sublimation under new historical circumstances, but instead as ‘signs’ whose significance is open to the possibility of continual deconstructive remotivation in the face of changing circumstances. Put another way, Foster can be seen to apply to the workings of historical narration – despite, we would argue, the

somewhat unnecessary use of the stand-in terms *parallax* and *deferred action* – a deconstructive attention to language, with its figuring of meaning as something which arises not out of a direct correspondence between signifiers and signifieds, nor indeed a given set of differences between signs, but an unstable and indeterminate action of differing and deferring between signs (that is to say *différance*) across ever multiplying and mutating networks of signification. As such, Foster can therefore be seen to posit an understanding in which the art work is no longer to be thought of as a passive signifier of historical circumstance but as part of a more complex interaction between ‘text’ and ‘context’ in which the significance of historical events is constantly made, undone and then remade (that is to say ‘deconstructed’) through an unbounded interaction between the art work as text and a wider context of historical events.

If we accept the validity of both Bal and Bryson’s and Foster’s very similar lines of argument, it is therefore possible to think of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse not simply as an ethically and politically questionable dismantling of art history’s underlying conceptual order – a form of ‘destructionism’, if you will - but also as something which provides us with a glimpse of an alternative, though complicated and unstable, ‘modelling’ of the relationship between works of art and a wider history of events. In doing so Bal and Bryson and Foster, it could be argued, therefore provide us with an opening that might allow us to explore some sort of ethico/politically engaged line of thought beyond conventional notions of historical truth.

For certain ‘poststructuralist’ art historians, who have adopted a form of ‘close’ textual analysis akin to that developed by Derrida in his early writings on the development of the theory and practice of deconstruction - which, it could be argued, continues to place an emphasis on the undecideability of the artwork as ‘text’ at the expense of a wider deconstructive attention to the relationship between ‘text’ and ‘context’²⁹ - this appears to be an opening which has neither been recognized nor taken advantage of. Take here, for example, David Phillips essay “Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction”, published in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey’s *The Subjects of Art History*, where various writings by Derrida are called upon in order to support the somewhat formalistic point that photography – which Phillips seeks to represent through a largely decontextualised reading of certain works by William Henry Fox Talbot and Alfred Stieglitz –

²⁹ Terry Eagleton has identified this as a characteristic of Derrida’s early deconstructive practice in T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford U.K. and Cambridge U.S.A., 1983, p.148.

simultaneously upholds and unsettles a belief in its capacity to provide both a “literal representation of a palpable presence” [Phillips in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey eds. 1998: 155] and an “unmediated exteriorization of the interior self” [Phillips in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey eds. 1998: 168]. Take here also Green and Lowry’s aforementioned conference paper, “From Presence to the Performative: Conceptual Art and Photography”, where Derrida’s engagement with the linguistic theories put forward by the philosopher J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words* (1962) was used to support the equally formalistic contention that certain conceptual art photographs of the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies were deployed in an often knowingly performative rather than in a traditionally representational manner. Arguably, in both these cases we find an analysis that is largely divorced from a consideration of how the wider historical context related to artistic production and reception impacts on the possibilities of textual signification.

Another, perhaps less obvious case of this kind of ‘deconstructive’ closure on considerations of the relationship between ‘text’ and ‘context’ can be found, we would argue, in respect of more indirect, ‘poststructuralist’ applications of deconstructive thinking to the reading of works of visual art. Here, there has been a tendency, we would aver, to subsume the past all too readily under the rubric of a poststructuralist ‘present’, thereby effectively denying the past the sort of shifting historical ‘otherness’ assigned to it by Bal and Bryson’s reading of a deconstructive attention to art historical interpretation. Take here, for example, Michael-Anne Holly’s essay “Writing Leonardo Backwards” (1992), which is cited in Marcia Pointon’s *History of Art: A Student’s Handbook* (1997). Here, Holly writes:

My topic is not Leonardo as an artist but Leonardo as an allegory, as the fulcrum for thinking about historical consciousness in the late twentieth century. I will use a few of his images to problematize the connections between the narrative histories we fabricate about art and artists and the works these accounts talk about. This process involves putting texts together so that a story can unfold around and through them. I readily admit that it’s a kind of game, like being dealt a hand of cards, and in that sense has little to do with the canonically accepted notion of expertise. My ace-in-hand here is Leonardo, or at least a couple of his notebook pages and a couple of his paintings, but next to him I want to place Freud, Schapiro, Lacan, Derrida, some Egyptian hieroglyphics, some Albertian diagrams, and Gadamer. The analogy of a hand of cards is appropriate because of its lack of depth and suggestion of randomness. Picture the seven or so cards I hold as fanned out, and it will be difficult to think of them in terms other than as a spatial spread along a surface, undisturbed by what lies under or what came before. Although their face values may differ, it is their momentary relationship to each other that matters: the way each is empowered by the other through the creations of patterns that enable the game to go on. [Pointon ed. 1997: 99]

Clearly for Holly, in this instance at least, there would appear to be little need to think of any relationship between ‘text’ and ‘context’ beyond the set of associations which arise between those ‘texts’ which she arbitrarily holds up for our consideration. We are therefore presented with a position that would appear to abandon the possibility of a more searching attention to works of art viewed in relation to their wider historical setting(s).

This said, there are examples of art historical writing where the theory and practice of deconstruction would appear to have been deployed in a far more historically sensitive manner. Take, for example Griselda Pollock’s essay “The Gaze and The Look: *Women With Binoculars* – A Question of Difference”. Here Pollock begins by averring from a “poststructuralist perspective” that meaning arises not out of an ahistoric series of given differences, but “a complex [and] irreducible interplay between social and psychic formations” [Kendall and Pollock eds., 1992: 107, our square brackets]. In relation to which, she then goes on through a reading of certain paintings and drawings by Edgar Degas from the latter part of the nineteenth century and of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to assert that a painting by Mary Cassat of 1879/80, *Woman at the Opera*, subverts standard theorizations of *scopophilia* and the controlling male gaze – often deployed by feminist writers since Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay of the nineteen-seventies on Hollywood cinema, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” - in that its central figure, a woman gazing beyond the framing of the picture plane through binoculars, perhaps towards the unseen stage of the opera, can be understood to stand as part of a triad of looking in which we find her both as an *object* of the controlling male gaze and as a *subject* who takes pleasure not only in looking *and* in being looked at - something which Pollock avers is implicit within Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Baudelaire’s often related text, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) - but also in looking beyond what is envisaged for her within the social order depicted by Cassat’s painting.

Consider here also Fred Orton’s televised lecture for the Open University, *Flag* and the related essays contained in Orton’s book *Figuring Jasper Johns*, “Present, the Scene of My Selves, the Occasion of these Ruses” and “A Different Kind of Beginning”. Here, Orton employs a variety of key deconstructive ‘concepts’ to convey to his audience how Jasper Johns’ painting/collage *Flag* (1954-55) can be understood to unsettle not only any attempt to categorise it simply as either a collage or a painting, and as either a painted/collaged work of art, or as an actual North American flag, but also any sense in which a categorical or hierarchical distinction can be made between its undecideable function

as a work of ‘art’/‘flag’ and what Orton argues is its complex, and in some ways secretive, metonymic relationship to a wider series of events in North American Political and social history; events which include, *inter alia*, the American war of Independence, World War Two, the McCarthy hearings of the early nineteen-fifties and North America’s prevailing homophobia of the immediate post-war years.

Here, in both these cases – and arguably against the run of expectations – we find the theory and practice of deconstruction deployed in order to confirm rather than to deny a connection between works of art and their wider historical settings. Indeed, both would seem to invoke the kind of complex interactive movement between ‘text’ and ‘context’ outlined by Bal and Bryson in their reading of poststructuralist semiotics. However, what neither has been able to do, we would aver, is think explicitly in terms of the figures of *parallax* and *deferred action* articulated by Foster. Consider here, for example, the lack of any precise discussion in Orton’s work around the remotivational implications of his deconstructive critique for our temporally extended understanding of Johns’ work and that of the contextualising events to which it can be seen to relate; events which would appear to retain for Orton – who, as Jonathan Harris has pointed out has developed his writing in relation to an early commitment to the Social History of Art and ‘historical materialism’ [Harris, 2001: 203] - a certain background fixity as what might be called focal *points de caption* in what is otherwise figured as an open network of unstable metonymic relations. Consider here also the “Epilogue” from Pollock’s essay “The Gaze and The Look”:

The purpose of this paper has been to seek a way out of the relentless inscriptions of masculine desire in Western art and art history in order to invent ways to speak of, and from, a feminine place. Equally desiring knowledge, equally desiring certainties and secure objects for our scholarly gazes, we discover that the texts we have written ourselves, caught in the act of peering into history, longing to see clearly yet having to admit that we are formed by what we find already on the cultural screens of representation like art history. The representations we want to make as feminists are driven by our desire for that which seems outside current regimes of sense, ways of seeing art, doing art history, understanding the past.

It has taken years to unpick my formation as an art historian and the required identification with its masculine regimes so that I might begin to glimpse something of the depth and meaning of Mary Cassat’s passion for women. Her works can only have meaning for those who will share the socially and psychically specific spaces proposed for viewers, and recognise in their longing looks off screen both a psychic loss constituting desire and a powerful resistance to the social lack defined as bourgeois femininity. The force of her works can be acknowledged today because they find an echo of the current struggle of feminism to answer Freud’s famous question ‘What do women want?’ – ‘They want their own way’. [Pollock in Kendall and Pollock eds., 1992: 125-126]

In this passage there is an obvious resonance between Pollock’s wish to “invent ways to speak” of and from a place beyond “current regimes of sense” and a deconstructive attention to the existing

conceptual order inscribed in language. Here, then, Pollock can be understood to have aligned herself with a critical approach whose development is, for the most part, contemporaneous with her own as an art historian from the nineteen-seventies onwards. At the same time, by suggesting that the look depicted in Cassat's *Woman at the Opera* prefigures her own critical standpoint, Pollock can also be interpreted as having attributed deconstructive properties to a painting of the latter part of the nineteenth century when those properties would not have been recognised as such, and when there could therefore have been no conscious connection between artistic intentions and the pursuit of a deconstructive critique. It could be argued here, therefore, that Pollock has simply interpreted Cassat anachronistically, thereby collapsing the past into a feminist/poststructuralist 'present'.

It could also be argued, however, that it is precisely this sort of departure from conventional art historical sense that Pollock wishes to encourage through her 'post-structuralist' rereading of psychoanalytic theory. In this reading Pollock can be understood to make two significant assertions. Firstly, that the 'longing look' depicted in Cassat's *Woman at the Opera* is a product of the processes of social and psychic subject formation through which all woman go in the context of a patriarchal social order. And secondly, that these processes do not, when viewed from a poststructuralist perspective, give rise simply to the male-centred desiring gaze identified with the Freudian term *scopophilia*, but instead to the possibility of a form of looking in relation to which we might recognize, to use her words, "both a psychic loss constituting desire and a powerful resistance to the social lack defined as bourgeois femininity" [Pollock in Kendall and Pollock eds., 1992: 126]. Consequently, we are invited to see Pollock's writing and Cassat's painting as linked by a common formative process through which the feminine subject is inscribed not into a wholly stable masculine symbolic order, but instead one that is - always and already - open to the possibility of deconstructive remotivation. For Pollock there is, then, something interwoven with the seemingly ordered surface of the existing patriarchal order that has the potential to be invoked against it, and that 'something' is for her, as the passage quoted above suggests, to be identified very much with the notion of a separate 'way for women'.

From a deconstructive standpoint, such thinking could, of course, be criticised because in the end it subverts its own central argument by effectively insisting on the continuation of some sort of circumscribed 'female/male duality. However, a critical stance of this sort does not interest us here, since it arguably plays too easily and cheaply into the hands of Feminism's detractors. Instead, the

point we wish to make is one that might further support a feminist intervention upon the current regime of patriarchal 'sense'. While Pollock can be understood in "Women With Binoculars" to have invoked the persistence of deconstructive play beyond standard conceptions of historical development as a way of linking her own critical position to that of Cassat as part of a common cultural and subjective inheritance, she does not explore in any great detail the historical processes of development through which deconstructive play has come to be seen as such and what implications that seeing has had for the ways in which - to go back to an earlier point - we have constructed our understanding of the world and the ways in which we have acted in relation to that understanding. In other words, Pollock can be understood to have advanced her argument by emphasizing (in what is arguably a somewhat structuralist manner) the 'synchronic' dimension of social and psychic subject formation, rather than attempting a deconstructive coordination of the 'synchronic' and the 'diachronic' of the sort outlined by Foster in *The Return of the Real*. That is to say, while Pollock looks in her essay towards an examination of the interplay between social and psychic formations, in practice that examination would appear to sidestep any precise consideration of the historical distance travelled between the supposedly 'deconstructive' play of Cassat's work and that of her own. Consequently, the poststructural figuring of subject formation upon which her argument rests risks interpretation as a decontextualized, ahistorical constant.

Here, then, there would appear to be something of a slippage between the work of art historians influenced by the theory and practice of deconstruction and the readings of that same theory and practice put forward by Bal and Bryson and by Foster. Consequently, there is arguably scope for the development of a form of deconstructive attention to art historical discourse beyond those that have already taken place. And it is towards the development of such an attention that we now turn in parts two and three of this dissertation.

In doing so, however, it is not our intention simply to extend the repertoire of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse. Rather, we also wish to advance a performative response to those commentators who have raised objections of one sort or another to the continuation of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse, and in particular those, including Roberts, who would appear to have suggested that the theory and practice of deconstruction are straightforwardly antipathetic to the constructive progress of art historical discourse. As we have seen, objections to a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse can be understood to involve two fundamental lines of argument:

firstly, that the theory and practice of deconstruction undermine art history's conventionally understood potential to represent past events by problematizing not only the notion of a categorical aesthetic, but also any signifying relationship between the art work as 'text' and a wider 'context' of events; and secondly, that this undermining of art history's assumed powers of representation effectively negates the notions of 'truth' and 'reality' upon which any sort of ethical and/or political decision making might be based. In extending the work of Bal and Bryson and of Foster, we therefore intend to address these arguments by enacting a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse wherein the theory and practice of deconstruction are to be seen as inextricably bound up with the ways in which we construct our historical understanding of the world and how we might choose to act in relation to that understanding.

Here, in extending the work of Bal and Bryson and of Foster, we will mount two related demonstrations. In the case of the first, we will demonstrate a 'deconstructive genealogy' - similar in form to that suggested by Foster in *The Return of the Real* - of the transformations in the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse from Antiquity to the present day³⁰. In doing so, we hope to have enacted a number of key points concerning the relationship between deconstruction and how an understanding of art historical discourse has developed over time. Firstly, that the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse is inherently 'self-deconstructing'; that is to say, both made possible and rendered chronically unstable by the linguistic play of *différance* - or, as Foster puts it, the workings of *parallax* and *deferred action*. Secondly, that each new formation of the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse carries with it 'traces' not only of those that have preceded it, but also those that will come after it. In other words, we will attempt to show here the various transformations in the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse are linked to one another through a form of 'trace-structure' analogous to that which Derrida has attributed to the workings of language in his theorization of *différance*. Thirdly, that each new formation of the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse recontextualises and, therefore, remotivates the formations that came before it and the wider set of 'historical' contexts to which they relate. And fourthly, that the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse is, in being constituted 'historically' through the

³⁰ Here, we follow not only Bal and Bryson and Foster, but also the definitions given to the terms 'genealogy' and 'conceptual order' by McQuillan in his introduction to *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Namely, that "a genealogy is a kind of archaeology without limits" and a "conceptual order" is "a system of terms or concepts, which are all produced in the same way and are all related to and

play of *différance*, open to the possibility of continual transformation in the face of changing circumstances of ‘time’ and ‘place’. In mounting this demonstration we will therefore have attempted to show not only that deconstruction is intimately bound up with the way in which an understanding of art historical discourse has developed over time, but also the underlying conceptual order of art historical discourse has become remotivated in relation to a wider context of unfolding events and accompanying shifts in circumstance. Consequently, without wishing to normalize a deconstructive attention to art history unduly, it is also envisaged that this demonstration will have shown *différance* and, therefore, deconstructive ‘play’ not as recent and wholly aberrant entrants onto the scene of art historical discourse, but as factors which have always and already ‘constituted’, to use Derrida’s phrase, “the possibility of [its] conceptuality” [Derrida, 1982: 11 – our square brackets].

In the case of the second demonstration mounted here in part three of this dissertation, we will reprise the form of ‘deconstructive genealogy’ advanced in part two, this time using it to map two sets of discursive transformations. In the first instance we will show how in *Specters of Marx* Derrida attempts to remotivate the theorization of deconstruction advanced in his earlier essay “Différance” so that it can be deployed not just as a means of undermining the assumed capacity of language to close on meaning, but also as way of engaging with the ethical and/or political questions raised by adverse critiques of deconstruction. Here, as we shall see, Derrida redeploys his theorization of *différance* in much the same way as Foster uses *parallax* and *deferred action* in *The Return of the Real* to question notions of historical closure. In the case of *Specters of Marx*, however, the object of criticism is not how we might best interpret the historical standing of the avant-garde, but instead the ethical and/or political questions raised by the neo-Hegelian argument, put forward by Frances Fukuyama in his book *The End of History And The Last Man*, that after the fall of communism in the late nineteen-eighties and the resulting the triumph of liberal capitalism we have arrived at the logical end point of a purposeful history.

In the second instance, we will then attempt to show through the demonstration of a deconstructive genealogy linking the Duchampian readymade to a series of ‘history’ paintings by Anselm Kiefer via the life and work of Joseph Beuys how the critical application of collage-montage techniques by avant-garde artists working in what might be seen as a Duchampian tradition has become transformed in a manner analogous to that involved in the distance travelled between Derrida’s essay

dependent upon one another (the word ‘order’ also suggests a hierarchy within that system) See

Différance and the later publication *Specters of Marx*. In doing so, we also intend, therefore, to demonstrate that a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse made through the mounting of deconstructive genealogies has the potential not just to involve us in a ‘historical’ analysis of the relationship between the art work as ‘text’ and the wider ‘context’ of events to which it can be seen to relate, but also, despite all its invocations of undecideability, indeterminacy and uncertainty, that it cannot be divorced entirely from the workings of language as discourse. That is to say, as Terry Eagleton puts it in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, from language “as something we do, indissociably interwoven with our practical forms of life” [Eagleton, 1983: 147]. Consequently, there will have been an attempt here to demonstrate – to use Eagleton’s words - the potential of the theory and practice of deconstruction to engage us productively with “meanings, identities, intentions” and “historical continuities...as the effects of a wider and deeper history – of language, of the unconscious, of social institutions and practices” [Eagleton, 1983: 148], and, moreover, what part the theory and practice of deconstruction could play in a consideration of “what might *count* as deciding, determining, persuading, certainty, being truthful and the rest” and, moreover, of “ what beyond language itself is *involved* in such definitions” [Eagleton, 1983: 147].

Clearly, as we have already seen, some would see these two lines of thinking as fundamentally incompatible, since one would appear to point us away from the belief that we can arrive at a stable mapping of our relationship with the world over time, and the other towards the notion that we simply cannot ignore the pressing need to make practical decisions and to arrive at judgements in and about the world. It could, therefore, be argued that the only possible conclusion that might be drawn at the end of this dissertation is that one of these positions simply negates the other, or that some form of synthesis can be arrived at between the two - a line of thought arguably put forward by Harris. However, in aligning ourselves here, in so much as we can, with Derrida’s deconstructive vision it is assumed from the outset that a conclusion of this sort is insufficient, and that what is required instead is a working through of the implications of the somewhat contradictory standpoint outlined above. Implications which promise to be no less contradictory in tone, but which, it will be argued, may yet enable us to propose a possible future for a deconstructive attention to art history beyond the notion that it is simply antithetical to the constructive, ethico-politically committed practice of writing history in general and art history in particular.

Part II -

A Deconstructive Genealogy of Art Historical Discourse

And so I hope that my 'incapacity' – the scepticism that stands in for my capacity – may after all turn out to be an important 'modern' strategy for humankind. Even more than before, therefore, I can assume (and where possible proclaim) that the absurdity (and inhumanity) of all ideology is a given fact.

- Gerhard Richter³¹

As we have already indicated in part one of this dissertation, deconstruction can be understood to undermine a philosophically underwritten faith in the possibility of an absolute historical consciousness. It could be argued, however, that this understanding only arises when we view deconstruction from a 'historicizing' perspective. Here, one might posit the thought that deconstruction makes little 'sense' other than as something which points towards the end of an extended period during which philosophy has continued to vouchsafe the conceptual stability of language, and towards the beginning of a new one where some alternative form of signification will have emerged. Moreover, it could also be argued that a more complete understanding of deconstruction can only be arrived at if we examine the relationship between deconstructive theory and practice and the wider historical circumstances within which they have been developed and received. Indeed, Derrida himself has made the point in *Specters of Marx* that "one can understand nothing" of deconstruction's earliest period of development unless one takes into account its "entanglement" with the paradoxical events of early nineteen-fifties and sixties; a time when, as Derrida points out, there was a palpable tension between the institutionalised reading of those texts by writers such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Kojève (which formed what Derrida calls the "canon of the modern apocalypse") [Derrida, 1993: 15] and the increasingly conspicuous totalitarianism, bureaucracy, and socio-economic instability of the then 'Marxist' states of eastern Europe [Derrida, 1993: 15].

In attempting here in part two of this dissertation to grasp the impact of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse as comprehensively as possible, we therefore propose to proceed not just from a formal analysis of how deconstruction can be understood to undermine the underlying conceptual order of art history (a task which has, in any case, already been carried out) but on the basis

³¹ Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, Thames and Hudson and the Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London, 1995, p. 171.

of an extended narrative that seeks to ‘frame’ the formal implications of a deconstructive attention to art history in relation to a wider historical understanding of the development of art historical discourse. In doing so, however, it is not our intention simply to advance a representative history of art historical discourse; the writing of such a history would, as we have already seen, be thoroughly inconsistent with the theory and practice of deconstruction. Rather, it is our intention to utilise a deconstructive strategy similar to that described by Martin McQuillan in “Deconstruction is History”, section four of his introduction to *Deconstruction: A Reader*, where a genealogy of the transformations in the underlying conceptual order of a given discourse is mounted as a means of demonstrating the chronic inability of that discourse to establish stable categories of meaning. Here, then, we intend to uphold a ‘deconstructive’ genealogy both as a means of arriving at a fuller understanding of the discursive forces leading up to the emergence of a conscious deconstructive attention to art history and as a vehicle for the further development of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse.

Clearly, a genealogy of this sort could be seen as more or less congruent with the poststructuralist/Nietzschean view of ‘history’ put forward by Michel Foucault in works such as *Madness and Civilization* (1965). And, indeed, in a number of respects it is. Consider here in particular Foucault’s own framing of the history of conceptuality and its concomitant practices as one of constant transformations and discontinuities. However, a reading of the ‘poststructuralist’ genealogy as a relatively stable, history-friendly, ordering of discursive transformations, which art historians such as Eric Fernie would appear to have drawn from Foucault’s writing, is something we wish to challenge here [Fernie, 1995: 335]. Although we will develop this line of argument in greater detail in part two of this dissertation, our contention will be that there is, in a manner analogous to the play of *différance* revealed by Derrida with regard to language, a continual recontextualisation and remotivation of meaning across an unfolding network of historical ‘events’. Consequently, the notion that we can give a definitive genealogical mapping of discursive transformations is to be held in doubt. Furthermore, we will also submit that the widely accepted understanding of a Foucauldian genealogy of discursive transformations as something which proceeds morphologically on the basis of dualistic abstractions, where an abnormal term takes on differing identities over time in relation to a stable, normative other, must also be called into question. With regard to the ‘deconstructive’ genealogy outlined above, such thinking can be understood to stand in danger of overlooking the possibility of a continuing

undecideability of meaning, wherein any historical 'norm' would find itself constantly infected by the traces of its unstable, supplementary other(s).

It should be understood, therefore, that the following genealogical 'framing' of a deconstructive attention to art history is, though we hope rigorous, an entirely provisional one for which no final claim to authenticity is to be made. Indeed, it will have been put in place not only to provide us with an opportunity to develop an understanding of how a deconstructive attention to art history can be seen to relate to a wider history of the discipline, but also to develop an understanding how that relationship might come to be understood differently.

Chapter I: Art Historical Writing From Antiquity to the Mid-Fourteenth Century

The First period to be considered here encompasses the 'classical' writings of Cicero (106-44 BCE), Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) and Quintillian (30-100 CE), as well as those of the Byzantine period and the Middle Ages. As such, the art historical writings of this period can be characterised in at least two significant ways. Firstly, it should be noted that they are invariably part of larger texts that address a wider range of subjects. Consider here, for example, Cicero's discussion of the sculptural and painterly 'ideal', which takes place in his history of Roman oratory, the *Brutus* (46 BCE). Consider also, Pliny's writings on ancient Greek and Roman art, which are embedded within the thirty-seven volumes of his *Natural History* (77CE), a work principally devoted to an examination of the natural world. Consequently, they do not conform exactly to our current understanding of art history writing as an autonomous activity. Secondly, it is possible to divide up the art historical writings of this period according to two basic paradigms: one, in which there is an adherence to the notion of a structured development of the visual arts over time - a model put forward by Cicero and Quintillian, who, as Eric Fernie tells us in *Art History and its Methods*, both "describe a systematic development of four stages in painting and sculpture from the early fifth century BCE on, moving from a hard, rude, early style to one of perfection in the form of a naturalism which is restrained by ideal beauty...then to a refinement and a softness, and finally to a naturalism which is taken too far" [Fernie, 1995: 10]; and another, where there is an adherence to the notion of history as an 'enquiry' into the notable or spectacular - an approach exemplified by Pliny's writing about the visual arts, where attention is given to anything

judged worthy of mention, regardless of how it might fit into some wider developmental pattern or system.

In addition to this, it is also possible to view the bifurcated art historical writings of Antiquity in relation to a wider set of discursive differences that had developed at that time within ‘history’ writing as a whole. As Andrew Lintott points out in his essay “Roman Historians”, chapter twenty-six of *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (1986), during Antiquity ‘history’ writing can be understood to have been divided between three schools: the ‘antiquarian’ school, whose lineage can, as Oswyn Murray points out in his essay “Greek Historians”, chapter eight of *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, be traced back to the writings of Herodotus in the fifth century BCE and their promotion of a largely unsystematic enquiry into the notable or spectacular; the ‘tragic’ or ‘pathetic’ school, a Hellenistic variation on antiquarianism, “whose chief features were”, as Lintott explains, “pathos, sensationalism and the cult of the bizarre” [Lintott in Boardman, Griffin and Murray eds, 1986: 639]; and the ‘pragmatic’ school whose lineage, as Lintott also explains, can be traced back from the writings of Polybius of Megalopolis in the second century BCE to those of Thucydides in the fifth century BCE, and whose belief in a practical, critical, self-reflexive and explanatory approach to history writing – one that, as Lintott puts it, “explained the links of cause and motivation between events” and which “judged critically the behaviour of men under stress as examples for future conduct” [Lintott in Boardman, Griffin and Murray eds. 1986: 639] – is consistent with the systematic understanding of history we find in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian. Here, then, it is possible to see the art historical writings of Antiquity as conforming to one or other of two distinct traditions of thought rooted in a wider tradition of ‘history’ writing: one which sees history writing as a largely unsystematic ‘enquiry’ whose shape and sense of purpose derives, as Murray points out, largely from the rhetorical force with which writers such as Herodotus, working as *logos*-makers or ‘story’-tellers, are able to put across their vision of the world [Murray in Boardman, Griffin and Murray eds. 1986, p.191] - hence, the gravitation of some Hellenistic writers towards a concentration on rhetorical effect - and another which sees it as an essentially systematic enterprise where the writer concerned seeks to compile a coherent and explanatory representation of the world based upon an accumulation of verifiable evidence.

Further to all of this, it is also possible to see a correspondence between these differing approaches to history writing in Antiquity and a general distinction that was also made at the time

between ‘history’ and ‘biography’. As the chapter entitled “The Study of History” in volume twenty of the 1998 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* makes clear, in ancient Greece a distinction was made between history as an ‘enquiry’ into the world (*historia*) – which can be understood to derive from the argument of sixth century Ionian philosophers that “the universe is an intelligible whole and that through rational inquiries men might discover the general principles that govern it” [Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998, vol. 20: 559, our square brackets] - and ‘biography’, as a form of writing more closely aligned to the Homeric tradition of epic story-telling. Consequently, despite the confusion that sets in here around the shifting usage of the term ‘enquiry’, it is not only possible to identify ‘systematic’ and ‘unsystematic’ traditions in the historical writings of antiquity, but also to align those traditions respectively with the ancient literary notions of ‘history’ (*historia*) and ‘biography’.

However, despite the evident clarity of these distinctions and alignments, during Antiquity it is also possible to see systematic and unsystematic understandings of history combined within a single piece of writing. Consider here, for example, Herodotus’s seminal text *The Histories* (fifth century BCE), in which an “enquiry” is made into the circumstances surrounding the war between the Greek city-states and the Persian Empire in the early fifth century BCE. Here, on the one hand, as John Marincola points out in his introduction to *The Histories*, Herodotus can be seen to distinguish “his work at the outset from epic poetry, where gods and humans both are characters and act in concert with each other” [Marincola in Herodotus, Marincola ed. 1996: xiii] when he states in the opening sentence to “Book One” that he, “Herodotus of Halicarnassus, here displays his inquiry so that human achievements may not be forgotten in time” [Herodotus, Marincola ed. 1996: 3]. On the other hand however, as Marincola also points out, it is also possible to see Herodotus looking back to Homer as an example of how the rhetorical figures of poetic “variety” and “movement” might be used to give shape to the essentially linear, unsystematic structure which underpins his narrative of an advancing, monolithic Persian army and its conflict with the loosely allied forces of Greece. It could, therefore, be argued that *The Histories* is not simply a work in the ‘antiquarian tradition’, as Murray would seem to suggest, but a hybrid of the ‘antiquarian’ and the ‘pragmatic’ traditions. Indeed, this is something which arguably comes more sharply into focus when one considers the history of the Great Peloponnesian War written by Thucydides in the late fifth century BCE, where, as Murray points out in his essay “Greek Historians”, a devastating critique is offered up of Herodotus’s conspicuously unsystematic approach to the gathering together of evidence in *The Histories* and his reliance in that

work upon the obscure and supposedly inevitable relationship between *hybris* and *nemesis* as a device to explain the course of historical events [Murray in Boardman, Griffin and Murray eds. 1986: 193-197]. Further to which, one might also consider the writings of the later Roman historian Polybius which, although they are usually seen to stand in the ‘systematic’, ‘explanatory’ tradition of Thucydides - where, as Andrew Lintott points out in his essay “Roman Historians”, there is a clear refusal “to attribute to chance what can be rationally explained” [Lintott in Boardman, Griffin and Murray eds. 1986: 640] – can also be understood to share with Hellenistic and Classical historians a fascination, as Lintott tells us, “with the paradoxes of fortune (*tychē*), that is to say rapid changes in human circumstances, whose particular components can be rationally explained, but whose cumulative effect is unpredictable and awe-inspiring” [Lintott in Boardman, griffin and Murray eds. 1986: 640].

On the strength of this textual evidence, it might therefore be argued that, while they may appear to be entirely distinct and while one may be upheld in a dominant position over the other in any given work, ‘systematic’ and ‘unsystematic’ approaches to the writing of history in Greco-Roman Antiquity can also be seen to have been interwoven at times in such a way that any sharp distinction between the two is lost. Consequently, if we return to the specific question of art historical writing in Antiquity, deeply embedded as it is within a more general tradition of history writing during that period, there would appear to be a clear pointer towards a lack of distinction between ‘systematic’ and ‘unsystematic’ approaches to history there also. Indeed, on close inspection of the apparently ‘unsystematic’ art historical writings of Pliny in the *Natural History*, we find contained within in its ostensibly unsystematic biographical format a clear hierarchical distinction between certain artists, such as Apelles, who are pushed to the fore and other, supposedly less important practitioners, who figure as thematic counterpoints³². Further evidence, we would submit, of a widespread blurring of boundaries in Antiquity between the otherwise clearly defined domains of ‘history’ and ‘biography’.

After the first century CE there is no clear evidence (available to the present writer, at least) of any major innovation in art history writing up until the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the publication of key texts by Lorenzo Ghiberti and Giorgio Vasari. Up until that point, approaches to art history writing appear to have remained essentially consistent with those described above. The only discernible difference between the art historical writings of Antiquity and those of later years is their

³² See, the extract from Pliny’s *Natural History* cited in Steve Edwards ed. *Art and its Histories: A Reader*, Yale University Press in association with the Open University, New Haven and London, 1999, pp.97-100.

repositioning within an increasingly static, self-justifying tradition of Christian history writing, where all significant events are seen as part of a teleological progress towards final judgement and possible redemption. Consequently, at this time there would seem to be an implicit subordination of the unsystematic, biographical tradition of ancient Greco-Roman history writing to a more rigidly structured, Christian understanding of history. As we shall see, this subordination of an unsystematic understanding of history to a systematic one was to become a key feature of art history writing at least up until the end of the eighteenth century. And it is towards a consideration of that period that we now turn.

Chapter II: Art History From the Early Fifteenth Century to the Late Eighteenth Century

The second period we wish to consider here extends from the early fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century to encompass the work of the art historians Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378-1455), Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), Karel van Mander (1548-1606), Giovanni Bellori (1615-96) and Johann Joachim Wincklemann (1717-68). As Eric Fernie points out in his introduction to *Art History and its Methods*, writing on the history of art during this period differs from that of the preceding period in three significant ways: firstly, because it emerges as a discrete activity distinct from other forms of history writing; secondly, because its emergence as a discrete activity can be seen to initiate a continuous tradition of specialist art history writing which did not exist prior to the fifteenth century, and which extends without a break up to the present day; and thirdly, because it promotes for the first time as paradigmatic a cyclical modelling of historical events - usually understood to derive from the fourteenth century writer Petrarch's notion of a 'cycle of ages' - in which the 'classical' art of Greco-Roman antiquity and of Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is understood to form the twin peaks of humanity's artistic achievement standing at either end of an intervening period of decline [Fernie, 1995: 10].

As Fernie also points out, these changes were initially brought about through the writings of Ghiberti and Vasari, both of whom present texts - in the case of Ghiberti, the *Commentaries* (c.1450), and in the case of Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters' Sculptors' and Architects'* (first published in 1550, and then again in a revised and expanded edition in 1568) - which not only make

the visual arts the principal subject of a written history for the first time, but which also introduce the ground-breaking notion (in the context of art history, at least) that a 'systematic', cyclical modelling of historical events, of the sort described above, can be brought together with a 'unsystematic', linear narrative history, made up of a loosely connected series of artists' biographies, to give the latter an underlying shape and sense of purpose [Ferne, 1995: 10]. As Fernie goes on to point out, this latter bringing together then becomes established as something of a disciplinary norm to which other art historians during the period in question feel they must respond, elaborating upon it and adapting it, as we shall see later on in this chapter, to accommodate shifts in ideological investment relating to changing circumstances of time and place.

To summarise, then, the newly independent art history of the early fifteenth century to the late eighteenth century could be characterised in broad terms as a sustained attempt to bring an 'unsystematic' approach to the writing of history under the controlling aegis of a 'systematic' one. Indeed, this has in many ways become the standard view of art history during the period in question. However, despite the pivotal role which a 'systematic', and abstract, cyclical modelling of historical events undoubtedly plays in the art historical writings of the early fifteenth century to the late eighteenth century, it is equally important to note, as Fernie also points out in the introduction to *Art History and its Methods*, the impact which the Renaissance ideology of humanism had on art historical thinking at this time, and the resulting stress which the likes of Ghiberti, Vasari, van Mander and Bellori placed upon the significance of individual human achievements as a measure of historical development through the predominantly biographical content of their writings [Ferne, 1995: 10]. Consequently, we must be careful not to rush into a characterization of the art historical writing of the period under consideration here that sees it simply in terms of its broad, 'systematic' modelling of events. Rather, it should be viewed, as we will attempt to demonstrate here, as an extension, and further problematic weaving together, of the 'systematic' and 'unsystematic' approaches to the writing of history we find in Antiquity. To pursue this line of argument further, we will now turn to a more detailed reading of Vasari's *The Lives*.

Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives Of The Most Eminent Painters', Sculptors' and Architects'* - a text widely recognised as the first extended, self-contained and intellectually consistent history of the visual arts and architecture in Western Europe - is made up of three distinct, though conceptually overlapping

elements. Firstly, a main preface which advances a broad, schematic history of the visual arts and architecture stretching from “before the Flood” through to the work of the painter Cimabue in the thirteenth century; secondly, a number of subsidiary prefaces which advance Vasari’s views on, amongst other things, chronology, historical narration and aesthetics; and thirdly, an extended series of biographies, beginning with those of Cimabue and Giotto and culminating (in the first edition of *The Lives* at least) with that of Michelangelo Buonarrotti, which describe the lives and works of some the most notable artists of the Italian Renaissance.

As anyone familiar with Vasari’s text knows, it is possible to engage with these three elements separately, reading and making sense of each without making reference to the others. Indeed, in many ways, the tripartite structure of *The Lives* – especially when one is faced with the seemingly endless series of biographies contained in the revised second edition – would appear to lend itself to selective, rather than to sustained, reading. Furthermore, popular (and not so popular) editions and translations of *The Lives* have arguably been able to retain the overall coherence of Vasari’s original historical vision while omitting parts of the original text(s) considered as being of little interest to the modern reader. In short, *The Lives* is able to signify successfully not just as a textual whole, but also as a set of textual fragments (an aspect of *The Lives* which we will consider in more detail later on in this chapter).

However, despite this potential for fragmentary signification, it is nevertheless clear that Vasari intended the various elements of *The Lives* to be considered as a coherent literary whole in which the views put forward in the various prefaces would work to uphold the historical standing of those individuals whose stories are included in the series of artists’ biographies. Consider here, for example, the following relationship. Take, on the one hand, the view advanced by Vasari in the main preface to *The Lives* that the classical painting, sculpture and architecture of Greco-Roman Antiquity and of Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stands as humanity’s greatest achievement in the field of the visual arts and architecture on either side of an intervening period of ruinous artistic decline - a period which is seen to extend from the fall of Rome during the reign of the emperor Constantine in the early part of the fourth century CE to a perceived revival in Italy’s cultural fortunes during the middle part of the thirteenth century, and whose nadir is marked by a supposedly ‘barbaric’ style which Vasari calls “German” and which we would now see as broadly synonymous with ‘Gothic’. Take, on the other, the biographical content of *The Lives* which focuses almost exclusively on the lives of fifteenth and sixteenth century Italian (Tuscan) painters, sculptors and architects working in a classical

manner, and which can be understood to map a progressive improvement in artistic quality from the time of Cimabue to that of Michelangelo Buonarroti (although artists such as Cimabue and Giotto, who feature early on in the series of biographies contained in *The Lives*, cannot be labelled convincingly as classicists, they are clearly included by Vasari as indispensable contributors to the full revival of Italianate Classicism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). When we look at these two things together, it not only becomes clear that the ostensibly linear series of biographies contained in *The Lives* is intended by Vasari to be read as the latter rising section of the historical cycle described in the main preface, but also that both of these structures – one conforming to the shape of a qualitative cycle and the other to that of a linear, though no less hierarchical, series – incorporate perceived differences, value judgements and associations that either coincide with, or mutually support one another.

Consider here, also, the relationship between the metaphorical shape of Vasari's 'systematic', cyclical modelling of events – with its echoes of developmental cycles found in nature – and the ostensibly 'unsystematic' series of biographies contained in *The Lives*. In the case of this relationship, the apparently 'natural' shape of the former can be understood – especially in the light of contemporary art history's increasing self-reflexivity³³ - to bestow a certain sense of inevitability on the latter. Moreover, the apparently 'natural' shape of Vasari's cyclical modelling of events can be understood to underwrite the fundamental connection that Vasari's seeks to make between the classical art of Antiquity and the classical art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries throughout *The Lives* as a whole.

Further to this, one might also note the connection that Vasari makes in the main preface to *The Lives* between a decline in the quality of classical art and architecture during late Antiquity and events leading up to the dissolution of the Roman Empire. Here, he writes:

[B]y the time of Constantine sculpture had already fallen into decline, together with other fine arts. And if anything were needed to complete their ruin it was provided decisively when Constantine left Rome to establish the capital of the Empire at Byzantium. For he took with him to Greece not only all the finest sculptors and other artists, such as they were at the time, but also countless statues and other extremely beautiful works of sculpture.

After Constantine had departed, the Caesars whom he left in Italy continually commissioned new buildings, both in Rome and elsewhere. They endeavoured to have the work done as well as possible; but we can see that sculpture, painting and architecture went inexorably from bad to worse. And the most convincing explanation for this is that once human affairs start to deteriorate improvement is impossible until the nadir has been reached. [Vasari in Bull trans., 1987: 34, our square brackets]

³³ See, the section entitled "History" in the "Glossary of Concepts" included in Eric Fernie Ed. *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, Phaidon, London, 1995, p.343, where the implications of metaphor with regard to the shaping of historical narrative are discussed.

In this passage, Vasari can be understood to make a clear connection between the ‘fortunes’ of classical art and architecture in Italy during the fourth century CE and surrounding events. It should be noted, however, that Vasari does not present this link as explanatory in and of itself. Rather, in the final sentence of the passage cited above, he connects the fates of both art and culture explicitly to the inexorable workings of some grand, underlying teleological order. One, which would seem to follow a pattern similar to that associated with the Greek concept of *tychē* (as personified in ancient Roman mythology by the goddess *Fortuna*³⁴), or the concepts of *hybris* and *nemesis*, or indeed the related mediaeval concept of *fortune*. In other words, Vasari would have us see the history of classical art and culture as joined, not because of some direct causal link between the two, but because they both conform to a transcendently given pattern of attainment and decline in “human affairs”. If we consider this aspect of the main preface in relation to the ostensibly ‘unsystematic’, biographical content of *The Lives* – when viewed as a fragment of the wider cyclical model of history advanced by Vasari in the main preface – then the former can again be seen to bestow a certain sense of inevitability on the latter. Furthermore, this sense of inevitability can be understood, as before, to underwrite Vasari’s vision of a historical connection between the classical art of Antiquity and that of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In addition to all of this, one might also consider the link that Vasari makes in the main preface to *The Lives* between artistic practice in the classical manner and divine creativity. According to Vasari, “design”, which he regards as the “animating principle of all creative processes”, is to be considered as having reached a peak of attainment both through the classical art and architecture of Greco-Roman antiquity and that of fourteenth and fifteenth century Italy. Moreover, argues Vasari, “design” existed “in absolute perfection before the Creation” embodied by the “Divine architect of time and nature” who “being wholly perfect, wanted to show how to create by a process of removing from and adding to material that was imperfect in the same way that good sculptors and painters do when, by adding and taking away, they bring their rough models and sketches to the final perfection for which they are striving” [Vasari in Bull trans. 1987: 25]. Here, then, Vasari would have us think of artistic practice in the classical manner as nothing short of divinely inspired. Indeed, he can be understood to

³⁴ See Clara Erskine Clement, *Legendary and Mythological Art*, Bracken Books, London, 1994, p.446. Originally published as *A Handbook of Legendary and Mythological Art*, Hurd and Houghton, New York, 1876.

have erected a somewhat Manichean structural opposition between classical and non-classical artistic practice which places the former squarely on the side of God and of goodness and, by implication, the latter on the side the Devil and of evil. Consequently, we – as the surrogates of Vasari’s original Christian readership - are again pressed to see the biographical content of *The Lives* as something of a given. Furthermore, we are provided with yet another transcendental mechanism linking the past with the present.

As such, this structural alignment between classical art and divine creativity can also be seen to extend to the aesthetic arguments put forward by Vasari in the subsidiary prefaces to parts two and three of *The Lives*. Here, Vasari reinforces the link he makes between classicism and divinity by advancing two related points: firstly, that the imitation of nature is a requisite of true, classical art; and secondly, that this imitation is a necessary adherence on the part of the classical artist to the example of ‘good’ design set by God through his seminal act of universal creation. However, in doing so Vasari makes the point that he does not see ‘good’ classical art as the mere imitation of appearances. Rather, he adopts the arguably neo-Platonic view, first put forward by Leon Battista Alberti in *Della Pittura libri tres* (1436) and *De Re Aedificatoria* (1450-72), that artists should work selectively, drawing upon the best aspects of nature in order to build up the image of a divinely inspired ideal lying behind the evident inconsistencies and imperfections of the visible world³⁵. In this way, Vasari is then able to reinforce still further the sense of inevitability he clearly wishes to bestow upon his cyclical modelling of historical events and the connection which that modelling makes between the classical art of Antiquity and that of Vasari’s own time by appealing, yet again, to the somewhat obscure workings of a transcendental authority.

In turn, these aesthetic arguments can themselves be seen to support another line of argument, put forward by Vasari in the main preface to *The Lives*, which also attempts to span the gap between the classical tradition in Antiquity and its supposed revival in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Here, Vasari argues that the ruins left behind in Italy after the fall of ancient Rome provided Italian artists of the middle part of the thirteenth century onwards - whom he suggests were “helped by some subtle influence in the very air of Italy” [Vasari in Bull trans. 1987: 45] (a suggestion which resonates

³⁵ See Anthony Blunt, *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1600*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1988, p.20.

yet again, perhaps, with echoes of the ancient notion of *tychē*) - with an index through which they could find their way back to the values and accomplishments of antique classicism. He writes:

The new generations started to purge their minds of the grossness of the past so successfully that in 1250 heaven took pity on the talented men who were being born in Tuscany and led them back to the pristine forms. Before then during the years after Rome was sacked and devastated and swept by fire, men had been able to see the remains of arches and colossi, statues, pillars and carved columns; but until the period we are discussing they had no idea how to use or profit from this fine work. However, the artists who came later, being perfectly able to distinguish between what was good and what was bad, abandoned the old ways of doing things and started once again to imitate the works of Antiquity as skilfully and carefully as they could. [Vasari, Bull trans. 1987: 45]

In this passage, Vasari clearly argues that the true significance of the ruins of classical Antiquity, which he contends had remained wholly obscure to previous generations, was suddenly and miraculously revealed to the Tuscan artists of the mid-thirteenth-century because they had undergone a heaven-sent, almost Damascene, conversion of their sensibilities. Vasari can therefore be understood to have supported the structural integrity of *The Lives* at this crucial, and potentially weak, point in the architecture of his argument, once more through an appeal to the ruling actions of a transcendental authority or *Deus ex machina*.

Here, then, from a contemporary perspective, it is possible to view *The Lives* as a somewhat flawed 'architectural' masterpiece. On the one hand, Vasari can be understood to have erected an elaborate, highly rational, interlocking, narrative structure - the literary equivalent of an architectural work in the classical style, if you will, and one arguably reminiscent of Vasari's work as an architect on buildings such as the courtyard to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence - through which an extended, 'unsystematic' series of biographical writings might be brought sharply into line with a 'systematic' modelling of events. On the other hand, it is also clear that crucial structural elements of this piece of 'classical' literary architecture are simply inconsistent with Vasari's fundamentally rationalist vision of history. That is to say, those points in *The Lives* where Vasari seeks to hold his narrative structure together through irrational (and, arguably, somewhat mediaevalist/antiquarian) appeals to the obscure, workings of a transcendental authority. Think here, most crucially perhaps, of the potential discontinuity that Vasari's cyclical modelling of events opens up between the classical art of the past and that of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which clearly threatens, if it is not bridged convincingly, to bring the structure of Vasari's historical vision crashing to the ground, and which Vasari seeks to span by calling variously upon the obscure offices of 'nature', 'fortune' and 'divine

creativity'. To which one might add the observation that Vasari's promotion of a hierarchical opposition between a privileged, divinely inspired, classical, Italianate order and a subordinated non/anti-classical, evil, 'German' disorder in *The Lives* can be read as an attempt to confer legitimacy onto what we would now see as an unjustifiably partisan assessment of Italian – or, more accurately, given the regional bias of the biographies contained in *The Lives*, Tuscan – art and architecture as the dominant cultural force in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Crucially here Vasari can be understood to have been informed by an underlying self-interestedness, made evident both by his stated desire in *The Lives* to see the artists of his own time elevated from their then impoverished positions within Italian society as lower class 'artisans' [Vasari in Bull trans. 1987: 254]³⁶ and by the favourable position which Vasari gives to his own work as a painter and architect within the historical schema presented in *The Lives*. Here, then, from a contemporary point of view it is possible to see the elaborate conceptual structure put forward by Vasari in *The Lives* as an unstable one which is not only held together by a number of opaque, metaphysical concepts, but which is also put forward in order to advance Vasari's own standing in the world.

These structural weaknesses - which are, as we shall see in more detail below, the central focus of a standard post-Enlightenment critique of Vasari's position – are, however not the only ones which can now be seen to threaten the stability of the historical model advanced by Vasari in *The Lives*. It could also be argued that, in addition to the architectural 'flaws' outlined above, Vasari's 'systematic', cyclical modelling of history is also made unstable because it ultimately fails to subsume or control the 'unsystematic' modelling of history implicated in the series of biographies contained in *The Lives*. As Oswyn Murray points out in his essay "Greek Historians", it is possible to see our modern tradition of history writing in relation to two much older models. On the one hand, that found in the "Old Testament" of *The Bible*, in which the fortunes of the Jewish nation are seen to vary in line with the willingness or otherwise of its people to obey the word of God. And, on the other, the model found in the writings of ancient Greece, perhaps most notably in Herodotus's *The Histories*, in which the independence of the Greek city-states from Persian authority is understood to have been maintained

³⁶ In this regard, Vasari can be understood to follow the example set by Ghiberti, who through his art historical writings, argues Steve Edwards in *Art and its Histories*, attempts to place himself "in an analogous position with poets, theologians, or philosophers, whose careers were thought worthy of record like other great men whose lives had been celebrated in Antiquity by Plutarch, and in the fourteenth century by scholars like Filippo Villani". See Edwards ed. 1999, p. 100.

ultimately not through obscure acts of divine intervention - as had been the case in the preceding Homeric tradition of story-telling - but through decisive human action. Here, Murray writes:

The Greek tradition of history writing is our tradition, and we can best see its peculiarities by comparing it with that other tradition which has so strongly influenced us, the Jewish historical writings preserved in the Old Testament. Greeks and Jews came to history independently, but at roughly the same time and in response to the same pressures, the need to establish and sustain a national identity in the face of the vast empires of the Middle East: Just as the struggles with Assyria, the exile in Babylon, and the return to the promised land created Jewish historical writing, so the sense of national identity resulting from the defeat of Persia created Greek historical writing. But the presuppositions and the materials with which the two historical traditions worked are very different. For the Jews history was the record of God's covenant with his chosen people, its successes and disasters conditioned by their willingness to obey His commands. History was, therefore, a single story, belonging to God: the different elements and authors are moulded (not always successfully) into a continuous account. Greek history, whilst it could recognize a moral pattern in human affairs regarded these affairs as in the control of man: history was the record, not of the mercy or wrath of God, but of the great deeds of men...The Greeks indeed taught the west how to create and write a history without God. [Murray in Boardman, Griffin and Murray eds. 1995: 186]

If we follow this line of thinking, it could therefore be argued that the cyclical modelling of history advanced by Vasari in the main preface to *The Lives* – where artistic events are seen to alternate between success and disaster - stands squarely in a Judaeo-Christian tradition of history writing. Indeed, a Judaeo-Christian history's privileging of an adherence to God's law would appear to be underwritten by two of the aesthetic arguments advanced by Vasari in *The Lives*: firstly, that the making of classical art is analogous to the seminal act of divine creativity; and secondly, that the artist working in the classical style should look beyond the apparent imperfections of the natural world towards a purely intelligible, God-given ideal lying behind appearances. Furthermore, it is possible to discern links between the conceptual order underpinning the historical narrative contained in the "Old Testament" of *The Bible* and Vasari's somewhat Manichean association of the Italianate classical style with goodness and light and the 'German' with evil and darkness³⁷. Right at the opening of the book of "Genesis" we find the following, often quoted, lines:

1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
 2 And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.
 And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
 3 And God said, let there be light: and there was light.
 4 And God saw the light and it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
 5 And God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. [King James Version, 1611: 1]

³⁷ As Evelyn Welch points out in *Art and Society in Italy: 1350-1500* (1997), this association is usually understood to derive from "Boccaccio's notion of Giotto's 'return of art to the light' (the origin of the notion of a Medieval 'dark ages')". See Welch, 1997, p.129.

Here, not only do we find a ‘spatial’ differentiation of heaven from earth, but also a further temporal division of ‘good’ light from ‘evil’ darkness in the form of “Day” and “Night”. As a result, God’s seminal act of creation is associated from the outset of the Biblical narrative not only with the making of the Earth, but also with the inauguration of a spatio-temporal order within which subsequent earthly events might be seen to unfold. By repeating the conceptual opposition of ‘good’ light and ‘evil’ darkness that underlies the inception of “Old Testament” historical narrative through his historical characterisation of classical and ‘German’ art, Vasari can therefore be seen to share with “Old Testament” history writing a common understanding of the conditions under which historical events occur. Conditions that not only open up the dimensions of space and time within which historical events take place, but which also confer moral value on those events depending on whether they adhere to, or depart from, the legislative word of God; that is to say, whether they stand on the side of ‘good’ light or ‘evil’ darkness.

In addition to this link between Vasari’s cyclical modelling of history in *The Lives* and the underlying structure of “Old Testament” narrative, it could also be argued with regard to Murray’s observations on the nature of Greek and Jewish history that there is also a similar connection between the biographical content of *The Lives* - which, as Eric Fernie points out in the introduction to *Art History and its Methods*, can be seen to place human actions rather than God-given law at the centre of attempts to understand the world [Fernie, 1995: 10-12] - and a Greek model of history writing. Indeed, if we make a direct comparison between the biographical content of *The Lives* and the historical model put forward in *The Histories* by Herodotus - which, as the first written-down, prose history of Greek Antiquity, can be understood to initiate the ‘Greek’ tradition of history writing referred to by Murray - we can see that this is very much the case. Consider here, first of all, *The Histories* by Herodotus. As such, this seminal literary work can be understood to incorporate two significant components. On the one hand, an ‘enquiry’ - the Greek word *historia* connoting a more general cross-disciplinary enquiry or investigation than our modern term ‘history’ would suggest - into the events surrounding the conflict during the fifth-century BCE between what are perceived as a loosely associated group of Greek city-states and a monolithic army of ‘barbarian’ (that is to say, non-Greek speaking and, therefore, ‘babbling’) Persians which, as Herodotus tells us at the beginning of “Book One” of *The Histories*, has been displayed “ so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great marvellous deeds - some displayed by Greeks some by barbarians - may not be without their glory” [Herodotus,

Marincola ed. De Sélincourt trans. 1996: 3]. And on the other, a detailed inventory of differing cultural practices, notable artistic and architectural achievements, diverse ethnic groupings and outstanding examples of the natural world as a background to the events of the Greco-Persian wars. What *The Histories* does not promote, however - as we have already seen in our consideration of the art historical writings of Antiquity - is a sharply drawn set of value judgements that would give a systematic shape to the events it describes. Rather, in relaying a narrative of the events of the Greco-Persian wars of the fifth century BCE, Herodotus can be seen to do so for the most part without undue prejudice, allowing the actions of individuals, regardless of their nationality, to be considered as significant in their own right and not as functions of some wider transcendental scheme. This is perhaps at its most evident in Herodotus's descriptions of the battles between Greeks and Persians, where a narration of individual acts of heroism can be seen to take precedence over any detailed description of tactical or strategic organisation on the part of either side. Consequently, *The Histories* can be understood to uphold - as Murray's observations about Greek history suggest - a vision in which the significance of freely chosen human actions has the upper hand over any sort of pre-ordained, transcendental ordering of events.

Now consider the biographical content of Vasari's *The Lives*. As Evelyn Welch points out in *Art and Society in Italy 1350-1500* (1997), the biographical content of *The Lives* can, when read in isolation from the main and subsidiary prefaces, be understood (in the first edition, at least) to be a three-stage, linear narrative free of the sharp peaks and troughs which characterise the cyclical modelling of history usually associated with Vasari: with stage one representing the lives and works of "Giotto and his trecento contemporaries"; stage two, those of "fifteenth-century artists who strove but failed to perfect [Giotto's] vision"; and stage three, the life and work of the "pinnacle of perfection Michelangelo Buonarroti" [Welch, 1997: 129]. In addition to which, it is possible to read the biographies contained in *The Lives* separately and in any order without any significant loss of individual meaning, or any sense that they are linked together elsewhere in *The Lives* by an underlying, cyclical narrative structure (in any case, they are not arranged in what we would now regard as a strict chronological sequence). Furthermore, the biographical content of *The Lives* can be understood, when read in isolation, to concentrate on individual human actions rather than on the transcendental patterning of events described in the prefaces accompanying it. Consequently, if we compare the underlying narrative structure of *The Histories* with that of the biographical content of *The Lives*, it could be argued that

both present a largely unsystematic and human-centred modelling of history at odds with the cyclical, 'Judaeo-Christian' narrative order presented in the main preface to *The Lives*.

It could ultimately be argued, therefore, that *The Lives* as a whole contains not one, but two historical models: a principal, valorised one advanced largely in the main preface, which has an affinity with the systematic cyclical modelling of history found in the "Old Testament" of *The Bible*; and a supplementary, subordinated one relating to the biographical content of *The Lives*, which echoes the unsystematic, linear modelling of history found in Herodotus's *The Histories*. If we understand this to be the case, then it could also be argued, as previously suggested, that *The Lives*, rather than being simply an attempt to uphold as true a systematic Judaeo-Christian vision of history, is in fact an attempt to bring an unsystematic Greek vision of history under the aegis of a systematic Judaeo-Christian one. Indeed, this argument would seem to resonate with a standard academic understanding that from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century Italy was the principal site of a rationalist-humanist attempt to revive the achievements of a largely pagan classical Antiquity within the context of a European culture dominated by the teachings and doctrines of the Christian church; an attempt which, as Irving Lavin points out in "Donatello's Bronze Pulpits in San Lorenzo and the Early Christian Revival", chapter one of *Past-Present: Essays On Historicism In Art from Donatello To Picasso* (1993), can be understood – in the case of the humanist group surrounding Cosimo de' Medici (otherwise known as 'Pater Patriae' (1389-1464), the relative and namesake of the Cosimo de' Medici (1519-74) to whom Vasari dedicated *The Lives*) at least – to have the goal of reconciling "antiquity with Christianity by returning to the "early" phases of the church" [Lavin, 1993: 2]. However, while *The Lives* can be characterized in this way, it is not at all clear, we would argue, that Vasari's text does in fact successfully bring an unsystematic Greek vision of history under the control of a systematic Judaeo-Christian one. As has been previously suggested, it is possible to read and make sense of the 'unsystematic' biographical content of *The Lives* without reference to the privileged 'systematic' modelling of history put forward in that text's main preface. It could, therefore, be argued that the biographical content of *The Lives* maintains a relative autonomy from Vasari's cyclical vision of history. Indeed, it could be averred that, because of this relative autonomy, the biographical content of *The Lives* occupies a supplementary position in relation to Vasari's systematic, cyclical modelling of history, whereby it is able to straddle the line supposedly dividing a 'Greek' modelling of history from a 'Judaeo-Christian' one. As such, the logic of this supplementarity could therefore be seen to work

against Vasari's emphatic valorization of the classical manner and its supposed adherence to rationalist architectural principles by infecting *The Lives* as a whole with a state of indeterminacy which that text can otherwise be understood to eschew. Moreover, if we return to the aforementioned notion that narrative structure of *The Lives* is comparable to that of a flawed piece of classical architecture, we might now begin to see the metaphorical style of that architecture not as a corrupted form of classicism, but as one that shuttles uncontrollably and uncomfortably between the 'classic' and the 'German' or 'Gothic', to the point where the supposed rationality of the classical is overrun by the undecideability of the Gothic - a vision which would have undoubtedly caused some distress to Vasari as arguably the sixteenth century's greatest proponent of a continuing Italianate, classical tradition.

Clearly, the above reading is in many respects a formalistic one, relying as it does on a close textual analysis of *The Lives*. It is, therefore open to criticism on the grounds that it advances a largely de-contextualised argument, rather than one that addresses in any great depth the historical circumstances surrounding the writing and the publication of *The Lives*. We would argue here, however that the sense of indeterminacy and lack of closure which can be discerned through a close reading of *The Lives* also extends to a reading of the relationship between that text and the traces remaining to us of the immediate historical context within which it was first produced and received. To consider this line of argument further we will now turn to a consideration of the events surrounding the initial publication(s) of *The Lives* in the middle part of the sixteenth century.

As Margaret Aston points out in *The Fifteenth Century: The Prospect of Europe* (1968), during the two centuries leading up to the first publication of Vasari's *The Lives* in 1550 the security of "life and faith" in Europe was subject to two major external threats: bubonic plague and the Ottoman Empire [Aston, 1968: 10]. The first of these to make its presence widely felt was bubonic plague (known throughout Europe at that time as the 'pestilence'), which, as Aston tells us, began to establish itself in western Europe during the mid-thirteenth hundreds when, over a three-year period between 1347 and 1350, it reduced the population in many areas by up to a third or a half. After which, it remained a highly visible, if increasingly less deadly, phenomenon from the mid-fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century and beyond [Aston, 1968: 15]. The second threat to make its presence widely felt was the Ottoman Empire, which, as Aston also tells us, made increasing territorial gains throughout the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries across what we would now see as eastern and southern Europe.

These gains included the taking of Constantinople in 1453, the conquest of Negroponte and territories in Albania between 1464 and 1479, a short-lived occupation of Italian territory at Otranto in 1480 under the Turkish ruler Mohammed II and a campaign in 1532 which took the vast army of Suleiman the Magnificent as far as the gates of Vienna [Aston, 1968: 12].

In addition to all of this, as Aston indicates in *The Panorama of the Renaissance* (1995), during this period the security of life and faith in Europe was also subject to two significant, and ultimately related, internal threats: conflict both between and within sovereign European states, and the Protestant Reformation. As Aston suggests, conflict between and within sovereign states in Europe during the Renaissance was often a drawn out, bloody and complex affair. Consider here, for example, the continual violation of Italian territory from the fourteen-nineties to the fifteen-twenties by forces from other parts of Europe. Firstly, by the armies of a territorially ambitious Charles VIII of France in 1494, then by those of King François I of France in 1515 (when the Sforza duke of Milan was defeated at Marignano) and finally by the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, which defeated the French at Pavia south of Milan in 1525 before going on (because they had not been paid) to sack Rome in 1527 [Aston, 1996: 63-5]. Consider also the brutal dynastic struggle at the centre of the English Wars of the Roses between 1461 and 1485, and the constant round of warfare and economic competition between largely autonomous Italian city-states which spanned the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries³⁸. Equally disruptive to life and faith, as Aston also points out, was the growing Protestant opposition throughout the early sixteenth century to certain practices and doctrines of the established church, including the intercession of saints, the selling of indulgences for both the living and dead and the supposedly idolatrous and, therefore, blasphemous representation of holy figures through the mediums of painting and sculpture. Two major consequences of which were that the staunchly Catholic Holy Roman Emperor Charles V went to war with the Lutheran states of Germany, whose forces he defeated at Ausburg in the summer of 1548, and that the imagery which had hitherto

³⁸ As Evelyn Welch indicates in *Art and Society in Italy 1350-1500*, the constant economic and military conflict between regions and city-states in Italy during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries took place against the background of a profound cultural pluralism, in which dialects and customs varied sharply from area to area, and town to town. See Welch, 1997, p. 15. Consequently It is possible to view Italy of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as an internally fractured territory, despite the fact that its coastal limits to the South, East and West and the Alps to the North gave it then, as now, a certain geographical coherence; a state of affairs which must surely have exacerbated any sense of instability brought on by the many threats to the stability of Italian culture in existence at that time.

supported Christian worship in many northern European countries was either covered over or destroyed by Protestant iconoclasts [Aston, 1996: 105-107].

The writing of Vasari's *The Lives* can, therefore, be understood to have taken place not at a time of stable regeneration, as the retrospectively applied term 'Renaissance' would suggest, but of enduring crisis. One in which there were a number of persistent and very real threats not only to the physical safety of individual Europeans and their extended family lines, but also to the existence of those institutions, social structures and practices around which European culture had by then begun to take shape. Moreover, this time of enduring crisis can be understood to have loomed large for Italians of the early to mid sixteenth century, given their 'country's' relative proximity to the advancing armies of the Ottoman empire, its continuing susceptibility to invasion by other European states, the continuing internecine strife between Italian city-states and the northern Protestants' rejection of Papal authority in Rome. Indeed, in many respects a politically fragmented and embattled Italy, then standing at the crossroads between East and West and as the ultimate focus for European Catholicism, was almost uniquely placed to endure the full force of the various tensions and conflicts which tested Europe during the two centuries prior to the publication of *The Lives*.

It is striking, then, to note that in *The Lives* Vasari does not seek to acknowledge in any great detail the tumultuous events in Europe during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, or to make a substantial connection between those events and the broad, cyclical modelling of events posited in the main preface³⁹. Indeed, the nearest Vasari comes to making a connection between the two is at the end of the main preface, where he suggests somewhat in passing that, having reached a peak of perfection, the classical art of his own time may now be in danger of suffering the same fate as its counterpart in Antiquity [Vasari in Bull ed., 1987: 47]; a suggestion which arguably implies a link between the events surrounding the decline of classical culture in Antiquity and contemporary events such as The Sack of Rome in 1527.

What then are we to make of this weak connection? It could be argued, of course, that our own perception of events in Europe during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is simply at variance with that held at the time, and that the threats posed to European security during the two centuries prior to the mid-sixteenth century did not then occupy a prominent place in the consciousness

³⁹ As numerous commentators have pointed out, *The Lives* is far from being a cultural history of art of the sort first put forward by Wincklemann in the late eighteenth century. See, for example, Fernie, 1995, p. 70.

of Europeans. After all, Europeans of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been able to pursue their own lives often with scant regard for the persistent threat of nuclear annihilation. However, as textual evidence from the early to mid-sixteenth century makes clear, this is far from being the case. As Margaret Aston points out in *The Fifteenth Century: The Prospect of Europe*, there are numerous works of painting and literature that signify the concern of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europeans with the tumultuous events of their own time. Consider here, for example, as Aston suggests, the woodcut prints of Albrecht Durer, with their apocalyptic visions of the effects of plague, or Machiavelli's play *Mandragola* (1518), with its uneasy joking about the threats posed by Ottoman expansion [Aston, 1968: 15]. Consider here, also, another important art historical document of the mid-sixteenth century: the artist Benvenuto Cellini's autobiographical work, *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini* (written between 1558 and 1562, but not published until 1728). In this work, we find the author – who was a fellow artist and contemporary of Vasari's at the court of Cosimo I – placing himself (and here one needs to be extremely wary, given the level of hyperbole within Cellini's writing) very much in the thick of historical events in Italy during the first half of the sixteenth century. Take, for example the following passage which sees Cellini at the Castel Sant'Angelo as a defending member of the papal household during The Sack of Rome in 1527:

Quitting our position on the ramparts, we crossed the Campo Santo, and entered the city by St. Peter's; then coming out exactly at the church of Santo Agnolo, we got with the greatest of difficulty to the great gate of the castle; for the generals Renzo di Ceri and Orazio Baglioni were wounding and slaughtering everybody who abandoned the defence of the walls. By the time we had reached the great gate, part of the foemen had already entered Rome, and we had them in our rear. The castellan had ordered the portcullis to be lowered, in order to do which they had cleared a little space, and this enabled us four to get inside. On the instant that I entered, the captain Pallone de' Medici claimed me as being of the Papal household, and forced me to abandon Alessandro, which I had to do much against my will. I ascended to the keep, and at the same instant Pope Clement came in through the corridors into the castle; he had refused to leave the palace of St. Peter earlier, being unable to believe that his enemies would effect their entrance into Rome. Having got into the castle in this way, I attached myself to certain pieces of artillery, which were under the command of a bombardier called Giuliano Fiorentino. Leaning there against the battlements, the unhappy man could see his poor house being sacked, and his wife and children outraged; fearing to strike his own folk, he dared not discharge the cannon, and flinging the burning fuse to the ground, he wept as though his heart would break, and tore his cheeks with both his hands. Some of the other bombardiers were behaving in like manner; seeing which, I took one of the matches, and got the assistance of a few men who were not overcome by their emotions. I aimed some swivels and falconets at points where I saw it would be useful, and killed with them a good number of the enemy. Had it not been for this, the troops who poured into Rome that morning, and were marching straight upon the castle, might possibly have entered it with ease, because the artillery was doing them no damage. I went on firing under the eyes of several cardinals and lords, who kept blessing me and giving me the heartiest encouragement. [Cellini in Symonds trans., Pope-Hennessy ed., 1995: 63-64]

Clearly, by comparison with such a vivid, first hand account, *The Lives* can be seen - even in its biographical content – to be somewhat detached from events outside the sphere of art and architecture. Nevertheless, as the passage above shows, it is also clear that the writing of *The Lives* took place at a time when it was possible for an author to register most forcefully the impact of the events surrounding his or her life.

Given that this was indeed the case, how then might we account for Vasari's failure to engage directly with the tumultuous events in Europe during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? One possible explanation consistent with our previous reading of *The Lives* is not that those events went unrecognized, but that it was simply impossible for Vasari to reconcile their somewhat ragged profile with the rather more clear-cut vision of history which he advances there in the main preface without, in some way, blunting the latter's descriptive edge. Put another way, it could be argued that Vasari saw a detailed representation of material events as being at odds with the vision of a transcendental historical order, in much the same way as he saw an indiscriminating, naturalistic representation in the arts as being at odds with the artistic realization of ideal beauty. Here, Vasari's cyclical modelling of historical events – which incorporates a fundamental opposition between an orderly, Italianate classicism and a disorderly, 'German' anti-classicism – can therefore be understood to respond to immediate threats to the classical Italianate culture of the sixteenth century not by ignoring them, as would appear to be the case, but by abstracting them as part of a wider transcendental scheme; one that carries with it a comforting sense of the historical persistence of classicism and its ultimate alignment with the forces of good.

This is, however, not the only possible gloss that can be placed on Vasari's apparent marginalization of contemporary events. To the modern, post-Freudian reader at least, this apparent marginalization also suggests the possibility of an unconscious repression on Vasari's part; one in which painful threats to the continuity of Italianate neo-classicism are not faced directly, but hidden away behind a reassuringly ordered narrative façade. Consider here in support of this line of argument not only the wider history of events in Europe described above, but also the events of Vasari's own life. As George Bull tells us in the introduction to his translation of Vasari's *The Lives*, Vasari's ambition to be an artist suffered a number of major setbacks. As a very young man during the fifteen-twenties, Vasari's artistic practice was interrupted first by the death of his father from plague, which left him with an extended family to provide for, and then by civil unrest and war in Florence where he lived and

worked. In 1537, after a relatively fruitful period of artistic activity, Vasari's hopes for advancement as a court painter were then brutally crushed when his patron was assassinated; as a consequence of which, as Bull tells us, Vasari may well have suffered a nervous breakdown [Bull in Vasari, Bull trans., 1987: 10-11]. If we consider this personal history through a modern, post-Freudian lens, it is possible to see Vasari's valorization of a systematic, modelling of history not just as a defensive abstraction of contemporary threats to European culture, but also as a sublimation of traumatic events in his own life; one which strives to divert and then elevate those events into a reassuringly fatalistic order where renewal always follows disaster.

Further to this, if we look at the *The Lives* through a post-Althusserian as well as a post-Freudian lens, it might be argued that there is also there an attempt to sublimate class difference and class struggle within some higher legislative scheme. Consider here, in this regard, Vasari's stated desire in *The Lives* that the status of artists in society should be brought above the level of artisan to that of scholar. As such, this desire would appear to support the notion of a radical overthrowing of an existing social order. However, as Welch reminds us, the transition from artisan to scholar was more of a wish than a reality for most Italian artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth century [Welch, 1997: 124], whose businesses remained almost wholly dependant upon aristocratic and Church patronage despite the increased economic and social mobility that had followed on from a depletion of the population by recurrent bouts of plague [Welch, 1997: 25]. Consequently, Vasari can be understood to have adopted his seemingly radical stance on the status of the artist within a continuing social hierarchy. From a post-Althusserian perspective, Vasari's eventual realization of his desire to ascend to the status of scholar, which came about largely through his writing of *The Lives*, can therefore be understood to involve not a radical overthrowing of established social structures, but an appropriation on his part of an existing ruling-class ideological content; one that had by the sixteenth century seen various European rulers – whose legislative power was more often than not understood to be a divine right – acquiring a conspicuous taste for the scholarly life (Federigo da Montefeltro of Urbino and the Medicis, for example, were directly involved with the study and collection of texts from Antiquity, while Charles V retired to a monastery in Spain for a life of study and prayer after his abdication in 1556). Here, then, it is possible to see Vasari not as an outright radical, as some might have it, but as someone who attempts to keep an otherwise unsettling social mobility well under the control of an existing, God-given set of class relations.

As such, these possible sublimations can, of course, be understood to extend Vasari's attempt to bring disorder within the controlling aegis of its diametrically opposed other within the compass of *The Lives*. However, given our other previous reading that *The Lives* is ultimately not only a structurally weakened piece of intellectual architecture, but also a stylistically indeterminate one, how successful is that extended attempt? Here, in this regard it is not at all clear that disorder is something that can be made to occupy a stable position within the limits of its privileged other. Rather, it can be understood to stand simultaneously both inside and outside the perceived limits of classical order and, therefore, as a fundamental challenge to the rational integrity of that order. Consequently, it could be argued that the weak structural link which Vasari makes in *The Lives* between the tumultuous events of his own time and the fate of classical art in the mid-sixteenth century places threats to the continuity of classicism, not within the reassuring confines of an abstract historical model founded on the supposedly God-given possibility of continual artistic renewal, but instead disturbingly both within and beyond the perceived limits of that model. Moreover, it could be argued that Vasari's stated desire to elevate artistic practice to the level of scholarship is equally disturbing in this regard, given that its challenge to the existing social order of sixteenth century Italy can also be seen to carry with it traces of tumultuous events largely obscured by the abstract nature of Vasari's overall vision.

To sum up, then, the thesis put forward by Vasari in *The Lives* can be understood to involve a complex, multi-layered conceptual structure that not only envisages a progressive return to the artistic values of Greco-Roman Antiquity in the visual arts in Italy during the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also a historical sublimation of the anti-classical within the all-enveloping compass of a transcendently ordered and continuous cycle of disaster and renewal. However, despite its evident sophistication, the thesis contained in *The Lives* can also be understood to incorporate a number of significant structural weaknesses and inconsistencies. Firstly, as we have seen the structural fabric of Vasari's thesis can be seen to rely at crucial junctures upon what we would now see as weak appeals to an obscure transcendental authority. It can, therefore, be argued that despite its conspicuous ingenuity, the architecture of Vasari's vision is held together at crucial points by highly questionable metaphysical mystifications of one sort or another. Secondly, while Vasari's cyclical modelling of historical events can be understood to rest upon a clear distinction between a divinely inspired, classical order and an evil, anti-classical disorder, it also envisages the sublimation of the latter entirely within the ordered compass of the former. Consequently, anti-classical disorder can be seen to occupy

an indeterminate position within Vasari's cyclical modelling of historical events – at once the opposite of and a supplement to order - at odds with the sharp rationality of that model's underlying conceptual logic. And thirdly, while Vasari's cyclical modelling of history may be understood to sublimate threatening historical events within the reassuring compass of an orderly cycle of disaster and renewal, that sublimation can also be seen to encode an only barely repressed entanglement with the material disorder of historical events.

As a result of these inconsistencies and weakness we might therefore see *The Lives* not simply as a sophisticated attempt to promote a rational, systematic vision of art's history – which it undoubtedly is – but also as a text whose apparently ordered vision is troubled by the unwanted spectres of irrationality and disorder. However, these are not the only ways in which *The Lives* can be understood to work against the stability of its own position. As commentators such as Eric Fernie have pointed out, art historians coming immediately after Vasari who wished to adhere closely to the underlying precepts of his art historical vision were also faced with a number of destabilizing difficulties which their work can be understood to have inherited from Vasari's view of history [Fernie, 1995: 11-12]. And it is to a consideration of these that we now turn.

Art historians of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries wishing to adhere closely to Vasari's art historical vision were faced by two major restrictions. Firstly, Vasari's privileging of Italianate art in the classical style precluded an expansion of his vision to include non-Italian or non-classical art regardless of its perceived quality. Secondly, Vasari's cyclical modelling of events, and its implication that there might be a drop in artistic quality during or after the author's lifetime, brought any valorisation of contemporary art in the classical style sharply into question. This meant that writers both within Italy and outside it who wished to align their thinking with that of Vasari and to write sympathetically about non-classical art and/or the classical art of their own time could only proceed by coming up with new variations on the theme of Vasari's seminal vision.

Here, we find two significant attempts to reinterpret Vasari's vision along what are arguably progressive lines. The first of these, by Karel van Mander, retains the broad sweep of Vasari's cyclical modelling of events while also putting forward an argument that naturalistic painting of Northern Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries culminates in the establishment of a classical tradition during the sixteenth century comparable to that found in Italy. The second, by Giovanni Bellori,

extends the privileged position given by Vasari to classical art and architecture of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to include that of the seventeenth. In addition to the above, we also find another highly influential⁴⁰, though arguably backward-looking, reinterpretation of Vasari by Johann Joachim Wincklemann, who can be understood to retain Vasari's privileging of the classical style, while adapting the shape of the Vasarian cycle to suggest something of a general decline in the quality of art after the achievements of Greco-Roman Antiquity.

What all of these reinterpretations can be understood to have in common is that they each involve an attempt overcome the sharp conceptual distinctions and potential limitations of Vasari's vision so as to reconcile it with differing social and cultural perspectives. Moreover, each can be seen to result from a desire to improve upon or perfect the seminal work carried out by Vasari. However, as we shall attempt to show here, while each of the three variations described above can be understood as an attempt to expand art history's field of vision to include new or neglected subjects, none can in fact be seen to present a vision that successfully repositions the distinctions and limitations initially set out by Vasari. Rather, each offers – as, arguably, Vasari's had before, with its unstable juxtaposition of a 'Judaeo-Christian' and a 'Greek' modelling of historical events – an uneasy conjunction of differing theoretical perspectives.

In *The Painter's Book* (*Het Schilderboek*) (1604), the Dutch painter, academician and art historian Karel van Mander sets out to reconcile naturalistic painting in Northern Europe during the fifteenth century with the art historical vision put forward by Vasari in *The Lives*. This he attempts to do by arguing that the naturalistic tradition in northern European painting, as exemplified by the work of the van Eyck brothers during the fifteenth century and by that of Albrecht Dürer during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, eventually culminates in the establishment of a classical tradition in the North which is epitomised by the work of the late sixteenth century painter Jan van Scorel. Van Mander can, therefore, be understood to offer a reinterpretation of Vasari's art historical vision that upholds its basic valorization of the classical style while breaking the categorical link it makes between high art and Italian culture. Moreover, it can be understood to involve an attempt to bring northern naturalistic painting of the fifteenth century more closely into line with its southern classical counterpart by presenting the former as a significant contribution to the dissemination of the classical tradition north of the Alps.

⁴⁰ Wincklemann is generally considered to have influenced Hegel's understanding of artistic

However, on both these counts van Mander can be understood to depart markedly from Vasari's original art historical vision. Consider here, for example, the following passage:

When Italy, properly adorned with the excellent perfection of our art of painting became famous and was celebrated and admired by other peoples, Germany too, began rapidly to shed its darkness by means of a most outstanding practitioner who illuminated that period brightly, and most fortunately comprehended all that can be understood or embraced within the art of drawing without having received the light of Italy or being inflamed by the shining, ancient, Greek marbles. This was the all-round Albrecht Dürer, who was born in Nuremberg in 1470. [van Mander in Fernie ed., 1995: 53]

Here, van Mander makes two separate assertions. On the one hand, he repeats Vasari's claim that European art had emerged from a period of dark, disastrous decline when Italian artists began to model their work on the example set by the classical art of antiquity. On the other, he praises the German painter Albrecht Dürer, claiming that his great facility as a draughtsman had been arrived at not through direct contact with the 'light' of Italy, nor with the 'shining' art of antiquity, but as a consequence of sheer good fortune. In this passage we can therefore see van Mander breaking with two of Vasari's principal claims. Namely, that the great art and architecture of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe had come about through first-hand study of the ruins of classical Antiquity, and that it was only the transcendently enlightened artists of Italy who had been able to grasp the full significance of those ruins and, therefore, produce truly great works of art. Consequently, van Mander can be seen to undermine Vasari's notion of a single, transcendently inspired artistic tradition by identifying two distinct developmental streams in the art of fifteenth century Europe: one based on an engagement with nature following the example set by the idealising art of classical Antiquity, and another simply based on a direct engagement with nature alone. Moreover, he can also be understood to have moved northern art only partly – and somewhat unconvincingly, it might be said – away from the association with dark anti-classical decline demanded by a close adherence to Vasari's vision.

Equally problematic in this regard is the high status that van Mander accords to the conjunction of naturalism and the technique of oil painting in Northern European art; both of which had emerged, he avers, from the studio of the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Here, van Mander writes:

It is evident that the art of painting must have come to our Low Countries from Italy – that is, glue and egg painting – because this technique began first in Italy, in Florence, in the year 1250 as we have related in the life of Jan Cimabue. These brothers, that is Jan and Hubert van Eyck, made many works in glue and egg paint – for no other technique was known, except in Italy where one also worked on fresco. And because the

town of Bruges in Flanders overflowed with much wealth in former times, on account of the great commerce which was carried on there by various nations – more so than in any other town in the whole of these Netherlands – and because art likes to be near wealth so as to be maintained with rich rewards, Jan went to live in the aforementioned town of Bruges where all manner of merchants abounded. Here he made many works on wood with glue and egg – and was very famous because of his great art in the various countries to which his works were taken. He was (according to some) also a wise learned man, very inventive and ingenious in various aspects of art; he investigated numerous kinds of paint and to that end practised alchemy and distillation. He got so far as to succeed in varnishing his egg or glue paint with a varnish made of various oils which pleased the public very much as it gave the work a clear, brilliant shine. In Italy many had searched for this secret in vain, for they could not find the correct technique. On one occasion Jan made a painting on which he had spent much time, diligence and labour (for he always did things with great fastidiousness and accuracy). When it was finished he varnished the painting according to his new invention in the now usual way and set it to dry in the sun – but whether the planks were not properly joined and glued, or whether the heat of the sun was too great, the picture split along the joints and came apart. Jan was very upset that his work was thus lost and ruined by the sun and determined to ensure that the sun would never again cause him such a loss. Thus, put off using egg paint and varnish, he eventually set about investigating and considering how to make a varnish which could dry indoors and away from the sun. When he had finally thoroughly explored many oils and other natural materials, he found that linseed and nut-oil dried best of all; by boiling these along with other substances which he added, he made the best varnish in the world. And since such industrious, quick-thinking spirits strive towards perfection through continually researching, he discovered by much experimentation that paint mixed with such oils blended very well, dried very hard and when dry resisted water well; and also that the oil made the colours much brighter and shinier in themselves without having to be varnished. And what astonished and delighted him even more was that he noticed that paint made thus with oil spread thinly and handled better than was possible with the wetness of the egg or glue medium and did not demand such a linear technique. Jan was highly delighted with his discovery and with good reason; for an entirely new technique and way of working was created, to the admiration of many, even in distant countries where fame, trumpeting it forth, had already flown so that people came from the land of the Cyclops and ever-smouldering Mount Etna to see such a remarkable invention. Our art needed only this noble invention to approximate to, or be more like nature in her forms...The year that Jan invented oilpaint was 1410, as far as I can discover or ascertain. In this Vasari or his printer erred by describing this invention as having taken place a hundred years earlier...Leaving this aside for brevity's sake, these two brothers kept this new discovery carefully hidden and made many handsome pictures together, and separately or individually...The largest and most outstanding work which they made was in Ghent, the painting in the Church of St. Jan's...The innermost panel of this work is from the Revelation of John – depicting the Adoration of the Lamb by the elders. There is an overwhelming amount of detail in it and outstanding precision – as is the case with the work as a whole...But to describe this work overall: on account of its draughtsmanship, poses, spirituality, its invention, clarity and precision it is excellent and admirable, considering its time. The rendering of the folds of the draperies is somewhat in the manner of Albrecht Dürer; the colours – blues reds and purples are incorruptible and everything is so clear that it looks newly painted, surpassing all other paintings. [van Mander in Fernie ed., 1995: 49-51]

In this extended passage, van Mander can be seen to bolster his notion of a second developmental stream in European painting in three ways. Firstly, by openly asserting the technological superiority of northern European painting; secondly, by suggesting that Vasari's account of the invention of oil painting in *The Lives* is misleading; and thirdly, by giving enormous praise to the

achievements of the van Eycks. Here then, as before, van Mander's text marks a departure from the underlying precepts of Vasari's art historical vision and its explicit downgrading of non-Italian/ non-classical art.

To sum up, then, in the two passages quoted above van Mander can be understood to have made claims as to the high quality of both Italian classical painting and its Northern European naturalistic counterpart by promoting and respecting evident differences between the two; not only in terms of technique and stylistic approach, but also in terms of the cultural context within which they have been produced. Consequently, he can be seen to depart from the somewhat Manichean vision promulgated by Vasari in *The Lives* by positioning Northern European naturalistic painting as something different to, but comparable with, that of its classical Italianate other.

As a result, when van Mander seeks to return more directly to Vasari's original vision by asserting that the naturalistic painting of Northern Europe comes together with the classical painting of Italy through the work of the northern classicist Jan van Scorel – who had been instructed in the classical style during a prolonged stay in Italy, and who, according to van Mander, had then imported the true flame of classical painting into Northern Europe, thereby bringing northern art into a final conformity with Vasari's art historical vision - he is forced to prepare the ground by making something of an intellectual *volte-face*. Consider, here, the following passage from van Mander's biography of van Scorel, which returns to the question of the origins of the classical style:

But when Rome eventually began to feel better under the peaceful rule of the popes, some of the aforementioned beautifully formed marbles and bronzes were rediscovered and taken from her dusty bowels which, when they emerged from the dark, cast a great light upon our art of painting and opened the eyes of its practitioners so as to distinguish between ugliness and beauty, and what was the most beautiful in life or in nature regarding the shape of the human body and various beasts. So that the Italians, who were thus enlightened, touched on the correct essence and the best appearance of figures earlier than we Netherlanders – who with particular habitual manner of working, but with incomplete knowledge, constantly and diligently aspired to work better and better, by which means they were content for the greater part with simple working from life and thus (so to speak) rather remained in the dark, or with little illumination. [van Mander, in Fernie ed., 1995: 56-57]

In this passage, van Mander reasserts, to some extent at least, Vasari's rather dark view of northern European painting. Consequently, van Mander can be understood to make northern European painting 'fit' within Vasari's vision only through a rather inelegant act of obfuscation; one which ultimately works against van Mander's assertions as to the quality and difference of Northern European naturalism by placing that tradition uncertainly on the penumbral edge of classical enlightenment.

We are therefore left, we would submit, with a lingering sense that *The Painter's Book* opens up, and then swiftly attempts to conceal, a favourable interpretation of Northern European naturalistic painting that would not only see it occupying a position alongside that of good, enlightened classical art – such a position would, in any case, simply fly in the face of the evident differences between northern naturalism and Italian classicism – but which would also straddle the boundaries set up by the conceptual opposition underlying Vasari's art historical vision; an opposition which, as we have seen, pits classicism against anti-classicism, the Italian against the 'German', good against evil and, crucially here, light against dark and vision against blindness. Even if one were to argue that the shadowy status of fifteenth century Northern European painting is part and parcel of a developmental progress to full classical enlightenment, as van Mander's text seems to suggest, then one is forced back on the notion that European classicism in the sixteenth century, as van Mander sees it, has not emerged from one, single, pure, divinely inspired source set against the background of a history where light and dark are clearly divided right from the outset by the will of God, but from two sources, one of which is neither wholly light nor dark. Here, then, not only do we find echoes of the undecideability that, as we have already attempted to show, can be understood to undermine the conceptual architecture of Vasari's *The Lives*, but also a destabilization of the vision put forward in that text brought about by its relocation to another time and place.

In *The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (1672) by Giovanni Bellori, we arguably find a similar state of affairs. In this text Bellori sets out to override the notion of a decline in artistic quality implicit in Vasari's cyclical modelling of events by rethinking the earlier writer's position with regard to an idealizing aesthetic. Bellori begins by describing the *Idea* in somewhat metaphysical terms as "the goddess of painting and sculpture" who "unveils herself to us, and descends upon the marbles and canvases". He then goes on to assert that the *Idea* arises out of, but is not confined to the natural world. He writes:

Originating from nature, she rises above her origin and becomes herself the original of art by the compass of the intellect, she becomes the measure of the hand; and animated by imagination, she gives life to the image. [Bellori in Fernie ed., 1995: 63]

For Bellori, as for Vasari before him, the *Idea* is therefore something whose presence is not to be found directly in nature. Rather, it is ultimately a transcendental spirit, underlying and informing nature, that presents itself to us in art: firstly, through apprehension by the senses; secondly, through comprehension by the intellect; and thirdly, through translation into artistic form by the imagination.

Thus, argues Bellori “the *Idea* constitutes the perfection of natural beauty” which “not only emulates but surpasses nature and manifests to us as elegant and accomplished the creations which nature is not wont to show perfect in every part” [Bellori in Fernie ed., 1995: 64]. In this regard, then, Bellori can be understood to concur in large part with the Albertian aesthetic vision promulgated by Vasari in *The Lives*.

Bellori then goes on to argue, again very much in line with Vasari’s aesthetic position, that this understanding of the *Idea* is central not only to the making of good contemporary art, but also the good classical art of Antiquity. Bellori pursues this line of argument firstly by citing numerous writers from Antiquity who would appear to concur with his aesthetic viewpoint, including Proclus, Cicero, Maximus Tyrius, Lysippus, Seneca, Plato, Quintillian and Appollonius of Tyana. Consider here, for example, Bellori’s paraphrasing of Appollonius of Tyana where he states that “imagination renders the painter wiser than does imitation, because the latter makes only the things that it sees, while the former makes even the things that it does not see, relating to those that it sees” [Bellori, in Fernie ed., 1995: 65]. Bellori then continues by making the following statement:

Now join to the precepts of the ancient philosophers the best maxims of our modern ones, Leon Battista Alberti teaches that in all things one should love not only the appearance, but principally the beauty, and that one ought to select the most praised parts from the most beautiful bodies. Thus Leonardo da Vinci instructs the painter to form this *Idea*, and to think about what he sees and question himself about it, so as to select the most excellent parts of each thing. Raphael of Urbino, the greatest master of those who know, thus writes to Castiglione of his Galatea: ‘In order to paint a beautiful woman it would be necessary for me to see many beautiful women, but since there is a scarcity of them, I make use of a certain *Idea* which comes to my mind’. [Bellori in Fernie ed., 1995: 65]

Here, then, Bellori can be understood to uphold two of the basic tenets of Vasari’s art historical vision: firstly, the conception of a classical, idealising aesthetic; and secondly, the cyclical repetition of that aesthetic across the ages.

Further to this, Bellori can also be understood to share in Vasari’s doubts about the capacity of modern art to sustain the achievements of the past. Consider here the following two passages where Bellori openly castigates contemporary artists and architects for what he sees as their dereliction of the ideals of antiquity and their abandonment of the imagination. First he writes:

[T]hose who do not know the truth and do everything according to habit, create empty shells instead of figures; nor is it different with those who borrow genius and copy the ideas of others; they make works that are not daughters but bastards of Nature, and appear to have sworn by the brushstrokes of their masters. Combined with this evil is the other that they through poverty of genius, and not knowing how to select the best parts, choose the defects of their teachers and mould the *Idea* on the worst. On the other

hand, those who glory in the name naturalists do not carry in their mind any Idea; they copy the defects of bodies and accustom themselves to ugliness and errors; they also swear by a model as their teacher; if this is withdrawn from their eyes, together with it all art departs from them. [Bellori in Fernie ed., 1995: 66 – our square brackets]

Bellori then goes on to contend that:

[B]eauty being one only in each species, cannot be altered without being destroyed. Hence those who with novelty transform it, regrettably deform it; for ugliness stands close to beauty, as the vices touch the virtues. Such an evil we observe at the fall of the Roman Empire, with which all the good Arts decayed, and architecture more than any other...Bramante, Raphael, Baldassare, Guilio Romano and finally Michelangelo laboured to restore it from its heroic ruins to its former *Idea* and look, by selecting the most elegant forms of the antique edifices.

But today instead of receiving thanks these very wise men like the ancients are ungratefully vilified, almost as if, without genius and without invention, they had copied one from the other, On the other hand, everyone gets in his head, all by himself, a new Idea and travesty of architecture in his own mode, and displays it in public squares and upon the facades: they certainly are men void of any knowledge that belongs to the architect, whose name they assume in vain. So much so that they madly deform buildings and even towns and monuments with angles, breaks and distortions of lines; they tear apart bases, capitals, and columns by the introduction of bric-a-brac of stucco, scraps and disproportions; and thus while Vitruvius condemns similar vovelties and puts before us the best examples. [Bellori in Fernie ed., 1995: 67 – our square brackets]

Clearly, in both these passages Bellori, who is writing in the late seventeenth century, could be understood to confirm Vasari's view that there was the possibility of a decline in the quality of art during or after the mid-sixteenth century and, by extension, the regular shape of Vasari's cyclical modelling of art historical events. However, Bellori goes on to leave an opening for something that does not appear in Vasari's modelling of art historical events, namely the continuity of a truly classical, idealising art. He writes:

But the good architects preserve the most excellent forms of the order. The Painters and the sculptors, selecting the most elegant natural beauties, perfect the *Idea*, and their works go forward and become superior to nature; this, as we have proved, is the ultimate excellence of these arts. [Bellori, in Fernie ed., 1995: 67]

Here, Bellori clearly opens up the possibility of a continuing human perfection of the *Idea* that is not subject to the regular ups and downs of Vasari's cycle. Further to which, if we turn to the biographies of the artists included in Bellori's *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, we find that this opening is sustained by the author's choice of who should and who should not be included. For Example, the 'Baroque'⁴¹ sculptor and architect Bernini (1598-1680) is left out,

⁴¹ It should be noted here that while work in the Baroque style was recognised as a distinct entity at the time of its making during the late sixteenth to late eighteenth centuries, the somewhat pejorative term 'baroque' (used initially in relation to misshapen pearls) was not applied formally by art historians as a

presumably because of his abandonment of the *Idea* and of true imagination, while the ‘classical’ painter Nicolas Poussin (1594-1664) – a friend of Bellori’s and co-author of the *Lives of the Modern Painters Sculptors and Architects* [Ferne, 1995: 58] - is left in. Here, then, Bellori can be understood to have identified a continuing tradition of classical idealism, set against the background of what he sees as a decline in the quality of artistic achievement exhibited by those artists of the seventeenth century working in the then culturally dominant style we now know as the Baroque.

On the one hand, Bellori’s thesis is therefore to be seen as consistent with that of Vasari’s, in so far as it reasserts the latter’s valorization of the classical style while confirming his stated fears of a coming or existing decline in the fortunes of art. On the other, however, Bellori’s view that the achievements of seventeenth century Classicism represent an extension and perfection of those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggests the possibility of a timeless tradition at odds with the inherent logic of Vasari’s cyclical modelling of art historical events. Consequently, like van Mander before him, Bellori can be understood to have set out to uphold the basic tenets of Vasari’s vision while at the same time revising that vision in such a way that it turns against itself. Moreover, again like van Mander before him, Bellori can be understood to have effected this revision in response to cultural pressures and investments different from those experienced by Vasari himself. Pressures and investments that arguably see van Mander attempting, in a reversal of Vasari, to establish a stable cultural identity for art in the North at a time of continuing military conflict there (*vis.* The Netherlandish revolt against imperial Spanish rule between 1572 and 1609), and Bellori attempting to avoid a shameful sense of decline in Italian art of the seventeenth century and to support the fortunes of his friend the classical painter Poussin and by extension his own. And again, like van Mander, we might also see that Bellori establishes in his thinking a troublesome ‘other’ to true classicism that occupies an undecidable position in relation to the underlying precepts of Vasari’s art historical vision; namely, the supposedly deviant work of ‘Baroque’ artists such as Bernini, which might be viewed according to Bellori’s assertions as a style in imitation of true classical ideals but without the necessary discipline or imagination and, therefore, as neither wholly classical nor wholly anti-classical. In other words, haunting the conceptual architecture of Vasari’s, van Mander’s and Bellori’s texts is a somewhat spectral stylistic entity – in Vasari’s case the ‘German’/Gothic, in van Mander’s northern European Naturalism and in Bellori’s the ‘Baroque’ - that works to supplement a valorised classical order while

stylistic tag until the twentieth century. See, Rolf Toman ed., *Baroque: Architecture – Sculpture –*

undermining the categorical distinction between the classical and the anti-classical and, as a consequence, the very foundations of the Vasarian paradigm.

The problematic undecideability that arguably characterises the revisions of Vasari put forward by van Mander and Bellori can also be understood to haunt the art historical vision put forward by Johann Joachim Wincklemann in *The History of Ancient Art* (1764). Here, Wincklemann can be understood not only to have retained the broad sweep of Vasari's cyclical modelling of artistic development when he writes, first that his book is "intended to show the origin, progress, change and down fall of art, together with the different styles of nations, periods, and artists and to prove the whole, as far as is possible, from the ancient monuments now in existence", and then that "[t]he arts which are dependent on drawing have, like all inventions, commenced with the necessary; the next object of research was beauty; and finally the superfluous followed: these are the three principal stages in art" [Wincklemann in Fernie ed. 1995: 72-73 – our square brackets], but also to have bolstered that retention by referring to precedents for Vasari's cyclical vision in the writings of Cicero and Quintillian. Moreover, he can also be understood to retain something of Vasari's metaphorical association of good art with light, and bad art with darkness. Consider here, for example Winckelmann's description of the rise and fall of second century CE Roman art – which he perceives to be the last great achievement of classical art in Antiquity – as something resembling "the flame of a lamp which, before it is entirely extinguished, gathers the remaining oil together, flares up into one bright blaze and then instantly disappears" [Wincklemann in Fernie ed., 1995: 68]. Further to all of which, Wincklemann (who was much influenced here by Bellori's writing) can also be understood to uphold Vasari's conception of an artistic ideal when he writes that the ideal is not "confined to an imitation of one individual", but is instead "a selection of beautiful parts from many individuals, and their union into one", and that "beauties as great as any of those which art has ever produced can be found singly in nature, but, the entire figure, nature must yield the palm to art" [Wincklemann in Fernie ed., 1995: 75-76].

However, despite these marked similarities, Wincklemann's art historical vision can also be seen to differ from that of Vasari in two significant ways. Firstly, as Fernie points out in *Art History and its Methods*, Wincklemann departs from Vasari's juxtaposition of a cyclical modelling of art historical events and an extended series of artists' biographies by seeking to "present the visual arts in

the context of the relevant period and place, including climate, form of government, habits of thought, the status of the artist, the use to which art is put, and the studious application of scientific knowledge by members of the society, that is, in other words, in the context of the culture as a whole” [Ferne ed., 1995: 71]; a thoroughly cultural approach which, as we have seen, is to a large extent incompatible with Vasari’s keen adherence to the notion of a transcendently governed historical cycle of disaster and renewal. Secondly, as Ferne also points out, this cultural view of art history is used by Wincklemann to suggest that ancient Greek art represents a single unrepeatable peak of artistic perfection. Consider here, the following assertions made by Wincklemann. First, that “[t]he superiority which art acquired among the Greeks is to be ascribed partly to the influence of climate, partly to their constitution and government, and the habits of thinking which originated therefrom, and in an equal degree also to respect for the artist, and the use and application of art” [Wincklemann in Ferne ed., 1995: 74 – our square brackets]. And second, that in certain countries “the climate has not allowed the gentle feeling of pure beauty to mature; it has either been confirmed in them by art – that is, by constantly and studiously employing their scientific knowledge in the representation of youthful beauties – as in Michelangelo, or become in time utterly corrupted, as was the case with Bernini, by a vulgar flattery of the coarse and uncultivated, in attempting to render everything more intelligible to them. The former busied himself with the contemplation of lofty beauty...The very course which led Michelangelo to impassable places and steep cliffs plunged Bernini, on the contrary, into bogs and polls; for he sought to dignify, as it were, by exaggeration” [Ferne ed., 1995: 75]. Clearly, when taken together, these passages indicate strongly that Wincklemann does not share in Vasari’s view that the classical art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is equal to its supposed counterpart in Antiquity.

It could be argued here, therefore, that in *The History of Ancient Art* Wincklemann’s combines both a Judaeo-Christian and a Greek modelling of historical events. That is to say he retains, on the one hand, the notion of a developmental cycle in the affairs of art, while, on the other, seeking to place artistic production squarely in relation to its material setting. Moreover, it could be argued that he inverts the priorities of Vasari’s art historical vision by privileging the latter over the former as a determinant of artistic quality, thus bringing ancient Greek art and an ancient Greek modelling of history into structural alignment. This is not to say that Wincklemann can be understood to dispense with a ‘systematic’, Judaeo-Christian view of history in favour of an ‘unsystematic’, Greek one. Rather, as Wincklemann himself suggests, his is an attempt to “present a system” as a means of

extending the significance which “the term history...has in the Greek language” [Wincklemann, in Fernie ed., 1995: 72].

Further evidence of this inverted juxtaposition of ‘unsystematic’, Greek and ‘systematic’, Judaeo-Christian visions of history can be found in the preface to *The History of Ancient Art* where Wincklemann struggles inconclusively to give a definitive metaphorical shape to his art historical vision. Here, he writes:

In the infancy of art, its productions are, like the handsomest of human beings at birth, misshapen, and similar to one another, like the seeds of plants of entirely different kinds; but in bloom and decay, they resemble those mighty streams which at the point where they should be broadest, either dwindle into small rivulets, or totally disappear.

The art of drawing among the Egyptians is to be compared to a tree which, though well cultivated, has been checked and arrested in its growth by a worm or other casualties; for it remained unchanged precisely the same yet without attaining its perfection, until the period when Greek kings held sway over them; and the case appears to have been the same with Persian art. Etruscan art, when in its bloom, may be compared to a raging stream, rushing furiously along between crags and over rocks; for the characteristics of its drawing are hardness and exaggeration. But, among the Greeks, the art of drawing resembles a river whose clear waters flow in numerous windings through a fertile vale, and fill its channel, yet do not overflow. [Wincklemann, in Fernie ed., 1995: 74]

In this passage, Wincklemann would appear to be involved in a somewhat ham-fisted attempt to reconcile Vasari’s metaphorical representation of history as a natural cycle of birth, growth, maturity and decay with another which sees history as a river flowing through a landscape, and all of this through the intermediary figure of a tree, whose metaphorical form can be understood to carry echoes of both. Here, then, it could be argued that we find ourselves faced, yet again, not with a well constructed revision of the Vasarian paradigm, but instead with an unstable reworking of the already tense dialectical relationship between a Judaeo-Christian and a Greek vision of history that, as we have already shown, can be found at work in Vasari’s *The Lives*. Consequently, it could also be argued that, like Vasari before him, Wincklemann is unable to resolve the clear tension between a ‘systematic’ and an ‘unsystematic’ view of art’s history. If anything, as has already been suggested, he simply inverts Vasari’s priority from the former to the latter. Seen in this way, the relationship between Vasari’s art history and that of Wincklemann, and indeed van Mander and Bellori, no longer resembles that between an authoritative parent and his offspring in which the ‘word of the father’ is adhered to by subsequent generations – a vision implicated in Vasari’s often perceived position as the originator of European art history – but rather a persistent remotivation of an already unstable genetic code.

To sum up, then, the art history of the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth century can be understood to proceed from the view put forward by Vasari in *The Lives* that an ‘unsystematic’ vision

of history and a 'disorderly' anti-art could both be sublimated within a transcendently ordered historical cycle of disaster and renewal. Moreover, subsequent art histories of this period can be seen as attempts both to uphold the basic tenets of Vasari's vision and to revise that vision in order to respond to discursive pressures emerging within cultural contexts very different to the one in which *The Lives* itself was written. In addition to this, as we have attempted to show, the progressive art histories of the period in question can also be seen to harbour structural inconsistencies and contradictions which suggest that the unsystematic and the irrational are not entirely subsumed by Vasarian systematicity. Indeed, as we have tried to argue, the art histories from Vasari to Wincklemann can be understood to maintain something of the dual identity found in the historical writings of antiquity - with their unresolved interplay between 'systematic' and 'unsystematic' narrative forms - through the somewhat indeterminate position occupied by the unsystematic and the irrational within the Vasarian paradigm. Consequently, despite the fact that the art history from the late fifteenth century to the late seventeenth century signifies a tendency to privilege the rational and the systematic, there is also a sense in which it sustains the irrational and the unsystematic as a supplementary other that straddles and, therefore, unsettles the sharp conceptual distinctions upon which the art historical discourse of the period is founded. Moreover, this supplementarity can also be seen to confer a structural instability upon Vasari's initial vision that leaves it open to unstable transformation in relation to the discursive pressures emerging from changed cultural circumstances. That is to say, the discursive pressures brought about by changed cultural circumstances can be understood both to expose the structural inconsistencies of the Vasarian paradigm and to provoke revisions which are themselves to be viewed as conceptually unstable. To pursue this unstable lineage further, we now turn to a consideration of the development of academic art history from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century.

Chapter III: Academic Art History From the Late Eighteenth to the Late Twentieth Century

The third period to be considered here, which stretches from the late eighteenth century to the late twentieth century, comprises events relating to the establishment and development of art history as a discrete academic discipline. While our modern tradition of writing on the history of the visual arts and architecture can be understood to have emerged in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,

largely through the writings of Ghiberti and Vasari, it is only since the latter half of the nineteenth century that art history has been recognised as an academic discipline in its own right separate from a more general engagement with the study of history. Consider here, in this regard, the contrasting positions exhibited by the following texts and the professional standings of their respective authors: firstly, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) by Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) - who was professor of *history* at Basle University – which, following on from the example set by Wincklemann, examines Italian art of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as part of a wider historical investigation into Italian culture during that period; and secondly, *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901) by Alois Riegl (1858-1905) - who was professor of *the history of art* at Vienna University – which seeks, in a manner evidently influenced by the writings of Hegel, to explain the development of the arts and crafts during the late Roman period in terms of an era-defining ‘aesthetic urge’ or ‘will to form’ (*kunstwollen*). Here, not only do we find differing narratives of historicity, one ‘cultural’ and the other ‘idealizing’, but also a significant narrowing of investigative limits both at a practical and at an institutional level.

This narrowing of investigative limits can, of course, be seen as part of a more widespread movement towards academic specialization which had begun towards the end of the eighteenth century within the context of the European Enlightenment and which sought to overwrite a belief in the possibility of a unitary scholarship inherited from the mediaeval period with an increasing diversification of the categories of knowledge. However, as well as being viewed as part of this wider intellectual movement, art history’s emergence as a distinct field of academic enquiry can also be understood to have taken place in relation to a more localized shift in thinking; one which, from the latter half of the eighteenth century, saw within art historical discourse the beginnings of a radical departure from certain aspects of the Vasarian paradigm.

As such, this departure can be understood to have involved three significant changes in outlook. As Eric Fernie again makes clear in the introduction to *Art History and its Methods*, one of these was that art historians began to expand the limits of their field of enquiry to include objects, ways of working and biographical information either excluded from or severely marginalized by Vasari’s art historical vision. As we have already seen, that vision effectively rules out a serious, in-depth study of non-classical works of art and architecture. Moreover, it largely ignores non-European works of art and architecture, and artefacts that fall outside the set categories of painting, sculpture and architecture (i.e.

the decorative arts, studio crafts and industrial design). Further to all of which, it focuses exclusively on the work of male artists while also overlooking differences in sexuality (differences which could be said to have a direct bearing on a number of the biographies contained in *The Lives*, including those of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti). From the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, art historians began to think of these limitations by turns as both arbitrary and unduly restrictive. Consequently, during the period under consideration here we find a progressive liberalization of art history's investigative domain. Consider here, in this regard, works such as Goethe's *Of German Architecture* (1772), which exceeds the expectations imposed by Vasari's seminal vision by taking Gothic architecture as a proper focus for art historical study. Consider here, also, Jacob Burckhardt's *Reflections on Art History* (1872), which also breaks the bounds of Vasari's vision by positing an inclusive, 'pan-cultural' form of art historical enquiry encompassing all of the visual arts and architecture regardless of when, where and by whom they were produced (here the term 'pan-cultural' has been qualified because in the context of late nineteenth century academicism Burckhardt's position cannot be divorced from the concomitant actions of European colonialism). Furthermore, consider, Riegl's *Late Roman Art Industry* where, contrary to the Vasarian paradigm, studio crafts are brought squarely within the bounds of art history's object-domain. In addition to which, consider here also Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1975), published in *Women Art and Power and Other Essays* (1989), and Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1988) both of which seek to develop a feminist understanding of the history of art. Moreover, consider Whitney Davis's essay "'Homosexualism', Gay and Lesbian Studies, and Queer Theory in Art History", published in Cheetham Holly and Moxey's *The Subjects of Art History*, which traces a genealogy of modern art historical concern with questions of sexuality from relatively covert beginnings in relation to the writings of Wincklemann and his development of the term *angeborenlich* as a signifier of, as Davis puts it, the "inborn nature of homoerotic aesthetic sensibility (as distinct from sodomitical and pederastic interest)" [Davis in Cheetham Holly and Moxey eds., 1998: 115] through to overt applications of 'queer' theory within art historical discourse during the nineteen-nineties.

Another of these changes in outlook, as Fernie also points out, is that from the late eighteenth century many art historians began to question the sharp qualitative distinctions ascribed to works of art and architecture by Vasari's cyclical modelling of historical events. Here, we can discern at least seven

significant developments. The first of these, as we have already seen, relates to writings by Goethe where Gothic is brought alongside Classical on the side of ‘good’ art. The second can be found in William Morris’s *The Revival of Architecture* (1888) where the author simply inverts Vasari’s cycle, thereby privileging the Gothic over and above the Classical. The third can be found in Heinrich Wölflinn’s *Principles of Art History* (1915), where Vasari’s cycle is partly abandoned in favour of a somewhat flatter model of artistic development. In this case, two fundamental arguments are put forward: one, that all ‘units of style’ (the Classic, the Gothic, the Baroque, the Rococo etc.) can be understood to develop over time from a condition of limited simplicity to one of limitless complexity – the former being synonymous, as Wölflinn sees it, with the notion of the ‘classic’, and the latter with that of the ‘baroque’ (note here the historically generalising absence of capital letters); and two, that this leaves any work of art or architecture open to a structural analysis based on five pairs of opposing concepts: “the linear versus the painterly”, “plane versus recession”, “closed versus open”, “unity versus multiplicity” and “absolute versus relative clarity”. Clearly, this model can be understood to retain something of the cyclical waxing and waning of the classical style we find in the main preface to Vasari’s *The Lives*. However, it can also be understood to level off the sharp qualitative differences which Vasari makes between the classical and the anti-classical, thereby allowing, very much against the grain of Vasari’s vision, for the decisive elevation of non-classical works of art and architecture to canonical status. The fourth significant development can be found in Roger Fry’s *Vision and Design* (1920). Here Fry makes two fundamental assertions: firstly, that formal innovation is an ahistorical marker of artistic quality; and secondly, that modernist art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involves a sharp departure from established representational modes of artistic expression, but, because of its formal inventiveness, without any overall loss in quality. In this case we therefore find a modelling of history that detaches artistic quality completely from the notion of a single, continuous stylistic tradition. The fifth innovation can be found in Alfred H. Barr’s diagram for the cover of the catalogue accompanying the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of modern Art in New York. Here, late nineteenth and early twentieth century art is shown as having developed through a ‘delta’ shaped model of genealogically linked movements culminating in the distinct but otherwise equal flows of non-geometrical and geometrical abstraction. In this case Barr can therefore be understood to present us with an art historical vision that, contrary to Vasari’s, openly espouses the possibility of a bifurcated tradition within the visual arts. The sixth innovation can be found in the

development, from the nineteen-twenties onwards, of a Marxist or 'social' history of art. While in this case aspects of Vasari's own somewhat teleological view of history are retained as part of a materialist 'righting' of Hegel's idealising view of history, one is nevertheless exhorted to view art's development as something which follows a distinctly teleological path towards a decisive moment of revolutionary change, rather than a potentially open-ended, cyclical pattern of events (the final judgement of souls notwithstanding). Finally, the seventh innovation to be considered here can be found in writings by the critic Clement Greenberg, such as his essay "Modernist Painting", first published in *Art and Literature* no. 4, (Spring 1965) and reprinted in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison's anthology, *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (1982). Here, Kantian notions of an increasing cognitive specialization are brought together with a Hegelian/Marxist influenced view of historical development in support of the assertion that the history of Western painting involves an inexorable movement towards the development of an increasingly pure abstraction. In this case we have a model that can be understood to uphold a Vasarian sense of artistic progression while replacing the supposed constancy of the classical style with a valorized sense of formal innovation akin to that which we find in the writings of Fry.

The third major change in outlook with regard to art history of the period under consideration here is that during the latter half of the nineteenth century many art historians started to form - in line with earlier developments elsewhere both within and beyond the confines of the Academy - what can be seen as an increasingly positivist understanding of their chosen discipline's proper limits and functions. As a consequence, they began to adopt a quasi-scientific approach to study - based principally on the example of academic philology - which not only involved them in the classification, comparison and contrasting of empirical evidence, and its consequential organisation into explanatory taxonomies and developmental patterns, but also in the increasingly forensic methods of the archaeologist, the rationalist organisational principles of museums and libraries and the development of ever more sophisticated technological means of retrieving, recording and analysing information. In line with which, they also began to move away from a deductive approach to art historical interpretation where attempts are made to match the results of empirical research with a previously formulated idea or principle, towards an inductive one where the polarities of that dialectic are reversed and, as Eric Fernie points out, the view is taken that a true representation of the past can only be developed *after* the "careful accumulation of...an incontrovertible mass of fact" [Fernie, 1995: 13].

As Donald Preziosi has pointed out in “The Coy Science”, chapter four of *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science*, the emergence of this scientific approach to research can therefore be understood to have ushered in a markedly altered view of art history’s objects of study. One in which, as Preziosi suggests, art historians no longer contemplated artefacts in order to assess their conformity to an aesthetic ideal and therefore their place within a pre-given, transcendently ordered pattern of events, but instead to gauge their particular significance as part of the remaining evidence of the wider historical context within which they were first produced and received. Put another way, the professional practice of the scientifically minded art historian became more akin to that of the detective than the priest. Consequently, the artwork was transformed from an ultimately autonomous and persistently mysterious focus for study to, as Preziosi puts it, an ostensibly “semantically dense, complex and by and large opaque analysand” whose relationship to the wider panorama of art history could nevertheless be “ex-plicated” through a systematic process of scientific analysis [Preziosi, 1989: 83].

On the basis of these perceived changes in outlook, it is therefore tempting - given Oswyn Murray’s previously discussed identification of two major strains within modern history writing - to think of art history’s emergence as a discrete academic discipline in terms of a marked shift away from an abstract, idealising, ‘Judaeo-Christian’ modelling of historicity - as typified by the work of Vasari - towards a more materially-rooted and qualitatively flatter ‘Greek’ vision. However, it is important to note that art history of the period under consideration here also demonstrates, alongside the modernising, counter-Vasarian changes in outlook described above, a tendency to retain and even promote aspects of its previous discursive incarnation. Take here, for example, Wölfflin’s aforementioned model of artistic development. As we have seen, through this model Wölfflin identifies a timeless, non-hierarchical opposition between the ‘classic’ and the ‘baroque’ that ostensibly appears to do away with the sharp qualitative distinctions at the root of Vasari’s cyclical modelling of art’s history. What is easy to overlook, however, is that this apparently open model also incorporates its own profound sense of qualitative difference, since for Wölfflin the structural opposition between the ‘classic’ and the ‘baroque’ specifically excludes from consideration any ‘primitive’ form of art – such as that found during the preliminary stages of the High Renaissance – where, as Wölfflin has it, “established pictorial form does not yet exist” [Wölfflin in Fernie ed., 1995: 140]. Wölfflin’s model of artistic development can therefore be understood to loosen some of the constraints imposed on art

history's investigative domain by the Vasarian paradigm while at the same maintaining the latter's notion of a clear distinction between those artworks worthy of consideration and those which are not. That is to say, it can be understood to give definition to its founding structural reconciliation of the 'classic' and the 'baroque' (and therefore to have resisted a descent into uncontrolled relativism) only by continuing to uphold a highly decisive sense of what does and does not count as 'good' art. Consider also in this regard the modernist/formalist approach to art historical interpretation advanced by Clement Greenberg in his essay "Modernist Painting". As previously discussed, in this essay the practice of painting is understood to have developed historically towards an ever-increasing state of abstraction and formal specialisation now realised under the aegis of twentieth century Modernism. Moreover, all instances of figurative or representational painting are viewed either as progressive steps on the way towards the historical fulfilment of abstraction or, in the case of contemporary works of art, as aberrant deviations from the prevailing *zeitgeist*. As Paul Wood and Charles Harrison point out in their joint essay "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered", chapter three of *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (1993), it is therefore possible to see the "appearance of coherence and cohesiveness" which Greenberg wishes to uphold in relation to modernist abstraction as something that is only achieved – as in the case of Wölfflin's modelling of stylistic change – "at the expense of other artists and tendencies that are derogated, marginalized or simply ignored" [Harrison and Wood, 1993: 181]. Here, then, the emergence of art history as a discrete academic discipline can be understood to involve a somewhat contradictory movement; one which progressively exceeds the boundaries of Vasari's field of enquiry while continuing to uphold sharp distinctions between what counts as 'good' or 'bad' art. As a result, academic art history can be thought of not so much as a wholesale departure from the Judaeo-Christian idealism of the Vasarian tradition, as a series of attempts to reconcile the Manichean form of its basic value structure with more open (and, it has to be said, professionally fertile) historical models.

Further to this, it is also possible to discern a similar form of discursive inconsistency in relation to academic art history's adoption of a scientific approach to study. As previously suggested, the adoption of this approach can be understood to involve a departure from the deductive metaphysics of the Vasarian paradigm and a gravitation towards a more materially rooted, inductive form of research. Moreover, it can also be understood to have substituted the Vasarian view that works of art are worldly markers of an obscure and timeless transcendental authority with another, more positivist

outlook where they are to be seen as potential indexes of material circumstance. Consequently, as Preziosi points out in *Rethinking Art History*, the stability of art historical meaning was something that could no longer be vouchsafed by appeals to a divine legislative power beyond the limits of the temporal world. Rather, it had to be underwritten by a number of key assumptions about the structural relationship between works of art as 'text' and the wider 'context' within which they were first produced and received. The first of these is that, as Preziosi puts it, "the objects in [art history's] domain were in some sense stable entities with determinable significations". That is to say, it was assumed that artworks were unchanging texts with a potentially comprehensible significance. The second is "that art works say, express, or reveal something determinate (with respect to which a certain indeterminacy or ineffability was to be construed as a species of determinacy)". In other words, it was assumed that the significance of artworks had a fixed scope even where that significance was itself somewhat vague or doubtful. And the third was that a purely formal consideration of the possibilities of artistic signification simply detaches art works from the limitations imposed on meaning by their particular place within a wider context of historical events [Preziosi, 1989: 82-83]. Here, then, we find the basis for art historical research moving away from a faith in the divine as an ultimate source of meaning towards a faith in the power of the artwork to *represent* the conditions of its initial production and reception. Consequently, as Preziosi goes on to point out, art history's assimilation of scientific method can be understood to involve an attempt to leave the mystifications of the Vasarian past behind and to place itself firmly at the centre of a "*theatrum analyticum* for the study of an ontologically pre-given class of phenomena over time" [Preziosi, 1989: 83].

However, as Preziosi goes on to point out, at the same time as establishing this supposedly stable, panoptical arena for art historical research, art historians of the nineteenth century also began to promote two contrasting methods of reading whose ultimate lack of compatibility can be understood to undermine the intellectual foundations upon which it had been built. One of these, as Preziosi tells us, is what might be called an 'essentialist' form of semiotics first articulated by the theologians of the Port-Royal in eighteenth century France. According to this approach, the work of art is not to be seen simply as the *re*-presentation of some missing presence, but rather as the Eucharistic *presentation* of a singular transcendental state of being. That is to say, it is to be thought of as a "perfect, pure, and transparent signifier", which is no mere symbol or simulacrum, but a direct affirmation of the "very body" of that which it presents [Preziosi, 1989: 102-3]. Consider here, for example, paintings and

sculptures portraying royalty or the aristocratic ruling class, which can be interpreted under the semiological rubric of the eighteenth century Port-Royal as the embodiment of an immanent authority. The other form of reading is, as Preziosi would have it, a 'modernist' or 'structuralist' form of semiotics shared, Preziosi argues, by the eighteenth century philosopher John Locke, the nineteenth century art/cultural historian Hippolyte Taine and the nineteenth/twentieth century structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In the case of this approach to reading, the artwork is seen as the index of a dynamic, synchronous working out and working through of world-views through the medium of language; one which, as Preziosi suggests, involves a complex set of "causal connections among phenomena in the world, wherein the object or work may relate to an absent cause by any number of semiotic relationships" [Preziosi, 1989: 106]. Clearly, it is possible to align both of these approaches with a scientific approach to study because each sustains the notion of a true being which can be represented objectively through language; in the case of the former, one whose static presence is transubstantiated directly into works of art regardless of differences in form, and in the case of the latter, one whose dynamism and plurality finds its reflection both in cultural differences and the play of language. Equally clear, however, is that these differing perspectives cannot be maintained simultaneously. This is because, as Preziosi points out, the former involves a closed form of reading where there is perceived to be straightforward, transitive correspondence between the artwork and the state of being to which it relates, while the latter involves a more open-ended approach that leaves room for differing lines of interpretation. Here, then, we find interwoven with a scientific approach to art historical research a highly divisive and destabilizing difference of views over the acceptable limits of signification; and one that would appear to carry with it traces of the tension between 'systematic' and 'unsystematic' views of history we arguably find throughout the proceeding development art historical discourse.

In addition to this, it is also possible to discern a slippage between each of the approaches to reading discussed above and the underlying linguistic principles of a scientific art history. In the case of the former, 'essentialist' approach we find the retention of a fundamentally mystical link between signifier and signified highly reminiscent of Vasari's idealising view of art. While, in the case of the latter, structuralist approach we find the distinct possibility of a descent into outright relativism at odds with a classical scientific desire for objectivity. Consequently, far from being a stabilizing influence, a scientific approach to art historical study can be seen to harbour not only divergent and essentially

incompatible approaches to the reading of works of art – a state of affairs that Preziosi likens to the paradoxical perspectival condition of a Necker Cube – but also approaches to reading that effectively double back on their apparent conformity to the notion of scientific objectivity.

A prime example of this unsettling semiotic bifurcation can be seen to occur, we would argue, in relation to the development of a ‘social’ history of art, which has its roots in nineteenth century art history. Here we find two distinct but overlapping strains of thought, both of which draw upon Marx’s supposedly scientific analysis of capitalist economics. The first is an ‘orthodox’ strain that, in its most extreme form, sees art as an inert superstructural embodiment of the workings of the economic base. The second is a ‘sophisticated’ strain that, while deferring in the ‘final analysis’ to the workings of the economic base, sees the relationship between a superstructural art and the base as a more open, multi-faceted and interactive one. From a sophisticated viewpoint, an orthodox position is simply too reductive in its grasp of historical conditions and is therefore in danger of presenting itself as a form of negative theology. While from an orthodox viewpoint, a sophisticated position harbours the danger of a descent into bourgeois relativism that can only be avoided by a doubling-back to an orthodox – in the last instance - faith in the primacy of the economic base. When taken together, we therefore have two incompatible views of art, one relatively ‘closed’ the other relatively ‘open’, which can nevertheless be understood to stem from a common, though in each case ultimately destabilizing, intellectual root. That is to say, it could be argued that in making a choice between the two positions the ‘social’ art historian is unable simply to go one way or the other, since his or her ultimate belief in material conditions as the prime mover of historical events can be understood to carry with it persistent traces of a supposedly abandoned metaphysical idealism. Consequently, it is possible to perceive in relation to academic art history’s adoption of Marxist, scientific principles, not the negation of the metaphysics of the Vasarian past, but the substitution (in part at least) of one metaphysical vision for another.

Further to all of this, as Fernie suggests in the following passage from *Art History and its Methods*, it could be argued that in writing up the results of empirical research the ‘scientific’ art historian is unable to arrive at a wholly objective, unmediated representation of historical events because of an unavoidable entanglement with linguistic metaphor:

[I]t is probably impossible to think about the past without giving it a metaphorical shape, such as a map or a road, or images of strata from archaeology, or sequences of rooms from architecture. The character of the model being used needs to be acknowledged and understood, as it carries assumptions which can affect the way in which problems are handled. Thus a river or an archaeological section appears to present the past as indeterminate and open-ended, whereas a road or building may be

more systematic and Hegelian in its implications. We also have at least two views of the past, each of which can affect the model in a different way, by producing, for instance, a myopically close structure for the first and something much more abstract for the second". [Ferne, 1995: 343]

As Ferne suggests here, it could be averred that in writing historical narratives we must invariably resort to metaphor as a means of giving shape to our understanding of the past. Furthermore, it could also be argued that in doing so our writing is then made subject to the strictures of a conscious or unconscious set of assumptions bound up with our choice of metaphorical image. As a result, the supposed objectivity of a scientific approach to art historical research can be brought sharply into question on the grounds that one's historical viewpoint is always subject to the possibility of some form of unrecognized linguistic mediation.

In addition to this, however, it could be averred that such engagements with metaphor also invoke an imaginative sense of signification at odds with the belief that science has the potential to circumvent the vagaries of language and arrive at a true representation of historical events. That is to say, they can be seen to work not through a supposedly direct correspondence between the artwork as textual sign and a wider contextual referent, but through indirect and unstable chains of linguistic signification of a kind more usually associated with the poetic content of works of art. Consequently, it is no longer clear that a chosen metaphor will be read in a given way at all times, since its significance will always be subject to the influence of individual subjectivity or, indeed, collective cultural difference both in terms of its production and reception. Here, then, it could be argued that while linguistic metaphor constrains one's world-view to some degree, such views are never made wholly pure or stable through language. Take here, for example, Ferne's perception of the difference in significance between a road and a river when used as metaphors. In the passage cited above Ferne suggests that the road as metaphor is a marker of determinacy and the river a marker of indeterminacy. We would argue, however, that this sense of dualistic opposition is an unstable one, since, as we have already seen in the case of Wincklemann, an apparently conscious use of metaphor in support of an abstract, systematic view of history has the potential to be read against its own grain as the marker of a more indeterminate art historical vision. Consequently, any use of metaphor in relation to a scientific understanding of art's history should not just be seen as a conscious or unconscious form of linguistic mediation, but also as a polysemic figure with the potential to turn meaning back upon itself.

In addition to all of the above, it can also be argued that art history's claim to scientific objectivity is severely compromised by the influence of those conscious and unconscious ideological positions from which its adherents speak. Take here, for example, the involvement of many academic art historians with the identification, authentication and interpretation of art works for the international art market; something that ultimately qualifies readings of artworks that challenge capitalist values. Take also here the influence of individual self-interest, careerism, social self-aggrandisement or the defence of established intellectual positions, or cultural factors, such as one's position in relation to social structures such as class, gender and race. As a result, it is not entirely clear that the art historian can ever achieve a desired state of scientific objectivity.

To summarise, then, academic art history's claim to scientific objectivity can be problematised in a number of ways: firstly, on the grounds that it harbours contradictory views of linguistic signification - one of which tends towards an upholding of difference and the other of singularity in the reading of works of art; secondly, on the grounds that those contradictory views can be understood to reach across one another's conceptual boundaries, thereby compromising any notion that one can simply choose between the two; thirdly, because the explanatory ordering of the results of scientific research can be understood to rely unavoidably upon the unstable signification of linguistic metaphors; and fourthly, because a scientific viewpoint cannot be disassociated convincingly from the influence of ideology, which can itself be understood to take shape unstably through language. Consequently, the notion that art history's appropriation of scientific principles represents a radical departure from the metaphysical mystifications of the Vasarian past must be brought sharply into question.

Indeed, one might add to this problematic state of affairs by pointing out that alongside the shift towards positivist thinking within academic art history we also find a continuing strain of consciously and unconsciously applied art historical idealism. While art history's emergence as an academic discipline during the latter half of the nineteenth century can be understood to have involved a number of significant departures from the metaphysical paradigm developed by Vasari during the sixteenth century, in one crucial respect at least art history remained closely tied to the thinking that had sustained it during the period from the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century. Throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, and despite the radical expansion and diversification of the discipline during that time, it was usual for academic art historians to uphold, as Vasari had before them, an explicit belief in their discipline's capacity to arrive at a single, totalizing

vision through which the history of the visual arts might be comprehensively revealed to the present. Indeed, during the century and a half leading up to the last quarter of the twentieth century it is possible to think of art history as a forum for competing visions of this sort. As such, these competing visions can be understood to fall into three main categories. Firstly, visions which involve a more or less direct continuation of the transcendental idealism promoted by Vasari, Bellori and Wincklemann. Consider here, for example, Alois Riegl's aforementioned development of the notion of *kunstwollen* in works such as *Problems of Style Late Roman Art Industry*. Consider also Paul Frankl's contention, in *Principles of Architectural History* (1914), that spiritual forces transcending material influence or artistic intention have ultimately determined the development of artistic styles. Moreover, consider Erwin Panofsky's contention, in lecture texts such as "What is Baroque?" (1934), published in *Three Essays on Style* (1995), that the influence of material conditions and artistic intention on the development of style is always subordinate to dialectical forces generated by opposing concepts embedded in the *zeitgeist* of a given time and place. Clearly, in each of these cases it is possible to trace a line of thought that reaches back via Wincklemann's influence on Hegel to the idealising rationale for art inherited by Vasari from the writings of Alberti. Secondly, visions which relate to the emergence of a 'social' history of art and its attempt to explain the development of art and architecture not just in terms of a dialectical interaction between material forces but also a teleological progression towards radical social and political change. Take here, for example, Marxist influenced histories of art such as Max Raphael's *The Marxist Theory of Art* (1932), Frederick Antal's *Remarks on the Method of Art History* (1949), Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* (1951) and *Philosophy of Art History* (1959) as well as T.J. Clark's *The Image of the People* and *The Painting of Modern Life*, all of which can be understood to retain within them traces of Vasari's systematic vision of artistic development. And thirdly, visions which attempt to reconcile the material and the spiritual under the heading of a 'cultural' history of art. Take here, for example, Jacob Burckhardt's dual assertion, in *Reflections on History* (1872), that "[s]ince mind like matter, is mutable, and the changes of time bear away ceaselessly the forms which are the vesture of material as of spiritual life, the task of history as a whole is to show its twin aspects, distinct yet identical, proceeding from the fact that firstly, the spiritual, in whatever domain it is perceived, has a historical aspect under which it appears as change, as the contingent, as a passing moment which forms part of a vast whole beyond our powers to divine, and that, secondly, every event has a spiritual aspect by which it partakes of immortality...[f]or the spirit

knows change, but not mortality” and that history should therefore involve the conception of “a vast spiritual map on the projection of an immense ethnography, embracing both the material and the spiritual world and striving to do justice to all races, people, manners and religions together” [Burckhardt in Fernie ed., 1995: 87, our square brackets]. In this latter case we find an openly acknowledged adherence to the transcendental spirituality of the Vasarian paradigm alongside a desire to focus on the material influence of culture.

Here, then, it could be argued that academic art history is not simply an arena for the ascendancy of a scientific/materialist approach to study over a metaphysical/idealising one, but is instead the site of a persistent, unreconciled difference whereby scientific/materialist and metaphysical/idealist views of history continue to operate within the same discursive domain. It could of course be argued that cultural histories of art form an attempt to arrive at a synthetic resolution of these seemingly polar opposites. However, as we have tried to show in relation to a Marxist art history, there is ultimately both a continuing difference between materialist and idealist views of history and a cross-infection of one with the other which compromises the purity of both positions. Consequently, not only is it possible to unsettle the anti-metaphysical positivism of academic art history on the grounds that it harbours within itself numerous unresolved semiological and methodological uncertainties and contradictions, but also on the grounds that academic art history as a whole continues to display traces of an unstable, interdependent opposition between ‘systematic’ and ‘unsystematic’ narratives of historicity that, as we have attempted to demonstrate in previous chapters of this dissertation, can be found running through the art historical discourse of Antiquity and of the period from the mid-fourteenth century to the late eighteenth century.

Further to this, it is also possible to find a similar tension in relation to the expansion and diversification of academic art history’s field of enquiry. Here, at least two points can be made. The first is that academic art history’s departure from the sharp qualitative distinctions of the Vasarian paradigm and the accompanying expansion and diversification of its investigative domain can be understood to have transformed art historical discourse from the site of a widespread conformity to a single paradigmatic view of history into an arena for widely differing perspectives on the history of art. Here, not only does art history begin to embrace a multiplicity of styles and practices specifically excluded from Vasari’s art historical vision, but, as we have seen above, it also becomes an arena for competition between markedly differing narratives of historicity. As a result, while the discipline as a

whole can be seen to continue on the basis that it is possible to arrive at a single, all encompassing meta-narrative through which the art of the past can be represented truthfully to the present, there is nevertheless within the art history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an increasingly conspicuous theoretical and methodological diversification at odds with this belief. The second point to be made relates to continuing attempts by art historians since Antiquity to place the art of their own time within some sort of historical continuum. Consider here, for example, Vasari's *The Lives* which, as we have seen, seeks to frame Italianate neo-classical art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in relation to a much wider, systematic understanding of art's historical development. Consider also the view advanced by Greenberg in "Modernist Painting" that the history of art involves an inexorable progression towards abstraction. As Preziosi points out in his introduction to *The Art of Art History*, here art history is to be thought of not only as a means of surveying the past, but also as an attempt to identify a continuity between past and present upon which a present sense of modernity might be safely constructed. He writes:

From its beginnings, and in concert with its allied professions, art history worked to make the past synoptically visible so that it might function in and upon the present; so that the present might be seen as the demonstrable product of a particular past; and so that the past so staged might be framed as an object of historical desire: figured as that from which a modern citizen might desire descent. [Preziosi ed, 1998: 18]

Clearly, when viewed in relation to the increasingly conspicuous diversification of art history throughout the period under question here such notions begin to look decidedly ill-founded, given the evident lack of consensus amongst art historians as to what might constitute the proper inheritance of modern art; moreover, when we look at attempts by art historians of the twentieth century to reconcile the modernist art of their own time with art's wider history we find increased difficulties. In this case Modernism's radical departure from traditional forms of artistic practice can be seen to involve - despite a modernist desire to uphold a lineage of formal invention common to all good works of art - an undeniable discontinuity with the art of the past. Here, then, it is possible to discern yet another set of conceptual reversals that highlight the inherently contradictory nature of academic art history.

To complicate matters still further, we would also aver that the conceptual discontinuities and slippages which accompany the emergence of academic art history do not arise - as might appear to be the case - simply out of an unbroken tradition of dialectical tensions between 'systematic' and 'unsystematic' strains of thought. Rather, we would contend that the possibility of their conceptuality is made possible, as we have already attempted to show in relation to the Vasarian paradigm, by a

continuing process of displacement and remotivation involving a non-hierarchical interaction between art historical discourse and changing historical circumstances. In other words, we would argue that it is possible to see within academic art history the persistence of a highly unsettling movement of discursive difference and deferral which can be understood not only to have rendered art history chronically unstable, but also to have enabled it to renew itself in relation to changing circumstances of time and place. In the case of academic art history one would look principally towards the industrial and cultural modernization and colonialism of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Here, then, while the line of argument ventured above could be said to impute a degree of continuity to art historical discourse, given that it rests upon an iterative interaction between 'unsystematic' and 'systematic' narratives of historicity, it must also be admitted that any sense of continuity that might be found must be set against a countervailing sense of instability and rupture. As we have attempted to show, it is possible to see art historical discourse from Antiquity up to the last quarter of the twentieth century not just as the site of a constant interaction between 'systematic' and 'unsystematic' views of history, but also as a divided field persistently riven by methodological differences and conceptual undecideability. Consequently, art historical discourse over this extended period could be said to comprise a long-standing tradition of dialectical thought interlaced with a dynamic and ultimately destabilising series of discursive breaks. This suggests, we would argue, that art historical discourse is not simply a self-replicating formation that has adapted successfully, in an evolutionary manner, to changing conditions over time, but is something continually open to the possibility of radical transformation beyond its prevailing limits. Indeed, it is possible to discern something of this in relation to some of the points put forward above. Despite the dynamic conceptual tension between 'systematic' and 'unsystematic' strains of thought which can be understood to have characterized art historical discourse since Antiquity, up until the late twentieth century it is possible to trace at least one constant; namely, the belief that art history has the capacity to arrive at a single, representational vision of its object of study. As we have already seen, this is a view maintained not just by idealist art historians whose work emerges out of the remnants of Vasari's nakedly metaphysical paradigm, but also their scientific/materialist and cultural counterparts (and indeed any shades in between). Equally evident however, as we have also tried to show, is that the various innovations in thinking associated with the emergence of academic art history – an expanded and diversified field of enquiry; a reassessment of Vasari's qualitative distinctions; and the development of

a positivist approach to study – work, both singly and in concert, to undermine the relatively sharp perspectival focus previously enjoyed by art historical discourse. Consequently, we find in relation to the persistence of a dialectical tension between the ‘systematic’ and the ‘unsystematic’ in art historical discourse a set of interacting discursive transformations that point towards a decisive breaking with the basic conceptual order of conventional academic discourse. However, instead of bringing art history to a full stop, as one might expect, an understanding of the sort outlined above can be seen to have underlain a persistence of art historical discourse beyond a standard nineteenth and twentieth century academicism, and it is towards a consideration of this ‘new’ art history that we now turn.

Chapter IV: The New Art History

The fourth period to be considered here extends without conclusion from the early part of the nineteen-seventies through to the present day to encompass the emergence and development of what has come to be known as ‘The New Art History’. Although the name ‘The New Art History’ appears to have been used in public for the first time in relation to a conference held at Middlesex Polytechnic in 1982 entitled “The New Art History?” [Rees and Borzello, 1986: 3], the somewhat uncertain ‘movement’ to which it refers can be understood to have its beginnings some eight or ten years earlier during the first half of the nineteen-seventies. At this time the academic discipline of art history was at the high point of a period of unprecedented growth as part of a general expansion in further and higher education provision initiated in many parts of the world during the years following the end of the Second World War. In the United Kingdom, for example, prior to the Second World War art historical research had largely been confined to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and to the Courtauld and Warburg institutes in London. After the War, however, art history departments began to multiply at a prodigious rate, first becoming established within ‘old’ universities such as Edinburgh, London and Reading, then within ‘new’ universities such as East Anglia, Essex and Sussex and finally within polytechnics (these institutions having since become universities in their own right) and art schools right across the United Kingdom [Rees and Borzello, 1986: 6]. As a result, by the early nineteen-seventies art history’s profile within the Academy was much greater than at any time in the past.

In addition to this, by the early nineteen-seventies many of the concerns and interests of the academic art historian had begun to reach a growing non-specialist audience through high-profile exhibitions, media broadcasts and the publication of numerous, richly illustrated books. Take here, for example, Sir Kenneth Clark's BBC television series *Civilization* (1969) and the book of the same name which accompanied it, or John Berger's rather more overtly politicized and demotic BBC television series *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and its eponymous publication, or indeed any number of popularising exhibitions held in the major museums and art galleries of the world and their accompanying catalogues. Further to which, during the nineteen-seventies art history was able to maintain a position of some influence within society through its long-standing associations with ruling-class patronage and the international art market. Think here, for example, of the dual role occupied in the United Kingdom during the nineteen-seventies by Sir Anthony Blunt as both director of the Courtauld Institute and the keeper of the Queen's pictures – a role famously brought into sharp political relief by revelations of Blunt's activities as a soviet spy.

Here, then, it is possible to see that by the beginning of the last quarter of the twentieth century art history had established a significant and hitherto unimagined presence for itself both inside and outside the Academy. However, the material expansion which lay behind this enhanced presence can also be seen to have brought with it a virulent form of self-reflexivity which was eventually to undermine all of the basic assumptions upon which art history's initial claim to academic respectability had been founded.

It is often assumed that a highly interdisciplinary approach to academic research is a present-day phenomenon. However, by the beginning of the nineteen-seventies it was not unusual to find art historians turning to other fields and disciplines for novel ways of illuminating their chosen field of enquiry. Clear evidence of this can be found if we turn to W. Eugene Kleinbauer's *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History - An Anthology of Twentieth Century Writings on the Visual Arts* (1971). Here, we find, alongside selected texts addressing concerns usually considered intrinsic to art historical discourse, such as iconography and iconology, connoisseurship, syntactical analysis, formal change, period distinctions and documentary studies in architectural history, a number of others grouped under the general title "*Extrinsic Perspectives*" which focus on, by then, well-established interdisciplinary links between art history and psychology, art history and social/cultural history and art history and the history of ideas. As Kleinbauer's text makes clear, for the most part these

interdisciplinary links were made as a way of extending the scope of art historical research along unorthodox lines and therefore as a means of shedding new light on familiar objects. Consider here, for example, the link between art history and the writings of Karl Marx where a strong tradition of writing can be traced back to the nineteen-thirties which seeks to make a connection between art historical research and the domains of social and political science.

By the early to middle part of the nineteen-seventies, however, through the work of writers such as T.J. Clark and Laura Mulvey, art historical interdisciplinarity had taken a very different turn. Here, in texts such as Clark's *On the Social History of Art, Image of the People* and *The Absolute Bourgeoisie* (all 1973) and Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", first published in *Screen*, 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), we find an appropriation of discourses from outside of art history that begin not just to stretch the limits, but also to unsettle the founding principles of established art historical discourse. As John Roberts points out in his introductory essay to *Art Has No History!*, throughout Clark's writing of the early nineteen-seventies there is an attempt to align art history with a sophisticated, late Althusserian Marxism and its vision of the artwork as a site of ideological contestation and negotiation [Roberts, 1994: .11-13]. On the face of it, this project sustains many aspects of traditional art historical discourse; most notably the notion of a identifiable canon and, as Clark's now notorious article "The Conditions of Artistic Creation" [*Times Literary Supplement*, 24th of May, 1974, p.562] makes clear, a unitary art historical vision. However, as John Tagg suggests in his essay "Art History and Difference" (1985), Clark's alignment of art history with Althusserian Marxist theory can also be understood to imply, through the concept of overdetermination, "an accumulation of analyses corresponding to the complexly overdetermined nature of cultural production itself" whose "different theoretical statuses and different levels of application...cannot be ranked or put into a hierarchy in advance" [Tagg in Rees and Borzello eds, 1986: 165-166]. Consequently, Clark can also be understood to have inadvertently opened up art history to the possibility of an unhierarchically differentiated theoretical and methodological pluralism which not only undermines Marxism's 'in the last instance' reliance on the dialectics of class asymmetry as the prime mover of historical events, but also a conventional academic faith in art history's capacity to arrive at a single, all-encompassing meta-narrative.

In addition to this, Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" can be understood to challenge the foundations of academic art history in two further ways. Firstly, Mulvey's

essay emerges from outside of the then established limits of academic art historical discourse, in that it deals with an idiom, Hollywood cinema, which was thought of by many academic art historians at that time as being neither ‘art’ in the proper sense, nor sufficiently ‘historical’. Secondly, in her essay Mulvey opens up a line of argument, based on a conjunction of psychoanalytic and feminist theory, that posits the possibility of an ‘aesthetic’ vision in the cinema beyond the conventional Kantian notion that images in art are presented primarily as sources of pleasure for the viewing subject. Consequently, Mulvey can be understood to have adopted a position on matters of artistic interpretation that calls not just for an expansion of art history’s field of enquiry into hitherto neglected or overlooked areas, but also for a radical rethinking of its philosophical precepts on the subject of what counts as art; a stance echoed by Adrian Rifkin’s description of a general feminist approach to art history in his essay “Art’s Histories”, which he suggests stands in relation to art history both “as an iconoclastic danger from without and a demand for the transformation of its professional relations and directions of study from within” [Rifkin in Rees and Borzello eds., 1986: 162].

Here, then, we find two interdisciplinary approaches to art historical research, one Marxist and the other psychoanalytical/feminist, which would appear to point towards the expansion of academic art history, not as the widening of a unitary domain, but as a movement towards a state of theoretical and methodological diversification in which a conventional academic understanding of the categories of ‘history’ and of ‘art’ are brought sharply into question.

In the years immediately following the publication of Clark and Mulvey’s aforementioned writings, it is possible to see the state of diversity and challenge to which they point as something that becomes more and more marked in practice. From the mid-nineteen-seventies onwards growing numbers of art historians began to move the principal focus of their activities away from the capturing, storing and retrieving of information and the taxonomic ordering of objects - which was at that time the conventional, scientific *modus operandi* of most of their colleagues - towards the more ‘creative’ possibilities offered by a critical interpretation of artistic meaning. Here, not least because of the introduction into the Academy of (supposedly) labour-saving, computer related and lens-based technologies⁴², art historians turned increasingly for a sense of direction to other areas of the

⁴² For a discussion of computer related technologies and their relationship to contemporary art historical research, see William Vaughn’s essay “Computer Applications for Art History” in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey eds., *The Subjects of Art History: Historical objects in Contemporary Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, 1998, pp. 308-327.

humanities where various forms of ‘continental’ – feminist, psychoanalytical, structuralist, Marxist and post-colonialist - theory had already been used to unsettle the established conventions of academic discourse. As a result, there was in the ten years from the mid-nineteen-seventies to the mid-nineteen-eighties a significant expansion in the number of theoretical and methodological positions adopted by art historians towards their field of study⁴³. This multi-faceted critical tendency within art historical discourse, which came to be known from the early nineteen-eighties onwards as ‘The New Art History’ through events such as the Middlesex Polytechnic conference of 1982 and the publication of landmark texts such as Rees and Borzello’s *The New Art History*, can therefore be understood to have extended and amplified the critical self-reflexivity of writers like Clark and Mulvey to take art history away from any lingering appearance of homogeneity into a recognized state of interpretative diversity. It is therefore possible to see the development of ‘The New Art History’ as something which moves disciplinary art history away from the relatively straightforward contest between differing visions of totality which had characterised it throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, towards a more complex stand-off between those art historians able to sustain a believe in the possibility of a single, all explanatory art historical vision and those attached to the notion of an unstinting art historical pluralism.

Furthermore, as A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello make clear in their introduction to *The New Art History*, many of the ‘new’ art historians of the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties continued to espouse the issues-based, left-leaning politics of a Clarkian Social History of Art and/or Mulvey’s radical feminism out of which the ‘New Art History’ can be understood to have emerged. Consequently, The New Art History’s adherence to the notion of an inescapable diversity in art

⁴³ The various strands of critical theory and methodology applied to contemporary art historical study are surveyed in Donald Preziosi ed., *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1998. Here, in the introduction Preziosi argues that this collecting together of texts is neither a “history of art history” nor “a historical novel with a beginning, middle and end”, but is instead “rather more of an assemblage, or cabinet of provocative things to think with, each of which has multiple connections to others, both within this anthology and elsewhere”. See Preziosi ed., 1998, p.9. Preziosi can, therefore be seen not only to have presented his reader with the current diversity of art history writing, but to have done so through a web like ‘structuring’ of texts consistent with the new Art History’s problematisation of conventional forms of art historical narrative. Moreover, Preziosi can also be seen to have problematised any notion of a fixed boundary between the academic discipline of art history and the art to which it relates when he states in the introduction to *The Art of Art History* that the work is intended to be “an ‘anthology’ in the older sense of the word – an accounting of things which in their variety and allure might resemble a garden of flowers; a collection of texts that, in some cases, have been appreciated as fine works of art in their own right” See Preziosi ed., 1998, p. 9. Another discussion of the theoretical and methodological diversity of contemporary art history can be found in Marcia Pointon, *History of Art: A Students’ Handbook*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997.

historical discourse can be seen as aligned with counter-hegemonic cultural tendencies focussed on overturning not only the standing structures of conventional art history, but also those of society in general. It is therefore also possible to view 'The New Art History' of the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties very much as Rees and Borzello did in 1986 when they wrote in the introduction to *The New Art history* that:

“[t]he new art historians question, giving not only art but the society which enshrines it a long, hard look. They question the status of art, and the most automatic assumption that art means paintings and sculptures in certain styles. They ask how such objects and not others came to be called 'art' in the first place, and why they alone are worthy of study. Unimpressed by the special claims made for art, they ask what purpose it served for the people who owned it and for those who look at it today in books, stately homes, museums and galleries. Art's subject matter is scrutinized and questions asked as to why the poor, or landscapes, or women look as they do in the 'representations' art makes of them. Art's economic and political role in contemporary society is addressed, in particular the sometimes camouflaged links between scholarship and the market, and the uses made of art by states or corporations anxious to polish up their images. Not even the founding fathers of the discipline escape their severe stare. Fuelled by strong social and political beliefs which they wave like banners above their heads, the new art historians are led by a self-consciousness about their own points of view to question the claims of earlier historians to produce objective scholarship. [Rees and Borzello eds, 1986: 4]

As this passage shows, for Rees and Borzello, writing in the mid nineteen-eighties, The New Art History was in essence a highly politicized movement, which was not looking to pursue an existing art historical agenda, but to establish another, alternative one based on a relentless round of inward looking criticism and a persistent upholding of difference from established norms.

As anyone familiar with contemporary art historical discourse knows, since the mid-nineteen-eighties an ever-increasing number of academic art historians have come to support the idea that art history is an inescapably heterogeneous focus for study. Take here, for example, the stance taken by Iain Borden and David Dunster in their introduction to *Architecture and the Sites of History: Interpretations of Buildings and Cities* (1995):

This book is grounded on a simple assertion; that the history of architecture and cities is capable of being explained and interpreted in many different ways, and that any understanding of these subjects should excavate below the surface of facts and objects to unearth and confront the multiplicity of possible meanings. In short, there is no single way, and still less any 'right way', of knowing what architecture and cities are all about. [Borden and Dunster eds, 1995: 1].

As this passage indicates, for Borden and Dunster it is clearly no longer possible to think of the history of architecture and cities as something that can be encapsulated by a single, totalising narrative. Rather, for them it is something to be explained and interpreted through a form of archaeological

excavation “below the surface of facts and objects”, where, if we follow Borden and Dunster’s metaphor closely, the decomposition and fragmentation of meaning under the accumulated weight of historical circumstance precludes any final, unitary form of understanding. Consider here also Cheetham Holly and Moxey’s previously discussed assertion, in the introduction to *The Subjects of Art History*, that the intellectual excitement of contemporary art historical discourse stems precisely from the fact that it promises its students “neither a unified field of study nor a time-tested methodology for analysing visual images” [Cheetham, Holly and Moxey, 1998: 1].

In addition to this, the deconstructing iconoclasm of the ‘New Art History’ can also be seen to have informed certain instances of art historical writing aimed at a non-specialist audience. Take here, for example, Andrew Graham Dixon’s recent attempt to unsettle the conventionally accepted boundaries and characteristics of the art and architecture of the Renaissance in the BBC television series *Renaissance* (1999), or Matthew Colling’s reworking of the standing myths of modernist art in the Channel Four series *This is Modern Art* (1999), both of which arguably set out to present an essentially heterogenous vision of historical events.

Here, then it is possible to see ‘The New Art History’ moving away from its initial position as a straightforward critical other to conventional art history to occupy a place squarely within the mainstream of the discipline. However, despite the high profile that ‘The New Art History’ now appears to enjoy both inside and outside the Academy, it is not at all clear that a consensus has emerged on what its arrival means for the future development of art historical discourse. Indeed it is possible to discern at least three views on the possible implications of the ‘heterodoxy’ represented by the notion of a ‘new’ art history.

As Donald Preziosi points out in *Rethinking Art History*, one of these views can be understood to rest on the (modernist) assumption that art historical discourse has the potential to follow an essentially progressive, teleological trajectory towards an increasingly unified and truthful representation of art’s history [Preziosi, 1989: 13]. On the basis of this assumption, the growing diversification of contemporary art history begins to look at best like a divergence from this trajectory and at worst a block to meaningful progress within the discipline. Thinking of this sort can therefore be seen to accommodate two possible points of view: firstly, an optimistic one that art history can be returned to its former state of progressive revelation; and secondly, a pessimistic one that the development of art historical discourse has now been permanently arrested.

Examples of the first of these points of view are relatively easy to find. Consider, for example, the view put forward by John Roberts in the introduction to *Art has No History!*. Here, Roberts points out that from the mid nineteen-eighties onwards it is possible to discern, in texts such as Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* and *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893* (1993), the growing influence of poststructuralist thinking on art history. According to Roberts, this poststructuralist strand of art historical discourse centres on the rejection of a structured privileging and subordination of concepts in language. Consequently, argues Roberts, despite arguments to the contrary from the likes of Pollock, 'The New Art History' can be seen to depart radically from its Marxist roots by explaining art not in terms of "hierarchy *and* difference" as would a standard Marxist vision of art history with its ultimate reliance on class asymmetry as the prime mover of historical events, but instead in "terms of interrelations of difference", that is to say in terms of interrelations between equally regarded notions of class, gender and race [Roberts, 1994: 18]. Here then, as Roberts sees it, it is possible to make a distinction between a continuing tradition of sophisticated Marxist-influenced art historical writing which seeks to promote interpretative complexity while ultimately concentrating on hierarchical class difference as the prime mover of historical events, and a deconstructing, essentially bourgeois, "New Art History" based on the view that representations of gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality each have "their own logics of identity and interrelation" [Roberts, 1994: 17]. For Roberts, 'The New Art History' is not to be seen, therefore, simply as an extension of the revolutionary Marxist/feminist art history of the early to mid-nineteen-seventies, as the view reported by Rees and Borzello would have it, but (in its poststructuralist incarnation at least) as something which leads to a radical reversal of Marxist principles. Consequently, there is for Roberts, as we shall see in more detail below, a pressing need to return art history away from the confusion supposedly wrought by a poststructuralist New Art history to a more genuinely progressive agenda still offered by a Marxist attention to art historical discourse. Consider here also in this regard Michael Ann Holly's essay, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (1984), where, as Preziosi points out in *Rethinking Art History*, it is argued that there is a need to return to the work of the twentieth century art historian Erwin Panofsky, who in texts such as *Die Perspektive als 'Symbolische Form'* (*Perspective as Symbolic Form*) (1924-25), Holly avers, was able to suggest in advance a way of circumventing the confusion brought about by the diverse semiologies at work within contemporary art historical discourse [Preziosi, 1989: 112-114].

Finding examples of the second, pessimistic view of The New Art history is in some ways more difficult, however. Indeed - perhaps because the adoption of such a point of view would almost certainly amount to an act of professional suicide on the part of any art historian willing to do so - to get a flavour of it one has to look beyond specialist writings on the subject of art history to more obviously theoretical speculations about the end of art and its history. Take here, for example, key texts by Arthur C. Danto and Peter Bürger. According to Danto, writing in his text *The State of Art* (1987), art has now become congruent with its institutional essence at the end of a period during which modernist art had enquired self-reflexively into where the limits of its particular sphere of activities lay⁴⁴. For Danto art has, therefore, become 'post-historical' since all possible aesthetic strategies have been played out, leaving only the possibility of an 'eternal return of the same'. For Bürger, writing in his highly influential essay *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, things are to be seen in much the same way. Here, Bürger argues that the artistic 'neo-avant-garde' of the nineteen-fifties, sixties and seventies have merely repeated the critical strategies of the artistic 'historical-avant-garde' of the early part of the twentieth century; strategies which, Bürger argues, seek a sublation of art into praxis and a consequent reorganisation of a despised, means-end rational life-world along artistic lines; as a consequence of which, contends Bürger, the ultimate failure of the historical-avant-garde to sustain a necessary distance from the object of its criticism can be understood to have been constantly repeated in such a way that art has now been consigned to an ineffectual state of post-revolutionary limbo. Further to which, the continuation of avant-garde artistic production can, Bürger suggests, be understood to be little more than an attempt to assuage Capitalism's unending demand for changes in fashion. Clearly neither of these writings specifically addresses the issues raised by the emergence of the 'New Art History', however each can be understood to follow a pessimistic line of thinking on the possibility of a progressive approach to art history writing.

The increasing diversification identified by the title the 'New Art History' is, however, not simply to be categorised as a state of decline that may or may not be terminal. If we invert the conceptual order underpinning art historical 'crisis thinking', then the 'New Art History' can also be understood as a productive diversification that has broken with the restrictive conventions of established art historical discourse. In many ways, this vision of productive diversification predates the

⁴⁴ See also, Clement Greenberg's 1965 essay "Modernist Painting", reprinted in Francis Francina and Charles Harrison eds., *Modern Art and Modernism*, Paul Chapman Publishing in association with The Open University, London, 1982.

naming of the 'New Art History'. As early as 1971 we find Ernst Gombrich articulating the view that a traditional approach to the study of art history should be replaced by a more open application of paradigms from outside the discipline. In his essay "A Plea for Pluralism", first published in *The American Art Journal* (Spring 1971), in reply to a question on the state of art history, Gombrich openly appropriates a perceived opposition between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science from the writer Thomas Kuhn to argue in favour of a continuing diversification of art historical research, and against the blind acceptance of the connoisseurship and scientific positivism that continued to dominate the research methods of most art historians at that time. Here, Gombrich writes:

Knowledge is stored in books and periodicals where it can be activated any time by those who know how to use them. It is this we must persuade our students to learn; it implies learning languages and if necessary different terminologies. Once we have done this it should be easy to convince them of the intellectual impoverishment that a facile application of ready-made paradigms brings about. We can encourage them instead to look for questions that have not yet been asked and that may need new paradigms for their answer. Obviously there will be failures as well as successes, but if reasoned criticism of fundamentals will again be encouraged the process of trial and error should result in a real advance. Instead of cultivating 'normal science' we shall enter into that interesting state of ferment Thomas Kuhn describes as revolutionary science, and keep it on the boil. True if that happens it will no longer make sense to ask about 'the present state of art history'. There will not be one art history, but many different lines of enquiry freely crossing the boundaries of any number of so called 'disciplines' that owe their existence merely to administrative convenience, not to say inertia. Only in this way can our studies re-capture what Erwin Panofsky so beautifully described as 'the joyful and instructive experience that comes from a common venture into the unexplored. [Gombrich, 1979: 188]

Here, perhaps contrary to the expectations of those who know him best for his constantly revised art history primer, *The Story of Art* (first published in 1950), Gombrich privileges a persistent state of theoretical and methodological revolution over the normal *modus operandi* of the art historian working within the narrow confines of what might be called the 'academic industry'; that norm being viewed by Gombrich as a "ready-made" whose repeated application unnecessarily limits the possibilities of art historical research. Consequently, although Gombrich himself does not set out here to reflect critically on the meta-languages of art history in quite the same manner as the 'new' art historians, his embracing of the idea of a boundless art historical revolution can be seen to involve a certain prescience with regard to the conspicuous diversification and interdisciplinarity of art history from the mid-nineteen-seventies onwards.

As such, Gombrich's notion of a continuous revolutionary pluralism has been directly influential upon subsequent attempts to define the 'New Art History'. An example of this can be found in the case of Stephen Bann's essay "How Revolutionary is the New Art History?", published in Rees

and Borzello's *The New Art History*. Here, Bann explicitly follows Gombrich, whom he describes as an "inexhaustibly fertile source of new readings and new interpretations of the most diverse materials" [Bann in Rees and Borzello eds, 1986: 22], by looking positively upon what was, at the time of his writing, the recent importation of 'continental' theory into art history from the literary humanities. Here, Bann begins his essay by arguing the point that the recent commitment of a "significant number of art historians" to "new social movements and radical causes" derives its potency as a revolutionary force not from the fact that it has overturned the 'old' art history, but "from the fact that the 'old' positions are already bankrupt" [Bann in Rees and Borzello, 1986: 19]. He then goes on to write:

I would want to ask if there is indeed a New History which is beginning to emerge, Phoenix-like from the self-immolation of the Old. I may be accused of a feverish imagination, but it does indeed seem to me that such a prodigy may be taking place... It may no longer be regarded as taboo for a historian to have a self-critical estimate of the rhetorical underpinning of the historical craft, such as might be obtained from reading Foucault, or Barthes, or Hayden White. This is necessarily hasty evocation. But the point which I am making is surely clear. There can be no 'new art history', revolutionary or not, except to the extent that it participates in a 'new history'. And even if the signs are that the new (art) history will cause a blurring of demarcations, and a migration to rather different territory, this should be seen as an opportunity and not a catastrophe. After all, the art historian is no less qualified than anyone else to take part in such an enterprise. What must be abandoned is simply the debilitating assumption that a strict archival method, coupled with an interpretative *open sesame* which enables us to convert paintings into moral, social or political texts, will reveal to us all that needs to be known about visual representation. [Bann in Rees and Borzello, 1986: 28]

On the evidence of this piece of writing, both Gombrich and Bann can therefore be seen to share a common vision of a deregulated 'new' art history that would take the discipline beyond the restrictions of an already redundant academicism into a novel and productive interaction with alternative paradigms emerging from elsewhere within the Academy.

This sense that the diversification of art history represents a new and productive way forward for the discipline is also a feature of Hans Belting's preface to *The End of the History of Art?* (1984). Here, Belting argues that the fact-finding skills of the connoisseur are becoming increasingly marginalized in relation to those stretches of art history that have already been subjected to close 'scientific' scrutiny. Furthermore, he avers that the recent theoretical and methodological diversification of contemporary art history has brought with it a profound loss of faith in the discipline's capacity to arrive at "an all-embracing, universal 'history' of art" reflecting "a rational, teleological process of artistic history" [Belting in Fernie ed., 1995: 293]. According to Belting, these shifts have come about through the effects of post-Enlightenment modernization which, he argues, have resulted in the over privileging and consequent exhaustion of empirical approaches to study, and

an artistic avant-garde's rejection of traditional forms of artistic expression; this latter change being responsible, according to Belting, for the development of an unsettling break between a 'pre-modernist' and a 'modernist' history of art. It may appear therefore, Belting contends, that the divergence from tradition implicated in the idea of an artistic avant-garde and the concomitant diversity of the 'New Art History' has simply brought the history of art to an end (a conclusion not dissimilar to that reached by Arthur C. Danto in his essay *The State of Art*). However, as Belting goes on to argue the avant-garde's departure from tradition can also be seen to involve a progressive attempt to bridge a gap between art and praxis opened up by the increasingly autonomous art that came before it. Consequently, the 'New Art History' could itself be seen, Belting suggests, to involve a progressive attempt to explore the historical significance of this supposedly novel engagement between art and life.

Here, then, we find two somewhat divergent perspectives on 'The New Art History': one, where it is viewed as a positive attempt to overturn the perceived conservatism of existing art historical discourse – shades here, perhaps of academic art history's own earlier challenge to the perceived narrowness of the Vasarian art historical paradigm; and another where it is seen as an unwelcome negation of many of the structures upon which the notion of a progressive art history has come to rely. It may be tempting, therefore, to think of the debate over the significance of the 'New Art History' as a straightforward contest between normative traditionalists and radical innovators similar to that implicated in the 'Quarrel' between the 'Ancients' and 'Moderns' of the late seventeenth century. Indeed, Marcia Pointon alludes to such a conception in *History of Art: A Students' Handbook* when she writes:

Over the past two decades there has been an explosion of theory in all the humanities disciplines and it is over theory and its place in the academy that...the fiercest and most bitter battles have been fought. To sceptics, the theoreticians are self-indulgent intellectuals playing games. To the proponents of theory, their opponents are obstinate and blinkered reactionaries who are satisfied with simple causal explanations. [Pointon, 1997: 118]

Applying such an understanding to the present state of art historical discourse is, however, somewhat problematic. While the title 'The New Art History' signals an internally fractured grouping whose tribalism is somewhat at odds with the conventional demand that academic art history should unify around a single, perspectival vision, as some have argued it cannot necessarily be said to represent a wholesale departure from all of the discipline's traditional values.

As Adrian Rifkin makes clear in his essay “Art’s Histories”, published in Rees and Borzello’s *The New Art History* it is possible to view the ‘New Art History’ not as a radical departure from tradition, but as an attempt by academic art history to come to terms with the various critiques that threaten its institutional stability. Here, Rifkin cites the specific case of a feminist critique, which, he argues, stands in relation to art history “as an iconoclastic danger from without and a demand for the transformation of its professional relations and directions of study from within” [Rifkin in Rees and Borzello eds., 1986: 162]. For Rifkin, the idea of the ‘New Art History’ does not so much involve the prosecution of this double threat, rather an attempt to normalize and diffuse it. He writes:

Here the new art history reveals its basically reactionary nature by setting out to police the boundaries of the threat of this dual collapse. The new art history can be defined as the academic enterprise which reinstates the elementary terms of the tradition from which it comes, turning political and social movements into specialisms and confounding interdisciplinary investigations by turning them back on the series-object. Looking at any sample of new art histories will show that sometimes they will ‘take on’ the feminist argument: but taking on is, more often than not, an option. The masterpieces stay put. [Rifkin in Rees and Borzello eds, 1986: 162]

Here, as Rifkin sees it, the ‘New Art History’ is an attempt to assimilate dissent as a disciplinary norm in order to prolong the life of the canonical assumptions that have underpinned academic art history since the nineteenth century. Indeed, he argues explicitly elsewhere in his essay that the term ‘New Art History’ suggests little more than “an anxious liberal strategem to market a faded product in a new package” [Rifkin in Rees and Borzello eds, 1986: 158].

A similar understanding of the ‘New Art History’ can also be found in John Tagg’s essay “Art History and Difference”. While Tagg acknowledges, as we have already seen, that the complexity of contemporary art historical discourse can be thought of as a “necessary diversity of response” in which an “accumulation of analyses” corresponds to “the complexly overdetermined nature of cultural production itself” [Tagg in Rees and Borzello eds., 1986: 166], he nevertheless argues that this should not lead us into the mistaken belief that the ‘New Art History’ is anything other than an attempt to gloss over the persistent inconsistencies and discontinuities of academic art history. Here, Tagg submits that the ‘New Art History’ is a proper name that collapses “converging critiques into an identity” which “also means returning, against the direction of the very theoretical traditions invoked, to the metaphysical notion of a homogeneous Reality as the common referent of a number of discourse from which it may be extrapolated to serve as an index of truth” [Tagg in Rees and Borzello, 1986: 166]. In other words, Tagg argues that the sense of a categorical identity that inevitably flows from the

collective term 'The New Art History' is fundamentally inimical to many of the critiques – and here it is clear that Tagg would have us think of the New Art History's relationship to the line radical critique stemming from Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytic theory – that are supposedly contained by that term.

What both Tagg and Rifkin seek to draw our attention to here is that, while art history may not conform to a single, authoritative paradigm, we should not rush to uphold uncritically the notion of a straightforward opposition between a traditional, totalising view of academic art history and the complexity of the 'New Art History'. The basic thesis which both writers promulgate being that neither the 'old' nor the 'new' art history can be contained by the respective notions of limitation and transgression that have been applied to them.

It may well appear, therefore, that Tagg and Rifkin in their separate essays are intent on opening up a space for a truly critical form of art historical discourse that would operate away from both the evident restrictions and prejudices of the 'old' art history and what is arguably the false radicalism of the 'new'. And, indeed, Tagg in particular argues that art history stands in need of such "a new work of theory and practice" [Tagg in Rees and Borzello, 1986: 171]. However, as Tagg is at pains to point out, it is still not clear how any "singular strategy can do anything but conceal the inherent complexities and necessary diversity of response" of an art history faced with the overdetermination of cultural production [Tagg in Rees and Borzello, 1986: 171]. What Tagg advocates instead, therefore, is a form of critical discourse that would "grasp the role within the state, in its national and local manifestations, of the cultural practices and institutions of which we are a functional part", and that would do so not in a "grand context", but by knowing "how it is touched by and touches in turn [the] dispersed structure of governance" through which those cultural practices and institutions are administered [Tagg in Rees and Borzello, 1986: 171-our square brackets]. In other words, Tagg looks towards the possibility of a permanently critical form of 'art history' that would occupy an interstitial position in relation to the governing structures of its institutional self, somewhere between the notional extremes of total (intellectual) disengagement and outright (bodily) complicity.

To many observers this position will seem unbearably indeterminate. Indeed, it could be argued that in adopting it Tagg has entered into an intellectual and practical double bind; one that refuses conventional forms art historical discourse on the grounds that they smooth over complexity and diversity, while giving only the vaguest indication of an alternative direction for art history, for

fear of arriving at a singular, fully rounded theory that would immediately become susceptible to existing forms of institutional governance. Consequently, rather than finding a way of going beyond 'The New Art History', it could be argued that Tagg has simply brought art historical discourse to the threshold of yet another *impasse*; this time, one that blocks off 'progress' going backwards *and* forwards.

Here, we might decode Tagg further by saying that, although he does not openly acknowledge a debt to the writings of Jacques Derrida, his stance in "Art History and Difference" is an undeniably deconstructive one. That is to say, he can be understood to have unsettled the supposed opposition between 'old' and 'new' forms of art history by pointing out that the 'New Art History's' inversion of the underlying conceptual order of conventional art historical discourse reveals both the 'new' *and* the 'old' art history to be fundamentally undecideable. Moreover, in doing so Tagg can also be understood to have removed any sure sense of an underlying conceptual order upon which the future or, indeed, past 'progress' of art history might be seen to be based.

This is in many ways an appalling moment for disciplinary art history, for what Tagg can be understood to have done is apply a critique to the workings of art history that severely problematises both the possibility of a return to the supposedly stable conceptual footings of conventional art historical discourse, and any notion of a progressive dialectic within the discipline where the arrival of 'new' thinking could be understood to be a force for forward-looking innovation and change. Furthermore, Tagg can also be understood to have brought us face-to-face with this *impasse* not just because he has exposed us to the fact that the undecideability of the 'New Art History' reveals that there is with no single, clear way forward (or backwards) for the discipline, but also that there is no obvious way to pursue art historical studies which does not conflict with a desire for a truly critical objectivity. What we appear to be left with instead is, at best, Tagg's somewhat pessimistic vision of a diffuse (maybe even complicit, since it compromises conventional notions of intellectual distance) form of criticality that defies any easy conceptualisation, and, at worst, a complete void.

On the other hand, however, it could be argued that the overwhelming sense of dislocation flowing from Tagg's essay has allowed us an opportunity to catch a sublime glimpse of a discursive space beyond our normal modes of thinking; one that leaves us with a sense of pleasure at the possibility of our being able to think beyond normal conceptual limits, and a sense of pain at the

realization that somehow our imagination or our sensibilities might not be able, presently at least, to encompass such thoughts.

Here, then we have arrived at our third view of the implications of the 'New Art History'. While the first two can be understood to conform to a standard rationalist sense of the dialectical opposition between positive and negative views of 'The New Art History', this third (deconstructive) one conceives of a heterogenous art historical discourse as one which plays critically across such Cartesian divisions and their continued relationship to conventionally governed forms of art history. Furthermore, this third view can also be understood to unsettle two possible historical models to which the first two conflicting views might be reconciled: a cyclical 'regressive' one, in which an 'early' New Art History, emerging out of a Marxist/feminist-influenced desire for interpretative complexity, gives way to a 'later' one whose adoption of poststructuralist thinking returns us to what might be seen as the unstructured mystifications of a pre-academic past; and a cyclical 'progressive' one, in which a poststructuralist-influenced 'New Art History' is to be seen simply as the logical and welcome extension of an unsystematic 'Greek' vision of history which, as the previous chapter suggests, can be seen to have overwritten a systematic 'Judaeo-Christian' vision through the continuing expansion and diversification of academic art history throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, our third, deconstructive view can be understood to reveal the instability of the underlying conceptual oppositions upon which these historical models ultimately rest. Indeed, here one might arguably substitute another historical model, coextensive with that discussed in previous chapters, which envisages not a 'cyclical/systematic' or even a 'flat/unsystematic' model of the dialectical opposition between the 'new' and the 'old' art history, but one in which systematicity and unsystematicity are involved in a constant and unresolved dialectic whereby each infects and destabilises the perceived integrity of the other and where discursive progress and innovation in the conventional sense is to be seen as dependent ultimately on an overlooking of that instability.

Despite this early sense of *impasse* relating to a deconstructive attention to art history, since the mid-nineteen-eighties deconstruction has come to have a major impact on radical art history, with numerous texts having been published in which deconstructive thinking has been applied to the study of the visual arts. Indeed, as has been indicated here previously, some commentators have not only discerned the emergence of a deconstructively supported poststructuralist movement within art history, but also that supposed movement's increasing domination of the art historical mainstream.

Although deconstructively influenced art history writing has been highly varied in scope and intent, its texts can be understood to involve two interrelated interpretative strategies. On the one hand, writers have ascribed deconstructive ‘properties’ to recent works of art, design and architecture as a way of theorising a perceived shift away from the supposed certainties of a modernist aesthetic. Take here, for example, Paul Crowther’s essay “Postmodernism in the Visual Arts: A Question of Ends”, published in R. Boyne and A. Rattansi’s *Postmodernism and Society* (1990), in which just such a view is put forward as part of a response to the ‘endist’ position adopted by Arthur C. Danto in his essay “The State of Art”. On the other, works of art, designed artefacts and art historical writings of one sort or another have themselves been subjected to deconstructive readings that render their significance within or as historical narrative thoroughly undecidable. Consider here, for example the deconstructive historiography put forward by Stephen Melville in his text “The Temptation of New Perspectives”, or David Phillips’ previously discussed treatment of nineteenth and early twentieth century photography in the essay “Photo-Logos: Photography and Deconstruction”. For many ‘end users’ of deconstruction within the art historical community the emphasis within their writing has therefore been not so much on a direct and problematic questioning of the fundamental tenets of conventional art historical discourse - as in the case of Tagg’s essay “Art History and Difference” - but on the deployment of a methodology that allows the critic to read texts differently, and thereby to displace them (productively) from their existing positions within established art historical thinking. Here, deconstruction can, therefore, be seen to have operated not as a way of questioning the philosophical basis of conventional art history, but as a convenient means of challenging certain aspects of established art historical thinking. Consequently, it could be argued that deconstruction is seen by many of those art historians who deploy it as a useful tool for extending the institutional life of their discipline, rather than as a threat to its very existence. Indeed, this is understandable given that for virtually all art historians, including those of a deconstructive/poststructuralist persuasion, the identity of their discipline continues to stem from an abiding desire to ‘place’ works of art, design and architecture within some kind of historical framework, and not from a willingness to question art history’s most basic conceptual foundations in a specifically ‘philosophical’ manner.

However, as we have already seen in our reading of John Tagg’s essay “Art History and Difference”, such an understanding would involve an overlooking of the full implications of a deconstructive attention to art history. What we arguably find, therefore, is not an art history whose

mainstream has become increasingly dominated by deconstructive thinking, but instead one where a great many of its adherents shuttle (uncomfortably) back and forth between an allegiance to their discipline's traditional articles of faith and an engagement with deconstructive/poststructuralist scepticism. Indeed, it could be argued that art history is now a place where the vast majority art historians attempt to find a place for themselves somewhere between these two extremes.

It would, therefore, appear to be the case that art history has not found a way to move on from the position mapped out for it by Tagg in his essay "Art History and Difference". That is to say, the discipline still seems to face the same four options implicit within Tagg's essay. Firstly, art historians could choose not to pay a deconstructive/poststructuralist attention to art history and return to, or continue with, established and more obviously constructive approaches to art historical study. Secondly, they could choose to assimilate deconstructive/poststructuralist methods as a means of furthering their practice, while at the same time overlooking, for administrative convenience, the wider 'philosophical' implications of those methods and the necessary diversity of response to the study of art history that they have helped to bring to the fore. Thirdly, they could choose to accept the wider philosophical implications of a deconstructive/poststructuralist approach to reading, only to find, it might be argued, that the focus of their activities has moved away from the study of art history *per se* to a more formalistic speculation about the legitimacy of their discipline's founding principles; a process that can be seen to move swiftly from novelty to repetition (after all, once you have unsettled the founding principles of art history the best you can do is find more ingenious - and perhaps entertaining - ways of doing the same). And fourthly, they could choose, in a sense, not to choose and instead pursue Tagg's vision of a 'capillary' resistance to governmental authority; something which, as we have already seen, arguably brings art history to the threshold of a debilitating *impasse*.

The question that arises here, then, is: how can art history move on from the territory mapped for it by Tagg? One possible response to this question can arguably be found in the call from within art history in recent years for a return to historical materialism and the 'aesthetic'. And it is towards this call which we now turn our attention.

Chapter V: Beyond The New Art History

Although, as we have seen in the introduction to this dissertation, it can be argued persuasively from a deconstructive standpoint that there is no coherent ‘deconstructionist’ movement at work within contemporary art historical discourse, a number of commentators on the radical left of art history have nevertheless attempted to uphold something of the kind as a target for criticism. Take here, for example, John Roberts writing in his introductory essay to *Art Has No History!*:

The remnants of post-Althusserianism have dovetailed with an intellectually dominant post-structuralism and supportive Derridean deconstructionism to create, as I write, a widely anti-Marxist climate in the humanities, not seen since the fifties, though Derrida’s own debt to Althusser and his insistence on his work as a *dialogue* with Marxism complicates matters. In most hand, however, these forms of epistemological scepticism have extracted an almost adamantine provisionalism from writing history. As *subjected* subject, the writer of histories is never more than a writer of fables. Although [T.J.] Clark was warning about this perspectival approach in the early seventies, it has come to have a profound influence on the newer art history, as the Althusserian critique of the idea of a unitary history has emerged through post-structuralism into the methodologies of micro-history. The Result of this is a downgrading of dialectical knowledge as such, to the point in fact where it is seen as actually antithetical to the business of doing art history. Consequently, complexity is now understood in terms of interrelations of difference, rather than in terms of relations of hierarchy *and* difference. The rise of theories of difference in recent art history, therefore, can be seen as part of that wider derogation of ‘totalizing’ forms of knowledge that now dominate the horizon of Western culture. However, what largely goes unremarked by the left is how this derogation has always marked the parameters of bourgeois thought, which is quite happy singing paeans to difference. What all this installs, in fact, is a quite extraordinary collapse of ‘common sense’ on matters of explanation and determination. As Norman Geras says, the idea that there can’t be a ‘middle way’ between an all-explanatory concept of the economy or class and a pluralism of elements or factors because economic or class determination in ‘the last instance’ is no less reductive is just ‘inane’ when exposed to explanatory reason. In effect what it does is forbid ‘the possibility that one thing might just be more important than others’. [Roberts, 1994: 18]

Here in this passage Roberts can be understood, while acknowledging Derrida’s “own debt to Althusser and his insistence on his work as a dialogue with Marxism”, to position the wider influence of ‘deconstructionism’ on art history as an essentially negative force which promotes sheer difference at the expense of the differential and hierarchical structurings of Marxist thought. For Roberts, deconstruction is therefore to be seen, through its extended usage at least, as something opposed to a Marxist understanding of history.

According to Roberts, a prime example of this anti-Marxist insistence on relations of difference can be found in the writings of Griselda Pollock. Here, argues Roberts, we find, despite Pollock’s insistence on her work’s relationship to historical materialism, an explanatory framework based on the ‘postsructuralist’ notion that artistic expression is influenced by a “complex interdependence of gender,

class and race” which ultimately works against a Marxist, ‘in the last instance’, prioritisation of “class relations and class exploitation” as *the* fundamental movers of historical events [Roberts, 1994: 16-17].

Further to this, Roberts also advances the view, in the introduction to *Art Has No History!*, that the “trying-on of much post-structuralist theory in art history recently has produced writing that is textually sensitive but indifferent to matters of intention, reproducing the worst kinds of simple-minded pattern recognition in the name of ‘critical difference’ as in old style formalism” [Roberts, 1994: 3]. Roberts can, therefore, be understood to align deconstruction not only with an anti-Marxist position but also with a form of reading which disregards the notion of a limiting causal relationship between the significance of a text and its surrounding context; in other words, one that ultimately exchanges the rigour of historical materialism for the formalistic pleasure of textual polysemy.

To sum up, then, we find in Roberts’ writing a somewhat Cartesian line of argument in which the indeterminacy of Derrida’s own intellectual positioning is sidestepped in order to identify as a target for criticism the more generalised, and it has to be said polemically convenient, notion of a wider ‘deconstructionist’ *bloc* in sympathy with the interpretative openness of ‘old-style’ formalism and at odds with the structured historicism of Marxist thought.

Clearly, this critical vision of a ‘deconstructionist’ movement and its alignment with a prevailing climate of anti-Marxism/formalism within art history could be readily categorized as a variant of the arguably backward-looking art historical ‘crisis thinking’ described earlier on in this dissertation. Indeed, in the introduction to *Art Has No History!* Roberts characterizes his position as one sharing in an inherited “sense of abiding crisis about the discipline of art history” [Roberts, 1994: 20]. For Roberts, however, the apparently ‘common sense’ need for a return to a historical understanding that prioritises asymmetric economic/class relations as fundamental causes of artistic expression does not involve a straightforward reversion to the kind of Marxist art history which preceded the supposed emergence of an art historical ‘deconstructionism’. Rather, Roberts is at pains to dismiss not only the swingeing generalisations of ‘vulgar’ Marxism, where, as Roberts puts it, “art simply passively ‘reflects’ class interests or ideologies” [Roberts, 1994: 5], but also the ‘sophisticated’ post-Althusserian Marxism of T.J. Clark, which, according to Roberts, is in some ways no less generalizing than a vulgar Marxist approach to the history of art, since its attempt to uphold a model where ‘formal’ artistic innovation is seen to equate with a desire for ‘social’ change ultimately fails to register the “ideological complexity” of the “social formations” to which the production and reception

of art in fact relates [Roberts, 1994: 15]. According to Roberts, we should now begin to look beyond these positions and think instead of a Marxist influenced history of art in which “art must be seen to be caused within some open system of causal relations” that are not simply ascribed to social differences, but ultimately to “contradictions in thought and the crises of socio-economic life” [Roberts, 1994: 21]. In other words, Roberts wishes us to think here of a Marxist-influenced art history that continues to accept asymmetrical power relations, as expressed through class difference and class exploitation, as the final underlying cause of artistic expression, while also accepting the relative autonomy of art’s potential for a complex, variable and often contradictory manifestation of ideological ‘positions’ held in relation to the material workings of the economic base.

On the basis of this understanding, Roberts then goes on to flesh out his opposition to poststructuralism and Derridean ‘deconstructionism’ by advancing a number of thoughts about the relationship between artistic intention and the production and reception of works of art. Roberts’ principle argument here is that we should not move too readily to an analysis of artistic activity based on the stated intentions or ostensible ideological positionings of artists, since those ‘reasons’ can, he avers, often be understood to run counter to more plausible and coherent explanations relating to the relationship between “material conditions, actions and the agent’s intentions” [Roberts, 1994: 22]. Here, then, Roberts can be understood to have attempted an advance on a poststructuralism, as he sees it; firstly, by matching poststructuralism’s vision of a complex, shifting interrelationship between ‘artistic’ text and ‘material’ context, and secondly, by arguing that, despite the constant possibility of a slippage between authorial intention and meaning in art, the significance of artworks can still be explained in the final instance by their relation to the wider, and invariably complex and conflicted circumstances of their production.

To sum up, then, we have here the outlines of a position that does not fit comfortably either with the kind of reactionary crisis thinking usually drawn up in opposition to a poststructuralist/deconstructive attention to art history, or with thinking that sets out to valorize that attention. While Roberts can be understood to oppose what he sees as poststructuralism’s mistaken refusal of Marxism’s explanatory hierarchies and its alignment with the anti-historicism of a formalistic approach to the reading of texts, he would also appear to accept something of the validity of poststructuralism’s sensitivity towards the notion of a complex interaction between the possible significances of a text and the circumstances of its production and reception. Indeed, as we have

already seen in relation to his more recent essay “The Labour of Subjectivity/The Subjectivity of Labour”, Roberts has subsequently elaborated upon the argument put forward in *Art Has No History!* by using notions of interpretative complexity and fractured subjectivity more usually associated with poststructuralist thinking as the basis for a ‘progressive’ theorization of Marxist influenced art historical discourse; one that seeks to circumvent the apparent intellectual impasses of the poststructuralist ‘present’ by installing a sophisticated, ‘post-poststructuralist’ understanding of radical human agency. Consequently, it is possible to interpret Roberts’ position not as a purely reactionary one, but as one that seeks to remotivate aspects of poststructuralist thought within the context of historical materialism.

Roberts has not been alone in adopting this position. Arguments similar to his can be found in many of the essays brought together in *Art Has No History!*. Take, for example, Gen Doy’s essay “Cindy Sherman: Theory and Practice”, in which Doy argues that Sherman’s stated ignorance of feminist theory does not undermine the fact that her work can be read credibly as a critical engagement with a male dominated, class divided society. Take also, for example, Inter Alia’s (David Beech and Mark Hutchinson’s) essay “Francis Picabia: Another Failure to Interpret the Work”, in which it is contended that Francis Picabia’s life-long political conservatism should not prevent us from seeing that his ‘monsters’ of the nineteen-forties are not simply a bourgeois reaction to the then dominant, left-leaning cultural politics of the surrealist avant-garde, but an extension of a long-standing critique of institutionalised authority in all its forms. In both these cases we find readings that, in seeking to establish a materialist rationale for art works at odds with the apparent ideological positioning of their makers, can be understood to resonate with the theoretical argument spun out by Roberts at some length in the introduction to *Art Has No History!* and its sense of history as the site of continuing dialectical tensions.

An arguably more sophisticated expression of this notion of a progressive adherence to the tenets of historical materialism can also be found in the pages of *Art Has No History!*. In his essay “Truth and Beauty: The Ruined Abstraction of Gerhard Richter”, Paul Wood sets out to challenge the combined view of the writers Benjamin Buchloh, Stefan Germer and Peter Osborne that the persistently diverse output of the painter Gerhard Richter – which has shuttled characteristically since the mid-nineteen-sixties between a ‘representational’ form of painting based on a close, yet dead-pan transcription of found photographic images and various kinds of ‘abstraction’ including, over the past two decades or so, a painterly, but strangely inert style strongly suggestive of modernist abstract

painting of the nineteen-forties, fifties and sixties – belongs to a postmodernist avant-garde tendency within twentieth century visual art practice (perhaps best exemplified by the work of Marcel Duchamp) that can be understood to refuse/deconstruct the assumptions of stylistic coherence and expressive originality which not only underpin a conventional Kantian aesthetic of beauty, but also Clement Greenberg's influential theorization of a modernist tradition in the visual arts⁴⁵. According to Wood, it is only the varied body of work made by Richter between the mid-nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-eighties that conforms directly and in its totality to the notion of a postmodernist anti-aestheticism/counter-Modernism. This is because, Wood argues, Richter can be understood, in his late 'abstract' paintings of the early nineteen-eighties onwards, to have superseded the aesthetically deadening and, Wood contends, 'dead-ending' effects of postmodernist deconstruction - there being nothing more to deconstruction, Wood avers, other than a persistent refusal of all received values – by deliberately reconstituting an aesthetic experience of beauty out of the ruined remains of abstract painting left behind by the unsettling actions of a deconstructive Postmodernism.

In support of this line of argument, Wood turns initially to a consideration of some of the material facts of Richter's life. Here, he points out four things. Firstly, that as a German citizen Richter has pursued his career as a painter within the context of a nation that was geographically and politically divided during the period from the end of the Second World War in 1945 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Secondly, that in 1961, only months before the building of the Berlin wall, Richter migrated from Dresden in communist East Germany, where he had lived for the first twenty-nine years of his life, to Düsseldorf in capitalist West Germany. Thirdly, that Richter's migration allowed him to take up a position within the ranks of West Germany's artistic avant-garde where he was able to free himself from the tight restrictions which had been imposed on his artistic practice by a hegemonic Socialist Realism/Expressionism in the East. And fourthly, that Richter took up his place within West Germany's artistic avant-garde just at the moment when it was beginning to move away from an allegiance to American-style, formalist Modernism and towards an association with what we now think of as deconstructive Postmodernism.

On the basis of these material facts, Wood then goes on to suggest that Richter's involvement with postmodernist art under Capitalism has been made from the standpoint of an ideological 'outsider'

⁴⁵ See, for example, Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" (1965), reproduced in Frascina and Harrison eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London, 1988, pp. 5-10.

who would have been encouraged during his time in East Germany to distrust the intentions of the artistic avant-garde because of the role its 'deconstructive' refusal of all received values can be seen to have played in supporting the disastrous rise of fascism in Germany during the nineteen-twenties. And, what is more, an outsider who, by dint of his early training, not only had an enduring commitment to the importance of painting, but who was also unusually possessed of those technical skills which were still required by Socialist Realist/Expressionist painting in the East and which had been largely abandoned by the avant-garde artists of the West.

Wood then continues by bringing these arguments to bear on the view, advanced by Buchloh, Germer and Osborne in their various writings, that, since the mid-nineteen-sixties, Richter has simply set out to refuse/deconstruct the assumptions of aesthetic coherence and expressive authenticity which underpin the western tradition of painting, by reworking aspects of that tradition through a varied series of painterly pastiches. Here, Wood argues that while Buchloh's, Germer's and Osborne's view that Richter's work is essentially deconstructive in tone is a correct one - characteristically placing as it does the whole of Western painting, so to speak, *sous rature* - the material circumstances of Richter's early life point towards the supplementary notion that he took up his place within the ranks of West Germany's postmodernist avant-garde already disposed to reflect critically not just on modernist abstraction, but also upon the outcomes of postmodernist deconstructive practice.

To support this line of argument further, Wood then turns to a consideration of what he sees as the avant-garde's refusal of a Kantian aesthetic of beauty. Here, he begins by advancing three points: firstly, that the refusal of a Kantian aesthetic of beauty by the postmodernist avant-garde can be understood to stem from the fact that the demands for 'disinterestedness' and 'universality' which accompany Kant's idea of beauty do not resonate with the avant-garde's desire for direct social engagement and its concentration on the notion of a differential subjectivity; secondly, that the normalization of this refusal by a now institutionalized postmodernist avant-garde, reluctant to reflect critically, Wood argues, on its own hegemonic position, not only works, somewhat paradoxically, to marginalize alternative points of view, but also to obscure the possibility of an imaginative transcendence of prevailing circumstance; and thirdly, that a postmodernist avant-garde ultimately closes down any critical/evaluative distance between itself and the world by producing works of 'art' that are little more than 'cultural symptoms', that is to say indexes of an increasingly prevalent refusal of categorical limits throughout society. Wood therefore sets out to define deconstruction's apparent

refusal of the aesthetic as a fundamentally limiting act that brings us to a profound and seemingly terminal *impasse* in our thinking, both in terms of our capacity to reflect critically on the world and to transcend the present circumstances of our existence.

Wood then goes on to argue – in line with his previous suggestions relating to the material facts of Richter’s life - that while Richter’s work can be understood to conform for the most part to the postmodernist avant-garde’s aforementioned refusal of the aesthetic through its practical rebuttal of the established Western conventions of fixed authorship, stylistic coherence and authentic expressive content, certain of Richter’s late ‘abstract’ paintings of the early nineteen-eighties onwards depart from this refusal because they involve a deliberate, “moral” attempt – and here Wood cites published statements by Richter - to transcend our presently “divided and fragmented” world-view through an imaginative “reconstitution of beauty” [Wood in Roberts ed., 1994: 197]. Not, Wood argues, by pretending that the postmodernist avant-garde’s ruination of the Western tradition of painting never took place, but instead by making images that are conspicuously “*of that debris, that negation*” [Wood in Roberts ed., 1994: 193]. Put another way, Wood argues here that in his late ‘abstract’ paintings Richter has adopted a *modus operandi* that continues to place the conventions of Western painting ‘under erasure’ while at the same time returning us, beyond the impasse arrived at, as Wood would have it, by the deconstructive actions of the postmodernist avant-garde, to the possibility of a truly critical aesthetic. Moreover, Wood also avers that the continuing critical deconstruction/refusal of “certainties and inherited conventions” in Richter’s work ultimately relies, because of the painter’s deep engagement with long-standing tradition, upon “a concept of shared human experience, of continuity in history, and commonly held powers of imagination” [Wood in Roberts ed., 1994: 198]; something which, in line with Wood’s previous arguments, attributes to Richter’s work those properties of ‘universality’ and ‘disinterestedness’ that supposedly accompany the aesthetic of beauty.

Here, then, Wood can be understood to have built his argument around three major points. Firstly, like Roberts, he can be seen to have aligned an allegiance to the tenets of historical materialism with a critique of deconstruction, appealing as he does to the material circumstances of Richter’s life as crucial determinants of his artistic actions. Secondly, he can be seen to have buttressed that position by lining up Richter’s apparent ‘reconstitution of beauty’ in opposition to what he sees as a deconstructive postmodernist avant-garde’s debilitating refusal of the ‘aesthetic’ and the associated notions of a critical/evaluative autonomy and an imaginative transcendence of contingent circumstance. Indeed,

Wood goes still further here by stating explicitly in his essay that historical materialism, despite its long-standing associations - in its 'vulgar' form, at least - with a scepticism of the ineffable, "requires an aesthetic dimension insofar as the latter is integral to the sense of what it is to be an embodied being; and embodied consciousness cannot be adequately represented while shorn of its evaluative aspect" [Wood in Roberts ed., 1994: 193]. And Thirdly, Wood can also be understood to have aligned his critique of institutionalised deconstruction with the 'good' by presenting Richter's own apparent critique of the same as a 'moral' act intended to return art, beyond the state of impasse supposedly imposed upon it by a deconstructive avant-garde, to more consensual and imaginative forms of discourse.

According to Wood, Richter's work can therefore be understood not only to present a critique of an institutionalized deconstruction emerging out of the conflicting pressures inherent in the material circumstances of the artist's life both as a post-war German citizen and as a latter day avant-gardist, but also one which seeks to reconcile the unavoidable consequences of avant-gardist deconstruction with a progressive 'return' to the critical distance and ethical commitment supposedly opened up by a traditional aesthetic of beauty. What Wood arguably performs here therefore is an alignment between the critical position supposedly adopted by Richter in his late paintings and the return to historical materialism advocated by Roberts in his introduction to *Art Has No History!*.

As such, this interest on Wood's part in the notion of a critical reconstitution of beauty in art can be seen to relate to another essay of his, written in conjunction with the art historian Charles Harrison, in which the work of the artists Mel Ramsden and Michael Baldwin (otherwise known as the collective Art and Language) is also interpreted as having made a post-deconstructive return to questions of aesthetic value. In their joint essay, "Modernity and Modernism Reconsidered", published in Wood, Frascina, Harris and Harrison's *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* [Wood, Frascina, Harris and Harrison, 1993: 170-256] Wood and Harrison point out that in the late nineteen-seventies Ramsden and Baldwin, who had been leading members of the conceptual art movement since the late nineteen-sixties, began to feel themselves becalmed by the "moral security and certitude" of their own neo-Duchampian, postmodernist practice, which, as they saw it, had refused a conventional Greenbergian Modernism, while at the same time failing to adopt a sufficiently self-reflexive attitude to its own counter-Modernist position. As a result, they attempted, as Wood and Harrison go on to point out, in works such as *Portrait of V.I. Lenin in July 1917 Disguised by a Wig and working Man's Clothes in the*

Style of Jackson Pollock II (1980), to adopt a somewhat critical stance towards their own former practice by bringing the supposedly opposed camps of Modernist ‘abstraction’ – with its connotations of increasing specialization/autonomy and rigorous self-reflexivity - and Postmodernist ‘conceptualism’ – with its relentless, politicized refusal of modernist aestheticism - together into an “implausible conjunction”; a gesture which they felt might afford some space for a renewal of conceptualism’s project along more obviously self-critical lines. However, according to Wood and Harrison, they found that in doing so through the ‘abandoned’ idiom of painting that they had not only found a (somewhat humorous) way to move beyond what they felt was the piety and self-righteousness of a now institutionalized postmodernist conceptualism, but also that they had been thrown back against the grain of their previous conceptualist practice onto questions of aesthetic value. Consequently, according to Wood and Harrison, Ramsden and Baldwin’s extension of a critical conceptualist art practice can be understood as having been achieved through a somewhat paradoxical return to an aesthetic that they had once sought to leave behind.

As Wood and Harrison go on to point out, this reengagement with painting and the aesthetic on Art and Language’s part is, however, not to be confused with the institutionally supported notion of a post-conceptualist return to painterly practice arguably implicated in the ‘New Spirit’⁴⁶ painting of the late nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties (and here we think of the work of, amongst others, Julian Schnabel and Sandro Chia). Rather, as Wood and Harrison point out, the deliberate derogation of institutional notions of what counts as proper artistic practice has continued to be a central aspect of Ramsden and Baldwin’s work. Take, for example, many of their *Hostage* paintings from the late nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties, where the notion of an ‘implausible conjunction’ of styles, worked through in the earlier *Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock* series, is taken to new levels of complexity⁴⁷. Here, in many cases, we find a substantial, slab-like support upon whose surface a relatively conventional, ‘naturalistic’ depiction of a landscape with trees has been juxtaposed with a broad band of flat colour that works both as abstract surface and as the representation of a wall in the foreground of the depicted landscape; something which can be seen to set up an unresolved three-way tension between a ‘pre-modernist’ concentration on the opening up of spatial illusions, a ‘modernist’

⁴⁶ The term ‘New Spirit’ here refers to the seminal exhibition of ‘postmodernist’ painting, *A New Spirit in Painting*, which was staged at the Royal Academy in London in 1980.

privileging of surface and shallow painterly depth and an arguably 'post-modernist' emphasis on the 'readymade' materiality of the object. In addition to which, we find that thick accretions of paint used to make up the naturalistic part of the painting have been squashed, spread out and distorted by being caught up under a thick layer of highly reflective glass; something which can be understood not only to emphasise forcefully the materiality of the painting, but also to baffle the gaze of the viewer. Furthermore, we find that the handling of the paint is conspicuously amateurish in quality; a conceit (from two highly trained professionals) which can be understood to introduce a deliberate element of *bathos* into a work destined to be viewed within a conventional, high-art, gallery setting. Ramsden and Baldwin can, therefore, be understood in their work from the early nineteen-eighties onwards to have returned to a concern with questions of aesthetic value, but without any stabilizing allegiance to a pre-conceived view of what the stylistic or idiomatic 'answer' to such questions might be. Indeed, Ramsden and Baldwin's work on the *Hostage* series can be seen as an exercise in how to construct a workable, autonomous aesthetic out of a persistent critical refusal of all forms of artistic convention, including those to which they have contributed through their own previous artistic practice.

As Wood and Harrison seek to point out in "Modernism and Modernity Reconsidered", Ramsden and Baldwin's return to the aesthetic does not, therefore, sit comfortably with what might be seen as 'New Spirit' painting's institutionally supported, postmodernist refusal of a Greenbergian Modernism's desire for an ever greater specialisation and self-reflexivity. Rather, it can be viewed more convincingly as an attempt to construct an aesthetic vision that would retain an effective critical/evaluative distance from all forms of institutionalised artistic practice.

To summarise, then, Wood can be understood to have upheld the work of both Gerhard Richter and Art and Language as examples of how a reconstituted aesthetic might be used as a means of circumventing the blockage supposedly put in the way of art's future progress by an institutionalised postmodernist avant-garde and its persistent refusal of all values. Moreover, he can be understood to argue that these reconstitutions of the aesthetic can be aligned successfully with a materialist view of history without succumbing to the *bathos* of a straightforward reaffirmation of Modernism's idealistic certainties (or any others, for that matter). Indeed, in his essay on Richter, he can be seen to have constructed an elaborate discursive architecture in order to show how these aesthetic circumventions of

⁴⁷ See, David Batchelor, "Interview with Art and Language: A Conversation In the Studio About Painting" in Papadakis and Benjamin ed., *Contemporary Painting*, Art and Design magazine profile no. 25, VCH publishers, Cambridge, New York and Weinheim, 1992, pp. 60-71.

an institutionalised deconstructive attention to art can be aligned with a counter-deconstructive return to historical materialism in art history.

Clearly, as our previous examination of the genealogy of art historical discourse shows, this latter conceptual construction process is not an entirely novel one. Indeed, Roberts' and Wood's shared notion of a structural opposition between an essentially positive historical materialism, on the one hand, and a negative deconstruction, on the other, echoes strongly the opposition between the supposed order of Italianate Classicism and the supposed disorder of the 'German' put forward by Vasari in *The Lives* over four and a half centuries before. We might therefore ask, given the structural instability that as we have already seen can be understood to pervade the conceptual architecture of Vasari's model, whether Roberts' categorisation of deconstruction as a form of anti-Marxism and Wood's aligning of deconstruction with an anti-aesthetic can in fact be sustained; and, moreover, whether deconstruction is simply an impediment to the future progress of art historical discourse.

Here, we might make a number of initial points. As we have seen, Roberts' objections to deconstruction stem from two related lines of argument. Firstly, that deconstruction is, in the hands of most writers, a variation on 'old-style' formalism. That is to say, it is a form of reading which is sensitive to the subtleties of the 'text' but which is insensitive to the contextual actualities of the material world and their potential effects on the way a work is produced and received. And secondly, that deconstruction sees the world not in terms of the restrictive asymmetric power relations, which, Roberts argues, continue to underpin social class distinctions, but in terms of a more pluralistic series of interrelations of difference. However, as we have also seen in part one of this dissertation, in relation to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's essay "Semiotics and Art History: A Discussion of Context and Senders", these lines of argument can be unsettled by the potential of deconstruction to problematise any sharp distinction between 'text' and 'context' and the perceived trajectory of the relationship between the two. Moreover, it might be argued that deconstruction may work towards a problematization of the given status of hierarchical relations in the world, but that it does so characteristically from the starting point of a critical attention to the asymmetric conceptual dualities in language which inevitably make up our thinking about the world and which, therefore, influence our actions within it⁴⁸. Here then, we may see that although, as Roberts suggests, deconstruction differs from a Marxist historical materialism in positing a non-synthetic 'negation' of received values – that is

to say, it does not seek ultimately, as in the case of classical Marxism, to effect a sublimation of existing dialectical relations within some sort of higher social unity – it does, in fact share with Marxism the impulse to go beyond those received values as they are currently inscribed in language. Roberts’ suggestion that deconstruction somehow embodies an outright lack of sensitivity to the relationship between context and meaning production is therefore to be seen as somewhat misplaced, as is his sense of a direct opposition between art historical deconstructionism and Marxism. Indeed, Roberts’ overlooking of Derrida’s own rather less decideable relationship to the Marxist tradition, in favour of the polemically more cut and dried notion of an art historical deconstructionism can ultimately be understood to undermine the Cartesian certainties he otherwise wishes us to accept.

Further to this, it is also possible to see that Wood’s objections to deconstruction stem not only from a misplaced understanding that deconstruction, as exemplified by the writings of Buchloh, Osborne and Germer, is ultimately insensitive to the dictates of material circumstance, but also from one that sees a deconstructive ‘refusal’ of the aesthetic of beauty on the part of an institutionalized postmodernist avant-garde as something which simply collapses outright the notions of universality and disinterestedness necessary to evaluative criticism and an imaginative transcendence of individual circumstance. If we turn to Art and Language’s *Hostage* paintings it could be averred that, rather than returning us simply to an aesthetic of beauty, these works involve the viewer in a far more complex aesthetic response. Let us first consider statements made by Michael Baldwin and Mel Ramsden in a 1992 interview with David Batchelor, entitled “Interview With Art and Language – A Conversation In the Studio About Painting”, in which they discuss how they intend the juxtaposition of an ‘abstract’ band of colour with a ‘realist’ depiction of a landscape in a number of the *Hostage* paintings to operate on the viewer:

DB: *Let’s move across to the other side of the painting. The landscape motif is qualified in each work by the band of colour down one or both sides. Didn’t these start life as a foreground wall in an early museum version of the series?*

MB: This was come by more or less honestly: these trees skirt a playing field in which there is a cricket pavilion. The post supporting the veranda could actually be incorporated into the landscape. Degas uses similar foreground devices, for example.

MR: Of course you can’t account for the band entirely in a naturalistic sense. It’s a device, as it was for Degas. It’s a bit like painting a frame, it can serve to push the remainder of the painting into something like a quotation. You can see this in Cézanne and Vermeer and Velásquez. In Degas it’s almost a voyeuristic device which gives the sense of someone peeping around a corner.

⁴⁸ See, Martin McQuillan’s introduction to *Deconstruction: A Reader*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2000, pp.1-43.

MB: The Band was got honestly both in the sense that it has one of its feet in observation - it is genetically connected to the landscape site, and in the sense that it is a fairly ordinary device and not only in modern painting. It's a naturalistic device which can then be tuned in various ways, in the case of Cézanne to create a kind of ambiguity, in the case of Velásquez or Degas to create a kind of psychological atmospherics – how you place yourself in relation to the picture, how you leave the picture or enter it. In another way the band is a point of reference. These works have this curious inside out characteristic. What is emphatically surface is the surface of the depicted landscape. The most clearly literal surface is the surface of the picture – of the icon. This is odd since there is a lot of 'literal' (non-pictorial) paint spread across the surface. But this latter is read iconically or figurally. The iconic is rendered somehow literal, the literal somehow iconic. The band is caught – oscillating between a pictorial device and a 'literal' surface. It is, as it were, out of control figurally and literally. This shifting instability of landscape as icon, 'paint' as icon, landscape as literal surface, and so on is not an immanent property of the painted surface(s). It seems in general that the disturbed paint integrates the 'abstract' band into the icon to a very considerable extent. So you don't in fact get a melange of a 'modern' (abstract) painting and an 'old' landscape painting, what results is continuous pictorial entity. In other words there is a torsion almost to the point of self-contradiction. The disturbed paint makes a continuous 'icon' of the landscape and the band, but that icon is, in turn, relatively more literal, it is the literal surface of the painting. The disturbed paint is relatively more of an iconic psychological presence than the landscape and the 'wall' itself – they are the ground for the figure. There is, if you like, a folding up or crumpling such that one's sense of the iconicity of the landscape is hidden or folded within one's sense of the iconicity of the disturbed paint. [Batchelor, Ramsden and Baldwin, in Papadakis Benjamin eds., 1992: 63]

Now compare this with a passage from Jacques Derrida's *The Truth in Painting* in which the author sets out to describe how the *parergon* - the word used by Kant in his *The Critique of Judgement* to denote the various 'framing' devices used by artists - actually works to deconstruct the perceived distinction between itself and the *ergon*, or the main body, of a work of art:

A *parergon* comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [fait], the fact [le fait], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation on a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [au bord, à bord]. It is first of all the on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [Il est d'abord l'à-bord]...The *parergon* stands out [se détache] both from the *ergon* (the work) and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground. But it does not stand out in the same way as the work. The latter also stands out against a ground. But the *parergonal* frame stands out against two grounds [fonds], but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges [se fond] into the other. With respect to the work which can serve as a ground for it, it merges into the wall, and then gradually into the general text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands out against the general background. There is always a form on a ground, but the *parergon* is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. The frame is in no case a background in the way that the milieu or the work can be, but neither is its thickness as margin a figure. Or at least it is a figure which comes away of its own accord [s'enlève d'elle-même]. [Derrida, 1987: 54-61]

While we would not wish in the absence of any supporting evidence to argue that there is a direct causal link between these two passages, the similarities between Art and Language's description

of how the framing band of colour operates in the *Hostage* paintings and Derrida's description of how the *parergon* works to deconstruct figure-ground relationships is striking. We would, therefore, wish to make the point that despite Baldwin and Ramsden's description of postmodernist art in their interview with David Batchelor as a "mere assembly of minor fetishes which undergo no transformation and are simply the props for deconstructive babble" [Batchelor, Baldwin and Ramsden in Papadakis and Benjamin eds., 1992: 65] their own work on the *Hostage* series would seem to involve the use of identifiable deconstructive devices.

In addition to this, we would also argue that Wood's characterisation of the aesthetic in the paintings of Richter, and his use of the material facts of Richter's life to support that characterization is itself open to further interpretation. As we have already seen, Wood seeks to make a clear alignment between the material circumstances surrounding Richter's development as a painter and his apparent reconstitution of beauty in his paintings of the nineteen-eighties onwards as an aesthetic device aimed at overcoming the deconstructive impasse which, Wood argues, he had arrived at through his earlier work. Here, we would like to raise two related objections: one aesthetic and the other historical. In the case of the first of these it is not clear that Richter's later work is simply beautiful. According to Immanuel Kant, writing in his *Critique of Judgement* - the principal source of our current sense of what might be meant by the term 'beauty' - beauty is to be defined as a source of unalloyed pleasure taken through the apprehension of the perceptual form of natural phenomena or man-made works of art by an observer or reader wholly disinterested in how the object in question might be classified, what its use-value might be, or how it relates to questions of morality or, indeed, how it might satisfy the observer's particular desires or appetites. In relation to this definition, Kant makes a number of crucial points. Firstly, he argues that an appreciation of beauty appeals beyond individual subjectivity to a universal consensus of opinion. Consequently, if one person finds something beautiful through a truly disinterested act of appreciation, Kant argues, then, in principle at least, everyone else ought to find it beautiful too. According to Kant, beauty is therefore not something that resides simply 'in the eye of the beholder', as is often suggested. Secondly, he argues that the disinterestedness involved in the appreciation of beauty makes it a category of experience that defies rational conceptualization, and that gives us no ready example of how we might act as moral agents in the world. Consequently, avers Kant, while an appreciation of beauty can be understood to involve an imperative that we should all assent to the beauty of the object concerned, conformity to that imperative is not something that can be

brought about through rational argument or moral instruction. Rather, it is something that can be understood to arise only through an unpremeditated first-hand 'bodily' encounter between a human subject and the perceptual form of an object. As a result, for Kant, disagreements about whether an object is beautiful or not can only be resolved by a greater attention to the perceptual form of the object concerned and not through the establishment of an agreed set of rules. In other words, in the circumstances of a disagreement over the beauty of a form one cannot be instructed rationally or morally as to why it should be considered beautiful, however one can be asked to attend to the form again in the hope that its beauty will eventually be revealed. Thirdly, Kant argues that while we readily discuss beauty as though it were a property that certain forms possess and others do not, this is not strictly speaking the case, since beauty, which from a Kantian standpoint cannot be conceptualized, is something that takes place somewhere in the interaction between the perceptual form of a 'beautiful' object and the experience of pleasure taken in apprehending it. And fourthly, Kant also argues that while beauty is not a property of objects, beauty nevertheless can only be apprehended in relation to a perceptual form viewed in its totality. For Kant beauty is therefore tied to a sense of limitation or completeness of a kind similar to that which, as we have seen, has traditionally been associated amongst art historical circles with the classical style.

To sum up then, for Kant beauty is a potentially universal source of pure pleasure arising out of a direct human engagement with a limited perceptual form which, when viewed in its totality, transcends the limitations of differing subjective tastes and desires. It is therefore unsurprising, that Wood would seek to identify beauty as possible device to overcome the apparently stultifying consequences of deconstruction, since as defined by Kant it relies upon the possibility of a direct bodily engagement between human subjects and objects in the world and the possibility of a consensus between human subjects, while at the same time maintaining a certain critical distance between subject and object, and subject and subject – all of which are, as Wood suggests, traditionally crucial aspects of progressive human discourse that are arguably ruled out by deconstruction. Now, what we would wish to argue here is not that Wood is mistaken in his view. Richter's later paintings are, we would suggest, like many other works of art capable of engendering experiences of apparently unalloyed pleasure in human subjects. Rather, we would wish to aver that beauty is only one transitory and provisional aspect of Richter's later paintings, which, like the *Hostage* paintings of Art and Language, provoke a more complex aesthetic response than simply one of unalloyed pleasure. As writers such as Jean François

Liotard have pointed out, alongside his commentary on beauty in *The Critique of Judgement* Kant also seeks to give definition to the aesthetic experience of the sublime. According to Kant the sublime differs from beauty in a number of ways. As Kant would have it, unlike beauty, the sublime relates to phenomena, both natural and man-made, whose limitations, whether of size or of power are not apparent to the viewer. Here Kant proceeds from a proposition that when a human subject perceives something whose measurable boundaries lie beyond his or her perceptual range – the night sky, for example – or whose power threatens to overwhelm us – a violent storm, perhaps – we are faced with an apparently limitless or formless object whose totality can only be arrived at through an application of reason inconsistent with the recognition of beauty. As a result, argues Kant the subject finds him or herself caught up not in an experience of unalloyed pleasure, as in the case of beauty, but in one which shifts indeterminately between two extremes, pleasure and pain. Pain, because of a sense of insignificance or inadequacy in the face of that which confronts us, and pleasure, because of the realization that we are able, in the case of the incomprehensibly large, to extend our powers of reason somehow beyond the physical limitations of our bodies and, in the case of the incomprehensibly powerful, to recognise in ourselves a categorical moral imperative that transcends contingency in the world. For Kant the sublime is, therefore, more likely to be experienced in the face of natural phenomena than man-made works of art, since the form of the latter is almost always readily comprehensible, making it only a potential signifier of limitlessness and not its actual embodiment. Moreover, it can be understood to involve a somewhat indirect engagement between subject and object that is arguably takes us away from the kind of material, face-to-face, bodily encounter we have in the presence of beauty towards some sort of mystical communion with the spiritual or the transcendental (here, we should perhaps remember that, as traditionally conceived by writers such as Vasari and Bellori, beauty is itself always to be seen as a temporal manifestation of a transcendental, God-given idea). To summarise, then, the sublime as Kant defines it, can be understood to differ from beauty in that the former involves the apprehension of apparently limitless phenomena whose full significance can only be approached painfully, not through the image they present to the senses, but through an almost superhuman, and, therefore, ultimately pleasurable, leap of rational thought or recognition of a moral imperative, while the latter involves the apprehension of limited perceptual forms that give rise to an experience of pure pleasure which ultimately defies rational conceptualization or any association with the recognition of a moral imperative. Despite this articulation by Kant of differences between

beauty and the sublime, it is possible to discern since the end of the eighteenth century - in Western(ised) culture at least, and with the notable exception of major 'movements' in art such as Romanticism, Neo-Gothicism and Dada - a general cultural tendency to privilege beauty over the sublime, initially through the continuing retention of the classical style as a cultural norm against which other styles must be measured, and latterly through its association during the mid-twentieth century with the theorisation of a culturally dominant Modernism by writers such as Clement Greenberg. In many respects this privileging is understandable given the connotations of stability, harmony and universal well-being which accompany the Kantian conception of beauty and the way in which those connotations can be used to underwrite the stability of established forms of discourse and their associated power/knowledge relationships. More recently, however, this general cultural privileging of beauty over the sublime - and, indeed, the classical over its others - has been brought sharply into question. Perhaps the most notable instance of this can be found in the writings of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. In his now famous essay, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", published in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard sets out to challenge the privileged position enjoyed by the Kantian concept of beauty in post-eighteenth century Western culture by unsettling the beauty-sublime duality set up by Kant in *The Critique of Judgement* in such a way that all aesthetic experience worthy of the name is ultimately brought into line with Kant's notion of the sublime. Put very simply, Lyotard argues that in the light of poststructuralist semiotics the perceptual form of an artwork as signifier can no longer be seen as wholly adequate to its signified content, since that content is from a poststructuralist point of view inherently unstable and without fixed limits. Consequently, for Lyotard the pleasure supposedly derived from an appreciation of beauty is simply an illusion that must ultimately give way to the sublime experience of pain-pleasure. Moreover, avers Lyotard, the sublime is the aesthetic experience of 'choice' of those truly creative artists throughout history who have understood that their practice precedes any precise articulation of the relationship between form and content in their work and any subsequent formulation of aesthetic rules to which other less creative individuals might adhere; while beauty is the chosen aesthetic of those working within already established artistic conventions. Here, then, we have a line of argument that could clearly be used against Wood's reading of Richter's later paintings. Indeed, if we revisit some of those paintings it is arguably possible to discern, not beauty, but the sublimity of a conspicuous slippage between the limits of form and content. Take, for example late Richter paintings

such as *Landschaft bei Koblenz* (1987) or *Wasserfall* (1997), in which strangely inert, almost photographic images of landscape defy any categorical interpretation of meaning⁴⁹. However, it is not our intention here to adopt such a line of argument. Rather, we would like to propose that, despite the fact that Lyotard can be understood in “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” to have made a deconstructive intervention in which the pure pleasure of beauty succumbs to the indeterminate experiential logic of the sublime as its supplementary other, it is also possible to see his presentation of that intervention as one that runs the risk of being interpreted, against the grain of its underlying linguistic ‘principles’, simply as a privileging of the sublime over the beautiful and, therefore as a repetition of the kind of straightforward oppositional thinking which, as we have attempted to show, has characterized art historical discourse throughout its history. Indeed, in aligning the sublime strongly with the notion of progressive innovation in the arts it may appear to some that Lyotard is doing little more than invert the idealist position we find in the writing of Bellori, where classical beauty is valorized as the product of true artistic creativity, or polarise Wölfflin’s model of stylistic development by giving a privileged position to the supposed(ly sublime) limitlessness of the ‘baroque’ over the (beautiful) closure of the ‘classic’. In acknowledgement of this risk, our contention is that Richter’s later paintings can be understood, not as either beautiful *or* sublime, but as moving stochastically between beauty and sublimity. Again, if we take Richter’s later landscapes as an example, it is possible to see these works as undeniably beautiful. They are highly finished and meticulously considered paintings with a subtle, well ordered sense of design whose formal organisation and technical accomplishment has the potential, we would argue, to engender an intense experience of aesthetic pleasure in the viewer. However, they are also paintings that confound, as Wood’s interpretation of Richter’s early paintings suggests, any settled attempt at definition, not only in terms of their authenticity as original works of art and their stylistic identity but also in terms of their intended significance. In that sense they are then also readable, we would aver, as sublime works in both a Kantian and a Lyotardian sense. As such, they are, therefore, not to be taken simply as works that offer a critical reconstitution of beauty as a way out of the discursive impasse supposedly brought about by a hypercritical deconstruction. Rather, they are, we would suggest, works that, intentionally or otherwise, make artistic ‘progress’ by problematizing the supposed difference between beauty and sublimity, and the traditionally consonant conceptual oppositions between closure and limitlessness, order and

⁴⁹ See, Dietmar Elger ed. *Gerhard Richter: Landschaften*, Cantz, Sprengel Museum Hannover, 1998.

disorder and the classic and the non-classical which we arguably find running through much of the discourse surrounding art and its history from Antiquity to the present day, thereby offering us a glimpse of a form of painting beyond that which we have come to expect.

A further part of Wood's argument is that the material circumstances surrounding Richter's development as a painter fully support the reading of his later work as an intentional, critical reconstitution of beauty. And, indeed, an understanding of Richter's migration from a realist/expressionist East German artistic tradition to a modernist tradition in the West does offer such support. However, we would argue that the somewhat indeterminate position which Richter enjoyed in relation to the East and West German artistic spheres; finding something of value to uphold in each while adopting a critical stance in relation to both, can also be interpreted as supportive of the deconstructive reading of his late work which we have advanced above. That is to say, the circumstances of Richter's life can be understood to place the artist in position where he is equipped to further painting by a persistent deconstructive problematization of its assumed limits and internal divisions. Let us state yet again that this is not to dismiss Wood's reading out of hand. Rather, it is to point out how Wood's appeal to the importance of a rigorous understanding of context in the interpretation of works of art does not necessarily guarantee a single, unitary reading. Even on its own terms Wood's approach is, we would aver, always open to differing, empirically supported interpretative outcomes.

Where then does all of this lead us? What we have attempted to show through the arguments presented above is that a return to historical materialism and the aesthetic in contemporary art historical discourse does not take us beyond the problematic thinking introduced by a deconstructive attention to art history according to the stated intentions of its authors. Instead, we would argue it attempts to return us back beyond that attention to the kind of dualistic thinking that, as we have tried to show, has always characterized art history, by presenting itself as the reconstitution of a lost sense of order in opposition to the disorder supposedly wreaked by an intellectually dominant 'deconstructionism'. Our argument has been that an unquestioning adherence to such oppositional thinking is simply unsustainable in the face of deconstructive criticism, and moreover, as our reading of Richter's later landscape paintings suggests, that the apparently virulent critique of established values offered by deconstruction does not simply bring established discourse to a full stop, as Wood and Roberts would have it, but that it points beyond that discourse by allowing for the possibility of its provisional continuation by other critical

means. Furthermore, as we have tried to show through the genealogy put forward here in part two of this dissertation, deconstruction is something that has defined art historical discourse through a constantly shifting interaction between 'text' and 'context'. In other words, we advance here three arguments: firstly, that the critical interventions of deconstruction cannot, now they have been made, simply be overridden/written by a renewal of conventional, 'metaphysical' forms of discourse; secondly, that deconstruction has the potential if applied rigorously, and despite its severe problematisation of all received thought, to provide us with a viable, if extremely vexing and inconclusive, way forward for the way we think historically about the world; and thirdly, that the conceptuality of art historical discourse is something that has simultaneously been undermined and made possible by the workings of deconstructive dislocation and remotivation.

The question, we would aver, that remains then is this: in the light of our interpretation of Richter's painterly practice, how then might we articulate a continuing deconstructive attention to art history. Moreover, since this question also remains for us to address, can such a 'progressive' attention find some sort of accommodation with a desire to act ethically or politically in the world. And it is towards these questions which we now turn our attention in the third part of this dissertation.

Part III –

Rethinking A Deconstructive Attention to Art History

He [Marcel Duchamp] had come to see the paintings and other works he had done since 1910 as a linked series in a sustained process of thought...One idea led to the next, just as each painting or object related to the ones that had gone before and the ones that would come later, and only by seeing the works together could the viewer participate fully in the mental activity that had given rise to them.

- Calvin Tomkins⁵⁰

In part two of this dissertation we set out, following lines of thinking put forward by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson and by Hal Foster, to problematize the notion that deconstruction is simply antipathetic to the productive writing of art history. We attempted to do this by mounting a genealogy of art historical discourse, stretching from Antiquity through to the present day, through which we hope to have demonstrated two things: firstly, that art historical discourse has remained constantly open to remotivation in the face of changing circumstances of time and place; and secondly, that this remotivation has been made possible by a historically persistent deconstructive action of differing and deferring between signs which simultaneously upholds and unsettles linguistic meaning. In doing so we also set out to suggest a way beyond the kind of problematic *impasse* arguably arrived at by John Tagg in his essay “Art History and Difference”. That is to say, the notion that a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse simply undermines the underlying conceptual order of conventional art history, but without positing any kind of readily conceivable alternative. Here, by mounting our extended genealogy of art historical discourse, we attempted to demonstrate that an interaction between deconstruction and art history writing is not simply a recent – some would say aberrant - phenomenon, but something that has, since Antiquity, supported the possibility of an open-ended, though still critically searching, consideration of the relationship between the art work as ‘text’ and the wider historical ‘context’ of its production and reception. This insight was then deployed as means of unsettling recent attempts by art historians critical of deconstructive theory and practice to reaffirm a historical materialist approach to art history writing, since all such attempts can be seen, when viewed deconstructively in relation to a wider ‘history’ of art historical discourse, to harbour what might be thought of as a chronic deconstructive unconscious and therefore to be subject to the continual

⁵⁰ Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*, Pimlico, London, 1998, p. 301.

possibility of recontextualization and interpretative remotivation. In mounting this demonstration we have, then, sought to pay a deconstructive attention to the significance of historical events that enacts, rather than just asserts, the immanence of deconstruction to the formation of art historical discourse as a supposedly epistemologically underwritten enterprise.

In part three of this dissertation, we now intend to extend this performative demonstration by attempting to show how a deconstructive genealogy of the sort described above might also be used to open up the possibility of an ethico-politically committed response to the reading of art historical events. Initially, we will look at the way in which Derrida's theorisation of *différance* in the essay "Différance", published in *Margins of Philosophy*, deconstructs our established sense of an underlying spatio-temporal order by revealing linguistic meaning as both spatially and chronically unstable in the face of unfolding signification. Against this background, we will then attempt to show how, through an ingenious presentation of a plural Karl Marx in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida has gone on to reprise his earlier theorisation of *différance* (under different headings) as a means of unsettling the notion, put forward by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*, that the apparent triumph of liberal capitalism over state communism over recent years has brought ideological conflict and therefore an eventful history to its logical and rightful conclusion. As such, this 'ethical turn' in Derrida's work will therefore have been upheld here as a riposte to the notion that deconstruction is a form of criticism simply given both to outright ahistoricity and ethico-political relativism.

Following on from this, we will then attempt to give further shape to this ethico-political dimension of deconstructive thinking within an art historical context by presenting a provisional genealogy linking the arguably *avant la lettre* deconstructive strategies performed by the early twentieth century readymades of Marcel Duchamp, first to those found in relation to the post-war performance-based work of the German artist Joseph Beuys, and then those found in relation to certain 'history' paintings of the mid-nineteen-seventies by Beuys's one-time pupil Anselm Kiefer. Here, we will attempt to show that Kiefer has, in works such as *Maikäfer Flieg* (1974) and *Varus* (1976), drawn upon the 'deconstructive' approaches discernible in relation to the earlier work of Duchamp and Beuys to develop a critical position akin to that put forward by Derrida some two decades later in *Specters of Marx*. In the case of Kiefer's paintings from the nineteen-seventies it will be argued that recognisably 'deconstructive' strategies have been used in the following three ways: firstly, to problematise supposedly authoritative versions of German history by pointing to the continuing eventfulness of

history and the persistent instability of historical signification in the face of changing circumstances; secondly, to demonstrate the ways in which the reading of events in German history has been skewed and supposedly fixed in support of various forms of German nationalist ideology, not least that of Germany's far right; and thirdly, to expose the persistent polysemy of historical motifs from Germany's past, thereby liberating them from any closed view of German history which might otherwise leave them squarely in the hands of an oppressive nationalism or the far right. With regard to all of which, we will then go on to aver, that Kiefer's paintings of the nineteen-seventies uphold, contrary to the protestations of deconstruction's critics, not only the possibility of a continuing attention to the significance of historical events, but also of a constant, politically engaged watchfulness over the ethical content of any and all claims to historical authority and authenticity.

By demonstrating a historical transformation of avant-garde practice within the visual arts comparable with shifts in Derrida's own deconstructive practice it is, however, not simply our intention to reinforce the notion put forward by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* that a deconstructive attention to history has the potential for some sort of ethical and/or political commitment. Rather, we will also have attempted to enact the ethical/political 'positioning' possibilities of a specific deconstructive attention to art history by setting out to trace a 'genetic' link between Duchamp, Beuys and Kiefer; a tracing which seeks to explore a changing grasp of the critical potential of Duchamp's work within altered contexts of time and place and which opens up the possibility of a deconstructive unsettling of the unthinking relativism sometimes associated with Duchamp's intellectual legacy.

Chapter I - Jacques Derrida: From "Différance" to *Specters of Marx*

Jacques Derrida's development of the theory and practice of deconstruction marks a substantial and unsettling move away from previously established linguistic theory. According to Derrida, writing in his seminal essay "Différance", a linguistic sign takes on its significance not because it stands directly for (that is to say, represents) an otherwise absent concept or referent – the 'classical' semiological view of how language works, which has been upheld consistently since Antiquity – nor simply because of its arbitrary differentiation from other signs within a linguistic system – Ferdinand de Saussure's 'structuralist' view of language, first put forward in its currently recognised form in Saussure's *A*

Course in General Linguistics (1916) – but instead because it both differs from *and* defers to all of the other signs circulating within the particular linguistic system or systems to which it is conventionally understood to belong. As a consequence of this, Derrida goes on to argue, “the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself” because “each element appearing on the scene of presence” – that is to say each sign as a conjunction of signifier and signified – “is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element” [Derrida, 1982: 13]. In other words, for Derrida, the meaning of any given linguistic term is to be thought of, since it emerges from a double movement of differing and deferring between signs, where each sign can be understood to carry with it the ‘traces’ of its related others, as something which is never fully realized. Moreover, as Derrida would also have it, it is something that is always subject to the possibility of change in the face of an unfolding chain or network of signification.

In his essay “Différance”, Derrida sets out to mark this understanding of the workings of language by coining the term *différance* - in 1968 a new addition to the French language. As such, this term can be understood to relate to three commonly recognised French words: the standard verb *differer*, meaning both to *differ* and to *defer* in English translation; the noun *la difference*, meaning *the difference*; and the verb-adjective *different*, meaning both *differing* and *deferring*. Here, *différance* can therefore be understood to fill a gap left by a previously non-existent French noun-verb standing for the actions of differing and deferring. However, while the signifier ‘*différance*’ can, as a consequence, be taken to stand for either of the signified actions or conditions of differing or deferring, it cannot be pinned down simply to one or the other. Moreover, when spoken it continues to elude any attempt to fix its significance by being indistinguishable from the speaking of the French word *difference*. In other words, *différance* is a perpetually nomadic sign, always somewhere in transit between noun, verb and adjective, and between speech and writing. It therefore serves, not only as a signifier of the double movement of differing and deferring between signs theorised by Derrida in his essay *Différance*, but also as an acting out of that to which it might otherwise be seen to refer. As a result, the term *différance* can be understood to work across the perceived boundary between theory and practice by performing rather than just asserting an objection to both ‘classical’ and ‘structuralist’ understandings of the workings of language.

The implications of this shift in our understanding of language and the coining of the performative term *différance* have, of course been written about extensively elsewhere, not only by Derrida himself in essays such as “Plato’s Pharmacy” (1969), but also notably by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the translator’s preface to her English translation of Derrida’s *De la grammatologie* (1976) and by Christopher Norris in *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. Consequently, they require little in the way of an introduction here, other than to say that through his theorisation of *différance* Derrida introduces us to a ‘poststructuralist’ understanding of language in which the significance of any given term or text, and indeed our conception of what is real or true - since our articulation of the world can be seen to arise only through language - is not to be thought of as given or fixed, but as something only ever partially formed and, what is more, as something open to the continual possibility of revision through shifts in cultural/linguistic context or setting. And, what is more, that this ‘poststructuralist’ understanding of the workings of language informs Derrida’s development of the critical practice of deconstruction, where various strategies of textual dislocation – such as grafting, repetition, citation, juxtaposition and superimposition - and the identification of contradictions or inconsistencies in thinking, or terms with multiple significance are used to unsettle the assumed authority of a text’s *prima facie* or intended meaning.

Clearly, the consequences of all of this for art historical discourse are profound. Crucially, Derrida’s problematization of present meaning brings into question, not only the notion that language can represent the world objectively – something already figured within a structuralist conception of language – but also that there is a wholly stable reality beyond language to which a text might in fact refer. In other words, Derrida’s ‘notion’ of *différance* suspends any belief in the being of history both as a narrative representation of events and as a given set of events to which historical narrative might refer. Moreover, its sceptical stance in relation to the notion of presence also brings into question any absolute distinction between history as ‘text’ and as a wider ‘context’ of events, in such a way that language is to be seen not just as a passive vehicle for the transmission of meaning but as an active participant in its formation. Further to this, Derrida’s view that signs are open to the continual possibility of reinterpretation in the face of unfolding signification undermines the notion that historical narrative is simply a sedimentary accumulation of meaning. Rather, according to Derrida’s conception of the workings of language, it is a dynamic literary form whose significance remains thoroughly volatile throughout.

These are, however, not the only ways in which Derrida's 'poststructuralist' conception of language problematises our conventional understanding of history and historical narrative. Consider here also the following passage from "Différance":

The structure of delay (*Nachträglichkeit*) in effect forbids that one make of temporalization (temporalisation) a simple dialectical complication of the living present as an originary and unceasing synthesis – a synthesis constantly directed back on itself, gathering in on itself and gathering – of retentional traces and protentional openings. The alterity of the "unconscious" makes us concerned not with horizons of modified – past of future – presents, but with a "past" that has never been present, and never will be, whose future to come will never be a *production* or a reproduction in the form of presence. Therefore, the concept of trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming-past of what has been present. One cannot think the trace – and therefore différance – on the basis of the present, or of the present. [Derrida, 1972, p.21]

Here, Derrida sets out to elaborate on his articulation of *différance* by focussing on the way in which it can be understood to give rise, both to our sense of the spatial difference between signs and things, and the seemingly ineluctable flow of time within which signification and events are conventionally held to unfold. For Derrida, not even the apparently natural order of space-time escapes the 'logic' of *différance*, since, according to that logic, past, present and future touch upon one another in such a way that the past is always part of the present and future, while the future is always and already an immanent feature of the past and present. Put another way, for Derrida, in the light of *différance*, space-time is, despite our conventional understanding of it, in some sense always and already disordered, or 'out of joint'. Consequently, Derrida can be understood to challenge our traditional understanding of historical narrative, not only in relation to its conventionally perceived capacity to furnish us with an objective representation of actual events, but also in terms of the apparently natural status of the spatio-temporal ordering of things to which it is usually understood to relate; that is to say, where events are to be distinguished historically from one another within an ordered framework of spatial difference and inexorable, mono-directional temporal flow. In short, Derrida's 'poststructuralism' arguably positions him as the Heisenberg of linguistic theory; or to put it another way, as the upholder of essentially relative rather than absolute values.

Clearly, it is possible to see all of this as a profound challenge to the underlying tenets of historically related forms of discourse. Not only can Derrida's scepticism over absolute truth value as expressed through language be understood to undermine any claim that historians might make as to the epistemological relevance of their discipline, but it can also be understood to unsettle the relationship between the writing of history as a form of epistemological enquiry and any ethico-political conclusions which might be drawn from or upheld in relation to its findings. Think here, for example,

of the clearly perceived relationship between historical analysis and political critique that lies at the heart of a Marxist world-view, or the similar connection between historical veracity and political challenge upon which any study of the Holocaust is often seen to rest. In both cases it is no longer evident with regard to Derrida's poststructuralist thinking how exactly ethical or political judgements might be arrived at in the absence of an unequivocal understanding of the truth of historical events.

Here, then, it is possible to perceive Derrida's critique of language as one that leaves room for a dangerous abdication of values. Indeed, such an understanding of Derrida's work would seem to draw some strength from its relationship to that of the writers Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man, both of whom can be shown to have had connections to Nazism. Consider here, for example Derrida's now notorious defence of de Man's deconstructive literary criticism after the latter had been revealed as a one-time contributor to the state approved press within Nazi-occupied Belgium. Consider here also, since it is most relevant to the present discussion, Derrida's intervention in the Heidegger-Schapiro debate. In this instance, Derrida can be understood to have sided with, as Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe puts it, "the old Nazi Martin Heidegger against the old Humanist-Marxist Meyer Schapiro" [Gilbert-Rolfe, 1995: 137] in their now notorious *contretemps* over the importance of historical context as a limiting factor on the interpretation of artistic meaning⁵¹. According to Derrida, writing in *The Truth in Painting*, while there is an interaction between the work of art (*ergon*) and the frame or context (*parergon*) within which it sits, framing or context in and of itself never achieves sufficient stability (given what Derrida sees as a deconstructive relationship between the work of art as text and its surrounding context) so as to work as a decisive limit on the interpretation of artistic meaning. Clearly, it is possible to see such a line of argument as one which takes us way from the assumed certainties of Hegelianism/Marxism into a rather murkier realm where credence seems to have been given to the possibility of an interpretation without limits; something which is clearly inimical to those opposed on ethical/political grounds to the notion that history might be open to endless, dehierarchized reinterpretation.

What then should our response to a deconstructive attention to history be? For anyone who regards Derrida's poststructuralist vision of the workings of language as little more than an absurdist

⁵¹ For a further discussion of Derrida's intervention, see "Van Gogh, Schapiro, Heidegger; and Derrida", chapter thirteen of Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beyond Piety; Critical Essays on the Visual Arts 1986-1993*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1995, pp.143-149. Also see "Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation", chapter eight of Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art*

conceit, the case is of course an open and shut one. We should simply give up its overwrought concerns about the slipperiness of language and rededicate ourselves to the quest for some form of epistemological, ethical and political certainty. For anyone sympathetic to Derrida's position things are, however, much less clear-cut, as we will now attempt to show through a consideration of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.

One of Derrida's principal targets in *Specters of Marx* is the somewhat neo-Hegelian view of history put forward by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*. Here, Fukuyama can be understood to argue three main points: firstly, that the post-war ideological stand-off between Western liberal democracy and Marxism came to an end with the political and economic collapse of the communist states in Europe at the end of the nineteen-eighties; secondly, that the apparent triumph of Capitalism over Communism which resulted from this collapse amounts to a completion of our "ideological evolution" and, therefore, the logical conclusion of "history with a purpose"; and thirdly that this end of 'history with a purpose' is a point beyond which a now unchallenged Western liberal democracy and capitalism can move freely to provide the whole of humanity with an optimum level of political stability, peace and material prosperity. The only concern which Fukayama raises against this almost utopian vision is that the relative featurelessness of this 'new world order' may well provoke the coming of the 'last man' - an atavistic figure culled from the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche who resists to the notion of an end to a history with a purpose –and as a consequence attempts to return the world to a disruptive ideological conflict of a kind similar to that which dominated world history prior to the fall of European Communism (clearly, given the timing of Fukuyama's argument, we are supposed to think here of figures such as Saddam Hussein).

As Stuart Sim points out in *Derrida and The End of History* (1999), Fukuyama's position can be understood to have links to two other lines of argument. Firstly, to that put forward by Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (1962), which posits the notion that the ideological binarism of the Cold War had at that time resulted in a stalemate of political inaction beyond which some new form of postmodernist consensus had to be found; and secondly, to the 'endism' which has characterised certain forms of postmodernist discourse during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Take here, for example, Arthur Danto's assertion in *The State of the*

Art (1987) that the dialectical workings of Modernism have brought art to a logical conclusion in which it can be seen simply to have been sublimated within the everyday. Here, in relation to such thinking we can see Fukuyama adopting a view in which a dialectical opposition between Capitalism and Communism can be understood to have resulted in a final overcoming of the latter by the former.

As one might expect, Derrida's response to Fukuyama's somewhat neo-Hegelian thesis is to bring into question the actuality of such outright historical closure. The manner in which he does so can, however, be seen as something of a departure from standard Derridean practice, which as critics such as Terry Eagleton have pointed out often seems to be both politically evasive and ahistorical [Eagleton, 1983: 148]. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida sets out to problematize Fukuyama's position, not simply through an 'ironic' deconstruction of the claims to truth value contained in *The End of History*, but by upholding Marx's supposedly dead and buried critique of capitalism as a something whose spectre continues to haunt the certainties of Fukuyama's supposed 'new world order'.

As such, Derrida's problematization of Fukuyama proceeds from the view that Marx's writing is itself haunted by the metaphorical presence of the spectre, most notably at the very beginning of *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) where Marx famously states that "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism". For Derrida, this metaphorical spectrality – which he amplifies through a superimposed reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – works to deconstruct standard readings of Marx on at least two counts. Firstly, this is because, according to Derrida, the spectre as a metaphorical figure inhabits a somewhat undecidable position somewhere between the spiritual and the corporeal or, if you will, between the ideal and the material. Here, Derrida writes:

[T]he specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter. [Derrida, 1993: 6]

As a Consequence of this, Derrida argues, Marx's writing can be understood to be haunted by a metaphorical figure which cannot be entirely disassociated from the Hegelian notion of the *Geist* – a wholly motive, transcendental 'spirit' to whose influence the pattern of historical events supposedly bends – even though that figure is clearly deployed by Marx in order to add dramatic weight to his materialistic inversion of the Hegelian *weltanschauung*. The second way in which the metaphorical

figure of the spectre deconstructs Marx is, according to Derrida, because it harbours a troubling anachronism. That is to say, it can be understood to appear in Marx's writing – like the ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – as a portent of the future, while also suggesting the return of something that had already had a living presence at some time in the past or, as Derrida puts it, as an occurrence where “what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past from the back” [Derrida, 1993: 10]. Here, then, we have the somewhat unsettling notion that the nascent Communism of the mid-nineteenth century is something that arrives simultaneously too early and too late on the scene of its own presence. In other words, as something that arrives as an always and already spectral entity, without a definite attachment to any single time or place in history.

Clearly, the implications of this for a standard reading of Marx are profound, in that Marx's critique of capitalism can be understood to be haunted by the metaphorical figure of the spectre in such a way that it can no longer be thought to stand in straightforward opposition to an idealist world-view, nor simply as the upholder of a rationalist conception of history. In short, for Derrida, Marx is to be viewed not as a monolithic figure in support of a teleological view of history opposed to the continuity of capitalism, but as a much more troubling, plural one whose writing works to disrupt its own dialectical foundations.

In Derrida's view the implications of this spectral Marx for the kind of endist argument put forward by Fukuyama are also profound. He writes:

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. What is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a spectre, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the “to be”, assuming that it is a matter of Being in the “to be or not to be”, but nothing is less certain). It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. I would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. How to comprehend in fact the discourse of the end or the discourse about the end? Can the extremity of the extreme ever be comprehended? And the opposition “to be” and “not to be”? *Hamlet* already began with the expected return of the dead King. After the end of history, the spirit comes by *coming back* [revenant] it figures both a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again. [Derrida, 1993: 10]

Here, in this passage from *Specters of Marx*, Derrida addresses simultaneously two critical targets. The first is Marx's millenarian vision of a crisis of Capitalism and the history of an old world order about to come to an end. For Derrida, the metaphorical presence of the spectre in Marx's work

disrupts the supposedly immutable order of space-time and, therefore, any place, or site where such events might in fact come fully into being. The second target is Fukuyama's notion of an end to an eventful history of the opposition between Capitalism and Communism whose own 'staging' is, Derrida suggests here, now haunted by the spectral presence of a supposedly dead and buried Marx; a 'presence' which continues to emerge anachronistically 'in advance from the past' and which cannot, therefore, simply be consigned to history as Fukuyama would have us believe.

All of this is of course readily recognizable to anyone familiar with Derrida's writing. When Derrida posits the notion of a spectral Marx that disrupts our sense of present being and of the stability of space-time, he is, of course, invoking the return of another spectral presence, that of *différance*. This time, however, *différance* is not raised simply (if indeed it ever was) as the nemesis of all truth, of all reason and of all history. Rather, it emerges from the 'back' as the portent of another, 'future' form of deconstruction, one that invites us to consider not so much the end of history (something beyond which we cannot as yet fully go, given the necessity of our present reliance on the spatio-temporal order inscribed in language), but, as Derrida himself puts it, the "end of a certain conception of history" [Derrida, 1993: 15]. That is to say, a historicist understanding of history which attempts to arrive, through language, at a comprehensive and objective representation of events and the underlying forces that supposedly govern their progress, and which at the same time goes some way to counter criticism of Derrida's work for the possibility of its alignment with an unregulated capitalism and the politics of the far right. For Derrida, there is a 'history' remaining to us. A supremely eventful and illimitable one that, like the writings of Marx, is haunted by the spectral presence of *différance* coming and going, momentarily glimpsed, along the crenellated walkways of language, unbidden, uncontrolled and ultimately beyond our comprehension.

What, then, are the implications of all of this for a deconstructive attention to art history? Here, a number of points might be made. The first is that the metaphorical figure of the spectre which Derrida latches on to in *Specters of Marx* can be understood, as previously stated, to act as a surrogate for the earlier linguistic figure *différance*, in that its undecideability can be seen to undermine, not only the notion that the writings of Marx have a stable and sustainable significance, but also that they operate within a clearly defined historical framework. In *Specters of Marx* Derrida, therefore, remains entirely consistent with his earlier problematization of historical narrative as a form of representation in the essay "Différance". The second point to be made is that in *Specters of Marx* Derrida uses this insight to

challenge the notion that there can be narrative closure on the events of history. Indeed, Derrida can be understood to deploy *différance* once more through the metaphorical figure of the spectre to posit the notion of a chronically unstable 'history', which in being open to the possibility of continual reinterpretation in the face of changing circumstance of time and place defies the very idea of narrative closure. In other words, while Derrida continues to suspend the traditional conception of historical narrative as the possible representation of a series of once present events, he simultaneously keeps the notion of an eventful 'history' (as narrative *and* as a series of events) – in much the same way as he keeps the notion of an unstable, eventful language - very much in play. Arguably, therefore, Derrida problematizes Fukuyama's somewhat Hegelian notion of a 'history with a purpose', but without succumbing to the attendant notion of a possible end to history. The third point to made here is that in *Specters of Marx* Derrida can be understood to keep both the writings of Marx and the concept of 'history' in play, not simply as a way of deconstructing Fukuyama's position in *The End of History*, but also as a means of questioning the supposedly benign hegemony of liberal Capitalism. Clearly, Derrida's conception of 'history' and of a plural Marx is not one that would pass muster with traditional Marxists, nevertheless Derrida can be understood to have marshalled the forces of deconstruction not just as pure criticism for its own sake, but in an attempt to get behind Marxist thought and its ethical challenge to the effects of capitalism on the individual and collective subject. Indeed, in *Specters of Marx* Derrida calls both for a return to the notion of the political *contretemps* – something his thinking has arguably worked to problematise over recent years – and to an internationalist critique of the workings of capital. Arguably, therefore, Derrida can be seen to sustain the consistency of his thinking over many years while bringing that thinking to bear in a world in which a persistent absence of ethico-political commitment is simply unacceptable. What Derrida may well have opened up in *Specters of Marx*, then, is the possibility of a deconstructive attention to history that can be pursued along both ethically and politically committed lines. That is to say, one that represents a riposte to those critics of Derrida who see his work only as a politically indifferent dead-end.

However, while Derrida might well have cleared the intellectual ground for an ethically and politically committed deconstructive attention to history, it is perhaps not immediately clear from a first reading of *Specters of Marx* what precise form such an attention might take. Like much of Derrida's work since the mid-nineteen seventies, *Specters of Marx* is a dense, multi-layered and polysemic text

that defies any straightforward form of interpretation. Its principal theme, as has already been pointed, is a meditation on the apparent death and possible future of Marxism interwoven at times with, and amplified by, a commentary on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. On The face of it, *Specters of Marx* can therefore be understood to operate, much like Derrida's notorious publication *Glas*, as a polylogue or layering of texts that brings together into an unlikely alliance both philosophical and literary approaches to textual analysis. However, running throughout *Specters of Marx* there is also a far more obviously historicizing tone than we have perhaps been used to in Derrida's previous writings. That is to say, Derrida takes us beyond a relatively limited textual analysis of Marx's writing seen in relation to that of Shakespeare, into an extended reflection on the wider historical impact of Marxist thought and our continuing struggle to come to terms with the spirit of its critique. Although not a history in the conventional sense, *Specters of Marx* sees Derrida adopting a form of genealogy in which the significance of Marx's writing is understood, like the spectre in *Hamlet*, to defy any settled ontological definition and the apparent strictures of the spatio-temporal order. Moreover, it is a genealogy that ultimately claims the apparent spectrality of Marx's writing, not simply as that which stakes out the territory of its past, but also precisely as that which will propel its critical spirit into the future. Further to which, we also find Derrida weaving into this genealogy of the spectres of Marx considerations of the past and possible future development of deconstruction. Indeed, at one point Derrida – writing in what is arguably an unusually prosaic and personal manner – talks about the context of the early 'development' of deconstruction in the nineteen-fifties as a period of "historical entanglement" where a reading of Marx and other works belonging to "the canon of the modern apocalypse (end of History, end of Man, end of Philosophy, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, with their Kojèveian codicil and the codicils of Kojève himself)" was tempered by the increasingly evident totalitarianism of the communist states [Derrida, 1993: 15]. Derrida's point here being that the baffling irrationalism and apparent indecision of early deconstruction can be understood to have emerged squarely in relation to the apparent political paradoxes of the immediate post-war period. With regard to which, the deconstructive attention contained in *Specters of Marx*, where a clear strategic decision has been made to keep Marxist thought in play, could be understood to emerge in relation to very different historical and political circumstances; ones where the political paradoxes of the past appear to many to have been resolved. Here, then we have amongst the dense fabric of *Specters of Marx* the performative traces of

how a deconstructive attention to history might be played out and, what is more, an example that opens itself up to the possibility of a response to ethical concerns.

On the face of it, one might be tempted to argue that there is little difference here between the writing of a genealogy as a deconstructive strategy and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Indeed, both approaches could be seen to share an understanding that linguistic significance is in a constant state of flux through 'historical' transformations in the perceived relationship between structurally opposed signs or syntagms. Take here, by way of an example, the well-known text *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, where Michel Foucault puts forward the argument that the word 'madness' does not signify a historically constant meaning opposed to that signified by the associated term 'reason', but is instead a signifier which has held differing denotations and connotations at different times and in different places throughout history. Here, put crudely, Foucault contends that in Antiquity there was dialogue between reason and unreason that allowed for an acceptance of the latter as the necessary partner to the former. This was then followed, he argues, by a growing segregation of madness and those individuals deemed mad – a category which at certain times has expanded to encompass, not only those with mental illness, but also the feckless, the troublesome and the supposedly undeserving poor – from the supposed normality of an increasingly rationalized society. This rupturing was then followed during the twentieth century by a partial restoration of the ancient dialogue between reason and unreason with the development and rise of modern psychoanalysis. However, despite the obvious links between this Foucauldian mapping of transformations in meaning and Derrida's conception of a chronically spectral Marxism, we would argue that the various attempts by Foucault to unearth discursive change in works such as *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish* (1979) and the three volume *The History of Sexuality* (1980, 1985 and 1986) sustain an implicit sense of narrative stability fundamentally at odds with Derrida's theorization of *différance*. Although it would be fair to say that Foucault, like Derrida, unsettles the conventional understanding that certain conceptual oppositions form a constant, immutable basis on which all human discourse rests, he arguably does so by positing a historical model wherein discursive instability is mapped out in a relatively simple way as an accumulated series of transformations, some of which are understood to mark definitive, epoch-making changes, not only to the way in which individuals understand the world and their relationship to it, but also to the way individuals and groups act in the world and towards one another. There is therefore, we would aver, a residual and potentially

unquestioned historicism in Foucault's writing which distinguishes it from Derrida's own use of the genealogy in *Specters of Marx*, where a conventional understanding of history is placed consistently *sous-rature*. Moreover, in *Madness and Civilization* at least, Foucault seems to suggest that a historically unstable discourse on madness starts from some sort of original position of conceptual balance in Antiquity and that reason remains throughout history a relatively stable term whose meaning remains largely unaffected by changes to its structural other; suggestions which find little or no resonance with Derrida's 'poststructuralist' conception of language.

To assess the possibility of applying Derrida's deconstructive attention to history to the history of the visual arts we now turn to our own genealogy which seeks to map out a provisional link between the work of Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. Here, we intend to show how our understanding of the critical strategies adopted by Duchamp in the early part of the twentieth century through readymade works such as *Fountain* has transformed over time, both in relation to readings of Duchamp's work and the way in which other artists – Beuys and Kiefer – have adapted his legacy to the demands of differing historical settings. As such, this genealogy aligns itself with Derrida's reading of Marx in *Specters of Marx* by advancing the notion that Duchamp haunts the history of contemporary art as a somewhat spectral figure, continually returning out of the past to point towards the future development of the visual arts. Moreover, it seeks to sustain a parallel between the critical strategies of Duchamp and those of Derrida and to show how Duchamp's legacy – which has itself been criticised as a dangerous abdication of values - has been adapted by Kiefer to advance a form of deconstructive attention to history that bears some comparison with that put forward by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. In the case of this play within a play, however, the focus for ethical concern is not the uncontested progress of capitalism, but the historical interpretation of the Holocaust and the ever-present threat of a return to Fascism.

Chapter II – Marcel Duchamp: Man In a 'Mutt' Case

According to Gregory L. Ulmer, writing in his essay "The Object of Post-Criticism"⁵², Jacques Derrida's theory and practice of deconstruction has a strong affinity with the collage/montage techniques first widely used by the artistic avant-garde during the early years of the twentieth century.

Here, following a lead established by Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), Ulmer argues that ‘post-criticism’- the title he gives to deconstructive textual analysis of the kind practised by Derrida – “is constituted precisely by the application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations” and, furthermore, that “the principal device taken over by the critics and theorists is the compositional pair collage/montage” [Ulmer in Foster ed., 1985: 83]; the former being defined by Ulmer as “the transfer of materials from one context to another” and the latter as “the “dissemination” of these borrowings through the new setting” [Ulmer in Foster ed., 1985: 84].

Ulmer supports this basic thesis first by arguing the point that “[t]he interest of collage as a device for criticism resides partly in the objective impulse of Cubism” which “by “incorporating directly into the work an actual fragment of the referent (open form), remains “representational” while breaking completely with the *trompe-l’oeil* illusionism of traditional realism” and, moreover, - and here Ulmer quotes Eddie Wolfram writing in *History of Collage* (1975) – because ““these tangible and non-illusionistic objects presented a new and original source of interplay between artistic expressions and the experience of the everyday world. An unpredicted and significant step in bringing art and life closer to being a simultaneous experience had been taken” [Ulmer, in Foster ed., 1985: 84 – our square brackets]. Ulmer then goes on to contend that the attraction of montage to post-criticism is that in semiotic terms the collaged fragment, when disseminated through its new setting, becomes remotivated in such a way that it begins to signify both “itself and something else” [Ulmer, in Foster ed., 1985: 85], thereby disrupting the perceived stability of its ‘original’ meaning. As Ulmer points out, this is a telling critical weapon in that it can be used to unsettle the supposedly authoritative significance of any given object or text. And here Ulmer cites by way of examples both the photomontages of John Heartfield, with their mocking remotivations of Nazi imagery, and the ‘epic’ theatre of Bertolt Brecht, with its illusion breaking insertion of non-naturalistic action.

For Ulmer, this artistic deployment of collage/montage is entirely commensurate with the Derridean techniques of textual dislocation, juxtaposition, matting and superimposition, whereby fragments of a textual object are excised from their usual milieu to be disseminated within new surroundings. Here, according to Ulmer, Derrida uses these techniques as a way of inviting us to shuttle indecisively back and forth between the meaning the textual object of criticism is usually understood to have in relation to its original setting in ‘life’ and the one it takes on in relation to its new critical

⁵² See, Gregory L. Ulmer, “The Object of Post-Criticism”, in Foster ed., *Postmodern Culture*, Pluto

surroundings, thereby revealing to us performatively the workings of *différance* as that movement of differing and deferring between signs which simultaneously gives rise to meaning and which denies it full presence. Moreover, for Ulmer, Derrida's consistent use of direct citation as a critical strategy parallels the 'representational' processes of collage/montage and their miming of 'life' without the intervention of conceptual or explanatory interpretation; an intervention which, according to Ulmer, sustains the metaphysical notion that the repeated object in question has a present being that can, in fact, be re-presented. Further to which, Ulmer avers, Derrida's critical practice and that of a collage/montage using artistic avant-garde can both be understood to take us beyond a modernist/structuralist tendency to assume that the sign has the capacity to stand as a metaphorical substitute for its referent, and therefore to bracket off any the question of a direct mimetic relationship between the two, towards a postmodernist problematization of the very act of reference played out by the very undecideability of the deconstructive critical text as paraliterary allegory. In addition to all of which, contends Ulmer, both avant-gardist collage/montage and Derridean deconstruction can be understood to work not as parasites in relation to their object text – that is to say as opportunistic feeders on their more substantial host – but as saprophytes which enter into a productive, open-ended and mutually beneficial interpretative relationship.

Here, then we have a line of argument that places Derridean 'post-criticism' within a critical lineage that begins well before the first of Derrida's writings on the subject of deconstruction were first published. Equally, it is a line of argument that enables us to interpret the collage/montage experiments of the early twentieth century artistic avant-garde specifically in terms of Derrida's later 'poststructuralist' conception of language.

Clearly, there is a danger here of a wilful anachronism on the part of any reader intent on describing the collage/montage techniques of the early twentieth century avant-garde specifically as deconstructive given that the Derridean term 'deconstruction' was not coined until the nineteen-sixties. Nevertheless, on the basis of Ulmer's essay it is difficult not to think of many avant-garde works of the early twentieth century as a form of deconstruction *avant la lettre*. Perhaps the most telling example of this is the Duchampian 'readymade'. Arguably the most extreme and least obviously mediated form of collage/montage, where 'real-life' objects such as a urinal, a snow shovel and a bottle-drier are simply 're-presented' as themselves, in some cases with minor additions and alterations, for contemplation as

works of art. Here, the excising of a prosaic, functional object from its usual setting and its subsequent mounting and dissemination as a work of art clearly conforms to Ulmer's notion of deconstructive textual dislocation. Indeed, we can find pre-emptive traces of such an understanding in some of the self-presentational strategies deployed by Duchamp away from the gallery space. Take here, for example, Duchamp's brief paper, *The Creative Act*, which was delivered at the Convention of the American Federation of Arts in 1957. In it Duchamp writes:

[I]n the chain of reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to fully express his intention, the difference between what he intended to realize and did realize, is the personal 'art coefficient' contained in the work.

In other words, the personal 'art coefficient' is like an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.

To avoid a misunderstanding, we must remember that this 'art coefficient' is a personal expression of art *à l'état brut*, that is still in a raw state, which must be 'refined' as pure sugar from molasses by the spectator; the digit of this coefficient has no bearing whatsoever on his verdict. The creative act takes another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the esthetic [sic] scale.

All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. This becomes even more obvious when posterity gives its final verdict and sometimes rehabilitates forgotten artists. [Duchamp, in Tomkins, 1998: 510 – our square brackets]

Here, it could be argued that Duchamp advances a line of thinking that not only prefigures the stance adopted by Derrida towards authorial intent and textual significance some ten years later in essays such as *Force and Signification* (1967), but which also frames the creation of a work of art in recognisably Derridean terms as a performative rather than as a constative or assertive act. That is to say, as an act in which the artwork takes on its somewhat unstable significance, not because of any essential being as a work of art, but because of the relationship it has with the conventional signifying context within which it sits. Or, to put it in terms closer to Duchamp's somewhat ecclesiastical choice of words, as an act where, by dint of a recognised celebrant (the artist), an agreed ceremony (the art exhibition) and suitably consecrated ground (the gallery space), an arrangement of otherwise commonplace materials (the work of art) is held up to view in such a way that a suitably initiated audience (the art viewing public) feels itself able to accept, or not as the case may be, that arrangement, without any fundamental alteration in its superficial appearance, as an object worthy of aesthetic contemplation.

It is hardly surprising therefore, given the apparent similarity between Duchamp and Derrida's critical practice, that Duchamp, as one of the earliest and, in a sense, purest exponents of avant-gardist collage/montage, is now widely revered as the principal source of a postmodernist/poststructuralist 'tradition' in the visual arts. Indeed, as Amelia Jones points out in *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (1994), in North America at least he has in many ways come to be viewed – somewhat paradoxically - as the 'father' of an otherwise politically 'feminised' Postmodernism in the visual arts; a perceived role which, as Jones makes clear, sets Duchamp and his work in opposition both to the perceived masculinism of modernist abstraction – one thinks here principally of the 'with balls' painting of the Abstract Expressionists and the Post-painterly Abstractionists, as well as the welded metal sculpture of David Smith, Anthony Caro and Jules Olitski - and the neo-Kantian metaphysics of much of the critical writing which supported it throughout the middle part of the twentieth century – most notably that of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Michael Fried⁵³.

However, as Jones also suggests in *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, any notion that there is, in actual fact, a direct and mutually illuminating historical correspondence between Duchamp's work and that of Derrida should be approached with a certain degree of caution. Here, she writes:

There is a particular seduction in examining Duchamp's works through a Derridean model for, when viewed from a perspective already informed by poststructuralist theory, the fabric of Duchamp's own philosophies (as expressed in the works, his spoken and written texts, and his self-presentational strategies) often appears to veer tantalizingly close to a Derridean deconstructing textuality. The linguistic and epistemological games that both French intellectuals put into play encourage precisely the "making present" of Duchamp's works by aligning them with Derridean poststructuralist philosophies. The impossibility of resisting this alignment foregrounds the extreme difficulty of "understanding", finding "meaning" in the Duchampian field from the perspective of 1990s poststructuralism without simply divesting the works of any historical specificity by subsuming them in a facile way into postmodernism. [Jones, 1994: 112]

Put simply, what Jones argues in this passage is that a straightforward alignment of Duchamp's work with that of Derrida's serves merely to gloss over the relationship of the former to a world whose history cannot be wholly contained or defined by the contemporary notions of Postmodernism/Poststructuralism. Or, to put it another way, that by subsuming Duchamp's work

⁵³ See, for example, Clement Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting" (first published in 1960 and then again with revisions in 1965), reprinted in in Frascina and Harrison eds., *Modern Art and Modernism: a Critical Anthology*, Paul Chapman publishing, London, 1988 and Michael Fried's "Three American

within some sort of homogenous postmodernist/poststructuralist ‘present’ – which is, Jones argues in the preface to *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, precisely what a great deal of post 1960, North Americanised, Duchamp-friendly, art historical/critical discourse does [Jones, 1994: xi] – we stand in danger of overlooking the ‘true’ complexity of that work’s wider historical relationship with the world.

According to Jones, again writing in *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp*, despite its seductiveness, the notion that Duchamp’s “works can be refixed as wholly present in the postmodern” [Jones 1994: 111] can however be resisted. Not, she suggests, simply by reaffirming Duchamp’s ‘modernity’ – that is to say, Duchamp’s place within a modernist tradition of progressive stylistic iconoclasm, constant innovation and change – but instead by continually taking note “of the undecideability of his author-function” and by recognising “that this very undecideability, determined through this poststructuralist point of view, is an always already postmodern function”. To which Jones adds the supplementary contention that “[w]e can examine and question the discourse of postmodernism only from a position within (a position saturated with our “postmodern” desires)” [Jones, 1994: 112 – our square brackets]. On the basis of this argument Jones then goes on to argue that the evident problematization of fixed gender identity in Duchamp’s work – a prime example of which is Duchamp’s photographic transformation into his assumed female alter ego, Rose Sélavy (whose name can be rearranged into the phrase ‘Eros, that’s life’) – and, consequently, the stability of Duchamp’s standing as an authorial figure, works to unsettle his already paradoxical status as the ‘father’ of Postmodernism/Poststructuralism.

In many ways, the gender-identity/author–function argument that Jones advances here is a telling one, drawing out deconstructively, as it does, the contradictions and inconsistencies that pertain to the perceived opposition between an overly-demonised masculinist-Greenbergian Modernism and a now institutional – for this, one might also read patriarchal – feminist-Duchampian Postmodernism. Moreover, it also suggests a historical reading of Duchamp reminiscent of the *parallax/deferred action* model put forward by Hal Foster. That is to say, Jones can be understood to propose the protension of a chronic undecideability on the part of Duchamp’s work only activated ‘fully’ from the point of view of our present postmodernity. However, despite the potentially unsettling significance of Jones’s insights into the ‘en-gendering’ of Duchamp, her arguments do appear to harbour some significant difficulties of

their own. On the one hand, as we have seen, Jones appears to argue that a straightforward alignment of Duchamp's work with Postmodernism/Poststructuralism glosses over the specificity of its historical relationship with the world, particularly where, one might argue, the existence of Duchamp's *oeuvre* can be seen to precede the development of a postmodernist/poststructuralist world-view. On the other, she would also appear to argue that Duchamp's work escapes any straightforward alignment with Postmodernism/Poststructuralism not because of its one-time association with Modernism, but precisely because of the undecideability of Duchamp's 'author-function', as determined through the lens of 'present' poststructuralism and as an "always already postmodern function". Furthermore, Jones appears to suggest that we, as readers, are now inextricably saturated in a Postmodernist/Poststructuralist point of view and all of the 'desires' that are attendant upon it. In other words, Jones seems to be arguing that we can conceive of Duchamp's lack of compliance to the notion of a present Postmodernism/Poststructuralism, but only from within the confines of a postmodernist/poststructuralist perspective. For Jones, Duchamp escapes postmodernism only by being judged undecideable from an irrevocably Postmodernist/Poststructuralist point of view. The deconstructive circularity of this argument would, therefore, seem to work very much against the possibility of our grasping the historical specificity that Jones explicitly claims for Duchamp's work. That is to say, Jones can be understood to have opened up the notion of a historically plural Duchamp while at the same time closing off – intentionally, or otherwise – our ability to grasp something of that plurality beyond the supposed horizons of our poststructuralist/postmodernist 'present'.

With all of this in mind, we would therefore like to extend Jones's initial concerns about the crude subsumption of Duchamp's work within a Postmodernism/Poststructuralism 'present' by putting forward in the first instance a deconstructive genealogy illustrating the chronic functional undecideability of Duchamp's work. Here, we will proceed on the assumption that we are not entirely immured within a postmodernist/poststructuralist present, but that our spatio-temporal grasp of the world involves a 'trace-structure' where signifying elements are metonymically interrelated through a series of retentions and protentions always and already linking each to its others and, as a consequence, made subject to the possibility of continual remotivation in the face of unfolding events. In short, we proceed from the assumption that past and the present are not entirely closed or fixed categories, but permeable, mutable domains where the traces of the past can be grasped, if only provisionally, in the

present, and, therefore, that we can indeed think ourselves, at least to some degree, outside Jones's notion of a Postmodernism/Poststructuralism 'present'.

In doing this, we intend to take into consideration the unfolding relationship between four readings of Duchamp's work, as exemplified by the readymade *Fountain*: one from the immediate aftermath of the scandal generated by the threatened showing of *Fountain* in 1917, where Duchamp's work was understood to have expanded, but not necessarily to have removed, the boundaries of a categorical aesthetic; another from the nineteen-sixties where the Duchampian readymade was seen as a seminal example of nihilistic anti-art through which Duchamp had sought to liquidate the conventionally understood division between art and life; another from the nineteen-seventies when the Duchampian readymade was aligned with the notion that the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century had attempted a critical sublation of art into praxis, and that later repetitions of this strategy by the neo-avant-garde in the post-war period simply negated the critical efficacy of the historical avant-garde; and the already stated view of Americanised art criticism of the nineteen-nineties that Duchamp's work involves a form of proto-deconstruction in which all notions of categorical difference and containment are suspended. On the way, we also intend to touch incidentally upon André Breton's largely unsuccessful attempt to co-opt Duchamp and his work to the cause of Surrealism and Terry Atkinson's casting of Duchamp as persistently bourgeois counter-revolutionary.

Here, we will attempt to show not only that Duchamp's work has provoked a rich diversity of readings, but also that those readings have, as they have emerged in relation to their historical settings, constantly recontextualised and remotivated one another. In addition to this, we will also attempt to show that in the midst of this constant state of discursive flux each (re-)reading of Duchamp's work remains internally fractured, contradictory and open to the possibility of further interpretation. Furthermore, we will also attempt to show how each reading of Duchamp's work carries the traces of those that preceded it and those that were still to come.

In addition to all of this, we also intend to extend a further provisional genealogy linking Duchamp's work to that of the German artists Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer. This genealogy will have been advanced in support of the thesis that our grasp of Duchamp's legacy involves not only a history of literary interpretation, but also of the deployment of Duchampian critical strategies by other artists within contexts very different from those within which Duchamp himself operated. Here, then,

Duchamp's legacy will be framed as something that can be understood differently in relation to changing historical contexts and not as a chronically constant genetic strain.

Further to which, it will also be argued that the Duchampian critical strategies appropriated by Anselm Kiefer in paintings such as *Varus* (1976) and *Ways of Worldly Wisdom – Arminius's Battle* (1978-80) show how Duchamp's legacy has been turned to a form of critical 'history' painting. And, what is more, that this adaptation of Duchamp's legacy to 'history' painting has enabled Kiefer to pursue an ethically and politically engaged form of critique which many (including Terry Atkinson) have seen as absent from Duchamp's work. Clearly, parallels will then also have been drawn here between Kiefer's elaboration upon Duchamp's legacy and the development by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* of what is arguably also a politically and ethically engaged response to world events.

The history of Marcel Duchamp's readymade, *Fountain* is both Byzantine and inconclusive. According to the available evidence collected together in the numerous writings on the subject, *Fountain* was first held up to public attention as part of events surrounding the American Society of Independent Artists exhibition of January 1917. Here, artists were invited through the release of a public notice to submit works for exhibition on condition that they pay an entry fee of one dollar and membership dues of five dollars for the year in hand. For this, each prospective member would receive an automatic right to show their artwork in the Society's exhibitions and to vote at the Society's annual meetings. The initial notice also listed the founding directors of the Society. This listing included the names George Bellows, Homer Boss, John R. Covert, Katherine S. Dreier, Marcel Duchamp, Regina A. Farrelly, Arnold Friedman, William J. Glackens, Ray Greenleaf, John Marin, Charles E. Prendergast, Maurice B. Prendergast, man Ray, Mary C. Rogers, Morton L. Schamberg, Joseph Stella and Maurice Stern. However, it is clear from other sources that Walter Arensberg and the French artists Albert Gleizes, Jacques Villon and Francis Picabia were also involved in the planning and setting up of the Society.

It is important to note, for reasons that will become clear later on in this discussion, that many of those named above were at the time close friends and associates of Duchamp. Jacques Villon was, of course, Duchamp's elder brother. Francis Picabia was a close friend and artistic collaborator of Duchamp's from his early years in Paris. Albert Gleizes was a Parisian acquaintance involved in events surrounding the humiliating rejection of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (no.2)* by the cubist dominated Salon des Indépendants of 1912; a work which subsequently made Duchamp's name in

North America. Walter Arensberg had, with his wife Louise, provided Duchamp with a place to live and work on his arrival in New York, and was to become one of the foremost patrons and collectors of Duchamp's work over the next forty years. Man Ray was a close personal friend and artistic collaborator. And Katherine Dreier was one of Duchamp's wealthy New York patrons, his lover and a co-founder with Duchamp and Man Ray of the Société Anonyme (the French business term for 'incorporated'), a group given to the collection and exhibition of contemporary art. In addition to this, Duchamp was also to work closely with his friends Henri Pierre Roché and Beatrice Wood on *The Blindman*, a short-lived journal intended as a focus for comment on the activities of the Society of Independent Artists.

Following the release of its initial notice, the founding committee of the American Society of Independent Artists decided to stage its first exhibition, which was planned to open to the public at the Grand Central palace in New York on Tuesday the 10th of April 1917 after a private viewing on the evening of the 9th. Of the founding membership, Walter Arensberg was given the task of directing the exhibition as a whole; Walter Pach the job of treasurer; and Duchamp was made the head of the hanging committee. Instructions sent out to potential exhibitors by the show's secretary, John Covert, asked for works to be submitted between April the 3rd and 5th, and made clear the Society's intention that hanging would take place between the 6th and 9th. Anyone wishing to have their work listed in the catalogue to the exhibition was asked to submit relevant details by March 28th. Photographic illustrations of individual works were also to be submitted by that date. According to Calvin Tomkins writing in *Duchamp: A Biography* (1997), by the stated closing date for the submission of exhibits, over two thousand, one hundred and twenty-five artworks had been received. These included works as diverse as Constantin Brancusi's highly abstract sculpture, *Portrait of Princess Bonaparte*, amateur photographs, academic landscapes, batiks and artificial flower arrangements that would require almost two miles of wall space for their display.

It is important to note here that although the show had a hanging committee, it was not intended that this would constitute a jury deciding which works should be hung and which should not. Rather, as the principles of The Society of Independent Artists stated, all those who had paid the combined six-dollar entrance and membership fee were given the right to show their work without restriction. The only condition imposed on the hanging of works – which would appear to have been

put forward by Duchamp himself at the point when works had been received – was that they should be hung ‘democratically’ according to an alphabetical ordering of their makers’ names.

However, despite the absence of any serious constraints on the hanging of works at the American Society of Independent Artists 1917 exhibition, one artwork submitted in accordance with the stated demands of the Society was not shown. This was a work called *Fountain*, which had ostensibly been submitted by an unknown Philadelphian artist, Richard Mutt, and which consisted of a ceramic men’s urinal, signed “R. Mutt 1917”, mounted on a wooden pedestal. The work was rejected for open public exhibition, very much against the stated principles of the American Society of Independent Artists, by a hastily assembled majority of the Society’s directorate; most of whom apparently either took the view that if shown *Fountain* would break the bounds of common decency, or that it was simply unoriginal and without sufficient artistic merit, and therefore did not qualify as a work of art in the commonly understood sense. Apparently as a result of this break with its agreed principles - to which he had of course been party - Duchamp ostentatiously resigned as the head of Society’s hanging committee, allegedly withdrawing from the Grand Central Palace exhibition a work he had submitted in his own name called *Tulip Hysteria Co-ordinating* – no subsequent records of which appear to exist.

It is, of course, now generally accepted that *Fountain* was not in fact a work by Richard Mutt, but was instead a ‘readymade’ that had been devised by Duchamp himself, perhaps with the knowledge and assistance of Walter Arensberg and Joseph Stella. Moreover, it is also now generally understood that *Fountain* involves an open series of literary and visual puns that extend the kind of polysemic signification we find in earlier cubist paintings by Braque and Picasso. Take, for example, the pseudonym ‘Richard Mutt’ which can be read as a pun both on the name of ‘J.L. Mott’, the New York works from which the urinal in *Fountain* was almost certainly purchased, and the name of the character ‘Mutt’ from the famously syndicated cartoon strip *Mutt and Jeff*, which ran daily in the American press in 1917. Consider also, the first name ‘Richard’ of ‘Richard Mutt’ which as Duchamp himself suggests in a later testimony, can be read as the French slang word for ‘money-bags’ and as playing against notions of poverty associated with the French word ‘pissotiere’; a playing which, as Jack Burnham has suggested writing in “The True Ready Made?”, an article for the journal *Art and Artists*, is reinforced by a possible punning of ‘R. Mutt’ on the German word for ‘poverty’, ‘armut’⁵⁴. In addition to all of

⁵⁴ See, Jack Burnham, “The True Readymade?”, *Art and Artists*, February 1972, p.27.

which, there is now a tendency to see a crudely sexual and even misogynistic aspect to *Fountain* since the readymade places on its back a ('feminine') object into which a man usually points his penis when standing up, thereby bringing to the mind of the viewer a correspondence between the urinal and the form of a woman's vagina. In addition to which, Duchamp's threatened placing of a urinal on its back when read in association with the title *Fountain* also brings to mind the somewhat distasteful notion of a drinking fountain where urine and not water is imbibed.

Further to all of this punning, it is now also widely understood that *Fountain* stands as an epoch-making challenge to conventional nineteenth and early twentieth century notions of artistic representation, craft and aesthetic value. That is to say, it can be seen to defy any notion that a visual artwork should always act as a representation and that it should display a conspicuous level of artistic craft skill; this by dint of the fact that it is a largely unmediated, industrially produced object that simply plays itself. Moreover, the notion that an artwork should always be either conventionally beautiful or involve some form of morally enervating or life-enhancing sublimity can be understood to have been subverted, somewhat bathetically, by its profoundly quotidian aspect. In addition to which, *Fountain's* appeal to wordplay and conceptual association, of the sort described above, rather than purely 'optical' forms of reading, can be understood to subvert the notion of fixed specialist boundaries dividing the visual and plastic arts from other more obviously 'symbolic' idioms such as writing or music; a notion which not only informs a nineteenth and early twentieth century mainstream/academic view of the visual arts, but also Clement Greenberg's conception of modernist painting in the mid-twentieth century.

However, as Gabrielle Buffet (the wife of Francis Picabia) indicates in her article "Magicircles", written for a special 'Marcel Duchamp' edition of *View* magazine in March 1945 – where she sets out to trace "the thread of an evolution" in Duchamp's work "which has remained obscure to many of his contemporaries" – and as William A. Camfield makes abundantly clear in his essay "Marcel Duchamp's Fountain: Its History and Aesthetics in the Context of 1917", contained in Rudolf E. Kuenzli and Francis M. Naumann's anthology *Duchamp: Artist of the Century* (1987), in 1917, and perhaps for some time afterwards, much of the above almost certainly went unrecognised both by wider viewing public and many of Duchamp's inner circle of friends and artistic collaborators. As a New York press article of the time cited by Camfield indicates, in the wake of The Society of Independent Artists Exhibition there appears to have been a continuing acceptance that a disgruntled,

and very much real-life, Richard Mutt intended to sue the Society not only for the return of his exhibition fee, but also for damages. Furthermore, it is important to remember that *Fountain* was, through a somewhat hypocritical act on the part of the majority of the organizing committee, not put on open public display at the Society of Independent Artists' exhibition (although there is some suggestion that Duchamp's work might have been kept hidden behind a screen at the Grand Central Palace during the early part of the exhibition's run). Nor was a photograph of it included in the show's catalogue. Indeed, the only sighting that a wider public was to receive of *Fountain* in 1917 was through a small, grainy photographic representation, often attributed to Alfred Stieglitz, which was published in the second edition of *The Blindman* in May 1917 alongside the now famous editorial defence of Richard Mutt, possibly written by Beatrice Wood with Duchamp's approval, entitled "The Richard Mutt Case". Together this suggests that neither the majority of the founding membership of The Society of Independent Artists, nor the wider New York public as a whole grasped the circumstances surrounding the submission of *Fountain* for exhibition as we have now come to understand them. Indeed, it is difficult to see how *Fountain* would have been able to threaten established artistic convention in the way it did, and to provoke the scandal that ensued in the New York press, if all but a very few had not remained blind (as the journal title, *The Blindman*, suggests) or at best partially sighted with regard to the elaborate subterfuge which appears to have lain behind it.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear, as Camfield also points out, that the critical challenge presented by *Fountain* was understood in 1917 in quite the same way as subsequent generations have come to understand it. While many views of the Duchampian readymade from the nineteen-thirties onwards have been focussed sharply on their undecideable status as both quotidian object and artwork and, therefore, on their capacity to unsettle established artistic conventions such as aesthetic value and craftsmanship, in 1917 the emphasis was somewhat different. Take here, for example, Louise Norton's article "Buddha in the Bathroom", which was published alongside "The Richard Mutt Case" in the second edition of *The Blindman*. Here, *Fountain* is defended not because it undermines the concept of aesthetic value in art, but because it works to challenge and to expand the established limits of good taste – a point arguably echoed much later both by Richard Hamilton's review of the Duchamp retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963 for *Art International*, where he writes that "[i]t is a shock to find that the assembled work reveals a hand of fine sensitivity, an eye of acutely personal taste, and a mind capable of taking key thoughts of our time and translating them into subtle plastic

expression...Anti-Artist, my fanny!” [Tomkins, 1997: 422 – our square brackets], and Alfred H. Barr’s famous challenge to Duchamp’s assertion at a panel discussion at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1964: “But, oh, Marcel, why do they look so beautiful today?” (to which Duchamp is reported to have replied in characteristic style: “Nobody’s perfect”) [Tomkins, 1997: 427]. Consider also, *The Richard Mutt Case*, which, as will be argued below, in many ways remains closely tied to Kantian notions of refined aesthetic judgement. We should, therefore, be careful not to ascribe later perspectives on the work of Duchamp to the New York art consuming public of 1917, since their view of things was, going by the traces left behind in the available textual evidence, not the same as those that followed.

In addition to all of this, it should also be noted that the original artefact that went to make up *Fountain* in 1917 has almost certainly never been exhibited in public. It appears that at some time during 1917 it was lost. Consequently, apart from the *Blindman* photograph, *Fountain* effectively went unseen by a wider art consuming public until its ‘presence’ was revived first in the nineteen-fifties by the New York art dealer Sidney Janis, who produced at least two replicas of *Fountain* for retrospective exhibitions, and then in the nineteen-sixties by Duchamp himself who, working in conjunction with the gallery owner and writer Aturo Schwarz, produced thirteen facsimiles, eight of which were made available for purchase by museums and private collectors. It is these latter facsimiles - all of which are, according to the findings of recent conservation work, not readymades, but individually hand crafted sculptures - that now ‘represent’ *Fountain* in Museums such as Tate Modern in London. *Fountain* ‘is’, therefore, unusually a work of visual art for which there is no single, present visual object. Rather, its somewhat spectral ‘presence’ has been disseminated indirectly through word, photographic reproduction and simulacrum. *Fountain* is, then, arguably not a work that can be looked at all, but one whose traces can only be glimpsed both sensibly and intellectually.

Further to this, it is also possible to pick up through Duchamp’s reported views and associated texts on the subject of the ‘readymade’ a continually changing understanding of their significance on his part. Take here, for example, the text of “The Richard Mutt Case”:

They say any artist paying six dollars may exhibit.

Mr. Richard Mutt sent in a fountain. Without discussion this article disappeared and never was exhibited.

What were the grounds for refusing Mr. Mutt’s fountain: -

1 Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.

2 Others it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr. Mutt's fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see everyday in plumbers' show windows.

Whether Mr. Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He chose it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The Only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges. [Duchamp (Wood?) in Harrison and Wood eds., 1992: 248]

Here, in a contemporary context, this short piece can be read very much in support of the view that *Fountain* works as a challenge to a conventional nineteenth and early twentieth century aesthetic, in that it openly questions traditional notions of artistic representation, craft-skill and morality. Moreover, it can be seen to resonate with the content of Duchamp's apparently proto-poststructuralist paper *The Creative Act* of 1957 in its suggestion that the significance of an object is not inherent but subject to changes in context. However, we would like to argue that it also carries with it traces of a latent Kantianism of a kind which would have been all too familiar, as Camfield's citing of Louise Norton suggests, in the context of 1917. Not only can its focus on the centrality of the artist's choosing be seen to sustain the Kantian notion of a highly developed and specialised sense of taste – a view supported by Duchamp himself in a film interview of 1961⁵⁵ - but its defence of *Fountain* on the grounds that it is neither just a plain piece of plumbing nor vulgar or immoral in tone seems to retain something of Kant's tripartite philosophical division between a scientifically measurable realm, a moral realm and a realm of aesthetic beauty. In this way, "The Richard Mutt Case" can be understood to leave at least some room for a reading that allows for the more openly Kantian defence of *Fountain* promulgated by Norton in "Buddha in the Bathroom".

Consider, here, also Duchamp's essay "Apropos of Readymades" (1961) and a letter to Hans Richter (1962), both of which are cited in Richter's *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (1965). Here, Duchamp expounds the view that the readymade upholds an aesthetically neutral, or as Duchamp provocatively puts it "anaesthetic" object, for contemplation as a work of 'art'. Richter's interpretation of this is that the Duchampian readymade is therefore not so much an attempt to extend established aesthetic boundaries, as Norton and others would appear to have it, but a nihilistic work of 'anti-art' which seeks to overturn the conventional notion of the artwork by presenting something as 'art' that is thoroughly worthless both in aesthetic terms and in terms of its overall significance, and thereby showing that art is little more than an empty conjuring trick perpetrated on a blindly following art consuming public

⁵⁵ See Terry Atkinson's televised lecture for the Open University, *Duchamp* (1983)

[Richter, 1965: 89-92]. As such, this interpretation of the Duchampian readymade has remained highly influential right up to the present day, particularly it would seem within a German literary context. Note, for example the title of a publication on Duchamp by Janis Mink for the publisher Benedikt Taschen, *Marcel Duchamp 1887-1968: Art as anti-Art* (1995). Nevertheless, we should be careful not to accept uncritically the notion of the readymade as 'anti-art' as Duchamp's long-term settled view of his own work. Not only is Richter's notion of 'anti-art' not one to which Duchamp would appear to have subscribed directly, but it is also important to note that Duchamp's notion of aesthetic indifference appears only to have been articulated with any clarity during the nineteen-sixties through texts such as "Apropos of Readymades". Moreover, it is possible to discern a continuing attachment to the notion of aesthetic value running through Duchamp's thinking right up until the end of the nineteen-fifties and the beginning of the nineteen-sixties. Consider here texts such as the aforementioned "The Creative Act" and Duchamp's contribution to a panel discussion at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art in 1961, where, apparently speaking out against the growing commodification of the artwork and its concomitant absorption into the wider life-world, Duchamp put forward the view, as reported by Tomkins in *Duchamp: A Biography*, "that there had been an "enormous dilution" in the quality of art since Impressionism" [Tomkins, 1997, p.415]. Consequently, Duchamp's claims for the aesthetic indifference of the readymade may well have been a retrospective gloss on the workings of pieces such as *Fountain* whose unconventionality may not have been understood by Duchamp in 1917 in quite the same way as he understood it some half a century later in 1967. Here, then we might begin to see Duchamp's own understanding of the workings of *Fountain* as a constantly developing one, and that any attempt to ascribe later readings of the readymade entirely to Duchamp in 1917 are almost certainly misplaced. To describe Duchamp in 1917 simply as a nihilistic anti-artist, or indeed as a proto-poststructuralist is therefore, we would argue, something of a historical category mistake. His work at that time may carry with it the possibility - or, if you will, traces - of such readings. But as for labelling Duchamp as a knowing anti-artist or postmodernist/poststructuralist *avant la lettre*, is on the available textual evidence, we would argue, somewhat less than convincing. Duchamp's grasp of his own work in 1917 and at times afterwards must always remain somewhat other to our own later point of view. It is, therefore, not only the viewer of 1917 who remains 'unsighted' with regard to an understanding of Duchamp's work, but also those who now have no immediate

access to the past and who can only glimpse its fugitive traces amidst the ruins of the remaining textual and material evidence.

To sum up then, it could be argued that *Fountain* and its associated texts sustain the possibility of differing interpretations of the Duchampian readymade. Moreover, *Fountain* and its associated texts could also be understood to retain the traces of differences in thinking and point of view on the subject of the Duchampian readymade. Furthermore, each new perspective on *Fountain* could be understood to carry with it traces of prior and of future perspectives. However, as we have suggested above, it could also be argued that our understanding of *Fountain* and of any related texts is open to continual revision in the light of changing circumstances. Consequently, it could be averred that while prior perspectives on *Fountain* are always in a sense partially sighted with regard to the present, it is also the case that the present only offers a provisional and partial sighting of the past. It follows, therefore, that while a traces of differing perspectives on *Fountain* are available to us, any sense that our current perspective on the work encompasses these traces fully is something of an illusion. In coming to an ‘understanding’ of *Fountain*, then, it is not simply our own present point of view that is in play, but a textual fabric of constantly shifting and inherently partial perspectives.

This sense of constantly shifting and partial perspectives in the interpretation of Duchamp’s work is, of course, not confined to the texts we have already mentioned. Consider here, for example the following short, genealogy of writings touching on the subject of the Duchampian readymade. Let us begin with Herbert Read’s admittedly indirect reference to Duchamp’s work in his lecture “What is Revolutionary Art?” (1935), reprinted in Harrison and Wood’s anthology *Art in Theory – 1900-1990*. In this text, Read sets out to make a distinction between what he sees as two revolutionary strains in the modern art of the time: on the one hand that of abstraction; and on the other a strain which he terms both as “Surréalisme” and “Superrealism”. According to the avowedly Marxist Read, abstraction is the truly revolutionary movement in modern art, not only because it challenges outmoded academic/bourgeois attitudes and practices, such as representation and mimetic realism, but also because its timeless formal qualities point the way forward towards new, classless and socially reconstructive forms of architecture and industrial design. For Read, ‘Superrealism’ – which, would appear, given the clear dialectic which Read sets up in his text between abstraction and non-abstraction in modern art, to encompass the non-abstract ‘Dadaism’ of the likes of Duchamp – is also part of the revolutionary movement in art, in that it works negatively “to discredit the bourgeois ideology in art

[and] to destroy the academic conception of art” by “breaking down the barriers between the conscious reality of life and the unconscious reality of the dream-world – so to mingle fact and fancy that the normal concept of reality no longer has existence” [Read in Harrison and Wood eds., 1992: 505]. However, as Read goes on to argue, extreme ‘reality denial’ of this sort provides no serious or constructive alternative to established convention, and is therefore simply a “destructive” act with only “temporary” or “transitional” validity. Moreover, it is something which, Read avers, “may lead to a new Romanticism,” [Read in Harrison and Wood eds., 1992: 505]. Here, then, it is possible to see Duchamp’s work indirectly aligned both with the notion of a negative, if politically expedient, reality-denying act of cultural demolition and, what is more, the possibility of a return, through that reality-denying act, to a conventional form of Romanticism in the arts at some time in the future. Or, to put it another way, here there is an indirect association between Duchamp’s work and the notion of a destructive anti-art, which, if it becomes institutionalized as such, threatens to turn art away from progressive revolutionary thinking towards established forms of bourgeois thinking.

Now let us move on to two texts with a more direct relationship to Duchamp’s work: André Breton’s essay “Lighthouse of the Bride”, and Gabrielle Buffet’s aforementioned “Magicircles”, both of which were written for the special Duchamp issue of *View Magazine* in 1945. Here, two similar views of Duchamp’s work as a deliberate attempt to blur conceptual boundaries are put forward. In his essay Breton – who on a number of occasions attempted unsuccessfully to bring Duchamp into the surrealist movement – praises Duchamp’s *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*) or, as it is otherwise known *The Large Glass* (1915-1923), as a “significant” work which gives, more than any other up to that point, “equitable scope to the rational and the irrational” [Breton, in Ford ed. 1991: 132]. While, in her essay, Buffet suggests that Duchamp’s work involves “a sort of wilful confusion of values and of the arbitrary limits, which according to human concepts of order, separate concrete from absolute and Art from the Commonplace” [Buffet in Ford ed., 1991: 132]. In both cases here, we can see echoes of Read’s assessment of Surrealism in the arts as an attempt to blur the boundaries of what might be considered in a conventional sense as real. However, if we consider the Surrealist Breton’s famous attempt, along with Leon Trotsky and (notionally) the painter Diego Rivera, in their joint manifesto text *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* (1938), to bring art into line with communism as that which prepares us for the coming revolution by grasping man’s inner need for freedom from authority and opening up a wholly independent, anarchist

realm of unrestricted creativity to which the emerging socialist state might relate itself, we can also see running through Breton's essay on Duchamp's *The Large Glass* traces of a departure from Read's thinking. For Breton, Surrealism's challenge to the received order of thought is not simply a short term, anti-bourgeois wrecking operation, but a necessary and persistent component of revolutionary action and the subsequent liberation of humanity from the restrictions of capitalism. Here, then we find a chain of discourse that places Duchamp firmly on the side of progressive revolutionary change.

Now let us consider Peter Bürger's well-known text *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974). Here, Bürger argues that works of the artistic avant-garde in the early part of the twentieth century, such as the Duchampian readymade, worked to undermine a conventional, bourgeois aesthetic and the associated "means-end rationality of the bourgeois everyday", by proposing a Hegelian sublation of art within life (praxis). That is to say, as in the case of the Duchampian readymade, they can be understood to have sidestepped conventional forms of representation to uphold everyday objects as works of art, thereby bringing art and life together. As Bürger goes on to contend, through this sublation it was not intended, however, that art should simply be destroyed. Rather, it was to be "preserved, albeit in a changed form" in an attempt "to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art" [Bürger in Docherty ed., 1993: 239-241]. At this point we, therefore, find Bürger repeating Buffet and Breton's assertion that Duchamp's work involves a deliberate confusion of existing limits, but this time explicitly aligning such confusion with the notion of a revolutionary synthesis between the freedom of art and the means-end rationality of life in which the latter would find itself refashioned in the image of the former. For Bürger, however, this is not the end of the story. With the repetition of the once revolutionary actions of the 'Historical Avant-garde' by the 'Neo-Avant-garde' during the latter part of the twentieth century, argues Bürger, there is not so much a continuation of the actions of the former grouping by the latter, but an assimilation of art into praxis that simply leads to the negation of the autonomy of the avant-garde and, as a result, its efficacy as a platform for revolutionary action. Here, then we can find echoes of Read's contention that the revolutionary content of non-abstract modern art would be both short-lived and the marker of a possible return to institutionalized modes of artistic activity.

Further to this, let us now turn to Terry Atkinson's assessment of Duchamp's work, *Duchamp*, which was first broadcast for the Open University in the UK in 1983 as part of a course of study entitled *Modern Art and Modernists*. Here, Atkinson sets out to answer the question: just how revolutionary is Duchamp's work? To do this he first goes back to Breton, Trotsky and Rivera's

contention, in *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*, that avant-garde art should not succumb to political indifference, but should instead clear the revolutionary ground by opening up a sphere of total creative freedom. According to Atkinson, works such as Duchamp's *Large Glass* can be understood to do precisely that by opening up, rather than closing down, the possibilities of artistic signification. However, Atkinson also contends that beyond such formal openings and the manifest cleverness of his work, Duchamp remained resolutely bourgeois and politically indifferent in his attitudes; a fact which, he argues, is exemplified by Duchamp's seemingly incoherent return to outright naturalism in the notorious work, *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*) of 1946-66. Here, then, we arguably see something of a return to Read's interpretation of the non-abstractionist tendency within the avant-garde art of the twentieth century.

Finally, let us return to Gregory L. Ulmer's, "The Object of Post-Criticism". In this essay it is possible to perceive both an adherence to and a departure from some of the views expressed above. In terms of its adherence, in his essay Ulmer clearly upholds the notion expressed by Read, Breton, Buffet Bürger and Atkinson that avant-garde works, such as those of Duchamp, act to unsettle conventional categories of meaning, thereby bringing into question any restrictions which might be imposed on artistic creativity and signification. However, for Ulmer this unsettling of boundaries can in no way be thought of simply as 'destructive' of existing categories of meaning, nor can it be seen as a 'constructive' transcendence of established patterns of thought, moreover, it cannot be considered simply as a form of 'synthesis' in which one category is sublated within another. No, according to Ulmer writing in "The Object of Post-Criticism", works such as the Duchampian readymade act to 'deconstruct' meaning, keeping signification in play so as to challenge the stability of terms like 'destruction', 'construction' and 'sublation'. Here, then we arrive at an understanding of *Fountain* that sees it very much through the lens of 'present' postmodernism-poststructuralism.

So what, then, does all of the above signify for our current understanding of Duchamp? Does it mark a progressive peeling away of the skins of Duchamp's work until we finally arrive at its essential character: the deconstructive truth of the work? Does it show a series of partial insights finally reconciled by a full and clear postmodernist/poststructuralist vision? Here, in line with our previous contentions about the historical grasp of the significance of *Fountain*, we should like to depart from such thinking. What the above genealogy suggests, we would argue, is that Duchamp's work does not have one, true significance that simply awaits a suitably incisive act of interpretation. Rather, we would

argue that it has a profound capacity to be seen to operate differently in different contexts of time and place. One cannot help but think, for instance, of the likely influence that the pressing need for the reconstruction of working class housing in Britain had on Read's view of 'Superrealism'. Moreover, one cannot help but think also of the likely influence Cold War political stalemate had on Bürger's vision of the negation of the autonomy of the avant-garde, or of the part that the increasingly evident collapse of a communist-capitalist duality played in the formation of Ulmer's views on the art of the avant-garde. Moreover, we would like to contend that while all of these visions can be understood from our present point of view to be partially sighted in some way - consider here for example Read's manifest inability to foresee the failure of post-war social housing and the powerful and, for all intents and purposes, defining link made in America during the post-war period between avant-gardist abstraction and capitalism, or Bürger's evident inability to spot what has arguably been the capacity of many avant-garde artists since the mid-nineteen-seventies to maintain at least some form of critical distance from praxis through a persistent use of deconstructive methods - they continue to pass on traces both of a historical otherness not wholly congruent with our present world-view and, what is more, ethical and political concerns that must continue to exercise an influence on our own thinking. Consider here, for example, Breton's insistence that there is no room on the part of the avant-garde thinker for political indifference; surely a telling injunction in a world still subject to what many would see as the divisive effects of global capitalism and, in some parts of the world at least, the threat of Facism.

Here, then, we have an understanding of the Duchampian readymade that sees within it a capacity to be read differently. However, it is also one that brings with it persistent questions about the political and ethical commitment of Duchamp's work; a question undoubtedly amplified by what appears to have been an increasingly strong adherence on Duchamp's part as his 'career' as an artist progressed to a philosophy of outright indifference. Do the critical strategies brought forward by the Duchampian readymade have the capacity to be ethically and politically committed, or, as Atkinson argues, are they simply the index of a clever and witty, but nevertheless bourgeois consciousness? To answer this question one might, of course, replay the argument that the 'Dadaism' of Duchamp was, like that of the Cabaret Voltaire, an act of non-cooperation with a means-end rational world that had by August of 1917 already fought out three years of unimaginably bloody conflict in Europe and elsewhere. And if not that, we might of course turn back to the notion of an undecideably gendered

Duchamp put forward by Amelia Jones. However, here we will temporarily turn away from a direct consideration of Duchamp and his work to look at ways in which the legacy of his critical thinking has arguably been inherited and remotivated by two later artists, Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer, to meet the political and ethical demands of times very different from Duchamp's own.

Chapter III – Joseph Beuys: We Can't Do it Without The (R)Roses(élavy).

An understanding of Beuys's work as an artist is in many respects inseparable from the events of his life. Indeed, Beuys saw his work as a series of "autobiographical documents" which marked his combined progress both as a person and as an artist [Beuys in Tesch and Hollman eds., 1997: 160]. The only child of Joseph Jacob and Joanna Beuys, Joseph Beuys was born on May 12th 1921 in Krefeld Germany. He spent his early years in Kleve, a largely Catholic town near the lower river Rhine on the Dutch-German Border, before moving with his family in 1930 to nearby Rindern where his father had a grain store and animal-feed business. In these surroundings, which are especially rich in their natural, geological and cultural history, Beuys developed an early interest in the natural world and folk-tales, which he was to retain throughout the rest of his life.

Although Beuys was often extremely reticent about his life between 1933 and 1940, it is nevertheless generally accepted that like most children in Germany at the time he was a member of the *Hitler Jugend*, or Hitler youth. After which, between 1941 and 1945 Beuys then served in the German *Luftwaffe*, first as a radio operator and then as a fighter pilot. During this period of military service, despite postings to Italy, Yugoslavia, Poland and the USSR, Beuys also pursued the study of natural sciences by attending local universities.

In 1943, as a fighter pilot, Beuys was shot down over the Russian Crimea, where he is understood – largely through his own later somewhat mythologising testimony – to have been rescued by local Tartar tribesmen, who first wrapped his badly injured body in fat and felt, both to heal his wounds and to save him from the effects of the cold, before subsequently handing him over to the German military. Beuys, who was wounded on a number of subsequent occasions, was eventually taken prisoner by the British army before returning to a war-ravaged Kleve in 1946.

After World-War II, Beuys eventually abandoned his study of natural sciences to enrol, between 1947 and 1952, at the Staatliche Kustsakademie in Düsseldorf for classes, first under the academic sculptor Josef Enselling (1886-1957), and then under the more progressive Ewald Mataré (1887-1965). Between 1952 and 1954 Beuys was then a mature student in Mataré's master class, collaborating with the older sculptor on a number of public and church commissions. In 1953 Beuys secured his first solo exhibition in Haus van der Grinten and the Von-der-heydt Museum, Wuppertal.

After leaving the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie Beuys entered a long period of isolation from the world. During this time he read extremely widely, educating himself in the natural sciences, the occult, folk-tales, philosophy poetry and literature. From this wide reading Beuys developed a longstanding interest in the work of the German Romantic writers Goethe, Schiller and Novalis, as well as the anthropologist Rudolf Steiner, whose sense of the interrelatedness of the spiritual and material worlds was to underscore much of his subsequent thinking. During his time of isolation Beuys also worked on thousands of drawings. These were bought *en bloc* by the brothers Hans and Franz Joseph van der Grinten, who in 1951 had committed themselves to being patrons of Beuys's work.

In 1957 Beuys succumbed to a severe mental and physical breakdown which may well have been a delayed response to his experiences during World War II and which we might now see as a form of post-traumatic shock. As part of his recovery Beuys went to live for several months with the van der Grintens where, by his own account, he underwent a profound epiphany.

In the wake of this period of recovery and renewal, Beuys returned to work as a sculptor, renting a studio in Kleve's former municipal sanatorium. Here, Beuys not only completed a number of substantial sculptural works, but he also began to articulate clearly for the first time the polarised theory which would subsequently inform his career as a mature artist. According to this theory everything in the world can be understood to move from the organic warmth of disorder to the crystalline cold of the orderly and, as such, it can be understood to owe a great deal to Beuys's life-saving encounter with felt and fat in the snowy wastes of the Crimea.

The end of the nineteen-fifties and the beginning of the nineteen-sixties saw an increasingly happy and productive turn in Beuys's life. In 1959 he married Eva Wurmbach, an art history student at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. This was followed in 1961 not only by a major exhibition of Beuys's work from the van der Grinten collection at the Haus Koekkoek in Kleve, but also by Beuys's appointment as a professor of sculpture at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie.

It is also at this point that Beuys's life and art become ever more closely intertwined. There are perhaps three main reasons for this. The first is that in the early nineteen-sixties Beuys for all intents and purposes abandoned traditional sculptural practice to embark on a series of performances – which he termed *Aktionen* or 'actions' – that would characterise his career from that point on. These works, which were strongly informed by Beuys's involvement from 1962 with Fluxus – a diverse, international grouping of 'situationists' given to the notion of art as a highly public and revolutionary interruption of the everyday who were influenced themselves, as Jean-Luc Duval points out in *Sculpture: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (2002) were "directly inspired by Dada and Duchamp" [Duval in Duby and Duval eds., 2002: 1084] – saw him working directly with audiences to create profoundly moving 'theatrical' events, whose material remnants (which often included the signature materials of fat and felt) could then be exhibited as traces of the 'action' concerned. The second reason is that Beuys began at this time to see his 'actions' not as isolated instances of artistic activity, but as part of his life *as an artwork*; a point made clear by Beuys's "Lebenslauf/Werklauf" (Life Course/Work Course), first published in 1964 and reprinted in Ann Temkin and Bernice Rose's *Thinking is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys* (1993), which records the events of his life from birth as a series of "exhibitions". The third and final reason is that the *Aktionen* and their residual by-products were not simply an attempt to break with artistic convention, or to shock audiences with unfamiliar forms of artistic expression. Rather, they were an attempt to draw the viewer into the making of a text whose resonance with the lived experience of history, science, philosophy, politics and culture would bring art and life sharply together. Consider here, for example, Beuys's action *Eurasia – 32nd Movement of the Siberian Symphony*, held in Copenhagen and Berlin in 1966. As Sandro Bocola tells us in *Icons of Art: The Twentieth Century* (1997), in the course of this performance Beuys "[d]rew a cross division on a slate blackboard, indicating the division between East and West that was to be bridged symbolically by this action". After which, Bocola goes on to relate, Beuys then "tied a piece of iron to his foot and maneuvered [sic] a dead hare, the length of whose legs he had extended with long, thin wooden rods, through the room towards the east, the direction in which the hare would be travelling"; after all of which, as Bocola describes it, Beuys then "united the board and hare to form an object, completing the complex with bits of grease and felt [Bocola in Tesch and Hollman eds., 1997: 160]. One way of interpreting this potentially baffling performance and the 'sculptural' collage/montage to which it gave rise, is to think of it not as a representation, but as a bringing into action of the lived and shared cultural

and political experiences of its maker and audiences. Namely, the circumstances surrounding a Germany then forcibly divided between east and west in which the general population was still very much coming to terms with the traumatic and ultimately divisive events under National Socialism, and in which West Germany's concentration upon post-war economic regeneration was understood by many to have marginalized the crucial matter of Germany's spiritual reconstruction. Against this backdrop, the hare's movement from the west to the east can, therefore, be understood as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation made in relation to a divided nation and one which, as Beuys and others such as Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll were insisting at the time, remained, despite post-war capitalist and communist reconstruction, culturally and politically sick and in need of healing. What is more, and here we return to Beuys's aforementioned theory of sculpture, the hare's movement can also be seen as a politically challenging march from the warm disorder of the West to the cold order of the East; a difficult thought perhaps, particularly for any German soldier who, like Beuys, had served on the eastern front, or who had found him or herself marching back from the east to escape the Communist advance at the end of World War II, or any of the many German women in the east brutally raped by advancing Russian troops at the time, or indeed those in East Germany who were by 1966 prevented from travel to the West by the crashing descent of the iron curtain, but nevertheless one which can be understood to build a crucial critical opening between Beuys and the capitalist (and as East German communists saw it, still Fascistic) West of which he was part.

Here, then, the events of Beuys's life from the early nineteen-sixties onwards can be viewed as meeting places, or border crossing points if you will, between art and life; crossing points that can be seen to bring the two towards some position of reconciliation. Consider, for example, in this regard Beuys's irreverent and seemingly counter-intuitive proposal in the "Lebenslauf/Werklauf" that the wall between East and West Berlin should be raised by 5cm along its length purely on aesthetic grounds. Consider here also Beuys's activities as a teacher during the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, which became increasingly politicized and integral part of his *Aktionen*. In 1967, for instance, against the background of widespread student unrest throughout West Germany, the rest of capitalist Europe and the United States, Beuys founded The German Student Party (otherwise known as Fluxuszone West) among the students at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie. This "metaparty", as it was known to its membership, was dedicated amongst other things to global disarmament, European unification and the devolution of government control (shades of more recent official European union

politics, perhaps) and was highly suspicious of the political intentions of centralized West German governmental authority. Unsurprisingly, therefore, The German Student Party came under the suspicion of the West German authorities for actions likely to endanger the stability of the state. In October 1971 the party moved from general political posturing to became involved in direct action within the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie when Beuys and a number of other party members and supporters occupied the Akademie's offices in protest at restrictions imposed on the admission of students. As a result of this action, the Akademie's management capitulated and Beuys was allowed to teach rejected students on the basis of a two-semester review of their progress. However, when Beuys and the German Student Party repeated their occupation of the Kunstakademie the next year in October 1972 to gain further concessions, things turned out very differently. The authorities, worried about the longer-term consequences of giving more ground, cracked down hard. Beuys's contract at the Kunstakademie was summarily terminated and, after a two-night sit-in there, the Police forcibly ejected both Beuys and his supporters; and all this despite the mobilization of a wider student protest on the streets of Düsseldorf in support of Beuys's action. With regard to almost anyone else, none of this would of course be thought of as anything other than a political act of revolt. With Beuys, however, the protest immediately shifted register to become simultaneously both a political act and a matter of artistic expression. Indeed, Beuys reinforced such a reading by appropriating a photographic image of his ejection from the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie which shows him, in characteristic Fedora hat, fishing waistcoat, jeans, jackboots and long overcoat, wearing a broad grin in contrast to the stony faces of surrounding paramilitary police and which Beuys then published in 1973 - in the manner of Fluxus - as a series of posters and postcards carrying the mocking inscription "democracy is merry".

Consider here also Beuys's involvement with the Free International School for Creativity and Research. In February 1973 Beuys and the writer Heinrich Böll realised long-standing plans for a free international school intended to bring together individuals from different fields who would then apply themselves to multi-disciplinary research through the kinds of creative action usually set aside for students of the arts. As such, the roots of this school can be seen to lie, *inter alia*, in two things: firstly, a 1968 resolution of The German Student party that a student is not defined by their adherence to any particular discipline, but a general interest in the processes of learning and spiritual development; and secondly, Beuys's personal commitment to the development of a democratic politics that would attend to questions of artistic as well as social importance. In 1977, at the Documenta VI exhibition at Kassel,

Beuys set up a temporary venue for The Free International School by using his allotted exhibition space as a forum for open discussion on a variety of social and artistic issues. Surrounding this discussion forum was a sculpture by Beuys entitled *Honey Pump*; a piece which literally pumped many litres of honey through a complicated series of pipes and conduits as a symbol of how shared acts of creativity could enrich, nourish and 'sweeten' the democratic process. In 1979 The Free International School then played a major part in the inauguration of The German Green Party, of which Beuys was one of the five hundred founding members. Initially seen as a 'party' opposed to party politics, the Greens were effectively a coalition of special interest groups united over a common concern for the environment who sought democratic representation both in the European and the West German Federal parliaments as a means of pressing for environmentally friendly economic and legislative change. By the mid-nineteen-eighties, however, the Greens had become a party in the conventional sense. So much so, in fact, that an increasingly marginalized Beuys, who had stood unsuccessfully as an electoral candidate for the Greens on a number of occasions, began to see that his vision of the party as a nexus for creative democracy would never be realized.

Despite the frustrations which Beuys suffered in the sphere of conventional politics, his work throughout the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties as an artist and teacher for The Free International School – which had spread from its beginnings in Düsseldorf to various parts of the world, including Japan, Australia, the USA, England, Italy and Yugoslavia, as well as a number of towns and cities in Germany – remained largely undimmed. Indeed, Beuys gained increasing recognition as an artist both in his native Germany and abroad, where he continued to stage countless actions and exhibitions of their residue. Major examples of this include *7000 Oaks*, which between 1982 and 1987 saw the planting of 7000 oak trees around the town of Kassel as a symbolic resistance to the growing industrialization of the German landscape, Beuys's major retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1979, which brought together on the Guggenheim's spiral walkways key examples of Beuys's work from the early nineteen-sixties to the late nineteen-seventies, Beuys's immense installation *The End of the Twentieth Century*, which was part of the 1985 exhibition *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* at the Kunsthau Zürich, Beuys's installation *Palazzo Regale* at the Museo di Capodimonte in Italy in 1985, in which Beuys, who was in increasingly poor health, set out to stage a memorial to his life's work, and Beuys's final installation *Plight* at the Anthony d'Offay gallery

in London in 1985, in which the exhibition space - containing amongst other things a piano - was lined with a thick insulating layer of felt. Joseph Beuys died in Düsseldorf on January the 23rd 1986.

How, then, can all of this be understood relate to the work of Marcel Duchamp? Let us venture here a number of observations. The first is that there is strong formal similarity between the residual objects left behind in the wake of one of Beuys's *Aktionen* and the readymades of Marcel Duchamp. Consider, for example, Beuys's *The Pack* (1969), which consists of a Volkswagen van out of the rear door of which appears to be coming an insect-like column of sledges, each with a flashlight and a roll of felt attached to it. Consider also Beuys's multiple *Felt Suit* (1970), a large, baggy suit of clothes in grey felt on a coat hanger issued in a limited edition of one hundred, which echoes Duchamp's earlier reissue of *Fountain* in 1964. The second observation is that both Beuys's *Aktionen* and his subsequent installation of their readymade-like residue clearly involves dislocating collage-montage techniques comparable with those that can be ascribed to the Duchampian readymade. Indeed, as we have already attempted to show, much of Beuys's work from the early nineteen-sixties onwards operates, like readymades by Duchamp such as *Fountain*, to unsettle the conventional boundary between art and life by bringing one into unusually close proximity with the other, or by mapping the two into an intentionally volatile combination. The third observation is that despite some of the formal and technical similarities between Beuys's work and that of Duchamp, it is possible to interpret many of Beuys's actions as a continuing critique of Duchamp's apparently persistent position of aesthetic and political indifference. Consider here, as a marker of this, Beuys's televised action *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated* (1964), in which Beuys takes Duchamp's supposed retreat from artistic activity in favour of chess playing in 1923 as a provocation to artists working in a Duchampian tradition not to turn their back on questions of social and political importance. The fourth observation stems from Kim Levin's essay "Joseph Beuys: The New Order", her review of Beuys's Guggenheim exhibition for *Arts Magazine* (April 1980), in which she builds on Beuys's assertion that he is not interested in critical disorder for its own sake, but rather "in transformation, change, revolution – transforming chaos, through movement into a new order" [Beuys in Levin, 1988:173]. Here, Levin writes:

If Duchamp at the start of the century demonstrated that the most ordinary objects of the world could be art, Beuys insisted that art could also be the ordinary actions of life in the world. The art object for him was just a by-product, a relic. [Levin, 1988: 173]

Effectively what Levin opens up here, we would aver, is the possibility of an understanding that sees Beuys's combination of Duchampian collage-montage techniques with everyday action as a remotivation of Duchamp's earlier disorientating challenge to the conventional order of things along more explicitly political lines.

To sum up, then, it is possible to view Beuys's work from the early nineteen-sixties onwards as something that inherits, criticises and adapts Duchampian collage-montage techniques bringing them to the service of an immanent, real-world, demand for political action. However, does this remotivation of Duchampian techniques bring us to the kind of political restructuring desired by Beuys? Does Beuys in fact turn the Duchampian readymade into an effective vehicle for committed political action? One possible response to these questions can, of course, be found in Peter Bürger's aforementioned text *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Here, Bürger famously argues that Western art since the middle-ages has progressed through three distinct stages: the "Sacral Stage", in which art "(example: the art of the High Middle Ages) serves as a cult object...wholly integrated into the social institution 'religion'...produced collectively as a craft...[with its] mode of reception also...institutionalised as collective"; the "Courtly Stage", in which art "(example: the art at the court of Louis XIV) also has a precisely defined function. It is representational and serves the glory of the prince and the self-portrayal of courtly society. Courtly art is part of the life praxis of courtly society, just as sacral art is part of the life praxis of the faithful. Yet the detachment from the sacral is a first step in the in the emancipation of art. ('Emancipation' is being used here as a descriptive term, as referring to the process by which art constitutes itself as a distinct social subsystem.) The difference from sacral art becomes particularly apparent in the realm of production: the artist produces as an individual and develops a consciousness of the uniqueness of his activity. Reception, on the other hand remains collective. But the content of the collective performance is no longer sacral, it is sociability"; and the "Bourgeois Stage", in which art "is the objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeois class. Production and reception of the self-understanding as articulated in art are no longer tied to the praxis of life...Not only production, but reception are now individual acts. The solitary absorption in the work is the adequate mode of appropriation of creations removed from the life praxis of the bourgeois, even though they still claim to interpret that praxis. In Aestheticism, finally where bourgeois art reaches the stage of self-reflection, this claim is no longer made. Apartness from the praxis of life, which had always been the condition that characterized the way art functioned in bourgeois society, now becomes its content...Although art as an institution may

be considered fully formed towards the end of the eighteenth century, the development of the contents of works is subject to historical dynamics, whose terminal point is reached in Aestheticism, where art becomes the content of art” [Bürger in Docherty ed., 1993: 237-239 – our square brackets].

Bürger then goes on to contend that the Western avant-garde “can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society”. One that sets out to negate, according to Bürger, “not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men” and which attempts to do so, as has previously been discussed, through “the sublation of art – sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term - [where] art was not to be simply destroyed but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form” [Bürger in Docherty ed., 1993: 239 – our square brackets]. Here, however, Bürger does not, as has previously been suggested, claim that the avant-garde’s proposed sublation of art is in any way an attempt simply reintegrate art into life. Rather, he argues that it is an attempt to “organize a new life praxis from a basis in art”; one which will maintain Aestheticism’s critical rejection of the world and its means-end rationality” [Bürger in Docherty ed., 1993: 239].

Bürger then goes on to argue three further points in relation to the avant-garde. The first is that the critical distance between the “image of a better order” and the “bad order that prevails”, which is sustained in the first instance by bourgeois aestheticism, is in fact lost in relation to the avant-garde, since the latter as “an art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it along with its distance”. For Bürger, this annihilation of critical distance is difficult to spot with regard to the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century because its then attempt to “do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side”, whereas it is all too clear with regard to the neo-avant-garde of the latter part of the twentieth century and an associated culture industry’s patently “false elimination of the distance between art and life” [Bürger in Docherty ed., 1993: 240]. The second related point Bürger makes is that the historical avant-garde’s “radical negation of the category of individual creation” through works such as the Duchampian readymade, “cannot be repeated indefinitely”, since “[o]nce the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite”. For Bürger, therefore “[i]f an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it”. Moreover, for Bürger, “[s]uch adaptation does not eradicate the idea of individual creativity, it affirms it”.

Consequently, in Bürger's view the repetition of the strategies of the historical avant-garde by the neo-avant-garde and the resulting acceptance of the "protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution...as *art*" amounts to failure of the avant-gardist intent to sublimate art" that renders "the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde...inauthentic" [Bürger in Docherty, 1993: 241]. Bürger's third point is that the avant-garde's attempt to negate individual, bourgeois acts of reception through the collective and sometimes violent response to the avant-garde artwork is also problematic in that its elimination of any "antithesis between producer and recipient" throws the receiver/producer somewhat paradoxically back on the bourgeois function of art as an "instrument for living one's life as best one can" and as a place of "retreat to the problems of the isolated subject"; a point which, Bürger suggests, was understood by André Breton who saw "the spontaneity of the erotic relationship" and strict group discipline" as ways of exorcizing the danger of such a solipsistic end [Bürger in Docherty ed., 1993: 241].

Here, we would argue that two points might be made in relation to Beuys's work. The first is that Bürger's construal of a neo-avant-garde art has a powerful resonance with the work of Joseph Beuys and its critical entanglement with the various institutions of the post-war West German state. Not only does Beuys's work represent in Bürger's terms a clear attempt to sublimate art within life as a basis for the reconstruction of a means-end rational life-world, but its involvement with the eventual institutionalization of a neo-Duchampian aesthetic as part of West Germany's post-war cultural reconstruction industry at sites such as Documenta, state sponsored television and any number of federal museums and galleries can be seen as a failure of that attempted sublation. Moreover, Beuys's involvement in political action through The German Student's Party, The Free International School and The German Green Party could be seen to lead less to radical social action than to bourgeois-friendly, conventional party politics. The second point to be made is that Beuys was by the time of the initial publication of the German writer Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde* a high-profile art celebrity within West Germany. This suggests that Bürger's text is almost certainly a direct critical response to contemporary artistic events in West Germany. It would therefore appear that for Bürger Beuys's adaptation of Duchampian techniques does not, in fact, lead us to effective political action, no matter how noble Beuys's intentions may have been.

Is this, then, a dead-end for the challenging political and ethical possibilities of Duchampian collage-montage? In some ways it is, since much of Beuys's political legacy, for example his

ecological views and his notion of life-long learning, can be seen to have been assimilated into the now highly conservative sphere of contemporary consensus politics – in the United Kingdom one thinks immediately of New Labour. While his artistic legacy has recently been revived through shows at established art institutions, such as *The Secret Block For A Secret Person In Ireland* exhibition at the Royal Academy in London (1999), and has even been appropriated through prints as an interior design accessory by Habitat stores in the UK. In others however, we would aver, it does not. If we remain consistent with our earlier discussion on the subject of Derrida's rebuttal of Fukuyama in *Specters of Marx*, then we should not concede too easily Bürger's evident sense of historical closure on the avant-garde. But if this were to be the case, what is there in relation to Beuys's work that escapes Bürger's somewhat Hegelian perspective? Or to follow Derrida more explicitly, what spectrality is there in relation to Beuys's work that unsettles Bürger's (somewhat Marxian-critical) view of a now historically all-enveloping bourgeois Capitalism?

In response to these questions, let us turn first to the following reading of Beuys's 1979 retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York by Kim Levin:

There is a secret narrative in the work of Beuys, of which no one dares speak. Autobiography is by now an acceptable content for art; the atrocities of Nazi Germany are not. But with a little effort, the stations –which are neither chronological nor exhibited in numerical order [the retrospective of Beuys's work at the Guggenheim saw his work arranged into twenty four individual 'stations'] – are decipherable in terms of what is now euphemistically called the Holocaust. Station 22, *Tram Stop*, is an iron track alongside a rusty cannon. Besides the purely autobiographical childhood memories mentioned in the catalogue, *Tram Stop* – with a head protruding from the end of the cannon – suggests the end of the line at the concentration camps. Unravelling this hidden narrative backward, Station 21, *Hearth II*, is a large pile of felt suits: the clothing of the victims stripped off. And although Station 23, *Tallow*, seems the culmination of the show, there is also Station 24, *Honey Pump*, with its tubes full of honey, vats of honey and fat generators. Beuys calls the *Honey Pump* “the bloodstream of society” and says it is “only complete with people”. In its metaphor of regenerated energies and transformation, there is a curious echo of Nazi concepts of the New Man. Hitler, who also saw himself as a messiah, spoke of “the bloodstream of our people” and thought he was restoring his people to “racial health”. It makes us look at the iconography of Beuys in a new light: a suffering bathtub [Levin refers here to Station 1 which incorporates what was said to be Beuys's childhood bathtub] may be referring less to Duchamp's urinal than to the gas showers. [Levin, 1988: 176-177 – our square brackets]⁵⁶

Here, Levin puts forward a view of Beuys's work all too evident to anyone who has visited the memorial death camps in Germany. Namely, his work has a powerful resonance with the display

⁵⁶ Levin also places a footnote here to put forward the suggestion that “the tub could also be an allusion to an event that took place in Germany shortly after Beuys's birth”. When Hitler was sentenced to imprisonment after the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923, Levin points out, “several [women] requested permission to bathe in Hitler's tub. The request was denied according to John Toland in *Hitler: The Pictorial Documentary of His Life* (New York: Doubleday & Co. 1978)”.

techniques used at those memorials where, in places such as Buchenwald, the fragmentary residue of the actions carried out in the death camps is upheld to view, Duchamp-like, as a 'readymade' reminder of the events of history. Under these circumstances the presence of what remains of the camp buildings is in and of itself deemed insufficient and is supplemented by a most disturbing forensics of death; one in which the smallest fragment of an inmates jacket or of a written document is held up for exhibition where it takes on a profound metonymic significance, and in which the mounting and dissemination of the real avoids too strong a feeling of distasteful theatrical illusionism. It could be argued, therefore, that Beuys's work doubles this to sustain a powerful, perhaps unconscious, allegorical warning against an over easy acceptance of notions of historical closure, indeed of 'final solutions'.

What a visitor to the Nazi death camps might also understand, however, is that, it is not simply a similarity of technique that joins the scattered Holocaust memorial to Beuys's work, it is also the strangely disquieting presence of a common aesthetic. Right across Germany, but in its most concentrated form in the death camps themselves, one finds what might be called a post-Holocaust 'memorial' style - a conjunction of almost subtly combined tonal greys, carefully preserved 'original' surfaces and objects, controlled lighting and industrial-looking forms of display. Consider here, not only intentional memorials such as Buchenwald, but also the strange simulacra-like quality of a recently refurbished Weimar of which Buchenwald is a near neighbour, or of the Bauhaus building in Dessau, which is the focus of a long drawn out process of forensic reconstruction, or of any number of federal German art galleries and museums with their often 'bunker'-like aspect. What is all too evident when one visits displays of Beuys's work, such as that at Tate Modern in London (itself, with its 'light touch' reconditioning of the high-chimneyed Bankside power station, arguably the epitome of the postmodern, postindustrial art bunker – cum – offshore death camp memorial surrogate), is how much they share with this memorial style and how exquisitely 'tasteful' the work of the one time '*enfant terrible*' of European art has now become. Indeed, it is not just Beuys's work that can be interpreted in this way, it is also the work of other more contemporary German sculptors such as Hans Haacke, whose installation *Germania* for the Venice Biennale of 1992 is, with its conversion of the German pavilion into a rubble filled place of meditation on the historical position of contemporary Germany, almost the apotheosis of a 'memorial' style. Moreover, one can find traces of a Germanic memorialism in works such as the *Holocaust Memorial for Judenplatz, Vienna* (1996-2001) by British artist Rachel Whiteread. One might also argue, therefore, that even the unsettling presence of an allegorical warning

against historical complacency has been diffused by being swept up as part of some commonly understood, and supposedly cathartic (to a bourgeois audience), stylistic currency. However, we would maintain, there is something in this memorial legacy of Beuys's that escapes final assimilation by a tomb-like sense of historical closure. To explore this further, we now turn to the work of Anselm Kiefer.

Chapter IV – Anselm Kiefer: A Mutating Varus.

Anselm Kiefer's paintings of the mid to late nineteen-seventies onwards often involve a complex layering of historical narratives. They could, therefore, be categorized as something of a return to the traditional genre of history painting. A return, since work within that genre – which was once considered to be the highest painterly idiom to which an artist could aspire⁵⁷ – has arguably been eclipsed for much of the twentieth century by a general modernist drive towards an ever-greater abstraction in painting and a related preoccupation with 'lesser' genres, such as still-life, landscape and portraiture. However, this sense of a postmodernist return demands a certain degree of qualification. Rather than being a straightforward reversion to the pictorial valorization of significant historical events, so characteristic of late eighteenth and nineteenth century academic painting, Kiefer's 'paintings' of the mid to late nineteen-seventies onwards not only undercut the very notion of a pictorial form of expression through their consistent juxtaposition of words, images and objects across the same visual field, but they also hold up to critical examination through such formal juxtapositions the often suppressed links between historical narrative and ideology.

Take here, for example, one of Kiefer's paintings from the nineteen-seventies, *Maikäfer Flieg* (*Cockchafer Fly*). Ostensibly, *Maikäfer Flieg* represents a large, open expanse of dark, furrowed earth receding in space towards a low, lightly wooded ridge at the horizon. The view across this expanse of earth, which appears to have been consumed by some sort of conflagration, is interrupted only in the middle distance by a solitary burning tree and residual pockets of flame and smoke. The pictorial representation of this plot of scorched earth in *Maikäfer Flieg* occupies approximately five-sixths of the image, pushing the horizon of the depicted landscape very near to the top of the picture plane. In

⁵⁷ See, Edwards ed., *Art and its Histories*, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 4.

addition, the earth is denoted by a dark, tar-like paint which forms an extremely heavy impasto in the lower third of the picture plane and which throughout retains both the drips and the brush marks clearly contingent upon its application. Consequently, the spatial illusion staged for the viewer by *Maikäfer Flieg* is interrupted by an ‘all over’ painterliness, reminiscent of many abstract paintings of the middle part of the twentieth century, which invites a consideration of the painting as ‘flat’ material object. Here, then, *Maikäfer Flieg* can be understood to function both as a traditional illusionistic window on the world and, in a more modernist manner, as *l’art pour l’art* object in its own right - and this despite the fact that *Maikäfer Flieg* does not incorporate, like a number of Kiefer’s other landscapes, ‘real’ or sculptural objects such as straw, sand, photographs and, as in the case of the various versions of *Wöhlundlied (mit Flügel) - Wayland’s Song (With Wing)* (1982), a bird’s wing made out of lead sheet. Further to this, while at a cursory glance there may appear to be nothing in *Maikafer Flieg* that would help us locate its depicted landscape with any degree of geographical precision – something which would, if it were the case, see *Maikäfer Flieg* conform to the pattern of earlier landscape paintings by Kiefer, such as *Jeder Mensch steht unter seiner Himmelskugel (Every Human Being Stands Beneath His Own Dome of Heaven)* and *Winterlandschaft (Winter Landscape)* (both of 1970), and *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh (There is peace upon every Mountain Peak)* (1973), which present archetypal rather than geographically specific landscape images – on a closer inspection there are aspects of the work that break with a conventionally static form of painterly illusionism (if there is, indeed, such a thing) to open up the work to a variety of geographically precise readings. One is that that the scorched landscape in *Maikäfer Flieg* can be read as one that has been subjected to the agricultural practice of stubble burning; something which suggests a direct experiential link between the painting and the agricultural land which lay near to Kiefer’s studio in the Odenwald, part of the lower Danube region of West Germany, at the time of its making. Another is the somewhat anti-illusionistic incorporation into *Mäikafer Flieg* of words from a German nursery rhyme which have been written out in cursive script along the low ridge depicted in the painting, and which can, at first glance, be mistaken for a row of trees. In English translation these words read:

Cockchafer fly,
 Father is in the War,
 Mother is in Pomerania,
 Pomerania is burnt up.

As mark Rosenthal has suggested in his essay for the catalogue of the Kiefer exhibition held jointly by the Art Institute of Chicago and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (where, incidentally the

Arensberg collection of Duchamp's work is kept) in 1987, "On Being German and an Artist: 1974 to 1980," this poetic citation places the landscape depicted in *Maikäfer Flieg* with some exactness, in much the same way as the inscription on the cartouche hovering illusionistically above the battlefield in the sixteenth century German painter Albrecht Altdorfer's painting *Die Alexanderschlacht (The Battle of Alexander)* (1529) identifies its precise locale. For Rosenthal, by "referring to the region of Pomerania – once part of Germany and now mainly in Poland – the artist makes the landscape archetype specific" [Rosenthal, 1987: 32]. Rosenthal then writes:

Pomerania was one of the areas lost to Germany after World War II, but the pathos of the poem has to do not with that loss but with the sacrifice of life. In *Cockchafer Fly*, Kiefer became a kind of war poet, and the blackened scorched earth his central motif, his Mont sainte Victoire, as it were, showing the province of the landscape to be human suffering, not the glory of nature. Rising from the earth, the smoke suggests the fires of hell, just as seen in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch...[and] The wilful destruction of the land, whether by outsiders or by inhabitants [an attempt] to render the earth useless for occupation troops...[Rosenthal, 1987: 32]

As this passage suggests, *Maikäfer Flieg* can therefore be read not just as a piece of lower Danube agricultural land surrounding Kiefer's studio in the nineteen-seventies, but also as a reference to part of Germany's Pomeranian theatre of operations during World War II. However, it is also possible to go further along this polysemic chain of reference. As Andrew Benjamin points out in his essay "Painting Words: Kiefer and Celan", printed in the journal *Art and Design Profile* no. 25 (1992), Kiefer's somewhat incunabular landscape motif can be read as an unstable field; a palimpsest upon which any number of historical narratives and geographical associations can be continually reinscribed. Here, Benjamin writes:

The landscape is the field of history. It is the inscription of the place of history into painting and as painting. If history is not just the recitation of events, then the presence of the field is Kiefer's response to the question of how the event of history is to be represented. History as the field of repetition. A repetition that breaks with the dominance of the Same by the repetition of landscape where that repetition is contemporaneous with the impossibility of the field's being reduced to a simple enactment, repetition within the genre of landscape. The frame becomes therefore the field of irreducibility and thus the site of an original heterogeneity. The frame resists simplicity. [Benjamin in Papadakis ed. 1992: 46]

What Benjamin alludes to here is that Kiefer's grafting of verbal and visual citations in paintings such as *Maikäfer Flieg* unsettles the notion that a painting's significance stems simply from the sensible appearance or self-value of its painted surface, that is to say its appearance either as representation or as formal object, but from what Klaus Herding has called in his introductory essay to *The Divided Heritage: Themes and Problems in German Modernism* (1991), "Against the Cliché of Constants Beyond History", the workings of an "imaginative consciousness" [Herding in Rogoff ed.,

1991: 9]. Moreover, in the above passage Benjamin points to a possible reading of paintings by Kiefer, such as *Maikäfer Flieg* which sees them not as history paintings *per se*, but as paintings which open up the idea of historical narrative as a complex, differentiated and imaginatively unstable web of references. As a result, we can begin to see the Lower Danube/Pomeranian landscape of *Maikäfer Flieg* as a number of other ‘landscapes’: an oil-covered sea burning in the aftermath of a naval action – a U-boat attack, perhaps; a ruined city-scape in the wake of incendiary bombing – Dresden or Coventry, for instance; the scorched earth of any number of central European conflicts – those of the Napoleonic Wars or the thirty years war; or, indeed, as a landscape metaphor for the Holocaust. All of which can be understood to amount, as Benjamin’s account suggests, not to a sublation of art into life but an attempt to keep the boundaries of the perceived difference between the two very much in play.

Clearly, the notion of a persistently unstable relationship between history painting and the actuality of historical events of the sort which Benjamin puts forward could be considered highly problematic, particularly where paintings such as *Maikäfer Flieg* can be understood to refer to highly sensitive events such as World War II and the Holocaust. However, this very sense of problematization points towards the political rationale that lies behind Kiefer’s challenge to traditional forms of representational history painting. As Kiefer makes clear in an interview with Frank Whitford which made up part of *Operation Sea Lion*, a BBC Omnibus programme first televised in the UK in 1992, what he intends in ‘history’ paintings of his, such as *Maikäfer Flieg*, is not to challenge directly the known “facts” of events like World War II and the Holocaust, but instead to challenge the notion that there can be a single, officially sanctioned version of history that provides us with an objective representation of those ‘facts’. As Kiefer points out in his interview with Whitford, his principal target here was the official history of Germany promulgated in the West by the occupying powers after World War II. As such, this official history constituted an attempt on the part of the occupying powers to de-Nazify the German Bundesrepublik by bringing the populace face-to-face with the horrifying events leading up to and surrounding the Holocaust. However, for Kiefer speaking in his interview with Whitford, it also effectively closed the country off from an active consideration of much of its past and, what is more, an ability to explore issues of national, political and cultural identity; something which, according to Kiefer – echoing his one-time teacher Joseph Beuys - remains crucial to the healing of a once divided post-war Germany.

Here, then, it is possible to interpret ‘history’ paintings such as *Maikäfer Flieg* not as a straightforward return to tradition, but to as an attempt to marshal avant-gardist collage-montage techniques, as both Rosenthal and Benjamin suggest, as a means of problematizing conventional notions of artistic and historical representation. And moreover, in doing so, as an attempt to build upon the kind of cultural and political interventions we find in relation to the work of Joseph Beuys. However, as Whitford points out in *Operation Sea Lion*, it is also possible to interpret Kiefer’s challenge to the notion of a representational history as something which makes space for the kind of historical revisionism we find in, amongst others, the writings of David Irving. Indeed, in some ways Kiefer can be understood to court such an interpretation by consistently refusing to call himself an anti-Nazi on the grounds that this would stand as an insult to those who resisted Nazi aggression at first-hand. However, while Kiefer’s work undoubtedly does raise uncomfortable historical spectres, if we turn to a detailed reading of another of his paintings from the mid-nineteen-seventies it is, we would argue, not at all clear that it supports accusations of crypto-fascism on Kiefer’s part.

Kiefer’s painting *Varus* (1976) – one of a series of thematically linked works from the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen eighties, which includes *Piet Mondrian – Hermannsschlacht* (*Piet Mondrian - Arminius’s Battle*) (1976), *Wege der Weltweisheit* (*Ways of Worldly Wisdom*) (1976-77), *Wege der Weltweisheit – die Hermannsschlacht* (*Ways of Worldly Wisdom – Arminius’s Battle*) (1978-80) and *Wege der Weltheiseit – die Schlacht der Teutoburgwald* (*Ways of Worldly Wisdom – The battle of Teutoburg Forest*) (1978-80) – depicts a snow covered track running through a densely wooded forest. Along the length of this depicted track there are spots of red, blood-like, dripping paint and the names “Varus”, “Hermann” and “Thusnelda”. And in the canopy of branches above the track can be found the names of several notable figures from German and European history, including, from left to right of the picture plane, “Stefan Martin”, “Reiner Maria Richte”, “Königin Lüisse”, “Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher”, “Gerhard Leibrecht Blücher”, “Fichte”, “Friedrich Höderlin”, “Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock”, “Heinrich von Kleist”, “Christian Dietrich Grabbe” and “von Schlieffen”, each written out - as the words of the cited poem in *Maikäfer Flieg* - in cursive script. Here, the names in the forest canopy and along the track are linked by an indistinct series of painted white lines, which make up a pattern reminiscent of a genealogical tree. As such, the central motif of this work is the well-known battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9CE in which Germanic tribesmen led by Arminius – a figure otherwise known as Hermann, whose wife is known as Thusnelda and who was a local guide to the

occupying forces of Rome – is understood to have drawn three legions of the Imperial Roman army under the command of the general Varus deep into the Teutoburg Forest, where they were ambushed and systematically slaughtered; an event which has often been interpreted as the symbolic birth of German nationhood.

Although the battle of the Teutoburg Forest constitutes the central motif of Kiefer's painting, there is no direct reference to the actual events of the battle. Rather, Kiefer signifies the action indirectly by his indexical inclusion of the blood-like spots of paint and the names inscribed along the track depicted in the lower part of the painting. Moreover, Kiefer takes us away from any sense that *Varus* is simply a representation of the Teutoburg Forest battle through his inclusion of the names in the depicted forest canopy, all of which represent historical figures living some time after the events of 9CE. Consider here, for example, Blücher the victorious Prussian field marshal at Waterloo, von Schlieffen the architect of Germany's mobilization at the outset of World War I, Klopstock and Grabbe, both of whom dramatised the battle of the Teutoburg Forest at the time of the Napoleonic wars as a symbolic example of German resistance to foreign domination (a stance that has a strong affinity with Caspar David Friedrich's contemporaneous painting *Chasseur in the Forest*, in which a lone French cavalryman is depicted facing seemingly impenetrable German *wald*) and Höderlin and Martin, both of whom used the theme of the Teutoburg Forest battle in their writings and whose openly xenophobic tendencies endeared them to National Socialism. Yet again, then, Kiefer can be understood to have set up a complex overlaying of historical themes atop a single, incunabular image. Moreover, against the background of Germany's official post-war version of history it is, once more, a highly problematic one. As Walter Grasskamp makes clear in his essay "A Historical Continuity of Disjunctures", also included in *The Divided Heritage: Themes and problems in German Modernism*, the official post-war vision of Germany's history incorporates the notion of a *kahlschlag* or 'clear-felling' intended to put a fire-break between the Nazi-era and the post-war present in which, as Grasskamp puts it, "everything that fascism touched and used for its cultural legitimation was relegated to cultural oblivion" [Grasskamp in Rogoff ed., 1991: 21], and in which room could be made for a new German identity. Consequently, where in *Varus* Kiefer establishes a genealogical tree tracing the links between the Teutoburg Forest battle and subsequent figures in German history, some of them associated with Nazi ideology and others with Prussian militarism, he can be understood to have reversed the *Kahlschlag* and the official notion of a cultural and historical de-Nazification.

It could be argued here that in his paintings Kiefer adopts a somewhat questionable position that leaves room not only for a renewed involvement of Germany with the ideology of the far right but, what is more, for a relativistic reading of history that threatens to collapse the historical specificity of Nazism. However, it is also possible to read *Varus*, we would aver, as something other than this. Perhaps the first marker of such an alternative reading lies in the bloody state of the pathway through the forest depicted in *Varus*. This would appear to suggest that for Kiefer the post-war *Kahlschlag* is not the clean break with the past it purports to be, and that some sort of problematic violence resides in its attempt to isolate Germany from an exploration of its historical identity. The second marker, as Grasskamp points out with reference to Kiefer's 'studio' series of 1973, *Resurrexit, Nothung (Notung), Vater, Sohn, Heileger Geist (Father, Son, Holy Ghost)* and *Deutschlands Geisteshelden (Germany's Spiritual Heroes)*, is that it is possible to see Kiefer evoking in his painting from the nineteen-seventies "nineteenth-century motifs" – such as that of the densely forested German landscape – "which were intended to prepare and anticipate Germany's first process of unification and were compromised by the use the fascists later made of them" not "in sympathy for their fascistic misuse", but rather in an attempt to "find out if they are still at his disposal as functioning signs in a cultural discourse" [Grasskamp in Rogoff ed., 1991: 22]. That is to say, Kiefer can be understood in his paintings to represent historical motifs once appropriated both by nineteenth century German nationalists and by twentieth century German fascists, not to glorify or further support their association with the politics of the right, but in an attempt to wrestle them out of the clutches of Nazism, where the *Kahlschlag* effectively leaves them, in order to remount and remotivate them within the context of a renewed exploration of German cultural identity. Here, then, the revisitation of motifs from German history in Kiefer's paintings of the nineteen-seventies may be interpreted as a challenge to the *Kahlschlag*'s somewhat negative proposition that Germany can only move forward by surrendering much of its past to the far right. Moreover, it can also be seen both as a challenge to what is the *Kahlschlag*'s effective doubling of the kind of totalising historicism which characterized the Nazi's own officially racist, 'blood and soil', version of German history, and as a call for a more open-ended exploration of history that would 'break' with Nazism not through a decisive giving up the past and all its political associations, but through a continual revisitation of the question of what it means historically to be German. Further to which, as Rosenthal suggests, it is possible to view Kiefer's challenge to officially sanctioned versions of German history through an archaeology of the changing significance of

historical motifs as one through which the “artist can hope to supercede the dictates of history...to form a newly imagined world picture” [Rosenthal, 1987: 79]; or, to paraphrase Kiefer himself, speaking in his televised BBC interview with Frank Whitford, as a moving into and picturing of an as yet undetermined future while facing and continually remaking sense out of the ruins of the past. Here, then, Kiefer’s depiction of scorched earth in *Varus* may not to be seen simply as an index of disastrous events in the metaphorical field of German history, such as those of the Holocaust, but also as an undecidable ‘stubble-burning’ in which (to appropriate thinking by Heidegger) *destruction* by fire holds out the possibility of the field’s future *retrieve*. Kiefer’s painting of the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties is on this account, therefore, not so much a marker of pro-Nazism on the part of the artist as it is an opening up of historical narrative to a persistent attentiveness which, it might be argued, displays a greater sensitivity to the warning legacy of disastrous events like the Holocaust than any single, fixed version of history.

To sum up, then, it is possible to see Kiefer’s painting of the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties as a form of genealogical exploration which eschews both the notions of fixed historical significance and of sharp distinctions between past, present and future, while retrieving from a constant rereading of the past the possibility of a renewed picture of the future. However, this is, we would argue, only part of the possible significance of Kiefer’s work. Here, we would wish to advance a number of related points: firstly, that Kiefer can be understood to inherit, via the work of his teacher Joseph Beuys, the avant-gardist use of collage-montage techniques exemplified by the readymades of Marcel Duchamp; secondly, that Kiefer can be understood to extend Beuys’s critical reworking of Duchampian collage-montage techniques, continuing to turn them away, through an appropriation of a readymade history painting, from what is arguably a dangerous form of aesthetic and political indifference on Duchamp’s part towards an engagement with pressing questions of political and cultural importance in the context of post-war Germany; thirdly, that in rejecting the notion of an official post-war version of German history Kiefer can be seen to move, not only beyond what he ultimately regards as a politically suspect desire during the immediate post-war period to close down discussion on the historical question of Germany’s cultural identity (and, thereby, effectively to echo Nazi historicism), but also what Germano Celant suggests in his essay “The Destiny of Art: Anselm Kiefer”, published in *Anselm Kiefer: Himmel-Erde* (1997), is an equally suspect desire on part of Joseph Beuys for some sort of collective response to Germany’s post-war ills, in which a “transgressive

“sensibility” aimed at “opposing the social spectacle of art” is intended to triumph and “dominate as the celebration or exaltation of a community of thought or behaviour” – an aspect of Beuys’s work which, Celant argues, Kiefer is clearly uncomfortable with [Celant in Cacciari and Celant, 1997: 13]; and fourthly, that Kiefer’s appropriation of a readymade history painting and his genealogical multiplication of meaning is not, as Celant also argues, merely an “evasion, denouncement, and disengagement from the historical world”, but “a deepening of the effectiveness of art in everyday life and in reality through a new sense of “mediation”” [Celant in Cacciari and Celant, 1997: 14]. In other words, Kiefer’s painting can be understood, we would aver, not simply as the straightforward repetition of an inherited Duchampian tradition of avant-gardist collage-montage and the resulting problematization of the traditionally perceived boundary between life and art – one which as we have seen is, despite Jones’s intervening notion of a performative, and politically challenging ‘deconstruction’ of gender positions on Duchamp’s part, is still open to criticism because of what commentators like Terry Atkinson have described as its deep sense of political and ethical indifference – nor as a direct retreat from Joseph Beuys’s conspicuous politicization of Duchamp’s critical strategies, but as an excision, remounting and remotivation (reimagining) of collage-montage techniques within a historical context in which it has become possible to retrieve new meaning from the ‘ruins’ of the past. Consequently, while Kiefer’s work can now, nearly twenty-five years after the painting of *Maikäfer Flieg*, be seen to have become thoroughly assimilated by a burgeoning culture/entertainment industry through a constant round of high-profile publications and international exhibitions, and while Kiefer himself has become one of the major stars in the firmament of postmodernist art, it is still the case, we would argue, that Kiefer’s ‘history’ painting of the seventies and eighties points towards a ‘stance’ - ultimately drawn from a skein of possibilities implicated in the readymades of Marcel Duchamp - which in some way confounds the problems associated with an avant-gardist sublation of art into praxis. That is to say by ‘mediating’ our understanding of history and maintaining its provisional status, Kiefer’s painting continues to open up an interstitial space for the relative autonomy of art and, thence, for a critical distance between art and life. According to Kiefer’s work, avant-gardist collage-montage is therefore not wholly amenable to the kind of false sublation and adaptation to the market place cited by Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Rather, it can be understood to posit the possibility of a continual renewal and reimagination of the field of history and of art; one that, it might be argued, has been pursued through the work of contemporary German

'history-photographers', such as Ivan Gursky and Thomas Struth (whose work was recently on show in the major *Moving Pictures* exhibition at the Guggenheim museum in New York).

Here, then, we would argue that it is possible to view Kiefer's history painting of the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties (and even beyond), very much in relation to the historical context of that time, as a form of collage-montage which opens up a provisional space for art - and indeed for painting at a time in the nineteen-seventies when a highly self-reflexive conceptualism was in the ascendant - through a genealogical mediation on the ideological investments in and polysemic possibilities of historical interpretation. Moreover, we would argue that it is possible to see this meditation on history as a critique of the political and ethical dangers implicated in an over-easy acceptance of the notion of historical closure. As such, Kiefer's is therefore an approach to painting that has, we would also aver, a strong affinity with the critical stance taken by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* and his own deployment of deconstructive collage-montage techniques in the service of a pointed political and ethical problematization of historical endism. In both cases, what might have hitherto been seen as techniques ultimately wedded to an absence of political and ethical commitment, have clearly been reimagined differently in relation to unfolding events. For the history of the avant-garde, this, we would aver, points us away from Bürger's notion of a disastrous historical negation and towards the possibility of a continuing artistic and critical renewal. For the history of history - and in particular here the history of art history - it points us away from the discursive impasse which seems to loom up in the face of a rigorous deconstructive attention to the subject and the seemingly unethical relativism of many of its poststructuralist readings towards a 'methodology' that has the capacity to keep in play our sense of the conceptual articulation of the world while maintaining, in the absence of any direct alternative, a provisional, performative identity for historical research and, what is more, a critical capacity for a continual remotivation of that identity along politically and ethically committed lines. In other words, it points away from an interpretation of avant-gardist collage-montage and the associated practice of deconstruction simply as wanton acts of destructive vandalism towards one in which they can both be seen to carry the traces of a serial incompleteness, 'past', 'present' and 'future'.

Conclusion: Ways of Worldly Wisdom

In this dissertation we began by highlighting the movement of contemporary critical theory from the margins to the centre of art history over the past two decades or so and how this can be understood as a shift away from a traditional modernist faith in the underlying coherence and purposefulness of historical events and the capacity of academic research to arrive at an objective narration of those events towards a postmodernist acceptance of the plurality of interpretation. We also began by discussing how, as part of art history's increasing involvement with critical theory, Derridean deconstruction can be understood to undermine both the philosophical underpinnings and the discursive superstructure of conventional art historical discourse. Indeed, we sought to point out how deconstruction can be seen to severely problematize a continuation of art historical discourse as we have come traditionally to understand it without proposing any obvious alternative beyond its own persistent, performative critique of metaphysical language and the somewhat obscure ultra-metaphysical realm of 'understanding' towards which that critique arguably points.

In relation to this opening we then went on to point out how in recent years critics, such as John Roberts, have become increasingly impatient not only with the discursive *impasse* which a deconstructive attention to art history can be understood to have placed in the way of a progressive art history, but also the way in which deconstruction can be seen to have taken art historical interpretation away from a rigorous study of the significance of the art object seen in relation to the specific circumstances of its production and reception towards a more formalistic and open-ended ('literary') reading of texts. Moreover, we also indicated how deconstruction's apparent downgrading of the notion of a transitive link between the art object as text and the context of its making raises problematic issues concerning the capacity of the art historian to adopt an ethically and/or politically committed position based on a true understanding of historical events; a decisiveness which our everyday sense of the pressing actuality of the world would still seem to demand.

In relation to these criticisms of deconstruction we then proceeded to ask whether there is any future for a continuing deconstructive attention to art history, given that such a thing can be understood to have led us into a highly problematic double-bind from which we can not escape without either breaking through to some as yet inconceivable form of ultra-metaphysical understanding beyond that

involved with existing language systems or returning wholeheartedly to a faith in the efficacy of conventional metaphysical discourse.

In part one of this dissertation we then began, working through a brief genealogy of Derridean deconstruction's influence on art history, to address the above question by demonstrating that while a deconstructive attention to conventional art historical thinking can be understood to have supported the somewhat formalistic approach reading identified by its critics it can also be seen to sustain the possibility of a continuing analysis of the relationship between a text and historical context. As Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson have argued, in deconstructive terms differences in historical understanding can be seen to arise not through an overlooking of given relationships between text and context but in relation to an immanent and persistently unstable, iterative interaction in language between signs and the circumstances of their signification in which the sign can be understood to signify by both constantly differing from and deferring to its wider setting. Here, then, one can begin to think of a deconstruction as something with the potential to go beyond a formalistic reading of texts to address the part which context plays in the formation of meaning over time. Indeed, as Hal Foster and Martin McQuillan have both argued, it is possible to envisage a deconstructive form of historical narrative - or genealogy - in which emerging events are seen not just to accrue, as traditional forms of history writing would have it, but also to recontextualize and remotivate our understanding of those which have come before them while presaging or 'pre-contextualizing', if you will, those which are yet to come. In other words, it is possible to imagine deconstructive approach to history writing that sees the significance of events as chronically unstable elements in an unfolding 'trace-structure' of signification. Clearly, this viewpoint is not wholly comparable with a conventional understanding of historical narrative as a representation of past events with a given significance, since on its terms the notions of 'representation' and 'given significance' are to be held, as it were, *sous-rature*. Nevertheless, it does allow for the possibility of a form of deconstruction that addresses not only the synchronic, but also the diachronic dimensions of meaning formation, albeit in a manner which problematizes any clear distinction between the two.

As we have pointed out, this insight has at least two significant implications for those critics with a negative view of a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse. Firstly, it demonstrates the performative manner in which deconstruction works simultaneously both to uphold and unsettle its object of criticism, thereby problematizing the notion, put forward by Eric Fernie, that deconstruction

is simply antipathetic to the writing of historical narrative. Secondly, it suggests that our grasp of deconstruction is itself not historically fixed and that it too is open to the continual possibility of recontextualization and remotivation as part of a chain of 'historical' events; a state of affairs that would always see a slippage between deconstruction and any definition placed on it by its detractors. Indeed, here one would have to recognize the pervasive undecideability of deconstruction and that it would, under the circumstances described, always stand in relation to art history as both a negative and a positive force – 'destroyer' and 'retriever'.

Moving on from this line of argument, in part two of this dissertation we then set out to look more closely at the relationship between deconstruction and the wider 'history' of art historical discourse. In doing so we had three aims. The first was to go beyond theoretical assertions about the possibility of a deconstructive 'history' writing by demonstrating in practice the kind of genealogy suggested both in the writings of McQuillan and Foster. The second – and we shall return to this point in more detail at the end of this conclusion – was to map out through this genealogy not only a morphology of art historical discourse over time, but in addition how deconstruction might be seen to relate to this morphology. And the third was to examine critically, within a wider discursive context, existing forms of deconstructive attention to art historical discourse and recent challenges to their continuity. With regard to this latter point we attempted to show that while much of the criticism aimed at deconstructive thinking within art history is well aimed, pointing out as it does deconstruction's role in supporting a lack of historical specificity and political commitment within recent mainstream, poststructuralist art history writing, the desire to counter deconstruction through a reaffirmation of foundationalist thinking by writers both on the left and right of art history is itself highly questionable. Here, we attempted to make the point that in relation to Derridean deconstruction not only is it possible to unsettle through close textual analysis contemporary claims regarding the inviability of those perceived structures which deconstruction's critics see as central to our understanding of historical events – whether they be class hierarchies in the case of John Roberts, or narrative tropes such as authorship and period in the case of Eric Fernie – but also to see that the formation of contemporary art historical discourse is part of a longer unstable lineage of art history writing through which meaning has been subjected to the continual possibility of recontextualization and remotivation in the face of emerging events and shifts of time and place.

Finally, in part three of this dissertation we set out to unsettle the notion that deconstruction is necessarily wholly detached from concerns of an ethical and/or political nature. Here, we began by examining the relationship between two of Jacques Derrida's key writings: "Différance" and *Specters of Marx*. The point we wished to make here is that Derrida's thinking has exhibited its own developmental logic in that the relentless critique of the truth claims carried through conventional metaphysical language in the essay "Différance", which can be seen to support the somewhat relativistic, and as Roberts avers, anti-Marxist stance taken by many poststructuralist art history writers of the nineteen-eighties and nineties, also underlies the rather more committed political stance adopted by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. In the latter publication, Derrida in 'essence' puts forward a view (comparable with that of Foster's notion of a regenerative avant-garde) whereby Marx's economic critique is not to be seen as a historically fixed entity that has ultimately been overcome by a benign liberal capitalism – as Francis Fukuyama would have it – but as an undecidable critical spectre that continues to haunt the 'new world order'. With regard to which Derridean thinking can be understood to have developed in relation to unfolding events.

In relation to the above argument, we then attempted to show, again through the mounting of a deconstructive genealogy, that it is possible to articulate a parallel development with regard to the field of fine art practice. Here, we began by drawing out similarities between deconstruction as a performative critique of metaphysical truth-claims and the workings of the Duchampian 'readymade'. According to our reading, Duchamp's seminal readymade *Fountain* can be understood to uphold aspects of traditional fine art practice while simultaneously unsettling all of its fundamental tenets, thereby shifting the art object away from its perceived former role as the embodiment of certain given aesthetic values towards one in which it can be understood to have become worthy of aesthetic contemplation only by the force with which it continues to perform its own propositional content as 'art'. That is to say, the Duchampian readymade can be understood to reveal the art object not as a representation of given values but as the nexus for an ultimately agnostic, quasi-Eucharistic sacrament in which physical and institutional contexts come together through an agreed form of ritual involving both an artistic clergy and an initiated, art consuming congregation to share in, or not as the case may be, some form of provisional 'aesthetic' experience constituted by the work of art. As such, the Duchampian readymade can therefore be seen to open up the possibility that aesthetic experience is not tied to prescribed, transcendental limits existing outside the process of artistic production and

reception. Rather, it is to be seen as a highly unstable, though historically persistent, entity invoked only through cultural interaction of one sort or another. Consequently, for many it could no longer be regarded as aesthetic experience at all, since its distinct standing in relation to the everyday – that which conventionally makes it what it is – has been done away with. We then went on to argue that the insight performed by the Duchampian readymade has itself been taken up and adapted within differing cultural contexts that take it beyond a relatively straightforward undermining of conventional artistic values. First we examined the work of the German sculptor Joseph Beuys and its relationship with Duchamp's legacy. Here, we noted Beuys's openly critical attitude towards Duchamp's self-proclaimed silence as an artist from the early nineteen-twenties onwards and what can be seen as his attempt, beginning in the early nineteen-sixties through the medium of the performance artwork or *Aktionen*, to collapse the boundary between art and praxis which the Duchampian readymade had so severely problematized earlier in the century. We also noted how this move on Beuys's part might be understood to relate to the political and cultural circumstances of his native Germany during the post-war period, in that it can be seen to involve an attempt to formulate a form of aesthetically charged political action aimed at healing the entrenched ideological schism involved in the division of Germany after nineteen forty-five into capitalist West and communist East. Furthermore, we also registered the critic Peter Bürger's well-known assertions of the early nineteen-seventies, - which, we have argued, can be readily understood as having been directed at Beuys and other members of the state-sponsored artistic avant-garde working in West Germany at that time - that the post-war neo avant-garde's repetition of the seminal critical challenges of the historical avant-garde during the early part of the twentieth century had led, through an institutionalized sublimation of art into life, to a catastrophic loss of distance between the artist and his/her object of criticism; namely, as Bürger would seem to have it, the political hegemony of the capitalist West. We then went on to discuss the work of Beuys's one-time pupil, Anselm Kiefer, which, we argued, can be understood both to defer to and differ from that of his mentor. On the one hand, it can be understood to defer because it carries on Beuys's critical concern with the open political and cultural wounds of post-war Germany. On the other, it can be understood to differ in that it involves a return beyond the established avant-garde's rejection of conventional forms of artistic expression to the somewhat neglected genre of history painting; something which itself can also be interpreted as a differing/deferring action since it can be viewed both as a knowing Duchampian appropriation of painting as 'readymade' – as we have seen Kiefer's 'painting' often

incorporates readily discernible collage-montage techniques as well as relatively traditional painterly skills – and as an attempt to reassert some form of aesthetic autonomy and thereby to ‘re-open’ a degree of critical distance between art and praxis. Indeed, as such, Kiefer’s collage/montage painting of the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties can, we have argued, be understood to involve an attempt to maintain the possibility of a relationship between artistic autonomy and an engagement with praxis which stands to some degree apart from Beuys’s apparent desire to arrive at a profound art-life synthesis. Furthermore, we have also argued, that while Beuys’s work can be understood, like that of many other post-war German artists, to enshrine the traumatic events of Germany’s recent past so that they might be faced squarely and a cathartic process of cultural and political healing and ‘moving-on’ take place, Kiefer’s work of the nineteen-seventies and early nineteen-eighties, with its challenge to official post-war versions of German history and their attempt to erect an impermeable barrier between Germany’s past and its present after the horrors of the Holocaust, is principally concerned with keeping our understanding of the past very much in play and thereby with liberating a German cultural inheritance which is in danger not only of being entombed within an institutionalized form of ‘memorialism’ – and here we think not just of the memento-like quality of much of Beuys’s work but also its affinity with the strangely Duchampian form of presentation commonly used by Germany’s Holocaust memorial sites – but also of being handed over permanently to the keeping of the far right.

To sum up, then, in part three we attempted to demonstrate how a Duchampian approach to artistic practice could be understood to have become remotivated over time, moving on from what might be seen as a relatively straightforward ‘deconstruction’ of the institutionalized tenets of artistic practice in the early part of the twentieth century, through an ultimately stultifying attempt to erase the perceived difference between art and life in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, only to reemerge as an ‘deconstructive’ appropriation of history painting in the nineteen-seventies and eighties which can be understood not only to hold up to critical scrutiny established versions of historical truth but also to involve a simultaneous commitment to the pressing ethical and political concerns of the life-world.

In mounting this genealogy our intention was four-fold. Firstly, as indicated above, we wished to reinforce the notion that deconstructive practice is in some way historically dynamic, in that both in relation to a reading of Derrida’s work and that of Duchamp, Beuys and Kiefer the possibilities of ‘deconstructive’ practice can be understood to have become transformed in relation to shifting contexts of time and place. Secondly, we wished to show how the form of deconstructive historiography put

forward in part one of this dissertation could also be put to work in relation to a more obviously art historical context. Thirdly, we attempted to demonstrate through a combination of the above that a deconstructive attention is not simply destructive of art historical discourse but, in manner broadly analogous to the Duchampian readymade, that it shifts the register of its host discourse by revealing the complex interactions through which that discourse produces rather than reflects meaning and by working through its existing conceptual structures while simultaneously undermining all of its standing tenets and limitations. And fourthly, by implication we also tried to show how a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse might be deployed in relation to questions of an ethical and/or political nature and, moreover, how deconstructive analysis could be used, as in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and, arguably, Kiefer's *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* series, to sustain the possibility of some form of critical *contretemps*.

Of course, critics of deconstruction will maintain their own doubts as to the legitimacy of this performance, reasoning that it continues to undermine not only the fundamental conceptual underpinnings of historical discourse but also, thereby, the notion of a link between what 'is' and how one 'ought' to act which arguably underpins a belief in the possibility of ethical imperatives. However, if we return to our earlier genealogical reading of art historical discourse it could be argued that such concerns continue to ignore the way in which art historical meaning has arisen 'historically'. As we have attempted to show, art historical discourse is not necessarily something that simply fell disastrously under the spell of deconstruction sometime during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Rather, it can be understood as having been transformed continually over time through what is arguably a deconstructive action of differing and deferring in which shifting circumstances of time and place have provoked an unstable remotivation of established paradigms. Indeed, as we have also attempted to show, art historical discourse is simultaneously both stable and unstable in that it can be understood since Antiquity to involve variations upon two basic historical visions, the 'Judaean-Christian' notion of a cyclical ordering of historical events and the 'Greek' notion of history as a relatively flat unfolding of events over time, in which one continually carries with it traces of the other and where neither can be seen to possess a clear identity of its own. Consequently, art historical meaning can be understood to have emerged historically not in one settled form or another, but as a series of monstrous hybrids where the ostensibly dominant paradigm is never wholly free of its other. Moreover, that meaning can be understood as having been produced not simply through attempts to

represent the actuality of events but through a far more complex, interactive process in which shifts in context – including, the geographical, social, cultural and political - play a crucial part in meaning production. In short, art historical discourse has arguably been open throughout its history, and has in a sense proceeded in relation to, what we would now see as the simultaneously productive and unsettling movement of *différance*. Arguments against the relationship between deconstruction and art history might, therefore, be understood to overlook a temporally persistent relationship between deconstructive action and art historical discourse. If this is indeed the case, then it is not so much a question of whether there is any future for a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse as how we might now act in relation to the problematic understanding that art historical discourse has always and already proceeded in relation to deconstructive action. This dissertation has been an attempt to do just that.

Here, then, we have not sought to choose simply between a return to traditional art historical discourse and the further development of a deconstructive attention to that discourse. Instead, we have performed a form of deconstructive historiography which admits, in the absence of any fully articulated alternative to conventional, metaphysical language and in relation to what appears to be a continuing imperative - brought about by the pressing actuality of events - to act decisively in the world, the current necessity of a more or less recognisable form of art historical discourse which at the same time has assimilated the immanence of its own persistent instability. It could, therefore, be argued that we have in some sense normalized deconstruction, given that the main thrust of our argument here has been to question the notion that deconstruction is an entirely recent or aberrant phenomenon. However, to follow such a line of argument would, we would suggest, be to ignore the sheer irrationality of the deconstructive ‘moment’ and the way in which it unsettles conventional notions of spatio-temporal order. Yes, in a sense, a deconstructive attention to art historical discourse could be seen to have a future because of our understanding of the possible past relationship between the deconstructive properties of language and the formation of art historical meaning. Nevertheless in articulating such a future, as we have here, we are already too late. Like the *revenant* in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* our deconstructive historiography can be seen to arise out of the past as a portent of future events. But, in doing so, it performs something that is already over and that was never actually fully present in the first place. To attempt to repeat it, as we have seen, will always be to open up the possibility of something other than itself. Consequently, what we have ‘arrived’ at here should not to be viewed as a direct and

workable substitute for conventional forms of art historical discourse. Even as we write, events will already have moved on...

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