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'On Writing: propositions for art history as literary practice'*, W.G. Sebald's Artistic Legacies: Memory, Word, and Image*, Leonida Kovač, Christa-Maria K.E. Lerm Hayes, Ilse van Rijn & Ihab Saloul (eds). Amsterdam UP, pp.195–226.

On Writing: Propositions for Art History as Literary Practice

Tilo Reifenstein

Abstract

This paper embraces W.G. Sebald's irreducible "writing with pictures" as a proposition for art-historical practices. By exploring theoretical and philosophical approaches to writing's epistemic capacity, the paper uses Sebald's work to interrogate a history of art that often struggles to give up restraining the images it covets. The paper develops the characteristics of art-historical writing *as a practice* that necessarily not only negotiates the boundary of the visual and verbal, but also manifests a literary fiction produced in the discursive framing of knowledge and meaning-making about artifacts, subjects, processes and their historic contexts.

In developing a methodological approach from Sebald's word-picture combinations, we glimpse an art-historical practice that is necessarily already bound up in the liabilities of its subjects. Following Boris Groys's suggestion that the writing of art history occurs in a literary space, which implies that the historian, too, is involved in artistic production and thus cannot approach the work (formally) under scrutiny from an external position, the paper reflects on the exigencies of writing about art. Recognizing the limitations of what Derrida identified as teleological genre restriction and institutional pressures to preserve language as a transparent vehicle for "communication," the paper advances a notion of art history as a literary pursuit that writes (with) pictures. Art history's recursive self-reflexivity—producing image-texts in order to trace the words and pictures of artists—is therefore used to reflect on the creative practice of art-history writing, as well as the assumed division between writing's own form, material and content.

On Writing: Propositions for Art History as Literary Practice

Much has been said and written about W.G. Sebald's semi-fictional, associative and historically motivated writing and his work with pictures. Rather than add another

interpretive layer onto the writer's work, I would like to think methodologically or, perhaps, in a way that thinks alongside the author *about* theoretical concerns that arise when one writes (with pictures) about an author's writing that includes pictures.

Right from the outset then, it is evident that this kind of writing cannot be external to its *object*. Object and subject overlap, and the subject is used to scrutinize itself and is found to do so already. It becomes necessary to take up the task of writing to address (itself as) an epistemic practice. Moreover, there is an explicit requirement to recognize that two writers already partake in a shared space. Writing about Sebald's work manifests not only the necessity to address the imbroglio of pictures and writing, but also the secondary imbroglio of combining text and picture in order to address text and picture. The literary or art-historical challenge to explore Sebald's verbo-pictural work is mirrored in the work of history writing and thus becomes a methodological problem and opportunity. Conventionally, art-historical or critical writing about such work produces verbo-pictural texts about verbo-pictural works without indicating the confluence of the two activities. If the writers' or artists' particular and intricate ways of negotiating the relations of writing and pictures in their work is picto-discursively explored, perhaps suggesting a kind of mutual verbo-pictural graphism or hinting at the irreconcilable gap between the verbal and the picture, the works' careful equipoise and the makers' reflection thereof are, all the while, subsumed into the dictate of convention. A convention that is persistent despite the proliferation of writing that elaborates its conventionality and which undermines the very possibility of interpretive art-historical practice by showing itself as governed by rules absolutely external to those it addresses. It is therefore an incumbent necessity to take on an implicit form-content separation that prevails in the writing of art history or visual culture. This separation operates on multiple levels and abounds, despite having been made explicit and revoked. It is a separation that has subsumed its revocation into and through the very separation at the heart of the rebuke of the perceived distance between form and content.

Fiction and fact

If writing is one of the practices of art or literary history—though decidedly not the only, unless we assume that artists *write* art history in different ways, that is, they merely *write* in different ways—what are the relations between art and its history, and art-history writing? What is art history prior to the writing of art history? *Is* art history before the writing of art

history? Is art *history* before the writing of art history?

To follow Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference* is to recognize writing as a practice that inscribes itself in a place that is not yet. Meaning is here something that comes about in writing. In order to arise, meaning must be different from itself: it arises in writing, it is neither prior, nor discovered, nor transcendent.

> To write is to know that what has not yet been produced within literality has no other dwelling place, does not await us as prescription in some *topos ouranios*, or some divine understanding. Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning.[1]

Derrida goes on to cite Maurice Merleau-Ponty to reinforce the point that meaning, which is here the possibility of art history, does not precede writing "as part of an a priori of the mind," it is not *given* before it is written, it is not a *given* before writing: "The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself."[2] Elsewhere Merleau-Ponty elaborates his rejection of the conceptualizations of language, which either reduce it to mere representation of thought or make it the bare mechanics of physiognomy, when he notes that "the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it."[3] Language is here not a theoretical construct that is medially used to take on the mantle of pre-existing *truths* or to re-present a thought or meaning that has been had differently elsewhere. In writing, meaning is constituted, *inaugurated*, if, however, in response to an "already-there"; conversely, "speech, in the speaker, does not translate ready-made thought, but accomplishes it."[4] Similarly Jean-Luc Nancy, whose philosophical language does not seek to perform a neutral role in the face of thought, describes the inseparability of form and content in drawing in *The Pleasure in Drawing* and seemingly performs it in the writing.[5] As David

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), 11. Italics in original.
[2] Merleau-Ponty cited in *ibid*.; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "An Unpublished Text: A Prospectus of His Work," *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie and trans. Arleen B. Dallery (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 8–9.
[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 213.
[4] *Ibid*., 207; also in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 12.
[5] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, trans. Philip Armstrong (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

Espinet suggests, “Nancy does not want to write *about* drawing [...] but to answer it appropriately in the medium of writing,” relating the form-content connection of drawing to writing “by, as it were, writing drawingly.”[6]

This constitutive non-neutrality of language is nothing new, and so it hardly comes as a surprise when Jaś Elsner notes of art history’s ekphrastic description of its objects that it creates its own work of art. It adds what is not already there and deletes what it cannot express: “In other words, description is not merely selective; it is (at its best) a parallel work of art.”[7] For Elsner this statement is not meant to condemn art history for a failure of objectivity, of neutrality or of the application of proper scientific standards, rather he emphasizes the inevitability of the “tendentious” qualities of any descriptive gesture and urges the writer of art history to be cognizant of the “ekphrastic process” itself.[8] And similarly, the photographic representation that almost by default has to accompany the writing of art history, rather than enabling “greater objectivity,” is also affected by “partiality and tendentiousness” because it is “a visual ekphrasis” exhibiting the same bias for particular angles as an essay might, except for reassuring the reader of the “thereness” of the external object.[9]

The inclusion of photography in art-historical inquiry is often linked to ideas of shedding subjectivity to achieve greater objectivity. Yet as Ralph Lieberman argues, the camera and other devices only appear to offer “scientific” avenues for humanities disciplines, and in the case of art history led to “*Kunstwissenschaft*, an oxymoron, [being] born.”[10]

Elsner’s description of art history’s writing as ekphrasis is perhaps unsurprising. It already supports the planting of the practice firmly in the purview of poetry, literature or fiction, though be it, in his words, “fiction with footnotes.”[11] However, ekphrasis is an interesting label to affix to art history for another reason, for it renders part of art-historical practice as

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[6] David Espinet, "Skizze einer Ästhetik des Entwerfens," *Rheinsprung 11*, Zur Händigkeit der Zeichnung, no. 3 (2012), 167; italics in original, my translation. "Nancy möchte nicht *über* das Zeichnen [...] schreiben, sondern im Medium der Schrift angemessen darauf antworten," "indem er gleichsam zeichnend schreibt."
[7] Jaś Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," *Art History* 33, no. 1 (2010), 12.
[8] *Ibid*., 12, 13.
[9] *Ibid.*, 13, 24.
[10] Ralph Lieberman, "The Art-Historical Photograph as Fiction: The Pretense of Objectivity," in *Fictions of Art History*, 8th ed., ed. Mark Ledbury (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2013), 118. Italics in original.
[11] Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," 24.

translation (or more precisely intersemiotic transposition) and therefore at once re-inscribes the impossibility, yet also the necessity, of the very process.[12] Again, the correspondences and equivalences between a content and form *out there*, and the form and content of the very practice that wants to address the *out there*, are questioned.

In the idea of art history as fiction,[13] a fiction that creates its own space, rather than occupying a given one, we then also recognize Derrida's beginning of writing. That is, a writing that has stopped to be form for a preconceived idea, that has stopped to function as signifier for a predetermined meaning.

> It is when that which is written is *deceased* as a sign-signal that it is born as language; for then it says what is, thereby referring only to itself, a sign without signification, a game or pure functioning, since it ceased to be *utilized* as natural, biological, or technical information, or as the transition from one existent to another, from a signifier to a signified.[14]

Thus, visual culture studies and art history, far from being ignobled by the fiction tag, are enobled to pursue the multiplicity that they have already displayed but which hitherto sat uneasily with the scientistic (not scientific) pursuit of linearity, resolution and teleological determination. Derrida is particularly interested the "institution" of fiction because it "gives *in principle* the power to say everything" (though this may be restricted in view of wider political, social and familial, etc. contexts).[15] In not abiding by the rules, Derrida detects the possibility to draw up new ones and to recognize "the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history."[16] Fiction harbors a juridico-political force in its potential to say everything. It can dream what is not already constituted and appreciate the constitutive forces already at work. Yet art history's fictions are not only

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[12] For a perspective that reverses Elsner's relations between ekphrasis and art history, making "ekphrasis [...] a subset of art writing," see Cole Swensen, "The Ekphrastic O," in *Fictions of Art History*, 162.

[13] For art history and fiction, see Paul Barolsky, "Art History as Fiction," *Artibus et Historiae* 17, no. 34 (1996), 9–17; Catherine Grant, "'A Narrative of What It Wishes to Be': An Introduction to 'Creative Writing and Art History,'," *Art History*, special issue, ed. Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin, *Creative Writing and Art History* 34, no. 2 (2011), 230–43. For an account that clearly differentiates genres, see H. Perry Chapman, "Art Fiction," *Art History*, in special issue, ed. Dana Arnold, *Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method* 32, no. 4 (2009), 785–805.

[14] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 13. Italics in original.

[15] Jacques Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge and trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London: Routledge, 1992), 37. Italics in original.

[16] *Ibid.* On this very aspect and fiction's relation to *its* truth, see Jonathan D. Culler, "Derrida and the Singularity of Literature," *Cardozo Law Review* 27, no. 2 (2005), 872.

discursive; its literary appeal also concerns its letters, a scale at which the boundary between image and text is transgressed through graphic writing.

As Boris Groys has argued, theorization occurs within a space produced by the text. Texts position themselves and other texts, not in relation to reality but to a literary space. The writer needs to be aware of this jostling about space as any assumption of reality promotes a position outside of textual production.

> Even if theory claims to describe and interpret reality, it remains literature and situates itself in an artificial, literary space. Now: If the theoretical positions are thus situated in the literary space, the figure of the theoretician remains extra-textual. It is therefore in the space of literature that the oft-described death of the author comes about.[17]

Moreover then, the practice of writing cannot extract itself from its own position of artistic production. The writer who wants to adjudicate from the outside, who considers their own (literary) work to occupy an external space in relation to the object, "only manifests his inability to reflect on the artistic dimension of his own textual production."[18] This is also what Hayden White calls the "lack of linguistic self-consciousness."[19] Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes similarly emphasizes the propinquity between the work of the art historian and the artist, especially since their roles and practices already overlap more obviously in activities such as curation, as well as critical, interpretative and conceptual engagements.[20] She highlights the "radical historical insights" that can be brought about when art-history writing suspends the division of theory and practice, not because it does not recognize it, but because the suspension itself is fruitful.[21] Artistic practice ceases to be a realm discrete from its (own) articulation and critique but cannot help but be shaped by the same forces of so-called creative practices.

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[17] Boris Groys, "Versklavte Götter: Kino und Metaphysik," in *Inzenierungen in Schrift und Bild*, ed. Claudia Öhlschläger and Gerhard Neumann (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2004), 243. My translation. "Auch wenn die Theorie den Anspruch erhebt, die Realität zu beschrieben und zu interpretieren, bleibt sie doch Literatur und situiert sich in einem künstlichen, literarischen Raum. Nun: Wenn die theoretischen Positionen auf dieser [*sic*] Weise im literarischen Raum situiert werden, bleibt die Figur des Theoretikers dabei außertextuell. So vollzieht sich im Raum der Literatur der so oft beschriebene Tod des Autors."

[18] *Ibid*., 242. My translation. "[M]anifestiert er damit bloß seine Unfähigkeit, die künstlerische Dimension seiner eigenen Textproduktion zu reflektieren."

[19] Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 95.

[20] Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, "Writing Art and Creating Back: What Can We Do with Art (History)?," *Oratiereeks [Inaugural Lecture] 537*, University of Amsterdam 2015, 17–18, https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/2542257/164566_Oratie_Lerm_WEB.pdf.

[21] *Ibid.*, 14.

> Questions of the kind: “What is an image?” or “What does this text mean?” etc., cannot be asked and discussed from a meta-artistic perspective, if they deal with modern images and texts, because every theory is for itself already a text—and thus a literary piece. At the same time, as Plato had already noted, every text is also an image—which, in our time, has been made especially clear by conceptual art, which works with the text in the image.[22]

The affordances and exigencies of the literary space require the writer not “to confuse ontology and grammar.”[23] The putative address of an object subsumes it into the rules of the literary text that carries itself forth through the questions posed within it. The attempted instrumentalization of the literary text in pursuit of an object is inevitably turned into the workings of the text itself, “all the tortures inflicted upon it, are always transfigured, drained, forgotten by literature, within literature; having become modifications of itself, by itself, in itself, they are mortifications, that is to say, always, ruses of life.”[24] White is similarly blunt when he stakes that historians who believe they “deal with ‘real’ [not] ‘imagined’ events” need to be reminded that they and novelists deal with a “problematic and mysterious” scenario in the same way, by shaping it into “a recognizable, […] familiar form. It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined; the manner of making sense of it is the same.”[25] In art historians’ lack of self-recognition as writers, however, Paul Barolsky detects the reason why their prose is so often lacking to express the love they (presumably) have for the subject.[26] Though distinguishing between scholarship and style, content and form, Barolsky nevertheless maintains that there must be a strong relationship between how we say what we say.

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[22] Groys, "Versklavte Götter," 242. My translation. "Die Fragen vom Typ 'Was ist ein Bild?,' oder 'Was ist der Sinn des Textes?' usw. können, wenn es sich um moderne Bilder und Texte handelt, nicht aus einer meta-künstlerischen Perspektive gestellt und diskutiert werden. Denn jede Theorie ist doch ihrerseits vor allem ein Text—und damit auch ein Stück Literatur. Zugleich ist jeder Text, wie schon Plato festgestellt hat, auch ein Bild—und das hat in unserer Zeit die Konzeptkunst, die mit dem Text im Bild arbeitet, besonders deutlich gemacht."

[23] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 95.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 98.

[26] Paul Barolsky, "Writing (and) the History of Art: Writing Art History," *Art Bulletin* 78, no. 3 (1996), 398. On the same subject in the same volume, see also, David Carrier, "Writing (and) the History of Art: Artcriticism-Writing, Arthistory-Writing, and Artwriting," 401–03; Ivan Gaskell, "Writing (and) the History of Art: Writing (and) Art History: Against Writing," 403–06; Joseph Kosuth, "Writing (and) the History of Art: Intention(S)," 407–12; Linda Schele, "Writing (and) the History of Art: History, Writing, and Image in Maya Art," 412–16.

Catherine Grant draws on a number of these issues, although from a different theoretical base, in her introduction to the themed *Art History* issue "Creative Writing and Art History." She suggests that "all writing is to some extent creative" though seemingly differentiates between art-history writing and creative art-history writing in stating that the latter is "writing that is self-conscious of its own process, foregrounding form as much as content."[27] A number of issues, whose (dis)entanglement seems crucial, come to the fore in this understanding of writing.

Firstly, the use of "creative" in "creative art-history writing" does not only function as an adjectival qualifier that characterizes a particular kind of art-history writing, it also has a pejorative, parasitic trajectory—whether intended or not—in distinguishing one kind of writing, in need of qualification, from another that does not demand attributive distinction. In other words, "creative" art-history writing is decidedly not "normal" art-history writing or "proper" art-history writing, whichever it is that must be attributively opposed to the word "creative."

Secondly, if creative writing is self-conscious of its own process, proper writing is presumably not. If creative writing foregrounds form as much as content, proper writing presumably does not. It is one thing to claim, as Groys and White do, that the writer is lacking a particular linguistic self-consciousness to understand the constitutive, performative, material, even creative powers of their writing. However, to pin the consciousness or creativity on the writing itself is to propose the possibility of a writing whose form is subordinate to its content. It is to propose the possibility of a neutral kind of writing that can *express* content without the very form that *expresses* it to affect that *expression*. Finally, it is to reassert the distinction between form and content that presupposes meaning before it is realized in writing, articulation or whatever other *form*. Of course, it is possible and potentially useful to affix the descriptive labels "creative," "poetic," "lyrical," "technical" and so on to art writing, though this needs to be seen within a context in which there is no attributeless writing. Art writing without complement positions itself as a default or center seeking its place inside of content but outside of style. It entertains a naturalization or neutralization of

[27] Grant, "'A Narrative of What It Wishes to Be,'" 231.

form that implicitly disavows its own and renders attributed writing as the other writing. If the attributions made in response are the adjectives "scholarly," "traditional," "typical" and so on, we find the illegitimating forces of "creative" confirmed. There is no inherent opposition between "poetic" and "scholarly," yet in the act of application the indivisible difference between giving a name and its involution in discourse surfaces. On the one hand, there is "nomination," the giving of a "proper name [as] the asemantic limit of the semantic gesture," through which Nancy, for example, characterizes Gilles Deleuze's philosophy.[28] On the other hand, there are the semantic operations of discourse that relate word and world in a play of illimitable meanings. However, the evocation of a possible discursivity should already question any immutable relation between truth, fact and fiction. To limit the connections between them, especially by asserting a simple correlation between truth and fact, and asserting a pellucid translatability into language also manifests particular socio-cultural beliefs. As White asserts, the association of truth with fact—rather than with a multitude of possibly verifiable interpretations—is a historical occurrence: "In the early nineteenth century […] it became conventional, at least among historians, to identify truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth, hence as a hindrance to the understanding of reality rather than as a way of apprehending it."[29]

Art history's particular and probably unrequited love affair with fact is possibly most succinctly exemplified in the kind of "text" that is permitted to remain closest to the work, when all "interpretative" panels have been left behind. As though the tiny wall or page label with name, date of birth and death, perhaps place, title, date of creation and medium are irrefutable, they are finally a way to assure that the bewildering interpretability before us can be boiled down, explained, classified and subsumed into an unimpeachable catalogue of facts—far removed from the conflicting, mutually exclusive and yet individually justified interpretative fictions around the work.

As this account more than hints at, the fact presumed to be *in* the formal value "is *in fact* not the object's own object-hood and existence as matter but that ekphrastic transformation

[28] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deleuzian Fold of Thought," *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton and trans. Tom Gibson and Anthony Uhlmann (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 111.
[29] White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 123.

which has rendered it into a stylistic terminology."[30] This also applies to the broader picture of the work's history or the artist's story, which, equally, may not be separated from the fictional business of interpretation. Story and thus history, White remarks, should not be confused with life: "We do not live stories, even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories. And so too with nations or whole cultures."[31] The telling of the story itself, its relations between fact, truth and fiction, is moreover already structured by the particular nomenclature chosen. Through it and in it, the engagement with the work, the artist or the phenomenon is framed and positioned in view of other discourses. In the adherence to or contamination of disciplinary approaches the story is already foretold. Whether biographical, historical, technical, theoretical, critical or of another kind, in the allegiance to genre a unified, consistent and distinctly categorizable discourse, that is, one that responds to its own call, is affected. Theory too, which seeks claims beyond the historical or critical, is equally prone to pursuing its own self-determination. As Jean-François Lyotard argues: "Theory is in effect a genre, a tough genre. Modern logic has elaborated the rules for this genre: consistency, completeness, decidability of the system of axioms, and independence of the axioms."[32]

In the (self-)identification with a genre writing already forfeits the possibility not to axiomatize as per the law of the genre. Derrida reminds us that theory in the classical sense sets limits on its concerns but paradoxically seeks to address *its* object totally. It necessarily develops hierarchies and "oppositional values" that betray an "intrinsic ethics and teleology" that are incongruent with the putatively descriptive and abstracting relationship it has to its object.[33] The aim is not to develop a self-enclosed, limited and conclusive theory—whether of *the* graphic, *the* picture or writing—but to draw on "another discourse, another 'logic' that accounts for the impossibility of concluding such a 'general theory.'"[34] Such a discourse endorses its own volatility, its impossible boundedness by a margin it does not exclude, its own processes and practices of production (including those that seemingly transgress its *proper* form), as well as its identity as other. Genres

[30] Elsner, "Art History as Ekphrasis," 16. Italics added.
[31] White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 90. Italics in original.
[32] Jean-François Lyotard and Georges van den Abbeele, "Interview: Jean-François Lyotard" (trans. Georges van den Abbeele), in special issue on the work of Jean-François Lyotard, *Diacritics*, 14, no. 3 (1984), 19.
[33] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*., ed. Gerald Graff and trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 71.
[34] *Ibid.*, 117.

depend on telos, the telos of "do" and "do not" that seeks to uphold "the essential purity of their identity."[35] This identity of the genre is only an identity unto itself. It proposes an outside to itself that already supplements it. Neither unity, nor consistency, nor completeness is pure and absolute, because the iterability of writing breaks with the unity of the center. Though necessary for the law of genre, purity is contaminated in the instantiation of genre, when the generic begets and bears its kin(d), the latter cannot be subsumed in the former. "What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counterlaw, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason?"[36]

Not to axiomatize in the moment of undecidability, not to unify in the view of difference without border and not to paper over either is the impossible demand for a writing that tells a story other than its own. Though this story too will inevitably display its own conventions and procedures, just as Jonathan Culler diagnosed with reference to Derrida about the *Tel Quel* group.[37] Any assumption of freedom or emancipation from language and concept is illusory in writing because it is a way to produce meaning and ensure the possibility of communication. We can offer "resistance" and "dream of emancipation," knowing that the work of displacement and deconstitution will continue with and in our own writing.[38] The difference between Derrida's and White's writing accentuates an important aspect of language's framing capacity. While Derrida is concerned with the displacement of discursive power that already operates in writing, White's semiological engagement moves from authorially conscious, subconscious or unconscious ideological hues to the "seemingly self-evident, obvious, natural ways of making sense of the world." White thereby inscribes texts with particular—though not necessarily inevitable—logics or mechanisms.[39] The aporia of language as a non-neutral medium for the fiction of non-fiction remains. Different expressions will engender the historical narrative in different ways, and contradictory

[35] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre" (trans. Avital Ronell), in "On Narrative," special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980), 56.
[36] *Ibid.*, 57. Italics in original.
[37] Jonathan D. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 252.
[38] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 33.
[39] Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 202. For White on ideology and the writing of history, see especially, White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 62–75.

versions of historical narratives are possible without requiring one of them to be illegitimate.

> This *aporia* or sense of contradiction residing at the heart of language itself is present in *all* of the classic historians. It is this linguistic self-consciousness which distinguishes them from their mundane counterparts and followers, who think that language can serve as a perfectly transparent medium of representation and who think that if one can only find the right language for describing events, the meaning of the events will *display itself* to consciousness.[40]

Forty years on from this project to unravel history and art history as ideological, how is the art historian to write, now that there has been a visual and material turn, or at least its identification? Can we not just in name extol the virtue of historical turns and carry on writing as before?

Figures

Any general response would defeat the purpose of my previous account, while any specific one needs to be implicated within a literary discourse that anticipates and promotes its own maturation, senescence and redundance. Dealing with the relationship of writing and pictures in Sebald's or any other writer's or artist's work textually and *picturally*, that is, in a text that itself is constituted by writing and pictures, cannot disregard that these works deal with similar relationships. To recognize the literary space of this inquiry is to recognize its graphic intervolution. Sebald, for example, exploits this intervolution of the space of picture and text in his essay on Johann Peter Hebel's *Kalendergeschichten*. In a long sentence that explores the precision and order that Sebald detects in the author's writing, he requires the reader to become a viewer who needs to preserve the grammaticality of the sentence he has written by reading through the inserted figure that shows a photographic image of a Kempter Calender. The reader-viewer completes the sentence by reading the words "Kalender der Juden" in the picture before picking up Sebald's writing in the next line.[41] The displacement of the text in the figure is however not just textual. Through the *Faktur* typeface of the image's "Jewish calendar" Sebald *graphically* unravels the Nazi state's uneasy relationship with the

[40] White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 130. Italics in original.
[41] W.G. Sebald, "Es steht ein Komet am Himmel: Kalenderbeitrag zu Ehren des rheinischen Hausfreunds," in *Logis in einem Landhaus* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2015), 16.

appearance of writing expressed in the 1941 *Frakturschriftverbot*. Sebald's writing through the figure manifests here not only the imbrication of word and picture, but also the need to write in graphic marks, that is, a kind of writing that is decidedly not merely writing down but writing that constitutes meaning that is not available elsewhere.

My selection of an essay by Sebald for this example—rather than any of his other texts classed as *fiction*—is deliberate, for it broaches again the putative boundary between discursive and artistic or scholarly and literary practices. The literary fiction of art-history writing like literature itself cohabits form and content (if we must continue to divide them). That does not mean art-history writing needs to assimilate or simulate the verbo-pictural relations of its subject matter. If these relations matter in art, visual culture or historic discourse, then the contextualizing text is part of these entanglements. It cannot extract itself by referring to conventions that equate reproductions with works, use figure numbers to sort unruly images, format images at the convenience of the text and treat its own textual graphic qualities as invisible or neutral. Neither is adding a few externalizing and exculpatory words toward formulating a general problem sufficient as it, too, still seeks to exclude the specificity of this text. To meaningfully address "literary hegemony" or "verbal imperialism" held over the visual arts—or, showing the English term's scopo-centrism and -phobia, following Derrida we might say "les arts que vous appelez visuels"[42] or the German "bildende Kunst"—all *figures* in writing must be recognized. The inserted *figure* as illustration must be joined in recognition by the *figure in the text* without presumption that the latter's relationship to the former is either static or the referral one-way.

Finding the figure in discourse and language, Lyotard's approach in *Discourse, Figure* similarly revokes certain putative oppositions between art and language.[43] Though he considers the recognition of the plasticity of the writing's line as writing's death, preferring it to remain verbal or *graphique*, that is, part of textual space, the figure still partakes in writing and yet cannot be contained by linguistics. Lyotard identifies three types of figures with varying degrees of visibility. The *figure-image* is visible but marks the disturbance of any "'real' space" in the image.[44] This figure is not figurative, though it may be part of figuration,

[42] Jacques Derrida, *Artaud le Moma: interjections d'appel* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), 19.
[43] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
[44] *Ibid.*, 275.

but rather belongs to the lateral vision of a curved space, refusing the subsumption by perspective, single point-of-view, focus, etc., thus objecting to becoming readable as signification. The *figure-form* may be visible but is more removed from the line and its construction or the trace itself, rather marking "the Gestalt of a configuration, the architecture of a picture, the scenography of a performance, the framing of a photograph—in short, the schema."[45] The *figure-matrix* finally, is neither visible, nor legible, and links discourse, image and form without belonging to either. Rather it is the difference of the plastic (as the space of image and form) and the textual, violating one through the other. In the figure-matrix Lyotard notices the realm of the artist's work, recognizable as the thickness or opacity that renders words *inisolable* from form and image, or form from words and images, or images from words and form. Though the figure may be a product of vision, Lyotard's recognition of it in discourse hinges on the designation of another object as a point of reference that both share.[46] Speaking particularly of poetry, Lyotard asserts that the figure in discourse does not permit the alternative of a "deceptive figural space and a textual space where knowledge is produced," the figural is precisely not "a second discourse in discourse."[47] Thinking of the figural merely as another discourse would absorb it into textual space, rendering it explainable as, in and through discourse. Rather, the figure in writing partakes in textual space, though without being limited by textual borders. Writing's figure overlaps text, form and image, thus violating linguistic restrictions of the structure and order of language, and "produc[ing …] meaning-effects that cannot be the result of the normal interplay of semantic and/or syntactic givens […]."[48] Though the violations occur within linguistic space they cannot be explained by it as the figure itself exceeds this space. Lyotard's figure in writing finally promotes sensory effects that moves us bodily. The figure disturbs the arbitrariness of language, which becomes sensorially available.

> The key property of arbitrariness, which radically distinguishes language from all sign-systems, is precisely what the figure subverts in discourse. Through the figure words begin to induce in our bodies (as would colors) such and such a hint of attitude, posture, or rhythm: yet further proof that discursive space is dealt with as a plastic space, and words as sensory

[45] *Ibid*., 268.
[46] *Ibid.*, 268–80; see also, Mary Lydon, "Veduta on *Discours, Figure*," in "Jean-François Lyotard, Time and Judgment," special issue, *Yale French Studies*, no. 99 (2001), 14.
[47] Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 278.
[48] *Ibid*., 283.

things.[49]

Lyotard's plastic space of writing is not the material ground of inscription or the implication of the gesture in thought, rather the figure beyond signification and designation opens the reader's body to the sensuous of writing. As Daniel Rubinstein points out, Lyotard is, however, not interested in using this setup to promote sense over logos (or vice versa) but designates them as already partaking in each other through the figural.[50] In doing so, the isolation of sense from thought is pre-empted and the subordination of images by words forestalled. Nevertheless, it would be preposterous to claim linguistic imperialism null and void because the figure and sensorial experience have been written into discourse again. Rather, Lyotard's move emphasizes the necessity to acknowledge the figure in language in order to move away from writing that externalizes images because it cannot recognize its own. Or differently, the figural demands that the restrictions of traditional forms of discourse are acknowledged and reconsidered. As Kiff Bamford argues:

> It [the figural] is not a romantic or nostalgic search for that which language is unable to say but rather draws attention to the need to find a mode of presentation for that which has been repressed—an inevitably unending search which confronts the paradox that the unsignifiable aspect of the figure is changed through attempts to make it "present." The effect of this attempt, however, displaces the assumed preconditions of the view, disturbs notions of fixed address and resists assimilation to established orders, forms and means of signification.[51]

The task is not to present the figural but to transgress and displace modes of discourse and knowledge that perpetuate the repression of the lateral, the undecidable, the *pictural* and so on. Lyotard's own texts are often demonstrations of the possibility of such discourses, as they refuse to resolve and dissolve differences and evade the unifying tendencies of focalized, that is, non-lateral, engagement. Figure and discourse are not opposed, yet discourse that does not recognize its own sensorial appeal, "implies," as Martin Jay suggests, "the domination of textuality over perception, conceptual representation over prereflexive presentation, rational

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[49] *Ibid*.

[50] Daniel Rubinstein, "Discourse in a Coma; A Comment on a Comma in the Title of Jean-François Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure*," *Philosophy of Photography* 4, no. 1 (2013), 106; see also Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1992), 15–16.

[51] Kiff Bamford, *Lyotard and the* Figural *in Performance, Art and Writing* (London and New York: Continuum 2012), 21.

coherence over the 'other' of reason. It is the realm of logic, concepts, form, speculative reciprocity, and the symbolic."[52] Such discourse is premised on its own transparency, the self-contained closedness of its language and the possibility of singular contexts and references. Undecidability, diffuse vision and sensing are not opposed to discourse, rather, they are the moment of non-automated decision, "the lateral in the focal"[53] and the other of intelligibility, all of which are usually repressed in discourse.

Border patrol

Lyotard confirms, too—as Derrida did vis-à-vis the possibility of emancipation from language—that the philosopher as writer will never be able to shake off the "structuralist unconsciousness" imposed by language as long as they deal with words.[54] Yet, short of "becom[ing] a painter," the writer can displace and reverse the orders and conventions of discourse, and pursue its form and image, so that "[i]t is not even a question of drawing or painting, but rather of painting and drawing with and in words."[55] Comparable to Groys's proposition about the interpretive work that seeks to position itself outside of creative production, Lyotard asserts that the interpretation of a poem that positions itself outside of the poem's language (extratextual relations) can only present "a negative proof."[56] For an approach that seeks to respond to the work, the writing needs to be situated on the side of the poem's language, generating the poem's language and grammatical structure through intertextual relations instead of as a mode of negative comparison to regular language. Bamford outlines polemically why it is a requirement for art history or visual culture too, to recognize the figure in their discourse and in the texts that they engage: "It is necessary as it disturbs the complacency of art-historical discourse, which neuters philosophical challenges and fails to reconsider the basis of its engagement."[57] For Bamford it is indispensable to the engagement with Lyotard's ideas that they are inassimilable to a rationalizing and linearizing

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[52] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 564.
[53] Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 155, see also 156, 232. For discussions of laterality in Lyotard's *Discourse, figure*, see also Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 74; Geoffrey Bennington, "Go Figure," *Parrhesia*, no. 12 (2011), p. 39; Antony Hudek, "Seeing through *Discourse, Figure*," *Parrhesia*, no. 12 (2011), 54; Timothy Murray, "What's Happening?," special ossue on the Work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Diacritics* 14, no. 3 (1984), 108; Lydon, "Veduta on *Discours, Figure*," 21; Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, 20.
[54] Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 51.
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] *Ibid*., 307.
[57] Kiff Bamford, "Better Lyo*Tard* than Never, I Figure," *Art History* 36, no. 4 (2013), 887.

discourse whose language gives up on its constitutive power of the figural in writing. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that the writer is ever in control of the interactions any text may open up and draw upon. For Lyotard, writers do not "use [...] language like a toolbox," they are not the anthropocentric players of a "language game" that is closed onto itself, because the "phrases" they employ are already loaded with innumerous past and future intervolutions.[58] Lyotard refers to intention in the act of writing (or speech) as merely another "phrase" that inscribes itself in other phrases that are already multiply inscribed, in a way akin to Derrida's designation of iterability.

The burden and boon of the attraction of pictures and writing makes it possible for the writer to be an image-maker, and for the artist's work not to escape the word, facilitating the recognition of the image that writing already performs and the writing that issues through the picture. Notwithstanding the extension of practices, this is not to suggest that the writer's picture offers an infinitely accessible array of translatable *truths* waiting to be verbalized. Yet in the confluence of activities the common conventions and borderless differences of a shared practice can be recovered. Testing material and technological affordances, intervolving gestural and motor-sensory processes with intellectual ones and positioning *practice in its product* are aspects that cognizance of the work of *making* offers. These elements and situations are not external to the hermeneutic practice of looking at finito work, however their recognition is facilitated when the act of making is a priori given a position in the formation of the work, as well as in its subsequent itemization as art history, visual culture, material culture and so on. In this particular case, the practice of writing was already part of the investigation of graphic marks and could not be prevented from perpetually *contaminating* the "report" on itself. Or perhaps, it could have been excluded on the grounds that one writing is artistic and the other scholarly, one exceptional and the other typical, one parasitic on the conventionality of the other, but in this exaggerated fashion the course of iterability would have also been betrayed. Any such exclusion would have had to follow a different path in which the rigorous adherence to models, categories and genres is as unshakable as it is implausible. Lacking such conviction, writing this requires the acknowledgment that the practice of writing is not outside the ones with which it may already share a desk, materials, bodies, gestures and which also probed the same questions. Are the cogitation and its

[58] Lyotard and van den Abbeele, "Interview," 17; more elaborately, see also Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

deportment of *writing this* and picturing (whatever it may be that would be) *it* identical? No! But neither are they the same for the writing of *this* in pen, pencil, typewriter, word processor, in the first place, in its transcription, in quotation, in quotation as an involuntary intertextual echo, as an example of grammatical construction *et cetera*. As long as the question aims to establish a self-identity that belies the possibility of repetition in alteration, that is, it belies a non-oppositional difference, it will already anticipate its reply and adjudicate based on metaphysical or empiricist parameters that implicitly constitute the question and are yet also external to it, or, differently, that explicitly constitute the question and are already internal to it.

To acknowledge the effects of writing in art-historical practice may begin with the cellulosic or digital sheet that presents a material space that is not merely neutral content holder for any inscription. That writing possesses a material trajectory that is also visual, figural, graphic and so on, is already apparent when one considers the enmeshing of "content and form" in aspects of writing, such as headlines, content pages, indices, lists, tables, footnotes, etc., that art history *normally* also abides by.[59] This visual dimension is, however, highly conventionalized and restricted, repressing the possibility of seeing writing outside of acknowledged parameters. Writing art history or visual culture also partakes in the production of visible and readable artifacts, though ideally we look through them to some transcendent content—logos—beyond. If art-history writing also performs ekphrasis then it needs to come to terms with the tautology implicit in James Heffernan's canonical definition and recognize the imbrications of its diagnoses of artifacts in itself.[60] More generally, though, a refusal to provide resolutions and establish consistencies to differential phenomena is a necessary response.

Drawing similarly on White, Gavin Parkinson points out that if inconsistencies and gaps structure our understanding of history (as well as our lives at large) and if we intend to avoid the deliverance of a uniform narrative in light of a variety of interpretative situations, art-

[59] Mitchell has of course often argued that there are no pure texts or pure images and also noted the picture qualities of titles, narratives, iconology, monograms, signatures, hieroglyphs, ideograms, etc. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 98–99.

[60] Tilo Reifenstein, "The Graphics of Ekphrastic Writing: Raymond Pettibon's Drawing-Writing," *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. David Kennedy and Richard Meek (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 203–18.

historical writing cannot continue to proceed without questioning itself.[61] Explicitly, while the annalist may provide an empty record to designate years during which "nothing happened," the historian feels obliged to sustain "narrative strains for the effect of having filled in all the gaps, of having put an image of continuity, coherence, and meaning in place of the fantasies of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time."[62]

Parkinson's call for the disruption of the homogenizing tendencies to offer "the consistency, unity, systematism, fixity, coherence, and monism that continue to characterize our ideal of rational communication through writing" extols the necessity to embrace *literary* writers.[63] This means in no way aping the writing of any one person or particular group but ceasing to "coloniz[e]," "assimilat[e]" and "domesticat[e]" language-bound ideas into the "functional realism of art-historical rationalism" as though this strategy can meaningfully partake in their ideas.[64] The attempt of usurping complex ideas but divorcing them from a use of language that challenges institutional and metaphysical assumptions about writing and knowledge fails to engage and recognize their workings and force. In fact, as Lyotard suggests, it is with violence that writing that deliberately works against the metaphysical desires of closure and difference as opposition is subsumed into the very discourses it seeks to displace: "Terror through theory only begins when one also claims to axiomatize discourses that assume or even cultivate inconsistency, incompleteness, or indecidability."[65] Writing that resists totality or refuses the plenitude of telos is neither deficient nor can it be straightened and meaningfully absorbed into the discourses of intent and closure. Rather, it seeks to pose questions that do not already propose—and thereby prepose—their own answers; that do not already limit the answer by way of a teleological trajectory that has been built into the question.

> A community of the question, therefore, within the fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently

[61] Gavin Parkinson, "(Blind Summit) Art Writing, Narrative, Middle Voice," in "Creative Writing and Art History," ed. Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin, special issue, *Art History* 34, no. 2 (2011), 273.
[62] White, *The Content of the Form*, 11. Part of the latter quote is also in Parkinson, "(Blind Summit)," 273.
[63] Parkinson, "(Blind Summit)," 273.
[64] *Ibid*., 271.
[65] Lyotard and van den Abbeele, "Interview," 19.

articulated within the very syntax of the question.[66]

The language of the question and the writing still seeks itself, still probes, interrupts and questions itself in order not to predic(a)t(e) the answer. Of course, however probing and self-reflexive such a language may be, it will always fail to contest the presumed coherence of history, philosophy and metaphysics among others through language. There is no language outside language—"no syntax and no lexicon"—that escapes its intervolution in the logic it aims to displace.[67] Yet this is precisely why the inconsistent, incomplete and undecidable are so necessary, because they continuously deconstitute the existing logic and themselves without the proposition of a general theory that merely affirms the possibility of a general theory. The lack of closure opens the pleasure to do again and return to a language and object that have never been identical to themselves. It is the chance to review, reread and rewrite a response that was already built on iterability. Derrida chides the reader who wants to know in advance what is to be read. The reader in need of certitude like the writer of a language that captures and envelops its object totally and transparently seek to know what is proper to their object through a language that is not their object's. Their reading and writing is an act of appropriation, of wanting to contain and limit what is without borders and not within language.

> Because I still like him, I can foresee the impatience of the *bad* reader: this is the way I name or accuse the fearful reader, the reader in a hurry to be determined, decided upon deciding (in order to annul, in other words to bring back to oneself, one has to wish to know in advance what to expect, one wishes to expect what has happened, one wishes to expect (oneself)). Now, it is bad and I know no other definition of the bad, it is bad to predestine One's reading, it is always bad to foretell. It is bad, reader, no longer to like retracing one's steps.[68]

Within the literary space of writing art history, the language of art history and its thought cannot be divorced. As Margaret Iversen and Stephen W. Melville have argued, such a separation of idea and language is typical for an understanding of methodology that "mechanistic[ally]" aims to apply abstract, "transferable" methods and as such divides the

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[66] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 98.
[67] *Ibid.*, 354.
[68] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4. Italics in original.

discipline itself into its "archive and canon" on the one hand, and its "method or methods" on the other.[69]

> Whatever their differences, the very idea of a "methodology" course or book suggests that there is a field of freestanding objects (visual art and architecture) and that certain specialist tools and techniques must be wielded by the art historian in order to study them. In other words, the underlying assumption is that "method" bears an external relation to both the subjects and the objects of art history.[70]

Instead, they suggest, we need to embrace the *writing* in *writing about art* more comprehensively in order to recognize the (continuing) development of the discipline and not to limit it from itself.

Iversen and Melville's argument references "French theory," while Parkinson's is centered on the Tel Quel circle and Bamford's addresses of Lyotard's writing in particularly, yet either's is open to being expanded to accommodate a wider range of different writers. Significant to these various considerations is that form and content of writing present themselves as inisolable. The difficulty of paraphrasing Derrida's or Lyotard's work and the indulgence in extended quotes that commonly characterize the discussion of it, are testament to intervolution of so-called content and so-called form. As Parkinson has noted, the tendency to extricate *a* theory or notion from *its* language is also a taming and naturalization of its wide-ranging effect that cannot help but reorient it. That Parkinson continues to speak of *style*,[71] as though it were a mode that could be applied to writing, rather than being, as he explicitly states, part of the workings of the writing is curious but also exemplifies how prevalent and language-bound the content-form division is. On the other hand, the persistence of the term also marks that the notions of form and content, or style and substance cannot and should not be simply disabled and replaced with another metaphysical center that re-inaugurates the same discourse merely differently. Derrida rather advocates the operation of the graft, which is attached to a historical concept in order to intervene and displace.

> Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing—put

[69] Margaret Iversen and Stephen W. Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 8.
[70] *Ibid*., 7.
[71] Parkinson, "(Blind Summit)," 272.

> into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes and that is also a field of nondiscursive forces.[72]

For Derrida, the graft assures that the historical concept remains palpable in order for the intervention and transition to proceed through the friction with a discursive order that it does not seek to replace or neutralize but whose permeating force needs to be traced, opposed and displaced. Harald Tesan, who describes Derrida's writing as working against *dualisms*, against linear uniformity of concepts and against wholeness, comments that his writing continuously questions "the metaphysical character of language" while recursively unraveling itself.[73] His thought too, though already bound up in the intricacies of Derrida's language, is inevitably also already structured by the impossible separations of language.

> [Arguments, theses and enquiries] evade the economy of conceivability through language ornament, through metaphor and through linguistic jokes. Derrida creates a kind of allegorical writing, in which the deficient character of the singular image is annulled through variety—as large as possible—of expressive possibilities.[74]

The questions that touch upon the content-form divisions of language concern the kind of division drawn between writing's form and its content. What is ornament in writing? Is there unornamented writing, and if so, what does it look like? What is style in writing? Is the consideration of the graphic a style? And, if this style structures the argument of writing, how can it be style?

Catherine Soussloff and James Elkins have asked why Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida "tend to have their texts viewed as sources *for* art history,

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[72] Derrida, *Limited Inc*., 21. Italics in original.

[73] Harald Tesan, "Form ohne Wissen - Wissen ohne Form: die Schrift, das Bild und die Unmöglichkeit absoluten Denkens. Nebst Überlegungen zur Ordnung der Dinge bei Maciunas, Beuys, Derrida," *Wissensformen: Sechster Internationaler Barocksommerkurs Stiftung Bibliothek Werner Oechslin, Einsiedeln*. ed. Werner Oechslin (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2007), 297. My translation. "[D]en metaphysischen Charakter der Sprache."

[74] *Ibid*., 296. My translation. "Durch ein sprachliches Ornament, durch Metaphern und durch Wortwitz entziehen sie ['Argumente, Thesen, Fragestellungen'] sich einer Ökonomie der Erfassbarkeit. Derrida kreierte eine Art von allegorischem Schreiben, in dem der defizitäre Charakter des Einzelbildes durch eine möglichst grosse Bandbreite an verschiedenen Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten annuliert wird."

rather than examples of art history."[75] And, as Parkinson points out, perhaps Derrida had already given the answer, when he wrote that within the university language is a neutral tool, which will be defended in its neutrality: the "content" of one's writing may be provocative and revolutionary, but we may not touch the neutral integrity of language.[76] Derrida recognizes in the university's attempt (as well as in that of other institutions) to preserve an untempered language a "juridico-political" endeavour that also paradoxically seeks "the effacement of language."[77] On the one hand, it is an insistence on ideal translatability of language, which is fundamental to the traditional notion of pedagogy and its forms of communication and knowledge. The institution is here also the place for the transmission of a national language. On the other hand, this translatability also reassigns the universalism of language and thus the erasure of the singular idiom. Derrida insists that the institution protects both, the national and the universal of language, because they ensure that all other contractual, political, judicial et cetera agreements are upheld.[78] Engaging with the constrictions imposed by the university from a methodological perspective, Iversen and Melville argue similarly that the compartmentalization of methodology and subject which promotes the former "ever more [... in] defining the terms of enquiry" restricts the scope of the discipline to something that sees itself external to it.[79] As Derrida identifies a juridico-political drive in the institution, Iversen and Melville comparably detect the exigencies of econometric politics at work, diagnosing that the dubious "ongoing professionalization of the subject" is overall part "of the reduction of the world to a stock of available and, as it were, merely denumerable items."[80]

(A)destination

Insisting on the import of the differential inseparability of form, matter, substance and content does not seek to broaden the "readable" text or any horizon of "readability." Rather,

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[75] The quote is Elkins, who asks this question explicitly about Barthes, Derrida, Berger and Cixous. James Elkins, "Writing Schedule," James Elkins, August 2015, http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/component/content/article/16-vita/258-writing-schedule. Italics in original. Soussloff asks a similar but differently worded question about Foucault. Catherine M. Soussloff, "Michel Foucault and the Point of Painting," in "Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method," ed. Dana Arnold, special issue, *Art History* 32, no. 4 (2009), 734.
[76] Parkinson, "(Blind Summit)," 274.
[77] Jacques Derrida, "Living on / BORDER LINES," *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom et al. and trans. James Hulbert (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 95, 93.
[78] *Ibid*., 90–96.
[79] Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History*, 14.
[80] *Ibid*.

what holds for the picture also holds for writing, and in keeping with Lyotard's figure, which is illimitable to discourse though partakes in it, and Derrida's pursuit of the oppositional even in nondiscursive forces, the aim is to emphasize continuous processes not static objects, as well as transformations not meanings. The intervolution of form and content in writing—as in the picture—cannot be successfully unraveled to excavate or produce another limited and limitable text. Neither does it generate a mysterious, unfathomable force about which nothing can be said.

The diminution of form, material and process or their reduction to another content are part of what Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp call the "discursivation of (the understanding of) culture."[81] Lamenting the shift that has made culture and its *products* less connected to their creative and skillful making and turned them into a rarefied intellectual activity *as text*, Krämer and Bredekamp recognize a concomitant fortification of the borderlines between language and image. Not only is writing derogated to being a discursive text but the overall effect of discursivation is a separation of practice from interpretation, material(ity) from symbol(ism), non-verbal from verbal phenomena and more broadly cultural production and art from research and knowledge.[82] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has similarly sought to question "an *institutional* configuration within which the absolute dominance of meaning-related questions had long led to the abandonment of all other types of phenomena and questions."[83] Though the approaches diverge, what they have in common is a refusal to render writing or images into a fixed text that can be structurally dissected and whose force may be captured or contained.

Conversely the recognition of the content in the form does not seek to institute another formalism that dogmatically insists on purely differential or arbitrary reading, writing and picturing. Neither the procession of this chapter, nor the rest does in any way advocate a free-for-all for writing or pursue the so-called *obscurantisme terroriste*[84] of meaningless writing.

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[81] Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp, "Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik: Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur," *Bild, Schrift, Zahl*, ed. Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2003), 11, 12. My translation. "[D]ie Diskursivierung der Kultur," "Diskursivierung des Kulturverständnisses."
[82] *Ibid*., 12–13.
[83] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 16. Italics in original. Interestingly, Gumbrecht remains attached to the hylomorphic model in his investigation of materialities and the nonhermeneutic.
[84] Searle claims that Foucault had described Derrida's writing in this way. Apparently, "obscurantisme" reflected the baffling opacity of the writing that did not allow certitude, while "terroriste" referred to a perception of unimpeachability of the author who would scold the incomprehensive reader with "*vous êtes*

Rather, the writing here is a response to the paradox of writing's fictional nonfiction, its material linguistics, its verbal substance and its formal content. It is an attempt not to limit writing to a verbal activity of speech transcription or to imply a transparent legibility of communication. Hence, it seeks to decelerate reading and speed it up, to indicate how language may perform itself in being written, to note the displacement of the inky word from its phoneme, to demonstrate the gap between description and described. How can we address each other without go-between, without deviation when all our attempts are indirect, via couriers, via language that does not reach its destination but arrives? As Derrida writes in a lengthy postcard from June 6, 1977:

> Would like to address myself, in a straight line directly, without *courrier*, only to you, but I do not arrive, and that is the worst of it. A tragedy, my love, of destination. Everything becomes a post card once more, legible for the other, even if he understands nothing about it. And if he understands nothing, certain for the moment of the contrary, it might always arrive for you, for you too, to understand nothing, and therefore for me, and therefore not to arrive, I mean at its destination.[85]

Yet it is not only the courier who runs and stumbles but also the currere of the writer's hand and *the message* caught between itself, its language, its sender and its receiver. Derrida's postcard (or the writing of art history and this chapter) may always not arrive at its destination. Yet this "adestination" already structurally underwrites all communication and is part of the destiny of the postcards of all writers.[86] But who speaks in writing and whose discourse addresses itself to the image. And if it is not the writer, or not only, what of the message, what does it say?

> That is to say, the *who* and the *what*, which burst the walls of *that-is-to-say* in advance. Who will say the that-is-to-say which goes beyond saying when it joins [*articule*] the elements of a discourse with those of visual art? and when it orders grammar and semantics on the laws of the phoneme?

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idiot." John R. Searle, "The Word Turned Upside Down," *The New York Review of Books* 30, no. 16 (1983), 77. Italics in original. The charge is here not repeated to develop any comparison between Derrida's writing and this chapter but to signal that Derrida's ideas (and in the wider sense, what is called "French theory") used throughout are commonly countered from this perspective.

[85] Derrida, *Post Card*, 23. Italics in original.

[86] *Ibid*., 29. Like *différance* and *différence*, there is no difference in pronunciation between *l'adestination* and *la destination*. However careful addresser and addressee thus are, adestination already performs itself as nothing can guarantee its certain arrival at its destination.

> when it adjusts the clamour to a graphy of words and things, even a graphy without word and without thing? [87]

In the phrase "that is to say" Derrida recognizes what occurs in all saying and in all writing. To speak of "that is to say" is to say the impossible, adding another saying onto the said and requiring a further "that is to say" to say what was to be said. Recursively and ad infinitum, another "that is to say" piles on the need to say more and say again in a language that can(not) explain itself. Yet what is this "that is to say" in relation to its phoneme, can we say what is to be said about these two "that is to says"? And if this "that is to say" occurs vis-à-vis *visual* art—and here it does not need to say "that is to say" because it already says so in saying anything—it speaks in view of silence that does not stop saying. "That is to say, these silent works are in fact already talkative, full of virtual discourses,"[88] which cannot be exhausted by the explanations of any "that is to say." In the virtual discursivity we may also recognize why Maurice Blanchot indicates that criticism disappears in the space it allows the work to inhabit.[89] Critical writing permits a literary experience that is in search of what was already silently loud at work in the work. As for Lyotard, Groys, Bamford and others, critical writing is for Blanchot "an action taken within and in light of creative space."[90]

Writing about Sebald and his images, and art and artistic production more broadly, are in this chapter not only practices that occupy a shared creative space, they also partake in each other through the figure and the irreducibility of their discourses. When J.R. Nicholas Davey observes that writing about art animates the work, keeping it "alive, open and productively unresolved," he refers to a kind of writing that recognizes the non-oppositionality of material artefact and discursivity.[91] The artwork is an inseparable confluence of sensuous material and ideational content, and writing itself partakes in these realms. While Lyotard does not fully recognize the material, gestural and motor-sensory dimension of writing, he affirms the

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[87] Derrida, *Artaud le Moma*, 17. Italics in original. My translation. "C'est-à-dire le *qui* et le *quoi* qui crèvent d'avance les parois du c'est-à-dire. Qui dira le *c'est-à-dire* qui emporte au-delà du dire quand il articule les organs d'un discours à ceux d'un art visuel ? et quand il ordonne la grammaire et la sémantique aux lois du phonème ? quand il ajuste la vociférération à une graphie des mots et des choses, voire à une graphie sans mot et sans chose ?"

[88] Derrida in Peter Brunette and David Wills, "The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture*, ed. Peter Brunette and David Wills (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13.

[89] Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 4.

[90] *Ibid*., 6. Derrida similarly notes: "'Good' literary criticism [...] implies an act, a literary signature or counter-signature, an inventive experience of language, *in* language." Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," 52. Italics in original.

[91] J. R. Nicholas Davey, "Writing and the In-Between," *Word & Image* 16, no. 4 (2000), 379.

plastic space in writing through the figure's corporeal appeal. The figural is not outside writing because, on the one hand, discourse invokes bodily resonances that are illimitable to the linguistic yet irreducibly part of it. On the other hand, writing is also already a graphic inscription that shares material, deportment and contingencies with other graphic practices, such as drawing. Krämer and Bredekamp are optimistic about a looming discursivization of culture because they recognize in the increased interest in "'performance' and 'performativity,'" the strengthened value of "'*tacit' procedures of knowledge*," the "*willingness to dehermeneutise 'thought' and 'sense'"* through the turn to materials, processes and functions, and the acceptance of the knowledge function of "*picturality*" or "*iconicity*" a waning of the trope of culture as text.[92] Through Derrida and Lyotard we are able to reframe this statement, noting that performance, material, picturality, iconicity and affect are not outside of discourse and that the picture may also already be in writing, while the latter may write picturally. Writing is here not a practice *about* something, though it may respond to an already-there, rather it arrives adestinately as literary inauguration, literal instantiation and letteral initiation in the littoral of many practices. Such a wide-ranging understanding of discourse, however, is only possible through a non-oppositional difference of form and content. It relies on an institutional framework that permits the complexity and intervolution of disciplines without seeking to reduce and compartmentalize. Recognizing the subordination of writing's figure to the transparency of linguistic discourse also demands the interrogation of the juridico-political aspirations of the institution, as well as its econometrics, from page numbers to bean counting. Both forces are so potent that they may need to be countered through fiction's power first.

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[92] Krämer and Bredekamp, "Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik," 14. Italics in original, my translation. "'Performanz' und 'Performativität,'" *"'stummen' Prozeduren des Wissens*," "*Bereitschaft zu Dehermeneutisierung von 'Geist' und 'Sinn,'* " "*Erkenntnisdimension der Bildlichkeit*."

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