

## AN APOLOGETIC PRAISING OF DERRIDEAN DECONSTRUCTION

MARTTA HEIKKILÄ, *DECONSTRUCTION AND THE WORK OF ART. VISUAL ARTS AND THEIR CRITIQUE IN CONTEMPORARY FRENCH THOUGHT.*

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In the book, *Deconstruction and the Work of Art. Visual Arts and their Critique in Contemporary French Thought*, Martta Heikkilä approaches in seven chapters different themes and aspects connected to deconstruction and visual art, focusing primarily on Derrida. The overriding aim of the book is ambitious in its claim of answering the necessity of “making general and comprehensive claims about art... as an object of research”<sup>1</sup> in response to what is described as recent “modifications of the ‘work’ reflected both in the practice of visual arts and the philosophy of art.”<sup>2</sup> The main purpose of the book is to look into the “possibility of explaining consistently the span of the ‘work’ in the tradition of French deconstruction” with the focus on “the multiple relations between art and philosophy, particular in Derrida but also in Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe.”<sup>3</sup> A key question is how to study art philosophically without making it an instance of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Another is to inquire into “how the poststructuralist notion of visual arts is related to the tradition of the late modern ‘anti-aesthetics’ that is conventionally seen to oppose the principles of the modern ‘aesthetics.’”<sup>5</sup>

Generally, Derrida’s philosophy of art does not culminate in an aesthetics in its intention to overcome *metaphysics*, *logocentrism*, and the determination of being as *presence*, an intention described by Heikkilä to be part of the anti-aesthetic movement. Truth is preconditioned by the alterity of the artwork, being without intention or a goal. At the center of Derrida’s thought is *différance*, a term that forms an important role in Heikkilä’s book. *Différance* implies a presence through presence that only is present through its absence. It is described primarily as a graphic intervention of writing or reading, but an intervention that does not end. Or, as described by Espen Hammer, *différance* implies the impossibility of finding any positive terms that can stabilise the system.<sup>6</sup> The term *différance* is first described in an essay by Derrida in 1963 and,

together with *De la grammatologie*, marks a turning point in the development of French structuralist theory into what later became known as poststructuralism. Poststructuralism represents an alternative to Western philosophical thinking that was diagnosed to be centered on the origin or the moment of presence, guaranteeing the identity and self-presence of “philosophical systems and thus grounding them on a bedrock of certainty of truth.”<sup>7</sup>

In her reading of Derrida, Heikkilä creates a discursive reconstruction of the term deconstruction, just as she opens central issues connected to art in her exhaustive exposition of Derrida’s writings on art. Throughout the seven chapters she touches on themes such as ‘muteness and blindness,’ form and figure, frame, the *trait*, words and art and mimesis, ending with a chapter on the deconstruction of the image. The focus is on the interaction between art and philosophy, opening reflections such as “What are the possibilities of theoretical criticism in the realm of art in general, and contemporary art in specific?”<sup>8</sup> Heikkilä presents a meticulous description of how Derrida formulates the connection between ‘sign’ and artwork. The emphasis is on how Derrida’s theory of the sign, of art as text, contains a surplus of meaning that cannot be controlled or understood, undermining any ideas of a writer, a message, or a receiver.<sup>9</sup> Here, the concepts of *parergon* and *trait* are essential. Traits are defined as textual events happening in the materiality, the thickness and tones of the painted surface. The concept of *trait* is essential in the understanding of Derrida. It is part of the frame, just as it is in between any opposites, such as inside-outside. It divides where it occurs. Derrida calls it *passee-partout*. It is a place where nothing takes place. In Heikkilä’s description, *parergon* “evokes the question of inside and outside, what remains inside the frame, and what is excluded from it. The confrontation between the inside and the outside become blurred, however—the *parergon* is the point of origin for a work and disturbs the discourse of painting and the way it is internally constructed.”<sup>10</sup>

The ambitious undertaking notwithstanding, the book does not concern the full scope of visual arts and their critique in contemporary French thought, as the subtitle promises. It is focused primarily on Derridean deconstruction, and the role of arts in this deconstruction. When Heikkilä includes other contemporary French philosophers, she highlights the importance of Derrida and the influence he has had on French philosophy, rather than formulating a critical analysis of differences and similarities between the thinkers. This results in an unnuanced

“reduction to likenesses.” One example is the relationship between the post-phenomenology of Nancy and Derrida’s deconstruction. Here, Derrida and Nancy are described as sharing a “dismantling of the relationship between the sensuous and the linguistic.”<sup>11</sup> What forms a crucial difference between the two is how they approach the relation between image and sense, namely, the importance of sensuality in relation to the perception of art for Nancy. In his introduction to Nancy’s philosophy, Ian James describes a difference between these thinkers: “Unlike Derrida, Nancy is a philosopher who is happy to deploy the language of ontology or of being without invoking its erasure. Unlike Derrida, one could argue, he is happy to be a philosopher of existence, of the material and the concrete.”<sup>12</sup>

Visual arts in the book are also read through Derrida’s lens only. Elsewhere, Heikkilä’s comments on art show little reflection and tend to be banal, often pointing to the obvious. One example is when the insufficiency of looking at art as produced within the scheme of beauty is emphasised.<sup>13</sup> In another case, Heikkilä concludes that art does not have a single meaning, just like there is no ‘grand narrative’ in the history of art. It is unclear what is meant when Heikkilä writes that it is difficult to tell what the evident pictorial focus in abstract art is because we cannot know its subject.<sup>14</sup> It seems that Heikkilä is unaware that subject matter in visual arts is not necessarily connected to figurativeness, and that figurative works can be just as abstract as non-figurative. She may also be giving deconstruction too much credit in claiming that “deconstruction has influenced the way in which contemporary art appears today theoretically and practically: as a procedural, undefined, and non-categorical phenomenon.”<sup>15</sup> As Heikkilä herself emphasises, Derrida’s deconstruction cannot be isolated from what was happening in aesthetics and the arts since the middle of the 20th century, including the anti-aesthetic movement. Anti-aesthetics does not represent a break with traditional art and artistic beauty, but with modernity. As Hal Foster underlines, modernist art and aesthetics, as theorised by Theodor W. Adorno, was subversive in forming a “critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world... Now, we have to consider that this aesthetic space too is eclipsed—or rather, that its criticality is now largely illusory.”<sup>16</sup>

Just a few words on formalities: the book is excessively repetitive. It would have merited from a stricter editing and there are some unfortunate misspellings.

To conclude, there is no doubt that Heikkilä's exposition of central texts by Derrida is impressive and shows a profound knowledge of his thinking. Neither there is doubt of the relevance of a book aiming to focus on Derrida, deconstruction, and art, and its relation to contemporary French thought. Furthermore, the overall aim of the book, to make general claims about art, is in line with Derrida's thinking, which presents transcendental conditions for conceptualisation as such. However, with its shortcomings in relation to pictorial analyses, its disregard of the huge differences in variety and richness within contemporary French philosophy, and the ways in which post-structuralism as well as post-phenomenology have formed interesting renegotiations of deconstruction, the book turns primarily into an apologetic praising of Derrida.

*Bente Larsen*

- 1 Heikkilä, Martta. *Deconstruction and the Work of Art. Visual Arts and their Critique in Contemporary French Thought* (London: Lexington Books, 2021), 1.
- 2 Ibid., 1.
- 3 Ibid., 3.
- 4 Ibid., 17.
- 5 Ibid., 17.
- 6 Pointed out by Espen Hammer in "Etterord," in Jacques Derrida, *Sannheten i maleriet* (Oslo: Pax forlag, 2004), 246.
- 7 See also Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand* (Stanford: Sanford University Press, 2006).
- 8 Heikkilä, *Deconstruction and the Work of Art*, 273.
- 9 Hammer, "Etterord," 240.
- 10 Heikkilä, *Deconstruction and the Work of Art*, 89
- 11 Ibid., 29.
- 12 James, *The Fragmentary Demand*, 148.
- 13 Heikkilä, *Deconstruction and the Work of Art*, 101.
- 14 Ibid., 98.
- 15 Ibid., 6.
- 16 Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), xv.