
Hubert Damisch: It’s a field with three poles, and here my early training with Merleau-Ponty played a decisive part: the question of the unconscious; the question of history (which I would put in third place); and something I don’t know whether to call form or structure. I guess I’d say, using Wittgenstein’s definition: form as the possibility of structure. Why art? Because I thought that art would be the medium through which I could simultaneously connect these three poles.

When I was studying with Merleau-Ponty, I wanted to work on Goya in relation to something I called “the perception of history.” This interested Merleau-Ponty very much. It was the idea that there was a perception of history that connects to darkness in the sense in which you find this in Lucien Febvre, or initially in Michelet: “l’histoire noire.” It was the idea that in the midst of a history that was narrative, discursive, something suddenly occurred in the work of Goya and especially in the “Black Paintings” of the Quinta del Sordo: a kind of silence. It would be, then, a matter not of narrating history but of seeing it. What would a phenomenology of the perception of history be? You have to remember that we were just emerging from the war. It was extremely important to me, the idea that I had perceived history. During the war as a child and adolescent this was something I saw. I remember hearing the first news about the war announced on the radio; but I didn’t really believe it until I saw the facts actually written on the posters. In the same way, I was profoundly marked by one of the first examples of what I experienced as graphic design as such: the eagle and the swastika on the deportation notices.

Yve-Alain Bois: But how did you pass from Merleau-Ponty to structuralism and what role did Francastel play there?

* This conversation took place on January 11, 1998.
**Damisch:** As soon as Merleau-Ponty—whose work I had known previously through having read him—came to the Sorbonne, I attended his seminars. These were astonishing in that he was a voracious reader. Whatever the subject, each seminar took up the question by examining all the major books on it; for example, in the seminar on consciousness and the acquisition of language, we read Saussure, Jakobson, etc. So, strangely enough, I was initially exposed to structuralism through Merleau-Ponty. It was also Merleau-Ponty who directed me to the seminars of Lévi-Strauss. As I said, Merleau-Ponty was interested in the three major questions of the time, which were linguistics, psychoanalysis—not only Freud, but Melanie Klein, Lacan (although not really Lacan, even though he was present as a personality. Merleau-Ponty would say that he expected great things from Lacan but that he had produced nothing; his expression was, “What a shame, such genius!”)—and the third thing was the reflection on history.

When I presented myself to Merleau-Ponty to do what at the time was called a diploma in graduate studies, he listened to me talk about my interests, then he was silent for quite a while, and then he said, “Fine, you will do your thesis on Cassirer.” When I said I had never heard of Cassirer, Merleau-Ponty retorted, “You claim to have read me and yet I cite Cassirer every other page.” I realized that of course he was the source of the idea of symbolic forms but his work was in German which I didn’t know and the diploma was supposed to be finished in a year. Merleau-Ponty said, “No problem, you will learn it in six months.” The next thing was that at the time Cassirer was not available in Paris except at the Musée de l’Homme due to Lévy-Bruhl’s having bought Cassirer’s works.1 On that same day, Merleau-Ponty said that since I was interested in art there was a text by a great art historian called Panofsky (whose name I thus heard mentioned for the first time) who had developed something out of Cassirer on the subject of perspective.

**Bois:** And when did all this transpire?

**Damisch:** In 1955. Merleau-Ponty knew that I was interested in anthropology—in fact at the time I was undecided between that and art history. But Merleau-Ponty said that if I was really going to do art history I should work with Francastel.

**Rosalind Krauss:** Wouldn’t you say that you found your own voice not around art history as a historical matter but around structuralism—the fusion of structuralism with history?

**Damisch:** Francastel was interested in two things. One was what we now call the social history of art, of which he was a precursor. And, like Schapiro, he was simultaneously interested in the art of the Middle Ages and contemporary art, to the great benefit of both fields of research and criticism. But what interested me in Francastel was what he rejected. There was a whole aspect

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1. After Lévy-Bruhl’s death, his library was given to the Musée de l’Homme.
of Francastel’s work that was concerned with the problem of what he called “figurative language” which he wanted to investigate in a systematic way, and yet there was a total refusal of structuralism on his part. He was taken up by the dispute between structuralism and history—it was the moment when Sartre or Lucien Febvre argued against Lévi-Strauss—and he was caught up with this. What immediately interested me, however, was the perception that there are questions that emerge from within the historical field that can be posed in historical terms but that history itself cannot answer. That’s what absorbed me: how is it that history can pose questions that it nonetheless cannot answer?

Krauss: Would you say that such a question arises with regard to the problem of origins?

Damisch: No, I wouldn’t. It might arise regarding [à voir]—I like the French expression à voir because this brings in the dimension of perception—regarding the origin but it wouldn’t relate to it in the way a historian would, for example a contextualist historian. In opposition to this I am interested on the one hand in the archaic and in a future about which we have no means to think. This is important because today we are in a situation in which history only thinks retrospectively, in the past tense. All utopian, all projective dimension within it is thus aborted from the outset. In relation to history we have this paradox in which we now live, namely, that of “lateness”—late capitalism: what is it now that it has survived its great enemy? I think our incapacity to imagine a future is related to this sense of living in a situation defined only by its belatedness. Are we going to dwell unceasingly in the “late,” the “post”? Jameson, for instance, now speaks of the “post-contemporary” as though contemporaneity is only thinkable as a type of après-coup.

Bois: I think Rosalind asked this question about the origin because you have often raised it, even in the titles of your books and, for example, in your text on Robinson Crusoe or your interest in Dubuffet. All this concerns the myth of origin.

Damisch: If I invoke the notion of origin in the title of The Origin of Perspective [1987] this doesn’t imply going back to an origin. It’s a play on the word origin in which, first, there is the aspect of parody: The Origin of Perspective is a parody on Husserl’s Origin of Geometry. And the Piero book [Un souvenir d’enfance par Piero della Francesca (1997)] is a parody on Freud’s Leonardo da Vinci: And a Memory of His Childhood [Un souvenir d’enfance de Leonardo da Vinci]. In the Renaissance there was much discussion about whether perspective was invented or discovered. Discovered implies that it is a natural form that one is able to find in the world; invented means that perspective is a convention. The play between invention and discovery is one about origin. It’s a departure in the sense both of starting up and straying from. If there is an origin, it’s in the sense that the development of perspective itself is a parody of the origin of geometry. As was geometry, it was founded on a whole perceptual, sensory
body of previous knowledge, from which it constructed a new departure. There is no sense in maintaining that perspective is constituted from a whole empirical development, which is the traditional argument, that of André Chastel, Robert Klein, etc. No, there is a real departure and thus a point of origin that is marked and I want to know what this point of origin is.

We have to recognize that this is not the same as the “myth of origin.” I am a “modern” and thus I am interested in the need to start from a zero that is not synonymous with the origin. When Robinson Crusoe is beached on his island he has very few things, but importantly, not nothing: a rifle, nails, a hammer. And he has to start from zero. In Valéry’s wonderful text on Robinson he focuses on the question of what Robinson chooses to do with regard to culture: Will he rewrite all the books he’s read, the poetry he’s known? Or will he go back to zero? And Valéry says that the real issue for Robinson is to work on the sequel. And that I think is one of the major themes of my work: the sense expressed at the beginning of the century and shared by Schoenberg, Kandinsky, etc., that a great period of art is founded on everything that comes before it; one must have perfectly assimilated the past before going forward (this is a theme of Greenberg’s, but it was formulated well before him).

Bois: Does this relate to your interest in chess?

Damisch: Yes, this is why the metaphor of chess engages me. Because either you can think of it in terms of the whole history of a particular game—as it has developed up to that point through the succession of all the preceding moves—or you stumble into the middle of a game and see the positions on the board at that moment and you have to figure out what to do from then on. In a certain way this is a model of history as well because there we are caught between the same two possibilities. Either we think of our situation as the outcome of such and such a series of historical determinations or we take it simply as it is and ask what to do from there, given the information that is contained within the present moment. The difference between chess and history is that in a game with perfect information, each position provides the players with all the information that is necessary to decide about the next move.

Krauss: Could you develop the chess metaphor in relation to what you mentioned before about your field’s second pole, which you spoke of as being located between form and structure?

Damisch: I didn’t say that it was between form and structure. It is not a matter of something midway between the two but more of a dialectic. Take the example of a grid. In English you can say that it’s a structure, that, like a scaffold, it holds; it resists stress. In French you can’t say that. Like a chessboard, a grid is something one calls a “weave”—two strands that interlace; whereas a braid has at least three strands. If we are dealing with a slightly more complicated grid, to which the element of color is added, we could arrive at something like a structure, but a grid isn’t one yet.
Krauss: But everything I understand about structuralism is based precisely on the coordinates of the grid. For example, the relationship between metaphor and metonymy, the relationship between substitution and contiguity—all have to do with the coordinates mapped by a grid.

Damisch: For me structuralism is not to be found in a binary model but in the Lévi-Straussian model, which is three-dimensional. It’s the model from the *Elementary Structure of Kinship* in which relationships cannot be thought in two dimensions. In working on this book Lévi-Strauss constructed little cardboard models that are still in his study through which he thought about kinship relationships—about how women circulated, for example. You can’t map this two-dimensionally, you need three coordinates. You can’t think it without a coordinate that is the equivalent of time.

As for the grid itself, it’s a form that opens the possibility of defining a structure: either a formal structure in which one adds color, for example, thereby producing multiple elements that can enter into relation with each other; or a support on which to play, within which the game that takes place on the grid will become something like a structure. In its Renaissance definition, perspective is—and this is what is important for me—first and foremost the construction of a stage on which a narrative takes place (the *istoria* in Alberti’s sense); and because this narrative can add an unconscious dimension, perspective plays on those multiple poles that interest me.

Hollier: To open up a parenthesis, the other day I was struck to find a text in which Barthes speaks of the churches depicted by Sanredam in a manner that is fundamentally close to the way you speak of the Urbino perspectives. And I wondered about the way you use the word stage—the construction of a stage that is anterior to the appearance of a particular narrative. During that period—when Barthes wrote his text—there was, precisely, a widespread fascination with these moments of narrative suspension, with a kind of threshold of narrative, as in the *nouveau roman*, etc.

Damisch: Yes. One chapter of *The Origin of Perspective* is called “The Suspended Representation.” And this idea of suspension is everywhere in Piero. In the Urbino perspectives it is impossible to know if the curtain, so to speak—since there were not actually stage curtains then—is going up on an action about to happen, or being lowered after it is over. In the *Madonna del Parto* there are the two angels that hold the flaps of the tent, and we don’t know if they are in the process of opening or closing it. It’s these moments of suspension that interest me.

Bois: How does a historical or theoretical object such as those on which you work get transformed?

Damisch: Yes, and end up playing different roles? The perspective apparatus continues to fill a practical function today. In a computer you still need to refer to the grid as an ultimate frame of reference in order to study all the possibilities of transformation. But at the same time perspective has a
different status because it has become a kind of paradigm on which we constantly rely: when Lacan wants to speak of the topology of the subject he refers to the dispositif of perspective. So the question is: how do objects become models, paradigms?

Bois: Exactly. The objects you work on are those that have become models.

Damisch: I call them theoretical objects.

Bois: So what’s the difference between such an object and a historical or empirical object?

Damisch: It is not we who produce this object. A theoretical object is one that is called on to function according to norms that are not historical. It is not sufficient to write a history of this object. It’s what I said before: it’s not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it’s an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself. While I worked on perspective I began to have aperçus with regard to the history of science that are not at all traditional; I began, that is, to produce theory. Third, it’s a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory.

But I never pronounce the word theory without also saying the word history. Which is to say that for me such an object is always a theoretico-historical object. Yet if theory is produced within history, history can never completely cover theory. That is fundamental for me. The two terms go together but in the sense in which each escapes the other.

Bois: If we use the /cloud/ as such an object (as in your Theory of the /Cloud/ [1972]), couldn’t we also say that it is an object that forms an exception, in this case to the system of perspective? How did you arrive at this idea of finding the organizing vector for various historical periods in an object that exists as an exception to a given system?

Damisch: It’s not that it exists as an exception... although it’s true that in the perspectival system, which is linear, the cloud is something that has nothing linear about it and that within a system of spatial coordinates can’t be delimited. But at the same time, the cloud is that which is closest to “painting,” and thus it has an emblematic value. The cloud is the zero degree of painting. It’s the “stain.” I’m not speaking of the “stroke” here; there’s nothing graphic about it. It’s what is purely material or substance. So as a theoretical object it has an emblematic status: the emblem of pictoriality. This means that at the same time as it is exceptional within the system, the cloud always contains something “pictorial” as such. I incessantly return to Brunelleschi’s experiment in which he represents the Baptistery in Florence by all the means available to geometrical perspective but when he gets to the sky, geometry defaults and he has to insert a mirror in which to reflect the real
clouds and sky. The cloud introduces something that has no place in painting but at the same time is painting. So painting is itself defined within this type of paradox.

In the Urbino perspective the rules are observed in the strictest sense—and here we could return to the example of Sanredam—but then there is a sky in which the clouds are brilliantly painted and there is the experience that painting itself has suddenly arrived at a kind of synthesis—able to master at one and the same time light, chroma, language. But I repeat that the cloud has an emblematic character. It is found exactly at the point in the system where it escapes. Painting vanishes within the graphic system only to discover itself in the cloud.

Bois: So you called your book *Theory of the /Cloud/* precisely because it's a theoretical object.

Damisch: Well, there is still another play on words in this title. In Greek the word *theory* means succession—the women who march in the Panathenaic procession, for example. So it is (or should be) the “theory” of all the /clouds/ in history, at least in the history of painting. Once again *theory* implies *history*; you have to be in history in order to do theory. So a theoretical object can be an element of painting insofar as it can claim an emblematic status, or insofar as we could make such a claim for it. What we find in classical Italian painting is not a language but a will toward language. Renaissance painting was inhabited by a will to “speak,” or at least to communicate, to signify; it attempted to construct a system without ever being able to achieve it fully. And the /cloud/—between slashes to designate it as a sign—the /cloud/ gives us access to the system through . . . There’s the properly analytic dimension of my work. I start from details such as clouds—to which no one else pays the least attention—and I try to enter a given system by means of it. In taking a particular fresco by Piero by means of a detail—the hand of the Virgin in the *Madonna del Parto*—that’s where it becomes a theoretical object, it raises questions.

The great question regarding history that never stops attracting me—since it has a relation to our contemporary situation—is, why do the works of the Quattrocento still concern us? If a work of art truly depends on a specific historical context, as the social historians of art would have it, then in order to understand it we have to transport ourselves into the conditions that existed in a specific time and place. But all that makes no sense as far as I am concerned. There is absolutely no way to look at a work through the “period eye,” as Baxandall would have us do. The issue is that we, in our own time, look at works of the Quattrocento. And the question is, how is it that a historical work of art interests us, given that we should only be compelled by works of our own time, works that belong to the same “context” as we do?

Hollier: So would you enter the /cloud/ into the work of Dubuffet?
Damisch: I wouldn’t say so. Dubuffet is another question. What interested me in Dubuffet was that he was the anti-Duchamp. You remember Duchamp’s famous print of two chess players that I showed in the exhibition I curated at the Boymans Museum in June 1997? One day I arrived at Dubuffet’s studio and he was furious. I asked him what was wrong and he said, “That idiot, Duchamp! He just managed to get $2,000 off of me for his Chess Association and in exchange he gave me this horrible etching of chess players. You want it? Take it!” The two of them knew each other rather well. Dubuffet interested me because in a certain way he was Duchamp’s complete adversary. Duchamp, the consummate Hegelian, said that art no longer had any internal necessity; it was now a pure convention. I’m simplifying of course. But what interests me here is the absence of necessity. Why did Dubuffet look at the work he collected under the label of “Art Brut”—which is not to be confounded with the so-called art of the insane (which meant nothing to him: “There is no more ‘art of the insane’ than there is art of the sufferers from housemaid’s knee,” he would say)? It’s because these works were driven by necessity. There was no audience. So it was the inverse situation from that of Duchamp. There was no public, there was no museum, no exhibition—only an urgent drive to draw, to paint. Why was Dubuffet opposed to therapeutic activity in the asylums? Because at that point an audience begins to form. The patients start doing things on the walls. Whereas what interested Dubuffet was just this little guy in his tiny room obsessively scribbling or whistling and driven by necessity. And that’s what is interesting because Dubuffet too was obsessional, driven, or wanted to be. He constructed his own “necessity.” He tried to discover a form of art that would be “necessary” once again. That’s why the word art preoccupied him so. I only realized this aspect of my interest in Dubuffet later on; but fundamentally that is its basis.

However, Denis, if you’ve posed the question of Dubuffet in relation to the /cloud/, it certainly is the case that Dubuffet’s work raises the issue of the physical matter that is deposited and that the /cloud/ is fundamentally about the question of physical matter. But in Dubuffet matter is reduced to a substance that is ridiculous, derisory: sand, charcoal, dirt, nothing “aerial” except for butterfly wings.

Needless to say, I sent Dubuffet my book on clouds. I don’t know what he thought about it. At least he liked the title; it was one of the few books that remained in his library after his death. And he would constantly send me postcards with little clouds. He would call me Mr. Cloud and refer to himself as “your Robinson.”

Krauss: There are certain holes in what we’ve done up until now, and I don’t know whether this is the time to try to fill them. For example, I’ve never read The

Origin of Geometry. You refer to The Origin of Perspective as a parody of Husserl. Could you explain how that works?

Damisch: It’s the idea that in order for something like a geometry to appear there has to be an empirical ground of experience. Take the pyramids, for example. For Thales to come, it was necessary that the Egyptian land surveyors learn how to calculate the surface of a definite area. It was necessary that one be able to produce a new type of object—clean, well delineated, regular, “pure.” Taking off from there something develops that one would call a geometrical experience. But the geometrical experience consists in breaking with the empirical—that was Husserl’s basic idea. Geometry consists in abstract thought. The empirical was necessary in providing a ground, but one had to abstract from it. The same with perspective; it is constructed on an empirical base—how to suggest depth through the receding lines of a coffered ceiling—but at the moment when perspective constitutes itself, it is as a theoretical object. There is a leap forward which consists in saying that perspective defines itself by means of a point of view reflected in a vanishing point. The major idea is this one of departure. Francastel and I argued about this a lot although Francastel also refused the notion that perspective was the result of a long evolution. There was a moment of departure in the various senses of the word: a new start, but also a displacement, a deviation [écart]. In mentioning the Barthes text you reminded me of something I haven’t thought about for a while. I am very interested in Sanredam for a reason that is consistent with what we’ve said about perspective, geometry, and history.

Sanredam painted his most famous works at the moment when Protestantism definitively wins out in Holland over Catholicism and in a Protestant church you no longer have altars or pictures. You have nothing. So what happens is that perspective is employed in a slightly awkward, slightly warped way. It’s not a central point, frontal perspective, but one on the bias; instead of seeing the church from an axial point of view, one gets a transversal view. This is in relation to the transformation of the way perspective always functioned as a stage. One no longer celebrates the mass; what’s going to occur instead is the preacher standing in front of the walls of the church. So what’s going to count are the church walls. This is a perspectival field that takes the place of the perspective apparatus. What Sanredam reveals is what I hope is in play in my own work, namely, that it only takes a slight warping, a slight displacement of the main axis, for one to be able to see things differently.

That’s what I want to do, to succeed each time in displacing the objects slightly, and at that point they gain their function as theoretical objects. I started out with the idea of a theoretical object as something that would make doing theory an act of extrapolation; but more and more I see it simply as a kind of deviation, as a displacement within which theory takes place.
Hollier: I was interested that what you proposed to Merleau-Ponty as a subject was silence in art, because it seems that in the reference to Husserl—The Origin of Geometry, the book by Derrida—and in many of your works, you are participating in the critique of phonocentrism. There is in this silence and in the interest in still life, in suspension, in the stroke as defining the pictorial as nonlinguistic—as escaping precisely the linguistic, phonocentric model—something completely consistent. Can you develop this?

Damisch: The problem was that at the beginning I was caught in the vogue for semiotics but I always denounced various of its metaphors such as “reading,” “text,” and above all the idea that one could simply speak of painting as a “language.” I am less interested in having painting “speak,” using different historical tools, than in reflecting on what makes us speak in it. Music, beginning with the seventeenth century, constitutes itself as a quasi-language (as Adorno says). It has no need for analysis in order to constitute itself. But painting only constitutes itself as a language through our acts of describing it, or the linguistic appropriation of painting. But what fascinates me the most is the moment when painting forces us into silence. We talk and then we sense that there’s something that escapes us.

Why am I interested in description now? The Littre Dictionary says that description is a way of rejoining, through linguistic means, the silence or mutism of painting. Thus a description must finally arrive at silence. And this is a complete paradox. One uses the detour of language in order to encounter muteness. It’s an idea of description that is completely different from the notion that it should substitute itself for the object—because it’s an idea that description should be used to find what escapes description, what stumps it. Taine had a caricatural practice which was that when he traveled in Italy he would stand in front of each painting (of course, he didn’t have a camera and he didn’t sketch the work) and write down two or three lines of description in his notebook. And afterward he worked from what he had written. Working on these descriptions he thought he was working on the paintings.

Here the reference to Freud is important in that when, in the Studies on Hysteria, he asked his patients to describe what they saw, the images disappeared in the course of their very description. So the description was an instrument for making the images return but at the same time for making them disappear, since what happened was that the description substituted itself for the image. The relation this has to art is that if description makes the object disappear, what is its rationale? On the contrary, for us every description should make the work function more intensely, more actively—it should reactivate the work by providing a new point of departure for it, for our eyes today. For me, silence is at the very heart of description.

Bois: The concept of invention, as you see it, presupposes a discontinuity. What about the epistemological models of Koyré and Canguilhem, which you
often mention? How did their conception of discontinuity affect your approach to history?

*Damisch:* What I never accepted in Francastel is the idea that there was something like a figurative system that began at a certain time, lasted one, two, three, four centuries, and was then replaced by a new system, the so-called modern one. I was always very suspicious of this myth through which one said that modern art corresponds to the end of scientific perspective, because no period has been more immersed in perspective, or more dependent on the model of perspective, than ours: photography, computers, and so forth. For instance, I just saw a production by Merce Cunningham. What is fascinating is how he now uses a computer to work on givens that are stagelike but not at all traditional. What questions does he ask? If I balance a dancer on one foot with one arm raised, what then? By using a computer he can find all the positions that can be permuted from these two points given the possibilities of the human body. It's exactly the question that Leonardo posed. The underlying grid can be distorted, transmuted, but for the system to operate you must have this grid, as I said, as the ultimate frame of reference. If you accept that perspective is first and foremost a reticulated system that forms a support for a whole range of different types, it becomes obvious that we haven’t exited that system, any more than we have left the system of tonality in music. That we had, at the beginning of this century, broken with either of these systems is a fiction. Now, how does this fiction operate in relation to the issue of the stage or the “scene”? And it’s here that the matter of history enters. What operates as a stage, or a “scene,” now? How does film help us to think about this question?

*Hollier:* But doesn’t the question of abstraction entail, precisely, something like an epistemological rupture?

*Damisch:* Abstraction is what enters with the vanishing point, the idea of infinity. When Alberti says that the difference between the painter and the geometer is that the latter is involved with a line that has no thickness, with surfaces that have no substance, with points that have no extension (which means that they cannot be seen, that they remain invisible)—that’s where abstraction starts from. There is a concept that is beginning to take on more and more importance for me—it’s the idea of knotting, which is to say nouage as opposed to nuage [cloud]. I fantasize about writing a *Theory of Knotting/*[Une Théorie du/nouage/], which would ask how Western art constitutes itself in relation to a fundamental knotting or linking with geometry in Greece or even in Egypt—the business of the pyramids is absolutely extraordinary. There are immediate consequences of geometry and the reduction to the limit, which were clearly analyzed for example by Jackie Pigeaud, which means that with its linkage with geometry Western art was haunted by a number of fantasies, such as the idea that a line could have no thickness, a point no extension. As we have seen, you find this in Alberti. In fact, this
operated for two millennia. When the knot with geometry unravels, what replaces it? I will answer by means of a detour and then return to abstraction itself.

On the one hand, there is a linkage with poetry. *Ut pictura poesis*. This opens onto iconography. But from a formal point of view painting doesn’t operate in any way like poetry. On the other, at the end of the nineteenth century there is a linkage with music. Walter Pater stressed this. This is music as a model for art, since it is a music that functions as abstract—without a program, nonillustrative, not depicting dances, etc. So there is a striking continuity between painting’s relation to geometry as a modality of abstraction and its relation to music declared abstract. If it is abstract, this means that music is understood as something like a language.

So what happens with painting is that on the one hand it had attained a quasi-linguistic status at the iconographic level; and on the other hand in relation to music’s abstraction it claims another type of quasi-linguistic definition. Now the first letter Kandinsky wrote to Schoenberg, in January 1911, says that we are in a time of construction in painting but this will not take place through a relation to geometry. Through what might it pass? There are several hypotheses. There is color: Van Gogh, Gauguin, speak of color sonorities the way one would speak of this in music. And then at the same time there was the idea of a relationship with a topology, albeit a very strange one, because it was a topology that wasn’t one of figures or knots but one of color. Is such a thing thinkable? Now one of the hypotheses I have is that in relation to color what is organizing itself is a type of basic sensory experience that is like what we were speaking of before in relation to geometry—the organizing of an empirical basis from which a new theoretical departure could occur.

A break makes sense in terms of its relation to what preceded it. The rupture that occurs with abstract art only has sense if abstraction has a relation to Cézanne, and even more with Seurat. Thus there is a rupture, but at the same time there must be a “relève”—an *Aufhebung* in the Hegelian sense. So there is a rupture, something new which manifests itself, but was already present in that will to language which was in Renaissance painting. It manifests itself in abstraction—which is also a will to language. Painting claims to self-affirmation as language through the model of music.

*Hollier:* I was wondering about the difference between abstraction as that is manifested in geometry where a line shrinks to the point of becoming abstract and the equivalent for this in the domain of color, which is not evident for me.

*Damisch:* But it’s no longer geometry. It’s topology. How can we conceive a topology of color?

*Hollier:* The experience of color itself is irreducibly empirical, no?

*Damisch:* When Wittgenstein speaks of a geometry of color, what does he say? He says
that we can’t just say anything whatever about color. There are constraints in language that prohibit us from uttering certain statements about color. Thus there is a kind of “geometry” within language as far as color is concerned.

It’s a hypothesis that I advance in order to help me think this thing about knotting: at one time art knots a relation to geometry—it loosens; then it knots one with poetry; afterward it knots one with music. But what is there in this that is still geometrical?

Bois: In your book on perspective there is something that always strikes students; it is the manner in which you apply the concept of the transformation group.

Damisch: The transformation group formed by the Urbino panels forces one to think about transformation in a systematic way. What interests me more than the system are the transformations themselves. It’s like the sentence we find in Lévi-Strauss’s Way of the Masks: “What counts in a mask is not what it represents but what it transforms.” Now, the group of three Urbino perspectives is a typical theoretical object. It’s a strict group since every permutation of every parameter is done in relation to the two others. If a fourth panel had been introduced that didn’t respond to the parameters of the three others, I would have had to reconstitute the rules for the entire new group. The whole business of Velasquez’s Las Meninas and Picasso’s subsequent exercises works in the same way.

Hollier: But Las Meninas is not a group in itself. In this way we might return to the issue of parody. In Picasso’s case it is not simply a matter of a transformational group whether unconscious or historical, but it is thematized.

Damisch: I hesitate to speak of this aspect of my work. But I can’t embark on a work unless I have a title and a form. That’s why a form as the possibility of a structure is utterly basic for me. Before starting a book, I have to have a form. The Cloud is formally very simple. It’s a book in five parts. The first part has five chapters; the second part has four chapters; the third has three chapters; the fourth has two chapters; and the fifth has one.

Hollier: Very cloudy at first, but then it clears up!

[General laughter]

Damisch: Another important aspect is the parody: in A Childhood Memory by Piero della Francesca, a parody of Freud’s essay on Leonardo da Vinci, there is a parody of Derrida’s approach to Husserl’s Origin of Geometry. But also, what counted for me enormously was that Merleau-Ponty did his last seminar at the Collège de France on The Origin of Geometry. I couldn’t attend the whole thing but I have very complete notes for about half, which I cite of course. I always wondered if Derrida attended this. Derrida’s Origin and Merleau-Ponty’s are very different one from the other.

Hollier: To return to this idea of transformation, it seems to me that it’s difficult to make it agree with what you said at the very beginning about history—which is to say, about the present historical moment when there is no longer any opening...
onto the future. I have the impression that there are two models of history that are incompatible here: the one that we could call the history of transformation and the one in a sense that has to be called history at a dead end.

**Damisch:** I’m not speaking of a history at a dead end; but we are completely trapped. Marxism, as Derrida says, has become a specter that haunts our nights and our days. As a matter of fact, we are now living a certain Marxism become real. We live in a world in which the economic subsumes everything. Logic now is simply economics. How can we still refer to “late” capitalism as if capitalism were approaching its end? We live in a moment of suspension. Is it the end of something or the beginning of something else?

**Bois:** We’ve been talking about rupture along with the longue durée: perspective is not over; it continues in another form. Could you speak more about your relation to anthropology which you mentioned at the beginning? Because what has always struck me about your work is its strong anthropological dimension, since the idea of the longue durée in your work has always seemed linked to this anthropological impulse.

**Damisch:** In the 1950s what was striking about anthropology was its preoccupation with societies supposedly without history. Lévi-Strauss responded to this problem by drawing the difference between so-called hot societies and cold ones, societies that developed very rapidly or societies that evolved very slowly. But it was also a matter that these societies didn’t think in terms of history. It wasn’t just that they didn’t evolve. As Marc Augé says, anthropology has to deal with the issue of the other. The question that occupies me enormously is one—typically Lacanian—that asks what type of truth one strives for in each domain of work. In anthropology we strive for a kind of truth related to the issue of the “other,” which of course isn’t a disinterested truth. If I ask the question of alterity it is because it concerns me in my being-as-subject. The passage to art has something of the same thing. There is an alterity in art that concerns me in the same way.

**Krauss:** Well, to buckle the buckle, you said at the beginning that doing contextualist history, a history where you would have to try to imagine yourself in the shoes of historical characters, is not interesting to you. But this notion of ethnography is one precisely of imagining yourself in some sort of intimate connection to people who are absolutely other. So you would succeed spatially where you say it is impossible to do so in a temporal dimension.

**Damisch:** Relating to the past as well as to distance is always a matter of alterity (times as well as spaces are different) and a matter of identity (the past, the distance as such, being part of our present culture). The problem is how to deal both with alterity and identity (or continuity) simultaneously. Social anthropology, in its classical days, implied the possibility of dialogue between the anthropologist and his informers. As far as the art of the past is concerned, this is more of a monologue: the works keep silent. I repeat: what matters to me is less how to make the work of art “speak” (as Aby
Warburg used to say) than to understand what urges us to speak or, on the contrary, what silences us in front of the work of art. This happens, sometimes, when a work emerges from a remote past that becomes an active part of our present context. It may take a book in order to cope with the mute paradox of such a proximity—a proximity in the distance, in which history acquires a spatial dimension—whereas the flight of time seems to be interrupted, suspended, in the same way as music is inscribed with “rests,” with “silences.”