Hubert Damisch and Stephen Bann: A Conversation
B. Let me begin recalling that it is nearly thirty years since I began to be involved publishing your work in English. The very first occasion was when I published a translation of your article on Klee’s ‘Equals Infinity’ in the Visual Poetics number of 20th Century Studies, in 1976. It was also around then that I read Theory of Cloud, which has now finally been brought out in translation by the Stanford University Press. In the interval, I published your article on Balzac’s Chef d’oeuvre inconnu, ‘The underm this painting’, in one of the first issues of Word & Image in 1984, and not long afterwards I had the pleasure of being invited by you and Louis Marin to spend a month as Associate Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études. Most recently we have coincided again in April 2003 as the two Senior Mellon Fellows at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal. I took good note at the time of the message enclosed in a fortune cookie that you opened at one of our many meals together over that period. It said, in so many words, ‘you are always ready to tackle the big issues.’

D. Yes, I remember. I have kept it.

B. It’s a tribute that is undoubtedly well merited when applied to your work. Now these big issues that you’ve tackled will clearly be coming up in a substantial way in the papers of those who are speaking later in the day, and of course they will be raised throughout the discussion with the audience. But what I think is useful, just to begin with, is to focus a little bit on your career before the 1970s, just so that the audience can get some idea from the start of the really interesting intellectual formation of Hubert. I think, from the English point of view, it will in fact seem very exotic. Certainly it is not very comparable to what an English art historian or theorist might have undergone. I have to begin by saying that your first career was as a jazz musician, as a saxophonist, in which capacity you once told me you took the credit for discovering Sacha Distel. More significant, I am sure, was the early connection with Merleau-Ponty, which began in the 1950s when you studied philosophy with him at the Sorbonne, and the fact that you began as a philosopher is definitely something that will resonate throughout this day. It is obviously a fundamental point, and we will be going back to it in the course of this conversation. It was Merleau-Ponty who introduced you to Cézanne, to film and perspective. He also advised you to do your ‘diplôme d’études supérieures’ on the work of Ernst Cassirer. This was somewhat incautious advice as you didn’t know German at the time...

D. I was supposed to learn to read it in six months.

B. I see. I’m sure you did.

D. No, not really. I still have to get to it.

B. And Merleau-Ponty, a font of knowledge about such things, also mentioned this essay by Panofsky on perspective, which was inspired by Cassirer’s work?
D. No student had ever heard of Panofsky in those days in Paris.

B. Indeed, and that of course was the essay on ‘Perspective as a symbolic form.’ We will certainly be coming back to it. Perspective will be a continuing theme in today’s discussions. And it was also Merleau-Ponty who advised you to take the seminars of Pierre Francastel who, I suppose, is a central figure not only for you but for many art historians of that generation?

D. Francastel? Yes, he certainly was, and still is. He was an outsider, a genuine outsider. He was first trained in the most academic kind of art history. But he soon discovered new fields of investigation, what we would call ‘interdisciplinary’ ones, and simultaneously developed a strong interest in modern and contemporary art. He thus had to look for new conceptual and methodological tools, until he was asked by Lucien Febvre, the great historian, and one of the founders of the ‘Annales School,’ to join the small group of individuals that started what later became the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.

B. I think there’s a fundamental point about Francastel that he’s someone whose access to the art of the past was through the art of the present.

D. It is through him, and later on through Meyer Schapiro, that I learned that in order to get access to the past, one first has to deal with the present, to make his way through the present and what is at stake in it.

B. In fact, most of your career has been spent at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, but at an early stage you taught at the Ecole Normale for a time.

D. I was then having difficulties at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Derrida and Althusser then asked me to join them at the Ecole Normale where we started a seminar that lasted for more than ten years. It was reputed to be a typical product of 1968, but it actually began two years earlier, in 1966, and I am very proud of having been responsible for it. There were a lot of interesting participants and visitors, and we had a very good time. ‘Those were the days,’ as you say.

B. And effectively, you’re still associated with the Ecole des Hautes Etudes?

D. I am retired. But I still keep in touch.

B. Yes, exactly. What is also interesting – particularly in view of all these connections, which are embedded in the rather special development of the French Academy and French culture in the 60s and 70s – is the fact that you went quite early to the United States.

D. This was during the same period in which I went through difficult times at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. Meyer Schapiro became a very good, very close friend. He knew a lot of people, and he introduced me to the United States in the most generous way. My first appointment was at the Society for the Humanities, at Cornell, in 1972. And I have taught in several places subsequently, as a visiting professor. I was the Meyer Schapiro Professor, at Columbia in 1985–86. And I also spent a year as the Kress Professor at CASVA, the Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts in Washington. And then I paid several visits to the Getty Research Institute, where you and I met on another occasion two years ago.

B. Were you ever tempted to stay in the United States?

D. Well. I had just married an American, and she kept telling me that if decided to stay in Cornell, she would leave me. So I went back to France, with her and with no regrets. But I sure enjoy living transatlantically!
B. And you had a very close connection with Meyer Schapiro?
D. Yes, my main art-historical connection had been with him. I used to spend some days every summer at their place in Vermont, and we would have endless discussions ranging from politics to formalism, and I don’t know what else. Abstraction, the issue of abstraction, was one of our favourite subjects of debate.

B. And that of course is a plug for the Oxford Art Journal, which did this excellent number on Meyer Schapiro.

D. Certainly, I must confess that when the editors asked me to participate in this enterprise I felt pretty proud, and I said to myself ‘Well, now it’s my turn… too bad Meyer couldn’t be part of it.’ I was touched and still am.

B. Well, that’s a very good auspice for our conversation. But just coming back to what is the major point in your early formation — which is the debt to Merleau-Ponty — I wonder if you would say something more about that.

D. First of all, I have to say that someday I would like a former student of mine to praise me in the same way that I will now praise Merleau-Ponty. When I met him for the first time, it was for ten minutes, but he quickly decided from listening to me and my interest in the visual arts that I should work on the writings of Ernst Cassirer. And then, as I already mentioned, he added: ‘Well, there is also a great piece on perspective by a German art historian, Erwin Panofsky, that directly derives from Cassirer’s Philosophy of Symbolic Forms.’ This was to decide of my work for years to come. Merleau-Ponty was a remarkable teacher: he would come every week to his class with a new book to be read, and it is through him that I first got introduced to linguistics, with Saussure and Jakobson; to anthropology, with Mauss and Lévi-Strauss; to psychoanalysis, with Freud and Melanie Klein (Lacan wasn’t yet part of the picture); and it was through Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Kurt Goldstein that I first discovered the concept of structure. But I didn’t respond to his wish that I should become a student of philosophy.

In fact, I keep thinking of myself as some sort of a displaced philosopher. The issue of displacement is, in any sense, crucial to my work. According to Gilles Deleuze, philosophy has mostly to do with inventing concepts. In that sense, I am not a philosopher: I do not invent concepts, but I try to displace them. For instance, the concept of structure is of great interest, when dealt with in artistic terms. I first became interested in architecture because architecture provides us with an open series of structural models. My first small book, published in André Chastel’s Miroirs de l’art collection, in 1964, was dedicated to Viollet-le-Duc, and I was very pleased to learn directly from Lévi-Strauss that he considered the author of the Dictionnaire raisonné d’architecture as one of the first ‘structuralists.’ Viollet-le-Duc dealt at length with a very interesting notion of structure, which I would call ‘bone structure’: the idea of architecture being built as a skeleton, with bones. This means that, in such a system, there is always a discontinuity between the elements that are associated together in a structural way. But, at the same time, according to Viollet-le-Duc, Gothic architecture foregrounds the continuous line, running from the vaults down to the ground on which the supports, piles or columns, are implanted. Such a view paved the way for a new type of structure, radically different from the skeletal one and strictly depending on the invention of concrete as a new constructive material, a new medium, one that can be poured and moulded with no solution of continuity.
Displacing concepts, this is what I stand for. What does a concept like the one of structure mean when transferred into the domain of art? There are many other examples, ‘history,’ for instance. History is a concept that doesn’t take on the same sense, the same meaning, the same uses, when dealing with politics, or with economy, with religion, with law, and first of all with science. History is not the same, the word itself does not have the same resonance, the concept doesn’t operate in the same way when applied to such topics as art or science and the rest.

B. In a sense, when you were writing that book, you were contributing to the development of what was to be known as Structuralism, at that point in time.

D. It was definitely structuralist. And I do consider myself a structuralist, still now. It’s not a matter of fashion. Structuralism is a method, a way of dealing with different objects, as well as a concept that is of constant use in different ways. We can’t talk of its coming to an end, that would simply make no sense.

B. In certain ways, though, there’s another important shift in your work when, in Theory of [cloud], you move to something which appears to have no structure. To the very concept of not having a structure.

D. Well, after Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein was to be of great importance to me in philosophical terms. Recently I was very interested in his saying that one cannot construct a cloud: for two friends of mine, the architects Liz Diller and Rick Scofidio, actually built a cloud on the Lake of Neuchâtel in Switzerland last year. It was a steel structure, made of tubes pierced with holes that emitted steam and which would itself disappear within the cloud thus generated. Thirty years ago, my idea was that dealing with clouds in the context of structure was also some sort of displacement. I liked the concept of ‘cloud’ for what one would call its elasticity (Derrida praised me, jokingly, for having finally invented something ‘philosophical’: the ‘elastic concept’). It was a matter of dealing with the cloud as an object that would circulate from being a stage implement in the theatre to being a description in linguistic terms. Then there was the fact that it could be used as a tool in painting, in order, for instance, to separate what is happening on the Earth and what is happening in the sky. The [cloud] could be the means of communication between Earth and sky, opening on to (and masking) the heavens, the infinite. I took a structuralist approach to the issue of the cloud: a structural approach to a non-structural object.

B. It also enabled you to effect another displacement. Starting with Correggio and the painters of the Renaissance, you also came to write about Oriental painting.

D. From the outset, I have been a devoted adept of the comparative method. To make comparisons between the arts, comparing the art of the past with the art of the present, and also comparing the art of the East to the art of the West, European painting to Chinese painting, which gives such an important place to the opposition between clouds and mountains. I am by no means a specialist in Chinese art, but I developed a strong interest in it at that stage, and it’s still very important to me. I think we constantly have to keep in mind the difference between the two traditions in terms of history of art. Dealing with history of art in Chinese studies involves a totally different approach than our own.

B. Perhaps it’s now the moment to make another shift. Brunelleschi’s famous experiment is already mentioned in your Theory of [cloud], and it comes to the centre of attention in The Origin of Perspective.
You used to visit Urbino every summer over ten years, and this will prove important in the sequence of slides that follows.

D. This is a view of the Duomo, the Cathedral in Florence, with the Baptistry in front. You know that Brunelleschi is said to have painted one small panel representing the Baptistry as seen from the steps of the cathedral in strict perspective. He painted it on a small, square panel, a tavoletta. Then he pierced a hole through the tavoletta, turned it around, put his eye to the hole on the reverse, and looked at the painting as it was reflected in a mirror, that he held in front of the panel.

This schema gives you an idea of the equipment that he used, except the mirror should have been placed much closer to the painting. Nevertheless, it clearly shows what Brunelleschi intended to demonstrate: the viewpoint and the vanishing point are in one and the same line perpendicular to the panel, with the result, in projective terms, that they coincide in what appears to be the point of departure (the ‘origin’) of the system. One century later, Pèlerin Viator will call it the ‘point du sujet.’ This is what started me off: the ‘origin’ of perspective is not to be understood in historical, but in geometrical terms.

Here we have what Stephen has been referring to, the famous Città ideale in Urbino, with at its centre a circular temple which is the equivalent in the round of the Baptistry in Florence (Fig. 2). I consider this panel as
an offspring of Brunelleschi’s demonstration, or, I would prefer to say, as Brunelleschi’s demonstration turned or translated into a painting. Here you have the city square drawn in perspective, but you also have the clouds painted — not ‘constructed’ but painted, as part of the demonstration. There are three major paintings of this kind, one in Urbino, one in Baltimore and one in Berlin, and they all deal with the location of the so-called vanishing point. There is no need for more than these three paintings to constitute not only a set, but a group. [Next slide.] This is the Baltimore panel, where the vanishing point is no longer located in the door of the temple, but a bit farther on, through the triumphal arch, and the Berlin one were it is carried backwards onto the horizon line. In each case, the vanishing point operates in the same way, in so far as it is located at the same spot on the surface of the panel, with no regard for its apparent distance in depth, so that we are dealing here with the equivalent of what mathematicians call a group of transformations. You can analyse systematically the occurrence of any feature in these three paintings, negative or positive. And this led me to the only archaeological discovery I have ever made in the course of my long career. We used to go to Urbino every summer; and each time we paid a visit to our friend Martino Oberto, who was in charge of restoring the Città ideale. It took him more than ten years because he was very careful about asking the advice of specialists and connoisseurs. And then came the day when the painting was finally fully restored. There it was, lying on a table (like this one), and Martino and I started arguing for a change about the precise location of the vanishing point. I thought I knew where it was, and where we see it now, in the Galleria delle Marche: as if someone were holding the door of the Baptistry half open, looking at us in the same way as we are looking at him. Martino suddenly picked up a scalpel and pulled out a sort of plug from the varnished surface of the painting. ‘But what are you doing?!’ said his wife with great astonishment. He answered: ‘Nothing. I was just looking for the hole I had covered up.’ We later succeeded in convincing the soprintendente to leave the hole exposed, unplugged.

There you see, ‘it’s looking at us’ (‘ça nous regarde’) from inside the door, with one eye. I still am rather proud for having excavated it.
B. This also coincides very much with Lacan’s notion of the subject.

D. Of course, it is directly related to it. For it has to do, literally, with the emergence, the rise of the subject in modern times, in modern science, what Lacan calls ‘le sujet de la science.’ My approach to the ‘origin’ of perspective has constantly been misunderstood. For it has nothing to do with the so-called birth or rebirth of perspective. I don’t care about the historical origin of perspective. For me, the ‘invention’ of perspective in the Renaissance amounted to no less than a replaying of the origin of geometry according to Husserl. Marx used to say that history repeats itself, first as a tragedy, and second as a comedy or farce. The origin of perspective appears to me as a somewhat theatrical repetition of the origin of geometry according to Husserl. This is very important because it corresponds to a reassessment of the link between science and art, which is characteristic of the European tradition. I doubt that we could find any equivalent of it in the Far East. For the Western tradition, it was like a foundation, a founding act. Not in the sense that we should imagine art deriving from science. No, not at all. On the contrary, according to Husserl, it’s thanks to the artistic work on the regularity of shapes and volumes, edges and the straight or curved lines, that the Greeks started a geometrical approach, that they began to think in mathematical terms. So art played its role in the origin of geometry, just as geometry, a kind of geometry, played its role in the origin of art. And this was to be a permanent link, a more or less permanent feature of Western art that was renewed in a way during the Renaissance. The Renaissance was not only a revival of Antiquity; in theoretical terms it goes back; first and foremost, to the very roots of Western culture, back to geometry.

B. Another point to mention here is the function of the unconscious.

D. Yes and no. We shouldn’t go too fast. I learned an important thing from Lévi-Strauss. You referred just now to Lacan’s idea of the subject. The first thing that I wanted to stress when we’ve been looking at the three paintings, the three so-called ‘urbinate panels,’ was that I dealt with them in the same way as Lévi-Strauss dealt with masks. I bore in mind that what matters in a work of art is not so much what it represents than what it transforms. And this means looking at the work of art as transforming another work or set of works. This is what I mean when I speak of the three paintings as of a group of transformations. Each of them transforms the other ones in another way: starting with the way in which they deal with the vanishing point, by setting it at the nearest at first, and then a bit farther away, and finally at the infinite. This is a typical transformation, in the mathematical sense.

Lacan’s concern with perspective is different. We had to wait for him to correct our view of the very notion, the very concept of ‘tableau’. I will use the French word, since there is no word in English for ‘tableau’. ‘Picture’ doesn’t say exactly what we mean by ‘tableau’. ‘Tableau’ refers to the tabula, the table, something square. Of course, there are ‘pictures in the round, but a tondo is not exactly the same thing as a ‘tableau’. Lacan was the first one to give us a definition of the ‘tableau’ which is both coherent and productive, by asserting that the ‘tableau’ is a function in which the subject had to find its marks, to find them as such (as the subject). Isn’t strange that we had to wait until the twentieth century to have a correct definition to answer the question, ‘what is a “tableau”?’ And isn’t odd that we had to wait for psychoanalysis to give us a correct definition of this term? Well, ‘correct’ may not be the appropriate term: let us say a
definition that makes sense. So this is what I learned from Lacan. In Lacan’s seminar on the ‘Four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis,’ there is an extraordinary section on ‘What is a picture?’ – ‘Qu’est qu’un tableau?’ This is where you find the definition I just mentioned; it amazes me that even the best art historians could ignore it when dealing with the genesis, the institution of the ‘tableau’.

This is a famous image of The Judgement of Paris (Fig. 3). An engraving, supposedly made after a drawing by Raphael, by Raimondi, on the right of which we see a group of two river-gods and two nympha. It took twenty years for the critics to discover that Manet’s Déjeuner sur l’herbe was based on this motif. Aby Warburg didn’t make the discovery, but he duly commented on it. Which is interesting because dealing with the tale as well as with the images of the Judgement of Paris raises the issue of the part played by the unconscious, not only in art, but in our approach to art. But the tale is in itself of great importance. For at the same time we can look at it as the first judgement of taste, the oldest remote one, and as the starting point of Western history. Supposedly the Trojan heroes had to leave Troy after the wreckage of the city, and they moved to different places which later on were said to be the origin of the European dynasties, of kings and emperors. The fact that a judgement of taste could be at the origin of Western civilization seemed quite interesting to me.

Fig. 3. Anton Raphael Mengs, The Judgement of Paris, 1757–59, oil on canvas, 226 x 295 cm. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.
B. And in your book, *Le jugement de Pâris*, you’re really moving onto the terrain of aesthetics. And particularly you are concerned with this question of beauty, rather than the judgment of ‘what is art?’

D. Yes, I try to displace the issue of aesthetics, to move it back to its origin, its genealogy, to put the issue of beauty back at the centre of the aesthetic, instead of the issue of art, which has come to seem bigger and more important with Duchamp. There is all that fuss on the issue of art, what does ‘art’ mean, what is ‘art?’ What allows us to declare that something is ‘art?’ I try to go back to the issue of beauty, but of course not in classical terms at all! I went back to what Freud had to say on the matter. He argues that beauty is a matter of displacement. What we judge as beautiful is what we see through displacement, displacement of the sexual features, what we call in French ‘les appâts’. These are the source of beauty or what relates to beauty. Freud approaches the issue of beauty by first claiming that psychoanalysis doesn’t have much to say about it. But the fact is that what he has to say is unbearable: not only beauty is related to the sexual but it derives, in the most literal way, from the attraction for the genitals. It is all the more astonishing that Jakob Burckhardt previously acknowledged this, in his own way, when he claimed to have deciphered Rubens’s *Judgement of Paris*, and discovered why Paris chose Venus: because, thanks to the tricks of perspective, and represented as she is in profile, standing in front of her judge, she was the only one to show him — I quote — ‘all of herself.’

B. You use as a subtitle for *The judgement of Paris*, the idea of an ‘analytical iconology’.

D. Yes, it has been misunderstood because iconology has a bad reputation. To say that the book was dealing with iconology in analytical terms was a way of introducing the unconscious — in a rather Warburgian style — and of putting it to work in our approach to art. Building upon a series of different versions of the Judgement of Paris as I did, for instance, was like the method that Warburg used with sets of figures in his *Bildatlas*. This involved a lot of unconscious work, a lot of free association, albeit well founded in historical terms. Whenever you refer to another painting as a transformation of the first one, the unconscious is at work in some way, and the idea of dealing with iconology in analytical terms has to do with the part the unconscious plays in the operation.

B. I think we should have another slide, of a painting that you’ve been working on for quite some time.

D. Yes. This is a slide that belongs to Stephen and it’s a beautiful slide: *The Resurrection of the Dead*, from Signorelli’s cycle of frescoes at the cathedral of Orvieto (Fig. 4). This is a very strange story for me because I started working on Signorelli’s frescoes more than thirty years ago, at a time where I had an exchange of letters with Meyer Schapiro on the subject. I intend to publish these letters in the book if I ever finish it. I say so because it seems that I can’t finish it, it’s very strange. I invested so much in these frescoes that seem to be related to mourning, related to death, related to birth, related to surviving, in a very strange way. I have a very strange investment in Signorelli’s work, that runs parallel to Freud’s account of his lapse of the name of Signorelli in the overture to the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud tells his reader that while he was travelling on a train, on a vacation in Bosnia, he started talking with the people in the compartment, and at a certain moment he wanted to
refer (it's a complicated story) to Signorelli’s frescoes, but couldn’t remember the name of the painter. It took him more than a week to find it again. He immediately started to analyse the episode, using the name of Signorelli both as a tracer and as the material for interpretation. In the book I am presently trying to complete, I'm tracing a parallel between my own approach to the frescoes and Freud’s mapping of the whole process of forgetting. His question is a perplexing one: how can one become so invested in a poem or in a painting that he would forget the name of its author, or commit a lapsus when quoting a line or a verse? This raises the issue of what I call the 'mise-du-sujet', what may be at stake and at work for the subject in his relation with the a work of art.

B. Yes, this leads me to make a quote from what I think is going to be the first chapter of the book. Is that right?

D. A part that I’ve already published.

B. Yes, it is already published in the proceedings of the colloquium on your work held at the Villa Médicis recently. It involves an interesting question. Somebody asked you in the course of an earlier colloquium: ‘Why is it that an art historian like you has taken such an interest in Freud, and in his writings?’ And I will paraphrase the way in which you replied to that question: ‘Without giving it any more attention, I thought I would get out of this particular problem by replying, in a no less abrupt way, that it could well be the case that what is called history of art and what it has represented for me is, first and foremost, a devious means of access to the work of Freud.’ To put it in your own words again: ‘My own experience has convinced me
that criticism is never more interesting, more persuasive, than when it shifts slightly in the direction of the clinical.

D. I am pleased that you quoted those lines, because I am often tempted to look at my own work in the history of art as a way to read Freud. Someone who didn’t practice psychoanalysis, someone who wasn’t even analysed, would need some kind of material in order to invest in one’s own reading of Freud. The fact is that art history provided me with such material. A material, to use Deleuze’s terminology, which is both critical and clinical. According to Deleuze, there is a difference between ‘critique’ and ‘clinique’. ‘Critique’ has to be practised according to certain rules; it has to conform to certain patterns. ‘Clinique’ is free association, free appropriation. So it is the space in between which is interesting, especially when criticism deviates towards the clinical. I repeat that art provides us with material that is of great importance for reading Freud, with no concern for applying psychoanalysis to art. Quite the opposite, it could well lead to apply art to psychoanalysis, another way of playing with concepts, of displacing them, of testing their elasticity...

B. If we can have the lights on now, we can move on. I think that now we should tackle the question of modern art. We’ve talked a lot about your work in relation to the Renaissance, in particular. What about your early work on Mondrian...

D. My first piece of art criticism was indeed on Mondrian. I already mentioned that I learned from both Francaistel and Schapiro that there is no valid art history that doesn’t have its point of departure in the present. I have always had a bad feeling about historians of art who claim that they’re not interested in modern and contemporary art, or actually hate it. I have great doubts about their competence. There is no other alternative approach to the art of the past but viewing it through the present, what is going on now.

I have always attached much importance to my relation with artists. I had a long and very strong friendship with Dubuffet. I published the four volumes of his complete writings and for something more than ten years we continued to be very close, with highs and lows because he was a very difficult person, and so was I. I also had a good relationship with Robert Motherwell, and with Barnett Newman a short, but very strong one. And I keep up my interest in younger artists. And with architects too: Jean Prouvé was a decisive figure in my formation. I have developed a close friendship with Rem Koolhaas, and with other architects like Peter Eisenman and Greg Lynn. These contacts have been and are very important to me. I think that just as we have to learn from modern art to raise relevant issues concerning the art of the past, we have to learn from the artists about history in the making and not only in the writing.

B. You were interested to see, I believe for the first time, the work of Gillian Wearing on show in Montreal?

D. Yes indeed. That was thanks to you. In general, I am more and more concerned with experiments related to the filmic substance. I have often repeated that my first interest was in film. It’s through the cinema that I got in touch with art.

B. And you’ve done quite a lot of work curating exhibitions...

D. I haven’t done that much. I have been asked to curate two exhibitions. One was very important to me because it involved a displacement of the Louvre tradition. It was amazing that they accepted putting on such an
exhibition. My show was part of a series where people like Peter Greenaway, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva...

B. ...and Jean Starobinski, from Geneva...

D. ...were asked to borrow drawings from the Département des Arts Graphiques in order to develop their own 'parti-pris'. In my Traité du Trait (Tractatus tractus), I myself dealt with a concept for which, once again, there is no equivalent in English. My intention was to exemplify the issue raised by Wittgenstein: how concepts happen to descend into the sensible, the perceptible; to what extent can a concept inform our perception of the visual? As a concept, the 'trait' is not to be reduced to an outline: in Chinese art it is the opposite. How would you translate 'trait'? 'trace'?

B. 'Trace' doesn't really get the meaning.

D. No, but this is an important point. You don't really need the word in English, because there is no such thing as a 'trait' in general, only as a concept. Using the word 'trait' prompts you to look at drawings and even at paintings in a special way. Is there something like a trait in painting or not? In Chinese painting or calligraphy there is, definitely: the bamboo leaf as rendered by one stroke of the brush is a typical model of what a 'trait' is, or should be; but this has nothing to do with our Western notion of the trait as an incision, traced as it is with a styllet, or sharp-pointed pencil.

So the whole exhibition was quite Wittgensteinian - a bit too much, perhaps! I was associated with Regis Michel, a good friend of mine, but he overstated the propos by putting quotations all over the place. Then, some years later, Chris Dercon, then Director of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, asked me to curate an exhibition for the museum. We had a great time preparing it. This was part of a series in which he asked various people, such as Harald Szeeman, Bob Wilson, Hans Haacke and, once again, Peter Greenaway, were invited to deal with objects from the museum, each one of us in his own way and to his own purpose. We were given a large space in the museum, and were allowed to take any pieces of art from the collection and install them as we chose. My idea was to play chess with the paintings and the objects, and to play cards with the drawings, engravings and some photographs. It was a very interesting experience because I was allowed to experiment with original works of art (such as Bruegel's Tower of Babel, or a famous Mondrian) instead of using mere reproductions, in the way Malraux did. I thus discovered that there were things, like putting a painting next to another, that could be done on paper, using reproductions, but that simply didn't work when we had the paintings actually hanging on the wall. This was quite an experience, which led me to question Walter Benjamin's argument on what he called 'the age of mechanical reproduction.' No matter how influential Benjamin has been for me: we now need to rethink the whole argument.

B. Yes, that's an interest we definitely both share, isn't it? And I know that, when we were in Montreal you were writing a paper on Jean Fauvte, the French abstract artist, which focused on his practice of reproduction...

D. That's right. At a certain point, Fauvte started experimenting with the means of reproduction, he wanted to make reproductive art. Art that was itself a reproduction, art that was a reproduction by definition. I think that his attempt was a total failure.
B. Indeed... Perhaps you'd like to say something about abstraction in general? Because again that is something that is featuring very much in your current writing, isn't it?

D. Yes, this leads us back to Wittgenstein. I'm presently working on a small book that I modestly title Remarks on Abstraction. Several years ago, I was asked by the president of the Centre Pompidou to curate a major exhibition on the theme. Eventually it didn't work out because the staff didn't like the idea that abstraction could be an issue that would not be restricted to the twentieth century. They wanted me to deal with abstract art as it developed during the twentieth century, intimating that it was now over, and that we need to get rid of all these questions... My idea was to develop the notion that abstraction started long ago, two thousand years ago in Greece, with the origin of geometry. And we would have dealt with abstraction as understood by mathematicians, with a special concern for the Middle Ages - we would have dealt with what abstraction means in general. We would have developed the idea that, in a way, abstraction always formed part of the general process of Western art, and that some sort of a crisis developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, to be paralleled with the crisis in mathematics that was looking for its own fundamentals. In the same way that painting was looking for its own specificity, its own fundamentals. Due to such a crisis - the crisis of abstraction, abstraction as a crisis - abstraction was turned into the central issue of art. And this would have corresponded to the main axis of the exhibition.

These considerations lead me to pay tribute to Meyer Schapiro by quoting a piece of his which is of a great importance to me. It is from a paper that he wrote in the 50s, entitled 'The Meaning of Abstract Art.' It's very important because it cut short any kind of semiotic, or rather linguistic approach, any approach to art in terms of meaning. This is what abstraction is about. I quote: 'The method of study applied in the theory of communication has been extended to literature, music, and painting as arts which communicate. Yet, it must be said that what makes painting and sculpture so interesting in our time, is their high degree of non-communication. You cannot extract a message from a painting by ordinary means. The usual rules of communication do not hold here. There is no clear code or fixed vocabulary. No certainty of effect at the given time of transmission or exposure.' ('Exposure' sounds interesting to me, for it relates both to photography and exhibition. But let's go back to Meyer.) 'Painting, by becoming abstract and giving up its representational function has achieved a state in which communication seems to be deliberately prevented. And in many works where natural form is still preserved the object and the mode of representation resist an easy decipherment, and the effects of these works are unpredictable. The experiment of the work of art itself is a process ultimately opposed to communication as it is understood now. What has appeared as a noise in the first encounter becomes in the end a message of necessity. Though never a message in a perfectly reproducible sense. You cannot translate it into words or make a copy of it, which will be quite the same thing.'

We have here a perfect example of Schaprio's way of writing, that sounds so simple and goes so deep. Every word is exactly chosen. But what matters to me amounts to a decisive move: enough about meaning in the visual arts. Let's concentrate on what is to be seen; let's look at it.

B. I think that's just the right point at which we can hand over to Pat Rubin, and ask her to chair the rest of the morning session.
Further discussion later in the day between Hubert Damisch, John Goodman, Stephen Bann, Jon Bird, Margaret Iversen, Yve-Alain Bois and members of the audience.

D. Well, it is difficult for me to react to Yve-Alain's talk, because, of course, at least two-thirds of it is mere fiction. But let's remember Lacan: 'Il n'y a de vérité que de fiction.' Considering that Yve-Alain and I are both French, addressing a British audience, it's worth recalling what John Goodman has said a moment ago, when he pointed out that this kind of thing couldn't have happened ten years ago - I mean the meeting we are having today. I suddenly remember what happened to me in Paris many years ago, when I was participating in Colloquium organised by Pierre Francastel on Paris during the classical age. I attempted to analyse certain aspects of the development of the Grand Louvre from a semiotic point of view. At the end of my talk, the late and then Sir Anthony Blunt came up to me and said coldly: 'That kind of thing could not happen in England.' Whatever he meant, then, things have changed a lot. But even in Paris, as Yve-Alain told you, the only place where it was possible to work on art in a non-conformist way was the École des Hautes Études. And the same goes for architecture, for at that time there was no other place in Paris where we could debate.

I'm not saying that things were much better in France than in England, by no means, on the contrary. But I think that it is very important that now we can meet in the way we are doing today. And that we can meet to discuss the specific issues that have been raised by the three preceding speakers. And I will myself try to be as specific as I can. Margaret referred to the problem of perspective. How can we treat perspective in historical terms? We need a different approach to the history and the ideas of perspective, and this leads me again to what I learned from Francastel and from Merleau-Ponty, when he advised me to read Panofsky (whom Francastel abhorred!). What Panofsky intended to do, after Cassirer, was to construct a genealogy of the a priori: the a priori of space considered as the result of a manifold history, that involves different cultures. And this led me to deal with the problem of its institution as we say in French — institution rather than constitution — in relation to the rise of the subject; I mean, in relation to the product of the system, the point that was assigned to the so-called viewer, or to quote Viator, 'le point du sujet.' Pascal has a very powerful way of expressing it, when he says that we need a point to start with: in painting perspective tells us where to locate it. But what about morals, what about ethics? (I'm translating the text roughly, from memory.) So the idea that perspective involves the subject as a product of the system is also something very important because it means the subject is not in charge of the system, there is no idea of mastery. It's just the position assigned to the subject that makes us believe that he is at the origin of the system and that he is in total control of it. The subject is a product of the system, with no consideration of sex, class, or gender. It is a product of the system in the same way as, in a grammatical system, the subject 'I' is a product of the system. Descartes says, 'I think therefore I am.' Gender doesn't matter, class doesn't matter at this stage — well, it matters in a way. But first we must deal with the subject in the most abstract terms.

The most interesting moment comes between Alberti and Piero della Francesca. Alberti was still adhering to the idea that the viewer had to
position himself at the apex of the pyramid. Then came Piero della Francesca who stated that the only constraint the viewer was submitted to was not to step too close to the painting. He had to stand at a distance which was no less than half of the width or the length of the painting. But he was free to move in front of it, as we all do, except that the best view of course, is still on a line perpendicular to the painting. The freedom is in proportion to the constraint, but the constraint is itself in proportion to the freedom.

Once again, my main concern consists in transforming the view, or displacing the concept. That's why I became interested in gender studies from its very inception, even if I didn't practise this (although I hint at it in The Judgement of Paris). Gender studies also involved some sort of displacement, one of great importance in its time. The trouble for me — because I really do have trouble in expressing myself about it — is in relation to the so-called 'social' history of art. People always think of my work as opposing this. I don't oppose the so-called 'social history of art.' But I don't practise it, which is a different matter. One of my great models — and in dealing with art I think it is possible to use that model — one of my great models is Theodor Adorno's approach to music. Music, especially modern music, is such a coherent, not to say structural object that it is possible to analyse it in strictly formal terms and at the same time be attentive to the context. In dealing with visual art, the object is much more loosely structured, with nothing systematic about it except when dealing with Mondrian and maybe with Pollock, which is not that obvious. In most cases the relation is so loose that you really have to be able to work hard in order to develop some sort of formal analysis of any kind. It's not that easy. If you had the time, you could also practise social art history but you can't do both at the same time. I'm afraid that's impossible.

**AUDIENCE.** Question: Why? just because you think its too hard to concentrate on both at the same time?

**D.** No, because there are too many threads to be held simultaneously. You cannot at the same time take a look at the work and at its context. You have to make use of two different optics, or lenses.

**B.** I think Adorno does say at one point in his Philosophy of Modern Music that you can potentially do for Mondrian what he is doing for music. And this reminds me also of the case of Lévi-Strauss which came up in the other discussions. Of course Levi-Strauss takes a very reactionary position on abstraction. While at the same time of course, he produces a marvellous musical analysis in what he calls the 'overture' to Le Cru et le Cuit.

**D.** You're perfectly right. It's interesting to note that Lévi-Strauss first dreamed of being a painter. His real ambition was to be an artist. And when I first met him — I was commissioned to write a short book on his work, but I never did — I got him interested in the project when I referred to the models made out of paper and cardboard that he had constructed in order to represent in 3D the functioning of the different systems of kinship. At this time — some twenty years ago — he still had them in his possession, and he was very proud of them, because they made him think he was some kind of an artist.

This reminds me of the importance that I have attached to grids. For more than ten years I have been lecturing on the subject. But have great doubts about my ability to complete the book, still another one I've been working on for all my life: an essay in what I call 'graphic ideology.' The way a grid is installed goes back to the processes of divination in antiquity.
The starting point involved establishing some sort of grid to play with the object in the form of a drawing. Then there came the stage of setting up towns according to specific decrees and so on, so it's a long story. What is very important here is that the grid provides us with a very interesting device. Here I disagree with my friend Rosalind Krauss, when she refers to the grid as a structure. A grid is not a structure. In Wittgensteinian terms, a grid is a form; that is to say the possibility of a structure. On a grid you can do different things, in dealing with a grid you can do different things. You have to apply the right formula, seeing that the form is a possibility of structure. On a grid you can play draughts and you can play chess, two different structural approaches to the use of a grid.

Here, we are pointing to something that matters. In French we have a word that is untranslatable in English, still another one. We refer to the board, the chessboard, as the 'sous-jeu'. It's a condition of the play, it is sub-jacent. And we are also pointing to the thing that relates me to Rosalind. Although we approach grids in different ways, we have the same concern for them. The grid underlies much of our work. The very notion of the grid allows for different interpretations, different ways of playing with the concept.

JON BIRD. I appreciate all the points that you've been making — what you're saying about the impossibility of combining the two types of approach to the art object: the semiotic and structural approach, on the one hand, and the social history of art. But I do have difficulties with that; I don't want it to be an impossibility at all. Impossibly difficult, perhaps, a hopeless mission... maybe. But I value the very productivity that comes in the attempt by people to deal with both of those questions.

D. What do you mean?

JB. I think it's impossible to do both of these things at once. But the very attempt to work across that divide, however hopeless, however deserving of failure it might be, is itself, the tension, the dynamic, the context within which interesting work takes place. And, I don't remember who it is, but it's one of the Russian formalists, I think it might be Tomshesvsky, who said that a little bit of formalism, I'm paraphrasing, takes you away from history, but a lot of formalism gets you right back to history again.

D. Definitely. First we have to know how a work functions to understand its relation to the context. I think that the Formalists were the genuine Marxists in those days, we share that opinion. As far as art was concerned, Marx never objected to the fact that one has first to take into account the works themselves. For him, the real issue was: how is it that we may still be interested in the works of the past? How come, if they are strictly depending on the context? Marx's answer was that the works of art are like memories of previous stages in the development of mankind. Hence the 'eternal charm of Greek art.' I disagree with the view that our relation to art has become more and more intellectualised. It is not true; we are still affected in the most literal way by a painting by Vermeer or by Miro. How come? How do you explain it? What is there in the work of art that still touches us?

JB. But the difference we might have is the understanding of what we meant by this term social history, and whether it is more empirical as described earlier on today. I recognise that there is that stage, in its existence in the world. But there is also what I recognise as coming out of Marxist
thinking too, and this is actually what I think you're referring to—a reference back to an earlier concept as it was defined in the past. It is the force of abstraction—I'm talking about abstraction as thought here—that it has the ability (as it were) not to do the empirical, but to ask the questions in the abstract.

D. We definitely have in mind two different notions of what social history is about...

TAMAR GARB. That raises the question of pleasure. I mean, thinking about arguments surrounding the Judgement of Paris, and thinking about the way in which Paris is constantly a figure that makes aesthetic judgements, and also makes judgements about objects of beauty or women. And the way in which the women in the picture come to stand, metaphorically in a way, for the aesthetic, and the sexual. You play very wonderfully and interestingly with the possibility of sexual gratification and the question of desire. But what interests me today, and it struck me looking at the versions from the seventeenth century, is how all the women look the same. That there is no difference between them, except in so far as they stand for different attributes. Metaphorically, they're physically identical.

D. This is debatable. We would have to look at a larger range of examples. It is not true with Cranach, for instance. Cranach's women have hair of various colour, they are dressed differently, wear a hat or not, they definitely don't look the same.

TG. That's true, but that has to do with different conventions and stylistic traditions, etc. But what comes to be a conflation, a habitual conflation it seems to me, in a lot of aesthetic theory, is that the connoisseur of women and the connoisseur of art come to be understood, in a sense, as two sides of the same coin: flipsides.

D. The connoisseur of women, you say?

TG. The connoisseur of women and the connoisseur of art—the conflation between them is a problematic conflation, and it's one with which, obviously, you were deeply concerned, in terms of the aesthetic of the sexual...

D. We have to remember John Goodman's point, you know, about the heterosexual relation and the homosexual relation. He is perfectly right in what he has said about the Judgement of Paris being very ambiguous from that point of view. Paris was reputed in all the Greek mythology as being a very beautiful man. He was apparently very attractive, even if somewhat effeminate.

I'd like to say a word about pleasure. Of course, there is pleasure in art. Pleasure plays the most important role. But pleasure in what sense, exactly? Beauty in what sense? Beauty is not a mere matter of harmony, proportion, and so on. Beauty has to do with what we are referring to, sexuality; and the same goes for pleasure. Pleasure is by no means simple, and Kant has some very precise ideas on the subject. It is related to the way we can get involved in the work of art. For instance, what I tried to do in my book on Piero della Francesca's Madonna del parto is to show why we are interested in the fresco not only in terms of meaning, but first of all in terms of painting. The trouble is that I totally missed the point of colour. This was a serious oversight and I need to correct it. Colour plays an essential role in the process and I missed that. I only had eyes for certain issues that are still of importance for us: where do children come from,
etc.? By the way this has nothing to do with the social context: the children in
the world, where did or do they all come from? Where do we all come from?

Works of art raise a number of fundamental issues. Every time we deal
with a work of art, we have to deal with an issue that we have to identify
as such. It’s not an enigma. We have to understand the question that the
work of art is raising. It’s not directly a matter of pleasure, but not only
of pleasure. It’s a matter of ‘investment’ in the Freudian sense, an
investment that may be profitable in terms of pleasure.

AUDIENCE. It seems to me important, then, to say that whatever interest
you have in Kant and in aesthetic judgement, your own position is much
closer to Hegel in the sense that you take it that art thinks. That that’s
what it does.

D. Yes. My point is radically non-Kantian because this would imply that our
relation to the work of art is in no way ‘disinterested’.

AUDIENCE. That sets the conditions under which you approach Kant.

D. Definitely. And I constantly keep reading and rereading the third Critique.

AUDIENCE. I’m interested in your reference to the Subject in relation to
the system, the structure, that comprises the art work. And I’m recalling
what you said earlier about your particular attachment to Chinese painting.
And given the sense in which, in your account of things, the subject is, as
it were, structurally embraced by the work, perhaps Chinese painting
especially responds to your approach. This would be because your approach
can deal with transformations within the structure more readily than you
can deal with the movement from one such system or structure to
another. So that you tend not to look at, let’s say, at what’s characterised
by a lot of Western art, which is that it changes structurally. So that you
might operate within the spectrum and within the system constituted, let’s
say, by the work of Mondrian or by abstract art as such. But your
operations would be in terms of that system. I’m wondering whether,
then, Chinese art as a system which comprises transformations within itself
might be an ideal region for your operations.

I have a subsidiary question, which is, when you shift from Renaissance
perspective to abstract painting and to Chinese painting, are you in each
case a different subject?

D. With regard to Chinese painting, the first thing to say is that the notion of
the picture, the notion of the ‘tableau’, is not relevant. When unrolling a
Chinese scroll one can only glimpse a part of it at a time. In western
museums, the visitors may have direct access to them in their full length,
as they also do in the Palace museum in Taipei, but with great reluctance
and parsimony. Normally, you’re allowed to look only at one part, a very
short section. And as for what we call the ‘paintings’, they are not
supposed to be permanently hanging on the wall. In Lacanian terms, we
cannot speak of the picture as a function in which the subject had to find
his marks. The viewer has first to find access to it, and make his way
through it following the path of some small figure of a traveller riding on a
horse, or be absorbed in contemplation through the intermediary of a
hermit seated on the bank of a river, etc.

My second remark is that the Chinese have their own idea of what the
history of painting is about. The history of painting is presumably founded
not on reproducing, but on copying. Everything starts with the great
models of antiquity that artists should try to equal, or at least to recall.
But of course, there is always some difference that may call for appreciation. The real challenge is how to cope with the great masterpieces of the past. Artists can never equal their predecessors, but they must try, try desperately. This is what the history of painting is about, what it is made of in its very texture, with no avowed concern for innovation.

Now, about the Subject. I wouldn't put it in terms of the one who looks at a Mondrian or a Renaissance painting. If you allow me, I would like to transform your question. The subject is by no means to be considered as something given. It is true that the subject is, in a way, a product of the Renaissance system of painting, in which it appears, emerges as such. What we are confronted with, in Mondrian, is a brand new type of subject, a 'sujet nouveau' which we cannot yet define. Mondrian's art is calling for a new subject, a new type of subject. In front of the Broadway Boogie-woogie, I cannot refrain from asking to myself: 'What am I doing here? Do I have my place here? Is there room for me?'

In front of a traditional painting, one was meant to feel more secure. According to Alberti's definition of the picture plane as a section of the visual pyramid, the viewer had to sit at the apex of the pyramid in order to have an appropriate look at the 'tableau'. Pascal was still adhering to such an image when he referred to perspective as a device that imposed looking at a painting from a point of view precisely located and at a no less precise distance. Supposedly, one knew where to sit as a 'subject'. There is no such commitment in front of a painting by Mondrian (not to mention Pollock). You don't even know how you're supposed to hang it on the wall, and so forth. Unrolling a painting, as they do in China, also implies a different relation to painting. But I am not Chinese, and haven't been educated in a way that could help me to comment properly on the matter.

**MARGARET IVERSEN.** I want to press on this idea of Renaissance painting or the subject being the product of the system of perspective. I mean, how literally do you mean that? I mean, what about division of labour, family relations, you know, surely, those kind of very strong economic social conditions produce the subject in some sense. So, could it not be that perspective comes into being at that time because it is an integral, satisfying, or whatever, position for that historical subject.

**D.** My answer would be that Renaissance perspective was based on the total abstraction of all that you are referring to, and that in order to really penetrate the implications of the system, we have to defer to the same rule. Piero della Francesca's treatise on perspective starts with the assumption that all we need is the eye, that is to say a point. At that stage, I don't see what class, gender, etc. has to do with the point. The subject is first reduced to a mere abstraction that was to be of great consequence in graphic as well as in philosophical terms. Then, of course, I agree with you, we would be free to raise all the issues you just mention. But the first move is to reduce the subject to a point. That is why perspective has been so influential, that is why it is related to the rise of the subject of science according to Lacan. But Lacan missed the point; he didn't see the importance of the reduction of the subject to a point. In order to build a system of perspective, we need no more than that: one point. And one point only, with no use for any distance point — Desargues will make this clear — and no difference made between the view point and the vanishing point. The subject is reduced to a point in exactly the same way as in the grammatical system it may be reduced to an 'I'. When you say 'je', you
say nothing about your being a worker, or a woman, or a man; you say 'je',
that's all.
I don't recall exactly how it reads in Piero's beautiful Italian: 'La
prospettiva suona nel nome suo...' Alberti was the first to assimilate
the eye to a point (the apex of the pyramid): the first to deal with the point as
the image of a line perpendicular to a plane, with the result (Brunelleschi's demonstration depended on this) that two points located on
one and the same line can coincide on the plane. But he still deferred to
optics and the classical theory of vision in all its aspects, physical as well
as atmospheric. Piero needs nothing but a point. Nothing but geometry.

MI. But you need desire?

D. Not at this stage, which is only theoretical. You may decide, you may even
want or need to inscribe a point on a surface, or want to trace it, I dare say:
but it would not be a matter of desire, nor of pleasure.

MI. Oh?! But is it fair to say that in this discussion, when you say the subject
is a point, and that that's how perspective constructs the subject...

D. This is not the way to put it. You cannot introduce the subject without any
preparation. You first have to deal with the point, as the first step towards the
emergence of the subject, which would eventually be sexualised or
gendered. Is it a woman or a man? This is not a matter of perspective. It
has nothing to do with ideology. As an offspring of 1968, some friends of
mine, interested in film theory, started debating on perspective as a typical
bourgeois system. That meant nothing to me. It was like saying that
arithmetic was 'bourgeois'. We've heard that one too, the idea of a
'bourgeois' science. Of course there is a bourgeois art, but it makes little
sense to deal with perspective in such terms. Perspective is not a science.
But it tends towards being one.

MI. But you did say at least at one moment - you were willing to say that, for
example, François Rouan's practice might be establishing a way of proceeding
with the 'tableau' that would offer something like a rethinking of the subject
of the 'tableau'. An alternative to the subject, the grammar of the subject,
installed by perspective.

D. I must thank you for referring to the work of François Rouan, another
close friend of mine - I don't know if you're familiar with his approach
to painting called 'tressage'. He would paint two canvases, cut them into
strips, which he would then carefully interweave in order to produce what
he calls a 'tableau'. Once again, here is the call for a new subject, 'un
nouveau sujet'. We have no idea of what that might be, except by looking
at such a new kind of painting. We cannot approach a painting by
Mondrian in the same way as we approach a painting by Piero della
Francesca. It situates, it addresses the viewer in a totally different way. To
what extent does it matter if the viewer is a woman or a man? You can
raise that issue, but then the subject is no longer reducible to a point.

MI. And therefore the grammar of predication...

D. ...is totally different. That's part of the question. We then have to deal
again with the eye and the predicates the eye is able to support. The promise
of Rouan's work in some way is that the subject is installed not as a single
point but as a duplicity...

MI. As divided. Split.
D. Divided, split. So the question of gender, as it’s raised potentially within Rouan’s practice, is very different from the question of gender as it would be raised within the work of a Renaissance artist. We have to understand that perspective is a typical example of what abstraction means in Western art. The first lines of Alberti’s treatise on painting — nobody ever mentioned this — are taken directly from Aristotle. According to Aristotle, mathematicians think of a surface as having no texture, of a line as having no thickness, of a point as having no extension. In order to make things visible the painter depends on a more substantial medium. But notwithstanding this restriction, abstraction is at work in Renaissance painting in a paradoxical way: how are we to think of the abstract in terms of visibility?

SB. Another aspect you mention in Theory of Cloud is not so much abstraction but repetition. The fas fatale, as applied by the Romans, typifies this. Surely it works in a rather different way?

D. Yes, thank you for mentioning a motif of great importance and to which I didn’t devote enough room in my Theory of Cloud. We owe to Georges Dumézil, the French historian of religions, some very interesting examples of repetition in the sense you just mentioned. During the archaic period, a certain category of priests were supposed to open the way before the Roman army would attempt to invade a foreign country. They were not acting as spies, in the hiding. On the contrary they would proceed to work in the open, marking the spots where the battle would take place, according to a precise ritual. In the same way as the primary task of perspective was to construct the chessboard on which representation was to take place, the fatale were in charge of setting up the stage for the actors to come. This being done, they would return to Rome, and the army would proceed according to the lines laid down by the priests.

At another level, no longer abstract or ritual, I think of perspective as an institution of the theatre. In these terms, perspective is also repetitive. First, it installs the grid on which the storia will take place. This is exactly what Alberti has in mind when he describes the chessboard as a ground on which to set up a three-dimensional decor, that would serve as a scene for the storia. And this is exactly what Foucault had in mind when he characterized Las meninas as a representation of the system of classical representation.

A. I may be wrong, but it seems to me as if you’re talking at cross-purposes. When you speak of the subject you mean something fundamentally different from Maggie Iversen. It seems to me that when you talk about the point that constitutes the subject as a product of the system of perspective, you’re making a philosophical, logical, or structural point about something that necessarily is part of the system. It’s only when the system is inhabited in the way you put the figures on a chessboard that you get a particular game, that you get a particular subject with particular characteristics. So that you’re talking about something philosophical and Maggie Iversen, it seems to me, is making a different kind of point.

D. I would formulate it differently. When I refer to the point as to the product of the system, there is nothing philosophical about it, even if it was to be of great consequence for philosophy.

A. But the point is a logical product of the system...

D. . . . a geometrical product.
A. ...and that is something different to what Maggie was saying?

D. Of course, a ‘subject of difference’ between us — meaning that it is not a word with only one sense. That is what is so interesting. You have in English a remarkable concept: ‘subject matter’. It’s extraordinary. I remember discussing this with Schapiro...

A. Or ‘object matter’?

D. Yes, you’re right, for ‘subject matter’ sounds like a paradox, or an oxymoron: the most abstract thing, the subject, turned into matter or matter turned into a subject. Well, I suppose that in English, as in French, ‘subject’ doesn’t only refer to a person, physical or grammatical, ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘you’, ‘he’, etc. there are different senses of the word, active as well as passive. One interesting aspect of perspective theory is that it allows and even urges you to think of all these differences. You can think of all these different meanings of ‘subject’ in perspectival terms. That is why the paradigm is so strong, why there is no end to it. You just have to look at what’s going on in new media. They all refer to the perspective as to a system which is in a way ahistorical. That’s why it makes no sense to refer to its being ‘bourgeois’, or the opposite. The paradigm is still active. It’s still useful in theoretical terms and it will never stop working as a model.

A. This also means, doesn’t it, that the same thing applies to the narratives we tell. There’s a strong tendency in art history to tell stories about Modernism and the emergence of abstraction in which you think of painting discarding things that are called conventions, and are evidently discardable. And one of them is perspective and that was discarded a number of years ago, right? But it seems to me that it’s important both for the things that let you engage with perspective, and for what is taken out of that. It’s not obvious that you can discard perspective, or that it has been discarded. As long as there is the question of the ‘tableau’, in some sense, there is always a question of perspective. But I think it stays active in French painting in the 50s and 60s, at the same time as, at least over in the USA, we thought that we’d just throw it out.

D. There is a classic book by Fritz Novotny entitled Cézanne and the end of scientific perspective. But Cézanne never claimed to have discarded perspective. When he says ‘I have to treat things with the plane, the sphere, and the cylinder,’ this has nothing to do with introducing cubes, spheres, or triangles in his paintings anything. This simply refers to different types of geometrical projection: planar, spherical, or conical. Cézanne didn’t by any means reject perspective. My point is that perspective plays a much more important role in our culture right now than it did during the Renaissance. There are not that many paintings constructed according to a strict perspective in the fifteenth century whereas film, photography, the new media, directly depend on it.

TAMARA TRODD. Can I just ask about Mondrian?

D. Well, Mondrian is a totally different case, but you can see that one and the only way to get rid of perspective was to become abstract.

TT. But it still has to do with the ‘tableau’?

D. It certainly has to do with the issue of the ‘tableau’ as such. You know that now it’s fashionable to say that we no longer have to deal with painting, that painting is something of the past. In a way that’s true; on the other hand,
when you look at what's going on in terms of video art and in terms of conceptual art, the pictorial model is still at work everywhere. And a number of photographers are obviously aiming at producing a kind of photograph that could be received, in terms of merchandise and with the help of colour and large formats, as substitutes for paintings. Painting may look outmoded, the model of the 'tableau' is still active.

BRIONY FER. I agree absolutely with what you've just said; but I'm interested in Tamara's point about Mondrian. I don't know whether this is a little side issue, and I'm slightly confused because just now I think you referred to a new type of subject with Mondrian. On the other hand, Mondrian is kind of surprising given that in some ways Mondrian represents a kind of abstraction that's pretty old. You know, that's been around for a long time. And one might think that we've become very familiar with it. On the other hand, you were speaking this morning very interestingly about an exhibition that I think that you never made, where you wanted to take abstraction way, way back.

D. And way ahead also.

BF. And way ahead. One of the things you've done wonderfully — and you've been very influential obviously, in your work on perspective — is the way you've made it so amazingly elastic and all pervasive. But I wonder whether the Mondrian question is a small side issue ... or an alternative paradigm that you might want to make as large or as significant as the other one ...

D. I agree, but Mondrian was pretty radical in his own way. You cannot deal with Mondrian in the same way that you would deal with other painters. Like Pollock. Pollock is much more radical than Picasso, except for Picasso's cubist period. But there are some moments in the art of the twentieth century that are so radical that we have to take them into account. And you cannot treat Mondrian merely as something of the past. For me, the reason that twentieth-century art is so important is that it explored most of the possibilities of the picture, by dealing with colour. We have some idea of geometrical abstraction, but we have no idea of chromatic abstraction. Yve-Alain has some idea of it, when he deals with Ellsworth Kelly. But we still have to investigate this. My idea is that, in the same way as art has paved the way for the development of geometry, in terms of points, line, and surface, modern art has paved and is still paving the way for a geometry of colour that will develop in the next centuries.

BF. Colour, then, is a crucial issue.

D. Definitely. And it has to do with the point because a point may have no extension in mathematical terms. But in order for a chromatic point to be active as such, it needs some extension. Seurat's dots, you know, cannot be minimised. They need some extension to work as chromatic points. But this would mean an entirely new start in geometry.

AUDIENCE. I'm just wondering about pushing the questions onto slightly different terrain. One of the things that's been striking to me today, if we think back to what you were saying about what art history is, philosophy in art, and so forth, is the amount of emphasis that we've had over the last thirty minutes, probably even longer now, on the issue of the spectator, the beholder, the subject. The person, as it were, at the point of reception of the finished art work. And what I'm thinking about, and I'm thinking this because I work in an art school amongst practitioners of art and I know that there are a lot of people from that background here today,
is that rather than thinking of it from that kind of art-historical perspective, where one's at the point of receiving a finished item, one's concern is often more about how is one thinking, testing knowledge, stretching knowledge, through the actual making of the work? I suppose, quite crudely speaking, it is a matter of production and consumption being in opposition here. I am thinking of the need to reappraise ideas that we have received through Kant, whose work has been detected as being one of the key institutionalising factors of this kind of approach.

This is a broad question, and it's not meant to be a trick question at all, but I think it raises quite important issues about the way in which one thinks about art and the stretching of philosophy towards art. Possibly moving towards art objects in the way we talked about earlier. But thinking about them, as it were, in the processes of making. You touch on this question occasionally, yet the overarching theme of the discussion (which I think is not at all surprising, because I think it's the world that we've come to inhabit) has been driven by the receiving of art as finished, or possibly unfinished, goods. But more from the practitioner's perspective.

D. I am surprised to hear Kant invoked in the context of audience response, because when I think of Kant, I see him as offering a kind of aesthetics that is, in any case and in a very strong way riveted to an object. It's true that I'm the one who says that an object is beautiful. But my judgement would be of no consequence if there were no target.

A. Well, Kant never says what's beautiful.

D. You're right: he never does. But one could argue that the whole burden of his aesthetics has in fact less to do with the spectator, than with the object.

A. I would say the opposite.

YVE-ALAIN BOIS. Kant doesn't give any rule, that's what's so surprising. There is no aesthetic rule except that one must have the conviction that his judgement is of universal value. The judgement is subjective in that one has to make it; but it needs to be objectively founded...

D. What's impressive in the analysis of the judgement of taste is that one cannot give any objective reason to support it. Nonetheless, there is a footnote on colour in which Kant refers explicitly to the new developments in Optics and explicitly states that starting to deal with light and colour in mathematical terms could lead to a more rigorous form of aesthetic judgement. I agree with you: the task is now to move from the sphere of reception back to the one of production. In this, I strictly adhere to Marx: production comes first, no matter what the claims of the ideology of consumption are. That's why it is so important to keep in touch with the artists, and their work in progress.

A. And I think that in a work like Yve-Alain's, this has resulted in a tremendous emphasis on, and careful attention to, the 'made-ness' of the work.

D. We agree on that. Reception surely is to be taken into account. But you can't get real access to the arts through it.

YAB. I'm sure this is not very well known, but in the post-68 years, Althusser held a seminar and wanted to produce a book on the production of art from the point of view of the practitioners, based on interviews with artists and the analysis of their practice from a Marxist point of view... Do you remember that?
D. Of course I do. That was one of the reasons for my joining the École Normale. I even published in *Scalier*, a short-lived periodical sponsored by the ENS, a kind of manifesto entitled 'Histoire et/ou théorie de l'art' in which you find an echo of these discussions. The problem, in retrospect, was with the kind of artists we were respectively interested in... Those were the days!

A. And perhaps it's time to call this a day? Can we do that?

D. Sure we can! Sure it was! I simply want to thank all of you, before we leave. It was really a great experience for me. Thank you!