

Notes on the index

1. In regards to casting and photography we presume indexicality as the primary mode of signification, especially in sculpture multiples, as well as with photography in its pursuit of depicting an intractable relation to reality.¹ Both casting and photography enact a representation that is perceived as cathected to the referent (the object). Yet this is performed in two quite distinct ways; one through a three dimensional imprint from a mold taken from a model or so called ‘original’, the other through the transference of light onto paper or screen surface to create a two dimensional image—‘flat death’ as Barthes would term the photograph in relation to images of the human subject. Rosalind E. Krauss in her account of 1970’s conceptual practices drawing on Duchamp through the lens of semiotic and psychoanalytic concepts fails to sufficiently complicate and deconstruct the presumption of indexicality, especially in relation to photography. But also in cast objects as highlighted in her discussion of the work by Duchamp *With my Tongue in my Cheek* (1959) where the cheek cast in plaster is taken as an index while the line drawing on paper is described as functioning iconically. Given *Notes on the Index*² was written in 1976 we benefit from the ways Krauss isolates conceptual practices within an indexical model, thus affording future critique on the ways artists have dealt with the ‘crisis or representation’ and the irreparable fissure of the Saussurean sign.

2. Much conceptual art from the 1970s entrusted the photograph to fix what was otherwise unfixable through its temporal nature (happenings, performance), site-specific context (limited or non-accessibility) or simply as the best medium to document an activity otherwise undocumentable (time based process work). In effect much of this work was made with photography as having an equivalency to any experiential or physical manifestation. In other words, the referent and its image were conflated, joined at the hip in order to prove the event or object existed while transposing this event or object into the photographic ‘work’. They became inseparable and in some cases the photograph elided any physical object or event that may have preceded it. This is the departure point from which this series of notes emanate on the unreliability and subsequent rupture of the indexical sign, lightly scripting the objects and images in this project that appropriates Krauss’ essay title. One such image is coded through the traces of objects left by stains. *Stain in three parts* (2013) directly addresses the function of the indexical sign that presumes something that-has-been. In this wall work, the stains suggest objects since removed. Yet the absent objects are understood as textual traces in the Derridean sense, it is the past and future trace. As a text these marks are thoroughly inscribed by other events and future textual transpositions. The physical presence of the stains is written by what is not there, and it is ‘that-which-is-not-there’ to which these objects and texts circle.

3. It is this question on the function of photography as a document or record to which we are in part concerned. More specifically it is the relation between the photograph and that other indexical practice of casting where the two dissolve into each other in a confusion of origins and referents; where the writing and the accompanying visual forms may engage in a textual play (text is the primary vehicle to explore this play). Barthes and Kristeva refer to signifiance as the mobility of the signifier that cannot be fixed to a signified; the possibility that meaning is confounded, communication is jammed. This fracturing of the sign that emerged as fundamental to post-structuralist theories of the late 1960s was directly adopted by much conceptual art in the 1970s and the accompanying art theory. Krauss makes a point of the ‘pervasiveness of the photograph as a means of representation’³ in the 1970s as central to an indexical model that deconstructs the conventional sign into a trace, yet a trace that figures a presence. For Krauss the index sustains the existence of what otherwise would dissipate, evaporate or be incidental to discursive models of art theory. The argument I outline here lies in a more problematic textualisation of the object beyond the indexical model. *Inside-out* (2013) operates as three visual texts: a section of wall, a photograph of the section of wall, a casting of the section of wall. These texts unfold as the reader negotiates the space of their placement and material relations. Yet, the confluence of these representations that bear some likeness is not a line from ‘a’ to ‘b’ to ‘c’. The displacement of the casting from the wall surface via a mold enunciates a trace that is produced by the whole symbolic order of citations and quotes; it is not a simple matter of making a casting of a section of wall. The sink that has been removed to reveal three plumbing holes and stains on the wall releases various possible references; the staining that occurs on the opposite wall runs around another plumbing fixture; the *Spout and Vessel* that sits below the cast wall area recalls Duchamp and the myth of the Argo; the black tray of *Slug Oil* is associated with the liquid stains having solidified, and so the text weaves its web. The point is that *Inside-out* cannot figure its presence any more than the text can confirm an origin; the traces are linguistic ghosts.

4. Instead of the trace as an indexical mark that figures a presence, we may detach the trace from its function of signification and determinant of presence. I propose a model that identifies only to eschew the reliance of meaning making on any trace that presumes an origin or prior state, whether it be an event or object. This modelling touches on aspects of Derrida’s writing on différance and trace, notions that are themselves furthered in Feu la Cendre (translated as *Cinders*⁴). It is the cinder as a trace that can be anything but itself to which the presumption of indexicality is pulled apart. In other words the cinder is ‘a remainder without remainder’ or ‘something which is not’. Derrida dispenses with the alignment of the trace with the indexical sign, taking the trace well beyond any presence into the notion of the cinder:

but that is just what he calls the trace, this effacement. I have the impression now that the best paradigm for the trace, for him, is not, as some have believed, and he as well, perhaps, the trail of the hunt, the fraying, the furrow in the sand, the wake in the sea, the love of the step for its imprint, but the cinder⁵

The semiological understanding of the index that functions as the sign adhering to its referent, the signifier as conflated with the signified, as the naturalised (given) sign is imploded by Derrida in these few lines. For no longer can a footprint be so simple in it’s meaning of someone having passed; the trace or cinder, as it has become, is no longer causally or physically linked to a ‘real’ object or event. The index is shifted from the spatial and temporal world into the evasiveness of the word, into a concept that has no origin, that immolates at the origin. The referent is textual.

5. The material object can be understood as a textual productivity, that is a trace, a ghosting, a gap. In this Derridean logic there is no existence of the object beyond its role as signifier of the signifier, it’s presence is non-presence as it is constantly deferred. It casts back to a past while moving into the future; as a difference the object, in its trace, occupies a (non)place of movement and différance. Therefore the signifier of the object in its textual syntagmatic chain is an element that is always in referral to another element that is not present. This element is the trace of other traces to which it differs. This difference is also the possibility of the forms created from negative spaces cast in another material and imbedded in a black field. *Slug Oil* (2013) is occupied with this movement of the trace, the displacement of the referent as signifiers are ‘constituted on the basis of a trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system’⁶. The object is a productivity that occurs through the transformation and difference to another text. Therefore it is the textualisation of the object that leaves its trace rather than its material or physical presence. This is an important distinction as it identifies the motility and deferment of the signifier, that in this case makes the very notion of an indexical trace an impossibility.

6. We can say that the process of translation negates, renders redundant any recourse to the original in the sense that the ‘original’ becomes a figure of language. As Paul de Man notes ‘the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, thus confirming the death of the original’.⁷ We need to be clear here that it is the translation that renders the ‘original’ dead because it precipitates an ‘afterlife’ of something that was, in a similar way that a photograph presumes something ‘that-has-been’. However, if we extend this conception of the ‘death of the original’ into the theory of the Text without beginning or end, then the death of the original serves as a notion in which to figure an original that never existed, though not to deny a precursor: the original that in its theoretical conceptions acts as a device that produces linguistic movement and play; the copy after the copy.

7. Duchamp precipitated a semiotic play with the meaning of words that extends to the mold and the casting, developing a distinction between “apparition” and “appearance” as inside-outside. Notably in the ‘Nine Malic Molds’ of *The Large Glass* (1915-23), but also in the enigmatic *Objet-Dard* (1951) he twisted meanings inside out and allowed objects to be liberated from referential function so as to be (re)written by the viewer. *Objet-Dard* part of the armature used to support the casting of the figure in *Etant donnés* (1946-66), specifically her breast and rib area, is both a play on the negative/ positive reversals and inside-out transpositions of the casting and the mold, as well as the text—the title plays on the ‘d’art’ with the masculine ‘dart’; Adam’s dart to Eve. As such *Spout and Vessel* (2013) is another trace that alludes to other events and objects, a fragment translated from the imprint of the mold, eschewing the vessel to which it is transported. The vessel is imaginary yet its trace is a pivotal linguistic movement. The vessel may be an amphora, an object that claims an origin, yet as in the reconstruction of the Argo we know that the original never existed:

The translation is a fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment—so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly—and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there never has been one.⁸

8. *Objet petit a*, the other as object cause of desire; alas a return (always a return) not without delay: a chimerical return.

The object cause of desire wrapped, presented, folded out (inside out): the mold.

Alas
Lask
Lasse
Lassie
Lassia
Lassus
Lassitude

Ashes of etymologies slip though our grasp, trickle through the gaps between our fingers, our voice; tiring as a silent vociferation. Yet as graphic marks on paper another energy restores them, a replenishment with a certain possibility to shimmer in différance, in the deferment of the referent.

9. We know much about the textual play of the absent *Winter Garden* photograph. We know that this photograph for Barthes provides the hinge to which ruminations on personal trauma projected as the photographic punctum may emanate. But we also know that this photograph is a linguistic construction, one woven from imaginary indexical marks and traces:

Barthes’s liminal curtains cover his text and its invisible photograph... It is constructed and rhapsodized, or sewn together, from the fragments of woven fragment or texts.⁹

There is one colour image in *Camera Lucida*.¹⁰ It is an image on the frontice page by Daniel Boudinet tiled *Polaroid*, depicting light coming through bluish green curtains. It is the only image in *Camera Lucida* without the human subject. It is the fragment to which a translation breaks open; where the traces of the subject appear as a convulsion. *Polaroid (for R.B)* (2010-13) was made before the Daniel Boudinet photograph was sighted (the Boudinet image is not printed in the current English translation of *Camera Lucida*). It occurred as a translation from what was written about it, thereby treating the image as a text to which another text would emerge. This transposition of text into image undergoes reversals and duplications as the origin has no place or prior position. *Polaroid (for R.B)* is a visual text as the fragment of woven fragments to which the index frays.

10. ‘A *figure* of the text, necessary to the bliss of reading’: the body of the text ‘split into fetish objects, into erotic sites’.¹¹ Hence the potential of the text for bliss (jouissance), the chance that the subject may be undone, that desire does not have a representation, a determinate object. Instead many objects, or parts of objects may move in and out of the body of text; the porous and amorphous textual body. This text can be said to have no body. Rather this body of text is formed momentarily as the divergent and differentiated texts coalesce, before drifting apart. The body of this text is drifting amongst other bodies, absorbing, meshing, conflating only to separate, disband, defuse. The body has no stability, no centre; the text of production, of enunciation has no singular attribution—the subject’s textual body is not particular. Alas the representation of pleasure (as in the coding of pleasure) has no need for attachment to an object; the subject’s body itself a textual field, permeated and perforated by multiple and mutable “I”s. He searches for a self that may be suitable (in that moment) to write an object cause of desire; “cinders there are”. But his object does not sit still, stay seated long enough to be fixed on the plate. The object disperses, enacts a transfiguration as it becomes something else. This text may be read as figurative for it postulates desire but never attaches itself, never gives itself up (or gives itself over). This text can contrive to shiver, to shudder in the moment of voice, of enunciation as the subject reads (physically) a jouissance, when the object of desire leaves its trace; “of the others, cinder there is”. Alas at the moment beyond the object, after the object where the idea of the disappearance holds the import of jouissance; the erotic site incontestable in its unlocatableness. The erotic site is thus the cinders of the text of jouissance, for the text in its apparition creates the affect (objet petit a) to which no indexed object could ever perform.

11. The mold is a kind of text that operates in the linguistic realm of the ‘shifter’: it only makes sense in the context of what it is supposed to utter, to produce. In the Lacanian sense if the mold operates as an indexical signifier (shifter), it is split between its stated function (to reproduce something) and its action of production (enunciation). The ‘I’ of the indexed author is similarly split as in the textuality of the mold. When one views the split subject as the shifter at work (enunciation) within a particular context (this writing under a pronoun), there is a relation to the duplicity of the mold as a site of a reproduction, while maintaining its unique ‘objectness’. In other words, the mold states its purpose as a very particular and determinate one. Yet as it is the obscured internal surface that is the only reason for its existence, the enunciation is what is produced from the mold: the negative space of the mould is fundamentally split with the positive object that is produced. They can never be reconciled, though they are co-dependent.

We therefore have in the mold an object that is both indeterminate and highly specific in its function. It is an object that is produced to facilitate a constant production (enunciation). It is the object par excellence as an indexical signifier; a shifter for the enunciation of other objects.

12. The cast object must be recognised as thoroughly textual. It is derived from previous texts, it is contiguous (intertextually woven) with whatever its context of writing may be: its site and means of display, its reproduction in photographic form, the words that are written or spoken about it, etc. It is also textually imbued with social, economic and art histories. As a fragment that is found and then cast, reproduced in photographic form and written and spoken about, this object is non-specific in the sense that it is part of many texts that cannot be particularised. It is a supplement in the Derridean sense because its is the product of a larger discourse, of systems of language to which it is both part of and separate to, as Derrida notes: ‘Its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness’.¹² It is inside and outside these structures because it functions in both its absence and presence; it is premised on a web of productions: a prior object that falsely suggest an origin, the origin that is translated (“translation augments and modifies the original”¹³) into another material through the absent space of the mold. Yet the so-called original also existed in a prior state (another material text) that was molded. Further, the photographic text proposes its absence again (‘flat death’) as another supplement. To what? And so the centre is lost, or rather there never was a centre. We have the affects of the supplement, it never had an absence or a presence, only an affect, a virulence.

13. If the cast object is textually and physically incomplete then the photograph of the same object is doubly incomplete; it is a fragment of a fragment. Yet the photograph attempts to sign the imaginary object—as in Kristeva’s semiotic— as complete, the flat plane of death presumes that the stillness of death provides an end to signification, for the signified to be stabilised. In this conception, the only death that occurs is the fantasy that the text can resolve itself upon death; the fantasy of death as the imaginary piercing the symbolic with the ideal of a transgressive nothingness, the void before and beyond language. The semiotic chora would have this ideal state where the subject and its other are indistinguishable, the imaginary persists—after the advent of the symbolic—through language, to conjure a space outside language so as to fantasise the possibility of a complete subject (without fragmentation): the symbolic return to the semiotic. Such an impossibility is made all the more urgent by the tacit realisation that flat death and physiological death cannot complete anything let alone resolve the incomplete subject. The subject is doomed to an infinity of incompleteness, and thus the fantasy of death is the imaginary peeping through the cloak of the symbolic. Death here functions as the drive that allows the subject to sustain its illusory sense of completeness, to disavow the real.

14. Alas there is a constant deferment of the referent in this procession of signifiers; we cannot locate the real for as much as we cannot determine a suitable, knowable signified. I return to Derrida’s notion of différance as ‘a thought which wishes to yield to the imminence of what is coming or about to come’.¹⁴ But this ‘coming’ can never arrive as the present is perpetually deferred through the very process of signifiers that never settle, and thus the subject is constantly in formation and production as are the these objects and images. The binary of floating and sinking acts as a play on yield as an act of giving up or one of gain. *Yield* (2011-13), the photograph of the mine-shaft and the lead object seek this gap, the deferral of the present. A dangerous surplus Derrida may say, for where is the specific meaning of this text, the locatable signifieds? Where is the certainty of intent, a relevant translation? This textual relation between the fragmented subject whereby the gap produces the potential for jouissance and the real, finds the only possible redemption in the writing of the Text itself, and this text is constantly being written and rewritten forcing the subject to perpetually avoid the real through a search for the other. This could be understood as a search for *objet petit a* in an attempt to both trace and avoid the real; in the same way the index may be considered an impossible definition of an object.

¹But not forgetting its historical uses such as plaster death masks, busts, copies of famous sculptures, children's feet, and contemporaneously in architectural mouldings.

²Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 196-219.

³*Ibid.*, 206.

⁴Jacques Derrida and Ned Lukacher, *Cinders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991).

⁵*Ibid.*, 43.

⁶Jacques Derrida, Christopher Norris, and Alan Bass, *Positions*, 2nd English ed., Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (London: Continuum, 2002), 26.

⁷Paul De Man, "Conclusions" Walter Benjamin's "the Task of the Translator," *Yale French Studies* 69, (1985): 38.

⁸*Ibid.*, 44.

⁹Beryl Schlossman, "The Descent of Orpheus: On Reading Barthes and Proust," in *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 149.

¹⁰Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography* (London: Vintage, 1993).

¹¹Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 56.

¹²Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

¹³Jacques Derrida and Christie McDonald, *The Ear of the Other : Otobiography, Transference, Translation : Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

¹⁴Jacques Derrida, "The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 534.