

The Other “Sch,” or When Damisch Met Schapiro*

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for Teri

I. Vermont

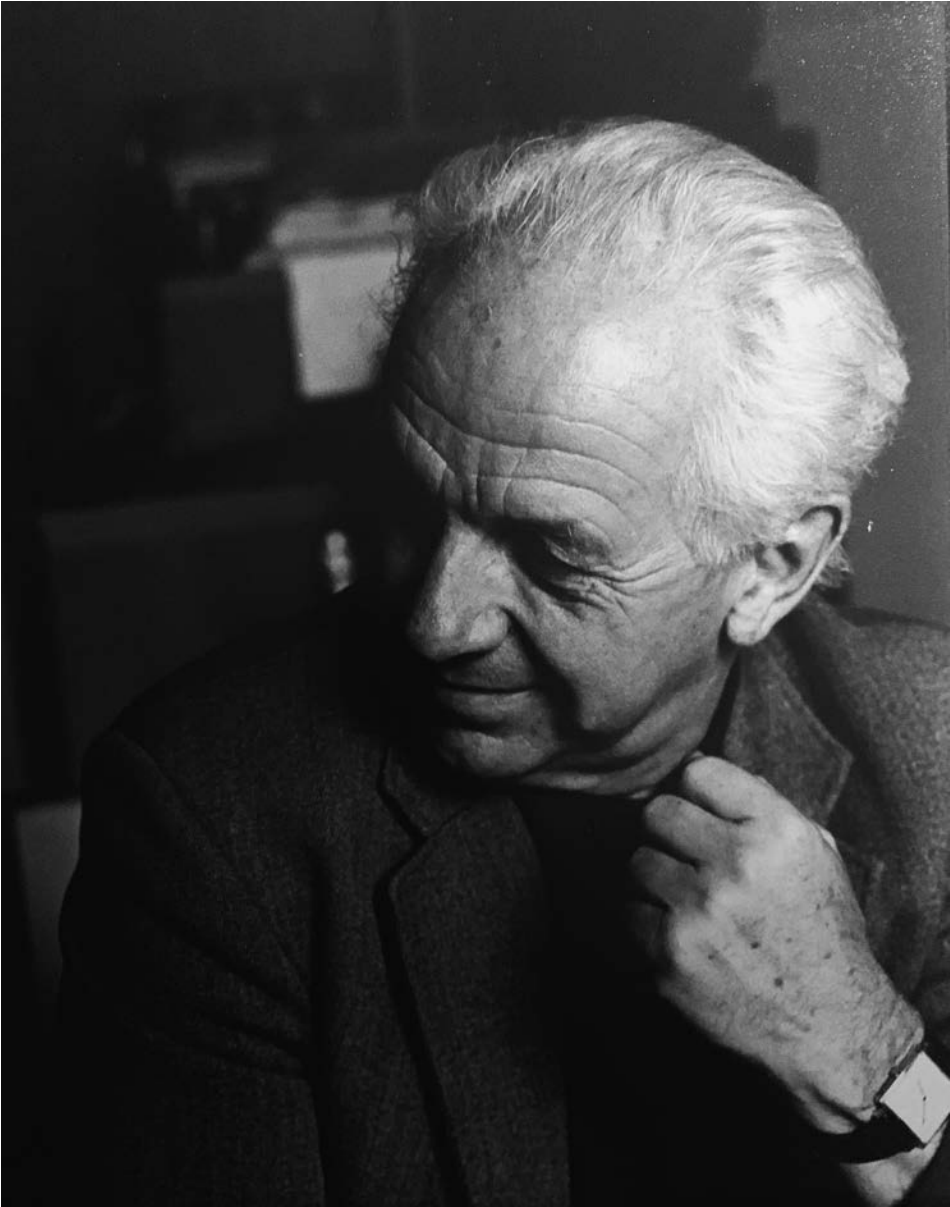
S[chapiro] alleges that our discussions are so interesting for him because, after the death of Panofsky, he no longer has anyone to talk with who is both an art historian and a philosopher.

Hubert Damisch wrote these lines in his black bound notebook immediately after spending two days (September 9th and 10th, 1972) with Meyer and Lillian Schapiro at their home in Rawsonville, Vermont. He singled these lines out for emphasis with two vertical lines in the margin.¹ Was this a point of pride for him? Was there perhaps more than a hint of presumption? It is certainly possible. However, we would probably be wrong to draw such hasty conclusions. Damisch was surely well aware of the weight of a comparison that put him on a par with Erwin Panofsky in Schapiro’s mental universe (Damisch, at the time, was only a marginal figure in the French academic world of art history and philosophy²), and so he would certainly have had in mind the fact that in situations involving a growing friendship, compliments are among the instruments of seduction. These two vertical lines of emphasis, likely put down after his return to France, were not so much a way of marking a flattering comment (he mitigates the thrust of the com-

* This title echoes Damisch’s “L’autre ‘Ich’ ou le désir du vide: Pour un tombeau d’Adolf Loos,” *Critique* 339–340 (August–September 1975), pp. 806–18, reprinted in *Ruptures Cultures* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1976), pp. 143–59. English translation by John Savage, “L’Autre ‘Ich,’ L’Autriche-Austria, or the Desire for the Void: Toward a Tomb for Adolf Loos,” *Grey Room* 1 (Fall 2000), pp. 26–41.

1. The first page of the notebook bears the inscription “Hubert Damisch. The Society for the Humanities . . . Sept. 1972.” The notebook, currently in the possession of Teri Wehn-Damisch, will become part of the Damisch archives at the Institut Mémoires de l’édition contemporaine, or IMEC, which are in the process of being organized and classified.

2. Damisch did not obtain a secure academic post until 1973 (see letter 34), and it was not until 1975 that he was to be appointed full professor at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), a position he was to occupy until 1996.



Renate Ponsold. Hubert Damisch. 1991.

SCHAPIRO (9-10 Sept.)

S. prétend perdre tout d'intérêt à nos discussions du fait qu'il n'a plus personne à qui parler, depuis la mort de Panofsky, qui soit en même temps qu'un philosophe, un historien d'art.

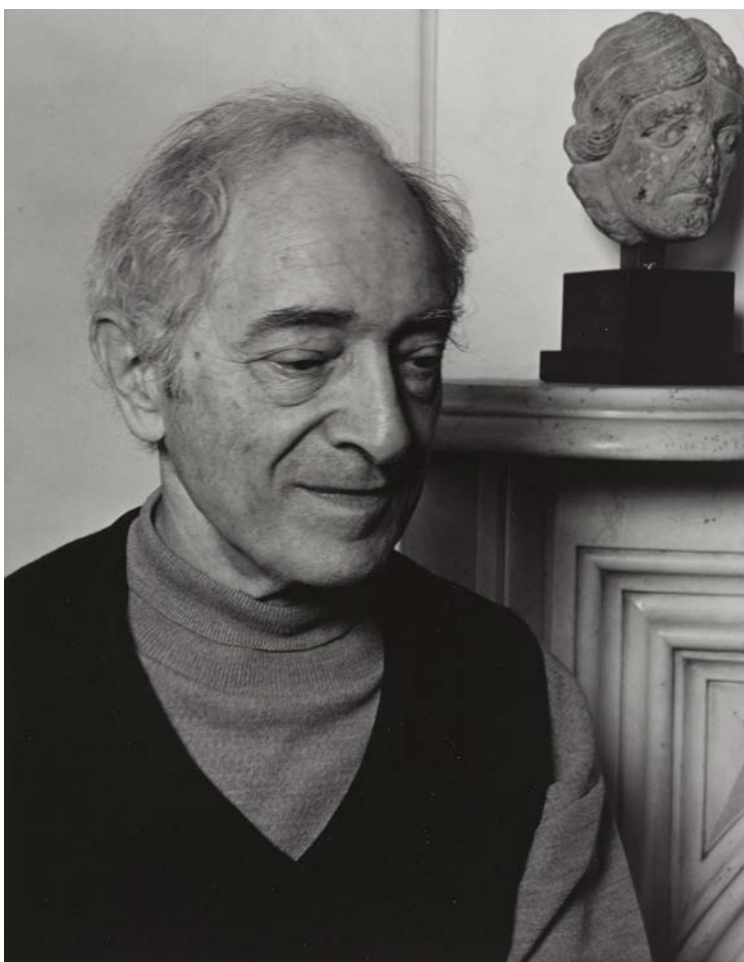
L'intérêt qu'il porte aux hommes autant qu'aux écrits : la façon qu'il a de toujours situer l'autre d'un lieu auquel il fait référence -

Même sans la moindre défaillance (noms, dates, positions etc.) - Quelques jours plus tard, j'apprendrai que S. a été malade pendant deux ans, et qu'après la médiane (pensée) n'a plus ni les fonctions. Aujourd'hui parfaitement remis en état, en acte de marche -

Hubert Damisch's notes. 1972.

parison, in his usual fashion, by noting, before reporting the words of the master, "Schapiro *alleges that*") as they were a means to underline a recognition, namely, the recognition of the uniqueness of their intellectual exchanges, situated as they were in the field not only of art history but also of philosophy. Damisch, who was to spend his life steering a course between these two poles (but surely *two* is saying too little), could have dreamt of nothing better than this recognition, placing as it did their friendship under the seal of a dual passion: philosophical and artistic. There is an element of truth here in this small concession to vanity, and also a key that will allow us to unlock the treasure chest of their relationship. Certainly, something happened at Rawsonville during those two days. It was something that Damisch wanted to explain more fully, as we can see from a letter dated September 15, 1972: "I must also mention the fantastic amount of information that you imparted to me." But these details were never to be put down on paper. Rather, Damisch was to content himself repeatedly (letters 16, 19, 32, 39) with dreaming of the return of "those days and evenings spent in Vermont, eating, talking, and walking" (letter 32), days that had allowed him to feel "a bit stronger and, perhaps also, [. . .] a better person" (letter 16).

We shall, of course, never know the exact content of the spoken exchanges that



Arthur Mones. Meyer Schapiro. 1980.
© Estate of Arthur Mones.

were to take on for Damisch a mythic dimension; yet we can get an idea of them from the long list of suggested readings that Schapiro gave to Damisch and that Damisch was careful to note down in the very same notebook (see the bibliographic appendix, pp. 119–23).³ In addition to Schapiro’s essays, reviews, and lectures on Romanesque art, Eugène Fromentin, Bernard Berenson, and Piet Mondrian, we find notes connected to Schapiro’s communist (but nonetheless anti-Stalinist) affiliation with the *Partisan Review* from 1937 to 1942,⁴ as well as numerous names and titles dealing with subjects as diverse as Chinese poetry and culture (Arthur Waley), Russian literature (Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy, and Anton Chekhov), the English essayist and artist William Hazlitt, the cathedral of Milan, linguistics (Otto Jespersen, Roman Jakobson), Russian semiotics (Lev F. Zegin and Boris A. Uspensky), molecular structure and its possible relevance to the study of art and artifacts (Cyril Stanley Smith), the theory of relativity and the concept of space (Albert Einstein and Max Jammer), Wittgenstein’s philosophy (Max Black and Norman Malcolm), Willard Van Orman Quine’s concept of “extension,” the history of art (August Schmarsow, Dagobert Frey, and Panofsky), the composer Ernst Krenek’s theory of music, etc. In short, these two men moved in an infinite number of worlds, and they did so together as much out of friendship as out of a desire to reflect together on new horizons for the history of art.

2. Meeting Points

When Damisch visited Schapiro at Rawsonville in September 1972, the two had known each other for some ten years. Damisch had first met Schapiro at Columbia University (letter 44), when, as a Focillon Fellow at Yale during the fall of 1963, Damisch was traveling up and down the East Coast of the United States. As Damisch tells it, this first encounter was an abortive beginning.⁵ Schapiro apparently was wary of Damisch because of the latter’s connection with Pierre Francastel, a historian of art who was known for his sociological approach and for his left-wing political activity (things that would have endeared him to Schapiro), but also for being a proponent of a nationalist art history and champion of the spirit of France (views that Schapiro abhorred).⁶ It would not be until October 1969 that the two men were to meet on more equal terms, and that a mutual confidence began to be established. At that

3. As we can see from the notebook, as well as the letters published in this issue, this list will serve as a point of reference for Damisch’s readings throughout his American stay.

4. For a discussion of Schapiro’s political commitment, see Andrew Hemingway, “Meyer Schapiro and Marxism in the 1930s,” *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994), pp. 13–39.

5. Hubert Damisch, in Damisch, Giovanni Careri, Bernard Vouilloux, “Hors cadre: Entretien avec Hubert Damisch,” *Perspective: Actualité en Histoire de l’Art* 1 (2013), pp. 11–23.

6. On the position Damisch took with regard to Francastel, see Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Damisch, “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” *October* 85 (Summer 1998), pp. 4–5. Francastel’s parochialism was clearly evident in several of his publications, including *L’humanisme roman* (1942) and *L’histoire de l’art instrument de la propagande germanique* (1945). Schapiro mounted a rigorous critique of this essentially nationalist form of art history in “Race, Nationality and Art,” *Art Front* 2, no. 4 (March 1936), pp. 10–12.



*Meyer Schapiro. Drawing
of Hubert Damisch.
September 9, 1972.*

time, Damisch was living in New York City and attending Schapiro's seminar at Columbia, "Theory and Method of Art History."⁷ Damisch's notes taken during October and November bear witness to his interest in Schapiro's way of attacking the problems arising from the classification and distribution of works of art according to historical periods, geographical regions, and cultural, political, and religious relations, and they show his interest in Schapiro's critical approach to the use of the terms "style" and "meaning."

Given the cold nature of their initial encounter, it might seem odd that Damisch would have decided to become one of Schapiro's students. There is, however, a simple explanation. After the death of Panofsky in 1968, Schapiro was not only the most renowned American art historian of his time, he was also one of the most original. He was a unique figure in the academic world, challenging the limits traditionally set upon the discipline of art history by drawing upon psychoanalysis, ethnology, the philosophy of science, and political philosophy. He could be found working one day on medieval art objects, another day on modern art, and then another on contemporary artworks; he was constantly open to connections across chronological boundaries. This way of reckoning the landscape of art fit well with Damisch's intellectual sensibilities since Damisch was at once a philosopher (he had studied under Merleau-Ponty), an ethnologist (he had at one time considered writing a thesis with Claude Lévi-Strauss as advisor), an art critic (he was a contributor to numerous gallery catalogues), and an art historian (he had studied with Francastel at the *École pratique des hautes études* [EPHE] before becoming a student of Gaëtan Picon, who

7. The typescript of these lectures and discussions is conserved at Columbia University, Meyer Schapiro Collection, box 187. The first session of the seminar took place on October 1, 1969. Damisch refers to these sessions in "Hors cadre."

was to be the advisor of the doctoral thesis that Damisch defended in 1970).⁸ More crucially perhaps, Damisch’s interest in Schapiro had been sparked by several articles that the latter had published in 1968 and ’69 in which he engaged directly with psychoanalysis, the philosophy of language, and semiotics. In “The Apples of Cézanne” (1968), Schapiro drew upon Freudian theory in order to understand the displacements and processes of figuration (*Darstellbarkeit*) underlying certain of the painter’s iconographic obsessions and formal inventions.⁹ At the same time, in his article “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art,” Schapiro had developed an alternative approach to the analysis of the visual arts (mainly painting) that involved taking into account the role of non-mimetic components (frame, direction, field, vehicle) in the creation and perception of the image-sign.¹⁰ Since Damisch had for some time been keenly interested in the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and in particular in the implications of their ideas for understanding exactly how the various elements combine in the viewer’s experience of a painting, he could not help being so greatly interested by Schapiro’s investigations as to want to get closer to their source.¹¹



Schapiro. Self-portrait. 1960.

8. See Bois et al., “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” p. 4. On the many faces of Damisch and his relations with Schapiro, see also “Hubert Damisch and Stephen Bann: A Conversation,” *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 2 (2005), pp. 155–81; and the studies collected by Giovanni Careri and Georges Didi-Huberman, *Hubert Damisch, l’art au travail* (Paris: Mimesis, 2016).

9. Meyer Schapiro, “The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still Life,” *Art News Annual* 34 (1968), pp. 34–53. Damisch had access to the French version of this article that was published in the first issue of the *Revue de l’Art* in 1968.

10. Meyer Schapiro, “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Sign,” *Semiotica* I, 3 (1969), pp. 223–42.

11. This recalls several texts by Damisch: “Robinson,” *Tel Quel* 31 (Fall 1968), pp. 74–80, reprinted in *Ruptures Cultures*, pp. 25–34, and translated by Rosalind Krauss as “Robinsonnades I: The Allegory,” *October* 85 (Summer 1998), pp. 18–27; his “La colonnade de Perrault et les fonctions de l’ordre classique,” in *L’urbanisme de Paris et l’Europe (1600–1680)*, ed. Pierre Francastel (Paris: Klincksieck,

3. *Correspondence(s)*

This new beginning to their relationship can be seen not only in Damisch's notes on the courses mentioned above but also, and more essentially, in the beginnings of a correspondence that was to become more frequent and extensive after 1971–72 and that was to be maintained, without ever really letting up, until Schapiro's death in 1996.¹² In March 1970, having returned to France, Damisch was very much involved in the planning of a new journal (provisionally named *Cahiers*) along with a group of young art historians and theoreticians that included Yve-Alain Bois, Jean-Claude Bonne, Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, and Jean-Louis Schefer. Damisch sent the tables of contents of the first issues to Schapiro; among the pieces intended for publication was Lebensztejn's translation of Schapiro's "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art."¹³ A good part of the conversation between Damisch and Schapiro at this time concerned shared readings (Derrida, Freud, George Kubler, Paul Roazen) as well as the exchange of their own publications. In particular, in June 1971, Damisch sent Schapiro two articles: "Le gardien de l'interprétation" (The Keeper of Interpretation), on Giovanni Morelli and Freud's *The Moses of Michelangelo*, and "Figuration et représentation: Le problème de l'apparition" (Figuration and Representation: The Problem of Appearance), one of the preludes to his first major work, *A Theory of /Cloud/*.¹⁴

Beyond these shared readings and projects for publications, the growth in the correspondence from the end of 1971 emerged out of two other concerns. The first was Damisch's insecure academic situation at the EPHE and the frustration and distress he was feeling at the lukewarm reception of his ideas in the university. Schapiro offered to help him by facilitating his coming to the United States, and he encouraged Damisch to apply for a fellowship with the Society for the Humanities at Cornell. Damisch followed this advice and, in December 1971, received a positive response from the director, Henry Guerlac. The prospect of a stay in America from the end of August 1972 to January 1973 led Damisch to inform Schapiro both of his plans with regard to his own work and also of his ideas for trips to New York, Washington, D.C., and Princeton. Schapiro, who was

1969), pp. 85–93; "La partie et le tout" (1970); and "Un outil plastique: Le nuage," *Revue d'Esthétique* 1–2 (June 1958), pp. 104–48, a first step towards *Théorie du nuage: Pour une histoire de la peinture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972). The English version, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd, was published by Stanford University Press in 2002.

12. The entire correspondence is being prepared for publication by the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA).

13. Damisch's first letter has disappeared, but we know part of its content through Schapiro's reply, dated March 28, 1970 (Damisch archives). Damisch and Schapiro were to continue this discussion throughout 1971 and into 1972 (letters 4 and 7).

14. Hubert Damisch, "Le gardien de l'interprétation," *Tel Quel* 44 (Winter 1971), pp. 70–84, and 45 (Spring 1971), pp. 82–96; and Damisch, "Figuration et représentation: Le problème de l'apparition," *Annales ESC* 3–4 (1971), pp. 664–80. Schapiro comments on this article in his letter to Damisch of November 12, 1971, Damisch archives. He would send *Théorie de nuage* to Schapiro in May 1972.

on good terms with most of the members of the Society for the Humanities, not only drew up a list of people for Damisch to meet at Cornell—(Mike) H. Abrams, Norman Malcolm, Angus Charles Graham, Peter Kahn—but went so far as to write to them himself in order to recommend the future Senior Fellow in glowing terms. When Damisch arrived at Cornell, therefore, he was to find the warmest of welcomes.

The second major topic in the correspondence is the interest in psychoanalysis that the two men shared at the time. Starting in January 1972, they began to examine in detail the Freud-Signorelli case. They had both been intrigued by the pages in the first chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*¹⁵ that deal with Freud’s forgetting of the name of the artist Signorelli, and for a period of two years, including before, during, and after Damisch’s stay in the United States, the letters that they were to write to each other centered in large part on this text and its implications for interpretation.¹⁶

As this highly productive period in the correspondence coincides with its focus on art and psychoanalysis, we have decided now, a little less than a year after the passing of Hubert Damisch, to bring together in this issue the forty-four letters exchanged between Damisch and Schapiro from January 1972 to December 1973 (nineteen written by Damisch and twenty-five by Schapiro), as well as three pieces that take as their subject the “Freud-Signorelli case.” These include Schapiro’s unfinished and unpublished essay “On Freud’s Forgetting of ‘Signorelli,’” which Schapiro worked on intermittently from 1960 to 1980, and two texts by Damisch: the unpublished “Sign/or/sigm: Freud and the Name of Signorelli” (the transcript of a lecture that Damisch gave at Cornell in December 1972) and “La mise du sujet,” translated here for the first time into English, which was published in 2010 in *Y voir mieux*, a prelude to *La machine d’Orvietto*, the work dreamed of for so long by Damisch and left unfinished upon his death.¹⁷

4. “Into the Swim of Our Conversation”

Before going into the substance of what lay at the heart of their discussion, namely, the Freud-Signorelli case, and in order to get a fuller idea of the richness of this correspondence, we first turn briefly to the other subjects dealt with by these two men. In addition to the already mentioned recommendations for reading and plans for publications that would continue to occupy them during the years 1972 and 1973 (letters 22 and 32), the letters deliver to us a wealth of infor-

15. Sigmund Freud, “The Forgetting of Proper Names,” in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 6, trans. James Strachey, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1960), pp. 1–7. Henceforth abbreviated *SE*.

16. See “Hubert Damisch and Stephen Bann: A Conversation,” pp. 165–66.

17. A posthumous edition of this work is being prepared by Angela Mengoni.

mation concerning their lives and their work (life and work being more often than not intertwined). We find here comments on a great number of contemporary figures, including, in addition to those already mentioned, the artists Arshile Gorky, Barnett Newman, Saul Steinberg, and Pavel Tchelitchev; the psychoanalyst Guy Rosolato; the philosophers James J. Gibson, Nelson Goodman, Arthur Szathmary; the linguists and semioticians Noam Chomsky, Umberto Eco, Isaak J. Revzin, Ferdinand de Saussure, Thomas A. Sebeok; and the art critics and historians of art Jan Bialostocki, André Chastel, Max Friedlander, Ernst Gombrich, Tom Hess, Margit Rowell, Donald Preziosi, and Henri Zerner. The correspondence also contains reactions to the exhibitions they visited: in Paris, for example, *Équivoques* (1973, letter 34); and *Trésors d'art chinois* and *Tériade* (1973, letter 37); in London, *Barnett Newman* (1972, letter 7); and in New York, *The Sculpture of Black Africa* (1972, letter 19) and *Philadelphia in New York* (1972, letter 22). Finally, there are accounts of travels in Italy (Orvieto, Urbino), on the East Coast of the United States, and in Turkey. For this last destination, where Damisch was to stay along with his wife in September and October of 1973, Schapiro drew up for Damisch a list of places to visit in Istanbul (letter 40). Recalling his own journey in Turkey in the spring of 1927, Schapiro recommends in particular to Damisch's "poetic eye" a visit to the Chora mosque.¹⁸ After his return to Paris, Damisch writes of this journey with narrative flair, making this particular letter, like so many others, a genuine literary experience for the reader.

Another topic of discussion that appears consistently in their correspondence during these two years is the semiological approach to art (letters, 1, 2, 3, 19, 20, 38, 39). Both Damisch and Schapiro repeatedly bring up questions about exactly how interpretive models based upon structural linguistics, analytical philosophy, and semiotics might best serve investigations into painting, sculpture, and architecture (serially ordering art objects, analyzing transformations within such a whole, breaking away from the linearity of chronology, decomposing objects in the visual arts into discrete elements, etc.).¹⁹ The letters of September 26 and October 5, 1972 (letters 19 and 20), are devoted to Wittgenstein and the problem of the image as proposition, and they are evidence of a clear interest in questions raised by linguistic or analytical philosophy. In the context of a discussion of the difference between "saying" and "showing," i.e., what is peculiar to words (saying, asserting) and what is peculiar to images (showing), Damisch wonders, for example, "if there are images that articulate themselves on the model of consequence (*if . . . then . . .*) not just in regard to content, but in their very *conjunction*. *If* in the cycle of Assisi, the Saint makes his entry *in the majority of cases* from the left (the direction of history), *then* the *few* times where he enters from the right (or turns around)

18. The former Byzantine Church of the Holy Savior was transformed into a mosque in the sixteenth century.

19. Damisch's thoughts here inform an article such as "Semiotics and Iconography," *The Times Literary Supplement*, Oct. 12, 1973, pp. 1221–22, where Damisch introduces Schapiro as one of the rare figures to have opened up this rich line of research.

stand out particularly” (letter 19). Damisch here brings logic, semiotics, and structuralism all to bear on the analysis of Giotto’s frescoes. His approach is informed not only by Quine’s experimentations with statements but also by structuralism (Lévi-Strauss’s structural analyses of myths) as Damisch tracks the transformations taking place within a stable series in order to understand painting as a signifying apparatus.²⁰

5. “Augenmenschen”

As they engage with the new linguistic paradigm (and we must underscore the fact that their knowledge in the fields of linguistics and semiotics was far from rudimentary, since they refer to numerous contributors: de Saussure, Jakobson, Benveniste, Barthes, Eco, Greimas, and Kristeva, and their reading extends to the Russian writers on these subjects, Revzin, Uspensky, Zegin, and Aleksandr Zolkovski [letters 38 and 39], whose work was beginning to be translated in the early 1970s), Schapiro and Damisch develop a certain wariness (letters 1, 2, 40, 41) toward logocentrism and anything that might tend to reduce the work of art (and the image in general) to a purely communicative function or a simple illustration, in the modern sense of the term.²¹ In their discussion of Wittgenstein’s argument, Schapiro and Damisch both refute the idea that it is necessary, as Wittgenstein claimed, to *recognize* and therefore to *identify* a seen object (assuming therefore a form of knowledge) in order to be able to paint it. For Schapiro, “one can represent an object one doesn’t know” (letter 20). The proof here is that, as Schapiro put it, “drawing is a method of discovery of visual properties of the object.”²² Schapiro refers to himself as an *Augenmensch* (letter 3) and argues for a “semiotics beyond text-based iconography” and a “non-logocentric semiotics” (letter 43) that would be able to go beyond the misleading dichotomy of form and content in order to grasp the problems of transformation, translation, and displacement (understood as metaphor) that form the real substance of painting’s work, this term being understood both as process and object.²³ Damisch concurs and consid-

20. Damisch proceeds in this way in most of these investigations, e.g., cloud, perspective, or the representation of the *Judgment of Paris*.

21. This shared approach is underlined by Damisch in “La peinture prise au mot,” *Critique* 370 (March 1978), pp. 274–90; English version: “Six Notes in the Margin of Meyer Schapiro’s ‘Words and Pictures,’” trans. Frances Keene, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 45 (Spring 1978), pp. 15–35. “La peinture prise au mot” was published as the preface to Meyer Schapiro, *Les mots et les images: Sémiotique du langage visuel*, trans. Pierre Alferi (Paris: Macula, 2000), the French edition of Schapiro’s *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (The Hague: Mouton 1973). See also Bois et al., “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” p. 12.

22. Schapiro had also criticized Wittgenstein’s view in “On Representing and Knowing” (1960), published in *Meyer Schapiro: His Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), pp. 22–24.

23. On Schapiro’s semiotics, see Schapiro, *Words and Pictures*, and Damisch’s preface to the

ers it vitally important to see the system of representation and iconography as always taken up within the human experience of seeing the painting. The painted image cannot be reduced to its iconic function since it carries with it always and necessarily something of its own “texture” and its own particular way of finding “a foothold on the surface”:

The description of what we see passes through language, through *knowing*; however, it is noteworthy that here the painted image has its *word to say*, as if it not only posed in itself a philosophical problem but had to be taken into account by a *theory* of perception. The painted image such as it is offered to perception, and insofar as it is not simply a *cosa mentale* (as a strictly *dated* theory would have it), is inseparable from a context that emerges on the basis of the foreclosure of the materiality of the surface of inscription. The painting is seen then not as a surface on which colors are laid out, but as a void where colors appear and where one hesitates to *know* if they really do “*find a foothold on the surface*” (in the literal and figurative sense), seeming to carry with them, outside of and before all interpretation, a spatial determination or charge.²⁴

In seeking to understand what characterizes the painted or sculpted image, the structure underlying its visibility, Damisch and Schapiro brought attention, well before W. J. T. Mitchell’s *pictorial turn* and Gottfried Boehm’s *iconic turn*, to the unique visual and plastic qualities of works of art. Yet they did so without falling into the trap of seeing artworks as totally autonomous entities, and of thus producing a caricatural counter to the *linguistic turn*. For Damisch and Schapiro, works offered to the eye are never so foreign to the order of the letter that they escape the play of language.

6. “*The Signorelli Saga*”

As they continued these “ruminations on language” (letter 31) and these reflections on the formal and visual substance of works of art, Schapiro and Damisch, as we have seen, attached a particular interest to the Freud-Signorelli case. This convergence of their thinking was not accidental, since each of them had for some time taken a special interest in psychoanalysis. Schapiro had already written articles on two famous cases described by Freud: the “*Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci*,” on which Schapiro had published a widely read article in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and “*Der Wahn und die Träume in W. Jensens Gradiva*,” which he had examined in lectures that he gave at

French translation of this book, *Les mots et les images: Sémiotique du langage visuel*, trans. Pierre Alferi (Paris: Macula, 2000), “La peinture prise au mot,” pp. 26–27.

24. Letter 19. This topic of investigation was to be at the center of several of Damisch’s texts published in the 1970s and ’80s and collected in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

Columbia and at Harvard University in 1965.²⁵ In 1971, Damisch had begun to make a serious study of Freud’s *The Moses of Michelangelo*. So it was quite natural that the two of them should move their discussion to the field of psychoanalysis and that they should exchange their thoughts, intuitions, and doubts concerning these first pages of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, the ones that are devoted to the analysis of Freud’s forgetting of the name of Luca Signorelli.

They were intrigued in this case not only by Freud’s analysis of the mechanisms of forgetting, repression, displacement, and substitution employed by his unconscious as it drew a veil over his efforts to recall the name of the creator of the frescoes in the San Brizio Chapel at Orvieto, but also by the absence of any real consideration on Freud’s part of the painted decoration itself.²⁶ Freud acts as if the famous frescoes—*The Preaching of the Antichrist*, *The End of the World*, *The Resurrection of the Flesh*, *The Last Judgment*, and a *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, including also in the lower register a decoration of grotesques framing portraits of poets, all painted between the years 1499 and 1504—did not have their own “word to say” in the process of repression.

He analyzes only the name of Signorelli and the substitute names, Botticelli and Boltraffio, in his attempt to explain the operations of association and displacement that—originating with the idea of the respect that the Turkish patients in Bosnia-Herzegovina displayed toward their medical doctors and going on to the announcement in Trafoi of the suicide of a patient of Freud’s who had been suffering from an incurable sexual anxiety—led to the complete obliteration of the name of Signorelli from his own conscious mind. For Damisch and for Schapiro, Signorelli’s frescoes must surely have influenced Freud’s unconscious mind.²⁷

25. Meyer Schapiro, “Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (1956), pp. 147–78; and “Freud’s *Gradiva*: the Bearing of Psychological Insight on Literary Value,” Schapiro Collection, box 255. A note by Schapiro dated July 18, 1987, and slipped into the Freud-Signorelli file (Schapiro Collection, box 261, folder 2) provides some useful information on the origin of his interest in psychoanalysis. We learn, for example, that the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* was the first text by Freud that he read, and that he was fifteen or sixteen years old at the time.

26. The philosopher Anthony G. Wilden had already become interested in the Freud-Signorelli case, and Schapiro had read his article “Freud, Signorelli and Lacan: The Repression of the Signifier,” *American Imago* 23, no. 4 (1966), pp. 332–66.

27. The ceiling decoration showing the *Angels and Prophets* and *Christ in Judgment* had been started by Fra Angelico, before being quickly abandoned and then taken up later, in 1499, by Signorelli. Before the 1970s, few studies had been devoted to the frescoes, and the two art historians were mainly inspired by the work of Adolfo Venturi, *Luca Signorelli interpreta di Dante* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1922); Enzo Carli, *Luca Signorelli: Gli affreschi nel Duomo di Orvieto* (Bergamo: Istituto d’Arti Grafiche, 1946); Pasquale Rotondi, “Gli affreschi della cappella di S. Brizio e l’arte di Luca Signorelli,” in *Temi Danteschi a Orvieto*, ed. Mario Apollonio (Milan: Arti Grafiche ricordi, 1965); and Massimo Carrà, *Signorelli, gli affreschi di Orvieto* (Milano: Fabbri, 1969). See also the following more recent studies: Rose Marie San Juan, “The Illustrious Poets in Signorelli’s Frescoes for the Cappella Nuova of Orvieto Cathedral,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989), pp. 71–84; Jonathan B. Riess, *The Renaissance Antichrist: Luca Signorelli’s Orvieto Frescoes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); *La Cappella Nova o di San Brizio nel Duomo di Orvieto*, ed. Giusi Testa (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996); Sara Nair James, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto: Liturgy, Poetry and a Vision of the End Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Alison Wright, “Authority and Vision: The Painter’s Position in the Cappella Nova at Orvieto,” *Renaissance Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007), pp. 20–43; Tom Henry, *The Life and Art*

Proof of this, as Damisch suggests (in letter 2), can be seen in the fact that as long as the name of Signorelli eluded the analyst, the painter's self-portrait, inserted by Signorelli into the scene of the preaching of the Antichrist, remains "ultra-clear" (*überdeutlich*) in Freud's mind. Infused with the dual theme of death and sexuality (the latter theme recalled certainly in *The Resurrection of the Flesh*, where we see an orgy of heroic nudes such as had never been displayed before in a Christian chapel, and in *The Last Judgment*, where several of the figures are depicted in positions that pushed the limits of licentiousness), the frescoes have to be taken into account in our understanding of the processes underlying the lapse of memory.

On the basis of this shared premise, Schapiro and Damisch were, each in his own fashion, to examine the Freud-Signorelli case. We can see this in the three texts that we have chosen to publish here, and again in the letters that they exchanged on this subject. The letters allow us to follow the beginnings, turns, and transformations in their thoughts as they reflect on this celebrated case.

In Schapiro's reading, Freud's explanation of his lapse of memory suffers from Freud's own repression of his sexual anxieties. In the letter that Schapiro sent to Damisch dated January 18, 1972 (letter 1), Schapiro points out that Freud had allegedly had no sexual relations with his wife since 1898: "Freud repressed the Turk's speech about sexual impotence because it aroused a painful thought of his own failure sexually. According to report, F. ceased to have sexual relations with his wife at the age of 42, i.e., in 1898." This biographical detail, which Schapiro had heard about from a psychoanalyst friend,²⁸ was to become central to his essay on Freud's forgetting of the name of Signorelli. He was to write in his essay, "The root of his forgetting lies, I suggest, in his own circumstances in 1898, his family life, and his sexual problem." For Schapiro, the sudden appearance of the Orvieto frescoes in Freud's discussion with his traveling companion was the result of the work of Freud's unconscious in connection with this sexual problem. The transfer of the topic of discussion to the field of art and culture was a sublimation of reality, producing something like a screen memory: "He changed the subject of conversation to art, a field of noble sublimation, and it seems that the first object or eventual object of F's thought of art was the cycle of frescoes at Orvieto" (letter 1).²⁹ The subsequent explanations that Freud gave were merely consequences of this initial displacement: "Can it be that the explanation is itself a continuing stage of repression, and perhaps a further evasion of the unpleasant?" The fact that Freud did not make a connection between the first three letters of his own first name, *Sig*-mund, and the first three letters in the name *Sig*-norelli was again for Schapiro further evidence of this repression.

Damisch's inquiry was more strictly theoretical, operating thus at some dis-

of Luca Signorelli (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); and for a psychoanalytical perspective, Margaret E. Owens, "Forgetting Signorelli: Monstrous Visions of the Resurrection of the Dead," *American Imago*, 6, no. 1 (2004), pp. 7–33.

28. In his essay, Schapiro refers more precisely to a letter Freud wrote to Fliess on October 31, 1897, included in *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Marie Bonaparte (London: Imago, 1954), p. 227.

29. See page 25 in this issue.

tance from Schapiro’s historical and biographical analysis.³⁰ As Damisch makes clear in his introduction to the Cornell lecture, the Freud-Signorelli case provided him, above all, with a chance to reflect upon the way in which a work of art, in this case a major work of decoration, implicates the viewer-analyst, and on how this relationship affects interpretation: “I would like to use Freud’s account of the forgetting of the name of Signorelli as an introduction to the deciphering, to the interpretation, of Signorelli’s work, and more generally as an introduction to the problem of deciphering and interpretation in the field of visual art.”³¹

Damisch begins his own inquiries, therefore, with the question “How can a [viewing] subject be taken up, implicated in a text along with his or her little personal history?” (letter 34). As he defines it in his notebook on November 12, 1972, his central concern was “that of the *implication of the subject* in the various dimensions of perception, remembering, analysis and interpretation.”³² In “La mise du sujet,” the title of which comes directly from this line of inquiry, Damisch was to reflect upon what it was that, a quarter-century after he began his book project, continued to implicate his own self.

Damisch does not mention explicitly in any of the letters, lectures, or articles that we are publishing here his own initial implication in the frescoes, and he alludes to it only obliquely in the manuscript of “Le voyage à Orvieto—1967–1999,” the second chapter of the unfinished *La machine d’Orvieto*. In fact, Damisch’s experience of the Orvieto frescoes was for him entirely bound up with a double tragedy: He visited the San Brizio Chapel for the first time during his and his first wife’s 1967 trip to Italy; Annette Damisch would die not long after. And art historian Robert Klein committed suicide just a week after Damisch and Annette had visited him in Florence as they were making their way to Orvieto.³³ Seeing

30. This is what emerges in particular from a section of the Cornell lecture where Damisch says that he wants to focus again on the substitutions operated by Freud, noting that he is doing so “not at all in order to pretend to trace in Freud’s personal history the deepest motivations of the lapse of memory, but on the contrary, avoiding ‘psychology’ in order to enter the play of another text.”

31. This idea is also present in letter 2, where Damisch writes, “What I personally find so interesting in this incident, as Freud tells it, is less the analysis itself and the ways it might be extended than where it takes us with regard to the Orvieto frescoes.”

32. In the black bound notebook dated September 30, Damisch articulates the same view upon reading “L’action de la structure” by Jacques-Alain Miller: “Freud’s lapsus concerning Signorelli was a way of reintroducing the subject into the analysis: the only possible analysis of the frescoes is one that passes through the subject: not through the name by which the work is curiously effaced but through the subject that is implicated in the analysis: *wo es war, soll ich werden.*” The German sentence is quoted from Freud’s “Die Zerlegung der psychischen Persönlichkeit” (1932) in *Neue Folgen der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, vol. 31 (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), p. 81; English version: “The Anatomy of the Mental Personality,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1933), p. 113.

33. October 9, 1967. I arrived at Orvieto late at night, after having left Pisa around noon and having gone along the coast as far as Rosignano before finally reaching Volterra and Siena, thus avoiding Florence and the autostrade. It was at Florence that, six months previously, I had spent two weeks with A[nnette], for whom this was to be her last trip, sanctioned by the doctors only on condition that she underwent treatments that the nurse,

these frescoes again, in 1972, with his second wife, Teri, was to transform Damisch's memory of the place from a scene of death to one of life since, as Teri Wehn-Damisch tells Lillian and Meyer Schapiro in a letter, it was on the occasion of this visit that their son, Thomas, was "conceived."³⁴ The depth and complexity of this history could not fail to overdetermine the object "Orvieto." Still, for Damisch, despite this personal history, the answer to the question he asks in connection with the Freud-Signorelli case could not be found in the matter of biography. Seen through the lens of his own epistemological perspective, biography is not the end but rather an agency necessary to the functioning of the machine, a means to get it started and to generate its effects.³⁵ Central to the inquiry, therefore, is the question of how a work of art becomes an operational machine for a subject. In order to test out this way of understanding the subject-object relation, Damisch carries out, in "La mise du sujet," a conscious displacement (authorized, he says, by the multiple displacements effected by Freud himself) in moving from the personal to the universal dimension. The theme of death that is present in the decorative ensemble is not explored from his own personal perspective but rather from that of humanity in general, since he compares the unusual presence of poetic culture within a work that is devoted to the Last Things (a poetic culture represented by the portraits of poets in the lower register of the decoration) with the equally unusual sudden irruption of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in the middle of the hell of the concentration camps that Primo Levi describes in *If This Is a Man*.

The second major concern for Damisch, following directly upon the first

summoned to our room and duly warned, refused at first to administer to her, frightened as she was by the quantity of substances that she was asked to inject at one sitting. Florence, still half-sunken after the *diluvio* that had hit the city in January . . . where, in the midst of odors reminiscent of an ancient charnel house, we had met Robert Klein. The cry from A. (immediately stifled), when I had been forced to tell her, a few days after our return to Paris, of our friend's suicide. . . . The following day [after meeting Robert Klein], returning in darkness after a Piero-inspired trip to Borgo San Sepolcro and Monterchi, to see once again the *Madonna del Parto*, curled up in the back of the tiny car, Robert said he felt "like he was in his mother's womb." In a café in front of San Firenze, he offered us a last glass of white wine, and then he left us with a strange smile saying he was sure, at that moment, that it was he who would leave this earth the first, making the both of us, myself and A. (as condemned as she was), into "survivors."

Hubert Damisch, "Le voyage à Orvieto—1967–1999," chapter 2 of the manuscript of *La machine d'Orvieto*, pp. 39–40.

34. "I know [Damisch] is in Orvieto today (birthplace of Thomas-Alexis—if you count the way the Chinese do, from moment of conception). You are probably thinking we should therefore have had the idea of calling him Luca (perhaps: Luca—Aliquis—Alixes—Alexis). This being the only reason(ing) I can find for the justification of adding Alexis to Thomas (Thomas, having been H.H.'s choice, for reasons *obscure* and *incredulous*)." This letter dates from August 25, 1973 (Schapiro collection, box 121).

35. For Derrida, the origin of machines is the relation to death. See "Freud and the Scene of Writing" in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 227.



Hubert Damisch. *Variations on a Saussurean diagram*. 1972.

one, involves the way in which interpretation might possibly be carried out.³⁶ The problem raised in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* was not, he thought, limited to the sphere of language, and it implicated just as much the visual and images: “For what we are concerned with, in this incident, is nothing less than the relation between the reign of images and the reign of words. [. . .] What we can learn from the Signorelli incident is that the relation between images and words, between painting and speech or discourse, is anything but clear.”³⁷ As Damisch understood it, Freud’s interpretation “is typical of our culture, a culture tied down to the order of names: when the name is given, there is no longer room for images.” Yet the image, the image as text, in the sense in which Derrida understands it in *Of Grammatology* and in “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (as a product of a certain writing, a trace of thought), has also “its word to say” (letter 19).³⁸

By choosing to assimilate the painted decoration to a text, and in asking, for example, “how a subject can be implicated in a text” (letter 28), Damisch reintroduces the substance of the work into the interpreter’s field, conserving at the same time the possibility of the play of language brought about by the instability of the pairing signifier/signified. In the context of the semiological questions referred to previously, Damisch looks closely at how the play of image and *décor* is at work in the decorative ensemble, and how it makes its appeal, in alternation or at the same time, to the imaging consciousness and the perceiving consciousness.³⁹ The Freud-Signorelli case thus becomes for Damisch a space of play (letter 32), an object of experimentation allowing him to take up, on the level of interpretation, the challenge that Signorelli offers to the viewer: “I introduce the (false) pairing image/*décor*, a pairing [. . .] on which Signorelli had explicitly played, with the intention of disturbing the system” (letter 41). Damisch opens this pairing of image and *décor* to a whole series of permutations (in particular in letter 39: “all of this allowing for multiple permutations”) based on the tree algorithm attributed

36. This investigation also includes the question of the form that the interpretation should take, and here the choice of a diary in “La mise du sujet,” and also more generally in the manuscript of *La machine d’Orvieta*, is a response to the implication that Damisch seeks to articulate.

37. Damisch, “Sign/or/sigm.”

38. On December 31, Damisch wrote in his notebook, “(Re)read Derrida’s essay on Freud (‘Freud and the scene of writing’), undoubtedly the most *crucial* of Derrida’s writings (at least for my own work).”

39. Damisch also intends to analyze the iconography of Signorelli’s frescoes in terms of the operations Freud describes in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (condensation, displacement, figurability), dreams and images obeying the same operational logic (letter 44). We find at the very beginning of the notebook a record of his reading dated August 28, 1972: “Read Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.”

to Ferdinand de Saussure.⁴⁰ Functioning on the basis of the model of a folding, these permutations allow Damisch to note how a single element in a work of painting can change its aspect according to whether it is considered as image or as *décor*. The machine painted by Signorelli, in allowing for these permutations and sudden changes in aspect, can show us how the academic separation established by the discipline between the sign of the *décor* (“falling within the domain of ornamentation”) and the sign of the image (“within the order of representation”) “fails to account for the specific economy of a decorative ensemble such as the one at Orvieto.”⁴¹ For Damisch, therefore, the *décor* is a site of transformation, and it is that transformation that must be analyzed. He made this clear in 1974 in a lecture he gave in Strasbourg:

Signorelli is said to be the originator of “grotesques” (where animal becomes man, man becomes plant, etc.). This is the place of Dante’s *Inferno*, where, among the punishments of Hell, man is transformed into fish, etc.—a monstrous process just like the one we can see in the Signorelli *décor*. The *décor* is not an afterthought but rather the determining element; it is the starting point for the whole.⁴²

As Damisch explains to Schapiro, this assimilation of a painted ensemble to a *machine*, a mechanism calling for interpretation, was not without risks (letter 32).⁴³ However, Damisch felt that the delirious excitement that such a machine can incite is in reality determined by the machine itself. The interpretative machine responds to the machine that is the painting.

40. The black bound notebook, dated October 5, 1972, bears the trace of the elaboration of these permutations: “Correct the Saussurian diagram as follows in such a way that each of the three terms appears in the position of signifier *and* signified in a series of three binary relations all of which involve *translation*.” This play on the Saussurian schemata was to be taken up again in chapter 4 of *La machine d’Orvieto*, “La pliure (Folding).” Tullio de Mauro has shown in his edition of the *Cours* that the diagrams were in fact made and inserted by the publishers after Saussure’s death. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, critical edition by Tullio de Mauro (Paris: Payot, 1972). I am grateful to Yve-Alain Bois for this observation.

41. Hubert Damisch, “La pliure,” chapter 4 of the manuscript of *La machine d’Orvieto*, pp. 99–100.

42. Report of the discussion following the lecture “L’oubli du nom de Signorelli,” session of November 23, 1974, by the Research Group on the Theories of the Sign and the Text at the University of Strasbourg (Damisch archives). In his answers to certain questions, Damisch also develops here a series of thoughts on the connections between the syncopated structure of the decoration (arcades, broken scenes) and the workings of the unconscious: “Everything leads me to believe that the decorative ensemble was *deliberately* truncated by Signorelli. . . . The machine of the frescoes works on the basis of the lapsus, the truncated, on the basis of condensation.” On the importance of the notion of *transformation* for Damisch, see Bois et al., “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” p. 15, and Damisch et al., “Hors cadre.”

43. The term *machine* adopted by Damisch was already present in his “Un outil plastique: Le nuage,” pp. 114–15, but at the beginning of the 1970s it took on another shade of meaning in the light of his reading of Derrida (“Freud and the Scene of Writing”); Leo Marx (*The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* [New York: Galaxy Books, 1964]), a work that, as Damisch records in his notebook, was suggested to him by Henry Guerlac; and also his reading of Aleksandr Zolkovskij, “Deus ex machina,” in A. J. Greimas et al., *Sign, Language, Culture* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 539–47 (letter 39).

7. The Cornell Hour

When Damisch presented the initial results of his investigations into the Freud-Signorelli case at Cornell on December 5, 1972, his wide-ranging experiments in logic and theoretical dexterity were especially appreciated; in fact, as Damisch tells Schapiro (letter 26), some members of the audience wished that the machine had gone into higher gear and that it had been more provocative. The conquest was overwhelming; Damisch was offered not only a teaching position at Cornell (a position he was hesitant to accept immediately, letter 28) but also the publication of a revised version of his lecture in *Diacritics*, the journal produced by the French department at Cornell (it had been created in 1971 and was one of the main channels through which the ideas of Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, and Foucault were being introduced to readers in the United States). The lecture never appeared in the journal, however; it is published here for the first time. Having been copyedited and returned to its author for final touches on January 6, 1974, the text was never sent back to the publisher. Damisch had decided to transform it into quite a different project: the book whose title was to be *La machine d’Orvieto* (letters 32 and 44).

It should not surprise us that Damisch received such a welcome at Cornell. The renewal of the field of art history and also of psychoanalysis (Damisch’s work being essentially no less important to the latter field than to the former) that he proposes in drawing upon other disciplines such as linguistics, philosophy, and semiotics was no less well received for being expected. As he noted, “Here ... interdisciplinarity has ‘value’” (letter 28). Cornell was one of the universities that were particularly receptive to what would come to be known as “French theory.”⁴⁴ While Damisch was at Cornell, Foucault came to give several lectures, one of which, on October 5, 1972, was entitled “Une société qui enferme” (A Society of Confinement). Damisch was present, and in his notebook he describes the audience as entirely at the mercy of the speaker: “... the diabolical skill with which he *hooked* his listeners, bewitching and dazzling them by his show of purely academic brilliance, and then the fantastic resistance that came up as his discourse swerved *to the other side* (judicial confinement as a dialectical and exacerbated form of the confinement of the proletariat).”⁴⁵ Later in the same notebook, Damisch records for the date of November 10:

Lunch with J[effrey] Mehlman and Richard Klein. Richard returned the conversation to [the] Foucault/Derrida [debate], saying he had

44. For a discussion of the introduction of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, etc. to the United States, see François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), in particular pp. 62 and 64 for the role played by *Diacritics* and *October*.

45. Black bound notebook dated October 5, 1972 (Damisch archives). After the lecture, there was a cocktail reception given by Guerlac in honor of Foucault. Damisch records the following: “Cocktail at the Guerlacs. Foucault: ‘I flatter myself on having been one of your first admirers’ (although he could not remember which article from ’67). And he did not seem particularly impressed by *Nuage* ...” Damisch was also to be present at the lecture Foucault gave on October 18 entitled “Ma morale” (My Morals). Several pages of Damisch’s notes in connection with this lecture show us his interest in the thoughts of the philosopher concerning literature, poetry, play, and the subject.

been struck by the absence of signifier in the former (a text, as I would say, that does not ‘work’ its reader). To make sure that he was himself not mad, he had reread Derrida, and found his own ideas confirmed. But Foucault’s *passing through* has certainly had an effect here.”⁴⁶

8. “A Promenade Together”

Returning to the relationship between Damisch and Schapiro, one has to understand that all of these exchanges and all of these shared thoughts on Freud-Signorelli in particular and on art, philosophy, and semiotics in general were not simply the product of scholarly interests; they were just as much, and perhaps above all, the fruit of a genuine friendship.⁴⁷ Damisch’s desire to dedicate *The Orvieto Machine* to Schapiro is powerful proof of this (letter 44).⁴⁸ Everything that they considered and debated was henceforth always to bear the trace of this shared experience.

46. Ibid.

47. It is important to note that this friendship involved Teri Wehn-Damisch and Lillian Schapiro as much as the two men. After the death of Meyer Schapiro, Hubert Damisch and Teri Wehn-Damisch would continue to exchange letters with Lillian.

48. Damisch was eventually to dedicate *L’origine de la perspective* to Schapiro. The manuscript of *La machine d’Orvieto* bears a dedication to his son, Thomas.



Susan Raines. *Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram at their home in Rawsonville, Vermont. 1991.*

It would be inappropriate, then, to try to extract too quickly what belongs to the academic sphere in their correspondence from what touches upon the more private, since the signs of scholarly and personal complicity are so deeply interwoven. Indeed, it is the lack of a clear break between their personal and working lives that gives such value to these letters. The slippage from one to another and back again between these two spheres is a sign of the mutual understanding that was established right from the time of Damisch’s stay in Vermont, and it is accompanied by shared private

thoughts and bursts of wit and poetry (letters 18, 40, 44) that tell us so much about their way of being in the world, their way of grasping the visual and the sensual world, whether it be a painting, a book, a landscape, a town, or a person. One letter perhaps stands out particularly as representative of this permeability of life and thought, of sensation and intelligence. It is the letter Damisch wrote to Schapiro on September 26, 1972 (letter 19). Having told Schapiro several days previously about the disappearance of their car from right in front of their house at Cornell, Damisch narrates in detail, and with consummate comedic skill, the story of how the police discovered it several hundred yards down the hill. As a means to clarify his description and to “illustrate” his hypothesis of how the car had ended up at that place (where it had remained hidden for quite a few days), Damisch drew two views showing, in longitudinal section and as seen from above, the path of the car as it zigzagged its way downhill across roads and through brush. This drawing—which Schapiro describes in his reply as “perfectly ‘legible,’”⁴⁹ making reference to their semiotic speculations (letter 20)—then becomes the starting point, in the same letter of September 26, for Damisch’s further thoughts on Wittgenstein’s idea of the image:

I wanted to include this little explanatory sketch because it fits in perfectly with the train of my thoughts as you have set me thinking since

49. The use of a drawing by Damisch was a nod to Schapiro, since the latter was always drawing, using it as an essential tool in his work. On the drawings of Schapiro, see my article “Au moyen du trait: Meyer Schapiro et le dessin comme outil épistémologique,” *Les Cahiers du MNAM* 136 (2016), pp. 75–98, and my forthcoming book, *Meyer Schapiro: En dessinant*.



*Schapiro. Sketch
of his house in
Rawsonville.
1963.*

that unforgettable weekend in Vermont. Norman Malcolm's memoir of Wittgenstein (a really fine book, in a rare genre) was going to be the first of the titles on the list you gave me, and in that book Malcolm alludes to the supposed "origin" of the central idea of the *Tractatus*, which is that a proposition is likened to an image (picture).

As we have already noted, Damisch's thoughts on this resonated with Schapiro, who recalled having objected, in a lecture he had given at Cornell in 1960, to precisely this part of Wittgenstein's argument (letter 20).

It is abundantly clear from these documents that Damisch and Schapiro were very much on the "same terrain," and that, as Damisch hoped on the eve of his departure for the United States, they would, as Schapiro put it, "enjoy a promenade together" (letter 10). Our purpose here, in looking at the substance of their exchanges, is not to reinsert biography within the horizon of intellectual history; rather, it is to recall that a way of thought is like a human life, and as such it is always tied up and interwoven with something more complex than the mere transparency of ideas.

—Translated from the French by Nicholas Huckle