Few thinkers have had as dramatic an impact on recent cultural theory as Jacques Derrida, whose researches have taken him into diverse areas of enquiry, though in the first instance his concern has been language. General principles can be distilled from his linguistic theories, and deconstruction, the philosophical movement associated with Derrida, has its own unique perspective to offer on almost any area of human endeavour, including art. We shall be considering Derrida's most sustained pieces of writing on the topic of art, *The Truth in Painting* (1978) and *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990). First, however, some general comments about the deconstructive project initiated by Derrida seem in order.

Deconstruction starts out as a theory of language; more precisely, a critique of the theories of language put forward by structuralist thinkers building on the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857—1913). Saussure had emphasized the system-bound nature of language, treating it as a self-contained domain with its own internal set of rules — or ‘grammar’. Language constituted a model for how systems operated, and structuralism appropriated that model as the basis for its analyses of cultural phenomena. Deconstruction turns many of the ideas of structuralism on their head, arguing against its notions of deep structures determining meaning within systems, or of signs communicating meaning in an unproblematical fashion over time. For Derrida, meaning is in a constant process of evolution, and signs always fail to achieve full meaning, given that they carry within them ‘traces’ of other contexts and thus other meanings (themselves carrying traces, and so on, seemingly, into infinity). Language is a much less ordered phenomenon in this reading, and any attempt to impose order, in the manner of structuralism, for example, is to be regarded as authoritarian. The deconstructive project sees itself as having a brief to unmask such authoritarianism, and of undermining the pretensions of all totalizing theories and systems.

This radicalism can also be seen in the objective to destabilize the binary relationships on which so much of structuralist thought is based (language being divided into either *langue*, the system, or *parole*, individual utterances, for Saussure, for example), on the grounds that these binaries always privilege one term over another: thus *langue* / system takes precedence over *parole* / utterances in any structuralist scheme. When such binaries are applied in more contentious cultural ways — man/woman, or North/South, for example — their ideological connotations become more sinister, and deconstruction wants to challenge all such cases. Deconstruction believes that identity, like the sign, is internally fractured (that is, never wholly present at any one time, and *incapable* of being so), and that fixed ‘subject positions’ such as man/woman are based on an illusion. This illusion is what Derrida refers to as the ‘metaphysics of presence’, and it underpins Western culture. Neither meaning nor identity can be wholly present to itself, or exist in its entirety at any one point; rather, they are in a process of evolution, with totality always being deferred.

Deconstruction has enjoyed some of its greatest success in the domain of aesthetics, most notably on the subject of literature — an area highly susceptible to its radical theories of language. From such a perspective, no text can ever be considered as complete in itself, or as communicating a fixed meaning over time. Neither does it make any sense to speak of an author controlling meaning or interpretation over time, or a critic offering a definitive reading of an
author's supposed intentions. The lack of unity in signs and identity renders this an activity doomed to failure from the outset.

Art is another area where such theories have significant implications, since it, too, has its language, texts and assumptions about meaning and artistic intention; not to mention critical analyses claiming to reveal the ‘truth’ about individual works and artists. Derrida plunges into such debates in *The Truth in Painting* (1978), a fascinating series of meditations on the meaning of art. The study takes as its theme a remark of Paul Cézanne to Émile Bernard that ‘I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you’, which turns into a practical demonstration on the impossibility of making any authoritative critical statement, or aesthetic judgement, at all — let alone being able to render truth itself (whatever that may be) in the act of painting.

Derrida's answer to the problem is to write ‘around painting’. We are offered a series of impressions, rather than any specific account of the nature of art. Deconstruction is never going to be a specific account of anything, never mind what anything means; what it will be instead is an exercise in pointing out the gaps in our theories, where we are unjustified in making assumptions, etc. No work of art is ever going to have full presence, because full presence is a myth. Questions about truth and meaning in painting become questions about truth and meaning in language, and that leads us into an infinite regress of questions that prevent us from ever establishing a solid base from which to make critical pronouncements.

What *The Truth in Painting* will show us is how we can never arrive at any decision as to what would constitute the ‘truth in painting’. Traditional criticism, of the kind that tried to arrive at the truth in painting, or at criteria by which this might be determined, can only appear authoritarian and totalitarian to the deconstructionist, who will swerve away from any such activity. Deconstructive writing aims at being a *supplement* to the object of enquiry rather than an *explanation* of it, with Derrida warning us that he has no intention of providing ‘a transcendental pass, a password to open all doors, decipher all texts and keep their chains under surveillance’. The implied target of attack is structuralism, which, in its deployment of the linguistic model, did seem to promise that facility to its practitioners.

When Derrida turns his attention to actual works of art, rather than the problem of commenting on them, the effect is much the same, as in his contribution to a debate on the theme of ‘Martin Heidegger and the Shoes of Van Gogh’. *Van Gogh's Old Shoes with Laces* (1886) receives the following treatment from Derrida: ‘Here they are. I'll begin. What of shoes? What, shoes? Whose are the shoes? What are they made of? And even, who are they? Here they are, the questions, that's all.’ It is typical of deconstruction that what Derrida comes up with is a clutch of questions of this nature (and there are many more to follow), in order to delay the process of critical judgement. In fact, much of the essay is concerned with the issues raised for deconstruction by the readings of the painting in question by Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro.

To Heidegger the shoes were those of a peasant; to Shapiro those of a city-dweller, possibly those of the artist himself. To opt for one side or the other in this debate is to impute a particular *meaning* to the painting, in that the shoes would be taken to reveal something about the country or the city, to have an *attitude* to one or the other context supposedly encoded in their representation, as well as to the owner of the shoes. Heidegger, Shapiro and the painting become locked in a closed circle of debate, where there is only one question of note to be answered, after which one's reading can proceed to unfold. Derrida undermines such a standard art-historical debate about meaning by enquiring ‘what makes him so sure they are a *pair* of shoes? What is a *pair*?’ Immediately we find ourselves outside the closed circle, reflecting on matters peripheral to
criticism, which is precisely what Derrida wants. He sets out to frustrate ‘the desire for attribution’ that lies behind both the Heidegger and Shapiro readings, the aim being to prove instead that the shoes ‘might well be made in order to remain-there’: that is, to escape, not just the question of attribution to a particular person, but the attribution of meaning.

*Memoirs of the Blind* (1990), based on the catalogue Derrida wrote for an exhibition he organized, examines the theme of blindness in a range of drawings and paintings in the Louvre's collection. The paradox of blindness as a theme for a visual art suggests another paradox at the heart of art itself, where representation finds itself confronted by the unrepresentable: ‘it is less a matter of telling it like it is ... than of observing the law beyond sight’. There are Kantian echoes here, with ‘the law beyond sight’ sounding like a reference to a noumenal world which representation can never capture. Drawing, like writing, is for Derrida a leap into the unknown, with the draftsman being ‘blind’ as to where his efforts are leading. The theme of blindness becomes symbolic of the draftsman's own situation within the process of creation: ‘a drawing of the blind is a drawing of the blind.’ Yet again we find the artworks being not so much analysed, as used as a basis for philosophical speculation.

What legacy does deconstruction leave art? In the first place it problematizes structuralist notions that we can isolate the deep structural grammar of painting, and sub-divide this neatly into various genres such that we can lay bare the meaning and function of painting within its particular cultural context. The language of art is no more amenable to the ordering of its future than is ordinary language: perhaps we could say that deconstruction helps to retain the mystery of each, their ability to develop in unpredictable ways and endlessly to create new effects. Traditional art history has a question mark hanging over it if deconstruction's linguistic theories are correct. The discipline's pretensions to explanation become hard to sustain if full presence is unachievable, and its search for system and pattern will seem an example of authoritarianism in action to a deconstructionist: an attempt to close off the act of individual interpretation. (For some Derrida-inspired writing on art, however, see Brunette and Wills, 1994.)

Deconstruction insists on the sheer contingency of both the work of art and its reception: that moment of individual reception can never be repeated, fits into no pattern, does not ‘fix’ the work in any way, and certainly does not involve any experience of unity.

The critique of unity is arguably the most significant aspect of deconstructionist aesthetics, in that unity is an abiding concern of much twentieth-century critical thought. Unity of purpose is often assumed of the creative artist, and unity of execution becomes one of the most sought-after characteristics of the artwork as well as one of the major ways of classifying artistic success. Deconstruction calls the notion of unity into question, and with it many of our assumptions about what is going on in the creative process. In line with various late-structuralist ideas such as ‘the death of the author’, deconstruction is more concerned with the effect of the work of art, its ability to generate chains of reasoning in the viewer, than the work of art in itself. Derrida's response to art, like his response to literature, is impressionistic, and anti-explanatory in intent. Artists have often complained about the critical desire to explain their work, to reduce it to a set of restricting meanings, and we are all familiar with viewpoints of the ‘a work of art doesn't mean anything, it just is’ variety. It could be argued that deconstruction is an aesthetic which embraces this belief, with the qualification that what the work is, for deconstruction, is an entry into a network of traces, the unpredictable pattern of which is a practical illustration of the deconstructive world-view. In the case of Van Gogh, for example, this would lead us, not just to Heidegger and Schapiro, but even further afield: ‘we should have to let this debate between the
two great professors resonate with so many other texts. Marx, Nietzsche, Freud’ (*The Truth in Painting*).

Whether creative artists would appreciate their work being used as a pretext for the exploration of traces is a moot point, but they ought to be attracted by deconstruction's anti-critical bias. Deconstruction does not interpose a definitive interpretation between the viewer and the artwork, and, if anything, is encouraging pre-critical responses — which one suspects most artists would quite like. The critical industry, on the other hand, is likely to remain unimpressed by this rejection of its very reason for existence. Nevertheless, deconstruction does invite us to think about art, and particularly our *reception* of art, in a new way — one oriented towards the creative potential of the ‘moment’, where both viewer and artwork are, as Derrida puts it, ‘in the mode of contingency’ (*The Truth in Painting*).

**Biography**