

Deconstructing the Frame: Spacing, Trace and the Phenomenological Ontology of Post-Conceptual Art

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Abstract

What emerges when contemporary art is read—not as a historical period but as a post-conceptual condition—through Derrida’s concepts of *spacing* and *trace*? Drawing on George Bondor’s interpretation of Derridean *spacing* within a post-foundational hermeneutic ontology, I argue that post-conceptual art literally deconstructs the frame, displacing the artwork from the regime of pure presence, objecthood and representational logic toward a relational field of traces, intervals, and historical forces. Read through the lens of the *parergon*, the image no longer appears as a self-identical object, but as a site of contamination between inside and outside, text and context, memory and its erasures. In this sense, the aesthetic relation becomes a practice of spacing that unsettles fixed meanings, institutionalized memory, and totalizing narratives.

Keywords: Derrida, spacing, trace, hermeneutic ontology, post-conceptual art

1. Spacing, the Frame, and the Post-Conceptual Condition of Contemporary Art

In attempting to map the ontological mutations of the image in contemporary art, the aesthetic autonomy of the isolated art object can no longer serve as a point of departure. Instead, such inquiry should begin with the radical destabilization and questioning of the object's boundaries that happened during the historical avant-gardes and accelerated during the neo-avant-gardes (Osborne 2013, 37). Peter Osborne argues that contemporary art is not merely a chronological category, but a specific historical and conceptual condition emerging in the wake of the conceptual movements of the 1960s

and 1970s (Osborne 2013, 37). Within this post-conceptual paradigm, the artwork undergoes a process of deterritorialization and trans-categorization: it is no longer defined by the specificity of a unique material medium—as Clement Greenberg's modernist formalism dictated—but instead becomes a trans-medial node within an infinite network of spatio-temporal relations (Osborne 2013, 37–51). Contemporary art is inherently “post-conceptual” because it retains as its ontological engine the critical investigation into its own status of existence, operating an irreversible opening of the artwork toward its political, institutional, and discursive context.

This radical openness instigated in the history of visual arts a process of deconstruction of the traditional apparatus that historically guaranteed the isolation and purity of the artwork: the frame. This transformation becomes legible when Osborne's critical account of the “post-conceptual condition” is read alongside Derrida's deconstruction of presence. In his seminal study *La vérité en peinture*, Jacques Derrida analyzes the status of the frame through the lens of the *parergon*—that which stands at the margin, the hybrid element that is neither entirely intrinsic to the work (as *ergon*) nor completely external to it (as *hors-d'œuvre*) (Derrida 1978, 19–27). According to Derrida, the frame is not a mere ornament or a passive boundary; it functions as an active ontological operator that institutes the presence of the work by excluding the exterior. Just like the aporias of the difference between text and interpretive context highlighted in *De la grammatologie* (Derrida 1967, 103–104), Derrida argues that the representational frame is structurally fissured—it is, in fact, not a closure, but an interstice through which the exterior (the context) constantly contaminates and co-constitutes the interior (the text of the work). Within the post-conceptual condition of art, the frame can no longer conceal this vulnerability, transforming itself from an instrument of separation into a space of transit and contagion (Derrida 1978, 61–63).

What makes this ontological shift possible is what Derrida calls *spacing* (*espacement*). In *De la grammatologie*, the French philosopher posits that this concept „expresses the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and

the becoming-time of space” (Derrida 1967, 103). A strictly ontological reading of spacing reveals that any presence is already structured by a constitutive distance that precedes it and, paradoxically, allows it to appear in the world. No interiority can completely close in upon itself, for it already bears within the traces of the exteriority it refuses, and in relation to which it constitutes itself through closure. In this sense, spacing represents the ontological articulation of difference (*différance*) as a pre-originary movement of differentiation (Derrida 1967, 103–104). Understood spatially, it designates the interval, the positioning within a radical “in-between”. Spacing is not substantial: it does not have a place, nor does it take place statically, but rather *makes place* for the very possibility of meaning to emerge.

George Bondor develops this point in a more explicitly hermeneutic direction, expanding the concept through John Sallis’s readings of the Nietzschean lineage (Bondor 2014, 64). Tracing the genealogy of the term from its typographical origins to its ontological expansion, Bondor notes:

“Spacing would be the ‘relation’ of space with itself, the ‘movement’ that opens up the space in which it occurs. It suggests the idea of ‘taking a trip,’ ‘wandering.’ Of course, it is originally a typographical process: the pause, the blank space, the line between words, the hyphen, through which spaces are inserted into a text; hence ‘the interval in general.’ However, we can also speak of ‘spacing a thing,’ that is, inserting intervals into the interstices of the thing, dispersing it, to make it lose its compact and closed character” (Bondor 2014, 64).

Although not intended by Bondor in his last observation about the ontological effects of spacing quoted above, this dispersal of the compact and closed character of the object is precisely the operation that post-conceptual art applies to the image and the aesthetic artifact. Through spacing, the internal reason of the work is dislocated and projected outside its secure boundaries. Citing Sallis in the margins of the Nietzschean text, Bondor demonstrates that to make possible the spacing of reason presupposes opening reason by displacing it beyond itself, breaking its identity with itself, and thus its presence to itself, through which any spacing was impossible. “To space reason means to send it into a field, for instance, that of sensibility or that of history” (Bondor 2014, 65).

It is this shift toward the field of sensibility, suggested by Bondor in his commentary, that I wish to pursue further. In the philosophy of contemporary art, such a displacement beyond self-identity implies that the work can no longer be understood as a repository of pure presence or as an autonomous form; rather, it emerges as a network of intervals open to history, ideology, and materiality. The foundation of the work loses its classical capacity to “ground” a unique, fixed, and stable meaning, giving way to a site of play and multiple forces (Bondor 2014, 65). This is one of the reasons we can speak of a hermeneutical grounding: a ground that is no longer an identity with itself, but precisely a play of differences, a ground that has lost its power to ground (Bondor 2014, 74).

Transposed into the philosophy of art, this hermeneutico-ontological paradigm provides a framework for reconfiguring the “post-conceptual condition” of the image. Hermeneutically, we witness a *différance* of meaning—a chronic instability determined by the infinite play of significations and the traces left by other interpretations or signs upon the actual presence of the work. Ontologically, spacing declares the definitive impossibility of enclosing the proper space of the artwork within fixed boundaries, margins, or frames. The Derridean concepts of *parergon*, *hors-texte*, and *trace* thus become indispensable tools for reading the inter- and para-textual proliferation of signs, the contagion of images, and the hybridization of contemporary artistic genres. Artistic representation can no longer be understood as a mimetic mirroring or an unmediated presence, but exclusively relationally, as a tense play of differences.

2. Phenomenological Roots: Trace, Voice, and Temporality

The migration of spacing into art theory becomes clearer when read against Derrida’s foundational critique of phenomenological presence in *La Voix et le Phénomène* (Derrida 1973, 63–104; see also Lowler 2002). Here, Derrida criticizes Edmund Husserl’s model of transcendental subjectivity, which posits that consciousness synthesizes time and experience from a transcendental standpoint (Husserl

1913, 46–49; see Derrida 1973, 63–77). In Husserl’s early lectures on internal time-consciousness, the standing-streaming present (*lebendige Gegenwart*) is established as the absolute ground of experience, where temporal moments are synthesized through retention, primal impression, and protention (Husserl 2012, 10–12). For Husserl, the identity of an object—such as a sustained musical tone—is maintained because the ego retains the immediate past and anticipates the future within a continuous, unbroken horizon of presence (Husserl 2012, 10–12; see Derrida 1973, 63–77).

Derrida’s deconstruction of this model targets the very locus of Husserlian self-presence: the phenomenological voice (Derrida 1973, 77–104). Husserl privileges the voice because it operates in a seemingly unworldly medium where the speaking subject hears themselves speak at the very moment of utterance, creating the illusion of pure, unmediated presence that requires no spatial detour (Derrida 1973, 77–87). However, Derrida uncovers a critical fault-line within this structure. He demonstrates that the retentive mechanism, which Husserl relies on to maintain the continuity of the present, is already structurally contaminated by absence (Derrida 1973, 64–67; see also Seebohm 1995, 185–200). Retention is not a direct presentation of the past; it is a representation, a trace of a past that has already vanished.

Because retention must refer to a “now” that is no longer present, the living present is structurally split and mediated by a non-presence (Derrida 1973, 64–67). Derrida argues that the phenomenon—that which appears to consciousness—is not grounded in an unconditioned intuition, but is instead pre-structured by a network of traces and differences (Derrida 1967, 92–103; Derrida 1973, 64–67). The voice is not a pure source, but is already an *archi-écriture*, a system of differential marks where meaning is endlessly deferred (*différance*) (Derrida 1967, 65–73). This temporal synthesis is closely aligned with the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action or retroactivity) developed by Sigmund Freud (Freud 1950). For Freud, past events do not persist as fixed, static memories; they undergo structural revision and gain new meaning when they are recalled within new contexts. Memory

is therefore an active, interpretive translation rather than a passive storage of the past (Derrida 1967, 154–168). Transposed into post-conceptual art, the trace becomes the index of a withdrawal from appearance, revealing the work's relationship to inaccessible bodies and historical events (Taylor 2012; see also González-Torres 1991).

3. Art Historical Translations: From Modernist Materiality to Networked Agencements

The transition from late modernism to the post-conceptual condition is fundamentally marked by a shift from the canvas as an autonomous space to the canvas as a site of literal and institutional spacing (Osborne 2013, 37–51). A crucial early moment in this genealogy can be traced to Rosalind Krauss's critical deployment of deconstructive motifs to read the minimalism of Frank Stella (Krauss 1981, 243–260; Krauss 1985, 9–22). Analyzing Stella's use of the cut stretcher, Krauss implicitly identifies a parergonal operation: the literal physical frame of the canvas ceases to be an external boundary and instead dictates the internal configuration of the painted stripes (Krauss 1981, 243–260). Interpreted through a Derridean lens, one may argue that, by forcing the internal composition to mirror the physical shape of the support, Stella collapses the traditional hierarchy between the autonomous artwork (*ergon*) and its margin (*parergon*).

Furthermore, in Krauss's reading, the spatial intervals between Stella's repetitive bands function as literal manifestations of spacing (Krauss 1985, 9–22). In his *Aluminum Paintings*, the painted stripes separate from the straight lines of the picture carrier, buckling or veering, creating empty spaces within the composition that prompted Stella to cut the canvas away and customize the stretcher frame (Fried 1966, 18–27). Through this examination, the canvas is stripped of its status as a pure, self-contained visual presence; it is transformed into a differential matrix, a system of graphic traces akin to Derrida's *archi-écriture* (Krauss 1985, 9–22).

While Krauss uses this structural reading to undermine the optical myths of high modernism, the broader shift toward a relational ontology of the artwork in the mid 1960's required a

reconfiguration of the picture plane itself. Robert Rauschenberg functions here as the definitive watershed moment (Steinberg 1972, 82–91). As David Joselit and Leo Steinberg have noted, Rauschenberg's *Combine paintings* introduced the concept of the "flatbed picture plane," transforming the canvas from a modernist window or a psychological field into a screen, a surface capturing circulating cultural signs (Steinberg 1972, 84–90; see also Joselit 2007, 34–42). Rauschenberg's work is no longer an organic whole representing an interior world captured within the picture's frame. Its seemingly chaotic composition is a space of arrest, storage and transit, a locus where heterogeneous images—derived from mass media, urban detritus, and art history—are juxtaposed through a logic of mechanical and allegorical assembly. By treating the image as a mobile, reproducible signifier, Rauschenberg effectively opens the artwork to a networked ontology, laying the groundwork for the post-conceptual obsession with image circulation (Joselit 2007, 34–42).

This structural dissolution of the image as a mere representation of a given, external reality is also theorized with political and historical precision by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in his foundational essay on the allegorical procedures of contemporary art (Buchloh 1982, 43–45). Buchloh demonstrates how the neo-avant-garde utilized strategies of appropriation, montage, and collage to dismantle the bourgeois myth of aesthetic autonomy and subjective expression (Buchloh 1982, 43–45). In Buchloh's reading, the allegorical procedure operates precisely as a form of conceptual spacing: it de-contextualizes the appropriated sign, inserting a gap or an interval between the signifier and its original historical referent (Buchloh 1982, 43–45). That is why, after Robert Rauschenberg's series of serigraphic paintings using both collage and montage, the image no longer maintains its position within a stable logic of representation; instead, it enters an allegorical arena of displacement, interrogation, and destabilization (Buchloh 1982, 43–45). Buchloh links this to Walter Benjamin's theory of baroque allegory, where the world of material objects is perceived as invalid and devalued through their transformation into commodities (Buchloh 1982, 51; see also Benjamin 1977).

The allegorist devalues the object a second time through allegorical practice, splintering the signifier and the signified to protest against its transformation into a pure commodity. For artists like Rauschenberg, montage is thus not merely a formal technique, but a critical weapon against the institutional frameworks that attempt to construct a fixed, universal memory and a singularity of meaning on behalf of dominant power relations (Buchloh 1982, 51).

Once the allegorical procedure unmaskes the artwork as an assembly of contingent signs, the deconstructive focus shifts inevitably from the physical frame of the canvas to the ideological frame of the gallery. This is the precise juncture where Institutional Critique materializes the ontology of spacing. Artists like Michael Asher radically intervene in this dynamic by exposing the hidden structural link between the economic infrastructure (the material reality of finance and administration) and the aesthetic space of exhibition (Buchloh 2000, 1–23). In his landmark 1974 exhibition at the Claire Copley Gallery, Asher physically removed the partition wall that separated the gallery's commercial office from its public viewing space. By executing this spatial displacement, Asher shattered the myth of the neutral “white cube” (O’Doherty 1983). He exposed the white cube not as an objective background, but as a highly coded modernist convention designed to universalize and eternalize the artwork, stripping it of its literal “here and now” (*hic et nunc*) presence to facilitate its seamless circulation as a pure commodity within the contemporary art ecosystem (Buchloh 2000, 1–23).

Daniel Buren takes this institutional deconstruction a step further by physically projecting the parergonal critique beyond the architectural envelope of the art world. In his 1973 project *Within and Beyond the Frame* at the John Weber Gallery in New York, Buren suspended nineteen striped canvas banners inside the gallery space, but allowed the sequence to breach the architectural border, extending through the window and hanging across the public street. By literally straddling the boundary between the internal institutional space and the external urban matrix, Buren’s work demonstrates that the visibility, legitimacy, and meaning of art are entirely dependent

upon the spatial and ideological frames that contain them. The work does not simply exist *in* space; it *spaces* the institution itself, rendering the threshold between inside and outside entirely porous.

In the contemporary landscape, this unsettling trajectory finds its ultimate systemic articulation in David Joselit's theories of the networked image (Joselit 2012, 55–90). Joselit argues that in the era of digital networks and post-truth politics, art can no longer concern itself with the creation of discrete objects, but must focus on the management of *agencements*—a term inherited from Deleuze and Guattari, for whom assemblages are provisional configurations of heterogeneous elements whose relations are stabilized through territorialization and transformed through deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 88; see also Litaker 2014)—that regulate the transit of images (Joselit 2009, 125–127). Painting becomes reflexive, aware of its own status as a node within a vast network of global circulation (Joselit 2012, 55–90). Under these conditions, the post-conceptual image is no longer a site of stable representation or a monument to memory, but a dynamic profile of displacements (Joselit 2012, 90–115). By embracing the logic of the network, contemporary post-conceptual art utilizes spacing to wage a critical war over the control of collective memory, resisting the fixity of institutional truth through what can be considered a restless, fluctuating ontology of the trace.

4. Trace, Scar, and Latency: Toward an Ontology of the Negative in Post-Conceptual Art

If the earlier genealogy, from Stella and Rauschenberg to Joselit's interpretation of contemporary art, foregrounds the displacement and circulation of the image, the following studies shift the emphasis toward a broader deconstruction of the frame, in which trace, scar, and latency emerge as figures of an ontology of the negative. They do not simply extend the trajectory outlined above, but open another possible reception of Derrida in contemporary art. Félix González-Torres disperses the absent body into public space; Kader Attia turns historical violence into a visible scar; and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil

Joreige relocate the image within a latent archive that resists postwar amnesia.

Félix González-Torres's practice offers a paradigmatic instance of the trace as public spacing. In *Untitled* (billboard of an empty bed, 1991), created after Ross Laycock's death, a closely cropped photograph of an unmade bed registers the withdrawn body only through the imprint left on two pillows (González-Torres 1991; Folland 2020; Conaty 2012). Reproduced on billboards across New York, the image displaces private mourning into urban space and transforms absence into a politically charged public form.

This spatial distribution also functions as a parergonal intervention (Derrida 1978; Conaty 2012). By placing an image without text, commercial logos, or didactic framing within the billboard format, González-Torres interrupts the aggressive visual economy of the city with a silent interval of intimacy and mourning (Folland 2020; Conaty 2012). The billboard frame becomes porous, allowing the private space of love and loss to enter the public sphere.

In the context of the AIDS crisis and the political repression of queer life in the early 1990's, this transfer of mourning into urban space acquires a distinct political charge (Folland 2020). Yet the work avoids declarative identity markers, allowing the body to appear only through the traces of its withdrawal (Taylor 2012; see also González-Torres 1991).

The meaning of the work is never fixed or stable; it is radically open, dependent upon the physical context of the billboard and the personal history of the individual viewer (Folland 2020; Conaty 2012). A traveler encountering the image on a highway in Texas will receive the work entirely differently than a viewer in the Bronx, illustrating how the play of spacing and context continually re-frames the text (Munoz 1999).

The same logic extends to works such as *Untitled* (Lover Boys) (1991), where viewers consume and disperse the work materially, and *Untitled* (*Perfect Lovers*) (1991), where synchronized clocks stage the fragility of temporal co-presence (Munoz 1999; Braddock 2016; Taylor 2012). Together, these works show how disappearance becomes a poetic and political form of visibility.

If González-Torres renders absence legible as trace, Kader Attia shifts the emphasis toward scar. Through the concept of repair, he challenges the Western ideal of seamless restoration and insists on the visibility of historical injury. In *La mer morte* (2015), this logic takes on an explicitly political form, as roughly three hundred used blue garments spread across the gallery floor evoke drowned migrant bodies through their empty forms (Attia 2015; Kastner 2016). The garments remain as empty shells, bearing the creases of bodies that can no longer appear (Attia 2015). By working through clothing rather than mimetic depictions of suffering, Attia refuses the spectacularization of trauma and instead stages a contemplative encounter with absence itself (Attia 2015; see also Kastner 2016).

Adjacent lightboxes from *Rochers Carrés* sharpen this reading by placing the dream of departure beside the material infrastructures that block it. Attia thus turns the scar into a spatial and political device: the work exposes violence without translating it into spectacle, and makes the damaged surface itself bear memory.

Where Attia makes damage visible on the surface, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige turn to what remains suspended, undeveloped, or withheld. Their practice explores the relation between image, history, and collective amnesia in postwar Lebanon (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013). Treating the image not as a transparent document but as a site of latency, they develop this question in *Wonder Beirut* (1997–2006), a project centered on the fictional photographer Abdallah Farah, whose idealized prewar postcards of Beirut are later reworked against the logic of state-sponsored forgetting (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013).

In *Postcards of War*, Farah begins physically burning the original negatives, forcing the idealized tourist image of Beirut to register the destruction it was meant to conceal (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013). The gesture counters the state's postwar reconstruction of the city as a neoliberal space cleansed of conflict, reintroducing trauma into the collective imaginary through the scarred image itself (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013).

In *Latent Images (Images Latentes)*, the problem is displaced further, as the work centers on undeveloped film rolls exposed between 1997 and 2006 and accompanied only by short written descriptions in Farah's diary (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013). Here the image survives not as visible record, but as deferred possibility.

Here Derrida's account of the archive becomes especially relevant. Derrida uncovers a deep, structural pathology at the core of the archival impulse, which he terms "archive fever" (*mal d'archive*) (Derrida 1996, 19). Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytic theory (Freud 1950), he demonstrates that the archive is driven by a profound internal contradiction: the tension between the *conservation drive* (the desire to preserve, protect, and accumulate traces of the past) and the *death drive* (*destruction drive*) (Derrida 1996, 10–19). The death drive is silent, aggressive, and archive-destroying; it operates in secret to destroy memory, inducing forgetfulness, amnesia, and the reduction of traces to absolute ashes (Derrida 1996, 10–11). In Hadjithomas and Joreige's work, this contradiction reappears as latency: the image is neither fully present nor fully lost, but persists in a suspended state that resists both erasure and transparent recovery.

Hadjithomas and Joreige compiled these descriptions into a massive, 1,312-page artist book published by Rosascape, featuring thirty-eight photographic plates selected from hundreds of undeveloped rolls (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010). The book is designed with sealed pages, which physically prevent the text from being read unless the viewer takes a knife to cut the paper open (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010). In this work, the visual image is entirely negated, replaced by the *grapheme* (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010).

At the 56th Venice Biennale, the book was activated through a daily reading-performance in which sealed pages were cut open while actors read the descriptions aloud (Enwezor 2015; Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010). The latent image thus emerged not as visual evidence, but as a bodily and vocal event. This performance represents a profound realization of Derridean *espacement* and *archi-écriture* (Derrida 1967; Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010). By withholding the visual

image and replacing it with written text that must be physically cut open and read aloud, Hadjithomas and Joreige deconstruct the traditional, indexical relationship between the photograph and the referent (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010). The image is never immediately present; its presence is deferred, emerging only through the oral expression, the breath, and the physical gestures of the actors (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010).

This strategy of latency is a highly political position: “I am here even if you do not see me” (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013). By refusing to participate in the endless, commodified flow of digital images, the artists create an alternative archive, utilizing the trace to preserve traumatic memory and resist the state-enforced erasure of historical truth (Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013).

5. Conclusion: An Aesthetic Ontology of the Negative

When spacing is transposed into the philosophy of contemporary art, it ceases to be a mere technical procedure or an abstract philosophical curiosity, becoming instead the very foundation of an aesthetic ontology of the negative (Osborne 2013, 37–51). Post-conceptual art practices demonstrate that the classical model of the aesthetic object—conceived as a self-contained, autonomous repository of pure presence—can no longer sustain itself when faced with historical trauma, displacement, and systemic erasure (Taylor 2012; see also González-Torres 1991).

By utilizing the logic of the parergon, the trace, and latency, artists such as Félix González-Torres, Kader Attia, and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige expose the structural limits of representation itself (Derrida 1978; Hadjithomas and Joreige 2013). They prove that what is traditionally dismissed as marginal or supplemental—the physical stretcher frame, the empty clothing of absent figures, the textual descriptions of undeveloped negatives—is structurally necessary to the co-constitution of meaning (Krauss 1981, 243–260; Hadjithomas and Joreige 2010). These parerga do not merely frame the work; they actively space it, rendering the boundaries between the

internal text and the external historical context entirely porous (Derrida 1978).

The final case studies also suggest a departure from the line of deconstruction associated with Stella and Rauschenberg and extended, under contemporary conditions, by Joselit's paradigm of the networked image. They point instead toward another possible reception of Derrida in contemporary art, one in which the decisive question is no longer the circulation of the image, but the deconstruction of the frame in an expanded ontological and political sense. From this perspective, latency, affect, and the force of absence emerge as privileged modes through which the ontology of the negative takes material form. By centering the viewer's hermeneutic labor on the trace and the interval, contemporary post-conceptual art offers a mode of political and ethical witness in which collective memory remains open, contested, and historically charged.

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