# Three step deconstr

Deconstruction has been around for a long time. It is the buzzword which encapsulates a legacy of shared opinions and assumptions about our culture. Nobody any longer needs to be told what it means, deconstruction is a daily activity, to ask what deconstruction is, as Derrida told us, is to make unreasonable demands of the deconstructive project, is to posit essence where there is deferral, to look for truth where there is a play of meanings.

Contemporary art practice is unimaginable without deconstruction. So called Neo-conceptualist art is a distillation of deconstructive method, and the status afforded neo-conceptualists within state institutions such as the Tate gallery is a testament to the growing status of deconstruction as a now recognised method. Artists who use deconstructive methods such as Douglas Gordon and Christine Borland, and their recognition through the Turner prize, point to the common acceptability of this practice.

Not only is its influence widespread within art practice but also within art education. Since the mid 8o's its position has grown within the UK's art institutions, through the status afforded to it as the legitimate opposition to the dominant conservative hierarchies.

Glasgow School of Art, The Slade and Goldsmiths are names synonymous with the 'infiltration' of deconstructive theory and indeed the high status of these institutions now is testament to certain victories in its history. Students who were the first generation to absorb deconstructive theory are now working within those institutions, Borland and Gordon now lecture and work on assessment periodically within the Glasgow School of Art. It is not an exaggeration to speak of a second generation of deconstructionists, and of deconstruction as a now institutionally recognised practice. One could even claim that it is impossible to make art in the 90's without a firm grasp of the basic tenets of deconstructive method.

As the method reaches maturity, however, we are at a transitional point in time where deconstruction is no longer the opposition but the dominant practice. It is possible at this point to conceive of an entire generation of young artists who are engaged in deconstruction, without being aware of the theoretical concerns upon which their method is based. A generation for whom, deconstruction needs no justification or critique. The danger here is that deconstruction becomes a style, a routine or system, an unquestioning and self

reflexive exercise: What is at stake is the redundancy of the method itself. It is at this point that we are forced to question what claims are being made in the name of deconstruction. A revision is due, or it would be, if only deconstruction could or would allow such a revision to take place. In many ways deconstructive practice has placed itself beyond criticism and as a result has become reduced to a set of formula and truisms which inevitably compromise or undermine its entire project. As such the need to chart possible grounds from which such a critique might occur is urgent.

The ubiquity of deconstructive method can be shown by looking at the common connections between a number of artists work. There could be said to be a basic model or schema which artists use which is both rigid and homogeneous—a "three step guide" to making a deconstructive artwork which is commonly used and accepted. The following discussion centres around three artworks by three artists, and is an attempt to, through their work, situate a critique of deconstruction.

### Three artworks three artists

Christine Borland *L'homme Double* Lisson Gallery, London

Jeremy Deller The Uses of Literacy CCA, Glasgow

Kerri Scharlin *Diary* Wooster Gardens, New York

These three artists have each been situated in previous writings within the frame of reference of deconstruction, and their work has been critiqued using the deconstructive vocabulary. Whether this influence is within the artists' work or within the reading of their work is of little consequence. The following model could equally well be applied to many of their contemporaries whose work exists through 'deconstructive readings'.

The schema or 'deconstructive equation' proposed here has been culled from a number of secondary sources most specifically Against Deconstruction by John. M.Ellis. As any supporters of deconstructive theory will know the following attempt to characterise a method for deconstructive practise in art, runs counter to, the spirit of deconstruction itself. The arguement being that deconstruction is 'descriptive and analytical, not prescriptive or programmatic' (1). I would argue however that the use of deconstruction in art has become programmatic, and at that this point it is necessary to clarify what the terms of that programme are. The following schema is intended, not to reduce each artists' work to a single reading, but to show the ways in which their work is already based upon an existant theoretical model.

# S in the demise of UCtion

# **Ewan Morrison**

## The deconstructive equation: one method in three stages

Before a deconstructive project can be inititated 'the artist' (author) must be removed to divest the creative act of the illusion of authenticity, and to question the status of the artist as metaphysical originator of meaning. Any possibility of the artist 'making a statement' or of 'self expression' must be denied. The artists role is shifted then towards that of curator and fascilitator. Thus the use of other people to make the work on the behalf of the artist. The artist formulates the equation, and supervises its execution. The artwork is the gradual working through of the elements that the equation has set in motion and the presentation of the results.

The first step is to find a dominant term. This could be a respected tradition of representation, a concrete identity, a metaphysical assertion, or a claim to truth. e.g. The artist, objectivity, the original artefact.

The second step is to set it up against its opposite, e.g. the non-artist, subjectivity, the fake. Thus the traditional binary opposition between two terms has been set up: Good/evil, form/content, inside/outside, objectivity/subjectivity.

These first two steps are essentially the same as that used in traditional metaphysics however it is the third steps that characterises the deconstructive shift.

The third step is to swap the order of the terms, to reverse the supremacy of the first term with the second, to show that they are mutually dependent upon the other for their meaning. This is usually done by placing the second term within the same context as the first term, from which it is necessarily excluded. Thus in *Glas*, Derrida, set Hegel and Genet side by side and let the two texts infect and disrupt each other. And in Duchamp, the ready made is placed within the context of the gallery.

Thus the authority, and autonomy, of either opposite is deconstructed. The two terms are seen as being mutually dependent on each other for their self definition. The possibility of any 'originary' meaning, or of true presense is rendered 'problematic'. Everything becomes relative.

Within a successful work, the two terms will cancel each other out in a mutual self referencing. Thus all traditional oppositions are destabilised: good/bad, black/white, male/female, original/fake. The final outcome is a destabilised text (or work) which takes no sides in the equation which it has set up and which will ambiguously float between meanings. It will be 'undecided', 'unfixed'. The unfixing of these terms, it is claimed, is the unfixing of the metaphysics of opposition, the destabilising of heirarchy. The destabilising of hierarchy has been seen by many critics as being a politicised project, it follows then that work which uses deconstructive method has been variously described as: 'radical', 'subversive', 'strategic' and 'challenging'.

## Applying the method: 3 Examples 1. Jeremy Deller The uses of literacy

The uses of literacy is a work by Deller which takes as its source the 'artwork' of fans of Manic Street Preachers. In the deconstructive schema he takes as his first term 'art' and his second term 'pop culture'.

The work is a collation of drawings, poems, and dedications to the Manic Street Preachers which the artist has 'curated' and also includes documentation of the artist's correspondences to fans. The Manic Street Preachers are themselves of little importance to the artwork and are no more than a ruse, for Deller's highly effective deconstruction of 'personal expression'. Deller does not express himself, but sets the mechanism in motion that will deconstruct personal expression by itself. By choosing to curate the works of other 'amateur' artists he has already set up an opposition to the notion of the professional artist. and has reversed the hierarchical order of the terms by placing the amateur art within the gallery.

By showing amateur drawings and poems by fans of the band, Deller on the one hand deconstructs the idea of the authenticity of the professional artist. This device doubles back on itself when the 'authenticity' of the pop culture which is opposed to high art turns out to be little more than imitative: Most of the fans drawings are copies taken from the pages of magazines and fanzines. This act of copying undermines the authenticity of the sentiments expressed. This is cross referenced by the fact that the Manic Street Preachers are themselves the self proclaimed "fans band"—their own originality is placed in question. In the work all 'personal expression' refers back to something else, is rendered relative, and hence inauthentic.

The bookshelf of one fan is also exhibited, showing a predictable assortment of the tomes of teenage enlightenment, *Catcher in the Rye, Ecce Homo, Nausea*. The angst of the suffering existential hero, is viewed in the light of adolescant hero worship. The philosophy of individualism is laid bare. The expressive is suddenly seen as being a fallacy. The artist, the human subject, is no more original than a posturing pop star.

Through their art the fans yearning for real experience is apparent, but their reliance on copying reveals the poverty of their own imaginations and the impossibility of transcendence. Their idols are a copy, of a copy of a copy, and their acts of self expression are copies also. However while 'authenticity' may be discredited, the feelings aroused by the yearning for authenticity, cannot be discounted. Unlike many deconstructive artists there is the possibility that Deller appreciates the dilemma of his subjects. What Derrida termed:

"The saddened, nostalgic guilty response which dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign." (2)

Deller exhibits the fans longing for authentic experience without participating in it. A gesture which can be read as either one of empathy or of detached condesension. This is not however just a formal exercise in pure method, the sense of homage in the work by the fans and perhaps even by the artist imbues the deconstructive act with a sense of loss. An ironic nostalgia for the very things that the work itself undoes.

### 2. Kerri Scharlin

In *Diary* American artist Kerri Scharlin takes the persona of the artist as her first term and the celebrity as the second. As with Deller, Sharlin has employed other people to make the work for her. In this instance Hollywood scriptwriters have been hired to write a fictionalised account of a trip she made to LA, and professional actresses to act out the role of herself: 'the artist'. The scripts are exhibited, along with the video taped auditions by the actresses.

Scharlin's work like Deller's sets up an opposition between the 'real' and the 'fake', between the individuality of the artist, and fabricated identity of the celebrity. The persona of the artist is split up into representations which have been transformed, misinterpreted and reinterpreted through an impersonal communications industry, (TV script writing, casting and acting). The original persona of the artist is lost, and we can only begin to doubt whether or not it ever existed.

The two terms, artist and celebrity, are reversed, both are thrown into question. This seems at once a critique of the status of artist as celebrity, and at the same time a complete undermining of any possibility of a true artistic statement. Traditionally we conceive of the integrity of the artist as being compromised by the media. Scharlin has reversed this hierarchy and so deliberately constructed an exercise in complicity which destroys any notion of true, original meaning, and hence of integrity. There can be no compromise because there is no authenticity. One can read the work as a critique of the commercialisation of contemprary art practice, only at one's own expense as Scharlin undermines the possibility of a valid artistic project or an un-mediated critical space. The ambivallence of the gesture sits uncomfortably as the difference between corporate media and contemporary art is abolished with so slick a slight of hand. If any irony is intended it is lost as Scharlin's use of deconstruction is so well honed that she undermines the possibility of any artistic project other than deconstruction itself.

Scharlin's deconstruction ends up lapsing into what Hal Foster termed "the duplicity of cynical reason" where a radical critique of the role of the artist is seen to be taking place, while the status of art is re-instated as "deconstructive art". With Scharlin there is no sense of the problem posed by deconstruction, the loss of critical perspective. Instead there is the proffessional

### Three steps in the demise of deconstruction continued

illustration of deconstruction as a positive project in itself. Ambivallence as a message. Duplicity as the truth of our time.

### 3. Christine Borland

Christine Borland's *L'Homme Double*, is commonly perceived to be a deconstructive artwork. An Artwork which questions the nature of representation, truth and presense, an artwork which focuses on "the forms and machineries of interpretation themselves." (3) In *L'Homme Double*, Borland toohas contracted other 'professionals' to make the physical elements of the work for her. She employed six sculptors from different technical backgrounds to make portrait busts of Nazi scientist Josef Mengele, from a pair of photographs and a set of contradictory descriptions. The resulting sculptural busts were displayed alongside the documentation and letters of invitation.

Borland has used 'the original' as her first term, and taken 'the reconstruction' as her second. She has set the notion original and authentic identity against interpretation, and set expression through material in sculpture, against the notion of objective reconstruction.

In deconstructive procedure the terms are reversible, thus we can also read from Borland's work the notion that objectivity cannot completely divest itself of creativity, that its objectivity is in fact infected with vestiges of creative interpretation, and is therefore flawed. The six busts do not and cannot show Mengele as he really was.

The form has resonances with the content as we find that the notion of 'copies from an original' has associations with cloning, and the scientific experiments which Mengele was involved in during his life. The fact that each copy is different, goes some way towards, poetically, disproving some of the so called 'scientific' theories upon which Mengele's experiments were based. Metaphorically, each bust is a failed clone. An injection of difference at the heat of a fascistic closed system.

L'Homme Double throws up the heartening thought that although the author is dead, and there is no such thing as innate creativity or self expression, we are all in some way different—there is something which escapes systems of understanding—and herein lies our freedom.

As the death of the author gave rise to the birth of the reader, so too the death of the artist gave rise to the birth of the viewer. That 'something' which escapes in this deconstruction of identity, is none other than the viewer's subjectivity—the possible multiplicity of interpretation, the sheer benevolent magnitude of pluralism. As Borland has said in interview, she hopes that the work "asks a million questions about the human condition."

Thus the death of the author is conflated with a critique of hierarchical power structures. A typical deconstructive side shift which associates self expression and representation (metaphorically) with fascistic structures. All attempts at tying down meaning are seen as logocentric, and thus inherently hierarchical and oppressive. This destruction of the singular truth through the multiplicity of interpretation takes on political meaning in the context of the political persuasion of those who in this instance saught to enforce their truth.

L'Homme Double can be read as an anti-fascist work. According to deconstructive theory it could and should also be able to be read as a pro-fascist work: as both left and right and neither left nor right. But how

can we interpret the role of deconstructive ambiguity in the context of an issue as important as fascism? In reading L'homme Double we can say that the work problematises a politics of binary opposition, or conversely that it is irresponsibly ambivalent in its politic. What could it possibly mean to say that both readings in this case are equally valid? Does Borland's work here not point to a problem within deconstructive theory? Borland's work is interesting here in that there is something questionable in her use of deconstructive method. In addressing such a loaded subjects as cloning and fascism, Borland has 'cheated' the ways in which the artwork can be interpreted. She has not allowed the deconstructive equation to operate unhindered. She has stacked the odds against a particular set of readings which she does not want viewers to make.

As has already been pointed out by David Barret (4) Borland has given her own game away in her letters to the invited sculptors by stating "this information and these photographs can be interpreted as freely as you wish". The work would have been more academically correct in deconstructive terms if 'objectivity' had been required: allowing the incongruous and contradictory interruption of multiple objectivities to deconstruct the notion of singular and universal objectivity.

Borland's attempts to rig the results are an attempt to smooth over the ethical issues which surround the work. She has made each of the sculptors come up with a different Mengele. In so doing they 'un-do' the presence of the real person, they disperse Mengele though representations of Mengele. The work shows that there is no such thing as 'real' or true identity, true identity is equated with fascism, with the search for the defining Aryan specimen. Instead of fixed identity, we have the free play of interpretations. The work, through its method, shows that deferral of identity can be used as a weapon against those who would define and confine meaning, enforce a single truth.

It is interesting here to speculate on Borland's intent in her 'cheated' use of deconstruction. Could it be that she never wanted to risk the possibility of her sculptors delivering similar busts and hence creating a singular objective representation of Mengele? If she had, as in previous work, employed exclusively forensic sculptors, this might have been the end result. She had instead stacked the odds in favour of multiple interpretations. Had she not done this the work would have had very different associations. The deconstructive equation could had yielded something approximating a single true image of Mengele. Thus identity would be fixed, Mengele's bust would become a representation of 'evil' and we would end up reading the man's ethics from his physiogamy. This is exactly what Mengele himself did.

We can only assume that Borland was aware of the dangers of this posible outcome. Her 'cheating' is then understandable. This cheating with deconstructive method however throws up some very important questions about the assumptions that exponents of deconstructive practice hold on the implicit politics of deconstruction.

# Deconstruction and the problem of value judgement

In his book, *Against Deconstruction* John.M. Ellis points out what he sees as the "heavy emphasis on moral terminology" in deconstructive discourse.

Deconstruction is described as "disturbing", "disruptive", it "unmasks", "subverts", "dismantles", "exposes" and "challenges". (5)

This observation seems at first seems inaccurate.

Are not these words deliberately used within deconstructive discourse precisely to question the moral certainties of any one fixed position. Is not the whole deconstructive enterprise based upon throwing the certitude of the oppositions good/bad, right/wrong, into question, of rendering them 'problematic'? Are words such as 'subverts' and 'challenges' not used precisely because they are ambiguous enough to avoid being fixed to one position.

But Ellis' point has validity. These particular words are both emotive and imply a politic, they have a history, a tone. It is undeniable that there is a set of value judgements behind the choice of these words. But where could this 'moral tone' possibly come from if there is no possible ground for 'moral codes' within deconstruction? From what ground is the 'subversion' or the 'challenge' coming from? Certainly not from the left or the right, or from a humanist base.

"The main weight of Derrida's idea lies very much in their being an antidote to logocentrism. Its positive aspect derives from the thing that it sets itself up against." (6)

Deconstruction cannot claim to have a grounded position, however it is often assumed by its exponents that the hierarchies it undoes tend to be rigid right wing authoritative structures. There is an inference then that deconstruction is inherently radical and inherently of value to the left. In doing deconstruction one undoes the opponent through subjecting them to the destabilising influence of relativism, one un-does the right through being pluralist.

It is from this use of relativism, that the (implicit) moral tone that Ellis pinpointed arises. Deconstruction expounds the questioning of all fixed values. Multiplicity, ambiguity, and ambivallence, were initially used as tools, but when they soldify into a project and become self justifying exercises the project of deconstruction then inevitably becomes relativism for its own sake.

There is however a name for relativism elevated to the status of a moral imperative. It is otherwise known as liberalism. It becomes apparent then that the 'subversive', 'challenging' nature of deconstruction arises from nothing more radical than liberal pluralism.

The deconstructive dictum that all interpretation is misinterpretation, that meaning cannot be tied down, fits very comfortably with the liberal belief that 'every interpretation is valid'. The now commonly accepted claim that meaning is relative, and that there are 'as many interpretations of a work as their are viewers' inevitably results in a situation where value judgements become entirely relative, and tolerance of plurality, acceptance and encouragement of other readings, becomes elevated to the status of a moral imperative

The danger here is that under the sheer magnitude of multiple interpretations, every reading becomes equally valid. Not only can no singular reading be seen as any more valid than any other, but any singular reading becomes criticised for its lack of pluralism, its 'closure'. Inevitably under such conditions any value judgement at all becomes impossible. This problem with deconstructive reading is the same contradiction which lies at the heart of liberalism. Liberalism expounds a moral relativism which:

"...gives a special support to toleration as a moral attitude to codes which diverge from one's own.

Paradoxically however, if that were accepted as a universal (and universally morally approvable) attitude, it would contradict the relativism which disallows any

authorative principles." (7)

Herein lies the contradiction which upsets deconstruction. There is an implicit agenda behind the use of the deconstructive vocabulary—an agenda which cannot admit to itself without undermining the entire deconstructive project. As soon as it can be shown that deconstruction operates from a fixed position, or requires grounded values, that cannot by definition be deconstructed then deconstruction collapses. Deconstruction then is caught in the same impasse as liberalism: The inability to tolerate any system that has fixed values, the inability to tolerate anything other than itself, the inability to confront its own groundlessness and its inevitable expounding of its groundlessness as its positive aspect.

Relativism can be useful as a tool for destabilising hierarchies and established power structures, but when it becomes a self-justifying project in itself, an end in itself, its lack of any founding values makes its operation questionable. Deconstruction, as we know, is not tied to a project, and can be used to undermine the left as well as the right. It is after all just as easy to deconstruct moral codes as it is oppressive hierarchical structures.

By inference a leftist bias is read into *L'Homme Double*, simply by the fact that it sets itself up against the right. There is however no guarantee of this reading of the work, and as with all deconstructive method it could easily have doubled back on itself.

As an experiment in deconstruction, *L'Homme* Double could have gone terribly wrong. Without the request to the sculptors to interpret "as freely as you wish", we may have seen six heads of Mengele, which were horribly similar. Given the possibility of the sculptors doing their own research on a larger archive, we may have ended up with something approximating the real presence of a real person. If this had been the case then, the results would have been very different, and the 'uncommon handsomeness' of Mengele captured in sculptural form could have had disastrous implications. We could have had: the fetishism of pure (Aryan) form, the nostalgic longing for origin and essence read through national identity, worse still, the reading of individual character traits through facial structure ( a now condemned pseudo science once practised by Mengele himself). Even more questionable would be the opening up of a very specific moment of history, to a multiplicity of interpretations, in short to revisionism, with all of its attendant right wing connotations. Can we question that the Nazi's were wrong? What does it mean to deconstruct the opposition right/wrong in the context of fascism.

In rigging the results, Borland has exposed her own distrust of deconstructive method and revealled her own leftist agenda. As such she points out that there is something dangerously missing in deconstructive method proper.

Borland wants it both ways. She wants to give the impression of remaining open to interpretation, and at

the same time she wants the moral certainty of ensuring that no-one reads the work as a valorisation of fascism. This contradiction is unresolvable. This is not to accuse Borland of misunderstanding deconstructive method. On the contrary her loading of the odds in favour of a particular reading pinpoints a need for 'correction' in deconstructive theory. A correction which nonetheless undermines the theory entirely. Her courage or foolhardiness in tackling such a loaded subject pinpoints the blind spot at which deconstruction ceases to function effectively. That blind spot is: its inability to deal with ethical questions.

It is around the issue of ethics that Deconstruction derails itself, or rather it is around the issue of ethics that deconstruction always retracts, backtracks and obfuscates its own movements. For, to acknowledge the existence of ethics at all would undermine the antiontological impulse of deconstruction. How can a set of grounded values possibly exist, if all values are in play. When we start to deconstruct question of ethics, we find ourselves really getting into trouble—A relativist ethics—how could this be possible? If we accept, and expound, relativism in ethics then we can draw the inevitable Nietzschean conclusion that moral values are determined by those with power and that this is both inevitable and acceptable.

Attacks on deconstruction are usually dismissed as being either 'reductive' or 'distorting'. The accusation being that the critic has reduced deconstruction to an ontological statement, to a set of truisms or claims to truth. The common reaction being 'to ask what is...of deconstruction' is to perpetuate a system based upon the notion of presence. To attempt a critique from outside of the terrain of deconstruction leads immediately to the above accusations—deconstruction just does not recognise the legitimacy of conventional logic.

To attempt a critique of deconstruction from within, is equally impossible as any attempt to tie down meaning, to formulate a critical position is just not recognised as a legitimate practice.

There is however a third and ironic position, and that the irresponsible or 'cheated' use of deconstructive method, by artists can actually point to a weakness within deconstructive theory. That is that deconstructive theory is based upon certain criteria which it will not and cannot admit to. To do deconstruction, to cheat at it, to make the mechanisms too apparent, and the results too foregone, is to expose certain assumptions that we harbour about the implicit politics and ethics of deconstruction.

Deller, Scharlin and Borland each seperately beg questions of deconstructive method.

They here represent three very different interpretations of deconstructive method, which, respectively, could be termed playful, illustrative and ethical.

Deller's works pushes the playfulness of intertextuality to its limit, without making any grandiose claims to its own importance. As Derrida is often portrayed as a joker, so too Deller's work is challenging through its

playfulness. This is both its success and its limit. Perhaps deconstructive practice can go no further than to admit to Deller's' form of tragi-comic humility. Deller's form of playful popular deconstruction carries with it the nostalgia for the myths of creativity that deconstruction itself tears down. By placing deconstruction within popular culture he shows the ways in which deconstruction is a negative force, a destroyer of cultural values, a leveller. His work in some way measures the human cost of what is lost when we deconstruct our own culture.

Scherlin's work is at the forefront of American deconstructive art, but is deconstruction gone text book. It seems consciously constructed to illustrate deconstructive method, to even teach the viewer 'how to do deconstruction'. Scherlin's work announces deconstruction as an art methodology which illustrates theory, and goes to great lengths to get it to get its message across (it is done professionally and expensively—all scriptwriters and actresses were paid for their work as 'makers' of her work). As such it is based upon a misreading; it does not take deconstruction as a tool to, but as a message to be expressed. As soon as deconstruction becomes 'the truth of our time' then it becomes redundant. Her work shows the degree to which artists and critics have come to accept deconstruction not as a tool, but as a set of truisms, almost a belief system. If this is the case then Scharlins' work signals the demise of decontruction as a critical tool, and the solidifying of deconstruction into a form of liberal pluralism.

In pushing deconstruction into direct confrontation with important ethical issues and 'cheating' with the viewer's reading of the work Christine Borland is forcing us to question, the appropriateness of deconstructive method in such contexts. It could be that by overstepping the mark, by going into terrain where 'openness to interpretation' is not enough, Borland has exposed the fact that there are certain boundaries which deconstruction cannot cross, certain issues which it cannot address, certain questions it cannot ask without completely undermining itself. Ethical deconstruction? A contradiction in terms.

### Notes

- (1) Just be yourself . Logocentrism and differance in performance theory. Philip Auslander.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Against Deconstruction John.M.Ellis. (A text concerning the impact of deconstructive criticism on literary theory in the USA.)
- (4) The woman in possession Make 76. June July 97.
- (5) David Barret. Review. Christine Borland Lisson Gallery. Freize magazine. Issue 35.
- (6) Against Deconstruction John M. Ellis.
- (7) The Oxford Companion to philosophy