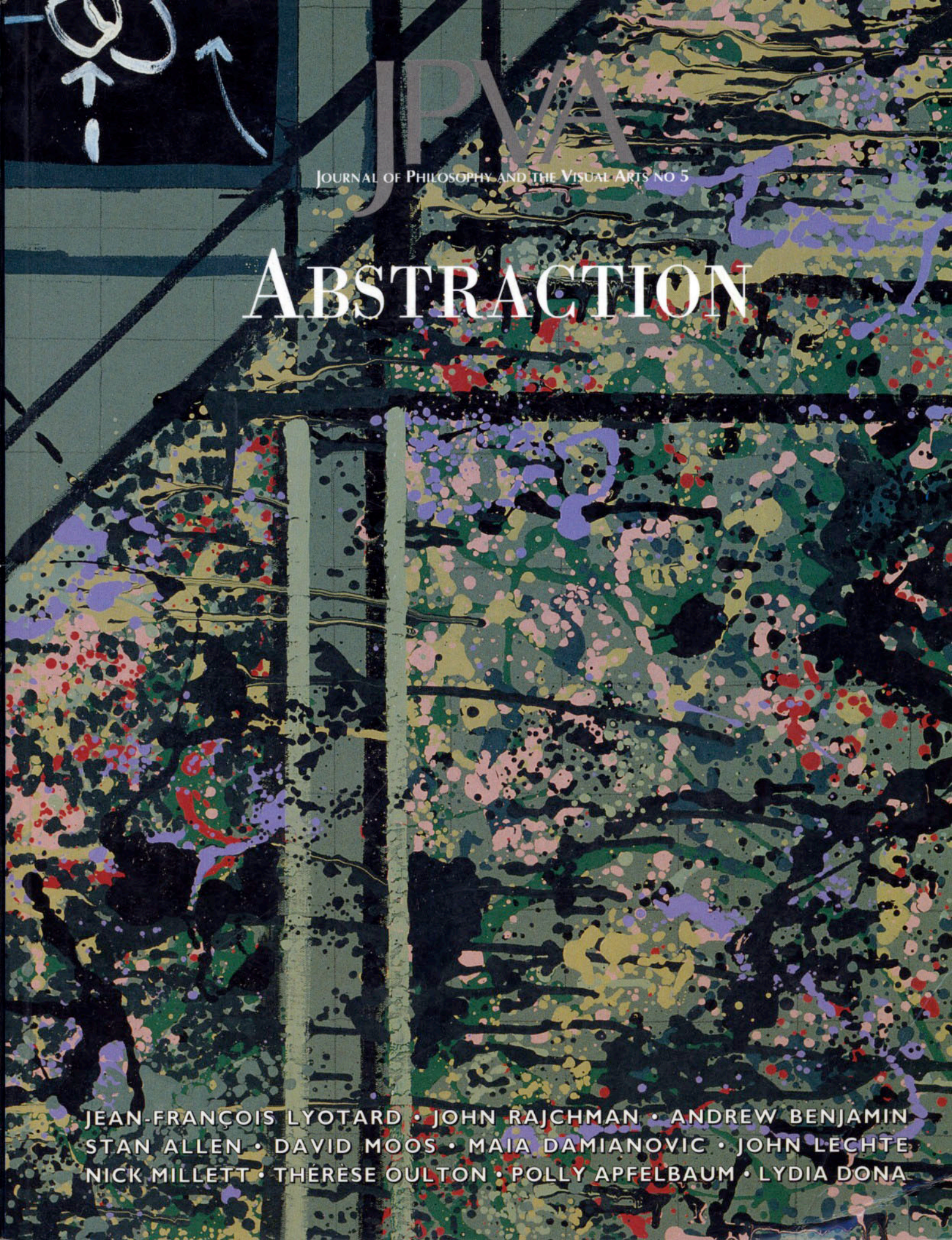

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Abstraction

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LYDIA DONA: ARCHITECTURE OF ANXIETY

David Moos

I see painting as this molecule that is constantly in the process of its rupture. This is what my painting really is. It's this big molecule, this big map, this big urban construct, this void, this body, this skin. Lydia Dona, 1991

By linking architecture to anxiety I expect two things: first, a better understanding of how the fabricated is fashioned along emotive or expressive urges; and second, a better grasp of how biomorphic constraints mediate their interface. The painting of Lydia Dona roots conceptions of the corporeal in visual tropes of contingency. The human body becomes a figment of contestation that must mediate between chemically fluid genetic codes and a cognisant agent forming culture, society, a world. The sole index becomes that of scale, not a relative notion but rather the introduction, or induction of an absolute scale, the scale of painting. Each of her paintings offers a scaling – where the mind must conceive separate yet simultaneous paradigms of its own purpose. From 'molecule' to 'urban construct', location of the human seeks a multi-tiered synthesis and, inevitably, a constantly shifting scale for itself.

For the practice of painting this strategy has far-reaching implications. The active painting body that leaves clues to its corporeality depicted in paint (field, line, drip, dot, etc), is managed upon multiple plateaus of connotation, and in the process catches up all manner of demarcation that inscribes it with meaning. Historical, cultural, textual, social, libidinal, biological – 'this big map' opens before us, posturing for invention, questing to be deciphered as we travel its trajectory, which is, we must remind ourselves, primarily artistic. Dona is engaged with the production of a painted space into which these separate lineages can be operated, their differences meshed, their likenesses decoded. Before treating the 'content' of her painting, which I assume can only be addressed once the painting's method has been engaged, let me remark upon the milieu in which her meanings are pictured and abstraction can be associated. This essay will attempt to preserve certain breaks or discontinuities within itself, to focus upon a topic but leave it suspended as image. And perhaps this is a valid description of how Lydia Dona's painting functions – it is the posing of visualised questions. What kind of viewer is needed for abstract painting today; who will this person be, in which body, where?

In setting herself the goal of allowing painting, as a singular object, to commute through diverse connotational terrain, Dona phrases her task in a sythesising language. Abstraction in painting becomes a project that is pollinated by and can profit from allusion and intersection:

> Colour codes are both cosmetic and cosmic. Cultural codifications of the 'cosmetic bodies' of femininity and masculinity are both quoted and displaced to build a systematized degendered 'code', a third zone of schisms and multiplicities: the zone of techno-urban bodies. The ghostly painting of the ghosts of the body.[1]

Into this syntax, which speaks of 'build[ing]' and the construction of metropolitan 'zones' – adopting the voice of urban planner – the figure of the 'body' becomes the locus of meaning. For painting, despite the use of a novel descriptive vocabulary pregnant with technology's tongue, the site of confrontation remains that of the body. 'Cosmetic bodies', in the manner of cyborgs, are what the painter speaks about. Dona's 'techno-urban bodies' refer less to the act of painting than to the kind of consciousness required for approaching her work. Will the historical gestures of painting remain valid in a future that is capable, through the augmentation of cybernetics, of fabricating conscious bodies?

As our culture continues to evolve from a machine-based technological ethos into an information-based floorplate, the body's relationship to its environment is re-mapped – literally rewired from the outside in. As Paul Virilio observes of his *telecity*: 'Clearly the urbanization of real time entails first of all the urbanization of "one's own body".' An ominous archetypical urban inhabitant is envisioned as the body is 'plugged into various interfaces (computer keyboards, cathode screens, and soon gloves or cyberclothing), prostheses that turn the over-equipped, healthy (or 'valid') individual into the virtual equivalent of the well-equipped invalid'.[2] Human mobility, that great enterprise of the post-war mechano-world, is over-mastered in the electro-information world by a merely localised motility. Planetary environments are distilled into the interactive home managed by a *terminal citizen*,

whose immediate genetic predecessor is the 'motorized-handicapped' – able to control the domestic environment without undergoing physical displacement. The adaptations and re-toolings required of the information age will remodel the (house, city, nation, cosmos) and the body (arms, implants, cells, chemicals), with both converging in the super-consciousness of cyberspace. Mediating the interface will be the human mind, in no prescribed location *per se*, but rather situated at some crucial delta where flows of information – like rivers with tides – go out and come in.

Flows are more constant than the material world that expresses and embodies them.[3] In virtual reality, where technologies splice a human subject into a cybernetic circuit by putting the human sensorium in a direct feedback loop with computer data banks, flow becomes the operative concept: 'the flow of information within systems [i]s more determinative of identity than the materiality of physical structures. Plunging into the river of information implies recognizing that you *are* the river'.[4] When equipped with Virilio's 'interactive prostheses' this plunge is taken 'physically', taking the body along with the mind.

In seeking a human model able to contribute vitally and reflect upon the conditions of culture, Gilles Deleuze discusses the place of the nomad. In the framework of the information age, which enables a globalising projection of presence, the paradigm recurs with particular potency. 'The nomad is not necessarily one who moves,' Deleuze suggests. 'Some voyages take place *in situ*, are trips in intensity. Even historically, nomads are not necessarily those who move about like migrants. On the contrary, they do not move; nomads, they nevertheless stay in the same place and continually evade the codes of settled people.'[5] The notion of 'in situ' acquires magnified connotations within the context of the information environment, and this is especially true for abstract painting. Lydia Dona's work confines itself to the unmediated surface of canvas, restricting the flow of expression to paint alone. Passing through recognisable 'codes' of painting, the canvas surface becomes an arch-site where 'trips in intensity' are navigated. Voyages of mind are pictured by processes of paint that form a compound identity through a dense accumulation of references that can be multiply construed.

The painting of Lydia Dona speaks in two tongues, with two referential codes: the textual (Deleuze and Guattari) and the art historical (Duchampesque diagrams, abstract expressionist icons, minimalist components). From this bi-vocality Dona's own voice emerges, reconstructing these sources onto a plane of polyvocal visual parlance. Her paintings should not improperly be conceived as synthetic or pastiche-based – the now all-too familiar strategies of post-modernism – because with each application of an adopted source, a crucial adaptation occurs. Dona's painterly articulation of recognisable parts allows for her work to defend against mere emulative schemes of appropriation. Her strategy is that of posing visual questions through the display of emblematic origins. The cumulative image thus calls attention to its multiplicity as sources are 'reformulated or redefined according to the relevant context now: the question of post-modernism, the void, the decay, the breakdown'.[6] Her careful enunciation of hybridised imagery subverts the initially recognisable source or referent, questioning re-cognition in the presence of the virtual experience offered by the painting. 'Freedom of meaning', the literary critic Harold Bloom has argued, 'is wrested from combat, of meaning against meaning.'[7]

The first encounter with 'meaning' occurs between text and painting. Before describing the painting, let me cite the discernable source that frames the intention of meaning. Each line, each idea written in the following passage quoted from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* finds its way analogically into the painting *Anatomies Of Molecular Motors And The Segments Of No Beginnings Nor Ends* (1994). The envisioned thoughts appear to narrate the painting's motives:

> There exists a nomadic absolute, as a local integration moving from part to part and constituting smooth space in an infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction. It is an absolute that is one with becoming itself, with process. It is the absolute of passage, which in nomad art merges with its manifestation. Here the absolute is local, precisely because place is not delimited.[8]

Nomad space – smooth space; close-range vision as opposed to long-range looking, haptic space as distinguished from optical space. To trace the integration of 'part to part' displayed in the painting, its 'process' of making must be retrieved. Stand near its surface, at about brush distance. Here the eye can seek the annexation of time, the segmented disparate time involved in its making. Process and time, painting and looking – each an interposing, mapping, mimicking.

We approach the painted image 'moving from part to part', gathering up likeness where we can find it. Match the upper corners, quadrants of the hazy machine diagrammings (Duchamp's now antiquated *Coffee Mill* (1911) cum *Chocolate Grinder* (1913) rotated, concatenated and multiplied), with the triangular components of this same chalk-board-like demonstration. Unite the internal flowing parallel lines, follow them like vectors to the centre, and reverse the flow

outwards to the rim of the ovoid, circulatory edges; the 'infinite succession of linkages and changes in direction'. Commence the linking, travel the walkways of line or begin bounding over the surface, watch how the image imbibes 'becoming itself, with process'. The blue drippings (Pollockesque) accumulating along the curved edges in the four corners, locally attain a manifest difference that is nevertheless linked through colour and application. Switch colours and move with the dripping to the interior, to the dangling, ebullient, frenetic green. Become the painter with your eyes and 'merge with its manifestation'; become embedded with how successive applications of distinguishable paint have arrived to refute priority of application; undermine difference in the effort to bind parts of the painting together.

Such multiple overlaying of processes aspires after the 'absolute [that] is local, precisely because place is not delimited'. The painting is a labyrinthine happening, an insistent subjectively governed eloquence that demands 'close-range' scrutiny by virtue of its intricacy. For example, a faint pencil-drawn grid is seen to structure the smoothness of black exposed at the lower left (a reference to minimalism, perhaps the grids employed by Peter Eisenman). We read out the textual inscription as follows: 'The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favour of the production of properly rhythmic values, *the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal.*' (my emphasis)[9]

With the appearance of the 'diagonal' as key signifier implicating the definition of 'smooth space' (as defined by Deleuze and Guattari),[10] the painted image stands alluringly close to its antecedent text. Dona's composition is forcefully governed by a diagonal that cuts across – an irregular border line, transgressive, antithetical to the horizontal and vertical formula of the composition. The text supplies us with a pantheon of signifieds with which we can inscribe and suture the painterly signifiers. Furthermore, if our aim is to commit the art historical heresy of reading artistic biography as skeleton key to image, the 'nomad' trope could superficially be sustained. As a transplanted person – from Eastern Europe, through Israel, via Germany to New York – Dona's individuality invites speculation as, say, nomadic, rhizometric; 'no mother tongue', 'never send down roots'.[11]

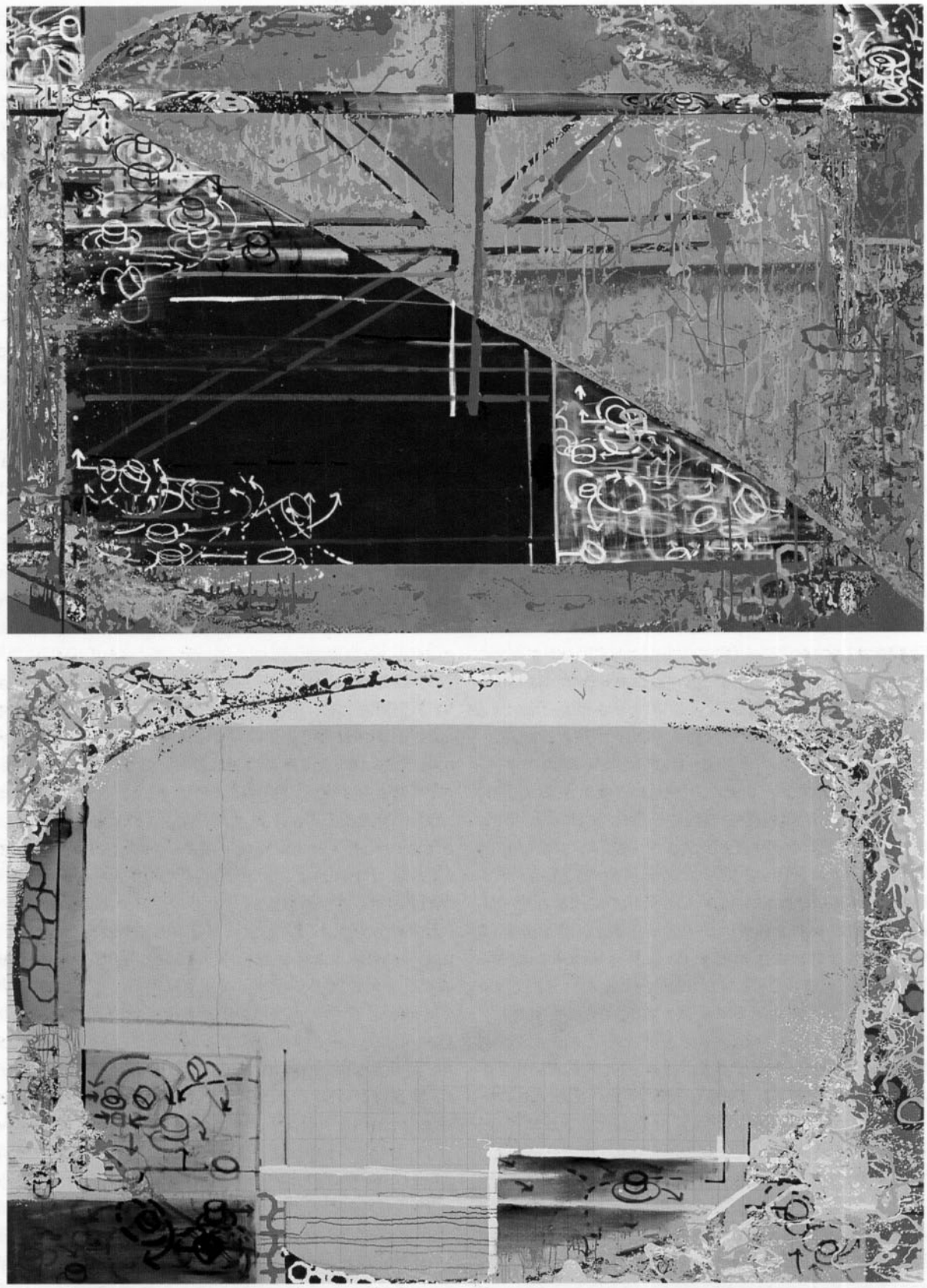
A common tendency in criticism when confronted by abstract painting, especially Dona's, is to rely upon the text, the ideally equipped Rosetta Stone of *A Thousand Plateaus*. Indeed, the ingenuity of the book is such that it declares itself to exist 'only through the outside and on the outside', in relation to other 'machines' (painting) of the world: 'We will ask what it [our book] functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit, intensities in which other multiplicities than its own are inserted or metamorphosed.'[12] With this model of infinitely connectable textuality, narrative potential blossoms. Indeed, this has been the norm in approaching Lydia Dona's painting. Under the aegis of polyvocal, rhizometric, segmentary, aggregate analysis, recipes for how her work dramatises abstraction have been synthesised.[13] The method has a certain appeal for it ceaselessly throws the signifying power of painting onto a preordained horizon of linguistic certainty. Writing, as the medium within which criticism operates, naturally welcomes this seduction of the textual.

In clearing a creative space both for the painting and its critical appreciation, however, we may stand close with Harold Bloom who has emphasised the critical act of 'misreading or misprision'[14] as emblematic of the position poets (and artists) feel in relation to their predecessors:

> The strong reader, whose readings will matter to others as well as to himself, is thus placed in the dilemmas of the revisionist, who wishes to find his own original relation to truth, *whether in texts or in reality (which he treats as texts anyway)* but also wishes to open received texts to his own sufferings, or what he wants to call the sufferings of history. (my emphasis)[15]

Such insight anchors the relation of Lydia Dona's paintings to the textuality of Deleuze and Guattari. She reads as a 'strong reader', committing acts of wilful misprision in order to acknowledge simultaneously and swerve from the source. As her painting rhetoricises its compounded, adopted imagery gleaned from art historical sources, so too does she tropologically defend against strict emulation of Deleuze and Guattari. The clue occurs in her titles. Titles direct the movement of abstract painting, governing connotation. The title marks the point of entry through which the artist passes, and in this case affords for a dismantling of equivalence between text and image.

Dona's titles are acts of adjacency as much as revision. Curiously, the first letter of every word of all her titles is capitalised. Seemingly major words like 'Molecular' or 'Beginning' are brought into the same orbit with those minor connectors and prepositions such as 'And' or 'Of'. Why the constant capitalisation? The move is syntactical as much as grammatical, emulsifying the ingested vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari, rewriting it in a supraconscious[16] fashion, welcoming other antecedents. We may think, for example, of Duchamp's string of capitals L.H.O.O.Q. which typo-telegraphically transmits the uttered contemporary voice cyclically onto history. The role of Dona's titles splinter or scatter their referential attachment to the image. They state that she



ABOVE: Lydia Dona, Anatomies Of Molecular Motors And The Segments Of No Beginnings Nor Ends, *1994, oil, acrylic, signpaint on canvas, 147.3x213.4cm; BELOW: Lydia Dona,* Shadows Of Annexation And The Voids Of Paradox, *1994, oil, acrylic, signpaint on canvas, 147.3x213.4cm*

is misreading her sources, recognising many lineages in order to branch out to assert her own. Supplying a mobile army of metaphors with which to scale the painting, the title operates as arch-clue producing an essential swerve from a theoretical orthodoxy.

Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari state that there will be 'no typographical, lexical or even syntactical cleverness'[17] in their writing of multiplicity. But Lydia Dona's titles commit all three of these turns, veering close to Derrida's favourite territory. The task here is not to compose a venue of precedent, but rather to understand the inherent message encoded in this intentional, emphatic act of titling. Taken collectively, her titles speak of a fundamental dysfunction between text and image.

The problematics of properly merging the linguistic with the painterly begin at a very basic level. With colour alone, for example, we realise the disparity. 'Although semiologic approaches consider painting as a language,' Julia Kristeva has remarked, 'they do not allow for an equivalent for colour within the elements of language identified by linguistics.'[18] Not by coincidence colour emerges as perhaps *the* major signifying component of Lydia Dona's work. Colour overrides and specifies the tenor and intentionality of her formal gestures. The title of her recent exhibition – 'Iodine Desire, Loss And Stain' – suggests that codes are merging, colouristically resonating through one another. 'The purple, pink, green and ultraviolet of the paintings,' the artist writes in an accompanying statement, 'are high-toxic tones, chemical types, photo lab colours that provoke a disoriented and diffused gaze'. By virtue of sheer amplification the colours seek to disassemble our vision of historical acuity, while also disfiguring the linguistic.

Giotto's frescos at Padua are the platform from which Kristeva articulates her insights about the role colour plays in painting. 'By overflowing, softening, dialecticizing lines,' she notes, 'colour emerges inevitably as a "device" by which painting gets away from identification of objects and therefore from realism.'[19] The kind of realism Kristeva is referring to is depictive, figurative, didactic – the subservience of painting to 'literal' appearances of the world. But realism, taken as veracity, can also be transcribed onto the text/painting paradigm. The text is *not* an image that can be realistically pictured. It offers possibilities, modalities, pathways, entries and exits into the culture and potentially onto the painting, but it cannot be used to deliver images. Imagery, and especially abstraction, is the preserve of the artist, of a tightly levered subjective, interpretive imagination. If we were to trace the contours of the text onto visualised abstraction, mimesis would become the conceptual content of painting. Colour is the topic and topology that defends against this move, resisting absorption and over-writing the textual.

One is referred instead to sources belonging to the history of painting, to prior imagery that is now articulated in unique colour. In *Pyramids Of Breakdown And The Tears For Cleopatra* (1994) [see page 96] the colour scheme is, indeed, 'cosmic and cosmetic' – comprised of fuchsias, hot pink, powder blues, orange drips and fiery red enamel. It is Dona's only painting that explicitly and iconically makes use of the triangle as a primary shape governing her composition. Vibrating against two airy registers of blue we find the lacy, garishly coloured Pollockesque drip; a brood of cellular forms consigned to demarcated side-zones; the maniacal painterly jumble of schematised machine parts; a pencil grid structuring the interior of form and the assertion/emergence of primary form posited as conduit, conductor. These components are the pillars upon which Dona's imagination interprets the task of painting. They imbricate abstract expressionist leitmotifs with minimalist remnants with interpolated signs of the Duchampian diagram.

How, and to what end, does a contemporary artist utilise and inscribe such historically diverse sources? Consider the 'drip'. Pollock's infamous 'all-over drip' has been excised from its infinite grandeur, localised and reined in to become a sputtering filiation at the pinnacle of someone else's pyramid. The smooth, flowing labyrinth is now a competing assortment of mismatched colour clamouring like electric, spasmodic energy along the sides of an alien form. The method of application could not be more distant from Pollock's action-oriented improvisations that involved his body in rhythmic movements, achieving a utopian formal signature of gesture. As the sagging orange 'drip' at the upper left reveals, Lydia Dona has applied her 'drips' to an upright canvas, not a canvas unrolled onto the floor *à la* Pollock. Her body does not gyrate around or step onto the canvas to deliver its drip, but instead with a refined, meticulous, and almost effete hand she dabs and then drops the paint onto her vertically posed canvas. There is no randomness, no sudden ejaculation of creative furore, only the close movement of the hand at work, curtailing and managing each local application. The methodical process is obviated by the pink placed at the two lower corners of the pyramid. In the back of our consciousness, when we see Dona's carefully constructed and calculated drips, we liken the process to restricted intentionalites now available through computer programmes – the ghost of the cyborg making its trace felt. This acute placement of the drip begins to formulate questions about how painting is able to generate an identity specific to its creator, pondering whether it will be possible for such an ideal trace of indi-

viduality to be programmatically mapped out, set into prescribed coordinates.

The sign of Pollock is the sign of a precursor, and it instructs that 'influence' be conceived along errant but definite lines – a misinterpretation: 'Influence, as I conceive it, means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts.'[20] However Derridean or deconstructive this Bloomian assertion may sound,[21] it allows for positioning painting beyond the game of textual recovery or mere historical source-hunting. In valuing the drip in Dona's work, we ascertain how it has been transmuted. In addition to the process of application there are material concerns. Where Pollock used combinations of oil and enamel to achieve a watery interaction, Lydia Dona focuses on enamel alone. Her drips are hardened, shiny and reflective because she exclusively uses car enamel. In all of her paintings (but especially in those where the dripping densely accumulates), the enamel becomes a surface in which we see a splintered, discontinuous reflection of ourselves looking at the painting. This reflection comes to meta-reflect upon Pollock's mythic painting body, which lies dismembered, scattered peripherally as so many shards. We catch only glimpses, the polish of high-keyed toxic tones, each only able of sustaining one facet of the refracted body – our's, Pollock's, her's. In this manner, the machinery of the contemporary electro-information body (process), the historical improvisational body of abstract expressionism (sign), and the now fractured body of the viewer (referent), all begin to collide.

Material associations subliminally slide across the surfaces of Dona's paintings, unleashing terse parables of contortion. Subversive duplicity is accomplished with Duchamp, who is catastrophised when we realise that on top of a fuchsia acrylic surface, Dona has painted out her Duchampian machinic parts in oil paint. Oil! – for an artist who ceased painting with the declaration that he could not stand the smell of oil paint and turpentine.

The title *Pyramids Of Breakdown And The Tears For Cleopatra* suggests as much, admonishing the thinking that demythologises Pollock and Duchamp and turns them over to Cleopatra's geometry. Trading in formal likeness, however, would commit precisely the project that abstraction and criticism must keep away from. Sourcework such as this is expected and predicted as the currency of our culture. It serves, however, few profound aims that the project of misinterpretation requires: 'Source study is wholly irrelevant here; we are dealing with primal words, but antithetical meanings, and an ephebe's best misinterpretations may well be of poems he has never read.' Indeed, to motivate the form of the triangle we might face a more arcane, equally tenable precedent in order to propose a 'strong reading' of the painting.

We go to *Jericho* and to *Chartres*, to those atypically unmistakable paintings, vertical works that slope as they tower. These triangular paintings maintain a specific place in Barnett Newman's *œuvre*. The format was new, a late 1960s reckoning with the philosophical tenets that had underpinned Newman's work; his insistence that painting deliver a sense of place, confer the impact of totality where the human self comes to recognise its individuality. Painting engendered for Newman the fundamental tasks and through the expunging of reference and representation the artist sought an originary experience where creation could flourish. 'The onlooker in front of my painting knows that he's there,' Newman stated in 1965: 'To me, the sense of place not only has a mystery but has that sense of metaphysical fact.'[23]

In tackling the triangle Newman shaped his aesthetic schema along provocative lines, immolating mythologies and imploding accrued cultural histories. *Jericho* dramatises the pyramidal component of Newman's antecedent sculpture *Broken Obelisk* (1963-67),[24] subsuming Egyptian mysteries as geographical connotation masters the cultural. The matte black substance of *Jericho* is bisected by a red vertical band, the off-balance total awareness of symmetry revealed to compose its potential obverse. What might this obverse be? What human topic could elude the grasp of painting that rose before us and declared itself to incarnate 'metaphysical fact'?

The topic of the self might suffice, if we are able to destructure and decompose its essence. *Pyramids Of Breakdown And The Tears For Cleopatra* inserts itself at this juncture, beginning to define a self in painting. The uninflected acrylic ground of the triangle – Newman's serene metaphysical surface – is now attacked by vigorous overpainting. Lydia Dona lays siege to the most refined abstract expressionist philosophies of the creative self. Cells crowd in upon the triangle, breaking through the fuchsia wall of the outer pyramid, pink cells feeding off or latching onto the interior pyramid. They hunger for plastic union with the isolated machinery inside the pyramid. The self becomes a 'breakdown' of essence in dissected terms – part biology, part chemistry, part pure machinery – as these topics (cyber-predicates) now overtly occupy the painter (creative self) in abstraction. The pyramid in Dona's figuration offers occasion to let the Duchampian machine madly proliferate, hieroglyphically to postpone hierarchy and rhetorically to muddy the 'high ambition' of Newman's metaphysic.

Contrary to her other titles, which designate processes without naming the components involved, this painting dictates the interior form (as pyramid) and instructs its historical reference (Egypt). The title names 'pyramids', but the

painting physically delivers, as only it can, triangles. A dimensional play is engaged, a transposition crossing through the painting and equally through its figurative histories. We are forced to concoct a leap in dimensionality that takes into account the triangle/pyramid geometric schism. 'Cleopatra' emerges as the operative word requiring 'breakdown'. If we rewrite the name we generate its essence: 'Clio', muse of history; 'patra', as in patrimonial, patron of origins. This word, a name, is preceded by that countermasculine expression of grief, the shedding of tears. Overt or guised, elusive or definable, the 'breakdown' of signification allows for identity to emerge. It takes on the master-trope of artistic incarnation, the trope of origins. The ethos of abstract expressionism, its sanctifying of a self-sufficient empowered creator, is now insurgently reinscribed by a contemporary woman artist who wholly reflects herself through the intention of her own gestures within an intrinsic paradigm.

According to Bloom, 'origins, poetic and human, not only rely upon tropes, but *are* tropes . . . Tropes or defenses (for here rhetoric and psychology are a virtual identity) are the 'natural' language of the imagination in relation to all prior manifestations of imagination'.[25] With the phrase 'rhetoric and psychology are a virtual identity' parenthetically situated by Bloom, we evidently cross into Freudian territory. Mention of Bloom's name instantly conjures his theory of poetry as presented in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Beginning with title, but continuing throughout his analysis, Bloom co-opts Freudian language in an effort to overcome its personalising implications. Although often misunderstood, the Bloomian 'anxiety' a poet (or painter) feels in the face of his/her precursors is not something within *him/her*, it is not part of the psychic economy of a person, but is rather manifest by the text or painting. The trope of misprision or misreading was never internal to a person but always the province of the artistic work itself: 'Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not *an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety*.'[26] This artifactual definition, which Bloom frequently stresses, informs the position of Lydia Dona's paintings in relation to their sources.

Anxiety, conceived in counter-Freudian terms and divorced from the person of artist, is the consequence of a painting overcoming its precursors. The emblem of this quest in Dona's work emerges to be the 'Void'. In *Shadows of Annexation And The Voids Of Paradox* (1994) the interior ovoid space is emptied of vigorous presence. A stilled world, the void is evacuated of markings or painterly tracery, and is only traversed by the lone spectre of a diluted drip scaling the vertical height of form. Colour alone pulsates, a massive dilation of violet. There are no clues to orientation. Gravity has acted in more than one direction implying that fixity of place and orientation no longer predominate. Here the space of painting is opened up, swept clear of iconic elements. The Duchampian machinery is sectioned off, relegated to subordinate blue rectangular zones. The drip-work is dangled only along the periphery of the oval, somehow prevented from spilling onto the serene field of violet. This pushing of the precursors to the marginal – shaping their existence around the oval, coupled with the peculiar colouration – masters a composition that evades absorption into historical streams of connotation, regardless of how we manage to stratify/destratify reference. Anxiety of departure becomes the essence of this form. Neither subject matter nor content, anxiety *is* the experience of this work.

Such is the space of abstract painting, a reality of visuality that must doubly contend against a century of overwrought artistic production and an increasingly abstract world. Lydia Dona heightens the task of painting by taking on explicit textual concerns – additional sources such as *A Thousand Plateaus* – that inform the kinds of associations we may integrate analogically. The play of reading text into image is precarious, and by choosing Bloom I have tried to plot a course that stays close to poetry (a sister art of painting), rather than impulsively latching onto those ever-appealing, constantly proliferating language machines of contemporary critical theory.

In recognising its position in the culture of today, abstract painting strongly presents itself only when the necessity of looking becomes paramount. The subjectivity involved in its making shuttles artist and viewer over diverse terrain. Seductively, at times erotically, it moves through topical paradigms of connotation, each expressed through a situating of how to look. From an aerial vantage-point; with microscopic powers; in the scale of a brush stroke; at the poetic remove of self-contemplation – all of these modalities of sight validate an approach to Dona's painting. Her historical tropes escalate possibilities, throwing sight onto a metonymic temporal plane. The methodical time taken to draw the grid, the systematic timing of the drip, and the smudgy diagrammatic sequence of Duchampian machine parts – each represent a separate making time, each a different historical site in time.[27] All issues implode to intersect on the surface of canvas, a subjective territory that welcomes analogy, yet continually denies an orthodoxy of interpretation.

To grasp the subjectivity of painting, one merely needs to measure Lydia Dona's distance from post-modernism as adeptly expressed by one of her contemporaries. Moira Dryer's work, which seems to trade in similar territory, assumes a vastly different material position. Dryer's painting unfolds

across frequently separated or disparate surfaces, remarking upon the inadequacy of the single rectangle as format for painting. The painting surface may have holes punched into it, alien appendages (such as metal handles, aluminium implants), or might curvilinearly present irregularised frame edges. Such devices materially literalise – that is, visually illustrate – such concepts as the 'segmentary', 'assemblage', 'aggregate', to name some obvious concepts from Deleuze and Guattari. Recalling observations made earlier about the body, what kind of parallels can be drawn, now that the natural body, unmodified by technology, is displaced by a cybernetic construct consisting of body-plus-equipment-plus-computer-plus-simulation? Dona's work emphatically states that the canvas alone, freed from material paraphernalia, will generate all routes to meaning.

For over a decade now, Lydia Dona has conducted her discourse in painting with the traditional tools of the craft and has done so confined to the single canvas. Dona's is a brush-made world, one that the hand alone produces. Within these limitations, painting necessarily focuses intention. In compliance with the canvas, that inveterate surface of subjectivity and template of defined absolutes, we turn out towards the world, in towards ourselves. Maurice Blanchot, the magnificent scaler of night, whose thoughts about artistic creation haunt the ends of all critical inquiry, figures the dream onto itself: 'One seeks the original model, wanting to be referred to a point of departure, an initial revelation, but there is none. The dream is the likeness that refers eternally to likeness.'[28]

The text always allows us to speak about the painting, but that is only what it can do. Whether this task restores or diminishes meaning, it is a different flow. Painting is never text; like the world, text is only commentary:

> There are no individual statements, there never are. Every statement is the product of machinic assemblage, in other words of collective agents of enunciation (take 'collective agents' to mean not peoples or societies but multiplicities). The proper name (*nom propre*) does not designate an individual: it is on the contrary when the individual opens up to the multiplicities pervading him or her, at the outcome of most severe depersonalisation, that he or she acquires his or her true or proper name. The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of multiplicity.[29]

Notes

1 Lydia Dona, Statement accompanying the exhibition 'Iodine Desire, Loss And Stain', Galerie des Archives, Paris, April, 1994.

2 Paul Virilio, 'The Third Interval: A Critical Transition', in Verena Andermatt Conley (ed), *Rethinking Technologies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp 4-5.

3 See for example Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed Josué V Harari and David F Bell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp 71-83.

4 N Katherine Hayles, The seductions of Cyberspace, in *Rethinking Technologies*, p 174.

5 Gilles Deleuze, 'Nomad Thought', in David B Allison (ed), *The New Nietzsche: Contemporary Styles of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1977), p 149.

6 Lydia Dona, interview with Klaus Ottmann in *Journal of Contemporary Art*, vol 4, no 2 (Fall/Winter 1991), p 27.

7 Harold Bloom, 'The Breaking of Form', in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p 5.

8 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p 494.

9 *Ibid*, p 478.

10 For a complete definition of smooth space and its ideological implications See Deleuze and Guattari, '1440: The Smooth and the Striated' in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Ch 14, pp 474-500.

11 *Ibid*, pp 7, 23.

12 *Ibid*, p 4.

13 In a recent catalogue essay, for example, Klaus Ottmann adopts the strategy of sheer quotation where approximately one quarter of his text is comprised of passages culled from Deleuze and Guattari. see Klaus Ottmann, Lydia Dona, exhibition catalogue, Galerie Barbara Farber, Amsterdam, 1993. See also Maia Damianovic, 'Paradox View: New Paintings by Lydia Dona', *Artsmagazine*, vol 63, no 4 (December 1989), pp 70-73. In this article the various section headings are direct textual lifts from *A Thousand Plateaus*.

14 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford University Press, 1975), p 3.

16 I use 'supraconscious' along lines that Roman Jakobson implied. The slavic word *Zaumnyj* (supraconscious) alludes to the particular form of poetry practiced early this century by the Russian Futurists, notably Khlebnikov, which in its most drastic instances verges on total verbal delirium. 'Zaum' aspires to stand outside language and grammar in an effort to dismantle traditional meaning and produce significations predicated on the sudden impact of the trans-sense utterance. See, for example, Roman Jakobson, 'Supraconscious Turgenev', in Marshall Blonsky (ed), *On Signs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp 302-307. A longer discussion of Lydia Dona's relationship to language could certainly benefit from the 'zaum' paradigm.

17 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p 6.

18 Julia Kristeva, 'Giotto's Joy', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p 216.

19 *Ibid*, p 231.

20 Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p 3.

21 Bloom himself measures his distance from Deconstruction as follows: 'Nietzsche, according to Derrida, inaugurated the decentering that Freud, Heidegger, Lévi-Strauss and, most subversively, Derrida himself have accomplished in the Beulah-lands of Interpretation. Though I am myself an uneasy quester after lost meanings, I still conclude that I favor a kind of interpretation that seeks to restore and redress meaning, rather than primarily to deconstruct meaning. To de-idealize our vision of texts is a good, but a limited good . . .' See *A Map of Misreading*, p 175. For commentary on Bloom's differences from Derrida and de Man see Peter de Bolla, *Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp 25-35, 105ff. Christopher Norris expresses ambivalence over Bloom's self-differentiation, but nevertheless writes that Bloom's argument, 'shrewdly undermines the deconstructionist position by insisting on the conflict of wills to expression behind the encounter of text with text. This struggle, he urges, must not be lost sight of in the undifferentiated merging or free play envisioned by Derridean deconstruction.' See Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1982), 122ff.

22 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1973), p 70.

23 Barnett Newman, Interview with David Sylvester, (BBC, November 17, 1965) reprinted and amended in John O' Neill, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p 257.

24 Newman distinguishes between the pyramid and the triangle, regarding one as form and the other as shape. The pyramid strictly belongs to the domain of sculpture and the triangle to painting. See Barnett Newman, *Chartres* and *Jericho*, *ARTnews*, vol 68, no 2 (April 1969), p 29. Lydia Dona counters this formality, instructing that the triangles within her painting be conceived as pyramids.

25 Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p 69.

26 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p 94.

27 In the context of scaler analogies, one may recall Virilio's tracing of the trajectory of speed in this century. with the acceleration of instantaneous communication and supersonic travel: 'every city', Virilio notes, 'will exist in the same place – in time'. See Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War*, trans Mark Polizotti (New York: semiotext[e], 1983), p 60.

28 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans Ann smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p 268.

29 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p 37.