

## DRAFT: CIRCLING THE VOID: DERRIDA'S STYLE OF COUNTING

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### 1. No More Secrets: Style and Being

The present work attempts to imagine a point at which expressive style and ontological style are indistinguishable. While expressive style refers to the manner in which an entity is presented, or presents itself, ontological style refers to the manner in which an entity exists, persisting - however contingently - in space and time.<sup>1</sup> This point of convergence is central to the polemical force of Derrida's *Spurs*, which, as with much of Derrida's writing, investigates style both thematically and performatively. The coordinates of style – expression and existence, presentation and persistence – identify one of the principal ways in which singular entities come to exemplify universal propositions. Here, where it is possible “to remain at once and for all, open...and undecipherable,”<sup>2</sup> style proves the pivot upon which expression and being are demonstrably coextensive. It is in this sense that it is possible to recognize the resonance of the familiar claim – for some, it is scandalous – that *style is substance*.

*Spurs* undertakes an extended, if often oblique, meditation on the relation of style to the essence of being. Insofar as style is instantly recognizable, it appears to precede its object – “surg[ing] ahead”<sup>3</sup> – and to present itself in terms of something which is in excess of any essence to which it might lend itself; to which it might give its particular style. In this sense, style “protects the present, the content, the thing itself, meaning, truth,”<sup>4</sup> and so instantiates itself in terms of a dissimulation or veiling of essence. Derrida imputes to Nietzsche, who is the principal informant of *Spurs*, the insight that “[t]ruth, unveiling, illumination are no longer decided in the appropriation of the truth of being, but are cast into its bottomless abyss as non-truth, veiling and dissimulation.”<sup>5</sup> It is against the understanding of ontology as a search for the essence of being that it becomes possible – as it does for Heidegger – to discern the vocation of history as a progressive becoming, an unconcealment of

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<sup>1</sup> That existence and presentation are related is not in doubt. At the same time, it is far from clear that every entity which exists, discovers a medium or means of presentation or self-presentation.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1979), 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

*aletheia* as the truth of being itself. If there exists some original covering of *aletheia*, it follows that such a dissimulation extends to the manner in which being is represented. It is this manner of representation which might be described in terms style.

Derrida emphasizes that style expresses the intimate connection of being to the representation of being. It is on the basis of this assertion that he calls into question the manner in which Heidegger, despite numerous and remarkable insights, discounts certain problematics of style in his extensive engagement with Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Gods*. In particular, Derrida contends that Heidegger's decision to analyse "all the elements of Nietzsche's text with the sole exception of the idea's becoming-female"<sup>6</sup> in certain aphorisms, fails fully to recognize the ontological significance of style. Derrida is adamant that stylistic particularity not be reduced to a metaphorical peculiarity,<sup>7</sup> yet to resist such a reduction it is necessary simultaneously to radicalize the connection of style to identity,<sup>8</sup> and to press style to a point beyond identity where it has an existential momentum of its own.

It is largely to the latter task that the present work addresses itself, drawing its momentum from the central proposition of *Spurs*: if style, as dissimulation, did not mediate between essence and the simulation of essence, then essence would be absolutely irretrievable, and all that would remain would be simulation.<sup>9</sup> Style veils essence from appearance through an archaic dissimulation which raises the possibility that objects, as they appear, "might only be pretending to be simulating"<sup>10</sup> a withdrawn essence: "[i]ts secret is...the possibility that indeed it might have no secret."<sup>11</sup>

The extent to which style appears to effect an occultation of reality reflects not a radical inconsistency within reality itself, but occurs on account of the historical rift which forces apart the immanence of the real from the means by which such immanence is presented.<sup>12</sup> Thus, to clarify the logic of style is to facilitate, rather than hinder, access to the facticity of the real. In *Writing Degree*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>8</sup> This seems to be a principal strategy adopted by Derrida in *Spurs* (Ibid., 95-7, 103-5).

<sup>9</sup> Derrida phrases the case as follows: "'Truth' can only be a surface. But the blushing movement of that truth which is not suspended in quotation marks casts a modest veil over such a surface...But should that veil be suspended, or even fall a bit differently, there would not longer be any truth, only 'truth' – written in quotation marks" (Ibid., 59).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> In a remarkable footnote (Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London and New York: Continuum, 2004, 286-8 (187-315), Derrida offers an incisive and eminently concise analysis of this rift as it derives from Plato's various accounts of *mimesis*, a term habitually misappropriated (ibid., 198, 247).

*Zero*, Barthes offers a similar insight: “if style is always a secret...it’s allusive virtue...[owes to the fact that] what stands firmly and deeply beneath style...are fragments of reality.”<sup>13</sup>

In this way, style concretises the tension between concealment and revelation, a concreteness which is nowhere more apparent than in the field of aesthetic production. In the artwork, style is clearly distributed between the conception, production, material existence, perception and interpretation of the work. If expressive style is an aggregation of these positions, such aggregation is nonetheless nonsummative – a term which will be accorded some significance in the argument which follows. Style is at once pervasive and evasive; it is recognized, felt, and responded to. Yet, in itself, style resists precise definition, taking shape “in the interval between several styles.”<sup>14</sup>

It is perhaps for this reason that it becomes necessary to trace the passage between expressive style and ontological style, and in so doing to move from one level of description to another. The present contention is that the distinction of expressive style from ontological style is symbolized in *Spurs* as the difference between the mask and the veil.<sup>15</sup> The mask – habitually worn by the quasi-heroic figures of the artist and the philosopher<sup>16</sup> – involves a “reactive dissimulation”<sup>17</sup> which bars art from presenting reality by emphasizing the artificiality of the artwork. However, it is also possible to imagine artworks in which the logic of presentation is one of veiling, of an “affirmative dissimulation”<sup>18</sup> which acts as a sign or an oblique presentation of *aletheia* – the as yet unrepresented existential truth of reality.

## **2. Seeming is Being: The Convergence of Expressive Style and Ontological Style**

The problem of style haunts the entire history of *mimesis*, mediating between the mask and the veil; between an essential concealment – a sign for the irretrievability of essence – and the process of unconcealment – reality laid bare without any form of dissimulation. In Derrida’s estimation, it is “[a]t this point, where it pierces the veil of truth...[that] the question of style must be measured

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> As Derrida emphasizes, a veil refers both to that which obscures or separates, covering the face or demarcating one space from another, and to the sail of a vessel which, filled with wind, drives it forward.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 75, 97.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

against the larger question of...interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> With respect to interpretation, style measures familiarity against surprise, and convention against newness. As Culler recognizes, style also provokes.<sup>20</sup> Thus, although “style involves first of all the artist’s connection to his or her own time, or historical period, society, and antecedents,”<sup>21</sup> in Said’s estimation, it is not simply subsumed by context. Installing the artwork in place of a lost access to *aletheia*<sup>22</sup> – veiling the real, as it were – it is the avant-garde stylist in particular who provokes by the “formidably difficult aesthetic...that refuse[s] connection with...[its] own time while spinning out...artwork of considerable power nonetheless.”<sup>23</sup>

This “untimely”<sup>24</sup> artist is a figure familiar to Barthes’ view of style as “residing outside art, that is, outside the pact which binds the [creator] to society.”<sup>25</sup> For Barthes, style exists in a paradoxical relation to the artwork: it indicates the singularity of the individual who generates the work, rather than the singularity of the work itself,<sup>26</sup> yet is inextricable from the work precisely to the extent that it reflects this privative part of the creative process which connects the aesthetic object to an individual who generates it, if not necessarily to the society within which the work will discover its significance.<sup>27</sup>

The untimely artist – who steps away from contemporaneity – is the one whose work imagines the point which concerns the present work, the point at which expressive style and ontological style, the veil and that which lies beneath the veil, are indistinguishable from one another. When an artwork no longer reflects a distinction between presentation and representation, except in terms of a minimal difference or an “interval between several styles,”<sup>28</sup> it becomes plausible to claim that art simultaneously instantiates and clarifies the real. For such an art, *style is matter* – a claim which constitute an “article of artistic faith,”<sup>29</sup> and which testifies to “the inseparability of manner and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 71-3.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Culler, “Bad Writing and Good Philosophy,” *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), 213 (205-21).

<sup>21</sup> Edward Said, “Glimpses of Late Style,” *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 134 (134-160).

<sup>22</sup> *Spurs*, 87, 107.

<sup>23</sup> “Glimpses,” 136.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *Writing Degree Zero*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> *Spurs*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, “Style is Matter: The Moral Art of Vladimir Nabokov,” (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2007), 193.

matter.”<sup>30</sup> In this sense, style is something eminently concrete, even visceral: it “achieves its opacity from a certain experience of matter”<sup>31</sup> where “flesh and external reality come together;”<sup>32</sup> it constitutes a material substratum upon which the singularity of the work comes to rest.

In a remarkable essay on exemplarity, Giorgio Agamben cites the following evocative lines from Wallace Stevens’s “Description Without Place,” a poem which takes up an ontological motif as central to Stevens as it is to Plato, the sun: “What it seems/ It is and in such seeming all things are.”<sup>33</sup> According to this logic, the idea or form is in fact continuous with the concrete instantiation of form, a position which Warren Montag recognizes as “Platonic in the most traditional sense of the term.”<sup>34</sup> Plato’s suspicion “of art as mere appearance is not based on the hypothesis of its immateriality but precisely the opposite: its irreducible materiality. Plato fears that the effects produced by the work of art will escape the control of the determining form.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in “The Double Session,” Derrida stresses that “Plato, far from linking the destiny of art and poetry to the structure of *mimesis*...disqualifies in *mimesis* everything that ‘modernity’ makes much of: the mask...the simulacrum.”<sup>36</sup> It is the stubborn concreteness of *mimesis* which constitutes its threat, since in a strict material sense it is the Plato’s view.

What might this mean with respect to the contention that style is matter? In the first instance, it is of considerable significance that poetry should prove the appropriate medium for demonstrating that the force of *seeming*, of the simulacrum, is nothing other than an instantiation of *being*. It is the poets, after all, who are subject to Plato’s most intense scrutiny, precisely because *poiesis* names a force through which something real is produced. As it is used in this fragment from Stevens’ poem, *seeming* effects a field of continuity between appearance and essence (“What it seems/it is”), a continuity which itself distinguishes an element universal to being (“and in such seeming all things are”). Indeed, when Derrida refers to “the remainder of the simulacrum which has been left in writing,”<sup>37</sup> does he not identify the intimate element of this ontological continuity? At the same

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. Although Leland de la Durantaye examines style in a far more restricted sense than the present work, and focuses on the work of Nabakov, his study ends with a number of memorable and strikingly applicable turns of phrase.

<sup>31</sup> *Writing Degree Zero*, 11-2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>33</sup> Wallace Stevens, “Description Without Place,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 339 (339-46). See Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone, 2009), 32.

<sup>34</sup> Warren Montag, “What is at Stake in the Debate on Postmodernism,” *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 98 (88-103).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> “The Double Session,” 287.

<sup>37</sup> *Spurs*, 133.

time, however, this remainder marks a “distance from distance”<sup>38</sup> – a rhetorical figure which marks the dissimulation of essence which, with respect to the representation of being, constitutes an ontological style.

Thus, to suggest that there exists a point at which expressive style and ontological style are indistinguishable, is effectively to imagine the aesthetic situation in which seeming *is* being. In such cases, where dissimulation is most intense, style becomes reality. The ominous overtones of such a claim echo across the history of thought from Plato to Schmitt, but, as in the case of Baudrillard’s hyperreality, installing style in ontological pride of place invariably overreaches itself. For, finally, if the real describes the pervasive condition of every possible reality, it means that style intensifies rather than dissimulates the real. Accepting that style is most clearly problematized in art, this intensification is equally evident in artworks which exist nonreferentially, as it is in those which self-reflexively call attention to their artificiality or to their mimetic fidelity.

Simultaneously weaving and penetrating the veil which separates seeming from being,<sup>39</sup> style marks an acute problematization of the connection between the artwork and reality. In this aspect, it is not a question of maintaining that style is a sufficient ground for the constitution of reality, but rather of recognizing that style always presents itself in terms of a relationship to the real. Mediating the intensity of our encounter with the real, style defines our comportment towards reality.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, style serves a radical ontological purpose. To clarify this proposition, the present work pursues this radicalism at the point where the knot of aesthetic realism and ontological realism is at its tightest. This is a point where presence is marked in terms of fundamental quantity, and quantity is translated by a style of counting, a style of relating to quantity itself as the ground of the real. It is the aesthetic logic of minimalism – preoccupied as it is with number, scale, sequences and series – which rehearses this style of counting with particular clarity and force.

### 3. Quantitative Style: Responding to Parmenides

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Spurs*, 107. Derrida’s image of style as a “spur...[which] rips through veil” (ibid.) is a highly sexuated image, related variously to images of feminine plurality, a refusal of closure, and the perennial patriarchal anxiety of symbolic castration.

<sup>40</sup> For Heidegger, comportment describes a mode of relation to being which is simultaneously an appropriation of being: “[o]ur comportment amounts to a having of the immediately present being in its presence” (Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato’s Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. Ted Sadler (New York and London: Continuum, 2002), 211. Similarly, if style describe a comportment to reality, it is because it simultaneously describes a relation to reality which is eminently real.

A style of counting – a quantitative style – refers to the representation of entities in their quantitative dimension. Its calculations address the manner in which entities belong to certain sets, sequences and systems. A style of counting measures reality in terms of economic principles of equivalence and exchange, but it also attempts to imagine real entities as contingent unities in the midst of multiplicity. To count is, of course, to calculate, but it is also to participate in an ongoing dispute as to whether it is quantity or quality which underpins being. The wager of the present work is that it is fundamental quantity that grounds being, and so constitutes the field of potentiality from which entities emerge in a manner which constitutes reality. Among the truly ancient questions of philosophy is how best to grasp being itself. The poet-philosopher, Parmenides, whose thought is taken up and developed by Plato, presents this problem in the starkly axiomatic terms with which thought is still attempting to come to grips: is being *one* or *multiple*; is it governed by *unity* or by *multiplicity*?

According to Alain Badiou, this problem remains unresolved: “the upshot of the aporias in *Parmenides*...[reveals that] it is pointless to try to deduce the existence (or non-existence) of the One: it is necessary to decide [between unity and multiplicity], and then assume the consequences.”<sup>41</sup> However, regardless of whether the decision is in favour of unity or of multiplicity, being appears to be unavoidably entangled with questions of quantity. To represent how quantity is immanent to existence is a formidable task. What mathematics renders intelligible, it presents in a style which, for most, remains somewhat abstract. It is for this reason that it is useful, if admittedly reductive, to consider radical quantity in terms of different styles of counting – styles which recognize that unity and multiplicity are seldom easily distinguished from one another, and recalling that style is precisely a problematization of the limit between expression, seeming and being.

A style of counting traces the way in which entities are grouped together and belong to certain sets, sequences and systems. It refers to the representation of entities in terms of their quantitative dimension. Measuring reality in terms of principles of equivalence and exchange, a style of counting also tries to imagine real entities as contingent unities in the midst of multiplicity. Quantitative style simultaneously reflects a way to *account* for real entities – explaining how entities emerge from

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<sup>41</sup> Alain Badiou, “Platonism and Mathematical Ontology,” *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 60 (51-60).

sheer multiplicity;<sup>42</sup> and a way of examining how entities are made to *count* – explaining how entities are assigned particular value, rendered significant, and incorporated into various economies in a manner which makes quantity itself a primary quality of being.<sup>43</sup> To trace a style of counting is not to deny the worrying commitment in contemporary life to accumulation and acquisition. Indeed, to clarify the link between quantity and being may yet produce an effective means of resisting the reduction of existence to a mere set of numbers within the machinations of a global capitalist economy.<sup>44</sup>

In this light, the situations and objects which exhibit an aptitude for exemplifying different styles of counting take on a particular significance. Art, in particular, possesses the singular capacity for reflecting and reflecting upon quantitative style, making sensible that aspect of number which all too easily is left in the stratosphere of pure concepts. Artworks realize situations in which vastly different styles and intensities are rendered intelligible in terms of qualitative equivalences and differences. Yet it is also true that these qualities are aggregated or separated, arranged into sets, systems or sequences, in a manner which precisely reflects different quantitative styles. Quantitative style clarifies the situations in which objects persist, however contingently, as singular calculations of properties, and collections of qualities. In the conceptual framework sketched above, quality does not compete with quantity. Rather, it is subtracted from the absolute multiplicity which simultaneously grounds and constitutes being itself.<sup>45</sup> The account which is given of such processes of existential calculation – for example, whether or not subtraction is seen as negative diminution or recursion, or as positive testament to the inexhaustibility of multiplicity – is what characterizes a particular quantitative style.

#### 4. Essence Evades Calculation: Addressing Multiplicity

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<sup>42</sup> With respect to the relation of absolute multiplicity and real infinity, Badiou contends that mathematics proposes “a vertigo of an infinity of infinities distinguishable within their common opposition to the finite” (Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York, Continuum, 2005), 146).

<sup>43</sup> See Stuart Elden, *Speaking Against Number: Heidegger, Language and the Politics of Calculation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), 147-8.

<sup>44</sup> Badiou asks: “Isn’t *another idea* of number necessary, in order for us to turn thought back against the despotism of number?” (Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), 4). See Daniel Smith, “Badiou and Deleuze on the Ontology of Mathematics,” *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 91-3 (77-93).

<sup>45</sup> *Being and Event*, 40-8.



In *Spurs*, Derrida observes that since essence, or the truth of being, is neither a property of being, nor simply a process of appropriation of properties, it “falls short of the undecidable exchange of more into less.”<sup>46</sup> Put simply, essence evades calculation. This evasiveness is clarified in light of two important claims: first, that it is radical quantity which grounds being; and secondly, that it is pure multiplicity which constitutes radical quantity. According to Badiou, being is irreducibly multiple: “[t]he multiple from which ontology makes up its situation is composed solely of multiplicities”.<sup>47</sup> Amongst the numerous thinkers who, like Badiou, “seek in some sense to express, intuit, figure or otherwise articulate the multiple,”<sup>48</sup> we might count Derrida.<sup>49</sup> However, where Badiou seeks to demonstrate multiplicity by a direct mathematically derived ontology,<sup>50</sup> Derrida pursues multiplicity more obliquely, through a hermeneutic derived from the relation between difference and repetition. While for Badiou, multiplicity conditions being, and so precedes specific entities or identities, for Derrida, multiplicity is clarified from within the process of identification. Here, then, are two styles of counting. They arrive at a shared affirmation - that being is multiple - yet by paths which reveal different horizons for number and its significance to the real as each conceives it.

Number and mathematics are irregular topics for Derrida. It is clear, nonetheless, that he explores at least two styles of counting: the first is well exemplified in the brief examination of repetition and origin conducted in “Ellipsis,” from which can be drawn a general position on counting. This is complimented by “The Supernumerary,” the last part of *Dissemination*, in which Derrida elaborates his resistance to enumeration and calculation more directly. In both cases, number and calculation are viewed as procedural, rather than essential. In a significant sense, a style of counting is all there is to number, for Derrida, which, to some extent, clarifies why he associates number with a reductive regime, and the limitation of being to equivalences, rather than with potentiality. For Badiou, number is eminently real, and constitutes a field from which change can be both drawn and better comprehended. By juxtaposing the quantitative styles of Derrida and Badiou, it becomes clear that to resist the instrumental quantification of being, it is necessary to remain responsive to a range of quantitative styles, and to both their confluences and differences.

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<sup>46</sup> *Spurs*, 113.

<sup>47</sup> *Being and Event*, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Hallward, “Introduction,” *Thing Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London and New York, Continuum, 2004), 5 (1-20).

<sup>49</sup> Alain Badiou, “Homage to Jacques Derrida,” *Adieu Derrida*, ed. Costas Douzinas (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2007), 36-7 (34-46).

<sup>50</sup> For a concise and clear discussion of the mathematical basis of Badiou’s ontology, see Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 328-34.

## 5. Representing Number: 0 through 9 and the Remainder

Explaining that the singularity of the work resides not solely in the unique way in which its qualities cohere, but also in the capacity of this unique aggregation to be repeated, Derrida offers the following remarkably concise statement regarding his style of counting: “[w]hat we have here is an incalculable scene, because we can’t count 1, 2, 3, or the first before the second, a scene which never reveals itself by definition, and whose phenomenality can only disappear.”<sup>51</sup> What might at first seem a cryptic claim, is clarified through the realisation that Derrida seeks to demonstrate that existence can only be grasped in terms of contingent intensities, fleeting moments of incomplete identification, rather than in terms of essence.

Deconstruction recognizes that identity is neither a radical or original quantity which precedes instantiation, nor a process of sequential accumulation. Identity, which might be described as the medium through which being renders itself knowable, is dependent on its repeatability. Although repetition involves accumulation – the compounding of iteration upon iteration – each repetition carries with it a difference from the others that precede it, however imperceptible this difference may be. The minimal momentum gathered by identity in this way means that existence is always veering towards multiplicity. Indeed, deconstruction offers itself as the intuition that being is marked by multiplicity rather than unity, but maintains that multiplicity is perceptible only because there is a radical rift which marks every entity as constitutively double – split between an absent and irretrievable point of origin, and the minimal mark of this absence which calls for reiteration and so constitutes a “prosthesis of origin.” Identity always issues and answers this call, for it cannot inhabit this split, which always threatens to slip back into the absence it tentatively defies by existing. For this reason, repetition becomes the prerequisite for stabilizing identity. As Derrida contends in “Ellipsis”, “[t]here was immediately a double origin plus its repetition. Three is the first figure of repetition.”<sup>52</sup>

There is an eminently quantitative logic at work here. Identity is never fully present to itself since it is always figured in terms of the repetition of a split – the double, which translates that to inhabit a point of origin is impossible, and so is always a fragmented desire. Thus, where we might expect any entity to offer itself in terms of unity – as one (1) – in fact such unity is always already lost to the

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<sup>51</sup> Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge, “This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” *Acts of Literature Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 70 (33-75).

<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Ellipsis,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 378 (371-8).

double, in which case, numerically, it appears that two (2) precedes one (1). However, this double origin does not have the capacity for self-presentation, precisely because, as a split, it is the mark of a lack of unified origin. Coherence is granted only through repetition, reiteration, and re-marking this mark of the double. It is for this reason that three (3) – double plus repetition – precedes two (2). Three (3) is thus the figure of contingent unity (1) – “the first figure of repetition,” or prosthesis for the absent unity which, in any event, is merely a myth of origin marked by a split, or a double (2).

In this way, Derrida’s quantitative style suggests that, in returning to the Parmenidean axiomatization of being as a decision between the one and the many as soon as it is admitted that being makes itself intelligible in terms of identity, this decision has, in practice, already been made in favour of multiplicity. Grounded only in radical absence which is marked by a split or double origin, identity is unintelligible without repetition. The quantitative logic of deconstruction is triplicate: three – the double and the repetition – is the number of an identity which resists the force of final identification or unification, maintaining in its iterability a strict nonsummativity, and an openness to the simultaneity of repetition and reinterpretation.

The quantitative style of deconstruction, with its emphasis on repetition as a gathering of difference which, in itself, is an orientation towards the future, bears a significant resemblance to the form of the Nietzschean eternal recurrence of the same<sup>53</sup> – “the eternal yes to all things”<sup>54</sup> – which, in the midst of its return, marks a minimal displacement, an “exit of the identical into the same [which] remains very slight.”<sup>55</sup> The complacency that there exists a point of access to the immanence of the present is decisively undermined by the logic of return. “By definition [the eternal return] cannot let itself be understood in the present,” Derrida avers. “[I]t is untimely, different...[and] repeats an affirmation...since it affirms the return, the rebeginning, and a certain kind of reproduction that preserves whatever comes back.”<sup>56</sup>

It is necessary here to recall Said’s contention that the untimely stylist is the one whose singularity refuses reduction to any sort of uniform style. However, as Derrida notes, “[t]he mark [which the stylist] has left behind, irreducible though it may be, is just as irreducibly plural.”<sup>57</sup> A singular style cannot be reduced to a question of uniqueness, since it exists as an enjoiner to reinterpretation,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>54</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 131.

<sup>55</sup> “Ellipsis,” 373.

<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Names,” *The Ear of the Other*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985), 19-20 (1-38).

<sup>57</sup> *Spurs*, 105.

and thus also to multiplicity. Derrida might be identified as an untimely and singular quantitative stylist insofar as his attempt to trace a species of multiplicity which is *supernumerary* – beyond quantity and quantification, number and calculation – resists reduction and stasis. If concerted resistance to quantification marks this style, it is because the supernumerary refers to an intuition that writing<sup>58</sup> points to something which is simultaneously in excess of and devoid of any determination of identity.

The quantitative tension between excess and void is exemplified with some force in Jasper Johns' *O through 9* sketches and paintings – amongst numerous numerically themed works which the artist executed in the early 1960s. By superimposing the numbers 0 through to 9 in various ways, these works interrogate the figuration and configuration of number. The passage between number as an abstract entity and its manifestation in terms of concrete figures, is central to Johns' numerical works. These raise significant questions regarding the transcription of quantity, and the conceptual and representational element of number, either in isolation, or as part of a sequence or equation. The visual superimposition of these ten numerical figures might at first overwhelm the viewer. This is particularly the case in the paintings, where a kaleidoscopic pattern of bright hues, superficially reminiscent of the Orphist texturing of space, generates considerable work for the viewer in discerning its constituent figures.

More interesting than these painting for the present purpose, however, are the preparatory charcoal sketches which Johns executed (see [http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object\\_id=65207](http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=65207)). These carry the clear traces of inscription, calling attention to these definite yet fragile markers of style and, symbolically, to the fact that quantity is the subject of an immanent materialism. Lines cross one another repeatedly, some perfectly measured and other roughly sketched, confusing the space contained in individual numerical figures with areas which overlap and lie between these. The way in which these figures are interlocked reflects how their singularity is simultaneously affirmed and compromised. With respect to both the stylistic execution of the work and the ideal series from which it draws its material, a clear sense of which number precedes and which proceeds, which coordinates and which follows, is easily lost in the superimposition of figure and process.

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<sup>58</sup> For Derrida, *writing* is the principal exemplar of the generative errancy he terms *différance*: every inscription locates a dislocation, tracing an elliptical orbit around an absent centre – an evasive point of origin and meaning – which at once constitutes the possibility of unique interpretation and reinterpretability.

The title of the work enjoins the viewer to count. However, although it suggest an ordinal sequence running from 0 through to 9, the order of this count may as easily be nonsequential as it is sequential. Equally, there may be no count at all, the viewer becoming transfixed by a single figure, or intersections where familiar angles and curves seem to promise the materialization of numbers, but which fail to cohere. Much as repetition gathers difference despite the fact that its logic seems to be one of duplication, so too the simple calculation to which Johns refers, is in fact always complicated by the process by which it is counted.

## 6. The Uncounted and the Uncountable

Alternating between figures, intersections and interstices, *0 through 9* teases out the tension which exists between unity, seriality and multiplicity. What is perhaps most remarkable about this work, though, is that what escapes calculation is more important than that which is calculable. Derrida refers to this aspect of identity and identification as the *remainder*. According to Derrida, the remainder “knows of no proper itinerary,”<sup>59</sup> resisting incorporation into a sequence, and remaining uncounted. The remainder has neither imminent valence nor evident agency, yet, since “it...comprise[s] the larger part of historical experience,”<sup>60</sup> it must be accounted for. The remainder – that which goes uncounted in any scenario of calculation – is persistent, but not insistent. It is on this account that it needs to be safeguarded.

In the case of Johns’ *0 through 9*, what is uncounted is evident both materially and in terms of process. Those intersections of lines which do not readily give themselves to interpretation, either as a figure or as part of a sequence of numbers, resist calculation. Similarly, it is not possible to count the many errant lines which are executed not with the sure hand of the draftsman, but sketched expressively, on impulse. Most poignantly though, what is uncounted is evident in the moments of decision. It inhabits the choices Johns makes in executing the work, in those things his technique of inscription brings to the fore as well as those aspects of the figure he chooses not to emphasize. It is carried into the decisions which confront the viewer, who must process complex visual and conceptual information, discerning forms and constructing sequences. Invariably, numerous routes are missed and left indefinite, both as a consequence of the superimposition of forms, but also by the multiple ways in which these forms might be tied together to constitute contingent order.

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<sup>59</sup> *Spurs*, 131.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 82.

These are the persistent markers of the quantitative style of *0 through 9*, left aside and uncounted, but crucial to how the work communicates itself. Recalling that quantitative style ultimately describes the manner in which entities are included or excluded from certain sets, systems and sequences, the challenge which the indefinite numericity of this work seems to pose to thought is precisely one of offering a means of conceptualizing the quantitative dimension of belonging and non-belonging. Determining whether non-belonging is the predicate of an active or a passive exclusion remains an urgent task for thought – one which amplifies the entanglement of subjectivity, identity, politics and aesthetics.

Finally, the tension exhibited in Johns' work in terms of an explicit act of counting coming up against a resistance to any final calculation, points to *nonsummativity* as the essential dimension of any quantitative style sufficient to the task of contemplating the multiplicity of being. Nonsummativity describes, in terms of process and calculation, the precise incommensurability of the one and the multiple which dominates the Parmenidean ontological paradigm. The contingent stability of any situation cannot be accounted for by the interactions of its parts, but neither do the interactions of parts necessarily constitute a contingently stable system. Simply put, nonsummativity is the recognition that things do not necessarily add up. In this way, a nonsummative understanding of multiplicity retains the possibility of resistance to calculation, but also the possibility that those things which are uncounted in a particular situation, may yet be counted or count themselves as part of another.

In Badiou's ontology, nonsummativity – which simultaneously invokes the potential for being subjected to calculation, while resisting final calculation – discovers a paradoxical analogue in *forcing*. As Badiou conceives it, forcing gives expression both to a mathematical procedure and a type of calculative thought experiment. It rests on the assertion that events, which present decisive disruptions in a given state or situation, give rise to novelty. However, since events are "instantaneously vanishing points," novelty cannot be grasped as such: it retains an indiscernible element,<sup>61</sup> which compels us to participate in the constructive process of testifying to the fact that an event has taken place, that novelty emerges, but that this novelty cannot be calculated in full.

The resultant continuum of positions which exist in relation to this event, Badiou refers to as a truth procedure. In Brassier's estimation, "[f]orcing describes the process whereby a truth procedure hazards assertions on the basis of the supposition that, although unverifiable within the situation as

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<sup>61</sup> See Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 109; Christopher Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event: A Reader's Guide* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 226-7.

it stands, they will prove verifiable according to an extension of this situation than can and will exist even though it does not exist as yet.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, we are compelled to make decisions in the present, and to imagine situations in which the consequences of these decisions have run their course, in order to come to grips with change both critically and productively, from the midst of a situation which is itself subject constant change.

The persistence of an indiscernible element in every calculation of novelty, articulates a final and important question with respect to quantitative style: to what extent is that which is uncounted also uncountable? Returning to Johns’ *0 through 9* provides a remarkable insight in this regard. The lines of the sketch are thickest and least sure in tracing the figure of zero (0). On the level of practical execution, this is clearly because the elliptical shape of the zero cannot easily be executed with the tools readily available to the sketcher. The zero requires a freer hand, a willingness to retrace the uncertain curves which constitute this cipher for the void. Repeatedly and elliptically tracing that which constitutes this numerical figure which is offered as a prosthesis for nothingness itself, and which intuits but fails to represent this absolute absence in the space it tentatively encircles and imperfectly contains, is nothing other than quantitative inscription of the “repetition [which] is writing, because what disappears in it is the self-identity of the origin.”<sup>63</sup>

The ellipse – which constitutes the concrete mark of Johns’ zero as well as the symbolic course of writing with respect to an absent origin<sup>64</sup> – is a fine analogue for the quantitative style implicit in Derrida’s account of the vertiginous abyss for which identity is the substitute. This absence of ground necessitates repetition, which is the sole means by which identity is able to establish itself.<sup>65</sup> However, merely to encircle an absence is insufficient. As in the case of Johns’ zero, it is necessary to retrace the circle to establish sufficient difference for the emergence of identity. To recall, the “origin...beg[an] by repeating...[T]he double did not only add itself to the simple. It divided and supplemented it. There was immediately a double origin plus its repetition.”<sup>66</sup> For Derrida, there remains something strictly unrepresentable at the heart of identity – “something that is not really anything and does not even take place, cannot be counted, recounted, numbered, ciphered,

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<sup>62</sup> Ray Brassier, “Nihil Ubound: Remarks on Subtractive Ontology and Thinking Capitalism,” *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, ed. Peter Hallward (London and New York, Continuum, 2004), 54 (50-8).

<sup>63</sup> “Ellipsis,” 374.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

deciphered.”<sup>67</sup> Yet there is also the apparent compulsion to try to represent this absence, to calculate, to write against the void.

It is by no means insignificant that such calculation encounters its limit in relation to zero, nothingness or the void. For Derrida, “nothing *itself* is determined by disappearing”<sup>68</sup> – an emptiness which is only circumscribed:<sup>69</sup> zero or the void cannot be directly presented, but only obliquely represented. This disappearance, which Badiou terms the “errancy of the void,”<sup>70</sup> marks an important measure for Derrida’s quantitative style. Despite the differences in their ontological commitments, an examination of the void as it is presented in Badiou’s writing clarifies rather than obscures what this disappearance or errancy means to Derrida. A principal contention of Badiou’s work is that since being is constituted by irreducible multiplicity, the proposition even of contingent identity requires that a distinction be made between being itself – inconsistent multiplicity – and existence – or consistent multiplicity.<sup>71</sup> In this light, the void identifies the point at which consistent multiplicity gives way to inconsistent multiplicity,<sup>72</sup> a point which Badiou claims is foundational, since being is nothing other than “multiplicity plucked from the void.”<sup>73</sup>

For both thinkers existence is drawn out of a tense relationship with zero, or the void. They agree that the void cannot be presented directly without amounting to annihilation. As a consequence, any knowledge of the void must arrive in terms of representation, which Derrida refers to in terms of structuration and Badiou in terms of metastructure. Yet, despite these consonances they differ with respect to how best to grasp such representation and its ontological significance. While Derrida contends that being must be approached from the phenomenological perspective of consistent multiplicity, Badiou argues that it can be accurately apprehended only when approached from the mathematical perspective of inconsistent multiplicity. In this light, Badiou and Derrida possess very different quantitative styles: for Derrida the void or zero cannot be presented; for Badiou the void zero cannot not be presented – it is “distributed everywhere.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Dissemination,” *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1981), 397 (317-401.)

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Force and Signification,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 8 (1-35).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>70</sup> *Being and Event*, 110.

<sup>71</sup> Badiou provides a remarkably concise account of this claim in relation to the work of Derrida in his “Homage to Derrida” (“Homage,” 37). See also *Being and Event*, 24-29.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>73</sup> Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), 29.

<sup>74</sup> *Being and Event*, 57.



## 7. The Remainder

Johns' *0 through 9* again proves instructive. The thick outlines of the zero literally seek to encompass the other numerals from one to nine. However, in each of the four corners, as well as to the left of the sketch, several of the numerals exceed the borders of the zero. This is at once a result of the shape of the numerical signifiers, as well as formal division of space which the superimposition of the numbers dictates. However, it is also the product of a singular, but necessarily imperfect, execution of the sketch. This flawed superimposition in a sense incorporates all the numerical ciphers from which natural numbers are constituted. By framing the other numerals, the zero – the attempted encircling of the void – seeks to contain the procedural element of calculation itself, suggesting not only the rising sequence of natural numbers from zero to nine, but every possible reckoning.

In this estimation, calculation is bounded by zero. For Derrida, though, such calculation should be regarded with considerable caution. "E-numeration, like de-nomination, makes and unmakes, joins and dis-members, in one and the same blow, both number and name, delimiting them with borders that ceaselessly accost the borderless, the supernumerary,"<sup>75</sup> he suggests. A clearer censure of the idea that being is calculable is hardly imaginable. Yet, it is worth interrogating whether the source of this misgiving is directed at calculation itself, or rather to those calculations which seek to effect an *a priori* elimination of any remainder. Not unironically, Derrida tends to reduce calculation to an economy – a situation in which number is metonymically substituted in place of qualitative singularities.<sup>76</sup> Thus he is able to argue the case for a vigilant preservation of the "innumerable [which] does not simply come to exceed or bound the numerical order along its borders, from the outside. It works through it from the inside"<sup>77</sup>.

The physical significance of the lines which exceed the already inexact boundaries of the zero in Johns' sketch take on particular significance at this point. For these lines are nothing other than a concrete manifestation of the remainder. It is now possible to revisit the question posed above, first by extending it – is the remainder, which is uncounted, in fact supernumerary, or uncountable? – and then by answering it – as it manifests through Derrida's style of counting, undoubtedly yes. In

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<sup>75</sup> "Dissemination," 398.

<sup>76</sup> "This relation to the absence of traces, to the innumerable...is constitutive of my 'unity,' my 'unit-ness,' that is, my inscription and my substitution within the series of numbers" (Ibid., 363).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

this sense, Johns' *0 through 9* at once exemplifies and instantiates the point which is so central to the first part of the present work: the aesthetic conditions under which seeming is being.

The artist's style of expression coincides with the style of being of the work in question, returning to the materialism of style by contingently calculating the incalculable, inscribing both number and its remainder. Thus, while Johns' sketch contains a multiplicity of possible numerical sequences, it testifies to its own nonsummativity by resisting any final calculation. This point of resistance – only ever a tentative supplement – is the remainder. Emblematic of Derrida's quantitative logic, the remainder represents an attempt "to think the unique in the plural,"<sup>78</sup> and also to disrupt the momentum both of material and temporal calculation. In this sense, the remainder is the mark of persistence, of a patient "waiting for the event,"<sup>79</sup> in Gibson's terms. Johns' *0 through 9* poses a difficult challenge in this respect. The imbrication of number and process, the evocation of multiple enumerations from amidst a collagic simultaneity, seems to wait for no one. Yet, finally, this is a work of patient deconstruction, and is emblematic of how every attempt to render being in terms of a stable calculation without remainder invariably reflects only "a kind of writing that does not say, that no longer speaks."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP), 248.

<sup>80</sup> *Dissemination*, 397.