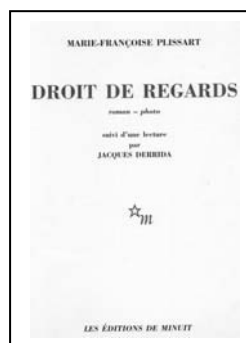


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DE-TITLED: GENDER AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE
DOUBLE SIGNATURE IN DROIT DE REGARDS (ROMAN-
PHOTO DE MARIE-FRANÇOISE PLISSART SUIVI D'UNE
LECTURE DE JACQUES DERRIDA)

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“Chambre obscure de cette force d’écriture où nous développons des images dont ‘je’ et ‘vous’ n’aurons jamais eu que les négatifs” (Derrida, 1972).

“It is always necessary that the other sign and it is always the other that signs last. In other words, first” (Derrida, 1990).

“Je le prends par derrière”.

I open it at the last page. I enter through the back door, inverting the order of reading imposed by the architecture of the book.

I try that way not to pass.

Not to walk under the law that the title imposes, engraved on the frontispiece: “*Droit de regards*” (Derrida, 1985)

And yet, je sais que ça me regarde.

Mais, je ne le regarde pas.

I renounce by now a patient reading of the photographs, and I abandon myself to the voyeurism of tracing with the eyes each of the voices of the text.

Je prends le livre par derrière.

In place of the title, the signature “Jacques Derrida” alone, lies beneath the last line, as if the photographs and the text alike would belong to him. But, to whom does this signature refer? Which one of the voices of the polyphonic text is to be charged with this signature? And what is the relationship between the signature and the photographs?

And then, repetition to begin with: “-*Droit de regards*” (Derrida, 1985: 36).

The constant return of the title re-inscribes itself like the origin of every line. No way out. No matter from which point I take it, I cannot make head-

nor-tail of this corpus. “*Un discours sans queue ni tête, aphalle et acéphalle*”, Nancy could have said (Nancy, 2000: 14), drags the eye in a blind spiral. Like the “*poème en abyme*” by Francis Ponge that Derrida quotes at the end of the text, “*Par le mot par commence donc ce texte*” (Derrida, 1985: 36), everything starts and finishes with a “*Droit de regards*”. No image before or after this “*Droit de regards*”.

But *Droit de regards* is not *one* title. The inaudible mark of the plural regard-s installs a primordial non-identity within the title, an impossibility of closing off the deferral of the meaning in relation to the title itself. Is it the title to be read in silence (like a photograph) or is it to be pronounced by an invisible and yet audible voice? In any case, if the title invokes a law, it must be a bisected law. A law that calls into question the oppositions between writing/speech, signifier/signified, *langue/parole*, sensible/intelligible, diachronic/synchronic, space/time... but also masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual. But then, which *droit de regard/s*?

The legal sentence “*droit de regard*” indicates both the right of inspection and the fact of having something to say, and therefore refers directly to the relationship between language and photography. The written title adds an inaudible “s” to the legal formula “*droit de regard*”. Taking as referent its own written trace, the title *acts as* photography, like a silent graph, distancing itself from the spoken word. This inaudible plural mark in “regards” seems to stress the particular relation which the law could entertain with a plurality of ways of seeing, with a multiplicity of ways of “*prendre en vue*”. The plural breaks into the legal formula multiplying and disseminating the eye. The same way that the photographic machine has already rendered the eye multiple from a prosthetic exteriority. From the very title, the irrecoverable oscillation between the right of inspection, the right to talk and the complex authority of the eye(s) responds to the caesura between mute photography and non illustrated text. The title holds a wake over this discontinuity, over this (almost moral) line break between voyeurism and exegesis that determines the architecture of the book. It is precisely the title that from the beginning comes to “*mettre en regard*” the photographs and the text. But also, the declination of the plural “*droit de regards*” indicates the dissemination of the “natural” eye into technological media, and therefore the *différance* introduced by the mechanical, analogical or digital (re)production of the image.

Eight years after having written *Droit de regards*, 22 of December of 1993 in an interview with Bernard Stiegler, Derrida recalls having used the expression “*droit de regard*” (notice that he –or the editor– omits the mark of the plural) in relation to photography. Curiously, “*droit de regard*” will be also the title of this interview which was filmed in Derrida’s own house, as if

this “*droit*” would come to regulate precisely the access of the camera to the private space of one’s own house. Here, he defines “*droit de regards*” not so much as “right of inspection”, so to speak, as an “autorité abusive, l’autorité usurpée, violemment appropriée, violemment approprié ou imposée là où nous n’avons pas ‘naturellement’ de droit”, but rather as “regulation of the gaze”, or as “savoir d’une manière générale, ce qui lie le juridique, ou le juridico-politique, à la vue, à la vision, mais aussi à la capture des images, à leur utilisation” (Derrida & Stielger, 1996: 42). And he adds:

Je m’étais servi de cette expression “droit de regard”, à propos de photographie, d’une œuvre photographique silencieuse dont j’avais fait proliférer les matrices narratives, mais cela déborde largement la question de l’art -ou de la photographie comme art. Cela concerne tout ce qui, dans l’espace aujourd’hui, est réglé par la production et la circulation des images, réelles ou virtuelles, et donc des regards, des yeux, des prothèses optiques, etc. (Derrida & Stielger, 1996: 43).

The expression “*droit de regards*” seems to refer to the contemporary necessity of an ethics of the eye and its prostheses¹, the necessity of a reflection on the limits of the right of the eye to see, and the right that links the physical eye to its prosthesis, which may or not might not have the right to take, produce or reproduce certain images.

Droit de regards, as a written title, is above all a *frontispiece*. At the same time, the principal façade of an edifice and the image of a written sentence engraved on the cover-door. Plissart’s photo-romance behaves as a building-book designed for the purposes of a particular Quintilian “art of memory”, not very different from the composition formulae of the roman-ciné, according to which “In order to form a series of places in memory, a building is to be remembered, as spacious and varied as possible, the forecourt, the living room, the bedrooms, not omitting the statues and other ornaments with which the rooms are decorated” (Yates, 1963: 3 y 45-46). This classical mnemotechnique analogy translates in Derrida as one of the conditions of production of a book as a spatial object:

¹ Derrida had signed in October 1993 a text published in “Le Monde” demanding the application of what it would be call later (January 1994) “la loi de dépôt légal de l’audiovisuel” which “reconnaît que la société, un État ou une nation, a le droit ou le devoir de ‘stocker’, de mettre en réserve la quasi-totalité de ce qui est produit et diffusé sur les antennes nationales. Cela étant mis en réserve, accumulé, ordonné, classé, la loi doit y donner accès, comme à tout patrimoine, comme à tout bien national; et elle doit ouvrir cet accès, comme à tout patrimoine, comme à tout bien national; et elle doit ouvrir cet accès à tout citoyen qui désire consulter cette archive” (Derrida & Stielger, 1996: 43).

Un objet d'art, dit plastique, ne prescrit pas nécessairement un ordre de lecture. Je peux me déplacer devant lui, commencer par le haut ou pas le bas, parfois tourner autour. Cette possibilité a sans doute une limite idéale. Disons pour l'instant que la structure de cette limite laisse un jeu plus grand que dans le cas des objets d'art temporels (discursif ou non), sauf si un certain morcellement, un mise en scène spatiale précisément (une partition effective ou virtuelle) permet de commencer en plusieurs lieux, de faire varier le sens ou la vitesse. Un livre... c'est une espèce d'architecture (Derrida, 1978: 58).

In the case of Plissart's photo-romance, it is within this virtual space deployed by the turning of the pages of the book that a door, a window, or a mirror takes us from one photograph into another². Only this structural homology between the building/checkerboard/photographic album enables the visitor/player/eye of memory to circulate within the book as if it were a "*espace photographique*" (Derrida, 1985: 33).



Neither a mere photo-romance, nor a collection of photographs, Plissart's book-building works as an architecture that regulates the displacement of the eye within a certain space. For this reason Derrida does not hesitate to call the book a "*topo-photographie*" (Derrida, 1985: 9) whose architectonic design combines the rules of the game of draughts ("*le damier*") and the construction strategies of a classical French edifice ("*la demeure*"). It is "*la spacialité du livre*" commanding the eye, giving or denying the "*droit de regard*": "Il n'ya que de l'architecture, des constructions plus ou moins habitables, des demeures. Le casier ou la case, c'est aussi la casa" (Derrida, 1985: 15).

² Alain Robbe-Grillet in *La Belle Captive* plays with the "mise en abyme" of architecture is René Magritte's "*Éloge de la dialectique*": a painting of an open window that takes us into another house. René Magritte, "*Éloge de la dialectique*", Musée d'Ixelles, Bruxelles.

REVELATIONS WITHOUT STORIES

The first (or which amounts to the same, the last) series of $n+1$ voices had already warned us: “Tu ne sauras, vous non plus, toutes les histoires que j’ai pu encore me raconter en regardant ces images” (Derrida, 1985: 1). The voice promises us silence, it threatens to leave us without “*histoire(s)*” (history/story(ies)). Right from the simulacrum of the opening, which is actually the end of a work to which the text itself does not belong, the narrator advances by splitting himself into several *positions* which engage the unity of the text in an indeterminable drift. And it is this splitting, which divides the narrative voice into multiple (and non-dialogical) voices, and separates the “voice that talks” from the “voice that sees”, that assures the impossibility of narrating the stories. This is a dialogue of the deaf, or better, a polylogue of the dumb.



But what does the voice grant itself thanks to this prohibition? What does this prohibition produce and authorize? What are the effects of this framing gesture, this way of getting into the book by drawing its own limits, surrounding the photographs with words that have sworn to have nothing to say, or better to have no story to tell about them? What kind of prohibition could have the force of chopping up the voice into $n+1$ voices not to give us the story? Or even more, what is the story that forces all these voices to obey a single rule: “*pas d’histoire*”. What does this prohibition give... *encore* by withdrawing the story which the voices kept telling themselves as they look at these photographs? *À quel titre parle la voix qui interdit?* On behalf of whom or of what does this voice give itself the categorical imperative of “*pas d’histoire*”?

Again, all these questions *come out* as a paradox. This prohibition takes the form of a positive law, that Foucault would have called a “censure productive”. In fact, the voice that declares “*pas d’histoire*”, and that seems to be the first to talk, inscribes itself beneath the law of the title.

The prohibition gives itself the “*droit de regards*”.

And yet the voice seems to have pronounced its first word to declare itself mute of stories. Cruel performativity of self-cancellation. But without saying anything it confesses all. It says that the law that shall rule the text is a negative one:

Je m'interdirai, ce sera la règle, de vous avouer toutes les histoires que je me raconterai longtemps encore à leur sujet. A chacun les siennes, je vous laisse les vôtres, c'est votre droit de regard. Ces histoires ne sont pas en nombre infini, bien sûr, mais restent quasi innombrables. Et la disposition des "images" en rend surtout le récit interminable. Peut-être même une relation ne peut-elle commencer, d'où la règle que je me suis fixée: pas d'histoire (Derrida, 1985: 1).

The ambiguity in French that the expressions "*pas d'histoire*" et "une relation ne peut-elle commencer" establish between the *histoire/relation* as *récit*, and the *histoire/relation* as *sexual or love affair*, seems to suggest that the ban on narration is simultaneously a prohibition on a possible sexual or love relationship. The text coming after the *photographs* gives itself a single law, a "mise en abyme" of the law of Plissart's photo-roman itself, which prohibits the *histoire* as *récit* and the *histoire* as sexual or love relationship/(*rapport*): "Voilà ce qui se donne à penser, c'est impensable, ce 'sans-rapport' comme rapport à la loi" (Derrida, 1985: 8).

In making this prohibition its only *relation* to law, Plissart's photo-romance sets a trap to its *genre* (genre/gender)³.

Derrida has already noticed that a *genre* (genre/gender) trouble is always a trouble with the law: "the question of literary genre/gender is not a formal one. It covers the motif of the law in general, of generation in the natural and symbolic senses, of the generation of difference, sexual difference between the feminine and the masculine gender, of the hymen between the two, of a relationless relation between the two, of an identity and difference between the feminine and the masculine"⁴. In fact, Plissart's photo-romance depends on a double treason of *genre* (genre/gender) that emanates from the imperative: "*pas d'histoire*". First, "*pas d'histoire*" as *récit*. This first infidelity of Plissart's photographic work in relation to literary genre comes from the will to produce a photo-romance without words, without "*bulles*" (without balloons). One of the voices of Derrida's text affirms: "J'ai l'impression, la surimpression d'un monument à la mémoire d'un genre délaissé -ou dépassé parce que trop bavard, donc trop autoritaire" (Derrida, 1985: 7). The task is not the elimination of all possible narration, but rather the dislodging of the super-position of written narration and photographic narration. This is why this photo-romance is governed only by a photographic grammar that is "étrangère à la langue même" (Derrida, 1985:

³ Derrida's text will play constantly with the double meaning of the word *genre* in French: literary genre and gender as sexual difference.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "La loi de genre", *Glyph 7* (1980). Reprinted in *Parages* (Derrida: 1996a), p. 249-87. Translation by Avital Ronell in "The law of genre" (Derrida: 1992: 243).

27) and thus cannot be translated into it. In other words, the aim of this treacherous photo-romance is to create a narration in which the techniques of photography themselves –focusing, blow-up, montage, *mise en abyme* (what Derrida calls in the text “*inclusion répétée*” (Derrida, 1985: 11) or “*invagination*”), serialization, “*regimen de la suite*” (Derrida, 1985: 35)– are the *only* narrative tools to be deployed. That is why, for Derrida, the photo-romance “garde lui-même l’autorité, le droit de regard, par son dispositif même, sur les discours que tu voudrais tenir ou les histoires que tu enchaînes à son sujet” (Derrida, 1985: 2).

A similar severity of the formal discipline had been practiced before by the artisans of the *Nouveau-Roman*, Jean Ricardou or Alain Robbe-Grillet, who had transformed the modes of production of the cinematic image into techniques of literary writing. In fact Benoît Peeters, who collaborates with Plissart in the writing of the script and the montage for *Droit de regards*, uses here some of these techniques of cinematographic writing (“ciné-roman”). One of the rules of production of the récit in the Nouveau Roman was a similar systematic elimination of the “*histoire*” as “*règle de composition*”. The “*histoire*” can only be “*la conséquence*” of the application of this rule. As Jean Ricardou affirms: “composer un roman de cette manière, ce n’est pas avoir l’idée d’une histoire, puis la disposer, c’est avoir l’idée d’un dispositif, puis en *déduire une histoire*” (Ricardou, 1973: 39). And we already know it, in Plissart’s photo-romance, *photography* as such shall become the only *dispositif*⁵.

Because of the reflexivity of this law, *what happens* in Plissart’s photo-romance, Derrida claims, does not derive either from theatre or from cinema. It is nothing but photography/ic. It takes to its limits the photographic *dispositif* that cancels time, rolling the *déjà-vu* images around the “*l’anneau*

⁵ In Plissart, the hetero-sexual “*histoire*” is meticulously replaced by a reflexive use of the techniques of photography itself. The voices of Derrida’s text:

- Tu dois, tu te dois d’inventer ces histoires, du moins dans les limites imposées par l’ordre.
- J’entends maintenant ce mot autrement: non plus comme l’ordre donné (jubeo), non plus comme l’ordre d’une conséquence ou d’une consécution (la suite), mais comme la clôture de ces communautés religieuses ou de ces sociétés secrètes liées par un contrat, qui peut aussi être un vœu. A quel ordre appartiennent cet homme et toutes ces femmes?
- L’ordre de la photographie (Derrida, 1985: 5).

Which “communitary” and “sexual” similarity (other than “homosexuality”) would justify Derrida’s analogy between Plissart’s “photographic order” and the contracts and the vows of religious communities and secrets societies?

de l'éternel retour". The photographic event, says Derrida, is making this time take place ("ayant lieu") (Derrida, 1985: 12). As a matter of fact, this banning on "récit" regulates not only the absence of words/"bulles" which usually accompany the images, but also, and especially, as condition of its own production determinates the temporality and the spatiality "proper" to photography. Thus, by excluding the "histoire" from the photo-romance, Plissart and Peeters subjugate the genre of the photo-romance to the relentless spatio-temporal law of photography. It is in this sense, that, as Derrida affirms in the text, the "pas d'histoire" is a "mise en demeure" (Derrida, 1985: 2). Stay here, remain right where you are, do not move... now and forever. Again as in the case of *différance*, Derrida plays on the temporal and the spatial senses of the word "demeure". The "pas d'histoire" as "mise en demeure" announces "the disjointure in the very presence of the present, the sort of non-contemporaneity of present time with itself" (Derrida, 1993: 25). This untimeliness, as Wills notes in his translation⁶, is nothing other than the peculiar "presentness" of photography. But "mise en demeure" stresses also the spatial condition of photographic impression, that in the case of Plissart's photo-romance, as we have seen, determines the analogy between the photographic album and the edifice ("demeure").

But in *Droit de regards*, the exclusion of the "récit" is neither the only nor the most playful way of genre/gender fucking. Plissart will move away from the genre of photo-romance not only by eliminating the words and the ballons, (*les bulles*), but especially by dispensing with the heterosexual narration that traditionally straightens out the photo-romance. From the beginning of the genre, in popular literature of the 1940s, the photo-romance, visual version of the romantic novel, depends on a *récit*, sometimes supported by a crime or a detective story, that tells us the story (most of the time, dramatic) of a heterosexual romantic relationship. It is in this respect that Plissart's work imposes a queer law on the genre/gender of photo-romance. This photo-romance without heterosexual "histoire" is a photo-romance *manqué*.

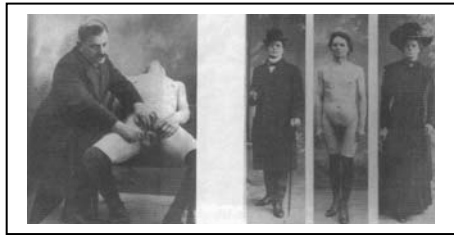
It is this betrayal of its own genre/gender and this betrayal alone (neither the name nor the identity of its author(s), or of the characters who pose for the photographs) which enables us to situate *Droit de regards* within a genealogy (and by this I mean, following Foucault, a "histoire" made up of ruptures rather than of continuities) of "lesbian" photographs. To see/read *Droit de regards* without having a look at this history would be like forcing the work, a second time, to be "sans-rapport"... repeating: "pas d'histoire".

⁶ Translation notes by David Wills (Derrida, 1999).

LE "PAS D'HISTOIRE"... OF LESBIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

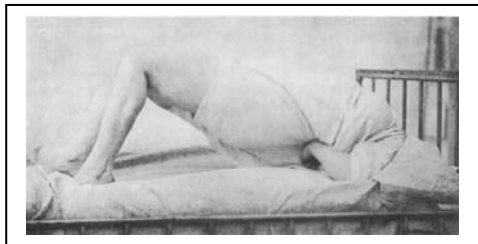
"The lesbian" as photographic image has been produced from the end of the nineteenth century under the registers of criminology, pathological medicine and heterosexual pornography. In the late 1860s, less than thirty years after the invention of photography, the most renowned European and American medical institutions built photographic chambers and laboratories ("*ateliers de photographie*") from which to produce "scientific portraits" of their patients as material proof of diverse pathological symptoms and features. It is within the chambers of psychiatric hospitals and in the private offices of surgeons specialized in the so-called "cure and treatment" of "hermaphrodites" and "transsexuals" that some of the first photographs of "lesbians" were produced.

From 1985, Doctor Hugh Diamond used photography to create a visual archive of madness at Surrey County Asylum. But Charcot's treatment of "hysteria" in women is probably the best example of the parallel



development of a science of the feminine mental and sexual pathologies and photographic techniques of medical portrait (Didi-Huberman, 1982). Hundreds of "plates" taken by the photographer M.P. Renard from 1875 were compiled in Bourneville "*Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*" and published in the form of *photolithographies*. They all had a common subject: women before, during, or/and after the so-called "*attaque d'hystéro-épilepsie*" (Charcot, 1878). But the description given by Charcot of the photographic production of these "*planches de Vérité*" shows a strong theatrical *dispositif* to which the female patients were subjected: the patient was tied to an "*estrade*" and an "*appui-tête*" that kept her immobilized in front of the lens during the time of exposure required for the "impression" of the photographic image. The hysteric was in this sense, "*mise en demeure*". First, she was confined to a building that she could not leave; she was then "*mise en demeure*", fixed in a "pose" in front of the photographic machine and there again "*mise en demeure*" to produce the truth of pathological sex. Londe, a doctor from La Salpêtrière in charge of a medical photographic laboratory explains: "Dans certains cas, nous nous servons d'une potence en fer qui est destinée à suspendre les malades qui ne peuvent ni marcher, ni se tenir debout. Cette potence mobile sur une axe se rabat en temps ordinaire le long du mur de l'atelier. Le malade est soutenu au moyen d'un appareil de

suspension qui le maintient par le bras et la tête” (Didi-Huberman, 1962: 277-278). Since the expected “attacks” are brief and the taking of the photograph requires a certain time, several mechanical harnesses are designed to hold the patient and grasp the “true” pathological gesture. To achieve a clearer image, the doctor who has noted (pictorial and linguistic combined) the particular gestures of the patient during the attack “re-shapes” the body of the patient during a period of calm and finds the “pathological pose” to produce a “true” photograph. In fact, the photographic machine takes a picture of the medical apparatus *through* the hysteric. The two machines, what Derrida would have called, “*machines à faire parler*” (Derrida, 1985: 3) face each other producing the “hysteric”, or “the mannish woman” as a new visual-sexual artifacts for the new photographic century.



A similar photographic taxonomy of the genitals of what the medical discourse of the period named “inverts” was developed by Magnus Hirschfeld and Richard Mùhsam in Germany. Early twenty century medicine considered that

“*hermaphrodites*” and “*transsexuals*” could be recognized visually by the presence of physical traits of both sexes, and that “*effeminate males*” and “*pederasts*” could be recognized, although with less accuracy, through the physical examination of the penis (which they claimed to be “pointed” in the case of the “active” homosexual) or the anus (the so-called “funnel-shaped anus of the passive sodomite” (Rosario, 1997). Even if according to the theory of inversion the “female invert” should present “abnormally developed” clitoris and labia minora, Krafft-Ebing claimed that sexual inversion in women was more difficult to perceive, being most of the time *invisible* to the naked eye, since “the exterior genitalia of most inverts are virtually always differentiated into the normal female types” (Von Krafft-Ebing, 1965: 304). For this reason, the identification of the “female invert” depended on psychological traits, often related to “onanism”, “hysteria” and other forms of “mental alienation”, and could only produce a “visible type” under the precise conditions of clinical and photographic observation, as in the case of La Salpêtrière.

Thus, photography appeared to medical discourse as an insufficient technique to represent “the lesbian”. As Judith Butler has pointed out, heterosexuality as a visual regime imposed a strict causality between sexual organs, gender performances and sexual orientation which “the lesbian”

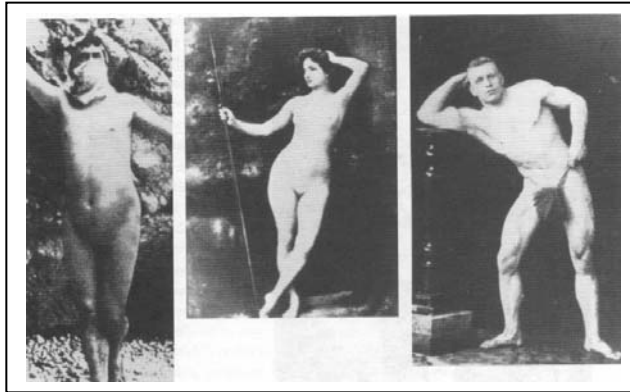
seems to elude (Butler, 1990: 128-143). “The lesbian” was, in this sense, a break in the causal chain of sexual types. Moreover, she appeared as a body stratified within several layers of visibility (for instance, masculine attire, female sexual organs, “inverted” sexual orientation...). Because of this apparent dissociation between visible sex and hidden truth of sex, similar to the distinction within classical photographic techniques between “*image photographique*” and “*image latente*”, the lesbian was constructed as the opaque sex, awaiting yet another optical method to render her exterior layer transparent to the eyes of medicine and bring to light the truth of her sex. Within this regime of visibility, depending on a logic of the unveiling of a hidden and interior truth, “the lesbian” becomes during the century the object of different representation techniques, from radiology to genetic screening.

Simultaneously to the development of photography as a medical technique, photographs of undressed women together started to circulate in Europe. Michael Wilson has documented the publishing in the 1890s of photographs of “lesbian scenes” as part of a new genre of tourist sexual guides of Paris (Wilson, 1991:195-222). These scenes of “lesbian sexuality” were invented and fantasized as part of the “exotic lure” and “decadence” that only the male bourgeois client could find in the best brothels in several European cities. Scenes of women in the harem coming from the colonized South, were received and interpreted as “primitive” and “oriental” variations of the same “lesbian vice”. By the early 1900s, “lesbian” pornography had become standard fare at the better-class brothels which made their largest profits on the viewing of the assorted “*tableaux vivants*” of highly theatrical and ritualized scenes such as the famous “*Her Majesty Woman*”, a display seen by Brassai that included a “*Lesbos*”.



Two conclusions can be drawn from this brief “*histoire*” of the production of the lesbian as visible. First, photography as technology and homosexuality as pathological identity are contemporary productions. The crucial result for a reading of Droit de Regard is that, *inversion* as a spatial and visual model is used at the end of the nineteenth century to explain both the physical transformations that produce the photographic image (from negative into positive, from latent image into photographic image); as well as the deviation of “normal genital sense” that lead to “homosexual perversion”. Curiously the notion of inversion applied to the analysis of sexuality (“*inversion sexuelle*”) is first introduced in French by Jean-Martin Charcot and Valentin

Magnan (Charcot & Magnan, 1882: 296-322) in 1882. Two years later Chevalier normalizes the expression in his *De l'inversion du point de vue médico-légale*, defines “inversion” as “crossed sensation of sexual individuality” (Chevalier, 1885). In fact, Plissart’s photo-roman *develops* this historical ambivalence of the notion of “inversion” as photographic procedure and sexual identity. Derrida states: “Il n’y a que de l’inversion dans cette oeuvre, cela se démontrera peu à peu, selon toutes les codes, y compris le sexuel” (Derrida, 1985: 8).



Second, medicine and pornography depend on a common visual discourse of the sexual body. While Charcot invented at La Salpêtrière the truth of the hysteric’s sex as photographic pose, pornography produced at the Parisian brothels (yet another “*mise en demeure*”) the truth of sexual pleasure as photographic performance. In fact, as Tom Vaugh has noticed –and appears clearly in the “pin up” pictures of “hermaphrodites” by Hirschfeld– both visual regimes shared common representation techniques: visual fragmentation of the body, over-exposition of certain body parts, framing, labeling, etc. What Benjamin called “*la lecture du détail*” or “*l’art du magnifier*”, and Derrida renames in *Droit de regards*, the “*anti-panoptikon*” effect (Derrida, 1985: 23), operated in pornographic and medical photography as the main technique of production of the body as exotic, grotesque, desirable or sick. It is this visual pornographic grammar present in the genre of photo-romance that Plissart patiently turns against itself. Thus, Plissart plays with sexuality as architecture: with the assemblage of bodies, and of body parts and gestures, with the montage of encounters and farewells, and the regulation of the gaze through framing.

To use terms coined by Teresa de Lauretis, it is with photography as *technology of gender* that Plissart and Peeters play in this photo-romance. In fact, if as Derrida suggests in the polylogue, “*on a touché à la différence*

sexuelle en photographiant des photographies” (Derrida, 1985: 12) is because the logic of gender and the logic of photography resemble each other. Photography like gender, are both technologies of representation, but also “technologies de la reproduction, de la génération, de la production de généalogies” (Derrida, 1985: 5).

Photographic techniques and techniques of representation of sexual difference are affected by the same ontological distortion. They do away with mimesis. They both unsettle the distinction between that which is imitated and what imitates, between truth and the representation of truth, between referent and reference, between the original and the copy, but also between sexual organs and gender practices.

PHOTO-TROPISMS OF GENDER

Plissart’s photo-romance works as a differential system made up of the folding and unfolding of a repeated cliché, of displacements within the very interior of an image, of zoom-ins and zoom-outs, and all these movements without ever leaving the space of the photograph itself. Every photograph belongs from the beginning to a pre-existing photograph. Nothing but photographs of photographs. Gender within gender. “Lesbian” sexuality operates here as the differential genitivity, the non-original generic to which Derrida refers as “deux femmes enlacées –le générique en somme sur la couverture” (Derrida, 1985: 2).

And these “photographs of photographs”, “citations of citations”, “mirrors of mirrors”, behave like gender. Because gender imitates nothing that pre-exists its mimicry, in its short-circuit of temporal relations, in its situation as one term in a dizzying network of signs and performances from which have never seem the “*néгатif*”. In *Marges de la philosophie*, and even in *Droit de regards*, Derrida seems to maintain, following Barthes, that photography although a form of “tele-technology” like writing, differentiates itself



from the later because of photography's dependence on "*l'extériorité du référent*" (Derrida, 1985: 35). Thus, whereas neither the "voice" nor the "idea" can be taken as referents for writing, the object that photography represents must have been once "there", "outside" and "in front" of the camera, ready to "*se laisser prendre*" (Derrida, 1985: 34), ready to be taken. If that were the case, says Derrida, photography would be closer to pictographic or ideographic systems of writing. But it is precisely the "*extériorité du référent*" that is "*abimé*", at the same time damaged and engulfed, by Plissart's "*speculation photographique*". The result of Plissart's *dispositif* of taking photographs of photographs is an irrecoverable "*mise en abyme*", a constant deferring of the exteriority of the referent. And this is precisely, according to Derrida, what equates Plissart's photographs with writing:

S'il y a un art de la photographie (au-delà des genres déterminés, et donc dans un espace quasi transcendantal), il est là. Il ne suspend pas la référence, il éloigne indéfiniment un certain type de réalité, celle du référent perceptible. Il donne droit à l'autre, il ouvre l'incertitude infinie du rapport au tout autre, ce rapport sans rapport (Derrida, 1985: 35).

If we are to credit what Plissart's photographs show us, give us to see, the error would consist in believing that photography has an exterior, causal and temporal referent. The same way that it would be short-sighted to believe that gender would be, as straight medical and juridical institutions pretend, a mere representation of biological sex –where biological sex would behave as an external referent. But no, gender does not imitates sex, gender (as technology) imitates photography. In the same manner, Derrida's text, its play with masculine and feminine voices, this "writing-in-drag", is nothing other than a double mimesis, the imitation of an imitation⁷.



⁷ K. Weston, following the work of K. Silverman, has used the expression "double mimesis" to refer to the transgenderism performances. See: K. Weston, "Do clothes make woman? Gender, Performance Theory and Lesbian Eroticism". *Genders* 17 (2): 125-52.

The *référent* of Plissart's photographs has left ("*est parti*"), not only because of the strategic *mise en abyme*, but also, and by the same token, because these "women" who appear in the photographs are *revenants*, ghosts, specters stolen to darkness to be taken into the real of the visible by virtue of a trace of light. For Derrida, these "women" have "*une valeur de spectre: revenance, effet de retour. En revenant, le spectre recouvre le champ de tout ce qui fut jusqu'ici visible, comme si rien 'en réalité' ne s'était passé, rien 'hors de la scène primitive', rien hors de la tête... rien au delà des yeux micros de Claude et de Dominique*" (Derrida, 1985: 34). Unlike Barthes, who attached to the life-value of the referent, and characterized photography in *La chambre claire*, as a "*expérience de micro-mort*" (Barthes, 1980: 14) we could follow Derrida interpreting Plissart's photography as techniques of the "bringing to light" and "revelation" of a phantasmatic and invisible life. Photography acts here like writing, "*écriture du paraître*" and register of a phantasmatic life (Derrida, 1985: 16). Thus, photography becomes (or rather is always) "*phantasmaphotography*" (Derrida, 1985: 32) by producing its own referent as visible.

LESBOTYPES

Fantômes et phantasmes, toujours l'écriture du paraître, de l'apparition et de l'apparence, la brillance du phainesthai et de la lumière, photographie. Genèses inverses: que la lumière fût (Derrida, 1985: 16).

But, how to take a picture of the invisible? We know from *Memoirs of the Blind*, that invisibility is not contrary to vision, and that "the visual arts are also the arts of blindness"⁸. In *Droit de regards*, entire regions remain trapped between two stripes of visibility. The ancestral residences ("*demeures*") have been emptied of all that is visible and are now inhabited by shadows. These blurred figures, like the "lesbian", exist precisely in a queer zone where blindness amounts to visibility. The tension, the non-coincidence and the constant slippage between the invisibility of "the lesbian" within the public and political spheres and the visual saturation of "the lesbian" as object of pornographic and medical discourses makes of "the lesbian" a revenant that haunts representation without belonging to it. Like the vampire, the ghost, the possessed and the virus –all figures that have occupied the attention of deconstruction–, "the lesbian" inhabits a *contrebande* area where female/masculine, death/alive, animal/human, friendship/love, true/false, and invisible/visible are not mere opposites. A

⁸ Entrevista con Wills, *Acción Paralela 2*, p. 3.

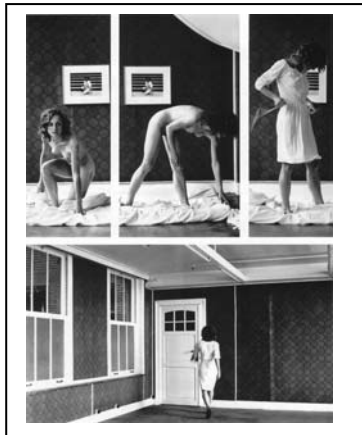
zone optically non dialectical. In deconstructive terms, “the lesbian” would be a figure of indecidability within the order of the invisible and the visible.

In this respect, Plissart’s photography rather than a Barthesian experience of death, resembles more a *visual development*, a material process of making a latent image visible, like an “invocation” or an “incarnation” of a phantom. In fact, it is photography which gives to “the lesbian” a plus-value of visibility. But what are the conditions of this visibility? What is the visual status of “the lesbian” as revenant? When trying a taxonomy of “revenants” that inhabit the enormous unfurnished and vacated residences in Plissart’s photo-romances. I would distinguish three forms of “apparitions”, which I would call, in the case of this reading, the “*passing nymphs*”, the “*parerga-figures*”, and “*les femmes qui sont vues en trains de prendre*”.

Aby Warburg fell for the nymphs in the paintings of Ghirlandaio or Botticelli:

Figures féminines qui, dans une sorte de battement, font irruption, semblent voler ou avoir leur vent pour elles toutes seules. Leur mouvement contraste avec les attitudes plus figées des autres figures. Elles créent un courant d’air, et il y a un vent qui souffle dans leur robe. Leur aspect à la fois fantomatique et chorégraphique tranche dans le tableau par leurs caractéristiques de figure incidente. Franchissant des portes, des seuils, elles semblent entrer dans un lieu de une manière incongrue. Elle amorcent ainsi l’idée même de “passer”. Leur status est celui d’apparition/disparition (Didi-Huberman, 1999: 219-234).

Within painting they anticipate the essence of the photographic cliché: the fixation of aninvisible, almost imperceptible movement. In these classical paintings they are most often young slaves who walk by the side of their



master, or female servants who run from one place to another carrying food or water whose weight seems to be floating above their heads. But undoubtedly the most phantasmagoric of all classical nymphs is Judith’s servant carrying on her hands the severed head of Horlopherrne. Even when she carries the fresh proof of a crime, her lightness makes her “pass” almost invisible, as if she were transporting water. But what rule of substitution enables the exchange of water for Horlopherrne’s head? What kind of secret cannibalism does the passing of the nymph set in movement?

Like the nymphs of Botticelli, Plissart's "revenants" seem to be urged to penetrate and for a moment cross the real of visibility by the force of a hidden movement. As in the case of Freud's *Gradiva*, we do not know yet if the step takes them forward or makes them fall... Maybe because this gravity is the force of falling in love, the force of falling into photography, of being gripped by photography –this is what Derrida calls "*chute photogénique*" (Derrida, 1985: 14).

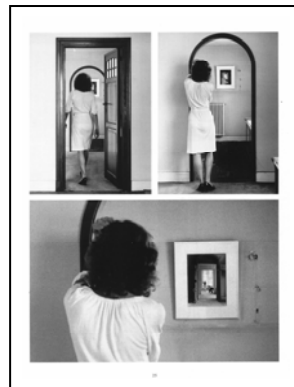
But, after the "falling" (notice that the bed is right at the level of the floor-image 14), like Judith's servants, the passing nymphs abandon the lesbian scene as if nothing would had happened. They get up, they get dressed and they leave. In fact, the nymph is a figure of crossing, of transfer. Apparently superfluous to the scene, their "passing" condenses all the possibilities of change and transformation virtually contained in the action. This is why in *Droit de regards*, Derrida calls the passing nymphs, "*ces dames qui sont toujours 'parties', surprises au moment de quitter la pièce, ou la partie, de sortir vers un escalier*



qui conduira vers une autre partie, et ainsi de suite, sans fin" (Derrida, 1985: 11). Like "passing" figures, they perform the transition between the private and the public, between the familiar and the unknown, between naked and dressed, but also between lesbianism and apparently straight femininity. Because they seem to be just crossing the room by chance, we can never affirm that they belong to the "lesbian" scene. They swing from a photograph into another "*toujours en diagonale*" (Derrida, 1985: 9), they move along the spatiality of the book, as if they were walking from a room of a "*demeure*" into another. This suspended existence reserved to "the closet" of photography is the proper status of most of the figures in *Droit de regards*. They can never come out, because they are just passing. And this "passing" is the highest visual price to pay: the nymphs are "bodies" that inhabit only photographs.

The second kind of *revenants* make themselves visible right at the limit of two spaces of visibility, they are fixed, locked right at the threshold, having visual access to a picture to which they do not belong. They are phantasmatic voyeurs who pierce the photographic paper to be able to peep into the picture. They occupy the position of the frame, because of that "marginal" situation, I give them the name of "*parerga-figures*". They are located, says Derrida, "*en*

bordure de la scène principale". And from this peripheral position, they act as "*observatrices, surveillantes de l'extérieur et du dedans*" (Derrida, 1985: 33). If the nymphs come from movement and provoke movement, the *parerga-figures*, on the contrary, blend into architecture becoming almost imperceptible as parts of the columns, the frames of doors and windows. Kant himself would have suspected them of their ability to take the place of architecture. But is precisely this on-the-limit position what gives them the *droit de regards*. Like the door or the window, they literally frame the image, regulating the crossing, surveying the apparition and disappearance of the nymphs.



When they move, and they do so rarely, they do it in order to establish a new threshold, to change the distribution of visibility, opening another window, or closing a door. Derrida describes their intervention this way:

Dans l'intériorité stricte de cette séquence, dans son dedans photographique et spéculaire, intervient tout à coup un personnage qui se tenait d'abord immobile, tel un observateur caché, "tableau vivant" et tous les encadrements de plus d'une porte. Elle est dans la photographie (25) mais hors de son foyer, en marge. Elle surveille. Puis elle intervient, car l'intruse paraît violer, pour s'y assurer un droit de regard, l'espace clos par de miroirs, des embrasures, des fenêtres (Derrida, 1985: 17).

And finally they are “*les femmes qui sont vues en train de prendre*”. Those who are observed by a secondary camera/eye while they make love; they take photographs, they make phone calls, or they write. Although they appeared as agents of representation, in the very act of being registered into a photographic paper, of being engulfed within another photograph whose process of development they do not govern, they became mere voyeuristic objects. This displacement of the author of representation, this “ex-propitiation” of the signature coincides with the historical way of producing “the lesbians” in photography.

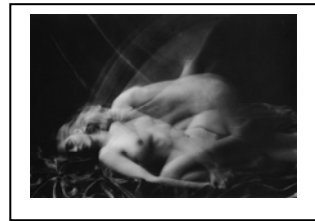
LESBIAN COUNTER-SIGNATURES

Because the historical conditions for the production of “the lesbian” body as visible are inseparable from the pornographic and medical photographic technologies developed during the twentieth century, photography seemed to be an impossible medium of self representation for lesbians. In some sense, “lesbian” photography, notices Susie Bright, has remained an exceptional oxymoron, a self-canceling phrase that means something only when created by someone who could never be a lesbian, a male voyeur (Bright, 1996: 6) Trapped in between two realms of visibility, like the commodity-ghost in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 1993: 156) “the lesbian” cannot recognize herself from her photographic *specular* image, in the same way that the ghost does not see itself in the mirror. But only those who have absolute power do not need photography –the same way that only Thamus, crowned by the presence of his pharaonic voice, does not need writing. But “lesbians” needed photography as the “*pharmakon*” of their own phantasmatic images.



It is possible to argue that there is no “lesbian” self-representative photography, an image in which “the lesbian” is not produced as a radical sexual other for the heterosexual eye, until the beginning of the 1970s. Tee A. Corine, who had already published *Cunt Coloring Book* -now considered the “first lesbian sex picture-book” (Bright y Posener, 10, 1996: 7). Honey Lee Cottrell and Morgan Gwenwald produced some of the first “lesbian” photographs during the late seventies. The feminist book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* published in 1973 included the chapter “In America They Call Us Dykes”. It gathered some of the first openly “lesbian” self-representative pictures as those of Doreen Querido. The critical reaction of the feminist community towards these images judged as “contrary to the feminist

aesthetic agenda” caused the suppression of the chapter in the following editions of the book⁹.



The re-shaping of the chapter under the rubric “Loving Women: Lesbian Life and Relationships” tended in extremis to re-feminize lesbianism, in other words, to bring lesbian into the straight visual laws of gender.

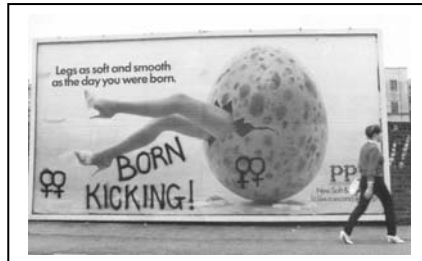
In fact, while this movement of self-representation was in part the result of a larger feminist political critique of the so-called production of women’s body by/for the “male gaze” –According to the canonical expression used by Laura Mulvey–, it is clear now that certain forms of “visibility” of “lesbian” sexuality were erased by the constrains of feminism itself. According to the principles of an essentializing feminist aesthetics, scenes of penetration (both vaginal and anal), dildos and “fetish” accessories, butch-fem couples, role-playing, and S&M images were systematically suppressed both from feminist and lesbian publications. By the beginning of eighties, feminism (and its hypostatic subject “woman”) had become, paradoxically, the major and strongest instance of the repression of lesbian visibility within public representation. Those lesbian images were first relegated to lesbian leather publications like the anthology *Coming to Power: Writing and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, published by the group *Samois* in 1981 (*Samois*, 1982). From 1984, several lesbian magazines, such as *On Our Backs*, *Outrageous Women*, *Bad Attitude* or *Cathexis*, contributed to the publication of self-produced lesbian photographs by Tee A. Corine, Gon Buurman, Jill Posener, Morgan Gwenwald, Tracy Mostovoy, Laurence Jaugey-Paget, Jessica Tanzer... During the 1990s, several of these photographers such as Della Grace¹⁰, and Cathy Opie are constructed by mainstream art criticism as the ultimate representatives of “lesbian” photography.

⁹ A similar story could be told in relation to the feminist anxiety in relation to the visibility of non-white women.

¹⁰ Nevertheless, by then, paradoxes of visibility, Della Grace goes from lesbian to trans-gender identity.

In fact, within the recent history of lesbian/queer photography, the possibility of photography, the *droit à la photographie* of “lesbians”, depends, as Derrida seems to suspect by giving title to Plissart’s work, on its “*droit de regard*”. “L’œuvre pose en silence la question du genre (genre/gender) comme question du droit de regard, elle analyse: qui le détient, ce droit, et qui détient l’autre, qui le tient sous son regard ou à portée de son ‘objectif’? Qui dispose du ‘révélateur’? Qui ‘fixe’? Qui ‘monte’?”¹¹ (Derrida, 1985: 8). It is a question of authorship, of the “*titre qu’on peut avoir à regarder*” (Derrida, 1985: 2), a question of authority to “*prendre des photographies*” (Derrida, 1985: 2) and finally a question of the legitimacy of the gaze. It is precisely the double spectral character of “lesbians” in photography (specters of specters, photographs of photographs) that demands the re-inscription of the *droit de regard* as the writing of another signature over the figure of the apparition, over the trace of the *revenant*, on/over/around/about the photograph.

In this respect, the necessity to “mark” the referent as “lesbian”, to specify its “title”, to counter-sign (*contresigner*) its authorship, to affirm its *droit de regard* as different from that of the medical and pornographic institutions, seems to question the mute condition of photography demanding a supplement of the image by the word¹². As Tamsin Wilton points out: “How to say “lesbian” in photography is perhaps the key problem. Because we are defined by/as our sexual selves, an unmistakable lesbian photographic image, and one resistant to heterosexist erasure, is obliged to present a sexualized “lesbian” –or to depend upon extra-textual labeling/interpretation of the image, such as a caption saying the “lesbian”, which the photograph cannot” (Wilton, 1995: 148).



This would imply that there is a deficit of referent in the case of “the lesbian” which demands the image to be framed by language, subsumed within a particular discourse, whether medical, hetero-pornographic or queer. In the case of “the lesbian” the referent seems not to be sufficient to produce a readable image. The “lesbian” image could be defined then, paradoxically,

¹¹ Derrida’s use of verbs like “détenir l’autre”, “monter”, let us think that according to him something similar happens in the case of “lesbian” sexuality.

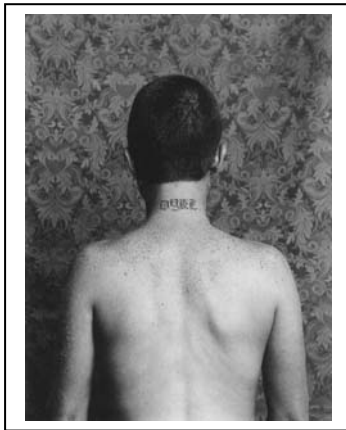
¹² That might be the reason why we can say that if in *La vérité en peinture* Derrida interrogates “l’idiome en peinture”, in *Droit de regards*, the question will be about “l’idiome en photographie”.

as an image which in order to be “fixed” and “revealed” needs to go through a precise process of discursive “erasure”. The visual mirage derives from this contradiction: making visible through erasure. Here we have an image that has been produced from the beginning as “a lack of visibility”. And this subtraction of visibility is precisely its only condition of possibility as “visible”.

Now, in the case of the production of a queer or self-representing photograph, a second trace comes to re-write, to write-over the first trace of light that constituted the image. The process of production of a queer image depends always on a kind of *contrefaçon* a process of *forging*, of an already made photograph: a second erasure and a rewriting of the remained image. Producing a queer photograph is not and cannot be to (re)present the original “lesbian” referent (that we know now is just the phantasmatic result of another process of straight representation), but rather to make the “lesbian” specter visible under different conditions of erasure. Or, similarly, letting the “lesbian” phantasmatic referent be written over, crossed-out, re-erased, as if a second “branding” could take place for the first time. And all this writing takes place as material and technological processes. There is no queer writing that is not institutional, political and sexual at the same time. Because “the lesbian”, produced as a parasite body within the straight photo-romance of the sexes, could not render herself visible without altering the order of straight seeing/writing. Like the virus, “the lesbian” derails all processes of codification and decodification of the image. If as Derrida has said, deconstruction is before anything else a form of “virology”, then, lesbian self-representative photography is already *deconstruction*. It is in relation to this (im)possibility of a “lesbian” authorship in photography that the analysis of the *topology* of the *title* and the *signature* that Derrida has developed in numerous texts becomes relevant for our reading. I am going to sketch now some of the strategies of “re-writing” of the signature, by which I mean, some of the modes of inscription of *droit de regard(s)*, in several contemporary queer photographic projects.

Jill Posener renders literal in her series of “Posters with Graffiti” (Posener, 1982) the mechanism of over-writing and over-inscription of the referent working on a ready made photograph used for advertising purposes. The process has certain characteristics: the counter-signature takes place in a medium different from photography, and presupposes the existence of the photograph to be re-inscribed. There is heterogeneity of media, heterogeneity of authors, and temporal *décalage*. Posener’s over-writing, responding to the invisibility of lesbian within advertising photography, works as an “exorcism” that brings a hidden phantom out of the image, developing a different photographic image from a certain “*image latente*”. The strength of

these over-writing techniques, used first by feminist activists during the seventies and later taken to theatrical extreme by queer activist groups such as ACT UP or Radical Fairies, consists on playing a “performative force” against itself, de-turning, di-verting an image produced by and circulating in straight discourse¹³.



In the panel-photograph *Tattoo* (1983) by Susan Trangmar, we can identify some of the techniques of re-inscription of the lesbian signature which will later become essential for the possibility of the lesbian self-portrait: the signing-in of the represented subject, and the labeling of the image through writing/framing. Notice that these techniques are inseparable from the techniques of representation that lead to the production of the image, although they do not intervene in the process of production of photography as such. First, in Trangmar's image, language, imposing reading as a de-turn from consuming the image, guides the viewer's gaze backwards. As the title *Tattoo* indicates, the skin of the face to be photographed has been marked, breaking into the immediacy of the realistic codes of the documentary picture and the portrait. In the case of Cathey Opie's "*Dyke*", the paradoxes of



¹³ This is similar to what Jonathan Dollimore calls “transgressive re-inscription” in *Sexual Dissidence, Agustin to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991.

lesbian representation play on the opposition between the labeling of the skin and the withdrawal of the “face” as the truth of the portrayed subject. Thus, the signature marks the represented subject while eluding the codes of the portrait traditionally used by medical and criminal institutions. Second, in relation to the techniques of “*cadre*”, a stripe of words comes to frame Trangmar’s picture, at the same time limiting the space of the photograph and labeling the image, as a second tattoo imprinted over the photographic paper. A similar by stronger re-writing of the image through external framing is used by Loren Cameron in the self-portrait series. Here the signature has been displaced to the margins of the photograph acting at once as frame and as inscription.

The main difference between Trangman’s and Tessa Boffin’s image in respect of the use of techniques of over-writing is that in the case of *The Knight’s Move* series (1990), the counter-signature is introduced in the photographic image through a secondary internal framing. According to Boffin, “the representation of “the lesbian” cannot take place within the norms of documentary realism, to portray “a lesbian” is necessary a certain form of “photo-theatre”, a non-naturalistic form of representation which insists first and foremost that “reality” is mediated, staged, and framed”. In fact the inscription takes the form of a picture within a pictures where names of other “lesbians” have been written (Una Troubridge, Alice Austen, Janet Flanner, etc.). The “branding” in this case takes the form of a multiple, displaced and genealogical signature which at the same time re-appropriates the image introducing it within a fictional lesbian “archive”.

De la Grace takes the strategies of inscription of the “signature” within the photograph to its formal limit following Mapplethorpe’s techniques of self-portrait. In 1978 Robert Mapplethorpe photographed himself with a whip butt up his anus while he looks back directly to the camera. As Richard Meyer has pointed out “the fact that Mapplethorpe is both the agent and objet of anal penetration (both top and bottom) refers as well to the procedure of creating a self-portrait, to the simultaneity of serving as both productive agent and receptive object of photography. In short, the reflexivity of Mapplethorpe’s auto-penetration mirrors the reflexivity of his auto-portraiture... The bull-whip



resembles nothing so much as an extension cord or cable tying Mapplethorpe's body to the clicking camera off-frame. Notice the photographic careful fingering of the whip and the way his cupped left hand mimics the action of triggering a shutter-release" (Meyer, 1993: 363). In *De la Grace* the reflexive gesture of triggering the shutter-release is portrayed within the picture, stressing what Barthes already foresaw, namely that "the photographer's organ is not his eye but his finger" (Barthes, 1982: 15). Breaking the spell of "lesbian" photographic representation (spell which still affected Plissart's "reventants") *De la Grace* "*se prend (en photo) en train de prendre*"¹⁴.

The tension between mute image and writing in "lesbian" photography, presented in Plissart's photo-romance without words, becomes especially acute in the case of photographic show: "Drawing the Line. Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall". Organized in 1990 in a San Francisco Gallery by Susan Stewart in collaboration with Persimon



Blackbridge and Lizard Jones, the show proposed a visual-writing contract to the visitors. One hundred photographs of "lesbian" sexuality were arranged on the walls. In front of them, the female visitors were invited to write their comments to the photographs on the walls¹⁵.

Two elements of this photographic show seem interesting in relation to Plissart's photo-romance. First, the interaction between the photographs and the comments produced a hazardous wall "photo-romance" with several "bulles" emerging out of every image. Second, the taking of the blank spaces of the walls as surfaces for writing transformed the consumption of the photographs into an architectural event, producing the wall (as later the book in the case of Plissart) itself as performance space.

¹⁴ I play here with the double sense of the word "prendre" in French that Derrida uses in the text: "prendre une photo" (to take a picture) and "prendre" (straight expression that normally refers to the act of "fucking somebody").

¹⁵ The "invitation to write" around/about the photographs emanated from the anxiety of rendering "public" certain representations of "lesbian" sexuality under the risk of being recuperated by the medical and/or pornographic voyeuristic eye. This anxiety translated into a necessity to give limits ("drawing lines") to the representation of "lesbian" sexuality. The fact that the "right of inscription" (somehow the *droit de regard*) was given according to gender criteria (men were invited to write their comments on a notebook) rather than a criteria of sexual orientation ("lesbian" versus "non-lesbian", straight versus queer) shows that even at the beginning of the nineties "gaze" was highly essentialized.

WHAT TITLE, WHOSE SIGNATURE

How to understand Plissart's invitation to Derrida in relation to this gesture of drawing the line? How to read Derrida's text with *regard* to the techniques of over-writing or counter-signature that are at work in contemporary "lesbian" photography? What is the specific topology of the signature, and counter-signature in Plissart's photo-romance? All the questions that Derrida asked in *La vérité en peinture* about the particular *topos* of the title in relation to the work of art:

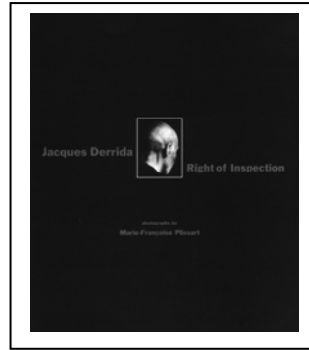
Quel est le topos du titre? A-t-il lieu et où quant à l'œuvre? Sur le bord? Hors bord? Sur la bordure interne? Dans un par-dessus-bord remarqué et réappliqué par invagination, au-dedans, entre le centre présumé et la circonférence? Ou entre l'encadré et l'encadrant du cadre? Est-ce que le topos du titre, comme d'un cartouche, commande l'œuvre depuis l'instance discursive et judiciaire d'un hors-d'œuvre, depuis l'exergue d'un énoncé plus ou moins directement définitionnel, et même si la définition opère à la manière d'un performatif? Ou bien le titre joue-t-il à l'intérieur de l'espace de l' "œuvre", inscrivant la légende à prétention définitionnelle dans un ensemble qu'elle ne commande plus et qui le constitue, lui, le titre, en effet localisé? (Derrida, 1978: 29).

Become relevant to understand the relationship in *Droit de regards* between the title and Plissart's photo-romance, but also between Plissart's photo-romance and Derrida's text.

As Derrida notes in the interview with Bernard Stiegler, he himself gave the title "droit de regard(s)" to the text that "follows" (*suivre*) Plissart's photographic work. But, what about the photographs? What is their title? Moreover, does the title of the text give a name to Plissart's photographs by the same token? Or rather the withdrawal of language in this photo-romance implies that the photographic work should remain "untitled"? And, in the case that the title would refer only to Derrida's text, what is the specific relationship between the title/text and the photographs? How is it possible for Derrida, whose signature affects only the copyright of the text grafted to the photographs, to give us the title, or even more to entitle us to have "*droit de regard(s)*" over the photographs? How can the text have "*droit de regard(s)*" over the images? How to explain the particular architecture of the double signature¹⁶ (Plissart/Derrida, photography/language) in *Droit de regards*?

¹⁶ Derrida has played with the double signature in different texts. Probably the most explicit is "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," in which he lets Benjamin the last word and the signature (Derrida, 1992).

I started this reading by noting Plissart's double treason to the genre/gender of the photo-romance in *Droit de regards*. Now, it is precisely in relation to this insufficiency (as we have seen a deficit derived from the imperative "*pas d'histoire*") that Derrida's title and text could be said to operate as a supplement of genre (genre/gender). In fact, we could say that Plissart's work alone does not constitute a photo-romance, but rather it emerges as such as an effect of Derrida's textual supplementation. In this sense, if the photographic work of Plissart appears as "*l'histoire d'une infidélité*" (Derrida, 1985: 7) to literary genre and to feminine/masculine gender, this final gesture of giving back the photographs to writing inverts the sense of the treason, trying to compensate both the lack of words, and the lack of heterosexual *relation* introducing an exterior eye/voice into the *économie manquée* of "lesbian" representation. This supplementary relation between the title, the text and the photographs determines the particular topology of the book.



In *Droit de regards*, neither the title nor the text *belong* to the photographs to which they come to supplement. In fact, we know that the text shall add nothing to the photographs after the opening promise: "Tu ne sauras, vous non plus, toutes les histoires que j'ai pu encore me raconter en regardant ces images" (Derrida, 1985: 1). Nothing¹⁷. As the voice gives to itself the imperative "*pas d'histoire*", it averts us from the perils of having something other than a photographic relationship with them. The voices have seen it all, but they want "no fuss", "*pas d'histoire*", and to avoid this risk nothing better than keeping themselves "*au cadre, à la limite*" of these lesbian stories. Derrida's title, text and signature occupy a singular topos, at the same time "within and without the work, along its boundary, an inclusion and exclusion with regards to genre/gender in general"¹⁸. They respond to the same law of genre/gender than the photo-romance itself: they participate in

¹⁷ We know from *Donner le temps* (cf.) that nothing can be really given except from what it is not possessed. Thus, the title, *droit de regards*, does not stop giving us what does not belong to it... *encore et encore*.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, "La loi du genre", translated by Avital Ronell, "The law of genre" (Derrida 1992: 231).

the book without belonging to it¹⁹. From a supplementing exteriority they “produce” what they seem to complete.

Even the exteriority of the title in relation to the text is accentuated. They do not touch each other. They never find themselves together on the same page. And yet, in between the title and the text, the photographs dwell, “*demeurent*”. It is in this space between (*espacement*) the title and the text that photography takes (“*prendre*”) place. The title and the polylogic text operate as *parerga*, framing and drawing limits, “*exercent une pression à la frontière*” (Derrida, 1987b: 65) to Plissart’s photo-romance. What interests me here is precisely this relation of neighboring between Derrida’s title/text and these queer photographs. The way in which the text finds its place within the book, at once exterior and interior eye that talks about/around the photographs. The way in which the text *invaginate*s itself inside the book without ever entering photography. And this liminal position, we have already seen the work of the “*parerga-figures*”, is the privilege place of the voyeur. One of the voices warns the writer/viewer:

Vous êtes le maître unique. Vous participez, si même vous ne l’organisez pas, à une entreprise pornographique qui ne vous attend pas là où vous croyiez la trouver, côté photos porno, mais qui, dans l’acte même de sa performance, démontre ce qu’elle sous-entend sans jamais le dire. Voilà pratiquement, pragmatiquement, un photo-performatif au sujet du discours, de la loi, de leur essence pomologique” (Derrida, 1985: 31).

In fact, one of the voices of Derrida’s text acknowledges that the effects of *signature* and *authority* of the text could bring photography back into the pornographic discourse where these “invisible” photographs could be marketable and merchandisable:

-C’est le contrat, la loi du marché, le marché du conclu. Vous connaissez l’état du marché, de la culture, et de l’inculture photographique. Il est sans public, il rend invendable et donc illisible un produit de ce type, une œuvre qui n’appartient à aucun genre légitime: ni roman-photo, ni photographie dite d’art, ni cinéma muet, ni bande dessinée, etc. Il faut donc engendrer un “public”. Par du discours (titres, préface ou postface, signes de reconnaissance, évaluations qu’on suppose accréditées, effets d’autorité), il fallait donc rendre l’œuvre présentable, recevable, exposable, légitime.

-Elle veut dire vendable. La valeur marchande de la photographie, comme celle de la peinture, se garantit par du discours. Ce que nous écrivons ainsi, même en

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “La loi du genre”, translated by Avital Ronell, “The law of genre” (Derrida 1992: 230).

nous livrant à l'exégèse du titre, n'est-ce pas le moment ou l'acte le plus pornographique de l'affaire? Littéralement: la mise en vente. La pornologie de l'œuvre ne tient pas à quelque mise à nu des corps, à l'obscénité des "parties" exposées, elle dépend du discours sous-entendu: quant au droit de regard sur le corps ou le corpus de l'autre (les deux photogrammaires), à la substitution incessante d'un sujet à l'autre, donc à la loi du marché, de l'escalade, de la surenchère qui commande à tout, y compris à nous qui parlons ici. Nous faisons monter les enchères (augmentation, auction, auctoritas) là où nous parlons d'amour en échangeant des regards (Derrida, 1985: 30-1).

But against the voices' fear (of pornography) and their expectations (of legitimating the photographs), and in spite of the careful architecture of the book, this act of writing will not be enough to restore the genre/gender of this roman-photo *manqué*. The insufficient compensation of the genre/gender of Plissart's photo-romance was manifest in the problems of translation, publication, distribution and circulation that the book found during the eighties and nineties in Europe and the United States. The book was published first in France in 1985 by Minuit, that had already published several *ciné-romans* and novels of the Nouveau Roman²⁰ with explicit sexual content. On the other side of the Atlantic, whereas most of Derrida's texts published during the same period are almost immediately translated into English and published by University presses such as Stanford, Chicago and John Hopkins or by Routledge, Derrida's text in *Droit de regard* [that should have served to modify the context of reception (the "engendering of the public" to which Derrida refers) of the work], was banned because of the proximity, because of its contact with photographs of illegitimate genre/gender. So, in fact, in this case, the ghostlike lesbian signature haunts again the text menacing to contaminate Derrida's name. Thus, Derrida's signature, submitted to a gesture of straight erasure, is crossed-out as if it were that of a lesbian. As one of the voices of the text foresees: "-Peut-être sommes-nous en train de partager les droits avec l'auteur, avec les auteurs" (Derrida, 1985: 30).

In an interview with David Wills the first translator of this text into English in Australia, Derrida himself recalls with surprise and indignation the problems of translation of *Droit de regards*. After discussing about the difficulties of translation derived from the vertical/horizontal and beginning/end inversion of the order of reading of the photographs that

²⁰ The referential *ciné-roman* of these period is Alain Robbe-Grillet (Robbe-Grillet, 1974); see also the film, 1974.

rendered Plissart's photographic *dispositif* unreadable in Japanese, he comments on other difficulties that affected the text in America:

It is true, he says, that this text is difficult to translate because of reasons internal to the text itself. But, apart from that, I guess that the text was only published in English in Australia for other reasons -I do not know which ones exactly, although I have my own opinion after having talked with some people. It seems that, and in spite of everything, in the field of American editing houses, the "obscenity" of the photographs is an obstacle. I mean that my American editors, the respectable university presses, did not want to publish the work not to associate my name with the photographs of lesbian lovers, and they said that they work didn't interest them... I was very naïve because of the confused idea that I had about what it was happening in the United States. I didn't think that this kind of hypocrisy prevailed still today... From this point of view, this continues to be very enigmatic country to me. Total freedom coexists with the most ridiculous moral prohibitions. The proximity of both is difficult to understand.

The American editing houses "knew" what was best for deconstruction: "*pas d'histoire*"... lesbienne. It is in order to prevent an "association" of straight and lesbian signatures, to avoid Derrida's name to be touched by "lesbian" images that translation would be delayed²¹.

SOMEHOW, GENDER SUPPLEMENTATION HAD FAILED.

The philosopher, whose text should have come to supplement the photo-romance's genre trouble, missed his chance. A "man/philosopher", and he alone, was invited to write about/around/on/after these "lesbian" pictures. This invitation could become an operation of supplementation only under two conditions. First, philosophy should come to fill the silence left behind by photography²². It should come to restore, to discipline the "talkative silence", the mute discourse, of this "lesbian" photo-romance without words. And second, a heterosexual eye should enable a total dialectical sexual triangulation of the lesbian stories, making possible a certain pleasure-profit

²¹ The book will only appear in English in the United States thirteen years after its first publication in French. Notice that the order of the "authors" has been inverted. There is no mention of the photo-romance. Next to the name Jacques Derrida appears the title "Right of inspection", below "photographs by Marie-Françoise Plissart". Here, the text seems to be accompanied (*suivi*) by Plissart's photographs.

²² A similar supplementary gesture of philosophy in relation to the arts (whether photography or architecture) can be observed in the case of the "collaboration" Peter Eisenman-Jacques Derrida (Derrida & Eisenman, 1991).

for the straight reader. A proper philosophical text would have worked simultaneously as a *bulle prosthétique* (prosthetic balloon) that would have added the right word to the photo-romance, and as *bulle pornographique* (pornographic balloon) in order to re-establish a heterosexual relation between the mute pictures and the loquacious eye. If Derrida had done his “gender job”, Plissart’s photographs would have become a *roman-photo à bulle*²³, protected by the sterile structure constructed around it by the law of the title and the authority of Derrida’s signature over the text.

Instead of supplementing with his text the lack of genre/gender of Plissart photographic work, Derrida’s text engages in a theatrical polyphony that deconstructs the very activity of giving title, de-titling the text of its absolute “*droit de regard*”. In this respect, Derrida’s text performs its own impossibility of supplementing gender.

Droit de regards is a polyphonic text, where an undetermined number of voices (n+1) arrange to meet around photography. As if an undefined number of visitors would have written on the cracks of a wall where paint has rubbed off, or similarly, on the blank spaces between the pictures of a photographic album. In fact, in *Droit de regards* everything depends on the voice. As if the “*droit de regard*” were subjected to an endless *partition*, at once *division* and *sharing*²⁴. Derrida says about writing:

Every time I start writing a text, the anxiety, the sensation of failure, comes from the fact that I am not able to establish a voice. I ask myself to whom I am addressing the text, how to play with the tone, being tone precisely that which informs and establishes the relationship. Not the content, but the tone... I guess that when I write I try to solve my problems looking for an economy which consists in a plurality of the tone, in using many different tones, in such a way that I do not allow myself to reduce to a single interlocutor or moment²⁵.

²³ I use here “*roman-photo bulle*” from medical expression “*bébé bulle*” which designates the enclosure of an immuno-deficient baby within a sterile environment.

²⁴ I retain here the double sense of the word in French such as it has been used by Jean-Luc Nancy in *Le partage des voix* (Nancy, 1982).

²⁵ “Cada vez que comienzo un texto la angustia, la sensación de fracaso, vienen del hecho de que no soy capaz de establecer una voz. Me pregunto a mí mismo a quién me estoy dirigiendo, cómo jugar con el tono, siendo el tono precisamente aquello que informa y establece la relación. No el contenido, sino el tono... Así que imagino que cuando escribo intento resolver mis problemas de tono buscando una economía -no se me ocurre ninguna otra palabra- una economía que consiste en pluralizar siempre el tono, en escribir en muchos tonos, de forma que no me permito a mí mismo reducirme a un sólo interlocutor o a un sólo momento”. Jacques Derrida: Entrevista con David Wills, *Acción Paralela*, 2, p. 1.

If this multiplicity of tones is present, according to his own confession, in each and everyone of Derrida's text, we can say that in the case of *Droit de regards* this genitive tension of the voice, the distancing between the "who" that talks and its own voice, the gap between the voice and its *tones*, is acted out, staged. This vocal performance provokes not only a simple change of register, a fluctuation of the voice, but rather a poly-gramphony whose choral shrillness resonates within Plissart's own photographic architecture.

Polyphony rejects the unity of the narrative voice, and by the same token, prevents the literary corpus from becoming a single body. The aim of the multiplicity of voices is oriented more towards the production of a "literary space" in Blanchot's sense, than towards a coherence in meaning depending, like a net to be held by a multiplicity of discrete forces, upon the tension of those pieces (at the same time body parts, photographs, and rooms). Thus, Plissart's work assembles 289 photographs within the exact space of 100 pages, like 100 squares of the draughts-board, or the 100 rooms of a house/"*demeure*". In the same way, Derrida's text reproduces this *spatialization* distributing 186 paragraphs (that could be 186 voices, or n+1 modulated into 186 utterances) within 36 pages. There is a deconstructive relationship between polyphony and *spacing* that according to Derrida makes writing a form of visual art or architecture: "I would say that my texts have in common with the spatial, architectonic and theatrical arts their acoustics, their voices. I have written many texts with diverse voices and spatiality becomes visible in them. There are different persons talking, and this implies necessarily a dispersion of voices, of tones, that automatically produce spatiality"²⁶. In this respect, philosophy renounces its traditional privileged visual position over the photographs, to its voyeuristic and vertical eye, through active spatialization/multiplication of its own voice. The polylogue provokes an *anti-panoptikon effect*, a photographic dissemination of the eye, a pluralizing of the gaze, of what is the same, a performative transformation of the *droit de regard* into *droit de regards*.

It is important to remember that the voices do not represent the two poles of a dialectic argument, or even the multiple voices of a reasonable and consensual polylogue. The polyphony of Derrida's texts, incapable of choral unification and unfaithful to the laws of dialogical communication, is the result of a single voice that is not one. A voice that has no origin, a voice condemned to exile, to perjury and to dissemination. Then, no remedy against this multiplicity of the voice. Polyphony, as the result of an "active division"

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, Entrevista con David Wills, *Op.Cit.*, p. 2.

within language²⁷, is the condition of possibility of the voice itself. Therefore, the supplementation of *genre* that photography seems to demand was from the beginning condemned to failure.

If we pay attention to the texts in which Derrida uses polyphony (to name just some of them: “Restitutions” in *La vérité en peinture*; in *Feu la cendre*, a small book published at Les Editions des Femmes en 1987, in “*En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici*” in *Psyché*, in *Pas*, in *Monolinguisme de l’autre*, etc.), we may conclude that this *active division* within itself of the voice is very often related to the impossibility of speaking only one language, the impossibility for the work of art (*ergon*) to exist without exteriority (*parergon*), the impossibility of a country of being only one nation, but also with the impossibility of belonging only to one sex. All these forms of bastard affiliation respond to the same polyphonic logic that Derrida has identified with different names in the course of different writings: prosthetic origin, supplementary logic of the *parerga*, *différance*... but also *loi du genre*, law of genre/gender.

It is this relationship between polyphony and “la loi de genre” that is especially relevant to the reading of *Droit de regards*. In fact, we could say in many of the polyphonic texts that the multiplicity of the voice results directly from the introduction of a variation of gender within the voice, in other words, from the introduction of “une voix de femme” in the text. For instance in *Feu la cendre* Derrida describes the polylogue this way: “un enchevêtrement de voix en nombre indéterminé, dont certaines masculines, d’autres féminines, et cela se marque parfois dans la grammaire de la phrase. Ces signes grammaticaux sont lisibles mais ils disparaissent pour la plupart à l’audition, ce qui aggrave une certaine indécision entre l’écriture et la voix” (Derrida, 1987: 8). Here we could run into an essentialist characterization of *différance* as related to a sexual difference between masculine and feminine²⁸, but polyphony depends on a slide movement which initiates itself with the split of the voice: in two, one “apparently masculine, the other apparently feminine”, and that results on a “*mise en abyme*” (composition strategy that we have observed already in Plissart’s photographs) of this split that dividing each voice, each gender within itself multiplies sexual difference:

²⁷ About the “active division of language” see among other texts (Derrida, 1996b: 8).

²⁸ For a reading of the relationship between Heidegger’s ontologic difference, Derrida’s *différance* and psychoanalytic sexual difference: “la différence de Derrida doit donc être sexuelle. Ce qui veut dire: la différence ontologique est sexuelle (et réciproquement, ce qui sans doute affecte l’être en son élan ou estance même). Donc l’être est sexué et/ou sexuant” (Nancy, 2001: 89).

Puis si la version enregistrée donne à entendre deux voix, explique Derrida, dont l'une paraît masculine, l'autre féminine, celle ne réduit pas le polylogue à un duo, voire à un duel. Et en effet la mention "une autre voix", qu'on entend parfois sans la lire, aura souvent la valeur d'une mise en garde. Elle signale que chacune des deux voix se prête à d'autres encore. Je le répète, elles sont en nombre indéterminé: celle du signataire des textes ne figure que l'une d'entre elles, et il n'est pas sûr qu'elle soit masculine. Ni l'autre femme" (Derrida, 1987a: 12).

Thus, in *Droit de regard*, Derrida's text, rather than supplement Plissart's photo-romance *manquée*, imitates photography. First, by splitting the monologic/masculine voice into an indefinite number of voices. As we have seen, this split in the voice results in a multiple impersonation of several feminine and masculine voices that cannot be identified with the voice of the author. In other words, we would have to conclude that even when talking/writing with a masculine voice, the philosopher is only performing masculinity, rather than talking with his own "natural" voice. The second effect of this multiple phonic impersonation is the possibility of the exegetic voices to be detached, disjointed from the naturalized core of an voyeuristic masculine eye (the hard of the so called "male gaze") for which "lesbian" as visual object has been historically produced.

Instead of displaying a text as a *cordon sanitaire* which would come to protect the photographs from a "lesbian" drift, Derrida, through the use of the polylogue, performs in *Droit de regards* the "failure" of genre/gender supplementation questioning both philosophical genre (and therefore philosophy's authority, *droit de regard*, over photography) and the gender (the "natural maleness") of the philosophical voice.

LIST OF IMAGE

1. Front page for the French Edition of M.F. Plissart (Plissart, 1985).
2. Plissart (1985: 66).
3. Plissart (1985: 67).
4. Hirschfeld demonstrating a case of "erroneous sex determination" in Friederike Schmidt "pseudohermaphrodite". From Hirschfeld, Plate 684, Margus Hirschfeld Society, Berlin, (1910).
5. "Attaque hystéro-épileptique". Régnaud, *Iconographie, Op.Cit.*, Tome III.
6. From Margus Hirschfeld Society, Berlin.
7. Moorish woman, Scènes et Types, Planche 77, reproduced in Malek Alloula (2001: 401).

8. "Three bodies types: the Urning, the female and the male", From Margus Hirschfeld Society, Berlin, (1903).
9. Plissart (1985: 1).
10. Plissart (1985: 18).
11. Plissart (1985: 81).
12. Plissart (1985: 22).
13. Plissart (1985: 24).
14. Plissart (1985: 25).
15. Plissart (1985: 38).
16. Plissart (1985: 50).
17. Tracy Mostovoy, "Virgin Mary" (1987).
18. Diana Blok and Marlo Broekmans, "The Bite" (1980).
19. Tracy Mostovoy, "Untitled" (1987).
20. Jill Posener, "Posters with Graffiti" (Posener, 1982).
21. Catherine Opie, "Dyke" (1993).
22. Tragmar, "Tattoo" (1983).
23. Tessa Boffin, "The Knight's Move series" (1990), (Boffin, 1991).
24. De la Grace, "Hermaphodyke" (1990), (De la Grace, 1991).
25. Susan Steward, "Kiss and Tell" (1990) (Steward, 1991).
26. Front page for the English edition of Jacques Derrida, *Right of Inspection*, Monacelli Press, New York, 1998.

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