Beside(s): Elizabeth Presa with Jacques Derrida

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Abstract
This paper explores the way that Elizabeth Presa’s artworks respond to Jacques Derrida’s thought. By examining how the particularity (the beside) and its supplements (the besides) operate in Presa’s works, it is shown how this movement between beside and besides is also central to Derrida’s thought.

* Barely four years after Derrida’s death, I was in ‘Readings’ bookshop in Melbourne and I noticed that for the first time the books on the shelf about Derrida outnumbered the books bearing Derrida’s name as their author. The ratio was almost two to one. Beside Derrida’s own writing, numerous monographs, collections of articles and introductions were waiting, like friends, even though there are no friends: perhaps because after death there can only be mourners. Besides Derrida’s writing, the others’ writings, which respond to Derrida by continuing in his aftermath, and also by discontinuing or deforming his thought. Oscillating between a ‘derrida industry’ and the processes of mourning and response that constitute part of his legacy and promise, all these books showed that there is no security in advance about the tenure of the reply.1 The most that can be hoped for is the possibility of a reply, the possibility of being beside the other in such a way as to be besides the other. Beside—the finite presentation of singularity—inscribes, and is inscribed within, a besides—its infinite supplement, parergon, or différance, to list but a few of its names that demand still others to come.

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Beside the writing, a form. Beside the amorphous hieroglyphs on the white page, the morphe. Elizabeth Presa’s first work on, about, with,
in response to Jacques Derrida is lodged in this verbless space that the beside can institute. It is verbless not in the sense that there is a complete absence of verb—a verb, an action, is always implied. It is verbless, rather, in the sense that, in the space between the amorphous and the morphe, the doer of the action is obscured, and hence the action itself loses the security of a pre-determined destination. An action without a secured agent erases its aim, remaining suspended in the interstices that names possibility.

The work I have in mind here is ‘The Four Horizons of the Page’, shown in the Linden Gallery (St Kilda, Melbourne), from 28 July to 17 August, 2000 (see figure 1). Presa describes how the work came about:

This installation took as its material starting point a text by Jacques Derrida entitled *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*. Part of this text was typed on a laptop computer during Derrida’s visit to Melbourne. Before flying to Sydney Derrida gave me part of the original text, saved on a computer disc… I opened a file on the disc, the file called *10 August*, and printed many copies…. This paper formed an undergarment for one of the paper kimonos I was to construct…. This installation was comprised of thousands of sheets of A4 paper with printed text, many of which were folded into fan shapes and embroidered with white silk thread. (Presa 2003, 88; 90; 93)²

Derrida’s back-up copy of what he was writing at that moment is taken up by Presa for the construction of a series of kimonos. The alphabet’s characters are no longer read but rather folded into a garment that both dresses up the text into a visual extravagance and, simultaneously, undresses it of its purpose to become a book. The folding, Presa’s touching of Derrida’s words—assuming that the possessive is appropriate for an electronic back-up in a floppy disk, while noting that Presa’s print-out challenges the straight-forwardness of such an assumption—is the possibility contained in the promise of singularity, it is the enactment of that possibility. Presa beside Derrida, and also Derrida beside Presa. The verblessness of this touching disables any hierarchies in this contact. The first is second and the second first. Neither purely seen, nor purely read. Dressed and undressed. Side by side. Amorphous form.³

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Besides the verbless touching between Presa and Derrida that the work enacts, there also arises a meditation on the limits of this amorphous form. The beside lets a thinking of the besides take place. This besides is gestured towards by Presa with reference to Edmond Jabès’ insistence
Figure 1. ‘Kimono’ from Presa’s exhibition ‘The Four Horizons of the Page’ (2000). Source: photo by Elizabeth Presa.
that the book is also outside itself, there is also something in addition to, besides, the ‘real’ book:

These garments were doubled in deference to the book that is written twice, ‘in the book and outside it’. I wanted a sense of this double experience of the book in which ‘page is yoked to page, like word to subjegated sign’ through the stitching and doubling of the sheets of paper. (Presa 2003, 94)4

Besides the book, this also applies to art. In a reading of principally Kant’s aesthetics as presented in the third Critique, this ‘besides’ is called parergon by Derrida. In his close, attentive reading of Kant’s text, Derrida early on points to a fundamental indecision permeating the Kantian discourse: ‘Common sense is constantly presupposed by the Critique, which nevertheless holds back the analysis of it’ (Derrida 1987, 35). In summarizing his reading of ‘The Analytic of the Beautiful’, Derrida asserts:

In the fourth and last moment of the judgment of taste (modality), the value of exemplarity appeals to common sense (Gemeinsinn). The rule of the exemplary judgment attracting universal adhesion must remain beyond all enunciation. So common sense does not have the common meaning [sens] of what we generally call common sense: it is not intellectual, not an understanding. What then is its status? Kant refuses to decide here, or even to examine (‘we neither want not are able to examine here’) whether such a common sense exists (if ‘there is one’) as a constitutive principle of experience or else whether, this time in a regulatory and no constitutive capacity, reason commands us to produce (hervorbringen) in ourselves a common sense for more elevated ends. What remains thus suspended is the question of whether the aesthetic principle of pure taste, in as much as it requires universal adhesion, has a specific place corresponding to a power of its own, or whether it is still an idea of (practical) reason, an idea of the unanimous universal community which orients its idealizing process. As always, so long as such an idea remains on the horizon, moral law allies itself with empirical culturalism to dominate the field. (Derrida 1987, 115–16)

Judging something as beautiful exceeds its own enunciation in the sense that it is a universal judgement, shared by all. This ‘by all’ is the excess and is identified with ‘common sense’, which is explicitly dissociated from the judgements of understanding. Is this beauty, then, self-subsistent, autonomous, or is it maybe that which enables, ‘in a regulatory… capacity’, the creation of a community? Derrida does not castigate Kant for the failure to answer this ambiguity. On the contrary, Derrida indicates that the ‘besides’ as the common sense of a community finds its proper excess not in itself, but rather in the double bind that
it instigates. The besides is allowed to appear between the autonomy or cultural empiricism that soon after Kant came to be called Romanticism and the imbuing of culture with moral value that characterized neo-Kantianism. There is neither an idealized work of art, nor an idealized community, but rather a labour that lets itself unfold besides this neither/nor. This besides is both productive of common sense and produced by common sense, ‘(if “there is one”)’. Moreover, it is important that this question arises in relation to modality. On the site of the possible, this besides is enacted in response to Kant’s own discourse. It is, to use Catherine Malabou’s phrase, ‘another possibility’, in that it does not reject or deny Kant, but rather shows what Kant’s own logic cannot deny as undeniable (Malabou 2006). Thus, the besides operates on at least two levels simultaneously: it unfolds in the force field between the constitutive and the regulative as Kant’s double bind indicates, and at the same time it unfolds in the force field between a constative and a performative that Derrida’s own response demands. The beside(s) can be discerned, perhaps, as the chiasmic relations between these two levels.

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Beside the idealized community’s culture, there is another culture. Such a culture cannot presuppose or cause an idealized ‘we’. The other one finds oneself beside is never symmetrical, analogous or assimilable:

What is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself. Not to not have an identity, but not to be able to identify itself, to be able to say ‘me’ or ‘we’; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself or, if you prefer, only in the difference with itself. There is no culture or cultural identity without this difference with itself. (Derrida 1992, 9)

This is where the importance of the animal in Derrida’s work arises. Beside the idealized community’s culture, there is sericulture. Beside the artist, the sericulturist. Beside the human, the animal. The other’s unassimilable identity effects one’s own self-differentiation. Presa’s second artwork in response to Derrida tackles this constellation of ideas. The installation ‘A Silkroom of One’s Own’ (Linden Gallery, Melbourne, 28 September to 11 November 2007) makes an explicit reference to the last few pages of Derrida’s ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own’, where Derrida recalls how he cultivated silkworms as a child in Algeria. At one corner of the room there is an old display cabinet in which silkworms are cultivated. A veil of silk hangs in front of the large window on the other side, softening – veiling – the bright light (see figure 2).
No possibility is entertained here that the silkworms will reproduce or represent anyone’s work. The silkworms are unlike the proverbial monkey who, reason had it—can the monkey be allowed by reason to be referred to by a personal pronoun, a he or a she?—that if it typed for an infinite number of years, it would produce by accident Shakespeare’s works. This fable about the monkey presupposes a plenitude of reason within which the animal is assimilated. Presa and Derrida’s animals, and their silkworms in particular—their particular silkworms, those in a boy’s bedroom and those in the care of an artist—question this presupposition. They inscribe the irrational within the rational in such a way as to show that they can never be separated. The image here recalls the silkworm itself, as Derrida observes in *Rogues*:

I would be tempted to take somewhat seriously this metaphor of the cocoon... that objectivizes, animalizes, indeed naturalizes a nonnatural movement: reason spontaneously envelops itself in the web and threads that it itself weaves, after having itself secreted them—like a silkworm. The threads
of this web come at once to reveal and veil the unveiling of truth. This reason resembles the \textit{physis} of a silkworm, which, from the inside, on its own, produces and objectivizes on the outside of the veil of naturalism and objectivism in which it will shut itself up for a time. Up until the point when the heroism of reason makes it appear, resuscitates it, and lets it be reborn. (Derrida 2005, 130–1)

According to Derrida, reason animalizes itself. When reason is beside the animal, there is a reversal. Instead of the truth remaining a prerogative of reason and the animal being used as a metaphor in this context, the imagery is here reversed: ‘reason resembles the \textit{physis} of a silkworm’. The animal is at the core of reason’s potential. The irrational is indissociable from the rational dictating its economy of veiling and unveiling.

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\textit{Besides} the animal, there is the human. The title of the exhibit—‘A Silkroom of One’s Own’—could be understood as a misnomer, since a number of friends from around the world sent email messages that Presa transcribed with a pencil on the white walls of the Gallery beside Derrida’s own text about his silkworms. Besides the artist and the silkworms, besides Derrida and the silk veils, there are also communiqués by Geoff Bennington, Jean-Luc Nancy and Alexander Garcia Düttmann. The nature of these messages varies. For instance, on 4 November Nancy wrote:

\begin{quote}
Are you really waiting for messages—oh my dear and unknown worms? I am not sure you really wait. I think you wait for silk to write messages yourselves. . . . I’d like very much to get some answer from you! If you are too busy to do that, please ask Elizabeth to do it for you!
\end{quote}

Nancy asks: can an animal wait? This question echoes Derrida’s own question: can an animal feel shame? And it also echoes Augustine, who in the \textit{Confessions} describes God as that one from whom one waits for an answer but who never replies. But besides these echoes, there is also a humorous edge, coupled with affection for Derrida, Presa, and the silkworms themselves.\textsuperscript{5} The registers proliferate. The silkworms are for Düttmann a prompt to think about sexuality. The message dated 10 October asks:

\begin{quote}
What if the decision to be gay were a decision to remain virginal like a silkworm? A lubricant consisting of silkworms that gather around the erect penis and allow it to slide in and out while causing additional excitement by moving in a sinuous manner.
\end{quote}
Düttmann asks: If to call someone virginal is to inscribe their sexual activity within a moral register, can an animal not be virginal? Can a gay person not be virginal when in touch with the ‘animalistic’ sexual desire? And besides this problematic, Düttmann also asks Presa: will you allow such a discourse to be written on the white – virginal? – walls of the gallery space? And more generally, can an artwork not be virginal?6

Bennington’s messages are different from Nancy’s or Düttmann’s. Presa had first contacted Bennington, writing on 17 September:

As the translator of ‘Veils’ I was wondering if you would be interested in writing, a little each day or every few days, something that could become part of the installation? The idea being that as the translator of the original French text into English, you would, in effect, continue the process of translation as a form of generation… like the silkworms themselves!

The challenge, then, was to continue the text, to continue the process of translation, to let the besides unfold. Remember that, besides being a translator, Bennington had also collaborated with Derrida, most notably in the writing of the parallel text of the volume that was
The singularity of Bennington’s proximity—and distance, his being beside—Derrida, allowed for a different kind of email message to be transmitted. The more confessional tone betrays a brotherly attachment to Derrida, leading suddenly on 15 October to a confession about Bennington’s own brother:

(Haunted all weekend, in the mental box or cabinet where the silkworms are constantly eating and growing, by a childhood memory of a drawing (made by my elder brother, I think: the affect is one of slightly jealous admiration rather than pride, at any rate) in a school exercise book, illustrating the circuit of mulberry, silkworm and fish pond in China. Little semi-iconic drawings of trees fertilized by fish manure from the bottom of the pond; worms fed on mulberry leaves; fish fed on shed worm skins; farmers who eat fish and spin silk… There were arrows to indicate the cycle. The outsize penciled silkworm on the stick branch of the tree was, I seem to remember, smiling broadly. This seemed so very satisfying, this circuit, so self-satisfying and self-satisfied, almost smug, like the drawn silkworm itself.)

Can one help but feel a ‘jealous admiration’ for such a writing that has the capacity to unfold its possibility besides other writings—the drawing of childhood memory, Derrida’s writing, and so on—and in that way extend the other writings’ possibilities? Beside writing, more writing. Beside the beside always a besides. Can one help but feel part of this beside(s) which is both the condition of the possibility and the enactment of writing itself?

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Beside(s) names two neither/nors. The ontological status of the relation it allows is neither regulatory nor constitutive. And this relation itself is presented as neither constative nor as performative. This double matrix allows the interplay between singularity and repetition. Is this a circuit that is, in Bennington’s words, ‘so self-satisfying and self-satisfied, almost smug, like the drawn silkworm itself?’ My contention is that Presa’s works are anything but. I agree with Kevin Hart, that Presa’s work ‘neither construes Derrida as a cultural monument nor ironizes the process of monumentalizing’ (Hart 2001, 174). Self-satisfaction would entail a halting of the neither/nors. It would be a state in which the neither/nors would function as a justification, an alibi, or a grounding of a libidinal economy. Conversely, residing on the beside(s), Presa’s works are restless; restlessly dissatisfied, because restlessly probing, they resist finality. They persist because they are without a horizon of expectation, other than the promise of their persistence.
References


Notes

1. And the same point can be made about all the Derrida conference, symposia and seminars in the past few years. The presented paper was written for one such conference, titled *Derrida Today* (Sydney, 10–12 July 2008), organized by the editors of the homonymous journal, Nicole Anderson and Nick Mansfield.

2. I believe that the detail about Derrida flying to Sydney is wrong; in fact Derrida was flying to Auckland, New Zealand.

3. Derrida’s own response to ‘The Four Horizons of the Page’ can be found in his postscript to Hantai with Nancy and Derrida, *Connaissance des textes*.


6. Düttmann has written the catalogue for another exhibition by Presa; see http://elizabethpresa.com/alex.pdf. But, even more importantly, in *Verwisch die Spuren* Düttmann has used Presa works as a prompt for his own reflections.


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