

Michael Wetzel

## The Authority of Drawing: Hand, Authenticity, and Authorship

2006

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13237>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wetzel, Michael: The Authority of Drawing: Hand, Authenticity, and Authorship. In: Sonja Neef, José van Dijck, Eric Ketelaar (Hg.): *Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of New Media*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2006, S. 50–59. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13237>.

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

# The Authority of Drawing: *Hand* Authenticity, and Authorship

The idea of an ‘authentic copy’ that forms the focus of this book’s chapter, is based on a contradiction; on what is rhetorically termed a *contradictio in adiecto*: ‘authenticity’ is generally associated with genuineness, originality, uniqueness. In other words, with something that cannot or should not be reproduced or that could only be ‘copied’ by losing its character, its specificity; in short, its sense. Thus, we can refer to cultural theories, for example on the decline of media societies – as represented, in a first and superficial impression, by someone like Walter Benjamin – that are based on the opposition of, on the one hand, a pre-medial world of authenticity and the aura of the original and, on the other, the realm of media-technical reproduction of what may be called a copy, surrogate, *simulacrum*, dummy or, nowadays, simply *fake*.

Conversely, we know that if we try to provide a definition of the originality of the authentic, we enter into a cycle of reaffirmations of the ‘one’, only now in a chain of substitutions or supplements. I remember a paradoxical formulation I found in an art advertisement from the 1970s, when very expensive reproductions of masterpieces, produced by means of a new printing technique, were offered with the slogan: *The absolute authentic reproduction*.

We may laugh at this absurdity, but even a short look at the etymological context of the word ‘authentic’ teaches us more about both the original relationship of the concept and the question of handwriting or, as we say, authentication by palm/finger: the definition of *authentēs* refers to the concept of a ‘master’, a ‘potentate’, someone who makes something with his own hands as originator: an *author*. This is why it is often used as an adjective for the noun ‘auctoritas’ (authority). But all this is only representable by repetition, revealed as something *identical* within *difference*. Its authority derives from iteration, domination, and force: as a disposi-

tion by a strategy of application and appropriation. As, for instance, in Kant's definition of authentic theodicy as exegesis, *given by the legislator himself*, an argument that always comes too late and that refers to a founding, establishing moment in the sense of donating as *giving* an origin which eternally lacks. And even though this origin is absent, it plays a fundamental role in the presence (Kant 1964, 116).

To cut up the complex and over-determined aporia and at the same time to precipitate forward: we are at once confronted with the abyss of a less mediatic and more metaphysical or, even better, theological question of creation: the monopolizing, monotheistic god who has to split, to differ, to double, or to reproduce himself in what we call the creation as revelation for the sole purpose of knowing about himself as the one and only god. But let us stop our speculation here, before we get sick of Hegelian dialectics.

The passage from the etymological context to the historical development of authenticity is perfectly analyzed in Lionel Trilling's book *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Trilling argues that in the beginning of the 16th century, the concept of sincerity was the first to claim a kind of moral or political correctness against a world of betrayal and falsification. A look at the word's etymological roots may be informative here:

The word... derived from the Latin word *sincerus* and first meant what the Latin word means in its literal use – clean, or sound, or pure. An old and merely fanciful etymology, *sine cera*, without wax, had in mind an object of virtue which was not patched up and passed off as sound, and serves to remind us that the word in its early use referred primarily not to persons but things, both material and immaterial.... But it soon came to mean the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence. (Trilling 1972, 12)

On the contrary, the word authenticity enlarges the range of legitimacy of pure origin:

I can rely on its suggesting a more strenuous moral experience than sincerity does, a more exigent conception of the self and what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life.... Conversely much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example disorder, violence, unreason. (Trilling 1972, 11)

In this sense, authenticity is attributed more to strategies of transgression and excess, but also, in an aesthetic sense, of artistic creation by destruction. Trilling recalls again the Greek etymology:

Authenteo: to have full power; also, to commit a murder. Authentēs: not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide. These ancient and forgotten denotations bear upon the nature and intention of the artistic culture of the period we call modern. (Trilling 1972, 131)

## Trait

I am concerned with these aspects because I would like to concentrate more on the aesthetic point of view, especially in the form of a comparison between the artistic strategy of producing authenticity within so-called modernity and the juridical analysis of the underlying concept of authority.

And, of course, this is an article about the hand, about what is at hand or to hand.

But first of all I would like to invoke the basic theory of *difference as delay*, as *trace*, as developed by Jacques Derrida in his first great book, *Of Grammatology*. The main argument is – and here I have to be unapardonably short – that sense is not given as the representation of a former and original truth, but that it is produced by a real and material movement in the context of writing as tracing. We quickly see how Derrida subscribes to a long anti-Platonic tradition, to the critique of the meta-physical model of *archi-idea* and *ektypos* of sensorial appearance (*noumenon* and *phaenomenon*). We know the important stages of a kind of *pre-histoire*, such as Kant's model of *schematism*, which is also built on the idea of tracing a line to connect concepts to their apperceptions (a move later recycled in the linguistic turn of Humboldt's theory of human language). But what remains a crucial thesis, which Derrida never stopped repeating for more than 30 years, is the paradigm of iteration as supplement: the so-called *archi-trace* that is something that reveals itself only in the infinite difference ('*différance*') from something else, as an effect of dehiscence or, in different but no less confusing words, the trace is testimony only to the absence of which it is an index.

Derrida's writing on art, especially his work on painting and 'architexture', also claimed the difference between the picture as drawing and the act of drawing as the production or path-breaking (as in pushing forth) of visibility as *trait*. This difference, I will argue, applies for handwriting as much as for drawing, as both practices rely on the activity of a creative hand. The drawn visible mark refers to an invisible potency, a potency (as irreducibly unseen, invisible) of the *trait*, neither as the opposite of vision, nor as *reproduction* of an original vision, but rather as the *invention* of visibility (*invention of the other*; Derrida 1987). Thus, as Derrida argued in 'Memoirs of the Blind', painting, like writing, is the result of an unconscious, blind process of drawing:

Whether it be improvised or not, the invention of the *trait* does not follow, it does not conform to what is presently visible, to what would be set in front of me as a theme. Even if drawing is, as they say, mimetic, that is, reproductive, figurative, representative, even if the model is presently facing the artist, the *trait* must proceed in the night. It escapes the field of vision. Not only because it is not yet visible, but because it does not belong to the realm of the spectacle, of spectacular objectivity – and so that which it makes happen or come about cannot itself be mimetic. The heterogeneity between the thing drawn and the drawing *trait* remains abyssal, whether it be between a thing represented and its representa-

tion or between the model and the image. The night of this abyss can be interpreted in two ways, either as the eve or the memory of the day, that is, as a reserve of visibility (the draftsman does not presently see but he has seen and will see again: the aperspective as the anticipating perspective or the anamnestic retrospective), or else as radically and definitively foreign to the phenomenality of the day. This heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible can haunt the visible as its very possibility. (Derrida 1993, 45)

The important step of representation, therefore, will be to re-appropriate the revealed form or figure as possibility, an act that constitutes the so-called *authorship* as domination of the work, which is always belated due to the withdrawal and inaccessibility of the trait. The *signature* as appropriation does not belong to the signing subject: what may be called 'deconstruction' in visual arts as a condition of construction implies this experience of decentralization, of the dislocation of the presence in a work of traces. The signature does not belong to the work, it is something different, foreign, a name which is part of a discourse *on* the work and which constitutes the relationship between the mere existence of a piece of work and the artist as inventor or producer not by the mere act of signing, but by referring to the whole sociological context of reception, publication, attribution, acceptance, recognition, etc. There is no signature without countersignature, as Derrida explained in an interview:

The origin of the work ultimately resides with the addressee, who doesn't yet exist, but that is where the signature starts ... When I sign for the first time, that means that I am writing something that I know will have been signed only if the addressees come to countersign it. Thus the temporality of the signature is always this future perfect that naturally politicizes the work, gives it over to someone else, that is to say, to society, to an institution, to the possibility of the signature. (Wills 1994, 19)

This idea of the artist refers more to his practice as craftsman than to the idealistic tradition of the genius. It is a re-reading of the history of art beyond the dominating perspective of subjectivity, which Heidegger, as one of the first, criticized in *Being and Time* and *The Origin of the Work of Art* as a false inversion of the ontological relation. The distinction between 'being at hand' (*Vorhandenheit*) as existence and 'being to hand' (*Zuhandenheit*) as utility led Heidegger to the very important assumption that we have no *real* relation or contact with being as being, but that we can only relate to it by transforming it into 'Zeug' (from 'ziehen': *to pull: draft* in the sense of the trait). This constitutes an implicit re-evaluation of the *hand* as the primordial or basic medium of data processing. Our relationship to the world is literally mediated by the hand that tears up the things near us and makes them useful. However, in this way, things are only given when they are framed by utility and as data of perception; they do not exist in themselves.

Contrary to all utilitarian dealings with things as 'Zeug', the mind is confronted with what Heidegger calls the 'Zeigzeug': the toolkit, a reference to what turns

out, at the moment of the accident to be the annihilation of all readiness or handiness, the withdrawal of the things themselves: to be not at hand, to refuse all utility and to be nevertheless there only as a useless obstacle. In this sense, things are reduced to their pure and mere being-there, their *Vorhandenheit*, their being at hand, which, strictly speaking, does not at all stand in relation to any hand or handiness. They do not speak to the hand, but to the eye. We are dealing here with the very important occidental difference between the *visual* and the *haptical* (a seeing by touching, as when we say that blind men see with their hands). And it is no wonder that this dimension was largely developed in the new technical media, such as photography, where the artist's hand is substituted by a machine, by the so-called *ap-paratus*, with whose help 'Nature' inscribes itself as 'Pencil of Nature' (Talbot):

This most exact technique can give the presentation a magical value that a painted picture can never possess for us.... [T]he viewer feels an irresistible compulsion to seek the tiny spark of accident, the here and now. (Benjamin 1980, 202)

But this alienation as distance changes to a transcendental condition of magic, called *aura*: the aura of authenticity as absence or distance. The aura, as Benjamin argues, is the opposite of the trait, the track as presence:

What is aura? A strange web of time and space: the unique appearance of a distance, however close at hand. On a summer noon, resting, to follow the line of a mountain range on the horizon or a twig which throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or hour begins to be a part of its appearance – that is to breathe the aura of these mountains, that twig. Now to bring themselves closer – and closer to the masses – is as passionate a contemporary trend as is the conquest of unique things in every situation by their reproduction. Day by day the need becomes greater to take possession of the object – from the closest proximity – in an image and the reproduction of an image. The removal of the object from its shell, the fragmentation of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sensitivity for similarity has so grown that by means of reproduction it defeats even the unique. (Benjamin 1980, 209)

Derrida was aware of the problematic way in which this ideology of reproduction tried to forget the difference between the trait as witness (as *high fidelity*) and the artificiality of the made, which Derrida named, in the very context of media studies, *artefactualité* (after *artificial* and *factual*) and which leads to the question of the legitimization of the trace as *mise en abyme* of authority (Derrida 1996, 11). In *Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'* Derrida refers to another text by Benjamin, entitled *Critique of Violence*. The basic figure of the *possibility of justice* is here referred to as a promise and repetition – a figure similar to iterability or the countersignature as re-establishing the original by means of the posteriority of visualization, reception, and representation:

A foundation is a promise. Every position... permits and promises.... Thus it inscribes the possibility of repetition at the heart of the originary.... Position is already iterability, a call for self-conserving repetition. Conservation in its turn refounds, so that it can conserve what it claims to found. (Derrida 1992, 38)

The founding sign appears as a given hand, a signature. But it is a performative and not an affirmative act: if we can say that the trace engenders its own origin without proving its legitimacy, the *acting or practicing* of justice in its own singularity (without generalization) generates authority without decidability, guarantee, or calculability. This *double bind* or *double mark* of the mystical ground as the secret of innocence and transgression introduces the *hymen of authority*, the veil of visibility that cannot be torn without destroying the founding tension of *intention* as a move towards a forthcoming alteration instead of towards a future as reduplication of the present.

*Impa - Thun*

We are also dealing here with a narrative of *touch*, a narrative of membranes as revived in the well-known anecdote of Balzac's fear that photography may flay the skin. This of course has its roots in Lucretius and late antiquity's theory of eidola, which lives on in the mythical theme of photography as the removed skin of things. It also refers to a narrative of the injured gaze, of scarring, stitching, or the 'suture' mending the gaping hole between the original and the image. The aspects of skin under discussion here concern not only the skin on the surface of objects, but also the sensitive skin of that which touches. With Derrida we can connect this back to the origin of painting, to the story of Dibutade, the daughter of the Corinthian potter, who records the silhouette of her lover on the wall with a stick before he goes off to war:

Unlike the spoken or written sign, it does not cut itself off from the desiring body of the person who traces or from the immediately perceived image of the other. It is of course still an image which is traced at the tip of the wand, but an image that is not completely separated from the person it represents; what the drawing draws is almost present in person in his *shadow*. The distance from the shadow or from the wand is almost nothing. She who traces, holding, handling, now the wand, is very close to touching what is very close to being the other *itself*, close by a minute difference; that small difference – visibility, spacing, death – is undoubtedly the origin of the sign and the breaking of immediacy; but it is in reducing it as much as possible that one marks the contours of signification. One thinks the sign beginning from its limit, which belongs neither to nature nor to convention. (Derrida 1976, 234)

The touch, then, lies between denotation and connotation. The trace inscribes itself in the course of a development that includes all three aspects: touch, imprint,

and its becoming autonomous as an icon. This new autonomy comes about, to put it more precisely, by a process of montage, that is, by construction or *mise en scène*. It is, however, determined by an implicit double bind, which deconstruction can again make explicit: the double bind between origin and invention. Derrida's designation of this minimal gap as *différance* has a predecessor in Marcel Duchamp's concept of *inframince*, which may be translated as 'wafer-thin' or 'infra-small', 'infra-thin' or 'infra-minimal' (as opposed to 'ultra-'):

This is one way in which the 'same' distances itself from itself, becomes dissimilar to itself, diverging from itself by an 'infra-minimal distance'. On the spatial level... Duchamp connects the question of the infra-minimal with the question of 'sameness' – that is, a way of tracking a 'same' back to a prototype, as in serial fabrication, which served as Duchamp's model. (Didi-Huberman 1999, from the German translation of the French original, 173)

Duchamp had already demonstrated this type of shift in the repetition or difference of identity in his ready-mades, which ushered into the artistic arena not only the industrial principle of pre-fabricated products, but also that of the serial production of apparently identical stereotypes. The point, then, about ready-mades – such as the *Bottle Rack* (1914) or the *Fountain* (1917) that Duchamp apparently found in a department store – is that in the process of aesthetic presentation, individual examples depart from a context which determines them as a whole unit, so that they become totality in themselves, without any reference to what they represent, like an object identical to its image. Thereby, it suggests the absence of an original prototype or object. And here we arrive at the question of the occult, of the cryptic element of the mediality of that which represents, or rather – remembering the minuteness, the imperceptible difference of the gap posited by Duchamp – of the *crypticness* of infra-mediality.

But what is meant by the concept of *infra-mediality*? One might say it is an answer to the question of the monadological element of the *translatibility* of data in the sense of their shifting from the authenticity of the drawn trait to the *manipulative* re-appropriation as authorship. Our attention is now focused not on intermediality's horizontal shifts, but on the vertical compression of heterogeneity; that is, on the relocation of the moments of intermediality – such as 'fault-lines, gaps, intervals or interstices, as well as borders and thresholds, in which their media differential plays a part' – to the interior of a structure with its layerings, dislocations and thresholds: as the potentiality or intensity of an inner, infrastructural change (Paech 1998, 25). According to Leibniz, monads have no windows, which does not, however, mean that they cannot form constellations or represent them. They must do this as monads, i.e., as fragments of a whole that develops (further) within these fragments, autonomously but at the same time synchronously or affinitively. What counts is the media auto-referentiality of the semantics that attains meaning by means of the potentiation of the system.

*Infra* in this sense, then, implies more than simply the immanent or internal. Rather, it implies an internal inclusion, subcutaneous virtualities, something con-



cealed underneath that does not, however, pre-exist as anything substantial but reveals itself – like infra-red energy – in its subsequential effects. The use of the term in Duchamp's phrase *infra-mince* can be applied to Plato's *chora* as well as to Derrida's *différance*. The poem of the same title ('*If tobacco smoke smells of the mouth it issued from, both scents are married in infra-mince*') celebrates this definition of the transition from the possible to the nascent or the difference 'between two serially produced objects (from the same mold)' (Tono 1984, 55). Infra-mediality, then, has to do with the infrastructure of the media as a virtual dispositivity of the medium, the inner work: as an internal act of translation, as a version taking all things into account, as it were. One might also – with reference to Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' – speak of an infra-linear version which, like Benjamin's 'interlinear version' between the original and the translation, sees itself as a virtual and transcendental subtext, functioning 'underneath' or 'inside' ('infra'), representing something like a dispositive or invisible/unconscious 'matrix' for its intention – but as a symbol for the unconscious of the trait.<sup>1</sup> Intention as a kind of inner exterior now turns out, in fact, to be an infrastructure – certainly in terms of Benjamin's original phrase, 'in the intention of the asserted', where 'in' indicates how the determination of the kind of assertion occurs 'inside'.<sup>2</sup> And it is in this sense that Duchamp himself speaks of creation as 'osmosis', 'a transparency from the artist to the spectator... taking place through the inert matter'.

'Intention' as a metaphor could not only replace the tiresome division of *index* vs. *icon*, but could also perform the role of missing link between the three aspects of *materiality*, *apparatus* and *code*. One should emphasize the critical valency of this reminder of 'artificiality', obligated to the subconscious, as well as recognizing it as a new impetus for research: inframediality inquires after every medium's intentions with regard to other media in its 'interlinear version' (Benjamin). The infralinear version, however, reduces each particular mediality by its own computations and representations of, for example, visual knowledge – through the paper or the screen, for instance, as a kind of 'approximate remembrance' of the real, which clears a path for its own memory in the narrativity of the allegorical aspects of the material recording.

The trace or trait thus exhibits its own genealogy, the implements hidden in the actual *infra-trait*. Actually, what we call 'authentic reproduction' is *projection*, because the authentic can only become visible as trace of the 'producing' hand in its reproduction and afterwards. Thus we arrive at the final thesis: we cannot close the gap between the drawing and the drawn, but need to stay within the chain of supplementations, as in a film where the next picture *sutures* the gap of the one before. This whole play of difference, delay, and deviation constitutes the artistic production and the responsibility of the artist as author: the difference between the piece of work in its total materiality and the artist as its first spectator who 'smells' of what he has done in this afterglow of the infra-thin transformation.

The authenticity of handwriting appears precisely as a re-appropriation of this gap. Thus, authenticity does not reveal a reference to a real or ontological origin. Rather, it appears as an intention in the sense of a drift of difference. The so-called 'infra-thin signature' disseminates each trait in a kind of performativity of produc-

tion. The act of signing then resembles less a giving hand in the sense of a source of originality that the hand owns and now gives away. Instead, this metaphor of gift or present transforms into the slightly different iconography of the presence of a touching hand, living on the borderline of the seeking and of the meeting impulse of drawing.



**SIGN HERE!**

## Notes

1. Compare with Lyotard, Jean-François, *Discours, Figure*. 1971, 339.
2. This phrase, literally *Intention vom Gemeinten* (from: Benjamin, Walter. 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', in: R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 1974, 14) is translated into English as 'the intended object' (Benjamin, Walter. 'The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens"', in: *Illuminations*, 74).

## Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', in: R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 1974. (English translation: Benjamin, Walter. 'The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens"', in: Hannah Arendt (ed. and intro.), *Illuminations*. Trans. by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968.)
- 'A short story of photography', in: A. Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven: Leet's Island Books, 1980.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. and with an introduction by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- *Psyche. Inventionen de l'autre*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987.
- 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', in: D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld, and D. Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Trans. by P.A. Brault and M. Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- 'Artefactualités', in: Derrida, Jacques and Bernard Stiegler (eds.), *Echographies de la télévision. Entretien filmés*. Paris: Institut national de l'audiovisuel, 1996.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Ähnlichkeit und Berührung. Archäologie, Anachronismus und Modernität des Abdrucks*. Köln: DuMont, 1999. (German trans. of: Didi-Huberman, Georges, *L'Empreinte*. Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1997).
- Heidegger, Martin. *On Time and Being*. Trans. Joas Stambaugh. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks', in: *Holzwege*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1952.
- Kant, Immanuel, 'Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee', in: W. Weischedel (ed.), *Werke in zwölf Bänden*. Bd. XI. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964.
- Lyotard, Jean-François, *Discours, Figure*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1971.
- Paech, Joachim. 'Mediales Differential und transformative Figurationen', in: J. Helbig (ed.), *Intermedialität*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1998.
- Tono, Yoshiaki. 'Duchamp und "Inframince"' in: *Duchamp*. Köln: Museum Ludwig, 1984.
- Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Wills, David. 'The Spatial Arts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in: Peter Brunette and David Wills (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.