Between Translation and Invention

The Photograph in Deconstruction

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You could speak of these photographs as of a thinking, as a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended.

—Jacques Derrida, *Right of Inspection*

The most direct path toward an understanding of the relationship between deconstruction and photography paradoxically may be by way of a detour through the concept of translation that will have caused both a slowing down and an acceleration. The detour involves “translating” the discourses of deconstruction and photography into something else and, in so doing, eventually into themselves.

Jacques Derrida’s provocative assertion that the “origin of philosophy is translation or the thesis of translatability” situates deconstruction—whose heterogeneous operations presuppose that something can be presented, interpreted, explained, and even understood *in terms of something else*—as the mode par

excellence of philosophy.¹ In fact, we could say that the “as-ness” whereby something can signify as something that is not (quite) itself is the very condition of possibility for a mode of analysis that fundamentally is a thinking and problematization of the “as” as such and the “as-ness” of the “as.” We recall that the word *deconstruction* itself—a word that, for better or worse, has become synonymous with Derrida’s idiomatic protocols of reading—emerged from the thinker’s attempt, early in his career, to translate the conceptual operations of Martin Heidegger’s German words *Destruktion* and *Abbau* into French.² Wishing to avoid the Nietzschean connotation of demolition that the French word *déstruction*, like its English counterpart, conveys, Derrida hoped to capture the double movement of Heidegger’s notion of a mode of building (*bauen*) that also is a form of un-building (*ab-bauen*). The gesture involves taking something apart in a way that heeds the logic of its own architectural plan and thereby exposes the internal tensions that both enable and vex it. Heidegger takes pains in his accounts of Being to formalize the “building-unbuilding” construction that always also is an undoing of itself, mobilizing the words *Abbau* (partially derived from the phenomenological work of his teacher, Edmund Husserl) and *Destruktion*, or de-structuring, instead of the more usual German equivalent of *destruction*,

that is, *Zerstörung*. Derrida eventually found in etymological dictionaries the old and unusual French word *déconstruction*, which, in its various evocations of the figure of a construction that also undoes that same construction, comes close to capturing the unsettling epistemological investments of Heidegger's German concepts, expanding and radicalizing them in the process. To be sure, Derrida's interest in translating Heidegger's German terms was not exclusively philological but rather also signaled the beginning of a sustained engagement with and critical transformation of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, a thinking of Being that exerted a strong influence on Derrida, even while he often remained critical of it.³ What both the de-structuring of Heideggerian *Abbau* and the operation of deconstruction share is that they are meant not merely as negative, destructive, or rejecting. Rather, they simultaneously embody something positive, a mode of affirmation and even future-directedness. In his 1983 "Letter to a Japanese Friend," addressed to a translator who had raised concerns regarding the difficulties of translating *deconstruction*, itself already a translation of sorts, into Japanese, Derrida echoes the concerns with the concept of translation found in Heidegger's own "A Dialogue on Language Between a Japanese and an Inquirer":

To be very schematic I would say that the difficulty of *defining* and therefore also of *translating* the word “deconstruction” stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or that translation, are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, etc. And that goes for the *word*, the very unity of the *word* deconstruction, as for every *word*. *Of Grammatology* questioned the unity “word” and all the privileges with which it was credited, especially in its *nominal* form. It is therefore only a discourse or rather a writing that can make up for the incapacity of the word to be equal to a “thought.” All sentences of the type “deconstruction is X” or “deconstruction is not X” a priori miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false. As you know, one of the principal things at stake in what is called in my texts “deconstruction” is precisely the delimiting of ontology and above all of the third person present indicative: S *is* P.⁴

Departing from any kind of essentialism and dogmatism, Derrida proceeds to inscribe the translatability of *deconstruction* into its iterations in different forms and situations:

The word “deconstruction,” like all other words, acquires its value only from its inscription in a chain of possible substitutions, in what is too blithely called a “context.” For me, for what I have tried and still try to write, the word has interest only within a certain context, where it replaces and lets itself be determined by such other

words as “écriture,” “trace,” “différance,” “supplément,” “hymen,” “pharmakon,” “marge,” “entame,” “parergon,” etc. By definition, the list can never be closed, and I have cited only names, which is inadequate and done only for reasons of economy. In fact I should have cited the sentences and the interlinking of sentences which in their turn determine these names in some of my texts.⁵

If, therefore, the thought and operation of deconstruction require that definitions and essentializing determinations be placed under erasure in favor of a perpetual recontextualizing, rereading, and reconfronting of deconstruction’s movements—which is to say, movements that are not merely brought to a given instance from the outside, by an external intervention or by a more conventional *Ideologiekritik*, but rather are shown silently to have been at work in the object, text, or idea *already*—then the thinking that Derrida imagines under the name *deconstruction* cannot be thought in separation from translation, substitution, and reinscription in a variety of alternative names and open-ended contexts. At the same time, these operations of translation are not arbitrary. They do not imply that the work of deconstruction is a good-for-everything label that can easily be “applied,” that is, instrumentalized, tamed, made respectable and palatable, ossified into a mere discourse on method. Derrida himself always emphasized that he had reservations about the word *deconstruction*—and even rejected outright such

convenient -isms as “deconstructivism” and “deconstructionism,” along with “deconstructivist,” that some felt compelled to derive from it—precisely to the extent that, as a label, a predictable category of thinking that could easily be scanned and co-opted by the market and ideological economy of critical “approaches,” a certain dogmatic and self-assured usage threatens to erase simultaneously its singularity and its plurality. For Derrida there can be no single deconstruction but only multiple deconstructions, singular and each time idiomatic operations that are related to each other only in their radical difference.⁶

The kind of thinking—regardless of the heading under which it is performed—that Derrida wishes to stage would have to take into account first and foremost something for which thought itself can never be quite prepared, something that, for instance, the structuralism, however powerful, of a Claude Lévi-Strauss cannot quite think, that is, the “structurality of structure” as a challenge to the metaphysical preference for Being as presence, as Derrida’s early essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” suggests. From that perspective, the substitution that is implied by the translation of deconstruction into other signs and contexts would have to come to terms with “a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its

own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it.”⁷ Therefore, we may begin to think a system “in which the central signified, the original and transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.”⁸ We could say, by extension, that when the thought of deconstruction is to be translated into its substitutions and its related contextual phenomena—and there can, by definition, be no other form of deconstruction—this translation will not retroactively yield, as though it were merely the expression of a kind of Freudian deferred action, the “original” essence of something that at one point in the past was present to itself, transparently available as a mode of anteriority. If this is so, then any “translation” of deconstruction into another substitute, another chain of signification, is called upon to show itself responsible to the ways in which its very operations embody both its conditions of possibility and its impossibility all at once.

Why begin a meditation on the relationship between deconstruction and photography with a consideration of the forces that place deconstruction and translation into a shared constellation of thinking and of experience? Does our reconstruction of the

imbrication of deconstructive movements of thought and the idea of translation not attest to the predominantly verbal or linguistic preoccupations of Derrida's project, preoccupations in which instances of visual culture and its proliferation of images of various kinds—including, precisely, photography—do not play a key role? In a 1990 interview with Peter Brunette and David Wills concerning the relationship between deconstruction and visual culture, including photography, Derrida admits his preference for words over images, while also undermining the strict hierarchy between these two orders of presentation and modes of cognition. In a remarkable passage he states:

It is true that only words interest me. It is true, for reasons that have to do in part with my own history and archaeology, that my investment in language is stronger, older, and gives me more enjoyment than my investment in the plastic, visual, or spatial arts. You know that I love words. I have the greatest desire to express myself in words. For me it involves desire and the body; in my case the relation of the body to words is as important as it is with painting. . . . I am often reproached: "You only like words, it is only your lexicon that interests you."

Having confessed his desire and the history of his investment in words, Derrida goes on to complicate the relationship between words and images, emphasizing the elusively translative relationship between them:

What I do with words is to make them explode so that the nonverbal appears in the verbal. That is to say that I make words function in such a way that at a certain moment they no longer belong to discourse, to what regulates discourse—hence the homonyms, the fragmented words, the proper names that do not essentially belong to language. . . . And if I love words it is also because of their ability to escape their proper form, whether they interest me as visible things, letters representing the spatial visibility of the word, or as something musical or audible. That is to say, I am also interested in words, paradoxically, to the extent that they are nondiscursive, for that's how they can be used to explode discourse. . . . Not always, but in most of my texts there is a point at which the word functions in a nondiscursive manner. . . . So I am very much in love with words, and as someone who is in love with words I treat them as bodies that contain their own perversity, let's say the regulated disorder of words. . . . It's when words start to go crazy . . . and no longer behave properly in regard to discourse that they have more rapport with the other arts, and conversely this reveals how the apparently nondiscursive arts such as photography and painting correspond to the linguistic scene . . . even in the case of the photographer Plissart. These are words that work on them whether they know it or not: they are in the process of letting themselves be constructed by words.⁹

One might say that Derrida here lays bare his particular and unconventional version of philology, *philologia*, the love of the word. This radical version of *philologia* is one that also undermines, even as it posits, the

hierarchical positionality of the word in relation to the image. After all, one way of glossing Derrida's explanations is to suggest that deconstruction, when it becomes effective in the words that it mobilizes and that are mobilized by it, always is translated into something else, even *translates itself* into something else. From this perspective the gesture of translation that deconstruction performs also involves a translative carrying across of the discursive realm of words into the realm of images, in a manner that shows how what is most unsettling in deconstruction may ultimately resist the conventional logic of words and how, by the same token, what is most transformative about images, including photographic ones, is the way in which, when their reading is pushed to the limits, they strongly begin to resemble the textual orbit usually thought to be inhabited by the word. It is, we might say, because of this chiasmic relation that Derrida can suggest that "the most effective deconstruction . . . is one that deals with the nondiscursive, or with discursive institutions that do not have the form of a written discourse."¹⁰ There can therefore be no love of the word in deconstruction that is not always also, whether acknowledged or not, a love of the image, no translation of deconstruction that is not always also a translation of (in both the genitive and accusative cases) the image. It is instructive to consider, therefore, that

one of the translations, alternate names, or “substitutes” for deconstruction that Derrida does not explicitly mention in the letter to his Japanese translator is precisely that of photography. But he does emphasize that, with regard to deconstruction’s possible names, “by definition, the list can never be closed,” so that there is always one more important translation yet to come. Indeed, the to-come structure of deconstruction’s translation is precisely what makes it a transformative mode of thinking, reading, and writing. We could say that photo-graphy, or light-writing, belongs to this list like few other terms because its hidden logic, at least as Derrida wishes to understand it, is inseparable from the technical and presentation-oriented movements that, in a variety of registers and modulations, always have traversed deconstructive thought. Although he himself for the longest time did not allow—in part for political reasons and in part as a protest against the bourgeois valorization of the “Author” at the expense of a generalized concept of *writing*—photographs of himself to be published, and although he retained a highly ambivalent relation to his own photographed image, to say that, for him, there is a strong affinity between deconstruction and photography would be to understate the matter.¹¹ Like photography, deconstruction is concerned, among other things, with questions of presentation, translation,

techné, substitution, deferral, dissemination, repetition, iteration, memory, inscription, death, and mourning. Yet while Derrida's engagement with concerns of visual culture more generally, especially painting and drawing (for instance, in such works as *The Truth in Painting* and *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*), with the imbrication of visual culture and technicity (such as in portions of his 1999 *Sydney Seminars*), and with visual media technologies such as television (*Echographies of Television*) and video art (for instance, in his reflections on Gary Hill's work in his essay "Videor"), is gradually coming into critical focus, his engagement with photography has been relatively neglected.¹² This relative neglect applies in particular to his "occasional" pieces on photography, including such works as his meditations on photographs by Jean-François Bonhomme entitled *Demeure, Athènes* (originally published in 1996 in Greece), a short excerpt of which also is included under the title "Athens and Photography: A Mourned-for Survival" in his collaboration with Catherine Malabou, the philosophical travelogue *Counterpath*; the 2002 conversation on the trace, the archive, and the photograph at the Collège iconique, entitled "Trace et archive, image et art"; the essay "Aletheia," originally published in Japanese in 1993 (and in French in 1996) on the work of the Japanese photographer Kishin Shinoyama and

his model Shinobu Otake; and his series of moving miniature essays on specific photographs by Frédéric Brenner in the latter's collection of images of Jewish life around the world, a monumental visual archive of cultural dispersal entitled *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile*.¹³ Among Derrida's statements on photography, even his seminal essay "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" and his discussion of the work of the Belgian photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart in *Rights of Inspection* have received comparatively scant scholarly attention.¹⁴ Derrida's interrogation of photography works to open the medium to its own alterity, to the ways in which photography exposes the non-self-identity and internal self-differentiation that, for him, ultimately condition any act of aesthetic experience and its ethicopolitical futurity. His engagement with the inscriptions of photography illuminates syntactical linkages among some of the major claims of a Derridean aesthetics and politics of presentation as they unfold in the language of technically mediated images. It always is tempting, from a deconstructive perspective, to think "the rhetoric of photography and the scene of deciphering" together, so that it is "difficult . . . to resist the temptation to read, in each of these photographs, a displacement and a condensation, an allegory, a metonymy or a metaphor," as Derrida writes in his meditation on a 1983 photograph by

Brenner depicting a young child and his grandfather intently studying or praying, with open books on their laps, in a Yemen jewelry workshop.¹⁵ The protocols of close reading and deciphering, analyzing and translating, questioning and obsessive revisiting that deconstruction follows hardly can be thought in separation from the kind of prayerlike attentiveness and careful, restless study that a serious engagement with photography requires. The place that the peculiar grammar of photography holds in his thinking, therefore, cannot be overestimated, as Derrida himself makes explicit in *Right of Inspection* when he argues that, taking “all differences into account, we would not be reducing the specificity of . . . photography were we to find it pertinent elsewhere: I would say everywhere.”¹⁶

When Derrida claims that an analysis of the peculiar logic that inhabits photography is pertinent everywhere, his statement should not be construed as encompassing only the image-saturated phenomena of modernity and postmodernity that require rigorous analysis, from the first so-called heliograph, “View from a Window at Gras,” recorded by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826, to the images of self-reflexively postmodern photographers such as Cindy Sherman and Victor Burgin and the more recent digital extravaganzas of an Andreas Gursky. The crux of the matter is not the prospect that an analysis of

photography would yield yet another view on the relationship between photography and “society,” as, say, Gisèle Freund, the great photographer and historian of photography paradigmatically postulated it in the 1970s.¹⁷ Nor would the main thrust of Derrida’s analytic gesture be confined to a philosophical appreciation of the artistic achievement of a certain photographer, as, for instance, in the case of the philosopher Arthur Danto discussing the oeuvre of Robert Mapplethorpe.¹⁸ As the art historian Graham Clarke reminds us in his standard work on photography, “far from being a literal or mirror image of the world, [the photograph] is an endlessly deceptive form of representation. As an object it announces its presence, but resists definition. It is, in the end, a sealed world,” even a “complex play of presence and absence.”¹⁹ What Derrida wishes to emphasize, rather, is that photography, once its idiomatic logic is elaborated and generalized, can be seen as an operational network and a metalanguage through which larger philosophical, historical, aesthetic, and political questions can be brought into focus. It is in this sense, too, that he wishes to preserve the singularity and particularity of photography—whether analog or digital—while making visible the ways in which it operates in a certain universality of thinking and of posing questions. We might even say that Derrida works to keep

the particularity of the photographic medium alive in order to preserve the universality that individual manifestations of the medium—we can only ever look at certain photographs, never at photography itself—tend to obscure.

To appreciate this interplay between singularity and universality in the space of photography, we may think of the photographic image as a technically mediated moment of witnessing, in which the inscription with light cannot be separated from an act of bearing witness, which, by definition, always must be addressed to the logic and unpredictable movements of a reception that is irreducible to the act itself. For instance, as Derrida writes in his discussion of Brenner's 1994 photograph depicting citizens protesting anti-Semitic acts in Billings, Montana, "photography always bears witness by interrogating us: What is an act of witnessing? Who bears witness to what, for whom, before whom? The witness is always singular, irreplaceable, unique, he presents himself in his physical body." He continues: "But as a *third party* (*testis, terstis*), he attests and testifies exemplarily to the universality of a law, a condition, a truth. In order to be able to call it as witness in turn, he addresses himself to the entire world."²⁰ Photography's function as a witness is not necessarily limited to what is depicted in any single photograph, its apparent subject or content. Witnessing also takes

place as the procedure of a recording, storing, and dissemination of technically mediated inscription; a photograph, therefore, also bears witness in that it activates the circulation of a certain cultural memory and exchange through its medium-specific modes of writing, inspection, and interpretation. The kind of looking, recording, and witnessing that a single photograph occasions is always also a bearing witness for the technical medium *tout court*; that is, a photograph, for all its singularity, cannot but evoke, in more or less subterranean ways, its relation to photography as such.

The current volume makes available for the first time in English—and for the first time in its entirety in any language—an important, yet little-known, interview that Derrida granted to the German theorist and historian of photography Hubertus von Amelunxen and the German literary and media theorist Michael Wetzels, who also has translated several books by Derrida into German. The conversation took place in French in the sun room (the winter garden, as it were) of Derrida's Ris-Orangis home in 1992 and was first published in an abridged form in German translation for an anthology of theoretical texts on photography, edited by von Amelunxen

in 2000.²¹ The present edition draws on the entire French transcript of the conversation, as well as on the abridged German translation prepared by Amelunxen and Wetzel. In light of Derrida's abiding concern with the relationship between deconstruction and translation, it is worth noting that German and English translations of the French conversation will have appeared before the so-called original, which still awaits publication in France. Once again, the original needs its substitutes, must no longer be itself, in order to become properly what it is. Such a movement shows, among other things, that "origin" is not a form of presence but rather a derivation.

It is no accident, then, that Derrida returns in his conversation on photography to questions of presence and its manufacture, the technicity of presentation, the aleatory volatility of the authorial subject in its image, and the concept of the archive as that which records and, precisely by archiving and recording, questions the status of the original and the metaphysical assumptions that saturate it. As Derrida reminds us in *Archive Fever*, technologies of inscription and the undoing of certain protocols of reading, writing, and thinking that they occasion must be thought together, so that, in addition to the affirmative, gathering, preserving dimension of the archive, there is "the violence of the archive itself, *as archive, as archival*

violence.”²² For Derrida the photographic image cannot be thought in isolation from the concept of the trace and from the ways in which it allegorizes a subject’s nonself-identity and dispersal, even when photography works to capture a subject by interrupting and arresting time in the moment of a shutter’s release. The archive of the photograph, Derrida suggests in the conversation, “is constituted by the present itself” so that it is “necessary that the present, in its structure, be divisible even while remaining unique, irreplaceable and self-identical. The structure of the present must be divided so that, even as the present is lost, the archive remains and refers to it as to a non-reproducible referent, an irreplaceable place.” This self-division will have been the domain of the photographic image.²³

Learning to read the ways in which the *techné* of the photograph perpetually illuminates and obscures cannot be separated from the experience of learning to learn from the medial specificity of photography as such and from the idiomatic and unverifiable language of a given photograph.²⁴ In contemporary work on photography, whether analog or digital, such issues are implicitly encoded—but only rarely addressed directly—by writers such as Susan Sontag on the relation of photography to the pain of others; by such philosophers of the image as Vilém Flusser and his concern with a positively inflected “telematic” society;

by historians of photography such as Geoffrey Batchen and their understandable preoccupations with the photograph's material and cultural inscriptions; and by theorists of photography such as Amelunxen himself and his ongoing and highly suggestive investigations of how certain indexical and postindexical modes of seeing have rendered the late modern subject a "homo photographicus."²⁵ For Derrida, what photography gives us to read is the elusive trace of vigilant thought itself, mediated and exposed by the image.

The ways in which the archive, the signature, and the copy of the photograph work to preserve a memory while also threatening to put it under erasure, "signing on" to memory while also silently moving to displace it, provide Derrida with the space into which the memory of deconstruction—to be understood in the double meaning of the genitive—can be translated.²⁶ Has not one of the movements of deconstruction always been the conservation of a memory, of disallowed and marginalized, even repressed, modes of knowing? In his final interview, given in 2004 shortly before his death, Derrida admits to having "the feeling that two weeks or a month after my death *there will be nothing left*. Nothing except what has been copyrighted and deposited in libraries."²⁷ And in an earlier reflection he makes explicit the centrality of the trope and experience of memory for his entire project, explaining that

if there were an experience of loss at the heart of all this, the only loss for which I could never be consoled and that brings together all the others, I would call it loss of memory. The suffering at the origin of writing for me is the suffering from the loss of memory, not only forgetting or amnesia, but the effacement of traces. I would not need to write otherwise; my writing is not in the first place a philosophical writing or that of an artist, even if, in certain cases, it might look like that or take over from these other kinds of writing. My first desire is not to produce a philosophical work or a work of art: it is to preserve memory.

Therefore, he confesses, "I struggle against this loss, this loss of memory."²⁸ There can be no work of deconstruction without the work of memory, its promises as well as its failures. The thinking of deconstruction cannot proceed without the technical prostheses of its mnemonic devices and inscriptions. It works to conserve and to preserve, even as it undoes. It is in this sense, too, that Derrida's thinking returns to what in "Videor" he calls "the history of an active, vigilant, unpredictable proliferation that will have displaced even the future anterior," which is to say "another mode of reading . . . without destroying the aura of new works whose contours are so difficult to delimit" but that, for him, "are delivered over to other . . . modes of production, of 'representation,' archiving, reproducibility, while giving to a technique

of writing in all its several states (shooting, editing, ‘incrustation,’ projection, storage, reproduction, archiving, and so on) the chance for a new aura.”²⁹

To the extent that one dimension of photography, too, is concerned with the staging of a struggle against the loss of memory, an attempt to archive and preserve what is about to disappear for good, it also belongs to those moments that prepare the photographed subject for its own death, as Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, among many other thanatographical reflections on the photographic image, powerfully demonstrates.³⁰ As Eduardo Cadava reminds us, the photographic image “bears witness to the enigmatic relation between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation, mourning and memory” so that the image often tells us that “what dies, is lost, and mourned within the image . . . is the image itself.”³¹ It is no accident, therefore, that “Aletheia” associates photography with birth and death, with the giving of light and life (“*elle donne naissance à la lumière*”), as well as with death and departure (“*l’expose et la dépose, la met au mont et la met à mort*”), in relation to Shinoyama’s photographic studies of his model, Otake.³² Along similar lines, in *Demeure, Athènes* Derrida thinks Bonhomme’s photographs by means of an incessant return to and obsessive meditation on the expression “Nous nous devons à la mort”—“we owe

ourselves to death” or “we owe each other to death.” This phrase stands as the first line of the book and returns throughout the text like reprints of a photograph that enact a central characteristic of the “clichés,” which in this context also could be translated as “stills,” according to which Derrida self-consciously divides his book, a book whose last word is, tellingly, “mort” (dead).³³ Here, “Athens and Photography: A Mourned-for Survival,” the key passage from *Demeure, Athènes* that Derrida selects for republication and reinscription, as if it itself were a reproducible photograph, in *Counterpath*, relates Bonhomme’s photographs of Athens to its cemeteries and tombstones, as well as to a vigilant guarding, within the photographic image, of the interplay of living and dying:

Who is that, death? The question can be posed at each and every step in this photographic journey through Athens, and not only in the cemeteries, in front of the amassed tombstones. . . . For the person who took his time to take these images of Athens over a period of almost fifteen years did not just devote himself to a photographic *review* of certain sites that *already* constituted hypomnesic ruins, so many monumental signs of death (the Acropolis, the Agora, the Kerameikos Cemetery, the Tower of the Winds, the Theater of Dionysus). He also saw *disappear*, as time passed, places he photographed, so to speak, “living,” and which are now “gone,” “departed” [*disparus*], this sort of flea market on Adrianou Street, for example, the Neon Café in Omonia Square, most of the

street organs, and so on. . . . Their ruin, the only telling archive for this Market, this Café, this Street Organ, the best memory of this culture, would be these photographs . . . an absolute mutation, though one prepared from time immemorial. . . . This book thus bears the signature of someone keeping vigil and bearing more than one mourning, a witness who is doubly surviving, a lover tenderly taken by a city that has died more than once, in many times, a city busy watching over all that is non-contemporaneous within it [*contretemps*], but a living city nonetheless. Tomorrow, living Athens will be seen keeping, guarding, regarding and reflecting its deaths.³⁴

There can be no photograph that is not about mourning and about the simultaneous desire to guard against mourning, precisely in the moments of releasing the shutter and of viewing and circulating the image. What the photograph mourns is both death and survival, disappearance and living-on, erasure from and inscription in the archive of its technically mediated memory. (One may think here, for instance, of the contemporary German artist Thomas Demand, whose work consists in reconstructing famous press photographs as meticulous life-size models made entirely from paper—notorious political scenes, buildings, parliaments, etc. He then photographs these paper reconstructions of iconic images before destroying them again, and the work survives only in true-to-life-sized photographic images of images of images.)³⁵ The

photograph captures the moment of the here and now that, once taken, no longer corresponds to any existing reality. Photographs of the self can be circulated in one's absence, even when the self pictured in them is still alive, just as they will be when the photographed self has died. In this way, the photographic portrait prepares the self for its own death; it is a form of mnemonic mortification that commemorates a passing that already has occurred or that is yet to come.³⁶ Does not the scene of the thanatographical image of photography therefore shed new light on Friedrich Nietzsche's intuition, memorably staged in his foreword to *The Anti-Christ*, that "some are born posthumously"?³⁷

To suggest that such questions are operative in the orbit of photography is ultimately to interrogate the problem of *invention* that attaches to it. Does photography, at least in its classical technical formulations, depict what is already present in the object world, or does it create its own reality? This question returns us to certain issues of the old debate—associated with writers of the mid-nineteenth century such as Charles Baudelaire and brought to a tentative end in the 1930s by critics such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, for whom photography assumed specifically aesthetic and epistemological functions—about whether photography is merely a mechanical form of technical reproduction or an aesthetic form in its own

right, an idiomatic instance of *poiesis*. Implicitly displacing the binary model of this exhausted discourse, Derrida in the conversation prefers to distinguish between two forms of invention, namely “invention as a discovery or a revelation of what already is there in the invention of the other” and “invention as technical intervention, as the production of a new technical apparatus that constitutes the other instead of simply receiving him.” The classic photograph invents in that it records an already existing presence while at the same time causing this other or this otherness to be there in the object world as a form of production, performance, and manipulation. (Indeed, photography’s movement along these two axes of image production recently has been taken up again, in a variety of registers, by art historians and historians of photography as one of the core *political* issues of visual studies in the twenty-first century.)³⁸ This double sense of invention leads Derrida to ask his central question: “Is photography simply the recording of the other or of the object as he or it is there, presented to intuition,” or does it rather “invent . . . in the sense of technical production”? To pursue the implications of these questions, we should turn to the text of a lecture that Derrida first gave in 1984, “Psyche: Invention of the Other,” which represents his most sustained engagement with the question of invention. There, arguing that an “invention always

presupposes some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract,” he suggests that the kind of finding that an invention performs (as, we might add, in the German word for invention, *Erfindung*) always hovers on the brink of finding something for the first time and calling it into presence.³⁹ These movements of invention can be traced through the realms of finding or inventing oneself, finding or inventing the signature, finding or inventing truth, and finding or inventing God. Derrida, however, comes to the surprising conclusion that, even though all these concepts can be seen as effects of an invention, the other cannot be submitted to this law of invention. He writes:

The other is indeed what is not inventable, and it is therefore the only invention in the world, the invention of the world, *our* invention, the invention that invents *us*. For the other is always another origin of the world and *we are to be invented*. And the being of the we, and being itself. Beyond being. . . .

. . . The coming of invention cannot make itself foreign to the repetition and memory. For the other is not the new. But its coming extends beyond this past present that once was able to construct—to invent, we must say—the techno-onto-anthropo-theo-logical concept of invention, its very convention and status, the status of invention and the status of the inventor. . . .

The other, that’s no longer inventable.

“What do you mean by that? That the other will have been only an invention, the invention of the other?”

“No, that the other is what is never inventable and will never have waited for your invention. The call of the other is a call to come, and that happens only in multiple voices.”⁴⁰

If the purview of invention, according to this logic, does not extend to the domain of the other, if the movement by which everything can be invented cannot incorporate the other, this is because the other *as* other must remain the unknowable, that which in its radical otherness cannot be reduced to a self that could invent it—even by inventing itself—but rather to the very structure of self and other, close perhaps to what Emmanuel Levinas calls the *wholly* other. Indeed, it is possible to read this relation to an incommensurate other, in all its permutations and reinscriptions, as one of the main concerns that cuts across the entirety of Derrida’s variegated oeuvre, from the early writings on *différance* to the late “ethico-political” works.⁴¹ If the other, thought in this radical sense, were inventable, it simply would have waited to be invented or found, when in fact it resists this calling forth through finding or invention. Invention in that sense proceeds through a multitude of voices, the voices of those who are no longer one, no longer *either* self *or* other. This is also why Derrida’s passage about the multiple voices of the other, precisely in the moment when it thematizes the relation to this other,

itself breaks out into multiple voices, lest it be deaf to its own claims. The call of the other, if it is yet to come, can only be staged in multiple voices, and this future staging itself can only be written and thought about in multiple voices, ones that remain elusive and spectral. "The spectral," Derrida reminds us, "is the essence of photography."⁴²

We could say that, by the same token, the other of invention, the other that cannot be invented, also unhinges the binary opposition between invention as finding and invention as the *techné* of production or as *poiesis*. Does the photograph, understood in its most radical form—that is, as a name for certain complex figures of thought, experience, and their reproducibilities—not also participate in a movement that places the strict demarcation of the two senses of invention quietly under erasure? Is not photography itself a name for the impossible possibility of invention? If Derrida writes that "deconstruction loses nothing from admitting it is impossible" because it is a thinking whose interest is tied to "a certain experience of the impossible," then "the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible" may well be "the only possible invention."⁴³ One of the key questions to keep in mind when reading the following conversation, then, should be whether and to what extent Derrida's reflections help us to learn to think photo-graphy, light-writing,

in terms of—that is, in the deconstructive *translation* of—the impossible possibility of invention, and perhaps even as an image—or as a translation—of the *only* possible invention. This will have been one of the reasons why Derrida can write: “The photographer left; he told the truth.”⁴⁴