# From Discourse to Figure. Plasticity and Mimesis in Disrupted Realism

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Grounded in the philosophical discourse mainly articulated by Catherine Malabou and Nidesh Lawtoo, this study posits that the so-called Disrupted Realism, a distinct tendency within contemporary representational painting as proposed by writer and curator John Seed, and exemplified by the works of Antonio López Garcia, Jenny Saville, Alex Kanevsky, Ann Gale and others, actively embodies and interrogates the concept of plasticity in relation to mimesis, with its receptive, creative and destructive capacities manifested in the painting practices and conceptual connotations. Through their distinctive approaches to depicting the natural world, these painters not only reflect, but also expand upon the nature of plasticity — engaging in a (trans)formative process that challenges traditional notions of mimesis, representation and realism, showing them to be "plastic" concepts. This dynamic, dialectic interaction often filled with contradictions, illuminates how this type of contemporary painting, often termed "realist", contributes to and reshapes philosophical discussions on subjectivity, identity, form, essence and transformation.



— PLASTICITY
— MIMESIS
— DISRUPTED REALISM
— AESTHETICS
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## 1. Introduction

Even though it remains impossible to completely define a signification of an artwork, to describe all its meanings, clearly, in a contained linguistic space, it can be insightful and productive to try to satisfy, however brief and limited this effort might be, our everlasting search for understanding. This allows us to outline at least a «silhouette» of interpretation «that was hitherto hidden» and explore the depth of discourse embodied in art (Malabou 2010, 55-56). The aim of this study is to inhabit a plastic space by examining the works of painters described as "Disrupted Realists" to highlight how plasticity, in relation to the transformed notion of mimesis, operates within the visual arts as a dynamic process of becoming, rather than a static, fixed state of being (Malabou 2005, 11). To address the title of the study, From discourse to figure is a reference to Jean-François Lyotard's influential interdisciplinary work Discourse, Figure, but also serves as a reflection of the methodological approach applied in this study, structured to follow the two co-implicated terms in «the transition of the category from its concept into external reality», or rather, more directly, to move [1] «from the interior of discourse… into the figure» (Malabou 2010, 13, 56). Such a structure benefits from exploring the «purity of a thought» within the tangible «materiality of a culture», specifically in the paintings of Disrupted Realism (Malabou 2010, 14), [2] exemplified primarily by painters like Antonio López Garcia, Jenny Saville, [3] Alex Kanevsky, Kai Samuels Davis, Ann Gale, Nicola Samori and others. Described by John Seed, who first characterized the phenomenon and curated a major exhibition on the topic in 2018, not as a style or even a tendency, but a «set of developments in painting that crosses international borders and stylistic boundaries» (Seed 2018), Disrupted Realism not only represents but actively constructs and reconfigures a system of ideas, acknowledging the dynamic interplay between the abstract and the concrete, where art becomes a medium through which theoretical discourse is not merely illustrated, but critically examined and materially instantiated.

[1] I am using this term to imply «movement», or a methodological flowing energy, which is, in fact, «the foundation of the dialectical process» (Malabou 2005, 12).

[2] This categorization deserves a more in-depth elaboration in a separate study, but for the purposes of this paper it is safe to say there is enough distinction within contemporary representational painting to give this selection its own theoretical framework and discuss its implications.

[3] While not included in his first explorations of the topic, John Seed grants Jenny Saville special consideration in his newest book *More Disruption: Representational Art in Flux* (2023). It is important to recognize, though, that the categorization of artists within this tendency need not be confined solely to those selected by Seed. Broadening the scope to consider the phenomenon itself encourages an examination of the underlying principles and techniques that define Disrupted Realism, rather than limiting our perspective to a specific roster of artists.

Building on the function of Disrupted Realism, to conceptually represent, deconstruct and expand a system of ideas, it is imperative to highlight the significance of plasticity, which, as Nidesh Lawtoo has shown thoroughly, not only reinvigorates the ancient concept of mimesis, but also allows interdisciplinary approaches that bridge the humanities and the neurosciences (2016, 131-132; 2017, 1205). Without being reductionist, this fusion underscores a critical examination of how artistic expressions, like those found in Disrupted Realism, align with, and illuminate, neuroscientific understandings of perception, emotion, and the cognitive processes involved in producing and viewing art. This in no way guarantees that any scientific theory or philosophical concept, when analogized, would serve a useful backdrop for the cultural domain, but it means that

plasticity, specifically, has a rich genealogy [4] deeply connected to mimesis and the fields of neuroscience and aesthetics, beyond surface-level comparisons that might mislead our inquiry.

The goal of such parallels and transdisciplinary analogies, therefore, isn't to seek in neurons, for example, the solutions to cultural questions. Nor is it to overstate the possibilities of a conceptual analysis to solve neuroscientific problems, like the relation between the neuronal and the mental (the body/mind problem). Instead, the aim is to use scientific findings and philosophical investigations about human nature [5] and condition – like those in contemporary neuroscience – to offer a model, a symbolic schema [6] for understanding (or decoding, to use a Derridean term) a certain type of representational painting. In short, as Lawtoo puts it, such approaches can «give material substance» to scholars in the humanities (2017, 1221). It must be noted, however, that the aim here isn't merely to apply theory to art; it is also to show how art exemplifies and, more importantly even, extends theoretical discourse. Therefore, it would be productive to return the concepts of plasticity and mimesis, as well as their relation, to the context of the symbolic and conceptual, or simply – aesthetics, after they have been enriched outside of it.

[4] The rich genealogy of these topics includes, to borrow Lacoue-Labarthe's terminology, both the ancients and the moderns, from Aristotle and Plato, to Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Lacoue-Labarthe himself, Derrida, and more recently, Malabou and Lawtoo, whose work grounds the theoretical framework proposed in this study.

[5] Much has been said in recent decades about the brain's capacity to change its innate, genetic constitution over time, in its «ability to establish new synaptic connections between neurons, which modify their capacity for transmission depending on our physical activities, cultural impressions, and life experiences» (Lawtoo 2017, 1203). In fact, genetic endowment and experience are the two main factors that characterize the growth and the development of not just the brain and human nature, but any organism in the natural world, the third being the principles, or the laws of nature which are «organism-independent» (Chomsky 2005, 1, 6, 9). With regard to the first factor, Malabou writes about *developmental* plasticity in «the execution of the genetic program» during the first six months of life, which «sculpts» the brain such that «the identity of an individual begins to outline itself» (2008, 20). With regard to experience of the external environment, the second factor, Malabou writes about *modulational* plasticity, which allows the brain to adapt to its environment and change the «transmission efficacy» of the «plastic synapses», resulting in new neuronal connections (2008, 22).

[6] In the context of the methodology of this study, a *symbolic schema* suggests a flexible, adaptive framework that uses both direct and analogous methods to link theory with practice. In Kantian terms, this *hypotyposis* has both schematic and symbolic aspects (Malabou 2005, 202). On the one hand, while it will not be imposing strict rules per se, this method will explore how theoretical concepts (plasticity and mimesis) manifest in the tangible form of paintings (of Disrupted Realism). This systematic exploration aligns with the schematic aspect, as it involves a structured, though not rigid, application of abstract concepts to concrete examples. On the other hand, these artworks do not always directly embody theoretical concepts in a literal, one-to-one correspondence, but rather resonate with, reflect, or express these concepts in nuanced, often indirect, symbolic ways.

## 2. Interior of Discourse: The Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 – Plasticity: Emergence and Annihilation

The concept of plasticity has emerged as a significant philosophical construct, primarily and most thoroughly through the work of Catherine Malabou, who has, through a Hegelian reading of the neurosciences, redefined traditional views on form and transformation. Despite her successful application of the rich history of the concept mainly to the field of neuroscience and recent discoveries related to neuroplasticity, which underscores the brain's ability to reconfigure itself both functionally and structurally in response to diverse stimuli (2008, 20), for the purposes of this paper, our interests lie primarily in the aesthetic and conceptual connotations of plasticity. In her critical reinterpretation, plasticity is dialectically structured in a play of the emergence and annihilation of form (2008, 72). Emergence (or construction) of form denotes the simultaneous capacity to *receive form* (the plasticity of the molded, formed and "formable", like clay which passively takes shape) and the power to *give form* (the plasticity of the molder, the

formative, who or which actively shapes form), aligned with the etymology of the Greek word *plassein*, and more frequently connected to the "plastic arts" (2008, 5). The second property in this contradictory nature of plasticity is annihilation (or destruction) of form, which is the ability to cause «violent explosions», linked to a different use of the term plastique, an explosive substance which shapes the words *plastiquage* and *plastiquer* (2008, 5). Both properties are crucial for understanding the conceptual implications and painterly processes of the Disrupted Realists.

These etymological explanations that form the meaning of plasticity do not imply that any similar notion that could be, mistakenly so, understood as a synonym, like "flexibility", is useful for this analysis, nor that plasticity is a notion at all: it goes beyond that. As Malabou points out, while flexibility is a «vague notion», plasticity is a concept with a «long philosophical past» as well as tangible and productive relations to mimesis, another ancient concept, which is why it will be instrumental for this discussion (2008, 13).

In her work, Malabou discusses how plasticity pertains to Hegel's dialectic, highlighting, along with his definition of philosophical exposition with the «goal of plasticity» in mind (2005, 11; Hegel 2018, 40), its relevance in understanding transformations beyond physical or biological alterations to encompass ideological and symbolic shifts (Malabou, 2008, 69-70), which can be readily applied to the analysis of art forms such as contemporary representational paintings. This philosophical lens is pivotal in examining how artworks engage with notions of forming and deforming, echoing the fluidity and dynamism that Malabou associates with structural and conceptual reshaping and a materiality that is "plastic" (Johnston 2014, 128). Furthermore, Malabou recognizes Hegel's definition of what he calls the "Absolute Relation", meaning the «relation between substantiality and accidentality» characterized by the «activity-of-form» that implies the «plasticity of substance itself», relating us back to the first property of plasticity, namely, the «capacity to both receive form and give form to its own content» (2005, 11-12). Thus defined, the "Absolute Relation" implicates what Barthes called the «infinite transformation» of substance (1972, 97), by the play of accidentality as a necessary condition of (artistic) creation. [7] In the phenomenon of Disrupted Realism, this involves «an interest in painterly improvisation», spontaneity, expected accidentality, controlled chaos and enough «skill to burn» (Seed 2018, 5, 7). In turn, these practices transform, disrupt and, perhaps, even de(con)struct the depicted and, through the «sudden transformation of nature» (Barthes 1972, 97), "plasticize" their subjects. This allows us to appropriate plasticity to discuss the ways in which art not only represents but actively constructs our perception of reality in general, but also shows how the painting practices of Disrupted Realists could thus be seen as plastic processes, forms of action that mold and are molded by material as well as cultural and historical conditions.

[7] This view of artistic creation, as analogous to a natural force, especially in the context of representational art, means that art «not only reproduces nature», even when "copying" it, «but rather re-*produces* the creative force of Being itself» (Lawtoo 2017, 1218).

We can trace these "plastic" processes not only in the production, but also the reception of art. Akin to developmental and modulational plasticity, described by Malabou when speaking about the genetic endowments molded by the environment (2008, 20, 22), we can notice a parallel with the way one receives a work of art. Simultaneously, the observer

receives form of the work and accepts it, while giving back to it a form shaped by his or her perception, informed by innate properties of the individual, their personal experiences, attitudes and associations.

The applicability of plasticity to contemporary art is especially pertinent in discussions about the representational, where the interplay of visibility and invisibility – presence and absence, creation and negation – reveals the inherent plasticity of representational practices. To use an example which will later be discussed in greater detail, the work of artists like Jenny Saville redefines bodily forms in ways that challenge and expand the viewer's understanding of corporeality and identity, illustrating plasticity's role in the continuous renegotiation of form and meaning, and in understanding more completely the conceptual motivation behind painting practices like those in Disrupted Realism.

### 2.2 – Mimesis: Between the Passive and the Active

The layered nature of mimesis has been investigated in the past, counter to the usual and limited view of mimesis as simple imitation, and recently tackled in an exhibition at the Museu Europeu d'Art Modern in Barcelona, titled Mímesis: Representational Art 2023, which included different considerations of the concept, «from the venerated traditional classic realism» described just now as a limited view (on the condition it is the only one presented), to «highly meticulous hyperrealism», to what is of particular interest in this discussion, namely, the «loose brushstrokes that lead to wild abstraction within realism» (Kloosterboer 2023, 9). This multiplicity of interpretation may be the result of an awareness of the inherent plasticity of mimesis, thoroughly explored in recent years by Nidesh Lawtoo, who designates the inquiry into the concept of plasticity as crucial for its potential to reshape our understanding of mimesis throughout history (and vice versa), as well as enabling significantly refreshed viewpoints in art theory. Through a «logic of repetition», Lawtoo argues, mimesis has manifested and adapted across epochs to fit new artistic and cultural paradigms (2017, 1201), which is a perspective that aligns with the broader historical and philosophical narratives explored in this paper.

Even though we will concern ourselves primarily with the philosophical and aesthetic genealogy of mimesis, it is interesting to note that recent interdisciplinary studies have begun to explore the role of mimesis (and plasticity, as was already mentioned) in cognitive science and neuroscience, suggesting that our capacity for imitation extends beyond artistic endeavors into the very fabric of cognition and our social reality (Lawtoo 2016, 131-132). [8] Nevertheless, as with many things in philosophy, the concept of mimesis can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, whose writings show that since its inception, the concept has been characterized by a complexity and an ambiguity that resonated throughout the historical discourses on the topic, shaping views we might hold today. Therefore, it could be argued that all art, since Plato and Aristotle, is reflected upon through its relation to mimesis in the broad sense (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 101). Originally, the Greek term mimesis referred to the act of imitation, similar to how an actor would

[8] Mirror neurons, for example, represent a neuronal basis for mimetic behavior, underscoring the biological underpinnings of this ancient concept. These studies enrich the concept of mimesis, portraying it as a fundamental aspect of human nature that encompasses learning, language acquisition, and social behavior (Iacoboni 2009, 76-78).

replicate, or mime, the speech and actions of a mythic hero (Blinder 1986, 20). Over time though, mimesis evolved beyond its original descriptive definition of simple imitation, transforming into a concept that sparked a centuries-long discussion about human nature and the role of art in society. This expansion opened up new philosophical inquiries into how art reflects, shapes, and interprets human experiences. However, it was initially introduced into art theory with negative implications, beginning with Plato's critiques. In the hierarchy of reality and truth, or rather their stratification in relation to the Theory of Forms, Plato designates art (poetry to be exact) as being twice removed from it, therefore condemning art as being mimetic, imitational and ill-equipped as a form of knowledge (Havelock 1963, 30). In the same vein, Rousseau talks critically about acting talent as passively inhabiting, or to use the term in Malabou's sense, receiving a character, as «counterfeiting oneself» with illusionistic, deceitful connotations and a loss of identity (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 35).

Contrary to their view, Nietzsche understands mimesis, even in its literal sense of imitation in art, as a productive process to the highest degree of activity, more in line of what Aristotle outlined in his views on the matter (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 101). Aristotle countered Plato's theory of mimesis with his own, which adopted a less critical stance towards art and allowed for a variety of approaches to representation, very effectively freeing the concept from its Platonic shackles. He notes the differences between drama and epic, where, for example, Homeric-type epics creatively mimic action through narration, while in drama, the characters themselves are active bearers of the action or the tragic conflict. This key distinction could be applied to painting, differentiating between a tendency toward descriptive illustration that passively "narrates" content (as much as such a thing is possible) on the one hand, and the suggestiveness and «the flexibility of paint itself» (Seed 2018, 7) on the other, where the particular and purposefully visible application of paint becomes the «active bearer» of meaning (Grlić 1974, 58).



But even with Aristotle's expansion of the concept which involves not just direct imitation but also capturing the essence of the subject matter, this double understanding of mimesis is already, albeit unknowingly, implied in Plato's work, as pointed out by Eric A. Havelock, depending on whether his critique is applied, on the one hand, to poetry, where it could describe an «act of composition which constitutes an act of creation», and on the other hand to a performance by an actor «who is a mouthpiece or a reciter» (1963, 22). This dichotomy between Plato's and Aristotle's views encapsulates the classical tension within the concept of mimesis: between imitation as deceit and passive reception, and imitation as a means of understanding and conveying meaning on a deeper level, which justifies Lawtoo's elegant classification of the paradox of mimesis (reflecting the paradoxical nature of plasticity), as being one of a *restricted* and a *general* nature (2017, 1214-1219). He explains restricted mimesis in terms of a «mass of spectators» who passively receive an identity of a model (2017, 1215). This has implications for the artistic, but also political context, where the «mass of spectators» becomes the Nietzschean *Masse*, «malleable, passive, and pathologically suggestible to authoritarian types» (Lawtoo 2017, 1217), or what Walter Lippmann deemed an uninformed public susceptible to manipulation and manufactured consent (1991, 248). Against this political,

restricted mimesis, Lawtoo proposes, via Malabou and Lacoue-Labarthe, the other side of the coin which concerns poetics, namely, general mimesis (2017, 1214). This offers a different type of mimesis that spawns from Aristotle's Physics, rather than Plato's Republic (better aligned with restricted mimesis). As the focus in this case is on the "plastic actor" (in our case a painter), general mimesis is well suited to the conceptual and technical position of the Disrupted Realist painter, whose painting practice is characterized by a «formative force», since they function as a «virtuoso mimetician who generates artistic characters not deprived of formal qualities» (Lawtoo 2017, 1214-1215).

As in the discussion on plasticity, it would be appropriate to turn to questions regarding the reception of art, now in the context of mimesis. In modern philosophical discourses, mimesis has been revisited and expanded beyond classical understanding. Philosophers like Adorno and Gadamer have explored how mimesis functions not just in terms of representation (to quote Schoenberg: «one paints a painting, not what it represents»; Adorno 2002, 4), but as a form of engagement with the world that involves a transformative process, where the viewer or reader is *present*, in the sense of a «genuine mode of participating», [9] rather than as a passive observer (Gadamer 2004, 121-122). Furthermore, semiotic theory about mimetic processes in art, as elaborated by David Blinder, aligns with Lawtoo's general mimesis, since it states that «pictorial resemblance rests primarily on the observer: The resemblance between pictures and reality is not given, but taken» (1986, 20), reflecting the transformation that turns «negative into positive, passivity into activity» (Lawtoo 2017, 1214). No matter the supposed objectivity of mimetic efforts, «it is a matter of how the viewer interprets the signs before him», says Blinder (1986, 20), allowing us to conclude that the act of viewing art, being present within the work, is both a creatively plastic and mimetic process. Let us now turn to a closer analysis of Disrupted Realism to further explore this theoretical framework outlined in this chapter.

[9] Gadamer applies the Greek concept of *theoria* to the type of spectator who «takes part» while being present (2004, 122).



## 3. Into the Figure: A Closer Study of Disrupted Realism

As we transition from the theoretically dense space of the "Interior of Discourse" to the more practical considerations in "Into the Figure", this chapter delves into the tangible manifestations of plasticity and mimesis within contemporary painting. Namely, this analysis will examine how Disrupted Realists – a group of artists connected through a network of exhibitions, art academies and other institutions of the artworld, — not only represent but actively question and reconstruct the very fabric of "realism". Special consideration will be given to Antonio López and Jenny Saville, who offer a generational foundation to the contemporary manifestation of this dialectical form of representation in painting, but others as well. Their work challenges traditional boundaries, blurring the lines between the abstract concepts discussed earlier and their concrete, visual realizations, thus offering a dynamic, evolving picture of contemporary aesthetics.

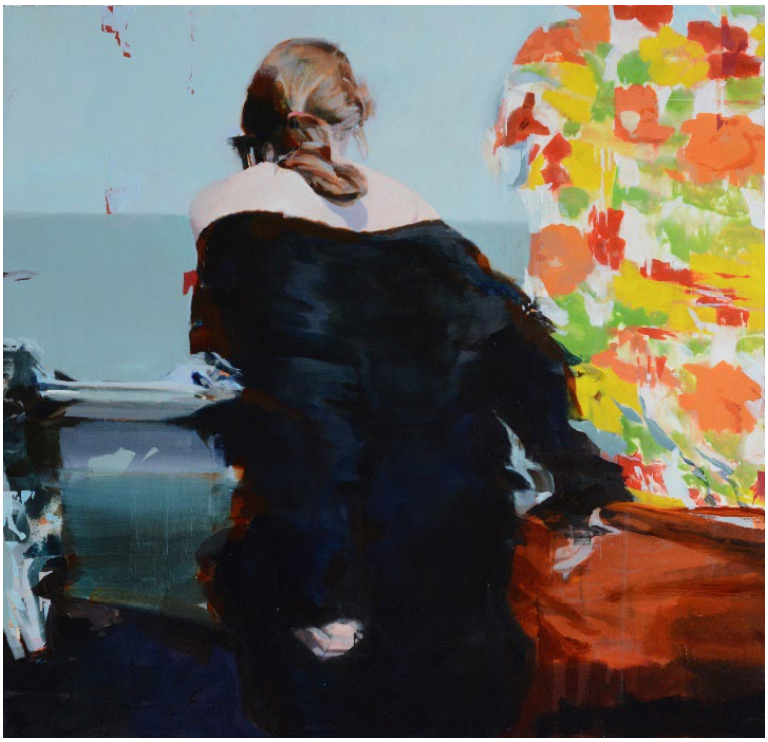
To begin, we will examine what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as a *figure-form*, which he explains using the work of Jackson Pollock. Although this connection to the painting process of Disrupted Realists might not be

immediately obvious, it is a compelling link worth exploring. Figure-form can be interpreted as a result of dialectic joining of *good form*, qualified as the Apollonian form (or rather, Pythagorean, Euclidian, Neoplatonic, rational, mathematical) and *anti-good form*, the Dionysian, "bad" form. An example of figure-form would require that «Apollo cooperate with Dionysus» (Lyotard 2011, 275), which is precisely why it is appropriate to offer examples of inherently contradictory Disrupted Realism. Any depiction of a landscape or cityscape by Antonio López (Exterior façade, summer, painted in 2020, for example [10]), or the human form by Ann Gale (Space Between [11]), Kai Samuels Davis (The Mirror, 2017), or Alex Kanevsky (Unstable Equilibrium [FIG. 1]), show more than obvious and purposeful disruptions of the pure mimetic illusion in the Platonic sense, and make a clear example of figure-form, as described above. The subject matter of these works is akin to plasticity since it refers to the «spontaneous organization of fragments» (Malabou 2010, 7), and lives in the plastic "space between" (in Ann Gale's case, literally) appearance and disappearance, inside and outside, active and passive, mimicking a «double structure of plasticity» which in turn «shadows the double structure of mimesis» (Lawtoo 2017, 1213). Alex Kanevsky's painting Unstable Equilibrium [fig. 1] is particularly interesting here (not least due to its title), for it contains the opposing forces of stillness and suggested movement that seem to rip the human figure between the dynamic energies of gestural expression of paint (sliding left and right, both thickly applied and in parts scraped off the painted surface, tearing the contour

[10] See: https://en.antoniolopezwe-boficial.com/obra-actual?pgid=l8ijv-2v2-4f892509-af11-4a2e-9d63-9c-d3e35cd11f

[11] See: https://paintingperceptions.com/interview-with-ann-gale/





**[FIG. 1]** Alex Kanevsky, *Unstable Equilibrium* (2018). Oil on wood, 91 x 91 cm
© Alex Kanevsky, courtesy of the artist.

of the figure), therefore also corresponding to this structure that «turns stable oppositions into destabilizing equivalences» (Lawtoo 2017, 1213).

On the topic of tearing the contour of the figure, another term developed by Lyotard might prove useful for this analysis. *Figure-image* refers to the «transgression of the contour», or the «abuse» (in other words: disruption) enacted on the «rules regulating the formation of the perceived object» (2011, 274). And although Kanevsky's painting certainly commits this "abuse" via the gestural expression of paint which is its «object of deconstruction», figure-image is best exemplified by Jenny Saville's series of paintings titled In the Realm of the Mothers [12] showing «the coexistence of several silhouettes» (2011, 274). This simultaneity erases the mathematical, Euclidian space of the Apollonian form, with bodies intertwined in such a way they «display several positions in a single place and time» (2011, 275). The loss of rational space and any hint of linear perspective signifies also the loss of a compositional focus, akin to the "allover" approach developed by the Abstract Expressionists. This leads (but never gets there, inhabiting instead the "space between") towards the «elimination of all recognizable figure» (2011, 275), which can be applied, to a varying degree, to all painting practices in Disrupted Realism.

[12] See: https://www.thebroad.org/art/jenny-saville/realm-mothers-ii

There is also a third approach that Lyotard develops which can be linked to Disrupted Realism, namely his description of the relationship between the *graphic* and the *figural* in the painting process, emphasizing how disruptions in form can expose underlying tensions and challenge conventional boundaries (2011, 212). When a painter adheres to conventions that the eye has grown accustomed to through copying of styles and repetition by previous generations, they engage with what is termed "graphic space". In such instances, «the figural power of a line», or a brushstroke, «can only break out, like a scandal» (2011, 212). This represents an unconventional approach that is disruptive, critical, transformative, and defamiliarizing. It slows down the viewing process, compelling us to actively engage and pause before the image. The figural departs from its element (conventions, habits), moving away from the «discourse of signification» (2011, 212). Such conventions, disrupted in this way, might be the restricted considerations of classical, Platonic mimesis (criticized via the disruptions), or the well-known historical styles of painting, even works themselves that are a part of our collective cultural consciousness. In the latter case, the Italian painter Nicola Samori serves as an illuminating example, and uses not nature as his subject, but a mimesis of nature (in a general sense), namely, the older forms of painting, such as tenebrism, often making a copy of a specific work that he then disrupts through an iconoclastic process, involving scraping and chemically altering the painted surface. This perfectly aligns with the notion that Disrupted Realism has a dialectical "original essence", meaning that any change or distortion, any disruption, however extreme, of the "original" structure of the picture (the copied work in Samori), becomes the structure. As Gadamer puts it, «it still remains itself» (2004, 120-121).

The next convention we can analyze is one of a geometric space, getting us back to the work of the Spanish painter Antonio López. Although the artist initially employs a very strictly organized and traditionally understood geometric space to the picture plane, especially in his monumental

cityscapes, but also the more intimate still lifes, the geometry (the drawing) is so precise and delicate that each instance of "error" (purposeful, of course), or disruption by an apparent unfinishedness (like the simultaneity of white contours outlining individual grapes – figure-image, or the breaks in continuity of the painted and drawn layers) further accentuates and intensifies his critique of that space, which is why its "original essence" was never purely geometric to begin with, but rather dialectical, plastic. Lyotard links the geometric space with the Quattrocento (2011, 196), which provided a conceptual backbone for western European painting until the avant-garde, cubism especially, offered the deconstruction of that rationality, unambiguity, closure, even progress (represented in the linear movement steered by orthogonal lines towards the Ineffable One). It is no coincidence that John Seed recognizes Cézanne and cubism as the precursors to Disrupted Realism, which shares their doubt in the purely rational and geometric ordering of the world (2018, 6). Cézanne is especially relevant here, since he too, like López, tried to imbue the world with a geometric structure, as a response to the ephemeral qualities of impressionism, to make «something solid and durable like the art of museums» (Becks-Malorny 2007, 70), but in so doing, produced the fundamental impossibility of such an accomplishment in the modern age. To demonstrate the treatment of space in late Cézanne, Lyotard compares his work to Masaccio's The Tribute Money (a different ordering of space than the one propagated by Alberti) and concludes that Cézanne makes us «see what seeing is», indicating a meta-perception of his subject (2011, 196-197). This is also an apt analysis of López's many curved cityscapes (like in the previously mentioned Exterior Façade, Summer), which embody «the deconstruction of the focal zone by the curved area in the periphery of the field of vision» (2011, 197). This also means, in López, that the more we turn our gaze towards the periphery of the painting, the higher the degree of unfinishedness we notice, emphasizing a central focal point. Contrary to the geometric understanding of space in painting, López, like Cézanne before him, imbues *what* is visible with *how* it is visible, and by including «distortions, overlappings, ambiguities, and discrepancies» (2011, 197), comments on the very nature of vision and the mimetic processes thereby involved. More appropriate in both cases, therefore, is Lyotard's notion of "plastic space", which particularly refers to a type of space in visual arts that is dynamic and fluid, resisting static interpretation and form. This space is not fixed but is continuously formed and deformed by the forces and movements within the artwork. Unlike the more traditional, geometrically structured spaces, this plastic space engages the viewer in a less predictable experience.

Even though López's work is closest to an identification with "hyperrealism" where he takes a position of an «unmoved and disinterested onlooker» (Diderot 1891, 7), we could argue that this is precisely the reason it contains the highest potential for an active critique of restricted mimesis. [13] To connect this argument with an astute observation by Lacoue-Labarthe, «the rule is always the same: the more it resembles, the more it differs», which designates López's process as one of a «formative mimesis, properly artistic and poietic» (1985, 29, 34). Inherent to this paradox is a logic of semblance, «articulated» in the plastic and mimetic space of «sharing of appearance and

[13] Malabou employs the term "homeostasis" as a way to describe the maintenance of the system, and "self-generation" to describe the simultaneous ability to change the system (2008, 74), which readily applies to the characterization of López's approach.

reality, of presence and of absence, of the same and of the other, or of the identity and difference» (1985, 29). This is not surprising since plasticity reflects a similar paradox in its simultaneous capacity of formation and explosion, emergence and annihilation, construction and deconstruction, which Malabou ascribes, in a typical interdisciplinary fashion, not only to the central nervous system, but the «dialectical nature of identity» as well (2008, 72, 74).

This "sharing" of contradictory notions, to which Lacoue-Labarthe ascribes the establishing of mimesis (1985, 29), is analogous to Malabou's material relation of the dual aspect – plastic and graphic – defined in terms of presence, on the one hand, and «that which breaches presence», on the other (2010, 11). She further elaborates this as the relation of «flesh, face, body» and «traces and marks on the flesh, face, or body» (2010, 11), which can be recontextualized in the domain of painting, more specifically, Jenny Saville's painting Trace. [14] The questions Malabou poses in her own analysis regarding the simultaneously "oppositional" and a "functional" relation between plastic and graphic elements, seem clearer here, considering what we have discussed in López's work. In Trace, Saville's depiction of unmistakenly robust and palpable flesh exemplifies the "presence" that Malabou describes. The sheer physicality and scale of the nude body, seen from behind and with the head and legs obscured (and still more than two meters tall), convey a potent sense of that which is "present", designating it in terms of time and space, and bringing the viewer into a confrontational encounter with the corporeal. The thing that breaches this plastic (in terms of the sculptural) presence is noted in the title of the painting, namely, the graphic traces and marks that show bodily discomfort, even trauma, illustrating clearly the "oppositional" relation between the plastic and the graphic. On the other hand, both elements form the same reality of the work and contribute "functionally" to its overall meaning and impact, embodied in the very materiality of the painting.

[14] See: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/saville-trace-l04740

Perhaps the quintessential example that inhabits the space between "Discourse" and "Figure", aligning closely with the theoretical framework discussed in this paper, is Jenny Saville's painting Propped. [15] The painting has a very significant relation to both plasticity, described above in terms of the plastic and the graphic processes of formation and deformation, and mimesis. Saville's use of text scraped across the flesh-like surface of the painting embodies this common dual capacity. The text – violent, direct, and integrally tied to the body it is inscribed upon – acts as both a graphic element that disrupts the presence of the body, and as a plastic element that molds the viewer's perception of the body and meaning of the work itself.

[15] See: https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/history-of-now-collection-david-teiger-l18623/lot.6.html

Along with this consideration of plasticity, Saville examines the active and passive aspects of mimesis by carving, with conviction, a quote by the French feminist writer Luce Irigaray from her essay When Our Lips Speak Together on the surface of the painting, which acts as the plastic, the body, but does so in reverse, making it only legible with a mirror:

> If we continue to speak in this sameness – speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads – disappear, make us disappear. (Irigaray 1980, 69)

The integration of Irigaray text points to the negative or passive aspects of mimesis and plasticity, which involve the reception of form and the potential for this reception to enforce conformity or invisibility. Irigaray's critique speaks to the way language and traditional forms of representation can erase or suppress female voices and identities, only present as a mimetic reflection of men, in the passive sense. Saville's reversal of the text suggests a refusal of this passive reception, an assertion of agency that resists the disappearance of these identities. By reversing the text, Saville disrupts the traditional mimetic function of painting thereby requiring the viewer to use a mirror to read it. This act turns the mimetic process into one of active, formative engagement, rather than passive reception. The viewer must physically and cognitively engage with the work to decipher its meaning, whether turned towards the painting to serve as a metaphorical mirror, or away from it in an act of self-reflection, illustrating a transformative mimesis that shifts from passive to active. [16]

[16] The importance of this shift was recognized by Nietzsche, who, even though he affirms stereotypical gender norms by aligning the active and the passive as the virile and the feminine, suggests that «to convert mimesis is to virilize it», abandoning «the form of submission and becoming truly creative» (Lacoue-Labarthe 1985, 101).

## 4. Final Reflections

In concluding the exploration of Disrupted Realism in contemporary painting, two central themes emerge that resonate deeply with the theoretical framework discussed throughout this paper. First, the painterly approach characteristic of Disrupted Realism exemplifies a profound plasticity, embodying the dual structure of both plasticity and mimesis in a distinctly dialectical manner. This approach not only demonstrates the artists' adeptness at navigating and expressing these complex philosophical concepts, but also highlights an inherent contradiction within the very act of representational painting. As these artists strive toward an objective representation of reality, for which the work of Antonio López makes the clearest case, they simultaneously underscore the inherent impossibility of such an endeavor, thereby sowing doubt about the feasibility of truly objective representation.

Furthermore, this dialectical tension within Disrupted Realism brings us full circle to Hegel's conception of plasticity, which extends beyond the confines of the plastic arts to encompass the formation of what might be termed a «plastic subject» (Lawtoo 2017, 1205). This subject, much like the art it creates and interprets, is continually shaped and reshaped, reflecting a dynamic process of becoming, rather than a static state of being. In essence, the practice of Disrupted Realism does not merely mimic the world, but interrogates and transforms it, engaging viewers in a deeper contemplation of what it means to perceive the world and represent the human experience.

Following Malabou's analysis of the neuronal self, we can recognize an analogy to the painting processes of the Disrupted Realists and conclude they are «structured by a dialectical play of the emergence and annihilation of form» (2008, 72). In this analogy, these disruptions would represent

the «creative bursts that progressively transform nature into freedom» and realism would represent «nature» transformed into «freedom» (2008, 74). Encapsulating this sense of freedom in painting, Alex Kanevsky describes a working atmosphere such that a painting is always in danger of «crashing and burning» (Seed 2018, 10), which is, again, comparable to the concept of plasticity, since it «signifies the disruption and deflagration of presence, the "explosive side of subjectivity"» (Malabou 2010, 9).

By examining the works of Disrupted Realism through this philosophical lens, we gain a richer understanding of not only the artworks themselves, but also of the broader implications for how art interacts with and informs our perception of the world. In this process, Disrupted Realism serves as a powerful artistic embodiment of philosophical explorations of plasticity and mimesis, illustrating the vibrant interplay between theory and practice, conceptual and visual – discourse and figure.

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