

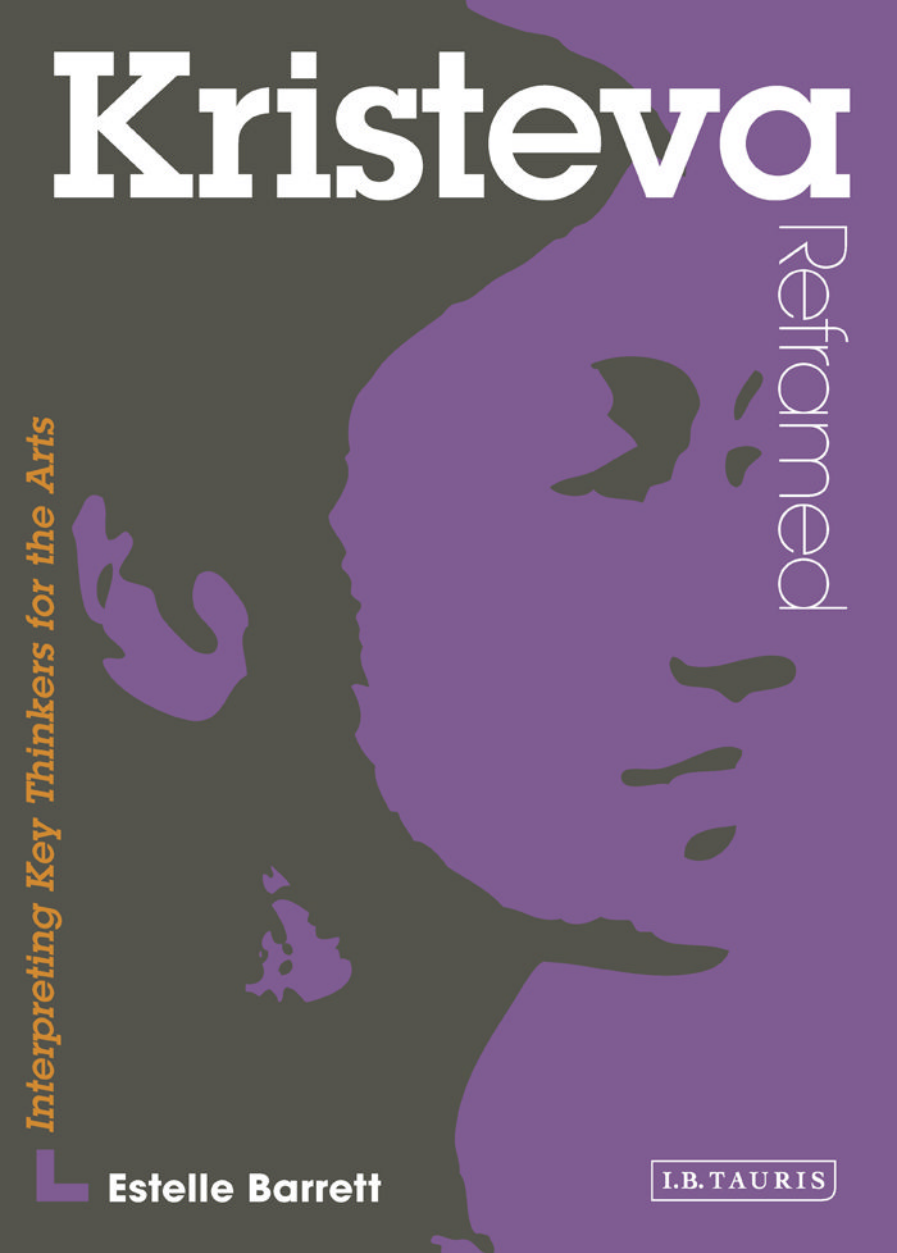
Kristeva

Reframed

Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts

Estelle Barrett

I.B. TAURIS



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I.B. TAURIS

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Introduction

In a world immersed in readymade images, consumer advertising and the bureaucratized language of institutions, Kristeva's work explains how art or aesthetic experience is one of the few means by which we can generate and access images that are linked to our vital and lived experiences and that have the capacity to engender personal, political and social renewal. For Kristeva art or aesthetic experience is a *practice* that constitutes both a subject (a sense of self), as well as an object that has the power to transform meaning and consciousness. She views the production of a work of art as continuous with the production of the life of the individual, as a dynamic and performative process that moves between and across embodied experience, biological processes and social and institutional discourses.

This book will examine some of the major ideas in Kristeva's work to demonstrate how her view of language and aesthetic experience has specific relevance for elucidating visual practices, including painting, photography and film. Kristeva's emphasis on *practice* and *process* demonstrates how art itself provides us with the means for discovering and naming the knowledge it produces. In order to grasp this, we need to engage closely with key concepts in her work and then examine how they can be put to use by art makers, art viewers and others who are interested in studying the creative process and the relationship between the artist and artwork, the art object and audiences of art.

In Kristevan thought, creative production is not an application of theory, but allows practice to enter into a dialogue with theory

and to question theory. Her work challenges conventional binaries set up between theory and practice by demonstrating how theory can be a creative practice in its own right and is an inseparable aspect of practice. Schooled in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, Marxism and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva also took up clinical practice in psychoanalysis alongside her work as an academic at the University of Paris VII. In her later work, there is a shift from an application of psychoanalytical theory as a means of illuminating the artistic process to one in which psychoanalysis as *practice* is presented as a transformative process that has parallels with aesthetic experience. Drawing on her clinical experience of the psychoanalytical process, Kristeva reveals that both art and the 'talking cure' involves what she calls 'amatory discourse', a discourse that connects embodied experience, affects and emotions in ways that expand the capacity of language to articulate meanings that lie beneath established codes and the customary use of language. Her psychoanalytical insights point to the necessity of linking artistic production and the knowledge it uncovers with social and institutional discourses through new modes of interpretation. Her conceptualisation of practice and interpretive method 'semanalysis', provide the artist and critic with conceptual tools for articulating the 'new' and the revolutionary in art.

So where should we begin with a reframing of Kristeva in ways that will open up her work for arts students, audiences and others who may be bewildered by the sheer volume and complexity of her output? If selection becomes the first necessity, on what basis might such a selection be made? From many years of teaching and working with artists, it has become evident to me that concepts and ideas, like tools, are only worth acquiring if they have some use-value. This notion underpins much of the content and the trajectory taken in this book. It has also prompted a number of questions that provide a map for embarking on the journey: what aspects of Kristeva's work are most relevant to artists? How does

her work illuminate practice and the creative process? In what ways can Kristeva's ideas be applied in interpreting artworks? How does her work illuminate the relationships that exist between artist and art object, between artists, artworks and audiences, and between art and knowledge? Finally, what might addressing these questions reveal about the role and function of art in contemporary society?

Accompanying my concern for relevance has been the imperative to present core themes of Kristeva's oeuvre that elaborate the distinction between Kristevan aesthetics and traditional conceptions of aesthetics that continue to influence the practice, teaching and interpretation of art. Central to this distinction is Kristeva's account of the dual nature of language, the relationship between body and mind, reason and emotion, and between biological and social processes. The language of art is the residue of our lived and sensory encounters with objects and ideas, and as such it has specific and embodied value as opposed to value that conforms to academic principles and predetermined standards of taste. These themes, to which I will now turn, inform the broader approach taken in my reframing of Kristeva in this book.

Drawing mainly on ideas from *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), Chapter 1 will examine Kristeva's account of the materiality of language and her analysis of literary practice to explain two mutual but irreducible features of language, the semiotic and the symbolic. Her theorisation of the double articulation of language emphasises how subjectivity or a sense of self is perpetually renewed through an embodied engagement with language, an engagement that involves both conscious and unconscious processes. In creative practice, this heterogeneous process articulates the logic of practice that leads to the transgression of established codes and a rupturing of meaning to produce revolutionary discourse. Kristeva's account of the subjective and heterogeneous processes at work in textual practice will

be applied to a consideration of its equivalent articulation in visual language in the work of Vincent van Gogh and Pablo Picasso, among others, contributed to the Modernist revolution in painting.

Chapter 2 examines the relationship between practice, experience and interpretation. It will focus on Kristeva's critique of structuralism and linguistics-based, or traditional, semiotics. She contends that such approaches limit interpretation to meanings that fall within the rules of the system, rather than those aspects that are concerned with lived experience, play, pleasure and desire. In doing so, such methods fail to seek out or articulate 'mutant' or revolutionary elements in practice. Kristeva points out that there is a need for a mode of analysis that looks for meanings that fall beyond or exceed the rules of a semiotic system. I will apply her interpretive method, *semanalysis*, to map these supplementary meanings, and transgressive elements that produce them, in the work of two feminist artists, Alison Rowley and Linda Banazis.

The third chapter will turn to affect, a core theme in her work and one that is central to her understanding of the creative process and aesthetic experience. Kristeva theorises affect as a structuring of psychic space that through creative practice attributes value and valency to experience and is transferred to the audience via artworks. Creative practice involves a grafting of affect to the symbolic so that language can take on renewed meaning. In Western societies where there is a growing sense of meaninglessness and a greater incidence of depression, Kristeva suggests that art remains one of the few means of restoring psychic space, a relation to self, and connection with others. In the two later works of her 1980s trilogy, *Tales of Love* (1987) and *Black Sun* (1989), melancholia and love emerge as two sides of psychic functioning that constitute the subject's relation to language, to self and to the social other. In this chapter, I will illustrate this relationship and its significance for understanding

aesthetic experience by applying Kristeva's thinking on melancholia and love to a reading of the work of animation artist Van Sowerine.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982) Kristeva examines the complex notion of abjection variously described as: a physiological functioning that maintains the boundaries between mother and child before birth; a primary process that is fundamental to the emergence of language and the development of the ego; a revulsion that serves to maintain the borders between the subject and that which threatens life; primal fear. Religious rites and rituals serve the function of mediating abjection; this mediation is also motivated by the need to maintain the separation between the sexes, prohibition of incest and by extension the general system of prohibitions around which societies are organised. Because the first object to be abjected is the mother, abjection is ambiguous in that it exerts forces of attraction and repulsion that prevail throughout a person's life. This perhaps explains why children are fascinated by frightening stories and why some of us enjoy horror films and gruesome images. Chapter 4 traces the trajectory of Kristeva's thought on abjection to her account of the relationship between abjection and transgression in art. In her recounting of this relationship, Kristeva focuses on the creative process and the site of *production*. Following my commentary on her theorisation of abjection, I will consider shifting the focus on abjection from the site of the production of art to the site of *reception*, opening up possibilities for a different kind of critique related to audience response. In particular, I will examine the way in which abjection gives rise to negative affect – fear, loathing and disgust – and how this is played out in the viewing experience. Bill Henson's 1994–5 Venice Biennale series will be the focus of this analysis and discussion.

In the final chapter I will return to the theme of revolution and revolt to examine how Kristeva's ideas might provide artists with a framework for articulating creative arts research as the

production of knowledge. This will involve revisiting aspects of Kristeva's thinking on experience-in-practice in the light of her more recent reflections on revolutionary practice in *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* (2000). If, as Kristeva argues, art has become one of the few means through which revolt and renewal can occur in contemporary society, it seems appropriate to turn to her work to articulate a rationale and argument for claiming a place for practice as research within the broader research arena. Kristeva's work constitutes both an implicit and explicit critique of science, allowing us to conceive of artistic research as an alternative and performative production of new knowledge. My discussion of the research project completed by Australian photographer Wendy Beatty in 2004 is a reflection on how Kristeva's work can be applied to advance this view.

The definitions in the glossary at the end of this book carry inflections or examples that are closely related to the ideas discussed within and across various chapters. I trust that this will facilitate a smooth passage through this reframing of aspects of Kristeva's thought.

Chapter 1

Language as material process

Kristeva's explanation of the relationship between language and the body is fundamental to understanding language as a material process and art as revolutionary practice. As will be demonstrated, her ideas, initially drawn from the analysis of literary practice, can be extended to visual language. Though ultimately irreducible to each other, these means of communication operate at least in part through socially agreed codes. This chapter will focus on Kristeva's theory of language and her account of art as revolutionary practice that involves transgressing rules and codes of language and the prohibitions they articulate.

Language cannot be set apart from the speaking subject and/or the subject who hears or receives language. In other words, language can only have meaning insofar as it articulates with living beings, and hence with the material and biological processes that support the lives of such beings. It becomes clear, then, that there is something prior to language that attributes value and human valency to meaning and knowledge. In Western society, a world that is saturated with visual and verbal communication, Kristeva observes that there is a growing sense of meaninglessness, incidence of depression and absence of affirmation of social bonds. She views this crisis of subjectivity as an outcome of the way in which bureaucratic organisation depersonalises our everyday practices and interactions and how institutional discourses are increasingly removed from our lived experiences. In such a world, according to Kristeva, psychoanalysis and art are

among the few means by which the symbolic world may be reconnected with the living body, our vital biological and psychic processes. Psychoanalytical theory provides the means for unravelling the complex relationship between body and mind and individual and society as a dynamic process of how we come to make meaning. Kristeva shows that as *practice*, psychoanalysis has some fundamental parallels with artistic practices. Both involve processes of revolution and renewal. The work of psychoanalysis and art is concerned with challenging institutional and other discourses that have become divorced from our vital feelings and therefore undermine our capacities for self-relation, relations with others and possibilities or motivations for agency. Initially, Kristeva looks to literature – creative textual practice – to explain how such practice involves reconnecting the symbolic and the semiotic dimensions of language. These key terms refer to what Kristeva has theorised as the heterogeneous dimension of language – that is to say, language as it signifies (the communicative function of language) and language as it is related to material or biological processes that are closely implicated in affect and emotion. In this chapter, I will explore how these and related concepts allow us to understand the revolution in Modernist art.

Central to Kristeva's thought is the notion of the subject or self as a living and constantly evolving process. How does a feeling and thinking subject come to be? What underpins this most creative of all processes and how is this related to art or aesthetic experience? Something occurs or lies behind language and meaning that must be acknowledged if we are to arrive at an explanation. In her work, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) Kristeva turns to the infant's relationship with its mother prior to birth, and to its experience before language, in order show that the subject and language *emerge* from material processes; that material process is continuous with the life of the subject and has a dialogic relationship with language even after the child has

separated from the mother and has developed the capacity for speech: the capacity to be a speaking subject.

The semiotic and the symbolic

The mother's body is not a static container, but one that is experienced primarily as sound – voice rhythm, and prosody. This space or site of interactions and exchanges gives rise to what Kristeva calls the semiotic 'chora', which registers the first imprints of experience and is a rudimentary signal of language that is to follow. The chora is an articulation of bodily drives, energy charges and psychical marks which constitute a non-expressive totality, one that does not give way to form, but is known through its *effects*. The chora can be related to the dynamism of the body constantly in motion and perpetually seeking to maximise the capacities of the living organism. It is a complex of pulsations – intensities, tensions and release of tensions that occur through interactions with what lies beyond or outside the living system. Operations of the chora that precede the acquisition of language organise pre-verbal space according to logical categories that precede and transcend language. These operations or semiotic functions which are constituted through biological drives and energy discharges, initially oriented around the mother's body, persist as an asymbolic modality that governs the connections between the body and the 'other' throughout the life of the subject. They articulate a continuum between the body and external objects and between the body and language (Kristeva 1984: 27). Since the body is necessarily implicated in our encounter with language, we may now understand the 'semiotic' as an alternative 'code' of language, a 'bodily knowing' that nonetheless implicates itself in relays of meaning that are manifested in social relations.

We can appreciate the effects of this non-discursive or pre-linguistic dimension by first considering interactions between the newly born infant and the mother. A mother's smile or withdrawal of attention can be felt or apprehended by the infant without

being able to be placed in linguistic categories or related to anything else. The baby's response of crying or laughter sets up a series of interactions and effects both within the baby's body and the child's physical and social environment. New meanings and behaviours (practices) emerge through a combination of non-verbal events – the child's physical responses *and* parental responses of nurturing which involve both linguistically or socially mediated behaviour (accepted mothering practices) and non-verbal and less mediated responses that might vary according to the pitch and intensity of the child's crying. Let us take this explanation a step further and relate it to a child who has some command of language. Where the mother chooses to sing a lullaby to the child, the words of the song communicate shared social meaning: 'Go to sleep little child' constitutes the symbolic; the rhythm, tones and other auditory elements of the mother's actual singing of the song, on the other hand, articulate the semiotic dimension. Now, imagine the mother reading the words of the song in a monotone instead of singing it with all the soothing modulations that would accompany her performance. This would be less likely to have any effect on the child. Alternatively, delivering the words as a loud and angry command would certainly have an effect. In this scenario the non-verbal dimension of the interaction – loudness and frequency of crying, tone and timbre of mother's voice, for example – would articulate what Kristeva would term the 'semiotic'. In the language of art, the semiotic emerges in more varied and complex forms as the result of the artist's manipulation of rhetorical codes.

The semiotic is made up of articulatory or phonetic effects that shift the language system back towards the drive-governed basis of sound production. The choice and sequencing of words, repetition, particular combinations and sounds that operate independently of the communicative function of language also constitute the semiotic function, a function which has the capacity to multiply the possible meanings of an utterance or text. In

visual language, the semiotic is made up of articulatory effects that shift the system back to the drive-governed basis of *visual* production. This functioning is related, for example, to sensations and affects evoked by colour, visual marks and formal elements that operate independently of figuration or iconicity.

What is predominantly at work here is the way in which drive or bodily impulses implicated in the performance of verbal and visual language result in variations and multiplicity of meanings that may be produced. The drives or impulses articulated by the semiotic always operate through and in language. In creative practice, elements of the genotext or semiotic disposition of language indicates a shift in the speaking subject and a capacity for play and pleasure that refuses total constraint by the symbolic law. The semiotic disposition establishes a relational functioning between the signifying code (the phenotext) and the fragmented or drive-ridden body of the speaking (and hearing/seeing) subject. This relational functioning supposes a notion of a 'frontier' and the transgression of a frontier. Practice can thus be understood as the acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of that law for the purpose of renovating it (Kristeva 1986a: 29). Leon S. Roudiez suggests that the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic can be understood in terms of the texture of a piece of cloth interwoven from two different threads. Those that are spun by bodily drives and sensation relate to the semiotic disposition of language or what is also known as the 'genotext'. Certain combinations of letters, particular sounds (think of alliteration and onomatopoeia in poetry) are also indicative of the genotext irrespective of the meanings of the words. Those elements of language that emerge from societal cultural constraints and grammatical and other rules articulate the symbolic disposition or what is referred to as the 'phenotext' (Roudiez 1984: 5). What makes language different to the static woven cloth is that language is fluid and constantly shifting as a result of individual, social and historical usage.

Two important points related to Kristeva's work should be taken from this. The first is that for language to have any meaning or effect on us at all, it has to be spoken and/or 'heard' – it has to be put into *process*. Secondly, this putting-into-process of language must connect with our biological processes, affects and feelings in a vital way in order for language to take on particular meanings or to *affect* us. When the semiotic and the symbolic are insufficiently connected, language, communication, and hence social bonds, lose meaning and value. From this we can begin to understand how the *subject* and *practice* are crucial to Kristeva's account of language as material process. Creative practice or 'performance' of language maintains the link between the semiotic and the symbolic, between language and our lived and situated experiences.

If the semiotic and the symbolic are two dimensions of language and subjectivity that need to be connected to make self-relation and relation with objects in the world and social others possible, does this imply any possibility of the two becoming disconnected? This is not possible in an absolute sense, since the notion of the materiality of language presupposes a living (material-biological) subject of language. Kristeva's thinking, however, allows us to posit the idea of a *tendential* severance between the two. In contemporary life much of the language we encounter, the techno-speak and bureaucratised language of institutions has increasingly become abstracted from the particularities of lived experiences, drained of emotional valency. Kristeva contends that there is a tendency towards a further separation of the semiotic and the symbolic in conditions where modern institutions and discourse fail to provide everyday social and symbolic sites for practices that maintain an adequate connection of the semiotic and symbolic (Beardsworth 2004: 14).

The hypothetical positing of the isolation of the semiotic is necessary in order to explain material processes that are prior to language. It allows Kristeva to elaborate how the semiotic chora persists as motility or negativity that has the capacity to

threaten the symbolic and subvert established rules and meanings. Although the semiotic chora is pre-linguistic, its effects can only be found at the symbolic level as a heterogeneous contradiction of the symbolic. Its workings are an indication of the instability of subjectivity and the way in which the body as material process operates through and in language as a subversive and revolutionary force.

What does this have to do with art? In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva draws on the work of a number of French symbolist poets, including Mallarmé and Baudelaire, in order to demonstrate why and how the semiotic dimension of language operates as the basis for the critique and renewal of discourse. Kristeva's account of this in relation to poetry and literature can be extended to the visual arts as will be seen in a consideration of Modernist painting. But before we proceed to this, it is necessary to understand, in more specific detail, the material processes that underpin creative textual practice.

Negativity, rejection and *signifiance*

Kristeva's analysis of particular types of literature reveals a signifying process that results from a crisis of social structures and capitalist discourses, and what she refers to as their ideological, coercive and necrophilic manifestations (Kristeva 1984: 15). Art as practice involves a confrontation between and across unconscious subjective forces and social relations, a kind of productive violence that shatters established discourse and in doing so changes the status of the subject, its relation to the body, to others and to objects (Kristeva 1982: 15). Art is different to psychoanalytic practice because the addressor and addressee are not just part of a familial or social structure, but of language itself. Kristeva contends, however, that a psychoanalytic understanding of the drives provides a means of explaining the negativity that is repressed by bourgeois society and its discourses.

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