A. INTRODUCTION

In conversation with Angela Breidbach, South African artist and film-maker, William Kentridge, speaks about his early interest in art:

I come from a very logical and rational family. My father is a lawyer. I had to establish myself in the world as not just being his son, his child. I had to find a way of arriving at knowledge that was not subject to cross-examination, not subject to legal reasoning.²

Kentridge presents artistic and legal practices as being entirely different to each other, yet the creative process of making a drawing, for Kentridge, involves a movement that is partly “projection” and partly “reception” of an emergent image – it has to do with “what you recognize as the drawing proceeds.”³ This act of projection, reception, and hence of recognition, also applies to the event of viewing a drawing, and it is in this context that I discuss the implications of “drawing the line” in all its ambiguity. Drawing a line in the literal sense – as a graphic artist would – is a gesture that may not be subject

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¹ Sincere thanks to Peter Fitzpatrick, Stephen Clarkson, and the editors of this volume for insightful comments on the draft of this chapter.
³ Ibid.
to legal reasoning (to use Kentridge’s phrasing), but at the same time, in the drawing’s address to those who view it, the artwork depends upon and anticipates a ground of recognition. It thus sets perimeters to a potential field of response. With this in mind, the literal act of drawing a line can be understood as beginning to approach the metaphorical meaning of the phrase, to draw the line – that is, “to fix a limit or boundary” (OED). Are there ways of understanding art’s operative space in relation to those of law and politics, and further, what part do the arts play in a time of reconciliation? These are my central preoccupations.

In this chapter I explore the ethical implications that arise in the artist’s attempt to redraw the lines of South Africa’s post-apartheid cultural and political landscapes. In reconfiguring the lines that trace out patterns of meaning and paths of communication, the arts play a transformative role in calibrating the socio-political space of reconciliation. The chapter thus raises the question of what a post-apartheid aesthetic might entail. In the course of my discussion I make particular reference to the work of contemporary South African artist, Willem Boshoff. My argument is structured by what I see as a convergence of two of Derrida’s essays, written nearly thirty years apart: “Force and Signification” (first published in French in 1963) and “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” (1990; complete English version, 2001). The subtext throughout the chapter is the thought that the idiom of the

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4 Most of Boshoff’s artworks can be viewed on his website: www.willemboshoff.com. For an insightful reading of Boshoff’s oeuvre, see Ivan Vladislavić, Willem Boshoff (Johannesburg: David Krut: 2005).


arts constitutes lines of force that inaugurate meaning, precipitating at each turn the possibility of a future “we.”

B. DRAWING THE LINE:

LAW AND THE GEOMETRY OF ADDRESS

The first part of Derrida’s “Force of Law” was read at a colloquium - “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice” – held at the Cardozo Law School in 1989. Here are the opening sentences: “C’est pour moi un devoir, je dois m’adresser à vous en anglais. This is for me a duty, I must address myself to you in English.” This “question of language and idiom,” far from being a playful diversion from the more serious business of justice and the law, Derrida tells us, “will doubtless be at the heart of what I propose for discussion tonight.” The issue of the language spoken at the event of the Cardozo conference is inextricably bound up in its theme. English is the language of the majority, but, “through hospitality, it grants speech to the stranger or foreigner.” This is a law “of which it is hard to say whether it is a rule of decorum, politeness, the law of the strongest [la loi du plus fort], or the equitable law [lo] of democracy.” Further, Derrida goes on to say, “I must be capable, up to a certain point, of understanding the contract and the conditions of the law [lo] – that is to say, of at least minimally appropriating to myself your language.” Derrida’s address itself, then, runs along the lines of contract law, and through his response to the request that he address the

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7 Derrida, “Force of Law”, p. 231.
problem, in English, of “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice,” the entire speech event brings into force an exacting geometry:

Tonight, I have agreed by contract to “address,” in English, a problem, that is to say, to go straight toward it and straight toward you, thematically and without detour, in addressing myself to you in your language. In between the law or right [droit], the rectitude of address, direction and straightforwardness [droiture], one should find a direct line of communication and find oneself on the right track.10

But deconstruction has the reputation of being indirect, oblique, of taking the detour, of never quite arriving, and Derrida’s primary philosophical medium is French, not English. By the time of his address, an act of translation, a linguistic detour, has already taken place. The theme of justice that Derrida is asked to speak about is also not as straightforward as the interlocutionary geometry demands – and it too is caught up in the “anguishing gravity of this problem of language.”11 At a primary level (there are other levels, more of which later), “the violence of an injustice has begun when all the members [partenaires] of a community do not share, through and through, the same idiom.”12 It is thus that the question of idiom – not only in the sense of a national language, but also in the sense of nuanced and local inflections – exposes the potential injustices of the linguistic contractual law as its vectors cut across from one to another, over fault-lines in the political

10 Derrida, “Force of Law”, p. 243-244.
terrain. Even an oblique line, as Derrida points out in a different essay, runs the risk of insensitivity to the nuances of a dialogic exchange:

What one would have to criticize in the oblique, today, is without doubt the geometrical figure, the compromise still made with the primitiveness of the plane, the line, the angle, the diagonal, and thus of the right angle between the vertical and the horizontal. The oblique remains the choice of a strategy that is still crude, obliged to ward off what is most urgent, a geometric calculus for diverting as quickly as possible both the frontal approach and the straight line: presumed to be the shortest path from the one to another. Even in its rhetorical form and in the figure of figure that is called *oratio obliqua*, this displacement still appears too direct, linear, in short, economic, in complicity with the diagonal arc.¹³

The question of language in relation to the law, and in relation to the possibility of justice and reconciliation, could hardly be more urgent in South Africa, a country with eleven official languages: Sesotho, Sesotho sa Leboa, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Afrikaans and English. There are other “unofficial” languages too (Braille, for example), and still others that are no longer spoken or that are on the brink of extinction: San, Khoisan, Khoehoen, Nama, Griqua … The question of language in South Africa has been at the core of some of the most brutal staging of apartheid’s institutional force. The 1976 Soweto uprising, for

example – which would lead to the deaths of hundreds of students – was a protest against the Bantu Education Department’s ruling that Afrikaans should hold equal status with English as a medium of instruction in African schools. Willem Boshoff, a leading contemporary South African visual and conceptual artist, uses language as his medium. Given the context of South Africa’s infamous language policy under apartheid, and its current recognition of eleven official languages, Boshoff’s work has political – and ethical – ramifications, as much of the discussion to follow in this chapter hopes to demonstrate.

Boshoff’s art defies ready categorization; it bears family resemblances to conceptual art, to sculpture and to concrete poetry. Taken together, his works play out a series of implacable tensions – tensions between system and anarchy, sense and non(-)sense, concept and per erect. A preoccupation with the material and performative aspects of language informs his work in a philosophically radical way, to the extent that the uncertain play between what is seen and what is read in each encounter with a Boshoff piece seems to re-enact a primal awareness of inchoate meaning as it surfaces in writing and runs along the purposive lines of graphic inscription. Boshoff is preoccupied with the very earliest meaningful marks. A grapheme’s being understood as meaningful or not sets the perimeter to the work’s “responsive range.”14 It draws the line between those who are included or excluded from that mark’s address, which has momentous socio-political implications.

Fitzpatrick speaks of the “spatial locating of law’s range via the obliging etymology of ‘nomos.’” He goes on to cite Cornelia Vismann’s essay, “Starting from scratch: Concepts of Order in No Man’s Land,” where she describes the “initial scene of the law.”

The primordial scene of the nomos opens with a drawing of a line in the soil. This very act initiates a specific concept of law, which derives order from the notion of space. The plough draws lines – furrows in the field – to mark the space of one’s own. As such, as ownership, the demarcating plough touches the juridical sphere ... The primordial act as described here brings together land and law, cultivation and order, space and nomos.

Boshoff, through his artworks, explores the effects of the way in which meaning-bearing signs mark out the space of one’s own. Writing calls readers at circumscribed socio-political sites, and Boshoff, in his language artworks, draws attention to those different places within the field of address that the artwork instantiates in relation to its viewers. Many of Boshoff’s works are three-dimensional dictionaries: sequences of words in wood, sand or stone, with definitions or translations that prescribe the limits to the meanings of the words, but in a way that also serves as a disconcerting reminder of the linguistic boundaries that actively divide speakers within the polis. One such

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work is a huge mural, *Abamfusa Lawula – The Purple Shall Govern* (1997, 3660 mm x 2440mm, printed text on paper, masonite and wood). Printed along the length of the wall in large, bold, letters, are the words of the rhythmic protest chants performed with such energy and urgency during the apartheid years. Between the lines, in a much smaller script, one can read the English translations of the songs. Viewers who know an indigenous African language can read the work from a distance, but those who do not will find themselves up against the wall, forced to read between the lines to gain some understanding of the writing that was always on the wall in the apartheid era. *Abamfusa Lawula* thus actively positions its addressees; sites of response are determined by different lengths in the linguistic lines of address that the work throws out to those variously responsive to its call. The work dramatizes the political and legal distances that “not-speaking-your-language” effects. Of course, under apartheid, protest songs were banned by law, and would not have been seen in writing, let alone in translation. *Abamfusa Lawula*, in positioning its viewers apart, constitutes a theatrical re-enactment of *apartheid* – in unambiguously spatial terms. In a physical way it draws attention to the enforced legal segregation and political distance between people as they fall under apartheid law’s jurisdiction.

C. CROSSING THE LINE:

JUSTICE AND THE ART OF RECONCILIATION
One of the meanings of “line” is “the trace of a moving point” (OED), and it is within the context of an idea of movement that I now turn to a consideration of justice and the art of reconciliation. Derrida’s reflections on the “force of law” are pertinent to my discussion. In its multivalency, “force” exposes Derrida’s conception of the aporetic relation between justice and the law, and between what he terms the founding and preserving violence of the law. The titular prominence given to “force” in both “Force and Signification” and “Force of Law” invites me to bring about a convergence of questions of law and of signification – which in this chapter I associate with literary signification and signification in the visual arts. The operative space of reconciliation, I argue, is at this point of convergence.

Firstly, it is necessary to consider the way in which “force” exposes an aporetic relation between justice and the law. On the one hand, for Derrida, “force” is not exterior to the law, and neither is justice: force is “essentially implied in the very concept of justice as law, of justice as it becomes law, of the law as law.”18 But this is not to say that justice is absolutely subsumed within the law: so that, on the other hand, Derrida is insistent that he “reserve the possibility of a justice, indeed of a law [loi] that not only exceeds or contradicts law but also, perhaps, has no relation to law.”19 Thus, “Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable.”20 As I have already begun to suggest, justice and reconciliation require that the participants speak a mutually shared language, but this question of language

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19 Ibid.
20 Derrida, “Force of Law”, p. 244.
in itself circles back on the aporia of justice and the law, on the force that justice-as-law demands:

To address oneself to the other in the language of the other is both the condition of all possible justice, it seems, but, in all rigor, it appears not only impossible (since I cannot speak the language of the other except to the extent that I appropriate it and assimilate it according to the law [\(\text{loi}\) of an implicit third) but even excluded by justice as law, inasmuch as justice as law seems to imply an element of universality, the appeal to a third party who suspends the unilaterality or singularity of the idioms.\(^{21}\)

It seems to me that the potential for reconciliation arises in this linguistic force-field between justice and the law, where the singular idioms surface in what is universally readable, even in the very attempt to meet the singular idiom of the other. Reconciliation demands that one engage the possibility of stepping beyond the limits of one’s own given discourse (let alone one’s singularity), which, in itself, involves a measure of violence. The effects of this step beyond may not be predictable or calculable, but at the same time, it needs to be readable by those towards whom a reconciliatory gesture is made, or from whom it is sought. This \textit{fiat} of giving oneself over to the discourse of the other is prior to any subsumptive “theme” or “message” that might be communicated, so that (as Derrida points out in \textit{On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}): “Even if I say ‘I do not forgive you’ to

\(^{21}\) Derrida, “Force of Law”, p. 245.
someone who asks my forgiveness, but whom I understand and who understands me, then a process of reconciliation has begun; the third has intervened.”

This “process of reconciliation” is not safely situated within the bounds of a received grammar; it requires a crossing of the line, a breach with the directive geometry of the law, which opens onto questions of justice, and an ethics of address and response: “And so we have already, in the fact that I speak the language of the other and break with mine, in the fact that I give myself up to the other, a singular mixture of force, justesse and justice.”

This “break” with one’s own idiom is something that the poet, Paul Celan, understands as being integral to the creation of and response to a work of art; art’s encounters thus have an ethical resonance. The one “whose eyes and mind are occupied with art … forgets about himself. Art makes for distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road.” But this is not to say that art follows a clearly marked path to a predetermined destination: “perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself. Though where? in which place? how? as what? This would mean art is the distance poetry must cover … La poésie, elle aussi, brûle nos étapes,” which is to say that art breaks the path, it is “language actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation which, however, remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens.”

23 Derrida, “Force of Law”, p. 244.
26 Celan, “The Meridian”, p. 49, my emphasis.
the “direction” in which it travels, cannot be mathematically determined by a set of a priori spatial and temporal co-ordinates:

The poem is lonely. It is lonely and en route. Its author stays with it.

Does this very fact not place the poem already here, at its inception, in the encounter, in the mystery of encounter? ²⁷

My discussion is gradually bringing about a convergence of two lines of force: the force of law, and the force of art. I do not wish to make a crude claim that law and art operate in exactly the same way, but the movement of convergence is towards this point: both the force of law and the force of art reach out for the creation of a new semantic articulation. In speaking about reconciliation I find myself at this chiasmatic intersection, which is neither exclusively in the realm of law, nor in that of the political. ²⁸ Both law (especially constitutional law) and the politics of reconciliation raise the possibility of a reconstituted future community within the fields of affect that they instantiate. And this instantiation of new fields of affect is surely one source of motivation for art.

What is at stake in the act of creating meaning in the arts? For Celan (as we have seen), the place of art is in the mystery of an encounter that breaks, rather than follows new paths of meaning. In other words, art is a risk, the meaning of which is not guaranteed in advance. In ways that are strikingly reminiscent of the passages I have cited from Celan above, Derrida, in his

²⁷ Ibid., emphasis in the original.
²⁸ The place of reconciliation in relation to that of law and politics is cause for debate in contemporary legal theory. See, for instance, the collection of essays in Scott Veitch (ed). Law and the Politics of Reconciliation (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
early essay, “Force and Signification,” speaks about the literary meaning and its directedness towards an uncertain future:

It is because writing is *inaugural*, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future.\(^{29}\)

Yet in its precipitation towards a future meaning, towards potential sites of reception, a work of art is primarily an *address*, even if that address is inflected by risk and uncertainty, by temporal and spatial drift. And of course, this vexed question of “address” is precisely what sets “Force of Law” into philosophical orbit – “if, at least, I want to make myself heard and understood, it is necessary [*il faut*] that I speak your language.”\(^{30}\) This then, is another level at which the question of justice/injustice has to do with language and the contractual law of meaningful address: all possible future meanings cannot be exhaustively calculated in the moment of the utterance (all possible future meanings are incalculable – as justice is incalculable), yet it is necessary to project one’s utterance – to address it – along a trajectory that will become readable (that is, along the ruled lines of a language, these are the laws with which one calculates). So then, what is at stake in literary creation – and perhaps even more so in the visual arts – is an aporetic vibration of the calculable and the incalculable, where something can be *recognized as new*. And perhaps it is in this recognition of the new in the utterance of the other

\(^{29}\) Derrida, “Force and Signification”, p. 11.  
that a process of reconciliation might begin. If this is so, then reconciliation has primarily to do with the problem of *speaking a newly readable language*.

In the idea of the paradoxical re-cognition of a language that is readable *from now on*, I am reminded of Derrida’s deconstruction of the relation between the founding and preserving violence of the law. In the second part of “Force of Law,” Derrida responds intimately to Walter Benjamin’s *Zur Kritik der Gewalt*. One of the distinctions that Derrida draws (following Benjamin), and deconstructs, is a distinction between the founding violence of the law (*die rechtsetzende Gewalt*), and the preserving violence of the law (*die rechtserhaltende Gewalt*). “Gewalt” can be translated as “violence,” but also as “‘legitimate force,’ authorized violence, legal power, as when one speaks of *Staatsgewalt*, state power.” This complex account of force provides the cue for the rest of my discussion. Force inaugurates a field of potential addressees; it precipitates the possibility that something beyond the given boundary of the readable may one day also be read as meaningful. Force thus evokes cognate conceptions of creation and *constitution*, in both the colloquial and legal senses of this last term. The beating of a precipitous path that crosses previously existing boundary lines toward a new (site of) readability is as much a preoccupation of the arts as it is of law’s effort to render justice within the climate of an urgent political plea for transformation and reconciliation.

This brings me back to the term, *constitution*. The event of founding a law, or a state, does not fall within the jurisdiction of the existing law. The inaugural moment of constitution is to be “before a law still nonexisting, a law

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still ahead, still having to and yet to come [une loi encore devant et devant venir].”  

Now it is in these terms that Derrida speaks about literary signification: let us recall, writing is inaugural, in breaking the path, it “does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future.”  

It is in these terms, too, that Andrew Schaap, following Hannah Arendt, speaks of political reconciliation. The “act of constitution” Schaap sees as the first step in a sequence of reconciliation, an act which entails both beginning and promising. On the one hand, it requires that we conceive the present as a point of origin, which might appear in retrospect as the moment in which a “people” first appeared on the political scene. On the other hand, it requires that former enemies promise “never again” in order to condition the possibility of community in the future. 

Schaap thus uses the word “constitution” not only to refer “to issues of jurisdiction and state organisation” but to the “performative constitution of a ‘we’ through collective action and the constitution of a space for a reconciliatory politics in which the appearance of this ‘we’ is an ever-present possibility.”  

The process of political reconciliation, for Schaap, is future- 

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33 Derrida, “Force and Signification”, p. 11, my emphasis.  
directed, but his use of the phrase, “in retrospect,” in the passage I have just cited, demands careful attention. The concept of retrospection exposes the aporia between the founding and preserving violence of the law. An act of constitution – a founding violence – “interrupts the established law to found another. This moment of suspense … this founding or revolutionary moment of law is, in law, an instance of nonlaw [dans le droit une instance de nondroit].”37 But in order to found something that will last, this originary instance of “nonlaw” has to be readable in the future, with a retrospective gaze, as the legitimate origin of the new order. This retrospective assertion of the legitimacy of an act, which in its time was an instance of nonlaw, is the preserving violence of the law. It is significant that Derrida speaks about these founding and preserving forces in terms that conflate a discourse of law and politics on the one hand, with a discourse of creative writing and literary interpretation on the other. In his discussion of the American Declaration of Independence, for instance, Derrida speaks of “fabulous retroactivity:” the signatories of the declaration, “the people,” are invented by a signature, rather than the other way round.38 In “Force of Law,” the act of founding a state (a political event of nonlaw) inaugurates, in what will become a retrospective interpretation, a new way of reading the event:

There is something of the general strike, and thus of the revolutionary situation, in every reading that founds something new and that remains

36 Thoughout his essay Schaap relies on a somewhat too tidy distinction between “the certainty of law,” associated with the restoration of a “universal moral community” on the one hand, and “the risk of politics,” associated with the contingency of a future political community on the other hand (see especially the introductory and concluding paragraphs, p. 9 and p. 29).
unreadable in regard to established canons and norms of reading – that is to say the present state of reading or of what figures the State (with a capital S), in the state of possible reading. 39

Andrew Schaap uses this logic to apply specifically to the initiation of a process of political reconciliation: “political reconciliation is initiated not by the acknowledgement of wrongdoing in terms of an already established set of shared norms but by the act of constitution: the constitution of a space for politics makes possible a future collective remembrance.” 40 In this view, the initiation of a process of reconciliation entails all the risk, creative ingenuity, and technical consideration one usually associates with the making of a work of art: the process of reconciliation begins with the invention and the projection into the future of an event that will become a past worth remembering. It is precisely this logic that informs the architecture and overall design of South Africa’s new Constitutional Court in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, which is built on the site of the Old Fort, the high-security prison, where Nelson Mandela, amongst many other political prisoners, was held. 41 In his speech announcing the winners of the architectural competition for the new Court on the 8th of April, 1998, Mandela speaks of the way in which the building’s artistic conception transforms a reading of what has taken place at

41 For a history of the prison and the building of the new Constitutional Court, see Lauren Segal (compiler, lead writer and editor), Number Four: The Making of Constitutional Hill (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2006).
that site: certain events from the past now become the constituted future's history, and the physical act of constructing the building itself lays the foundational stone of the constitution in both a literal and a metaphorical sense:

The Court's physical foundations will rise from the horrific memories of torture and suffering which [were] perpetrated in the dark corners, cells and corridors of the Old Fort prison. Rising from the ashes of that ghastly era, this new institution will shine forth as a reminder for the future generation of our prevailing confidence and optimism that South Africa will never return to that abyss and indeed is a better place for all.^{42}

In fact, in many accounts of the building and of daily life at Constitutional Hill,^{43} the creation of the artworks and museum spaces, the foundation of the Constitution, and the founding of a polis, are all understood to happen in the same gesture and in the same space. "Like the Constitution," writes Albie Sachs, Constitutional Court judge,

the Court belongs to and serves the whole nation. We want the eyes, hands and hearts of all our artists famous and unknown, to be involved.

^{42} Segal (ed.), Number Four, p. 84.
^{43} The name of the precinct was cause for debate. Albie Sachs: "I proposed that the whole area be called 'Freedom Hill' and that it be dedicated to freedom. Chief Justice Arthur Chaskalson responded with 'Constitution Hill.' I was a little dubious; I thought that was giving a kind of a legal slant to the place. But I'm very pleased that he made that suggestion." Segal, Number Four, p. 74. This anecdote perhaps adds point to Andrew Schaap's argument: "law frustrates political reconciliation by representing community as the given end of politics rather than a contingent historical possibility that conditions the possibility of politics in the present. The tendency of a legal constitution to undercut the ethical constitution of a 'we' in this way was demonstrated, for instance, in the constitutional politics of South Africa." Schaap, "The Time of Reconciliation and the Space of Politics", p. 26.
We do not want to acquire loose art and place it in the building but rather ensure that the art is integrated into the very fabric of the building. We want this to be a national project. We want to include people who don’t even know they are artists. We want people who do beautiful doors, crafts and mosaics.44

In ways that remind me of Paul Celan’s reflections on poetry and of Derrida’s analysis of the founding and preserving violence of the law, Sachs comments that the architectural design of the building opened up the whole hill. The site wasn’t the end of the journey. It was a place of thoroughfare and encounter – ongoing, mobile, fluid, moving – for people coming past. And connecting Hillbrow with Parktown with Braamfontein: the three totally different Johannesburgs.45

Paul Celan concludes his speech, “The Meridian,” with the following remarks,

I find something which consoles me a bit for having walked this impossible road in your presence, this road of the impossible.

I find the connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters.

I find something as immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial, in the shape of a circle which, via both poles, rejoins itself and on the way serenely crosses even the tropics: I find … a meridian.

44 Segal, (ed.), Number Four, p. 108.
45 Segal (ed.), Number Four, p. 89, my emphasis.
With you and Georg Büchner and the State of Hesse, I believe I have just touched it again.\textsuperscript{46}

Another line, then! It is the notion of “encounter” (the word that Sachs also uses) that I wish to consider in the next section. But to conclude this section – on the question of lines, at least this much should be clear: the lines I have been speaking about in this chapter are not simply the visible outlines of discrete objects in the world – it is in a more abstract sense that I have referred to lines of address, to lines that mark legal, political and linguistic limits, to lines that project signification beyond normative boundary lines, opening up new ways of reading.

\section*{D. REDRAWING THE LINES: TOWARDS A POST-APARTHEID AESTHETIC}

Derrida’s “Force and Signification” offers a detailed and provocative reading of Jean Rousset’s structuralist work, \textit{Forme et Signification: Essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel}. A structuralist approach, especially as it is evinced by Rousset, writes Derrida, practises a certain literary geometry; it

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grants an absolute privilege to spatial models, mathematical functions, lines, and forms … in fact, time itself is always reduced. To a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46} Celan, “The Meridian”, pp. 54-55, my emphasis on “encounters.”
dimension in the best of cases. It is only the element in which a form or a curve can be displayed. It is always in league with a line or design, always extended in space, level. It calls for measurement.\textsuperscript{47}

Rousset, in Derrida’s reading, is preoccupied with the lines that trace out the internal thematic structures and patterns of the work. Of Célidée and her lover in \textit{La galerie du Palais}, for example, Rousset writes,

Initial accord, separation, median reunification that fails, second separation symmetrical to the first, final conjunction. The destination is a return to the point of departure after a circuit in the form of a crossed ring.\textsuperscript{48}

To delineate the thematic patterns in this way is to presuppose the structural boundary of that literary work in advance. It is to disregard the lines of address that the writing sends out to potential readers; it is to consider the work as self-contained \textit{representation}, rather than as historically inflected \textit{appeal}. I use this last word in the sense of “Language addressed to, or likely to influence, some particular principle, faculty, class, etc.” (\textit{OED}). It is in the understanding of an artwork as an appeal that it becomes possible to speak about art’s \textit{encounters}. By way of the references I have made to Celan thus far, these encounters can readily be understood as encounters between the artwork and the viewer/reader, or perhaps in a more abstract way, as encounters between the artist and the reader. But what interests me within the

\textsuperscript{47} Derrida, “Force and Signification”, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{48} Cited in Derrida, “Force and Signification”, p. 17.
context of a political climate of reconciliation, is the encounter that an artwork effects *between its readers*. Many of Willem Boshoff’s works (some of which, incidentally, have a strong presence at the new Constitutional Court), are at once poignant and adventurous in this regard. The shift in emphasis from an interaction with the work itself, to the interactions the work causes between its viewers, deepens the ethical and political engagements of Boshoff’s art, especially since these works are so relentlessly preoccupied with the question of a readable language.

*The Blind Alphabet ABC* (1991-2000), for example, consists of three hundred and thirty eight exquisitely carved wooden sculptures, each one representing a word that designates a shape, form or texture. Each carving is housed in a steel mesh cage, with an aluminium lid. The word, its derivation, and examples of its use are written on the lid. The only trouble – but also the *raison d’être* of the work – is that the writing on the lid is in Braille. In front of the installation, a sighted person cannot see the sculptures clearly through the steel mesh, and will need to ask someone who is blind, someone who can read Braille, for guidance. An understanding of this work demands a conversation with someone you might not ordinarily find yourself talking to; you have to cross your usual linguistic limit in order for the work to become readable. In the process, a social balance of power so readily taken for granted is inverted: it is the blind person who becomes the seer. The artwork thus demands a collaborative reading between the artwork’s viewers, where difference from the linguistic norm is valued, rather than elided. The artwork thus draws attention to an awareness of difference *that provokes dialogue*.

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and this is the remarkable consequence of much of Boshoff’s work. His installations have the potential to become sites of dialogic interaction where the viewer/reader is forced to cross a line – in this case, between the worlds of the sighted and the blind. An artwork such as *The Blind Alphabet* exposes the porosity of supposedly infrangible barriers, and opens the possibility that at least some lines can be redrawn.

Like *The Blind Alphabet*, *The Writing in the Sand* (2000) is a work that is striking not in some “theme” or image that it represents, but in the encounters that it potentially effects between its readers. *The Writing in the Sand* consists of a list of words and definitions stencilled onto the floor in black and white sand. The words all end in “–ology” or “–ism,” for instance, “pognology,” “concettism” and “carphology.” The headwords are written in English, but the definitions are written in South Africa’s other official indigenous languages. As an English speaker, one is obliged to defer to the expertise of speakers of these other languages in order to understand what is written. Once again, a shift in the balance of power is brought about, as the English speaker is unseated from his or her usual linguistic position of the one-who-knows. Now the content of the work is far from being politically committed in a thematically representational way. In fact, the words and their definitions are breezy, to say the least. “Pognology” is the study of beards, “concettism” means the art of appearing intelligent without actually saying much, and “carphology” is an inordinate fondness for fondling one’s pyjamas … well, that is what Boshoff says! But the point is this: the importance of the work lies in the encounters it potentially brings about, rather than in some

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50 See the artist’s notes on the website: [www.willemboshoff.com](http://www.willemboshoff.com).
subsumptive theme that it might represent. A work such as this one is a reminder of Adorno’s observation that “there is no straightforward relationship” between the “appeal and the thematic content of the work.”51 Further, it seems to me, *The Writing in the Sand* has the potential to initiate the kind of political reconciliation discussed in much contemporary legal theory – where reconciliation is not primarily considered to be the restoration of a predetermined community that relies on the myth of a communal past. Instead, in this view of the politics of reconciliation, community is a “contingent historical possibility,”52 and readers (I use this word in the broadest possible sense) are aware that being attuned to difference (rather than riding roughshod over it) can recalibrate the socio-political settings in which new kinds of dialogue might now take place. But those readers are aware too, that their very differences render notions of “reconciliation” and “community” extremely vulnerable.53 With a further poignant twist, Boshoff’s work leads us to realize that an unthinking preoccupation with “speaking the same language” runs the risk of hastening the extinction of minor and indigenous languages and cultures. The work is made of sand, so easily disturbed or blown away, and of course, once each exhibition is over, *The Writing in the Sand* will be swept up, gone. Unless existing relations of power are challenged, the desire to speak the same language – in both a literal and a metaphorical sense – is

certainly tantamount to what Stewart Motha calls “reconciliation as
domination.”

But, for the time being, as viewers stand and talk before *The Writing in
the Sand*, they themselves perform the protest raised by the artist against
linguistic and hence cultural exclusions, against prejudicial social hierarchies,
against the extinction of indigenous languages, in ways that actively
transcend the barriers that occasioned the artwork in the first place.

*The Writing in the Sand* has been exhibited three times – at the
seventh Havana Biennale in Cuba (2000), at Den Frie Udstillings Bygning in
Copenhagen (2001) and at Rand Afrikaans University (2001). On the one
hand, one might be sceptical about a work like *The Writing in the Sand*: just
how many Xitsonga or siSwati speakers, one might be tempted to ask, have
actually seen it and enlightened their fellow English-speaking art-lovers? But I
think that to ask this question is somewhat to miss an important point.

“Committed art in the proper sense,” writes Adorno,

is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative acts or
practical institutions – like earlier propagandist plays against syphilis,
duels, abortion laws or borstals – but to work at the level of
fundamental attitudes.

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54 Stewart Motha, “Reconciliation as Domination”, Scott Veitch (ed.) *Law and the Politics of
55 In January 2005, RAU merged with Vista University and with the Witwatersrand Technical
College. The new institution is now known as the University of Johannesburg.
56 Adorno, “Commitment”, Trans. Francis McDonagh, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB,
Each event of art’s being *read* attentively, in a way that does not necessarily depend on the work’s internal representative delineations, goes some way towards operating at the level of “fundamental attitudes” on the part of those readers. An artwork sends out lines of force into the socio-political field beyond the limits of that work’s own physical or representational quiddity. These lines have the potential (without insurance) to reconnect, along different routes, previously closed or isolated circuits of meaning. In speaking about art-lines in this way, I am interested in the abstract patterns of space that *surround* the art object. This is certainly not to dispense with the importance of the materiality of the work, and the sensory perception of it; it is precisely *on the basis* of the material that the abstract spatial patterns can delineate art’s force-field at all. But I think of an act of art not only as the act of creating and placing some physical thing in the world, but as a gesture that *displaces* the space around it.

It is with these ideas in mind that I read Derrida’s “Force and Signification” – an essay which offers a sustained critique of structuralist literary discourse. Implausible as it may seem initially, this essay has important bearing on questions of reconciliation, and more specifically, on what I would like to call an aesthetics of reconciliation. Structuralism, says Derrida,

will be interpreted, perhaps, as a relaxation, if not a lapse, of the attention given to *force*, which is the tension of force itself. *Form*
fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself. That is, to create.\textsuperscript{57}

If we understand the artwork as initiating possible encounters that break open new paths of meaning between the work and its readers, and between the readers themselves, then it is easy to see why a classical structural analysis of the kind that Rousset conducts falls short of paying attention to art’s force-field. It is in this context, perhaps, that it is easier to understand Derrida’s interesting claim that “there is no space of the work, if by space we mean presence and synopsis.”\textsuperscript{58} In its lapse in the attention given to force, a structuralist reading is conducted in purely spatial terms, running the risk of overlooking a

history, more difficult to conceive: the history of the meaning of the work itself, of its operation. This history of the meaning of the work is not only its past, the eve or the sleep in which it precedes itself in an author’s intentions, but is also the impossibility of its ever being present, of its ever being summarized by some absolute simultaneity or instantaneousness.\textsuperscript{59}

Force is associated with notions of creation, constitution – which applies both to the founding/preserving violence of the law and to the force of signification in an artwork. It is in very similar terms that Derrida speaks about “the history of the meaning of the work” (in the passage just cited) and the

\textsuperscript{57}Derrida, “Force and Signification”, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{59}\textit{Ibid.}
history of the law. Here is a passage from “Force of Law” – to read alongside the passage from “Force and Signification.” The moment of founding a law, as we have seen, is an instance of “nonlaw” – but, Derrida continues,

it is also the whole history of law. *This moment always takes place and never takes place in a presence.* It is the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone. The supposed subject of this pure performative would no longer be before the law [*devant la loi*], or rather he would be before a law still undetermined … a law still ahead.\(^{60}\)

The most striking example of this “history of law” – which will also have become the “history of the meaning” of one of Boshoff’s artworks – is the statement Nelson Mandela delivered from the dock at the Rivonia Trial in 1964.\(^{61}\) Mandela voiced a powerful *political* protest; it was an instance of operating beyond the limit of apartheid law, but in ways that would nevertheless redirect the lines of judgement and defence, and reconfigure Mandela’s responsive range. He was not making a statement *to the judge* in his official capacity, and he was not simply speaking *in* an apartheid court. Mandela’s was an ethical appeal for justice, addressed to the conscience of his fellow human beings. “By representing myself,” says Mandela in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, “I would use my trial as a showcase

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\(^{60}\) Derrida, “Force of Law”, pp. 269-270. Emphasis in the original.

for the ANC’s moral opposition to racism. I would not attempt to defend myself so much as put the state itself on trial.” Of course, in the court of apartheid law, Mandela had no illusions – that he would be pronounced guilty was a given, but already, at the initial hearings of the trial in 1962, he insisted: “I have no doubt that posterity will pronounce that I was innocent and that the criminals that should have been brought before this court are the members of the government.” The effect of Mandela’s speeches during the Rivonia Trial was this: his words crossed law’s line and inaugurated his addressees beyond apartheid’s field of affect. “Right from the start,” says Mandela, “we had made it clear that we intended to use the trial not as a test of the law, but as a platform for our beliefs.” Further, Mandela tells us, “We had agreed not to plead in the traditional manner, but to use the moment to show our disdain for the proceedings.” Mandela’s decision to make a statement from the dock, instead of giving testimony and going through cross-examination, was taken explicitly so that he would “open the defence with a statement of our politics and ideals,” even in the knowledge that what he said in the statement wouldn’t carry “the same legal weight as ordinary testimony.” Mandela’s speeches had the extraordinary power, let us say force, to recalibrate the socio-political – and ultimately, the legal – setting in which those words would be heard. Retrospectively, his statement from the dock would be regarded as an originary moment in the founding of South Africa’s democracy.

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64 Mandela, _Long Walk to Freedom_, p. 346.
66 Mandela, _Long Walk to Freedom_, p. 347, my emphasis.
One excerpt from Mandela’s statement has been cited in several different contexts:

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.67

Mandela repeated this part of his Rivonia Trial statement in Cape Town when he addressed the crowds upon his release from prison in 1990; the speech is cited in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, which was published in the same year as the first democratic elections in South Africa, and the words, “It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die,” are engraved on a massive panel in the new Constitutional Court. In each instance, the mode in which the words are said shifts the ground of their reception – at the Rivonia trial the ground shifts from law to politics. At the Cape Town Rally speech Mandela reconstitutes his subject position in relation to his addressees as political leader, no longer state prisoner. In his autobiography the words inscribe their addressees as interested readers of a past worth remembering as historical narrative, and in the Constitutional Court, they address the readers as inheritors of the democratic state that Mandela’s voiced aspirations founded.

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A structural analysis, writes Derrida, is a “reflection of the accomplished, the constituted, the constructed. Historical, eschatological, and crepuscular by its very situation.”68 It is an analysis that divests a field of its operative forces, oblivious to the ways in which the process of signification performs its field of affect. An attentiveness to the responsive range of the work (whether this work is a law, a constitution, an artwork), can tell us much about the history of that work’s operation, which is a discussion altogether different from a structural analysis of a supposedly sealed-in content.

The words of Mandela’s statement from the dock at the Rivonia Trial make a reappearance, nearly thirty years later, in Willem Boshoff’s two etchings, Neves I and Neves II (2003. ink on paper, 52cm x 64cm). The letters are minute – “micrographic” – as Boshoff would say, and because this is an etching, the letters are reversed. From a distance, the etchings look like a scribble pattern; but upon closer inspection, the large sweeping lines which form the overlapping word “neves,” twice on each etching, in a casual copper-plate style, are themselves made up of tiny spidery, mirror-writing. With patience, a word here and there, or a phrase from Mandela’s Rivonia Trial statement, can just be can be made out, but the script is barely legible at all. The word “neves,” Boshoff tells us, is used by prisoners to refer to “a really long prison stretch – seven years at least … and longer.”69 He sees his work as “a vague mirror, held up to acknowledge, in a small way, a great man’s perplexing life.”70 Now the addressees of these words are in an art gallery; the

speech and its first speaker take on near-legendary status as they inspire the cultural manifestations of a post-apartheid society. In looking at the history of the meaning of this work, not simply in terms of the express content of Mandela’s speech, but in terms of the modes of its saying, the focus is as much on the configurations of the perceptual field, as it is on the work itself. It is with this in mind that one can begin to discuss the implications of the operation of the work, and move away from the staid calculations of a supposedly self-contained structure. In each dramatic event of a work’s perception, the force of signification erupts, and “what is at stake, first of all, is an adventure of vision, a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us, to historical objects – [one’s] own – in particular.”

E. CONCLUSION: LINES OF FORCE

In his essay on the paintings of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty writes,

the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed.

These lines of force are contingent, kinetic, and not necessarily coterminous with objectively discrete objects in the world. Further, they do not presuppose

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72 Derrida, "Force and Signification", p. 3.
clearly defined areas to be marked off and coloured in afterwards; the lines are projected by the mass of colours in the world, as they become more intense, and press outwards. The art of reconciliation (in all the multivalency of this phrase) has to do with a decision of where and when to draw these lines; lines that reconfigure the margins of exposure of one to the other.