



## Deconstructing the Political Persona in Nguyễn Đức Đạt's *Misprints of bibi*

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Nguyễn Đức Đạt's "Misprints of bibi" critiques the portrayal of political figures as unified symbols of authority while exposing the fragility of representational systems. The works dissolve the boundaries between the artwork and its surroundings, prompting viewers to interrogate the inseparability of art and its physical and cultural contexts. This essay argues that Nguyễn exemplifies the operation of the *passe-partout* by dissolving boundaries between art, context, and viewer, thereby critiquing the systems of power and representation that frame our understanding of political figures and artistic works alike.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida is best known for developing deconstruction, a critical approach that interrogates and dismantles traditional structures of meaning in language, philosophy, and art. Deconstruction challenges the notion of a singular, fixed meaning in art, emphasizing instead the fluidity of interpretation and the crucial role of context. It aims to expose the internal workings of language and the relational quality of meaning, recognizing that meaning is generated through a complex interplay of differences and is constantly deferred, never fully present.<sup>1</sup>

Derrida utilizes the concept of the *passe-partout*, a term borrowed from picture framing, to highlight this dynamic process of meaning construction. In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida expands the *passe-partout* beyond its literal meaning, referring not just to the physical mat surrounding an artwork but encompassing all the external elements that frame and contextualize a work, such as the title, signature, frame, museum context, and critical discourse.<sup>2</sup> These elements act as "frames" that shape our perception and understanding, revealing how meaning is not solely inherent in the artwork but is generated through its interaction with these external

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Fry, "10. Deconstruction II," YaleCourses, September 2, 2009, online lecture, 30:00–30:45, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51s-J\\_Jwr40&t=10s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51s-J_Jwr40&t=10s).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Passe-Partout," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 12.

factors. By emphasizing this interplay between artwork and context, the passe-partout deconstructs the idea of the artwork as a self-contained entity with a singular, intrinsic meaning.<sup>3</sup> It reveals the multiplicity of interpretations that can arise from an artwork, challenging traditional notions of authorship, truth, and fixed meaning. As Derrida notes, the passe-partout “works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do,” highlighting the active and dynamic nature of meaning production.<sup>4</sup> Deconstruction is a particularly relevant framework for analyzing Nguyễn’s works because both the philosophical approach and the exhibition theme explore the instability of meaning and the provisional nature of representation. Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction emphasizes how meaning is never fixed but is constantly deferred, shaped by the relational context of language and symbols. This idea parallels the concept of a “draft,” which implies impermanence, incompleteness, and openness to revision.

The artworks, rendered through experimental screen printing on polypropylene paper, represent distorted/incomplete images of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. The central-left portrait retains the clearest resemblance to Netanyahu, marked by his suit, tie, and an iconic gesturing hand, evoking the public and political persona associated with leadership and authority.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brunette and David Wills, “Introduction,” in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts: Art, Media, Architecture* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, “Passe-Partout,” 12.



Fig. 1, Nguyễn Đức Đạt, exhibition view of Misprints of bibi<sup>5</sup>, 2024, oil on canvas, various dimensions, Galerie Quynh,

<https://www.galeriequynh.com/vn/exhibitions/138-the-gioi-nhu-la-ban-nhap-o-thanh-lang-nguyen-uc-at/>.

<sup>5</sup> The works numbered from left to right: #3, #4, #1, #2.



Fig. 2, Cliff Owen/AP, photo of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gestures while addressing the 2015 American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference in Washington, D.C.

<https://www.npr.org/2015/03/03/390351226/netanyahu-speech-is-latest-glitch-in-u-s-israel-relations>.

However, the clarity in this work contrasts sharply with the other three, which use murky, dark brushstrokes that blur or entirely obscure the figure's features. These distortions transform the expected sharpness of a political portraiture into a fragmented view of power and representation.

Netanyahu—as a key political figure—symbolizes state authority and policies that have been central to the Israel-Palestine conflict, a long-standing dispute over land, identity, and sovereignty, marked by events like the establishment of Israel in 1948 and ongoing territorial

and political tensions.<sup>6</sup> He is not just a leader but the entire representational system that frames such figures as symbols of unilateral power and legitimacy.

The title of the exhibition, “The World as a Draft,” serves as a conceptual anchor that amplifies the deconstructive themes present in the artworks. The term “draft” suggests incompleteness, provisionality, and openness to revision, disrupting the expectation of finality often associated with both artistic and political representations. By framing the exhibition as a draft, Nguyễn aligns with deconstructive philosophy, particularly Jacques Derrida’s assertion that meaning is inherently unstable and always subject to reinterpretation.

A viewer’s primary interaction with an artwork is oftentimes reading the note detailing the artwork’s name and materials. The title functions as an initial passepartout, framing the viewer’s engagement with the work. The word “Misprints” suggests imperfection and the possibility of multiplicity not only in the quantity of faulty works, but also in interpretation of the title and the work’s meaning. It establishes an initial tension between the seemingly authoritative subject and the flawed, fragmented modes of representation within the artwork. The title thus acts as a threshold for meaning, inviting viewers to question the authority of representation itself.

Nguyễn chose screen printing as a technique that introduces an industrial, reproducible aesthetic, often linked to mass media or propaganda, further complicating the interpretation.<sup>7</sup> However, the works are not uniform nor clean, quite the opposite they are vastly different in terms of color, and clarity, with some pieces having the paint enveloping the subject and all. The “misprints” in the titles further evoke the sense of technical errors, drawing attention to the imperfection inherent in systems of reproduction and representation, whether political, cultural,

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<sup>6</sup> BBC, “Israel Gaza war: History of the conflict explained,” April 5, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-44124396>.

<sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Đức Đạt, interview by author, HCMC, December 12, 2024.

or artistic. The uneven surface textures emphasize these imperfections, visually signaling disruption and instability.

During an exhibition walk-through, the artist mentioned that the works were indeed, actual misprints and originally were not planned to be showcased. The background information acts as a passe-partout, making the title even more impactful. The misprints, being errors, disrupt traditional expectations of polished representation. However, within the framework of “The World as a Draft,” their imperfection gains relevance, challenging viewers to reconsider the value of accidents and the role of the incomplete in artistic and political narratives. The decision to feature these flawed images underscores how even discarded or unintended artifacts meaningfully contribute to the deconstruction of fixed ideas about authority, perfection, and representation.

The series’ disordered numerical arrangement (#3, #4, #2, #1) extends this sense of non-linear and disruption. By breaking the normal expectation of a monotonically increasing sequence system of numbering paintings, Nguyễn destabilizes the conventional progression of time and meaning, compelling the viewer to question the relationship between the parts and the whole. This disruption resonates with Derrida’s critique of the idea of fixed endpoints or conclusions and instead emphasizes a fluid, open-ended interpretive process. The exhibition’s spatial arrangement rejects a conventional, linear narrative, presenting the artworks as fragments of an incomplete story. This fragmented approach mirrors the deconstructive process itself, which breaks down fixed meanings and hierarchies. The viewer is invited to engage in an active process of interpretation, navigating the gaps and inconsistencies without arriving at a definitive conclusion.

The seamless integration of the frames with the unfinished gallery walls amplifies this effect. Traditionally, frames function as boundaries that separate the artwork from its context, offering a sense of closure and distinction. However, Nguyễn's choice to match the frames to the wall paint collapses this boundary, blurring the distinction between artwork and environment. This collapse destabilizes the inside/outside binary, revealing that what lies within is always shaped by what lies outside. Here, the unfinished walls themselves become part of the artwork's meaning, underscoring the impossibility of isolating the image from its context which is questioning the authoritative value given upon political figures. Without the clear supporting culture context, the character in the paintings just resembles an ordinary Caucasian male figure, nothing more nothing less.

Nguyễn Đức Đạt's *Misprints of bibi* exemplifies deconstruction in its interrogation of power, representation, and context. By fracturing and re-contextualizing the Prime Minister's image, Nguyễn highlights how power structures rely on constructed and contested meanings, encouraging viewers to question the narratives that shape their understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Through these strategies, Nguyễn not only destabilizes traditional representations of political figures but also challenges the frameworks that shape our understanding of art and its role in critiquing power.





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