

## Writing & Society Research Centre Seminar Program 'Writing by the River'

### **Burning Down the House: What Remains? Valedictory Address: Dennis Schmidt**



Twombly, "Like a fire that consumes all before it", series of 10 paintings, "Fifty Days at Illium".

The world is, as Hannah Arendt argued, entering the time of its “Verwustung” – it is becoming a desert. And yet, perhaps without reason, we remain rivetted to hope, to the promise of bettering the world, making it more just and beautiful.

Three assumptions guide this paper: a powerful sense that we live in a time of crises, an equally intense sense of the moral responsibility to address the crises of our time, and finally an overwhelming sense that we are largely powerless. It seems as if today we are burning down the house that we live in, on, and need. One wonders what remains, what is left, who we have become, and above all, what to do.

The idea that history is moved by crises that we manufacture – wittingly or not – is not new. What does seem new today is the perfect storm and global character of the problems we face: Climate change, AI, economic inequality of incomprehensible magnitude, unprecedented levels of violence and capacities for destruction of unthinkable scale– and more – we seem to live in a time of a cluster of crises that are eroding something elemental. The public realm, the bonds that hold a larger world together, no

longer seem to help our efforts to address our situation. And yet we cannot escape being responsible, infinitely responsible for a future, that we still do not understand.

The intent of this talk is not to examine any of the specific crises we face, apart from an effort to highlight some significant communalities magnifying the force of these crises. Rather, the primary intent of this talk is to ask about the source and character of our responsibility, and to speak to the question of what power remains and, above all, what we – especially we who live the life of privilege and obligation that shapes a university – can and should do.

**DATE:** Friday 14 August

**TIME:** 11:00am - 12:30pm

**VENUE:** Western Sydney University, Parramatta City Campus, Level 9, Conference Room 3 (right near Parramatta Station), AND online on zoom.

**RSVP:** for F2F attendance [rsvp via Humanitix](#). For online attendance [register through zoom](#) and a link will be sent to you.

**ALL WELCOME!**

**DENNIS J. SCHMIDT** has taught at Western Sydney, Penn State, Villanova, and Binghamton Universities where he was a member of departments of Philosophy, German, Classics, and Comparative Literature. He has been a visiting distinguished Professor at the Tübingen and Freiburg Universities (Germany), the University of Roma, la Sapienza (Italy), and Professor Honoris Causa, Institut International d'Herménéutique, University of Warsaw (Poland). He has published *Idiome der Wahrheit*, *Between Word and Image*, *Lyrical and Ethical Subjects*, *Germans and Other Greeks*, and the *Ubiquity of the Finite*. He has co-edited *Hermeneutische Wege* and *Difficulties of Ethical Life*. He has translated Ernst Bloch's *Naturrecht und menschliche Würde*, and co-translated Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. He edits the "SUNY Press Series in Continental Philosophy" which currently has a list of 219 books in print. He publishes in English and German and has had his work translated into 8 other languages. A collection of essays on his work, *Idioms of Ethical Life*, was published in 2017. He recently finished a new book entitled *Socrates with a Cane*.



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