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# From Immaterials to Resistance: The Other Side of *Les Immatériaux*

Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein

*Les Immatériaux* has often been seen as a celebration of information technology and a new postmodern world based on the immateriality of flows of information. The proposal here is that the underlying conception was far more ambivalent, not in the sense of some psychological hesitation on the threshold of the new, but rather as something inherent in the things themselves – most importantly, because the very sense of “thing” here was at stake due to the changes wrought upon our sensorium by technology, in the widest sense of the term.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, a sequel to *Les Immatériaux* entitled *Résistances* was planned, and would have dealt with the underside of communication: noise, distortion, and the dimension of experience that resists both consciousness and language. This part was never completed, and what remains are only the accounts of participants in Lyotard’s seminars.<sup>2</sup> It can however be understood as aligned with the direction in which Lyotard’s own research was moving at the time, away from the postmodern as a universe of messages and codes, and retrieving some of his early ideas worked out already in *Discours, figure: touching, the event, and what he called “passibility”*. *Les Immatériaux* may then be seen in conjunction with this second exhibition that never took place. This,

- 1 The argument sketched out here is extracted from a forthcoming book, *Spacing Philosophy: Jean-François Lyotard and the Philosophy of the Exhibition*.
- 2 Philippe Parreno and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversation Series 14* (Cologne: Walter König, 2008), p. 17. The specific claim that will be made throughout this essay, that the planned sequel to *Les Immatériaux* was to have dealt with the resistance to communication, is based on Parreno’s recollections, and in this it can obviously be contested; the presence of the theme as such in the writings of Lyotard from 1985 onwards, however, is undeniable.

of course, is a tenuous proposal. We have no way of knowing what the sequel would have looked like, and any claims about it must remain conjectural. And yet to undertake the task of imagining such a second part, we suggest, means to continue Lyotard's thought into the present, and to remain attentive to its complexity and contradictions, both as a conceptual investigation and as a practical task.<sup>3</sup>

## Resistance, Possibility, Infancy

If the project presented in 1985 was incomplete, at least if seen in relation to the possibility of a sequel, then we must attempt to locate something like an ambivalence or hesitation in the underlying conception. In fact, there are traces of a change in Lyotard's approach that seems to occur at roughly the same time as *Les Immatériaux – a fact* which makes the exhibition into something like a point of bifurcation, as if the unease that it aspired to bring about in the spectators first of all struck Lyotard himself. Throughout the books and articles that would follow, he moves away from the philosophy of phrases and the claims about communication and the pervasive linguisticality of experience that formed the organizational grid for *Les Immatériaux* – or, as we prefer to read this juncture, he began to develop precisely this moment of unease as that which gives thought, the unthought underside of the communicational paradigm as an irreducible resistance that is not simply negative, but that into which thinking must tap in order to uphold its strange incapacity and belatedness as a promise.

Entitled *Résistances*, the unrealized project for a second exhibition would likely have focused on necessary zones of friction and on what first appears as an irreducibly *material* dimension, even though such materiality in turn must displace the inherited notion of matter, just as the immateriality of immaterials is not simply a resuscitated version of Platonic ideas. Material and matter are here not meant as mere physical inertia or passivity, as the *hyle* that cannot exist other than as informed by a *morphe*, but as a modality of givenness as such, a resistance that bypasses or passes in-between the sensible and the intelligible. And if *Les Immatériaux* somewhat cautiously suggested that matter was here referenced only in a contradictory fashion, Lyotard will in his subsequent writings speak of matter in a sense that relays this contradiction, in an attempt to think matter not as a metaphysical category set in opposition to mind, soul, and consciousness, or to idea, form, and ideality, but as something at the limit of thinking, which calls thinking forth just as it withdraws from it.

3 As a second part of this investigation, Daniel Birnbaum, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno will curate an exhibition entitled *Résistances*, which will continue Lyotard's ideas into the present. This project informs some of the claims at the end of this essay, even though the exact shape of this exhibition is at present still not decided.

From the point of view of communication, the second part of the exhibition would have focused on its obverse side: noise, loss, scrambling, and disorder; all of those facets of experience that offer a resistance to transmission. Beginning in the physical sense of resistance (as in the resistance produced in electric circuits), the theme may obviously be expanded to cover all facets of experience, and it belongs to the indeterminacy that is inherent just as much in immateriality and ideality as in matter and its various cognates. Thus, even if the first exhibition can at first sight be taken as championing various forms of dematerialization, the attentiveness to forms of resistance was in fact present throughout, even though in an oblique manner – which is why one might assume that the planned sequel, at least to a certain extent, was already present in *Les Immatériaux*, as a kind of undercurrent or possible counterpoint reading against the grain. What such an exhibition would have looked like in the mid to late 1980s must of course remain purely conjectural, and our proposal here is rather to trace this idea of resistance as it is reflected and inflected in many other questions and concepts that Lyotard was developing simultaneously with *Les Immatériaux*, and that would follow him to the end.

One term that surfaces in some of Lyotard's writings contemporaneous with and adjacent to the 1985 exhibition, and which seems to gather together many of the senses of the theme, is *passibility*, which we here choose as our point of entry into this complex of ideas. The term originates in medieval theology, where it denotes God's capacity to be affected by the course of the world instead of simply remaining sealed in a state of impenetrable plenitude or "impassibility". In modern philosophy it seems to have been taken up by Levinas (who also became a major source for Lyotard's reflections on the possibility of a radicalized version of Kantian ethics from the latter part of the '70s onwards), and has gained currency in some strands of contemporary phenomenology, where it is often understood in terms of a "radical passivity" that can draw on Husserl's extensive manuscripts on passive synthesis and explorations of the level of subjectivity that lies at the fringes of its constitutive power.<sup>4</sup> The above phrase "capacity to be affected" must be understood with equal emphasis on both terms, so that the paradox that was already present in the theological tradition is allowed to exert its full power. In pointing to an intermediary zone, neither simply active nor passive – which in the theological register would amount to a divine middle voice of sorts – it opens an obscure domain of the in-between, neither first nor second, neither the stuff of givenness nor the forming concept. In this sense, passibility may be understood as developing what Lyotard already in *Discours*, *figure* called "event" or "donation",<sup>5</sup> and which in the later works also appears in

4 See, for instance, Didier Franck, *Dramatique des phénomènes* (Paris: PUF, 2001).

5 In an earlier essay, we have attempted to outline the genesis of these themes in Lyotard's early work – which, however, will remain in the background here. See Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, "Figuring the Matrix: Lyotard's *Les Immatériaux*,

the guise of “touching”, “presence”, or “gift”, drawing on the Kantian sublime, Heidegger’s *Ereignis* and the *es gibt*, as well as affectivity in Freud.

Implicated in all of these references is a peculiar structure of time as delay and deferral, which Lyotard often describes in terms of the Freudian concept *Nachträglichkeit*, a “deferred action” that scrambles the before/after structure of consciousness. For Lyotard, rather than being simply the opposition to presence, deferral will prove to be fundamentally entangled with it, fusing into a complex idea of presence itself *as* deferral. Presence and delay are thus not two distinct ideas, but make up a constellation in which presence eventually becomes an overarching term for that which is elusive or even erased in experience; that which resists the unifying capacity of the retentive and protentive structure of consciousness, while yet being *given* in a way that holds consciousness captive, haunting it in the form of an event or an occurrence that it struggles to grasp.<sup>6</sup> In the essay “Time Today”, Lyotard writes: “What memorizes or retains is not a capacity of the mind, nor even inaccessibility to what occurs, but, in the event, the ungraspable and undeniable ‘presence’ of a something which is other than the mind, and which, ‘from time to time’, occurs.”<sup>7</sup> For Lyotard, however, the event is not only some overpowering or disruptive occurrence, as in the Freudian trauma, but more like a constant dimension of experience itself, the eventhood or “eventuality” of that which touches us at the level of affective sensibility – which is also why it becomes an important concept in aesthetics, even though the latter is a term that Lyotard distrusts, perhaps hastily, because of what he sees as its pacifying nature. The event signals the irruption of something in the sensible, in the *aisthesis*, that demands to be articulated, and calls forth our capacity of reflection.

In a different register, the delay of the event, the temporal fold that joins past and present, in Lyotard also receives the name of “infancy”.<sup>8</sup> Infancy, as the etymology *in-fans* signals, is located before language, though not merely in a

1985”, in Thordis Arrhenius, Mari Lending, Wallis Miller and Jérémie Michael McGowan (eds.), *Place and Displacement: Exhibiting Architecture* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2014).

- 6 Lyotard often explicitly, but perhaps too hastily, denies that phenomenology would be able to approach such a presence. His use of “presence”, however, comes close to Heidegger’s term *Anwesen*, “presencing”, understood as a verb, in opposition to presence as *Anwesenheit*, the form or modality of that which is present, i.e. beings. Presencing is that which remains concealed in the present, belonging to the dimension of the event (*Ereignis*) as that which “gives” but cannot be apprehended as given in the entity. Lyotard’s presence might in this sense be read as belonging to a phenomenology “*éclatée*”, as Dominique Janicaud calls it (without any reference to Lyotard); see Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology “Wide Open”: After the French Debate*, trans. Charles N. Cabral (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
- 7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 75.
- 8 For a rich exploration of this theme that rarely refers to Lyotard, yet remains close to him in many respects, see Christopher Fynsk, *Infant Figures* (Stanford: Stanford

chronological sense, but also as an underlying order that subsists throughout adult life in its entirety. It is never accessible to memory and conscious representation, but only given as a “debt” that we can never pay off, and as such it also has a close proximity to an aesthetic that must remain at the limits of *aisthesis* because it touches us, as an event, at the fringes of the sensible, before the ego has acquired any definite shape. In the essay “Prescription” Lyotard suggests that “aesthetics has to do with this first touch: the one that touched when I was not there... The touch has its place and moment in a savage or alien space and time that are foreign to the law. And to the extent that it maintains itself, persists in the mode of this immemorial space-time, this savagery or this sinful peregrination is always there as a potential of the body.”<sup>9</sup> Childhood can in this way even be understood as “inhuman”, in that it exceeds our life as rational subjects, and its mode of being is that of the remainder, of return and haunting. In another register, however, it is also what is eminently *human*, because its “distress heralds and promises things possible” as well as “manifests to this [adult] community the lack of humanity it is suffering from”.<sup>10</sup>

The response to this touch or event on the part of thinking must take the form of *writing*, Lyotard sometimes suggests, a writing that originates in the body – which in relation to *Les Immatériaux* would mean to complete the trajectory that the exhibition proposes in the opposite direction, taking us from language to body: to return to the body means to uncover the other side of “the immaterials”, their inescapable resistance to universalization and translation into numerics, though not in the sense of an origin or ground in a life-world that would precede them as an anexact and more fluid material on which idealizations are performed.<sup>11</sup> But this infant body can also – and perhaps more surprisingly, since, unlike what Lyotard here refers to as the “phenomenological body”, it withdraws us from the world of transitivity and relations – be taken as a source of resistance in a much more straightforward sense. This comes across in the essay on Orwell’s *1984* in *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, where Lyotard looks to the main character Winston’s attempt to retrieve a different language inside the official lies by probing into a childhood that is his own and no one else’s, which still invites a “sharing

University Press, 2000). For a study of Lyotard’s later phase, see Geoffrey Bennington, *Late Lyotard* (CreateSpace, 2008).

9 Jean-François Lyotard, *Lectures d'enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), p. 39.

10 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 4.

11 This would be Husserl’s answer, as presented in the *Crisis* texts from the late 1930s. Lyotard’s path would rather seem to take him into the vicinity of Heidegger. It is only by following the movement of technology to the end, through its consummate emptying out of humanism, that we can begin to grasp its essence as something other than machinery.

of sensibility that it can and should take as communal".<sup>12</sup> Such a sharing has its obvious predecessor in the Kantian *sensus communis*, and Lyotard is here at once close to and far from Arendt's political philosophy,<sup>13</sup> but also to the Benjamin of *One Way Street* and *Berlin Childhood*: what is important is not the singular facts in their empirical specificity, but a "childhood of the event", that which brings us together precisely by not being captured.

Against the theories of pragmatics and communication that were at stake already in the first discussion of the postmodern condition, but also shifting the accent from the systematic analysis of phrases in *Le Différend*, these later texts suggest that it is on the basis of and drawing from the *incommunicable* and *incommensurable* in our experiences that we *communicate*, rather than through a shared set of contents and claims about the world, or through the application of a set of transcendental rules that would govern the formation of phrases and arguments. While the incommensurability between phrase regimes was one of the major themes of *Le Différend*, and the theme of blanks, caesuras, and silences was essential for the analysis of why phrases must be linked to each other in the absence of defined rules (so that silence too is a phrase like any other), in the later writings the dimension of the body and its affectivity, which was largely absent from the philosophy of phrases, returns and provides the idea of blanks and gaps in language with a different kind of depth. That which lies in between phrases is not just silence and gaps, but indicates a dimension of affectivity and sensibility that is the precondition for phrasing as such.

## The Crisis of Foundations

In a little-noticed text from 1989, "Argumentation et présentation: La crise des fondements",<sup>14</sup> Lyotard speaks of this depth, as something that on the one hand – depending on one's philosophical convictions – threatens *or* promises to disappear, and on the other ceaselessly returns as a mirage *or* an infinite task, in terms of a *crisis of foundations*. Understood in the most general sense, the crisis has no doubt been around since the dawn of Greek philosophy (*krisis* in fact being one, or perhaps *the*, key operative term already in the Poem of Parmenides), but has acquired a particular depth in modernity, especially after the violent transformations of the sense of space and time – of the

12 Jean-François Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Gallilée, 1986), p. 142–143.

13 See "Le survivant", in *Lectures d'enfance*.

14 The text was originally published in André Jacob (ed.), *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle, vol. 1, L'univers philosophique* (Paris: PUF, 1989), p. 738–50, and has not been reprinted in any of Lyotard's books. It is here cited from the English translation by Chris Turner, in *Cultural Politics*, Volume 9, Issue 2 (July 2013), p. 117–143.

“transcendental aesthetic” as delineated by Kant – and continues to haunt our present in an even more intensified form.

Historically, the phrase “foundation crisis” stems from the debates that occupied the mathematical and physical sciences during the early decades of the twentieth century, and it concerned the very sense of the reality to which theories could refer once the classical conceptions in science had been discarded. For Lyotard, this implied a blow against the referential as well as pragmatic values that traditional science could rely on, a profound mutation in thought’s relation to its other, to something like being itself. The aporia of the given and the constructed imposed itself throughout philosophy and the various sciences, and just as the idea of a foundation that would be simply given appeared increasingly tenuous, so the claims about a univocal and rational method of construction became doubtful as more and more paradoxes emerged in the foundations of logic and mathematics. Many analyses, direct and indirect, were proposed, from the sense-data reconstructions of logical positivism to the life-world of Husserl and the clearing of being in Heidegger, and Lyotard suggests that what is at stake here is the question from where the object would be “ob-jected”: that is, whether there is anything at all that precedes our constructions, or if the technical efficacy of science is simply all that remains.

For Lyotard, this crisis, in all the various contradictory shapes that it took, cannot be solved in the way proposed by Karl-Otto Apel, that is, by recourse to a “metapragmatics” that locates the ground of reason in rules of argumentation, themselves in turn founded in a community of rational agents.<sup>15</sup> This solution is based on the idea of a universal and transcendental communicational competence that aspires to displace the foundational claims made by philosophers like Husserl and Descartes by showing that all such claims already presuppose communication. In this, Apel’s rejection of earlier version of foundationalism provides yet another ultimate foundation of reason, this time by recourse to an idea of ultimate rules of argumentation that must be (indeed have always necessarily been) respected in all other previous or future foundational language games in order for them to make sense, and in this way can lay claim to a transcendental status. As Lyotard remarks, however, Apel remains largely silent on the content of these rules, somewhat vaguely referring to a common focus on the problem to be solved, or the aspiration to achieve rational consensus – and perhaps, one might

15 Apel cites Wittgenstein, who speaks of a “system” within which any “confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place”, a system which is “not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life”. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), sec. 105. For Lyotard this element is not so much a system as a field of a “certain pre-cogito phenomenology” that he locates in Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible*, which shows the renewed relevance of phenomenological themes in Lyotard’s later work.



add, necessarily so, since any more substantial specification would already commit him to a particular philosophical claim and deprive the rules of their “meta”-pragmatic status; they would be yet another move in the game, and not the condition for the game – any game – as such. Against this, Lyotard suggests that what advances the sciences is rather the scrambling and breaking of rules – scientists are more prone to empirical than transcendental pragmatics, he somewhat ironically quips. The transcendental account in fact always comes too late, and is incapable of elucidating the emergence of the new, of the eventful dimension of thinking. In this, the discourse of science is more akin to the moves made in ordinary language – and, we might add, to philosophy, as Lyotard will later say in *Le Différend*, where it is the very sense and even possibility of any such rules that are the objects of discussion, and thinking must proceed in an experimental fashion without any once-and-for-all pre-established guidelines. What it means to think philosophically cannot be decided through a recourse to pre-existing rules; rather, the rules are what results from the process of thought, which itself is in search of the rules that guide it. And in this philosophy communicates with both science and art through a common zone of indeterminacy – which, however, they *inhabit differently*, we might say.

With respect to the idea of foundations, for Lyotard this necessitates a reappraisal of what must precede all rational constructions, for which he finds the resources in Kant – or, more precisely, in a Kant reread in the light of our present concerns, which the sciences at the horizon of the *Critique of Pure Reason* foreclosed by offering securities that are no longer our own. The question of foundation has to do with space and time, or more generally the idea of something sensible as such, which is something on which all constructions are made, though itself not there as a given, but rather as that which is withdrawn. In Kant, Lyotard suggests, there is already an attempt at “tracing the path toward an infancy of thought that is always presupposed in its adult age (which is argumentative) and ever present as something concealed”,<sup>16</sup> and which becomes even more pronounced as we move from the space-time of the first *Critique* to the rather different approach of the third *Critique*, which provides the bridge to Lyotard’s own reflections on the possibilities and limits of aesthetics. Here the pre-objective domain is what gives rise to a reflective judgement that bears on “feeling”, in a “plasmatic” state, in a way that for Lyotard underlies all other claims, rather than just being an intermediary capacity located between cognition and ethics: “Kantian aesthetics, in its architectonic guise, teaches us something much more radical: that reflexive judgement is, if not constitutive, then at least required by the other faculties of

16 “Foundation Crisis”, p. 126.

knowledge and that feeling is the primordial, fundamental mode of reception of any givenness."<sup>17</sup>

This is also where he once more comes back to his earlier discussions of Merleau-Ponty in *Discours, figure*, and how the analogy with the visual field might allow us to approach the layer of the pre-objective: "the analogy is not an arbitrary one, since the 'free-floating forms', to which Kant refers the aesthetic feeling, also constitute without a doubt the weft or, as Merleau-Ponty has it, the 'nervures' of the field of perception ... [even] 'nervures of being.'"<sup>18</sup> And yet – and in this the claims of *Discours, figure* against the phenomenology of perception as well as against the phenomenological "flesh of the world" remain in place – there is always a difference in the visual, an invisibility for which terms like non-presentable and sublime may stand as markers. This once more signals a departure from Merleau-Ponty, which is not just one of vocabulary – since the invisible here is not what already begins to transcend the sensible in the form of ideas and concepts – but the moment of donation that underlies the sensible and only can be reached through a dispossession of subjectivity of a more radical nature than that attained through the descent into the flesh. If the aesthetic takes us toward this region, it is thus also, always, as an "anaesthetic" that opens towards the event.

At the end of this essay, however, Lyotard suggests that this crisis of foundations can in fact be overcome in a way that does not preserve the dimension of the event, but rather produces something like its final occultation. This could perhaps be understood as something like a *crisis of the crisis* – or, in Heideggerian terms that Lyotard here perhaps brushes aside too quickly, the *forgetting of forgetting*, the technological *erasure of the withdrawal* that is necessary for beings to appear – and he envisages the possibility that donation might have become a calculable construct, a *physis* synthetically produced in "technoscience", in a way that directly picks up the basic theme of *Les Immatériaux*. "The new *techne*", he writes, "in keeping with the essential concept of *fingerere* inherent in it, enables us to obtain not only 'results' in all sorts of calculations but sounds, colors, or, in other words, materials and arrangements of things both musical and plastic. These are now replacing 'forms' that arise out of the synthetic power of the imagination, or out of the Other. They are not apprehended reflexively; they are determined by calculations, both in their 'design' and in their restitution and dissemination. And calculation includes not only the work that occupies the time of computer engineers but also the – itself constitutive – accounting of spaces and times (including all those known as working spaces and times) expended in the production and dissemination of synthetic materials and

17 Ibid., p. 128.

18 Ibid., p. 133.

forms.”<sup>19</sup> “Anthropologically”, Lyotard concludes, this transfer from intuition to calculation and construction can be interpreted as “an emancipation of human beings from their condition as earthly animals”; “transcendentally”, on the other hand, such a crisis “remains to be thought through”.<sup>20</sup> It is to this thinking through that the work after *Les Immatériaux* was dedicated.

## Rewriting Freud

It is at this juncture of Lyotard’s work that Freud too returns, and the exchange between psychoanalysis and phenomenology begun in *Discours, figure* is taken up again, albeit in a transformed fashion. If, in his early work, Lyotard arrived at a set of affirmative claims about energies and forces, these will now be displaced by what he sometimes, with a term borrowed from Lacan, calls “the Thing” (*la Chose*), a body that is held hostage to something that it cannot decipher. This is the infant body, not in a simply chronological sense, but as a site of pre-inscription that will always remain with us, drawing together the birth of the subject as conditioned by the sexual difference and the emergence of something out of nothing in terms of the ontological difference, so that the priority between them becomes entangled and undecidable.

In this renewed reading of Freud, the idea of passibility is worked out in terms of affectivity, which in many ways pursues old themes, but also gives them a new twist. While the philosophy of phrases in *Le Différend* has evacuated the possibility of the physics or metaphysics of drives that once underwrote the claim that “The Dream-Work Does Not Think” (as reads the title of one of the central chapters in *Discours, figure*), it nevertheless opens a more positive approach to language, though one that still wants to steer clear of the theory of the signifier that for Lyotard limits the Lacanian approach, to which he nevertheless remains close. While, as we have noted, already in *Le Différend* phrases are understood as events in a broad sense, constituting a category that expands beyond the narrowly linguistic to include silences and affects, this latter dimension ultimately remained marginal in the earlier book, and the dynamic and affective dimension of the Kantian faculties was largely overshadowed by Wittgensteinian motifs. In this sense it is no doubt significant that Wittgenstein’s importance will diminish as we move into Lyotard’s final phase, when the connection to phenomenology and psychoanalysis will be made once more.

In the new approach, the unconscious is reconstructed as an “inarticulate phrase”, or an “affect-phrase”. This phrastic quality does not mean that it presents a universe according to the axes sense-reference and sender-receiver. What is presented is rather a feeling of pleasure and pain that

19 Ibid., p. 140.

20 Ibid., p. 140f.

remains non-localizable with respect to the coordinates of the universe of language as the presentation of something objective; and as we will see, in this it is akin to the feeling of pleasure and pain as laid out in Kant's third *Critique*, which provides a bridge to aesthetics. What transpires is that there is something there, there is an "it happens" which, however, is betrayed as soon as it is translated into a communicative language.

This new take on the unconscious is spelt out in detail in the essay "Emma",<sup>21</sup> where Lyotard interrogates one of the case histories in Freud's 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, which indeed is one of Freud's most physicalist texts, where he speaks of forces that produce "facilitations" (*Bahnungen*) in a way that would draw him close to Lyotard's early conception of energetics. What comes across in this later reading by Lyotard, however, is the problem of time, of how events are inscribed and become meaningful in a particular structure of deferral. The unconscious affect, Lyotard suggests, can remain unrecognized while still entering into consciousness through a substitute that cannot be understood.

The patient Emma's fear of going to the store alone is, in Freud's analysis, linked to two scenes from her childhood; neither of which, however, is sufficient to account for her present state. Lyotard suggests that they must be understood as overlaid, so that the first scene only produces its traumatic affect when it is remembered and activated at a subsequent stage, in a kind of retroactive or inverted causality that is at the basis of Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit*. In Lyotard's reading of the Emma case, what is important is Freud's idea of a primal repression – that is, an object that never was conscious, and which may account for the presence of originary formations in the unconscious, as was already suggested in the elusive position given to the matrix in *Discours, figure*.

For Lyotard, the possibility of this primal repression signals something like a pure *passibility*, where the affect is inscribed without ever being conscious, and only appears at the later stage; a capacity for being affected regardless of whether the event can be represented or not, which implies that the active-passive distinction is derivative in relation to such primordial events. Such an event cannot be represented or remembered; it is a pure event, and its time is the present, the here and now; while – from the point of view of consciousness, and of what can be named in language – it will never have been there at all as a content. The pure presence eludes consciousness, structurally, while consciousness as such is held in the grip of this presence, which is what locates it in a childhood beyond memory.

21 In Jean-François Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 2000). For a lucid discussion of this text in relation to Lacan, see Anne Tomiche, "Rephrasing the Freudian Unconscious: Lyotard's Affect-Phrase", in *Diacritics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1994), p. 43–62.

This dimension also comes across in that particular quality of language known as timbre, which Lyotard investigates in another essay, "Voix", dedicated to the problem of language in psychoanalysis. What lies at the core of the Freudian enterprise, at a depth that may have escaped Freud himself to the extent that analysis remains modelled on Socratic dialogue, is not speech in the sense of the Aristotelian *lexis*, i.e. statements that would be situated along the axes of the universe of communication and transmit an objective content, but the sounding of the *phone*, the inarticulate and passionate dimension of a voice that directly indicates affects – or more precisely, *is* the affect as indicative of itself, "tautegorical",<sup>22</sup> Lyotard says – rather than inscribing them as a moment of representation. The *phone* escapes the temporal order of the signifying chain and its interlocutors, in which a first "I" relates to a second "you", eventually convertible to objective third-person propositions that may be reported in a case study, ultimately becoming a theme for public, scientific discourse, with its "transcendental pragmatics" and rule-bound exchanges. The *phone* is simply *there*, as a tone or timbre just as elusive as it is insistent, in a *now* that defies the order of time as the structure of before and after; and it cannot even be attributed to a subject that would be its bearer, but rather belongs to the same dimension as the *in-fans*, the speechless and affective life that haunts all language, also and perhaps most insistently in its silence, in not being heard, or in disrupting the order of the *lexis*.

What is ultimately at stake in these later meditations on Freud's writings is perhaps not the truth about the Freudian texts themselves, even though Lyotard remains a scrupulous reader, sometimes even to the point of obscuring his more general claims. In *Discours, figure*, regardless of the suspicion against conceptual synthesis and argumentative closure, psychoanalysis could still be marshalled against the phenomenology of the body and visual depth as a discourse that would somehow be more *true*, closer to the event and the donation, and could be opposed to the philosophical project as such, which Lyotard at the time perceived as inextricably bound up with a Platonist downgrading of the disruptive force at work inside or beneath the sensible. However, just as inevitably as, say, the Nietzschean overturning of metaphysics as analysed by Heidegger, this countermove tended to produce yet another metaphysics, this time centred around the "drives", as Lyotard would later say. Against this, the later texts no longer pose as anti- or counter-philosophical, but propose as the task of philosophy to listen to that which lies underneath the *lexis*, communication, and the subject, not in order to dispel them in favour of some more originary power or energy (the "libidinal", as it was called in the earlier texts), but rather to uncover a

22 *Lectures d'enfance*, p. 137. The term "tautegorical" is also used by Lyotard to describe the Kantian sublime, in its capacity to disclose to us how it feels to think; see Lyotard, *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime (Kant, Critique de la faculté de juger, §§ 23–29)* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), p. 26.

different stratum – the passible, infancy – that they always presuppose. In this, psychoanalysis, art, and a certain albeit reluctantly accepted phenomenology, are allies, not because any one of them would be more true, but because each of them, in their particular way, are attempts to grasp the same ungraspable and ineluctable condition.

## The Limits of Communication

In the present context, it is particularly relevant to see how the theme of an irreducible obverse side to the *lexis* already from the outset comes to rework the idea of communication from within, so that it appears precisely as that which art must resist in order to preserve its proper, eventful dimension, that within the aesthetic that makes aesthetics as a discipline possible but also eludes it.

In an essay that was composed roughly out at the same time as *Les Immatériaux* opened, “Something Like: ‘Communication... without Communication’”,<sup>23</sup> Lyotard radically questions the idea of communication that at first glance seems like the unquestioned point of departure for the exhibition. The starting point for the essay is the respective and seemingly incompatible claims by Kant and Adorno, firstly that the faculty of judging is what renders our feeling universally communicable (*mitteilbar*) without the mediation of a concept (Kant), secondly that no work of art should be understood through the category of communication (Adorno). However, rather than an opposition, Lyotard here sees both claims as differently phrased, although in the end not incompatible, reactions to Hegel’s sublation of art into the concept, and in both he perceives the continuity of a quest for the possibility of a non-conceptual communication. It is precisely this communication without communication that is extinguished in modern communication theories and technologies, and finally in an art-industry that, in a phrase that echoes Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry, “would be a completion of speculative metaphysics, a way in which Hegel is present, has succeeded, in Hollywood”.<sup>24</sup>

Against this Lyotard marshals the Kantian analysis of the judgement of taste as something that is always presumed, a feeling or sentimentality that also requires a particular kind of community anterior to communication and pragmatics (the choice of terms here translating Lyotard’s resistance to the theories of communicative action and transcendental pragmatics in Habermas and Apel). This he calls a “passibility to space and time, necessary

23 The text was first presented as a lecture at the conference “Art et communication,” organized by Robert Allezaud at the Sorbonne in October 1985.

24 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 115.

forms of *aesthesis*”,<sup>25</sup> whose very possibility implicitly would then be what is fundamentally at stake in the world of immaterials, where “*calculated* situations are put forward as an aesthetic”,<sup>26</sup> and where the demand for efficiency, performance, and malleability have by far superseded the cybernetic theories that formed the horizon of Heidegger’s meditations on the essence of technology in the 1950s.

This passibility is neither an activity of forming a giving matter nor the simple passivity of receiving it, but rather, once more in continuity with the central theme of *Discours, figure*, presupposes a “donation” as “something fundamental, originary”,<sup>27</sup> that eludes our control and mastery. In the Kantian vocabulary employed by Lyotard here, this would not be the *determinable* matter given in an intuition that in fact is there only as already *determined* by the categories of the understanding, and a such only separable through a secondary reflection, but something that *seizes* us without already being part of cognition, and without necessarily being destined to become such a part. The origin of this gift however remains concealed, it is an X that Lyotard here refers not only to the Kantian transcendental object = x (in fact somewhat misleadingly, since this “x” is not a part of the conceptual structure of the third Critique that he here draws on, but belongs specifically to the analysis of cognition in the first Critique, as its constitutive limit), but also, and perhaps more pertinently, to Heidegger’s being as the withdrawn side of the ontological difference. The x is what gives matter for reflection and determination, and it is *on* it, perhaps even on its erasure or ruins, that we construct or aesthetic philosophies. The feeling that accompanies it is a “welcoming of what is given”,<sup>28</sup> and it is what ultimately renders the subject open to the world in a way that will also hold this world in suspense. The violence of donation and of a truth that “detonates” – which were the guiding ideas of *Discours, figure* as the argument moved from the still harmonious views of the phenomenologies of perception and the flesh to the unthinkable and unrepresentable primary process in Freud – here give way to a more benign, or perhaps neutral, conception of welcoming, giving, and gift that comes from Heidegger, although this is a heritage towards which Lyotard will remain ambivalent to the end, and not only for political reasons, but first and foremost because the response to the withdrawal of presence for him is an open-ended *experimentation* that he, rightly or wrongly, perceives to be missing in Heidegger.

This passible moment, the *there now* that is given only in a temporal spasm that precludes any there or now from being simply there and now, but only

25 Ibid., p. 110.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., p. 111.

28 Ibid.

allows them to be understood in an act of anamnesis or “re-writing”, is necessarily forgotten in representation and all the modes of production of reality that draw on modern communication technologies, it is their always presupposed and yet elusive underside. And yet it is precisely not opposed to them, but what makes them possible, which is why the immaterials of communication and resistance belong together, and one without the other would only give us a limited and distorted picture.

If we disregard this originary entanglement, the idea of resistance might seem to once more ensnare us in a dualist conception, where donation, the gift, and the domain of originary passibility only appear as that which *distorts* communication, as a kind of negativity and noise that in the end contributes nothing positive to thinking and experience. But as Lyotard notes, this is “because we think of presence according to the exclusive modality of masterful intervention”,<sup>29</sup> and creation only as a mode of technical construction at the expense of the openness to the eventfulness of the event; it must be both, anamnesis and construction, a memory of withdrawn presence and the experimental gay science unfolding in its wake.

In other words, if this withdrawal in some respects entails a loss of experience, a hollowing out of the subject, it has however itself to be *thought and felt*, also as an opening towards *other* dimensions of sensibility and experience. The exhibition becomes a way of doing this, i.e., not just to “signify” the difference between what in *Discours, figure* still appeared as the “space of the subject and the system”, but also to render this difference itself and its effects on us palpable. Thus the necessity of confronting “works” in the widest sense of the term – including not only the fine arts, but also science, technological artefacts, theories, modes of writing – with each other in order to produce the “unease” that a philosophical proposal, in the coherence and closure that inevitably characterize it, cannot avoid *dispelling*, and thus the need of an exhibitionary mode that expose thinking to an *outside*.

## An Aesthetic of Presence

A term that more and more comes to the fore throughout Lyotard’s later writings on art is “presence”. In what way should we understand this term? At first, it may seem to signal a somewhat surprisingly direct return to a phenomenology of perception and of the body, based in an aesthetic vision that underscores the material presence of artworks, touch, gesture, and a whole vocabulary that reinstalls precisely those motifs that *Les Immatériaux* would have deemed no longer possible. For some, this shift amounts to a nostalgic turn that, possibly under the influence of Heidegger, or more generally a phenomenological suspicion towards technology, discarded the

29 Ibid., p. 118.



radical perspective of invention and creation that was at the basis of *Les Immatériaux*.<sup>30</sup> As we will see, even though this characterization might be misleading as an account of Lyotard's development, it points to a set of problems in the late work that must be addressed. While the shift was not only already part of the initial statement of *Les Immatériaux*, but also corresponds to a motif that was there in Lyotard's thought from the beginning of his trajectory, it is also true that many of the claims that we find in his later writings perhaps tend to short-circuit the possibilities of his inquiry, in tying it too closely to particular forms of art in a way that immobilizes the exchange of concepts and particulars. In short, as we will argue, to remain faithful to the path opened up here, we must question some of Lyotard's examples, at least to the extent that they take on too much of a paradigmatic value, and in fact, in spite of the open-ended and hesitant philosophical character of his late writings, seem to resuscitate many traditional *topoi* of art theory.

From a certain distance, no doubt a respectful one and yet a distance, the term presence obviously refers to Derrida and the problem of the metaphysics of presence inherited from Heidegger (and the term "deconstruction" sometimes appears in the later writings, without further explication, in a way similar to *Discours, figure*). Lyotard's *presence* is however rather the opposite of Derrida's, or rather, it bears a strong resemblance to the kind of thinking that Derrida was trying to articulate through concepts like trace, *différance*, and spacing, precisely as the limits to the metaphysics of presence. Lyotard's presence signals the moment of what must remain elusive in the sensible, although by way of a difference that is announced in and by the sensible; it is a sensible no longer understood in opposition to the intelligible, but as a dimension of its own, which is why it also draws close to the immaterial materiality already at stake in *Les Immatériaux*. Colors, words, gestures, sounds are on the one hand what is presented, on the other hand they withdraw from presentation, and this duplicity is what gives the aesthetic dimension its privileged role; not however as a fullness or richness of sense that would have been betrayed in objectivity and technoscientific constructions, as the traditional phenomenological answer from Husserl's *Krisis* onward has been, but as a more enigmatic kind of poverty of sense, a "thing" that does not even address us, or remains turned away in its very address.

It is true that Lyotard often displays a profound suspicion toward the term aesthetics, which he associates to a tradition that finds its resources in Kant's third Critique and the Analytic of beauty, and its claims about beauty and harmony. Against this, he pits the Analytic of the sublime with its disruption of beauty's consonance, which for him signals an "anaesthetic" power that shatters form and the transitive relation of concept and world.

30 As has been suggested by Jean-Louis Déotte, in "*Les Immatériaux* de Lyotard (1985): un programme figural", *Appareil* 10 (2012).

Liotard has given us many versions of this particular claim, sometimes in a way that seems to straightforwardly disavow the basic ideas explored in *Les Immatériaux*. In the brief essay “Two Forms of Abstraction” (1988) he suggests that art today – somewhat surprisingly claimed to be generally characterized by “abstraction” – follows two main avenues. The first he calls Hegelian, or an art of the “understanding”, of the *Verstand*, where forms are posited as exterior to content, allowing beauty to become kitsch, without any density of singular experience. Such is the art, he suggests, produced through computation, synthesis, and technology – claims that are difficult not to read as directed against many of the items that were selected for *Les Immatériaux*, where the claim often seemed to be a discovery of a continuum between art from the early avant-garde onward and the new forms of everyday technologies that render the limits of the body and perception fluid and insecure. The second tendency, only briefly alluded to in the text, instead follows the line traced out by the Kantian sublime, with its emphasis on the unrepresentable, and leads up to a final alternative that once more seems to render aesthetics impossible, or at least without any purchase on what is essential: “caught between the two kinds of abstraction that I have just outlined, that of understanding which determines visual data, and that which clings to the indeterminable material presence hidden in the presentation of data, thus torn apart, how can an aesthetics, a reflection on the pleasure provided by the beauty of free forms, perpetuate itself?”<sup>31</sup> Now, while the first line seems to usher in a pessimistic view of art, the second opens the question of the work as event, as Lyotard underlines in another essay, “The Pictorial Event Today” (1993): “The intrinsic vacuity of the pictorial institution does not at all change the necessity of the gesture of painting, its ‘call’ to be carried out.”<sup>32</sup> This *gesture* of painting does not lead to a display of already recognized cultural forms, but opens onto a thought that mobilizes a different type of body: “Painting is the thought of painting, but its thought-body. It operates in, with and against the space-time and matter-color: the sensorium of the seeing body.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than celebrating the visual as a plenitude that would be the result of creation and subjective expression, the work is an appearance in which an apparition happens, by way of a particular negation of the visual: “The pictorial *factum* is completely different: it turns the chromatic (or formal, etc.) appearance into an apparition by marking the *aistheton* (the sensible) with a hallmark of its threatening suppression. The visibility of painting always retrieves itself up on blindness.”<sup>34</sup> It is not directed to sight, but to what is “incarcerated in sight”, and “transforms appearance into apparition, like the

31 Jean-François Lyotard, *Textes dispersés I: Esthétique et théorie de l'art / Miscellaneous Texts I: Aesthetics and Theory of Art* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), p. 199.

32 Ibid., p. 227.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., p. 228.

poem changes words, vehicles in the communicational field, into uncertain asteroids enveloped in nothingness."<sup>35</sup>

This process is for Lyotard precisely what gets lost in aesthetics. But would it not be equally pertinent, in fact more so, to see *both* moments as integral part of aesthetics, first of all since this is explicitly the case in Kant? The resource of such an aesthetic critique of reason, which is part of a long tradition extending far beyond the particular claims of Lyotard, is not that it fetishizes a sensibility that would in general be refractory to conceptual subsumption – although it sometimes does this too – but that it demands that such resistance be articulated in works that must always be approached as singular events, whose particular presence and take on the concept-sense divide cannot be derived from a general theory. This is in fact sometimes highlighted and even pushed to an extreme by Lyotard, to the effect that the only adequate philosophical response would be to surrender to the singular – once more a temptation to anti-philosophy, as it were, which in the end may prove as much a dead end as the unquestioned confidence in the subsuming gesture of philosophical aesthetics. This question of singularity, understood as a challenge to theory rather than its mere demise, is in fact what opens the problem of *writing*, as it once also did for Adorno: aesthetic theory, to the extent that it wants to measure itself to what is at stake in the works, is not theory that would have “the aesthetic” as one of its objects, but it is writing that itself must become constellation, in search of its own rules, without thereby merely emulating literature or some other artistic form. Just as little as the artwork can be accounted for by what it says, let alone “communicates”, can philosophical reflection, to the extent that it, as Adorno demands, steps into the monad of the work, settle for generalities, even though it is, as such, inevitably bound up with conceptual work, which is why aesthetic theory is still *theory*, even if not simply a theory *of* something that it would encounter as a set of mere external particulars. Aesthetic theory does not have objects that are simply there, but must in a certain way constitute the objects as questions at the same moment as it constitutes itself as a theory, in an exchange that renders both poles of the equation just as problematic.

It is however just as significant as it is problematic that Lyotard chooses to focus his later reflections almost exclusively on painting, not just in the biographical sense that his writings for various reasons dealt with painters like Jacques Monory, Valerio Adami, Sam Francis, Karel Appel, and many others, but also because of the philosophical weight given to a particular medium, to the extent that it is precisely painting that is given the role of challenging the philosopher to surrender in the face of what cannot be articulated. While Lyotard constantly rejects a certain art-historical approach, and instead wants to understand the works from within, precisely as questions to thought, he

35 Ibid.

remains strangely dependent on a set of claims inherited from the history of modernist painting, which as it were takes its revenge all the more since this historical narrative is claimed to have been suspended.

Thus, in these writings, Lyotard both pushes his own anaesthetic to the limit – of which surrender is one, although perhaps not the most productive form – and rehearses a series of surprisingly conventional claims that often seem to take him back to the rhetoric of action painting. In the book on Appel, Lyotard thus speaks of the necessity “to terminate the authority of arguments and to disturb the calm assurance of philosophical aesthetics”,<sup>36</sup> and what occasions this surrender is colour, or rather the “gesture of colour” that provides the book with its title, *Un geste de couleur*. Appel, according to Lyotard, approaches colour as that “which is there before form and concepts”,<sup>37</sup> and like Pollock, Appel would inscribe colour through a gesture that transfers the body onto the canvas, in a movement “not mediated by a concept, images, schemas, memories”, but as “colour itself”.<sup>38</sup> Colour is what transforms matter, leading it to “vibrate,” and finally is itself that which performs the “dance”. In the book on Sam Francis, *Leçons de ténèbres*, he finds a similar surrender to the chromatic material, this time inflected through darkness, whose “lesson” is that we must look to “the substance of which light is made”, leading Francis’ painting to “emanate from a blind void, (...) vanishing towards Black”.<sup>39</sup>

In this way, painting more and more becomes the very name of thought. Rather than a particular art form with its history and institutions, it appears as a cipher for the ineffable, as if divested of that historical specificity which it still retains, precisely in the evocation of colour, gesture, vibrations, dance, and a whole series of related terms that aspire to displace the vocabulary of subjectivity and expression in favour of the work’s eventhood, while still perpetuating it. It is precisely at this point that we believe that fidelity to Lyotard’s problems necessitates that we distance ourselves from what, no doubt too quickly, could be called his particular “taste”.

## Conclusion: Spacing Philosophy

From the point of view of those artistic practices that make up our present, there seems to be a need to disengage from painting, or at least to think the problem that Lyotard addresses in the name of painting in its full generality.

36 Jean-François Lyotard, “Karel Appel: Un geste de couleur / Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour”, in *Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 1 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), p. 27.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

39 Jean-François Lyotard, “Sam Francis: Leçon de Ténèbres / Sam Francis: Lessons of Darkness”, in *Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), p. 11.

The questions of the sensible, touch, and presence indeed remain with us, perhaps even in an intensified form, given the ubiquity of the digital and the electronic: the constellation of concepts and intuitions, of the body and the senses, and of the relation between work and truth, has by no means receded from the horizon. That the promises or threats of violent transformations of the life-world, of our bodily sensorium, of our experience of space and time, continue to haunt us shows the importance of the task.

In many ways the proposals of *Les Immatériaux* retrieve the promise of *indeterminacy* of the early avant-garde of the twentieth century, as Lyotard's own statements clearly indicate. While we seem to be faced with an infinity – and the experience of infinity as an abyss is a fundamental feature of *Les Immatériaux* as well as of Lyotard's writings on the sublime – of possible modes of experience, this just as much produces anxieties and fantasies, precisely the kind of “unease” that the exhibition wanted to provoke: a loss of self, identity, and stability, a disconnection from the space-time of perception, from matter, materials, and materiality, from the *ground* in all senses of the world. The question is how to make such an unease productive, how to make it into the *matter* of thought, in all senses of the term; how to allow for the “foundation crisis” not to be resolved too quickly by appeals to either the synthetic constructions of technoscience or a naïve, sensory given, but to make the “unease” that it produces become a productive condition for an experimental thinking and making.

The philosophical task proposed by Lyotard, if we see *Les Immatériaux* and the conjectural *Résistances* together with the many essays and writings that surround the first project and may be understood as pointing to the second, is the question of how we can approach artworks that, while they at least from conceptual art onward actively resist traditional modes of aesthetic enjoyment, nevertheless not just amount to a withdrawal of sense or sensibility, but rather open up to a restructuring of the sensorium that allows representation and its underside to enter into a new constellation that would be in tune with the mutations of our present space-time. For this, the term “postmodern” that Lyotard at one point suggested was perhaps a deceptive one, since it tends to enclose us in the schemas of cause-effect and before-after that his thought on the temporal knots of presence precisely took as its task to undo. Something similar must of course be said of all claims to locate the mutations of our present. For who would claim to know what the present is, what its limits and possibilities are? Just like any other temporal category the present is only given in anamnesis, through a rewriting and working-through; *Les Immatériaux* was such an attempt, unfinished, incomplete, and even contradictory, which is why it still demands to be not only thought, but also continued.

In hindsight, one cannot avoid noting that most of the technological inventions that appeared new and exciting in the 1980s have either become part of everyday life, and in this sense lost their capacity for producing both unease and thought, or, more alarmingly, turned into an increasingly hegemonic system of information and surveillance. All of this could be taken as simply an intensified version of what Adorno called the “administered world” – and one in which the techniques of administration have grown infinitely more subtle, insidious, and difficult to resist. In the world of global capital, where the ubiquity of information ensures that all thought is transformed into bits of exchangeable digitized units, identity and difference go together, and the unifying and levelling power of what was once called the “culture industry” have been replaced by a smooth production of differences, in taste, desires, lifestyles, and affective dispositions. Variation, specification, and infinitesimal penetration into the local is how capital works, and how it sustains its ordering and regimenting function on a higher level.

It is against this development that one could pit the insistence on zones of resistance to information: opacity, inertia, friction, physicality, all seem to offer other possible avenues, and the thinking of the sensible that Lyotard engages in his last writings. The sequel to *Les Immatériaux* could in this sense have amounted to a counter-statement, or, as we have attempted to show, an obverse side that was already present in the first exhibition, perhaps even as the possibility of completing its trajectory in the opposite direction, from language to body, from the immateriality of information to a kind of resistant materiality that is inherent in information as such.

The first problem with such a countermove is that it inevitably – as we saw in many instances in Lyotard’s own writings – runs the risk of reactivating regressive ideas of art, drawing on what are in fact highly traditional ideas of painting in particular, which since the advent of modernism in the mid-nineteenth century for a host of historical reasons has been accredited with the potential for providing us with an alternative to technological mediation. While obviously not as such simply exhausted, the ideas of touch, gesture, and the presence of colour, together with many other similar moves that emphasize the irreplaceable Here and Now in body art, performance, etc., often function as integrated parts of the system they supposedly dislodge, and in this they are akin to the movement of differentiation that is the other side of systemic control, and may exert a compensatory function. Such returns to the sensible can sometimes be conservative in an uninteresting sense, in simply claiming that we need to regress to some earlier point in time; others have a more complex agenda, for instance as in the theories of “obsolescence”, where the strategic return to technologies and mediums that are no longer considered up to date allow for a different take on historical genealogies, but without making any claim that we could return to the

past without further ado.<sup>40</sup> Both of these returns however share a focus on medium, no doubt as an echo of a formalist legacy that can be retrieved in any number of ways, and yet remains caught in a theory of art and an aesthetic that begins by shunning away from the present. The convergence of material “carriers”, or at least their almost infinite variability – which was one of the basic claims of *Les Immatériaux* – poses problems that are unlikely to be addressed in a relevant fashion by the reclaiming of obsolete technologies. This is obviously not to deny the force, critical value or interest of any particular form of artistic practice, only to note the complexity of the problem of resistance, which, as already the classical formulations of information theory show, is a necessary part of transmission and not something that would form a radical outside. It would seem that Lyotard poses the problem, but then, as he moves away from the at least seemingly celebratory stance of *Les Immatériaux*, somehow ends up being trapped in his own examples, which limit the force and scope of his philosophical claims.

Second, if we begin in a theory of resistance – which must also be thought as a resistance *in* or *to* theory itself, if we follow Lyotard’s mediations on passibility, the event, and other related concepts – that takes its cues from the physical features of circuits and information systems, how can we move upwards to the dimension of subjectivity and social practice? If a concept like resistance is to be at the centre, the political dimension that seemed more or less absent from *Les Immatériaux* must somehow be addressed, in a way that articulates the physical with the social.

In terms of exhibitions as physical sites, an ulterior issue would be the possibility of pursuing the inverted trajectory in the form of an exhibition that takes account of the transformations of space itself that have occurred since *Les Immatériaux*. Could the move back from language to body, or on the level of an exhibition, from information to space, at all be undertaken in the sense that it would project an abstract level into a circumscribed location? If this is still the case, it must in a produce its own space as a different kind of interstice or interface in a way that takes into account the shifting relations between the abstract and the concrete, the material and the immaterial. The sites of the work and the exhibition have long since become if not wholly obsolete, then at least far removed from the phenomenological coordinates that once upheld the first discussions on site specificity, and have gone through many stages, from the various attempts to inhabit the institutions in a reflexive and critical fashion, to the complex overlays of places, times, and representation that characterize much of contemporary art.<sup>41</sup> Thus, spiralling downwards we pass

40 This concept has been developed by Rosalind Krauss; see, for instance, “Reinventing the Medium”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25 (1999), and “The Rock: William Kentridge’s Drawings for Projection”, *October*, no. 92 (2000).

41 For a succinct analysis of these three steps, the phenomenological site, the site of institutional critique, and the “discursive” site, see Miwon Kwon, “One Place after

from what appears as spheres of pure ideality, a weightless realm of information circulating frictionlessly, to inertia, body, visceral grounding, and incarnation – but to *which body, which ground*, provided that we must keep the crisis of foundations alive as the possibility of thought? As Lyotard himself suggested, the grand claims about the end of Modernity and the possible emergence of something entirely new, were in the end discernible only as a question mark or as something missing, a certain absence: “I keep telling myself, in fact, that the entirety of the exhibition could be thought of as a sign that refers to a missing signified.”<sup>42</sup>

Another: Notes on Site Specificity”, *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997): 85–110.

42 Interview with Bernard Blistène, in *Art And Philosophy* (Milan: Flash Art Books, 1991).