# Contemporary Art as *"Immatériaux"*: Yesterday and Today

**Francesca Gallo**

In 1985 as today, the historical and critical interest of *Les Immatériaux* lies, in my opinion, in the way it opposed the trend towards the triumph of traditional values that marked the 1980s. This was a decade in which, in both the political and cultural arenas, the Western world witnessed the gradual advance and dominance of conservative positions, with the great success of a return to the various forms of painting: Transavanguardia, Neue Wilde, New Expressionism, and so on. *Les Immatériaux* should be understood as a kind of "Manifesto of Technophilic Postmodernism", of which Jean-François Lyotard was an interpreter.

While Lyotard left his stamp on *Les Immatériaux* especially through the work he did on the exhibition as a medium – the organization and display, the soundtrack, the catalogue, etc., are the very areas in which one can sense the hand of the philosopher[1] –, for the selection of the works, Lyotard often relied on specialists (such as Alain Sayag for the photography, or Bernard Blistène for fine arts). Indeed, after studying the documents in the archives of the Centre Pompidou,[2] one can understand that the collaboration with the National Museum of Modern Art (the art department of the Centre Pompidou,

---

1    Cf. Rosalind Krauss, "Le musée sans mur du postmodernisme", *Cahiers du MNAM*, no. 17–18 (1986): 152–158; Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (eds), *Thinking about Exhibition (*London & New York: Routledge, 1996); Jean Davallon, *L'exposition à l'oeuvre* (Harmattan: Paris, 2000).

2    I dedicated my PhD to *Les Immatériaux* and Lyotard's interest in contemporary art. See Francesca Gallo, *Les Immatériaux. Un percorso di Jean-François Lyotard nell'arte contemporanea* (Rome: Aracne, 2008); "Ce n'est pas une exposition, mais une oeuvre d'art: l'exemple de Les Immatériaux de Jean-François Lyotard," *Revue Appareil* (online), Varia, Articles, November 3, 2009, http://revues.mshparisnord.org/appareil/index.php?id=860.
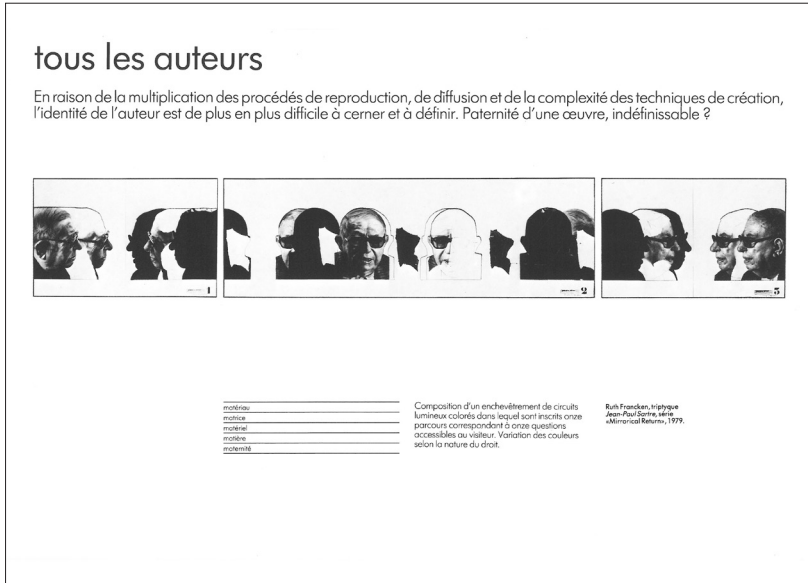
[Figure 11] Ruth Francken: *Jean-Paul Sartre*, 1979. *Inventaire*, site *Tous les auteurs*, recto (Source: Centre Pompidou, MNAM, Bibliothèque Kandinsky).

MNAM) wasn't easy. For example, Lyotard did little to secure loans from other museums, an exception being the Egyptian bas-relief of the Grenoble Museum[3] – a strange choice, if truth be known. Despite this, the choice of art-works exhibited in *Les Immatériaux* is very stimulating, and gives rise to many lines of thought, even though the works represent only a part of the materials, documents, artefacts, instruments and images that filled the 60 sites on the fifth floor of the Centre Pompidou.

## Unstable Photographic Identities

I will concentrate on different types of works by artists who were alive at that time, in order to demonstrate the idea of postmodern art that Lyotard valued. Let us start with photography (by which I mean works of art made with a camera), among which those by Annegret Soltau, Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, and Ruth Francken, are the most representative.

Ruth Francken is one of the few artists included in *Les Immatériaux* whose work Lyotard knew personally. Indeed, he wrote a long essay about her entitled *L'Histoire de Ruth*, which was published as a short monograph in 1983. Francken concentrates on photographic portraits using *dècoupages* to replace faces with drawings, or silhouettes made of corrugated cardboard and parts of

3    Archives Centre Pompidou, deposit 1994033, b. 668, fasc. *Compte-rendus et réunions.*

[Figure 12] Exhibition view, site *L'Ange* (site design by Martine Moinot): Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki, *Orlando-Hermaphrodite II* (Source: Klonaris/Thomadaki).

other photographs, bits of broken mirrors and so on. It's a process which calls into question the reliability of photographs as a means of documentation, following the footprints of Surrealism. The triptych *Jean-Paul Sartre*, 1979 (from the series *Mirrorical Return*), is reproduced on the page of *L'Inventaire* dedicated to the site *Tous les auteurs* [Figure 11]. The position of this work, far from being random, uses its power to challenge the supposed objectivity of the portrait, be it photographic or drawn. This aspect is made even more explicit by the choice of work on public figures (among which are Jean Tinguely, Yannis Xenakis, Samuel Beckett, John Cage, Joseph Beuys, and Lyotard himself). The philosopher sees in this modus operandi a proof of the conception of a multiple identity: these portraits contain within them a type of implied otherness of the subject.[4]

The same applies to another photography work, this time by Maria Klonaris and Katharina Thomadaki – *Orlando-Hermaprodite II* (1983, 15 black-and-white photographs) – which is located on the site *L'Ange*. This work superimposes self-portraits of the two artists, and is inspired by *Orlando* and *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf [Figures 12, 13]. On the same site one can find images taken

4    Jean-François Lyotard and Ruth Francken, *L'Histoire de Ruth* (Paris: Le Castor Astral, 1983), p. 9–65; the same writing is also in the exhibition catalogue of *L'Histoire de Ruth*, an exhibition first shown at the Parisian gallery J. & J. Donguy, and afterwards travelling in Germany in 1986–87.

from the two artists' *Mistère I: Hermaphrodite endormi/e* (1982), which show the well-known Greek statue.

Klonaris and Thomadaki started a new cycle of works in 1985, dedicated to *L'Ange*, in which inter-sexuality and inter-media are joined. Their research is very complex from the point of view of the media used (film, photography, multi-media installations, video, holograms and digital images), at the centre of which there is, however, a cohesive set of themes related to the body and sexual gender. The focus on these issues defined the artistic nucleus of the 1970s, when efforts in the field of the expanded cinema coincided with the feminist position.[5]

At the site *L'Ange*, *Schwanger* (*Pregnant*), a work by Annegret Soltau, can also be seen.[6] The German artist has focused – from the late '70s until today – on the themes of motherhood and female identity, often using her own body, as for example in *Schwanger*: a mosaic of photographs which documents her pregnancy, following the transformation of the physical appearance of the woman's body [Figure 14]. *Schwanger* consists of front and profile shots, in successive stages, and culminates with the explosion of the reassuring shape of the pregnant body in a blurry image of light and shadow on the film. Formalizing the union between birth and death, formation and deformation, defined and undefined, the sequence of the shots makes this classic and reassuring theme of motherhood disturbing; it overturns the traditional iconography and harks back to the feminist demands and the threats that progress in science and technology poses to the individual and the physical body.

Taken together, these three cases are emblematic of the attention that *Les Immatériaux* dedicated to identity, and to the transformation which this idea has suffered due to advances in science and technology such as plastic surgery, genetic engineering, robotics, and more recently the web, which is just the latest challenge to arrive. It is also worth mentioning that the deconstruction of the concept of identity is one of the most prominent themes of anti-metaphysics, of which Lyotard and Jacques Derrida were defenders. Deconstruction is a method that is anti-systemic, anti-authoritarian and anti-homogenizing, and is fully in line with the type of postmodernism of which Lyotard was an interpreter.

Looking at our present time, certain themes beloved by Lyotard are still topical. For example, the game of identity has become one of the most widespread pastimes among web users: social networks, blogs, chatrooms and dating portals have fuelled the fashion of self-presentation and *representation*,

5    Cf. *Maria Klonaris, Katerina Thomadaki*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: ASTARTI, 1985); Sandra Lischi, *Visioni elettroniche* (Rome: Marsilio, 2001), p. 109–110; and the artists' web site: http://www.klonaris-thomadaki.net.
6    The photographic reproduction of *Schwanger* is to be found in the *Inventaire,* on the page dedicated to the site *Les trois mères*.

[Figure 13] Maria Klonaris and Katerina Thomadaki: *Orlando-Hermaphrodite II* (Source: Klonaris/Thomadaki).

backed by the great pressure of television. Anna Helmond has explored the link between search engines, social networks and identity constructions, showing how software and works associated with these web tools – as "Identity 2.0" – are a variant of a performative notion of identity, once again

elaborated within postmodernism. Such forms of self-representation are more dynamic than static personal webpages, because they make possible the storage of documents related to the flow of personal and professional life. But the fact that they are often produced with an API (Application Programming Interface) causes a substantial seriality of personal profiles, documented in the various social networks. The relationship between self-determination and over-determination of identity is variable, but forms and contents automatically selected by software seem to prevail.[7]

Among female artists like Orlan, Cindy Sherman, Adrian Piper, and so on, Lynn Hershman, a pioneer of new-media art who has explored gender stereotypes in her famous alter ego *Roberta Beirtmore* (1974–78) – a work with a strong photographic part –, alludes precisely to mixture, where the percentage of stereotype prevails over personal identity. I am referring to *DiNA* (2004), an artificially intelligent agent, linked to the Internet and equipped with a custom software, video, and microphone, which makes her able to directly interact with the museum visitor [Figure 15]. *DiNA* is engaged in an ongoing campaign, via her website, for virtual elections to the office of TV-president; she converses with voters and collects votes on topics pertinent to global survival. *DiNA* is unique because she is able to process these responses in real time, and to mix virtual events which have occurred during her campaign with current events as they are unfolding throughout the world. Lynn Hershman writes about this work: "I've always been attracted to digital tools and cinematic metaphors that reflect our times, such as privacy in an era of surveillance, personal identity in a time of pervasive manipulations."[8]

## The Postmodern Painting

In *Les Immatériaux* there were, of course, some examples of paintings. On this matter Paul Crowther has pointed out that the lack of the type of painting that was most popular at that time – New Expressionism, for example – showed that the selection used by Lyotard was guided by modernist criteria which, from the starting point of the historical avant-garde, led inevitably to conceptual art.[9] This is an interesting perspective, that, in my opinion, reiterates the fact that Lyotard is an interpreter of a postmodernism which is technophilic and post-structural rather than nostalgic and conservative.[10]

7    Cf. Anne Helmond, "Lifetracing. The Traces of a Networked Life", in *Networked. A Networked Book about Networked Art*, 2009, http://networkedbook.org; Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999).

8    Lynn Hershman Leeson, in *The Art and Film of Lynn Hershman Leeson. Secret Agent, Private I*, ed. Meredith Tromble (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

9    Cf. Paul Crowther, *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996, 1st ed. 1993).

10   Cf. Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays in Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983); Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York:
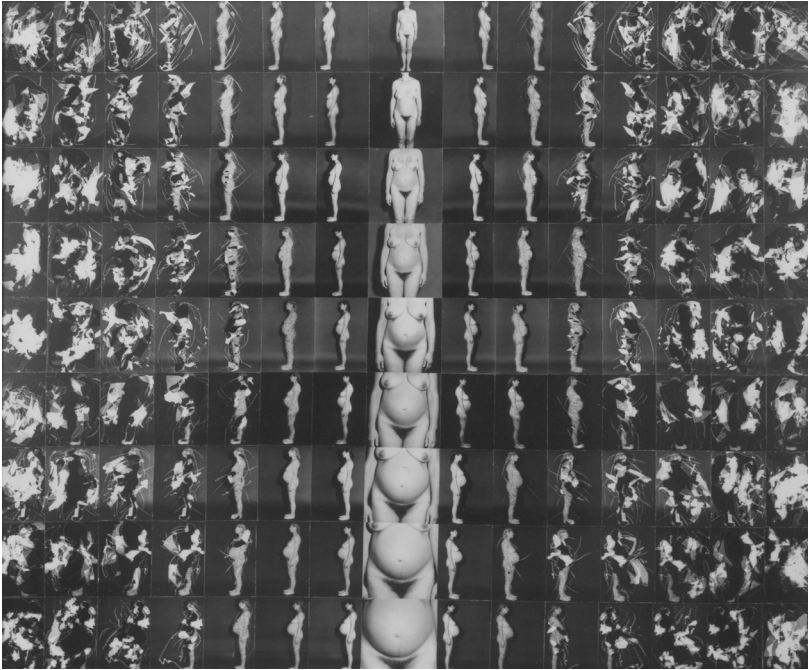
[Figure 14] Annegret Soltau: *Schwanger*, 1978–80, site *Trois mères* (Source: Annegret Soltau, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015).

Even among the painters featured in the exhibition, one finds artists who Lyotard followed closely, like Jacques Monory. The site *Peintre sans corps*, in fact, is entirely occupied by *Explosion* (1973), a set of four diptychs (one painting and three photographic print canvases) depicting, from a close vantage point, the explosion of an aeroplane landing on a runway. In the sequence of canvases, the image fades and grows dim, eventually becoming barely discernible, as if it had been washed away. The title of the site (*Peintre sans corps or "P*ainter without body"*) alludes to the choice by Monory, as well as other hyper-realist painters, to suppress the gesture of painting in favour of the photographic print, a "mechanical" procedure. But the feeling when standing in front of the canvases is that painting itself was deprived of its body – i.e. the sensual aspect, the colour. This is one of the sites where the basic assumptions of a work of art, such as its physical aspects and its procedures, are challenged by the methods of the artist, following a sense of immateriality. Lyotard, at the time, had just dedicated to Monory a highly complex text, the *Assassinat de l'experience de la peinture* (1984), consisting of two essays – the first written in

Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984); M. Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic Media* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).

the '70s, the second at the beginning of the '80s[11] – which, taken together, document the transition from a mindset based in psychoanalysis and Marxism, in which the forms of artistic production are reflected in the forms of economic production, to the aesthetics of the sublime applied to contemporary art. Monory – a dispassionate painter who portrays the environments of the "jet set" and fashionable interiors – has become famous for polyptychs dedicated to violent events, in which he painted the scene of a crime or its protagonists, without sentiment, almost like a photojournalist.

In these paintings, the image is often repeated, as if it were the frame of a film, or a sequence of photographs; an impression which is also accentuated by the serial nature of the composition, obtained by the use of adjacent panels. At the same time, the scenes are often displayed inside monitors, mirrors, glass and windows, as if to confirm the role of the photographic framing as a visual mediation, one that is artificial and mechanical. It is for this reason that Lyotard proposes an implicit comparison between the photochemical and electronic visual devices, and the reproduction of the image, on the one hand, and the techniques and themes of the contemporary painter on the other.[12]

In *Ciels, nébuleuses et galaxies* (1978–81) Monory, instead, reproduces images of the starry sky without any "poetry", because they were taken from recordings of radio telescopes: the primary source of the painter is stored numerical data transformed into images by software.

The reference to an "impersonal" iconography, such as radio telescopes or illustrated magazines, and the use of a mechanical technique, presupposes, of course, an anonymous observer: the sources and methods are diluted by the ubiquitous mass media; and, paradoxically, the realism of the scenes painted by Monory coincides with them being "recognizable" as images that belong to the universe of fashion, industrial production, scientific documentation, and the illustrated story of televisual communication.

Lyotard takes the inadequacy of the aesthetic category of beauty in contemporary art as widely understood and, in the case of Monory, he explains that Monory's painting "*does not solicit taste, in the Kantian sense of a disinterested sentiment that claims universality and, in doing so, appeals to a sensible community in agreement with itself as to what should be felt.*"[13] Monory's paintings are postmodern – continues Lyotard – because they have achieved the synthesis of the infinite (sublime) and finite (beautiful).[14] This text of 1981 is the first occasion in which Lyotard applies the concept of the sublime to contem-

---

11    Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory* (Paris: Le Castor astral, 1984).

12    Ibid.

13    Jean-François Lyotard, "Esthétique sublime du tuer à gages", in *L'Assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory*, p. 144–145.

14    Ibid., p. 145–154.

[Figure 15] Lynn Hershman: *DiNA*, 2004 (Source: Lynn Hershman).

porary art:[15] a connection that is mainly based on the fact that the painter, by choosing to paint images which use media as their primary source, brings into play technical reproduction.

## Ways of Interaction in Art

However, it is certainly not painting which draws the most attention in the exhibition curated by Lyotard, but rather – as I pointed out at the beginning – the presence of works of new-media art, and in particular of some interactive

---

15    In the same years appeared the following texts by Lyotard: *La pittura del segreto nell'epoca postmoderna, Baruchello* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1982); *Rappresentazione, presentazione, impresentabile* (1982), now in *L'Inumano* (Milan: Lanfranchi, 2001, ed. orig. Paris, 1988), p. 159–170; *Il sublime e l'avanguardia* (1983), now in ibid., p. 123–144; *L'istante, Newman* (1984), now in ibid., p. 109–122; cf. Francesca Gallo, "Lyotard fra estetica, arte e critica d'arte. Forme di resistenza e modi di decostruzione", *Annali di critica d'arte*, no. 2 (2006), p. 637–660.

installations and works of computer art, which are novel – bearing in mind the aesthetic predilections of the philosopher, who usually paid more attention to painters.

Many of those who knew Lyotard remember his curiosity and enthusiastic interest in new technological devices: stories which we can well believe when we see pictures of Lyotard using the headphones that carry the soundtrack of the exhibition [Figure 16]. The headphones were one of the ideas that the philosopher-curator was most proud of, and for which he explicitly took credit.[16]

Returning to the selection of the works of new-media art, it seems to me that this is the terrain on which Lyotard had the strongest confrontations with the other lecturers from the University of Paris VIII. Jean-Louis Boissier remembered his extensive collaboration on *Les Immatériaux*: Boissier's work *Le Bus* is one of the iconic works of the exhibition, particularly because of the exploration of urban space that it proposes, which in some ways recalls the Situationist practice of urban drifting[17] [Figure 9]. The latter, in turn, is a fitting model for the visit to *Les Immatériaux*: that is, to stroll, with no points of orientation, being able to keep crossing the same sites, and observe objects of a different nature, such as those that the Situationists observed in the shop windows and in the streets of Paris.

Disorientation is perhaps the most ubiquitous element in *Les Immatériaux,* and the image which best illustrates the "confusion" experienced during a visit to the exhibition was, perhaps, the catalogue, which was made up of a hundred loose sheets (not bound in a book) – much as the individual sites were not included in a pre-planned, sequential or narrative-driven route of the exhibition. The architect Philippe Délis has underlined how the spatial conception of the exhibition – which at the time was novel – has become familiar to us during the last 20 years, mainly thanks to the experience of surfing the net.[18]

16    The headphones were tuned to various soundtracks which were present in some areas of the exhibition. During the visit one could listen to different emissions/programmes – just like a car radio which passes from one station to another during a journey. In this case, the relationship between the soundtrack and the visual images was complex in nature and echoed the method Lyotard had used in various videos in the '70s and '80s: in both cases he made extensive use of being out of sync, as the quintessence of the anti-narrative.

17    Cf. Jean-Louis Boissier, *La relation comme forme. L'interactivité en art* (Genève: MAMCO, 2004); F. Gallo, "*Le Bus* di Jean-Louis Boissier: esplorazione vs deriva", *Materiali di Estetica*, n.s., n. 1 (2010): 322–329.

18    Cf. Phillipe Délis, *Les Immatériaux*, speech at round table *L'Hyper matériel/l'immatériel, le paradoxe de l'usage des matières*, international congress *L'œuvre plus que jamais* (Institut Français de Casablanca, April 2005), now in www.integral-philippedelis.com; *Architecture: l'espace-temps autrement...*, in E. Théofilakis (ed.), *Modernes, et aprés? "Les Immatériaux"* (Paris: Édition Autrement, 1985).

[Figure 16] Jean-François Lyotard during the opening of *Les Immatériaux*, 26 March 1985 (from left to right: Claude Pompidou, Thierry Chaput, Jean-François Lyotard, Jack Lang) (Source: Centre Pompidou, MNAM, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, photograph by Jean-Claude Planchet).

But returning to the interactive art of *Les Immatériaux*, as well as *Le Bus*, there is *Son=Espace*, created *ad hoc* by Rolf Gehlhaar [Figure 17]. Technically advanced, the work was indebted to research in visual kinetics. *Son=Espace* comprised a space which viewers walked through, with sensors that picked up the movements of the audience and turned them into sounds by means of an elaborate computerized system devised by the artist. This project was born from the idea of creating a piece of music that was non-deterministic, and in fact Gehlhaar had been working since 1983 on developing an adequate software program, work which also gave rise to the title of the work. The movements of the user were detected by a sensor system using ultrasonic devices, which sent them to the software. The software produced different sounds, depending on the areas in which the public was located, on the speed and direction of the movement, and so on. The work consisted of the software developed by the artist which, among other things, he has continued to work on since, creating different variations of the prototype exhibited at the Centre Pompidou[19] thanks to the committee of La Villette, the museum of science and technique that opened in 1986, and for which *Les Immatériaux* was, from the point of view of institutional policy, a sort of dress rehearsal.

But what are Lyotard's ideas about these works of art? Can one consider "interactivity" as being equivalent, in the arts, to the theme of "the crisis of the subject" in philosophy?

19    See Rolf Gehlhaar, *Sound=Space*, http://www.gehlhaar.org.

In the early 1980s, Lyotard argued that "experience" is a modern concept, which is possible when the following conditions are present: 1) there is a subject (ego); 2) there is a dimension of time articulated by past-present-future; and 3) the idea that the world, and the objects which compose it, are objects of the alienation of the subject itself, which is a necessary step to ensure that the subject goes dialectically back to itself, according to Hegel's philosophy. The expansion of the "technical science-based capitalist" since the nineteenth century, however, has suppressed these basic points of reference, implying that the ego, and the linear concept of time that produces experience, do not exist, and that the world has no need for alienation – that is, for the objectification of the subject that is necessary for it to understand itself.[20] In a nutshell, you could say that we are facing the prelude to the "crisis of the subject" that is one of the themes of contemporary thought, running parallel to the "crisis of objectivity", or the crisis of the existence of the traditional concept of truth as a matter of correspondence between subject and object.[21]

The epistemological and aesthetic legitimacy of plural narratives and truth, therefore, is reflected in the redefinition of the role of the author. According to Lyotard, the author may appear in a different guise than that which is defined by a form;[22] while, at the same time, modern day social communication leads to a rejection of space for contemplation, in favour of the "active" spectator, who meets the "proposing" author halfway, in a type of dialogue in which the two roles merge and become confused.[23] On the other hand, Lyotard shares the premise of the "death of the author" proposed by Roland Barthes in 1968, according to which it is the reader who takes responsibility for the construction of meaning.

However, despite these premises, Lyotard is not at all convinced that interactivity with a work of art is a transfer of theory from a linguistic game to the artistic field. This is primarily because art cannot be equated with a move in a game: if anything, communication can be equated to a move in a game. Art is a creative move that experiments, that rewrites the rules of the game while playing**.** Therefore, when art is combined with new technology, according to Lyotard, art can not simply change its form to adopt that of new technologies. The specific point of the artistic experience remains in the realm of emotion and sensitivity; Lyotard uses a term that is difficult to translate: "*passibilité*",[24]

---

20   Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, "L'Expertise", in *L'Assassinat de l'expérience par la peinture, Monory*, p. 7–10.

21   Cf. H. Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern. A History* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995); R. Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1997); D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, Mass./Oxford: Routledge, 1990).

22   Jean-François Lyotard, "Qualcosa come: 'comunicazione… senza comunicazione asdf'", in *L'Inumano*, p. 156.

23   Cf. ibid., p. 156–157.

24   Ibid., p. 155–156.

[Figure 17] Rolf Gehlhaar, *Son = Espace*, 1983-85, installation view, site *Musicien malgré lui* (Source: Rolf Gehlhaar).

which is not only the opposite of impassivity, but also the condition by which we welcome, we receive, as when we are touched by something else without knowing what it is – or, in Kantian terms, without any intellectual intervention.

It is difficult to say whether the philosopher of postmodernism would have appreciated a new kind of artwork, made with data flows on the web – one of the newest forms of interaction. Carlo Zanni, an Italian artist who lives in Milan and New York, combines technical research with high-level stylistic solutions, while also integrating suggestions from literary texts and soundtracks.

From *Ebay Landscape* (2004) – where the form of a simple Japanese landscape changes constantly following the NASDAQ, the stock market of *Ebay*, and the CNN home page – to *In time* (2005) – a skyline where the weather changes every 15 minutes according to the meteorological station at La Guardia Airport, while the choppers and zeppelins follow the updates of CNN website, and the skyline is like a dynamic histogram related with the most frequent queries on the *Time Out New York* website[25] – Zanni explores a sort of inter-action without personal intentions.

The fluid and unstable nature of these works is evidently a metaphor for our increasingly connected world. In the same direction, Zanni works on "data cinema", which is what he calls a kind of work in which the constant changing of the web – with which the user interacts via his or her Internet connection – modifies the novel. *The Possible Ties Between Illness and Success* (2006) is a

25    See http://www.zanni.org.

[Figure 18] Carlo Zanni, *The Fifth Day*, 2009 (still of the web work) (Source: Carlo Zanni).

reflection upon the relationship between talent, success and manic-depressive illness. We observe the protagonist of a short film attacked by a progressive disease. The spots that slowly cover his body, like a contagious disease, are generated automatically by software that communicates with Google Analytics, a well-known statistical analysis system for monitoring the traffic on websites: "The patches extend as much as the virtual visitors increase, and distribute on the actor's body in different places, depending on the geographical origin of the visitors. The film is constantly changing, due to the interaction of the unaware spectators."[26]

Another work by Zanni embodies early analysis of digital photography, as proposed by Edmond Couchot more than fifteen years before.[27] *The Fifth Day* (2009) is a sequence of pictures showing a taxi ride. The photos were taken in Alexandria (Egypt). They change during the exhibition, because linked to the web, being thereby sensitive to the dataflow from Egypt, describing the evolution of statistics of some aspects of its cultural and political life. The data, retrieved from the Internet and transforming the aesthetics of the photos, relate to such matters as the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament (which changes the position of the pedestrian crossing the road in one photo), or the perception of corruption (which changes the image in the rear-view mirror of the taxi in another photo),[28] to name just two [Figure 18].

So, in the end, in my opinion, works of art based on the Internet are the clearest examples of how *Les Immatériaux* was on the right track, in the middle of the 1980s.

---

26    Valentina Tanni, "Il cinema ha un nuovo DNA", *Exibart.onpaper*, no. 47 (2008); "Maps and Legends. When Photography Met the Web", in *Fotografia 2010. Futurespective*, exhibition catalogue (Rome: Macro, 2010).

27    Cf. Edmond Couchot, "La synthèse numérique de l'image: vers un nouvel ordre visuel", *Traverses*, no. 26 (1982), p. 56–63; Edmont Couchat and Norbert Hillaire, *L'art numérique: comme la technologie vient au monde de l'art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003).

28    See http://www.zanni.org.
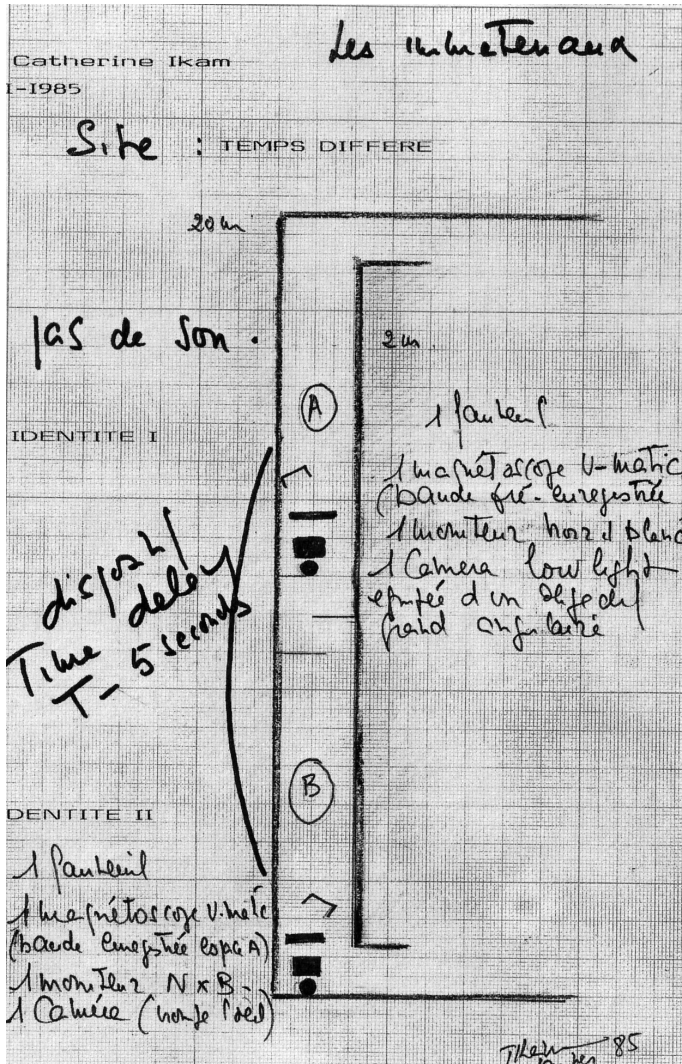
[Figure 19] Catherine Ikam, installation sketch, site *Temps différé* (detail from *Inventaire*, site *Temps différé*, verso) (Source: Centre Pompidou, MNAM, Bibliothèque Kandinsky).

Continuing our stroll through *Les Immatériaux*, looking for works of new-media art, we encounter a work that is almost "rudimentary" for its time, even when compared to *Le Bus* or *Son=Espace*, for example. I am talking about *Temps différé* (1985) by Catherine Ikam, a closed-circuit video installation identifiable with the site of the same name.

Originally linked to minimalist research on perception and its space-time dimension (an example being Bruce Nauman's work), and subsequently

focusing on the social implications of video surveillance (different examples we can cite are the experiences of Fred Forest and Dan Graham), closed-circuit video installations are located in an intermediate position between video art and interactive environments.

The artwork of Ikam focuses in particular on the distorting effect that mirrors have on closed-circuit television [Figure 19]. *Temps différé* consists of two rooms, which are identical, empty and interconnected, equipped with a video surveillance system: a minimalist purity whose result is rather mundane. In the first room, the visitor sees on the monitor the place where he is standing, devoid of his own presence; in the second environment, however, the TV displays an image of the preceding space, recorded immediately before. In this way, the experience of the place and its image on the monitor do not match, as occurs in the classical *Corridors* of Bruce Nauman. The goal in both cases is to undermine the fidelity, realism and documentary ability of the video, and to simultaneously induce in the viewer a kind of cognitive vertigo, caused by the inconsistencies.[29]

I have long questioned why Lyotard chose such an outdated work, even if it was specially made for *Les Immatériaux*. Beyond any other considerations, I believe that the philosopher meant the selected artworks to serve as emblems, symbols of certain tendencies in contemporary society, and that he therefore sometimes glossed over the artistic value of some of the works. *Les Immatériaux* is a classic example of an educational exhibition – a theoretical exhibition if you like – rather than an object-oriented show. And this is also the reason why some works were displayed both at the 1983 exhibition *Electra: Electricity and Electronics in the Twentieth Century,*[30] and at *Les Immatériaux*, because they have a very different meaning and purpose in the two exhibitions.

In the case of *Temps différé*, it is probably the idea of using feedback, which is at the core of the artwork, that Lyotard found interesting: it is a concept that was borrowed from biology and psychology, and that has been applied to both social communication and the arts. Starting from the various forms of interactivity, passing through some examples of Institutional Critique, of Conceptual Art and Relational Art, the attention given to "feedback" is a typical aspect of late modern culture, and one of those concepts that mark the horizon of artistic research in the last 30 to 40 years, even if it changes its appearance.

Before concluding, some thoughts on one of the most challenging and perhaps the most successful spaces included in *Les Immatériaux* – at least

29    Cf. Catherine Ikam. *Dispositif pour un parcours video*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980).

30    Cf. *Electra: l'électricité et l'électronique dans l'art du XX siècle*, exhibition catalogue curated by Frank Popper, Paris (Musée de la Ville), 1984; Katherine Dieckmann, "Electra Myths: Videos, Modernism, Postmodernism", *Art Journal,* Fall (1985), p. 195–203.

according to the public at the time. I refer to the site *Labyrinthe du language*, full of computer terminals where one could experience the first rudimentary forms of network connection through the network Minitel (the French ancestor of the web), and play with some examples of computer art which were extremely simple and graphics-based.

From a current perspective, it is *Epreuves d'écriture* that attracts our interest. Its relative failure – due both to the inadequacy of the computer equipment, and a lack of familiarity on the part of the intellectuals with this new form of writing and the idea of mutual cooperation – brings us to examine the instincts of the curatorial team and the importance of infrastructure in the form taken by an artwork. Today *Epreuves d'écriture* is a curious chronicle publication that includes the experience of specialists from different disciplines, called to deal with the new ways of online word processing, which was still full of technical problems. The book is obviously the wrong format for a work that should have continued to be produced in a digital format, like a hypertext (on a hard-drive memory, because the CD-ROM did not yet exist).

*Epreuves d'écriture* is located between the *Plissure du texte* (1983), which Roy Ascott created for the *Electra* exhibition, and the network organized also by Ascott for the laboratory *Ubiqua* at the Corderie dell'Arsenale at the 1986 Venice Biennal.[31]. At *Les Immatériaux*, instead, Roy Ascott presented *Organ et function d'Alice au pays des merveilles*, in which, through Minitel, the inhabitants of the Île-de-France could intervene by altering the text from home, in a more anonymous and free way than in other, comparable works by Ascott:

> Randomly selected quotations from a French translation of Lewis Caroll's *Alice in Wonderland* were juxtaposed with quotations from a scientific treatise entitled *Organe et function*, creating unexpected relationships and associations. Conventional notions of originality, authenticity, objecthood, narrative, and style were supplanted by appropriation, duplication, distribution, juxtaposition, and randomness.[32]

I agree with Edward Shanken's claims, not only in relation to the vitality of BBS (Bulletin Board System), local networks and blogs in the 1990s and the first decade of this century, but even today, when verbal communication and narration are still attractive for those who work with new-media art.

Translated from the Italian by Mary Desmond and Pasquale Polidori.

---

31   Cf. *XLII Esposizione internazionale d'arte. Arte e scienza,* exhibition catalogue (Venice: Marsilio, 1986): some artists who had participated in *Les Immatériaux* participated also in this edition of the Venice Biennale.

32   Edward A. Shanken, *From Cybernetics to Telematics: the Art, Pedagogy and Theory of Roy Ascott*, in R. Ascott, *Telematic Embrace*, ed. E.A. Shanken (Berkeley-London, 2007, 1st ed. 2003), p. 67.