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A Late Performance: *Intimate Distance* (Yingmei Duan)

Kiff Bamford

Lyotard wrote on a diverse range of art and artists, yet the idiosyncrasies of publishing and academic taste in the anglophone world have placed an emphasis on particular texts. Short essays such as ‘Newman: The instant’ (1989a), in which Lyotard contrasts the effects of time in the work of Marcel Duchamp and American abstract painter Barnett Newman, have overshadowed other aspects of his thought in relation to art. This chapter seeks to highlight the importance of Lyotard as provocateur, a thinker whose own experience of being challenged by the act of writing about art provoked him also to question and investigate the act itself. Lyotard does not give us a method to follow but his continual refusal to accept presuppositions suggests a manner. It is in following this manner that I approach the issue of writing about performance art, as I attempt to recall a particular performance (described in the italicized sections) whilst struggling to maintain its contingency.

What is ‘late Lyotard’? The term suggests an identifiable shift away from the main body of his work, thus marking it out for its maturity – late Rembrandt, or immaturity – late Picasso. Given the increasing preoccupation with ‘childhood’ in the writings published in the last decade of his life, it might be assumed that the latter form of late be best suited to the task. However, I want to form this essay around the return that I see as characterizing this late childhood and to parallel Lyotard’s concerns with not dissimilar anxieties in the history of performance art, in the hope that the two may

find points of convergence. Lyotard's many and diverse writings on art form an important part of his work: from his doctoral thesis published as *Discours, figure* in 1971 to the posthumously published collection *Misère de la Philosophie* (2000). I will draw on the breadth of Lyotard's work on art in order to highlight its richness as a largely untapped source of provocation for art history and criticism, whilst also focusing on performance art, about which he wrote very little. The themes to which his later writings attend – affect, gesture, anamnesis – do suggest connections to ways of thinking about, and reflecting upon, both the experience of performance art and the problematic task of participating in its commentary. It is these connections that I aim to embellish here; I begin with the return of a performance by the Berlin-based artist, Yingmei Duan (Manchester International Festival, Whitworth Art Gallery 2009):

Yingmei Duan I

A darkly painted space: dark, dark blue with dimmed, shaded spotlights from above. She is naked and enwrapped in her own world, sometimes close to the wall – touching, feeling her way along its surface as though clinging to the shadows – whilst humming slowly to herself a melancholic, but not mournful, tune and slowly caressing her body: her thighs, breasts, stomach. Slowly, ever-so-slowly rocking and moving in sliding steps as though caressing the floor – head down, eyes closed with an intense expression and furrowed brow – she moves towards a visitor, clad in a white coat. The medical overtones are accentuated by the contrast to her nakedness. Sensing the person's presence she begins to tour the body at a close proximity; very close, with no sense of private space, moving rather into the space between which becomes her own through the strange movement and murmured humming. It is not a serenade in the romantic sense but a seduction of another type, a sensory beguiling of the space between bodies.

This is it and this is its importance, its steadiness, her almost imperceptible progress round the space through the energy fields of the visitors.

Return

Collected in Lyotard's *Lectures d'Enfance* (1991) is an essay that considers James Joyce's *Ulysses* as the untrustworthy inheritor of its Homeric quasi-equivalent, *The Odyssey*. Untrustworthy on several accounts, says Lyotard, with more displacements between the two than similarities. The correspondences are 'illusory' (Lyotard 1993: 193), likened to the hidden system of ordering, inherent – but invisible – in Alberti's perspectival system, the *costruzione legitima*. This device for the construction of apparent optical depth is a reference that returns from Lyotard's book published twenty years earlier, *Discours, figure*, where it was used to exemplify a restricted code of vision, one that neglects the distortions inherent in that which he termed the figural. In the later essay on *Ulysses*, simply titled 'Return upon the return', Lyotard asks: 'How can one be sure that what returns is precisely what had disappeared?' (1993: 192) In the documentation and narration of performance art which constitutes its rapidly coalescing but still contingent history, there is no presumption about such a return. There is instead an assumption that in the moment of the act, the performance is lost forever, never to return. However, such an assumed loss need not be either final or traumatic. Lyotard's own returns can open us up to the potential in the paradox of the lost as already returned. In reference to the early fifteenth century Italian painter Masaccio, Lyotard writes: 'The window that Masaccio traced on the wall is not the discovery of a world that is given but its loss; it is, if you like, its discovery as lost.'¹ (2002: 201) With *Ulysses* it is not so much a loss that Lyotard describes. It is a 'shifting' whereby the

¹ Translations from *Discours, Figure* are my own.

coincidences with *The Odyssey* can be unravelled in a manner that gets lost in its own proliferation, averring and wandering. It is this manner which is the prompt for my scribbles on the performance of Yingmei Duan: I am aware of the distance that is already there yet averring in the hope of return.

Yingmei Duan II

A newspaper review likened her pose to Masaccio's Expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the pose is very close, yet the comparison goes only so far – it is not a shame-filled, crime-ridden angst but a gently soporific pulling of the viewer... I grapple for parallels... Odysseus and the sirens. But it is too still and the suggestion of the female ensnaring the visitor does not gel; there is no subjugation here and it is the participants who will the artist to involve them.

It is an old printers's trick to separate the figures of Adam and Eve on separate leaves of a double-page spread, only for them to be reunited when the book is closed. This layout is used for the plate showing Masaccio's expulsion in *Discours, figure*. It is also a suitable metaphor for the task of writing on performance, inextricably linked but divergent, a double-bind that is prevalent in Lyotard's own writings on art and exemplified by his catalogue essay on the drawings of Valerio Adami. Lyotard's response to the work of Adami focuses on the line itself, drawing out the complex comparison inherent in writing about that line with what appears to be the same line, but which simultaneously figures the irreconcilable difference between the artist and the writer. Lyotard meditates on the desire for unity where there can be none, a relationship which is also mirrored in the relationship of performer and viewer; an irreconcilable difference which, according to performance theorist Philip Auslander, is 'predicated on the distinction between performer and spectators.' (1999: 56) Auslander goes on to

quote Sean Cubitt, writing on the performer Laurie Anderson: ‘The more you approach a performer, the more you inhabit the very performance you are there to see. No matter how much the performer gives, no matter how intensively you attend to her, the gap remains between.’ (1999: 56)

The immediacy present in the intensity of pen crossing paper as I struggle to capture that which draws me to Yingmei Duan’s performance is an illusion. Subsequently I reformatted my writing as a video piece which has me voicing the lines I wrote whilst watching the performance: notes which were made in an attempt to capture something of the time spent in the performance space. (See Fig. 1) These notes were subsequently transcribed from handwritten scrawl to typed document, then learnt and recounted to video – stopping the camera whenever I forgot the words and beginning again, wanting to film in a single take. The shot is tightly framed, removing the mouth and showing only my tired eyes: wanting the face to tell the story. Even the process is a demonstration of the pathetic attempt to somehow capture an immediacy, becoming complicit in the conceit of ‘liveness’ and a desire for the authenticity to which Auslander draws our attention. It is away from this impasse that Lyotard can lead us, not as followers of a model or methodology but inspired by his manner.

[insert Illustration 1.1 here – landscape]

Figure 1. Kiff Bamford, *Intimate distance* (Yingmei Duan), Video, 2010 (copyright, the author)

Affect-phrase

A key idea from Lyotard’s late work that builds on the idea of return is the affect-phrase. The brevity of the essay, titled ‘The Affect-Phrase (from a supplement to *The Differend*)’, belies the richness of its contents, recognized in particular by Claire Nouvet

(2007) and her focus on its psychoanalytic insights. First delivered as a lecture in 1990, this short essay returns to one of the most intriguing aspects of *The Differend* – the suggestion that what cannot be put into words can be ‘signalled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling.’ (1988a: 13) Whilst Lyotard’s concerns are primarily philosophical, linked to the singularity of judgements and the role of Kant’s ‘aesthetic feeling’ (Lyotard 1988a: 64) in creating not communication but communicability, there is a convergence between this writing and the challenges that performance art practice presents. In the most frank manner performance art tends towards confrontation, confusion and demand, articulated predominantly through affective modes of address; that is not, however, to say that performance art consists of affect-phrases *per se*. Lyotard uses affect-phrase to name that feeling which is ‘unarticulated’ yet cannot be wholly forgotten, despite its exclusion from articulated discourse: it is excluded because it is addressed to no one and has neither meaning nor referent outside itself. (2006: 106-8) In contrast, performance art is constructed within a set of presuppositions and directed toward a range of potential addressees. Before I explore this relation further it is useful here to give a brief introduction to the terminology used by Lyotard in both ‘Affect-Phrase’ and *The Differend*.

The subtitle to the English translation of *The Differend* is *Phrases in dispute* which usefully highlights the main concern of the book as the conflict or ‘differend’ between what Lyotard terms ‘*phrases*’ – considered to be not only linguistic utterances but also gestures and even silence.² All phrases must be linked: the important consideration is how they are linked. Each phrase presents a ‘universe of phrases’, a

² ‘*phrases*’ would translate directly as ‘sentences’ but in the English translation of *The Differend* by Georges Van Den Abbeele the word ‘phrase’ is used to indicate the particular pragmatic usage by Lyotard.

universe which is defined by a set of instances and may include one or more of the following: addressor, addressee, referent and sense. According to Lyotard each phrase follows a previous phrase and can potentially be linked onto in differing ways – for instance, through a phrase of reasoning, questioning, showing, describing, ordering and so on. However, Lyotard argues that any previous phrase carries with it the rules of the discourse (the genre) to which it belongs, and therefore the linkages to it are not as open as might be thought. Each type of discourse, each genre, has certain goals – for example, to teach, to seduce, to justify, to evaluate – and to attain these goals a particular type of linkage is necessary. The decision to link a phrase according to one genre of discourse renders another phrase unactualized and therefore potentially wronged – the phrase of silence has several possible referents, for example – hence the importance of linking without determined judgement and maintaining the contingency of linking. Recognizing the potential of what is signalled only as a feeling is the challenge of *The Differend*; the status of such a feeling as a possible phrase is what provokes Lyotard's return to the issue in 'The Affect-Phrase': 'Feeling is a phrase. I call it the affect-phrase. It is distinct in that it is *unarticulated*.' (2006: 104)

The set-up of performance art presents a phrase-universe which anticipates a particular audience who are prepared to link onto the phrases and provide the appropriate emotional responses. In contrast an affect-phrase does not have an addressee or an anticipated link, yet it still has an important role to play in thinking through performance art and commentary. Here, a brief note is justified on the use of the term affect-phrase in order to clarify the extent to which it differs from an emotional response that can be recognized and categorized. The recent rise of affect in cultural studies and social theory – which has led to the term 'affect theory' – has brought with

it very different understandings of the term. In Lyotard's usage, an unfamiliar and contested feeling differs from the category of emotion because of its lack of definition. I am therefore approaching cautiously the realm of performance art and its possible connection to affect-phrase in order to suggest that the affect-phrase occurs in spite of the intentional manipulation of emotions. It is not the performance itself that constitutes an affect-phrase, rather it is the experience of a feeling – detached from the universe of phrases presented by the performance set-up – that signals an effect on articulate discourse, one that Lyotard describes as 'intolerable.' Lyotard describes the effect of this assault on articulate discourse, the concatenation of phrases and their determined linkages, as follows: 'Discourse does not appear to be able to support for long an unarticulated and unargued remnant remaining outside of its grasp.' (2006: 106) When we do encounter an affect-phrase it destabilizes the habitual flow of multiple phrase regimens and presents a threat to the linkages that organize meaning: it is 'intolerable.' Consequently this would indicate that the role of discussion or commentary is part of a need or desire to bring the unarticulate affect-phrase back within the fold of known phrases constituted by articulate discourse. Once an affect-phrase is made the referent of an articulated phrase, its 'inopportune, unseemly, and even disquieting' effect is brought under control, and the affect-phrases of pain, pleasure or disorder are shown retrospectively to have had 'legitimate' origins in the absence of logic, that is, in its inability to be articulated at the time. (Lyotard 2006: 106) According to this formulation the task of the commentator on art and performance is usually to aid this transition from unarticulate to articulate phrase – to transform the intolerable to the recognizable. The effect of rendering an affect-phrase the referent of an articulate phrase is, however, to lose its singularity.

Yingmei Duan III

Her movements are gentle, a rhythmic swaying – back against the wall, arms by her side, head down and chin pressed to herself – turning one way then another whilst her feet begin moving slightly, slowly, shoulders angled. This shuffling forwards prompts the viewers to move away or steady themselves for the approach of slow, deliberate steps. Again, feet sliding or transferring weight very deliberately in a single movement – like the slow walk undertaken by visitors to Marina Abramović's 'drill', the initiation to durational performance that prefaced this performance. Her face is peaceful, though the slight 'cough, cough' interrupts the music of her internalized hum and deepens her furrowed brow. One hand is on a breast, the other on her belly. She turns and feels one shoulder as though embracing herself in sorrow or peace, sadness or intimate meditation. I keep thinking of the title: Intimate distance, not knowing if the Blanchot reference is deliberate or helpful but the connotations of the unbridgeable divide between subjects is effective. There is desire here: desire on the part of the artist to be close to the other, the clothed figure who has come to observe and who has made the effort to stop. In turn the viewer is rewarded somehow by her attention – her slow circling absorbing the viewer's aura; an energy transformation occurs and often the visitor responds, closing eyes to join in the intimacy and avoid the gaze of others left outside the experience: they are in the art work, in the performance, it is their body which has drawn the others into the space and caused them to linger.

The first few evenings there were not many prepared to linger and the artist stayed near to the walls, but confidence has grown. The naked body slowly tours the proximity of the other's white coat and breaks the barrier between observer and performer, between subject and object – it is an intertwining in action, the tension is

palpable, and the willingness of visitors once approached to remain for the duration of the encounter is almost without exception.

They are informed it is over by a gentle pushing of shoulders, leaving the naked artist alone and humming to herself once more: the recipient is left swaying and in shock, though often smiling.

I did not include the above part of the account in my video piece or the previous short reflection on the similarity to Masaccio. It was already too long. Also, there is a change in register, the latter part being more reflective and aware of the desire to place an experience into a context for comfortable comparison. The sense of an immediate response to the performance unravels and with it the initial feeling of being immersed in an experience. In part two the reference to Masaccio and the newspaper review ushers in an art-historical reference as a point of validation and permission. In the third section, above, the ambiguity and urgency have gone, the tone slides to more familiar terrain, contextualizing the performance by mentioning that this performance by Yingmei Duan was prefaced by an introductory ‘drill’ by the self-styled ‘Grandmother of Performance Art’, Marina Abramović. The cover is blown and more details are needed: the occasion was a performance event that took place under the auspices of the Manchester International Festival in July 2009, titled *Marina Abramović presents...*, held at the Whitworth Art Gallery. The galleries were cleared of their usual paintings, sculptures, costumes and prints in order that thirteen artists could perform simultaneously in different areas of the building for a duration of three to four hours on seventeen consecutive days. On each occasion the first hour was devoted to Abramović’s ‘drill’: part potted history of performance art, part introduction to Abramović by herself and part mini-workshop which included exercises designed to ‘slow down’ and prepare the

viewers to experience the work. Seeing herself very much in the curatorial role Abramović made it clear that she wanted to present performance art – specifically performance art of long duration – in a format that was compatible with the conventions of a modern gallery or museum space.³ At the same time, however, there was an attempt by Abramović to emphasize the historical significance of the event as an experiment, obliging visitors to don white medical coats and referring repeatedly to the ‘exciting’ stakes at play. Without doubt the parameters were clearly defined: the initiation told the visitors what to expect, what they might experience and how to ‘overcome boredom’ in order that the prescribed duration might bear fruit. Thereby, in the same manner that Lyotard describes how a genre of discourse gives rules by which phrases can be linked to attain certain goals, *Marina Abramović presents...* clearly established a frame of reference within which reactions to the performances could be understood. The set of possible phrases (reactions) was assigned within an explicitly predetermined genre of discourse which recounted a rhetoric of the avant-garde re-packaged for the museum. This is evident in the first section of my account of Yingmei Duan’s performance. For example, when I talk of ‘energy fields’ I am repeating the romantic vocabulary used by Abramović in her introduction, itself replete with connotations of the mythical time of performance art in the early 1970s.⁴

Does my somewhat cynical interpretation of a ‘ground breaking event’ divest the experience of its artistic significance? Is it linked to my own role as assistant to

³ This desire is accentuated by her own solo retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2010 which presented past works re-enacted by trained artists under Abramović’s direction.

⁴ The performance artist Vito Acconci referred to ‘energy fields’, as used by the sociologist Kurt Lewin, in his 1972 interview for *Avalanche* magazine.

Abramović for the duration of the project, standing on stage as the instructions to slow down were dogmatically dispensed on each of the seventeen days? What of those unarticulated phrases that fail to present themselves to the linkage of articulate phrases? Do they escape the anticipated concatenation of phrases set up by ‘the drill’, by the gallery, by the neutralizing effect of the history of performance art and its clichéd embrace of the idiom of the avant-garde? Do the unarticulated phrases return in the manner of the Freudian *après-coup*? Is it Lyotard’s previous concern with anamnesis (2008) that is now voiced through that of the affect-phrase? To paraphrase the question asked by Lyotard in both ‘Return Upon the Return’ and ‘The Affect-Phrase’, how can we be sure that what returns is that which was lost? Perhaps it is through anamnesis that re-performance can work a destabilizing return.

Anamnesis

Anamnesis is described in Platonic philosophy as the process by which knowledge is not learnt but rather re-called: the soul, having lost an awareness of immortal knowledge through the shock of birth, comes to a re-awareness of that which was ‘forgotten.’ Lyotard’s use of the term also draws from psychoanalysis and its emphasis on that which cannot be recalled to consciousness, yet cannot be forgotten; it is the importance of not forgetting that is emphasized by Lyotard in the attention he gives to that which cannot be expressed in a coherent way because it remains unthought. Lyotard is aware of the paradoxical nature of both the term and the task of employing anamnesis as a means of approach to the visual: ‘Is it any more than a vague analogy?’ he asks. (2008: 92)⁵ But the term anamnesis is important to his late lexicon as it emphasizes the importance of the return as a critical task.

⁵ Translations from *Que Peindre?* are my own unless otherwise noted.

The tendency in late Lyotard to connect back to earlier writings is not a reiteration of a stable position but a cyclical reflection that undermines both past and present. There is an important moment in Lyotard's 1987 book on three painters, *Que peindre?: Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, that suggests a return to previous concerns but hesitates significantly and tellingly about the implications of such a move. Lyotard writes of the need to return to *Discours, figure*, stating: 'I would not be able to work through an anamnesis of the visible without doing an anamnesis of *Discours, figure*.' (2008: 96) This declaration appears as part of the essay '*L'anamnèse*', the last of three essays on the drawings and paintings of Italian born artist Valerio Adami which appear in *Que peindre?*

The manner in which Lyotard arranges his writings always rewards careful consideration and highlights the extent to which essays that might otherwise be regarded as secondary or supplementary to his philosophical work, can be firmly placed as integral to his ongoing concerns. '*L'anamnèse*' constituted the second part of a catalogue essay written for the exhibition of Adami's work held at the Pompidou centre, Paris, in December 1985; the first part '*La franchise*' also appears in *Que peindre?*.⁶ The Pompidou essay is not only split into two separate essays for *Que peindre?*, Lyotard also separates the text into different voices – *Lui, Elle, Vous*, one of many stylistic strategies used to dissipate the author's voice – and four pages of new material is added to the beginning of '*L'anamnèse*.' That new section is a reconsideration of *Discours, figure*, particularly the point in the book where a transition takes place from a

⁶ The Pompidou catalogue essay appears in English translation as 'Anamnesis of the visible, or candour' (ed. Benjamin 1989) but should not be confused with the later essay 'Anamnesis of the visible' (Lyotard 1997) which concerns the work of the painter Bracha Lichtenberg Etttinger.

largely uncritical use of phenomenology to psychoanalysis and an emphasis on the unconscious as the force that is driving the figural to disrupt structured systems of presentation and knowledge. Lyotard's *vous* reflects: 'It was necessary, I concluded then, to reverse the moment of the phenomenologization of the unconscious.' (2008: 97) Recalling this abandonment of phenomenology and the priority given to Freud's primary processes in *Discours, figure*, Lyotard gives a '(late) apology', but one which is insufficient to remove 'double reversal' from suspicion. 'Double reversal' is the process considered at the end of *Discours, figure* as the elaboration, but not interpretation, of a work that seeks to turn over and draw out figural differences. In *Que peindre?*, however, Lyotard is suspicious:

This suspicion, it is simply that the visible, or rather the visual is in no way attributable to a montage of desire, at least in its constitution, it has nothing to do with the intrigues coming from sexual difference, which only comes as an *après coup* to impose its law, that of human language and its turns, on the enigmatic but frank presence of *voici*. (2008: 99)

Packed into this complex declaration is a disagreement with the structuralist conception of language in general and in particular the role ascribed to language in Lacanian psychoanalysis, as the means by which the subject comes to formation through language and sexual difference. In contrast, the figural – which includes the non-visible element of the visual – has the potential to declare the immediacy of that which evades the representative structures of the sign by operating through affect. This section of *Que peindre?* is therefore no mere recollection of arguments presented in *Discours, figure* but rather a working through of the effect of this dismissal of phenomenology and an acknowledgement that ideas from psychoanalytic theory, whilst overemphasized in the past, have a new role to play in his reconsideration of the sensible. As a result of this anamnesis, or critical return, to *Discours, figure*, Lyotard will emphasize in his late

work those aspects of the sensible that were central to *The Differend*, but also forgotten.

Yingmei Duan IV

Today I saw Yingmei crawl: carefully bending down to place both hands on the floor one after another and then, approaching a couple sitting at the edge of the space, she prowled round them like a big cat, moving arms and legs in synchronicity and nearly touching the couple before coming to rest beside them where she tucked up her knees to make a ball, coughing softly before continuing round the edge of the room in the same manner. I became aware that all the observers were also sitting – perhaps she had reduced herself to our level and altered the piece in doing so, taking on a feline presence. The strains of music from the other pieces, especially Nat King Cole's Mona Lisa, made the humming less audible today. But it was there.

In 'The Affect-Phrase' Lyotard turns to the Aristotelian distinction between articulated human discourse (*logos*) and the wider *phônè* of all animals – including the human – in order to highlight the extent to which *phônè* extends to gesture. It is *phônè*, the confused, inarticulate voice that signals the *aisthesis* of pleasure and pain, not with the articulated phrases of *logos* but 'with vocalisations (and I would add: with gestures ...) provoked by objects that are not objects of thought' and which have no addressee.

(2006: 109) Although the body is both central to performance art and closely attuned to the affect-phrase, Lyotard asserts that the body as a bounded, identifiable entity exists only as a referent of an articulate phrase: 'Only the logical animal *has* a body. – The *phônè* does not have a body since it is not referential.' (2006: 109–10) The body of the affect-phrase is the continuous surface of libidinal intensities whose turning, stretching skin presides over Lyotard's exhilarating opening to his 'evil book' *Libidinal Economy* (1993). Intensities are invested indeterminately across a multiplicity of zones, attempts

at systematization are shunned and despite the inevitability with which Lyotard's writing is enacted the rhetoric sizzles with something close to the confused voices of *phônè*. It is unsurprising then that the difficulty of writing about that which is communicated through intensities relates clearly to the difficulty in writing about the body. As Judith Butler comments: 'Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language ... The body is that upon which language falters.' (2004: 198) Like Butler, drawn back to language when discussing the body, we are called to render the 'intolerable' signals of the affect-phrase as signifiable; once the desire to translate, to transform or to link is acknowledged however, its singularity is past.

There are many stylistic shifts in the manner with which Lyotard writes, particularly in his attempts to write about art, but there is a discernable hesitancy in the later work. The inability of the writer to occupy the same time as the reader is articulated by Lyotard in his heuristic 'Foreword', written for the collection of his writings published in English in 1989: 'Sometimes you have to listen to yourself writing. That is not the same thing as hearing yourself writing.' (vi) In this essay Lyotard supports an overly cautious, self-conscious – more hesitant – approach to writing because it 'indicates that you are not sure of your direction, unsure of where you are, or completely lost.' (1989b: vi) Whether through overwriting or adopting a style that feigns nonchalance the result is that it 'annoys the reader.' (1989b: vi) Such disdain is not for the reader *per se* but for their presumptions; it is to undo these presumptions that Lyotard took up a variety of writing styles and approaches, including the attempt at a 'zero-degree style' in *The Differend* and its prologue, a 'Reading Dossier', which allows 'the reader, if the fancy grabs him or her, to "talk about the book" without having read it.' (1988a: xiv) Lyotard's ascorbic disdain is for the ceaseless drive to

‘gain time’, a trend that he termed ‘performativity’ in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) as the quantifiably efficient realization of a measured output, usually within a system. Here Lyotard shares something with Marina Abramović in her mission to teach the art of slowing down and shift perceptions away from systematized ocularcentric forms, although the egocentric title of her exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010 (*The Artist is Present*) draws attention to differences in their approach.

Intimate Distance

It turned out that the performance by Yingmei Duan that I have been intermittently describing was not titled *Intimate Distance*, but simply *Naked*. In my hurried desire to type out my own quickly written responses to the performance with minimal alteration I had mistaken a note to myself for that of the title – the note is in fact the title of a book by the art historian Rosemary Betterton on women, painting and the body. My largely unedited account of time spent in the performance space of Yingmei Duan over successive evenings is part of the same search for the figural that is present in Lyotard’s writings on art, explicit in his early work and in a modified form in his ‘late’ writings where the ‘anamnesis of the visual’ makes a modification to the means by which that (same?) force is described. Once attuned to one aspect of Lyotard’s writings on art, the echoes multiply across the decades between early and late. When writing of the line in the paintings of Adami, Lyotard dryly notes the insurmountable distance between letter and line: ‘His line arouses the graphite in my ball-point, the graphite which has been anaesthetized for a long time, since childhood, and is dreaming. What is the capacity of drawing, to escape from the letter?’ (1988b: 462) Lyotard is recalling not only his own childhood desire to become a painter (or a historian, or a monk), but also referring back to ‘The line in the letter’, a section of *Discours, figure* which includes an extensive

discussion of the line in the work of Paul Klee. Here Lyotard questions the function of the letter as mere support to enable rapid, comprehensible signification and writes of the value that the same graphic mark can gain when it appeals to ‘the capacity of corporeal resonance.’ (2002: 212) It is by forcing language to hesitate, to draw attention to the line in the letter, that a sensitivity to the figural elements of language might be made apparent and its graphic elements become something other than arbitrary signifiers in a closed system. This same task remains prescient to Lyotard throughout his work on art, playing with the phenomenological insistence of ‘distanciation’, the separation that is essential to representation.

...the recipient is left swaying and in shock, though often smiling.

Is my account of Yingmei Duan’s performance only description? Does the eye stop its automatic scanning of the lines which form the text – not in a material manner which might be the typographer’s answer – but in the ‘corporeal resonance’ of the figural trace, that plastic space where rhythm, not sense, appeals to the viewer?⁷ It is a response that attempts at immediacy but fails to acknowledge the constructs of such experience and the staging of its effects. Am I so preoccupied with maintaining the instantaneity of my response – pen crossing paper in empathetic connivance with hand touching skin, like a writer’s life class – that the staging of the view is left intact? And what of the video piece that you, the present reader, cannot see but has to be recounted, again in writing. Here is another empathetic attempt at gaining some proximity, through the self-imposed insistence on the single take and the resulting long night of filming, recorded through tired eyes. No longer written commentary but performance to camera:

⁷ It is significant that the example given in Lyotard’s text at this point (2002: 216) is that of Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, a comparison that returns in the multi-vocal presentation of essays in *Que peindre?*

a familiar trope and another form of linking.

Gesture

In Lyotard's significant study of the Dutch painter Karel Appel, which is also a study of the relationship between the philosopher and the task of writing about art, Lyotard gives a meditation or reflection on his own approach. Previously his acts of written commentary had been perceived and thereby justified as adding to work which was itself '*already* a commentary, a commentary on a way of being in chromatic or linear space, habitable surface or sonorous duration ... so that this philosopher both had to and could begin commentary on such of these questions as he assessed to be filigreed into the said work.' (Lyotard 2009: 35 original emphasis) In such acts the translation of the '*gesture*' of art into the words of philosophy were carried out without the intention of '*peacefully digesting* it into the organism of a system' but were rather paid in debt to that which the work of art gives to the philosopher, as 'the as-yet-unthought sense' that renders the philosopher '*powerless*.' (Lyotard 2009: 37, 39 original emphasis)⁸ This ability to undo presumptions with regard to established, recognized knowledge is at the heart of Lyotard's continual privileging of art as a realm of thought that has a capacity to challenge attempts to impose determinate categories. Therefore the position of Karel Appel in art history – tied to his association with the short-lived Cobra group (1948–51) – is not insignificant and neither is the relevance of the term gesture in the title of Lyotard's book *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour* as it echoes the much longer engagement of Appel with thickly painted gestures, characteristic of his work throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

⁸ Words italicized in the translation highlight the repetition of words associated with gesture [*geste*] and the latin for mind [*mens*] as in *démuni* [powerless].

Conversations and correspondence between Lyotard and Appel from 1985–6 show the beginnings of what would become this book, and although a significant section was published in 1989, the whole was not published until a German translation in 1998, the year of Lyotard's death. A French and English version was published for the first time in 2009 in which a face-to-face parallel text appropriately manifests the struggle of translation that is, in part, its concern. Gesture is particularly significant for our discussion here as the term links to both affect-phrase and performance. The description of art as 'gesture' encompasses a broad remit from painting to dance to sound and also gives rise to that which is defined as commentary: anything that links onto objects or situations understood as art. The gesture of commentary that concerns Lyotard is the demand to remain open to the contingency of linking, where the knowledge of the philosopher is put aside, rendered 'powerless' and open to the suffering that accompanies ridding the mind of its presumptions and its capacity to understand. The artist and the writer on art must be open to feeling, in a manner Lyotard begins to refer to as one of 'passibility': maintaining an openness to that which is forgotten and the suffering it presents to the mind's capacity for understanding. The gesture and the affect-phrase operate in a 'parachronic' temporality which operates only in the present – 'The time of feeling is *now*' (Lyotard 2006: 106 original emphasis) – and as such it cannot be anticipated, prolonged or re-experienced. In the case of Appel's paintings it is their excess of matter that renders Lyotard powerless, a description that deliberately evokes the experience of the sublime. Lyotard turns to Kant's Third Critique to investigate the effect of gesture, its impact on understanding and the importance of indeterminate judgement: 'Surely there is no real painting that does not so impose upon the understanding the proof of its impotence. That chromatic matter 'is

there' – the understanding can and will be able to do nothing about it. As soon as understanding touches it, it no longer is.' (Lyotard 2009: 33) This description of the inability of gesture to maintain its specificity when touched by understanding echoes the temporality of immediacy which Lyotard analyzed in *The Differend* with reference to the 'Is it happening?' ['Arrive-t-il?'].⁹ As soon as a phrase is linked onto, it is subject to significant alteration – its singularity can only be maintained in the hesitation between linkages, that is, before the question mark of the 'Is it happening?' is answered by the link that follows. It is this inability to be appropriated that marks the importance of both gesture and 'Is it happening?' for Lyotard as a confounding of attempts to pin down and articulate. The confrontational question with which Lyotard ended *The Differend*, 'Are you prejudging the Is it happening?', is a challenge that is felt throughout his later writings including *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour* and 'The Affect-phrase.'

It might be said that an affect-phrase, being addressed to no-one, is complete and does not need to be linked onto, but to acknowledge that one is being addressed by such a phrase is to render it as a phrase with at least (now) one addressee. In responding receptively to an affect-phrase one becomes obligated to that which it signals and the resulting demand that the phrase must be linked, if not articulated. How to link is the preoccupation inherent in Lyotard's hesitant stance, one that makes 'language anxious', he writes in 'Return Upon the Return.' (1993: 206) Words, when divorced from sense, are also immaterial matter, when their sounds are voiced or their graphism given space to figure in a communication limited to feeling – an inarticulate phrase that testifies to the presence of something without a referent, signification, addressee or addressor. Such

⁹ See Bamford 2010.

feelings, because they are not articulated, signal what Lyotard termed the differend. It is the challenge to bear witness to such feelings that is encapsulated in §22 of *The Differend* and which provoked Lyotard's essay on 'The Affect-Phrase' almost a decade later. Why, asks Lyotard in this later essay, if such an affect-phrase is not articulated, can it not be ignored? The response that he gives to this rhetorical self-examination is that not only is it an ethical obligation to bear witness but there is also the implication that such feelings constitute the presence of the forgotten. Here the potential parallel with Freud's *après coup* breaks down: the feeling is not the consequence of an initial wound or trauma that can be healed through its reoccurrence or 'working through.' The affect-phrase does not belong to the realm of temporality that recognizes repetition, it happens now and we cannot know whether it is the same affect or not: 'The feeling cannot be identified with itself by itself. It can only be experienced, as we say: it signals itself, it is tautegoric in the moment that it occurs.' (Lyotard 2006: 107) In a text on the painter Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, 'Anamnesis of the Visible', Lyotard describes the process in Freud's terms as '*Durcharbeitung*, working through, *perlaboration*.' (2004: 107) Whereas in clinical practice this signals the final stages of analysis, for the artist or writer there is no end and the affect is unpredictable and interminable – driven not by the individual but by the work.¹⁰

In 'The Affect-Phrase', as part of his discussion of the voice shared by all animals, the *phônè*, Lyotard considers the different sounds of air passing in and out of the mouth, the sound mu, murmur and the possible etymological correlation with mute:

It spreads over the face and it spreads through the whole body which thus "signals" like a face.

¹⁰ The associations of 'labour' in relation to obstetrics and 'work' as *Arbeit* in Freud are made explicit in Lyotard's text.

The essence of the face considered negatively (referred to by an actually articulated phrase) is that its lips are mute. Thus it will be necessary to extend the *phônè* as far as the gesture. (2006: 108)

Yingmei Duan V

In the staged darkness Yingmei Duan's eyes perform blindness and her lips do not part, closed in the mu of a mute sound, murmuring. Her nakedness is not shameless but vibrates on the edge of knowing. It is not an expulsion but an unveiling of our own boundaries and our pretence to understanding, a prompt to open up to that which is not cognizable, the figural.

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