Traversals of Affect


38 Ibid.


40 Ibid., 343.


42 Lyotard, *Que peindre?/What to Paint?,* 333–5.


45 Ibid., 103.

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Lyotard’s Gesture

Kas Saghafi

1. Following the publication of *The Differend*, Jean-François Lyotard frequently expressed his wish to publish a supplement to his "book of philosophy" that would address the "affective dimension" of the differend. In fact, his essay "The Affect-phrase" (originally titled "l'inarticulé ou le différence même"—The Inarticulate, or the Differend Itself) that appeared in the posthumous volume *Misére de la philosophie* (published in 2000) bears the subtitle "D'un supplément au Differend" (From a Supplement to *The Differend*). Unfortunately, Lyotard was not able to publish this envisioned text. Or so the story goes. Did he not, I'd like to ask, a little mischievously or some would say quite erroneously, write this supplement—perhaps not in the form that he had wished or that we would expect, but under different guises?

2. While all the essays collected in *Lectures d'enfance*, mainly written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, cannot be described as simply addressing the affective dimension of the differend, it can be argued that Lyotard's essays on Aristotle and Freud ("Voix"), and Kafka ("Prescription") take up the relation between phôné and logos, inarticulate voice and articulated language, Freudian affect and presentation (Darstellung), first touch and the law. In addition, "Emma," in *Misére de la philosophie*, explores the relation between an other temporality and pure affectivity, or childhood. Moreover, does not Lyotard's book on Karel Appel take up the above-mentioned dimension of the differend in the relation between gesture and commentary?

3. *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour*, containing Lyotard's most extensive late ruminations on painting, following on from *What to Paint*, may be said to be the aesthetic or inaesthetic component of his reflections on the differend that we are discussing. The Appel project which began around 1985, and was supposed to result in a volume for Galilée, was not published until a German edition appeared in 1998, the year of Lyotard's death.
4. Art "gives to thinking [donne à penser]." But what art gives are not "givens [données]" or cultural objects. For Lyotard, whose interest throughout his years of writing about art was mainly in painting, what art gives are bursts of color. "Painting is the passion of color," he was fond of saying. What cannot be denied when faced with a painting is the undeniability of this matter. The work occurs; it happens to space-time-matter. It is, each time, an event in space-time-matter.

5. The thinking viewer incurs a debt to this work. The work makes him or her indebted by its very existence, or by what Lyotard dubs after Levinas, its "way of being [manière d'être]." Recall that in Totality and Infinity Levinas explained that the I and Autrui ("Other") existed in two different ways. Using façon and manièr (manner or way) interchangeably, Levinas wrote of the singular way of being of the Other. Here, Lyotard writes that each work has its own way of being in space, in time, and in matter, to which the thinker is indebted. The artists ask one, whether directly or indirectly, "to think the sensible singularity" of the work "presented here and now."

6. The gesture that the work is is an actus and a situs. As an actus, "as movement and passage of colors, lines, volumes or sounds, it is an upsurge [poussée] of matter." It is also a situs (not a situs that simply takes place in a site, but one that in happening to space-time and re-orders it). But this space, this time, and this matter cannot be presupposed as already pre-existing or pre-established, since they come about as the work takes place.

7. The gesture that the work is, what Lyotard refers to as its happening, its existence, and perhaps most provocatively, its "presence," constitutes its impenetrability to thought. "Do not read me, do not understand me," Appel's work seems to proclaim.

8. Lyotard candidly discusses his role as a philosopher regularly approached by artists who request that he provide an account of their work and admits to the difficulty of philosophizing about these gestures. Traditionally, philosophy has used the language of experience to write about these gestures. But experience in the language of the philosopher, Lyotard notes, is "predisposed to comprehension," already made for the philosopher. Philosophy fashions and organizes all givens for the understanding. The concept "determines and regulates the forms of the object in order to know it." Thus, the mind ends up digesting experience in order to produce a reasonable discourse. The work of art becomes a "prey" for philosophical thought.

9. Accordingly, the contemporary discourse on art, the production of "theories" of objects, is in the service of their determination. While this is to a degree necessary and inevitable, the work is not simply a cultural object. It overflows all determinations of its "reception" and its "production." The profusion of discourses—religious, political, psychological, philosophical—which seek to objectify the work condemn it to being merely a phenomenon among other phenomena. These discourses, which are appropriate to anthropological givens, reduce the force of apparition that the work possesses to the "form of its appearance."

10. "There is no history of art as such," Lyotard writes, but "a history of [determinable] cultural objects." What the latter discourses do is to confuse art with the cultural object, artistic time with historical time. But art is not solely the expression of its time. The "astonishing power" of the work is independent of periods and of contexts. This is why previous pronouncements about "the death of art" and the transformation of beauty into kitsch are misguided, for they also commit the same error.

11. Rather than comprehending and making comprehensible, which have been the traditional task of the philosopher, painting now calls for "reflection." Taking Kant's writings as inspiration, Lyotard writes in favor of reflection rather than argumentation. This reflection is guided by feeling, by pain and/or pleasure on the occasion of a work—an affected thinking. The painter, who is touched by a circumstance, makes paintings out of his feeling and those who encounter them are in turn touched. Paying tribute to the work, Lyotard seeks to call into question the authority of arguments and to disturb the serene assurance of philosophical aesthetics. He writes of the latter's deflection, of its forfeiture, which leave him with uncertainty and torment.

12. What seems to be undeniable is matter and its "enigma." Chromatic matter is given to thinking and the "work" is "a gesture of and in matter [geste de et dans une matière]." It is as though the understanding were under assault by colors and, when faced with them, feels its "impotence." A "rupture" or "astonishment," Lyotard writes, causes thinking to suspend its activity, to come to a standstill.

13. A "debt of obligation" is thus incurred. How is reflection to act? How could canvases with swathes of color resulting from a gesture, "the gesture of painting," be articulated? The philosopher is put in the position "to reach the gesture that is the work," to translate this way of being into words and to "transcribe it in his or her own space-time-matter." But how to do this? In the tone of "an account of affect [un compte-rendu d'effet]." The effect can only be accounted for by transmitting it. Lyotard observes: "It seems to me that the philosopher who loves art must learn to carry out, on a singular work, an anamnesis of the secret gesture from which the work receives its paradox of
space-time-matter, and which touches us."25 The work, which holds or keeps in reserve the gesture, a curve, color, range, rhythm, or tonality, can be an event. It cannot be decoded.

14. "The gesture of painting" opposes to thinking a kind of aporia. This gesture inscribes in the space-time-matter of the visible figures that stem from an entirely other space-time-matter, not abstract, but visible in an entirely other way ("tout autrement").16

15. Lyotard himself admits that "gesture is surely not a great name."27 In "Le Geste de Dieu" Sur un lieu de l'Ethique de Spinoza, Alfonso Cariolato argues that the French term geste is derived from the Latin nutus. Signifying movement, nod or shake of one's head as a sign of assent or approbation, nutus, which appears in Cicero, Livy, Lucretius and others, is in turn derived from the Greek to neuma, to incline or tilt one's head, to command or order.28 In Medieval Latin, nutus was another term for gestus. According to Jean-Claude Schmitt, in the Middle Ages, gestus gave way to signum and occasionally to nutus.29

In Karel Appel, Lyotard explains that gestus is the substantivized supine of the verb gerere, meaning "the state of 'carrying oneself,' of holding oneself in a certain way."30 The "carrying" carries itself, intransitively. The reversal of a verb of action or of a state, gestus is thus "itself a gesture of language, a gesture of and in the space-time-matter of language."31

16. Lyotard remarks that gestus could be joined to actus and situs: actus, understood not simply as an act, but the acting where "the action will have been," and situs, understood not simply as a situated site, but as "the situating of which there will have been a situation."32 It is through the gesture that art "transforms the conditions of being-there [être-là]," but the work, which is "the trace of this transformation," must be there in the regular presentation.25

17. Gestus, a torsion of the time of an action or of a state, indicates that "the state will have appeared and persisted."34 In this future anterior, "the state has not yet appeared at the moment of speaking," and "later on, when one tries to think of it, it no longer will be."35 But "this torturous gesture, this twist [tors], must present itself in the "space-time, where it becomes a work."36 The gesture "has to be rendered sensible at the same time that it is a challenge to sensibility." This challenge itself is what makes art. The work, then, "will have gestured" to another time, space, and matter, to which commentary will have to link on.37

18. "The example of a 'deferred affect' [l'effet après-coup]."38 Lyotard writes, "reveals the necessity of the future anterior to the understanding of the aesthetic gesture."38 Drawing an analogy with the Freudian après-coup (Nachträglichkeit—belated stroke, deferred effect, after shock, after the fact, after the event), he writes of an event that is not marked in ordinary conscious experience or space-time. "The work, which invokes a space-time-matter different from the ordinary one, reveals, after the fact [après-coup], a hard before-shock or a blow before the fact [une frappe avant-coup] which without it would have remained unknown."39 The work reveals "a trace of the event that had remained hidden without presentable trace before-shock [avant coup]."40 The debt to a before-shock, this "delicate touch, coming, perhaps, from another time"41 is present in a "blank [blanchet]" affectability or a possibility.42 This is a debt of art, or what Lyotard prefers to call, "a debt of gesture."43 The debt can be "recalled" and the gesture of art is this "recall [rappel]."44 Thus, Lyotard writes, "What is there will have done justice to what perhaps was, which from now on will have been there and which has never been."45 This is the "astonishing authority" of art that is negotiated in Appel under the motif of what Lyotard refers to as childhood.

19. If the writer/thinker is always asked "to get across [faire comprendre]" what the artist has done, he or she can only do so, Lyotard ruefully admits early on in Karel Appel, "in an operation ... on the order of a crossing [une traversee]," decanting [transvasement], transcription, transposition, translation and always treason.46

20. A stroke, a line, a swathe of color—painting's gesture—gives rise to or signals affects (pathémata), affects of pain and/or pleasure. Like a timbre, an intonation or an inflection, a gesture, painting's gesture, is not articulated; it does not present a phrase universe. As Lyotard explains in "L'inarticule ou le differend situs, actus, and occasionally to nutus.49

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21. Transcription is inevitable. Transcription—or transference—is the transmission of affect. To report the affect arising from the gesture of painting is to transmit it. A report or account of the affect provoked by the work—an anamnesis of the gesture—is its transmission in a gesture in, and of, writing. But need this writing be, strictly speaking, the employment of logos? As Lyotard writes, gestus is itself "a gesture of language, a gesture of and in space-time-matter of language."46 One can only "bear witness" to matter-color by means of this gesture.49

22. Transference then would be, adopting its definition in Lectures d’enfance while slightly modifying it, the gesture of, and in, painting "in the process of articulating itself."51 Trans-division, trans-formation,
transcription, or transference speak of a gesture, of writing, which is haunted, inhabited by another gesture. Even though the two gestures of painting and writing are "heterogeneous" to each other, the former can inhabit the latter, like the apparition that Lyotard often reminds us inhabits the appearance. For example, when in a dense passage, he writes: "Beauty is and is not sensible. It is an apparition at the heart of appearances. It is in what it promises." What it promises is "the happiness of a free presentation." This freedom "makes an appearance (fait apparition)" in beauty "without appearing itself." For, what appears is only "a trace, the work." Elsewhere, in "Fait pictural (Necessity of Lazarus)," a text on Albert Ayme in Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists, Lyotard observes that "the work is an appearance [apparence] in which an apparition happens [advient]." The gesture of writing would somehow bear the pleasure and/or pain provoked by the gesture of painting.

23. The affect can inhabit articulated language, but it is an inarticulate muteness that needs to be conjured, cajoled into articulation by writing. Though, in what idiom can one express affects and the happening of painting's gesture? The writing of gesture would be an affected writing, a writing inhabited by affect, or the writing of gesture inhabited by the gesture of painting. This writing, then, would not take the shape of a logos but rather would be a "trace of a gesture of and in language that links on or with a work of art." The affect can inhabit articulated language, but it is an inarticulate muteness that needs to be conjured, cajoled into articulation by writing. Though, in what idiom can one express affects and the happening of painting's gesture? The writing of gesture would be an affected writing, a writing inhabited by affect, or the writing of gesture inhabited by the gesture of painting. This writing, then, would not take the shape of a logos but rather would be a "trace of a gesture of and in language that links on or with a work of art." The affect can inhabit articulated language, but it is an inarticulate muteness that needs to be conjured, cajoled into articulation by writing. Though, in what idiom can one express affects and the happening of painting's gesture? The writing of gesture would be an affected writing, a writing inhabited by affect, or the writing of gesture inhabited by the gesture of painting. This writing, then, would not take the shape of a logos but rather would be a "trace of a gesture of and in language that links on or with a work of art." 24. In Flora Danica: The Secession of the Gesture in the Painting of Stig Brøgger, Lyotard refers to Brøgger's paintings, these "pieces of painted wood" on display at the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, as "phrases." But they are phrases without referent, sense, addressor, or addressee. They can thus be likened to affect-words because their inarticulation makes them similar to feelings. Standing before these works, Lyotard writes, "I must receive some gesture in my thoughts (in my phrases)" that comes to encounter "the singular gesture" of these pieces. However, the commentary that Brøgger's works would require, Lyotard writes, is "a commentary that questions the sense, the reference, and the address of the articulated language in which this commentary itself is articulated." He refers to the gestures of painting as well as writing because each is nothing but "a way of time, space, and matter (color for painters, words for the writer) to organize themselves [se gerer]." It should be noted that the gesture is not the form, for the form tends to "hide the gesture" that brings it about. The gesture withdraws into the form, which represses it and denies it. 25. Perhaps this thinking of gesture would begin to account for the kind of writing practiced by Lyotard in his later writings on contemporary artists such as Sam Francis, Pierre Skira, François Rouan, and Corinne Filippi. These texts display Lyotard's attempt to put himself in tune with the gesture of the artistic work, "awakening the layers asleep in words and in linkages of words." The gesture of writing would be the transmission of affect: it would somehow bear at once the affect, the pleasure and/or pain provoked by the gesture of painting, and be its transmission. This, then, would be his writing—Lyotard's gesture—a writing that feels its state of being affected.
22 Ibid., 26–7.
23 Ibid., 52–3.
26 Ibid., 200–1.
27 Ibid., 202–3.
30 Lyotard, Karel Appel, 202–3. Lyotard notes that in scholastic Latin supinus means “turned onto one’s back.” “Thus the gesture is a carrying oneself that has been turned on its back.”
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 204–5.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 202–3.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 204–5.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 206–7.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 84–5.
42 Ibid., 210–11.
43 Ibid., 208–9.

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