

- 33 Lyotard, *Lectures d'enfance*, 140–53. A first version of the essay published in *Lectures d'enfance* appeared, under the title “Les Voix d'une voix,” in *Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* 62 (fall 1990). That version has been translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, “Voices of a Voice,” in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 14, no. 1 (winter 1991–2): 126–45.
- 34 Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews,”* 20, translation modified.
- 35 Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, 103, translation mine.
- 36 Lyotard, “La peinture, anamnèse du visible,” *Misère de la philosophie*, 100–1.
- 37 Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Histoire de Ruth*, in *Écrits sur l'art contemporain et les artistes. Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. IVb: *Textes dispersés II/Miscellaneous Texts II*, 386–7.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Lyotard, *Que peindre?/What to Paint?*, 317.
- 40 Ibid., 343.
- 41 Lyotard, *The Differend*, 67.
- 42 Lyotard, *Que peindre?/What to Paint?*, 333–5.
- 43 Lyotard, “Formule charnelle,” in *Misère de la philosophie*, 280. Translation mine.
- 44 Lyotard, “La peinture, anamnèse du visible,” in *Misère de la philosophie*, 112.
- 45 Ibid., 103.

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 différend même”—The Inarticulate, or the Differend Itself) that appeared in the posthumous volume *Misère de la philosophie* (published in 2000) bears the subtitle “D'un supplément au *Différend*” (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 *phōnē* and *logos*, inarticulate voice and articulated language, Freudian affect and presentation (*Darstellung*), first touch and the law. In addition, “Emma,” in *Misère 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 inaeesthetic 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.¹

4. Art “gives to thinking [*donne à penser*].”² 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.³ 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*].”⁴ Recall that in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas explained that the I and *Autrui* (“Other”) existed in two different ways. Using *façon* and *manière* (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.”⁵

6. The gesture that the work is is an *actus* and a *situs*.⁶ 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,” Appell’s work seems to proclaim.⁸

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.⁹ Philosophy fashions and organizes all givens for the understanding. The concept “determines and regulates the forms of the object in order to know it.”¹⁰ Thus, the mind ends up digesting experience in order to produce a reasonable discourse. The work of art becomes a “prey” for philosophical thought.¹¹

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.”¹² 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*.”¹³

10. “There is no history of art as such,” Lyotard writes, but “a history of [determinable] cultural objects.”¹⁴ 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 “astounding power” of the work is independent of periods and of contexts.¹⁵ 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 defection, of its forfeiture, which leave him with uncertainty and torment.¹⁶

12. What seems to be undeniable is matter and its “enigma.”¹⁷ Chromatic matter is given to thinking and the “work” is “a gesture of and in matter [*geste de et dans une matière*].”¹⁸ It is as though the understanding were under assault by colors and, when faced with them, feels its “impotence.”¹⁹ A “rapture” or “astonishment,” Lyotard writes, causes thinking to suspend its activity, to come to a standstill.²⁰

13. A “debt of obligation” is thus incurred.²¹ How is reflection to act? How could canvases with swathes of color resulting from a gesture, “the gesture of painting,” be articulated?²² 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.”²³ But how to do this? In the tone of “an account of affect [*un compte-rendu d'affect*].”²⁴ The affect 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*”).²⁶

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.³³

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’affect après-coup*],” 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 [*blanche*]” affectability or a passibility.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 [*fasse 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 traversée*]: decanting [*transvasement*], transcription, transposition, transition, translation and always treason.”⁴⁶

20. A stroke, a line, a swathe of color—painting’s gesture—gives rise to or signals affects (*pathēmata*), 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’inarticulé ou le différend même*,” it is on the occasion of objects that pleasure and pain are signaled by “gestures—*The Differend* §110.”⁴⁷ This gesture, however, is mute, it only signifies affections. Even though there is “a communicability of pleasure and pain,” it is “without the mediation of *logos*.”⁴⁸ How, then, to respond to this mute communication? To respect its mutism would be to lend it one’s ear.

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.”⁴⁹ One can only “bear witness” to matter-color by means of this gesture.⁵⁰

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-mission, trans-lation, trans-position, 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.”⁵² What it promises is “the happiness of a free presentation.”⁵³ This freedom “makes an appearance [*fait apparition*]” in beauty “without appearing itself.”⁵⁴ For, what appears is only “a trace, the work.”⁵⁵ 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*].”⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.”⁵⁸

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.”⁵⁹ But they are phrases without referent, sense, addressor, or addressee. They can thus be likened to affect-phrases 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.⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ 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 gérer*].”⁶² It should be noted that the gesture is not the form, for the form tends to “hide the gesture” that brings it about.⁶³ The gesture withdraws into the form, which represses it and denies it.⁶⁴

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.”⁶⁵ 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.

Notes

- 1 The original German edition was published as *Karel Appel: Ein Farbgestus, Essays zur Kunst Karel Appels mit einer Bildauswahl des Autors*, trans. Jessica Beer (Bern/Berlin: Gachnang & Springer, 1998).
- 2 Jean-François Lyotard, *Karel Appel: Un geste de couleur* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), 38; trans. Vlad Ionescu and Peter W. Milne as *Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), 39. All further references are cited with page references first to the French, then to the English, of this bilingual edition. I have very occasionally silently modified the translation to reflect my reading.
- 3 “La peinture, anamnèse du visible,” in *Textes dispersés II: artistes contemporains/Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists*, ed. Hermann Parret (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 585.
- 4 Lyotard, *Karel Appel*, 34–6/35–7.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 40–1.
- 6 “Gesture” is a late term in Lyotard’s writings. References to gesture in painting begin to appear in texts from 1991 and 1993.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 40–1.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 44–5.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 42–3.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 82–3.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 36–7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 90–1.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, 96–7.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 26–7.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 34–5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, translation modified.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 32–3.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 192–3.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 56–7.

- 22 Ibid., 26–7.
- 23 Ibid., 52–3.
- 24 Ibid., 190–1. Following Freud, Lyotard understands affect as an excitation that cannot be represented, thus remaining “within” the apparatus as “unconscious affect.” For affect in Freud, see Sigmund Freud, “Entwurf einer Psychologie,” *Gesammelte Werke* (GW), vols 1–18, eds Anna Freud et al. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1960), Nachtr.: 387–477, translated as “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1895), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (SE), 24 volumes, eds James Strachey et al. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953–74) 1: 283–397; *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie in Studienausgabe*, GW 5, 13–145, translated as *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE 7:135–243; “Zur Einführung des Narzissmus,” GW 10, 137–70, translated as “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” SE 14: 73–102, and *Hemmung, Symptom und Angst*, GW 14, 113–205, translated as *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926) in SE 20: 87–172.
- 25 Ibid., 194–5, 195–6.
- 26 Ibid., 200–1.
- 27 Ibid., 202–3.
- 28 Alfonso Cariolato, “*Le Geste de Dieu*”: *Sur un lieu de l’Éthique de Spinoza* (Chatou: Editions de la Transparence, 2011). The phrase “*le geste de dieu*” is a translation of *nos ex solo Dei nutu agere* that appears in Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 49, Scholium.
- 29 Jean-Claude Schmitt, “‘*Gestus*’—‘*Gesticulatio*.’ Contribution à l’étude du vocabulaire latin médiéval des gestes,” in *La Lexicographie du latin médiéval et ses rapports avec les recherches actuelles sur la civilisation du Moyen Âge* (Paris: CNRS, 1981), 383.
- 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.

- 44 Ibid., 210–11.
- 45 Ibid., 206–7.
- 46 Ibid., 38–9.
- 47 In “La phrase-affect (D’un supplément au *Différend*),” in *Misère de la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 53, translated as “The Affect-Phrase (from a Supplement to *The Differend*),” in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, eds James Williams and Keith Crome (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 109, Lyotard adds a passage about gesture as an extension of the *phônè* to paragraph no. 13: “it will thus be necessary to extend the *phônè* as far as *gesture*.” This passage does not appear in the earlier version of the essay, “L’inarticulé ou le différend même,” in *Figures et conflits rhétoriques*, eds Michel Meyer and Alain Lempereur (Brussels: Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1990), 205.
- 48 Lyotard, “The Affect-Phrase,” 108 (“La phrase-affect,” 51).
- 49 Lyotard, *Karel Appel*, 202–3.
- 50 Ibid., 200–1.
- 51 Jean-François Lyotard, *Lectures d’enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 144.
- 52 Lyotard, *Karel Appel*, 204–5.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid., 204–6, 205–7.
- 55 Ibid., 206–7.
- 56 Jean-François Lyotard, “Nécessité de Lazare,” in *Textes dispersés II: artistes contemporains/Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 350; translated by Geoffrey Bennington, Vlad Ionescu and Peter W. Milne as “Fait pictural [Necessity of Lazarus],” 351.
- 57 See Claire Nouvet’s excellent “The Inarticulate Affect: Lyotard and Psychoanalytic Testimony,” in *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, eds Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak, and Kent Still (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
- 58 Ibid., 32–3.
- 59 Jean-François Lyotard, *Flora danica: La sécession du geste dans la peinture de Stig Brøgger*, in *Textes dispersés II: artistes contemporains/Miscellaneous Texts II: Contemporary Artists* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 628; translated by Vlad Ionescu and Erica Harris as *Flora Danica: The Secession of the Gesture in the Painting of Stig Brøgger*, 629.
- 60 Lyotard, *Flora Danica*, 630–1.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid., 632–3.
- 64 Ibid., 634–5.
- 65 Lyotard, *Karel Appel*, 52–4, 53–5.

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