

EXCEEDING the GIVEN

Rewriting Lyotard's Aesthetics

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The past few years have seen a remarkable resurgence of scholarship on Jean-François Lyotard. New texts have been uncovered and released (Lyotard 2012b); first-time English translations of major works have appeared (Lyotard 2009a, 2011); the bilingual six-volume *Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists* is now complete (containing, in its turn, both reissues of previous material and newly published works and translations; see, e.g., Lyotard 2009b, 2012c); and there are several recent monographs and collections devoted to his thought in both French and English (e.g., Nouvet, Stahuljak, and Still 2007; Grebowicz 2007; Enaudeau et al. 2008; Vega 2010; Pagès 2010, 2011; Cany, Poulain, and Prado 2011; Bamford 2012; Bickis and Shields 2013). Though it would hardly be fair to suggest that scholarship on Lyotard had dried up since his death in 1998 (this is not the case), the recent spate of publications would seem to testify to a certain resilience in his polymorphous and ever-resistant thought, in spite of the general decline of the “postmodernism” to which Lyotard’s name is so often—and so problematically—attached. Far from dating itself with the passage of supposed scholarly fads, the richness and variety of Lyotard’s thinking is perhaps only coming more fully into view now that some common misconceptions of the so-called postmodern have been—at least partially—deflected.

Of course, as we will see, one cannot simply dissociate Lyotard from some sense of the postmodern. Since the publication of *La condition postmoderne (The Postmodern Condition)* in 1979, the book that to some extent brought him to

international attention, Lyotard's name has been attached to the term *postmodern* for better or (usually) for worse—and we should not forget that he himself, quite aware of the controversies surrounding his use of this word, has continually returned to the question, reworking it from a variety of angles. Some of these reworkings or rewritings appear in the pages that follow, and I shall return to them. But one should recall too that Lyotard's writings span many years and concern far more than the "postmodern condition," however one might come to understand this term. His earliest book, first published in 1954, was devoted to phenomenology (see Lyotard 1991b), and as Geoffrey Bennington remarks in his contribution to this special issue, Lyotard's philosophical career proceeded to take a number of "apparently dramatic and often disconcerting shifts"—of emphasis, style, method—in the many works that followed. Over a decade of militant Marxism in the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, leaves its traces not only on a collection of writings from that period (Lyotard 1989) but also in the rejections, resistances, and inflections of the texts from the early 1970s that mark his "drift" from both Marx and Freud (for instance, *Discourse, Figure, Libidinal Economy*, or, most obviously, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* [*Drifting from Marx and Freud*]). Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, paths of inquiry multiply around a plethora of figures: the libidinal, the pagan, language games, phrase universes, infancy, the inhuman, the sublime—and yes, the "postmodern." Similar to the logic of what he calls the avant-garde, each new path avoids familiar and comforting idioms (often even those of his own invention), experimenting instead with the categories through which thinking ought to proceed. Rather than fulfill the expectations of an already-established

audience or "community" of thinkers (a theme we will return to), these figures demand thought precisely by questioning the rules of thinking. It might rather be a question of the *creation* of an audience or a public after the fact, while the challenge for the commentator would be to find "passages"—to use yet another figure, this time from *The Differend*—between them (see Lyotard 1988a).

Lyotard's work is thus anything but one-dimensional, as testified to by the four essays that make up the section of this special issue titled "Rewritings."¹ These essays were all initially presented at the "Rewriting Lyotard" conference at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in February 2011. This conference, which sought to build on the growing interest in Lyotard, invoked in its title the essay "Rewriting Modernity" from Lyotard's book *The Inhuman* (1991a: 24–35). The term *rewriting*, he tells us there, performs a dual displacement of the elements of "post-modernity": it replaces the inherently periodizing "post-" with "re-," and it replaces the substantive "modernity" with the verb "writing" (Lyotard 1991a: 24). Rewriting invokes the continual *act* of thinking itself, as it circles around that which occasions it. It is linked to the process of "working through" (in the sense of Freud's *Durcharbeitung*) the event—of continually returning to and rethinking that which elicits thought in never quite being open to or exhaustible by it. This might include a text, a trauma, the "experience" (if it can be so called) of the sublime, or the "event" of the postmodern itself (see, e.g., Lyotard 2012a: 200–203). A conference devoted to "rewriting Lyotard" would thus serve as an occasion, as Lyotard himself might say, for the thinker to reflect on and return once again to his or her commentary on the writings of Lyotard and to the questions that those

writings raise for thinking (see Lyotard 2009b: 26–27).

A truly “global” group of participants (from Canada, the United States, Europe, Turkey, Iran, New Zealand, and Australia) were involved in this attempt to “rewrite” Lyotard across themes and figures as disparate as the texts with which they engaged. The four conference papers included here share as their focus one of the most insistent of Lyotardian figures: something we might still call “aesthetics” in the broad sense, even if Lyotard shows some reticence toward using this term (see, e.g., Lyotard and Blistène 1985: 34; see also both pieces by Lyotard in this issue). Each essay is concerned with some aspect of aesthetics or of art in Lyotard’s work that has yet to be given sustained attention, from the “figural aesthetics” of the important book *Discourse, Figure*, to Lyotard’s seldom-discussed text on Edward Kienholz, *Pacific Wall*, and to music, a subject to which Lyotard devoted a number of important essays but that has so far received little attention in the literature. These articles thus make significant and overdue contributions to scholarship on Lyotard, as well as bear enduring witness to the conference that was their initial impetus.

In addition to these works (I’ll return to them), we also include here two previously untranslated texts by Lyotard himself. The long essay “Argumentation and Presentation: The Foundation Crisis” makes up the first section and was initially published in 1989 in volume 1 of the *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle (Universal Philosophical Encyclopedia)*, near the end of Lyotard’s more than decade-long study of Immanuel Kant’s sublime (a study that reached a culmination of sorts with the publication, in 1991, of *Leçons sur l’analytique du sublime [Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime]*).² This important

essay brings together a series of recurring themes in Lyotard’s work, situating his reading of Kantian aesthetics in the context—indeed—of what he continues to call the “postmodern” crisis of legitimacy. But let us note, once again, that the “postmodern” cannot be understood here as a movement or school of thought, much less a scholarly “fad.” It is the name Lyotard gives to what he takes to be the present state of the “foundation crisis” in the mathematical sciences and particularly the aporias these sciences have encountered in attempting to establish their own foundations. The problem is not new (indeed, as Lyotard suggests, it might just go back to Parmenides and the beginning of Western philosophy), but it takes its present—“postmodern”—form with the hegemony of what he calls “the ‘technoscientific’ mode” (attributing the term to Jürgen Habermas, in Lyotard, “Argumentation and Presentation,” 118; see also the final section of “What to Paint?” in this issue).

The theme of crisis is not a new one for Lyotard; it goes back at least to *The Postmodern Condition*, where it is rather famously couched in terms of a crisis of narratives (see Lyotard 1984: xxiii). Here the crisis is described as one of space and time—a (perhaps slightly strange) claim that will take us from the seemingly narrow epistemological questions at the outset of the essay to aesthetics taken in a fairly broad sense (and from there to the politics that could be said to be lurking behind or below the entire discussion). The “foundation crisis” in the mathematical sciences would appear to be one of reason, pure and simple, but arithmetic is the science of time, geometry the science of space, mechanics the science of movement (Lyotard, “Argumentation and Presentation,” 121; see also Lyotard 1991a: 116). What the crisis of

these sciences reveals, then, is a crisis of place and moment as that which frames what *happens*. It is thus a crisis of the given, what Lyotard here refers to as the Other (with a capital *O*), by which he means an Other to reason itself: sense data, that basic something to which thought must respond in order to make judgments about the world. The inability to verify or establish space and time as conditions of any sensory given is part of what Lyotard elsewhere calls the “lack of reality of reality” from which modernity suffers (see the appendix to Lyotard 1984: 77).

Technoscience “rounds off” the crisis of foundations, according to Lyotard (“Argumentation and Presentation,” 121), by submitting all immediate givens or “data” to calculation, analysis, synthesis. Technoscience is therefore less the nuts and bolts of actual technology than a kind of “attitude” or logic (in this respect it isn’t far from what Martin Heidegger calls *Gestell* [usually translated as “enframing”], and Lyotard indeed invokes this notion in both of his pieces included in this issue). Its model is that of programming and of computer languages, a logic of calculation, anticipating results and problems in the pursuit of continual development for its own sake. Technoscience, as he puts it in “What Is the Postmodern?,” is “the massive subordination of cognitive statements to the finality of the best possible performance, which is the technological criterion” (Lyotard 1984: 76–77). It is thus a way of responding to the crisis of foundations by anticipating and taking control in advance of whatever may “take place.” And its effects are far-reaching. Lyotard goes so far as to suggest that the logic of calculation has a “transcendental impact” on the faculties of understanding and reason (“Argumentation and Presentation,” 139), that it conditions the very possibility of the exercise of

these faculties. It would thus be central to what he takes to be the “real” crisis of foundations.

Lyotard rejects Karl-Otto Apel’s attempt to resist the “foundation crisis” by appealing to a transcendental metapragmatics as the ultimate ground of reason. Such a solution makes the conditions of argumentation in a sense “preliminary” to those of sensible givens by subordinating all judgments pertaining to sensory data to the a priori rules of the argumentative game (see Lyotard, “Argumentation and Presentation,” 123). We might say that thinking “places” or “frames” the event of the given via those rules—which come “first” in virtue of the form they give to data. Lyotard, by contrast, insists on the priority, even in cognitive discourse, of a moment of “showing” (*zeigen*) of sensory data as a necessary (pre)condition of judging those data. As he will try to show in the context of Kant’s aesthetics, this moment of givenness would be prior to any “transcendental” conditions of rationality or even of consciousness. Knowledge in this case would not consist in the demonstration of “communicational competence” (to use Habermas’s term, quoted by Lyotard, in “Argumentation and Presentation,” 122) by testing all truth claims against the rules of critical argumentation. It would be to give a voice to the silence of “a more or less mute exteriority” (120). Reason will not find its ground in argumentative pragmatics alone, then. It will also be grounded—will find or take its ground, *Boden nehmen* (129)—in relation to a sensory given that in some sense always comes “first.”

It follows that reflection on foundations will not first be occasioned by a member of a rational communicational community who will respect the rules of argumentation—an “other,” with a lowercase *o*. Reflection starts with, is even elicited by, what is given

(in this text, the Other with the capital *O*). This is where Lyotard invokes Kant's aesthetics, which, perhaps surprisingly, will turn out to underlie this entire problematic and to show up the "true foundation crisis" affecting space and time "as forms in which the Other is present" (127).

I cannot do justice to the entire question here or to the complexities of Lyotard's argument. But let us recall that Kant uses the term *aesthetic* in two different ways. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the term refers to space and time as a priori forms of intuition, while in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* it picks out two particular kinds of reflective judgments: that of taste (beauty) and that of the sublime. Though he has much to say about this distinction, Lyotard maintains that in either case the "aesthetic" in Kant refers to the "transcendental examination of receptivity" (Lyotard, "Argumentation and Presentation," 127). But rather than privilege the more "limited" inquiry into receptivity in the first *Critique*, he takes the aesthetic judgment as it appears in the third *Critique* to be exemplary, particularly the judgment of taste. What explains this privilege? The fact that the Kantian judgment of taste is nonconceptual, that it is disinterested and has no care for the existence of its object, that it is not caught up in the "end goal of knowledge" (Lyotard, "Argumentation and Presentation," 128). For Lyotard such a judgment attests to a kind of primordial affectivity of thought by forms—"before" any conceptual grasping and even "before" experience itself (if experience in Kant requires the basic syntheses that are suspended in the judgment of taste—the subsumption of the forms presented by the imagination under the concepts of the understanding, for example). Thought here is in its infancy. If such a feeling is, in principle, communicable, if it even invokes a kind of community via the

sensus communis (understood in the sense of a shared sensibility), it can only produce an "infancy of community" (Lyotard, "Argumentation and Presentation," 132). Its community is not that of argumentation or "communicational competence" (122) but that of shared feeling.

The *sensus communis*, Lyotard tells us elsewhere (1988b: 22), is a "sensible analogue" of the harmony of the faculties that Kant describes in the judgment of taste—that is, of the famous "free play" of imagination and understanding in the beautiful (Kant 2000, sec. 9). In this harmony is to be found the birth of the subject itself, in the infancy of feeling (and not yet in the "adulthood" of rational cognition). It is a feeling that escapes the mastery of concept or of will and as such "extends itself underneath and beyond their intrigues and their closure" (Lyotard 1988b: 22). This is not without implications for a kind of politics, since this freedom from concept or will makes the feeling of the beautiful, thought in its infancy, a "region of resistance" to these intrigues, "to institutions and establishment" in general (Lyotard 1988b: 22), since it escapes the strictures of their programs. It comes "before" them and cannot be brought into their calculations.

Though Lyotard's reading of the sublime is better known, the Kantian conception of the judgment of taste is thus more important to his engagement with Kant than might be supposed. But the sublime is in fact more directly linked with the crisis of foundations, since it exemplifies the withdrawal of forms of givenness. The sublime is a moment brought on by a kind of *excess* of the given, of which the faculty of presentation, the imagination, cannot form an image (this is the "pain" of the sublime). Here the imagination's "partner" is not understanding but reason: the pleasure comes when reason's ideas are "provoked and called to

mind" by this failure to form the given (see Kant 2000, sec. 129/Ak. 5: 245). In Kant, ideas of reason are ideas that have no corresponding intuition in experience—ideas like "God" or "humanity" or, in the case of the sublime, absolute power or magnitude. They thus, in turn, exceed the given.

On the one hand, the sublime exemplifies the affliction felt by space and time, since the "object" that is the occasion of this feeling exceeds the framing power of either (see Lyotard 1990: 32; 1994). It would therefore seem to lend itself to the crisis Lyotard is attempting to elucidate; indeed, it might even be symptomatic of it. But the need to respond to this lack of form may also open other possibilities in the gap between its two kinds of excesses. If the "foundation crisis" is really one of space and time as the forms of givenness, one brought on by a break of the harmonious relation between mind and world, one way for thinking to respond would indeed be to reject this crisis of forms and to neutralize events through calculation. This would be technoscience, which Lyotard links to Gottfried Leibniz and the *mathesis universalis*: a universal science that would leave nothing to chance (Lyotard 1991a: 65; see also the final passages below of Lyotard, "What to Paint?"). This would correspond with what he calls, in "What Is the Postmodern," the "modern" or nostalgic response to the anxiety of the "lack of reality of reality" (Lyotard 1984: 79–81). But there is another way to respond to the retreat of forms: to affirm the opening it announces, because in this opening lies the possibility of raising the question of reality anew. The sublime not only opens a space for the artistic inquiry that Lyotard associates with the avant-garde (1984, app.; "Argumentation and Presentation," 138) and thus for a kind of embracing of possibilities in artistic experimentation. It also "wages war" on

the totality of technoscience (Lyotard 1984: 82), it shatters the simulacrum of its productions, and it forces the rethinking of the community, including the political community, in calling its foundations into question (Lyotard, "Argumentation and Presentation," 136). It is thus a form of resistance and even a (brief) moment of liberation from the confines of how things are projected to be. It produces dispersion, dissensus, diversity—and out of this diversity perhaps even the desire for a community that nonetheless has no idea (in the Kantian sense) of what it wants to be (Lyotard 1988b: 5).

If, then, the disruption of the faculties epitomized by the sublime has allowed the forms of presentation to shift from intuition to concept, and if this disruption has yet to be thought through (transcendentally), what conclusion might we draw from the text? A hint might perhaps lie in the claim that, "anthropologically," this "transfer" from intuition to concept, from sensibility to calculation, can be seen as an emancipation from our condition as animals (Lyotard, "Argumentation and Presentation," 140). If we link the "animality" that is being left behind here with the "inhumanity" of other texts (see, e.g., Lyotard 2001), we would find this animality/inhumanity again in the infancy of thought in the aesthetic judgment—a "transcendental" condition of thought itself and thus impossible to ever really leave behind. Animality/inhumanity, then, would figure an affectivity always resistant to the subordination of the forms of presentation to calculation. And what else is politics, asks Lyotard at the outset of *The Inhuman* (1991a: 7), than the resistance of *this* inhumanity (animality?) to the inhumanity of technoscience?

The second text by Lyotard that we publish in this issue (again, for the first time in English), the interview "What to Paint?," takes this thematic up in its final passages.

Technoscience, *Gestell*, the postmodern are all so many names for the fact that a certain metaphysics, a reduction of all things to their harnessing as energy or as forces, is realized in everyday life. In Lyotard's Kantian terms, this is an attempt to make an idea (of complete knowledge, the position of God—though this is "a Leibniz without God" [217]) manifest in intuition, which can only produce simulacra—and the worst injustices. This interview was given soon after the initial publication of Lyotard's book *What to Paint?*, where he thematizes painting in part in terms of its material presence, the event of a break in space-time that is very much linked to his reading of the sublime.³ Presence and matter are the only problems that offer any resistance to the present-day "actualization of the philosophico-metaphysical logos" (Lyotard, "What to Paint?," 217). We now perhaps have some sense for why. While painting—and perhaps aesthetics or at least "anaesthetics" more generally—ought not to be subordinated to specifically political ends for Lyotard, it would still appear to have some significance for politics: to resist the reduction of all ends to the logic of capital. The sublime, after all, produces a thinking that is not confined to what is already given or known, a thinking that goes beyond what can be experienced in sensibility. This thinking thus remains a power for Lyotard (which is perhaps why he remains a philosopher). As the "You" (formal) voice of the chapter "The Exposure" in *What to Paint?* suggests, "to think is to have ideas, and ideas exceed the given" (Lyotard 2012c: 345).

In the opening passages of *The Inhuman*, Lyotard tells us that he finds, "after the fact," that he has always tried to attend to the unharmonizable (1991a: 4). It is this that we've been speaking of here in the context of the crisis of space and time. Vlad Ionescu, in his essay in this issue, "Figural

Aesthetics: Lyotard, Valéry, Deleuze," considers it in another incarnation: the forms of space-time-matter known as the "figural" in Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure* (1971). Arguing that a number of major "Lyotardian" themes are prefigured in this work's insistence on the difference between visuality and language, Ionescu examines the figural in terms of its relation to the sign and in its three dimensions of figure-image, figure-form, and figure-matrix, tracing throughout its inflections in texts like *The Differend* and *What to Paint?* He argues that Lyotard's notion of the figural can even be seen as a "pattern," in modern French aesthetics, "of a certain understanding of visuality and of visual presentation," a claim he supports through a comparison with Paul Valéry and Gilles Deleuze.

Joseph J. Tanke's essay "Art before the Sublime: The Libidinal Economy up against the Pacific Wall" also takes as its subject one of Lyotard's earlier engagements with aesthetics, this time his little-known and highly idiosyncratic text *Pacific Wall*. Tanke argues that Lyotard's experimental approach in that book to Kienholz's installation work *Five Car Stud* offers an alternative to the work on the sublime as a model for writing and thinking about art. We return in this text to the themes of the "foundations" or "limits" of thought, considered now in terms of the limits of Western knowledge (pressed up against the "Pacific wall"). Lyotard uses Kienholz's piece, as well as his own setting, to meditate on desire, empire, foreignness, sex, and race, and Tanke reads the complexities and ambiguities of the work in terms of Lyotard's dream, in his *Libidinal Economy*, of a writing that would directly transmit desire, affect, and intensity. Tanke sees Lyotard as using the libidinal dimensions of Kienholz's highly charged commentary on racism to disrupt the closure not only around our understanding of the

work but also around “the more general political-libidinal *dispositif*.”

The two essays that follow, Matthew Mendez’s “. . . A Power of Sonorous Paradoxes . . .” and Mickey Vallee’s “‘Say Rawr!’,” both address music in Lyotard. Mendez offers a careful and close analysis of Lyotard’s work on music in relation to one of his most common interlocutors on the subject, John Cage. Mendez focuses his reading on what he sees as two shared concerns between the two: the use of creative strategies centering on passivity and indifference and the desire to approach singular events free from the strictures of cognition. Lyotard’s attention, in much of his writing on music, to timbre, tone, and nuance as sonorous (and even immaterial) “matter” provides an analogue to the discussion of matter in painting mentioned above. Mendez examines this aspect of Lyotard’s thought in terms of how it rewrites Cage’s theories on music (and the paradoxes contained therein), while also contextualizing it in the broad spectrum of Lyotard’s (and Cage’s) work.

Vallee’s discussion starts from Lyotard’s argument that a composer’s main challenge is to liberate sound from grand narratives, so as to make music out of what was once noise. Lyotard thus sees music, as he sees certain practices of painting, as an act with potentially “political” implications. Vallee uses both Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari as philosophical lenses through which to approach the work of African American alternative musician Wesley Willis, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia and who made music in part to silence his demons. On the one hand, these thinkers help in “reconceptualizing the terms and conditions under which individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia produce art and music.” But Vallee also argues that Willis, in turn, better elucidates Lyotard’s insights into music than Lyotard’s own

concentration on canonical European composers did, not only offering a broadening of our understanding of Lyotard, but also “widening the scope for a more inclusive discussion of music, culture, and society.”

The section that follows, “(Further) Commentary,” consists of Bennington’s rich piece “Opening Up.” The problem of commentary and its relation to its object is a recurrent concern for Lyotard (the question of “rewriting” being one of its inflections). Bennington’s essay thus provides a kind of commentary on the commentary, taking the above texts as an occasion to consider the state of scholarship on Lyotard in English, as well as to rethink, once again, the status or place of that thinking itself, particularly in light of the transitions through it that the text on “argumentation and presentation” opens up. This section is followed by “What to Paint?,” in which Lyotard’s interview bearing that title is paired with an essay by our issue’s featured artist, Leon Phillips, who meditates on precisely this question (a seemingly fortuitous accident), aided in this case by both Lyotard and Gerhard Richter. Phillips is a stringent defender of the continuing relevance and importance of painting as an art form (even in the face, as we might put it, of the “technological criterion”), and his work embodies many features dear to Lyotard: a concern with presentation over representation, experimental methodologies, attention to paint in its material form, and, above all, a tireless exploration, for more than two decades, of painting in its relation to the forms of space and time.

We have had the good fortune to close the issue with two reviews of texts by or on Lyotard: Keith Crome’s thoughtful and provocative review essay on the *Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists* (with particular attention to the political significance of Lyotard’s thinking on art) and Julie Gaillard’s very careful review of Kiff Bamford’s *Lyotard*

and the "Figural" in *Performance, Art, and Writing*. That these texts are available for review will attest, I hope, to the continuing relevance of the work of Jean-François Lyotard and to the enduring need to rethink and perhaps even to "rewrite," with or alongside it.

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Notes

1. I have separated the issue into sections so that the reader can follow the logic of its organization more clearly.

2. The Lyotard archives at the Bibliothèque Doucet contain lecture notes from courses Lyotard gave on the sublime almost without interruption from 1980 to 1991, the first at Vincennes, the last at the Collège International de Philosophie. See Lyotard 1980–89.
3. This book has just been reissued (with the first-ever English translation) as volume 5 of Leuven University Press's *Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists* mentioned above. See Lyotard 2012c.

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