

LYOTARD BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND ART

Paper to be given at the conference

French Philosophy and Contemporary Art

at the Center for Body, Mind and Culture, Boca Raton,
Florida, Dec. 3-4, 2007.

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For nearly three decades, several of the French philosophers known as “postmodern philosophers” have been highly influential on both aesthetic reflection and the visual arts. Notably, because their thinking makes no separation between the world of images and the world of concepts. This opening leads not only to an intensification of the creative forces of knowledge and understanding within art and philosophy but also to a refined perception of the vocabulary of form and its possibilities for artistic conceptualization and expression.

Of all the “postmodern French philosophers,” Jean-François Lyotard is the one who has been most involved with visual art. Widely inspired by visual artists, he, in turn, influenced their view of art and their artistic activities in a multitude of ways. With great force, he emancipated visual art from all ideological ties to clearly bring out its creative and experimental aspects. Consequently, visual art has enjoyed better opportunities for crossing pre-established boundaries, opening up new horizons, revealing the unexpected and – in new ways and on its own terms – inspiring ethical and social thought.

Lyotard has no doubt that, in the 1980s and following decades, the modern emancipation project that originated in the Enlightenment has increasingly been losing its philosophical validity, perhaps even its credibility. This project can no longer be considered a universal tool for fixing societal, cultural and cognitive problems. In large part because the project, in the 20th century and the new millennium, has often been realized in caricatured guise, leading to oppression.

But what is this entity or unity against which Lyotard reacts so powerfully? In his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (published in French in 1979 as *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*)¹, he calls this unity “the grand narrative” (“*le grand récit*”). Originating in the French Enlightenment and German idealism, the “grand narrative” was perpetuated in Marx’ dream of human liberation. But despite its many positive effects, this “narrative” never had a fairytale ending. In our time – in “the postmodern condition” – “the grand narratives” of knowledge and power have broken down. Not only because their striving for unity led to oppression, but also because their concepts and strategies were

1 The book was translated into English in 1986 by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. It was last reissued in Oxford, 2005.

quite powerless in the face of the rapidly circulating movement of immaterial knowledge in the information society. This development has continued with increasing intensity in the 1990s and up to 2001.

In his book, Lyotard provides an in-depth analysis of the information society's multifaceted influence on art, research and knowledge-dissemination. Information technology, quite simply, has changed the essential conditions for producing both knowledge and art. It is clear to him that this technology's one-sided imprinting of both societal and cultural spaces requires that room be made for developing a form of knowledge that is not subordinate to the limitations of technological programs or answers to ruling power and capital interests but enhances our understanding of nuances and variety in social and cultural space. It is especially important to identify such knowledge as cannot be disseminated through the various information technologies and thus is in danger of being forgotten.

The narrative form that he calls "the little narrative" ("*le petit récit*") is such a form of knowledge. He also calls it "postmodern knowledge," defined as follows:

Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy.

(Le savoir postmoderne n'est pas seulement l'instrument des pouvoirs. Il raffine notre sensibilité aux différences et renforce notre capacité de supporter l'incommensurable. Lui-même ne trouve pas sa raison dans l'homologie des experts, mais dans la paralogie des inventeurs.)²

As for the "little narrative" ("*le petit récit*"), Lyotard notes that "it remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention." ("*Le petit récit*" reste la forme par excellence que prend l'invention imaginative.")³ His break with the "grand narratives" puts dialogue and creative activity in a prominent place in his space of cognition, while refining and enhancing the singularity and distinction of individual art forms and other forms of knowledge.

Three years after *The Postmodern Condition* was published in French, in 1979, Lyotard finished an essay, *Painting the Secret in the Postmodern Age, Baruchello* (*La pittura del segreto nell'epoca postmoderna, Baruchello*, 1982), outlining the differences between the rules for image creation of visual art and informatics, respectively. There, we encounter the first contours of aesthetic theories that would only be sharply defined later. Indeed, coming upon Gianfranco Baruchello's art adds new dimensions and clarifications to Lyotard's aesthetic. He is aware that there is a type of clarification coming from visual art that is important to the formation of theory. Exempting electronic or digital art, visual art's signs, figures and categories

2 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, ed. cit., p. xxv, and *La condition postmoderne*, ed. cit., pp. 8-9.

3 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 60, and *La condition postmoderne*, p. 98.

of forms can never enter into what Lyotard calls “an artificial memory that is subordinate to a binary algebra.” (“*Ils n’entreront pas dans une mémoire artificielle soumise à une algèbre binaire.*”)⁴

Signs and symbols affixed to the picture surface cannot be translated through concepts and categories. That is why the prime enterprise of visual art is expressing all the things that concepts cannot capture. The figures, situations, signs or abstract sequences that appear in visual art Lyotard characterizes as “depots of narrative energy” (“*des dépôts d’énergie narrative*”) that create other “narratives” and stimulate the viewers to create some for themselves. Visual art does not transmit unambiguous signals. It keeps its secrets. Hence, Lyotard characterizes its visual universe as “depots of the indefinite” (“*dépôts d’indéfini*”) and power fields saturated with intensity and presence.⁵ As Lyotard puts it, Baruchello’s pictures, resembling monograms – *Rite du passage* (1969) (Fig. 1) is a good example – fix



1. Gianfranco Baruchello. *Rite du passage*. 1969.

“an ethical moment in the field of vision that is not the visible but the visible and the invisible at once. They are not signs of signification but of intensity (...). There is little to look at and much to think about, as in all the postmoderns.” (“*Les monogrammes fixent dans le visuel – qui n’est pas le visible, mais le visible et l’invisible à la*

⁴ Lyotard, “Det hemmelige maleri i den postmoderne tidsalder, Baruchello” in *Jean-François Lyotard. Om det sublime*, introduced and translated by Carsten Juhl, Copenhagen, 1993, p. 42. Lyotard, “La peinture du secret à l’ère postmoderne. Baruchello” in *Le secret. Traverses*, 30-31, 1984, p. 98. The essay was originally published in Italian in 1982 as *La pittura del segreto nell’epoca postmoderna, Baruchello*, Feltrinelli, Milan.

⁵ “Det hemmelige maleri,” *ed. cit.*, p. 40 and p. 44. “La peinture du secret,” *ed. cit.*, p. 97 and p. 100.

fois – un instant éthique. Ils ne sont pas des signes de signification, mais d’intensité. (...) Il y a peu à regarder, beaucoup à penser, comme chez tous les postmodernes.”⁶

That might lead one to believe that Lyotard is saying that an artwork solely consists of “little narratives” and energy-loaded power fields, but the Baruchello essay reveals that not to be the case. An artwork also contains another more expansive perspective that, referring to Kant, he calls “the sublime”:

The sentences of the sublime precisely consist in the contrary, where pleasure and pain reveal the presence of something. The pleasure of imagining the infinite, the pain of not arriving at the infinite in these works, even as they evoke the idea of it.

(Les phrases du sublime consiste justement en cette phrase contrariée où se livrent à la fois le plaisir et la peine. Le plaisir de se représenter l’indéfini, la douleur de ne pas arriver à trouver cet indéfini dans les œuvres qui en éveillent pourtant l’idée.)⁷

Inspiration from Zen Buddhism is evident in this early definition of “the sublime.”

In the eighties and up to 1998, “the sublime” becomes a central concept in Lyotard’s thought, which he constantly elaborates and further refines. His discourse – unlike Jean Baudrillard’s – is distinguished by the easy rhythm of in-depth reflection. At a seminar in 1988 at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, Lyotard characterized his method in a brief statement addressing Baudrillard, with whom he was having an animated discussion:

I think what is necessary for thought today requires the exact opposite of the urgency that is imposed upon us; and that is taking your time, letting things take some time, losing time. This is constitutive of all reflection and essential to the activity of thought; it is called “anamnesis.” Time is lost. This activity is indispensable, at least for trying, not to understand, but to retain and bring back what is forgotten in the rush. Your entire discourse seems to me to be moving toward one prescription: ‘Let us forget and let us do so as quickly as possible.’ I feel I must offer resistance to your discourse; just as I think there is a secret region of possible resistance to speed. I think it is very important not to forget.

(Je crois que le plus nécessaire pourtant aujourd’hui dans la pensée exige exactement le contraire de l’urgence dont on nous presse, c’est de prendre le temps, de prendre du temps, de perdre du temps. Cela est constitutif de toute réflexion et essentiel au travail de pensée qu’on appelle “anamnèse.” Le temps s’y perd. Ce travail est indispensable au moins pour essayer, non pas de comprendre, mais de retenir et faire revenir ce qui s’oublie dans la vitesse. Il me semble que tout ton discours va dans le sens d’une seule prescription: “Oublions et oublisons le plus vite possible.” Je

6 “Det hemmelige maleri,” *ed. cit.*, p. 41. “La peinture du secret,” *ed. cit.*, p.98.

7 “Det hemmelige maleri,” *ed. cit.*, p. 39. “La peinture du secret ,” *ed. cit.*, p. 96.

sens que je dois résister à ton discours, comme je pense qu'il y a une région secrète de résistance possible, à la vitesse. Je pense qu'il est très important de ne pas oublier.)⁸

The “aesthetic of the sublime” precisely is such a forgotten dimension that can only be unfolded through the intense and slow rhythm of thought. In the 18th century, Diderot and especially Burke were the most radical founders and defenders of the “aesthetic of the sublime.” They considered that aesthetic a necessary opening in Enlightenment thought’s unilateral faith in reason and its striving for unity and union. However, it is only in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that the contours of “the aesthetic of the sublime” are clearly brought out. During the above discussion at the Academy in Copenhagen, Lyotard characterized “the sublime” thus,

Kant’s reflections on ‘the sublime’ appear as a rupture, occurring like the crash of a meteorite onto the surface of the book (...) this is the ontological earthquake that modernity is all about.

(...cette considération sur le sublime est elle-même comme une rupture et intervient comme la chute d’un météorite à la surface de ce livre. (...C'est) le séisme ontologique dont il s’agit avec la modernité).⁹

In his essay, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?,” Lyotard clarifies his interpretation of “the aesthetic of the sublime,” while, along similar lines, presenting his interpretation of “the postmodern” and “modernity” in visual art:

It is in the aesthetic of the sublime that modern art (...) finds its impetus and the logic of avant-gardes finds its axioms.

(Je pense en particulier que c'est dans l'esthétique du sublime que l'art moderne (...) trouve son ressort, et la logique des avant-gardes ses axiomes.”¹⁰

8 The lectures from this seminar were published in Danish by Carsten Juhl as *Kunstens og filosofiens værker efter emancipationen* (*The Works of Art and Philosophy after the Emancipation*), Copenhagen, 1988. Participating in the seminar were Sylviane Agacinski, Jean Baudrillard, Per Aage Brandt, Else Marie Bukdahl, Jean-Louis Déotte, Carsten Juhl, Jean-François Lyotard and Hans-Jørgen Schanz. The discussions among the seminar’s participants were also translated and included in the book. See the discussion between Lyotard and Baudrillard, p. 41. The anthology includes a summary in English. Lyotard’s statements have not been published in French.

9 *Kunstens og filosofiens værker efter emancipationen*, ed. cit., p. 133 and p. 135. Lyotard’s “intervention” has not been published in French.

10 J.-F. Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” translated by Régis Durant and included in the book *The Postmodern Condition*, ed. cit., p. 77. The French essay is entitled “Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?,” *Critique*, April 1982, p. 362.

Defining “the sublime sentiment” or “the sentiment of the sublime,” Lyotard incorporates Kant’s interpretation. Lyotard’s contains an answer to what use human cognition would have for this conception and its consequences to the artistic process of creation. Everything that the imagination cannot sum up in a single impression – the stormswept sea, the formless or the infinitely great – arouses a sensation of the sublime. In Lyotard’s words:

“We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to “make visible” this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate.”

(“Nous pouvons concevoir l’absolument grand, l’absolument puissant, mais toute présentation d’un objet destinée à “faire voir” cette grandeur ou cette puissance absolues nous apparaît comme douloureusement insuffisant.”)¹¹

Reason, however, can think the crisis of imagination and conceive an idea of the “activity of the sublime.” Accordingly, pain is replaced by the pleasure of gaining an experience and discovering hitherto unknown, intense forces. For the artist, the experience of the sublime generated by the encounter with “the formless” or “the raw natural mass” means a liberation from age-old rules and pre-established models. In the attempt to grasp the absolute great, the unlimited and the immeasurable – that which cannot be visualized – new principles for artistic creation are discovered. Experiences gained from this encounter with “the sublime” are concentrated in the work of art that creates precise demarcations and dense units of meanings in the infinite space. As the Danish aesthetician Carsten Juhl puts it: “By interfering with the raw mass of nature (...) form is created. Faced with the formlessness of the absolute great, the work starts to set boundaries.”¹²

Describing the place of visual art in “the aesthetic of the sublime,” Lyotard wrote:

Little needs to be added to those (the abovementioned) observations to outline an aesthetic of sublime paintings. As painting, it will of course ‘present’ something, though negatively: it will therefore avoid figuration or representation. It will be ‘white’ like one of McLeish’s squares; (...) (Fig. XX). One recognizes in those instructions the axioms of avant-gardes in painting, inasmuch as they devote themselves to making an allusion to the unrepresentable by means of visible presentations.

(Il n’y a pas beaucoup à ajouter à ces observations pour esquisser une esthétique de la peinture sublime: comme peinture elle “présentera” évidemment quelque chose, mais négativement, elle évitera donc la figuration et la représentation, elle sera “blanche” comme un carré de

11 Lyotard, “Réponse à la question qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?,” *ed. cit.*, p. 364.

12 Carsten Juhl, “Det sublimes kultur,” in *Den blå Port. Tidsskrift for litteratur* 4/1986, p. 77.

Malévitch (...) On reconnaît dans ces instructions les axiomes des avant-gardes picturales, dans la mesure où elles se consacrent à faire allusion à l'imprésentable par des présentations visibles.)¹³

Malevich himself described this groundbreaking experience: “I have broken the blue boundary of color limits. I have emerged into white. Beside me, comrade pilots, swim in this infinity. I have established the semaphore of Suprematism. Swim! The free white sea, infinity, lies before you.”¹⁴

Lyotard considers “the sublime” to be the driving force infusing transgressive and innovative artists in modernity and late modernity – that is, the period from the beginning of the Romantic Age to now. In modernity, the neglect of that striving, and that rupture, led to formalism and formal beauty. In late modernity, also known as “postmodernity,” especially in the 1980s, the neglect of the above mentioned resulted in constellations of quotations, signs and figures taken from different periods of art history. This is an approach that Lyotard considers a return to the traditional values of taste, and he finds it in the following art currents: “The trans-avantgardism, neo-expressionism, the new subjectivity, postmodernism, etc.: the neo-’s and the post-’s.”¹⁵

In particular, he is referring to the new trends in 1980s painting that were labeled Neo-Expressionism, including German *Violent Painting*, Italian *Transavantgardia*, American *New Image* and French *Figuration libre*. Indeed, these painters often cut straight across cultural-historical boundaries, creating paintings that tend to consist of webs of art-historical quotations. Lyotard takes them and many of their colleagues to task for suppressing experimentation:

This is a period of slackening – I refer to the color of the times. From every direction we are being urged to put an end to experimentation, in the arts and elsewhere.

(Nous sommes dans un moment de relâchement, je parle de la couleur du temps. De partout on nous presse d’en finir avec l’expérimentation, dans les arts et ailleurs.)¹⁶

Paradoxically, several artists belonging to the above currents were inspired by Lyotard’s perception of “the postmodern condition.” In particular, his interpretations of various facets of the information society’s immaterial universe, which he

13 Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?,” *ed. cit.*, p. 70. “Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne?,” *ed. cit.*, p. 364.

14 Cited in *Concepts of Modern Art*, ed. Nikos Stangos, Thames and Hudson, London 1974, p. 130.

15 Lyotard, “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics” in *The Inhuman*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Blackwell Publishers LT, Oxford, 1991, p. 135,

16 Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism,” *ed. cit.*, p. 71. “Réponse à la question: qu’est-ce que le postmoderne?,” *ed. cit.*, p. 357.

presented at the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (1985).¹⁷ The dissolution of “the grand narratives” (“les grand récits”) and the failure of all-embracing utopia left a mark in the early and mid -1980s on paintings by artists in the above groups. Often, it is “the little narratives” (“les petits récits”), or private myths, rooted in the artist’s own experience that find expression. These personal elements are manifested in an abundantly expressive style and individualized brushwork, as seen for instance in *Café Deutschland* (1977-78) (Fig. 2) by the German painter Jörg Immendorff.



2. Jörg Immendorff. *Café Deutschland*. 1977-78.

Other painters from the above groups – notably Robert Moskowitz of *New Image*, A.R. Penck of *Violent Painting* and Dorte Dahlin of Danish *New Painting* – scribble simple signs and silhouette-like figures on monochrome surfaces, referring to Lyotard’s interpretation of the information society as a place where body, matter and human acts are rapidly vanishing in codes and signs. Other examples include Moskowitz’ *The Thinker* (1982) (Fig. 3), Dahlin’s *Sphinx* (1983) (Fig. 4) and Penck’s *The Standart* (1982) (Fig. 5).¹⁸

Only later did several of these artists take up Lyotard’s concern about the advance of new, in-itself interesting digital technology that, as he puts it, forces “us to reconsider the position of the human being in relationship to the Universe, in relationship to himself, in relationship to his traditional purposes, his recognized abilities, his *identity*.¹⁹

17 The exhibition was held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, March 28 – July 15, 1985. Lyotard wrote the text of the exhibition catalogue.

18 See Else Marie Bukdahl, “The Break with Modernity and the Emergence of Postmodern Art” in *Northern Poles, Breakaways and Breakthroughs in Nordic Painting and Sculpture of the 1970’s and 1980’s*, editor and publisher Torsten Bløndal, 1986, p. 391 and p. 394.

19 “A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard” by Bernard Blistène in *Flash Art*, No. 121, March 1985.



3. Robert Moskowitz *The Thinker*. 1982.



4. Dorte Dahlin's *Sphinx*. 1983.



5. A. R. Penck. *The Standart*. 1982.

Lyotard defines “the postmodern” in visual art as closely interlinked with the “aesthetic of the sublime” and with the important place of experimentation has in it. Indeed, he defines “the postmodern” as:

(…)*that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.*

(Le postmoderne serait ce qui dans le moderne allègue l'imprésentable dans la présentation elle-même; ce qui se refuse à la consolation des bonnes formes, au consensus d'un goût qui permettrait d'éprouver en commun la nostalgie de l'impossible; ce qui s'enquiert de présentations nouvelles, non pas pour en jouir, mais pour mieux faire sentir qu'il y a de l'imprésentable.)²⁰

In “postmodern art,” the creation of new artistic principles is central:

(…)*the work he (the postmodern artist) produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules (...). Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that the work and text have the characters of an event.*

(L'oeuvre qu'il (un artiste postmoderne) accomplit ne sont pas en principe gouvernés par des règles déjà établies (...) Ces règles et ces catégories sont ce que l'oeuvre ou le texte recherche. L'artiste et l'écrivain travaillent donc sans règles, et pour établir les règles de ce qui aura été fait. De là que l'oeuvre et le texte aient les propriétés de l'événement.)²¹

As a case in point, Lyotard highlights Daniel Buren's large, site-specific works, such as *Voile/Toile – Toile/Voile, première présentation au lac Wansee, Berlin Ouest* (1975) (Figs. 6, 7, 8): “We are not dealing here with education but with the refinement of the strategies that give efficacy to a work of art. For Buren there is no primary view in a hierarchy of vision. Nor does he recognize a priori categories of space and time.”²²

20 Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism,” *ed. cit.*, p. 81: “Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?,” *ed. cit.*, pp. 366-367.

21 Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?,” *ed. cit.*, p. 81: “Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?,” *ed. cit.*, p. 367.

22 J.-F. Lyotard “Preliminary Notes on the Pragmatic of Works: Daniel Buren,” in *October*, , p. 22 and p. 66.



6. Daniel Buren. *Voile/Voile – Toile/Voile*, première présentation au lac Wansee, Berlin Ouest 1975.



7. Daniel Buren. *Voile/Voile – Toile/Voile*, première présentation au lac Wansee, Berlin Ouest .1975.



8. Daniel Buren. *Voile/Voile – Toile/Voile*, première présentation au lac Wansee, Berlin Ouest. 1975.

Lyotard mainly finds clear traces of the activity of “the sublime” in abstract and minimalist artists who work with centerless open spaces. They include, once again, Buren, and also Donald Judd.

Lyotard locates impacts of the activity of “the sublime” in Conceptual Art, as well, noting of this art form that it “may be one of the most hopeless and thus, in a certain sense, one of the most hopeful when it comes to referring to the un-presentable.” (“*Je mettrais, même au compte de cette recherche le “Concept art” qui est probablement l’un des plus désespérés et donc en un sens un des plus pleins d’espoir.*”)²³ He has in mind, among others, the Conceptual Art of Joseph Kosuth.²⁴

The essence of the impact of “the sublime” in visual art he defines as, “The sublime exclusively consists in the experience that the absolute leaves its mark in the work, whatever form it may take.” (“*Le sublime est seulement le sentiment que l’absolu fait signe dans l’œuvre quelle que soit sa forme.*”)²⁵

In his essay, *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, Lyotard expands and amends his analysis of “the sublime.” In particular, his close reading of Burke’s interpretation of “the sublime,” Barnett Newman’s essay “The Sublime is Now”²⁶ and Newman’s large painting *Vir Heroicus sublimis* (1950-1951) (Fig. 9) inspires



9. Barnett Newman. *Vir Heroicus sublimis*. 1950-1951.

this new interpretation. Newman’s painting consist of red serial sequences – punctuated by five vertical stripes, “zips” – that could, in principle, continue indefinitely, lending an impression of boundless space and evoking a sentiment of the sublime. Because “the Sublime is Now,” Lyotard contends, the artwork is “an

23 *Kunstens og filosofiens værker efter emancipationen*, ed. cit., p. 132. Lyotard’s comments has not been published in French.

24 See, for instance, Joseph Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, foreword by Jean-François Lyotard, The MIT PRESS, Cambridge, 1991.

25 Jean-François Lyotard, *Gestus*, translated into Danish from the French by Kasper Nefer Olsen, Copenhagen 1991, p. 21. The citation is from Lyotard’s French manuscript, which has not been published. The essay has been published in German, however, as *Karel Appel: Ein Farbgestus*, Verlag Gachnang und Springer, Bern, Berlin, 1998.

26 This text appeared for the first time in the third issue of *Tiger’s Eye*, March 1948, at the same time that Newman was in the process of liberating himself from the bonds of the Western aesthetic tradition by painting *Ornament I*.



10. Barnett Newman standing in front of one of his “blue paintings”.

event, an occurrence – what Martin Heidegger called *ein Ereignis* (“*un événement, une occurrence, ce que Martin Heidegger appelait ein Ereignis*”)²⁷ – that is, an action that emerges in the here and now. At issue is the nature of creation: “The ‘subject-matter’ of Newman’s work is ‘artistic creation’ itself, a symbol of Creation itself, of the Creation story of *Genesis*. (“*Le “sujet” de l’œuvre de Newman était en somme “la création artistique” elle-même, symbole de la Création tout court, celle que rapporte la Genèse.*”)²⁸

The event – the fact of the artwork’s creation and the question, “Is it happening – here and now?” cannot be demonstrated or, as Kant said, presented. As Lyotard stresses, to the artist, this “now” – “the Sublime” – is the revelation of the unproduced, that which has not yet been presented and perhaps cannot be presented.²⁹ “Is it happening?” is a question. It is suffused with intensity, expectation and pain. It is akin to Kant’s view of “the sublime” but has lost its metaphysical connotations. Hence, the artwork becomes the event, the mark in reality, which visualizes for us that concepts, categories and words do not suffice to comprehend reality. In painting, color expresses “the “inexpressible.” As Lyotard puts its,

Thus, when he (Barnett Newman) sought sublimity in the ‘here and now’ he broke with the eloquence of romantic art but not with its fundamental task of bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible. The inexpressible does not reside in an ‘over there,’ in another world or another time, but

27 J.-F. Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in *Artforum*, April 1984, p. 37. The essay in French is “Le sublime, à présent,” *Poesie*, No. 34, Paris, 1985, p. 98.

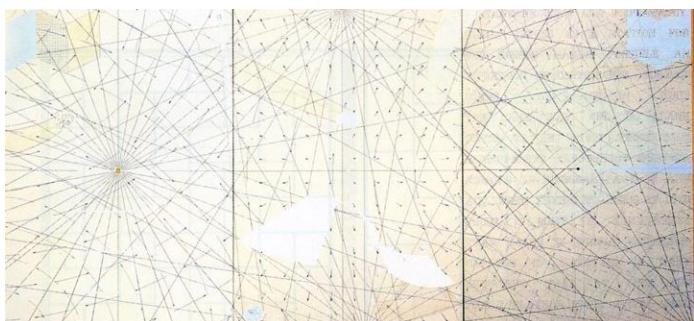
28 Lyotard, “Newman: The Instant” in *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, 1991, pp. 81-82. “L’Instant, Newman” in the section “Analytique du Sublime” in *Poesie*, No. 34, 1985, p. 112.

29 Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in *ed. cit.*, p. 36, p. 41 and p. 43.

in this: that ‘it happens.’ In the determination of pictorial art the indeterminate, the ‘it’s happening,’ is color – the painting. The color – the painting – as occurrence or event is not expressible, and it is to this that it must bear witness.

(Quand donc il recherche la sublimité dans l’ici et le maintenant, Newman rompt avec l’éloquence de l’art romantique, mais il n’en rejette pas la tâche fondamentale, qui est que l’expression picturale ou autre soit le témoin de l’inexprimable. L’inexprimable ne réside pas en un là bas, un autre monde, un autre temps, mais en ceci: qu’il arrive (quelque chose). Dans la détermination de l’art pictural, l’indéterminé, le Il arrive, c’est la couleur, le tableau. La couleur, le tableau, en tant qu’occurrence, événement, n’est pas exprimable, et c’est cela dont il a à témoigner.)³⁰

Lyotard finds another example of “Now the Sublime is This” in 982 the art of Shusaku Arakawa: “Une peinture de Arakawa – e.g., *Blank Stations, no 1 and 2* 1981-1982 (fig. 11 and 12) – signifie-t-elle autre chose que son événement? (De même



11. Shusaku Arakawa. *Blank Stations, no 1.* 1981-1982.



12. Shusaku Arakawa. *Blank Stations, no 2.* 1981-1982.

que les deux tableaux de Barnett Newman intitulés Now sont leur propre maintenant. Newman écrivit un texte intitulé: The Sublime is Now.”³¹

Lyotard was highly interested in, and also wrote about, contemporary Danish art. For Danish artists, coming upon “the sublime” in Lyotard’s interpretation meant an encounter with “the formless” and a liberation from rules, models and

30 Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” *ed. cit.*, p. 37. “Le sublime, à présent,” *ed. cit.*, p. 100.

31 J.-F. Lyotard, *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa. Buren.* Vol. I, éditions de la difference, Turin, 1987, p. 67.

fashionable trends. Attempting to present the unrepresentable, they gained new artistic experiences and created new artistic principles.

The work of Albert Mertz has clear traces of his sharp eye, even very early on, for the consequences of Newman's break with the Abstract Expressionist approach to canvas, surface and subject – a break that led to the revelation of “the aesthetic of the sublime.” Distinguished by dense monochrome color planes and a web of relations between the spaces of the works and their surroundings, *In Situ* (1988) (Fig. 13), problematizes painting's time-honored premises in the question: What is a painting?



13. Albert Mertz. *In Situ*. 1988.

In Mertz's painting *Who's Afraid of Barnett Newman* (1983) (Fig. 14), wittily and fondly referring to Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I, II* (1966-67), the artist emphatically demonstrates that he is not afraid of red, yellow or blue or the master's demand that each color should have a distinct voice by its quantity, method of application and placement within the composition.”



14. Albert Mertz. *Who's Afraid of Barnett Newman*. 1983.

In the work of the Danish sculptor Mogens Møller, notably *Vegas* (1988) (Fig. 15), the activity of “the sublime” has opened doors to cosmos and underscored the substance of sculpture. *Vegas* appears both as a monument, saturated with presence, and as a celestial body from a distant part of the universe, marking the enigmatic intersection between two dimensions in our world: everyday reality and cosmic space.



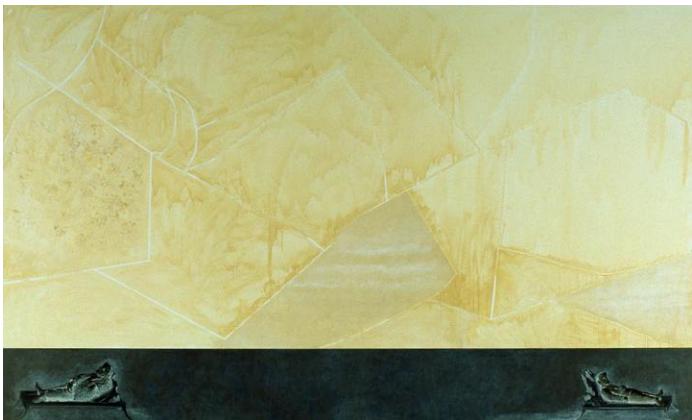
15. Mogens Møller. *Vegas*. 1988.

As visitors to the Royal Library Garden in Copenhagen walk around Mogens Møller’s monumental sculpture *To Wiedewelt* (1999) (Fig. 16), it will appear to them now as a closed, now as an open figure. Not oriented out from a center, it points to an infinite perspective, which it can only suggest not visualize.



16. Mogens Møller. *To Wiedewelt*. 1999.

The big open space of Dorte Dahlin's *Mad Marble* (1991) (Fig. 17) denotes the artist's striving to capture an expansive image of the world and describe the unrepresentable, the absolute and the infinite. This striving has dissolved traditional frames of reference, making room for the creation of surprising figures and new orders.



17. Dorte Dahlin's *Mad Marble*. 1991.

Since the 1980s, "the sublime" has been a central concept in the work of the Danish sculptor Hein Heinsen, including his *Skulptur 1985* (*Sculpture 1985*) (Fig. 18). Three spirals twist through this sculpture, which rises straight up from the ground. The spirals build on three principles – the cube, the cylinder and amorphous mass – that have become so intertwined that a persistent vacillation between density, variety and sharpness emerges. This enables the sculpture to latch into countless aspects of its surroundings and point to open space where there are no boundary stakes (Fig. 19). The encounter with "the sublime" is particularly evident in the artist's efforts to find new solutions to the problem of the sculpture's site, its relationship to space and the world around it. Personally, Heinsen considers "the sublime" a fracture that can never be healed, revealing the existence of things forever beyond our grasp. As he puts it,



18. Hein Heinsen. *Sculpture 1985*.



19. Hein Heinsen. *Sculpture 1985* placed in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen.

*"The sublime is beyond our imagination; it is the formless and the infinitely great. One might ask what ties my works together, for there is no immediate similarity between them. Perhaps they resemble each other because I rearrange the pieces in each new work according to the frisson deriving from the sublime."*³²

The Danish painter Stig Brøgger has a fondness for serial images as well as large-scale single works that reveals his yearning to capture the biggest possible framework or the most expansive interpretation. Though it cannot be visualized, it constantly appears as a boundary that he calls the “edge of the sublime.” It prevents “the little narratives” from blocking the view and narrowing the cognitive space. Brøgger’s seminal work *Flora Danica. An Installation of 205 Paintings* (1990) (Fig. 20-21) confronts viewers with sequences of paintings, small and large, in which color and various painterly registers are the principal carriers of meaning.

In an essay on Brøgger’s large installation of paintings, Lyotard stresses that Stig Brøgger is particularly consumed with revealing “that singular gesture which deposited itself impenetrable in the long series of painted objects.” (“Le geste singulier qui s’est déposé, impénétrablement, dans cette longue suite de choses peintes.”)³³ *Gesture* – upholding artistic intentionality – is a central concept in Lyotard’s aesthetic. As he defines it:

The gesture in painting as in writing is an attempt to penetrate the screen of what has already been accomplished or of what is always possible. I call it a gesture

32 Hein Heinsen, “Parting with the Classical Work,” a conversation with Lars Morell, in *Skala. Nordic Magazine of Architecture and Design*, No. 17/18, 1989, p. 22-23.

33 Lyotard, *Stig Brøgger. The Event. The Strife. The Heterogeneity. An Installation of 205 Paintings*, essay in the catalogue for the exhibition *Stig Brøgger. Flora Danica* at Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 1990, p. 17, translated from the French by Jeremy Martin and Lyotard, *Flora Danica. La sécession du geste dans la peinture de Stig Brøgger*, Paris, 1997, p. 9.



20. Stig Brøgger. *Flora Danica. An Installation of 205 Paintings* (1990).



21. Stig Brøgger. *Flora Danica. An Installation of 205 Paintings* (1990).

because it is more than a way for time, space and matter (color for the painter, words for the writer) to manage, ‘gérer,’ itself.

(Le geste, de peinture comme d’écriture, essaie de passer à travers l’écran du déjà accompli ou du toujours possible. Je l’appelle un geste parce qu’il n’est rien qu’une façon pour le temps, l’espace et la matière (la couleur pour le peintre, les mots pour l’écrivain de se gérer.”)³⁴

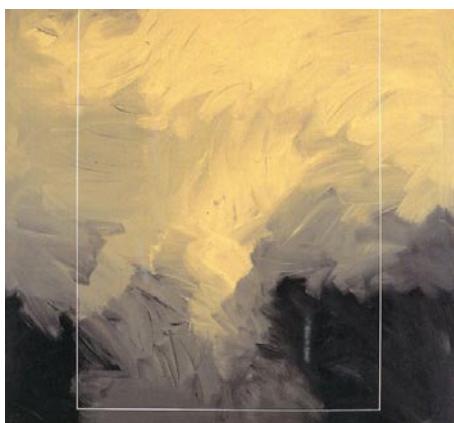
In Brøgger’s installation, Lyotard reveals two heterogeneous gestures now active in one and the same painting, now distributed across several paintings in the series. Lyotard has no doubt that it is the combination of gestures, or, rather, its visible aspects, that gives *Flora Danica* its singular rhythm. The two gestures he describes as:

The two aspects are clearly identifiable even when only considering what is visible: on the one hand you have the rule of geometry, on the other a thrust of colour with no obvious rules. (Figs. 22 and 23).

34 Lyotard, Stig Brøgger, “The Secession of Gesture,” ed. cit., p. 17, and *Flora Danica. La sécession du geste*, ed. cit., p. 17.



22. Stig Brøgger. A painting from *Flora Danica. An Installation of 205 Paintings* (1990).



23 Stig Brøgger. A painting from *Flora Danica. An Installation of 205 Paintings* (1990).

(À s'en tenir à ce qui est visible, on discerne aisément les deux aspects: d'un côté, une autorité géométrique, de l'autre une poussée de chromatisme sans règle apparent.)³⁵

The two gestures constantly intersect in unpredictable ways (Fig. 24). Accordingly, as Carsten Juhl put it, the singularity of Brøgger's art is not simply "that the experiments are taken to extremes the whole time, it is especially the way in which this happens: both quite clearly, without mystery, *and*, at the same time, with a fascinating, overcomposed complexity." ³⁶

35 Lyotard, "The Secession of Gesture," *ed. cit.*, p. 19, and "La sécession du geste," *ed. cit.*, p. 22. Carsten Juhl defined the concept of gesture as, "(Gesture is) the turn of the mind that internalized the expression and made art, not as the unfolding of a uniquely special talent but as the conveyance of an intensity via art's experience of the world." See the postscript for J.-F. Lyotard's book, *Duchamp Transformationer (Les TRANSformateurs Duchamp)*, 1977, in Danish, by Kasper Nefer Olsen, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen, 2000, p. 178.

36 Carsten Juhl, "The Aesthetics of the Format," *ed. cit.*, p. 132.



23 Stig Brøgger. A painting from *Flora Danica. An Installation of 205 Paintings* (1990).

In a lecture, *After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics*, presented at the aforementioned seminar in 1988 at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Lyotard revealed new traces of the “activity of the sublime” in visual art.³⁷ The experience of “the sublime” entails that the imagination is unable to compress the experienced into one impression. The artist confronts the formless and the unformable. The wedding of “matter” and “form” that is the foundation of “beauty” cannot be made, a fact that raises the following questions for Lyotard: “But in that case, where does the matter stand, if the forms are no longer there to make it *presentable*? How is it with presence?”³⁸

Lyotard answers this question by reference to the fact that, in the experience of “the sublime,” certain qualities of matter imperceptibly slip into the artwork and there become present, appearing as “nuance” or “timbre.”

We can determine a color or a sound in terms of vibrations, by specifying pitch, duration and frequency, but this does not apply to “nuance” and “timbre,” because they indicate the *quality* of a color or sound:

*Nuances and timbre are scarcely perceptible differences between sounds and colours. (...) This difference can be due to the way they are obtained: for example, the same note coming from a violin, a piano or a flute, the same colour in pastel, oil or watercolour. Nuance and timbre are what (...) makes the difference between the note on the piano and the same note on the flute, and thus what also defer the identification of that note.*³⁹

37 The essay was published in Danish in the anthology *Kunstens og filosofiens værker efter emancipationen* (*Oeuvres de l'art et de la philosophie après l'émancipation*), in ed. cit., pp. 102-108. In French, the essay, “Après le sublime, état de l'esthétique,” was published in *L'inhumain*, Galilée, Paris, 1988.

38 Lyotard, “After The Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” in *The Inhuman*, Oxford, 1991, p. 136.

39 Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

The issue involves an almost imperceptible, indefinable side tone that emerges in painting when we are receptive to colors and brushstrokes on their own terms and do not try to control them. For instance, Lyotard perceives such receptiveness in the color sequences of Matisse's *Memory of Oceania* (Fig. XX).⁴⁰

Timbre and nuance are an untouchable zone in art containing qualities that do not lend themselves to "dialogue and dialectic." They are present but hold no references and can never be translated into any of the ruling discourses of social and cultural space.⁴¹

Lyotard was so important to visual artists – and was inspired by them in turn – no doubt because visual art, in a whole other way than words, reveals the unfamiliar and the unexpected, carving out spaces where new orientations and meanings emerge. Thus, visual art – on its own terms and in whole new ways – can inspire ethics and philosophical reflection. Meeting Lyotard personally – in Paris, Copenhagen or elsewhere – and reading his books was inspiring to artists, because he was always consumed with finding other tracks than the beaten ones, promoting inventiveness and intensity, enhancing the sense for differences and making room for creative activity.

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40 Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

41 Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 106.