

Les Immatériaux: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard. with Bernard Blistène

"Even the most modest tinkler with software has an attitude that's somehow "artistic", an attitude of a kind of astonishment. The idea of the artist as "creator" is one of strictly limited utility today."

- JF Lyotard, 1985.

Bernard Blistène: Tell us about the exhibition you're organising.

Jean-François Lyotard: The idea of "immaterials" or "non-materials" was a little bit different at first, since I'd been asked to do the exhibition under a different title. It was supposed to be called "Nouveaux Matériaux et Création" - New Materials and Creativity. But then I slightly shifted the subject by trying to give it a somewhat different range; I said to myself, "Creativity? What is that supposed to mean?" And again, "What is 'new' supposed to mean?" Thinking about "materials" today, I thought, "But what does that imply for an architect, or for an industrialist?" I came to the conclusion that all of these words have undergone considerable shifts in meaning, and I thought that the question had to be approached from a different point of view.

BB: But what can we say about the philosopher who decides that his job is to give us something to look at?

JFL: Everybody knows that books are going through a period of crisis as instruments for the diffusion of ideas, and that this is a part of the general crisis of intellectual life today, here in what we could call a kind of democratic despotism that makes for the world we live in. And of course, there's no question of maintaining the superiority of any kind of aristocratic power, but the both of us know very well that the philosopher experiences a very grave problem with respect to the writing or recording of what he has to say, and there is a problem of the shortcomings of the philosopher with respect to the available modes of writing and recording, or of what I would call "inscription". As far as I myself am concerned, my acceptance of the idea - to use the words with which you've stated it - of becoming "the philosopher who decides that his job is to give us something to look at" is something very simple and not even particularly original. I accept myself as a philosopher, and it seems to me to be important for the philosopher to be able to record what he thinks through the use of instruments that don't have to be restricted to the instrument of the book. It's just that simple. New and different things are at stake today, even though they're not totally new, and we have to try to understand the things that are being offered to us.

It's as though one were now to decide to restrict one's interest in art to the question of the pleasure of the contemplation of the beautiful. Surely you'll agree that it's not that sort of thing that's most important and pertinent. It's as though we were to think about the romantic aesthetic of the sublime and then to back down from dealing with

Duchamp. And I mention Duchamp because we know very well that his aesthetic had nothing to do with the sublime, that it leaves the sublime behind it, and so today we have to ask ourselves what's now at stake in art. It's a question of limits, and one finds such questions everywhere, including the field of the sciences. And are the scientists still concerned with talking about "the truth of the object"? Everything is different now that the Anglo-Saxon epistemologists have begun to stress the idea of "non-falsification". Like philosophers in general, these people are now interested in questioning the transitional finalities of the work they do. And that has always been the distinguishing trait of philosophy, which is to say that philosophy has always investigated the rules of the field of philosophical thought, and never been able to define them.

BB: Could we say that you're attempting to establish a relationship between scientific and artistic modes of thought?

JFL: Undoubtedly. The idea of artistic creation is a notion that comes from the aesthetics of romanticism, the aesthetics of the idea of genius. And I'm sure you'll agree that the idea of the artist as "creator" is, to say the least, of strictly limited utility in our world today. That's no longer where we really are. We're no longer concerned with the philosophy of subjective genius and all the "aura" that goes along with it. With Duchamp, we already find ourselves in an area that has an aspect of bricolage, there's that side where you think of him as an "inventeur du temps gratuit".

BB: But wouldn't you still think of the work of Duchamp as something relative rather than some kind of transhistorical value?

JFL: Well, really, both yes and no, since that's the way it always is with art: it always has a value as an expression of its time, but there's also a way in which it can always be perceived as lying outside of the time that produced it. There's always something that turns art into a transhistorical truth, and that's the part of the art that I think of as "philosophical". It's within this part of art that it poses the question of what it has at stake. Art, after all, is a relatively modern notion. Even Greek tragedy couldn't have been said to be art for the Greeks - it was still something else, and it's clear that we have to wait at least until the close of the Middle Ages to discover the emergence of an art that isn't simply an expression, for instance, of metaphysics or religion, or political praise. What strikes me, if we can start out from Duchamp, is the way it can seem, from a certain point of view, to be difficult to be an artist if one isn't a philosopher as well. I don't mean that the artist will have to read Plato or Aristotle, I mean that he has to posit the question of what he has at stake, he has to ask himself about the nature of what he's involved in doing. Precisely this question is the most interesting thing to be found in the works of art that are strongest today, it's the thing in which these works are most interested. What's at stake is something that's extraordinarily serious, and it's not at all a question of pleasure, and not even of the way the pleasure of the sublime is intermixed with pain; it's a question instead of a relationship to time and space and sensibility, even though I don't like to make use of that word. What I mean to say is that certain works have a structure that keeps them from being concerned with their existence as events; they do something entirely different as an attentive observer comes away with the feeling that their engagement with the senses, if any such engagement exists at all, is of far less importance than a primary interest in the most fundamental philosophical question of all, "Why does something happen, rather than nothing?"

BB: And that is the point where we find a lack of differentiation between technological experimentation and the questions posed by art?

JFL: Even the most modest tinkler with software has an attitude that's somehow "artistic" - an attitude of a kind of astonishment. And what that means is that metaphysics, as Adorno puts it, goes into crisis at much the same time as the rest of classical philosophy and that there's away n which it is going under as a result of a decline in the capacity it can have for the creation of wide-ranging global systems that include the great and final issues for which we feel a need. If there's a decline of metaphysics, there's also a decline of everything that people in general call philosophy. And this decline - which is something that Adorno grasped quite clearly - shows us the history of the diaspora of philosophy as it wanders through domains that can't be properly defined as philosophical, even though the domain that can be properly defined as philosophical continues to exist. What this means is that metaphysics, as Adorno puts it, goes under, along with classical philosophy, even though certain people continue to practice it as though it weren't in crisis at all.

BB: Aside from your desire to investigate modalities of knowledge other than the book, it seems to me that the very concept of the exhibition you want to realise is concerned with an attempt to appeal to all of the most various human sciences and to reappropriate all of the various things that they've given us: linguistics, science, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and so forth.

JFL: That's quite right. Our attempt, as you've put it, is to reappropriate a whole series of things and to try to see the problems they pose from a philosophical point of view; we'll look at them within a context where they don't begin by positing what the human sciences or liberal arts always begin by positing, which is to say, the Human Being. It seems to me that these technologies are interesting, and at the same time troubling, to the extent that they force us to reconsider the position of the human being in relation to the universe, in relationship to himself, in relationship to his traditional purposes, his recognised abilities, his identity.

BB: Is this what you mean when you speak of "general interaction"?

JFL: Yes, that's what that means, and it will be one of the two major themes of the exhibition. It's the first theme, and I see it as the basis of the entire discussion of the postmodern, which is a subject the French don't yet know very well, since they're always turned so completely in upon themselves. Even though the field of the postmodern is very very vast, and even though the work can sometimes be applied to things that are diametrically opposed to one another, it's based fundamentally upon the perception of the existence of a Modern Era that dates from the time of the Enlightenment and that has now run its course; and this modern era was predicated on a notion of progress in knowledge, in the arts, in technology, and in human freedom as well, all of which was thought of as leading to a truly emancipated society: a society emancipated from poverty, despotism, and ignorance. But all of us can see that development continues to take place without leading to the realisation of any of these dreams of emancipation. So, today, one no longer feels guilty about being ignorant.

BB: You've remarked that "Each of us has the awareness of our condition of solitude, and an awareness, as well, both of being a 'self' and of knowing that this 'self' counts for very little."

JFL: Yes. And so what sort of legitimacy can be seen in this mode of development? It's intended for this question to be somehow latent or implicit in a kind of grieving or a melancholy with respect to the modern era, a sense of disarray. And the exhibition hopes to reactivate this disarray rather than to appease it since there's no longer any matter to be appeased. The exhibition also has another theme that tries to give legitimacy to this "monstrous neologism - the immaterials"; we make the point, obviously enough, that all of the progress that has been accomplished in the sciences, and perhaps in the arts as well, is strictly connected to an ever closer knowledge of what we generally call objects. (Which can also be a question of objects of thought.) And so analysis decomposes these objects and makes us perceive that, finally, there can only be considered to be objects at the level of a human point of view; at their constitution or structural level, they are only a question of complex agglomerates of tiny packets of energy, or of particles that can't possibly be grasped as such. Finally, there's no such thing as matter, and the only thing that exists is energy; we no longer have any such thing as materials, in the old sense of the word that implied an object that offered resistance to any kind of project that attempted to alienate it from its primary finalities.

BB: You've written more about painting than about any of the other forms of artistic expression. In terms of what you've just been saying, don't you feel that the cinema today is more intimately concerned with the kinds of problems that interest you?

JFL: I don't really know. I adore films, and just about any kind of films. I was quite impressed by the latest film by Wim Wenders. But I don't want to think of any art as more pertinent than any other, and I think that the great musical compositions are entirely astonishing in terms of what I've been talking about.

BB: So you haven't written very much about film?

JFL: I've written a short text entitled *l'à - cinéma* as well as another text on music which is entitled *Plusieurs Silences*. But that's all very modest, since I am very ignorant.

BB: But what then has stimulated you to write about painting?

JFL: Perhaps that's because I once had some small future in drawing, even though that future has since gone a little astray. Sometimes, though, I still draw, but only occasionally.

BB: And that's all? You're not interested in working on something that shows an equivalence to your own particular field?

JFL: No, I don't think so. I simply think that line contains something that's totally radical and somehow ontological. To trace a line onto a surface, any kind of line at all, is to produce the minimum of meaning that I was talking about a moment ago. One immediately finds oneself in the midst of the very poorest form of art. A simple scrawl of a pencil on a sheet of paper makes for one of the poorest forms of art. I find this poverty, which is almost mystical, to be something entirely original. In this sense, I feel closer to drawing than to colours. A simple mark with a pencil and the sheet of

paper splits apart, and something is as though direct somewhere else. What you have there is both the completest form of power and, at one and the same time, the completest form of dispossession. Because the person who is doing it doesn't at all know what he's doing. This poverty is something perfectly equivocal since it's simultaneously both everything and nothing.

BB: Your texts on "painting" go from Adams to Buren, and from Monory to Arakawa. They seem to contain what I'd call the logic of discontinuity. Can you say something about the reasons that have prompted you to write about certain painters rather than others? And do you think of your essays on painting as fragments of a whole within your work as a writer?

JFL: I'd answer quite simply that it has been something of a question of chance. I'm usually acquainted with the painters whom I decide to write. I've worked along with them, and I've seen them at work, but then again, there are obviously painters with whom I'm personally acquainted but whom I'd never want to write about. It's not that I can give you an answer simply by saying it's a matter of people I've happened to meet. And if you ask me if these essays are part of some single thing, and if this single thing is part of my reflections as a philosopher, I'd have to answer in much the same summary way and that for the moment I think of all these various short texts as the beginning of a kind of dossier that could lead to some substantial study not so much of art, but specifically of painting. Contemporary painting. And my goal would be to attempt to define the nature of a possible philosophy of art today.

BB: You mean that you don't at all exclude the idea of writing a theory of aesthetics?

JFL: I don't think it would be a question of a theory, and I don't think it would be a question of aesthetics. I don't think it could be a theory since I think of the idea or theory as belonging to the area of metaphysics, which we were saying is now in decline, and I don't think of it as a question of aesthetics, since I don't think that aesthetics corresponds to the time we live in. Aesthetics primarily appertains to a very precise moment in the commentary on art, which is to refer to the Age of Enlightenment and to what follows after it, so it's a question of something in the order of two centuries ago. Basically, I'd be ready to maintain that there wasn't any such thing as aesthetics up until the 18th century, and that up until that time there was only a series of poetics. Aesthetics actually corresponds to the philosophy of the sublime and to a theory of genius.

BB: In the light of what you're saying, do you think that Adorno could give an explanation of the title of his book?

JFL: No, I don't think he could. I think that his title...how can I put it? I think his title is bad but that his book is very good. And that's precisely because it isn't at all a theory and has nothing to do with aesthetics. This is the line of thought into which I'd like to situate this work, and I'd want it to be a kind of prolongation of what's indicated in Adorno's work. But, you know, whenever I reread Adorno, I always see that his approach is negative, and almost always cynical, which is the measure of the breadth of his despair. It's the measure of the strength of the attachment still to be felt for modern aesthetics, the measure of the strength of the attachment still to be felt for modern aesthetics, the measure of a refusal to go into mourning for the final death of it. With Adorno we're within the sphere of melancholy. You can't forget the context in

which that book was written. The most admirable parts of German art were being burned in public, and the most intelligent parts of literature and the arts were being persecuted. We no longer live under that kind of despotism, but today we can see we live under a kind of democratic despotism of the media, which is of course, something very different. And so, even though there's nothing that has been forgotten, we have to attempt to work our way into the philosophy of contemporary art by completely disengage in ourselves from romantic aesthetics. And so this reflection on art begins for me with Discourse-Figures as a way of starting to palliate- or rather to supplant - the political thinking of the present day.

Basically, the most essential question of all for me, is the question of all, for me, is the question we've just been talking about: "What do we do if we no longer have the prospect of emancipation? What sort of line of resistance can we have?" When Zola took part in public affairs, he knew exactly what he was talking about, he was aware of his "prospects of emancipation". The same thing was true for Voltaire, and for Fourier, who was also a political thinker, and it was still true for Sartre, even though Sartre was wrong. We intellectuals are no longer capable of any kind of real intervention. And so what is our line of resistance if it's no longer a question of a prospect of emancipation? I think that it's something that's very closely connected to artistic activity, or philosophico-artistic activity. It's something that has to be thoroughly explored by asking ourselves what's happening at the level of time, space, and the social community in contemporary art. That's what I've been trying to explore by means of these various small texts that I write on art, and sometimes of music, when I feel sufficiently audacious. I'd like to write a commentary on Paris Texas and say that it's an Alice in the Big City, which is not poor art anymore.

BB: Let's go back to your exhibition "Les Immatériaux" and to the concept behind it.

JFL: We arbitrarily and quite purposely created a kind of filter, since there were so many things to exhibit that our very first worry was about how to go about dealing with it all. There was never any pretense of doing some sort of universal exhibition. Universal exhibitions are no longer possible, and that's more than just a question of budgeting. And so what were our criteria of selection? They were on three different levels. First of all, we wanted to exhibit things that inspire a feeling of incertitude: incertitude about the finalities of these developments and incertitude about the identity of the human individual in his condition of such improbably immateriality. That's a criterion of selection that's concerned with the philosophical stakes of the exhibition. Then we obviously had to give attention to the arrangement of the show in terms of time and space. And here we appealed to two principles: no fancy mouldings and no pedestals. We didn't want still another re-evocation of a gallery or a salon, by which I mean an arrangement of rooms in a Royal Palace as designed by the king. We wanted to avoid this way of squarely defining things and we had to discover a more fluid and immaterial system for the organisation of space.

So, instead of walls, we'll have a system of webbings that will be stretched from floor to ceiling, and the ways in which they're lighted will permit us to vary the distances that the eye can cover and to modulate the indications that ought to be followed, but without being prescriptive, since many of the sites we'll be building will be in the form of intersections that allow one then to go off in any number of directions. These webbings will be grey, and they'll change in quality according to the ways in which

they're lighted, and that will also determine whether or not they are more or less opaque. Here again you can see that I'm still within the tradition of the modern. Something else that we've decided to realise for the exhibition is a system of portable radio guides. Each of the visitors will have a kind of Walkman, and even though they won't have to tune into different stations, they'll move from one broadcast to another as they walk through the exhibition space. The broadcasts will cover several sites at once. This is a way of permitting me to create a soundtrack of commentaries that won't even really be commentaries at all, and the textual element included in the visit to the show will be a considerably more forceful presence than it usually is; there will also be music and other sound effects. I'm particularly concerned with turning the exhibition itself into a work of art, and I imagine that that may cause some discomfort for Daniel Buren.

BB: How do you mean?

JFL: You'll remember that he once had a complaint to make about one of the Documenta exhibitions, and he remarked, "What they're exhibiting isn't the works of art, but the exhibition itself." There's a way in which that's what we'll be doing here, even though I'm not at all concerned with asking myself if I have the right to declare myself an artist. I simply feel that there are things that can be done at the level of the physical articulation of the exhibition, and we've decided to try to do them. Something else, for example, is that any art objects that may find a place next to the other elements of the exhibition will have to be compatible. We also intend to exclude works that are expressionist, neo-expressionist, or "transavantgardist". We intend to be quite "strict" in our attempt to detect the existence of a postmodern sensibility, which isn't at all the sort of thing to which the term is generally applied in the field of the arts.

BB: Is there a postmodern formalism?

JFL: That depends on what you mean by "formalism". Personally, I'm not very deeply acquainted with the painting that's now generally referred to as "postmodern". I can only say that it strikes me rather unfavourably. These forms of painterly expression that one now sees returning, these transavantgardists, or let's say neoexpressionists (which is what the Germans call it, and they've had quite a lot to do with it) seem to me to be a pure and simple forgetfulness of everything that people have been trying to do for over a century: they've lost all sense of what's fundamentally at stake in painting. There's a vague return to a concern with the enjoyment experienced by the viewer, they've abandoned the task of the artist as it might have been perceived by a Cezanne, a Duchamp, or by any number of others, such as Klee, for instance. I see it all as an enormous involution. It's possible that the way I diagnose things could be wrong, but...

BB: How do you feel then about the attempt to rehabilitate "technique" and "métier" as primary values for the judgement of an artist?

JFL: It would be a little paradoxical to reduce the history of a painting to a single problem of technique or supports. In any case, that's far too little. Do you remember those extremely incisive texts by Diderot, like the one he called *La petite technique* not without a certain air of disdain. And if Chardin, for example, was far beyond his contemporaries even though they were technically his peers, one surely has to

explain that in different terms from a phenomenological point of view. And look at Cezanne: he wasn't exceptional from any technical point of view, and yet, at the same... But even though I'm not at all tempted to take these problems of technical mastery any too seriously, I'm in any case quite concerned with the aspect of technique when it comes to trying to understand the way it can affect a viewer and modify the course of his attempt to make use of his sensibility as the instrument of some kind of exploration. I imagine that someone from Flanders who made a trip to Venice in the 16th or 17th century must have been terribly shocked. But apart from that kind of consideration, we still have to realise that we've been witnessing a permanent process of reformation in the individual's ability to see and then to love what he sees. But that's not at all the situation to be seen in the majority of the works that are being produced today. They don't teach me anything. I say to myself, "I've already seen that, and I've already seen it done better." The overemphasis of the hand, the agitated drawing, and all the rest of it, we already know that, and we've already seen it. I'm not saying that it's entirely without interest. I'm just saying that it's without any interest to me.

BB: You've built your exhibition around the root of the word that serves as its title: "Mat". Why have you done that?

JFL: We began to think about "Mat" which is an old Indo-European radical. But now, of course, we know that that's all a fiction since the Indo-Europeans never existed. In any case, however, we can say it's found in any number of languages, sometimes as a common root, and at other times as a borrowing. This root is an indication of "Taking measurement by hand" and very quickly assumed the meaning of "building" or "modelling". And it's from there that we get such words as "materials", "Matter", "maternity", "matrix". That's why we decided to make use of them as presuppositions in a what that's somewhat reminiscent of "communications theory". Now, perhaps you'll know that the basic presuppositions of the theories of communications is that every object is a message, that every message has a source, goes to receiver, is inscribed upon a support in a code that makes it decipherable and therefore a message, and finally that it gives information about something. So there are five poles: from where, to where, how, by means of what, and concerning what. We quite arbitrarily decided to deal with these poles in terms of the root, "Mat". Where do we start from: the maternity of the message. What's it about: the material. What's it inscribed in: that's its matrix since every code is a matrix that allows for permutations. What's it concerned with: that's the matter of the message. What it talks about in the sense of what the English call the "Table of Elements". And finally we have material, which is a question of reception, in the sense, for example, that one could say that the ear is material for the reception of a message. None of that is in any way new, it's only a way of giving a structure to our work, only a way of being super selective about what we were already intending to do: we could deal with this object or that object to the extent that it now poses a particular question: "What is the maternity of the message today?" "What has happened to their matter?" And so on. And it didn't matter what field was being considered, cuisine, or painting, or astrophysics.

And we've turned these five poles into five individual sequences that will extend from the south to the north of the large gallery of the Centre Georges Pompidou. This means that the spectator who follows one of these poles along a straight line will remain within a sequence called "Matériaux", "Matrice", "Mat'ère", "Materiel" or "Maternité". I keep telling myself, in fact, that the entirety of the exhibition could be

thought of as a sign that refers to a missing signified. And this missing signified is what I was just explaining, in the sense that it's a question of the chagrin that surrounds the end of the modern age as well as the feeling of jubilation that's connected with the appearance of something new. But it's also, perhaps, a question of trying to underline something that concerns the identity of what we are and of the objects that surround us as it comes to expression through the material or the immaterial.

BB: What finally, is postmodernism?

JFL: My work, in fact, is directed to finding out what that is, but I still don't know. This is a discussion really, that's only just beginning. It's the way it was for the Age of Enlightenment: the discussion will be abandoned before it ever reaches a conclusion.