

Translating The Avant-Garde Into Esperanto

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Abstract:

How important is the "public" in contemporary works of art? Should we expect artists to communicate with or educate their audience? Whenever the public is brought up in debates about funding for the arts, the selection of appropriate memorials for urban spaces or art education, discussions often focus on the "difficulty" or élitism of avant-garde art and the need to transform art into an instrument of cultural stability and understanding. This paper deals with some prominent cases that have dealt with these issues in the last quarter of a century, and argues that Jean-François Lyotard's thought provides us with a valid defence of avant-garde experimentation in the arts. The last part of the paper argues that the various calls for public relevance often oversimplify the notion of the "public" by not taking into account the heterogeneous nature of postmodern societies.

Preamble: Of Maltese talk shows and German Holocaust memorials

I remember watching a Maltese talk show some years ago in which the host was discussing the popularity of theatre with his guests. It was one of those light evening shows that typically (and fortunately) erase themselves from your memory by the next morning, a television show in which the grey reality of everyday life (represented by the "normality" of the guests) is presented to viewers as entertainment. At predetermined intervals in the show, the audience in the studio is asked or prompted by the host's helpers to clap. They clap enthusiastically, loudly applauding the guests' and their own average lives (her favourite food is Chinese – applause – his favourite song is *Imagine* – applause – her boyfriend is scared of spiders – applause – and so on). All of them celebrate the democratic generosity of the show: this is not

just prime TV time, but it is also *their* time, a time during which they can talk to a microphone and clap, and a time which they will relive later at home during the repeated broadcast (“Hey, that’s me in the third row!”). The guests and audience re-enact their lives in the studio only to have their fetishised voices and images broadcast back to them as simulated prime time TV through the glass screen in their living rooms. This is how the talk show turns reality into glorified banality: it transforms the television screen into a mirror.

That evening, the discussion turned to the “difficulty” of some theatrical productions. When someone complained that some Maltese productions are becoming too difficult to understand, the host’s reaction was both immediate and categorical. In two sentences, he argued that an artist who is unable to communicate with the audience is not really an artist. All art that is worthy of the name can or should be “understood” by the general public. His hasty explanation was followed by a brief moment of silence, then the customary, noisy applause that drowned out all hope of an appeal that might have challenged the host’s self-assurance. The show went on. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable in my own home, I realised that a television show that thrives on the lukewarm taste of some vaguely defined notion of the “public” does not tolerate ambiguity. It is an unpleasant mirror, reflecting a self-justifying and self-referential sort of banality that is *not* very difficult to understand. There was nothing I could do about it, except switch off the television set and go to bed.

I do not intend to defend the conservative view that opposes popular or mass culture (or even *kitsch*) to high culture; I believe that arguments such as the host’s above actually perpetuate this opposition by proposing an inverted form of élitism. Social scientist Norman M. Klein once made an important point when he reminded us of the *similarities* between what he termed “audience culture” and fine art, and held that “the storyteller must find a new way to speak honestly to the audience” (Klein 1993: 257). Klein’s view is relevant because it raises the question of what it is to “speak honestly to the audience”. Yet, Klein is also suggesting that artists are honest when they turn their practice into a “confessional” space, a space where the intimacy of their ideas can be negotiated with the public. At first glance, this would sound like a good piece of advice. But, on second thoughts, what if an artist is *honestly* “difficult”? Is the artist’s prime responsibility that of communicating with or educating the audience, and if so, *which* sector of the public should the artist start with? The idea of confessing “honestly” to someone implies the possibility of a smooth mediation of thoughts and concepts between artists and their public. Klein’s conclusion seems to suggest that if artists try to convey their intentions (honestly, truthfully, in good faith) to their public (as a scrupulous confessor might speak to a priest, but even more openly, publicly), these intentions would easily be grasped by people who come into contact with their works. Since the audience rarely has the opportunity to meet the actual artist, we may conclude that these honest intentions are supposed to be mediated by the work of art itself. And this should not come as a surprise, since the work (in Klein’s view) emanates from an “audience culture”, i.e. a culture that is not only shared by the general public but tends to perpetuate itself by being self-referential.

The problem of relating artists, works of art and the public can be approached, rather bluntly, in the following way: is a work of art made for the sake of “people” or does it serve the purposes of a more abstract development of an idea (something we call by the name of art)? This question still surfaces from time to time in the art world and never ceases to be polemical. In the recent controversy surrounding the construction

of American architect Peter Eisenman's Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, for example, the public debate surrounding the work even threatened to bring its construction to a halt. By subcontracting Degussa AG (a company linked to the production of Zyklon B gas pellets during the Second World War) to provide the massive monument with anti-graffiti paint, the Board of Trustees of the Holocaust Memorial Foundation became involved in a wave of protests, mainly coming from the direction of Jewish groups. The heated debate about the politically objectionable company brought to the fore other related questions about art and the public, as had happened with Rachel Whiteread's equally controversial *Holocaust Memorial* in Vienna (2000). Was the Berlin project about Eisenman himself, about the development of his architectural or artistic language in the twenty-first century? Was it designed for the Jewish communities, as a place of reflection and identity? Or was it meant to function as Germany's most visible image of atonement, a way of coming to terms with the guilt of a nation?

The real question we are asking here is whether popularity should be an issue in the design of a new memorial such as the one in Berlin. Peter Eisenman was quoted as saying that many Germans would have preferred "a Rodin with seven weeping Jews under a tree" to his enormous project of 2,751 concrete blocks designed "to make you feel awful about being lost in time and space" (Harris 2003). Eisenman's comment about the public's preferences refers to art with a narrative content that is spelled out to the viewer, the sort of work that can be communicated and therefore "taught" to many people with relative ease. His refusal to be "merely a mechanism" serving his clients' wishes shows that popularity was certainly *not* the most important issue for Eisenman (Eisenman 2003). His (and countless artists') attitude is that an artist must do what he or she must do; coming to terms with the reactions of the public is a problem you deal with later. The vociferous attacks on Rachel Whiteread's proposal for a Holocaust memorial in Vienna also expressed anger at the artist's uncompromising design. People signed petitions to shelve plans for the monument's construction, and the Austrian Freedom Party campaigned against the artist because her work was considered to be unacceptable to the general public. Whiteread later said that her monument was reacting against the figurative (hence, "easier") *Monument against War and Fascism* (1988) by Alfred Hrdlicka, also in Vienna (incidentally, the feeling was reciprocal: Hrdlicka did not like her memorial either). In an interview, she admitted that "some people already think it's an abstract block that they can't really understand", but still went ahead with her plans because she did not believe "that looking at memorials should be easy" (Houser 2001: 59). For her, a memorial should challenge rather than appease or please the public.

Public art, architecture and public commissions almost invariably involve political and economic tensions and often have to come to terms with their more historical or traditional surroundings. Italian architect Renzo Piano's design for a new City Gate in Valletta had sparked similar arguments related to its aesthetic qualities and its "deconstruction" of the traditional idea of what supposedly constitutes a "gate" (the difference, of course, is that in Piano's case the anti-innovation campaigners won the day, as the gate was never built). Protests about public commissions usually revolve on the issue of who has the "right" to choose how public funds are spent, and typically, artistic work that tends to rethink tradition in innovative ways is faced with the harshest animosity. Conservative critics, it appears, sometimes forget that tradition itself is subject to change. Writing about Eisenman's earlier work, philosopher Andrew Benjamin explained that his "development as an architect is to be understood as the continual search for the means...to overcome the 'complacency' of

tradition” (Benjamin 1991: 118). Overcoming tradition does not mean negating tradition; rather, it is to be understood as a dislocation of tradition, a process that simultaneously works within and outside tradition. Architecture for Eisenman is not nostalgic for traditional architectural symbolism but creates a kind of tension between its dual functions of locating and dislocating. Similarly, according to the American architect, the Berlin monument “should be devoid of meaning” and should provoke “a sense of insecurity” (Harris 2003). It must also be clear to Eisenman that architectural or artistic work that engages with these tensions is bound to be interpreted by some people as being more “difficult” than works of art with a more pronounced narrative or symbolic content. But, we may ask following the cue of *The Art Newspaper.Com*, “Is it that the spectator is the artist’s enemy, distanced by a different viewpoint?”

The Dictatorship of the Viewer

The last question in the previous paragraph was asked in the context of the endless debates about some of the artistic and curatorial decisions taken during the organisation of the 50th edition of the Venice Biennale held in 2003. *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer* was, in fact, the title of the Biennale in 2003, curated by Francesco Bonami. Bonami’s declared aim was that of giving power back to the *individual* rather than to the “audience”, an important distinction to make. Nonetheless, his idea still puts the person who “consumes” art rather than the curator at the centre of discussion. What does it mean when someone like Bonami claims that we are no longer living in the times of “grand shows” dictated by one person or artistic direction, and that he should consequently give up at least part of his curatorial status? Bonami’s desire to avoid a hegemonic curatorial position at all costs did not pass unnoticed: art historian Scott Rothkopf referred to it as an “abdication of curatorial responsibility” (Rothkopf 2003: 177). Yet, Bonami’s position is only a symptom of a wider phenomenon that pulls the public into discussions about art at all levels: at the curatorial or political level, at the economic level, and of course, at the educational level (where the pupils’ *response* to works of art and to the experience of making art is an essential aspect of the educational process). “Interactive” forms of art are widespread, and one wonders today whether contemporary art *must* continue to interact with its audience (or, in Bonami’s terms, with the individual viewer) in order to defend itself successfully against charges of élitism. Artists and artistic organisations are constantly reminded that artistic events should include rather than exclude the public, that public access to the arts should not be obstructed in any way, and that the arts must be able to communicate to a wide sector of the public.

Undoubtedly, the existence of public funding for the arts tends to contribute to these discussions (the 2003 Venice Biennale, for instance, cost around 6.4 million Euros). It would be interesting to study elsewhere how the *lack* of funding for the arts in countries like Malta affects this phenomenon (does this mean that Maltese artists are “freer” or, on the contrary, are artists more constrained to “please” the public because they can rely on very little official support?). Nevertheless, it must also be said that the individual’s experience of art *can* be more enriching when the artistic process is decentralized. This immersion in art can occur in different forms: from installations that permit a “hands-on” approach to art to the more extreme gesture of avoiding sculpture altogether and merely discussing one’s artistic ideas with passers-by (Joseph Beuys’ “information office” at the 1972 Documenta in Kassel). Most of us will

probably agree that encouraging members of the public to participate in a work of art is commendable; whether we can also conclude that the work of artists like Beuys is “popular” and intellectually or pedagogically unambiguous for the general public is another matter.

For political and cultural authorities that stress the “public” in discussions about art, there seem to be two general requirements: first, that as many people as possible are exposed to artistic events, and second, that art be relevant to as many people as possible. Needless to say, these are hardly new demands. At times in the past, some forms of artistic expression were even condemned for being *too* relevant. There is a story about the ancient Greek dramatist Phrynichus, whose play about the capture of Miletus was so painfully reminiscent of the actual destruction of the city that it moved the audience to tears, leading the people to sentence him to pay a fine. Wasn't this also a form of “dictatorship of the viewer”?

Nobody can argue with the fact that the arts in ancient Greece, as in other cultures of the past, were often deeply relevant in the sense that they were woven into the fabric of a communal life, unified by a shared cultural base. But can we speak of this sort of unified, social fabric in contemporary, postmodern societies? Who in these diversified societies is the real dictator? Last but not least, can an artist still be “difficult” today without running the risk of being labelled “*élitist*”?

The charge of *élitism* in the arts is a common one and is not restricted to Marxist critical approaches. Both so-called “formalist” understandings of art and more “*avant-garde*” approaches (minimalist, conceptualist, and so on) have been branded *élitist* in different historical periods. During the early 1980s, for instance, the *avant-gardes* found themselves on the receiving-end of this kind of criticism. Some critics argued that the artists' urge to experiment at all costs was ultimately self-defeating and even irresponsible. The so-called “intellectualism” of movements such as minimalism, conceptual art or *arte povera*, the argument went, pulled art deeper and deeper into a secluded and self-centred area of cultural activity, beyond the needs and interests of the public. This was naturally the reaction of the Italian *Transavanguardia*, a term coined by art critic Achille Bonito Oliva in 1980 to describe the post-*avant-garde* paintings of artists like Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi and Sandro Chia. Achille Bonito Oliva's idea was to replace *avant-garde* experimentation with a new subjectivity centred on the artist and modelled on Italian painterly traditions and other artists belonging to the early stages of modernism, like Picasso, Chagall and Klee. The contemporaneous existence of counterparts in other countries, such as the neo-expressionists in Germany (Baselitz, Lüpertz, and so on), *figuration libre* in France, and a number of figurative painters in America, seemed to confirm the need for this revival of painting. The appropriative gestures of these painters, who quoted freely from African art as well as from the Italian Renaissance, were even interpreted by some critics and artists as the very essence of postmodernism: not a Duchampian sort of postmodernism but one coloured by mannerist eclecticism and irony. Referring to their own, national traditions of pictorial art (for example, Expressionism in Germany), German and Italian painters in the 1980s personified the shared cultural base I mentioned earlier, a return to “authentic” (honest?) nationalistic and supposedly non-*élitist* tendencies that helped them gain not only a “public” but also a committed group of international clients. For some, this looked very much like the end of the *avant-garde*.

Lyotard and the elusiveness of art

Probably no philosopher of the period fits into this debate about the avant-garde and the public as snugly as Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard's status in recent and contemporary debates about art was established by his incisive writings about the artistic avant-gardes and about individual artists like Marcel Duchamp, Barnett Newman, Joseph Kosuth, Ruth Francken, and Daniel Buren. It is difficult to pinpoint a precise set of artistic preferences or criteria that led Lyotard to write about these and other artists, even though Anne Tomiche is right when she states that Lyotard usually "privileges a tradition of nonrepresentational painting that goes back to Cézanne's greater emphasis on color than on forms" (Tomiche 2001:151). In an interview with Lyotard carried out for *Flash Art* in 1985, Bernard Blistène stated that the list of artists whose work had been commented upon by Lyotard seemed to contain "the logic of a discontinuity" (Blistène 1985: 34). David Carroll also warned against any facile definition of the philosopher's aesthetic positions, writing that there are evident "signs of the contradictory status of the aesthetic in his work". Carroll points out that "it is important not to resolve these contradictions too quickly" (Carroll 1987: 29-30), since much of Lyotard's work pits itself precisely against the possibility of a dogmatic or consensual definition of art.

If there was, indeed, one conviction that the philosopher did not seem prepared to let go of, it must have been his belief in the artist's commitment towards the development of thought. For Lyotard, the artist constantly bears witness to this development and hence should make few, if any, concessions to public taste or demands for communication. Art, according to Lyotard, can be such a disruptive force that even commentary about it is rendered difficult, if not entirely impossible. This is what attracts Lyotard to an artist like Marcel Duchamp, whose work often destabilized conventional attitudes toward art. As implied by the French title of Lyotard's book about the artist (*Les transformateurs Duchamp*, translated as *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*), Duchamp's work transformed the field of artistic practice in a way that threatened to render art unrecognisable. Lyotard's very unorthodox "critique" of the French artist's work is reinforced by statements such as: "There remains something uncommentable, to save him", or "In what you say about Duchamp, the aim would be not to try to understand and to show what you've understood, but rather the opposite, to try not to understand and to show that you haven't understood" (Lyotard 1990:11-12). For Lyotard, Duchamp is not nostalgic about the loss of "good sense" or "beauty", nor is the inconsistency of his work comparable to a mystic's journey into the "ineffable". Duchamp is inconsistent only because he is elusive: nobody could define him or predict his next move.

In an essay included in the collection *The Inhuman*, Lyotard compares Duchamp to yet another artist whose work is often interpreted as being "difficult": Barnett Newman. Once again, Lyotard describes Duchamp's work as "an attempt to outwit the gaze (and the mind)" (Lyotard 1991: 79), while "the baroque nature of the materials" in his installation called *Etant Donnés*, Lyotard tells us, "demands many a story" (but which is the "correct" one?). This implies that the pictorial message the artist transmits to the public, whatever it is, can only be received with a measure of perplexity. The work of Barnett Newman is even less revealing: his paintings are not even "organized around a sender, a receiver and a referent. The message 'speaks' of nothing; it emanates from no one" (Lyotard 1991: 81). The viewer is at a loss because Newman's abstract canvases, usually composed of monochrome surfaces divided by

vertical “zips” of colour, do not seem to allude to anything in particular. A painting by Newman simply *is*.

This minimal approach to painting avoided all narrative, with the result that (unlike the neo-expressionist painters mentioned earlier) Newman’s art did not enjoy much popular appeal when it went public. Even some art critics appeared to lack confidence in front of his work. For example, the German critic Armin Zweite agrees with Lyotard and writes that Newman’s works “captivate us and at the same time fail to give us the sense of security we feel we need” (Zweite 1999: 27). Critic and art historian Yve-Alain Bois has written: “in my opinion, Newman...is the most difficult artist I can name” (Bois 2002: 106). Jeremy Lewison starts his book about the artist (*Looking at Barnett Newman*) in the following way: “I begin with a confession: I have always found the painting of Barnett Newman difficult. Difficult to understand, difficult to empathise with, difficult to penetrate” (Lewison 2002: 7). To many of his contemporaries, Newman’s paintings were like a blank wall; as Bois points out, even his sympathisers misunderstood him, let alone his many critics.

It should be clear from the choice of these two artists – Duchamp and Newman – that the problematic reception of their work does not worry Lyotard as much as it actually draws him to them. Naturally, Newman and Duchamp are very different artists. Yet, they seem to be similar in at least one respect. What Duchamp and Newman appear to have in common is their refusal to strike a balance with the expectations of the general public; their impenetrability is almost their virtue.

Writing about the paintings of Danish artist Stig Brøgger, Lyotard states that he is once again brought face to face with the “silence” of a work of art. “Its green light is a red light: Come, you will not enter. Speak, you will say nothing (of what I say)” (Lyotard 1997a: 10-11). This critical dilemma is accompanied by the philosopher’s interest in the way avant-garde art constantly re-examines its own rules; Carroll even writes that for Lyotard, rules “are ultimately made to be broken” (Carroll 1987:169). Postmodernism can never mean post-avant-garde for Lyotard, as it does for Achille Bonito Oliva. According to the French philosopher, the problem with the eclecticism of the *Transavanguardia* movement is that it reduced artistic genres to the same level of consumption, much like choosing products from a supermarket shelf. With neo-expressionist painting, the avant-garde lost its critical edge and turned cynical.

Even more aggressively, critic Benjamin H. D. Buchloh attacked the fetishization of *peinture* by Italian and German artists in 1981, writing that its auratic qualities transformed the works into “the luxury products of a fictitious high culture” (Buchloh 1984: 124). These paintings, for Buchloh, make use of historicist clichés in order to confirm the “ideological domination” of those who can afford to acquire them. According to Buchloh, this “is the price of instant acclaim achieved by affirming the status quo”. While many of these painters asserted that their revival of a traditional mode of production addressed and rebutted the élitism of the avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Buchloh maintained that they perpetuated another form of élitism, one based on subjectivity, commodity, masculinity, and falsely heroic images of nationalism. Most importantly, for Buchloh, traditional modes of artistic expression do not guarantee anti-élitism; on the contrary, their regressive, apolitical and nostalgic attitudes actually exhibit a sort of contempt for the social realities that surround the artists.

Interestingly, even Francesco Bonami's Biennale in 2003 included a historical exhibition called "*Pittura/Painting: From Rauschenberg to Murakami, 1964-2003*", which hosted a collection of paintings produced during the last forty years by artists like Warhol, Guttuso, Kiefer, Clemente, Basquiat, and Currin. For Bonami, the medium of painting is still capable of asking important questions, despite the relative neglect it has suffered at the hands of past Biennale directors. Jean-Louis Déotte has argued that painting was a privileged medium for Lyotard too (Déotte 2001), and this is confirmed by Lyotard's several references to colour, for example in the work of Tintoretto in *Soundproof Room* (Lyotard 2001). Like Bonami, Lyotard did not think that painting is dead: in fact, he even stated in 1985 that he intended to write a "substantial study not so much of art, but specifically of painting" (Blistène 1985: 34). And he did produce a book about the paintings of Adami, Arakawa and Buren in 1987, fittingly called *Que Peindre?* (Lyotard 1987)

If Lyotard had a problem with neo-expressionist forms of painting that were popular in the 1980s (to the extent of excluding these tendencies from *Les Immatériaux*, an exhibition he organized at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1985), it was because he felt that these artists had forgotten "everything that people have been trying to do for over a century" (Blistène 1985: 35). In his view, the "popular" painterly revival of the 1980s was predominantly market-oriented and typically quoted fragmentary ideas out of context, piecing together moments in the history of art in a manner that conveniently forgot the *real* stakes in the art of painting.

Witnessing the Unpresentable

So, *what* is at stake in art and philosophy for Lyotard? Is it the development of technique or the pleasure of the viewer? Neither one nor the other; rather, for Lyotard, the function of art is to present the fact that there is something that cannot be presented, that something indeterminate, formless, invisible, or sublime comes to disrupt the visible. This emphasis on the "sublime", which came to characterize Lyotard's later work, challenges those very educational institutions (like art academies) from where many artists emerge, since, as Lyotard reminds us (quoting from Boileau), "(t)he sublime...cannot be taught" (Lyotard 1991: 95). The sentiment of the sublime also produces an unsettling effect in the viewer, since it is essentially a mixture of pleasure and pain felt by the viewer when he or she realises that "what" happens (in a painting by Newman or in Eisenman's Berlin memorial, for instance) is inexpressible. Hence, the relationship between the artist and the public is not determined by common criteria of beauty or taste. Instead, this relationship is based on an element of surprise resulting from the overturning of rules or manifestos established by previous artists or institutions.

For Lyotard, Cézanne was such a turning point, not an exceptionally talented painter but one who was capable of asking the most essential question: What is painting? Cézanne ran the risk of "being taken to be a mere dauber" (Lyotard 1991: 102). But this is a risk that every artist must take, by bearing witness to the unpresentable (or bearing witness to the inaudible, in the case of composers). This process of questioning the past in order to affirm the new is not merely an aesthetic game. On the contrary, it is so serious that (as Lyotard warns us) the effort to eliminate the so-called "decadent" avant-garde movements in order to regain some form of cultural stability and public "enjoyment" has often been dangerously associated with national-

socialist academism and totalitarian politics. In an essay called “Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable”, Lyotard argues that totalitarian political systems often feel threatened by the “anxiety” engendered by this constant questioning. This is due to the fact that

The avant-gardes carry out a secret questioning of the ‘technical’ presuppositions of painting, which leads them to a complete neglect of the ‘cultural’ function of stabilization of taste and identification to a community by means of visible symbols. An avant-garde painter feels first of all responsible to the demand coming from his activity itself, i.e. ‘What is painting?’. And what is essentially at stake in his work is to show that there is invisibility in the visual. The task of ‘cultivating’ the public comes later.

(Lyotard 1991: 125-26)

The role of the artist is not that of a model citizen, nor is it primarily that of a teacher who “explains” his or her own work to non-artists. According to Lyotard, the same line of reasoning applies to the philosopher, whose primary responsibility is to answer the question: ‘What is thinking?’ The philosopher is therefore a kind of avant-garde thinker, not someone who proposes illusions of cultural stability and consensus. Lyotard does not mean to say that philosophers and artists cannot teach (Lyotard himself taught philosophy for many years) or even that teachers are incapable of using “artistic” (in the sense of “creative”) pedagogies. What he means is that producing art and communicating it to a public are two different activities and should not be confused:

Teaching is (or has become) a cultural activity, at least to the extent that it is subordinated to a demand coming from a community. I have no contempt for cultural activities, they too can and should be properly carried out. Simply, they are quite different from what I’m here calling artistic work (including thought).

(Lyotard 1991: 135-6)

Educators may find it hard to agree with what Lyotard is proposing in this paragraph; surely, the best teachers often challenge the “community” and its expectations. Beuys even considered teaching to be the most intense form of “social sculpture”. While we may disagree with Lyotard’s rather restricted view of teaching in this context, we must not overlook the fact that Lyotard is not as wary of the educational process as he is of institutionalised versions of “good taste” (he does, in fact, refer once or twice to traditional institutions of art education like Academies or salons as examples of the latter). Demanding eclectic and “easy” work from artists results in “deresponsibilizing the artists” (Lyotard 1991:127). It is this repeated demand for communication that engenders academism, i.e. artistic forms that not only provide the artist with established criteria of beauty but also with an audience. Lyotard thinks that

...in the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is an identical call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity (in the sense of *Öffentlichkeit*, of “finding a public”). Artists and writers must be brought back into the bosom of the community, or at least, if the latter is considered to be ill, they must be assigned the task of healing it.

(Lyotard 1984: 73)

This is why it would be wrong to represent the Holocaust as “a Rodin with seven weeping Jews under a tree”, as Eisenman put it. According to Lyotard, the Holocaust is the unrepresentable itself: its horror cannot be communicated or represented by a form, and yet, it cannot and should not be forgotten. To “heal” the wound would merely imply closing off debate about it. With a subject like the Holocaust, no image of closure is possible. The artist is only a witness. As Robin Usher and Richard Edwards have written in their analysis of the educational implications of the philosopher’s thought, “we witness Lyotard’s stance as one of resistance rather than liberation” (Usher and Edwards 1994: 170). For Lyotard, the “way forward” can only be aesthetic or “paraesthetic” (as David Carroll would say): we should all imitate the artist’s resistance to ontological or conceptual closure by refusing all emancipatory goals (and communication is one such goal).

Of course, bearing witness to the “unrepresentable” will not immunize artists against the common argument that represents (even in Malta) contemporary art as an irresponsible and willingly obscure artistic phenomenon. But this is like saying that Hegel was irresponsible because most people do not understand his work. Or that Picasso should have resisted his cubist sensibility because it was bound to be misunderstood by the public (who knows how modern art would have developed had he done so?). Lyotard himself was definitely not immune to such criticism. He refers to an article by French historian Pierre Nora in which the author criticized “the disorder and terror that reigned in French criticism and philosophy” (Lyotard 1997b: 204) and joined forces with public opinion by asking “above all “to be able to know where they were” within the affairs of thought”. Lyotard hit back with the following string of examples, which I shall quote in full:

My stupor was as follows: Could the *Essays* of Montaigne become the object of a debate and would one be able to know where one was in reading them? Augustine’s *Confessions*? *A Season in Hell*? But also Hegel’s *Phenomenology*? And that of Husserl, or of Merleau-Ponty? Claude Simon’s *Georgics*, *Doktor Faustus*, *The Castle*? What was there to debate, and how then to know where you were, in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, in Delaunay’s *Eiffel Tour*, Cage’s *Mureau*, or Boulez’s *Répons*, in Beethoven’s thirteenth string quartet? Whether their material was language, timbre, or color, wasn’t there some solitude, some retreat, some excess beyond all possible discourse, the silence of some terror, in the works of thought? And not out of capriciousness, fashion, or bravura, but in essence – if it was true, as Apollinaire said, that the work of art requires the artist to become inhuman. Is it possible without terror to bring something you don’t understand to “signify” by means you don’t control, since those means must be liberated from the ones tradition has controlled?

(Lyotard 1997b: 206)

What all these examples show is that those who stress *the* functionality of art wrongly attribute art with a final purpose, that of making society more “transparent”. Artists are asked to become translators. Translate your work, remove its opaqueness, speak to us in a language we all understand. The linguistic analogy is not a coincidence, of course. It is the “clarity” of language that is expected to come and save the day by verbalising the silence of colour. But, as Lyotard reminds us, it “has not yet been proved that a willed silence constituted a fault” (Lyotard 1997b: 209). Artists are not

duty-bound to speak in a way that reflects a sense of cultural uniformity, because “in front of the canvas or the page, consensus is null and void” (Lyotard 1997b: 216). Those who ask the artist to suffer the pain and loss of translation – for the sake of consensus and communication – seem to forget or ignore the heterogeneous nature of the public, particularly in postmodern societies. Translate into *whose* language? Whenever (and if) translation is possible, it tries to bridge the gap between one shore and another, but it cannot link all possible shores to the point of departure. And the act of translation can only be possible if the artist knows his or her audience, if one is fully aware of the identity of the listener. Since *the* public does not exist (and hence cannot be known), the artist translates in vain (and in pain) and the “function” of communication becomes either oppressive or irrelevant. Moreover, the notions of “ease” and “difficulty” become problematic. Writing about “The Difficulty with Difficulty”, philosopher David Novitz states:

There are old and young people, Jews and Catholics, Marxists and capitalists, feminists and born-again Christians, Islamic fundamentalists and new-right economists, all of whom approach the same work with different beliefs, values and expectations. Hence what one group within this epistemically differentiated mass finds “difficult” in a work of art, another will often find “easy”.

(Novitz 2000: 10)

In a nutshell, Novitz is implying that art does not speak a universal language. Artists are not Esperantists. What, then – if anything – can be communicated? If it is not the artist’s business to function directly as a “teacher” (and artists cannot be expected to know *intuitively* how to teach their ideas to others), should we conclude that artists are not burdened by any social responsibilities? No, artists have at least one profoundly important responsibility, and that is to keep alive the indeterminacy of the “rules” of art. Since Cézanne, artists have found that the most effective way to do this is by questioning the very nature of their work. And artists usually ask questions by making objects and images, by facing the blank canvas and marking it with fresh pigment. The very process of making art is the “example” offered by artists to the community. The indirect “educational” consequence of this act that reshuffles the cards again and again is not the possibility of shared understandings. Rather, the artist’s example is characterized by the fact that it exemplifies nothing but its very singularity, which is neither translatable nor reducible to a universally applicable and ready “recipe”. When an artist is at work, he or she proposes a language of possibilities. This language is the artist’s pedagogy.

According to one of his students, German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen once said in a class: “In every work there must be something that makes it utterly different!” (Kurtz 1992: 194). The student (Wolfgang Rihm, who himself evolved into an important composer) later said that “a blow struck” him when he heard Stockhausen’s words. What had Stockhausen “taught” him? He had shown Rihm that an artist can “touch” a student by asking him to attend to difference (to a difference that is *utterly* set apart from the known conventions of art). Listen, listen to this sound that only exhorts you to question the very essence of sound-making. Do not search for its “meaning”. Absorb the actual process of modulating new combinations of sounds, imagine as an artist imagines. The experience of art should not direct the viewer or the listener to the finality of the end-product; rather, it should reverse its aim and transport him or her through the trial-and-error of the process back to the emptiness of the page or the unrepresentable silence that precedes the first sound. There, away from

the cacophony of social discourse, the artist searches for the “utterly different”. Alone.

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