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# French Aesthetics: Contemporary Painting Theory

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## Contemporary Painting Theory

One peculiar feature of the Anglo-American reception of French thought since about 1970 is the view that the variety of thinkers and tendencies involved reduces everything to language. One crucial place to test such a reading is with regard to a set of texts devoted to painting and the visual arts, for the latter would seem to be situated at or beyond the boundaries of language, a place that Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic. The alleged reductionism of the French is usually construed as the claim that language is a seamless whole in which all meanings are defined in terms of one another. But it is characteristic of French poststructuralist thinkers to deny precisely this view, and to emphasize the fissures and fractures in linguistic systems, their susceptibility to psychological, social, or institutional power, and their tendency to generate inconsistencies and aporias. So even if the alleged reduction were to occur, it would be to a language that was already understood in what might be called a "materialistic" fashion. On the other hand, if language is construed more narrowly and conventionally as verbal, then the leading tendency among poststructuralist thinkers would seem to be the desire to distinguish between the linguistic and the visual while at the same time tracking and articulating the structure and play of their incursions into and intersections with one another. In this respect Jacques Derrida speaks for these theorists when he suggests (in *The Truth in Painting*) that we should question the traditional philosophical hierarchy or system of the arts, according to which it is the arts of language to which the others aspire and which complete their mission (the traditional view is found to be especially strong in G. W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger). Given this approach, it becomes an important task for poststructuralist thinkers to be self-critically vigilant about the position of the speaker or writer who addresses painting.

**Maurice Merleau-Ponty.** Merleau-Ponty, the most immediate French target of poststructuralist critiques of phenomenology, develops a parallel between the work of the phenomenologist and the painter (he differs here from his contemporary Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom the artist produces images that are capable of phenomenological analysis; for Sartre it is the writer of philosophy or prose who can disclose the truth of consciousness). At first this parallel seems to respect the differences between the visual and the discursive, with painter and philosopher working in quite distinct and equally significant media. In "Cézanne's

Doubt" Merleau-Ponty sees Paul Cézanne's project not in terms of the finished products of his work (indeed, Cézanne denied that most of his paintings were finished, and refused to sign them), but as a continually renewed effort to work back to the primordial roots of perception. Just as Edmund Husserl found the articulation of the levels of intentionality that structure all experience an endless task, so Cézanne, on this view, kept going back beyond the easy abstractions of convention and tradition in order to disclose the nature of vision. For the painter this entailed a questioning of the residues of quattrocento perspectivism, according to which the world is seen by a monocular, immobile gaze that transcends the field it dominates. It also entailed Cézanne's parting ways with the impressionists, rejecting their dissolution of everything into light; he insisted on the obstinacy of the object. Implicit in Cézanne's stylistic development is a refusal to divorce sight from touch or from the temporal experience in which vision is always more than a momentary impression; it is the latter that should be considered an abstraction, rather than considering the object as a mere construct.

In this portrait of Cézanne Merleau-Ponty relies rather heavily on the painter's reported conversation and the literary testimonies of his contemporaries. Because Cézanne was reported to have said that he submitted himself to the *pater omnipotens*, Merleau-Ponty infers that he was "oriented to an infinite Logos" (Merleau-Ponty, 1993). In order to make Cézanne's paintings speak, the philosopher has recourse to the painter's speech, so that language seems to be the court of last resort. Especially since Merleau-Ponty's use of the written sources is rather uncritical, there seems to be an implicit priority given to the linguistic that produces unacknowledged consequences for the analysis of painting.

This apparent priority of the linguistic takes a more explicit form in "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence," an essay inspired by André Malraux's *Voices of Silence*. As the latter title indicates, the question is whether and how one can speak for the visual, which seems to have no voice of its own. Merleau-Ponty sees Malraux as submitting visual art to the monstrous order of Hegelian history, according to which it is later works, as understood and articulated by the critic, that put us in a position to assess earlier ones. The museum, with or without walls, and its associated practices and discourses are said to overwhelm the style or "inner schema" that constitutes the artist's "life itself." So far Merleau-Ponty contrasts a primordial phenomenology of the artist's activity with a discourse that can only be secondary and external to it. The extreme expression of such a position is found in the late "Eye and Mind," where it is said the very first painting went to the farthest reaches of the future, implying that each painting involves an "advent" of meaning that can never be exhausted. "Indirect Language" begins by appealing to Ferdinand de Saussure's diacritical account of language to suggest that all meaning lies in the

interstices; in Merleau-Ponty's analysis this applies to visual art as well as to language in the narrower sense, so that the latter would have no priority over the former. Yet the essay ends with a kind of reformed Hegelianism, setting out a series of distinctions between painting and writing that hinge on painting's failure to achieve presence: "The Spirit of Painting appears only in the Museum, because it is a spirit external to itself. . . . Man does not paint paintings, but he speaks about speech, and the spirit of language wants to depend upon nothing but itself." Art seems to become more truthful, more fully present, as it approaches the condition of language. Literature of any time is said to live "entirely in the present" whereas paintings date much more easily. What emerges from these dubious contrasts is a traditional commitment that undermines Merleau-Ponty's desire to provide a phenomenological recognition of the autonomy of painting. Merleau-Ponty's late and unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible* is tantalizingly suggestive; it introduces the idea of a hyperreflection (*sur-réflexion*) that seems to hover on a boundary between the perceptual and the linguistic and that

would set itself the task of . . . reflecting on the transcendence of the world as transcendence, speaking of it not according to the law of the word-meanings inherent in the given language, but with a perhaps difficult effort that uses the signification of words to express, beyond themselves, our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet said. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968)

Although Merleau-Ponty was not able to develop this himself with respect to articulating the relation between language and painting, it could be taken as a motto for much of the succeeding work in this intellectual tradition. *The Visible and the Invisible* is also notable for the thesis that the relation between human vision and the world is chiasmic; that is, our seeing is possible only insofar as the world is a kind of extended "flesh" that in some sense sees us. This thesis, reminiscent to some degree of Friedrich von Schelling's absolute idealism and philosophy of nature, was taken up by Jacques Lacan, who suggested that there is "a pre-existence of the gaze—I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (Lacan, 1978, p. 72). This gaze is associated with castration anxiety; it is an "evil eye" that discloses the inadequacies of the viewer. For Lacan our modes of dealing with the world are either in the imaginary mode, based on our recognition and misrecognition of ourselves in the mirror stage, or in the symbolic or linguistic register, in which language seems to form a relatively seamless set of signifiers by which we glide from one meaning to another. The visual can function as a disruption or interruption of the symbolic, making us aware of the limitations of language; and within the visual the phenomenon of distortion, or specifically anamorphosis, which Lacan analyzes in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, can serve to disturb the illusory integrity of the imaginary. In Holbein's painting the

anamorphic skull stares back at us, challenging the assumed autonomy of our gaze and marking the inevitability of loss and death. Effects like this are "stains" on the imaginary wholeness of the visual field. Despite his famous insistence that "the unconscious is structured like a language," then, Lacan arrives at a position similar in some respects to that of Jean-François Lyotard, who accuses him of a form of linguistic reductionism (at least in Lacan's alleged omission of the visual dimension of the dream); given their common debt to Merleau-Ponty, this partial overlap is not as surprising as it might initially appear.

**Michel Foucault.** Foucault's *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* begins with a celebrated discussion of Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, which inserts the painting into history (or reads it archaeologically, to preserve the author's language) by suggesting that the position that the painting allocates to its artist, model, and spectator is one that is occupied in oscillating fashion by each, but that these roles must fail to coincide. This is taken to be an indication that the epoch of which the painting is typical does not yet have a conception of human beings as self-knowing subjects, one that would be the ground of all other knowledge. While some have criticized the essay for carelessness in understanding Velázquez's use of perspective (and these criticisms seem rather hasty), we might attend to another dimension of the text in which it explores the relation between painting and language. The "starting point for speech," Foucault writes, is the incompatibility of language and the visible. *Las Meninas* can be read either as a simple group portrait or as a highly self-referential work involving a complex reflection on the conditions of pictorial representation; similarly, Foucault's essay can be read either as a commentary on the painting (the level at which questions about matters such as perspective would arise) or as an artful meditation on the relations between painting and language. Consider the question of who is marking the failed coincidence of artist, model, and spectator or the absence of a human being; Foucault insinuates a voice in the first person plural, a "we" that manages a virtual incorporation of its readers. If "we do not know who we are" insofar as we occupy the position of the spectator/artist/model in front of the visible painting, no such uncertainty infects us in our role as the collective subject who observes and records such uncertainties or ambiguities. If the figures depicted in or implied by the painting are frozen in time, "we" are involved in a process of discovery that unfolds through Foucault's narrative. Much later in *The Order of Things*, when Foucault is explaining the rise and disappearance of the concept of the human being, he refers once more to the discussion of *Las Meninas*, pointing out that it was precisely that concept ("enslaved sovereign, observed subject") that was lacking in the painting. He broaches the possibility of imagining a different version of the work in which the various roles sketched earlier coin-

cide, and in a highly impersonal way recalls that earlier “one imagined” the figures in restless oscillation. Now the collective subject has disappeared. In each case Foucault’s rhetoric is appropriate. In the opening essay the linguistic “we” marks a distinction between a speech that can assume concepts not open to its object, while in the later reference to the painting, since it is now the concept of the human that is being articulated and questioned, a different voice, one no longer rooted in the “we” takes over. Indeed, something like this shift had already occurred between the two parts of the opening essay, for the second part begins by explicitly noting the different registers of the linguistic and the visual; neither can be reduced to the other. Yet even this must be placed within a historical (or archaeological) context. This becomes clear in Foucault’s essay on René Magritte, *This Is Not a Pipe*, in which he argues that painting has overcome the code, traditional at least since the fourteenth century, that prohibited interchanges between the linguistic and the visual. There he complicates the genre of ekphrasis, the verbal description of a visual work, by writing of a painting that, on his reading, has already entered into the linguistic realm.

**Jacques Derrida.** Perhaps with a nod to Merleau-Ponty, Derrida begins *The Truth in Painting* by citing a line from Cézanne: “I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you” (Derrida, 1987). Derrida’s commentary on this phrase, given directly in an introductory essay and indirectly throughout the book, takes the form of a series of meditations on how it is possible to speak, truthfully or adequately, of that which is silent. Derrida expects us to be familiar with what he refers to as “the canonical difficulties of description in discourse on art,” which have to do, presumably, with the difference between visual and verbal media. The pitfall in speaking or writing about visual art seems to consist in forcing its translation into language and overlooking its specific character as painting. This danger is analyzed in the book’s longest essay, offering an analysis of the difference between the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the art historian Meyer Schapiro with regard to the understanding of a Vincent van Gogh painting of old shoes. Heidegger had invoked the painting in “The Origin of the Work of Art (1936),” both to demonstrate something about the nature of equipment (such as shoes) and to show how art could be truthful. For Heidegger, the shoes disclose the world and earth of the peasant woman to whom he imagines that they belong; and insofar as art discloses something about equipment, which supposes both a world of meanings and a resisting element (earth), with which the world is in tension, it is truthful. Heidegger describes this illumination by saying “this painting has spoken,” a phrase that Derrida takes quite seriously as indicating the point made more explicitly later in Heidegger’s essay that the art of language somehow embraces and surpasses the other arts. Schapiro, on the other hand, had argued on biographical grounds that

these were the shoes of van Gogh, an artist and a man of the city. In a complex dialogue (or polylogue), Derrida deploys a number of voices who offer an analysis of the “correspondence” between the two interpreters of the painting. The dialogue suggests that the two are as one in their assumption of the project of appropriating the painting by means of language. To say that the shoes belong to the peasant woman (or artist) is to say something like “they belong to me, the interpreter.” The linguistic project proceeds by finding familiar categories of meaning: a pair of shoes, an absent owner. But the several voices of the dialogue—pluralized so as to avoid the illusion of a single magisterial speaker—ask whether the shoes are really a pair (they could be two left shoes) and whether they must be thought of in relation to an owner (why do they stand there empty and very prominently unlaced?). As one voice suggests, the shoes are, in some sense, on the other side of language: “they concern us/look at us, mouth agape, that is, mute, making or letting us chatter on, dumbstruck before those who make them speak . . . and who in reality are made to speak by them.” This suggestion has a psychoanalytic flavor: we are compelled to speak of painting, we may have an obsessive desire to do so, but if we fail to acknowledge and thematize that desire, then we become its plaything and are able to speak only of ourselves. Therapy would itself be verbal, although conducted without a magisterial speaker, and would consist in accepting the detachment of the work (for which the detached state of the shoes is a metaphor). Derrida is also wary of one tempting but false exit from the verbal/visual complex: this would be to fetishize the very silence of the work in such a way as to give it a kind of aphoristic authority, to endow it with a virtual and unquestionable discourse (see especially his interview with Peter Brunette and David Wills in *Deconstruction and the Visual Arts*). Strategies other than the dialogue are possible to avoid the two extremes. In *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, Derrida, responding to an unnamed interlocutor, explores the possibility of assuming explicitly one’s own speaking position in all its fallibility and with all its limits. He attempts to show that the one who draws or paints does not see the subject (e.g., the model) in the very act or moment of marking the paper or canvas; whence the interest of the iconography of blindness and its analogues in the works Derrida selected for the exhibition that is the occasion of his essay. Writing also involves a certain blindness, a plunging headlong into an as yet undefined area. The blind person’s cane, the artist’s brush, the writer’s fingers on the keyboard are analogues of one another. There is no all-seeing gaze for the same reason that one does not know what will be written until one writes it. The conditions of possibility of these activities become even more prominent in self-portraiture, whether visual or verbal. In this particular essay Derrida explores his own opticality, including dream visions, a paralysis of the eye that occurred while writing, and the tears that,

he suggests, are the eye's most distinctive and truly human activity. The traditional ecphrasis, with its assumption of a magisterial viewer and speaker, is replaced by a model of a fractured self for whom these activities fail to coincide with each other and are split within themselves. The banal fact that one cannot write and see at the same time has become a way of rendering the genre of ecphrasis problematic, so that the writer becomes a "ruin," like the self-portrait. (It is perhaps needless to add that many of the analogies piled on top of one another here may appear deeply questionable.)

**Roland Barthes.** Barthes's pioneering and wide-ranging work in literary and cultural semiotics might suggest that he applies a specifically linguistic model to all forms of art and image making. The analyses collected in his relatively early *Mythologies*, including those of such visual products as magazine advertisements and covers, photographic exhibitions, and films, tend to support this view. He also wrote of the photograph, however, that it is "a message without a code" (Barthes, 1981), suggesting that it cannot yield a specific meaning without contextual clues; and he went on to say that the *image* (a general term for any visual artifact, which can be profitably compared to Lacan's idea of the picture) is essentially polysemous and that language is needed to limit its indefinitely proliferating possible meanings. In an essay on the artist Cy Twombly, Barthes investigates the reciprocity of drawing and written language, pointing out that Twombly's drawing is a kind of trace or inscription, a mark of his having been there; at the same time the titles of his pieces, while not describing in any simple way what they might be thought to represent, provoke a certain direction of thought that leads us to see their strictly visual content in a more specific way than we would otherwise (for example, in terms of a "Mediterranean atmosphere").

Barthes's most sustained exploration of the relation between image and language is *Camera Lucida*, a book about photography that involves a meditation on death, genealogy, and modernity. Artfully designed, the text is punctuated by a series of photographs which illustrate and amplify the essay that ostensibly comments on them. Seeming to take up the project of phenomenology (dedicating the book to Sartre's *The Imagination*), Barthes first suggests a binary distinction for the analysis of photographs. Every photograph has its *studium*, a topos (e.g., a Russian street scene, a body in the road during wartime); but if it is a photograph of some real interest it will also have its *punctum*, some unexpected, unpredictable detail or mood that troubles, disturbs, or excites us (e.g., a strange cap worn by a Russian boy, a sheet carried by a woman at the death scene). The *punctum* can be compared to the role of the stain or anamorphosis in Lacan's theory (to which Barthes often alludes), insofar as it interrupts a quasi-linguistic continuum. One of Barthes's most striking gestures in *Camera Lucida* is his *not* reproducing the photograph of his mother as a five-year-old child on which the later argument of the book

turns. This absent image intensifies the realization that all photographs have a distinctive temporality: they are marks of something that has happened earlier, signifying "that-has-been," or the tense of the simple past. This mere fact of being there in the mode of being related to what was can be compared with Heidegger's conception of the artwork as simply giving or manifesting itself and with Derrida's attempt to honor the remainder in the visual work, even defending it against Heidegger's lapses; but we should also note the contrast between the present tense of the "it gives" or "it shows itself" and the past of "that-has-been." Beyond that, Barthes suggests, this photograph is emblematic of this: insofar as photography is marked by pastness it is akin to death and our concern with it can be a mode of mourning. If the awareness of death is largely repressed in contemporary society, the photograph, especially in its stark black-and-white form, may be the way in which this repressed element returns. Photography can be tamed, Barthes says, by the addition of color, which restores the illusion of life, or by film, which does something similar through motion and sound. The nonappearance of the mother's photograph might be taken at first to indicate that Barthes believes that his writing can provide its equivalent, as in the classical poetic and rhetorical genre of ecphrasis. But he tells us that the true reason is that the photograph is too personal, and too closely tied to that which ultimately ("nondialectically," he says) individualizes him, his death, to have a general meaning; in other words, it is precisely because the picture escapes the linguistic dimension to an extreme degree that its absence says something about the ineluctable inadequacy of language in the face of the photographic image. *Camera Lucida* can also be read as a translation of Lacanian concepts to photography, in which, for example, Barthes's analysis of death would correspond to Lacan's "real."

**Julia Kristeva.** Kristeva's early intellectual career owes much to the work of Barthes in particular, as well as to the general context of French structuralist and poststructuralist linguistics, criticism, and philosophy. Some affinities and contrasts with Barthes emerge in her major statement concerning visual art, "Motherhood according to Giovanni Bellini," for there she is concerned, like her mentor, with the way in which the maternal either escapes representation and language or interrupts the flow of the symbolic (perhaps it should be noted that this essay of 1975 predates *Camera Lucida* by several years). Painting occupies a role at the edge of the linguistic or symbolic in Kristeva's analysis. She is concerned, much in the manner of Lacan, with how human beings become "speaking animals." Kristeva argues that our initiation into what she calls the "socio-symbolic contract" always involves loss or sacrifice of a pre-Oedipal bond with the mother; once situated within the symbolic, we are caught between two dangers, to which art and literature can sometimes offer a resistance. We might accept the

symbolic without question, as a system for the exchange of meaning without affect, in which case we become nothing but functionaries of the social norms; or, we might attempt (as some radical feminists do, she suggests) to flee the symbolic altogether for the sake of a fantasized return to the prelinguistic maternal. Yet the symbolic is never all-powerful; it may be interrupted by what Kristeva calls the semiotic, that is, drives, impulses, and feelings that come from the maternal, presymbolic level. Art and literature can present and frame this interplay of the semiotic and symbolic; in the case of painting it is color and space that can break through and question or modify the linguistic and social norms. Although painting, we might say, is from the first nonlinguistic, the symbolic plays a role in it insofar as painting has recognizable themes, an iconological vocabulary, and fits into specific social, religious, or philosophical traditions that are typically articulated by means of language. The return of the semiotic in art, then, is both a way of escaping from the tight constraints of the socially and linguistically constructed self and a way of reconstituting that self in a less rigid form. As Kristeva says of color, in "Giotto's Joy," "it is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as conscious subject, accepts" (Kristeva, 1988, p. 37). The contrast with Barthes, who valorizes the contrast black and white, is striking (and while it is true that Barthes does this in the rather special case of photography, it is also true that he has very little to say about color in his other writings on the visual).

In her essay on Giovanni Bellini, Kristeva turns to the theme of the maternal as such. On the basis of rather sketchy biographical information, she supposes that Bellini lost or was in some way abandoned by his mother, and that his work can be read as a search for the lost maternal in its semiotic manifestations of color and space. On one level, she is offering a parallel and contrast to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic account of Leonardo da Vinci; but whereas Leonardo (for Sigmund Freud) was dealing with too many mothers (his birth mother and his stepmother), Bellini was attempting to recapture the semiotic equivalent of archaic, prelinguistic memory or desire. Another contrast has to do with painterly and religious traditions, which form part of the symbolic context for both; this is the opposition between the figurative style of Florentine painting (Leonardo) and the colorist mode of the Venetians (Bellini), as well as the stronger presence of Eastern Orthodox conceptions of the Virgin Mary that, on Kristeva's account, reinforce the artistic contrast insofar as Byzantine Christianity is less concerned with representing the mother by clearly delineated figures. Unlike Freud, in his writings on visual art, Kristeva is relatively unconcerned with iconographic or iconological meaning in Bellini's work; rather, she attempts to evoke the ways in which, through a complex series of stages constituting a long career, he fulfills the role of the

artist to let the traces of the semiotic break through the limits of the symbolic: "At the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place where she [the mother] is not. He delineates what, in her, is a body rejoicing [*jouissance*]" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 242). For Kristeva, to imagine that painting would be reducible to language or the symbolic could only be a symptom of the hypertrophy of rationalism and idealism; whereas to think that it could be an avenue for ecstatic flight into the purely semiotic would be a form of regression or madness inconsistent with our destiny as "speaking animals."

**Jean-François Lyotard.** At least since *Discours, figure* (1971), Lyotard insisted that language is not a self-sufficient system; it is, he always maintained, constantly disrupted, interrupted, and contested by something else that alternately is called presence, figure, or event. If painting cannot be reduced to the word, this provides no foundation for a cult of silence around art. Even silence, Lyotard argues in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1988) is a marked position within the world in which we speak. There is no escape from phrasing or sentence making. Merleau-Ponty's presence in this early work of Lyotard's is strongly marked, and perhaps one can see *Discours, figure* as a carrying out of the hyperreflexion of which the former spoke. In *Que peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren*, Lyotard examines the differend, or unresolvable dispute, between those who believe that there is nothing in painting that cannot be verbalized and those who claim that there is an irreducible level of visual presence in art. Appropriately enough, the exploration proceeds by a series of dialogues that eventually focuses on the problematic work of the three contemporary artists named in the book's subtitle. Lyotard sets up the issue in something like the following way. "A" claims that whatever is seen in art can be described linguistically; rhetorical ecphrasis, art history, or criticism can evoke images of real or imaginary works. If painting is meaningful, then its meaning must be linguistically accessible. If someone were to claim that something was missing from such linguistic performances, then it should be possible to say what it is. But as soon as such naming occurs, we are on the way to a verbal articulation. But someone else, "B," maintains that reference is not reduction, that the ability to speak about painting does not imply that there is nothing in the painting that is not translatable into language. B might be suspicious of any commentary that led us to short-circuit our looking. The rush to commentary obscures the fact that painting's point may be precisely to contest the hegemony of the linguistic. A replies that by valorizing the silence of painting, B actually makes it speak after a fashion; the painting is understood as making a statement, albeit a self-referential one about its own powers, status, effects, and integrity. If the work excludes the profane speech of the rhetor or critic, then its eloquent silence becomes authoritarian. Lyotard defines the work of

philosophy as bearing witness to the differend, that is, to such seemingly unresolvable disputes as the above. Each advocate points to a wrong that cannot be recognized in the other's perspective (for Lyotard such a perspective is a "regime of phrases" and such a wrong is a "damage"). Lyotard sets himself the task of rephrasing such oppositions. The first dialogue of *Que peindre?*, titled "Presence," centers on whether there is an irreducible dimension of presence in painting. The background of this discussion is the critique of the metaphysics (and, by implication, any aesthetics) of presence by Heidegger, Derrida, and others. "You" (a character with whom the reader may at first be tempted to identify) argues that there is no unmediated perception, especially in art, that everything we apprehend is surrounded by a halo of thought and language; and You adds in Hegelian fashion that art itself has become increasingly aware of this and has recently taken the inescapability of mediation as its theme. Yet the other participant in the discussion, "Him" (positioned initially as object rather than subject), asks that we pause for something like a phenomenological reflection here. Him attempts to evoke a sense of the event, the fact that something has taken place when we look at a painting that has interrupted the flow of discourse, external or internal. Another name for the event is presence. Him argues that the becoming-linguistic of recent art is not the sign of a Hegelian self-knowledge in which art realizes its true nature by dispensing with the myth of presence; it is rather simply a redistribution of social roles in which the work of commentary is now assumed by artists without waiting for the contributions of critics and historians. Color is perhaps the most striking case of discursive interruption in painting. The possibility of speaking of color (by, for example, articulating a theory of color symbolism or considering the price and esteem of pigments in fifteenth-century Florence) does not alter the fact that it is presented to us. Being receptive to such presentation demands a kind of nonaction, which Him evokes with echoes of Heidegger's letting-be and explicit reference to the Zen thought of Dōgen. Like these thinkers, Him (who seems increasingly to speak for Lyotard) recognizes that speaking of the nondiscursive is paradoxical in the way that Hegel claimed the attempt to utter the immediate (in "Sense-Certainty") is paradoxical. One way of evading the paradox is to write or speak in a way that opens itself up to interruptions, a form Him calls "the painting of presence." The consequence would be that an artfully constructed ecphrasis could show by its phrasing how art interrupts language. This seems to be the project of the ensuing dialogues in *Que peindre?* that explore variations on these themes in the work of three artists and in the phrasings to which they give rise. Similar strategies are at work in many of Lyotard's other writings, notably in about half of the essays collected in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*.

[See also Barthes; Baudrillard; Deleuze; Derrida; Foucault; Lacan; Lyotard; Ricoeur; and Sartre.]

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