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PERFORMING ARTS

JOURNAL • 29

A Periodical of PAJ Publications
PAJ 29 (Volume X / Number 2)

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Performing Arts Journal is listed in *The American Humanities Index*, a *Quarterly Index to Scholarly, Critical, and Creative Journals*. Book reviews are indexed in *Book Review Index*.

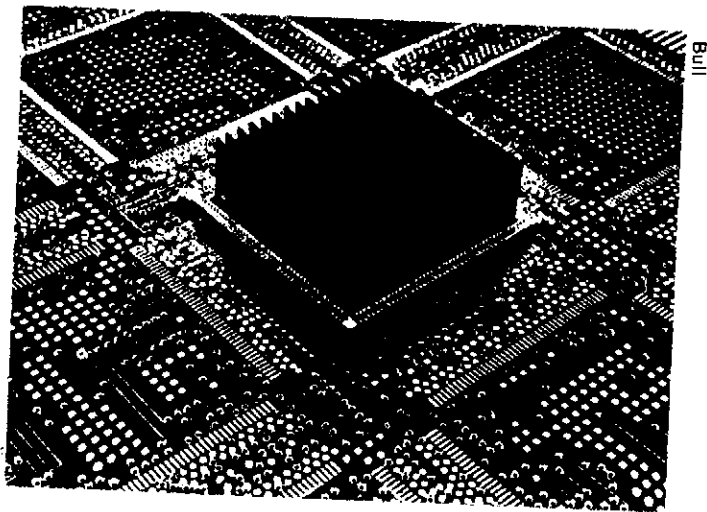
Performing Arts Journal is distributed to bookstores only by:

Bernhard DeBoer, Inc., 113 E. Center Street, Nutley, N.J. 07110

Overexposure

Les Immatériaux

Johannes Birringer



Nightmare of a traveler: slowly driving across Southern California on identical freeways, from San Diego to Santa Barbara, with an increasing feeling of disorientation vis-à-vis the images of mountains, beaches, deserts, barren suburbs and glossy shopping malls that flush by the window. The map offers no help; the inanimate, blind landscape on the other side of the window conspires against the driver whose point of view has collapsed. Los Angeles has disappeared into hundreds of miles of deterritorialized zones. It is neither city nor country nor desert. The opposition between center and periphery has disappeared too. Sheer contiguity replaces the spatial logic of oppositions, the syntax and grammar of representation which ordered the grid structure of the industrial city. Los Angeles holds an invisible seduction because it can no longer be comprehended (seen) geographically; the vision it produces has to do with travel time, the speed and energy spent in movement across obliterated boundaries. The apparent infinity of routes and the equivalence of all directions only heighten the sense of cir-

cular drift. The car radio may be the last indicator of a change in territory—yet there is no guarantee that weather reports or hit parades will differ from one wave-length to another.

This scenario of the "overexposed city," as the French urban sociologist Paul Virilio calls it, captures the post-industrial ambience that we gradually begin to experience in the changing relationships of our bodies and our consciousness to the constant ubiquity and instantaneousness of a kind of *visual sprawl* of information in electronic culture. Whereas Virilio explains this sprawl in terms of a telecommunicational world of absolute speed that will ultimately lead to the complete disappearance of cities and their inhabitants, there is another fiercely debated French theory (Jean Baudrillard's concept of "simulation") which seems even more pertinent to American perceptions of the technological "revolution" and the new "automobility" of audio-visual information.

For Baudrillard, the idea of orbiting around L.A. is directly correlated to a postmodern mentality conditioned by several decades of (American) mass culture, by a relentless commercial reproduction and fabrication of reality, which leaves nothing in its place. No more subject, focal point, exteriority, no more distance between subject and object, no more scene, no illusion, no secret. What is lost cannot be found because it has been covered or simulated in advance.

It now seems a long time ago that Artaud, in *The Theatre and Its Double*, attacked the theatre for *representing* life instead of being life. In Baudrillard's nihilistic scenario of contemporary mass media culture, the whole idea of "theatre," or any representational art, is completely inverted: the distinction between representation and reality has become irrelevant because the real itself has been eclipsed by a self-regulating, global technology of "programs," "models," or "genetic codes." Baudrillard's favorite example for such a model is Disneyland: the miniature operation of phantasms set up to conceal that all of "real" America is Disneyland.

We may not be inclined to suspend our disbelief in such French speculation on American models, but what are we to do when French theory travels into the Beaubourg museum to *dramatize* questions raised by the postmodern culture of simulacra? When I visited "Les Immatériaux" (March 28-July 15, 1985) at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, I felt as if I had walked into a theatre. Upon entering a long, airport-like tunnel, I was given a set of headphones, and to complete the *Verfremdungseffekt*, I first heard a low electronic hum in my ears, followed by a dramatically recited fragment from Beckett's *The Unnamable*, a convoluted monologue of an "I" who can neither speak nor remain silent. But when I looked, I found myself in a dark, mirrored vestibule, entitled "Theatre of the Non-body." Apart from my headphoned reflection in the mirror, there were five dioramas displaying images of stage sets evacuated and empty but for imperceptible shifts in the lighting. As if I had met the last riddle of the old subject/object dualisms at

the crossroads, this disembodied remainder of a theatre opened onto five meandering paths that provided passages—interrupted by music and spoken texts transmitted along separate radio wave-lengths—through the gigantic metallic labyrinth into which the Beaubourg exhibition in the fifth floor gallery had been arranged.

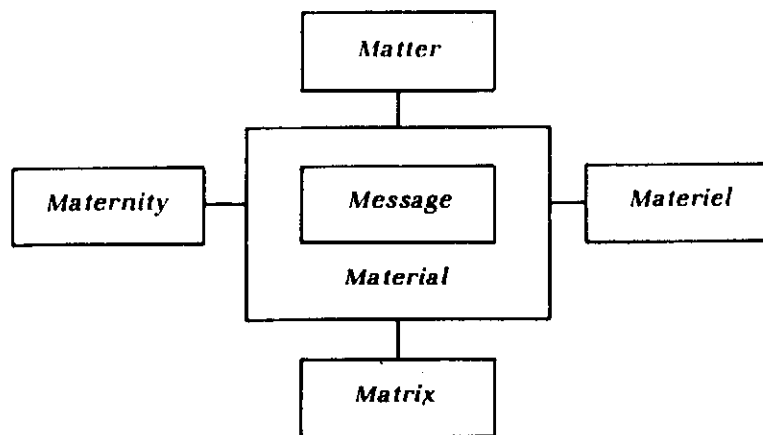
It was a labyrinth of sounds and sights, indistinctly divided by silver gauze screens and lighting effects into sixty "sites" yet interpenetrated by the broadcast "zones" and their invisible infrared signals. One's first impression of the exhibition, then, had to do with the uncertainty of the itinerary and the unsettling experience of audio-visual juxtapositions: the sound in one's ear (e.g. literary and theoretical texts by Borges, Artaud, Baudrillard, Barthes, Blanchot, Virilio, etc.) did not refer to the technological displays and objects in the "sites." During the walk, one could look into a computerized index of the concepts of the exhibition. But both the index and the catalogue of the show were "illegible" as a guide; they referred to new scientific theories of circuits, cells, energy states, genetic manipulation, etc., in physics, biology, and micro-electronics. I heard several visitors complain that the catalogue offered no help at all—that was precisely the point.

Organized by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and a large team of collaborators from the Centre de Création Industrielle, "Les Immatériaux" was indeed meant to create an interactive environment for conceptual explorations of our world, a "reality" no longer securely representable in human or artistic terms but increasingly dependent upon immanent techno-scientific operations. "Les Immatériaux," in other words, was not an exhibition that exhibited anything (least of all paintings). It was a provocation to the mechanism of viewing art in a museum as well as to any aesthetic or art-historical narrative based on anthropocentric and historicist notions of continuity and tradition. The references to Artaud and Beckett were hardly accidental: we were confronted with the postmodern fulfilment of an older avant-garde battle cry: no more masterworks. But no more authors either.

"Les Immatériaux" radically broke with spectatorial mechanisms, with the idea of domination and control over perceptual space as such, and in another sense it also abandoned the Foucauldian concept of the "panoptic" museum of human nature, the relationship between power and gaze, and its subjection of the body. It is quite impossible, then, to describe the exhibition without distorting it, since it primarily sought to evoke a temporal, multi-sensory experience of an author-less, discontinuous, placeless world of invisible interfaces between heterogeneous objects, artifacts, industrial products, and complex theoretical constructs. The *effects* of these theoretical constructs, the new "immaterials" of postmodern culture, inform our experience: computer-generated signals, electronic processing, biogenetic manipulation, telecommunications, filmic, holographic and video simulation. Disneyland, Hollywood, and Silicon Valley all at once.

Walking past the sixty sites turned out to be a nightmare of a different sort,

namely the familiar experience of total information overload. It was a significant effect, however, because the five paths that started in the "disembodied theatre" also turned out to follow a certain logic that made them eventually converge in a concluding site entitled "The Labyrinth of Language." This site, with its profusion of computer consoles and text processors, repeated what was implied by the dispersed jumble of projectors, photocopiers, electro-microscopes, spectrographs, VCR's, sound synthesizers, microwave ovens, and designer robots (including a set of Japanese "sleeping cells" equipped with radio, TV, telephone, and climate control!) in the preceding sites: first, we live in a world of invisible wiring, surrounded by machines that are not only ubiquitous but that facilitate a flow of plural messages with which we as individuals can no longer keep up. Second, if everything is the immaterial function or effect of messages, then "Les Immatériaux" would seem to suggest that the labyrinth of reproduction and technoscientific reinvention is organized, after all, according to general interactions within a communicational system.



And here we come to the most problematic aspect of Lyotard's conception of "Les Immatériaux": while dramatizing the experience of *overexposure* and *dispersion* in postmodern culture, he held on to a structuralist model of the communication process (sender, receiver, code, referent, etc.), which was shown to underlie even the most disparate high-tech "special effects." Human creators and material objects (the mirror of the subject) have disappeared from the center; "messages" (and their control) determine the horizon of this technological labyrinth.

In various interviews, Lyotard referred to this post-theatrical stage setting as an "operational structure," a kind of "scenography" of our postmodern condition which can be understood as a nervous system of instabilities and mutations within the parameters of the communicational circuit. According to Lyotard, "the model of languages replaces the model of matter. The scale on which the structure is operational in contemporary technoscience and artistic experimentation is no longer a human one. Humans are over-

whelmed by the very small (microchip), which is also the only means of information about the very large (astrophysics)."

Lyotard is able to equate "contemporary technoscience and artistic experimentation" because they are on the same order of dispersed "language games" and synthetic processes that have displaced all the older unifying theories of knowledge claiming control over physical reality (cf. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979]). The "material," he suggests, "disappears as an independent entity." Both mind and matter, in other words, have become part of a general code of rational abstraction (a new metaphysics of the perpetual absence of reality in the code?) which replaces subjective or objective "reality" with a cybernetic pattern of circulation.

This is not a comfortable vision (and maybe I only thought I saw it), since it implies that the coded system *is* the instrumentation by which everything (any message) is available and interrelatable. But "Les Immatériaux" made a great effort towards showing—even as I heard the voice of Artaud in my headphones protesting the "presence of my corporeal pain"—the consequences of Virilio's and Baudrillard's scenarios of an overexposed culture: the disappearance of consciousness into the space of technology means the disappearance of bodies. Far from being the extensions of man, as popular mythology describes our machines, "Les Immatériaux" displayed countless examples of the production of potentially endless equivalents: everything could become subject to simulation at any time. In all five paths of the exposition, the most diverse "messages," from holograms to fast food, from music video or computer music to synthetic skin or olfactory simulacra, were shown to be artificial replacements of/for the human body and its material activities.

I shall conclude my report on the self-enclosed structure of Lyotard's postmodern exposition by briefly pointing to the concerns that performance research might share with scientific thought. If we reflect on the Squat Theatre's recent presentation of their screen images in *Dreamland Burns*, superseded by partial holograms (filmed faces projected onto mannequins) on a stage that appeared less real than the actual film scenes, we might ask ourselves whether the ancient theatrical conundrum—what is the nature of reality/appearance?—is not in danger of becoming irrelevant. Similarly, John Jesurun's provocative staging of *Deep Sleep* had his live actors trapped between two movie screens. After they had made their way into the film, they found it impossible to break out of the frame again, with the exception of one actor who refused to be "projected," and turned schizophrenic.

I don't want to consider "Les Immatériaux" a schizophrenic vision of our postmodern electronic culture. On the contrary, that exposition clearly suggested a "natural" loss of reality due to the maximization of information, which from now on might simply transcend the human mind and bodily

materiality through electronic processes that can be read and decoded like the consciousness or "neurovegetative system"(Lyotard) they simulate. If my language has turned circular, it is only because my reflection is already caught in the logical and calculable operation of the cybernetic model dramatized by "Les Immatériaux." Assuming the compatibility of mind and system-operated language (artificial intelligence), cybernetics has developed a theory of messages and their control which would *define*—for the users of simulation technology—what can be expressed, invented, and exchanged within the frame. We could find countless examples of such frames (video games, MTV, TV serials are the most obvious media formats), but we would not yet have answered Lyotard's question: what happens if knowledge (emotional knowledge, sensitivities, personal and cultural memory, sexual experience, etc.) is reduced to information that can be computed? What happens when artistic experimentation is indistinguishable from techno-scientific operation? At the heart of such questions lies the modern history of scientific thought, and perhaps one could see "Les Immatériaux" as an ironic confirmation of Heidegger's prediction (in his 1954 lecture "The Question concerning Technology") that modern science was becoming a tool of technological modes of "enframing" our condition in the world.

The history in question has advanced in quantum leaps: from older cognitive models that projected the logico-mechanical operations of the mind onto a natural cosmos viewed as non-probabilistic, causal, and mechanistic to the explosive re-thinking of our notions of the meaning of reality, the nature of matter, and our representations of it, after the physics of Einstein, Heisenberg, and Godel. If concepts of uncertainty and relativity are now being discussed in terms of the exchangeability of signs, maximum entropy, noise, and redundancy, we have reached a stage in the dialectic between modern physics and cybernetics where the postmodern paradigm of "mind," *information processing*, is based on the deterministic, calculable operations through which computer technology can transform the world and supersede human creativity.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Beaubourg exposition, sponsored by the Centre de Création Industrielle, no longer envisions a realm in which the systematized operation of "embodied mathematics," as computer engineers lovingly call their machines, could be contested. That realm, Heidegger once recalled, used to be art.

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