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Kiff Bamford, *Lyotard and the 'figural' in Performance, Art and Writing*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012. vii + 213 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4411-6707-1; \$37.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1472522443.

Review by Ashley Woodward, University of Dundee.

First, what this book does not do: It does not provide a Lyotardian theory of performance art. It does not stake out the terrain of contemporary performance, art, and writing, and argue for the necessity of a Lyotardian intervention in such fields. Its chapters do not invite boiling down to a thesis that can be easily summarised. In fact, it does not really defend any particular thesis as such. Instead, imagine a device: it has a scanner which can move freely forwards and backwards through tremendous amounts of material, including written text, images, verbal anecdotes, various forms of exhibition documentation, and so on, and can highlight material at any point, link it with material at any other point and make it resonate. It can then produce a print-out of this scanned path. The result is a kind of map through mysterious and fascinating terrain. The device is led in its scanning and resonance-producing processes not just by a keen algorithmic intelligence, but is imbued with a receiver and processor of sensations, and a “soul”—which means that this processing is not simply well-regulated and predictable. This device, suggested by Lyotard’s notion of the “set-up” (*dispositif*), as well as the print-out of each individual visitor’s path through his exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, can be called with the proper name “Bamford.”

The book is an exploration, a journey. It imparts to the reader continual flashes of interpretive insight, which have both a negative and a positive function: negatively, they disrupt the closure of thought around Lyotard’s name which has taken place through its binding to yesteryears’ fashion, postmodernism, thus opening his work for fresh consideration.[1] Positively, these insights glean from Lyotard’s work concepts which have potential for productive employment in performance art, both in practice and theory (and it should be noted that despite the book’s title, its key focus is really performance art, notwithstanding some discussion of other arts and writing). These potentials are demonstrated through examples: we get to see how Lyotard’s thought gives expression to key aspects of performance, such as the body, nonverbal communication, temporality, affect, and documentation. Yet these concepts are never then systematized into a theory, or fitted with explicit prescriptions for how they should be used. In the book as a whole, Lyotard’s work is surveyed, overflowed, by a concern for *openness*.

Typically, I tend to find an emphasis on such openness and on the limits of conceptual grasp in work on Lyotard and other French philosophers (Blanchot, Derrida, et cetera) simply annoying and unproductive. Such is happily not the case, however, with this book. The concern for such things are here both strongly motivated in terms of its specific concerns (the non-conceptual aspects of performance art), and don’t become for the author an excuse for vagueness or lack of scholarly rigour. Key Lyotardian terms are (at least provisionally) defined with a high degree of clarity, and with an insight born of careful scholarship.

Bamford’s book appears in the context of a recent renewal of interest in Lyotard, especially around his work on art. This interest has been cultivated especially by the long-overdue appearance of *Discourse*,

*Figure* in English translation, and of the beautiful six-volume series of his collected writings on art from Leuven University Press.[2] Bamford's book has just been followed by another excellent, and quite different, book on Lyotard and art, Graham Jones's *Lyotard Reframed*. [3] Bamford's manuscript was clearly being prepared whilst the Leuven series was still in production, and whilst this is certainly not a criticism, it is worth noting that many of these newly-available writings are not considered in the book. It is extremely well-researched, referring to obscure, hard-to-find writings and bearing evidence of research in the Lyotard archive at the Doucet Library in Paris. Yet it is not exhaustive. In addition to the lack of reference to recently published material, the final paragraph of the last chapter is perhaps something of an apology for covering almost nothing of Lyotard's work on art in the 1990s (pp. 163-164). Again this is a point worth noting but not a criticism, since exhaustive coverage is by no means a condition of meeting the book's aims (and something of an impossible goal in any case).

The book positions its own genre as that of art history, though it is a variety which sees itself not simply as a sub-discipline within history, concerning itself with names, dates, and cultural contexts, but also with much broader philosophical questions surrounding theory and the arts. It is equipped with a strong art-historical armature, and one of its most impressive aspects is its careful attention to the historical and conceptual contexts in which Lyotard's work emerged. A primary concern here (the "negative" function mentioned above) is to free Lyotard's writings on art from the trajectory of their reception in the English-speaking world of art theory, which tends to align them with the notoriously vague postmodernism or with the modernist formalism of critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, and which has now relegated them to a place of merely historical interest in anthologies. Tracing the publication of key articles (which journal, under whose editorship, given what general conditions of the art world at the time, et cetera), Bamford ably demonstrates the divisions between concerns in the French context and those in the American one, which gave Lyotard's works a certain skewed reading in its historical reception. He then corrects such readings (especially of the most well-known essays on art by Lyotard, "Answering the Question, What is Postmodernism?"; "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime"; "The Sublime and the Avant-garde"; and "Newman: The Instant"[4]) with careful attention to Lyotard's other works and to the French context in which the artists Lyotard writes about were received (often very different from those in America). Occasionally these archaeological expeditions can be a little wearying, and we don't always feel like we've discovered Troy (the changing of the word "heroic" to the word "admirable" in the revised version of an essay, for example, seems a little inconsequential, [p. 112]). Yet the scholarship is always insightful, and contributes to the overall "freeing" of Lyotard's legacy from established patterns of reception. Frequently, this negative task leads to a positive one as concepts are carefully excavated from Lyotard's intricate and difficult works, and offered for insight and use.

Bamford wisely allows one of Lyotard's more under-appreciated terms, "the figural," to govern the study, a useful strategy in the attempt "to drag his ideas out from under the stifling weight of the postmodern" (p. 9). Another strategy he employs is to focus his discussions around relatively little-known texts. Among those which receive focused consideration here are "Painting as a Libidinal Set-up"; "Presence" and "Anamnesis" in *What to Paint?; The Assassination of Experience by Painting: Monory*; "It's as if a line..."; "Les Immateriaux"; "The Affect-phrase"; "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?"; and *Enthusiasm*. [5] When some of Lyotard's more well-known works, such as those mentioned above, are discussed, Bamford focuses on aspects which have received little attention. Notably, he discusses Lyotard's interest in the sublime by foregrounding his references to Edmund Burke (rather than Kant). Moreover, Bamford illustrates Lyotard's relevance to performance art by focusing his discussions around a number of (often classic) performance works, by artists such as Vito Acconci and Gina Pane. These case studies are one of the most surprising and impressive aspects of the book: they animate Lyotard's ideas and demonstrate their relevance beyond academic theory.

As can only be expected when dealing with an *oeuvre* as extensive and complex as Lyotard's, there are some interpretations here which I would challenge. For example, I believe Bamford, perhaps lacking

awareness of the other contexts in which Lyotard uses the term “intellectual” in a rather pejorative sense, has failed to distinguish the terms “intellectual” and “philosopher” in his discussion of the essay, “Presenting the Unpresentable,” thus confusing the critical distinction Lyotard establishes between the painters’ and the philosophers’ restricted responsibility to painting or to thought (respectively) with the intellectuals’ responsibility to communicate these to the public (p. 114).<sup>[6]</sup> Or again, his insistence on the impossibility of any translation between what Lyotard calls “phrase regimens” (pp. 131-132) begs for simple counter-examples. Lyotard’s point is rather that, while of course such translations can always be made, they are never without significant remainder (they always transform the pragmatic situation). Yet most of these disagreements are minor quibbles: my far more frequent response to Bamford’s unfamiliar interpretations are that they are plausible and insightful points of which I had not thought.

My most significant interpretive concern is that around the body, developed primarily in chapter three, “*Les Immatériaux*: What is Lyotard’s Attitude to the Body?.” The trajectory here is promising and generally insightful, examining his 1985 exhibition at the Centre George Pompidou, not as others have done (in terms of exhibition design, or new media art), but for what it tells us about Lyotard’s view of the body. There are, for example, useful links back to Lyotard’s earlier work on phenomenology. Bamford notes the trajectory of Lyotard’s thought away from phenomenology towards philosophy of language, yet misses the clearest characterization of it here in the progression of *Les Immatériaux* as a kind of “dissolution of the body,” from its beginning with sites such as *Nu vain* (which Bamford does discuss in quite some detail) to the end of the exhibition’s *parcours* in the *labyrinth du langage*. Instead he gestures towards the affect-phrase, an important later addition to Lyotard’s philosophy of phrases developed in *The Differend*, and situates the body as “a source of inarticulate affect” [that which the affect-phrase indicates] (p. 109). Perhaps in a sense it is, but I find this claim difficult to reconcile with Lyotard’s other attempts to characterize the body in terms of phrases. For example, in the essay “The Affect-phrase” itself, he writes: “There is a *body* only as the referent of one or several cognitive phrases, attested to by the procedures for the establishment of reality....Only the logical animal *has* a body. The *phônè* does not have a body since it is not referential. The pleasures and the pains experienced in the adventure of the *infans* are only attributed to the excitation of this or that erogenous zone by the articulated discourse of adults, which takes the organism as its reference.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Here, Lyotard states that the inarticulate affect (called here the *phônè*) does not have a body, and that the body is only the referent of a cognitive phrase (i.e., one concerned with knowledge). Now it is likely that in citing the body as “a source of inarticulate affect” (p. 161), Bamford is using the term in a different sense, and he astutely notes elsewhere that Lyotard (elsewhere) has a particular understanding of the body as un-individuated—like Deleuze and Guattari’s “body without organs,” for example. But my critical point here is that these different notions of the body in Lyotard remain unclarified, and in particular the answer to the question “What is Lyotard’s Attitude to the Body?” does not result in an answer detailed enough to map the various relations between the affect-phrase and the body once the later has been dispersed in the “labyrinth of language,” as we find it in some of Lyotard’s later writings. I would like to have seen a page or two of more theoretical exposition at the end of chapter three drawing its points together. This is typical of each of the chapters of the book, but it is chapter three which left me most wanting. This lack of summary and buttressing of argument is likely a deliberate strategy in maintaining the mobile openness of the book’s exploratory journey. It is perhaps also an expression of its deliberate hesitation (see below). Nevertheless, my own strongest concern about the book as a whole concerns this very hesitation at such critical points, where there are missed opportunities for yet further insight.

The book itself is an admirable performance; a delicate balancing act. Bamford is concerned to follow Lyotard’s “desire not to produce theory, but to stumble unknowingly as a philosopher who writes in response to the affects, emotions and bodily sensations...” (p. 107). He does so not by imitating Lyotard’s style(s), but by developing his own. Bamford’s manner of stumbling is really rather confident and graceful most of the time. His exploration is accompanied with a comfortable hesitation, a confident

uncertainty, performing a riposte to the partisans of mastery and the infinite capacities of thought who position themselves as today's philosophical avant-gardes. Like many accomplished performers, Bamford makes what must have taken a great deal of hard work appear effortless.

Despite the roughly chronological ordering of material in the chapter titles, the book plunges through Lyotard's work, rebounding freely between different periods and positions, uncovering rarities and reconsidering classics, and putting the whole to work. It alternates styles between the personal ("I didn't visit the exhibition, I was at high school in the north of England at the time of *Les Immatériaux*" [p. 76]), the imagistic ("have we not 'moved on' to other thinkers the philosophy and art theory bookshelves seemed to groan, offering instead a diet of Deleuze and Rancière" [p. 5]) and the scholarly and theoretic ("Burke also dismisses the belief that proportion can be applied as a determining factor in beauty, taking issue with the anthropocentric humanist notions embodied in the Vitruvian man and Alberti's schema for architecture as based on divine proportions of geometry" [p. 121]). It usually does not labour the deep erudition which grounds the study, but allows it from time to time to rise to and play on the surface. Explorations and experiments, hypotheses and insights, alternating voices and genres: It shouldn't work, but it does. Occasionally Bamford's delicate high-wire balancing act teeters a little to one side under the excessive heaviness of an obsessed-over point, or moves forward a little too quickly and lightly for our sustained engagement, but the impressive thing is that he never falls.

Bamford's book draws welcome and long overdue attention to Lyotard as the poststructuralist thinker most concerned with art, who brings to poststructuralist thought "a concern for visibility and a particular feeling for that which is not visible" (p. 166). What he brings specifically to an understanding of performance art is a sensitive consideration of affect and of nonverbal meanings—in Lyotard's technical terms, inarticulate phrases (p. 169). As well as being required reading for any future engagements specifically with Lyotard and art, I would recommend the book to students and scholars researching at the juncture of theory and the arts generally as an illuminating and inspiring example of how such research might proceed. *Lyotard and the 'figural' in Performance, Art and Writing* is a surprising and quite brilliant book, one which takes its place among the small number of essential books on Lyotard in English.

## NOTES

[1] I am thinking of a comment Mary Lydon makes about Lyotard's *Discours, figure*. See Lydon, "Veduta on *Discours, figure*," *Yale French Studies* 99(2001):10.

[2] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Herman Parret, ed., *Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), p. 13.

[3] Graham Jones, *Lyotard Reframed* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

[4] Lyotard, "Answering the Question, What is Postmodernism?," in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); "Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime," *Art Forum* (April 1982): 64-69; "The Sublime and the Avant-garde," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); "Newman: The Instant," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

[5] "Painting as a Libidinal Set-up," in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. K. Crome and J. Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); "Presence" and "Anamnesis," *What to Paint?*, ed. Herman Parret, *Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 5 (Leuven: Leuven

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University Press, 2012); *The Assassination of Experience by Painting: Monory*, ed. Herman Parret, *Jean-François Lyotard: Writings on Contemporary Art and Artists*, vol. 6 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012); "It's as if a line...", trans. Mary Lydon, *Contemporary Literature* 29/3(Autumn 1988): 457-482; "Les Immateriaux," *Art and Text* 17:8-10(April 1985): 47-57; "The Affect-phrase," in *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, ed. K. Crome and J. Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006); "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?," in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. G. Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[6] See for example Lyotard, "Tomb of the Intellectual," in *Political Writings*, trans. by Bill Readings and Kevin Paul (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), where he writes: "The *only* responsibility of artists, writers, or philosophers as such is a responsibility toward the question 'What is painting, writing, thought?'...they are not 'intellectuals'." (pp. 4-5) [*Italics mine*].

[7] Lyotard, "The Affect-phrase," pp. 109-110.

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