

Involuntary Phrases for the 21st Century: “No Phrase is the First.” §184

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Abstract

In an interview in 1978, Lyotard was asked if he believed a “communication volontaire” is possible. The difficulty of translating this phrase—“self-directed” or “voluntary” communication?—is enhanced by the fact that such a notion seems oddly out of time. Lyotard’s reply invokes aspects of the strange and strained relationship between his most philosophical book, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, and his most popular, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in particular the shift from Wittgensteinian ideas of “language games” to that of phrase regimen and its attending critique of anthropocentrism. Is there, in this shift, a move that echoes current aspects of ecocriticism and into which it might, in turn, feed? The possibility of a “communication volontaire” will be considered through the inter-relationship of both texts, Lyotard’s own response in relation to his teachings at the university of Vincennes, and through artworks which perform aspects of this voluntary process.

Keywords: Language games, Wittgenstein, The Differend, The Postmodern Condition, Contemporary Art, Lyotard, Ecology, Education

When art and technology work together the visitor is often invited to experience what is occurring without explanation, freed from the didactic explanations of how the differing elements operate. It is a reframing outside the usual genres of technological or scientific discourse, which tend to prioritise innovation and future application, to a terrain which is less sure of its function or destination. Who or what is doing the questioning has long been a concern of a particular approach to aesthetics, exemplified perhaps provocatively by W.J.T Mitchell's 2005 title *What Do Pictures Want?* but developed more seriously through the development of a new materialism. "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with," is Donna Haraway's adaptation of the approach and thoughts of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, in order to draw our attention to what is framing the form that questions take: "it matters what stories we tell to tell to tell other stories with"¹

In the installation *In Love with the World*, directed by the studio of artist Anicka Yi for the turbine hall of Tate Modern, London, 2021-2, there is a deliberate desire to present a spectacular experience which prompts questions, not to narrate or direct answers. The whole space, measuring 3,300 square metres with a height of 35 metres, becomes an ecosystem for a number of large, floating dirigibles whose form and behaviour take their cues from the *Aurelia* species of jellyfish, with the intention to create semi-autonomous machine-beings, informed by artificial intelligence systems devised by industry collaborators.² The project aimed to create an environment in which the complexity was provided by the visitors, not the technology. The simple actions and behaviours of the floating forms, termed aerobes, were intriguing yet simple enough to elicit speculation about the technology and what informed their elegant movements. As the technical artists Nathan S. Lachenmayer and Usa Sadiya Akasha explain: "we resisted the urge to create a more complex artificial life system, instead preferring simple rules over complex ones," following Valentino Braitenberg's early work in cybernetics, "the key to compelling complex behaviour is simple rules combined with a complex environment."³ The ambiguity of the visual cues supported the experience: if they were jellyfish then we, the visitors, were in an alien ecosystem, placed as though in an ocean and shrunk somehow to the position of bystander. Looking up at the creature-machines from below, or across from one of the elevated viewing platforms, their behaviour could be observed. Some aerobes seemed to be more inquisitive of the human beings which surrounded their space, but all eventually returned to the "battery pond" for recharging, where technicians worked to

1 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 12.

2 Nathan S. Lachenmayer and Usa Sadiya Akasha, "An Aquarium of Machines: A Physically Realized Artificial Life Simulation," *Proceedings of the ACM on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques* 5, no. 4 (2022).

3 Lachenmayer and Akasha, 9, citing Valentino Braitenberg, *Vehicles: Experiments in Synthetic Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

facilitate their return to the air. Although in this story it was unclear who was servicing whom.

To leave at least one of the pragmatic poles of communication open—addressor, addressee, referent, sense—allows for an inquisitiveness that is engendered throughout the work of Jean-François Lyotard.⁴ This article will follow three instances of such incompleteness, across two publications and an exhibition, charting their sometimes-entangled paths as Lyotard's thought intersects with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. But it begins with a phrase. In an interview in 1978, Lyotard was asked if he believed a "*communication volontaire*" was possible.⁵ The difficulty of translating this phrase—perhaps as either "self-directed" or "voluntary" communication—might suggest that such a notion has little contemporary currency today. Perhaps it refers to something that has fallen out of common understanding relating to the function of language? Yet it inhabits the realm of Anicka Yi's installation and is typical of questions asked by contemporary technological developments, those which evoke the possibility that information comes from elsewhere than reasoned, articulated human thought. When the question mark stands for the unknown element of the pragmatics of communication in the simplified model proposed by Harold Lasswell three quarters of century ago: "Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?"⁶ It is the same model adapted by Lyotard for the overarching schema of the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* and complexified in his contemporaneous book *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. This article considers both the strange and strained relationship between this, Lyotard's most philosophical book, and his most popular, *The Postmodern Condition*, in order to establish the extent to which the former can elucidate aspects of the latter, particularly the shift from Wittgensteinian ideas of "language games" to that of phrase regimen and its attending critique of anthropocentrism. The possibility of "*communication volontaire*" will be considered in various ways throughout both texts, Lyotard's own response in relation to his teachings at the university of Vincennes, and through art works which perform aspects of this voluntary process as a provocation to art criticism.

The Differend was the result of close to a decade's work on language, pragmatics, and judgement: a work which makes almost no reference to the postmodern, except in its publicity and subsequent reception. In the text of *The Differend* itself "postmodern" doesn't have its own entry in the otherwise comprehensive index; it appears, rather, only

4 Ashley Woodward, "Pragmatics and Affect in Art and Commentary," in *Traversals of Affect: On Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Julie Gaillard, Claire Nouvet, and Mark Stoholski (London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2016).

5 Jean-François Lyotard, "Entretien entre Jean-François Lyotard et Alain Pomarède," *Art Présent* 8 (Spring, 1979): 10.

6 Harold Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," in *The Communication of Ideas*, ed. Lyman Bryson (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948), 37.

as a secondary term under "Modern," which reads "Modern, postmodern" (and for this there are 6 entries—only two of which actually name the postmodern;⁷ therefore you could argue it sends us searching, for the postmodern in the modern). I would like to think of this as a ruse: a playful obfuscation of the term for which Lyotard was best known and yet it also demonstrates the important re-thinking of temporality which is a recurrent theme in *The Differend*: time is anachronic, or rather it doesn't accept a chronological sequence, particularly with the discussion of the now. The ordering of *The Differend* similarly resists a teleology; whilst the reader is told to read the paragraphs in sequence they frequently refer elsewhere, sending the reader back or forward to other paragraphs—the "pile of phrases" is ordered but uncertain about its order.⁸

The Differend is structured to challenge periodisation and to highlight simultaneity, slipping between one state and another: after/before: a before that can only be named as such after: Epilogue. Prologue. They both announce but neither is the subject of its announcement. Now that interrupted reading streams are the everyday of web-enabled experience, what might a return to the engineered uncertainty of the A. permit us to explore? Writing in the preface, Lyotard positions himself not as author but as "A."—both addressor and addressee of phrases—warning that the book is not of "our time" but "a little out of date?"⁹ Such self-doubt about the timeliness of the core text in an article intended for a special edition on Lyotard, aiming to highlight his relevance for the twenty-first century, might seem problematic. But to be not of "our time" refers to the contemporary preoccupation—then, as now—with "gaining time" in a drive for an efficiency of means, of communication, and to overthrow the presumption with regard to both the authorship of thoughts and the assumption that they be always driven forward toward a telos dominated by the goals of the economic genre. Lyotard's thought is prescient for the current concerns of the twenty-first century in the sense of our need to redress an obsession with authorship, with the dominance of human thought and time and the presumption that technological "advancement" is linear. "So, in the next century, there will be no more books. It will take too long to read, when success comes from gaining time."¹⁰

Communication volontaire

Academically, Lyotard was first and foremost a philosopher—that is what he studied and taught—but he was always reaching out into other areas, without the pretention that he

7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 207.

8 Lyotard, *Differend*, xv.

9 Lyotard, *Differend*, xiv.

10 Lyotard, *Differend*, xv.

could “do” those things, but neither with any unnecessary reverence for experts. This was how he approached art, writing, film-making, exhibition-making, music: with a respect for the material or matter he was working with, or responding to, without the need to feel constrained by conventions and historical framing. Some of this attitude comes from the particular context of his teaching in France, specifically at the experimental university centre of Vincennes, which opened in 1968 and whose Philosophy department he joined in the academic year 1970–1, the same time as Gilles Deleuze—they both continued to teach there until 1987. In the early days there was something quite specific about Vincennes because it took students without traditional qualifications and scheduled classes in the evenings and at weekends to make them more accessible to those who were working.¹¹ As a result, there was an eclectic mixture of students in terms of age and background, including many from overseas, particularly Latin America and Africa. There was a very particular teaching situation: no prior knowledge could be assumed, and the backgrounds and experiences of the students varied greatly. The courses in the Philosophy department were not regarded as sequential or progressive, there were no prerequisites, and everyone was taught together.¹² As a consequence, there had to be a process of negotiation which didn’t presume prior knowledge, and didn’t reserve some thinkers, whom some deemed more difficult, for higher-level courses.

Lyotard’s approach to teaching is described in the 1978 interview for the short-lived art magazine *Art présent*. The interviewer asks: “Can you conceive of a self-directed communication?” Yes, he replied, “that is what I do, three hours a week at Vincennes. They give me the floor and for three hours I declare everything I think.”¹³ But this is not a holding forth in some magisterial, masterful, way but rather an opening up. I think of it as closer to a Freudian free-floating attention where the connections are no longer those articulated by an individuated subject but rather an exploration together, in tandem; even though the floor might be predominantly given to Lyotard he is not speaking as a master, it is more of a divesting of the self—or more specifically the knowing self—through speech. While I am situating this example at Vincennes, a similar approach is described in his first major book *Discourse, Figure* which he worked through with students at the University of Paris, Nanterre, 1967–69. In the section “The line and the letter,” Lyotard describes the means by which a “discourse of signification” might be abandoned to allow the figural to emerge, and the slowness it requires:

11 François Dosse, *Vincennes: Heurs et malheurs de l’université de tous les possibles* (Paris: Payot, 2024), 40–46.

12 Université de Paris VIII, “Programme de l’université Paris VIII, Département de Philosophie, 1977–8,” <https://octaviana.fr/document/FVNP0243#?c=&m=&s=&cv=, 2>, accessed 13 September, 2024.

13 Lyotard, “*Art Présent*: Interview with Jean-François Lyotard by Alain Pomarède” trans. Kiff Bamford and Roger McKeon, in *Lyotard and Critical Practice*, ed. Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 160.

An almost endless effort is required for the eye to give in to form, to become receptive to the energy stored therein. Here one must keep at arm's length the presumptions, interpretations, and habits of *reading* that we contract with the predominant use of discourse. It is precisely of this skill that discourse-centred education and teaching deprives us: to remain open to the floating presence of the line (of value, of colour).¹⁴

One of Lyotard's students at Nanterre was the translator Roger McKeon, who edited the first collection of Lyotard's essays in English, *Driftworks*, and with whom I have been fortunate to work. When I made the mistake of thinking I could translate the 6000-word *Art présent* interview for a recent collection, he tidied things up, corrected my many mistakes and untangled some of the complications I had encountered. One such tangle was how to translate "*communication volontaire*"—we went between "voluntary" and "self-directed" communication, eventually deciding on the latter. But now I do like the sense of voluntarism that is carried in the French. Even though "voluntary communication" doesn't have any clear meaning in English, it does have a poetic sense: we can start to imagine what it *might* mean, to ask who or what is doing the volunteering, what is being offered up. "Self-directed" doesn't quite convey the idea of the speech driving the communication, something beyond the self, in the limited sense of well-articulated, well-conceived discourse. Looking back at our email exchange, I refer to having found a reference which led me to believe that *communication volontaire* was a "trendy" term from the 1970s for an unmediated, free-flowing communication, but the words used to describe this phenomenon then seems now to have passed away, along with the suggestion that we might value such an idea when everything is seemingly reduced to a cost / benefit analysis. As Lyotard described it: "They give me the floor and for three hours I declare everything I think."¹⁵ Of course, he wasn't just talking off the top of his head, preparatory notes exist for some of these sessions, and the night before would be devoted to intense preparation. But I am intrigued by this vignette from another world, another time, another set of priorities and values, which might still give us something to consider today when the instinctive reaction is to ask: why would we value this idea? In contrast to the lost desire "to remain open to the floating presence of the line"?¹⁶

14 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 212. Translation modified.

15 Lyotard, "Art Présent: Interview," 160.

16 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 212.

Uncertainty

When the interview was first published, it was prefaced by an epigraph taken from Lyotard's essay "Apathy in Theory,"¹⁷ a long assessment of the last two sections of Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this essay Lyotard highlights Freud's uncertainty; unable to really believe what he is putting forward, Freud finds himself working without clear evidence yet putting on paper a train of thought, feeling his way through material without a firm basis for where he might be going. To draw a connection between Lyotard's *communication volontaire* and Freud's free-floating attention is not therefore unreasonable and exemplifies what is most appealing about this unknowing approach: there is a listening out for, a paying attention to, that which isn't expected. There is something intensely challenging about Lyotard's refusal of that which is already said, the mundanity of platitudes characterised as the "*déjà dit*."¹⁸ It may be quite simplistic as a mantra: "to avoid the *déjà dit*," yet is profoundly difficult to live up to. When Lyotard is reading Freud, reading André Malraux, writing on Marcel Duchamp, on Michael Snow, on the work of the sixty or so artists whose work he responded to, it is always a listening to the work and the thought.

I read a letter by Lyotard replying to an editor in the United States; excited about the prospect of his forthcoming book, *The Differend*, they referred to it as "your book on Kant"—Lyotard corrects them: "It is *not about* Kant, it has been written *with* Kant."¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, the philosopher perhaps most associated with the Enlightenment and the age of reason, everything which would seem to be antithetical to a thinker associated with the postmodern. Such an assumption is refuted by the fact that Lyotard devoted more than a decade to thinking with Kant, including seminars which were disciplined examinations of Kant's texts. Some of these "*explication de texte*" were published as *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, in which he describes the approach and method taken as being one of paying attention to the "manner" of the thinking.²⁰ In the preface he writes that in retaining the heavy awkwardness of oral presentation the book is "something of an awkward homage, and a farewell, to this strange 'profession': one 'teaches philosophy' only by learning how to philosophize," before indicating that the "lessons try to isolate the analysis of a differend of feeling in Kant's text, which is also the analysis of a feeling of differend, and to connect this feeling with the transport that leads all thought (critical thought included) to its limits."²¹ This perhaps helps us to appreciate the disciplined

17 Lyotard, "Apathy in Theory," in *Lyotard and Critical Practice*, trans. Roger McKeon, ed. Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz, (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 141–50.

18 Lyotard, "The Other's Rights," in *Lyotard and Critical Practice*, trans. Chris Miller and Roger Smith, ed. Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2023), 79.

19 JFL 529, Fonds Lyotard, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet, Paris.

20 Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 6.

21 Lyotard, *Lessons*, x.

significance of the "*communication volontaire*" and the responsibility of being given the floor. We should also note the attention given to the *feeling* of a differend, the affect rising from the presence of different modes of thought struggling to emerge, phrases always in dispute. *The Differend* considers many examples of "differends," the most frequently discussed are presented in its preface and opening,²² but we will turn rather to a different modality of differend, to the "neglected, forgotten, or repressed possibilities" of each linkage and the continual dispute of phrases (not to be confused with language).²³ Before moving on we will return to the 1978 interview and Lyotard's answer in full:

A.P.: Can you conceive of a *communication volontaire*?

J.-F.L.: It seems to me that I am very much in favour of *communication volontaire* since that is what I do, three hours a week at Vincennes. They give me the floor and for three hours I declare everything I think. The important thing is that the conveyance of these messages, be they linguistic or plastic or whatever, is always accompanied by the language game clause. That is all I ask. In other words, basically, that the theorist or politician know that they speak like an artist, that they do it like an artist, that they do it like an artist. I don't know whether it's possible, but I believe that it's an issue which is now being raised.²⁴

The "language game clause" refers to Lyotard's concern for pragmatics following the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In this instance the acknowledgement asked from the "theorist or politician" is that they are aware of their own complicity in the act of creating, of exploring, as much as the artist, yet also of manipulating with an end goal in mind. Here is a useful place to begin to unpack the differences between *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend* on this point, with an initial though crude distinction being that the implication of "language games" is that the speaker or player is in control of the game, whereas in the terms of *The Differend* such a presumption of control is moved considerably, to the stakes already inherent in the universe of phrases and the regimen to which they belong or might be linked. Lyotard stopped using the term "language games" because it implies that we are in charge of the game, that we (the user, the speaker, the writer) are credited with too much agency, ignoring the fact that we are already linking on to another set of phrases which are already in play.

22 Lyotard, *Differend*, xi; §22.

23 Lyotard, *Differend*, §184.

24 Lyotard, "Art Présent: Interview," 160.

“Language games”

Lyotard makes frequent use of the term “language games” in *The Postmodern Condition*, referring directly to Wittgenstein’s usage in the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. Whilst Lyotard adapts the term to his own purpose rather than to make any direct comment on Wittgenstein, it is notable that the characteristics he highlights share much with Wittgenstein’s stated motivations. Games are not to be regarded as trivial but emphasize the integral role of the rules within which they are played. The example of chess given in *Philosophical Investigations* is repeated by Lyotard, for example, emphasizing the multiplicity of possible manoeuvres within the frame of established rules and the stakes at play. The collective term “game” does not seek an essential codification of what constitutes a game, however, the definition of which is both open-ended and continually “in play” without an identifiable essence. For Wittgenstein this is in deliberate opposition to those seeking solutions to the language problem through logic or the articulation of a closed system; for Lyotard the employment is more operational, to highlight the differing stakes at play in particular language games. Specifically, it is the dominance of the performative language game and its role within “the postmodern condition” that is Lyotard’s main focus, famously highlighting as its stakes the principal of performativity: maximizing output whilst minimising input. The consequences of the performative language game’s dominance for knowledge is one of Lyotard’s focuses in this ‘report on knowledge’, a report that was commissioned for the Universities Council of Quebec.²⁵

It is common to cite or refer to Lyotard’s own assessment of *The Postmodern Condition* as a being “a bit of a parody.”²⁶ Whilst this is in keeping with the eye-roll with which Lyotard met the continued emphasis placed on this one book at the expense of his other writings, it is also useful to acknowledge the game within which Lyotard was playing. Adopting the format, language, and tone of a report, it was, however, a report that he not only deemed himself inadequately equipped to write but a task which was in itself unachievable—as though it might be possible to know what the state of knowledge was—and as such lent itself to parody. As he describes in the final pages, his opposition to the search for consensus on such questions is to contest the presumption that consensus is either possible, or desirable as the goal of social interaction. In its place he describes the need to recognize the “heteromorphous” nature of language games as a first step toward “a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown.”²⁷

25 Lyotard, *Rapport sur les problèmes du savoir dans les sociétés industrielles les plus développées*. (Conseil des universités: Québec City, 1979).

26 Lyotard, “Interview with Alain Arias-Misson,” trans. Alain Arias-Misson, *Lotta Poetica* Series 3, no. 1, (January 1987): 82.

27 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 1984), 65; 67.

Wittgenstein's emphasis is on language in use, activated, especially through speech, and whilst many commentators observe the significant shift from the earlier to the later work, that is from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the teachings and writings which formed the *Philosophical Investigations*, it is the revision of the former in the latter through a cycle of revisiting which is also significant. It is significant particularly in the context of what draws Lyotard to Wittgenstein: the problem set up by the concluding statement of the *Tractatus* regarding what cannot be dealt with in relation to the terms of the book's own consideration of language, and therefore must be passed over in silence, is that to which both thinkers return in their respective reconsideration of the very need to address that silence. It is the context of the use of language that Wittgenstein returns to in the *Investigations*, the action which both establishes meaning and brings about the unfixed multiplicity of possibilities characteristic of that which he terms language-games. In the opening definition in §7 it is clear that the considerations are broad and contextual: "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'."²⁸ It is through everyday language, not the dry, specified terminology of logical positivism, that these games are played and through which they should, in turn, be questioned and discussed.

The weave of contextual situations within which language is activated is deliberately echoed by Lyotard when considering the role of language games in everyday inter-relations—those that form the social bond—going so far to write that it is through the "moves" that the social bond might be observed, that "the social bond is linguistic but is not woven into a single thread."²⁹ Language games and their different rules intersect with one another without a single metadiscourse of knowledge containing or legitimating their goals or validation. The extent to which the participation of the players within the game enables the modification of its rules varies between the different books under discussion here. In *Philosophical Investigations*, the analogy between games and language use is explored through reference to the different roles played by rules: some games involve making up the rules as we go along, others develop only over time and seem to maintain their boundaries. Yet even the latter must adapt, as the introduction of VR technologies in established sports have shown. It is this variation and adaptability of rules within games which leads Wittgenstein to reassert the analogy with language and emphasize scenarios where rules are modified, evolve through use, or deserve attention because they have become conventions: "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity."³⁰

For Lyotard, the social bond extends further, it seems, with the weave of which we are

28 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), §7.

29 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 40.

30 Wittgenstein, §129.

a part existing prior to our emergence as a “self”: thrown into a network of language games. We are named before our arrival and positioned within the social bond as language game, yet never “entirely powerless” in relation to the messages that situate us, whether as addressee, addressor, or referent.³¹ The sometimes crude sociological flavour of *The Postmodern Condition* means that Lyotard’s report rests largely on a consideration of two forms of knowledge: the diversity of language games operating within forms of narrative knowledge, in contrast to the self-legitimizing utterances of “performativity” (an extended but aligned use of J. L. Austin’s “performative utterance”), governed by its stakes of maximizing efficiency. It is the latter which has become dominant, according to Lyotard’s assessment of “the state of knowledge in the most economically developed countries”—the given remit of the report, and its original title—by means of creating its own criterion for validation regardless of the suitability of the language game at hand. The consequences of such dominance are outlined by Lyotard through several scenarios, many of the best-known relate to the results of technological investment as a means of establishing knowledge and asserting claims to truth. The example which perhaps best sums up the inadequacy of maximizing performativity as the dominant criterion is the declaration that the needs of the underprivileged within society are only considered in order to better regulate that which Lyotard refers to as “the system.” He refers to the dominance of “liberal, imperialist capitalism” at a point where, without any serious political challengers, it performs its own maintenance as its goal; the traditional political ideals of liberty, equality, or communality are abandoned unless they further the same goal of the economic genre i.e. sustaining the system itself.³² Synonymous with the stakes of performativity, the system seeks to exercise power as if it were the only legitimizing language game: “moves” (*coups* or “blows” in French) are needed by the system as a regulating mechanism.

Whilst Wittgenstein’s *Investigations* presupposes there are speaking individuals, Lyotard distances himself from the anthropocentrism of this presumption. In *The Differend* he moves away from the term “language game” referring rather to the “universe of phrases” which comprise phrases and phrase regimen, to emphasize the shift in emphasis away from restricted conceptions of language and communication. *The Differend* presupposes nothing but the “phrase.” Although the French term “*phrase*” is usually translated as “sentence” the wider conception of Lyotard’s usage is harnessed in the English translation by maintaining its English homonym “phrase.” When asked about the reason for shifting away from the terminology of language games, Lyotard explained as follows:

Briefly: I have schooled myself in the *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Investigations) in order to purge myself of the metaphysics

31 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 15.

32 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

of the subject (still present, in my opinion, in the *Tractatus*). Little in the way of thought, since Spinoza, the Sophists, Dōgen and Kant(!), has so... dispossessed me. Turning my culture into a desert made me fecund. Thereafter, it seemed to me that 'language games' implied players that made use of language like a toolbox, thus repeating the constant arrogance of Western anthropocentrism. 'Phrases' came to say that the so-called players were on the contrary situated by phrases in the universes those phrases present, 'before' any intention. Intention is itself a phrase, which doubles the phrase it inhabits, and which doubles or redoubles the addresser of that phrase.³³

The move away from "language games" as a term does not constitute a jettisoning of Wittgenstein in *The Differend*, but rather underlines a further reading, apparent in the approach taken to writing.

Style

The style of *The Differend*, described in the preface as a naïve attempt to attain a "degree zero style,"³⁴ avoids the explicative and the aphoristic in favour of a series of numbered paragraphs which begin thoughts and provoke the reader without giving conclusions. At times in conversation with one another, the remarks ask questions of previous statements and query the position given, a characteristic shared with that of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. One example of such a dialogic approach also highlights an important difference between the two thinkers: §123 of *The Differend* questions the extent to which the partitioning of the phrase into the four poles of addressee, addressor, sense, and referent, might still privilege human language. The response, introduced by a short dash (–) asks what non-human entities could *not* occupy one of the poles: the gesture made by a cat's tail is open to be linked onto by a phrase, as are various non-human entities highlighted in literary examples, by Proust, Butor, Simon, and Derrida. It is in the linking that the criterion remains in play: how to link is the pervasive question, as seen in §102: "It is necessary to make a linkage. This is not an obligation, a *Sollen* [an ought to], but a *Müssen* [a must]. To link is necessary, but how to link is not (No.135)."³⁵

The numbered paragraphs frequently suggest their own linkages elsewhere in the book, in an attempt to disrupt a simple sequential reading; the number indicated in brackets here sends us to section 135, which opens with a citation of the final statement from the

33 Lyotard with Georges Van Den Abbeele, "In reading your work ...," In *Jean-François Lyotard: The Interviews and Debates*, ed. Kiff Bamford (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 61.

34 Lyotard, *Differend*, xiv.

35 Lyotard, §102.

Tractatus, asking to whom the “must” of “we must pass over in silence” is addressed? To humans? Asking whether such a passing over [of what we cannot speak about] is in their power; while not phrased in “common idioms,” it has already been phrased, as feeling. The remark ends by sending the reader back to section 102, cited above, thereby invoking the endless loop, seen as a potential risk of the customary linkage of phrases. This looping back is not necessarily a repetition of the already said, however; at each occurrence a phrase arrives with its own set of possibilities and linkages. The technology of the book as a bound codex of printed pages, which can be thumbed and flicked between easily, is integral to the set-up described above; a digital platform does not perform this function with the same ease and the once-feted hyperlink feels more systematised and less aleatory. It is an irony worth noting that for many books of philosophy, their transfer to a digital platform happens most often via a direct or indirect replica of its printed version, whether via a PDF or one of several e-readers, neither of which facilitate the same ease of interaction; whilst academic journals, which have transferred more readily to electronic supports, still maintain and emphasise a linearity either through scrolling or “turning” page by page. Lyotard’s pessimism about the future of the book is tied less to its function as a technological apparatus than the extent to which reading as an activity fails to align with the economic imperative to harvest a reward from our investment in terms of time gained. In spite of the perverse relationship of the time Lyotard expended in writing *The Differend*, close to a decade, and its minimal return in the form of a comparatively svelte volume (288 pages in French; 208 in English), for the reader it necessitates that time be spent to follow the possible linkages, to respond to the A. and their questions and to circle back through the numbered paragraphs, or tackle the denser philosophical “notices” which interrupt these.

It is in this “style” that the enactment of a “*communication volontaire*” might be identified, no longer voiced live through the discourse of Lyotard’s seminars at Vincennes but within the reading of *The Differend* itself. The “voluntarism” of the communication at play within the text is not only removed from Lyotard as author but repositions him both as addressor and addressee—as A. With this loss of ordered sequencing, the style shifts further from Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, where it is still apparent that the philosopher is posing the questions, to an unanticipated combination of phrases. Wittgenstein draws our attention to the “simplicity and familiarity” which shields hidden assumptions³⁶ whilst *The Differend* invokes a circularity which wears them away through its refusal to present and defend a thesis, tasking the reader rather to work through the uncertainty. This also encourages a coming back to earlier work without prejudice, without looking either for origins or to establish a trajectory but to cycle through the writings, thrown like a bottle into the sea, as Lyotard said in the series of conversations from 1978 published as *Just Gaming*³⁷—a title

36 Wittgenstein, §129.

37 Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzick (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 9.

whose translation emphasizes the playful aspect of language games, but risks obscuring the question of justice which is emphasized in the French title: *Au Juste*. The question of temporal positionality is important in these exchanges where Lyotard highlights the difficulty of assuming that he is capable of answering on behalf of books written previously. In the course of their conversations, Lyotard and his interlocutor Jean-Loup Thébaud will make Lyotard change his opinion, he will revise his position by listening to the reader of the books under discussion. Lyotard describes this as being "un-mastered."

It is in this spirit that I return again to the section of *Discourse, Figure* titled "the line and the letter" which plays with the undetermined potential of the line, poised as if "on the blade of a knife" between the form of a letter's signification and the line of expression.³⁸ Here Lyotard is reminding us that "reading is hearing, not seeing," audible not visible and that the figural requires a slowing down, if we are not to be whisked away by the presumptions of signification.³⁹

Whether connoted or not, intonation fails to translate into punctuation. This explains why text allows for interpretation in the sense of an actor or an orator: through intonation, interpretation will bring out a text's expressive quality. On the contrary, punctuation always indicates significative intonation, and, in particular, the intervals. And it is often through the absence or displacement of precisely this punctuation that expression will erupt in the order of signification and communication. Aristotle confesses that he dare not punctuate Heraclitus's texts out of fear of making them say what they do not mean — proof that polysemy arises from the absence of indications regarding pauses.⁴⁰

With this quotation we are entering into the middle of an argument about the role of punctuation and intonation in relation to signification or expression, which I want to consider in the light of Lyotard's turn away from Wittgenstein's language game as being language in use, activated by the players. Rather, for Lyotard the phrase is there already and to emphasise the role of such use or activation is "anthropological empiricism."⁴¹ Can we conceive, then, of these intervals, these pauses, as phrases?

The observation regarding Aristotle's hesitancy over Heraclitus from Book III section 5 of *Poetics*, strikes a chord when revisiting this discussion in the light of current fears regarding the use of AI technologies and their impact on creativity, whether in writing, illustration, or content creation for screen-based media. The call for papers for this

38 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 209.

39 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* 211.

40 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* 209. Translation modified.

41 Wittgenstein, §122.

Lyotard anniversary special issue of *Technophany* asks how might Lyotard's thinking help us address the crises of the present. A recent article in this journal on ChatGPT and Hans-Georg Gadamer refreshingly explained why that particular thinker was used in relation to the issues regarding language, with an open explanation that whilst Wittgenstein might have been an obvious choice, his philosophy was too "opaque," and Jacques Derrida, the second choice, too concerned with "what *cannot* be known in dialogue."⁴² In this declaration an unintended chink of light illuminates the question of why I have been drawn back to the shifting relationship between Lyotard and Wittgenstein's language games, and why Lyotard is important in considering the impact of technological developments: because he asks us to pay attention to how we link, drawing our attention to the risks of the normative genre by which the decision how to link is already given. Gadamer's philosophy gives the author the opportunity to consider the shortcomings of large language models in depth but simultaneously limits the debate. In the declared decision not to engage with Wittgenstein or Derrida, the discussion leaves behind those aspects of language—the expressive, the ethical—that the *Tractatus* had passed over in silence and which we have been discussing above in relation to language games and Lyotard's embrace of the non-human "speaker" within the pragmatics of communication.

Medusa

There is a segue into addressing these questions which comes via the exhibition which Lyotard co-curated at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1985, *Les Immatériaux*. It was an overwhelmingly ambitious exhibition of art, science and technology which adopted the term "postmodern" in its publicity even though Lyotard was wanting to move away from that terminology, having just published *The Differend*. The uneasy tension between the conception of "language games" in *The Postmodern Condition*, with its connotations of players operating with language taken from Wittgenstein, and the explicitly anti-anthropological philosophy of phrases in *The Differend*, which states categorically that "You don't play around with language,"⁴³ was being played out in the exhibition. Visitors were often overwhelmed sensorially by this excessive exhibition of sixty sites arranged in a labyrinthine configuration. There was no single route through the exhibits which included interactive and immersive elements: every visitor was obliged to wear a head set into which were broadcast sounds, music, and readings that augmented but never explained the visual, tactile and olfactory experiences. Reactions included confusion, frustration, and elation, but often ambivalence, unsure how to react as the set-up precluded anticipated models of encounter—the feeling of a differend, as phrases dispute to be heard, to be linked onto otherwise.

42 Robert Hornby, "Is Generative AI Ready to Join the Conversation That We Are? Gadamer's Hermeneutics After ChatGPT," *Technophany, A Journal for Philosophy and Technology* 3, no. 1 (2024): 4.

43 Lyotard, *Differend*, § 188.

There is a sculpture exhibited in *Les Immatériaux* which appears to defy documentation yet, I would argue, gives us an important insight into one aspect of the *communication volontaire* that I am chasing in the present article and its relevance for current approaches to art and technology. Through assiduous efforts by archivists, historians, and technicians it has been possible to create a virtual recreation of the exhibition which brings aspects of the visual and sonic together. Although the corporeal is firmly placed outside the experience, whether one uses a VR headset or a static monitor, it allows a different way of experiencing the archival material and the exhibition's trace.⁴⁴ Under the rubric of the site named *Peinture Luminescente* (Luminescent painting) but installed in an unnamed interstitial space between two adjacent sites, sits *La Méduse* (*Medusa*) by the Greek-born artist known as Takis.⁴⁵ Created in 1980 and donated to the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in the same year, it is comprised of a large blown glass container filled with mercury vapour, whose glow dominates the darkened space. The neon light makes both the space and the attending apparatus glow with an incandescent light reminiscent of both horror films and the eerily unnatural bioluminescence of deep-sea creatures. In French *Méduse* can refer both to the mythological being Medusa and to jellyfish, which makes a felicitous connection to the aerobes of Anicka Yi's installation described in the opening to the article. Jutting out from the base of the central bulb-shaped centrepiece are several "arms" blown from the same glass; here the colour is at its most intense and from which cables extend into its visible workings beneath. Surrounding this centrepiece are three additional elements, described by commentators as sentinels as they are situated between the viewer and the main figurehead.

Here a most curious element is at play. Using simple electromagnetic resistance, three spherical objects swing gently from cables fixed to the exhibition's ceiling. Their slow swing is jolted at unexpected turns through proximity to one of three magnets mounted on low stands in a semi-circle surrounding the main "figure." The play is continuous: the neon light emits its incandescent light in waves of artificial blue whilst the dance of its attendants—and it is hard not to return to anthropological language given the set-up—continue in their gently jolting circuit. A low, pervasive hum is emitted by the installation, a sound absent from the virtual reality soundscape, and perhaps also to the visitors when wearing their prescribed headphones. Electronic noises are a frequent element of many Takis' works featuring electromagnetics, including the series *Ballets magnétiques* and *Télélumière*, which Takis worked on throughout the 1960s and 70s, using mercury arc valves similar to those used in *La Méduse*. Archival photographs show a visitor placing a hand above one of the spheres, able to come into closer proximity with the structures than

44 Beyond Matter, "The virtual exhibition of Les Immatériaux": accessed September 13, 2024, <https://lesimmatériaux.beyondbeyondmatter.eu>.

45 Takis (Panayotis Vassilakis 1925-2019), *La Méduse*, 1980, work in 3-dimensions, installation with electro-magnetic light with mercury-vapour lamp, 220 x 60 x 40 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris.

would be the case today and in a gesture that eludes the virtual recreation.

The description of *La Méduse* above is a non-scientific, aesthetic response to the performance of materials in action and the mystical draw of electricity when its effects and manipulation are made both visible and audible. Placed at one of the entry points to the largest site of the exhibition filled with computer monitors, it might also have played a historical bridge for viewers, whether associating *La Méduse* with outdated technology, or the special effects of horror film. What the documentation does not include is any indication of the installation's sound or the movement of its elements. To gain a sense of the drama its material constituents are playing out one has to resort to demonstrations of its principal technological component, the mercury arc valve or rectifier. These were widely in use in the 1950s–70s to transform high voltage alternating currents to direct current for use by equipment such as electric cranes, trams and trains, including the New York Subway. The process seen in the large, fragile vacuum glass bulb is activated by exciting a small pool of mercury sitting in the base of the rectifying bulb, ionising then vaporizing the mercury creates an arc to one or several anodes, rectifying the current and producing an ethereal light. *La Méduse* uses a six-phase rectifier with six glass arms. The intensity of the blue mercury vapour is greatest in the arms but pulses and fluctuates constantly, as does the excited pool of mercury whose surface shines and stridulates, all the while condensation forms on the upper surface of the bulb and returns to its source in a cycle.

In Takis's work, everyday forces are brought to our attention through the assembling of technological equipment which once had an everyday function but was for the most part hidden: "I follow the clues provided by the matter and don't try to dominate it [...] It's only about revealing, in one way or another, the sensory vibrations or the interlacing potentials for energy that exist in the universe."⁴⁶ Takis' work does not bind us to the scientific process in a didactic way but invites the visitor to experience what is occurring without explanation, in a similar manner to that of Anicka Yi's *In Love with the World*. In each example the phrases offered by the technologies accompany the question: from where do they arrive, who is the addressor of these curious, floating dirigibles, of the intense luminescent forms? What is the "maternity" of these communications,⁴⁷ these phrases, and how should we link onto them?

One of the sections of *Philosophical Investigations* which Lyotard quotes at length in

46 Takis, "A conversation with Takis by Maïten Boussiet (1990)" in Takis, trans. Alayne Pullen, ed. Guy Brett and Michael Wellen (London: Tate Publishing, 2019), 115.

47 "Maternity" or "*Maternité*" was the title of one of the five strands of the exhibition *Les Im-matériaux*, to which Lyotard loosely aligned the question "what is the function of the sender of the message?" Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, "The Exhibition Guide" (*Petit Journal*) trans. Robin Mackay (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2022), 1, https://monoskop.org/images/b/bf/Les_Im-materiaux_PetitJournal_EN_LD.pdf

The Postmodern Condition relates to the layers of language in use, living alongside and enmeshed in one another like "an ancient city" whose old streets are bordered or cut through by the new.⁴⁸ For Wittgenstein this illustrates the incompleteness of language and its continual evolution with "the symbolism of chemicals and the notation of the infinitesimal calculus." To this Lyotard adds "machine languages," "new systems of musical notation," "the language of the genetic code and so on," emphasizing not only the growth of new forms of language but also the expansion of our understanding of that which is beyond the normal category of language.⁴⁹ As highlighted above, for Lyotard the turn to phrases in *The Differend* maintains this plurality whilst de-centring the role of the human and exploring the importance of that which does not fit forms of articulated speech. The luminous gas of *La Méduse* and the quiet flight of the aerobes in the Tate's turbine hall might also fit within the pragmatic universe of phrases, taking the place of addressee, addressor, referent, or sense, but without our necessarily being able to determine their address, or to articulate their position in linking to such a phrase. When Lyotard speaks of the *communication volontaire*, such an indeterminate positionality is being listened to—that there might be something to which we can respond but cannot give voice within existing strictures of language. Hence the importance of listening for Lyotard, an open receptivity encapsulated by the unconventional assertion that "reading is hearing, not seeing," riffing perhaps on the aphoristic remark of Marcel Duchamp "[see] one can look at seeing: one can't hear hearing."⁵⁰ We are reminded that something else is possible aside from that determined by the seemingly overwhelming dominance of certain genres, the cognitive or economic.

An installation is a phrase; how it operates is undetermined until it is linked onto. Anicka Yi's commission for the Tate turbine hall, the Hyundai Commission—so named after its commercial sponsor—was delayed because of the intervention of Covid-19. The impact of its olfactory element, devised to infer the deep geological history of site, was minimised due to the obligatory wearing of face masks, yet as Yi readily reflects in that hesitant, exploratory manner that sometimes gets captured through the informality of a podcast, "I've been thinking about the importance of non-living viruses and the need for our way of thinking of life in a different way [...] especially in the West, where we are very attached to this notion of an individuated living entity. And I think this virus is teaching us that that doesn't really exist. And we have to let go of that way of thinking...."⁵¹ Yi is voicing

48 Wittgenstein, *Investigations* § 18; Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 40.

49 Wittgenstein, §18; Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 41.

50 This handwritten note was reproduced in facsimile 320 times as part of the box of notes for *The Large Glass* (1915-23) known as *The Green Box* (1934), both works also share the longer title *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* [*La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*]. Translation by George Heard Hamilton.

51 Anicka Yi and Elvia Wilk, "Anicka Yi on nonhuman ecologies and embodied machines," *e-flux* podcast, April 7, 2020, 37:27-37:47, <https://www.e-flux.com/podcasts/407863/anicka-yi-on-nonhuman-ecologies-and-embodied-machines>

the necessary but sometimes difficult admission that to link is not a human prerogative; neither is it the prerogative of language. As Lyotard writes, in the beginning there was not the word, not doubt, but phrases: “No phrase is the first,”⁵² each carrying with it a multitude of possible linkages—involuntary phrases for the 21st Century.

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52 Lyotard, *The Differend*, §184.

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