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## The Boundaries of the Book: Material and Immatériaux

Kiff Bamford

**Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition, by Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Berlin: Sternberg, 2019, 252 pp., 4 b. & w. illus., paperback, £16.00**

**Material Noise: Reading Theory as Artist's Book, by Anne M. Royston, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019, 224 pp., 16 b. & w. illus., hardback, £28.00**

A book that considers the philosophical implications of *Les Immatériaux* has been needed for some time. The show was co-curated by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and design theorist Thierry Chaput and is now recognized as having made a significant contribution to the history of exhibitions, not least for its incorporation of burgeoning new media, industrial technologies and experimental forms of presentation. However, I am not sure that *Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition* does justice to 'Lyotard's exhibition' (14) or even that it is right to regard the exhibition as belonging to Lyotard, certainly not as the 'culmination and materialization of a life's work' as the blurb on the back cover of Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olov Wallenstein's book would claim.

*Les Immatériaux* filled the top floor of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris for sixteen weeks in 1985. Over three years in preparation, it was the most ambitious and expensive exhibition undertaken by the then still-new flagship cultural centre. It was not an art exhibition in the traditional sense; only a small number of the exhibits were considered artworks, but the result of ambitious interdisciplinary planning by the Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI) working with a large number of industrial collaborators. The show drew on recent developments in art, science and technology and its bewildering array of sixty sites overwhelmed visitors through sensory stimulation and simulation. In this way it both mirrored and anticipated our contemporary world of complexification.

Lyotard was not involved from the outset but was invited to join the team as co-curator by Paul Blanquart, director of the CCI, at a point where many exhibits and

themes were already established. Lyotard's contribution from the middle of 1983 was significant, however, and whilst the collaborative nature should not be overlooked, it is possible to discern his influence on many areas of the exhibition. Birnbaum and Wallenstein sideline the collaborative nature of the enterprise but take an ambitious approach in considering *Les Immatériaux* within the wider scope of Lyotard's philosophical work, which is the book's main strength. Their proposal is to place the exhibition not in relation to Lyotard's best-known writings of the time – *The Differend* (1983) or *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) – but rather in relation to his earlier work, including *Discourse, Figure* (1971), and work still to come, written in the last decade of his life before 1998. There is much to applaud about this approach as it reorients the focus from the more commonly known postmodern to the figural. Less well known in the anglophone world, this aspect of Lyotard's thinking deserves the reappraisal which is slowly emerging, thanks in part to the late translation of *Discourse, Figure*, published in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

Birnbaum and Wallenstein give a clear outline of their approach in the introduction to *Spacing Philosophy*, highlighting Lyotard's own frustration with the format of *Discourse, Figure* as a book which is unable fully to enact its own proposition that figure and discourse are mutually imbricated, yet exist in constant tension.

The need to go beyond the book does not imply a rejection of thought, as he would sometimes appear to be saying in the following years, but a way to pursue it with other means – which is a proposal, we suggest, that could only come to fruition in 'Les Immatériaux'. (21–22)

Here lies one of the main problems with Birnbaum and Wallenstein's book: the idea of the exhibition as 'fruition' evokes the authors' residual desire to systematize Lyotard's thought. They do this either by attempting to incorporate *Les Immatériaux* into a linear history of exhibitions, as in their chapter one, or by trying to unify Lyotard's thought as the search for a theory. The latter is exemplified by the connection seen between the 'matrix' of *Discourse, Figure* (*figure-matrice*) and one of the five 'pathways' within the exhibition, named 'matrix' (*matrice*). This is a potentially rich seam of investigation but it is neither sufficiently worked through nor divested of the apparent desire to make sense of the exhibition in a reductive manner. Similarly, the fourth chapter, dedicated to the exhibition itself,

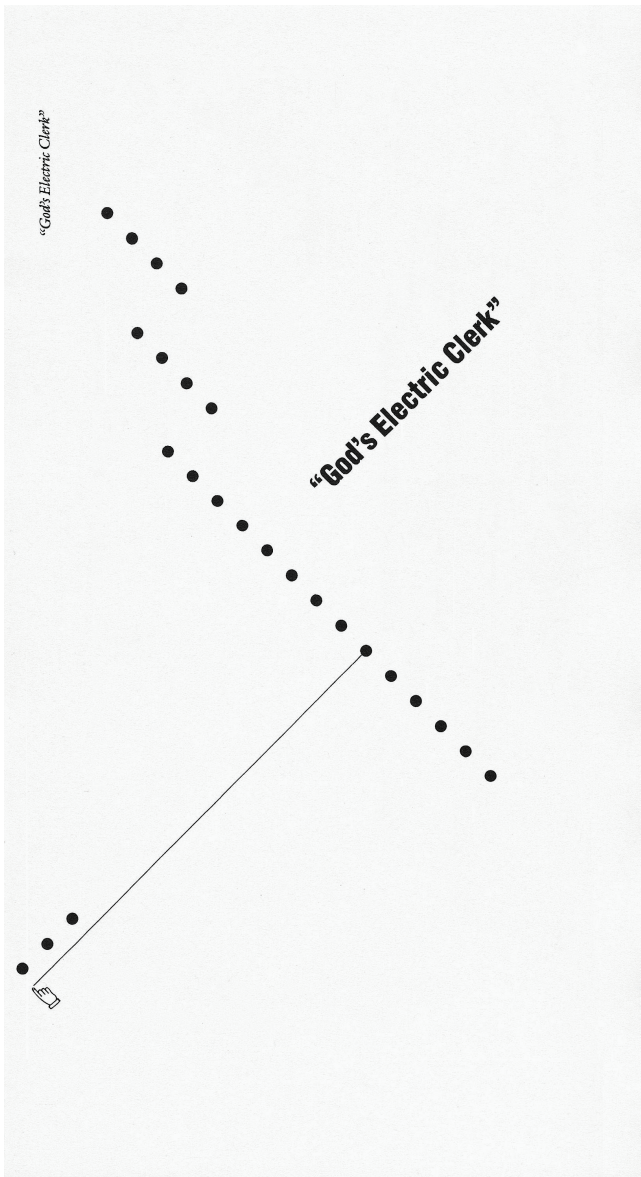
leads us through a brief account of all sixty sites in a description redolent of a surveyor's overview, made possible only through the plan of the exhibition – helpfully reprinted on the inside of the dust jacket – which fails to evoke possible audience experiences.

Visitors to *Les Immatériaux* were unlikely to encounter all the sites in one visit and could not follow the pathways as described by Birnbaum and Wallenstein. On the ground, these pathways merged and required switchbacks to create the labyrinthine effect often evoked by commentators: lost in the semi-darkness and cut off aurally from their surroundings by

**I Avital Ronell (author) and Richard Eckersley (designer), interior spread from *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, 1989, pages 152–153. Print on paper, 466 pages, 14 × 2.5 × 25.4 cm. Photo: Courtesy of University of Nebraska Press.**

obligatory auditory headsets. The authors refer to such disorientating effects but neither describe nor attempt to evoke this important aspect of the exhibition's *mise-en-scène*, carefully created by the designer Philippe Délis. Very few visitors' experiences are referred to by Birnbaum and Wallenstein, nor do they highlight or address the difficulty of analysing the exhibition after the fact.

Like the show itself, this is a book that provokes ambivalence. I welcome its ambition but am frustrated by its failure to work through the proposed approach in a way that really considers the philosophical implication of the exhibition for either Lyotard's philosophy or, more broadly, for the philosophy of exhibitions. The philosophical background given by reference to Theodor Adorno and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in chapter three



Why the US should have spoken more directly. It is not as though there were a  
 non-substitutable totality of fixed telephone – the virgin Watson Bell and  
 their divine child (one major work on telephony avows the child “God’s  
 Electric Clerk”).<sup>114</sup> It works differently here, somewhat along the lines in the  
 careful manual of engineering and science, under the section “Annunciations  
 or Drops.” We are not plugging one completion proposition into the key  
 to telephony, though the very notion of invention always returns to a meta-  
 physics of the subject: connect, connecting, mastering and mastered. In “An-  
 nunciations or Drops” one discovers that “the main purpose of pluggs, jacks,  
 and keys in the early switchboards was to provide the mechanism for estab-  
 lishing talking paths between calling and called subscribers and between sub-  
 scribers and operators. It is however, they also formed part of the complex system  
 which conveyed the various signals required for controlling the switching  
 functions. Perhaps the most important single device used in early boards for  
 signalling was the annunciations or drops. These devices came into existence  
 long before telephony, being used in large call bell systems to indicate the par-  
 ticular source of the call.<sup>115</sup> We are trying to establish an expedient talking  
 path between the legacy of an acknowledged history and its secret account for  
 within the discourse of knowledge, some expressed in terms of a sack of form  
 of expression, as if an original mouthpiece had been covered by the film of a  
 red house where that has since forgotten its source. “Bell System?” by now has  
 come to signify something utterly foreign to the fragile extensibility of its na-  
 tive: poetry. The currency of the electric sacred makes us question what it  
 means to contain the lightning flash of sacred electric genius, to contain its ca-  
 its self-dissolution into predictable and

is useful but not really followed through. The role of the figural and its correlation to the late Lyotard of infancy, affect and anamnesis is tantalizing, as is the brief suggestion of an unrealized further exhibition project: 'Résistances' (19).<sup>2</sup> The physical organization of the book also frustrates in an unintentional way: the type is so small and the footnotes even smaller, almost requiring the old technology of a magnifying glass to make them readable. The illustrations are very limited – only four from one of the most copiously documented of exhibitions (the Pompidou holds in excess of 900 images) and there is nothing of the interactivity which the exhibition sought to embrace. Given that Birnbaum and Wallenstein often refer to the exhibition as exploring the 'Boundaries of the Book', the title of their third chapter, it is particularly unfortunate and surprising that they neglect to refer to the experimental writing project central to the exhibition. Titled 'Épreuves d'écriture' (Writing proofs), it involved twenty-six authors, artists, scientists and philosophers who accepted the installation of a networked computer into their homes in late 1984 in order to respond to fifty key words. These were chosen by Lyotard to relate to key themes of the exhibition and participants were also required to respond to each other. The results were incorporated into the exhibition both on-site and off-site, on-screen (via the online Minitel system) and in printed form (as the first volume of the exhibition's unusual catalogue), about which Lyotard enthused: 'It is probably a "book" that elicits a kind of beauty, as it were [...]. For me it is a great book.'<sup>3</sup> *Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of an Exhibition* is a great idea. It asks questions of where *Les Immatériaux* sits in relation to the international industrial expositions of the late nineteenth century and how it might lead us to other aspects of Lyotard's work, eliciting aspects that might invoke a kind of beauty, but it is not the great book it could have been.

*Material Noise: Reading Theory as Artist's Book* takes on a similar challenge to that of Lyotard, Chaput and the team at the Pompidou: how to approach questions of materiality and immateriality through the means of presentation. Whereas *Les Immatériaux* took place as a spatial, aural, multi-sensory experience of disorientation, with traditional printed forms pushed to a marginal role, Royston's focus is on the matter of the book in hand. That is not to say her choice of books is not similarly disorientating or experimental, especially when the works escape out of the codex to the digital realm. Her intention is clear; to draw our attention to the physical processes at work in these volumes: their

type, its arrangement, the stock, its show-through, the sequence and format. Royston pays detailed attention to the material aspects of the books under consideration, following what she terms 'artistic arguments' (4) by drawing on 'nonsemantic' elements and assemblages which form 'materially immersive reading experiences' (2).<sup>4</sup> Georges Bataille, Jacques Derrida, Avital Ronell, Johanna Drucker; the references are largely familiar figures from the history of the artistic avant-garde in France and North America and their philosophical and literary counterparts, yet Royston's story is excitingly told and her approach is true to her word – whispered with pursed lips, blowing air between the quires to make them sing.

There is an underlying theme of presence and loss which runs throughout the book; it is one of the many subtle connections which help to weave a narrative from sources and approaches often treated as distinct from one another. Loss is in the theme of some of the books under discussion – Derrida's *Glas* (1986 [1974]) famously echoes the 'knell' of its titular theme recalling the wake of James Joyce's *Finnegan*, and a present absence runs throughout the book in the gutters between its two main columns of text. But loss also returns as that inescapable element in electronic technology where, Royston notes, entropic degradation is unavoidable – even pixels are in a slow process of decay. Equally, the unwanted presence of noise in the ideal system of communication – introduced by Claude Shannon in his model of 1948 and reprinted on page 103 – is also at the heart of the book, as indicated in the title *Material Noise*. If communication is to be honoured for the clarity of its conveyance of information, the interruptions of 'noise' are unwanted. Anything which distracts from the idealized purity of transmission is at issue: the touch of the paper, the jolt of the eye, the play of possible plural meanings, the dissonance of visual and verbal incongruities, the judder, the stutter or, God forbid, desire. These are the aspects which fire Royston's 'artistic argument', allowing her to approach her material with a new set of priorities.

The political implications of this method are perhaps dealt with most clearly in her discussion of Ronell's technological feminism, as presented in *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (1989). Ronell critiques the 'black box' mentality presented by Shannon's model, drawing on Friedrich Kittler's observation that military dominance within technological spheres results in a trickle down of technological forms to entertainment. The result is a social situation imbued with technological assumptions

A beautiful  
 on view  
 a very small mind  
 all  
 confused  
 an almost imperceptible  
 moment  
 of time.

conform to  
 these principles,

Unity and a sense  
 of the whole  
 is lost.

It takes force to not straighten the system having its way through us  
 pull a hair too late for hormones their wide sexy appetite  
 straight and eliminate nature's options.

**2 Johanna Drucker, 'Noise', *Stochastic Poetics*, 2012, page 45. Letterpress on mohawk superfine paper, 56 pages, sewn in etched aluminium covers, 12¾ × 9¾ inches, inconsistent edition of 39. © Johanna Drucker. Photo: Courtesy of the Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, University at Buffalo, The State University of New York.**

prioritized by the military-industrial complex. The role of *The Telephone Book* in showing what escapes from such 'black box' mentality comes not only through its text but equally through its presentation, the result of a close collaboration with Richard Eckersley (plate 1). Eckersley's role as in-house designer for the University of Nebraska Press for over two decades (1981–2006) is well known within type and graphic design history but often gets scant mention when the books he designed are under discussion for their semantic content. This is strange, Royston would argue, given the essential role that the non-semantic play in many of these books, especially those featured here: the English translation of *Glas* (including its companion *Glassary*) and *The Telephone Book*. Royston redresses the balance by focusing on these books in her second and third chapters (*Glas* and *The Telephone Book*), in a manner that glosses the philosophical concerns of the writing whilst paying significant attention to material noise.

Royston also highlights the important role of communal enterprise in the production of these works, describing *The Telephone Book* as 'a network of lines converging' (86). The potential of certain publications as a nexus for activity and pursuit of 'nonknowledge' is clearly foregrounded in her first chapter, which focuses on the three publications collectively referred to as the *Encyclopedia Da Costa*.<sup>5</sup> First published anonymously in 1947 by figures linked to the secretive Acéphale group, the involvement of Marcel Duchamp as designer and contributor, and Bataille as contributor, were hidden until 1959 and 1995 respectively (36–37). Royston's retelling links these faux encyclopedia fascicles back to Stéphane Mallarmé, with a beautiful account of the book as a 'white butterfly' (48), as well as to the viscerality of Bataille's *Inner Experience* (1943) and his distasteful response to Jean-Paul Sartre in *Literature and Evil* (1957). The analysis of how the assembled elements of the encyclopedia work with their found and parodied sources is given in detail. Whilst I longed for further images, those that are given certainly work to entice the reader to seek out further nourishment. And with nourishment comes waste, the life source of Bataille's writing, in a clear parallel with the attention to material noise that buzzes throughout Royston's book.

The connections between and through the works discussed come easily: the careful setting up of the encyclopedic format in *Da Costa* enables Royston to move within her subsequent chapter on Derrida's *Glas* to the hidden Bataille, rarely noted directly but hovering behind Derrida in Jean Genet's base references, like a fly buzzing over shit. The unseemly, jerky flight path of a fly trapped against a window mimics the reader's eye when presented with the unfamiliar layout of *Glas*. Two columns of unequal size tell of Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel, the grand author of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, presented on the left, and – set on the right in a larger font – the not-so-grand ex-prisoner and excremental aficionado Jean Genet. Derrida's insertions come in the middle – the 'judases' as he named them – and additional notes cut-in as invading marginalia. As Royston describes it: '*Glas* charts a bastard course, discussing the sign without accepting or rejecting the signification, opting instead to keep it continually in question' (69). 'We read one and the other column in fits and starts, unable to read the whole page at once' (71).

It is tempting to feast on the excess delivered within the quadratic format of *Glas*: the 24 × 24 cm of the French Galilée edition, or the 10 × 10 inch of the otherwise painstakingly replicated English translation (both typeset without computer assistance). But enjoyment is barred by another, less forgiving, unknown. The assistance of an online repository, the legality of which may lean more to Genet than Hegel, allows one to see the layouts in English, at least, but not to touch, nor to turn the carefully crafted pages. Consequently, the columns of text, once broken at every page end, are now reunited in the scroll of a continuous pdf – the codex has been returned to the volumn of its predecessor.<sup>6</sup> Royston touches on such digital concessions granted to increase accessibility in her conclusion. She describes how limited-edition artist's books by Susan Howe and Johanna Drucker are found catalogued differently in the library of the University at Buffalo, as art object or in the rare book collection. Both also have an alternative presence, sacrificing the materiality of their letterpressed form either as online pdfs, in the case of Drucker's *Stochastic Poetics* (plate 2), or as a trade edition for Howe's *Tom Tit Tot*, which was a collaboration with her daughter Rebecca H. Quaytman.<sup>7</sup> In both cases the artists' projects are supplemented with readings and performances, literally insisting on the inclusion of noise (155).

With a certain melancholy, in chapter four Royston notes the fate of early attempts to take theory online. This includes sites such as *The Hydra* that now languish in HTML 3, whilst the ‘electronic artist book’ by Mark C. Taylor, José Marquez and collaborators – set in a Las Vegas buried under sand – is now, itself, buried by obsolete technology.<sup>8</sup> *The Réal Las Vegas*, NV is neither collected nor cared for, a victim of rapidly outdated technology: the still partly active microsite includes a ‘buy now’ hyperlink which does indeed lead to Amazon and its sale as a used CD-ROM (for use with Windows 95).<sup>9</sup>

The issues of reproduction and adequate representation must have concerned Royston during the preparation of *Material Noise*: images are limited to sixteen and are of the inevitably reduced quality dictated by uncoated paper. As regards nonsemantics, however, it would appear at first that a decision has been made to present the book as ‘packaged for its semantic content’ (9), rather than employing the arsenal of material possibilities discussed in the works of others.<sup>10</sup> This initial impression is deceptive, however: the nonsemantic is not bound exclusively to the materiality of the book but is carried also in the poetic noise, which Royston deliberately and effectively employs. The inability to divorce semantic from nonsemantic aspects of the book echoes the entwined relationship of discourse and figure in Lyotard’s work: it is the figural (which includes the unsystematic, poetic and unconscious workings of desire) on which discourse relies. Similarly, Lyotard’s *immatériaux* are not non-materials but rather evoke the effects of new materials, synthetic, industrially developed smells, tastes and fabrics. And they raise awareness of that which human senses cannot recognize without technological assistance – deep space, the microscopic, particles, quanta and their destabilizing uncertainty – which, in turn, draw attention to the unseen effects of sound, touch and sensation which have always accompanied the visual experiences of embodied beings.<sup>11</sup> The noise which preoccupies Royston in her ‘artistic arguments’ share some characteristics of the *immatériaux*: that which is present but not attended to, except in specific circumstances. In *Material Noise* it is not simply the physical materiality of books’ technologies of discourse which is the concern, but what that ignites in the realm usually reserved for theory. Hence the poetic style brought to her telling of these stories offers its own materiality because it exists within the constraints of a book that would at first seem to be ‘packaged for its semantic content’ but which draws from within and beyond those uncertain boundaries.

## Notes

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Anthony Hudek and Mary Lydon, Minneapolis, 2011 [1971].
- 2 The idea of a subsequent exhibition was discussed at a seminar attended by the artist Philippe Parreno. It is his account and remembrance of this proposal which has made the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist speculate about realizing such a project since at least 2008.
- 3 Jean-François Lyotard quoted in Anthony Hudek, ‘From Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of *Les Immatériaux*’, in *30 Years after Les Immatériaux: Art, Science, and Theory*, ed. Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann, Lüneburg, 2015, 76–77.
- 4 Royston’s use of ‘nonsemantic’ is derived from Charles Bernstein, ‘Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word’, in *My Way: Speeches and Poems*, Chicago, 2010, 279–301.
- 5 For Georges Bataille’s term ‘nonknowledge’ (*non-savoir*) see *Inner Experience*, trans. Stuart Kendall, Albany, NY, 2014 [1943], 57.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand, Lincoln, NE, 1986 [1974]. Made available as a pdf online, as out of print: [https://monoskop.org/images/d/d5/Derrida\\_Jacques\\_Glas\\_1986.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/d/d5/Derrida_Jacques_Glas_1986.pdf); accessed 3 May 2020.
- 7 Johanna Drucker, *Stochastic Poetics*, New York, 2012. Made available as a pdf online by the author: [https://ubutext.memoryoftheworld.org/vp/drucker\\_stochastic\\_poetics\\_2012.pdf](https://ubutext.memoryoftheworld.org/vp/drucker_stochastic_poetics_2012.pdf); accessed 3 May 2020.
- 8 *The Hydra* was established in 1994 by Peter Krapp as part of a wider network of media theory resources; it remains accessible but has deliberately not been updated since 2009. [Hydra.humanities.uci.edu](http://Hydra.humanities.uci.edu); accessed 3 May 2020.
- 9 <https://web.williams.edu/wcma/motelreal/index-2.html>; accessed 3 May 2020.
- 10 Thomas Vogler, ‘When a Book is not a Book’, in *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay, New York, 2000, 448–466.
- 11 *Les Immatériaux* is a neologism and does not correspond to the meaning of its rather unfortunate English title, used sparingly at the time: *The Immaterials*.