

ARTICLE

Les Immatériaux: the expansion of philosophy and its hybridization with art and curatorship

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Abstract

In 1983, the Centre Georges Pompidou invited Jean-François Lyotard, the prominent theorist of postmodernism, to organize an exhibition at the Centre de Création Industrielle. The exhibition *Les Immatériaux* examines the intersection of philosophical practice and curatorial craft. This article contends that *Les Immatériaux* should be regarded not just as an exhibition but as an artistic installation. According to Juliane Rebentisch, the key characteristics of an art installation are theatricality, intermediality and site-specificity, all of which are present in *Les Immatériaux*. This positions Lyotard as both an artist-curator and a philosopher-curator, thus embodying Nietzsche's concept of the philosopher-artist. The philosopher-artist empowers life and opens up new possibilities. Similarly, the philosopher-curator-artist creates a reflective space that fosters the development of new values.

Keywords

Lyotard; *Les Immatériaux*; curator; artist; philosopher; installation

Les Immatériaux: la expansión de la filosofía y su hibridación con el arte y la curaduría

Resumen

En 1983, el Centre Georges Pompidou invitó a Jean-François Lyotard, el destacado teórico del posmodernismo, a organizar una exposición en el Centre de Création Industrielle. La exposición *Les Immatériaux* examina la intersección de la práctica filosófica y la artesanía curativa. Este artículo sostiene que *Les Immatériaux* debe considerarse no solo como una exposición, sino como una instalación artística. Según Juliane Rebentisch, las características clave de una instalación artística son la teatralidad, la intermedialidad y la especificidad del sitio, todas ellas presentes en *Les Immatériaux*. Esto posiciona a Lyotard como artista-curador y filósofo-curador, lo que representa el concepto de Nietzsche del filósofo-artista. El filósofo-artista da poder a la vida y abre nuevas posibilidades. Del mismo modo, el filósofo-curador-artista crea un espacio reflexivo que fomenta el desarrollo de nuevos valores.

Palabras clave

Lyotard; *Les Immatériaux*; curador; artista; filósofo; instalación

Introduction

In 1983, the Centre Georges Pompidou invited philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the prominent theorist of postmodernism, to organize an exhibition at the Centre de Création Industrielle. Curated alongside Thierry Chaput, the exhibition, titled *Les Immatériaux* (The Immaterials), opened on 28 March 1985, and ran until the 25 July. Conceived as a philosophical project, the exhibition reflected on the new postmodern condition and examined how emerging technologies and media reconfigured human relations and sensibility. Lyotard aimed to explore how the immaterial aspects of telecommunication and virtuality intersect with the material world. In a darkened room, artworks, installations, technological objects and scientific devices coexisted in a chaotic space. Controversial and often misunderstood, *Les Immatériaux* marked a significant “curatorial turn” in the art and intellectual world (Birnbau & Wallenstein 2019, 15). Given that a philosopher curating an art exhibition was unprecedented, what motivated a distinguished intellectual like Lyotard to undertake such a project? How does *Les Immatériaux* merge philosophical practice with curatorial craft, and what can this intersection contribute?

In 1968, Gilles Deleuze predicted the book’s demise as a medium for philosophical discourse. He stated, “the search for new means of philosophical expression was begun by Nietzsche and must be pursued today in relation to the renewal of certain other arts, such as the theatre or the cinema” (Deleuze 1994, xxi). A year earlier, Jacques Derrida declared the end of the book in *Of Grammatology* (1998). In 1971, Jean-François Lyotard, in his work *Discourse, Figure*, highlighted the limitations of the book for philosophical inquiry: “A text is not deep sensorially, you do not move in front or inside of it so that its agreement may be fulfilled; if you do it is metaphorically” (Jean-François Lyotard

2011, 3). He argued that the world cannot be fully conveyed through words alone without losing something essential. This sentiment is echoed in *The Differend*, a text Lyotard was completing in 1984 when approached by the Centre Pompidou. He foresaw that “in the next century there will be no more books. It takes too long to read when success comes from gaining time” (Jean-François Lyotard 1988, xv).

Over the years, Lyotard experimented with various methods of engaging in philosophy. For instance, in 1978, when invited to appear as an “intellectual” on the television program *Tribune libre* on FR3, he instead proposed creating an experimental video. The resulting piece, titled *Tribune sans tribune* (Tribune without a speaker), criticized the legitimacy of supposed specialists who speak authoritatively on television about any subject. In the video, Lyotard speaks off-screen in the third person, challenging the authority of the “philosopher” as a bearer of knowledge, while images of him in the television studio are fragmented and superimposed. Earlier, in 1974, Lyotard produced a film essay titled *Mao Gillette*, which questioned the cult of personality in advertising. The exhibition *Les Immatériaux* seems to be part of this ongoing exploration of new ways to practice philosophy. The use of diverse media, both technological and artistic, adapting to a specific space, and even working collaboratively (apart from the co-curation with Chaput, the exhibition involved many people),¹ are different elements that pulled the philosopher, accustomed to working alone in the studio, out of the traditional book writing. Here, the notion of author must be deconstructed. The philosopher is not the master of the exhibition. Quite the contrary:

“The philosopher was an apprentice to the exhibition designer, who is a professional. On his own, the philosopher would never have done this, he couldn’t have. And, conversely, in his own way, the designer

1. These included the curator Bernard Blistène (Broeckmann 2022a), the set designer Philippe Délis (Hudek 2019), the artist Jean-Louis Boissier (Boissier & Broeckmann 2015), the architect Alain Guiheux (Broeckmann 2023), the CCI team, a group of scientific advisors including chemists, computer scientists, astrophysicists (Broeckmann 2022b) and many others.

needed the philosopher to break away from the classic techno-socio-logical exhibition [...]. I might add that I find it very hard to control this exhibition; it keeps slipping away from me.” (Lyotard & Soutif 2024, 74. Author’s translation).

Lyotard is reimagining the practice of doing philosophy, both in terms of media (abandoning the traditional book format), form (renouncing argumentative discourse) and collaboration (opening up to collective works). In this way, he expanded philosophy. In an interview with Bernard Blistène during the exhibition, Lyotard stated, “I accept myself as a philosopher, and it seems important to me that the philosopher should be able to record what he thinks by using instruments that need not be limited to the instrument of the book” (Blistène 1984, 29).²

For Lyotard, the philosophical exercise cannot be confined to creating rational arguments and their written communication. He clearly intended to expand the philosophical field into other registers beyond traditional ones. However, what did Lyotard mean by the philosophical exercise? How can the traditionally discursive discipline of philosophy be linked to new channels of expression, such as an exhibition? What role does Lyotard play in this exhibition: curator, philosopher, or a combination of both? Can we even consider him an artist? Marie Vicet argues that by questioning the traditional categories of art and exhibition, and by hybridizing various genres, the exhibition becomes a work of art in itself (Vicet 2019, 2-3). Francesca Gallo suggests that *Les Immatériaux* is a work of art for a different reason: the use of sound combined with the movement of visitors makes it an actual work of art (Gallo 2012, 7). In this context, the visitor drifts through the space like a *flâneur*.

This article defends the hypothesis that *Les Immatériaux* should be understood not only as a work of art, as Gallo and Vicet argue, but more specifically as an art installation. The exhibition shows the characteristics that Juliane Rebentisch (2012) identifies as fundamental to the art installation: theatricality, intermediality and site-specificity. Theatricality refers to the active role of the spectator, who becomes physically involved in the “scene” proposed by the installation. Lyotard envisioned his exhibition as a theatrical space, a “postmodern dramaturgy” (Jean-François Lyotard 1985, 6). Intermediality indicates that the installation/exhibition is not restricted to a specific medium but incorporates various objects, including images, paintings, drawings, photographs, texts, videos, computers, robots, holograms and sound installations, as seen in *Les Immatériaux*. Lastly, the exhibition is designed as a site-specific experience that can only be fully appreciated in the context for which it was created.

Following Boris Groys (2008), the distinctions between artist and curator have blurred, with the act of creation being an act of selection. An art installation is essentially a selection of objects by the artist. *Les*

Immatériaux is an installation-exhibition that positions Lyotard as an artist-curator. Simultaneously, he can be seen as a philosopher-curator, and thus a philosopher-artist, invoking Nietzsche’s concept. The philosopher-artist is someone who empowers life and opens up new possibilities. Similarly, the philosopher-curator-artist creates a space for reflection, facilitating the creation of new values.

1. *Les Immatériaux* project

Les Immatériaux represented a significant gamble for the Centre Georges Pompidou. It was the most expensive exhibition to date and occupied the entire fifth floor of the Centre de Création Industrielle. The exhibition presented a challenge for visitors accustomed to clear and distinct curatorial narratives. Instead, attendees found themselves immersed in a labyrinth of metallic meshes, surrounded by a variety of objects, and equipped with headphones that, rather than offering guidance, delivered a soundtrack featuring texts by Antonin Artaud, Paul Virilio and Samuel Beckett, among others, alongside music. The space was divided into five sectors, each inspired by words containing the root *mat*: materials (*matières*), hardware (*matériels*), matrices (*matrices*), maternity (*maternité*) and support (*matériau*). Each axis mirrored Laswell’s communication model: referent, addressee, code, sender and medium.

Lyotard did not seek to provide a clear and straightforward path for his viewers, nor did he aim to “illustrate” philosophical concepts. Visitors did not experience a transparent and didactic exhibition, or an “educational journey”, as Lyotard described it. In the expansive space on the fifth floor, Lyotard and Chaput designed a layout that was neither linear nor hierarchical. Although the space featured an entrance and an exit, the curators intended there to be no predetermined direction. Consequently, visitors were not offered explanatory leaflets upon entry, nor were there curatorial texts in the room to direct them. Each visitor’s pathway was unique.

For this reason, Lyotard also refrained from producing a traditional catalogue. As he explained, a catalogue “is a book that has the exhibition as its content [*matière*], that is to say as its referent, and which tries to be as complete a summary of it as possible, in the form of, on one hand, a declaration of intent in the preliminary articles, in particular the commissioner’s statement” (Jean-François Lyotard 2015, 63). In other words, the catalogue, like the curatorial narrative, serves as an instructive guide determined by the curator. However, two texts were published in connection with the exhibition. *Epreuves d’écriture* documents a telematic³ discussion of fifty terms proposed by Lyotard among 26 partic-

2. In the same vein, the philosopher affirms with Daniel Soutif: “Nevertheless, the exhibition still seems to me to be a relevant medium, because, as a philosopher, after finishing *Le Différend* and after many discussions with my publishers about the future of the books we make, their distribution and reading, I was led to wonder whether it wasn’t possible to move away from the book medium, insofar as it is struggling to compete with other media, and whether it wasn’t possible to philosophize by other means. If we want to give the exhibition the same strict purpose as a philosophy book, it’s obviously out of the question, because of, let’s say, the privilege of language as far as argumentation is concerned; but if we shift the target, if we don’t seek to make something understood, or even to argue it, and especially not to explain it, but rather to make it felt, then the exhibition is no longer taken in a pedagogical, didactic way” (Lyotard & Soutif 2024, 72. Author’s translation).

3. Each author was given an Olivetti M20 connected to another Olivetti at the Pompidou Centre which recorded each author’s entries. See J.-F. Lyotard & Chaput (1985, 6-7).

ipants, including Daniel Buren, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Isabelle Stengers. *Album et inventaire*, on the other hand, is a catalogue with loose pages that can be arranged in any order.

The visitor could not obtain a transparent representation of *Les Immatériaux* but instead had to wander through elements that could not be reduced to concepts – what was neither thinkable nor signifiable. Naturally, many visitors, raised in the tradition of Cartesianism, struggled to relinquish the dominance of rational understanding and were bewildered. Others, however, allowed themselves to be moved by the unrepresentable. For Lyotard, this openness to the unrepresentable is the true greatness of thought.

2. *Les Immatériaux* as an artistic installation

Boris Groys (2008) argues that the distinction between curator and artist has shifted dramatically in recent decades. Previously, the boundaries were clearly defined: the artist created works, and the curator selected and exhibited them. The artist was the author, while the curator served as a mediator. However, since Duchamp invented the readymades, the act of selection has also been recognized as a creative act. If choosing objects from a factory or bazaar and exhibiting them can be considered a work of art, then is not the act of selecting certain artworks to create a unique experience also an artistic act? Since the 1960s, artists have been creating installations using objects made by others. Thus, can we not also consider a curator's exhibition an installation? "In short, once the identity between creation and selection has been established, the roles of the artist and of the curator also become identical" (Groys 2008, 94).

Could we not understand *Les Immatériaux* as an installation and, therefore, Lyotard as an artist? Lyotard himself was thinking with this in mind: "Our team does not intend to create a didactic exhibition that explains new technologies, for example, but an exhibition that is a work of art" (Théofilakis 1985, 7). *Les Immatériaux* is an extensive work of art, a large-scale installation that draws from other works and installations (such as *Le Bus*, which we will explore). It is the curated selection of these diverse works and installations that converges to form a singular and large installation, a combination that creates specific effects on its visitors. As mentioned in the introduction, both Vicet (2019) and Gallo (2012) interpreted the exhibition as a work of art in general terms. However, we can specify even further: *Les Immatériaux* possesses all the characteristics of an artistic installation. Following Rebentisch (2012), Lyotard's display features the three elements of an installation: theatricality, intermediality and site-specificity. Next, I will analyse how these three qualities function in *Les Immatériaux*.

2.1. Theatricality

One key characteristic of installation art is that, unlike traditional mediums such as sculpture, painting and photography, this art presupposes a viewer who walks through the work. It offers an immersive experience.

As Claire Bishop (2005) explains, rather than disembodied eyes contemplating what is before them from a distance, an installation requires the viewer to engage all their senses, not just sight. In other words, it does not imply a neutral spectator who watches from afar but a visitor who actively participates. The individual enters the artwork and navigates through it to fully grasp the experience. Rebentisch describes this immersive quality as "theatricality": the viewer, being actively involved, becomes physically enveloped in the scene created by the artist. The installation blurs the lines between actors and viewers, placing everyone on stage.

The staging of *Les Immatériaux*, designed by Françoise Michel, undeniably possesses a theatrical quality. Choreographer Johannes Birringer remarked: "When I visited *Les Immatériaux* [...] at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, I felt as if I had walked into a theatre" (Birringer 1986, 7). It is worth noting that Lyotard referred to the exhibition as a "theatrical dramaturgy". One of the techniques used to create this immersive and theatrical atmosphere and establish an immersive space was the use of lighting. The exhibition played with contrasting light intensities, shifting between areas of complete darkness and brightly illuminated sections. The space was adorned with semi-transparent grey metallic fabrics serving as partitions. The visitor's entire body was actively engaged alongside captivating readings and intricate sounds in the headphones. For instance, in the "material" area, there was an installation called *Musician in Spite of Himself*, where every movement made by the viewer was translated into music. In the "matrix" site, an installation titled *Chess Game* allowed visitors to walk on a chessboard, influencing the game with each step they took. In *Hidden Variables*, participants were encouraged to use computers to compare astronomical data about celestial bodies with statistical information about themselves. The experience was not solely visual – it involved auditory perception, physical sensations and movement, engaging our complete physicality. As Lyotard asserted, "it is the visitor's body that, through its movements, will alter the scene. [...]" The way they navigate through the exhibition will determine its significance. They are the actors" (Pencenat 1985, 22). Another example is the installation *Le Bus*, created by artist Jean-Louis Boissier and his students from Paris 8 University. There was a scale model of a Parisian bus in a display case. Screens were placed in the windows, displaying various images from a passenger's perspective – showing routes, roads and passengers getting on and off. A bar with a button, similar to those on a real bus, allowed visitors to start or stop the film by pressing it, imitating the experience of using public transport. The spectator is no longer a passive viewer of the screens but instead participates in this visual "journey", deciding at which "stops" to pause. In this context, Boissier refers to it as a "dramaturgy of interaction" (Boissier 2015, 115).

Lyotard seeks to abandon the concept of the spectator as merely a "moving eye", a hallmark of the traditional exhibitionist model. In this immersive environment, the modern gaze is transcended. Renaissance art constructs its images around an ideal spectator: the vanishing point is arranged to align with the viewer's frontal and central position before the artwork. As Lyotard articulates in "Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable", "the eye of the monarch, positioned as indicated by the vanish-

ing-point, receives this universe thus placed in order” (Lyotard 1992, 120). Conversely, in an installation setting, there is no central order, sovereign artist, ideal spectator and fixed vanishing point. Instead, multiple perspectives coexist without a singular vantage point. By abandoning traditional exhibition norms, *Les Immatériaux* sought not to prescribe a correct way to navigate or contemplate their works but to foster the coexistence of diverse viewpoints. “The eye will be deprived of the exclusive privilege it enjoys in the modern gallery” (Jean-Francois Lyotard 1996, 121).

Lyotard decisively challenged the prevailing concept of the “white cube” that dominated museums and galleries throughout much of the 20th century. The “white cube,” famously characterized by Brian O’Doherty, epitomized the spatial arrangement of exhibition spaces during that era. Rooted in the legacy of modern art, which proclaimed art’s purity and autonomy, the white cube involved displaying artworks in windowless rooms, hung at eye level on pristine white walls and illuminated from above. “Do not touch” was its cardinal rule, creating a serene, almost otherworldly environment where artworks floated silently, free from distractions that might dilute the aesthetic experience. This setup aimed to immunize visitors, offering them a pure, neutral and objective encounter with the artwork, devoid of any contextual, political or historical associations – “a disembodied eye” experience. “The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not” (O’Doherty 1986, 15).

In contrast, *Les Immatériaux* departed from the white cube logic in several ways. This departure was evident in the exhibition’s pervasive use of grey tones (in fabrics, flooring and solid walls). The use of light and the deliberate play with darkness further diverged from the white cube’s bright, uniformly lit spaces. Additionally, the incorporation of eclectic sounds through headphones starkly contrasted with the silent ambience of traditional galleries. Objects were unevenly placed on the walls, and visitors were invited to interact with some – a departure from the strict, hands-off approach of the white cube. These elements collectively signify a definitive abandonment of established exhibition norms up to that point. *Les Immatériaux* was paradoxically recreated “immaterially”, through virtual means. This was accomplished by *Beyond Matter*, an international research project funded by the European Union, which aims to translate cultural heritage into virtual reality. While the virtual recreation offers insight into the exhibition’s original structure, it raises the question: can it truly replicate the live, theatrical experience of 1985? Can the exhibition have the same impact in an entirely immaterial space?

2.2. Intermediality

Contemporary installations incorporate diverse materials, integrating physical, visual and auditory media while hybridizing disciplines like photography, performance and video art. They blend various artistic genres and everyday objects – drawings, machinery, photography, paintings, and

more – into cohesive environments. Installations represent a deliberate challenge to the disciplinary boundaries upheld staunchly by modern art, particularly under Greenberg’s influence. The 1960s marked a significant shift as classifications and boundaries within the arts began to blur. As previously mentioned, *Les Immatériaux* exemplified this shift by assembling a broad array of objects, spanning from an ancient Egyptian bas-relief to works by contemporary artists like Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth and Giovanni Anselmo, alongside robots, computers and holograms. While Lyotard advocated for the inclusion of the Egyptian bas-relief and works by Marcel Duchamp and Jacques Monroy, the selection of objects primarily fell under the responsibility of Bernard Blistène. But as Andreas Broeckmann (2017, 235) argues, *Les Immatériaux* was not simply an exhibition of disparate objects but a genuinely interdisciplinary platform for exploring and reflecting on previously unimaginable things.

Upon entering the *Matériau* site, visitors were immediately immersed in a diverse array of intriguing elements reminiscent of a “cabinet of curiosities”. Within this very space, one encountered music videos from the 1980s, artificial skin samples, paintings depicting biological elements like cells and tissues, microscopic photographs of dust and artworks by renowned artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Yves Klein, among other items. The initial installation, *Nu vain* (Naked in Vain), showcased fully nude, genderless anthropomorphic mannequins alongside photographs of similarly unclothed individuals from World War II and a video installation depicting an art dealer acquiring stolen artworks from Jewish owners.⁴ Moving on to *Second Skin*, framed samples of artificial skin adorned the walls, accompanied by an astronaut suit and a sensory deprivation chamber. The subsequent section, *Angel*, explored corporeality and gender through various photographs and sculptures. This eclectic presentation continued with a series of heterogeneous objects, reflecting a selection and arrangement that appeared diverse and seemingly arbitrary. Another example is the *Arôme simulé* site, where visitors were challenged to distinguish between natural and artificial smells.

The audio component was another crucial aspect of this exploration within the “inter-medial” search. The sounds emitted by these artefacts did not necessarily correspond to what was being observed, and the voices did not provide a narrative explanation of the surrounding space. Audio would play automatically in different zones without visitors needing to press a button in front of a specific piece. As Heinrich noted, “most visitors did not make the connection between the voices and their own movement through the exhibition, which inevitably led to some colourful misunderstandings” (Heinrich 2009). In essence, the audio did not merely serve as an educational supplement to the exhibition but instead constituted another integral element of the overall experience. Furthermore, as Broeckmann (2020, 5) points out, the headphones helped the viewers silently isolate themselves, making the experience even more immersive. On the other hand, certain sites within the exhibition explored the use of sound and music, such as *Corps chanté*, a series of videos depicting

4. *Monsieur Klein* (1976) directed by Joseph Losey.

body transformations set to music, and *Tous les bruits*, which showcased a 17-meter-long piano score accompanied by a recorded performance.

In his essay “Topology of Contemporary Art” (2009), Boris Groys contends that the appropriate medium for installation art is space, whether within a museum, gallery or private venue. Here, the specific medium of installation art revolves around the arrangement of diverse objects in spatial contexts. Lyotard’s exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou focuses less on the individual objects displayed and more on the interactions they generate within the space. As Philippe Parreno argues, “*Les Immatériaux* was an exhibition producing ideas by displaying objects in space. It was very different from writing a book or developing a philosophical concept. Moreover, that is precisely what I loved in that exhibition, that it was not a conceptual exhibition” (Obrist & Parreno 2008, 17). Lyotard intended not to illustrate preconceived ideas or merely showcase technological artefacts but to utilize space as a catalyst for contemplation and reflection.

2.3. Site-specificity

Ultimately, all installations are site-specific, intended for a specific location and meant to interact with a particular environment. This context is not solely geographical but also encompasses social, political and cultural dimensions. According to Boris Groys (2009), contemporary art distinguishes itself not by the novelty of its form, as in earlier periods, but by its integration within a specific context – a concept he terms “topological inscription” (Groys 2009, 74). Each installation is defined by its unique “here and now”, inherently irreproducible elsewhere. As Groys asserts, “Artworks in an installation are originals for one simple topological reason: it is necessary to go to the installation to see them” (Groys 2009, 74). In the case of *Les Immatériaux*, rather than being tailored to a specific geographical site like the Pompidou Centre, it was embedded within a temporal context: the postmodern era.

John Rajchman (2019) characterizes *Les Immatériaux* as the “first postmodern museum”. While the modern museum typically recontextualized objects within an aesthetic framework, the postmodern museum blurs the boundary between the real and the simulated, akin to Baudrillard’s concept of “simulacra” (1994). Consequently, aesthetic, non-aesthetic and anti-aesthetic objects coexist within the same exhibition space. In *Les Immatériaux*, everything exists without distinction, hierarchy, or classifications – reminiscent of Borges’ “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins”. Here, objects are not segregated into works of art versus technological artefacts, aesthetic versus non-aesthetic, or “low and high” culture categories; instead, they are blended without discernible criteria.

Les Immatériaux did not aim to outline the keys to postmodernism conceptually. Instead of illustrating specific conceptual content, it emerged as an expression of a new sensibility – the postmodern sensibility. According to Jean-François Lyotard, this sensibility encompasses insecurity, identity loss and crisis not only in economic and social realms

but also in domains of human knowledge, power dynamics (such as futurity, life and death), and ways of life (including work, customs and food) (Jean-François Lyotard 1985, 26). For Lyotard, the postmodern condition signifies the collapse of grand-orienting narratives of existence. No longer do metaphysical or universal systems provide comprehensive explanations of reality. Scientific, Christian, Marxist and capitalist narratives alike fail to offer humanity a path to fulfilment or salvation. Postmodernity is characterized by wandering and uncertainty, exacerbated by rapid technological advancements and telecommunications, which further cloud the future. Similarly, for Lyotard, *Les Immatériaux* represented “a kind of mourning or melancholy regarding the ideas of the modern era, a sense of disorientation” (Blistène 1984, 30).

Les Immatériaux seeks to provoke uncertainty and unease in an age of confusion. The rise of digital technology, coupled with the emergence of new media and the decline of overarching legitimizing narratives, set the stage for an exhibition like Lyotard’s to emerge. For instance, contemporary accounts reflect a sentiment among visitors that, despite their perplexity, few would have expected conventional explanations. “There is nothing to understand. If they had intended to explain it, they would have provided labels, captions, or something else” (Altshuler 2013, 225). This sentiment mirrors how visitors to *Les Immatériaux* likely felt – orphaned of explanations, echoing the ethos of the postmodern era.

Conclusion: Jean-François Lyotard as philosopher-artist-curator

Les Immatériaux was more than a traditional exhibition of artworks; it constituted an art installation in itself – a hybrid creation, part installation and part exhibition. Instead of catering to a specialized audience, it sought to break free from the ivory tower where intellectuals often retreat. Its primary goal was not merely to display and showcase the creations of others but to establish a space for inquiry. In the words of Georges Didi-Huberman (2011), it operated as a war machine – an exhibition that creates a dialectical space, a realm of dialogue where contradictions unfold. Didi-Huberman draws on Deleuze’s concept of the “war machine,” a device capable of contradicting “the apparatus of the state” and the established status quo, deterritorializing familiar spaces. As Deleuze and Guattari described it, territory is where one navigates comfortably and confidently, where I can easily orient myself. Deterritorialization exposes us to the unfamiliar, the inhospitable – the experience of being away from home. Engaging with the new and the unknown opens up avenues for new thoughts and possibilities. That is why the exhibition, by deterritorializing us, opens up a new space for thought in the sense of Warburg’s Denkraum. “An exhibition should not try to take power over the spectators, but provide resources that increase the power of thought” (Didi-Huberman 2011, 25). Thus, by deterritorializing our perceptions,

exhibitions like *Les Immatériaux* create new intellectual spaces, fostering exploration and rethinking established norms and ideas.⁵

“The conception of the exhibition will be philosophical. We will first of all ask questions and incite others to ask questions” (Jean-François Lyotard 1996, 114). We might consider the idea of a philosopher-curator-artist based on Nietzsche’s concept of the philosopher-artist (1968, 419). According to Nietzsche, the philosopher-artist is tasked with creating new values that enhance our vitality. The decadent philosopher, in contrast, preserves the status quo, while the philosopher-artist or *Übermensch* strives to establish a fresh scale of values. Their role is not to educate the “ignorant” but to stimulate and empower life itself. *Les Immatériaux* embodies this Nietzschean and “untimely” perspective. Lyotard aimed not to provide visitors with certainties but instead to provoke internal reflection and dialogue. In *The Postmodern Condition* (2005), Lyotard distinguishes between the philosopher and the expert: the former questions while the latter concludes. The philosopher acknowledges the limits of their knowledge, whereas the expert does not. Therefore, *Les Immatériaux* was not designed for visitors seeking instrumental knowledge – valued above all else in the postmodern era – but rather to navigate uncertainty.

“A philosopher like me is more inclined to think that what interests him is to get involved in what goes on outside the institutions, that he needs to get out of the university. Hence my presence in the team that is planning *Les Immatériaux*... Beyond institutionalised philosophy, there is a philosophy to come, which corresponds to the abolition of ‘disciplinary’ borders.” (Lyotard in Théofilakis 1985, 5-6)

Jean-François Lyotard, philosopher, curator and artist, aimed to dissolve disciplinary boundaries, expanding the realm of philosophy and liberating it from the constraints of traditional books. According to Lyotard, philosophical inquiry should extend beyond text and embrace diverse mediums and forms of expression. *Les Immatériaux* exemplifies this endeavour, seeking new ways to provoke thought and stimulate inquiry. However, this expansion necessitates a hybridization across the frontiers of art, philosophy and curatorship. Lyotard, alongside a large team, sought to create a space for postmodern thought, challenging established curatorial norms. *Les Immatériaux* represented a significant innovation in both philosophical and curatorial discourse, paving the way for other “philosophical” exhibitions such as Bernard Stiegler’s *Mémoires du futur*, co-curated with Catherine Counot (Bibliothèque publique d’information, Paris, 1987), Jacques Derrida’s *Mémoires d’aveugle* (Musée du Louvre, 1990), Julia Kristeva’s *Vision capitales* (Musée du Louvre, 1998), Paul Virilio’s *Ce qui arrive* (Fondation Cartier, 2002) and Bruno Latour’s *Iconoclash*, co-curated with Peter Weibel (ZKM Karlsruhe, 2002), among others.

We no longer live in an era where the roles of intellectuals, curators and artists are clearly separated. Since the early 1980s, these disciplinary boundaries have started to blur. Lyotard epitomized a hybrid thinker, adept at navigating different realms. As I have sought to illustrate, *Les*

Immatériaux may be viewed as a work of art in its own right, specifically as an art installation. Building on Rebetisch’s characterization, it displays all the hallmarks of an installation: theatricality, intermediality and site-specificity. Lyotard’s exhibition, in its endeavour to expand the scope of philosophy through integration with artistic creation and curatorship, transformed *Les Immatériaux* into a uniquely immersive experience that challenges our senses and intellect.

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5. I have worked on curatorship as a cure of our time in Belgrano (2024).

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