

Noisy Bodies

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Suppose that Sara Manente's *Lawaai Means Hawaai* were science fiction. The sun we know, has just imploded, and somewhere far away in another solar system, three bodies, after a journey of many ancient-lunar years in which their thinking was put on hold, rediscover time and space.

In 1986 Jean-Francois Lyotard wrote a text at the occasion of a doctoral seminar at a West German university. The text, with its title, asks "Si l'on peut penser sans corps": whether we can think without body. Mankind should ask that question, says Lyotard, for in about 4.5 billion lunar years the sun will implode, and it will be demonstrated that the "the sun, our earth and your thought will have been no more than a spasmodic state of energy, an instant of established order, a smile on the surface of matter in a remote corner of the cosmos."ⁱ Lyotard wrote these words in the aftermath of the great debates and protests following the arrival of U.S. cruise missiles, in several western European countries. At the time these debates made the realization that mankind could destroy itself, even more urgently felt. Lyotard's question however takes as its point of departure a different kind of disaster, both inevitable and inhumane: the implosion of the Sun.

Hardware (1)

"You, the unbelievers, you're really believers: you believe much too much in that smile, in the complicity of things and thought, in the purposefulness of all things!" Lyotard continues. By accounting for an event in an incredibly far future of mankind, a future in which it will have no hand, the French philosopher dealt a double blow to the humanistic idea that humanity can take charge of itself and it can gauge and understand the times it lives in. While the death of men is still part of the life of man's thought, the death of the Sun constitutes "an irreparable exclusive disjunction between death and thought: if there's death, then there's no thought."ⁱⁱⁱ In short, man will have disappeared for ever in 4.5 billion years. And although Lyotard in 1986, recognizes many attempts to develop new forms of intelligence to ensure that "some form of thinking remains materially possible after the phase-transition of the catastrophe", he criticizes such efforts for neglecting the materialistic needs of the challenge of thought. "To think, at the very least you have to breathe, eat, etc."ⁱⁱⁱ Or put still differently: "The body might be considered as the hardware of the complex technical device that is thinking." The challenge about to be posed in 4.5 billion years to engineering, should therefore be formulated as follows: "This software (the memories that regulate all living beings and of which language, according to Lyotard, is just the most complex form " LK) needs to be given a hardware independent of the conditions of life on earth. Thought without human body must be created, thought that persists after the death of human corporeality." But the question is whether such thought is possible without a body. Lyotard has his doubts. Is it not true, he states referring to insights of Henri Wallon and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that one must speak of the human field of thought just like we know a 'field of vision' or 'field of hearing'? Thought as we know it, can not do without the human body, because there is an intrinsic analogy between the mind, and man's perceptual experience, while the relations that thought draws and those of experience (symbolic and sensory) also each are analogical by nature. Lyotard concludes at the end of the first part of the text, which goes under the title "He", that he cannot support the hypothesis of the fundamental separability of intelligence, as formulated in the mid eighties in argument for the development of artificial intelligence.^{iv}

Clumsy

About ten minutes into her 2009 piece *Lawaai Means Hawaai*, Sara Manente tapes a piece of paper against the back wall of the stage and reads from it an associative chain of reflections on pollution, parasites, camouflage, invisibility and noise. For some moment she goes on alone, but then Ondine Cloez enters and starts repeating the words she hears Sarah speak, and next Michiel Reynaert joins in on Ondine's copy. Their both voices are a haphazard echo or reverb, the words flow in triplicate and the text becomes a difficultly understandable verbiage. As part of the performance that follows, the three dancers move on stage, as though it were a sort of resonance box. By jumping, stomping and falling with their bodies, they produce sound, which they record with a loop pedal to play it back straight away, trying to repeat the movement in the first step, using only the sounds as a reminder. They repeat these two actions several times. Finally the last quarter hour of the show they spend rolling on the ground until they hit something or someone else. Every time they bump into each other, a wall or the amplifiers, they lay still for a moment and then together start rolling again, in an opposite, but slightly shifted direction.

Each by themselves, these actions appear chaotic: the sounds Manente, Cloez and Reynaert produce by stamping and falling hard on the floor, do not seem rhythmic or orderly disposed, and for example, the directions in which they roll on the floor, show no obviously plan or pattern; and when Cloez and Reynaert, after having 'explored' the stage at the beginning of the show, also shortly play the guitar, they produce just some apparently stray notes.

Clumsy and dangerous. Or jerky and abrupt ... The vocabulary needed for a description of the concrete actions in the most violent part of *Lawaai Means Hawaai*, in which they jump, stamp and fall, certainly is no evidence of great confidence in the motor skills of the three bodies on stage. The show also reminds of a strategy of frustration: expectations are never met, there is no story, and it is not about feelings neither... in short, there is nothing beautiful or interesting to be seen on stage. The strange thing is that the piece is at no time boring or actually frustrating. Rather, after seeing it, I left the theater with a vague sort of joy.

Noise

Rather than telling us something at a subjective level, what is played out on stage in *Lawaai Means Hawaai*, at the first glance, demonstrates a silly sort of objectivity. The three bodies on stage, however, would undermine the whole idea of such objectivity. In their attempts to repeat sound, movement and text, they try to relate to it as subject, but also that appears quite difficult. Any attempt to do that, also produces more noise. The French philosopher Michel Serres argues that in any form of communication noise is unavoidable. He goes so far as to say that communication happens not despite, but because of noise, resulting in the paradoxical position: the system works because it does not work. A concrete example of this is the inevitable change in the meaning in a text after it is translated ten times. This change is not perpendicular to the translation, but inherent to it. Any translation requires that the translator parasites on the original text: instead translating literally, word for word, he must reappropriate the text, in order to better translate it. Several interpretations of the concept of noise were used by Sara Manente as a basis for making *Lawaai Means Hawaai*. The title *Lawaai Means Hawaai* is itself a noisy affair in the second degree: *Lawaai* is one of the Dutch translation of the concept *noise*, but *Hawaai* means nothing in Dutch except a probable typo, or a noisy twist in the spelling of the Dutch word that spoken aloud still sounds as Hawaii; in fact, in the pre-communication of a Brussels community center and an in Austrian festival where the show was programmed, the title was actually written respectively as Hawai (sic) and Hawaii – thus confirming with verve Serres' theory, in their efforts to 'correct' the title and to create a sense out of it that was thought to be less noisy for the reader.^v While the common notion is that the noise associated with a message, disfigures its form or hampers its passage -- noise in scientific research should therefore be filtered out as much as possible -- in *Lawaai Means Hawaai* something else is at stake. Sara Manente, Ondine Cloez and Michiel Reynaert, by stamping and jumping and falling

are not only producing sound (and movement) that likens noise, they subsequently try to repeat that noise (which yields more noise). Meanwhile, their body movements have since long been turned into noise: they are a visual remnant of that which Manente, Cloez and Reynaert truly seem to aim for on stage: self-reflexive noise.

Lawaai Means Hawaai may seem to speak about an always imminent loss of significance or sense, but the opposite is also true. This piece is as much about the conditions of possibility for assigning a meaning to anything, and by extension, the existence of an intelligible world. Michel Serres argues that just because the system is not perfect, in unexpected ways messages can be decoded and recoded. In other words: translation and interpretation empowers the audience. In light of the thinking of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who was influenced by Serres' ideas about communication, we can still add something else. Sara Manente reduces all matter addressed in *Lawaai Means Hawaai* to the inevitable rest of its own negation: noise, grandiosely magnified through a device operated with the foot (in times of automation, mice and semi-automatic gear shifting, that is a threatening curiosity). *Lawaai Means Hawaai*, on the whole gets a somewhat anachronistic quality. A loop pedal, acoustic guitars ... at the beginning of the 21st century, we would rather associate noise with other sounds and tools- less bodily related.

Hardware (2)

Lyotard wrote his text in 1986. In the years before that he and design historian and theorist Thierry Chaput conceived the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, taking place in the spring of 1985 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. *Les Immatériaux* was an exhibition about and with new materials and communication techniques. It brought together, amongst other things, Minitel (the French forerunner of the Internet), the latest industrial robots, personal computers, holograms, sound installations and interactive 3D cinema, alongside paintings, photographs and sculptures. The techniques shown in *Les Immatériaux*, controversial at the time and sometimes still at an experimental stage, today contribute to shape a large part of mankind's experiences of the world. "The exhibition denies [a "postmodern" break], and this is precisely its gambit, to not offer any reassurance, especially and above all by prophesising a new dawn. ", he said in a comment in *Le Monde* on a negative review that had appeared in that paper.^{vi} Some critique of the exhibition left no room for illusion: in the darkened exhibition one could barely read, and there was the constant pressure to choose a route with no identifiable goal in view.^{vii} In short, many spectators felt abandoned amidst all these new techniques. When, one and a half years later, in the fall of 1986, Lyotard addressed a group of West German doctoral students, wondering whether one can think without a body, he expressed an open question that likely was already at the core of *Les Immatériaux*'s awkward exhibition: what kind of bodies do these new technologies assume, or worse, do they still suppose a body at all? "The model of language replaces the model of matter" one could read in the exhibition catalogue.^{viii} If in the context of the exhibition, that statement may be interpreted as a future *fait accompli*, in 'Si l'on peut penser sans corps', one and half years later, Lyotard clearly states that the story of this materiality is far from been written: in the form of hardware of the (human) body, that matter may well be the *sine qua non* of language.

Analogy

"Real 'analogy' requires a thinking or representing machine to be *in* its data, just as the eye is in the visual field or writing is in language (in the broad sense). It is not enough for these machines to simulate the results of vision or writing fairly well. It's a matter (to use the attractively appropriate locution) of giving body to the artificial thought of which they are capable. And it's that body, both 'natural' and artificial, that will have to be carried far from earth before its destruction if we want thought that survives the solar explosion, to be something more than a poor binarized ghost of what it was before."^{ix} In the second part of "Si l'on peut penser sans corps" that is titled "She", Lyotard zooms in on the analogy between thinking and experience. Because of this analogy, he considers it necessary that when the mind

recognizes something, that recognition, just like our perception, can never be complete, never can comprise a full description. Herein we can find, according to Lyotard, the true meaning of the analogy between thinking and experience, and thus the necessity of giving a body to all form of thought. Exactly because thinking or representing machines can never wholly transcend that which they listen to, watch, think about, or imagine, they must own a body, by which they can inhabit all those 'data'. Lyotard does not know whether this is feasible. He doesn't call for despair over this technology, but he does see an other, thornier challenge. "There is such a thing as an interweaving of thought and suffering," he writes. Words once written, and painterly gesture, music in the process of being written, once they are entrusted to paper, cloth or instrument, say something else than what the author wanted to say. They are, after all, even before the author came along, already as much overloaded with use, as they are connected with other words, phrases, tones, timbres. Data thus *are not* given, but *may be* given, in a world which is constituted of "an opaque set of successive horizons to be overcome". Therefore, in order to be able to think or write something, mind and body must first be relieved. A void must be created, and all ways toward it pass by a suffering: "The pain of thinking is not a symptom coming from outside to inscribe itself on the mind, instead of in its true place. It is thought itself resolving to be irresolute, deciding to be patient, wanting not to want, wanting precisely, not to produce a meaning in place of what *must* be signified."^x According to Lyotard any thought machine must be able to think the unthought, just like we can. Therefore, such a machine must be able to assimilate "the pain of thinking". Lyotard calls this pain a form of suffering, and a few paragraphs further on, he attempts to articulate what could characterize that suffering "as produced by the impossibility of unifying and completely determining the object seen a unit without residue and fully define it". "Very likely", he concludes, "it is characterized by uncontrollable difference between the sexes, that is the paradigm for the incompleteness of not just bodies but of minds too."^{xi}

Anamnesis

Lyotard wrote this in a time when the idea to build thinking machines, was quickly accumulating real weight. With considerable delicacy he had already pointed out in the text that humans are not the real engine driving matter to increasingly complex configurations: "You know, technology wasn't invented by humans. Rather the other way round."^{xii} Man is just one of the many statistically improbable episodes that technique, or the *tekhne* of matter, so far passed through. Now suppose that Sara Manente, Ondine Cloez and Michiel Reynaert in *Lawaai Means Hawaai* in the distant 'future past' are three bodies that, after a journey of many ancient-lunar years in which their thinking was put on hold, slightly bewildered (but also euphoric, notice the energy they radiate at their discovery of the stage), re-awaken to their own *tekhne*. By dressing in colors similar to those on the scene, they execute a clumsy camouflage act, or also a half-hearted attempt to render their bodies slightly inconspicuous, and apart from the scene in which they roll on a newly discovered floor, all their actions seem basically aimed at producing sound. In order to make that sound, what in their old solar system had been named hardware, magnificently took the limelight: a clumsy threesome of angels who have just landed, start motioning in all sorts of twists and drop their bodies to the floor. These noisy angels thus own a body, which - in all their clumsiness they too expose as hardware, in other words, as the existential condition and limitation of each experience.

Is *Lawaai Means Hawaai* perhaps in the distant future an epilogue of the body? Lyotard in mind, we must say that for the thinking or writing of such an epilogue one needs a body: the mere fact that an epilogue of the body is being thought or written, supposes that matter still keeps on writing itself. *Lawaai Means Hawaai* therefore is no epilogue, but an anamnesis: noisy it be, matter is stuff for thought. In *Lawaai Means Hawaai*, do not recognize some naive nostalgia for the rash body bewildering the mind, but consider this performance as an attempt at what we all are: matter which over and over again starts thinking from the non-thought. Noël Arnaud's "Je suis l'espace où je suis"^{xiii} - I am the space

where I am - should be rewritten to say “Je me souviens d'être tous les espaces où je me serai retrouvé” - I remember embodying all the spaces in which I ever will have found myself”. Usually such an anamnesis of the materiality of body and space evokes a feeling of melancholy: an impossible, but nonetheless beautiful desire to merge into a cloud of atoms (think of some noisy electronics). Sara Manente shows us that such an anamnesis of a *futur-antérieur* can just as well embody the joy of play.

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- i Jean-François Lyotard, 'can thought go on without body' in: The Inhuman Stanford University press 1988 p.10
- ii Lyotard 1992, p. 11.
- iii O.c., p. 13.
- iv O.c., p. 27. Lyotard touches on problems here that in the following years will be formulated more precisely in the development of strong artificial intelligence (AI that is capable of reasoning, problem solving en perhaps also selfconscious, as opposed to weak AI, which is only applicable to partial fields of knowledge, such as search algorithms). Problems such as *commonsense reasoning*, for instance the ability to deal with uncertainty in thought, or of taking decisions where the knowledge required for it is incomplete. In the 80's the focus would shift to robotics, where the creation of AI would be thought in the reverse sense: from the sensorial to the abstract. *Bottom-up* in stead of *top-down*, one could say.
- v http://www.pianofabriek.be/spip.php?page=article&id_article=182□=nl&moturl=&date=2010-03 , <http://www.impulstanz.com/gallery/videos/en/performances/> and various press articles at the occasion of the performance in Impulstanz 2010. The word *lawaaï*, incomprehensible for the German speaking audience, was rewritten (on the instigation of an overzealous communications agent?) to 'Lawaii', analogous to Hawaii. The word *Lawaii* thus became almost the perfect embodiment of noise in language: a Dutch, and therefore mostly incomprehensible, but also for the Dutch speaker miss-spelled, ie. noisy translation of the concept.
- vi Anthony Hudek, 'From Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of *Les Immatériaux*' *Tate Papers*, 12, herfst 2009. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/>
- vii Anthony Hudek, 'From Over- to Sub-Exposure: The Anamnesis of *Les Immatériaux*'
- viii Jean-François Lyotard, *Les Immatériaux*, vol. 2: *Album. Inventaire*, tent. cat., Centre Pompidou, Parijs, 1985, p. 3. Geciteerd in: Dirk Pauwels, 'Naar een palinodie op de materie? Omtrent Lyotards tentoonstelling *Les Immatériaux*', Jeroen Peeters en Bart Vandenabeele (eds.), *De passie van de aanraking. Over de esthetica van Jean-François Lyotard* (Damon, Budel, 2000), p. 78, noot 15.
- ix Lyotard 1992, p. 17.
- x O.c., p. 19.
- xi O.c., p. 20-21.
- xii O.c., p. 12.
- xiii Noël Arnaud, *L'état d'ébauche*, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, PUF, Parijs, 1974 (8^{ste} ed.), p. 131 (1^{ste} ed. 1957).