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Dr. Andreas Broeckmann

Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany

The Place of Les Immatériaux in the Exhibition History of Media Art, Science and Technology

1. Introduction to Les Immatériaux and recent research results

The exhibition Les Immatériaux was shown at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in the spring of 1985. It is significant for a variety of reasons. As an historical event it marks an important moment in the history of exhibitions, and, it was an important philosophical and epistemological project. Co-curated by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, it was a unique contribution to debates on the emergent technoculture of the 1980s. And it is an exhibition that continues to fascinate because *Les Immatériaux* presented at such an early stage examples of transdisciplinary research on questions that still concern us today – like for instance the manipulation of life, so-called "artificial intelligence," or the distribution of authorship in digital networks.

The work that has been done under the label of *Les Immatériaux Research* over the past ten years has been based on the research by art historians Antonia Wunderlich, Francesca Gallo and Antony Hudek. It has comprised a thorough analysis of the archival documents that can be found in the public archives of the Centre Pompidou – work that has in part been conducted together with Marie Vicet.

Based on this research, and in the framework of the EU-funded project Beyond Matter, the Centre Pompidou's New Media Department has commissioned a virtual 3D reconstruction reconstruction of the exhibition, which can be freely visited online and which gives a sense of the spatial and scenographic arrangements, of the soundtrack created for the exhibition at the time, and the 3D model gives access to the photo documentation and selected archival documents.

Moreover, the *Beyond Matter* project has facilitated the digitization of a significant part of the archival documents related to Les Immatériaux; these are now available in an immensely rich online database, an Instrument de Recherche, through which the research environment for this important exhibition has changed and improved quite dramatically.

2. Les Immatériaux in the Exhibition History, the methodological question

Even before these archival materials became so much more easily available. Les Immatériaux was regarded by many critics as a particularly significant moment in the history of exhibitions of the twentieth century. The US-American art historian Bruce Altshuler, in his seminal volume Biennials and Beyond – Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1962–2002, lists Les *Immatériaux* among his selection of twenty-five exhibitions from those four decades "that made Art History". The basic tenets of such canonization are of course highly problematic. But it points to the fame that Les Immatériaux continues to hold.

Altshuler lauds the fact that Les Immatériaux staged "a complex investigation as an exhibition," and that it thus "anticipated the participatory and discursive aspect of many future exhibitions." Moreover, "Les Immatériaux culminated the interdisciplinary exhibition program of the Centre Georges Pompidou,"2 whereby Altshuler gestures towards both the innovative original concept of this cultural institution opened in 1977, and the exhibition series curated by the director of the Centre's Musée National d'Art Moderne, Pontus Hultén, from 1977 through 1981, marking Paris as the hub of modernism in the first half of the twentieth century.

This talk addresses the different "places in history" that have been accorded to Les Immatériaux. I will look at some of the genealogies which have been claimed and which suggest different ways of telling the story of Les Immatériaux in either institutional, art historical, biographical, or philosophical contexts. – A more comprehensive treatment of this topic is forthcoming in a book that I'm working on, titled *The Making of »Les Immatériaux*«, which will hopefully be out in a year from now.

There is, then, no singular answer to the question about the specific "place" of Les *Immatériaux*, or any other exhibition, in the history of exhibitions, whether such a "history" is conceived in the form of a linear genealogy, or as a network of relations. Instead, any such evaluation is determined by the specific conceptual, historical, and narrative framing employed in a particular analysis.³

3. Suggestions for genealogies of Les Immatériaux: Hudek, Birnbaum/Wallenstein, Rajchman

Let's look at three genealogical references that scholars of *Les Immatériaux* have suggested for the show.

A deliberately genealogical argument was put forward by **Antony Hudek** in 2019. Hudek suggests a whole series of instances in the history of exhibitions which lead towards Les *Immatériaux* and its unique scenography devised by Philippe Délis. These include the CCI's architectural and sociological exhibitions on the theme of the city (1977–1983); André Malraux's *Musée imaginaire*; Pontus Hultén's scenographic concept for the first presentation of the MNAM collection in 1977, his 'capital cities of modernism' exhibitions (1977–1981), and Hultén's previous exhibitions in Stockholm, Amsterdam and New York City; as well as the first temporary exhibition of the MNAM, *Duchamp* (1977), curated by Jean Clair. By offering these exhibition historical references, Hudek does not so much spell out a substantiated genealogical argument, but rather seeks to suggest examples from which the scenographic conceptualization for Les Immatériaux may have emerged, like the first, nonlinear presentation of the MNAM collection with its multiple paths,⁴ or the proximity of Jean Clair's Duchamp exhibition at the MNAM (1977) to Lyotard's publication of TRANSformateurs DUchamp (1977) and certain formulations in his La Condition postmoderne (1979).⁵

The most elaborate exhibition-genealogical argument about *Les Immatériaux* to date has been developed by Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olof Wallenstein, in a chapter of their book,

³ For a discussion of the "metahistorical", narratological and historiographical aspects of writing history, see Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 1973.

¹ Altshuler 2013, p. 215.

⁴ Hudek 2019, 62–63.

⁵ Hudek 2019, 64–65. ("On en a comme preuve la compatibilité des termes que Lyotard utilise pour décrire à la fois les opérations des machines transformantes de Duchamp et les modalités de la condition postmoderne ...")

Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition (2019).⁶ Birnbaum and Wallenstein see *Les Immatériaux* in an historical lineage of exhibitions which address the core issues of modernity and the relations between art, technology, consumer capitalism, and perception, articulated through their spatial arrangement. In the narrative presented by Birnbaum and Wallenstein, this exhibitionary constellation first culminates in the World Exhibitions of the 19th century, and its most significant 20th-century episodes include El Lissitzky's "demonstration spaces", the non-exhibitions of Conceptual Art, Lippard and Chandler's curatorial project on "dematerialization in art", and Daniel Buren's artistic practice – not least in his critical contribution to *Documenta 5* (1972). The goal of this particular genealogical presentation is, firstly, to explain the way in which Les Immatériaux is also. crucially, a critical engagement with the spatial aspects of the postmodern condition. And secondly, Birnbaum and Wallenstein seek to analyze the conceptual framework in which Lyotard, after Les Immatériaux, was thinking about an exhibition whose theme would have been resistance, Résistance.

While Hudek proposes a lineage that is primarily constituted by exhibitions which took place in the institutional framework of the Centre Pompidou and are associated with the name of Pontus Hultén, Birnbaum and Wallenstein suggest a sequence of precursory exhibitions which strongly engage the question of the commodification of art. It should be noted that Lyotard and Chaput either ignored these precursors, or openly rejected such a lineage in their own curatorial discourse in which they explicitly counterpose Les Immatériaux to the World Exhibitions, and they also oppose their notion of the "im-materials" to the art-theoretical trope of "dematerialization." Finally, Lyotard and Chaput organized an exhibition in which Daniel Buren did not participate as an artist. These contradictions don't necessarily undermine Birnbaum and Wallenstein's hypotheses, since Buren may well have chosen not to participate in Les Immatériaux precisely because the show resembled his own artistic strategies to a degree that left no room for his practice – which usually works by affirming an aesthetic difference from its context. Instead, from these contradictions we can take the encouragement to read Les Immatériaux not only with, but also against Lyotard's own theorizations.

A third genealogical hypothesis for *Les Immatériaux* was put forward by art theoretician **John Rajchman** for whom the exhibition marks a critical moment in the history of aesthetics. Rajchman proposes to analyze *Les Immatériaux* as an exhibition that partly continues, and partly interrupts an art history of engaging the contemporary, referring to examples like Alexander Dörner and El Lissitzky's experimental exhibitions of the 1920s, and gesturing towards Alfred H. Barr's modernism and Conceptual Art, to André Malraux and Daniel Buren:

> "[...] we might then imagine Les Immatériaux as an extravagant staging of a peculiar moment [...] in the history of aesthetics after so-called 'modernism', yet before the 'contemporary' configuration of biennials that was already taking shape in the 1990s, within and against which the question of a new 'history of exhibition' now itself arises."⁷

Rajchman associated this 'contemporary' paradigm with the practice of artists like Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno, and exhibitions like Hou Hanru's Cities on the Move (1997), Ph.-A. Michaud's Images on the Move (2006), and – rather more controversially – Jean-Hubert Martin's 1989 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Magiciens de la terre.

⁶ Daniel Birnbaum and Sven-Olof Wallenstein: *Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019, chapter "Exhibitions", p. 25–64.

⁷ Rajchman 2009.

"[...] Les Immatériaux marked the beginning of a reflection on the question of how the 'contemporary' itself forms part of interactions across borders irreducible to the grand nineteenth-century division of 'modernity' and 'tradition'."8

Rajchman's argument interlaces the exhibition-historical argument with an hypothesis on the history of Post-Kantian aesthetics:

> "Perhaps such a history [of an exhibition] is not one thing, governed by a single logic or narrative but, on the contrary, vital precisely because it intersects with many others. This at least is what is suggested in my little contemporary fable of Les Immatériaux: how this exhibition can now be seen as a point of intersection for different histories going off in numerous directions. We might therefore consider 1985 not simply as a date in the field of exhibitions, but also in theory and research, and hence for that presentation of 'ideas' of, and in, art which for two centuries after Kant came to be known as 'aesthetics'."9

It is noticable that all three hypothetical genealogies reviewed here, those suggested by Hudek, Birnbaum/Wallenstein, and Rajchman, are based on theoretical considerations. They argue not on the basis of archival evidence – none of the referenced curators, or exhibition projects, are mentioned in the various archived documents and statements by Lyotard or Chaput, prior to the exhibition opening –, but they instead develop theoretical and speculative narratives which claim plausibility through some form of conceptual or aesthetic proximity.

An important methodological question is how the place of an exhibition like *Les Immatériaux* can be mapped in relation to other exhibitions and historical developments. Is it a question of connoisseurship in the histories of art or philosophy, or should such relations be ascertained through archival evidence, biographical interference, or discourse analysis? On what basis can such claims be made that certain exhibitions influenced or even prefigured Les Immatériaux, or that other, later exhibitions were influenced by Les Immatériaux? How to qualify the relations in such a constellation? Which types of causality are taken into consideration – correlation, influence, resonance, correspondence, similarity, or certain degrees of contrast and negation?

Because questions like these cannot be answered conclusively, we cannot expect to arrive at a definitive genealogical description or constellation, but only at different readings of the historical contexts which lead to sometimes different, and sometimes similar narratives, encapsulated in the various constellations represented by "Rajchman's list", or "Birnbaum/Wallenstein's list", and so forth.

3. What did Chaput and Lyotard think is an exhibition, in 1983?

These genealogies also focus on the concept and content of the exhibition. An alternative would be to take a biographical approach and look at the particular experience of exhibitions that key actors like the curators, Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, brought to the project when they worked on Les Immatériaux. A theme that is frequently discussed with regard to Les Immatériaux is the question what an "exhibition" is in the first place. We can therefore ask, what Thierry Chaput may have thought was actually his task when he first took the assignment, in 1981, for preparing a "manifestation" about 'new materials and creation'. And we can ask what Jean-François Lyotard thought was requested of him when he was approached by CCI director Paul Blanquart in May 1983, to collaborate on the project for an exhibition.

⁸ Rajchman 2009.

⁹ Rajchman 2009.

Thierry Chaput had worked for the CCI since 1975, and organized several small-scale exhibitions with diverse themes, including time measurement, labour conditions, pinball machines, and disabilities (La mesure du temps, 1979; Travail sous conditions, 1979; Billes en tête. L'imagerie du flipper, 1981; différences/indifférences? Handicapes et vie quotidienne, 1981). He experienced the large exhibitions organized at the Centre Pompidou by his senior colleagues, the curators of the CCI, on design and architecture, including Cartes et figures de la terre (1980), and may also have seen the earlier exhibition, Matériau technologie forme, which was shown at the CCI's pre-Beaubourg location, the Musée des arts décoratifs, in 1974. This exhibition already posed the question of the materiality, technology, and aesthetics, which were then also addressed in design curator Raymond Guidot's first concept for an exhibition about 'new materials and creation', drafted in 1981. Moreover, Chaput would also have seen Pontus Hultén's exhibitions about the 'capitals of modernism', understanding the ambitions and expectations of scale that came with the project of an interdepartmental exhibition for the Centre Pompidou's fifth floor.¹⁰

Unlike Chaput, Jean-François Lyotard had no prior experience in curating exhibitions, but he was an avid visitor of art museums, like the Louvre in Paris, or the Uffizi Galleries in Florence. He frequently attended gallery openings of contemporary artists, and took part in contemporary culture by visiting concerts and performances. Lyotard saw *Documenta 5* (1972) in Kassel, and he was familiar with the artistic practice of Daniel Buren as well as with the curatorial projects by Marcel Duchamp. Besides the dialogue with contemporary artists like Jacques Monory or Ruth Francken who Lyotard wrote about, his most intense, properly curatorial experience was probably in the years around 1970, when he co-organized a workshop on experimental film, together with the artists Claudine Eizyckman and Guy Fihman.

The visit to *Documenta 5* in Kassel in 1972 left a lasting impression on Lyotard. This edition of the exhibition series of contemporary art was curated by Harald Szeemann together with a number of collaborators and advisors, including Bazon Brock and Jean-Christophe Ammann. It marked a decisive break from the earlier, more conservative presentations of international contemporary art, towards a radically conceptual approach, presenting a diverse set of exhibits which also included examples from popular and visual culture, advertising, covers of the German weekly magazine DER SPIEGEL, and religious devotional images, all shown in a variety of unusual formats which manifested the exhibition not as a space of display, but as a site of social interaction.¹¹

In a book about his experience of living and teaching in California in the 1970s, *Pacific Wall* (1979). Lyotard gives a detailed account of an environment by the US-American artist Edward Kienholz about racialized violence which Lyotard had seen at *Documenta 5*, taking the scene he had encountered in Kassel as an example of what he experienced in real life in the US. Lyotard further highlights the importance of this encounter when he begins another chapter, entitled "The Labyrinth at the Center," with the remark: "We chatted about Kassel on the shores of southern California."12

Lyotard was also aware of Daniel Buren's critique of *Documenta 5*. Buren had claimed that in this exhibition the position of the curator took prominence over the position of the participating artists, and that the exhibited artworks were being instrumentalized for

¹⁰ Moreover, in 1975–1976, the CCI presented Paul Virilio's exhibition, *Bunker Archéologie*, at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, and published the catalogue of texts and photos which Virilio had taken between 1958 and 1965; this catalogue was one of the first to be published by the CCI.

¹¹ See Roland Nachtigäller e.a (eds.): Wiedervorlage d5: eine Befragung des Archivs zur documenta 1972. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2001.

¹² Jean-François Lyotard: Pacific Wall. [1979] Venice, CA.: Lapis Press, 1990, p. 26; on Kienholz's environment Five Car Stud (1971), see chapter "The Kienholz Story," p. 11–17.

illustrating the curatorial concept. This was a critique that would later also be extended to Les Immatériaux. Lyotard and Buren already knew each other since the early 1970s, and Lyotard wrote several texts about Buren's work between 1978 and 1981, some of which formed the section dedicated to Buren in Lyotard's book *Que peindre? Adami Arakawa Buren* (1987).¹³

Lyotard was thus not only aware, but he had in fact critically contributed to the theoretical debate on the postmodern crisis of the exhibition format which Buren addressed in his work. The same can be said for the reception of Marcel Duchamp's work, whose rediscovery in France since the 1960s culminated in the retrospective exhibition, curated by Jean Clair on the occasion of the opening of the Centre Pompidou in 1977. Lyotard's own critical engagement with Duchamp took place in the same years. He worked on his book, Les TRANSformateurs DUchamp (1977), from 1974 onwards, one of the chapters becoming part of the catalogue to Jean Clair's exhibition. ¹⁴ In 1975, Lyotard wrote a review of Jean Clair's book-length analysis of the Large Glass, Marcel Duchamp ou le grand fictif (1975), and Duchamp's artistic and curatorial practice – including his *Boîtes en valise* display cases, and the *Surrealist Exhibition* of Objects held at the Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris in 1936, which showed a most diverse array of material objects, - [these curatorial projects by Duchamp] could be seen as an encouragement for a radical approach to exhibition scenography, and to the selection of disparate exhibits.

This genealogical constellation – formed by *Documenta 5* and the *Surrealist Exhibition of* Objects, by the 'machines' of Marcel Duchamp, the interventions of Daniel Buren, and the paintings of Jacques Monory – marks a field of references from which Lyotard started off when he ventured into the exhibition project that would become Les Immatériaux, and for which, in August 1983, he wrote a first conceptual sketch, the *Esquisse*. Here the form imagined for the exhibition is yet vague, Lyotard indicates that the selection of exhibits shall be heterogenous, and that the cohesion of the show will hinge on the formulation of a clear, "principal" conceptual question that the exhibition as a whole should address. Half a year later, in the discourse prepared for the team and published only posthumously, "After Six Months of Work" (1984), Lyotard develops basic scenographic ideas which ground the conceptual development of the shape that the exhibition will take. ¹⁵ In this exceptional text, Lyotard speaks about the scenario and about scenes on which his own thinking about the exhibition in-the-making is based: Denis Diderot's review of the Salon of 1767 as well as the critique of the museum galleries of the 19th century and the type of reception they invite. Lyotard contrasted these historical examples with a post-modern understanding of space time, encapsulated in the notion of an "electronic-nuclear paradigm" suggested by sociologist Giairo Daghini, and in urban theorist Paul Virilio's notion of the "over-exposed city."

There is biographical evidence for this genealogical constellation of *Documenta 5*, Szeemann's 1975 project *Junggesellenmaschinen*, Duchamp's exhibitions and Daniel Buren's exposures. It differs from the constellations proposed for *Les Immatériaux* by Hudek, Birnbaum/Wallenstein, or Rajchman, in that the constellation just sketched, "Lyotard's list," represents an approach that deliberately takes the subjective perspective of Lyotard, rather

¹³ For the relationship between Buren and Lyotard, see Jean-François Lyotard: "Faire voir les invisibles, ou: contre le réalisme." In: Daniel Buren: Les Couleurs : sculptures, Les Formes : peintures (exh. 1977). Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1981, p. 26-38; Françoise Py: "Lyotard et Buren: Relever le voir." In: Claude Amey e.a. (eds.): À partir de Jean-François Lyotard. Paris: Harmattan, 2000, p. 161–173, and Herman Parret, introdurction to Jean-François Lyotard: Que peindre? Adami Arakawa Buren. [1987] 2012, esp. p. 48–49. See also Daniel Buren interviewed by Daniel Birnbaum, in Christine Macel e.a. (eds.): Airs de Paris, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2007, p. 24. Buren included his contributions to the Épreuves d'écriture in his collected writings, Les Écrits (1965–1990), Tome III: 1984–1990. Bordeaux: capcMusée d'art contemporain, 1991, p. 81–85. ¹⁴ On the constellation between Lyotard and Duchamp, see Parret, introduction to Les Transformateurs Duchamp, 2010, p. 37-43, Évelyne Toussaint: "Lyotard avec Duchamp. La condition post-esthétique," in Coblence/Enaudeau 2014, p. 215–228, and Hudek 2019, p. 64–65.

¹⁵ Lyotard 1984/2015. See the analyses in Wunderlich 2008, and Hudek 2009/2015.

than looking at the development of the exhibition format in general. In the genealogies suggested by Birnbaum/Wallenstein or Rajchman, Les Immatériaux and Lyotard's curatorial agency is only an example, maybe a symptom, for a shift in exhibition paradigms, or in the history of aesthetics.

The decision for one or the other analytical approach need not be exclusive, but either of them necessitates a critical awareness of the ways in which certain readings or results are predetermined by the chosen methodology.

4. Lyotard thinking about exhibitions after Les Immatériaux

The question of chronology in such constellations is pinpointed by the case of Lyotard's reflexions on the writer and politician, André Malraux. Malraux was a prominent figure in French cultural life since the 1930s, and a member of several de Gaulle governments from 1946 to 1969. Among his most influential ideas was the notion of an "imaginary museum," of a "museum without walls," that was made possible by the technical medium of photography and that fundamentally changed the way in which artifacts contributed to the understanding, and the construction, of cultural history.

In his later life, Lyotard took a keen interest in Malraux, publishing several essays and a biography of Malraux during the 1990s. 16 It is of course possible to speculate about the resonance that Malraux's thinking – which was no doubt 'in the air' throughout Lyotard's adult life – may have had on the making of *Les Immatériaux*. ¹⁷ But it is important to acknowledge the fact that Lyotard's active engagement with Malraux began only after 1985, and was itself informed by the experience of having worked on an exhibition. In the essay "Monument des possibles," for instance, held as a lecture in 1993, Lyotard speaks about Malraux with regard to the relationship between the museum, the archive, and the exhibition. 18 His contemporary references are again Marcel Duchamp, and Daniel Buren's critique of the curator, formulated on the occasion of *Documenta 5*. Writing about the presentation, the *exposition* of museum objects, Lyotard remarks:

> "Le conservateur, l'archiviste et/ou le commissaire travaillent ici comme des artistes. Et plus le matériel est riche, plus ils doivent inventer des formes de présentation – comme le compositeur contemporain confronté à la série infinie de sons que peut lui fournir le synthétiseur a toute licence de les organiser en structures "arbitrairement" choisies. Daniel Buren n'avait pas tort de voir, dans le commissaire d'une exposition d'art, le seul artiste véritablement exposé. Il n'avait peut-être pas raison de s'en indigner. On ne voit pas comment cette esthétisation de la présentation pourrait être évitée quand le matériel disponible se met à proliférer comme un monde en expansion."19

Lyotard is here clearly speaking from his own curatorial experience, during which he had been confronted with an immense amount of material which offered itself for presentation, and forced to make a selection and to integrate it in an aesthetic, scenographic structure. What Lyotard found in Malraux's reflexions on *The Voices of Silence* (1947), affirmed his own experience of the curatorial practice as a form of anamnesis of matter:

> "On dit que les oeuvres sont mises en prison en musée. Elles sont au contraire incarcérées dans la réalité, objets cultuels ou culturels, et le musée, en les

¹⁶ Jean-François Lyotard: Signé Malraux, Paris, Grasset, 1996, and Chambre sourde, L'antiésthetique de Malraux, Paris, Galilée, 1998. See also Élisabeth de Fontenay: "Un généreux coup de force. Le Malraux de Jean-François Lyotard," in Coblence/Enaudeau 2014, p. 163–174.

¹⁷ See for instance Hudek 2019, p. 66–69.

¹⁸ in Moralités postmodernes (1993), p. 143–157.

¹⁹ Lyotard, "Monument des possibles" (1993), p. 145.

éloignant de la contingence de leur occurence, peut écrire et délivrer ce qu'il y a en elles d'écriture et de cri. [...] Le musée ne transforme pas arbitrairement des restes d'événements en traces s'il est vrai que sa sélection est guidée par l'écoute du cri que ces restes étouffaient. Le conservateur et le commissaire d'exposition prêtent l'oreille aux voix du silence comme l'analyste à celles de l'inconscient."20

Lyotard's reading of Malraux appears predicated on the experience of the *Immatériaux* project – perhaps a typical case of what in Freudian theory is called *Nachträglichkeit*, the subsequent constitution of meaning of a memory previously buried in the unconscious. In an analoguous instance, during a lecture held in June 1986, Lyotard called the Philips Pavilion at Expo '58 in Brussels (1958), realized by composer Edgar Varèse and architect Le Corbusier, the "first exhibition of immaterials", "première exposition d'immatériaux". ²¹ We cannot deduce from such a reference that the earlier instance (the Philips Pavilion) impacted on the later (Les Immatériaux), but rather that the later experience subsequently changed the memory and understanding of an earlier event – that may even have gone unnoticed at the time. For the analysis of Lyotard's work on Malraux, this means that it was crucially informed by the engagement with the museum, the exhibition, and objects for presentation which Lyotard had passed through in the years 1983 to 1985.

²⁰ Lyotard, "Monument des possibles" (1993), p. 152.

²¹ Lyotard, "L'obédience" (June 1986), published in L'Inhumain, 1988/2014, 166, see also 168.