

## About a Cooperation. Jean-François Lyotard's work with the CCI on the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*.

Andreas Broeckmann

Leuphana University Lüneburg / Malmö Art Academy

The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard was invited by the Centre de Création Industrielle (CCI) in 1983 to join the project for an exhibition which would eventually be shown two years later and which became one of the landmarks in the history of twentieth century exhibitions: *Les Immatériaux*. Lyotard was called in as a Chief Curator, yet he performed this role not as a solitary leader but as a cooperation and dialogue partner who was there to learn, and to enable multiple interdisciplinary encounters, within the Centre Pompidou and outside of it.

Conversations about the legacy of this exhibition occasionally turn to the question whether the cooperation between the CCI and Lyotard was in any way exemplary, and whether something can be learned from it for similar projects. The hypothesis proposed here is that the particular constellation that led to *Les Immatériaux* was rather exceptional, both in terms of the individuals who were involved, and as regards the institutional setting in which it took place, and that it would be hard to draw any more general lessons from it. Yet, as Paul Virilio reminded us, any technology breeds its own specific accidents; and in that sense, the 'accident' of *Les Immatériaux* was certainly the result of a constellation that can, despite its overall complexity, at least be described in its main aspects.

After eighteen months of preparations, CCI project manager Thierry Chaput and a team of researchers had by April 1983 collected ideas for an exhibition about "new materials and creation" which however still wouldn't seem to gel into a convincing proposal. It is not clear who in that situation proposed to ask Jean-François Lyotard to join the project. But there was more than one reason why his name would have been suggested in conversations at the Centre Pompidou that spring. Chaput had been in conversation with the film makers Claudine Eizykman and Guy Fihman since 1982, and the couple had been close collaborators and friends of Lyotard's ever since the 1960s. Also, through Chaput's contact with the artist and teacher Jean-Louis Boissier, there was a continuous relation with the University of Paris VIII where Lyotard was teaching. And Lyotard had not only occasionally written about artists, but more importantly, his book *La condition postmoderne* (1979) had made him internationally known as a philosopher who was thinking about the societal impact of the new technologies. It is therefore likely that Lyotard's name would have been mentioned not only once, but several times and by several different people, when CCI director Paul Blanquart picked up the phone to call him.

After their initial encounters in June 1983 and in the course of the following summer months, Lyotard and Chaput, together with the team of researchers and project managers at the CCI—including at that moment Martine Moinot, Sabine Vigoureux and Catherine Testanière—developed their collaboration and laid the foundations of the exhibition project by mapping Lyotard's thinking onto the projects and ideas prepared by the team over the previous year. In September followed the meetings with the directors of the other departments of the Centre Pompidou, with Michel Melot of the BPI, Pierre Boulez of IRCAM, and with Dominique Bozo of MNAM. It was due to the effort that Lyotard made in these meetings—certainly helped by his intellectual reputation—that the planned exhibition changed from being merely a big project of the CCI with some additional contributions by IRCAM and the BPI, back into the major interdepartmental project of the whole Centre as it had originally been intended at its outset in 1981. Especially the re-integration of the MNAM and the strong presence of works of visual art from museum and gallery collections first became possible at Lyotard's initiative.

Lyotard returned to Paris in December 1983 after teaching the fall semester in San Diego, California. The following months saw the constitution of an elaborate network of scientific, technical, artistic and curatorial advisers who contributed to the sixty diverse *sites* which finally made up the exhibition. During more than a year—and perhaps in contrast to comparable projects where an external curator is recruited and comes in only at a few critical moments—Lyotard was present almost continuously, participating in meetings on a weekly, sometimes on a daily basis. He had no desk in the CCI offices, but rather occupied the adjoining meeting room (*bulle*) with changing constellations of internal and external partners and contributors.

The calendars of Lyotard and Moinot for those months document a dense sequence of interlacing meetings. The following, condensed sketch is intended to give an impression of the 'methodology' used. Lyotard and Chaput met the scientific committee—consisting of computer scientist Mario Borillo, chemist and science theoretician Paul Caro, the astrophysicist Michel Cassé, the micro-biologist Jean-Pierre Raynaud, and the mathematician Pierre Rosenstiehl—on a monthly basis throughout the first half of 1984, in addition to meetings with individual members of this group and other science experts recommended by them. During the same period Lyotard had regular meetings about the seven visual arts sites with the curator of contemporary art at the MNAM, Bernard Blistène, and with the CCI's curator of architecture, Alain Guiheux, who in turn prepared three sites on architectural themes. Meanwhile Lyotard occasionally joined the meetings which Thierry Chaput and Nicole Toutcheff held with Alain Rey and other members of the SERPEA agency, developing the technical and network infrastructure for the editorial and exhibition projects. These technical preparations also became the basis for an innovative collaborative writing project which was eventually conducted with twenty-six authors in the autumn 1984 and led to production of the first, conceptual part of the catalogue, *Epreuves d'écriture*. In the summer began more or less simultaneously the work with the architect Philippe Délis on the exhibition design, the realisation of the scenography with the Centre Pompidou's exhibition architect Katia Lafitte, the audiovisual production managed by Martine Castro, and the editorial work on the texts for the audio track which Lyotard prepared together with Dolorès Rogozinski. Chaput acted as the main project manager, but whenever the problems became bigger than he could solve, Lyotard jumped in and got in touch directly with François Burkhardt, director of the CCI since 1984, or with Centre Pompidou president Jean Maheu, MNAM director Dominique Bozo, or with minister for culture Jack Lang, to raise additional funds or find other forms of help.

All of these meetings were accompanied by one or more of the project managers who worked with Chaput and Lyotard on the project—Martine Moinot, Sabine Vigoureux, Nicole Toutcheff, Chantal Noël, Catherine Testanière—and who together formed what Lyotard would later refer to as the "mind of seven heads" (*esprit à sept têtes*) that made the exhibition possible. (Lyotard 1986/2021) The team members had the responsibility for certain sites and projects, from the technically elaborate *Labyrinthe du langage* coordinated by Nicole Toutcheff, to the editorial work led by Chantal Noël.

Almost everybody involved at the time speaks, until today, of the special atmosphere in which all of this work took place. It is described as exceptionally convivial and intensive, both emotionally and intellectually. Importantly, Lyotard was fostering dialogical and non-hierarchical relations in which the expertise and the opinions of the team members were taken seriously and everybody, including Lyotard, was both teaching and learning all the time. A striking example for this is the democratic procedure in which the fifty keywords for the *Epreuves d'écriture* writing project were selected: most of the words were chosen through taking the votes of the "seven", each considered with equal weight.

At the centre of this cooperation was the amicable relationship between Lyotard and Chaput who after their first encounter in June 1983 quickly developed a bond that appears to have been woven of both professional respect and friendship. In all of the interviews which Lyotard gave about *Les Immatériaux* he insisted on the collaborative nature of the project, and on Chaput's indispensable expertise of making exhibitions. It was Chaput's role to translate the conceptual considerations into ideas for concrete exhibits. When Lyotard was asked a few years later whether he would consider working on another exhibition, he affirmed that there was no meaningful way for him to even think about making an exhibition without Chaput. Speculating about such an improbable project in an homage written on the occasion of Chaput's premature death in April 1990, Lyotard hints at the way in which they had worked together in 1983–1984, spinning ideas from his 'words': "And I thought: if I did this, in any case, I'd do it with Thierry. [...] I would have passed him the word, we would have discussed it, associated freely, and he would have conjured up lots of sites from the poor word." (Lyotard 1990)

Such a dialogical relationship was also characteristic of Lyotard's work with the various other collaborators. For the seven sites dedicated to the visual arts, the role of a conceptual partner was Bernard Blistène's. In consecutive meetings he and Lyotard jointly developed the curatorial program, partly

relying on a shared expertise—for instance with regard to the work of Marcel Duchamp or Andy Warhol—and partly building on Blistène's propositions, including pieces from the MNAM collection, and by contemporary artists like the young Philippe Thomas. When they disagreed, they found ways to negotiate their dissent by, for example, moving the paintings by Jacques Monory—which Lyotard insisted to include—into a neighbouring site for which Blistène took no responsibility. In contrast, architecture curator Alain Guiheux worked more independently, developing the proposals for the architecture exhibits from his previous research and using the occasional exchanges with Lyotard to sharpen the conceptual focus of his three sites.

Yet another path led to the seven sites proposed by the scientific adviser Paul Caro. Of the five members in the scientific committee, Caro took an exceptional interest in designing sites which would serve to explain scientific and mathematical phenomena to the exhibition audience. Besides some evocative sites like *Surface introuvable* and *Irreprésentable*, the results of Caro's endeavors were so affirmatively 'modernist' and conceptually obscure that it seems hard to imagine that Lyotard and Chaput did more than tolerate what, under greater scrutiny, would have had to be rejected for curatorial or for philosophical reasons (e.g. *Indiscernables*, *Matricule*, *Jeu d'échecs*).

Lyotard took the credit only for a small number of projects in the *Immatériaux* exhibition, among which were the sites *Nu vain* and *Peintre sans corps*, and the original idea for the audio programme, the *bande sonore*, a soundtrack with readings of philosophical and literary texts which would not so much illustrate or explain the exhibits, but rather add an important experiential dimension of the visit. But even in this case we see Lyotard immersed in a collaborative network in which his idea was realised: He selected the texts together with Dolorès Rogozinski, the sound recordings were made by Gérard Chiron of the Service audiovisuelle, the montage of the voice recordings with musical pieces was accomplished by the young IRCAM composer Arnaud Petit, and the technical realisation of the headphone system for transmitting the soundtrack—so essential for its scenographic impact—was coordinated by Thierry Chaput and Martine Castro.

Such a collaborative working and learning environment benefits everybody in their own ways. For Thierry Chaput, *Les Immatériaux* was the biggest project he realised at the Centre Pompidou and became the *opus magnum* of his short life. In turn, for Lyotard the exhibition was a transitional event that resolved some old debts and opened up new doors. Importantly, the work of 1984 offered him the opportunity to test and delve into some of the questions that had been formulated only superficially in *La condition postmoderne*. Lyotard's conversations with the scientists, and those with Chaput and the technical team of the SERPEA, served to substantiate his critique of modern technoscience articulated in the essays of his book *L'Inhumain* (1988), and contributed to the elaboration of the concept of "infancy".

More indirectly, Lyotard's engagement became instrumental for confronting some of his colleagues and peers—François Châtelet, Jacques Derrida, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe among them—with computer-based and networked writing when they were involved in the *Epreuves d'écriture* project, an experience which proved decisive at least for Derrida (though not for Lyotard himself who continued to rely on female type-writers, like Véronique Guillaume, Dolorès Rogozinski, or Chantal Noël).

As secondary effects there were also the cosmological narrative, and the discourse on the finality of the Earth and thus of human thought, which Lyotard picked up from Michel Cassé (site *Creusets stellaires*) and consequently elaborated in texts such as "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" (1986) and "A Postmodern Fable" (1992). Themes from *Les Immatériaux* also crop up more peripherally in other texts, like the reference to contemporary music and to urban habitation as sites of philosophy in *Moralités postmodernes* (1993), or Lyotard's preoccupation in the 1990s with André Malraux, which leads to several essays and a full biography of the artistic and political polymath and was presumably spurred by Lyotard's own excursion into the borderlands of art institutions, exhibition curating, and cultural politics.

The tally of benefits was more ambivalent for the CCI and its members. *Les Immatériaux* began as a project that was intended to serve the programmatic agenda of the CCI and, at the same time, strengthen its position within the Centre Pompidou. Both in terms of its content and its form, the exhibition went against the grain of what the CCI would have normally done in its major efforts, like *Architecture et Industrie* (1983), or *Lieux ? de travail* (1986). But from today's perspective we can see how *Les Immatériaux* helped to broaden the scope of what belongs to the domain of "design thinking". Architecture curator Alain Guiheux criticised the scenographic solution chosen by Philippe Délis and Lyotard for being representational of the sentiment of vagueness and insecurity that it was supposed to

convey, and thus for being designed to look like what it was supposed to mean (Guiheux 1985, 214). But his argument can also be reversed, in the sense that Lyotard's postmodern approach made such a narrative and representational scenography possible and thus enabled the CCI to expand its horizon.

For a variety of reasons, *Les Immatériaux* did not serve to substantiate the standing of the CCI within the Centre Pompidou. The collaborations with the BPI, IRCAM, and MNAM, remained distanced and did not remove the stigma of the CCI being 'merely' an institute for the sociology of the applied arts. Through its own organisational freedom, *Les Immatériaux* rather served to accentuate the shift from the 'first', more anarchic Centre Georges Pompidou—whose beacon the CCI had been—to the then emergent, 'second', more centralised and more representative Centre Pompidou. Seen in this context, the departure from the CCI of people like Thierry Chaput and Marc Girard—who joined the new Cité des Sciences at La Villette in 1986—also forms part of the legacy of *Les Immatériaux*, as well as the very disappearance of the CCI as an independent entity in 1992 under the presidency of Dominique Bozo, when it came under the tutelage of the MNAM.

However, when viewed from further away than the Beaubourg compound, *Les Immatériaux* quickly became famous for being one of the earliest instances anywhere in the high-profile cultural sphere in which the new electronic and digital technologies were not only used as technical supports, but where they featured as the objects of a philosophical and critical reflexion about the impact that these new technologies were having on society in general, and artistic production in particular. It was a particular historical juncture which made this project possible: a young tech-savvy design curator who dared to take an ambitious assignment, an unorthodox thinker who wanted to get away from the usual ways of doing philosophy, a cultural context in Paris with plenty of technocultural expertise in what would, two decades later, be conceived as "digital culture", and two nested institutions—the CCI and the Centre Pompidou—which were flexible, curious and open enough to welcome and house such an unlikely project.

## Bibliography

Andreas Broeckmann: *The Making of Les Immatériaux*. Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2025.

Alain Guiheux: *L'Ordre de la brique*. Bruxelles: Mardaga, 1985.

Yuk Hui, Andreas Broeckmann (eds): *30 Years after Les Immatériaux: Art, Science & Theory*. Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2015.

Jean-François Lyotard: "Lyotard's Interviews on *Les Immatériaux*." *Les Immatériaux Research*, Working Paper No. 11, edited by Andreas Broeckmann and Sergio Meijide Casas, 2024. [<https://les-immateriaux.net/working-papers/>]

Jean-François Lyotard: "On a Collaboration / D'un travail" (1986). *Les Immatériaux Research*, Working Paper No. 6, edited and with a preface by A. Broeckmann, 2021. [<https://les-immateriaux.net/working-papers/>]

Jean-François Lyotard: "Hommage à Thierry Chaput", unpublished document, dated May 1990, private archive.

The French version of this text appeared under the title "D'une coopération. Le travail de Jean-François Lyotard avec le CCI pour l'exposition «Les Immatériaux»" in *Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, special issue on the CCI, No. 170, Winter 2024–2025, p. 129–137. The research for this paper was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, Project No. BR 6317/2-1). It was kindly supported by the MNAM/CCI New Media Department (especially Marcella Lista, Marie Vicet, Julie Champion) and the Bibliothèque Kandinsky (Nicolas Liucci-Goutnikov, Mica Gherghescu and colleagues). It was chiefly conducted in the Archives publiques of the Centre Pompidou where it was generously facilitated by Jean-Philippe Bonilli and Jean Charlier.

Berlin, February 2025