Exhibiting and Sensibilizing: Recontextualizing Les Immatériaux[*]

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What could it mean to recontextualize *Les Immatériaux*, an unpopular yet legendary exhibition that took place in March 1985 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris? *Les Immatériaux*, now widely considered one of the most important exhibitions of the twentieth century, was co-curated by design theorist Thierry Chaput and philosopher JeanFrançois Lyotard, the latter of whom was enjoying the international fame of his *The Postmodern Condition*, published in 1979. Only decades later was the value of the exhibition recognized outside France, notably in a special issue of *Tate Paper* in 2009[1] and in 2014 at a two-day conference in Lüneburg titled *30 years after Les Immatériaux*.[2] This essay is an attempt to recontextualize the event, to position the importance of this exhibition historically, and to give new meanings to *Les Immatériaux* in our time.

To begin, it must be noted that the object of *Les Immatériaux* was "sensibility." The curatorial team preferred to call it a "manifestation" rather than an exhibition, because the aim was not to exhibit certain artworks, but rather to arouse a sensibility elicited by new scientific discoveries and technological inventions. "Manifestation" must be understood here as "sensibilization." But is this not a truism, since every exhibition is an organization of the sensible? To be sure, every exhibition deals with the sensible, namely aesthetics, but not every exhibition has sensibility as its object. Some orthodox art historians would say Lyotard was a philosopher and not knowledgeable about art and exhibition-making; in saying so, however, they refused to understand that this was not an exhibition. The importance of *Les Immatériaux* lies precisely therein.

The new material condition of the era demanded a return to the question of sensibility. In fact, there was no immaterial in this exhibition, for "immaterial" meant "new material," that is, telecommunication technologies, artificial skin, synthetic textile, and robotics, etc. From this perspective, the technological transformation addressed in *Les Immatériaux* cannot easily be identified with registers of traditional philosophy since it exceeds and overflows such schemes. The neologism "immaterial" (manifested by its prefix im-) signified a rupture, a negation, contrary to the notion of continuity that the term "new material" might convey. Lyotard's concept of the postmodern, considered as a synthesis, resulted from the dialectics of the modern: the development of modern technology negates the philosophical system which has been its foundation. It is for this reason that *Les Immatériaux* is an opening, the announcement of a new epoch, in which a new sensibility had to be presented and interrogated.

Matter and Sensibility

How can sensibility possibly be the object of an exhibition? Readers of the *Les Immatériaux* catalog will find the word sensibility on almost every page. Although the French word "sensibilité" is often translated as sensitivity or sensitiveness, referring to the Kantian "sensible presence," I have chosen to keep the term "sensibility" since for Lyotard,

it also implied the "attention" to an epochal change. The other reason why I prefer "sensibility" to sensitivity is that Lyotard's concept of sensibility, different from Kant's concept, is primarily a form of "resistance." This gesture of resistance is omnipresent in Lyotard's writings on aesthetics as well as in "*Les Immatériaux*," which we may want to consider as anti-aesthetics. What is the relation between sensibility and anti-aesthetics? And how does this relation manifest itself in the exhibition? In order to have a better understanding of its role, we cannot avoid an excursion into Lyotard's thinking, which is fundamental for the conceptualization of *Les Immatériaux*.

Anti-aesthetics does not mean against aesthetics, negating aesthetics, but rather against the harmony of the beautiful, namely the agreement between sensible intuitions, imagination, and understanding. In *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*,[3] a collection of lectures dedicated to Kant's concept of the sublime, we find the most elaborated philosophical exposition of Lyotard's interpretation, which we venture to summarize as follows. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant introduces what he calls reflective judgment in juxtaposition to determinative judgement. If determinative judgment means the subordination of sense data to categories of the understanding (i.e., universals already given as such), then reflective judgement does not begin with the universal, but rather from the particular, in order to make its way to the universal. This means that reflective judgement is fundamental to autonomy since it has to reach its own universal laws instead of following heteronomous rules. In this sense, we can say that the beautiful, though universal and necessary, is not something already given, but rather that which occurs through a heuristics of reflection.

Like the beautiful, the sublime is a subjective experience. But it is an exceptional one, because the feeling of the sublime stems from the malfunction of the Kantian analytic machine: understanding and imagination alone cannot arrive at the concept. To have a concept of an object, say a triangle, it is possible to do so by subordinating the sense data to categories of the understanding—such as quality, quantity, relation, and modality— before it is unified by the transcendental imagination (i.e., schematization). But in the case of the sublime, imagination ceaselessly tries but fails to arrive at a concept (or, in the Kantian language, it fails to produce the concept of the object): it is the moment when reason is called upon to impose violence on imagination, in order to stop the heuristic process. We may refer to the example given by Kant himself, of encountering an Egyptian pyramid: when we are too close to it, our gaze always rests on successive apprehension (*Auffassung*) without being able to comprehend (*Zusammenfassen*) the pyramid as a unity.[4] Ironically enough, we know that Kant never encountered a pyramid in his life since he never travelled outside of Konigsberg, but he was able to imagine an artificial object that could not be comprehended by imagination alone! This example of the pyramid shows that the sublime functions as malfunction. The sublime is, in Kant's sense, a use (*Gebrauch*) or, for Lyotard, an abuse, a subreption.[5] It is an abuse because it demands that reason imposes violence on imagination in order to keep the process from running into an infinite loop. The sublime sacrifices the aesthetic to the ethical, because its real goal is to arouse a feeling of respect (*Achtung*): as Lyotard himself posited, "The sublime is none other than the sacrificial announcement of the ethical in the aesthetic field."[6] This antiaesthetics of the sublime is the aesthetics of the avant-garde, as Lyotard claims in a chapter of his book *The Inhuman* titled "After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics": "For the last century, the arts have not had the beautiful as their main concern, but something which has to do with the sublime."[7] This signifies a historical break from the Enlightenment humanism featured in the work of, for example, Friedrich Schiller who, in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), proposed that the realization of the beautiful is the realization of humanity, placing the notion of harmony at the center of his discourse.

In Kant and Schiller, art must be in service to the moral. In Kant, we find the beautiful as the symbol of the moral, and in Schiller, we find art as the realization of the "most

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JeanFrançois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime. Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 23-29.

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Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment, trans.* James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 26.

5
Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 70.

6
JeanFrançois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflection on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 137.

7
Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 135.

sublime humanity." What, then, could art be if it refused to become a sacrifice to the moral? Could art refuse to be a symbol of the moral at all? This question is central to Lyotard's writing on aesthetics as well as his discourse on the postmodern, in which he gives an affirmative answer. The sublime for Lyotard is no longer a rare exceptional event, but rather that which presents a new sensibility of its epoch. Such affirmation consequently demands a redefinition of art according to its epoch, and a return to the sublime, as Jacques Rancière has observed in this article "The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller":

> Lyotard seems at first glance to be in keeping with the Hegelian
> innovation. Hegel changed the Kantian feeling of the sublime
> into the characteristic of an art, the symbolic art. He makes the
> sublime discrepancy into a property of artworks themselves.[8]

Lyotard has generalized the sublime as the aesthetics of the avant-garde and consequently avant-garde as the artistic form of the postmodern. It is the reason why the unpresentable (*Undarstellbar*) constitutes the core idea of the avant-garde, since the unpresentable is that which activates the confrontation between reason and imagination, and leads to the unrepresentable (*Unvorstellbar*). It is not only Hegel, as we know, who attempted to reinvent the sublime as an art form, but also his contemporaries Schelling and Novalis, who undertook such a reinvention by exploring, for example, the Greek tragedy or the Laocoon. The difference is that, for Lyotard, such a sublime is no longer limited to nature and the work of art, but also applicable to the very notion of matter.

As mentioned above, the title of the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* does not designate anything immaterial, but rather refers to new materials. Before the arrival of Lyotard as the cocurator, several tentative titles were proposed: "Matériau et création" ("Materials and Creation"), "Matériaux nouveaux et création" ("New Materials and Creation"), "La Matière dans tous ses états" ("Matter in All Its Forms"), and finally *Les Immatériaux* was chosen. The neologism immatériaux was meant to signify a break from the modern, as opposed to "new materials" which may have suggested a continuation of the modern. "New material" carried an understanding of nature as a passive entity waiting to receive a form and identity, while the immaterial, different from matter, pointed to the unmasterable.[9] This may sound like what is called "vibrant matter" today in the framework of so-called "new materialism," however there is a significant difference in that Lyotard did not mobilize a vibrant matter against a form considered to be dominant and active, but rather completely moved away from the hylomorphism between form and matter of classical philosophy. Matter is considered to be an "event of passion," as Rancière has remarked:

> At the end of the ninth paragraph, after having emphasized the singular,
> incomparable quality of the grain of skin, the fragrance of an aroma, of
> the tone or the nuance [...] Matter designates "the event of a passion," a
> disarray that brings to mind the consciousness of "an obscure debt."[10]

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Jacques Rancière, "The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller: Two readings of Kant and their political significance," *Radical Philosophy* 126, Jul/Aug 2004: 8.

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See JeanFrancois Lyotard, "After 6 months of work…," Hui and Broeckmann, eds., *30 Years after Les Immatériaux*, 37–38.

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Rancière, "The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller," 9.

Given his careful reading of Lyotard, it is rather surprising that Rancière does not once mention *Les Immatériaux* in his text, though he may have known that these objects ("grain of skin," "fragrance of aroma") were all included in the exhibition. (One may wonder if this is due to Rancière's reluctance to think with technology, in ways that led him to unconsciously reduce Lyotard's aesthetics to simple dialectics between agreement and disagreement?) We know that Lyotard was also impressed by the French networked machines called Minitel during that time, and these machines were used in the exhibition as well as in a collective writing project called "épreuve d'écriture" which was published as part of the catalog: matter is conceived rather in terms of a model of communication (which we will examine later). Understanding the new materials demanded a new sensibility; this is why sensibility was the object of the exhibition, which I propose to call a new episteme.

While it is true that Lyotard never employed Michel Foucault's concept of episteme to describe the postmodern, it is rather intuitive to connect what Foucault did in *The Order of Things* (1966) with Lyotard's intention. In his book, Foucault analyses an epistemic transformation that occurred in Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, corresponding to three periods: Renaissance, Classical, and Modern. We can generalize the concept of episteme as the following: the sensible condition under which a certain system of knowledge is possible (for example, in the vocabulary of Philippe Descola,[11] a sensibility associated with analogism will hardly produce the same type of knowledge as sensibility associated with naturalism). It seems that Lyotard continued Foucault's analysis by extending it to the twentieth century, though we must also acknowledge that the two philosophers have a different definition and periodization of what is modern. If we want to see *Les Immatériaux* as a manifestation of the postmodern sensibility, we must first of all understand how this sensibility is called into question by the exhibition.

The exhibition wanted to arouse a sensibility towards the transformation of the material world and the new form of aesthetic experience it implied, giving rise to new ways of knowing as well as new relations to the world. It sought to provoke a feeling of insecurity, anxiety, and uncertainty. As mentioned earlier, this sensibility is motivated by the material transformation of the world, including telecommunication, bio, and chemical technologies, which significantly changed our way of perceiving materiality. Lyotard emphasizes this point in the "Album" part of the exhibition catalog:

> We wanted to awaken a sensibility, not to indoctrinate the spirits. The exhibition is a postmodern dramaturgy. No heroes, no story. A maze of situations organized by questions: our sites. A fabric of voice received by portable earphones: our soundtracks. The visitor, in his solitude, is summoned to choose his course at the intersection of the plots holding him and the voices calling for him.[12]

Thierry Chaput states further:

> When the true becomes uncertain, when existence loses its Manicheism and is only a state of density of a probable presence, then "grasping" becomes vague. Delivered from the hegemony of the understanding (vain vanity?), *Les Immatériaux* then calls for a secret sensibility.[13]

This secret sensibility is itself the object of the exhibition, characterized by the insecurity or loss of identity of the human being in face of the immaterial. How is this immaterial analyzed? We may want to remind ourselves that Lyotard was part of the "linguistic turn." When he took up the curatorial work in 1983 (though the whole project has actually started a few years earlier under the direction of Chaput and got suspended), he just published *Le Différend* (1983), a book dedicated to a parallel reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and Kant's critical philosophy. The question of language was hence fundamental in Lyotard's conceptualization of this exhibition, since telecommunication technology had created a new materiality of language between senders and receivers; or more fundamentally, it served as the material basis of the postmodern. The communication model of the immaterial is for Lyotard a means to dissolve the substantial understanding of being that we can identify, for example, in the hylomorphism of Aristotle as well as in the dualism of Descartes. The self-grounding figure of the human is subverted by its own technical exteriorizations. Interaction, a term that was closely related to new technologies at that time, was frequently employed by Lyotard to describe a possible new metaphysics within which the human subject is totally dissolved, and conceived as no more than movements of particles and activities of waves:

> This plasticity of humans means that this structure of communication today seems like something upon which identities can no longer be fixed: we can no longer say that in the structure of communication man is, for example, in the role of the sender any more than that of the receiver.[14]

This conceptualization allows Lyotard to develop an ontology of the material or immaterial according to a model of telecommunication, as shown by this communication diagram included in the *Petit Journal* published in conjunction with the exhibition.[15]

Each of these five categories are raised not only as a fact, but also as an insecurity brought about by these changes. For example, in the Inventaire part of the catalog, Lyotard understands the term "matériau" as follows:

> Matériau – That on which a message is inscribed: its support. It resists. It is necessary to know how to take it, to vanquish it. It was the craft (métier), making a table from a tree […] The evolution of craftsmanship towards design and computer engineering. The decline of the value attached to work, experience, willingness, emancipation […] The pressing question is: with the loss of the support (matériau), is our destiny unemployment?[16]

The insecurity of unemployment joins the new form of knowledge production brought about by automation technology. The objects and artworks in the exhibition, as well as the "sites" around which their presentation was organized, were also classified and ordered according to these five categories. At the entrance, there was an Egyptian bas-relief sculpture, accompanied in the Inventaire of the catalogue by the following words: "Humans received life and meaning: the soul. They had to return it, intact, perfected. Is there something for them today? This is a major issue of this event."[17] The visit was then followed by a long and dark corridor. Visitors had to wear headphones and listen to the soundtrack, made of spoken texts accessible in 26 different zones throughout the exhibition space. After passing through the corridor, one entered the "Théâtre du noncorps (Theatre of the nonbody)" dedicated to Samuel Beckett, which showed five dioramas installed by Beckett's set designer, Jean-Claude Fall. There was no actor, or rather there were actors without bodies: the first direct reflection upon the modern gaze. From there began very different, intersecting paths, leading to more than sixty sites. For example, corresponding to the category Matériau, the site titled *Deuxième peau* (*Second skin*) showed different types of grafts made of pork skins, cultivated skins, and artificial skins. Another site, titled *L'Angel* (*The Angel*), displayed a large photograph of Annegret Soltau's *Schwanger* (1978), which shows the artist's body in different stages of her pregnancy.
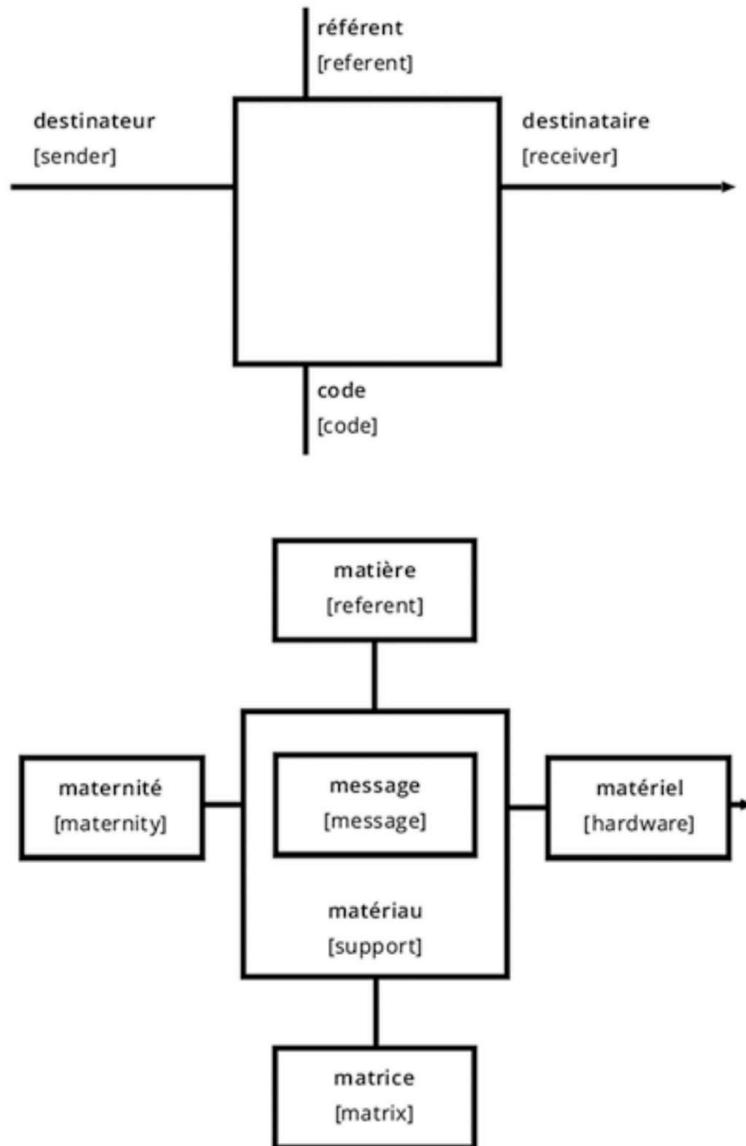
We will not exhaust the objects displayed in the exhibition, since they are all presented in the Inventaire of the catalog. The exhibition, or as Lyotard preferred to call it, the manifestation, was a demonstration of the epochal change expressed by the new material construction of the world, drawing visitors into disorientation. Visitors did not have a feeling of being at home, but rather, as in *Alice in Wonderland*, everything was meant to be familiar yet strange. To put it more generally, *Les Immatériaux* presented a liberation from the shackles of rules, codes, and oppositions of modernity; a celebration which was evident in almost all the domains listed in the exhibition: alimentation, perfume, architecture, urbanism, art, astrophysics and physics, biology and genetics, writing, habitat, mathematics, money, music, theater, and dance, etc. These objects were taking new shapes and new compositions, things that we normally do not pay attention to. The exhibition with the organization of its sites presented a disoriented world, a labyrinth in which every object was at once familiar and strange.

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Lyotard, "After 6 months of work…," 37.

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Les Immatériaux: Petit Journal (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1985), 2.

16
Les Immatériaux, Inventaire (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1985), 11. My translation.

17
Les Immatériaux, Inventaire, 5. My translation.

référent
[referent]

destinateur
[sender]

destinataire
[receiver]

code
[code]

matière
[referent]

maternité
[maternity]

message
[message]

matériel
[hardware]

matériau
[support]

matrice
[matrix]

Exhibiting and Sensibilizing

Keeping in mind that the main object of *Les Immatériaux* was not to display artworks or any particular theme, but rather "sensibility," this exhibition has to be distinguished from the genre of "new media art" exhibitions taking place in the same period.[18] It was meant to be an experience of disorientation, in the sense that one lost direction, failed to identify a daily familiarity, while opening something new, a break, as indicated by the prefix "im–." In the exhibition press release, one can read that *Les Immatériaux* "is a kind of dramaturgy set between the fulfilment of a period and the anxiety of a nascent era at the dawn of postmodernity, and in this sense, it is both a philosophical and artistic project. It seeks to awaken a sensibility already there, to make strange in the familiar, and how difficult it is to get an idea of what is changing."[19] Envisaging the construction of the exhibition space, Lyotard proposed to go back to the "Promenade Vernet" written by Denis Diderot when he was reviewing the seven paintings of ClaudeJoseph Vernet in

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Such as, for example, *Electra. Electricity and Electronics in the Art of the XXth Century*, held at MAM – Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1983.

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"Texte de la cassette-son remise à la presse," *Les Immatériaux Press Release* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1985), 9. My translation.

the 1767 Salon,[20] in which the philosopher described the paintings not as pictures to be viewed following the traditional logic of the division of the gallery space, but rather as real sites (or *machine à sites*).

Lyotard and Chaput did not want to just show how computerization was at play in society, nor were they trying to make a prophecy on where it was heading; rather they wanted to conceive a new episteme as something that had "already" arrived and had "yet" to be interrogated and made present. The exhibition was an invitation to experience this new sensibility and, with it, to see the world anew. In other words, the exhibition was an "education of sensibility." Sensibility is that which cannot be exhibited as such, but can be sensed like an addon (à-côté) of the exhibition. It is something that is not present as such but can be made sensible precisely because of its absence: as Lyotard claimed in his book *Que Peindre*, "When you turn to the front of a sculpture, you find yourself at its back, and when you look at the back, there is something missing in the front."[21] The unpresentable becomes the subject of presentation, and it is only in this seeming contradiction that art takes over philosophy.

Les Immatériaux can also be seen as a response to the advent of new media art exhibitions and the hype of the "information revolution" at that time in Europe. First of all, it is said that *The Postmodern Condition* was a response to another report/book titled *The Computerization of Society*[22] published by two computer scientists, Simon Nora and Alain Minc. Secondly, a prevalent discourse in museology at the time focused on the computerization of museums, prescribed for example by Pontus Hulten who later became director of the Centre Pompidou. Hulten spoke about museum space as a "space of communication," in response to the "true science of information being developed in correlation with the new direction taken by science and the humanities: history of art, computer science, cybernetics, linguistics and semiology, the calling into question of the concepts of theory, of history, space and time, sign."[23] Let us note that the computerization of museums that Hulten proposed continues today, now in the name of artificial intelligence and data analysis aimed at automatizing museums and improving visitors' experience. However, *Les Immatériaux* was not an endorsement of the computerization of society, of which Lyotard was already very critical in *The Postmodern Condition*. Neither was the exhibition a denunciation of computerization, since it is a condition for the existence of the immaterial, without which no postmodern sensibility is possible. We are thus confronted with a contradiction, namely, we can conceive of computerization as being simultaneously both hegemony and resistance: it is hegemony because it imposes systemic determination; it is resistance because it provides means to resist such determination. It is the question of sensibility that helps us resolve this paradox, since the exhibition was neither a simple rejection nor an endorsement of technology, but rather a project suggesting and making present a new episteme, one able to condition our relations to and our feelings of technologies.

Les Immatériaux, therefore, opens up the question of exhibition as a form of sensibilization, presented as a response to both the problem imposed by technology and the possibility brought about by it. It seems to me that this is a task that Lyotard has given to art, as a response to the epoch of the "enframing(*Gestell*)." Let us recall that in his 1949 lecture *The Question Concerning Technolog*y,[24] Martin Heidegger proposed to distinguish technology from the essence of technology. For Heidegger, the question of essence goes beyond technology as utility and tool in its relation to Being. If the essence of the Greek technē is poiesis (or "bringing forth", Hervorbringen), then the essence of modern technology is enframing (or *Gestell*): its mode of unconcealment is no longer bringing forth but rather challenging; it sees everything as resource or standing reserve. Digital technology is a continuation of the *Gestell*, namely its essence is also *Gestell*. However, *Les Immatériaux* did not simply condemn digital technology as *Gestell* like Heidegger would have done; rather it suggested that we see an irreducible double in it, and attempted to transform it into a new condition rendering modern technology

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Denis Diderot, "Salon de 1767," *Œuvres*, ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Laffont, 1994–1998).

21
JeanFrançois Lyotard, *Que Peindre?* (Paris: Hermann, 2008), 169. My translation.

22
Alain Minc, Simon Nora, *The Computerization of Society, A Report to the President of France* (MIT Press, 1980). [*L'Informatisation de la société / rapport à M. le Président de la République* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1978)].

23
Pontus Hultén, "Le musée, lieu de communication," *Skira annuel* 75, 1975: 126. My translation. Hulten conceived it as four concentric circles defined by information: 1. Primary information (tele promised communication); 2. Space and tools for information processing (workshops for the public, artists, and museum staff); 3. Processed information (art exhibition, films, music, dance, theater...); 4. Art collection, film archives ... (Processed and preserved information: memory). See also Pavie Yann, "Vers le musée du futur: entretien avec Pontus Hultén," *Opus International* 24–25, 1971: 58-61. For a more detailed analysis please see Yuk Hui et Adeena Mey, "L'exposition comme médium. Quelques observations sur la cybernétisation de l'institution et de l'exposition," *Appareil* 18, 2017. Available at: http://journals.openedition. org/appareil/2413 (DOI: 10.4000/ appareil.2413).

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Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays" (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1977). ["Die Frage nach der Technik," *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Garland Publishing, 1954].

contingent. In other words, *Les Immatériaux* proposed understanding the *Gestell* with a new episteme, instead of saving its modern anchorage in the opposition between nature and technology. If our hypothesis is correct, that *Les Immatériaux* was an attempt to exhibit a new episteme, an opening which is almost closed now—after the decline of the postmodern and most of its interpretations since Lyotard's death in 1998—there is an urgency to raise this question anew in view of the technological acceleration towards increasing automation.

It is said that after *Les Immatériaux* Lyotard wanted to conceive a sequel exhibition titled "Les Résistances." While there is no documentary evidence to support this claim, the question of resistance is clearly omnipresent in his writings after *Les Immatériaux* (for example in his 1988 *The Inhuman* as well as in his posthumous publication *Misère de la philosophie*). Our main task here is not to elaborate on the problem of technology and Lyotard's later thinking.[25] Rather our aim is to use *Les Immatériaux* as means of elaborating on exhibiting as sensibilizing. To exhibit is not just to show what is in fashion and interesting—such as demonstrating what artificial intelligence and machine learning can do and how creative artists can work with big data—but rather to awaken a sensibility, not only as a response to the epoch but also to resituate and transform the *Gestell* in order to liberate the power of imagination which has been impoverished by a blindness towards progress and acceleration. We should emphasize that sensibilizing does not mean to decelerate, but rather to take technology in another direction, as *Les Immatériaux* attempted to do and "Les Résistances" wished to continue. Sensibilizing means precisely to intervene and to transform the epoch by radicalizing the question of aesthetics.

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I deal with these questions specifically in *The Question Concerning Technology in China. An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016) and more extensively in the monograph, *Recursivity and Contingency* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019).