

Notes for Description
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I would like to talk about the relationship of making a work and theory. Can a work of art describe, and if so, what does it describe? Is there always a what of description? Description seems to belong to language, but perhaps the description that art provides is the significance, or the mark, or the space of what Blanchot writes in the *Painfulness of Dialogue* is "that which eludes any form of communication is the basis of what they communicate." Or, it is a turn of that circle of which we are always turning in our seeking and finding. And so I must think of this relationship, or making a work and its relationships as dialogue, and of investigation.

I was reading an essay by Mary Kelly recently, and wrote this down:

"The materiality of practice: initially defined in terms of the constraints of a particular medium, it must now be redefined as a specific production of meaning."

Does this production of meaning come about through language, or perhaps through form, a limit in the way language is?

Blanchot: the first paragraph of the *Narrative Voice*:

The limits set by exhaustion limit our lives. The significance of life is in turn limited by this limit--the limited significance of a limited life. But a reversal occurs which can be perceived in various ways. Language alters the situation. The words I speak tend to draw life into the limits that ought to contain it. To say that life is limited does not make the limit disappear; but language gives it the possibly limitless meaning it is supposed to limit; the meaning of limit by stating it contradicts the limitation of meaning or at least displaces it. But in this way the knowledge of limit understood as limitation of meaning may be lost. How then can we talk of limit (convey its meaning) without the meaning un-limiting it?

There is a lot to unpack here. Signification seems to be the visibility of a limit, a boundary of meaning made known drawn from limitless meaning. Not an act of signification as in assigning a proper code, but as an act of indication, or making known. A word opens up into many meanings, but meaning is dependent on limit. How does the limit come into appearance?

Nancy, *Suspended Step*:

... sense comes before all significations, pre-vents and over-takes them, even as it makes them possible, forming the opening of the general signifyingness [or significance] (or opening of the world) in which and according to which it is first if all possible for significations to come to produce themselves.

. . . it is not a matter of signification because it is a matter of a labor of thought -- of discourse and writing -- where thought uses itself to touch (to be touched by) that which is not for it a 'content' but its body: the space of this extension and opening in which and as which it exscribes itself, that is, lets itself be transformed into the concreteness or praxis of sense.

The thing itself: the sense of the world. "To accede to the thing itself" can no longer mean 'to arrive at the constitution of an ordinary signification, but to hold the step of thought suspended over this sense that has already touched us.

The step of thought is something other than the sense of completeness which perhaps comes about when we concentrate on what is inside of the limit, this makes the limit a point of closure instead of one of openings. In attending to limits, there is no completion or perfection, just stepping. Blanchot gives us images of a circle whose center is not known, of night and waiting and a certain emptiness, which drives us towards the limit. It is something that makes us vulnerable and in pain and is the place which compels us to work, to enter a dialogue. The clarity of the detailed observations in Robbe-Grillet's novel brings us to an awareness of what is not observed. They are the evidence of the scene in which we are not present.

In looking up the definition of noticing, there is a listing of synonyms -- to discern, to perceive, and these words are described as "point-action" verbs. This pointing suggests a relationship to something. By pointing to a thing, we do not destroy it, but call attention, acknowledge. A poem describes an experience, when we read it, we come to the realization of that which is described is like how it is described. The description changes how we know something. The meaning is changed by its being pointed to.

"To see is thus to apprehend immediated from a distance and through distance. To see is to make use of separation, not a mediating, but as a means of immediation, as immediating." (Blanchot, *Speaking is not Seeing*, p. 28)

"The absence of work in which discourse ceases so that, outside speech, outside language, the movement of writing may come, under the attraction of the outside" (Blanchot, *Speaking is not Seeing*, p. 32)

Concreteness, touch, immediacy. There is an underlying sense of touch in these quotes: 'a means of immediation', 'under the attraction of the outside' or Nancy, 'to hold the step of thought suspended.' Immediacy, attraction, suspension are spaces of tension, of some sort of force, not a passivity, or mere reflection, or violence of one over another.

The word tact -- a sense of touch, but also a politeness, being appropriate. Tact in a social situation is aimed at resolving a difficult situation of not wanting to

harm, it comes from discomfort, it strives to overcome discomfort. Conversation comes from comfort, from knowing.

To wonder if art can describe, and what these relationships of making work has to both its own making and to language, and to theory. In another essay by Nancy, *The Vestiges of Art*, he describes art as a vestige. Art as becoming visible, otherwise than as image, coming to make itself felt otherwise.

The vestige is almost nothing; it is the smoke of the fire, or footprints that mark someone passing without making known who passed by. It seems to be some marking that is not closure, but drawn into other relationships -- that of action, like the point-action verb. There is something valuable in this description of art in the temporality of the relationships, as sort of endless tension for a practice of investigation.

Works cited:

"Speaking is Not Seeing," by Maurice Blanchot, from *Infinite Conversation*

"The Painfulness of Dialogue," by Maurice Blanchot, from *The Siren's Song*

"The Clarity of Fiction," by Maurice Blanchot, from *The Siren's Song*

"The Narrative Voice and the Impersonal 'He'," by Maurice Blanchot, from *The Siren's Song*

"The Vestiges of Art," by Jean Luc Nancy, from *The Muses*

"Suspended Step," by Jean Luc Nancy, from *The Sense of the World*