Jean-Luc Nancy
(1940-2021)
Jean-Luc Nancy’s writing covers a huge range of concerns and intellectual references. His main ideas though are centred upon the notion of sense, the concept of freedom, community, the fragment, the work of art, the image, finite thinking, singularity and sovereignty. Throughout his writing, which is invariably dense, even opaque, we see influences ranging from Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, Blanchot, Lacan and Derrida. It is particularly important to understand how Nancy readings often assume a dual character of both being within and against or outside texts on an equal level. This is especially evident in relationship to Hegel and Heidegger.
Nancy bases his philosophical outlook on the notion of a finite thinking. It is a way of thinking of an essential finitude of sense outside of the assembled power of signification. Recording the movement of thought itself, then it exposes thought at its limit as experience.
BEING-WITH (MITSEIN).

For Nancy being means making-sense and is the sum total of its articulations. Following from this being is both relational and differential. All being is being towards something and assumes spacing of this as relation. Sense is born in that space of fracture and takes place or is figured as surprise. Exposure is thus an exposure to the spacing of being. In turn there is no totality of the body, only its sharing out. Being is the sharing of places and the production of spaces. This factor provides the basis of community.
SENSE

Sense in Nancy precedes the separation between the intelligible and the sensible and as such is both before and in excess of signification. Sense is without substance, and it is born into presence so is a becoming of something. Sense is that something that is always-only-coming and once it is presented then it disappears into nothingness. Sense is only sense when it comes to its limit.
“The Hegelian subject is not to be confused with subjectivity as a separate and one-sided agency for synthesizing representation nor with subjectivity as the inclusive interiority of a personality. Each of these can be moments among others of the subject, but the subject is nothing of the sort. In a word: the Hegelian subject is in no way the self all to itself. It is, to the contrary, and it is essentially, what (or the one who) dissolves all substance—”

P4-5
For Nancy “freedom is not a sense conferred upon existence... Rather, it is the very fact of existence as open to existing itself.”
In his book ‘The Experience of Freedom’ Jean-Luc Nancy states that freedom ‘is not a property of which we must demonstrate our possession, nor is it a faculty whose legitimacy we must, in the Kantian sense, deduce.” (P21) Freedom for Nancy, ‘cannot be the object of a question’ but is rather ‘the putting into question of an affirmation.’ The experience of freedom or its presentation is not an object of knowing because freedom does not essentially belong to itself and therefore cannot be posited as an essence. Freedom and thought are co-existent in the sense that freedom lends to thought its leap into existence, thinking “is thus in freedom’ (P58) Thinking requires this leap because otherwise it is held within its limit, whereas freedom unleashes thought at the very border of its existence because it comes to know itself as thought by touching the experience of freedom and trembling upon its own border along freedom. As such thinking is the freedom from the necessity of essence, foundation or cause. “The other of all thought – which is not the Other of thought, nor the thought of the Other, but that by which thought thinks – is the burst of freedom.’ (P59).
“Kant...had begun to recognize that what was at stake in art was not the representation of the truth, but - to put it briefly - the presentation of freedom.”

Jean-Luc Nancy
“Trembling is the act of being affected – a passive acting that merely makes the body vibrate, that unsettles substance. The self trembles at being touched, awakened, roused; it trembles as much at the feeling of its fragility as in the desire for its freedom.”

Jean-Luc Nancy
Hegel: The Restless of the Negative
In an essay ‘Finite History’ Jean-Luc Nancy states that our “time is no longer the time of history, and therefore, history itself appears to have become part of history. Our time is the time… of the suspense or suspension of history”. The claim that history is without direction or teleological path means that we can no longer assert that art history is a completed method but rather is subject to scissions that might not be resolved within its own matrix. In another essay ‘The Vestige of Art’ Nancy poses the idea that all that remains of art is its vestige (an ungraspable fragment, a trace) that in a fact art becomes a process of withdrawal (a passing through) from what it once was. So if history is suspended and art is withdrawn, how do we start the process of theorising contemporary art?
For Nancy, art is now, “both an evanescent trace and an almost ungraspable fragment,” and is “nothing more than its passage” but if this idea holds that what is the transmutation within the nature of modernity? To continue with this, “rather than a refusal of sense or sense of the Idea, joined to a will to end, there is a desire, or the will for sense in which signification can appear in relationship to any form so that “all that remains is its metaphysical desire.” For Nancy the “Idea” must go outside of itself in order to be itself and in withdrawing as an Idea, the image likewise withdraws and “the other of the image is the vestige.” Art suffers a similar withdrawal along with the image, so that art is its own vestige. This notion of the vestige is a form of passing by, a passing without identification.
“Painting is always on the threshold. It makes up the threshold between intactness and touching – between the intactness and touching of light and shadow.”

The Sense of the World, P82
"The imagination thus presents the image, or rather that there is (such a thing as) "image" (Bild). The image here is not the representative image, and is not the object. It is not the placing-in-form of something else but form forming itself, for itself, without object: fundamentally, art, according to Kant, represents nothing in either the beautiful or the sublime."
“The sublime does not escape into a space beyond the limit. It remains at the limit and takes place there.”
In the essay ‘A Sublime Offering’ (published in “A Finite Thinking’) Nancy is concerned with developing a re-reading of Kant and his ideas about the sublime and with this the notion of negative presentation. For Nancy “art itself is deranged’ in the sublime but what is central or at stake in the sublime is “a suspension of art” (P213). A way of understanding this notion is through the idea that art is provoked by something other than art and thus in a state of suspension trembles on its own edge. Nancy notes, that what is at issue with the work of art was not its relation to truth as representation but rather the presentation of freedom. Nancy also claims that the sublime is rather “unaesthetic” and is closer to an ethics and that the sublime, rather than being subordinate to the beautiful transforms and reconfigures it. The sublime if figured as “an aesthetics of movement as opposed to an aesthetics of the static” (P223) and as such an escape from limitation, a state in which everything becomes small. Placed at a limit, “there is no longer either figure or figuration or form,” (P229) instead we are given over to a pulsation. For Nancy the “sublime does not escape to a space beyond the limit. It remains at the limit and takes place there,” (P239) and that the “sublime offering” occurs as “the limit of presentation.”
“The sublime is a feeling... it is the emotion of the subject at the limit.”

Jean-Luc Nancy, The Sublime Offering
“A landscape is always a landscape of time, and doubly so: it is a time of year (a season) and a time of day (morning, noon, or evening), as well as a kind of weather (un temps), rain or snow, sun or mist. In the presentation of this time, which unfolds with every image, the present of representation can do nothing other than render infinitely sensible the passing of time, the fleeting instability of what is shown”

The Ground of the Image, P61
“The image contains the index of its frozenness (its form, its present, its representation) and at the same time the index of movement (force, appearing/disappearing).” For Nancy the photograph always contains something which is hallucinatory, something “that has lost its way or is out of place,” and thus represents a flight into a refined zone in the very heart of the familiar.

Jean-Luc Nancy ‘The Ground of the Image’ P98
In the ‘The Ground of the Image’ Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the deep ambivalence of the image. For Nancy there is always something that appears outside of the bounded condition of the image because the image exceeds form, breaking the surface of representation in the process. In this respect the image is excessive and part of this excessive is monstrous, drawing in some way the fault lines within presence. “The image is of the order of the monster; the monstrum is a prodigious sign, which warns (moneo, monstrum) of a divine threat. The German word for the image, Bild – which designates the image in its form or fabrication – comes from a root (bil-) that designates a prodigious force or a miraculous sign. It is in this sense that there is a monstrosity of the image.” (P22) Partly what is signified is the way the image is a tearing away in order to reveal “the depthless underside of its presentation”. For Nancy this feature is the source of the relationship between the image and violence, in both figures the excess of signs whilst also exceeding signs.
Titian, Perseus and Andromeda
1554-5
Jean-Luc Nancy says that the “image is always sacred” and in the sense it signifies what is set aside or removed. Nancy terms this quality the distinct, a quality in turn marked by the trait of withdrawal. What distinguishes the image from the thing is the quality of force or energy invested in it. It is not availability for use and as such is not an outcome of form but instead “gathers itself into itself.” As distinct, the image is unbound, approaching across a distance. For Nancy every “image is in some way a “portrait,” Not in that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and draws…”

Not only is the image designated as distinct, but Nancy states, that the “image always comes from the sky” (signifying by distinction and distance). The image is separated by its detachment from the ground and the way it is cut out from the ground: this creates edges, and in turn, the framing of the image. When the seductive lure of images is evoked it is because of their availability that issues from their being offered.
“...the image is not a matter of beauty. Rather, it is a matter of a certain tension in the look. An image draws the look, draws it in. This tension of the image is time. In time, I come before what is coming; I come right up to a thing that comes up to itself. I come, in other words, right up to the coming of the thing. What we call an “artist’s work” is nothing other than the organisation of this experience.”

Jean-Luc Nancy, Multiple Arts P215
Nancy discusses the relationship of images and violence noting that we have images of violence but that images are seen to bombard us. The idea of violence is connected with the quality of force that the image exhibits. “Violence always makes an image of itself, and the image is what, of itself, presses ahead of itself and authorizes itself.” Both violence and truth are for Nancy “self-showing” acts that take place in the image. This leads Nancy is to say that the “image is of the order of the monster”, a warning of divine threat and this also connects to the German word for the image, bild from the root bil designating “a prodigious force or a miraculous sign.” In talking of paintings in art galleries, there is an observation that perhaps “every image borders on cruelty.” If violence is the excess of signs and the image is likewise such an excess, then art is the transgression of being carried “beyond signs”, exceeding the sign by refusing to signify anything other than excess.
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“Violence “doesn’t want to hear it”, it has no interest in knowing. It is not interested in being anything but this ignorance or deliberate blindness, a stubborn will that removes itself from any set of connections and is concerned only with its own shattering intrusion.”

Jean-Luc Nancy, The Ground of the Image
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In his essay ‘The Vestige of Art’ in ‘The Muses’ Jean-Luc Nancy asks the question about art being only a vestige (“evanescent trace and an almost ungraspable fragment”). Nancy repudiates the idea that we are a civilisation of the image and states instead that “we are a civilization without image” because we are without idea. Following from this “art withdraws along with the image” and this withdrawal of art is the reason that art is manifest as vestige. The vestige signifies a step or passage that cuts a figure as opposed to creating an image. The vestige then is that of a passer-by because the vestige leaves no trace of identity occupying instead “the very brief lapse of time.”
“What is crucial to Nancy’s notion of art is a matter of strangeness. Art means access to what cannot be anticipated: art comes into presence on its own limit and as this limit, which borders on what is still strange, that is to say, unknown, impossible and negative to it, and even remains so.”

Martta Heikkila  At the Limits of Presentation (P291)
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Jean-Luc Nancy ‘The Ground of the Image’   P98
“The event points to what is to be thought at the heart of becoming, as something both more inaccessible and more decisive than the ‘passage’ (Ubergang) to which one ordinarily reduces it.”

Jean-Luc Nancy  The Surprise of the Event

A thought is an event.

The opening of modernity is nothing other than the opening of thought to the event.

The event is not an episode but “that there be” something.

The event points to what it is to be thought at the heart of becoming.
"The dialectic of the subject - the dialectic, the subject - has two sides, however. It contains death, it has only as a moment, but it does have that moment, the moment of gaping difference. The subject contains its difference from itself."

Jean-Luc Nancy  The Birth of Presence
In the chapter ‘Distinct Oscillations’ Nancy states that “the difference between text and image is flagrant. The text presents significations, the image presents forms.” Nancy traces the word imago as designating “the effigy of the absent, the dead, and, more precisely, the ancestors… it images absence. It does not represent this absence, it does not evoke it, it does not symbolize it, even though all this is there too. But, essentially, it presents absence. The absent are not there, are not “in images.” But they are imaged: their absence is woven into our presence. The empty place of the absent as a place that is not empty: that is the image.”
Van Gogh once said that death would take us to another star.
“Touch is nothing other than the touch of sense altogether and of all the senses. It is their sensuality as such...touch presents the proper moment of sensible exteriority, it presents it as such and as sensible.”

In Nancy being is given to us as sense but sense is shared or the capacity for sharing. We do not have sense but are sense.
Images give rise to yet more images. They are like foam.

...your hands, your lips...
Figuring time, memory and history

Sankai Juku, UMUSUNA (Memories Before History)
In his essay ‘Changing of the World’ published in the book “A Finite Thinking’ (2003) Jean-Luc Nancy states: “Yet we are talking about major ruptures that affect everyone, every generation, and all their images, languages, ways of life. From one moment to the next, this opens in us, allowing us to see this vast drift (derive) of the world. From one moment to the next, we find ourselves sensibly and physically outside of ourselves, outside the blind slipping away of our tiny stretch of time. We see the night that borders our time, and we touch on some aspect of it - not the future, but the coming of something or someone: the coming of something that is already of us and of the world, but that has to come from somewhere else, displaced elsewhere into an unimaginable elsewhere.” (FT301)
In the book “A Finite Thinking” Jean-Luc Nancy discusses the relationship between destruction and ways in which we might understand how this force might assume indexical relationship to the present culture. “Destruction has become a fact of culture or of civilisation. It has become not only, as is always the case, an action perpetrated, and not only a grand-scale operation, systematic in its object and methods (the genocides, the camps, the Armenian catastrophe, the Jewish Shoah, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Stalinist deportation, the shelling, napalm, defoliation, and oil fires that characterise modern warfare, the gassing of the Kurds, and so on – a litany that’s both unbearable and entirely necessary), but also a “value” or the distorted reflection of a value, the index, even, of a duty, a task, or a destiny. Perhaps this history is itself in the process of touching upon its limit; at the very least, though, we’d to say that destruction has ended up becoming just such an index, if not the index, of our culture.”