

Jean-Luc Nancy: Presentation and the Interval of Art

Martta Heikkilä

To characterize the role of aesthetics in Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy is hardly a simple task. Typical of his philosophical interests is the linking together of a manifold of ontological questions, which stretch from the various stages in the history of Western thinking to particular fields such as ethics and politics. In Nancy's view, what is at stake is thus no less than the sense birth into presence of Being itself. However, in order to consider Nancy's position in regard to aesthetics, and to gain an understanding of his notion of "art", I find it necessary to take a brief look at both his concepts of coming-into-presence, and those of difference, spacing or distance, by virtue of which things may present themselves. Tracing the roots of how these notions have arisen in Nancy's thought involves, in turn, taking up the theme of presentation (*Anwesen*) in Martin Heidegger's philosophy, as well as the idea of *différance* as presented by Jacques Derrida.

On what basis should we, then, attempt to draw together the lines connecting Nancy, Heidegger and Derrida? The most plausible answer, repeatedly addressed in the texts written on Nancy, is probably the tradition of deconstruction. I find it reasonable to agree with this, although deconstruction can by no means be referred to as "the whole truth" concerning Nancy's aims as a thinker, nor his relations to the philosophers that are closest to him. Yet Nancy's relation to both Heidegger and Derrida does not seem to be that of a philosopher commenting on the work of another. Admittedly he often cites these philosophers, especially Heidegger, but he does this in a far more complicated way by making cross-references, and challenging their work. Regarding Nancy's *œuvre* on a larger scale, the influence of Heidegger is particularly strong when speaking of their common horizon, that of the closure of metaphysics and the forgetting of Being. As regards his critique of metaphysics and the return to Being, it is not difficult to see that he owes a debt to Heidegger's efforts to descend from the

ontic level and discover Being. However, it should perhaps be noted that for Nancy the level of Being and that of beings is the same: existence is always the existence of an existent.

In building his view on the closure of metaphysics, Nancy usually turns to the interrogation of two opposing concepts and corresponding axes, namely philosophy and metaphysics.¹ Philosophy and metaphysics are not simply in opposition, though: Nancy defines metaphysics as what philosophy reveals itself as in its completion.² Philosophy, in turn, is constituted by sense³ and presentation, whereas the key terms of metaphysics are “signification” and “representation”, respectively. In this manner, the interrelated and interdependent pairs are “sense and signification”, “presentation and representation” and, finally, “philosophy and metaphysics”. These concepts, Nancy thinks, are the ones that manifest the process of the forgetting of philosophy, embodied in the metaphysical endeavour and leading to the limits of *logos*.⁴ The forgetting of Being and of philosophy consists in forming a new object for of philosophical questioning, derived from the discourse itself, that is, from its own existence and its own signification. With Nancy the forgetting thus means philosophy’s turning away from its original interrogative nature and, thus, its folding and closing in on itself; philosophy having itself as the source of questioning.⁵

In this process what is at stake, above all, is the deconstitution of the classical, self-appropriative subject of knowledge and its substitution with the finite subject of existence. The subject of metaphysics means, according to Nancy, “an autonomous,

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, e.g. *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul & Gregory Recco (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1997), 7-71.

² *Ibid.*, 47.

³ “Sense” is the key word of Nancy’s philosophy. The French *sens* is the exact equivalent of the English *sense*, also in that both of these are polysemantic — they may point to direction, intuition, reason, the five senses, or meaning. In his writings Nancy uses the whole semantic field of “sense”, which often makes the meaning of the word ambiguous. First, he uses “sense” in order to differentiate “meaning” or “signification”, which indicates something given and fixed. Sense, in turn, refers to what precedes the separation between the sensible and the intellectual: sense is what exceeds or is beyond any signification. In speaking of the sensuous senses (sight, hearing, touch, etc.), I have tried to refer to them as the “five senses” when necessary.

⁴ See e.g. Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 48.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 37-42.

self-subsisting, and self-relating activity of *representation insofar as it is not the world*, and insofar as it signifies at a distance”.⁶ This would be to say that in metaphysical discourse, the world is always posited as an object of representation, whereas the properly philosophical attitude means a return to the way in which the sense of the world returns to itself in its infinite unfolding. The return to Being implies exploring the *sense of Being* in Nancy’s philosophy. Following Heidegger at many points in his quest towards revealing Being in its originary sense, Nancy understands the disclosing of Being, above all, as the subject’s opening of itself to the world.

At the most general level it is perhaps possible to say that the critique of metaphysics introduces thinking on the destitution of the essence of Being and the groundlessness of subjectivity. What is shared by both Nancy and Heidegger is their attitude toward what may be termed the abyssal foundation of existence, and which brings forth the event of coming into presence: presence *before* signification.⁷ The thought of presence in its state of coming takes the place of thinking Being as presence, which is to say that attention must be given to the view that Being is always only coming and in the state of presencing. In this matter, art is a question of the limit of the coming-into-presence of sense: the limit takes place where presentation touches itself.⁸ Here the limit is between the arts, the distribution of which Nancy discusses from the view that art is the exposition of differences — art presents singularly the detail and the local in their multiplicity.⁹ This would be to say that the occurrences of presence are for Nancy always multiple, but in a singular way, since they are, from the beginning, infinitely differentiated according to the heterogeneity of different ways of being-in-the-world. This is the primary basis on which Nancy constructs his notion of art.

Nancy’s thought on presentation does not imply a subjective reproduction of an “original presence”. On the contrary, it suggests presenting something which is not to

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 34.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 20.

be presented, or could not be accomplished or completed; it is “neither Nature nor Idea, so that what is in question is finitude itself, as far as it means coming *into* presence, presence itself without presence”.¹⁰ It is starting from presence or coming-into-presence that beings may manifest themselves as present, and the antecedence of the horizon of Being in reference to beings can be understood.¹¹ The sense of Being is time, opening itself in its finitude with death as its horizon. In his analysis of time Heidegger tries to withdraw from the “metaphysics of presence” as well as from the notions of subject and object, according to which time is articulated. In turn, this makes it possible to understand what Heidegger calls the supremacy of representation (*Vorstellung*) in the history of modern philosophy. For this reason “my being” cannot be my object, and thus is not representable. Being is not a property, but my being, *being myself*.¹²

Coming-into-Presence

If the Heideggerian difference between presence and presencing lies behind Nancy’s interest in the sense of coming into presence (*venir or naître à la présence*), this can also be considered as the key term in his differentiation of aesthetic representation and presentation. Before examining Nancy’s theory of presentation, some references to his body of work may be worth citing. The first book inquiring into the subject of presentation was namely a monograph on Kant, *Le discours de la syncope*.¹³ Here we find the concept of *Darstellung* as the centre of attention. In Kant’s vocabulary *Darstellung* is referred to as “presentation”, “exhibition” or “exposition”, whereas *Vorstellung* is the traditional rendering of “representation” or “conception”.¹⁴ *Darstellung* names the intuitive presentation of a thing, without which there is thought

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 23–4.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James Churchill (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1962), 118–119, 122. Cf. William J. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, 1963 (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 147–148.

¹² Cf. also Susanna Lindberg, “Avaus Olemiseen ja aikaan”, *Tiede & Edistys* 2000: 3, 214.

¹³ Nancy, *Le discours de la syncope, I. Logodaedalus* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1976).

¹⁴ See e.g. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 961, 980.

but no cognition. Imagination joins together intuitions and concepts, and “where the concept of an object is given, the function of judgement, in its employment of that concept for cognition, consists in *presentation* (*exhibition*), i.e. in placing beside the concept an intuition corresponding to it”.¹⁵ For Kant *Darstellung* refers to the Latin translation of “exhibition”: *subjectio sub adspectum*.¹⁶ *Vorstellung* designates the way of *making* things present, meaning *re-praesentio* and thus having the sense of repetition — of establishing something before oneself and of keeping things at one’s disposal.¹⁷

In his essay *The Age of the World Picture* Heidegger associates the representation of beings with the metaphysical tradition, namely because “to represent” (*vorstellen*) means to set out (*stellen*) before oneself and to set forth in relation to oneself.¹⁸ *Vorstellung* is given the following definition: “to bring what is present at hand (*das Vorhandene*) before oneself as something standing over against (*Entgegenstehendes*), to relate it to oneself, to the one representing it (*den Vorstellenden*), and to force it back into this relationship to oneself as the normative realm”.¹⁹ As a result, Heidegger writes, “That which is, is no longer that which presences; it is rather that which, in representing, is first set over against, ... which has the character of object [*das Gegenständige*]”.²⁰ This critique is directed against the metaphysical notion of the world as a picture, according to which a being, or what is present, or a subject would be brought before man as object. In this way, “presence” as an objectifying notion is a name for the concealment of more original experience. For Nancy, representation is the problem of a philosophy which is in “crisis” because of the exhaustion of sense: sense is now presence-at-a-distance, which entails that distance is engendered as the truth of

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34; § 59. Cf. Jean Beaufret, *Dialogue avec Heidegger, II. Philosophie moderne*, 1973 (Paris: Minuit, 1984), 78-80; Jacques Derrida, *Psyché* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), esp. 119-123; also Éliane Escoubas, *Imago mundi* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 20.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Psyché*, 120-121.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

presence.²¹

Another explanation, equally inherited from Aristotelian metaphysics, is to understand beingness as *ousia*: the presence of the presence is eternal, that which does not change, and is a permanent present. But Being, Heidegger writes, is not a thing, nor is it in time; instead, Being as presencing remains determined as presence by time, by what is temporal, and thus time has to be thought of in terms of becoming, event or occurrence.²² This fact has made the tradition think of this Being in the same mode as it thinks of the beings of the world in general, and it inscribes them only in the linear time of simple successiveness. This time conceals original temporality and historicity in the very basis of the Being of *Dasein*.²³

For Nancy, Heidegger's discussion on presentation — be it termed as *Anwesenung*, *Anwesenheit*, or *parousia* — works as the grounds for his explorations on this matter. According to Nancy, “no *philosophical* tradition is possible as such but departing from the point at which philosophy, having as its object and as its condition its own presentation, produces the category and the problem of *Darstellung*”.²⁴ “Presentation” means to him, first of all, an exposition, which in every discourse borders the sense of significations, always presented on the limits of sense.²⁵ Presentation is nothing else but presence before any signification, allowing “a thing to present itself ‘in its own truth’.”²⁶ Representation, in turn, takes a signification to its limit, so that the thought of representation includes its own limit as its closure.²⁷ This is to say that representation tends to close into itself *also* what lies outside of its limits; representational thinking strives to give a thing a fixed identity, and at the same time to define the ground it emerges from. As a result, as Nancy concludes, nothing emerges from any ground.²⁸

²¹ Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 54.

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), e.g. § 5-6.

²³ *Ibid.*, § 6, 42.

²⁴ Nancy, *Le discours de la syncope*, 73.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 55-58.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 53 ff; Nancy, *Le poids d'une pensée* (Sainte-Foy: Le Griffon d'argile, 1991), 129-135.

²⁸ Nancy, *Le poids d'une pensée*, 130.

This is also to say that representation has a substitutive function as regards the represented object, if the represented thing is understood as a picture or as an idea that is brought before the subject.

Derrida and the Space and Time of Difference

How should we think of the nature of the presentation of art in and the distance or interval required for the birth of the aesthetic sense in Nancy's philosophy? One perspective is offered by Jacques Derrida's notions of *différance* and dissemination. At stake in these terms is the critique of the metaphysics of presence. Instead, what Derrida attempts to show is a constant shifting and reconfiguration of concepts and meanings, in a way which comes close to Nancy's understanding of the singular plural origin of art.

With Derrida, the *différance* works, first of all, as a textual practice, the purpose of which is to break with any notion of a linear writing — be it linear in either spatial or temporal terms. Instead, he introduces a mode of writing which he calls *écriture*, arche-writing. It is writing that produces a space of writing which “writes *itself* and reads *itself*, presents itself its own reading, presents its own presentation and accounts for this continuous operation”.²⁹ Here he refers to a writing which always starts again, infinitely and fictively, so that it lacks any *decisive* beginning and constantly repeats and already refers to another “beginning” or event of the text.³⁰ This makes the process, called dissemination, multiply itself from its start, which is numerous and diversified. In this way, the text consists of comings into presence in an endless sequence, the openings of presence having no foundation in themselves. A somewhat similar reasoning as regards the concept of a groundless ground, also figures in Nancy's, as well as Heidegger's, texts.

For Heidegger, the thinking of the groundlessness of Being implies the turning away of presence or of what is present in presence in the event of Being. A correspondent logic holds for what is termed as *trace* by Derrida: trace, or the “arche-

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 326.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 333-334.

phenomenon of memory”, never coincides with anything present; trace is its own erasure.³¹ As Derrida describes it, trace is “the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing”.³² This is the reason why *différance* must be termed at once temporalization and spatiality, for in *différance* time and space are intertwined in an irrevocable fashion. Such an intertwining leads one to think of *différance* as a non-place, a place or region of difference and of different relations. *Différance* is the “becoming-space of time and becoming-time of space, the ‘originary constitution’ of time and space”.³³ It is rooted in the problematic of the sign and writing, as the sign represents the present in its absence, thus taking the place of the present. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence.

According to Nancy’s interpretation, the sense of Derrida’s *différance* is that “it is not, but it ‘is made’ or it ‘acts,’ and its making and its acting have the essence of decisiveness. This is what makes the difference according to which *being withdraws from/within entities*”, with the result that “*undecidability itself makes the decision*”.³⁴ This will probably throw some light on Derrida’s own explication of *différance* as a question of “dissimilar otherness ..., an interval, a distance, *spacing*”, which will “be produced with a certain perseverance in repetition”.³⁵ The key notion is *brisure* or “hinge”, also translated as “fracturing”, “joint” or “break”.³⁶ “Fracturing” is a name for articulation and difference, characterized as the “strange movement” of the trace in that fracturing is the relation of the present to its presence. It takes place in the endless

³¹ This is how trace belongs to the very movement of signification, which is a priori written, in a “sensible” and “spatial” element that is called “exterior”. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 70.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 8.

³⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, eds. Werner Hamacher & David E. Wellbery, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993), 103-104. See also footnote 47, in which Nancy gives a definition of Derrida’s *différance* in somewhat more technical terms: “[*différance*] differs/defers (the Being of) the difference-of-Being of existence and its action”.

³⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 8. In this book Derrida relates some of the fundamental features of “deconstruction” essentially with the Heideggerian understanding of ecstatic temporality, inseparable from the questions of spatiality. See e.g. p. 65-73.

³⁶ Cf. Nancy, “Elliptical Sense”, trans. Peter Connor, in David Wood, ed., *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 39-40.

division and multiplication of the presence which is never present, but exists in its difference to itself; this is its possibility as impossibility.³⁷ *Différance*, in turn, is the origin of meaning — being of a non-place that differs-defers (*diffère*) at the same time.³⁸ Similarly, fracturing is the origin of space and time, allowing a “psychic imprint” or articulation to appear as a trace.³⁹ What is implied in the Derridean *différance* is the thought, shared by Nancy, that the articulation of sense is always singular — it is nowhere other than in its articulations.⁴⁰ As proposed by Heidegger, this is why Being must be thought of as differential, in its difference from itself. Thus Being must be thought of in its existence.

Nancy interprets Derrida’s term *différance* as presence-to-self, as an interval of the “to-itself”, implying itself as difference.⁴¹ Furthermore, difference means the dislocation taking place in the origin of sense, which gives space to an infinite exposition of the limit of sense.⁴² The concept designed to describe this event is “spacing” (*espacement*). Spacing is inherent in the existence of a human body, which keeps distancing from itself within its being, as well as dislocating itself outside of. Indeed, its being is being-*there* (*Dasein*, être-là) and *ek-static* by nature.⁴³ With Nancy

³⁷ Derrida, *La dissémination*, 336.

³⁸ In French, “differing” and “deferring” of *différance* may be designated by the same verb, namely *différance diffère*. *Différance* is a non-existent place and thus the origin of *khôra*, a place of different relations as a relation where the truth takes place. Jacques Derrida, *Khôra*, 1987 (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

³⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 66. Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 65, 377, § 68, 401. However, Derrida explains, only because there is a difference between the sensory appearing [*apparaissant*] and its lived appearing [*apparaître*] or “mental imprint”, the temporalizing synthesis is able to operate. This synthesis permits differences to appear in a chain of significations. Yet a trace does not let itself be summed up in the simplicity of a present, but it is always-already-there, referring to an absolute past without any possibility of reanimating the evidence of an originary presence.

⁴⁰ Cf. Peter Fenves, “Foreword” in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xii-xiii.

⁴¹ See e.g. Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 36-51; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 34-36; Jean-Luc Nancy, “Our History”, trans. Cynthia Chase et al., *Diacritics* 20: 3 (1990), 97-115, esp. 105.

⁴² Cf. Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 91-95.

⁴³ Being is, for Nancy, being “here or there”: sharing places and making spaces, and the *here* is abandoned — or exposed — in its movement. Werner Hamacher, “Ou, séance, touche de Nancy, ici”, in *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy*, ed. Darren Sheppard et al. (London: Routledge, 1997), 38-42.

this means that the existence of the body always extends outside of itself as it is itself.⁴⁴ *exposed* to sense: to itself and to the world.⁴⁵ All being is being *towards* something (*être-à*), which signifies that senses emerge only out of relations between singular beings.⁴⁶

For Nancy the notion of spacing, understood as an intertwining of time and space, is thus destined to mark a place where the sense of Being, or just any sense, is born by showing exactly the space of fracturing. Fracturing is the movement of meaning whereby it does not come back to itself, but unfolds an absence of origin as its origin. The birth of sense happens where meaning reveals its own *différance* in regard to itself, thus creating a caesura and a space for the exposition of sense. The structure of sense is ecstatic: sense has its “origin” outside of every consciousness, unreachable by consciousness. It is only in starting from the origin, which in itself is already shared, that sense may be articulated.⁴⁷

On Nancy’s Aesthetic Presentation: The Interval of Art

Having now taken up some aspects of presentation and difference as proposed by Heidegger and Derrida, how can we express the particular relation of these notions to Nancy’s view on art and the aesthetic? The term here refers to the “aesthetic” as the ontological foundation of art in Nancy’s philosophy. However, at this point one cannot stop at the simple inquiry into the origin of *art*: with Nancy the question is essentially that of *arts*, for his claim is that the origin of art is not one, but plural from the start. In considering the multiplicity of arts Nancy takes as his point of departure the Muses of antiquity who, he says, have always been several, whatever their attributes and number. This fact offers him the point of departure for thinking the multiple origin of art — why there are *several* arts instead of just one. Still, this is not a question of

⁴⁴ This is one of the main themes in Nancy’s book *Corpus*, which is concerned with the Cartesian separation of body and mind. In *Corpus* Nancy wants to investigate their unity, stating that body is the non-discursive place of thought, in which sense is given and out of which sense emerges. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris: Métailié, 1992), 19-25.

⁴⁵ Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 8-10, 27-29.

⁴⁶ Cf. Heidegger’s notion of *Zu-sein*.

⁴⁷ See also Nancy, *Corpus*, 37; Susanna Lindberg, *Filosofien ystävyyys* (Helsinki: Tutkijaliitto, 1998), 90-91.

finding a principle of plurality, but of regarding plurality *itself* as a principle and in relation with the essence of art.⁴⁸ The question of the multiplicity of art, Nancy claims, has so far not been recognised in theories of art, or it has resulted in various difficulties.⁴⁹ One of them is the identification of the arts with the five senses. To derive the arts from senses is not possible, chiefly because the difference between the arts does not correspond to that of the senses, which was already stated by Hegel. Thus the division of arts and that of senses cannot be identified, for art *dislocates* the sensuous difference.⁵⁰

According to Nancy, no more than the existence of art can be returned to sensibility, can the origin of art be reduced to thought or reflection. Nor can it be located in the material practices of producing works of art. From which direction can we approach the ontology of art? Nancy's answer is that the division of the arts is due to their multiple singularity (*le singulier pluriel*), that is, to their origin which is shared in itself, not one but originally heterogeneous, that is, divided or zoned — as is the origin of the senses. The origin of art has to be searched for in a distance, for the origin itself is indefinitely divided into areas and zones, and it differentiates into an art when a mutual space is opened between the work of art and the world. As, citing Wittgenstein, the empirical may be called “the technics of the local, the presentation of a place”⁵¹, the same kind of locality holds for art. This idea gives rise to Nancy's argument: that art is *technique of the detail*, technique of difference and discreteness. The zones of art are themselves zoned, which means that art as technique “multiplies itself into an infinity of points, in an infinitely divisible *locality*”, so that “in each local value it combines heterogeneous values without homogenising them”.⁵² The origin of art takes place at a limit: in the relation of one zone to another, to their heterogeneity to

⁴⁸ Nancy, *The Muses*, 1-2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Also, Nancy seeks the source of the zoned quality of the Hegelian position on the particularisation of art, pointing here, roughly speaking, to the Idea and its incarnation in sensuous presentation (*sinnliche Darstellung der Idee*).

⁵¹ Nancy, *The Muses*, 20.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

the smallest detail; zones which are always already dislocated and exposed to another.

How is it, more specifically, that Nancy wishes to motivate his ontological view on the original multiplicity of art and the arts? One answer must be searched for in the direction of heterogeneity and differentiation. Namely, for him, art and the arts belong to each other (*s'entr'appartiennent*) in an extended mode of interiority, and for this reason a tension exists between them — the tension between art and the different arts. As Nancy suggests, art, in this way, would be a matter of *res extensa* and *partes extra partes*.⁵³ In their division different “arts” remain each outside one another in a state of oscillation between the repulsion and attraction of the attributes of each other, yet breaking their contact and thus maintaining their limits and separation.⁵⁴ The division of art is composed of the singularity of “art” and the indefinitely multiplied plurality of what he terms “technics”. Technique is exteriority to self in operations and objects, and multiplication enters the play when the artist makes his technical decisions; as Nancy points out, the number of alternatives among which to choose is endless.⁵⁵

The necessary plurality of the arts results in thinking of the origin of art in terms of a foundation without foundation. Difference is the “ground” of appearing: a groundless ground, which makes each presence a ground for others. As a consequence, Nancy views the question of art as the one which asks how to produce the ground that does not produce itself.⁵⁶ In my opinion, the point that links Nancy’s philosophy to Heidegger and Derrida is the break or interval, which allows the sense to come into presence. Nancy’s thought seems to suggest that the answer might be approached from the notions of a threshold and a blackout (*syncope*), of a limit as well as of a distance or a space. This is a case of the singularity and plurality of art and the arts, as well as presentation and representation. Taken more extensively, at stake is an interrogation of

⁵³ Ibid., 4-6.

⁵⁴ The tension of simultaneous belonging and ek-sisting would also be the structure in Nancy’s idea of *transimmanence*. Transimmanence is the chiasm of transcendence and immanence. See *The Muses*, 18-19.

⁵⁵ For Nancy, technique is the name for knowing how to produce what does not produce itself by itself, so that technique designs a space and a delay between the producer and the produced — thus between the producer and him- or herself. *The Muses*, 25-26.

⁵⁶ Nancy, *The Muses*, 26.

the nature of art's coming into presence and what makes it different from any other presentation. In this way it may be stated that, apart from the ontology of art, aesthetics bears for Nancy the meaning of "transcendental aesthetics"⁵⁷, the aesthetics of the birth into presence and the infinite coming into presence of a finite sense.⁵⁸ Such aesthetics is transcendental because it is not a question of an established sense or the institution or foundation of sense, but of the comings of sense. Or, one might also say, the other is encountered by us as existing, that is, in its finitude: as opening to us out of its own relation to alterity.⁵⁹

Between the arts and the senses there are thresholds in question; they are limits of coming-into-presentation, on the verge of being touched. Nancy's comments on the distribution of the arts can be compared with the distinction he makes between the metaphysical "signification", and the rediscovered, genuinely philosophical "sense". According to him, art has the ability to release the senses of the signification, that is, it releases the *world* of the signification. Here is the moment of the opening of sense, which is always only coming. Hence it may be said that art is always postponed, in a state of being born; thus, for Nancy it means presentation, or in other words, the setting itself to work of exposition.⁶⁰ By the same token art cannot be a question of representation: art is the beginning of a beginning.⁶¹

If we suppose that art does not reproduce but produces, Nancy's interpretation is that art exposes what is evident but not apparent or "given": art is *the presentation of presentation*, it presents the fact *that* there is art and that there are several arts. There is no evidence or patency of the world "in general", but "only the plural presentation of the singular plural of presentation".⁶² Yet the presentation of presentation is not

⁵⁷ Speaking of "transcendental aesthetics" does not mean, however, that Nancy would have simply taken up the Kantian project under the same name. With Kant transcendental aesthetics refers to the forms of sense perception.

⁵⁸ Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 27-8.

⁵⁹ See Fenves, "Foreword", in Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xvii.

⁶⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Regard du portrait* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 34. The "setting itself to work of exposition" (*la mise en œuvre de l'exposition*) recalls Heidegger's idea of art as the setting itself to work of truth. See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 39.

⁶¹ Nancy, *Les Muses*, édition revue et augmentée (Paris: Galilée, 2001), 182.

⁶² Nancy, *The Muses*, 34.

representation, Nancy says, for it does not relate presentation to a subject (for which or in which it would take place), but to itself, in a way that it is evident. This is the moment when *there is* presentation, that is, when presentation *touches* itself in the context of different places, spaces or instants in the singular plural of occurrences of existence, presence or passage. Touch is for Nancy the paradigm of senses in that it is the presentation of sensibility. Touch takes place on a limit, to the extent that it is a limit-term — it takes place on the limit of being touched, on the limit of exposition or coming-into-presence. What is central to presentation is a distance, a difference: presentation touches itself and thus remains suspended in its passage, “in its coming and going”.⁶³ Thus art exposes the “transcendence of immanence”, ek-sistant immanence or “transimmanence”. Transimmanence is the patency of the world, which takes place as art, that is, as works of art in which “presentation touches itself, which is also to say that we are touched”.⁶⁴

In his treatise of art, as I see it, Nancy attempts to develop an aesthetics based on an original break, provided that the way art presents itself is on close terms with Being’s coming-into-presence. Thus it remains to be asked what the position of art is, in the ontological sense, and how it could be possible to define art’s specificity with regard to any other forms of existence. One way to elucidate the problem is to think of the presentation of art as composed around a blackout, or as a death on the verge of coming into presence — or that *we* are the threshold of the presentation.⁶⁵ In *Une pensée finie* Nancy writes that in the process of painting “the unrepresentable Beauty is presented as unrepresentable, which is to say that its impossibility comes into

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 35. Touch touches itself, and this is the sense of self-affection, which, at the same time, is *your* touching — or touching the other in oneself, in general. As well as *I* touches itself (*Je se touche*), it touches its own limits in touching “you”. According to Derrida’s interpretation what is thus born is a distance even where *I* touches itself — in the heart of *I* there proves to be a difference and a break or a syncope, as if one were addressing the other in oneself. The difference here is the difference of Being (to itself). Touch touches only the limit of one touching itself. This is why touching takes place between the touchable and its untouchable limit. See Nancy, *Corpus*, 36; Jacques Derrida, “*Le toucher. Touch/to touch him*”, trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Paragraph* 16: 2 (1993), 140-143; Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 47.

⁶⁵ See Nancy, *The Muses*, 57-67.

presence”.⁶⁶ What follows is that the escaped presence of a painting “becomes the ‘cave’ and the ‘blackness’ where that which makes it appear disappears: it fades away [*s’évanouit*] in its own presentation, plunging in its own darkness the thing that makes it present”. This is how art makes a passage and leaves a vestige or a trace of itself in the “... strange place where art *only passes*”.⁶⁷

To draw together some aspects related to the themes of presentation and to introduce the notion of *différance* more specifically into Nancy’s interpretations of these aspects, it may be useful to take a look at the Heideggerian notion of spatiality in the context of art.⁶⁸ For Nancy the touch of art is a spacing: when “art touches on the sense of touch itself”, it touches “at once on the ‘self-touching’ inherent in touch and on the ‘interruption’ that is no less inherent in it”.⁶⁹ Art is, then, what touches upon and touches by means of the principal heterogeneity of sensing. Art touches “on the immanence and the transcendence of touch”, on the transimmanence, as Nancy calls it, of being-in-the-world. Not the world as a simple exteriority but rather as a milieu.⁷⁰ In the chiasm of transcendence and immanence, being-in-the-world is exposed, “isolated and presented as such”. This is how the dis-location of the world into plural worlds, that is, into “the irreducible plurality of the unity ‘world’” takes place, producing the *a priori* and the transcendental of art.⁷¹ The discreteness of the zones and distance in itself are what constitute the world. This is the sense of spacing — or what might as well be called Being, and according to Nancy, “the absolute difference of appearance or of being-in-the-world as such”.⁷²

The space of the aforementioned “spacing”, to be sure, is not a spatial notion here, but ontological. At this point, as Nancy himself states, one can hear undertones of Heidegger’s philosophy.⁷³ In the short essay *Die Kunst und der Raum* Heidegger

⁶⁶ Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, 300 ff.

⁶⁷ Nancy, *The Muses*, 81.

⁶⁸ See Nancy, *The Muses*, 19 and note 34. Nancy remarks that Heidegger’s “space” is here the name of “Being”.

⁶⁹ Nancy, *The Muses*, 18.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 19.

⁷² Ibid., 20.

⁷³ Ibid.

proposes an interpretation of spatiality.⁷⁴ As a point of reference for this text he cites § 70 of *Being and Time*, where he explores temporality and spatiality on the basis of *Dasein's* belonging to a place. It is this conception which now comes under substantial revision. In *Being and Time* Heidegger contends that *Dasein's* spatiality must be grounded in temporality, without, however, deducing space from time.⁷⁵ Instead, *Dasein's* spatiality is existentially founded upon temporality in the connectedness of space and time, and *Dasein* makes room for itself by directing itself in space. "The space which it [*Dasein*] has ecstatically taken in", Heidegger writes, "the 'here' of its current factual situation never signifies a position in space", but signifies a "leeway" opened up for *Dasein* in directionality and de-severance.⁷⁶ *Dasein's* spatiality is such that it is never present-at-hand in space; it takes space in by determining its own location.⁷⁷

It is in *Die Kunst und der Raum* that Heidegger acknowledges the untenability of his idea to derive the spatiality of *Dasein* from temporality. Space in this text is considered not as a spatial but as an ontological term, for Heidegger's aim is now to rethink the notion of space in terms of *spacing*, starting from the idea that things themselves are the places, and do not merely belong to a place.⁷⁸ At stake is thus the taking place and opening up of a space, on the ground that every locality (*Ortschaft*) means the taking place of what gives space. For Heidegger, a place opens up a region, in which it gathers things in their belonging-together and frees them for their region.⁷⁹ What is proper to space must present itself from the space itself, and not inside any given space. In this way art, and specifically sculpture, would neither be thought of in terms of a seizure of space nor a confrontation with it. Instead, plastic art would rather be regarded as the incorporation and setting-into-work of places. Emptiness of space,

⁷⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum* (St. Gallen: Erker-Verlag, 1969). Cf. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 23.

⁷⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, § 70, 418.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 420.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁷⁸ Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum*, 11.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

in turn, is nothing; it does not mean a deficiency, but the double of space, and as such, bringing forth (*Hervorbringen*).⁸⁰ What is shared by Heidegger, in his rejection of the notion of space as a homogeneous expanse, and Nancy's thinking in regard to the origin of art would thus be diversity and plurality as a principle. With Nancy this would be to say that art exposes the unity and the uniqueness of being-in-the-world in the singular distance of a touch and the interruption which it produces: every touch is heterogeneous and zoned within itself.

The Finitude of the Aesthetics of Sense

I have now sketched some aspects concerning Nancy's conception of Being as coming-into-presence. Firstly, this follows and brings together some ideas introduced by Heidegger in his objection to the metaphysical notion of subject, as well as his emphasis on Being as an event or taking place. Secondly, Nancy relies on Derrida in his attempt to account for the "place" of presentation and exposition according to *différance*, understood by Nancy as an interval which creates a distinction between the presentation of a present on the scene of presence, and its division in itself.⁸¹ To be more precise, for Nancy it is in this inner division of the present that the distinction between the truth of signification and sense lies; this is, to be sure, one of the crucial differences which separate metaphysics and philosophy proper.

To retrace the scope of aesthetics in Nancy's philosophy, one must think of what it is that comes into presence or into existence in art, and how. According to him, what holds true for artistic coming-into-presence is the fact that absolute finitude is all there can be. Thinking of an absolute finitude is followed by the thinking of *limit*, in reference to which only the reflection of an infinitely finite existence is possible. And since, in the sphere of finite meanings, there can be nothing but birth into an *infinite* presentation, this reflection demands something which Nancy calls "a new transcendental aesthetics". Finitude comes to mean "the irreducibility *a priori* of

⁸⁰ Ibid., 11-12.

⁸¹ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 14; Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 12-13.

spacing” or “the time-space in the finite here-and-now”. It also refers, however, to transcendental aesthetics as a material aesthetics of the disparity and the dislocation of our five senses⁸², which helps us to understand Nancy’s definition of “finitude” as “the ‘essential’ multiplicity and the ‘essential’ non-resorption of sense or of Being”.⁸³ This probably explains what he wants to say, namely, that finitude is fundamentally connected with the conception of Being as *being-toward*: Being is always inclined or toward something in the exposition of each sense. Being, Nancy states, in every singular existence, is the arrival, the coming and the event of Being, and sense can only be thought of in terms of its infinite advent or birth into presence.⁸⁴ For this reason the heterogeneity of the arts also bears a profound relationship with the sense of the world itself, because, in dis-locating “the common sense” art makes the world touch itself.

Art retains the present which presents itself; thus, art has a particular relation to the present in time. Art retains the impulse (*élan*) of a presentation by holding it, which is to say, by letting it go.⁸⁵ There is thus a dual moment in art which gives the beholder the chance to present himself to himself by virtue of the fact that art’s present is *prae(s)ens*, Being-before-itself: art anticipates itself. On the other hand, art itself is preceded by the line or the *tractus*, which simultaneously precedes itself while commanding itself.⁸⁶ The coming-into-presence has thus to be searched for in the distance of the presentation itself: in how presentation presents itself in the event of touching its own limit. As such, it has the structure of the origin of art itself in that it is composed of an “infinity of infinitely multipliable points”, being thus a dimension of Being which only exists by being outside of itself, by preceding and succeeding

⁸² Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, 27-8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁴ Cf. Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Bourgois, 1990), 206.

⁸⁵ Nancy, *Les Muses*, 183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

itself.⁸⁷ One could, as a consequence, say that it is a question of drawing the presence, not beyond absence, but to the point of absence which brings absence before itself and exposes it in its relation to itself by exposing it to “us”.⁸⁸

It is because of the dis-location or difference mentioned above that sensibility consists of nothing but its own division, which Nancy also calls its dis-sent.⁸⁹ Yet, the fact that art touches us — or is exposed to us — is possible only in what unfolds itself both in the work of art and in the subject of the experience. It is between these polarities that an empty space is born. This space is a distance or their setting apart, a distance in which “a local difference and a differing division” are at work.⁹⁰ Finally, Nancy goes as far as to say that “the in-sensible *différance* is sensible”, because the five senses themselves are “the fragmentation or the fractality of the sense that is sense *only as fragment*”.⁹¹ Such an emptiness, born in differentiation, is the condition making possible the meaning in its being. It is Being that never simply arrives but always returns as an infinite coming, making visible “a thing in itself”, which is a thing touching itself and distanced in itself.

The idea of instituting and of accomplishing sense has, according to Nancy, been a prevalent tendency in aesthetic thinking, in which all thinking of the beautiful, and even of the sublime, has until now insisted on extending to infinity the feature of

⁸⁷ Ibid. A “stroke” and a “shock” are Nancy’s names for this stretch of time, which results in “an irreparable damage made to the simple presence, the irreversible start of Being-there”. In *The Sense of the World* Nancy thematizes the spacing also figured by ‘surprise’ and ‘leap’ of Being in Heideggerian terms, as *Spanne* — separation, space, or extension. *Spanne* is defined in temporal terms; to cite Heidegger’s statement, “Time is intrinsically spanned and stretched”, and not punctualized as proposed by the ordinary notion of time. *Spanne* stands for the spacing of the present that takes place; it allows for the existence to expose itself, being the altered sameness of time. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, rev. ed., trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 264; Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 64.

⁸⁸ Nancy, *Le Regard du portrait*, 51.

⁸⁹ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 129.

⁹⁰ One might remark here that for Nancy a notion comparable to difference or distance here is *rhythm*: rhythm is something which does not appear itself, but allows things to appear, simultaneously dividing and sharing out things. Rhythm makes communication possible in a coming and going of presences. Nancy, *The Muses*, 24; see also note 42.

⁹¹ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 129.

finitude. Exposure, one might say, is finitude itself in Nancy's thought, since that which is exposed to such an exposure, thought or philosophy will have to give up its pretensions to a total appropriation of sense.⁹² The exposition of art is *coming* before any presence and beyond any presence; rather, it might be described as the burst of a presentation. Being exposed to one another is "presence itself": what is exposed is exposition itself, and what is presented is the coming-into-presence of presence and the *différance* of its being-present.⁹³ Because all presentation proves to be the presentation of a limit within presentation, I would like to argue that Nancy's aesthetic thinking is articulated by an interval and a threshold — that of sense in its infinite opening, art offering access to the limit of sense between "the intactness and touching of light and shadow".⁹⁴

⁹² See François Raffoul, "Translator's Preface" in Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, xvii.

⁹³ Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 74.

⁹⁴ Cf. Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, 81-83.