

Martta Heikkilä

At the Limits of Presentation: Coming-into-presence and its Aesthetic Relevance in Jean-Luc Nancy's Philosophy.

Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2008.

312 pages

US\$74.95 (paper ISBN 978-3-631-58105-6)

Martta Heikkilä's *At the Limits of Presentation* is one of the best works on Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy and will surely become indispensable to anyone working with it. It surveys the terrain of Nancy's expanding interests, marking the borders of his work where its interests lie in ontology and aesthetics. It fulfills its promise admirably: to be equally valuable to those interested in Nancy's aesthetic theory and to those involved with avant-garde visual arts culture. Yet its achievement is even broader than that. Anyone exploring Nancy's thought must grapple with the daunting notion of 'coming-into-presence', which is central to nearly all of Nancy's philosophical concerns. Heikkilä's work explains its significance by contextualizing it within Nancy's non-aesthetic work and, by extension, in his usage of sources, including Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and Derrida. In a multifaceted conclusion, Heikkilä maintains that those working in aesthetics should be more concerned with art's finitude and its presentation of some specific presence, as well as the social ontology of being-with to which it is inexorably bound.

This monograph's division into two sections, each approximately one hundred and fifty pages long, provides great assistance to the reader. The first part offers a historical genesis of the notion of presentation. This task involves careful attention to those aspects of Nancy's work on ontology that engage with Kantian, Hegelian, Heideggerian and Derridean expositions. Conceptions of foundation, sense, singularity, plurality, community, and birth are crucial to this task. Included among the questions she answers in this section are: what is aesthetic experience, if anything, without the relation between subject and object? To whom does art present itself? How does art's sense 'open' to someone? (20). Taking nothing for granted, Heikkilä leads the reader back to familiar domains of Heidegger's work on the question of being and Derrida's work on *différance* and the trace. Especially engaging in conjunction with this contextualization is her work on the nature of Nancy's relationship with the Kantian distinction between *Vorstellung* and *Darstellung*, which she approaches directly through Kant, Heidegger, and indirectly through Nancy's little-read books on Hegel. One especially valuable conclusion of this inquiry is that, for Nancy, Heidegger's conception of finitude places limitations on the possibilities of *Dasein* from its very beginning, a conclusion having significant consequences for what follows concerning aesthetics (101). Moreover, Heidegger and Nancy's critiques of the idea that being as subjectivity is the foundation of metaphysics set up Heikkilä's analysis of what might be the philosophical orientation most frequently associated with Nancy's work: the conception of the singular plural, and of course,

community. One vital step in this analysis is a thorough presentation of the nature of sense, sensation and body, and Nancy's difficulty in conceiving of a 'someone' that is not a metaphysical subject, which clearly paves the way for the second section of the book. Heikkilä claims that Nancy 'radicalizes' Heidegger's notion of *Mitsein* so that he may conceive of the plural spacing of singularities in a 'nonidentitarian' way, that is, without conceiving of the social ontology of community as consisting merely in a collection of related individuals with a shared identity (137-146).

The second section offers a close, critical analysis of the role of being-with in Nancy's approach to art and the aesthetic. Heikkilä argues that art extends the limits of philosophy in Nancy's work because of the task to which he puts the complex notion of 'coming-to-presence'. Questions addressed here include the following: why is art ontologically distinct from other objects and from philosophy itself? Is this ontology actually 'plural' in respect of the relationship between the arts and the usage of 'sense' in Nancy's work? Is Nancy's radicalization of Heideggerian *Mitsein* relevant to art?

In her conclusion, Heikkilä not only draws conclusions but speculates on their overall significance. Art's 'strangeness' — in the sense of coming into presence on its own limit in an interval in which art touches us emotionally because it touches this limit — is determined by its material facticity. Matter gives form, or difference, to itself in the possibility of representation because its ontology can only be found in the singularity of artwork's existence. This is a point at which transcendentalism, empiricism and 'material facticity' come to a head in Nancy's work. Although the author touches upon it (e.g. 98), it would have been interesting to an exploration of the 'empiricity' of Nancy's conception of the artwork in respect of the 'free passage' to a limit that incessantly surprises the limits of comprehension without permitting those limits to be comprehended. One finds something similar in Nancy's work on freedom. For example, the etymological work Nancy does there concerning the givenness, seizure and piracy of empiricist conceptions of experience would have melded very nicely with Heikkilä's own view of coming-to-presence.

Ultimately, art does not merely present; it presents the fact that there is presentation. This leads Heikkilä to wonder whether Nancy can maintain his view of the arts as singular plural, on the grounds that even a deconstruction of art in its totality presumes a conception of art in general. She suggests a resolution of the matter by noting that, although the arts do present the fact that there is presentation, each of the arts is the coming to presence of some presence, and not of presence in general, so that there is difference amongst the forms by which presence is presented.

Heikkilä's conclusion is that the ontological status of the artwork is to be found in its finitude, and in particular, in the dislocation and diffraction of senses discernible in the way the senses overlap with one another's 'spaces'. If Nancy's aesthetic thinking is articulated by an interval and a threshold, she asks, then isn't it the case that

discontinuity and finitude give art and each of the arts its original singularity? And so each artwork must 'decide' its place in the field of genres and arts, but also the place of the notion of art itself.

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