

The Other as Host: Gina Pane's *Je* Christopher (Kiff) Bamford

One evening in August 1972 the Italian-born French artist Gina Pane performed an action in the Place aux Œufs in Bruges. She positioned herself on the window-ledge of a second floor apartment situated above a café that overlooked the square. But Pane faced away from the square, away from the public, positioned rather with her face to the windowpane looking through the glass to the apartment within. Inside a family of four went about their usual, private, domestic activities: eating dinner, talking, playing a game, and generally ignoring the face at the window.

The set-up that Pane created deliberately positioned the artist in-between private and public; precariously positioned on this lintel, she was acting out the role of the artist as social interlocutor. Whilst on the window ledge Pane took Polaroid photographs of the domestic scene inside the flat, dropping the resulting images to assistants below who distributed them among the gathering crowd. Pane also read a number of short texts which referred to the relationship between self and other, coloniser and colonised, whilst all the time the sounds of the unremarkable everyday events taking place in the family apartment were being broadcast to those in the crowd below. One of the texts Pane read is a series of statements in both first and third person:

Je m'appelle	ils s'appellent
Je suis né	ils sont nés
Je mesure	ils mesurent
J'ai le teint	ils ont le teint
J'ai les cheveux	ils ont les cheveux
J'ai les yeux	ils ont les yeux ¹

These are the statements learnt by children at school, learnt to give names to their identities within the given categories of name, date of birth, height, colour of skin, hair and eyes. The title of Gina Pane's action is the first person singular in French: *Je*.

On the night of the action there were two words fixed to the floor below the window where Pane placed herself: *Les Autres* (The Others). The text is surrounded by a collection of buttons, grouped as though they were coins thrown to a street performer or beggar. In Pane's text, written to accompany the presentation of the piece in the contemporary art magazine *artitudes International*, she writes: 'In placing my body on the window's parapet between two zones: one private, one public, I had the power of transposition that shattered the limits of individuality so that "I" could share with the "Other"'.² Such an unselfconsciously serious belief in the power of art as transmitter echoes aspects of the approach to art taken by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, in particular his privileging of art as a space of provocation and 'transformation'. I will take two specific aspects of Lyotard's work to address issues which arise from a consideration of this work by Gina Pane: one relates to Lyotard's own approach to commenting on or writing commentary on art, and the second is Lyotard's translation of Emmanuel Lévinas in a section of his 1983 book *The Differend*. What both aspects share and to which I will draw particular attention is the demand to respond to something, without understanding what it is.

Lyotard is best known in Anglophone contexts for *The Postmodern Condition*, a book which has overshadowed much of his other work but whose attack on any form of totalising discourse, famously referred to as 'metanarratives', does indicate one of the driving forces in his work.³ As such it is not insignificant that Lévinas was important to Lyotard as a thinker who rejected the universalising project of Western philosophy and turned to rupture in order to open up discourse to the Other, a theme central to the premise of the conference *Transmission. Hospitality*. It is in his 1961 book *Totality and Infinity* that Lévinas makes a critique of philosophies that consider the other in relation to (and therefore inferior to) their own philosophical systems, one that inevitably results in the reduction of the other to the same: a totality.⁴ In contrast, Lévinas postulates the search for infinity that will not interiorise the other but recognise that it brings an exteriority which necessitates a fundamental obligation to the other. Unlike the Hegelian master/slave model of the encounter with the other, which necessitates a relationship of dominance and subjugation, Lévinas'

encounter with the other precludes such a dialectics premised on struggle and also overturns ideas of welcome and hospitality. It is not a dependence on the other but an obligation to the other.

‘Obligation’ is the title given to the chapter of Lyotard’s *The Differend* in which Lévinas is introduced in order to consider the encounter with the other as event. Lyotard draws on a range of Lévinas’ texts but describes two ‘kernel phrases’ from *Totality and Infinity*: ‘The ego does not proceed from the other; the other befalls the ego’.⁵ It is useful to posit this in contrast to the Lacanian conception of the other as that on which the ego relies for its own conception of itself as a (false) whole.⁶ In Lévinas’ account the ‘I’ exists prior to an encounter with the other; it exists in a world of ‘interiority’, it has no awareness of the other and is completely ‘closed over’ in its own egocentric enjoyment, ‘living from’ (*vivre de*) things in the world. It is only with the ethical call of the other that this intensity is ruptured and the radical alterity of the other ‘befalls the ego’.

The ethical call of the other is a demand to respond, not as host – which would leave the ego at home and in charge – but to open oneself unquestioningly to its call. It is an asymmetrical relationship which ruptures the interiority of the ego and entails an unquestioning obligation to the other as Host. The immediate consequence of being addressed by the other, according to Lyotard’s analysis, is that of being divested of the position of ‘I’ (*Je*). In being addressed, the ‘I’ immediately forfeits the first person position of ‘I’ because it is supplanted by ‘you’, your position in the network of communication – the universe of ‘phrases’ as Lyotard terms it – is altered; by being addressed by the other your position changes to one of addressee. Lyotard describes this as the ‘scandal of obligation’.⁷ Without necessarily uttering a response you have become obligated and are ethically responsible to the other. The formulation goes like this: if the ego is internally covered over it cannot recognise itself in the other but is rather divested of the self-contained, ‘covered over’ self. The ethical response to this radical epiphany, which plays a central role for Lyotard, is an unquestioning obligation without knowledge of to what one is being obligated, or the consequences of the obligation. The ethical call has no moral code: it demands a response to what occurs, before knowledge of what it is, or its implications. As Lyotard puts it:

Lévinas comments on the destituteness of the other: the other arises in my field of perception with the trappings of absolute poverty, without attributes, the other has no place, no time, no essence, the other is nothing but his or her request and my obligation.⁸

Returning to *Je*, the action by Gina Pane, we can see that Pane positions herself as stranger but also as intermediary, interlocutor, a transformer of situations. It is not my intention here to suggest that Pane’s action illustrates the ethical call of the other, but rather to use it as a prompt to question my own position in relation to the piece. Where am I as a viewer of the documentation of this action, thirty-eight years later, almost a lifetime away and when the artist is no longer alive? I am distanced by historical difference, cultural difference, gender difference, difference of sexuality, and therefore, it would seem, at least doubly protected. Yet the set-up used by Pane allows the documentation to continue the action, to be part of it. Pane is somewhat unusual in her attitude towards the role of the physical performance, insisting that it constitutes only one part of what she termed the ‘action’, which also includes both the period of preparation and the subsequent assemblage of documentation. In 1972 the action was presented in the French art magazine *arTitudes* over two pages, one consisting of the title and a short text written by Pane whilst the following page showed four photographs taken by Pane’s frequent collaborator, the photographer Françoise Masson. The first photograph shows the backs of spectators turned towards Pane’s distant body outlined against the illuminated window; the next is from inside where the family sit round a dining table occupied with the rules of a board game, backs turned away from the figure visible at the window. The two other photographs do not include Pane but focus on ground level: passers by, café tables, and the collection of buttons, also shown close-up in the last image with the words clearly visible: *Les Autres*.

For exhibition Pane typically chose to combine multiple photographs in framed panels, often together with diagrams and text. When *Je* was presented as part of an exhibition in 1998 at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, four framed panels were shown which included thirty-two photographs and handwritten texts.⁹ These assemblages, termed ‘constats’, which roughly translates

as ‘proofs’, continue the work, introducing different elements of time and space that open up the action to different audiences. In the case of *Je* the ‘constats’ show photographs from both outside and inside, indicating visually the simultaneity which was not evident to the audience on the night except through the sound relayed from the interior or via glimpses of the Polaroid photographs. The ‘constats’ consciously present a different experience and not a record in the usual sense of documentation. This set-up is important, I suggest, because it works contrary to arguments that privilege the experience of being present at a ‘live’ event. Pane’s argument that the action is continued through the ‘constats’ questions assumptions about distance: through the archival documentation and through the re-telling of the narrative I am presented with the challenge that Lévinas and Lyotard demand: to respond without questioning.

Because the other is radically other to the ‘I’, the occurrence has no sense for the ‘I’; it suffers from what Lyotard terms an ‘insufficiency of knowledge’, and whilst it is tempted to ask what happened, to recoup the occurrence and to explain it, these attempts cannot alter the fact that something happened: ‘it cannot annul the event’, writes Lyotard.¹⁰ The result is, consequently, a dispossession of the ego and its ‘sufficiency of knowledge’. This process of dispossession and the openness to its occurrence links to what Lévinas terms ‘passivity’ and Lyotard ‘passibility’. In the notoriously complex work *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence* Lévinas describes ‘passivity’ as ‘the subjectivity of subjection of the self is the suffering of suffering, the ultimate offering oneself, or the suffering in the offering of oneself’.¹¹ It is a state that Lyotard has referred to as ‘passibility’ in the *The Inhuman* as a state in which ‘something is happening to us’, an unanticipated occurrence in which ‘the feeling is a welcoming of what is given’.¹² The theological meaning of the term ‘passible’ relates to the capacity to feel suffering, therefore it may seem to sit uneasily with the description of ‘welcoming’, yet this welcoming of suffering relates to the destabilising of knowledge and the shattering of the conception of the self as sufficient, ‘living from’ the things in the world without any responsibility to them. ‘Passibility’ is a state where the egoist individuality of the self is challenged by a force of desire that comes not from the primary processes of the individual but from ‘something fundamental, originary’ which we cannot conceptualise.¹³ The suffering of which Lévinas writes ‘in the offering of oneself’ is key both to the actions of Gina Pane and to the approach Lyotard takes to writing commentary on art. Lyotard’s writings on art are always serious reflections on the impossibility of the task. They constitute an ethical response to the call of the other, to proceed without knowing how to proceed, which results in the despair he writes of when asked to ‘pen the three words, or perhaps three hundred pages, which would transcribe the absolute insignificance of the gesture that is the work of art’, despair because of the manner in which art can displace the thought of the philosopher and the suffering that it entails.¹⁴ It is, however, a ‘passible’ suffering, not sacrificial but saintly: ‘It is what is witness to the fracturing of the I, to its aptitude for hearing a call’.¹⁵

As a coda I want to mention the perhaps unanticipated response to Pane’s action. As night fell and her body became clearly picked out by a theatrical spotlight, still positioned on the window-ledge of the second floor flat, a crowd formed in the square and started to shout, baying for her to jump. Perhaps in hearing this we are witness to their inability to respond to her as Other.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Anne Tronche, *Gina Pane: actions*, Paris: Fall Éditions, 1997, p. 118.
2. Gina Pane, 'Je', *arTitudes International*, 1 (1972), p. 15. My translation.
3. Jean-François Lyotard (1979), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. xxiv.
4. Emmanuel Lévinas (1961), *Totality and Infinity*; tr. by Adolph Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
5. Jean-François Lyotard (1983), *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, tr. by Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p.110.
6. Jacques Lacan (1966), 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', *Écrits*, tr. by Bruce Fink, New York: Norton, 2002.
7. Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.110.
8. Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.111.
9. See *Premises: Invested Spaces in Visual Arts, Architecture and Design from France, 1958–1998*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Guggenheim Museum.
10. Lyotard, *The Differend*, pp.110–111.
11. Emmanuel Lévinas (1974), *Otherwise than Being: or, Beyond Essence*, tr. by Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991, p. 54.
12. Jean-François Lyotard (1988), *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, tr. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, London: Polity, 1991, p. 111.
13. Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.111.
14. Jean-François Lyotard (1993), 'Gesture and commentary', tr. by Stephen Schwartz, in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundary*; ed. by Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos, Albany: Albany State University Press, 2002, p. 74.
15. Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.113.