

By Elie During

If I had to say in a few words what I expect metaphysics to do, I would gladly quote Wilfrid Sellars's definition of the aim of philosophy: "[T]o understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term."¹ For I believe that the question that is at the heart of metaphysical inquiry—no matter how this inquiry is conducted—has to do with the coexistence, or the connection, of things. In other words, the question of *nexus*, considered in its universal extension. Space and time (or "space-time," the term popularized by contemporary physics) constitute the canonical forms of this nexus, though they are probably not the only ones, and space-time itself—the joining of space and time, considered in both their logical and sensible dimensions—admits of a great many varieties.

But since we are here to talk about art, and its relation to a metaphysical system, let us begin with an example: a video by the Austrian performance artist known as VALIE EXPORT, entitled *Adjungierte Dislokationen* (1973). The piece takes the form of a triple projection. Three separate sequences of images are juxtaposed in the space of a large rectangle: on the right, two superimposed 8mm projections; on the left, a single projection equal in height to the ones on the right, in 16mm. The large image reveals the organizing principle of the performance. The artist has strapped two cameras to her body, which functions as a mobile tripod: the first looks out straight ahead, from the level of her collarbone; the other is placed in the middle of her back, pointing in the opposite direction. These are the two 8mm cameras whose footage is projected on the right part

of the screen. At first, VALIE EXPORT walks about in an anonymous urban environment: a city square, streets, the courtyard of a building; then through more bucolic surroundings, climbing the slope of a low hill, crossing a field, and so on. The film lasts eight minutes, amidst the roar of three projectors operating simultaneously.

The title of the work speaks of "conjoined dislocations." But what exactly has been *dislocated*? And what could it mean to try to *join together* dislocations? One has only to watch the video, and to perform the task of split (or distributed) attention that it demands of the viewer, in order to see that the simultaneity one naturally expects to obtain between these three images is broken, dislocated in a thousand ways. First of all, the small image at the top right is not synchronized with the one below it; nor do the two images taken together seem to correspond in any systematic fashion to the large image on the left. The sense of dislocation becomes more pronounced as the film goes on. Apart from two or three moments of apparent coincidence or symmetry, there is no way whatsoever to reconstruct, on the basis of these queerly conjoined segments, anything like the sort of coherent sequence shot one might otherwise expect to obtain by combining the two small images and the large one to create an improbable 360° perspective. *Dis-lokation* in this case also signifies that any attempt to reconstitute the route traced by these images, which is to say an unfolding trajectory associated with a time, is hindered at each instant, so that the form of space itself, and indeed the very sense of a continuous movement, ends up being hopelessly blurred. Instead one is left with a rhapsodic succession of increasingly abstract shots, albeit with episodic synchronizations and occasional points of reconnection.

Plainly this amounts to taking the usual rules of cinema, understood as the editing and assembling of separate takes, and pushing them

¹ Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 1.

to their limit. But perhaps the most surprising thing about this kind of montage is not so much the discrepancy or deliberate dislocation of the 8mm shots in respect of each other as the relationship that they both enjoy with the larger image to their left. This larger view, one soon deduces, is filmed by a third camera that never appears in any of the 8mm shots. In principle, then, it should reveal to us the truth of the artistic exercise, and indeed it does do this to the extent that it shows us how the exercise is carried out, while showing us at the same time, from an encompassing vantage point that seems somehow to be exempt from the play of shifting perspectives, the mobile site from which the smaller projections look out upon the world, in opposite directions. To conjoin forward- and backward-looking perspectives whose lines of sight never intersect, and then to place next to them a projection that flattens them, so to speak, by aligning them on the same plane, namely, the wall of a gallery—this is a splendid idea, and by no means a simple one. But to relate the progressive dislocation of the two smaller perspectives to a witness-image, a central perspective that in reality witnesses nothing at all, apart from the performance itself, is to plunge the whole exercise back into a state of complete indeterminacy with regard to the coordinates of space-time.

Let us now make an abrupt jump cut and try to join up all of this with the metaphysical question of connection, by stating the question in the most universal possible way. I would suggest the following formulation: how can the global point of view of a totality be reconciled with the local point of view of a particular situation? All the ontologies that, from Bergson to Sartre and Deleuze, have tried to place a principle of radical indeterminacy at the heart of being have

to face this problem. The *situs* must be set in a situation space without thereby abolishing the singularity, the necessarily surplus, supernumerary character of the act of locating it there. This problematic requirement is generally expressed in terms of an unstable solution that takes the oxymoronic form of an “open totality”—in other words, a totality that is not closed on itself. More positively, one may think of an open totality as being identical with a principle of local extension, which has the effect of never forcing us to leave the plane of experience (what Deleuze calls the “plane of immanence”). The basic idea is that every way of representing, or conceiving, the compositional space of perspectives amounts, in its turn, only to one more perspective. William James clearly stated this principle in connection with “external relations.”² A perspective being, in the last analysis, merely a bundle of relations ordered by a point of view, it is easy to transpose what may be called artistic configurations (including the cinematic idea of mobile perspective) and scientific configurations (including the notion of a system of reference). The argument against idealistic monism—the doctrine that there is in reality only one thing, and that this thing is not material in nature, but made of the same stuff as our ideas—assumed in

² See William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 321. “Pragmatically interpreted,” James says, “pluralism or the doctrine that [reality] is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related*. Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely ‘external’ environment of some sort or amount. Things are ‘with’ one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes.”

James a very simple form: not only must the relations between two distinct terms be conceived as *external* relations, not deducible from the terms themselves, but as a consequence any relation must be able in its turn to be the object of a local *experience*. In short, every experiential relation is also a relational experience.³ Such an experience necessarily arises from the point of view of a third party, which therefore appears as an extension of the experience, rather than as a “geometral” (or flat) point of view, the perspective of a global space that comprehends all relations (what James calls the “block-universe”). To say that such a space is real evidently amounts once again to reducing relations to internal relations—internal this time, however, to a Whole of relations, a Whole given in one piece, so to speak, for all eternity.

As against this classical ideal of a *mathesis universalis*, the second wave of philosophical modernity inaugurated by Marx, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud (and which is with us still) asserts that every experiential relation may be converted into a relational experience, that every combining of perspectives yields a new perspective. The philosopher Patrice Maniglier has shown how this intuition more or less secretly stimulated the thinking of Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze, and Latour, and how artists can echo it in their own way.⁴ I must leave for another time, however, the task of examining the assumptions of this intuition, and of analyzing its internal difficulties, which may have

³ See Lecture VII (“The Continuity of Experience”) in *ibid.*, especially 279–80.

⁴ See Patrice Maniglier, *La perspective du diable: Figurations de l'espace et philosophie de la Renaissance à Rosemary's Baby* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2010).

encouraged some philosophers (here I am thinking, of course, of Badiou) to forswear oblique reference to a totality and to contemplate instead the pure multiple—a non-totalizable multiple multiple.

Short of embracing this radical alternative to classical metaphysics, I believe there is room for a variety of intermediate positions that the allied powers of art and science will help us to better apprehend. Art and science function, in effect, as precision instruments: they calibrate an entire range of alternative conceptions of space-time, which jointly constitute it as the overarching framework of the nexus of relations and perspectives; they show us, for example, that space-time may be perfectly regular, uniform, and symmetrical—and therefore “global,” in the sense that its metric form is fixed once and for all—while at the same time being perfectly local, in the sense that the principle of linking up perspectives is defined by strictly local operations, so that its overall properties are not immediately given, but can only be discovered or inferred at the end of a process of exploration that proceeds by connecting different points of view. One encounters the like of this in the space-time of special relativity, which is compatible in principle with any “flat” but globally warped local space (cylinder, torus, Möbius strip, Klein bottle, and so on). In my recent book *Faux raccords* (Jump Cuts),⁵ I have sought to show that the filmic and mental space-time of Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo* can be seen to have an overall structure of the Möbius-

⁵ Elie During, *Faux raccords: La coexistence des images* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2010).

strip type (a disorientation space), although it can be intuited only on the basis of local jump cuts.

More generally, these examples suggest that classicism in metaphysics (and perhaps in art and science as well) may be thought of as having a warped—or, rather, kinked—form. The theory formulated by Einstein in 1905, contemporaneously with the advent of cubism, depends on two axioms of immediate metaphysical import. They may be summarized by considering two works by the conceptual artist Dan Graham, *Two Correlated Rotations* (1969) and *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974), which respectively incorporate the two fundamental ideas of Einstein's theory: on the one hand, a principle of *reciprocity* that asserts the radical equivalence of perspectives (what physicists ever since Galileo have considered to be a "relativity principle"); and, on the other, a principle of *locality*, or of action from place to place, one place at a time (which physicists associate with the idea of a *finite* maximum speed, a sort of horizon of the space of possible velocities, which in the event corresponds to the speed of light in a vacuum). In other words, relativity asserts two things: first, there is no privileged point of view; second, there is no action at a distance. Dan Graham is a contemporary of Einstein: he introduces into video and performance art a dual principle of reciprocity and of locality.

This latter principle is altogether novel from a metaphysical point of view, for it implies that things can be joined up with one another only *from place to place*, which is to say locally. There is no action at a distance, no instantaneous action (that is, action at infinite speed); or, to state the same idea in positive terms, every action, every

interaction *takes time*. It is this state of affairs that gives rise to the famous relativistic paradoxes, which, in "shearing" (the technical term employed by mathematicians) classical space-time, show us that movement brings about various kinds of deformation: dislocation of simultaneity relations, length contraction, time dilation, and so on. Notice that all of this neatly disposes of the apocalyptic vision of the world urged for thirty years now by thinkers like Paul Virilio. No matter how many ominous technological developments they may marshal in support of such an opinion, the universe they inhabit remains fundamentally Newtonian: they still believe in infinite speeds; indeed, they think that we have already broken the light barrier and that the age when distances have been abolished, the age of instantaneous connection and of "real time," is now upon us. For Virilio, of course, that literally means the end of the *world*. Now, this may be true phenomenologically, on the macroscopic scale of medium velocities to which we are accustomed in everyday life. But the principle of locality obliges us to insist on greater precision than this. It forces us to go beyond our ordinary threshold of perception, to pay closer attention to the tears, the jump cuts, the blindspots that punctuate the course of human experience—and that cinema and video-art have long made it their business to explore. Talk of instantaneity is not absurd. It errs only through an excess of anthropocentrism, a sort of futuristic hocus-pocus that confines us to a rustic phenomenology of experienced speeds. Art and science suggest that the world is really more interesting than it seems.

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