

**COMMUNITY AT
LOOSE ENDS**

**Edited by the
Miami Theory Collective**

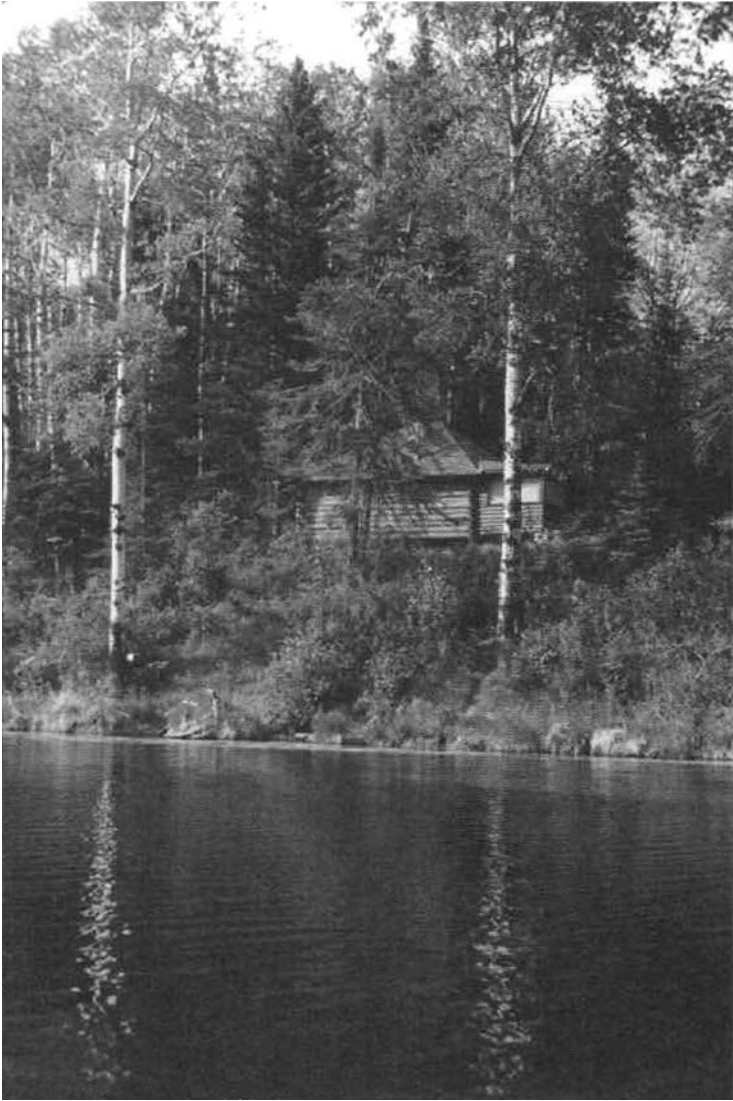
COMMUNITY

Communal Crisis

Verena Andermatt Conley

From the solitude of the North Woods, I am led to wonder what it means to meditate on our chosen topic of community. My library here is in keeping with my surroundings: *Wildflowers of North America*, *Our Birds*, and *The Edible Mushroom*, volumes that will inflect somewhat, I hope, the words to follow. The book on mushrooms features glossy reproductions of the exquisite morel, whose name—when pronounced with a little French inflection—is not without echoes of the philosophers’ moral law. In a guide to the study of boreal trees, I learn about their communities with divisions into canopies and subcanopies. The basic organizing principle of trees appears to be the search for food. To obtain the latter, action is decisive, often violent, and quite a contrast with the point of departure for the very colloquium that puts into question a community working along such lines of inclusion, exclusion.

A word about this book title. Last year, in preparation for Jean-François Lyotard’s visit at Miami University, each of us submitted a question. Mine had to do with the status of the intellectual in the present-day world and with certain inevitable contradictions I perceived. After reading my question, Tom Conley said to me: “Mais quand-même, you should not ask questions like this, *ad hominem*.” Somewhat contrite, I went to apologize to Jean-François Lyotard, who said in his cultivated, urbane style, with resonances of an Eastern sage, “Oh, I just read in your question that you were in crisis.” “In crisis,” the words echoed in my head, “in crisis.” Surely it was not that famous forty-year-old crisis, the cliché so dear to some of our administrators that helps them to settle complex issues by draconian means. Thinking about what had been called “my crisis,” I discov-



ered that it was not a *toujours déjà*, an always already, but that it could be attributed to be moment and a place. Something had been determined by my return to Miami University last fall with a change in my life that, due to a regular schedule of commuting, took me out of a serene campus community, built on the nineteenth-century agrarian model, and plunged me into a world of airports, airplanes, and electronics. What struck me was not only that the world that was hustling and



bustling was totally ignorant of my ways of reading and did not seem to care, but that what I was discovering seemed to be what in fact made the world go round. This world was quite different from the one I had been proposing in my courses and in my writings—based mainly on a reading of French feminist theories, in which a breakdown of community, an unavowable community, an undoing of the self in a discourse of intense poetic vision was in question. These discourses had

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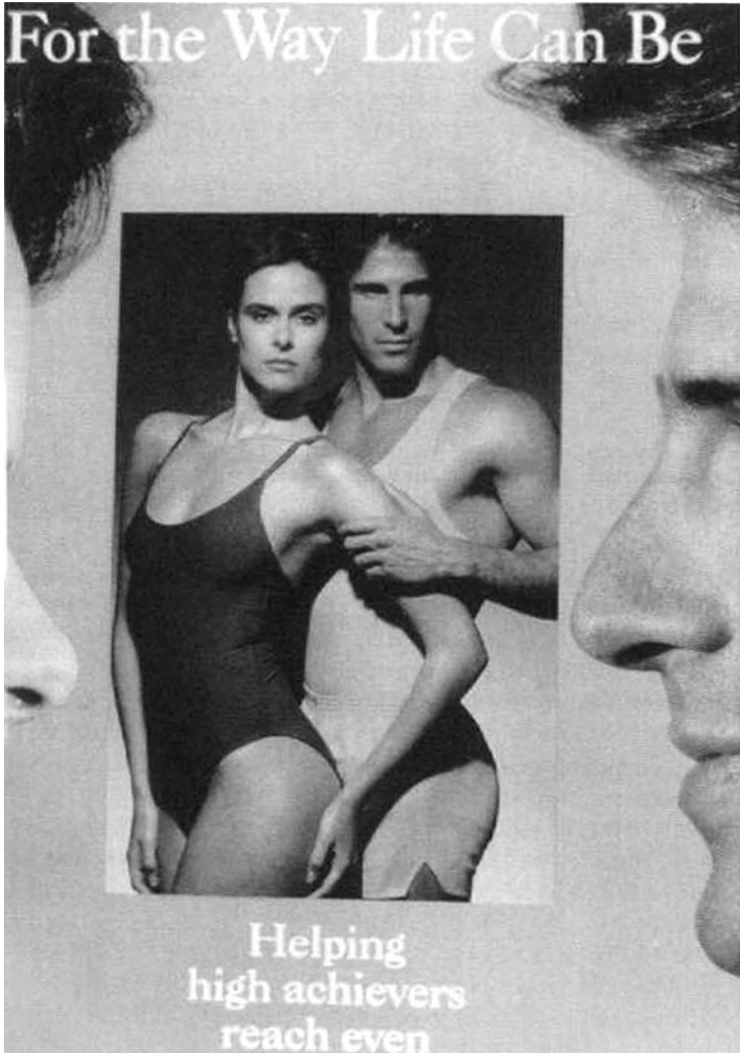
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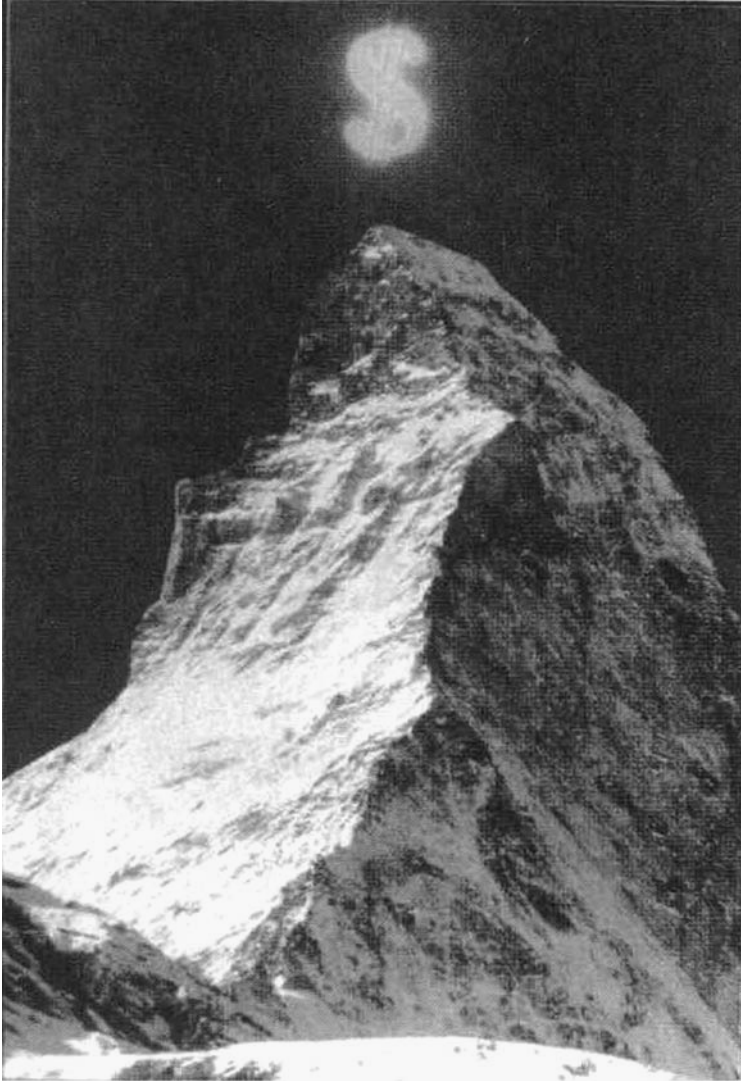
taught me about dispossession, about *délivrance* and *jouissance*, deliverance and pleasure, about politics through poetry. I seemed to have gone from one flight to another, from one delta to another; from Hélène Cixous's textual machines, always in flight, alighting here and there at nodal points, and Marguerite Duras's haunting deltas that no barrage can control, to what was called, in a condensation of the two, postmodern travel by Delta Airlines. And as everybody knows, they say, "Delta loves to fly and it shows." Now, what is it like to fly Delta and read the world? If the series of weekly displacements erases an old sense of communal bonding tied to a place in which one lives, loves, and toils, my new experience is not devoid of newly proclaimed communal bondings. By "choosing Delta"—note the freedom implicit in the American way of life here, contrary to the European, no state machine dares interfere—I enter into a complex network of micro- and macrocommunities (or commutities, the difference being that of a *t*), all seemingly quite avowable. Language is plain and all allegiance is based on saving time and money. Through a communal bonding between Delta and Amexco, I earn triple mileage on my Frequent Flyer Card (the mileage statement is courteously sent each month to "Mr. Vern Conley"), enough to pay for a trip for two next year to the Orient—not to the exotic Parisian China of Kristeva's erstwhile Taji-quan, but to Tokyo. My Crown card gives me access to The Club, where businessmen are tied to the world via long-distance calling cards—rather than the feminist *téléfaune*—or conducting conferences in special seminar rooms at the airport. It is the twentieth-century version of the first floor of the Eiffel

Tower, which was supposed to be a futuristic world of its own. Only academics have the luxury of traveling fifty miles from the airport to a conference—have the time to spend, surely not the money. In the Club, the barman says hello, and so does the community of regulars, set apart from the tourists waiting for their flight to London. Delta effectively provides you with a home away from home. Or rather, Delta becomes the home, in displacement, held together by a mutual interest in gain. Businessmen, the beatniks of the eighties, are “on the road.” In flight, everything is done to do away with that sensation. A continuous flow of liquid prevents the passengers from acceding to the sublime: there is no jolt, no stopping followed by a flow. *Sky* magazine, put at the disposal of the community of flyers—mostly men—offers a reading of the world based on straight materialism, optimal gain, and a direct rapport between name and referent. A world of market research, efficiency, and reasoning projects the future. There are glossy ads for electronic gadgets, from worldwide pagers to Panasonic VCRs with remote control to videodiscs that tell doctors whether they are right or wrong and computers that translate into different languages. The monthly psychological column in September of 1987 informed the reader of the effects of therapy: chemical therapy is the best for those who need it. Freudian therapy also works but is slower. One month’s time is gained by using A rather than B. All is done to save time, to eliminate human error, and ultimately to save money. The new configuration is linked to new supersubjects, as exemplified by the world of SyberVision. If I choose to enter the world of SyberVision (conveniently accessible with an 800 number and all major credit cards), I can listen by way of tapes and cassettes to melodious, paternal voices, reciting texts by eminent professors of management from USC and Stanford University, or to sports figures like Jean-Claude Killy, who guarantee to change my life in every area of my choice, from leadership to high achievement, from executive stress to a better marriage, from an improved golf game to weight control. As with the trees I am watching while I am writing this, there are communities and subcommunities everywhere—perhaps, like the white pines, spraying their acid on intruders. SyberVision is yet another community of men and women, based on the assumption of a common language, where, like the image of the muscular couple advertising the program, its users are “in charge.” It guarantees the American version of success defined by eternal youth, good looks, and money. The ultimate in the development of any philosophy of the subject and mastery of the self, SyberVision is perhaps best allegorized by the ad for the program on self-discipline, featuring the mountain from my erstwhile homeland, the Matterhorn, surmounted by a dollar sign. What Jean-François Lyotard called my crisis had to do with my becoming aware, all at once, of the gap between my feminist discourses, those that seemingly made the world go round, and the distance covered from the days of Vietnam to the present days of “yuppie ennui”; between the days when Patti Hearst was a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army and those during which, as a New York socialite, she presented the film Paul Schrader made about her to the Cannes Film Festival; between what I entered in my twenties as critical and tactical



avant-garde discourses, which proposed to change, artistically and theoretically, modes of production and reproduction, and a world that, at many levels, has developed in disregard of them. Lyotard's final invitation in *The Differend* to listen to the unrepresentable — "Arrive-t-il," Is it happening? — was here supplanted by the ultimate in market research.¹

I had come to this country nourished by romantic, filmic images from *Gone*



with the Wind and *Geronimo*, with clichéd readings about the Far West by Karl May. But I had found the Living Theater in teargassed streets in Madison, Wisconsin, which made me decide to leave the statues of the reformers in the courtyard at Geneva far behind. It is from there that I had entered feminist discourses, Cixous's undoing of the narcissistic *sujet un*, Kristeva's revolution through poetic language, Irigaray's doubling of the woman, or Wittig's assimilation of the woman's cause with that of the flower children. Feminist writings, vaguely



linked to the German romantics, to the literary absolute, to the integration of otherness in reason, and to Freudian models of repression, urged for the unleashing of potentially creative forces. I had been trained to view art as subversive, emancipatory, and ultimately reconciling. But these discourses seemed to have been overwhelmed by those I found in the back pockets of the seats on Delta Airlines.

The question became, like that phrased by Lyotard, though in a different context, how to link: “*Comment enchaîner?*”

After reading recent publications, I concluded that the “crisis” wasn’t mine alone. There seems to be a more general malaise with a world dominated by the *genre économique*, run by large, almost anonymous corporations, or communities, broken down into myriad smaller ones, and with theories that—after an ephemeral moment of ’68—did not bring about the proposed universal changes, be it through a historical genealogy, the temporalization of the origin, or a reading of the world in terms of language games. It seemed less like a community at loose ends than a loose-ended community at loose ends.

This I gathered from various calls to action: Paul Smith’s book *Discerning the Subject*; Jürgen Habermas’s *Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: 12 Vorlesungen*, an attempt at critically historicizing contemporary discourses, deftly translated into French but a bit narrowly introduced by Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz; an issue of *Diacritics* (17, 3 [Fall 1987]) featuring articles urging a return to history (a subject that had never really disappeared) and exhorting the reader to be both “affirmative and contestatory”; as well as a review by David B. Downing of Christopher Norris’s new “politics of enlightened critique,” which alternates between Lyotard and Habermas and opts for Fregean logical semantics.² Downing, with perspicacity, focuses on the disagreement between Lyotard and Habermas. Lyotard insists on locating any form of emancipatory rhetoric as dependent on one of the great metanarratives of Western culture. He privileges the gap or rupture as a departure for the new, the unheard, the unrepresentable. Habermas attempts to link theory with pragmatics through his three categories of knowledge: technical, practical, and emancipatory, and insists on making abstract theory point to specific counterdominant political movements such as those of peace, ecology, and feminism. (*Communicative Action*, 35, 73). Their differend, as Thomas McCarthy points out in his introduction to *The Theory of Communicative Action*,³ seems to revolve around a question of linking, of a playful twentieth-century aesthetics, insisting on the unrepresentable, from Duchamp’s readymade to the linguistic configurations of the new novel, versus a linking of abstract theory to a more pragmatic field. And, concludes Downing, in favor of Habermas against Norris’s reading of Frege and leaving aside Lyotard: “This perhaps will allow us to make headway in questions of inequality, of race, class, gender.” The emancipatory discourse prevails. Only hinted at, but not taken up again, are, next to feminism, questions of ecology and peace. This all reads as a part of the intellectual’s desire to act in and on a world that eludes him, and I choose *him* purposely because the women’s theoretical preoccupations seem to be less exteriorized, less regulatory, in accord with a tradition of gender—or perhaps a wisdom to be cultivated?



There also arrived two issues of *Critique*, one featuring an article on “the invasion of French theory in America” (April 1988, 491), and the other on philosophy, on “how it continues” (June–July 1988, 493–94). The former title may confirm that malaise is worldwide, that America looks to European theory for issues that it cannot solve and Europe to American pragmatism. A point about invasion, since I am meditating on this in the North Woods, between Belgium Fred’s and the DeCaigny Rapids: the very idea of “invasion” may be an American interpretation of French behavior. The famous voyageurs, traveling after the Greenwich meridian had already replaced that of Paris on the Picard map, were not invaders; they were interested in local exchange among riverain Indian groups, in trading copper pots and trinkets for beaver pelts. They found in America some ideal communities, be it that of the beavers, the *castor gras* (reproduced with quasi-human physiognomies in the style of Fontainebleau), or their version of a first Disneyland, an Indian community of 1552 set up for the king’s enjoyment in Rouen. The French seemed more interested in how the world was constituted than in changing it for colonial ends.

What I sense from all these readings is a malaise concerning our discourses, our positions in the world—or perhaps an attempt to make an evaluation, à la Dumas, twenty years later: “self-criticism, action, contestation” are the terms. Yet the general climate in America is not good. Bouchindhomme and Rochlitz quite sincerely refer to a world about to become extinct. This may be true. But it certainly is not lived that way by many, and there’s the rub.

Following the debacle of the Communist party in France, roughly twenty years after World War II and its leading role in the Resistance, H el ene Cixous was able to say in an interview printed in the party's cultural review *Les Lettres francaises*: "Politically, there has been a move to the left, an effraction of what used to be called 'leftist' and constituted a large part of the traditional public: liberals, intellectuals, humanists, academics are retreating and are on the defensive in relation to an avant-garde production that does not allow them any subjective gratification and undermines their values. Inversely, there has been a breakthrough: a public of young people now has access to what an authoritarian, test-oriented university discourse did not allow even three or four years ago. What is being read at Vincennes is unreadable in other universities in stagnation."⁴

After World War II and the Algerian War, May '68 certainly seemed a rallying point for many. It seemed to be a time in France when changes in production and reproduction could be brought about, when the community was to open onto a communism based on love without an object. The revolution of poetic language was going to lead to the promised land, via the conscience of women, workers, Jews, and China. The Vietnam War seemed to rally Americans and orient them in a direction in accord with these discourses.

But things developed differently. A certain form of capitalism, if we may still call it that, seems at an all-time high. Economic interests dominate political interests. *Le genre  conomique*, as Lyotard would have it, is all-pervasive, making every linking or *enchaînement* conflictual, in philosophers' terms, or in managerial terms, aggressive and hostile. We may begin to wonder whether terms like left and right, residues of the French Revolution, still apply, whether other ways of designating should be thought of, away from a certain ideal of emancipation to something more communally prescriptive—as when we worry, for example, about the rain forests being depleted, for how are we going "to swim in air," as the feminists exhort us, when there is no more air to swim in? Colbert, though his project was economically controversial, in the mid-seventeenth century planted an oak forest near Charroux in Auvergne for wood to be cut in 1990 to rebuild the French navy. Today, foresight is at an all-time low, and people seem to live entirely for the profit of the day. Gallup polls show, for the presidential election in November, more women than men are ready to vote for Democrats, and more people over fifty than between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. It is the young people who plan to vote Republican—that is, loosely, to the right. The yuppies (or the dinks) are far from that *public de jeunes* (a public of young people) acclaimed by H el ene Cixous in 1968. However, more college graduates than nongraduates will vote for the Democrats—marking, ever so remotely, an interest in social issues.

Perhaps we should situate ourselves, redefine ourselves as trading in French theories in America today, be it as voyageurs, as settlers, or as natives. An at-

tempt at linking heterogeneous discourses cannot be made without an evaluation of a rapidly changing position of the thinker and the artist in the world. And who is the communal “we”? Lyotard thinks of himself as a philosopher, as someone analyzing how the world is constituted. He distinguishes himself agonistically from the intellectuals, whom he sees as noisily rallying around a cause without any sign of rigorous analysis. The philosopher, taking his models from the world he analyzes—at times a French world—is to be both in the world and above it, showing how it is constituted. I am not a philosopher and have no debt to pay. But having been trained in reading literature and film, I have always taken it upon myself to read the world critically through these media. What is the relationship between the world and art, how does a certain piece less reflect than predict and criticize by opening onto something new? Like Lyotard, I situate myself in an aesthetic of discontinuity, in a tradition favoring social change through art, without attaching to it the present negativizing label of aestheticism. This is all perhaps in keeping with the preponderant role of art since the German romantics, echoed for literary people in Freud’s dictum that “poets are ahead of us common men,” and with the potentially revolutionizing capabilities of art that underlie a lot of French theories being questioned. Perhaps we ought to situate ourselves and see what we are trying to achieve. “We” here are a “community” of philosophers, critics, professors. Are we providing a critical theory of society, a critical reading through texts and film? What is the relationship between a critique and a tactic? Do we stay within the university? If not, how can our philosophy or criticism change the world? And art? Do we, like Sartre, “take our pens for swords”? Do we prolong the idea of progress and improvement of the human lot, or do we relativize the ups and downs and shifts of power? And what are our own implications for power? As my analyst used to say: Stop trying to change the world.

A difference between France and America may have to do with the position of the intellectual (I retain the word for the sake of convenience). In France, people are bureaucrats, *fonctionnaires d'état*, integrated on a fixed pay scale, as well as writers, artists, philosophers. In the United States, we are first and foremost professors—teachers for the rest of the world, like the customs official stamping my passport each time upon return—and nonexistent without an academic affiliation. Our departments function on a managerial model of effectiveness, growth, and gain, unlike that in which I taught at Vincennes-Saint Denis, where the secretary, her dog, the faculty, and students all shared the same room and semiautomatic typewriter. American universities are leaning more and more toward the corporate world, to the point of losing their nonprofit status—as we read in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in June 1988. Free agency has also hit the academic market. We are negotiating ourselves as theoreticians preaching dis-possession. Presses sell ideas. A recent article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

showed how the University of Minnesota Press attracts buyers through alluring covers. And their bestsellers today are Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* and Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*. Marxism sells and so does feminism. The main buyers of French ideas, from existentialism to the new novel and recent theories, have been the Americans. The book that is intended to shape our lives, as readers and as writers, is also an object of commodity, a geometrical shape, a cultural good to be marketed. Ironically, in our era of market conglomerates, what is coveted most is information. Information is the spice of Frank Herbert's *Dune*. And a company like Murdoch and Triangle, which just concluded a multibillion-dollar deal with the acquisition of the most widely read publication in the United States, *TV Guide*, also owns the *New York Post*, the *Financial Times* of London, *Seventeen*, and the *Village Voice*. There is no way that we can *not* be a part of the market world against which we speak. In an interview about the transaction, one CEO coined a new term for the postmodern era, a condensation of information and entertainment into *infotainment*. Infotainment rationally exploits collective irrationality. It erodes text in favor of more pervasive images linked to the cryptic message—a style that reigns in *USA Today*, which one can buy in Paris as well as at the entrance points to the North Woods. But intellectuals cannot ignore massification, a twentieth-century phenomenon they too often simply refer to as “the marketplace.” They are part of the world they criticize, and use to some degree its mottos of “bigger and better.” Critical theories easily become institutionalized, and too quickly become currency in academic bargaining and lose their cutting edge, their *coup du tranchant*.

Filmmakers for whom the economic contradiction is a matter of life and death have been more frank. As Wim Wenders has shown in *The American Friend* and other films, there is a tension between the artisan filmmaker and big production. Wenders somewhat unilaterally makes the division between American money and European artistry. But we too are caught in the ideology of this dilemma—and how do we resolve it? Pay scales easily show where society's values are situated. The difference in salaries between a football player or a movie star and a professor is that of a couple of zeros. Yet the player and the star are also pawns in a larger system and the game and movie disappear in favor of sheer profit. The existential heroism of a football game of thirty years ago has given way to a two-dimensional game, a flattened image subjugated to a network of concessions, “food enterprises,” advertisements that market research strategically controls for maximum gain. In this sense, America has in its way truly become a *communauté désœuvrée*.

This is well known in the art market, where artists and gallery owners like Julian Schnabel and Mary Boone, in collusion, are making money. Paintings are auctioned off and put in a closet by insurance companies that purchase them for tax write-offs. In more than one sense, the artwork disappears. And this pertains not just to mass goods and imposters but to worthy avant-garde artists as well,

artists like Jasper Johns and Claes Oldenburg, whose work was once thought to be subversive. Oldenburg recently took part, with three thousand artists present, in what the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* called an “event,” an unveiling of a sculpture garden at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, built at a cost of \$12.8 million, with no one but Tom Conley protesting the disappearance of the softball field it replaced. An avant-garde filmmaker like Spike Lee, whose *She’s Gotta Have It* was based on Godard’s and Truffaut’s New Wave technical devices of thirty years ago with a script based on recently gathered statistics, is offered a big contract by Columbia Pictures the second time around and is making TV ads for Nike shoes. It is his financial success that opened possibilities for other black filmmakers. Gone is the ideal of the nineteenth-century *artiste maudit*. Artists are center stage, right up there with big businessmen and college administrators. Grants made available by owners of grocery and department stores, or by former lumber barons, are plentiful.

I am essaying a sociological presentation of what Lyotard and others have theorized in their works. All this to note that money is increasingly the determining factor that makes and breaks communities. Many of the young around ’68 dropped out to lead alternative lives, often in communes. The dream of today seems to be to get rich quickly, to fall victim to drugs, to rehabilitate, to tell a compelling tale about the process, then to make a movie or play the stock market and retire. Some academics may still speak, somewhat naively, of high art and low art, and deplore the snobbery of the former over the latter when in fact it is all reversed. It is the money commanded by the low arts that imposes. It cost more a couple of weeks ago to see Prince perform than it did to hear Leontyne Price.

What then does it mean for intellectuals in this context: to contest, to act? Who is performing self-criticism? We do not believe in model societies or model communities, and we know that neither the proletariat nor women will lead us to the promised land. Any change in power brings with it another configuration of power. On the one hand, it is difficult not to agree with Lyotard in his dialogic meditation on revolutionary discourse:

In historical-political reality, it is necessary to “let this subject speak.”— Aren’t its phrases the signs in question (No. 236): suffering, class anger and hatred, enthusiasm and solidarity? And only these signs?—But if these signs have a universal value, they are on the side of the audience (Kant Notice 4:§5), they have an aesthetic and not a “practical” value.”⁵

On the other hand, no one seems to follow the simple, if somewhat romantic, precept of Gilles Deleuze, quoting Faulkner, in *Mille Plateaux*: One has to *become* black in order not to be fascist (emphasis mine). We have seen the Vietcong turn against their neighbors, the Israelis against the Arabs. Certain events are

privileged, while others go unnoticed. The Jewish question in France is much debated and Auschwitz has become the unavowable event. Little is being said about continuous “events,” like that through which American Indians—of whom there were perhaps twenty million when Europeans first arrived—have been decimated to just over a million. We militate for the abolition of apartheid and the release of Nelson Mandela, its literary representative. But next to the picture in the paper giving our protest coverage, there is another article in small type about 75,000 families in the Mississippi Valley living on an annual income of less than \$5,000 per family. And a few pages later, a triumphant Donald Trump shows off his yacht bought for \$30 million from the Arabs, presumably to help the balance of payments: “I look at this ship as one of the great jewels of the world, and as an American, I’m proud to have pulled it back here. I think Americans should have the jewels, should go out and buy the jewels of the world because we’re a great country.”⁶

Derrida’s critique of metaphysics and Foucault’s historical genealogy may have had certain claims to universal intentions. The *relance du concept*, a remarking of the concept, was to take us out of oppositional categories, while Foucault’s analysis of power was to expose the mastery of the subject through power that underlies the models of the human sciences. They both wanted to get out of a constituted self. Foucault even somewhat flatly declared the end of man. Lyotard’s project is twofold: to defend and illustrate philosophy against the *genre économique* and against university authority. The problem at work in translating Lyotard into our conditions is that the American university is a corporate university and we are a part of it. Through the blatant marketing of our theories we are back in capitalism. At the same time, we cannot not market our theories. Lyotard, setting aside his all-pervasive notion of desire from earlier texts, following Wittgenstein, Frege, Kripke, figures that it is economically productive to show that existence does not exist. “The ontological argument is false. Nothing can be said about reality that does not presuppose it.”⁷ And elsewhere: “The picture’s form, its propositional form when the picture is a logical one, constitutes a kind of standard measurement (*Masstab*) which comes to be laid against (*angelegt*) reality. . . . It can do this only if reality is shaped the same way as the picture. But how can this conformity or communality [*communauté*] be proved?”⁸ The ultimate in unmooring, it may, of course, also be the ultimate in power and lead to a new one-upmanship where nothing can ever be decided.

Habermas, following Frege and Kripke himself—with vigor and keen ruse, no less—decides in favor of a tactic: a temporary consensus among people who, though their speeches are made of different forces, would decide on one. Ignoring much of the work done in *The Differend*, presumably basing his criticism on earlier works by Lyotard on Freud and Nietzsche, Habermas decries the postmod-

ern position of the observer. For Habermas, we're all in it, part of a community that is decided temporarily by a course of action. What is convincing about his strategy, his call to communicative action based on consent and his nonparanoid relation to the world, is undermined by the blindness of his accusation. Freud and Nietzsche both had shown that the observer is already the observed, is already in a position of countertransference. The way we choose, consciously and unconsciously, to approach the world—as technocrats, revolutionaries, and brokers, or as philosophers and professors of literature—has much to do with our perspective on the world. It is our *libidinal economy*, to use an earlier term of Lyotard's, that prompts our ways of investigating and reading the world, along with socialization and a historical positioning.

However, what is my position from the university, dealing as I do with feminism, literature, and film? With money as the real force pervading our very gestures of self-criticism, action, contestation, and the like? With the dominance of the economic genre to which all other genres, including the political, are subjected, the field of action may likely be in politics or the legal professions. It is really through legal measures that issues get decided. But ideas raise consciousness.

To come back to my earlier question of linking: what about feminism as an emancipatory discourse when it is, perhaps, no longer even a question of giving a language to the oppressed? New issues are emerging, such as ecology and the plight of the homeless, estimated at several million in the United States. The issues crosscut gender, class, and race. French feminists have only indirectly dealt with linking their discourses to the economic genre: Kristeva turns to psychoanalysis to praise the "solitary, playful modern subject" (*In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*); Irigaray analyzes sexuality through linguistics ("Le Sexe linguistique," in *Languages* 85, 21 [March 1987]); Wittig's fighting women of *Virgile-non* seem more tuned into memories of '68. And Cixous's mystical and lyrical writings, shifting from the scene of the unconscious to the scene of history through *Manne* or her plays, avoid the problem by rejecting it.

Most feminist discourses of French stamp have followed major currents, criticizing a philosophy of the subject along the division of body/mind, reason and unreason. Woman has been given somewhat mystifying attributes: darkness, night, enigmatic, fascinating, nonexistent, inaccessible, and the like. Temporary, strategic insistence on going back to various pre-stages of language may have been necessary but these are becoming increasingly difficult to link to sexuality in an age of mass production. Ultimately, it is not the state that oppresses the subject through rationalization, but the economic genre that exploits the masses by appealing precisely to their unreason and emotions. Hysteria is no longer a disease of the lonely madwoman but is mass produced for economic exploitation. "Infotainment" does away with any rationality at all costs, for the sake of saving money.

French feminists—though themselves hardly ever on the side of undecidability—have dealt primarily with questions of the origin and Freudian models of repression, with whether the maternal body speaks or whether it is silent—an orthodox position still defended by some, like Kristeva. They fought (male) socialization as repressing instinctual forces, as making a division between cultural and noncultural—the barbaric, closer to the body, a romantic paradigm often relayed via Nietzsche. They wrote in the wake of crossing the boundaries between theory and fiction. This is not to downplay their personal differences through an easy synthesis. Nor especially to mitigate the impact of those theories, with their insistence on the scene of the unconscious and a viewing of the other as other (self) rather than as nonself, with a negative inflection. Their very strength may have been in their insistence on being perpetually in dialogue, in quest, on reducing to a minimum the conceptual moment of repression. Their concern is with how the word, in dialogue, links, touches the addressee. A form of practical theorizing allows them—and this is politically vital—to bridge the gap between theory and its empirical practice, a gap often to be deplored. Their community is never homogeneous but put together by heterogeneous elements in solidarity. French feminist theories have put their emphases on the private sphere, on deliverance and pleasure. They do away with the necessity of linking with a world of public (masculine) glory and so run the risk, perhaps, of failing to link up with various other discourses in the world.

Their aesthetics, from those of the new novel, from generators and linguistic patterns, have evolved, in contact with Bataille and Nietzsche, to ecstasy and ravishment, to a refinement in communication with the other so extreme that it reaches the point of becoming ethereal. From writing a world to come, they have come full circle in the face of the economic genre to nostalgically regretting a past world without technology, a community that never was. Yet to be effective, the link with that world must be made. Massification can be neither sneered at nor ignored.

What struck me a year ago was what I perceived as a gap between feminist theories and the present-day world. It sounded, all of a sudden, as if those theories were written from a sheltered drawing room.

It is to be hoped that these theories with their refined communicational skills might have an impact on practical everyday living, where they would come to touch upon questions of ecology and peace if followed through—and be other than economic currency in an academic power game. How these theories, generally opting for ethical consideration of the living, can be implemented in a country whose economic genre urges for “hostile takeovers” remains to be seen. The United States, where women are the most sexually emancipated, curiously favors the reign of the father around whom sons and daughters gravitate. A personality, though in the singular, is already an institution.

Habermas's contribution may have been to urge us to view a certain normativization as a given. His critique of Foucault's theory of power seems of interest for feminist purposes. The body has not become increasingly tyrannized but, rather, some legalization has provided help. *Technobody*, as it has become fashionable to say, is not just a crushing word, and our body is certainly not the same as a hundred years ago. Feminism, having explored the body/mind duality, can leave it behind. The days of the hysteric are over and probably those of lengthy sessions on the couch as well.

Statistics show that the sexual revolution and its pleasures have brought about some unpleasures. A staggering percentage of unwed mothers often only marginally provide for children and end up homeless. This is thought not in terms of a social stigma and a moral law, but in terms of a norm: low income, problem children, welfare, drugs. These children with a diminished future are measured, it is true, in terms of a capitalist mode of success. But is there another? Desublimation has brought about certain side effects but is here to stay, in spite of rumors to the contrary. Of importance, though, is not just *jouissance* or pleasure, but legalization of abortion to alleviate human pressures exercised on the earth and help mothers and children in poverty. Certainly theories cannot explain rape, and contrary to popular fiction, it is often the white middle-class man who rapes the white woman, in collusion with his mother. Necessity of normativization is too neglected by French feminists who, living an aesthetic myth of negativity, permanent revolution, or of joyful exposure to the other, are unaware of the impact of massification on the way we live.

All depends, as Lyotard reminds us, on where one speaks from, and ours is but a world of differends. The relatively privileged position of the United States on the globe—seldom subjected to natural cataclysms, sheltered largely from urgent poverty, and with war kept at a distance—allows us to engage in the activities of our choice, be it as artist, critic, philosopher, lawyer, or politician. All is happening so fast that our positions have to be constantly reevaluated. To repeat: it may be necessary to reevaluate our theories in view of the economic genre of which we are also a part, to attune French feminist writers, with their keen skills in communication, to our everyday world. It may be economically productive to leave aside undecidability, something that most feminists have always done—and establish more direct links with the present-day world.

I have gone at full speed and high altitude, without giving you the advantage of following your journey on a little videodisc, the electronic device replacing the narrative voice of the invisible pilot, and my remarks turned out to be general and only marginally communal. In movement, my aerial view is far from that of Montesquieu in his tower. This is how I read the world following the remarks made by Jean-François Lyotard last year. Again, it all depends on where one chooses to speak from. And as a critic of literature and film, I am less intent on



drawing up a social theory of the world than I am on reading critically, in dialogue with artistic practices of all kinds, to see and listen to how they might bring about different ways of reading the world for others and for ourselves. As the French like to say: My words do not seek to apply a theory, nor are they ignorant of all of theory.

The exclusive building of bigger and better elephants—as in the joke—leaves people with a void. Hence perhaps the popularity of New Age, that form of mysticism, formalized by the passage of Godfrey Reggio and Phillip Glass's *Koyaanisqatsi*, life out of balance, to *Powaqqatsi*, life in transformation. It may be an illusory dream, but we have to gamble and be vigilant at all times, to theorize and practice, to criticize not just a system but ourselves, to replace the great moral law with the law of the living, as Cixous would have it: To live and let live, to do away with a purely quantitative evaluation of the world.

How to navigate between relativism and normativization, to be less obsessed with death, to think of an affirmation of life, to fly but touch the ground, lighting here and there, was suggested at a local theater this summer by the latest film by Wim Wenders. Wenders, parting from his lunar landscapes of *The State of Things* and the plastic world of simulacra in *Tokyo-ga*, has shown us, in his *Himmel über Berlin*, an attempt at moving from death to life, from apocalypse to a reaching out. *Himmel über Berlin* transforms Jean-Luc Godard's ambiguous first or last couple in *First Name: Carmen* to the first couple of a different sort. Not unlike Resnais/Duras with *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Wenders/Handke ask what it is like



to live and love in Berlin with history past and present. The answer is quite different and the insistence is on the reaching out, on holding out the hand. (The French *maintenant*, now, is not just an appropriation of the hand—*tenir la main*, to hold the hand—as Lyotard said in a recent seminar, but a holding-as-caress, on a passage from death to life.) In the Wenders film, the metaphor of flying is all-pervasive: from wings mechanical to wings human, animal, and celestial; from planes to angels; from the wingless man falling to his death and from bird statues to the double inscription of the bird and flight in the name of Peter Falk, alias Colombo. Mechanical wings, bronze wings, absence of wings, chicken wings: the insistence is on flying and on touching down, not on fleeing.

From my cabin where I write, I look over the Vermilion River where the solitary bald eagle flies, a symbol of nineteenth-century freedom that has found its way in these days of time efficiency onto the envelopes of Express Mail, with which we destine at great cost our amorous or scholarly pronouncements. But I also see the ubiquitous poplars quaking high up in the wind. The tree book tells me their Latin name: *Populus tremuloides*, which I loosely translate as the community of trembling people. A move from the fear and trembling of a paternal Abraham or a solitary Nietzschean subject to that of a trembling people, a trembling community, would perhaps be a way of reading the world.

Did I work myself out of a crisis into a resolution? And “crisis” after all is a historical term opening our era of modernity. But perhaps there is no crisis, no resolution and no destiny, only a trembling, an agitation in the wind, and the



question would less be that of a gap than of a continuous linking, unlinking, in movement, and of a (non-)communal: *qu'est-ce qui nous agite?*

Notes

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 181.
2. Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: 12 Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985); translated into French by Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz, *Le Discours philosophique de la modernité* (Paris: Gallimard, Coll. "Bibliothèque de Philosophie," 1988); David B. Downing, "Deconstruction's Scruples: The Politics of Enlightened Critique," *Diacritics* 17, 3 (Fall 1987), 66–81.
3. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xxxv. Quoted by Downing in "Deconstruction's Scruples," 73.
4. Hélène Cixous, "La Crise dans la littérature," *Les Lettres françaises* 221 (Nov. 25–30, 1970); see also Verena Andermatt Conley, "Epilogue," in *Lire Les Lettres françaises: périmètres et limites d'une idéologie*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1974.
5. Lyotard, *Differend*, 172.
6. *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, August 18, 1988.
7. Lyotard, *Differend*, 32.
8. *Ibid.*, 38.