

## The Visible that *Means* and the Boundless Universe An Ethical Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience

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Perhaps time has come ... to see the visible face to face as a gift of the appearing.<sup>1</sup>  
(Jean-Luc Marion, *La croisée du visible*)

The experience of meaning in art cannot – of course not – be confined to its *visible* phenomenal nature. Nor can it be determined by its *invisible* surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

Many philosophers from within the phenomenological tradition have attempted to explain and/or describe how meaning experienced as such relates to its invisible surrounding, whether understood concretely in terms of physical space or, more abstractly, history or society. Maurice Merleau-Ponty is arguably the most obvious example of a philosopher who explored the matter with particular reference to art and painting.<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, phenomenologists such as Jean-Luc Marion have undertaken to describe the perceptual experience of the visible in terms of ‘gift of the appearing’, bringing thus a clear ethical dimension to the relational fundamental of the experience of the ‘visible’ and, by extension, ‘meaning’.<sup>4</sup>

This essay attempts to reformulate in ethical terms the description of our perceptual experience of the work of art as a visible that *means* in relation to the infinite whole made of space, time and humanity – that is, the universe whose boundlessness makes it *unseen*.<sup>5</sup> Thus defined, the universe is more than a simple invisible nebula: the universe gives something to be seen out of its infinite and therefore unseen potential.

To conceive the visible in general as gift from the unseen implies a particular ethical attitude with regards to the infinity of space and time; and to conceive art as gift similarly implies a particular ethical attitude with regards to the infinity of humanity. In both cases, the ethical attitude is a ‘disinterestedness’ that acknowledges the need to give up any drive to control or enframe the infinite which, as such, is bound to remain unseen.

Art can be thought as means by which the infinite comes to the surface: the ‘signifying-ness’ of

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<sup>1</sup> ‘*Le temps vient peut-être ...de voir le visible en face, comme le don de l'apparaître.*’ Jean-Luc Marion, *La croisée du visible* (Paris: La Différence, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> This essay is an expanded revised version of ‘The Unseen as a Gift of Art’, in *Visual Arts 2009*, National University of Tainan, Taiwan, 101-106.

<sup>3</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished work *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), which highlights the dialectics at work in art between the emerging visible and the ‘objective world’ (*le monde objectif*) as invisible background.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of ‘gift’ runs through the works of many philosophers such as St Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Derrida, or more recently Jean-Luc Marion. The latter has also made it a key concept of his philosophy of art.

<sup>5</sup> In the English language the verb ‘to mean’ is always followed by an object: to ‘mean’ is always to mean some-thing. The deliberate usage of the expression ‘the visible that *means*’ is used to highlight the intentional meaningful dimension of visible entities such as the work of art, as opposed to, for example, natural things that are not intentionally meaningful.

art brings out the infinite. Just as the ‘face’, for Emmanuel Lévinas, ‘*testifies* to the Infinite’, art testifies to the infinite – a testimony that calls for a response in tune with the ‘given-ness’ at work; a disinterestedness in response to the gift from the infinity of humanity. The following is a quote where Lévinas defines the ‘Infinite’ and the ‘face’ as its testimony:

To my mind the Infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face *signifies* the Infinite... When in the presence of the Other, I say, “Here I am!”, this “Here I am!” is the place through which the Infinite enters into language... The subject who says “Here I am!” *testifies* to the Infinite.<sup>6</sup>

(Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*)

The appearing from the unseen does not come from within the work of art alone, but rather, from the boundless universe, in the direction of the one for whom such an appearing appeals. But what makes the work of art such a specific gift?

The work of art designates a configuration whose given visibility testifies to the infinity of humanity and, as such, whose voice calls for and deserves our attentiveness. In other words, the work of art is a gift from persons to persons, understood as individuals, communities, or civilisations. The configuration as stake can be a painting, performance, film, installation, sculpture; it can be music, or the culinary arts; it can also be a haptic configuration. As an appeal that calls for a response, meaning in art is certainly not innocent, but it is not interested, instrumental, or motivated. Through the work of art, history, culture and the artist *give themselves up* for the unseen infinite to be seen in a concrete form. That is how the visible manifests the unseen. Furthermore (and consequently), the visible that *means* bears a suchness yet to be explained, objectified, or analysed. The visible that *means* is not yet *signified*. History, culture and the artist give themselves up for us to receive *as such* the unseen as a gift yet to be unwrapped. And to unwrap the gift from the unseen can only be done with different tools, be they from the natural, social, or human sciences; be they in the form of discourse or analysis.

In the 1970s, Jean-François Lyotard equally described what he called the ‘opacity’ (*opacité*) of the visible in terms of ‘given-ness’ (*donation*).<sup>7</sup> One vital account was, however, crudely overlooked: the nature of the gift in the experience of the visible that *means*. There were, without doubt, socio-politically motivated reasons for this overlooking: the alleged true nature of the visible had to be established contra the coercive drive of institutional discourse. The ‘opacity’ of the visible became synonymous with a force of liberation and therefore a breaking-off from authority.

The nature of the gift, however, is to be unwrapped, whether with the tool of discourse or that of analysis – and as soon as the gift is unwrapped, it becomes an object. For sure, the visible that *means* should not be confused with the object of knowledge that discourse and analysis determine. But what must not be overlooked is the profoundly ethical nature of the experience of the visible as a gift from the boundless universe. For those who make themselves available to the appeal from the unseen, for

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, E. (1985) *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. pp. 105-106. Fr. (1982) *Éthique et infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*, Paris: Livre de Poche.

<sup>7</sup> See Lyotard, J.-F. (1971) *Discours, figure*, Paris: Klincksieck.

those who respond to this appeal through an act of self-emptying – that is to say, when we give ourselves up to let time, space and humanity speak in a way we either believe or trust – the experience of the visible that *means* awakens us to the infinity of the unseen. This also implies that the ethical character of the experience of the visible that *means* is shared equally by the one who gives and the one who receives; the work of art as gift is shared by both the spectator and the artist. Moreover, the gift is reciprocal and mutually self-emptying.

Let us now consider the work of art as a visible that *means* from the infinity of the unseen. Needless to say, reading the work of art as a text to be understood by means of discourse can hardly be seen as gift that awakens us to the infinity of the unseen.<sup>8</sup> Textual configurations need to be read in order to understand the alleged already existing reality that is provided through explanation. The discursive text is the opposite of a gift in the sense that, to borrow from the language of structuralism, the inexorable dimension of its syntagmatic mechanisms, or the transparency of the signifier in the service of the signified that points in an unquestionable way to a designated reality, tells us to accept the same reality as a finite fact, regardless of when, where, and by whom it is spoken – and regardless of their infinity. Such a discursiveness can be found in forms of Christian art that were taken over by the Church as institution. The windows of Canterbury Cathedral, in England, are a striking example amongst many others such as Notre Dame de Chartres, France, or Cologne Cathedral, Germany. The different stained glass panels unfold like words in a text and tell us the already granted spiritual reality narrated in the Scriptures.

To experience the visible that *means* as gift from the infinity of the unseen is not about retrieving a pre-established reality or external truth recalled by visual figures; but it is not either to experience the alleged inner truth of the image. If the gift from the infinity of the unseen is not a signifying object – making therefore Levinas' usage of the word 'signifyingness' inappropriate – the gift cannot either be reduced to that of the 'opacity', or rather the such-ness of a visual event. This latter point has arguably been one of the most overlooked in the context of Western contemporary art following modernity.

In many parts of the world, it is now widely accepted that the nature of art can be other than to represent an origin, a model, or a certainty, and that the meaningfulness of the work of art can be expressed through its own visibility – a perceptibility that can be extended beyond the particular case of the visual arts. The eventful nature of various forms of contemporary art makes it easier to understand why any discursive or analytic reading based on the signifying trilogy signifier-signified-designated would betray the visible suchness of the meaning of the work of art. Needless to say, any absence of 'signifying' dimension does not make art – more specifically contemporary art – meaningless. An event is always a meaningful event and, as such, is the moment and place where meaning is experienced as fusion – or rather *con*-fusion – between signifier, signified and designated.

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<sup>8</sup> For a study on the discursive nature of the windows of Canterbury Cathedral, see Norman Bryson in (1982) in *Word and Image - French Painting of the Ancien Régime*. The panels 'represent the Passover, with a priest sacrificing a lamb and marking a lintel with a sign that is almost across; then a strange group of two figures who carry between them a cluster of grapes hanging from a rod; then a patriarch performing a miracle: Moses striking the rock on the desert and causing the river to appear; and finally a scene of sacrifice: Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac.' (p.1).

However, to confine the perceptual experience of the boundless unseen to such a confusion would be to ignore that the gift-like nature of what is perceived, far from being limited to the disclosure of an inner world, awakens us to the boundlessness of the unseen, be it history, culture, or persons.

Without doubt, the experience of the visible that *means* does not consist in grasping something *given* understood as an accepted fact, or taken for granted. The visible that *means* experienced from the infinity of the unseen does not fall within discourse or analysis; it does not *speak* as signifying transparency. At the same time the visible that *means* cannot be grasped merely *as such*, in the sense of such-ness, for the world that the unseen discloses becomes visible as an appeal to the one who is willing to be attentive to it. The phenomenal nature of the work of art may indeed give a false impression of mere suchness for it precedes, disrupts, or prevents any attempt to structure our perceptual experience according to conceptual tools such as signifier, signified and designated. Art – in particular contemporary art – gives the false impression that it has a life of its own; that a certain suchness is displayed precisely because there is no origin, no model, or no certainty anymore to represent or to be faithful to. Contemporary configurations or performances are certainly no media arranged to convey what they teleologically seek to signify. By giving the feeling that they point to nothing other than themselves contemporary works of art reduce to its minimum the distance that too often separates message, conveyance and truth. At once, the same works of art reduce another kind of distance: the one that characterised how the Western world traditionally conceived its relationship with art, that is to say in terms of subject and object.

It would be, however, a grave mistake to confine the experience of the visible that *means* to a mere fusion between subject and object, for the role played by established ideas, the alleged real world, and how we relate to them would be overlooked to the benefit of an ideology of embodiment that would confine such an experience to a mere conception of suchness of meaning. No one can deny that, overall, Western culture did not fully acknowledge the value to be found in the sensory-perception of the visible arguably until the advent of late 19<sup>th</sup> century modernism. This marked the time when the mistake was duly rectified; this was the time when the nature of the visible that *means* started to be shown in a different light. When Merleau-Ponty described in *Le visible et l'invisible* what he *calls* the 'original chiasm' (*chiasme originel*) in perceptual experiences, he did no more than to work out the suchness of the visible that *means* before being broken down and made into objective knowledge.<sup>9</sup> As we know, this undertaking also gave birth to one of the most beautiful and profound texts ever written in the field, *L'œil et l'esprit*, which in part describes the perceptual experience of the suchness of the visible. Even the visible that *means* – the work of art – is not looked at as a finite thing clearly determined and located at a particular place; rather, the perceiver sees the visible, according to it, with it, and therefore as something given that deserves a particular attentiveness.

In Merleau-Ponty's words,

Things have an internal equivalence in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn't these in their turn give rise to some visible shape in which anyone else would

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<sup>9</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (1964a) in *Le visible et l'invisible*, pp. 172-204.

recognize those motifs, which support his own inspection of the world? Thus there appears a “visible” of the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first. It is not a faded copy, a trompe-l’oeil, or another thing. The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same ways as the fissures and limestones formations. But they are not elsewhere. Pushed forward here, held back there, held up by the wall’s mass they use so adroitly, they spread around the wall without ever breaking from their elusive moorings in it. I would be at great pains to say where is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I see it.<sup>10</sup>

(Merleau-Ponty, *The Eye and the Mind*)

To express this perceptual experience Merleau-Ponty used in many ways the same *gestural* language that modernist artists felt the need to experiment – the language of suchness (or ‘opacity’ if we adopt Lyotard’s political interpretation). Merleau-Ponty used words to render perceptual experience through phenomenological descriptions – a language that in some respects comes close to poetry. The language of suchness evokes the ineffable, the sensory nature of the visible, the interiority of the world that is seen and that looks like it means something from within. Such is the visible that *means* and to which corresponds a particular form of attentiveness that Merleau-Ponty adopts through a language that incarnates the very suchness we may experience in our perception of the work of art.

The task is not impossible; Merleau-Ponty does not pretend to determine the visible from the infinity of the unseen. He does not seek to find the means to render the objective truth of the visible. He uses words to make us sensory-experience the same suchness we may share with the visible. The visible that *means* from the infinity of the unseen is certainly not to be read, but its suchness can be carried through another language – carried by words in the case of Merleau-Ponty. In a way, his language of suchness finds a home in the visible and by doing so makes us aware of its nature. With Merleau-Ponty, what is thus sensory-experienced is the *connaturality* between the suchness of the word and that of the visible.<sup>11</sup>

Lyotard, who tells us that the ‘opacity’ of meaning can only be grasped by deconstructing the languages of institutional discourse and objective thought, by deconstructing the veiling signifying order that typifies such languages, exemplifies a different approach.<sup>12</sup> The ‘opacity’ of meaning is unlocked by negating what has, over the centuries in the Western world, striven to control it, that is to say discourse, the language of transparency, and other tools that structure our understanding of the world in terms signifier, signified, and designated reality. The ‘opacity’ of the visible operates thus like a truth that unleashes itself against the political order, the institution, the language of discourse, and all their ensuing repressed desires. If not applied in a timely fashion, when needed, deconstructing

<sup>10</sup> See Merleau-Ponty (1964b) ‘*L’œil et l’esprit*’ (The Eye and the Mind) in *The Primacy of Perception*, (trans. Carleton Dallery, Evanston: Northwestern University Press), p. 165.

<sup>11</sup> Lyotard himself declares that the only way we ‘touch’ things in themselves is through metaphorical language (ibid., p. 19).

<sup>12</sup> The etymology of the word tells us that ‘signification’ comes from the Latin ‘*significatio*’ which means: the act of making signs (in Latin: *signa facere*). In other words it refers to the ‘function’ of signs and by extension to the idea of a means for an end: a design intended to mean some-thing.

discourse, objective truth, or signification runs the risk of becoming ideological and betraying its original goal by becoming a language of 'opacity' that does no more than determine what the visible is meant to be *like*.

In whatever case, neither the 'connatural' language of suchness (Merleau-Ponty) nor the deconstructive language of 'opacity' (Lyotard) allows for the perceptual experience of the visible that *means* to be understood as a gift from the infinity of the unseen. Admittedly, such a conception equally raises issues of temporal and spatial relevance, depending on the historical period, cultural place, or persons to whom we relate. There may always be more than what transpires from the connatural approach or the deconstructive practice when relating to the work of art, in the sense that we, percipients, artists, can be made aware of being given something from a boundless and therefore unknown or unseen world made of histories, cultures and persons. The gift that we are called upon to receive comes from the unseen – an infinite that throws light on ourselves as it awakens us, with all the humility it requires, to the need to let such an infinite renew our own finitude in the light of what we are not.

Postmodern discourse would sustain that the 'opacity' of the visible that *means* characterises very often the unexpected or unfamiliar nature of contemporary art, and that its eventful nature lies precisely on its ability to precede, disrupt, or overcome what the institution, tradition and culture make recognisable and understandable, for example through representation and narration. But there is more to the work of art than a liberating eventful dimension that unlocks closed categories and established orders: the work of art is an unexpected gift, not only from the artist, but from the boundless universe made of equally infinite temporal, spatial, cultural, and human complexities. To disrupt representation and narration to let the visible appear may indeed look like an event that shows itself from itself, in the sense that such a disruption prevents us from recognising external categories or from reading a story. The work of art, however, must also be seen as a gift of the appearing from the infinity of the unseen – a gift without which the visible and those of us who witness it would not be.

No one can question nowadays that the infinity of the unseen is a condition of the suchness of the work of art, that the eventful nature of the work of art lies precisely in its ability to unlock the objective world, or that the 'opacity' of the visible stems from its power to disrupt the order of things. At the same time, by 'testifying' – to use again Levinas' expression – the infinity of the unseen, the work of art calls for us to witness the appearing of the visible that *means*, not as pure suchness or emancipated 'opacity' that has its own life, but as a gift that we should welcome insofar as it awakens us to our own finitude and, by doing so, allows us to be renewed in the light of the infinity of the unseen.

The visible that *means* from the infinity of the unseen is not a simple event that opposes or negates the order of things; even in such a case, the visible inexorably calls upon us as a gift that invites us to listen to the voice of the oppressed, the repressed, or the underprivileged. To experience meaning from the infinity of the unseen is to grab the chance of accepting that gift. However, to see in the work of art a liberation of the signifier from the grip of the signified, or a liberation of the form from the control of discourse – can also be the symptom of welcoming the appearing as gift. Such was the case, for example, with Western modernism. On the other hand, to systematically explain the

visible that *means* in critical terms may disregard the voice from the infinity of the unseen; to respond to what appears as an appeal from a particular time, place and person is to accept such an appearing as a gift, that is, accepting it from someone whose finitude we do not seek to determine, control, or use – someone from the infinity of the unseen. Such a gift calls for a response that we trust will deservedly do justice to its appeal. To experience the visible that *means* as a gift does not presuppose its appearing as a conveyance for a particular meaning. If such was the case, meaning would be merely provided by the tool used to unwrap the suchness of the visible as gift. The experience of the visible that *means* as gift does not even presuppose the work of art as event. Indeed, the suchness of the work of art is unexpected and calls for an attitude that can only let the visible speak from the infinity of the unseen.

To see in British sculptor Antony Gormley's figures some symbols related to questions of existence, or some representations of the human condition in an overwhelming technical world, or even simply some visual statements about what is human presence, is not to experience the visible from the infinity of the unseen or the boundless universe.<sup>13</sup> It is rather to see through the figures what we already know, what is thought to be real, objective, or confirmative. To let the suchness of the visible speak is to see from these figures an unknown world that stems as a gift from the infinity of history, culture and the artist. The appearing of the figures in different settings (e.g., open spaces or galleries) and through various configurations (e.g., groups of figures or monumental figures) can be seen as an appearing in the process of being given to the spectator who should, in all trust, welcome the gift. The suchness of Gormley's work, the visible that *means* from the infinity of the unseen, stems from the unusual way and context in which the human figure is presented. Gormley's figures appear in various settings and ways that are unexpected. His standing figures appear to us through a particular temporality, as if objective time was suspended, or intuitively given up in the form of what Henri Bergson called 'duration' (*durée*).<sup>14</sup>

The appearing from the infinity of the unseen is that of the figures being given to us, with no pretension other than to renew ourselves by awakening us to our own finitude of recognition and expectation. The suchness of the figures corresponds to that very moment of self-awakening when the gift from the infinite is about to be unwrapped. Gormley's figurative works, however, seem to operate at the same semiological level whereby signifier (the material used) and signified (the recognisable figure) relate to each other in a predictable and homogenous way. All seems to operate at the same level of sensation, making his works, at first glance, an unlikely candidate for the experience of the unexpected suchness of the visible from the infinity of the unseen.

In contrast, Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang's film *Face* plays with various forms of overlapping and superimposition between reality (the film maker Hsiao-Kang shooting a film at the

<sup>13</sup> Antony Gormley (1950-). See for example *Field for the British Isles* (1993), *Another place* (1997), *The angel of the North* (1998), *Quantum cloud* (1999), *Lost horizon* (2008), and so on.

<sup>14</sup> Bergson contrasts 'duration' (*durée*) to 'objective time'; the former is 'intuitive' whereas the latter is measurable. This conception of 'duration' was first developed in his early doctoral work '*Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*' (1888). See Henri Bergson, *Oeuvres*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, Coll. 'Grands ouvrages', 5ème éd. 1991, pp. 51-156. 'Duration' also plays a pivotal role in his vitalist conception of life in '*Matière et mémoire*' (1896), *ibid.* pp. 337-352; '*L'évolution créatrice*' (1907), *ibid.* pp. 495-500 & pp. 725-807; and in '*La pensée et le mouvant*' (1907), *ibid.* pp. 1251-1432.



Louvres museum) and fiction (the myth of Salome that is supposed to be shot); or between realism and surrealism; or simply between death and beauty.<sup>15</sup> Here, the unexpected suchness of the visible appears in a somehow obvious manner. In Gormley's works, nothing unexpected appears by disrupting what may be perceived as a symbolic order with human figures as centre of gravity. There does not seem to be anything disrupting, impossible, or ambiguous that would make the viewer perceive the suchness or even 'opacity' of the visible – no obvious visual device that would make those figures be easily bracketed from foreign disturbances, making thus a-symbolic forms appearing against the background of objective time. In point of fact, the unexpected suchness of the visible *does* appear in Gormley's works. His artificial figures, in whatever materials, numbers, scales, or positions show through unexpectedly; they are often displayed in unexpected locations, calling thus for our attentiveness. In *One & Other* where live figures were asked to stand on the empty Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London,<sup>16</sup> the visible appears from the infinity of the unseen by the way those figures are made to relate to the location and its history, against all expectations. Viewers are somehow prevented from recognising what is represented or from reading a story. The live figures are neither symbolic nor signifying. The viewer's mind is intentionally directed towards the suchness of the visible that means. The figures are bracketed from the surrounding everyday life world, from history, as well as from the world of aesthetic values. The suchness of the visible stems from the impossibility we have to read or recognise the link between Gormley's live figures and the everyday life, history and aesthetic values, which all become unexpectedly neutralised as metaphysical irrelevances.

Thus, the visible that *means* gives here the paradoxical impression of being both detached and embodying; detached from the everyday life, history and the world of aesthetic values, and embodying through its own spatiotemporal world.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the paradox simply comes from the confusion we may make between two different, albeit necessarily related, worlds: the visible and what may be called the *finite world*, the world we have already seen. As we now know, however, there is more to it.

The appearing of the visible that *means* is given to us from the infinite world of the unseen, the infinite world of time, space and persons. As such the visible that *means* calls for our disinterested attentiveness. That the infinite world of time, space and persons, gives itself up to call for our disinterested attentiveness suggests, once again, that there is more to the experience of the visible that *means* than a mere visual phenomenon that shows itself from itself. The visible that *means* is more than the disclosure of a meaning-for-us. To experience the suchness of the visible as a gift is to accept being awakened to our limiting finitude and to accept being renewed in the light of the infinity of the unseen. The appearing of the visible is not for-us, but rather between-us. Of course, the appearing of the visible as a gift does not simply tell us about something or even about ourselves. Once again, the visible that *means* is not something to be re-cognised or confirmed. The visible that *means* does not look at us either, as if the visible was like another subject that made us self-conscious, creating thus

<sup>15</sup> *Face* (2009), by Tsai Ming-liang (1957-).

<sup>16</sup> *One & Other* (2009), by Antony Gormley.

<sup>17</sup> Mikel Dufrenne, amongst others, noticed in his *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* the same paradoxical relationship between the 'aesthetic object' and the 'real world': 'as much a way of embodying as of detaching' (Dufrenne 1973, p. 155).



a barrier between us and this quasi-subject. The visible that *means* gives us the chance to empty ourselves by accepting it as a gift from the infinity of time, space and persons.

There is therefore no such a thing as the self-referential nature of the visible, or even about what art theorist Georges Didi-Huberman considered to be tautological in the minimalist works of American artists Donald Judd and Robert Morris as well as British artist Carl Andre, amongst others.<sup>18</sup> At a mere phenomenological level, it may be possible to see where the tautology lies in minimalism, as these works confirm the bracketed or reduced nature of the visible. In other words, by highlighting the minimal nature of the visible, those artists show the same thing twice. To some extent, this applies to Gormley's figures; but arguably not to Tsai Ming-liang's film. In any case, the tautological interpretation does not acknowledge the visible that means as a gift from the infinity of the unseen – an ethical dimension that equally applies to minimalism for it awakens us to a (minimal) aspect of the infinity of the yet-to-be-seen unseen.

To perceive the work of art in tautological terms overlooks this vital ethical dimension. The appearing of the visible in the work of art does not point in the direction of an external end to reach, giving thus the impression that it possesses its own finality. In truth, the appearing of the visible that *means* calls for our ego-less attentiveness. This call, which takes the form of a gift from the infinite, is perhaps also what gives us the feeling that the work of art has a certain 'presence'. In a way, such a feeling confirms that the experience of the visible in the work of art is that of a voice from an infinity that we cannot define, control, or use. There is always something unexpected about a gift. That is why the gift is always self-awakening and renewing.<sup>19</sup>

The visible that *means* never shows where it is expected. At the same time, the visible that *means* is an appeal that calls for a particular kind of response. In other words, if the phenomenal nature of the work of art can only be unexpected, the response from us must be in tune with the ethical nature of the voice that speaks from the infinity of the unseen. The visible in the work of art calls for the viewer to witness what is appearing, apprehend the suchness of meaning, and accept being emptied by the voice from the infinity of the unseen, which will resound at the place of the body of our consciousness. The appearing of the visible that *means* precedes, disrupts, or transcends the objective world, but insofar as we accept such an appearing as a gift from the boundless universe. As a gift, the visible that *means* is not an instrument; nor is it an object of consumption. It is bound to appear to the one who accepts being awakened to one's own finitude and renewed by an infinity that cannot be mastered. To respond to the gift is a disinterested matter.

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<sup>18</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman in *Ce que nous voyons, Ce qui nous regarde* defines 'tautological objects' (*objets tautologiques*) as 'objects that call for nothing else than being seen for what they are' (Didi-Huberman 1992, p.28). In addition to Donald Judd (1928-1994), Robert Morris (1931-) and Carl Andre (1935-) his analyses also include the works of American artists Dan Flavin (1933-1996), Sol Le Witt (1928-2007) and Frank Stella (1930-).

<sup>19</sup> If, as Lyotard asserts, 'the event does not happen where it is expected' (Lyotard 1971, op. cit., p. 23), or 'truth never appears where it is expected' (ibid., p. 17), the same truth always appears as a gift of otherness.

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