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Atopia & Aesthetics. A Modal Perspective

Yves Millet

Abstract

Living in an era where global exchanges of forms and ideas are the norm raises some questions about the status of artistic practices. To explore these questions, we use Roland Barthes' notion of atopia and the complementary yet related notion of *Neutral* on which Barthes commented in his later years. Atopia highlights the fact that rather than viewing current artistic activities as searches for homogenous identity, we need to view them as belonging to plural communities of practices offering modal and qualitative distinctions. We suggest that adopting this perspective sheds light on the capacity of any individual to act creatively within his or her daily life. Before considering this last point, we will explore how adopting an atopic perspective helps to throw light on the relation between aesthetics and politics. [1]

Keywords

art, atopia, Roland Barthes, identity, *the Neutral*, plurality, politics

1. Introduction

Artistic activity is involved in the general flow of global and multi-polar exchanges that dominate today's world. The transfer or circulation of ideas and forms, and the constant cycle of borrowing and citation, are not new in themselves. However, these processes have gained a new momentum and this raises questions about the nature and existence of communities. Would it be right to think in negative terms, to assume that since everything can be found everywhere, then nothing comes from anywhere in particular? Or should we see the situation as something else in the making?

In the context of globalization everything is to some extent taken over, reformulated, and reproduced. Thus from this perspective the notion of atopia, coming from the Greek ἀ-τοπος (*atopos*), seems to describe many aspects of our present world rather well. (*Atopos* literally means "non-place" or "without place.") However, it could be argued that the elaboration of forms and ideas has always been a matter of interrelations, a consequence of the specific organizations of contrasting materials that embody differences. In that case, what is really new today is the fact that this activity is now directly connected to new technologies that dramatically increase the rate of circulation of pictures, signs, and information. The density of this ceaseless circulation can make it seem as if a second or new reality is being created. However, this sensation is more a consequence of the speed of the circulation than of the novelty of the processes themselves.

Exploring the notion of atopia in relation to artistic activity leads us in two directions. First, the globalization process delocalizes the simple or homogenous identity of art works themselves. Placed in direct interaction within a network, their identity becomes open, polycentric, or heterogeneous. Secondly, the status of the artist also changes and his identity is experienced as plural or atopic. This blurring of individual identities and boundaries, the so-called standardization of cultures, has been much criticized. However, rather than viewing the situation negatively, our intention is to draw attention to the fact that within this larger process, a series of modulations exists that is by no means insignificant. Today, obviously, certain kinds of diversity are disappearing.

However, at the same time a new series of differences is making itself known. We just need to focus differently in order to see them.

2. Atopia, an exhibition

In 2007, six Taiwanese artists presented their work at the Taiwan Pavilion of the Fifty- Second Venice Biennale in an exhibition entitled "Atopia." The very fact that the Taiwanese who organized this exhibition borrowed its title from the German sociologist Helmut Willke^[2] could be taken as proof of the global and multi-polar exchanges and constant flow of borrowing and citation mentioned above. The fact that this exhibition was held in Venice, Italy could also be taken as such proof. Here is a quotation from a *Taipei Times* article that mentions this exhibition:

Taiwan is not a utopia, or a dystopia. It's not a place. Diplomatically it has no space. Politically it does not exist. We can't even agree on its name. ... The theme of the entry is atopia and refers not only to the political position that Taiwan finds itself in, but also [to] a twenty-first century condition that applies to us all. 'Atopia' refers to the situation of post-colonialism we are in. There has not been much time to become a country. Many other places are like this, nations without nationality," curator Hongjohn Lin (林宏璋) said yesterday at a press conference introducing Taiwan's Venice Biennale entry.

...Lin has borrowed the term atopia from the German sociologist Helmut Willke, who defines it as a non-place, or society without borders. Globalization, multinational companies and the Internet are creating a world in which international markets, non-governmental organizations and multi-culturalism erase the relevance of nationhood. Lin has adapted the term for his own purpose and localized it. The artist, academic and drummer said that Taiwan was an atopian state *par excellence.* "^[3]

It is important to stress two points in relation to this example. On the one hand, the notion of atopia seems to be properly used as a concept expressing a non-place or a world without borders. On the other hand, the notion is used to underline the situation of a "nation without nationality," especially by Lin Hongjohn, the curator of this exhibition.

This notion is also used to underline the identity crisis or lack of recognition that results from colonialism or multinational and multicultural realities and that pervades a country like Taiwan, among many others. In other words, while in the first case, from the journalist's point of view, the 'a' of atopia seems to have a neutral connotation, Hongjohn assigns the 'a' a privative meaning.

In fact, we ourselves are in a position to wonder whether or not the six artists ("the author Tsai Ming-liang (蔡明亮), the photographer Lee Kuo-min (李國民), the video director Tang Huang-chen (湯皇珍), the 'bricoleur' Huang Shih-chieh (黃世傑), and the comic-book artist VIVA") actually share the analysis of their curator. Or, as is often the case, is the curator imposing a particular ideological view on the artists' work? According to the *Taipei Times* article, for the artists, atopia seems to be an enjoyable source of inspiration, while for the curator, the term is used only in reference to the negative geopolitical aspects of Taiwan's position. The curator and the group of artists do not appear to be speaking about the same reality. Whereas the curator is using a set of objects commonly referred to as "art" to ask questions about political identity, the artists seem to be taking a specific action as a starting point and using it as a potentiality through which to express something about a particular state

of the world around them.

There is a clear divergence in the way in which the notion of atopia is appropriated. Why is it that while artists seem to understand the potentiality of an atopic perspective perfectly, our inherited institutions (and their representatives) seem to miss the point, holding on to a traditional vision of the relation between creativity and political identity?

However, the above example serves to underline the fact that, as Jacques Rancière points out, artists and institutions do not participate in the "distribution of the sensible" at the same level. Whereas so-called institutions of the avant-garde tend to represent the "archi-political idea of a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for change," the "aesthetic regime of the arts," which, according to Rancière, still characterizes our time, corresponds to a "meta-political idea of global political subjectivity, the idea of the potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come."^[4]

In other words, the point of art, given the fact that every artistic practice plays a role in a larger political sphere, is not so much the representation of a specific theme (*topic*), or the *what*. Rather, the point is to question *how* any kind of thing can be the subject for artistic practice: "The aesthetic regime of arts did not begin with decisions to initiate an artistic rupture. It began with decisions to reinterpret what makes art or what art makes," Rancière writes.^[5] That is to say, artists do not start with preconceptions about the role that a historian or a curator might assign to art objects *a posteriori*. Instead, artists set out to question the way in which we think about our relation to things. In short, whereas one, the historian or curator, is dealing with forms of change, the other, the artist, is dealing with modes of experience. The innovative meta-political perspective defined above could then provide a means of explaining how the singularity of art works is compatible with the idea of a global community.

When Roland Barthes writes, "Art = refined practice of difference,"^[6] we are invited to see artistic activity as a regular disqualification of two things. The first is our usual categories and the second is what daily use leads us to think of as an *object*. This generates differences in the way we perceive our common experience. This invitation to rethink the categories inherited from the Moderns, to re-interrogate and re-compose the articulation of our categories, is as pertinent today in the world of art as it is in the world of politics, if *politics* is understood as a way to live together. The "refined practice of difference" provides a link between these two seemingly disparate domains, helping us to make sense of our common world and the new global community to which we belong and within which we interact. To consolidate this point, distinctions among *object*, *thing*, and *subject* are needed. This process of distinction introduces an intermediate term between the substantialist disjunction between *subject* and *object*.

As Heidegger stressed in *What is a Thing?* the term *thing* allows an opening. This means that a *thing* should not be thought of restrictively, as being solely an object of knowledge. Rather, *things* exist prior to our abstract knowledge of them and prior to their practical use. Even if it is a cause of knowledge, a *thing* is first and foremost a free subject *per se*; that is, free from classifying apprehension. However, taking a different position from Martin Heidegger, the shift from *objects* to *things* (from *Gegenstände* to *Dinge*) must incorporate the technical and scientific realities with which our lives are involved. The shift must not exclude these realities.^[7] To better understand the theoretical potential of this extension of the distinctions among *object*, *thing*, and *subject* let's have a look at the broader implications of atopia as found in the work of Roland

Barthes.

3. Roland Barthes and the notion of atopia

According to Barthes, atopia originally meant somebody or something that can be said to be unusual, strange, odd, insane, extravagant, or poorly thought of.^[8] From his standpoint at the frontier of literature and philosophy, what Barthes clearly finds interesting about atopia, which encompasses the notions *topos* and *topic*, is the idea of a possible register of language where the authority of predication and the need to constantly make sense are contested.

Atopia can be viewed as equivalent to a sovereign right to “wander off the point,” to act and think beyond usual social definitions and classifications.

From the point of view of rhetoric, atopia corresponds to a disruption of predication and implies a loss of *subject* (or *topic*). Atopic would mean athenatic. That is why atopia is related to oddness, because atopic discourse is not in line with common sense. Within the world of rhetoric, for any speech to be credible or, even better, convincing, it needs to have a clear and delimited *subject*. Atopia blurs coherence, which is the main quality of speech, in as much as that coherence is the guarantee of speech’s effectiveness. At the same time, atopia provides the opportunity for a more poetic use of speech (or at least a less univocal use of speech) to come about.^[9]

In the same way, when Barthes refers to *the Neutral* as “the nonpredicable,”^[10] asserting that a predicate might be “as nothing more than a moment: a time,”^[11] he clearly wants to promote the idea of keeping a distance from the authority or violence of language and paradigm. In fact, he tends toward the opposite point of view, toward a world where “the object fades away to the profit of the quality.”^[12]

Finally, what is noteworthy about Barthes’ conception of a predicate as a *moment* is the idea that language is not belittled as a consequence of its supposed limits. The idea that focusing at the right distance allows us to conceive of a time before something is apprehended as an *object*, a time when that thing already participated in a common (or neutral) dimension as an indeterminate or non-specified subject, is at once more important.

This includes new realities that come from technical or scientific research.

This moment can be viewed as a breath, a moment of respiration where, from either an artistic or a political point of view, creativity is possible, if not to say desirable.

Thus, from an aesthetic point of view, atopia lets us foresee a moment of respiration where mobile and discontinuous qualities provide sufficient reason to say that a *thing*, a *being*, or an *event* first exists as a free fact of consciousness before it eventually becomes the object of judgment or of intellectual determination. This respiration is none other than the moment of poetry that allows what Barthes labels *nuance*,^[13] or variation, to emerge. It is the source of intensive differences.

In order to fully measure how, from an atopic point of view, contemporary aesthetics can be relevant for present day politics, we need to consider two points. First, we need to examine more precisely how Barthes links atopia and *the Neutral*. Secondly, we need to investigate whether it is possible to conceive of the relation between artistic singularities and what Rancière calls a “shared sensible world”^[14] as being a necessary condition of the existence of a community.

4. Atopia and the *Neutral*

Dealing first with atopia, we must be careful to make a clear distinction between atopia and *utopia*. « *L’atopie est supérieure à l’utopie.* »

("Atopia is superior to utopia."), Barthes says.^[15] *Utopia* can be defined as a way of holding up a mirror to society through the projection of an ideal world. Since its modern origin, *utopias* have been employed as counter-models to criticize existing society. The term atopia cannot however be used to refer to this projection of civilization into another world. Atopia is not a model; instead it is a potential access to a different positive perspective on our *present* world.

Analyzing the makeup of the word atopia, we must understand that the 'a' of atopia doesn't have a negative sense; it doesn't imply privation. It should be considered from a neutral perspective. According to Barthes, by 'looking beyond' the law of predication and univocity of paradigm, atopia permits a certain level of vagueness within the hierarchical organization involved in classical representation, a kind of suspension of *univocal* meaning in favor of plurality. "The best *Neutral* is not the null, it's plural," Barthes wrote.^[16] From an atopic perspective, 'place' (*topos*) has neither a positive nor a negative determination. Instead, it can be thought of as a common "polycentric" ground where we are led toward another conceptualization in which our relation to the world has a modal nature rather than a disjunctive nature, such as the subject-object relation.

Within this conceptualization, each mode corresponds to a singular given situation, and a position corresponds to our experience of the specific situation of which we are a component. The notion of atopia does not stress an absence of place; rather, it encourages us to think of the notion of *place* in a different way. A *place* should not be conceived of as a closed delimitation equivalent to a guarantee of stable identity with fixed borders. Rather it should be viewed as a *limitless limit*. Topology provides a means of visualizing this kind of experience. Unlike metric space, which is based on measurable distances, in topological geometry the local and the global are simultaneously co-present within what are called *zones of neighborhood*. There is no distance separating me from the place where I am.

Instead, there is a continuum like a Möbius strip, or a complex of relations where I am in place and place is in me. Turning now to *the neutral*, this notion corresponds to a pre-individual common nature from which the process of the individuation of different singularities emerges. Echoes of this idea can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze: "Just as singularity as differential determination is pre-individual, so is individuation as individuating difference an ante-I or ante-self. The world of 'one' or 'they' is a world of *impersonal individuations* and *pre-individual singularities*; a world that cannot be assimilated to everyday banality but one ... in which resonates the true nature of that profound and that groundlessness which surrounds representation, and from which simulacra emerge."^[17] On the question of individuation, Barthes follows Deleuze.^[18] Both agree on the idea that "difference precedes generic, specific and even individual differences within being."^[19] Considering this ante-predicative reality, which is at the same time undifferentiated and determinable, we once again find ourselves facing the same quality of vagueness previously mentioned in connection with atopia.

However, here vagueness is not synonymous with reverie and should not be thought of negatively. Here vagueness is viewed as a mark of both indetermination and potentiality. In other words, only individual numerical units, as objects of intellect, are predicable while what is common, because it is shared by several items at the same time, cannot be predicable and must be considered *neutral*. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, at the same time *the neutral* marks a time when a thing exists as pure experience before it is grasped as an *object*. But I would like to

underline that 'before,' as it is used above, should not be understood in purely temporal terms. Rather, it represents logical anteriority, a constant pre-individual potentiality for a thing to be the subject of a singular individuation.

Since politics is always implicit^[20] in Barthes' work, it is possible to apply the discussion in a political context. Within any given community, despite social determinations or intellectual categorizations that arise as a consequence of judgments or analysis, the undifferentiated or atopic reality discussed above is present in each person and should be understood as none other than the possibility for freedom or creativity.

5. Common / Singularity

Let's look more closely at the relation between atopia and creativity within the political context of a community. At the end of Section 3, we used the work of Rancière to ask whether it is possible to conceive of the relation between artistic singularities and the possibility of a "shared sensible world" as the possibility, or otherwise, of the coexistence of singularity and plurality.

If we focus on the relation between singularity and plurality within a shared experience of a sensible community, it is necessary to say that it is not enough to think of a community as being plural in nature or as being made up of a large diversity of components. It is also necessary to consider the idea that *each* subject in the community (whatever community we are talking about) is plural in itself. That is to say, each subject is as much the sum of the plurality of which it is composed as it is the sum of the potentialities of this very plurality. The identity of a subject is not reducible to the sum of that subject's properties but must be understood through the deployment of the subject's qualities. From an atopian perspective, the identity of a thing, a being, or an event is in its qualitative deployment from which real differences emerge. This deployment can be viewed as equivalent to transformation over time or to a process of individuation.

This qualitative approach does away with any kind of conventional principle of identity. What matters is no longer the notion of individual or group identity as an absolute category but rather *relations* themselves, relations which precede forms understood as marks of identity. Assuming this to be the case, it is not possible to think about community without thinking about the notion of commonalities, without inquiring into the nature of *what* is common between the different plural entities that make up the community. The only way to proceed is not to conceive of the community as a gathering of different subjectivities but instead, as Jean-Luc Nancy pointed out, to conceive of a community as an interval where "the *inter* of the in-common, ...should be thought beyond any logic of subjectivity," which means it should be thought of as "an empty *topos* of the interval."^[21]

Nancy's work on community stresses the idea that community should not be thought of as a substance but as an experience, as a condition rather than as a value. As a consequence, "we can only derive the subject from the in-common, not the reverse."^[22] Therefore, the "empty *topos* of the interval," lived as an experience of "being in-common," is present between each component of a community and within each subject.

Interestingly, in order to illustrate his ideas concerning the interval and its pertinence when thinking about the notion of community, Nancy turns to a musical metaphor. Numerous references to music also occur in the work of Barthes himself.^[23] "In Western music," Nancy says, "the interval is the name for a combination of two notes played at the same time, thus creating a sound that we hear as a new note. The separate

notes composing the interval are still audible but at the same time something new has installed itself between them....The interval 'is' nothing: it is nothing without its elements, and still it is something different from its elements."[\[24\]](#)

The interval in music provides a metaphorical analogy for the way that singularity can combine with plurality. Although a note can be conceived of as a clearly defined entity, it is in fact also a vibration and not solely a rigid body. A note is not a monad with a closed, unchanging identity.

Notes are always interpreted in relation to a wider milieu of other notes within which they interact. Like a note, all places, since they are inhabited by both humans and non-humans, are bound to each other with greater or lesser degrees of implication. And as the brief topological digression in Section 4 puts forward, there is no opposition between local and global; there are only intrinsic modal differences.

Taking an atopian perspective provides the opportunity to switch from the two notions, "local" and "global" that, since the modern age, became the usual and limiting ways of thinking about questions of territory and identity, to the two notions: *singularity* and *common*. As is the case for any individuality, the identity of a locality is an ongoing process of modulations of intervals. In fact, if everything is local, the local has never been a closed entity. Rather, the local always presents degrees of interrelation with variations of intensity.

6. Atopia and "aesthetic engagement"

To conclude, let's look in more detail at how the term 'atopia' relates to people. The notion of 'atopia' helps us to see that cohabiting, or living together, requires a certain level of vagueness. Atopia can be used to designate a certain common part of each of us. This part is neutral because it is pre-individual and impersonal. It cannot be referred to with an "I" of identity or with a unilateral collective "we." Instead, it must be referred to as "it," as in *it is talking, it is writing, it is creating*, etc.

In other words, atopia indicates a part of ourselves and between each of us that cannot be localized. That part is Nancy's "empty *topos* of the interval." It is the part that escapes from any kind of control but whose escape is possible because it creates a difference by doing so: The nothing which is nonetheless something. This common part of each one of us is pertinent in relation to artistic activity and in broader terms in relation to our common sensory experience and our capacity to interact creatively with our own lives.

Creative activity, as Alfred North Whitehead put it, "aims at preservation of the components and at preservation of intensity" of emotion.[\[25\]](#)

Applied in a wider context, this definition seems to advocate paying more heed to new or emerging singularities, while at the same time reinforcing the idea that there is a part that is common to every subject. It is this part that provides the opportunity for each individual to be a stakeholder in a common project and to experience what Arnold Berleant calls "perceptual commons."[\[26\]](#) These commons are the sensory node that binds aesthetics and (meta-) politics together.

From the point of view of sensory perception (*aesthesis*), the notion of 'atopia' provides an opportunity to conceive quality as intensity, as being a sliding scale on which differences within shared common realities can be measured.[\[27\]](#) Encouraging this perspective means encouraging thinking about the world as a theatre of dynamic qualities rather than as a conglomeration of substantiated objects; as Barthes says, a "world of qualities, not of qualified, predicated substances."[\[28\]](#) Within whiteness there is always a certain degree of white but this is not recognizable as a

consequence of where or how the white is named but rather as a consequence of its intensity, an intensity that already exists prior to the process of abstract cognition.^[29]

The specific moment of sensory perception becomes the opportunity to be more sensitive about what and whom we are living with and (hopefully) what and whom we are concerned about. As a consequence, the creative interval that the notion of 'atopia' implies could be regarded as a way to actively live our "aesthetic engagement" as the first condition of existence, as Berleant puts it.^[30] This interval lived as an aesthetic engagement refers to a specific way of being an actor of one's own life, since a practice is nothing other than a moment of freedom seized and is equally meaningful in artistic activity and for all of us in our everyday lives. This is what Barthes invites us to see when he announces, "What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course, is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project): I want to live according to nuance."^[31]

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^[1] A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 35th International conference of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature (IAPL), National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan, May 2011, under the title "Atopia in perspective." This article has been supported by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund 2013.

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^[2] Helmut Willke, *Atopia: Studien zur atopischen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).

^[3] Jules Quartly, "Atopia: it's more than a feeling," Thurs, May 24, 2007, p. 15.
<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2007/05/24/2003362317>.

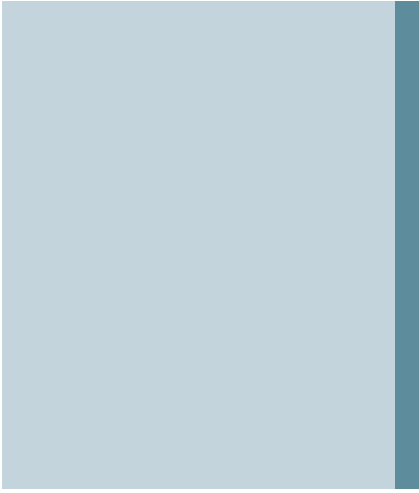
^[4] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Trans. by G. Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 30.

^[5] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 25.

^[6] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, Trans. by E. Krauss and D. Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 30.

^[7] See Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (dir.), *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005). More precisely: Bruno Latour, p. 22, p. 44 and Richard Rorty, p. 274.

- [8] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), chapter "Atopia."
- [9] This latter point helps to explain the specific attraction for the Japanese poetical form of haiku that Barthes had during his later years. See: *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); 'Le Neutre' [*The Neutral*] (1977-1978) and 'La préparation au roman I et II' [*Preparation for the novel*] (1978-1980) both Lectures at the College de France respectively published in France in 2002 and 2003.
- [10] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 53.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- [14] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 42.
- [15] *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 53.
- [16] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 120.
- [17] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 277.
- [18] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 36.
- [19] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, p. 38.
- [20] See for instance Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture" trans. Richard Howard, in *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) and *How to Live Together*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- [21] Jean-Luc Nancy and Laurens Ten Kate, "Cum... Revisited: Preliminaries to Thinking the Interval," in *Intermedialities*, Ed. by Henk Oosterling and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (UK: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 40- 41. See also Roberto Esposito, *Communitas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), Appendix, p. 149.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- [23] Barthes played the piano and his work contains numerous references to music. For further analysis, see Michael David Szekely, "Gesture, Pulsion, Grain: Barthes' Musical Semiology," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol. 4, 2006. For present purposes I'd like to mention *How to Live Together* where Barthes develops the concept of "idiorythmy" to express a possible way of living together.
- [24] Jean-Luc Nancy and Laurens Ten Kate, "Cum," p. 40.
- [25] Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), "Nature Alive," p. 167.
- [26] Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense. The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (UK: Imprint Academic, 2010), p. 209.
- [27] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, pp. 53-54 and Annex, 196.
- [28] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- [29] See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, p. 223. "Intensity is the form of difference in so far as this is the reason of the sensible."



[30] Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense. The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*, pp. 222, 126-130.

[31] Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, p. 11.
