



Karel Appel: Un Geste de Couleur = Karel Appel: A Gesture of Colour, by Jean-François Lyotard. (Jean-François Lyotard: Writing on Contemporary Art and Artists). Leuven University Press, dist. by Cornell University Press, January 2010. 272 p. col. ill. ISBN 9789058677563 (cl.). \$49.50.

Jean-François Lyotard's *Karel Appel: Un geste de couleur* finds one of the late twentieth century's most prescient philosophers speculating about the gesture, or mark, in painting. The focus for Lyotard's investigation is the gestural abstractions of Dutch painter Karel Appel. Appel was widely known for his strident colors and violent brushwork, and as a cofounder of the short lived COBRA group in Paris in 1948. COBRA artists prized spontaneity over surrealist automatism, and created often crude and childlike imagery. By virtue of Appel's spontaneity and violence in paint, Lyotard argues that the gesture resonates beyond temporalities of vision and matter.

Lyotard identifies the gesture, not only as an action or remnant of an action, but as a caesura, a pause, in which challenging notions of duration and representation is permitted. The gesture in this case infinitely exceeds readable meaning, approaching "raw nature" (p. 79) thereby not adhering to a traditional sense of time. He continues toward the Kantian sublime, which he reads not as an unattainable experience, but as an anguished feeling between the infinite and the knowable.

Occasionally throughout *Un geste*, Lyotard acknowledges a dilemma of commentary, addressing the presumptive failure of language to precisely convey experience. He notes that "this work is already a commentary," and that the only way to take up commentary is if it "in its turn becomes work...language as matter of words" (p. 35). He continues, "The philosopher so solicited must therefore begin to write and cease merely to 'think'" (p.55). He calls into question the ability of the philosopher to dislocate his thought at the demand of the artist. Because Appel's work exists in this suspended state of time and order, the viewer must therefore suspend disbelief and reconstruct vision before Appel's chaotic figuration.

Karel Appel: Un geste de couleur is the premier edition in a five volume series devoted to writings on contemporary artists by Jean-François Lyotard. This is the first French/English translation of the manuscript since originally being published in German in 1998, the year of Lyotard's death. The book is a sturdy, hard bound, bilingual edition with twenty-five small color plates at its close which are cited throughout the text.

The overall structure of *Un geste de couleur* is linear with each chapter narrating a step in the process of Lyotard's engagement with Appel's work. Graduate and undergraduate students familiar with either philosophy or art theory will recognize some of the terminology and concepts discussed however specialization is not a prerequisite. Lyotard contextualizes his ideas such as "before-shock" and "immateriality" within the body of the text resulting in a less formal tone when compared to his other writings. For an excellent summary of the book there is Christine Buci-Glucksman's epilogue. She encapsulates Lyotard's thought for those who struggle, but situates *Un geste* within a greater lineage of aesthetic discourse.

Matthew Mann, Library Associate/Exhibition Coordinator, Arts + Humanities Division, DC Public Library, matthew.mann@dc.gov