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**Between Blindness and Touching.
Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy on the Self-Portrait**

Abstract

*The paper analyzes Jacques Derrida's and Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the self-portrait. It is argued that Nancy builds on Derrida's approach but introduces two decisive modifications. Firstly, he develops the emergence of the painter on the canvas as constitution of the self – an aspect Derrida does not consider. Secondly, Nancy understands portraying – and thus images – on the basis of touching. In contrast, Derrida conceives portraying as coming from the invisible and two forms of blindness. In doing so, he remains *ex negativo* in a tradition which links images to vision, whereas Nancy tries to overcome it. Nancy's alterations not only lead to a modified theory of the self-portrait but also refine Derrida's influential concept of *différance* by highlighting its corporeal and ontological dimension.*

Keywords: Derrida, Nancy, self-portrait, *différance*, art theory

Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, as developed in "De la grammatologie" (1967), was widely discussed and became very influential in the field of philosophy, literature, and also the fine arts. In 1990, Derrida was invited to organize an exhibition at the Louvre which he entitled "Mémoires d'aveugle. L'autoportrait et autres ruines". In the accompanying text, he develops in detail his understanding of a self-portrait. According to Derrida, the self-portrait is characterized by a paradoxical logic: first, the painter necessarily has to remove her/his eyes from her/himself as the model in order to emerge anew on the canvas (Derrida 1993, 68); second, the brush stroke of the painter that s/he has to perform to make her/himself visible on the canvas introduces a necessary deferral in space and time. With one and the same brushstroke the painter moves away from and approaches her/himself (Derrida 1993, 68). These two are the "great 'logics' of the invisible at the origin of drawing" and "by correlation two *blindnesses*" (Derrida 1993, 41)¹. Thereby, Derrida aims to overcome the classic criteria of the self-portrait such as similarity and recognizability (Hyman/Bantinaki 2017).

¹ "[D]eux grandes 'logiques' de l'invisible à l'origine du dessin", "par corrélation, deux 'aveuglements'" (Derrida 1990, 46).

This paper argues that the approach of Jean-Luc Nancy, student and friend of Derrida, has its starting point in his conception of the self-portrait, but is accompanied with two significant modifications that have far-reaching consequences also for the concept of *différance*. Firstly, he broadens the concept of the self-portrait by combining the painter's emergence on the canvas with the constitution of the self. In this sense, the self-portrait has a key function for his philosophy of the subject (Nancy 2018b, 59, 63-64). He thus provides a corporeal and difference-theoretical approach to it. Secondly, Nancy understands the act of painting (a self-portrait) not on the basis of seeing, or more precisely of blindness, but as an act of touching and getting into contact (Nancy 2003, 81, 235). For him, coming on to the canvas means getting radically exposed, open to the world, touching and being touched.

Thus, compared to Derrida, Nancy's approach is much more corporeal and ontologically orientated. Consequently, Nancy (1997, 57-58) interprets the concept of *différance* as material difference, that is, matter is the reality of difference and of *différance* through which alone there *is* something.

1. The Paradoxical Structure of the (Self-)Portrait

Derrida starts his reflections on the self-portrait with the fact that the painter must rely on a mirror in order to portray her/himself. In it s/he observes her/himself, studies the own body or face down to the smallest detail. If s/he then wants to paint the body on the canvas, s/he must turn the gaze away and towards the canvas. Consequently, s/he cannot see the own body/face when painting. Both mirror (with body/face) and canvas can never be in view simultaneously: in the act of painting, the painter has already left the mirror image in order to put her/himself on the canvas. Derrida concludes that the painter must be *blind* to one or the other, the model or the canvas, in some way. He calls this 'turning away' from the external-pictorial visibility (the model), in order to give sight to something in the image, a *sacrificial blindness* (Derrida 1993, 41). It differs from the *transcendental blindness* (Derrida 1993, 41), which is how Derrida describes a non-seeing that is the condition of the possibility of the image.² With reference to the language, Derrida explains this as follows: "The difference which establishes phonemes and lets them

² In this context, Derrida (1993, 51-52) refers to Merleau-Ponty's concept of the *absolute invisibility*, assuming that the latter inhabits the visible, haunts it. Although the invisible is absolutely alien to the visible and even to the only potentially visible, it penetrates the latter.

be heard remains in and of itself inaudible" (Derrida 1982, 5)³. Transferred to the image, it means that the difference which makes pictorial representation visible, and therefore possible, remains invisible itself. The stroke withdraws and thereby refers to other strokes which in turn withdraw (Derrida 1993, 53-54). Thus, seeing images emerges from a non-seeing, an invisible (Derrida 1993, 55).

The concept of *différance* which Derrida describes in detail in "De la grammatologie" becomes evident here. Based on the French verb *différer*, two connotations are emphasized: on the one hand, a conscious or unconscious temporal shifting, postponing, or delaying—which Derrida summarizes with the term *temporization* (Derrida 1982, 8). On the other hand, *différer* means not being identical, being different, being recognizable, which requires a spacing, an interval, a distance (Derrida 1982, 8). The necessary delay between image and model becomes for Derrida the *hypothec* of his theory of images. Thus, the image is detached from its function of referring to an object or an idea, which significantly changes the status of an image and of the (self-)portrait for which resemblance and furthermore recognizability is considered as a key criterion (Hyman/Bantinaki 2017). Following Derrida, no sign or image can be determined by a relationship to the thing designated. Instead, they are arbitrary in the way they are named. They do not refer to the thing itself but always already to other signs or pictures. The result is a *freely floating movement* in which no center can be determined (Derrida 1978, 289). There is no sign, no image, that is closer to what it represents. They do not refer to something else that is absent, rather they create their own reality in the difference to others: they take the place of the one they denote. This continuous process makes it impossible to reach the actual substitute, that is a presence (Derrida 1997, 156). As soon as the first substitution is given – and it is always already given – the endless chain from supplement to supplement can no longer be stopped (Derrida 1997, 154).

The stroke of the artist becomes for Derrida the initial point for the irreversible turning away from the model, or, ontologically speaking, from the (original) being. Thus, the *trait* is

interrupting all pure identification and forming [...] our general hypothec for all thinking about drawing – inaccessible in the end, at the limit, and de jure. This limit is never presently reached, but drawing always signals toward this inaccessibility, toward the threshold where only the surroundings of the trait appear – that which the trait spaces by delimiting and which thus does not belong to the trait. Nothing belongs to the trait, and

³ "La différence qui fait lever les phonèmes et les donne à entendre, à tous les sens de ce mot, reste en soi inaudible." (Derrida 1972, 5)

thus, to drawing and to the thought of drawing, not even its own 'trace'. Nothing even participates in it. The trait joins and adjoins only in separating. (Derrida 1993, 54)⁴

The *traits* do not represent because they always start replacing the model. Furthermore, they do not refer to the model but rather to other strokes, Derrida calls this the "chain of supplements" (Derrida 1997, 156)⁵. In this sense, "there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added" (Derrida 1997, 159)⁶.

According to Derrida, the painter does not copy the model, rather he has to become blind to it to bring it out anew on the canvas. As a result, painting is an *anamnestic act*⁷ and not a reproduction. "As soon as the draftsman considers himself, fascinated, fixed on the image, yet disappearing before his own eyes into the abyss, the movement by which he tries desperately to recapture himself is already, in its very present, an act of memory." (Derrida 1993, 68)⁸ What is preserved in the picture is not the immediacy of the object but, according to Derrida, the mediality of the act of recording in its subsequent creation. The painter must give up direct vision in order to make visible: at the moment of depiction, perception already changes into memory, seeing into recording, perception into apperception (Wetzel 1997, 134).

Derrida sees the *anamnesis* in every single brushstroke, thus placing less emphasis on representational accuracy but on the deviation of the model and the creative act. Instead of referring exclusively to a model, the (self-)portrait refers to itself, which is why Derrida (1993, 3) prefers the Italian term *autoritratto*. Like the term portrait, it is derived from the Latin *trahere* which means to pull or pull out, a withdrawal, a removal itself. The portrait brings a self onto the canvas by drawing or pulling it out (of itself), brushstroke by brushstroke. In this process, the image of the model moves away from the model step by step, becomes something else, leaves flesh and blood to become color. Simultaneously to this pro-

⁴ "[I]nterrompant ici toute identification pure, et formant, [...] notre *hypothèque générale* pour tout pensée du dessin à la limite inaccessible en droit. Cette limite n'est jamais présentement atteinte mais le dessin toujours fait signe vers cette inaccessibilité, vers le seuil où n'apparaît que l'entour du trait, ce qu'il espace en délimitant et qui donc ne lui appartient pas. Rien n'appartient au trait, donc au dessin et à la pensée du dessin, pas même sa propre 'trace'. Rien n'y participe même. Il ne joint et n'ajoute qu'en séparant." (Derrida 1990, 58)

⁵ "la chaîne des suppléments" (Derrida 1967, 225).

⁶ "il n'y a jamais eu que des suppléments, des significations substitutives qui n'ont pu surgir que dans une chaîne de renvois différentiels, le 'réel' ne survenant, ne s'ajoutant" (Derrida 1967, 228).

⁷ Derrida indirectly refers here to the Platonic theory of *anamnesis*, but gives it a different interpretation.

⁸ "Dès lors qu'il se considère, fasciné, arrêté sur l'image, mais disparaissant à ses propres yeux dans l'abîme, le mouvement par lequel un dessinateur tente désespérément de se ressaisir est déjà, dans son présent même, un acte de mémoire." (Derrida 1990, 69)

cess of distancing, a movement of reappropriation begins: by painting her/himself, the painter re-constitutes her/himself on the canvas. Thus, the portrait raises the problem of representation in particular: seeking to bring her/himself onto the picture, the painter distances from her/himself, as s/he has to refrain from her/himself in order to appear on the canvas. In the sense of *autoritrato*, the movement of distancing leads back to oneself, since the painter brings her/himself anew on the canvas. Therefore, the *autoritrato* is not a pure self-reference but a self-reference that has always been permeated by a withdrawal and thus the foreign. Referring to the figure of Polyphemus, Derrida describes the complex logic of the self-portrait as follows: "By presenting himself as Nobody, he at once names and effaces himself: like nobody, like nobody else – the logic of the self-portrait." (Derrida 1993, 88)⁹ The complementary movement of the (self-)portrait as a movement of *différance* is thus as follows: in one stroke it removes itself from itself and a movement of reappropriation sets in, in which the painters re-constitute themselves by drawing themselves into the picture. However, this process can and must always remain incomplete, a complete self-presence is impossible. Derrida shows that there is blindness at the beginning of the painting process and thus highlights the *différance* of the absent object as a deferral of seeing in the picture. The image is thus no longer thought of as based on the process of seeing, but from blindness, the invisible and thus in its withdrawal. With this concept of blindness, vision, and also mourning¹⁰, Derrida vehemently emphasizes the creative power of images, but always thinks of it negatively in terms of withdrawal, blindness, and representation. The picture in its materiality as well as the physical self – the model, the painter – remains untouched.

2. The Subject of the (Self-)Portrait and Touching

2.1. Exposition of the Self

Nancy follows Derrida closely in his examination of the portrait but combines the creative movement of *différance* with a theory of presence based on touch and existential exposition. In doing so, he not only expands Derrida's approach but also provides a counter-model to the classical definition of the portrait as a representation of a person in his or

⁹ "En se présentant comme Personne, il se nomme et s'efface en même temps : comme personne, logique de l'autoportrait." (Derrida 1990, 90)

¹⁰ Derrida (1996, 171-192) works on mourning and images in detail and with reference to Louis Marin.

her selfhood (e.g. Waetzold 1908, 312), and also opposes the definition of the subject as the underlying.¹¹

When the painter brings her/his self into the picture, this is not only accompanied by a movement of drawing and withdrawing but also by a radical exposure of her/himself, combined with becoming a stranger: each brushstroke changes the model, adds an alterity to it and, as it were, pulls it out, creates it. In the (self-)portrait, the painter assures her/himself by bringing her/himself onto the surface and thus into an outwardness, exposing her/himself, getting into contact. Subjectivity is therefore characterized by an opening-up in which the self is for itself only insofar as it is in contact with others (Flatscher 2011, 331).¹² The self experiences otherness as belonging to itself and itself as another. Therefore, entering into a relationship is fundamental for the self.¹³ Exactly at this point, Nancy sees the structure of the subject potentiated: on the canvas, the opening becomes intensified by exposing the self onto the surface of the picture. The self that is brought onto the canvas shows itself in its constitutive externality, its exposure, its entering into relationship, its flatness – and the medium, the canvas, is also characterized by the fact that it has no depth, no secret interior, it is only surface: "Devoid of any inside, the painting is the inside or the intimacy of the person. It is, in short, the subject of its subject, its support and its substance, its subjectivity and its subjectility, its depth and its surface, its sameness and its alterity in a single 'identity' that we call the *portrait*. (Beyond this, perhaps, we would call it *painting* in general [...])" (Nancy 2018a, 17)¹⁴. Hence, Nancy contradicts one of the main criteria for portraits, according to which it is a monological revelation of the inner personality structure (i.a. Waetzold 1908, 312).

The picture manifests an experience of alterity that counteracts a supposed unity of the self by linking it with an otherness. In being exposed, the self experiences what it means to be a self – a self, however, that is constitutively infused with alterity and is therefore never pure self. Exactly this experience is depicted in the (self-)portrait:

¹¹ For this reason, Nancy also avoids using the term subject and speaks rather of self (*soi, ipse, autos*), the existing, or singularity. See: Heikkilä 2007, 14.

¹² See also: Steinweg 2014, 199-209, esp. 206; 2009, 9-34.

¹³ In contrast to Descartes' (1644/2005, I,7) "*ego cogito, ergo sum*", Nancy (2000a, 31) introduces the following formula: "*Ego sum = ego cum*". It is not thinking that constitutes the subject, but the *coming into relationship/contact*. See also: Nancy 1979.

¹⁴ "Le tableau sans intérieur est l'intériorité ou l'intimité de la personne, il est en somme le sujet de son sujet: [...] sa mêmété et son altérité en une seule 'identité' dont le nom est *portrait*. (Peut-être, au-delà, ce nom est-il *peinture* en général [...])" (Nancy 2000b, 27).

Only painting, then, can provide the subject with his or her own words, without either voice or language that could be rendered by discourse, and without, too, this name 'subject'. What it designates or names is shown here to be a single trait: not a self-relation, not a resemblance or a recollection of the self, but the trait of an intimate disunion, the plane of an eclipse of an encounter missed in advance because it turns immediately, with the same stroke, with the same brush stroke, into the spacing of a world with its attraction and its disquiet. 'Art' is the fragile name of this other encounter. (Nancy 2018a, 40)¹⁵

This *other encounter* of the portrait mentioned in the quotation thus lies in bringing out and pulling out the interior, the peculiar, to the outside. What appears to be a contrast is nevertheless complementary and can be found together in a single stroke of the brush. With this trait of alienation, the peculiar and innermost of the subject is shaped and determined. Thus, the portrait is a "limit-concept" (Nancy 2018b, 59)¹⁶: the thin surface of the painting, the painted canvas, is the border or transition between exposing and entering, appearing and disappearing, self and foreign, representation and dissolution, proximity and distance. According to Nancy, the (self-)portrait is thus a *revelation, unveiling, or even uncanvassing*, namely of the structure of the subject: its *sub-jectivity*, its *being-under-itself*, its *being-within* that is its being outside itself, its being exposed (Nancy 2018a, 14). By thinking this theory of the self coming from the self-portrait, Nancy's approach goes much further than Derrida's. Nancy, however, does not contradict Derrida, but continues to conceive his approach on a subject-theoretical and ontological level. Consequently, the task of the self-portrait is not to capture the real character or the identity of a person. Rather, the portrait shows that being oneself is only possible through being a stranger, or that being in or with oneself can only be understood as being outside oneself. Therefore, human existence cannot be understood as an essence or subject in the sense of a unity or an essence, but through being exposed and coming into contact.

¹⁵ "Seule la peinture donne ainsi au sujet la parole propre et sans voix ni langage qu'aucun discours ne peut lui rendre, ni même ce nom de 'sujet'. Ce qu'il désigne ou appelle se montre ici comme un seul *trait*: non pas un rapport à soi, ni semblance ni rappel de soi, mais le trait qui le tire au devant tout en le tournant au dedans: le trait unique d'une désunion intime, le plan d'éclipse d'un rendez-vous manqué d'avance, car il vire instantanément, du même trait, de la même touche du peindre, en espacement d'un monde, avec son attrait et son inquiétude. 'Art' est le nom fragile de cet autre rendez-vous." (Nancy 2000b, 82)

¹⁶ "concept-limite" (Nancy 2014a, 37).

2.2. Get in Touch

With touching Nancy strengthens another *limit-concept*: in touching, the own and the foreign come into contact. There is no touch without the other – not even touching oneself because it also requires an outside or an in-between.¹⁷ The decisive factor here is that being itself is nothing, but just emerges in this in-between (Morin 2012, 37-38), and Nancy describes it with different terms such as: *with, exposure, relationship, sharing, contact*.

Touching happens at the border, it belongs neither to one side nor to the other, rather it happens between them through rapprochement and differentiation. For this reason, touching is for Nancy the sense of the limit itself (Nancy 2003, 235). And precisely because the portrait, and thus the image, is such a *limit-concept*, touching is so relevant to painting. To portray oneself means to pull the self outward, to present, to expose oneself radically – once on the canvas, the figure cannot hide again. Images always present themselves and the depiction – be it a person, a line, a color, or a bare canvas. They expose themselves and something to the viewers who, in turn, are themselves exposed, open. Different concretions or singularities stand in a relationship of touching and being touched to one another and to the world. Following Nancy, it is precisely this constant process of exposing bodies, boundaries, and sense, that images, and above all painting and (self-)portraits, celebrate in a particular way.

As this makes clear, Nancy, but also Derrida, turn away from the primacy of the visual, under which pictures traditionally stand.¹⁸ In doing so, Derrida makes a turnaround: he conceives pictoriality from the invisible and from blindness, as becomes apparent in his analysis of the self-portrait. Although this leads to far-reaching changes in the understanding of pictoriality, he remains *ex negativo* bound to this tradition.¹⁹ Nancy, on the other hand, understands images, and thus also the portrait, as starting directly from touching and exposure. But for Derrida, too, touching plays a crucial role and Nancy is a central reference here, as can be seen in the book "Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy" published in 2000,

¹⁷ With reference to Nancy and in the form of a deconstructive reading of Husserl's and Merleau-Ponty's concepts of self-affection by touching one's own hands, Derrida (2005, 211-215) develops a concept of "auto-hetero-affection" (2005, 180). Nancy's concept of touch is also radical in this respect. To touch yourself, you always have to be outside yourself. As an example, he mentions the organs: if you feel healthy, you do not feel your heart or stomach. But if you sense your stomach, it is from the outside (Nancy 2008a, 129).

¹⁸ See for example Wiesing 2008, VII; 2013.

¹⁹ Jay (1993, i.a. 587) emphasizes that Derrida thus joins a tradition beginning with Bergson, in which the image is examined primarily with the aim of making blindness the basis of thought and discrediting vision.

which Derrida worked on again and again for ten years. Right at the beginning, he writes: "for Jean-Luc Nancy, the greatest thinker about touching of all time" (Derrida 2005, 4). Nevertheless, only Nancy develops the concept of touch for the images, or rather from them. This seems provocative, because pictures, especially paintings, have historically been subject to a ban on contact (Nancy 2008b, 9-17), and even today museums still demand a strict distance from the paintings in particular.

However, this concept of touching differs from a tradition Derrida calls *haptology* or *haptocentric metaphysics*, which is close to *phonocentrism* or *logocentrism* (i.e. Derrida 1997, 3, 18). Consequently, touching does not mean immediacy or perfect proximity in the sense of absolute presence, indivisibility, or merging into each other. According to Nancy, every touch is accompanied by a *syncope*,²⁰ that is, an interruption or distance in the contact with others and a discontinuity in the relationship to oneself. This is a spatio-temporal postponement similar to that in Derrida's *différance*, but it is understood in terms of exposure and materiality (Nancy 1997, 57-58). Contact takes place with other bodies—*con*. This being with one another in the world is connected with a *tact*, which in turn denotes the touch and marks the sensitivity to always maintain a certain distance that addresses the ethical dimension of touch. Therefore, touching must be understood independently of a single sense. Instead it is characterized by a fundamental affectability, a passability that is a contact phenomenon (Nancy 1997, 128).

Touching is not an act of a touching subject and a touched object because touching is always both at the same time: touching and being touched, active and passive. In the moment of touching, one is always already touched. One gains control by experiencing sensory data about something, and at the same time loses it because the intensity of touch is not fully controllable – that is, the touching person cannot be sure to what extent s/he is touched and what will happen (Heikkilä 2007, 272). Art and in particular painting aim at precisely this kind of affectedness of the viewer, and it stimulates perception by exposing something to it, inviting contact, attraction and repulsion, rapprochement and distance. Thereby, images are not only seen, that is, it is not just the eyes that make contact with the image and thus produce an image, but the entire body experiences the reality of the images and comes into contact with them (Wulf/Zirfas 2005, 15). There is no specific art of touching, rather every art form, every artistic action, touch in their very specific way.

Furthermore, touching does not mean a meta-principle of the senses; its synaesthetic synergy is based on the "auto-heterology of touch" (Nancy 1996, 17)²¹. In other words,

²⁰ The term syncope is introduced mainly with reference to Kant; see Nancy 1976.

²¹ "l'auto-hétérologie du toucher" (Nancy 2001, 36).

touching affects several senses without switching them into line. What brings the senses in touch, "what makes it into the touch that is a dis-location, a heterogenization in principle" (Nancy 1996, 18)²², but the respective expression can then be classified diversely. Therefore, touching takes place where differentiation occurs, and thus in all senses. As "*corpus* of the senses"²³ it has its special position only if it is not understood as a totality which would include all senses among themselves. On the contrary, Nancy's concept of touch is based on the fact that the senses touch themselves, interact, are not hermetically sealed in themselves. Thus, Nancy's concept of touching is very broad and describes the self-relationship to our world, the coming into contact on an ontological level, in which the *being-with*²⁴ becomes concrete.

3. Différance as être-à

Nancy's further development of Derrida's concept of the self-portrait has a crucial impact on the concept of *différance*: the *a* of *différance*, already emphasized by Derrida, is reinforced by Nancy by connoting it with an *accent aigu*. With the emphasis on the *à*, Nancy expresses that every being must stand to another being— not *in*, not *through* or *by*, but being is always *to* (*à*) something else. On the one hand, this is related to Merleau-Ponty's (1966, 7) concept of *être au monde*, but is critical to the connotation of unity, continuity, and moreover the strong proximity to Heidegger's (1977a, 123-124) *Mitsein* or *Being-with*, which suggests that one can also be outside the world. In contrast to this, Nancy emphasizes the character of the *to* and emphasizes in an almost obsessive way that one is always already *to* the world. To be (*être-à*), or as Nancy also writes,

[w]orld means at least being-to or being-toward [être-à]; it means rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation to – if only of entities or existents to each other. We have known how to categorize being-in, being-for, or being-by, but it still

²² "une dis-location, une hétérogénéisation de principe" (Nancy 2001, 36).

²³ "*corpus* des sens" (Nancy 2001, 36).

²⁴ In this regard, Nancy follows Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* (1977a, 123-124) as an ontological characteristic of human beings. He complains, however, that Heidegger did not reflect it consequently, instead he repeatedly fell for the primacy of *Dasein*. In contrast, for Nancy (2000a, 26-28), being-with is central.

remains for us to think being-to, or the to of being, its ontologically worldly or worldwide trait. (Nancy 1997, 8)²⁵

This transformation or extension of the *différance* by a *worldwide trait* is less a critique of Derrida than Nancy's interpretation of Derrida's thinking which he already considers as an *absolute realism of the pure real* (Nancy 2014b, 76). That means an affirmation of materiality, however, without being absorbed in it, but rather that the materials are in contact and thus enter into a differential process. Therefore, the *real* is constantly in the process of being realized, but never fully realized, rather in exchange and in the process of creating itself by being different. It is the painting process in which Nancy sees this event exposed. That is the reason why the act of painting is crucial for him and not the finished picture: to set a stroke leads to the withdrawal of presence, at the same time, it is precisely this withdrawal that is presented in its capacity to be unrepresentable. An event is drawn out that does not arrive but is always arriving in its material existence (Nancy 1988, 182).

For both Derrida and Nancy, the concept of *différance* is not about removing meanings in order to come to an original one, not about reduction or bracketing in order to reach the origin of things. However, in contrast to Derrida, Nancy considers the *différance* ontologically as being *singular plural*, which can or has to be thought in a particular way, for and even starting from the images: the line or spot of color that the painter places on the canvas is a body, is matter, is a being, and as such it is always extended, exposed, and *to* others. What the painter shows in her/his painting through the layering of colors also applies to the trait which Derrida conceives in the precariousness between sensuality and intelligibility. The inaudible *to* (*à*) in the *différance* shows the spatialization, the exposure, and the materiality of the stroke in contact with others but not in the sense of a *Dingontologie* (Heidegger 1977, 100), according to which the world exists as a constellation of things with properties. Consequently, being is never fully with itself. It is because it is outside of itself, in relation, in contact: "being is an area, and its reality gives itself in areality. It is thus that being is body. Not 'embodied', nor 'incarnated', not even in a 'body of its own': but body, hence possessing its own outside, differing and deferring." (Nancy 1997, 35)²⁶ Like the picture, the body is thus understood as a boundary where contacts are made, where

²⁵ "*Monde* veut dire au moins *être-à*, il veut dire rapport, relation, adresse, envoi, donation, présentation *à* – ne serait-ce que des étants ou existants les uns *aux* autres. Nous savions catégoriser l'*être-en*, l'*être-pour* ou l'*être-par*, mais il nous reste à penser l'*être-à*, ou le *à* de l'*être*, son trait ontologiquement mondain, et mondial." (Nancy 1993, 18)

²⁶ "Être est chaque fois une aire, sa réalité se donne en aréalité. C'est ainsi qu'être est corps. Non pas 'incorporé', ni 'incarné', même en 'corps propre': mais corps, donc ayant son propre au-dehors, différent." (Nancy 1993, 58)

spatialization takes place, where sense opens up. Through contact, a fracture or break occurs which opens and constitutes both sense and matter (James 2006, 131-133).²⁷ Therefore, matter is not an immanent density which is closed on itself but "it is first the very difference through which *something* is possible, as *thing* and as *some*" (Nancy 1997, 57).²⁸ Before any symbolic, there is a spatialization and this original spatialization is matter. This does not include a shapeless content which is modeled by a form, but resistance of a form against its deformation. Matter means density, texture, and power of the form itself – it enables by creating differences: "Matter means here: the reality of the difference – and *différance* – that is necessary in order for *there to be something and some things* and not merely the identity of a pure inherence" (Nancy 1997, 57).²⁹ Every singularity, every concreteness, is material. Conversely, matter is also always singular: it is not *materia prima*, but always already exposed, differentiated, and differing (Nancy 1997, 58, see also footnote 60). Herein lies the necessary circularity of materiality which in turn is also the condition of touch and contact.

To sum up, starting from the self-portrait and the act of painting, Nancy refines the concept of *différance* as *être-à*. Thereby, he strengthens its corporeal and ontological dimension as *being singular plural* and understands it broadly as relationship or contact to the world which is exposed, especially by images.

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²⁷ This discontinuity or fracture also distinguishes Nancy's approach clearly from Merleau-Ponty's concept of *flesh* or *being in the world* and the associated vocabulary of reciprocity, chiasm, and entanglement which is much more strongly based on continuity. Thus, Nancy, even more than Merleau-Ponty, avoids a thinking of the (self-)presence of things, or a substantialist thinking, and emphasizes a thinking of the world as differentiation and distancing (James 2006, 132; 138).

²⁸ "la différence même par quoi quelque *chose* est possible, en tant que *chose* et en tant que *quelque*" (Nancy 1993, 95).

²⁹ "Matière veut dire ici: réalité de la différence – et de la *différance* – par laquelle seulement *il y a quelque(s) chose(s)* et non pas seulement l'identité d'une pure inherence" (Nancy 1993, 96).

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