

European Connections

33

Lorna Collins and
Elizabeth Rush (eds)

Making Sense

For an Effective Aesthetics



Peter Lang

This volume of texts and images has evolved from papers given at the inaugural Making Sense colloquium, which was held at the University of Cambridge in September 2009. The chapters collected here reflect the multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary sense made at this event, which became something of an artistic installation in itself. The essay 'Making Sense' by Jean-Luc Nancy provided the grand finale for the colloquium and is also the culmination of the volume. The collection also includes articles that expound and critique Nancean theory, as well as those that provide challenging manifestos or question the divide between artist and artisan. The volume contrasts works that use texts to make sense of the world with performance pieces that question the sense of theory and seek to make sense through craft, plastic art or painting. By juxtaposing works of pure theory with pieces that incorporate poetry, prose and performance, the book presents the reader with a distillation of the creative act.

Lorna Collins is a PhD student in French philosophy at the University of Cambridge, where she is a Foundation Scholar at Jesus College. Her philosophical work develops the concept of Making Sense through the aesthetic theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Rancière and Bernard Stiegler.

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Making Sense

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edited by
Peter Collier

Volume 33



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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The editors are honoured and delighted to be able to host Jean-Luc Nancy's previously unpublished essay, 'Making Sense', within this book. Nancy's work is an openhanded endowment to the project of exploring sense across the full spectrum of its significations. His thought calls upon academics and artists to re-envision – creatively, and collaboratively – the systems of meaning and range of experiences that inform our notions of community. The contributors to this book have risen to Nancy's challenge. We thank them for refusing the identity politics of schism, for speaking together, rather than as two camps, and for agreeing to share the fruits of their discussion with a wider public. In reflecting on how to properly acknowledge the work of so many individuals towards the material production of this book, it has become clear to us that it has generated its own set of – to borrow from a Deleuzian view of sense mobilized in some of the essays – 'rhizomatic' connections. Emma Wilson championed our colloquium within the Department of French at the University of Cambridge, and made it possible for us to host it there. Her contribution resonates, however, in both the background and the foreground of this book; we cannot thank her enough for her lucid and beautiful translation of Nancy's essay, which is included in this volume. Bill Burgwinkle, Head of the Department of French and fellow at King's College, Cambridge, supported our petition for funding through both channels. We are deeply grateful to him for his kindness and unwavering support. We must also thank the bursar of King's, David Munday, for granting additional funding in the final stages of the project, and to Esther Palmer and Jacky Graves in the Department of French for balancing out our books. We appreciate the Society for French Studies for its willingness to support a colloquium with an unorthodox, yet apposite, connection to contemporary research in French literature, culture and thought. We owe a particular debt to Peter Collier at Sidney Sussex College. Peter gave his editorial expertise unreservedly; this book owes its existence to his strong promotion of our efforts to convert the colloquium into a manuscript. Peter put us in touch with the editorial personnel at Peter Lang, who gave us extensive assistance. Thus, heartfelt thanks

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Elizabeth Rush
Lorna Collins
July 2011

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LORNA COLLINS

Introduction

This volume of texts has evolved from papers written and performed at the first Making Sense colloquium, which was held at the University of Cambridge in September 2009. This event brought together artists and scholars from all around the world, who gathered to build an interface between artistic creation, theoretical debate and academic scholarship. The underlying purpose of this event was to provoke and install the aesthetic encounter and an art practice as media to help us understand and make sense of the world. We wanted to formulate new ways to frame and develop discourse, and found a new way of making sense.

The chapters collected here reflect the multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary creativity and sense made at this event, which became something of an artistic installation in itself. With a stimulating and sensuous economy of mutual exchange and intimate debate, the colloquium deconstructed the traditional hierarchy between the audience and the speakers, reassembling participants who proceeded from the belief that we can all be artists.

This book follows from one of the underlying aims of the colloquium, which was to produce a new and creative form of academic scholarship. By juxtaposing works of pure theory and philosophical texts with pieces that incorporate poetry, prose and performance, *Making Sense* tries to present the reader with a lozenge of the creative act *per se*. This scholarship is new because of its direct acquisition: each piece in this book presents itself as a work of literature or art, which performs making sense in the mind of the reader, who is inspired to begin searching for sense. Together, we transgress the range of different genres from which the pieces included here emerge, by the way that the process of reading instigates the process of sense-making in the reader.

We include works that expose how one can make sense of the world from texts of Modern French aesthetic theory, alongside performance pieces that question the sense of theory and seek a making in craft, from plastic art or

the painting event. The essay on 'Making Sense' by Jean-Luc Nancy formed the grand finale for the first colloquium, and it provides the heart of this volume.

Chapters are grouped into themes. The first three chapters present 'Theoretical Approaches to Making Sense'. In this section we have works that begin from the viewpoint of what sense is in the thinking of Jean-Luc Nancy. Florian Forestier's 'Sens et composition: quelques remarques sur la pensée du sens et de l'art chez Jean-Luc Nancy' discusses what 'making sense' means in terms of the ontology and phenomenology implied in the process of sense-making, whilst concentrating on singularities and art, to investigate making sense through art in terms of the thought of Nancy. Then Ian James's 'Affection and Infinity' presents a theoretical thesis that sets Nancy's thinking about sense, and making sense, in terms of the philosophical registers of twentieth-century French and German phenomenological thought. James argues that Nancy can be seen as a thinker of affection who seeks to think this question in relation to that of infinity. The thesis of this chapter is that making sense involves affection and its relation to the infinite. The third chapter in this grouping is by Ryosuke Kakinami, who asks what is a *making sense* of art and a *making sense* through art? What does it mean to *make sense*? What does a work of art that *makes sense* look like? To answer these questions Kakinami addresses Nancean sense in the terms of 'a sort of destiny of modern subjectivity in art'. From this perspective Kakinami brings forward the thesis that a *fragmentary* subjectivity appears in the thought of Nancy, at the crossroads of literature, critique and philosophy. This theory of the *fragment* then prepares a new concept of community, that is, *making sense* of the way we inhabit the world.

The next group of chapters is presented as a set of 'Manifestos'. By this we mean to bring forward works that call the reader to think and make sense of aesthetic objects and aesthetic practices differently, calling for new aesthetic situations or re-situations. Chris Watkin describes his piece, 'Making Ethical Sense', as a 'collaborative venture', in which he makes a position on sense and ethics in relation to Jean-Luc Nancy. Watkin argues that Nancean sense-making brings with it an ineluctable ethical dimension. After making this position, Watkin then asks what implications might this have for an artist, sculptor, or filmmaker who is seeking to take Nancy's thinking into account. This chapter is juxtaposed with Patricia Ribault's 'Making Makes Sense: Craft

as an Exploratory Mode of Thinking'. In this chapter Ribault works from her own experience as a glass blower, and considers the *making* of making sense in terms of her own craftsmanship. Ribault exposes the difference between art and craft by emphasizing the corporal dimension of craft, and by highlighting in particular the way that craft involves the sense of touch. She then demonstrates how craft can be seen as a mode of thinking as well as a mode of production. Then Hugues Azérad presents the reader with a 'Making Sense of Epiphanic Images', which explores images that present what Joyce defined as a 'sudden spiritual manifestation' – a shock or profound emotion. Drawing particularly from Modernist masters such as Tarkovsky, for Azérad the epiphanic image is a privileged, distinctive event of encounter because of the emotion it produces in the viewer. The fourth manifesto is Faith Lawrence's 'The Art of Listening'. This chapter begins with Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Sonnet to Orpheus' and considers how this poem can help us learn to *listen* to sculpture. Lawrence develops what she calls a 'listening poetics' as a method of engaging with contemporary art, exploring a poetics weighted towards the possibilities offered by listening and sound, and by considering Jean Luc Nancy's meditation on listening alongside Rilke. Lawrence then applies her listening poetics to contemporary art; the object being to replenish and renew, rather than exhaust and reduce, the meaning of the artwork.

Lawrence's poetics provides an effective crossover point to the next grouping of chapters, which explore 'Poetry'. In this section we have works by Carol Mavor and Ben Morris. Mavor's essay, "'Phantoms of the Past, Dear Companions of Childhood, Vanished Friends': Making Sense of Sally Mann's Trees", responds to the recurring theme of the image of the tree that is seen in a selection of works by the contemporary American photographer Sally Mann. Mavor's text is intertwined with these images that she is directly making sense with, so that her prose – touched by the images – at times becomes itself moving stanzas of poetry. Underlying this aesthetic juxtaposition of poetry and image is a theoretical investigation, which appeals to Nancy's *À l'Écoute*, bringing forward a rich sense that seeks a 'listening to the beyond-meaning'. In Mann's piece the trees have agency; the images she uses in her piece could be seen to answer back to the strong direction against arborescent, or root-tree thinking, which is seen in Deleuze's notion of the rhizome. As such, the images of Sally Mann's trees in this work play a strong part in its agency; they might even challenge the concepts we see in other chapters. This piece

is juxtaposed with Morris's 'On Bilingualism in English', which is an essay about making sense in terms of the relationship between critical and creative work. Morris is a poet, and we sample his creative work in this chapter, which includes *The Names of Storms*, a poem that came out of Morris's making sense of his research experience.

Morris's poetic praxis and work of literature sets up the next group of chapters, which involve and instigate 'Performance Art'. First in this section is Elizabeth Wright's and Susan Sellers's 'Painting in Prose: Performing the Artist in Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia*'. This piece was originally brought forward as a performance at the first Making Sense colloquium. In this chapter they describe what happened in their performance, and use Nancy's scholarship to make sense through the different genres of novel, visual art and performance that it involves. The second piece in this section, Jean-Luc Moriceau's and Jennifer Milligan's 'I Could Only Tell, by the Skin of my Body', is also based on a performance given at the first Making Sense colloquium, in which Moriceau and Milligan set out to embody philosophy in performance by layering Nancy, the work of the Parisian photographer Victor Bellaich, and personal experiences of touch and resonance. In this chapter Moriceau and Milligan replay the sense and impressions that they made during their performative piece. The next chapter is brought forward as a performance in itself. Alice Shyy's 'Making "Me" Things Makes "You"' intrudes upon the mind of the reader as they take in the cheeky musings on making sense that define this impetuous piece. Alice Shyy describes herself as an artist and this piece presents her efforts to make sense from her profession. This piece does not really fit into a specific genre such as theory, literature, poetry or criticism; by expressing and following an imaginative conscious stream of thought trying to make sense of the present, Shyy brings us performance in praxis.

This writing as art and creative praxis bleeds into the next grouping of chapters, which express 'Making Sense as "Event"'. This section is heavily influenced by the rhizomatic thinking of Gilles Deleuze, and it begins with Caroline Rannersberger's 'The Sensation of Painting Country in Remote Northern Australia'. In this essay Rannersberger describes her own painting practice as a landscape painter in the Northern Territory. She explores the ways in which the remote north exists outside of the traditional European genre of landscape painting, how she experiences the process of painting in the remote north of Australia, and how Deleuzian philosophy allows her to

make sense of her painting experience and of the artwork itself. This theme of making sense by making art is carried over into the next chapter, which is Lorna Collins's 'Making Sense of Territory: The Painting Event'. This chapter considers Deleuze's ideas about geophilosophy, the event and subjectivity, to think on a different register – through the painting event – about territory, i.e. how we inhabit the world. Collins demonstrates how we can make sense with material forms and use the process of artistic creation to consider the formation of territory. Collins brings forward Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'geophilosophy' as a mode of thinking that opens a topology and territorial outlook, and interprets this term by applying it to an art practice. By describing her own process of painting, Collins intends to think about how the painting event – or the act of artistic creation – helps us make sense of how we encounter and inhabit the world.

The third chapter in this grouping is Laura McMahon's 'Passage of Sense: Anish Kapoor's *Memory* (2008) with Jean-Luc Nancy'. McMahon begins from her own embodied encounter with the artist Kapoor's *Memory*, drawing out the ways in which 'making sense' may lie in an unfolding of the specific temporality and situatedness of that encounter. She argues that Kapoor's installation discloses much to make sense of, in terms of the specificity of its location, the inaccessibility of memory and the destabilization of vision. These ideas are considered in terms of Nancy's understanding of sense.

This return to Nancy sets up our grand finale, which is Jean-Luc Nancy's own 'Making Sense'. This piece was written specifically for the first Making Sense colloquium, and it presents Nancy's reflections upon the meaning of the phrase 'making sense'. Nancy considers sense in terms of a process of sensory reception, and argues that it then becomes an overflowing of sense, building sensibility, sensuality, and meaning. This chapter is a key text because it extends Nancy's acclaimed scholarship on sense, as it is framed specifically for our concept of Making Sense. We publish Nancy's text next to Emma Wilson's translation of it. This translation is printed so that one can read the original French as well as the English translation, enabling the *sense* to be *made* during the reader's efforts to grasp the sensible meaning that tallies through both versions.

From this grouping and selection of chapters we bring together pieces interested in Nancean theory with those which are creating manifestos to challenge us to do something differently, and those challenging the divide

between artist and craftsman, or actually enacting performance art, poetry or the painting event. The backdrop of this is Making Sense the collective, which is a loose and expanding group of artists and scholars who gather at yearly colloquia to create a vital, international forum that crosses between modes of thinking and doing.

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PART I

Theoretical Approaches to Making Sense

Sens et composition: quelques remarques sur la pensée du sens et de l'art chez Jean-Luc Nancy

L'objet de cet article, essentiellement didactique, est de mettre en perspective la pensée du sens de Jean-Luc Nancy, en décrivant le contexte auquel elle répond, la stratégie qu'elle adopte, et les concepts qu'elle mobilise et déplace. Ce faisant, il s'agit aussi d'expliquer de quelle façon Jean-Luc Nancy fait de l'oeuvre d'art une forme exemplaire de déploiement et de mise en jeu de la question du sens. Nous procéderons pour cela en plusieurs temps. D'abord, nous ferons un point sur les problématiques plus globales au sein desquelles la pensée de Nancy prend place et tâcherons de comprendre la singularité de sa démarche dans ce contexte. Puis, nous nous attacherons à caractériser plus précisément « l'ontologie » que propose Jean-Luc Nancy en explicitant le rôle que jouent les concepts de sens, de monde et de singularité dans l'économie de sa pensée. Nous nous concentrerons enfin sur la place spécifique de l'art dans ce dispositif, et proposerons quelques pistes complémentaires.

Pour plus de clarté, nous prenons le parti de nous référer essentiellement à la famille de pensée à laquelle Nancy est affilié, de ne pas croiser, autant qu'on le pourrait, sa problématique à celle d'auteurs d'autres horizons. Signalons tout de même que les développements les plus avancés de la phénoménologie sur la question du sens, en particulier dans l'oeuvre de Marc Richir, seraient amplement susceptibles de donner matière à des remarques complémentaires. Nous avons également choisi de simplifier autant que possible les concepts techniques que nous utilisons pour conserver à cette présentation son caractère didactique.

Des « significations directrices » au « sens nu »

La pensée de Jean-Luc Nancy est une pensée du sens après, ou par-delà, ce qu'on a pu appeler la mort de Dieu ou la fin des significations directrices, après, disons, les diverses figures de la transcendance auquel le sens devait sa consistance, et qui ont constitué le régime de notre rapport à lui. Par figure, il faut ici entendre un horizon récapitulant et fondant les autres interprétations de cette transcendance, dévoilant et explicitant leurs propres implicites, leur conférant leur propre intelligibilité. Pour Nancy par ailleurs, ces figures ne sont ni de simples archétypes intellectuels, ni des formes transcendantales de notre rapport au monde; elles sont aussi ce qui a fondé la communauté du monde, les visages sous lesquels le monde se donnait comme une transcendance commune à laquelle nous étions ensemble assignés et qui recueillait nos pensées et nos actions sous l'horizon du commun. Dès lors, la crise des significations directrices – de la possibilité même des significations directrices – est tout aussitôt une crise de la communauté, que rien, dès lors, ne fonde plus, et dont il s'agit pourtant de penser la possibilité.

Dans la double filiation de Hegel et de Heidegger, Nancy accorde un rôle capital au Dieu chrétien qui, plus que de fournir une figure parmi d'autres, incarne en quelque sorte la figure même de la figurabilité du transcendant en sa transcendance, non simplement donc de la totalisation du sens mais de l'idée même de totalisation comme horizon de sa compréhension. En un sens, l'infigurabilité du Dieu unique, loin de laisser, comme les puissances païennes, le divin reposer en lui-même, annonce paradoxalement son entrée, comme horizon, dans le règne de la figuration. Ainsi ouvert comme possibilité, le transcendant, en sa transcendance, devient la source invisible de toutes ses manifestations et le principe de toute principialité. Celle-ci procède d'un rapport au sens régi par une logique de principialité, par une recherche des principes à partir desquels la pensée peut ordonner, poser, articuler ses objets, ou tout simplement les appréhender, à partir desquels le sens peut être articulé au « sens du sens ». De la sorte, la principialité, au « sens » le plus large qu'on puisse lui donner (on peut sous ce terme placer les différentes figures du fondement et du principe de la raison qui s'enchainent, dans l'histoire de la métaphysique décrite par Heidegger, comme une ré-interprétation de la principialité qui ne cesse d'en « déterminer » les mécanismes jusqu'à sa pure

et simple dissolution), conduit toujours à chercher, à travers le sens, ce à quoi il doit être rapporté et à partir de quoi seulement il peut être saisi comme tel. Or, cette logique de la principalité culmine et s'exprime dans la figure de Dieu, qui recèle à son tour la principalité de tout principe, saisie en deçà de lui. Mais dès lors la principalité, vouée à se résoudre dans l'idée de Dieu, l'est également à se perdre avec lui. Relevée par la figure de Dieu, la principalité finit par s'y dissimuler tout à fait, et à désertir l'étant dont le sens, dépris de sa source, s'épuise.

De quoi parlons-nous finalement quand nous évoquons la mort de Dieu ? Moins, sans doute, d'une dissolution effective que d'une impuissance. Ce qui est mort, c'est bien la capacité de Dieu à éveiller la foi, et celle-ci, privée de toute possibilité de publicité, déserte ainsi le monde et la communauté car la figure du Dieu chrétien est aussi une certaine figure de ce que Heidegger appelle le divin, ce en quoi nous sommes appelés à la pensée, par quoi le réel se donne à nous sous l'horizon de sa propre transcendance. Il ne s'agit pas seulement donc d'une figure conceptuelle, mais également d'une figure de la façon dont les dimensions qui structurent notre expérience du monde (dans les termes de Heidegger, le Quadriparti structurant la co-proprieté de l'être à la pensée) se manifestent. Dieu – dont la figure, au moins possible, est en germe dans la structure de la pensée occidentale avant sa manifestation réelle, et est au contraire nécessaire pour comprendre réellement le « rapport à l'être » des anciens grecs – incarne ainsi un mode du rassemblement du sens, de l'ouverture à l'être et à l'expérimentable, qui a « fait son temps » : un mode où la fragilité du sens a besoin d'être compensée parce qu'elle n'est pas saisie comme une dimension intrinsèque de sa manifestation, où le sens, coupé du tremblement de sa propre vie, n'est soutenu que par l'extériorité du divin qui vient vers nous, nous appelle et nous impose la tâche de retisser vers lui le sens du sens. Plus encore que l'épuisement des figures conceptuelles de la transcendance à travers le concept de Dieu, l'actuelle crise des significations directrices manifeste finalement un rapport au sens où sa faiblesse et son indétermination sont refoulées par son éclat. Même si ce n'est pas l'objet de notre texte, rappelons que Didier Franck, dans *Heidegger et le christianisme*, montre de façon précise comment, implicitement chez Heidegger, la « structure de la pensée chrétienne » habite déjà implicitement la philosophie grecque jusque dans ses moments présocratiques, comment la place du Dieu chrétien et de son geste est déjà ouverte dans la logique de la *Parole d'Anaximandre*, et

comment il y a en quelque sorte co-appartenance originelle de ce qu'exprime le Dieu chrétien et de la pensée grecque.

Il serait intéressant, mais ce n'est pas le sujet de ce texte, de comparer les lectures que Nietzsche et Kierkegaard font d'un même phénomène. Pour Nietzsche, la dite « mort de Dieu » entraîne une modification définitive du rapport au réel puisque tout absolu y est désormais contesté, et que l'appel de l'absoluité doit, en quelque sorte, être incorporé à la dynamique de la vie. Pour Kierkegaard, le nom de Dieu persiste au delà des institutions historiques de sa présence; il persiste comme indiquant une transcendance irréductible, mais aussi, incompréhensible, qui m'interpelle dans ma singularité et devant qui il me faut faire un choix, un saut. En somme, la mort des figures visibles et conceptuelles de Dieu n'abolit pas la foi, mais lui redonne la pureté des premiers temps; la « mort de Dieu » rejoue le mystère de la croix qui constituait, plus encore, un scandale face auquel la raison ne pouvait que vaciller.¹

Pour Nancy, il s'agit dès lors de penser le sens au delà de toute figure totalisatrice, et au delà même de la totalisation comme figure. L'épuisement de la figure de Dieu, en effet, entraîne celui de toutes les autres figures et fait paraître le sens nu par décomposition de la « figurabilité » en général:

C'est alors que ressurgit, plus impérieuse que jamais, l'exigence du sens qui n'est rien d'autre que l'existence en tant qu'elle n'a pas de sens. Et cette exigence à elle seule est déjà le sens, avec toute sa force d'insurrection.²

Dès lors, la question du sens *tombe à notre charge*, persiste, autrement dit, à même son énigmaticité. Mais cette charge n'est ni notre « guise », ni notre liberté. Ce serait précisément le pire contre-sens (ce que Heidegger, sans doute à tort, croyait lire en Nietzsche et en quoi il discernait l'accomplissement ultime de la métaphysique) de croire que la charge du sens équivaut à notre disposition. Pas plus les structures institutionnelles et techniques de la circulation du sens que l'acte instigateur de la pensée constituante et configurante ne prennent à proprement parler le relais de la transcendance instituante du sens. Au contraire, le sens tel qu'il s'agit de le penser, garde sa concrétude et sa résistance. Il est encore, si l'on veut, jeu de la transcendance

1 Sur ce thème, cf. aussi J.-L. Manon, *Dieu sans l'être*.

2 J.-L. Nancy, *Le Sens du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p. 20.