



REVIEW - Kevin Honan

The Pleasure in Drawing

by Jean-Luc Nancy,

translated by Philip Armstrong

Fordham University Press, 116 pp

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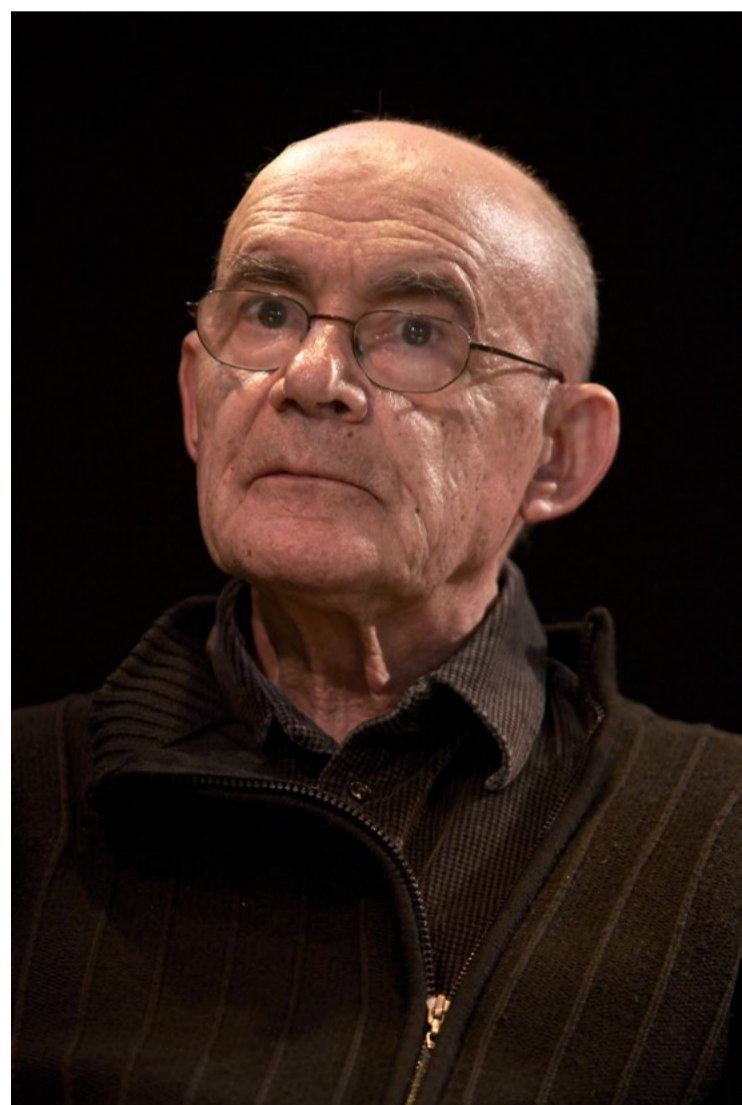
Cueva de las Manos (Cave of the
Hands), Santa Cruz province,
Argentina, where the drawings are
between 2,000 and 10,000 years old.

Jean-Luc Nancy, born in 1940, has spent most of his professional life as a teacher of philosophy in Strasbourg. He belongs to that generation of French thinkers who, coming after the high point of the phenomenological movement, embarked on a deconstructive critique of phenomenology. His approach is clearly influenced by Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida but his *modus operandi* is to work through the conceptual schemes of a wide variety of philosophers — René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche — to reform their concepts in a ‘post-metaphysical’ context. He unmoors their philosophies from any fixed starting point or transcendent end — God, the Subject, Man, the Phenomenon — and tries to think through the reality of a world of multiplicity and fragmentation. His range is exceptionally wide, with books on ontology, politics, violence, community, art, literature, the body, Christianity, sleep, listening, technology, sex, globalization . . . and all this after he had a heart transplant in 1990 and cancer a few years later.

Jean-Luc Nancy, 2010.
Photo: Georges Seguin

Style, the literariness of the writing, has a real bearing on Nancy’s thought. *The Pleasure in Drawing* is just over 100 pages, including, at the end of each of the sixteen short chapters, added quotations from artists and writers in what Nancy calls his ‘*carnet de croquis*’ or sketchbook, notes gathered as an artist might gather inchoate ideas for possible work to come. Unusually for a philosopher, there are a mere seven pages of endnotes. (‘It is not necessary here to become burdened by erudition.’)¹ Written originally as the introduction to an exhibition of drawings, it was published in English in 2013.

In *The Pleasure in Drawing*, the reader immediately gets a sense of one important element of Nancy’s approach: a polysemic drawing-out of the various senses of the vocabulary of drawing (making life more difficult for the translator, Philip Armstrong, who gives us a lively, considered version of Nancy’s text). A recurrent theme in his work is the idea that not only literature, but philosophy too is ‘embedded in the sensible contingency of language’ and therefore that philosophy cannot get away from its style of presentation. As a stylist, Nancy pays particular attention to prepositions. He is a philosopher of relations; one of his most important works, *The Inoperative Community*, could be read as an extended meditation on the word ‘with’. Its central idea of the essence of community, ‘being-with’, was influential in French political thought of the 1990s among theorists who were rethinking the word ‘communism’. In the present



1 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Pleasure in Drawing*, translated by Philip Armstrong (Fordham, 2013), viii (hereafter, Nancy, *Pleasure*).

work, his choice of 'au' rather than 'de' in the title (*Le Plaisir au dessin*) is significant and creates a relation between drawing and pleasure that brings pleasure to the centre of his presentation of drawing. The gerund 'drawing' with its look of the present participle evokes a sense of continuation and therefore incompleteness, the key feature of his understanding of drawing. And the word 'dessin' itself has ramifications in its relation to 'dessein' (design), 'à dessein' ('on purpose') and the Heideggerian word for 'human being', 'Dasein'. (Heidegger was a major influence). Nancy comments in a preface to the translation:

When I read drawing in English, knowing that I ought to be thinking of dessin, I feel myself carried far away on a sea of complexity, all the while knowing that there will be something to discover, an island of sense, or even just a current or turbulent zone.²

He is not alone in this shift of grammatical focus. Fredric Jameson draws attention to its appearance — from substantive and verb, subject and predicate, to a focus on prepositions — in what he calls 'the modernist descent into language', quoting Stéphane Mallarmé as an exemplar. And the effect of the shift is to break the flow and continuity of signifiers into 'a mere collage' where the syncategorematics function as indicators of juxtaposition and segmentation.³ Nancy's reflections in, for example, *Being Singular Plural* as an exposition of this bare multiplicity of being, and his analysis of *being-with* in *The Inoperative Community*, deploys this kind of semantic analysis.

There are words that emerge at particular moments in philosophy which achieve a spread across the discipline; 'opening', 'the open' and its cognates (Heidegger's 'clearing') is one such, and for Nancy it is the characteristic of drawing. In *The Pleasure in Drawing*, his first sentence, 'Drawing is the opening of form' announces a tension between mobility ('opening') and stasis ('form') that dominates his consideration of drawing and equally his reflection on pleasure and the relation between the two. He thinks of 'opening' as a beginning, a moment of departure, an impetus that evokes the gesture of mark-making; and also of an inherent but inexhaustible capacity, an essential incompleteness, a non-totalizing of form. The act of drawing can't be detached from its becoming; it is the birth, the upsurge of form, never preformed, and therefore impossible to anticipate entirely. The expression, 'drawing a line,' has exactly the opposite meaning of the English expression (imposing a limit, controlling, concluding); rather it is essentially inconclusive. It is a sign of potential, of a dynamic that projects itself beyond itself, the movement of being drawn out, essentially of *existing* in the sense of opening oneself to the outside, to the future.

Nancy's use of the word 'form' has some peculiarities. The idea has been in circulation since Plato. Nancy does not shake off the millennia of analyses it has elicited but while he owes something to the traditional philosophical lexicon, he rides the semantic wave in his own way. He looks briefly at Plato, for whom form is the 'idea' of the thing, its principle of intelligibility, yet whose primary register of reference is 'the visible'. The form gives us a sense of a thing's use and what it affords. It gives sense — another key word for Nancy — or truth to the thing. But, while pairing them here, he uses sense and truth differently; while 'sense' is

² Nancy, *Pleasure*, xii.

³ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (Verso, 2009), 477–78.