

At Bay

An exhibition is a name for the ordering of time, a period that suspends a work or set of works in a context but which nevertheless seems to have a determinate beginning and end, like a life. A work meanwhile supposes an ordering of space, exterior framing interior, recto shadowing verso, like a body. The principle of a reality consecrated by edges, which is to say the reality of lives and bodies, subsists only in the moment of their transgression—edges being a function of what slips their containment, like lips salty with the wet of the river's mouth. What is a lip but a zone of trembling intensities, brackish with anticipation of the rising tide.

An intrusion is the acknowledgement of these boundaries by negation. Though an intrusion may be anticipated, it cannot be prepared for, because the preparation itself is the sign of the intrusion's coming into being. It is addressed precisely to what is not prepared for it, what remains unrecognized because unseen. An intrusion shows its context, raising the question not of the intruder's identity but of the identity she unsettles—the identity which itself demands, depends on, and produces the intrusion. It is a deixis that points back at the limit it intrudes upon, assimilating its meaning into that limit's effects.

“This” is the difficulty of deixis: what points stands in for the thing pointed to, always threatening a collapse. In intruding on what had previously been experienced as an autonomous existence, the identification of a thing erects a border around its qualities, drawing up positions of affirmation and negation. For every “this,” so too a “not-this.” The periphery of the known fortifies its categories through the absorption of what intrudes on them; what is said puts a limit on what can be seen.

A shibboleth is the boundary set against intrusion by intruding, the elaboration of the deictic binary through the suspension of its definition. It is the letter that splits negation from negativity, the possibility of knowing from what is known. It is the question put to the unrecognized and the answer of the unrecognizable. It names that which cannot be named, brokering identifications under threat of a river (“shibboleth”) red with mispronunciation. It is the outside that comes inside and turns the inside out. The shibboleth overwhelms deixis not with some imaginary referent but with its own unspeakable constitution, laying new articulations onto its intrusive tongue. The limit crossed by the intruder becomes the limit of the intruder, the limit to remaining a stranger.

It is only the intruder who can establish the meaning of the shibboleth's letter and only then through an act of erasure, the lack that pronounces the intrusion. She greets with silence; she welcomes with distance. This gap is what secures the shape of her signifier—the limit as material, the limit to what can be known in advance—which is at the same time the prospect that her meaning will continue to run under her, like a shibboleth (“river”). What cannot be controlled is only this void, this addition that resists integration, this surplus experienced as lack. A letter that speaks not from the limit of what it can say but of what it cannot.

A greeting of silence effaces the outside in a single breath. The dimension of intimacy opens in place of the dimensions of volume. On the edge of this hole whose opening undoes the meaning rolled off the tongue, the lip grazes another shore. The intruder slips past the teeth, to be carried away by the river. To know anything is easier than to know nothing at all.