

The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy

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In 2009, after attempting to settle upon an organizing principle for an online participatory archive of contemporary art, the editors of *e-flux* web journal concluded ‘that no objective structure or criterion exists with which to organize artistic activity from the past twenty years or so’ (Aranda et al. 2009). Recognizing the ubiquity and persistence of the term ‘contemporary art’, the editors remark that it is the ‘unanswerability’ of its ‘self-evidence’ that gives the horizon for art’s production and reception over the period. In the first of two ensuing *e-flux* journal issues dedicated to the question ‘What is Contemporary Art?’ a number of well-known historians, artists, curators and critics were asked to respond to this paradox wherein contemporary art is without definition or criteria yet is recognizable. Hal Foster (2010) summarizes the tenor of agreement among the contributors by stating that ‘the category of “contemporary art” is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment’. While such a recognition of contemporary art regularly leads to a dismissal of its capacity to engage in effective forms of political critique, it is exactly the condition of ‘heterogeneity’ more precisely, art’s indefiniteness *and* identifiability – that, in sharp contrast, Jacques Rancière establishes to be art’s political specificity. Rancière lucidly identifies the paradox at work here in his notion of ‘art in the aesthetic regime’ – that which ‘asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity’ (2004b: 23). For Rancière, aesthetics is the condition for art’s horizonless dispersion

to nonetheless be the specific and cogent operation of a coherent logic of art. Contrary to any lament of the loss of art's critical or political endeavours, it is this logic that for Rancière manifests a politics that is more radical and more principled with respect to equality than the normative criteria and methods exemplified well by Foster's determination of a critical art.

Assuming a consistency between Rancière's conceptualization of politics in the mid-1990s, primarily in *Disagreement* (first published in French in 1995), and his characterization of the politics of contemporary art in the mid-2000s, we seek here to identify what the claimed politics for art in the aesthetic regime might be. This requires the elaboration of a torsion in Rancière's thinking of aesthetics, specifically through an examination of the fate of the 'wrong' that is the operation of politics in the earlier work and its connection to the later writings on art. This leads us in turn to understand Rancière's cogent articulation of a logic of art as being not only entirely fitting to the current terms of contemporary art's affirmation and distribution but also to expose the limitations of the politics occasioned in and by art.

The basic schema of Rancière's logic of art is that of an originary complexity: the non-identity of art to itself and the identification of this non-identity, which aesthetics provides in its relation to art. Aesthetics does so because, following Schiller's *Aesthetic Education* (Rancière 2009a: 27ff.), it affirms the 'free play' between the production of art (*poiesis*, form-making) and its 'reception' by a passive sensibility (*aisthesis*, matter) such that the two 'stand [. . .] in immediate relation to one another through the very gap of their ground' (Rancière 2009a: 8). Contrasted to both the representative regime of art, in which *poiesis* and *aisthesis* are pegged to one another by a common account that gives these dimensions of art a systematic integrity, or the ethical regime of art, in which images are considered only with regard to a truth or communal meaning outside of the art itself (Rancière 2004b: 20–12; 2009a: 28), each of which fill in or close the gap between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, in the aesthetic regime there is no art in general, no unity or coherence but only the singularity or particularity of art affirming the paradoxical consistency of aesthetics. It is this paradox that allows art to be identified at all: aesthetics is 'a way of thinking the paradoxical sensorium that *made it possible to define* the things of art' in and as the exappropriation of its own production (Rancière 2009a: 11, emphasis added). Without aesthetics art would disappear into the

particularity of its each time unique inventions (and the singularity of art would vanish with it). Aesthetics is then the name of the paradoxical identification of the non-identity of art. If there is to be something called contemporary art, aesthetics and art are indissociable. Hence, Rancière's formulation of 'art in the aesthetic regime' or what is here called 'aesthetics-art'.

The schema of aesthetics-art is concisely presented in Rancière's formulation that 'art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or something other than art' (2009a: 36). Here, Rancière distinguishes what we call aesthetics-art from forms of art that through their content and form (location, use of signifying materials, etc.) propose a deliberative social and/or political agenda typical of a historical notion of 'critical art' that Rancière deftly characterizes as 'set[ting] out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation' (2009a: 45). Rancière's examples of this 'critical art' range across modernism, from John Heartfield to Martha Rosler, Krzysztof Wodiczko and Hans Haacke. Such work is premised upon the assumption that the viewer is incapable of recognizing the relations between image circulation, power and capital (for example) and seeks to lead her or him to recognize (better yet) the horrors of the world (war, capital, misogyny, xenophobia, etc.). Instead of activating a 'suspension of relations of domination' (Rancière 2009a: 53) – an aim that would seem inherent in the critical ambitions of such work – such art in fact does nothing to suspend the 'relations of domination'. Quite the opposite. For Rancière, aesthetics-art takes a different tack and has different effects. It shifts the focus of an analysis of art's politics away from its internal or socially-driven claims towards its structural capacity to *instantiate* a politics, effecting a different relation with the spectator of art than historical models of critical art. The free play between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* in aesthetics-art sustains a 'tension' between, on the one hand, a logic that maintains the separation of art from other kinds of sensory experience – all the more to have political effectivity through its autonomy from the domination of life by capitalism and so on – and, on the other, a logic that pushes art towards 'life' in which it becomes fully integrated as an effective and direct form of activity (Rancière 2009a: 46). The tension between these two logics 'combin[es] these two powers' and 'involves [. . .] heterogeneous logics': ensuring its 'political intelligibility' by borrowing from its tendency to indistinction, or non-identity, while its identity proposes a distinction from other kinds of production (Rancière 2009a: 46).

In *The Emancipated Spectator* Rancière uses a particular installation by Josephine Meckseper to illustrate his argument. The work, an untitled piece shown in one of the main cultural venues of the second biennial of contemporary art in Seville in 2006, comprises photographs taken of the protests that accompanied the announcement of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. These photos are accompanied elsewhere in the city by a vitrine of objects – perfume bottles, advertising notices, pieces of packaging, etc. – placed in a shop front that bring to the viewer's attention the ways in which the critical culture that sought to disestablish the society of the spectacle in the late 1960s has itself been spectacularized and commodified. Meckseper's work uses vitrines, images and unadulterated (although rearranged) commodities to 'escape the limitations of radical aesthetics and get into the more complex, seductive sides of power' (Gillick 2008). Differently from the earlier photomontages of Martha Rosler, whose art is identifiably 'critical' along the lines advocated by Foster, with Meckseper's art the viewer also recognizes her own complicity in the image bank itself, and in this respect it is typical of the rhetorical strategies of contemporary art. While the viewer is still told what she does not want to see – 'the participation of your supposed gestures of revolt in this process of exhibiting signs of distinction governed by commodity exhibition' (Rancière 2009b: 29) – she is also shown what she does not know how to see: her participation in the commodification of revolt, the 'march is itself a march of image consumers and spectacular indignations' (2009b: 28). The doubling in Meckseper's work with the spectator's informed or 'emancipated' position distinguishes it from the previous generation of critical art artists: it is the *absence* of a structuring narrative controlling the reception or delivery of these images in relation to the vitrine of objects that makes it exemplary of aesthetics-art.

Whatever politics this art has is generated not from its ostensible subject matter alone but from 'the short circuit and clash that reveal[s] the secret concealed by the exhibition of images' (2009b: 29). Such a 'clash' instantiates a politics for Rancière for two main reasons:

1. The free play between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* means that aesthetics-art has no order(ing) between these aspects. Maintaining the free play between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* is in Rancière's terms a politics because it disarticulates the police order (1999: 28–31). The latter is the most general notion of the organization of power, places, ways of being and

doing; the system of distribution and legitimization, however formally or informally implemented, that is a 'governing of th[e] appearance' of bodies which Rancière famously calls the partition of the sensible.¹ It is exemplified most cogently for Rancière by Plato's organization of politics in which the *logos* is not just the sonorous emission itself *qua* speech but also 'the *account* that is made of speech', most pointedly, that a sound *is* speech and not just noise or animal grunt (1999: 22–3). In the police order, the two dimensions of the *logos* – speech and its account – are pegged. In these terms, the representational and ethical regimes are kinds of police orders for the arts (and there are, Rancière notes, better and worse police orders). For Rancière, 'whatever breaks the tangible configuration of parties governed by a presupposition' of such partitions is politics (1999: 29) – and this is exactly what the admission of the free play of the aesthetic regime does in maintaining the scission between the two dimensions of the *logos* for art. More generally, politics disorders the police order and has 'no place in that configuration' (Rancière 1999: 29–30); it does not assume anything of that partition or power.

2. The free play between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* for aesthetics-art admits an equality between them and so of the active intelligence and passive sensibility by which they are respectively characterized. In affirming such an equality, aesthetics-art observes the principle of equality that is for Rancière 'solely' what occasions politics (1999: 31) in that it is equality that is instantiated by 'whatever breaks the tangible configuration' of a police order. That the principle of equality is the occasion of politics is understood in more familiar terms when it is rendered as the bringing community and non-community together, or what Rancière phrases the 'assertion of a common world' (1999: 55). If community is in part constituted through what it takes to be legitimate communications which are its own (its *logos* as the account of what speech counts) then the assertion that 'speaking beings are equal because of their common capacity for speech' is a version of the principle of politics since it 'redistributes the way that speaking bodies are distributed in an articulation between the order of saying, the order of doing, and the order of being' (Rancière 1999: 55). For aesthetics-art, the disestablishment of the account of the *logos* or the more general sensorium by the repartition of the sensible is assured not only by the 'free play' and 'gap' between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* but also by the absence of any

narrative that binds these two aspects of the work to one another in any inevitable way.

A politics of aesthetics-art along these lines can be elaborated by referring to Thomas Hirschhorn's installations and sculptures. These works range in scale and site but are recognizable by his use of signature 'everyday' materials such as plastic sheeting, tin foil, newspaper, parcel tape and cheap wood, and by their overload of information – visual, textural, architectural. In particular, the artist's 'monuments' produced from the late 1990s, each located in traditionally poor districts of the cities whose festivals commission them, enlisting local people to work on their construction and maintenance, and each dedicated to a philosopher – Spinoza (Amsterdam, 1999 and 2009), Deleuze (Avignon, 2000) and Bataille (Documenta, Kassel, 2002) – are widely regarded as sites of potent contradiction in debates about contemporary 'political' art, not least in their forceful if schematic meshing of those who live in the areas in which the monuments are situated with the contemporary art milieu who seek them out as part of their circuit of interests. Contrary to initial readings of the *Monuments*, Hirschhorn dismisses the idea that his work needs to be activated through some sense of community participation. Speaking of the *Bataille Monument*, commissioned for Okwui Enwesor's *Documenta XI*, and sited in a Turkish area of Kassel a taxi-ride away from the main sites of the exhibition, Hirschhorn says:

Rather than triggering the participation of the audience, I want to implicate them. I want to force the audience to be confronted with my work. This is the exchange I propose. The artworks don't need participation; it's not an interactive work. It doesn't need to be completed by the audience; it needs to be an active, autonomous work with the possibility of implication. (2004: 25)

Hirschhorn's articulation of the concept of an active work resembles Rancière's notion of a politics generated not only by the free play between the art's production and its 'reception' by whomever, but also by the principle of equality between the artist, the local inhabitants and the visitors interested in the work of a renowned contemporary artist:

[T]he only social relationship I wanted to take responsibility for was the relationship between me, as an artist, and the inhabitants. The artwork didn't create any social relationship in itself; the artwork was just the artwork – autonomous and open to developing activities. An active artwork requires that first the artist gives of himself. The visitors and inhabitants can decide whether or not to create a social relationship beyond the

artwork. This is the important point. But it's the same in the museum. (Hirschhorn 2004: 29)

Put in Rancière's words, Hirschhorn's distinction between artistic 'activity' and social responsibility is one between the specific aesthetics of politics with 'its own modes of dissensual invention and characters [. . .] which distinguish it from, and sometimes even oppose it to, the inventions of art' (2009a: 46). To be clear: Hirschhorn 'takes responsibility' only for the *social* relationship between himself as artist and the local inhabitants, but leaves the *artistic* relationship open to 'developing relationships' which are beyond the power of the artist himself. While this may sound like a revamped assertion of art's modernist autonomy, such a claim is here taken as being concomitant to the assertion of equality in intelligences and capacities between the local residents and the art cognoscenti, who usually belong to a very different kind of sociological class. In this respect, Hirschhorn's artistic declaration is closer to Rancière's sense of politics than his social responsibility: the monuments are political because their account is not in the hands or mouths of those who 'know their art' – the artist included – nor in those of who know the areas in which they are situated, but in the clash of the two or more ways of speaking, doing and being.

Schematic though the example may be, the crudeness of Hirschhorn's *Monuments* and his discourse on them is instructive in highlighting the two primary vectors in Rancière's conceptualization of *how* politics predicated on the principle of equality is occasioned. Their elaboration will not only return us to Rancière's insistence on aesthetics rather than the *logos* as condition of politics but will also, for that reason, make clear the severe limitation of any substantial sense of politics proposed on this basis – including, most proximately, the claims to politics made in and by contemporary art.

First, Hirschhorn's rudimentary juxtaposition of sociologically distinct milieus in the siting of the *Monuments* as well as his juxtaposition of disposable images, philosophical texts and trade building materials within his work are modes of collage that Rancière identifies as a key strategy in critical art, notably in Brecht (2009a: 47–52). But collage is not just one technique among others of modern art for Rancière; it in fact obeys a 'more fundamental aesthetico-political logic' (2009a: 47) in that aesthetics is what 'allows separate regimes of expression to be pooled' (1999: 57, emphasis added). As such it is the condition for the connecting and disconnecting of

different areas, functions, operations, and so on, that is the ‘reconfiguring of the partition of the sensible’ which ‘overturns legitimate situations of communication, the legitimate parceling out of worlds and languages’ (1999: 55) – or, in a word, politics. This *general* political principle is demonstrated *in particular* in aesthetics-art as the realization of a ‘pure encounter between heterogeneous elements’ and as a demonstration of ‘the hidden link’ between apparently incompatible worlds or ways of being and doing (2009a: 47): the vegetables in Brecht’s *Arturo Ui* serving at once as common vegetable and index of the power of commodity capital; Meckseper’s vitrines positing objects in the world that are at once desirable (either as commodity or protest politics) and objectionable (the indistinction of the two); Hirschhorn’s ramshackle constructions and impoverished locations as venues for prestigious reputational investments for the intellectual and transnational art milieu.

If politics is necessarily predicated on aesthetics, and aesthetics is that which identifies art in its exappropriation of the partition of the sensible then it is understandable that contemporary art looks to Rancière’s ‘aesthetico-political logic’ to secure its claims to be effecting a politico-critical operation that succeeds where the conventional models of critical art did not. Notwithstanding his success in that milieu, Rancière in fact warns against such identifications by insisting on the singularity of aesthetics-art – predicated on its originary complexity – and distinguishing it for this reason from the ‘specific aesthetics’ of politics. However, even despite Rancière’s caveat, if politics is aesthetic ‘in principle’, if *aesthetics in general* is the condition for politics, then the politics of aesthetics-art has no particularity compared to politics *in general* (and the solace sought by contemporary art in Rancière’s aesthetico-political logic is not only warranted but also provided). But it is then not only the ‘pragmatic criteria for isolating [art’s] singularity’ that is destroyed but also that singularity – its criterialess identifiability – which is destroyed with respect to politics.

The quandary here troubles Rancière’s formulations of the relation between aesthetics-art and politics to the core. In schematic terms, if contemporary art is political by virtue of its manifestation of the repartition of the sensible it is no longer identifiable as such; the tension between its logics of autonomy and heteronomy tendentiously slackens in favour of its identification with politics in general. The question is whether and how art’s singularity, predicated as it is on an *aesthetics in particular* – both identity and non-identity, heteronomy and autonomy – can be sustained if

its politics are general. Or, put the other way, the question of how politics happens given Rancière's conceptualization of it then falls back to the question of what the general aesthetics of politics is; that is, whether or not it is distinct from the particular aesthetics of aesthetics-art. The issue here is whether the singularity of art is indeed also the singularity of its politics. That is, it is an issue of identifying what the political instance is *in fact*.

That there is more than one politics to be had within art is expressed by Hirschhorn's distinguishing between 'working politically' as opposed to 'making political work', continuing: 'I wanted to work in the height of capital and the height of the economic system I'm in. I wanted to confront the height of the art market with my work. I work *with* it but not *for* it' (2004: 21). The issue for Hirschhorn, as for Rancière in other terms, is how 'working politically' can be distinguished from 'making political work' and what the latter politics is if it readily accommodates itself to the 'height of capital and [...] the economic system'. The problem here can be elaborated by turning to the second vector in Rancière's conceptualization of how politics is realized: political subjectification. It has been seen that politics' repartitioning of the sensible is how 'those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account'; that is, manifest themselves in both dimensions of the *logos*. What is political in this manifesting is the 'placing in common [of] a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation' (Rancière 1999: 37). Wrong is the name for the conflictual conjunction of the police order and politics. The 'transforming [of] egalitarian logic into political logic' is what Rancière calls 'the constitutive function of wrong' (1999: 35). Wrong is how equality occurs in the police order, its political appearance or, more stringently, it is the appearance of politics:

politics is the practice whereby the logic of the characteristic of equality takes the form of the processing of a wrong, in which politics becomes the argument of a basic wrong that ties in with some established dispute in the distribution of jobs, roles, and places. (Rancière 1999: 35)

Wrong is not the 'established disputes' of the police order, however iniquitous they may be, but the transformation of police order and logic. The principle of equality only has particularity and 'content' in the 'processing of a wrong' that is bound, each time specifically, to particular inequalities of that order. Rancière calls the processing of wrongs modes of subjectification: the *production* of 'a body and a capacity for enunciation

not previously identifiable within a given field of experience' and which, identified, thus reconfigures that field. Assuming the principle of equality, political subjectification is the undoing of the conventionalized or naturalized relation between who an individual is and what she or he is or does (role, place, activity, expectations, etc) – the opening of questions such as 'what is it to be a woman or a man?' for feminism and 'what is it to be a worker?' for labour-class movements. Since subjectification is the transformation of the given roles and places of the police order into 'instances of experience of a dispute' (1999: 36), it effects not a social bond (1999: 34) but a political bond: not the assigning of places in the social order but a *disidentification* with established social categories, which is what politics is *in fact* and not just in principle for Rancière.

Subjectification reorders the relation of the two dimensions of the *logos* to one another by either asserting a new account (*logos*) of speech (*logos*) or by the opening of 'free play' between these two dimensions; hence Rancière's claim that 'the modern political animal is first a literary animal' (1999: 37). In this respect, politics is 'enabled' by aesthetics in general and Rancière calls it a 'principle of politics' (1999: 58). Most generally, political subjectification is how

specific subjects take the wrong upon themselves, give it shape, invent new forms and names for it, and conduct its processing in a specific montage of *proofs*: 'logical' arguments that are at the same time a way of reshaping the relationship between speech and its *account*. [. . .] A political subject [. . .] is an operator that connects and disconnects different areas, regions, identities, functions, and capacities existing in the configuration of a given experience. (Rancière 1999: 40)

From which it is clear that the 'fundamental aesthetico-political logic' manifest in collage is that of political subjectification. Simply identifying aesthetics-art with political subjectification on this basis would however be misguided, if not entirely without cause. Although Rancière cautions, as we have seen, against identifying political subjectification in general with 'a politics that is peculiar' to aesthetic experience and education (2009a: 33), if it is to be at all political the equality of *poiesis* and *aisthesis* in aesthetics-art must be the processing of a wrong. In fact, as the manifestation of the fundamental aesthetico-political logic of montage it is intrinsically and necessarily such a processing, and that is what is indexed by the 'singularity' of its maintenance of the Schillerian 'free play'. What is processed however is not and cannot be an established dispute *within* the police order since such disputes are consigned by the *logos*. Rather, the equality of aesthetic-art's

free play reorganizes the partition of the sensible *in general*; that is, it re-partitions aesthetics *qua* the police order as such, exposing its total contingency (Rancière 1999: 14–15). In other words, the wrong processed by aesthetics-art is that of the police order itself, the iniquity that the partition of the sensible is. Observing Rancière's discretion, then, the processing of a wrong by aesthetics-art is not so much a political subjectification as it is an aesthetic subjectification (not Rancière's phrase). But the distinction can be only partially sustained: since political subjectification is in any case aesthetic montage, aesthetic subjectification is no less a political subjectification. It is only that its politics are generalized since the wrong it processes is the *fact* of the police order rather than any iniquity or dispute within it.

The torsion in Rancière's aesthetico-political logic of art is that political subjectification, tied to particularities of the police order whose re-partitioning it is, is enabled by aesthetics in general while what is here called the aesthetic subjectification of art is tied to politics in general and is restricted to a particular aesthetics – that of art in its singularity. Summarily put: aesthetic generality enables political particularity (Rancière's logic of politics), and political generality is enabled by aesthetic particularity (Rancière's logic of art). It is the latter generality that destroys any pragmatic criteria for isolating the singularity of art. And it is this generality that marks aesthetics-art as what Rancière calls a metapolitics (2009a: 33). In *Disagreement* Rancière remarks that metapolitics is the 'change of scene' of politics from political appearance – the processing of a wrong – to the truth of its underlying cause or reason that lies behind or below its appearance (1999: 81–3). Marxism is Rancière's local example: it transforms the 'what' of politics from the appearance of politics to otherwise subterranean forces of production that it presumes shape such appearances and on this basis posits the appearance of politics to be at best an epi-phenomenon or a lie that obscures the true dimension of the 'real movements of reality'. It declares the truth of politics to be 'the gap between any political process of naming or inscribing in relation to the realities subtending them', thus hardening the gap between the two dimensions of the *logos* – speech as a putatively originary production, and the account of that speech as its 'superstructural' perversion – and even dissociating them (Rancière 1999: 82). More generally, since politics happens precisely with the intercalation of equality between the two dimensions of the *logos*, metapolitics 'achieves-eliminates' politics *qua* political subjectification of the disputes of the police

order. Aesthetics-art fits this account: it posits the truth of politics to be not the wrongs processed as particular political subjectifications but the fact of the police order *qua* the partition of the sensible. It ‘changes the scene of politics’ from the appearance of political dissensus and dis-agreement – the encounter of police logic and egalitarian logic transforming an established dispute in the police order into politics – to the iniquity of the police order as such.

If Rancière’s own theory of politics as an aesthetic montage is at risk of falling into this metapolitical account of politics in the very effort to get away from any such account, then the increasing importance of aesthetics-art to it can be understood as an important corrective to this misfortune. Political subjectification as the montage of the police order, aesthetics-art and Rancière’s aesthetico-political logic itself ‘changes the scene of politics’ not to a truth determined otherwise than with regard to the appearance of politics but only in its degree of particularity of political subjectification. Politics does not happen anywhere else than in its appearance in the police order as partition of the sensible yet it also does not itself appear as a political subjectification within the police order. As such, the processing of the wrong of the fact of the police order that is the subjectification of aesthetics-art can be designated a quasi-metapolitics, or what will here be called a supra-politics.

It is as a supra-politics that contemporary art’s claims to politics can be understood as being necessarily partial and generalized. It is the difference, in Hirschhorn’s phrasing, between ‘making political work’ – a politics which has a particular subjectification as its ‘cause’ – and ‘working politically’ – an art that is political by virtue of its repartition of the sensible but which has no other determinations than that. In processing the police order as such as a wrong, aesthetics-art remains indeterminate with regard to the particularities of politics. Meckseper’s photograph-installation, for instance, involves the viewer in a difficult (because self-recognizing) involvement with the *problematic* of protest as itself a ‘march of [...] spectacular indignations’, and it is just the repartitioning of the protests against the Iraq war in 2003 with luxury items advertising themselves through images of protest that complicates the partition of the sensible between the dimensions of protest against a state-capitalist nexus and that very nexus as represented through the commodity. While this art certainly strains any attempt to obtain a conscientiously politically pure side, the ambivalent

denunciation of the police order as such – the state-capitalist nexus and the media-friendly configurations of protest – bypasses the particularity of the demands of the protests themselves. Its politics become rather the question of ‘[h]ow [. . .] you avoid showing a dominant culture what it already knows’, as the artist Liam Gillick puts it in an interview with Meckseper (2008).

It is important to stress that in Rancière’s conceptualization of politics such an indeterminacy of political particularity is not a shortcoming of art. The declaration of a wrong is an inceptive act; the ‘origin’ of politics is for Rancière not the principle of equality itself but its encounter with the police order since ‘it has no place or objects of its own’ (1999: 29). It cannot, as a matter of logic: if it did, it would have exactly the differentiation and hierarchy, be the kind of organizational principle, that it undoes. No one and no thing can claim the principle of equality in advance or assume it. This is a first sense of the necessary indeterminacy of politics. It is apparent with regard to the bringing together of community and non-community that we have seen to be one of Rancière’s characterizations of politics. Writing on several of Philippe Parreno’s ‘collectively’ made films in the decade since the mid-1990s, Maria Lind (2009) gathers evidence of a radical dissimulation of authorship from Parreno’s various works, describing the nature of these collaborations as follows: ‘Parreno seems to be obsessed with collectivity, community and the common’ as a negotiation between how to be part of a collective and an individual at the same time. Taking up a Rancièrian terminology, she proposes that the issue posed by Parreno’s films is ‘[h]ow to grant the whole and at the same time its parts equal share’ suggesting that the films ‘perform’ this as their ‘subject matter’. In the film *Vicinato* (1995), this proposition might be understood as the way in which a group of actors is filmed playing a group of artists having a discussion among themselves, the artists all knowing each other well. In the installation *Snow Dancing* (1995), it might be the fact of staging a confusion of actors and spectators in an exhibition opening/party situation playing, dancing, drinking. This performance of ways of working, in the privileged or heightened form organized by the artist, is the exemplar of a ‘relational community’:

deeply embedded in current social, political and economic situations Parreno’s work needs to be considered a part of that foil. Contrary to popular belief that community is vanishing today, it can be claimed that ‘coming together’, ‘bonding’ and ‘caring’

are more vital than in a long time. In fact, if we resist the temptation to understand community as the foundation of the formation of society, we make possible something that is non-essential and non-absolute. Community as relational if you wish, which emerges in the wake of society rather than the other way round and which is resistant to immanent power. (Lind 2009)

Despite Rancière's aversion to 'relational' art as an attempt to recuperate a social bond (2009a: 21–3, 56–7), displacing art's enactment of the political bond of dis-identifications in doing so, the ambition accurately outlined by Lind for Parreno's art is an appropriate example here because of its indeterminacy as to what the particular politics of such a community in fact are. The assertion of a common world is only that: a non-essential and non-absolute 'coming together' that is resistant to immanent power. This is not any politics in particular but a phrasing of an indeterminate politics of community as a repartition of the sensible, and this is right for the politics of aesthetics-art.

The indeterminacy of community returns us to *e-flux* but now as an organization concerned, precisely, with the repartition of the sensible as the 'assertion of a common world' which in part reorganizes the given order of the contemporary art milieu. *e-flux* stands for and supports the identification of an equality of access by free information dissemination via the web and email, a variety of format and content (ostensibly anyone can buy an announcement though the prices are prohibitive). An advertisement for an international biennale of contemporary art funded by large global conglomerations has equal status on *e-flux* to an advert for a small not-for-profit gallery in Hong Kong, and both might be the subject of an article written by a leading academic and published in the journal. Orthodox codes of restriction are structurally dissipated by contemporary art's lack of 'objective structure' and organizational criteria, a condition to which *e-flux* is supremely responsive and takes its part in formatting, and from which it yields substantial profit though the privileging of the free trade circulation upon which contemporary art builds its capacity to produce marketable heterogeneity. Along with *e-flux*'s 'special projects', such as talks series and curatorial initiatives, the journal has an intellectualizing intent, the name itself proposing that which the editors identify as the flexible, temporal or fluctuating locus of contemporary art, at least in its general ambitions and claims. As a serious contender in the reputational economy of the art system, run by a respected and seemingly close-knit set of producers and attracting highly established writers, curators

and artists to contribute to its online content, *e-flux* is heavily involved in repartitioning the art-system *qua* community in terms other than those that were organized by reputed art journals, communicational systems and major public or private institutions. To that extent, and insofar as it uses the web as a vector of equalization of significance in the art system, *e-flux* exemplifies Rancière's conceptualization of politics. That it does so with the indeterminacy of the politics of aesthetics-art rather than the particular politics of aesthetics in general is clear in its reflexive editorial worry over its own slippery definition of contemporary art:

there is some agency in the idea that [parameters] remain open: how can we also take advantage of this to develop our own criteria for browsing and historicizing recent activity in a way that affirms the possibilities of contemporary art's still-incompleteness, of its complex ability to play host to many narratives and trajectories without necessarily having to absorb them into a central logic or determined discourse – at least before it forms a historical narrative and logic of exclusion that we would much rather disavow? (Aranda et al. 2009)

If *e-flux* itself contributes to this incompleteness of contemporary art, it does so in the very formulations of its task. What is telling here is that the questions posed, which are (typical) questions of contemporary art's politics, are entirely indeterminate and formal.

Such formality is not a result of unnecessary abstraction but is consistent with the generalized politics of contemporary art's particular aesthetics. This is a second sense of the necessary indeterminacy of aesthetics-art: since the wrong that aesthetics-art processes is only that of the fact of the police order – that there is inequality, a given partition of the sensible, etc – its (supra-) politics has no particularity. It is, in other words, only a formal wrong that is processed by aesthetics-art. Formal in two senses: first, that it is the forms of wrong – space and time – that are processed by aesthetics-art; second, as discussed, that there is no particularity to that wrong in terms of specific social and other determinants. This double sense of formality – the generalized politics of art's particular aesthetics – is presented and in some ways thematized by Liam Gillick in formulations that have wide currency within contemporary art:

art is a place where you can develop modes of refusal that are qualitatively and ideologically different from the production and negotiation of other objects and ideas in the world – in terms of intentions and results. As such art is a place to heighten contemporary discussions of the way we reconfigure relations between each other and the places that we occupy and/or are forced to operate within. However many artists take a cultural form of the Fifth Amendment or a refusal to engage. By doing this they

attempt to allow the work to sit as the location of complexity, contradiction and even beauty that might be necessary in order to create alternative visions of the world without conditions or explanations but never free of them. (2009)

Gillick captures well a common sense of contemporary art as irreducibly complex, non-particular and indeterminate, whose cogency as an aesthetico-political undertaking is given by Rancière's logic of art, which can then be understood to give an exact, precise and lucid account of contemporary art in its criterialess heterogeneity. That contemporary art is but the manifestation of the formalism of a suprapolitics, only ever taking the fact of the police order as its point of dispute, is for Rancière no shortcoming. On the contrary, the formal generality of politics granted by its aesthetic particularity gives it a two-fold advantage with respect to the principle of equality: one is art's admission of any content whatsoever as the term of the police order it takes as its 'dispute' (indeed, *theanyspacewhatever* was the name of the major 'relational aesthetics' retrospective at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 2008). Aesthetic-art's generalized politics means that equality can be effectuated across the entirety of the police order in the sense that it can have any content at all for its politics (even colour, time, pixellation, solidity, space, and so on, as well as more evident concerns such as poverty, exclusion, social and identitarian struggles). The second advantage is that what aesthetics-art demonstrates in its manifestation of formal wrong is that the politics of an egalitarian logic is entirely contingent: it is contingent in/on its 'content' (the particular inequality that the principle of equality ties in to) and it is contingent in its manifestation since, as Rancière establishes and aesthetics-art demonstrates, political subjectification can be occasioned anywhere and with everything – even when the principle of equality does not tie into a given social ordering or 'established dispute'. If politics has any particularity or content, it is only contingently so since police and egalitarian logics do not necessarily have to meet anywhere, and any one thing may or may not enable this encounter (Rancière 1999: 32–3). Politics for Rancière is then occasional; nothing is inherently political. More emphatically, that the principle of equality has no content of its own and cannot be assumed in advance of its implementation means that it is an 'empty' notion (1999: 34). The principle of equality is without content of its own – and this contingency is the characteristic of art *qua* processing the wrong that is the police order as an otherwise indeterminate aesthetics. The contingency or occasionalism of political particularity demonstrated through the particular aesthetics of aesthetics-art is why,

to return to *e-flux's* initial question, contemporary art as manifestation of that formal (in)determinate generality of politics has no thematic, no movement, no limit.

Politics is rare in the police order, Rancière remarks, because the contingency of politics is (mis)taken in its social determinations for the contingencies of power which are concerns of the police order (1999: 16–17). The question ‘who has power?’ posed as a matter of course by aesthetics-art, is not answerable, for if it were it would be a denial of the fundamental repartition mobilized by art as a matter of course by aesthetic art. Evading the trap of identifying (with) power – a technique readily identifiable in what Rancière calls ‘critical art’ – by virtue of its suprapolitics, structuring the originary complexity of aesthetic-art’s tension between its logics of autonomy and heteronomy, contemporary art demonstrates the principle of equality that attests to politics and its inventions *as such*. The appeal of such a suprapolitics as a way of recuperating politics in form while avoiding it in fact does not escape Rancière. In the conclusion to one of the essays in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* he notes that

it seems as if the time of consensus, with its shrinking public space and effacing of political inventiveness, has given to artists and their mini-demonstrations, their collections of objects and traces, their *dispositifs* of interaction, their *in situ* or other provocations, a substitutive political function. Knowing whether these ‘substitutions’ can reshape political spaces or whether they must be content with parodying them is without doubt an important question of our present. (2009a: 60)

Parody is however not the only risk in this ‘substitution’: contemporary art may invent a politics at precisely the time that what Rancière identifies to be the distinct space of political dissensus seems to be shrinking (if it is), and such a politics might be understood as the instantiation of a wrong that is properly indeterminate and unpredictable; but the logic of this invention is that politics is reconfigured as a suprapolitics. That is, identifying the non-identity of aesthetics is no less the identification of politics as an aesthetic category, which is what the wrong of art processes, leaving the partition of the sensible in fact undisturbed by the principle of equality – a shadow of any political particularity, of how politics is in fact occasioned.

Notes

1. We translate Rancière’s phrase ‘*partage de sensible*’ as ‘partition of the sensible’ rather than the now more prevalent ‘distribution of the sensible’ to emphasize

that *partage* is at once a sharing – a taking part – and a separation. Though it risks suggesting an underlying unity that is divided between participants – which is exactly what Rancière’s conceptualization of politics and aesthetics precludes and which is anyway no less a problem with ‘distribution’ – partition seems to us to better capture in English the dual commonality *and* division of the aesthetic that is central to Rancière’s undertaking.

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