RANCIÈRE'S PRODUCTIVE CONTRADICTIONS: FROM THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS TO THE SOCIAL POLITICITY OF ARTISTIC PRACTICE

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This article explores the force and limitations of Jacques Rancière's novel attempt to rethink the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In particular, it unravels the paradoxical threads of the fundamental contradiction between two of his steadfast claims: (1) art and politics are consubstantial, and (2) art and politics never truly merge. In taking Rancière to task on this point, the primary objective of this article is to work through the nuances of his project and foreground the problems inherent therein in order to break with the "talisman complex" and the "ontological illusion" of the politics of aesthetics *in the name of a new understanding of the* social politicity of artistic practices.

Jacques Rancière has earned a much-deserved reputation as an intellectual maverick who has sought to entirely rethink the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In many ways, his contribution to date might be understood as a veritable Copernican Revolution since he has inverted the standard approach to the very question of how aesthetics and politics relate to one another. Instead of beginning with the assumption that they are separate entities and then searching for their privileged point of intersection, he asserts that art and politics are actually consubstantial as distributions of the sensible. This means that politics, for him, is fundamentally an aesthetic affair—and vice versa—since it is, above all, a matter of establishing and modifying a sensory framework distinguishing the visible from the invisible, the sayable from the unsayable, the audible from the inaudible, the possible from the impossible. "Art and politics," he writes, "are not two permanent and separate realities about which it might be asked if they *must* be put in relation to one another. They are two forms of distribution of the

sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification."[1]

The reader familiar with this fundamental thesis—what I will call the Consubstantiality Thesis or Thesis 1 (T1)—will, perhaps, be surprised to discover that Rancière constantly calls it into question. He reminds his reader, again and again, that art does not truly coincide with politics because it does not produce political subjectivisation, that is to say, dissensual acts that disturb the hierarchies of the given "police order" in the struggle to verify the presupposition of equality through the construction of a *we*.[2] In fact, aesthetics—and particularly literature—tends to distance us from politics proper and hinder its development by producing "desubjectivization."[3] At this level, art and politics not only part ways, but actually tend to be mutually exclusive: politics proper extricates itself from the desubjectivisation of aesthetics, and art tends to act as a metapolitical bulwark against politics proper (thereby implicitly maintaining the police order). Rancière's second elementary thesis—the Differentiation Thesis or Thesis 2 (T2)—is hence that aesthetics and politics are distinct domains that are incongruous with one another.[4]

The concise recapitulation of these two theses allows me to formulate a core contradiction that is arguably *the* contradiction of Rancière's work on aesthetics and politics because it sums up both the force and the limitations of his project to date. This contradiction is in many ways the "productive contradiction"—to use his own vocabulary—that has allowed him to generate some of the most interesting recent work on art and politics while at the same time trapping his project

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[1] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, (tr.) S. Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 25–26. Originally published as *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2004), 39–40 (translation slightly modified). Hereafter these books will be referred to parenthetically in the text as AD and ME. See also Rancière's *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2009), 590. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ETP. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[2] See, for instance, "The Method of Equality," in *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, (ed.) G. Rockhill and P. Watts (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 284. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MoE.

[3] See, for example, *Et Tant Pis*, 321, 431 and 609.

[4] See, for instance, *ibid*., 367, and *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2007), 54. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PL.

between two extremes: the abstract identification of aesthetics and politics and the concrete reification of the border separating them. These extremes, as we will see, foreclose the possibility of thinking the social politicity of aesthetic practices. The contradiction in question can be succinctly summarised as follows: Rancière regularly affirms the consubstantiality of aesthetics and politics (T1) while constantly reminding us that there is no clear correspondence between them (T2). In short, art and politics are consanguineous (T1) only insofar as they never intermingle in any concrete and determined way (T2). If Rancière were a Buddhist sage, we might be intrigued by the deep wisdom stowed away in these incompatible proclamations. Since this is most decidedly not the case, unpacking the core elements of this contradiction will help us come to terms with his profound rethinking of art and politics as well as the deep impasse to which it leads.

Titillating Tautologies and Sobering Demarcations

Rancière is not known for the crisp clarity of his definitions and distinctions. On the contrary, his sibylline style prides itself—for reasons that will here become clear—on indetermination and ambiguity. In the case of the contradiction that I have just highlighted, it is precisely the ambiguity of the terms *politics* and *aesthetics* that allows him to navigate between two apparently incompatible registers.

Let us begin with the word *politics*. Although he never, to my knowledge, distinguishes between them, Rancière works with at least three different definitions of this term. Politics is understood, most generally, to be an overall distribution of the sensible: "the configuration of a specific space, the delimitation of a particular sphere of experience, of objects established in common and coming from a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and arguing about them" (D1). (AD, 24/ME, 37) More specifically, however, politics proper is defined as the dissensual act of subjectivisation that intervenes in the police order, i.e., the given distribution of the sensible, by calling into question the "natural order of bodies" through the verification of the presupposition of equality and the attempt to construct a collective subject of enunciation. In other words, political activity actually "reconfigures the distribution of the sensible" (D2). (PL, 12) Finally, Rancière occasionally refers to politics (*la politique*) as the

meeting ground between police procedures and the process of equality (politics proper according to D2), an encounter that he more often calls *the political* (*le politique*) (D3). It is primarily the first meaning of the term *politics* that is operative in the Consubstantiality Thesis, whereas it is the second definition that is at work in the Differentiation Thesis. If there were some clear continuity between these competing definitions, Rancière's ambiguity on this point might be understandable as a clever attempt to underscore the proximity between two notions of politics. However, this does not seem to be the case,[5] and it leads us—in classic Rancièrian style, so to speak—to yet another contradiction that must be dealt with before moving on to the question of aesthetics: the contradiction between politics and the police.

The first definition of politics is, strictly speaking, a contradictory identification between *politics* and what Rancière calls *the police*. Compare the following definitions:

> It [politics] is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them.[6]

> It [the police] is an order of the visible and the sayable that makes it such that a certain activity is visible and another is not, that a certain form of speech is heard as discourse and another as noise.[7]

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[5] Ostensibly in order to try to avoid the contradiction between D1 and D2, Rancière has increasingly referred to politics qua distribution of the sensible as the configuration *and* reconfiguration of the sensory order (see, for instance, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 24/*Malaise dans l'esthétique*, 38).

[6] Jacques Rancière, "The Politics of Literature," *Substance* 103, vol. 33, n. 1 (2004), 10.

[7] Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, (tr.) J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29. Originally published as *La mésentente* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995), 52 (translation slightly modified). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as D and M. It is arguable that Rancière uses at least two definitions of the police, and that the second opens up space for *partially* avoiding the contradiction of politics and the police: (1) the given distribution of the sensible or the self-evident system of sensory facts and (2) a specific

In spite of the clear proximity—if not outright identity—between politics (D1) and the police as distributions of the sensible (particularly in his more recent writings), Rancière first introduced these terms in clear opposition to one another. Indeed, in the passage just cited from *Dis-agreement*, he goes on to write that he reserves the term *politics* (D2) for the activity that is "antagonistic" to the police because it "breaks the sensible configuration in which parties and parts or their absence are defined, and it does so by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in this configuration: that of a part of those who have no part [*une part des sans-part*]." (D, 29–30/M, 53, translation slightly modified) The contradiction between politics and the police emerges between these two incompatible definitions: politics is, on the one hand, the set of self-evident sensory coordinates that define modes of being, doing, making, perceiving and speaking, which Rancière also calls the police (D1) and politics is, on the other hand, the precise opposite of the police because it is an intervention in the distribution of the sensible that disturbs the "self-evident" sensory order (D2). If we relate this contradiction to the fundamental contradiction between art and politics, we arrive at one of the central problems of Rancière's project: the Consubstantiality Thesis is based on the first definition of politics as a general distribution of the sensible; in other words, it is founded on the identification between politics and the police. This reveals that what is perhaps Rancière's most well-known claim actually means the opposite of what it appears to mean: aesthetics is, in fact, consubstantial with the police or the given order of beings, discourse and perception, which is—according to the second definition of *la politique*—the very opposite of politics. Instead of art and politics being consanguineous, the former is pitted against the latter as the faithful companion of the police order of self-evident sensory facts. In a certain light, this could perhaps be taken as a sign for how to extricate Rancière from the contradiction between Thesis 1 and Thesis 2, as it suggests that the latter—in which aesthetics and politics are largely considered to be opposites—is the position he ultimately

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distribution of the sensible, "whose principle is the absence of a void or of a supplement" ("Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory and Event*, vol. 5, n. 3 (2001)). Originally published as *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: Éditions La Fabrique, 1998), 176 (translation slightly modified).

wants to maintain. However, it is by no means clear that he desires simply to identify aesthetics with the police order, since he regularly claims the opposite by asserting that aesthetics and *politics* are consubstantial.

Let us now turn to aesthetics. Once again, it is possible to distinguish between at least three different definitions. To begin with, Rancière occasionally uses the term simply to refer to the distribution of the sensible in general (D1). More often than not, however, he defines aesthetics more specifically as a particular distribution of the sensible (D2):

> It [aesthetics] strictly refers to the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art, to the mode of being of the objects of art. In the aesthetic regime, artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself....[8]

Lastly, he occasionally uses the term to refer to what is called, in common parlance, the general realm of art, which is identifiable and circumscribable in terms of the recognisable practices of literature, painting, film, etc. (D3). It is the first definition that is at play in the Consubstantiality Thesis, whereas the second definition is mobilised in the Differentiation Thesis. Unlike in the case of politics, there is no outright contradiction between these two definitions as they can simply be understood as a general and a specific understanding of aesthetics. It is between D2 and D3 that a contradiction emerges, particularly in Rancière's most recent work. On the one hand, aesthetics is defined as a problematic entity with undetermined limits because of the ambiguous borders that exist between art and life (D2): "The aesthetic regime...simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself."[9] (PA, 23) On the

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[8] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (ed. and tr.) G. Rockhill (London: Continuum Books, 2004), 22–23. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PA.

[9] See also *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 36/*Malaise dans l'esthétique*, 53.

other hand, aesthetics is understood (D3) as a circumscribed domain distinct from other fields, such as politics. Here we encounter what we might call the contradiction of aesthetics: the Differentiation Thesis depends on the reification of the realm of art (D3), which directly contradicts one of Rancière's central definitions of aesthetics as a field with problematic horizons (D2). Aesthetics is suddenly disambiguated as a domain distinct from politics proper. However, if this is indeed the case, then aesthetics is simply domesticated as a particular *manière de faire* (way of doing and making) distinct from other *manières de faire*, meaning that it is resituated within the representative regime in which the arts remain clearly discernible practices. Thus, the Differentiation Thesis, in order to prove the distinct nature of aesthetics and politics, actually has to destroy aesthetics proper (D2), i.e., the specific distribution of the sensible in which the identity of art remains problematic.

I would like to underscore a final series of complications. In Thesis 1, politics and aesthetics are defined tautologically—and at a significant level of abstraction—as distributions of the sensible. Instead of offering a concrete proposal that can be more or less objectively evaluated according to tangible criteria, Rancière establishes this identification as if by philosophical fiat. Although it is surely a rich and interesting proposition, which sometimes plays itself out in powerful and insightful analyses, if it is simply based on a tautological definition of abstract concepts, nothing precludes anyone else from marshalling rival definitions and advancing similar blanket assertions by declaring, for instance, that aesthetics is consubstantial with ethics or that politics is the same thing as morality, or as the culinary arts and horseback riding, for that matter (aren't these all ways of "distributing the sensory order" in some general sense?). The level of abstraction is such that Rancière's tautological definition runs the risk of losing all purchase on the specificities of political and aesthetic practices, which he actually suggests by generally reverting to Thesis 2 as soon as he begins analysing particular, concrete instances of art and politics.[10]

[10] This level of abstraction is also visible in Rancière's tendency—with the notable exception of workers' literature—to privilege the analysis of *de jure* equality within works of art over the examination of the *de facto* institutional inequality inherent in their social inscription (such as the hierarchy separating

The Differentiation Thesis does indeed have the distinct advantage of being more specific. However, the strict separation of these apparent synonyms only leads to further complications. In the case of politics, Rancière has to circumscribe its specific domain in spite of the fact that he regularly insists that there is no "proper" of politics (in part because any proper definition of the nature of politics remains open to the possible impropriety of political disagreement and dissensus). In other words, he has to identify, at least at a minimal level, the proper of politics in order to distinguish it from the proper of aesthetics. This reveals what we might call the contradiction of politics: if the proper of politics is to be "improper," to have no proper place or identity, but is rather to disturb the given distribution of the sensible (D2), it nonetheless needs to properly distinguish itself from other activities, such as aesthetics, by a minimal identity that allows it to be recognisable as *politics proper* (even if this identity is nothing other than the "impropriety" of dissensual acts). Regarding aesthetics, Thesis 2 also comes into contradiction—as we've already seen—with one of Rancière's central claims: aesthetics proper (D2) renders the very distinction between art and life problematic. In order to maintain Thesis 2, he has to reify aesthetics and the art world as separate, identifiable realities with clear-cut horizons (D3), thereby contradicting his thesis on the very nature of aesthetics "proper" (D2).

With this in mind, let us now turn to the arguments advanced in *Le spectateur émancipé*. More than any of his other works to date, he explicitly emphasises in this book the political efficacy of aesthetics as a force of dissensus (a slight but important variation of T1):

> The aesthetic rupture thereby sets up a singular form of efficacy [*efficacité*]: the efficacy of a disconnection, of a rupture of the relation between the productions of artistic know-how and defined social objectives, between sensible forms, the meanings that can be read in them and the effects that they can produce. We can say this differently: the efficacy of a dissensus.... It is in

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the *great works* of authors such as Flaubert from the *n'importe quoi* of cartoons, pornography, etc.).

> this way that art, in the regime of aesthetic separation, happens to touch upon politics.[11]

These and other such claims are constantly curtailed by incessant reminders of the clear limits between art (the domain of *this* and *I*) and politics (the realm of *we*) (T2). If aesthetics "touches upon" politics, it is obviously not politics proper in and of itself. Moreover, aesthetics only comes in contact with politics in an undetermined and ambiguous manner:

> The forms of aesthetic experience and the modes of fiction thereby create an unprecedented landscape of the visible, new forms of individualities and of connections, different rhythms of apprehension of the given, new scales. They do not do this in the specific manner of political activity, which creates forms of *we*, forms of collective enunciation. But they form the dissensual fabric from which are cut out the forms of object construction and the possibilities of subjective enunciation proper to the action of political collectives. If politics properly speaking consists in the production of subjects who give voice to the anonymous, the politics proper to art in the aesthetic regime consists in the elaboration of a sensible world of the anonymous, of modes of *that* and of *I*, from which emerge the proper worlds of political *wes*. But inasmuch as this effect passes via the aesthetic rupture, it does not lend itself to any determinable calculation. (SE, 72–73)

Moreover, if aesthetics can in fact produce a dissensual fabric that can then be used by political subjects, the latter remain undetermined by aesthetics itself, and Rancière suggests on numerous occasions that it is up to political actors to capitalise (or not) on aesthetic possibilities.[12] This is one of the closest encounters between art and politics, and it is under the rubric of aesthetic dissensus that Rancière provides some of his

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[11] Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: Éditions La Fabrique, 2008), 65–66. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SE. The essay cited is not included in the English translation.

[12] See, for instance, *Et Tant Pis*, 368 and 372.

most compelling and precise arguments. Nevertheless, he continues to remind his reader that there is no fluid confluence between aesthetic dissensus and political dissensus. In one of his boldest claims, he asserts that the politicised art of those who purport to venture out into the real world or to provoke public mobilisation is condemned either to disappear as art (by being indiscernible from politics) or to remain within the museum space, forever cut off from the real world. In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, he formulates this contradiction as the "founding paradox" and the "originary contradiction" of the politics of art—more specifically, the "meta-politics" of art—in the aesthetic regime: "the solitude of the work bears a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of the promise is the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life." (AD, 36/ME, 53, translation slightly modified) The "politics of aesthetics" therefore finds itself divided between two extremes: "An art that is political on the stipulation that it maintains itself pure of all political intervention is opposed to the art that does politics by abolishing itself as art." (AD, 40/ME, 58, translation slightly modified) In short, either art is political by no longer being art, or it is political precisely insofar as it remains distinct from politics. This fundamental contradiction ultimately means that the singularity of art and the specificity of politics remain incompatible:

> The contradictory attitudes that today are drawn from the grand aesthetic paradigms express a more fundamental undecidability of the politics of art. This undecidability is not the result of a postmodern turn. It is constitutive: aesthetic suspension [*le suspens esthétique*] immediately lends itself to being interpreted in two senses. The singularity of art is linked to the identification of its autonomous forms with forms of life and with political possibilities. These possibilities are never fully implemented except at the expense of abolishing the singularity of art, that of politics, or both together. (AD, 60/ME, 83–84, translation slightly modified)

This argument is problematic at a number of levels. To begin with, Rancière appears to suffer from a crypto-essentialism when he suggests that art is detached from politics inasmuch as it is recognised as art, as if these were necessarily mutually exclusive domains: *either* art is

in the real world of politics *or* it is only in the realm of aesthetics. Indeed, he regularly refers to the domain of art and fiction, on the one hand (D3), and the field of "the real" on the other, thereby reifying an opposition that by no means goes without saying.[13] This is visible in his repeated references, in works such as *The Emancipated Spectator*, to art trying to leave its place, to move outside into the real, etc. (D3), references that themselves contradict his assertion that there is no "real" outside of art (D2), but only folds in the sensory fabric where the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics "join and disjoin."[14] (SE, 83) Unfortunately, Rancière's critique of the metapolitics of art and the various attempts to bring art into the "real world" appear to suffer from the same problem that he has highlighted in the work of many of his predecessors: the use of painting and the museum-based model of art as the paradigmatic model for art history. To cite only one poignant case—a case that lies outside the purview of the museum-based model—how can the aesthetic and the political be distinguished in protest songs or national anthems? When a girl began singing "We Shall Overcome" during a police raid on a meeting to discuss the emerging black-freedom movement at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in 1960, where did the song end and the political act begin?[15] Moreover, it is essential to remind ourselves that the world of the museum is itself clearly bound up with the "real" world of politics in very significant and concrete ways, as Andrea Fraser has acutely argued regarding the relationship between the art-market boom and the politics behind neoliberal economic policies.[16] This does not, of course, mean that we are condemned to recognise the ubiquity of aesthetics and politics, but rather that their strict separation by no means goes without saying.

Let us return to the core of the matter before considering the crucial issue of causality and indetermination: abstractly and conceptually (D1), politics and aesthetics are consubstantial (T1) for

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[13] See, for example, *Et Tant Pis*, 471 and 559.

[14] For Rancière, this "joining" is dependent on the appropriation of aesthetic configurations by political actors: *true* politics (D2) is assumed to be outside the realm of "the arts" (D3)(T2).

[15] See T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1.

[16] See Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum*, vol. 44, n. 1 (September 2005).

Rancière, but concretely and specifically (D2), there is no direct correspondence between them (T2). He tends to oscillate between these two levels in ambiguous crescendos and decrescendos that create zones of indetermination and reciprocal reverberations, which ultimately suggest that these two positions are vaguely compatible. The abstract identification in Thesis 1 is based on defining aesthetics and politics tautologically, as empty emissaries of the same central concept: the distribution of the sensible. This titillating tautology reveals its inner vacuity as soon as Rancière descends to the specific level of cultural particulars and discovers *a contrario* that art and politics are more or less discordant (T2). However, this sobering discovery is itself dependent on the reification of the horizons of entities that, according to D2, have no "proper" identity. In short, it appears that politics and aesthetics can only be identified if they are defined so abstractly that they lose all specific content, and they can only be separated if they are reified to such an extent that they are alienated from the very impropriety that makes them "distinct."

Causality or Indetermination

The Consubstantiality Thesis is based on an abstract tautology that is as interesting and provocative as it is vague. Unless it is grounded in a more specific account of the correspondence between the sensory order of aesthetics and the political fabric of society, it remains a very intriguing proposition with limited purchase on specific practices.[17] Given the more concrete nature of the Differentiation Thesis, I would now like to explore its internal logic in greater detail. If aesthetics does not foster politics proper for Rancière, it is primarily because there is not a causal relationship between works of art and political activity: art does not directly produce political subjectivisation. While it is probably true that there is no monocausal relationship between a particular work of art—in the traditional sense—and a specific political activity, I take it that Rancière is drawing our attention to one aspect of a much larger problem, which I propose to call the *talisman complex*. This complex is based on the naïve belief in the innate power of works of art to instigate

[17] To his credit, Rancière has been fleshing out this thesis in his most recent work.

social and political change. In extreme cases, this relationship of determination might be taken to be a one-to-one causal relationship, although many other forms of determination are possible. The core of the issue, however, is the supposition that a work of art has an inherent, independent essence, as if it were an autonomous entity with its own inner force. The talisman complex is therefore closely related to the *ontological illusion*, or the idea that art and politics have identifiable natures and that we can determine once and for all where they do and do not overlap.

I will come back to the talisman complex and the ontological illusion in a moment, but for the time being, it is important to foreground the fundamental conceptual opposition at work in the Differentiation Thesis: the polarisation between causality and indetermination. If art and politics part ways for Rancière, it is because there is no causal relationship between them: their rapport is one of indetermination. Moreover, it is precisely insofar as it is undetermined—and a force of indetermination—that aesthetics can, perhaps, have interesting political implications for Rancière. Thus, he invites his reader to abandon causal determination in favour of indetermination at two different levels.[18] This dual valorisation of indeterminacy is founded on the assumption that if there is no *necessary* link between art and politics, then the connection must *necessarily* be undetermined, and that it is precisely this indetermination that can help us establish a tentative and precarious link between art and politics.[19] In addition to the fact that this does not necessarily follow, we should highlight in passing that Rancière surely succumbs to the tendency to over-valorise indeterminacy that has plagued many of the leading members of the French intellectual avant-garde.[20] It is worth reminding ourselves in this regard that indetermination can be as politically dangerous as it can be beneficial

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[18] See *Et Tant Pis*, 429, 589–91, 606, 635; "The Method of Equality," 285; and *The Emancipated Spectator*, (tr.) Gregory Elliott (London: Verso Books, 2009), 14, 105. *Le spectateur émancipé*, 20, 62–64, 114 (see note 11). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as ES.

[19] See *Et Tant Pis*, 556.

[20] I have critically explored this issue in "*La différence est-elle une valeur en soi?*" in *Théories de la reconnaissance et philosophie française*. Forthcoming in *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale*.

because politics does not obey our conceptual categories or our fetishised notions (in spite of what many conceptual authorities would like to believe).

Before examining in greater detail the limits of the binary logic of causality and indetermination, let us consider the examples of a productive proximity between a certain form of aesthetics (D1) and politics (D1) that Rancière provides. These examples, as I have already mentioned, are few and far between; the overwhelming majority of his specific interpretations of authors and artists actually criticise the innumerable faulty and failed attempts to link art and politics. In fact, his positive examples are so rare that Rancière often returns to a privileged set of paradigmatic cases. One example that he is very fond of citing is that of a jobber, Gabriel Gauny, who describes gazing out of a window while he is working on a floor. For Rancière, this is a clear case of indetermination. On the one hand, Gauny is determined by an entire sensory framework imposed by the dominant order, a framework that dictates ways of seeing, speaking, acting and thinking, as well as a specific distribution of space and time. However, when he gazes out of the window during his workday, he breaks with this dominant order; he creates a fissure within the system of determination by appropriating the privileged activity—spectatorship—of the aesthete. This does not change the fact that he is exploited by the capitalist system. However, for Rancière, the "worker's emancipation is the possibility of making for oneself ways of speaking, ways of seeing, ways of being that break with those that are imposed by the order of domination." (ETP, 624–25) Gauny's gaze, which escapes the determined sensory registers of experience, is an example of the way in which "aesthetic" indetermination—to use the vocabulary that has become much more prevalent in Rancière's recent writings on Gauny—can be political in a certain sense. This is a very interesting point, particularly as it is developed in *The Nights of Labor* in the description of the way in which Gauny constructed an alternative space-time:

> The absence of the master from the time and space of productive work turns this exploited work into something more: not just a bargain promising the master a better return in exchange for the

> freedom of the worker's movements but the formation of a type of worker belonging to a different history than that of mastery.[21]

Unfortunately, however, the discussion of Gauny remains within a rather stark opposition between Marxian determinism and Rancièrian indetermination: either we see in Gauny a mystified worker trapped in the illusory ideology of "internal emancipation," in which he blindly remains within the system of exploitation, or we follow Rancière in finding in Gauny's wandering gaze the powers of indetermination that are emancipation proper. These extremes are unnecessary, and they cast a long shadow over the multiple levels of determination and agency at work: exploitation is not necessarily total domination of the sensory order and there are varying degrees of emancipation from systems of thought, perception and action. Fortunately, in *The Nights of Labor*, Gauny's description of his gaze is situated in the larger context of the newspapers of the French Revolution of 1848 and various attempts to distribute and redistribute the space-time of work. In some of Rancière's more recent writings, however, Gauny's case is presented as an example of emancipation proper, if not of politics itself (the ambiguity on this point appears to be wilfully maintained). Indeed, this is arguably one of the closest encounters between aesthetics and politics in Rancière's corpus. Yet we cannot overlook the fact that the supposed coalescence between the two does not actually appear to be one at all, in spite of the lexical indetermination cultivated by Rancière.[22] Gauny's gaze and his description of it do not directly produce politics proper (D2) by creating a *we* of collective enunciation. It is true that Rancière suggests that Gauny's personal experience, like the multiplicity of other "micro-experiences of repartitioning the sensible" (MoE, 277), would take on a collective meaning in the revolutionary context of 1848. However, Gauny's account of his gaze is constructed first and foremost out of the *I* (or the *he*, since his account is in the third person) of the jobber and the *that* of the window: "Before taking on this collective meaning in a revolutionary context, it was the product of both the joiner's individual

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[21] Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor*, (tr.) John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 82. Originally published as *La nuit des prolétaires* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1981), 92–93.

[22] See, for instance, "The Method of Equality," 274.

experience and his personal appropriation of the power of writing." (MoE, 274) In redistributing the sensory order, his experience appears to be primarily "aesthetic" (D1), and the possibility of implementing new forms of political subjectivisation is explicitly situated at a different level:

> That verification [of equality in the appropriation of the perspective gaze] contributes...to the framing of a new fabric of common experience or a new common sense, *upon which new forms of political subjectivization can be implemented*. (MoE, 280, my emphasis)

We would surely be justified in referring to Gauny's experience as a form of "aesthetic dissensus" insofar as it attempts to "reconstruct the relationship between places and identities, spectacles and gazes, proximities and distances," but it is not, as far as I can tell, a type of political subjectivisation in and of itself. (ETP, 593) This is the precise point at which we see that when it comes to aesthetics and politics proper, *never the twain shall meet*. Even when undetermined forms of aesthetics disturb the sensory fabric, they do not directly produce political subjectivisation and collective forms of enunciation, as is indeed much clearer in Rancière's other positive examples, drawn from the work of Roberto Rossellini, Alfredo Jaar, Sophie Ristelhueber, Pedro Costa, etc. Instead, they act as modes of sensory dissensus that *could*, perhaps, lend themselves to political developments (this is—in an important decision—left up to the agency of politics proper for Rancière), but they are most definitively *not* politics: "Aesthetics has *its own politics* just as politics has *its own aesthetics*." (MoE, 285, my emphasis) This ultimately means that even the positive examples of an apparent coalescence between art and politics are not the merging of aesthetics (D1 or D2) and politics proper (D2), but rather a redistribution of the sensory order via aesthetic dissensus that is political only in a general and abstract sense (D1): "art and politics are attached to one another [*tiennent l'un à l'autre*] as forms of dissensus, operations of reconfiguration of the shared experience of the sensible."[23] (SE, 70)

[23] See also *Et Tant Pis*, 559, and *Politique de la littérature*, 11–12.

Aesthetics in the strict sense (D2) and politics proper (D2) never actually overlap in any determined and concrete sense for Rancière.

Furthermore, he explicitly states that it is not primarily works of art or particular messages that are political, but rather the construction of a unique arrangement of space and time (proper to the aesthetic regime):

> Art is not political first and foremost by the messages and the feelings that it conveys regarding the order of the world. Neither is it political by the manner in which it represents society's structures, the conflicts or identities of social groups. It is political by the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, by the type of time and space it establishes, by the manner in which it delimits this time and peoples this space.[24] (AD, 23/ME, 36-37, translation slightly modified)

This suggests that the aesthetic dissensus linking art to politics in the general sense of a distribution or redistribution of the sensible (a minor variation of D1) is less dependent on individual works of art and political strategies than on the institutional system of exhibition, which could itself clearly benefit from a more in-depth analysis by Rancière, who tends to make provocative statements in passing.[25] If art and politics cross paths in some sense, it is less, therefore, because the arts are, in general, distributions of the sensible (D1), or because individual works of art in a generic sense (D3) are vehicles for primarily political messages or representations. It is because aesthetics is a *specific* distribution of the sensible (D2) that produces a neutralized space-time in which cause and effect are disconnected.[26] This is the privileged locus for the close encounters between aesthetics (D2) and politics in the general sense (D1), a locus in which there is no direct causal link between aesthetics and politics proper (D2).

Ultimately, Rancière tries to force our hand and make us choose between abstract principles when we do not, in fact, need to make any

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[24] See also *Le spectateur*, 61 and *Et Tant Pis*, 469.

[25] See, for instance, *Le Spectateur*, 69 and "The Method of Equality," 279.

[26] See *Le Spectateur*, 67. Rancière does, of course, make room for the strategies deployed by artists who attempt to change the reference points of the visible and the sayable (see *Ibid*., 72–73).

such choice. In trying to establish a stark contrast between his writings and the work of his predecessors, he draws a sharp line between causal determination (art causes politics, workers are determined by ideology, etc.) and indetermination (art has an undetermined relationship to politics, workers can produce zones of indetermination, etc.). The abstract categories of causality and indetermination are so far removed from concrete social practice that they do very little to capture the specificities of aesthetic and political activities. In fact, they tend to distract from the social dynamic at work in history, which is *neither* rigorously determined *nor* totally undetermined. Socio-historical practices such as "art" and "politics" do not abide by the black-and-white logic of conceptual delimitation. They are necessarily inscribed in time and in a field of social action: there is no work of art in itself or politics proper that would somehow be separate from material production, institutional inscription, social struggle, etc. Therefore, they remain irreducible to universal conceptual attributes such as "determined" or "undetermined." To a certain extent, it might be said that both of these practices are determined in various ways and with varying levels of determination, and that they are also undetermined in certain key respects. In point of fact, the abstract conceptual opposition between determination and indetermination does little or no justice to the variegated field of forces that play a role in socio-historical practices. Instead of having to choose between causality and indetermination, we need to develop a logic of practice capable of describing and explaining the complex constellation of forces at work in the practices labelled "art" and those labelled "politics." Such a logic of practice needs to make room for overdetermination, causal variability, degrees of determination, levels of agency, etc., because social practices such as art and politics are never simply determined or undetermined (unless it is in the dreamscape of theoretical abstraction).

Art and Politics as Social Practices

Rancière appears to have opened the door to a radically new conceptualisation of the relationship between art and politics *qua* distributions of the sensible (T1). However, as we have seen, he leads us to a door that he has locked and bolted from the inside, leaving aesthetics and politics proper cut off from one another (T2). In addition to this

deep-seated contradiction between the Consubstantiality Thesis and the Differentiation Thesis, we have seen that each thesis leads in turn to a harrowing series of paradoxes. Thesis 1 is founded on the contradiction between politics and the police: politics and aesthetics are only consanguineous if politics is defined as a self-evident distribution of the sensible, as a police order, which is, in principle, the very opposite of politics. Thesis 2 leads to the contradiction of aesthetics and the contradiction of politics proper: politics and aesthetics are only clearly demarcated insofar as the latter is disambiguated as a specific field of the arts distinct from life, and the former is given a *proper* identity and thereby alienated from its constitutive impropriety (according to which the very "nature" of politics is one of the *questions* of political activity).[27] It appears, then, that either aesthetics is identified with the police as the more or less indisputable system of self-evident sensory facts, or it is disambiguated as a specific *manière de faire* distinct from politics and thereby resituated within the representative regime of arts that destroys the ambiguity proper to aesthetics. In short, either aesthetics is identified with the police, or it is eliminated along with politics! For any close reader of Rancière, it should be perfectly clear that this is *not* the conclusion that he would like us to draw from his work.

Against this potpourri of paradoxes, I would like to argue in favour of abandoning unnecessary conceptual abstraction and the reification of art and politics in the name of understanding them as socio-historical practices that can and have been linked in various ways. Art and politics have no fixed natures. They are concepts in struggle that vary according to the social setting and historical conjuncture. Strictly speaking, there is not even an "art" or "politics" in general that undergoes changes through time. As Rancière has forcefully demonstrated in the case of aesthetics, art in the singular is the invention of what he calls the aesthetic regime of art, which is only approximately

[27] Moreover, Rancière defines politics (D2) as a transhistorical process that is always and everywhere the same. Although he does, of course, recognise that there are certain historical differences and a "history of the political," the *form* of politics proper remains *an abstract constant* that is or is not implemented in various and sundry historical configurations ("The Method of Equality," 287; also see *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 51).

200 years old.[28] Similarly, I would argue that there are numerous and varied political cultures that have more or less incompatible understandings of the very nature of the political and its stakes. In other words, instead of art and politics being general or universal concepts that have undergone various iterations through time, they are immanent concepts in struggle that are operative (or not) in various artistic regimes—to use Rancière's vocabulary—and political cultures. Rather than concepts that transcending the totality of social practices and describing them as if from the outside, they are inseparable from the concrete theoretical practices that produce them (hence the difficulty of talking about them with singular terms).

If the search for the definitive link between politics and aesthetics is in vain, it is not because these two terms are synonyms for the distribution of the sensible. It is because there are no definitive categories of politics and aesthetics. There are only rival definitions, competing practices and more or less compatible artistic orders and political cultures. The politics of art is ultimately based on the ontological illusion, i.e., on the idea that politics and art are circumscribed phenomena with identifiable natures and that the relationship between these naturalised entities can be determined once and for all. In fact, the conclusion that art and politics never meet is founded on the same presupposition. Against the politics of art understood in this sense, I would like to argue for a new understanding of the social politicity of aesthetic practices. Instead of purporting to define the being of art and politics as well as the nature of their relationship, the study of the social politicity of the arts seeks to come to terms with the political elements integral to works of art in their social inscription. Whereas the politics of aesthetics is based on the idea that there is a particular type of politics inherent (or not) in aesthetics *per se*, the study of the social politicity of artistic practices examines and participates in the complex social negotiations within and between various aesthetic activities and assorted political agendas. It breaks with the fundamental assumption that works of art have an inherent politicity and that we can determine, once and for all, the political value of an artistic project as an

[28] See also Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), and Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

isolated event. It also rejects the widespread inclination to define the politics of art only in terms of the "good" works of art and the "correct" political agenda (usually progressive), which fails to recognise the important ways in which the politicisation of aesthetic practices often leads in the opposite direction. Furthermore, the study of the social politicity of art jettisons the widespread proclivity to think the politics of art within the framework of the visual and literary arts, leaving aside architecture, urban planning, public art, design, music, etc.

It is important to recognise that works of art are *not* talismans with inherent powers. They are social phenomena with a production logic, a set of propositions, strategies, assumptions, potentialities, etc. This does not, however, mean that we are condemned to acquiesce to the pervasive thesis that works of art are texts open to an infinite number of equally valid interpretations. The recognition that there is no *episteme* in politics and art (to modify slightly one of Castoriadis' important claims), does not force us to join in the "postmodern" celebration of infinite interpretation. On the contrary, if there is no science of art or politics insofar as they are collective phenomena whose "being" is negotiated in the social field, it is absolutely imperative to intervene in the battles of opinion and the ongoing struggles over art and politics. In breaking with the politics of art, there is, therefore, a shift in emphasis from artistic production *qua* object of knowledge to the relationship between aesthetic production and circulation in the social field as well as to reception by a dynamic public battling over the meaning and values of cultural products.[29]

One of the core problems in Rancière's project is that, in his analysis of art's relationship to politics (and therefore to its social inscription), he largely, although not entirely, removes art from its social inscription. The answers he provides reveal the roadblock that he has implicitly erected: either art and politics are related to one another in a purely abstract manner as distributions of the sensible, or they part ways as two distinct activities. The primary reason for this parting of ways is the criterion of success that he establishes for truly political art, which he

[29] On these issues, see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, (tr.) Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), and Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

attributes to the representative regime of the arts: it must directly cause political action. However, as collective endeavours with multiple factors at work, social practices do not follow the monocausal logic of determination operative in the classic example of causality: one billiard ball striking another. The idea that an independent work of art—understood in the traditional sense—could directly produce political action as it is commonly understood not only reifies art and politics as distinct entities, but it then establishes a criterion of success that is based on a faulty understanding of social practice. In fact, it is arguable that it is nearly impossible for a single work to alter radically the nature of political constructs. To begin with, in order to have an impact on a political conjuncture, a work of art has to be recognisable *as such*, i.e., within the conjuncture itself. Therefore, it has to adopt certain elements from its immediate setting. Moreover, it has to circulate in the social field (which takes time) and undergo various iterations and interpretations. Thus, it is not the work *in and of itself* that produces political consequences, but the life of the work, with its various strategies and propositions, as it is received, interpreted, circulated, mobilised for various ends, etc. It is the social life of works of art, not the works in and of themselves, as if they were magical talismans capable of sparking off changes by the preternatural power of their own internal chemistry, that has political value.[30] Rancière's criterion of success for political art therefore actually guarantees its failure precisely because it is based on the assumption that an artistic work in the traditional sense could—in and of itself—directly provoke political action in any rarified sense of the term. Rather than attributing this failure to the nebulous indetermination of the aesthetic regime of art and then fleeing into abstract tautologies in order to save the cherished consubstantiality of art and politics, it is essential to break with the internal logic of the talisman complex at all levels in order to think through the social politicity of aesthetic practices. This will allow us, in turn, to reconsider social works of art that directly perform political actions (such as some of Gianni Motti's work, for instance). According to Rancière, these necessarily

[30] Rancière's passing comments regarding the politicity of the novel space-time of the aesthetic regime of art are extremely provocative precisely insofar as this new space-time is linked to the emergence of the modern museum and a new social framework of exhibition.

remain distinct from politics proper precisely insofar as they are works of art. Therefore, even the most radical attempts to stage artistically political actions are destined to fail on his account. In this case, the failure is not due to the indetermination of aesthetics but, on the contrary, to the strict determination that separates art from politics.

There is no set recipe for the correct relationship between art and politics; there is no panacea or ultimate equation. There are experiments in the social field with various consequences. There are choreographies, *mises en scène* and propositions, as well as underlying possibilities, within works of art. Their politicity manifests itself in their inscription in the social field, and it cannot therefore be determined once and for all by ontological deduction (which does not, however, preclude the possibility of making strong arguments regarding the political dimensions of various works of art—*au contraire*!). The criteria of success equally vary based on the operative value systems and social objectives. If we take art and politics as they have generally been understood in the European world since approximately 1800, we can identify a series of nodal points for encounters between them. This is obviously not the place for a full-scale investigation, but it is nonetheless important to chart, if only briefly, an important field for further research, a field largely foreclosed by Rancière's binary logic of consubstantiality and differentiation, causality and indetermination. In no particular order, the following points of intersection between art and politics deserve further investigation:

1. Political Pedagogy and Perception Management

From nineteenth-century realism to contemporary documentaries, art can and often does serve to inform the public regarding various social, moral and political issues.[31] It can also participate in the management of the collective perceptual framework of citizens by either reaffirming the dominant model of visibility or contradicting it. To summarise the potential of art to function as a form of political pedagogy, we can take

[31] It is interesting that Rancière admits to learning about the U.S. program of "extraordinary rendition"—an extraordinary euphemism for the illegal international kidnapping, transfer and detention of suspected "terrorists"—from an artistic performance by Walid Raad (see *Et Tant Pis*, 606).

our cue from William Carlos Williams' "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower":

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there.

2. Fictionalized Perspective on the Real and Satirical Intervention

From the work of Franz Kafka, George Orwell and Eugène Ionesco to films such as *Level 5*, *Brazil* and *Children of Men*, fiction can be a powerful venue for trying to tap into the real of reality in a world whose apparent "reality" might mask more than it reveals. Likewise, satire has long been an important tool for political criticism, and the satirical can at times be pushed to the point of intervention and revelation, as in the work of the culture-jamming activists The Yes Men.

3. Social and Political Imaginary

Art can act as a vehicle for the dominant social and political imaginary operative in a particular society, or it can, to various degrees, attempt to dismantle it. The work of Wafaa Bilal serves as an interesting case of an artist attempting to destabilise various features of the contemporary American political imaginary, particularly regarding the war in Iraq. Brian Jungen's critique of the contemporary cult of sports icons could be taken as an example of the way in which art can counter (or solidify) the core social representations of a given culture. As is the case with the other points of intersection, art can often span the two extremes of critique and confirmation of the status quo, and the case of Andy Warhol might be interpreted as one in which the horizons between criticism and complicity remain ambiguous. At a deeper level of determination, it is also important to emphasise the ways in which works of art can reinforce cultural hegemony by exercising an influence over ideas, feelings and institutions via consent rather than domination (as Edward Said has argued on the basis of Antonio Gramsci's work). Finally, at the more overtly manipulative level of ideological power games, Frances Stonor Saunders has provided an insightful account of the disturbingly central

role played by the C.I.A.—and particularly the Congress for Cultural Freedom—in the international *Kulturkampf* during the Cold War.[32]

4. Collective Identity and Counter-Histories

From the development of nation-states and their national music and literatures to the *Négritude* movement and beyond, art can act as a powerful framework for collective identity by producing a shared reservoir of sounds, images and stories that make sense of "who we are as a people" or "who we can be as a people."[33] The modern museum and certain forms of public art—as well as the canonisation of national artistic traditions—has helped substantiate the role of aesthetics in establishing the continuity of a collective past and present.[34] Art can also produce powerful counter-histories that aim at dismantling dominant national narratives and reconfiguring their operative categories or assumptions (as in *Heart of Darkness* and *Beloved*). Finally, aesthetic production is often a rallying point for more local movements of political solidarity and collective mobilisation, ranging from murals, posters, flags and banners to shared dress codes, common insignias and popular songs.

5. Critical Intervention or Complicity

Art can reify or break with a given state of affairs in order to bring alternative worldviews into focus. This intervention can be sensory and perceptual (see Jean-Luc Godard's juxtaposition of Vietnamese and American films about the Vietnam War, or Banksy's graffiti interventions on the Israeli "security fence"), but it can also be more conceptual and theoretical (see John Pilger's ongoing critique of Western imperialism). Its objects of criticism can be political in the common

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[32] See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War* (New York: The New York Press, 1999).

[33] See, for instance, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Books, 2006); Esteban Buch, *La neuvième de Beethoven* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1999); and Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Éditions Présence Africaine, 2004), 85–86.

[34] On the modern museum, see Dominique Poulot, *Musée, nation, patrimoine* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1997).

sense of the term, but they can also be specific to the political establishments of the art world, as in Hans Haacke's cancelled exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1971, where he proposed to unveil the inner complicity between the art world and the vicious powers of the business world. On the side of institutional complicity, there are, of course, many artists whose obvious agenda is to defend the political status quo by providing the art establishment and other institutions with precisely what they are looking for. Claire Bishop has argued, for instance, that this is the role of relational aesthetics as it manifests itself in the work of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija: "Tiravanija's microtopia gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers."[35]

6. Intersection

It is possible for art to serve as a forum to advance directly political projects. When Wafaa Bilal asks each visitor to his exhibit to donate $1 to the group Rally for Iraq in order to help finance scholarships for Americans and Iraqis who have lost their parents in the war, his exhibit becomes a direct venue for political fundraising.

7. Interrogation

Art is capable of raising questions about the world we live in and staging inquiries aimed at proposing possible solutions or soliciting responses from the public. Godard's *La Chinoise* could be taken, at least in part, as an interrogative film exploring the question: What is the sensory materiality of Marxist-Leninist discourse in France in the late 1960s, and what are its implications?

8. Transformation of Sense and Expression

Works of art can offer alternative modes of perception, as in the way in which Hugo, Tolstoy and others constructed a new form of visibility in

[35] Rirkrit Tiravanija, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October*, n. 110 (Fall 2004), 69.

which the *misérables* and the "little people" of history came to occupy centre stage instead of being caricatured or relegated to the wings. They can also propose alternative forms of expression, such as in Hugo's stalwart defense of linguistic equality in poems such as "Reply to a Bill of Indictment":

> ... Till 1789,
> The language was the State: words well or ill born,
> Lived in castes, with their own compartments ...
>
> Enter the villain—me. I asked myself,
> "Why must A always step aside for B?"
> ...
> I blew a revolutionary wind.
> I dressed the old dictionary in liberty's colors:
> Away with peasant words and senator words![36]

9. Coordination of Collective Bodies and Stylisation of Social Existence

Haussmann's widening of the Parisian boulevards to allow for easy troop deployment and to inhibit the construction of revolutionary barricades reveals the ways in which projects in urban planning—like architecture and other arts, as Benjamin and Foucault have argued—sculpt the social body, establish relations of power and distribute the sensory order in very direct ways. Art is thereby capable of producing a political geography and a more or less stable set of social relations. At a slightly more personalised level, aesthetics in the broad sense—from fashion and marketing to furniture design and cookware—also functions as a stylisation of social existence. As Stuart Hall argues, "through design, technology, and styling, 'aesthetics' has already penetrated the world of modern production. Through marketing, layout, and style, the 'image' provides the mode of representation of the body on which so much of modern consumption depends."[37]

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[36] Victor Hugo, *Selected Poems of Victor Hugo*, (tr.) E.H. and A.M. Blackmore (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 165–67.

[37] Stuart Hall, "Brave New world," *Socialist Review*, vol. 21 (1991), 62. In the 19th century, Charles Baudelaire had already insisted on the intertwining

10. Political Propositions and Social Experiments

Art can propose an alternative world and purport to help bring it about, as was the case with a significant portion of Communist art, Futurism and Nazi artwork such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. Art can also foster experiments with alternative social and political structures or new modes of collective interaction. Le Corbusier's *Unité d'habitation* could be taken as such an experiment, and movements such as Fluxus have emphasised the social and participatory dimension of artistic experimentation.

This is neither an exhaustive list nor a set of fixed categories. There is surely significant overlap between many of these points of intersection. Moreover, there are obviously works of art that cut across several of them at once. My goal in this brief overview is simply to indicate, in summary fashion, the broad and multifarious ways in which politics and aesthetics concretely overlap and interact. It is by no means my intention to suggest that the encounters between them are so ubiquitous that the pragmatic distinction between them no longer makes sense. Moreover, it is important to insist on the ways in which these forms of interaction depend on the circulation and reception of works of art. There is no politics *inherent* in art (although there might be certain propositions and possibilities). And for art to be political, it does not have to directly cause political action in any rarified sense. Aesthetic practices *qua* social practices participate in sculpting collectivities in more or less direct and active ways. Art can inform, satirise, indoctrinate, give a sense of belonging, intervene, mobilise, raise questions, transform perception and expression, organise collectivities, experiment, etc. This is the veritable "politics of art," or more specifically, the social politicity of aesthetic practices. The politics of art only makes sense within a social field in which art is recognised as a communal phenomenon that circulates and is received in diverse ways. Developing one of Sartre's key insights, we might say that a work of art that is not engaged with is not strictly speaking a work of art. In other words, there is no work of art in isolation, since a work only *works* and

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relationship between style and politics (see his *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. II, (ed.) C. Pichois (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), 494).

functions as art insofar as it has a social existence. Its politicity is never, therefore, inherent in its production logic as a given aspect of its inner reality. Unlike the *politics of aesthetics*, which tends to focus on the production of works of art at the expense of their distribution and reception, the study of the *social politicity of artistic practices* recognises that works of art are collective phenomena that are politicised precisely through their production, circulation and interpretation in the social field.

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