

Aesthetics is Politics

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Abstract

In the 2005 Venice Biennale, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were represented for the first time in a shared Central Asia pavilion that presented a curious and seductive group exhibition entitled 'A Contemporary Archive'. Several videos and installations included in the show conveyed a strange feeling of *déjà vu*, by reworking avant-garde forms of the 1970s and 1980s – Abramovic and Ulay's *Light/Dark* (1977), Kabakov's domestic interiors of Soviet Russia – to make them espouse a search for political and ethnic identity initiated by these new post-soviet republics. The way these artistic forms travelled from the past to change meaning in the present raised the question of the displacement of 'critical' art in new contexts and beyond this, the exhibition begged the question of whether or not it was possible to perceive the art of these countries independently from their specific political context. Whether or not this was possible, could the works nonetheless be interpreted as political, even though the title of the exhibition evoked the more restrained form of the archive? The interlacing of political motivations, re-use of avant-garde forms and use of the archive are the kind of question the French philosopher Jacques Rancière addresses in his recent book, *Malaise dans l'esthétique*. (Paris, 2004).

Following his work in the field of political philosophy, Rancière's interest has in recent years shifted towards visual culture and the relation between politics and aesthetics; two fields he perceives as inherently belonging to one another rather than being autonomous. While his new book reviews some of the theories developed earlier in *The Aesthetics of Politics*, (translated into English in 2004), it extends his reflection with the discussion of specific examples drawn from recent art exhibitions. *Malaise dans l'esthétique* seems to propose a working way of apprehending the political nature of aesthetics in the specific context of today's art and provides at the same time a salutary demystification of the 'critical art' of the 1960s and its legacy.

In order to achieve this, Rancière's program is rather ambitious: it involves nothing less than shredding notions we usually happily go by with: modernism and postmodernism, autonomous art and avant-garde. His departure point is a reworking of the notion of aesthetics, a term, he argues, that has been under attack in recent French intellectual debates. He notably responds to publications by Alain Badiou, Jean-Marie Schaeffer and reiterates his long-term dialogue with Jean-François Lyotard's work on the sublime. Going back to the origins of the term aesthetics, in the mid-eighteenth century, Rancière contends that aesthetics is not a discipline as it is usually defined but rather a particular 'regime of identification of art', that is, a particular way in which, in a given historical or social context, art is identified as art. Art therefore never exists as an abstraction, but is always tributary to the way it is perceived in different periods or regimes, of which Rancière identifies three.

In the ethical regime, exemplified by Plato's republic, a sculpture is gauged against the question of truthfulness and copy. In the representational regime the sculpture will be considered within the system of the hierarchy of genres and in relation to qualities such as skill and adequacy between subject matter and representation. In the representational regime the arts occupy a particular place in what Rancière has elsewhere called the 'distribution of the sensible', a notion that can be understood as the division of activities in a society. The aesthetic regime differs from the other two in that it no longer assigns to art a particular place in society, nor is art any longer defined by skill and practice: for this reason, the term art in the singular replaces the pluralized form of the (fine) arts. (Here, Thierry de Duve's idea of art in general, motivated by Duchamp's ready-made, comes to mind.) Stripped from these categorisations, what defines the work of art in the aesthetic regime is its belonging to what Rancière calls a specific 'sensorium'— something like a way of being – in which it will be perceived as art. A paradox arises here, because this specific sensorium exists in a context in which art has not been attributed a specific place: the aesthetic regime rejects the distribution of the sensible. As a result, in the aesthetic regime art is constantly caught in a tension between being specifically art and merging with other forms of activity and being.

This tension between art as art and art opening up onto life enables Rancière to argue that there is no such thing as the completion or failure of the modernist project as signified by the advent of postmodernism, just as it is simplistic to oppose strictly, as is often done, autonomous art and engaged art. Instead of these, he says, one can better speak of two 'politics of aesthetics': the politics of the 'becoming life of art' (*le devenir vie de l'art*) and the politics of the 'resistant form' (*la forme résistante*), which always exist together: In the first politics, the aesthetic experience resembles other forms of experiences and as such, it tends to dissolve into other forms of life. In the second politics of aesthetics – the resistant form – the political potential of the aesthetic experience derives from the separation of art from other forms of activity and its resistance to any transformation into a form of life.

These two politics of aesthetics, although opposite, cannot be envisaged separately, but exist in a tension with one another. This principle anchors the political at the heart of the aesthetic. It permits, furthermore, to understand that opposite positions, such as for instance, Peter Bürger's theory of the avant-garde as politically engaged and Theodor Adorno's preservation of the autonomy of art are necessarily complementary. For the artistic generation engaged in 'critical art' in the 1960s, the question, argues Rancière, was not about negotiating between art and politics, but rather of finding a form that can exist in-between the two opposite aesthetics of politics. The critical art of the 1960s thus oscillates between legibility and illegibility, everydayness and 'radical strangeness'. The heterogeneous forms emanating from Hans Haacke and Wolf Vostell try to establish what Rancière calls a micropolitics. The term is perhaps ill-chosen in that it recalls the exhibition *Micropolitiques* (Magasin, Grenoble, 2000) which under the intellectual tutelage of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari brought to view artworks that favoured an immediate and restricted political impact (Kendell Geers, Philippe Meste). Rancière's micropolitics, by contrast, designate a third term between the two politics of aesthetics of art as art and art as life. It is this that makes it impossible to read in a simplified way the art of the 1960s as politically committed, and by extension, annuls the idea of a postmodernity that acknowledged the impossibility of the political. Yet, the forms of these

micropolitics developed by the artists of the 1960s have changed in contemporary practices. While the art of the 1960s expressed unambiguous positions (Haacke), today's art functions on very different means. Rancière identifies these by looking at a series of exhibitions organised around the year 2000 in Europe and in the United States. There is the playful way, introduced by a description of Wang Du's sculptural collage *Les Temps du Monde* (1998) presented in the exhibition *Bruit de Fond* (Centre National de la Photographie, Paris, 2000) in which derision and double-entendre has come to replace the straightforward denunciation operated by the art of the 1960s. Another category is that of the archive: the artist becomes a collector and archivist who in so doing, models her behaviour on practices of daily life and brings them together as art. The third category, the encounter, essentially repeats Bourriaud's idea of relational aesthetics: art is there to bring social links between people where these have disappeared in modern society. Mystery, finally, is best embodied according to Rancière, by Jean-Luc Godard's sense of montage. Rancière describes how Godard's montage brings together heterogeneous elements to emphasise their proximity rather than their differences, constituting what Godard calls a 'fraternity of metaphors'. These four categories similarly function along a principle of ambivalence: no position is made explicit, one thing and its opposite can be equally intended, equally acceptable. Beyond this perceptive point, there is some degree of flakiness in the categories defined, which, Rancière admits himself, are schematic. One of the problems is that they rely essentially on several exhibitions – *Moving Images* (Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York), *Let's Entertain*, (Walker art Centre, Minneapolis, and Centre Pompidou, Paris), *Voilà, le Monde dans la tête* (Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris) – the concepts of which Rancière never discusses at length. Similarly, he mentions works included in these shows without looking further into individual artists, with an offhandedness that suggests that these works may not deserve a lengthier commentary. But beyond these flaws, arguing that strategies of play, encounter, archive and mystery have underlying political motivations helps to usefully broaden the field and the manners in which these political aesthetics can be located, and stress the way in which, in the aesthetic regime, political aesthetics is always a result of the interchange between a work of art and its interpretation. While these art forms differ from those adopted by critical art in the 1960s, the context of their reception has also changed. Rancière notes in his somewhat provocative conclusion that paradoxically, this profoundly ambivalent, 'undecided' art is increasingly invited to play a role in a social context that is marked by the deficit of political action – here the use of social art in local political contexts is a case in point. There lies of course the challenge that contemporary art faces: really recompose political spaces or only parody them?

The ambiguities of the Central Asian pavilion in Venice pointedly reflect this question. Its use of the term archive in its title adopts one of the strategies defined by Rancière. The archive as consensual collection, rather than selection resulting in the ambivalence underlined by the philosopher: the accumulation of works conveys no clear message, and that is true of most individual works in the show: Sergey Maslov's *Survival instructions for Ex-USSR citizens* are simultaneously pitiful, ironic, pathetic and violent. The raw vision of naked women wrestling amidst severed heads of sheep promotes indiscriminately ²the idea of an overwhelming nature (Almagul Menlibayeva, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, 2002). But in this aesthetic regime, what further comes into prominence is the overall presence of this pavilion, both in the defined

place of the Venice Biennale and in the larger context of world politics. The undecided nature of the art takes on wider significance in light of the recent political events in the region. The association of the three countries concealed the very different realities of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 and the quasi-simultaneous repression of demonstrations in Uzbekistan. Overlooking these recent developments, the Central Asia pavilion exudes above all a pragmatism that the art of the 1960s was devoid of and which functions along those consensual lines that Rancière finds in today's art's relation to politics and aesthetics. The Central Asia pavilion hence responds, or even turns around the paradox that Rancière described as the increased place given to 'undecided' art in contexts marked by a lack of political action. In a pragmatic gesture, the politically charged context in which the pavilion comes to Venice is evacuated altogether in favour of the political ambivalence of the works included and their absence of any reference to contemporary events (a different strategy was deployed by Mykola Babak who included as part of his installation for the Ukraine pavilion news footage of the Orange revolution of November-December 2004 as if it were a filmed performance piece)³.

If the ambivalence of the works on the Central Asia pavilion were both tantalising and somewhat frustrating for the viewer, this stemmed perhaps from the unshakable burden of history that no viewer could ignore. Rancière's definition of an ethical turn affecting aesthetics and politics offers a reflection on the way in which history perceived as trauma affects the aesthetics of politics. Rancière finds that films such as *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003) and *Mystic River* (Clint Eastwood, 2003) illustrate this ethical turn by showing a world dominated by absolutes: to the infinite, invisible terror described by Bush's War against terrorism there must be an infinite justice. *Dogville* showed how one responds to evil by evil, and *Mystic River* blurs ideas of guilt and innocence. These contemporary fables outline a context dominated by a lack of distinction between good and bad, a lack of measure and by the unrepresentable (that of terror, for instance). These two tendencies are tributary, in the ethical turn of the tension described earlier between the two aesthetics of politics: the indistinct emerges out of the consensual forms of art opening onto life and the unrepresentable derives from the desire to preserve the autonomy of art up to the point of following Adorno's belief that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.⁴ While emanating from the two forms of aesthetics of politics, they express extreme positions that these aesthetics may come to assume in the ethical turn. The indistinct and the unrepresentable – which has been the subject of heated debates around Claude Lanzmann— are, however, not inevitable⁵. Rancière points out the conjunction between the resurgence of thought on the genocide and the collapse of the Eastern block in 1989, and argues that the discourse on the unrepresentable and on the indistinct conceals a fantasy of purity that needs to be shaken off to enable the democratic game of the aesthetics of politics to be preserved. In other terms, and in the specific case of the Central Asia pavilion, the pragmatism it demonstrates in its political ambivalence might be more positive than negative. Instead of suggesting a lack of conviction, it displays the micropolitics of a plurality of voices that, more than absolutes, is a token of the democratic nature of aesthetics and politics.

Reference

¹ The present text is an updated version of an essay originally commissioned by the Dutch magazine, *Metropolis M*, and which appeared in Dutch as 'Jacques Rancière: Esthetiek is politiek.' *Metropolis M*. 26 (2005) 4 (Aug/Sep) p. 64–72.

³ Mykola Babak, *Your Children, Ukraine*, 2004-2005. Ukraine Pavilion, Fondazione Levi.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Camb. Mass.: MIT Press, 1967), p.34.

⁵ On the subject of the unrepresentability of Auschwitz, also in relation to Claude Lanzmann, see Georges Didi-Huberman's important book *Images Malgré Tout*. Paris, Editions de Minuit, 2003.