



Liam Gillick, *The Hopes and Dreams of the Workers as They Wandered Home from the Bar*, 2004, red glitter. Installation view, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2005.

Vegetables LIAM GILLICK

The political allegory of the cauliflowers was possible because the connection of art, politics and vegetables—the connection of art, politics and consumption—already existed as a set of moving borders, enabling artists to both cross the border and make sense of the connection of the heterogeneous elements and play on the sensory power of their heterogeneity.

—Jacques Rancière

MUCH AS THEY DID FOR BERTOLT BRECHT in his parable of the vegetable seller whose business practices reflect more general political schemes, a cauliflower in the corner and some rhetoric on the lips regularly play off each other on the stage of contemporary art. Jacques Rancière allows us to analyze these otherwise veiled relationships between incongruous elements of the everyday and the complex ideological structures in the artworks they sit alongside. In fact, his elaboration of the idea that political art is not a negotiation between politics and art but “between the two politics of aesthetics” makes him compulsory reading. As many artists know, the apparent contradictions and limitations of a notionally political practice require some elegant maneuvers in order to avoid merely reflecting what the dominant culture already knows. There remains potential as well in the area between exposing the failings of the present—showing the protagonists what they are up to, in effect—and slipping into a poetic void of allusion and implication. An implementation of Rancière’s formulations, however, ensures that questions about the possible deficiencies of such a nuanced practice are turned back toward the failures of consensus culture. He challenges a situation in today’s artistic context where instrumentalized gestures range from supersubjectivity to showing us what “they” already know—presenting instead a new way to read a politically conscious field of action.

In so doing, Rancière has offered artists a means of bypassing the continual requirement to ironize their way out of postmodern paradoxes. Under the logic

of pure postmodernism, there was no binding philosophical or critical impediment to reactionary and neoconservative appropriations of artistic strategy; the use of an ironic base allowed a critical position to slide easily into a reinforcing role. Subsequently, in the face of relativism—and of crude readings of a postmodern blur in terms of high and low, social and antisocial, political and apolitical—the politically conscious field increasingly had to answer accusations of naïveté or co-option, and it struggled to proclaim urgency. Yet such simplistic application of a postmodernist veil around a structure of apparent conflicts is rendered problematic by Rancière’s key texts, which suggest that we may have created false tensions in order to develop a dynamic discourse around contemporary art.

While art’s relationship to modernist and postmodernist theory will always shift, Rancière asserts the following: “What is at stake in contemporary art is not the fate of the modernist paradigm. Its validity is neither weaker nor stronger than it ever was. In my view [this formulation] was always a very restrictive interpretation of the dialectic of the aesthetical regime of art.” The philosopher, in other words, directly addresses the space between the relentless progress of modernity and the super-self-conscious implosion of modernism. This is also a territory where artists have played for a long time. But might this territory offer us nothing more than a new zone of avoidance—a zone that may be traversed with ease as we lull ourselves into the belief that we don’t have to account for uncomfortable and apparently nonresolvable tensions between ideas and actions? If the critical language of modernism was complicated by the critical haze of postmodernism—and its attempt to question the relentless course of technological and social development in every direction—the position of the artist has similarly been problematized. Even so, both modern and postmodern critical structures have been avoided by many artists deploying the monochrome or the personal journey.

Rancière never spends too much time attending to any web of ideas that might be illustrated by one artwork or another; he does not agonize over a detailed exposure of unresolvable peculiarity. Instead, he addresses the appeal of negotiated boundaries between two parallel political aesthetics, suggesting that it is possible to go beyond clumsy attempts to resolve what seems made with the dynamic of political consciousness. This leads us to the heart of what is useful: Rancière examines the continued mutation of contemporary art in relation to an ongoing critique activating the political sphere. Rather than establishing and asserting dysfunctional paradigms that dissolve like morning fog, Rancière looks at what gets made and compares it to what has been previously proposed within aesthetic theory. He looks at conditions, discerning how earlier conceptions of aesthetics do not help us avoid the facts of the present.

Of course, the danger here is that we are merely happy to read a theorist who has even bothered to address contemporary art. We might be ascribing an excess of potential to his reassuring assertion that visual combinations at the root of certain familiar artistic strategies transcend modernism’s endgames and postmodernism’s perpetually circling relativisms. Nevertheless, in the face of impossible attempts to proceed with progressive ideas within the terms of postmodernist discourse, Rancière shows a way out of the malaise. Consider, for example, a body of work taking as its starting point the idea of a group of laid-off car workers returning to their now abandoned factory, and who subsequently seek to create a resolved ecopolitical equation of totalizing relationships. Don’t attempt to illustrate any of this directly but heap 440 pounds of red glitter on the floor. Red snow? Dispersed form? Rancière’s ideas might be understood as a structural justification in this case. The cauliflower in the corner has moved to center stage without displacing the rhetoric of self-conscious critique. Moreover, if the factory is in Sweden, the thinking filtered through Brazilian academic papers, and the works produced while

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This page: Chantal Akerman, *De l'autre côté* (From the Other Side), 2002, still from a color film in 35 mm, 102 minutes. Opposite page, from top: Chris Marker, *untitled* (Paris, April 2006), black-and-white digital image, dimensions variable. From the series "The Revenge of the Eye," 2006. Bernd and Hilla Becher, *Blast Furnaces 1970–1995*, 2005, twelve black-and-white photographs, 66 1/4 x 73".

2002 installation *Shit Plug*, which placed the excrement of visitors to Documenta 11 in containers to show us the gigantic waste of the society of the spectacle and to reveal the participation of art in the empire of merchandise and spectacle. I think of all these recycled objects mixed with advertising imagery, quotations of social-realist imagery, fairy tales, and video games that go from fair to fair, to the four corners of the world. If there is a circulation that should be stopped at this point, it's this circulation of stereotypes that critique stereotypes, giant stuffed animals that denounce our infantilization, media images that denounce the media, spectacular installations that denounce the spectacle, etc. There is a whole series of forms of critical or activist art that are caught up in this police logic of the equivalence of the power of the market and the power of its denunciation. The work of dissensus is to always reexamine the boundaries between what is supposed to be normal and what is supposed to be subversive, between what is supposed to be active, and therefore political, and what is supposed to be passive or distant, and therefore apolitical. That is what I was just saying about Pedro Costa's films. I was also thinking of the portfolio of images by Chris Marker published recently in these pages ["The Revenge of the Eye," *Artforum*, Summer 2006]—pictures of French students in the spring of 2006 protesting against a law that would have made working conditions for young people less secure. By proceeding in two modes, through filming and through manipulated screen captures from the video footage, Marker created a sort of fabulous population out of groups of real protesters. I'm thinking in particular of an image of a group of young people in hooded sweatshirts. During the riots in the Parisian *banlieue* in the fall of 2005, these hoods, covering the heads of Arab and black youth, became a stigma: They were compared both to terrorists' masks and to Muslim girls' veils. The hoods became the symbol of a population locked up inside its own idiocy. Now,

in "The Revenge of the Eye," they transform the young people into medieval monks, bringing to mind Saint Francis's companions in Rossellini's film. The protesters become a "fabulous" population in Deleuze's sense. It's as if the capacity of art brought to bear on the figures were actually a property of the figures themselves. That's an example of a reversal of perspective. And I think what art can do is always a matter of the reversal of perspectives. Police consists in saying: Here is the definition of subversive art. Politics, on the other hand, says: No, there is no subversive form of art in and of itself; there is a sort of permanent guerrilla war being waged to define the potentialities of forms of art and the political potentialities of anyone at all.

KELSEY: When I saw those Chris Marker images, I immediately thought of police surveillance methods. Identifying individuals in a crowd of demonstrators, isolating their faces—it's a similar technique.

RANCIÈRE: It's not a technique for identifying individuals. It's a tactic for blurring identities. The ambition here isn't to locate individuals but to blur roles, to extricate characters from their documentary identity in order to give them a fictional or legendary cast.

KELSEY: Speaking of surfaces, you have described the modernist surface as a paratactical space, or a site of exchange, where language, images, and actions collide and transform one another. In a hyperactive world of surfaces, can we still say that the surface is a public or common space? Or would you say that the nature of the surface has changed in the meantime?

RANCIÈRE: Contrary to the modernist thesis, the surface has not been a boundary, isolating the purity of an art, but, rather, a place of slippage between various spaces. Mallarmé gives a persuasive example of this when he defines dance as a form of writing on the surface of the floor and seeks to transpose this choreographic writing to the written page. The great artistic effervescence that

modernism wanted to bend to its paradigm of separation was on the contrary determined by this slippage of surfaces from one to another: the page, the canvas, the musical score, the dance floor. Today the "surface" has a bad reputation: The Marxist critical tradition that called for seizing the reality hitherto concealed from us morphed, by way of Debord and Baudrillard, into the idea that there is nothing behind the surface, that it is the place where all things are equivalent, where everything is equivalent with its image, and every image with its own lie. Thus the dogmatism of the hidden truth has become the nihilism of the ubiquitous lie of the market. And suddenly we valorize all these installations that monumentalize the screen or place it in a dark cube and thus allow us to uncover its lie once again. But the media screen is not flat. The anchorman who occupies its surface ceaselessly reports on the depth of a world that he unfolds and refolds, a "profound" world that testifies to him and that he confiscates. Critical pretension then risks constructing a space homologous to that of the consensual police. On the other hand, surfaces of cinematic projection in theaters or museums might exert a critical function with respect to the depth of the media, by returning the image to the fragility of its surface and letting it linger over fragments of the world and discourse about the world where conflict and injustice take time to appear and express themselves. I think of the time that a filmmaker like Chantal Akerman takes to glide along the wall of a Mexican border in her film *De l'autre côté* [From the Other Side, 2002] or to allow the discourse of those who want to leave and the discourse of those who are defending their space against them to unfold. Here the screen performs a separating function that maintains the border in question precisely, the border that, by crossing it constantly, the to-and-fro of information makes disappear. The flattening of the surface takes on the function of a divide. It's not an overwhelming subversion. But the politics of aesthetics involves a multiplicity of small ruptures, of small shifts, that refuse the blackmail of radical subversion.

KELSEY: And of course the surface is now also completely integrated into the space of work. When we work, which is to say, when we communicate, we are mostly sliding on these surfaces.

RANCIÈRE: There again we must relativize the idea that everything has become immaterial, that work is nothing but screens, and that screens are a surface of slippage, etc. I don't have a lot of sympathy for Santiago Sierra's actions, but when

he pays immigrant workers minimum wage to dig their own graves or to get tattoos that signify their condition, he reminds us at least that the "equivalence" of an hour of work and its effect on the body is not the so-called equivalence of everything that slides across a screen. The screen is neither Big Brother nor a network of collective intelligence representing the power of the "multitudes." A screen is not so much a surface of reproduction as the site of a construction, not a mere surface of equivalence on which we slip but a place where a process of transformation occurs. The problem lies in knowing what types of surfaces to construct in order to disrupt the normal functioning of surfaces and depths. What happens in video projections that cast a spectacle of solitude on the white walls of museums—as in the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, say—or of everyday misery, as in that of Gillian Wearing? If we change the dimensions, if we go from the TV screen to three images simultaneously projected on the walls of a room, will we disrupt the logic of the production of the everyday? That remains to be seen, but in any case the surface, like the image, is not the amorphous destiny of things—it's a process of art that changes the coordinates of the given.

KELSEY: Video installations tend to reproduce the everyday activity of window-shopping. I rarely feel emancipated in a video installation.

RANCIÈRE: There is no reason to be emancipated by a video installation. But we must refuse the logic that says the video projection, the TV screen, and the shopwindow are the same thing. No surface produces emancipation in and of itself. The problem is to define a way of looking that doesn't preempt the gaze of the spectator. It's true for spectacular installations, but it's also true for the photographs of blast furnaces or of warehouses and shipping containers that anticipate a new objective gaze as a product of objective framing against blank backgrounds. We cannot escape the slippages of the surface and the gaze. Emancipation is the possibility of a spectator's gaze other than the one that was programmed. This goes for the critical artist as well as for the window dresser.

CARNEVALE: So, another question about the surface: Can one properly receive a reflection on all these themes inscribed in a space that is half-filled with ads for galleries and half-filled with articles that serve to sell what is being shown in the galleries?

RANCIÈRE: We have to refuse the false choice between "collaboration or exodus" demanded by contemporary thinkers like Paolo Virno. There



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