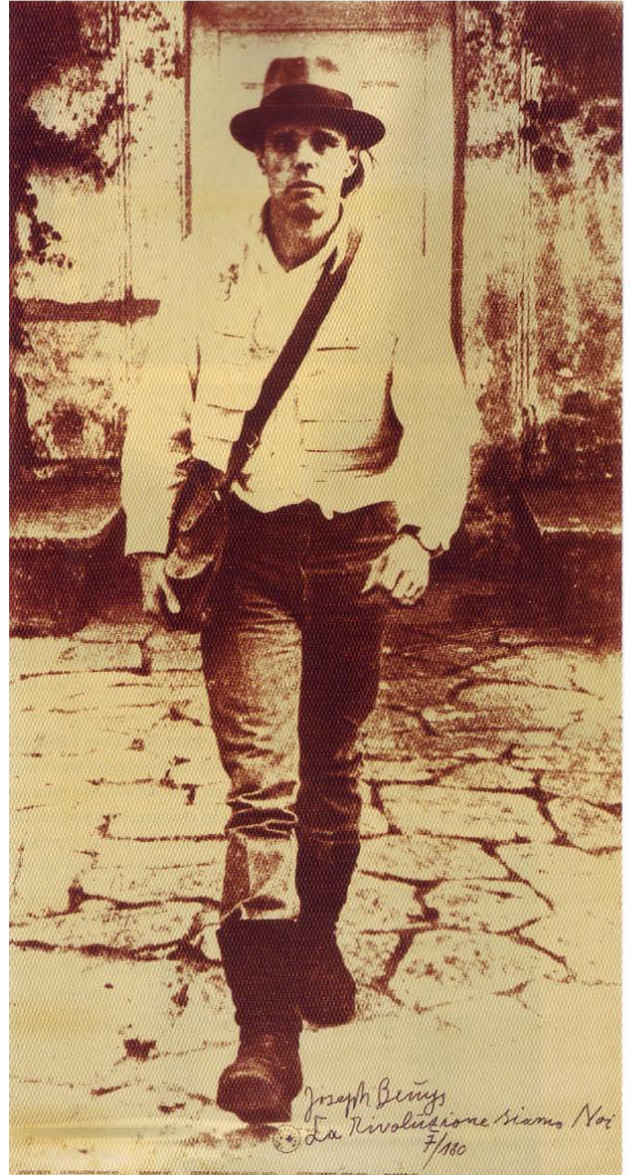
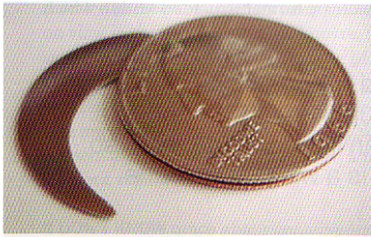




Displaced Struggles

BETTINA FUNCKE ON RANCIÈRE AND THE ART WORLD





Spread, from left: Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793, oil on canvas, 65 x 50 1/4". Joseph Beuys, *La rivoluzione siamo noi*, 1972, phototype on polyester, ink, and ink stamp, 75 1/2 x 39 3/4". © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Alfred and Marie Greisinger Collection, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Claire Fontaine, *In God They Trust*, 2005, twenty-five-cent coin, steel-shaped box-cutter blade, rivet, and solder, 1 x 1". Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait*, 2006, still from a color video, 90 minutes.

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hy might philosopher Jacques Rancière have become increasingly interested in contemporary art, even as the art world, in neat symmetry, has become increasingly interested in him? He has apparently followed art for many years, he spoke at the Frieze Art Fair in 2005, and now he has chosen to publish an essay in and submit to an interview for this magazine—all signs of his confidence that the art world can provide a space for his multilayered discourse.

Rancière is not an easy read, yet he is widely read (for a philosopher), largely because he situates himself between disciplines and debates and seeks to banish the division between specialist and amateur, obviously a stance with broad appeal. At the same time, his philosophical work can be quite abstract, with paradox intentionally lodged at its core. Although this embrace of internal contradiction complicates any discussion of his thoughts on art, might it not also be the reason today's art world is so interested in his voice? The hothouse of contemporary art harbors its own contradictions, after all. The artist today finds it harder than ever to *meaningfully* pose important questions at the very moment that the culture has accorded unprecedented attention to the artist as persona. And in the difficult task of thinking through this predicament—and seeking a way around it—many have turned to Rancière's writings for insight.

One of the more intriguing ideas Rancière has contributed to art discourse is an insistence that art and politics are simply two forms of what he calls "the distribution of the sensible." The sensible is a sphere in which both art and

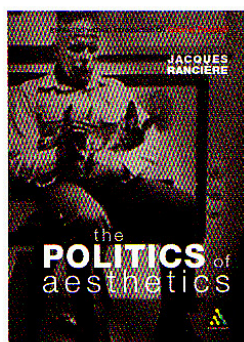
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politics act through processes of structuring, framing, identifying, and contextualizing (that is, distribution). It is a kind of unstructured matter that precedes all else. The distribution of the sensible, then, is synonymous with aesthetics, a term Rancière employs in the sense of *aisthesis*: a science concerned not simply with beauty and art but also with appearance and perception, all general terms that evoke Schiller's aesthetic education of man or Kant's description of aesthetic experience. Indeed, Rancière's own notion of aesthetic experience presupposes the equality that underwrote Kant's formulation of the judgment of taste as a judgment freed from hierarchies of knowledge and social status.

Rancière's philosophical path has been guided by the central presumption that there is a disruptive, anarchic equality that can undermine the normative,

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM with the art world's reception of Rancière's ideas is that they are often applied in an overly direct way. They're handy. We're relieved to address the politicization of art or to conclude that a particular work is indeed political art, because that gives a more concrete sense to what otherwise is an amorphous debate about aesthetics and politics based on ill-defined criteria. It would be far more challenging—and more fruitful—to examine what contemporary artists make of the politics of art and of the role of art in today's culture. What could these questions mean in light of Rancière's thinking?

In the interview that appears in these pages, Rancière claims that the truly political approach for art today is to engage popular culture and countercultures in terms of "the capacities they set in motion" rather than the images they offer. In other words, we must learn to create formal structures within which



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orderly, hierarchical inequalities that have forever bedeviled human social organization. A student of Louis Althusser's, Rancière coauthored *Reading Capital* (*Lire le Capital* [1965]) at the age of twenty-five but broke with his teacher shortly thereafter, angered by Althusser's critique of the 1968 student revolts; Rancière condemned in print his elder's

work as authoritarian, academic, and elitist (*La Leçon d'Althusser*, 1969/1974). Still, Althusser's focus on school, family, and media as the crux of ideology inspired Rancière's reflections on the social and historical constitution of knowledge when he delved into workers' archives of the 1830s and 1840s (*The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* [*La Nuit des prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier*, 1981]). Opposing Althusser's theory, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (*Le Maître ignorant*, 1987) propounds the pedagogical notion that everyone, lettered or unlettered, is equally capable of teaching and learning: "Equality is not an end to attain but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance." *Disagreement* (*La Mésentente: Politique et philosophie*, 1995), a reflection on the relation of politics to philosophy, is the book that cemented Rancière's philosophical reputation and on which rests *The Politics of Aesthetics* (*La Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, 2000), the first book in which he begins to think about the politics of art.

But what does politics mean here? It doesn't just signify institutions of power, or government, or law. The political order doesn't only define relationships between individuals and goods; it determines the apportionment of that which is common, that which lies—or should lie—beyond commerce's categories of profit and loss. When the sensible is structured, things are always left out: There is always more than can be counted and represented, and it is a material *more*—more people, more objects. For Rancière, politics attacks this false equation. It is the revolt against exclusion from forms of representation. It occurs at the moment of dissent and disagreement and is a disruption of the existing order, a means of exposing that which has been denied representation in the distribution of the sensible. The political begins when we stop balancing profit and loss and worry instead about distributing that which is *common*, creating communal shares and the bedrock of a sense of community.

one may operate with anarchic equality. Art can be a response to the inequality of inherited hierarchies, whether the systems of art history or those of a dominating popular culture; it can break them down and propose new connections, activating previously overlooked capacities.

In the context of art and politics, Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's film *Zidane, a 21st Century Portrait*, 2006—made by training seventeen cameras almost exclusively on the eponymous soccer star for the duration of a match—might seem like an antiexample. However, it addresses the politics of art, how art operates, how it makes meaning. The film aligns itself, in form and in content, with mass entertainment and high art at once. At ninety minutes, it is the length of both a televised soccer game and a feature film, and it was premiered more or less simultaneously at the Cannes Film Festival and the Basel Art Fair, during the final, frenzied weeks of the 2006 World Cup. Uniting the spectacular aspect of all three spheres, the artists deliver us a movie star, an iconic art image, and a sports legend, all in the same package.

I have watched the film twice, and both times missed the scoring (I honestly couldn't say whether it was absent or whether I simply missed it). The artists' editing strategy undermines any known dramaturgy, defamiliarizing the game, discovering instead a dreamy and barely recognizable event and a star player who scarcely moves, conserving his energy for brief bursts of action. When the cameras aren't closed in on Zidane, they pan across the audience in the background and the green expanse of the field, following the movements of Zidane's feet and the bands of advertisements encircling the field alike. Instead of constructing a familiar narrative about a familiar phenomenon, *Zidane* returns the image to the "fragility of its surface," to appropriate Rancière's language from the interview, and lets it "linger over fragments of the world and fragments of discourse about the world," out of which any sort of knowledge might be produced at any time.

But why would art be interested—or, more to the point, able—to take on a public sphere that encompasses soccer stadiums, globally mediated film images, and the Museum of Modern Art? This situation, like so many aspects of our culture, might productively be traced back to the ashes of the French Revolution, when "the aesthetic regime of art"—one of Rancière's key concepts—emerges. The term describes a new dispensation that promotes equality and the destruction of hierarchies, calling into question the distinction between art and other

activities. Art can now potentially reverse hierarchies of representation, suspended as it is between a newly established autonomy and a nascent public sphere ready to be conquered by art as well as by politics. T. J. Clark, in his 1994 essay "Painting in the Year Two," also looks to the 1789 Revolution, suggesting that the history of modernism may be seen as the development of an understanding of art's role after it was freed from mimesis and from the canons of church and court, entering instead a free market, a disenchanted world, or, perhaps better, a world now enchanted only by capital. Clark, a Marxist art historian who published early work alongside Rancière in the *New Left Review*, reflects on the circumstances under which Jacques-Louis David displayed *The Death of Marat*, 1793. Painted soon after Marat's murder, David's work was revealed to the public with its paint still wet, perched on top of the martyr's coffin on view in the courtyard of the Louvre, the terminus of a lavish funeral procession through Paris. With the passing of the Revolution, the need for new cult objects arose, and the importance now ascribed to the manner in which images are seen would intimately alter the process of artmaking. The context of display is as important as the image displayed. We can say, then, that the distribution of the sensible at that moment entered a new stage—that of modernity and the aesthetic regime of art.

"I DON'T KNOW much about contemporary art," apologizes Daniel, the protagonist of Michel Houellebecq's 2005 novel, *The Possibility of an Island*. "I've heard of Marcel Duchamp, and that's all." Daniel, a retired multimillionaire comedian, is visiting the studio of his friend Vincent, an artist. Vincent brings Daniel up to date on twentieth-century art, observing that one of three major art trends employs humor: "There's irony directed at the art market . . . or at finer things, à la Broodthaers, where it's all about provoking uneasiness and shame in the spectator, the artist, or in both, by presenting a pitiful, mediocre spectacle that leaves you instantly doubting whether it has the slightest artistic value; then there's all the work on kitsch, which draws you in, which you come close to, and can empathize with, on the condition that you signal by means of a meta-narration that you're not fooled by it."

The appearance of such dialogue in a book by a controversial and widely read novelist must be considered a symptom of our cultural moment. Serious writers and philosophers, who have always searched for a public sphere beyond academia, increasingly perceive the art world as a glamorous, and sometimes even lucrative, place to be; it joins that old standby Hollywood as a place of refuge for prominent cultural workers. In part, this is because, over the second half of the twentieth century, the art world—and, in particular, the artist as persona—has achieved an unprecedented prominence. The figure of the artist has been elevated (or lowered, depending on whom you ask) into the realm of common interest, gossip, and idle speculation: yet another site capable of focusing the public's wild, nonspecific desire, in this case through a dialectical movement between longing and loathing, as exemplified by Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys. Engaging the artist persona through fiction is a response to these changes.

The early work of Houellebecq's artist Vincent addresses explicit social concerns (e.g., an installation featuring crude sculptures of bread and fish placed before a monitor displaying the message **FEED THE PEOPLE. ORGANIZE THEM**). He comes to believe that while the artist is often assigned the role of either revolutionary or decorator—the distribution of the sensible in action—he can do his work in other ways. Only modestly successful as an artist, Vincent ultimately transforms himself into the reincarnation of a powerful prophet and presides over a burgeoning sect for which he creates values through his persona and his architectural vision for this new religion. As with Warhol (and perhaps Beuys, with his Organization for Direct Democracy), Vincent produces not outright

"revolutionary" work but something so insidiously influential that others take up his ideas and do his work for him; and it is through this multiplication that he changes the social fabric.

This idea recalls Rancière's interest in the way that the borders defining a practice as either artistic or political are drawn and redrawn, and his interest in activating dormant or unused capacities. By situating their reflections or discussions in the context of contemporary art, Rancière and Houellebecq seem to agree that it is worthy of engagement despite—or perhaps because of—its well-known limitations: for instance, that its radical experiments are always necessarily entangled with and allowed for by commerce. Art might provide a model, in fact, for the challenges facing contemporary cultural discourse generally.

RANCIÈRE SET OUT to break down the great divisions of specialist and amateur, high culture and popular culture, teacher and student, and his refreshing thinking has always placed itself between disciplines, generating discussion rather than closing it down with the either/or choices that so easily lead to the nihilism that has largely befallen the Left or to the self-righteous and self-defeating declaration that there is no way out of the spectacle. Rancière's work, then, is particularly appealing to the art world because it is, as he says, "a world in search of something." The art world continually asks what the role of art should be and what it means to make art, and this is an inquiry so general, so fundamental, and with such diverse answers that the result is a wide-open arena that sustains a heated art market wherein the same practices that give rise to unsurpassed commodification and monetary valuation also define new modes of appropriation regarding market circulation, yielding spaces of free time, questioning, discussion, and play—"breathing spaces," in the words of Rancière. Now that art circulates with such tremendous speed, synchronized with the movement of capital, information, and the desire that makes them go, a new generation of artists insists on a certain flexibility, as defense. This generation freely adopts the styles of both consumer and producer, always inventing new ways to manipulate information.

Perhaps contemporary art is more receptive than academia to the possibility of social change because it is defined by the erasure of boundaries (between the specificities of the arts), even by the erasure of its own visibility as a distinct practice. Rancière's notion of the aesthetic regime of art encapsulates the paradox that, under modernity, art is increasingly defined and institutionalized as a sphere of common and even public experience at the same moment that the boundaries between what is and is not art are being erased, effectively moving the goalposts. How does this all play out in the younger generations of artists today?

Rancière and Houellebecq approach the terrain of art from the position of writers and thinkers who are attracted to this world in all its contradiction, and they engage with it in particular ways—by speaking at an art fair, say, or by addressing the cultural ascendancy of the artist persona by means of a novel. What happens with the next generation—what becomes *possible*—is that a writer or a thinker can engage directly with the operations and structures of the art world. As Fulvia Carnevale puts it, "At this point the art world is more or less filled with political refugees who come from various other fields"; it is a world that is many worlds at once, "all sealed in the great stomach and intestine of Capital."

Carnevale and John Kelsey, who together interview Rancière in these pages, may be particularly useful examples of this condition. Trained in philosophy and closely allied with Rancière's thought, both come out of writerly backgrounds and now operate in the art world through the deployment of pseudonyms and cloaks of ambiguity: As writers working under collectively invented artist personae, they have effectively eliminated the

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individual author's (unnecessary) burden of subjectivity. Kelsey is affiliated with Reena Spaulings, first known as a New York gallery and project space and now as an "artist" as well—a brand that might transform itself into anything. A writer becomes an "artist" (a "symbol manager," as Kelsey puts it) because that role offers an open space of practice, not simply an opportunity for theoretical modeling. Carnevale and collaborator James Thornhill's "ready-made artist" Claire Fontaine can also be seen as a symbol, a response to the limits of academic language; "she" operates as a visual artist to transcribe symptoms of our current crisis, addressing our incapacity to assimilate and process the contemporary experience and to translate it into forms that express, alternately, the muteness and the inefficiency of verbal language today.

Other examples, many of them temporary structures, come to mind, including New York's Scorched Earth, a yet-unpublished "magazine" that for its year of operation functioned more as a discursive and social space, Sarah Pierce's Metropolitan Complex in Dublin, Berlin's United Nations Plaza, and New Delhi's Raqs Media Collective. You create a public for your work; you elicit participation in the circulation of your discourse from multiple audiences.

However, you also expose yourself to the contradictions inherent in the very things your work is about. What happens when you push these internal contradictions, when your artist who's not an artist makes you real money, when your gallery that's not a gallery sells art at real art fairs, when your magazine that's not a magazine needs infusions of real capital? In fact, and this might also be the case with the Reena Spaulings project and the others mentioned above, it's not clear that the fictitious Claire Fontaine's very real artworks succeed. These are stubborn objects, weapons of a displaced struggle that only grudgingly bow down to be art: the cover of Guy Debord's *Société du spectacle* wrapped around a brick; a US quarter retrofitted with a concealed blade. Are they too literal in translat-

ing philosophical concepts? Do these artistic projects court failure in their own way? Does Reena invite accusations of cynicism? Does Claire align herself with naive sincerity?

Most of these examples are collective efforts, and recent years have seen a resurgence of, or at least a renewal of interest in, art-world collectives, a tradition whose distinguished history includes the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire, the Situationist International, and the Guerrilla Girls. (I should mention that I myself participate in a collective called Continuous Project, which among other things has produced somewhat nonstandard magazines.) Collectivity holds out the promise that, through group activity, ambitious artists might tweak the status quo. The examples I have cited may differ from the traditional model, inasmuch as they activate the collective not as a vehicle for traditional social change, but more along the lines of a business model that can be adapted to effect change in the way art-world structures operate, including how capital is funneled through this sphere. These are structures for channeling art-world money and power and for allowing writers and thinkers to live artist personae. The impulse of a more traditionally legible activist politics might seem compromised by a "collective" structure that functions more like a dummy corporation that launders money through ideas, but in the end, the goal is the same: to keep alive what are, ultimately, traditional ideas of emancipation and disruption. If they need to be cloaked in the guise of business structures, so be it.

But what comes next? What lies beyond the aesthetic regime? The current invented artist personae and artist collectives are often engaged in a displaced struggle as they wait for something else to arrive, or attempt to make it happen themselves. There is a sense of pushing, an impatience. Rancière, on the other hand, prefers to calmly pose the questions rather than definitively answer them. Houellebecq, through the form of pure storytelling, envisions an artist figure beyond the aesthetic regime, an artist as propagandist, who is plucked from obscurity and given a real function as a religious leader. It comes as no surprise, then, that Houellebecq's Vincent would refer to Beuys. For Beuys, the question of how to create a relationship with the public that goes beyond a shared definition of beauty was central to his idea of "social sculpture." One of his unique achievements was to invent his public, understand it, and activate it, a strategy for which he developed the remarkable role of charlatan-artist. He offers an example of an artist who over the years developed an ambiguous position somewhere between sincerity and fraudulence, between the sacred and the profane, and for whom such uncertainty sprang from within as much as from without.

In 1964, Beuys called on the state to augment the Berlin Wall by five centimeters—an absurd demand, but one that deployed the common symbol of German national trauma in a theatrical gesture designed to appeal to both East and West. His memorandum to the Ministry of the Interior opens by declaring: "[The wall] is an image and it should be seen as an image." Ignoring the way the wall was normally perceived, Beuys only seemingly shifted the issue to a matter of pure aesthetics: "The view of the Berlin Wall from an angle that solely considers the proportion of the built structure," he continues "immediately defuses the wall." In other words, it directs us from the physical wall to the figurative wall and thus to the possibility of overcoming it. Beuys goes on to calculate the ideal height for the wall as a function of its length, by recourse to that most classical standard of beauty: proportionality. The document remains in limbo between aesthetic play and political declaration, redrawing the boundaries of politics and art

and envisioning, *avant la lettre*, a redistribution of the sensible, because once a physical wall appears to be a figurative wall, anything can happen. □

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