

*Nowhere is aesthetics contra ethics:
Rancière the other side of Lyotard'*

Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield

To assert the radical heterogeneity of sensory experience is, for Rancière, to transform art into 'sheer ethical testimony' in which ultimately 'both politics and aesthetics vanish'.² What Rancière calls 'the new reign of ethics', a reign he ascribes in the main, at least in the field of art, to the influence of the work of Jean-François Lyotard, confuses 'political and aesthetic distinctions in the same indistinct point of view'.³ That point of view sees otherness to be ontologically primary. In *Malaise dans l'esthétique* Rancière has in mind principally the way in which Lyotard ontologises otherness by, on the one hand, inverting the logic of the Kantian sublime, such that the incapacity felt in the experience of the sublime is that of reason itself unable to master what for Lyotard is the sensible event of matter; and, on the other, ascribing to art the task of testifying to our subservience to the sensible thing.⁴ If for Kant the experience of the sublime in the sensible world introduces in a supersensible order our obedience to the law of the superior autonomy of legislating reason, for Lyotard it is the reverse, the mind's subservience to the sensible is proof of our acquiescence to the law of alterity in which sensible experience is the experience of a debt, an ethical subservience, without escape, to the law of the other. Then *is* art possible under the category of the sublime so-construed? asks Rancière. Whereas Lyotard thinks that from the sublime issues the very task of art: to constitute a sensible world which testifies to the alienation brought about by our dependence on matter as such and its sheer power to disorientate the mind and make it suffer. According to this account, the sublime in Lyotard becomes a principle both of the ethical law of heteronomy and, in contradistinction to Kant's sublime, of artistic practice, of the practice of the artistic avant-garde.

If the force of the *immateriality* of matter – by which Lyotard means a pure difference, one which, because it is not a function or property of specific material features but of matter as such, and because it is not able to be determined by a concept, is in a way invisible and thus unrepresentable – is to be harnessed to its fullest extent then it must happen without recourse to specific means of presentation, indeed without recourse to any content whatsoever. Hence Lyotard's dismissal as mere eclecticism art which brings together within the bounds of a single frame both the conceptual and the representational, the abstract and the figurative. Curatorial or artistic practices setting out to combine such 'opposites' without heed to their ontological difference could only be seeking to bring about a new taste catering to the

market, in the process de-responsibilising the artist from testifying to the unrepresentable that materiality is.

But what determines when a taste is not a taste? asks Rancière. In this case simply that it *should* not be. Lyotard's is nothing but the conflation of the radical autonomy of art with the promise of political emancipation, founded on the experience of a particular *sensorium*, what Rancière calls the primitive scene of a certain Marxian conception of art's modernity shared also by Adorno and Greenberg. As with these other thinkers Lyotard defines art's value by the radicality of its separation from politics, in that he sees the political potential of art to consist in its being the one place where the purity of a break, a rupture, a revolution can be vouchsafed. But Rancière counters this reification and protection of the notion of revolution with the claim that an aesthetic revolution has already happened, such that the disaccord between matter and that to which it is opposed, between the sensible and thought, between imagination and the understanding, is a rupture always already at the heart of aesthetic experience, including that of the beautiful, and not just in the experience of the sublime, that *any* agreement between form and matter, between the understanding and the imagination, is already a *disagreement*, that consensus is already a shared dissensus, that art is always a movement of these contrary forces, to the extent that the aesthetic state is always a neither/nor in which these distinctions are annulled in their oppositionality. Why? Because the autonomous sphere of the aesthetic, Lyotard's condition of possibility of the experience of pure materiality, is for Rancière heteronomously constituted.

What defines the aesthetic, for Rancière, is that *everything* is material, everything and not just materiality. What Rancière calls the 'aesthetic revolution' is 'the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner'.⁵ It looks as though Rancière is not opposing Lyotard by calling for the reinsertion of a lost or missing or suppressed content or by appealing to a unjustly neglected subject, it is that he disclaims the idea that materiality is restricted to matter, or that matter be defined in terms of its physical properties. And he does so by showing how art is always the redistribution of matter whatever it talks about or however it presents itself. If the aesthetic revolution is first of all, according to Rancière, 'the honour acquired by the commonplace', it is in virtue not of what the commonplace says or is, but because what is commonplace is as much material for art as is anything else.

Rancière draws our attention to the *emergence* of the aesthetic, the way in which the specific sphere of aesthetic experience emerged, paradoxically, when the boundary separating art's objects from those of other realms of experience was blurred, making art's objects available to everyone equally, what Rancière calls, following Schiller, an 'equality of indifference', but in such a way that the forms of domination holding sway prior to the aesthetic revolution, for example the hierarchies of form over matter, of understanding over sensibility, are dissolved. The specific kind of experience which is the aesthetic, then, has always presupposed a collective life where the usual hierarchies which frame everyday life are withdrawn, the hierarchies of subject matters and genres and forms of expression, along with distinctions such as high and low, with the consequence that there is no longer any principle of distinction

between what belongs to art and what does not. Any profane object can enter the frame of aesthetic experience, and any artistic production can become part of the framing of collective life.

There is thus a paradox at the very foundation of an aesthetic regime, namely that art defines itself by its identity with non-art. And the idea of an autonomous realm of aesthetic experience therefore has at its centre a heterogeneity that is the material it draws from life. Autonomous art has at its centre a heterogeneous sensible.⁶ Lyotard's modernist paradigm of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere is but one side of this tension at the heart of the idea of such a sphere, a tension, a contradiction, a solidarity between autonomy and heteronomy. Lyotard separates art's autonomy from its constitutive heteronomy, he separates art's separateness from its non-separateness.

The equality of all subject matter in the aesthetic leads to the negation of any necessary relation between a determined form and a determined content, between subject matter and content.⁷ We might say it is the separation of the two. This break in the causal chain between art and affect, art and audience, between material form and political effect, is where I would locate the event of art in Rancière's work.⁸ To draw a specific kind of material from social life, to separate that material from the life from which it is drawn in order then to address it to that life, for example in the form of the content of, or feelings about, or stances taken on social issues or political events, does not make art political. And nor is art political owing to the way in which it might represent existing social structures or identities or alternatives to these. 'As a matter of fact' says Rancière, 'political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an "awareness" of the state of the world'.⁹ On the contrary, art is political to the extent that it is able to distance itself, separate itself from such functions through the use of the materials it draws from the social, art is emancipating only when it renounces the political message and the manifest will towards emancipation.¹⁰

And yet, says Rancière, art *can* be political. The political act of art is 'to save the heterogeneous sensible which is at the heart of the autonomy of art and... of its power of emancipation' from the twofold threat of either its identification with everyday life (in which case there would be no art), or its transformation into a pure aesthetic (no politics).¹¹ And the way it does this is not by keeping art's separateness separate from its non-separateness, but by continually staging its relation of separateness and non-separateness. Rancière sees political art to be a dialectic, a dialectic between the apolitical and the political, one which would 'take up the tension between two poles', these 'two constitutive politics of aesthetics', in such a way as to retain something of both, in a manner that reconfigures collective life yet withdraws aesthetic sensibility from other spheres of experience, a dialectic that would provoke political intelligibility yet retain sensory foreignness. He calls it a 'collage of opposites'. It involves setting together specific forms of heterogeneity and, contrary to Lyotard's dictum, borrowing elements from different spheres of experience and different arts and different techniques and montaging them,¹² negotiating between 'the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning'.¹³

Now, here is the important point, and it's where I find myself at odds with Rancière's theory. In *The Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière states that political art produces a 'double effect': on the one hand a readable political signification, and on the other a sensible shock caused, conversely, by that which resists signification and indeed threatens to undermine it. This double effect is named also the 'ideal effect', its ideality consisting in how it holds open and makes visible opposites which, left to themselves, would destroy that to which they are opposed. But do we not have here what would amount to a revocation or a contradiction by Rancière? For no sooner does he in my view correctly expose as a prejudice Lyotard's separation of pure sensation from its other, be that other representation, figuration or culture, a separation by decree of an autonomy which would be separate from the heteronomy which constitutes it, than Rancière himself decrees that political art is made 'ideal' by its inclusion of those things that Lyotard would want to exclude from it. Rancière appears to be reinforcing the other side of Lyotard's false opposition between art which would signify a determinate meaning and one which would foreground its materiality at the expense of that. Political art achieves its 'ideal effect' only when it incorporates into its play a 'readable political signification'. But why, if there exists no determinate link or causal relation between a determined form or content and its political affectivity? Why must an artwork, in order that it be read as political, visibly retain within it a 'political signification' at all? If there exists no causal link between any material arrangement and its political affectivity why cannot, for example, an 'abstract' painting with no ostensible, visible, readable political content not count as political? Rancière himself said in yesterday's lecture that 'What makes the aesthetic political is precisely what gets in the way of the politicisation of art', and that there is no causal or determinate link between why understanding the state of the world should lead to a decision to change it. Then why call for any political signification, which we might say cannot but refer to 'the state of the world', as a requirement of political art practice at all?

To be sure, Rancière's politics of aesthetics gives new visibility to practices of art as political practices, what he calls a 'meta-politics of the sensory community'. A meta-politics is a manner of doing politics other than how politics does politics, and the meta-politics of art is the establishment of a sensory community achieving, says Rancière, 'what will always be missed by the merely political revolution', namely freedom and equality brought together in forms of life, freedom and equality in accord with modes of speaking and being, new relationships between thought and the sensory world, between bodies and their environment, between bodies and the distribution of words.¹⁴ The emphasis here on speaking and on writing is important, for throughout Rancière's work runs a discourse on the debt the heteronomously constituted autonomous aesthetic sphere owes to literature, and a discourse on how art practices are made possible by and emerge co-originally with ways of speaking and writing about art which reveal what would otherwise remain unseen within it. Visual artworks are always both of these, the visible and the sayable, the seen and the said, image and word, the visibility of what is sayable, what is sayable about the seen. And the two, and Rancière too insists on this, the visible and the sayable, need not be present in the work for both to be materially present. 'A theoretical discourse is always simultaneously an aesthetic form.'¹⁵ An image may consist 'wholly of words'.¹⁶ And

by the same token words may consist wholly of paint, blocks of paint with no readable signification.

Artists economise these two modes of aesthetic sensoriness on the boundary between, and at the point of the absence of boundary between, art and non-art, in such a way as to ask and yet not to allow the work to make sense, or at least not politically in the present moment. If art truly does invent its addressee, which Rancière following Deleuze who in turn follows Heidegger on this calls a ‘people to come’, a people that in no way can be circumscribed as a community that we today could in any way recognise – so why retain the word ‘community’? is one question I would put to the presentation Rancière made yesterday – if art truly does call for a ‘people to come’ then we can no more appeal to art’s ‘ideal’ effect than we can to its task being to bring about a political revolution in the present moment.

Artworks distribute what is sensible in ways which differ from the social realm from which they draw their material, a sensibility at odds with the social and yet common to all. It is this distribution or partition of the sensible, as Rancière puts it, which makes of art the primary way in which we can intervene in the material world. Art can intervene because the materiality of artworks, a materiality drawn from ‘everywhere’, from the everywhere of what is common to all, is vested with a force or power foreign to that matter as it occurs in the world from which it is drawn and in which it will intervene. Part of the force of this insight is how it puts into question the ways in which we understand materiality. The materiality of artworks is no longer, if it ever was, what the modernists or Marxists define it as – in the hands of a Greenberg or a Lyotard such descriptions become prescriptive and amount to prejudice. Instead, what material is for art is yet to be decided, always yet to be decided. I take this to be part of the force of the appeal to a ‘people to come’, and why Rancière (using the same term as Lyotard) petitions for the ‘immateriality’ of the sensible in the form of the insensible of art which is the ‘thinking of the work’.¹⁷ Thus art will never intervene purely or simply *materially*. Rather, it will intervene as art. Art is a construct, a material arrangement of what can be apprehended and gathered not just by the senses but by words – where *both* are forms of the sensible of thought.

Art is a regime of a sensible that has become foreign and exterior to itself,¹⁸ and through the word – which may not visibly be present – art makes this difference of the sensible to itself coincide with a difference of thought with respect to itself.¹⁹ And only when the sensible has become foreign to itself, and made coincident with a ‘power of thought outside of itself’, can the social or the political be thought. What Rancière calls the fictionalising of the real, its acting out social space, the place where beings are ‘as if’ together, will be a common place safeguarded as the space of art, where its material intervention – material in the form both of the work’s materials and the material of words – will begin as a displacement foreign from the matter to which it addresses itself all of the time and everywhere – including the matter of political discourse. In this way is art made visible as art, even if, or especially if, art seeks to erase itself as a distinct practice.²⁰

The political partition which is everywhere visible is made apparent by the materiality of art which, foreign to itself, exceeds or falls short of or flees from the social matter

from which it is drawn. The aesthetic distribution of the sensible is an interactive or participatory art or a writing or a painting in which a remainder is produced which cannot be utilised for any social function and which promises only the indefinite destruction of those principles of differentiation and hierarchisation by which we might wish to order art or politicise art or give it some sense in relation to political or social life. If art is about making the invisible appear it is not as if what is invisible is decided by what was already visible. And as visible it is aesthetical, not societal. Once society claims for itself the meaning or the making visible of what was hitherto invisible it is the imposition of a fixed interpretive grid or framework, an imposed visibility, a forcing to stay visible, in short something which is *public*. And therefore political. Against which, art can be 'read' as a 'political inscription' become visible only on condition that it be shifted and displaced and kept separate from the reciprocal social relations from which nonetheless it appears to be drawn, the only place from where it *can* be drawn, and in which it must stay and to which it must continue to address itself. In this way are artworks absolutely singular. And yet the aesthetic regime, one which welcomes any material whatsoever into the field of art, negates any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity: no criterial principle exists for differentiating the aesthetic sphere from what it is not. The artwork is its differentiation – and thus a question about its own finitude.

And if art is always a question of its finitude, then it is an inquiry not just into *its* finitude but as much into where falls the world's finitude from which art's material is drawn. We have seen how art enacts a struggle between its separateness and non-separateness, a struggle Rancière refers to as a dialectic between the apolitical and the political. But dialectics will always be able to take into account, that is appropriate, our rejection of it, and indeed our affirmation of it. It makes no difference whether we reject it or affirm it. But this does not amount to an indifference. The dialectic could not be what it is without being moved by difference. Artworks, on the other hand, are absolutely indifferent to our responses to them. This is in part what for Rancière makes of the aesthetic a new idea of thought, 'the power of thought outside of itself', a power of thought 'in its opposite': mute things; the presence of thought in things which do not think, thought disconnected from the will in which the will becomes unregulated,²¹ and emptied of anything other than pointing 'forever to art'.²² This is not the will to create, still less the will to create 'readable political significations', it is the will to create the sensible of thought, a will manifest as much in saying as it is in showing.

To say that at the heart of the aesthetic is the idea that the highest effort of the will is to identify itself with the highest point of its abdication, and to establish that identity in a work, is to say that a work is set forth for the will of another, a writer, an artist, a viewer. Hence a certain movement in art towards nothingness, silence, self-annihilation, invisibility, even theory – all of which modalities remain visible as art. Theory too can be put forward as an image, a work of visual art. The power of thought outside itself, the vesting of mute things with speech, the tendency towards silence and will-lessness, the theorising of art by artworks themselves, theory as art practice, is a language which tolerates every relation and no relation, and in this is art's relation to the social always singular. Every relation because no two things are immune from being placed in common; no relation because art tolerates no symmetry

of relation to that to which it addresses itself as separate in order to be related to it. Art will always remain indifferent to reactions to it or interactions with it or to significations of it, precisely in order that it intervene materially. In this respect art continually effaces itself, eludes our grasp, precisely at the moment when we have invested it with speech, for this speech is not reducible to signification, still less readable political signification. There can never be a work of art about which nothing could be said, in the silence or invisibility of which we somehow hear or glimpse the possibility of the unrepresentable, or the materiality of which would resist everything to be said about it, reducing us to silence. But this is not the same thing as saying that art is political if and only if it brings with it a readable political signification. The truth is, we cannot with any surety or fixity say when and how a work of art is political – we have to work it out in the space of that work itself.

In this is our experience of artworks always a singular, particular material organisation of the experience of *nowhere*. Not because artworks are nowhere, on the contrary, all artworks are experienced somewhere. It is not a nowhere in opposition to the places where art is shown or whence its viewers or participants come. It is the nowhere in each place of that sort. This sensible organisation of the experience of nowhere is not to use material as if what material is pre-exists the event of the artwork. What material is, both for the artist and the viewer, has to be worked out in the place of the artwork. And these workings out are made possible by the space afforded art by the very things it wishes to bring into question: the social institutions of art, the place where a commonality of experience is institutionalised and the concomitant discourses of art (which may well also be seeking to bring into question those very institutions). But in the place of the artwork does not mean temporally co-extensive with our experience of it. Thus so-called ‘relational’ or ‘socially-engaged’ artworks, for example, which seek to take over the entire space of the presentation of art, including the time for critical reflection on it, are no less in need of a time outside of themselves in which to follow its questioning than are, for example the so-called sheer material or purely sensible things that abstract expressionist paintings are, works which claim for themselves pure ‘presence’ with no temporal duration at all. Such is the way that the space which is common, the space which allows everything into the realm of the aesthetic, can be the most uncommon space of all.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read to the Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy at the University of Leicester (February 2006), and after its presentation in Amsterdam it was given in revised form to the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin (March 2008). The version published here contains revisions made subsequent to the discussions following all three talks.

² Jacques Rancière, ‘The politics of aesthetics’, <http://theater.kein.org/node/99>, p 6.

³ Jacques Rancière, ‘From politics to aesthetics?’, *Paragraph*, 28 (1), Summer 2005, p 23.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), in particular the chapter ‘Lyotard et l'esthétique du sublime: une contre-lecture de Kant’, pp 119-141. See also ‘The sublime from Lyotard to Schiller: two readings of Kant and their political significance’, translated by Max Blechman, in *Radical Philosophy*, 126, July/August 2004, pp 8-15.

⁵ Jacques Rancière, ‘Politics & aesthetics: an interview’, with Peter Hallward, translated by Forbes Morlock, in *Angelaki*, 8 (2), August 2003, p 205.

⁶ Jacques Rancière, ‘The autonomy of art, in the aesthetic regime, is heteronomy as well.’ ‘The thinking of dissensus: politics and aesthetics’, Goldsmiths College, London, Sept 2003, <http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/psrpsq/ranciere.doc>, p 10; ‘The autonomy is its heteronomy as well.’ ‘The

politics of aesthetics', op cit, p 3; 'Autonomy itself is still the other side of heteronomy.' 'From politics to aesthetics?', op cit, p 20.

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000), translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p 14.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, 'Art of the Possible', in conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, *Artforum*, March 2007, p 259.

⁹ *The Politics of Aesthetics*, op cit, p 63.

¹⁰ 'Art of the possible', op cit, p 258.

¹¹ 'The politics of aesthetics', op cit.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *The Politics of Aesthetics*, op cit, p 63.

¹⁴ 'The thinking of dissensus', op cit, p 7.

¹⁵ *The Politics of Aesthetics*, op cit, p 65.

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (2003), translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), p 7 (my emphasis).

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, 'What aesthetics can mean', in Peter Osborne (ed), *From An Aesthetic Point of View* (London: Serpentine Books, 2000), pp 25 and 19.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, 'Literature, politics, aesthetics: approaches to democratic disagreement', interview with Solange Guénoun and James H Kavanagh, *SubStance* 92, 2000, p 12.

¹⁹ 'What aesthetics can mean', op cit, p 16.

²⁰ '... contemporary art is, quintessentially, art defined by the erasure of medium specificity, indeed by the erasure of the visibility of art as a distinct practice.' 'Art of the possible', op cit, p 257.

²¹ 'Literature, politics, aesthetics', op cit, p 22.

²² 'What aesthetics can mean', op cit, p 31.