

Behind Police Lines: Art Visible and Invisible

Stephen Wright



Production of street signs by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for an "escrache" denouncing the "flights of death" carried out by the Argentinian dictatorship between 1976-83. Buenos Aires, 2003. Courtesy the author.

I am not a specialist on the work of Jacques Rancière. But his writings, and in particular his insistence on how excess rudely intrudes into otherwise ontologically and politically stable orders, allowing what was previously invisible or unheeded to suddenly emerge, have – more than those of any other contemporary philosopher – accompanied me as an art critic in trying to make sense of recent shifts in the symbolic configurations and activities that can be described as art. Jacques Rancière as the philosopher of the rude holds immense appeal for me. However, I tend to make a less dramatic – even far less dramatic – distinction between the sensorium of artistic production and the sensorium of other realms of creative action than does Rancière. Actually, Rancière's thought has – rightly or wrongly – led me to breaking with the order of art per se (which is also an order, with its own police, though we are sometimes loathe to acknowledge that) in favour of a broader and at once more extensive and intensive conception of creativity, of which artistic creativity is merely one vector.

To my knowledge, Rancière doesn't offer a definition of 'creativity' per se. But it is clear that, to his mind, creativity must be closely bound up with dissensus: creative activity (or the production of creativity) is dissensual activity (or the production of dissensus). Thus I have deduced what I believe to be the Rancièrian definition of creativity: the raising of wrongly posed questions; questions which are paradoxically, absurdly or even scandalously wrongly posed. In *Aux bords du politique*, discussing the efforts of France's early feminists to rip apart the seamless

identification of man and citizen in the definition of political universality that allowed no place for women, he writes this:

[In] nineteenth century France, workers were able to build their strikes in the form of a question: do French workers belong to that group known as the French, which the Constitution declares to be equal before the law? ... The first French feminists raised the question in still more paradoxical terms: 'is a French woman a French person?' (*Une Française est-elle un Français?*) The formulation may seem absurd or scandalous. But 'absurd' sentences of this kind can be far more productive, in the process of equality, than the mere assertion that workers are workers and women are women. They make it possible not only to reveal a logical breach which itself unveils the workings of social inequality. They also make it possible to articulate this breach as a relation, to transform the logical non-place into a place of polemical demonstration.¹

In other words, if the questions were well posed – that is, in keeping with the decorum and precepts of the established epistemological and social order – they would elicit a response, more or less interesting, but one which could not fail to be logically compatible with that order, and thus submissive to it. They would not, and could not, produce creativity or dissensus.



Street signs and maps produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for the "escrache" of Luis Juan Donocik, unpunished dictatorship perpetrator, Buenos Aires, December 2003. Courtesy the author.

I begin with this reflection on creativity, both because I want to dedramatise the conventional sundering of art-specific creativity from more diffuse forms of creativity, and to foreground the extent to which creativity is the very essence of the political as Rancière understands it. I am entirely sympathetic to what I construe as Rancière's vision of creativity, though I am more reticent about his celebration of that sort of channelled and domesticated creativity known as art. Whereas Rancière's political writings provide conceptual tools to rethink art – and I am thinking here above all that of the 'police' which embodies and upholds consensus and defines the partition lines of the sensible – his aesthetic and art-critical writings paradoxically seem to reinforce a conventional partitioning and conception of art. By this I mean that for him it appears almost self-evident that in order to make visible the invisible (that is, to bust up consensus, shift the partition lines of the sensible) art must in and of itself enjoy the highest coefficient of artistic visibility possible; it must be not merely visible, but be visible as art *per se*. While sharing Rancière's concerns and conceptual groundwork, my hypothesis is just the opposite: in order to effectively

shake up the redistribution of the places and functions – that is, the parts and lack of parts of all parties involved – art must forego its coefficient of artistic visibility. If art is to recover something of the disruptive capacity that Rancière attributes to it, art must accept to no longer appear as such. The question then is: to what extent can Rancière's political aesthetics accommodate *invisible* art – a far more and ever increasingly widespread phenomenon than the art critic Rancière appears prepared to acknowledge?



Street signs and maps produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for the “escrache” of Luis Juan Donocik, unpunished dictatorship perpetrator, Buenos Aires, December 2003. Courtesy the author.

Let me back up a little now, to the very starting point of Jacques Rancière’s inspiring lecture last night. He began, you will recall, with three ‘propositions’ of community, of being-together. I would like to propose one of my own, in the form of a quote: ‘We were friends and we didn’t know it,’ wrote Maurice Blanchot of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. What a strange idea – a friendship that remained invisible to itself. After all, if anything should be self-aware, surely it is that form of interpersonal solidarity based on elective affinity known as friendship. We know, roughly speaking, when friendship begins, and it is one of the rituals of friendship to recall the circumstances of its beginnings. We know too, often with painful precision, when friendship ends, and we may find ourselves looking back alone at what caused the rupture. But an unselfconscious friendship seems to imply that there can be disparate regimes of sensibility that prevent us from perceiving modes of being-together in which we are nevertheless actively involved. If this is the case, we can see Blanchot’s remark less as a mildly perplexing paradox than as a profoundly political insight. For politics, like art, is about perturbing stable regimes of perceptibility, making visible bodies which, though always there, went somehow unnoticed, making audible and legible as music what was previously written off as mere noise. Reality, in other words, doesn’t just show up on our radar screens because it is there; like desire, it has to be composed. And that composition is a political act.

What determines which bodies and aggregates of bodies are visible or invisible in the perceptible order of things? What assigns them their coefficient of visibility is what Jacques Rancière broadly refers to as the ‘police’. Not the police in the crassest sense, understood as the bludgeon-wielding wardens of the law; but the police in the broadest sense – in other words, the often invisible set of institutions that ensure the prescription and regulation of the existent arrangement of what is not only

legitimate, but literally perceptible. As Rancière put it in his now classic though still provocative definition:

The police is, in its essence, the law which, though generally implicit, defines the part or lack of part of the parties involved. But to define that, one must first define the configuration of the sensible in which the various parties are inscribed. The police is thus above all a bodily order that defines the partition between means of doing, means of being and means of saying, which means that certain bodies are assigned, by their very name, to such and such a place, such and such a task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable, which determines that some activities are visible and that some are not, that some speech is heard as discourse while others are heard as noise.²

As political struggle – in which art may of course play a role – forces changes in the distribution of the sensible, social arrangements, discourses and groups emerge from and recede into the darkness monitored by the police. Rancière’s analysis clearly pertains to art; but it also and more generally applies to a line of partition between practices that are admitted and those that are discredited, between what must be said and what cannot be said and by whom, between socially mandatory and forbidden speech and action. To take but one example on the shores of Europe: it is only recently, after sustained political struggle that Kurds have come to be acknowledged as existing in the eyes of the Turkish state. Though of course their collective existence is by no means a recent phenomenon, their emergence as a collective entity has only come about through a decisive shift in the dominant regime of sensibility – a shift in the police lines, so to speak, which means that today Kurdish videomaker Sener Ozmen’s works can be shown in Istanbul in their original version with Turkish subtitles.³



Street signs and maps produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for the “escrache” of Luis Juan Donocik, unpunished dictatorship perpetrator, Buenos Aires, December 2003. Courtesy the author.

Seen in this positive light, art is political not because of its subject matter but because it secretes the sort of dissensus-engendering – or consensus-corroding – sensibility that brings previously invisible or scarcely visible bodies into focus. One way artists do this is by enlarging their artistic material to including human interrelations, bringing other people’s subjectivities – often subordinated subjectivities – into the artistic equation. This is unquestionably the major impetus behind so-called ‘relational aesthetics’. Yet, because of the single-signature structure of artworks (which are almost invariably signed by the artist alone), those who

Behind Police Lines: Art Visible and Invisible

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/wright.html>

collaborate in their production, contributing their own creativity to the common end, are somehow condemned to disappear – or, paradoxically, to *re-disappear*, if the work succeeds in drawing attention to their perceptibility to start with. This is one of the greatest pitfalls of relational aesthetics, and indeed one of the most irksome political paradoxes of art today. Inasmuch as it repatriates this anonymous creativity into the folds of the artworld, the work of *Urban Encampment* – mentioned yesterday evening by Jacques Rancière – merely reproduces the predatory logic of the artworld, and is closer to a colonisation of the real than to fissuring it open.⁴



Street signs and maps produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for the “escrache” of Luis Juan Donocik, unpunished dictatorship perpetrator, Buenos Aires, December 2003. Courtesy the author.

Art obviously enjoys a place of pride in Rancière’s system. But it appears paradoxical that whereas other bodies and phenomena are seen to produce dissensus by cropping up where they are not supposed to, where they are not allowed to, by intruding into policed fictions, barging into spaces and times where there is no space nor any time for them, art is somehow supposed to remain in its place. Unlike everything else, art is political when it does what it is supposed to: being produced and exhibited within the performative framework of the artworld. But how is aesthetic rupture, and the efficacy of disconnection, to take place without breaking with artworldly consensus? Yet Rancière is explicitly wary of art seeking to sunder from itself. ‘Politics and art refer to one another as two forms of fiction, working on the same material. A certain will to get outside or to join up with the real thus ultimately tends to identify the politics of art to its opposite, that is, consensual ethics.’⁵ On this one, crucial point, the conclusion I draw from Rancière’s work is at odds with his own.

I suspect that one reason for the artworld’s warm embrace of Rancière’s aesthetic theory is that it tells the artworld what it wants to hear about itself; it reinforces the glowing stereotype that the artworld fancies for itself – that is, as an inherently political and almost subversive place, whatever sort of predictable and conventional buffoonery it actually engages in. For in fact, the artworld is a very policed world, though one which has a paradoxical proclivity for not looking at itself, and its implicit conditions of possibility, with any sort of hard-headed lucidity. For instance, and for the dominant mindset, it goes almost without saying that for art to take place at all, it must be visible; indeed, it should enjoy the highest coefficient of artistic visibility possible. In art, being is not only being perceived, but being

perceived *as such*. So self-evident does this appear, that it scarcely seems to bear mention, for in the absence of the framing devices separating art from mere real things, objects and activities of whatever description obstinately refuse to change their perceptual and indeed ontological status to become art. The past decade, however, has witnessed the emergence of an increasing number of practices, which, though informed by artistic competence and intention, have such a low coefficient of artistic visibility as to be imperceptible as art. We *see* something, but not as *art*. What, then, are the determinant framing devices that dictate the conditions under which art appears in the world – at least under current conventions? Three normative assumptions form a sort of implicit compact: that art necessarily and almost naturally manifests itself in the world in the form of an *artwork*; that art takes place through the intermediary of an artist, whose bodily presence and creative authority – upheld by the signature – guarantee the artistic authenticity of the proposition, underwritten by *authorship*; that art takes place before homogenised aggregates of visual consumers that make up the institution of *spectatorship*. Questioning the places and non places of art thus involves at the same time raising the question as to *who* is authorised to do art. Who, in other words, is invested with the authority required to insure the acquiescence of the spectator? For ultimately, if the spectator fails to adhere to the artistic nature of the proposition, validating its quest for recognition (‘this is art’) through the voluntary suspension of disbelief, art cannot take place at all.



Street signs and maps produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for the “escrache” of Luis Juan Donocik, unpunished dictatorship perpetrator, Buenos Aires, December 2003. Courtesy the author.

Fortunately, a growing number of artists and artists collectives are questioning the need for art to conform to these normative constraints: in the place of the sacrosanct artwork, some are favouring an art which remains open and process-based, showing scant concern for the usual criteria of showing and disseminating, refusing to subordinate process to any extrinsic finished product; others (often the same), challenging the artist’s authority, have come to advocate co-authorship, broadening responsibility for the creative process to all those taking part; still others (invariably the same), instead of contributing to an art whose legitimacy relies on recognition by the spectator, refuse this conventional division of visual labour (whereby subject₁

produces an object for delectation, consumption or bracing reception by subject), preferring interventions, which, though not exempt from the exigencies of the public sphere, have only a negligible coefficient of art-specific visibility. Such practices undermine positions of authority and diminish the remit historically attributed to those experts of expression, generally referred to as artists.

Envisaging an art without artwork, without authorship and without spectatorship has an immediate consequence: art ceases to be visible as such. For practices whose self-understanding stems from the visual arts tradition – not to mention for the normative institutions governing it – the problem cannot just be overlooked: if it is not visible, art eludes all control, prescription and regulation – in short, all ‘police’. In a Foucauldian perspective, one might argue that the key issue in policing art is the question of visibility.



Street signs and maps produced by the Grupo de Arte Callejero for the “escrache” of Luis Juan Donocik, unpunished dictatorship perpetrator, Buenos Aires, December 2003. Courtesy the author.

Of course, Rancière nowhere refers to the ‘art police’. Indeed, so silent is he on the point that one suspects that the very notion is antinomical to his thinking. At any rate, it remains to be understood why art consistently enjoys a status of exception both in Rancière’s writing and in the general symbolic order – rather than being the very image of that order. As he writes:

The essence of the police is to be a partition of the sensible characterised by the absence of emptiness and supplementarity: society consists of groups devoted to specific modes of doing, of places where these occupations can be performed, of modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this adequation of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of the ‘there isn’t any’ which is the policing principle at the very core of state-sanctioned practice.⁶

The art police acts tacitly, its hidden injunctions only becoming truly perceptible with the benefit of hindsight, when the shape of an era or movement slowly comes into focus. For, as I see it, Rancière’s analysis applies as much to art as it does to the partition of the real between places and non places of knowledge, visibility and legitimacy, and enables us to better see how actions and words are distributed in keeping with a line that has been defined a priori.

And it may well be for this reason that ever more artists today are quitting the artworld, sacrificing their coefficient of artistic visibility in favour of a more

corrosively dissensus-engendering capacity in the dominant semiotic order. For to see something as art according to the dominant performative paradigm of the contemporary artworld, is to acknowledge something terribly debilitating: that it is *just* art – not the dangerous, litigious, real thing. It is not my intent to deny that art can, on occasion, do what Rancière claims it can: for the artworld élite that likes that sort of thing, the concentrated, composed and self-reflective works one finds in museums have a disruptive value that is far from negligible. But deliberately circumscribing it within the policed structure of the artworld is to ensure that our relationship to art remains one of constantly renewed, constantly dashed hopes.

Art has a long history throughout the twentieth century of seeking to do away with itself, at once realising and abolishing itself. However, this is not the impetus of what some people are now referring to as ‘stealth art’ or ‘spy art’ practices today, whose coefficient of artistic visibility is so deliberately impaired as to render the work well nigh invisible. In seeking to pry out that void from the core of fullness, which Rancière contends is the very dynamic of the political, they seek a coefficient of efficiency, beyond the reaches of those art practices that appear under the unambiguous banner of art. Quite frankly, if art framed as art really had anything like the disruptive capacity Rancière generously ascribes to it, we would have noticed it by now. At any event, an increasing number of artists have apparently grown disenchanted with the sort of invisible parentheses around art, bracketing it off from a more inclusive sensorium of experience. These artists have broken with a paradigm that Rancière seems not to question, or perhaps even to notice: that art need not necessarily appear in the world in terms of its specific ends (artworks) but in terms of its specific means (its tools). Or to use a distinction from Chomskian linguistics, which I find useful, rather than appearing as performance art can exist as competence. What happens when artists use their reflexive competence to inform symbolic activities and configurations without laying claim to it as art? If they do it in collaboration with scientists – as is the case of the Critical Art Ensemble, for instance – they may enhance the visibility of the police lines around the production of scientific knowledge, revealing science to itself as a capital-intense culture of experts – bringing together technocrats, academics and investors – all of whom belong to a sort of *epistemic community*, sharing a common intellectual and above all axiological and ideological background. Or if they do it in collaboration with social movements, they enhance the visibility – and thus the creative, dissensual capacity – of those intrusive bodies, as they endeavour to eek out a space for themselves.

Let me conclude with a single example, which I find emblematic, for it also suggests to my mind that art is increasingly moving toward its own ‘invisibilisation’ in its quest to elude the police, artistic and otherwise. The Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC, or Street Art Group) is an Argentine artist collective, whose coefficient of artistic visibility is as low as its contribution to enhancing the visibility of popular movements in Argentina is significant. Founded in 1997 in Buenos Aires, it is currently made up of eight members, some of whom have formal artistic training, while others are graphic designers. The group works in situations of public participation, rather than art-referenced contexts, using its graphic-design and art-related competencies to challenge the public consumption and foster the public production of signs. Over the past few years, the GAC has worked with the steering committee of the H.I.J.O.S. movement (‘Hijos’ is the Spanish word for sons and daughters, and was founded by the children of some of the 30,000 people those who were ‘disappeared’ by the military dictatorship), in organizing public actions with the

Behind Police Lines: Art Visible and Invisible

<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/wright.html>

objective of drawing attention to the ongoing presence in Buenos Aires' residential neighbourhoods of those who, in one capacity or another, took part in the criminal activities of the military government. These actions, highly specific to the Argentine context, and developed by H.I.J.O.S. in 1995, are known as *escraches*. An *escrache* is a sort of collective performance, where the production of memory and knowledge is inseparable from the production of form. The point is not so much to demand that the perpetrators of the genocide and political repression – which were of course not carried out by a handful of officers and their henchmen but required an extensive network of profiteers from all walks of life – be brought to trial, nor certainly to lynch them in a further miscarriage of justice, but to shed light on the role they played and their ongoing impunity, in order to constitute a sort of social memory and a popular understanding at the neighbourhood level of how the dictatorship actually functioned, so as to prevent its re-emergence. To this end, the GAC has developed a full array of tools – street signs indicating the location of clandestine detention centres, city maps showing the addresses of the perpetrators of repression – that the group deploys itself and makes available to others.

What I find artistically compelling is that the GAC has taken what might be described as the 'tautological imperative' that is the hallmark of conceptual art practice, and has wrested it from the sterile framework of the artworld, turning it outwards, unleashing it, so to speak, on the real. The GAC has chosen to inject art-specific competence into social processes as a tangible form of energy, while at the same time maintaining art as such in a state of objective absence. What they do is not art, yet without art it would not be possible to do it. This paradox underscores an ethical imperative: how could art adequately reconcile form and content to represent the absence of the 30,000 people assassinated by Argentina's military regime some two decades ago, for it is not their presence which is absent, but their absence which is so devastatingly present. In such circumstances, and others too, art must have the good grace to respect that absence with its own.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 1998), pp. 86-7. My translation.

² Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), p. 52. My translation.

³ *The Meeting or bonjour Monsieur Courbet*, in the exhibition *The Uncanny/Unheimlich*, curated by Ali Akay, Akbank Art Centre, September 15 – October 23, 2005. (Curated as part of 9th International Istanbul Biennial).

⁴ <http://www.campementurbain.org/>

⁵ Jacques Rancière, 'Some Paradoxes of Political Art,' public lecture on Monday 21 November 2005 at the Home Works III forum, 17-24 November Beirut. My translation.

⁶ Rancière, *Aux bords du politique*, op. cit., pp. 176-7.