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The Unpredictability of the Political Effect of Art

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ABSTRACT. According to Jacques Rancière, the political effect of art can be explained in terms of the experience of a sensory clash (*dissensus*), a political awareness and a mobilization for a political action. The political effect is unpredictable or incalculable. In my paper, I want to challenge the condition of unpredictability by showing that Rancière's description of the political works of art allows the artist to draw some guidelines of how to successfully create a political art. I will also point out what are the consequences of the unpredictability claim to the definition of political art. I will argue that since the reception of political art depends on socio-political situations and the experience of a sensory clash is not repeatable, there is no room for universal, timeless political works of art in Rancière's theory.

1. The Political Effect of Art

For Jacques Rancière, something is a work of art if it produces a new perception of the world. It can be characterized as the conjunction of three processes or three steps: first, it produces a *sensory form of strangeness*, second, it develops a *political awareness* of the reason for that strangeness, and third, it *politically mobilize* individuals as a result of that awareness (Rancière, 2010, p. 142). The political effect of art, thus, must be described in these terms.

The production of a sensory form of strangeness is the most central term in Rancière's text on political art. He calls it the efficacy of *dissensus* which is a specific kind of conflict between *sense* and *sense*: "Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'" (Rancière, 2010, p.

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139). As Joseph Tanke explains it, the aim of political art is not simply to change political regimes but to change the meaning of life (Tanke, 2011, p. 83). In other words, a work of art must create a new experience that distinguishes itself completely from the everyday life experience; it offers experiences “fundamentally dissimilar from the everyday ordering of sense” (Tanke, 2011, p. 103).

As a result of the *dissensus*, we experience a clash or a shock. Rancière calls it an *artistic shock* (Rancière, 2010, p. 143) or a *sensible or perceptual shock* (Rancière, 2004, p. 63). The reason for the experience of a shock is that the work of art discloses “some secret connection of things hidden behind everyday reality” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 41) and the disclosure comes as a shock for us. Rancière also believes that the *dissensus* can be created by juxtaposing heterogeneous elements in the form of collage or montage. His favourite example of political art is Martha Rosler’s series “Bringing the War Home” from the 1970s. In these photomontages, Rosler juxtaposes photographs of the Vietnam War with the images of happy American domestic life. The aim is to reveal one world behind another: the war conflict behind domestic comforts (Rancière, 2009c, p. 56). To quote Rancière: “The connection between the two images was supposed to produce a dual effect: awareness of the system of domination that connected American domestic happiness to the violence of imperialist war, but also a feeling of guilty complicity in this system” (Rancière, 2009b, p. 27). Other examples of political art include Bertolt Brecht’s play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941) in which “heterogeneous elements are put together in order to provoke a clash” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 42), and John Heartfield’s photomontages from the 1930s and 1940s (*ibid.*).

2. The Unpredictability of Political Effect

A necessary condition for the political art is that its hidden meaning or effect must *not* be anticipated (Rancière, 2009b, p. 103). There are and cannot be any guidelines for the artist of how to create a political art. For instance, it is a common mistake among artists to have the underlying assumption that “art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things” (Rancière, 2010, p. 135). For Rancière, political efficacy is always unpredictable or incalculable:

But there is no reason why the sensory oddity produced by the clash of heterogeneous elements should bring about an understanding of the state of the world; and no reason either why understanding the state of the world should prompt a decision to change it. There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action. (Rancière, 2009b, p. 75).

It is generally agreed that Rancière's texts "do not contain a model to create or read political images" (Ramos, 2013, p. 220). As John Roberts summarizes, for Rancière there are "no generalized rule-following modes or suitably trained spectators; on the contrary, there are only freely determined spectators and freely determined works" (Roberts, 2010, p. 77). The reason for the impossibility for rules lies in the aesthetic regime of art. For Rancière, political art must be created in the aesthetic regime of art.¹ As Rancière explains it, "The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres" (Rancière, 2004, p. 23). Accordingly, there are no rules for the artist of how to represent a subject matter and no rules for the spectator of how to read or understand the work. Thus, the exclusion of the rules applies both to the artist and to the spectator.

However, Rancière's texts give us reason to conclude that the experience of *dissensus* does not depend on an individual but is rather communal, that there are underlying tendencies and attitudes in a society that make us react in a certain ways. Also, the change in thinking and attitude occurs both on the side of the artists and the beholders. For instance, Rancière believes that the ineffectiveness of contemporary art is occasioned by the fact that the dissensual world has become self-evident (Rancière, 2010, p. 143), and the artist present meanings that are known and shared by everyone. As a result, contemporary art either plays on the very undecidability, arrange heterogeneous elements into a positive recollection, invite people

¹ In Rancière's view, there are three regimes or three major distributions of the sensible in art: i) ethical regime of images, ii) the representative regime of art, and iii) the aesthetic regime of art (Rancière, 2004, pp. 20-30). He believes that the rise of the aesthetic regime or art is concurrent to the French Revolution and the rise of modern art.

to be engaged in new forms of relationships, or emphasize the connection or similarity between heterogeneous elements. These four forms – the joke or play, the collection, the invitation and the mystery – are the main examples of contemporary art (Rancière, 2009a, pp. 46–48).

Rancière believes that an example of a joke or play is Wang Du's work "Les temps du monde" (1988). Comparing Martha Rosler's series "Bringing the War Home" with Wang Du's work, Rancière states:

So in both cases an image of American happiness was juxtaposed with its hidden secret: war and economical violence in Martha Rosler, sex and profanity in Wang Du. But in Wang Du's case, both political conflictuality and the sense of strangeness had vanished. What remained was an automatic effect of delegitimization: sexual profanity delegitimizing politics, the wax figure delegitimizing high art. But there was no longer anything to delegitimize. The mechanism spun around itself. (Rancière, 2009a, p. 44)

In other words, Wang Du's work does not have the effect of *dissensus* since it does not reveal any hidden meaning previously unknown to the spectator. It is very likely that his aim was to show that behind the happy image of the Clinton couple there is a dirty secret, but "since it is very difficult to find anybody who is actually ignorant of such things, the mechanism ends up spinning around itself and playing on the very undecidability of its effect" (Rancière, 2010, p. 144). Now, if we hold on to the idea that the experience of a work of art is purely singular or individual, then all we need to do to prove that Wang Du has made a political art is to find someone who has never heard of Clinton's affair and for whom it might come as a shock. But, surely, this is not the view that Rancière wants to defend. It seems more plausible to claim that Rancière is critical of contemporary art because it has failed challenging the prevalent understandings of the life in a society in general. But if so, then there is no reason why the artist could not predict the efficacy of his work: if he/she takes into account the current tendencies in society and discloses some hidden meanings previously unknown to the public, he/she has all the reasons to expect the audience to be effected by his/her work, and most likely will succeed.

3. The Definition of Political Art

For Rancière, the definition of political art is equal to the definition of art, since “art under the aesthetic regime is necessarily political” (Yepes, 2014, p. 50). It has been claimed that Rancière’s definition of art is too narrow since it leaves out much of contemporary works that are generally considered to be art (Yepes, 2014, pp. 50–51). My aim is to show that his definition is, on the contrary, too vague or inclusive. His definition does not help to classify artworks and to explain how certain political works continue having the status of an artwork throughout the history.

As stated in the previous chapter, the simple juxtaposing of heterogeneous elements is not sufficient for the *dissensus*. The artist must choose the elements wisely as to reveal a hidden meaning yet unknown to the public. It also means that one and the same work can have different effects depending on the time it is presented to the public. For instance, Rancière believes that Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Histoires du cinéma* is an example of a *mystery of copresence* and not that of *dissensus* only because it was made in the late 1980s and 1990s. To quote Rancière:

If it had been made twenty years ago, this collage could only have been understood as a dialectical clash, denouncing the secret of death hidden behind both high art and American happiness. But in the *Histoires du cinéma*, the image of denunciation is turned into an image of redemption. (Rancière, 2009a, pp. 47–48)

But, in my view, if the understanding of a work depends on the socio-political situations of a given time or general knowledge prevalent in a specific time period, then there is no reason why a work that unsuccessfully presents itself as a political art *now* or in the *past* could not be understood as political art in the *future*.² We cannot rule out the possibility that a work of art can have a different effect on the viewers in some new context in some other time. In fact, Rancière is not ignorant of this. He says that: “Depending on the times, it [*Les Misérables*] has been seen as a

² Some critics even question to idea that the political effect reveals itself immediately: “...if there is no one-to-one correlation between a given work of art and a political community, the ‘political’ effect of art is *always and necessarily* one of delay and distancing.” (Roberts, 2010, p. 77)

catechism with socialist leanings, ignorant bourgeois sentimentalism over class struggle, or a first-rate poem whose democratic meaning is not to be found in the din of the revolutionary barricades but in the individual and quasi-subterranean obstinacy of Jean Valjean” (Rancière, 2004, p. 62). Accordingly, I claim that Rancière’s theory does not exclude the possibility that every work can *potentially* be a work of political art and this makes it difficult to classify or make a list of political art. Moreover, since it is also possible that a work of art that caused a sensory clash at the time it was made does not have the same effect in the future (in some other context in another time), it raises the question whether a work that *was* considered to be a political art can *still* (continuously) be classified as a work of political art.

Finally, a political art must create the *dissensus* and that, in turn, causes a shock in the perceiver. The shock is an *original effect* (Rancière, 2009b, p. 73). But an original effect cannot be repeated. Accordingly, a work of art can create a new sensory clash – a new way of seeing a world – only once. It will not be a *new* way of understanding the world the next time we see it. But if so, then Martha Rosler’s works are no longer political art since her collages do not cause a sensory clash for the contemporary perceiver anymore, neither mobilize him/her for a political action. The hidden meanings have already been disclosed and do not come as a shock anymore. Thus, I would argue that Rancière theory does not sufficiently explain how a work of art can *continue* being a political art throughout the history. Rancière theory does not leave room for universal definition of political art.

4. Conclusion

My aim was to show that although Rancière claims that the political effect of art is unpredictable, his texts allow us to conclude that by taking into account the current socio-political situations and the prevalent public understanding of the world, the artist can be successful in his expectations to cause the effect of *dissensus* in the audience.

Also, my aim was to show that Rancière’s definition of political art is not too narrow but instead too vague or inclusive: first, every work can

potentially be a work of political art, and second, if we take that the political effect of a work of art depends on socio-political context then it may not be a work of art in some other context in the future, and if we take that the political effect is necessarily an original unrepeatable shock then a political art must necessarily cease having political effect in the future.

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