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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan

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Designing Worlds: Explorations of the Possible Structures of the Aesthetic in Jacques Rancière

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ABSTRACT. The idea of design can be seen in a new light when it comes to configurations of the senses, distributions of the sensible, shared spaces and aspirations for essential and abbreviated forms as well as forms for restoring and re-creating the aesthetic fabric of the world. My analysis aspires to reflect on the actual levels for capturing the aesthetics of design, following the thought and the respecting contributions of Jacques Rancière. Starting from the consideration of the ontological features of art within a space of possibilities, we can move towards ideas of designing a world, experimenting with possible structures of the aesthetic and the construction of new senses of seeing, working, acting, feeling, that is, new forms of life based on new conceptions of a common, shared space. Aesthetics are interrelated with ethics and politics. As spectators, as parts of a broader whole, we are implicated in changing regimes of relatedness, attention, solidarity, compassion. Thus, designing a world could also mean designing new ways for perceiving reality and exploring possible aesthetic structures for inhabiting in a different way the sensible world we share.

1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to explore the idea of design in the thought of Jacques Rancière. Although there is only one text dedicated exclusively to the practice of design, namely, *The Surface of Design*, we could isolate aspects and derive several insights for the design process with regard to the aesthetic domain and the contemporary artistic practices. One of my hypotheses is the working idea that design can be approached by means of a conceptual

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analysis, that is, by the delineation of a community of concepts, practices, images, words and artistic references. On these grounds, I hold the additional hypothesis that the aesthetic can be approached in terms of structure. I will use the notion of topology in order to capture not only an actual structure but the idea of possible structures. Thus, the aesthetic, in general can take the form of a topology for re-configuring constructions and communities of shared things.

In this context, my interest is twofold, focusing on (a). the creative and expressive aspects of art, those processes and tools implicated in contemporary artistic practices, (b). the conceptual and theoretical grounding developed by Rancière, through the mobilization of notions such as *emancipation*, *aesthetic revolution*, *partition of the sensible* and *dissensus*.

2. Aesthetics of design and ontology of art in Rancière

The aspect of design in Rancière can be traced in a family of formulations such as *constructing*, *inventing*, *producing*, *creating*, *making, composing, assembling* along with the axes that serve as the primal material for the design process: *temporalities*, *places*, *rationalities*, *fictions*, *mechanisms of expositions*.

To speak of design, one should specify an appropriate scale for the matter which is not always a straightforward task due to art's undecidability. I am speaking of a *world* and this could be the world of an artwork, an artist or the world of a spectator. So, it is more convenient to speak of the aesthetic fabric that participates in the design of a world. For Rancière, *art* is a regime of experience, a regime of identification of objects and performances that stems from the same thread of experience. What does belong to that thread? Institutions such as places of performance or exposition, forms of circulation and modes of reproduction as well as modes of perception and affection, concepts, narratives, judgements of identification and processes for attributing a meaning (Rancière, 2018, p. 50). In addition, art, according to Rancière:

> constructs effective forms of community: communities between objects and images, images and voices, between faces and speeches that weave the relations between the past and the present, between distant spaces and the place of an exhibition.

Art invites the spectators "to enter into the ongoing process of creating these communities of senses" (Rancière, 2010a, p. 21).

The design and re-design potential inherently in the artistic and aesthetic domain are becoming evident following the way Rancière describes the *aesthetic regime of the arts* as being characterized by "its multi-temporality, the unlimitedness of the representable and the metamorphic character of its elements". In addition, an essential feature of the aesthetic regime is what Rancière calls *exceptional sensible*, that is "a self-differing sensible weave that is inhabited by a self-differing thought" (Rancière, 2010b, p. 218). Following Kant, Rancière supports the idea of possible architectures of the sensible: the existence of various kinds of the sensible, various configurations between sense and sense. Specifications of this idea pertaining to art are the *distribution of the sensible* and the *dissensual function of art*.

From this point of view, we could establish, following Rancière, a framework for considering the *ontology of art* under the aesthetic regime as a process of designing and re-designing sensible worlds by instituting the dissensuses weaved by the inventions of art, by "placing one sensible world in another" (Rancière, 2010b, p. 219). We could say that there is a platform for aesthetic weaving, a *topology of possibles* (Rancière 2010b, p. 225), offering itself to design processes that lead to world-making, to aesthetic structures that construct new ways of seeing.

In the *Emancipated Spectator* Rancière argues in favor of an emancipated community, "a community that has more to do with a world of words and stories, of available things and images, out of which its member can produce their own stories, their own intellectual adventures" (Rancière, 2017a, p. 250). The spectator act as the designer of its proper path, refusing to comply with an ascribed place designed in advance and without the interweaving of the different strands of the sensible at play, without the displacement operated by a discursive aesthetic fabric, by the different configurations and possibilities within a community of senses.

The encounter between artists and spectators is an encounter between creators, between designers of worlds within a given set of worlds: "Works exist in and through their world-making and that world-making depends on us, spectators, to constitute a space in which works meet and mutually displace, disfigure and transfigure one another" (Rancière, 2017a, 251). In a similar vein, emancipation has also a creative aspect open to world-making possibilities, since it has been always, according to Rancière, a way to create another time within the normal order of time, "a different way of inhabiting the sensible world we share" (Rancière, 2017b, p. 32).

In his discussion with Mark Foster Gage, Rancière iterates the idea that the aesthetic

problem is about "the experience of a common world and who is able to share this experience" (Rancière, 2019, p. 10), whereas he dissociates the aesthetic from the artistic: "The aesthetic is not same as the artistic. The artistic is about the implementation of an idea […] Instead the aesthetic means that you don't exactly know what will be the effect of what you are doing" (Rancière, 2019, p. 17). What is of interest in this discussion is the conceptualization of architecture in aesthetic terms: "Architecture is not only supposed to construct units for inhabiting, but really constructing new senses of seeing, working, acting, feeling" (Rancière, 2019, p. 18). Engaging with these formulations, it is of interest to ponder on the distinction between *life* and *use* made by Rancière and to reflect on the questions posed by him: "How you define life? How you think about the relationship between intentions incorporated in designing and the way it will be used, the form of life that it produces" (Rancière, 2019, p. 20).

On these grounds, the constellation of the aesthetic, architecture and design in Rancière could provide a path for reflecting what it means to design a world along with the exploration of aesthetics as (1). an inventory of metamorphic structures, processes and objects that has the capacity "to create the need to inhabit an infinitely richer sensible world" (Rancière, 2017a, p. 301) and (2). the actualization of a capacity to produce changes in perception, new feelings and to design new forms of life by constructing new ways for dealing with the actual state of things.

3. Designing world-events, world-schemes, abbreviated forms

In *The Surface of Design,* we have a paradox comparison and at the end, a convergence, between the French poet Stephan Mallarmé (1842 – 1898) and the German architect, engineer and designer, Peter Behrens (1868 – 1940). From the beginning of the text there is that connection between the *act of design* and the impact on the *communal space*: "by drawing lines, arranging words or distributing surfaces, one also designs divisions of communal space". And subsequently, Rancière implicates his well-known formula of the *distribution of the sensible*:

> By assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the material world. These configurations, which are at once symbolic and material, cross the boundaries between arts, genres and epochs (Rancière, 2009a, p. 91).

Here, we could put forth the question *how do we move from the new divisions of the communal space to a new world*, which narrows down to the question, *how can we go from an abstract idea of common space to a more concrete idea of a common world*. I suggest here as a transitional path, the idea or the experience, even a constituted one, of a *shared space*. *Sharing* means that there is an agreement already, there is a contribution that arranges the relations between individual and groups on the one hand, functions and spatial parts on the other. Here of course, we have to be clear about the distinction between aesthetic politics and institutional politics. Politics from an aesthetic point of view simply means the existence of dissensual forces, the act, material and symbolic, of disagreeing with a given order. Politics from an institutional point of view, on the other hand, means that there are processes and institutions leading to concrete policies along with a reflection on the effectivity of the processes and institution themselves. So, from this second point of view, a new form of community would be that around "certain exemplary institutions, practices or facilities" (Rancière, 2009a, p. 91).

Here, referring to Peter Behrens, Rancière summarizes a functionalist approach to design, a unified approach, which means that everything should be submitted in the same "principle of unity", "the application of a single principle" and the designed objects to be produced according to "a certain number of typical forms", that is, "essential forms, geometrical motifs, streamlined curves" that the design of objects should "approximate as closely as possible to their function" (Rancière, 2009a, p. 93).

What comes to mind here, is the idea of a *type*, standardization and of course, the notion of a meta-line, which is the *assembly line*. I am speaking of a *meta-line* taking as a ground the classical conception of the line, the drawing line. Then we have, the *product line*, which mainly includes manufacturing processes. And then, the assembly line, which is, a production line that performs the task of assembling parts and components.

Rancière turns to the French poet Stephan Mallarmé, who, like Behrens, proposes also *types*:

> The object of his poetics is not the assemblage of precious words and rare pearls, but the layout of a design. For him every poem is a layout that abstracts a basic scheme from the spectacles of nature or of accessories of life, thereby transforming them into essential forms. It is no longer spectacles that are seen or stories that are told, but world-events, world-schemes (Rancière, 2009a, p. 94).

World is associated with life. World in its essential form, is not the decorum of objects or stories. And poems, the forms of poems, "like those of the objects, are also forms of life». Both for Behrens and for Mallarmé "types outline the image of a certain physical community» (Rancière, 2009a, p. 95). Behrens follows the axioms of the *Werkbund* as he aims at the restoration of a singular style instead of having plurals, which is to have one form corresponding to its content. In other words, to have a *type*, to have forms that convey the internal principle makes a society exists:

> Types are the formative principles of a new communal life, where the material forms of existence are informed by a shared spiritual principle. In the type, industrial form and artistic form are conjoined. The form of objects is the formative principle of life forms (Rancière, 2009a, p. 96).

On the other hand, Mallarmé speaks of the "meaningless gesture of writing", that is: "recreating everything with reminiscences so as to prove that one is indeed where one should be". For Rancière *recreating everything with reminiscences* "is the principle of the quintessential poem" since,

> poetic labour for Mallarmé is a labour of simplification. Like engineers, he dreams of an alphabet of essential forms, taken from the ordinary forms of nature and the social world. These reminiscences, these creations of abridged forms answer to the need to construct an abode where man is at home (Rancière, 2009a, p. 96).

Rancière concludes that "between Mallarmé and Behrens […] exists this singular link: the same idea of streamlined forms and the same function attributed to these forms – to define a new texture of communal existence" (Rancière, 2009a, p. 97), here, the idea of texture that has a strong aesthetic undertone.

Another form of community, mentioned by Rancière, is "the community of principle between the form of art and the forms of everyday objects" (Rancière, 2009a, p. 103). This suggested form of community introduces the respective question of the relationship between art forms and life forms. Again, as a methodological investigation we could look for a common ground, still in the form of shared space, a surface, *a shared surface*. For, Rancière, "surface is

to be understood in two senses", (a). communication and (b). arrangement, outlining a space. Surface, establishing connection with art, assures: (a). the function of conversion "where words, forms and things exchange roles" and, (b). the function of equivalence among different levels of schematization, such as *abbreviated forms*: "*Abbreviated forms* are, in their very principle, an aesthetic and political division of a shared world: they outline the shape of a world without hierarchy where functions slide into one another" (Rancière, 2009a, p. 107), which equals the working towards new forms of life.

4. Politics of design: communities of senses, structures of intensities and solidarity

Today, there are many examples of artists or artistic groups who intervene directly in the public space, in the space that is set as common within the community, creating an opening, a gap, a possibility of escaping or of temporarily withdrawal, an emancipation from the dense urban tissue or even vice versa, activating urban gaps, intervening in what already exists. In fact, what an artist does, according to Rancière, is the weaving of a new sensory fabric. Weaving this new fabric means "creating a form of common expression, or a form of expression of the community" (Rancière, 2008, p. 4). There is an inevitable political dimension associated with the concept of the public. And if we want to understand this political dimension in its aesthetic significance, we can suggest that this form of expression of the community is linked to a certain distribution of the sensible. The design of a new world can emerge through a new structure of the aesthetic, through the transformation of the existing sensory fabric.

Transformation basically means connections and disconnections, a particular dialectic between these two, transformative actions concerning the lives of human beings in a community and the relationships between them. What has to be changed? In other words, what do these connections perform? Since it is about a redesign of the space and the relationships between human beings in a community, we can reasonably argue that the force that pushes into these transformations is the figuration and integration into the community of those who are missing.

This is also an aesthetic community, namely a *community of sense*, or a *sensus communis*. In this context, Rancière explains in three complementary ways the concept of the

aesthetic community. First of all, the aesthetic community is a sense community. That is, "a community of sense first is a certain combination of sense data. This also means a combination of different senses of sense". With reference to Mallarmé and his prose poem *The White Water Lily*, Rancière argues that the words of the poet are sensory realities suggesting other sensory realities and this relationship can be seen as a more general metaphor of a poetic work. There is a displacement, a disagreement, even if it is about the same words, there is an aesthetic processing of a new space-time where they are inserted:

> The words of the poet are first used as neutral tools to frame a certain sensorium. They describe us a movement of the arms oriented towards a certain aim: reaching a place which could be visualized on a space. But they superimpose to that sensorium another sensorium organized around that which is specific to their own power, sound and absence. They stage a conflict between two regimes of sense, two sensory worlds. This is what dissensus means (Rancière, 2008, p. 4).

Dissensus does not mean the disappearance or definitive imposition of one world or the other. The displacements are material as well as symbolic. In *Aesthetics and its discontent* Rancière advocates that:

> what the term 'art' designates in its singularity is the framing of a space of presentation by which the things of art are identified as such. And what links the practice of art to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience (Rancière, 2009b, p. 23).

What emerges in terms of design is a temporary, fragile architecture that provides a receptive framework for the dissensual configuration of the two different words in question, to the dissensual aspect in the relation of two different worlds, and distributions of the sensible. The task of the philosopher in this case is to provide a conceptual framework for the tension between these two sensory words. This is the second way of approaching the aesthetic community. And the third concerns the fact that an aesthetic community is necessarily connected to a community of people.

The aesthetic community as a structure is a structure of intensities, a different vibration introduced to the community of human beings. It is perhaps a *topos* of political subjectification that shapes the expectation of new political subjects, that provides the image of people to come

and that of their absence at the same time. It is a world whose architecture, however temporary it may be, will be based, principally, on an aesthetic structure, this means that the coherence and stability of the architectural construction will be safeguarded by an aesthetic rationality, a rationality that is not subjected to predetermined relationships between causes and effects. It is exactly what Rancière refers to as *aesthetic efficiency*, that is, "a paradoxical kind of efficiency that is produced by the very break of any determined link between cause and effect" (Rancière, 2008, p. 7).

In the *Theater of images*, Rancière analyzes the works of Alfredo Jaar as exemplary cases of world constructions where there is a constant shift from the world of the victims to the world of a few unknown living people. There changes of attention are performed through inversions that are part of rhetorical structures such as litotes and metonymy. The world-shapes in Jaar's works emerge through the construction of a certain space-time, of an architecture that sets its proper temporality. In this way new plans are created for the circulation of images: a rearrangement of the streams of sense and information, a redistribution of the meaning of things.

All this is evidently done through ascertainments about the existence and functioning of the dominant forms of selection and circulation of images that are deemed to be the most representative, that is, to be in the place of other images and speak in their name. Therefore, there is a world of images claiming a role of telling and showing us the world, what is happening in the world. However, it is one of the fundamental tasks of art and politics to suggest another world of images, another way of making connections between the singular and the whole, the choice of the singular that can also speak for the whole.

These new connections could also arise through reversals between causes and effects. Rancière mentions an essential Mallarméan principle: "paint not the thing, but the effect it produces here" (Rancière, 2007, p. 76). So, the body that was there, the eyes that saw the event, constitute a world that can speak of something that has been. But obviously, it is not enough to say that this body was there. A proper design is needed, to bring out the enigmatic, aesthetic power of this relationship between the *I was there* and the *now we are here as viewers*. This force, which Rancière also analyzes with reference to Godard's work, he calls it *solidarity*. It is about a force of connecting with another through the recognition that there is a common ground of humanity. Solidarity is a condition of compassion but the reverse is also true: through

compassion one can be led to the realization of the work of solidarity. Anything that appears as a positive designation, of course, as a desired or existing human quality is suspect. Compassion, however "is not pity for the unfortunate, it is the capacity to feel with them, which equally entails the capacity to make them feel with us, to constitute the sensorium of a capacity shared equally by the boat people and the New York artists" (Rancière, 2007, p. 77).

We recognize in these formulations the ethical nexus of relationships which, is complemented by the aesthetic. Community appears here as the construction of a sensory arrangement that seeks to restore attention. The world is approached as a sensory event through the changing connections between the part and the whole. The focus and manner of that focus, the staging of a body, a face, or even a gaze can function as metaphors for what has happened, for much larger group of individuals. A new world is designed when these metaphors exist. A new space of substitutions can be made possible through the capacity to move in a network of equivalences between senses. A key dimension of world design is giving shape to a story. Here, the form also defines the viewing angle of the story. Designing a world has to do more with a local rearrangement within a world that already exists, a change in existing spatial and temporal connections, the creation of a different plan of intensities. Designing a world can emerge from rendering a story in images and other elements that have been placed together or could be placed together.

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