

On the Art of Aesthetic Ideas: The Kantian Background of Jacques Rancière's Aesthetic Ontology of Art

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ABSTRACT. This paper revisits Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas in order to reconstruct the Kantian background of Jacques Rancière's aesthetic ontology of art. In Kant, aesthetic ideas are imaginative representations that exceed conceptual determination while still orienting thought; they mark an expansion of the mind where reason, imagination, and sensibility enter into free but indeterminate play. I argue that Rancière reactivates this indeterminacy through the concepts of pensiveness, the aesthetic unconscious, and dissensus to describe artworks as sites where unthought thought, surplus meaning, and undecidable relations between art and non-art are staged. By tracing Rancière's reflections on method, the distribution of the sensible, *sensus communis*, and the anti-systematic "art of systems", the paper proposes that his so-called ontology of art is best understood as a fictional or operational ontology: a poetics of how art constructs its own modes of being by configuring spaces, times, and forms of appearance. In this sense, the ontology of the dissensual is not a metaphysics of art, but a way of mapping aesthetic practices that reconfigure what can be seen, said, and felt. The Kantian heritage thus appears less as a doctrinal source and more as a methodological and conceptual matrix for thinking the aesthetic as a transformation of the sensible world.

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1. Introduction: From Kant's Aesthetic Ideas to Rancière's Ontology of Art

This paper investigates the Kantian origins of several of Jacques Rancière's conceptual contributions to aesthetics. I will focus on Kant's conceptualization of aesthetic ideas, whose strangeness Michel Chaouli aptly emphasizes: "One of the strangest conceptions in Immanuel Kant's writing about aesthetics ... is that of aesthetic ideas" (Chaouli, 2017, p. 173). Rancière offers an incisive reading of Kant insightfully and understands the art of aesthetic ideas as a distinctive ontology of art, which recasts through concepts developed in his own work. Rancière's reading reactivates key Kantian positions while simultaneously providing a new framework for understanding aesthetics' relationship with the history of art, political theory, and contemporary artistic practices. The guiding hypothesis of this paper is that Rancière's ontology of art can be more fully understood if we foreground its Kantian premises, especially as they emerge through the notion of aesthetic ideas and their relation to genius, *sensus communis*, and the distribution of the sensible. A secondary claim is that the "ontology of the dissensual" is the ontological model most consistent with Rancière's account of art, precisely because it remains fictional, operational, and anti-foundational.

Kant uses 'ideas' to designate concepts of reason, which are distinct from concepts that can have an object in experience, namely, the concepts of the understanding. On the one hand, then, we have ideas, which refer to objects that cannot be directly experienced, such as the idea of freedom or the idea of the soul. On the other hand, we have concepts of the understanding, such as causality, necessity, and possibility, which apply to objects in experience and help us organize what we perceive. In Kant, 'ideas' are not just vague thoughts; they are concepts of reason that reach beyond the bounds of possible experience and yet still guide how we think. They function as regulative principles rather than constitutive ones. Accordingly, Kant states that an aesthetic idea is "a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e. concept, to be adequate to it, which consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (Kant, 2000, p. 192).

In the same paragraph (§49 of *The Critique of the Power of judgment*), Kant further characterizes an aesthetic idea as follows: "A representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it" (Kant, 2000, p. 194). I argue that this kind of indetermination is a form of aesthetic enlargement of a given concept

or, more generally, of a given context or situation. This enlargement is not simply a matter of ornament or emotional intensification, but rather implies a surplus of sensible and imaginative content that cannot be fully captured in conceptual terms. This excess is precisely the point where Rancière's notions of pensiveness, the aesthetic unconscious, and dissensus become relevant as different articulations of Kantian indetermination.

2. Pensiveness, Aesthetic Unconscious, and Dissensus

My argument relies primarily on two crucial remarks by Rancière. The first concerns his idea of *pensiveness*, a term implying that “the act of thinking seems to be encroached upon by a certain passivity”, that is, the fact that works of art “contain unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without linking it to a determinate object” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 107). Pensiveness thus refers to a “zone of indetermination between thought and non-thought, activity and passivity, but also art and non-art” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 107). Rancière's conception of pensiveness draws on (a) his account of the aesthetic unconscious in relation to genius: “The genius is the active power of nature who sets his own creative power against any model or norm. The genius, we might say, becomes a norm for himself. But at the same time, he is the one who does not know what he does and is incapable of accounting for his own activity” (Rancière, 2009b, p. 24), and (b) the Kantian definition of the beautiful as “what is represented as an object of universal delight apart from any concept” (Kant, 2000, p. 96).

Rancière thus radicalizes the Kantian insight that aesthetic experience involves a free play of imagination and understanding that cannot be fully conceptually grounded. Pensiveness is the name he gives to this *operative surplus* of the artwork: the way it exceeds any intentional program or symbolic coding. In this sense, pensiveness, the aesthetic unconscious, and dissensus are not simply metaphors but conceptual operators within the aesthetic regime of art, figural entities that displace and redistribute meaning. The second remark concerns the distinction between two kinds of forms and the operational role of aesthetic ideas: “Kant had already pointed to the distance between artistic form, the form determined by the intention of art, and an aesthetic form, the form that is perceived without a concept and declines any idea of intentional purpose. Kant called those inventions of art that are capable of making this connection between two

‘forms’, which is also a leap between two regimes of sensible presentation, aesthetic ideas” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 131). In other words, aesthetic ideas are not simply ‘contents’ but operations that connect and disconnect regimes of form, intention, and non-intention, concept and non-concept, art and non-art.

What is at stake in Rancière’s appropriation of Kant is precisely this leap between regimes of the sensible, a leap that he will describe in terms of *dissensus*. The importance of aesthetic ideas in Rancière’s thought becomes even more clearer when Rancière explicitly relates them to what he calls the ontology of art. This requires us to examine how Rancière derives from Kant his notion of dissensus and its associated critical operations. In two different instances, Rancière makes explicit the close link between an ontology of art (or an ontology of the dissensual) and aesthetic ideas: “Aesthetic ideas are inventions that transform the willed and the unwilled, the known and the unknown, the fact and the non-fact. These are the inventions that give art its sensible quality, what we might call its ontology” (Rancière, 2010, p. 219). Elsewhere, he describes the ‘play of aesthetic ideas’ as an ‘ontology of the dissensual’ which is actually a ‘fictional ontology’ because “the set of relations that constitutes the work operates as if it had a different ontological texture from the sensations that make up everyday experience” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 67).

Now, I will try to elaborate further on the connections between these crucial remarks and passages in an attempt to support the idea of a Kantian background in Rancière’s aesthetic ontology of art. The question of the ontology of art in Rancière might be paradoxical given the tensions between ontology and critical theory, that is, the tension between the need for fundamental principles and the need for a critical approach to the given. Thus, it is important to highlight before continuing that Rancière’s concept of ontology is mainly methodological and it draws on several respects from Kant’s aesthetics and philosophy of art and especially the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. In other words, one of this paper’s aspirations will be to show that Rancière’s ontology of art can be understood by discerning its Kantian premises. A subordinate thesis will be that the ontology of the dissensual is Rancière’s preferred ontological model among the various ontologies of art.

3. Method, Topology, and the Aesthetic Practice of Philosophy

Rancière's emphasis on method appears in various forms, from titles that summarize the essence of his work (*The method of Equality*, *The method of Scene*) to the self-reflexive essay *A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière*, wherein we are told: "this idea of what 'method' means should never be forgotten when it comes to Jacques Rancière" (Rancière, 2009c, p. 114). But what is this idea of method? At a first level, method concerns the production of a thinker's ideas, "the issues they address, the materials they select, the givens they consider significant, the phrasing of their connection, the landscape they map, their ways of inventing solutions (or aporias)". More precisely, "a method means a path: not the path that a thinker follows but the path that he/she constructs, that you have to construct to know where you are, to figure out the characteristics of the territory you are going through, the places it allows you to go, the way it obliges you to move, the markers that can help you, the obstacles that get in the way" (Rancière, 2009c, p. 114). Rancière's method of thought is evidently topological in a double sense: there is a path under construction charged with a mapping activity, and there is a systematic search for a set of points from which it would be possible to distribute what belongs to politics, art, or their respective theories. From this perspective, the presuppositions of a system, the very forms of distribution that make it possible to think a system, are very close to the idea of topology.

In his discussion with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan, Rancière stresses the fact that his method begins by examining the conditions that allows us to define domains of competence such as philosophy, politics, art, science, and others. Defining these domains entails "a certain cutting of possible territories" (Rancière, 2016, p. 51). Here, the notion of the *scene* is crucial to understanding how a topological organization of points is recognized as such. Instead of beginning with a foundational topology or a primary rationality, Rancière proceeds in the opposite direction; he starts from scenes that function as laboratories for observing, defining, and verifying actions, dispositions, and the choices that produce the distributions through which performances and acts of thought become identifiable. For Rancière, space denotes, first, a material or symbolic place understood in terms of disposition, distribution, or set of relations. Secondly, space is a form of co-existence, a certain topography that emerges from the disposition and distribution of the possible.

The idea of distribution is thus closely linked to *possibility* and *difference in the sensible*. A topography of possibilities means that, against the model of the strict Platonic distributions of places within a community, different places and positions enable different sensible experiences. Distribution can be seen as a counterforce to any hierarchical regime. Rancière developed this idea in reaction to Althusser's concept of ideology and, to some extent, to Foucault's analyses of disciplinary dispositifs, especially the panoptic apparatus. While Foucault seeks to systematize territories of thought and perception by delineating their borders, Rancière attaches greater value to chance, possibility, and multiplicity. His broader project concerns "the possibilities for reconfiguring a field of possibilities" (Rancière, 2016, p. 64), a project he explicitly links to his critical stance toward Foucault: "After all, what I've constructed has been both in reference to, and in reaction to, Foucault; I wanted to say that, in any given world of experience, there are several ways of systematizing this experience precisely because that world is made up of several worlds, of several lines of temporality, of several lines of possibilities" (Rancière, 2016, p. 65).

For Rancière, philosophy is 'a chance, supplementary activity' that can be defined as "a certain dissensual practice," an activity of declassification, dehierarchization, and despecification that seeks to "think the lines according to which boundaries and passages are constructed, according to which they are conceivable and modifiable". Philosophy is a name shared across several fields, but its different meanings do not coincide; this idea of homonymy and the conflicts that it engenders over homonyms, is a conflict, according to Rancière, "between one who says white and another who says white" (Rancière, 2010, p. 226). Against this backdrop, philosophy can be seen as a topology that has to invent its own space in order to think the difference between homonyms rather than accepting a radical indetermination. In *Dissenting Words*, Rancière again approaches philosophy in spatial terms: "What we'll have to do, instead, is think of philosophy as a space in which thoughts lose their specificity, such that thought is no longer identified as the thought of an activist, a politician or worker" (Rancière, 2017, p. 319). He underscores the role of chance: "We can think of philosophy, we can cultivate a practice of it, as the space wherein discourses, words and ideas that should never have met, met" (Rancière, 2017, p. 320).

Philosophical practice must therefore proceed from an understanding of the composite structure of the world: "A world is made of interpretations, it is composed and held together by a certain structuring between the perceptible, the thinkable and the sayable, and of course, of what is possible as a consequence of these" (Rancière, 2017, p. 320). Changing the world is inseparable from "struggling over interpretation" (Rancière, 2017, p. 320). The central task is

“mapping what can be seen, thought and said”. Such mapping is indissociable from the creation of new perceptions, new affects, and new possibilities of life. “In sum, what we can imagine, what we can endeavor to produce, is a philosophical practice that can be part of this transformation of the perceptible and this remapping of the possible” (Rancière, 2017, p. 320).

4. Art , Aesthetics and Sensus Communis in Rancière

In ‘The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge’ Rancière states from the outset that “what aesthetics refers to is not the sensible. Rather, it is a certain modality, a certain distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2009d, p. 3). He also acknowledges that the text “that has framed the space of aesthetics” is Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which serves as his “guiding thread in the construction of a tentatively more comprehensive concept of aesthetics” (Rancière, 2009d, p. 1). Against this backdrop, Rancière extracts from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the constitutive elements of his well-known formula of the distribution of the sensible. The apprehension of a form according to Kant entails a doubling of sense; there is the sense of the given and a sense produced out of it. This also implies a certain relation between the senses that can take the form of a reconfiguration of the given. This is what Rancière calls ‘the aesthetic dimension’ or ‘dissensus’: “It is another kind of relation between sense and sense, a supplement that both reveals and neutralizes the division at the heart of the sensible” (Rancière, 2009d, p. 3).

In ‘What aesthetics can mean’ Rancière defines aesthetics as a kind of knot that ties together “a sense of art to an idea of thought and an idea of the community” (Rancière, 2000, p. 33). We can identify in this definition a kind of architectural function of the aesthetic, an approach to aesthetics as a tripartite architecture that effectuates the relations between three distinct components: a sense of art, an idea of thought, and an idea of the community. From a methodological point of view, it becomes possible to trace a path towards an ontology of art by starting from an ontology of the aesthetic. Drawing on Kant’s methodological innovations in designing the outline of his philosophy of critique, we can approach ontology here as architecture and as fiction, that is, as an *as if* construction with special attention to mapping the relations between different parts. Ontology involves not only selecting a set of necessary components but also recognizing the provisional and constructed character of that selection,

especially regarding the connections that institute relations between ‘ontological’ components. This *as if* structure acknowledges unplanned connections and latent possibilities that undermine any attempt to construct a rigid ontological structure; it points toward the work of an aesthetic unconscious as a matrix for dissensus.

In *Disagreement*, Rancière offers another concise definition of aesthetics as “partition of the perceptible as well as discourse on the perceptible”; this discourse is autonomous, meaning that there can be “an evaluation of the perceptible that is distinct from any judgment about the use to which it is put” (Rancière, 1998, p. 90). Referring to Kant’s example of the palace in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he underscores that aesthetic satisfaction derived from a mere representation of an object is indifferent with regard to the existence of that object (Kant, 2000, p. 90). In this way, a virtual community is constituted, a *sensus communis* that presupposes a principle of universality: “By ‘*sensus communis*’ [...] must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole” (Kant, 2000, p. 173).

While Aristotle’s *sensus communis* refers to a physiological power coordinating the senses, Kant transforms it into a reflective principle: the imagined universality of aesthetic judgment grounded in shared sensibility and communicability. Rancière, in turn, treats this as a model for thinking an aesthetic community structured not by identity or function but by a shared mode of perceiving and judging, a community sustained by a specific distribution of the sensible. It is also useful to recall here the difference between the aesthetic and the artistic as introduced by Rancière in his discussion with Mark Foster Gage: “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). The difference between the artistic and the aesthetic is a matter of possible states of things. An artistic spatialization is more concrete than an aesthetic one, just as a topography is a more concrete actualization of a topological configuration. Although Rancière does not explicitly use the term topology, his approach relies on operations that are essentially topological. These topological operations become more explicit in Rancière’s account of the figure.

5. Figural Operations and the Community as Dissensus

In this light, operations such as the twist of sensations and the dialectic of embracing and splitting can be understood as configurations of ‘different senses of sense’, of multiple sensory realities stemming from the combination of sense data. This process is part of a larger one that participates in the architecture of the aesthetic community, which Rancière organizes around three forms or levels of community. The first form corresponds to the conceptualization of the community as “a certain combination of sense data: forms, words, spaces, rhythms and so on,” which, according to Rancière, is the base for the creation of a chain of sensory realities. The words of a poet are a sensory reality that suggests another sensory reality (such as the material aspects of a landscape, scene, image, etc.) which can be perceived in turn as “a metaphor for poetic activity”. Each sensory reality is a regime of sense, a *sensorium*, that is superimposed on another sensorium. This superposition creates a conflict that defines dissensus and gives specific form to the community of sense that Rancière calls ‘dissensual figure’ (Rancière, 2008, p. 4). In “Community as dissensus” Rancière specifies that a dissensual community inscribes a common world in another (Rancière, 2017, p. 142).

In the thought of Jean-François Lyotard, the figural is designated as an intermediary space between the respective spaces of signification and subject. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze presents the figural as an opposing pole to the figurative, that is, to the illustrative and narrative character of the Figure (Deleuze, 1990, p. 2). The logic of the figural implies that the Figure is a body without organs, a figure freed from the constraints of representation and organicity. Rancière, for his part, elaborates his conceptualization of the figure in a topological manner; his approach is based on a spatial framing together with an account of the properties of that space. In *Les mots et les torts* Rancière assigns two contrasting functions to the figure: the general and perhaps more widespread one according to which the figure indicates a semantic displacement rather than the invocation of a visual form; and, a second function in which figural interpretation reveals an abstract meaning in a sensible presence (Rancière, 2021, p. 86). Understood in this way, the figure presents a dissensual function in the sense that it does not reinforce the given and apparently self-evident semantic content of a sensory reality but, on the contrary, produces dissensus through semantic displacement and an interpretation that prevents consensus on the definitive meaning of a sensible reality. The figure as presented here contributes to the refinement of the sensible texture of a community of sense. Accordingly,

figuration is a process of displacement within a system of relations between similarity and dissimilarity that enriches a given sense by producing different yet figuratively equivalent senses of it.

In another instance, Rancière provides the lines for understanding the displacement itself in the notion of the figure: “In its classical sense, the figure combined two meanings: it was a sensible presence and it was an operation of displacement that put one expression in place of another. In the aesthetic regime, however, the figure is no longer simply an expression that takes the place of another” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 122). In this new status of the figure it is possible “to conjoin two regimes of expression without homogenizing them” (Rancière, 2009a, p. 122). In a crucial passage from *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière brings together the notion of pensiveness as both a resistance to thought and an escape line for art, with Kantian aesthetic ideas and the figure as conceptual ground for an art of aesthetic ideas. These remarks suggest a configuration of forces in which figuration emerges through the interaction of an instituting force and a force that simultaneously defigures and refigures it.

6. Fictional Ontology and the Art of Systems

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s well-known definition of the architectonic as “the art of systems” (Kant, 1998, p. 691) refers to the scientific character that emerges from a systematic unity. The architectonic marks the difference between a mere aggregation and a system. Rancière inherits this problematic but displaces it. He states that “the fundamental problem of method” is “determining a common ground in thinking” (Rancière, 2016, p. 34), a set of conditions and distributions that make politics, art, or philosophy thinkable in the first place. This concern with common ground is closely tied to his principle of non-hierarchy, which he sums up “in the idea of the distribution of the sensible” (Rancière, 2016, p. 29). Rather than grounding domains in the nature of things or in the history of Being, Rancière is interested in the ways in which territories are cut up and assembled, in the compositions of rationalities that make something appear as “art” or “politics”. If there is an “art of systems” in Rancière, it is therefore anti-systematic. As he puts it, systematicity, if it exists at all, is an “anti-systematic systematicity” (Rancière, 2016, p. 51). Not a will to chaos, but a search for forms of distribution

that make a system thinkable by foregrounding what precedes and conditions it. A system is always a division of territories, and there is “nothing in the nature of things that establishes the existence of an area of Being called art” (Rancière, 2016, p. 52). What there is, instead, are “systems of reasons” that allow us to link certain practices, skills, and forms of visibility to the idea of art as an activity that is an end in itself.

From this perspective, classical ontology, understood as a theory of being as such, no longer provides the relevant model. Rancière explicitly distances himself from any ambition to say what being is: “It all depends on what you mean by ontology. If you mean by ontology a theory of being as a being, or a theory of the being of being, I’ve obviously never concerned myself with that, since I know nothing about it and I have no means of knowing what being is as a being. Generally, I only get interested in things I have the means of knowing about, things I can make hypotheses about and then verify” (Rancière, 2016, p. 62). In a key passage, he characterizes his work not as a doctrine of being but as a ‘general poetics’, a general theory of “the multiple ways in which it’s possible to make the gap work, this non-concordance between multiplicities” (Rancière, 2016, p. 63). Ontology, in this sense, “is always in a way a poem” (Rancière, 2016, p. 63); not a discourse that tells the truth about difference and excess, but a way of constructing metaphors and allegories of a given distribution.

On this basis, we can speak of an ontology of art or literature, but only in a restricted, operational sense. Literature “constructs its own ontology” by inventing its modes of being, figures and temporalities. An ontology of literary or artistic being is therefore an “occasional discourse,” a way of weaving connections or building bridges between different regimes of rationalities without homogenizing them into a single system (Rancière, 2016, p. 63). In this sense, what I call Rancière’s “ontology of art” or “ontology of the dissensual” can be understood as a Kantian-inspired poetics: a fictional, operational ontology that does not claim to ground art in being, but instead maps how art’s aesthetic ideas, figures, and distributions of the sensible reconfigure what can be seen, said, and thought. It is an ontology that remains faithful to the indeterminate, expansive force that Kant identified at the heart of aesthetic judgment.

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