

POVERTY/LINE:

Aesthetic and Political Subjects in
Santiago Sierra's "Line" Photographs

David W. Janzen



COLLISION

In a series of installations, contemporary artist Santiago Sierra remunerated marginalized people to have a single black line tattooed across their backs. Captured in medium-close up, black and white photographs, documentation of the works places the inked line horizontally and slightly askew across the middle of the frame. The grainy sobriety of the photos renders textures that resemble police documentation, an aesthetic matched by the works' factual titles: "[Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person](#)" (1998),¹ "[250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People](#)" (1999)² and "[160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People](#)" (2000).³ Accompanying descriptions offer basic details about the individuals in the photographs and the immediate economic situation surrounding their participation, gesturing at the poverty – economic but also subjective – of the participants.⁴

Critical accounts emphasize the way in which these works produce an ambiguous social and ethical experience: an immediate discomfort with the ethical transgressions enacted by the works collides with, and is exacerbated by, the viewer's recognition of his or her own complicity, as viewer, in the violence. Such socio-experiential accounts, however, largely overlook the significance of the fact that the tattoo – the material remainder of violence – takes the form of the line. Since the early twentieth century the line has been central to the artistic struggle to destroy any immediate relation between, on the one hand, artistic *presentation* of forms and, on the other, existing modes of *representation*, the latter understood both as mimetic representation and, more broadly, as the aesthetic structures or categories by which perception is ordered.

Using both oppressed human subjects and the linear form, Sierra's "Line" photographs intervene in two distinct spheres: the social sphere of economic marginalization and the artistic sphere of aesthetic form. Within these photographs these two elements are not reconcilable but remain in contradiction. Through this contradiction, Sierra's work poses the question of the potentially dialectical relation between the law-bound structures of representation and the site of material presentation; or, more concretely, between an experience of the artwork as mediated by social categories and identities (class, poverty, labor, and so on) and an account of the artwork as mediated by aesthetic categories (most fundamentally, those of space and time).

On the most immediate level, the "Line" installations present this duality as a tension between two basic elements – the body and the line – both of which potentially become the figure reducing the other to ground. In considering this tension, my guiding hypothesis is twofold. First, the tension between body and line constructs separate and irreducible trajectories: one in which the presentation of human subjects (the bodies and their incumbent lumpen qualities) takes priority; and another in which the geometric form of the line takes priority. Second, I suggest that these trajectories demarcate a more general problem for experiencing and understanding art – a problem that requires a decision between the primacy of the social world and the primacy of geometric forms. In short, the "Line" installations pose a critical and timely question: whither artistic presentation? Do we ground artistic presentation in the socialized body or in geometric form? Within which mode of abstraction do we situate our experience of the artwork? The task herein is to develop the critical and philosophical implications of these questions as they are posed by these works.⁵

Within the social aesthetic, which I'll develop through the work of theorist and critic Claire Bishop, the subject of the "Line" photographs appears as a set of objectified bodies that bear particular qualities: both social characteristics (including the biographical details that accompany the photographs) as well as the material characteristics of the bodies themselves. On the other hand, within a geometric aesthetic, which situates the work within an aesthetic trajectory, the subject of the "Line" photographs emerges from an interrogation of the form of the line itself. While this latter trajectory incorporates a diverse set of works and ideas – among them, Joan Miró's horizon, Barnett Newman's zips, and Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of bread lines come immediately to mind – the primary aim herein is to explore how Sierra's installations recover and reconfigure the implications of an artistic event that finds its most focused instantiation in Soviet constructivism: specifically, the recognition of the line as the essential aesthetic form that marks the minimal, abstract difference between ground and form.⁶

I suggest that a social-aesthetic interpretation tends to reduce the work of art to a didactic representation determined by an extrinsic discourse. In demonstrating this limitation, I argue that Bishop liberates artistic presentation from ethical representations only to subsume presentation all too immediately under political representation. On the other hand, a geometric-aesthetic account provides a foundation for the appearance of the singular idea of the work while, albeit less immediately, maintaining the extrinsically political implications of the work. In this sense, a geometric aesthetics structures an understanding of artistic presentation that develops a more rigorously material encounter with the work.

Antagonism in a Social Aesthetic

In an *October* article, Claire Bishop compares Sierra's "Line" installations to prominent examples of what Nicholas Bourriaud names relational aesthetics, arguing that, if the relational artists have enacted a shift from the production of artistic objects to the production of social relations, they have thus far failed to address the question of the quality of social relations produced.⁷ Taking up this question, Bishop suggests that whereas relational artists tend to construct ephemeral and artificially harmonious relations Santiago Sierra's "Line" installations reveal: "how all our interactions are, like public space, riven with social and legal exclusions."⁸ This revelation is substantiated, for Bishop, by contemporary conceptions of radical democracy. Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Bishop argues that the politics of social institutions cannot be understood in terms of consensus. Rather, social contexts are formed through the antagonistic delimitation of categories, the demarcation of spaces, and the determination of inclusion and exclusion within these categories and spaces.⁹ Moreover, Bishop demonstrates, Sierra's work does not merely produce ephemeral relations; it intervenes in actual institutions (those of marginalized labor and prostitution, in

particular); in doing so, Sierra's work enacts "a kind of ethnographic realism, in which the outcome or unfolding of [Sierra's] action forms an indexical trace of the economic and social reality of the place in which he works."¹⁰

The most immediate question emerging from Bishop's analysis is: what, specifically, is the relation between the evaluation of a work's politics and the evaluation of the artwork itself? Is an artwork – its function and value – determined by the politics it produces in its immediate context? Bishop seems to think so. She writes:

The tasks facing us today are to analyze how contemporary art addresses the viewer and to assess the quality of the audience relations it produces: the subject position that any work presupposes and the democratic notions it upholds, and how these are manifested in our experience of the work.¹¹

This assertion is symptomatic of a broader movement in contemporary theories and practices of art. It raises the question of whether an emphasis on the production of relations leads to a transfer of, rather than a challenge to, the knowledge/power structures that govern artistic production and consumption. Indeed, current artistic movements – relational art, but also more recent developments like Object Oriented Curating – do tend to replace artists and critics with curators and philosophers without fundamentally altering the hierarchies of the institution.¹² More immediate to the discussion at hand, conceived in terms of the social context of the work, an emphasis on relationality may undermine the political force immanent to the art object itself. In Bishop's account, a work is evaluated on the basis of an extrinsic discourse or abstraction – that of political theory. Moreover, this extrinsic discourse describes the social "effects" of the artwork, not the artwork itself. While Bishop's analysis rightly identifies the way in which the artwork aims to present the lack in, and falsity of, the idea of consensus, her account immediately re-inscribes this lack in an alternative mode of representation – i.e., the reality of the socio-political situation as described by the discourse of political theory. Thus understood, art becomes an essentially didactic practice: it may teach us something about the current socio-political situation. It may even teach us something new about how to enact democratic relations. But the artwork cannot, as an artwork, intervene in the actual *material* relationality in which objects are encountered.¹³ In other words, in spite of claims regarding the politics of art, there is an important sense in which Bishop's account accepts at face value the kinds of social identifications produced by a given situation and is content merely to describe these relations or, at best, the lessons that emerge out of such relations.

Inexistence in a Geometric Aesthetic

A geometric aesthetics places Sierra's installation within an artistic trajectory, one that includes the interrogations conducted by Russian constructivist artists into the nature of the line. Initiated by the work of Malevich, Rodchenko and Popova, constructivist praxis demonstrates that, in the logic of classical and romantic art, both material and form are subsumed under representation; the potentiality of particular materials and essential forms are valued and understood only insofar as their properties can be actualized in a figurative rendering of the world, in a replication of what we see in the world. Negating this logic, constructivist art sought to emancipate both form and materiality by stripping away modes of abstraction until they arrived at what they discovered to be the most foundational aesthetic element: the line. As Rodchenko writes:

The perfected significance of the line was finally clarified – on the one hand, its bordering and edge relationship, and on the other – as a factor of the main construction of every organism that exists in life, the skeleton, so to speak (or the foundation, carcass, system) The line is the path of passing through, movement, collision, edge, attachment, joining, section.

*Thus, the line conquered everything and destroyed the last citadels of painting – color, tone, texture, and surface.*¹⁴

In short, as an essential form the line is both destruction and generation. Malevich pushes this idea further, suggesting that the line is also the form that leverages new modes of aesthetic consciousness. He writes: "It was through the conscious line – through being conscious of the line before focusing consciousness on the object – that the artist could cognize not the object itself but what lay within that object: the non-objective forces that give structure and movement to it, to the world of space and time as such."¹⁵


This mode of aesthetic consciousness implies two assertions that are relevant to our discussion. First, it asserts the aesthetic consciousness of non-objective forces over the externalized object. Thus, the question of the nature of objects themselves remains relevant, not for its own sake but because objects instantiate more essential categories – i.e., the categories that determine what appears in the world and how.¹⁶ The work of art, in this understanding, is not primarily engaged in representing what appears in the world. Rather the work of art presents the relational conditions of its own appearance, conditions that might include the socio-economic situation in which the artwork emerges but are grounded, more fundamentally, in the aesthetic categories of "space and time as such."¹⁷

To give these assertions greater specificity, we ask: what happens when the line, with its destructive and generative capacities, is marked on human bodies? In the most immediate sense, it remains significant that, in the "Line" installations, the bodies of prostitutes and marginalized laborers are out of place, not only in the museum where they are photographed but also more generally in the situation of the contemporary west, wherein to be identified as a prostitute or migrant laborer is to be excluded from the representative structures of the law, society, and the state. In this sense, the situation of

marginalized surplus labor under capitalism is an essential element of the work. However, understood in relation to constructivist interventions and interrogations, the line does not merely pose a question regarding the legitimacy or contingency of such exclusion, it re-grounds this out-of-placeness in a more foundational form of relationality. The question is posed anew at a level of abstraction that cannot be immediately co-opted by ideological Liberal discourse about job-creation policy, immigrant labour, and so on.

The line initiates the subtraction of these bodies from any immediate social determination. This idea involves a kind of logical separation. It is obvious enough that in one sense the linear form cannot exist without material support, which in this case is provided by the set of bodies. But, as Alain Badiou suggests, there is a more significant sense in which the background against which marks, lines, or forms take place does not exist—the background (again, in this instance the set of bodies) is constituted by the lines as empty or open space. Thus, the marked bodies persist as inexistent.

The presentation of precarity and non-belonging is thereby doubled: the bodies that already do not appear literally dis-appear in the presentation of the art object. To put it in more processual terms, the invisibility of marginalized labour *dis*-appears in the making of the art object, i.e., in the formation of aesthetic value. The very appearance of the belaboured bodies already contradicts the structure in which they appear; with the presence of the line the belaboured bodies disappear under the new contradiction between the drawn line and the disappearing background.

An emphasis on the aesthetic logic of the work of art—as opposed to the socio-political representations of the work—doesn't circumvent the relevance of the artwork to its political situation. Indeed, the Constructivists were adamant that their art derived its formal problems from the situation of industrialization. What changes in the move from an aesthetics of the socialized body—such as the account developed by Bishop—to an aesthetics of geometric form—like the one I've gestured toward here—is the specific relation between artistic presentation and political re-presentation. To call for a more rigorously formal or geometric aesthetic is not to retreat from politics, but to affirm that the world remains, in spite of the reductive forces of capitalism, essentially heterogeneous and, subsequently, to acknowledge that a rigorous interrogation of our situation is not reducible to any single sphere of examination, intervention, or action. 

Notes

- 1 Santiago Sierra. "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person" (1998). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php Link used by permission.
- 2 Santiago Sierra. "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People" (1999). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php Link used by permission.
- 3 Santiago Sierra. "160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People" (2000). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200014_1024.php Link used by permission.
- 4 Ibid. The description for the 1999 work reads: "Six unemployed young men from Old Havana were hired for \$30 in exchange for being tattooed." The 2000 work reads: "Four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally, they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas ... for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas."
- 5 See: Jacques Rancière, "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2002). Unless specified, "works" refers, in this essay, to both the photographs and the installations. Implicitly, I'm contending with Rancière's claim that photography "presents itself as the rediscovered union between two statuses of the image that the modernist tradition had separated: the image as representation of an individual and as operation of art" (8-9).
- 6 See: Cornelia H. Butler and M Catherine de Zegher, *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010). This book provides an art-historical survey of the line in twentieth-century art.
- 7 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Peasance & Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), 113. Bourriaud defines Relational Aesthetics as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context." For Bourriaud and Bishop, primary examples of this movement include works by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Liam Gillick and Pierre Huyghe.
- 8 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 73-4.
- 9 Ibid, 72.
- 10 Ibid, 70.
- 11 Ibid, 78.
- 12 Bishop is certainly aware of this risk; the question, though, is whether or not her emphasis on antagonism provides any leverage against such a risk. See also Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).
- 13 The tendency to reduce art to a didactic function is described by Alain Badiou (see *Handbook of Inaesthetics*) and in Jacques Rancière's conception of "aesthetic regimes" (see, in particular, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes").
- 14 Aleksandr Rodchenko, "The Line," *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. A. N. Lavrentiev, trans. J. Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 113-114. Emphasis added.
- 15 Kazimir Malevich. *The Non-Objective World* (1927), quoted in the exhibition "A Century under the Sign of Line: Drawing and its Extension (1910-2010)" in *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, 47-48.
- 16 This understanding of the connection between aesthetic categories and politics is developed in Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible. See for example *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.
- 17 See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Adorno writes: "[I]n artworks the element that precedes their fixation as things constantly breaks through the thing-character" (99).

References

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Badiou, Alain. *Handbook of Inaesthetics*. Translated by Alberto Toscano. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2005.
- Bishop, Claire. "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 51-79.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Peasance and Fronza Woods. Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998.
- Butler, Cornelia H. and M. Catherine de Zegher. *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010.
- Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996.
- Malevich, Kazimir. *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Translated by Steve Corcoran. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009.
- . "Notes on the Photographic Image," *Radical Philosophy* 156 (July/August 2002): 8-15.
- . "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes." *New Left Review* 14 (2002): 133-151.
- Rodchenko, Aleksandr. "The Line," *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*. Edited by A. N. Lavrentiev. Translated by J. Gambrell. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005: 113-14.
- Sierra, Santiago. "160 cm line Tattooed on 4 People," installation and photographs, 2000 (El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo, Salamanca). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200014_1024.php
- . "250 cm Line Tattooed on Six Remunerated People," installation and photographs, 1999 (Espacio Aglutinador, Havana). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/996_1024.php
- . "Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated Person," installation and photographs, 1998 (51 Regina Street, Mexico City). http://www.santiago-sierra.com/982_1024.php