

# Aesthetics, Politics, and Art's Autonomy: A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière

Ruben Yepes

In this paper, I consider Jacques Rancière's influential theory of the relation between aesthetics and politics, in order to offer my own critical perspective of the French philosopher's conception of the autonomy of art in relation to his theory of politics and aesthetics. I will assess the advantages and disadvantages of Rancière's theory of art and politics and characterize his notion of the autonomy of art in terms of ideology in order to arrive at my main thesis, which hinges on Martin Heidegger's notion of art as *enframing* and *Stoss* (shock): the politics of art are best understood in a *relational* sense as a relative and dialogical suspension of habitual aesthetic experience and as the production of a singularity amidst the world of the habitual, which is always partial and transitory. As I hope to demonstrate, this view is distinct from Rancière's understanding of the politics of art as an oscillation between autonomous and heteronomous modes of art. Instead I propose that autonomy and heteronomy are inherent not merely to art considered as a structural totality but to every independent artwork.

## • Politics, Aesthetics, and Art •

Rancière's main philosophical concern is not with art but with politics. However, he notoriously understands aesthetics not as supplementary or subsidiary to politics but fundamental to its very concept. To understand this, we must first outline the difference that Rancière draws between police and politics. In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière reconceptualizes the habitual sense of the term 'politics' to avoid the kind of 'politics' subsumed under the practices of contemporary liberal democracies.<sup>1</sup> Rancière uses the term 'police' to refer to this compound of entities, institutions, discourses, and practices through which a metropolis' or a nation's order is produced and procured.<sup>2</sup> According to Rancière, what is particular to the police is its participation in the creation, legitimization, and sustainment of the premises of individual and collective experiences and positions within the social corpus. In other words, the police produces, reproduces, and operates the hegemonic distribution of the forms of social participation that are available to individuals and institutions within a particular society. Practices and institutions referring to "the aggregation and consentment of collectivities, the organization of powers, the distribution of the places and functions, and the systems of legitimization of that distribution" are not political but merely police.<sup>3</sup>

This definition allows Rancière to reserve the word 'politics' for the heterogeneous processes that oppose the consensus concerning the ways of participating, doing, perceiving, feeling, and relating to others that appear as unquestionable, something which the habitual conception of politics makes invisible. While the police institutes and sustains a particular social order that determines the capacities and possibilities of all those within it, 'politics' emerges as the dimension of dissensus and disagreement.<sup>4</sup> In Rancière's words:

I ... propose to reserve the name politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration: that of the part of those who have no part.<sup>5</sup>

Here, politics refers to the redistribution of social positions and roles, performed in such a way that those who did not participate in the

community may begin to do so. It is the intervention by which those who were (rendered) invisible and inaudible (or who were silenced) become visible and audible, therefore entering the world of the common and the public sphere; hence, politics *a/ways* involves an emancipatory quality. The unforeseen emergence of the heterogeneous interrupts the homogeneous space of police consensus; consequently, politics is necessarily relational, for it is always an intervention in the police, not the establishment of a political regime. In Rancière's view, the emergence of the heterogeneous must not be seen as a constant or a finality: the nature of politics is that of the *event* – an emergence that interrupts the forms and practices of domination.

In Rancière's view, politics, aesthetics, and art are intrinsically related; his elaboration of this relation hinges on two definitions of 'aesthetics'. In his view, the police produces the *distribution of the sensible* – "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the receptive parts and positions within it."<sup>6</sup> These delimitations are "based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in the way various individuals have a part in this distribution."<sup>7</sup> The distribution of the sensible is therefore a system that configures habitual ways of seeing, of saying, of feeling and doing – in short, habitual ways of being – that determine individuals' possibilities for political participation and in consequence their positions within the community.

In this sense, politics is the interruption of a regime that is in itself aesthetic, for it has to do with the perceived forms and prescribed spaces through which participation becomes available. Here, 'aesthetics' (*aisthetikos*) refers to the sensitive and the perceptive generally; in relation, politics performs a *redistribution of the sensible*.<sup>8</sup> It is important to stress the relevance of Rancière's formula: by placing the sensible at the heart of the possibilities for social participation, it becomes part of the very structure of the political. In Rancière's view, politics is *a/ways* concerned with the sensible, for it consists in "the reconfiguration of the division of the sensible, in presenting new subjects and objects, in rendering visible that which was not, in listening to those who were considered to be no more than noisy animals as beings bestowed with the gift of word."<sup>9</sup> If politics is a matter of the redefinition and redistribution of what is *visible* and what is *sayable* in a particular place and time, then it is clear that (insofar as we use the term in its original meaning) aesthetics,

far from being a subsidiary or minor category that would describe secondary facts and practices, is linked to politics at its very core. This is the aesthetics of politics, which incidentally has little to do with the aesthetization of politics that Walter Benjamin attributed to fascism.<sup>10</sup>

However, Rancière also understands aesthetics in a more specific sense, one that is directly related to art. At the start of *The Politics of Aesthetics*, he writes: “[These pages] are inscribed in a long-term project that aims at reestablishing a debate’s conditions of intelligibility.”<sup>11</sup> According to Rancière, the pervasiveness in contemporary critique of Situationist discourse, of the spectacle, of the crisis of art and the death of the image is symptomatic of the transformation of avant-garde thought into nostalgia in the face of which discourses of the ‘end’ or the ‘return’ have emerged as the recurring *mise-en-scène* of critical discourse. Reestablishing the conditions of the debate therefore means reaching an understanding of the connections between contemporary artistic practices and “modes of discourse, forms of life, conceptions of thought, and figures of the community” that avoids both the repudiation of present art as well as the revamping of the past; in this sense, the elaboration of the meaning of ‘aesthetics’ is a primordial task.<sup>12</sup>

In this second sense of ‘aesthetics’, the term does not refer to a theory of art in general or to a theory of the effects of art on sensitivity. Rather, it “refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships.”<sup>13</sup> In Rancière’s account, there have existed three aesthetic regimes: the *ethic*, the *poetic*, and the *aesthetic* regimes of art. The aesthetic regime is therefore the last of three regimes by which the boundary between art and non-art has been historically drawn. This regime is of particular interest with regard to the relation between politics and aesthetics.<sup>14</sup>

In the aesthetic regime, “the identification of art no longer occurs via a distinction of ways of doing and making, but it is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products.”<sup>15</sup> Here, art is always singular in the sense that it is free from any hierarchy of genres as well as from any specific rule. This singularity, however, is obtained by destroying the pragmatic barrier that separated it into an autonomous sphere – that of mimesis. But that does not mean that art does not retain its autonomy; quite the contrary, it establishes a state of

suspension in which form is experienced for itself while closely identifying with the forms of life that are nevertheless external to it.

In the aesthetic regime, as Steven Corcoran states, "art is art to the extent that it is [something else] than art."<sup>16</sup> Art is *aesthetic* in the first sense of the term as defined above, meaning that it is posited as an "autonomous form of life."<sup>17</sup> This is the key formula of the aesthetic regime, one which Rancière derives from Friedrich Schiller: "there exists a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community, namely the *aesthetic*."<sup>18</sup> Aesthetics in its broader sense subtends both the art of the aesthetic regime in its autonomy and that which Schiller calls the "art of living," i.e., the free play of life that the masses oppose to the organization of life by the state.<sup>19</sup> In the aesthetic regime, art is autonomous but only by means of tying art to non-art: the aesthetic experience itself communicates the realm of art with that of life experience. We may say that aesthetics in its broad sense is therefore the *frame* that gives art its political potential: insofar as politics and aesthetics are structurally connected, the politics of aesthetics is a form of meta-politics of art, the structural condition that connects the art of the aesthetic regime to autonomous life.

Art has the potential to provide an experience that is alternative to the ordinary, an experience in which freedom from habitual thought and from the hierarchies of power are foremost. In Rancière's view, art's potential as an independent aesthetic configuration to *interrupt* the distribution of the sensible is what properly renders it political. There is no field more privileged for the production of an aesthetic *other*, for the production of *dissensus* than art, for it is in this field where human endeavor sets itself to the invention of the forms, the percepts, and the affects of the new. This is not to say, as the artists of the avant-garde sometimes thought, that art leads or ought to lead the way for transformation or that it may in itself spur revolution. However, it is to say that art has an unequalled potential to provide political imagination with forms and modes of participation as well as with the procedures and processes required to bring them into existence – forms and procedures that are needed in order to resist and counter the regime of the police.

In the aesthetic regime, art places itself in its moment of political significance. In Rancière's view, it is the autonomy of art that gives it political relevance. His understanding of art and politics is similar to that of pre-Situationist Marxist philosophers such as Adorno, who stresses

that art's function is to not have a function.<sup>20</sup> The argument that art's political potential results from its autonomy is the goal of Rancière's aesthetics; such an argument "restitut[es] the conditions of the [aesthetic] debate."

## • The Autonomy of Art •

In the context of Rancière's contemporary aesthetic regime, 'autonomy' applies neither to the artwork nor to the artist *qua artist*: twentieth-century art has made it all too clear that the institutions and discourses of the autonomy of these two terms is an illusion.<sup>21</sup> In *Dissensus*, Rancière proposes that the politics of the aesthetic regime may be summed up in three points:

First, the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art but that of a mode of experience. Second, the "aesthetic experience" is one of heterogeneity such that, for the subject of that experience, it is also the dismissal of a certain autonomy. Third, the object of that experience is "aesthetic" insofar as it is not, or at least not only, art.<sup>22</sup>

The autonomy that Rancière highlights is that of the aesthetic experience of both the artist and the spectator as individuals who participate in the aesthetic dimension of life itself; in light of it, the 'autonomy' of 'art' – that is, of the artwork and of the artist *qua artist* – recedes, taking on a relatively less relevant status. The artist may be constricted by the discourses and expectations of the institution of art, but these do not hinder the aesthetic experience that the artist constructs. The autonomous experience *exceeds* the autonomy of art; in it, the artwork and the artist's intentions become heteronomous, i.e., imbricated with habitual aesthetic experience outside of art, even if they were intended as autonomous.

In Rancière's view, the aesthetic experience bears the politics of art: art produces an experience that suspends the relation between art and use-value, art and the world of objects, art and the habitual forms and practices of life. The politics of art lie in the fact that by producing such an experience art interrupts the distribution of the sensible. The aesthetic

regime includes the relation between art and politics on a structural level because the aesthetic practices that correspond to a sensorium different to that of power are precisely those that are validated as art. Thus, in Rancière's perspective, any dichotomy between autonomous and heteronomous art in the aesthetic regime becomes a non-issue in light of the autonomy of the aesthetic experience that art provides. I will critically address this below.

Indeed, Rancière argues that in the aesthetic regime *all* art is political, for as an experience that is separate from the distribution of the sensible, art itself is a political, sensible experience. In other words, autonomy defines both the regime of art and its politics. This leads Rancière to affirm that there may indeed be painting, sculpting, or drawing without there being art. This is of course a polemical assertion but one through which the philosopher wishes to keep his parallel affirmation of the event character of politics: art, like politics, emerges from the fabric of the habitual; if there may be power without politics, there may also be aesthetic practices that do not come forth as art. Thus, reactionary art – art that supports the *police*, the hegemonic distribution of power, and thereby opposes social change – is not at home in the aesthetic regime and to the extent that the regimes of art are also historical regimes of eligibility actually would not be art at all. For example, the Futurism of Marinetti and his followers with its alignment with fascism's glorification of war, technology, and patriotism would not classify as art in Rancière's view.

Further, in *Dissensus*, Rancière elaborates the idea of art as an oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy. Basing his analysis on a thorough historical account of the developments and vicissitudes of visual art, theatre, and literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he proposes that this oscillation leads either to "art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art."<sup>23</sup> In the first sense, art – as defined by the aesthetic regime – leans toward dissolution in life while in the second, objects from aesthetic experience are rendered autonomous as art. The conclusion that Rancière draws from his historical analysis is that in the fundamental link, subtended by aesthetic experience, between the art of the aesthetic regime and life itself, either autonomy is valorized over life or life is valorized over autonomy in a constant historical oscillation between these two poles.<sup>24</sup> In Rancière's view, art oscillates between autonomy and heteronomy in order to maintain the fundamental autonomy of the aesthetic experience (which is heteronomous with regard to art) while at the same time it purports its specificity as art. This oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy has in each case its own limits, its own formulation of the

'death' or 'end' of art: autonomous art reaches its 'death' when it exhausts all of its formal possibilities; heteronomous art when it dissolves into the broader context of life.<sup>25</sup>

Art is dissensus insofar as it is autonomous; however, it is not dissensus in the same way as politics is. As we have seen, according to Rancière politics is the interruption or redistribution of social roles and positions; it invents and brings forward new collective subjectivities. The aesthetics of politics is the *framing* of such collective subjectivities insofar as it makes them visible and audible. Conversely, art is not political because it lends its voice to individual subjects or to the individual interests of artists but because "it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience."<sup>26</sup> Art creates the conditions of possibility for a form of political subjectivity that is yet to come. Whether or not it does so by highlighting the individual experience of artists or other individuals is incidental, not definitive; what is important is that art as autonomous collective experience recreates the fabric of common experience, which may lead to new possibilities for collective subjective enunciation.

There are several advantages to Rancière's theory for the politics of art. First, there is the fact that, if we agree with Rancière, then we must hold that art is not political simply because it refers to political subjects: a painting or a sculpture may reference or illustrate political discourses or themes while being in consonance with the police's regime. Art may denounce injustice; it may refer to the horrors of war; it may highlight the existence of social inequality, violation of civil rights, or the depredation of the environment, but nevertheless do little or nothing to modify the distribution of relations of visibility/invisibility and audibility/inaudibility that subtend such issues.

Second, we must accept that art is not political merely because it conveys or directs our attention to a political discourse. That is – art does not become political merely by translating political ideologies. If this were the case, we would have to accept propagandic paintings and sculptures as political, according to Rancière's criteria. Art's collusion with propaganda reduces the necessarily open nature of art to the presentation of a 'message' in a sense no different from that of advertisement. This typically results in a notion of art as 'riddle', whereby the spectator must discover the 'message' the artist is trying to convey, thereby reducing art to a mere guessing game. When art becomes an illustration of a political 'message', it annuls the aperture of meaning and the power to affect that the work of



art operates inasmuch as discourse always exerts an overcoding effect on the image.

Third, art does not become political by occupying spaces 'external' or 'independent' to the art gallery or the art museum. The forms and possibilities of participation within a community are not extended merely by placing art in these sorts of spaces. While it is necessary to acknowledge the role these institutions play in the configuration of a field that, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu points out, is structured in relation to the general structure of the field of power, the emergence in spaces codified as supposedly 'external' to such institutions is insufficient to render a painting or a sculpture political (and therefore to render it as art).<sup>27</sup> It may be that works which emerge in public space operate in such a way that they reinforce the structures of power (that is, of the police) inasmuch as they allow dominating sectors of society to emerge as inclusive and socially aware, thereby obscuring their asymmetric advantages within the social field.

Despite these advantages, Rancière's theory is not without difficulties. My intention is to work towards the development of a theoretical base from which we may follow Rancière's theory of the relation between aesthetic experience and politics whilst avoiding compliance with his relatively fixed notion of the autonomy of art as an attribute of the aesthetic regime. While art may indeed be political insofar as it participates in the redistribution of the sensible, this does not necessarily mean that it is always in itself political or that its politics must necessarily be based on the autonomy of the aesthetic regime. I consider that while it is both necessary and profitable to keep Rancière's notion of an autonomous aesthetic experience that is in itself political, this experience is distinct from the autonomous experience prompted by the aesthetic regime of art.

In other words, I believe that there are two autonomies: one that subtends the relation between aesthetics and politics and another that determines the aesthetic regime of art. While autonomy played an important role in the early avant-garde movements, its value has been eroded by many contemporary artists, especially by those whose work aims at unconcealing the structures, discourses, and practices that frame not only contemporary art but also spectatorship. More significantly, Rancière's idea of the autonomy of art is susceptible to a critique that emphasizes the ideological role of free play and autonomy within contemporary production, a critique which is at the heart of the production

of the spaces and institutions that art occupies and that are its very condition of existence.

Let us question Rancière's concept of art. Although Rancière does not seem to be very concerned about the aesthetic practices of the police (those that do not suspend the distribution of the sensible), it is clear that he considers that art under the aesthetic regime is necessarily political: any non-political aesthetic practice will not qualify as art. In the aesthetic regime, Rancière conceives art as being necessarily invested in the production of a space of estrangement from everyday life, a distance between an aesthetic experience that has itself as end and the servitude of quotidian experience, an art that produces a suspension, a state of *shock*, thereby opening an aperture upon the prevailing doxa of the habitual.

But this is not all: Rancière adds a pessimistic tone to his outlook on twentieth-century art that makes his definition of art seem even narrower. He claims that artists' production of such an estrangement, of a suspension of the habitual, has resulted in the proclamation of the necessity for art to either become more modest or take preeminence as the only authentic political space that remains: critical art becomes either "testimony, archive, and documentation" or "a form of direct social action" that hinges on the concepts of "*relation* and *infiltration*."<sup>28</sup> In both cases, Rancière argues that the historical outcome is disenchanting: "critical art, whose purported task is to produce forms of political awareness and mobilization, is in actual fact always buoyed by the self-evidence of a dissensual world."<sup>29</sup> In other words, the twentieth-century art that attempts to produce political mobilization becomes hackneyed because of the very fact that it comes about amidst a political thrust that is not in and of itself, thereby becoming parody; indeed, one can think of much contemporary 'political' art that seems to merely be playing on the forms and strategies of 'serious' activism, an art that comes across as a joke *without* a jab: three examples that come to my mind are the Yes Men's "identity correction" pranks; Tania Bruguera's offering of cocaine lines in a 2009 performance in Bogota, Colombia; and Banksy's graffiti puns on war, poverty, and contemporary capitalism.

Despite this, Rancière's dismissal of much of contemporary critical art seems unwarranted. Indeed, Rancière offers not only a theoretical scenario in which certain paintings, sculptures, literary writings, and films do not qualify as art due to their more or less direct allegiance with the common taste but also a scenario in which at least some of the more radical art forms of today would also fail to classify as art precisely

because of their direct political commitment, which hinders the very separation that Rancière proclaims as the basis of the aesthetic regime. This is a very narrow definition of art, one that marginalizes much of what we in fact call art today. Rancière's notion of an oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy does not seem to help here: we would gain little by proposing, for instance, an 'autonomous' art and a 'heteronomous' art, an art that exists through the fundamental separation that the aesthetic regime purports as its basic parameter and an art that is merely in correspondence with the forms and doxa of common taste, for it is hardly the case that the works we may subsume under the latter category are not recognized as art today or even that they are polemically so recognized.

Things are further complicated by the fact that much of what we call art today in some way provides an autonomous experience – as it removes us from the habitual patterns and experiences of everyday life at least in a relative sense – while being complacent with the taste and the aesthetics of the police. In the same manner, one may say that there is a lot of contemporary art, particularly installations and video art, that deploys sensory strategies akin to those of certain contemporary spectacles and forms of mass entertainment in such a way that it would be difficult to distinguish the former experience from the latter. Such art is nevertheless an autonomous experience: what is a spectacle if not a form of placing in suspension the weariness of everyday life? In both cases, the autonomy of art as a regime does not seem to fit neatly as the guarantor of politics.

The problem here is that for Rancière the aesthetic regime is not a category within the historical development of art but the very regime that defines its historicity. Therefore, if we are to keep Rancière's historical partitions, we may not simply bypass this regime by holding that there is an art that corresponds to it and an art that does not.<sup>30</sup> It is plausible to accept the aesthetic regime of art inasmuch as it refers to a form of aesthetic practice that purports to separate itself from use-value and from any other form of assimilation within the habitual fabric of life. However, it is difficult to support a notion of a definitional category of art that bars from it many of the objects and images that are currently given that name. But if it is not the autonomy of the aesthetic experience that ought to be questioned, then the problem takes on a larger scale, for it places in question the very relation between art and politics that Rancière has drawn.

If autonomy is in fact the defining trait of current art (ideologically at least), then the link between politics and the autonomous aesthetic experience provided by art is problematic. Some art merely corresponds to the forms, sensitivities, and discourses of the police, playing on the tastes of the hegemonic order while still claiming its autonomy. Furthermore, it is plausible that there is an art that provides a space for an autonomous experience in the sense that it is in itself separate from the experiences of everyday life but that in this space the spectator may do nothing more than indulge in a heightened recognition of predominating tastes. Such art may be considered an autonomous experience because it offers a space of pause, of suspension, amidst the continuous flow of life, but it would hardly be an art that challenges the distribution of the sensible.

## • The Ideology of Autonomy •

Ultimately, it seems that what Rancière calls 'police' in fact produces the apparently autonomous space of the aesthetic experience that art provides; I argue that art is a particular cultural space and a practice of the common sensorium, of the distribution of the sensible, and that art's aesthetic experience is in fact distinct from the autonomy of the political experience. Here, we may not argue that there is an 'authentic' autonomy of the aesthetic experience of art that prevails over an 'inauthentic', ideological autonomy, for the autonomy produced by the police would frame aesthetic experience itself: ideological autonomy is the condition and not the consequence of art. But if we cannot argue that in relation to the definition of art there is a distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' aesthetic experience, then the link Rancière draws between politics and the autonomous aesthetic experience produced by art must be problematic.

So far, I have used the term 'ideology' to refer to the autonomy of the aesthetic experience of the aesthetic regime. What is meant by autonomy as ideology, and what is its relation to autonomous aesthetic experience as understood by Rancière?<sup>31</sup> The notion that the autonomy of art is merely ideological has a long history in critical theory and Marxist theories of art and culture; so does the concomitant notion – that of a fundamental autonomy of art – which has been defended by Marxist thinkers such as Adorno and of course Rancière.

According to Terry Eagleton, autonomy, creative freedom, and imagination constitute central values for capitalism, particularly in the current moment of its expansion in which it heavily relies on the inventive and productive capacities of individuals.<sup>32</sup> These capacities are especially important for participation in the productive system of the middle and professional classes in post-Fordist society. In this sense, the production of individual and collective values and the production and exercise of individual creative capacities are promoted and administrated through art and other cultural institutions. In other words, the artist's creative autonomy and the similarly autonomous experience that the spectator is invited to undergo serve as models for the type of subjectivity that is required in the modern capitalist world.

Paolo Virno uses the term *virtuosity* to refer to the public performance of intellectual abilities that characterize contemporary capitalist production: capitalism requires autonomous, proposing, entrepreneurial subjects.<sup>33</sup> The art of the aesthetic regime corresponds to this by promoting the figure of the independent, autonomous creator to the status of hero of creativity, who advances a form of experimentation that the spectator may replicate. Understood in this sense, art may be seen as an experimental 'laboratory' of capitalism with its constant need for innovation and new subject positions or, if one prefers, as the *gymnasium* where virtuosity is exercised and enhanced.

This is what I mean by the ideology of the autonomy of art: art creates an apparently independent space for creativity that in fact serves the interests of capitalist production. Insofar as the distribution of the sensible is a distribution of parts and positions, of modes of visibility and audibility that the productive system requires, we may say that production is at its core. The distribution of the sensible establishes a set of productive relations that are as such relations of power. In this sense, art as defined by the aesthetic regime, far from having historically emerged as an autonomous space for the exercise of dissensus, has structurally emerged as an ideological space from which production may benefit and through which the distribution of the sensible is enacted and actualized. Verifying this would require submitting the theory of the autonomy of art not only to an analysis that relates it to production (as Eagleton has done) but also to a genealogical analysis of the historical configuration of the aesthetic regime of art, something that exceeds the scope of this paper. But if Eagleton has a case, then we must accept the idea that the police in fact produces the autonomy of the aesthetic experience of art as defined by the aesthetic regime.

## • Relational Autonomy •

Where does this leave us with regard to the politics of art? To recap, I have argued in favor of the link between politics and aesthetics as theorized by Rancière because it allows an understanding of politics that places aesthetics at its very core. Also, I have held to Rancière's notion of the autonomy of aesthetic experience as it is theoretically necessary in order to understand the way in which aesthetic experience may produce an interruption, a hiatus, in the distribution of the sensible and even contribute to its redistribution.

However, as I have argued, Rancière's reliance on aesthetic autonomy to define the aesthetic regime of art results in a very narrow definition of art, one that does not allow space for many of the practices and objects to which we typically assign that term. In fact, the aesthetic autonomy of art is an ideology – at least in relation to the art of the twentieth century. In this sense, the autonomy of the aesthetic regime of art is a product of the police rather than a political space and is therefore distinct from the autonomous aesthetic experience of politics.

In these final pages I wish to propose that autonomous aesthetic experience – the dissensus it produces, its interruption of the distribution of the sensible – only comes about in opposition to *the ideology* of the autonomy of art. The autonomous aesthetic experience is not structurally built into the aesthetic regime of art, its mechanisms, or its defining values; on the contrary, it must be constructed. Insofar as the aesthetic experience that art provides is a product of the police, the irruption of the political in art must be an interruption of such a product; it must interrupt the ideological function of autonomous art.

Does this mean that in order to be political, art *must* challenge the institutional structures that frame it insofar as they are a product of the police? While challenging institutional structures is a political option, it is

not the only option. Indeed, our cultural institutions play an important part in the distribution of the sensible, but they are not monolithic, impenetrable structures that cannot host resistance within them. Quite the contrary: they are porous and malleable. Thus while the autonomy of art is ideological, the autonomous aesthetic experience that constitutes the political may still come about *within* it. The opportunities for significant aesthetic experience do not derive from the autonomy of the field but from the dialectical relations between the artwork and the spectator's discursive frames. That aesthetic experience is autonomous means that there is a background, a matrix from which it is autonomous; in this sense, autonomy cannot be absolute. This matrix is embodied by the spectator–subject: the matrix from which the experience of the political separates itself is that of the spectator's discourses and practices, the world as the subject experiences it. The autonomous aesthetic experience that brings about the political therefore operates a suspension in the subject itself.

While it would be possible to develop this line of inquiry using Rancière's categories, I would like to resort to a philosopher who in my view haunts his discourse. In his famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Martin Heidegger argues that art has a fundamental relation to truth insofar as being is unconcealed through art.<sup>34</sup> In Heidegger's view, art is not a representation, a frame set upon the world; neither is it a means of expression or catharsis. Rather, as *aletheia*, art is the unconcealing of that which was until then to be brought into existence, the installation of being, the opening of a world, not a framing but an *enframing* (*Ge-Stell*). Through this opening, a relation is formed between things and humans in such a way that the relations of the habitual world are brought into suspension. Art opens up a world because it brings humans and things into a new proximity.

Just as Rancière conceives art as a hiatus in the distribution of the sensible, for Heidegger art suspends the habitual relations that constitute the world of common experience in order to install a new relation that configures a new world. This is what Gianni Vattimo, commenting on Heidegger, calls the *Stoss* (shock) of the work of art:<sup>35</sup> the clearing of a space amidst the habitual world in order for the work of art to occur, the opening of a hiatus, the reconfiguration of parts and positions within the social distribution of hierarchies, agency, and power.<sup>36</sup> According to Vattimo, the opening produced by the work of art is dialogical. A dialogue "is above all a kind of reckoning ... with the alterity of the other, in order to reestablish the continuity he has interrupted."<sup>37</sup> In other words, a dialogue comes about in relation to a subject's discourses and relations, to

the subject's world, which is at first placed in suspension and later reconstituted. This means that while there may be a radical, groundbreaking, foundational experience resulting from certain art, there is also art that produces a relative opening, one that places the world in relative suspension. In other words, there is always room for a relative experience of otherness, a relative *Stoss*, a nuanced encounter with the essence of art.

While a 'great' work of art may provide for a completely autonomous experience – opening a radically new perspective, a new form of relation, and in this sense, a new world – a work of art that produces a partial opening of a world, a relative, dialogical *Stoss*, nevertheless still produces an apprehension albeit relative of a singularity, a relative feeling of estrangement, a partial suspension of the distribution of the sensible. This art may not necessarily be autonomous in a radical sense, but we may still say that it is autonomous in a *relational* sense. That is – it may be embedded in the 'autonomous' space provided for it by the police while still opening up – partially and dialogically – a hiatus in the distribution of the sensible. In both cases, however, art would inhabit an ideological space, one that is construed as autonomous, all the while managing to open an alternative space, one that provides for an independent aesthetic experience; indeed this seems to be the case with much of the art that purports to be 'political.'

It is important to notice that this dialectic of ideological autonomy and autonomy as opening of a world is not equivalent to Rancière's scheme of the relations between art and life. It is not a case of 'art becoming life,' of art framing a desired heteronomy, for we are admitting the ideological character (and therefore the heteronomous character) of the framing art itself. Nor is it a case of life becoming art, for there is no transit from a heteronomous aesthetic experience that is isolated through the separating practices of the institution of art. Even less is it a case of a merging of the borders between art and life, for it is not a matter of objects crossing back and forth between the two terms of the dialectical relation. In this view, autonomy and heteronomy would not be distinct modes of art but constitutive terms of the *event* character of each artwork.

Ultimately, the politics of art depends not on a fixed, structural, and ideological autonomy of art that constitutes the defining regime but on relations with the discourses that constitute the habitual world of the spectator-subject. The forms of creativity, free play, and inventiveness that inform the autonomy of art have an ideological function not only in art



but in relation to the subject (as they prepare the subject for entrepreneurship in the contemporary marketplace); consequently, the *Stoss* produced by the work of art is a suspension of the subject's correspondence to contemporary production. It is in this sense a liberation from a subjectivity of production. The political, therefore, is the suspension that takes place within the ideological framework of art, eroding the latter's capacity to fulfill its purpose as separation – even while depending on it for its very occurrence.

If the autonomous aesthetic experience produced by art is relational, contingent upon the spectator–subject's discursive and sensible disposition, then art's political effect is not a broad, structural one but rather one that occurs at a micropolitical level. It does not seem to me that art can aspire (as the avant-gardes did) to produce a major, structural redistribution of the sensible as if it were the leading field of human endeavor in which politics are played out. Rather, art's political effect is localized, contingent, and always precarious. Art is enormously creative in a political sense, but at the same time, it runs the risk of being reabsorbed into the dominating sensorium, of becoming hackneyed, of being converted into spectacle and rendered mere ideology. When Rancière states that the object of the autonomous aesthetic experience is 'aesthetic' insofar as it is not art, we must identify a fundamental suggestion: the effects that the autonomous aesthetic experience produces are beyond the realm of artistic free play; on the contrary, they are in relation to a specific circumstance or configuration that does not necessarily appertain to the discourses of the regime of art. In other words, the political exceeds the ideological realm of art's autonomy, for it is about the process of negotiation of that which constitutes our common world.

It is a shame that Rancière, invested in maintaining art's autonomy, does not develop the insight he offers when referring to the object of the autonomous aesthetic experience. Even though Rancière gives a central position to the object of the autonomous aesthetic experience in his definition of art (quoted above), it is largely left unconsidered throughout his discourse. If he were to give greater relevance to this object, he might perhaps assess the autonomy of art in a different manner. That the object of the aesthetic experience that art produces lies beyond art means that this experience is not sufficient to define what art is, for it does not define its autonomy as such. Rancière wishes to see art as a field of human endeavor that is structurally political; in consideration of its ideological constitution and functioning, however, we must stress that it is a product of the police, and that within it, the political is always fragile, sporadic,

contingent. Just as in the case of politics beyond art, the political in art is always an *event*.

There is a politics of aesthetics which, as we have seen, has to do with the interruption of the distribution of the sensible. This politics is ultimately insufficient to define what art is and does and especially insufficient to define its autonomy. Furthermore, like any politics, that politics is not neutral: it has as its purpose the triggering of a relation, a dialogue, between the spectator and the *other*, which insofar as art has an object must not be read as 'any other'. It is not merely about the creation of a chasm; indeed insofar as it has an object and an objective, the suspension it produces is an *analytical consequence*, not a sought effect. The politics of aesthetics are not free play; they carry a purpose. The politics of aesthetics is therefore also an *aesthetics of politics*.

A final thought. Given the relational quality of the politics of art and the fragile nature of that politics, the *border* emerges as the trope that may perhaps best characterize the politics of art. Artistic practices that actively engage with social and cultural contexts and issues that exceed the realm of the free play of art's autonomy have in my view the potential to establish active dialogical relations with the subjects that occupy those contexts. This does not mean, however, that we must disregard the autonomy of the field of art, its purported separation: the artist and the artwork are at the other end of the dialogical relation, and the very possibility of that relation depends on the existence of the artist's position and the separate space of the artwork. Even though its politics do not define it, it is the very existence of the field that renders political possibilities for art. While emphasizing autonomy as free play and separation seems to hinder the relational quality of art, emphasizing the border may lead to a better understanding of its politics.

## • Notes •

- 1 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 2 This conception of the institutional framework of power is very similar to the notion of ideological apparatuses of the state of his professor and mentor, Louis Althusser, who in his well-known essay refers to institutions such as education, the media, religion, and culture as fundamental to the production and dissemination of state ideology.
- 3 Rancière: *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 43.
- 4 In his doctoral dissertation *The Nights of Labour: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Rancière had already outlined his understanding of the relation between aesthetics and politics, regarding the specific case of the cultural practices of 19th century French proletariat. In it, Rancière proposes that the nightly artistic and literary practices of the proletariat constituted an exercise in the imagining and construction of alternative forms of existence towards which that social class could work and strive. Within a form of experience that was divided into a time for work and a time for rest, the proletariat's extraction of time and space for artistic and cultural endeavors emerges as a form of resistance in its own right. See: Rancière, *The Nights of Labour: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).
- 5 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29–30.
- 6 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 As we know, the word “aesthetics” comes from the Greek *aisthetikos*, which refers to the sensitive and the perceptive. The term was popularized in English by translation of Immanuel Kant as “the science which treats of the conditions of sensuous perception.” Kant had tried to correct the term after Alexander Baumgarten had taken it in German to mean “criticism of taste” (1750s), but Baumgarten's sense attained popularity in English and now informs the common usage.
- 9 From Jacques Rancière, *Sobre políticas estéticas*, trans. Manuel Arranz (Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2005), 15, which reads : “*La política consiste en reconfigurar la división de lo sensible, en introducir sujetos y objetos nuevos, en hacer visible aquello que no lo era, en escuchar como a seres dotados de la palabra a aquellos que no eran considerados más que como animales ruidosos.*” The English translation given here is my own, after Arranz.
- 10 “‘*Fiat ars – pereat mundus*’ says Fascism,” Benjamin famously writes, adding that, in “*l’art pour l’art*”, “[mankind’s] self-alienation has reached such a degree it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order”. In Benjamin’s view, art is deployed by fascism in order to provide aesthetic gratification vis-à-vis the totalitarian organization of life around war, resulting in the ultimate alienation of the masses. While in Benjamin’s formulation, Fascism uses aesthetics in order to annul the possibility of dissensus, in Rancière’s view, politics seeks to open the

aesthetic dimension in order to make space for those who have been alienated from political participation. See: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. and trans. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 42.

11 Rancière, *Politics*, 10.

12 Ibid., 11.

13 Ibid., 10.

14 For the sake of completeness, let us briefly look at the first two regimes. First, there is the Ethical Regime of Images, in which the important relation is that between the particular modes of being of images and the modes of being of individuals and communities, that is, the ethos of a specific people. Rancière stresses that “in this regime, there is no art properly speaking but merely images that we judge according to their intrinsic truth and their effects on the ways of being of individuals and the collective” (*Dissensus*, 19). The relation between image and ethics prevents the prior from properly becoming art in the modern sense of an autonomous practice. Although Rancière does not explicitly state it, he clearly has Classic Antiquity in mind.

Second, there is the Poetic or Representative Regime, which identifies the couple *poiesis/mimesis* as the core structure of the arts. In this regime, *mimesis* is not a normative principle that conditions art to the making of copies; rather, it is a pragmatic principle that isolates as art certain ways of doing and making that produce imitations. By this principle, these forms of art are isolated both from use-value and from the ethical value of truth. Rancière calls this regime ‘poetic’ because “it identifies the arts ... within a classification of ways of doing and making, and [because] it consequently defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing imitations” (Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, 22). Clearly, this definition follows from the term ‘*techne*’ that the Greeks used to identify art. This is the regime of the Classical Age.

15 Rancière, *Politics*, 22.

16 Corcoran, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 18.

17 Ibid. Even though Corcoran calls this a “productively ambiguous formula” and that Rancière does little to clarify the meaning of “autonomous form of life”, it is clear in the context of his body of work that Rancière is drawing from Aristotle (see, for instance, *Dissensus*, 30; 37). Rancière’s notion of ‘form of life’ seems informed by Aristotle’s distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, i.e. between private, ‘natural’ life and public life qualified by politics. Rancière wishes to “return politics to the life of subjects”, not to relate politics to “the expression of an originary living subjectivity” but to return it to a property of humans that does not depend on the *bios*, their “equality [as] speaking beings.” One could infer that the expression “autonomous form of life” refers to a property of *zoe* that is unrestrained from power, free from the control of the police (*Dissensus*, 91–2). See also: Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Trevor Saunders, trans. T.A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1981).

18 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 115. Here, Rancière is paraphrasing a famous claim by Schiller, which Corcoran, Rancière’s editor, quotes textually in his introduction: “aesthetics will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful *and* of the art of living” (“Editor’s Introduction,” 18).

- 19 Schiller's notion of play or *play drive* ('*Sinnestrieb*') has been important to Rancière's for the development of his theory. This is especially clear if we consider that in *Políticas estéticas*, he dedicates a considerably long passage to elaborate this notion, and in the fact that it remains linked to his notion of the autonomy of art even though there is relatively less mention of Schiller in *Dissensus*. It is worthwhile to mention here the way in which Rancière benefits from Schiller's notion of play. As we know, in Kant's aesthetics, the free play of imagination suspends the determination of matter by form, of sensitivity by understanding. Schiller politicizes the Kantian notion of free play by relating it to the opposition between the "intelligent" State and the "sensual" masses, the opposition of "cultivated men" to the "men of nature". In turn, Rancière further develops this line of thought by opposing free play to the "servitude of work", the playful autonomy of the aesthetic experience to the modes of living prescribed by the class of the dominators (here, it becomes clear why Rancière attributes a significant political dimension to French nineteenth-century proletariat artistic endeavors). Free play, as an activity devoid of a utilitarian end, does not purport to obtain power over people or things, and this is what in Rancière's view separates it from the dominant forms of power. See: Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Dover, 2004).
- 20 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (London: Athlone, 1997), 225.
- 21 Amongst the group of artists who have become notorious for their deconstruction of the discourses and practices of the art institution, we may name Michael Asher, Santiago Sierra, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson, and Hans Haacke.
- 22 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 116–117.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 132.
- 24 In this scheme, three options are posited by the philosopher: "Art can become life. Life can become art. And art and life can exchange their properties" (*Dissensus*, 119). In all three cases, a particular relation between the autonomous and the heteronomous is posited. In the first case, art may become a practice by which life 'educates itself', gives itself a new sensorium, a new collective ethos, new 'types' around which to mold itself; in this sense, art, in the autonomy of the experience it provides, frames a desired heteronomy as to render it visible. In the second case, it may become a practice by which the heteronomous aesthetic experience is projected onto a cultural artifact by means of a constitutive separation – that which is operated, for instance, by the art museum – in such a way that the artifact becomes art; in this case, art is construed as an autonomous practice while the will that produced it is heteronomous. Further still, it may be that the heteronomous appears in the space of the autonomous by means of a blurring of the boundaries of art by allowing common objects to cross its borders.
- 25 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 123–24.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 142.
- 27 Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- 28 Rancière mentions as examples of the first case Chris Burden's 1991 piece *The Other Vietnam Memorial*, Christian Boltanski's 2002 installation *Les abonnés du telephone*, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss's 1987 installation *Monde visible*; as examples of the second case, he mentions relational art in general and Lucy Orta's transformable

objects in particular, Krystof Wodiczko's 1998 *Homeless Vehicle*, and Matthieu Laurette's *Produits remboursés* (1991–2001). See: Rancière, *Dissensus*, 145–46.

- 29 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 143.
- 30 We could of course entertain the idea that the different regimes of art – the ethical, the mimetic, and the aesthetic regime – can coexist; Rancière hints at this idea in *The Future of the Image*. In this case, the aesthetic regime would separate itself from the other two regimes although there could still be paintings and sculptures that may be define as art by the other two regimes (especially by the mimetic regime). However, this would merely lead us to assert that the aesthetic regime derives its politics from its opposition to the other regimes; since this opposition has been going on for at least 150 years, such a politics would be quite dull and uninteresting. More importantly, it would radically simplify the political scope of the aesthetic experience provided by the art of the aesthetic regime.
- 31 I use the term ideology in Althusser's sense. According to the definition given by this Marxist philosopher, "ideology does not represent the system of real relations that govern individual existence, but the imaginary relation of individuals to the real relations in which they live." Ideology is part of the superstructure in which cultural production may be inscribed. It serves the purpose of promoting albeit in veiled form the discourses, subjectivities, and forms of social relation that the productive system (the base in Marxist terms) requires. In Althusser's sense, it is a necessary aspect of capitalist production insofar as it plays a fundamental role in the creation and reproduction of the social relations of production and the values and ideals that are vital to it. By giving tangible form to the ideological content of capitalism, cultural production aids in the reproduction of capitalist society. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," trans. Ben Brewster, accessed July 7, 2014, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>
- 32 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).
- 33 Paolo Virno, "On Virtuosity," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 34 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of The Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).
- 35 In *Art's Claim to Truth*, Vattimo attributes the term *stoss* (shock) to Heidegger's essay although the German philosopher does not in fact use it. In any case, it is evident that what Vattimo is getting at is Heidegger's notion of the radical originality of the art work. Indeed for Heidegger, what the artist does is "remove [the work] from all relations to something other than itself, in order to let it stand on its own for itself alone." The work is the suspension of all relations, which are hereby replaced with the relations it produces; insofar as these relations effectively constitute the world, it is indeed legitimate for Vattimo to say that a shock is exerted through the experience of the work of art. Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 40.
- 36 Near the beginning of his essay, Heidegger stresses that he is referring to great art. What does he mean by that? In a sense, this is a sort of disclaimer on behalf of the philosopher by which he anticipates the critique that not all art – indeed not even the majority of it – is successful in opening up a world: the prevailing pattern of most art is one of continuance rather than difference. But of course continuity is not the trait of the art that Heidegger is referring to: he is concerned only with art that is great insofar

as it manages to produce a radically new sensorium. While Heidegger does not write that other forms of painting, sculpting, and writing are not worthy of the name art, it is all too clear that Rancière's restricted definition of art is akin to Heidegger's notion of great art.

37 Vattimo, 133.

## • References •

Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Rolf Tiedemann. London: Athlone, 1997.

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)." Translated by Ben Brewster. Marxists.org. Accessed July 7, 2014.  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

Aristotle. *The Politics*. Edited by Trevor Saunders. Translated by T.A. Sinclair. New York: Penguin, 1981.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*. Edited and Translated by Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Levin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *In Other Words: Essays Toward a Reflexive Sociology*. Translated by Matthew Adamson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Corcoran, Steven. "Editor's Introduction." In *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* by Jacques Rancière. Edited and Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2004. 1-24.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

- Rancière, Jacques. *The Nights of Labour: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth Century France*. Translated by John Drury. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.
- . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.
- . *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Edited and translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Continuum, 2004.
- . *Sobre políticas estéticas*. Translated by Manuel Arranz. Barcelona: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2005.
- . *The Future of the Image*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2009.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Continuum, 2009.
- Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Translated by Reginald Snell. New York: Dover, 2004.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *Art's Claim to Truth*. Translated by Luca D'Isanto. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Virno, Paolo. "On Virtuosity." In *The Visual Culture Reader*, Third Edition. Edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff. New York: Routledge, 2013.