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# Introduction

Mandy–Suzanne Wong

This issue began as an idea for a collective meditation on fantasy and the fantastical, the monstrous and the magical, and the aesthetic curiosities and conundrums implied thereby. The ideas submitted by our authors changed all that, altering how we editors conceived the issue and the theme and the general notion of “themes”, consequently altering what this issue has become. As the journal grows and progresses, it becomes that much clearer that as a forum for aesthetic thought and philosophical, scholarly writing, EA ought to define itself by its dynamism: by flexibility as much as by the uncompromised standards of peer-review. With that goal in mind, we do not mourn the fantasy-themed section but gratefully celebrate the authors whose ideas made us think beyond it, reaffirming our commitment to dynamism.

Our contributors explore such a rich variety of aesthetic problems that it almost seems unfair to bind them together with any sort of common thread. But a superficial relationship does exist between the pieces, all of which in their own ways pose the question of the potency of ideas. Can ideas really change things? Can how thinking beings think about other beings affect the constitution and efficacy of those other beings? This is a

political question, an existential question, a phenomenological question, and an ontological question. Thus, and far from least of all, it is an aesthetic question. As but one of their critical accomplishments, the following essays deepen this question. They suggest that it will always be a question with dire implications and that if it has an answer, that answer might be horrifying. Although the very possibility of aesthetic practice and experience might well hinge on the supposition that ideas can affect the physical world, our contributors imply that the reach and effective power of ideas might be limited, even overestimated. For these authors, the power of ideas is an open question, therefore it always undermines itself. Perhaps, however, it is precisely as such that ideas are most powerful.

**Jane Forsey** begins with a meditation on Chardin, a painter who, endorsed by Louis XV, painted miniatures of cooking pots. At the height of the Rococo era, in Paris and at court of all places where opulence reigned supreme, Chardin almost obsessively insisted upon kitchenware. Centuries before Yuriko Saito and other aestheticians acknowledged the philosophical profundity of everyday aesthetics, what could a painter have meant to say with quotidian subjects? Possibly nothing, Forsey concludes, considering Chardin's circumstances. His works are neither formalistic experiments nor attempts to draw us into the rustic human lifeworld implied by the pots. And yet, firmly pre-Duchamp, are they really simply pots? Forsey suggests that what Chardin is getting at is the fact that in the face of *things*, humans sooner or later run out of things to say. By unassumingly depicting such humble subjects that his paintings exceed the limits of interpretation, Chardin painted nothing less than what Kant called "supersensible", the unknowable "thing-in-itself" which exceeds every thought's attempt to pin it down. Forsey's approach is not technically object-oriented, but in the interest of sparking further discussion of her piece, it is worth noting that from her implied perspective Chardin seems to foreshadow Graham Harman's powerful thesis that all entities withdraw from view even as they make appearances before other entities.<sup>1</sup> From this standpoint, ideas cannot shape "reality" at all – only how it appears. A question to consider in light of Forsey's piece might therefore concern the relationship of withdrawal to Enlightenment in Chardin's work and that of his contemporaries. In the burgeoning Age of Reason, where in Chardin's thinking did he find room to accommodate the limitations of ideas? How did he come to realize that the darkness beyond every frontier of knowledge could be found in a simple cooking pot?

Phenomenology refuses to make life any easier for ideas. In a close reading of Sartre's ambivalent views on imagination, **Sarah Marshall** notes

that ideas about things cannot escape their foundations in “real” or somehow *a priori* things. As we go about the world, our perceptions compile a storehouse of “real” knowledge, which we draw on when we use our imaginations. But imagination cannot summon any “real” object to presence; it only directs our attention to “analogical” yet potent “representatives” of objects. Thus in its own private realm, the imagination weaves prior experiences into transcendent yet keenly sensible phenomena. These imagined (“irreal”) beings cannot be “possessed” by the subject who imagines them; indeed a subject can only act upon imagined objects in imaginary ways. As Marshall puts it, Sartre in fact “undermines any causal relationship between the ‘I’ and the will with respect to the image,” this despite the fact that “the image is an act of consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> Even “real,” perceived objects are always more than we can perceive, “open[ing] upon an infinite surplus with respect to what is actually present to consciousness.”<sup>3</sup> The implication is that despite Sartre’s insistence on separate spheres of action for perception and imagination, in neither sphere can consciousness fully apprehend or affect its objects. Where then is the autonomy of consciousness? Where is its power and its consequence?

The autonomy of ideas – and thus ideas’ ability to influence physical events and “practical” relationships – seems to fare no better in the political realm. As **Ruben Yepes** observes in his critical assessment of Rancière’s aesthetic politics, what we normally call “politics” (though Rancière prefers the term “police”) refers to how entities are arranged and perceptibly assigned to various roles. Humans must be able to sense these arrangements; otherwise they could not order our world as we know politics do. Thus as “distributions of the sensible,” politics are inherently aesthetic in the Greek sense (αἰσθητικός; pertaining to the physical senses) and presumably susceptible to the influence of aesthetic ideas and practices such as those that come to life in art.<sup>4</sup> In fact Rancière argues that among art’s greatest advantages are its autonomy from politics and its ability to interrupt distributions of the sensible: art disrupts political status quos in the interests of freedom and change. What does and does not count as art is therefore an important political question. The problem is, as Yepes shows, art can only be considered “autonomous” in relation to that from which it is autonomous: to divorce itself from politics, art must in some sense bind itself to politics. So the regimes that determine and “police” distributions of the sensible risk doing the same to the aesthetics that purport to disrupt those distributions. Yepes attempts to salvage aesthetic ideas’ ability to make a political difference, knowing that in order

to succeed, he must ask us to rethink the fundamentals of Rancière's acclaimed aesthetic theory.

What happened when our contributors set fire to the idea of thinking about fantasy? A fiery collection of work that calls into question the affective power of *every* idea. This de-anthropocentric humbling, paradoxically instigated by aesthetics – a practice to which ideas have always been paramount – is a matter to which we hope to return in a later volume, wherein we hope that authors continue to push ideas to their limit even at the risk of their exhaustion. Perhaps ideas are most powerful when they exert themselves upon themselves, bringing about their own self-reflexive re-evaluation, just as they did in the reformulation of this issue.

## • Notes •

- 1 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, Chicago: Open Court, 2002.
- 2 Sarah Marshall, "'One Must Imagine What One Denies': How Sartre Imagines *The Imaginary*," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 23.
- 3 Ibid., 24.
- 4 "Distribution of the sensible" is Rancière's well-known term. See Ruben Yepes, "Aesthetics, Politics, and Art's Autonomy: A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 43.

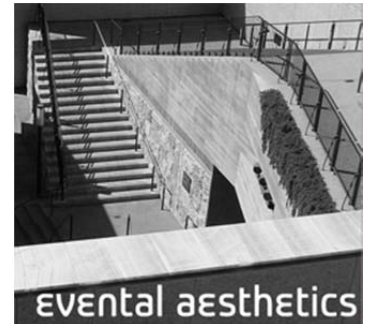
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- Yepes, Ruben. "Aesthetics, Politics, and Art's Autonomy: A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière." *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 40–64.

# COLLISION

Vol. 3, No. 1 (2014)

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Jane Forsey, "The Puzzle of Chardin," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 8-15.

## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses problems in the interpretation of Chardin's still life paintings, which are disconcerting because they are so out of step with those of his contemporaries. It is suggested that, with the application of Kantian aesthetics, Chardin can be best understood as representing things in themselves as well as the limits of language and understanding.

## KEYWORDS

Chardin, still life painting, Kant, interpretation, things in themselves



# The Puzzle of Chardin

Jane Forsey

Chardin disconcerts.<sup>1</sup> It is one thing to see his still lifes on a museum wall and appreciate their subtle and quiet dignity, but it is quite another to view his work “in situ” as it were, surrounded by the interiors they would have graced in the eighteenth century. Yet it is here in the splendid Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris that the puzzle of Chardin becomes most acute.

The wealthy banker and collector Comte Möise de Camondo had a mansion built in 1911, modeled after the Petit Trianon at Versailles, which he completely furnished in eighteenth-century style; he had amassed an enormous collection of paneling, furnishings, textiles, and objets d’art of the period and sought to live among them as though he were an elite member of the court of Louis XV. (He did concede to his architect’s urging, however, to include such twentieth-century comforts as electricity, heating, and running water.) In 1924, he bequeathed the mansion to the city to become a museum, declaring in his bequest that its interior arrangement should remain as unaltered as possible: this is what we can view today.

Tapestries by Aubusson; *chaises à la reine* by Foliot; cabinets by Reisner, a favorite of Marie Antoinette; a roll-top desk by Oeben, who had made Louis XV's desk at Versailles; chinoiserie; gilt; a room devoted to Sèvres porcelain; walls covered with Peking silk against which hang the paintings of Boucher, Fragonard, and Watteau – in short, a visitor is immediately immersed in the best of French Rococo style. Yet we suddenly stop short: what on earth is a tiny oil of a domestic cooking pot and two onions doing in the midst of all *this*?<sup>2</sup>

Certainly still life painting was a recognized genre in the eighteenth century, and depictions of the everyday graced many walls. But as Saisselin has claimed, still lifes commonly acted as a "species of indirect portrait" of their owners – that small and privileged aristocratic set who could afford to collect art.<sup>3</sup> Norman Bryson noted that "still life cannot escape the phenomenon of class: the table is an exact barometer of status and wealth."<sup>4</sup> If we consider works by Vallayer-Coster or Spaendonck, two approximate contemporaries of Chardin's in France, we find depictions of (over)abundance: porcelain, crystal, and silver; tables laden with feasts of imported luxury foods such as lobsters, oysters, olives, figs, and pineapples; and trays of delicate pastries and wines. Moreover, the food is displayed to tantalize: the figs cut open to reveal their sweet interiors, the grapes dewy with moisture, the wine ready to drink. With palettes as bright as the history paintings of Fragonard, one could well imagine such works among the gilt and silk of an eighteenth-century salon, reflecting the lives and tastes of its occupants.

Not so with Chardin. For most of his career he painted still lifes, and most of his still lifes depict domestic pots, bowls, and kitchen implements; in fact, the same pots and bowls reappear in work after work, accompanied at times by onions, at others by eggs or a loaf of bread. These humble objects stand in stark contrast to the compositions of his peers and in no way reflect the decadent lives of the bourgeoisie. Their muted browns and grays and their minimalist arrangements seem to refute the riot of abundance with which they are surrounded. Chardin's singularity of vision – his paintings of the "everyday" which must have struck his bourgeois audience as unfamiliar and even alien – is thus all the more mysterious for its very simplicity and humility. Yet he was no renegade: accepted into the Royal Academy in 1728 as a painter of animals and fruits, Chardin held the lowest position in the hierarchy of genres that championed history painting above all.<sup>5</sup> Yet he was granted a pension by Louis XV in 1752 and a studio and living quarters in the Louvre by 1757. He also came to serve as treasurer of the Academy itself. For all

his peculiarity, he was a respected artist in his own time. What then are we to make of these puzzling works?

Let us look more closely at one of them: *Nature morte au chaudron cuivre*.<sup>6</sup> The painting is intimate – 17 x 20.5 cm – and centrally depicts the cooking pot on its side, fronted by a bowl and those two onions. To the left stands a mortar and pestle, and to the right a knife rests at an oblique angle, its handle extending beyond the stone shelf on which the objects lie. There is little sense of depth and none of location, but there is light. What we can immediately reject in our efforts at interpretation is the idea that this work is somehow a political statement about the inequality endemic in aristocratic society – Chardin would not have been championed by the king if it were.

The painting is striking, not for what it does say but for what it does *not*. As Frédéric Ogée has noted, Chardin's subjects have no "allegorical or metaphorical charge";<sup>7</sup> this work does not point beyond itself to suggest an "indirect portrait" of its audience or a mimetic representation of the bourgeois world or even an ethico-religious lesson of some kind, such as we can see with Baugin's paintings of wine and wafers. As Ogée observes, the categories of the hierarchy at the Academy were dependent upon the "quantity and quality of discourse which the works could generate": the more "verbalization" they could produce, the more valued they were. Chardin's paintings instead created an "enormous embarrassment" because they eluded any clear discursive grasp.<sup>8</sup> As Bryson has said, Chardin somehow "expels the values human presence imposes on the world" and "breaks the scale of human importance."<sup>9</sup> The pot is upended; the onions are whole and unready to be eaten; the setting is unknown. In the work there is an overwhelming stillness: no obvious human activity has preceded this moment, and none is obviously forthcoming. Instead we have implements that are quietly waiting for human intervention<sup>10</sup> or as Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, "what is left when human beings exit the scene: things."<sup>11</sup> A pot, a knife, and two onions. Diderot called Chardin's works "mute compositions,"<sup>12</sup> and Condillac noted that with them we enter a "psychic area which does not allow itself to be spoken."<sup>13</sup> There is for Ogée "no entry for discourse" in this work because Chardin emphatically denies that there is anything to say.<sup>14</sup> And this is disconcerting, for what can be spoken about a work that denies speech? What interpretation is possible when the very ideas of metaphor and allegory are rejected?

One possibility is simply beauty. The pot, the onions are divorced from their quotidian functions; they stand outside of the activities of

everyday life. We are being tasked to *look*, not to speak, when we confront them. Thus, are they purely formal compositions whose lines and colors are meant to be admired? I would reject this suggestion as too simplistic. Not because Chardin's work is not beautiful; it surely is. But if he sought to "transport" his audience to "a world of aesthetic exaltation" as the formalist Clive Bell has put it, he would have failed through his choice of subject matter alone.<sup>15</sup> These items so carefully rendered must have been crude and beneath admiration for the eighteenth-century viewer. Further, if Chardin were merely experimenting with color and form, any number of objects would have been at his disposal. Instead, he returned to the same ones again and again as though charging us to look – to just look.

At what? At *these* things. And why? Because, I would suggest, Chardin was attempting to present to us the unrepresentable. Kant knew well enough that there are limits to what we can know; beyond those limits are what he called "rational ideas" – of God, freedom, or justice – about which we can only speculate. If we try to establish the truth of these ideas, "we are asking for something impossible" because they cannot be conceptually determined in any adequate way.<sup>16</sup> But there is art. And for Kant, its proper subject matter is "aesthetic ideas": in painting, these are visual representations which "cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language."<sup>17</sup> Aesthetic ideas are the manifest counterparts to our intellectual speculations; through visual means, artworks "strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience," arousing in our imagination "more thought than can be expressed in a concept determined by words."<sup>18</sup> It is only through art that we can approach the inconceivable, that we can attempt to canvas what forever lies beyond our means.

Art does not, however, present aesthetic ideas in general but a particular one. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant mentions hell, eternity, creation, death, envy, love, and fame as examples of rational ideas made manifest in various works, but surprisingly he does not mention the *sina qua non* of all the rational ideas in his entire architectonic: the thing in itself.<sup>19</sup> This, the supersensible, is the "basis of the possibility of all these objects of experience, but which we can never extend or elevate into a cognition"; it is the idea of objects as they exist outside of our experience of them.<sup>20</sup> The thing in itself – or mind-independent reality – is for Kant something which must be entirely unknown to us. It lies outside of the spatio-temporal forms of our experiences; we cannot even determine if there is a causal connection between the supersensible and our

experiences of perceptual phenomena in the world around us. The supersensible is as mysterious for Kant as God. If art in general is an attempt to capture the inconceivable, there is no reason why this particular rational idea could not also be its subject matter. What is more interesting is that we have long failed to see that Chardin achieves precisely this in his work.

Chardin offers his audience depictions with which they would be unfamiliar and in which they would not normally be interested. Instead of a mirror of themselves, his viewers are presented with mere things, stripped of ornamentation, decoration, the trappings of society, even of human presence. His audience is offered the residue of what is left behind when humans have “exited the scene.” How better to charge them to simply look, to focus on those things themselves than to confound their expectations? To present not shows of abundance but rather objects that are humble, displaced, singular, and mute?

We can see in the writing of art critics and historians attempts to capture the singularity of Chardin’s vision; they come close to the answer to our puzzle but do not make this final connection. Chardin worked outside of language; his canvases do not allow their subject matter to be spoken because there is nothing we can speak *about* when we are confronted with what we cannot *know*. His images for Bryson are “not quite of this world”;<sup>21</sup> they present for Arnheim a “detached reality”;<sup>22</sup> the space of his pictures is for McCoubry “a private place, ultimately serene and inaccessible” that “comes closer to the alien timeless world of the inanimate things presented.”<sup>23</sup> Each of these various attempts at understanding Chardin is correct on its own: if we put them together, however, we arrive at a more complete truth – that Chardin confronts us with what is truly unknowable.

Chardin disconcerts because in a simple pot and two onions, we are faced with the limits of language, the limits of understanding, and the limits of human experience. His work is both puzzling and an “embarrassment” for his contemporaries because, rather than a reflection of the known, it suggests to us a vista that is ultimately unreachable. In this way his work is not only beautiful; it is sublime.<sup>24</sup>



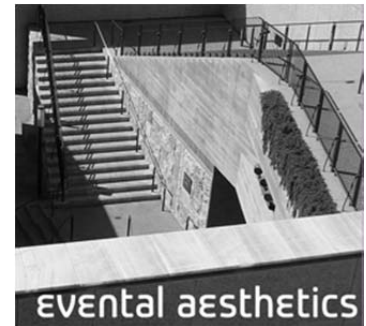
## • Notes •

- 1 I must acknowledge that this opening sentence was directly inspired by that of Charles Taylor's essay "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 152–184.
- 2 In the spirit of the "great deal of license" afforded authors of "Collisions" in this journal, I have combined experiences from my wanderings in Paris for dramatic effect. The Musée Nissim de Camondo is exactly as I have described it, but the Chardin painting that is the centre of this piece actually resides at the Musée Cognacq-Jay across town. Ernest Cognacq and his wife Marie-Louise Jay were entrepreneurs who also bequeathed their (much smaller) collection to the city of Paris to become a museum. But their collection does not present as complete a picture of the eighteenth century as Camondo's does and is housed in a sixteenth century townhouse that has been greatly altered. I felt that the setting of Camondo's mansion was more effective for demonstrating the disconcerting surprise that Chardin's work provokes. I would urge readers to visit both splendid museums if they can.
- 3 R.G. Saisselin, "Still-Life Paintings in a Consumer Society," *Leonardo* 9 (1976): 202.
- 4 Norman Bryson, "Chardin and the Text of Still Life," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 245.
- 5 See Hélène Prigent and Pierre Rosenberg, *Chardin: la nature silencieuse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 118; and Frédéric Ogée, "Chardin's Time: Reflections on the Tercentenary Exhibition and Twenty Years of Scholarship," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33 (2000): 432.
- 6 This work (1734–5) is alternatively titled *Egrugeoir avec son pilon, un bol, deux oignons, chaudron de cuivre rouge et couteau* in Prigent and Rosenberg, *Chardin*, 123. The titles of still lifes were often little more than a catalogue of their depicted objects.
- 7 Ogée, "Chardin's Time," 445.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 432.
- 9 Bryson, "Text of Still Life," 228.
- 10 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *Evental Aesthetics* for this suggested interpretation of Chardin's painting.
- 11 Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 163.
- 12 Quoted in Ogée, "Chardin's Time," 434.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 439.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 77.
- 16 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1972), 197.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 157–158.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 11.
- 21 Bryson, "Text of Still Life," 239.

- 22 Rudolf Arnheim, "Why Chardin: The Adoption of the Tangible," *Salmagundi* 126/7 (2000): 235.
- 23 John W. McCoubrey, "The Revival of Chardin in French Still-Life Painting 1850–1870," *The Art Bulletin* 46 (1964): 46, 45.
- 24 I am grateful to the editor and reviewers at *Evental Aesthetics* for their comments and suggestions on this paper.

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Sarah Marshall, “‘One Must Imagine What One Denies’: How Sartre Imagines *The Imaginary*,” *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 16-39.

#### ABSTRACT

This essay is a defense of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Imaginary* as a text which changes the direction of philosophical thinking regarding the image. Historically depreciated as a mere “copy” or “appearance” of a “reality” grasped through perception, the image is reconceived in Sartre’s text, which culminates in a revaluation of imagination as the condition of possibility for a human consciousness that always already transcends its situation towards something entirely other – what he calls “the imaginary.” Despite the metaphysical bias that clearly operates on Sartre’s thinking throughout *The Imaginary* and leads him to privilege perception over imagination, his work ultimately succeeds in nihilating the traditional thing-image binary. In effect, he imagines something other than his situatedness within the philosophical reality of his time, ushering in a thought of the imaginary through a creative encounter with nothingness. This thought could only occur spontaneously, for the advent of the imaginary is not produced in an act of will. Accordingly, this essay attempts to trace the movements of Sartre’s project in its transformative process.

#### KEYWORDS

Sartre, image, imaginary, imagination, perception, consciousness, irreality, nothingness

# "One Must Imagine What One Denies": How Sartre Imagines *The Imaginary*

Sarah Marshall

Beginning with Plato, the Western tradition of philosophy has prioritized perception over imagination as providing privileged access to being. The image has been treated as a copy or appearance of something which originally exists independently; it is therefore conceived as a deceptive imitation of the so-called "real thing." Jean-Paul Sartre, in his early work, *The Imaginary*, investigates this historical division from a phenomenological standpoint. In a preliminary remark to Part I of the text, Sartre outlines his goal there as an effort "to describe the great 'irrealizing' function of consciousness, or 'imagination,' and its noematic correlate, the imaginary."<sup>1</sup> Following Husserl, he disavows the empirical tradition of thinkers like Hume who understood images as "small imitations" of real things located within a passive consciousness.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he conceives the image as an intentional act of consciousness in relation to its object. More specifically, he describes it as

"a certain way in which consciousness presents to itself an object."<sup>3</sup> In what will be a continual engagement with his predecessors, Sartre hopes to reenvision the imagination from a Husserlian perspective as a way consciousness relates to objects by making them "irreal," designating the irreal objective domain "the imaginary" in the process.

Despite Sartre's explicitly nontraditional view regarding the image, however, the very formulation of his project assumes the priority of something "real" to be "irrealized." Thus, metaphysical considerations are clearly supporting his theoretical framework from the outset, however much he claims to be operating within the bounds of the transcendental reduction. And yet, Sartre's project does not merely culminate in a series of contradictions as detailed in the relatively scarce commentary on this text; rather, something more happens through Sartre's work as he undertakes the project.<sup>4</sup> Though he does not recognize the implications of his investigation at first and at times outright denies the inevitability of his findings, Sartre's thinking nonetheless succeeds in nihilating the traditional thing-image binary.<sup>5</sup> In effect, he imagines something other than his situatedness within the philosophical reality of his time. As will become clear, this thought could only occur spontaneously, for the advent of the imaginary is not produced in an act of will. Accordingly, this essay attempts to trace the movements of Sartre's project in its transformative process. For the sake of conceptual lucidity, it is divided into three "moments" which parallel Sartre's own accounts of perception, willed imagination, and spontaneous imagination. In the first moment, Sartre provides a relatively straightforward phenomenological analysis of the traditional distinction between perception and imagination. In the second, it becomes clear that Sartre's investigations trouble this opposition, but he resists his findings, leading him to logical inconsistencies. Finally, in the last moment, Sartre affirms the inevitable conclusions of his project in a recounting that undoes and re-solves what has gone before.

## • Philosophical Reality: Imagination and Perception •

Sartre's preliminary remarks implicitly uphold a distinction between what is "real" and what he calls "irreal."<sup>6</sup> Initially, he accounts for this opposition through his analysis of the difference between the perceiving and imaging consciousnesses. Perceiving consciousness observes the object by



"making a tour" since "though it enters whole" into perception, the object is given only "one side at a time."<sup>7</sup> Because it cannot be observed in its entirety from any given vantage point, Sartre explains, "I must *learn* objects, which is to say, multiply the possible points of view of them."<sup>8</sup> The object is therefore "the synthesis of all these appearances," rendering perception "a phenomenon of an infinity of aspects."<sup>9</sup> Using Husserl's cube example, he explains that it is only possible to see three sides at a time, so one is unable to ascertain that the cube is truly a cube until she has observed it from a variety of different profiles in succession, confirming that it actually has six sides. "The cube is indeed present to me, I can touch it, see it," he observes, "but I can never see it except in a certain way, which calls for and excludes at the same time an infinity of different aspects."<sup>10</sup>

The imaging consciousness by contrast is limited. According to Sartre, one no longer needs to "make a tour of it" because the image is given immediately in its entirety.<sup>11</sup> Whereas in perception, objects are slowly learned through observation, images are given whole as they are and are therefore not learned at all. Providing another example, this time of a sheet of paper on a table, Sartre discerns that "[e]ach new orientation of my attention, of my analysis, reveals to me a new detail: the upper edge of the sheet is slightly warped, the end of the third line is dotted, etc. But I can keep an image in view as long as I want: I will never find anything there but what I put there."<sup>12</sup> This leads Sartre to characterize perception as an "infinity of relations" and "a kind of *overflowing* in the world of 'things'" whereas he regards the image as having "a kind of essential poverty."<sup>13</sup> The image's elements maintain only a few relations between themselves and do not maintain a relation to the world at all. According to Sartre, consciousness has to present the object of the image to itself as if it were the object of perception, and because of this aspect of its presentation, the image's "contents retain, like a phantom, a sensible opacity," only *seeming* to be an object of observation.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he further maintains that the image differs from perception in that while perception can mislead and be corrected upon further observation, the image is "a certainty."<sup>15</sup> This deceptively observational quality of the image leads Sartre to call "the attitude in relation to the object of the image ... '*quasi-observation*.'"<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between perception and imagination continues to prove important for Sartre's analysis in the first part of *The Imaginary* since the knowledge one obtains from perception makes imagination possible. This is because here he understands the image as a synthesis of

the concrete knowledge one already has of perceived objects with elements which are "more properly representative."<sup>17</sup> Clarifying this somewhat in the subsequent chapter, he defines the image as an act of consciousness "that aims in its corporeality at an absent or nonexistent object, through a physical or psychic content, that is given not as itself but in the capacity of 'analogical *representative*' of the object aimed at."<sup>18</sup> From the "ground of perception," imaging consciousness makes objects which are not present to perception appear by using "a certain matter that acts as an *analogon*, as an equivalent of perception."<sup>19</sup> Although a "sensible residue" remains of the perceived object, Sartre insists that the image is characterized by a transcendence with respect to perception; it represents sensible qualities "*in its own way*."<sup>20</sup> Sartre's understanding of the image as transcendent, however, somewhat counterintuitively limits imaging consciousness. He explains: "The object as imaged is therefore contemporary with the consciousness I have of it and is exactly determined by that consciousness: it includes in itself nothing but what I am conscious of; but, inversely, everything that constitutes my consciousness finds its correlate in the object."<sup>21</sup> Hence, the imaged object's existence is exhausted in the consciousness which posits it. It is nothing outside of that consciousness, and it exists only in so far as that consciousness is positing it. At the same time, though "inversely," that which constitutes the imaging consciousness – the *analogon*, which corresponds to the perceived object – also correlates to the object of the image. Thus, consciousness first must learn objects through acts of perception, only after which can it combine that knowledge with certain peculiar sensible qualities to represent to itself the object as imaged. For Sartre then, perception exhibits a transcendental priority with respect to imagination.

Despite the dissimilarities he attributes to the perceiving and imaging consciousnesses, Sartre holds that the same objects can be either imaged or perceived. Rejecting any theory of consciousness which would posit a world of images apart from a world of things, he claims that "every object is susceptible to functioning as a present reality or as an image."<sup>22</sup> For Sartre, "[t]he two worlds" are instead "the imaginary and the real," and they are "constituted by the same objects."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the "attitude of consciousness" and not its object distinguishes perception from imagination.<sup>24</sup> This distinction allows Sartre to make further developments in Part III of *The Imaginary*, where he reveals "the image and the perception" as representations of "the two great irreducible attitudes of consciousness."<sup>25</sup> "It follows" from this, he infers, "that they exclude one another."<sup>26</sup> Imaging consciousness corresponds to an annihilation of

perceiving consciousness and vice versa. "As long as I *look* at this table," Sartre explains,

I cannot form an image of Pierre; but if all at once, the irreal Pierre surges up before me, the table that is under my eyes vanishes, leaves the scene. So these two objects, the real table and the irreal Pierre, can only alternate as correlates of radically distinct consciousnesses: how could the image, under these conditions, contribute to the forming of consciousness?<sup>27</sup>

Sartre thus disagrees with contemporary psychological theories which would introduce images into perception, asserting that "I always *perceive more and otherwise* than I see."<sup>28</sup> While certain formal structures of perception explain why one perceives otherwise than one sees, Sartre thinks that the way intentionality constitutes objects can explain why one perceives more than one sees. In aiming at a given object, "a mass of empty intentions" determine that object through relations between aspects of it that *are* present to consciousness and aspects of it which *are not* present to consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Sartre employs an example of an ashtray, which perceiving consciousness constitutes in part through a visible upper face and in part through an invisible underneath that is structurally implied. This act can give rise to an image of the underside as a secondary phenomenon; however, he insists that the empty intentions involved in perception are "radically heterogeneous with imaging consciousness."<sup>30</sup> They "posit nothing separately" and "are limited to projecting onto the object, as a constituting structure, barely determined qualities," which are "almost possibilities of development."<sup>31</sup> There is, he maintains, something about the structure of the perceived object itself that determines the way consciousness constitutes it, and further, the aspects of the object that consciousness is unable to present to itself make the object's constitution possible. By contrast, Sartre claims, imaging consciousness detaches the empty intentions and posits them "for themselves, to be *made explicit* and to be *degraded*."<sup>32</sup> He thus characterizes the image as finite and static, maintaining its opposition to a potential perceptual overflowing.

## • The Will to Imagine the Irreal and the Real •

Though Sartre characterizes perception as an overflowing of consciousness, he nonetheless maintains that consciousness is able to possess the objects it presents to itself in this act. By contrast and despite the apparently limited nature of the image in Sartre's account, possession is impossible for imaging consciousness because the imaged object is always "affected with the character of irreality."<sup>33</sup> This distinction leads Sartre to analyze the irreal object as such, observing that even though it is indeed present to consciousness, the object's irreality renders it "out of reach" at the same time.<sup>34</sup> As a result, he thinks, one can only act on the irreal object in an irreal manner. "Renouncing being served by my own hands, resorting to phantom hands that will deliver irreal blows to this face," Sartre muses, "to act on irreal objects, I must duplicate myself, *irrealize* myself."<sup>35</sup> He contends here that "I" cannot act on the imaged object; rather, consciousness must also image itself in order to act on the object that it has also imaged, creating an imaginary double of itself in order to act in the imaginary. Due to its "irreality," the image is not only out of the reach of any "I" who would attempt to possess it, but what's more, no "real" perceiving unified "I" is capable of willfully acting on the image.

Sartre further undermines any causal relationship between the "I" and the will with respect to the image. Irreal objects, he says, "do not claim an action" or "a conduct of me" because they "wait" in "pure passivity" without making demands.<sup>36</sup> "[T]hey are neither causes nor effects," acquiring the "feeble" lives they have from the sheer spontaneity of consciousness.<sup>37</sup> The image thus appears to consciousness spontaneously rather than through any willfully productive act therein; its appearance does not require any action on the part of the consciousness in which it happens to appear. And yet, Sartre also holds that the image is an *act* of consciousness. The irreal is neither an automatic tendency of the object nor a mechanical reproduction of the mind. Citing Pierre Janet's work on psychasthenia, Sartre affirms an apparently incompatible claim – that "the obsession is *willed*, reproduced by a kind of giddiness, by a spasm of spontaneity."<sup>38</sup> Refusing to take into account "distance and difficulties," for Sartre, the act of imagination is characterized by "something of the imperious and the infantile."<sup>39</sup> Consciousness produces images, he maintains, in an effort "to *make* the object of one's thought, the thing one

desires, appear in such a way that one *can* take possession of it."<sup>40</sup> In what he calls "an incantation," imaging consciousness "strives to obtain these objects in their entirety," despite the impossible nature of such a task.<sup>41</sup> According to Sartre, this means that irreal objects do not appear in the same way that real objects appear in perception. While the object as perceived is always given "from a *point of view*," the object as imaged is "'presentified' under a totalitarian aspect" from "several sides at once" in an attempt to make it appear as it is in itself.<sup>42</sup> Sartre likens the irreal object to a child's drawing of a silhouette, in which "the face is seen in profile, and yet both eyes are drawn."<sup>43</sup> At this point in the text, Sartre clearly begins to reach contradictory findings. He has shown that consciousness cannot produce the image in a willful act; at the same time, however, he has asserted that consciousness produces the image in a willful though ultimately unsuccessful effort to possess the object of desire.

Rather than attempting to resolve the matter here, Sartre continues with his investigation. The foregoing analysis of the irreal object leads him to specify its world. For Sartre, however, speaking of a world of irreal objects is "an inexact expression" used only "for greater convenience."<sup>44</sup> According to him, "a world is a dependent whole, in which each object has its determinate place and maintains relations with the other objects."<sup>45</sup> On his view, the objects composing it make a world what it is according to a "double condition": the objects "must be strictly individuated" and "they must be in balance with an environment."<sup>46</sup> Because irreal objects fail to fulfill this double condition, there cannot, technically speaking, be an irreal world. To begin, irreal objects are not strictly individuated in the way that real objects are since "there is at once too much and not enough in them."<sup>47</sup> Sartre observes that these "evasive" and "ambiguous ... phantom-objects" are "at once themselves and things other than themselves," supporting "contradictory qualities."<sup>48</sup> This ambiguity is essential to the irreal object, and Sartre speculates that because it is never really itself, the "suspect" nature of the object as imaged haunts consciousness and elicits fear in the imagination. Despite his recognition that a perceived tiger would indeed frighten its perceiver, Sartre finds something "eminently reassuring" in a "clear and distinct perception."<sup>49</sup> He seems to indicate that at least when one perceives a tiger lunging toward her, she can rest assured that the tiger is really there (and perhaps protect herself). The imaged tiger, however, is "too much"; one never can identify it as such, for its nature is to contain a multiplicity of alternate associations. Here, Sartre makes clear that the irreal is not to be trusted. There is a truth to be found in perception, but imagination is deceptive.



This puts him squarely within the age-old tradition of Western philosophy, which situates truth in the “real thing” perceived with clarity and distinctness and associates the image with a false resemblance.

Sartre acknowledges that the irreal object admits of a certain depth because of its ambiguity; nevertheless, he is quick to insist again on the “essential poverty” of the irreal object due to the sparsity of its spatio-temporal determinations: it is “not enough” to “constitute a strict individuality.”<sup>50</sup> For, he observes,

[t]his object that I pretend to produce in its totality and as an absolute is basically reduced to a few meagre relations, a few spatial and temporal determinations, which, without doubt, have a sensible aspect, but which are *stunted*, which contain nothing more than I have explicitly posited—aside from that vague ambiguity of which I spoke.<sup>51</sup>

Again, Sartre’s investigation here arrives at conclusions of which his theoretical framework cannot admit. In analyzing the irreal object, he reveals that it cannot easily be distinguished from the real object in terms of magnitude. Just as the perceived object opens upon an infinite surplus with respect to what is actually present to consciousness, the imaged object’s essential ambiguity makes it impossible to limit its individuality to any particular determination. Still, Sartre maintains his prior distinction by emphasizing the difference between the empty intentions necessary to constitute the perceived object and the detached and separately posited existence of the image. One knows, he argues, that any new qualities one might attribute to the irreal object “are not already *in* the object in an implicit state.”<sup>52</sup> At “any instant,” Sartre insists, one can “stunt” the irreal object’s existence whereas one is despite oneself “carried along” to observing the real object’s implicit qualities.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore implied that the existence of the real object carries with it a kind of independent necessity. One cannot help but constitute it with certain qualities because it “really” has those qualities. The irreal object by contrast is characterized by contingency insofar as Sartre insists despite his contrary findings that one constitutes the irreal object however one pleases, rendering it dependent upon the consciousness which constitutes it for its existence. Despite his claim to be conducting a phenomenological investigation, Sartre is clearly relying upon certain traditional metaphysical assumptions about the self-sufficiency of substance, which subsists independently from any perceiving consciousness. And yet, the imaginary object does not

so easily conform to metaphysical categories due to the ambiguity which Sartre describes as essential to its nature. Like the real object, the irreal object escapes the control of the consciousness which constitutes it.

It is perhaps in light of these inconsistencies that Sartre attempts to differentiate the will from spontaneity. He expects that one could object to his analysis by pointing to the fact that one can make imaged objects move.<sup>54</sup> In an effort to address this criticism, he reveals that acts of the imaging consciousness can be formed by either the will or a spontaneity which is prior to willing. When an image is formed by the will, he argues, one is unable to move an inanimate image after the fact without destroying the original object. Because the irreal object lacks both a determinate identity and a world which would govern permanence, causal relation, and interaction, the willed imaging consciousness is unable to endure change. Any change made to the image therefore results in a different image or what is the same – the disintegration of the initial image. Hence, in order to will an irreal object to move, Sartre holds that one must have already constituted it as moving. “Nevertheless,” he asserts, “what the will cannot obtain could be produced by the free spontaneity of consciousness,” such that “[a]n imaging consciousness can appear suddenly” and “can of itself vary freely and conserve for a moment its essential structure.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the image can undergo transformation when it occurs spontaneously prior to an act of willing, which destroys the irreal object in its attempt to change it.<sup>56</sup> Here, the autonomy of consciousness is clearly undermined. Whereas Sartre has attempted to maintain the image in a relation of dependency with respect to consciousness, consciousness itself has again proven to have very little control over the image as it presents it to itself. A willed act of imaging consciousness is unable to change the object it posits, and a spontaneous act of imaging consciousness occurs independently of the will. Sartre accordingly returns his attention to the will, which “quickly reclaims its rights” over the spontaneity of imaging consciousness; for as soon as “one wants to develop the image” and attempts to will some variation of it, “everything is broken.”<sup>57</sup> “Thus,” he concludes,

I can produce at will—or almost—the irreal object that I want, but I cannot make of it what I want. If I want to transform it, I must in fact create other objects; and between them there will necessarily be holes. From this, the image acquires a discontinuous, jerky character: it appears, disappears, reappears and is no longer the same; it is immobile and it is in vain that I try to give it movement: I can succeed only by producing a movement without the moving body that I attribute to it in vain. Then all

of a sudden it reappears in motion. But all of these changes do not come from it: just as the movements of this beautiful violet spot which remains in my eyes after I have looked at the electric lamp, do not come from the lamp but from the spontaneous and willed movements of my eyeballs.<sup>58</sup>

That which Sartre attributes to the image here – an impoverished, sparse character – seems to result not from the nature of the image as such but from the intervention and failure of the will to determine it. The irreal object as it spontaneously arises before consciousness, however, is not necessarily so impoverished. For as Sartre has already shown, in spontaneity the image can appear and transform with continuity. Given this possibility, Sartre's electric lamp example seems more problematic. One can stare at a lamp to intentionally produce a lovely violet spot in one's eye, but often an unintended or "spontaneous" glance can produce the same effect without one's having willed it. In the case of the image, however, the irreal object manifests differently when it is subjected to the will than when it arises spontaneously.

Nevertheless, Sartre both maintains that the irreal object depends upon consciousness for its existence and situation and upholds his earlier inference that it does not fulfill the second condition necessary to justify the existence of an irreal world. On his view, the irreal object is out of balance with its environment because "it is presented without any solidarity with any other object."<sup>59</sup> In fact, Sartre contends that "it has no environment" but is rather "independent" and "isolated."<sup>60</sup> For him, irreal objects "are always given as indivisible totalities" or "absolutes" which confront consciousness as "strange beings that escape the laws of the world."<sup>61</sup> Whereas perceptual consciousness constitutes its objects as simultaneously interacting in a world regulated by causal laws, imaging consciousness does not require the acceptance of any regularity or normativity as a result of the existence it constitutes. The image is, according to Sartre, "*without consequence*" since "it acts on nothing and nothing acts on it."<sup>62</sup> Thus, even when an imaging consciousness contains more than one object, it cannot be said to constitute a world since objects do not interact with one another according to physical laws. For instance, he characterizes the imaging consciousness as "constantly surrounded by a cortège of phantom-objects," which can appear as real objects would in an act of perceiving consciousness despite retaining their distinct character as imaged.<sup>63</sup> The imaginary cortège can, however, "just as easily" contain phantom "virtues, kinds," and "relations," which he does not associate with

perception.<sup>64</sup> Despite the inconsistencies he finds in his account, Sartre thus continues to maintain a radical break between the irreal and the real.

Yet, while he renders illegitimate the imaginary world envisioned in Part I, these peculiarities of the image lead him to conclusions that he is unable to sustain at this point in the work. He claims, for example, that due to their disregard for worldly laws, irreal objects provide consciousness with “a perpetual ‘elsewhere,’” inviting consciousness to escape the world by offering to consciousness something other than “the constraints of the world.”<sup>65</sup> He ventures that irreal objects “seem to be presented as a negation of the condition of *being in the world*, as an anti-world.”<sup>66</sup> In a note following this proposition, however, he denies that this is truly the case; it is an escape in appearance only. Gesturing toward his conclusion, he insists that in reality, “every image ... must be constituted ‘on the ground of the world.’”<sup>67</sup>

### • Sartre’s Spontaneous Conclusion: “Consciousness and Imagination” •

Sartre begins his concluding remarks with a metaphysical question, one which “has been gradually disclosed by these studies of phenomenological psychology”: “what are the characteristics that can be attributed to consciousness on the basis of the fact that it is consciousness capable of imagining?”<sup>68</sup> The question can, he notes, be reformulated from the standpoint of “critical analysis”: “what must consciousness in general be if it is true that the constitution of the image is always possible?”<sup>69</sup> Although he thinks that this question can best be broached from a phenomenological standpoint, Sartre expressly capitulates to his Kantian-minded readers and opts for a “more oblique method” of investigation. In this vein, he reformulates the question once more: “what must consciousness be in order that it can imagine?”<sup>70</sup> In other words, Sartre plans to undertake a transcendental analysis. Accordingly, he reveals that he will relate the results of that analysis to those of Descartes’ *cogito* in order to compare the imaging consciousness’ conditions of possibility to those of consciousness in general.

As he embarks upon this plan, however, he returns to a phenomenological perspective as he reminds the reader that any object of

consciousness corresponds to “a *thesis* or positing of existence.”<sup>71</sup> At this point, he reviews and elaborates upon the distinction between imagination and perception that he has upheld throughout *The Imaginary*. The theses of the imaging and realizing consciousnesses are, he maintains, “radically different” insofar as “the type of existence of the imaged object *in so far as it is imaged* differs in nature from the type of existence of the object grasped as real.”<sup>72</sup> The imaged object is posited as absent, and it is this “fundamental absence” or “essential nothingness” which, for Sartre, continues to differentiate the imaged object from the object of perception.<sup>73</sup> This leads him to reformulate his guiding question once more: “What therefore must a consciousness be in order that it can successively posit *real* objects and *imaged* objects?”<sup>74</sup> Such a question, he thinks, requires that one “make an essential observation” regarding once more the “difference between being *aimed at emptily* and being *given-as-absent*.”<sup>75</sup> To illustrate this difference, he provides an example of a tapestry which is partially hidden behind a chair. As he gazes at it, consciousness presents the tapestry’s hidden designs as continuing behind the legs of the chair and therefore as existing but veiled. “It is *in the manner in which I grasp what is given* that I posit as real what is not given,” he concludes. Then he explains what he means by “real”:

Real in the same sense as that which is given, as that which confers on it its signification and its very nature. ... To perceive this or that real datum is to perceive it on the ground of reality *as a whole*. This reality is not the object of any special act of my attention but it is co-present as the essential condition of the existence of the reality currently perceived.<sup>76</sup>

It thus remains necessary for Sartre to posit an independently-existing reality apart from consciousness as the condition for the possibility of realizing consciousness. In order for consciousness to make a given reality present, there must exist some reality that is not dependent upon it such that consciousness can from that ground posit particular entities as real. This formulation quite explicitly reveals a metaphysical inheritance based on a traditional concept of substance albeit with a manifestly Kantian flavor.

Such a theoretical framework can only oppose the image to the real in a binary fashion. Thus, Sartre characterizes “the imaging act” as “the inverse of the realizing act.”<sup>77</sup> In order to imagine the hidden parts of the tapestry, he explains, one must “isolate” the empty intentions which give

sense to the tapestry as perceived and "give" them to oneself as they are "in themselves."<sup>78</sup> This act, however, presents the tapestry's aspects as absent. "Certainly, they really exist over there under the armchair," Sartre admits, "but as I aim at them there where they are not given to me, I grasp them as a nothingness for me."<sup>79</sup> "Thus the imaginative act is at once *constituting, isolating, and annihilating*."<sup>80</sup> At this point, he is able to "grasp the essential condition for a consciousness to be able to *image*."<sup>81</sup> It must, he claims, "have the possibility of positing a thesis of irreality."<sup>82</sup> For Sartre, this means that "consciousness must be able to form and posit objects affected by a certain character of nothingness in relation to the totality of reality."<sup>83</sup> To explain this, Sartre distinguishes between a portrait as real and the same portrait as imaged. The material canvas with its paint and frame, etc., serves as an analogon for the imaged object, such that, were the real portrait to burn, the image would remain unaffected. In relation to the totality of the real then, the "irreal object" appears "out of reach."<sup>84</sup>

Thus, the real and the irreal are not merely distinct in terms of the attitude of the consciousness that posits them; more than that, they radically negate each other in their constituting acts. "To posit an image," Sartre infers, "is therefore to hold the real at a distance, to be freed from it, in a word, to deny it."<sup>85</sup> Understood thus, Sartre uncovers a "double-condition for consciousness to be able to imagine."<sup>86</sup> Consciousness must be able "to both posit the world in its synthetic totality" and at the same time "posit the imagined object as out of reach in relation to that synthetic whole."<sup>87</sup> Sartre defines the world as "the totality of the real, so far as it is grasped by consciousness as a synthetic *situation* for that consciousness."<sup>88</sup> To posit the image as out of reach with respect to the world thus conceived is for Sartre also to "posit the world as a nothingness in relation to the image."<sup>89</sup> Hence, the real and the irreal are here conceived as mutually exclusive. In order to think one, the other must be negated.

This opposition leads Sartre to further considerations. "It is impossible," he says, "for [consciousness] ever to produce anything other than the real" if it is mired in the world and unable to escape.<sup>90</sup> Consciousness must instead be capable of "standing back" from the world, therein negating or "nihilating" it.<sup>91</sup> But moreover, for consciousness to be able to posit the world itself as a synthetic whole in the first place, consciousness must be able to "stand back" from or nihilate the world; therefore, to constitute the world as world and to nihilate it are "one and the same thing."<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, consciousness is only capable of such an



act from its concrete and lived situatedness within the world. For this reason, any negation of the world is "always the world denied from a certain point of view."<sup>93</sup> Sartre thus points to the individual consciousness' situation as "the concrete and precise motivation for the appearance of a certain particular imaginary."<sup>94</sup> Because consciousness is situated in the world, the world must be grasped as a world where the image is not in order for the image to arise. This allows Sartre to "finally grasp the connection of the unreal to the real."<sup>95</sup> Because every apprehension of the real as a world is "always, in a sense, free nihilation of the world" from the point of view of an individual consciousness, apprehension of reality "tends of its own accord to end up with the production of unreal objects."<sup>96</sup> It follows from this, Sartre thinks, that the noematic correlate of a free consciousness "should be the *world* that carries in itself the possibility of negation ... by means of an image."<sup>97</sup> "Reciprocally" though, negating the world from a particular point of view by means of an image is only possible "on the ground of the world and in connection with that ground."<sup>98</sup> He thus concludes that "although, by means of the production of the unreal, consciousness can momentarily *appear* delivered from its 'being-in-the-world,' on the contrary, this 'being-in-the-world' is the necessary condition of imagination."<sup>99</sup>

Sartre again resists the findings of his investigation. On the basis of his understanding of real objects existing in a world regulated by laws, he clearly discovers that in order for any act of perceiving consciousness to occur, the world must be constituted and therefore also negated. This means that the imagining consciousness as that which can transcend the actual world in creating other possibilities must be involved in order for perceiving consciousness to stand back from the reality of a given situation and posit the world as a whole. While Sartre's reasoning seems to make obvious the reciprocal role imagination and perception must play in the constitution of both acts of consciousness, he nevertheless maintains perception's priority as the only legitimate "ground." Consequently, the image is once more relegated to the status of mere appearance.

Sartre's analysis does not terminate at this point but rather starts afresh. He goes on to recapitulate his findings and in so doing allows certain inevitabilities that he had previously denied to surface. To begin, he reformulates his guiding question once again, this time in Cartesian terms:

What is the free consciousness, in fact, whose nature is to be consciousness *of* something, but which, for this very reason, constitutes

itself in the face of the real and surpasses it at each moment because it cannot be other than 'being-in-the-world,' which is to say by living its relation with the real as *situation*, what is it, in fact, if not simply consciousness as it is revealed to itself in the *cogito*?<sup>100</sup>

Recasting the doubt which makes possible Descartes' famed "I think, therefore I am," Sartre reveals the nihilating-constituting act of consciousness that posits the world as at the same time constituting "the apodictic intuition of freedom."<sup>101</sup> The fact that consciousness constitutes itself as situated in a world means that it nihilates the reality of that situatedness in the world in order to constitute it as a totality. In so doing, consciousness surpasses the real in positing it as real since to apprehend the real is to "stand back" from it and view a given situation as a whole. "Being-in-the-world," as Sartre understands it, involves this continuous nihilating-constituting act which posits the real as its situation; it is thus that consciousness lives its relation to the world. Reflecting on this, Sartre reaffirms that consciousness must be free in order to live its relation to the real in this way; consciousness is not mired in its situation but negates and surpasses it in the very act of apprehending it.

Nevertheless, Sartre has throughout the text maintained that consciousness cannot be consciousness of nothing; rather, consciousness as such is always consciousness of something. "Nothingness can be given only as an infrastructure of something," he contends; it is "an experience that is, on principle, given 'with' and 'in.'"<sup>102</sup> Sartre follows Bergson in maintaining that any attempt to conceive "the nothingness of existence *directly* is by nature doomed to fail."<sup>103</sup> And yet as he has shown, any apprehension of the real as situation implies negation. Logically then, Sartre acknowledges that "if the nihilating function belonging to consciousness ... is that which renders the act of imagination possible, it must be added that, reciprocally, this function can be manifested only in an imaging act."<sup>104</sup> It is thus "the appearance of the imaginary before consciousness that allows us to grasp that the nihilation of the world is its essential condition and its primary structure."<sup>105</sup> Since imagination requires negation, he reasons, negation "can only ever be realized in and by an act of imagination."<sup>106</sup> That which is negated, he infers, "cannot be a *reality*, since this would then affirm what is being denied."<sup>107</sup> Yet if something is negated, then the object of negation must be some-thing. Therefore, Sartre deduces that "the object of negation must be posited as imaginary."<sup>108</sup> In other words, "[o]ne must imagine what one denies."<sup>109</sup> For Sartre, "the sense and value" of this insight lies in the fact that "all

apprehension of the real as world implies a hidden surpassing towards the imaginary."<sup>110</sup> "[E]very existent," Sartre insists, "as soon as it is posited, is consequently surpassed"; still, "it must be surpassed *towards something*," and this "concrete 'something' towards which the existent is surpassed" Sartre defines as the imaginary.<sup>111</sup> This means that any awareness of *what is* is only possible through its negation, which is at the same time its surpassing toward something other. He concludes that the imagination is "the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom" and that "every concrete and real situation of consciousness in the world is pregnant with the imaginary in so far as it is always presented as surpassing the real."<sup>112</sup> While Sartre maintains that "the unreal is produced outside of the world by a consciousness that *remains in the world*," he recognizes that "in its turn" the imagination as "a psychological and empirical function" has become "the necessary condition for the freedom of empirical humans in the midst of the world."<sup>113</sup>

These considerations allow Sartre to bring together his previous analysis of the empty intentions necessary to the constitution of the real object and the unreal, which before was said to be radically distinct and separate from realizing consciousness. Here, he affirms that "the imaginary represents at each moment the implicit sense of the real."<sup>114</sup> The imaginary act, as he now understands it in its "proper" designation, consists in making the sense of these empty intentions overt. This "specific positing" of what is implicit in the real results in a "collapse of the world," which becomes "no more than the nihilated ground of the unreal."<sup>115</sup> The image in its "proper" sense thus corresponds to a willful attempt at subjecting an imagining consciousness to isolation and presentation, which renders a collapse of the world and meaning. Consciousness' attempt to willfully make present the empty intentions necessary to make sense of the world produces nonsense, a reproduction of certain aspects of a given situation but in accordance with another logic. Nevertheless, the pre-willing spontaneity Sartre discovers earlier in his analysis is clearly involved in making sense of what is given by means of what is absent. Any coherent appearance of the world – including oneself, one's relations to others and things, one's present and historical situation, etc. – happens through a spontaneous occurrence which is prior to willful action.

Finally, Sartre arrives at his work's conclusion regarding the imaginary. "All imaging consciousness," he explains, "maintains the world as the nihilated ground of the imaginary and reciprocally all consciousness of the world calls and motivates an imaging consciousness as grasping the

particular *sense* of the situation.”<sup>116</sup> And yet, he goes on, “[t]he apprehension of nothingness cannot occur by an immediate disclosure”; rather, “it is realized in and by the free succession of consciousnesses, the nothingness is the matter of surpassing the world towards the imaginary. It is such that it is *lived*, without ever being posited for itself.”<sup>117</sup> The imaginary gives significance to a world which is never fully present, resists possession, and cannot be positively comprehended. Essential to this world, therefore, is a nothingness which cannot be immediately disclosed or posited for itself; rather, it is lived. Thus, for Sartre, “there could be no realizing consciousness without imaging consciousness, and vice versa.”<sup>118</sup> “[I]magination,” he affirms, “far from appearing as an accidental characteristic of consciousness, is disclosed as an essential and transcendental condition of consciousness.”<sup>119</sup>

Sartre’s own project in *The Imaginary* can be interpreted in this light. Each surpassing of the tradition amounts to its negation and each time the tradition is negated, it is transformed into something else. Sartre can only apprehend the imaginary from his situatedness within the reality of the history of philosophy, which maintains the image in opposition to the real as its degraded copy; however, the very work of apprehension requires a nihilation of that history and the arrival of its beyond. Each time he denies his discoveries, Sartre is, according to his very text, imagining them. The nothingness which gives sense to the Western privileging of perception could only be realized through the free succession of Sartre’s own conscious writing as he labored through the work which has heralded a thought of *The Imaginary*. This essay has been an attempt to reflect on Sartre’s struggle, which is also of course a transcending.

## • Notes •

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, trans. Jonathan Webber (London: Routledge, 2010), 3.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid., 7.

4 For a detailed account of the contradictions which arise in Sartre's analysis, see Edward Casey's "Sartre on Imagination." There, he provides a critique of what he considers to be "three areas of weakness": "the analogon, the relationship between the real and the [irreal], and the relation of imagining to knowing or reflective thinking." According to Casey, the weaknesses in Sartre's text can all be attributed to "an inadequate description of the phenomenon of imagining itself," whose "definitive eidetic analysis" is "confined to the first twenty pages" of *The Imaginary*. Casey also treats the influence of the rationalists on Sartre's theory, which he thinks renders Sartre prey to what he calls an "intellectualist illusion." Edward S. Casey, "Sartre on Imagination," in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 146–7, 165 (footnote), 158–160.

Paul Ricoeur considers both Sartre's and Gilbert Ryle's theories of imagination in light of Kant's distinction between productive and reproductive imagination. For Ricoeur, both thinkers ultimately fail to treat imagination in its productive capacity, reducing it to the traditional original-copy model constitutive of reproductive imagination. On his reading, Sartre ultimately privileges the picture over fiction, leaving him unable to account for fiction "on its own terms." Paul Ricoeur, "Sartre and Ryle on the Imagination," trans. R. Bradley DeFord, in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1981), 167–173.

5 "Nihilation" here follows upon Sartre's own usage, and therefore neither the transcendence of the traditional thing-image binary nor the elimination of difference between the two would fully capture the theoretical implications at work in the deployment of this term. Rather, apprehending the difference between the thing and the image leads to their mutual contamination and prevents privileging one as more originary or essential than the other (as the history of philosophy has considered the thing with respect to the image). The third section of this essay undertakes a more detailed analysis of "nihilation" in this text and the term's importance for interpreting Sartre's project. See "Sartre's Spontaneous Conclusion: 'Consciousness and Imagination.'"

6 The French *irréel*, usually translated into English as "unreal," will prove important in Sartre's analysis of the imaginary. This essay keeps with Webber's Anglicization of the French since what is usually indicated by the English word "unreal" does not necessarily capture Sartre's usage. Because his analysis ultimately opens upon a reconsideration of the traditional real-unreal binary, and in particular the impact of what he designates as "irreal" on what is "real," this seems to be a fruitful translation. For more on Webber's translation, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, xxviii.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 8.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid., 9.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 10.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 9.
- 18 Ibid., 20.
- 19 Ibid., 18. An exhaustive account of the *analogon* in Sartre's *The Imaginary* is not within the scope of this essay. For a defense of this concept which takes into account Sartre's later work on consciousness and temporality, see Cam Clayton's "The Psychological Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination." According to Clayton's interpretation, "we should understand the psychological analogon in terms of the embodied materiality of past subjectivity rather than as the retention of an originary, objective presence." Cam Clayton, "The Psychological Analogon in Sartre's Theory of the Imagination," *Sartre Studies International* 17 (2001): 21.
- 20 Ibid., 53.
- 21 Ibid., 11.
- 22 Ibid., 20.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 120.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 121.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., 122.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., 125.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., 126.
- 39 Ibid., 125.
- 40 Ibid. (emphasis added).
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 132.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 133.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 134.

55 Ibid., 134–5.

56 Based on this distinction between a willed imaging consciousness and one which occurs spontaneously, Norihide maintains a corresponding difference between what he calls a “voluntary image” and the imaginary. In a footnote, he suggests two aspects of Sartre’s concept of the imaginary: “a creative one – to recall or produce something that is not present – and an apprehensive one – to function in the apprehension of the present real object.” Mori Norihide, “The Image and the Real: A Consideration of Sartre’s Early Views on Art,” *Aesthetics* 16 (2012): 14–15, and 23 (footnote).

According to Stawarska, the distinction (between a willed imaging consciousness and a spontaneous one) corresponds to the influences of Husserl and Janet respectively. She espouses Janet’s clinical research on obsession as “the source of an account of imagination which emphasizes the creative and unrealizing potential of the imagination.” Beata Stawarska, “Defining Imagination: Sartre between Husserl and Janet,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2005): 151.

Given the foregoing analysis of the irreal object, however, it is not clear that Sartre can maintain a strict distinction between the image as willed and the image as spontaneous occurrence. More specifically and based on Sartre’s own account, it is not clear that any image can be willfully produced in the strong sense. While maintaining consciousness’ capacity to produce images, Sartre also demonstrates that any product of consciousness resists the willful control of its creator. “Thus,” he remarks, “I can produce at will – or almost – the irreal object that I want, but I cannot make of it what I want.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 135.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 136.

62 Ibid., 135.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 136. Norihide treats the distinction between what at this point in the text is a necessarily *perceptual* world and an *imaginary* “world” which consequently cannot



strictly classify as such. He interprets the imaginary “world” in a metaphorical sense. On Norihide’s reading, the “degradation of knowledge” and “belief” in the unreal object “as if” it were an object of perception results in a “relaxation” of the double-condition necessary to the constitution of a world, changing the quality of consciousness. This change in quality allows consciousness to attribute “worldliness” to the imaginary “world” as an “additional property.” Norihide, “The Image and the Real,” 17–18.

In his concluding remarks, Sartre himself seems to relax his conception of that in which a world consists, allowing for the imaginary production of something beyond the world in which one is situated. This imaginary beyond is certainly other than any given perceptual world of the present. Nonetheless, it is not merely a metaphorical quality attributable to imaginary objects, but a nihilation and potential transformation of that world. More on this in the subsequent section of this essay.

65 Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 136.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 201 (footnote).

68 Ibid., 179.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 180.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 181.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

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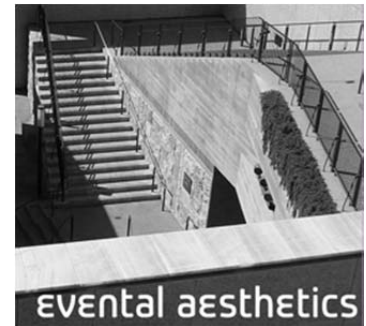
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92 Ibid.

- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid., 185.
- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Ibid.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Ibid., 185–6 (emphasis added).
- 100 Ibid., 186.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Ibid., 187.
- 103 Ibid. (emphasis added).
- 104 Ibid.
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- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ibid.
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**Ruben Yepes, “Aesthetics, Politics, and Art’s Autonomy:  
A Critical Reading of Jacques Rancière,” *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 1 (2014): 40-64.**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers Jacques Rancière’s influential theory of the relation between aesthetics, politics, and art. First, it synthesizes Rancière’s theory. Second, it offers a critical perspective of Rancière’s conception of the autonomy of art in relation to his theory of politics and aesthetics. In doing so, the purpose is to work towards the development of a theoretical base in which we may follow Rancière’s theory of the relation between aesthetic experience and politics whilst avoiding compliance with his relatively fixed and structural notion of the autonomy of art as an attribute of what he calls the aesthetic regime of art. Drawing a distinction between the autonomous experience of the work of art and the ideology of the autonomy of art, this paper argues that the prior comes about both *within* and *in opposition* to the latter: the autonomy of art hinges on a relative and relational production of a singularity, not on a structural and defining separation of art from the world of habitual aesthetic experience.

### **KEYWORDS**

Jacques Rancière, aesthetics and politics, art and politics, autonomy of art,  
contemporary art theory

# 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 *a//* 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.

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