

Continuum

The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX,  
15 East 26th Street, New York, NY 10010

First published in France under the title *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique  
et politique*

© La Fabrique-Éditions, 2000

© Gabriel Rockhill, 2004

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or  
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,  
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval  
system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 0-8264-7067-X

Typeset by Fakenham Photosetting, Norfolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall

## Contents

<b>Translator's Preface</b>	vii
The Reconfiguration of Meaning	vii
<b>Translator's Introduction</b>	1
Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception	1
<b>The Distribution of the Sensible</b>	7
Foreword	9
The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics	12
Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity	20
Mechanical Arts and the Promotion of the Anonymous	31
Is History a Form of Fiction?	35
On Art and Work	42
<b>Interview for the English Edition</b>	47
The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill	49
Historical and Hermeneutic Methodology	49
Universality, Historicity, Equality	51
Positive Contradiction	56
Politicized Art	60
<b>Afterword by Slavoj Žižek</b>	67
The Lesson of Rancière	69
Appendix i Glossary of Technical Terms	80
Appendix ii Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Sources	94
Notes	102
Index	108

identities, the delegitimation of positions of speech, the deregulation of partitions of space and time. This aesthetic regime of politics is strictly identical with the regime of democracy, the regime based on the assembly of artisans, inviolable written laws, and the theatre as institution. Plato contrasts a third, good *form of art* with writing and the theatre, the *choreographic* form of the community that sings and dances its own proper unity. In sum, Plato singles out three ways in which discursive and bodily practices suggest forms of community: the surface of mute signs that are, he says, [16] like paintings, and the space of bodily movement that divides itself into two antagonistic models (the movement of simulacra on the stage that is offered as material for the audience's identifications and, on the other hand, the authentic movement characteristic of communal bodies).

Here we have three ways of distributing the sensible that structure the manner in which the arts can be perceived and thought of as forms of art *and* as forms that inscribe a sense of community: the surface of 'depicted' signs, the split reality of the theatre, the rhythm of a dancing chorus. These forms define the way in which works of art or performances are 'involved in politics', whatever may otherwise be the guiding intentions, artists' social modes of integration, or the manner in which artistic forms reflect social structures or movements. When *Madame Bovary* was published, or *Sentimental Education*, these works were immediately perceived as 'democracy in literature' despite Flaubert's aristocratic situation and political conformism. His very refusal to entrust literature with any message whatsoever was considered to be evidence of democratic equality. His adversaries claimed that he was [17] democratic due to his decision to depict and portray instead of instruct. This equality of indifference is the result of a poetic bias: the equality of all subject matter is the negation of any relationship of necessity between a determined form and a determined content. Yet what is this indifference after all if not the very equality of everything that comes to pass on a written page, available as it is to everyone's eyes? This equality destroys all of the hierarchies of representation and also establishes a community of readers as a community without legitimacy, a community formed only by the random circulation of the written word.

In this way, a sensible politicized exists that is immediately attributed to the major forms of aesthetic distribution such as the theatre, the

page, or the chorus. These 'politics' obey their own proper logic, and they offer their services in very different contexts and time periods. Consider the way these paradigms functioned in the connection between art and politics at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Consider, for example, the role taken on by the paradigm of the page in all its different forms, which exceed the materiality of a written sheet of paper. Novelistic democracy, on the one hand, is the indifferent democracy of writing such as [18] it is symbolized by the novel and its readership. There is also, however, the knowledge concerning typography and iconography, the intertwining of graphic and pictorial capabilities, that played such an important role in the Renaissance and was revived by Romantic typography through its use of vignettes, *culs-de-lampe*, and various innovations. This model disturbs the clear-cut rules of representative logic that establish a relationship of correspondence at a distance between the sayable and the visible. It also disturbs the clear partition between works of pure art and the ornaments made by the decorative arts. This is why it played such an important – and generally underestimated – role in the upheaval of the representative paradigm and of its political implications. I am thinking in particular of its role in the Arts and Crafts movement and all of its derivatives (Art Deco, Bauhaus, Constructivism). These movements developed an idea of furniture – in the broad sense of the term – for a new community, which also inspired a new idea of pictorial surface as a surface of shared writing.

Modernist discourse presents the revolution of pictorial abstraction as painting's discovery of its own proper 'medium': two-dimensional surface. By revoking the perspectivist illusion of the third dimension, painting was to regain [19] the mastery of its own proper surface. In actual fact, however, this surface does not have any distinctive feature. A 'surface' is not simply a geometric composition of lines. It is a certain distribution of the sensible. For Plato, writing and painting were equivalent surfaces of mute signs, deprived of the breath that animates and transports living speech. Flat surfaces, in this logic, are not opposed to depth in the sense of three-dimensional surfaces. They are opposed to the 'living'. The mute surface of depicted signs stands in opposition to the act of 'living' speech, which is guided by the speaker towards its appropriate addressee. Moreover, painting's adoption of the third

## *The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics*

*In Disagreement, politics is examined from the perspective of what you call the 'distribution of the sensible'. In your opinion, does this expression provide the key to the necessary junction between aesthetic practices and political practices?*

I call 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 respective parts and positions within it.<sup>5</sup> A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is 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 what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. Aristotle states that a citizen is someone who *has a part* in the act of governing and being governed. However, another form of distribution precedes this act of partaking in government: the distribution that [13] determines those who have a part in the community of citizens. A speaking being, according to Aristotle, is a political being. If a slave understands the language of its rulers, however, he does not 'possess' it. Plato states that artisans cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do *not have the time* to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be *somewhere else* because *work will not wait*. The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed. Having a particular 'occupation' thereby determines the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; it defines what is visible or not

in a common space, endowed with a common language, etc. There is thus an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the 'aestheticization of politics' specific to the 'age of the masses'. This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art. If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of [14] spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.

It is on the basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of 'aesthetic practices' as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they 'do' or 'make' from the standpoint of what is common to the community. Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility. The Platonic proscription of the poets is based on the impossibility of doing two things at once prior to being based on the immoral content of fables. The question of fiction is first a question regarding the distribution of places. From the Platonic point of view, the stage, which is simultaneously a locus of public activity and the exhibition-space for 'fantasies', disturbs the clear partition of identities, activities, and spaces. The same is true of [15] writing. By stealing away to wander aimlessly without knowing who to speak to or who not to speak to, writing destroys every legitimate foundation for the circulation of words, for the relationship between the effects of language and the positions of bodies in shared space. Plato thereby singles out two main models, two major forms of existence and of the sensible effectivity of language – writing and the theatre –, which are also structure-giving forms for the regime of the arts in general. However, these forms turn out to be prejudicially linked from the outset to a certain regime of politics, a regime based on the indetermination of

dimension was also a response to this distribution. The reproduction of optical depth was linked to the privilege accorded to the *story*. In the Renaissance, the reproduction of three-dimensional space was involved in the valorization of painting and the assertion of its ability to capture an act of living speech, the decisive moment of action and meaning. In opposition to the Platonic degradation of *mimēsis*, the classical poetics of representation wanted to endow the 'flat surface' with speech or with a 'scene' of life, with a specific depth such as the manifestation of an action, the expression of an interiority, or the transmission of meaning. Classical poetics established [20] a relationship of correspondence at a distance between speech and painting, between the sayable and the visible, which gave 'imitation' its own specific space.

It is this relationship that is at stake in the supposed distinction between two-dimensional and three-dimensional space as 'specific' to a particular form of art. To a large extent, the ground was laid for painting's 'anti-representative revolution' by the flat surface of the page, in the change in how literature's 'images' function or the change in the discourse on painting, but also in the ways in which typography, posters, and the decorative arts became interlaced. The type of painting that is poorly named abstract, and which is supposedly brought back to its own proper medium, is implicated in an overall vision of a new human being lodged in new structures, surrounded by different objects. Its flatness is linked to the flatness of pages, posters, and tapestries. It is the flatness of an interface. Moreover, its anti-representative 'purity' is inscribed in a context where pure art and decorative art are intertwined, a context that straight away gives it a political signification. This context is not the surrounding revolutionary fever that made Malevich at once the artist who painted *Black Square* and the revolutionary eulogist of [21] 'new forms of life'. Furthermore, this is not some theatrical ideal of the new human being that seals the momentary alliance between revolutionary artists and politics. It is initially in the interface created between different 'mediums' – in the connections forged between poems and their typography or their illustrations, between the theatre and its set designers or poster designers, between decorative objects and poems – that this 'newness' is formed that links the artist who abolishes figurative representation to the revolutionary who invents a new form of life. This interface is

political in that it revokes the twofold politics inherent in the logic of representation. On the one hand, this logic separated the world of artistic imitations from the world of vital concerns and politico-social grandeur. On the other hand, its hierarchical organization – in particular the primacy of living speech/action over depicted images – formed an analogy with the socio-political order. With the triumph of the novel's page over the theatrical stage, the egalitarian intertwining of images and signs on pictorial or typographic surfaces, the elevation of artisans' art to the status of great art, and the new claim to bring art into the décor of each and every life, an entire well-ordered distribution of sensory experience was overturned.

[22] This is how the 'planarity' of the surface of depicted signs, the form of egalitarian distribution of the sensible stigmatized by Plato, intervened as the principle behind an art's 'formal' revolution at the same time as the principle behind the political redistribution of shared experience. The other major forms, among which there are those of the chorus and the theatre that I mentioned earlier, could be considered in much the same way. A history of aesthetic politics, understood in this sense, has to take into account the way in which these major forms stand in opposition to one another or intermingle. I am thinking, for example, of the way in which this paradigm of the surface of signs/forms entered into conflict or joined forces with the theatrical paradigm of presence, and with the diverse forms that this paradigm itself has taken on, from the Symbolist figuration of a collective legend to the actualized chorus of a new humanity. Politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigm as the relationship between the stage and the audience, as meaning produced by the actor's body, as games of proximity or distance. Mallarmé's critical prose writings stage, in an exemplary manner, the play of cross-references, oppositions or assimilations between these forms, from the intimate theatre of the page or calligraphic choreography to the new 'service' performed by concerts.

[23] In one respect, these forms therefore appear to bring forth, in very different contexts, figures of community equal to themselves. However, they are susceptible to being assigned to contradictory political paradigms. Let us take the example of the tragic stage. It simultaneously carries with it, according to Plato, the syndrome of democracy and the power of illusion. By isolating *mimēsis* in its own proper space

and by enclosing tragedy within a logic of genres, Aristotle – even if this was not his intention – redefined its politicality. Furthermore, in the classical system of representation, the tragic stage would become the stage of visibility for an orderly world governed by a hierarchy of subject matter and the adaptation of situations and manners of speaking to this hierarchy. The democratic paradigm would become a monarchical paradigm. Let us also consider the long and contradictory history of rhetoric and the model of the ‘good orator’. Throughout the monarchical age, democratic eloquence à la Demosthenes denoted an excellence in speaking, which was itself established as the imaginary attribute of the supreme power. It was also always receptive, however, to the recovery of its democratic function by lending its [24] canonical forms and its consecrated images to the transgressive appearance of unauthorized speakers on the public stage. Let us consider as well the contradictory destinies of the choreographic model. Recent research has evoked the metamorphoses undergone by Laban’s notation of movement. It was developed in a context favouring the liberation of bodies and became the model for the large Nazi demonstrations before regaining, in the anti-establishment context of performance art, a new subversive virginity. Benjamin’s explanation via the fatal aestheticization of politics in the ‘era of the masses’ overlooks, perhaps, the long-standing connection between the unanimous consensus of the citizenry and the exaltation of the free movement of bodies. In a city hostile to the theatre and to written law, Plato recommended constantly cradling unweaned infants.

I have evoked these three forms because Plato conceptually charted them out and because they maintain a historical constancy. They obviously do not define all of the ways that figures of community are aesthetically designed. The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at this level, the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization. [25] It is from this perspective that it is possible to reflect on artists’ political interventions, starting with the Romantic literary forms that aimed at deciphering society, the Symbolist poetics of dreams or the Dadaist or Constructivist elimination of art, and continuing up to the contemporary modes of performance and installation. From this

perspective, it is possible to challenge a good many imaginary stories about artistic ‘modernity’ and vain debates over the autonomy of art or its submission to politics. The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.