

Some Paradoxes of Deartification and Rancière's Philosophy of Art

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Fears of the end of art and its correlative discourses are constant, structural to modernity. A fundamental motive behind the discussions concerning the end of art since the times of Romanticism has always been the idea of saving autonomous art from the manifold threats that have hung over its very existence throughout the last two centuries. De-aestheticization, degeneration, disintegration, decomposition, decentralization, displacement, dehumanization, dematerialization, dissociation, decapitation and other concepts have all been invoked in attempts to substantiate the different aspects of what I will call “deartification”. The causes have many names: capitalism, power, money, goods, commerce, rationalization, functionality, utilitarianism, materialism, performance, simulation, globalization, and other concepts that are used to conjure up the aetiology of the threats to the survival of art. Hegel, who was a strict Spinozian defender of the thesis that freedom is knowledge of need, believed that the end of art was an unavoidable process that was driven by modernity. He believed that the only thing that could be done was to preserve art as the past: to admire in it the power of spirit of strange or wonderful periods and cultures that are well and truly behind us. The vision of Heidegger or Adorno, instead, was of a heroic death: art is fading away like a light in a world that is gradually being dominated by darkness; something akin to Tristan's ship as it sails away from the shore while the fire consumes his remains and the notes of Wagner's *Liebestod* ring out. Recent discourses, like the times we live in, have clearly been somewhat more prosaic in the case of ironic glances. For example, the positions adopted by Donald Kuspit or Jean Clair are more than anything a reflection of an ironic understanding, sometimes with more than a touch of bad temper, and contempt that of

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ten mocks much of what is happening in the world of contemporary art.¹ The end would be a never-ending story in which stupidity and fakery triumph on almost all fronts. Wagner's music can no longer be heard ringing out but rather we now just have the tinny music and the mindless choruses of TV jingles. Autonomous art is disappearing, although there are still some artists whose work deserves to be preserved; this is a very old species in danger of extinction like the coelacanth or the wollemi pine. To the ironic cry of: "Art is dead, long live the arts!" Félix de Azúa, among Hispanic thinkers, maintains that this never-ending death of Art is making way for the arts, understood as the postmodern version of the crafts and their guilds that existed before the time spanning the Renaissance and the Enlightenment when the mythology of Art was constructed, which culminated in Romanticism.² Be that as it may, these discourses share with Adorno the idea that works of art from the past and the few rare examples from the present should be saved as extremely valuable things, not in any commercial sense but in themselves: as examples of something that, unfortunately, is coming to an end.

In contrast, however, there are those who, like Hegel, more or less enthusiastically accept that art is a thing of the past and that there is nothing to be sorry about, because now we are simply involved in something different: cultural practices that have erased the difference between art and life. All the proposals to bring the history of art to an end in favour of visual studies, and to substitute art by what is merely visual, lead in this same direction.³ Although he is far removed from cultural studies and the talk of visual culture, Yves Michaud⁴, for example, is not particularly worried that autonomous art is disappearing like a species that is unable to adapt and survive. Today's world demands something else and there is no need to waste time in lamentations or funerals. Several avant-garde artistic movements since Duchamp and the surrealists have wanted to break down the barriers that separate art and life. That difference no longer

¹ Donal Kuspit, *The End of Art*, Cambridge U.P., 2004; Jean Clair, *Considérations sur l'état des beaux-arts. Critique de la modernité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

² Félix de Azúa, *Diccionario de las artes*, Anagrama, Barcelona, 2002; Félix de Azúa, "Yo diría que...", *Archipiélago* 41 (2000), pp. 41 ss.

³ See, for example, José Luís Brea (ed.), *Estudios visuales*, Madrid: Akal, 2005.

⁴ Yves Michaud, *L'art à l'état gazeux*, Paris: Stock, 2003.

exists: art has become our atmosphere, it is all around us and we can no longer think of it as something specific and different from other cultural phenomena. Although everything suggests that we have now reached an impasse. So today art becomes deartified time and time again to convert itself into another type of cultural practice: political, anthropological, festive or of any other kind; but just any old cultural practice is no longer art. When art and life are fused together, paradoxically, art disappears. So, for example, since the legacy of the situationists, Martí Perán, to give one of the latest examples of those who throw away the concept of art, is very interested in walking and in the insignificant everyday experiences that when understood as superfluous can reorganize our lives and prompt the construction of a new subjectivity.⁵ With all my respect and goodwill, I cannot agree with this point of view. Art, although it may be historically variable in many respects, is an essential way of thinking, it is thought regarding the sensible realm, a capacity deeply rooted in our nature as a species and, therefore, unless we profoundly change it, art is going to stay with us, even in the grimmest of futures. The conceptual problems are not resolved by simply doing away with the word “art” and trying to make them disappear with some gruesome gesture of non-specific negation. Furthermore, art is something extremely valuable that occupies a central place in culture, understood as both descriptive and prescriptive. It may well be that that central place has to change and with it our concept of art has to change, but the value of art will continue to be one of the principal values of what we call culture and, therefore, something that is well worth preserving. However, those who see art as worthless compared to cultural practices, position themselves at one extreme — that of surrendering to heteronomy — that is diametrically opposed to the symmetric extreme adopted by those who radically defend autonomous art in a world that is decidedly set against any of the forms it adopts. Thus, inevitably, those who contemplate the problems of contemporary art from the perspective of its preservation as a valuable asset, find themselves (in contrast to those who think about such things from the opposite perspective) in need of simultaneously considering some familiar conceptual opposites: art and life,

⁵ Martí Perán, “Productive Walking and Idle Walking (Where we are going)”, Barcelona Metropolis 2009; *ibid.*, “Experience Surplus and Ways to Make Treasures”, *A Prior Magazine* 18 (2008). Both texts can also be read in his website: www.martiperan.net.

autonomy and heteronomy, ethics and aesthetics, legibility and illegibility, communion and dissent. Anyone who embarks on this theoretical journey today will find that fortunately they are in very good company; in the company of a fellow traveller who has come from far away and who has been considering such matters very seriously and very radically. I am referring to the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, whose name has become very popular in the last decade in the world of art theory and art criticism, despite the fact that his positions are sophisticated, conceptually complex and, on occasion, counterintuitive and only just or not at all obvious. I would like to go over some of the extremes of his aesthetics in the certainty that they constitute an indispensable theoretical reference in the present and that he continues the age-old discussion concerning the end of art with innovative insight. I will begin by going over Rancière's concept of the "aesthetic regime" of art, and then I will move on to show some of its ambiguities. I will conclude with some reflections on his concept of emancipation that is associated with the idea of an increase in capacities.

1. The Aesthetic Regime of Art

In the last ten years, Rancière has expressed his ideas, insofar as what concerns us in here, in terms of a few guiding principles: a selection of philosophical leitmotifs. The first of these ideas is quite clearly part of a narrative that aims to tell us where we come from and how we are; and which therefore is confirmation that there is no discourse concerning the end of art without a narrative that formulates a philosophy of the history of art. This is what the title of this section refers to, that is, the idea that there are regimes in art and that since the Age of Enlightenment we have been dominated by the "aesthetic regime" of art. For Rancière, the aesthetic regime is the last of three regimes that have come and gone throughout history. The first is the ethical regime that was dominant throughout the Ancient World and the Middle Ages. The second is the representative regime that lasted from the Renaissance until it was replaced by the aesthetic regime after the Enlightenment. This reconstructed triptych of the history of art reminds us, at least in part, of the Hegelian division of the history of art into its three stages, symbolic, classical and romantic, and some of the features inevitably coincide, although the conceptual construction of the two

schemes differs in certain essential aspects. Thus, while the Hegelian construction forms part of a broad metaphysical project, in Rancière we find ourselves faced with a less ambitious project in political philosophy; and while in Hegel we find a vast body of argumentation concerning the nature and the evolution of each one of three stages of art, Rancière's references are not systematic but fragmentary.⁶

A first basic idea about the regimes of art is that they concern different modes of existence of art that correspond to different political modes of sensitivity or, as Rancière says, to different modes of the distribution of the sensible (*partage du sensible*)⁷ or to a common predefined sensorium, which arose historically. In this sense art is always political because what art is in each period depends on a regime of intelligibility, of visibility or of identification which is essentially political and which defines a sense community. In fact, the generation of such a space, the redistribution of objects and subjects, places and identities, spaces and times, visibilities and meanings, is precisely what politics is. It is not the exercise of power or the struggle to gain it, but above all it is the conformation of a specific space, the demarcation of a specific sphere of experience, of objects treated as shared and that respond to a common decision of subjects capable of designing those objects and of discussing them. Politics is the very conflict over the existence of this space; over the designation of objects that share something in common; and of subjects with a capacity for com-

⁶ J. Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes. Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy", *New Left Review* 14 (2002), pp. 133-151; ---, *La malaise dans l'esthétique*, Paris, Galilée, 2004. English version (translated by StepehnCorocran. "Aesthetics and Its Discontents", Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press 2009; ---, *Sobre Políticas Estéticas*, Barcelona, Macba/UAB, 2005; ---, *The Emancipated Spectator*, (translation by Gregory Elliott) London/Brooklyn, Verso, 2009; ---, "The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge", *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2009), pp. 1-19; ---, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués. Entretiens*, Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2009.

⁷ The translation of the French term "partage" is somewhat problematic. It can be translated as "distribution" as in the Continuum International Publishing Group, English translation: "The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible". However, this does not take onboard the idea of spaces, categories, exclusions, etc. being shared. Alternatively "partage" could have been translated as the almost opposed "sharing" which I feel may capture Rancière's meaning better. However, I will stick with the published term "distribution".

mon language.⁸ Thus, in the oldest of the three regimes of art, the ethical regime, works of art are not autonomous. They are seen as images that are to be questioned as to their truth and as to their effect on the ethos of individuals and of the community. In the dialogues of Plato, and particularly in *The Republic*, we find the model analysis and description of this regime. Rancière does not explain how this regime came about or who founded it, and neither does he consider the interesting question of why it disappeared, but he does describe the way in which this regime functions. In this regime, paradoxically, there is no real art as we understand it today; there are only really images that are judged in function of their intrinsic truth and of their effects on the mode of being and behaving of the individuals and of the community. The regime of ethical identification or visibility allows us to comprehend the image of a goddess, which involves our perception and judgement of it in questions such as whether we can produce images of the divine, whether the divinity we imagine is a real divinity, and, if the answers are in the affirmative, whether it is imagined and represented as it should be. The paradox, however, is that for us, in reality, this ethical regime of images is a regime of a “lack of distinction of art”.⁹ Paradoxes such as: “there are not always occurrences of art, although there are always forms of poetry, painting, sculpture, music, theatre and dance”.¹⁰ By the same token: there are not always occurrences of politics, although there are always forms of power. Politics only occurs when there is a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible that defines what is common to a community, in order to introduce new objects and subjects into it: to make visible and intelligible things that previously were not. In this sense, the aesthetics of politics is the creation of dissent.¹¹

This regime is followed by another that sets images free from the rule of truth and ethics, from judgements regarding validity, and replaces them with the principle of imitation or of representation. In this second regime, works of art belong to the sphere of imitation, so that statues of the gods

⁸ J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 18. See also *La mésentente: politique et philosophie*, Paris, Editions Gallilée, 1995. English version (translated by Julie Rosa): *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

⁹ *Sobre políticas estéticas*, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

or stories of princes are subordinated to a specific category: that of imitation. For example, the sculpture of a goddess, such as the Juno Ludovisi, is art within this regime because a form has been imposed on a material at the same time as it is the product of a representation. That is, a true-to-life resemblance has been constituted which combines the imaginary features of the divinity with the archetypal features of femininity, and the monumental scale of the statue with the expressivity of a particular goddess, who has been given specific character features. In this case, the statue is a “representation”. It is perceived through a range of expressive and formal conventions, a complete system of criteria that determines the manner in which the skill of the artisan sculptor, in giving form to the marble, can coincide with an artistic capacity when giving the appropriate features the adequate forms of expression.¹² In this way we find ourselves with a hierarchy of genres, with the criterion of the suitability of the expression for the theme, with correspondence between the arts, etc. This regime, like the previous one, is not the object of particular attention from Rancière, who is truly interested in the final regime, the one that we are still in at present.

The Juno Ludovisi is the example that Schiller uses in a foundational text on the aesthetic regime of artistic images. It is referred to by Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, the dramatist of *Sturm und Drang*, and taken up again by Schiller in the fifteenth of his *Letters on the aesthetic education of man*, in 1795. Rancière maintains that in this letter Schiller identifies the nature of the aesthetic regime, its paradoxical character, and the philosophical problem that it presents us with.¹³ The aesthetic regime of art is what has traditionally been called modernity.¹⁴ This regime overthrows the normativity of the mimetic regime, and the relation between matter and form on which it is based. Works of art are now defined as such by way of their belonging to a specific sensorium that emerges as an exception to the normal regime of the sensible that is presented to us with an immediate match between thought and sensible materiality. Now the Juno Ludovisi

¹² Sobre políticas estéticas, p. 23.

¹³ Aesthetics and Its Discontents. pp. 27 ff. Sobre políticas estéticas, pp. 23ff.; “The Aesthetic Revolution”, passim.

¹⁴ “Le partage du sensible. Entretien avec Jaques Rancière”, Alice n° 2 (1999): <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Le-partage-du-sensible>

is identified, together with the pictures of Rembrandt, the canvasses of Pollock and the performances of Schwarzkogler, as a work of art. In this regime it does not matter whether the Juno corresponds to a suitable idea of the divinity or with the canons of mimetic art and of representation. The Juno is art because it belongs to a specific sensorium with a mode of being not with a mode of doing. This is what “aesthetics” means: the property of being art in the aesthetic regime of art is no longer given by criteria of technical perfection, but is ascribed to a specific form of sensible comprehension. In his letters Schiller claims that the statue is “a free appearance”, that is, a sensible form that is distinct from the ordinary sensible forms of sensible experience. The aesthetic experience entails the suspension of the ordinary connections between appearance and reality, form and matter, activity and passivity. In his concept of “play”, Schiller summarizes the Kantian analysis of the aesthetic experience as sensible experience in a state of the suspension of cognitive power (both theoretical and normative) and of the power of desire as we encounter it in the analysis of reflexive judgement in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. The Kantian “free play of the faculties” is not solely an activity without a purpose, it is an activity that resembles a lack of activity, passivity, because those who play, those who engage in aesthetic experience, suspend their ordinary relation with the world, suspend their capacity when faced with a heterogeneous sensory block. As Rancière says “the ‘player’ stands and does nothing before the goddess, who herself does nothing, ... within this circle of an inactive activity”.¹⁵ However, Schiller maintains in his fifteenth letter that “man is only fully human when he plays”, which is surprisingly paradoxical, while at the same time he promises his reader that “the whole edifice of aesthetic art and the still more difficult art of life will be supported by this principle.”¹⁶ Thus the aesthetic experience, the experience

¹⁵ Sobre políticas estéticas, pp. 24ff; *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p 30.

¹⁶ “... der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Worts Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt. Dieser Satz, der in diesem Augenblicke vielleicht paradox erscheint, wird eine große und tiefe Bedeutung erhalten, wenn wir erst dahin gekommen sein werden, ihn auf den doppelten Ernst der Pflicht und des Schicksals anzuwenden; er wird, ich verspreche es Ihnen, das ganze Gebäude der ästhetischen Kunst und der noch schwierigeren Lebenskunst tragen.” ENG: “<http://www.readbookonline.net/read/20755/58131/>”

of art in the aesthetic regime of identification of art, makes us the double promise of a new world of art and at the same time, of a new life for the individuals and for the community.

Aesthetics, as art's new regime of identity, began at the time of the French Revolution, and the coming of the new regime brought with it two contradictory revolutions in appearance that, nonetheless, supported each other. It was responsible for constituting a sphere of experience specific to art, but it was also responsible for the suppressing all the criteria that served to differentiate objects of art from the other objects in the world. At one and the same time it brought about both the autonomy of the world of art and the vision of that world as the prefiguration of another autonomy; that of the ordinary everyday world freed from the law of oppression. The same term, "avant-garde", referred to the two opposite intertwined forms of the autonomy of art and the promise of emancipation that it brought with it. So, it had two opposite effects, which on some occasions became more or less indistinguishable, while sometimes they were clearly antagonistic. On the one hand, the avant-garde was the movement that aimed to transform the forms of art, to make them identical to the forms of the edifice of a new world in which art no longer exists as a separate reality; in which the borders between art and life are destroyed. Of the other, it was the movement that preserved the autonomy of the artistic sphere from any commitment to the practices of power and from the political struggle or forms of aestheticization of life in the capitalist world. On one hand, the futuristic or constructivist dream of the self-suppression of art in the formation of a new sensible world. On the other, particularly in the tradition of Adorno, the struggle to preserve the autonomy of art from all the forms of aestheticization of goods or of power — to preserve it, not as pure enjoyment of art for art's sake, but quite the opposite, as an inscription to mark the unresolved contradiction between the aesthetic promise and the reality of a world of oppression. In the aesthetic regime of art, therefore, we encounter an insurmountable entwining of autonomy and heteronomy, or if you prefer: aesthetic modernity is defined by the unresolvable dialectic tension between the tendency towards autonomy and precisely the opposite tendency. At times Rancière uses another term to qualify this dialectic: undecidable. In the contradictions of contem-

porary art, and here postmodernity is no different from modernity,¹⁷ the most fundamental undecidability of the politics of art (or of its metapolitics) finds expression; it is constitutive of this regime, a condition that is already defined by the peculiar mode of existence of art today. On one hand, there is a politics of art that aims to fuse art with life; and on the other, the politics of resistance. These opposing logics should be contemplated and understood together; separating them only leads to unilateral thoughts, as was paradigmatic in the case of Adorno.

This constitutive or structural character of the undecidability of the aesthetic regime of intelligibility of art theorized by Rancière is what is at the origin of the narratives of the “end of art”. Hegel and Adorno did not simply theorize personal visions of the state of art, but rather they laid out the configuration of modernity as a new distribution of the sensible in which art and non-art can be one and the same thing.¹⁸ That is: “The politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art, or rather its metapolitics, is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art.”¹⁹ The historicized philosophies of art of Hegel and Schelling were pioneers in the constitution of the aesthetic regime of intelligibility. Their discourses rationalized what could be seen at the first large museums in the world, since a shortly before: Fra Angelico between Giotto and Massacio framing the idea of princely splendour in Renaissance Florence; Rembrandt between Hals and Vermeer characterizing the domestic and civil life of the Dutch; the rise of the bourgeoisie; and so on, up to the present. Life become art, while maintaining the difference between the two. However, this logic taken on its own leads to a death sentence, because in the end art will become deartified, it will become banal: no more than goods. “When art is no more than art, it disappears. When the contents of thought are transparent to themselves and when no matter can resist them, such success is the death of art. When the artist does as he wishes, Hegel tells us, he is only placing a mark on the paper or the canvass.”²⁰ The other logic, however, in which

¹⁷ I have no desire to enter into this here; and indeed, neither can I, Rancière has never worried much about the distinction. See, however, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 28.

¹⁸ “The Aesthetic Revolution...”, p. 142.

¹⁹ *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 36.

²⁰ “The Aesthetic Revolution...”, p. 142.

life becomes art, works in the opposite way: there is a desire for goods to become art, they become aestheticized, which also leads to the death of art. When the ordinary becomes extraordinary, it also means that the extraordinary is ordinary: the prosaic becomes poetic and the poetic prosaic. This means that in the future, art is no longer necessary either as an expression of a way of life or as the bearer of a model of the ordinary life of the future.

The structural logic of the aesthetic regime, as well as being at the origin of the discourse about the death or end of art, is also the cause of other phenomena. For example, the undecidable tension between autonomy and heteronomy means that some hybrid forms of art appear as a kind of third way between the extremes. This is the case of the collage and the assembly, in a broad sense of the terms, which occupy a central place in contemporary critical art because they have to seek their own way between two opposing politics of aesthetics. This third way is political because it constantly tends towards crossing the boundaries, and this is translated into mixed works that make the poetic more prosaic while they also make the prosaic more poetic. Since certain of Zola's novels, such as *Le ventre de Paris*, through the photomontages of Heartfield, the theatre of Brecht, the "combines" of Rauschenberg or the films of Godard, political art has revealed itself to be a type of negotiation; not between politics and art, but between the two politics of aesthetics in constant tension: the politics of autonomy and the politics of the fusion of art with life. In his most recent texts, Rancière has indicated that the dialectic form of aesthetic dissent has split into four main forms.²¹

In first place is the joke, or what we may call the ironic comment. Works of parody or humour such as the merry-go-round of "Revolution Counter-Revolution" (1990) by Charles Ray or the giant rabbit *Errotin le vrai lapin* (1994) by Maurizio Cattelan illustrate perfectly the undecidability of contemporary art. The former, via a modification of the mechanism that makes the carousel turn, is an allegory of undecidability: by specifically reconfiguring the mechanism that makes the horses turn, they move back-

²¹ In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* pp. 53 ff; *The Emancipated Spectator*, op. cit., pp. 51-82, and in "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics", in Beth Hinderliter et al. (eds), *Communities of Sense. Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, Durham/London: Duke U.P., 2009, pp. 31-50.

wards very slowly while the carousel moves forwards. This movement in both directions gives a literal meaning to the title of the work, but also invokes the allegorical meaning and its political statute. It is the subversion of the entertainment machine *par excellence*. It is criticism as parody, but at the same time it is a parody of criticism, of political art. It is impossible to decide which of these effects is the dominant. The same may be said of the work by Cattelan which may symbolize either the pop parody, criticism of commercialized entertainment, or the positive potential of play. This would explain the great importance of humour in contemporary art; a mechanism to produce such undecidability. Although this has its dangers: humour is also the dominant mode of presentation of goods in advertising and, in general, in the media. This procedure of delegitimizing that flits between the critical and the playful is, when taken to the limit, indistinguishable from the way the powers that be and the media proceed.

The second way of producing aesthetic dissent would be the inventory, the collection or, as it is now theorized, the archive. Work such as *Les Abonnés du Téléphone* by Christian Boltanski, the minimalist numerations of thousands of years by On Kawara, or the photographic series of people from 0 to 100 years of age by Hans-Peter Feldman, exemplify this procedure by which the artist is the archivist of collective life and the private collector subjected to a compulsion. A collection is historical memory, it is the memory of the community: family photographs, videos, all kinds of objects scattered through society are brought together and seen in a space reserved for art, reinforcing via the exhibition the community vocation of art.

The third, the invitation or the encounter that relational or participatory art cultivate. Examples of this procedure are Rirkrit Tiravanija with his socializing actions, or Pierre Huyghe and Jens Haaning with their emulation of the Duchampian strategies of the ready-made, but who substitute the objects for everyday social situations and in this way produce a dislocation that adds a strange political dimension to daily life. And all of this while sewing doubts and suggesting questions about public order and about existence itself, with which the artists try to force a reaction from the spectator or achieve the active involvement of the audience.

Finally, mystery; which here means neither enigma nor mysticism. Since the time of Mallarmé, Rancière claims, mystery has been a specific mode

of placing heterogeneous elements together. For example, the thoughts of the poet, the steps of the dancer, the opening out of a fan or the smoke of a cigarette. The procedure of mystery does not make the heterogeneous elements that it brings together clash with each other, rather it establishes an analogy, a familiarity with strangeness that bears witness to a common world, an analogy in which the heterogeneous realities are woven into a single fabric and they can be related to each other by means of the fraternity of a metaphor. Jean-Luc Godard's *Histories du cinéma*, the films in the *Cremaster Cycle* by Matthew Barney, the video installation *The Crossing* by Bill Viola, would all be examples of this last way of producing critical art that brings to the fore the tension between the two great politics of art and their undecidability.

The success of these critical strategies, however, is for Rancière problematic insofar as, due to the ambiguity of the results, they may reinforce a twist in what he calls the "aesthetics of politics", a twist which takes the name of consensus. This "consensus" is not agreement between the political sections with a common interest in the community, instead it is a reconfiguration of the visibility of that which is common. It means that whatever is accepted about any collective situation is reified in such a way that it no longer takes part in the dispute, in the polemic, in questioning the controversial world within the accepted world. Consensus means, in this way, the dismissal of the "aesthetics of politics". So, the triumph of consensus means the failure of these new strategies of political art. Be that as it may, art should continue to seek out ways of pushing back the frontiers of art, inventing new forms of aesthetic distance or indifference that can help to establish, against the consensus, new political communities of sense. But art cannot, neither should it, take the place of politics. The space left empty by the weakening of the political conflict that is a result of the consensus cannot be filled by art. The political invention of dissidence can be aided by critical art, but art cannot substitute it. The job of art is such that it "contributes to the reframing of forms of experience"²², not for it to carry out political actions.

²² "A few remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière", *Parallax* 15 (2009), p. 122.

2. Some Doubts

Up to here: Rancière. I am not convinced that I have been able to capture his ideas faithfully. He is a thinker who does not lay out his thoughts in a systematic way, and who in addition understands that his texts are not “theories of”, but rather they are always “interventions on”.²³ However, once that reservation has been expressed, I cannot but express my sympathy towards his points of view. In fact, I generally agree with the thesis that at the heart of modernity, in a broad sense of the term (including postmodernity), a double-edged phenomenon is at work. There is a constitutive aesthetic tension between the autonomy and the heteronomy of art that cannot be resolved within the framework of modernity, although it always pushes us on in search of a third way that eschews the unilateralisms of one and the other poles of the tension. And it is in these attempts that the politics can be shown to be true and where there may be an occasion for art to contribute to changing the world in accordance with the principles of freedom and equality. What seems less clear to me is this discourse concerning history being divided into three stages that correspond to three regimes of art. It is a less united and consistent philosophical narrative than that of Hegel, Adorno or Danto, and therefore it is much less solid — always with the understanding that a narrative can only be challenged with another different narrative, whether it is done explicitly or implicitly. The regimes of art aim to be like the modes of production of Marxist discourse, but they are much more like the Heidegger's epochs of Being, the progression of language or the epistemes of Foucault, which happen without us knowing how or why, nor who or what is responsible for them. In contrast, Hegel and Marx put considerable effort into arguing for their points of view, which is something that one avoids through not proposing theories. Even, a thinker not specially friend of argumentations, Walter Benjamin, maintained in his famous text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”²⁴ that with changes in technol-

²³ Ibid., p. 116.

²⁴ Accessible at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>. Other references could include: R., Debray (translated by Eric Rauth) “The Three Ages of Looking”, *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1995), pp. 529-555; J. Elkins, “Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction”, London/New York: Routledge, 2003; M. Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, in H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, pp. 3-28.

ogy, not only do the modes of production change, but so too do the modes of perception, assessing so a cause for this changes. Whatever the truth of the matter, we do not seem to be able to avoid some questions of the type: Are there really three regimes of the visuality of art? Are we, or should we be, heading towards a fourth regime? Alternatively, is the aesthetic regime an ultimate regime that will never be surpassed?

We could start with some considerations regarding art, human nature and history. Like a good (Marxist) product of his time (May '68) and of his culture (France), Jacques Rancière is a convinced antinaturalist. That is, for him, everything is a social construct; a product of culture and social categories, since there is no human nature. At some point ridicule is made of all attempts to examine the natural bases of our aesthetic and artistic capacities through the argument that all attempts to demonstrate the independence of any aesthetic attitude towards works of art is evidence of the existence of the aesthetic regime of identification.²⁵ My departing point of view is different from Rancière's, although we do not go on to develop it: there is such a thing as human nature which is particular to *Homo sapiens* and perhaps also to Neanderthals, in which basic features of our humanity, like the capacity for language and aesthetic capacities such as the capacity for embellishment, the production of art or aesthetic judgement are aspects of our capacity for symbolic thought. All humans are born with these capacities at which we may shine or not, more or less within the differences that are known to exist in all population samples with respect to any variable factor. That all of us have the capacity to appreciate and choose between two fox furs or two minerals, not only for their utility but aesthetically, does not mean that we have always done so in the same way and with the same attitude. Just as the capacity for speech is the same on average for all humans, some speak Yanomami and others BBC English. Nobody was designed specifically to speak particularly refined English or to use the complete Mandarin Chinese alphabet. This is the historically contingent part. At different moments of history we have even done very different things with our capacities. Neither are we sure that these historically contingent factors are completely invariable, but although there

²⁵ The object of his contempt is Jean-Marie Schaeffer and his short book "Farewell to Aesthetics". Cf. *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 2 ff.

may have been some evolution of our brain and of our perceptive organs in recent millennia, something which is still to be demonstrated, the distinction between nature and history would still make perfect sense. The capacity to count to three is essentially the same capacity we use, after much learning, to solve differential equations; the capacity to adorn ourselves with feathers and pigments is the same capacity used by Kiefer to produce his landscapes. But clearly they are different. What makes them different? Well, we could dare say that they are different, for example, in such aspects as the technology, the degree of theoretical knowledge of the subjects involved, the cultural sense of each thing and its social function. But Rancière maintains that, in addition, they are differentiated by something more profound and constitutive: regimes of intelligibility. Rancière does not tell us whether the oldest regime he mentions, the ethical regime, was historically the first, and if, therefore, prehistoric peoples and primitive peoples were subjected to that regime. Neither does he tell us to what degree, when one regime substitutes another, the change is sudden and radical or a slow evolution, which might allow different regimes to coexist. The most important thing, undoubtedly, is that these regimes are not an endpoint; rather political action, the activity that questions a regime, has meant that through the course of history we have passed through these three major stages.

However, it becomes difficult to accept that the first two stages were successive. I would strongly favour a different narrative. A look at the history of art and at the history of thought incites us rather to consider that perhaps these regimes coexisted throughout most of history and that they have even come back to life after having apparently been overtaken by history. In fact, the most important sources of doctrine for these two regimes go back to Plato and Aristotle respectively. The latter is the source of all vision of art that is dominated by the notions of mimesis, of verisimilitude and of categorization or the establishment of a hierarchy within the arts. I have no doubt that the Juno Ludovisi was sculpted and venerated in something much like an ethical regime of art, with her inexpressive and idealistic character. However, the often referred to *Boy with Grapes* painted by Zeuxis did not function under an ethical regime, but under a mimetic regime. In his famous dispute with Parrhasius, the criterion of correction applied by Zeuxis was that the sparrows were trying to eat the grapes.

Furthermore, Aristotle did not in general like Zeuxis's murals and panels because they were too expressive, paid too much attention to the feeling, to the pathos, instead of to the character, to the ethos, of the characters. I could add examples that suggest that, although the ethical regime was dominant until the Renaissance, it seems clear that it was also possible to adopt a view closer to that which was dominant in the representative regime. Moreover, the ethical regime did not suddenly cease to exist and give way to its successor. It is not easy to understand religious painting or baroque historical painting as mimetic art. Spanish painting often is not mimetic art, but it is also arguable to what extent the great works by Rembrandt or Poussin are. On the other hand, the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century had great success in restoring, in the middle of modernity, ethical regimes of the arts. We could also point out that, although in modernity the aesthetic regime of art is dominant, views that belong to previous regimes have not ceased to exist, in fact we can trace their presence right up to the present, and that the categories, criteria and values of the mimetic regime have repeatedly been used against modern art, the avant-garde and postmodern art.

Are there only three regimes of identification of art? Perhaps they are not so much regimes of intelligibility, which undoubtedly may be dominant in certain periods, as ways of seeing developed throughout history and which have been coexisting, interrelating and even mingling with each other. Maybe we should talk of ways of seeing, ways which, although they are inherited by each of us and in that sense they are a priori, are not transcendental in any strong sense, but which are historically a priori and contingent, and from which we can distance ourselves in a critical manner in order to correct them and even abandon them for others. If they were considered as ways of seeing rather than something akin to necessary epistemes, then possibly we would have to extend them in number. I am thinking, for example, of the formalist way of seeing which has survived political regimes, artistic genres and the rise and fall of all kinds of beliefs ever since the Pythagoreans and right up to the present. In addition, perhaps the aesthetic regime is not the end of history. Perhaps Danto is right and contemporary pluralism is a new start that is less combative than many, such as Rancière, believe, and among whom I include myself. Perhaps we are moving towards another regime that is more republican

or maybe we are already in it. Whatever the case, the thesis that I would defend is that humans have the universal capacity to make art, a capacity that is one of our basic ways of doing and which defines us, like Heideggerian existentials. This way of doing has, through the course of history, led to many classes of objects or products whose intellection has been diverse, and to a very long learning process. The appearance of autonomous art and of its concept allowed us, retrospectively, to recognize all these products of our doing and making from the past and place them together under the concept of art, and deposit them in galleries and museums, disconnected from their place of origin. This is a process that even today does not seem to have come to a complete stop. There are still transfers from ethnographic museums to art galleries, and once there, photographs and documentaries, or other products that were not seen as art at the time they were made, are added to them. The mode of being of all these objects and products has changed and was originally very different, that much is true; but they are all born of the same capacity of ours to produce art. And it is a capacity that we had even when our ancestors did not know that they had it, and neither did they have the least idea that they were making "art"; just like those who talk in prose without knowing it. "They do not know it, but they are doing it", Marx maintained. All this is not a process of teleological learning, aimed at some ultimate goal. Neither is it a linear progression. History has taken and will take many twists and turns, and anyone who is familiar with the subject can tell that in art there is no progress in any usual sense, that the most advanced art of the present can be surprisingly similar to that from other, long-past periods, and that no work of art is better than its predecessors just for coming later in time. However, there is progress in art as a way of doing, that is, as a strange way to conjure up the world, since the arts have explored and continue to explore the possibilities of experience in all directions. The aesthetics experience is peculiar compared to theoretical, normative or religious forms of experience because it is the experience of the possibilities of experience; the experience of the contingency of sense, of the plurality of the interpretations of the world. Using a well-known metaphor, we could say that progress in art is in concentric circles, circles that move outwards like the ripples caused by a stone thrown into a pond. And since the waters of history are changeable, even when you have been past a point, you have to

pass it again because it is different. So the exploration does not even stop when the ripples reach the edge of the pond. We do not know whether art has any limits in any sense, as the metaphor suggests, but as we can never step into the same river twice, the task of art is endless. That is why art has so many “eternal” themes: death, love, injustice, unhappiness, etc., have to be contemplated by each generation, over and over again, as we never die nor do we love in exactly the same manner, or for the same causes or reasons. We may substitute the medium of poetry or the novel for the cinema, it may be that the ways to make poetry and film are very different, but what unites us to the art of the past and allows us to communicate with it is the eternal return to the same themes. Paris’s love for Helen and the consequences of it, although the story was first told nearly thirty centuries ago, allows us to think about love, about our love or the love of our friends as much, if not more than the best present-day romantic novels or films do. If you like, progress in art is Sisyphean progress, but, since the boulders to be pushed up the hill — the works of art — multiply, it generates an accumulation of products of all sorts that are not mere “history”, as the products of the history of science are. Rather they are very often perfectly alive in their role as privileged places for thought regarding many important pieces or aspects of the world.²⁶

All of this deserves to be argued in some detail, which I cannot do here because it would inevitably require the formulation of an entire alternative philosophical narrative. In the last section of this critical reflection I am going to consider, with Rancière, the task of critical art today.

3. *Emancipation*

As Rancière himself correctly maintains: “Aesthetics is the thought of the new disorder”²⁷. However, we should add that the task of imagining a disorder requires recognition of an order which allows us to recognize what is disordered, and that the process of considering disorder culminates in the creation of a conceptual order, so, in general, any disorder is only rela-

²⁶ Some previous reflections on aesthetic progress can be found in: Gerard Vilar, *Las razones del arte*, Madrid, Machado, 2005, pp. 172ff.

²⁷ *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 13.

tive to a certain order and eventually ends up generating a new order.²⁸ If we suppose that we have to locate its origins much further back in time, the appearance of the aesthetic way of seeing or of the aesthetic regime in the 18th century brought with it a disorder with respect to the classical world; but how do we see today the disorder present in the arts? Rancière's answer is that at the heart of the order of the aesthetic regime there is a permanent disorder caused by the undecidability between art and non-art, or by the possibility of the two being one and the same. Can this disorder be resolved; this undecidable condition that is almost always present in contemporary art, or that so often even today becomes the theme of works by artists as diverse as Jeff Koons, Paul MacCarthy and Maurizio Cattelan? In order to give a tentative response to this question we have to go back to the core of Rancière's conception regarding the connection between aesthetics and politics. For Rancière, in the wake of Western left-wing thought, the goal and the meaning of politics is emancipation: the transformation of the current societies that are scarred by a multitude of forms of injustice, exploitation, oppression, exclusion and inequality, into emancipated societies that can only be formed of emancipated individuals. There can only be genuine politics, according to Rancière, when the very structures that generate or lead to the social ills are being questioned, otherwise there is no politics, only police. Art has a role in this transformation, but only when it is political in the strong sense of the term. In other, less emphatic, senses, art is already always political since it becomes visible in a given regime of intelligibility which assumes a given distribution of the sensible. The role of political art then is to question the current distribution of the sensible and the aesthetic regime of identification of art, which means reconfiguring the forms of individuals' experiences. This implies moving the limits of the shared sensorium and of the aesthetic community to emancipate them from their limitations; to form a genuine community of emancipated artists and spectators. It is not at all clear, however, how this community is to be understood, or how to progress towards it. In some of his latest texts, Rancière proposes using the example of the theatre, "the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who

²⁸ Cf. Gerard Vilar "El desorden estético", Barcelona, Ideabooks, 2000.

look; between individuals and members of a collective body.”²⁹ To this end, good theatre and good emancipating performances, those that use their separated reality precisely to overcome that separated reality, “intend to teach their spectators ways of ceasing to be spectators and becoming agents of a collective practice.”³⁰ This teaching is emancipating, democratic and not authoritarian; this is just as it was in the Leninist model of the avant-garde movements. We have to start from the equality of intelligences and trust to self-learning, following the model of the “ignorant schoolmaster” developed by Rancière in the nineteen-eighties,³¹ where he aspires to radically egalitarian horizontal relations even in language teaching. This wonderful idea has been taken up again recently, for example, by Manuel Borja Vilell, current director of the MNCA Reina Sofía in Madrid, who, based on Passolini’s beautiful short film entitled *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*, also defends the emancipation of the spectator.³² In a puppet theatre where Othello is being performed, we see the actors rebel against their characters, changing the lines that they should speak and reinventing the work, while the public also intervenes to exact justice against Iago, with all of this leading to the reinvention of the roles of both actors and public, of their places and of their times. Theatre is the most communal of the arts, and perhaps in it situations of this type that subvert the established order are possible. We should remember, however, that theatre and participatory performances already have several decades of history behind them. But the problem becomes much more reticent when the aim is to convert these situations into an exemplary model for other arts to follow, particularly the visual arts.

To start with, it is very improbable that there could ever actually be a genuinely democratic aesthetic community, since the majority of individuals only have, and in the future only will have, a limited interest in art. As is commonly said, art will never be as popular as football. Because of

²⁹ *The Emancipated Spectator*, op. cit., p. 19

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

³¹ Cf. Jaques Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant. Cinc leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle*, Paris, Fayard 1987. English version (translated by Kristin Ross): “The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation”, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

³² “La rebelión del espectador”, in *El País* 02-05-09.

this, from the point of view of aesthetics, the democratic aesthetic community has been seen as a counterfactual body. Kant pioneered this with his idea of a *sensus communis aestheticus*. Today it has become a recurrent theme in discourses in the theory and philosophy of art.³³ Although the democratic aesthetic community is never going to exist in reality, nothing stops us thinking of it *de jure*. Just as in the sphere of democracies that actually exist, the fact that part of the citizenry does not get involved in political life and has no reasoned political opinions does not make democracy or the citizenry worthless, neither does the fact that the aesthetic community only exists *de jure*. I have previously proposed the notion of a Republic of the Arts as a guiding principle for artistic practices; both creative and receptive.³⁴ The empirical social reality will be nearer or further away from the guiding principle, but it counterfactually entices us to consider all the members of society as citizens of the Republic of the Arts and to consider its universalization. This guiding principle also has an ethical nature, although, since it has authority over nobody, it does not have the strength of moral principles and neither is it binding. One ascribes to it freely to convert oneself into what Baudelaire so wisely and poetically called *goût infini de la République*: the infinite taste of the Republic that works of art so often exude.³⁵ Mass culture with its aestheticization imperative, the empire of power and money that converts everything into goods and utility, and the forces that push art over the precipice of deartification cannot bring about the disappearance of art, of free art, for ever; not while the *goût infini de la République* still exists. Those who are nostalgic for autonomous art from the times of the Romantics or for certain avant-garde movements need to be reminded that the democratization of art has not brought about its disappearance but the dominance of medi-

³³ Beth Hinderliter et al. (eds), *Communities of Sense. Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, Durham/Londres: Duke U.P., 2009.

³⁴ *Las razones del arte*, op. cit., pp. 210-216.

³⁵ « [...] En un mot, quel est le grand secret de Dupont et d'où vient cette sympathie qui l'enveloppe ? Ce grand secret, je vais vous le dire, il est bien simple : il n'est ni dans l'acquis ni dans l'ingéniosité, ni dans l'habileté du faire, ni dans la plus ou moins grande quantité de procédés que l'artiste a puisés dans le fonds commun du savoir humain; il est dans l'amour de la vertu et de l'humanité, et dans ce je ne sais quoi qui s'exhale incessamment de sa poésie, ce que j'appellerais volontiers le goût infini de la République ». (Charles Baudelaire, Pierre Dupont, 1851).

ocrity and the consumable, and that nothing stops us from continuing to distinguish and differentiate, because although in the present artistic moment anything goes, not everything has the same value. Perhaps it was less work when we had a chosen elite comprised of geniuses like Picasso, Miró and Pollock. Today we do not know if there is a Picasso or a Rothko of our time, which means we have to make an extra effort in our relationship with art. But we are freer to make our judgements, our own canons and to share them or not. Democracy is always more work, it is more exhausting and in a democracy everything seems to be less noble and more mediocre; but there is no need to be overwhelmed. Those who, going to the other extreme, applaud the dissolution of art in cultural practices, visual and others, perform an intellectual operation that can only be evaluated in terms of loss. As Thierry de Duve has said in one of the best-thought-out texts that I have read recently in favour of the preservation of the differences between art and everything else: “whereas all works of art are definitely cultural goods, some are not reducible to cultural goods, ... these are the ones that matter, the ones I would call, using an old-fashioned word, *authentic* works of art. Art and culture are not the same thing. The line is drawn case by case, by the singular aesthetic judgement in its claim to universality.”³⁶ As a philosopher I could not agree more. Above all, philosophers teach differences, as Wittgenstein said. We should add that we also defend them whenever the need arises.

³⁶ “The Glocal and the Singuniversal. Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World”, *Third Text* 21 (2007), p. 687.