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JACQUES RANCIÈRE

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CHAPTER TEN

The Paradoxes of Political Art

Since the turn of the century, there has been increasingly frequent talk of art's having 'returned to politics'. Numerous exhibitions and conferences have been put on that re-assert art's capacity to resist forms of economic, political and ideological domination. At the same time, this new faith in the political capacity of art has taken on many forms, which are very often divergent, if not conflicting. Some artists make big statues out of media and advertising icons to make us conscious of the power they have over our perception. Others silently bury invisible monuments dedicated to last century's crimes. Still others endeavour to show us the biases contained in mainstream representations of subaltern identities, or to sharpen our perception of images using photographs about characters whose identity is fleeting and enigmatic. Some artists, using false identities, crash the meetings of big bosses and politicians to make them look foolish; others design banners and masks for street demonstrations against the powers that be. Some use the space of the museum to demonstrate the functioning of new ecological machines, others lay out small stones or erect signs in disempowered suburbs with the aim of re-creating the environment and engendering new social relations. One artist pays migrant workers to dig their own graves in order to point to the violence of exploitation, while another plays the role of supermarket assistant as a way of mending the social bond.

Notwithstanding their differences, these strategies and practices all presuppose a specific notion of art's efficacy. Art is presumed to be effective politically because it displays the marks of domination, or parodies mainstream icons, or even because it leaves the spaces reserved for it and

becomes a social practice. Despite a century of critique – or so-called – directed at the mimetic tradition, it appears to be still firmly entrenched, including in forms of supposed political and artistic subversion. Underlying these forms is the assumption that art compels us to revolt when it shows us revolting things, that it mobilizes when it itself is taken outside of the workshop or museum and that it incites us to oppose the system of domination by denouncing its own participation in that system. This assumption implies a specific form of relationship between cause and effect, intention and consequence.

In fact, the politics of art suffers from a strange schizophrenia. In the first place, artists and critics never tire of repeating that art practices have to be re-situated interminably, placed in ever new contexts. Adamantly proclaiming that our context is one of late capitalism, or economic globalization or computer communication and the digital camera, they say we must completely re-think the politics of art. In the second place, these same artists and critics are still very attached to paradigms for understanding the efficacy of art that were debunked at least two centuries before these technological inventions appeared. For this reason, it pays to invert the usual perspective and, taking a maximum of distance from our present, discuss the following questions: which models of the efficacy of art govern our strategies, hopes and judgements regarding the political import of artistic practice? And to which age do these models belong?

To do so, I shall take a leap back in time to eighteenth-century Europe, and more precisely to a time when the hegemony of the mimetic paradigm was thrown into question from two opposed angles. The conception of the efficacy of art within this paradigm is well illustrated by the classical theatre. In classical times it was supposed that the theatre, or stage, functioned as a magnifying glass, inviting spectators to view the behaviour, virtues and vices of their fellow men and women in the form of a fiction. It was considered, for example, that Moliere's *Tartuffe* taught spectators to recognize hypocrites, and Voltaire's *Mahomet* and Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* to struggle for tolerance against fanaticism, and so on. Current ways of thinking and feeling are apparently far removed from this edifying vision of art's vocation, and yet they are still thoroughly bound to the causal logic underpinning it. This logic posits that what the viewer sees – on a stage no less than in a photographic exhibition or an installation – is a set of signs formed according to an artist's intention.

By recognizing these signs the spectator is supposedly induced into a specific reading of the world around us, leading, in turn, to the feeling of a certain proximity or distance, and ultimately to the spectator's intervening into the situation staged by the author. We may no longer believe that exhibiting virtues and vices on stage can improve human behaviour, but we continue to act as if reproducing a commercial idol in resin will engender resistance against the 'spectacle', and as if a series of photographs about the way colonizers represent the colonized will work to undermine the fallacies of mainstream representations of identities. Let us call this the *pedagogical* model of the efficacy of art.

The pertinence of this model was thrown into question as early as the 1760s. In his *Lettre à M. D'Alembert sur les spectacles*,[1] Rousseau argues against the presumption of a direct relation running from the performance of bodies on stage to its effects on the minds of spectators and its consequences for their behaviour outside the theatre. Does Molière's *Misanthrope* encourage us to value Alceste's sincerity above the hypocrisy of the socialites that surround him? Does it lead us to privilege their sense of social life over his intolerance? The question is undecidable. Moreover, how can the theatre itself expose hypocrites, given that its very essence is defined by what hypocrites do – namely, showing signs of feelings and thoughts on human bodies that they *do not have*? Transposing this scenario to a contemporary situation, we might ask the following: what should we make of a photographic exhibition depicting victims of genocide? Does it count as a form of rebellion against the perpetrators? Does it amount to anything more than an inconsequential sympathy towards the victims? Ought it generate anger towards the photographer who turns the victims' pain into an aesthetic matter? Or else to indignation against those who view them degradingly only in their identity as victims? The list can be extended. The element that is left over once all these reactions are subtracted is the supposed 'beauty' or 'power' of the photograph itself. The logic of mimesis consists in conferring on the artwork the power of the effects that it is supposed to elicit on the behaviour of spectators.

It is not the value of the message conveyed by the mimetic *dispositif* that is at stake here, but the *dispositif* itself. The efficacy of art resides not in the model (or counter-model) of behaviour that it provides, but first and foremost in partitions of space and time that it produces to define ways of being together or separate, being in front or in the middle of,

being inside or outside, etc. Therein lies the point of Rousseau's polemic. The problem with representation, for him, is not that it is evil as such, but that it entails a separation between doing and seeing. Rousseau sought to contrast this separation with the collective body of a city that enacts its own unity through hymns and dances, such as in the celebration of the Greek City Festival. This defines the second great paradigm of the efficacy of art, which contrasts one idea of mimesis with another, an ethics of representation and an archi-ethical paradigm. Archi-ethical, because the stake here is not to improve behaviour through representation, but to have all living bodies directly embody the sense of the common. This paradigm points right to the core of the question of political efficacy, but it does so by jettisoning both art and politics in the same stroke, fusing them together by framing the community as artwork. It is a paradigm that stretches at least as far back as Plato, but that came to be espoused in a modern guise as anti-representation, as art turned into its truth: the framing of the fabric of sensory common life – a model that is still with us. Although we no longer share early twentieth-century dreams of collective rhythmics or of Futurist and Constructivist symphonies of the new mechanical world, we continue to believe that art has to leave the art world in order to be effective in 'real life': we continue to try to overturn the logic of the theatre by making the spectator active, by turning the art exhibition into a place of political activism or by sending artists into the streets of derelict suburbs to invent new modes of social relations. It thus appears that, from the outset, the idea of critical art itself is caught between two types of pedagogy: one that could be called *representational mediation*, and another that we might refer to as *ethical immediacy*.

Ethical immediacy was not the only concept used to challenge representational mediation at the end of the eighteenth century. So also was its contrary, *aesthetic distance*, which does not consist in the ecstatic contemplation of the beautiful and thereby work mischievously to conceal the social underpinnings of art and dispense with concrete action in the 'outside' world. Instead, it was first used to refer to the suspension of a determinable relation between the artist's intention, a performance in some place reserved for art, and the spectator's gaze and state of the community. This is, after all, what 'critique' means: *separation*. When Rousseau wrote his *Lettre sur les spectacles*, this separation was emblematized by the apparently innocuous description of an ancient statue, that

by Johann Joachim Winckelmann of the *Torso* of the Belvedere. The break inaugurated by his description lay in its account of the statue as deprived of all that which, in representational logic, makes it possible to define bodily expressions and anticipate the effects of their viewing. The statue has no mouth enabling it to deliver messages, no face to express emotions, no limbs to command or carry out action. Even so, Winckelmann considered it to be a statue of Hercules no less, the hero of the Twelve Labours. But for him it is the statue of an idle Hercules, sitting among the Gods at the end of his labours. At its core, what this description expresses is an identity of opposites: in it activity and passivity merge together, forming an equivalence whose sole expression lies in the muscles of the torso that ripple with the same indifference as ocean waves. This mutilated statue of an idle hero, unable to propose anything to imitate, was, according to Winckelmann, the epitome of Greek beauty, and so also of Greek liberty. His description sums up thus the paradoxical efficacy of art. No longer predicated on the *addition* of a feature to expression and movement – such as an enigmatic power of the image – this efficacy is, on the contrary, based on an indifference and radical subtraction or withdrawal. This very same paradox is conceptualized by Schiller in terms of aesthetic 'free play' and 'free appearance', phenomena that he regarded as having been epitomized not in a headless statue but in a torso-less head – that of the *Juno Ludovisi*. This head, he thought, is characterized by a radical indifference, a radical absence of care, will or designs.

This paradox defines a configuration that I call the aesthetic regime of art, which itself stands in contrast to both the regime of representational mediation and that of ethical immediacy. 'Aesthetic' designates the suspension of every determinate relation correlating the production of art forms and a specific social function. The statue of which Winckelmann and Schiller speak is no longer an element in a religious or civic ritual; no longer does it stand to depict belief, refer to a social distinction, imply moral improvement, or the mobilization of individual or collective bodies. No specific audience is addressed by it, instead the statue dwells before anonymous and indeterminate museum spectators who look at it as they can a Florentine painting of the Virgin Mary, a little Spanish beggar, a Dutch peasant marriage or a French still-life depicting fish or fruit. In the museum, which is not merely a specific type of building, but a form of framing of common space and a mode of visibility, all these

representations are disconnected from a specific destination, are offered to the same 'indifferent' gaze. This is the reason that the museum today can accommodate not only all kinds of prosaic objects, but also forms of information and debate on public issues that challenge mainstream forms of information and discussion.

This means that the aesthetic rupture arranges a paradoxical form of efficacy, one that relates to a disconnection between the production of artistic *savoir-faire* and social destination, between sensory forms, the significations that can be read on them and their possible effects. Let us call it the efficacy of *dissensus*, which is not a designation of conflict as such, but is a specific type thereof, a conflict between *sense* and *sense*. Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'. This is the way in which dissensus can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined. Politics breaks with the sensory self-evidence of the 'natural' order that destines specific individuals and groups to occupy positions of rule or of being ruled, assigning them to private or public lives, pinning them down to a certain time and space, to specific 'bodies', that is to specific ways of being, seeing and saying. This 'natural' logic, a distribution of the invisible and visible, of speech and noise, pins bodies to 'their' places and allocates the private and the public to distinct 'parts' – this is the order of the police. Politics can therefore be defined by way of contrast as the activity that breaks with the order of the police by inventing new subjects. Politics invents new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the invisible, and between the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time – in short, new bodily capacities. As Plato tells us – *a contrario* – politics begins when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of work and reproduction, and prevented from doing 'anything else', take the time that they 'have not' in order to affirm that they belong to a common world. It begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the 'common' of the community. Politics creates a new form, as it were, of *dissensual* 'commonsense'.

If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus, the very kernel of the aesthetic regime: artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination. The statue of Hercules may have been mutilated for entirely extraneous reasons. Yet, it came to embody the ruination of the former distribution of the sensible, in which bodies were geared sensorially and mentally to match their function and destination. With the marble of the mutilated statue we thus shift to the reality of a dissociation 'in the flesh': on the one hand, the work carried out by arms; on the other, the activity of a gaze. Writing for a revolutionary newspaper, a nineteenth-century floor layer described this shift in a fictional diary of his brother:

> Believing himself at home, he loves to ponder the arrangement of a room, so long as he has not yet finished laying the floor. If the window opens out onto a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms and glides in imagination toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighbouring residences.

This passage shows that the aesthetic rupture works to qualify a body whose dwelling is geared neither to its task nor to its determination. Divorcing the fleeting gaze from the labouring arms introduces the body of a worker into a new configuration of the sensible, overturning the 'proper' relationship between what a body 'can' do and what it cannot. It is no coincidence that this apparently a-political description was published in a workers' newspaper during the 1848 French Revolution: the possibility of a 'worker voice' emerged through the dis-qualification of a certain reality of the worker body. It emerged through a re-distribution in the whole set of relationships between capacities and incapacities, defining the *ethos* of a social body.

We are now in a position to address the paradox that resides at the heart of the relationship between art and politics. Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible. If there is such thing as an 'aesthetics of politics', it lies in a re-configuration of the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation. Correspondingly, if there is a politics of aesthetics, it lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience. However, no direct

cause-effect relationship is determinable between the intention realized in an art performance and a capacity for political subjectivation. What goes by the name of the 'politics of art' involves the intertwining of several logics. In the first place, there exists a politics of aesthetics that predates artistic intentions and strategies: the theatre, the museum and the book are 'aesthetic' realities in and of themselves. In other words, they are specific distributions of space and time, of the visible and the invisible, that create specific forms of 'commonsense', regardless of the specific message such-and-such an artist intends to convey and or cause he or she wants to serve. This is not a simple matter of an 'institution', but of the framework of distributions of space and the weaving of fabrics of perception. Within any given framework, artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated. This might be called the labour of fiction, which, in my view, is a word that we need to re-conceive. 'Fiction', as re-framed by the aesthetic regime of art, means far more than the constructing of an imaginary world, and even far more than its Aristotelian sense as 'arrangement of actions'. It is not a term that designates the imaginary as opposed to the real; it involves the re-framing of the 'real', or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective.

This intertwining frames a new fabric of common experience, a new scenery of the visible and a new dramaturgy of the intelligible. It creates new modes of individuality and new connections between those modes, new forms of perception of the given and new plots of temporality. Similar to political action, it effectuates a change in the distribution of the sensible. The difference might be said to lie in the fact that the re-configuration of the sensible carried out by politics is an effect of forms of subjectivation. In other words, such re-configurations are brought about by collectives of enunciation and demonstration (*manifestation*). The 'aesthetics of politics' consists above all in the framing of a *we*, a subject

a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts, an element that I call the part of those who have no part – not the wretched, but the anonymous. The 'politics of aesthetics', as for it, frames new forms of individuality and new haecceities. It does not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience. In this way, it aids to help create the fabric of a common experience in which new modes of constructing common objects and new possibilities of subjective enunciation may be developed that are characteristic of the 'aesthetics of politics'. This politics of aesthetics, however, operates under the conditions prescribed by an original disjunction. It produces effects, but it does so on the basis of an original effect that implies the suspension of any direct cause-effect relationship.

This tension was long concealed by the pseudo self-evidence of the paradigm of 'critical art', which in fact conflates the logic of aesthetic separation and the pedagogical logics of representational mediation and ethical immediacy. Critical art is an art that aims to produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation. This schema, very simple in appearance, is actually the conjunction of three processes: first, the production of a sensory form of 'strangeness'; second, the development of an awareness of the reason for that strangeness and third, a mobilization of individuals as a result of that awareness. When Brecht portrays Nazi leaders as cauliflower sellers and presented their discussions about the vegetable business in classical verse, the ensuing clash of heterogeneous situations and heterogeneous languages is intended to bring about an awareness both of the trade relations hidden behind hymns to the race and the nation, and of the forms of economical and political domination that are hidden behind the dignity of high art.[2] When Godard, placing it against a monochrome background, depicts a high-society event whose attendees suddenly begin repeating advertisements for a new car and new chic underwear, the resultant break in the sound and image continuum is intended to reveal the forms of self-alienation and of estranged social relationships that are produced by the language of commodities.[3] When Martha Rosler juxtaposes photographs of the war in Vietnam with advertisements for petty-bourgeois furniture and household goods – the epitome of American happiness – it is intended to reveal the realities of imperialist war that lie underneath

standardized images of individual happiness, and the empire of the commodity that lies underneath the wars waged in defence of the 'free world'.[4] But the apparently clear-cut logic of distantiation actually presents a contradiction. It aims to produce a sensory clash *and* to mobilize bodies through the presentation of a strangeness, of an encounter between heterogeneous elements. That is, it aims to produce an effect of strangeness in order to engender an awareness of the underlying reasons of that strangeness, which is tantamount to suppressing it. In one and the same process, it endeavours to produce a fusion between the aesthetic clash of heterogeneous forms of sensory presentation and the correction of the behaviour through representation, between aesthetic separation and ethical continuity. The *dispositif* of the critical work is not annulled by this contradiction, since it can contribute to changing the cartography of the sensible and the thinkable. The effect thereby produced is not a kind of calculable transmission between artistic shock, intellectual awareness and political mobilization. There is no reason why the production of a shock produced by two heterogeneous forms of the sensible ought to yield an understanding of the state of the world, and none why understanding the latter ought to produce a decision to change it. There is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action. Instead, this kind of shift implies a move from one given world to another in which capacities and incapacities, forms of tolerance and intolerance, are differently defined. What comes to pass is a process of dissociation: a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt. What comes to pass is a rupture in the specific configuration that allows us to stay in 'our' assigned places in a given state of things. These sorts of ruptures can happen anywhere and at any time, but they can never be calculated.

This gap, which separates the aims of critical art from its real forms of effectiveness, can remain so long as there exist patterns of intelligibility and forms of mobilization strong enough to sustain the artistic procedures that, in turn, are supposed to sustain them. 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. The question that thus arises is: 'what happens to critical art in the context of consensus?' Consensus means far more than simply a new way of governing

that, in order to avoid conflicts, appeals to expertise, arbitration and the agreement of the respective parts of a population. Instead, consensus is an agreement between sense and sense, in other words between a mode of sensory presentation and a regime of meaning. Consensus, as a mode of government, says: it is perfectly fine for people to have different interests, values and aspirations, nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification. The context that is invoked to enforce the ideas and practices pertaining to 'consensus' is, as we know, 'economic globalization'. Precisely for the reason that it presents itself as a global development that is clear-cut and irrefutable, regardless of one's opinions about it – good or bad!

This critical *dispositif* then starts to spin around itself. We are not dealing here with the shift from a 'modernist' to a 'post-modernist' paradigm. Post-modernism might designate a certain kind of mood, but by no means does it refer to a specific kind of artistic paradigm. In fact, over the last 30 years, the procedures and rhetoric of the 'critical' *dispositif* have barely changed. Today, indeed, much art continues to assert not only its will, but also its ability to *denounce* the reign of the commodity, its iconic ideals and putrid excrement. Calls for the need to struggle against the society of the spectacle, to develop practices of *détournement*, continue to come from all quarters. And they do so by invoking the same standard repertoire of denunciatory techniques: parodies of promotional films; re-processed disco sounds; advertising icons or media stars modelled in wax figures; Disney animals turned into polymorphous perverts; montages of 'vernacular' photographs depicting standardized petty-bourgeois living-rooms, overloaded supermarket trolleys, standardized entertainment and the excrement of consumerist civilization; huge installations of pipes and machines that depict the bowels of the social machine as it swallows everything and turns it into shit. These sorts of rhetorical *dispositif* still prevail in a good many galleries and museums professing to be revealing the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle or the pornography of power. But since it is very difficult to find anybody who is actually ignorant of such things, the mechanism ends up spinning around itself and playing on the very undecidability of its effect. In the end, the *dispositif* feeds off the very equivalence between parody *as* critique and the parody *of* critique. It feeds off the undecidability between these two effects. This undecidability in turn tends to boil down to the

simple parodic *mise-en-scène* of its own magic; unfortunately, however, it has become increasingly clear that this mode of manifestation is also that of the commodity itself.

The critical *dispositif* has undergone a transformation in the context of consensus that has brought with it two kinds of response. First, the claim is made that art must become more modest, that, instead of professing to be able to reveal the hidden contradictions of our world, it ought help to restore the basic social functions threatened by the reign of the market, cast an attentive gaze on the objects of the common world and the memory of our common history, and emphasize the sense of taking part in a common world. Second, it seems that the shrinking of political space has conferred a substitutive value on artistic practice. It is increasingly the case that art is starting to appear as a space of refuge for dissensual practice, a place of refuge where the relations between sense and sense continue to be questioned and re-worked. This fact has given a renewed impetus to the idea that art's vocation is actually to step outside itself, to accomplish an intervention in the 'real' world. These two opposed trends, then, result in a form of schizophrenic movement, a shuttling-back-and-forth between the museum and its 'outside', between art and social practice.

In a first step, then, a shift takes place, as strategies of critical clash are replaced by those of testimony, archive and documentation, processes seeking to give us a new perception of the traces of our history and the signs of our community. Let us illustrate this shift from 'critical art' to 'testimony art' with an example: in a work of the 1970s, Chris Burden made a sort of counter-monument called *The Other Vietnam Monument*, dedicated to all the anonymous Vietnamese victims of the American war. The monument includes copper plaques on which Burden engraved the names of other anonyms, that is Vietnamese names picked randomly from a phone directory. By contrast, in 2002 Christian Boltanski also presented us with a work that deals with the subject of anonymity and directories, an installation called *Les abonnés du téléphone*.[5] The installation consists of two shelves filled with directories from around the world between which two tables are placed so that visitors can sit down and consult their chosen directory. The point of this work is no longer to give names to those left unnamed by the invaders. Nor is the anonymity it refers to emplotted in any kind of controversy. Here, the anonymous, as Boltanski himself says, simply become 'specimens of humanity'. Boltanki's

specimens were presented in Paris as part of a large exhibition to commemorate the new century which included, for example, a work by Hans Peter Feldmann of 100 photographs of individuals aged from 1 to 100 years, and a huge installation by Peter Fischli and David Weiss called *Monde visible* (1987–2000) consisting of hundreds of slides that looked identical to the photographs taken by tourists of famous sites from around the world. It also included an installation that is a favourite of many museums today, namely a big mosaic by Chinese artist Bai Yiluo called *The People*. Made of 1600 ID photos stitched together, the installation represents the anonymous multitude and their living environments, an attempt, in the artist's words, to point to 'the delicate threads uniting families and communities'. The work is presented, then, as the anticipated reality of what it evokes. Art is supposed to 'unite' people in a way that is comparable with the practice of stitching photos together, a method that Yiluo first developed while working as an employee in a photo studio. The photograph tends simultaneously to become a sculpture that already makes present what it is about. The concept of metaphor, omnipresent in curatorial rhetoric today, thus acts as a conceptualization of this new conjunction between representational distance and ethical immediacy, of this anticipated identity between the work's representation of its signification and the embodied reality of that signification.

There is a double play here between the work and its supposed effect which we see even more vividly in forms of art that claim to have overcome the separation between the museum and its outside, or between artistic performance and social activism: such art purports no longer to produce duplicates of objects, images or messages, but instead real actions, or objects, that engender new forms of social relationships and environments. The two concepts of *relation* and *infiltration* epitomize the trend. These concepts represent two attempts to transform the hackneyed critiques seeking to demonstrate the power of the market or the media into a form of direct social action. In one respect, at issue is to restore a certain sense of community to counter the bond-dissolving effects of consumerism. Such is, for example, the premise of relational art: the desire to create new forms of relationship in museums and galleries, as well as to produce modifications in the urban environment in order to bring about a change in the way it is perceived. In this vein, we might recall a recent attempt to identify the production of artistic artefacts and the

manifestation of new forms of social relationships – namely Lucy Orta's 'transformable objects'. Created as part of a collective dwelling project, these objects can be used both as a 'home' and as a form of collective link that work to forge 'lasting connections between groups and individuals'. This kind of 'social architecture' seems to constitute the third stage in a particular evolution in art. First, there was the time of the Werkbund and the Bauhaus, when artists became engineers and designers with the aim of re-framing the environment of everyday life. Then came the time of 'critical engineers', when, for example, Krysztof Wodiczko invented his homeless vehicle or his alien stall as dialectical tools to question the duplicity of public space. With Orta's sewing together of 'tent-clothes', however, this polemical horizon starts to disappear and is replaced by a conception of the artist as creator of new community bonds. This shift is clearly illustrated by a work presented at the Sao Paulo biennale by Cuban artist René Fernandez. Fernandez, using a grant he received from an artist foundation, conducted a survey in the poor suburbs of Havana, resolving, after it was completed to intervene in that situation of misery by restoring a poor old woman's house with some fellow artists. The work consisted of a screen made of gauze on which was printed the image of the old couple looking at the 'real' screen, a video-tape showing us the artists working as masons, plumbers and painters. This demonstration accords perfectly with current notions of art as a means of restoring the social bond. But because it took place in one of the last 'communist' countries, it was worked into a sort of parody of the great ambition that inspired artists in the time of Malevitch: to replace the production of paintings with attempts to frame new forms of life.

There have also been attempts to go beyond the limits of critical demonstration, by using it as a strategy to subvert the functioning of the market, the media and so on. In France, this strategy is epitomized by the work of artist Matthieu Laurette. Laurette decided he would take the promises of 'satisfaction guaranteed or your money back' made by food companies at face value. He went on a campaign, systematically buying those products so that he could express his 'dissatisfaction', seek reimbursement and use the allure of television to promote his subversion. The result of this process was presented at the 'Space of contemporary Art' in Paris, where spectators were treated to an installation consisting of three elements: a wax sculpture by the artist of himself pushing an overflowing supermarket trolley; a wall of TV monitors showing him

explaining his strategy on TV and huge photographs of international newspapers reporting on his endeavour. Laurette's claim, as one commentator put it, is to have discovered a strategy to overturn both the principle of surplus value and the principle of the TV game show. But it seems to me that the obviousness of this 'overturning' of both market and media would not be so apparent were it not already anticipated by the process of monumentalizing his actions and him as icon – had there been a single TV set and standard-size photographs of newspaper clippings of his 'bargaining' strategies, the 'overturning' might not have been so 'self-evident'. The reality of the effect is actually already anticipated in the process of monumentalizing his acts and him as icon. In 'activist' art nowadays a clear trend has emerged that plays on the reality of occupying an exhibition space as a way of proving the real effects of subverting the social order. The trend manifests a form of hyper-commitment to 'reality' that short-circuits reflection on the powers of artistic practices by relying on the combined effects of the self-evidence of sculptural presence, action in the 'real world' and rhetorical demonstration. Art attempts to exceed consensus by supplementing it with presence and meaning. But it may well be that oversaturation is the very law of consensus itself. The more art fills rooms of exhibitions with monumentalized reproductions of the objects and icons of everyday life and commodity culture, the more it goes into the streets and professes to be engaging in a form of social intervention, and the more anticipates and mimics its own effect. Art thus risks becoming a parody of its alleged efficacy.

It thus appears that art does not become critical or political by 'moving beyond itself', or 'departing from itself', and intervening in the 'real world'. There is no 'real world' that functions as the outside of art. Instead, there is a multiplicity of folds in the sensory fabric of the common, folds in which outside and inside take on a multiplicity of shifting forms, in which the topography of what is 'in' and what is 'out' are continually criss-crossed and displaced by the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. There is no 'real world'. Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. The real always is a matter of construction, a matter of 'fiction', in the sense that I tried to define it above. What characterizes the mainstream fiction of the police order is that it passes itself off as the real, that it feigns to draw a clear-cut line between what belongs to the self-evidence of the real and what belongs to the field of

appearances, representations, opinions and utopias. Consensus means precisely that the sensory is given as univocal. Political and artistic fictions introduce dissensus by hollowing out that 'real' and multiplying it in a polemical way. The practice of fiction undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces, framing a given sense of reality, a given 'commonsense'. It is a practice that invents new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said and what can be done.

It is a practice that shakes up the distribution of places and competences, and which thereby works to blur the borders defining its own activity. Doing art means displacing art's borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as *the* political. Displacing art's borders does not mean leaving art, that is making the leap from 'fiction' (or 'representation') to reality. Practices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses *for* politics. Nor do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective political action. They contribute to the constitution of a form of commonsense that is 'polemical', to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable.

They may thus contribute to constituting a new idea of what 'critical' art could mean today. For critical art is not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects. This is why perhaps one of the most interesting contributions to the framing of a new landscape of the sensible has been made by forms of art that accept their insufficiency – that refuse the sculpture-performance model – or by artistic practices that infiltrate the world of market and social relations and then remain content to be mere images on cibachrome, screens and monitors. They use those fragile surfaces to compose a proposition on what it is that is given to see to us and an interrogation into the power of representation. Unsurprisingly, many of those artistic propositions focus on matters of space, territories, borders, wastelands and other transient places, matters that are crucial to today's issues of power and community. Let me mention, among others, three works that seem to me particularly significant in this respect.

The first is a film by Chantal Akerman, *De l'autre côté*,[6] which deals with the fence along the US-Mexico border. The film is not about 'immigration' or border-crossing, but about the fence itself, both as a material object

and as an object of discourse. While so many film-makers focus on the drama involved in crossing the border and point out the contradictions that exist between the realities of the US economy and the injustices and prejudices of US nationalism, Akerman plays on the elements of their dissociation. Sometimes she has the camera move along the fence, making us feel its inhuman strangeness, especially under night lighting. The rest of the time, however, she uses it to present either the hopes, attempts and failures on the Mexican side, or the concerns and fears on the American side. The film's political impact consists precisely in the way it turns an economic and geopolitical issue into an aesthetic matter, the way in which it produces a confrontation between two sides, and a series of conflicting narratives around the raw materiality of the fence. Similar to Akerman's way of dealing with the border are photographer Sophie Ristelhueber's representations of Israeli blockades on Palestinian roads. Instead of choosing to photograph the big Wall itself, Ristelhueber took shots of little blockades on minor country roads from a bird's-eye perspective, and hence from a point of view from which the little rocks nearly disappear into the landscape. The attempt here is to effect a simple *displacement* from the – more spectacular but hackneyed – affect of indignation to the (less spectacular) affect of curiosity.

The second, a work called 'Give me the Colours' (2003) by video-artist Anri Sala, uses video as a means to reflect on art's 'political' power. His video-installation presents a project, initiated by the mayor of Tirana and reminiscent of the Schillerian project of the 'aesthetic education of Man', in which the mayor decided to have all the house facades of his town re-painted in bright colours in order to engender a new sense of aesthetic community among its citizens. Sala's camera movements work in such a way as to produce a confrontation between the discourse of the 'political artist' and both the run-down character of the muddy street and seemingly blithe circulation of its inhabitants, as well as the abstractness of the patches of colours on the walls lining it. The point, it seems, is to use the means specific to 'distant' art in order to question a prevalent politics of art. In other words, it seems to be a direct attempt to fuse art and life into a single process.

The third work is a film called *No Quarto da Vanda* by Portuguese film-maker Pedro Costa.[5] The film is about the life of a group of young underdogs who, caught between a life of drugs or small business, reside in a poor suburb of Lisbon that is slowly being raised by bulldozers. While

so-called 'relational' artists busy themselves with inventing real and fancy monuments and creating unexpected situations to engender new social relationships in poor suburbs, Pedro Costa's effort is to take a paradoxical look at the possibilities available to art and life in a particular situation of misery: from the strangely coloured architecture resulting from the demolition itself to the efforts of inhabitants, amidst the effects of drugs and despair, to recover a voice and a capacity to tell their own stories. Here, too, the 'politics' of art paradoxically consists in setting aside all economic and social 'explanations' of the existence and destruction of the shanty town to identify a more specifically political element: the confrontation between the power and the impotence of a body, between a life and its possibilities. This way of addressing the 'truly political', however, does not manage to sidestep the incalculable tension between political dissensuality and aesthetic indifference. It cannot sidestep the fact that a film remains a film and a spectator remains a spectator. Film, video art, photography and installation art rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. As such, they may open up new passages for political subjectivation, but they cannot avoid the aesthetic cut that separates consequences from intentions and prevents their from being any direct passage to an 'other side' of words and images.