

# 2011 Vol 11 Issue No. 1 — Rancière: Politics, Art & Sense

## > EDITORIAL

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière has argued that we need to rethink aesthetics as “the invention of new forms of life” (25). Rejecting the idea that aesthetics should be confined to such questions as the status of the art object and the aestheticisation of politics, Rancière’s work opens up aesthetics to a reflection on the possibilities of sense and its distribution in terms of sensible forms and practices. Politics is itself aesthetic in that it requires a sharing of sense in common; art is not the exemplary site of sensory pleasure or the sublime but a critical break with common sense, opening up possibilities of new commonalities of sense. Art as politics is thus a manifestation of what Rancière calls dissensus, or a gap in the sensible itself. Rethinking the avant-garde as “the aesthetic anticipation of the future,” (29) Rancière calls for an aesthetics concerned with “the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come” (29). This issue of *Transformations* contains a number of articles responding to Rancière’s ideas, and in particular his revisionist agenda which critiques many orthodox positions related to sense, aesthetics and political practice.

In her article “Thinking the Unthinkable as a Form of *Dissensus*: The Case of the Witness,” Anat Ascher follows Rancière’s critique of the “unrepresentable” in the work of Lyotard and Agamben, as the sublime moment of “holy terror” which reproduces within their arguments the very normativity that these arguments are designed to resist. Ascher argues that the invocation of otherness as unrepresentable elides the “moment” of politics as a “purely negative moment.” Rancière replaces the category of the unrepresentable with that of dissensus as a productive openness in the common sense of the polity. In a similar vein, Sudeep Dasgupta follows Rancière’s arguments through a careful analysis of the Dutch artist Ad van Denderen’s book of photographs *Occupation Soldier*. Dasgupta draws out the material framing of the photographs in terms of what he calls the “spare image,” linking this with Rancière’s account of resistive politics as the enacting of aporetic openness in the closed distribution of sense of the “police regime.”

In “Feminism After Rancière: Women in J.M. Coetzee and Jeff Wall,” Arne De Boever follows Rancière’s revisionist arguments that critique the idea of the political subject as an “empty

operator," and instead proposes a positive idea of the subject as an actual agent of change in specific historical circumstances. Using Rancière's analysis of political dissensus in the example of the French Revolutionary feminist figure, Olympe de Gouges, De Boever applies these arguments to Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* and Jeff Wall's photographs, showing how the female figures in them can be read as political subjects in the sense proposed by Rancière.

Nicholas Holm's article "The Distribution of the Nonsensical and the Political Aesthetics of Humour" offers a revision to Rancière's key ideas of the distribution of the sensible through what he terms "the distribution of the nonsensical," in which specific acts of humour are used to challenge the ordered regime of sense. The nonsensical, for Holm, refers to the "complementary arrangement of nonsense in common," a regulated regime held in common by social groups that allows them to see incongruity in shared common sense. Through discussion of the humour of American comedians Andy Kauffman and Jerry Seinfeld, Holm shows how humour produces dissensus in the distribution of the nonsensical itself. Applying Rancière to quite a different sphere of popular culture, Robin James's article "These.Are.The.Breaks": Rethinking Disagreement Through Hip Hop," employs Rancière's idea of art as disagreement to examine practices of remixing in hip hop music. In particular she uses the idea of the "break" as the cut or rupture in the rhythm of the music that disrupts corporeal schemas and opens up new sense arrangements. She asks "how might one go about staging corporeal disagreements?" through hip hop and other art practices in the name of emancipatory struggles.

In continuing the revisionist theme of Rancière's work in this issue, Toni Ross argues for a revision of the category of the postmodern. Drawing on Rancière's argument that the postmodern is not a category separate from the modern, and needs to be seen in the light of artistic modernity as "the aesthetic regime of art" generally, Ross draws interesting lines of intersection with earlier writings around these categories by Douglas Crimp and others. Ross implies that Rancière's arguments can be recuperated back into a postmodern position from this earlier stance to aesthetic modernity. In a discussion of Steve McQueen's experimental film *Gravesend*, Ross shows how it produces alterations of consensual patterns necessary for political action following Rancière's arguments on dissensus. Such art practices, so Ross suggests, are not to be confined to the category of the postmodern but are exemplary for the aesthetic regime of art in general. Finally, Karen Sellberg's "Sublime Gender Transposition: The Reformed Platonism of Jacques Rancière's Aesthetics as Queer Performance" considers the political and aesthetic impact of Rancière's reformulation of Platonic dialogics and reinvention of an emancipatory aesthetic sublime in relation to John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask's punk rock musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Sellberg argues that the cathartic moment of gender transposition or connection enacted in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* represents a redistribution of the gendered sensible not merely on the (virtual or staged)

body of the artist, but in the organisation of their aesthetic forums and ultimately society itself.