

SHARING SENSE: EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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It is now quite common to open publications dedicated to the work of Jacques Rancière with a general statement of appreciation for his reinvigoration of theoretical investigations into the relationship between art and politics. This brief introduction is no exception; however, I hope that it has the merit of explaining and contextualising this excitement, as well as indicating how the essays included in this special issue of *Symposium* can be situated with respect to Rancière's output and the spate of recent publications dedicated to his work. One of the reasons Rancière's work has recently been greeted with such enthusiasm is that it speaks, at the level of its content and in terms of its practice, to the interdisciplinary condition that characterises the Humanities today. Rancière describes his method as "in-disciplinary," that is, as an insurrectionary form of investigation developed in conscious opposition to the borders that customarily divide up the field of knowledge. His efforts to analyse what he calls the "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*) join together practices, discourses and areas of research often assumed to be disparate. He shows, for example, how art and politics share a common terrain inasmuch as they are operations that create, contest and shift configurations of sense/meaning (*sens*). As the expression *partage du sensible* indicates, these analyses pertain to the shared world of common sense/meaning defined by the practices of writing, visual art, philosophy and politics. The distribution of the sensible is thus the shared understanding of what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible. Far from being a neutral or innocent field of sense, the distribution of the sensible is always political, pertaining directly to the subjectivities of those inhabiting it, as well as to the objects and issues about which they can or cannot speak. The distribution of the sensible activates certain voices while condemning others to go unheard, and, in general, sketches an estimation of the capacities of the groups and individuals inhabiting it. Far from confirming the intractability of these relations, however, Rancière's writings are attuned to moments of disruption, whether offered by literary reverie, the practices of visual art, or the directly political

inscription of equality into spaces and institutions of hierarchy. In this sense, Rancière's work, and the conversations that have sprouted up in response to it, are about opening up breaches in the sensible. His analyses are attempts to sustain the gaps—what he term “dissensus”—between sense and the meanings made of it, for it is there, in that space of possibility, that we might create new, more equitable means for sharing the world. Needless to say, such a perspective has proven exciting for a generation of students and scholars who are accustomed to negotiating many intellectual interests and working between different academic fields, and for whom intellectual activity should play a role in contesting and transforming what presents itself to sense.

Readers of this issue will notice that, while the contributions here are deeply appreciative of Rancière's perspective and the different possibilities it creates, they also take exception with some aspects of his writings. In this sense, this issue is intended not so much as an introduction to Rancière's diverse output as a contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversations regarding the import of that work. In addition to celebrating Rancière's work, which includes having supplied a new language for emancipatory politics and breathing new life into the field of aesthetics, the essays assembled here begin to reckon with some of the challenges he has raised in relation to other thinkers engaged in similar pursuits. Because of Rancière's overriding commitment to intellectual equality, and his style, which is generally concerned with isolating capacities for political participation and artistic expression, one can sometimes forget that animating his writings is a critical voice that subjects predecessors and colleagues to trenchant scrutiny. It would be inaccurate to describe this aspect of Rancière's work as simply polemical, for it stems not from the love of battle, but from the desire to free thought, first and foremost his own, of ideas, forms of analysis and readings deemed incompatible with a politics of human emancipation. It is crucial for us as readers, however, to evaluate these encounters, and consider carefully the criticisms of others that Rancière has developed in the course of elaborating his own point of view. Many of the authors in this issue have thus placed Rancière in dialogue with the history of aesthetics, and some have explicitly sought to challenge the conventional wisdom according to which Rancière's work is taken to mean that we can discount some of the other attempts to articulate the relationship between art and politics. Some contributors have, for example, taken

exception with the way in which Rancière characterises interlocutors such as Benjamin, Sartre and Lyotard, while others have questioned directly his articulation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Much like Rancière's texts themselves, these essays engage his work with the conviction that disagreement is not inimical to the idea of equality.

Colin McQuillan's essay, "The Intelligence of Sense: Rancière's Aesthetics," opens our issue because it situates the latest phase of Rancière's work against the backdrop of his early archival texts, arguing that their concern with intelligence is essential for understanding Rancière's conception of aesthetics. As is well known, Rancière is the author of several books that challenged the supposed division between those deemed capable of thought and those who, because of the demands of labour, are considered incapable of devoting time and energy to its rigours. At issue in these investigations, McQuillan contends, is not only a distribution of the seeable and sayable, but also a struggle over the definition and allotment of intelligence. For McQuillan, Rancière's break with former teacher Louis Althusser stems from the latter's theoreticist conception of politics, and his denial of thought to those in the sphere of production. In contrast with many of the then-current forms of leftist analysis, Rancière insisted upon the simple idea that workers think, devoting *The Nights of Labor* (1981) to reactivating the voices that spoke in forms and styles thought to be foreign to their station. Rancière's worker-poets rejected their strict identities as workers, demonstrating that intelligence was not the preserve of a few. *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983) is a further critique of the ways in which philosophy and Bourdieu's sociology have restricted the boundaries of intelligence. Rancière's presentation of the writings of the radical pedagogue Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987) is landmark refutation of the idea that the world is composed of fundamentally different forms of intelligence, and an examination of the consequences that follow—primarily for pedagogy, but also for politics and artistic endeavours—from the idea that, while expressions may vary, thought is equal. As McQuillan insists, the key issue in these early texts is the parcelling out of intellectual capacities, and these concerns are necessary for understanding Rancière's recent work on aesthetics. One of the hallmarks of what Rancière terms the "aesthetic regime of art" is that it construes creation according to a new model in which sensible

passivity and conceptual activity are joined together without hierarchy. This model, valorised in the texts of Idealist and Romantic aesthetics, cancels the idea of artistic labour inherited from Aristotle and operative throughout the “representative regime of art,” according to which artistic production is the imposition of a concept upon sensible matter. As McQuillan reminds us, the equality of sensibility and intelligence found in the aesthetic regime does not mean that intelligence drops out of the equation. And he contends that the commingling of intelligence and sense discernible in Rancière’s presentation of the aesthetic regime allows for forms of artistic analysis more sensitive to how individual works join together both sensual and intellectual components. One virtue of such a perspective, according to McQuillan, is that it allows us to take distance from the strands of art theory and criticism that unduly fetishise the visible, enabling us to consider the “sensible intelligence” of works of art.

Gabriel Rockhill’s contribution, “Rancière’s Productive Contradictions: From the Politics of Aesthetics to the Social Politicity of Art,” analyses the central tensions animating Rancière’s investigations into the relationship between aesthetics and politics. While, on the one hand, Rancière describes the congruence of politics and art as distributions of the sensible, he also insists upon their fundamental differences. To put it simply, art, for Rancière, is political inasmuch as it belongs to and engages in a redistribution of the sensible. It is not, however, strictly identifiable with politics as such, which for Rancière consists in the construction of a particular type of subject, a “we” formed under the presupposition of equality. This subject, which Rancière terms the “part of those without part” (*la part des sans-part*) or the “count of the uncounted” (*le compte des incomptés*), opposes the exclusionary counts proposed by the police, as well as their hierarchical distribution of roles and capacities. For Rancière, then, art and politics remain distinct in that politics is about the formation and maintenance of a class capable of fundamentally altering the distribution of the sensible, while art, concerned with its own history and forms, may or may not alter the sphere of appearances. Against Rancière, Rockhill contends that it is possible to describe more concretely the ways in which art functions in an explicitly political fashion. In conclusion, Rockhill proposes some categories for describing what he calls the “social politicity of aesthetic practices.”

In his essay, “A Poetics of Sharing: Political Economy in a Prose Poem by Baudelaire,” Kevin Newmark questions Rancière’s understanding of the politics of aesthetics, as well as the idea, common to much of the scholarship on Rancière, that it necessarily displaces Walter Benjamin’s warnings against the aestheticisation of politics. Rather than framing the encounter between the two thinkers in terms of abstract principles, Newmark articulates the issue through a reading of Baudelaire’s prose poem *Le Joujou du Pauvre*. For Newmark, Rancière’s characterisation of the aesthetic state as giving rise to a sensible form of equality requires that we overlook certain disruptive features within the aesthetic experience itself, and he contends that Baudelaire and Benjamin are necessary reminders of the instability at the heart of the aesthetic. Newmark’s allegory indicates that absent from Rancière’s politicised aesthetics is a serious reckoning with political economy and the new and harrowing form of experience that Benjamin conceptualised under the heading of modernity. Rancière, as is well known, has criticised the notion of artistic modernity, even claiming that it was deliberately fashioned to avoid the politics of aesthetic art. As Newmark argues, however, far from describing anything like an attempt to establish the specificity of a given medium, modernity is, for Benjamin, the poetic undoing of the link between image and idea, or word and thing, which bears witness to the shock of historical experience. For Benjamin, therefore, modernity contains its own politics of art—a complicated one, however, in which the idea of equality is continually separated from its actualisation by the realities of social and economic differences.

In “Rancière, Sartre, and Flaubert: From *The Idiot of the Family* to *The Politics of Aesthetics*,” Christina Howells considers some of Rancière’s writings on literature, a major aspect of his output during the 1990s. Howells articulates a Sartrean response to Rancière’s readings of Flaubert in *La parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (1998) and *Politique de la littérature* (2007). While Howells finds in Rancière an astute reader of Flaubert, one whose sensitivity to Flaubert’s literary procedures restores to his language its political force as a redistribution of the sensible, she takes exception with his quick dismissal of Sartre’s own discussions of Flaubert. Howells argues that were Rancière to engage more substantively with Sartre and move beyond the limited and often caricatured position in *What is Literature?*,

he would find a reading of Flaubert approximating his own. Howells contends thus that a fruitful *rapprochement* between Rancière and Sartre should take the latter's *The Family Idiot* as its starting point.

In his essay, "Sensibility and the Law: On Rancière's Reading of Lyotard," Peter Milne also takes up the perspective of one of Rancière's interlocutors, defending Lyotard against the charge that his aesthetic theory sunders art from its political capacities. Rancière's most extended engagement with Lyotard is to be found in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004). There, Rancière charges that Lyotard's emphasis on the violence done to the faculties by sublime experience blocks the political promise contained in the idea that the aesthetic is fundamentally heterogeneous from everyday cognition. For Rancière, Kant and Schiller describe an aesthetic state that frees the mind from its traditional, hierarchical ordering of the faculties, thus introducing the idea of a deeper, more all-encompassing transformation of mind and world. Rancière criticises Lyotard's contention that art should exacerbate our feeling for what thought cannot think, claiming that it replaces this dynamic of discovery, capacity and promise with the experience of a mind subordinated to the sensible. Milne argues, however, that bearing witness to the unrepresentable itself constitutes a type of politics. He points out that the instance of the sublime as shock, disaster, trauma and mourning that Rancière objects to is only one moment in the process of thinking, that is, the process of attending to that which thought was not and could not be prepared for. The sublime, then, is thought's reminder to remain open to those voices and forms that do not present themselves in a recognisable idiom. Milne thus contends that one can find in Lyotard's discussions of the sublime what might be called a "politics of the event," one which, similar to Rancière's analyses of democracy, attempts to preserve in its uniqueness that which punctures the distribution of the sensible.

Finally, Cody Hennesy has assembled for this issue a comprehensive bibliography of Rancière's forty-plus years of intellectual output. This bibliography provides a chronological sense of the development of different themes, and enables readers to see how Rancière's book-length publications emerged from different invitations, encounters and occasional writings. It will serve those interested in Rancière's work as a resource for years to come.

Despite the fact that this special issue of *Symposium* focusses primarily on Rancière's recent efforts to articulate the political valences

of art, literature and aesthetics—for now the very heart of his enterprise—I hope it will be apparent that care has been taken do justice to Rancière’s own erudition and boundless curiosity by considering these topics from a number of different vantage points and with a variety of methodologies and styles. It has been a pleasure to work with these contributors, each of whom adds something quite valuable to the ongoing scholarly discussion of Rancière’s work. I wish to thank them for responding so thoughtfully to the call for essays, and for helping to develop our shared sense of how Rancière’s work intersects with different ideas, thinkers and conversations. A special thanks is owed to the editors of *Symposium* for their enthusiastic support for this project, and I hereby acknowledge my gratitude to Antonio Calcagno, Alain Beaulieu and Marie-Eve Morin for making possible this particular distribution of sense.

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