

# WHAT CAN ART DO? Politics, Experimentation and Museums

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Politics is not the exercise of power or struggle for power. It is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as common and of subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate the objects and discuss about them.

Jacques Rancière

It may sound naïve, but I think that for all its failings, the world of art and culture is still the only one where something like that can be done...the media can't do it anymore; they've become a vulgar business like any other. The world of culture – museums and universities – is the last place where you are still free to dream of a better world....

Alfredo Jaar

This article was originally published in the book *Time and Form*, edited by Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback e Luiz Carlos Pereira in 2014. It was the result of a research project between PUC-Rio and Södertörn University in Stockholm. Some of the issues discussed here concerning the politics of art are still an urgent topic. It is quite easy to assume the neutralization of any political relevance to art inside museums and galleries. Nonetheless, it is exactly under that risk that we have to think critically.

The relationship between art and politics has been the subject of an ongoing debate, whether in terms of new theoretical approaches or insofar as it concerns curatorial projects.<sup>2</sup> Thus, what follows does not exactly lay claims to originality. I shall refer to the ideas of Jacques Rancière, seeking only to deal with possible articulations between aesthetics and politics and focusing upon contemporary art's modes of reception as based on its apparently inevitable and certainly risk-filled reception on the part of museums. What are the effects of this insertion upon contemporary art practices? How does this reception re-signify this space which has heretofore been the province of norm and canon?

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<sup>2</sup> As immediate examples, I would include authors such as Jacques Rancière, Giorgio Agamben, and Claire Bishop, as well as the São Paulo biennial of 2010, the Berlin biennial of 2012 and the mounting of the Museo Reina Sofia's permanent collection, among so many others.

What interests me about Rancière's work is the way politics is considered from the perspective of the litigious space of appearance, redistributing roles, voices, narratives and redefining forms of subjectification and sociability. On the other hand, art is presumed to be art because of its ability to bring about displacements, surprises and friction within modes of perception, thus stimulating the imagination – and opening up spaces of action – beyond that which is given. According to Rancière, such displacements produced by art are a result of the very specificity of the aesthetic. "It was in keeping with the idea, spelled out by Kant and Schiller, according to which aesthetic experience is a specific sphere of experience which invalidates the ordinary hierarchies incorporated in everyday sensory experience."<sup>3</sup> By producing intervals in the sensible surface of the world, art deconstructs convention, confounding expectations, disseminating questions, disconnecting words and things, concentrating and dilating our experience of time and of space.

Within this interval art is political; it mobilizes new distributions of the sensible. It is precisely where Kant deals with the singular judgment of beauty, of disinterest and endless finality, that we are able to see, following Rancière's trail, a possibility of approaching the political phenomenon in terms of its contingency and, simultaneously, of universal opening. Responsibility for action and judgment occur before (and within) the circumstances of the moment, alluding to a network of shared and conflicting meaning which nonetheless maintains itself on the horizon of shared everyday life. Confronted with aesthetic experience, we simultaneously exercise that which is proper to us, aligning it with a sense of belonging in the world. In the act of judgment we perceive ourselves simultaneously as individuals and as members of a community-to-be.

This political appropriation of the Kantian aesthetic is of particular interest to us insofar as it makes us realize, within what is considered to be the origin of a formalist tradition within the philosophy of art, an ability to intervene and reconfigure a reality the tone of which is clearly political. How to displace/unfold formal experimentation in the direction of a force capable of actualizing itself in the world? To what extent does the focus upon the spectator contained within the aesthetic judgment of Kantian

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<sup>3</sup> Rancière, J. – *From Politics to Aesthetics?*, Paragraph, Volume 28, Edinburgh University Press, November 2005, p. 15.

origin – and not its rejection – obliges us to separate spectator and passivity, enhancing a call to participation which permeates the perceptive act of the spectator himself? To what degree can art and its metaphorical dimension – to be art and to appear to be reality – take on political pretensions? What should be the politics of art in a world tamed by museum and market? All of these questions may be telescoped into one: can it be expected of art today that it continue to bewilder us and perhaps even to transform reality? I should like to use the verb “to bewilder” in terms of its aesthetic suspension and political mobilization.

Many of the aforementioned questions have run parallel with the history of art in the twentieth century, most specifically with the history of artistic vanguards. In a way, it may be said that the history of engagement in art is indistinguishable from the very history of the modernist avant gardes. It is no coincidence that the Marx and Engels’ Communist Manifesto of 1848 is contemporary with Gustave Courbet’s Realist Manifesto of 1855, which he presented in Paris at the opening of his own independent art shows during the Universal Exhibition as a form of protest against the letter salon.

To analyze aspects of this programmatic orientation of the avant gardes, keeping in mind their desires, expectations and frustrations, is interesting to define its current relevance. It was this moment in the mid-nineteenth century that engendered the constitution of a modern poetics from Manet to Duchamp (and including Cézanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, Picasso and their inadequacies in terms of established pictorial convention). This movement within artistic practices was accompanied by a confrontation with institutions, resulting in the creation of the Salons des Refusés and societies of independent artists. From the Communist Manifesto of 1848 to the Russian Revolution of 1917, a sequence of political events spreads everywhere, preparing the terrain for the emergence of revolutionary rupture. Concomitantly, an equation is established between (the artist’s) engagement, (society’s) awareness and purification (of expressive media). In this process, the role of art and the status of the works were redefined in terms of their greatest possible political effectiveness. Ultimately, more than being a wager of sorts on the expressive power of a type of painting purified of literal illustration, Malevich’s “white square” exemplifies a sensibility rooted out of the fossilized conventions of representation, all of it available to a revolutionary future that would create a new man and a new society. The flat surface of the canvas is the place of experimentation for new life forms which conflated art, publicity, and design with mixtures of painting, posters and utilitarian objects.

Concomitantly with the engagement of that constructivist avant garde, intent on the post-revolutionary process and its internal conflicts, I should like to highlight the political dimension of Dadaist non-engagement and, in particular, of the one constituted by the derisory poetics of Marcel Duchamp. Constructivism and Dadaism are complementary pairs in this history of the avant gardes. To both – and for diverse reasons and contexts – art is more of an attitude than a finished object. The two movements associate this stance to a rejection of the past and the creation of a new individual and a new society. In fact, the difference between these movements may be associated with the relationship between the individual and society as well as the distinct contexts within which it was being considered. Not by chance, Dadaism was born in Zurich (which was neutral during the First World War) – where non-conformity came mixed with an active nihilism. Constructivism, on the contrary, was born in revolutionary Russia, where nonconformity was shot through by an unshakable faith in the possibility of transformation, not only political and social but, above all, spiritual.

Here is what must be highlighted in each movement. Dadaism is a revolution of the individual, of individual creative potential, and it denies an immediate link with society. It is a dysfunctionalizing practice. In Constructivism – as underscored by its very name – revolution is a social construct and art must assume itself as a collective production which is a determinant part of a new social functioning. It is not by chance that – to the Dadaist artist – art must go to the cabaret, resistance comes through enjoyment whereas, to the constructivist, art must go to the factory, where resistance will be transformed into new forms of production. As stated, different contexts produce different promises. What they have in common is art's need to engage with life, to move beyond its own condition as art.

Nevertheless, we know that both the Russian Revolution and Dadaist derision were eventually defeated or incorporated – one by the very consequences of the revolutionary future in a revolutionary state and the other by the institutional co-optation of anti-art's negative will. In other words, looking back from the present, Constructivism and Dadaism survive as “art” alone, without having fulfilled their desires for social construction or dissemination of creative rebellion. Both survive in museums and in art history books. What can we learn from these defeats? What remains in those places undesired by the revolutionary vein – the museum and history – of the poetic strength and political nonconformity of those movements? How to preserve an inadequacy? How to deal with art's political efficaciousness and its capacity for social transformation?

How to deal with these experimental attitude-works in the neutralized space of museums? How can part of the aborted dreams that nourished these works continue to reverberate? The challenge, therefore, is to maintain in those works some of the latent transformation which was originally part of them and that must be able to bring about new forms of subjectification, other principles of individuation, other possibilities of life within society.

In light of these questions regarding the legacy of the avant gardes and their institutional absorption, it is our role to inquire about the political relevance of contemporary art. This political unrest and its reverberation in contemporary poetics may be analyzed from several perspectives ranging from deliberate activism to the new artists' collectives, and including the various strategies for public insertion of the works. The possibility of experiencing new meanings that are subjacent to the modern experience of art is the foundation for a political (and poetic) freedom that assumes itself as an opening to the new. In dealing with this claim to a consideration of art's political reverberations, a recent observation made by Rancière in an interview published in *Art Forum* should be recalled: "An art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops wanting to emancipate us".<sup>4</sup>

What is of interest is making the political permeate the aesthetic without rejecting it in the name of an ideological program. The aesthetic regime emerges in the late eighteenth century as a rejection of poetics which had normative pretensions with regard to artistic practices. This indetermination of the aesthetic led to the emergence of criticism as an exercise for disseminating the meanings formalized by the works.

It is within the aesthetic regime of art that its identification ceases to be verifiable "via a division between ways of doing and making" and becomes "based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being specific to artistic products."<sup>5</sup> A notion of aesthetic experience was [being] constituted.

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<sup>4</sup> Rancière, J. – *Art of the Possible*: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière, ARTFORUM, NY, March 2007

<sup>5</sup> Rancière, J. – *The Distribution of the Sensible*, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* [Translated by Gabriel Rockhill]. London: Continuum, 2004, p. 22-23.

Always problematic and differentiating, in which the subject saw himself confronted by the unknown and enhanced his opening up to the world, expanding its horizons of meaning. Once a technical view of art had been surpassed, the experience of the works would produce meaning concomitant with the disturbing possibility that it might not become art. It is in this aspect that Rancière characterizes the aesthetic regime as the moment in which “artistic phenomena are identified by their adherence to a specific regime of the sensible, which is extricated from its ordinary connections and is inhabited by a heterogeneous power, the power of a form of thought that has become foreign to itself: a product identical with something not produced, knowledge transformed into non-knowledge, logos identical with pathos, the intention of the unintentional, etc”<sup>6</sup>. The uniqueness of the artistic phenomenon is to the aesthetic event as dissent is to political action. Is art still capable of producing dissent in today’s world?

## II

Given that we live in an age dominated by the institutionalization of art, by the vertiginous growth of biennials and art fairs and by the inflationary acceleration of the market, the question of how to replicate the potency of the heterogeneous remains; how is the dissenting spark of the sensible to be kept burning? The risks of co-optation are immense, but to refuse conflict and contradiction, remaining on the margins of the circuit, does not appear to be a viable alternative. The purity of isolation and its rational convictions do not bring with them the conflict of difference that is able to expand horizons to new forms of art. “To ask how can one escape the market is one of those questions whose principal virtue is one’s pleasure in declaring it insoluble...for artists as for everyone else there’s the problem of knowing where one plant one’s feet, of knowing what one is doing in a particular place, in a particular system of Exchange. One must find ways to create other places, or other uses for places.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Rancière, J. – *The Distribution of the Sensible*, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* [Translated by Gabriel Rockhill]. London: Continuum, 2004, p. 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, J. – *Art of the Possible*: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière, ARTFORUM, New York, March 2007, p. 262.

To consider the possibility of creating other uses for old places seems important to me in order that the entry of works into the museum is not reduced to a canonization which produces distancing or – in the case of less conventional and more experimental works – a co-optation that reiterates any possibility of criticism or conflict. The question to be posed pertains to the manner by which the institution receives the works without rendering them mere adequate and docile objects. How to liberate heterogeneity and aesthetic suspension – potencies inherent to art – in a situation dominated by the coldness of norm and market? What is intended is the very precariousness of the normative and heterogeneous quality of institutionalization, rendering the museum an open and indeterminate space in which to negotiate unpredictable possibilities of art, exhibition and education – ultimately, of non-canonized forms of life.

In order to rethink the uses of museums – which, with no loss to their legitimizing role – might constitute themselves as spaces simultaneously dedicated to artistic experimentation and political discussion, I should like to report on two recent experiments which took place at the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro. I am referring to exhibitions by the artists Elisa Bracher and Nan Goldin. The former was on view from October 2011 to March, 2012, and the latter from February to April, 2012. Bracher's work exemplifies the experimental process and its unfinished quality functioning within the museum. It highlights the possibility of displacing the hesitations of the creative process inside the exhibition space itself, thereby taking on risks of indeterminacy and failure – without, of course, any loss to the work's poetic or formal power. As for Nan Goldin, what she brings to the museum is the conflict-ridden relationship between the production of images and moral norms; in other words, the way in which fiction produces the world by manipulating the possibilities of what is seen and what is felt, displacing established conventions of subjectivity and sociability. They were two very different exhibitions which juxtaposed silence and noise, formal concentration and the excitement of images. Nonetheless what they had in common was an ability to surprise and disorient the public.

From its very beginnings, Elisa Bracher's work has been characterized by its public and monumental scale. It is no mere coincidence that the museum room in which her work was presented is called "the monumental space", with its verticality, its immense concrete wall, natural lighting, its suspended mezzanine, its sheer scope and silence. The artist's works were heavy, extremely so. They were made of solid lead – in all, over twenty tons of it – and none of it touched the floor. Gray and

opaque, the sheets and the sphere were fastened to suspended beams and hovered over the space. It was an equilibrium of forces which was supported by the structure of this powerful building designed by Brazilian architect Affonso Eduardo Reidy. Her pieces filled the void, working in between sculpture and installation, between the physical presence of the materials and the tensioned energy of the space. They created a place that was the enhancement of a malleable atmosphere which physically affected us. To circulate near the work within that monumental space was to experience one's own body in contact with what was outside it, with an imposing exteriority. Nonetheless, it is important not to mistake stateliness and monumentality for the excesses of spectacle. In its silence, in its gravity, the work was, above all else, anti-spectacular. It rejected all sense of affectation. Its weight weighed; its tension tensioned. In turn the grey was light and opaqueness, containment and expansion. The boldness of the scale drew strength and support from the lead's austerity.

Yet it took more than a month to set up this installation. The sphere – which in the initial project weighed a ton and a half – had already grown to eight tons even before it began to be mounted. Made of solid lead, it was suspended by two steel cables weighing five hundred kilos apiece. Engineers, architects and specialized workmen entered the museum and took on the risks. Three sheets of lead hung from beams and surrounded one of its sides, occupying a space of approximately fifteen meters. Each one of them weighed five tons. The scaffolding which held up the sphere was supposed to have been removed prior to the show's opening. However, some days before that, one of the sheets slowly began to collapse. What to do? Postpone the opening? Cancel the exhibition? Various sectors of the museum felt – rightly so, to a certain degree – threatened and the most prudent measure would have been postponement. Nonetheless, given that setting up the installation was so clearly a part of the work itself and that the public was following the entire process in a state of bewilderment, there seemed to be no reason why the exhibition should not (should not) proceed as scheduled without the work being duly finished, exposing the flaws, the failure, the mistakes and the fragility inherent to the creative process.

In this unstable equilibrium between process and work, between the finished and the unfinished, the sharpness and the fragility, the institutional space assumed its responsibility as an experimental space, moving beyond its normative nature without neglecting its own normative nature. The museum continues to be a museum, but what was merely a space to legitimize finished works became a tricky territory of trial and error, hesitation, displacement, doubt and decision – all

constituted as act. In a way, the museum might be a repository for the most exemplary aspect of the creative experience: the courage of the founding gesture, in all of its constituent power and fragility. The setting up continued for more than three weeks, during which the exhibition was quite normally visited by the public.

Before analyzing the Goldin exhibition, and by way of analyzing the similarities between these two experiences in terms of their relationships to the museum, let me once again quote Rancière: “The main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity is consensus – that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, competences.”<sup>8</sup> Believing that consensus is the enemy of creativity, the MAM decided to house an exhibition by Nan Goldin which had been rejected by another institution in the same city one month prior to its opening, arguing that some of the scenes in its slideshows were incompatible with its educational mission statement. In the name of dissent and of its pedagogical function in particular, given that the exhibition had been offered to it, it was up to the MAM, to take on the risks and face the possibility of legal action.<sup>9</sup>

Without going into detail with regard to Brazilian legislation and its endless interpretations, what presented itself as the possible legal complication was, in fact, an apparent contradiction to be assumed and debated between the Brazilian Constitution’s provisions regarding freedom of artistic creation and certain paragraphs of Brazil’s Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente [Child and Adolescent Statute] which touch upon the use of images of children, all of which left room for moralist interpretation. An intense debate raged in the Brazilian press and the exhibition arrived at the MAM with loud controversy in attendance.

The exhibition contained an utterly lyrical group of landscape photographs and three slide-shows: *The Other Side*, *Heartbeat* and *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. How could images focused on affection and intimacy be accused of pornography? In order to attempt to transform

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<sup>8</sup> *Ib. ibidem* p. 263.

<sup>9</sup> When another institution vetoed the show in November, 2011, curator Ligia Canongia asked me whether MAM might be willing to house it. Although it was impossible to do so at that moment, three months later a change in MAM’s schedule made it possible for the show to be added to its roster of exhibitions. It should be noted that the institution which had originally rejected the exhibition honored its commitment to financial support of the show.

controversy into debate, the curators and the MAM's Núcleo Experimental de Educação e Arte [Experimental Center for Education and Art] programmed a forum of public debates to which lawyers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, social workers, critics, curators and so forth were invited.<sup>10</sup> In order to fuel the debate and the multiple perspectives for interpretation two very simple and direct questions were initially proposed: what does exhibiting mean? What does it mean to exhibit the work of Nan Goldin? Our intention was to make use of the exhibition as a moment in which to experience heterogeneous ways of seeing and thinking.

As previously emphasized, what may be immediately highlighted was the discrepancy between what the slide show images revealed and the controversial tone which they produced. It is not that they are incapable of generating discomfort or unease; first and foremost, though, these images contain a series of more interesting questions that deal with a complex contemporary subjectivity, with the ties of affection which we build, with ways of dealing with fatherhood, motherhood, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, love, affection, pain, loneliness, joy, encounters and, ultimately, with life as it is: plural, unpredictable, tragic and lyrical. What is impressive about her work is its ability to bring together different people, to attract a diverse and plural public to the museum, seducing them through the power of her images, the potency of the musical element and the atmosphere created by her installations in which austerity and emotion are enhanced.

To return to the controversy and the conflict-ridden territory which the museum incurred by housing the exhibition at the precise moment of an institutional conflict, we should also add the notification received from the Ministério Público Federal [Federal Prosecution Office]<sup>11</sup>, accusing the museum of incitement to pedophilia and violence against women. A federal public prosecutor [Procurador da República] thus made his way to the MAM in order to check out the content of the images and the

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<sup>10</sup> The idea for this forum was suggested by educational center coordinators Jessica Gogan and Luiz Guilherme Vergara and based on a similar experiment undertaken by the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh when that institution dealt with issues of racial conflict.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to know that in Brasil a Federal Prosecutor besides criminal actions also deal with class or collective actions.

consistency of the accusations. When he arrived at the museum, he visited the exhibition carefully, returning on another day to attend one of the forum debates. Ultimately, his legal decision was completely favorable to the museum's initiative of putting on the exhibition, regardless of any personal evaluation of the images and leading to the dismissal of the suit. In the conclusion to his detailed and careful explanations in the trial documents, he made one particular observation of considerable pertinence to what I have been discussing here, to wit: "Undoubtedly, the most important demonstration of institutional maturity in a democratic and pluralistic society is its ability to accommodate divergence within a framework of tolerance towards – and recognition of – diversity, for dissent depends as much upon freedom as it does upon agreement [concordance]." I would take this last sentence a bit further and go so far as to say that freedom relies more heavily upon dissent than concordance [or agreement].

It is in managing this conflict between norm and transgression, determination and indetermination, potential and risk, that museum spaces have been questioning themselves, attempting to come to terms with art's possibilities and impotence in an institutionalized world, shot through by disquieting interests, but called upon to deal with the disconnect between past and future. Confronting it allows for an exploration of new possibilities of meaning that suggest themselves in the interval – the residue of power which is the province of art. It is up to the museums to live up to the residue, nourishing the public with the ability to be surprised, to question, to be able to see things independently and to imagine worlds that are different from those already constituted and established.