

## **Consensual, Dissensual, and Aesthetic Communities: Six Ways of Articulating the Politics of Art and Aesthetics**

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## **Consensual, Dissensual, and Aesthetic Communities: Six Ways of Articulating the Politics of Art and Aesthetics**

Everywhere in the world of art today there are calls to “politicize art.” So pervasive is the consensus that art should assume a political form, one might grow to suspect that beneath all the excitement regarding art’s political potential, there lurks the suspicion that without being joined to politics, art may drift into insignificance. Whereas the heavy-handed narrative of modernism at least had the virtue of providing relatively easy answers to questions regarding the meaning, value, and direction of art, we seem to have reached a point in which those answers are much less clear. If Arthur Danto’s assessment regarding what he calls “post-historical art” is correct, namely that “there really is no art more true than any other, and that there is not one way art has to be,” then the uncoupling of artistic practice from the modernist narrative can be seen as carrying in its wake a crisis of meaning.<sup>1</sup> If the thesis regarding post-historical art has so much intuitive appeal, is it not reflective of the fact that few people today have any genuine convictions regarding the nature, purpose, and direction of art? Perhaps we might sum up by saying that the happy pluralism of “no art is more true than any other” has been purchased with the risk of

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *After The End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 34.

nihilism.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas it was once believed that art required no further justification, few today share this faith. As a result, there seems to be a somewhat desperate effort underway to restore a purpose to art, with practitioners, critics, and theorists frequently invoking reasons drawn from other domains in order to support their activities. What I am suggesting regarding the latest developments in art-theory circles is that the effort to join art and politics may well be an attempt to avert this crisis of meaning. Accordingly, art would assume its significance by being given a new identity, one forged through its union with politics.

In my estimation, however, there exists little agreement amongst curators, critics, historians, theorists, and practitioners regarding how one should go about joining art and politics. To highlight some of the difficulties entailed in yoking art to politics, I will construct a brief topography of the different theoretical models currently in use. This topography is intended to draw out the differences behind the ostensibly attractive idea of politicizing art, and to illuminate the different notions of community to which they give rise.

The final portion of this paper advances what I take to be an accurate account of the ambiguous political significance of art. Against Jacques Rancière's celebrated retrieval of the politics of aesthetics, I will contend that the aesthetic, as a form of experience, is more vexed than he allows, and as such too ambiguous to sustain all of the practical aspirations being assigned to it. Rather than giving rise to concrete political propositions that can found new human communities, the aesthetic should be understood as a form of withdrawal, a rupturing of shared meanings and practices. As such, any attempts to politicize art by means of aesthetics must come

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

to terms with the recalcitrant and even anti-social aspects of the aesthetic experience, which I see as a stumbling block that prevents artworks from being a direct expression or justification of a community's way of life.

The first model that I identify is what one can call "Politicizing Art." At its worst it consists of calling for more art that deals explicitly with political content. Its more sophisticated forms employ vocabularies adopted from the writings of Bertolt Brecht or Jean-Paul Sartre. The hallmark of this approach is the idea of an "engaged art," one which would be subordinated to some political cause, either by serving as a form of pedagogy, as in Brecht, or by assuming the form of a political remediation, as in Relational Aesthetics. Politicizing art achieves the union of art and politics by converting the art object into a form of political address or action. It assumes that because a work's content is political, the final product will be political. Whereas both Brecht and Sartre specified the conditions by which theater, in the case of the former, and prose, in the case of the latter, become political, the call today to politicize art tends to assume the normativity of progressive causes, as well as the ability of art to facilitate them. It is important to note that in pointing to the poverty of this model, I am not passing judgment on the various artistic practices that are frequently placed under the heading of "political art." I am simply noting that as a discourse, this model explains little and presumes much. For example, it remains to be seen why treating political content renders an art object political. Politicizing art, as we see more clearly when contrasted with other approaches, is little concerned with the specificity of art, often treating works of art as just another form of political speech. Its greatest liability consists of failing to consider how art as art carries its own politics.

There is a similar attempt to politicize art objects at work in the strategy known as the "Politics of Art," or, following Walter Benjamin, "*Kunstpö-*

*litik.*” Here, rather than art being politicized by artists, it is the critics who politicize the object. The politics of art is a form of criticism intended to root out the complicity between art and domination, that is, to expose the role culture plays in legitimating political orders or normalizing prejudices. Obviously, this is a critical strategy associated with the Frankfurt school, and in particular Benjamin’s thesis regarding “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility.”<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin articulated the need for critics to take seriously the role that art plays in the formation of ideology. Mechanical reproducibility was, for Benjamin, a mutation in the nature of art, a fundamental change in its being after which it becomes necessary to evaluate the political uses made of art. As radio production, photograph, and film, art permeates the lives of the masses, forming the unexamined backdrop of their daily lives. For Benjamin, this is an ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, the audience for art has been expanded, allowing those previously outside of traditional cultural spheres a share of aesthetic pleasure. On the other hand, these new artistic products can easily be put to use as propaganda. It is here that dangers lurk and that cultural critics must intervene. Photographs and films are ideological formations that instruct viewers in everything from property relations and how to respond to war, to that which passes for beautiful.

In 1939 Benjamin warned that Fascism was aestheticizing politics, counseling communism to respond by politicizing art. His text served as a rallying cry for the post-war cultural studies movement, an orientation to art premised upon the suspicion that traditional culture harbors any

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3 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility,” *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 101-133.

number of unspoken prejudices, and that, as a methodology, aesthetics proves incapable of unmasking them. One must ask, however, whether the proponents of the politics of art even have a conception of the art, or if everything is to be treated as *culture*. Traditionally, the aesthetic has been the category reserved for appraising art objects and experiences independently of moral, cognitive, and political considerations. Denying art some autonomy from these domains—the moral, the cognitive, the political—risks equating it with every other form of cultural expression, without accounting for what is unique about its production and reception. Like those who call for more political art to be made, those seeking to politicize art by means of criticism run the risk of equating art with other forms of speech and address. This reduction threatens to neglect something unique about art's function in contemporary society, namely its ability to generate moral, cognitive, and political investments, without itself being determined by or reducible to them.

One can contrast these attempts to politicize art *directly* with the various efforts to politicize the *forms of experience* engendered by art. The first such strategy we should consider is the idea of "Aesthetic Education." This model is seldom invoked explicitly, although many working in the arts today unknowingly rely upon this model. When, for example, those who seek to explain the importance of art describe it as holding out an alternative to the dominant way of thinking, whether through its emphasis on materiality, specificity, or holism, they are implicitly rediscovering Friedrich Schiller's conception of aesthetic education.

In the wake of the French Revolution, Schiller claimed that political problems could only be solved by means of an apparent detour through aesthetics. For Schiller, the political failure of the revolution was first and foremost a moral failure, a failure on the part of the freshly emancipated to make proper use of their freedom. Aesthetic contemplation, Schiller

thought, offered humankind a necessary lesson in the employment of freedom. His key idea was that the disinterested form of contemplation that Kant claimed to be integral to the aesthetic experience, was itself already an education. Contemplating things disinterestedly means, for Schiller, to let them be, or, when he converts the aesthetic attitude into a moral and political dictum, to “*grant freedom by means of freedom.*”<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic experience becomes for Schiller a state of free resolution wherein force and compulsion are cancelled. Schiller’s idea of the aesthetic state refers to both the contemplative perceptual state brought about by contact with works of art, and the political order founded upon the spirit of play. Schiller conceived of the aesthetic as a transitional stage between the historical condition of humanity rent by the division of labor and a more perfect order in which the ideals of morality would not be experienced as a source of antagonism.

For our purposes, it is important to notice that it is the form of experience engendered by the work of art, and not works of art themselves, which achieve this political work. The aesthetic supports mankind’s political education because it enables him to contemplate things freely. It was for this reason that Schiller was skeptical of art that we would judge to be didactic. Art’s capacity for political transformation is premised upon its distance from every other form of address, notably those which would directly correct a people’s way of life.

Schiller’s writings solidified a tendency at work within German philosophy and literary criticism, that of conceiving of the aesthetic as something heterogeneous to everyday experience. It is this positioning of the aesthetic as something outside of everyday experience that is essential for

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4 Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Mineola, 2004) p. 137.

the next approach to art and politics, that which has been termed “Radicalizing the Aistheton.”<sup>5</sup> This strategy is common to the writings of Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, and Jean-François Lyotard. It consists of construing aesthetic phenomena in terms of their absolute heterogeneity vis-à-vis daily life, that is, of drawing a boundary between art and kitsch (Greenberg), indicating how the autonomy of art promises political emancipation (Adorno), or how art bears witness to the unrepresentable within thought, thereby serving to curb the totalizing pretensions of reason (Lyotard). On this model, art is given the task of separating itself from everyday experience, for it is judged that only art’s alterity is capable of stirring thought to wakefulness. Conceiving of an art object as an aistheton is the attempt to radicalize the difference between art and life through an insistence upon art’s difference as material form. Against the perceived dangers of commercial kitsch (Greenberg), conformism (Adorno), and an eclectic postmodern taste fashioned in the image of transnational flows of capital (Lyotard), art’s difficultness—its resistance to thought and meaning—allows it to function as a resistant form and a form of resistance.

In the specific case of Lyotard, the Kantian sublime is evoked as a reminder of thought’s indebtedness to its other. The avant-garde is outfitted with the duty to “be witness to the unrepresentable,” by putting forward, in presentation, the fact that the unrepresentable exists.<sup>6</sup> Lyotard’s contention that sublime experience discloses to thought the existence of the “Law” can lead one to ask whether his position attempts to join art with

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5 Here, I am following the analyses and terminology of Jacques Rancière in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Polity Press, 2009). See in particular the essay “Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime: A Counter-reading of Kant,” pp. 88-106.

6 Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 82.

politics or art with ethics.<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, for example, has charged Lyotard (and others) with suppressing the connection between aesthetics and politics by transforming Kant's narrative of capacity into an ethics of incapacity.<sup>8</sup>

Rancière's own position, the fifth model, "Retrieving the Politics of Aesthetics," attempts to demonstrate that art and politics don't need to be joined, for indeed as practices which both distribute and redistribute the sensible, art and politics are already linked. For this reason, Rancière argues that art and aesthetics do not need to be outfitted with a politics; at their core, both already contain their own politics. What we require, according to Rancière, is a framework that will allow us to take account of the ways in which art and aesthetics alter a given community's account of itself.

The idea that aesthetics contains its own politics is bound up with Rancière's claims regarding the aesthetic dimensions of the political. For Rancière, politics is the process of challenging the distribution of bodies, voices, roles, and capacities that exists within a given society. What he calls the "distribution of the sensible" [*le partage du sensible*] refers, on the one hand, to the partitions that determine what and who can be seen and said, and, on the other hand, indicates that these relations are shared, constituting a common world or world in common.<sup>9</sup> Equality, according to Rancière, is the only value capable of radically altering the distribution of the sensible. It enables those engaged in the process of politics to define a form of commonality between themselves and those who would

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7 On the ethical imperatives associated with the sublime see, Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews,"* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

8 Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, pp. 88-106.

9 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 13.

seek to prevent their taking part in the activity of governing.<sup>10</sup>

Rancière is fond of saying that “art lends to politics what it can.” What we can expect from art is not a series of propositions for how the world should be, but a means of altering the general sphere of appearances, that is, the distribution of the sensible. Rancière makes an important distinction between “primary aesthetics” (i.e., the distribution of the sensible) and “aesthetic practices.” He explains, “It is on the basis of...primary aesthetics that it is possible to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.”<sup>11</sup> For Rancière, art and aesthetics are political inasmuch as they alter the distribution of the sensible. Given his claim that equality is a necessary condition for politics, one can expect that in order for art and aesthetics to be political they must in some way be about equality. Rancière has thus attempted to reread the history of aesthetics in terms of equality, and to demonstrate how spectatorship presupposes equality between artist and audience. In works such as *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, *The Emancipated Spectator*, and the most recent book, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, Rancière aims to show how the aesthetic experience described by figures like Kant, Schiller, Hegel and the romantics is more properly understood as an experience of equality, rather than freedom.<sup>12</sup> For Rancière, the polemical affirmation of equality turns a hierarchical community of consensus

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10 Jacques Rancière, “Dix Thèses Sur La Politique,” in *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 223-254.

11 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 13.

12 I don’t mean to suggest that the attempt to read art and aesthetics in terms of a concern for equality is the only issue at stake in these beautiful and complicated texts; simply that it is a persistent theme and one of the hallmarks of Rancière’s approach. See, Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2009), and Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l’art* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2011).

into a dissensual community that must now address the exclusions upon which the initial community was premised. For him, art is a reminder that, at bottom, communication relies upon equality, and one of the main ways in which those who were previously denied a role begin to take part in a community's affairs

My own position is that it is problematic and reductionistic to assign the aesthetic any single meaning. Understanding the aesthetic experience in terms of equality runs the risk of squelching the ambiguity—the freedom from determination—which is the essence of aesthetic experience. Thus, the position that I call the “Anarchical Politics of Aesthetic Ambiguity” shares with those who would radicalize the aesthetic the sense of the aesthetic experience's heterogeneity vis-à-vis everyday life; however, unlike those theorists, it insists upon contextualizing this heterogeneity historically. This position claims that the advent of the aesthetic was a fundamental turning point in Western culture, after which it is no longer necessary for the beautiful to be good. On this point it is essential to recognize that, after Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the aesthetic is placed beyond the reach of moral and cognitive considerations. Our experiences of art and literature, therefore, take place in a space beyond good and evil. With Rancière, the Anarchical Politics of Aesthetic Ambiguity shares the idea that art impacts the broader distribution of capacities, roles, and practices. It doubts, however, that the form of experience it engenders carries a uniform meaning, such as that of equality. It sees in the aesthetic—a form of experience set adrift from the moral and the cognitive—a deeply ambiguous phenomenon, one capable of supporting both a progressive egalitarian politics of equality and the intoxicating thought of hierarchy.

Some may wonder what, then, makes such experiences political? Like Rancière, this view does not think that art and aesthetics need to be outfitted with a politics, for indeed both already contain their own politics. This

position, however, describes the politics of aesthetics as a type of “withdrawal” or “retreat.” Aesthetic experiences prompt the person—body and mind—to withdraw from the world of pre-established meanings, and all that is incompatible with human freedom. According to this position, the aesthetic experience begins when the meanings (*sens*) customarily associated with sense perception (*sens*) comes undone. Aesthetic sensation/reflection/reverie consists of playing between sense and sense, indulging in sense and reason for their own sake. This process can be described as “political” inasmuch as the production of new meanings and experiences may prompt the reconfiguration of the social order.

In attempting to think about art and community from an aesthetic point of view, one cannot escape that fact that aesthetics and the aesthetic experience offer few positive prescriptions for life in common. Aesthetic experience is a sensing of one’s freedom from determination, a sensation which may later result in the desire for shared meanings and new elective affinities, but which in the first instance causes us to depart from communal meanings. Rather than founding communities, the aesthetic removes us from them, allowing us to absent ourselves from the pre-established senses of sense scattered throughout the shared world.

Various artistic practices no doubt give rise to different models of community, and in some instances function as a working-out of alternatives to daily life. The aesthetic apprehension of these and other practices, however, tends to remove the individual from the realm of consensus—of shared sentiments and common meanings. These experiences break apart the habitual ordering of sense, granting to the individual the freedom of reverie. Any aesthetic community will always be haunted by the fact that individuals are free to make of the aesthetic experience what they will; indeed, art is a prompting to do just that, and as such it waters the solipsistic tendencies of thought that must be overcome in the production

of meaning.

Lest what I have described as a politics of withdrawal be understood in terms of the perennial conflict between the individual and the community, and then as a paean to the joys and sorrows of individualism, let me conclude with the suggestion that, from an aesthetic point of view, the problem should be located elsewhere. The aesthetic tradition offers us the tantalizing suggestion that, at bottom, this tension between the individual and the community is not as intractable as it appears. I am referring to the much-maligned idea that aesthetic judgments are judgments that can rightly claim for themselves universal validity. Proponents of aesthetic universality hold that the experiences of beauty and sublimity are by definition shared, or at least sharable in principle, and that in using these concepts we are attempting to express our sense that when presented with the same experience, others will feel as we do. If Kant and the others who think about aesthetics in this way are right, then one of the things that we discover in our solipsistic reveries is a becoming-common of sense and thought, and moreover, a commonality that is different from the consensus that pervades everyday thought and language. One might speculate that part of what sustains our reveries is the recognition that what is at first thought to be of deep personal significance turns out to be common. At the very least, we know that when we have the audacity to cut against the conventional wisdom of our times, daring to baptize something beautiful, we assume a “universal voice,” one that effaces all traces of subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> This is why, despite its recalcitrance, many insist on joining the experience of art with the ideal of community. Deep and abiding aesthetic contemplation forces the individual to give way to a blank subjectivity that belongs to everyone and no one. This sundering of the individual may be

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13 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), p. 60.

a necessary moment in the rearticulation of life in common. If this blank subjectivity of everyone and no one can facilitate the transformation of hierarchical communities, whether local or global, then, paradoxical as it may seem, it will be necessary, for the good of the community, to insist upon the right to solipsistic pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

## Keywords

Aesthetics, Politics, the Politics of Aesthetics, Community, Dissensus, Consensus, Disinterested Contemplation, Political Art

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## Abstract

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### Consensual, Dissensual, and Aesthetic Communities: Six Ways of Articulating the Politics of Art and Aesthetics

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This paper analyzes six different ways of articulating the relationship between art and politics. It calls attention to the differences that lurk behind the seemingly simple phrase—everywhere in vogue today—the “politics of aesthetics.” Five of these models are drawn from contemporary discussions regarding the politics of art. The last model is the attempt to develop an account of the politics of aesthetics that is faithful to the difficult and ambiguous dimensions of the aesthetic experience that were hinted at by the texts of classical philosophical aesthetics. Most notably, this paper is concerned with the idea that the aesthetic experience can be understood as a form of disinterested contemplation—one that is not reducible to cognitive or moral considerations—and with some of the consequences that this entails. It explores some of the political significance that can be attributed to this idea of disinterested contemplation, arguing that the aesthetic should be understood as a withdrawal from the world’s pre-established meanings. Unlike some of the other thinkers discussed in this paper, this author doubts that a single, uniform meaning can be ascribed to the aesthetic experience. I thus argue that we need to approach the aesthetic through the networks of textual significance that have been built up around it. Throughout this paper, I attempt to explain how the efforts to link art and aesthetics to politics simultaneously give rise to ideas about the nature of the human community. In looking at the sixth and final model, what I have called the “anarchical politics of aesthetic ambiguity,” I argue that the aesthetic tradition offers a rather unique way of understanding the relationship between the individual and the community. Here, we see that the aesthetic is prone to a number of paradoxes, central among them the one that makes art the bearer of a solipsistic pleasure in which we nevertheless discover our capacity for genuinely communicating with others, outside of clichés and banalities.