

## *Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art<sup>1</sup>*

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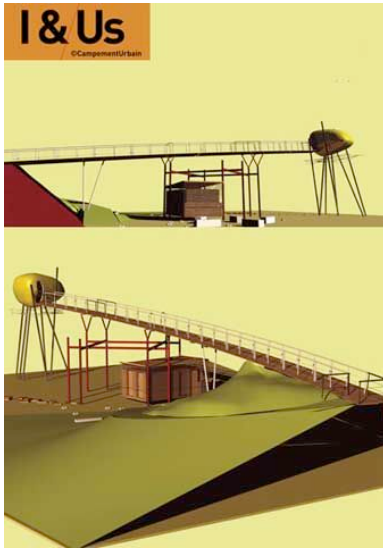
I shall bring up my subject by a short analysis of three propositions on community and separation. I take the word 'proposition' in its widest sense: a proposition means a statement; it means a proposal or an offer; it also means an artistic dispositif which lends itself to some form of response or interaction.



Georges Seurat, *Bathers at Asnières* (1884) oil on canvas, 79<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 118-<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub>", (detail) Reproduced by kind permission of the National Gallery / Urban Encampment Je & Nou (video still), Reproduced by kind permission of Urban Encampment.

The first proposition I shall comment upon is the shortest one. It is a poetic statement in four words: four French words 'Séparés, on est ensemble' that I will translate as follows: 'Apart, we are together'. This statement is quoted from a prose-poem by Mallarmé 'The White Water lily'. I will remind you what the poem is about. The poet makes a small boat trip on the river in order to see a lady who is supposed to stay somewhere along the river in the neighbourhood; as he gets close to the place where he believes that she stays, he hears a light noise of footsteps that might be the sign of the presence of the invisible lady; after having enjoyed that proximity, the poet decides to keep the mystery of the lady and the secret of their being-together unviolated by silently moving back without seeing her and being seen by her. The poem was first published in a magazine entitled *Art and Fashion*. So it is easy to blame the paradox of the 'being together apart' on the sophisticated attitude of the poet in search of both metaphysical purity and refined sensations. That easy attitude has to ignore two things: first the solitude of the being together was put at the same time on two large canvasses that were to pass on as paradigms of modern painting, I mean Seurat's *Grande Jatte* and *Bathing in Asnières*, two pictures which allegedly have been conceived of as modern transpositions of the Athenian frieze of the Panathenaia. Second the poet himself stressed that the crisis of the verse was part of an 'ideal crisis' which, he said, was itself dependent on a 'social crisis'. This <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html>

suggests that the very form of the prose-poem may have some kind of relation with the painterly conjunction of high art and popular leisure, some kind of relation, I would add, that might be itself a 'distant' relation, just as the relation of the silent boater with the invisible lady.



Urban Encampment 'scale model', Reproduced by kind permission of Urban Encampment.

Apparently contemporary art and social life have nothing to do any longer with those poetic landscapes of the 1880s. Indeed we live in a time when artists don't care much for water lilies – except for the sake of post-modern parody – nor even for painting. We also live in cities where the suburban youths have a darker skin and a more boisterous attitude than the teenagers of *Bathing in Asnières*. But this is precisely the point where the matter of being together apart takes on a new shape and a new signification. A number of artists to-day set out to create no more artworks. Instead they want to get out of the museum, and provoke modifications of the space of everyday life, giving rise to new forms of relations. Their propositions engage thereby with the new forms and the new discontents of social life around Asnières. This is the case of a project proposed by a French group of artists called *Urban Encampment (Campement Urbain)*. The project engages with the situation of one of the most wretched outskirts of Paris where riots broke out last autumn. Now the way it tackles the problem seems paradoxical. Much of the stuff that we can read or hear about the 'crisis of the suburbs' deals with the loss of the 'social bond' provoked by mass individualism and the necessity to weave it again. Now the project understands it in a very peculiar way since it proposes to create in that wretched suburb a place that would be 'extremely useless, fragile and non productive'. That place had to be discussed with whoever wanted to discuss it among the inhabitants and put under of the protection of the community. But it would be dedicated to a specific end: solitude, which meant that it would be conceived and implemented as a place that could be occupied only by one person for the sake of lonely contemplation or meditation. This is why the project was called *I and us*. So the 'being together apart' appears to be more than a poetic sophistication. Constructing a place for solitude, an 'aesthetic' place appears as a task for engaged art. The possibility of being apart appears to be the dimension of social life which is precisely made impossible by the ordinary life in those suburbs. Such is the argument which is embodied in the scale-model and also printed on the tee-shirt of this black youth in a video-film associated with the project where the members of the neighbourhood wear on a tee-shirt a sentence chosen by them. The black youth who exposes his taste for

solitude can be viewed of as a descendant of one of the young bathers in Asnières that would have met a descendant of the poet: a descendant, from the aesthetic point of view – a point of view which apparently is what is needed to pull the question of the community out of its ethnic configuration – be it its multi-ethnic configuration.



Urban Encampment Je & Nou (video still), Reproduced by kind permission of Urban Encampment.

So there is something in common between the prose poem of the refined writer and that new form of art that tries to create new forms of social bonds in the ‘bad’ neighbourhoods. Each of them presents us one face of a common paradox: the ‘social crisis’ and its possible solution are the background of the apparently apolitical poem about the unattainable lady. Conversely the intervention of a form of art devoted to the construction of empty places seems needed by the underdogs of the poor suburbs. How can we spell out the enigmatic link between those two forms of art? In order to pose the problem, I shall borrow my third ‘proposition’ from a philosophical work which is itself the product of a separated community, since I borrow it from Deleuze and Guattari’s book *What is Philosophy?* From the section on art, I quote a paragraph which is at the same time a definition of what the artist does and a statement on the political import of art:

The writer twists language, he makes it vibrate, embraces it and splits it in order to tear the percept out of the perceptions, the affect out of the affections, the sensation out of the opinion, with a view – hopefully- to that people that is still missing (...) this is the task of any art, and it is in the same way that painting and music tear out of colours and sounds the new chords, the plastic or melodic landscapes or the rhythmic characters that lift them up to the song of the earth or the cry of Men: that which constitutes the tone, the health, a visual or sound block. A monument does not commemorate; it does not celebrate some past event but it confides to the ears of the future the enduring sensations that give it its body: the ceaselessly revived suffering of men, their renewed protest, their relentlessly resumed struggle. Would everything be vain because the suffering is eternal and the revolutions don’t survive their victory? But the success of a revolution only lies in itself, precisely in the vibrations, the embraces and the openings that it gave to human beings at the time of their happening and that make up a monument which is constantly evolving, like those tumuli to which each new visitor brings a stone.<sup>2</sup>

The philosophers apparently come up with our expectation by spelling out what is ‘common’ between the ‘reverie’ of the refined poet and the engagement of the contemporary artist: the link between the solitude of the artwork and the human community is a matter of ‘transformed sensation’. What the artist does is weave a new sensory fabric by tearing percepts and affects out the perceptions and affections that constitute the fabric of ordinary

experience. Weaving this new fabric means creating a form of common expression, or a form of expression of the community, namely 'the song of the earth or the cry of men'. What is common is 'sensation'. The human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, I would say a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of the 'being together'. So far it seems that the paradox of the 'apart together' has vanished. The solitude of the artwork is a false solitude: it is a knot or a twist of sensations just as the cry of a human body is. And a human collective is a knot and twist of sensations in the same way.

But it soon appears that the sensory transformation of the being together goes through a complex set of connections and disconnections. First, what was traditionally described as a 'modelling' of raw materials becomes a dialectic of 'embracing' and 'splitting'. The result of this dialectic is a 'vibration' whose power is transmitted to the human community, that is to say to a community of men whose activity is itself defined in terms of embrace and splitting: suffering, resistance, cries. But, in order that the complex of sensations communicates its vibration, it has to be solidified in the form of a monument. Now the monument in turn takes on the identity of a person who speaks to the 'ears of the future'. And that speech itself seems to be a double one. The monument transmits the suffering, protest and struggle of men; but it transmits it by transmitting what is apparently opposed to it: the 'song of the earth': the song of the inhuman, the song of the forces of the chaos that resist the human will of transformation. It is in this way that the 'solitary' block of sounds and colours can become the 'health' of individuals and communities. But that coincidence itself is a problematic one. The relation between the 'block of sounds and colours' and the 'health' of the community might be only a matter of analogy. The operations of torsion, embrace and splitting which define the way in which art weaves a community are made *en vue de* – 'with a view to', in the hope of - a people which is still missing. The monument is at the same time the confidant of the people, the instrument of its creation and its representative so long as it is not here. The 'community of sensation' seemed to solve the paradox of the 'apart together' by equating the 'individual' production of art with the fabric of collective life. But the solid product of the action which 'twists' the materials of sculpture or painting remains somewhere between the *cry* of the suffering and struggling people and the 'song of the earth', between a voice of human division and a melody of cosmic – inhuman – harmony. The artistic 'voice of the people' is the voice of a people to come. The people to come is the impossible people that would be at the same time the divided people of the protest and the collective harmony of a people attuned with the very breath of Nature, be it a chaotic or a 'chaosmatic' nature.

What my three propositions do is to define a specific kind of community: let us call it an aesthetic community in general. An aesthetic community is not a community of aesthetes. It is a community of sense, or a *sensus communis*. This means three things. A community of sense first is a certain combination of sense data. This also means a combination of different senses of sense. The words of the poet are sensory realities which suggest another sensory reality, which in turn can be perceived as a metaphor of the poetic activity. The inhabitants put a white sentence on their black tee-shirt and they choose a certain stance to present it in front of the camera, etc. This is the first level of 'community'. Now in my three examples that community takes on a specific figure, that I will call a dissensual figure. The words of the poet are first used as neutral tools to frame a certain sensorium. They describe us a movement of the arms oriented towards a certain aim: reaching a place which could be visualised on a space. But they superimpose to that sensorium another sensorium organized around that which is specific to their own power, sound and absence. They stage a conflict between two regimes of sense, two sensory worlds. This is what dissensus means. The 'fragile' and 'non

productive' construction suspended above the poor suburb gives a visual manifestation and an architectural solidity to that dissensual relation. And the philosopher gives a conceptual frame to that tension between two sensory worlds. This is the second point.

Now what the philosophical proposition shows is that the tension between being together and being apart plays on a double level. The artistic 'proposition' conflates two regimes of sense – a regime of conjunction and a regime of disjunction. Now the community built by that dissensus stands itself in a twofold relationship with another community, a community between human beings. This is the third point. Mallarmé's poetry aims at giving to the democratic community the 'seal' that cannot be brought about by the count of the votes. Its very distance from social engagement is also a way of preserving, in the absence of the 'crowd', its capacity of intervention in the 'festivals of the future'. The construction of the lonely place of *Urban Encampment* aims to create new forms of socialization and a new awareness of the capacity of anyone.<sup>3</sup> But its own way of elaboration wants to be already an actualization of that community. Deleuze and Guattari elaborate on that double relation. On the one hand, the 'community of sense' woven by artistic practice is, in the present, a new set of vibrations of the human community; on the other hand, it is a monument that stands as a mediation or a substitute for a people to come. The paradoxical relation between the 'apart' and the 'together' is also a paradoxical relation between the present and the future. The art work is the people to come and it is the monument of its expectation, the monument of its absence. The artistic 'dissensual community' has a double body: it is a combination of means for producing an effect out of itself: creating a new community between human beings, a new political people. And it is the anticipated reality of that people. The tension between 'being apart' and 'being together' is tied up with another tension between two statuses of artistic practice: as a means for producing an effect, and as the reality of that effect. To the extent that it is a dissensual community, an aesthetic community is a community structured by disconnection.

Understanding what is exactly disconnected and what is at stake in that disconnection is crucial to the interpretation of what 'aesthetics' and the 'politics of aesthetics' mean. The canonical interpretations of artistic modernity and of aesthetics propose three major interpretations of the 'being together apart': there is the modernist view of the autonomy of the artwork, which connects more or less loosely its 'being apart' with the 'being together' of a community to come ; there is the postmodernist view which makes the 'being apart' an aristocratic illusion aimed at dismissing the real laws of our being together; and there is the aesthetic of the sublime which turns the modernist 'being apart' of the artwork into a radical heterogeneity, witnessing to the human condition of heteronomy, forgotten by the modernist dream of a community of emancipated men. I believe that none of those three interpretations get to the point of what the aesthetic disconnection means, that is to say of what the aesthetic break means.

The aesthetic break has generally been understood as a break with the regime of representation or the mimetic regime. But what *mimesis or representation* means has to be understood. What it means is a regime of concordance between sense and sense. As it was epitomized by the classical stage and the classical doctrine on the theatre, the theatre was the place of a double harmony between sense and sense. The stage was thought of as a magnifying mirror where the spectators could see, under a fictional form, the virtues and vices of their fellow men and women. And that vision in turn was supposed to provoke determined moves in their minds: Moliere's *Tartuffe* supposedly taught the spectators to recognize hypocrites; Voltaire's *Mahomet* taught them to struggle for tolerance against fanaticism, etc. Now that capacity of producing the double effect of intellectual recognition and well-oriented

emotion was predicated itself on a regime of concordance inherent to representation itself. The performance of the bodies on the stage was a display of signs of thoughts and emotions that could be read unequivocally because they had a grammar which held as the language of nature itself. This is what mimesis means: the concordance between the complex of sensory signs in which the process of *poiesis* is displayed and the complex of the forms of perception and emotion through which it is felt and understood – two processes which are united by a unique Greek word: *aisthesis*. *Mimesis* first means the correspondence between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. Because there was a language of natural signs, there was continuity between the intrinsic consistency – or the ‘autonomy’ - of the play and its capacity of producing ethical effects in the minds of the spectators in the theatre and in their behaviours out of the theatre. The ‘being apart’ of the stage was taken in the continuity between the ‘being together’ of the signs displayed by the representation, the being together of the community addressed by it and the universality of human nature. The stage, the audience and the world are taken in one and the same continuum.

Most of our ideas about the political efficiency of art still cling to that model. We may not believe any more that the exhibition of virtues and vices on the stage can mend human behaviours. But we are still prone to believe that the reproduction in resin of a commercial idol will make us resist the empire of the ‘spectacle’ or that the photography of some atrocity will mobilize us against injustice. Modern or post-modern as we purport to be, we easily forget that that the consistency of that model was called into question as soon as the 1760s or the 1780’s. Rousseau first questioned that supposedly straight line between the performance of the actors on the stage, its effect on the minds of the spectators and their behaviour outside the theatre in his *Letter on the spectacles*. He made the point about Moliere’s *Misanthrope*: does the play urge us to praise the sincerity of Alceste against the hypocrisy of the socialites who surround it? Does it prompt us to privilege their sense of social life against its intolerance? The question remains undecidable. Now the problem reaches further back: How can the theatre unveil the hypocrites since what they do is what defines its own essence: showing the signs on human bodies of thoughts and feelings that are not *theirs*. There is a gap at the heart of the mimetic continuity. The gap was spelled out, twenty years after Rousseau’s *Letter* by another hypocrite, Franz Moor in Schiller’s *Die Rauber* ‘The links of nature are broken’. The statement is not a mere matter of family drama. The two Moor brothers, the hypocrite and the rebel, both declare in their words and evince in their behaviour the collapse of the nature that sustained the coincidence between the law of composition of the representation and the law of its ethical efficiency. What is broken is the continuity between the thought and its signs on the bodies, between the performance of the living bodies and its effect on other bodies. Aesthetics first means that collapse; it first means the rupture of the harmony that allowed the correspondence between the texture of the work and its efficiency.

There are two ways of coping with the rupture. The first way opposes to the undecidable effect of the representational mediation a being together without mediation. Such was the conclusion of Rousseau’s *Letter*: the evil does not only lie in the content of the representation. It lies in its structure. It lies in the separation between the stage and the audience, between the performance of the bodies on the stage and the passivity of the spectators in the theatre. What must take the place of the mimetic mediation is the immediate ethical performance of a collective that ignores any separation between performing actors and passive spectators. What Rousseau opposes to the play of the hypocrite is the Greek civic festival where the city presents itself to itself, where it sings and dances its own unity. The model is not new. Plato had already opposed the ethical immediacy of the *choros* to the passivity and the lie of the theatre. Nevertheless it could pass on as the modern sense of anti-

representation: the theatre turned into the ‘cathedral of the future’ without any separation between the stage and the audience; the living community, expressing in its attitudes the law of its being together. The acme of that vision was proposed one year before the First World War in the ‘temple’ of Hellerau near Dresden where the choruses of *Orphee and Eurydice* were performed, on the stairs constructed by Adolphe Appia by a choir trained by Emile Dalcroze’s rhythmic gymnastic. The choir itself was supposed to blend the children of the artistic elite of modernist Europe – that made up the bulk of the audience – and the children of the workers of the local factory entitled ‘German Workshops for Art in Industry’. In such a way the representational mediation was entirely absorbed in the immediate fusion of gymnastic and music, activity and spectatorship, art and industry, etc. It was replaced by the immediate communion of all forms of sense and all senses of sense, from factory work to divine music.

We purport to be far from such utopias. Our artists have learnt to use this form of hyper-theatre for the optimisation of the show rather than for the celebration of the revolutionary identity of art and life. But what remains vivid, both in their practice and in the criticism they undergo, is precisely the ‘critique of the spectacle’, the idea that art has to give us more than a spectacle, more than something dedicated to the delight of passive spectators, because it has to act in favour of a society where everybody should be active. The ‘critique of the spectacle’ often remains the alpha and the omega of the ‘politics of art’. What this identification discards is the investigation of a third term of efficiency that gets out of the dilemma of representational mediation and ethical immediacy. I assume that this ‘third term’ is aesthetic efficiency itself. Aesthetic efficiency means a paradoxical kind of efficiency that is produced by the very break of any determined link between cause and effect.

It is precisely this indetermination that Kant conceptualized when he defined the beautiful as ‘what is represented as an object of universal delight apart from any concept’. That definition has often been aligned with the old definition of beauty as harmony and it has been contrasted with the break of the sublime that would give the formula of modern rupture with representation. I think that this view dismisses the radical break with the representational logic that is entailed in the ‘apart from any concept’. It means that there is no longer any correspondence between the concepts of artistic poesis and the forms of aesthetic pleasure, no longer any determined relationship between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. Art means the implementation of a set of concepts, the beautiful has no concepts. What is offered to the free play of art is a free appearance. This means that the free appearance is the product of a disconnected community between two sensoria – the sensorium of its fabrication and the sensorium of its enjoyment.

That disconnection could be emblemized by the body of a crippled and beheaded statue, the statue known as the *Torso* of the Belvedere, that was elected as the masterpiece of Greek Art by Winckelmann in his *History of Antique Art*, published twenty five years before Kant’s Third Critique. Winckelmann’s descriptions have come into a twofold criticism. On the one hand they have been viewed as the paradigm of the naïve admiration for the still and noble lines of a fancied antique beauty by the partisans of a sublime artistic modernity in line with a revived Dionysian antiquity. On the other hand they have been viewed as the first expression of the romantic dream of a new Greece that led to the disastrous utopia of the community as a work of art that allegedly led itself to the Soviet camps and the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Those two views miss the singularity of the kind of ‘Greek perfection’ embodied in the *Torso* and in Winckelmann’s description. How are we to understand that the paradigm of supreme beauty is given by the statue of a crippled divinity which has no face to express any feeling, no arms or legs to command or achieve any action?

What increases the paradox is Winckelmann's decision to consider the statue as a representation of Hercules, the hero of the Twelve Works. His Hercules was an idle Hercules, a Hercules after the works, that had nothing more to do or to suffer, that had no more will or feeling. He was only, occupied in the meditation of his deeds, a headless meditation of course that was readable only in the muscles of the torso and the back. But what relation of analogy can there be between the meditation of an action and a muscle of the abdomen? The folds of the torso expressed the meditation to the extent that they expressed nothing, that they were similar to the waves of the sea. The *Torso*, Winckelmann said, was the masterpiece of Greek art, which also meant the supreme expression of Greek liberty. But the sole expression of that liberty was the wavelike folds of the stone which had no relation whatsoever with liberty and were unable to give any lesson of courage or freedom.

So the so-called paradigm of classical beauty encapsulates in fact the collapse of the representational logic, which equated beauty with expressivity. In that sense, its immediate legacy should be looked for not in Canova's neo-classical statues but in Kleist's text on the puppet's theatre – a text that emphasizes the displacement from a body to another body – from the expressivity of the face, the arms or the legs to the body of the dancer whose soul stands in the elbow or in the lumbar vertebrae. Such would be the principle of modern dance: setting aside the expressions of the 'living body' in order to free the capacities of other bodies by exploring the disjunctions between the functional body, the expressive body and the indeterminate body. The *Torso* may have been mutilated for entirely casual reasons. But what is not casual, what marks a historical watershed (turning point) is the identification between the product of that mutilation and the perfection of art. It is the same overturn that had already been performed by Vico's invention of the 'true' Homer as a Homer who was a poet, because he had no inventions of his own – he was not an Aristotelian inventor of plots, characters, expressions and rhythms – but he was the expression of a people and a time that could not tell history from fiction, words from things, concepts from images, characters from allegories. He was the voice of an infant people that sang because it could not speak, because it could not use articulate language. The aesthetic regime of art begins with that upheaval of the very idea of perfection, an upheaval that has been conceptualized by Kant's analysis of the beautiful.

It would be easy to draw a line from the mutilated Hercules to the Deleuzian 'body without organs'. Obviously, the deleuzian monument that speaks to the ears of the future is heir to that statue which keeps the potentials of Greek liberty, just as Deleuze's description of Bacon's 'athletic figures' in *Logic of Sensation* restages the scene of the *Laocoon*. But the Deleuzian dramaturgy of the "athletic figure" is too much indebted to the modernist dramaturgy of the sublime break. It obscures the form of dissensuality which is specific to the aesthetic work and to 'aesthetic' beauty. Just as Vico's Homer, Winckelmann's statue is constructed – and constructed by words – on the body of another statue. It is constructed on the remainder of the product of the sculptor's intention. So it is the product of a subtraction and an addition. In the same way the 'modern' choreographic body is a body first deprived from its mimetic capacities, reduced to the 'immobility' of the statue in order to free the capacity of new unseen bodies; Mallarmé's poem is constructed as the 'divination' of the mute language written on the nude floor by the feet of the dancer. And even the stage designer (director) in search of the living artwork in the cathedral of the future, Adolphe Appia, contradicts in advance his own dream when he tears the characters of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk away from the visual setting imagined for them by Wagner and puts them in a space of geometric modules where the living bodies look like statues that the lighting must mould – which means that it must turn into shadows. If the art of the *mise-en-scène* became so important in the aesthetic regime of art, it is because it embodies the whole logic of



that regime, the way in which the sensory presence and the ethical immediacy, opposed to the representational mediation, are doubled, thwarted and eventually overturned by the powers of subtraction and disconnection of the statue, the words and the shadows. What characterizes the aesthetic regime of art is not the 'modernist' truth to the medium. Nor is it the Deleuzian 'pure sensation' torn away from the sensori-motor regime of sensory experience. The ontology of the dissensual actually is a fictional ontology, a play of 'aesthetic ideas'. The set of relations that constitutes the work plays *as if* it had another ontological texture than the sensations that make up everyday experience. But there is neither a sensory difference nor an ontological difference. The aesthetic work is in the place of the work that would achieve either the law of its medium or the law of pure sensation. The art of film is in the place of the 'cinematographic art' that was dreamed in the 1920's as the pure writing of the movement. And when an artist, namely Godard, sets out to revive the true vocation of the cinematographic art, he has to do it by the means of another art. Only the video surface that actually denies the filmic identity of the shots and the practice of cinematographic montage proves able to demonstrate the iconic individuality of the shot and the discontinuity of montage. And only the combination between the mobility of video superimposition, the continuum of the commenting voice and the sound and music background gives the equivalence of the alleged constitution of a 'place in the world' by the filmic projection. Just as Mallarmé's poem is constructed between the poem designed by the feet of the mute dancer and the inner poem of the silent spectator, Godard's *Histoires* are constructed between two 'cinemas': between the corpus of the cinematographic works and the body of a fictional cinema that oversteps the corpus of works produced by that medium and can only be shown by the means of another medium and another art.

What holds for the 'community of sense' constituting the work itself holds all the more for the community that is supposed to result from it. The seal that Mallarmé's poetry wants to give to the community, the new forms of community that the 'non productive place' must weave, the 'people to come' of the philosopher must be thought of as the legacy of that statue definitely torn away from the people which was 'its' people. The Greece that is embodied in the mutilated *Torso* dismisses at the same time the mimetic efficiency of the representation and the ethical hyper-theatre of the people. Schiller's Juno Ludovisi holds the promise of a free community because she does not speak nor act, because she does nothing, wants nothing and does not propose any model to be imitated. It is no more the element of a religious or civic ritual. It does no longer bring about any moral improvement or any mobilization of individual or collective bodies. It addresses no specific audience; instead it stays in front of the anonymous and indeterminate spectators of the museum who look at it just as they look at a Florentine painting of The Virgin Mary, a Spanish little beggar, a Dutch peasant wedding or a French still-life, representing fruit or fishes. In the Museum – which does not only mean a specific building but a form of cutting of the common space and a specific mode of visibility all those representations are disconnected from any specific destination, offered to the same 'indifferent' gaze. The aesthetic separation is not the constitution of a private paradise for the amateurs or the aesthetes. Instead it implies that there can be no private paradise, that the works are torn away from their original destination, torn away from any specific community and that there is no more any border separating what belongs to the realm of art and what belongs to the realm of everyday life. This is also why the 'aesthetic education' conceptualized by Schiller after reading Kant's Third Critique cannot identify with the happy dream of a community united and civilized by the contemplation of eternal beauty.

The aesthetic effect is in fact a relationship between two ‘separations’. The works that enter the new realm of aesthetic experience had been first produced according to a certain destination: the civic festivals of the antique times, the ceremonies of religion, the decorum of monarchic power or of aristocratic life. But their aesthetic condition is the condition of monuments, images or fictions separated from those functions and destinations. The aesthetic sensorium is the sensorium marked by that loss of destination. What is lost, along with the harmony between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, is the dependence of artistic productions on a distribution of social places and functions. The previous destination of the works fitted a certain order of the bodies, a certain harmony between the places and functions of a social order and the capacities or incapacities of the bodies located in such or such place, dedicated to such or such function. According to that ‘social nature’ the forms of domination were a matter of sensory inequality. The human beings who were destined to think and to rule had not the same humanity as those who were destined to work, to earn their living and reproduce life. As Plato had put it, one had to ‘believe’ that God had put gold in the souls of the rulers and iron in the soul of the artisans. That nature was a matter of an *as if*. It was not necessary that the artisans get convinced in depths by story. It was enough that they sensed it, that they used their arms, their eyes and their minds as if it was true. And they did even more so as that belief about fitting fitted the reality of their condition. This is the point where the *as if* of the community constructed by the aesthetic experience meets the *as if* at play in social emancipation. Social emancipation was an aesthetic matter because it meant the dismemberment of the body animated by that ‘belief’. In order to understand it, let us shift from the marble of the mutilated statue to the reality ‘in flesh’ of a dissociation between the work of the arms and the activity of a gaze. I borrow my example from a worker’s revolutionary newspaper called *Le Tocsin des travailleurs* (*The Workers’ Tocsin*) issued during the French Revolution of 1848. Among reports and statements on the situation, that issue contains an apparently apolitical description of the experience of a joiner who works as a floor-layer. This is how the joiner writes his diary in the third person:

Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room, so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the window opens out onto a garden or commands a view of 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.<sup>4</sup>

This is what the aesthetic rupture produced: the appropriation of the place of work and exploitation as the place of a free gaze. It is not a matter of illusion. It is a matter of shaping for oneself a new body and a new sensorium. Being a worker meant a certain form of fitting between a sensory equipment and its destination. It meant a determined body, a determined coordination between the gaze and the arms. The divorce between the labouring arms and the floating gaze introduces the body of a worker into a new configuration of the sensible; it overthrows the ‘right’ 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’ revolutionary newspaper: the possibility of a ‘voice of the workers’ went through the disqualification of a certain worker’s body. It went through the redistribution of the whole set of relationships between capacities and incapacities that define the ‘ethos’ of a social body. This is also why the same joiner recommends to his friends specific readings: not novels engaging in social issues, but the stories of those romantic characters – Werther, René or Oberman - who suffered from the misfortune that is forbidden by definition to the worker: the misfortune of having no occupation, of not being fit or equipped for any specific place in society. What literature does is not providing messages or representations that would give to

the workers the awareness of their condition. It is triggering new passions, which means new forms of balance – or imbalance – between an occupation and the sensory equipment fitting it. That politics of literature is not the politics of the writers. Goethe, Chateaubriand or Senancour were certainly not willing to arouse such passions among the labourers. It is a politics inherent in literature as an art of writing which has broken the rules that made definite forms of feeling and expression fit definite characters or subject matters.

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination that it presupposes disturbs the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is no rhetoric persuasion about what has to be done. Nor is it the framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world where they live and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ for fitting it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. Now this political effect operates under the condition of an original disjunction, of an original effect, which is the suspension of any straight cause-effect relationship. The aesthetic effect first is an effect of des-identification. The aesthetic community is a community of des-identified persons. As such, it is political since a political subjectivization goes through a process of des-identification. An emancipated proletarian is a des-identified worker. Now there is no measure of the des-identifying effect. On the one hand, the effect escapes the strategy of the artist; on the other hand, the artistic strategy completes the process of des-identification beyond the point of political subjectivization toward the ‘song of the earth’, that is to say toward the construction of new forms of individuation – the Deleuzian haecceities- that cancel any form of political subjectivization. On the one hand, the joiner gains the access to the community of the des-identified proletarian subjects by appropriating, against the will of Chateaubriand or Sénancour, the ‘sorrows’ of the idle René or Obermann. On the other hand the writer, Flaubert, castigates the peasant’s daughter Emma Bovary who has appropriated the dreams of Bernardin de Saint Pierre’s Virginie. Not only does he make her die, but he opposes to her desire to put art in her life, the ‘song of the earth’, or as he says the song of ‘inanimate existences, inert things that seem animal, vegetative souls, statues that dream and landscapes that think’<sup>5</sup>. ‘I want an empty word that I could fill’ says this woman of the Parisian suburbs. The joiner and the peasant’s daughter looked for such words, that the writers both unwillingly offered them and tried to take away from them by emptying them again, making them the breath of the impersonal respiration of the infinite. And the bathing at Asnieres, the strolling on the Grande Jatte or the look at the Parade on the Boulevards evince at the same time the enigmatic potential of the popular bodies who gain access to ‘leisure’ and the neutralisation of that potential. The Deleuzian identification analogy between the torsion of the work, the cry of men and the song of earth both evinces and neutralises itself that tension between the aesthetic effect of des-identification and its own neutralisation. The same reason that makes the aesthetic ‘political’ forbid any strategy of ‘politicization of art’.

That tension had long been concealed as the politics of art was identified with the paradigm of ‘critical art’. Critical art plugs the gap by defining a straight relation between its aims and its means: its ends would be to provoke an awareness of political situations leading to political mobilization. Its means would be to produce a sensory form of strangeness, a clash of heterogeneous elements prompting a chance in perception. This means that it wants to include the aesthetic break in the representational continuity. When Brecht represented the Nazi leaders as cauliflower sellers and had them discuss their vegetable business in classical verse, the clash of heterogeneous situations and heterogeneous languages was supposed to

bring about the awareness of both the merchant relations hidden behind the hymns to the race and the nation and the forms of economical and political domination hidden behind the dignity of high Art. When Martha Rosler intertwined photographs of the War in Vietnam with ads for petty-bourgeois furniture and household, epitomizing American happiness, that photo-montage was supposed to evince the reality of the imperialist war behind standardized individual happiness and the empire of the commodity behind the wars for the defence of the 'free world'. In such a way the aesthetic break would be absorbed in the representational continuity. But there is no reason why the sensory strangeness produced by the clash of heterogeneous elements should bring about the understanding of the state of the world, no reason why the comprehension of the state of the world should bring about the decision to change it. There is no straight way from looking at a spectacle to understanding the state of the world, no straight way from intellectual awareness to political action. What occurs is much more the shift from a given sensory world to another sensory world which defines other capacities and incapacities, other forms of tolerance and intolerance. What works out are processes of dissociation: the break in a relation between sense and sense - between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt. Such breaks can happen anywhere at any time. But they can never be calculated.

That distance between the pretensions of critical art and its real forms of efficiency could hold so long as there were patterns of intelligibility and forms of mobilization strong enough to sustain the artistic procedures that were supposed to produce them. When those patterns or forms are eroded by the weakening of political action, the undecidability of the critical procedures appears in full light. It happens that the artists play on that very undecidability. The struggle against the 'society of the spectacle' and the practice of 'détournement' are still put on all the agendas and they are supposed to be implemented in standard forms such as: parodies of promotional films, reprocessed disco sounds, advertising icons or media stars modelled in wax figures, Disney animals turned to polymorphous perverts, montages of 'vernacular' photographs showing us standardized petty-bourgeois living-rooms, overloaded supermarket trolleys, standardized entertainment or refuse of consumerist civilisation, etc., etc. Those dispositifs keep occupying many of our galleries and museums with a rhetoric assuming that they make us discover the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle or the pornography of power. As nobody ignores anything on those topics, the mechanism ends up spinning on itself and capitalizing on that undecidability, as is shown by this piece, by Charles Ray, presented in an exhibition called *Let's Entertain* in Minneapolis and *Beyond the Spectacle* in Paris, a piece entitled *Revolution Counter-Revolution*, both because the mechanism of the merry-go-round is disjointed from the movement of the horses and because it evinces the double play of 'critical art', while still capitalizing on it.

When the critical model comes to this self-neutralisation, other attempts at overcoming the aesthetic disconnection come to the fore. If the break cannot be anticipated, what is anticipated is its effect, the production of a new being-together. A lot of engaged contemporary works set out in that way to show itself in the space of exhibition as working outside the museum, in 'real life' and to produce the work as a visual equivalent of the being together produced by that way out. For instance, at the last Biennales of Havana and Sao Paulo, one could see the video-installation of the Cuban artist René Francisco. This artist had used a grant from an artistic foundation in order to make an inquiry in the poor suburbs of Havana. Then he had selected an old woman and decided, with some fellow artists, to refurbish their home. The final work shown in the biennale presented the viewer with a cloth screen printed with the image of the old woman, hung so that she appeared to be looking at

the 'real' screen of the monitor, where a video showed the artists working as masons, plumbers, or painters. Other works make the artistic invention a metaphor of its own 'extra-artistic' outcome. This is what happens 'outside' with artistic inventions such as Lucy Orta's collective clothes that are used both as a 'home' and as a form of collective link, in order to forge 'lasting connections between groups and individuals'. The same anticipation of the being together is documented 'inside' by the big mosaics or tapestries representing the multitude of anonyms that are among the favourites in many international exhibitions. Let us look for instance at that tapestry called 'the people' and made by the Chinese artist Bai Yiluo, out of one thousand and six hundred ID pictures sewn together. The tapestry aimed to evoke 'the delicate threads which unite families and communities'. So the work presents itself as the anticipated reality of what it evokes. Art is supposed to 'unite' people in the same way as the artist sewed the photographs that he had first made as an employee in a studio. The photograph tends to be at the same time a sculpture which already makes present what it is about. The concept of metaphor, omnipresent in the rhetoric of the curators, tends to conceptualize that anticipated identity between the being together signified by the artistic proposition and its embodied reality.

'Apart we are together'. There are two interpretations of the formula. On the one hand there is that anticipation of the being together of the community in the being apart of the work that I have just evoked. On the other hand, there are works that try to explore the very tension between the two terms, either by questioning the ways in which the community is tentatively produced or by exploring the potentials of community entailed in separation itself. On the first side, I am thinking here of Anri Sala's work *Dammi colori* that used the powers of video to question an attempt to use art directly in order to frame a certain sense of community. The work deals with the initiative of a 'political artist', the Mayor of Tirana, an artist himself who implemented a project that is much reminiscent of the Schillerian 'aesthetic education of Man' since he decided to have the facades of the houses in his town repainted in bright colours in order to bring about a new sense of aesthetic community among the citizens. The movements of the camera of Anri Sala confront the discourse of the 'political artist' with both the shabby aspect of the muddy street or the apparently unconcerned circulation of the inhabitants and the abstractedness of the patches of colours on the walls. This means that the resources of 'distant' art are used in order to question a given politics of art, which is a direct attempt to fuse art and life in one single process.



Pedro Costa Vanda's Room 2001 (still), reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

On the other side, I am thinking of the work of the Portuguese film-maker Pedro Costa who dedicated three films to the life of a group of young underdogs, poised between drugs

and little business, in a poor suburb of Lisbon. I would examine here a fragment of the second film of the trilogy *Vanda's Room* that shows his characters as they are preparing to leave the shanty town that the Caterpillars are slowly tearing down. While relational artists are concerned with inventing some real or fancy monument or create unexpected situations in order to provoke new social relationships in the poor suburbs, Pedro Costa paradoxically focuses on the possibilities of life and art specific to that situation of misery: from the strange coloured architectures that result from the degradation of the houses and from demolition itself to the effort made by the inhabitants to recover a voice and a capacity of telling their own story, amidst the effects of drugs and despair. I would like us to focus on a little extract that shows three squatters preparing their move. One of the squatters is scratching the stains on the table with his knife; his fellows get nervous and tell him to stop because they will not take the table with them anyway. But he goes on because he cannot stand dirtiness. Perhaps the complicity between the aesthetic sense of the film maker that does not hesitate to exploit all the 'beauty' available in the shanty town and the aesthetic sense of the poor addict gets more to the heart of the question than the project of the mayor. By setting aside the 'explanations' of the economical and social reasons of the existence of the shanty town and of its destruction the film sets forth what is specifically political: the confrontation between the power and the impotence of a body, the confrontation between a life and its possibilities. But this way of addressing the 'truly political' does not for all that sidestep the incalculable tension between political dissensuality and aesthetic indifference. It does not sidestep the fact that a film remains a film and a spectator, a spectator. The wretched addict keeps cleaning a table that never was his table and will soon be smashed by the Caterpillars. The film maker pays homage to his aesthetic sense as he makes a beautiful still-life like shot out of the arrangement of the table. He makes a film while being aware that it is only a film that will be scarcely shown and the effects of which in the theatres and outside the theatres are fairly unpredictable.

Film, Video art, photography, installation, etc. rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. As such they may open new passages toward new forms of political subjectivization. But none of them can avoid the aesthetic cut that separates the outcomes from the intentions and forbids any straight way toward an 'other side' of the words and the images. My inquiry in the constitution of the aesthetic regime of art has often been suspected of proposing a return to the fairy times and fairy tales of aesthetic utopias and aesthetic community, which either have brought about the big disasters of the 20th century or, at least, are out of steps with the artistic practices and the political issues of the 21st century. I tried to suggest that, on the contrary, this inquiry points to the tensions and contradictions which at once sustain the dynamic of artistic creation and aesthetic efficiency and prevent it from ever fusing in one and the same community of sense. The archaeology of the aesthetic regime of art is not a matter of romantic nostalgia. Instead I think that it can help us to set up in a more accurate way the issue of what art can be and can do today.

Jacques Rancière  
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<sup>1</sup> The following text is an edited transcript of a plenary lecture delivered on 20 June 2006 to the symposium, *Aesthetics and Politics: With and Around Jacques Rancière* co-organised by Sophie Berrebi and Marie-Aude Baronian at the University of Amsterdam on 20-21 June 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991), pp. 166-7. [My translation.]  
*Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*  
<http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/ranciere.html>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.evensfoundation.be/downloads/CAMPEMENTURBAIN\(anglais\).pdf](http://www.evensfoundation.be/downloads/CAMPEMENTURBAIN(anglais).pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Gabriel Gauny, 'Le travail à la tâche', *Le Tocsin des Travailleurs* (Juin 1848) in Gabriel Gauny, *Le Philosophe plébéien, textes choisis et présentés par Jacques Rancière* (Paris: La Découverte/Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1983), 91. As cited in Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labour*, translated by John Drury (1989; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> *La Tentation de saint Antoine*, Paris, 1924, p. 418.