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The emergent artistic object in the postconceptual condition

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Chapter 2

The Autonomy Project, Van Abbemuseum

1 Introduction

The ‘Autonomy Project’ was a three-day symposium held at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2011 that sought to explore the current state of art production in relation to politics. The symposium was organized around the term *autonomy*, as the quintessential historic artistic idea and form of politico-artistic organization which has been fervently discussed the last decade. The idea of artistic autonomy – until then very much the accustomed idea in the practices of artistic production – proved in need of re-assessment, given the success of the political attacks on it in 2011 in the form of the budget cuts by the liberal-conservative government in the Netherlands.³⁶ These cuts shook up the supposed accord between the artistic population and politics and exposed its frailty. Now suppose we consider this through Adorno’s notion of the autonomous artwork. It can be explained by: art is that what separates itself from the order as it is in order to critique it, and it does so by negation, abstraction and through its form.³⁷ We could, then, say that either today’s society does not recognize or support such a function, or that maybe both art and society do no longer recognize or acknowledge each other’s forms, in order to sustain their critical and dialectical relation. The discord that became apparent exposed a maybe outdated positioning and self-understanding of the artistic field vis a vis the political, as the art world could not mobilize societal or political support for its position. The theme can therefore be considered a question of assessing the historic relation between art and politics and a search for a new form of art production, occasioned by a specific crisis, a rupture of this societal accord.

³⁶ The budget cuts effected by the liberal-conservative government of cabinet Rutte1, amounted to 20% of the overall budget for culture. What was politically significant though was how these cuts targeted living production (the not-for-profit sector) specifically, leaving the bigger institutions and heritage relatively unaffected. The not-for-profit sector (individual artists and groups, smaller presentation spaces, project-based subsidies and post-academic education were cut by ca. 40%.

See: <https://merijnoudenampsen.org/2013/02/21/dutch-culture-wars-on-the-politics-of-gutting-the-arts/> and: <https://www.platformbk.nl/the-dutch-situation-2/> (accessed 07-02-2021)

³⁷ Josephine Wikström lays out the role of the artwork according to Adorno, and the meaning and implementation of autonomy in respect to its critical function in her text on the work of Yvonne Rainer. Josephine Wikström, *A Critique of Capitalism? The Mediation of Abstract Labour in Yvonne Rainer’s Task-Dance*, Parse Journal, Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts, Gothenburg Sweden, 2019

See: <http://parsejournal.com/article/a-critique-of-capitalism-the-mediation-of-abstract-labour-in-yvonne-rainers-task-dance/> (accessed 14-05- 2019)

In the symposium those working or involved in the field of art production – theorists, educators, artists and curators – gathered to debate this topic in lectures, workshops and discussions. The symposium clearly aimed to explore and present the relations between art and aesthetics, and between art and theory. As such the symposium fits the notion of the ‘scene’ as formulated by Jacques Rancière. This idea of the scene stands for the whole range of forms and disciplines that partake in artistic production as contributing to the aesthetics in case (this will later on be unpacked in this text).³⁸ It was therefore an opportunity to consider the relation between discourse and art, issues of authorship and the symposium as form in the infrastructure of art production. As the notion of the ‘scene’ by Rancière explicitly articulates the relationship between art and aesthetics it serves to shed light on the notion of multi-authorship in artistic platform-production, characteristic of the ‘postconceptual condition’ as formulated by Peter Osborne.

In what follows, the symposium will be analysed for its formal structure and artistic-political format. How did and does the Autonomy Project’s format act within the idea of art-aesthetic production? How are the relations between the organization and participants structured, and how are the relations between knowledge production, academia and art shaped through the binding platform of the conference? These questions are considered through the framework of Jacques Rancière’s conception of the relationship between politics, art and aesthetics: *the aesthetic regime of art*, notably to be found in his book *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*,³⁹ and through a critique on the practice of contemporary art production, as voiced by art theorists and educators Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips via Rancière in their essay *The Wrong of Contemporary Art*.⁴⁰

Rancière describes the philosophical convergences between art and politics via aesthetics, and also notes the limitations and specifics of art as a form of politics. Malik and Phillips, extrapolating on Rancière, critically expand on the shortcomings of contemporary art production and propose a reconsideration of the political in artistic production. They

³⁸ In *The Politics of Art* an interview with Jacques Rancière on the occasion of the publication of *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso, London, 2017), he describes art not as medium-specific and autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation.

³⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran, London: Continuum, 2010

⁴⁰ Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*. In: Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds. *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*. London: Continuum, 2011, pp.111-128.

formulate how the quintessential characteristic of the absolute openness of art (its indeterminacy) constitutes art's meta-political programme. This begs the question of what possible form the consequential application of such politics could take. This discussion provides the lens for a critique on the political agency and forms of new artistic platform models. I will first describe the Autonomy Project conference – in particular the role and the place of Rancière as philosopher/critic in the conference in relation to that of the artists present – after which I will expand on Rancière's philosophy and on his mobilisation of the function of critique. After that I will continue to discuss the relevance of the Malik and Phillips essay. The considerations in these reflections will re-appear – sometimes indirectly – in other cases such as the Benjamin in Palestine Conference, chapter 3.

2 The Autonomy Project conference, form and actors

The conference consisted of a mix of lectures by art theorists, experts on political governance, workshops, public discussion and artistic presentations. Among the theorists lecturing were Peter Osborne, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Gerald Raunig, Ruth Sonderegger, Isabell Lorey, Maria Gough and Jacques Rancière. In this text and for the purpose of the examination at hand, I will focus on the artists and art theorists that participated. The central editorial rationale and choice for this line-up was to provide a historical overview of the development and philosophies in the relation between art, aesthetics and politics, the genealogy of the political of aesthetics, and what possible routes out of the current situation, could be presented.

The artists Thomas Hirschhorn and Tania Bruguera gave extensive presentations about a selection of their own works. Both artists' practices are characterized by theoretical discourse as a substantial element in their works. As can be seen on Bruguera's website, her projects are mostly hybrid forms of research which combine participation, the specifics of locality (social issues), artistic interventionist forms and theoretical research which centres around the well theorized history of political art.⁴¹ Hirschhorn's work also relates extensively to theoretical and philosophical notions. He uses the legacies and ideologies laid out by philosophy's major writers and thinkers to frame and conduct his on-site projects. The *Gramsci Monument* at Forest Houses, a New York City Housing Authority development in the Bronx, the *Deleuze Monument* (Avignon, France, 2000) and the *Bataille*

⁴¹ See: <https://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/> (accessed 16-02-21)

Monument (Kassel, Germany, 2002) can be named in line with the *Spinoza Festival* (Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 2009) which will be discussed here.⁴²

Rancière, next to being interviewed by the organizers as main event of the symposium, was tasked to critically review the projects discussed by Hirschhorn and Bruguera. I will therefore specifically focus on their performances in the remainder of this text in relation to his theories. These artists' projects lend themselves particularly well to be critiqued for political-aesthetic considerations. Aligning with Rancière's notions of the artistic as interaction between aesthetics and discourse as in the scene, the artists voice their artistic practices as concerned with and aiming to produce political effects through the production and dissemination of aesthetics. Hirschhorn's *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* (2009) for example, that was discussed, was a long-term installation in the Bijlmer, an area in Amsterdam with distinct societal problems. It is an area characterized by lower income and higher levels of drug related crime. It can be seen as a social intervention, since the project concretely addresses and engages with the local population. Its choice of location is an unconventional venue not connected to art's existing infrastructure and is a generic public space which does not directly address or accommodate an accustomed art audience.⁴³ One has to specifically travel to see this particular work and how it comes into being in its social environment.

In this project, as stated by Hirschhorn, he as artist aimed to reach the local community. He wanted however to address this community without being patronizing or with an educational intent. He also insisted his approach was not based on the notion of participation. Hirschhorn considers the concept of the artwork as a form of social interaction as too intrusive, colonial and paternalistic. It rather needs to be seen as autonomous without an a priori notion of its participative function.⁴⁴ One can observe here that all these considerations are still current questions on how to engage as artist with an audience that is directly addressed, and in what form without giving rise to power differences, and what the ethical and formal implications are of such an intervention. Seen this way, the artist comes with a distinct set of presuppositions and concerns, captured in certain traditions and

⁴² See <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/exhibitions/>

⁴³ For an in-depth description see: <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/the-bijlmer-spinoza-festival/> (accessed 16-02-21)

⁴⁴ The development of participation as defining element in art that rose to prominence within the so called *social turn* of art has been extensively discussed by art historian and critic Claire Bishop. She describes the pitfalls that collaborative authorship and the introduction of social frameworks within the context of art may present. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso London, 2012

discourses that are probably unknown to the audience as such that need to be considered.

In his talk Hirschhorn describes how he dealt with these differences and makes the negotiation thereof, part of the work. He does so by considering the festival itself to be a social sculpture and site through which the artist and audience may meet. Whatever pre-knowledges exist may then be exchanged.⁴⁵ He thus draws attention to the difference between the artist's mindset and discourse through which he acts and that of the audience. What becomes expressed through this approach is that meaningful exchange can only take place through interaction and negotiation of frames of understanding, and that there must be no a priori intended or projected outcome for it. The exchange must be open and based on the assumption of equality. The political agency of art consists here in the organisation of a common place and sensorium that is to emerge out of an open process, to which the artwork serves. Both the emphasis on equality and the generative processes of aesthetics leading to formations of the communal are quite recognizable as the concerns that Rancière also raises as I will explain further on. To quote Hirschhorn writing about this project:

This project can only be done in Coexistence. Coexistence with the inhabitants of the Bijlmer neighbourhood. Coexistence because it is their place, coexistence because it is with them, it is resolutely with and for the Bijlmer inhabitants. It is with and for the local inhabitants first – without exclusion of others. But it is my work. It is me – the artist – who assumes fully the responsibility, who takes the responsibility for this work, for the entire work, in all of its aspects. The work must consequently be made in co-operation. «The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival» cannot be done without the help of the inhabitants. This work cannot be done without the help of the inhabitants because it is not me – the artist – who claims to be helping, who wants to 'help' or furthermore who 'knows' how to help – on the contrary – the inhabitants are the ones helping the work. The inhabitants are the ones who are helping «The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival» to be carried out to completion.⁴⁶

Rancière in public at the symposium also evaluated artist Tania Bruguera for the political-

⁴⁵ This is also why the introduction of theoretical discourse, here the work of Spinoza, which was read during the festival is not to be understood as patronizing since it is an open engagement with the text, it in fact would be precisely patronizing to consider it too difficult or problematic.

⁴⁶ See: <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/the-bijlmer-spinoza-festival/> (accessed 2019-05-31)

ness of her artistic strategy or artistic form. In her presentation she expanded on her project *Arte Útil (Useful Art)* and the ideas behind it.⁴⁷ As already expressed in the title *Arte Útil* she deliberately embraces the notion of instrumentality and purposeful intent to frame her art by. Coming from Cuba and a communist background, but working and living in the West, she combines the notions of a utilitarian art – a conventional attribute of art in communism – with the problematic notions of freedom in the liberal West under capitalism. In a sense she thus juxtaposes the two great histories of capitalism and communism and notions of art these have produced to artistically reflect on our current post-communist conditions this brings.

In her talk she presents several projects that have an activist-political character, like *Immigrant Movement International*, a project that combines direct social and political work with illegals and immigrants and the museum-context. As Bruguera states:

I feel that useful art has two ways to be experienced, one way is from the “art side”, which is, to look at how the artist structures the project and how they have developed the idea. If you experience the project from the user's side, then for me, it's more about, “what do I get from it?” It doesn't matter if it is art or not. It feels to me that depending on the intensity of your involvement in the project you can get to one side or the other.⁴⁸

She hereby is an outspoken exponent of the direct political artwork – in the aforementioned debate around the notion of art's role. According to Bruguera art can be intentionally organized as in addressing a cause exterior to it, it can be instrumental. This vision was a polemical stance in the artistic climate until then and has been wholeheartedly backed and supported by the Van Abbemuseum.⁴⁹ In the Rancièrè-ian scheme the question here is not so much the direct political but whether its outcome as artwork contains a prescribed narrative

⁴⁷ For information on this project at the Van Abbemuseum see:

<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-of-arte-util/> and on the website of Arte Útil itself, see: <http://www.arte-util.org> (accessed 2019-05-16)

⁴⁸ Interview Tania Bruguera by Ashraf Osman on the *Immigrant Movement International* project.

An Interview With Tania Bruguera, ONCURATING website, December 2012,

See: http://www.on-curating.org/issue-19-reader/tania-bruguera-interviewed.html#.XN_Toy2iFsY (accessed 2019-05-16)

⁴⁹ The museum has given her an extensive solo-presentation in the year 2013-2014 that consisted of a complete restructure of the museum into an activist platform for a period of three months. Bruguera The Van Abbemuseum has an ongoing cooperation and relation with Bruguera.

See for a description of the project at the Van Abbemuseum:

<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/museum-of-arte-util/> (accessed 2019-05-16)

which would negate the free play between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, between making and the meaning attributed to it, and who controls or directs this meaning (this will be discussed extensively in the next section). Arguably Bruguera's work implies a pre-existing critique (on working conditions and the legal status of immigrants) yet what happens in the work itself with those who partake, she argues, is basically free. She also turns the question of art's predominance around by introducing 'utility' as equal critical category in relation to art. So different notions of the artwork and its politics arise.

In both cases the artworks were critically politically mustered for the result Rancière requires from artworks: whether these organize an effect of re-distribution of aesthetic notions and their political mode. The critique deployed by Rancière is not limited to expressiveness and formal reading of works within the tradition of art-making as said before, but is directly related to how works function and address a much broader aesthetic and political sphere of activity. Alongside these lengthy public critiques, Rancière was the interviewee in a keynote discussion with the symposium's main organizers Charles Esche and Nikos Papastergiadis. Through this the figure of Rancière and his thematic framework and conceptual set of ideas became the central axis around which the conference was constructed.

Here, in regards to the role of commentator that Rancière performs in the symposium, some remarks must be made about the style of production and hybridity of the figure of Rancière himself. Apart from publishing unequivocal philosophical books, analyzing politics and aesthetics, as in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (or. 2004), his style of writing often also takes the form of literary critiques, through which he develops his arguments – like in *Aisthesis, Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (or. 2011) for example. These critiques often contain elements of a speculative quality and are therefore not straightforward art-historical treatises or critiques. As political sciences scholar Devin Lefebvre explains, Rancière's style of writing is based on the notion of the fragment which would undercut any identification with any discipline, including the art-critical and that precludes the notion of finalisation. To quote Lefebvre:

If I suggest that Rancière be thought of as a thinker of fragments rather than as purely a polemicist, it is because the reconfiguration he brings about does not so much *find* itself in that which it reconfigures as it *establishes* itself. Much as how the stakes of the conflict brought about by the sudden appearance part of those who have no part

can be found in both a particular and a universal sense, the stakes of his writings are not themselves confined to any one particular intervention. In a way similar to the essay and negative dialectic in Adorno, Rancière's writings, while never a *total* account, are nevertheless *an* account. They still *want* to say and are still able to find a certain completeness despite never settling on the finality of this completion.⁵⁰

The Romanticist emphasis on the fragment therefore results one can say, in an aesthetical technique that belongs to the notion of the aesthetic regime of art. The final element that runs through all of his work and that thoroughly binds it, is the fundamental notion of equality, which supposes that all can partake in the discussion on art, and which specifically acknowledges the pre-existence of knowledge in subjects. This well-known element in Rancière's thinking has been extensively put forward in his text *The Emancipated Spectator*.⁵¹ The assumption of fragmented knowledge supposes a fundamental incompleteness of account which is open to being continued upon. One can say that Rancière undercuts a possible critical authoritative position by fictionalizing his aesthetical assessment of the situation.

Paradox

This also means that his critique should not be understood as definite and authoritarian judgement, as judgment alone and that the critiques of the cases discussed as in the Autonomy Project conference – as critical objects – serve to develop speculative propositions. Which is done in the *way* Rancière discusses these. This modality as active ingredient of Rancière's aesthetic principle remained however, I argue, under recognized. In the symposium Rancière was attributed a central role as an expert and knowledgeable reader. This is contrary to what is at the core of his teachings and is against the grain of his manner of performance: there is no hierarchical distinction to be made in perception and in the formation of aesthetics, nor in the communication between participants. Furthermore: in Rancière's philosophy the sense of aesthetics that emerges through all that are present (what Rancière calls the optical lens of *the scene*) remains an issue of ongoing contention.

In the conference though, I claim, it was not this 'moment' itself – as the assembly of

⁵⁰ Devin Alexandre George Lefebvre, *Rancière and Commitment, The Strange Place of the Politics and Style of Jacques Rancière in the Western-Marxist Tradition*, School of Political Studies, University of Ottawa, 2015

⁵¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso London, 2014

all present – that was presented as the focus or motor of this event. Though the authoritative nature of expertise presented on stage, was emphatically denied, and though the discussion was to be a non-hierarchical exchange as specifically stated at the introduction of the talk with Rancière, this was not reflected in the structure of the wider symposium. This was because, as staged dialogue, it was the main event in the conference, conducted by its two main organizers: Charles Esche (also the director of the Van Abbemuseum) and Nikos Papastergiadis which gave it an unmistakable gravity. So, though a non-hierarchical (un-authored) conduct was presented for the course of the exchange between the protagonists, the central conceptual and idea-matic frame was set, around which the further dialogue would ensue and around which the other presentations, including those of the artists, in the program inevitably would come to relate.

This constituted a paradoxical situation where the form of the conference that was presented at the Autonomy Project conference with the expert-theorist put on display, served to critically comment on the artists, establishing an authoritative hierarchy between artistic production and theoretical reflection. Here the theorist arguably served to perform the expert-role contrary to his teachings, delivering an object in the form of a critique as reading. Subsequently the critique became the stand-alone object within the event. In a sense the critical format of Rancière which implies an enfolding of critique – and that is to *materialize* in social exchange – was transposed to the notion of critique perhaps more in line with a strictly philosophical or art-historical format: an object of thought as critical object. In this, a prospective object that these readings are supposed to constitute, implicated by Rancière's style as explained by Lefebvre, risks being missed: a speculative object that could have been produced in the exchanges as staged in this constellation. Here a potential deficit comes to light between the theorists who, besides Rancière, presented at the symposium, and whose reflections, manners of engagement and modes of critique may function differently. In the symposium such possible differences were not introduced or taken as point of departure for the ensuing discussion within the symposium.

In the next section I will extensively go into Rancière's ideas on the relation between art and politics and how he arrives at the crucial notion of the relation between art and aesthetics. This serves to explain the response Malik and Phillips have proposed, and how a politics of the arts can be understood differently from Rancière's position which yet departs from the same analysis.

3 Rancière's aesthetic regime of art

Jacques Rancière is well known for his notion of the *aesthetic regime*. For Rancière, this denotes our historic conception of art, which is constituted by the interplay and relation between art and life, politics and aesthetics. According to Rancière, art does not solely serve the representation of power but acts as a medium around which common fields of perception are organized. This is what Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. This notion establishes art as an indirect political agent, since it interferes in or is in communication with the aesthetics of politics.⁵² Politics for Rancière is a general principle of the struggle for recognition of a group or organization of subjects in the established order. This struggle involves aesthetics both in recognizing one's common perception of and place in the world (the identity of the group) as well as how this can manifest in the social order as it is. So this notion of the political is a broader concept than the mere representational forms of politics, and aesthetics is a wider concept tied to the political imagining and (re)ordering of the world. As Rancière writes:

If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense – re-examined perhaps by Foucault – as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of [14] spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.⁵³

For Rancière the art-historical categories of modernism and postmodernism both fall within this same broad periodization of the aesthetic regime. Rancière, like Peter Osborne, locates the origin of our contemporary aesthetics in early German Idealism and Romanticism, where the basic premises leading to our modern form of art and aesthetics are founded.⁵⁴ It is especially in Schiller that Rancière finds the argument for the interconnectedness of life and art as structural political bind, as Rancière says:

⁵² Joseph J. Tanke, *What Is The Aesthetic Regime?*, *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, nr. 12, 2011, p. 71-81

⁵³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London-New York, 2004

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.27

...In a sense, the whole problem lies in a very small proposition. Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful **and** of the art of living. The entire question of the 'politics of aesthetics' - in other words, of the aesthetic regime of art - turns on this short conjunction. The aesthetic experience is effective in as much as it is the experience of that **and**. It grounds the autonomy of art, to the extent that it connects it to the hope of 'changing life'.⁵⁵ (emphasis in text)

Life and art

For Rancière then, art is intimately entwined and in an ongoing relation with the organization of life. Yet at the same time, he distinguishes art as apart from life: it cannot coincide with it. This follows from Rancière's logic that says that art cannot require a unified reading or body of interpretation since it would be no longer poetic and heterogeneous and loses its meaning as an artwork as it would become a policing form. As Rancière writes:

Poetry is poetry, says Hegel, so long as prose is confused with poetry. When prose is only prose, there is no more heterogeneous sensible. The statements and furnishings of collective life are only the statements and furnishings of collective life. So the formula of art becoming life is invalidated: a new life does not need a new art. On the contrary, the new life is specific in that it does not need art. The whole history of art forms and of the politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime of art could be staged as the clash of these two formulæ: a new life needs a new art; the new life does not need art.⁵⁶

It is important to see how Rancière understands art here as lodged within the historical formation of politics and the relations between citizens and power. The role of art in this is that what expresses the unsettling of the laws and rules of ordered life (poetry vs prose) as a form of Hegelian dialectics. Poetry in this dialectical relation is that quality that can identify the law because it is strange and external to it, and importantly, needs to remain so. At the other end of the interplay between art life stands an ideal of sovereign life, where art no longer is needed, since a perfect life (or the ideal notion of such a life) would not be in need of art.⁵⁷ For Rancière art therefore oscillates between these two poles, and leads to a third

⁵⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, p.116

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.124

⁵⁷ And in the sense of the aim of emancipation of life as such stemming from notions from Romanticism to be found in Schiller, art strives to become life: 'art becoming life'. Here the aesthetization of life serves to fulfil the

scenario where art and life exchange their properties, which interrelationship also defines the relation between aesthetics and politics. Rancière:

These three scenarios yield three configurations of the aesthetic, emplotted in three versions of temporality. According to the logic of the *and*, each is also a variant of the politics of aesthetics, or what we should rather call its 'metapolitics' - that is, its way of producing its own politics, proposing to politics re-arrangements of its space, re-configuring art as a political issue or asserting itself as true politics.⁵⁸ (emphasis in text)

The definition of this third scenario 'aesthetics-art' is thus the continued negotiation of what the texture is that constitutes our world, through an ongoing assessment of what establishes a common sensibility without getting definitive or unified though. For Rancière art then is the moment of becoming that is prohibited from the onset to settle into an established form and therefore the constant play of renewing. This is best captured in what he defines as the *singular as arts*' defining quality. Rancière writes:

The aesthetic regime [33] of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres. Yet it does so by destroying the mimetic barrier that distinguished ways of doing and making affiliated with art from other ways of doing and making, a barrier that separated its rules from the order of social occupations. The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself. Schiller's aesthetic state, which is this regimes' first manifesto (and remains, in a sense, unsurpassable), clearly indicates this fundamental identity of opposites. The aesthetic state is a pure instance of suspension, a moment when form is experienced for itself.⁵⁹

human revolution. The human revolution would be realized through the fulfilment of the capacity to shape its own future, without god or state, egalitarian, sovereign and in freedom.

Ibid, p.119-121

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.119

⁵⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum, London-New York, 2004, p.23-24

The elevation of the singular as guiding principle results in a generalized and fundamental idea of political emancipation and the emphasis on that what is heterogenous (everything has the right to exist independent of recognition – and thus remains heterogenous –, sovereignty is not something that can be granted).⁶⁰ If we take this to be correct, and in principle I would agree, this means that any interpretation or an idea of art, can only be temporary and is in principal up for reconsideration.

The general rationale for this is deeply indebted to and founded in line with the principles of Romanticism. Rancière here points to a specific interpretation of Romanticist philosophy and aesthetics. Rather than emphasizing and elevating the artist figure as it is often the case or presenting art as the realm of the sublime, it means the fundamental impossibility to arrive at a determinate definition of what art is. What meaning art takes in the here and now in different times needs each time, to be considered and re-considered in the respective contexts of histories and times. This results in an unending assessment of the formation of aesthetics, by which even the demarcation of what art is, becomes undeterminable. This also means that these reconsiderations and re-ordering of the relation between art and life function as a mode for future actualizations as well. Importantly this also means that an idea of progress must be abandoned. This basic uncertainty becomes important when considering the symposium as site onto *and* from which art is discussed. As Rancière writes:

It is often thought that Romantic poetics involved a sacralization of art and of the artist, but this is a one-sided view. The principle of 'Romanticism' is rather to be found in a multiplication of the temporalities of art that renders its boundaries permeable. Multiplying its lines of temporality means complicating and ultimately dismissing the straightforward scenarios of art becoming life or life becoming art, of the 'end' of art; and replacing them with scenarios of latency and re-actualization. This is the burden of Schlegel's idea of 'progressive universal poetry'. It does not mean any straightforward

⁶⁰ The logic that this politics of egalitarian litigation entails is a paradoxical logic of the 'singular universal'. Against the particular power-interests of the ruling elite and forms of privatization of speech, political speech, as Žižek puts it, 'involves a local instance that acts as a stand-in for the universal: it consists in a conflict between the structured social body where each part has its place and the "part with no part" which unsettles this order on account of the empty principle of universality- the principled equality of all qua speaking beings'. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, Continuum, London – New York, 2010, Editor's Introduction, Steve Corcoran, p.6

march of progress.⁶¹

Rancière argues therefore also that in the encounter with art, a systematic integrity and coherent narrative can emerge that establishes a truth outside of art. Such narrative follows from the structural relationship between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, it emerges out of that what is being made and the meaning that is attributed to it. The true political power of art however, Rancière stipulates, lies in its abstinence from any such organized narratives itself. Instead art instigates this process of contingent outcomes, of experiences into aesthetics. In other words: it must be the free formation of art and ways to experience it – and most importantly, the free attribution to its meaning alone – that can be called political. Only there an uncontrolled meaning – a free logos – can emerge. An(y) emerging sense of community via art therefore, as a politics of a *demos*, can only be through a contingent process. One can then say that, diametrically to a notion of the autonomy of art that is based on the notion of art's purposelessness (a notion that still holds sway),⁶² art serves a direct socio-political function. And though art is separated from politics, as Rancière insists, one may say it serves a function.

The opposite of this is a politics that subordinates through direct management and control. Rancière distinguishes this method as 'policing': controlling any contingent meaning into a pre-existing mold of expectancy. This 'policing' is also exactly what characterizes regular politics, that prescribes an aesthetics through which to perceive meaning of what is presented, an ordering of the world and ethical coding, that subjectifies those in it. Yet he argues that politics is equally founded on aesthetics. To quote Rancière:

For aesthetics-art, the disestablishment of the account of the logos or the more general sensorium by the repartition of the sensible is assured not only by the 'free play' and 'gap' between *poiesis* and *aisthesis* but also by the absence of any narrative that binds these two aspects of the work to one another in any inevitable way.⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid, p.125

⁶² See for the discussion on art's use-value or function Stephen Wright's critique on art's *purposeless purpose* as formulated by Immanuel Kant. Wright claims that together with the notion of *disinterested spectatorship*, also a Kantian notion, these have helped to keep art depoliticised.

Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, Van Abbemuseum, 2013

⁶³ Ibid, p. 115-116

This is also the logic with which Rancière expresses a skepticism of what is called ‘*critical art*’, where the artist – or platformed mediation – acts as the illuminator of conditions that are supposedly unknown to the spectator. This kind of art contains a pre-existing narrative of its supposed purpose or intent, which is conveyed to the audience. This critical viewpoint then also relates to practices as those of Bruguera whose projects most times contain a clear pre-formatted political framework. In the strict sense of Rancière’s reasoning, such a frame constitutes a possible pre-emption of meaning and intent. The question of what a just politics is then, in Rancière’s idea, is the principal and fundamental notion of the free interplay between *poiesis* and *aisthesis*. Rancière establishes art-aesthetics thereby as the political since its very quality and presence questions authoritative formation per se. The quest of art and its requirement of autonomy than lie precisely in the connection with politics, the art of life, yet by its fundamental abstention of policing and of a stable narrative that binds *poiesis* and *aisthesis*, its political instrumental form is a structural problem.

This is also a main point where Osborne and Rancière diverge in their definition of art and aesthetics. Osborne does not accept Rancière’s proposition of the *Aesthetic Regime of Art* as an historical category in the overarching manner Rancière does. Osborne does not share the broad temporalization upon which Rancière bases his particular notion of the aesthetic regime, which in the end is a postulation by Rancière himself.⁶⁴ For Rancière art-aesthetics is an act of assessing one’s place and perception of the world through art (made possible by the special place that art is), which as a fictionalized proposal can establish an exchange in communication; it acts thereby as a direct social agent. The premise of radical equality in this assessing of one’s place in the world *and* in relation to others contains a political demand. Radical equality here means that no pre-existing narrative that would describe a political or social unity can exist, if all can partake any outcome is contingent.

For Osborne the question of the relation between art and aesthetics is less unambiguous. He treats these more as distinct fields with overlapping and intersecting but separate genealogies; aesthetics is treated more as and remains an issue of philosophy in relation to art. He observes the drive towards transdisciplinary in the fields of art, philosophy, history and critique and the erosion of categories. In between these fields aesthetics is the

⁶⁴ In a private conversation with Peter Osborne he explained to be unconvinced of the validity of Rancière’s conceptualisation of the Aesthetic Regime of Art, Symposium *Art and the Contemporary*, University of Surrey, Centre for Performance Philosophy, Guildford UK, 2018

contested object, so to speak. He observes for example how art comes to incorporate philosophical ideas and how art history becomes critique. From this general evolving historical situation the different -isms in art have developed, depending on the context of conditions. Osborne writes:

Yet works of art continue to require mediating interpretative categories, however negative, to acquire social objectivity – beyond the received conception of medium. There is no escape from the maze of categories – or, to switch metaphors, no option but to try critically to regulate the flow of their avalanche/rundown. In Kant’s terms, these are the logically conditioning elements of aesthetic judgements of art that make them judgements of art, rather than pure aesthetic judgements that could just as well be of nature. This logical conditioning of judgements of individual works of art is a process that remains, oddly, largely theoretically unelaborated, even today; perhaps because it requires a systematic philosophical mediation of the history of art of a kind only Hegel (positively) and Adorno (negatively) have risked. (Duve tried but failed to short-circuit the requirement, in his *Kant After Duchamp*, with the positivism of his Foucauldian version of the institutional theory of art.⁶⁵

He adopts therefore the position by which the judgment of art is tied and dependent on its philosophical framework, a framework that is historical and that has to be constructed. It can however not construct or order a ‘distribution of the sensible’, a new sensible world-construct as his critique on Rancière goes.⁶⁶ This means that Osborne’s viewpoint towards art – as philosopher – is of a much more distanced nature than Rancière’s.

What is important in how I discuss both Rancière and Osborne is not to choose the one over the other, but rather to see how Rancière’s inclusion of aesthetics, as the faculty of discourse and of reasoning that is part of the sensible, relates to both current condition of cognitive capitalism and of interdisciplinary artistic platform production. Osborne, in contrast, maintains a distinct place for aesthetics in the constellation of artistic production. Osborne’s position would imply that an external observer exists (and remains distinct). The proposition I bring forward in this dissertation, is that such an idea in the current conditions –and notably

⁶⁵ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p.107

⁶⁶ Peter Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition*, Verso, London, 2018, p. 62

considering the context of institutional artistic production – requires a closer look. These are the two models that contain different ideas on the place of authorship, the place for the object of art, and the place and function of critique in production.

Art-Aesthetics

It is important to notice that Rancière's definition of aesthetic-art implies a fundamental inclusion of the 'receiving end' in the exchange between proposing and meaning.

Notwithstanding its essential open-endedness, it is the receiver (or participant) that is given an important and crucial role in the establishment of what the proposition entails or may entail as speculative object or endeavour. In this sense, the roles of interpretation and of mediation of the 'art-object' become indistinguishable of art itself. This is closely related to Walter Benjamin's ideas on the role of critique in *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*⁶⁷. In this text, he establishes the crucial role of critique as the completion of artworks, albeit not in a sense of offering a conclusive reading but rather as a means of opening up modes of re-visiting, re-reading and thereby reviving the artwork discussed. Readings and mediations can be said to be carriers, as well as trajectories or instantiations in which these 'art-objects', in themselves inconclusive, are produced. For Rancière then, the political mode of art is an open process that considers the viewer as an emancipated spectator in the experience of what is proposed as art.⁶⁸ Radical equality between all that partake in this process, is here the prime parameter and overriding, zero-sum principle. Rancière lays out the same importance of the role of critique and of theory in the processes involved in art, and even goes so far as to say that there is no fundamental distinction between art and its discourse.⁶⁹ Based on the notion of the aesthetic endeavour as an experience of exchange rather than the object itself, Rancière formulates art as an activity through which one can exchange a point of view, through readings of the object (taken in its broadest definition). Joseph Tanke explains that for Rancière communication is a process of co-creation by the 'willed' exchange of fictionalized thought and emotions.⁷⁰ This means I argue, that the sets of

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. (GS I 65; SW I 151)

⁶⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso London, 2011

⁶⁹ "Furthermore, I criticize the very opposition between art and discourse on art. Art does not exist in itself; it is an outcome of a complex set of relationships between what one is allowed to say, to perceive, and to understand. Events and objects only exist within the fabric of discourse, and are perceived as art, or a revolution in art, only within this fabric."

Interview Duncan Thomas with Rancière on his publication *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, date: 30-11-17

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2320-the-politics-of-art-an-interview-with-jacques-ranciere>

⁷⁰ Joseph J. Tanke, *What Is The Aesthetic Regime?*, *Parhessia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, nr. 12, 2011, p.88

references that come to light in reading and interpreting these, are a form of politics; and in the relation and positioning to this ‘object’ the political relation occurs.

Here another significant difference between Osborne’s and Rancière’s aesthetics comes to the fore in that Rancière implies a *folding in* of the critical position, in the processes of communication. There is no ‘object’ of art remaining that is to be the container of critique, it is rather the process of communication within the realm or space of art that sits at the core of the artistic endeavour. To quote Davide Panagia:

But Rancière has no interest in articulating political practices as somehow enabled or emboldened by capacities for making judgments—reflective, determinative, or otherwise. Instead his project is to articulate new forms of criticism that look to the workings of things. “The critic,” he says, “is no longer a person who compares a work to a norm and says if it’s well done or not. . . . The critic is the person who identifies what’s happening.” And this, for him, means “constructing the sensible world to which the artwork belongs or which a political act makes possible.”⁷¹

And though Osborne equally refers to the blurring of lines between the authorial aesthetic positions of archivist, critic, curator or interpret by which no singular critical position can be determined, he insists on the operation and the ‘criticality’ of the artwork versus its heteronomy. So though the demarcations of positions are sliding, the function of critique remains; and it remains tied to an external object of contemplation (be it artwork, art practice or even history). For Rancière we already are performing *in* a generative mode of communal space of which art is part, whereas for Osborne art remains distinct. For Osborne this critical position and moment – as an exterior – remains whereas for Rancière it is enfolded in the space of interaction. This constitutes a clear difference in how to perceive the role of critique in the project of art by and how aesthetic judgement as such is operational. It means coming back to the Autonomy Project that completely different epistemological viewpoints are at play within the same space of exchange in regards to the relation between art and aesthetics and their respective roles as constitutive parts of this space. This would have to mean that these differences need to be negotiated first. As each ‘observer’ constitutes its own aesthetical lens which again acts as co-authorial medium, each position needs to be made clear first.

⁷¹ Davide Panagia, *Rancière’s Sentiments*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2018, Preface viii

4 Symposium as scene, fragment and form in infrastructure

Rancière explicitly includes intellectual labor here as a critical and communicative element in the social exchange. This he describes as an optical machine. This model takes the bind between art and aesthetics as the principle by which we can understand and talk of art. To do so he deploys a notion of aesthetics as follows, in the words of Davide Panagia again:

The aesthetic here does not operate as representative of anything...Rancière denies such purposiveness to his scenographies. For him a *scene* is “the optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end.”⁷²

The *scene* understood as a critical transdisciplinary gathering is therefore the political agent per se, in which cognition and poiesis are in a structural bind. It is here where the analogy with the Autonomy Project symposium becomes apparent. The symposium must be understood as the site of the scene in which the underlying principle of the wider assemblage of positions and fields contributing to the aesthetics and politics that are produced, is performed, as entering the arena of the *distribution of the sensible*.⁷³ Included are all participants, without hierarchical division of medium-specific qualities: theoretical discourse, curating, artists, publics and organisation that act in the symposium. They would be participating in a general cultural, though temporary and un-stable, form of community. Art in its direct bind with aesthetics, is here organized as sociality as well as production format.

Following Rancière’s logic, I would argue, this development concerning this institutional formation equally contains a political ambition. By bringing the forms of production and reflection together, as in the art-aesthetics bind, the notion of a more complete institutional body arises, that engages politically and aesthetically with the heteronomy of conditions (which usually also is expressed and identified as its societal ambition). Here we

⁷² Davide Panagia, the quote is taken from Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, Verso, London, 2013, XI.

⁷³ In *The Politics of Art* an interview with Jacques Rancière on the occasion of his publication *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (Verso, London, 2017) he describes art not as medium-specific and autonomous realm but as a form of heteronomous aesthetics-formation.

immediately are confronted with the limits set by Rancière who precludes any predetermination for such a politics, since it again would deteriorate into a ‘policing’ structure that excludes and sets hierarchies etcetera. Such limitation would however, if self-critically applied, also immediately force issues of visibility and distribution of resources to the fore: who is able to take part in the space of production, this means, in short, the political organization of space.

The fragment in infrastructure

This outcome of the inescapable transdisciplinary as argued by Rancière and with which Peter Osborne concurs, stems from the core philosophical notion of the fragment, developed through early German Romanticism. As the German philosopher Schlegel argued: since there is no possibility of a self-grounding principle of the whole, all knowledge therefore is necessarily fragmented, and the fragment is the fundamental object through which any understanding occurs. And though fragments may unite into collections that seem coherent, such coherence is fundamentally incomplete and temporary. Therefore, also, no subject position can have access or lay claim to an understanding of the whole. This gave rise to the notion of the fundamental incompleteness of any account, to seriality, the idea of the fragment as the ideal form and the transdisciplinarity that have come to define Romanticist philosophy and aesthetics.⁷⁴ It also means that through this profound philosophical understanding, the negotiation as a mode of communication (as aggregation and processing of incomplete knowledges and information), is a basic given and expression of this shared understanding and knowledge.

These are the fundamental principles conceptual art has picked up on, as observed by Peter Osborne in *Anywhere or Not at All*, his comprehensive study of the development of the field of artistic production. These findings, I claim, have also been furthered in the infrastructure of art production, in that the idea of the assembly of production is accepted: no single discipline or position contains or controls the whole, the whole is an assemblage of disciplines. As Peter Osborne describes, there is a direct link between these early Romanticist findings of the quintessential importance of the fragment, and how these result in conceptual art’s methodological approach and, importantly, how this generates the movement from *object to project* as form of production in the world of art. Osborne writes:

⁷⁴ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p. 58-61.

In the Athenaeum Fragments, ‘reason’ is the idea of a self-limiting totality; ‘unreason’ is the image of the hedgehog. This is what Schlegel was looking for in Romantic poetry (poetizing-philosophy, philosophizing poetry), what Benjamin sought from the dialectical image, and what LeWitt found in an art of series. It is in the priority of the process over the object or result here, which is the consequence of the ontological priority of the idea of the work – the virtual infinity of possible actualizations – that LeWitt’s conception of art in his Sentences approaches an early Romantic one most closely. Each involves the dissolution of genres into an artistic process of infinite becoming, and thereby a change in the fundamental status of works from ‘objects’ to ‘projects’.⁷⁵

It is these aspects from this legacy that as I contend, have found a structural foothold in our contemporary worldview and that shape the infrastructure of artistic production. The prominence of the *project* as the basic understanding of form in artistic production (which includes considerations of dissemination and of reception), means that the institution as a structural whole comes into play since project as form requires the organisation of space and time, of production and of reception. This means that the transdisciplinary assembly of positions: curating, theoretical reflection, artist and platform are conjoined towards a mode of artistic production. This is how, as I argue, the current dissolution of roles finds its origins in Romanticism.

Reading Osborne and Rancière together, and especially with the emphasis on Rancière’s ‘scene’ as the fundamental egalitarian principle within this assembled idea of production, I argue that there remain problems of stratification in its execution. In the Autonomy Project as well there remains a clear demarcation between the artist-position and its context of production, contra the idea of the ‘scene’ by Rancière which would require a more fundamental interdisciplinary exchange, and a much wider comprehension of artistic authorship and the inclusion of critique as I argue. Also epistemological differences that may exist, even between participants of the same discipline as such (as I have demonstrated) need to be negotiated first. This in the end leaves it politically incoherent, particularly by remaining aligned and susceptible to the division of labour, where the boundary of artistic production

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.67

meets that of the heteronomy of production as ordered by capitalism. It is here where the problem of political agency of artistic interdisciplinary production arises as an issue of form.

5 Co-authorship and agency within the complexity of current production

It is important to note that ‘autonomy’ is formulated on the premise of the privileged position of the artwork qua aesthetics in the field of art, which is, I argue, channelled through the stratified and exceptional artist-function. This notion of the primacy of art holds sway as can be observed in the VAM symposium, I claim, in the sense that the artists contributions are treated as the starting points in the discussion. This contradicts a more fundamental notion of the scene as described by Rancière which would also include theoretical reflections as co-authorial moments in the emergence of the artistic. In *The Wrong of Contemporary Art*⁷⁶ Suhail Malik and Andrea Philips analyse the fabric and state of current art-production in contemporary art through Rancière’s ideas of aesthetics, and from their analysis plot and map its political potential and agency. In this text they focus on the form artistic production has taken in regards to the political ambition it expresses. They agree that in contemporary art the prime mode of operation is precisely that of aesthetic art of which the foremost principle is to demonstrate the fact of policing as such. This is done by deploying a general mode of artistic production, which allows for an indeterminate number of participants, forms and disciplines to partake in engaging in the production of aesthetics. So through total openness and accessibility policing is demonstrated precisely through the omission thereof. Any new form of policing would namely degrade into a politics of subjectification. Processing the effects and mechanisms of this policing is addressing the ‘*wrong*’ as mentioned in the title of the essay and frequently used by Rancière as well. This is the main political means aesthetic art holds. It is, however, politically undetermined, in that it does not propose a strong new politics or political form. It is necessarily indeterminate because it has to, in principle, accommodate all current and future (unknown) participants to maintain the space of art. But because both art and politics are forms of aesthetization (as in the principle of that which organizes that what is sensible), and aesthetization is the ordering principle of politics,⁷⁷ they both compete in supra-politics over what is a common sensorium. This is the meta-politics

⁷⁶ Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*. In: Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds. *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*. London: Continuum, 2011, pp.111-128.

⁷⁷ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: politics and philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis USA, 1999

Rancière denotes in his tri-partition of scenarios in the aesthetic regime described earlier. It is only the underlying principle of radical equality and the abstinence of policing that distinguishes the politics of art from a policed aesthetics (of politics).

For Malik and Philips this holds consequences for how the field of art in relation to a politics should be conceived. It means that they would have to depart from the principle condition of equivalence to politics to begin with: the supra-politics of art. Malik and Phillips write:

It is as a supra-politics that contemporary art's claims to politics can be understood as being necessarily partial and generalized. It is the difference, in Hirschhorn's phrasing, between 'making political work' – a politics which has a particular subjectification as its 'cause' – and 'working politically' – an art that is political by virtue of its repartition of the sensible but which has no other determinations than that. In processing the police order as such as a wrong, aesthetics-art remains indeterminate with regard to the particularities of politics.⁷⁸

This is a different take, from regular ideas on what the relation between artistic production and politics is, where a notion of art's autonomy, as a primary position, still holds sway. It is important here to note that this autonomy is formulated on the premise of the privileged position of the artwork qua aesthetics in the field of art, which is, I argue, channelled through the stratified and exceptional artist-function. This notion of the primacy of art holds sway as can be observed in the symposium, I claim, in the sense that the artists contributions are treated as the starting points in the discussion. This contradicts a more fundamental notion of the scene as described by Rancière which would also include theoretical reflections as co-authorial moments in the emergence of the artistic.

If the similarities between politics and arts are taken seriously, the distance that is normally maintained between them, and that preserves the arts as autonomous from politics, dissolves. In the discussion concerning art's autonomy, which is needed to relate politically to the heteronomy of conditions, this question of privilege becomes obsolete since art, as is politics, is concerned with organizing aesthetics, a heterogeneous given as such. British media

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.122

studies scholar Nicholas Holm describes this through the disappearance of the distinction between autonomous art and art that aims at politics directly political art in Rancière's thinking. To quote Holm:

There is thus no contradiction between the purity of art for art's sake and the politicisation of art, but rather a deeper paradox which arises in the mode of aesthetic art itself, between the separation of autonomous art and its promise to transform the world: 'The work's solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfilment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality'.⁷⁹

Again, this relates to Rancière's tri-partition of scenarios in the relation between life and art as mentioned before, where he warns for the absorption of the free formation of a communal aesthetics by the policing forces of politics. So though art ceases to be art when it has 'fulfilled' its operation, as art in general, it has this overall political emancipatory function. Malik and Phillips specify what the autonomy of the artwork currently means by focussing on what has become art's most specific characteristic: its criterialess singularity. As explained before: this criterialess singularity is, according to Rancière, what stands for its most fundamental emancipatory characteristic: no criterion can be formulated to determine what art is. How this function is realized then becomes dependent of the quality of institutional handling and organization. The institutional infrastructure (and the socio-political organisation that designates such infrastructure) after all negotiates the place of art within society. In reading Malik and Phillips, following up on Rancière, I would therefore argue that the symbolic function is clear and the *criterialess identity* of art as only criterium becomes insufficient. In their words:

However, even despite Rancière's caveat, if politics is aesthetic 'in principle', if aesthetics in general is the condition for politics, then the politics of aesthetics-art has no particularity compared to politics in general (and the solace sought by contemporary art in Rancière's aesthetico-political logic is not only warranted but also provided). But it is then not only the 'pragmatic criteria for isolating [art's]

⁷⁹ Nicholas Holm, review of Jacques Rancière's *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Culture Machine Reviews, May 2010, <https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/393-663-1-PB.pdf> (accessed 26-04-2019)

singularity' that is destroyed but also that singularity – its criterialess identifiability – which is destroyed with respect to politics.⁸⁰

Malik and Phillips, thereby arrive at a critique on the practice of contemporary art, that builds on Rancière's scheme of politics and art and that dismantles some of institutional art's doxas: the *criterialess singular* quality of an artwork alone is in itself not enough (it is self-evident and when it holds no practical consequences it becomes a mere symbolic practice). It also means that there is a clear a priori component concerning art, in the formation of the political detectable: the deployment of the singular artwork serves the processes of formation of communal space (however instable and temporary). This puts a firm demand on how indeterminacy within the infrastructure of art-production needs to be installed or structured, I argue. In other words, the question that follows is: how to shape the supra-political of Rancière's third scenario institutionally?

Malik in his lecture-series in 2013 at Artists Space, New York, critiques the practice of contemporary art as being the mere 'meta-genre of indeterminacy'.⁸¹ His critique goes that institutional contemporary art production merely colonizes the multiplicity of contemporary subjects by representing these in a general format, preventing a true politics via a consequential application of indeterminacy (the world of contemporary art directs too much how art is to be perceived, and thus becomes its police). For Malik this also means that art cannot be thought otherwise than as instrumental to its meta-political ambition.⁸² Or stated differently: the issue of the avoidance of instrumentality as ontological criterium for art, dissolves all together.

The question of how to structure art production, then, remains centred around the conundrum of how to enable a non-policing and form of it that acknowledges its political form. This re-articulation of Rancière's ideas in the context of art production consequently phrases the need for a 'space for politics' as a fundamental aesthetic-political question. The

⁸⁰ Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, *The Wrong of Contemporary Art: Aesthetics and Political Indeterminacy*, in: *Reading Rancière*, Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, eds., London: Continuum, 2011, pp. 118.

⁸¹ See: <http://old.artistspace.org/materials/on-the-necessity-of-arts-exit-from-contemporary-art> (accessed 2021-03-02.)

⁸² Malik will later arrive to proposals to effectuate these ideas on artistic production, in which the political aim is clearly embraced from the outset of projects. And where the mere operationalisation of aesthetics-art: the proposition of anything as speculative medium, no longer is the end-goal, but is instrument to a much clearer political inquiry.

question of how to ‘install a proper space of indeterminacy’, that is captured in and follows from Malik’s and Phillips’s critique (continued on Rancière’s analysis), must, I contend, be considered through Rancière’s notion of the scene. The consequences of aesthetic art require us to look at the interdisciplinary character of production more deeply. It is in this wider and deeply imbricated constellation of positions, where the interplay between poesis and aisthesis is a multi-positional given, that the art-aesthetical object emerges. This would mean, in the context of the symposium as exemplary form of contemporary and institutionally binding production (however temporary), that all participants artists, theorists and organisation must be considered as equal and reciprocal authors in the establishment of the emergent object. This is, I argue, how *indeterminacy* would be taken to its consequential conclusion.

By taking the analyses of Rancière, Osborne and Malik together, allows me to draw to following conclusion concerning the organization of the contemporary system of art. These are the steps I have been tracing so far: 1.) art is to be seen as a mobile object of which many hold authorship. 2.) It needs to be seen as a mode of production of aesthetics in general as proposed by Rancière. 3.) It needs to be seen through the assertion of a *scene* that relates the contingent scope of participants. 4.) This implies that reflections on art as formulated in critical theory or philosophy serve as the active-receptive responses to the propositions of art and equally provide the conceptual guidelines by which it is furthered as well as the criteria for judgement. 5.) Therefore, the authors of such reflections can be regarded as co-authors. 6.) The same goes for the curatorial and institutional positions in play, that function in their respective as the distributive and platform agents, establishing in form and in action that what is proposed and how it is proposed (an aesthetical proposition). These contexts, the conditional elements and the management and mapping of these, therefore become equal formal elements - equal ‘fragments’ of the ‘work’, I argue. So, consequently this means there is no formal distinction to be made or left between the positions at play, complementary to that of ‘artist’: these are all author-artist. The role of the constellation comes to the fore as an assembled, meta-political, author.⁸³

Working within the field, however, one finds that an assertion of artistic co-authorship is yet little recognized. The notion of the scene would require the integration of function and discipline more and the artistic content that is to be platformed (presented, displayed,

⁸³ Peter Osborne, *Contemporary Art is Post-Conceptual Art*, Public Lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Villa Sucota, Como, 9 July 2010

published, interpreted and mediated) understood as function for all involved. While a basic message of interdisciplinarity is communicated, it is yet most times still the artist-figure that is attributed the position establishing the primary starting point of the ensuing discussion and course of events.⁸⁴ Furthermore, what can be observed is a limitation in the conversation between artists and the surrounding frame of production. Though artists are supposed to be critically responsible for the execution of the formal logic within their work(s) (this is the basic form critique takes in artistic production), such practices of accountability hardly extend to the conditions and frames of wider production in the art system. These are not understood as elements (fragments) of artistic production, but rather as accommodating conditions for art. One might say that there is no critical reciprocity between the artistic ‘objecthood’ – tied to the artist position – and the structures that support it and the politics the relation between these may contain.

The positions involved in institutional production, in total become implied towards the responsibility and accountability for it throughout the chain. In the symposium for example, the many philosophical and theoretical objects of thought, instrumental for ‘how’ to think of artistic production and how to think of practice as a model for working in general, are brought together. These constitute the generative aesthetical interpretations activating the communal exchange via art that is the symposium. The issues of communication that arises within this chain of positions then – as in the symposium – becomes of central importance. An important and first problem would be to map what problems arise for those partaking in a system of production when its ambition is based on communication between its positions? Normally in the category of critical thought on production, on politics and on aesthetics, these texts are transferred from the academic context of production to another system of economic logic. The artistic apparatus treats and organizes its materials in a manner different from the academic world where most of these texts originate from, and which are construed and conceptualized according the formal logic and milieu of academia. One can therefore say that in the interaction an epistemological displacement of authorship occurs that serves as a mediation between artist, institute, theorist, curator and audience.

⁸⁴ See for instance how art theorist Thierry de Duve identifies the artist-figure as presented by Beuys as catalyst between objectivity and intuition in order to find the universal principle of human existence, the embodiment of the ‘creative artist’ in the Romanticist tradition. Or how Duchamp figures in his account as explanation of how the relationship between aesthetics and art is complicated, and reception has become pivotal. Yet the position of artist and critical observer remain categorically stratified.

Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, October Book, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass./London UK, 1996, p. 315-316

6 Editorial authorship, authorship as such, platform as author

Where Rancière departs from: “art discloses the systems and mechanisms of domination without occupying such a position” this would also mean to critically self-reflect on the means of production put to use. In a sense the performance on stage, as an outcome of its structural artistic set-up – as scene – should have been the ‘object’ of reflection, or through which its recursive handling, a new ‘object’ would have been produced. The conference in its entirety, as the center of the site where the free play between aisthesis and poiesis is to be identified, needed to also consider its structural set-up. This mismatch indicates an unaddressed difference between the theoretical/academic, curatorial and institutional production methodologies, and the approaches of artistic art production. There is insufficient conversation between the different fields partaking and their epistemological languages and the political economies involved.

Spectres of authorship

Despite the declaration of the event’s egalitarian quality and set up, the pre-conditions leading to its construction itself went under-exposed to its critique or were at least left out of the considerations of evaluation. Who were the editors of the conference’s line-up for example, what were the ideas behind its editorial set-up, who invited who on what basis to speak about what? Following the rationale of transparency and radical equality as basic keystones of egalitarian production, these could have been disclosed as starting-points. This becomes especially relevant since the participants in these conferences are co-producers of the institute’s production: the archival and documental forms of artistic production to which they have contributed. They equally produce in the economics of the institutes in which they work or are affiliated with, which produces a web of dependencies and attributions of values in different registers and fields.

What can be added here is that the theories and the model proposed in Rancière’s writings are already of enormous value in the production-model of museums and in the way these organize presentation and programming. Especially the Van Abbemuseum, in the Dutch context of museums, emphasizes and fosters the emancipatory aspects of cultural representation. See for example how the museum engages the public in building the cultural canon or opens its archive to produce more interaction with the public (the *Play Van Abbe* and

Queering the Collection program); these are all efforts to democratize the museum.⁸⁵ The notions that are developed in these ideas in relation to artistic production, namely how to configure presentations or how to think of engagement with the audience, are so powerful these could be considered of authorial quality in the sense that these facilitate distinct frameworks of production as such. In a sense Rancière – or better said an institutional derivative – therefore already was present way in advance of this particular event, foreshadowing the manner art was discussed. One can say that Rancière performed doubly: as a theoretical/conceptual influence, as well as an actor in his delivering and performative capacity. It becomes therefore important to properly disclose what the origins and considerations of the museums curatorial policies are and who performs those.

In this intricate knot of art, theory, performative, distribution and platform production, a reference can be made back to Hirschhorn's description of his artistic methodology and how he operationalizes the work as agent between himself and the audience. In his presentation of how he set up the *Bijlmer Spinoza-project*, he emphasized how he kept a middle-position in-between artwork, author and its audience. He was there during the whole period and engaged with the inhabitants of the area in which the project ran, but not to clarify 'the artwork' or to point to it. Hirschhorn insisted that it was not his job to 'serve' an audience. 'The work' – the project in totality – was to engage autonomously with its surrounding from which possible fruitful encounters could follow. This is how the gap between poiesis and aisthesis was kept open and a binding narrative between them avoided. Within this situation, though the relations between author, audience and participation within the 'work' were complex, it was still made clear that the final authorship for this set-up rested with Hirschhorn. His artisterly authorship was acknowledged. The author-function here served to preserve the special place for art.

This acknowledgment of authorship is distinct from how it was handled in the Autonomy Project conference, where an effort was made to de-author the whole set-up. In most of the introductions of the interviews this was stressed. The very notion of de-authoring in cultural and artistic production in Western academia is an evolution of Roland Barthes' and

⁸⁵ *Play Van Abbe*, see: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/questions-to-the-museum-of-the-21th-century/> (accessed 08-02-21)

Queering the Collection, see: <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/collection/queering/about/> (accessed 08-02-21)

Michel Foucault's critiques, in which the latter proposed to speak of an author-function rather than of an 'author', in order to depersonalize such position and to indicate the intricacy of conditions that any author finds itself and through which he/she functions. Peter Osborne equally follows such reasoning and proposes a fictional and collective authorship for artists, by which the conditions of trans-global capitalism and the institutional formation of global art spaces and artists' practices could be addressed. Fictionality would, in this argument, be the feasible format of authorship for the contemporaneity. According to Osborne:

For Foucault, the replacement of the concept of the author by that of the author-function was 'a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse ... [by] grasp[ing] the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies'. The construction of an artist-function named 'The Atlas Group' is in many ways a precise application of the terms of this analysis to the production of artistic authority. Its primary characteristic is its dissemblance of a documentary practice. This dissemblance is dependent upon, first, its creative use of anonymity, within pseudonymity, via the 'Group' form (pseudonymity, one might say, is a condition of historical fictionalization); and second, the exploitation of the documentary, simultaneously, as indexical mark and pure cultural form.⁸⁶

Whether such fictionalization of authorship serves the conditions now becomes questionable given the complexity of fields connected in production. This complexity requires a constant negotiation to understand what information is communicated and what it means, in order to retrace each layer of involvement in a system. Fictionality and amorphous authorship obfuscate such retracing, and it only points to its final object on display, not to the object's coming into being and conditions that define it. Rather than fictionalization, I would argue that a re-authorization is needed. As mentioned before the participants of the symposium come from different epistemological fields which ideally would need to be disclosed to begin with. As British art theorist and writer Marina Vishmidt explains: authorship can be used to retrace issues of accountability in the complex infrastructure of artistic production.⁸⁷ I argue

⁸⁶ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, London and New York, 2013, p. 33-34.

⁸⁷ Marina Vishmidt In *Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural*, in *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists (A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice)* Eds. Tom Holert, Maria Hlavajova, Valiz/BAK Amsterdam and Utrecht, 2017, p.218

therefore that authorship should be taken up as a means to shed light on the complexity of production. Vishmidt's ideas will be extensively discussed in the chapter 4 of the thesis.

The acceptance of the scene that Rancière proposes also means that the demarcation of the unitarian coherence of the art-object and the position of 'artist' (however fictional) – upon which Osborne's argument still insists – is impossible to make. One can say that Charles Esche and Nikos Papastergiadis as the conference organizers, editors, and curators of the program, and as the director of the host-venue and the prime conceptual theorist of artistic production as such, are the central authors. They stage, as editors of the whole line-up of theorists and artists, the performative exchange within the conference, the framework in which the artistic personae are to become productive. They, in an important sense decide, set, and author the artistic moment. There is a distinct editorial guideline, manifested in the palette of speakers and the topics discussed. So despite the open character and de-authored set-up that is professed, a distinct path towards an 'object' to be construed, is there. It then also becomes a question if there is a categorical difference to be upheld in relation to artistic position here. The director and co-editor both, as well as Rancière, perform doubly or even multiply, in the capacities of editor, organizer, provider, archive-to-be and live performers. And what than is the ontological definition of the artwork? This editorial platformed commission must be named as such.

This is also the place where the question concerning the concept of Adorno's negative dialectics returns. How can Adorno's idea of the autonomous artwork: considered as the permanence of critique, the negation, be imagined when the author is an assembled author, which underlying system does not depart from a notion of (positive) unification but rather is a constant of negotiations and (self-critical) assessments. So how can the dialectic the autonomous artwork contains – internally and outward – be made productive? In the end it is the relation and positioning to the heteronomy of conditions, that are to be addressed, the final vector and aim of the artistic ambition.

The indexical mark Osborne speaks about must take into account that there is no substantial difference to be made anymore between art and its discourse as Rancière claims, with which I agree. The idea that there is a relation between art and its discourse that can be seen as the artwork to which the discourse serves as its pedestal, so where the artwork would need its interpretative apparatus to negotiate and constitute its meaning, must be discarded. In

the present condition the situation is far too complex and comprehensive to differ between these anymore. So where Osborne still presumes an *object* available for its interpretation, I would argue that 'the scene' is the site of the 'object' as such as well as its interpretative apparatus. A critical position therefore must be considered as enfolded.

It is also there where we can begin to think of its supra-political form as Malik and Phillips speak of. The paradoxes and oppositions contained within its system of production, would need then to be navigated, in order to be coherently furthered to an outside. The site of production (whether in the shape of a symposium or any other form of artistic production), then must foremost be seen as the site where artistic production takes place as space of interaction, of space as a fundamental contingent exchange between positions. Following Rancière: full egalitarian access is a fundamental prerequisite for any 'political' in the site of art to occur. Which leaves space, as long as this access is safeguarded (even if this means to fight), to address specific political issues.