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AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICAL TURN IN ART

Abstract: It was observed as early as the mid-twentieth century that aesthetics as a philosophical theory of art differs from its objects. The products of contemporary artistic practice go beyond the horizon of traditional aesthetics. Artists are involved increasingly often and on a wide scale in the actions aimed at transforming and constructing the common space. In the face of such activities as took place, for example, as part of the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art in 2012, traditional aesthetics seems to be helpless. That is why, if art is to continue to be the focus of aesthetic investigations, it must, as it were, redefine itself. Jacques Rancière is one of the authors who have outlined the new horizon of aesthetics. In my paper I will briefly present his conception. It provides some theoretical tools which I will use for the description and interpretation of some selected examples of contemporary socially engaged artistic practices. I will show that his distinction of the „aesthetic regime“ of the interpretation of art reveals the competence that combines all artistic practices, past and present, into one concept of art: art as politics. The foundations for setting such perspective were already provided by Schiller and Kant – the classics of modern philosophical aesthetics.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, Zoon Politikon, Friedrich Schiller, Immanuel Kant, Berlin Biennale, Artur Żmijewski, socially engaged art.

The political involvement of art appears to be in great demand today. The notion of involvement is becoming one of the principal categories of aesthetics. Some more critical commentators even say that it is in vogue to do politics using artistic means. It is not really an issue that political art is present at the greatest events on the “art scene” – because it has always been there – but one might mind the fact that today it manifests its politicalness using devices that are sometimes difficult to recognize as artistic. The case in point was the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012, whose curator was the Polish artist Artur Żmijewski, one of the leading figures of the “critical art” movement. The point of departure for the Biennale was the question of whether art still works. Not as a purely aesthe-
tic object, but as an instrument of social and political change. The question could be treated as an extension of the famous manifesto of *Applied Social Arts*, which Żmijewski himself had proclaimed in 2007. The manifesto expressed his disappointment with the situation in which art no longer provided recipes for improving social relations. Żmijewski advocated in it the restoration – to society – of politically involved art producing concrete outcomes that result in actual change. He demanded the creation of art that leaves sterile galleries and becomes an actor in social space. He voiced this demand from the position in which the implementation of involvement in art is understood only and exclusively as radicalism and confrontation. This should be the art that deals with the topics expelled from public discourse to avoid turning into primitive propaganda. The Berlin Biennale of 2012 resounded widely in the media, the critical voices being in the majority. The artistic character of the whole enterprise was questioned. The critics spitefully commented that it was the first biennale for contemporary art at which there was no art. Indeed, there were no works there whose form would fulfil in any way the textbook criteria of traditional aesthetics. Or at least this might seem so at first glance.

One of the works was the *Peace Wall* (Nada Prlja) placed in Berlin’s Friedrichstraße, i.e. in the immediate vicinity of the Berlin Wall pulled down in 1989. Although the association suggests itself at once, the reference to history was not the artist’s intention. Today’s Friedrichstraße is the borderline between the immigrant-populated Kreuzberg neighborhood and the Mitte district mostly inhabited by the Berlin middle class. The *Peace Wall* was meant to emphasize the difference between the two neighboring districts of the city. Crosscutting the street, the artwork made it difficult to go from one district to the other. For obvious reasons, this almost immediately angered the inhabitants of the two neighborhoods. The “wall” became the object of physical assault: it was doused with paint, and covered with inscriptions, such as “Weg Damit”. The anger of the citizens was gradually becoming more and more organized. Meetings and debates of neighbors were held; a meeting was arranged with the authorities of both districts, and eventually it was decided to pull down the obstacle.

One can certainly challenge the artistic status of this project and claim that it had nothing to do with art, and the fact that it was undertaken under the umbrella of an art institution can be regarded as an abuse that questions art in its essence. But this criticism is possible only when using the concept of art ruling out its political character. However, when one adopts the perspective

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from which art is by nature political, Nada Prljia’s project – and any other of this kind – must seem to be an obvious emanation of this nature. This point of view would certainly have to be justified first.

The reasons for this approach are provided by Jacques Rancière, and presented especially in his *The Politics of Aesthetics* (English ed. 2004) and in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (English ed. 2009). It is in the latter book, in the essay *Aesthetics as Politics*, that Rancière advances the thesis of a strong bond between aesthetics and politics. It is so strong that one can even speak of an inextricable connection between aesthetics and politics. It is also a feedback relationship, which means that there is no aesthetics that would not be political, and there is no politics without aesthetics. This relationship should also impact the character of art. According to Rancière, any artistic action is at the same time a political gesture. Crucial to this concept is how we understand politics. Today, in popular usage, it is understood as the mechanisms of coming to and staying in power, but its classical meaning is far broader. Rancière goes back to Aristotle, who defined man as a *zoon politikon*. Man is a political animal because he uses speech. But speech is something more than producing sounds. Owing to speech we articulate our interests, formulate our standpoints, and situate ourselves and others within the structure of social relations. It is the ability to make a public issue of the division into the private and the public, just and unjust, permitted and prohibited, visible and invisible, or acceptable and unacceptable. In this sense, in Aristotle’s Athens, slaves did not have speech. Their voice was reduced to producing sounds to communicate, but they could not speak out. And whose utterance will be treated as sounds and whose as speech is a political issue. In this interpretation, politics is shaping public space, introducing new forms of sharing the common world, reconfiguring the coordinates of daily experience, or, to use Rancière’s expression, the distribution of the sensible. In ancient Greece the lines of the distribution of the sensible divided the world in such a way that slaves functioned merely as an *instrumentum vocale*, while speech was used by free Athenian citizens. Despite the fact that both groups used language in the same way, the social division of the world meant that the voices of some were heard, and of the others weren’t. Such distribution can take place in different ways and set different horizons. For example, in Plato’s *Republic* craftsmen were deprived of the right to speak; their duty was to work, which deprived them of the time needed to take part in people’s assemblies, where public issues were discussed and social life was

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organized. However, that “lack of time” – as a prohibition to express opinions at people’s assemblies – was the result of a distribution of coordinates of sense experience. In other words, it was part of the order predominant at the time. But no order is ever given once and for all, and can be replaced by another. For example, the order in which the necessity of occupational work does not entail the prohibition to speak at public meetings and on public issues. And the decision concerning this is a political gesture – the redrawing of the line between the permitted and the prohibited, a new distribution of the sensible.

Such political gestures are inseparably connected with aesthetic issues. But “aesthetic” in what sense? We should remember that before Kant published his *Critique of Judgment*, in which he discussed judgments about beauty and the sublime, he had written his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which contains the chapter *Transcendental Aesthetic* treating of the a priori forms of sense. To Kant, the forms in which we experience the world were time and space. Also to Rancière, aesthetics is primarily time and space, but, entirely unlike Kant, he does not treat them as unchanging and ahistorical forms. Time and space are forms of dividing the world and the coordinates that organize the space of shared life, and as such they can be arbitrarily modified. Just as Adorno maintained that no social change could occur without changes in language, so too Rancière maintains that no political revolution can do without aesthetic revolutions. This problem was the subject of his dissertation published in 1981 as *La Nuit des prolétaires* (English edition in 1989 as *The Nights of Labour*). Rancière argues in it that the birth of the labour movement and the emancipation of the working class could not occur without thoroughly aesthetic changes in the distribution of time and space. It is within this distribution that our place in society is determined, our identities are defined, hierarchies are established and meanings are formed: this is what the distribution of the sensible consists in.

This kind of distribution took place in Friedrichstraße on the occasion of the *Peace Wall* authored by Nada Prljá. The artist’s intervention forced the inhabitants to take a stance in public space, to start a dialog, enter the process of decision-making: they were provoked into political action. Certainly, it was a kind of provocation and compulsion, but this does not change the fact that the “wall” was an aesthetic intervention. It changed the coordinates of sense experience in the way which turned anonymous inhabitants into real citizens and activated their civic potential.

What happened in Friedrichstraße as part of the 7th Biennale may perfectly illustrate Rancière’s words: “Art is politics (...) through the type of time and

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space it introduces, through the way it divides that time and populates that
space.”\(^5\) The way Rancière defines politics, particularly the way in which he
relates it to aesthetics, translates into the manner of identifying art. Besides,
according to his interpretation, what we recognize as art is also a consequence
of some prior political gesture. Painting, sculpture, or poetry has always existed,
but the concept of art binding these practices together not always has. In
a sense, this kind of concept does not exist even today. The closed concept
of art, i.e. one that defines necessary and sufficient conditions for something
being art has never been developed. We can however speak of certain regimes
of identification within which some objects are recognized as art and others
are not. When today we use the expression “contemporary art”, we mean the
objects that have simply replaced those exhibited in galleries in the past. The
term “painting” refers only to a certain system of visibility of art. Similar kind of
terms are “photography”, “film”, “video-installation”, or “performance”; there
is no art without a special form of visibility and discourse, owing to which we
recognize it as art.\(^6\) In other words, it is not the properties of an object or event
that determine its being part of the category ART. What decides here is a certain
discourse which calls an object/event art (quite as in A. Danto’s concept).\(^7\)
The ancient sculptor simply cast a figure in bronze, and the fact that we treat it
as an artwork today depends on the adopted regime of identification, owing to
which we recognize the object in question precisely as an artwork. According to
Rancière, politics has not always existed, although there has always been some
form of authority. Similarly, art has not always existed although people have
always created poetry, paintings, sculptures, music, theater and dance.\(^8\)

Rancière distinguishes three such possible regimes: ethical, representational,
and aesthetic. He describes them using the example of the Juno Ludovisi
sculpture - the portrait of the Roman woman Antonia Minor, who was portrayed
as the Roman goddess Juno, the counterpart of Greek Hera. One of the attitudes
we can adopt towards this work is to see it as an image of divinity. “In this
regime, there is properly speaking no art as such but instead images that we
judge in terms of their intrinsic truth and of their impact on the ways of being
of individuals and of the collectivity. That is why I propose that this regime, in
which art enters into a zone of indistinction, be referred to an ethical regime of
images.”\(^9\) Rancière speaks of the “indistinction of art” because in this regime

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p. 22.
\(^6\) Ibid. p. 44.
\(^8\) See: J. Rancière, Aesthetics and its Discontents, p. 34.
\(^9\) Ibid. p. 29.
art is not identified as such. A chair, a gold shield, and a marble statue are merely objects. They can at most differ in their status. The status is defined by answers to the question about the origin of those objects, their purpose and use, and the question about the effects that they produce. Therefore, this has to do mainly with the content of an artwork: what would be the “intrinsic truth” of artworks if not their content? If the external effects of the intrinsic truth were to be assessed, then we can speak of some recommendations or directives that an artwork contains in itself. This “ethical regime” was one within which almost all medieval and socialist-realist art functioned. “Ethical” means here “respecting a directive”: whether and to what extent we accept the teaching that an artwork conveys. The artwork interpreted in terms of this regime also defines the ethos that individuals and the community have to satisfy.10

The closest to the popular understanding of art is the second of Rancière’s regimes: the representational regime. The same statue of Juno can be assessed in terms of the adequacy of its presentation as compared with our conception of the figure of the goddess, i.e. whether in the sculptor’s struggle with matter he managed to give it an adequate or at least convincing form. The artwork here is only a representation, and if it is treated as such, what is assessed is the sculptor’s dexterity, his skill in producing an adequate image. Rancière does not write about it, but it appears that accuracy does not have to mean here the conformity of the representation to the represented. It can be a conformity to a certain canon, or simply any accepted manner of presentation. After all, non-representing Cubist and abstract artworks can also function within the representational regime of identification; the problem is to develop a form that is simply attractive.

The last one in Rancière’s concept and crucial to demonstrating the affinity between aesthetics and politics is the aesthetic regime. In this regime the Juno statue acquires its properties because the sculptor rose to the challenge and convincingly portrayed Antonia Minor, or because the author included some “intrinsic truth” in the work. The term “aesthetic” does not apply here to any criteria for technical excellence or any properties of the object. It thus does not require such categories as aesthetic sensitivity, taste, value or experience. The property that allows it to be perceived as art is its belonging to a “specific sensorium” – it is ascribed to a specific form of sensory apprehension.11 It is in this form and through its specificity that that the political character of art is realized. What does its specificity consist in, then? How does the aesthetic form of sense perception differ from other forms?

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It should be emphasized that Rancière did not choose the statute of the Roman goddess by accident. The same example was used by Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*, to which, incidentally, Rancière refers. In *Letter XV* Schiller describes the Juno sculpture in the following way: “The whole form rests and dwells in itself, a fully complete creation in itself and as if she were out of space, without advance or resistance; it shows no force contending with force, no opening through which time could break in”. This description reveals the inactivity and indifference of the artwork: it is self-contained and appears to belong to some reality other than that in which it is perceived, which is why we can notice in it, as Schiller did, “art of appearance”, and “an object of free play”. “Free”, because it is independent of external reality; “appearance” because it does not belong to it. The only proper attitude of the perceiver towards the self-contained artwork is the state of free play. “Man is only completely a man” – Schiller writes – “when he plays”, and “the whole edifice of aesthetic art and the still more difficult art of life will be supported by this principle”. It should be also remembered that the Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man were written not only to promote and develop some cultural competence: when writing those Letters, Schiller planned to educate and lead the humankind to full-fledged humanity. Why then should the term be appropriate for describing the special nature of aesthetics, so important in this project? Play is an activity which is an end in itself. It is a trivial thing, an ordinary pastime. All the more so, why does Schiller see in it the only possibility of moulding the truly human attitudes? Why is it that only through art-play can an individual attain full humanity? Rancière answers: art presented within the aesthetic regime of identification defines artistic objects as belonging to a *sensorium* different from the *sensorium* of dominance.

In order to explain that, a short excursion into Kant might be useful. His *Critique of the Power of Judgment* also speaks of free play. This applies to the powers of cognition in contact with the beautiful. Understanding and imagination are set in motion on the basis of what is provided by the senses. The motion consists in seeking harmony between the picture developed by imagination basing on the sensory material, and the concept provided by understanding. But this harmony is to be arrived at rather than produced. When the content of a concept determines our powers of cognition, we are not dealing with any free play. A concept is a form imposed upon sense-derived matter, therefore the

13 Ibid. “Letter XXVI - XXVII”.
14 Ibid. “Letter XV”.
state of harmony between imagination and understanding is produced automatically. Hence Kant’s definition of the beautiful drawn from the second moment reads: “That is beautiful which pleases universally without a concept.”\textsuperscript{16} Kant’s aesthetics implicitly requires adopting the appropriate attitude beyond which beauty cannot be experienced. The attitude can be interpreted as a state in which the power of form over matter is suspended. Rancière interprets this suspension in anthropological-political terms. “The power of ‘form’ over ‘matter’, is the power of the class of intelligence over the class of sensation, of men of culture over men of nature. If aesthetic ‘play’ and ‘appearance’ found a new community, then this is because they stand for the refutation, within the sensible, of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter which, properly speaking, is a difference between two humanities.”\textsuperscript{17} All forms of dominance strive to found their validity on the self-evidence of this division. According to Rancière, this self-evidence is challenged in the “aesthetic regime of art”. By suspending the distinctions and oppositions between the intellectual and the sensible, art, as “free appearance”, shows the arbitrariness of the functioning concepts, and ultimately, of whole discourses. The contentual determinacy of reality does not come from it, but is only an interpretation. Meanings are moulded by and dependent on the prevalent “distribution of the sensible”, which determines, classifies and assigns to individuals a specific place in a community. The playing man appears more human precisely because the play abolishes all previous coordinates of sense experience, and with them the established distribution of time, places, space and identities is no longer valid.

To illustrate the competence of art to redistribute the coordinates of sense experience, I will refer to another artistic project realized as part of the \textit{7th Berlin Biennale}, that is the \textit{New World Summit} by Jonas Staal, popularly called “the congress of terrorists.” In the space arranged like the UN General Assembly, the artist organized a two-day meeting attended by the representatives of the organizations placed on the international list of terrorists.\textsuperscript{18} During the plenary session, the participants read out the programs and postulates of their organizations, which was followed by a panel discussion. A congress of this kind could not be held outside of the walls of an art institution, because the binding distribution of the sensible tells us that you do not talk to terrorists. But owing to this project, the identity of “the terrorist”, a representative of


\textsuperscript{17} J. Rancière, \textit{Aesthetics and its Discontents}, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{18} Altogether, they were seven persons representing the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDF), the Kurdish Women Movement, the Basque Independence Movement and the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (MNLA).
a black-listed organization, was greatly remoulded. Suddenly, it was possible to see that these organizations are simply platforms for representing the interests of the social groups which were deprived of their say and thereby excluded from democratic procedures. There is no demagoguery – the point is that the coordinates of sense experience, at least for the moment, were interpreted in a different way.

It is true that the examples of socially engaged practices are not quite the same as art as “free appearance”. The latter only simulates other worlds. Its forms express its isolation and independence from the determinants of the external world, and the world that it shows is only virtual, reconstructed only imaginatively.\(^\text{19}\) In contrast, contemporary engaged art breaks this isolation: it strives to actually enter reality and pulls all the threads of the fabric of which our world is woven. Which is why the two differ so much in their forms, and at first glance they appear so far apart that they are called with one term “art” only by accident. But according to Rancière, this glance does not look where it is necessary, because the difference is superficial and depends on the regime of identification within which art is perceived. Only its placement in the aesthetic regime reveals the competence that combines all artistic practices, past and present, into one concept of art: art as politics. And the theoretical instruments for setting this perspective of its perception were already provided by Schiller and Kant – the classics of modern philosophical aesthetics.

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ESTETYKA WOBEC ZWROTU POLITYCZNEGO W SZTUCE
(streszczenie)


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