

historical avant-garde, within whose lineage he nevertheless wishes to situate social participation as a radical practice. Kester criticises Dada and Surrealism for seeking to ‘shock’ viewers into being more sensitive and receptive to the world – because for him, this position turns the artist into a privileged bearer of insights, patronisingly informing audiences as to ‘how things really are’. He also attacks post-structuralism for promulgating the idea that it is sufficient for art to *reveal* social conditions, rather than to change them; Kester argues that this actually reinforces a class division whereby the educated elite speak down to the less privileged. (It is striking that this argument seems to present the participants of collaborative art as dumb and fragile creatures, constantly at risk of being misunderstood or exploited.) My concern here is less the morality of who speaks to whom and how, but Kester’s aversion to disruption, since it self-censors on the basis of second-guessing how others will think and respond. The upshot is that idiosyncratic or controversial ideas are subdued and normalised in favour of a consensual behaviour upon whose irreproachable sensitivity we can all rationally agree. By contrast, I would argue that unease, discomfort or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity – can be crucial to any work’s artistic impact. This is not to say that ethics are unimportant in a work of art, nor irrelevant to politics, only that they do not always have to be announced and performed in such a direct and saintly fashion (I will return to this idea below). An over-solicitousness that judges in advance what people are capable of coping with can be just as insidious as intending to offend them. As my case studies in the chapters that follow bear out, participants are more than capable of dealing with artists who reject Aristotelian moderation in favour of providing a more complicated access to social truth, however eccentric, extreme or irrational this might be. If there is an ethical framework underpinning this book, then, it concerns a Lacanian fidelity to the singularity of each project, paying attention to its symbolic ruptures, and the ideas and affects it generates for the participants and viewers, rather than deferring to the social pressure of a pre-agreed tribunal in which a cautious, self-censoring pragmatism will always hold sway.

III. The Aesthetic Regime

As I have already indicated, one of the biggest problems in the discussion around socially engaged art is its disavowed relationship to the aesthetic. By this I do not mean that the work does not fit established notions of the attractive or the beautiful, even though this is often the case; many social projects photograph very badly, and these images convey very little of the contextual information so crucial to understanding the work. More significant is the tendency for advocates of socially collaborative art to view the aesthetic as (at best) merely visual and (at worst) an elitist realm

of unbridled seduction complicit with spectacle. At the same time, these advocates also argue that art is an independent zone, free from the pressures of accountability, institutional bureaucracy and the rigours of specialisation.⁴⁸ The upshot is that art is perceived both as *too removed* from the real world *and yet* as the only space from which it is possible to experiment: art must paradoxically remain autonomous *in order to* initiate or achieve a model for social change.

This antinomy has been clearly articulated by Jacques Rancière, whose work since the late 1990s has developed a highly influential account of the relation between aesthetics and politics. Rancière argues that the system of art as we have understood it since the Enlightenment – a system he calls ‘the aesthetic regime of art’ – is predicated precisely on a tension and confusion between *autonomy* (the desire for art to be at one remove from means–ends relationships) and heteronomy (that is, the blurring of art and life). For Rancière, the primal scene of this new regime is the moment when, in Schiller’s fifteenth letter *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), he describes a Greek statue known as the Juno Ludovisi as a specimen of ‘free appearance’. Following Kant, Schiller does not judge the work as an accurate depiction of the goddess, nor as an idol to be worshipped. Rather, he views it as self-contained, dwelling in itself without purpose or volition, and potentially available to all. As such, the sculpture stands as an example of – and promises – a new community, one that suspends reason and power in a state of equality. The aesthetic regime of art, as inaugurated by Schiller and the Romantics, is therefore premised on the paradox that ‘art is art to the extent that it is something else than art’: that it is a sphere *both* at one remove from politics *and yet* always already political because it contains the promise of a better world.⁴⁹

What is significant in Rancière’s reworking of the term ‘aesthetic’ is that it concerns *aisthesis*, a mode of sensible perception proper to artistic products. Rather than considering the *work of art* to be autonomous, he draws attention to the autonomy of our *experience* in relation to art. In this, Rancière reprises Kant’s argument that an aesthetic judgement suspends the domination of the faculties by reason (in morality) and understanding (in knowledge). As taken up by Schiller – and Rancière – this freedom suggests the possibility of politics (understood here as dissensus), because the undecidability of aesthetic experience implies a questioning of how the world is organised, and therefore the possibility of changing or redistributing that same world.⁵⁰ Aesthetics and politics therefore overlap in their concern for the distribution and sharing out of ideas, abilities and experiences to certain subjects – what Rancière calls *le partage du sensible*. In this framework, it is not possible to conceive of an aesthetic judgement that is not at the same time a political judgement – a comment on the ‘distribution of the places and of the capacities or incapacities attached to those places’.⁵¹ While brilliantly theorising the relationship of aesthetics to politics, one of

the drawbacks of this theory is that it opens the door for all art to be political, since the *sensible* can be *partagé* both in progressive and reactionary ways; the door is wide open for both.

In *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Rancière is nevertheless outspokenly critical, attacking what he calls the 'ethical turn' in contemporary thought, whereby 'politics and art today are increasingly submitted to moral judgement bearing on the validity of their principles and the consequences of their practices'.⁵² It is important to note that his targets are not the kind of art that forms the subject of this book, but Jean-François Lyotard's arguments concerning the unrepresentability of the sublime (*vis-à-vis* representations of the Holocaust in art and film), together with relational art as theorised by Nicolas Bourriaud. For Rancière, the ethical turn does not, strictly speaking, denote the submission of art and politics to moral judgements, but rather the collapse of artistic and political dissensus in new forms of consensual order. His political target is even more important to bear in mind: the Bush administration's 'war on terror', in which 'infinite evil' was subjected to an 'infinite justice' undertaken in the name of human rights. As in politics, Rancière argues, so too in art: 'Just as politics effaces itself in the coupling of consensus and infinite justice, these tend to be redistributed between a vision of art dedicated to the service of the social bond and another dedicated to the interminable witnessing of the catastrophe.'⁵³ Moreover, these two developments are linked: an art of proximity (restoring the social bond) is simultaneously an art seeking to witness what is structurally excluded from society. The exemplary ethical gesture in art is therefore a strategic obfuscation of the political and the aesthetic:

by replacing matters of class conflict by matters of inclusion and exclusion, [contemporary art] puts worries about the 'loss of the social bond', concerns with 'bare humanity' or tasks of empowering threatened identities in the place of political concerns. Art is summoned thus to put its political potentials at work in reframing a sense of community, mending the social bond, etc. Once more, politics and aesthetics vanish together in Ethics.⁵⁴

Although we should be sceptical of Rancière's reading of relational art (which derives from Bourriaud's text rather than artists' works), his arguments are worth rehearsing here in order to make the point that, in his critique of the ethical turn, he is not opposed to ethics, only to its instrumentalisation as a strategic zone in which political and aesthetic dissensus collapses. That said, ethics stands as a territory that (for Rancière) has little to do with aesthetics proper, since it belongs to a previous model of understanding art. In his system, the aesthetic regime of art is preceded by two other regimes, the first of which is an 'ethical regime of images' governed by the twofold question of the truth-content of images and the uses to

which they are put – in other words, their effects and ends. Central to this regime is Plato’s denigration of mimesis. The second is the ‘representative regime of the arts’, a regime of visibility by which the fine arts are classified according to a logic of what can be done and made in each art, a logic that corresponds to the overall hierarchy of social and political occupations. This regime is essentially Aristotelian, but stretches to the academy system of the fine arts and its hierarchy of the genres. The aesthetic regime of art, ushered in with the Enlightenment, continues today. It permits everything to be a potential subject or material for art, everyone to be a potential viewer of this art, and denotes the aesthetic as an autonomous form of life.

One of Rancière’s key contributions to contemporary debates around art and politics is therefore to reinvent the term ‘aesthetic’ so that it denotes a specific mode of experience, including the very linguistic and theoretical domain in which thought about art takes place. In this logic, all claims to be ‘anti-aesthetic’ or reject art *still function within the aesthetic regime*. The aesthetic for Rancière therefore signals an ability to think contradiction: the productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change, which is characterised by the paradox of belief in art’s autonomy *and* in it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. While this antinomy is apparent in many avant-garde practices of the last century, it seems particularly pertinent to analysing participatory art and the legitimating narratives it has attracted. In short, the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it always already contains this ameliorative promise.

Because of this structural openness, Rancière’s theory of the politics of aesthetics has been co-opted for the defence of wildly differing artistic practices (including a conservative return to beauty), even though his ideas do not easily translate into critical judgements. He argues, for example, against ‘critical art’ that intends to raise our consciousness by inviting us to ‘see the signs of Capital behind everyday objects’, since such didacticism effectively removes the perverse strangeness that bears testimony to the rationalised world and its oppressive intolerability.⁵⁵ Yet his preferences incline towards works that nevertheless offer a clear (one might say didactic) resistance to a topical issue – such as Martha Rosler’s anti-Vietnam collages *Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), or Chris Burden’s *The Other Vietnam Memorial* (1991). Despite Rancière’s claim that topical or political content is not essential to political art, it is telling that the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is never demonstrated through abstract forms unrelated to a political theme. In the chapters that follow, Rancière has therefore informed my thinking in two ways: firstly, in his attention to the affective capabilities of art that avoids the pitfalls of a didactic critical position in favour of rupture and ambiguity.⁵⁶ Good art, implies Rancière, must negotiate the tension that (on the one hand) pushes art towards ‘life’ and that (on the other) separates aesthetic

sensoriality from other forms of sensible experience. This friction ideally produces the formation of elements ‘capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability’.⁵⁷ Secondly, I have adopted Rancière’s idea of art as an autonomous realm of experience in which there is no privileged medium. The meaning of artistic forms shifts in relation to the uses also made of these forms by society at large, and as such they have no intrinsic or fixed political affiliation. The history traced in this book aims to reinforce this point by situating participation as a constantly moving target. Audience participation techniques pioneered in the 1960s by the Happenings, and by companies like The Living Theatre and Théâtre du Soleil, have become commonplace conventions in the theatrical mainstream.⁵⁸ Today we see a further devaluation of participation in the form of reality television, where ordinary people can participate both as would-be celebrities and as the voters who decide their fate. Today, participation also includes social networking sites and any number of communication technologies relying on user-generated content. Any discussion of participation in contemporary art needs to take on board these broader cultural connotations, and their implementation by cultural policy, in order to ascertain its meaning.

IV. Directed Reality: The Battle of Orgreave

Despite Rancière’s argument that the politics of aesthetics is a *metapolitics* (rather than a party politics), his theory tends to sidestep the question of how we might more specifically address the ideological affiliations of any given work. This problem comes to the fore when we look at a work that has arguably become the epitome of participatory art: *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) by the British artist Jeremy Deller. Since the mid 1990s, Deller’s work has frequently forged unexpected encounters between diverse constituencies, and displays a strong interest in class, subculture and self-organisation – interests that have taken the form both of performances (*Acid Brass*, 1996) and temporary exhibitions (*Unconvention*, 1999; *Folk Archive*, 2000–; *From One Revolution to Another*, 2008). *The Battle of Orgreave* is perhaps his best-known work, a performance re-enacting a violent clash between miners and mounted policeman in 1984. Nearly 8,000 riot police clashed with around 5,000 striking miners in the Yorkshire village of Orgreave; this was one of several violent confrontations prompted by Margaret Thatcher’s assault on the mining industry and signalled a turning point in UK industrial relations, weakening the trade union movement and enabling the Conservative government to consolidate a programme of free trade. Deller’s reconstruction of this event brought former miners and local residents together with a number of historical re-enactment societies who rehearsed and then restaged the conflict for the public, on the site of the original hostilities in Orgreave. At