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On Medium Specificity And Discipline Crossovers In Modern Art

Jacques Rancière interviewed by Andrew McNamara and Toni Ross

McNamara and Ross: In a recent interview in *Artforum*, you draw an analogy between the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary art and the nature of your own work.¹ This interests us because the question of the medium or intermediality is the focus of this issue of the *Journal Of Art*. Can you explain what is at stake in your approach to interdisciplinarity?

RANCIÈRE: I would describe my attitude as *a-disciplinarity* or *in-disciplinarity* rather than interdisciplinary. The stake of this attitude is clearly a political one. A discipline is much more than the study of a field of objects and questions. It is the delineation of a territory, which means a double operation of exclusion. First of all, the distribution of disciplines means the exclusion of those who have not the specific competence for exploring a territory. But what distinguishes the philosophical competence from the historical competence or the sociological competence, etc? It is always a matter of the specialist using his or her brain to study some facts and try to make sense of them. And what distinguishes, for instance, a philosophical object from a sociological object? A building, a performance or a discourse are each a form of occupation that concern space or usages of time. They are forms of distribution of the visible and the thinkable. The birth of the museum, of *mise-en-scène* or installation art each reframe the common landscape of the visible, the thinkable and the feasible. These forms of reframing don't belong to any specific discipline. On the contrary, you have to step out of the disciplinary frames to understand how they redistribute the relations between spaces and times, between forms of activity, spheres of life and modes of discourse. The allegation of the specificity of the territory abandons this possibility of understanding what is at stake in favour of a self-consciousness of competence: the attribution of disciplinary competences is the way of tracing the line between those who are able and those who are unable.

This brings me to the second aspect of the process of exclusion: the outer separation is the other face of an inner separation. The territory of the discipline is structured by the opposition between two kinds of beings: those who are objects of knowledge and those who are subjects of knowledge. The position of the scientific historian or sociologist gives them another kind of thought than that of the thinking beings who are their 'objects' and whose thought is considered merely the 'expression' of a totality that they are unable to grasp. What I try to oppose to that distribution of competences is what I called a 'method of equality', which makes the opposite presupposition that there are not two kinds of distinct intelligence. The descriptions and arguments of social science are manifestations of the same

intelligence as that which is at work in the thought and practice of those who are their 'objects'. They both depend on what I called a poetic of knowledge that oversteps the divisions of disciplines.

You also mention the prevalence of 'multimediality' in contemporary art. Why do you believe the emergence of such hybrid forms is important? What possibilities do such forms hold in your opinion?

The belief is not mine. Hybridity was celebrated in so-called 'postmodern' discourse as the collapse of the modernist tradition of separation between high art and popular art, or it was taken as evidence of new forms of life and art linked to new technologies. Conversely, modernists saw in hybridity the collapse of art with the commodity or entertainment. I only tried to reinscribe such practices in the history of the 'aesthetic regime of art'.² Modern and postmodern writers endorse the same view of modernity as the emancipation of each art, its commitment to its own medium, a commitment that they trace back to Lessing's 'Laocoon'. This is why they put the emphasis on the 'rupture' produced by multimedia art. But this view is misleading. The aesthetic revolution, as I have defined it, first means that the former equation of the artwork with a specific place and destination was replaced by the idea of the framing of a specific sensorium or a specific sphere of experience. This specific sensorium can be the museum – viewed as the 'remote' place where art works are disconnected from their social or religious destination – yet it can also be understood as the sensorium created by artistic practices that overstep the separation between senses and media. Mallarmé's project was not so much about the 'autonomy' of poetry as it was about inventing a spatial language of poetry, the model of which was the language of the feet in dance. Modern dance itself was an attempt at defining a new form of theatrical performance whose forms were borrowed from antique painting and sculpture. From the outset modernism created forms of performance, which connected the plastic arts, music, theatre, design, 'mimique', cinema, sport and so on.³ The idea of modernism as 'autonomy' or 'truth to medium' is a very late one. And it was a certain reversal of historical modernism, which was clearly about the crossing of borders between the different arts and between art and life. So I don't overstate the importance of hybrid forms. I only try to say that they must be viewed in the frame of a more comprehensive history where the crossings, shifts and displacements between media have always been crucial.

In the *Artforum* interview you say that artistic multimediality should not be confused with the 'great multimedia spectacle'. In addition, your essay 'The Emancipated Spectator' discriminates between different kinds of hybridity in contemporary art. You are critical of revivals of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as well as hybridised practices that inflate 'the power of the performance without questioning its grounds'.⁴ This suggests you don't regard multimedia or relational art as automatically subversive or even interesting. Could you clarify, perhaps with some examples, why you have doubts about these particular varieties of

artistic or cultural hybridity?

'Multimediality' only means that you combine several media. The combination may be implemented in various ways, with various intentions and effects. The combination may be an addition or it may be a fusion. The addition may produce a surplus of sensory power or it can create a lack, a gap or a distance. Multimediality has often been used by conceptual artists to explore the relations between words, meanings and visible forms. When Gary Hill used a number of monitors as sculptural elements to explore the relations between a mouth and the words that go through it, this could hardly be considered as 'hyper-spectacle'. Yet, in contrast, when Jason Rhoades built his gigantesque installation *The Creation Myth* (1998), that was supposed to represent the bellows of the capitalist machine swallowing everything and turning it to shit, he may have had the intention of denouncing the capitalist machine, but what remains on the ground is a kind of themepark entertainment. The same occurs when Yinka Shonibare creates his *Garden Of Love* (2007) where he turns some well-known French 18th Century paintings into 'tableaux vivants' and dresses the characters with batik cloth.⁵ He may have had the intention to both denounce the reality of slavery behind the happy amorous scenes of noble life and the false authenticity of African batik, which actually was made in Indonesia, but what remains is a wax-museum scene. More generally I would say that there is no straight connection between multimediality and subversion (or subjugation). A technical *dispositif* is always at the same time an aesthetic *dispositif*, and it is at this level that art may take on such and such political meaning, according to such and such a context.⁶ At the time of Appia, Mayakovsky or Artaud, stage-setting borrowed forms of physical empowerment from lighting or music, from dance, gymnastics, sport, the circus or cinema, so that the theatre might get out of itself and become a form of existence for society itself.⁷ It is clear that today those additions have mostly become mere forms of intensification of the effect of theatrical performance.

In cultural and artistic criticism, there has long been the view that to be critical meant demonstrating, for example, art's complicity with globalisation, consumer spectacle, or, as you put it, art's 'fatal capture by discourse'. Do you see your work as a supplement to such analysis – by which we mean that you don't dismiss the force of such critiques outright, but simply find them too mechanistic? Or do you instead regard your work as an antidote to such analyses, with their tendency to presume that all activity is compromised in advance?

I am not willing to discharge the artists of their responsibility, but I think that this responsibility must be disconnected from the stereotypes of the critical discourse about the overwhelming power of the market and consumerism that makes them victims or accomplices of its fallacies. The denunciation of the mythologies of the commodity, the fallacies of consumer society and the empire of the spectacle that were supposed 40 years ago to 'unmask' the various machineries of domination so

as to provide the anti-capitalist fighters with new weapons have turned into exactly the contrary: a nihilist wisdom of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, of the equivalence of anything with anything, of anything with its image, and of the lie of any image. That nihilist wisdom pictures the law of domination as a force that permeates any will to do anything against it. Any protest is a performance, any performance is a spectacle, any spectacle is a commodity, such is the grounding thesis of this post-Marxist and post-Situationist wisdom. In such a way responsibility is overturned into incapacity.

This is my point: the tradition of emancipation, which means the recognition of the capacity of everybody, has been contaminated in the critical tradition by views about the empire of the commodity and the incapacity to resist it that actually were born of a very different situation: that is, 19th Century bourgeois anxiety regarding the effects of popular access to new forms of consumption, fostering the capacity of anybody to reframe their lived world. That anxiety took on the form of a paternal concern with the danger threatening those poor people whose fragile brains were unable to grapple with that multiplicity. In other words, capacity was turned into impotence.

This paternal concern – and the presupposition of ‘incapacity’ that it entailed – were generously endorsed in turn by those who wanted to help those poor people to become aware of their true condition, forgotten and disguised by the enticements and lies of the image or the regime of the spectacle. They endorsed it because critical procedures are about healing the disabled, healing those who are unable to see, unable to understand the meaning of what they see, unable to shift from knowledge to action. The problem is that the doctors need the disabled; they need to reproduce the disabilities that they heal. And the prosecutors need the culprits in order to sustain their prosecution. What I tried to do is to set aside this patronising position in order to bring out the potential of new capacities involved in phenomena of cultural appropriation and negotiation between conflicting forces.

Leaving aside these critiques of art, your approach also runs counter to the argument put forward in some sectors of art history, which is concerned to preserve aesthetic judgment by linking it to the question of medium. Very broadly, their argument is that if you abandon medium you abandon aesthetic judgment. Given your work is involved in reviving the critical potential of the aesthetic, how would you respond to this assertion which links aesthetic judgment to the question of the specificity of the medium?

I find no theoretical or historical connection between ‘aesthetic judgment’ and the specificity of the medium. An aesthetic judgment, as Kant states, means the judgment on a form, disconnected from the knowledge of its mode of fabrication. In a sense, aesthetics means the loss of a system of mediations. *Mimesis* meant the set of explicit and implicit rules that made the connection between the laws of the *poiesis* and the forms of the *aisthesis*. *Aesthetics*, on the contrary, means the absence of any rule of connection between the sensorium of artistic production and the



sensorium of aesthetic experience. On the one hand, this makes it dubious that something like a 'medium' may be the principle of aesthetic judgment. On the other hand, the 'specificity of the medium' was invoked as a way to plug the gap and to restore continuity between artistic production and aesthetic perception. But the notion of medium has nothing clear about it. Does it refer to material techniques and instruments? In this sense, it is clear that you don't produce the same effect with a flute or a double bass, with watercolor, charcoal or acrylic. But, for all this, you have not yet defined the medium of music or painting. As it was used in the modernist quarrel, the concept of medium plays a double role. It ties up the plain idea of specific technical means with something quite different: the alleged essence of an art. In such a way, the truth to medium, conceived of as the inquiry about the possibilities given by a definite set of means was turned into its opposite: the idea of art as an end in itself opposed to the technical subjugation of a means to an end. The medium was identified as an end in itself. This means that the specificity of the medium became the mere metaphor of the identification between the self-consciousness of an art and the assertion of the autonomy of art. When doubt was cast on that identification, the idea of medium-specificity was overturned again: the truth to medium became the obedience to the other, the absolute choice amounting to the absolute absence of choice.

In the introduction to your book, *The Politics Of Aesthetics*, Gabriel Rockhill, asserts that you dismiss 'discourses founded on the singularity of the other' and instead show how 'they are ultimately predicated on keeping the other in its

place'.⁸ This seems a very limited way of thinking about singularity and the other. In his book on Clement Greenberg, for example, Thierry de Duve offers a reading of Greenberg's approach to the issue of medium as *other*. What he means is that Greenberg views the medium as a 'constraint' – the artist must struggle with the medium and is never simply in command – which de Duve believes turns around heroic assumptions about the avant-garde, by considering the medium as 'the address to an indeterminate other'.⁹ Do you have major objections to putting the issue of medium this way? What would these objections be?

The idea of the medium as the resistant other has to be traced back to its true origin: the Hegelian notion of symbolic art. It is Hegel who put the 'resistance of matter' at the centre of the analysis of art and conceived of it not as a mere imperfection, but as a gap inside the very practice and meaning of art – that is, the mark of an excess of the idea over its own representability. It is this excess which was conceptualised in the Adornian interpretation of 'autonomy' as resistance and inner contradiction. And it is this idea that was overturned in the Lyotardian idea of the sublime as the principle of modern art. In Lyotard's analysis there is a significant shift from the idea of the resistance of matter to the statement of a religious figure of the Other. Look at his text 'After The Sublime, The State Of Aesthetics', in which he states that the sublime is *the* principle of modern art.¹⁰ This appears to mean first of all that modern art is true to the alterity of the materials. As he states it, its task is to 'approach' matter in its alterity without having recourse to representation. In such a way he emphasises its commitment to the unique quality of a tone or a nuance, the grain of a skin or fragrance of an aroma. But soon he makes all those singularities interchangeable because 'they all designate the event of a passion, a possibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it and of which it conserves only the feeling – anguish and jubilation – of an obscure debt.'¹¹ In such a way the commitment to matter becomes the mere sign of the dependence on a radical alterity. That alterity is first brought up as the shock of the *aistheton* or the 'enslavement' to the *aistheton*, as he puts it.¹² But this enslavement to the *aistheton* ultimately becomes the ethical 'debt' to an absolute Other: this means ultimately that the task of art is to inscribe a shock which means the dependence of the mind on the law of the Other – be it the Lacanian 'thing' or the God of Moses. I think that De Duve's analysis of Greenberg is in keeping with Lyotard's idea of the 'debt', which means that it is in keeping with the shift that turned the 'modernist' commitment to the medium into the neo-religious commitment to the law of the Other.

In a number of your publications you propose that the maxim of equality central to the aesthetic regime of art is played out in terms of the identity of opposites. Here, normally opposed categories, such as form and matter, conscious and the unconscious, the intentional and the involuntary, and art and non-art are brought into a relation of equality rather than one of hierarchical division. Can you speak to the political implications of this relational equivalence between oppositional categories?

I did not want to establish a mechanistic equation, such as: aesthetic equality = identity of opposites. What I meant is that the aesthetic regime of art implied a redistribution with respect to the former distributions of territories and hierarchies. When Schiller set out to give a political meaning to the Kantian conception of form, he emphasised that it dismissed the old hierarchy of matter and form or understanding and sensibility. Obviously that hierarchy was in keeping with a whole political, social and ideological order that was structured around the opposition of activity and passivity in which 'activity' remained the privilege of the princes and the higher classes, while 'passivity' remained the lot of those who were entrapped in the necessity of productive and reproductive life. In this case, you can speak of an 'identity of opposites', but what occurs is much more like a suspension: the perception of form is no longer dependent on a form-matter model in keeping with a social hierarchy. The same happens with the dismissal of the division of genres, since that division was based on 'social' distinctions, namely on the 'dignity' of the subjects represented by art. When 19th Century artists, writers or critics asserted that all subjects were equivalent, it was still a question of asserting a form of aesthetic equality, but it could not be described as an 'identity of the opposites'. As for the art/non-art separation, it is an interesting case, because it is not a question of making opposites identical. It is a question of framing a new opposition, the status of which is very different from the former one. The 'art/non-art' distinction had no place in the representational order. In that order, what was relevant was the opposition between fine arts – or liberal arts – and mechanical arts, which meant an opposition between arts designed for the pleasure and glorification of gentle people and arts designed to respond to the necessities of practical life. There was a clear principle of distinction and, correspondingly, a set of rules proper to the dignity of each art. The aesthetic regime substituted for this hierarchy, the separation between art and non-art, which is an indeterminate one. It functions as a norm, but as an equivocal one. On the one hand, art must be separated from the net of social relations; on the other hand, it is viewed as the construction of new forms of life. Moreover, there are no clear borders between art and non-art: art is turned to kitsch; or, on the contrary, disused commodities enter the realm of art. So it is not so much an 'identity of the opposites' as it is a redistribution of territories and borders.

An impressive feature of your writings on aesthetics is your attentiveness to empirical developments in the various arts you have addressed. This differs from the way some philosophers dip a toe into art history, without much concern for the historical or formal specifics of art practices. At the same time, people like us, who work in art history, criticism and curating regularly introduce philosophical material into our writings on art. But, this too can have its problems. For example, the anti-aesthetic postmodernism that took hold in the U.S. in the 1980s announced that Kant's aesthetic philosophy was irrelevant to contemporary art. But such claims were usually based on cursory readings or even third hand accounts of Kant's philosophy. What is your feeling about these issues, because

in some respects they point to the perils of overriding disciplinary boundaries too cavalierly? Could you talk about how you approach the different disciplines that your work traverses?

In my view, the danger is not that of overriding boundaries. It is not a matter of boundaries. It is a matter of work and patience. Everybody is entitled to read Kant and make use of him, even if they have no 'philosophical training'. Reading Kant happens to be a good philosophical training in itself. And, in order to understand what is at stake in Kant, you have to override the boundaries of the history of philosophy. You have to look at various events and debates that occurred at the same time – discussions about the salons, the invention of the art museum (notably in a revolutionary context), the constitution of art history – and you have to make his theses resonate in different historical and social contexts. As for me, I understood what was at stake in Kant's idea of the aesthetic judgment as 'disinterested' in the wake of my research on workers' emancipation in 19th Century France. It would appear that this has 'nothing to do' with aesthetics. Yet it appeared to me that workers' emancipation meant for them the possibility of acquiring the capacity of a 'disinterested' gaze, the capacity of breaking away from the forms of perception and judgment that were supposed to 'fit' the ethos of the handworker. I could understand Kant's aesthetics from the point of view of workers' emancipation and workers' emancipation from the point of view of Kant's aesthetics. Of course, when I was doing this, historians thought that I was doing mere philosophical speculation and philosophers that I was doing mere empirical research. For me, it does not matter how you are classified. What matters is what new lines you are able to trace between separate objects and fields: art and theory are about this framing of new landscapes of the perceptible and the thinkable. So the peril is not that art critics, historians or curators read Kant in their own way. The point is that usually they don't read Kant, they just borrow readymade interpretations of Kant – or any other philosopher – that one of their colleagues has already borrowed from an 'authorised' commentary on Kant made by a philosopher who read it through the interpretation of Derrida, Lyotard or others. The point is that when you refuse to override the frontiers, you then have to trust people who have arranged the materials for you. Yet, if you make the decision to use your own eyes and brains, you will never know how much time it will take, nor where it will lead you.

1. Jacques Rancière interviewed by Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey 'Art Of The Possible' *Artforum* March 2007, pp256-69.

2. The 'aesthetic regime of art' that Rancière denominates roughly coincides with the period of modernity. Here art attains a certain autonomy or specificity, distinct from its utility in reflecting the truth or ethos of a community. Within the aesthetic regime, works of art are construed in Rancière's terms as 'belonging to a specific sensorium that stands out as an exception from the normal regime of the sensible, which presents us with an immediate adequation of thought and sensible materiality'. ('The Aesthetic Revolution And Its Outcomes: Emplotments Of Autonomy And Heteronomy' *New Left Review* 14 March - April 2002, p135.) At the same time, this specificity of art is consistently undermined by the fact that the aesthetic regime questions and alters distinctions between art and non-art activities. Rancière thus describes the 'aesthetic regime of art'

as motivated by a dual contradictory impetus towards autonomy and heteronomy.

3. By 'mimique', Rancière means a type of performance with a broader connotation than is designated by the English term 'mime', yet it also differs from the usual sense of the word in French, which implies mimicry.

4. Jacques Rancière 'The Emancipated Spectator' *Artforum* March 2007, [PAGE REFERENCE?].

5. Shonibare's *Garden Of Love* was held at, and created for, the Musée Du Quai Branly, Paris, 2 April - 8 July 2007.

6. The usual translation of *dispositif* in English is 'apparatus'.

7. Like Mayakovsky and Artaud, Swiss born Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) was a pioneer and theorist of modern theatre and scenography. Rancière discussed aspects of his 1899 book *Die Musik Und Die Inszenierung* (Music And The Scene) in his essay 'What Aesthetics Can Mean' in *From An Aesthetic Point Of View: Philosophy, Art And The Senses* (ed. Peter Osborne) Serpent's Tail, London, 2000, pp13-33.

8. Jacques Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution Of The Sensible* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill) Continuum, London and New York, 2004, p2.

9. Thierry de Duve *Clement Greenberg: Between The Lines* (trans. Brian Holmes) Éditions Dis Voir, Paris, 1996, p86.

10. Jean-François Lyotard 'After The Sublime, The State Of Aesthetics' *The Inhuman* (trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bolwby) Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp135-43.

11. *Ibid*, p141.

12. Lyotard does not use this specific term in his essay, which is the ancient Greek for 'the sensible'.