

### Abstract

Is public art necessarily political, by virtue of its siting in public space? Certainly, conventional theory implies that both public art and public space are replete with ideological potential which in turn promotes political interpretation. Yet, the writings of contemporary philosophers Rancière and Badiou lead to a rejection of this view. Their theories propose that it is impossible to assume that just because an aesthetic object is located in a public space, is viewed by the general populace, or encourages interaction, that it is innately political. Similarly, just because an artist or designer claims that their work is political, this does not make the aesthetic object they produce either innately political, or political in its affects. In a post-political world, where managerial governance has supplanted ideological politics as the dominant model of the state, public art must be understood differently if it is to remain relevant. This essay describes the origins of Rancière's and Badiou's metapolitical theories, their underlying concepts and how they assist in offering an alternative reading of public art and public space.

### Keywords

Public space; public art; metapolitics; Jacques Rancière.

## Public Space and Public Art: The Metapolitics of Aesthetics

**Michael J. Ostwald, Newcastle**

### Politics and Public Art

If the conventional theoretical frameworks used for the criticism of public art and public space have anything in common, it is the assumption that both art and space are capable of ideological interpretation.<sup>1</sup> The adjective 'public' evokes issues of citizenship, community, visibility and accessibility; all concepts which historically have had political connotations.<sup>2</sup> However, in recent years the argument that public art is necessarily political has come under sustained critique. Leading philosophers and cultural theorists have begun to summarily reject the notion that a work of art is necessarily political as a result of its context, siting, construction or, even, the intentions of its creator. As the French philosopher Jacques Rancière argues, the "core of the problem is that there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics."<sup>3</sup> A political movement may have a particular cultural expression and the arts, a political agenda, but "there is no formula for an appropriate correlation.

It is the state of politics that decides."<sup>4</sup>

Rancière's arguments have challenged a complacent art establishment to reject superficial readings of public art as being innately political and develop a more nuanced understanding of the way social and cultural systems frame or respond to cultural artefacts. Without an awareness of the operations that govern the politics of art in the contemporary world, Rancière argues that the pursuit of a political agenda through the creation of *les arts plastiques* is potentially meaningless.<sup>5</sup> A 2004 survey by the New York Foundation for the Arts reinforces this danger. It found 69% of the 3000 respondents thought that political art was dull or extraneous.<sup>6</sup> In this survey the arts community and its patrons provided the precise reaction that Rancière warns awaits most public art in the post-political world.<sup>7</sup> This chapter provides an overview of the metapolitical theories of Rancière and his contemporary Alain Badiou and discusses how they may be applied to public art.

### A Post-political World

In the early stages of his career Jacques Rancière's philosophy was closely aligned to the concerns of Marxism and the teachings of Louis Althusser. However, in the aftermath of the civil unrest of May 1968 in France, Rancière withdrew his support for all mainstream political systems. Instead, he turned his attention to understanding the rules and mechanisms that sustain political structures. Badiou characterises Rancière's theoretical method as metapolitical; a philosophy of politics that does not come from a distinct ideological tradition but which examines operations both within and across multiple governing structures.<sup>8</sup> Rancière has developed his metapolitical theory to analyse a range of relationships that exist in society. In particular, Rancière has argued for the importance of education and social equity and he has questioned the conventional relationship between philosophy and labour.<sup>9</sup> In the last decade he has also increasingly focussed his writings on the relationship between art and politics.<sup>10</sup>

At the heart of Rancière's metapolitics is a belief, that he shares with a growing number of contemporary cultural theorists, in the death of politics.<sup>11</sup> For Rancière, the failure of major political regimes in the 1980s — in Russia, South America and Europe — signalled a shift away from traditional political systems and towards a more contingent and operational model. The "end of politics itself"<sup>12</sup> occurs because conventional political systems (like socialism or fascism) are supplanted by governing structures that do not strive to achieve some social ideal or uphold a moral principle. Instead, their goals are expressed through economic or managerial concepts including growth, transparency, productivity and security. Important clues that the death of politics has occurred in a country include; the lack of differentiation between major political parties (characterised by political centrism), a fixation on numerical indicators (interest rates and unemployment statistics), the propagation of consumerism as an ideal and the development of science-based policy. This is not to suggest that contemporary politics lack ideological values. Rather, these values are hidden, repressed or subservient, and are rarely apparent in the artefacts they produce. It is against this backdrop that Rancière offers an alternative understanding of post-

political systems of governance in terms of the "distribution of the sensible".

In the forward to Rancière's *The Names of History*, Hayden White describes the concept of the distribution of the sensible as being derived from an understanding that "participation in politics hinges on conceptions of membership in communities whose pedigrees are either confirmed or denied by an appeal to 'history.' But this 'history' is a construction of those who already enjoy membership and indeed privileged positions in already formed communities."<sup>13</sup> Rancière proposes that every society is founded upon a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."<sup>14</sup> This, Rancière's definition of society, has two components. First, the limitations that determine how components within a system of governance are arranged or distributed and, second, the sensible which relates to what is allowable, visible or enabled.

Of equal significance to the distribution of the sensible is a parallel division of systems of governance into two notions: the 'police' and 'politics'. The former is the current partitioning of the sensible and the latter, a means for disrupting it.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, the police order is more than the uniformed officers of the state; it includes everything from the media and social mores to theological values and cultural practices. Indeed the "essence of the police... is not repression but rather a certain distribution of the sensible that precludes the emergence of politics."<sup>16</sup> To understand how politics can emerge from the police order, Rancière offers two examples of forms of disagreement in society. The first are actions, objects or expressions which oppose the police order, but have no impact on it. These are instances of 'dissent'. Thus, the breaking of a law might be a rejection of the state's dominant values, but it is not necessarily a challenge to that law. Similarly, the creation of a work of public art criticising the police order is typically an example of dissent; it signifies disagreement but it does not challenge the distribution of the sensible. Politics only becomes apparent in a system when the police order is sufficiently disturbed or undermined

that it is forced to respond; such a disagreement is called 'dissensus'.<sup>17</sup> For example, a individual refusing to pay for their train ticket is an example of dissent. The widespread advocacy of free public transport is also dissent. However, the call for all people to systematically refuse to pay for train tickets on a certain day becomes dissensus if people act on this calls. Moreover, if this dissensus is made visible, or *sensible*, through the media then it may force the police order, its *distribution*, to change.

Prior to Rancière formulating his metapolitical position, Badiou developed a model that he described as being reliant on "the state of the situation"; a concept which describes "the correlation between the counting and non-counted."<sup>18</sup> Like Rancière's distribution of the sensible, Badiou's model relies on two components. The first is a sense of the accepted order in a system, its *correlation*, or what Rancière calls its distribution. The second is a reflection on the extent to which actions are visible, or *counted*, what Rancière calls *sensible*. Badiou also offers a secondary, more tentative division of dominant political structures into the "state" and "insecurity"; a delineation which shares some similarities, respectively, with Rancière's police and politics. Where the former pair, state and police, signify the normative operations of a system of governance, the latter pair, insecurity and politics, refer to the capacity for disruption of this stability. Badiou calls this condition "on the edge of the void"<sup>19</sup> — an indication of the latent propensity of systems for failure.

Despite the similarities between Badiou's and Rancière's metapolitical constructs, the two philosophers argue that there are also important differences. Rancière's model is emphatically neutral in its framing; it seeks to provide a platform for analysis and understanding. In contrast, Badiou's model is based on an underlying ontology; it is designed for critical deployment to support change. Badiou also argues that the metapolitical understanding of governance, as either the state of the situation or the distribution of the sensible, is not restricted to the post-political world. The "fact that politics makes visible the invisible"<sup>20</sup> is not a new occurrence. Ultimately, Rancière and Badiou independently assert that in the post-political world any association between a system of govern-

ance and the aesthetic artefacts produced under its guise is more complex than it is under more overtly ideological and stable regimes.

Consider a classical example of the relationship between politics and aesthetics in an ideological system of governance. In Plato's *Republic*, all labour is directed to the needs of the government and the majority of citizens of the country support this goal. Labour that does not serve the government plan, like the artist's work, is banned. Thus, the clandestine production of an aesthetic object is a rejection of the expectations of the community but, if it remains hidden, it is an example of dissent. However, if that same object was visible and in a space reserved for the public then it constitutes dissensus. This is because it has already appropriated the space where the populace can enjoy the products of their own, more worthy, labour. Of equal importance is that the aesthetic object is a celebration of the joys of selfish toil; the pride that can be taken in the production of an object that does not serve the needs of the state. In this example, the content of the aesthetic object is irrelevant. The object could be a beautiful carving of a miniature chair or a humorous depiction of the leading citizens of the republic. The aesthetic object is a political catalyst because, through its visibility, it upsets the distribution of the sensible. In the post-political world the situation is different. The distribution of the sensible embraces the merging of art and public space rendering attempts to catalyse a political reaction effectively impotent. The following definition, of the space of public art in the post-political world, expands the rationale for this.

#### **Re-reading public space**

In the post-political world, public art occupies space that has three characteristic properties; managed occupation, calculated risk and weak programme. First and foremost, public art is licensed by the government to occupy space which is not owned by an individual or corporate entity. While the government may permit temporary occupation of a public space, the requirement for a licence is not a symptom of the control exerted by the government, or of some totalitarian desire for censorship, rather it is reflection of the need to ensure equity of access. The government is not, explicitly at least, concerned with whether the

occupation of public space is for a sporting event, a farmers' market, a public protest or the erection of a temporary art work. The government is concerned with the processes that ensure that each of these activities can occur without undue disruption to other peoples' rights. Fundamentally, in the post-political world, the machinations of the police order are bureaucratic not ideological. Any action which conforms with the values of the community is allowable in public space. The government may have oversight of the space, but it does not have control of it. Public space is not a physical reflection of the ideology of the government, but of the distribution of the sensible.

The second property of public space follows directly from the first; it is managed space not controlled space. Public space is exposed to the elements and to society. The objects that occupy public space are vulnerable; they will weather or age and may be defaced or destroyed. In contrast, controlled spaces, like shopping malls and art galleries, are typically internal or enclosed. Their environmental conditions are closely monitored and they are patrolled by private security firms. In a public gallery, the curator asks, how well can the art work be protected before it can be displayed? In a public space, the manager asks, how degraded can the art work become before it must be repaired or removed? Whereas the display of art in a major gallery is both authoritarian in its framing and sanguine in its ideology, in public space the aesthetic object is subjected to the calculated neglect of maintenance schedules and risk assessments. In the post-political world, communal space is the province of public liability insurance and infrastructure renewal programs; it stands for the poverty of the police order, not its power.

A final property of public space is that it is weak in programmatic terms. The word weak is not intended as a pejorative. Public space provides flexible and robust amenity; places to sit, tables to use, trees to shelter under. However, public space is not designed to serve a singular functional purpose; what would traditionally be called a strong program.<sup>21</sup> While shopping malls, art galleries, office buildings and sporting fields are all spatially and tectonically delineated to achieve optimal performance, public space is less clearly defined. Moreover, just as, historically,

institutions with strong programs, like prisons or hospitals, are a direct spatialisation of the power of the state, in the contemporary post-political world, weak programs best exemplify the qualities of public space.<sup>22</sup>

All three of these characteristics of public space grow from a reading of the occupation of space as a quotidian facet of the police order. Public space, more so than private space, is governed by the police order; by the values and expectations of the community. The positioning of a work of art, which is critical of the state, in public space is simply another facet of the police order. This is why Rancière warns that political art and public art are in danger of losing their capacity to speak. It is only by becoming sensible, by raising their presence above what is conventionally accepted, do they begin to come close to dissensus. Fundamentally, public space in the post-political world lacks the central ideological qualities that artists and designers have conventionally celebrated as necessary for arguing that a creative work is innately political.

One way of understanding the definition above is to see that it is concerned with the politics of public space not politics in public space or, alternatively, the politics of public art not the politics in public art. For Rancière, there are no politics in aesthetics, in space or in art. As in the example of Plato's *Republic*, the content of the aesthetic object, what it depicts, is not important, its sensibility is. The attempt to invest politics in a creative work is a commonplace occurrence which, in the post-political world lacks credibility. This is because politics does not arise from dissent, only from dissensus. Furthermore, even if the criticism in a work could become political, the state is a managerial system that supports the dominant values of the community and any criticism is therefore of the very society that has supported the artist.

From Rancière's perspective, probably the most political works of art in Australia's history have been a large canvas criss-crossed with jagged blue lines and a bright, yellow, angled metal sculpture. The former work is a classic example of abstract painting. Depending on your point of view, it is potentially a rejec-

tion of figurative representation, a poetic evocation of an aleatory cosmos, or a sublime demonstration of texture and technique. Yet, none of these dimensions render the work political. What makes Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles No II* infamous is a combination of its price and its purchaser. *Blue Poles* cost the Whitlam Government in Australia over one million Dollars when it was purchased in the early 1970s. Not only was this a record price for such a work at that time, it came during a period of instability in the Australian economy; a time when the general public were suffering from crippling financial constraints. While many factors lead to the downfall of the Whitlam administration, commentators still list *Blue Poles* as a potent symbol of the excesses of the government. The other great political controversy of Australian art was intended as a focal point for a new city square designed for Melbourne in the mid 1970s. "Few artworks anywhere have been caught up"<sup>23</sup> in the conflict that this cheerful, geometric sculpture heralded. In Australia, "no other public work has been the centerpiece of such a passionate and drawn out argument."<sup>24</sup> Designed by Ron Robertson-Swann and unofficially dubbed the "Yellow Peril", the sculpture has gone down in Australian history as the catalyst for public protests, union bans, letter writing campaigns, political provocation and media invective. Yet once again, this work, Australia's foremost example of the politics of public art, is without any innate political qualities. These two works, *Blue Poles* and the "Yellow Peril", are instances of the politics of aesthetics, not politics in aesthetics. They have become political because they have been highly visible, not because they have had any implicit ideological agenda. For the metapolitical philosophers, this is the reality of aesthetics in a post-political world.

In the post-political world the relationship between public art and public space is necessarily concerned with the distribution of the sensible and defined by the "delimitation of ... the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise".<sup>25</sup> The invisible, by its very nature, has limited impact on the rules or values governing a society, its police order. Rancière's philosophy leads to this conclusion and it is up to individuals to determine how they will respond. Badiou's reaction is more emphatic. While he agrees with Rancière's conclusion, he criticises Rancière's tendency to main-

tain an analytical distance from the subject. Badiou rejects Rancière's "tendency to pit phantom masses against an unnamed State."<sup>26</sup> Instead, Badiou sees Rancière's conclusion as the impetus for a "call to arms". Badiou argues that this situation in the post-political world "demands" the rise of "a few rare political militants against the 'democratic' hegemony of the parliamentary State."<sup>27</sup> For Badiou, the "central subjective figure of politics is the political militant, a figure totally absent from Rancière's system."<sup>28</sup> While it is no longer reasonable to just argue that an aesthetic object is political by virtue of its siting in public space, or even its creator's intent, this should not stop artists or architects aspiring to political militancy.

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3 Jacques Rancière, (2004). *The Politics of Aesthetics* (G. Rockhill, Trans.). London: Continuum. 62.

4 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 62.

5 For Rancière *les arts plastiques* include jewellery, sculpture, and architecture. Rancière also uses the phrase "aesthetic object" to describe literature, design, the arts and performance.

6 Mark Vallen, (2004). *Why All Art Is Political*. <http://www.art-for-a-change.com/content/essays/political.htm> [last accessed December 2007]

7 The "post-political world" refers to a series of geographically disparate nations that have a similar lack of overt ideology in their governing structures. Arguably, most of Eastern and Western Europe, the United Kingdom, the Scandinavian countries, North America, large parts of South America and Australia are part of this group. While it might be possible to argue that the systems of governance in some of these areas still possess some historical connection to political ideologies, in most cases the majority of decisions made in these regions are managerial.

8 Alain Badiou, (2005). *Metapolitics* (J. Barker, Trans.). New York: Verso.

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10 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Jacques Rancière, (2007). *The Future of the Image* (G. Elliott, Trans.). New York: Verso.

11 *The death of politics* is essentially a European theory which is driven by that region's long term engagement with a range of political systems that have openly sought to promote radical change in society. Some examples of this would include the grand social agendas of Soviet Communism, Italian Fascism or Greek democracy. Contemporary politics in Australia may seem to have an ideological basis, but in comparison with the political agendas of other countries, it lacks overarching social or cultural aspirations.

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20 Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 117.

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24 Wallis. *Peril in the Square*. 10.

25 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 13.

26 Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 121.

27 Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 121-122.

28 Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 122.

**Professor Michael J. Ostwald, Newcastle**

Dr. Michael J. Ostwald is Dean of Architecture and Professor of Architecture at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Between 2001 and 2006 he was foundation Head of the School of Architecture and Built Environment at Newcastle. In 2006 and 2007 he was President of the *Association of Architecture Schools of Australasia* (AASA). Michael is a Visiting Professor at RMIT University and a Professorial Fellow at the Victoria University, Wellington. He has a PhD in architectural philosophy and a higher doctorate (DSc) in the mathematics of design.

He is co-editor of the journal *Architectural Design Research* and on the editorial boards of *Architectural Theory Review* and the *Nexus Network Journal*. He has authored more than 200 scholarly publications and his recent books include: *The Architecture of the New Baroque* (2006), *Residue: Architecture as a Condition of Loss* (2007) and *Homo Faber: Modelling Design* (2008); he is also co-editor of *Museum, Gallery and Cultural Architecture in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Region* (2007).



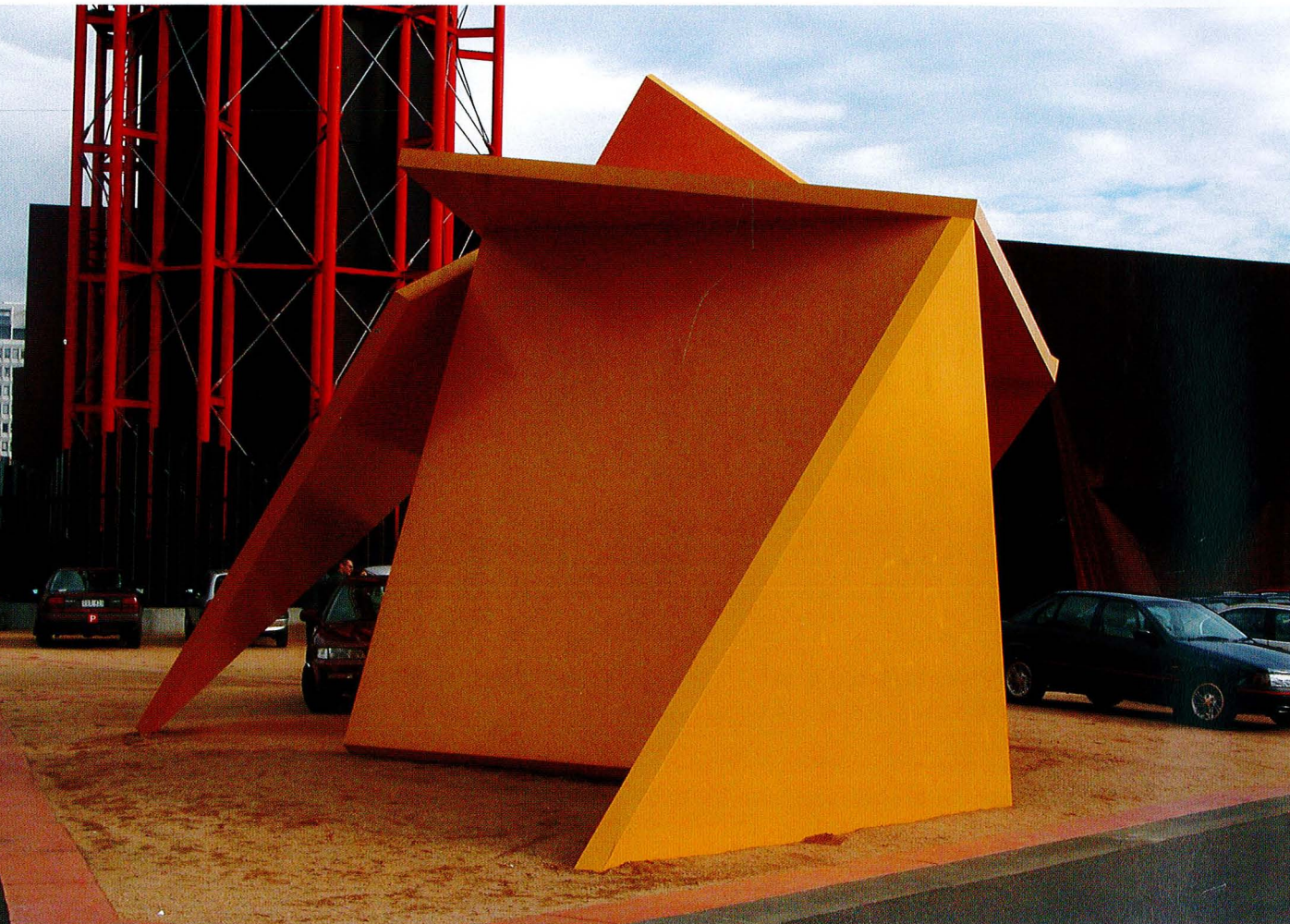


Fig 1: *Vault* ("Yellow Peril") 1980, sculpture in steel by Ron Robertson-Swann, Melbourne. Original location: City Square, Melbourne; relocated in 2002 to Southbank, Melbourne; adjacent to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. (Photo: M. Ostwald)