

2014

Politics and Aesthetics: Partitions and Partioning in Contemporary Art

Jonathan Owen Clark

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Dance, UK, j.clark@trinitylaban.ac.uk

Joao Lima Duque

joaoklavier@yahoo.de

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clark, Jonathan Owen and Duque, Joao Lima (2014) "Politics and Aesthetics: Partitions and Partioning in Contemporary Art," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 12 , Article 20.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol12/iss1/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

Politics and Aesthetics: Partitions and Partitioning in Contemporary Art

Jonathan Owen Clark & João Lima Duque

Abstract

Jacques Rancière defined the “distribution of the sensible” as the effect of a type of aesthetico-political decision-making that creates a *partitioning* of the realm of the perceivable in relation to both art and society. The artworld itself constructs its own particular types of curatorial partitioning: between “art” and “non-art,” between “dominant, residual, and emergent,” and between “mainstream” and “periphery.” This essay examines certain “boundary effects” that develop as a result of the act of the partitioning itself and closely examines what arguably are two new categories in contemporary art: “crossover” and “interventionist.” Both categories have a certain relationship to a culturally constructed boundary or partition. In the former, we see a type of artwork emerge that is the result of the overdetermination of the partition itself. In the latter, artworks appear that are antinomically situated at both sides of a partition simultaneously.

Keywords

aesthetics, antinomy, crossover art, interventionist art, partition, politics, Rancière

1. Introduction

This essay concerns contemporary performance events, practices, and artworks that we describe as either “crossover” or “interventionist.” The first category is defined as a kind of merging or juxtapositioning of two artistic genres or styles, or the attempt to unify seemingly disparate or mutually exclusive artistic methodologies. The second category is defined as performances, happenings, or art-events that typically last for a small duration, take place in public, often urban spaces, and have a certain fleeting or ephemeral appearance. They are typically performative acts that emerge only in order to disappear again and often are loaded with a suggestion of a certain type of subversion or even illegality.

Both of these categories of artworks raise interesting aesthetic questions that include the following: What criteria do major art venues and institutions use to decide whether a particular artwork should be “visible or invisible” to the public?^[1] How do certain types of artworks emerge from cultural constructions in art that create and partition the categories of the “dominant, residual and emergent?”^[2] How does contemporary curatorial politics seem to embody certain kinds of contradictions, whereby such artworks are simultaneously presented as “sanctioned” and “subversive”? Are these same politics at work behind the emergence or even predominance of the “crossover” artwork or event?

This essay considers how these types of artwork come into existence, and how that is due in part to certain ways in which contemporary art is organized and discussed. It is well known

that discourses surrounding art- and performance-making, coupled with the politics of curatorship, have had the function of creating certain types of aesthetic partitioning. This has resulted in the construction of *boundaries*, *interfaces*, and *interstices* in and between artworks and art practices. There are, of course, the famous “institutional” structures that forge distinctions between the very categories of “art” and “non-art” themselves: “To see something as art requires something the eye cannot describe—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.”^[3] There are also additional boundaries constructed within art movements themselves, including those between the “mainstream” and the “periphery” and, in terms of artists themselves, between “established” and “emerging,” and so forth. All these boundaries have both an aesthetic and a political dimension. They are part of what Jacques Rancière calls the “distribution of the sensible,” defined as:

... the 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. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.^[4]

What interests Rancière about works of art is their capacity to render visible what is invisible in a particular distribution of the sensible, and how they may offer possibility of genuine societal change. Not only do distributions of the sensible render certain elements of the world invisible, as in the case of workers (one thinks here of the French *sans-papiers*), but they also render themselves invisible by presenting the partitioning they construct as completely transparent, natural, or obvious.

Art, particularly a suitable political art, is a way to contest this supposed transparency. Art is not only able to shift boundaries but it can also reveal, in stark terms, the contingency behind the formation of those boundaries.

This essay concerns these same mechanisms of apportionment via the production of boundaries, interfaces, or interstices that exist, or are manufactured to exist, in and between certain types of contemporary art practices. Our concern is less with a historical account of the cultural construction of such boundaries or with how art has the capacity to displace them.

Instead, we aim to extend those ideas of Rancière that concern the reciprocal relationship between politics and aesthetics, and we shall focus more on the *effects* that partitions and partitioning have created within art practice and consider the feedback loops that occur when the discourse surrounding art interferes with its own object. This approach shares some affinity with the work of philosopher of science Ian Hacking, whose theory of “dynamic nominalism” aims to explicate feedback loops between societal systems of naming, taxonomy, and classification on the one hand, and

the targets of these measurements on the other. A situation thus emerges whereby these systems end up modifying the objects or phenomena they aim to classify or measure.^[5] In particular, we will describe two contemporary variants of these types of feedback loops that have resulted in new artistic formations.

In addition to an "interventionist" category, we consider performances that are idiomatically described as "crossover." In each case, we argue that a certain kind of boundary effect comes into operation. In the case of interventionist art and performance, the first effect occurs when a performance event is situated at both sides of a boundary simultaneously. In that of crossover art, a different effect of partitioning occurs whereby artworks are commissioned by virtue of the overdetermination of the partition itself.

To make these ideas a bit more distinct, we consider an analogous situation, that of the hermeneutics of boundaries or borders, real or virtual, in contemporary European politics. We can see that the concept of virtually bordered political space exists in addition to the real physical or geographical borders between separate nation states. In a recent discussion, Étienne Balibar claims that these virtual borders are constructed in at least four opposing versions.^[6] First, there is the partitioning model of a "clash of cultures," the most prevalent of which is the implicit conceptual boundary drawn between certain types of ethnoreligious groupings or ideas of nationhood. Secondly, one has the model of "global networks," separated and partitioned into two antagonistic variants, one capitalist and one "revolutionary," with their common point being "the tendency on both sides to view the emerging structure as a virtually delocalised system of communication, amongst capital as well as amongst social movements."^[7] Thirdly, there is a center-periphery model that sets up a dichotomy between the proposed "stable" and predominantly "northern" center states and the more "unstable," "southern" countries at the margins. This last distinction has been of particular importance since the financial crash of 2008. Now we see an explicit economic partition created by the relative levels of bond yields on government debt, which are seen as an indicator of credit-worthiness.

Lastly, one sees a vision of Europe as a kind of endless "borderland." Due to the growth of increased surveillance, the introduction of more and more complex mechanisms for personal identification, and the emergence of gated communities within and around "no-go" areas like the French *banlieues*, in the modern European city one is always "at the border" of something or somewhere, a kind of *ubiquity* of boundary.

What is interesting here is that we can discern a similar situation within the space of contemporary art. Talk of boundaries, barriers, interfaces, and cutting edges is now also ubiquitous in a type of curatorial discourse surrounding art production. Here, too, we see the same type cultural clashes and juxtapositions but, unlike the previous situation, these are given an overwhelmingly positive connotation and sense of aesthetic importance. Some contemporary examples of these types of artistic pairings include the collaboration between sculptor Anish Kapoor, musician Nithin Sawhney, and the

choreographer Akram Khan on the crossover genre work *Kaash* (2002), which merged European contemporary dance with Indian classical Kathak; the “reinvention” of the Brazilian Bossa Nova of Antonio Carlos Jobim by the Japanese musician and pianist Ryuichi Sakamoto (*Casa* 2002); the recordings and performances of the Gotan Project that mix Tango with Electronica (*Revencha del Tango* 2001); Björk and Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* (2005), which featured a now-familiar “East-meets-West” theme; and the *Africa Express* (2012) performance project involving the pop musician Damon Albarn and various African instrumentalists, such as Baaba Maal.^[8]

Of course, the explosion of such crossover events has not occurred by accident but under the supervision of certain varieties of the same “global networks” that Balibar described, such as media multinationals and large record labels that provide means of artistic distribution and promotion. Such “crossover” events also support the logic of the center-periphery model. A kind of stipulation exists that the crossover must occur between the two; otherwise its interest as crossover is negligible: “crossover is fine, as long as you are crossing-over with *us*.” And we also see, in the increasing hybridization of the performance and social spaces, that music, for example, inhabits a kind of ubiquitous boundary, one that is supported by exactly the same “virtually delocalised systems of communication,” such as the Internet, YouTube and social media, as Balibar's political counterpart.

One glance at the pages of music magazine *The Wire* confirms the emergence of this ultra-hybridization, where one bears witness to a proliferation of different musical special interests, defined by a specific nomenclature, which then bears witness to something important, namely that the (de)construction of aesthetic boundaries is not in any way arbitrary, as is often portrayed. We are not in a situation in which, due to the dissolution of previously hegemonic cultural boundaries, “anything goes.” Boundaries are constructed and then dissolved in particular and often precise ways. This is a further extension of the idea of the co-implication of politics and aesthetics theorized by Rancière. We see a congruence of the mechanisms of boundary-construction between the two social systems.

But meanwhile, in another series of contemporary performances, a completely different boundary effect is in operation. Here the boundaries, interfaces and interstices that comprise the “distributions of the sensible” lead to a specific effect in which a particular performance project is situated simultaneously at both sides of a boundary at once. This means that the artwork in question is involved in a type of antinomial relation with itself. Examples of this phenomenon are the projects collected under the name ‘interventionist.’^[9] The model for the curatorial politics that supports the commissioning of such work sustains a type of double logic, one that allows the simultaneity of its “sanctioned” with its “subversive” status, work that gains the status of the “visible” only insofar as it can maintain the appearance of “invisibility.” we will return to this issue in more detail later but, for now, let us now take a closer look at crossover phenomena in contemporary art and the way that the crossover category has

been curatorially constructed.

2. What is crossover art?

In both of the cases considered above, the boundaries, interfaces, and interstices constructed by curatorial and other discourse seem to live a strange double existence. On the one hand, the site of the boundary is posited in contemporary art as arguably the predominant location of meaning and artistic innovation. Artists are almost obliged to situate their work at some interface or other, whether this is a cross-cultural interface, a cross-genre interface, or an intra-genre interface.

Cross-genre interfaces, in particular, come to the fore; hence the ubiquity today in performances of the additional multimedia *dispositif*, the admixtures or hybrids of music and other media, for example, or the equally ubiquitous idea that innovation in performance is now a question of some kind of radical collaboration or juxtaposition of and between artistic genres of different varieties.

However, completely simultaneously, the rhetoric of boundary is supported by talk of its exact opposite. Barriers between diverse forms of artistic activity, it is claimed, are also "fading-away," "dissolving," "being transgressed," "crossed-over," and so forth. Indeed, is this not the exact *raison d'être* of the crossover event? The Western musician meets his or her African counterpart at the site of a constructed boundary precisely because of and simultaneously with the melting-away of the old fashioned "imperial" cultural boundaries between Africa and the West. The boundaries between art forms are "blurring," we are told, which makes the performance and multimedia *dispositif* an act "at the cutting-edge," which is not, supposedly, blurred at all. In our universities, there is a similar obligation to participate in cross-disciplinary research situated at boundaries with other subject areas. This happens precisely at the same time as and because these "old" disciplinary boundaries are "ceasing to exist." So, in looking at all this, the boundary constructed in various discourses of today is a strange animal indeed. Its existence depends on its non-existence; what it signifies coincides with its opposite.

Do we not detect here the contradictory logic of "fetishistic disavowal"?^[10] Any ideological edifice, Slavoj Žižek claims, contains an element, a special object that simultaneously embodies and denies its own impossibility. In our context, the aesthetic boundary is just such an element. The impossibility that it simultaneously represents and opposes is the impossibility of the "totalization" of the field of artworks itself.

This is precisely where the problem arises. The attempt at totalization is precisely what the contemporary culture industry, with its ideology of pluralism, aims at. But the field of art and performance is disparate, and the incommensurability of this disparity is beyond symbolization.

To understand more here, we can benefit from the perspicuous analysis of music drawn from some recent ethnographic and philosophical studies.^[11] Philip Bolhman, for example, interrogated the various musical "ontologies" at work both in and between different cultural formations that arise from the embedding of musical performance into all kinds of extramusical practices and beliefs. One can speak here of a

number of opposing musical ontologies: between "our" music and "their" music; between the idea of "natural" music and music "in nature," and music as a kind of scientific of mathematical metaphor; between music as "everyday" and music as "sublime" or otherworldly. In addition, and as an important example, music in the West is commonly thought of as either an object or as a process. But in Islamic cultures, there comes a need to negate this dual sense of musical or material presence. Koranic recitation, for example, is denied the status of "music" at all under alternative ontological conditions in which music itself is not deemed to be present, but its effects, or the recognition of its presence elsewhere, are.

The point here is that these types of embeddings result in culturally contingent differences as to what music and musical metaphysics is or could be, and that these differences aren't reducible to each other. In addition, music seems to exhibit a strong sense of intermedial interpenetration. One cannot say, with confidence, where, in a given cultural situation, the musical and the extramusical begin and end, or where music stops and related communicative systems, like gesture and vocal expression start.^[12] Along with the aesthetic differences that arise from different socio-cultural embeddings and interpenetrations of musical performance, there are equally important differences that arise within different performance practices. The ethnographic analyses of the past half-century yield the result that music can be organized in radically heterogeneous ways, both in terms of its pitch structure and tuning and its rhythmical and temporal organization. These technical differences are also resistant to merging. This is surely a truth of the contemporary aesthetic situation in general: "[T]here is necessarily a plurality of arts and, whatever the imaginable intersections might be, there is no imaginable totalisation of that plurality."^[13]

To return to Žižek for a moment, what we are required to do, in his analysis, is to perform a *discursive* procedure that seeks to "deconstruct" the field of meaning of a particular ideology and isolate the term or terms that exhibit "symbolic overdetermination." This results when such a term condenses a series of opposing or contradictory features. In this discourse analysis, we see how, within the ideology of aesthetic pluralism, the term 'boundary' has a duplicitous status. It is both there and not-there, both appearing and dissolving. It is the site of cultural co-operation and the blockage that prevents such co-operation. It is new, in the sense of innovation, and old, in the sense that it represents the bad, "colonial" past.

How does this confusion arise? Precisely because the cultural work done by first positing and then dissolving a boundary is a process that over-extends itself. Here, the word "boundary" is just a linguistification, a semantic reduction, a reification or hypostatization of something much more complex, and the error is really just a simple misrecognition. If art and performance are organized, as we claim, into a set of radically heterogeneous practices, embeddings, interpenetrations, knowledge, and beliefs, it makes little sense to talk of the "boundaries" between these things. The boundaries in this complex knot, rather than existing or not existing, may be

simply not defined at all. This "boundary" is just the reification of the total set of differences inherent in and between a diverse set of sociocultural practices into a single concept.

This reification also allows something important to happen. It allows for an easy decision-making procedure to be adopted in relation to aesthetic judgments. Boundaries can be formed that allow a "readymade" or preconceived judgment to be made; readymade, because whatever else has happened artistically, one can always claim that a boundary "has been crossed."

So what exactly are these "boundaries"? Do they reflect real states of affairs in the world? Or are they, to use the common terminology, purely "socially constructed?" Recall a metaphor from Wittgenstein from *The Blue Book*^[14] where he described how boundaries could be both blurred and yet reflect and delineate categories. Although Wittgenstein was actually referring to philosophical issues regarding language and signification, he used the analogy of the reading lamp in his study, which divided the room into the categories of lit and unlit without any precise boundary existing between the two. We see a similar situation in Ian Hacking's perspicuous analysis of what is exactly at stake when something is said to be "socially constructed," including social constructions that enable forms of partitioning or classification to occur.^[15] He drew an important distinction between *objects*, in the broadest sense of the term that includes human subjects, and *ideas* as constructs.

Consider the famous claim that gender differences are "socially constructed." Hacking reduced that claim to be that the differences between men and women are not somehow inevitable or determined by the biological "nature of things." But, in another sense, and this is the key point, the phrase "socially constructed" can also mean that our *ideas* about gender, and our conceptualization or understanding of the term 'gender,' are also not inevitable or determined by the "nature of things." It follows that there need not always be a conflict between saying that gender is "socially constructed" and saying that it reflects "real" biological difference. Both can be true. While a legitimate biological basis for gender may exist, some of our perceptions of gender may indeed be socially constructed. The most interesting cases of social construction occur when ideas start to influence objects within systems of classification. Hacking coined the term *interactive kinds* for ideas that influence the way people conceive of themselves, leading to subsequent modifications of their behavior.

How does all this apply to the situation under discussion? First, we can see that our aesthetic "boundary" is a social construct in exactly the sense meant by Hacking. The term "boundary" reflects both the "real" differences in the heterogeneous field of performance practice, but it also embodies a particular *idea* about performance, an assimilation of these differences into a single "catch-all" term or concept. There is also interactivity, in Hacking's precise sense. The curatorial politics that is the source for the construction of the term 'boundary' feeds back into its own object. Despite the fact that the aesthetic boundary is really just a reification, it nevertheless determines whole areas of actual artistic production.

This perhaps also explains why certain, but not all, crossover performances seem to fail or to disappoint. The crossover event, which aims at the elimination of certain “boundaries” that are actually constructed as a result of how art is spoken about, simply cannot eliminate some of the difficulties involved in the integration of the constituent artistic practices. We often see, for example, how the collaborative efforts involved in a crossover performance seem to lapse into two separate types of compromise. The first occurs when the “Other” (in terms of the center-periphery model) in the performance pairing has to concede to the more dominant partner. There is no way to reconcile the silent or “hidden” strong beats in Central African music with their accented and enunciated equivalents in Western Rock and Pop music, so that the supposed boundary-crossing is actually really an illusion. The other category occurs when ineliminable differences in artistic style and technique cannot be reconciled even by concession, and the result is a kind of collaged compromise: the music, dance, or other activity is simply placed “side-by-side,” merely juxtaposed. In that case, there is no “boundary-crossing” at all, just a preservation of (real) difference.

But perhaps all of this is taken into account in advance. Perhaps the crossover event, rather than being the site of radical innovation in artistic practice, is really about something else. But exactly what? To answer this, we need to reconsider the failures, now inherent within the contemporary art situation, of the two basic tenets of aesthetic modernism.

First, the belief inherent in critical theory of a utopian aesthetic revolution that could change society and lead to new ways of living has largely dissipated into the almost complete aestheticization of commodities and everyday life. Likewise, the *l'art pour l'art* movement, or the autonomy and liberation of art from everyday contexts, has proved an untenable alternative. We can detect a certain air of apathy regarding art's potential for changing the world or towards even just being critical of it, something which has arguably become established in contemporary art institutions, an apathy that Rancière's work in particular seeks to challenge.

The politicization of the arts today exists in a context of a seemingly hegemonic neoliberalism, and art is thereby charged with doing nothing other than fully embodying this new specter of capitalism. In some quarters, curatorial policy regarding artistic commissioning has not only embraced total commodification but has also become complicit with the effectual powers of neoliberalism through the unquestioning adoption of business ideology and its ubiquitous requirements for measurable and quantifiable “strategies,” “goals,” and “outcomes.” Thus, there is a convergence of arts-establishment and corporate jargon, reflecting a merging of the two spheres of activity. Moreover, the reification of aesthetic difference into a posited “boundary” is a way of guaranteeing in advance that an art-institutional “strategy” has been successful.

Within this situation there is no place for the Kantian distinction between mere talent and artistic “genius,” or the difference between rule-governed expertise and spontaneous invention, sustained by the possibility of a “judgment without criteria.” In an age of strict quantification, the possibility of

such an idea of judgment is deemed to be suspect; this is perhaps the most likely source for the ubiquity of collaboration and crossover events. This is not to say that the result of such events can be made more predictable but that the process can be conveniently externalized into the single notion of "boundary." This is judgment *with* specifiable criteria.

Whatever the success, artistic merit, or even profitability of something like Yo Yo Ma's *Silk Road* (1998) project, those responsible for commissioning it can always posit that a measurable and quantifiable event has occurred by means of a musical and/or cultural "boundary" being crossed.

3. What is interventionist art?

This section will take a closer look at the aesthetico-political notion of the partitionings, or "distributions of the sensible," by Jacques Rancière in relation to social systems. In particular, we will again consider how this idea can be restricted to contemporary art systems themselves; art is itself similarly distributed. This will reveal certain antinomies and/or co-determining contradictions surrounding the act of partitioning involved in this distribution itself. Most importantly, we will claim that the category of the interventionist is part of a new class of contemporary artworks that simultaneously operates at both sides of a visible/invisible partition.

The end result is a kind of aesthetic antinomy, or an artwork that condenses two mutually incompatible viewpoints. We will then look at examples of such works within contemporary art and performance. This will lead to a related question hinted at the outset, namely, how can an artwork be afforded the status of artworld commissioning while simultaneously avowing a commitment to be political? In aiming to present an additional perspective on contemporary art, the exploration of these contradictions will launch the main argumentative tropes of this section. The aim is to demonstrate how the paradoxes of permissioning involved in interventionist work could perhaps define a new discipline within contemporary art practice.

But first, some background. Notions surrounding the antinomical or dialectical status of particular artworks in modernity can perhaps be best articulated using three distinct examples. First, there is the Adornian dialectic between autonomy and commodity. Drawing on the work of Marx, Adorno convincingly showed that an artwork's presumed autonomy, its "purposiveness without purpose," or its resistance to commodification, becomes, in modernity, precisely the aspect that makes it commodifiable.^[16] A second Adornian dialectic refers to the promise of art in terms of its utopian function: "art can and must be utopian, but as soon as it approaches utopia, it is exposed as semblance."^[17]

Thirdly, Jacques Rancière theorized a similar antinomy or dialectic between specificity and heterogeneity in aesthetics itself. Namely, the more one tries to locate the particular essence of an artform via a process of subtraction, the more one realizes this essence is, in fact, a radical resistance to the process of essentializing.

As we have seen, many art forms, such as music, are now complex hybrids; the point here is that the essential nature of such art forms happens to coincide with this same

hybridity.^[18] In fact, the status of modernist art as somehow antinomical is a constant theme of much work in European philosophy. Many commentators, including Adorno, see a crucial measure of value in the “performative contradictions” idiomatic to certain works of art; it is these same performative contradictions that offer a viable basis for societal critique.

This same theme is taken up by Rancière, who sees the model for a suitable political art in a type of negotiation between extremes or opposites:

The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationships between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an “awareness” of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and at the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, but which resists signification. In fact, this ideal effect is always the object of negotiation between opposites, between the readability of the message that threatens to destroy the sensible form of art and the radical uncanniness that threatens to destroy all political meaning.^[19]

Political artwork, therefore, arguably survives through a dependence on antinomical contradictions, and, one could add, a certain subversive potential. The double effect Rancière mentioned here relates to two issues mentioned at the outset.

Political art can not only shift the boundary between the visible and invisible; it can undermine the very discriminations that make all political meaning possible.

The starting point for many interventionist projects is the same prioritization of subversive potentiality, that is, the questioning of institutional curatorial power and the mechanisms of partitioning that tend to favor established artists at the expense of emerging practice. This is a tendency that has, perhaps, become even more apparent in recent years because of a combination of austerity measures, government funding cuts for the arts, and the resulting retrenchment of artistic programming into safe options. But for this subversive potential to be actualized, it is necessary for the art project to create a fiction, one that can be described in terms of an elaborate *quid pro quo* that operates between artist and institution.

The artist, in order to gain commissioned access to the institution, has to create a fantasy that both embodies and denies the curatorial decision-making that leads to the commissioning. The project, in order to be commissioned, must pretend, with the full collusion of the institution, that it wasn't commissioned; it must appear to be a spontaneous act, even an act of illegality. What the institution gains through

this same arrangement is the possibility to demonstrate a commitment to other political imperatives that its everyday operations otherwise routinely undermine: a commitment to agendas like those of widening participation or to the support of the work of both emerging artists and artists from ethnic minorities.

The question for artists themselves, then, is simple: to accept the *quid pro quo*, or to remain on the side of invisibility. This is really just the dialectic of autonomy and commodity again. The semblance of illegality, normally out of bounds for the process of commodification, becomes, for precisely this reason, a new type of commodity. And while this commodification or appropriation of artists' subversive gestures by art institutions is certainly not a new phenomenon—it may be as old as art-making itself—we can, perhaps, see in the category of interventionist art both a new subversive method and new modes of its institutional appropriation.

To clarify this a little more, let us also refer again to the artist Banksy and to some of the other artists we have described as interventionist. What is interesting here is that the "value" of Banksy as an artist depends on a similar type of performative contradiction. His importance within the artworld as sanctioned and permitted depends precisely on the impression that he is simultaneously unsanctioned and not permitted, that he is the subversive artist of the people, who works outside the strictures of curatorship and outside all official or franchised art-making.

When Banksy exhibited at the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery in the UK in 2009, gallery employees, who normally watch over the spaces, were asked to leave while the exhibition was being prepared. This act was designed not just to preserve the anonymity of the artist but also to make this rare excursion into an established gallery space appear spontaneous and unplanned. Banksy's street art has also become a viable commercial commodity; we just need to recall the by-now famous *Kissing Policemen* (2004), which was stencilled onto a wall next to a public house in Brighton, UK.

This supposed act of vandalism stayed there for seven years, was used to attract visitors to the region and, at the time of writing, was to be sold at an American auction, with an estimated price of up to £1 million.^[20]

A different approach to public space can be found in the work of the German artist Wolfgang Weileder. His *house-projects* (2002-2004) was a series of public performance projects in which large temporary architectural structures were built in different European cities with labor supplied only by members of the general public: "[they] disappeared as [they] appeared, out of nowhere, without a trace, at once monumental and fugitive."^[21] The building of the structures became an event, a unique public spectacle, and provided a spatial experience of a process in flux rather than the presentation of a finished product. The project raised questions about the permanence of architectural structures, their relationship to their surroundings, and the nature of housing. But its inclusion in the category of the interventionist concerns some by-now familiar themes.

Weileder created a type of public performance that appears

to flout certain important legal measures. The structures appear to be spontaneously constructed by the public, simultaneously bypassing the usually elaborate laws that relate to the appropriate permissioning for the construction of buildings. In reality, the performances were actually carefully planned and sanctioned, with the full cooperation of the relevant council authorities. The commissioning body, through this same cooperation, was enabled to present the performance as a type of eruption of democracy or as the emancipation of the public worker-artist. No longer passive, this spectator can be portrayed as an active and vital participant in the construction of the artwork itself, thereby hitting a key target of what has become known as “widening participation” agendas.

As a further example, consider the *ASSAULT* project of João Lima Duque and Mário Pires Cordeiro, a series of film works that feature supposed “invasions” of iconic European art venues, such as museums or concert halls. Two men, seemingly pedestrian bystanders, are situated outside a series of these buildings. It is early evening or late at night. The two men initially appear to be simply loitering outside these venues, but they suddenly move towards an entrance. They enter the building without being questioned and enter the space, which is empty. For the first time in the portrayed action, they split into different directions: one follows the route to the main auditorium/concert hall and the other to the museum/gallery space. In the concert hall, a piano is situated on the stage and the room is in recital-mode lighting. One man starts playing the piano, and, simultaneously inside the gallery, his collaborator installs artworks. The performances take no longer than twenty-five minutes and, once finished, the two men leave the space, which is left as they initially encountered it. They reunite and leave seemingly unwitnessed. However, the whole scene has been recorded by two video cameras, and the viewer, on viewing the footage, is left with the feeling of not knowing whether the whole event was a “guerrilla-style” illegal intervention or actually a sanctioned performance.^[22]

As a final example of the interventionist tendency, consider the performance artist and sculptor Francis Thorburn, whose idiomatic works include performances featuring him pulling through the streets of central London a hand-made vehicle built in the style of an oversized rickshaw; “processions” involving portable greenhouses pulled by an army of men dressed as council workers; and performances where he is fixed to a giant wheel and paraded through public spaces, or naked, hanging upside down from the top of a tree in Lisbon, Portugal.^[23] Again, similar attributes apply to this type of performance-making. Again, the utilization by the artist of implausible structures coupled with normative modes of their operation creates a type of tension between the permissioned and un-permissioned. All performances appear spontaneous, ephemeral, and seem to border on illegality, but are, in fact, always carefully planned and receive full commissioning.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, we have demonstrated how the ways in which contemporary art and performance are discussed have created

feedback loops within artistic production itself. While we are critical of one such mode of production, that of the crossover performance, we remain convinced that the other works, discussed in the interventionist category, have more potential for achieving what Rancière calls a “suitable political art.” Why is this?

Interventionist work operates between the visible and invisible areas of society and, consequently, between art and politics.

It is also a genre that aims to perturb these barriers of visibility. It belongs within a fictional sphere that inevitably brings about a certain relationship with curators and programmers, operating between poles of autonomy and commodity. Its artists never work directly with their commissioning institutions but, nevertheless, depend on their full cooperation in what we described earlier as a *quid pro quo* arrangement. How can we conceive of this arrangement, which involves a type of mutual concession, as political at all?

In closing, we suggest an answer to this question. The key is that the concessionary nature of this relationship comes about through a series of quite specific institutional imperatives that center around ideas of what counts as appropriate access to art and art spaces, the issue of widening participation and spectator emancipation and/or relationality, and a whole host of wider themes that relate to the democratization of what have come to be seen as “elite” art institutions. But whether or not the categories of interventionist art and performance meet these institutional aims and no others is less than clear.

It is possible that the feedback loops between art discourse and its object that make these events possible could become *feed-forward* loops, whereby the resulting artwork modifies the same framework that enabled its commissioning. The political potential of the interventionist work equates with the impossibility of fully measuring its effects. There can be an emergence of unintended consequences that result from it, in short, an appearance of aesthetic negativity.^[24] At its basic level, such work shows that unknown artists can gain access to something that was hitherto considered to be prohibited: “As I understand it, politics begin exactly where those who ‘cannot’ do something show that in fact they can.”^[25] The political artist of today should perhaps take whatever route possible to preserve the potential of the unintended consequences of their work: “[T]he provocative otherness of the aesthetic sign drops like a probe into the all-too-familiar, to make it in this way into something genuinely familiar for the first time.”^[26]

Jonathan Owen Clark & João Lima Duque

Jonathan Owen Clark [J.Clark@trinitylaban.ac.uk] is Head of Research at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Dance, London UK, where he leads a postgraduate research program in performing arts. His research interests include critical theory, aesthetics and historiography.

João Lima Duque [joaklavier@yahoo.de] is a concert pianist and artist currently living and working in Berlin.^[27]

Published on March 18, 2014.

Endnotes

- [1] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).
- [2] Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual and Emergent," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991).
- [3] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 65 2 (1964); 571-584, ref. on 572.
- [4] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 12.
- [5] Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).
- [6] Manuela Bojadzije and Isabelle Saint-Saëns, "Borders, Citizenship, War, Class: A Discussion with Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra," *New Formations*, 58 (2006); ref. on 10.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- [8] Again, this list does not even begin to exhaust the field, nor is the phenomenon of crossover particularly new. For a discussion of crossover music in American cultural history, see, for example: John Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music, and American Culture* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
- [9] For a similar use of this term, see: Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2004).
- [10] Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 124.
- [11] Philip Bolhman, "Music Ontologies," in *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- [12] For more on this see: Andrew Bowie, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- [13] Alain Badiou, "A Manifesto of Affirmationist Art," in *Polemics* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 144.
- [14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Book* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 27.
- [15] Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
- [16] For more on this, see: Andy Hamilton, "Adorno and the Autonomy of Art," in *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future: Critical Theory*, ed. Stefano Ludovisi (Newark DE: University of Delaware Press, 2009).
- [17] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), p. 32.

[18] Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 87.

[19] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 63.

[20] Alexandria Topping, "Brighton Kisses Goodbye to Banksy's Kissing Coppers," <http://www.guardian.co.uk>, accessed 29 April 2013.

[21] James Watkins, "Foreword," in *Wolfgang Weileder House Projects*, eds. Florian Matzner et al (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2005). For more on the artworks themselves, see: Wolfgang Weileder, *House Projects*, www.house-projects.com, accessed 29 April 2013.

[22] The project has had five separate iterations at venues in: London (Royal Albert Hall); Lisbon (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation HQ); Amsterdam (Concertgebouw and Van Gogh Museum); Antwerp (MAS: Museum aan de Stroom) and Cologne (outside the Kölner Philharmonie and enclosed Ludwig Museum). The various iterations have involved different additional collaborators, and the complete performances can be viewed online at: <http://vimeo.com/assaults>, accessed 29 April 2013.

[23] For pictures, see: <http://blogs.arts.ac.uk/camberwell/2010/10/15>, accessed 29 December 2013.

[24] See, for example: Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999).

[25] Peter Hallward, "Jacques Rancière, Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 8 2 (2003).

[26] Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art*, p. 93.

[27] The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this article and Dr. John Croft for helpful comments.