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The Politics of Ambiguity

By Steve Klee

One current orthodoxy within contemporary art states that art betrays itself if it is too direct in its opinion especially in its political opinion.

Art's inherent energies are dissipated as soon as it is called upon to support a cause. God forbid that there should be an eco art... (Dean Kenning Art Monthly 313 Feb 2008)

What is proper to art – the argument goes – is a certain type of ambiguity. If art presents one message too strongly it becomes something else – not art – mere information or perhaps even propaganda. Artists who use unambiguous 'political' messages in their work therefore seem to adopt an authoritarian role telling the 'general public' what to think and how to act. Here the artist is seen as dictating a particular political vision to the people. And this dictatorial artist with her 'one message' discourages a diversity of political responses in an audience.

An art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the *authority* of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops *wanting* to emancipate us. (Rancière Artforum March 2007)

I take 'authority' here to mean an imposition of one interpretive framework through which to judge 'the world' framed by the artwork. This authority, which resides in imposed messages, target audiences and univocality, is different from, and in fact detrimental to, emancipatory art. In Rancière's terms an art of authority reinforces the status quo acting as a police procedure.

This notion is a severe challenge to political art which seems to have something urgent to say (a message) about society, usually about how society should be different. An example would be Suzanne Lacy's seminal feminist public performance *In Mourning and in Rage* which now exists as photographic, textual and video documentation.

On the morning of December 13th 1977 a funeral motorcade of twenty two cars filled with women followed a hearse from the Woman's Building Los Angeles to City Hall, at which point nine seven-foot-tall veiled women emerged from the hearse and took up positions on the steps facing the street. Women from the motorcade filled in behind them and unfurled a banner that read "In memory of our sisters, Women fight back." Then, with City Hall behind them and the assembled local press in front the first mourner walked to the microphone and said, "I am here for the ten women who have been raped and strangled between October 18 and November 29," after which she was echoed by the chorus of mourners who chanted, "In memory of our sisters, women fight back." In succession each of the nine veiled women made statements that connected the Hillside Strangler murders with the larger social and political issues of violence against women and each, in turn, was echoed by the chorus in the performance of what Lacy called "a modern tragedy."

There is a strong polemical message within the work, which is clearly expressed. There is little room for a spectator to interpret the video's content freely. And by staging the performance on the steps

of the town hall, deliberately directing her message at those in institutional power she targets a specific audience. Finally the 'truth' of the statements within the performance is not open to negotiation. To this extent the work is univocal.

As a species of poststructuralist thinker, Rancière is committed to the notion of the inherent instability of meaning and he values those meaning-generating-processes that emphasize this instability. To this end Rancière views as political a type of art that 'suggests' meaning whilst at the same time blocking any resolved meaning. In his terms this work shuttles between two ways of interpreting the world under the aesthetic regime. In simpler terminology he values ambiguity as a political resource in artwork.

For example in an interview in Artforum Rancière uses the photography of Sophie Ristelhueber to exemplify dissensual art, that is, art that in other contexts Rancière has named with the synonyms critical, political or emancipatory.

Sophie Ristelhueber photographs barricades on Palestinian roads. But she doesn't photograph the great concrete wall that petrifies the gaze. She photographs from a distance, from above, the little handmade barricades made of piled stone, which look like rock slides in the middle of a tranquil landscape. That is one way of keeping one's distance from the shopworn affect of indignation and instead exploring the political resource of a more discreet affect – curiosity. (260-261 Artforum march 07)

The photographer's strategy avoids, perhaps is premised upon the avoidance of, direct opinion and univocality. Here, a political subject matter, the contentious Israeli occupation is addressed by an artist obliquely. The road block images attempt a neutral presentation of an overlooked piece of physical evidence, which through its indeterminacy offers a thought-provoking entry point into this conflict. The possible politicality of her photographs then is premised on a type of ambiguity which enables a 're-thinking'. Unambiguous, determined images and their attendant discourses on the other hand seemingly petrify thought. However, I believe there is a way of thinking about work like Lacy's which confirms its politicality without falling back into simplistic understandings of political art whereby any sloganeering work is instantly understood as political.

My understanding of politics comes from Rancière. For him politics is split between two concepts: politics and police. Policing describes what might be one generally accepted definition of politics, that is, the organisation of society by way of the policies of a ruling party in conjunction with the laws of that nation. What is understood as 'hard economic reality' often provides a basis for these policy decisions. The notion of 'police' also exceeds government agencies. The opinions and beliefs which circulate in civil society through mass media and other forms of culture are intimately connected to this notion of power. Rancière thinks of this police organising in terms of the ordering of people into a hierarchic system, which is simply society as such.

Politics works against the police ordering of society by producing a community or group that does not fit into the organisational schema. This group - or as Rancière calls them – Demos, introduce a troubling element, disrupting the neat arrangement created by the police

The 'Demos' make a particular polemical demand on police authority to be recognised or recognised differently so that they might receive the rights afforded to others. Their newness is what upsets the police order because it reveals the limitation of its existing categorisation of society. When police power is confronted by a new type of community its 'knowledge' is proven wrong and it is forced into rethinking society and (perhaps) accommodating the extra group.

The Demos by presupposing their equality and demanding it be recognized by those individuals and institutions who in theory should recognize it but do not bring together opposing personal convictions so as to show their incompatibility. The argument made by the subordinated is not straightforwardly recognised because one consequence of their lowly status is that they are not heard or not taken seriously. Political action is the contestation of this muteness through the assertion of one's equal right to be heard.

Where once there was one reality of superiors and subordinates now there is also the possibility of the ruination of this unitary situation, the emergence of the equality of all with all. Here dual social realities exist in the same space. Rancière often calls this the condition of two worlds in one.

It is the struggle over this ambiguous situation or disagreement which decides the outcome of particular political endeavours. And It is (often) through clearly worded precise demands for equality (which seem – superficially - entirely determinate/ unambiguous) that the two worlds emerge in one. These clear speech acts create ambiguity by introducing an alternate reality. The beneficiaries of hierarchy have to choose which to endorse, they are placed in the position of a viewer in-front of an ambiguous artwork.

Here, then, we have a logic of politically effective behaviour which encompasses both a direct, upfront, explicit demand and a certain ambiguity. The group who communicates the partisan message are themselves ambiguous. In the feminist example It was only by behaving unlike the accepted understanding of women, say passive home-maker, that police agencies were forced to take notice and to modify the place that was allotted to women.

Look at the English petit-police's response to the Yorkshire Ripper murders and the subsequent 'Reclaim the Night' marches.

In 1977 The Yorkshire Ripper was still terrorising the north of England and the police had been advising that, to avoid attack, women should stay inside after dark. The march responded directly to this warning (placards read "No curfew on women - curfew on men") and hundreds of women shouted about their anger at being kept off the streets - the supposedly public highways, after all - by the threat of male violence <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/nov/22/publicvoices.crime>

Police imposed a curfew on women. This was flouted alongside a counter demand that it should be men who be kept indoors. This gesture exposed the inequality in societies' regard for women. They had their rights curtailed, 'for their own good', when it would have been just as logical, perhaps more so, to curtail the rights of men. We can begin to see *In Mourning and in Rage*, therefore, as a particular contestation of this positioning a political gesture in which there is a meeting of an egalitarian logic and a police logic. It is under the presupposition of equality, a 'fighting back' from a

marginal or invisible position to a place on-a-par with men that the political gesture occurs. It is as if the performers are trying to force themselves into being within a sensible distribution which views them as alien.

It is in this moment when the direct statement is voiced by a marginal group – or more accurately when this marginal group comes into being by ‘disagreeing’ – that the partisan statement is precisely *not* univocal. A univocal statement by its urgency or authority identifies a particular reality, a reality not open to negotiation. However, the world to which Lacy’s performers refer, one in which women are equal citizens was open to negotiation because this issue was in dispute. The world they refer to is ambiguous because it is in dispute. That is, the ‘referents’ of their representations, including their own identities were in doubt, not authoritatively singular but fluctuating, emergent, in a word, ambiguous.

The art world orthodoxy casts works like *In Mourning and In Rage* as dogmatic and authoritarian. However, in my argument the performer’s activities are anti-authoritarian. They are – in a precise sense – political actors. As part of the broader woman’s movement they can be seen as combining a direct demand which produces ambiguity in the form of atypical forms of female subjectivity. These identities are troubling for the status quo, which is forced to reorganise and accommodate the extra group. *In Mourning and In Rage* then is political.

If all art that incorporates clear political slogans and demands is dismissed as authoritarian because of its univocality then we will misrecognise those moments when these slogans actually introduce ambiguity into the social by forcing a split in the distribution of the sensible.