

INAESTHETICS AND TRUTH: THE DEBATE BETWEEN ALAIN BADIOU AND JACQUES RANCIÈRE

DEVIN ZANE SHAW

The recent interest in Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière in contemporary radical thought is anything but a “chance encounter on a dissecting table between a sewing machine and an umbrella.”¹ In terms of pedagogical genealogy, both began as students of Althusser, only to later develop their own approaches as critical responses to the master. In philosophical terms, both remain committed to thinking the radical possibility of egalitarian politics. Against the trend of delegating rights within the order of the State, or policing, inherent in contemporary political philosophy, both Badiou and Rancière focus on egalitarian interventions which disrupt the logic of the police-state. In addition, both have respectively contributed a considerable body of work to questions regarding art. However, despite the relative proximity, both have found occasion to distance himself from each other. In his *Metapolitics*, Badiou dedicates two chapters to illustrating the shortcomings of Rancière’s political thought, while the latter has raised several objections to the former’s inaesthetics. I will dedicate this essay to explicating the stakes of the debate on inaesthetics, although Rancière’s insistence on the link between art and politics will keep the discussion close to the political debate.

However, my intervention will not be neutral. Instead, it will take the form of a defense of inaesthetics against Rancière’s criticisms. In proceeding in this manner, I hope to both delineate the stakes of their debate and pinpoint a few open questions. In general, Badiou’s thought is oriented around the novelty of the event and the subject’s fidelity to the truth of an event. To summarize, leaving aside the all-important work on ontology, Badiou is interested in:

¹ Lautréamont, “Maldoror,” in Hubert Juin (ed.), *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 234. Translated in *Maldoror*, trans. Alexis Lykiard (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1994), p. 193 (translation modified).

1. The event of truth. An event breaks with the state of the situation, and reconfigures the co-ordinates of the symbolic order. However, an event takes no object (“every truth is *without an object*”²). Instead, it induces
2. Effects of subjectification. For each event, or truth (as truths are multiple), a subject must make a wager. After deciding in favor of an event, that it has taken place, this subject proceeds in fidelity to this truth, to ‘make sense’ of it.
3. The four conditions of philosophy: science, art, politics and love. Philosophy thinks under the events of these four conditions. While each condition is thought proceeding from an event and the subject, each is elucidated according to its own logic. “The process of a truth,” Badiou tells us, “thus entirely escapes ontology.”³

These three points will orient our approach to the debate between Badiou and Rancière. After explicating Badiou’s inaesthetics, I will delineate Rancière’s major objections. The adjudication of their debate will help us focus on an unresolved tension: what is the relation between inaesthetics and Badiou’s other statements on art? While Badiou claims that inaesthetics is the singular domain of thinking art, art is also considered under other conditions of philosophy. Thus the question arises: what is the status of this ‘transgression’? Is Badiou eclectically mixing the procedures of truth? Or, despite the singular nature of inaesthetics, can art be thought under other conditions? In briefly proffering examples from Badiou’s other work, such as *Le siècle*, I would like to show that, while Rancière is right to accuse inaesthetics of being oriented towards the ‘propriety of art,’ that inaesthetics is not exhaustive of art’s capacity for truth.

Inaesthetics and Truth

To elucidate the link between art and philosophy, in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* Badiou introduces three schemata which tie together art, philosophy and the theme of education. Each of these schemata have both a historical and a contemporary manifestation. From a ‘historical’ perspective, so to speak, beginning with the Greeks, art precedes the origins of philosophy.

²Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 91.

³Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum), p. 355.

Theater is well established in Athens by the time Plato proposes the first schema, which is what Badiou calls the didactic schema. As is well-known, Plato banishes nearly all the arts from the city; supported by the thesis that “art is incapable of truth, or that all truth is external to art.”⁴ The problem with art is not that it imitates things, but that it imitates the effect of truth. Art appears to immediately present the truth, thereby “divert[ing] us from the detour” of philosophy.⁵

In Badiou’s reading of Plato, philosophy is constituted by a detour which distances thought from ‘empirical’ immediacy through dialectical labor. For Badiou, poetry cannot account for the origins of Western philosophy, as poetry is found throughout the world of antiquity. Instead, philosophy can be identified by the subtraction of thought from the immediacy of the poem, and this first occurs with Plato.⁶ And while Badiou commends the interruption of the poem by the matheme in *Being and Event*, he finds Plato’s conceptualization of art wanting. Plato’s didactic schema ostracizes art from truth, as art is “the charm of a semblance of truth.”⁷ From this position, art can only be condemned or treated pedagogically in an instrumental fashion, the latter option leaving art at the mercy of external prescriptions, namely the norm legislated by philosophy. The effects of art are evaluated only from the basis of the social Good.

In the twentieth century, Marxism utilizes a variant of the didactic schema. For Badiou in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Brecht is the exemplar of Marxist didacticism. For Brecht the base of the stage is built upon the scientific truth of dialectical materialism. If we understand Stalinism as the jurisdiction of dialectical materialist philosophy over politics, then Brecht practiced a “Stalinized Platonism”: art is separate from the truth of dialectical materialism, but it educates; in the end, art is the pedagogical tool for the courage of truth, “against cowardice *in the face of truth*.”⁸

This relation between philosophy and art is inverted by the partisans of the romantic schema. For the latter, “art *alone* is capable of truth,” art alone embodies the absolute.⁹ Art takes on an educative possibility regarding a truth that philosophy can only point to. For example, the German Romantics held that art can overcome the impasses of philosophy, and can embody a

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 2 (hereafter *HI*).

⁵ *HI*, p. 2.

⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 123–129.

⁷ *HI*, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

new mythology which can reinstate the communitarian bond of Greek antiquity in modern Germany.¹⁰ From here, it is not far to Heideggerian ‘hermeneutics,’ centered on the figure of Hölderlin. In seeking the originary link between *poiesis* and Being, severed by the Platonic intervention, the thinker can only reiterate the announcement of the destiny of the poetic gods,¹¹ and shepherd thought towards the saving power of the poem.¹²

Between “didactic banishment” and “romantic glorification,” is a “peace treaty of sorts,”¹³ which Badiou calls the classical schema. Aristotle, he tells us, bases this schema on two theses: first, art is mimetic, its regime is that of semblance; and second, the purpose of art is neither truth, nor pedagogy, but therapy. The classical schema holds that art’s mimetic effects provide the possibility of catharsis, which Badiou provocatively defines as “the deposition of the passions in a transference onto semblance.”¹⁴ Art, constrained to the imaginary relation of transference, is evacuated of the weight of the traumatic encounter with the Real. The price of this ‘relative peace’ between philosophy and art is that the latter becomes what Badiou calls a “public service,” a kind of escape mechanism for social pressures.¹⁵ Insofar as art serves this purpose, it can be managed and legitimated – or funded – by the State.

In the twentieth century, Badiou claims, when psychoanalytic discourse

¹⁰The “Oldest System-program of German Idealism,” written in Hegel’s hand, but variously attributed to Hölderlin, Hegel and Schelling, states: “Poesy will thereby attain a higher dignity; in the end she will again become what she was in the beginning – *the instructress of humanity*; for there will be no longer any philosophy, any history; the poetic art alone will survive all the other sciences and arts [...] we must have a new mythology; but this mythology must remain in service to the ideas, must become a mythology of reason.” Translated in David Farrell Krell, *The Tragic Absolute* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 25.

¹¹For Badiou’s take on the ‘poetic gods,’ see the prologue, entitled “God is Dead,” of *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), pp. 21–32.

¹²Though Badiou references the later Heidegger, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” the poem has a specific communitarian-political role. The great work of art “grounds being for and with one another as the historical standing-out of human existence in relation to unconcealment.” This is how, according to Heidegger, Hölderlin’s work could still “confront the Germans as a test to be stood.” See “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 193 and 203.

¹³*HI*, p. 3.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵As Terry Eagleton states, in rather Lacanian terms, “We can vicariously gratify our self-destructive drives, at the same time as we can indulge in a certain sadistic pleasure at the prospect of others’ pain. Tragedy is in this sense a gentrified, socially acceptable version of obscene enjoyment.” See *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 26–27.

interprets art as the manifestation of desire (whether that of the artist or spectator) it activates the classical schema. The work of art makes it possible to inscribe the object of desire, the *objet petit a*, in the Symbolic, thus breaking the impasse of the Real. Although I think this account does some violence to Lacan, I find that Jacques-Alain Miller's recent turn to "psychoanalysis in the city," (I borrow the phrase, or at least its pejorative character, from Slavoj Žižek) is not so far from the classical apparatus of state legitimation. Art renders service to psychoanalysis, and the latter likewise does service to the state.¹⁶

Missing, however, from these schemata, are the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. According to Badiou, the avant-gardes, from Dada to the Situationists, were a hybrid and unstable entanglement of the didactic and romantic schemata. Thus the avant-gardes oscillated between the attempt to exhaust art of its alienated or alienating character, and the attempt to realize the absolute legibility of art's absolute and separate character. The former attempt is didactic, while the latter is romantic; yet above all, these "partisans of the absoluteness of creative destruction" were anticlassical.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the "aesthetic voluntarism" of the avant-gardes was more likely to splinter than unify, and neither this hybrid nor the other schemata could escape the recent "saturation" of the attempt to think art and philosophy.

In this situation of saturation, Badiou proposes a novel modality of the relation between art and philosophy: inaesthetics. The first definition of inaesthetics can be constructed through the account it provides regarding the relation of art to truth, using the categories of singularity and immanence. The relation is immanent if truth is internal to art's effects; that is, truth is not determined externally to these effects. The relation is singular if it belongs to art and cannot "circulate among other registers of work-producing thought."¹⁸ For the didactic schema, the relation between art and truth is singular but not immanent: art has a singular pedagogical role but truth remains external to it. For the romantic schema, the relation is immanent but not singular. Schelling says it best: "there is properly speaking but one absolute work of art, which may indeed exist in altogether different versions, yet is still only one, even though it should not yet exist in its most ultimate

¹⁶ See "Transcription of the J. P. Elkabbach broadcast with J-A. Miller and M. Accoyer on the phone on Europe 1" available at <http://www.lacan.com/europe1.htm>. Last accessed August 2006. For Žižek's commentary on this state of affairs, see *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 103.

¹⁷ *HI*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

form.”¹⁹ For the classical schema, there is no relation between art and truth; art is relegated to the imaginary effects of verisimilitude, catharsis and transference. We may extrapolate from this account that the avant-gardes vacillated between the either/or of absolute immanence and a singular task for art, often resulting in ruptures in affinities.

The Relation of Art and Truth

	Immanent	~Immanent
Singular	Inaesthetics	Didactic
~Singular	Romantic	Classical

The novel position of inaesthetics, then, is to affirm the singularity and immanence of the relation between art and truth. Yet, the question arises of how this singular and immanent relation can be thought. Badiou jettisons the familiar dichotomy of subject and object in relation to artistic procedures; neither the genius of the subject nor the authority of the object of art hold explanatory power. Instead, he introduces the concepts of the ‘artistic configuration’ and the ‘subject-point.’ An artistic configuration is a sequence of works which proceed from an event. A truth is singularized within a configuration, the latter forming a constraint which draws on a fidelity to an event. In a reversal of philosophical tradition, the work of art is thought as a subject-point of an artistic truth. However, for each event there are multiple works, or differential subject-points, which delineate the ‘subject,’ or ‘theme,’ of the event. Subject-points are articulated as a sequence of works in fidelity to an event; this conceptualization keeps a work from being understood as an absolute object while at the same time it prevents a subject from being understood as a subject of genius. As Badiou states: “a truth is an artistic configuration initiated by an event [...] and unfolded through chance in the form of works that serve as its subject points.”²⁰ Thus, we can return to our three points of summary to delimit the relation of art and truth under inaesthetics:

¹⁹ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 231.

²⁰ *HI*, p. 12.

1. Artistic events take no object. The work of art is not the object of an event. However, an artistic event submits art to a principle of novelty.
2. The novelty of the event is registered in the sequence of works as subject-points. New configurations *will have taken place* insofar as they are unprecedented within a previous state of the situation.
3. The truths of artistic events are thought from within the condition of art. This is the second implication of the intransitivity of events. Philosophy does not name the truth of a configuration, but registers the novel truths of art.

Instead of locating the truth of art in subjects or objects, truth is localized in artistic procedures, which circulate between configurations and differential subject-points, constrained by a post-evental rupture with the state of the situation. Finally, we can define the educational link between art and philosophy: “the only education is an education *by* truths. The entire, insistent problem is that there be truths, without which the philosophical category of truth is entirely empty and the philosophical act nothing but an academic quibble.”²¹

As an example of an artistic event and fidelity, we can turn to Badiou’s account of poetry. The event of a certain epoch of poets, announced by Hölderlin and traversing the works of Mallarmé and Celan, amongst others, is the event of poetry’s ‘disobjectification’ of language. The guiding thread, or fidelity, between these works is the affirmation of poetry’s singular immanence: poetry names less the difference between languages than it attests to the “difference within language.”²² This difference is the Real of language, the “coming to presence that was previously impossible.”²³ The poem does not bring this Real to fruition, but attests to the gap between presence and absence. However, the poem makes no guarantee in this attestation; or in other words, there is no meta-poem: “the meaning the interpretation achieves will never ground the capacity for meaning itself.”²⁴ To summarize, the configuration of the poetic event has no other guarantee but the fidelity of the poets themselves. Philosophy, then does not legislate for the poets, but answers their challenge: to identify the truth of the disobjectification of language.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

*Aesthetics and its Discontents*²⁵

Like Badiou, Rancière gives a central place in his thought to art. The basic divide between the two concerns this ‘placing’ of art: while the former names art as one of four separate truth procedures, the latter insists on the aesthetic constitution of the political itself. Rancière does not claim that one dominates the other (aesthetics over politics or vice versa), but that art can intervene in the domain of politics. For Rancière, politics occurs in the challenge to the dominant police order, in the reconfiguration of the distribution [*partage*] of the sensible: the distribution and redistribution of “places and identities, [the] divisions and redivisions of spaces and times, of the visible and invisible, of noise and speech, constituting what I call the distribution [*partage*] of the sensible.”²⁶ Insofar as politics distributes the lines between noise and speech, and visibility, it has an important aesthetic component. But, more specifically, aesthetics and politics relate in “the manner which the practices and visible forms of art themselves intervene in the distribution [*partage*] of the sensible and in its reconfiguration, the way in which they divide spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular.”²⁷

Due to the methodological decisions stated above, this cannot be the place to fully explicate all that is at stake in Rancière’s conception of the relation between aesthetics of politics and the “politics of aesthetics.” Our goal is more modest: to show how Rancière’s objections to Badiou originate in their respective conceptions of the domain of truth and art. Rancière’s commentary on inaeconomics, entitled “Aesthetics, Inaeconomics, Anti-aeconomics,” was first presented at a conference dedicated to Badiou in 1999, then published in *Alain Badiou. Penser le multiple* in 2002, and then revised and included in his *Malaise dans l’esthétique*. He identifies, in his concluding remarks, three processes through which inaeconomics confronts “the equivocations of the homonymy of art.”²⁸ In a possibly counterintuitive move, we will orient the explication of Rancière’s position through these concluding remarks.

First, Rancière states that “‘inaesthetics’ names the operations that dis-

²⁵ It should be noted that *Malaise dans l’esthétique* echoes the title of the French translation of Freud’s *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, which is *Le Malaise dans la culture*. I would like to thank Isis Sadek for reviewing my translations; however, all errors of judgment remain mine.

²⁶ Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), p. 38 (hereafter *MDE*).

²⁷ *MDE*, p. 39.

²⁸ Rancière, “Aesthetics, Inaeconomics, Anti-aeconomics,” in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 231 (hereafter *AIA*); and *MDE*, p. 116.

sociate the logic of art's aesthetic regime, through which the 'Platonism of the multiple' is constructed as the thought of art."²⁹ Like Badiou, Rancière names three general regimes of conceptualizing the arts: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art and the aesthetic regime of art, which roughly correspond to the didactic schema, the classical schema and the romantic schema respectively.³⁰ Rancière does not explicitly link the didactic schema and the ethical regime of images, but their descriptions remain close: the connection to Plato, the themes of imitation and image, and education. The representative regime understands the arts in terms of mimesis, providing criteria to judge good and bad art, and provide instructions for the use of art.³¹ The aesthetic regime of art is identified by Rancière with the romantic schema, with several modifications. This identification seems correct: Rancière tells us that "Aesthetics as a discourse was born two centuries ago," and he constantly references the young Schelling, Hegel, and above all, Schiller.³² However, Rancière quarrels with the thesis that Badiou ascribes to romanticism; it is not enough to state that the Romantics held that art was the absolute object of truth. Instead, the aesthetic regime of art names a double movement, the constant negotiation and identification of art and non-art – which ruined the hierarchies of the representative regime – and the "exorbitant promises" of an aesthetic revolution of the forms of art and forms of life.³³

Nonetheless, the aesthetic regime of art is as romantic as it is contemporary. It operates as the *dispositif* which undermines distinctions between art and non-art, as the name of this "confusion." However, this confusion is only the name for the indistinction between art and non-art, forms of art and forms of life, and the end of a rule for the propriety of art, a "novel equality" of an "aesthetic suspension of the supremacy of form over matter and activity over passivity."³⁴ How then does inaesthetics "dissociate the logic of art's aesthetic regime?" According to Rancière, this dissociation operates by ascribing a 'propriety' to art, by subtracting artistic truths from "the metaphoric universe in which the aesthetic regime connects the forms of art, the forms

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See AIA, pp. 219–220; *MDE*, pp. 89–91. The ethical regime of images is described in these terms in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 20–21.

³¹ It is interesting to note that both Rancière and Badiou connect Freud to the regime of mimesis. See Jacques Rancière, *L'inconscient esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2001).

³² *MDE*, p. 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

of life, and the forms of the thought of art.”³⁵ Artistic truths are subtracted, then, from the ordinary circulation of meaning. This accusation is correct, but it seems to miss Badiou’s point: an event is subtracted from the state of the situation (in Rancière’s terms, the police order), not from a distribution of the sensible.

Let us approach this question from a different angle. As we have seen, Badiou is concerned with novel events of art. Inaesthetics is not a totalizing – to use a fashionable term here – philosophy of art; instead, it names a relation between philosophy and art which “describes the strictly intraphilosophical effects produced by the independent existence of *some* works of art.”³⁶ If it only engages *some* works of art, it is because they introduce ruptures with previous configurations. Or, in other words, there is an issue with counting. Yet again, there is a close proximity between Badiou and Rancière. Just as, for the latter, the ‘aesthetics of politics’ revolves around who is counted as speaking and who remains the ‘part with no part,’ the ‘politics of aesthetics’ revolves around the porous boundary of what appears as art and the implications of these demarcations. Badiou’s emphasis on the novelty of the event revolves around the supernumerary name of the event and the post-evental reconfiguration of the domain of the art, which exceeds the “count-for-one” of the state of the situation. However, it should be acknowledged that the count for Rancière concerns the distribution of the sensible, while for Badiou the count is ruptured by the torsion of the event, and this difference concerns their respective ontological commitments.³⁷ In itself, Rancière’s first criticism does not offer a compelling reason to reject inaesthetics, unless he can introduce a conceptual distinction which demonstrates how inaesthetics quietly ‘polices’ the arts: this concept is modernism.³⁸

Thus Rancière’s second remark: “‘inaesthetics’ designates the twisted necessity whereby those dividing lines through which the Platonism of truths hides its affinity with aesthetic Platonism come to coincide with the dividing lines through which *modernism* seeks to guarantee that which is ‘proper to art’ against its aesthetic indistinction.”³⁹ Modernism, as Rancière defines it,

³⁵ AIA, p. 231; MDE, p. 116.

³⁶ HI, p. xiv. The emphasis is mine, but I take this point about the difference between inaesthetics and a philosophy of art from Gabriel Riera, “For an ‘Ethics of Mystery’: Philosophy and the Poem,” in Gabriel Riera (ed.), *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its conditions* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 61–62. Aside from this point, I think my differences with Riera’s interpretation of inaesthetics should be apparent.

³⁷ If, that is, we can attribute to Rancière any ontological commitments.

³⁸ The term ‘policing’ is borrowed from Rancière’s more political works, but it has been utilized regarding aesthetics as well. See MDE, p. 18; and *L’inconscient esthétique*, p. 49.

³⁹ AIA, p. 231; MDE, p. 116.

is the conceptualization of art which affirms art's autonomy while denying its heteronomy.⁴⁰ Clearly, this definition makes the conception of modernity dependent on the aesthetic regime of art and not vice versa. Modernism is a defensive reaction against the "confusions" of art and non-art, of art's heteronomy, as it delineates the propriety and autonomy of particular arts. Inaesthetics is understood by Rancière to continue this quiet policing of the frontiers of art and non-art.

Badiou, on this account, follows the modernist tendency by delimiting the roles of various arts: anything "'proper to art' is always proper of *an* art."⁴¹ What is proper to art is a truth, or Idea, which is separate from an art. On this reading, Badiou reproduces "the very divisions of *mimesis* in order to ensure the anti-mimetic principle of separation."⁴² So, for instance, the poem is divided between its immanent orientation for thought and the truth of which it is the task of philosophy to subtract. A reference to Althusser makes Rancière's distaste more than obvious: for Badiou, following "good Althusserian logic, philosophy is then summoned in order to discern the truths encrypted in the poem, even if this means miraculously rediscovering its own, which it claims to have been divested of."⁴³

However, there are two questionable claims regarding this critique. First, how can *a* poem be an imitation or representation of the Idea? This cannot be the case, as an event circulates within a differential arrangement of multiple works. Then, is a particular art a representation of the Idea? Again, this is not the case: it is difficult to see how an artistic configuration would *represent* truth. An artistic configuration is, instead, a procedure of fidelity to the event. Thus Rancière's accusation that Badiou reproduces the effects of *mimesis* in inaesthetics is unclear. And the "good Althusserian logic?" Leaving aside Badiou's own criticisms of Althusser, I don't think that it can be proven that philosophy *necessarily* reads its own truths into works of art. To show this necessity, one would need to comb through biographical details or psychologize an author's motives; otherwise, this claim can only be an assumption most often reserved for one's opponents.

Therefore, we can move to the second question regarding the critique: why condemn modernism *in toto*? If the critique is viewed askew, we could read the situation as the following: what if the proponents of modernism grasped what was at stake in the aesthetic regime of art and decided to intervene on behalf of securing a proper place of art, against a politicizing of art

⁴⁰ AIA, p. 221; MDE, p. 93.

⁴¹ AIA, p. 224; MDE, p. 101.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ AIA, p. 227; MDE, pp. 107–108.

and the vicissitudes of the market? This is definitely the case with Badiou's 'modernism,' which is the attempt to secure artistic configurations worthy of thought beyond the 'service of goods' of the market and political interests.⁴⁴ Underlying Rancière's denunciations of modernism or inaesthetics is an underdeveloped normative core: the link between the aesthetic regime of art and the politics of dissensus.⁴⁵ For Rancière, any regime of politics presupposes an egalitarian principle: in order to divide the ruled and the rulers, both must be able to understand a common address. In order for those who speak to command, they must presuppose that those with no voice still understand the command. As he states, "in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you."⁴⁶ Dissensus occurs when this presupposed equality is activated; that is, when those who 'cannot' speak (the "part of those who have no part") begin to: when the position of authority is usurped by the latter.

In an analogous way, the aesthetic regime of art operates through the constant transformation of the line between art and non-art, forms of life, and forms of art. However, when Rancière links dissensus to the aesthetic regime of art, he ends up in a difficult position: while, in principle, the irruption of dissensus is a possibility in any political regime, the aesthetic regime of art is a particular historical mode of making art visible, and thus contingent (as Rancière himself recognizes). There is no necessity that another regime of art, in the future, cannot practice dissensus. Yet Rancière ties dissensus to the fortunes of the aesthetic regime of art. As we have seen, Rancière's problem with inaesthetics is that it intervenes on one side of the aesthetic regime of art, and the link that he makes between the aesthetic regime and the politics of dissensus makes the normative core legible. It seems that, for Rancière, to intervene within the aesthetic regime forecloses on the possibility of dissensus. However, I am tempted to call Rancière's genealogical method a 'reversal of Foucault' (although the latter's last two published volumes of *The History of Sexuality* could be considered Foucault's own 'reversal of Foucault'): instead of unmasking the operations of a historically

⁴⁴ See *HI*, p. 15. Badiou states "there are artistic configurations, there are works that constitute the thinking subjects of these configurations, and there is philosophy to separate conceptually all of this from opinion. Our times are worth more than the label on which they pride themselves: "democracy.""

⁴⁵ *MDE*, pp. 46–53.

⁴⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 16.

situated *dispositif* in order to introduce a critical distance between a subject and his or her subjectification, Rancière ‘unmasks’ the functioning of the aesthetic regime of art in order to dismiss critical attempts to engage the paradoxical movements between forms of art, forms of life and an increasingly globalized market!

Finally, Rancière admits that, “perhaps,” inaesthetics undermines the other two processes, and

designates the movement whereby the attempt to delimit the places of art, to delimit what is not-yet-art and distinguish between art/non-art, [which] undermines the very end it was supposed to secure and releases what it was supposed to shut away by retying art to non-art and to the discourse on art.⁴⁷

Here, we are in agreement: inaesthetics thinks both the novelty of events and the fidelity of artistic configurations which break with the previous state of art. *However*, while “Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-aesthetics” offers a possible reconciliation between inaesthetics and the aesthetic regime of art, this offer is rescinded in the revised version published in *Malaise dans l’esthétique*. In the latter, Rancière writes (and I quote in full):

It does not seem that inaesthetics, such as Badiou understands it, goes in this direction. The “Manifesto of Affirmationism,” which represents the current synthesis of his vision of art, shows him to be more concerned with reaffirming a “propriety of art” submitted to the educational vision that he confers on it. In this way, inaesthetics can only encounter the dominant antinomy of modernism. This antinomy is simple to formulate: the more the propriety of art is accentuated, the more this “propriety” tends to be assimilated to an experience of a radical heterogeneity, whose ultimate model is the shock of the encounter with the God who disconcerts Paul or speaks to Moses from out of the cloud. As the *Manifesto* affirms, “Art which is and which comes must be as solidly linked as a demonstration, as surprising as a stroke of night, and as elevated as a star.” Assuredly, this formulation is anything but rhetorical approximation. It points exemplarily to the heart of Badiou’s problematic: the double transformation of the revolutionary cut in the Lacanian encounter with the face of the Gorgon and the encounter with the Gorgon in the Platonic call of the Ideal. To pose the identity between art which is and which must be, it is necessary to make art the pure

⁴⁷ AIA, p. 231; *MDE*, p. 116.

experience of the imperative dictated by the violent encounter with the Other. On this point, the Platonic strike of the Idea affirmed by inae-sthetics is in accord with the commandment of the Other claimed by the aesthetics of the sublime. Both isolate art from aesthetics only to incline it toward ethical indistinction.⁴⁸

I find this final objection, linking the event to the imperative of the Other untenable. First, there is the basic question regarding the concept of the Other: Rancière elides between the use of this concept in Lyotard (the focus of the chapter following this quotation, who draws on Lévinas) and Lacan. This quiet elision can be seen in the reference to the “Lacanian encounter with the face of the Gorgon.” Regarding Lacan, one should be careful to separate the Big Other and the Real: the Real is the domain of the traumatic encounter, of symbolic deadlocks, while the Other designates the locus of the symbolic order, or the mediation of meaning and the social bond. However, the Other is not the Lévinasian Other. While the latter is the transcendental imperative which calls one to ethical respect, the former is the symbolic fiction *par excellence*: for a Lacanian, the Other, strictly speaking, does not exist; it functions only insofar as subjects attribute to it symbolic efficacy.

Badiou has also made it clear that his concept of the event, and his ethics, are tied to the Subject, and not the Other. To avoid any confusion, or “ethical indistinction,” Badiou clarifies his position *vis-à-vis* Lévinas in the second chapter of his *Ethics*. For Lévinas, “I experience myself ethically as ‘pledged’ to the appearing of the Other, and subordinated in my being to this pledge.”⁴⁹ Like Rancière, Badiou finds this phenomenological account ethically ambiguous, and the similarity of their rhetoric is striking: both claim that the ethics of the Other conveniently conforms to democratic consensus and the nullification of politics proper.⁵⁰ Thus one cannot even say that Badiou is in ‘secret’ solidarity with the Lévinasian enterprise. Badiou explicitly states, time and again, that infinity is not the transcendental power of God, but “the banal reality of every situation.”⁵¹ The event cannot be guaranteed by the Other; it can only be wagered on by a subject.

Although we have dismissed Rancière’s latest objection, he is right to attribute to inae-sthetics a concern with the “propriety of art.” However, in

⁴⁸ *MDE*, pp. 117–118.

⁴⁹ Badiou, *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 19–20.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 23–25; and *MDE*, pp. 145–154

⁵¹ Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 25.

accepting this claim, we must apply an additional turn of the screw: while inaesthetics attempts to delineate the “propriety of art,” it does not exhaust the effects of art. Badiou often references artworks within his discussions of the other conditions of philosophy. For example, Mallarmé indicates a thinking of the event, Lautréamont reveals the need for a “severe mathematics,” or the same poem by Celan, “An die Haltosegkeiten,” registers its effects in both the *Metapolitics* and the *Handbook of Inaesthetics*.⁵²

These examples illustrate, I think, that the effects of art extend beyond the domain of inaesthetics. Thus Jean-Jacques Lecerle is right to say that the “general irony of Badiou’s readings of poetry is of course that they are such strong and decisive readings that they leave a lot of space for other readings, as the poem spectacularly exceeds the truth that Badiou’s reading extracts from it.”⁵³ Even more ironic, perhaps, is that Badiou himself engages with art beyond inaesthetics, leaving us with the question regarding the status of this ‘transgression’ or ‘plenitude.’ As previously mentioned, Badiou states in the *Handbook of Inaesthetics* that a singular relation of art and truth indicates that a truth of art belongs to it and does not “circulate among other registers of work-producing thought.”⁵⁴ Since Badiou examines art under the conditions of other domains of thought, it seems that this requirement is only necessary for inaesthetics, and that art can be thought in connection to other domains. The upshot is that art need not be thought in connection to “political lessons,”⁵⁵ but if it is, it is thought outside of the domain of inaesthetics. If there is an exemplary attempt to think the knot between politics and aesthetics in Badiou’s *oeuvre*, it is in *Le siècle*.

Inaesthetics and The Century

Le siècle constitutes Badiou’s attempt to think how the twentieth century thought itself. In thinking how the twentieth century has thought itself, Badiou gives prominent place to various works of art. To show how this project and inaesthetics differ, one only need compare how Brecht is considered within these respective works.⁵⁶ As we have seen, in *Handbook*

⁵² See Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 191–198; *Briefings on Existence*, p. 57; *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), p. 105; and *HI*, p. 34.

⁵³ Jean-Jacques Lecerle, “Badiou’s Poetics,” in Peter Hallward (ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 216.

⁵⁴ *HI*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ While it was published 2005, a majority of *Le siècle* was delivered as lectures from 1998–2000, not far from the publication of *Handbook of Inaesthetics*.

of *Inaesthetics*, Badiou attributes to Brecht the practice of a “Stalinized Platonism.” Yet, in *Le siècle*, he praises Brecht as the greatest and most “universal” of all communist artists.⁵⁷ This universality, no doubt, arises from the fact that, against today’s “celebration of moral and democratic consensus,” Brecht teaches us how “Theater is a device (*appareil*) to construct truths.”⁵⁸ This praise is far from the accusations – found in *Handbook of Inaesthetics* – of didacticism, or the use of theater to stage the external truths of dialectical materialism. Therefore, either Badiou is inconsistent regarding the legacy of Brecht, or we have crossed from inaesthetics to a different condition of philosophy, namely politics, from which to evaluate this legacy.

Yet if the example of Brecht serves to demonstrate discord between *Handbook of Inaesthetics* and *Le siècle*, one can turn to Badiou’s comments from the latter book on Malevich’s *White on White* (1918) for a more inaesthetic treatment of art.⁵⁹ In the twentieth century, Malevich is exemplary: against the destructive impulses of the avant-garde (and, incidentally, Heideggerian *Destruction*), *White on White* introduces the gap of what Badiou calls “minimal difference.” Against the purification of the *passion du réel*, which aims at demolishing the semblant to strike right at the Real, *White on White* exhibits, and inscribes in painting, the gap itself, between background and form. Therefore, “one must avoid interpreting *White on White* as a symbol of the destruction of painting, as it is a matter, rather, of a subtractive assumption.” Malevich opposes the ‘dialectic’ between the semblant and the Real, activated by the militants of the twentieth century, by exhibiting the gap itself as Real: “*White on White* is a proposition of thought, which opposes minimal difference to maximal destruction.” Here Badiou openly aligns his subtractive thought with Malevich, who demonstrated, against the destructive impulses of the *passion du réel*, an inaesthetic gesture.

Therefore, these two examples show that not only is *Le siècle* deserving of a more extensive analysis, but that the relationship between inaesthetics and Badiou’s other work remains ambiguous. To summarize, by way of open questions:

1. Rancière is correct to accuse inaesthetics of maintaining a propriety of art. Inaesthetics is concerned with thinking the singular and immanent truths of art; that is, thinking the truth of art not as object, but from within the fidelity to artistic events (in the plural) and not through the prescrip-

⁵⁷ Badiou, *Le siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), p. 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87 (the following quotes on Malevich are taken from these two pages).

tions of philosophy or politics. It should be noted however, that inaesthetics does not exhaust the thinking of art: outside of *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Badiou addresses art under the other conditions of philosophy. Yet, how are we to understand the relation between art and the other conditions of philosophy? Are we left to the abyss of fidelity and decision, or the guarantee of the master's *oeuvre*?

2. Artistic events follow a principle of novelty or rupture. Events break with a previous state of the situation and reconfigure a situation with previously unheard of elements. In this way, inaesthetics is concerned with artworks which reconfigure the divisions between art and non-art. However, an event is not analogous to the call of the Other; an event is not guaranteed by the transcendence of a God, but a wager by a subject on the void. A subject of truth wagers that the event has taken place, and pursues the discord of fidelity against the state of the situation. While this conception of artistic innovation allows for Badiou to maintain a rather modern selection of evental works, it remains difficult to sustain in analyzing the locality of contemporary art. Despite his circumstantial cynicism, inaesthetics does not foreclose on contemporary questions. Were there not contemporary locations for thought, why reinvigorate the relation between art and philosophy under the rubric of inaesthetics?

3. Finally, a critique of Rancière: is there not a problem with attaching the politics of dissensus (which is possible in any political regime presupposing the egalitarian principle) to a particular historical regime, namely the aesthetic regime of art? Could there not be other dissensual regimes of art? Or, is it even necessary that art is explicitly tied to politics? By separating artistic truths and political truths, Badiou avoids this 'historicist' impasse. Instead of tracing the relationship between events and historical regimes, Badiou offers us the conceptual tools to distinguish how events, whether artistic or political, stand out from their time.