



Aesthetics and Its Discontents

By Jacques Rancière

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Only yesterday aesthetics stood accused of concealing cultural games of social distinction. Now it is considered a parasitic discourse from which artistic practices must be freed.

But aesthetics is not a discourse. It is an historical regime of the identification of art. This regime is paradoxical, because it founds the autonomy of art only at the price of suppressing the boundaries separating its practices and its objects from those of everyday life and of making free aesthetic play into the promise of a new revolution.

Aesthetics is not a politics by accident but in essence. But this politics operates in the unresolved tension between two opposed forms of politics: the first consists in transforming art into forms of collective life, the second in preserving from all forms of militant or commercial compromise the autonomy that makes it a promise of emancipation.

This constitutive tension sheds light on the paradoxes and transformations of critical art. It also makes it possible to understand why today's calls to free art from aesthetics are misguided and lead to a smothering of both aesthetics and politics in ethics.

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Aesthetics and Its Discontents By Jacques Rancière **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

"Riveting. In short compass, Rancière provides a razor-sharp critique of the anti-aesthetics of postmodernism. His ear for the substitution of political substance by empty moralism ? call it: the sublime, the unrepresentable, the other, the Shoah ? is unerring. His dissections of Badiou, Lyotard, von Trier's *Dogville*, and a Christian Boltanski installation are pitch-perfect. For a pointed defense of the role of aesthetics for a radical politics: begin here."

Jay Bernstein, *New School for Social Research*

"Jacques Rancière's *Aesthetics and its Discontents* mounts a subtle and spirited defense of modern aesthetic thought, from Schiller to Adorno. Aesthetics is not philosophy seeking to dominate art, as its modish detractors claim. Rather, it is the attempt to think through the artwork's paradoxes and contradictions. In a forceful critique of rival thinkers such as Lyotard and Badiou, Rancière shows that abandoning aesthetic discourse does not mean respecting the integrity of art. Instead, art ends up being reduced to the vehicle of a remorseless ethical demand, or to the cipher of a transcendent truth."

Peter Dews, *University of Essex*

From the Back Cover

Translated by Steven Corcoran

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About the Author

Jacques Rancière is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Paris (St. Denis).

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