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Collective Performance as the Verification of Equality; the case of Arts Against Cuts and the Turner Prize Intervention

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Abstract

This paper seeks to describe the eruption of British anti-cuts activism of winter and spring 2010/11 as an instance of Rancièrian politics. My particular focus will be those performative activities organised under the banner of the Arts Against Cuts collective: marches, occupations and public interventions, in particular the Turner Prize action of December 6 2010 (See: <http://artsagainstcuts.wordpress.com/>). My objective is to examine how grass roots arts-activism of this sort operates, especially in terms of the pressure it manages to exert on power. This pressure, I argue, depends upon the mobilisation of an atypical collective “identity”, that which Rancière calls subjectivation. I use the scare quotes in the previous sentence to indicate that a subjectivation is a way of being that actually evades what we might conventionally describe as identity. For Rancière identity is synonymous with closure, domination and power.

To claim anti-cuts activities for a Rancièrian politics is to assert they are verifications of equality in dissensus with the hierarchical logic of government cuts. The minimal content of any verification is an assertion that everyone is capable of having a hand in his or her own governance. This is a *performative process* in which a particular political grievance – an instance of inequality – is brought to light and contested.

Power and its resistance therefore ultimately operate according to a sensory-symbolic logic rather than a resolutely “material” one. Under this model those who might lack material strength and resources can leverage police order by utilising those performative methods open to everyone. That is, they can perform as equal thereby destabilising the status quo.

Key words: Rancière, politics, Arts Against Cuts, performativity, equality

Paper

The Turner Prize ceremony of 2010 did not run smoothly. The speeches by selected notables were interrupted and overlaid by a chorus of voices emanating from behind security barriers. The chanters consisted of students from London art colleges as well as lecturers, artists and other interested parties. The intervention began as a teach-in occupying the newly installed British Art room. About 150 people listened to informal lectures by professional pedagogues or others who simply had something to say. At one point the group were led in an incantation for “JMW Turner to come back from the dead and prize back our artspace.”ⁱ

Later on sheets of paper were handed out and coned into dunce’s caps, signifying one supposed outcome of the government’s attacks on further and higher education. There was a session of impromptu life-drawing, with two volunteers stripping to their underwear to be sketched. The chanting began again in a conscious effort to register on the televisions of all those who had tuned into the award. Five demands were read out. Each line pronounced by a changing cast of volunteer callers then thunderously reiterated by the assembled mass. The statements were: “The Turner Prize needs artschools; the Tate would be empty without artschools; Education should be free for all not a product for purchase; we act in solidarity with public sector workers; we are not just fighting fees we are fighting philistinism.”ⁱⁱⁱ This intervention was part of the outpouring of anti-austerity activism which occurred in the UK during the winter and spring of 2010-11 and was the work of a group that came together under the banner of Arts Against Cuts. It is the activism of this group that provides the backdrop to the article.

To claim anti-cuts activities for a Rancièrian politics is to assert they are verifications of equality in dissensus with the hierarchical logic of government cuts. This is a *performative process* in which a particular political grievance, an instance of inequality, is brought to light and contested by the subject of subjectivation. The collective performance or verification of equality by a subordinate cohort is what constitutes subjectivation.

Police order

However before I can unpack and exemplify these statements I need to elaborate Rancière's theory of power, that which he calls police order. This diffuse agency structures all communities, except the community of equals produced in subjectivation. Police order, like the political action which challenges it, is constituted through a certain social performance.

Police order is essentially hierarchic, riddled with relations of inequality. For instance the adult might be considered superior to the child, the very elderly inferior to both; the worker of lesser importance than the middle-manager, and she subordinate to the director. Men are still often considered more worthwhile than women; if we take Western Europe equal pay has still to be achieved across the board. There is persecution of gay and lesbian people, different races, ethnicities and religions and those with disabilities. Police order influences our intellectual rationalisation of the world but also and at the same time our sensory perception of that world. It causes us to look and listen differently. Rancière often claims that the subordinated become invisible and voiceless, or their speech takes on the senselessness of animalistic noise.

In other words police order assumes that people are not equal: some deserve to be treated one way whilst others deserve to be treated worse or sacrifice more. In our new age of austerity the super-rich, the managing directors of banks etc, would seem to get off relatively lightly while "the poor", those who rely most on public services will be hit harder. These symbolically subordinated constituencies represent acceptable collateral damage and it would seem that artists, art lovers and students are joining their ranks... Hierarchies then are the default position for societies; the content changes i.e. who occupies the rungs of the ladder, who lords it over whom, but not the overarching structure. It is also quite possible within Rancière's model to be both victim and beneficiary of police order.

Importantly the essential question which structures all police inequality is this: can a person be considered capable of having a say in the governance of their own lives? If this answer is "yes" they are positioned somewhere towards the top, if "no" they are situated toward the bottom. But don't think that Rancière believes it is only those at the very bottom of the pile that suffer the indignity of domination; the shop assistant who is worked hard, her opinions ignored for barely minimum wage is a victim of hierarchy. But so are the vast majority of citizens. Do all people get to have their voice heard equally by the government or those other institutions which structure our world? We do all (most of us at least) get a vote. But some, the fantastically wealthy, those who donate to political parties, get to have private meetings with politicians... It would seem that some voices are louder than the others.

Is it not possible to see Nick Clegg's contemporaneous repudiation of the student protestors of 2010/11 as a classic example of the structural deafness inherent to police order? Was not his patronising appeal for students to "listen and look before they march and shout"ⁱⁱⁱ an attempt to put this constituency back in its place, to deny its (current) capacity to model its own life-world? His implicit suggestion was that students' were acting unreasonably like impulsive idiots, braying like beasts. To hold a view other than that of the coalition politicians was to exhibit a flaw in reasoning, even, perhaps, a weakness in character. Clegg was suggesting that before the students' could have their say they needed to undergo self improvement, maybe through quiet reflection, to gain a civilised knowledge of "the facts" so as to be able to contribute to the political process. In this case it would seem that the minimum requirement for a place at the table, so to speak, would be that the students learn to hold the same views as Nick Clegg himself.

The all pervasive hierarchical distinctions of police order are not premised on essential differences between groups; men have no more of a natural facility for leadership (or indeed map reading) than women, rather these groups' unequal positioning within social order is the result of pervasive social performances, of the type represented by Clegg's speech-act. We think and act "as if" these distinctions were true.

Police order for all its ubiquity is therefore based on shaky foundations, or rather, no essential foundation at all. This ontological void at the heart of the social is covered over, obfuscated by the dissimulating logic of identity. It is the categorisation of people as having "such and such" an identity that is responsible for hierarchic relations being formed. It is only by purporting to have captured the subject-hood of specific people, by matching a body to a capacity, that hierarchy is produced. This is because once subjects are categorised, or identified, they can be measured and weighed against each other, ordered one above the other. Here Rancière's system shows its indebtedness to 'deconstructive' thought. In this paradigm the predominance of final category is ascribed to an all pervasive metaphysics of presence,

which is responsible for the production of a dichotomous and hierarchically ordered “logos” through which the real takes shape for us. On this particular point Rancière’s police order is equivalent to Derrida’s Western logos.

One benefit of understanding power as a sensory-symbolic performance is that it offers certain opportunities for thinking through and enacting dissent. Under this model those who might lack material strength and resources (the demos) can leverage police order by utilising the same performative methods employed by power. That is, they can perform as equal thereby destabilising the status quo.

Politics

This egalitarian activism therefore has force, that is, it is able to effect social change. As already intimated, subjectivation occurs when a collectivity presupposes and performs their own equality and by extension that of all people. The minimal content of this supposition is that everyone is equally able to have a say in the processes that govern their lives. It is in the activity of bringing this supposition to light that they come into being as a group; the group does not pre-exist this moment of self activation. Rancière cites many examples, from Roman plebeians verifying their equality on Aventine Hill^{iv}, via eighteenth century French workers’ movements^v to May 68 and beyond^{vi}.

The fact that equality is pre-supposed decisively differentiates this model from that of distributive visions of politics wherein specific rights and allowances are *conferred*.^{vii} Under this latter perspective there are those who are assumed to possess the special knowledge and ability to both diagnose those in need and the nature of their want, thereby supposing a hierarchical division in society between distributors and receivers. This contravenes the presupposition of equality. The suffix “pre” should be understood as an attempt to register this difference with distributive models wherein equality is always “post”, after the action of an institution or state. Rancière argues that subjectivation is rare; it shouldn’t be assumed that all activism operates in this way. For instance it is possible to mobilise a grass-roots politics which nevertheless erects a hierarchy between its members and those it hopes to lead into emancipation; the classic avant-garde party provides an obvious example. Also an activism might seek to exclude certain constituencies: immigrants, gay people, etc.

For politics to occur the presupposition of equality needs to be verified in word and deed i.e. performed, so as to be made manifest. In so doing the collective communicate demands. Demands both verify equality and at one and the same time dissent against police order. First, the verification is directed within and amongst the group and to those that might potentially join. From this perspective the signification of the equality of all galvanises and induces confidence. Importantly, these subjectivating groups are necessarily characterised by equal or flat social relations.

Demands are also actively dissensual, attempting to target those subjects invested with the authority to change social conditions. These significations manifest in any number of ways; through protest marches, pickets, court actions, activist interventions, occupations, etc. These arenas of demand are stages which bring a struggle to light, imposing upon power. Simply by collectively contesting a particular hierarchy in this way the subordinated begin to verify their equality, to show they are active participants in their own destiny, just like everyone else. A subject who makes a demand thereby retroactively challenges the assumption on which any inequality rests i.e. the belief that there are those who lack the capacity to actively partake in ‘governing’.

In order to ground this rather abstract discussion let us examine one of Rancière’s favourite examples, a strike by French tailors in the 19th century. The owners of textile factories at this period in France were allowed by law to meet up and fix the wages of their employees. However any collective action by their workers - the tailors - to try and drive wages higher was illegal. In this way the tailors were discriminated against, treated unequally. However these workers persisted in meeting and were subsequently taken to court by their bosses.

In their defence the tailors cited a French legal document, the charter of 1830, which in its introduction or preamble stated that all French citizens should be treated equally. They delivered an argument based on the charter to the legal prosecutors Persil and Schwartz:

“If Monsieur Persil or Monsieur Schwartz is right to say what he does and do what he does, the preamble of the charter should be deleted. It should read: the French people are not equal. If by contrast [the preamble] is upheld, then Monsieur Persil or Monsieur Schwartz must speak or act differently.”^{viii}

By employing this line of argument they assert their equality with their bosses, an equality which is currently being denied. Also simply by taking this action, by defending themselves and demanding their rights, they begin to verify or perform that they are active participants in their own destiny. In other words simply by speaking-up, showing that they can engage in political or legalistic debate, shape sophisticated arguments and quote important texts, proves that they are not inferior, that they are people the equal of all other people. They prove they are capable of logical human speech, the speech of their supposed betters not trapped at an animalistic level characterised by emotive braying and nothing more. Clegg’s comments referenced earlier are indicative of this cusp moment, this tipping point, whereby police power prompted by evidence of the supposed inferiors’ equality attempts to push this evidence aside, to put the subordinate back in their place.

Back to the tailors: Speaking up as a collective then is one way that they prove to the bosses and themselves that they are equal. Therefore verbal statements, texts, or any other artefact - from the tailor’s legal documents to the arts against cuts demo-props - all perform equality. The Tailor’s actions resist, or act in dissensus with their allotted lowly role, their assigned identity and in so doing destabilizes the whole network of symbolic relations connected to them. Most importantly the tailor’s capacity is declassified as menial worker and begins to be extended to that of full citizen with every ability to have a hand in his own governance. The bosses’ role as necessary expert and coordinator would also seem less secure than before.

But more than this, the performance of equality is subversive to the extent that it attempts to render the categories of *every* police order inoperative revealing the utter contingency of any instance of hierarchy. The revelation of equality shows that there is absolutely no good reason for police order. If all are equal why do we need rulers? From this perspective every instance of hierarchy takes on a scandalous dimension as it is shown to be based only on opportunism, lucky circumstance, unjustifiable force, or a combination all of the above.

The stress caused by the mass verification of equality, that is, the destabilisation of usual social relations, places an onus on specific beneficiaries of hierarchy to act. This might mean making concessions, recognising some of those considered subordinate to be, in fact, equal. At this point a distributive logic reasserts itself. Nevertheless this is a redistribution forced upon power by subjectivation. Police order has been leveraged: “[a] verification [of equality] becomes “social”, causes equality to have real social effect, only when it mobilizes an *obligation* to hear”.^{ix} This then is the force of subjectivation, the ability to influence police order. The dissenting collective can win concessions achieving rights, policy u-turns, better pay and conditions, etc.

Attentive readers might at this point want to critique either Rancière or at least my presentation of him. For it would seem that there is a certain inconsistency within this philosophy of subject-hood, power and dissensus so far presented. Police order functions through a claim to position subjects within hierarchy according to their capacity, their possession of certain natural characteristics. Now the victims of this categorisation can blast apart its premise by revealing themselves to exceed their allotted identity to in fact exceed any given identity, to reveal identity as a construct pure and simple. However this revelation is achieved by way of an appeal to an equality that we all possess; Rancière often frames this as the fact that we all have equal intellectual capacity. If this is the case doesn’t that then make equality a natural human characteristic, a lingering essence? Isn’t the assertion of the equality of all a new trap, a new way of duping subjects into thinking and acting as if they are unitary, “such and such” a person? And couldn’t the corraling of subjects in this way be the precondition for an as yet unknown form of police domination, a police order beyond performative intervention and thus change?

However this flaw or contradiction is in fact a mirage. Rancière is very clear that equality is not a “characteristic” in any usual sense of the word. Importantly it does not have a positive content; in fact it is substantively empty, or negative. It is simply not possible to possess Rancièrian equality in the way that it is to have, say, a proclivity for leadership or indeed map reading. Let’s think about it this way: Rancière proposes that subjects are tabula rasa. They do not possess ‘positive’, determined qualities – a proclivity for leadership/map reading – which *necessitates* they become a particular type of person with an appropriate social position. Rather people take on characteristics and a particular social role through performance, through thinking and acting “as if” they were that person. In the terms most

employed in this text, they are able to think and act in ways that will position them as either superior/inferior or as equal. Therefore the verification of equality in any emancipatory political action is as much of a performance as those employed by police order to keep subjects in their place.

However Rancière does claim a primacy for equality, which is not the primacy of ontology, over and above hierarchy. To be consistent in the use of terminology we could say that Rancière's name for the table rasa from which subjects emerge is also equality. We are all equally indeterminate, all equally lacking in necessary characteristics. And importantly for Rancière we are all equally able to shape this blank canvas through performative action. Rancière's empty subject has a content-less will too...

It is hard to see how such an 'empty' conception of the human subject could be used to categorise, order and hierarchies. And this is why it is so dangerous for the categories, order and hierarchies of the police.

Arts Against Cuts as Subjectivation

It is my contention that AAC represent a subjectivation. The presupposition of empty equality is its primary ethos, providing a motivation for action and an organisational structure which is given, something to remain faithful before being wedded to other political content. The group held two extended events or Long Weekends (December 4th and 5th 2010 and January 15th and 16th 2011). These were to bring like-minded people together to work on strategies for fighting the austerity programme. Those initially responsible for the idea of the event did not seek to proscribe its content. Blocks of time and space were allocated to individuals and groups to fill as they saw fit. This meant that no management team was responsible for providing a monolithic shape to the days. At the first event the large central hall of Goldsmiths' student union was utilised to meet, discuss and thrash things out. The hosting role was fluidly shared with scrupulous attention paid to putting all considerations before the group. The strategy of consensual decision making was employed, whereby support or disagreement for a speaker could be indicated by hand movements allowing the temperature of the room to be read. Also, each breakout session fed their ideas and research back to the main collective where they were commented upon and assimilated. In one of these sessions the Turner Prize intervention was hatched. It was noticeable how in this atmosphere established hierarchies crumpled; the voices of students were given just as much of an airing as those of their teachers and proved as incisive. Also at the Turner Prize intervention a form of swarming, group decision-making took place. The action was successful not primarily because of the organisation of leader figures but because of a collective feeling of anger and responsibility for the success of the protest. This was equally true of the Long Weekends.

As with all subjectivations the activities of AAC dissented with police order. The presupposition of equality was turned against beneficiaries of hierarchy. In other words university buildings, city streets, social networking sites and the galleries of Tate Britain were turned into political stages in which an instance of inequality and its contestation were forcefully dramatised.

Short Biography

I am an artist and early career academic teaching in the Fine Art Department at the University of Kent. I completed a PhD by practice at Goldsmiths in July 2010. In the last five years I've exhibited in group shows in Britain and Europe. I've also worked collaboratively with the Carrot Worker's Collective and Precarious Workers' Brigade.

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