

The politics and possibilities of museum aesthetics: Reading Jacques Rancière

Klas Grinell

Representation

First, the concept of representation often implies that there is an original present that the re-representation is to represent. Example: We have diversity in Europe, now we need to find out how to represent/exhibit it.

But diversity is a concept used to describe the lives of all the millions of unique individuals that live their lives in Europe. When most of the modern museums were established the central notion of national belonging led to an exhibition of nations and groups of people as a unity, and diversity was allotted to the ethnographic museums that displayed the diversity of nations and groups. Today the ideological imperative has changed to the opposite. We want to exhibit diversity within nations, and unity between all peoples of the planet. This is an ideological shift, in itself it says very little about any shifts in the reality for living persons on the planet or whether there is more or less diversity in the world today than before.

Our only way of grasping what is present is to represent it in epistemological or aesthetic forms. What does it mean to represent something (diversity for example)? The English word representation carries two rather different meanings or aspects, discussed in the classical post colonial text “Can the subaltern speak?” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak..

To represent can mean to be a representative. In German this aspect is called *vertretung*. For this kind of representation to be legitimate the representative must be selected in a democratic fashion by those represented. The selected representative should voice the concerns of those she represents, not pursuing her own interests.

To represent can also mean to make something present again, to copy or interpret it. This aesthetic aspect of representation is covered by the German word *darstellung*. It concerns artistic and aesthetic work. It is hard to talk about legitimacy in this type of representation, it can instead be for example moving, or instructive.

Rancière and political representation

In his book *Hatred of democracy* Jacques Rancière discusses questions concerning the problems of selecting a right representative. In contemporary democracy the sovereign people delegate their power to the parliamentary representatives of the people. But the elite representatives of the people in parliament form a symbiosis with the elites of the educated cadres of the bureaucratic system. The states often called democracies aren't very democratic; Rancière rather calls them oligarchic rule of law states (*État de droit*), where the power of the oligarchy is limited by the acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the people and of individual freedoms.

The basis of political representation is legitimacy. Legitimacy is very tied to ability and expertise. But in the end of expertise lies the idea of social engineering as an

alternative to politics: Let those who best can construct the solutions govern. But this is not representation any more. This is governmentality. Political representation involves the paradox of politics: it rests on legitimacy, but there is no ultimate legitimacy.

In ancient Greek thought, according to Rancière, this paradox was met by the idea of chance as a source for legitimacy. The drawing of lots was used to select those who should govern, the let those with no claim to rule actually to rule.

There is a tension between popular legitimacy and professional legitimacy and democracy is for Rancière the act of taking the monopoly over public life from the hands of the oligarchic governments, and taking the power over life from the hands of Wealth. Democracy is an act, not a system or a form.

In other works Rancière stresses that the essence of politics consists in what he calls interrupting the distribution of the sensible. The drawing of the lots has its counterpart in the political act of supplementing the 'normal' oligarchic distribution of the sensible with a an aesthetic form that opens a space for those who up till then has no part in what he calls the perceptual coordinates of the community. Such a redistribution opens new fields of possibilities for the action of unrepresented parts of society. So politics is not everything in society immersed with power. A political event is where a meeting between the policing and the egalitarian logics comes about. That said, it is important to note that Rancière in many respect is very foucauldian and that he shares Foucault's views on the very broad reach of the policing logic.

Small things, as the changing of names, can result in a clash between logics and disrupt the political distribution. In *On the shores of politics* Rancière gives the example of the juridical process against Auguste Blanqui in France in 1832. When asked by the court about his profession Blanqui stated 'proletarian'. The judge claimed that that was not an occupation, whereby Blanqui answered that it was the occupation of the majority of the people and that they had been deprived their political rights. Rancière reads this moment as a subjectivation of the people that had not been part of the symbolic constitution of society. The majority of people could by the name of proletarian become visible; thereby the political field had changed.

Museums and political representation

Museums are involved in *darstellung*. The need to represent for example diversity in Europe today is connected to a felt need to have a better *vertretung* for newer groups in European societies. But to think that our *darstellungen* can work as *vertretungen* is ultimately undemocratic and would carry a belief in an objective present that an objective observer can represent in the interest of others.

The impossibility of objective representation means that we always must choose what to represent, and therefore we are always responsible for that choice. It becomes a moral question. There is no way we can come to a conclusive answer. That means that the exhibits we make can never be proven to be true, they can only be legitimate or not. And legitimate political representation must be built on a

mandate from those represented, *vertreten*. Such a political goal would change to role of museums drastically.

A fundamental problem is that museums most often are far from being elected as the legitimate representatives of those making up the diversity of Europe. A simple cooperation with stake holder groups is not an easy solution. A cultural community is very seldom a democratic organisation. The preferred cultural representatives are very often from the group's oligarchy. To take their voice as an authentic representation is very problematic. To use the problems of legitimate representation of stake-holder groups as an excuse to carry on in the old objectivistic tracks is not very good either. Involving stake holders is good and something that must be done to fill the democratic mission of museums. Self-representation is a fundamental right that must be given to stake holders of museum collections. But inviting representatives of stake holder groups can never make an exhibition into a legitimate representation (*vertretung*). In the choice of whom to invite as a stake holder representative the drawing of lots might be a good way to go about things.

Being open with such a procedure would also kill the lingering belief in that the stake holder representatives are there as culturally representative exemplars of their community. Such representativity simply does not exist.

Rancière and aesthetic representation

Rancière makes no real distinction between aesthetics and politics; rather he talks about particular aesthetico-political regimes. There are correlations between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics, he states, but refuses to give any criteria for how those correlations work. The theoretical analysis of such correlations is of course also carried out with a specific aesthetic form.

This can be seen as a very sense-centered way of thinking, as the title of the main interview in his best seller *The politics of aesthetics* shows – “The distribution of the sensible”. Aesthetics and politics – and theory and most everything else – is tied together by the fact that it is fundamentally a continuous redistribution of the sensible. We sense the world differently when we have seen it represented in a new way. It all is about defining the boundaries of what is visible, audible, and thereby thinkable.

It might be helpful to give a brief outline of Rancière's understanding of the academic field of aesthetics, as presented in the introduction to his 2004 book *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (not yet in English translation). He says that the discourse of aesthetics came to being some 200 years ago. Aesthetics is not the name of a discipline, though, it is rather a specific regime for the identification of art. Its birth is connected to the subsumation of the fine arts into Art, having a starting point in the writings of Immanuel Kant. The birth of aesthetics is also the death of representation, according to Rancière. He uses representation in a Foucauldian sense making it a synonym to mimesis. Mimesis is *darstellung*, but the end of mimesis in Art does not mean an end for de-picting. Rather it takes away the tie between the representation and the object and makes the connection between the work of art and the sensible effect it produces central. This is aesthetics according to Rancière.

Art is not political because of the messages or feelings about the state of the world that it conveys. It is not political because of the way it represents the structures and conflicts of society. Art is political because it distances itself from these functions; it is political in that it creates a different kind of time and space and through the ways that it peoples these timespaces.

One could read this as claiming that aesthetics is everywhere. That is somewhat correct, but must be understood in a more precise way. In “The distribution of the sensible” Rancière writes:

The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. This proposition should be distinguished from any discourse – positive or negative – according to which everything is ‘narrative’, with alternations between ‘grand’ narratives and ‘minor’ narratives. The notion of ‘narrative’ locks us into oppositions between the real and artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructivists are lost. (p.38)

Thinking is fictionalization. So of course there is no presentation beyond, before or besides aesthetics. Being scientifically sound is not a matter of being free from fictionalization; it is a matter of what the building blocks for the fictionalized thoughts are.

In *The future of the image* Rancière talks about how the present aesthetic regime is not about mimesis. Its form is assemblage and montage; it is about rhythm in contrast to the old common belief in a specific measure for each art form. The present aesthetic regime that takes its beginning with the German idealists where Art is born and the measures are lost; from then on we have nothing to measure the works of art against. The power of works of art comes from the commonality of chaos; it is about having a rhythm that relates to this common chaos.

In the representational regime there was a relationship between image and text, relevant for example for museum presentations. The textual part was carrying the ideal chain of events of the narrative, whereas the function of the pictorial part was to give it concrete flesh and a more permanent sense of presence.

This harmonious unit is no longer functional. In the present aesthetical regime we instead have what Rancière calls the phrase-image. The function of the phrase is still to join and create a sense of commonality, but now the textual phrase joins because it gives a kind of permanence to the chaos, while the image carries an active and eruptive power.

But the attaching of everything with everything else, that in the beginning of the present aesthetic regime was seen as subversive and radical is today more and more trapped by the babble of advertising that is not in favour of a redistribution of the sensible. Good art, as I understand Rancière is a montage that makes new connections, which can create a shock or a collision that creates an other order. Good art is a deviation that reveals an other world, which creates a redistribution of

the sensible that opens new spaces and makes room for new political subjects. But it is not simply about creating oppositions. Rancière rather sees that contemporary art is less and less interested in the once popular work aiming at creating a feeling for the rift between the forms of everyday life and the laws of repression. Today he sees a neo-symbolistic and neo-humanistic tendency involved with surveying traces of commonality and celebrating the power of the world and the visual. He doesn't seem totally happy with this, I think.

The possibilities of museum aesthetics

The practical use of Rancière for museum representation might not be obvious. I think about legitimate political representation is interesting and important. Working together with stake holders has become a standard and obligatory part of museum exhibitions. But this is often presented as a solution to the problems of representation connected to classical museums. A more elaborate understanding of representation makes it clear that there are a lot of problems that cannot be solved simply by that method.

The role of museums cannot be to be political representatives (*vertreter*) of any group in society. I think the public funders must create other arenas to solve the lack of political representation for the excluded groups in society. At the same time that is no excuse to run away from the moral responsibility immanent to the duality of representation, even in aesthetic or epistemological representation there is a political representation that has to be addressed responsibly.

But there is another take on the possibilities of museums aesthetics. A rational argument about the state of the world has seldom made anybody change their way of living, in Rancièrian terms it seldom create any redistribution of the sensible. An aesthetic representation involves other possibilities. Good aesthetics representation does create a redistribution of the sensible and can thereby touch people in a way that rational argumentation can not.

A well preformed exhibition of a subject connected to a specific group of people not having a voice in other public arenas can make new things become visible; thereby changing the political field and making new aspects of society sensible.

What has been lacking in my tracking of the question in this short paper is the question of epistemological representation.

Rancière touches upon the question in his book *The ignorant schoolmaster* about the pedagogical ideas of Joseph Jacotot, who in the early 19th century developed a method for showing that illiterate parents could teach their children to read. The book is primarily on how intellectual emancipation is possible from within every person. The representation of knowledge does not require a learned person explicating what shall be learned. Jacotot's favourite mode of learning was trough recounting, since in storytelling there is an innate presumption about the equality of the listener, rather than a focus on the inequality of knowledge between the two parts. I would very much like this supposition to be a ground for the approach of a museum exhibition towards its audience.

Another lesson of *The ignorant schoolmaster* is that intellectual emancipation is about knowledge, not only about a change in perception. Emancipation cannot come about merely through a redistribution of the sensible opening a space for new political subjects. If we shall be able to act upon that redistribution, we also need knowledge. The schoolmaster is as important as the artist or the politician.

From this perspective the museum exhibition should be seen as a unique art form, combining the informed and sound research of scientific traditions (the material and method of the schoolmaster) with professional aesthetic representations (the method of the artist). In contrast to art a well informed exhibition built with a belief in the mutual intelligence of the spectator can create not only a redistribution of the sensible, it might also be part of intellectual emancipation as it lets people develop their knowledge.

Ending on a credo and exclamation: The museum should take pride in its art form and argue for its abilities to make powerful representations (*darstellungen*) of different aspects of society. But it must take responsibility for and acknowledge its own voice. It can never represent (*vertreten*) anyone else but itself.