

THRESHOLDS 40



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**MOVE
ALONG!
THERE IS
NOTHING
TO SEE**

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“THE POLICE SAY THERE IS NOTHING TO SEE, NOTHING HAPPENING, NOTHING TO BE DONE, BUT TO KEEP MOVING, CIRCULATING; THEY SAY THAT THE SPACE OF CIRCULATION IS NOTHING BUT THE SPACE OF CIRCULATION. POLITICS CONSISTS IN TRANSFORMING THAT SPACE OF CIRCULATION INTO THE SPACE OF THE MANIFESTATION OF A SUBJECT: BE IT THE PEOPLE, WORKERS, CITIZENS. IT CONSISTS IN RECONFIGURING THAT SPACE, WHAT THERE IS TO DO THERE, WHAT THERE IS TO SEE OR NAME. IT IS A DISPUTE ABOUT THE DIVISION OF WHAT IS PERCEPTIBLE TO THE SENSES.”

— JACQUES RANCIÈRE¹

In a meditation on the French revolt of May 1968, the philosopher Jacques Rancière established a theoretical framework, presenting “the political” as an unremitting confrontation in the name of equality between police and politics. Rancière defines the notion of police as “a symbolic constitution of the social,” which defines society as parts by naming an order of intelligible bodies and sensory experiences. Politics, on the other hand, is distinguished from this notion as the partaking in the “common.” It is the manifestation of dissensus from those who have no part in the police’s “distribution of the sensible,” and the subsequent rupture of the normal distribution of roles, places, and occupations within.

What is the significance of space in the unremitting confrontation between police and politics? The distinctive spatiality of Rancière’s thought makes it compelling for addressing the politics of the socially conscious project, and distinguishing between a police project, which reproduces a consensual space of communitarian interests, and a project that constantly interrogates already-defined social projects

in the name of equity. According to Rancière, the police operate to reproduce consensus by the adulation of “communitarianism,” which reduces the social to the closure of identity politics. The police further contain politics by defining and appropriating a “space of flows,” which inherently prohibits a subject-position. The verbal intervention to break up demonstrations, “Move along! There is nothing to see,” illustrates how the organization of space operates toward the consolidation of police order. For Rancière, the police intervention is less about interpellating individual demonstrators in public space (i.e., the “hey, you there” of the interpellating cop in Louis Althusser’s staging² of how ideology functions). Rather, the police seek to parcel out places and forms of participation in a common world. They are concerned with the definition of a domain of the sensible, a partition between what is visible and what is not, what is sayable and what is not, within that order.³ “Move along! There is nothing to see” seeks to control the sensible by establishing certain modalities and ranges of perception while denying others. The impossibility of the witness is a necessary apparatus of the police. Political beings whose politic the police do not wish to acknowledge are denied a voice “by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths.”⁴ Similarly, political spaces whose politic the police do not wish to address are externalized to the banlieue, the hinterland, or the underground. They are dropped into black holes of representation or blurred by the speed of moving along.

Rancière’s thought provides a reading of the social as an anti-political apparatus of

1 Jacques Rancière, “Ten Thesis on Politics,” *Theory and Event* 5, no. 3 (2001).

2 Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: New Left Books, 1971), 163.

3 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), 84. See also, Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identity and Subjectivization,” *October* 61 (1992): 58-64.

4 Rancière, “Ten Thesis on Politics,” 8.23.

rule that disciplines disagreement in terms commensurate with an order of intelligible bodies, a distribution and counting of the parts of society. The police, according to Rancière, is the structured embodiment of the common through the process of identification, which, in the name of consensus, categorizes every individual into specific identifiable "profiles"—such as "populations," or "communities." Identification is further reinforced with the conflation of social and spatial formations, which tames and naturalizes difference to reinforce consensus. Henri Lefebvre, another protagonist of the '68 events, emphasizes the spatiality of the police by arguing that the exercise of the social is fundamentally a spatial project, for "what is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?"⁵ The space of the police, or what Lefebvre refers to as abstract space, dissimulates the violence of its ordering behind a homogeneous appearance which subsumes distinctions into specialized spaces, "subdivided into spaces for work and spaces for leisure, into daytime and nighttime spaces."⁶ The dead end of the political lies precisely in the identification of politics with the body of the community as consensus becomes "the suppression of the litigiousness constitutive of the political and identitarianism the flip side of this suppression."⁷

"Move along! There is nothing to see" is the assertion that "the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation."⁸ The police parcel out the common in terms of social groups and their respective identities and places. This act, and the carving out of the space of circulation, are an exclusive domain for the police's reinforcement of the distribution of parts. The space of circulation divides into the dynamic and static, into the moving and the still, to ensure a continuous flow. When William Harvey promulgated his ideas on the double circulation of blood in the vascular system of the human body in 1628, the concept began to permeate and infiltrate urbanism and intellectual thought.⁹ The "ideology of circulation" associated the modern city with efficient organization and

unimpeded growth of complex networks of flows. To favor the predominance of a frictionless space of circulation, urbanization implied a contract of non-violence, which tended toward the reinforcement of consensus.

However, denial by the police of a surplus of "community parts" inevitably produces remainders from within, against which politics arise. The contours of disagreement, for Rancière, emerge as those who are denied a part in a given order embark in a process of de-classification as a function of an injustice that needs to be addressed. Whereas identification is a reproducible difference at the service of consensus, subjectivization is the process by which the part-with-no-part "extracts itself from the dominant categories of identification and classification."¹⁰ This struggle necessarily entails a "clash between two partitions of the sensible," a noise that the unacknowledged part makes in an embodiment of a capacity of enunciation that was not previously articulated.¹¹ Such political action is neither conflict between one who says white and another who says black, nor a transformation of the processes of exclusion to include those who are discriminated against. Disagreement, for Rancière, is "the conflict between one who says white and another who says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same things in the name of whiteness."¹² The politics of subjectivization is thus less resistance within particular divisions, and more dissensus around the partitioning and control of the sensible.

5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 41.

6 Ibid., 319.

7 Jacques Rancière, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Dialectics* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 113-126.

8 Rancière, "Ten Thesis on Politics," 8.22.

9 Erik Swyngedouw, "Circulations and Metabolisms: (Hybrid) Natures and (Cyborg) Cities," *Science as Culture* 15, no. 2 (2006): 105-121; Matthew Gandy, "Rethinking Urban Metabolism: Water, Space and the Modern City," *City* 8, no. 3 (2004): 363-379.

10 Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 92.

11 Rancière, "Ten Thesis on Politics," 8.25.

12 Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

78 The Illustrated Outdoor World and Recreational Guide

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Politics consist of transforming the space of circulation into a space for the manifestation of a subject.¹³ In a divided, streamlined space, bodies move away from their designated parts. The part-with-no-part stands still to assert multiple possible meanings of whiteness. In the process, space is no longer the domain for the reinforcement of a social order but, rather, the apparatus through which politics are engaged. While the space of flows requires protestors to clear the streets, to move along, the act of standing still refigures what there is to do in the streets, what there is to see or to name. The demonstration of rights opens up the politics of the formations of the common, away from the closure of defined social categories.

If the social is, above all, a certitude about what is not there, then May '68 was, above all, a massive refusal to see in the social what we usually see: nothing more than the narrowest of identity categories and the reproduction of consensus. In May '68 and its Afterlives, Kristen Ross argues that the identification of the events with the identity or interests of the "students," obscures the broader political significance of the uprisings: the events were only loosely tied to a "youth revolt" and were more concerned "with displacements that took people outside of their social identifications, with a disjunction, that is, between political subjectivity and the social group."¹⁴ The protestors refused the closure of assigned categories—be it based on generation, class, or nationality—and their identification with spatial spheres.

So how can Rancière's reconfiguration of the political be significant to architecture's political project? Can architecture disrupt the closure of social symbols by interrogating the construction of solid social concepts and of fixed or defined subject positions? Can it look precisely into where "there is nothing to see" to differently represent the common? Michael Hays proposes architecture as a "socially symbolic production whose primary task is the construction of concepts and subject positions," a way of "negotiating the real, [of] intervening in the realm of symbols and signifying processes at the limit of the social order itself."¹⁵ In his call for the "science of

the imaginary," Reinhold Martin presents two particularly urgent tasks of the aesthetic and the territorial: the first, which "makes the invisible visible," the second which "breaks open the enclosure and enclaves that disposes these outside or inside of both political and cultural representation."¹⁶ As the propositions by Rancière, Hays, and Martin suggest, architecture can be a process of declassification that disrupts the social significance of places and their correspondence with identity-communities. Architecture can interrogate the assumptions and representations that sustain circulatory flow. Thus, a socially conscious project does not seek to solve inequalities or promote a social character for spaces. It is not caught in the socially relevant categories as defined and reproduced in political circles. Rather, it seeks to challenge existing categories as a process of continuous intervention in the name of equality. This project is fundamentally political at the moment it disturbs the socialized consensual order of solidified social categories by opening the domain of relevant spatial concerns. It brings spaces that were previously erased as insignificant matters of fact into focus as matters of concern.¹⁷ Architecture is political when it engages in a quarrel on perceptible givens, calling into question nothing less than the spatial and perceptual organization of our world.

13 Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 30.

14 Kristen Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3.

15 K. Michael Hays, *Architecture's Desire: Reading the Late Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010): 1.

16 Reinhold Martin, "Moment of Truth," *Log* 7 (Winter/Spring 2006): 15-20.

17 Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 225-248.

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