The French philosopher Jacques Rancière has written extensively on the relationship between aesthetics and politics as a parage du sensible – the sharing/division of what is visible, sayable and thinkable. In this extract from Malaise dans l’esthétique (2004), Rancière addresses the limitations of didactic critical art, as well as the spectacularization of relational art that seeks to repair the social bond.

In its most general formula, critical art intends to raise consciousness of the mechanisms of domination in order to turn the spectator into a conscious agent in the transformation of the world. We know the dilemma that weighs upon this project. On the one hand, understanding alone can do little to transform consciousness and situations. The explicit have rarely had the need to have the laws of exploitation explained to them. Because it's not a misunderstanding of the existing state of affairs that nurtures the submission of the oppressed, but a lack of confidence in their own capacity to transform it. Now, the feeling of such a capacity assumes that they are already engaged in a political process that changes the configuration of a given situation (dynamiques sensibles), and which constructs the forms of a world to come within the existing world. On the other hand, the work of art that ‘makes you understand’, and that breaks up appearances, thereby kills the strangeness of an appearance of resistance that bears witness to the non-necessary or intolerable character of a world. Critical art that invites you to see the signs of Capital behind everyday objects and behaviours risks inscribing itself into the perpetuation of a world where the transformation of things into signs recoubles the very excess of interpretative signs that make all resistance disappear.

In this vicious circle of critical art we generally see proof that aesthetics and politics can't go together. It would be more fair, however, to recognize the plurality of ways in which they are linked. On the one hand, politics is not a simple sphere of action that comes after the 'aesthetic' revelation of the state of things. It has its own aesthetic: its ways of dispassionately inventing scenes and characters, of manifestations and statements different from the inventions of art and sometimes even opposed to them. On the other hand, aesthetics has its own politics, or rather its own tension between two opposed politics: between the logic of art that becomes life at the price of abolishing itself as art, and the logic of art that does politics on the explicit condition of not doing it at all. The difficulty of critical art is not that of having to negotiate between politics and art.
It is having to negotiate the relation between the two aesthetic logics that exist independently of it, because they belong to the logic of the aesthetic regime itself. Critical art must negotiate the tension that pushes art towards ‘life’ and which, conversely, separates aesthetic sensoriality from other forms of sensible experience. It must borrow the connections that provoke political intelligibility from the blurry zone between art and other spheres. And it must borrow the sense of sensible heterogeneity that feeds the political energies of refusal from the isolation of the work of art. It’s this negotiation between the forms of art and those of non-art that permits the formation of combinations of elements capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability.

Therefore, the combination of these two forces necessarily takes the form of a realignment of heterogeneous logics. If collage has been one of the great techniques of modern art, it is because its technical forms obey a more fundamental aesthetico-political logic. Collage, in the most general sense of the term, is the principle of a ‘third’ aesthetic politics. Prior to mixing paintings, newspapers, old cloth or clock parts, it mixes the strangeness of the aesthetic experience with the becoming-life of art and the becoming-art of ordinary life. Collage can be carried out as a pure encounter of heterogeneities, testifying wholesale to the incompatibility of two worlds. It’s the surrealist encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine, showing the absolute power of desire and dreams against the reality of the everyday world, but using its objects. Conversely, collage can be seen as evidence of the hidden link between two apparently opposed worlds: thus do the photomontages of John Heartfield, revealing the reality of capitalist gold in the throat of Adolf Hitler, or those of Martha Rosler, mixing photographs of the horror of Vietnam with advertising images of American comfort. In this case, it’s not any longer the heterogeneity of the two worlds that should nourish a sense of the intolerable but, on the contrary, the making evident of the causal connection that links one to the other.

But the politics of collage finds its balancing point where it can combine the two relations and play on the line of indiscernibility between the force of readability of sense and the force of strangeness of non-sense. So do, for example, the stories of cauliflowers in Brecht’s Arturo Ui. They play an exemplary double game between denouncing the law of the market and using ways of deriding high art borrowed from the market debasement of culture. They simultaneously play on the readability of an allegory of Nazi power as the power of capital, and on a buffoonery that reduces all grand ideals, political or otherwise, to the insignificant business of vegetables. Behind this grand discourse, the secret of the market is thus equated with its absence of secret, with its triviality or radical non-meaning or non-sense. But this possibility of playing simultaneously on sense and on non-sense assumes another, which is that one may play at once on the reality of cauliflowers and on the performance, it’s necessary that the cauliflower that they be already linked, that they

In fact, when Brecht tries to distanciate, they already have impressionist still lifes. Think also of Les Halles and the piles of vegetables in general – and cabbage as political symbols. This novel, written in effect constructed on the pole of revolutionary who returns from a new world of mass consumption who sings an epic of cabbages, of Les Halles and the piles of vegetable, henceforth deprived of life, symb

This Brechtian double game with cauliflowers is possible because politics, the new beauty and market this vegetable allegory. Critical art is different aesthetic politics – is postmodern rupture blurring forms of popular culture. The bourgeoisie in itself, Brechtian distanciation is brought into the domain of art through the magazine illustrations, or the advertisement. Hegel believed to have exhausted

This is what Balzac shows us, dilapidated and muddy stalls of Stock Exchange and of prostituti

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The two aesthetic logics that exist in the logic of the aesthetic regime that pushes art towards "life" and civility from other forms of sensibility at provoke political intelligibility by means. And it must borrow the political energies of refusal from the forms of art and a mixture of combinations of elements and from their unreadability. The forces necessarily take the form of the village not been one of the great technical forms obey a more in the most general sense of the politics. Prior to mixing paintings, the strangeness of the aesthetic is becoming-art of ordinary life. A matter of heterogeneities, testifying it is. It's the surrealist encounter of the absolute power of desire and the world, but using its objects of the hidden link between two of the many montages of John Heartfield, and of Hitler, those of error of Vietnam with advertising at any longer the heterogeneity and the intolerable but, on the section that links one to the other. A point where it can combine the transparency between the force of the generality of non-sense. So do, for Arturo Ui. They play an exemplary of the market and using ways of debasement of culture. They category of Nazi power as the power of all grand ideals, political or vegetables. Behind this grand sated with its absence of secret, non-sense. But this possibility of sense assumes another, which is that one may play at once on the radical separation between the world of art and that of cauliflowers and on the permeability of the border that separates them. It's necessary that the cauliflowers be without any relation to art or politics and that they be already linked, that the border be always there yet already crossed.

In fact, when Brecht tries to put vegetables in the service of critical distanciation, they already have a long artistic history. Think of the unprecedented painting, Émile Zola, in Le Ventre de Paris (The Belly of Paris, also trans. The Fat and the Thin, 1874), elevated vegetables in general - and cabbages in particular - to the dignity of artistic and political symbols. This novel, written just after the fall of the Paris Commune, is in effect constructed on the polarity of two characters: on the one hand, the revolutionary who returns from deportation to the new Paris des Halles and finds himself crushed by the accumulation of commodities that materializes a new world of mass consumption; on the other hand, the impressionist painter who sings an epic of cabbages, of the new beauty, opposing the iron architecture of Les Halles and the piles of vegetables that it shelters to the old beauty henceforth deprived of life, symbolized by the neighboring gothic church.

This Brechtian double game with the political and the apolitical character of cauliflowers is possible because there already exists a relationship between politics, the new beauty and market displays. We can generalize the meaning of this vegetable allegory. Critical art — art which plays on the union and tension of different aesthetic politics — is possible thanks to a movement of translation that has, for a long time now, crossed the border in both directions between the world of art and the prosaic world of the commodity. There's no need to imagine a 'postmodern' rupture blurring the border that separated high art from the forms of popular culture. The blurring of boundaries is as old as 'modernity' itself. Brechtian distanciation is clearly indebted to surrealist collages that brought into the domain of art the obsolete consumer goods from the arcades, the magazine illustrations, or the outdated catalogues. But the process goes back much further. The moment when high art is constituted — by declaring its own end, according to Hegel — is also the moment when it started to be banalized in magazine reproductions and be corrupted in the bookshop trade and in the 'industrial' literature of newspapers. But this is also the time when commodities started to travel in the opposite direction, to cross the border that separates it from the world of art, to recopulate and re-materialize this art that Hegel believed to have exhausted its forms.

This is what Balzac shows us in Illusions perdues (Lost Illusions, 1837). The dilapidated and muddy stalls of the Galeries du bois, where the fallen poet Lucien de Rubempré goes to sell his prose and his soul among the trade of the Stock Exchange and of prostitution, instantly become the place of a new poetry:
a fantastical poetry made from the abolition of frontiers between the ordinary of the market and the extraordinary of art. The heterogeneous sensible from which art of the aesthetic age feeds can be found anywhere, and especially on the very terrain from which the purists wanted to eliminate it. Any commodity or useful object can, by becoming obsolete and unfit for consumption, become available to art in different ways, separate or linked: as an object of disinterested pleasure, a body encoded with a story, or as witness to a strangeness impossible to assimilate.

While some dedicated art-life to the creation of furniture for a new world, and others denounced the transformation of art products into the décor of aesthetized commodities, others seized this double movement that blurred the simple opposition of two great aesthetic politics: if art products do not cease to cross into the domain of commodities, then commodities and functional goods do not stop crossing the border in the other direction, leaving the sphere of utility and value to become hieroglyphs carrying their history on their body, or mute disaffected objects carrying the splendour of what no longer bears any project or will. This is what the idleness of the Jino Ludovisi could communicate to all obsolete functional objects and advertising imagery. This ‘dialectical work in things’ that renders them available to art and for subversion – by breaking the uniform run of time, by introducing a temporality within another, by changing the status of objects and the relationship between exchange signs and art forms – is what Walter Benjamin discovered in his reading of Aragon’s Le Paysan de Paris (Paris Peasant, 1926) which transformed a shop of old walking sticks in the Passage de l’Opera into a mythological landscape and legendary poem. And ‘allegorical’ art, which so many contemporary artists claim, inscribes itself in this long-term filiation.

It is because of this crossing of the borders and status changes between art and non-art that the radical strangeness of the aesthetic object and the active appropriation of the common world have been able to come together and constitute the ‘third way’ of a micro-politics of art, between the opposed paradigms of art becoming life and art as resistant form. This process underpins the performances of critical art, and can help us to understand its contemporary transformations and ambiguities. If there is a political question about contemporary art, it is not to be grasped in the grid of the opposition modern/postmodern. It is in the analysis of the changes affecting this ‘third’ politics, the politics founded on a game of exchanges and displacements between the world of art and that of non-art.

The politics of the mix of heterogeneous elements took a dominant form, from dadaism up to the diverse forms of anti-establishment art in the 1960s: the polemical form. The game of exchanges between art and non-art served to construct collisions between heterogeneous elements, dialectical oppositions between form and content, that the space was allocated for art there discussion in verse on the matter of fine words. Dadaism can other accessories ridiculed the propriety introduction of soup cans and Berlingo’s pretensions to isolation. Words images showed the dark side of projections of homeless figures, expulsion of the poor from public alongside museum works revealing and so on. Heterogeneous collage reveals one world hidden beneath happiness of consumption: marks the apparent serenity of art. Art is the mechanisms of state and market.

This polemical function of the in the legitimation of works, instead of this discourse conceals significant for us to grasp. In 2000, in Paris Noise) put 1970s and contemporaries Martha Rosler’s photomontages from juxtaposing advertising images of the war in Vietnam. Nearby was American happiness. Made by Welles, the Clinton couple, represented a new another kind of wax figure: Origin of the World, 1866), which, organs. The two works played on or greatness and its hidden side: Lewinsky affair was not enough to the Clinton couple. To be precise, witnessing the automatic function of the wax figure that turns the pole little dirty hidden/exposed so always work. But they work by power in general taking the place function is to make us questions delegitimizing the procedure delegitimizing their object.
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between form and content, that themselves denounced social relations and the place was allocated for art there. The sichomitic form that Brecht gave to a discussion in verse on the matter of cauliflowers denounced the hidden interests behind fine words. Dadaist canvases glued with bus tickets, clock parts and other accessories ridiculed the pretensions of an art cut off from life. Warhol’s introduction of soup cans and Brillo boxes to the museum denounced high art’s pretensions to isolation. Wolf Vostell’s blending of celebrity images and war images showed the dark side of the American dream; Krzysztof Wodiczko’s projections of homeless figures onto American monuments denounced the expulsion of the poor from public space; Hans Haacke’s little labels placed alongside museum works revealed them as objects of financial investment, and so on. Heterogeneous collage generally takes the form of a shock, which reveals one world hidden beneath another: capitalist violence behind the happiness of consumption; market interests and violent class struggle behind the apparent serenity of art. Art’s self-criticism thus blended with criticism of the mechanisms of state and market domination.

This polemical function of the shock of the heterogeneous is always mentioned in the legitimation of works, installations and exhibitions. However, the continuity of this discourse conceals significant transformations that a simple example can allow us to grasp. In 2000, in Paris, an exhibition called Bruit de fond (Background Noise) put 1970s and contemporary works on view. Amongst the former were Martha Rosler’s photomontages from the series Bringing the War Home (1967-72), juxtaposing advertising images of domestic American happiness with images of the war in Vietnam. Nearby was another work devoted to the hidden side of American happiness. Made by Wang Du, it comprised two elements: on the left, the Clinton couple, represented as two mannequins from a wax museum; on the other, another kind of wax figure: a sculpture of Courbet’s L’Origine du monde (The Origin of the World, 1866), which, as we know, explicitly presents the female sexual organs. The two works played on the relationship between an image of happiness or greatness and its hidden side of violence or profanity. But the currency of the Lewinsky affair was not enough to confer political stakes to the representation of the Clinton couple. To be precise, currency was of little importance. We were witnessing the automatic functioning of canonical procedures of delegitimation: the wax figure that turns the politician into a puppet; sexual profanation that is the little dirty hidden/exposed secret of all forms of sublimity. These procedures always work. But they work by turning on themselves, like the denigration of power in general taking the place of political denunciation. Or rather, their function is to make us sensitive towards this automatic-ness itself, of delegitimizing the procedures of legitimization at the same time as delegitimizing their object. Humorous stance then replaces provocative shock.
I've chosen this significant example, but you could cite many others that witness, beneath the apparent continuity of mechanisms and of their textual legitimations, the same slide of yesterday's dialectical provocations towards new figures of the composition of the heterogeneous. And you could range these multiple slidings under four major types of contemporary exhibitions: the game, the inventory, the encounter and the mystery.

First of all the game, which is to say a double-game. Elsewhere I have mentioned an exhibition presented at Minneapolis under the title Let's Entertain, and renamed, in Paris, Au-delà du spectacle. The American title already played a double game, winking towards a criticism of the entertainment industry, and also towards pop's denunciation of the separation between high art and a popular culture of consumption. The Parisian title introduced a further turn. On the one hand, the reference to Guy Debord's book [La Société du spectacle] reinforced the rigour of the critique of entertainment. But on the other hand, it recalled that his antidote to spectacle's passivity is the free activity of the game. This play on the titles brings us back, of course, to the undecidability of the works themselves. The menagerie of Charles Ray or the huge football-table of Maurizio Cattelan could indifferently symbolize pop derision, a critique of market entertainment, or the positive power of games. And all the conviction of the exhibition curators was needed in order to prove to us that manga, adverts and disco sounds as reprocessed by the other artists offered us a radical critique of the alienated consumption of leisure by their very reduplication. Rather than a Schillerian suspension of the relations of domination, the games invoked here mark the suspension of meaning in the collages presented. Their value as polemic revelations has become undecidable. And it's the production of this undecidability that is at the heart of the work of many artists and exhibitions. Where the critical artist once painted clashing images of market domination or imperialist war, the contemporary video artist lightly détours video-clips and manga; where giant puppets once made contemporary history into an epic spectacle, balls and toys now 'interrogate' our ways of life. A redoubling of the spectacles, props and icons of ordinary life, flimsily displaced, no longer invites us to read signs in objects in order to understand the jurisdictions of our world. They claim both to sharpen our perception of the play of signs, our consciousness of the fragility of the procedures for the reading of those signs, and our pleasure at playing with the undecidable. The virtue that these artists most willingly reclaim for themselves today is humour; well, humour as a flimsy displacement that it's possible not even to notice in their way of presenting a sequence of signs or an assemblage of objects.

These procedures of delegitimation, passed from a critical to a ludic register, become, if pushed, indistinguishable from those produced by power and the media, or by the market's own for dominant mode of exhibiting confidence on the undecidability of a producer's images or signs. The only remaining undecidability; to suspend, in the consumption of signs, the meaning.

Consciousness of this undecidability brought propositions towards the second heterogeneous objects no longer the undecidability of this shock, objects were interrogated according to summoned to the reverse operate, and seize their collective historic manipulatable signs. Assembling a memory, in a double form. Pipe objects, photographs or simply heads have thus set out to recapitulate displays and diverse installations making displays of any object being introduced into these will welcomed by the sign of a game then walked through a Christian comprising directories from different liked, take off the shelves and buy a sound installation by On Kawara a thousand years gone by. Hans-Jürgen Klein hundred people aged from one David Weiss's display of photos resembling holiday photos from collection of bottles of mineral water.

In this logic, the artist is a collector, witness to a shared potential of objects' and in the way the relationships between the art of the sculptor and the way the relationship between the inventions of the arts of doing world: DIY, collecting, language. The artist takes it upon himself the arts of doing that exist through
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dominant mode of exhibiting commodities, and advertising increasingly plays
on the undecidability of a product's use value and its value as a support for
images or signs. The only remaining subversion is, then, to play on this
undecidability; to suspend, in a society working towards the accelerated
consumption of signs, the meaning of the protocols of reading those signs.

Consciousness of this undecidability favours a displacement of artistic
propositions towards the second form, that of the inventory. The meeting of
heterogeneous objects no longer aims to provoke a critical shock, nor to play on
the undecidability of this shock. The same materials, images and messages that
were interrogated according to the rules of an art of suspicion are now
summoned to the reverse operation: to repopulate the world of things, to
re-seize their collective historical potential that critical art dissolved into
manipulable signs. Assembling heterogeneous materials becomes a positive
memory, in a double form. Primarily it's an inventory of historical traces:
objects, photographs or simply lists of names that witness a shared history or a
shared world. Four years ago in Paris, an exhibition called Volta - Le monde dans
la tete thus set out to recapitulate the twentieth century. Through photographic
displays and diverse installations, it was about gathering experiences, about
making displays of any old objects, names or anonymous faces speak, about
being introduced into these welcoming mechanisms. The visitor was first
welcomed by the sign of a game (Robert Filliou's pattern of multicoloured dice),
then walked through a Christian Boltanski installation, Les Abonnés du téléphone,
comprising directories from different years and countries that you could, if you
liked, take off the shelves and browse on the tables placed at your disposal. Then
a sound installation by On Kawara that: evoked, for him, some of the last forty
thousand years gone by. Hans-Peter Feldmann then presented photographs of
one hundred people aged from one to one hundred years old. Peter Fischli and
David Weiss's display of photographs under vitrines exposed a Visible World
resembling holiday photos from family albums, while Fabrice Hybert showed a
collection of bottles of mineral water, etc.

In this logic, the artist is at once an archivist of collective life and the
collector, witness to a shared ability. Because the inventory, which evidences
the potential of objects' and images' collective history, by bringing closer
the art of the sculptor and that of the rag-and-bone man, shows in this
way the relationship between the inventive gestures of art and the multiplicity
of inventions of the arts of doing and arts of living that constitute a shared
world: DIY, collecting, language games, props for manifestations, etc.
The artist takes it upon himself to make visible, in art's reserved space, these
arts of doing that exist throughout society. Through this double vocation of
the inventory, critical art’s political/polemical vocation tends to become a social/communitarian vocation.

This slippage is shown by the third form. I’ve called it the encounter. You could also call it the invitation. The artist-collector institutes a space of reception to engage the passer-by in an unexpected relationship. Thus Boltanski’s installation invites the visitor to take a directory from the shelves and sit at a table to consult it. A little further along in the same exhibition, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster invited us to take a volume from a pile of pocket books and to sit down and read them on a carpet depicting a desert island typical of children’s dreams. In another exhibition, Rirkrit Tiravanija put at the visitor’s disposal packets of food, camping gas and cooking pans so that he could prepare a Chinese soup for himself, sit down and engage in discussion with the artist or with other visitors. Parallel to these transformations in the exhibition space are many forms of intervention in urban space: a modified sign in a bus shelter transforms the necessity of everyday life into an adventure (Pierre Huyghe); an illuminated text in Arabic or a loudspeaker in Turkish reverses the relations between the local and the foreign (Jens Haaning); an empty pavilion is offered to the social desires of the residents of a neighbourhood (Group A12). Relational art thus intends to create not only objects but situations and encounters. But this too simple opposition between objects and situations operates a short-circuit. What is at stake is the transformation of these problematic spaces that conceptual art had opposed to art’s objects/commodities. Yesterday’s distance towards commodities is now inverted to propose a new proximity between entities, the institution of new forms of social relations. Art no longer wants to respond to the excess of commodities and signs, but to a lack of connections. As the principle theorist of this school writes: ‘by offering small services, the artist repairs the weaknesses in the social bond’.

The loss of the ‘social bond’, and the duty incumbent on artists to work to repair it, are the words on the agenda. But an acknowledgement of this loss can be more ambitious. It’s not only the forms of civility that we will have lost, but the very sense of the co-presence of beings and things that constitutes a world. This is what the fourth type proposes to mend, the mystery. Applying it to cinema, Jean-Luc Godard honoured this category that, since Mallarmé, designates a certain way of linking heterogeneous elements: in the latter, for example, the poet’s thought, the steps of a dancer, the unfolding of a fan, the foam of a wave or the movement of a curtain lifted by the wind; in Godard, the rose of Carmen, a Beethoven quartet, the foam of waves on the beach evoking The Waves by Virginia Woolf, and the surge of bodies in love. This sequence of Prénom Carmen that I’m summarizing really shows the passage from one logic to another. The choice of elements put into relation in effect restores a tradition of détournement: the Andalusian smugglers become crazy terrorists, it is only a plastic rose, and Micaelarias. But the détournement no longer high art. On the contrary, it efficaciously appeals in order to let the Bizet in a Beethoven quartet. It makes gymnastics of images that unites, in space and of bodies. In opposition to the heterogeneity of elements, the marked by antagonisms, mystery. It constructs a game of analogies. The most distant realities appear always be linked by what Godard called ‘Mystery’ was the central concept once again on the agenda. By the way of slightly nauseous forms, like the Wagnerian fantasies of the total war (1997–99). I’m thinking of the mystery which assemblages of objects, installations have, over the last few years, into that of a mystery that bears mentioned the photographs, video Pictures’, presented at the Guggenheim, affirmed contemporary art’s con 1970s as a critique of both artistic – in the image of Vanessa Beecroft’s female bodies in the museum space, Rineke Dijkstra or Gregory Crewdson – undefined spaces, or in Christ’s illuminating walls covered in an perceptual stereotypes, which was different interest in the vague b or real and the symbolic, that fake museum, a video installation by Broom: flames and deluges, slow casting off a ship, simultaneously cycle of birth, life, death and res giving up Isaac Rancière/1/
vocation tends to become a
definition: the Andalusian mountains become a weekend beach; romantic
smugglers become crazy terrorists; the discarded flower of which Don José sings
is only a plastic rose, and Micaela massacres Beethoven instead of singing Bizet
arias. But the détournement no longer has the function of a political critique of
high art. On the contrary, it effaces the picturesque imagery to which the critique
appeals in order to let the Bizet characters be reborn as the pure abstraction of
a Beethoven quartet. It makes gypsies and toreadors disappear in the melting
music of images that unites, in the same breath, the sound of strings, of waves
and of bodies. In opposition to the dialectical practice that accentuates the
heterogeneity of elements to provoke a shock, bearing witness to a reality
marked by antagonisms, mystery emphasises the kinship of the heterogeneous.
It constructs a game of analogies in which they witness a common world, where
the most distant realities appear as if cut from the same sensible fabric and can
always be linked by what Godard calls the 'fraternity of metaphors'.

'Mystery' was the central concept of symbolism. And certainly, symbolism is
once again on the agenda. By that I'm not referring to certain spectacular and
slightly nauseous forms, like the resurrection of symbolist mythology and
Wagnerian fantasies of the total work of art in Matthew Barney's Cremaster cycle
(1997–99). I'm thinking of the more modest, sometimes imperceptible way in
which assemblages of objects, images and signs presented by contemporary
installations have, over the last few years, slid the logic of provocative dissensus
into that of a mystery that bears witness to a co-presence. Elsewhere I have
mentioned the photographs, videos and installations of the exhibition 'Moving
affirmed contemporary art's continuity with an artistic radicality born in the
1970s as a critique of both artistic autonomy and dominant representations. But
- in the image of Vanessa Beecroft's videos presenting nude and inexpressive
female bodies in the museum space, in the photographs of Sam Taylor-Wood,
Rineke Dijkstra or Gregory Crewdson showing bodies of ambiguous identity in
undefined spaces, or in Christian Boltanski's dark room with lightbulbs
illuminating walls covered in anonymous photographs - the interrogation of
perceptual stereotypes, which was always invoked, slid towards a completely
different interest in the vague borders between the familiar and the strange, the
real and the symbolic, that fascinated painters at the time of symbolism,
metaphysical painting and magic realism. However, on the upper level of the
museum, a video installation by Bill Viola was projected onto four walls of a dark
room: flames and deluges, slow processions, urban wanderings, a wake, or
casting off a ship, simultaneously symbolizing the four elements and the whole
cycle of birth, life, death and resurrection. The experimental art of video thus
came to manifest the latent tendency of many mechanisms of today that mimic,
in their own ways, the great frescoes of human destiny that the symbolist and expressionist period had a liking for.

Of course these categorizations are schematic. Contemporary exhibitions and installations confer on the couple "to exhibit/to install" several roles at once; they play on the fluctuating border between critical provocation and the undecidability of its meaning, between the form of an exhibited work and that of the appointed space of interaction. The mechanisms of contemporary exhibitions often cultivate this polyvalence or submit to its effect. The exhibition Void thus presented an installation by Bertrand Lavier, Salle des Martin, which gathered together about fifty paintings, from the collections of provincial museums, that had as their only shared element the name of their author, Martin – the most common surname in France. The initial idea set this installation in relation to a questioning of the meanings of a work and of the signature that is characteristic of conceptual art. But in this new memorial context it took on a new meaning, attesting to the multiplicity of more or less ignored pictorial abilities, and inscribing a lost world of painting in the memory of the century. This multiplicity of meanings attributed to the same mechanisms is sometimes presented as bearing witness to art's democracy, refusing to disentangle a complexity of standpoints and a fluidity of borders that themselves reflect the complexity of a world.

The contradictory attitudes shown by the main aesthetic paradigms today express a more fundamental undecidability about the politics of art. This undecidability is not the effect of a postmodern turn. It is constitutive: aesthetic suspension lets itself be interpreted in two ways. The singularity of art is linked to the identification of its autonomous forms with the forms of life and with possible politics. These possible politics are only ever realized in full at the price of abolishing the singularity of art, the singularity of politics, or the two together. Being conscious of this undecidability today leads to opposed feelings: in some, a melancholy with regard to the shared world that art carried within itself, if this had not been betrayed by political enrolment or commercial compromises; in others, an awareness of its limits, the tendency to play on the limitation of its powers and the very uncertainty of its effects. But the paradox of our present is perhaps that this art, so uncertain of its politics, might be invited to a higher degree of intervention by the very deficit of politics proper. It's as if the shrinking of public space and the effacement of political inventiveness in a time of consensus gave a substitutive political function to the mini-demonstrations of artists, to their collections of objects and traces, to their mechanisms of interaction, to their provocations in situ or elsewhere. Knowing if these 'substitutions' can recompose political spaces, or if they must be content to parody them, is certainly one of the questions of today.
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1 The Junon Ludovisi is a statue described by Schiller in the fifteenth of his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794), and which is key to Rancière's elucidation of the aesthetic regime of art. For a fuller discussion see Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes', New Left Review, March/April 2002. [Translator]
2 Stichomythic, from stichomythia - dialogue in alternate lines of verse, usually in disputation. From Greek drama. [Translator]