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# Designing Dissensual Common Sense: Critical Art, Architecture, and Design in Jacques Rancière's Political Thought

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**ABSTRACT** How can design be socially engaged and politically efficient, as proposed by discourses labeled as critical design? This article introduces a conceptualization and historiography of politically charged design discourse based on philosopher Jacques Rancière's work on the intersections of politics, aesthetics, and critical artistic practices. By focusing especially on Rancière's reading of the genealogy of design from Ruskin to constructivism and the Bauhaus, the article aims to show that there is an important connection between design and politics present in Rancière's thought. Rather than solely revealing the oppressive dimension embedded in designed forms, for Rancière, design is itself a profound process of aesthetic and sensorial

reconfiguration of the way in which we perceive and articulate our communal existence in “the shared material world.” The article suggests that this connection is useful for examining the broader encounter of critical design with political theory.

KEYWORDS: critical design, political design, political theory, Jacques Rancière, aesthetics

### Introduction: From Critical Theory to Critical Design

In recent years, there has emerged a new interest towards the political dimension of design that critically address political and social issues through designed forms (Fuad-Luke 2013; Kimbell 2011; Mazé and Ericson 2011; Julier 2013; Irwin 2015; Pater 2016; van Borries 2016; Manzini 2019; Resnick 2019). Countering what is understood as market-oriented design, design practice is reclaimed with theoretical, political, and philosophical function mediating fundamental concerns about the human condition and ways of being together; issues traditionally associated with political theory and political philosophy (Yaneva 2009; Fry 2011, 2013; Fry, Dilnot, and Stewart 2015; DiSalvo 2012; Willis 2018; Keshavarz 2019; Tassinari and Staszowski 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Such reconsideration of design has taken place especially in the emergence of critical design, first theorized by Dunne and Raby (1999, 2013) and recently revised by Malpass (2017) and Tharp and Tharp (2019), among others. Critical design is an umbrella concept emphasizing the political potentiality of design and hence challenging “narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens about the role products play in everyday life” (Dunne and Raby 2013, 34). It is not limited to a single movement or practice. Instead, it is a “form of socially and politically engaged activity” (Malpass 2017, 6), including a range of socially and politically oriented design approaches, such as “participatory design, co-design, design-activism, feminist design, and, more recently, socially responsive and transition design” (Malpass 2017, 8). Instead of one clear conceptual definition, there exists common ground between overlapping practices, including “speculative design, critical design, design fiction, design futures, antidesign, radical design, interrogative design, design for debate, adversarial design, discursive design, and futurescaping” (Dunne and Raby 2013, 11). To some extent, the emergence of critical design also repeats the discourses of “critical architecture” present from the 1970s onwards, in which architectural design is not only about building but broader speculative and theoretical realm re-examining societal values (Rendell et al. 2007).

The definitions of critical design are theoretically oriented. Recent scholarship has outlined especially the resemblance between “critical design” and “critical theory.” Jeffrey Bardzell and Shaowen Bardzell

have suggested that critical design ought to be explicitly contextualized to a theoretical framework of critical theory because “critical design has unmistakable affinities with it” (Bardzell and Bardzell 2013, 3298). Marjanne van Helvert has stated that “the field of socially committed design would benefit considerably from a more widespread historical awareness and more developed critical theory” (van Helvert 2016, 27). Simon Bowen outlines that “critical theory (via critical design) could enable designers and users to devise products and systems with radically different roles and functions” (Bowen 2010, 1). In these approaches, critical theory is often understood in its broad sense, not limited solely to the Critical Theory of Frankfurt School scholars (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas). Instead, critical theory “includes the Frankfurt School of critical theory and the explosion of critical theory between the 1950s and 1980s, which included semiotics, poststructuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and Marxism” (Bardzell and Bardzell 2013, 3300; see also Dant 2004).

Common to these different approaches labeled as critical theory is that theoretical practice ought not only to reflect or explain society but aim to reveal, criticize, and change the dominant forms of oppressive power structures and hidden ideological frameworks that maintain the status quo. Critical design, in turn, thinks this in relation to design practices contesting power relations, values, and societal norms and hierarchies: to design is to make a critical, projective, and reflexive argument on the construction and delamination of the current state of things and how the world can be thought otherwise throughout design provocations (Bardzell et al. 2012, 289; Prado de O. Martins 2014).

But how should the relationship between critical theory and critical design be theorized given that there also exists multiple historical, theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary differences and concerns between the two? This article proposes one plausible theoretical framework for critical design by examining the relationship between art, politics, and design in Jacques Rancière’s political thought, ranging from industrial design to architecture. Rancière is one of the most-cited contemporary French philosophers and critical political theorists, known especially for his reconsideration of the relationship between art and politics and their critical efficacies. For Rancière, both art and politics have the same function: to critically examine and challenge the sensorial and aesthetic framework of what is considered common, normal, and visible. This involves broad reflexive and interdisciplinary questioning, evaluation, and contestation of what is considered normal status quo and whether it can be thought differently.

In a broad sense, Rancière fits the definition of critical theory as described above. However, his political thought is also considered to offer somewhat more nuanced and reconsidered articulation for the conditions of being critical compared to many other critical theorists. To be critical, according to Rancière, is not limited to revealing

oppressive ideologies and power relations embedded in cultural practices (Rancière 2009b, 25–49; see also Lampert 2019). This is especially an event regarding overlapping discourses between critical theory and critical art. Rancière strongly rejects a definition of critical art as “a type of art that sets out to build awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation” (Rancière 2009a, 45). Such definition suggests that art has the capability of revealing hidden ideological dimensions, power relations, and forms of domination that seduce people to be passive against their interest and, by doing so, raising new awareness that mobilizes alternative modes of collective action. For Rancière, such causal assumption, however, ultimately forecloses a more profound critical dimension of both politics and art as something that cannot be fully calculated in advance (Rancière 2009a, 2009b; see also Lampert 2017, 190–2; Chanter 2017, 115). Instead, for Rancière, “critical art is not so much a type of art that reveals the forms and contradictions of domination as it is an art that questions its own limits and powers, that refuses to anticipate its own effects” (Rancière 2015, 157).

What is the relevance of Rancière’s thought for contemporary politically and socially oriented design studies and critical design practices? The purpose of this article is not to discuss concrete examples of critical design from the point of view of Rancière’s thought or participate in the vivid debate over different strains of critical design in general. Instead, the article aims to show how Rancière’s discussion of design and its political function implies a similar redefinition of critique that is associated with his expansion of critical art. The article further suggests that this might be useful for examining the broader theoretical connection between critical design and critical theory as well. Rather than solely revealing the oppressive dimension embedded in designed forms, for Rancière, design is itself a profound process of aesthetic and sensorial reconfiguration of the way in which we perceive and articulate our communal existence in “the shared material world” (Rancière 2009c, 91).

What is interesting from this perspective is not only direct political outcomes of design but also the process of design itself as a way to produce, reproduce, and contest what is considered common sense in a given community. From this perspective, as the article aims to show, Rancière can be taken as a rare example of a political philosopher and critical theorist directly engaging with design, particularly from a perspective that also acknowledges and affirms design’s inherent and profound critical political agency. The hypothesis of this article is that, by contextualizing, clarifying, and elaborating this demarcation between design and politics revolving around the constitution and contestation of communal existence, a more nuanced understanding of design’s critical potential can be theorized further.

Rancière’s relevance for design theory has been increasingly addressed in recent scholarship. Keshavarz and Mazé (2013) have

suggested that Rancière's theory can help us to think about the role of disagreement instead of consensus as a basis of political activity in socially engaged design practices. Furthermore, with particular focus on Rancière's conceptualization of aesthetics as political activity, Thomas Markussen (2013) has proposed that politically charged "design activism" should be understood as Rancièrian "disruptive aesthetics," meaning a broader aesthetical change and disruption it may provoke. In the context of architectural design and urban planning, Camillo Boano and Emily Kelling (2013, 46) have argued that, to understand how design can be understood as political, it can benefit from Rancière's reading of politics as "invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come". Virginia Tassinari (2018, 255) similarly states that "reading design for social innovation through the eyes of Rancière's idea of aesthetics, allows us to see that design and *politics* have much more in common".

This article aims to push these insights further by arguing that Rancière's demarcations between design and politics need to be contextualized within Rancière's broader historical investigations on what he calls the aesthetic regime of art. Known especially from his historical studies concerning the politics of literature and cinema and reinterpretation of artistic categories such as modernism and the avant-garde, Rancière has also recently engaged in rethinking the historical development of industrial design and architecture from Arts and Crafts to Constructivism, Deutscher Werkbund, the Bauhaus, and beyond (Rancière 2009c, 91–107, 2013a, 133–53, 2017a, 2017b). For Rancière, the aesthetic regime of art does not provide direct models for contemporary critical artistic practices. However, it helps us to further theorize how art and also design are not critical only when directly tackling political, social, or ecological problems; instead, at stake is always broader readjustment of our perception towards the world.

### **Art, Aesthetics, and Politics in Rancière's Thought**

Attempting to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between arts and politics, Rancière has strongly emphasized the aesthetic constitution of politics. Rancière understands politics as an inherently aesthetic matter: politics is about a sensorial construction of what is considered a common world (Rancière 1999, 58). According to many, Rancière's approach has profoundly challenged the understanding of political art, the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and, consequently, the critical efficacies of critical artistic practices over the past decades (see, for example, Erjavec 2015; Hindeliter et al. 2009; Rockhill 2014; Plot 2014; Chanter 2017; Bray 2017; Panagia 2018; Feola 2018).

The emphasis of aesthetics in relation to politics can be traced to Rancière's reworking of German enlightenment philosophy, from William Baumgarten to Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller, considering aesthetics as common sense (*sensus communis*), meaning the

conditions of knowledge of given time and place (Chanter 2017, 101–119; Rockhill 2014, 145). For Rancière, aesthetics

as the system of *a priori* forms determin[es] what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determining the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it. (Rancière 2013b, 8)

In this sense, Rancière continues especially Kantian critical philosophy examining the sensorial construction of the conditions and boundaries of knowledge. Both art and politics aim to unravel these conditions – what can be known, what can be said, what is possible – and ultimately in which ways critical theoretical thought can contribute to challenging and surpassing them. Tina Chanter has argued that, with this reworking of the philosophical concept of aesthetics (how the world can be sensed), Rancière deliberately “radicalizes and historicizes Kant’s metaphysical understanding of how the forms of space and time organize our sensory perception of the world” (Chanter 2017, 106). What is at stake, according to Rancière, is not only the conditions of knowledge but also the constitution of sensible political community in a more profound sense: what is included and what is excluded, what is visible and what is non-visible, what can be said and what is silenced? Rancière refers to this configuration of common sense as the *distribution of the sensible*. It is “a system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it” (Rancière 2013b, 7).

Furthermore, this leads to a very particular demarcation of politics in Rancière’s theory. What Rancière calls distribution of the sensible, “an order of the visible and sayable” (Rancière 1999, 29), is not politics in a sense Rancière understands the concept. Instead, the distribution of the sensible has more in common with what Rancière calls the police. The concept of police, which is not to be restricted only to legal enforcement, deals with governing and other activities (such as parliamentary politics) that maintain the prevailing distribution and consensus. As opposition to police, politics reframes, re-organizes, and redistributes this order, making “visible what had no business being seen” (Rancière 1999, 30). What constitutes politics is hence an activity that creates sensorial dissensus and disagreement to the prevailing distribution of the sensible:

Politics invent new forms of collective enunciation; it re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and invisible. [...] Politics creates a new form, as it were, of dissensual commonsense. (Rancière 2015, 147)



In his more recent work, Rancière has increasingly attempted to think about how artistic practices “intervening in the general distribution of ways of doing and making” (Rancière 2013b, 8) participate in such configuration of what is considered common sense, even if they cannot be directly linked to Rancière’s earlier notions on dissensus and disagreement as to the core of politics. However, there is a similar Kantian definition of aesthetics and critique present in Rancière’s writings on art, which leads him to a detailed examination of various historical relations between art and politics, especially a particular model that he calls the aesthetic regime of art.

In general, Rancière makes a general distinction between three major regimes of art, found in the tradition of Western art. These regimes organize the “forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community” (Rancière 2013b, 8). The first one is called the ethical regime of images, in which art’s relation to society “is a matter of knowing in what way images’ mode of being affects the ethos, the mode of being of individuals, and communities” (Rancière 2013b, 16). Here the political potentiality of art is evaluated only in terms of how it serves the political goals of a given community. Art has didactic and indoctrinates purposes to strengthen the ethos of society. The second regime, the representative regime of art, is based on hierarchy over different forms of art that establish a “clear partition between works of pure art and the ornaments made by the decorative arts” (Rancière 2013b, 16). Art is considered to be a mimetic and imitational form of action and hence also a representation of prevailing social hierarchies. In the aesthetic regime of art, which is the center of Rancière’s analysis, “art no longer occurs via a division of within ways of doing but is based on distinguishing a sensible mode of being” (Rancière 2013b, 18).

The aesthetic regime of art emerges historically in a closer relationship with the political spirit of the French revolution and provides new ways of thinking about aesthetics as a political category; a type of politics that manifests precisely in movements such as modernism and avant-garde (see Rancière 2013b, 25, 2015, 123–41; see also Erjavec 2015; Bray 2017). Here, contrary to the other two major regimes of art, we face the problem that is crucial for Rancière and present virtually in his whole political thought: what could be the critical vocation of aesthetic experience itself beyond direct subordination to external political ideologies, to the *ethos* of a given community? According to Rancière:

Aesthetic experience has a political effect to the extent that the loss of destination it presupposes disrupts the way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations. What it produces is not rhetorical persuasion about what must be done. Nor is it framing of a collective body. It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are ‘equipped’ to adapt to

it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation. However, this political effect occurs under the condition of an original disjunction, an original effect, which is the suspension of any direct relationship between cause and effect. (Rancière 2009b, 72–3)

In the aesthetic regime of art, aesthetic experience has its own political modality. According to Rancière-scholar Devin Zane Shaw, politics in the aesthetic regime of art “seeks to change the sensible fabric of social relations rather than seizing institutional power” (Shaw 2016, 150). Art in the aesthetic regime is not (necessarily) attached to any external political ideology or clear political representation. Instead, the political effects of art are situated in the aesthetical redistribution of what is considered normal, visible, natural, and possible; but only in indirect ways. This is what Rancière refers to as a “founding paradox” of aesthetic regime defining art’s political potentiality (see Rancière 2015, 141; see also Lampert 2017). In the aesthetic regime, “art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy and thrives on that ambiguity” (Rancière 2015, 141). A majority of Rancière’s recent work can be characterized as an attempt to mediate this paradoxical interplay and its historical variances in different forms of art (Rancière 2013a). This attempt also involves Rancière’s lesser-known reading of the history of political design from the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, establishing “the paradoxical genealogy leading from Ruskin to the Werkbund and Bauhaus” (Rancière 2013a, 153n) that will be analyzed further in the following section.

### **Architecture and Design in the Aesthetic Regime of Art**

In this section, I discuss in a more detailed manner the formulation of Rancière’s aesthetico-political genealogy for thinking about the relationship between art and politics.<sup>2</sup> I focus especially on Rancière’s notions regarding the emergence of modern industrial design and architecture in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This genealogy is elaborated especially in Rancière’s *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2013), in which Rancière discusses design and architecture in the aesthetic regime of art from John Ruskin and William Morris to constructivism and the Bauhaus. For Rancière, this now-canonical tradition of socially engaged architecture and design (see also van Helvert 2016) should be understood in keen relation with a simultaneous aesthetic revolution in forms. Here, the critical vocation of design – its attempt to make a political difference – is intertwined with broader aesthetic emancipation: new sensorial communal existence, new perceptions, and new visions (Rancière 2017a; Rancière 2017b).<sup>3</sup>

Rancière begins by examining the political and social aspects of John Ruskin (1819–1900), an English reformer of applied arts, whose influence played an important role in the development of the Arts and Crafts movement, and also the work of German industrial designer Peter Behrens (1868–1940), German Werkbund (German Association of Craftsmen), and the Bauhaus. According to Rancière, Ruskin’s aesthetical thinking illustrates that, for design to be critical, it needs not only to be committed but also create a certain aesthetic counterpart towards the existing society. Aesthetics is a way to mediate broader social concerns of morality and humanity. This is evident in Ruskin’s suggestion that the designer’s social and moral responsibility is to stand against the ugliness of early industrial production that also resulted in the decreased quality of everyday objects. Ruskin’s approach was hence not limited to designing better objects in terms of quality but to think anew how these objects also participate in societal dreams and utopian aspirations for a different society. This is understood as an aesthetical reconfiguration inventing new “modes of social existence” (Rancière 2013a, 143), in which the aesthetic side of design appears as “the question of expressive supplement” that is formulated in keen interplay with the attempts to improve the material conditions of living (Rancière 2013a, 143).

In Ruskin’s formula, and its later development in the work of William Morris (1834–1896) and the Arts and Crafts movement, the political aspect of the design is not primarily committed to forms of political art as such (art for the people), but instead forms of art that are aesthetically distanced from the primary conditions of living. The design of new objects and spaces for new ways of living also makes visible a new utopian vision of the world that counters the prevailing distribution of the sensible. According to Rancière, this constitutes the original “politics of social art”: a designer’s social responsibility is not to supply the existing social needs but instead to think beyond prevailing societal conjuncture and provide a counter-vision, an aesthetic configuration of what is considered possible (Rancière 2013a, 135).

Furthermore, Rancière compares this Ruskinian paradigm of social art to Peter Behrens, who is often characterized as the pioneer of modern industrial design. Even though it is often suggested that the emergence of modern design, as developed by Behrens, subordinates aesthetics to the logic of industrial production, when it comes to the broader conceptualization of aesthetico-political social art, that is the relationship between art and society, we see undisputed Ruskinian lineages in Behrens’ work that associate the political function of new industrially produced objects, “suited to a practical need”, to broader aesthetical questions concerning the ways of “inhabiting the world”, understood as aesthetical or sensible revolution (Rancière 2013a, 148).

Another example of this connection between aesthetics and politics in design is present in Rancière’s *The Future of the Image*, which

addresses the unexpected common ground between Behrens and French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarmé (1842–1898). What is the common ground between these two very different artists is that the potential political efficacy associated with their work is inseparable from the project of inventing new forms, symbols, and other qualities often associated with style and artistic form:

Between Mallarmé and Behrens, between the pure poet and the functionalist engineer, there, therefore, exists this singular link: the same idea of streamlined forms and the same function attributed to these forms to define a new texture of communal existence. (Rancière 2009c, 97)

The redefinition of forms, in Mallarmé's case the development of new symbolic poetry and in Behrens' case the development of the rational language of modern design, can be understood as attempts to expand artistic vocabulary towards modernist forms (see Ross 2010, 151). At the same time, however, new forms are also politically charged reactions against the previous values transmitted by the old forms. This sensible revolution is not inseparable from the ethical, social, and political function of modern design to engage with the creation of a new world. As such, it "might lead us to reassess the dominant paradigms of the modernist autonomy of art and of the relationship between art forms and life forms" (2009c, 103).

In Rancière's recent work, this paradoxical coexistence of these opposite ways to think about the social impact of design is discussed, especially with references to Russian Constructivism (Rancière 2017a, 2017b). Here a good example is artist and designer El Lissitzky (1890–1941), whose design seems to manifest the type of politically charged design understood as an interplay between the creation of new autonomous forms and their simultaneous engagement with societal demands. In particular, Lissitzky's famous collection of paintings, prints, and architectural drawings created during 1919–1927, known as the *Proun* project (translated as "project for the affirmation of the new"), offers a way to think about the relationship between these two different stances.

In *Proun*, Lissitzky simultaneously follows the formal experiments of Suprematist painters such as Kazimir Malevich to discover new conceptualizations and visualizations of artistic forms and also associates it to the political rethinking of society undertaken during the Russian revolution. Resisting, however, the straightforward Constructivist tendency to think that art should construct a new communist society in the literal sense, Lissitzky comes up with a slightly modified framing of political design that does not stress the direct link between design and new society but instead constructs "a sort of sensible landscape of communist life" (Rancière 2017b, 265). Lissitzky's project for the "affirmation of the new" was hence, first and foremost, an aesthetical exploration of possibilities embodied in new forms and examination of new visions that would resonate with

certain qualities associated with communism rather than attempting to directly engage with the construction of the party version of communism (Rancière 2017a, 609; see also Margolin 1997).

For Rancière, a similar idea is found also in the designers of Western Europe, regardless of their “submission to the principles of capitalist rationality” (Rancière 2009c, 101). Rancière maintains that, for example, the project of the Bauhaus ought to be understood as a combination between new sensorium of life and new rationalized ways of living:

The new life announces itself as the concordance of vitality, geometric form, functionality, and technology. Not incidentally did the great revolutionary moment coincide with the great moment of the design of buildings, utensils, and posters, which was also the great moment of cubist, abstract, futurist, formalist, and constructivist experiments in art. In all those artistic, industrial, and social experiments there is a common aesthetic concern – the concern for a culture of use that would overcome the separation between the economic rationality of a production of things oriented toward the abstract production of exchange value and the artistic production of works of art destined to their own perfection. [...] In that context the same idea of form could unite the apparently diverging practices of industrial rationalization, abstract painting, functional design, new architecture, or advertising. (Rancière 2017a, 608)

New design forms introduce dissensual common sense to the prevailing distribution of the sensible “without necessarily being tied to idea of radical revolution” (Rancière 2017b, 264). The new forms and types associated with modern design are not directly political by nature, but they nevertheless can be understood as a reaction to earlier forms of living and the design of an object that also entailed the previous consideration of what is considered normal. Here the “paradigm of social art”, developed especially in industrial and architectural design, appears for Rancière not only as an instrument for external political goals but also more broadly as an attempt to give a new aesthetic constitution for political communities to come. From this perspective, both design and politics are about an alteration of what is considered common in given space-time conjuncture. Redistribution of the sensible is also the process of redesigning the sensible, a constant process of renegotiating and redistributing the societal norms and forms.

### **Designing Dissensual Commonsense: On the Surfaces of Design**

For Rancière, the consubstantiality of art and politics in the aesthetic regime of art is not based on direct and clear-cut relationships but their multiple productive tensions (Rockhill 2014, 164). Art tangles with politics by making visible something that contradicts and

reconfigures what is considered a normal state of things (Rancière 2015, 148). In this sense, Rancière asserts that the efficacy of “critical” or “political” art (words often synonymous for Rancière) is not limited to resisting the hidden ideologies that prevent us from seeing the “real world”:

art does not become critical or political by ‘moving beyond itself,’ or ‘departing from itself,’ and intervening in the ‘real world.’ There no ‘real world’ that functions as the outside of art. Instead, there is a multiplicity of folds in the sensory fabric of the common, folds in which outside and inside take on a multiplicity of shifting forms, in which the topography of what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’ are continually criss-crossed and displaced by the aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics. There is no ‘real world.’ Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. (Rancière 2015, 156)

The attempt to return to the real world and real needs is in many respects the prime story of the history of political design, including seminal works like Ken Garland’s “First things first manifesto” for graphic design (1964), Wolfgang Haug’s *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* (1971), and Viktor Papanek’s *Design for the Real World* (1971), addressing ethical, ecological, and humanitarian question through design (see Clarke 2013; van Helvert 2016). However, as we saw in the previous section, Rancière’s approach seems to offer another historical pathway of art and design becoming critical.

Furthermore, such emphasis can be approached also from a contemporary perspective. Here a good example is a recent discussion between architectural theorist Mark Foster Gage and Rancière that addresses the question of aesthetical critique as the primary condition for politics related to architectural design. Regarding this, an important question is whether political architecture is about critical contributions towards the prevailing power structures and existing social relations, or whether it is about producing new sensorial organization and communal existence throughout the design process itself (Rancière 2019, 14). For Rancière, the dichotomy produces two contrasting critical modes of action embedded in architectural forms: one based on an idea that architecture can make one aware; and the second on broader subversion throughout architectural design itself.

As Gage paraphrases the first position during the discussion, it “is an ingrained critical theory stance within architecture that insists that political action is contingent on awareness, and that architecture can make one aware” (quoted in Rancière 2019, 16–17), present today, for example, in urban artistic interventions that aim to produce plausible political effects from above by making residents aware of their environment and its decay. Here, architecture and design are utilized to raise awareness about segregation and poverty on behalf of the

passive residents (Rancière 2019, 20–1). From this perspective, architecture needs to cause plausible political effects calculated in advance and from above rather than examining how politics is itself shaped throughout the design process itself.

However, Rancière maintains that there exists a second, more complex, subversive design strategy, based on constant reconfiguration and estrangement of the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2019, 15–16). Here it is the (architectural) design itself that critically generates politics in the sense Rancière understands politics, from a broader aesthetical basis. Here design not only makes one aware of direct forms of social, economic, and political oppression. Instead, it is critical in a different manner, by becoming, according to Rancière, “an instrument for the reform of perception” (Rancière 2019, 18). From this perspective “architecture is not only supposed to construct units for inhabiting, but really constructing new senses of seeing, working, acting, and feeling”. This is where it “meets the critical tradition and notably the concept of estrangement”, understood as “freeing the object from all the mechanisms of ordinary perception” (Rancière 2019, 18).

This difference between awareness and aesthetical estrangement is crucial for Rancière and it ultimately also explains why Rancière often detaches himself from the general framework of critical theory (such as the Frankfurt School) and its implications for critical art. For Rancière, both critical art and critical theory often operate within the existing distribution of the sensible by revealing its hidden contradictions and biases: social contradictions of prevailing distribution might be revealed but they are still statements made within that distribution (Rancière 2019, 18). However, for Rancière, the inherent aesthetical emancipation present in the meaning of estrangement in the aesthetic regime of art suggests an entire departure from existing aesthetical distribution. Instead of thinking that there exists inherently critical or political artistic or design practices that can lead to the direct revelation of oppressive power relations and ideologies, design as a critical practice is to be understood here as a constant subversive, subtractive, and estranging process challenging the previous distribution of the sensible.

From this perspective, design practices, for Rancière (2019, 18), do not become critical in a sense that they “point towards social contradictions”. Instead, the critique elaborated here is about “drawings and narratives about space” (Rancière 2019, 17) that can expand political imagination over the shared communal space and various political subjectivization embedded in it. Not limited to only raising awareness in the forms of political image-making, didactic agitation, or propaganda, these drawings and narratives have substantial political agency and roles in framing and deciding what is included and what is excluded by a given community. This is what Rancière has called the surface of design:

By drawing lines, arranging words or distributing surfaces, one also designs divisions of communal space. It is the way in which, by assembling words or forms, people define not merely various forms of art, but certain configurations of what can be seen and what can be thought, certain forms of inhabiting the material world. (Rancière 2009c, 91)

Design, from clothing to urban planning, produces an idea of a shared symbolic community with forms of inclusion and exclusion and forms of normal types and abnormal types. The argument is, of course, far from unique. Recently, especially feminist and decolonial design scholarships have constantly suggested that the symbolic forms of power participate in the aesthetical constitution of unwritten hierarchies, assumptions, and prevailing political registers. Societal norms, related to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class relations, are constructed, performed, and reinforced, among other things, by the design of objects, spaces, and user interfaces. It does not take long to find examples of gendered product language, exoticized or colonized objects, class distinctions by taste, buildings and spatial plans that are not accessible or safe to everyone equally (Schultz et al. 2018; Ehrnberger, Räsänen, and Ilstedt 2012; Isaksson et al. 2017).

Understood from this perspective, politics related to design is not limited to political oppression and exceptions but also includes what is considered to be normal and natural (see Kiem 2013). As Matt Malpass has also outlined, critical approaches in design have “defamiliarizing and estranging effect in order to dissociate the users from their normal modes of use. It is the potential of critical design to make things unfamiliar and strange that allows us to start thinking about how we might use and design objects differently” (Malpass 2017, 63). Such defamiliarizing design introduces a new sensorial display of a particular community with its shared common political conditions.<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective, it is perhaps possible to propose a Rancièrian approach to critical design in which what is at stake is a sensorial interpretation of the world throughout the designed object, spaces, and surfaces that contribute to “an aesthetic and political division of a shared world” (Rancière 2009c, 107). By considering design as a constant process of the way in which societal values, norms, and common places are negotiated, design not only reveals political and social contradictions and disagreement but also departs from the sensible landscape that constitutes such contradictions.

## Conclusion

The emergence of critical design has brought social and political dimensions to the forefront of design studies and theory. However, critical design practices have been also criticized for being elitist, academic, and privileged (Tonkinwise 2014). Additionally, it is suggested that such an elitist position is made possible precisely due to



the language borrowed from critical theory, including, for example, the patronizing view of treating people as passive and ignorant that need to be activated by raising awareness about their oppression (Bowen 2010; Prado de O. Martins 2014). While I consider these reservations extremely important, it is additionally important to emphasize that there are multiple ways to understand critique in critical theory, especially if it is approached from a broad perspective that might also respond to such concerns.

This article has provided a slightly renewed theoretical framework by discussing the historical and theoretical grounding of critically oriented design from the point of view of Jacques Rancière's political thought. Particularly, the article has focused on Rancière's way of thinking about the aesthetic and political registers substantially intertwined in his understanding of critical art. This is present also in Rancière's discussion on the critical function of design. Rancière's definition of critical artistic practices is not limited to speaking for the passive people or revealing the real world in front of them. Consequently, what constitutes the potential "critical" element in design according to Rancière is not limited to direct revelations of social and political inequalities for passive audiences but also extends to looking at how these inequalities are constructed through different sensory experiences and how it is possible to subvert them altogether.

The purpose of this article is not to suggest that thinking through Rancière's thought would be the only plausible way to theorize design's social and political efficacy. What is primarily required is approaches that aim to surpass the primacy of theoretical position and instead deploy it as a practice in different contexts by acknowledging the design practice itself rather than subordinating it to theoretical and textual discourse (Bardzell et al. 2012, 289; Malpass 2017, 11). However, regarding the problem of moving from theory to practice, Rancière's reflection on design might give some further guidance. To paraphrase Rancière's vocabulary on critical art, what is of interest here is not to look at how new practices provide direct antagonizing tactics, but instead to look at how "they use those fragile surfaces to compose a proposition on what it is that is given to see to us and an interrogation into the power of representation" (Rancière 2015, 157).

## Notes

1. Here especially Tony Fry's and Carlo DiSalvo's contributions can be taken as examples for staging more substantial connection between politically oriented design practice and political theory. Drawing especially on the work of political theorist Carl Schmitt, Fry (2011) attempts to rethink design practices not based on how design may collide with the political sphere or how it might become a useful instrument for political goals, but as an activity that can be considered inherently political for framing, deciding, and designing what is brought into being and what is excluded by a given

community. In a similar way, Carl DiSalvo's *Adversarial Design* has become an important theoretical source. By utilizing the antagonist political theory of Chantal Mouffe, DiSalvo argues that design can contest the idea of *politics* as structures of organizational governing and administration by introducing *political* practices that are understood in Mouffe's theory as resistance to organizational politics. Applying this to design theory, DiSalvo suggests that the political dimension of design lies in creating antagonistic "spaces of confrontation" (DiSalvo 2012, 5).

2. The concept of genealogy is used here in a manner associated especially with Michel Foucault's readings of the historical construction of knowledge and modes of thought. Rancière has himself stated that his method of thinking the relationship between art and politics "is no doubt my own way of translating and appropriating for my own account the genealogical thought of Foucault – his way of systematizing how things can be visible, utterable, and capable of being thought." However, Rancière also states that, compared to Foucault, he is "more sensitive to crossings-over, repetitions, or anachronisms in historical experience. [...] So that where Foucault thinks in terms of limits, closure, and exclusion, I think in terms of internal division and transgression" (Rancière et al. 2000, 13; see also Rockhill 2014, 145–53).
3. The argument is of course not unique as such. In design theory especially Victor Margolin has argued that what is at stake in the avant-gardist design in Russian Constructivism and later in "German constructivism" in the Bauhaus was a struggle for utopia promoted by two interlinked revolutions: one revolutionizing the artistic practices and the definition what is art, and the second attempting to put art into the utopian building of new society (Margolin 1997, 3). For a discussion of "beauty-in-use" in design history, see also Tonkinwise (2003).
4. Here an interesting point of reference is an emerging critical design practice called norm critical design (normkritisk design), developed by critical design scholars focusing on gender (Ehrnberger, Räsänen, and Ilstedt 2012; Isaksson et al. 2017). Putting special focus to artistic work, exhibitions, and theoretical discourses, norm critical design practice examines how design displays and disciplines societal hierarchies, norms, and power relations and also critically contests them. From this perspective, norm critical approaches to design problematize "what is seen as being (ab)normal, permitted and prohibited. Further, it concerns who is considered as being 'us' and 'the others' and what expectations and characteristics that are associated with different groups such as 'women' and 'men'" (Isaksson et al. 2017, 236).

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