

○ VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2, 2009

## Queer Aesthetics

**Daniel Williford**

University of California, Los Angeles

*'Queer Aesthetics' argues for a mode of aesthetic enunciation based on the 'promiscuous image.' It reads Rancière's theory of the image in the aesthetic regime of the arts as a mechanism of discourse that is central to the process by which Art must distinguish itself as such. The 'image unbound' is a symptom of what Rancière describes as the disease of democracy, where all things are equally able to be substituted for one another. As in politics, the egalitarian threat whereby art and life can be confused must be checked through mechanisms of ordering logics that keep things in their place. The essay understands the image as both the function of an 'order of things' – but one which fails to contain its excess meaning in a single 'aesthetic enunciation' – and it reads a contemporary photo by artist David LaChapelle as demonstrating a queer aesthetic that portrays the promiscuous image of art.*

*'The manifestation of politics only occurs via specific acts of implementation, and political subjects forever remain precarious figures that hesitate at the borders of silence maintained by the police.'*

*-The Politics of Aesthetics (Rancière, 2006: 90)*

*'I never realized that people would receive [my look] as art. I just thought that it was good grooming habits.'*

*-Amanda Lepore (Lafreniere, 2006)*

## The queer aesthetic dimension

Walter Benjamin's founding essay on art and mechanical reproducibility makes a troubling assertion about the link between

politics and aesthetics. Advances in technology detached modern artworks from the aura of a unique art-object, Benjamin argues, offering an alternative to the fascist perversion of 'art for art's sake,' within which the technology of war was a *coercive* aesthetic experience – mankind experiences its own annihilation as 'a supreme aesthetic pleasure' (Benjamin, 2008: 42). 'Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism,' Benjamin concludes. 'Communism replies by politicizing art' (Benjamin, 2008: 42). In critically encapsulating the significance of the mechanical production of art, Benjamin expresses an axis of politics and art on which each is distinct from the other. Politics can use the principals of art just as art can participate in political discussions. Critical debates over politics and art depend upon understanding Benjamin's separation in order to better understand how political regimes aestheticize the mechanisms of their power and how art can be politically efficacious. Rancière reframes this debate entirely when he asserts that political discourse participates in a basic ordering of the population that is primarily aesthetic. Rancière interrogates the way that art and literature of the past few centuries has been periodized around a concept of modernism, which disguises a major shift in a politico-aesthetic way of seeing/doing/being in the world towards which Benjamin gestures. Further, Rancière explores the use of photography as enabling a new way of seeing the relationship of artist and subject, art and non-art (Rancière, 2009a: 15). Rancière's theory of 'the aesthetic regime of the arts' remaps visual and literary culture by undermining the distinction between *acts* of politics and *modes* of aesthetics. The stakes of this reconfiguration are stark in an analysis of those aesthetic modes and expressions that cultivate an ethics of ambiguity, whereby mechanisms of representation, such as 'the image,' are privileged when they create rather than close the distance between an artistic construct and the truth of things. What I will call 'queer aesthetics' constructs an ethics of ambiguity and artificiality in order to de-privilege the representation of 'things as they are' and to instead suggest that all representation shows 'things as they should be.' Categories of art are, after all, categories of fiction, or artificial constructs that are not true. Queer aesthetics puts into play assumptions of the real and true in order to suggest possibilities for reimagining the social world.

For Rancière, politics, like art, centers on the possible ways that the world can be configured and represented. Politics is a disruptive act of re-configuring the world in terms of what can be seen, said, and done. As such, it rarely happens, since most of the time the actions of government maintain the stability of the dominant order (under the guise of keeping 'order' as such). Similarly, self-declared 'political art' rarely enacts politics. Any aesthetic act is political when it effects a reordering of the social world. Rancière's political writings make interventions at the level of 'representation' as an aesthetic mechanism, whether challenging the tradition of Althusserian Marxist science in which philosophers must argue on behalf of the ignorant poor who cannot see outside of the system in which they are trapped, or theorizing a kind of politics that resists essentialist notions of 'the

people.’ His analysis of art, film, and literature operates at this same level, since ways of representing populations happen among and between discourses, none of which stay within stable boundaries. Fiction, painting, philosophy, and political theses all include types of representation that partake of and participate in the ordering of the visible, livable, social world. When texts don't stay within the boundaries of their fields, when they wander, they threaten to confuse categories and incite questions about ‘the world as it is.’ Rancière's theory of the image is, I argue, a theory of textual promiscuity, which is central to a specifically queer aesthetics. Much of Rancière's work on art and politics engages implicitly with traditions of queer art and queer representation. Queer aesthetics make use of the ambiguities that temper the politics of representation and bring about new possibilities for, as Rancière would have it, ‘the distribution of the sensible world.’

I will take up Rancière's understanding of ‘texts’ and ‘images’ as aesthetic modes and mechanisms, respectively, which cannot be bound to a medium or genre – since we might read as a text any cultural product (advertisement, film, poem, speech) and we might see a particular image or figure move across texts (here invented, there appropriated; here vilified, there idealized). But I will resist seeing the proliferation of the image as a characteristic of postmodernism, merely. In his forthcoming book *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, chapter titles such as ‘Politics of Aesthetics’ and ‘Aesthetics as Politics’ suggest that Rancière's might follow other post-Marxist theorists in asserting that political theory now must contend with a world saturated by the commodity (2009b). His efforts are not, however, towards purifying the two spheres, nor does he insist on blurring the distinction until art and politics are one in the same; instead, he tries to articulate the assumptions that are common to both in a given expression at a given time in a given place. For Rancière aesthetics is the study of the formative logics of a particular aesthetic enunciation and the regimes of being, doing or saying within which it is recognized. The common social world in which people are identifiable to one another and in which people speak, act, and do things is first a sensible world, that is, a world of the senses (Chambers, 2005). While Rancière discusses, separately, a ‘politics of aesthetics’ and an ‘aesthetics of politics,’ there is, in any political gesture, an assumption of the perceptible world in which the sensible social is ordered based on some sort of logic, be it a totalitarian regime or a government of, by and for the people; it is, therefore, an aesthetic gesture (Rancière, 2009b). And any aesthetic production takes place and takes part in a sensible social world through which it is perceptible; it therefore is only possible through a social order that is political (Rancière, 1999: 58). Rancière refers to this ordering logic as the distribution or partition of the sensible. So while one's first critique of Rancière might be on the order of a deficiency of attention to his task – when he so readily moves from writing social history to political theory to philosophy to literary criticism to film theory to art theory – one quickly comes to understand that to the extent that disciplines are a form of partitioning fields of study and roles of proper

authority, his intellectual promiscuity is a requirement and effect of his critical inquiry (Dasgupta, 2008: 71).

Within disciplines, an important way of ordering cultural productions is through historical periods. Rancière's recent work in art theory has criticized theories of modernism which tend to both narrativize failed movements and 'ends' ('the end of grand narratives,' 'the end of the image,' etc) while at the same time positing a teleology that 'explains away' subversive moments in art. Postmodernism might be understood as the break from a long tradition of understanding any 'modern art' as complicit in bringing about a new world. Modernity has been discussed for centuries as either a coming into being of a radically new social world or the failure of those modern moments of the recent past to make any clean break. Postmodernist expressions tend to insist not only on that failure but also on the naivete of its underlying sentiment, and to mock the latter criticism for believing, still, in the potential efficacy of modernism. This is not to say that theories of postmodernity in the latter decades of the twentieth century were not themselves motivated by a belief in thinking through new possibilities to come, but that those possibilities would have to come out of the recognition of the failure of modernity rather than in renewing it in earnest. Twentieth-century critical theory is often marked by melancholy, failure, subjectivization, disease, systemic ills, entrapment, and the end of things. It is a 'post-' world that must make use of advanced forensics to investigate criminal acts and must make novel use of the materials of wrecked or abandoned scenes (Dasgupta, 2008: 73). Rancière locates this tone of 'nihilist wisdom' in the post-Marxist critique of the failure of Marxism to lead to revolution; he is concerned that the critique intends to arrest the idea of emancipation. 'But nihilist wisdom does not merely give a phantasmagorical view of our world ... It also pictures the law of domination as a force that permeates any will to do anything against it. Any protest is a performance, any performance is a spectacle, any spectacle is a commodity, such is the grounding thesis of this post-Marxist and post-situationist wisdom' (Rancière, 2006b).

Theories of postmodernism and postmodern art frequently portray a world where even genuine efforts, such as a protest, are made ironic by the debris of consumer culture that they seem never to be able to escape (Rancière, 2008). The possibility of revolution and emancipation is past, and even the most radical thinker or the angriest protester is disempowered inside the machine. Rancière is not interested in theorizing the subject or power relations. But this does not mean he is not interested in people or power. Within a certain framework of the political an understanding of the 'aesthetical dimension' of politics is the way by which the egalitarian assumption of democracy is re-inscribed as a harmonious community of consensual subjects. The aesthetical dimension is the way in which democracy is 'acted out' on the political stage. But since democracy can never be achieved as a form of government, it can only be staged in just such a way, which entails a portioning out of roles that allows the scene of democracy to be brought to life. To analyze subjects in

relation to power can assume that the agency of the subject comes out of a certain individual subjectivity that comes to be defined in myriad ways through power relations. This is not wrong, but Rancière is interested in a different understanding of the political subject that speaks to that hated, feared, dangerous 'unconditional character' of democracy: its 'indifference to difference' (Rancière, 2009c: 276-8). Subjectivity is the logic of distinction that attempts to correct the substitutability of anyone with anyone. A democratic political subject is, then, not a subjectivity but a political capacity: a capacity of anyone to 'act as if' they are on the stage of politics, to 'act as if' they have a part (Rancière, 2004b: 11-13).

### **The image in the aesthetic regime of the arts**

The supposed 'new' (read modernist) impulses of twentieth century art and literature, Rancière shows us, first appear in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature. The aesthetic regime is a way of doing art that requires a reinterpretation of the political/social world based on the destruction of hierarchies of genre, subjects, and language appropriate to literature and the visual arts. Common, everyday life could be represented indiscriminately and without a moral imperative; forms from different time periods and different social classes could coexist inexplicably. He locates this shift in, for example, the work of British Romantic poets and French realists, and argues against the supposed 'modernist break' by showing that the aesthetic expression of modern life is the new form of art that enabled the work of Baudelaire, Proust, Woolfe, Warhol, and Godard (Rancière, 2006c and 2004). There is not a linear or harmonious trajectory across communities of artists in the aesthetic regime, but the Romantic poets 'common language' and Flaubert's 'subtle innumerable embraces' required a reordering in the distribution of the sensible and a new understanding of the possibilities of art and life. Indeed, there was no distinction between the two: any everyday life could be the subject of art (Rancière, 2008c). These possibilities of representation had, at the same time, to be sublimated to art or to aesthetics in order that art and life not become so confused that art ceased to exist. The critique of the vulgarity of the representation of common people and common objects comes from the disgust with the possibility that people of lower orders will be treated as equal to everyone else, thereby undermining refined beauty with something gross and thus disrupting the harmony of order that comes when things are in their proper place.

Within the aesthetic regime, new technologies of narrative or of image-making signal that ways of portraying the world participate in the construction of the visible/thinkable world. In 'Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed,' Rancière analyzes a number of texts that take part in the aesthetic regime of the arts and locates *Madame Bovary* as an early example of the shift toward a new regime that produced a literature that was 'a new art of writing' (Rancière, 2008b: 237). It is characteristic of this regime to posit that the subject of art no longer

would follow from its form, breaking from the *representative regime*. *Madame Bovary* was controversial for its seeming lack of point, where instead of writing a story about a figure of history or a social allegory, it portrays the common and banal through poetic language. It was a moment that instigated the anxiety of what counted in the sphere of art and what the social implications of turning non-art into art. The anxiety persists in Wordsworth's mad mother, Duchamp's fountain and Warhol's soup can. For Flaubert, it was an expression of 'art for art's sake,' where art had no imperative to reveal anything other than the aesthetic experience of the common world. That Flaubert did not signal a moral condemnation of the sensuous Emma Bovary furthered an association of vulgar realism with social corruption (Rancière, 2008b: 235-8).

Complicit in this new realist aesthetics was the political efficacy of the aestheticization of common objects and anonymous people. Any thing or person always exceeded him or her or itself through the mechanisms of art that re-imagined the world by re-imagining it in the work of art. The aesthetic regime of the arts is announced by the image unbound: the disordering effect of egalitarian democracy that introduces social angst when hierarchies are obliterated and things and people do not keep to their specific task dictated by their specific position. Literature 'is the voice and frame of modern anxiety,' it is 'the difference between two equivalences,' 'literature is the true life' (Rancière, 2008b: 245). The writers who take part in the new art of writing display symptoms of a 'disease of democracy,' allowing any subject to be the subject of art, and yet they elect themselves as the 'healthy schizophrenic' able to rationally order impersonal sensory events. The writers are those who can contain and consolidate true life into the domain of literature and thus construct themselves as its author. They resist falling into true schizophrenia. This is what is at stake in Huysmans' *À Rebours*, Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. In each, the author attempts to construct him or herself as the healthy schizophrenic who can portray the threat of the temptation to confuse art and real life 'singled out in one character and sentenced to death' (Rancière, 2008b: 240). Woolf, however, is only able to conclude that the writer as healthy schizophrenic is an impossible figure. Her schizophrenic character Rhoda, according to Rancière, 'dreams of breaking the "fences" of individual subjectivity and embracing the haecceities of impersonal life' (Rancière, 2008b: 248). She, too, is sentenced to death – she dies in a single sentence that has no story but is merely a speech act that announces her as dead. Killing off the schizophrenic who suffered from a dream of free will that only comes when the fiction of individuality is destroyed did not, however, save the artist (Rancière, 2008b: 248). This is the paradox of art: in order to reorder the sensible world and to introduce new possibilities in the ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of saying that are possible in it, its aesthetic enunciations must make use of the same ordering logics that foreclose 'new possibilities of life.' In this way, it is always an act of violence that, for example, differentiates and individualizes the author as such through diagnosing the radical trace of democracy – the

'indifference to difference' – as a disease in a character who then must suffer a 'literary death.'

To negotiate the authorial paradox through the violent act of reinscribing the ordering logics of genre need not be the only way to position the image of art. To exploit this paradox might be to emphasize the ambiguity inherent in 'imageness,' even as it positions the author and the subject of a work in a less certain position in relation to the work of art. Foucault has pointed out that the aesthetic philosophy of the modern artist tries to escape the 'blackmail of enlightenment' by the same logic that would create an 'authoritarian alternative.' The dandy of the nineteenth century, for Foucault, exemplifies an aesthetics of ambiguity: 'The dandy combines the indolent and the fashionable with the pleasure of causing surprise in others while never showing any himself' (Foucault, 1984: 40-43). There is a queer aesthetics that has a sense of the history of *aesthetic ambiguity* as the site of new possibilities of social experience. As with Oscar Wilde, whose social critique through Dorian Gray's many ambiguous 'sins' was effectively used to accuse him of crimes against nature, this guarantees nothing good. Nonetheless, aesthetic ambiguity is the site of a certain politics of aesthetics. The promiscuous text or the excess meaning of the image hint at *the instability of any given distribution of the sensible*. The political force of queer aesthetics lies not in a specific announcement but in an effort that keeps ambiguity at play in relation to social subjectivity, or perhaps even in an effort that merely remembers that aesthetic ambiguity is *sometimes possible*.

### **The promiscuous text: reading ambiguity**

One of the queerest images I have seen – or rather struggle to see – is a portrait of transgender performer Amanda Lepore by fashion/celebrity photographer David LaChapelle. LaChapelle's images are usually recognizable as commentary on the extremes and excesses of the celebrity culture in which they take part: they are all bright colors and shiny textures, populated by a famous face or a vacuous model coated in orange fake-tan or accentuated with plastic diamonds. A half-naked glistening body in a moment of dramatic (and often violent) action among absurd and highly-constructed backdrops; children in wigs and makeup, oily aged muscle-men, and massive blow-up hotdogs are commonplace in LaChapelleland. The photo, *Amanda as Andy Warhol's Marilyn*, is a fantastically clever, circular image that portrays a series of images until it seems to disappear into its own void of meaning – a postmodern ouroboros. The portrait features one of LaChapelle's favorite models, the self-proclaimed 'number one transsexual in the world,' Amanda Lepore. It depicts Lepore portraying Andy Warhol's famous image *Marilyn Monroe* (1962). If the yellow wig, smooth blue backdrop and bright red lips do not clue one in that the reference is to, not Monroe herself, but Warhol's print, black register marks are stamped on the side of Lepore's face, dripping slightly down her cheek and neck. The photo

is immediately comical. Lepore is known for her extreme body modifications accentuated with her hyper-glam style (most notable are her enormous lips, petite sharp nose, large hard breasts, and full, round buttocks). She has described her look as 'a mix between Marilyn Monroe and Jessica Rabbit;' that the latter is a cartoon is appropriate. Others have called her 'an exaggerated Jane Mansfield,' a 'human art project,' and a 'buxom, blond transgender icon,' among many other things (Maldonado, 2008; New York Blade, 2007; Romano, 2004; Cahalan and Otis, 2007). If one did not know her as a transgendered person, one would certainly recognize that she has formed her unusual look through intensive plastic surgery. Lepore became well known through New York City nightlife culture in the nineteen-nineties, and she continues to work as a host, promoter, and drag performer in New York. She represents the importance of New York City life, nightlife, and art to what we understand today as gay culture.



*Amanda as Andy Warhol's Marilyn, 2002. Image Courtesy Fred Torres Collaborations*

But this gay cultural contextualization does not in itself make the image queer. Instead, it is its confounding ambiguity, indeed the way it teeters on the edge of legibility that exemplifies what I have detailed as 'imageness,' following Rancière. To put it further in context, the

image first appeared at a 2002 show of LaChapelle's photography titled *All American*. The following year it was printed on the side of a massive shopping bag as part of an art installation in the promenade of Rockefeller Center that was commissioned by Montblanc North America to promote the opening of a new retail store. The installation consisted of six ten-foot tall shopping bags, each decorated by a contemporary artist. LaChapelle's contribution featured *Amanda as Andy Warhol's Marilyn* on one face of the bag, and on the opposite face of the bag an image titled *All American*. In this image Lepore appears on the floor, she wears only high heels, and she is being crushed by a giant cheeseburger. At the opening, LaChapelle told *The New York Observer* that the bag was a tribute to Warhol, and that 'my dream was always to work for Andy Warhol.' 'Amanda has always wanted to be Marilyn Monroe. She's the Marilyn Monroe of transsexuals. She never wanted to be a woman in the traditional sense' (DiGiacomo, 2003). The tribute was the fantasy of both Lepore and LaChapelle, but then it was also the portrayal of the violence of consumption. 'I'm a vegetarian, and the idea is that we spend so much time shopping and consuming that it's a never-ending cycle.' The photo also was shown that year at the Moscow Photo Festival and was included in the retrospective show *Artists and Prostitutes 1985-2005*. It is printed in LaChapelle's third book of photographs called *Heaven and Hell*. If it does not signify some movement in art, or if it cannot be discussed based on tracking its cultural impact, we can at least say that represents something important to LaChapelle's artistic statement.

At first blush, the image might read as a cheeky post-modern gimmick, devoid of any real meaning; or else, at most, it might depict the very excess of post-industrial globalized postmodernist affect, the boundless result of democracy as consumer culture (see Rancière, 2008). In all of its playfulness, however, the aesthetic of LaChapelle's photograph is utterly queer, as is the topology of gay culture in the twentieth century that it maps. It is an image about *imageness*, where art consumes icons of celebrity culture as a way of participating in the vast proliferation of images in popular culture from which it is supposedly excluded – that is, it represents the image as a marker of the social. The image portrays the potential threat of imageness itself: that it will continue to speak out of turn, to show up uninvited, to come alive, like some monstrous undead creature, at the very worst time. The illegibility of the image, the image of meaninglessness or depressing excess, to borrow from Rancière's critique of the frames of postmodernity, is a way to contain the threat that the image poses – its own promiscuity and its radical democratic accessibility (Rancière, 2008).

LaChapelle's photo is primarily a performance of Warhol's print, which itself plays on the ambiguity of appropriation. Warhol's *Marilyn* was self-consciously derivative, merely reproducing an image and claiming it as its own. But the image was of many things: an iconic, beautiful Hollywood star; a celebrity who died from the excesses of the life that she represented; and finally, that twentieth-century phenomenon,

celebrity itself. Warhol's print neither honored the life of Marilyn Monroe, nor memorialized her death. It was not an homage to the photographer, nor a representation of the original print as an artistic product. It refused to participate in any narrative to which the original photograph was affixed. Instead, it unfixed the image as a celebrity icon that circulated in the social world through the 'medium' of popular culture, and it questioned whether the films and photos that featured Marilyn Monroe portraying some fictive character were any different from the replication of a carefully constructed personality who was a celebrity because of those works – while also being a work of fiction herself. Warhol's use of the Marilyn icon – while refusing to participate in the Marilyn narrative – violated, in some small way, the rules of the economy of popular culture in its interest in celebrity. Celebrity status was as unstable as it was fantastic, such that it needed to be repeated, rehearsed, and reenacted constantly in public discourse in order to distract from its utter failure. The celebrity icon is the mediating placeholder that keeps pop culture from becoming an inculturation. Warhol's *Marilyn* was then something else from the actress or even the woman Norma Jean. It was, through appropriation, Warhol's own celebrity status and Warhol's own making (Flatley, 1996: 101-4, 109). It was a poetics of derivation whereby the ability to appropriate was equated with a claim to the economy of celebrity on the grounds that popular culture required the mass proliferation and repetition of certain images/texts at the cost of any one entity's claim of complete ownership or authorship. Warhol made use of the paradoxical logic of celebrity to claim insider status in the world of popular culture: the more fake something is, the more real it is. When something is an overt construction, transparently false, it becomes the prototype of itself, performing, as it were, its own blueprint.

*Amanda as Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe* exploits the ambiguous relationship of artist and subject to the work of art by making the subject of the work one who 'performs' the image of 'the work of art.' The image of a woman adored for her beauty becomes 'the image' made monstrous, threatening its ability to be appropriated, re-signified, indeed *re-imaged*. Lepore's swollen cherry-red lips hang open revealing flawless white clenched teeth. She looks through the feathery eyelashes that crowd around her eyes. They are barely open under the weight of heavy blue eye shadow. Above her left eye the messy uneven register marks are too densely printed, turning a soft shadow into something more of a bruise. The same black ink stains the edges of her perfect canary-yellow wig, dulls the shine of her lips, and drips down her neck like a hasty mark of illicit graffiti that announces the escape of the vandal. She brings to life Warhol's crude silkscreen of Marilyn Monroe and then gazes into the lens with a look of contempt and humor – a gaze of anger and vindication. The black ink that stains the perfect primary colors of her face become bruises, dirt, and dried blood. She is the victim left for dead who – surprise – shows up long after to say that the job was not finished after all. But while she presents herself with an aggressive direct eye contact that prevents a viewer from looking at her without being stared at him or

herself, she is entirely relaxed, threatening no movement, and suggesting no immediate future action. She presents herself as presence in a present that is not her own. She is The Image, that vague formulation that presents scenes in a story when it is the property of fiction or evidence of the crime if it is the property of the detective's file. Or rather it is the image of the promiscuity of imageness, the infidelity of the image to stay in its place: in time, in genre, in the order of things.

Rancière has constructed a theory of 'the image' by which he does not refer to any particular mode of its enunciation. The image is a function within the sensible world, and the sensible world is not merely the static material world of people and objects. It is the thinkable, the sayable, the doable; it thereby constitutes the possibilities of aesthetic enunciations. If something affects a reordering of the sensible world, as Rancière says happens when politics take place, it is because there is an order inherent to the social world, which he calls the 'partition of the sensible' or the 'distribution of the sensible.' The sensible distribution is most evident when a disruptive force insists upon its reordering, or insists upon *the possibility* of its reordering. Indeed, these may be the same thing: the reordering of the sensible and the possibility of the reordering of the sensible have the same formative logic, which is the imagining of the distribution of the sensible as such. At any given time, the social world is ordered through the distribution of roles, positions, types, classes, occupations, and so on. It is an image of a whole in relation to parts that allow people to imagine themselves as subjects with a place in the social order. An individual acts and behaves in ways that are audible and visible only through these parts: otherwise, they may make noise which is meaningless or they may portray something which is, in effect, imperceptible. The possibilities for 'doing, saying, and being' are contingent upon the partitioning of the sensible world that includes speaking/doing 'subject positions.' While entirely real, this is a process of 'aesthetic enacting' that entails constructing a fiction based on what Rancière refers to as various 'logics.'

The phrase 'the image' in its authoritative singularity is not meant to suggest some type of image-template, which, to theorize, would be the foundation of any *real* image. It is a function within the sensible distribution, meaning that it is a *way* of being, doing, or saying that happens through an aesthetic enunciation, which could be textual or visual. The image can consolidate possibilities into a representative 'as is.' It can authorize actions or organize structures through the performative 'is as such.' It can question those image effects through destabilizing its own imageness. The point is that the image is a function of the sensible order, and as such participates in *ordering*.

The image is also the point at which the equality of things confronts the heterogeneity of things. In other words, radical egalitarianism does not lead to a harmonious – that is to say homogenous – body, but must instead be re-imagined as a whole in which things take part

through the partitioning of their functions (see Ranciere, 2009a). Since this is never a static re-imagining, it happens through functions that require its constitutive logics. The image is always a formation of re-imagining, but one that only happens through the logic of the distribution or partition of the sensible within which it is an aesthetic event. The image can reify the dominant order of the sensible world, or it can radically call it into question, but only by participating in the foundational logic of the partitioning of that world.

There's a certain play in the work of Rancière's discussion of aesthetics of the fictive or literary in relation to history, or the science of the truth of things or the doctrines of the social order. One could hardly say that some fantastic tale is no less real than some formal account of things, nor would Rancière go so far as to suggest that all 'real' or 'truthful' accounts are merely fictions. But he frequently gestures towards the latter, and does so, I would argue, in order to ask how some things are understood as real or true and other things as fantasy or fiction. This process hinges on the tradition of the contempt for art, a contempt that we see in Plato's denunciation of the trickery of mimesis, or Wordsworth's alternative to aristocratic 'poetic diction,' or the deflation of the National Endowment for the Arts in the nineteen-nineties. It is a contempt for the ambiguous function of art in relation to politics, which might be to say the function of art as social ambiguity. The anxiety of the effect of the fictive on the real seems to always be based on a certain confusion of the use of art. But it also constitutes the possibility of the confusion of the fictive or imaginary *as serious* (when it should be merely play) or the confusion of art with real life. Art is not a thing in itself, but a categorical error *in negotio*. This is why the aesthetic regime makes art always an art of ambiguity; non-ambiguous art ceases to be art and must be considered something else.

*Amanda as Andy Warhol's Marilyn* suggests that Warhol's queer appropriation was also marked by a certain failure of ambiguity to evade the consolidating effects of the image. But its queer politics is something less certain. LaChapelle's photograph portrays the queer notion that the promiscuity of the image is the promise of politics. It paradoxically recalls the uncomfortable impossibility of any police order to fully consolidate image and meaning, or language and image. When acts of resistance fetishize anarchy by imagining the threat of disorder, it makes available that threat in the sensible world and sends it, as it were, on its way. The suggestion of disorder has resonance only in relation to the contingency of order; the less contingent order is, the less useful or available are the suggestions of disorder. Queerness resists identification, choosing to play at the borders of the visible, attempting to assert the possibility of the unidentified or misidentified subject and to eroticize the threat that an action or condition may displace a subject from an identity/category.

This is not to privilege the will of the subject but to draw out the fact that the logic of the police eludes representation. To represent

queerness is to represent police logic in a way that preconditions disruptive possibilities. The image is privileged in this configuration because it is always in excess of its own meaning. Anarchy is the absence of meaning. To fantasize emancipation as escaping a system is to invoke the logic of police as 'border control.' The politics of aesthetics attempts to create a logic of queerness as vacant positionality based on opposition to the ordering logics of normativity. Normativity always fails to order fully – there is always an excess, a logical remainder. Excess is the language of queer logic. Before making claims to equality or disidentification, which must happen by first acknowledging the dominant sensible order. Queer politics of aesthetics show that the compromises of ordering mean that possibilities of reordering exist. The politics of aesthetics strives to create conditions for disruptive assertions, sometimes by showing, simply, that ordering logics need border control; that meaning exceeds itself; that bodies are visible when they occupy a place; that the invisible, unsayable, and inaudible exist; that there are only surfaces of things. Queer appropriation makes images that linger precariously at the boundaries by invoking ambiguity. The less categorizable the work of art, the greater it impinges upon the politics of the aesthetic enunciations through which it was articulated. It may not demand a redistribution of the sensible, but it may create the conditions of possibility for that demand to be made in the sensible social world.

The function of a straightforward portrait of Amanda Lepore might allow one to read, through her transgendered identity, an image of visibility that contests marginalization. Instead, her body modification and identity are aligned with processes of image-making that exist in aesthetic discourses, such as fine art photography and performance art. Visibility, it seems, is only one way of partaking in 'the visible': an alternative is to allow the image to speak to its own unwieldy, uncontained excess that reveals that visibility is less often concerned with the truth of things than about redrawing the boundaries of what is allowed to count. In questioning the political efficacy of identity politics, Jasbir Puar has remarked that identity 'is but one effect of affect,' and wonders what a new queer politics might look like when we reframe the debate in terms of 'affective politics.' 'If we transfer our energy, our turbulence, our momentum from the defense of the integrity of identity and submit instead to this affective ideation of identity, what kinds of political strategies, of "politics of the open end," might we unabashedly stumble upon?' (Puar, 2007: 215). A politics that is not grounded in the truth or essence of a biological identity might allow us to get outside of debates over which marginalized populations are most precarious and to instead see the way that those figures who suffer the violence of illegibility also represent the threat of those queer figures who resist the consolidating effect that visibility violently imparts. The visible, sayable, and doable, are the possible aesthetic enunciations that circulate in a social world which is already the realm of the political, and every aesthetic gesture is either allowed or must insist upon its legibility. *Amanda as Andy Warhol's Marilyn* makes visible operations of imageness and elides visibility as such.

**Daniel Williford is a graduate student in the department of English at the University of California, Los Angeles.**

### **Bibliography**

Benjamin, W. (2008), *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings On Media*, Cambridge: Harvard UP.

Cahalan, S. & Otis, G.A. (2007), 'Ugly people are models, too', *New York Post*, 2 December, accessed 12 December 2008, [http://www.nypost.com/seven/12022007/news/regionalnews/ugly\\_people\\_are\\_models\\_too\\_148122.htm?CMP=EMC-email\\_edition&DATE=12022007](http://www.nypost.com/seven/12022007/news/regionalnews/ugly_people_are_models_too_148122.htm?CMP=EMC-email_edition&DATE=12022007)

Chambers, S.A. (2005), 'The politics of literarity', *Theory and Event*, vol. 8, no. 3.

Dasgupta, S. (2008), 'Art is going elsewhere and politics has to catch it: an interview with Jacques Ranciere', *Krisis*, no. 1, pp. 70-76.

DiGiacomo, F. et al. (2003), 'Jazzy forever', *The New York Observer*, 9 November, accessed 12 December 2008, <http://www.observer.com/2003/jazzy-forever>

Flatley, J. (1996), 'Warhol gives good face: publicity and the politics of prosopopoeia', in J. Doyle et al. (eds), *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, Durham: Duke UP, pp. 20-30.

Foucault, M. (1984), 'What is Enlightenment?' *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, New York: Pantheon, pp. 32-50.

Lafreniere, S. (2006), 'Amanda LePorre [sic] interviewed by Steve LaFreniere', *Sterile Cowboys*, accessed 13 October 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBTAG-cJxMI>

Maldonado, J. (2008), *Amandaleporeonline.com*, accessed 12 December 2008, <http://web.archive.org/web/20061108071320/http://amandaleporeonline.com>

New York Blade (2007), 'Editorials: diversity inspires', *New York Blade*, 16 February.

Puar, J. (2007), *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham: Duke UP.

Rancière, J. (2004b), 'The politics of literature', *SubStance*, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 10-24.

---. (2006), *The Politics of Aesthetics*, New York: Continuum.

- . (2006b), *Film Fables*, New York: Berg.
- . (2006c), *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. S. Corcoran, London: Verso.
- . (2007), *The Future of the Image*, New York: Verso.
- . (2008), 'Jacques Rancière and indisciplinary: an interview', trans. G. Elliot, *Art & Research*, vol. 2, no. 1.
- . (2008b), 'Why Emma Bovary had to be killed', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 233-48.
- . (2009a), 'Notes on the photographic image', *Radical Philosophy*, July/August, pp. 8-15.
- . (2009b), *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . (2009c), 'Should democracy come? ethics and politics in Derrida', in C. Cheah & S. Guerlac (eds), *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, Durham: Duke UP, pp. 274-88.
- Romano, T. (2004), 'New Year's weekend', *The Village Voice*, 21 December, accessed 12 December 2008, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2004-12-21/nyc-life/new-year-s-weekend>