

What art can (make you) do.

**Rethinking the performativity
of art through Van Alphen,
Ziarek and Rancière**

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Abstract

The meaning of the concept performativity has expanded from a concept that concerns a linguistic speech act to any event that happens because someone does something in the cultural domain. However, thinking of the work of art as a performative event goes one step further. In relation to paintings or photographs, we usually do not speak of a 'someone' who 'executes', or 'does' the work of art. These works of art generally do not move, nor change. This thesis questions how we can think of the work of art as performative through theories by Ernst van Alphen and Krzysztof Ziarek. What does the work of art do and what happens as a result of that doing? These questions are further explored through an analysis of the relationship between art and the 'other forms of doing and making' with Jacques Rancière's aesthetic theory.

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Introduction: The Performative Aspect

Although the dominant commonsense notions of art are still the expressive and conceptual ones, the importance of art is also quite often seen in terms that assign a much more active function, that is, a *performative* one (Van Alphen xiii).

Rather, the artwork has to be thought of as a force whose 'artistic' momentum is *performative* in just this sense: that it rediscusses the social relations beyond the power impetus constitutive of them (Ziarek, *The Force of Art* 20).

One major difference between art and theatre is that theatre does not last in time.¹ Theatre is a performative art, which means that it exists in the event that it establishes. Theatre differs every time its score is executed. In contrast to theatre, art exists out of a unique object and is regarded to remain the same object over time. This difference between theatre and art has consequences for the study to both disciplines. Characteristic of art history has been research to how an object of art reflects, represents, expresses, or embodies a certain historical person or society by whom or which the object has been produced (Preziosi 9). Yet in theatre studies many scholars focus in their analysis on the eventfulness of theatre and use concepts like performativity to get grip on what happens during the theatre performance. Although there exist many other disciplinary approaches to both theatre and art, in art history dominates a strong emphasis on the analysis of the object, while theatre is approached as a performative event.

What does it mean to be understood as a performative event? The concept performativity is significant here. Performativity stems from literary studies, since it is related to language. Performativity denotes "an aspect of a word that does what it says" (Bal 175). This means that certain words or sentences execute an act when they are said instead of merely describing that act. In the 1980s, with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory, the meaning of performativity expanded. Derrida discussed the concept in terms of cultural agency and the reiteration of norms

¹With 'art' I mean painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, ceramics: all arts that exist out of a unique object that remains over time.

rather than individual (speech) acts. With Derrida, performativity considers the effect a certain utterance has in a culture "that remembers what that act can do" (176-179). Judith Butler takes performativity a step further and links it to gender and identity. Gender is something that one does, instead of *is*, she argues (Culler 513). Next to language, also matter and the body are now considered to be performative. Performativity helps to understand social processes of meaning making and the role of the individual in these processes, Butler claims. In theatre studies, the concept performativity is a tool that can be used to understand how a certain act, body or text receives or resists meaning during the theatre performance. As a result, attention to the performative dimension of theatre has shifted the analysis and practice from a focus on what theatre represents to what theatre does and offers as experience during the performance. In relation to that, also spectatorship became an important issue in the field of study. Performativity helps to understand theatre as an event in the sense that it considers theatre as that which comes into existence in the encounter between the performed theatre-piece and the audience of that performance.

However widespread performativity is being used in my own discipline of study, theatre studies, it has not been adopted as a common approach to art in art history research. This seems logical, as the work of art does not act during a limited period of time nor happens because "someone does them in the cultural domain" (Bal 178). Nevertheless, I encountered two theories of contemporary art, one by Ernst van Alphen and one by Krzysztof Ziarek, that contain the statement that we should think of art as a performative event. Resultantly, I ask myself in this thesis, what do Van Alphen and Ziarek mean when they argue that art can be regarded as an event? What does art do and what happens as a consequence of that act? In order to explore this, Van Alphen and Ziarek's theory will serve as the crux of my study. I will interrogate these theories in order to understand what Van Alphen and Ziarek mean when they argue that art is an event. Consequently, I will rethink the results of my analysis through Jacques Rancière's philosophical perspective on art, so as to more fully illuminate the potential for regarding art as an event. What does regarding art as an event mean for our idea of what art can do and do we also need to change our idea of what art is?

Van Alphen and Ziarek argue in *Art in Mind. How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (2005) and *The Force of Art* (2004) that one should focus on the performative role of the art object when one analyses art. The dominant modes of art analysis are dissatisfactory in their approach to art. Van Alphen argues that these methods of analysis too often regard art as a *product* of a certain historical reality instead of as an *agent* that frames that history. He proposes the performative aspect of art as another productive perspective with which to interpret art. In turn, Ziarek's argument is more radical. Ziarek argues that we should think of art beyond the idea of an object at all because the object has become commodified. Art theories that consider visual art as an aesthetic object miss art's point. The 'art' of the work lies precisely in the event that evolves from the encounter with the beholder of the object of art, he argues. Seeing art as an event is a premise for understanding art's potential. Both Ziarek and Van Alphen challenge the dominant framework of art as an object.

In my analysis of these theories, I discovered that Van Alphen and Ziarek approach this topic from differing perspectives and draw different conclusions. For this research on art as an event, it became interesting to compare their accounts. Whereas Van Alphen proposes a perspective from cultural studies, Ziarek explicitly distances himself from this approach and frames his research as an alternative to approaches to art and aesthetics that are widespread in cultural studies ("Art, Power and Politics" 175). These distinctions, sometimes verging on antagonistic ideas on what it means to regard art as an event, have proven to be highly interesting for my analysis. I will argue that these varying conceptions have sharpened the discussion on the topic of art as an event and raise new questions in this field. As my own academic perspective on art is informed by a cultural analytic approach, my own line of thought has been more akin to Van Alphen than to Ziarek. Therefore, it has been both eye opening for me and fruitful for the discussion in this thesis to read the two theories in relation to each other. In the first chapter I will examine Van Alphen's *Art in Mind* and in the second chapter I analyse Ziarek's *The Force of Art*. In this second chapter I will also draw some comparisons between both theories.

The efforts of such comparisons undertaken in chapter two has made clear that theoreticians argue that the work of art actively transforms our relation to what we think of as our reality. However, their ideas on this transformation differ very

substantially, owing largely to their very different perspective on the nature of the reality that is being transformed by this relation. Yet another similarity between the two arguments is that both engage in a discussion about aesthetics. Van Alphen argues that aesthetics are active because they trigger new signifiers, while Ziarek argues that art is post-aesthetic and that art acts beyond the aesthetic object. Still, they agree upon the idea that it is the experience of the object - aesthetic or not - rather than what the object represents, which transforms our perspective on reality. These two topics, the concern about art's relation to our 'reality' and their focus on the experience of art, are addressed more extensively and from a more philosophical perspective in chapter three. In this third chapter, I employ the concepts of the French philosopher Rancière to frame these conclusions. Additionally, I discuss Van Alphen's and Ziarek's ideas on art as an event in light of Rancière's thinking on aesthetics and their relations to politics.

Why exactly is Rancière's work pertinent to my research? In the first place, I want to argue that his idea of how art acts is similar to that of Van Alphen and Ziarek even though Rancière does not theorize performativity as such. His outcomes are similar in the sense that he argues that art, or, as he calls them, artistic practices, intervene in the way in which we relate to the world. In his words,

Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of 'ways of doing and making' as well as in the relationship they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13).

Rancière sees art also as something that acts, as an artistic 'way of doing and making' that intervenes in our cultural modes of doing and making. Also, like Van Alphen and Ziarek, Rancière argues that it is the experience specific to art, which distinguishes art from other practices. Nevertheless, this is where the resemblance ends. The focus of Rancière's argument does not lie on what it means to regard art as an event. Instead, he questions on a fundamental level why we call certain practices art and others not and discovers a certain logic. This logic is the following: practices that are called art always represent those practices that are not visible or thinkable according to the dominant idea of what belongs to our community. In his *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Rancière offers a historiography on how western society has been

'thinking the world' and accordingly he distinguishes three regimes in which art is being thought and identified.² Rancière's perspective offers me the opportunity to see Van Alphen and Ziarek's theories as two articulations of one historically specific idea of art in relation to one historically specific idea of what belongs to our community. In Rancière's sense of the word, art is always an event, as it a practice can only be thought of as art in relation to the world in which it is being made. Art is not inherent to objects, because the artistic aspect lies not in the object as such, but rather in the way in which objects 'do' or 'make' in relation to what is common to the community. This also means that what art 'does' is precisely to conflict with dominant practices.

Rancière's ideas on why we call certain practices art in the first place and his thoughts on what art does in order to be called art, expose some gaps in the motives Van Alphen and Ziarek employ for calling art an event. Van Alphen and Ziarek both argue that the experience that art offers causes us to critically rethink the way in which we think of or relate to society. Both draw conclusions on what the distinct experience of art effects. These effects are not based on what happens in the intervention, but reach beyond the event. Van Alphen and Ziarek's ideas on what art does are based on older ideas of art's role in society, and on what it means to critique. This thesis maintains that approaching art as an event requires a close analysis of what it means to frame the work of art in relation to our social reality, which involves reconsidering why we call something art. The performative aspect of art should not be conflated with an agency that goes past the relation between the work of art and our social reality.

² Rancière only focuses on western art and philosophy, although he does not make that explicit. Therefore some of his claims sound universally applicable.

Chapter I: Art Thinks

i. Introduction

Regarding works of art like Rieneke Dijkstra's photographs, Marlène Dumas' paintings or Marien Schouten's sculptures as performative art has not been common practice in art history. However, it is exactly what Ernst van Alphen does in his book. This chapter seeks to understand how we can think of works of art like these and contemporary art in general as performative à la Van Alphen's point of view.³ The aim here is to understand what Van Alphen means when he argues that art is an event. What is this performative aspect and what is the event that art would create? I seek to answer these questions by reviewing Van Alphen's book *Art in Mind* written in 2005. In this book Van Alphen explores various ways in which contemporary works of art relate to history and how art actively articulates questions that this relation to history would pose. Ultimately, he claims that art 'thinks' this history. In what follows I will analyse what this claim means in relation to his argument that we should regard art performative.

ii. Van Alphen: "Art thinks"

In *Art in Mind* Van Alphen puts forward the argument that art thinks. He builds this claim on two pillars: Theodor Adorno's conception of aesthetics and Hubert Damisch's notion of history. Van Alphen locates the active role that art would have in a tradition of modern aesthetics that conceives art as a "form of critical understanding" (xv). He refers to Adorno's perspective on aesthetic negativity as put forward by the philosopher Christoph Menke. Although Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* was printed in 1973, Van Alphen claims the performative aspect of art has not been granted serious attention from art historians and literary critics up until now (xiii). This is the gap he aims to fill in *Art in Mind*. Next to an Adornian conception of aesthetics, he argues that we need another perspective on history. Van Alphen states,

³Van Alphen uses only examples of contemporary art and literature, but also cites Leonardo da Vinci to support Damisch's claim that painting thinks.

in line with the French art-historian and philosopher Damisch, for another conception of history in art history. From Damisch's perspective, the objects of art should not be considered the *products* of history, as history does not produce stories, people, objects or works of art [emphasis NA]. Damisch argues that this dominant perspective on history in the study of art history is too absolute. Instead, he claims that the work of art frames the historical reality in which it is made. The event that art is articulates the relation between the historical reality and the work of art. Van Alphen goes so far as to say that art 'thinks' this reality (xiv-xv). In this chapter I will reconsider Van Alphen's previous claim. What does Van Alphen mean when he argues that art is a form of critical understanding? And how does art think? To understand this, I will hone in on Van Alphen's conception of aesthetics and his subsequent claim that art thinks.

a. Aesthetics Trigger

What does it mean to regard aesthetics in the modern tradition? According to Menke, a philosopher to which Van Alphen refers, "characteristic of modern reflection on aesthetic experience is an unresolved ambivalence" (Menke vii). This ambivalence is also visible in Adorno's aesthetic theory and can be briefly explained in the following way. The aesthetic experience represents, on the one hand, one realm of reason, and at the same time, exceeds these limits. Adorno's thoughts on aesthetics combine these apparently contradictory ideas and he argues that art is both autonomous and thus forms a different realm of reason alongside other non-aesthetic discourses and is at the same time sovereign as "its enactment disrupts the successful functioning of non-aesthetic discourses" (viii). Van Alphen refers in his book to Adorno's conception of aesthetic negativity and translates this conception in his thesis that the aesthetics of an art object trigger you to rethink that object. Aesthetics trigger the beholder of the work of art because they give him or her negative understanding of that object. This experience is negative in the sense that aesthetics invariably disappoint you in your attempt to understand that object. The aesthetic object triggers both the effort to understand and the negation of such an attempt, as it disrupts reasoning. Yet, as Van Alphen emphasizes, this means that art negates positive understanding and not that it offers another mode of understanding

(xv).

How do aesthetics trigger a negative experience? In order to explain how this happens, Van Alphen goes on to rethink the aesthetic experience with Menke's interpretation of Adorno. Menke adopts a deconstructionist perspective on Adorno's negativity and argues that on a semiotic level negative understanding takes place since aesthetics separate the signifier from the signified. In contrast to all other things in our world that we understand automatically or can understand eventually, art does not allow us to comprehend. The meaning that is supposed to be embodied in the signifier is not identified in art. According to Menke this process of aesthetic understanding "always loses itself in an unending vacillation (...) the bridge - which defines the comprehensible sign - breaks down between the two dimensions of semiotic representation" (qtd. in Van Alphen xvi). In other words, Menke argues that when one looks at art, one experiences a negation of ones attempt to understand. Except for this aesthetic negativity, Van Alphen asserts the agency of art also triggers efforts to form new signifiers (xv-xvi). This would mean that art asks the viewer to rethink the meaning that they attach to signs. This is the performative aspect of art: its aesthetics trigger new signifiers. To sum up, art receives its agency in Van Alphen's theory, because it challenges culture on the level of meaning making. The object triggers new signifiers by negating the culturally determined meaning that we use to make sense of the world. However, Van Alphen goes further than arguing that art demands us to rethink cultural meaning. In *Art in Mind*, he extends this claim by arguing that art itself "thinks" (xiv). He does so in response to Damisch's argument that painting is a form of thought (2). I will discuss this claim further in the next section, when I will be discussing Damisch's notion of history.

b. Framing History

What does Van Alphen mean when he argues that art thinks? Using Damisch, Van Alphen argues that art produces an active reflection on society. For Damisch, this statement logically follows from his conception of history. He critiques the current art historical practice for seeing history as absolute, as something that you can write about without an object that frames that history. History itself is approached as an active force. Damisch's problem with this idea might be best illustrated by the

opening-sentence of his book on perspective in painting, also quoted by Van Alphen. "If history there be, of what is it a history?" (Damisch 2). Damisch objects to the idea that there is something that can be called 'history', without an object that frames the parameters of what that history actually can be. Van Alphen writes, "He [Damisch NA] will not allow 'history' to decide which questions are meaningful or legitimate" (3). History is not active and does not produce the object. Damisch and Van Alphen turn that presumption around. It is the object that frames and therefore 'thinks' historical events or historically specific ways of thinking.

How exactly does the object frame history? Van Alphen's last chapter of *Art in Mind* illustrates best how art frames history as he analyses performances that strongly intervene in the common social practices the beholder of the work of art is involved in. In 'Playing the Holocaust' Van Alphen analyses the work of contemporary visual artists, whose art he addresses as 'toy art'. Toy art is art that explicitly or implicitly refers to the Holocaust. Examples that he mentions are among others *Your Colouring Book* (Image 1) by Ram Katzir, that contains images with Nazi-propaganda that visitors of the museum are invited to colour and the *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* (Image 2) by Zbigniew Libera, that consists of LEGO boxes, which suggest that you can build your own concentration camp out of LEGO cubes. The link with the historical reality of the Holocaust seems extremely clear. In the specific case of toy art, Van Alphen takes up the function of play and the reference to the Holocaust in his analysis. The works of art raise, according to him, the following question: "What is the function of play in Holocaust representation?" (183). Accordingly, Van Alphen links the role of the Holocaust in today's society to the social practices of remembrance and education. Play is, naturally, linked to children games. He rephrases his question accordingly. "Is there [next to education and remembrance NA] a place for playing the Holocaust in Holocaust remembrance?" (Ibid.). Moreover, "What does it mean that the toy as memory can occur now and how can we evaluate this phenomenon in terms of remembrance?" (Ibid.). Van Alphen's questions directly concern the social practices of remembering, education, and playing in relation to the Holocaust. Van Alphen remarks how the serious practices of Holocaust remembrance in western society severely oppose the light-heartedness of children's games. The object forces us to think about the uncomfortable relation between these practices, he argues. Van

Alphen opposes the cognitive character of knowledge about the Holocaust to the imaginative character of art, which for one thing does not represent faithfully and besides that also can give pleasure. Van Alphen suggests that the art-objects actively links itself to those practices by opposing the dominant rules that are embedded in the practices of genocide remembrance and play. This is how the object of art frames the cultural history that is attached to the Holocaust.



Image I: Katzir, Ram. *Your Colouring Book*. Picture coloured by a visitor of the exhibition in Utrecht. museumserver.nl

Thus far, one can conclude that Van Alphen's argument suggests that art intervenes in our cultural habits by questioning, for example, our idea of remembering. Remembering is associated with a mastery of knowledge and a historical narrative. Toy art proposes to remember by means of play, dramatization and imagination. On the level of signs this would mean that art, like the images reproduced here propose new signifieds like play and imagination linked to signifiers like remembrance that we historically associate with signifieds like the mastery of knowledge. Art reframes the way we relate to history. However, it remains unclear what Van Alphen means when he argues that it is not so much us, beholders, but rather the work of art itself that thinks. What does he mean with the statement that 'art thinks'?

c. Thinking Objects

What does Damisch mean when he argues that painting does not only frame cultural habits and he maintains, "painting is a form of thought" (Van Alphen xv)? How can art, being a non-animated object, think? Damisch himself sheds some light on this

statement. He states that you are as a beholder invited to think with the work of art. In this dialogue, the beholder should ask philosophical, political or social questions, "will the artwork release its ideas" (4). Also, the object would articulate trans-historical questions. This means that painting frames itself in relation to other non-artistic practices. Having this in mind, I would interpret 'painting as a form of thought' in the sense that the artwork (actively) invites you to think with it and that it steers your line of questioning. Yet Van Alphen even goes so far as to say that (all) "art thinks" (xv). How does a work of art think? In what follows, I will explore Van Alphen's claim further.



Image 2: libera, Zbigniew. *LEGO Concentration Camp Set*. raster.art.pl

Another concept that Damisch uses in order to understand painting as thought is the notion 'theoretical'. Asking questions and looking at art from this 'theoretical' perspective is essential for understanding the artwork's relation to a certain historical reality, he claims. The object seems to be twofold in Damisch view, it requests from the viewer to do theory and at the same time outlines the relevant questions the viewer should ask. In an article on the use of the object in Damisch's

theory, Stephen Melville describes a theoretical object as follows: "This object is not one by which the art historian is, as it were faced; it is one in which the art historian is essentially inscribed, his knowledge only possible as a reading of that inscription" (Melville 6). In my view, Melville's quote underlines that the meaning of art comes into being in the encounter between a work of art and the art historian and thus that both are factors in the creation of meaning. However, the meaning is in my perspective not so much a result of the fact that art would actively think. Cultural analyst Mieke Bal also mentions in her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* Damisch's 'theoretical object'. She interprets this term as follows. "Such an object 'occurs' when it is *observed* (which implicates the subjectivity of the viewer), and when it *resists* ('implicating the intentionality of the work') normalization into the theory previously held" (277). Hence, according to Bal the work of art means either something or nothing in relation to the onlooking subject, depending on both the work of art as well as on the beholder of the work. The beholder observes and the work of art can resist the meaning that the subject aims to inscribe into the object of art. Still, I am not convinced that the work of art itself 'thinks'. The beholder seems to do all the thinking that is involved in the encounter with the work of art. I will return to the example of art analysis that Van Alphen puts forward in his chapter on 'toy art', in order to further explore what Van Alphen's claim that art thinks means.

In the example of toy art, Van Alphen explains the art's thinking in the following way. The questions that the work of art triggers concern our historically specific customs in teaching and knowledge about the Holocaust, our perspective on the Holocaust, and our current attitude towards the Holocaust, he argues. All these customs are questioned by a radically other way of relating to the Holocaust. Historical, social or more concrete philosophical questions are raised by the work of art when it questions our contemporary habits, which are in case of the Holocaust remembrance, education, and play. A more trans-historical aspect is also addressed when Van Alphen foregrounds the artistic aspect of the toys. Aside from the fact that he questions how these specific works of art intervene in the serious practices around Holocaust-remembrance, Van Alphen also compares art and pedagogy in their effort to understand the Holocaust. Hence, he questions more fundamentally the

role of art. Van Alphen claims that art frames itself almost explicitly in relation to education, by the very act of relating to the Holocaust, because the Holocaust is in our culture very strongly related to education. By intervening in the practice of education, art asks questions about the role of art as an educational tool. For example, how does the way in which art relates to cultural ideas differ from the familiar way of relating to things because of our education? What can art teach us that cognitive knowledge cannot (Van Alphen 197-198)? The questions illustrate how the work of art 'thinks', according to Van Alphen. Art thinks these questions because it stands in relation to a culture that attaches meaning to the issues the particular work of art as well as art as a cultural phenomenon refers.

Having addressed and illustrated the way in which Damisch and Van Alphen argue that art triggers questions, it still seem to be us, the beholders, who eventually have to think and ask the questions that the object seduces us to ask by giving us a negative aesthetic experience. Is it not more accurate to say that a work of art invites thinking? Or, that a work of art has been constructed in such a way that you are demanded to think about its meaning? The beholder or viewer is the one that really mulls things over and puts forward questions that the object evokes. In my view, Van Alphen's argument confines itself to the idea that it is the aesthetic experience that potentially asks from its beholder to rethink cultural habits. My difficulty with Van Alphen's assertion that art thinks concerns the question of agency. In Van Alphen's account it does not become clear that it is the work of art that thinks. However, this does not mean that I want to discard Van Alphen's claim that there is a performative aspect of art. Van Alphen circumscribes the thinking also in other ways than in terms of intellectual thought. I will discuss these in the following section.

Van Alphen introduces various terms to understand what he means with thought. First, he follows Damisch and describes thinking as an active reflection where "the painter thinks and she does that in her painting" (2). Painting here is considered a reflection in the active sense of the word. Art is "an act of thought" (*Ibid.*). However, it is not the painter's act per se. Van Alphen warns that it is not the painter's individual thought that makes the work of art think, but its "pictorial intelligence" (*Ibid.*). This term has been proposed by Svetlana Alpers and Michael

Baxandall⁴ and refers to "the intellectual thrust of the image per se" (Ibid.). Van Alphen stretches this term insofar as relocating the artist's intention from the painter to the object. What is meant precisely by the intellectual thrust, he does not explain. Yet Bal describes pictorial intelligence as a visual articulation of thought that offers "ideas for reflection and debate, ideas in which the political and ideological flavour cannot be distinguished from the domain of visuality itself" (274). The introduction of the term pictorial intelligence does expose that Van Alphen's idea of thinking is not (only) intellectual, but is instead related to imagination and the body. Art affects the beholder as it addresses one in a physical rather than a rational way. As Van Alphen puts it, "... art influences thought on an embodied level, and it makes its influence visible, so that thought of any kind can no longer appear 'natural'" (xix)." The aesthetic object can affect people and thereby influence their ideas. The thinking that the work of art 'does' is visual and affects the beholder on an embodied level. This experience of being affected by the work of art triggers the viewer to ask questions and to think.

Now I have explored the many ways in which Van Alphen addresses thought, I find it difficult to equalize Van Alphen's statement that art thinks with his argument that art affects the viewer on an embodied level. Moving away from his claim that art thinks, I would reformulate the performative aspect in the following way. The object of art affects the beholder, which triggers him or her to ask questions on an intellectual level, which in turn can transform the general way of thinking about cultural issues.

iii. Conclusion

What does Van Alphen mean when he argues that we should regard art performative and view art as an event? Van Alphen states that art thinks. In my view, van Alphen does not present enough persuasive power to convince me to accept his claim that art thinks. According to me, Van Alphen claims that it is the aesthetic experience that emerges in the encounter between the art object and the beholder, which estranges the object from its cultural meaning in the eyes of the beholder and mobilizes the

⁴Alpers, Svetlana and Michael Baxandall. *Tlepo/o and the pictorial intelligence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

beholder to rethink the ingrained cultural habits the object might articulate. Art can in this way cause a genuine transformation in the way in which cultural issues can be conceived, Van Alphen argues. Important to note is that regarding art as an event means that one considers art in relation to a historical reality that it frames. In the encounter with the beholder, the work of art intervenes in the cultural habits that the beholder of the work of art carries with as it frames these habits in that negation, he claims. I will now turn to Ziarek in order to analyse his conception of what it means to regard art as an event before drawing comparisons between the two approaches.

Chapter II: Forcework

i. Introduction: Crisis of Aesthetics

In the previous chapter, I discussed how Ernst Van Alphen locates the performative aspect of art in the aesthetic experience that the object evokes. Krzysztof Ziarek stands in contrast to Van Alphen, as he argues that one should avoid the role of aesthetics in thinking about art. The aim throughout his book is to re-establish art's potential to critique society and aesthetics disable such potential, in his view. In his book *The Force of Art* (2004) he explains in three chapters how art can be regarded beyond the idea of an aesthetic object. Ziarek, like Van Alphen, refers to the Adornian conception of aesthetics, but argues that aesthetics are no longer able to distinguish objects of art from other objects. His theories on art's performative role are incompatible with aesthetics, because aesthetics are involved in the power relations that determine our social reality and art works beyond that reality, he claims. Instead of being translatable in social or historical parameters as aesthetics are, art's complicity to reality is its otherness, its being other than reality. As Ziarek regards aesthetics to be indissoluble to the object, his approach to art as an event is an idea of art beyond the (aesthetic) object. The argument that Ziarek employs stands in close relation to his denunciation of aesthetics. *The Force of Art* aims to formulate an answer to the pessimism of art's social function that is present since, what Ziarek calls, the crisis of aesthetics. To further unpack what art as an event means according to Ziarek, I will first elaborate on his view on this crisis.

This crisis of aesthetics to which Ziarek refers, he claims is the outcome of the commodification of aesthetics and has resulted in the failure of art to be critical. This commodification was a result of the nineteenth century's emergence of mass culture, the entertainment industry, commercialization, and information technologies. Our modern reality is technological in a Heideggerian sense, Ziarek argues, and its ontological technicity has marginalized the critical potential of aesthetics because it has embedded aesthetics into popular culture and commercialized it. In short, Ziarek argues that there is a causal relation between technological reality, commodification of culture and the loss of a critical force in art. This technological reality is key in

Ziarek's theory and therefore essential for our understanding why art should be regarded beyond the object, as an event. Hence, I will first delve into this conception of reality so as to better understand what specific kind of reality Ziarek's idea of a work of art relates to in a way that critiques that reality.

a. Technological Reality & Power

Ziarek's conception of reality is based on two main philosophical concepts, which are technology and power. Ziarek builds on Martin Heidegger's idea of technology as put forward in 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1954). In this essay, Heidegger addresses the essence of technology. This essence is nothing technical, he argues, but instead should be seen as a mode of relating on an ontological level. The relation between two entities is technological, Heidegger argues, but this does not mean that the word 'technological' determines a specific type of relation. The mode of relating is technological, because it changes a 'being' into an object. Heidegger describes technics (*technik*) as a mode of thinking of reality and nature as "exploitable and usable matter and energy" (Ziarek *The Force of Art* 37). Resultantly, considering art as an object means that we turn it into something that is exploitable.

In this technological reality, power exists in the sense that it orders objects. Power determines what form the relationality takes. Hence, it is not the power of technology, but "the very modality in which power in contemporary society flows through institutions and forms of relations and regulates and mobilizes them toward further increases in power, both in reach and flexibility" (61). Being in this sense is power and making or coming into existence is always related to producing or increasing power. As Ziarek formulates it,

Power thus refers to the various flexible operations of producing, managing, and (re)programming, in which entities and relations come to be constituted into the modern world, whose standards of 'reality' and 'importance' are determined with a view towards a greater penetrative and formative reach of power (4).

Everything that is, serves the increase of power. From this quote, it becomes clear that Ziarek departs from a perspective on reality, which entails that the relations between everything that is are valued in terms of production and manipulation. In

addition, Ziarek argues that the modern world is technical in its essence; everything is exploitable and available as information. Since Heidegger's observance, contemporary society has severely increased its technicity. Ziarek asserts that we are currently living in the 'Information Age' where technologies have become digital and "turn being into a global, continuously modifiable and expandable data bank" (63). These modern technologies have infiltrated every level of modern society, global as well as genetic, he argues. Now that technologies have become digital, we have become programmable, Ziarek claims. Additionally, aesthetic objects have become subjected to the intensification of power because of their complicity in our technological reality. They have become embedded within power structures.

What do technology and power have to do with aesthetics? Ziarek argues that innovations in aesthetics moved from the realm of art into the realm of production causing aesthetics to become intrinsically technological and reduced to information. In the third chapter of *The Force of Art*, called 'Beyond subject-object dialectics', Ziarek specifies what consequences art beyond aesthetics has for the object. The relation between the work of art and the commodity should be dissolved, to be 'powerfree'. Hence, emphasis on aesthetics is even spurious for the artwork. As it is not what the work of art is about, it only increases the chance that it is considered a commodity, an aesthetic object. An emphasis on aesthetics "only confirms art's subordination to the social operations of power" (106). Ziarek warns that the more art tries to be 'aesthetic' and at the same time critical to society, the critique becomes accommodated in social praxis (because aesthetics are incorporated) and therefore loses its strength. Art that emphasizes its aesthetic object becomes some kind of "replicating self-criticism" (106). Artworks as objects are always bound to production; they are 'formed matter'. What has been produced is formed in relations of manufacturing and power. In order to reassert art's critical potential, Ziarek formulates a way of thinking of art beyond aesthetics, beyond the object, and beyond social praxis. He theorizes - inspired by the historical avant-garde - art's transformative force beyond the aesthetic.

ii. Art as a Forcework

In his theory of art, Ziarek tries to go beyond Heidegger's pessimism about the social function that art can play in this technological reality. He claims that only art *as aesthetics* marginalizes the role of art [emphasis NA]. The power of contemporary art, Ziarek argues, is post-aesthetic (15) insofar as we should look at an artwork beyond its aesthetic form. Instead, he locates the artistic moment in the performative event that the object evokes. Consequently, the transformation that this event stimulates is not limited to the work of art. Ziarek argues, "one needs, in other words, to stay within the different, powerfree mode of acting, perceiving, and knowing, in order to maintain the non-violent praxis" (27). This powerfree mode of acting should be preserved for the encounter with other practices. Art "radiates into the social context" (*Ibid.*), aiming to alter the relationality constitutive of those practices. This transformation of relations happens because of a certain force specific to art. Ziarek calls the work of art a forcework, "the force of art, as I formulate in this book, bears upon the modern technicity of power, interrogating its forms and flows, calling into question its increasing flexibility and reach" (5). This force specific to art both bears upon the technological reality and also interrogates it. I will discuss how the forcework relates to modern power in the following section.

What does this forcework do? The conception of force in Ziarek's theory has emerged from a combination of Michel Foucault's and Gilles Deleuze's theory on the one hand and Heidegger's notion of force on the other. I begin with Heidegger and then turn to the influence of Foucault and Deleuze. Heidegger uses the term to describe the relation between social and historical reality and art. The (artistic) force receives its meaning in its difference to a power relation, as the force 'frees' the relation between the work of art and the beholder from power [emphasis NA]. Ziarek argues that force ruptures, transforms, changes the dynamic of being and unfolding. Force is thus related to 'being' instead of to an 'object' because "in its spatial-temporal unfolding, being functions as a certain 'force' that bring beings into existence" (31). Heidegger relates force to 'physis' (*natura*). This Greek term defines nature as something 'before' its opposition to and thus its relation to culture or to history. Foucault and Deleuze describe force as "nonformalized functions and flows

of energy, that is, in terms of the elemental constituents of 'being', prior to their actualization in substances, objects or bodies" (7). According to them, force should be interpreted as an aspect of an object that has not been defined or formed. Ziarek combines these lines of thought in his own conception of force.

Coalescing these two approaches, Ziarek sees force as the energy that displaces relations on the level of the formation of objects and bodies as well as between objects and bodies. The unformed matter and non-formalized functions of force, in the Deleuzian sense, grants the possibility of relating and affecting other forces. In Foucault's theory, these forces can serve for the sake of power and knowledge as well as resist power. Forces are, so to say, the unformed matter 'on the outside' of power and knowledge. "Being, understood itself as 'force', thus describes the manner in which forces become disposed and composed into a shifting, molecular, and always only potential array of relations" (34). Force is here to be understood as something that is prior to these power relations. Force can enable power but it can also resist these relations. To call art a forcework means that the work of art can take place beyond the power relations. In order to understand how the force of art can escape power relations we need to understand Ziarek's notion of 'work'.

What does the term 'work' mean in 'forcework'? 'Work', like force, happens on the level of the art-object as a forcefield, the working of different forces. By calling the art-object 'work', Ziarek aims to critique the conception of art as static. To explain how this concept of work functions, he introduces Heidegger's conception of 'poiesis'. The difference between the artistic object and all other objects, or, the difference between the poetic object and the technic object is that the former is not made to increase power. With 'poiesis' Heidegger indicates a form of making that is, contrary to all other things that are being made, not related to power and opposing technicity. It is not a form of producing, but rather a way of bringing forth. Art is in Heidegger's words "non-violent" (9). To understand 'poiesis', Heidegger makes a distinction between two modes of making: 'machen' and 'lassen' that contradict in the way they dispose relations. 'Machen' namely means acting towards an intensification of power (*Macht*). 'Machen' also conveys that in production, one constructs a power relation between the one that makes the producer and the thing

that is being made (the object). Producing has a goal, which according to Ziarek, art lacks. Contradictory to 'machen', 'lassen' relinquishes power relations, which means any possible relation may be taken insofar as "an alternative modality of mutual enabling and becoming" (11). A forcework can, in this way, create a powerfree zone, a place where forces are released instead of increased. For this process of 'releasing', Ziarek chooses the term 'aphesis'. 'Aphesis' describes the working of forces as "disengaging from social, cultural, political or personal relations of power" (22). For my research it is evident to understand how the aphetic relation connects to Van Alphen's idea of aesthetic negativity. In the next section I will discuss how Ziarek argues that aphesis can reach what aesthetic negativity cannot, to criticize modern power.

In order to conceptualize the relationality that 'aphesis' supports, Ziarek combines Adorno's negativity with Heidegger's notion of the event and in doing so goes beyond Adorno's concept of negativity. According to Ziarek, Adorno has failed to escape art's involvement in power relations. Adorno's aesthetics are involved in the social realm. Aesthetics try to rework the relation between the object and the viewer of the object, while aphesis goes one step further and calls into question "the power momentum instantiated by them" (99). Whereas aesthetics work on the level of objects, 'aphesis' tries to call into question the power structures that are embedded in a relation between the object and the viewer. Ziarek aspires to a negativity that makes forces free from their service to the intensification of power, while aesthetic negativity will always be subject to the power structures. "While negation and affirmation are always already involved in the play of power, the event's force of nihilation opens up a (spatial-temporal) dimensionality in which relations transpire as powerfree" (57). To reiterate, Ziarek aims to reformulate the concept of negativity, because he argues Adorno's aesthetics are supporting the power relations constitutive of our modern technological society. According to Ziarek, art can annihilate these power relations.

Ziarek draws this idea of nihilation from Heidegger's conception of the event (*Ereignis*). 'Ereignis' denotes in Heidegger's theory a force "prior to' affirmation and negation" (56). Negativity is not freedom from specific ideologies or cultural modes of thinking, but from any domination of power. In this -what Adorno calls- "enigma"

(13) art can offer an alternative relation to the world, one in which beings are not subjected to power and one that offers the possibility to think beyond these existing forms of power. Art invites one to think beyond the subject-object dialectics, Ziarek claims. This aphesis takes place in the event that the forcework is and effects the transformation. "In the event, to put it simply, being is nihilation, (intrinsic to temporality) and not power, representation, mediation, knowledge, negation, and so on" (57). The powerfree relations are a nihilation of power relations and a return to a mode of relating that is (again) "prior to" (Ibid.) their determination in terms of power.

By now, it might be evident in what way Ziarek's conception of art's relation to social reality differs from that of Van Alphen. Whereas for Ziarek, any involvement with the social structures of meaning and power is weakening art's critical potential, for Van Alphen the aesthetic experience of art is both part of the social meaning and exceeds it at the same time. It seems as if Heidegger, and also Ziarek, depart from the idea that there is something beyond social reality, a powerfree 'place' which culture cannot influence, the force operates beyond the social and subjective inscriptions of artistic objects. Yet, what does it mean to regard art beyond the object? What about the cultural and historical dimensions of the object of art? Is it possible and desirable to think of art beyond the social aspect of the object at all? I certainly doubt this. I will explicate my doubt by utilising one of Ziarek's own case studies, *GFP Bunny* by the American artist Eduardo Kac.

a. Meaning versus Force

Eduardo Kac created the work of art *GFP Bunny* (see: Image 3) by using techniques of genetic manipulation. He inserted the gene that is responsible for the fluorescence of jellyfish into an albino rabbit and calls the subsequent animal his *Green Fluorescent Protein Bunny*. A second part of this work of art is the social interaction between the rabbit and the artist's family, with whom the rabbit lives and where he is kept as a pet. A third component of the work of art comprises the public dialogue that Kac instigates by means of his art and his propositions. On his website, Kac presents his art as *Transgenic Art*, "a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering to transfer natural or synthetic genes to an organism, to create unique living beings"

(Kac ekac.org).



Image 3: Kac, Eduardo. *GFP Bunny*. 2000, Avignon. medienkunstnetz.de

Ziarek discusses Kac's *GFP Bunny* solely on the level of forcework, as Ziarek asserts the social and ethical questions raised by the work of art are not part of the artwork itself. He rejects the work of art on the level of signification. The new insights and discussions that a work of art such as this actuates are not to be confused with its artistic aspect, he argues.

Kac's work has clearly energized and accelerated the pace of such discussion and it has contributed new insights that the scientific community itself perhaps would not have provided, but this in itself does not make *GFP Bunny* a work of art. (Ziarek, *The Force of Art* 96)

Instead, Ziarek points to what is in his eyes the only critical aspect of the work, that is the piece's interrogation of the boundary between technology and art. The most important question concerns the relation between transgenic art and the technicist flows of power. Ziarek's question reads: Does *GFP Bunny* give way to a possible turn in technicity? Ziarek concludes that Kac's work does allow that turn to happen,

because it keeps open the question that addresses the boundary between art and technology. In associating biological creation with artistic creation Kac seems to turn the intensification of power, which would be an immediate consequence of genetic manipulation, into art. Thereby he enables another disposition of forces. The forces present in *GFP Bunny* are no longer geared towards the accumulation of power. Instead, the turn towards an artistic moment, the event, shows the possibility of the nihilation of power and thus criticizes the increase of power.

As I understand this case study, Ziarek does not neglect the social or cultural issues that the work of art might question, yet these social or cultural aspects are not what make the work of art 'artistic'. Working from this premise, this would mean that the biblical passages that Kac in his work and on his website refers to are not important for the analysis. Neither are the discussions on the ethics involved in genetic manipulation. Nor are the questions that the object raises about the boundary between what we mean with art and with animal, with artificiality and with originality. In contrast to Ziarek, Steve Tomasula argues in his article on genetic art that the questions evoked by a work of art like that of Kac evokes, do take place on the level of signification. Tomasula argues that we should ask the question: "What does it mean to alter a natural evolutionary process millions of years old? How will people think of themselves, and their relation to others, once boundaries such as 'plant' and 'animal' have been eroded (138)"? Tomasula argues that the work of art aims to question what nature, animal and art signify in our culture. For Ziarek it is not important that art questions what we mean with art or with nature, but how the force of art transforms the existing forces that determine how we perceive, know and relate. I find Ziarek's position is doubtful. Not so much because it undervalues these, in my eyes, significant questions to the discursive systems, like religion and science. Yet I question what is left of the work of art "beyond signification, words and images (Ziarek, *The Force of Art*. 101)". My critique comes down to the idea that the force field of the object cannot be opposed to meaning and signification because the power structures involved in meaning are not (only) dominating the forcefield, as Ziarek and Heidegger put it, but these structures also enable a being, or forcefield to relate to the world and to receive meaning. According to Ziarek, art analysis should only be involved in the analysis of the extent to which the forcework transforms the

existing technic power structures into poietic modes of relating, while any concern of signification emphasizes the object's complicity to these power structures. Yet art is not, in my perspective, opposing technological reality, as it is also part of reality. Perhaps the only thing that art can do is to intervene in what we think of as our reality, that is, that which we construct as being part of our reality. Positioning art beyond our technological reality is problematic as the technological reality cannot be at the outside of art.

Beyond my critique, what remains interesting in Ziarek's perspective on art as an event is how he shifts the analysis of art to the way in which we relate to art. This is what art distinguishes from other objects, in his view: they offer a different relationality. Next, the analysis of art should in Ziarek's view not take place on the level of meaning, but on the level of what art does, the experience it creates. These are the two issues that I consider essential in what Ziarek means when he argues that art is an event. In what follows, I will compare his viewpoints with those of Van Alphen.

iii. Comparing Van Alphen and Ziarek

What are the differences and what are similarities in the approaches of Van Alphen and Ziarek in thinking of art as an event? In this section, I wish to draw two major comparisons and the different approaches to these similarities. The first commonality between the two lies in their idea of the intervention in reality that art would be capable of when we consider the work of art as an event. Ziarek argues that art can critique reality when we think of the work of art as performative, because it re-disposes relations. It is the forcework that "transforms the web of social, political, and cultural relations within which both the work and its reception take place" (28). Experiencing the release of power can reverberate into other social domains than art, via the beholder. Van Alphen goes further than Ziarek and he argues that the affect that art offers in the event mobilizes us to ask questions and rethink cultural issues. However, both Ziarek and Van Alphen claim that art, once considered as an event, intervenes in social praxis.

The other common point of departure is that the performative aspect of art lies in the experience it offers, although these experiences are of a dissimilar nature.

For Van Alphen, it is an aesthetic experience that affects the viewer. For Ziarek, the work of art transforms the relation to reality by offering a relationality that is powerfree. This is a relationality that works beyond the idea of an aesthetic object. Nevertheless, the two theories share a commonality insofar as they both argue that the artistic aspect of art lies in the experience the work of art offers. According to both Van Alphen and Ziarek, it is the nature of the relation between the work of art and the beholder that performs and out of which the event exists. In the next chapter I will try to understand these two issues: its potential to transform our reality and the experience that art offers in relation to Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

iv. Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to understand what Ziarek means when he argues that art is an event. I argued that for Ziarek this means that art criticizes the power structures that are involved in subject-object relations. Viewing art as an event means that the object of art is valued for the relation it establishes and for the extent to which this relation is aphetic and questions the technological nature relating, rather than for what the object means, represents, expresses or embodies. Art as an event means that art transforms the way in which we are used to relate to our reality, thereby critiquing that reality. Consequently, the beholder of the work of art should pursue this powerfree experience to other non-artistic practices in the social sphere, so that the powerfree relation can transform technic ways of perceiving and knowing.

My critique on Ziarek's perspective concerns the opposition he creates between originary freedom and technicity, thereby suggesting that there exists something beyond a technic reality that has not been affected by power. I have tried to explain my critique in foregrounding one of Ziarek's own case studies, *GFP Bunny* by Eduardo Kac. Ziarek argues about this work of art that we should think beyond the object itself in order to understand its critical potential. While discarding the questions about the meaning of nature and art that the object articulates, Ziarek argues we should focus on the extent to which the work of art transforms the

technicist flows of power. Ziarek presents technicity as something that has been added to the poietic forcefield or being, while I argue that the forcework cannot be opposed to the power structures involved in signification.

In my comparison between Ziarek and Van Alphen, I argue that what both theorists have in common is the idea that art as an event means that art intervenes in reality. Also, both argue that it is the experience that art offers which intervenes. For Van Alphen, this aesthetic experience eventually causes a shift or transformation in the thinking of the beholder. For Ziarek, this experience of a powerfree moment is the critical aspect of art itself. In the next chapter I will explore how Rancière thinks through these two aspects. First, I will turn to his philosophy to understand why he regards art as a practice and how he argues that art relates to and intervenes in reality. Consequently, I explore what the experience that art as an event offers means for Rancière's idea of what art does.

Chapter III: Politics and Performativity

i. Introduction

In the previous chapters, I sought to answer what it means to view art as an event by analysing Ernst van Alphen and Krzysztof Ziarek's theories of contemporary art. I concluded my analysis with two points of concern: First, both Ziarek and Van Alphen argue that art as an event means that art intervenes in our (either social/cultural or technological) reality. Second, both theorists suppose that this intervention is actuated in the experience that art offers. How can we think these conclusions in relation to a broader idea of what art is and what it can do? This chapter aims to rethink these two conclusions through the philosophy of Jacques Rancière. This means that Rancière's ideas are explored for how they might provide an answer to the two questions mentioned above. Again, the two questions that I deduced from these two conclusions are: How can we understand the relation between the work of art and the world in which it acts when we consider art as an event? Secondly, how can we think about the experience that art offers in relation to what art can do? Rancière argues that we should rethink what we mean with critique and politics and offers a critical perspective on Van Alphen and Ziarek's ideas on what art the experience that art offers would effect. In an attempt to answer these questions, I introduce Rancière's discussion on aesthetics, politics and the aesthetic regime of images. I will discuss Van Alphen's and Ziarek's approach to art's relation to society and the experience it offers in light of Rancière's argument.

ii. Art & Politics

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière rethinks the relation between politics and aesthetics and the consequences his ideas have for our perspective on, among other things, modernity, history, art, aesthetics and politics. In order to address how Rancière imagines the relationship between the work of art and other objects and practices that form our reality, I will first turn to what he understands to be art. This

is relevant, as what Rancière considers art is conditioned by the way in which a practice relates to other practices. Therefore I will need to explain his conception of politics and aesthetics and address the basic principle of his argument, where artistic practices meet other practices, on the level of sense.

a. Artistic Practices

Rancière's philosophy departs from the idea that how we think the world is determined by the way in which the sensible is structured in a given society. To take this distribution of the sensible, as he calls it, as the structuring principle of a society implies that the commonality upon which a community is based is sense. Rancière explains the sensible as that which structures our senses, and by extension of that, how our thinking and in extension of our thinking, the social order, is structured. The distribution of the sensible is concerned with the ways in which "the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable" are distributed (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 3). The principle of distribution implies that there is always a division between privileged senses, those that can be sensed and others that are excluded from producing and participating in knowledge, also known as the unintelligible.⁵ Since the distribution of the sensible is always an unequal distribution, it also always contains 'political subjects'. Thereby Rancière does not only designate human individuals, but any operator "that challenge[s] the given distribution of roles, territories and languages" (40). According to Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is an aesthetic distribution. To be more precise, aesthetics, in this broad sense of the word,⁶ articulate the way in which the sensible is distributed and bodies in the social order are structured. The Kantian perspective on aesthetics largely inspires this conception of aesthetics. In his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* Immanuel Kant investigates the preconditions that enable an aesthetic judgement. Aesthetics form, according to Kant, "the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" (Ziarek, *The Force of Art* 13). In a Kantian sense, aesthetics form the structural system that organizes sense experience. Rancière, after Kant,

⁵The principle behind the distribution of the sensible is the idea of equality. Rancière argues as the following: All divisions of society are hierarchical and unequally divided. Things can only be considered unequal if equality is the goal to be attained. The aim of polities is always to strive for equality, but this is ultimately not achievable or possible in the end. Instead, it is a presupposition, "a condition that only functions when it is put into action" (Rockhill and Watts, *Jacques Rancière* 53).

⁶Rancière also uses aesthetics in a more narrow sense, as an experience specific to art.

argues that aesthetics both condition our experience of the world and also delimit our position within that world. Art plays one specific role in this distribution of the sensible.

What role does art have in this aesthetic distribution? Rancière argues that the reason behind why we call certain practices artistic, or 'art', is a historically changing phenomenon. According to Rancière, art, or as he prefers to call it, artistic practice, intervenes in the distribution of the sensible.⁷ This means that artistic practices challenge the dominant distribution by making invisible practices visible. This intervention in the sensible is what Rancière calls politics. Politics is not conceptualised or predefined by Rancière, but is conditioned by aesthetics, as politics are about what is at stake when certain a priori forms are being made sensible thus excluding others. Practices are involved in politics when they are made sensible while not being part of the dominant distribution of the sensible, that is, when they disturb this distribution by becoming sensible. Rancière calls this the case of emancipatory practices as these practices emancipate certain ways of doing and making by making them sensible. This emancipation is pursued according to the principle of equality, meaning that these practices strive to be equal subjects. Perhaps this is already evident, but the politics involved in artistic practices is not primarily based on a political content of the object or on formal commitment. Neither is the idea that some artistic practices are political embedded in the practice as such. Rather, art is political because, as it were, it questions what we call 'community'. Art relates to our social reality in the way that it liberates certain practices that have been previously invisible in that society. This relation between art and the society is political, in Rancière's sense of the word. Now that I discussed here how Rancière thinks about the way in which art relates to other practices, I will discuss how Van Alphen and Ziarek's ideas on art's intervention in society relate to Rancière's claim that the relation between artistic practices and other practices is an emancipatory one.

b. Emancipation & Intervention

As was demonstrated in the previous chapters, both Van Alphen and Ziarek define the event that art would perform as an encounter between the object of art and

⁷ Rancière refers to this as artistic practices because 'art' is related to a specific kind of artistic practices.

society and hence in relation to other practices. In Van Alphen's theory, the object intervenes in the way in which we make and give meaning to society. I have illustrated this process by outlining how Van Alphen analyses toy art. Toy art refers qua subject matter directly to the Holocaust ('Hitler-jugend' and concentration camp) and intervenes in the way in which we usually relate to that historical event. The works of art propose the practice of art, play and imagination as new ways to approach this historical event. In Ziarek's theory, the performative object intervenes in our mode of relating to objects. Ziarek's perspective on art is that art intervenes on the level of relating and thereby criticizes the power structures that give form to subjects and objects in our modern society. The work of art *GFP Bunny* questions according to him the technicity involved in genetic manipulation because the work plays with the difference between the forces of art and the power structures involved in DNA-research. Still, both theoreticians argue that the object performs an intervention in the practices that constitute reality.

Although Van Alphen, Ziarek and Rancière propose a similar perspective on the role of art as an event when it comes down to art's relation to other practices, Van Alphen and Ziarek's points of departure are different from that of Rancière. For Rancière, the idea that the practice intervenes in the distribution of the sensible is a premise for a practice to be considered art. Rancière argues that only the practices that are emancipatory and that intervene in other practices are artistic. Van Alphen does not draw this line. In contrast to Rancière, Van Alphen does not make claims on what is art and what not. His proposal to regard art performative is a perspective on art that can stand next to other points of view on art. For Van Alphen, art does not necessarily have to be regarded performative in order to be understood as art. Ziarek's claim is more urgent and more in line with what Rancière argues. In his perspective, only art that evokes an event that takes place beyond object-subject dialectics can be called critical. 'Art' that does not in this way question the technicity of relating Ziarek more or less equalizes with commodities. Hence, to be critical and to question technology is art's artistic aspect, Ziarek argues. Ziarek's view is close to Rancière in the sense that he also maintains that the intervention that art makes is the artistic aspect of art. However, according to Ziarek this is what makes art critical, while for Rancière this is what defines a certain practice as art. Hence, whereas Van

Alphen relates the idea of art as a 'doing' and its relation to society to art as event [emphasis NA], for Rancière, and to a certain extent also for Ziarek, regarding art as an emancipatory practice is what defines a practice as artistic. This also means that Van Alphen starts his theory from the point of view of an *object* that has already been called 'art', while Rancière and Ziarek start with a certain practice that should be 'practiced' in order for an object to be called artistic.

Another difference in their ideas on how art relates to other practices lies in the efficacy they attach to the work of art. This means that they differ in their ideas on what the intervention accomplishes. Rancière, for example, calls the intervention art makes in the aesthetic distribution 'politics'. As might have become clear in the previous section, politics means for Rancière the process through which the dominant distribution of the sensible is disrupted and "the part of those who have no part" emerges and reframes our common experience (142). This means for Rancière that the logics of aesthetics overlap the logics of politics. It should be noted that this does not mean that the practice of art, the redistribution of what appears to our senses, has always consequences for politics and always emancipates these practices. Rancière argues that "no direct cause-effect relationship is determinable between the intention realized in an art performance and a capacity for political subjectivation" (141-142). Whereas Rancière is careful with attaching a direct effect to the viewing of the work of art, Van Alphen argues that art as an event demands from us to rethink cultural issues and Ziarek talks in his work about art's capacity to critique society. An emphasis on the eventfulness of art leads both Van Alphen and Ziarek to claim that art questions society critically. What they mean with this critique will be explored in the next section.

I can conclude that for all theorists the intervention that art makes lies in its distinct 'way of doing', thereby making certain practices visible that had been invisible in the dominant way of doing. Yet what defines art and the efficacy of art form points of discussion. What art does and what it might effect in relation to the experience that art offers will be explored in the next section. What does the suggestion that art offers an experience specific to art mean for our idea of what art can do? I will utilise Rancière's perspective on how the sensible is structured in our current regime of thought, the Aesthetic Regime of Art, so as to further unpack the practices he

considers to be emancipatory.

iii. The Aesthetic Regime of Art

In this thesis, I have argued that when we regard art as an event, we frame the work of art as a practice in relation to other practices. I concluded the previous paragraph by arguing that to regard the work of art as an event means that art intervenes in the dominant ways of doing. What it is that this intervention exactly 'does and makes' is not yet sufficiently explained. In principle, this intervention can be the work of art's content, style or genre, what it represents or what it expresses, any way of doing and making that intervenes with the dominant distribution of the sensible. Yet what counts as an intervention, and is emancipatory, depends upon the distribution, Rancière argues. What practices does art emancipate currently in order to be understood as an artistic practice in Rancière's sense of the word? Or, to put it in a different way, what does art do in order to differentiate itself from other practices? When we return to the theorists, it has become clear that from Van Alphen's perspective, aesthetics play a role in this relation. Aesthetics challenge cultural meaning. According to Ziarek, the relation between art and reality is one that is powerfree. Both theorists highlight the experience that art offers to be central to the event of art. Now I will turn to Rancière in order to discuss what he considers to be the artistic aspect of these practices. Therefore I will have to briefly introduce his historical perspective on art.

Rancière distinguishes three major different ways in which the sensible has been distributed over time. Accordingly, he sets apart three disparate 'regimes' for distinguishing artistic practices from other practices. These dissimilarities are based on the idea that they represent a different way in which aesthetics and politics relate, hence three variations on the ways in which art is being conceptualised. These distinctions are the 'Ethical Regime of Images',⁸ in which images were valued for the

⁸ In the 'Ethical Regime of Images', produces images instead of art. The images have nothing to do with what we nowadays call 'art', because they delineate the ethical principles the community already has. Artistic practices, on the contrary, aim to reconfigure these dominant principles. Images in the ethical regime are not valued for their resistance to the common distribution of the sensible, but for their ends, the education of people in accordance to the dominant policy and their origins. The craft of imitation is important to reach these goals. The ethical regime confirms the world in the way it already appears to the people.

extent to which they supported the morals of the community, the 'Representative Regime of Art',⁹ in which artistic practices were separated from other practices by using other techniques of imitation, and the 'Aesthetic Regime of Art' (Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* 4).¹⁰ The aesthetic regime is dominant nowadays and determines our thinking about art from around the year 1800 up until present times. The aesthetic regime came into existence as a response to the system of thought in the representative regime, Rancière argues, and also still contains features of the ethical regime.¹¹

Rancière indicates that the most important aspect of the 'Aesthetic Regime of Art' resides in its ambition to abolish the distinction between art and life. This means that this regime abolishes the hierarchical distribution of the sensible present in the representative regime. In the latter regime, artistic practices are placed outside of life, and are defined in relation to one another. The aesthetic regime rids of all the representative distinctions that defined artistic practices in the representative regime. This means that artistic objects can no longer be distinguished by their form,

9The 'Representative Regime of Art', also called poetic regime of art, breaks with the ethical regime. Artistic practices no longer have to support social, moral or religious criteria. Instead of reproducing reality, artistic practices are being placed outside reality. Artistic practices give a fictional representation of life. Art is no longer about the norms it expresses, but rather about 'ways of doing and making' (Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics* 22). The arts are defined in relation to each other. Those ways of doing and making are put in a hierarchical order, divided per genre and subject matter.

10 Rancière acknowledges that his development of art in three systems is to a certain extent similar to Michel Foucault's history of ideas. He also points to an important difference. For Rancière, the regimes are only historical to the extent that they can be found back in historical periods, whereas Foucault's approach is more historically contingent. As Rancière puts it:

I differ from Foucault insofar as his archaeology seems to me to follow a schema of historical necessity according to which, beyond a certain chasm, something is no longer thinkable, can no longer be formulated. The visibility of a form of expression as an artistic form depends on a historically constituted regime of perception and intelligibility. This does not mean that it becomes visible with the emergence of a new regime. (50)

For Rancière, these three regimes can be present at the same time. Within the current Aesthetic

Regime, the other two regimes are also possible.

11As might be clear, Rancière does not distinguish between standard periods like Modernity, Postmodernity and Avant-garde. Instead of reflecting a historical period, he argues, they only reflect to "break with the past or anticipate the future that takes place within this regime" (20). This division in regimes instead of historical movements or genres allows him to exceed discussions and judgements that are based on a priori perspectives on art or that figure aesthetics as a certain discipline or discourse. Rancière rejects a disciplinary division because art does not simply originate from a historical movement, but results from a new distribution of what is sensible. The three regimes do not represent certain historical ages, but rather represent certain modes of thinking and identifying the arts.

content, style or genre as they were in the representative regime. They are no longer discernible as another mode of imitation of life. What happens on the level of politics and aesthetics in this regime? Rancière argues that this system of thought attempts to synchronize aesthetics and politics. This means that in this regime we try to think of all aesthetic practices, hence all modes of doing and making, as equal. Resultantly, the difference between artistic and non-artistic practices dissolves and what we call art can no longer be distinguished by its specific way of making; it's style, genre, and form. Instead, art or artistic practices are determined by their special way of being, this is a certain sensibility specific to art, that we call an aesthetic experience.¹² What Rancière means with this specific way of being I will try to explain in the following section.

For Rancière, this being contains a paradox. He describes this paradox in the following way:

The aesthetic regime asserts the absolute singularity of art and, at the same time, destroys any pragmatic criterion for isolating this Singularity. It simultaneously establishes the autonomy of art and the identity of its forms with the forms that life uses to shape itself (23).

Art is both equal to life and autonomous to it at the same time. For Rancière, artistic practices in the aesthetic regime are distinct from other practices only in the sense that they evoke a certain experience that other objects or practices do not evoke. This experience has resulted from the way in which artistic practices blur the distinctions that were still present in the representative regime. As Rancière states, "In the aesthetic regime of art, the property of being art is no longer given by the criteria of technical perfection but is ascribed to a specific form of sensory apprehension" (Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents* 29). In suspending the sensorium common to the community, art questions the distinctions that were embedded in the representative regime in several ways. The emancipation in the aesthetic regime of art takes place where dissensus is, where different senses clash. For instance, art can question whether there is a difference between appearance and reality, a distinction that was present in the representative regime. Or, is there a

12 Here the term 'aesthetics' refers to the 'Aesthetic regime of Art' and should not be confused with the broader idea of aesthetics mentioned above.

difference between the representation of the model and the model itself? Is there a difference between form and matter, between activity and passivity, between understanding and sensibility? (30) The aesthetic experience is evoked when a practice presents itself in a certain sensory way that conflicts with the way in which the beholder tries to make sense of it and holds on to the distinctions between art and life and hence to those mentioned above (Rancière, *Dissensus* 138). To reiterate, Rancière argues that the emancipatory practice of art lies in its capacity to suspend the way in which we relate to practices. The aesthetic experience breaks with the distinction between art and life that has dominated the representative regime. Now I will examine how Rancière's perspective on what art can do relates to Van Alphen's and Ziarek's ideas on what art as an event is capable of doing.

a. Suspending the Sensorium

How do Van Alphen's and Ziarek's ideas on the experience that art evokes relate to the idea of art as the suspension of our common sensorium? For Van Alphen and Ziarek, regarding art as an event means that the artistic moment of art is the experience specific to art. It is the experience of the work of art that makes the encounter with art different from encounters with other practices and objects. Van Alphen and Ziarek stances are in line with Rancière insofar that regarding art as an event means that art offers a distinct experience.

Yet there is one important difference in their ideas on what art can do. As we have seen in the first chapter, Van Alphen discusses the efficacy of art in several steps. Firstly, the aesthetic experience suspends cultural meaning. Consequently, the aesthetic negativity triggers questions about cultural issues, which then demand from the beholder to rethink cultural issues. In the second chapter I have explained how for Ziarek the powerfree experience that art offers, suspends the way in which we are used to relate to objects. Art gives us a powerfree experience that changes the way in which the beholder relates to other practices and thereby critiques society. Both theorists think farther than art's potential to suspend common experience by claiming that the experience of art as an event triggers beholders to be critical and to transform their thought or by arguing that art as an event can critique the modern forms of power and society. Rancière does not anticipate on the effect the

experience of suspension has on intellectual thought and the attitude of the spectator. The politics of aesthetics take place on the level of experience. In *Dissensus* (2010), Rancière formulates the problem he has with most art that calls itself 'critical' and with drawing further conclusions on what art can do.

There is no reason why the production of a shock produced by two heterogeneous forms of the sensible ought to yield an understanding of the state of the world, and none why understanding the latter ought to produce a decision to change it. There is no straight path from viewing a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action. Instead, this kind of shift implies a move from one given world to another in which capacities and incapacities, forms of tolerance and intolerance, are differently defined. What comes to pass is a process of dissociation: a rupture in the relationship between sense and sense, between what is seen and what is thought, and between what is thought and what is felt. (...) These sorts of ruptures (...) can never be calculated (143).

According to Rancière, we should not make the mistake to equate the suspension of experience with a transformation in our thinking or with a fundamental critique of power. The work of art does not more nor less than suspending distinctions present in the dominant distribution of the sensible, he argues. The politics of aesthetics in the aesthetic regime try to make new forms of making sense of the sensible. "Artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give lessons nor have any destination" (140). Art in the aesthetic regime has no pedagogical function or ethical aim as it had in other regimes of art. Hence, the idea that art as an event can lead to the awareness of a feeling of strangeness and an analysis of that strangeness, eventually leading up to political mobilization, is based on different ideas of political or critical art and on another distribution of the sensible. In my view, both Van Alphen and Ziarek attach another idea of art's efficacy to art as an event than Rancière. Their idea of being critical is based on another view on politics than the one Rancière makes a case for. Both start alike, with their argument that art offers an experience that suspends our sensory apprehension of objects. Yet this experience turns into a more rational awareness of that strangeness which transforms thought and makes you rethink cultural issues (Van Alphen) and critiques the forms of power in society (Ziarek). Perhaps most of these ideas depart from a

pedagogical model of the efficacy of art, which means that art is a set of signs that has been formed according to the artist's intention. (135-136). Regularly, Van Alphen argues in his book that the transformation a certain work of art establishes is being done according to this logic. This can be found back in his analysis of toy art for example, when he argues that toy art shows us that there is also another way to remember the Holocaust, which would even improve the remembrance of this traumatic event. This implies the claim that presenting other ways of referring to the Holocaust will transform our ideas on how we should remember this event. In another chapter, Van Alphen argues for example that the reader of Ian McEwan's novel *The Comfort of a Stranger* 'sees' the violence of the heterosexual gaze and is therefore 'ready for a drastic rewriting' of that same gaze (Van Alphen 99-1 19). This idea of critique is in a completely different way also found in Ziarek's book. It has to be emphasized that Ziarek's aim in this book is to find out what it means to critique in this new by power dominated society. This is why Ziarek, in contrast to Van Alphen, does not pay attention to the level of signs, but to the level of powerstructures. However, he still follows the logics of a pedagogical model of art. Ziarek claims that the powerfree experience of a work of art radiates into the social context and that art in that way offers critique to the powerstructures that are embedded in our society. Again, art shows us something, a powerfree experience; we see that and turn that into a critique on society. Instead, Rancière argues that 'art' does not critique '(real) life', as it did in the representative regime but blurs this distinction. This different distribution of the sensible needs another idea of what it means to critique, not only another object of critique.

If we continue the thought that art as an event means that art intervenes in other practices, and that this intervention happens on the level of sense, it seems more logical to me that this also means that art's efficacy, its potential political impact or its critique happens on the level of sense. I agree with Rancière that these ideas on art's efficacy do not so much rest on what art actually does in the encounter with the spectator, but rather on old patterns of thinking about the efficacy of art. Van Alphen states that the 'negative' experience yields philosophical, social or political questions that the viewer should ask in order to understand the cultural issues the work of art articulates. I support the problem that Rancière has

with formulating the agency of art in this way as it moves past art's intervention on the level of sense and already draws conclusions on what social issues this intervention would critique.

To conclude, what does the experience that art as an event offers mean for our idea of what art can do? According to all theorists, the experience that art offers is a suspension of our sensorium. Art's efficacy is precisely this, it proposes different ways of experiencing things that we are used to experience in certain way. Above, I explained how Van Alphen and to a lesser extent also Ziarek relate art as an event almost automatically to a certain form of critique on our social reality (on the way in which we conceive cultural issues or on the way in which power dominates our society). Seeing art as an event implies for both theorists that art intervenes, but the results of art's intervention are related to an idea of critique and politics that have not so much to do with what actually happens when our sensory apprehension of the world is suspended. Rather, it is based on older ideas of what it means to critique and to be political. So, if we want to understand what it means to regard art as an event, we need to rethink the relationship between performativity and politics and how calling art performative creates new ideas of what it means to critique and of politics. These are new ideas and conceptions of critique and politics that pay attention to the way in which art intervenes in our social world.

iv. Conclusion

This chapter thinks through two questions that emerged from Van Alphen's and Ziarek's theories that argue that art should be regarded as an event. To recap, these questions are: How can we think the relation between the work of art and the world in which it intervenes? Secondly, how can we think about the experience that art offers in relation to what art can do? In response to these questions, I have explored how Rancière's theories might provide some answers. Van Alphen and Ziarek both argue that art as an event means that art intervenes in the world by performing different from other objects. The first distinction lies in the fact that Rancière argues that the intervention is a premise for calling a certain practice art. For Van Alphen and to a certain extent also for Ziarek counts that to intervene is an additional

function of a practice or an object that is already defined as art. Also, what is understood by this intervention differs. Rancière's perspective on the relation between art and other practices offers a critical view on what defines an intervention. Rancière argues that to intervene means that art makes visible certain practices that are invisible in the dominant way in which the world appears to our senses. This intervention of art overlaps with what Rancière calls 'politics', but is not quite the same. He argues that the intervention made does not necessarily effect the real emancipation of these senses. Art makes solely visible that which is invisible in the dominant way of making sense of the world. Rancière draws a line between what art does and what it might effect.

Then, how can we think of the experience that art offers in relation to what a work of art can do? All theorists argue that the efficacy of art resides in the distinct experience that it evokes. Art's agency is the suspension of the way in which we experience. This means that what art does, takes place on the level of sense. Hence, for Rancière this means that also politics take place on the level of sense. Van Alphen and Ziarek propose a different idea of art's efficacy and argue that the effect that the suspension of our experience changes the way in which we think about social and political issues or critiques the technological power structures. Rancière argues that these ideas of art's efficacy are based on older ideas of what it means to critique that do not conflict with the dominant way in which we think our reality currently.

Thinking Van Alphen and Ziarek's conception of art as an event through Rancière's ideas on aesthetics critically reframes how art relates to what we perceive as reality. Rancière asks what Van Alphen and Ziarek actually mean when they argue that art intervenes and critiques or critically questions society. What do we currently mean with critique? Regarding art as an event means that we consider art as a way of doing and making in relation to other ways of doing and making. This relation is one of intervention; art intervenes in these practices because it 'does and make' in a certain way that disturbs dominant ways of doing and making. Art's agency exists only in this relation to other practices. Calling art performative implies that art receives its meaning in relation to dominant ways of thinking the world. In this regime of thinking about art, this means that art 'happens' when a practice presents itself in a certain sensory way that clashes with the way in which the beholder is

used to make sense of it. We should therefore be careful not to think about art's performativity in terms how art might change our thoughts, but rather in terms of what it offers to experience in relation to what is common to the community.

Chapter IV: Conclusion

The meaning of the concept performativity has expanded from a purely linguistic speech act to any event that happens because someone does them in the cultural domain. Thinking of the work of art as a performative event goes one step further. In relation to paintings or photographs, we usually do not speak of a 'someone' who 'executes', or 'does' the work of art. These works of art generally do not move, nor change. This is why I asked in this thesis how we can think of the work of art as performative, what the work of art does and what happens as a result of that doing? And, if we rethink our idea of what art can do, should we then also rethink what we define as art? These are the questions that I have explored in my thesis.

Firstly, I analysed the arguments that Ernst Van Alphen and Krzysztof Ziarek employ to support their claim that art is an event. However different their points of departure were, both emphasize that the work of art is performative as it intervenes in what we perceive as our reality. Art disturbs what appears as our common world. Also, both Van Alphen and Ziarek argue that the disturbance is made by the experience it offers. The nature of this experience differs very substantially, as Van Alphen describes it as an aesthetic experience that challenges meaning making on the level of signs, whereas Ziarek claimed that art offers a powerfree experience and makes us aware of the powerstructures that are embedded within our society.

In the third chapter I tried to analyse these two conclusions. How can we understand the relation between the work of art and the world in which it acts? This question implied the question that asks what we actually mean with art? Don't we call a certain practice art because of its special relationship to society? Furthermore, how can we think about the experience that art offers in relation to what art can do? Or, what happens in the encounter between a work of art and our social reality? For these questions, I turned to Jacques Rancière's book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, in which he argues why we are calling certain practices artistic, how these practices relate to the world in which they are practiced, what the work of art does and what it does not automatically effect.

Jacques Rancière approaches art as a practice that intervenes in other

practices by emancipating practices that had been invisible up until then. In contrast to Van Alphen and Ziarek, seeing art as a practice that intervenes, is part of his idea of what art is. He basically argues that art is always an event in the sense that it always frames itself in relation to other practices in order to be considered art. The artistic aspect of a practice is not inherent to the object itself and can only be considered art in relation to other practices, in the sense that it always 'does' in the way in which non-artistic practices 'do not'.

What does this 'doing and making' exist of currently? Rancière states in line with Van Alphen and Ziarek that the distinct doing and making lies in the experience that art offers. This experience intervenes as it disturbs the way in which we are used to experience things because art would blur the distinctions we are used to make between art and life. In contrast to Van Alphen and Ziarek's statement that the (aesthetic or powerfree) experience of the work of art is art's performative aspect, they employ different ideas on the effect art has on the beholders. Both Van Alphen and Ziarek argue that art critically questions or critiques society, in a way that goes beyond the suspension of our common experience. The ideas about what it means to offer critique rests on more old-fashioned ideas about what is common to the community and do not disturb our current dominant way of thinking in any way.

In the introduction of my thesis I started out with a comparison between theatre and art. Is there a difference between the performative aspect of art and that of theatre? For both theatre and art being called performative means that the works receive meaning in relation to their beholders. Both theatre and art are valued for what happens in the encounter between the work of art and the audience. The fact that most art also exists when there is no beholder who views it while theatre only exists in the presence of an audience does not diminish the idea that both receive meaning when someone sees them. In this sense, performativity does not only designate any event that happens because someone does them in the cultural domain, but rather refers to the process of meaning making. The performative aspect of any work of art -both theatre and art- refers to the idea that a work of art receives meaning in *relation* to the cultural domain in which it is being viewed.

I hope to have made clear in this thesis that regarding art as an event does involve a rethinking of what position artistic practices have within our culture and

why they henceforth can be called artistic. Van Alphen's idea that art thinks and Ziarek's claim that art critiques society have not been grounded by a strong idea of why we call something art. Also, their ideas on what art effects are not based on what happens in the event as such, but are influenced by older ideas of what it means to be critical.

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