

## The suit really needs two pairs of hands

By Matthew Stock

*The suit I am wearing and the operation I am conducting with it and in it really needs two pairs of hands; one to slip the battery packs in to the specifically made pockets in the waistcoat and the other to site the cameras in the jacket and feed the wires from the battery packs. But as this is a one-person cubicle with a fair few gallery visitors outside it is better for me to this solo. The cameras are pin hole spy cameras with 10m night sights and audio; with some last minute adjustments they will soon be sited and I will be ready to exit and emerge into the gallery. The weight of the battery packs holds me upright and elegant.*

The Spectator is much more than a mere member of a momentary group that go to see this thing, then move over there and observe that thing; they are a community. The position and power of the spectator as implied by the work of art has been a central question from the time of Denis Diderot, and has been regularly contested from Roland Barthes essay *The Death of the Author* to Michael Fried's call for the passivity of the audience.

Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* brings the spectator back into focus once again asking us to re-examine its potential. Rancière's spectator is one that is developed through ideas raised in his earlier work *The Ignorant School Master*. This work converges on the theories of the eccentric Joseph Jacotot who believed in the pedagogical structure of intellectual equality. Rancière concentrates on this to discuss the relationship between the schoolmaster and the pupil. In the *Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière uses *The Ignorant School Master* as a basis to discuss the spectator of an artwork; a position that he always holds in doubt.

The spectator who sits and passively observes an artwork is viewed as an undesirable description of the viewing process for two reasons: firstly the spectator is portrayed as a position of ignorance, unaware of the codes and signs that enable the transmission of knowledge from actor to viewer. Secondly the spectator remains immobile and passive. He is separated both from the action on the stage and from the actions of other spectators. This is an ignorance that needs be countered to re-establish knowledge and action. Theatre needs to activate the spectator by reversing this ignorance's effect, and restoring what Rancière calls the "ownership of their consciousness and their activity".

But Rancière goes further for he calls for a new spectator, and a new relationship derived from his writings about the ignorant schoolmaster. The schoolmaster's role is to abolish the distance between ignorance and knowledge, by continuously re-establishing and breaking down this distance.

This pedagogical relationship between schoolmaster and pupil is one that can be seen as a parallel to the distance between the artwork and its spectator and may explain what is at stake for the spectator in contemporary art today.

"Emancipation starts from the opposite principal, the principal of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting, and understand that

the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection. It starts when we realise that looking is also an action that confirms or modifies that distribution, and that 'interpreting the world' is already a means of transforming it." *Art forum review, The Emancipated Spectator, March 2007.*

*The first route is the most important, the decisions that I make about my walking direction, pathways and stopping points will all have to be noted and catalogued for later repetition. It's the repetition of this walk through the site over and over again that will enable this artwork that I am in the process of creating.*

*Physically the galleries specific environment confronts me; in this instance it is the private view of its latest show. The visitors, the artwork, the artist, and the site make up the categories that I will be filming. The wondering gaze of the cameras retransmits these categories by divorcing them from time and place. In this way I am asking questions concerning the politics of art production and art viewing. I will begin by moving to observe this painting and then move over to my right to view this video installation; this has taken me 10 minutes so far. I will continue through...*

The question of an audience and readership arose again during the Self Assessment of Madame Wang. This journal is engaged in the potential for geo-distributed collaboration in order to call forth another site for artistic experiences, and in doing so is calling for a new way of approaching the art object. What is interesting is how Jacques Rancière and Boris Groys relate to this question. How can these artistic experiences and ideologies exist within a new site and what does this ultimately mean to the community that observes it? The contemporary art community is a self-aware community that has already been conditioned by the art world's numerous emancipatory and participatory projects. This community has already accepted its participatory role, actively welcomed its new authorities, and is ready to reject or accept any denigration offered. What would constitute a new site for art and what will its community of users look like? If we accept Rancière's position that the transfer of knowledge is dependent on maintaining the division of both mastery & ignorance, passivity & activity, then another question arises. This passivity and mastery continues to support the configuration of the involved individuals into positions of domination and subjection, can the artist functioning as the ignorant schoolmaster change the relationship of the spectator as the pupil?

Boris Groys offers an insight in his essay *Politics of Installation*, where he discusses what happens when a mass cultural community encounters the context of art. Groys suggests that groups attending a film screening are transitory encounters and that their structure is accidental; they share no commonalities or previous history to bind them together, but yet they are still communities. Groys calls these groups "radically contemporary communities", and makes it very clear that these groups are not to be confused with radical political, religious or working communities,

because these traditional communities all share, from the outset, a link to something common from the past.

“...a common language, common faith, common political history, common upbringing. Such communities tend to establish boundaries between themselves and strangers with whom they share no common past.” Groys, *Going Public*, P62

In contrast the communities created by mass culture transcend any links to the common past: a community viewing a film screening or a pop concert is only able to look forward; this is due to the constructs of stage and the positioning of the audience. Groys suggests that this is not adequate to keep the community together. The key is found when this community enters the art context, for the arts space has the ability to evoke self-reflection through its use of the installation, curatorial practices and most importantly mediated encounters with art.

“The contemporary art space is a space in which multitudes can view themselves and celebrate themselves... in a way that assists them in reflecting upon their own condition, offering them an opportunity to exhibit themselves to themselves.” *Groys, Going Public 2010 p.63*

In this self exhibition there is a parallel with Rancière’s argument that the ethics of our political efficacy stem from and still have a relationship to the classical theatre’s aesthetic break. The actors of classical theatre performing on stage exhibit thoughts and emotions that are interpreted and read by the audience, who see in these performances a reflection of themselves. This reflection enables the stage to directly affect the behaviour of the community. Rancière is quick to point out that while we no longer believe that the stage can bring about a utopian change in human behaviour, we do still however hold with the belief that images/things can instigate political social change. But therein lies a rupture point, and interestingly it relates to neuroscience and how the brain processes new information. Rancière suggests that the origins of this rupture stem from the spectator vs. performer,

“What was broken down was the continuity between thought and its signs in bodies, and also between the performance of living bodies and its effect on other bodies.” *Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, p.62.*

This refers to an aesthetically induced rupture point; the spectator who sees and reflects on what he sees with what he knows, observes in the theatre his reflection, but it is paradoxically opposite to the spectacle before him. The model has broken down.

*This crowded corner means that I will have to stop and wait; this is a good time for me to mentally re-walk my entrance through the first two rooms, corridor and drinks bar. I find myself in a state of hypnosis, I see neither the artworks or the people, I see just objects in space that I will re-appropriate*

*much later in my studio. The partially concealed cameras can be noticed by those that want to look; but they are unimportant and insignificant over shadowed by the greater impact that this private view has over the attending audience; who are a subservient community emancipated by one of arts most sincere of spectacles.*

*This artwork in creation aims to open up layers of possibilities within: the tragic space, the foreclose space, and the potential space.*

Ranciere puts forward the civic festival structure as a possible solution to this rupture, where there is no separation between actors and spectators through the use of ethical performance; or to put it another way, the actors perform what the spectators see in themselves. This new model proposes a stance without any separation between stage and spectator; an anti-representation. Linking this with Groys one can see a similarity with the model of his stance for production. The artist and the spectator view together their own reflection, and in doing so call forth new information, and new knowledge. Is this the model for Madame Wang?

### Arts Encounter with Madame Wang

Rancière now introduces what he calls the Third Thing in relation to the schoolmaster and the pupil. This Third Thing is described as being “..always a book or some kind of writing – alien to both and to which they can refer to, to verify in common what the pupil has seen..” An artist may wish an intention, an action or an intensity that is inherent in their work to be perceived or felt or understood by the spectator, and as such they seek a position between cause and effect. The artist is occupying the position of the schoolmaster as one who is aware of the distance and has knowledge of the ways to abolish it. There exists then this distance between the artist and the spectator, and also a distance between the artist’s intentions and the understanding of the spectator. This is where Rancière’s Third Thing comes in. Rancière suggests that it is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge, intention or understanding to the spectator but this Third Thing that is important. It is something that is owned by no one, but which subsists between them both. For the ignorant artist and ignorant spectator this Third Thing is both the intention of the artist and the understanding of the spectator. It is the spectacle, it is what links and separates them, there is no equal transmission of information; there is just the action of the spectator and the intention of the artist.

### A note about learning

When you acquire new learning you may feel that you can learn anything, however in fact the world of Neuroscience tells us something different. It says that what you have already learnt directly affects your ability to learn new things. This is important and poses an interesting question for art, because it is possible that there

will be limitations on the transmission of knowledge. For example, the spectator who stands in front of an art object in contemplation, does not stand in ignorant isolation for the spectator brings with them prior knowledge which they will access and reflect on to understand the object that they see before them. This knowledge is fundamental for the transmission of meaning from the artist to the spectator. This knowledge then provides the framework for which new knowledge can be linked. The brain's ability to acquire and process new information is fundamentally associative, that is to say what you can learn is influenced and affected by what you have already learnt.

The ability to learn is also motivated by differences between what is expected and what is actually transmitted; this difference between expectation and transmission is what produces further learning.

How can these new communities suggested by Groys and Rancière be empowered to approach Madame Wang's self-reflexive site, and to understand the processes by which this new encounter and its information will take place?

The spectator is not a passive position that needs to be made active; it is a natural position, it is what has always been. The community sees in an artwork that which it sees within itself and in doing so continues to reassert its position to itself. The artist aims to transmit an intensity of feeling, energy and action to the spectator, which is governed by the distance between them and the distance between the artwork and the spectator. More than that there is the Third Thing; placed between artist, artwork and spectator, to which all have access and which is described by Rancière as the book. Lastly and importantly there is neuroscience's association and its model of limitation.

This then displays the Self Assessment world that Madame Wang navigates and in many ways is a product of. By altering the site for art, the encounter with art is also changed, and with it are both the spectator and the artist. Madame Wang, the publication, is an object that is distributed, purchased, held and felt; its format is not necessarily new at all, but what is new is the way in which it is developed. In its dual call for both a new way of distributing writing, and an alternative collaborative process, it is placing demands on the centrality of the conception of the reader-writer relation. This openness is brought forth through the inclusion of the collaborators' processes and the outward stance of the text. It calls for collaboration in its creation and its reading, and in doing so it seeks to enable the re-conception of the audience. To be enabled is to give someone or something the authority or means to do something; this is a very powerful statement and in the end perhaps this is enough.

*Matthew Stock is an artist who uses video extensively in his work. He has made works that layer and fracture the times of public spaces, notably with a series made at the openings of art exhibitions.*

#### Bibliography

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