

**Gabriel Rockhill.** *Radical History and the Politics of Art*. New Directions in Critical Theory Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$27.99, e-book, ISBN 978-0-231-52778-1.

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## Art and Politics: Beyond the Binary

From the sorites paradox, which ponders how many grains of wheat can be called a heap if three, four, or five grains of wheat do not yet make up a heap, to the paradox of the ship of Theseus, which speculates just when a ship, whose parts are gradually replaced, ceases being the original ship, from Ludwig Wittgenstein contemplating problems associated with conceptual generalities, to Jacques Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible with the chapter-length detour detailing the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) role in the Cold War art politics, Gabriel Rockhill's ambitious and erudite *Radical History and the Politics of Art* covers a sizable and variegated terrain. He problematizes the concept of determinacy as it pertains to art and politics; critiques the notion of the transhistorical essence of art; questions the logic of periodic histories that privilege "the vertical dimension of chronology" at the expense of "the horizontal dimension of geography, and the stratigraphic dimension of social practices"; and assails "the omniscient defeatism of the end of illusions," which stipulates that the demise of the twin utopias of avant-garde and revolutionary vanguard was inevitable and foreordained (pp. 7, 94). Instead, Rockhill introduces the concept of "radical history" which "recognizes that everything is historical, including our most privileged practices,

cherished concepts, and venerable values," and which purports to ultimately subvert the fundamental premise that there are two distinct entities, "art" and "politics," and a determinate relation between them (p. 3).

To arrive at his conclusions, Rockhill critically examines a number of ontological positions on art whose deficiency, in his words, lies in a "quixotic search for the privileged link," or, conversely, "insurmountable dividing line existing between art and politics," in other words, Georg Lukács's realism, Herbert Marcuse's formalism, Jean-Paul Sartre's commitment, and Peter Bürger's views on art's autonomy, a stance that rules out "the possibility [that] multiple aesthetic practices might inhabit the same time frame" (pp. 8, 115). He gives a comprehensive overview of Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible, in which the French philosopher demonstrates that the domains of aesthetic history and the philosophic reflection are co-extensive and that "it is impossible to separate theoretical claims from artistic practice" (p. 138). This is a radically novel approach tantamount to a complete rethinking of the relation of aesthetics and politics and a contribution to the field that Rockhill likens to the Copernican revolution.

In one self-interrogatory instance, Rockhill suggests that the politics of art of the volume's title may not even be an appropriate expression since it implies that there has to be a politics inherent in art. He argues for a more dynamic and non-dualistic approach positing that a work of art is not the product of one privileged point of agency which isolates works of art from the complexity of their social nexus and that considers them according to only two possibilities of success or failure with the attendant view that the political charge of art is situated in the work itself, thus indulging in what Rockhill terms "the talisman complex" culpable of fetishizing the art object, not unlike the magical powers of a talisman (p. 7).

Structured as a palimpsest wherein the highlights of preceding chapters are often reiterated and reinforced in subsequent ones, Rockhill's text is also interspersed with impassioned calls for a new strategy—the rallying cries whose pitch and rhetoric on occasion curiously approximate the tonality of the avant-garde manifestoes of the early twentieth century. He writes: "I maintain that it is essential to examine the complex and diverse ways in which aesthetic practices are intertwined with the social fabric and its political struggles" (p. 220). Or, concluding the chapter on Bürger, who is critiqued for excessive reliance on unsubstantiated declarations at key moments of his arguments, Rockhill states succinctly, "We need a new historical order" (p. 117). Or, when extolling Rancière's refusal to adopt "a totalizing logic that aims at systematizing cultural and political history," Rockhill's language becomes strident: "Fortunately, his work has overcome the pathological fear of Hegel found in some of his compatriots" (p. 144).

The choice of theorists subjected to the author's scrutiny is tellingly agenda-driven as well: most of them, excepting Rancière who exerts the obvious influence on Rockhill's thinking, are of a staunch Marxist bent dating back to the 1930s through the 1970s. Rockhill's claim that he could have just as easily picked a different group of

thinkers and arrived at similar conclusions is never tested or substantiated. Indeed, one cannot help wondering whether Rockhill's approach would have been as effective if applied, for example, to Jacques Derrida, whose name is never invoked, nor is his writing on aesthetics examined—an omission that hides as much as it reveals, for Derrida's method, with its attendant decontextualization of works of art, bears a serviceable resemblance to Rockhill's recurring attack on the strictures of binary oppositions prevalent in modern philosophy. Or, to quote Rockhill's riff on Daniel Dennett's metaphor, "radical historicism ... [is like] a universal acid: it dissolves all of the supposedly fixed categories by unleashing the corrosive power of the sheer flow of time" (p. 37). At this juncture it would be worth pointing out that since the pernicious flow of time has not yet done much to affect the impact of, say, Giotto's frescos, Rembrandt's body of work, or Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed* (1872), ostensibly the first political novel ever written, Rockhill's unconditional—should we say talismanic?—confidence in the efficacy of radical historicism must be taken on faith. Surprisingly, Jean-Francois Lyotard is all but missing from Rockhill's study as well. Mentioned in passing as a could-have-been, the theorist's extensive writing on art and politics could sustain a close analysis by Rockhill, firstly because Lyotard's notion of multiple histories at work instead of one grand historical force/narrative is comparable to Rockhill's critical stance vis-à-vis Marcuse's supposition of a transhistorical nature of works of art. In addition, Rockhill's critique of Bürger's reduction of "the history of avant-garde" to "one overriding concern" is also reminiscent of Lyotard's postulating how in the postmodern condition no grand narrative is given much credence (p. 114). To conclude this wish list, and in keeping with Rockhill faulting the theoreticians in general for favoring the Western world, major works of art over minor ones, written texts over vernacular traditions, and painting over crafts, why not take on the lesser works of art criticism, say, Tolstoy's, who is no major name in

art scholarship but who nonetheless goes a long way in his radical reassessment of art in his book-length essay *What Is Art?* (1899), wherein he spares no sociohistorical preconception of his time and leaves no Western sacred cow unslaughtered, dismissing such figures as Richard Wagner, William Shakespeare, and Dante along the way.

Its intermittent didacticism and selectivity of subjects notwithstanding, the book convincingly argues for the need of an interventionist approach to art and politics, one that is less formulaic, less deterministic, and less dualistic than is currently accepted. Rockhill calls for a methodology wherein binary normativity, monocausal historicity, and ontological illusion would be jettisoned and supplanted by a dynamically negotiated approach to social practices as part of an alternative logic of history and historical change that Rockhill defines as sociohistorical praxeology, or radical history.

One of the questions raised in the book right from the start is whether there exists an unbridgeable divide between art and politics or, conversely, a privileged connection between the two. Rockhill maintains that neither supposition is entirely satisfactory since there may not even be such readily defined entities as “art” and “politics” in the first place. Instead, there are only variable configurations and constellations of practices perceived as artistic or political within different societies at diverse points in time. Many have argued, Rockhill reminds us, that the modern concept and practice of art dates back to approximately the eighteenth century, while politics, thought to have existed since the ancient Greeks, may not have always existed. Though Rockhill’s examples of artistic and political practices are culled primarily from twentieth-century Europe and the United States, with just a handful of forays into the nineteenth century, and as such are readily identifiable as art (or politics), the above may still be as sound a hypothesis as any, though students of cultural anthropology might advance a counterargument along the following lines: if art and artifacts have always

been an integral part of religious practices, and if the latter is assumed to have had a privileged niche in maintaining the normative order in early societies, then why not define such agencies as political and suppose that a sort of connection between art and politics has always been in place? Nor does one have to look long and hard for instances of clearly defined artistic statements, politics, and religion being closely, and sometimes perilously, intertwined today at the level of reception. Suffice it to mention the case of a Russian feminist punk group, Pussy Riot, whose piece titled “Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Chase Putin Away” was performed in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior a few years ago and led to the arrest and trial of the two members of the group who were subsequently sentenced to two-year prison terms. If we are to entertain for a moment the common sense supposition that it is art praxis that comes first, and theory enters the picture only later in order to contextualize it, thus serving a descriptive rather than prescriptive function, then it would be not only Rockhill’s insistence that we must examine the competing forces at the level of reception of the work of art, but also Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of art directly engaging politics that adequately describes the actionism of Pussy Riot. If an artist, immediately upon delivering a politically charged text, is apprehended and thrown in jail thereby attracting the world’s attention to the injustices of the political regime of her country, as well as the power of the church and its complicity with the state, then it is the agency of the two clearly delineated entities that are at work here: an artistic statement and a very repressive political regime with its attendant judicial and penitential system bearing down on the artist.

Generally speaking, examples from the art and cinema practices cited by Rockhill are not the strongest points of his study, a drawback that renders the book’s theoretical suppositions less cogent too. Thus, the reference to Luis Buñuel starting out as assistant director/script cowriter on Jean Epstein’s French impressionist classic *The Fall of the*

*House of Usher* (1928) and then moving on to collaborate with Salvador Dalí on *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and *L'âge d'or* (1930), two surrealist films, does not really support Rockhill's argument that the two discrete movements in cinema necessarily blend or intertwine. Film is a collaborative artistic endeavor, and an assistant director on someone else's project is liable to depart from its aesthetics when he comes into his own as director. He can also evolve as an individual artist and not be considered primarily a surrealist as it indeed happened to Buñuel who moved toward melodrama and "realism" at a later phase of his career. It would be counterproductive to look for melodramatic underpinnings of surrealism based solely on that sociohistorical development. Another example is the chapter-length account of the CIA's role in supporting modernist poetry and American abstract art in an effort to show the Communist bloc the advantages of democratic freedom, including freedom of expression. Though it is the book's most vivid, well-researched, and engaging narrative, it seems more of a showstopper than a chapter well integrated within the rest of the book. Indeed, decision making in the CIA, not unlike filmmaking, may well be a collective effort, and some of the agency's officials may also serve as members on museum boards, and, yes, nonrepresentational art, such as abstract expressionism or jazz, may acquire political import depending on fluctuations in a sociopolitical context. However, missing from the analysis is the interplay of the forces at the reception level of the process. On the one hand, the ensuing virulent campaign against modernist art by Soviet Marxist-Leninist critics made exhibitions of abstract expressionist artists virtually impossible in the Soviet Union; on the other hand, the goal of American cold warriors was reached, at least in part: the art propaganda piqued a small fraction of the Soviet intelligentsia's interest in Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and others, and influenced the aesthetics of the nonconformist artists.

A more telling example would be the much broader impact of the early rock 'n' roll of the "be-

bop-a-lula" variety on Soviet youth. Clearly devoid of overt political messages and, evidently, free of any government agencies' support, from the get-go it was deemed as potent and damaging a tool of propaganda and dissemination of "corrupt" Western values as modern art, if not more potent, effective, and unmediated since it could be more easily circulated (records, bootleg tapes) and aimed, quite spontaneously, at an audience unschooled in the subtleties of art. As the ideological tensions between the West and the Soviet Union intensified in the early eighties and the discotheque scene reached its peak, the All-Union Scientific Methodological Center under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR put together an annotated blacklist of rock 'n' roll, heavy metal, and new wave bands to be distributed to local chapters of the Young Communist League Organization in order to facilitate monitoring the music recorded and played in discos.[1] The list of one hundred bands included AC/DC, whose songs, according to the annotation, were loaded with references to satanic cults and black magic; U2, "named after the US military aircraft and whose songs contained the anti-Soviet military propaganda" (p. 1);[2] the B-52s (violence, militarism); Depeche Mode (apolitism); Culture Club (homosexuality, anti-culturalism); Michael Jackson (apolitism, horror); Motörhead (promiscuity); Pink Floyd (misrepresentation of Soviet foreign policy); Blondie (violence); Talking Heads (military propaganda); and more. The list goes on and on, and once censors ran out of "human vices" or ideological grounds for banning a group, "apolitism," interestingly, became a valid political justification for axing musicians.

Movies presented an even more curious and subtle example. Made primarily, but not exclusively, by American "left-wing directors" and chosen for distribution inside the former USSR for their critical stance toward the Western value system, they failed to construct the desired univocal meaning for audiences. Thus, the plotline, dialogue, and characterization may indeed have served the pur-

pose of exposing the ills of capitalism, but art direction could not help but carry with it “the secondary,” contraband message that ran contrary to the expressed one: hi-fi electronics, cars, furniture, etc., owned by the silver screen’s everyman were far superior to consumer goods available to the Soviet audience, which made the overall impact of the message mixed at best. In other words, the politics of apolitical abstract art may be but one example of a work of art acquiring a political charge on its way from the level of production to the level of reception along Rockhill’s stratigraphic dimension of history. The instances cited above concern the unanticipated and more complex responses of the audience at the other end of the ideological divide: be it an eager Soviet consumer of the spontaneously cultivated and transplanted forbidden fruit of Western rock ‘n’ roll, or a Soviet movie audience appreciating the representation of the “undeclared” consumer goods in the background of the imported cinematic social commentary.

In the book’s most comprehensive section, “The Politics of Aesthetics,” whose title, incidentally, is taken from Rancière’s collection of interviews, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), conducted and translated by Rockhill, Rockhill reiterates Rancière’s position that “the only valid response to the question ‘what is literature?’ thus consists in the genealogy of the historical conditions that produced the question and the contradictory responses to it” (p. 139). That is, the approach offered is perhaps not dissimilar from Talmudic, or psychoanalytic, tradition of answering a question with a question. Though Rancière carefully avoids overly systematic accounts of his three regimes of art, which comprise the system of perception called the distribution of the sensible, certain salient features are readily visible. “The ethical regime is based on the distribution of images—not to be confused with art in the contemporary sense—and their arrangement with regard to the ethos of the community” (p. 141). The representative regime of the arts emerges out of Aristotle’s critique of Plato, as put forth in the be-

ginning of Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics*, where an example of Plato’s tragic stage is cited. The tragic stage simultaneously carried with it the syndrome of democracy and the power of illusion. By isolating mimesis in its own proper place and by enclosing tragedy within the logic of genres, Aristotle, inadvertently or not, redefined its politics. And, finally, the aesthetic regime is an ambiguous realm that vacillates between nihilism and the “glorious incarnation of truth” (p. 144). “In moving between one regime to another, the entire distribution of the sensible is at stake, namely, ‘the system of relations between *doing, seeing, saying and sensing*’” (p. 142). The demos, or the people, who have no power in the distribution of the sensible, according to Rancière, are mimetically transformed into one of the parties of political litigation. In other words, “if aesthetics is understood in its broad sense as a distribution of the sensible rather than the domain of artistic practice in the restricted sense, then the realm of the political (*le politique*) is fundamentally aesthetic in nature” (p. 144).

Rockhill goes to some length explicating the difference between Rancière’s theory and those of his predecessors (only to eventually critique Rancière for trying too hard to do just that: put some distance between himself and thinkers that came before him). To begin with, Rockhill reminds us that Michel Foucault’s choice of historical continuity in favor of discontinuity was not clear-cut. Also, Foucault’s notion of episteme, which refers to “totalizing systems of discursive order that break down and reassemble themselves at epoch-changing moments in history,” does not “simply constitute periodic blocks that purport to encompass the sum total of discursive activity at a given point in time” but establishes “temporal sequences—the Renaissance, the classical age, the modern age—and is in fact dependent on isolating individual strands and series within the total field of discursive production” (p. 147). Thus, “the end of the eighteenth century remains a fundamental turning point for Foucault,” while Rancière never conflates

his three regimes of art with precise historical epochs. "Although the aesthetic regime is unique to what Rancière loosely refers to as the modern era, the ethical and representative regime dates at least since the ancient Greeks" (p. 149). Though Gilles Deleuze and Rancière, according to Rockhill, do share a few signs of conceptual proximity with each other, it is ultimately outweighed by a practical distance between the two. For instance, movement-image and time-image, the two underlying principles of Deleuze's study of film, get critiqued by Rancière for their lack of a clearly definable correlate in the realm of the sensible. Deleuze, according to Rancière, distinguishes between the two types of images with regard to the allegorical content that he reads into them, depending on the perspective that he privileges. Reminiscent of the break between materialists and idealists of yesteryear, this position begs a few questions: Is Rancière telling us that Deleuze's approach is tainted by subjectivity? If so, what perspective then should he privilege or not privilege? In the preface to *The Movement-Image* (1986), Deleuze clearly delineates the scope of his study, stating that he is not concerned with writing the history of cinema, nor will he deal with technical aspects of filmmaking. Rather, his aim is taxonomy according to Bergsonian discoveries of movement-image and time-image which are taken as starting points and then explicated and illustrated with nuanced and richly descriptive references to films throughout the entire history of cinema. Deleuze's subtle analysis of the work of major directors is then used to advance and support a number of theoretical positions, and this approach betrays a cineaste in the late philosopher, but also relies on concepts developed by Deleuze earlier in his career, in other words, lines of flight, rhizome, blockade, and fold, to name a few, so chiding him for frivolity of his personal allegorical reading is unwarranted.

"If Rancière inscribes Deleuze's writings on art and literature within the destiny of an aesthetic regime," the latter's "insistence on the purity of the sensible" is his much graver fault, says Rockhill, ap-

parently echoing Rancière's assessment (p. 156). Such insistence ostensibly condemns Deleuze's work to a series of selective interpretations whose final goal is to illustrate the existence of purity that has been repeatedly disproven by history. When precisely was it disproven, how well it sits with Rockhill's own critique of monocausal historicity, and just what purity is at stake here are the questions not satisfactorily addressed in Rockhill's book. The above-cited example of Buñuel's early career detours, or Rockhill's quote from Eric Hobsbawm, who lists a number of classical buildings erected in the world's capitals at the height of what eventually was described as the romantic age for reasons of taxonomy, do not substantiate the claim.

Rancière refuses to accept the economy of representation and difference, or being and becoming, and he purports to demonstrate the empirical falsity of Deleuze's logic and his inability to accept "what is ... the fundamental contradiction of modern times" (p. 158). One example of the supposed falsity is Deleuze's assumption that books, like paintings, can be created with the purified substance of the sensible. According to Rancière, they cannot—a notion that readers of *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), certain poems of e. e. cummings, or contemporary practitioners of sound poetry might contest. Rather than insisting on a unique formula throughout diverse historical formations like Deleuze, or formulating historical a priori like Foucault, Rancière focuses on the particular combination and organization of elements within bodies of work when compared to the plurality of possible amalgamations. Some points in Rancière's thought system remain unanswered.

What is unclear, says Rockhill, is why the only fundamental transformation since the ancient Greeks, meaning a change that has given birth to a new distribution of the sensible, occurred approximately at the end of the eighteenth century. Rockhill recognizes the deficiency in Rancière's system of thought when the latter suggests that the devel-

opment of the regimes has its source in their internal logic or their historical “destiny,” and points out that the said explanation risks eradicating the social dynamic of history in the name of an idealist revolution of aesthetic forms (p. 159). Since Rancière avoids postulating a transcendental set of historical laws or an exhausted list of immanent axioms, he maintains that artistic regimes remain open to change and to the production of novel aesthetic forms. If equality, according to Rancière’s oft-repeated statement, is the “only universal,” then its universal status is derived neither from human nature nor from any other founding principle. In other words, says Rockhill, it is a relational universal that only exists in concrete acts of struggle rather than an abstract universal resting on an a priori foundation. “By constructing a relational logic of immanence that abandons the hierarchical system of appearance and truth, Rancière outlines a novel methodology that escapes the age-old struggle between transcendental historical claims and appeal to the absolute specificity of individual elements.... He forsakes the privileged positions that purport to have direct access to either macrocosmic or microcosmic truths of history in order to analyze conceptual networks from a select point within them and elucidate both their modes of operation and their combinatory process” (p. 162). Though distinction between such a “select point” and Deleuze’s supposedly arbitrary “privileged position” remains to be clarified, Rancière’s “Copernican revolution,” according to Rockhill, lies in his rethinking of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. Instead of assuming that they are two separate entities and then searching for a privileged point of intersection, Rancière asserts that art and politics are consubstantial as distributions of the sensible. For him, politics is an aesthetic affair—and vice versa—since it is, above all, a matter of establishing and modifying a sensory matrix that delimits “the visible from the invisible, the sayable from the unsayable, the audible from the inaudible, the possible from the impossible” (p. 163). However, Rancière constantly calls

this thesis into question. And it is this tension between what Rockhill terms the Consubstantiality Thesis described above and the Differentiation Thesis, stipulating that art and politics not only part ways but also tend to be mutually exclusive, is the core contradiction of Rancière’s work.

A philosopher not known for clarity of his definitions and distinction, Rancière works with at least three different definitions of the term “politics”: politics, most generally, is the overall distribution of the sensible, “the configuration of a specific space, the delimitation of a particular sphere of experience, of objects established in common and coming from a common decision, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and arguing about them”; politics proper is “a dissensual act of subjectivization that intervenes in the police order”; and “finally, he occasionally refers to politics (*la politique*) as a meeting ground between police procedures and the process of equality” (p. 165). Alternating between the three, Rancière at times gives the impression that he desires to keep politics and aesthetics separate; at other times, he claims their consubstantiality. He also regularly insists that there is no “proper” of politics. In short, “either art is political by abandoning art, or it is political precisely insofar as it remains distinct from politics,” concludes Rockhill in his long list of contradictions, productive or otherwise, within Rancière’s theoretical framework. And it is “this fundamental contradiction that ultimately means that the singularity of art and the specificity of politics remain incompatible” (p. 170). Rockhill also correctly points out yet another unfortunate shortcoming of Rancière’s position, which he shares with many of his predecessors: “the use of painting and the museum-based model of art as the paradigmatic framework for art history” (p. 171). How about incorporating protest songs, or national items as well, ponders Rockhill. One is tempted to add the recent example of Sony Pictures pulling the movie *The Interview* (2014) from distribution due to the suspected North Korean cyber attack on Hollywood, an unprecedented

event caused by the very negative reception of a rather conventional artifact of mass cultural production and proof that art and politics can be consubstantial depending on the kind of art (in this case, a broad satire) and the kind of politics (a totalitarian dictatorship). Though the event took place after Rockhill's volume came out, it is worth pointing out once again that Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible can be said to share its shortcomings with Rockhill's *Radical History and the Politics of Art* in that they both seem to suffer from "limited purchase on specific practices" (p. 173).

Art and politics part ways for Rancière because there is no causal relationship between them, only indeterminacy. This valorization of indeterminacy, in Rockhill's opinion, puts Rancière in the same category with many leading members of the French intellectual vanguard, and it is a position that can be as politically dangerous as it can be beneficial. The following quote from Rancière elucidates this position best: "Art is not political first and foremost by the messages and the feelings that it conveys regarding the order of the world. Neither is it political by the manner in which it represents society's structures, the conflicts or identities of social groups. It is political by the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, by the type of time and space it establishes, by the manner in which it delimits this time and peoples this space" (p. 177). Instead of having to choose between causality indeterminacy, contends Rockhill, "we need to develop a logic of practice capable of describing and explaining the complex constellations of forces at work in the practices labeled 'art' and those identified as 'politics'" (p. 178).

The concluding chapter of the book is dedicated to reiteration of this proposition. A talisman-like approach to art, per Rockhill's terminology, is vested with the supposed power to engender political action or, alternatively, inaction, because it is frequently used to delegitimize political art and re-

veal the political vacuity of particular instances of politicized work. Rockhill recalls Sartre's 1948 pointed question about Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), and incidentally, shared by Theodor Adorno: "does anyone think it won over a single heart to the Spanish cause?" (p. 219). If the answer is no, asserts Rockhill correctly, it is "because paintings do not express unambiguous meanings that could galvanize spectators. Instead, they present imaginary objects and feelings that cannot be clearly committed to a political cause" (p. 220). We are encouraged to view Picasso the citizen who provided direct financial support to the Spanish Republic and Republican exiles in conjunction with his painting *Guernica*, the two acts that are consubstantial and codependent because of Picasso's status as an artist of certain financial means and a citizen of certain prominence. Reductively simplistic as this corollary may seem at first, it nonetheless is viable enough to counterbalance Sartre's and Adorno's presupposition that there is an episteme of art and politics and a strictly determined knowledge regarding the political efficacy or inefficacy of particular works. And of course, it is a moot point to ponder whether a work of art, such as *Le Rêve* (1932), depicting Picasso's seminude mistress Marie Therese Walter, would be considered political if proceeds from its sale were also used in a similar fashion. "The ontological illusion and talisman complex," continues Rockhill, are "rooted in a social epoche" (p. 222): such thinkers as Sartre and Lukács try to determine the very being of art and politics, as well as the nature of their relationship, by setting aside their sociality, thus bracketing the social by a transcendent, categorical determination of the nature of art and politics from a subjective point of view. The dichotomy of subjective versus objective seems to rear its age-old head here again, unexpectedly and inconsistently with some of the book's propositions. After all, Rockhill insists elsewhere in his study on the need for a non-dualistic approach, and in the most all-encompassing statement, he suggests that "instead of having to choose between causality and



indetermination, we need to develop a logic of practice that ... would make room for overdetermination, causal variability, degrees of determination, levels of agency, and so on because social practices such as art and politics are never rigorously determined or absolutely undetermined" (p. 178). If that is indeed the case, why not bridge yet another binary divide and make room for both objectivity and subjectivity in the proposed logic of practice as well? The need to examine the agency of reception declared early in the book is finally picked up in its concluding pages, wherein Sartre's statement is acknowledged as a good starting point: "there is no art except for and by others." In other words, in order for art to exist it needs to circulate in society and have its own proper social existence. Reception is facilitated by the role of critic and interpreter, whose importance is emphasized by Rockhill. Though it is essential, he specifies, "to forsake the hermeneutic hegemony that consists in trying to pass off a personal interpretation for a universal attribute of a particular work, or, in the language just evoked, making an informed opinion into a form of infallible scientific knowledge," Rockhill calls for pragmatic interventionism (p. 228).

In the concluding pages of the book, Rockhill argues against monocausality, epistemic illusion, the determinism of reductive or reductionist historicism, and the substantialist and ontological approach to art and politics, which are dynamic and temporary formations requiring a relational and praxeological approach. "Such an orientation is radically historicist in the sense that it recognizes that all our practices—be they linguistic, theoretical, aesthetic, or political—are historically constituted and that they are necessarily part of a temporal dynamic" (p. 233). In fact, all the labels used to classify various practices are contingent, adds Rockhill with the apparent nod to Rancière. "The problem is no longer 'what is *the* relationship between art and politics,'" but "how do the diverse aspects of practices identified as aesthetic or political overlap, intertwine, and sometimes merge in

precise sociohistorical conjunctures'" (p. 234). Rockhill's *Radical History and the Politics of Art* may indeed, per the author's claim, form a palimpsest and seek to performatively resemble "a radical history of overlapping and intertwining constellations" devoid of rigid borders, and it does forcefully argue for the need to "examine the constellations of the often conflicting and rival agencies" (pp. 235-236).

However, one occasionally feels adrift amid its plethora of reiterations and contradictions without borders, and the book's endeavor to justify the need for a praxeological approach could have benefited from more convincing substantiations from what is happening on the ground. It must be said that Rockhill does acknowledge that his study "does not lay claim to be the true and invariable nature of history and society (although it has sometimes pragmatically relied on oppositional schematizations for the sake of argument)" (p. 237). By emphasizing once again the book's opposition to reductionist historicism that negates a priori the possibility of affecting the predestined course of history, the entire spectrum of historical possibility is ostensibly opened. Though no claim is made that there exists an essential link between art and politics, or more pointedly, between radical art and revolutionary politics, by displacing substantialist ontology with sociohistorical praxeology, the book ends on a positive note: "There is ultimately no end of history when the latter is understood as radical history" (p. 238). Why don't we cautiously accept this hypothesis and stick with those terms long enough to see where they take us?

#### Notes

[1]. All-Union Scientific Methodological Center under the Auspices of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR, "How to Regulate the Work of Recording Studios and Discotheques," October 1, 1984. This document was smuggled to the West in the mid-1980s and first published by *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*, New York's oldest Russian daily. See also, Sarah Kaufman, "The Soviet Union Banned These Bands in

1985,” *Spin Magazine* (June 5, 2014), <http://www.spin.com/articles/list-western-bands-music-russia-banned-soviet-union>; Pedro Ramet and Sergei Zamascikov, “The Soviet Rock Scene” (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 1987), 30n24, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/op223\\_the\\_soviet\\_rock\\_scene\\_ramet\\_1988.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/op223_the_soviet_rock_scene_ramet_1988.pdf); and Red Square, “List of Forbidden Rock Bands in the USSR,” *The People’s Cube* (blog), August 31, 2009, <http://thepeoplescube.com/peoples-blog/list-of-forbidden-rock-bands-in-the-ussr-in-1985-t3962.html>.

[2]. The description of U2 is taken from the addendum to a letter for internal use from P. Grishin, the secretary of the regional Komsomol committee to the secretaries of the City and Regional Leninist Communist Youth Union of Ukraine, dated January 10, 1985.

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