Metaphysics is the discipline concerned with the excesses produced by rational civilization. Such excesses are produced insofar as rational civilization, according to its very principle, directs itself toward the automatic production of reason as a division with itself (avec soi), or a division in itself (en soi). The logos appears as one of two types. It is either a self-instituting and self-governing logic, or else a dialogic or dialectic that divides itself from itself according to the law of incompleteness, for which logical self-sufficiency would be its asymptote—in other words, an impossible possibility.

This division is found in Plato, of course, and is continued in a manner that one is tempted to call undisturbed through multiple variations, from the great avatars of the dialectic (Aristotle, Kant, Hegel) to various versions of excess: that is, specific heterologies such as those known as faith, other, matter, power, art. Under these names, and sev-
eral others, the confrontation between ontology and heterology is regularly made visible, a confrontation that is never exhausted because it proceeds from a division upon which the very possibility of the rational is, in principle, contingent. Under each of the aforementioned names—but also under many others—are held the concept and the force of an “irrational,” something irreducible to identification and conciliation according to a regime of reason-giving (Leibniz’s principium reddendae rationis).

“Under each of these names, but also under many others.” Indeed, nothing stops us from extending the list to include affect, technology, event, history, and being, or, for that matter, meaning and truth. And the final item on this list would be the logos, or reason itself. The regime of division and excess is so deeply lodged within the principle of reason that it separates it and divides it from itself. In the end, the rationality of reason resides in this dissention and intimate discord, while consensus, agreement, and harmony are its fantasies par excellence. In order to justify itself, reason must or should first explain its principium, and in order to do this it should go beyond itself to a principium principii rationis ipsae.

Anyone who has followed me thus far while still wondering how in the world I might end up talking about or addressing Jacques Rancière—this reader has begun to understand. He or she knows, in effect, how determinant the rejection of consensus is in Rancière’s analyses. It is not a question, for him, of mere political consensus, nor of consensual politics, which he rightly diagnoses as the political poverty of our time. He is the first, it seems to me, to oppose this model with such lapidary clarity, positing not another model of politics that would aim for a better form of agreement, but another idea of politics in the absolute: politics as the production of the disincorporation of assemblages, regulations, and configurations by which so-called collective bodies imagine themselves to be organized and subsist, and whose natural or supernatural resolution different systems of thought seek to represent with integrity and finality.

It should now be clear where I am going. As much as I share [partage] (and the word is carefully chosen, since share is a word that, like com-
mon, along with a few others, he and I have shared for a long time, and which also takes its share of responsibility for separating us, since it is one of the indices of dissent of which I want to speak)—as much, then, as I share his rejection of consensus, or that which we might call homology in general, I am also surprised by the general distribution of registers and what this implies in his work.

3

Generally speaking, Rancière seeks to do away with all forms of speculation (a term that he often uses to this effect), in which he discerns a fatal attraction for consensus, identity, or harmonic resolution. He wants to be anything but speculative or metaphysical, and one could say that he wants to be anything but a philosopher, if one considers certain texts where the label “philosopher” is identified with an aristocratic, inegalitarian, or aestheticizing posture.

And yet he is indeed a philosopher. First, because it is difficult to see (and he himself does not see) how else one is to speak of him according to the current distribution of roles. But most of all because he preserves, in spite of himself, something of the character of the philosopher, no doubt more than he wants to believe. Which is to say, also, something of the character of the metaphysician.

What he preserves presents itself nonetheless in abstentia. It is this presence through a mode of absence, or this more or less misunderstood persistence, that I would like to point out in speaking of the distribution [partage] that both brings us together and distances us. I would like to point this out, simply and schematically, as the opening of a possible discussion and not a closed statement, in terms of the major motifs of politics and art. I seem to observe in Rancière a sort of distancing or silent suspension with regards to both. That which is rendered absent has thus the general character of something “natural”—between quotation marks—as in this sentence: “Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his ‘natural’ purpose by the power of words.”1 One could find other occurrences. In each instance, the use of quotation marks indicates that the author does not take “natural” to be a consistent concept in the most banally metaphysical sense (its most common post-Nietzschean understanding), as in the opposition “nature/culture” or “nature/technology.” At the same
time, however, he relies on this word in order to designate the idea that allows us to speak of a rerouting or deviation. It is the contradiction between these two logics that intrigues me.

Let us resume. The “natural,” thus understood, manifestly designates the representation—whether imaginary or ideal—according to which nature in general can be said to exist—and in it or through it a natural destiny of man. Such a representation is “fictional,” another term placed in quotation marks, but the word does not here designate an invented story but rather a material assemblage of signs. Indeed, one may wonder why the “fiction” of the “natural” is not one of the possible and acceptable modes of this assemblage (and, ultimately, of the “distribution of the sensible”). Nevertheless, although Rancière does not give any express indication, one must understand from the general context of his work that the designation of a natural destination of man would align itself with a nonpolitical operation, somehow prior to or exterior to “political animality,” thus prepolitical or archaic. This operation is elsewhere characterized by the nondivision of arché, a nondivision that interrupts the dissent that is proper to politics and democracy.

The difficulty, to my eyes, is the following. If one is required to question all imputations of naturalness, to subscribe to all manners of thinking an originary “denaturing” (I myself have employed this term on occasion, likewise suspended between quotation marks), this cannot be done without fulfilling two conditions:

1. No confusion must be allowed to persist between the imaginary or speculative notion of “nature” and the real system of human affairs that existed prior to or exterior to the appearance of Clisthenian democracy (which is to say, the historical emergence of the West, more generally). Neither before this point nor elsewhere does there exist a “nature,” nor do there exist “natural” rights, which is to say the pure authority of a “natural logic of domination.” It is not by chance that in this citation, volens nolens, the quotation marks that one would expect are absent. Does this mean that Rancière believes, in certain instances and in spite of himself, in some archeo-political “nature”? But how is one to think, in this case, of the democratic irruption and its rerouting of a prior destiny?
2. One must not forget that in philosophy or metaphysics, “nature” never has the natural—without quotation marks—status that an exceedingly summary representation of metaphysics, accredited by the post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian vulgate, would like to impose upon it. Metaphysics, according to this vision, is considered a totalizing system of thought in its organicness—whether transcendental, sublime, or ecstatic—of the real and men within it. However, beginning with Aristotle’s first reflections on *phusis*, nature is insufficient for arriving at man’s ends; these must be pursued through *tekhnē*. It follows that the *zoon politikon* can exist only insofar as political life “denatures” the animal in man.

These two precautions intersect. The “natural” should neither be imputed to that which is outside the West, nor to any naïve belief fostered by speculation in any form. Rancière’s remarkable analyses of the birth of politics through the division of *archē*—and the division of the “people” with itself that was produced or enabled by it—leaves one question unanswered: namely, the reason for the irruption or invention of democracy, and the fact that it did not emerge from that which preceded it by a leap from “nature” to logos, but through a series of operations whose effects must be found in a heretofore political assemblage. One cannot simply stop interrogating the requirement to place quotation marks around the word “nature,” as around “fiction.” In other words, one must continue to question the remainder between a supposedly undivided *archē* and the self-division of politics, a remainder that may subsist beneath any projection of “nature,” “foundation,” or “origin.”

What is it that effaces itself with the invention of democracy and philosophy—and whose effacement leaves a mark both on the metaphysical attempt to conceive of an origin and the denunciation of fables of origins (denunciations that, themselves, belong to metaphysics, as witnessed by Rousseau or Kant)? I will not attempt to respond here, but I would like to remind the reader that this question is not “speculative,” in Rancière’s sense, and may suggest the persistence and resistance, within politics, of yet another division. This would be the division between politics and that from which it detached itself—that which is not and was not politics, religion, or art. Implied here is another distribution of the sensible, certainly, but it is precisely this otherness that
must be interrogated. Generally speaking, philosophy—the mode of thought that was born with the polis and the West—has trouble conceiving of that which preceded it as something other than a simple preamble or pure heterogeneity. Thus, Rancière’s conception of the nondivided archè seems to me to oscillate between something prehistorical moving toward its historical mutation (but how?) and something heterogeneous that exceeds all schemes of political and philosophical thought (but what does this mean?). The philosophical question concerning the “outside” of philosophy persists, then, with an even greater insistence. Indeed, this is a metaphysical question and not a historical or prehistorical one; it is a question concerning an excess of “reason” on this side of reason itself. Perhaps art, if not religion (of which Rancière does not speak), needs to be examined from this angle.

One might even be tempted to think that it is precisely because of the problem that I have just pointed out that Rancière joins together so forcefully—and with such a singular manner, in view of all the ways of thinking about politics—the questions of art and politics. His conjunction of the two carefully avoids subsuming one into the other. Art is articulated as the representation of assemblages according to which the sensible is distributed, and politics is the reworking of these assemblages by means of litigation or disagreements that open up, in the (in principle) egalitarian community, the inequality of the community or the “people” within itself. Art and politics are joined and distributed as two orders of “fictions”: one is a representation of the distribution, and the other is its reworking. Both form a continuous movement, however, insofar as representations of the distribution introduce lines of “disincorporation” into the received assemblages and thereby open up the possibility for their reworking.

I will not go further into the general logic of this arrangement, whose descriptive and analytic efficacy in treating three great regimes of art, or arts, seems to me very convincing. But this analysis obstinately brings me back to the following question: what is “art,” this thing called “art” (in the singular or the plural, under its modern name or before the invention of its name)? Or rather, why is there this specific register of the “representation and reconfiguration” of the distribution (here I am
citing the end of *The Politics of Aesthetics*)? I recognize that Rancière’s efforts are to dissolve the specificity of art, and furthermore the exception that is attached to it by a considerable spread of contemporary thought. In this effort, I share all that responds to the necessity of arming oneself against aestheticisms, religions of art, or hyperboles in the form of “the end of art” or the surpassing of art. There remains, however—in general, as in Rancière’s work—something that persists and resists underneath this name “art,” and without which it would be difficult to understand why it is there.

Rancière renews, in a highly interesting way, the analysis of the modern emergence of aesthetics and the autonomous and unitary category of “art,” which are entirely separated from the registers of *artes* or *tekhnai*, forms of *savoir-faire* or “ways of doing,” as he says in a more sensible mode. He thus calls into question the privilege placed upon art by the “paradigm of aesthetic autonomy”: the latter is typical of a modernity that wanted to see art as both the sensible manifestation of pure liberty and the valorization of the creativity of labor.

The intention of Rancière’s analysis is to attack this privilege as the effect of speculation—a speculation that is blind to the general conditions that govern the configurations by which all social practices make up different regimes of the distribution. I do not have the least intention to make this blindness my own. Yet I cannot avoid bringing up two points. First, the autonomization of art—striking for its belated appearance—is not a random occurrence, but rather the product of a history of transformations and configurations of the distribution. The aesthetic regime is but one of these configurations, whose driving impulses and deep causes merit examination, particularly insofar as the relationship between this form of modernity and democratic, industrial, and atheist modernities is concerned. What interests me here is that Rancière’s entire analysis appears to presuppose what it intends to call into question: namely, something of the autonomy and specificity of “art.”

It is not enough to prefer the plural expression *artistic practices* to the singular term *art* (a singularity that, in effect, harbors many questions, which several contemporary thinkers have not ignored). The former
epithet conserves the concept as such, and the use of the plural (which could be rephrased as “the arts,” since the word practice is only there to erode the problem of “art” somewhat) simply allows one to better raise the problem of specificity. Why is an irreducible plurality of arts the condition for the existence of “art”? At first glance, and awaiting confirmation, this situation is not homologous to the dyad “science/sciences” or “religion/religions” (whereas “philosophy/philosophies,” one might note in passing, is perhaps not as far off). Whether one likes it or not, to speak about arts or artistic practices engages a notion of specificity and thus authorizes one to question the eventual presence of this specificity precisely where it is not named, in regimes other than the aesthetic. This is a question that the problematics surrounding “African art,” as well as discussions on Paleolithic or Neolithic pictorial practices, have helped clear up—which is not to say resolve.

7

When Rancière writes “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 relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility,” one is allowed to wonder how exactly these practices “intervene.” This question receives a diffuse but constant response that the end of the same book aptly sums up: “Whatever might be the specific type of economic circuits they lie within, artistic practices are not ‘exceptions’ to other practices. They represent and reconfigure the distribution of these activities.”

Ignoring the fact that the only form of specificity recognized here is that of economic circuits (without failing to note in passing, however, that the relationship between art and wealth, which is as old as figural, musical, architectural, or choreographic practices, certainly merits more attention than the ritual and rather politically correct imprecation against the art market—which is not Rancière’s aim, to be sure), I must ask the question: what does “represent and reconfigure” mean?

The answer is not given in Rancière’s text, and the pairing of these two concepts seems to go without saying. Yet “represent,” whether understood in its imitative or ostensive sense, does not imply the entirely different idea of “reconfiguration.” And if the latter indeed designates the establishment of a specific model for the community of existence
The necessity for the commonality to present itself as such, in some way or another, can be at least understood by analogy with the necessity for the subject to have a minimal self-image. (But what status would this image have: imaginary, symbolic, abstract, or felt? Yet art does not seem to be necessarily implicated in this matter, whereas the same might not be said of art’s relationship to the “common subject,” if we can call it that.) However, the necessity for “that which is common” to (re)present itself in an artistic mode is harder to understand. Why must it be a matter of that which is alternately called “beauty” (even in Plato, who does not think about “art”), “pleasure” (Aristotle or Kant), “liberty” (Schiller or Duchamp), or simply “art” (Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, or Adorno)? All of these “speculative” motifs (to which one might add “the sublime,” “creation,” “nonfinality,” and “the ineffable”) are nothing other than efforts to modulate what I called an “excess.” More precisely, they are excesses of a function of “representation and reconfiguration,” when “that which is common” is not subsumed into the regime of “undivided archê.”

One cannot but agree that the emergence of art in the singular is the effect of a general transformation of our commonality, of the conditions for possibility of our being together, and thus of the conditions for the manifestation of this “being together.” Indeed, there is much more work to be done to multiply, or ramify, Rancière’s analyses on the many stages and forms of art between, say, the eleventh and the twentieth centuries. What comes from another register, however, is the notion that that which emerged brought to existence for itself the general condition for all commonalities (at the same time as the question was being raised as to what the commonality is or how it is possible). This condition is, precisely, the condition of representation and reconfiguration: in other words, a specific gesture of monstration and a specific form that is traced by this gesture through diverse artistic practices.

This register is present, even if it is not specified as such, as soon
as there is image, song, dance, ornament, monument, or poem. Neither its reabsorption by religious or state powers (as attempted in earlier times) nor its reinscription into the general distribution of practices is able to satisfy this specificity—whatever the legitimacies of these two processes. Rancière’s refined discourse and sensibility attests, in every way, to the presence of this specificity, which I dare call quasimanifest in his work. The art that he rigorously reinscribes into the general distribution raises no less vigorously the question of irreducible distinction (which is not to say privilege!): namely, what is the gesture of the Lascaux painter? The question not only persists, but it is renewed through Rancière with a decoupled intensity. What is this gesture insofar as it distinguishes itself from all other practices pertaining to and existing within the distribution?

One could extrapolate from Rancière that art is a means (and perhaps the most common one, considering all the forms of knowledge and power) of understanding our communal existence and the very modes of being-in-common (what brings us together and separates us)—a being-in-common that is, moreover, not exclusive to relationships between humans but is extended, through them, to all things and beings. But the reason for this reason-giving exceeds that which is authorized by rational examination, for it leads back to an examination of reason itself in general and its division with itself. It is at this point that—necessarily, simply, whether through its critics or its deconstructions—metaphysics once again awakens and reconfigures itself.

In Rancière as well? Of course! But distributed in another way, placed in a state of rest or reserve, implicit, yet rising up when one evokes “the great myths of writing, more than simply written but inscribed everywhere in the flesh of things.”

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92 J E A N - L U C N A N C Y