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### Everything you wanted to know about Jacques Rancière but were afraid to ask...

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## *Everything you wanted to know about Jacques Rancière but were afraid to ask.....*

**Sophie Berrebi**

The essays by Jonathan Dronsfield and Steven Wright included in this issue were first presented at the conference *Aesthetics and Politics: With and Around Jacques Rancière* co-organised by myself and Marie-Aude Baronian at the University of Amsterdam on 20 and 21 June 2006.

One of the elements that triggered the organisation of the conference was a passage of his then recent book *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (2004). In it, Rancière discussed several exhibitions of contemporary art that had taken place around the year 2000.<sup>1</sup> The way he approached these group shows was particularly refreshing in a context marked by heavy discussions about curatorial practice et al.: Rancière responded to exhibition concept, presentation and individual works without dissociating the one from the other. In other terms, and while his writings were already proving to be influential to the contemporary art milieu, he wove these exhibitions into his text, reacting to them more as a random albeit attentive visitor than as an expert. This attitude inevitably provoked the desire on the part of the reader to stroll alongside him and ask him everything we ever wanted to know about his views (but were afraid to ask).

The format of the conference developed out of that desire for a conversation, and Jacques Rancière proved to be extremely generous in his response, agreeing to a two-day visit to Amsterdam to give a lecture and respond to a series of papers discussing aspects of his work.

The plenary lecture Rancière delivered on the evening of 20 June, entitled 'Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art' was attended by an audience of more than 150 people ranging from students to artists and academics. The following day, during an intense day-long conference, academics of different backgrounds presented papers derived from their encounter with Rancière's work. Sessions on literature and politics, on performing and contemporary arts succeeded one another, separated by panel discussions in which Rancière gave informal replies to questions raised by the speakers. More than once these replies triggered animated discussions, although, predictably perhaps, a climax was reached in the discussion which ensued from third panel dedicated to contemporary art. A substantial part of that panel is reprinted here, with papers given by Jonathan Dronsfield and Steven Wright and the exchange that followed, which was kindly recorded by a member of the audience.

In addition to the elements of the conference that are reprinted here is 'Jacques Rancière and Indisciplinarity' an interview conducted with Jacques Rancière by Marie-Aude Baronian and our colleague from the University of Amsterdam and

ASCA, Mireille Rosello. A version of this extensive interview, which took place several months after the conference, was published in Dutch by Valiz (NL), in a volume of studies on Jacques Rancière that appeared in the Netherlands in late 2007. In this exchange, Rancière discusses his position with regard to democracy, politics, film, literature, art and research.

Finally, my short article 'Jacques Rancière: Aesthetics is Politics', also reprinted here, was prompted by a visit to the pavilion of Central Asia at the Venice Biennale in 2005. It was originally commissioned and published by the Dutch art magazine *Metropolis M* No. 4 (2005), pp. 64-71.

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, *Bruit de Fond*, (Centre National de la Photographie, Paris), *Let's Entertain*, (Walker art Centre, Minneapolis, and Centre Pompidou, Paris) and *Voilà, le Monde dans la tête* (Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris), all three organised in 2000.