Presupposition of the Equality of Intelligences and Love of the Infinitude of Thought

A Discussion between Jacques Rancière and Thomas Hirschhorn

Jacques Rancière, Thomas Hirschhorn

Interview – May 1, 2012

Between December 2009 and February 2010, French philosopher Jacques Rancière and Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn exchanged thoughts in a series of e-mails. [1] Using Hirschhorn's art project Bijlmer Spinoza Festival from 2009 in Amsterdam as an example, the two of them investigate the essence of a work of art in this day and age. Hirschhorn tries to analyse his work with terms like 'presence' and 'production', to which Rancière reacts and stimulates further reflection.

Dear Jacques Rancière,

I am happy to have the opportunity to write you. I'd like to suggest that I begin our exchange by sharing with you some experiences I had during the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival*, my latest work in public space, conceived for and with the inhabitants of an outlying neighbourhood of Amsterdam in 2009. I thought that sharing an experience, an experience I had thanks to my work, was a good starting point. The *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* is a work of art conceived according to the 'Presence and Production' guideline: my presence and production as an artist, but also that of Vittoria Martini, as an ambassador, that of Marcus Steinweg, as a philosopher, and that of Alexandre Costanzo, as an editor. 'Presence and Production' is my own term, a guideline I created to define those of my works that require my presence and production during the entire duration of an exhibition. With this term 'Presence and Production', I want to put forward my own notions because I think I can assess what is involved in being responsible for 'Presence' and 'Production'. I can understand what it will require of me. However, I do not know what 'community art', 'participative art', 'educational art', and 'relational aesthetics art' mean. With the 'Presence and Production' guideline, my aim is to answer the following questions: can a work – through the notion of 'Presence', my own presence – create for others the conditions for being present? And can my work – through the notion of 'Production' – create the conditions for other productions to be established?

Over the three months of the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival*, I noticed something that was new, unexpected and surprising to me: the first local inhabitants to come to the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* were inhabitants of the margins, the margins of the neighbourhood and undoubtedly of society. From the beginning, these inhabitants visited my work regularly and soon came every day. Of all the visitors, these were the ones who stayed the longest. As the first from the neighbourhood, they really involved themselves, yet they were all

people on the margins.

Over time, they formed a kind of 'hard core' of the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival*. Most of these people were isolated and did not know each other before the festival – or if so, barely. They often lived alone, had family issues, problems with work or were unemployed or disabled or had an awful lot of problems.

Their presence – which was lively and often funny – made me happy at once. I was simply happy because there was 'Presence'. These first inhabitants to confront my work were not the family people, employees, workers and members of associations, those who are generally 'active'. On the contrary, they were those who are generally 'inactive'. I had hoped and worked for a few people in the Bijlmer neighbourhood to share their time with me, but I had not anticipated it would be these people!

With time, I understood why they were the first – the pioneers – to get involved with and in my work. They all had something: free time, 'too much time', and thus time to kill. I was moved by this realization – for I became aware that my 'Presence and Production' guideline had provoked something and that from here on out we would share this thing: time passing. These first inhabitants had time, lots of free time to come into contact with my work. And I, present all day throughout the exhibition, had time to come into contact with them. I asked myself the question: Could it be because I am also on the margins? Don't I have to be, as an artist? Will I ever have to stop being on the margins?

Being on the margins was what we had in common, what we could share, and also understand – understand thanks to art. I felt there was an equality between these inhabitants with too much time and me and my precarious project. The fact that we were present on site was the thing to be shared, it was our 'common good'. With its 'Presence and Production' guideline, the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* offered a focus point. It was a powerful experience for me that those who first took hold of it were those who do not have moments and spaces to enjoy in their daily lives. Was the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* able to create a space, a time and a moment of public space thanks to the presence of the work itself but also that of all the participants – including me? A new space in which 'excess time' could crystallize and take shape?

The 'Presence and Production' guideline allowed me to understand the relationship to the margins as a common good constituting an exchange. And what if this connection with the margins and the precarious opening that results was the key to coming into contact with the other? Is this precarious relationship dense enough to create a real event?

The notion of 'Presence and Production', which I intended as a challenge, a 'warlike' affirmation but also a gift – an offensive and even aggressive gift – has taken on a new meaning for me. The formula 'Presence and Production' has taken on the dimension of a different and specific power. I thought I had an experience that means something to me, isn't that the experience of art?

Thomas Hirschhorn

Dear Thomas Hirschhorn,

Sadly, I wasn't able to participate in the experience of the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival*. I am sorry for that. I will therefore try to answer based on what you tell me, on what I know of your previous work and on my own concerns. The first thing I hear in 'Presence and Production' is the sign of equality represented by 'and'. Equality between two modes of presence that are commonly opposed: the presence of the work of art as a result of the artist's work, offered to viewers, and the presence of the artist as bearer or initiator of an action. Relational art has claimed to substitute the creation of relationships implying an interaction for the presence of the work of art before the viewer. Activist art claimed to demystify the myth of the artist by advocating an art that has become action. For my part, I've always argued that under the guise of demystification these strategies merely radicalized the traditional figure of the artist by relieving him of the task of relinquishing a product of his work, of separating it from his relationship to himself, to give it over to the examination but also to the temporality of others. There is no art without a production, giving the viewer the means to approach and appropriate within a temporality other than the artist's. 'Presence and Production' would then mean two things at once: that the artist exposes himself to being objectified as a producer whose productions are judged by all, but also that the artist is there, not being the work of art himself, but answering for what he has done and answering to those who react to his apparatus by adopting their time.

This means, I think, that the artist's presence is not that of an entertainer. This point probably needs to be clarified. If I understand correctly, this festival had in common with events you've organized in the past under other names (*Monument à Bataille*, *Musée précaire Albinet*, *24h Foucault*) the joining of a work of visual art with a series of activities ranging from philosophy conferences and open reading areas to theatre and creative activities for local children. How exactly would you define the difference between this apparatus and those for debates, publications, workshops and various activities put in place by biennales and other events of the same type or even simply by museums for exhibitions? Is it the very fact that in your case there is not the usual separation between artistic production and a series of actions intended to make its meaning resonate or to create media impact among the general public? Is that also what 'Presence' means, given that what you do is something other than creating a public venue or organizing interactions?

The first element of an answer to this question of presence comes in terms of time: the equality 'Presence and Production' would also be a sign of equality placed between heterogeneous times. This has no direct relationship, but I'm reminded of what Pedro Costa says about his work as a filmmaker, shooting in *No Quarto da Vanda* (Vanda's Room) for over two years, going every day, the way you'd go to the office, to see these 'margin-dwellers' whose time is more than fluctuant. Many artists and various types of activists want to make people 'active' by identifying activity with mobility. They want to make them move off the seat they're sitting on, force them to talk when they feel like watching, listening or keeping quiet. This view of the meaning of activity is far too simple. Let's not forget that those we once referred to as 'active citizens' and 'men of leisure' were one and the same white 'passive' citizens were those whose time was occupied by manual activities. Privilege can be expressed by opposite qualities – activity or idleness – but its core is the disposal of time. The artist's approach to equality is thus the ability to adapt his time to the time of those who do not 'possess' time, those whose fate is always to have too much or not enough time.

'Too much' or 'not enough' time determines the politics of art. In the past, when we worked to bring art closer to the people, we wanted to bring it closer to those whose work did not leave them enough time: not enough time to live within art, not enough time to travel far enough to get to know it. This entailed a certain economy to concentrate the art-effect.

With the Bijlmer experience, you point out an opposite phenomenon: those who were involved in the experience are those who have too much time, those whose time is not taken up by work.

Should we call them margin-dwellers and imagine a community between the artist and them as a shared position on the margins? I don't like this notion much, both because it threatens to raise certain stereotypes of the artist and to simplify the relationship of the work to its absence, of occupied time with idle time. The general phenomenon revealed by these kinds of experiences is the presence of powerful investments for knowledge, thought, art and any experience of this type in places where they aren't expected, among individuals whose business they aren't supposed to be. It has often been noted that the presence of time made available by force helps: prison provides more time to think and learn than the factory or the office: being in psychiatric institutions has provided a certain number of people with the time to explore their dramatic possibilities, etcetera.

But more generally, it is the porosity of the dividing line, the fact of circulating between occupied time and idle time that defines a type of experience that was largely present in yesterday's proletarian world but has been made more perceptible by all the current forms of precariousness and intermittence. The 'Presence' of the artist accompanying his 'production' would therefore be a manner of adopting this fluctuating temporality by confronting both his own work with other experiences of work and his available time with other available times. Making different times equal is in fact the condition for a public space, that is to say a space affirming anybody's ability to see, produce and think, to be created. The political power of art, rather than being in teaching, demonstrating, provoking or mobilizing, is in its ability to create public spaces thus conceived.

Jacques Rancière

Dear Jacques Rancière,

Thank you very much for your answer, which raises four points to which I'd like to respond: the question of the artist as an entertainer, the difference between my work and a cultural event, the question of 'participative art' in general and finally the question concerning the position of the margin and the stereotypes of the artist. Yes, the artist's presence cannot be that of an entertainer. The artist is not present because he is an artist (the creator of a body of work) – he is present because the most important thing is to be present. And he is present because he is responsible for everything, he is the concierge and the usher, the cleaning staff, the guarantor of his work: he is there to settle everything, to resolve everything. The artist is responsible for everything and even for what he cannot control or predict: this is why he must be present. I must be responsible for that for which I am not responsible. This is the noble task of my work and my presence. The artist is present to give of his time, the artist shares his time, the artist is present because there is nothing more important to do. The artist has nothing else – nothing more important – to do elsewhere. I was present beside my work for over three months in the Bijlmer neighbourhood, night and day without a break, because this was where the important thing for me was taking place, there was nothing more important to do anywhere else. That is the commitment and the sense of my presence. Presence is also an act of solitude, for I must be able to be alone, due to the complexity of my project, its irreducibility, its placement, its exaggeration, and its possible becoming. It is only by being alone that I can really be present and not make 'just another project': personally, I don't think in these terms – I couldn't – for a project like the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* requires such a high level of commitment, of open-mindedness, of strength, and energy, that it would never have come to fruition if I had considered it as 'just another project'.

The difference between a cultural event and the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* is not in production, the thing produced, whether it is a reading, a seminar or a workshop. The

fundamental difference is the autonomy of the work that affirms itself and the audience it addresses. I'm interested in this exactness: the simultaneous affirmation of the Autonomy and the universality of the work and the 'non-exclusive' audience for which the production of the work is intended. It is not a production specifically adapted to a different audience, it is a production for a 'non-exclusive audience'. According to me, this means that the production must be able to address an uninterested audience. That the production is not there to satisfy a demand, that it is not trying to find 'its' audience and that it is not trying to be a success in terms of the size of the audience or a specific audience. The production – without any concessions – remains an affirmation and something autonomous. Insisting upon that is what makes the difference. The more I insist upon it, the more exact it is. For it must also be possible to make this production without an audience, which was the case during some days of the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* – nobody was there! This is possible when the production is based on love. The work is done with the inhabitants, in a gesture of love. Therefore, this gesture doesn't necessarily call for an answer – since it comes from me – this is both utopian and concrete. I want to create a new form, based on love for a 'non-exclusive audience'. And the form itself is the difference and the act that distinguishes it from a cultural event. My love for Spinoza is the love of philosophy, of things I don't understand, the love of the infinitude of thought. It is a question of sharing this, of affirming it, defending it, and giving it shape.

I agree with you that it is not a question of getting people to 'move'. I have never used the term 'participative art' in referring to my work – that is a meaningless term, because someone looking at an Ingres painting, for instance, is participating. He can participate without anyone noticing. Similarly, I never used the terms 'educational art' and 'community art'. And my work has never had anything to do with 'relational aesthetics'. Nor have I read the book about it. If certain superficial critics put me in this category of 'relational aesthetics', it is simply an inaccurate representation of what I do. Not a single one of my works in public space has been a project of 'relational aesthetics' for the simple reason that I want to create a relationship with the Other only if that Other has no specific relationship with aesthetics. This is – and has always been – my guideline: to create a form that involves the other, the unexpected, the uninterested, those who don't see any interest in it, that involves a neighbour, a stranger, an alien. I have always wanted to work for this 'non-exclusive' audience, it is one of my most important goals. To address a 'non-exclusive' audience means to face the real, failure, lack of success, the cruelty of disinterest, and the incommensurability of a complex situation. But it also includes those who love art, the specialists, and those for whom art is important. My work includes them as part of that 'non-exclusive' audience, without specifically targeting them. I know that as an artist I am always suspected (of making 'relational aesthetics', for instance). That's fine with me – I'm not complaining – for I must be the 'usual suspect', but that is precisely why what is truly 'suspect' must be clarified. What is 'suspect' is to reign supreme in my role as the 'usual suspect'. This is why I want to try to define my work with my own notions, like 'Presence and Production' and 'non-exclusive audience'. I am conscious that these notions are not perfect, ideal or even accurate, but how can you accurately define a work of art in a single word? These notions are not concepts, they are tools I invented for myself and that I built myself.

The notion 'marginal' is not accurate or exact either, I admit, and its use can be stereotyped and also sterile. Therefore I don't want to exploit it, manipulate it or turn it into politics. I want to be more precise and clearer. I hadn't found an appropriate term to explain my experience at the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* to you and it's true that we need to look more closely into this question and position regarding the margin. Moved by the experience I was having, I tried to give a name to something that I was thinking and grasping, and with which I was in agreement. But the difficulty for me is to give a name to an experience – if it is a real experience, something new – to understand it and speak of this thing that is new. This thing was coexistence. I want to be more rigorous in describing my experience. As

rigorous as my work is – I hope. The difficulty is that as an artist, I must refuse to analyse my work before achieving it and experimenting with it. This is where the problem lies – and I'm not trying to avoid it – but you must understand that the artist must first do the work before he analyses it. This has always been my guideline: do first, analyse afterwards. I call it acting 'headless'. I'm conscious that with the *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival* or other projects acting 'headless' can be interpreted as a lack of rigour, but I think that it is the price to pay – as an artist – to do the work 'headless'. This is also why I believe my work deserves to be discussed in a critical manner, at a level that would include – for once – these questions in their paradoxical and problematic dimension. For I, who am neither theorist nor 'practitioner', must go beyond argumentation in order to be able to create a form, a form that comes from me and only from me. I want to make my work in 'low control'. Acting in 'low control' means to refuse to control, to put myself at a level of 'low control' like someone on the ground, at the end of his rope, overwhelmed, totally out of his depth yet not resigned, not reconciled and not cynical.

Thomas Hirschhorn

Dear Thomas Hirschhorn,

Since we have limited space, I won't ask you any new questions, which would remain unanswered. I just want to point out what strikes me in your answer, in order to open the way to other reflections. First of all, the term 'responsibility'. It seems to me that this term was already at the heart of the experience of the *Musée Précaire Albinet*. The Musée was placed under the responsibility – also day and night – of neighbourhood youths, who had to fill every function, both practical and intellectual, required by a museum. This amounted to scrambling the usual relationship between activity and passivity, which is always conceived as the reversal of symmetrical positions. And perhaps we have here a more interesting interpretation of 'everyone is an artist' than that which puts a paintbrush in the viewer's hand or tries to bring the spectator on stage. Sharing, that is to say re-sharing, touching upon the normal distribution of spaces and times is something other than reversing. And of course the artist isn't a good soul, he is first someone who produces, and this production does not allow itself to be dissolved in the simple creation of a relationship with others. I am struck by the fact that you insist so strongly both on the autonomy of production and the taking into account of an Other who goes beyond any system prepared to receive him. It strikes me because it also leads me to think about my own presuppositions. I have always adhered to Flaubert's requirement that the author withdraw from his work. Where it was customary to denounce an omniscient position and an aristocratic negation of the other, I always saw, on the contrary, the condition for an emancipation of the reader and the spectator, to whom the author abandons his work, by giving him the freedom and the responsibility to appropriate in his own way a work that no longer belongs to the one who made it.

'Absence' then seemed the appropriate complement to 'production'. Your watchword calls this pattern into question. It links production with the risk of the presence that verifies the effects while these have never been the object of any calculation. It links production and presence beyond the usual figures of generosity that exiles itself from art venues to reach the 'non-audience' or beyond a sacrificial exposure to the cruelty of the one to whom we come, powerless. It may seem contradictory to create a form that involves an Other while affirming one's own production, without concession, without the need for a response. The answer might be that the two terms imply the presence of a third party that includes both of them and takes them beyond themselves. A *BijlmerSpinoza Festival*, a *Deleuze Monument*, *Twenty-Four Hours for Foucault*: this means bringing into a contained time and space a power of thought, a power of community in which both the artist's absolutely determined, absolutely autonomous proposition and the unpredictable participation of a 'non exclusive audience', an audience without specificity, can be included. The autonomous

and the non-exclusive then both appear as two forms of universality that are linked not in the dual relationship of the encounter but because the proposition itself is already permeated by this power of universality and otherness that I call 'presupposition of the equality of intelligences' and which you refer to as the 'love of the infinitude of thought'.

Jacques Rancière

Jacques Rancière is a French philosopher. He has written various books, including *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010).

Thomas Hirschhorn is an artist from Switzerland.

Footnotes

1. This e-mail exchange was previously published by Les Presses du Réel in collaboration with Les Ateliers de Rennes in 2010 and appeared in French and English as part 4 of *Le Catalogue. Cinq Opuscules pour un catalogue*, Opuscule 4/4.

Tags

Art Discourse, Philosophy, Public Space, Aesthetics

This text was downloaded on November 14, 2026 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/presupposition-of-the-equality-of-intelligences-and-love-of-the-infinitude-of-thought