

Aesthetics and the Political

An essay on Francis Alÿs's 'Green Line'

Abstract

In this paper I examine Francis Alÿs's performance of walking the 'green line' – the 1949 act of partition that separated East from West Jerusalem – in light of his question: how can a work of art be political without engaging in politics? I situate this question in the context of a general problematic – that of the relation of the political to the aesthetic, borrowing Jacques Rancière's distinction between the aesthetic and representational regimes of the image. I explain how the political work of art faces a twofold paradox today, characteristic of its specific historicity. First, it faces what I call the 'state of aesthetic exception', which deprives art of a criterion ensuring a univocal, communicable message; second, it confronts a broader historical contradiction, which becomes symptomatic in Bourdieu's sociological reduction of art to the condition of the habitus. I argue Alÿs' *Green Line* circumvents this paradox and in the process provides a novel answer to the question of how a work can be political while evading 'politics'. The *Green Line*, I suggest, is thereby able to *disclose* not just the *logic* of the political but the constitutive aporia of the sovereign act of power which founds it.



In 1949, a peculiar act of political vandalism, perversely reminiscent of Paul Klee's technique of 'taking a line for a walk', saw the *de facto* division of East and West Jerusalem. This act, which sought to reflect the new distribution of power following the cessation of hostilities in the war between Arab and Zionist forces of the previous year, was one that both literally and symbolically redrew the map of the region. All that it required was the pencilling of two lines across a map of Palestine. Abdallah El-Tal, the Jordanian representative, drew his line using

a red wax crayon, while Moshe Dayan, on the Israeli side, used a green one. The profound ambiguity of this simple act of inscription would later be captured by Meron Benvenisti when he astutely remarked: ‘Who owned the “width of the line?”’ (Benvenisti, 1996, p.57). For the scale of the map (1:20,000) and the thickness of each line equated, quite unintentionally, to a stretch of no-man’s land, 60-80 metres in breadth and several hundred kilometres in length. The rhetorical force of Benvenisti’s question, however, does not derive from this fact alone but rather – in posing so starkly the issue of ownership Benvenisti exposed the fundamental paradox of the founding act of partition itself: this ‘cartographic monstrosity’, as Benvenisti described the ‘green line’, insofar as it resolved the crisis, at the same time perpetuated it.

It is not hard to see why an artist such as Francis Alÿs, whose work is rather obsessively preoccupied with exploring and uncovering those misaligned and atopic or unplaceable regions located on the margins of socio-geographic visibility would be attracted to the story of the green line. One can also see why he might perceive in it something rather allegorical, whose significance we have yet to determine. At any rate, over half a century after the line was first fatefully executed, this Belgian exile, and ‘Mexican’ artist, would spend two days walking the now infamous green line. Over those days, Alÿs, armed only with a can of paint, into whose base he had punctured a small hole, traversed the hills and valleys of Jerusalem, leaking along the path behind him a thin drizzle of green paint. Alÿs not only retraced the contours of Dayan’s line, thereby dryly inverting Klee’s dictum; he was reinscribing the original act of partition through a performative act of iteration. In doing so he was opening up the undeniable ambiguity of the ‘margin’, at once both real and imagined, created by the arbitrary thickness of Dayan’s pencil.

At first glance, the purpose of this act would appear to be self-evident. Alÿs was using art as a way of confronting one of the world’s most wretched and intractable political crises. The ‘*Green Line*’ is hence a manifestly *political* work of art. Even the title Alÿs gave to his ‘derive’ through Jerusalem in 2004 attests to its political intent: *Sometimes doing something political can become poetic... and sometimes doing something poetic can become political*. Nevertheless we should take care not to make premature judgments about what this

signifies, especially since Alÿs warns us that his turn to the political should by no means be taken as embracing any kind of militancy. In point of fact, one must situate the work in the context of the broader question Alÿs was himself to ask: ‘How can art remain politically significant without assuming a doctrinal standpoint or aspiring to become social activism?’ Framed in this way, the meaning of the work appears perplexing: given this puzzling question, how are we to comprehend the nature of Alÿs’s intervention? Herein lies the challenge which will preoccupy us in what follows: certainly Alÿs wishes us to understand the ‘*Green Line*’ as a ‘political’ work of art, but it is also, at the same time, a work of art that poses a disconcerting and I believe *decisive* question: in what way can a work of art *be* political?¹

This is not a new question, of course – thinkers such as Sartre, Althusser, Bourdieu and, more recently, Jacques Rancière have all attempted to grapple with it. What can be said however is that Alÿs provides us with a fresh way of posing the question. What is more, to the extent that it is articulated through the work itself, the *Green Line* also provides a clue as to how it should (and equally should not) be answered. Our approach, however, will be oblique: before we can hope to find an answer to the question posed by this work, we must first discern for ourselves what it means. To do this requires that we enquire into the general – one might even say – ‘formal’ terms of the problematic regarding the relation between the political and the aesthetic. Only after we have done this might we then find ourselves in a position to detect in what way Alÿs’s work provides a response to the problematic of the political within the concrete, specific, and material setting of the *Green Line*.

First, let us consider the title a little more closely, with its two thought-provoking ‘axioms’: (1) *Sometimes doing something political can become poetic* – and (2) *sometimes doing something poetic can become political*. One can extrapolate from these statements at least three underlying assumptions, or better still, ‘theorems’, which might be said to govern

¹ The work as presented *originates* with this act – in the gallery, it is presented as a video installation documenting the walk, accompanied by reflections of commentators from both sides of the line.

the relation of the political to the aesthetic, and whose validity the work aims, one way or another, to put to the test.

The first theorem presents the poetic and the political as two nomenclatures standing in an apparent antagonistic relationship to one another. According to this theorem we find, on one side of the divide, the system of poetic utterances and, on the other, the system of proper names for expressions of good governance – the opposition of politics and poetics in its classical Platonic sense. The poetic is a certain type of speech act that must be differentiated from the discursive sphere of the political, just as persuasion, oratory, and rhetoric must be properly preserved according to the Platonic schema from their falsification within the idiom of mimetic acts insofar as the latter appropriates them for mere theatrical effect. While one domain aims at reality and justice, the other delivers us over to nothing other than pure semblance. To be sure, Plato accepts that there is an art to politics, but this by no means requires the reduction of politics to a form of *poesis*. On the contrary, the first theorem adverts to an argument for the containment of the power of art – or more precisely, the ‘artisan’ as Rancière will point out² – by delimiting that power as one suitably subservient to the needs and requirements of the political and moral order of the *polis*.

A second theorem introduces a paradox since it simultaneously enforces and undermines this classical differentiation of the poetic and political, with its insistence on the obeisance of the former to the latter. It can be derived, on the one hand, from Alÿs’s use of the adverb ‘sometimes’, which bears within it, significantly, the quantifier ‘some’. There may be *some* times in which political acts are poetic; just as there are *some* poetic acts that are, on occasion, political. Equally, there are *other* times when this is not the case. Alternatively, as this way of formulating the matter shows, the second theorem derives from the fact that for Alÿs the statement is always in principle reversible. And so, now, the opposition of art and politics does not preclude the traversal by the poetic of that which separates and differentiates it from the political, or vice versa, but neither does it necessitate such a crossing. In this way,

² See Jacques Rancière *The Philosopher and his Poor* chapter 1.

one can acknowledge the interpenetration of these two idioms, these two modes of speech, and also of what makes them distinct. Hence one admits the possibility for the appearance of the political within the poetic and for the incursion of the poetic in the sphere of politics, describing two discrete movements in fact. At the same time, one also maintains a logical space of non-contamination and non-identity – preserving the formal autonomy of art and the specificity of political utterances by allocating each their proper domain: art and politics still refer in the last instance, according to this reading of the axiom, to two different modalities of speech and action.

To get some leverage on the third theorem, which volatilizes everything, we need to ask how this might yet be possible – how these two opposing terms can come to occupy the place of the other without simply collapsing the difference that makes them what they are, without simply aestheticising political discourse, or defiling the aesthetic with base political sentiment. To be sure, such a traversal would always in practice imply the risk of a conflation, reducing politics to facile presentation, deprived of meaningful content, or conversely, transforming art into crude didacticism. Nevertheless, the third theorem also signifies, for our understanding of Alÿs, something rather more scrupulous and precise: it names the condition of possibility that allows art to intervene in the sphere of the political. To be precise, on my reading, what it states is that the poetic *act* can become political *and yet* retain its autonomy from *politics* – while, correspondingly, the political can assume a poetic *form* without surrendering everything to *mere* semblance, as Plato feared. For this theorem, then, which specifies the condition for the possibility of a *poesis* which is political and of a politics of the poetic, what we find is that in both formulations the statement refers us to a reversible movement where it is a matter of *doing* one thing in the act of *becoming* another.

Of course we need to make sense of this rather obscure idea of ‘*doing* one thing in the act of *becoming* another’ in terms of Alÿs’s project, but to set the scene for doing so we must delve somewhat deeper into the general implications posed by this work with regard to the relation of the political to the aesthetic. Let us remind ourselves, therefore, of Alÿs’s question, but now attending to what it specifically *excludes*. The question, to repeat, is how

can art remain politically significant *without* assuming a doctrinal standpoint or aspiring to social activism? What this excludes, in fact, or so it would seem, is precisely *politics* from the work of art – what Sartre once referred to as the ‘committed’ work of art. It is precisely because it puts into contention the idea of a committed work of art that the question strikes us as interesting, even paradoxical. As a consequence, Alÿs’s question might be restated as follows: in what way can art be ‘political’ without engaging in *politics*?

Sartre himself, it should be said, believed that – with the exception of literary prose – art provided a rather inadequate means for expressing the artist’s political commitments: ‘does anyone think that [“Picasso’s Massacre of Guernica”] won over a single heart to the Spanish cause?’ (Sartre, p.278). In this way, Sartre’s notion of a committed work performed its own act of exclusion: i.e., he excluded any work that pointed away from a *situation* due to the self-referentiality of the medium. Prosaic semioticity is thus awarded priority, by Sartre, over the opaque aestheticism of non-literary forms of art. What he presupposed in so doing was an immediate and unproblematic correlation of form and function within the committed work of literary art – and thus in his mind an unbroken continuum extended between literature, life and the rhetorico-political act. Specifically, Sartre presupposed, on the one hand, a correlation between writing, rhetoric and intended affect, and on the other hand, an almost authoritarian identity of sense and reference, through which the work of literature was able to designate, on his account at least, the truth of a situation. Because of this, writing was conceived by Sartre as equivalent to a speech act possessing a certain illocutionary force; ‘style’ was understood as the form through which the art of persuasion was to produce its effects on the reader; and, finally, reading was grasped, not just in terms of a better understanding of the political dimension of the situation, but in terms of the generation of actual perlocutionary outcomes, as directed by the author’s explicit intention vis-à-vis the

situation in question. In short, Sartre presupposed what Jacques Rancière has recently called ‘the pedagogical model of the efficacy of art’ (Rancière, 2009, p.59).³

It should be observed that what is in dispute here is not the idea that ‘commitment is harmful to the art of writing’, as Sartre’s early critics had assumed. The objection, rather, is that there is no longer any basis for according transparent representational powers to *any form of art* – literature included: ‘The collapse of the representational paradigm’ as Rancière says, ‘means not only the collapse of a hierarchical system of address. It means the collapse of a whole regime of meaning’ (Rancière, 2004a, p.16). It is Rancière’s view, in fact, contrary to Sartre’s understanding, that what *we* call ‘literature’ – a peculiar mode of writing which arose during the 19th century, and whose canonical form is the novel – bears witness to an event which fundamentally shatters the idea of writing as the supplement of a *speech act*. In its place, we find, as Rancière proposes to call it, ‘the democratic disorder of literariness’. Literariness signifies the ‘democracy of the mute letter, meaning the letter that anybody can retrieve and use in his or her way’ (Rancière, 2004a, p.15). The notion of commitment, which we find articulated in Sartre simply belies, as Rancière sees it, a profound failing on Sartre’s part to acknowledge the occurrence of a radical historical shift in the specific epistemic conditions determining not just the production and reception of art – but, as Rancière says, of the very ‘partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear’. What Sartre, as a consequence, fails to see is how the aesthetic transformation of art precludes the very possibility of the art work as effective political utterance (Rancière, 2004a, p.10).

Consequently, if art is dominated by, as Rancière puts it, ‘regimes of the image’ – i.e., ‘a priori forms of historical sensibility’ (Rancière, 2005, p.13) and if – according to this analysis – the current regime of the image sees art today governed by the aesthetic disposition, then the idea of commitment is axiomatically undermined by what this ‘regime’

³ It was not enough that art convey to us a *truth*; for Sartre, it also had to be capable of convincing us of it.

inaugurates: the alienation of art from the assumptions of communicative rationality. In *de facto* terms: the specific historicity of the work of art today witnesses a break with the classicist schema – a break in the relation whereby form was subsumed to function, which is the founding principle of mimesis (‘the adaptation of expression to subject matter is a principle of the representative tradition that the aesthetic regime of art has called into question’ Rancière, 2004b, p.61). As a result, one no longer has any automatic right to proclaim the *effectiveness* of the work of art as the bearer of a univocal message – and not least because the aesthetic regime, if this is correct, must already have reconfigured or recast ‘a priori’ the fundamental conditions of sensible understanding, turning it away from the reception of the terms of a message, toward, as Bourdieu once thought to call it, an ‘aesthetic perception’ in which we find a ‘practical negation of the objective intention of a signal’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p.29). Hence, Rancière asserts: ‘The core of the problem, is that there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics’ (Rancière, 2004b, p.62).

But now, for Rancière, it seems the very lack of a criterion which could assert the self-certainty of a political intention through the work of art⁴ is to be identified with the emergence of a fundamental paradox, which detains the current epoch, and holds it captive to the opacity of the Sign. First, we can locate in the origins of the aesthetic regime an emancipatory moment, as enunciated in Kant’s third critique and in Schiller’s ‘On the Aesthetic Education of Man’, in which art is rendered autonomous from the functionalist representationalism of the categories of understanding.⁵ On the other hand, Rancière notes how this autonomy very rapidly produces a new pathology which assails art, and which is

⁴ He also writes, more explicitly that there ‘is no criterion for the political evaluation of works of art’ (Rancière, 2004b, p.65).

⁵ This is exemplified most explicitly in Kant with the distinction in the third critique between reflective and determinate judgments and in Schiller’s related notion of the liminal dimension of the aesthetic, which occupies an intermediate region between two forms of necessity – rational and natural – and which manifests itself in the ‘leap to aesthetic play’ (Schiller, 2004, p. 134).

betrayed through certain symptoms characterising the fate of art with increasing severity up to the present period. The principal symptom takes the form of a crisis at the level of the aesthetic: the attempt to assert the singularity or autonomy of art simultaneously induces a *state* in which we find the dissolution of the very distinction of art from other forms of ‘doing and making’. Not only do we thus witness a collapse of the mimetic order; we also witness a collapse of the hierarchy of aesthetic practices. What ensues is a perpetual state of ‘aesthetic exception’. This means that what defines the *political* dimension of art within the prevailing epoch of Rancière’s ‘aesthetic regime’ is a fundamentally negative disposition, which expresses itself through dissent from *any* aesthetic norm. The state of ‘aesthetic exception’, as I have called it – the refusal of a norm – suspends indefinitely the principle of adequation which was the *locus standi* of the mimetic ideal of classical *poesis*. With its suspension, the relation of art to politics is rendered doubly ambiguous, since what begins with an ‘emancipatory’ gesture, soon manifests an underlying *social* contradiction, which we can now begin to specify more accurately. First, the aesthetic revolution constitutes a process in which the normative distinctions that structured and divided the classical world are ‘delegitimized’: ‘the break with mimesis... meant that there was no longer any principle of distinction between what belonged to art and what belonged to everyday life’ (Rancière, 2005, p.21). Not only do we find a transformation in the forms of thought about politics, but the abruption of the aesthetic itself corresponds to a demand for a new political paradigm, which rejects the repressive hierarchies of the old oligarchic state. Second, however: to the extent that the ‘new aesthetic regime of art and its politics’ threatens to unleash ‘the disease of literarity’, which is to say, *political and social disorder*, specifically through an increasing demand for equality – ‘expressed in its *political* form’ as Marx says, ‘as the *emancipation of workers*’ (Marx, 1844, p.299) – it gives rise to an equally radical remedy which is itself made possible only through the aesthetic turn:

In the old representational regime, the frame of intelligibility of human actions was patterned on the model of the causal rationality of voluntary actions, linked together and aimed at definite ends. Now, when meaning becomes a “mute” relation of signs

to signs, human actions are no longer intelligible as successful or unsuccessful pursuits of aims by willing characters. And the characters are no longer intelligible through their ends. They are intelligible through the clothes they wear, the stones of their houses or the wallpaper of their rooms (Rancière, 2005, p.19)

Where, at first, the aesthetic revolution made possible the radical literature of Flaubert – that is, provided the circumstances for a genuinely egalitarian form of writing – the selfsame descriptive techniques that had overturned the representational and dramatic paradigm (by vigorously dismissing the priority classicism gave to action over life) fashioned in turn the epistemic condition that would inexorably lead to the sociological suppression of ‘literarity’. The emergent hegemony of the aesthetic produced, in short, sociologicistic modes of description that served to reinscribe social distinction across the mesh of social practices. Sociology then, through its method of deciphering and displaying everyday life and its symptoms, and without being able to alter the underlying fatalism of its approach one iota, simply condemned *at the level of theory* those whom it selected for observation to the ever increasing entrenchment of the modes of production and domination it claimed to diagnose. Hence Rancière’s objection to Bourdieu’s structural hermeneutics of distinction, which produces, as he describes it in *The Philosopher and his Poor* ‘a science of rankings, setting individuals in their proper places and reproduced in judgments’ (Rancière, 2003, p.167). It is this perplexing contradiction at the heart of the aesthetic regime which induces, for Rancière, I think, genuine scepticism concerning the fate of an expressly political or ‘emancipatory’ ambition within art; but also for us it shows how the new politics reverts, in the last instance, to the old politics, *that is, reverts to a mode of the political that seeks the total suppression of the radical democratic impetus – that seeks, in a word, the suppression of ‘politics’*.

And so, it is against the historical emergence of the state of aesthetic exception that we can and must understand the scepticism implicit in Alj’s question over the role of art as an effective means of conducting militant politics today. Indeed, any engagement of art in the politics of commitment might well strike us as naïve given the two broad paradoxes

enumerated in the discussion outlined above. One would demonstrate, in the case of so-called political art, if not obtuseness, at the very least a profound lack of appreciation of the disruptive effects of the state of aesthetic exception on the transmissibility of a message. The other paradox, which discloses the contradictions at play in the revolutionary shift in aesthetic practices over the past two hundred years, warns us that the emancipatory aspirations of art are founded on the very regime that has come to dominate and administer ever more thoroughly the democratic impulse that it once promised to unleash. Certainly art discovers the everyday – but at the very same time that a sociologising mode of politics subjects everyday life to what Foucault would call the ‘inspectorial eye of power’, and Rancière a ‘police order’.

As a result – and given the state of aesthetic exception which marks out the aesthetic regime as contradiction – what sense can we give, at this juncture, to Alÿs’s original question of how a work of art can be political without engaging in politics?

There is a reflex answer to this question, of course, which is not without a certain appeal, and which must be considered. It corresponds broadly to Bourdieu’s sociological reduction of art to the abstract condition of the habitus. But not only does this regress to the depressing and, dare I say, rather trivial notion that all art is political just by virtue of the fact that all art belongs to a socially encoded system of ‘taste’; it blithely exchanges scepticism for pessimism. In this manner, even politics is condemned by the gaze of sociology to a kind of structural impotence, which art makes manifest in symptomatic form. Apolitical art becomes political by default regardless of its being wholly incognisant and unconscious of the disposition to which it panders. Its disavowal of politics, which amounts to the disavowal of the social condition of art, exemplified notoriously by Théophile Gautier and the art for art’s sake movement, puts it, so to speak, in bad faith. Political art, by contrast, falls into bad faith as soon as it asserts a *position* for Bourdieu, if only because positionality can signify nothing other than an *entrenchment* and *repetition* of those predetermined coordinates conditioning the situation against which the political artist claims, putatively, to be protesting. Hence every position political art can adopt must ‘always already’ have been assigned according to

the social mechanics secretly at work in the prejudgements of taste; hence an indefatigable process of entrenchment indeed belongs to the logic of positionality which gives the lie to all so-called radical acts.

But there is an alternative to the pessimistic concoction that Bourdieu's 'blanket-theoretical' approach cooks up, and which I think Alÿs manages to capture in the *Green Line*. To get a purchase on what this alternative might be, it is worth taking note of what Rancière says regarding, as he expresses it, the 'dream of a suitably political work of art', which is –

... in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle. It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations (Rancière, 2004*b*, p.63).

Let us ask, then, in what way does Rancière's notion of 'rupture' help make sense of Alÿs's otherwise paradoxical work of art, which is 'political' but does not engage in politics?

Allow me to return, momentarily, to a remark I made at the outset regarding Dayan's original act of inscription, which, if you recall, I said possessed a certain allegorical significance for Alÿs, the interpretation of which I believe is crucial to the way we understand this work. What that significance amounts to, I think, is this: the *Green Line* presents us with an *allegory of the political*. Or rather and more precisely stated: Alÿs's iterative – and as he calls it 'meaningless' act – allegorises the 'green line', transforming it into a metaphor of the political. In this way, Alÿs diverts our attention away from the pre-established facts of the situation to its founding moment: to the zero and null point of its constitution, in which a specific political distribution is brought into existence via a sovereign act of power or 'will' – that is to say, brings into being a certain 'situation', a certain 'politics' of the situation. It is for this reason that Alÿs's act of walking the line can be said to be quite literally 'meaningless'. It is meaningless in the strict and proper sense that it is politically *inscrutable* – for although it makes reference to the 'green line', occupies it, so to speak, it makes no direct investment in the situation. To be readable, by contrast, would be to assign one's act a

meaning, either wittingly or unwittingly, according to the pre-given logic of the situation; but it is precisely this situational logic of identification – *the logic of identity politics* – that Alÿs wishes to disrupt. His act thus opts for neither one side nor the other; it is neither ‘for the Palestinians’ nor, in opposition to the Palestinians, is it ‘for the Israelis’. What the work rehearses is therefore not ‘politics’, in the usual sense of positionality – taking up a position. What it rehearses is the *performative event through which the political act first ‘opens up’ a situation and, to borrow a phrase from Althusser, ‘takes hold’*. What it rehearses, specifically, is Dayan’s original performative act of determining and producing, through the inscription of a simple, almost childish line, across the map of Palestine, the *particular distribution of power whose effect is to divide and apportion the city of Jerusalem*. What the work *points to* thereby is not ‘politics’, but its strategic affects, whose spread determines the socio-geographic topos: *the political logic of the situation as manifest in a concrete and material sense*. What it *speaks of*, vis-à-vis the situation is *its authorisations and prohibitions on the movement of people; its displacements and its divisions; its possession of a ‘territory’* – in reality the inverted logic of dispossession dressed up as a field of ‘defensive’ manoeuvring. What it *resists*, in this way, is *the matrixing of the situation, which specifies what is enactable according to the normative restrictions imposed by the ‘legal’ and ideological apparatus which springs from it*.

It is precisely so as to bring into question this prior and constitutive *logic* of the political and its grim effects, which we are more than familiar with, that Alÿs *does not engage in politics*.

Here several questions immediately press themselves upon us.

First question: what exactly is the ‘logic of the political’ which is disclosed through this allegorising and iterative act?

Second question: in what way does this performative act – which we described earlier as a matter of ‘doing one thing in the act of becoming another’ – inform us about the relationship between the political and the aesthetic?

Third question: what does this intervention within the situation of the green line tell us about the founding act of political sovereignty?

Fourth question: what, in more general terms, does *The Green Line* reveal in terms of the tactics of ‘political’ art under the state of the *aesthetic* exception?

Allow me to put flesh on the bare bones of these questions, however briefly in the space remaining, and by way of the example of the work itself. Now recall that Alÿs’s title, according to our third reading of the axiom above, initially called to mind two mutually reciprocal, but reversible movements. The first, *Sometimes doing something political can become poetic* – is a movement from the political to the aesthetic. The second, *Sometimes doing something poetic can become political* – describes a movement from the aesthetic towards the political. To these two abstract movements, and their correlative polarities, we find two corresponding concrete events. The first event is historical: it is the original act of inscription, a political performative, so to speak, which occurred in 1949 with Dayan’s drawing of the green line. The second ‘event’, occurring more recently in 2004, is Alÿs’s rejoinder to Dayan.

With the event of Dayan’s inscription we access the first movement, which reaches the *aesthetic* through the act of doing something *political*. By contrast, in Alÿs’s iterative act of ‘walking the line’, we find the second movement, which, travelling contrariwise to Dayan, describes an inversion of the first movement. The second reaches the political *through the act of doing something* ‘aesthetic’.

But what is the exact significance of this dual and reversible movement?

Let us try to be more precise still.

In the first case we reach the *aesthetic dimension of the political*. This is exemplified, but by no means restricted to, the cartographic delineation of a territory, quite literally through – as Michel de Certeau once expressed it – the ‘panoptic practice’ of map-making: flattening out the temporal and lived articulation of place and transforming it, by means of planar projection, into a spatialised and strategic system of points. ‘Whence’, as de Certeau explains, ‘the eye can transform foreign forces into objects that can be observed and

measured, and thus control and “include” them within its scope of vision’ (de Certeau, 1988, p.36). Still in more general terms, the logic of the political can be said to determine the *sensuous or ‘material’ appearance of existing social reality* – the ‘distribution of the sensible’, as Rancière puts it; or, earlier, as in Marx – the appearance of ‘externalised life’ in its *alienated form* (Marx, 1844, p. 298). In other words, the logic of the political expresses itself materially, determinately and practically through a *poesis*.

In the case of the second movement, which is our primary concern here, we discover two things about the relation of art to the political. The first is primarily negative, and confirms what we have already said: that the political power of art has nothing to do with making a political statement, for if it did then we would have no means of distinguishing these two movements, and thus no means of differentiating a work of art from a work of politics. On the contrary, the work of art would simply be, at best, a political act in an aesthetic guise. At worst, the movement from the political to the aesthetic would deprive art of the power to disrupt the sensible order of the political. In this case, and because it already results *from* that ‘order’, art could find no genuine way of unsettling it.

Nevertheless, as we discover in Alÿs’s *Green Line*, or such is the proposal I am advancing here, there is an alternative possibility, one which does not subordinate art to politics – to the contrary. In fact, we can discern in Alÿs what I would prefer to call a *critical species of poesis* – i.e., a movement that has the power to *disclose* the logic of the political at the same time as resisting its gravitational pull. More significantly: because of this ‘resistant-disclosive power’ we find in art a means of *disrupting* the aesthetic dimension which belongs to a given political conjuncture, for to reveal the logic of the political amounts to a teleological suspension of its order (its politics). This ‘critical *poesis*’, as I have called it, opens up in the second movement, described above, when art moves by means of the aesthetic towards the disclosure of the aesthetic dimension of the political. Critical *poesis* is thus the *disclosive movement that reaches beyond the given distributions of the situation to grasp the political dimension as such*. It is a critical *poesis* because it accomplishes this disclosure not by doing politics, but *through the act of doing something ‘aesthetic’*; and it is ‘critical’, in the

proper sense of the term, because it finds within this act *the limit condition of the political as such*.

Consider, in this regard, the act of ‘walking the line’ and the act of ‘drawing the line’.

Wherever and whenever one finds a line – and as we know they are everywhere, both actual and metaphorical – one finds a means of demarcating both a border and the territory laying either side of it. There one also finds a barrier, a system of inclusion and exclusion, a way of delimiting ‘home’ and ‘alien’, a *de facto* means of distinguishing between those who are and by definition are not ‘equal’ to one another, i.e., who are awarded (or denied) rights, according to the specific law that authorises and polices the line; but also, one finds through the device of the line the means of determining the rejectamenta of a situation, of deciding upon those who should be subject to a process of internal exclusion and sanction, etc. This is what the line, so to speak, ‘represents’. But the line is not simply a sign *representing* a border or barrier or frontier, it is also – as we have said – a political performative: *it enacts the division it institutes within and by means of a specific representational schema, a specific politics and thus a specific ‘aesthetics’ of the political*. When Moshe Dayan, for instance, draws the line through Jerusalem, separating Eastern and Western parts of the city, he does not simply *represent* the division of Israeli and Palestinian, he brings it into being *as a political division*, and he does so through a sovereign act of power from which springs the specific politics of the situation. This sovereign act, of course, owes everything to the implacable logic that constitutes it and makes it what it is. It is the logic of *antagonism*, which Carl Schmitt once codified in terms of his famous criterion of the political, the distinction of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’ – and through which, he captured, inadvertently perhaps, what we might call the *pathology* of politics. Behind Dayan’s line, this pathology is visible enough. To acknowledge the line – to be a subject of the situation – is to be contained within the matrices of an enmity that forces one to remain within its logic and whose resolution would not simply be the ‘elimination’ of the enemy – as Schmitt says⁶ – it would signify

⁶ See Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*

one's own extinction. Hence the pathogens at play in the friend enemy distinction: within that logic, in which the adversarial other is constituted as a power of negation, one is compelled to seek the destruction of the very 'differential' that founds one's own identity.⁷

Nevertheless, if a border is a limit whose specific performativity corresponds to the way in which it executes by means of the inscription of a line the specific distributions that divide the political *topos*; it is also *qua* 'line' a *limit*. Seen in this way, which is precisely what Alj's work allows us to do, is to pose the question – in fact, Benvenisti's question – 'what is the *normative* status of the line?' Is it inside or outside the terms it institutes? Is it subject to the law – a law prior to the law? – or is it altogether extra-legal? Note, therefore: this is a *quid juris* problem – it pertains not to the fact of the line, but to the formal condition of the act from which it originates. To pose the question of the line in this way is thereby to pose a question to the power that claims for itself the authority to *legitimate* its effects, its distributions, and to decide – in the name of that power – on the terms of the 'settlement' of the situation; in short, it is to put in question the authority that grants itself the *sovereign power of inscription*. Now no doubt there is a perfectly good 'Schmittian' response to this question, which indeed compels us to concede that the sovereign *is* extra-judicial – to paraphrase Schmitt: 'sovereign is he who decides in the absence of a norm'.⁸ It is only the sovereign, by definition, who has the power to suspend the law, and who can decide in the absence of any consensus on what needs to be done in the face of a political crisis. But Schmitt's decisionism does not get us out of the problem; on the contrary, it *exemplifies* the problem of the line. For the power of suspending the law is only meaningful, even on Schmitt's terms, in the act of guaranteeing the restitution of political *order* – that is, precisely, in securing the possibility of the return of the rule of law.

Let us spell out this problem as 'the paradox of the line', which can be posed as a question: how can the forceful assertion of an act of sovereignty prior to the law establish the

⁷ See Ernesto Laclau's *Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject* on this point.

⁸ See C. Schmitt's *Political Theology*.

law? Or to put it in terms of Alÿs's act: when Alÿs walks the line he directs our attention, first, to the ambiguous thickness of Dayan's pencil, and, second, to what that ambiguity signifies – namely, that the contingent thickness of the line undermines the normative authority of the sovereign act of inscription; or rather, that it undermines what that sovereign act claims to found. While Dayan's line signifies the restitution of political order – the cessation of hostilities – and thus a 'return to the rule of law', it also signifies the limit of that law by returning it to its point of origination, which is one of pure contingency: what we confront with the paradox of the line is consequently the *paradox of the political*.

The significance of the paradox can be made vivid as follows. The ideal of politics is the ideal of imposing a normative order. This is the reason why Plato begins his discussion of political economy in the *Republic* by explicitly posing the problem of politics – good governance of the *polis* – as a problem of justice. It is also precisely why he rejects Thraymachus's argument that what is just corresponds to 'the advantage of the established rule' (Plato, *Rb1*. 339, p. 983). Against this, Socrates will oppose a notion of justice that seeks no advantage for itself, but simply the advantage of (what is) good (*agathon*) as such; and that corresponds, according to the argument of the *Republic* – although one also finds the idea expressed in Aristotle, to the well-ordered state composed of equals (*homoioi*). Expressed in more contemporary terms, a political system is to be founded on the ideal of social justice. The ideal of politics, then, is the ideal of imposing a normative order founded on an egalitarian principle of citizenship. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the act of sovereignty, i.e., the act of imposition that would ensure that principle, and which would be the sole power capable of underwriting the normative order at the point at which it 'falters', undermines and reveals its limits. This is the allegorical significance of the green line. For how can a power be just if at the point of constitution it reveals itself to be unconstrained by any norm – if its power derives from nothing less than violence?

To be sure, one might respond that this just is the condition of politics, stripped of its ideality and utopian aspirations: political power reveals itself thereby, in the final instance, to be precisely for the advantage of the established rule. But as a consequence, it can no longer

lay claim to an ideal of social justice. The problem is, however, that matters are not resolved so simply – something which is again revealed in the *Green Line*. For even if the paradox of the political could be resolved by denying the necessity of the principle of justice, the issue nevertheless returns to haunt the political situation in the form of that which has been constitutively ‘repressed’ within its terms; hence we arrive at a new paradox, which we shall designate – *the paradox of justice*. In other words, if we are forced to concede that politics exists in the absence of justice; this by no means gets rid of the *problem* of justice. On the contrary, we will see that the condition of possibility of politics reveals itself – to express it in a somewhat Derridean fashion – precisely in the condition of the *impossibility* of justice.⁹ It is because justice is *not* that it is capable of providing a genuine political demand with its motive. Only because justice is not can it be *that which is called for*.

What is more, because the paradox of justice is the flip-side of the paradox of the political, one cannot easily dismiss it as an arbitrary side-effect of the logic of the political. This means it is always already constitutive of a situation – it belongs to its structure, so to speak. Hence if one wishes to speak of the *effect* this paradox has on the structure of a situation – for instance, that of the green line – it is always one of an implicit correlation: the lack of justice on one side of the line produces what we might call an ethical deficit on the other. Which is why, Alÿs’s work is so compelling. It shows that beyond the politics of antagonism one can discern within the logic of the political the supplementary rationality of a demand which transcends the situation, but which is implicit to its *structure*, i.e., as a *lack*. This, then, is what I think Alÿs can be said to be doing in this work. In retracing the inscription of the line, Alÿs draws our attention – not just to the *possibility* but to the *fact* of the equipotentiality for ‘justice’ – and he does this specifically by demonstrating a convergence of the poetic and the political within a symbolic act which stands for the very embodiment of the idea that in an overdetermined socio-political structure one can apply

⁹ Derrida formulates this question explicitly in his essay ‘Force of Law’.

pressure equally at any point across its topology precisely because what it lacks is actual justice.

This lack is itself revelatory of the deepest problematic of the political, which pertains to the very ‘event’ of the political. One finds this problematic expressed in Rancière, when he speaks of the ‘law of chance’, where ‘politics begins’ (Rancière 2006, p. 40), and elsewhere in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Giorgio Agamben – but also in Slavoj Žižek.¹⁰ But it is perhaps most cogently expressed in the final writings of Louis Althusser in his reflections on what he called ‘aleatory materialism’, which is a philosophy of the ‘encounter’ and of the ‘void’. Here, Althusser tells us that the fact of power is always belied by another fact, which it seeks to suppress. Namely that political power is always, at heart, the assertion of a ‘right’ *without right*; an assertion of force, in other words, which mistakes *the power of a fact* – the ‘established fact’ as Althusser puts it – that is to say, the ‘fact of history’ – as *justification* for the system which is born with it and through which it seeks to dignify its authority. Althusser’s point is that behind the apparent necessity of a historical situation, there lies a ‘void’ – a state of radical contingency, an ‘Epicurean rain’, as he expresses it, which belies all claims to rational or teleological justification within history, and whose mythogeme history itself finally exposes:

History here is nothing but the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another indecipherable fact to be accomplished without our knowing in advance whether, or when, or how the event that revokes it will come about (Althusser, 2006, p. 174)

Thus if one cannot dispute the fact of power, one can nevertheless put into question the ‘power of the fact’; or otherwise stated: what is disputable – at least according to this

¹⁰ See Agamben’s ‘State of Exception’, p.60; Žižek’s *Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-politics* in ‘The Challenge of Carl Schmitt’.

definition – is the *post hoc* claim of justification *after the fact* through which every political formation strives to legitimate itself.¹¹

It is precisely this act of ‘putting into question’ the power of the fact that – or so I have been arguing – *Sometimes doing something political can become poetic... and sometimes doing something poetic can become political* performs. Moreover, resisting the power of the fact, i.e., resisting the temptation to declare a political position, enables Alÿs to release the situation from the logic that immobilizes it. On this point I will defer to a remark made by Alÿs himself:

Poetic licence functions like a hiatus in the atrophy of a social, political, military or economic crisis. Through the gratuity or the absurdity of the poetic act, art provokes a moment of suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of senselessness that reveals the absurd of the situation and, through this act of transgression, makes you step back or step out and revise your prior assumptions about this reality. And when the poetic operation manages to provoke that sudden loss of self that itself allows a distancing from the immediate situation, then poetics might have the potential to open up a political thought (Alÿs, 2007, p.40)

Alÿs’s work – the *Green Line* – to summarise – resists politics precisely in order to reveal the aesthetic dimension of the political and what it delimits. On the one hand, it reveals the limit, border and threshold constitutive of political identities – a ‘pathological’ logic of enmity, as we saw earlier; on the other hand, it exposes the supplementary rationality of the political, which expresses itself in the twofold structure of an ethical deficit on one side of the line and a compelling demand for justice on the other.

¹¹ Althusser expresses the ontological significance of the aleatoric encounter thus: ‘instead of thinking contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies’ (Althusser, 2006, p. 194).

But it also tells us something more generally about the nature and possibility of ‘political art’ under the state of the aesthetic exception – which brings us finally to our fourth question.

To be sure, we can agree with Rancière that there is no longer a criterion that can guarantee the correlation of the politics of the aesthetic and the aesthetics of politics. Perhaps, however, we can venture the following reflections in support of Rancière’s alternative ‘dream of a suitably political work of art’. A politically motivated artist – one who acknowledges the state of aesthetic exception – necessarily adopts a technique approximate to that of a tactician, rather than a strategist – to borrow de Certeau’s distinction. This artist will no longer strive to assert themselves into the terms of a direct, confrontational position. They understand that the aim of the tactician, as de Certeau expresses it, is not conquest through full frontal attack; de Certeau’s tactician is rather more wily – his aim is to ‘make the weaker position seem the stronger’ (de Certeau, 1988, p.xx). Alÿs accomplishes this through a technique or tactic of ‘performative ironic instability’, as I shall call it. By this I mean firstly that Alÿs is an ironist in the sense that Henri Lefebvre once had in mind when he remarked that irony is a ‘kind of objectivity that goes deeper than the objectivity of knowledge which considers itself pure and purports to contain an absolute’ (Lefebvre, IM, 41). Alÿs is an ironist in the precise sense that he poses questions in order that those who are implicated in them are compelled to ask them of themselves. This is the tactic of the ‘Socratic’ ironist-cum-sophist, of course, whose power lies precisely in the knowledge that to pose a question is to say that one does not know – that is to say, who understands that the power of posing a question lies in the way it invites those who believe they know to revisit and challenge their assumptions. Alÿs’s act, then, which restages, in an ironic gesture, the symbolic partitioning of Jerusalem as we have said *performs* Benvenisti’s *question*: ‘who owns the width of the line?’ We have noted that by asking this question, which takes no sides, Alÿs was able, nevertheless, to challenge the very logic of partition, precisely by making it visible as a logic.

This tactic of performative ironic instability, enunciating nothing other than the ‘open’ possibility of asking a question, suggests, then, that the lesson we should draw from

the state of the aesthetic exception is as follows: that political art today derives its power precisely from the knowledge it bears within itself – the power of dissent from any aesthetic or established norm. On this basis, art represents a genuine countervailing force to the specific aesthetic distributions of the political.

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