



**Cognitive
Architecture.
From Biopolitics
to Noopolitics.
Architecture &
Mind in the Age
of Communication
and Information**

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8 Acknowledgments

10 Introduction: Architecture & Mind in the Age of

Communication and Information Deborah Hauptmann

46 Noopolitics, Life and Architecture Sven-Olov Wallenstein

I Plasticity and Potentiality

64 Movement Paolo Virno **78 The Politics of I Can** Patricia Reed

90 Comrades of Time Boris Groys **100 The Neural Basis of Cognitive**

Development: A Constructivist Manifesto Steven Quartz & Terrence

Sejnowski **116 Metastable Mind** J. A. Scott Kelso

II Epigenic Reconfigurations

142 Shaping the Environments that Shape Our Brains: A Long

Term Perspective Bruce Wexler **168 Deleuze and Wexler: Thinking**

Brain, Body, and Affect in Social Context John Protevi **184 From**

Spinoza to the Socialist Cortex: Steps Toward the Social Brain

Charles T. Wolfe **208 Other Minds, Other Brains, Other Worlds**

Patrick Healy **232 Designing the Lifeworld: Selfhood and Architecture**

from a Critical Neuroscience Perspective Lukas Ebensperger, Suparna

Choudhury & Jan Slaby

The Politics of I Can...

Patricia Reed

But thought, in its essence, is pure potentiality; in other words, it is also the potentiality not to think, and, as such, as possible or material intellect, Aristotle compares it to a writing tablet on which nothing is written.¹ *Giorgio Agamben*

It is symptomatic of the current plight of 'potentiality' that one must often add a prefix like 'pluri' in order to infer an understanding of a highly diversified notion of the term. The dichotomous relationship that has been instantiated between the potential and the actual is an unfortunate simplification, in which potentiality is reduced to a state of waiting for a catalytic event in order to render it productive, to render it *actual*, to render it *other*. This generic turn towards the binarization of the potential and the actual is inferred by such statements as a 'child has the potential to know,'² signifying that the child 'must suffer an alteration (a becoming other) through learning.'³ Such a binary conception avoids the question of potentiality altogether, 'reducing it to terms of will and necessity,'⁴ whereas potentiality, as expounded upon by Aristotle, goes far beyond such generic binaries. He addresses those who already possess 'knowledge,' and are therefore not obliged to undergo an 'alteration,' but rather by 'having' that knowledge can both bring it and not bring it into actuality. A more complex understanding of potentiality is not merely a trivial matter to be taken up in the sheltered journals of academia, but acts as a foundational concept in grasping the presuppositions that go into the ontological partitioning of places, bodies, and roles, and their legitimation therein. As Giorgio Agamben notes: 'Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality ... has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable.'⁵

The 'I Can' The verb 'can' is central to a more complex understanding of the notion of potentiality, and it is the verb that Agamben has gone so far as to declare the singular term denoting his entire body of philosophical enquiry.⁶ Agamben describes the verb 'can' not as referring to a directed course of action, but as a verb that marks out something vastly more arduous: 'For everyone a moment comes in which she or he must utter this "I can," which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity but is nevertheless, absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this "I can" does not mean anything – yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality.'⁷ The verb 'can,' in all of its troubling ambiguity, is a liminal verb in that 'I can' signifies that one has the capacity to do something, but this capacity or faculty does not necessarily entail a moment of actualization. Agamben proceeds

¹ Giorgio Agamben, **The Coming Community**, translated by Michael Hardt (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 36.

² Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality,' in **Potentialities**, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 177-84.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency,' in Agamben, **Potentialities**, 243-71. Originally published as 'Bartleby o della Contingenza,' in Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, **Bartleby, la formula della creazione** (Macerata: Quodlibet, 1993).

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, **Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life**, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 44.

⁶ Agamben, 'On Potentiality.'

⁷ Ibid.

to qualify the originary problem of potentiality in Western thought, as that pertaining to the question faculty. What does it mean to have the faculty of speech, of vision – which only implies that something ‘is or is not in one’s power,’⁸ thereby locating it within the domain of potentiality. This ‘*is or is not*’ essence of potentiality points to the complex nature of its existence, namely that it is ‘not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence; and this is what we call a faculty or power.’⁹ Potentiality, or rather the *existence of potentiality* (the present non-Being), becomes just as much about the potential to act (to pass into actuality) as about the potential not to act (not to pass into actuality). It is in the relation of potential to impotential where the existence of potentiality is constituted, where one is capable of one’s own incapacity. We all know the bad, adolescent joke, which, in spirit, embodies the profound depth of potentiality, when as teenagers, our parents would say ‘can you clean your room?’ and one replies ‘yes I can,’ but of course never actualizes this gesture of cleaning, never raises a finger, since ‘can you clean your room’ is not an imperative order but rather a question as to the existence of one’s capacity to clean.

It is this *can-ness* that distinguishes potentiality from possibility, and it is crucial to the understanding of potentiality that the differences be made clear – that the terms are not interchangeable. Agamben describes three levels of potentiality, calling on the reference of Avicenna, the prince of *falasifa* (disciples of Aristotle in Islam),¹⁰ who deploys the example of writing. There is ‘material’ potentiality, that is our colloquial dichotomous understanding of the term, embodied by the child who does not yet know how to write, but may very certainly learn to do so – and therefore undergoing an alteration. Secondly, there is ‘possible’ potentiality, where a child has begun to write and learned to form the first letters, but is by no means fully endowed with the capacity to write. And lastly there is ‘perfect’ potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is ‘in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write.’¹¹ Avicenna’s ‘perfect’ potentiality, is Agamben’s existence of potentiality, and from this point onwards, all use of the term potentiality should be grasped in this ‘perfect’ or existential sense.

It is within potentiality that Agamben finds the basis for life itself, lying in this zone of indistinction where a coincidence of two, seemingly opposed systems – the capacity to act and the capacity not to act – meet and produce an unknown, unnamed topology. It is within these indistinct zones, that the need for ethics arises, since, again, like our lazy adolescent, there is no mere task that must be fulfilled, no moral imperative, but rather an ongoing negotiation of one’s capacity (and the inherent inverse, incapacity) that constitutes the seat of ethical being. Rather than formulating a notion of potentiality that is forever bundled with the productive capacity of actualizing, we are instead confronted with the troubling position of a radical inoperativeness situated within the notion of capacity itself

in the fullness of its meaning. Agamben calls on various examples of people who fulfill their incapacity as potentiality, like the poet who does not write and the much discussed Bartleby, the scrivener, who instead of refuting his job, simply ‘*prefers not to,*’ to the bafflement and agitation of his employer. These figures exist in potentiality, for they actively contemplate the relation between their capacity to-act and their incapacity not-to-act. By engaging the capacity of incapacity in dialogic-thought, potentiality is not something that grinds-to-a-halt when actualized, it is rather a form of potentiality that ‘gives itself to itself,’ that ‘preserves itself’¹³ in actuality and perpetuates its very existence.

From the Dichotomous to the Di-Polar The zones of indistinction exemplified in the existence of potentiality shift away from the dichotomous disposition of the term in its potential/actual configuration, and point to what Agamben calls ‘di-polarities,’ not as substantial, but as tensional.¹⁴ Within this conception of potentiality it is the maintenance of tensionality that produces indistinction, and is therefore purely anti-synthetical. The di-polarity that constitutes the seat of potentiality in its complexity could better be imagined as a Moiré pattern of sorts – where two categories of shape meet and produce a visual interference. The interference pattern is not a result of an emergent synthesis, but rather the result of the optical tensions of overlapping systems of pattern. Important in this example is that the different categories (those of opposing shape) *must* interfere and overlap to produce the optical illusion – the categories of difference do not cancel each other out in their overlapping, but coincide as a result of the tension between different forms and categories of pattern.

The existence of potentiality, in its tensional, capacity-incapacity ‘di-polarity,’ is the underlying crux of the more overtly political argument posited by Agamben in his, perhaps, most well-known figure *Homo Sacer*. Above all, *Homo Sacer*, as a sacred being who can be ‘killed and yet not sacrificed, [who is] outside both human and divine law ...’¹⁵ is reduced to bare life and banished from the polis, outside the jurisdiction of normal law. *Homo Sacer*’s existence opens up a zone of indistinction insofar as he is simultaneously a being who can be killed, (and not sacrificed as in a godly order), yet if he is killed, he can be killed with impunity. *Homo Sacer*’s situation as a marginalized, banished *object* reduces life to its most basic biological function (in Greek *zoë*, which is the domain of life associated with all living things, kings, gods, animals).¹⁶ The *bios* (in Greek there are two words for ‘life,’ *zoë* described above and *bios* the domain of political life enjoyed by citizens of the polis) of *Homo Sacer* has been stripped foregoing the status of the citizen-subject of the polis, who has a political (and therefore juridical) status. *Homo Sacer*, however, does not merely get pushed outside

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Agamben, ‘Bartleby, or On Contingency’

11 Ibid.

12 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 43.

13 Agamben, ‘On Potentiality,’ 184.

14 Erinn Cunniff Gilson, ‘Zones Of Indiscernibility: The Life Of A Concept From Deleuze To Agamben,’ *Philosophy Today* (January 2007): 98-106. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7696/is_200701/ai_n32231355/?tag=content;col1 (accessed on 22 February 2010).

15 Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 73.

16 Ibid., 1.

of the bounds, or live outside of political citizenship, but remains included in a relation to the sphere of legislative decision making, of juridical distinction making due to his passing-through of the exceptional juridical order. It is, however, important to recognize that the exclusive inclusiveness involved in the designation of bare life, of banishment and marginalization, are not restricted to those blatant examples of Nazi camps or Guantánamo Bay, but constitute 'the decisive event of modernity [that] signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of political thought'¹⁷ where *zoē* enters the sphere of the polis, and bare-life itself becomes a political *object*, and naked life is wholly desubjectivized.

The existence of potentiality and its inherent zones of indistinction, exemplified by a diverse set of figures, from the lazy adolescent, to Bartleby the scrivener, to *Homo Sacer*, is a testament to its liminal ethical status. After all, where else could one situate and write about such drastically different figures as pertaining to a common order? The zone of indistinction is neither good nor evil as such, but exists as a conceptual topology in the understanding that such indistinctions underlie the articulation and enactment of all distinctions, and orders of partitioning drawn out on places, bodies, and roles. It is the recognition of the existence of potentiality, the un-named and undelineated foundation of indistinctiveness that calls out for an ethics of such an order. The in-between state of potentiality, the state before distinctions are carved out or actualized, is the seat of such an indistinct, or undelineated ethics, and leads us to a concept of equality elaborated by Jacques Rancière which can help us to better formulate a politics of the 'I can,' a politics of potentiality.

The Contingency of Equality In one of Rancière's seminal texts 'Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy,' he sets up an axiom of equality that forms the basis for all conceptions of hierarchical inequality as played out in the realm of the social. The an-archic precondition of equality that underlies all modes of social structuring is, paradoxically, that which makes inequality possible. Rancière sets up his description of a radicalized notion of equality, by firstly outlining the plight symptomatic of any social order: the foundation of politics is not in fact more a matter of convention than of nature, it is the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order. Politics exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society.¹⁸ After pointing out the sheer contingency upon which any social order rests, Rancière goes on to say:

Before the logos [an argument of reason] that deals with the useful and the harmful, there is the logos that orders and bestows the right to order. But this initial logos is tainted with a primary contradiction. There is order in society

because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order. Doubtless inferiors obey 99 percent of the time; it remains that the social order is reduced thereby to its ultimate contingency. In the final analysis, inequality is only possible through equality.¹⁹

The social order is that to which Rancière applies the term 'the police' denoting (in a non-pejorative fashion) a particular sensible ordering of bodies, roles, places, identities, and functions. The police should not be grasped as that petty order of people imposing the law, but is rather (a far more complex) symbolic constitution of the social itself, and delineates a party's part or absence of it. The operations of ordering inscribed by the police define 'the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.'²¹

The police, as such, is synonymous with the delineation of forms of life that govern and are already visible and accounted for within a given community. Politics, on the other hand, is that which is antagonistic (and therefore stands in exclusive relation to) a hegemonic structuring of the social, the police. In opposition to the police, politics 'is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.'²² The antagonism of politics is linked to a process of equality, not equality *proper*, but processes of testing the contingency of equality constitutive of any ordering of the police. Politics occurs in the meeting of these heterogeneous processes (the hegemony of the police and the antagonism in the processes of equality of politics). Politics, as such, is a relational mechanism denoting 'the open set of practices driven by the assumption of equality between any and every speaking being and by the concern to test this equality.'²³ In describing politics as a relational process, rather than thinking politics as a standalone phenomenon, Rancière extracts the (often presumed), direct correlation of politics with power relations – noting that, nothing is political in itself merely because power relationships are at work in it. For a thing to be political, it must give rise to a meeting of police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance.²⁴ Politics *happens*, rather than *is*, it happens as a *doing* of an eruptive, spontaneous abutment of two heterogeneous systems of logic between the police and the mechanisms of equality that operate and uphold its fragile structures and modes of demarcation.

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, translated by Julie Rose (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 16.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 29.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 30.

²⁴ Ibid., 32.

The operativity of the police is enacted through a 'distribution of sensibility' or partitioning of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*: in French *partage* means both to divide and to share). The partitioning of the sensible 'defines the "forms of part-taking" by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed.'²⁵ The partitioning of the world within the order of the police into sensory experience must be grasped in its double entendre intended in the original French expression: firstly, partitioning operates to exclude and to separate; and second as that which is shared, or common. The partitioning of the sensible is thus a 'relation between a shared "common" ... and the distribution of exclusive parts'²⁶ manifesting in that which can be experienced sensorially, in that which is perceptible. The distribution of the sensible is where politics and aesthetics meet. The shared exclusivity of parts operating through the sensible territory of police structuring is the aesthetic modality that effectuates the common of the community, to the exclusion of any supplement.²⁷ The supplementary exclusion concerns that which does not fit, that which has no part in the sensible configuration in the common community. As an antagonistic eruption, politics *happens* when those who have no part reassert and test out the contingent equality through which the unequal distribution of the sensible operates; politics asserts itself as a sensible disruption of the aesthetic coordinates of the police by the part that has no part.

Reflecting back on the example of Bartleby, the scrivener, we can trace his mode of being (that which embodies the essence of potentiality) as a political eruption of the sensible order. The particular formula, identified by Gilles Deleuze, at work within the mode of 'resistance' enacted by Bartleby is what linguists would define as agrammatical.²⁸ '*I would prefer not to,*' is of course, grammatically correct, 'but its abrupt termination NOT TO ... leaves what it rejects undetermined,'²⁹ it is neither an affirmation, nor a negation, but a 'logic of negative preference, a negativism beyond all negation.'³⁰ The force of Bartleby's secret agrammaticality is the disconnect between 'words and things, words and actions, but also speech acts and words – it severs language from all reference.'³¹ Bartleby's agrammaticality creates a suspension of the given forms of speech and behavior associated with the operative performance of a scrivener, the performance of work. His patiently spoken words, without comprehensible reference, are evocative of Austin's '*performative utterance*,'³² where a statement does not operate merely in a descriptive capacity; but where the utterance *becomes* the performance of an action. Bartleby's is a contestation of the partitioning of the sensible of the world of the attorney to whom he speaks; his agrammaticality disorganizes a particular, and reasonable, organization of life and work: 'It shatters not just the hierarchies of a world but also what supports them: the connections between causes and effects we expect from that world, between the behaviours and the motives we attribute to them and the means we have to modify them.'³³ Bartleby's formula suspends the orders of 'operative' being through an agrammaticality that destroys the syntax of rea-

sonable organization. By neither negation nor affirmation, he opens up a relation of tension between the two oppositional states of 'yes' or 'no.' His is a calmly repeated, radical utterance that enacts a testing of the fundamental contingency of the reasonable operations of things.

Dissensus as Politics

A world is always as many worlds as it takes to make a world.³⁵ *Jean-Luc Nancy*

The *doing* of politics is the bringing together of the non-relationship into relationship;³⁶ it is the bringing into aesthetic existence of that which had no part in the partitioning of the sensible, it is the struggle for the forms of life that abut with divergent systems of logic in the (ac)counting of and for the community. Politics is not a matter of the meaning represented by an action, but rather the linking of meaning and action itself, meaning becomes the action of attaining visibility; of enacting a *logos* that creates symbolic enrolment within a community. Rancière names the enactment of politics 'dissensus,' defining it as 'not a conflict of interests, opinions and values; [but as] a division inserted in "common sense": a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given.'³⁷

The relating of two separate worlds into 'one and the same world,'³⁸ a confrontation of one world with another world; operating through the making perceptible of the fact of equality, that there exists a belonging to a shared world, that the police or *nomos* cannot perceive. Dissensus is the clash of sense and sense; a struggle between the distribution of the sensible and the ways of making sense out of it, it is the redrawing of the 'frame within which common objects are determined.'³⁹ It is through the enactment or demonstration of dissensus that the fragile and fleeting event of politics reconfigures the sensibility of the *nomos*, scattering the sensuous coordinates of

25 Jacques Rancière, 'Ten Theses on Politics,' in **Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics**, translated by Davide Panagia and Rachel Bowlby (London: Continuum, 2010), 27-44. Originally published in **Theory and Event** 3 (2001).

26 Ibid.

27 Jacques Rancière, 'Biopolitics or Politics?' in **Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics**, 91-6.

28 Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency.'

29 Gilles Deleuze, 'Bartleby; or, The Formula,' in **Essays Critical and Clinical**, translated by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (New York: Verso, 1997), 68-90. Originally published in Agamben and Deleuze, **Bartleby, la formula della creazione**.

30 Ibid.

31 Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency.'

32 Ibid.

33 J.L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances,' in **Philosophical Papers** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 233-52.

34 Jacques Rancière, **The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing**, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 146-7.

35 Jean-Luc Nancy, **Being Singular Plural**, translated by Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 15.

36 Rancière, **Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy**, 89.

37 Jacques Rancière, 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?' in **Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics**, 62-75. Originally published in **The South Atlantic Quarterly** 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 297-310.

38 Ibid.

39 Jacques Rancière, 'The Paradoxes of Political Art,' in **Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics**, 134-51.

that which is apprehensible. The logic of dissensus is a struggle for the (ac)counting of community and the aesthetic modalities that demarcate that which is perceived as *given*, through which the presupposition of equality can be tested and potentially rendered sensible.

Potentiality of Equality The an-archic presupposition of equality that underlies the sphere of 'actualized' unequal, social structuring, rests on the shared capacity for *aisthesis* of speech; that is, on the presupposition of the shared capacity to recognize a sonorous emission as speech, and not merely as a noise. As we have seen, the capacity to possess (*hexis*) and deliver a speech act, and have it understood as such, is wholly contingent on the given partitioning of the sensible order – possession of the *logos* of the speech act is socially contingent. The equality of the *apprehension* of the speech act is where one can locate the existence of potentiality in the sense elaborated upon by Agamben (via Aristotle) since it is precisely at this point where all human-animals can be understood as having the shared capacity of comprehension (without undergoing an alteration in acquiring new knowledge). The shared capacity of comprehension of speech acts, *inclusive* of the excluded supplement of the parts-which-have-no-part is the shared existence of potentiality, the actualization of which is conditional on the given forms of life that govern the inequal perceptible order. If, as Agamben has formulated, the existence of potentiality is the possibility of an ongoing negotiation with one's capacity/incapacity in the face of actualization, what are the consequences in terms of the demonstration of dissensus, within a conception of the perceptible order? Seeing as the comprehension of speech acts as *speech* is the presupposed ground of equality upon which hierarchies are built and upon which roles, places, and identities are delineated, the demonstration of dissensus can be understood as taking shape in the articulation of an incapacity to understand such modalities of delineation. The *enactment* of misunderstanding; the demonstration of the capacity of one's incapacity to understand, is an event of dissensus in which the conflict of sense and sense releases the orders of inequality from its actual configuration, testing out the fundamental potentiality of an-archic equality. The enactment of the incapacity to understand a specific distribution of sensibility is the demonstration of a wrong, the setting in motion of an interruption in the (ac)counting for social structuring – the wrong described here is a contestation of the sensible situation itself, where those who have no-part 'make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world.'⁴⁰

It is not my intention here to conflate the philosophical worlds of Rancière and Agamben, between whom there exist well-known, intricate, and fundamental disagreements.⁴¹ What is of interest, however, is the ways in which the existence of potentiality works upon the axiom of equality, how the axiom of equality

becomes a struggle *with* potentiality, rather than a struggle *for* potentiality. Since every social order rests on this elementary potentiality of equality, every system of power and hierarchy rests on this fundamental virtuality before the operations of actualization take over and parcel out roles, delineate bodies and map out places. The equal capacity presupposed by any social system is that of an aesthetic order, for it is precisely the equal capacity to perceive and recognize the distribution of inequality, of power, vis-à-vis the inequality in the possession of power. The aesthetic order evoked here does not refer to that which comes to be known today as that which *thinks* art, nor should it be understood as the 'perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art.'⁴² Aesthetics, here, takes on the Kantian sense 'as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.'⁴³

Rancière's use of the term aesthetics is a revival of the eighteenth-century connotation of the term as a form of experience, which has nothing to do with art or the production of an art work destined for a hierarchical system of display, but as a description of experience of sensation without a specific audience in mind. In resurrecting such a conception of aesthetics as an open form of that which can be apprehended by the senses, as a way of 'mapping the visible ... the intelligible and also of the possible,'⁴⁴ it reopens the possibility of equality, insofar as it situates that perceptibility as an originary capacity of human kind, before the distribution of inequality. The unpossessability of aesthetics is where the shared equality of comprehension is manifest, in the appearance of that which cannot be apprehended.

The problem is not to accentuate the difference between the existing equality and all that belies it. It is not to contradict appearances but, on the contrary, to confirm them. Wherever the part of those who have no part is inscribed, however fragile and fleeting these inscriptions may be, a sphere of appearance of the demos is created ... the power of the people exists.⁴⁵

The domain of aesthetics is where one can recapture the equality of the existence of potentiality and release it from its restricted twinning with perpetual actualization. The equality of potentiality at work (or un-work) in the unpossessability of sensation – of the aesthetic experience itself, operates upon the fundamental plasticity of subjectification processes that dis-identify and re-identify given fields of experience. The potentiality of the plastic-subject, having the competence

⁴⁰ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 27.

⁴¹ For instance: Rancière's specific disagreements with Agamben are pointedly articulated in essays such as: 'Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?' (2004) and 'Biopolitics or Politics?' (2010). Likewise, Agamben addresses his critical perspective on Rancière, in *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2005).

⁴² Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁴ Jacques Rancière, Interview in *Palinurus*: 'Engaging Political Philosophy' series, 'Our Police Order – What can be Said, Seen, and Done: An Interview with Jacques Rancière,' (February 2007), <http://anselmocarranco.tripod.com/id18.html> (accessed 4 March 2010).

⁴⁵ Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 88.

of *aisthesis* – of sensation equal to all, is one who reconfigures fields of possible experience through said competence or faculty. The plastic-subject is a born translator, translating signs into other signs, sense into other sense, and who proceeds via comparisons without the need of an expert-guide. Such is the emancipatory potential of aesthetics; as fragile and un-grandiose as it may be, for it is through sensation working upon the inherent plasticity of subjectification that the apprehension of other modes of identification are made possible, made perceptible, made thinkable.

The Ethos of Potentiality The ethos of politics proper is not the calling out, or pointing to the existent actualized order of roles, people and places, but rather the ongoing excavation of the fundamental equality grounding any social system and the legitimating apparatuses of that system. Re-inscribing potentiality where only actuality appears is an effort to intervene in the core processes of delineation and partitioning; of releasing the imposition of actuality from the generic notion of potentiality. The operativeness of the actual, the demarcated and the unequal are held in di-polar relation to the inoperativeness of the existence of potentiality, the zone of fundamental equality. The ethical relationship implied by the inoperativeness of the existence of potentiality (for Agamben, life itself) is one of openness and confrontation with one's impotential – it is a grasping and ongoing witnessing of one's incapacity, an ethics *before* actualization and distinction-making. The ethics of potentiality are only effective precisely because there is no clear-cut moral certainty, as Agamben points out, there are no mere tasks that *must* be fulfilled in the enactment of human existence, just as there is no divine, nor naturally given ordering of humanity. The existence of potentiality is embodied, in the virtuality of the ellipsis⁴⁶ – the literary device of suspensions that both closes yet leaves open, while not fading away as it is inscribed and actualized. The ellipsis 'deposes the power of syntactical ties,'⁴⁷ it redistributes sensibility by suspending the completeness of meaning, by revealing the gap between sense and sense. Where the period declares and states, the ellipsis exposes an indefinition that is the root of potentiality, an indefinition that brings with it the arduous struggle of its modes of (non)/articulation. The 'I can' of potentiality is further diversified as the 'I can ...' in the richness of its political signification, it is nothing less than a movement of de-actualization, an unraveling of the thresholds that delineate the instantiation of inequality and modes of sensible distinction-making. Potentiality is the contingent state of equality that constitutes the root of all forms of social organization. It is the very faculty of non-consensus which both *can* and *can-not* instigate the appearance of other worlds and other *grammars* of being; the metaphorical syntax of which is the aesthetical stake of politics ...

⁴⁶ Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence,' in *Potentialities*, 220-39.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

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