

**Radical History and the Politics of Art.** By Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. xi + 274 pages.

According to Gabriel Rockhill's compelling new work, art historians, philosophers, and critics all too readily deploy the terms "art" and "politics" as if their meanings were the same across time, space, and circumstance. Two unnecessary consequences follow. First, the diversity of practices that can be called aesthetic or political are lost and our understanding is stunted by what he calls the "ontological illusion" (5). Second, discussions of art and politics are limited to considerations of the product of the process, the work itself, as if the work had a built-in capacity to initiate political change (the "talisman complex" [52]). Treating only the work itself means not attending to the multidimensional process of its creation and circulation. The more "common" approach allows historians, philosophers, and critics to assign one political destiny or meaning to a work or artist, foreclosing other possibilities, such as multiple understandings of what constitute aesthetic practices and the meanings of the political as well as the fact that works may have other lives and other possible lives across time and space. It is precisely these other possibilities that interest Rockhill, who responds, in technical language and an often polemical tone, by fashioning what he calls a "radical historicist analytic" (15). This historical approach attends to the multiple dimensions of aesthetic and political activities and in doing so, Rockhill argues, opens up a space wherein the different meanings of aesthetic and political activities and their relationship can be contested without becoming bogged down in stale debates over the "true" meaning of the terms and equally sterile debates among historians over questions of periodization and the like.

Both and especially together, the ontological illusion and the talisman complex stand between us and an appreciation of the complexity of the relationship between art and politics. For its part, the ontological illusion (that terms signify essences) carries with it a logic of history dependent upon binaries: either/or, art/ politics, aesthetic/political, idealism/realism, and the like. To demonstrate the difficulties with this "common sense" approach in twentieth-century considerations of art and politics, Rockhill examines relevant dimensions of the work of Georg Lukács, Herbert Marcuse, and Jean-Paul Sartre as emblematic of particular trends in approaches to art and politics. Lukács serves as representative of a kind of critical "realism" (65), allowing us to choose between art that serves the proper political ends and that which does not.

Marcuse's aesthetic "formalism" (71) posits a universal essence to art that keeps art and politics separate from one another and, in fact, leads what he considers true art away from politics. Finally, Sartre's "artistic commitment" or *engagement* (75), while recognizing changes in literature's function in historical circumstances, nonetheless posits a "universal literary condition behind all historical change" (84). For Rockhill, each of these three approaches is bound to the "binary normativity" (for example, either/or) that forecloses other potentially liberating possibilities. Each thinker provides criteria for what constitutes "valid or successful art" and, correspondingly, takes for himself the authority to deem some aesthetic products as either lesser or "illegitimate."

The criteria deployed by each thinker depend, to one degree or another, on the "talisman complex," the idea that works of art have their own political agency independent of the social forces around them. Rockhill knows that aesthetic practices and their products have lives of their own. What he is concerned to remind us, however, is that there are multiple dimensions to those lives. The meaning of aesthetic activity is never exhausted or completed by the historian, philosopher, critic, or even the artist. Aesthetic products, let alone the practices that produce and give them their social lives (like exhibition and criticism) cannot be reduced to a single meaning. The success or failure of a work is never final and certainly cannot be determined by how well or poorly it meets its talismanic obligations.

Rockhill resists the talisman complex in two ways. First, aesthetic activity cannot and should not be reduced to the product of that activity, the work of art itself. The viewer/critic must also take account of the activity of creation, the circulation of the work, and the various readings it is given. Second, aesthetic activity cannot be understood outside of the milieu (in terms of time and space) in which it circulates. When speaking of art and politics, then, the viewer/critic must consider both the aesthetic practices that give a work its life and think in terms of its "social politicity" or the way "the political dimensions of a work, including the circumstances of its creation, its circulation, and interpretation, play out in historical struggles among forms of social agency" (6).

Rockhill's point is clear: both aesthetic practices and their social politicity are open-ended processes and should be analyzed as such. For example, in chapter 3, he develops an extended critique of Peter Bürger's work on the avant-garde. Bürger ties the fate of the avant-garde to the failure of the revolutionary



project to which it was assumed to be related. Because that revolutionary project has failed, Bürger's argument goes, the avant-garde is past its day. These dual failures mark an "end of illusions" (91–117). Rockhill would have us jettison the finality of such a conclusion inasmuch as it suggests that the avant-garde dies with the revolutionary project. Such conclusions, Rockhill's work suggests, are premature, beyond the scope of anyone's capabilities, and anathema to the kind of analysis he is developing. Rather than foreclosing discussion, Rockhill is trying to open up a space wherein the philosopher, the historian, and the critic each remains mindful of the many dimensions of aesthetic practices and their social politicity, tries to account for them, and concedes that any conclusions drawn about what the sum of those parts means are contingent. The work of the historian, the philosopher, and the critic are more interventions than they are authoritative explanations (228–29).

As a counter to premature conclusions that foreclose possibilities, Rockhill offers a "radical historicist analytic" as a way to meet the demands of the difficulties he has identified. In devising and executing this analytic, he is most directly engaging the work of Jacques Rancière. Rockhill's close, sympathetic, but ultimately critical reading of Rancière's work forms the analytical core of the book and is an excellent example of this kind of reading. Rockhill credits Rancière for reopening the question of the relationship between art and politics. Contextualizing Rancière's work in that of forebears like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, Rockhill lays out how Rancière leads us away from the search for a privileged link between aesthetics and politics. Instead of making this common assumption, Rancière articulates a view wherein the aesthetic and the political are consubstantial; that is, they both function as "distributions of the sensible" (140). Much too simply put, the aesthetic and the political share a concern with the way articulations of the sensible world circulate. The link of consubstantiality, as Rockhill points out in chapter 6, proves illusory, for Rancière also claims that the aesthetic and the political never really meet in the same place. Rancière's appealing argument (from Rockhill's perspective) that there is no determinate link between the two activities cannot seemingly coexist with the claims of consubstantiality. In other words, Rancière re-creates rather than resolves the difficulties Rockhill is working through.

Despite its incompleteness, however, Rancière's project helps get Rockhill away from the ontologically burdened terms "art"

and "politics" to the more elastic and useful terms "aesthetic practices" and "social politicity." Rockhill's radical historicist analytic resists the ontological illusion by embracing the "praxeological" status of language, that is, the fact that language is used in particular human communities and cultures to particular and not always clearly articulated ends. Recognizing the contingency of language allows Rockhill to suggest that art and politics both are and are not distinctly identifiable activities. The forms they take and the meanings they take on depend a great deal on their uses in particular communities and at particular moments. It is part of the job of the historian, philosopher, and critic to sort out the nuances of these usages before drawing their always contingent and contestable conclusions about meaning. The radical historicist analytic resists seeing history either as marching on to an identifiable end or as merely the linear passing of time. Instead, in order to account for different meanings in different times and different places, Rockhill suggests a "logic of history" that takes account of time (the "vertical or chronological dimension"), place (the "horizontal or geographical dimension"), and the sedimented layers of meaning identifiable across social circumstances (the "stratigraphic dimension") (39). Attending to these three dimensions means that an analysis of the (non-)relationship between the aesthetic and the political must account for differences in the experience of the social activities that these terms signify for given communities at particular times. A reading is possible, even necessary, but a final one is not.

Rockhill's project is ambitious and very worth the while in that it forces us to struggle with what we take for granted: the relationship between "art" and "politics." His work poses quite a challenge. For instance, the reader can be sympathetic with the desire to recognize that art and politics (or aesthetic practices and social politicity) are categories whose meanings and practices are changeable across time, space, and circumstance. But sympathy may not get one past the problem of what distinguishes aesthetic activity from its politicity in the first place. Is the difference only found in what a given environment refers to when it uses the terms art/aesthetic and politics/ politicity? In other words, Rockhill's work confronts us with the fact that there still may be some (albeit very general) set of activities or characteristics that distinguish the aesthetic from the political. Otherwise, we would not be able to deploy them either as descriptors in a particular moment or as analytical categories when we do our work as analysts. Two examples from the text are the controversy over Pablo Picasso's



*Guernica* and the Spanish Civil War (219–21) and the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) patronage of the abstract expressionists (chapter 7). In these two examples, the Spanish Civil War and the CIA constitute the political dimension, while Picasso and the abstract expressionists are the aesthetic. But we only know this because we know Picasso and the abstract expressionists are artists and the CIA is a political institution and the Spanish Civil War is an extension of politics by other means. All four terms refer to some "common sense" understanding of what constitutes the political and the aesthetic. Relying on "common sense" would seem to depend upon some kind of ontological illusion as to the nature and function of aesthetic activity and social politicity. But Rockhill would not deny these difficulties. His polemical tone aside, he does not mind if the subjects who deploy these terms assume their grounding, as long as the historian, philosopher, or critic recognizes that the grounding is in fact an assumption and only one of many possibilities.

As abstract and seemingly academic as Rockhill's work appears, the argument itself suggests an interesting connection between the aesthetic and the political. Whether an artist intends a piece of work to make a political statement or not, the meaning intended does not exhaust the meanings conveyed to each viewer or critic in his or her time or space. Aesthetic practices and works of art engage their audiences independently of the artist and constitute a discursive community wherein ideas both intended by and imputed to the work and the artist generate a conversation beyond what the artist (or the historian or the philosopher or the critic) could have foreseen. The process, the product, and the circulation of the aesthetic engages the viewer, including the amateur or gallery patron, across time, place, and circumstance in an emerging and evolving community that may or may not be called political. Perhaps a radical historicist analytic captures this possibility—if only for a moment.

John Randolph LeBlanc  
*University of Texas at Tyler*  
*Tyler, Texas*

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