

# ***LUKAS DUWENHÖGGER: ~~HOMOSEXUAL~~ SIGNS***

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*Looking at Lukas Duwenhögger's use of queer codes, Roger Cook discusses the validity of 'homosexual' as a category denoting difference in the social sphere.*

*The homosexual's codes are counter-codes. Like a cannibal, it might be charged, he exploits all ideas, messages and roles by orgiastically wasting their content merely for the form, the vicarious fantasy, and then wearing them like a feather, or foreskin, in his cap. – Harold Beaver, «Homosexual Signs (In Memory of Roland Barthes)»<sup>1</sup>*

*Insolence is not an art without value. It is a way to be equal to oneself and superior to others in all the circumstances in which others have the advantage of you. – Maurice Blanchot, «On Insolence Considered As One of the Fine Arts»<sup>2</sup>*

I have never met Lukas Duwenhögger, and I am not sure I would be entirely comfortable doing so if a short clip on the internet of him expostulating on the «ego» is anything to go by. He purveys a savage and vituperatively «queer» intelligence and a propensity for disagreement, which for Jacques Rancière is singularly important for the disruptive dissensus that lies at the heart of both aesthetics and politics.<sup>3</sup> For Rancière, the operative word in French is *mésentente*, habitually translated as «disagreement», but which, Mieke Bal has suggested, does not adequately convey the sense of misunderstanding and «not getting along» of the original French.<sup>4</sup> Oliver Davis has also observed that there is an «irritable attachment» in and between «queer» and Rancière's notion of relationality. This attachment might be seen to reflect the «queer» affects one finds in Duwenhögger's works.<sup>5</sup>

There was once a time when the divide between image and word ruled the art world and the work of an artist like Duwenhögger would have been dismissed on the grounds that the charms of his use of narrative were better served by literature than visual art: for pictorial language to tell a story was thought to be a nostalgic, vestigial, illustrational thing that modernism overcame. Now «modernism» has been put in question, in particular by Rancière, who believes that its avant-garde teleology is unhelpful «when it comes to thinking about contemporary forms of art and the relation between aesthetics and politics».<sup>6</sup>

As Norman Bryson taught long ago, «the act of recognition» that art «galvanises is a production, rather than a perception of meaning». Viewing is an activity of transformation «and that transformation is perpetual [...] interpretation changes as the world changes».<sup>7</sup> We cannot lay claim to final or absolute knowledge of art's objects.

Given that Duwenhögger insolently embraces antiquated decor and uses the once discredited conventions of realism operating on the borders between the imaginary and the real, the principle problematic at the heart of his practice is that of narrative representation. His paintings and installations tell stories that make interpretive demands, inviting spectators to engage «queer» codes of reading. What is one to make, for instance, of the peculiar object titled *Rust at Rest* that was shown in his 2008 Cabinet gallery, London exhibition, *The End of the Season?* There distinctly maculine objects (nuts, bolts and a spanner) are rendered orally desirable and consumable (fabricated in chocolate), and served up in a dainty cake dish atop what appears to be a cake stand in the shape of an anchor and chain. This improbable and seemingly unstable object is enough to make Clement Greenberg turn in his grave. Is this a camp accoutrement for *The Celestial Teapot* (2006-07), his fey teahouse in the sky, created for the competition for a memorial site for the persecuted homosexuals of National Socialism in the Tiergarten in Berlin – a light-hearted response to an invitation to memorialise grim events that normally arouse angry feelings of resentment and victimhood? However, homosexuals have often responded to oppression with humour; this is at the root of the sensibility known as «camp». Duwenhögger's memorial rightly refuses to visually represent the Holocaust; but, contravening most Holocaust memorials, it also does not refuse representation altogether.<sup>8</sup> *Celestial Teapot* incorporates a gesture that captures «the post-industrial gay man's mode of embodiment», or a «gestural and vocal style [...] posture and gait» and an «occupation of space» that «remembers a political history».<sup>9</sup>

The gestural performance of the hand on the hip with the hand turned backwards and the elbow extending into space is what historian Thomas A. King has called «Performing «Akimbo»». <sup>10</sup> King analyses the camp appropriation and historical origins of this gestural stance in the mannerist imagery of European Renaissance courts, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when it came to be adopted as the theatrical stance of the effeminate fop and the defiant insolence of unashamed sodomites and «mollies». Eighteenth-century castrati and actors were often caricatured and sometimes mocked for the setting their arms akimbo; Henry Mossop, onstage from 1749, was nicknamed the «teapot actor» because of «his favourite attitude with one arm on his hip and the other extended». <sup>11</sup> The gesture is also to be found in the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle «aesthetic» or «Patience» teapot produced for the Royal Worcester manufactory by James Hadley following the success of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience* in 1881, in which the affectations of the Aesthetic movement and Oscar Wilde were popularly satirised. <sup>12</sup> As King puts it: «By setting an arm akimbo, one replays the history of the previous uses of that gesture; to be embodied is to put into practice a field of historical struggles and accomodations.» <sup>13</sup>

As a result of increasing prohibitions on same-sex activity, especially after the Oscar Wilde trials in the latter half of the nineteenth century, homosexuals were driven underground and forced to seek each other out clandestinely in the most obvious of places: the public urinal. <sup>14</sup> Certain urinals quickly became shrines where deviants could gather for communion and devotion. A moving scene in Jean Genet's novel *The Thief's Journal* (1949) gives an idea of their sacral significance. A procession of drag queens, described as the «Daughters of Shame», passes at sunrise to lay flowers to mourn the loss of one of these shrines in Barcelona: *Those whom one of their number called the Carolinas paraded to the site of a demolished street urinal. During the 1933 riots, the insurgents tore out one of the dirtiest, but most beloved pissoirs. It was near the harbour and the barracks, and its sheet-iron had been corroded by the hot urine of thousands of soldiers. When its ultimate death was certified, the Carolinas – not all, but a solemnly chosen delegation – in shawls, mantillas, silk dresses and fitted jackets, went to the site to place a bunch of red roses tied together with a crêpe veil. The procession started from the Paralelo, crossed the Calle San Pablo and went down the Ramblas de Las Flores until it reached the statue of Columbus. The faggots were perhaps thirty in number, at eight o'clock, sunrise. I saw them going by. I accompanied them from a distance. I knew that my place was in their midst, not because I was one of them, but because their shrill voices, their cries, their extravagant gestures had, it seemed to me, no other aim but to try to pierce the shell of the world's contempt.* <sup>15</sup>

The idea of creating a «teahouse» Holocaust memorial is a notion full of innuendo. In the United States the word «tearoom» is slang for a public restroom where sex acts between men take place. In the late 1960s teahouses were the subject of Laud Humphreys's famous doctoral thesis that studied this phenomenon with startling results; the thesis later became the controversial book *Tearoom Trade* (1970). Humphreys was a sociologist, an Episcopal minister and pioneering and fearless activist for civil and gay rights and the antiwar cause. In graduate school, he conducted extensive fieldwork in public restrooms in a St Louis city park to discover patterns of impersonal sex between men. Three decades later his findings still trigger debates about the ethics of social research methods. In 1974, he was putatively the first sociologist to come out as gay.<sup>16</sup> Humphreys found that the majority of the men engaged in these activities did not identify as gay at all, but were simply heterosexual men in unsatisfying relationships who found this a quick way to occasionally get their rocks off. Most of this, if not all this and more, was probably known to Duwenhögger when he conceived *Celestial Teapot*. The more is slightly less exciting but nonetheless of considerable interest: «celestial teapot» was first coined by Bertrand Russell in a 1952 article for *Illustrated Magazine* to demonstrate the idea that the philosophical burden of proof lies with the person making claims that are not scientifically falsifiable, rather than the burden of proof's being shifted to others, specifically in the case of religion.<sup>17</sup> Russell wrote that if he claimed that a teapot were orbiting the sun somewhere between the earth and Mars, it would be nonsensical for him to expect others not to doubt him on the grounds that they could not prove him wrong. Russell's teapot is still referred to in discussions concerning the existence of God.

All this is of interest when thinking about community and belief, especially the sexual community of «homo-ness», the word queer theorist Leo Bersani used to propose a more radical and separatist notion of same-sexness that resists integration into mainstream dominant culture.<sup>18</sup> Young persons, when they discover the difference their same-sexuality makes, often simultaneously experience an oscillation between sadness and pride: between a recalcitrant refusal to be a part of the society that spurns them, and a wistful nostalgia for the pleasures of participatory life. It is this simultaneity of sadness and pride that permeated Duwenhögger's 2008 Cabinet exhibition *End of the Season*, in which a wistful nostalgia for the conviviality of seaside communality (the beach, the promenade, the bandstand, the musical theatre) was referenced through a number of works. I can identify with the youth in Duwenhögger's painting *End of the Season* (2007-08). I grew up by the seaside in the 1950s with a growing awareness of my «difference»: the sadness of knowing that I did not belong. I knew the adolescent ache of wanting to find a hot-skinned singular someone with whom I could share this sad fact.

There was another poignant work in the Cabinet show titled *From Here to Eternity* (2008): a framed and glazed found poster of Marilyn Monroe defaced with marks and folded paper flower made from the foil interior of a cigarette packet affixed to the surface of the glass. Monroe has become a tragic icon for our times, immortalised above all by Andy Warhol: here we have Duwenhögger's own touching memorial to Marilyn.

«How do individuals get some idea in their heads that makes them either satisfied with their position or indignant about it?» asks Rancière. «How are representations of self and other – which sustain hierarchy, consensus or conflict – formed and transformed?»<sup>19</sup> Such questions are fundamental to the pursuit of homosexual equality and its staging. Rancière takes issue with the consensual nature of identity politics; for him, the essence of politics is dissensus.<sup>20</sup> At its best, the contemporary art world is a model of Rancière's notion of democracy as «disagreement»: the perpetual struggle by «the part with no part» (*le part sans-part*) for equality in the «distribution or partition of the sensible» (*le partage du sensible*). One might also say that the history of art is a model of Rancière's view that the subject comes about through dis-identification. It is always by *dis-identifying* from what has gone before that contemporary art and artists emerge; and one might add, it is dis-identification that asserts difference and demonstrates equality. As queer theorist Michael Werner understands it, «the activity we undertake with each other» is «a kind of agonistic performance» dependent on our interactions with others, bringing into being the space of our world, which is then the background against which we understand ourselves and our belonging. This world is not pre-designated, «but one disclosed in practice», immanent to history «unlike ideas of community or identity, which tend to be naturalised as stable or originary».<sup>21</sup> The policing of identity has been the curse of the history of the relatively recent invention of «homo» and «hetero» sexuality, which were conceived around the same time.<sup>22</sup> Stabilising identity is exactly what Rancière wishes to resist: this makes any discussion of sexuality in terms of identities inimical to his work. His investment is not in subjects but in processes of subjectivation and dis-identification. Ultimately, then, one might say that Rancière's understanding of art and politics is a «queer» one, insofar as he believes that both must be radically disruptive of the *policies* of established order that keep everyone in place. For Rancière, aesthetics is suspensive: «a way of thinking the paradoxical sensorium» that «makes it possible to define the things of art»<sup>23</sup> Aesthetic experience is experience of the ambivalent, its indentification with a way of life is a structural contradiction of the aesthetic regime of art.<sup>24</sup> The pure category «art» is mixed with the impurity of «non-art»: «art is art to the extent that it is something else than art. It is always «aestheticised», meaning that it is always posed

as a «form of life».<sup>25</sup> Duwenhögger's competition proposal for the public memorial in Berlin dealt humorously with same-sex experience playing off cottaging and the «tearoom trade», and taking the theatrical form of a «Celestial Teapot» performing the historically resonant and defiantly camp akimbo gesture with disruptive vigour and conviction on behalf of this specifically dominated form of life. Such a monument is patently frivolous and absurd, yet, *it disturbs*: in Rancièrian phraseology «*disturbing* in the very scenery of the sensible» and its distribution, in this case the terrifying humourless male fantasies of Nazi domination.<sup>26</sup>

Duwenhögger's work explores the aesthetic regime's torsion between art and life with regard to the singularity of queer subjectivation and the democratic aesthetics of equality in the belief that aesthetic experience is open to all who open themselves to its disruptions, «to the gaze of anyone at all».<sup>27</sup> Inequality is something that homosexuals share, *part-sans-part* with other stigmatised minorities: a past history of subjugation, non-recognition and non-celebration. Duwenhögger's decision to live and work in Istanbul originates with his identification with Turkish *Gastarbeiter* («guest workers») in Germany.<sup>28</sup> The category «queer» which was coined as a term of insult, was reclaimed by the same-sex community in the early 1990s as a non-gendered, non-clinical alternative term of «affirmative difference» to «gay», «lesbian» and «homosexual» – all terms which are subject to continuing discursive *dissensus*. Interestingly, «queer» bears an etymological relation to the legal term for being wronged – *tort* – through the Latin verb *torquere* («to twist»). The translation of *tort* as «wrong», though not incorrect, fails to disclose its legal dimension: that of the injustice of *being wronged*. However, *tort* is not simply a juridical category, since «a wrong does not occur between determined parties and cannot be resolved by juridical procedures. A wrong can only be treated by modes of political subjectivation that reconfigure the field of experience.»<sup>29</sup> As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has pointed out, «queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word «queer» itself means across – it comes from the Indo-European root – *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*.»<sup>30</sup> Further, its usage need not be confined to homosexuality:

*«queer» can refer to the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.*<sup>31</sup>

Presupposition of equality does not have to be recognised openly for it to be effective, «in order for a democracies to occur. It is usually explicit, but it can be implicit.»<sup>32</sup> The former operates

in a declarative manner, the latter coded. In an interview, the film-maker Terence Davies differentiated himself from fellow film-maker Derek Jarman in his categorisation as a «gay film-maker», declaring himself a film-maker who happens to be gay; the same might be said for Duwenhögger, as his comments and quotations from Sedgwick, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Cindy Patton in his 1998 *A letter from Paris* indicate.<sup>33</sup> The distinction might seem trivial, but it is important; categorising essentialises, reducing art to a specific destiny, compromising its universality and the equality of its aesthetic experience. Rancière states that he is concerned with «aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity»<sup>34</sup> – as good a definition as any of what makes art vital and emancipatory. The question of how the political agency of art is embodied in the artwork – how its meaning (*sens*) is present in the sensory, in the materiality of its «flesh» and not just in the rhetoric outside of it – is central to aesthetic specificity. This is especially important for art that deals with sexual politics and the political subjectivisation of minorities. As Alain Badiou, Rancière's fellow post-1968 philosopher, states in his *maxims of affirmationist art*: «Art cannot be the expression of a particularity, whether ethnic or egoistic. It is the impersonal production of a truth that is addressed to all.»<sup>35</sup> «Non-imperial art», Badiou says, «is related to a kind of aristocratic proletarian ethic: it does what it says, without distinguishing between kinds of people.»<sup>36</sup> As Rancière writes, the name of any «injured community that invokes its rights is always the name of the anonym, the name of anyone» and its «universality is not enclosed in *citizen* or *human being*; it is involved in the «what follows», in its discursive and practical enactment»<sup>37</sup> No matter on whose behalf, the battle for equality is a battle for all, though scepticism regarding categorisation in no way precludes artists' investment in the history of their specific form of sexual culture through their work. In short, categorisations regarding same-sexuality are paradoxical, suspensive, paratactical, non-identical – which is why in the title of this essay the word «~~homosexual~~» is put under erasure.<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

1. Harold Beaver, «Homosexuals Signs (*In Memory of Roland Barthes*)», in Fabio Cleto (ed.), *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 161.
2. Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas* (trans. Charlotte Mandell), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 306.
3. See «Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (trans. Steven Corcoran), London and New York: Continuum, 2010. For the clip of Lukas Duwenhögger on the «ego», see Cast an Eye [blog], <http://castaneye.wordpress.com/2010/11/06/lukas-duwenhogger-on-ego/> (last accessed on 13 June 2012).
4. See Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 10.
5. See Oliver Davis, «Rancière and Queer Theory: On Irritable Attachment», *Borderlands* [online journal], vol. 8, no. 2, 2009, available at [http://borderlands.net.au/vol18no2\\_2009/davis\\_irritable.htm](http://borderlands.net.au/vol18no2_2009/davis_irritable.htm) (last accessed on 13 June 2012).

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6. J. Rancière, «The Distribution of the Sensible» (2000), *The Politics of Aesthetics* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London and New York: Continuum, 2006, p. 20.

7. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983, pp. xiii-xiv.

8. The winning submission by Elmgreen & Dragset, attempts to represent the unrepresentable by showing films of same-sex couples kissing inside a modernist cube. See Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.

9. Thomas A. King, *The Gendering of Men, 1600-1750, Vol.2: Queer Articulations*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, p. 6.

10. See T.A King, «Performing *Akimbo*»: Queer Pride and Epistemological Prejudice», in Morris Meyer (ed.) *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 48.

11. T.A King, *The Gendering of Men, op. cit.*, pp.41–138; see especially pp. 48 and 431, fn. 8.

12. See Anne Anderson «Fearful Consequences... of Living Up to One's Teapot»: Men, Women and «Cultchah» in the English Aesthetic Movement c. 1870–1900», *Victorian Culture*, vol. 37, 2009, pp. 219–54.

13. T.A. King, *The Gendering of Men, op. cit.*, p. 50.

14. See Lee Edelman, «Tearrooms and Sympathy: Or the Epistemology of the Water Closet», *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994. Such activity can be dated back to the eighteenth century. See also Matt Houlbrook, «The Private World of Public Urinals: London 1918–1957», *London Journal*, vol. 25, no.1, 2000, pp. 52–70.

15. Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal* (1949, trans. Bernard Frechtman, Paris: Olympia Press, 1954, p. 48.

16. For more information, see John F. Galliher, Wayne H. Brekhus and David P. Keys, *Laud Humphreys: Prophet of Homosexuality and Sociology*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

17. See, for example, «Is There a God?», by Bertrand Russell, which was commissioned but not published by Illustrated Magazine in 1952; available at [http://www.cfpf.org.uk/articles/religion/br/br\\_god.html](http://www.cfpf.org.uk/articles/religion/br/br_god.html) (last accessed on 13 June 2012).

18. See Leo Bersani, *Homos*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

19. J. Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, (1983, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker), Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004, p. xxv.

20. See J. Rancière, «Ten Theses on Politics» (1998), *Theory & Event*, vol.5, no.3, 2001, p. 12.

21. «Queer World Making: Annamarie Jagose interviews Michael Warner», *Genders* [online journal], no. 31, 2000, available at [http://www.genders.org/g31/g31\\_jagose.html#n11](http://www.genders.org/g31/g31_jagose.html#n11) (last accessed on 5 May 2012).

22. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. : An Introduction, La Volonté de Savoir* (1976, trans Robert Hurley), New York: Penguin, 1990; and Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, New York: Dutton, 1995.

23. J. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2004, trans. S. Corcoran), Cambridge: Polity, 2009, p. 11.

24. J. Rancière, «Jacques Rancière: History and the Art System» (interview with Jan Ciret), *Art Press*, no. 258, June 2002, p. 73.

25. J. Rancière, «The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes», *New Left Review*, no.14, March/April 2002, p. 137.



26. Sudeep Dasgupta, «Art Is Going Elsewhere and Politics Has to Catch It: An Interview with Jacques Rancière». *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*, no.1, 2008, p.74, available at <http://dare.uva.nl/document/138101> (last accessed on 13 June 2012); Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, Cambridge: Polity, 1987.
27. J. Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
28. See Charles Esche, «Lukas Duwenhögger», *9th International Istanbul Biennial* (exh. cat), Istanbul: International Istanbul Biennial, 2005, available at [http://9b.iksv.org/english/?Page=Artists&Sub=Az&Content=Lukas\\_Duwenhögger](http://9b.iksv.org/english/?Page=Artists&Sub=Az&Content=Lukas_Duwenhögger) (last accessed on 13 June 2012).
29. J. Rancière, «The Distribution of the Sensible», *op. cit.*, p. 93.
30. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 8.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p. 58.
33. See Lukas Duwenhögger, «A Letter from Paris», in Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, Leontine Coelewijn and Hripsimé Visser (ed.), *From the Corner of the Eye* (exh. cat), Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1998, pp. 85–89.
34. J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
35. Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, London and New York: Verso, 2006, p. 143.
36. A. Badiou, «Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art», The Drawing Center, New York, 4 December 2003, available at *lacanian ink* [online journal] <http://www.lacan.com/issue22.html> (last accessed on 16 May 2012).
37. J. Rancière, «Politics, Identification, and Subjectivisation», *October*, vol. 61, Summer 1992, p. 60.
38. See Jean-Phillippe Deranty, «Jacques Rancière's Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition», *Political Theory*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2003, p. 146.

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