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Bruce Andrews, Dissensus and the Critique of Subjectivity: or, the Poet as Editor as Reader

1.

Bruce Andrews’s radically ‘reader-centered’ and notoriously ‘difficult’ poetics (McGann 1999, Perloff 1999, Lazer 1999, Dworkin 2001) has produced one of the most rigorously politicized and prolific bodies of writing to have emerged from that distinctly avant-garde moment signified by the term ‘Language Poetry.’ Given the socio-practical dimension of collective avant-garde activity, it seems obvious that Andrews’s textual politics has been collaboratively forged in the process of avant-garde or ‘post-avant’ practice to a significant extent. Ironically, while Language Poetry’s continued institutionalization/canonization has secured a non-marginal place for Andrews’s work, the specificity of both his critical-theoretical stance and compositional method (*vis-à-vis* other Language writers) have often been sidelined or ignored. With this in mind, I want to offer a theoretically-inclined analysis of Andrews’s most distinctive writing practice by way of a broadly Rancièrian reading of key texts/recordings from the 1980s, such as *Give Em Enough Rope* (1987) as well as the early sections of what will become *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)* (1992) and *Divestiture—A* (1994).

Not so much ‘difficult’ as *different*, Andrews’s centrifugal writing evinces a neo-Brechtian/quasi-Debordian shift of attention from literary production to writing conceived as editing of linguistic-discursive raw material, to allow for a more decidedly social address. Andrews’s “social modernism” (2001a), to use one of his pat terms, attempts no less than to render perceptible the historical contingency of a) the ideologically-functional discursive formation of the subject and b) the totality of capitalist social relations by soliciting what I suggest to call a “dissensual” mode of reading/listening. A key notion in Jacques Rancière’s theoretical framework, “dissensus” signifies a “disagreement [*mésentente*] about the sensible givens of a situation” (Rancière 2000: 124), of what it *is* that is given to the senses and what allows subjects to make sense of it, what can be perceived (aesthetically) and thought, and thus

addressed (politically)” (cf. Rancière 1999: x-xii; 2010: 2-3). I turn to Rancière’s work here, because I have been dwelling on how to articulate in what way, specifically, Andrews’s poetry can be said to solicit a mode of reading that would capacitate the subject of that experience in such a way as to facilitate a process of political subjectivity formation.

Given the idiosyncrasy of Rancière’s writing, it may be conducive at this point to outline his thinking before moving on to Andrews. For Rancière, very briefly put, and I side with this notion, aesthetic experience is inherently linked with radical democratic politics as a form of dissensus, because it “modifies sensory perception of what is common to the community” (Rancière 2004: 40). Instead of producing a rhetorical persuasion, aesthetics introduces a distance that severs the field of experience from its conventional reference points and re-frames the world of common experience as the world of a shared impersonal experience. In this way, however, “it helps create fabric of a common experience, in which new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of subjective *enunciation* may be developed” (Rancière 2010: 142).

What Rancière calls “consensus,” by contrast, entails the supposition of an identity between what can be perceived and what makes sense, “through the matching of a *poiesis* with an *aisthesis*, or horizon of affects” (2010: 216). Rather than signifying a mode of governing that appeals to expertise and policies of arbitration, “consensus” thus refers to that which is *censored*:

[C]onsensus is an agreement between sense and sense, [...] between a mode of sensory presentation and a regime of meaning. Consensus, as a mode of government, says: it is perfectly fine for people to have different interests, values and aspirations, nevertheless there is one unique reality to which everything must be related, a reality that is experienceable as a sense datum and which has only one possible signification. (2010: 44)

One may recognize in this description the rationale of liberal pluralism as well as the neo-liberal market imperative and its positivization of the socio-economic order. By contrast, “dissensus” can be understood as that which disrupts the identity and reveals the gap between *poiesis* and

aisthesis, what is given to the senses and according to what regime of identification, or meaning, one makes sense of it. While “politics,” according to Rancière, is an activity hostile to all forms of “policing” that redefines what counts as “*the political*,” aesthetics, as a paradoxical regime of the identification of art both identifies “art” in the singular and effects a blurring of the boundaries between art and non-art. (cf. Rancière 2010: 115-133; 149) This, I argue, forms a *dispositif* for avant-garde activity in its endeavor to effect “re-distributions of the sensible” in and through art. The question remains, however, in what way and by what means, specifically, Andrews politicized writing has tried to introduce “dissensuality” into the extensive neo-liberal and dawning “post-political” consensus of the long 1980s.

The canonical Western Marxists, from Benjamin to Baudrillard, have considered modern capitalism’s aestheticized mass culture nemesis to the autonomy of aesthetic experience. Notions like “the culture industry,” “the spectacle,” or “postmodern hyperreality” critique the short-circuiting of aesthetic experience with consumerist desire. More fundamentally: the threatening conflation of experience and ideology, i.e. the loss of ‘free appearances.’ Rancière suggests that this discourse of *Kulturkritik* (of distance, passivity, and alienation) risks perpetuating concrete inequality by positing a form of master-knowledge. Subjects and social movements which stray from its truths are condemned to a “social context of blindness” as they “misrecognize” their structural position within the capitalist totality. Rancière suggests to avoid this (from a radically egalitarian perspective) aporetic position. Instead, he posits equality as a polemical *a priori* to prevent it from being indefinitely deferred. Accordingly, he presupposes a non-passive recipient, similar in many ways to the post-Althusserian subject of *Cultural Studies* yet without subscribing to the kind of populist affirmation proposed by John Fiske, or, in a less identitarian key, Deleuze and Guattari. Similar, too, I believe, to the kind of reading subject posited by Andrews’s poetry, notwithstanding the Althusserian rigor of much of his theorizing throughout the 1980s. To conclude my theoretical excursus, then: Rancière insists, “that the question of the relationship between art, aesthetics and politics be raised at [...] the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its perceptibility *and* of its organization” (2004: 18).

2.

The unsettling ‘in-your-face’ quality of Andrews’s work in the late 70s and 80s has prompted such inventive critical labels as “Reagan-era word bombing” (Smith 1999) and “stream-of-political-consciousness-writing” (Levy 1999). His writing in the early pieces from what will become *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)* (1992) as well as *Divestiture—A* (1994), is both an assault on the senses and a concerted attack on specific ways of making (social) sense. Conceiving of “readerly *affect*” as that which “activates the political stakes for poetry,” Andrews emphasizes the task of creating a situation where reading/listening “produc[es] a *relation to affect*,” thus effecting “a bigger *capacitation*” (Andrews 2010a: 97). During the heyday of Reaganomics and the mediatized explosion of the ‘culture war,’ Andrews’s texts—instead of offering an imaginary author-reader dialogue—tried to occasion a “rereading [of] the reading that a social status quo puts us through” (Andrews 1996: 54) by presenting the reader with a choreography of linguistic-discursive raw materials ceded from its ‘original’ contexts and performatively projecting social antagonism into the reading/listening experience. To this end, Andrews montages modular bits of textual material—written and collected on small regular-sized cards, sometimes over the course of several years—in extremely polyvalent, paratactic arrays.

Further, adapting and transposing core methods from the dialectical theatre, Andrews seeks to render perceptible the semantic framing process (which is always already an aesthetic issue) and to sabotage specific instances of ideological framing, identity thinking, and consensus. Frequently driven by piercing sarcasm, he excels at this technique: “the *commodity* had twins to sell bunkbeds to / [...] / the world’s hard financial reference point / mined by black slaves / [...] / information is a waste of facism; your sensitivities are a bad credit risk” (Andrews 1995: 23-25). Rather than resembling a case of postmodern anti-subjectivity or schizophrenia, Andrews’s is heavily reliant on the Brechtian critique and extension of avant-garde strategy into a fully fledged social modernism, with syntax serving as a kind of “demolition derby” (Andrews 1996: 58). Consider the following excerpt from “IF A PEPPERMINT PATTY COULD SING”:

No more deportation, smash all borders! Tee hee, flat &
Round
those big harassed skirts = minute man of spiritual obsoles-
cence, to our satisfaction! Wet wolf hopper striker
valentines always wrong. That’s why we hate nature—
because of all the maintenance that it requires once we move it
indoors. Lance each boil. In the bathroom, customers are king.
I came to the party packed in soybean oil, a bit sympathetic to
the Soviets.
Why WASPs can’t afford to have a culture—proxy puppet prop,
cocoon with Velcro. Lobster tendencies. Proverbial nation of
sheep details. Believe in nothing, indulge in everything—that
runt must mediate counterfeited ice chests. When they say,
‘fuck you,’ you say, ‘excuse me’? Heat beams its commodified
juice: poison their hot tubs!
Heavier, hoppier, headquarters just a prop vest
reflex piety
security: watch everything. (Andrews 1982: 00:17-01:15 min.; Andrews 1992: 115)

As Brecht envisioned the role of the spectator, here it is the reader/listener, who “has again and again to make what we might call hypothetical adjustments to our structure, by mentally switching off the motive force of our society or by substituting others for them” (Brecht 1964: 191). The passage begins with what recognizably is a political slogan of anti-racist and human rights campaigning and a leftist political stance (“No more deportation, smash all borders!”), which is then juxtaposed with a sexist statement and image (“Tee hee, flat & / round / those big harassed skirts”), as it seems, by a sexually abusive person him or herself—which may imply, for

instance, the plight of sexually abused illegal immigrants who are discriminated against in terms of race, class, gender/sex, and who are neither protected by law from sexual and racial abuse nor from coarse economic exploitation, due to their status as illegal aliens. They may even be rounded up forcefully, while trying to cross, say, the Mexican border, by “minutemen” who no longer fight the British Empire but serve on behalf of the American one.

Or is it? What if “tee hee, flat & round” is read as cynical comment on the leftist slogan “No more deportation, smash all borders?” After all “skirts” are not literally “flat & round.” And what exactly happens here “to *our* satisfaction?” Who is “we” and why do “we hate nature”? Well, “because of all the maintenance [...]” The pronouns (and other shifters) in Andrews’s texts remain fully generic; the protean voices are never allowed psychological depth. Whatever motivates these utterances as well as readers’ reactions to them, can therefore be assumed social, or psychosocial. Accordingly, the reader may be exposed to psychological violence due to her own associations, while the origin of that violence is social. It is present in everyday social life but hidden, or naturalized, by ideologically functional discourses and the practices pertaining to “consensus.” As social antagonism and structural contradiction—the constitutive cracks and fissures of the totality—are “sutured” by the “semantic (sewing) machine of representation” (Andrews 1996: 126) and ideology, Andrews’s poetic praxis aspires to undo the “stitches” and “lay bare the [social] device, spurn the facts as not self-evident” (1996: 50).

Notwithstanding a Cagean element of chance, the informal composition of such modular, yet phrase-based writing—to continue with my ‘quasi-symptomatic’ reading—is far from being randomly improvised. From the “maintenance” of nature, which may be decoded as nature’s domination, the text propels the reader to the private realm with the enjambment of “indoors.” This gives way to the (cultural) imperative to “Lance each boil,” which is usually carried out in the “bathroom,” where “customers are king.” From service-oriented consumer culture and its (cognitive) association with what is ‘happening’ in the bathroom (the Real?), the text proceeds to what appears to be the stereotype of a greasy “party[-goer].” Yet the latter informs us that he “came to the party packed in soybean oil, a bit sympathetic to the Soviets”—a phonetic pun and

historical reference to the tension between democratic workers' councils and the authoritarian party *nomenklatura* in the early Soviet Union, besides numerous further “multimplication[s]” (Andrews 2001b). Several semantic frames are activated at the same time: the 1980s party-goer, canned food, arriving at the *nomenklatura*'s buffet, the historical fate of the Soviet Union.

The next couple of lines introduce the reader to “WASPs,” among other subjects, who despite their wealth “can't afford to have a culture.” Is this, then, a charge of decadence (“Lobster tendencies”), a case of affluenza and commodified subjectivity (“cocoons with velcro”), an indictment of the Reagan and Bush administration's failed educational and cultural policies, or is it the laconic assertion that the ruling class cannot tolerate a radical democratic culture as this would be its nemesis? In a thoroughly Brechtian manner, Andrews's critical poetics works against both identitarian and (uncritical) hermeneutic readings—“I take hermeneutics to the cleaners” (Andrews 1987: 50). Ideally, then, the reader is propelled outwards into the social by the centrifugal thrust of the writing.

Sound-wise, alliteration serves as a means of what William Howe calls “acoustic cueing” (Howe 1992) in Andrews's writing and introduces the recurring ‘theme’ of reification and social control, while referring to itself as a “prop”: “proxy puppet prop, / cocoons with velcro,” “Heavier, hoppier, headquarters just a prop vest.” “When they say, ‘fuck you,’ you say, ‘excuse me’?” stages a case of social conflict, possibly involving matters of class, and hints at the absurdity of social language conventions. “Heat beams its commodified juice” might be an obscene reference to the pornography industry as well as another Marxist insistence on defetishizing the commodity and acknowledging the labor process, or, perhaps more fundamentally: the domination of nature, including man, as prerequisite to be able to mass produce “juice” and “beam” it to into the “WASPs” hand, who enjoys her luxurious “bath[room],” which comes with a “hot tub.” While this reading probably reveals less about Bruce Andrews than about the author of this paper, the latter certainly takes pleasure in the hyperbolic incitement to “poison their hot tubs!” Is “piety” just a social “reflex,” is it to be “reflexe[d], or is it the noun as such, which is to be ‘verbed,’ on a formal-syntactical level, in order

to contest normative grammar and hint at the political problem of how [to] democratize *framing?*” (Andrews 1996: 141). In any case, the passage closes with a profound paradox: “security: watch everything.”

Explication here is truly abyssal; yet not so much in the sense implied by Derrida—where deconstruction is always already ‘at work’ in the text—or Barthes’s insight in *S/Z* that the “readerly text” is always already a “writerly text” (cf. Barthes 1975: 8f.). Rather, it is abyssal in the sense that “multimplication” (Andrews 2001b) and unresolvable grammatical structures continue with the same density throughout texts like *Divestiture–A* as well as the 300 pages of what will become *I Don’t Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)*. As Briam Kim Stefans puts it in one of the book’s first reviews: “it just doesn’t stop” (Stefans 1993). He also notes that the writing is “not hermetic, and in fact exhibits a terrific appetite for the ‘real,’ abstract as its expression may be” (Ibid.). If reading the work, in other words, seems like an ‘abyssal’ task, it is because the ‘true abyss’ is social. But let’s “[p]ause to reflect on prevalence of U.S.-supported tyranny in Third World” (Andrews 1987: 50) and listen to one more example. The following is from *Divestiture–A*:

Dear World, *fuck off* advice ingredients, empty swing. Studies show that couples who try to avoid arguments tend to average higher happiness scores. Sizes carried, class analysis, men’s consciousness-raising, medieval robbers, no one seems to know how many. There are freshly dug graves, but children were buried together, driven to obscurity by the unconscious need to cover up the defects of the argument. ‘I’m a knee fetishist,’ sit up, arching the back a little, the transformation of a worker into a mere hand. Noises? Smells fresh but doesn’t linger = semen disinfectant, 20kilos of heroin; if I had lost the race, I could start over, but by winning I get to race again. Eat letters! Excavations, soft minimalists, ELITIST INTENSITY — institutions no more than the barricades of repression clapping his twists. (Andrews 1988: 03:19-04:25 min.; Andrews 1994: 4)

While the unlikely pairing of radically disjunctive contexts and (almost) syntactically coherent prose is “preminiscent of spambot computational processing” (Goldsmith 2007), Andrews’s syntactic collisions and semantic as well as prosodic juxtapositions are *intentional* rather than aleatory. Refusing to ‘eliminate’ subjective mediation, Andrews’s poetic “informalism” (Andrews 2001b) fleshes out Adorno’s emancipatory call “to use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity” (Adorno 1973: xx). As the editing process allows for sufficient distance from a conventional author position and recasts writing as editing, and eventually as reading, Andrews’s poetry self-consciously presupposes an ‘emancipated reader,’ thus avoiding what Rancière calls “the logic of stultification” (Rancière 2009: 14).

While there is no handily available ‘cause-and-effect’ formula for the politicization of poetry, Andrews’s aimed rather precisely at facilitating the dissensual ‘rupture between sense and sense’ that Rancière posits as constitutive of political subjectivization. In Rancièrian terms, Andrews demonstrates how the references of language are being “distributed,” and how they provide a perpetual source of “disagreement.” Moreover, whereas re-aestheticizing language and discourse does work against ideological interpellation and shows the referent itself to be politicizable, ‘aesthetic play,’ for both Andrews and Rancière, is only ‘free’ insofar as it reveals the contingency of the “police distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004: 85) through the dissociation between what is perceptible and what is framed reasonable. For Andrews, as opposed to Kant and Schiller, both a judgment of beauty and the experience of the sublime are always already framed or mediated through language and social practice. However, unlike Bourdieu’s famous wholesale rejection (in *Distinction*) of Kantian aesthetics, Andrews suggests a materialist and social constructivist turn, where “the Sublime”—conceived as the system of language and the totality of discourse—marks a transition to questions of epistemology and ideology, cognition and mediation. We may thus relate Andrews’s notion to Jameson’s “aesthetics of cognitive mapping”—a (negative) mapping of the social totality that reveals its constitutive cracks and fissures but through dissensual operations.

3.

In conclusion, then: If the political-aesthetic nexus signified by the notion of “dissensus”, is always also an aesthetico-semiotic one, the politicacy of a given text or performance hinges to a significant extent on how it contests aesthetically—by rendering perceptible—the signifying practices of ideologically functional discourses: the process of ideological framing, divisions between speech and noise, sense and non-sense, bodily capacities and incapacities, and other consensual closures of meaning. Here, Andrews’s modular compositional method—the distinctive juxtapositional montaging of discursive raw material and its constructivist contextualizing of the reading subject—constitute sophisticated means not only to solicit critical reader response but to rupture aesthetically the consensual framing of a non-antagonistic social whole where radical politics is ruled out from the start.

Even *within* the post-avant, Andrews’s work stands out because of its rigorous endeavor to solicit a dissensual mode of reception. In fact, Andrews’s approach seems well suited to contest an ideo-affective formation which presents itself as non-ideological and depends solely on the reproduction of the status quo, part of which is the policing of subjectivities by means of “repressive tolerance” and what Foucault has called “neoliberal governmentality” (cf. esp. Foucault 2008: 260-271; 283). One should thus refute the argument advanced by Bob Perelman, and various more conservative scholars, that Andrews’s “aggressive[ly]” non-identitarian poetics and politics, and the highly “disjunct surface” of his texts and performances, by definition foreclose the work’s political significance. (Perelman 1996: 99-102) Instead, one should perhaps raise the question of *what* various critics actually talk about when they talk about “politics.” For Rancière, the political “disagreement” emerges on the basis of a “miscount” of the population. (Rancière 1999: 6f.). It thus creates political subjectivities that are only ever contingently related to pre-existing social identities. This is not to say that strategic mobilization of specific social groups to political ends is futile, but that this is hardly an issue pertaining to aesthetics. The post-avant-garde ‘author-as-editor,’ to play on Benjamin’s notion of the “producer,” rather expresses a

“mediated solidarity” with the disenfranchised through the “aesthetic tendency of the work” (Benjamin 1970: 90).

Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought, and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking, and altering the coordinates of the shared world, which in Andrews’s non-vanguardist political framework is each of us. Along these lines, the kind of “connective reading” (Spahr 2001: 51ff.) promoted by Andrews, to borrow a term from Juliana Spahr, contributes to a collective understanding of emancipation as “the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus” (Rancière 2009: 49). If any assessment of the political significance of Andrews’s work qua the concept of dissensus is all but methodologically unproblematic, it is certainly improving on the lamentable absence of even a proper working definition of “politics” from most studies of politicized avant-garde poetry. In most cases, the specificity of politics is collapsed with cultural criticism or the exercise of power. This holds true even for such sophisticated theorists as Hal Foster, who emphasizes the (post-)avant-gardes’s pivotal role as a “coarticulation of artistic and political forms” (Foster 1996: 5).

For Andrews, Western Marxism and neo-structuralism in the first place provide concepts for thinking about “what’s in the way of progressive social change” (Büscher-Ulbrich 2012). In that, it resonates strongly with Rancièrian concerns.

The play of language as action may suggest an infinity, an essential openness; but closure does occur outside it—in *settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling*. Poetic work can take on that establishment: of a paradigm of discourse & ideology, of meaningfulness which is organized socially, or socially coded, just like a sign: as a social body of what is unsaid, which carries (like a membrane) all that is said—the establishment’s strategic project of *already appropriating sense & already making use of it*. (Andrews 1996: 56)

The passage rather accurately describes the consensual framing that seeks to “forestall politics” (Rancière 2004: 90). Andrews, by contrast, seeks to capacitate the reader or listener precisely by *thresholding* “settled frameworks of perception & cognition & feeling.” The deconstructive impulse of his work is thus coupled with a constructivist contextualization of the subject that aims at “repossessing spaces & relations & articulation” (Andrews 2010a: 95). To this end, heterogeneous elements from a wide range of social fields are ceaselessly brought into play, cutting across otherwise detached discourses to foreground the generative qualities of language, the pervasiveness of social antagonism, and the perpetual sources of disagreement. If there is a kind of “dialectical shock” involved in reading Andrews, or listening, it is perhaps the realization that the police order has to be constantly reproduced by means of a consensual practice that negates its historical contingency. Contesting such practice through “dissensual operations,” is to make that contingency *tangible* without reifying it. After all, it is through emancipatory politics that radical social change can be brought about—unless “politics happens every four years” (Andrews 1987: 182), “spreadin’ demoCrazy” (Andrews 2010b) instead.

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