

Machete Interviews Jacques Rancière

First Installment

Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence

Machete: You have convincingly argued that theory and practice are closely intertwined in the recent history of the arts. Your own theoretical practice is one that attempts to intervene in consensual systems in order to displace them, whether or not it be the discourse on artistic modernity, the discourse on the avant-garde or other such examples. Could you discuss the nature of your theoretical practice as a polemical intervention? Are there aesthetic practices that try to do something along the lines of what you do at a theoretical level, i.e. intervene in order to displace the consensual framework of the sensible?

Jacques Rancière: What I try to do is to intervene in the space connecting what is called aesthetics and what is called politics in order to question forms of description and interpretation that have supposedly become self-evident. For instance, this is why both in what is supposed to be a political book like *Hatred of Democracy* and in what is supposed to be an aesthetic book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, I targeted more or less the same kind of discourse, which is very powerful on both sides: the discourse on the spectacle and the idea that we are all enclosed in the field of the commodity, the spectator, advertising images and so on. This is because, on the one hand, this discourse generates a kind of anti-democratic discourse and the incapacity of the masses for any political intervention and, on the other hand, it nurtures a discourse on the uselessness of any kind of artistic practice because it says that everything depends on the market. For example, there were all of these reactions when I made an interview with *Art Forum*: "But there is the market, and it's true that the market..." But it's necessary to get out of this discourse, which is a discourse of impotence, which nurtures, at the same time, forms of art that are supposed to be critical, projects and installations that are supposed to make us discover the power of the commodity and the spectacle. This is something that nobody ignores anymore. This discourse generates a kind of stereotypical art with all of these installations presenting displays of commodities, all these displays of images of sex or gender identity, etc. So what I try to do is really to target certain topics that both create some kind of discourse of political impotence and, on the other hand, either generate an idea that art cannot do anything or what you have to do is reproduce this stereotypical criticism of the commodity and consumption.

Machete: These stereotypical responses within the art world could perhaps be identified as avant-gardist or neo-avant-gardist attempts to critically respond to something like spectacle culture. You seem to be suggesting that there is a type of critical art that is more productive as an intervention or as a critique of contemporary society, a critical art that avoids the more stereotypical types of art that remain ensnared or entrapped in the logic of consumerist spectacles. Given your critique of modernism in the attempt to reopen the question of the aesthetic outside of the avant-gardist paradigm, how do you at the same time identify

certain normative critical structures within the arts? Is there ultimately a normative aspect to your discourse?

Jacques Rancière: I think that the critical spectacle has nothing to do with the avant-garde tradition because the avant-garde tradition is a tradition of art creating forms of life, and not of art as a criticism of social stereotypes. I think that political art is itself something of a kind of leftover from the real political avant-garde tradition. This being said, I don't have a fixed idea of some normative form of critique. What I mean is that I don't think that there are normative forms so that you could just refer to them and establish a way of doing real political art. I just observe forms of



"The Fadl Fakhouri File." sample page from the notebooks documenting the make of cars used in car bombs during the civil war. The Atlas Group.

displacement, breaking in some respects with the consensual way in which things are presented, told and made in the mainstream system. That's why I emphasize, for instance regarding the so-called problem in the Middle East, the way in which Israeli filmmakers, Palestinian filmmakers



Film still from Elia Suleiman's "Divine Intervention" (2002)

or Lebanese filmmakers, try to displace the situation of the victim. In Lebanon, for instance,

when the Atlas Group invents fake archives, it is a way of breaking the kind of division that consists in saying that fiction is for the rich and documentary is for the poor. And when you invent fake archives in a land that is supposed to be a victimized land, you displace the representation of a situation. I think that this is also the same case for the Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, who plays with Palestinian being, questioning the way in which Palestinians themselves get more or



Alfredo Jaar, "Real Pictures" (1995)

less ensnared in the position of the victim or the question of the nostalgic. There are many examples. I have discussed, for instance, the way in which Alfredo Jaar dealt with the massacre in Rwanda and how he escaped the discourse of the unrepresentable. He doesn't show images of the slaughter, but he creates an installation in which what he makes visible is the look of people or simply their identity. For instance there is an installation with black boxes where images were hidden in the boxes, but there were descriptions of the contents of the images on the boxes. There was thus an identification of the person, which means that he emphasized the fact that all those people have names and a place in history, whereas usually the victim is the one who has no name and no individuality (only an image as the victim of the slaughter). He breaks, in this case, with the partition between the part of the world that is constituted by individuals and the part of the world that is constituted by anonymous masses. However, I am not presenting a normative idea of what art has to do. I really don't think that there is a good practice of art. The relation between the consensual image and subversive images is constantly shifting so that you have to, at each moment, displace the displacement itself.

To be continued in the next issue of Machete

-This interview, conducted on October 30th 2009 by Gabriel Rockhill and Alexi Kukuljevic, was transcribed and edited by Emily Rockhill

Machete Interviews Jacques Rancière

Second Installment

Farewell to Artistic and Political Impotence

Machete: What is the role of the critic, the interpreter, the theorist in drawing out or highlighting the political elements in works of art or artistic endeavors? I know that you've been very critical of certain conceptions of committed art or politicized art that try to reduce the political dimension of art to the artist's intention. What, then, is the role at the opposite end of the spectrum, i.e. not with the producer of works of art but with their reception by the interpreter, the theorist, the active spectator if you will. Do they play a role in articulating the political power of works of art? Or is this power somehow inherent in works as they stand?

Jacques Rancière: No, I don't think that the power is inherent in the work as it stands because for me the problem is that there is no politics of art; there is a politics of aesthetics. This means that what is important is not the idea that the work can have this or that effect. In fact, the work is an implementation of an idea of the artist, which means that the work is an implementation of the relation of an artist to politics. But this does not mean at all that the artist can anticipate political effects of the work. Thus, the effect, the aesthetic effect, is not the effect of a work in the sense that a work should produce this energy for action or this particular form of deliberation about the situation. It's about creating forms of perception, forms of interpretation. The role of the critic—which is a controversial name for me—is to draw the outlines of the kind of common world that the work is producing or a kind of common world of which the work is a product. For me, the role of the critic is to say, "this is the world that this work proposes." It is to try to explain the forms—as well as the possible shifts in the forms—of perception, description and interpretation of a world that are inherent in the work.

Machete: Given what you've said about the relationship between artistic production and the critic, as well as your attempt to redefine aesthetics outside of the discourse of modernism, how can you account for artists themselves taking up in their work a false paradigm of modernism, which therefore informs the nature of their own practice? What happens when art embodies this kind of misunderstanding? What is the role of the critic in relationship to these false historical narratives?

Jacques Rancière: I would say that there is a kind of truthful negotiation. I mean by this that the work of an artist is more or less informed by a certain attitude. It would seem that an artist situates himself as an avant-garde artist, a modern artist or a committed artist. I think that he tries to define his art in this particular frame, and the framework in general is a kind of partial view of either modernity or politics, which means that the work may have a potential that exceeds the idea of the work's producer. Artists in the sixties, for instance, had a very strong adherence to this or that discourse, and sometimes that is very uninteresting. But what they do can nonetheless be interesting. This means that the task of the critic, if I think of myself as a critic, is also to try to create another kind of frame for this practice. With the example of Alfredo Jaar, which I brought up earlier, it's true that his work can be drawn in the

direction of the unrepresentable, but I try to draw it in another direction. To take another example, I had to write on the Irish artist James Coleman who, in a sense, is a very strong modernist, more or less dependent on a certain form of modernism linked with the minimalism of the seventies. I try to extricate from his work something that defines another way of representing social issues. He makes very sophisticated works composed of both slides and voice. He made, for instance, a work entitled "Photograph" in a school in a poor neighborhood of Berlin, on the way in which kids present themselves in front of the camera. It can be viewed as an entirely formal work: how people present their image to a camera. At the same time, the sound was borrowed from a kind of kitsch 19th century poem. I did a lot of work on this project, both on the images and the sound, to reveal a certain way of dealing with questions of social identity and the way in which those who are on the other side present themselves, try to construct their image and to play for instance singers or dancers, etc. I focused on this relation of people who are supposed to be outside of art to the world of art. This is an example, but very often when I am asked to deal with the work of an artist, I try to introduce my own shift, to say that what's interesting in this artist may come from an idea of avant-gardism, formalism, modernism, committed art or the art of the unrepresentable, but it can nonetheless produce quite a different image for instance of the poor, quite a different image of the victim (not only an image but also a different feature, a certain form of aesthetic experience out of shared experience).



Alfredo Jaar, *Let There Be Light*, 1996



James Coleman, *Photograph*, 1998-99

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