Jacques Ranciere
Misadventures of Universality

Thank you to Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Joseph Backstein and to the Biennale foundation. I shall bring out my subject by focusing on some statements and spectacles from another art Biennale that I visited last week in Seville, in Spain. The curator of that biennale in Seville was also the curator of the last ‘Documenta’ in Kassel, Kozui Enwezor, gave to the gathering of the artists and works a far-ranging objective court: “to unmask those machineries that decimate and waste social economic and political interconnection looking for a return to a logics of totalisation.” So, the question which the Biennale should address was: “how could, how can art play an integral and not only peripheral role in relation to the global challenge that affects both the artistic production and reception, especially in light of the damaging effects of reactionary conservative and fundamentalist politics in all social structures of the world today.” So, such statements affirm a will to oppose postmodern scepticism and resume a certain form of “universalist” view of art and politics and of the connection and attempt to challenge the machineries of dissociation, to restore a sense of universality and intelligibility, of the interconnections that frame a global world.

But this clear commitment to an enlightened view of the global world seemed to be questioned from the very beginning by the title chosen for that Biennale, this title was: ‘The Unhomely: Phantom Scenes in Global Society’. It transpired as though the global view on the global world, advocated as a purpose of the exhibition, could not be but a matter of ghosts. It transpired as though the old Brechtian will to make the “homely” strange in order to provoke a fresh gaze on the contradictions of our world was overshadowed by the darkness of the Freudian “unhomeliness”. This wavering between two meanings of “unhomeliness” was strongly emphasized by the first works proposed to the visitors. They were series of photographs and installations focusing on the war in Iraq and the antiwar protests in Western countries. Close to the photographs of the horrors of the civil war made by the freelance Iraqui reporter Ghaith Abdul-Ahad we could see photographs of anti-war protests in New York and Washington made by the German born New York based artist Josephine Meckseper. On one of those photographs we could see some protesters holding banners in the background. As for the foreground, it shows us an overfilled dustbin, the content of which falls to the ground. The title of the photograph is “Untitled”. A title, which in such a context means: no title is needed because the image is more telling than any discourse.

This image clearly points to the ambivalence of the “unhomely”. On the one hand it belongs to the tradition of collage. It is not collage in the technical sense of the word but it belongs to the aesthetics of collage that chooses to play on the shock of heterogeneity if not contradictory elements. But aesthetics was often implemented in the past as a means of producing political consciousness. Among the artists who used it in that way there was another New York based artist Martha Rosler who made in the 70’s her well-known series “Bringing war home” by pasting together photographs of the atrocities in Vietnam and advertising images of American petty-bourgeois interiors. Josephine Meckseper’s photograph may thus look as an ironic answer to Rosler’s series, as she pours the overflow of American consumerism into the way of the protesters that want to bring the Afghanistan or Iraqi war home. What is at issue is not the intention of the artist. What is at issue is a twist that has occurred in the practice of collage, which is also a twist in the meaning given to “unhomeliness”. Rosler’s collage, thirty years ago, was predicated on the heterogeneity of the opposite: the image conflated two opposite worlds, one of them was the hidden truth of the other, but also it conflated them in order to show that they could not go together. The image
of the little nude Vietnamese girl shouting ahead of the soldiers on the roads of her wasted country could not go with the image of the American cosy interior without exploding it. The universality of the struggle for emancipation was supposed to break through the universality of the market. Meckseper’s “collage”, on the contrary, is predicated on homogeneity: the world of consumption is no more alien to the world of the struggle. The anti-war protest brings war home, in its way, but it brings it in a space where it is at home in a space of struggle that is itself a territory of consumption. Forty years ago Jean-Luc Godard already made fun of the “children of Marx and Coca-Cola”. But when they marched against the war in Vietnam, the children of Marx and Coca-Cola were fighting with the children of Marx. The little Vietnamese girl did not shout only for grief but also for struggle and victory. Now the protesters can no more identify with the fighters of the other side, no more march for their victory. The Iraqi victims turn out to be only victims of the empire of Coca-Cola, and the protesters are only fighting against that empire, or as a risk of perceiving and making us perceive that this empire ultimately turns out to be the empire of their own consumption.

So, the “phantom scenes of global power” show us the circularity of a worldwide complicity: the protest is organized against the terrorism of the “war on terror”, made by the empire of consumption that throws its shells on Mid-eastern towns. The shells are response to the terror of the attack of the towers. The attack itself had been displayed as the spectacle of the collapse of the empire. The protesters in turn have consumed the images of the collapse of the towers, the image of the bombing in Iraq and what they offer in the streets is a spectacle too, performed by consumers of spectacular horrors and diet coke. Ultimately terrorism and consumption, protest and spectacle are shown as part of the same process, a process governed by the law of the commodity which is the law of equivalence.

Needless to say, this process of homogenisation, this way of erasing any difference between the ways of domination and the ways of protest in the creation of a work which will be displayed and sold by Saatchi can be granted as a pervasive critique of our “global world” where the anti-commodity protests are marketed in the same way as commodity performances. And apparently it was the idea that made the curator decide to display Meckseper’s works as a kind of introduction to the ground thematic of the biennale. What interests me is not to suspect the intentions of the artist or the curator. What matters to me is this horizon of suspicion on the background of which the works of the former and the strategies of the latter are set up. It is the way in which the universality of the protest for human rights or people’s autonomy appears to be absorbed by another universality: the universality of the commodity, or rather a certain idea of the universality of the commodity. This is also a certain idea of the link between contingency and necessity. “Contingency” means what happens and might not have happened, what comes without necessity, comes to us, falls on us. But from this point on “contingency” can easily be identified with a certain idea of indifference: the indifference of what falls into the garbage can. What falls into the garbage in turn can be identified with the equivalence of the commodity, which in turn can be identified with the democratic equivalence of anybody with anybodies in the name of which shells are thrown against those who refuse it but set to work, in attacking it, another equivalence; the equivalence between war and spectacle.

This is apparently what has changed in the relation between Marx and Coca-Cola: the change is not that Marx has disappeared. He has not disappeared at all, he has shifted places. He is now located in the heart of the system, as its ventriloquist’s voice. Gramsci once said that the soviet revolution was revolution against Marx’s Capital, because Marx’s book had become the book of the Bourgeois scientists. The same thing occurred with the kind of
Marxism with which the so-called “children of Marx and Coca-Cola” grew up: the Marxism of the denunciation of the mythologies of commodity, the fallacies of consumer’s society and of the empire of the spectacle. Forty years ago, it was supposed to “unmask” the machineries of domination, so as to provide the fighters with new weapons. It has turned to exactly the contrary: sort of nihilist wisdom that was the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, the equivalence of anything with anything, and of anything with its image and with the lie of its image.

But nihilist wisdom does not only give a phantasmagorical view of our world, featuring the entire mankind as a population of merry consumers overfilling all bins with the refuse of their frantic consumption. It also pictures the law of domination as a force that permeates any will to do anything against it. Any protest is a performance, any performance is a spectacle, any spectacle is a commodity, such is the ground thesis of this post-Marxist and post-Situationnist wisdom. But it is not only a matter of “vanity”, it is also a matter of culpability: ultimately the overwhelming empire of commodity is featured as the result of the sin of the individuals that live in it, and the worst sinners turn out to be those who want to rebel against its law.

I wish to substantiate this point by focusing on an apparently paradoxical phenomenon that has rocketed among western intelligentsia and most particularly French intelligentsias during the last ten years. I mean the development of more and more violent polemics against new disease that was said to threaten the future of civilisation. The name of that disease is said to be “democracy”. This is a strange case indeed. The intellectuals who herald this deadly danger live in countries that call themselves “democracy”, substantive that apparently implies the identity of a form of government based on public liberties and a way of individual life whose “freedom of choice” is based on the reign of the free market. As long as the Soviet Empire existed, it was commonplace to oppose that idea of democracy to the enemy called “totalitarianism”. And at the end of 89 the collapse of the soviet system was hailed in the Western World as the triumph of that idea of democracy, as the equivalence of public freedom, free market and the free choice by the individuals of their own way of life. But what happened after was exactly the contrary: the consensus on democracy as “human rights + free market+ free individual choice” vanished with the collapse of its enemy. In the years that followed, more and more furious intellectual campaigns trumpeted the disaster that was made to democracies by an enemy called democracy, more precisely by the disastrous connection between “human rights “ and “ free individual choice”. A number of sociologists, political philosophers and moralists began to explain us that the rights of Man, as Marx had proved it, actually were the rights of the egoistic bourgeois individual, and that, in our days, they meant the rights of the consumers to any kind of consumption – a right that pushed them to overstep and destroy all the limits to their thirst for consuming, thereby all the traditional institutions and forms of authority, imposing a limit to the power of the market. This is, they said, what democracy means in fact: the power of the individual consumer who cares for nothing but the satisfaction of his needs and desires. What the democratic individual wants is democratic equality. But what democratic equality means is equality between the seller and the buyer of any commodity. Therefore, they concluded, what the democratic individual wants is the triumph of the market in all the spheres of life and the more egalitarian it is, the more it is keen on providing that triumph. In such a way it was easy for those analysts to prove for instance that the students’ movements of the 60s and more specifically the movement of May 68 in France were aimed at the destruction of all those forms of authorities that hindered the invasion of the whole life by the law of Capital. By disparaging and impairing all those forms
of authority the movement, they said, paved the way for a rekindled capitalism, it allowed our societies to become free aggregations of unbound molecules, whirling in the void, deprived of any affiliation, entirely available to the law of the market.

But that was not yet the whole picture: the consequence of the democratic thirst for equality, according to those new prophets, was not only the reign of the market. It was the complicity and ultimately the identity of democratic individualism and totalitarian terror, conspiring in common to destroy all the human bonds. When I was young, individualism was supposed to be the opposite of totalitarianism. According to the new intellectual fashion, it turned out that totalitarianism was the necessary outcome of individualism, which meant the fanaticism of free choice and unlimited consumption. When the twin towers were destroyed, a well-known French philosopher, psychoanalyst and professor of Roman Law, Pierre Legendre, explained in a French newspaper that it was something like the return of the western repressed, the castigation for the western overrule of the symbolic order an upsetting emblematised by gay marriage. Two years after, a French linguist and philosopher, Jean-Claude Milner gave a more radical turn to the thesis, as he published a book entitled *The Criminal Tendencies of Democratic Europe*. The crime that he imputed to “democratic Europe” was quite simply the extermination of the European Jews. As the Jewish people, he argued, is the people faithful to the law of affiliation and transmission, it stood up as the only obstacle to the democratic desire of unlimitedness. That’s why democracy had to exterminate the Jews and was the only beneficiary of their extermination.

More recently in the fall of 2005 when violent riots burst out in the poor northern suburbs of Paris, populated mostly by families coming from Moghreb and from Black Africa, the spokesperson of French Media intelligentsia, Alain Finkielkraut found it a perfect case of illustration of the democratic terrorism of consumption. This is how he explained it to an Israeli newspaper. “Those guys that are wrecking schools, what do they actually say? Their message is not a call for help or a demand for more schools or better schools, it is the will to eliminate all what stands between themselves and the objects of their desires. And what are the objects of their desires? It is quite simple: money, brands and sometimes girls. What they want is the ideal of the consumer society. It is what they see on TV”. As the same author also assumed that those youths had been pushed to rioting by Islamic fanatics, the demonstration ended up identifying democracy, consumerism, puerility, wide primitive violence and Islamic terrorism. Why focus on those discourses? I think it’s not only a matter of local paranoia. Those discourses thrive on wider transformation, wider process that I would identify as the “decomposition of the model of social critique” and more generally of the enlightened model of action empowered by knowledge. According to that model, it was the power of reason to unmask the fake “universal” and therefore discover the true one, for example the universal law of the social structure behind the former universality of juridical and political laws. As the true universal was more comprehensive, more powerful then the other, the disclosure was supposed to produce an effect of empowerment. The critical model, in fact, worked as long as the forms of consciousness and the social political movement that it was supposed to end, in fact, were already at work and stronger enough to pre-empt in fact its efficiency. But so long as they actually supported it, the idea of its efficiency still worked. Reason and power went hand in hand at least in the minds.

What is specific of the present configuration is their dissociation. At first sight the implications of the new prophets still obey the critical model, it is still a question of revealing
the law of the nation, the law of the power of the commodity under its mask, but the explanation of the system now amounts to the explanation of the reason why the explanation of the reason is deprived of any power. This conjunction between reason and impotence is at the heart of the would-be-enlightened discourses of our time. They hung on to the universal but they hung on to it at the universal that doesn’t work, but is proved by the fact that it doesn’t work, so the universalist discourse becomes a pathological discourse about the disease of a world that doesn’t obey the law of the universal. Right-wing and left-wing discourses mostly bespeak the same syndrome of rational impotence, but they negotiate that impotence, according to different moods. First, the right-wing rage that I’d try to characterise very quickly and, on the other side, left-wing melancholy.

Left-wing melancholy, too, thrives on the evidence that the law of bio-power is extending its panoptical empire on individuals that are indulging in the new universal game available on the market: experimenting one’s life, which is, according to Peter Sloterdijk, the very dream of the modern individual. We are said to be in the belly of the monster where even the capacities of autonomous and disruptive practice and the networks of cooperative action that we could use against it, our virtuosity, as Paolo Virno names it, are exploited by the monster where they serve its new power, the power of immaterial production. Once we have accepted, you know, the premise that we are in the belly of the beast, the more logical deduction is the melancholic view of the omnipotence of the beast, which puts its grip on the desires and the capacity of its potential enemies as it offers them at the best price what is the most valuable commodity, the possibility of experimenting their life as a field of infinite possibilities. Therefore, it is said, the beast can offer anyone just what they want: reality shows on TV for the idiots and increased capacity of self-valorisation of their intellectual and relational capacities for the smart guys. So, in a sense, we are in the belly of the monster but on the other hand the monster appears to be so sweet. Some people sometimes object that the production of the commodities does not exactly identify with the development of the virtuosity of the high-tech workers. Some other people suggest that the shells and the jails of the beast are not that sweet. But they are answered that even if the beast sometimes strikes a bit too hard, it does it only to give way to the flood of universal liquidity.

This is how the master thinker of the post-modern sociology Sigmund Bauman put it, I quote: “the prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance Blows delivered by stealthy fighter planes and smart self-guarded and target-seeking missiles replaced the territorial advances of the infantry troops. What is really at stake in the new type of war in the era of liquid modernity is not the conquest of a new territory, but crushing the walls which stopped the flow of new, fluid, global powers.” That diagnosis was published at the beginning of 2001. The events of the five years that followed do not exactly confirm it. But, the content of the melancholic prediction doesn’t matter. No matter that two Gulf Wars happened though Baudrillard had affirmed that none of them could ever happen. The message of the melancholic prediction is not about verifiable facts. It is just about the lie hidden in any truth. Melancholy thus turns to a kind of cynical wisdom. It only says: things are not what you think they are. A proposition that will never be refuted. So, cynical melancholy, like prophecy, thrives on its very impotence. It is enough that it can turn it into general impotence and secure the subjective position of the “smart one” who casts a disenchanted gaze on a world where power and reason don’t go hand in hand any more and where the critical interpretation of the system is part of the system itself.

As we know, this ambivalence is also at the heart of many artistic practices, that thrive on both the relevance and the irrelevance of the critical model. The struggle against the
“society of the spectacle” and the practice of “détournement” are still put on many artistic and curatorial agendas and they are still supposed to be implemented in standard forms such as: parodies of promotional films, reprocessed disco sounds, media stars modelled in wax figures, Disney animals turned to polymorphous perverts, montages of “vernacular” photographs showing us standardized petty-bourgeois living-rooms, or overloaded supermarket trolleys, huge installations of pipes and machines representing the bowels of the social machine, swallowing everything and turning everything into shit. Those dispositifs keep occupying many of our galleries and museums, with a rhetoric assuming that they make us discover the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle or the pornography of power. But, as it will be hard to find anybody who would still ignore them, the mechanism ends up spinning around itself and playing on the very undecidability of its effect.

At the beginning of my talk I referred to Kozui Enwezor’s project for the biennale in Seville. The project of giving art an integral and no more peripheral role in the task of unmasking the machineries of the global world. It comes as no surprise that this enlightened project was dedicated to the production of ‘phantom scenes’. Unmasking the ghosts has turned to be an affair of ghosts. The ghost is a figure of the equivalence between the functioning of the machinery and the functioning of the unmasking the machinery. It has the power of “unmasking” turned to impotence, become itself a ghost, the voice of the ventriloquist.

This is probably why at the end of the space of the exhibition of the Biennale in Seville, there was an installation of a very different kind. In two rooms, the Austrian artist Oliver Ressler had set up a lot of monitors. On those monitors, there was no ghost. Nor collage. There were real persons, standing in front of us, speaking to us. One of them spoke about the Paris Commune, another about feminist perspectives, another one about zapatist movement, other one about alternative economy, alternative forms of production, exchange and life. So, it transpired as though the politics involved in the production of the “phantom scenes”, the politics of “unmasking” had to be supplemented by a politics of real scenes, where real people spoke about the state of the world, the sense of their struggle and the way to envision a new world - a supplement of “central” politics which precisely was “peripheral” in the space of exhibition.

What is at stake here in that spatial dissociation of the elements of the critical model is also the traditional view of the political empowerment of the Universal. It is the idea of the function of political Subjectivization. When the prophets bemoan the impending disaster or when the melancholic those denounce “anaesthesia” and thrive on its presupposition, they point to the same entropy of the historical model of political subjectivity as produced by both the dynamic of a global system and the denunciation of this global system. According to that model there was a two-fold relation between the dynamic of the system and the dynamic of its critique and of its destruction. On the one hand, the dynamic of the Universal was the dynamic of consciousness and of knowledge and consciousness, the unmasking of the machinery, the revolt against devastation, produced by the consciousness of the machinery and of its devastation. But, on the other hand, the dynamic of the Universal was supposed to be the dynamic of the system itself. Capitalism itself was supposed out of its own dynamism to produce the dissolution of its own particularity, it produced the universality of the class which is not a class, as Marx said. In the same way that he made everything solid, every solid thing melt into the air, become immarginal. On the one hand the force of rupture predicated on the historical assimilation of a critical knowledge of the system by the powerful material collectivity. On the other hand the force of rupture was predicated on the cumulating efforts of the melting effect.
What has been called the end of the “grand narrative” and of its “universal victim” is much more the entropy of that double logic of dissolution. Prophetic rage and cynical melancholy take advantage of this entropy to build the new “grand narratives”. Both make the same basic statement: everything becomes liquid, everything melts into the air. But it appears that this liquefaction turns to the contrary of what it was supposed to produce. It turns to the dissolution of any universalism the prophets say. All the human bonds, all the human institutions of social life are swallowed in the flood of consumption and communication, which mean the barbary of the individual beast. Everything becomes liquid, the cynical melancholic say. This means anything becomes equivalent to anything. There can be no subjectivity, but the subjectivity of the beast, which is a funny big monster. There can be no universality but the universality of the process, that makes everything melt into the air of universal equivalence and universal liquefaction.

As we know, some radicals still try to put the story the other way around, they still hang on to the promise of the becoming immaterial of the production of wealth. They tell us that what this becoming immaterial produces is the power of collective intelligence as Antonio Negri or Paolo Virno say, the power of the class that is really no class that needs no scientific head to lead its poliomentary body, no consciousness of the global system, since it is itself the enlightened, immaterial heart of the global system of the production of the common wealth. So it would be true that capitalism has produced its own grave diggers that we know how from this point on the whole idea that the machine produces its own negation has to be doubled by a very different idea, mostly voiced by Paolo Virno: the idea of exodus, that is to say the idea that we have to subtract the capacities of free individual and collective creation from the function of the machine.

From my point of view, the subtraction has to be both more modest and more radical. What we must leave first is the very idea of the Empire, the very idea of the global beast or the global machinery. It is the very idea of the necessity involved in the idea of the global logic. This way of staging the global system is still part of the logic of domination. The logic of domination is predicated now on the idea of the global necessity. As we know, the ruling oligarchies that govern our world today have appropriated for themselves the Marxist idea of the historical necessity. The only difference, you know, is that the historical necessity now leads to the triumph of the free market and not the triumph of the revolution. They tell us that there is a global necessity that imposes its laws, so that it is not in the power of anybody to oppose it. This is the principal of consensus. What “consensus” means is not only a specific form of government using expertise, arbitrage and agreement in order to avoid conflicts. What “consensus” means is the agreement between sense and sense: I mean it is the agreement on what we can perceive and of the meaning of what we can perceive.

As a way of government consensus says: there can be different interests, values and aspirations but there is only one reality that we can experience and there is only one sense that we can give to that reality. There is a clear evolution of the world according to a global logic. But you cannot deny whatever opinions you may have, or whether it is good or bad. Dissensus begins precisely with the contention that there is not one reality, that the given which offers such or such possibility or impossibility is controversial itself and this is what political Subjectivisation is about: reframing the very field of the given, of the sensible, the intelligible and, consequently, the possible. It is about putting in the unique common world of the consensual logics several worlds, conflicting worlds. To my mind, the first breakaway
from the logic of consensus, the first exodus, is the breakaway from the configuration that urges us to think of dissensus only as “exodus”. It is the breakaway from the spectacular partition between the in and the out. The breakaway from the consensual logic of historical necessity and global necessity. There are no historical necessities, there are forces, conjunctions of forces that frame such and such logic of the global necessity.

When our governments decide to reform the so-called welfare system or the regulation of the job market in order to make employment more fluid or adapt our welfare systems to the necessities of the global market they set up the logics of a certain collective intelligence, a certain global logic. When strikers and protesters take the streets in order to thwart that logic of collective necessity, they construct overflows of ‘collective intelligence’. The concentral logic usually stigmatises their struggle by saying that they oppose local and particular interest to the general interest and to the thinking of the future. But precisely the first thing the struggle is about is the very question of the distribution of this kind of opposition, you know, about the competence, you know, what is first challenge is the logic that separates the few ones, the few expert ones who are able to care for the general and the future from the mass of those who are only able to care for the particular and the present.

What is first at stake is the configuration of the possible. This also means what is first at stake is the distribution of the capacities. The struggle is between opposing ways of understanding the relation between the particular and the universal, the relation between the present and the future. The same goes, you know, for instance when networks of mostly anonymous social actors oppose the rational policy of the immigration quotas decided by our governments, when they oppose it with another idea of who can be counted as a member of our national communities. The collective intelligence of emancipation is the collective capacity at work in those scenes of conflict. This collective intelligence has nothing to do with high-tech virtuosity. What it sets to work rather is the capacity which is common to that virtuosity and to the virtuosity that allows for instance the immigrant worker to cross all the geographical and legal boundaries, all the material and symbolical boundaries in order to prove that he is a French worker similar to any other French workers, if we take the example of France, and I think that this may prove a form of universalisation, a struggle for the universal, stronger, sometimes, then many discourses on universal values.

So, what is at stake is the common capacity of those deferent virtuosity, their common capacity to shift places and identities to break through the distribution of places, identities and competences in order to reframe the given situation of the capacity of producing a new configuration of the visible, the intelligible and the possible by implementing the capacity of anybody. That is the kind of universality the politics is about: the capacity of anybody. The political subject is not a part of the social structure, an element of the process of production. It has to come as a supplement to the distribution of powers, places, functions, and identities that make up a society, a supplement to the distribution of the capacity. But what comes as supplement to the distribution of capacity is undistributed capacity, the capacity of anybody, or rather the capacity created by the collectivisation of the power inherent in the equality of anyone with any other one. I called it “the part of the uncounted” or “the part of those who have no part”. It was sometimes misinterpreted as the power of the excluded. But what it truly means is the power of anybody, no matter who, the qualification of those who have no specific qualification. I think that investigation of this power, maybe more fruitful for the sake of artistic and political invention today by the endless denunciation of the power of the
beast. The endless unmasking of the ghost. Universality has been for long associated with the
demonstration of the power of necessity. It might be time to explore its conjunction with the
powers of contingency, with powers of indifference to difference that don’t amount to the
equivalence of anything with anything, but with the empowerment of the capacity of no
matter who. Thank you.

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