

**Jean-Paul Martinon, "To Change an Opinion," in *The Showroom Annual* (London: The Showroom, 2004), 25-9, © The Showroom Gallery, 2004.**

We are here to reflect on the relationship that exists between art and the political in the light of recent global events.

The reason for this day of reflection is as follows: we believe that the global events that have marked the planet since the end of the nineties have been calling for an urgent re-evaluation of what we understand by the political in contemporary art.

The title of the conference is *To Change An Opinion*. This title does not specifically refer to the ability of art to change people's opinions, but to the battles of powers, artistic, theoretical, mediatic or political engaged in advocating a change of opinion amongst us. In other words, *To Change An Opinion* might not necessarily refer to art and might not necessarily be for a better world. Art is not necessarily good and does not always intend to do good. The imperative is therefore to reflect on the simple idea of encouraging a change of opinion. What does this mean? What is being changed, who is changing what, and above all to what purpose would anyone want to change an opinion?

To address these questions, we felt that there is no better place to start than the urgency imposed by today's events. These events are two in number and they are both historical and ongoing:

1. Terrorism:

The first one is the emergence of what has come to be termed "international terrorism". I realise that we all have particular opinions on "international terrorism". However, one thing is certain, the expression "international terrorism" is an unstable one and one has to be very careful when using it. For example, is it possible to distinguish between "international terrorism" and "national terrorism" when it comes to the IRA? Between "terrorism" and "state terrorism" when it comes to the regime of Ariel Sharon? Between "terrorism" and "fundamentalism" when it comes to the Catholic Faith in the middle ages or Al-Quaeda today? Between violent terrorism and non-violent terrorism like the one, for

example, imposed by the WTO on poor countries? Between the many territories involved in “international terrorism”, as was the case with the Madrid bombings a few weeks ago?

There is therefore an essential semantic instability, an indecision in the very concept of “international terrorism”, one which revolves around the fact that it is no longer possible to pin down a border, geographical or other. The only thing that can therefore be said in relation to “international terrorism” is that it is an elusive concept, which seems to have two effects:

-that of exposing the global political arena to imminent dangers as well as future challenges.<sup>1</sup>

-and that of producing symbolic and symptomatic reactions that extend far beyond the acts themselves.

## 2. Anti-Globalisation:

The second event is the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement. Ever since the Zapatista rebels came out of the mist of the Lacandón rainforest in Mexico on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1994, the main focus of the anti-globalisation movement has been twofold. One the one hand, the upwards transfer of power and wealth in the hands a few, and on the other, the fact that financial markets should be the only arbiter of all decisions in the world. They fight what has come to be called a globalised economy; that is an economy ruled by corporations, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This group of private and public transnational organisations claim that a deregulated, privatised, corporate-led global free trade regime is the answer to humanity’s problems.

The crucial aspect of the anti-globalisation movement is that it brings together for the first time in history, not nation states, but two networks of individuals. On the one hand, a corporate world that is constituted as a network of money markets and on the other, a weave of mainly electronic networks of grassroots resistance. We are here witnessing not a conflict of egos, religious fervour or patriotism, but of two wired communities. The first one is constituted with a unified front, a logo, and with a traditional pyramidal structure, the other is constituted as a horizontal series of dispersed and interconnected networks. Both globalisation and the anti-globalisation movement represent two forms of

power that are therefore difficult to evaluate: they are both flexible, nomadic and diffuse. On the one hand there is capitalism without a centre, an empire without a Rome, a world without a political platform except its endless replication, and on the other there is a movement without a hero, a multitude without a Che Guevara, a world without communism as a final teleological realisation.

### 3. The central question of this conference:

Considering these two events, we feel that the role of art has never been more crucial. This conference attempts to put forward the possibility of thinking a type of practice (visual or theoretical) deliberately articulated by the artist or the writer *in opposition* to these two events. On the one hand, it is the expression of a form of resistance to particular forms of transnational hegemonies (imperialism or globalisation) and on the other, a form of resistance against the belligerent role of nations and terrorist networks.

Although these two events call for different methods of resistance and oppositionality, we believe that both are characterised by a unique strategy. This strategy is that of being political in a strict sense. It does not concern itself with politics, therefore with the set of practices and institutions the aim of which is to create and regulate order. It concerns itself with the political in a strict sense. This sense has two inflections: it either engages a dimension of antagonism: on the one hand, a friend (the oppressed, the victims of terrorism), and on the other, an enemy (the IMF, multinational corporations, the WTO, etc.), or, following Chantal Mouffe's work, it engages a dimension of agonism: two adversaries on the same world stage.

The two inflections of this political strategy mark a fundamental distance from the struggles of the 70s. This time, we are witnessing a struggle that cannot be quantified as such. There is no possibility to discern a movement or a grouping. It is also impossible to establish a particular location for these artistic / activist expressions. It cannot be constituted as "territorialized", but "de-territorialized". Indistinct and non-localisable, in the museum and on the internet, it is in a way in a state of ever-present possibility.

This strategy of oppositionality calls for the following question:

How do these strategies affect our understanding of the political in art?

This central question has three aspects. Firstly, it is an attempt to circumvent the commonplace notion that “all art is political”. Secondly, it is an attempt to rethink the political in art independently of discourses surrounding identity. Finally, this central question wishes to challenge the idea that for a range of reasons — including amongst others the fall of communism, the lack of adequate theory and the appropriation of critique by the institution — we are unable to think in strict political terms and that there are no properly political debates in the public sphere of art.

There is no time for me to explore these three aspects in detail. For the sake of clarity, I will only comment briefly on the first one, namely the commonplace notion that all “art is political”.

#### 4. Not all art is political:

There is no doubt that by engaging oneself in the practice of art, art history, theory or philosophy, one automatically engages oneself in the effort to *reckon with one's time*. In a way, a political commitment in art, art history, theory or philosophy, is not a matter of personal choice, it comes with the job. However, there are degrees of engagement and not all engagement to reckon with one's time implies a political engagement. I would like to mark this distinction as clearly and as quickly as I can.

It is indeed a truism of the modern age that the political is the horizon of every practice, or to put it differently that all art is political. This truism establishes that every artistic practice is necessarily inscribed within the domain of the political. However, this self-evident omnipresence of the political makes it difficult to assign any determinate meaning to the term “political”. When all art becomes political, the sense and specificity of the political recedes until it becomes vague and meaningless, until even a monochromatic work becomes laden with political significance. The motto that claims that “all art is political” therefore presupposes a prior determination of the political; it knows what the political actually means, it knows that the political always-already rests on a solid ethico-philosophical and/or ideological programme assigned outside of the realm of art or the visual.

I will NOT propose here a strategy to differentiate between political and non political art. I leave this as a possible thematic for this conference. I will only content myself, for the sake of provocation to indicate the premise of a hypothesis: That the political in art only arises when artists engage themselves not only with the language of art, but also with that of the political. When these cases arise, artists do not just contribute to the reproduction of a given common sense or to the deconstruction or critique of it, but juggle the articulation of both practices simultaneously. In this sense and perhaps in this sense only, one can then talk of the political in art, a situation in which art is traversed by the political, that is, it participates in the creation, the invention, therefore the advent of both art and the political.

##### 5. The political:

Having said this, I am aware that there are a certain number of key issues that appear to prevent these practices from engaging themselves in a strictly political debate:

In an age of terror and savage capitalism, there is no possibility of balance or poised reflection. We are faced with incalculable or unquantifiable forces rather than identifiable enemies or adversaries. These forces represent the real threat to the point where the very concept of responsibility becomes potentially incalculable. Who is responsible for what, at what stage of planning, in the face of what juridical body? The effort to address the issue of globalisation or terrorism is truly Promethean. However, there is no choice.

In a way, one could say that there is an imperative for the artist or the writer to constantly call to wage war against war, whether this war is called imperialism, terrorism, repression, torture, colonisation, the domination of a language over another, of one sex, or of one way of thinking or philosophising over another. This war has to be political because its aim is to shake the foundations and perpetually destabilise all promise of peace and reconciliation, therefore all promise of closure. Above all, it is a question to subvert all forms of evidence that would establish a practice, a commonality, a particular conception of freedom, a particular typology of rights, a specific conception of someone's duties, all the way to the very concept of humanity and that of the political as such.

It would be wrong to understand this call to wage war on war as if it was a call for a revolution.

It is now a well-known fact that revolutions are metaphysical projects with an origin and an end, with the promise an “end-of-men” (communism, the proletariat, for example). A revolution calls for the return to the parousia of presence (in a way Marxism, qua project of revolution, is the last avatar of political metaphysics). The only thing that can be rescued from the idea of revolution is the idea of a grouping. In a way, however much one rejects the idea of revolution, one should not devalue the main idea of contributing to a cause as a force of regroupement. After all capitalism does not want people to organise themselves into a movement. It wants you to become a network, which means that you remain invisible. However, a network can become a movement as we have witnessed it with Al-Quaeda and the anti-globalisation movement to take two radically different networks.

Considering what I have just said in relation to revolution, this war cannot therefore have a political origin or a destination. This war can only take place precisely because there is no longer any origin nor destination. This lack of origin or destination, this lack which is also our fortune, one which leaves us not stranded, but in a heightened state of self-awareness is in fact the foremost form of violence with which we have to deal with, one constantly differed, always erased as if a trace that is not one.

This lack of origin or destination is important, because it frees us from the constraints imposed by the idea that there can be a course of action to save the world (Bush and Blair, some NGOs, the jihad and the anti-globalisation movements all believe in “saving the world” or in “making a better world”). To recognise our confinement in the closure of the political is to realise that despite real possibilities of revolt and courses for changes in the world, the idea of saving the world and therefore of marking History with a capital H is finished. It is no longer possible to accept theories offering *global* political solutions to inhumanity, there will never be a globalised world of free trade nor a globalised world of fair trade. The reason can be found countless times in history. In a way, the universalization of one utopian domain of reference (communism, endless capitalism, for example) belongs to the totalitarian age of the last two centuries and can no longer carry any serious weight.

However, the idea is not to sublimate or discard political or class struggles. Such struggles are the givens of our age and there is no way around them. There is no exit from the political. This engagement does not consist in pledging oneself to one or another politics. The idea is to maintain, to heighten, to intensify the dilemma which is ours, one in which on the one hand, we long for a post-marxian politics, a genuine engagement and on the other, we realise the current unavailability of a viable political stance, of what the French call, *une politique*.

What I am proposing for you today in the context of this conference is therefore not yet another philosophical or art historical interrogation of the political, but through the intensification of our own dilemma, to open up the possibility of a necessary engagement in the political. The fact that we have no other choice but to share our ethical and evaluative speeches in order to participate in the creation of the world. (I use here the word “world” instead of globe or globalisation, not solely to follow a desperate attempt by the French to escape the hegemony of the English Language (*mondialisation* instead of globalisation), but to give full weight to the fact that etymologically, the word “world” unlike “globe”, refers to human existence, in other words, to the affairs of humans.)

The idea is therefore to think the possibility that we can realise ourselves as subjects without object and above all without objective. This is what, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy understands by the infinite creation of the world, an infinite creation in which there is no other choice, but to participate as artists, curators, art historians or philosophers, as human beings in the general invention of the world.

He writes: “To create the world means to create it now, without delay, to reopen every struggle for the world, that is for what must be conceived as the opposite of a globalisation of injustice under the pretences of equality. The point is to lead this struggle in the name of a world that has no origin, no precedence and no model, a world without principles and without prescribed goals. This is exactly what will shape the justice and the meaning of the world.”<sup>ii</sup> As the Zapatista keep shouting: “Carry-on walking, carry-on asking questions.”

With these words, I can only hope that this conference will allow us to regain an understanding of the importance of the political strictly speaking, that is a form of

antagonism or agonism against or with hegemonic structures and that this struggle can only do one thing: to anoint itself as an end in itself, that is to be without reason, not in a sterile self-referential spin, but in the advent of creation itself. In other words, there is only one struggle, that of maintaining the struggle in order not to reach an after the struggle, but as Nancy remarks, “the insatiable and infinitely finite exercise that is the being in act of the world as world.”<sup>iii</sup>



## 7. Programme:

Let me present the speakers for today and go over the programme for the conference:

- 11.00am: Chantal Mouffe is one of the most important political theorists of our times. A political theorist educated at the Universities of Louvain, Paris, and Essex, Chantal Mouffe is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Westminster. Between 1989 and 1995 she was Directrice de Programme at the College International de Philosophie in Paris. She is the editor of *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, and *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*. She is the co-author with Ernesto Laclau of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985); and the author of *The Return of the Political* (1993), and *The Democratic Paradox* (2000). She is currently elaborating a non-rationalist approach to political theory and is engaged in research projects on the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the limits of the 'third way'. The reason we have asked Chantal Mouffe to speak today is based on her attempt to differentiate between agonism (the struggle between adversaries) and antagonism (the struggle between enemies). She will address a paper entitled *Which Democratic Public Sphere: Cosmopolitan or Agonistic?*

Andy Lowe, lecturer, Art History, Wimbledon School of Art, London will respond to her paper.

- 12.00am: Michael Hirsch is lecturer at the Arts Academy of Munich. He is the co-editor of *Adorno the Possibility of the Impossible* (2003). We have invited Michael Hirsch on the basis of a text written in 2001 for *Parachute Magazine* entitled "Politics of Fiction" and which explored the notion of subversion in art. He will present a paper for you today entitled *Subversion, Fifteen Theses on Art and Politics*.

Andrea Phillips, Assistant Director, MA Creative Curating, Goldsmiths College will respond to his paper.

Chair for the morning session: Craig Richardson, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Fine Arts, Oxford Brookes University

- 1.00pm: Lunch

- 2.00pm: Jananne Al-Ani, artist and co-curator of *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, New Art Gallery Walsall, Bluecoat and Open Eye Galleries, Liverpool and Oxford MOMA, 2003-4. We have invited Jananne Al-Ani to address the institutional pressures that were placed on the Veil show. Her presentation is titled, *Veil: Perception/Reception*.

Bridget Crone, Gallery Co-Ordinator, The Showroom will respond to Jananne Al-Ani.

- 3.00pm: Richard Noble, Lecturer on the M.A. in Contemporary Art, Sotheby and on the BA Fine Art, Dept. of Visual Art, Goldsmiths. He writes about political philosophy and contemporary art, and more generally about the relation between art and politics. We have invited Richard Noble for his interest in the fact that artists can engage the political independently of the discourses surrounding identity. His paper is titled, *Exile and Utopia: Two Approaches to Visualising the Political*

Lynn MacRitchie, artist, writer and critic for the Financial Times will respond to Richard Noble.

- 4pm: Tea

- 4.15pm: Subodh Gupta, artist. His practice elevates a bridge between Eastern and Western cultural traditions and has been included in many international exhibition, the latest of which was the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial. His next solo show will open at The Showroom Gallery on 20 April. His paper is titled *Irresistible Attack: Art in the Age of Globalisation*.

Kirsty Ogg, Director, The Showroom Gallery will respond to Subodh.

Chair for the afternoon session: Jean-Paul Martinon, lecturer, Dept. of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths College

• 5.15pm: Close

Thank you all for coming and I hope that you will enjoy the day.

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i The main crux of terrorism is that each time it raises the issue of a moral justification and that of the effectiveness of international law. Its main target is, as Derrida rightly observed, the Enlightenment project of the separation of political power from religious belief. As he writes, “terrorism [effectively] threatens the life of participatory democracy, the legal system that underwrites it and the possibility of a sharp separation between the religious and the secular dimensions.”<sup>i</sup> The other crucial aspect of terrorism is the fact that it is the last great conflict opposing two different territories. As Derrida also pointed out: “Despite all the horror that we witnessed, it is not unfeasible that one day we will look back at 9/11 as the last example of a link between terror and territory.”<sup>i</sup>

ii Jean-Luc Nancy, *La creation du monde ou la mondialisation*, Galilée, Paris, 2002, p. 63, my translation.

iii Jean-Luc Nancy, *La creation du monde ou la mondialisation*, Galilée, Paris, 2002, p. 64, my translation.