

continental thought—that contextualizes aesthetic and political phenomena within a dynamic space in which social meanings are generated and contested. Students exploring these burgeoning fields of study and practice are able to do so within the vibrant and highly interdisciplinary creative environment of CalArts. Core courses include three seminars on contemporary political theory, critical theory, and critical discourse in the arts, as well as a thesis seminar.

## UPCOMING CONVERSATIONS

**October 24–25:** Untitled: Speculations on the Expanded Field of Writing

**November 11:** Noted media, cultural, and political sociologist **Jeffrey Goldfarb** visits REDCAT for a post-election conversation with CalArts' Martin Plot.

**November 13:** An Evening of New Fiction: Brian Evenson, Thomas Glave and Samantha Hunt

**December 9:** Pulitzer Prize winner and distinguished *New York Review of Books* contributor **Thomas Powers** elaborates on the current state of the Iraq and Afghanistan occupations.

# ERNESTO LACLAU:

*ARTICULATION AND THE LIMITS OF METAPHOR*

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October 16, 2008

8:30 pm

presented by

REDCAT

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater

California Institute of the Arts

CALARTS

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# ERNESTO LACLAU:

## ARTICULATION AND THE LIMITS OF METAPHOR

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If we try to think those organising categories of the political field which make possible a comparison with rhetorical analysis, we could advance the following thesis: politics is articulation of heterogeneous elements, and such an articulation is essentially tropological, for it presupposes the duality between institution and subversion of differential positions which we [find] as defining a rhetorical intervention. Social organisation is not, however, exclusively political; to a large extent it consists of differential positions which are not challenged by any confrontation between groups. It is only through this confrontation that the specifically political moment emerges, for it shows the contingent nature of articulations. Using a Husserlian distinction, we could say that the social is equivalent to a *sedimented* order, while the political would involve the moment of *reactivation*. Contemporary forms of technocratism would express this dissolution of the political and the reduction of the management of the community to a mere question of expertise. It is the replacement of politics by knowledge, whose earliest formulation we find in Plato.

We have here the basis for a comparison between this duality politics/administration and the two axes of signification – that of combinations and that of substitutions. The more social order is stable and unchallenged, the more institutional forms will prevail and will organise themselves in a syntagmatic system of differential positions. The more the confrontations between groups defines the social scene, the more society will be divided into two camps: at the limit, there will be a total dichotomisation of the social space around only two syntagmatic positions: ‘us’ and ‘them’. All social elements would have to locate their identities around either of these two poles, whose internal components would be in a mere relation of equivalence. While in an institutionalist political discourse there is a multiplication of differential positions in a relation of combination with each other, in an antagonistic discourse of rupture the number of syntagmatic differential positions is radically restricted, and all identities establish paradigmatic relations of substitution with all the others in each of the two poles. In my work I have called these two opposed political logics, logic of difference and of equivalence, respectively. Given that the equivalential chain establishes a paratactic succession between its component links, none of them can have a position of centrality founded in a combinatorial logic of a hypotactic nature. So if the unity of the equivalential chain is going to be organised

around a privileged signifier, such a privilege cannot be derived from a differential structural position, but from a cathectic investment of a radical kind. The symbols of *Solidarnosc* in Poland got their success not from any structural centrality of the Lenin shipyards in the country, but from the fact that they expressed radical anti-status quo feelings at the moment in which many other social demands were frustrated for not finding institutional channels of expression within the existing political system. This process by which identities cease to be purely immanent to a system and require an identification with a point transcendent to that system – which is the same as saying: when a particularity becomes the name of an absent universality – is what we call *hegemony*.

### ABOUT ERNESTO LACLAU

**Ernesto Laclau** is Professor of Political Theory in the Department of Government of the University of Essex, in England, and Distinguished Professor for Humanities and Rhetorical Studies at Northwestern University, here in the United States. He is also Honorary Director of the Centro de Estudios del Discurso y las Identidades Sociopolíticas (Center for the Study of Discourse and Sociopolitical Identities) at UNSAM, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Laclau is author of *On Populist Reason*, *Emancipation(s)*, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek), *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (with Chantal Mouffe), and *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*.

### This event is presented by the CalArts' Graduate Program in Aesthetics and Politics

Using a broad, multiperspectival approach, this intensive one-year program enables advanced artists and scholars to explore various intersections and crossovers between aesthetic and political theory. The MA Aesthetics and Politics Program is designed especially for artists who seek to deepen the theoretical and political dimensions of their work, and for BA, BFA or MFA degree holders who wish to combine artistic practice with a scholarly career, or plan to build a bridge towards a more explicitly academic project. The program has three primary areas of focus. First, it examines what is normally understood as political art—artmaking that develops into a critical discourse in the public sphere. Second, the program addresses the reverse phenomenon: the notorious “aestheticization of politics” that so troubled critical theorists during the 20th century and now continues to attract further scrutiny. Finally, the Aesthetics and Politics Program provides a unique forum for scholars and artists interested in the type of theorizing—characteristic of