

OLIVER RESSLER. CARTOGRAPHIES OF PROTEST

Additional documentation of [*Oliver Ressler. We will beg for nothing, we will ask for nothing. We will take, we will occupy*](#) exhibition
(Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, September 11, 2015 - January 10, 2016)

FOREWORD

¹ Cf. Sylvie Fortin, "Fight-Specificity: A Conversation with Oliver Ressler"; in: Glenn Harper, Twylene Moyer (eds.), *Artists Reclaim the Commons: New Works / New Territories / New Publics*, 2013.

This book is published in conjunction with an extensive series of exhibitions of Oliver Ressler. Between 2014 and 2016 four European art institutions will each show a solo exhibition, each of which has been developed with a special emphasis on different focal points in Ressler's work. The accompanying book is the first publication spanning a wide thematic range across the two decades of Ressler's artistic work. Four notable theorists, highly regarded experts, each focus on a different aspect of the contents of Ressler's groups of works in their complex essays, thus enabling diverse perspectives of his work.

TJ Demos analyzes Ressler's concern with ecological themes as *Political Ecology*; Katarzyna Kosmala focuses on forms of political organizing against the backdrop of a global structural crisis; Suzana Milevska describes Ressler's depiction of state and social transition and transformation processes as *Bitter Symphonies*. Marco Scotini discusses Ressler's films on practices of resistance as "blackboard" cinema.

The artist, filmmaker and political activist Oliver Ressler positions his work in a highly unusual way in the context and at the sites of the so-called anti-globalization movement as well as in art institutions and at film festivals. Trained as a visual artist, Oliver Ressler was already operating in public space in the early 1990s, where he expressed politically confrontational criticism of the increasingly right-wing, nationalistic Austrian government taking hostile action against asylum-seekers and migrants. Several years later, inspired by the meanwhile legendary protests against the WTO (World Trade Organization) conference in 1999 in Seattle, Ressler's field of interest and radius of action expanded radically, which has – ironically – made him a truly "global" artist today.

As Ressler formulated his credo in an interview with Sylvie Fortin:

From the very beginning, I knew that I would want to do more than simply participate, which I did for many years: I would anchor my artistic production in this movement. I was not interested in neutral representation; instead, I thought about different ways to produce works that could be used by the movement or serve to mobilize it.¹

Ressler's projects can be characterized with three keywords: analyze, format, act. Fundamental and in-depth research is taken for granted as the precondition. What is shown are possible practices of resistance or alternative forms of organization as responses to political, economic and social ills.

The realization in a project, a film or an exhibition can have various intentions and be differently arranged. Interventions in public space (*Resist to Exist*, 2011), documentary films (*The Plundering*, 2013; *Take the Square*, 2012), experimental films (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 2014; *Leave It in the Ground*, 2013), and exhibitions of his own works (*After the Crisis is Before the Crisis*, 2012; *Political Imaginaries: Making the World Anew*, 2014), as well as exhibitions curated by the artist (*A World Where Many Worlds Fit*, 2008; *It's the Political Economy, Stupid*, 2011–2014; *Utopian Pulse – Flares in the Darkroom*, 2014), are the results of an intense engagement with themes, phenomena and concrete events. Some of the works were created in collaboration with artists, theorists, and political activists.

For an artist far removed from the art market and whose work eludes art dealers, the long list of important, internationally situated exhibition locations that have shown his work is astonishing and impressive. It seems to counter the pessimistic prognosis that museums, art galleries and exhibition centers increasingly allow themselves to be instrumentalized as display windows for the blue-chip art market. Although this cannot be denied, there are indeed alternatives and they are by no means marginal.

We thank TJ Demos, Katarzyna Kosmala, Suzana Milevska, and Marco Scotini for their excellent text contributions, Otmar Binder for the attentive translations from English to German, Aileen Derieg for proofreading the English texts and for the translation of the Foreword, Juma Hauser for the compelling graphic design, Milena Dimitrova for coordinating, and Silvia Jaklitsch for her dedicated supervision of the publication of this book. Most of all, though, we thank Oliver Ressler for the good and inspiring collaboration.

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What Is Democracy?,
8-channel video installation, 2009

OLIVER RESSLER: “BLACKBOARD” CINEMA AND THE CAPITALISTIC REGIME OF ENUNCIATION

MARCO SCOTINI

Since the time when the Fed simply said that in the near future it could slow the pace of its bond buying stimulus, the yields on government securities have actually increased; and this happened without the Fed having to change anything whatsoever in the meantime.

Christian Marazzi¹

Pages d'écriture:

The screen, the passport and other technologies of governmentality

Contemporary subjectivities (being the effects produced within particular discursive and visual formations) are no longer inscribed in a closed and circumscribed space pertaining to a disciplinary subjugation. The background against which they stand out is no longer that regulated by social technologies focusing on space and its internment (*enfermement*), of which the Fordist factory was nothing more than one, amongst other, forms of expression, even if the most paradigmatic. The Post-Fordist social factories are no longer places of reclusion as such, nor are they devices of training and concentration (with their own laws and own social identities), programming timings, distributing roles and assigning functions. There is no longer the opportunity to prepare and discipline elements within specific and rigid functional identities in reference to a predefined organizational plan.

In current societies of control, the production of subjectivities is framed, on the contrary, within “places of circulation” and communication “exchanges”, by the information economies and financial circuits, devices of action at a distance. Time (the forms of control that it puts to work and the resistance effects that it activates) is the new privileged field of the production of subjectivities. Nonetheless, this is time with *unlimited postponement* (according to Deleuze’s version),² which not only subordinates space as such, but which (in order to perform its role) claims an open and unlimited space. It is a space in which population limits correspond only to those of the nation, although these limits newly arise and ever more numerous, despite the trans-national nature of capital. But alongside these governmental technologies that can be ascribed to the State, there are many other social machines, generated by private enterprise, which endlessly compose and decompose flows of material and information. The system of interconnected bodies that we define as “information networks” is nothing more than one model amongst others.

¹ Christian Marazzi, *The Linguistic Nature of Money and Finance*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2014, p. 12.

² Gilles Deleuze, “Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle”, in *L’autre journal*, n.1, 1990, now in *Pourpaler*, Quodlibet 2000, p. 237.

3 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Il governo dell'uomo indebitato. Saggio sulla condizione neoliberista*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2013, p. 153.



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, *What Would It Mean to Win?*, film, 40 min., 2008

De facto, contemporary capitalism produces subjects and objects in a continuous variation, which are managed by means of technologies that, in themselves, are permanently modulated. Rather than physically limiting technical spaces, neoliberalism generates regulatory circuits that can control areas of free activity, within which subjective behaviors are molded to conform to the requirements of the continuous innovation of processes and products. However, as Maurizio Lazzarato states: "the post-Fordist sequence is characterized not only by the de-territorialization of technologies but also by that of its very signs."³ Therefore, which regime of signs is the current production of subjectivities dealing with and what is the plane of visibility on which they are inscribed?

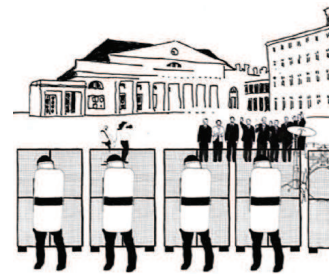
What are these devices of capture that, at each and every instant, are capable of registering the different positions of any particular subjectivity (as of every other element) in an open environment? What kind of "interfaces" are those that are capable of controlling, in real time (and with a capillary diffusion), that which is there to be seen, said, thought and heard? If it is true that media platforms have replaced the *closed spaces* of disciplinary societies, it is equally true that, despite any differences, we are still dealing with social machines that work as mechanisms of enunciation. Or rather, they govern, as never before, by means of that which they show and say, by means of that which they index and measure. They work as authentic foyers of enunciation capable of reconfiguring methods of action and perception as working procedures. Because, in the current socio-economic framework, the superimposition between communications and production processes is perfect.

The focus on surfaces of inscription or media interfaces of capturing new subjectivities is precisely that which marks the beginning (like a threshold) of every film by Oliver Ressler and, at the same time, is its "escape route". In Ressler's films, these planes of visibility and mediatization (both as images and concepts) become the first terrain of social conflict where antagonistic subjectivities encounter the forces of power. The political nature of this cinematic language lies not so much in its character of counter-information (with the ideological revelation of that which is already given) or in the assumption of political activism as a thematic objective (on the part of one who is an integral element of it, as in Ressler's case). There is rather an original and antagonistic stance that marks the political nature of this film production: that of social redistribution and the return to common usage of that which is captured by the devices of neoliberal power. The battle against the control and re-appropriation of the machines of communication is not enough. The process of freeing the subjectivities that are formed within these machines is fundamental. Ressler's filming practices try to return potential to these media interfaces. He shows the devices, makes them cinematically visible, and inscribes in them a plurality of "enunciative figures": from

the voices of the activists to the "gaze into the camera" of the theoreticians of the movement, from the inter-titles to the slogans written on banners and walls, from the protest songs to the symbolic intervals in the montage, from the documentary sequences to the video-animations. The centrifugal forces of the enunciations of the *general intellect* (and their problematic opening with regard to the events) remove themselves from the centralization of a majority language and the subordination to unified and normative codes of communication, both of the mainstream media and consolidated political representations. There are a whole series of linguistic and dialogue modes at work that try to return heterogeneity and alternative possibilities to subjectivities.

The film *Disobbedienti* (made with Dario Azzellini in 2002) together with *What Would It Mean To Win?* from 2008 and the more recent *The Right of Passage* from 2013 (both born out of a collaboration with Zanny Begg) are exemplary instances of this. It is no mere coincidence that, despite covering a decade, they focus on the anti-capitalist movement and its forms of resistance.

Disobbedienti opens on a white maxi-screen in front of an empty audience space, installed in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna for a public event. The screen (on which we expect to see our film) is doubled, therefore, on another screen (also awaiting a possible projection), while a voice-over recites: "We are here in Italy where all communication media is in the hands of a single person. It is an almost paradoxical situation like in a Latin American country." The voice is interrupted by a shouted slogan, also off screen: "Against the Europe of the powerful, now and forever Disobedient", while the graphic symbol of the word *Disobbedienti* descends onto the screen and acts as the film's headline title. In this sort of prologue, attention is immediately directed to two of the components at the center of the conflict in the Italian movement of the *Tute Bianche* [White Overalls] which, in the days of the Genoa protests in 2001, abandoned its identifying symbol (the white overalls of the employees in contrast to the blue overalls of the working class) and took the name of *Disobbedienti*. On the one hand there was the protest against Berlusconi's monopoly of the media (that inaugurated the figure of the political-entrepreneur), and on the other, the indissoluble link between battle methods and communication practices taken forward by the movement (which wanted to give visibility to that which remains invisible, such as precarious work, and to proclaim the income of citizenship). However, the white screen remains almost as a sort of composite matrix of the film that, by momentarily removing the images, creates intervals in the montage along a series of theoretical reflexions by seven members of the Italian movement. "These white surfaces" – Ressler claims – "are directly related to the white overalls of the Tute Bianche [...]" but they are also the expression of a wish to inspire viewers to fill the visual lacunae with their own ideas.



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, *What Would It Mean to Win?*, film, 40 min., 2008

⁴ Oliver Ressler, *Protesting Capitalist Globalization on Video*, 2002, published on <http://www.republicart.net>



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, *The Right of Passage*, film, 19 min., 2013

In other words, they represent the attempt to find an open visual correspondence for a development that is to progress questioningly and without prefabricated models in keeping with the concept of the Disobbedienti.⁴ There is a further sequence of screens assembled in the film *What Would It Mean To Win?*, which was filmed during the demonstrations at the G8 Summit in Heiligendamm, in Germany, in June 2007. A number of animated sequences, which complement the film, formulate three questions about the emancipating self-awareness of the multitude and about its possible political action: "Who are we?", "What is our power?" and "What would it mean to win?". It is superfluous to say that, yet again, the production of antagonist subjectivities reveals itself to be inseparable from the media devices of communications and their free usage. From the cinematic screen of the Lumières' vision of *Workers Leaving the Factory* we pass to the LCD screen of the camcorder that records the events, through to the television monitor by means of which it is possible to review the social struggles and new possibilities of life that they can express. All this, in Ressler and Begg's film, is anticipated by the theoretician John Holloway, when he quotes the response given by Subcomandante Marcos to a film critic who asked him how he imagined a perfect society: "We need an infinite cinema program where you could choose to live a different film each day." And he concludes by saying, "the reason why Zapatistas have risen up is that they were forced to live the same film for the last five hundred years."

The Right of Passage, however, opens with an image filmed through a solar control film that is applied to the glass surfaces of buildings and has the ability to control the transmission of light. This very common membrane, which has the power to obscure and – at the same time – maintain a view of the outside, creates a diaphragm inside the possibility of seeing – a diaphragm which, once again, returns recursively throughout the film. In *The Right of Passage*, a double regime of enunciability (discursive and visual) introduces us to the subject of the right to global citizenship and to the conventional and ferocious nature of the principle of exclusion. Even though it might appear to be different from preceding works, the subject of the film is again the same, because the very movement of criticism of global capitalism cannot but count migrants amongst the true, fundamental protagonists. A theoretical analysis is proposed here by Antonio Negri, Sandro Mezzadra and Ariella Azoulay, as well as a series of migrants from Central and South America and Africa who disembarked at Barcelona. Rather than speaking of transparency or opacity, we should talk of regimes of invisibility (spectral, as wandering ghosts), which is required of those subjects on the move (without residence permits) and which the levels of enunciation of the film perfectly evidence. In this instance, the passport (or rather, its layout) becomes an authentic screen, which figures and emblematic objects manage to pass through, thanks to animation, opening up fissures. As these figures appear on a passport

page (under the visa for one nation) and disappear on the subsequent page (under the exit stamp of another nation), they remind us again of this regime of visibility of control, but also of the opposite game (the bipolarity) of showing and nominating, signs and references, images and languages, anomie and rights. The various figures that make their appearance in this passage include Duchamp's *Hat Rack* and Magritte's *Pipe*. If, on the one hand, the first icon forces us to interrogate ourselves about the index, about the circumstantial conditions and conditions of significance, with the other icon, we are forced to deny "with similarity of appearance, the assertion of reality that it implies". It is impossible to crystallize the current condition of contemporary subjectivities' civil existence within the single and abstract space of a written certificate such as the passport. It is now impossible to define a level that will permit rendering the association between (juridical) rights and (material) life unequivocal. It is always twofold: divided between formal citizenship and real appurtenance. Thus, as in the space of Magritte's literal picture, the text does not conform to the *figure*, despite both doing nothing other than simultaneously alluding to the same object. But wasn't the original location of this latter icon (the pipe) precisely a blackboard? A blackboard placed on a thick and solid easel, where the image of the pipe was accompanied by writing in italics stating "this is not a pipe"? Was its space not that of the didactic explanation of a discourse? Did this discourse not belong to the more general one about the truth of things?⁵ Let us then close with the words of Godard: "During the projecting of a militant film, the screen is simply a blackboard or a school wall that offers a concrete analysis of a concrete situation."⁶

The spoken word.

The linguistic nature of finance capital

"There are two kind of militant films," Godard states in 1970, "those we call 'blackboard films' and those known as 'Internationale films'. The latter are the equivalent of chanting L'Internationale during a demonstration, while the others prove certain theories that allow one to apply to reality what he has seen on screen, or to go and rewrite it on another blackboard so that others can apply it."⁷ There is an authentic pedagogic stance behind Oliver Ressler's filmography, which ensures that every one of his films is a sort of manual of dissenting techniques to be taught and learned. But there is also a reserve of economic, social and cultural alternatives that, after the loss of the socialist counter-model, tries to respond in many kinds of way to the current neoliberal hegemony. Furthermore, this production, which meanwhile covers a span of twenty years, also has a geo-political framework. It is a contemporaneous inventory of the battles and forms of resistance that, from the end of the 1990s, have accompanied the rise and consolidation of the counter-globalization movement on a world-wide scale: from the demonstrations against the

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, Oakland: University of California Press, 1983.

⁶ Jean-Luc Godard, "Premiers 'son s anglais', in *Cinétique* n. 5, 1969; now in J.-L. Godard, *Il Cinema è il Cinema*, Milan: Garzanti 1981, p. 339.

⁷ *Godard par Godard*, éditions de l'Etoile-Cahiers du cinema, Paris, 1985, p. 348



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, *The Right of Passage*, film, 19 min., 2013

⁸ Oliver Ressler, "Approaches to Future Alternative Societies. Interview by Zanny Begg", 2007 in <http://www.ressler.at>. See also Maurizio Lazzarato, *La politica dell'evento*, Rubbettino Editore, Soveria-Mannelli, 2004.

World Economic Forum in Salzburg to the anti-G8 blockades in Heiligendamm, from the occupied factories in Venezuela to the Climate Camp at the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station, from the Syntagma Square uprising to the Occupy Wall Street protest movement, from the Italian social movement of the Disobbedienti to the Spanish 15M. However, Ressler does not limit himself to filming activists and activist practices. He takes the counter-globalization movement as represented subject and as a principle of representation. He provides a documentary catalogue of images, an undefined repertory of slogans, a program of potential actions. Without wanting to reduce the movement to the sum of its parts (or a single, totalizing model), Ressler films the different conflict workshops as an open and complex space of politicization, as a crucible of both political experimentation and linguistic and social innovation. It is no longer a question of reproducing political frameworks (of indoctrination) but of opening up formative spaces capable of developing critical subjectivities and of radically questioning existing models. Therefore, at the center of these film-essays, there is always a constituent space in which the process of subjectivization remains open. But how can one film the development of subjectivization that is both an affirmation of differences and, at the same time, is a composition of that which we have in *common*? Or is it the production of a *common place*?

There are at least three strategies which inform Oliver Ressler's working methods, by means of which the theoretical, practical and activist potential of the movement can be set out. However, there is one assumption that must be established: Ressler is, above all, a sort of actor and spectator of the movement itself (as are, implicitly, his works), and his films always have a formative and agitational nature. They intend, in other words, to be an integral part of the activist campaigns and the ongoing social struggles. The first strategy is a legacy of the Zapatista slogan "asking we walk", in the sense of aspiring to a new society, beginning with a constituting opening up to possibilities rather than with the solution to a pre-defined problem. It has rather to do with the formulation of a multiplicity of questions, which come from the suspension of that which is known, which will interrogate an unforeseeable horizon that is not yet present. "The revolution," Ressler claims, "has to be seen as a question rather than an answer."⁸ In effect, the questions (given Ressler's emphasis) thus become those instruments of conflict that are capable of raising a problematic field, in which solutions are not implicitly given but must be created each and every time. To any one question, there may be *n* possible answers. It is sufficient to think of the film (and video installation) in eight parts, *What is Democracy?* (2009), but also of *What Would It Mean To Win?* (2008) and the constellation of interrogatives that articulate their structure.

The second strategy is, possibly, the inheritance of the workers' social inquiry: an open knowledge-seeking process that produces transformation. It presupposes a continuous

exchange of ideas and experiences among subjects who are involved in varying roles. Just as the workers' inquiry of the 1970s, according to Raniero Panzieri, did not see the form of the class as automatically depending on the level of capital and its technical-production composition, in the same way, the current inquiry should place social autonomy and the antagonistic subjectivity of the contemporary multitude at the center, as this cannot be reduced to capitalist valorization and its methods of control.⁹ Everyone effectively takes on the actors' status and becomes a protagonist of the analysis of reality, capable of putting aside all certainties in order to discover new opportunities for transforming those already existing. In this way, a horizontal and transversal (non-hierarchical and unrepresented) communication space is opened up, in which the voices of the activists suggest subjective perspectives and alternative points of view that co-exist and are linked in different ways, without any one dominating the other. Furthermore, at the same time, each exhibits its own pure and simple ability to speak – the intrinsic political nature of language, giving preference to direct intervention (without mediation). Who speaks and acts, for whom and how?¹⁰ That which is excluded from corporate media and capitalism's monolanguage of information, circulates within Ressler's images, where segmented sequences of staged speech acts and fixed shots alternate, not according to additional montage but rather to a juxtaposition or parallelism that recalls more a spatial idea of the network, of the debate between a number of participants, of the transfer from one place to another. It substantially brings to mind the idea of a *forum*. The sixteen monitors of *Alternative Economics*, *Alternative Societies* (2003–2008), the seven monitors and the projection of *What is Democracy?* (2009), and the 3-channel video installation *Take the Square* (2012) are evidence of this. Conversely, everything that passes through the mainstream media has no place in these films, as exemplified by *This is what democracy looks like!* (2002) and *The Fittest Survive* (2006). This is precisely because, for Ressler, the linguistic-communicative act and the operation of enunciation do not only have, by their very nature, a political character but are also the central elements of the forms of valorization and expropriation of contemporary capitalism.

It is effectively through the statements of single individuals (the monologues) and the statements of the inter-titles (slogans, statistical data and programs) that the third film strategy becomes evident. This appears to come from the post-1968 militant cinema and finds its objective in words, in the discursive character of the written and spoken text.

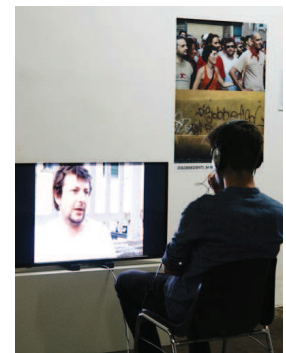
Un film comme les autres, which Godard made in 1968, is the lengthy two-hour recording of the dialogue between three students from Nanterre and two Renault workers who had been through the events in May and are discussing the movement's prospects. In *bientôt J'espère* (Be seeing you) by Chris Marker and Mario Marret, the word is attributed

⁹ See Raniero Panzieri, *La ripresa del marxismo leninismo in Italia*, Milan: Sapere Edizioni, 1972. See also Oscar Marchisio, "Geopolitica della valorizzazione. L'inchiesta come forma di lotta", in Federico Chicchi and Gigi Roggero (eds.), *Lavoro e produzione del valore nell'economia della conoscenza. Criticità e ambivalenze della network culture*, Milan: Franco Angeli 2009, pp. 117–128.

¹⁰ Paolo Virno, *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.



The Fittest Survive, film, 23 min., 2006



Dario Azzellini & Oliver Ressler, *Disobbedienti*, film, 54 min., 2002
Installation view: *Political Imaginaries: Making the World Anew*, Oliver Ressler's solo exhibition at Wyspa Institute of Art, Gdańsk, 2014

11 Jacques Rancière, *Il Disaccordo. Politica e Filosofia*, Rome: Meltemi, 2007, p. 23

12 Oliver Ressler, "Counter-globalization Manuals. Interview by Marina Gržinić", 2003, in <http://www.ressler.at>

13 Oliver Ressler, "More Visibility to Activist Practices", in *Make Film Politically. Contemporary Filmmaking and the Soviet Avant-garde*, Chto Delat? Newspaper, Special Issue, September 2007, p. 7

14 Francesco Casetti, *Inside the Gaze: The Fiction Film and Its Spectator*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998; see also Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, and "The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film", *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 4, 2010

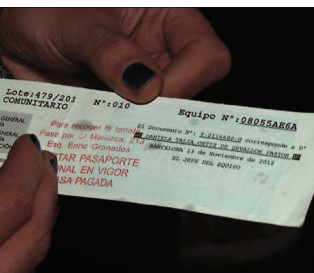
wholly to the direct opinions of the workers striking in the occupied Rhodiacéta factory in Besançon. All the films by the Medvedkin Group, which became the symbol of *cinéma ouvrier*, were based on this enunciative register. In *Die Teilung aller Tage* (The Division of all Days), a 1970s film about political economy explained to students and made by Harun Farocki and Hartmut Bitomsky, written and spoken language frame and permeate all the scenes. In all these cases, there is always a prevalence of the (not narrative but communicative) word over the image, which presupposes an inseparable relationship between language and political action: a relationship which pertains to the linguistic and original animal, in an Aristotelian sense. Where the *voice* only indicates – says Rancière – the word, as *logos*, conversely demonstrates. "The word demonstrates, makes evident to a community of subjects that listen, the useful and the damaging and, as a consequence, the just and the unjust."¹¹ In this new distribution of the spoken word (completely asymmetric with respect to the visual) there is not only a desire to report speech but, above all, the necessity to make evident the faculty of the act of speech as such, of what this act is capable of, its power. If in Oliver Ressler's films there are no longer the occupied lecture halls of Nanterre, nor the factories in revolt such as those of Peugeot in Sochaux or the Rhodia in Besançon, the primacy accorded to the word (written and spoken) remains unaltered, if not even reinforced, as the instrument of a new political subject. "Watching this work is like reading a book," claims Marina Gržinić – not coincidentally and with good reason – in reference to the film *Disobbedienti*¹². Although it may be true that a theory, as in the case of counter-globalization, is primarily an assembly of words, for Ressler there is a need to incorporate it in the subjects, to demonstrate it through a practice, which is that of activism. However, it is precisely with respect to this primacy of communication that his films have a direct relationship with his graphic production: text-only strategies for banners, wall texts, billboard texts, bold and typographic logo-posters, textual citations printed and mounted on the floor of the exhibition space, etc. If, as Ressler claims, "my own work affords the spoken word with this central position"¹³, that which unites both the areas of his research is precisely the role of enunciation. The passage from a set of virtualities to their actualization – which enunciation represents – is that by means of which the act of the word creates the event. Something that was not there before begins to exist, it is claimed, in that which expresses it and beginning with that which enunciates it. However, the principle of enunciation that Ressler makes his own, is that which in the cinema is called "interpellation"¹⁴. A speaker addresses the spectator, calling them directly into play by means of captions and by gazing into the camera, and this speaker's role is that of making explicit the instructions relating to the communicative plan of the film and to make them explicit to someone who is assumed to be following the operation. In other words, there is always an implicit spectator, a speaker called upon with respect to whom the film opens up a

space of dialogue, of debate. This configuration is called "interpellation" precisely because of the gesture that substantiates it: a sort of question or trusting invitation directed to the spectator who is transformed into a person consulted, interrogated. The series of banner texts or billboard texts, installed in public spaces for the project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*, are more explicit in this regard. One of these visual texts claims, for example: "Imagine a decentralized system of social order in which all persons affected by political decisions are allowed to make decisions in a grass-roots democratic way based on the principle of consensus." If it is true that the introduction of a language and a system of dominant meanings is always a political operation (before being a linguistic one), it is equally true that the work of centrifugal social forces that aim to undermine the semiotic empire is capable of creating other (and ever new) enunciation linkages. The enunciation, for example, "another world is possible", exists perfectly in that which expresses it. In the expression, or inasmuch as it is an expression, this possibility of life has a reality (awaiting to be enacted) that clashes with contemporary capitalism's enunciations and mechanisms of power. As we know, such an enunciation finds its origin in the opposite enunciation that Margaret Thatcher habitually used as a future neoliberalist matrix in the 1980s: "There is no alternative." In this sense, Ressler knows very well that today's enunciation has not only a political value but is central to the processes of production and financialization of the information economy in a post-Fordist era. As Marazzi writes: "The crisis of Fordism and its evolution into post-Fordism and into financial capitalism can be explained in the light of the crisis of labour-as-substance but also as a transition, to a new incarnation of capitalism where the most natural and common qualities possessed by the linguistic animal are put to work, controlled by value-mining devices which reach across the spheres of production and of the circulation-reproduction of goods."¹⁵ Also, "Monetary sovereignty is, above all, of a *dialogical* nature, impregnated by 'communicative experiments' intended to forge that intangible 'public trust' which is indispensable to the functioning of the entire economic-monetary machine."¹⁶

There is a graphic work by Ressler that can be taken as the keynote of his pedagogical method of filmmaking (with its politicized aesthetics) and, more broadly, of the politically active nature that defines it. A wall text almost seventeen meters long reproduces, in capital letters, one of these typical speech acts that financial capitalism has used to legitimize its monetary policies in the recent crisis. This is a text and an image at the same time. The text states "Too Big to Fail", in reference to the economic support demanded for the central banks, while the lettering of the four words are cut out from a black and white photo that shows the faces and bodies of thousands of demonstrators, who crossed Europe on 29 March 2009 under the slogan "We will not pay for your crisis!".

15 Christian Marazzi, *The Linguistic Nature of Money and Finance*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2014, p. 21

16 Ibid, p. 16



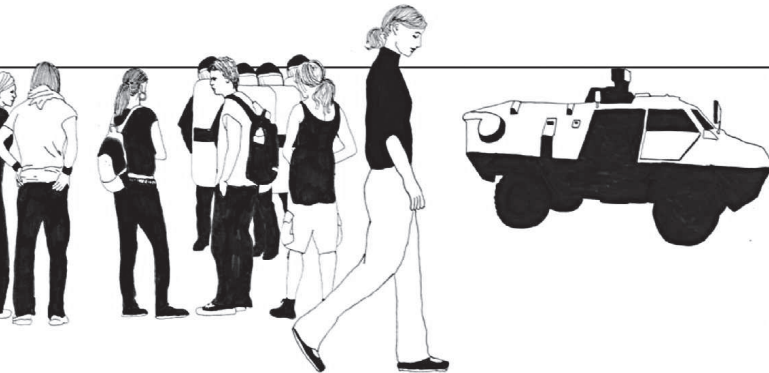
Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, *The Right of Passage*, film, 19 min., 2013



Too Big to Fail, wall text, 2011
Installation view: *Nach Demokratie*, Kunstraum Niederösterreich, Vienna, 2011

The capitalist enunciation thus becomes an occupied (and claimed) space of the antagonistic workforce who, through an inversion of perspectives, has appropriated and transformed it into its own slogan. The text opens on the wall the possibility of a passage from one mode of existence to another.

The violent privatization (and privation) of public resources that power returns to itself by means of communication and linguistic methods is responded to with the re-socialization of the same, not outside but within the same mechanisms that have made such resources an object of capture. Language and communicative competency, at the same time as they continuously reproduce the conditions of expropriation and capitalist command, also open up to its opposite: to the art of the possible and to the miracle of an awaited unforeseen event. Here and now.



Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler,
What Would It Mean to Win?,
film, 40 min., 2008

OLIVER RESSLER: „WANDTAFEL“-KINO UND DAS KAPITALISTISCHE REGIME DER ENUNZIATION

MARCO SCOTINI

Ab dem Zeitpunkt, als die Fed nur ankündigte, sie könnte in absehbarer Zukunft das Tempo ihres Anleihenkauf-Stimulus drosseln, sind die Erträge der Staatsanleihen tatsächlich gestiegen; und dies geschah, ohne dass die Fed zwischenzeitlich irgendwelche zusätzlichen Maßnahmen ergreifen musste.

Christian Marazzi¹

Pages d'écriture:

Die Leinwand, der Pass und andere Techniken der Gouvernamentalität

Als innerhalb bestimmter diskursiver und visueller Formationen erzeugte Effekte werden zeitgenössische Subjektivitäten nicht mehr in einen geschlossenen, abgegrenzten Raum eingeschrieben, der einer disziplinären Unterordnung unterworfen ist. Der Hintergrund, vor dem sie sich abzeichnen, ist nicht mehr von sozialen Techniken reguliert, die auf den Raum und seine Einschließung (*enfermement*) zielen, für die die fordistische Fabrik zwar der paradigmatischste Ausdruck war, aber als solcher doch nur einer von mehreren möglichen. Die postfordistischen sozialen Fabriken sind nicht mehr Orte der Abgeschlossenheit; sie sind auch keine Trainings- und Konzentrationseinrichtungen, mit eigenen Gesetzen und sozialen Identitäten, die Zeitabläufe programmieren, Rollen verteilen und Funktionen zuordnen. Ebenso wenig steht jetzt noch die Möglichkeit zur Verfügung, Elemente innerhalb eigener, starrer funktionaler Identitäten im Hinblick auf einen im Vorhinein festgelegten Plan zuzurichten und zu disziplinieren. In den Kontrollgesellschaften der Gegenwart gibt es vielmehr einen Rahmen für die Produktion von verschiedenen Arten der Subjektivität an „Orten der Zirkulation“ und des „Kommunikationsaustauschs“, die von den Informationsökonomien und den finanziellen Kreisläufen als Vorrichtungen mit Fernwirkung organisiert werden. Die Zeit und die Formen der Kontrolle, die durch sie auf den Plan gerufen, und die Widerstandseffekte, die durch sie aktiviert werden, stellen das neue, privilegierte Gebiet der Produktion von Subjektivitäten dar. Trotzdem handelt es sich hier um Zeit, für die ein *unbeschränkter Aufschub* (in der Version von Deleuze)² verfügbar ist; die Zeit erhebt nicht nur Anspruch auf den Raum, sondern sie beansprucht, um ihre Rolle spielen zu können, für sich einen offenen, unbegrenzten Raum; einen Raum, in dem die Beschränkungen der Bevölkerung zwar nur mit der Nation korrespondieren, aber dennoch, trotz der transnationalen Natur des Kapitals, immer wieder von Neuem und immer zahlreicher entstehen.

¹ Marazzi, Christian, *The Linguistic Nature of Money and Finance*, *Semiotext(e)* 2014, S. 12.

² Deleuze, Gilles, *Post-scriptum sur les sociétés de contrôle*, in „L'autre journal“, 1, 1990, jetzt auch in *Pourparler*, Quodlibet 2000, S. 237.

WAY OUT OF THE CRISIS? RESSLER'S TREATIES ON ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF GOVERNING AND CONSTITUTING

KATARZYNA KOSMALA



We Have a Situation Here,
digital print behind acrylic glass,
130 x 92 cm, 2011

From Occupy gatherings, protests born at the fringes, whether in Washington Square Park in New York, Syntagma Square in Athens, Yerevan's largest bazaar in Armenia, Caracas' los barrios, or precarious realms somewhere in rural Venezuela, Oliver Ressler continues to ask in his political art project: How can narration concerning ways of constituting and governing emerge out of a commitment to making sense of other possible realities? Otherness is related here to the other ways of systemic functioning, those that operate differently from Western legitimacy based on dominant ideologies supported by Capitalist-driven machinery, rising state nationalisms, and the increasing popularity of right-wing politics.

In 2011, Ressler produced a poster *Elections are a Con*, questioning the workings of democracy and, in particular, the effectiveness of democratic elections under Capitalist-based state nationalism. Ressler revamped the slogan *Elections piège à cons* of the May 1968 protests in Paris. The slogan seemed to regain its validity under the current climate, characterized by an overall discontent with the dominant political powers in the context of global market regimes. As it seems, the dominant systems supported by representative democracy appear to be less and less effective in representing the interests of voters. Elections seem to have mutated into a quasi-ritual, while political and economic elites make the real decisions that are finely tuned for the more affluent in society, removed from public debates¹. *Elections are a Con* is an example of the kind of political poster interventions that Ressler has been producing for almost twenty years now. Ressler's practice was political from the early stages in his career. After graduating in 1995, and frequently in collaboration with the Austrian artist Martin Krenn, he realized a series of billboard-based projects in public spaces across Austria, concerning rising state nationalism, right-wing politics, and institutional racism. The system persists, however, and the *Elections are a Con* poster was not allowed to be displayed in public space in Innsbruck, Austria, "due to its message", but it was showcased across several public spaces in Tbilisi, Georgia.

For Ressler's political project, a Bakhtinian reading of dialogism can inform the process of advancing a common-sense understanding of his commitment to the narration, and to applying possible alternatives to realities dominated by Capitalism. According to the Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin, we constitute ourselves in dialogical relationships with others, aspiring to an open-ended dialogue. Words, as Bakhtin argued in his *Speech*

¹ Cf. David McNeill on Walden Bello's conceptualization of Western democracy in the 8-channel video installation *What Is Democracy?*, Oliver Ressler, 2009

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Translated by V. W. McGee. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press. 1986.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel". In M. Mikhail Bakhtin (ed.), *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 1981.

⁴ Katarzyna Kosmala, "Art of Protest: On Testing Cultural Forms of Resistance. Katarzyna Kosmala in conversation with Oliver Ressler", *Variant Magazine*. 42 (Winter): 22–24, 2011. <http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue42/Variant42.pdf>

Genres and Other Late Essays, are at the center of our experiences and our existence². We need words for a story to emerge. Words are uttered expressions of meanings in a continuous chain of ceaseless dialogues, drawing their content from the human reservoir of behaviors and ideologies³. Ressler believes that art can have a function in the analysis of the uses of language under the current political and economic situation, and it can express criticism, connecting to existing social movements and thinking about alternative ways of organizing:

There are multiple roles art can play directly in protest: It is a central idea in my artistic practice to give a voice to protagonists of social movements around the world, and to create a certain space through my work, where these voices can be heard and be listened to. I am not interested in a balanced, "neutral" perspective (some media forms claim it exists!), but in a perspective emerging from the inside, or at least a perspective born out of participation and in solidarity with particular leftist social movements. (Ressler in interview with Katarzyna Kosmala, CCA Glasgow, 2011, Document Film Festival)⁴

The past decade has inevitably come to be recognized as the decade of global economic crisis and political unrest, the decade of international protest, fueled by social media and perpetuated by the media spin. People across the globe have taken to the streets, demanding fairness of public provision and human rights, questioning the current state of the global economy: from the Arab Spring to strikes across Greece, Spain, and throughout the Eurozone in response to austerity measures, to student campaigns across the UK over university fees, strikes over pensions, to the Occupy Wall Street movement against global corporate greed and their various reincarnations elsewhere. Indeed, Ressler's most recent work focuses on the Occupy movement phenomenon.

Against the backdrop of the dusky skies in New York City a group discussion is taking place among the members of the Strike Debt group, an offshoot of the Occupy Wall Street movement. "We are in the red, we are all broke and that's what we have in common." *In the Red* (2014) is a 20-minute film by Oliver Ressler and the Slovenian artist Ana Pečar about the endeavors of the Strike Debt group. Among other things, the organization is involved in buying out the private debts of bankrupt individuals from debt-collecting businesses:

The first thing to know is that debt is bought and sold for pennies on a shady secondary market, full of debt buyers and collectors. If you have a hundred dollars debt, for example, and you go into default, the lender can sell your debt for a fraction of its original value, giving themselves a sweet tax write-off. And then debt collectors try to collect the full amount from you, the debtor. Strike Debt's Rolling Jubilee Fund purchases this kind of debt on the secondary market. (Ann in *In the Red*, 2014)

Much of the discussion focuses on the issues of personal bankruptcies linked to medical debt. We get a snapshot into how Strike Debt initiates activities aimed to expose the hidden mechanisms of financial Capitalism. Similar to the Occupy movement, Strike Debt organizes along its affinity groups; for instance, the group organizes protests, provides free medical care and information about their activities. *In the Red* gathers feedback about the corporate health care provision system across the USA, juxtaposed with accounts of the individual stories of people who contacted the group in a need of help, revealing personal tragedies based on guilt and shame due to debt accumulation. As we learn from the film, many of the desperate individuals couldn't be helped by the organization, as the debt is sold in anonymous bundles on the secondary market. It is the Rolling Jubilee group that buys the huge amounts of personal debt the banks have already written off, for very little money. The film also showcases assemblies organized across the city's parks with music, dancing and banners. At the end of the film, we read on the screen: "Until the end of 2013, Strike Debt group bought circa 15 million US dollars of Americans' personal debt that the banks had written off and sold cheaply to debt-collecting businesses. The Strike Debt 'abolished' the debt and therefore freed people from their bills."

Movement-led debt recovery strategies are not new. In the midst of the socio-economic crisis that reached its peak in Argentina in 2001 and continued to unfold, thousands of workers have started to turn around the problem of unemployment by taking over the processes and the means of production into their own hands. To put it simply, 'recovering' implies keeping the businesses running and keeping workers employed by providing paid jobs, emphasizing their work commitment. Recovered businesses represent different approaches to running organizations, characterized by the flat organizational structure with the workers' control at the center. The harsh realities of the takeovers across Argentina along with the unpaid bills implied that factories had no electricity, running water, or the raw materials to continue production. Such disruptions to working life had a major impact on employees' security by putting their paid employment at risk. Similarly, stories told in Ressler's *In the Red* are the stories of ruin and despair among individuals who not only lost their income, but also found themselves with no way out of debt and with no access to any sort of support. The proliferation of business recoveries has led to the formation of a recovered factory movement across Argentina and further across South America. It could be argued that the Occupy movement has grown out of the *Fabrics Recuperadas*' legacy. Frequently, workers occupied the premises in order to preserve their rights to work, including confrontations with the police that came to evict their occupation. Workers started to find a common trajectory for constructing a story of continuation, of something they felt was lost. Equally, their interpretation of the official events reframed the understanding



Elections are a Con (Georgian version), poster, 59,4 x 42 cm, Tbilisi, 2012
In the framework of *Undergo. The Parallels*, curated by Nini Palavandishvili for GeoAIR, Tbilisi, 2012



Ana Pečar & Oliver Ressler,
In the Red, film, 20 min., 2014

⁵ As far as the legal and administrative processes are concerned, the most common arrangement during takeovers for *Fabricas Recuperadas* was assistance offered by the local authorities for the so-called phased transfer. The use of the buildings to carry out the work was agreed for a temporary period in a form of "comodato", based on a contract in which the city council agreed to cede the factory premises free of charge, as a form of a loan. Over the first few years, it was the local government who paid the rent on the premises and covered outstanding debts to the owner. After the initial period, the co-operative run by workers was given an option to buy out the business. For more, see: Katarzyna Kosmala and Imas J Miguel, "Narrating a Story of Buenos Aires' Fabricas Recuperadas", *The International Journal of Management and Business* 3(1): 103–121, 2012.



Take the Square,
3-channel video installation (detail),
88 min (altogether), 2012

of what a bankrupt business meant before the law. The co-emergence of a new story of legitimacy was told by framing a right to work at the center, as well as a right to protect income. A right to work is assumed as a given in the Occupy movement, but the harsh realities of the unfolding global crisis and the introduction of austerity measures have resulted in countless people being laid off. Organizationally, the *Fabricas Recuperadas* network spread internationally and now includes two major federations of recovered factories; the larger, more leftist organization *Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas* (National Movement of Recovered Businesses), and the smaller, *Movimiento Nacional de Fabricas Recuperadas* (National Movement of Recovered Factories), which is more towards the center-right of the political spectrum⁵.

Ressler's interest in the Occupy movement has developed organically and came about through his own personal involvement in activism. In a response to the global economic recession in 2008, protests mushroomed across the world. Among others, the economies of Greece, Spain and the USA were hit hard by the global debt politics and bailout discourse. In a direct response to the austerity measures introduced, throughout the capital cities of the world, in Athens, Madrid and New York respectively, people gathered *en masse* to express their dissent. Political movements and activist organizations staged large-scale protest events, including marches, rallies and various assemblies. The media broadcasted the occupation of central squares in those cities and across other cities at that time. The 3-channel video installation *Take the Square* (2012) is based on the series of parallel small group discussions carried out among activists taking place across these three cities, in which they explore ways of organizing and decision-making strategies. There is nothing spectacular about this work. In each of the sequences, it is very much a dialogue all the way through, where activists discuss the issues of organizing, probing decision-making processes and forms of assemblies. Nevertheless, a series of dialogues paves a way forward; an attempt to stimulate debate around collective action, in the search for the *Arcadia* of true democracy.

In a search for *Arcadia*, Ressler created an imaginary place where the central systems of power have collapsed, through the series of photographs *We Have a Situation Here* (2011). The series depicts piles of bodies lying on top of each other; all are men, dressed in white-collar suits, police uniforms and military garments. Yet, there is no evidence of blood or wounding. The set looks purposefully staged. It is a frozen still. As in Edward Hopper's world, something is about to happen. It is a theatrical footnote to a governance structure under a current dominant system that seems to be failing through its key state agencies; banking services, police force and the army. It seems that the central players in the exercise of power are no longer necessary. Is this game over? The aesthetics are

reminiscent of Northern Mannerism. For this series *We Have a Situation Here*, Ressler has drawn inspiration from *The Fall of the Titans* (*The Titanomachia*) circa 1588-1590, by one of the Dutch Mannerist forerunners Cornelis van Haarlem. The painting depicts a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A group of Titans, Cyclopes and Giants are challenged to a cosmic battle by the Olympian Gods, led by Zeus. The Titans end up defeated. Their naked muscular bodies lie on top of each other, arranged by van Haarlem in complicated and awkward poses. Ressler's dead agents appear somewhat artificial and somewhat sensual. They are not naked, but are instead all dressed in their uniforms, shaved and clean. *We Have a Situation Here* is an allegorical comment on the inevitably failing systems of today. What would an alternative system look like and how would it operate? How could new institutional structures work? And how would the power regimes be redressed?

Some of these questions have been thoroughly explored in Ressler's earlier works, for instance in one of his larger projects *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* (2003–2008). The project resulted in the 8-channel video installation *What is Democracy?* (2009) that as the title already suggests, exposes the limits of democracy, but not through a text published on posters, like *Elections are a Con*, for instance, but rather through a video camera⁶. In the 16-channel video installation *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*, each of the channels offers insights into peripheral theories, localized practices and socio-economic forms of organizing; among others Chaia Heller talking about libertarian municipalities, Takis Fotopoulos addressing inclusive democracy, Michael Albert discussing participatory economics, Paul Cockshott reflecting on the possibilities of new Socialism, Marge Piercy talking about feminist utopias, Ralf Burnicki discussing anarchist consensual democracy, Maria Mies addressing the notion of subsistence, Nancy Folbre advocating caring labor, Christopher Spehr arguing for a free co-operation, and videos historically framing workers' collectives in places such as former-Yugoslavia (Todor Kuljić), Spain (Salomé Moltó) and France (Alain Dalotel)⁷. In the installation *What Is Democracy?*, the viewer can also see national flags being burned. *What Is Democracy?* was presented for the first time at the Biennial de Lyon 2009. It was Ressler's purposeful decision to include something "more spectacular" in the installation – given the type of showcasing event and audience Biennials seem to attract – one of the channels was projecting burning flags to contrast the narrative-dense films shown on the other monitors. The piece was mentioned in most reviews of the Biennial. A French flag was among the burning flags, and the more conservative press disliked the piece.

What is Democracy? demonstrates how peoples' viewpoints can differ, depending on how they are ideologically framed; some participants in the film believe that representative democracy could work under different conditions – if the big corporations lose the power

⁶ In the case of *What is Democracy?*, Ressler interviewed more than 100 people, although the final film features 20-25 people and some only appear for a short time, between 2 and 3 min.

⁷ Aneta Szyrak and Oliver Ressler (Ed.), *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*, Wyspa Institute of Art, Gdańsk 2007.



Robbery, Film, 1'31'', 2012
Installation view: *Enacting Populism – Inside and Outside a Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Kadist Foundation, Paris, 2012

they have. Some maintain continued agreement with the system of representative democracy, but only after modifications. Others who feature in the film completely reject the idea of representation and instead opt for “direct democracy”, which is related to the original Greek idea. What all interviewees seem to have in common is the fact that they reject the current version of representative democracy.

Ressler's Manifesto reads along the lines that representative democracy can work only within distinct boundaries and among people who are part of the same group with the same interests. There is no recipe for a socio-economic model to function under one democratic principle. Instead, according to Ressler, we are left with an ongoing progressive struggle to re-shape societies according to the emergent needs and wishes – for some the system that draws on consensual decision-making might be the best way forward, for others the assemblies based on the majority vote might make more sense. Ressler's documentary film *Comuna under Construction* (2010), produced with the political analyst Dario Azzellini, describes how inhabitants of *los barrios* in Caracas, Venezuela, take part in community-led management and democratic decision-making via *consejos comunales* (communal councils). In his production process while working on a film, Ressler often creates a platform for activists' or other groups' expression, which is eventually transformed into a space for discussion, a space offering the possibility for participants to talk freely about their ideas, strategies, and to project their hopes and dreams for the future. Ressler produced three films with Dario Azzellini on the political processes in Venezuela. For the three films, the people involved in the social movements – grassroots activists, workers in occupied factories, people in assemblies – were also the film's largest audience, despite its wide circulation.

In his most recent works, Ressler attempts a more direct critique of the current conditions. For instance, *The Bull Laid Bear* (2012) is a 24-minute animated narrative that revolves around the financial crisis and, in a somewhat humorous way, exposes stories behind the bank failures linked to insider fraud in the USA and the harmful aspects of the American deregulation politics of 2008, with its subsequent consequences that unfolded across the globe.

In the old days a bank would make a loan, like a mortgage, a credit card loan or a student loan, and keep it. That meant that the bank had to be careful, because if it made a bad loan, it would be stuck with the losses. Now the system we have is that the banks will negotiate the deal with the borrower and then will sell the loan. There will be a package with lots of other loans and then sold to investors. That means frankly, all the bank has to care about is whether it can sell the loan to the next party. It is like a hot potato process. As long as you can pass the hot potato to the next guy, it doesn't really matter if the potato is rotten. (Yves Smith in *The Bull Laid Bear*, 2012)



What Is Democracy?,
digital print behind acrylic glass,
120 x 85 cm, 2009

Ressler often collaborates with and involves other people in the production of his works. *The Bull Laid Bear* was realized in collaboration with the Australian artist Zanny Begg. As in Ressler's other films, *The Bull Laid Bear* is structured around a series of interviews, this time with economists and activists including: William Black, an US-American lawyer and former bank regulator; Yves Smith, the author of the blog *Naked Capitalism*; Tiffany Cheng, campaign coordinator for *A New Way Forward*; and Gerald Epstein co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute and Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts. The material gathered from these interviewees has been edited and blended with hand-drawn animations.

The film evolves in the setting of a semi-fictional world made of bankers, some of whom are also criminals, and corrupt courts of justice. The point of departure is the fact that the economic model in the USA over the last twenty years or so has consisted primarily of the “ride and inflate bubble”, as Gerald Epstein points out in *The Bull Laid Bear*: “There was the dotcom bubble, the housing bubble, a stock market bubble, and so forth, but there hasn't been a coherent model of economic growth that was sustainable and socially efficient.” (Oliver Ressler referring to Gerald Epstein, an email interview with Bruce Barber, March 2014) Using humor the film probes into the international media spin-perpetuated beliefs in the strength of financial markets, unraveling the causes of the financial meltdown in 2008, and the spiraling economic crisis subsequently unfolding across Europe.

What is Democracy?, *Take the Square* and *Comuna under Construction* are stepping-stone examples of thinking about alternative political structures in a response to the ongoing global economic crisis. These are minor voices, yet voices that aim to broaden the perspectives on various other socio-economic forms of organizing and alternative instituting.

In my view, throughout Ressler's political project there is a tendency towards a re-territorialization of the peripheral; a process that refers to making sense, which is initiated by people within a particular place (e.g. *los barrios*, an occupied central square). It is a process that produces an aspect of culture by those individuals, here specifically in reference to organizational or governance forms, and by doing so in the context of their local realms, they make formations their own. The notion of a re-territorialization refers to the process of restructuring a place or territory, drawing on the term introduced by Deleuze and Guattari in their philosophical project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972⁸, 1980⁹). A re-territorialization of the crisis experience refers to the restructuring of narrative in the context of a particular territory and in a reference to a particular location (periphery). It advocates the need to restructure a narrative by bringing the local perspective to the decision-making table (Ressler's narrative-dense film productions). It could be argued that the interweaving of local voices, whether in case of Occupy activists or community mem-

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972), *Anti-Oedipus*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004. Vol. 1 *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* .2 vols. 1972-1980.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), *A Thousand Plateaus*. London and New York: Continuum, 2004. Vol. 2 *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* .2 vols. 1972-1980.



Dario Azzellini & Oliver Ressler,
Comuna Under Construction,
film, 94 min., 2010

10 Ibid. Katarzyna Kosmala, 2011.

11 Radical Footage: Film and Dissent, Friday 9th March 2012, The Space, Nottingham Contemporary UK. Part of the RaRa – Radical Aesthetics-Radical Art project, (Politicized Practice Research Group), Loughborough University School of the Arts.

12 David Beech, "Don't Look Now! Art after the Viewer and beyond Participation". In Jeni Walwin (Ed) *Searching for Art's New Publics*, Intellect Press, 2010.

13 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les Presses du Réel, 2002.

14 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London, Verso, 2012.

15 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, 2004.

bers in *consejos comunales*, potentially reverses the ontological control of representing and results in weaving a tapestry of meanings about the crisis experiences, also making explicit what is unheard, suppressed and silenced.

In the framework of the Occupy movement, activists in several hundred cities around the world are struggling to change the system in a direction that takes care of their social and political needs. This is something the marginalized people in Venezuela have already achieved, at least in a significant proportion. What is happening in Venezuela today is already far beyond the system of democracy, I mean democracy as we have it in the European Community or in the USA. In Venezuela, people refer to their system as a "participatory and protagonist democracy", and they keep persevering to achieve what they refer to as a "Socialism of the 21st century". I think it would be very valuable to Occupy movements to learn from these Venezuelan experiences.

(Ressler in an interview with Katarzyna Kosmala, CCA Glasgow, 2011, Document Film Festival)¹⁰

Narration in Ressler's work often emerges in the dialogical instances and is shaped by a participative dialogue. It is a process that reflects different ideological forces at work, emerging in spaces drawn between the official and unofficial languages. Ressler's art practice is characterized very much by the written text and the spoken word. In his films and installation works such as *Take the Square*, *Comuna under Construction* or *The Bull Laid Bear*, Ressler's intention is to reach out both, the general viewer as well as the members of movements to use the films as tools for reflection, education or mobilization purposes.

I see films as a perfect tool to involve people whose activities or analysis I adore in a production and develop something new out of it.

(Ressler in an interview with Esther Leslie, 2012)¹¹

Committed to his most recent project on the Occupy phenomenon, however, Ressler emphasizes: "It is important that the Occupy Movement does not come up with a coherent program, as this is something that has to emerge through a process of participation." Despite good international exposure facilitated by the overall move towards the staging of the political within art, Ressler's work continues to be showcased and discussed at the fringes of the art system. Reflecting on arts' new public, David Beech argues for the art of encounter¹²; capitalizing on Nicholas Bourriaud's ideas of relational dynamics in production as advanced in his *Relational Aesthetics*¹³, Claire Bishop's challenge to political and aesthetic ambitions of participatory arts in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Arts and the Politics of Spectatorship*¹⁴, and Grant Kester's contribution to ethics of artistic conduct in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*¹⁵. It is the art space that becomes a space where the refuge of democratic dissent is now being staged. In seeking ways of engaging the public, mobilizing and exchanging knowledge through art-created

spaces, whether at the periphery or at the central venues, and showcasing at key events such as Biennials or International Film Festivals, we need to be mindful of constructing social divisions through an apotheosis of participation without a critical reflection, including hierarchies of authorship, responsibility and control. These hierarchies also include geographies of regions as well as privileges associated with them¹⁶. How resistant and how critical art production and cultural dissemination can be depends on an individually driven initiative and an individual willingness to negotiate a safe distance from the institutional realm. Negotiating a safe distance in the staging of the political within art can be a tricky territory; a distance needs to allow for an instituted proximity in order to be noticed and to be heard.

16 Katarzyna Kosmala, "'Through A Glass Darkly' Performative Practice... Without Border, Without Name", *Variant Magazine*. 41: 48–53. 2011.



Wer vom Kapitalismus nicht reden will, sollte über die Wirtschaftskrise schweigen, (Anyone who doesn't want to talk about capitalism should keep quiet about the economic crisis), electronic billboard, 2009

DENATURALIZING THE ECONOMY: OLIVER RESSLER'S POLITICAL ECOLOGY

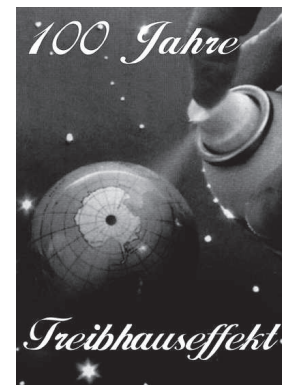
T.J. DEMOS



For A Completely Different Climate,
lightbox, 80 x 61 cm, 2008, courtesy Galleria
Artra, Milan

Oliver Ressler's recent film, *Leave It in the Ground* (2013), begins with shots of the pristine ecosystem of the Lofoten archipelago in Norway's Arctic Circle, its sparkling waters shown meeting the coastal grasses before the low-lying mountains that rise majestically in the background. Commissioned by invitation from the Lofoten International Art Festival in 2013, the film includes a voice-over that describes a conversation between a "fisherman" and an "oil producer," a dialogue of diametrically opposed interests that both offers a glimpse of the current ecologico-political conflict as it bears on this remote Far North region, and extends outward to manifold global environmental crises today. Joining the artist's long-standing commitment to making artistic projects that explore the social, political, environmental, and economic conditions of life under advanced neoliberal capitalism, the piece poses a fundamental question that implicates us all: Whether we—a "we" that transcends this local Norwegian community and suggests a global English-speaking civil society frustrated with the failed attempts by our governments to address climate change—should drill for oil in the Arctic at a time of increasingly limited hydrocarbon reserves, thereby expanding industrial fossil-fuel extraction and advancing further the contemporary death drive toward impending ecological catastrophe; or whether we should "leave it in the ground," transitioning toward a post-carbon future guided by the principles of ecological sustainability, democratic participation, and social equality.

As such, this recent piece is exemplary of Ressler's artistic practice, which, over the course of numerous films, light-boxes, and text-based works over some twenty years, has explored and challenged the central claims of mainstream corporate and governmental discourse on climate change, ecological policy and biotechnology, and invited viewers to consider the larger philosophical stakes of such claims. Going back to such pieces as *100 Years of Greenhouse Effect*, 1996, a text-panel installation for the Salzburg Kunstverein, Ressler has confronted in particular the flawed economic basis of conventional approaches to ecological crisis, as, for instance, outlined in the technocratic agenda of the 1996 "Future-Capable Germany" report compiled by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment, and Energy. As well, with *Focus on Companies*, 2000, an installation of image-and-text panels, he targeted corporations like Novartis, Schering, Bio-Rad Laboratories, and Roche, drawing attention to the negative socio-political effects of genetic engineering science.



100 Jahre Treibhauseffekt
(100 Years of Greenhouse Effect),
digital print, 1996

1 On the complexity of Ressler's past work in relation to activist forms, see Yates McKee, "Reactivating Productivism," in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 1:2, August 2003.



For a Completely Different Climate, 3-channel slide installation (detail), 2008, courtesy Galleria Artra, Milan

Critically complimenting this frontal attack on corporate environmental agendas are Ressler's pieces that document and amplify the climate justice activism of social movements insisting on alternative approaches to sustainability and democratic governance, such as *For a Completely Different Climate*, 2008, a 3-channel slide installation with sound that reported on the Climate Camp protests against the construction of a new coal-fired power station in Kingsnorth, England. As the projection rotates through a series of documentary still images of the temporary encampment in the Southeastern region of the country, shown ringed with imposing police checkpoints and surveillance stations, viewers are shown non-violent activists gathered to challenge the hypocrisy of British environmental policy under the Gordon Brown New Labour administration. Still more ambitiously, the piece articulates the failure of post-Kyoto climate protocols on behalf of global governance owing to the latter's paradoxical unswerving commitment to capitalism's growth economy, doing so by including interspersed titles woven into the slide show that reiterate protesters' critical analysis of British and indeed international policies on environmental matters (even while the work nevertheless asserts its singularity as a project distinct from the aesthetico-political sensibilities of Climate Camp¹). Amidst the political chanting and drumming heard on the piece's soundtrack, the voices of participants explain their position:

We do not focus on one issue but have a systemic critique of the problem. The problem is with the growth paradigm. The Kyoto Protocol established an emissions trading system that has had no discernible impact on emissions reductions. Since the Kyoto Protocol was signed, the global carbon emissions have exceeded the worst-case scenario of the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]. Emissions trading has had no discernible impact on actual carbon emissions, but it has created a market. By 2020, the global market for carbon emissions is projected to be worth 2,000 billion dollars.

Building on that project's critical insights into the financial priorities of current environmental policies shared by governments worldwide—the problem of the growth paradigm—*Leave It in the Ground* spells out the stakes of the current crisis in more detail. The film offers a narration delivered in the authoritative tones of a British-accented newscaster, as if we're watching a BBC documentary relaying a story about climate change. Yet, as indicated in its title, stemming from the common anti-fossil-fuel slogan of contemporary environmentalists (seen, for instance, written across the back of one activist appearing in *For a Completely Different Climate*), the content of this account is strikingly unlike anything that would typically appear on that or similar mainstream media platforms. While such news services may report on climate change, they do so typically without considering any approaches to the manifold problems that would not begin by repeating the automatically assumed commitment to the free-market principles based

on "sustainable development." As the film's speaker sarcastically intones: "After all one must learn that climate protection is a very relative thing: It must be compatible with economic growth."²

That, of course, is the standard assumption of green capitalism, which, as many critics have pointed out (including members of Climate Camp), offers a largely cosmetic retooling of industrial production without substantially reducing the ruinous accumulation of greenhouse gases, or the pollution of air, land, and water supplies (e.g. Al Gore's already outdated 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* is exemplary in this regard, as it suggests that trading emissions credits and developing clean and efficient technologies can save us from global warming, with no need to alter the capitalist system in structural ways).³ Broadly speaking, green capitalism proposes to overcome the "limits to growth" approach of the first post-WWII wave of environmentalism (as articulated in the eponymous 1972 UN commissioned report), which was soon seen to represent an unacceptable demand on capitalist globalization, wherein growth represented the answer to poverty alleviation and necessary modernization for recently decolonized countries in the global South, and was taken as a fundamental definition of "freedom" for developed countries in the North.⁴ Neoliberal globalization, however, quickly overcame the "limits" approach by reconciling growth with environmentalist considerations via the compromise discourse of "sustainable development"—what Ressler refers to in his work of 2000 as *Sustainable Propaganda*. That discourse enabled corporations, and by extension an increasingly fossil-fuel addicted society, to continue global development without any fundamental system change in production or consumption models beyond the inclusion of superficial greenwashing design modifications and a mystifying rhetoric of green publicity. However, as critics have shown—including Ressler's pieces such as *For a Completely Different Climate* and *Leave It in the Ground*—this turn toward green capitalism has utterly failed to curtail greenhouse gas pollution, which is all the more astounding when one realizes that the scientific knowledge of anthropogenic climate change is now more than a century old (first studied by Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius in the late nineteenth century, as Ressler's *100 Years of Greenhouse Effect* points out).

Despite such critiques, the continued irrational devotion to the economy above all else has become naturalized as unquestioned common sense within governmental reports, corporate mass media, and UN-instigated climate meetings. As such, it defines the current reigning ideology of our era, according to which the market is seen as part of human nature.⁵ Indeed, as Fredric Jameson has observed—in what has become a frequently cited saying on the Left—"it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."⁶ Ressler's confronting of this very predicament points to the ambition

2 My recent (admittedly non-scientific) survey of BBC reporting on climate change and global warming yielded the following observations: the news platform commonly reports on climate change by simply amplifying what conservative government officials say about climate change (exemplary of what Glen Greenwald calls "stenographic journalism" completely void of independence and criticality); reported "solutions" to climate change threats generally come from within the framework of neoliberal capitalism, free-market and growth-economy assumptions; articles frequently excitedly portray geoengineering techno-fixes as modes of adaptation (implicitly accepting a future of climate change); and there is never any mention of anti- or non-capitalist initiatives, such as degrowth and deglobalization proposals from eco-socialist or other unconventional sources. See, for instance, "How Broadcast News Covered Climate Change In The Last Five Years," January 16, 2014, <http://mediamatters.org>.

3 For a devastating critique of such an approach, see Richard Smith, "Green Capitalism: The God That Failed," in: *Truthout*, 9 January 2014, <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/21060-green-capitalism-the-god-that-failed>.

4 See Donella H. Meadows, et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, London: Earth Island, 1972.

5 The notion that "the market is in human nature" is a proposition that Fredric Jameson once said "cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged," arguing that the contestation of this ideology—the idea that the market is our second nature, a given, a biological fact—is "the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time." While it has been more than twenty years since he wrote these words, the situation has only become more pronounced, and its stakes all the greater. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991, 263.

6 Fredric Jameson, "Future City," in: *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003.

7 See http://www.ressler.at/for_a_completely_different_climate/.

8 See "Approaches Against the Fossil Fuel Fundamentalism: An interview with Oliver Ressler by Dorian Batycka, with an intervention by Mike Watson," July 5, 2013, accompanying Ressler's participation in the Maldives Pavilion of the Venice Biennale of 2013, <http://maldivespavilion.com/blog/interview-leave-it-in-the-ground-by-oliver-ressler/>.

9 For a wider consideration of this term, see my guest-edited special issue of *Third Text* (January 2013) on the subject of "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology." On contemporary economysticism, see Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, trans. Andrew Goffey, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

of his project, which is precisely to imagine a world beyond capitalism and beyond its naturalization of finance, an ambition that he has long investigated through the political-aesthetic intertwinements of his artistic practice, including his many documentary accounts of anti-capitalist and environmentalist social movements like Climate Camp. As Ressler observes, to realize something like "*a completely different climate*"—where "climate" references an ecology of politics as much as Earth's natural systems—climate change would need to "be confronted through a radical transformation of society that would effectively challenge the existing distribution of wealth and power-relationships that are guaranteed by the military."⁷ Which leads to the following formulation: "the main task today is to combine the discussion of climate change with the discussion of a need of a change of the economic and political system."⁸ Such is a succinct formulation of the key ingredients of current political ecology, which can only begin by overcoming what might be termed contemporary *economysticism*, according to which the world and all elements of life are envisioned through a financial lens, as if nature is in some sense economic, and the economy a part of the natural order.⁹

In this sense, Ressler's work is significant for raising a set of critical questions that few others are asking today. Among them, a critical inquiry into the nature of value and the value of nature, which anthropogenic climate change forces us to ask, even while dominant corporate-media discourse is generally set on suppressing it altogether: that is, whether we as a civilization would agree with the fisherman or the oil producer, as represented in *Leave It in the Ground*. Do we support the intrinsic value of nature as an ecologically integral site of biodiversity and interconnected life systems, seeing the Norwegian archipelago as a spawning ground of fish that forms part of a complex and interdependent ecosystem? Or do we agree with the oil producer who views the archipelago as a source of wealth accumulation, because "people can live with less fish, but not without oil." And so, with a quasi-religious fanaticism that enables a person to see money as more important than food, he explains: "We will extract millions of barrels of petroleum. It will make us rich, much richer. We are living in uncertain times. The economy is in crisis. What oil will give us is certainty."

If we go for the latter madness, what about the specters of environmental devastation that haunt this commitment to oil, the drilling of which would bring as well the "certainty" of the destruction of the seabed through the release of toxic and radioactive materials, as drilling effluent mixes with some of the cleanest water in the world? What about the negative effects of noise pollution and oil rig traffic on local animal life, as well as the carbon emissions that would further impact climate chance, endangering the viability of Earth's biosphere?

What certainty does the oil producer offer us beyond what Ressler's voice-over reminds us is the certainty of continuing down the road toward irreversible civilizational collapse?¹⁰

The imagery of the film is striking in this regard, as, over the course of its eighteen minutes, it mixes diverse geographies into a cauldron of geopolitical-environmental conflict—shots of ocean fish in the coast of Norway lay atop scenes of BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and images of calamitous flooding flow together with footage of UN climate summits. The resulting geo-aesthetics of montage allegorizes the interconnectedness of ecological systems, where politics and industry appear in cause-and-effect relations with natural environments, even as the inability to govern nature in a sustainable way at present brings disastrous results to the very sites of political and corporate power and decision-making.

The inability of our current system to imagine any form of environmental value that is not founded on an economic calculus—as in recently developed "natural capital" economics, and the latest corporate approaches to "ecosystem services" that "natural resources" are seen to provide—is perhaps one of the greatest threats to life as we know it, and an outcome of what *Leave It in the Ground* terms "fossil fuel fundamentalism." In this regard, Ressler joins a growing chorus of social activists in speculating what an alternative model of value might be, calling to mind David Graeber's social anthropology, where value, far from defining narrowly conceived financial wealth, figures as "a set of practices, beliefs, and desires that bring universes into being, a place where the world is continually re-constructed, and where human beings undertake the project of mutual re-creation."¹¹ According to Graeber's post-economistic definition, the way in which we define value, and importantly how we practice that definition, makes certain forms of life possible, others not—for instance, an ecologically sustainable world, or one headed for "a militarized geography of social breakdown on a global scale," as Ressler's film warns (and dramatizes in the accompanying images of trains transporting military tanks superimposed over pine forests and seascapes, as war capitalism dominates nature).

More, as *Leave It in the Ground* makes clear, climate-change disaster is not some distant future dystopia, but already impacts our present. As the film's narrator observes,

The United Nations has estimated that all but one of its emergency appeals for humanitarian aid in 2007 were climate related. Already now climate change adversely affects 300 million people per year, killing 300,000 of them. An estimated 50 million people have already been displaced by the effects of climate change, and the numbers will escalate in years to come. A study from Columbia University's Center for International Earth Science Information Network projects 700 million climate refugees will be on the move by 2050.

10 Such language may sound alarmist, but in fact it is employed guardedly by scientific bodies. See, most recently, Nafeez Ahmed, "NASA-funded study: industrial civilisation headed for 'irreversible collapse'?" *Guardian*, 14 Mar, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com>. For a broader picture of one potential dystopian future, see Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, New York: Nation Books, 2011.

11 See David Graeber, "It is Value that Brings Universes into Being," in: *HUA: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3/2, 2013, pp. 219–43.



For A Completely Different Climate, lightbox, 80 x 110 cm, 2008, courtesy Galleria Artra, Milan

These figures call to mind related catastrophic events of recent years, like the superstorms Hurricane Sandy that struck New York City in 2012, and Typhoon Haiyan that hit the Philippines in 2013, as well as the uncontrollable wildfires in the drought-afflicted West of the US in 2014, and the destructive and unpredictable heavy downpours in places like Kenya in recent years. All figure as current examples of the negative effects of climate change brought to mind by Ressler's film's repertoire of appropriated imagery. As his film notes, "Weather joins the chaos, un-free market chaos, with unprecedented temperatures and unprecedented rains. Climate refugees, displaced farmers, subject to victim-blame, have no choice but to make for the city."

Toward the end of the film, something striking happens to Ressler's narration. The speaker is in the midst of citing negative statistics and terrible future scenarios, wherein climate change figures as threat multiplier leading to geopolitical conflict over increasingly scarce resources, agricultural lands, and clean water supplies. At this point he starts to yield to whispered threats and emotional outbursts, which interrupt his otherwise scientifically supported, but unbearable discourse. In these moments, the exemplar of white male authority, and token of the governmental-media elite, appears to lose control and yield to irrational behavior. It's as if the necropolitical and ecocidal ramifications of military neoliberalism cannot help but to affect its stable, self-assured reportage.

With these and the above passages in mind, we can appreciate the multifaceted modeling of political speech that Ressler's films gather together, which works in tandem with his visual montage. Considering *Leave It in the Ground* in particular, the film performs the disturbance of conventional corporate news and nature programs, giving rise to a linguistic struggle between discourse and conflict, between language as the performance of normativity that naturalizes politics, and language as a counter-discourse of disruption that erupts into babble. This babble suggests not only the overwhelming severity of the ecological crisis we face and its ultimate inability to be translated fully into conceptual intelligibility via mass media soundbites, but also the meaningless verbiage of so much media spectacle that ignores that crisis altogether in favor of the endless production of un-newsworthy non-events. Although the narrator's subject-position might be initially mistaken for the authoritative rhetoric of corporate media, it instead proposes a vehicle of radical content marked by multiply-determined valences that invites from viewers a considered retort as much as collective politicization and solidarity. This invitation toward solidarity connects to Ressler's documentary reporting on grassroots social movements, as in *For a Completely Different Climate*, calling attention to collective struggles against the continuation of the government-corporate-military complex that has defined late capitalist modernity. As such, the films together enable the formation of critical speech acts by literally enacting

the vocalization of words otherwise consigned to noise in our increasingly privatized public sphere, words that are seldom heard in media forums generally merged with corporate interests. In this regard, these films practice what Ressler (writing with Gregory Sholette) has termed "unspeaking the grammar of finance"—in other words, unlearning the semiotics of money that has suffused seemingly all aspects of our collective life worlds, including the everyday language of ecological matters.¹²

By animating languages of value alternative to neoliberalism's economism, Ressler's work brings other universes into being, reconstructing the world and our relation to it. Going beyond the various proposals of green capitalism, including its dubious models of ecologically-sensitive design, its megalomaniacal geoengineering projects, its myopic techno-fixes, *Leave It in the Ground* centers attention on the economy: "Demystifying the economy; decarbonizing the economy; democratizing the economy; decapitalizing the economy"—this is the solution of Ressler's political ecology.

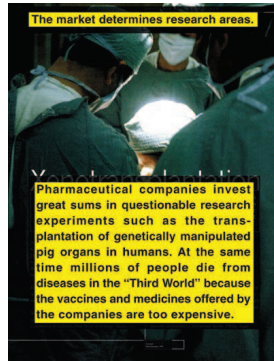
While admittedly part of a minoritarian discourse waged against neoliberalism's nearly global hegemony,¹³ Ressler's project nonetheless forms part of a growing multitude of forces intent on rethinking approaches to climate change from outside capitalist assumptions, including forces emanating from the global South as much as the North. These include indigenous enviro-political formations (such as The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth that met in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010, Canada's Idle No More movement, the Kari-Oca II declaration of indigenous people in Rio, Brazil, 2012, and the ongoing Zapatistas' revolution in Chiapas, Mexico); eco-socialist activists and policy analysts like Chris Williams, Richard Smith, and John Bellamy Foster¹⁴; Green party and World Social Forum politics posed against the elites of the World Economic Forum and conservative governments worldwide; transition-town, de-growth communities of localist eco-practitioners; experimental artists operating at a critical distance from the commercial artworld; Earth jurisprudence environmental lawyers like Polly Higgins and Cormac Cullinan; alter-globalization Occupy-affiliated social movements; and eco-feminists, small-scale farmers, and radical gardeners struggling against the corporate "biopiracy" of native species and the neo-colonization of GM seeds, and for pro-Earth democracy.¹⁵ While such a list represents a complex intersection of internally diverse groups and individuals, the varied elements share a commitment to comprehending ecological sustainability in ways newly delinked from the financial priorities of economic growth and unlimited development. In this vein, such a transversal network of political formations recalls Ressler's multi-video and publication project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* of 2003–07, which explores a similar array of creative social movements thinking outside the neoliberal box (including libertarian municipalism and partici-

¹² See the introductory essay of Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, "Unspeakable Grammar of Finance," in: *It's the Political Economy, Stupid: The Global Financial Crisis in Art and Theory*, ed. Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, London: Pluto Press, 2013, pp. 8–13.

¹³ On the history and theory of neoliberalism—which represents the integrated system of free-market deregulation, privatization, and the defunding of social welfare and public institutions that defines advanced global capitalism—see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ See in particular, Chris Williams, *Ecology and Socialism: Solutions to Capitalist Ecological Crisis*, London: Haymarket, 2010.

¹⁵ Ressler compiles his own related list in the Maldives Pavilion interview: "There are several examples for anti-capitalist struggles and practices with articulated focuses on ecological issues that already go back many years, and I believe there is no way to call them opportunistic: the self-government of the Zapatistas in the Lacandonian forests in Chiapas, the Guardia Indígena of the Nasa in the South of Columbia against the timber and mining industry, the transnational activities of the peasant organization Via Campesina, Murray Bookchin's attempts to initiate ecological and self-managed communities in the U.S., the aforementioned climate camp movement in the UK, Germany and elsewhere, to name just a few. All these are clearly anti-capitalist and ecologically oriented at the same time, not because of opportunism, but because of an understanding that a serious implementation of ecological principles will have to shred the free-market ideology that has dominated the global economy for more than three decades, as a serious response to climate change requires the break of every rule in the free-market playbook."

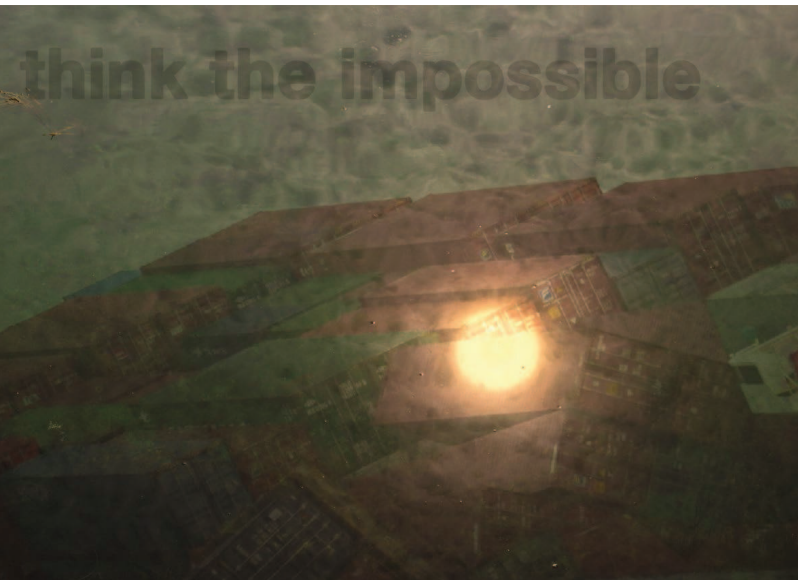


Focus on Companies, digital print on aluminium, 54 x 74 cm, 2000

¹⁶ For an excellent starting point for the proposed platform for such a social movement, see Naomi Klein, "Capitalism vs. the Climate," in: *The Nation*, 9 November, 2011, <http://www.thenation.com/article/164497/capitalism-vs-climate>: "We will need to rebuild the public sphere, reverse privatizations, re-localize large parts of economies, scale back overconsumption, bring back long-term planning, heavily regulate and tax corporations, maybe even nationalize some of them, cut military spending and recognize our debts to the global South."

patory economics, and new socialisms and utopian feminism, seen against the backdrop of historical and contemporary social movements, from workers' self-management practice in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 1970s, to Zapatista collective governance).

Faced with the reality of catastrophic climate change, and equipped with a range of proposals for demystifying, decarbonizing, democratizing, and decapitalizing the economy, the hysterical narrator of *Leave It in the Ground* at one point angrily yells out: "Do not expect your politicians to make these decisions on your behalf!" Among the film's crucial lesson is that "after years of recycling, carbon offsetting and light bulb changing, it is obvious: individual action just doesn't do the job when it comes to climate crisis." Despite whatever significance it may represent as a form of individual contribution to a different world, so-called ethical consumerism is also a further crass maneuver of green capitalism: to distract us from the necessity of forming social movements to bring about transformative, systemic change.¹⁶ Ressler's narrator articulates what his films demonstrate and help realize: "only collective action will do."



Leave It in the Ground
(Think the impossible),
LED light box, 84,1 x 59,4 cm, 2014

DIE ENTNATURALISIERUNG DER WIRTSCHAFT: OLIVER RESSLERS POLITISCHE ÖKOLOGIE

T. J. DEMOS

Oliver Ressler's Film *Leave It in the Ground* (2013) [Lasst es im Boden], ein Auftragswerk des Lofoten International Art Festival 2013, beginnt mit Bildern des vorzeitlichen Ökosystems der Lofoten im norwegischen Polarkreis. Vor dem Hintergrund der vom Meeresspiegel in majestätische Höhen aufragenden Berge wiegen sich Küstengräser in glasklarem Wasser. Der Film beinhaltet als Kommentar ein Gespräch zwischen einem „Fischer“ und einem „Ölförderer“, einen Dialog diametral entgegengesetzter Interessen, und macht so den Blick frei für den gegenwärtigen öko-politischen Konflikt, der auch diese entlegene Region im hohen Norden erreicht hat und auf die vielfältigen Umweltkrisen in der ganzen Welt ausstrahlt. Als Produkt von Ressler's langjähriger Beschäftigung mit künstlerischen Projekten, die sich der Erkundung der sozialen, politischen, umweltbezogenen und ökonomischen Lebensbedingungen im fortgeschrittenen neoliberalen Kapitalismus widmen, stellt das Werk eine Frage, an der keiner von uns vorbeikommt: Sollen wir – und dieses „wir“ geht über die kleine lokale norwegische Gemeinde hinaus und zielt auf eine globale englischsprachige Zivilgesellschaft, die vom Versagen der Regierungen im Umgang mit dem Klimawandel schwer enttäuscht ist – in einer Zeit des rapiden Schrumpfens der fossilen Energieträger in der Arktis nach Öl bohren? Sollen wir die industrielle Förderung dieser fossilen Brennstoffe noch einmal ausdehnen und den Todestrieb unserer Zeit in Richtung bevorstehende ökologische Katastrophe noch einmal beschleunigen? Oder sollen wir, auf unserem Weg in eine postkarbone Zukunft, die sich an den Prinzipien ökologischer Nachhaltigkeit, demokratischer Partizipation und sozialer Gleichheit orientieren wird, das Öl „in der Erde lassen“?

Diese neuere Arbeit steht beispielhaft für Ressler's künstlerische Praxis, die im Lauf der letzten etwa zwanzig Jahre ihren Niederschlag in zahlreichen Filmen, Leuchtkästen und textbasierten Arbeiten gefunden hat. Ressler erkundet und hinterfragt die zentralen Thesen des von Konzernen und Regierungen geführten Mainstream-Diskurses und lädt die ZuschauerInnen ein, sich vor Augen zu führen, worauf diese Behauptungen in letzter philosophischer Konsequenz hinauslaufen. Mit Arbeiten wie *100 Years of Greenhouse Effect* [100 Jahre Treibhauseffekt] aus dem Jahr 1996, einer Textpaneel-Installation für den Salzburger Kunstverein, hat sich Ressler immer wieder besonders mit der ökonomischen Schieflage



100 Jahre Treibhauseffekt
(100 Years of Greenhouse Effect),
billboard, 1996
Installation view:
100 Jahre Treibhauseffekt,
Salzburger Kunstverein, 1996

THE BITTER SYMPHONY, OR WHY DOESN'T THE SYSTEM WORK?

SUZANA MILEVSKA

The works by Oliver Ressler that deal with disenchantment in transitional societies: *Don't Purchase A Better World* (2008), *Socialism Failed*, *Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* (2010), *The Plundering* (2013)



The Plundering, film, 40 min., 2013

His interest in systemic power, in revealing the mechanisms and patterns of its functioning and the eventual failure of systemic structures is central in the recent art projects by the artist Oliver Ressler. His long-term and profound inquiries in different geo-political and economic conditions and systems have led him to continuously investigate how, on the way to successful stories of transformation, the ruling hegemonic power structures often forget or completely fail to provide basic human conditions for the subjects that actually enabled the change from one system to another at its outset.

Most of Ressler's recent works ultimately revolve exactly around making visible the transitional and transformational processes and the challenges faced by the inhabitants of different countries, wherein the promises of the change have been usually much bigger than what actually awaited the newly constructed transitional subjects on the other end of such processes. Throughout various works by Ressler it becomes evident how politics and economy are inextricably intertwined, and how the poverty of one population group means the enrichment of another group on the basis of "accumulation with dispossession" and redistribution of land, property and wealth that is not always acquired by legal means, in David Harvey's terms.¹

Even though the projects are the results of research in different countries and deal with the specificities of various local situations, what these works have in common is the "choirs" of different disenchanted voices that create a kind of cacophonous and "bitter symphony" with overwhelming hopelessness and resentment as the final effect. As a kind of zealous ethno-econographer Ressler visits, records and archives different cases and voices of discontent. They are eager to talk about their feelings of disappointment, disenchantment, and often about their despair because of the decline of their lives in many different ways, including in terms of weakened economic and social welfare, education, re-qualification to lower-paid professions, and ultimately unemployment and impoverishment.

¹ See David Harvey, "The 'New' Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession", in Leo Pantic and Colin Leys, eds., *Socialist Register 2004: The New Imperial Challenge* (London: Merlin Press, 2003).

In various countries that have undergone certain contradictory processes of transition at different paces and with different consequences (Poland, Georgia, Armenia), Ressler locates, meets and talks to various “victims” about their difficult experiences on the way to the transformation of both the political and economic system, particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America, and he listens to their attempts to explain the reasons for the wrongfully handled transition. In this text I will focus on Ressler’s projects that were particularly the result of his interest and research in the transition of the centralized economy of ex-communist countries in the direction of a neo-liberal free economy after the fall of the Berlin wall.

According to economists’ usual definition, the central issue in a transitional economy is the shift from central planning to the free market. The transformation that transitional economies undergo in order to achieve economic liberalization, where prices are “regulated” and set by the free market rather than by the state or other central planning organizations, is sometimes a long and uncertain process and sometimes experienced as quick, painful, forced, and aggressive change. Different models of transition—quick and slow (gradual), partial (micro) and whole (macro)—are often contradictory, and such differing paces of transition in economic terms create some of the biggest contradictions in contemporary society, contradictions such as unequal exchange, outsourcing, migration, re-immigration and non-registered immigration, the pauperization of certain ethnic communities, gentrification and urban regeneration on the city and national levels, etc.

The change in the systemic relationship between the state and economy—which entails the functional restructuring of state institutions from being providers of growth to enablers and regulators of the way in which a certain economy both grows and accomplishes the transition in general—lies at the core of a transitional economy and is the basis for the pressure that such processes impose on the individuals.

The push for the privatization of the large state-owned businesses and resources as well as for the creation of a financial sector, done in the interest of facilitating macroeconomic stabilization and the movement of private capital, entails unexpected and often deeply disturbing economic and social effects. Inevitably, the changes of governing the old institutions and the establishment of new institutions and private enterprises take place parallel to changes in the role of the state and, for better or worse, the change in the relationship between the state and its citizens. The citizens are forced to adapt to the newly emerged and fundamentally different governmental institutions, and to engage in or simply accept the promotion of privately owned enterprises, markets and independent financial institutions.

It is needless to emphasize that not all citizens are capable of facing and embracing such changes with eagerness and success. For example, the statements of the interlocutors interviewed in the 2-channel video installation *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What comes Next?* (2010) refer to the plundering of resources and/or its effects in Armenia, one of the countries that moved away the former state socialist system without clearly drawn economic, legal and social rules created in advance. The film *The Plundering* (2013) refers to the Georgian government’s complete obliviousness to the outrageous cases of *plundering* and failure to prosecute them.²

Ressler’s film describes these processes of systemic corruption and draws conclusions from some of the statements of his interlocutors (e.g. Levan Asabashvili) that the local purchasers are usually hiding behind companies registered offshore. Therefore, instead of the expected and desired improvement of their lives, the extreme levels of privatization drove most of the Georgian residents into severe levels of poverty.

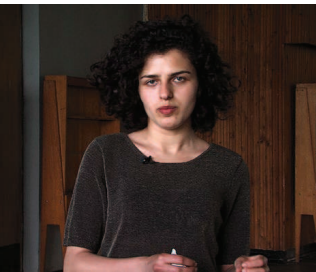
The ultimate goal of the change was a democracy that was supposed to reach out to all citizens—which is, of course, not an easy task even for other societies, but on the way to democracy the uneven economic development and redistribution of wealth exposed the people to many contradictions that emerged in the process. Particular analysis could be devoted to the desire and use of such objects in the construction of subjectivity, in terms of spaces of exploration and entertaining the collective experiences of transitional subjects where disruptions of many different relationships take place. In Ressler’s *The Plundering*, the example of common action that led to the prevention of the privatization of the National Scientific Library in Georgia therefore comes as a positive surprise. It even becomes a symbolic case of optimism that raises awareness of the contradictions between consumerism and reflection and of the difference between passive resentment and taking common action against the aggressive accumulation of capital. This case closely resonates with Ernesto Laclau’s ideas about the common negativity, the collective antagonisms of the emancipatory subjects that unite them against the dominant regime.³

For a better understanding of obsessive consumerist practices, fetish-objects and the fetishization of subject-subject relations that take place in transitional economies, one could review the introduction to the reader *Mapping of Ideology* (edited by Slavoj Žižek in 1999).⁴ Žižek already pointed out the reciprocal relationships and relevant differences in the relationships between objects and subjects in different societies. When it comes to identifying with things, Žižek made the paradoxical observation that commodity fetishism appears in capitalist societies where there is a certain exchange between free people, but does not exist in societies where there is a relationship of fetishism between individuals

² Oliver Ressler’s film *The Plundering* focuses on four cases of privatization in Tbilisi. It discusses the aggressive policies of privatization of the water system and the Dezerter Bazaar (Tbilisi’s popular market). The interviews reveal different strategies and cases of the selling off of state property, e.g. the destruction and conversion of the historical Gudiashvili Square in Tbilisi’s city center into a shopping mall.

³ See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso Books 2005, x-xi; Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso Books, 2007, 54.

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “How did Marx Invent the System?” in: Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Mapping of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1999, p. 296-332.



The Plundering, film, 40 min., 2013

5 Žižek 310.

6 Žižek 314.

7 "The Logic of Gender. On the separation of spheres and the process of abjection", *Endnotes* 3, Last accessed 30 May 2014, <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender>

8 "The Logic of Gender," <http://endnotes.org.uk/en/endnotes-the-logic-of-gender>

9 The billboards (size: 504 x 238 cm) with the original Polish text in uppercase (NIE KUPUJ LEPSZEGO ŚWIATA, WALCZ O LEPSZY ŚWIAT) were presented in the framework of the Passengers Festival in public space in Warsaw, September 2008, curated by Kuba Szreder and Zuzanna Fogtt.



Don't purchase a better world, fight for a better world,
billboard, 504 x 238 cm, 2008
Installation view: Passengers Festival, Warsaw, 2008

themselves—that is, in pre-capitalist societies. In such societies, commodity fetishism has not developed, because production is “natural”—that is, products are not produced for the market.⁵ On the contrary, he continues by stating that, in a society where relations between men are not “relations of domination and servitude,” where people see in each other only other subjects who share similar concerns, and where these other people are of interest to you only if they possess something (a commodity that can satisfy your needs), then commodity fetishism—that is, the social relationship between things—serves in such a society as a cover for real social relations between individuals. This phenomenon can be thought of as “hysteria of conversion.”⁶

The relationships among subjects in transitional societies have often retrospectively evinced the symptoms of both pre-capitalist and post-capitalist societies and proliferated the fetishization of both types of relations. This brings us to the discussion about the capitalist state and its “public sphere.” According to more recent critics, it should not be understood as any existing place, but as an abstract “community” of “equal citizens”: “Hence, the differentiation between the sphere of economic relations and that of the political—including relations between unequals mediated by relations between ‘abstract equal citizens’—renders ‘citizens’ *only formally* equal according to the state and civil rights.”⁷

Although these individuals appear as equals on the market, this becomes only a wishful thinking in reality. The “public” becomes only an abstraction that must exist “precisely because the directly market-mediated sphere is mediated by the market, a space of mediation between private labours, produced independently from one another in private firms owned and operated by private (self-interested) individuals.”⁸

On the top of the eponymous billboard in Oliver Ressler’s work from 2008 it states: “Don’t purchase a better world, fight for a better world.”⁹ This refers to the phenomenon of “gated communities”, which seem to emerge specifically in transitional countries where, with the rapid emergence of significant differences in income, the governments not only do not try to interfere or put any effort into securing a certain balance, but even exacerbate the contradictions in the distribution of wealth. More particularly, the work looks at post-socialist Poland and its capital Warsaw as a case study of severe social disintegration and segregation.

In the work, the development of gated communities at an unbelievable pace is tackled with a montage of two categories of different images: a photo of the living areas of the rich and images of poor neighborhoods. The billboard shows a typical façade of a gated community from the perspective of someone standing outside, on the other side of the street. It shows the posh façade, the fences, the cabin of the security guards, and the overall

architecture. According to Ressler’s website, the work’s description reads: “The irritating feature of the building is that most windows are broken. The broken windows can be seen as a rupture of the imagined stability and safety of a gated community.”¹⁰ The images of broken windows and the graffiti have been photographed in poor and abandoned areas in Warsaw. There is a graffiti on the building that states: “Donkeys from right to left tell lies to people.”

The text on the billboard, however, focuses on a more optimistic and dialectical understanding of the change. In fact, it suggests that the change from one system to another doesn’t happen by simply acquiring more goods, but rather one should engage in creating a different world that would enable and inhabit the change on a more profound structural level. Indeed, the artist had already pointed out an appropriate example for this kind of agency, which is possible and necessary but is not always easy to achieve: it is the aforementioned example of the National Scientific Library in Georgia that offers a certain hope for the possibility of intervening in the otherwise rampant pace of the privatization of common resources, thus reverting the bitter tone of complaints into a more optimistic sentiment and opening up perspectives for the future.

What do all these distinctions between political, economic and social relations, and the discussions about social inequalities have to do with art and the artist’s role in society? When watching Oliver Ressler’s narrative films or his installations, it becomes important to note that the artist’s main concerns are that such relations between people and relations between people, properties and objects are not always easy to trace. So he frequently assumes that one of the main roles of art and artists is to reveal, to make visible and to address precisely such paradoxes.

Today the relation between art, politics and economy needs to be reconsidered by critically addressing and questioning its basic ethical assumption, in order to reveal the complexity not only of the relation between art and money, but also of the intertwining of art, politics and society in general. The relation between art and economy and financial capital is surrounded by many controversies and contradictions, but it is ultimately evident that the inner paradox within this relation was created because of the claim to autonomy in the past and because of the dichotomized relation between art and money and the relation between art and property.¹¹

From the start, the basic conditions for autonomy emphasized the paradoxical nature of the autonomy of art, because its inner contradictions stemmed from several different definitions of autonomy that are interwoven and in conflict with each other, because of the different positions of those who claim such autonomy. Various artists in both the Eastern

10 *Installations, videos and projects in public space by Oliver Ressler*, Last Accessed 30 May 2014, http://www.ressler.at/dont_purchase_a_better_world/

11 Adorno’s reflections on the relation of art and society led to a different interpretation of autonomy, so there can be several different levels of autonomy in art, although this makes intersectionality even more complex. Andy Hamilton, “Adorno and Autonomy of Art,” Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi & G. Agostini Saavedra (eds.), *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future: Critical Theory*, Newark, DE: University of Delaware, 2009, p. 287–305.



Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?
2-channel video installation, 2010

12 Michael Hardt, "For Love or Money," Cultural Anthropology, *The American Anthropological Association*, 26:4, 2011, p. 676–682, 678–679.

13 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx, Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, London: Penguin, 1975, p. 379, see pp. 279–400, Qtd. in Michael Hardt, "For Love or Money," p. 679.

and Western political and art system have tried to define for themselves and for the others their own artistic production and how it relates to society, but they came to the limits when trying to define their relation with the political and economic ruling system. Today, however, it is very difficult to imagine an artist who could still claim that s/he is acting outside or beyond society and the political system.

There is a dialectical relation between social and aesthetic autonomy, just as there is between autonomy and commodification, which should not be forgotten, and artists are free to choose their paths and to diversify their justifications for different positions when calling for art for art's sake, whether based on the need for a formalist separation of aesthetic from moral values, or because of attributing superiority to aesthetic values above all other values, or because of aspiring to distanced and disinterested Kantian aesthetics, or even because of claiming that art is completely independent from life and subjected to completely independent rules of development.

This contradiction is closely linked to the Marxian dichotomous relation between money and another abstract concept: love. In his brief essay "For Love or Money", Michael Hardt considered as important some of Karl Marx's reflections on love in relation to money and property from Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and he emphasized his critique of the power of money:

Money corrupts, he argues, on the one hand, by displacing *being* with *having*. [...] One problem with money, in other words, and with the way it focuses our lives on "having" is not only that it distracts us from our being in society and the world but also and more importantly that it causes us to neglect the development of our senses and our powers to create social bonds. Marx also argues that money corrupts, on the other hand, by distorting relations of exchange, and this is where love comes into the discussion.¹²

Hardt quotes Marx for his warning that the ultimate result of the power of money comes from the fact that

Money is not exchanged for a particular quality, a particular thing, or for any particular one of the essential powers of man, but for the whole objective world of man and of nature. Seen from the standpoint of the person who possesses it, money exchanges every quality for every other quality and object, even if it is contradictory; it is the power that brings together impossibilities and forces contradictions to embrace. (p. 379).¹³

Therefore it is important to acknowledge that the problem with the way money dominates our social relations often effectuates unforeseen consequences, regardless of whether one looks at society in general or at different sections, e.g. the art system:

The exchange of money indiscriminately for all qualities and objects seems to make all of our particular human essential powers indifferent, thus distorting our relationships to each other and the world and undermining our powers to create social bonds.¹⁴

Hardt sees a certain potential in Marx's call for exchanging property's powers for the power of love, which should be accomplished when property is not just transformed from private to communal property, but when property is completely abolished, accessioned. Hardt's interpretation of Marx's concept of love and his call for reformulating love as a replacement for property after its eventual abolition is that love should fill in the social roles that private property still serves in contemporary society, e.g. it generates social bonds and organizes social relationships.¹⁵

As artists have recently become more aware of the complex social, economic and political implications of their practice, because it is profoundly interwoven in societal structures, perhaps this could also serve as a kind of relevant provocation of another call that would challenge the relation between property and money and lead to a possible intervention of both love and art in the closed circuit of social relations established with property as a center point.

As long as artists expand their role and the role of their art to serving society, if necessary also as a means of protest and a defensive mechanism against oppression and imperialism, there is hope that we might witness such a replacement. That is when art can claim a certain new political concept that will induce and embrace alternative social powers.

Although art does not play a central role in Oliver Ressler's projects, his role as an artist is defined as a facilitator who unravels and "depicts" certain contemporary, disturbing phenomena that concern everybody, artists and non-artists, the rich and the poor, Eastern and Western societies and individuals. However, Ressler also emphasizes the potentiality of "shared negativity" for overcoming the contradictions, and the rare cases and situations where the initially "bitter symphonies" become just the starting point for common actions in response to shared problems.

14 Hardt, p. 679.

15 Hardt, p. 681.



The Plundering, film, 40 min., 2013