



**CATASTROPHE**

**BONDS**

**OLIVER**

**RESSLER**

**Oliver Ressler**

**Catastrophe Bonds**

**IMAGINE  
A SOCIETY**

**IN WHICH PEOPLE HAVE A  
SAY IN DECISIONS IN PRO-  
PORTION TO THE DEGREE  
THAT THEY ARE AFFECTED**

Carol & Robert Bush Art Center, St. Norbert College  
Lawton Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay  
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## Curators' Foreword

Oliver Ressler's work is both urgent and timely. Reactionary populist movements have been on the ascendency in both the United States and in Europe, and counter-movements seeking to reassert the values of liberal democracy have risen in opposition to the threats against civil liberties and the attacks upon democratic institutions across the West. This exhibition is the first survey of Ressler's work in the U.S., and his focus on enacting and expanding forms of democracy is especially compelling and timely. The selected works in this exhibition focus on forms of grassroots democracy, economic and political alternatives to the existing state of global affairs, activism around climate change, and issues relating to what has been described as the European "migration crisis." But, as Ressler's work points out, it is not a crisis of migration. Rather, it is a crisis of war, terror, and economic strangulation that has forced people to move. A key unifying theme running through the work is envisioning and attempting to enact new forms of vibrant social and economic democracy where all voices are welcomed in the deliberative process. This theme is explored through documentary work highlighting grassroots organizing efforts, video interviews with contemporary thinkers on alternative social and economic models and their historic precedents, and on the pressures that the current catastrophes of climate change and emergency migration are having on Western representative democracies.

This exhibition and related public programming were developed as a collaborative project between St. Norbert College and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay through the International Visiting Scholars Program, a joint venture between our two institutions. The program was established to bring international scholars and professionals to lecture and teach on our campuses and to provide educational benefits to the citizens of Green Bay and the surrounding communities. This exhibition, the associated public programming, and the catalog are intended to bring the critical discourses of contemporary art to our region in general, as well as to contribute to the scholarly analysis and dialog surrounding the work of Oliver Ressler with this exhibition in particular.

We are pleased to present the exhibition *Oliver Ressler: Catastrophe Bonds* to the public in the Green Bay region. We present this exhibition to contribute to the ongoing critical dialog of Ressler's important and timely work, and to use the exhibition of visual art as a means to discuss the most pressing issues facing us today.

**Brandon Bauer** Lead Exhibition Curator and Associate Professor of Art,  
St. Norbert College

**Shan Bryan-Hanson** Curator of Art Galleries & Collections, St. Norbert College

**Kate Mothes** Curator of the Lawton Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

## About the Artist

Oliver Ressler, born in 1970, lives and works in Vienna, Austria. Ressler is an artist who organizes theme-specific exhibitions, multichannel video installations, and projects in public space. His work addresses issues such as economics, democracy, climate change, social alternatives, and forms of resistance, and it often blurs the boundaries between art and activism. Ressler has exhibited his work extensively internationally, including in recent exhibitions in the Museum of Capitalism in Oakland, California, USA (2017), and at Documenta 14 in Kassel, Germany as part of an exhibition by The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (2017), as well as in recent survey exhibitions of his work at Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo – CAAC, Seville, Spain (2015); at the MNAC – National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest, Romania (2016), and at SALT Galata, Istanbul, Turkey (2016). This exhibition, *Catastrophe Bonds*, is the first survey of Oliver Ressler's work in the United States.

## About the International Visiting Scholars Program

The St. Norbert College and University of Wisconsin-Green Bay International Visiting Scholars Program was established in 2003 to bring international scholars and professionals to lecture and teach on our two campuses and to provide educational benefits to the citizens of Green Bay and surrounding communities. The purpose of the program is to bring well-qualified professionals from other countries to improve international understanding by providing opportunities to learn from visiting scholars and for them to learn from us. Since its inception, the International Visiting Scholars Program has brought a diverse range of scholars from several disciplines representing all regions of the globe.

# **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

**REQUIRES AND ENHANCES DEGREES OF  
MUTUALISM, DIFFERENTIATION, AND  
DEVELOPMENT MORE THAN DOES  
REPRESENTATIONAL DEMOCRACY.**

# **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

**IS A PROCESS IN WHICH MEMBERS OF A  
LOCAL COMMUNITY ARE EMPOWERED TO  
PARTICIPATE DIRECTLY IN CREATING THE  
PUBLIC POLICY THAT GIVES SHAPE TO THEIR  
EVERYDAY LIVES, BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE.**

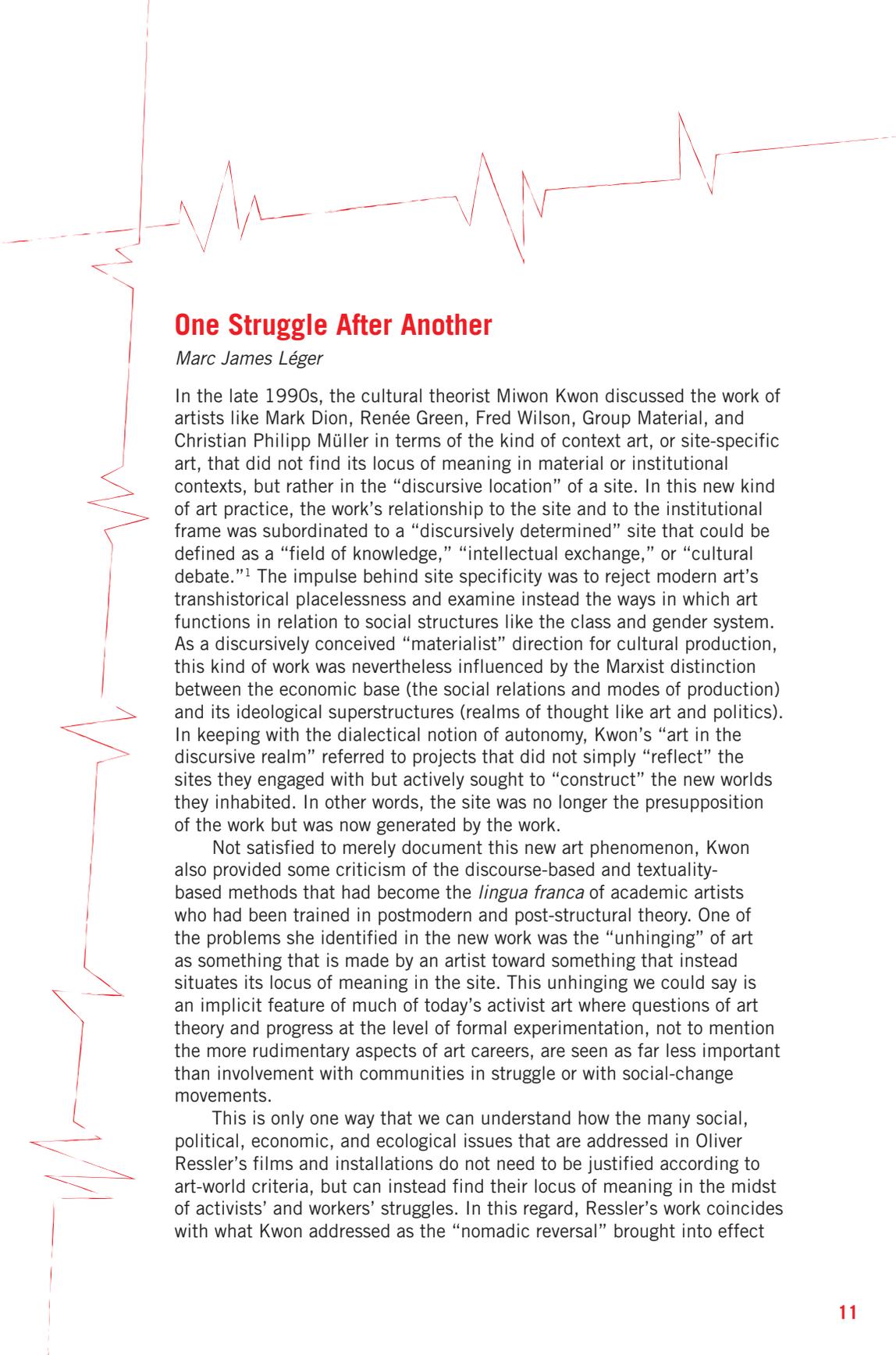
**UNLIKE A REPRESENTATIONAL DEMOCRACY  
IN WHICH**

**CITIZENS** ELECT A

**CENTRALIZED BODY OF “POLITICIANS” WHO  
MAKE DECISIONS**

**ON THEIR BEHALF, A DIRECT DEMOCRACY  
IS ONE IN WHICH DECISION-MAKING POWER  
IS DECENTRALIZED AMONG CITIZENS  
THEMSELVES.**

SOURCE: CHAIA HELLER, ECOLOGY OF EVERYDAY LIFE, 1999



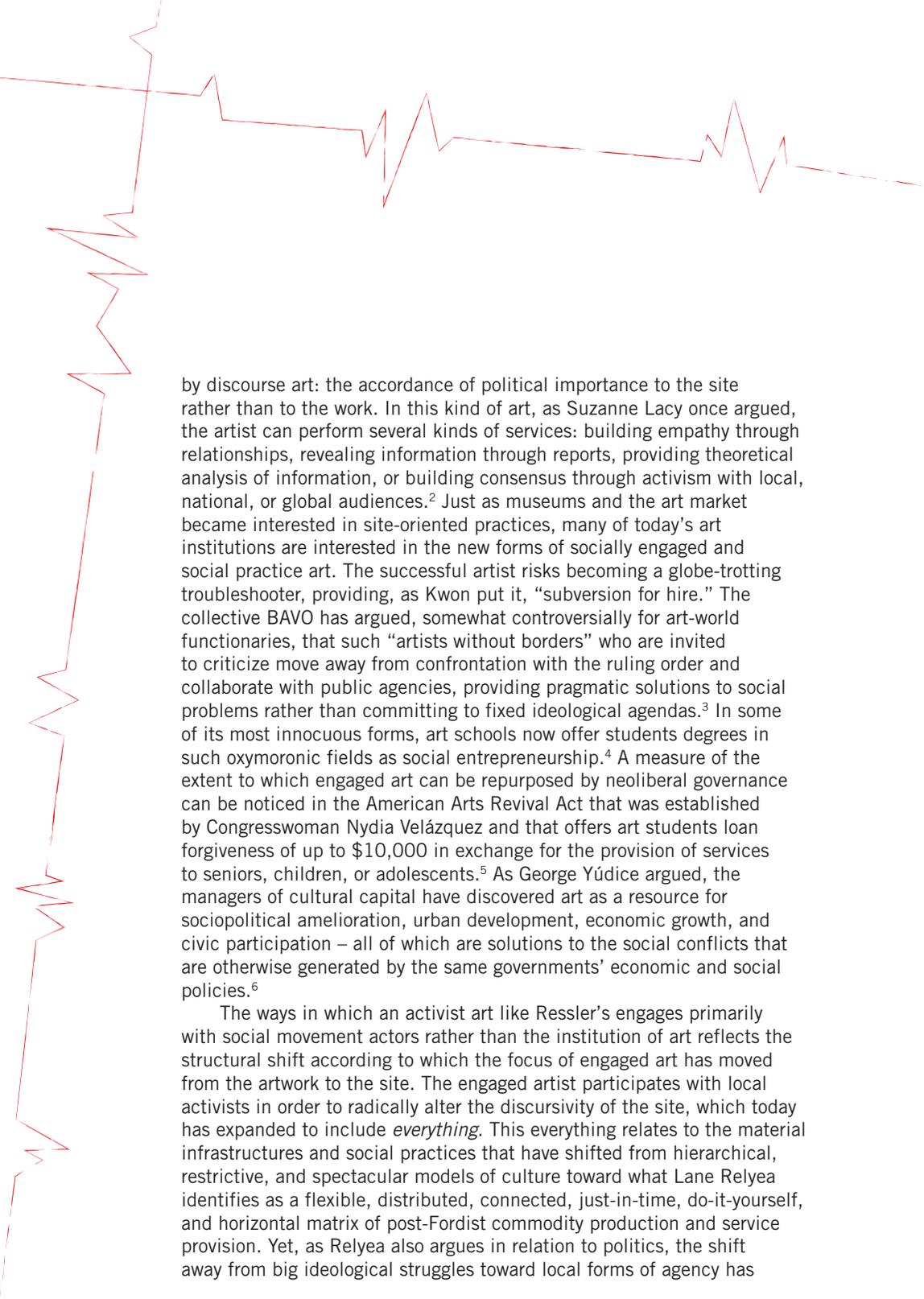
## One Struggle After Another

Marc James Léger

In the late 1990s, the cultural theorist Miwon Kwon discussed the work of artists like Mark Dion, Renée Green, Fred Wilson, Group Material, and Christian Philipp Müller in terms of the kind of context art, or site-specific art, that did not find its locus of meaning in material or institutional contexts, but rather in the “discursive location” of a site. In this new kind of art practice, the work’s relationship to the site and to the institutional frame was subordinated to a “discursively determined” site that could be defined as a “field of knowledge,” “intellectual exchange,” or “cultural debate.”<sup>1</sup> The impulse behind site specificity was to reject modern art’s transhistorical placelessness and examine instead the ways in which art functions in relation to social structures like the class and gender system. As a discursively conceived “materialist” direction for cultural production, this kind of work was nevertheless influenced by the Marxist distinction between the economic base (the social relations and modes of production) and its ideological superstructures (realms of thought like art and politics). In keeping with the dialectical notion of autonomy, Kwon’s “art in the discursive realm” referred to projects that did not simply “reflect” the sites they engaged with but actively sought to “construct” the new worlds they inhabited. In other words, the site was no longer the presupposition of the work but was now generated by the work.

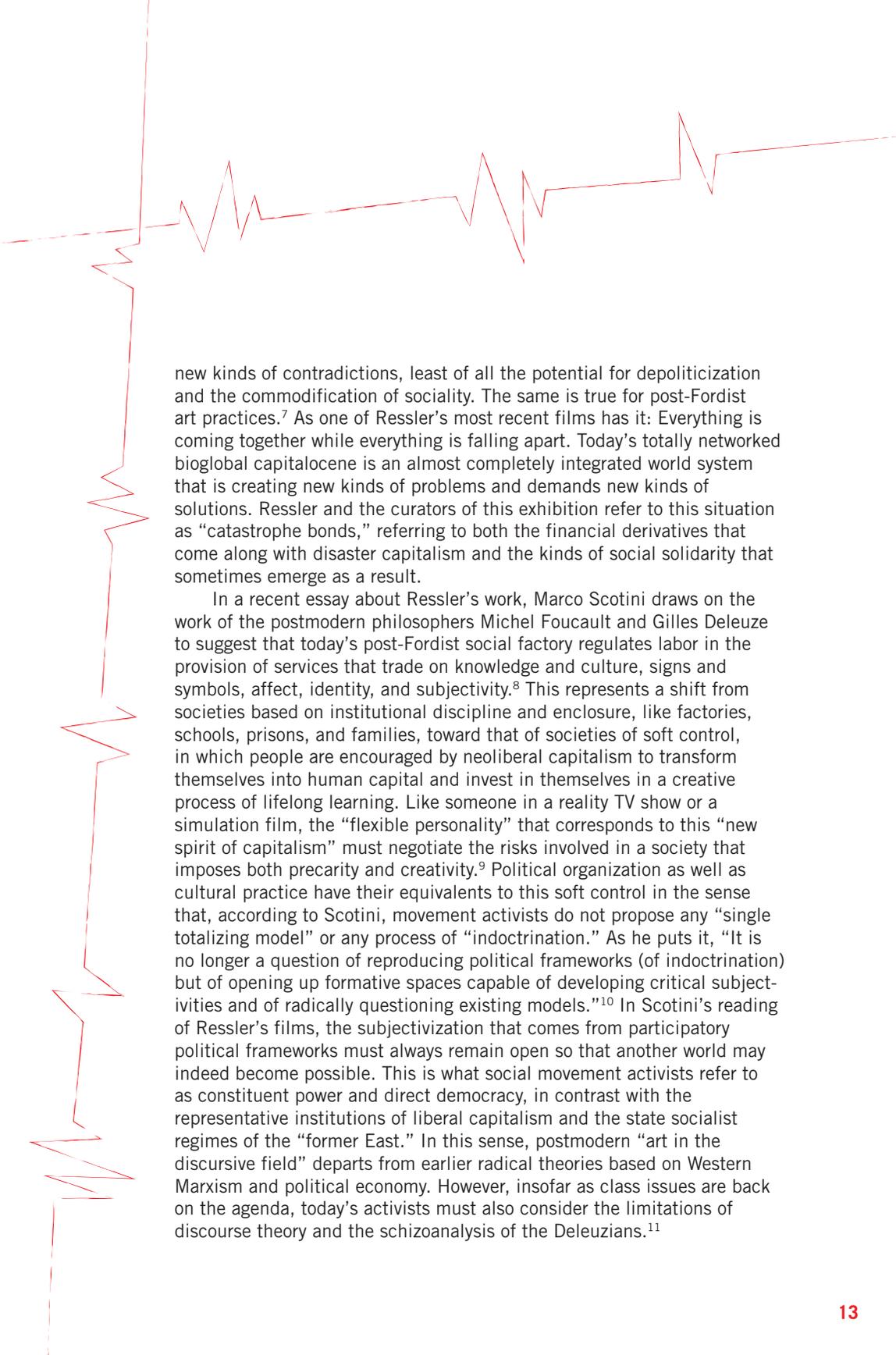
Not satisfied to merely document this new art phenomenon, Kwon also provided some criticism of the discourse-based and textuality-based methods that had become the *lingua franca* of academic artists who had been trained in postmodern and post-structural theory. One of the problems she identified in the new work was the “unhinging” of art as something that is made by an artist toward something that instead situates its locus of meaning in the site. This unhinging we could say is an implicit feature of much of today’s activist art where questions of art theory and progress at the level of formal experimentation, not to mention the more rudimentary aspects of art careers, are seen as far less important than involvement with communities in struggle or with social-change movements.

This is only one way that we can understand how the many social, political, economic, and ecological issues that are addressed in Oliver Ressler’s films and installations do not need to be justified according to art-world criteria, but can instead find their locus of meaning in the midst of activists’ and workers’ struggles. In this regard, Ressler’s work coincides with what Kwon addressed as the “nomadic reversal” brought into effect



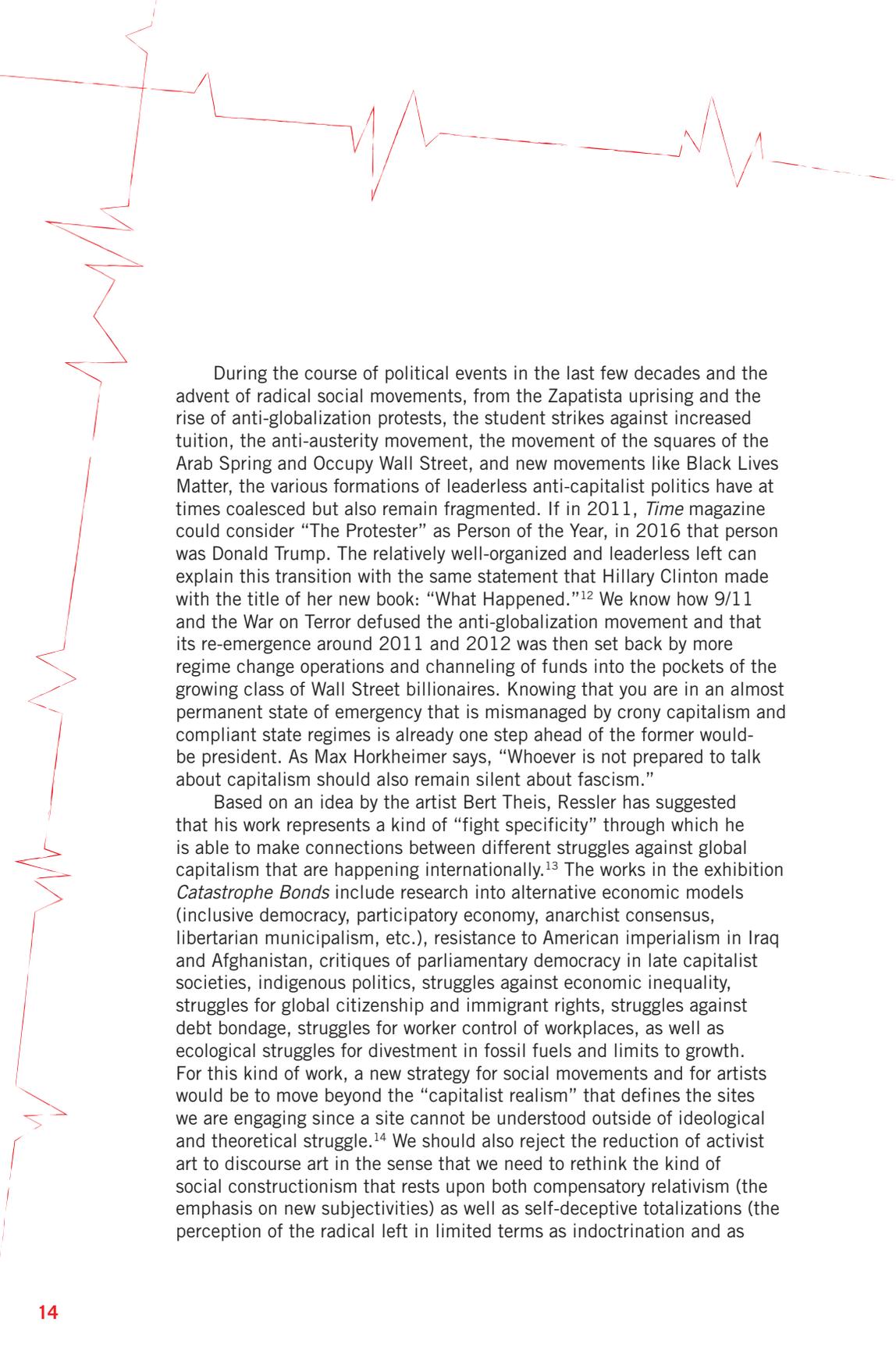
by discourse art: the accordance of political importance to the site rather than to the work. In this kind of art, as Suzanne Lacy once argued, the artist can perform several kinds of services: building empathy through relationships, revealing information through reports, providing theoretical analysis of information, or building consensus through activism with local, national, or global audiences.<sup>2</sup> Just as museums and the art market became interested in site-oriented practices, many of today's art institutions are interested in the new forms of socially engaged and social practice art. The successful artist risks becoming a globe-trotting troubleshooter, providing, as Kwon put it, "subversion for hire." The collective BAVO has argued, somewhat controversially for art-world functionaries, that such "artists without borders" who are invited to criticize move away from confrontation with the ruling order and collaborate with public agencies, providing pragmatic solutions to social problems rather than committing to fixed ideological agendas.<sup>3</sup> In some of its most innocuous forms, art schools now offer students degrees in such oxymoronic fields as social entrepreneurship.<sup>4</sup> A measure of the extent to which engaged art can be repurposed by neoliberal governance can be noticed in the American Arts Revival Act that was established by Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez and that offers art students loan forgiveness of up to \$10,000 in exchange for the provision of services to seniors, children, or adolescents.<sup>5</sup> As George Yúdice argued, the managers of cultural capital have discovered art as a resource for sociopolitical amelioration, urban development, economic growth, and civic participation – all of which are solutions to the social conflicts that are otherwise generated by the same governments' economic and social policies.<sup>6</sup>

The ways in which an activist art like Ressler's engages primarily with social movement actors rather than the institution of art reflects the structural shift according to which the focus of engaged art has moved from the artwork to the site. The engaged artist participates with local activists in order to radically alter the discursivity of the site, which today has expanded to include *everything*. This everything relates to the material infrastructures and social practices that have shifted from hierarchical, restrictive, and spectacular models of culture toward what Lane Relyea identifies as a flexible, distributed, connected, just-in-time, do-it-yourself, and horizontal matrix of post-Fordist commodity production and service provision. Yet, as Relyea also argues in relation to politics, the shift away from big ideological struggles toward local forms of agency has



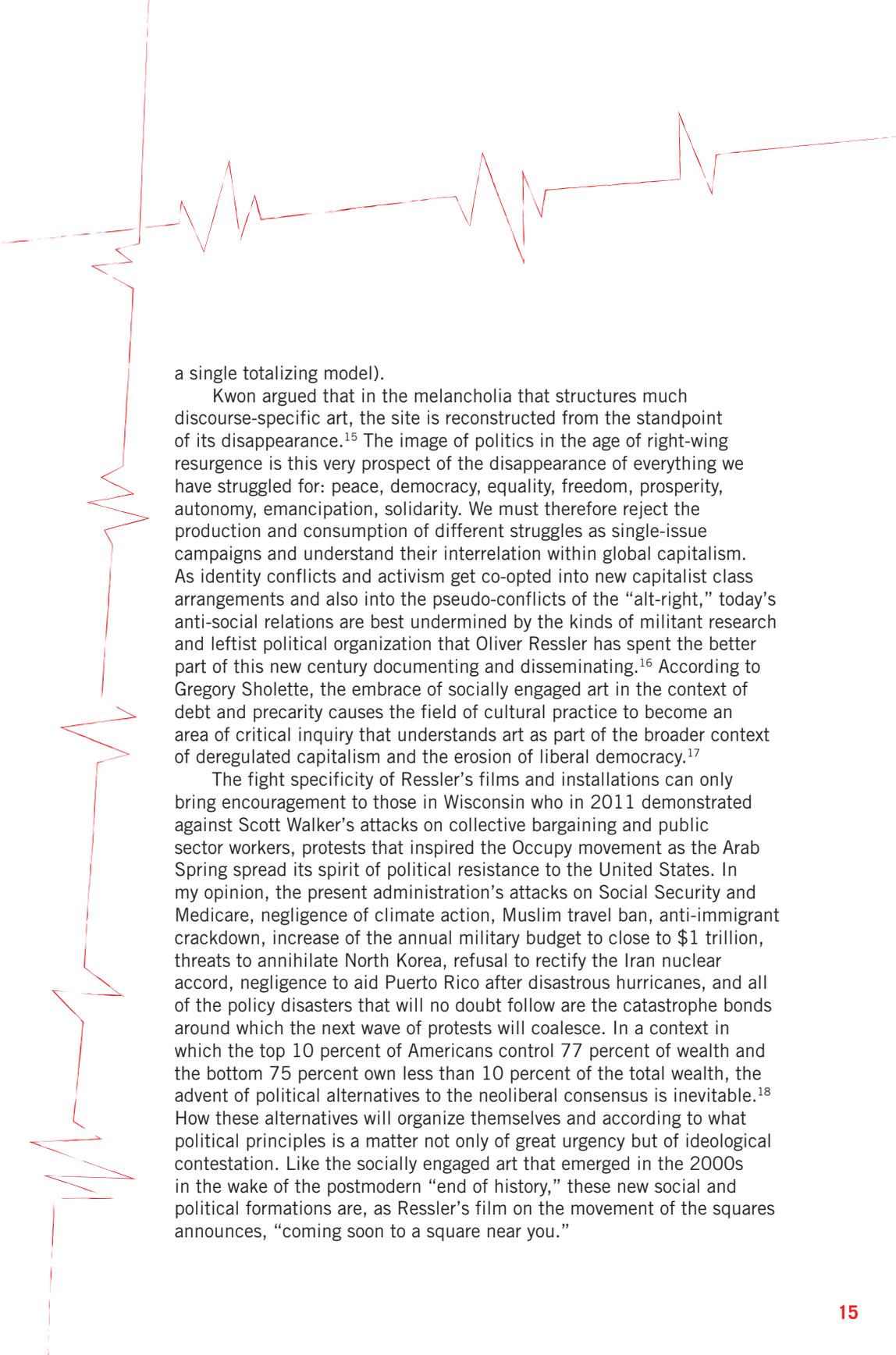
new kinds of contradictions, least of all the potential for depoliticization and the commodification of sociality. The same is true for post-Fordist art practices.<sup>7</sup> As one of Ressler's most recent films has it: Everything is coming together while everything is falling apart. Today's totally networked bioglobal capitalocene is an almost completely integrated world system that is creating new kinds of problems and demands new kinds of solutions. Ressler and the curators of this exhibition refer to this situation as "catastrophe bonds," referring to both the financial derivatives that come along with disaster capitalism and the kinds of social solidarity that sometimes emerge as a result.

In a recent essay about Ressler's work, Marco Scotini draws on the work of the postmodern philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze to suggest that today's post-Fordist social factory regulates labor in the provision of services that trade on knowledge and culture, signs and symbols, affect, identity, and subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> This represents a shift from societies based on institutional discipline and enclosure, like factories, schools, prisons, and families, toward that of societies of soft control, in which people are encouraged by neoliberal capitalism to transform themselves into human capital and invest in themselves in a creative process of lifelong learning. Like someone in a reality TV show or a simulation film, the "flexible personality" that corresponds to this "new spirit of capitalism" must negotiate the risks involved in a society that imposes both precarity and creativity.<sup>9</sup> Political organization as well as cultural practice have their equivalents to this soft control in the sense that, according to Scotini, movement activists do not propose any "single totalizing model" or any process of "indoctrination." As he puts it, "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."<sup>10</sup> In Scotini's reading of Ressler's films, the subjectivization that comes from participatory political frameworks must always remain open so that another world may indeed become possible. This is what social movement activists refer to as constituent power and direct democracy, in contrast with the representative institutions of liberal capitalism and the state socialist regimes of the "former East." In this sense, postmodern "art in the discursive field" departs from earlier radical theories based on Western Marxism and political economy. However, insofar as class issues are back on the agenda, today's activists must also consider the limitations of discourse theory and the schizoanalysis of the Deleuzians.<sup>11</sup>



During the course of political events in the last few decades and the advent of radical social movements, from the Zapatista uprising and the rise of anti-globalization protests, the student strikes against increased tuition, the anti-austerity movement, the movement of the squares of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, and new movements like Black Lives Matter, the various formations of leaderless anti-capitalist politics have at times coalesced but also remain fragmented. If in 2011, *Time* magazine could consider “The Protester” as Person of the Year, in 2016 that person was Donald Trump. The relatively well-organized and leaderless left can explain this transition with the same statement that Hillary Clinton made with the title of her new book: “What Happened.”<sup>12</sup> We know how 9/11 and the War on Terror defused the anti-globalization movement and that its re-emergence around 2011 and 2012 was then set back by more regime change operations and channeling of funds into the pockets of the growing class of Wall Street billionaires. Knowing that you are in an almost permanent state of emergency that is mismanaged by crony capitalism and compliant state regimes is already one step ahead of the former would-be president. As Max Horkheimer says, “Whoever is not prepared to talk about capitalism should also remain silent about fascism.”

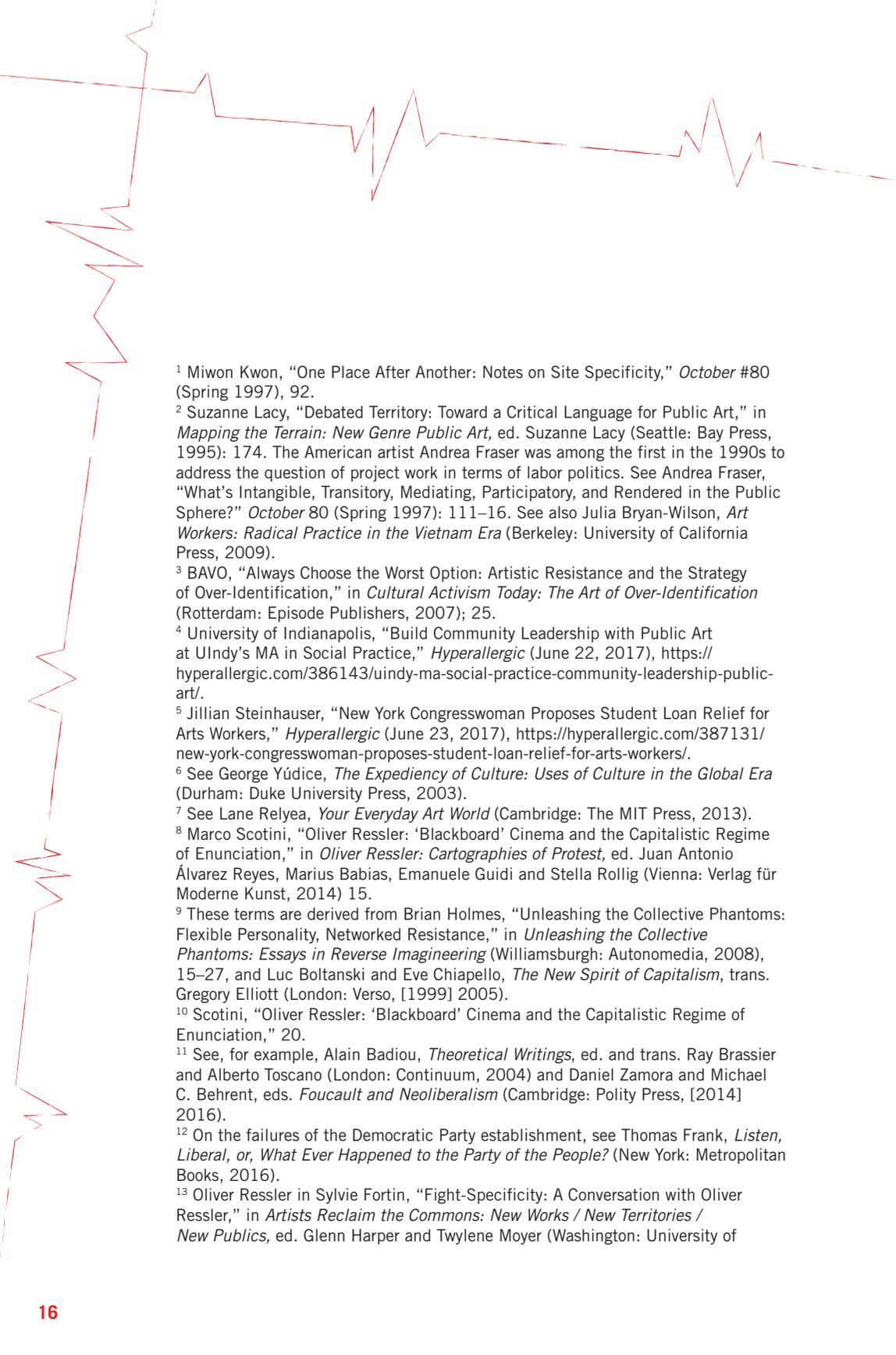
Based on an idea by the artist Bert Theis, Ressler has suggested that his work represents a kind of “fight specificity” through which he is able to make connections between different struggles against global capitalism that are happening internationally.<sup>13</sup> The works in the exhibition *Catastrophe Bonds* include research into alternative economic models (inclusive democracy, participatory economy, anarchist consensus, libertarian municipalism, etc.), resistance to American imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan, critiques of parliamentary democracy in late capitalist societies, indigenous politics, struggles against economic inequality, struggles for global citizenship and immigrant rights, struggles against debt bondage, struggles for worker control of workplaces, as well as ecological struggles for divestment in fossil fuels and limits to growth. For this kind of work, a new strategy for social movements and for artists would be to move beyond the “capitalist realism” that defines the sites we are engaging since a site cannot be understood outside of ideological and theoretical struggle.<sup>14</sup> We should also reject the reduction of activist art to discourse art in the sense that we need to rethink the kind of social constructionism that rests upon both compensatory relativism (the emphasis on new subjectivities) as well as self-deceptive totalizations (the perception of the radical left in limited terms as indoctrination and as



a single totalizing model).

Kwon argued that in the melancholia that structures much discourse-specific art, the site is reconstructed from the standpoint of its disappearance.<sup>15</sup> The image of politics in the age of right-wing resurgence is this very prospect of the disappearance of everything we have struggled for: peace, democracy, equality, freedom, prosperity, autonomy, emancipation, solidarity. We must therefore reject the production and consumption of different struggles as single-issue campaigns and understand their interrelation within global capitalism. As identity conflicts and activism get co-opted into new capitalist class arrangements and also into the pseudo-conflicts of the “alt-right,” today’s anti-social relations are best undermined by the kinds of militant research and leftist political organization that Oliver Ressler has spent the better part of this new century documenting and disseminating.<sup>16</sup> According to Gregory Sholette, the embrace of socially engaged art in the context of debt and precarity causes the field of cultural practice to become an area of critical inquiry that understands art as part of the broader context of deregulated capitalism and the erosion of liberal democracy.<sup>17</sup>

The fight specificity of Ressler’s films and installations can only bring encouragement to those in Wisconsin who in 2011 demonstrated against Scott Walker’s attacks on collective bargaining and public sector workers, protests that inspired the Occupy movement as the Arab Spring spread its spirit of political resistance to the United States. In my opinion, the present administration’s attacks on Social Security and Medicare, negligence of climate action, Muslim travel ban, anti-immigrant crackdown, increase of the annual military budget to close to \$1 trillion, threats to annihilate North Korea, refusal to rectify the Iran nuclear accord, negligence to aid Puerto Rico after disastrous hurricanes, and all of the policy disasters that will no doubt follow are the catastrophe bonds around which the next wave of protests will coalesce. In a context in which the top 10 percent of Americans control 77 percent of wealth and the bottom 75 percent own less than 10 percent of the total wealth, the advent of political alternatives to the neoliberal consensus is inevitable.<sup>18</sup> How these alternatives will organize themselves and according to what political principles is a matter not only of great urgency but of ideological contestation. Like the socially engaged art that emerged in the 2000s in the wake of the postmodern “end of history,” these new social and political formations are, as Ressler’s film on the movement of the squares announces, “coming soon to a square near you.”



<sup>1</sup> Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* #80 (Spring 1997), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Lacy, "Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995): 174. The American artist Andrea Fraser was among the first in the 1990s to address the question of project work in terms of labor politics. See Andrea Fraser, "What's Intangible, Transitory, Mediating, Participatory, and Rendered in the Public Sphere?" *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 111–16. See also Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> BAVO, "Always Choose the Worst Option: Artistic Resistance and the Strategy of Over-Identification," in *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification* (Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2007); 25.

<sup>4</sup> University of Indianapolis, "Build Community Leadership with Public Art at UIIndy's MA in Social Practice," *Hyperallergic* (June 22, 2017), <https://hyperallergic.com/386143/uiindy-ma-social-practice-community-leadership-public-art/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jillian Steinhauser, "New York Congresswoman Proposes Student Loan Relief for Arts Workers," *Hyperallergic* (June 23, 2017), <https://hyperallergic.com/387131/new-york-congresswoman-proposes-student-loan-relief-for-arts-workers/>.

<sup>6</sup> See George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> See Lane Relyea, *Your Everyday Art World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Marco Scotini, "Oliver Ressler: 'Blackboard' Cinema and the Capitalistic Regime of Enunciation," in *Oliver Ressler: Cartographies of Protest*, ed. Juan Antonio Álvarez Reyes, Marius Babias, Emanuele Guidi and Stella Rollig (Vienna: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2014) 15.

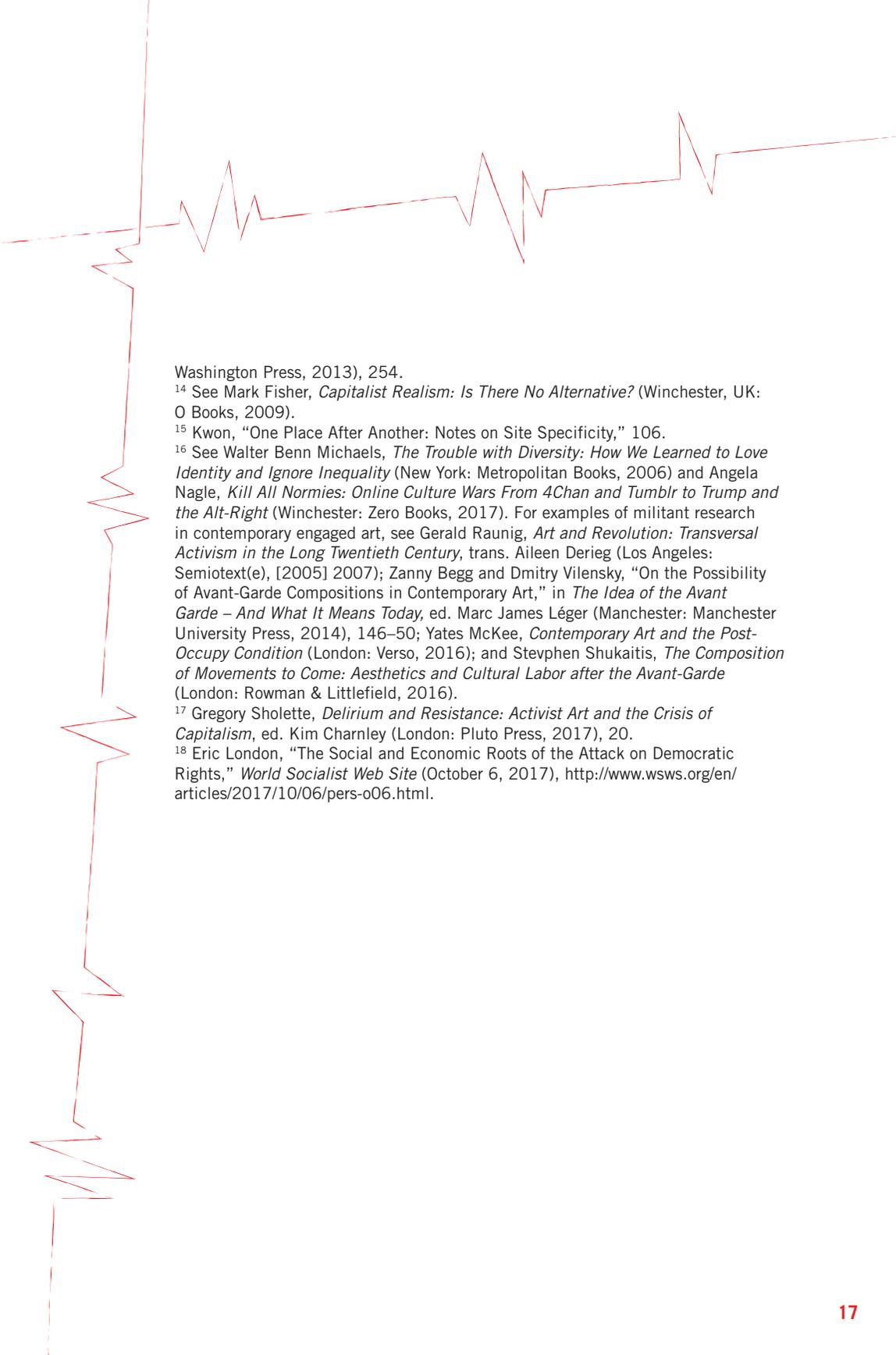
<sup>9</sup> These terms are derived from Brian Holmes, "Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Flexible Personality, Networked Resistance," in *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (Williamsburgh: Autonomedia, 2008), 15–27, and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, [1999] 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Scotini, "Oliver Ressler: 'Blackboard' Cinema and the Capitalistic Regime of Enunciation," 20.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004) and Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, eds. *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, [2014] 2016).

<sup>12</sup> On the failures of the Democratic Party establishment, see Thomas Frank, *Listen, Liberal, or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Ressler in Sylvie Fortin, "Fight-Specificity: A Conversation with Oliver Ressler," in *Artists Reclaim the Commons: New Works / New Territories / New Publics*, ed. Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer (Washington: University of



Washington Press, 2013), 254.

<sup>14</sup> See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," 106.

<sup>16</sup> See Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006) and Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2017). For examples of militant research in contemporary engaged art, see Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), [2005] 2007); Zanny Begg and Dmitry Vilensky, "On the Possibility of Avant-Garde Compositions in Contemporary Art," in *The Idea of the Avant Garde – And What It Means Today*, ed. Marc James Léger (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 146–50; Yates McKee, *Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London: Verso, 2016); and Stephen Shukaitis, *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor after the Avant-Garde* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Gregory Sholette, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Kim Charnley (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Eric London, "The Social and Economic Roots of the Attack on Democratic Rights," *World Socialist Web Site* (October 6, 2017), <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2017/10/06/pers-o06.html>.

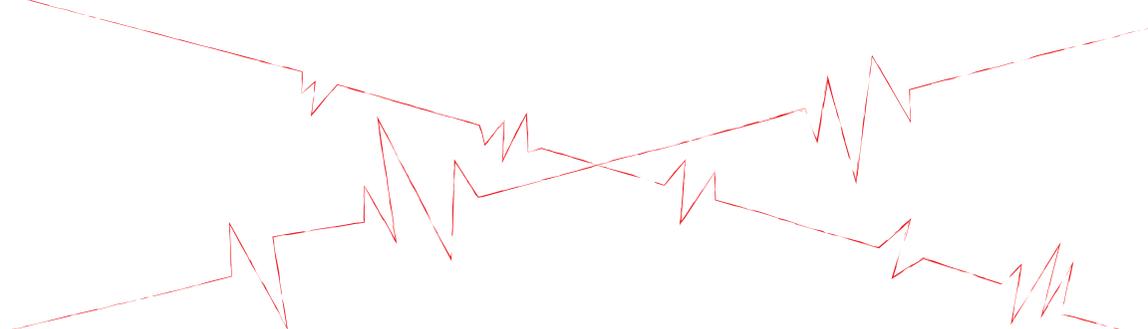
**CLEARLY, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES DO NOT OCCUR IN A SOCIAL VACUUM. NOR DO THEY GUARANTEE THAT A**

## **DECENTRALIZED MUNICIPALITY**

**EVEN IF IT IS STRUCTURALLY DEMOCRATIC, WILL NECESSARILY BE HUMANE, RATIONAL, AND ECOLOGICAL IN DEALING WITH PUBLIC AFFAIRS.**

## **LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM**

**IS PREMISED ON THE STRUGGLE TO ACHIEVE A RATIONAL AND ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY, A STRUGGLE THAT DEPENDS ON EDUCATION AND ORGANIZATION. FROM THE BEGINNING, IT PRESUPPOSES A GENUINELY DEMOCRATIC DESIRE BY PEOPLE TO ARREST THE GROWING POWERS OF THE **NATION-STATE** AND RECLAIM THEM FOR THEIR COMMUNITY AND THEIR REGION.**



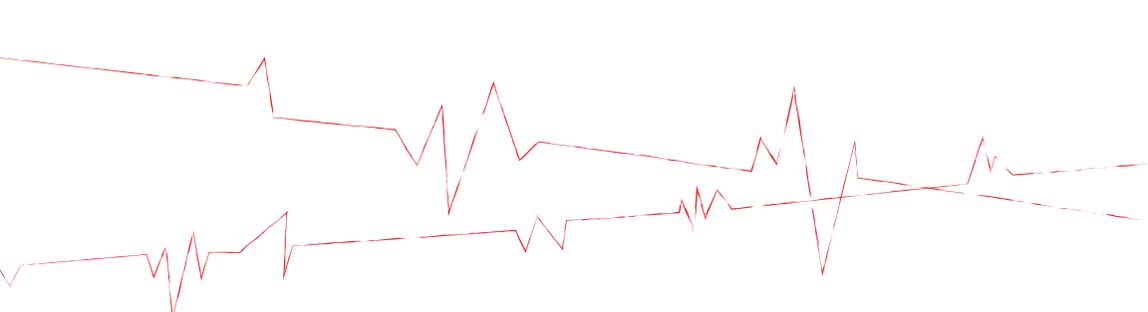
## **Precarity and Protest: States of Democracy in the Work of Oliver Ressler**

*Jennifer A. González*

There can be little doubt that we live at a moment in human history more precarious than any other. The evidence that our planet is rapidly transforming due to human ecological impact on the environment is incontrovertible, despite the efforts of governments and other social institutions to turn a blind eye. There are more political, economic, and war refugees than ever before.<sup>1</sup> As natural resources become scarce and whole populations are made homeless, the wealthy and privileged populations continue to operate in a state of denial. Fortunately, the arts provide a platform from which to enunciate the truths of inequality and injustice, of climate devastation and corporate greed. Before censorship quells dissident voices, the arts continue to speak with incisive clarity.

Oliver Ressler navigates this political landscape with particular attention to the enunciative possibilities of activist film and installation art. For the past two decades, his video and film installations, digital archives, and audio recordings offer alternative “scenes” of speech, sometimes reviving the social function of town squares or offering an antidote to the silence that typically surrounds repressive spaces, such as prisons and immigrant detention centers. His work helps to invigorate thinking regarding the value and importance of orality today, and to complicate the concept of free speech by exploring the hierarchical relations among bodies, words, and platforms that frame new kinds of democracy.

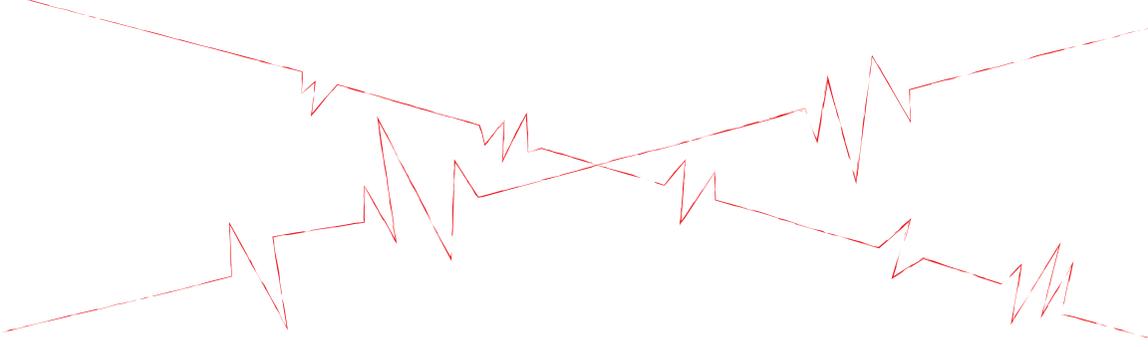
In the mid-2000s, Ressler launched a multi-year project to explore the complexities of democracy as a social, political, and international phenomenon. In 2007, he created *Fly Democracy*, a video installation that focused on the leafleting of both Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States government. In addition to dropping bombs, the U.S. military dropped thousands of paper documents that called upon enemy soldiers to desert and warned civilians to keep their distance from military targets, and it distributed political messages explaining the supposed democratic reasons for the attack.<sup>2</sup> Ressler’s video loop showed papers falling from a brilliant blue sky and individuals picking them up to read them, simultaneously making their message visible to the camera and legible to those viewing the screen. The message had changed, however, as Ressler notes: “Ten flyers set forth current political arguments on behalf of direct or participatory forms of democracy, all of which stand in contradiction to the model of formal democracy that – embedded in



a neoliberal, capitalist state – is imposed by the United States.”<sup>3</sup> In front of the screen, piles of scattered leaflets on the gallery floor invite viewers to read more carefully and take home. The irony of leafleting enemies (and potential allies) from the sky, of course, is that there is no possibility of response, no conversation to join, no voice or human exchange. A white rain of patronizing ideology takes the place of real diplomatic or social engagement with those on the ground below. *Fly Democracy* provides a moment of comparison of and reflection on democracy in its contested instantiations.

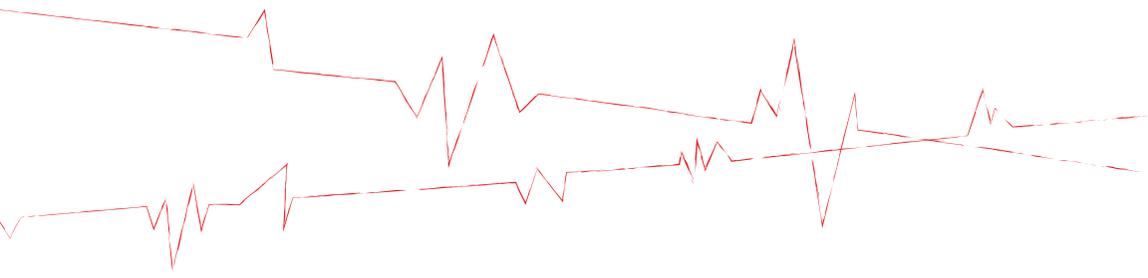
Ressler’s next project took him to 18 cities around the world: Amsterdam, Berkeley, Berlin, Bern, Budapest, Copenhagen, London, Melbourne, Moscow, New York, Paris, Rostock, San Francisco, Sydney, Taipei, Tel Aviv, Thessaloniki, and Warsaw. In each city, at least one local interviewee was asked to respond to a set of questions regarding democracy from theoretical and practical perspectives, both regionally and internationally. The resulting eight-channel video installation, *What Is Democracy?* (2009), offers a nuanced variety of responses to the question that the artist organized into eight independent sections titled “Rethinking Representation,” “Politics of Exclusions,” “Secrecy Instead of Democratic Transparency,” “New Democracies?,” “Is Representative Democracy a Democracy?,” “Direct Democracy,” “Reclaiming Indigenous Politics,” and “Should We Consign the Western Democracy Model to the Ash Heap of History?” The film version of *What Is Democracy?* includes 15 of the 18 cities and proceeds from country to country, inviting us to consider the concerns and complexities of each geographical site. While it is clear that Ressler is interviewing scholars, activists, and community members who share his critical perspective on democracy, what emerges is a chorus of voices that articulate parallel conditions operative across the globe in the present moment. In these very different accounts, from different sectors of the public, in different cities and sites, we begin to see how democracy is viewed as incommensurable with other, stronger social formations such as race and class hierarchies, international labor laws, and economic disenfranchisement – and indeed democracy seems to be a weaker social structure than all of these other cultural formations of power.

In the first section of the film, “Rethinking Representation,” Lin Chalozin-Dovrat, a professor at the University of Tel Aviv, observes, “Democracy is based on the presupposition that there is a regime that may enforce a fair game. It promises that at the beginning or the starting point of the political game, all participants are equal. This equality is based on



identity. If we talk about direct democracy, [...] if we talk about Athens, all the participants were white males, and they enjoyed, also, some kind of equality of class. So, when we try to reproduce this same regime on a larger scale, we have a big problem, because at the starting point everybody has to be equal.” Of course, equality is a goal of many democracies, but rarely their starting point. And if it is not their starting point, Dovrat’s observation reveals the internal contradictions of modern democracy’s enactment. In Taipei, Kuan-Hsing Chen, the author of the book *Asia as Method*, recognizes that democracy is a Western European invention that has been exported internationally, sometimes through colonialism or other forms of cultural domination. He comments, “Even by now, everyone is asking, what is the alternative to representative democracy? My answer would be, let everywhere try to experiment, try to sort out what is best for themselves in different places. There are different histories, there are different possibilities to come up with different rules of ruling and self-governing. Here, I think the real form of democracy does not operate on the level of the state, but on the level of the social, of the society. Smaller groups are there to maintain their own autonomy, which can no longer be touched by the political party or the state. It is in that form that the society maintains its own democratic principles.” Following Ressler’s interrogative approach, the interviewees also ask questions and offer alternative visions of democracy. If we agree with Chantal Mouffe that public spaces are always striated and hegemonically structured, we can begin to see how such artworks, that work cartographically, both demonstrate this very fact as well as work to unsettle notions of how democracy, as an idea, operates conceptually across borders.<sup>4</sup> We are invited to consider each subject as unique, but also to imagine their role, their position in a broader topology of democracy, not merely because of their physical, geographical location, but also because of their articulation of a topology of democratic ideals, democratic practices, or democratic desires.

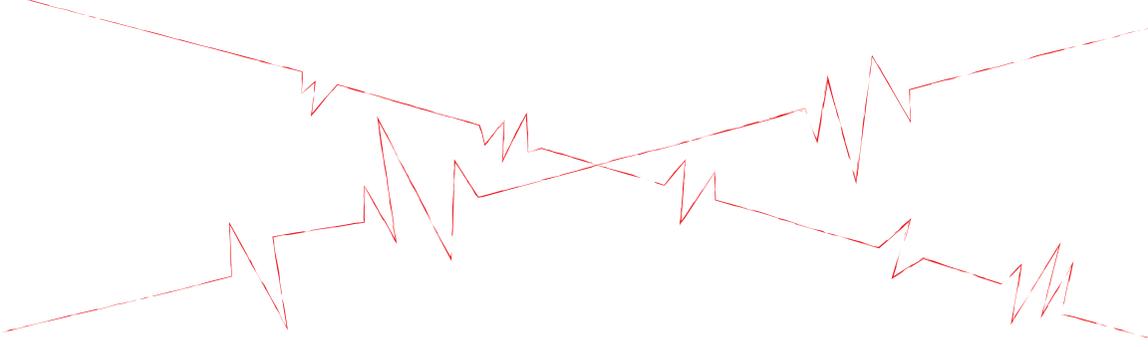
The film stages straightforward headshots of the interviewees talking directly to the camera, while Ressler’s own presence and questions are omitted. Each speaker thus seems to offer a monologue on the topic of democracy, but the film retains a conversational feel – the speakers seem to be addressing the audience candidly. There is little stylistic variation in each shot, but Ressler carefully places his subjects in evocative public spaces that might otherwise serve as democratic zones of the city. For example, Chen speaks in the popular Taipei Art Park in Taipei, Noortje



Marres speaks in front of the former city hall of Amsterdam, Dovrat speaks standing on architectural ruins in Jaffa, and Boris Kagarlitsky speaks next to the Pushkin monument in Pushkin Square, Moscow. When Wolf-Dieter Narr speaks in front of an immigrant detention center in Berlin-Köpenick, he states, “I should perhaps start by saying that it is a scandal that there is such a thing as a detention center for deportees, a scandal that, in any sense, is a democratic human-rights scandal. The fact that people are ‘deported.’ Already the word is so difficult for me to accept. This so-called legality shows that these representative democracies are fundamentally wrong. This is obviously another contradiction of representative democracy – namely, that the representative democracy and the state with the famous core monopoly of legitimate physical violence has the inside and outside of a border to mark and defend, for whatever reason, from those it does not want.”

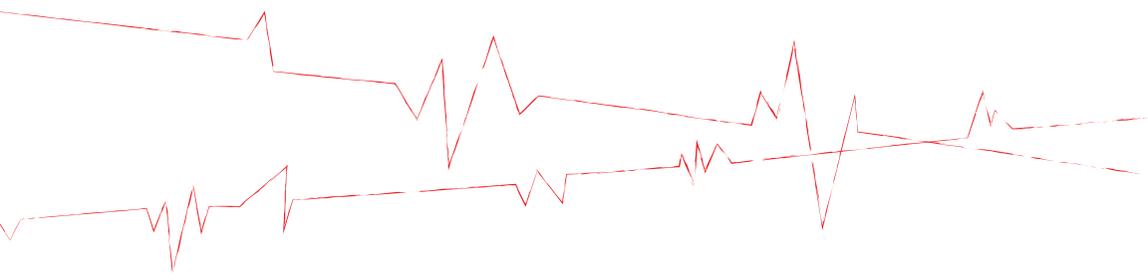
Each participant creates a scene of speech where public discourse should take place – such as public squares and detention centers – but does not, either because of an explicit prohibition or because the space has been rendered politically neutral by other discursive regimes. The names of the speakers and the locations of their interviews are placed on the screen as simple white text on a black ground, but these title sequences are preceded by long shots of the names of each city written somewhere in the urban landscape, such as signs posted on the street or in train stations, or frequently on commercial buildings or billboard advertising. The architectural scale of these commercial venues offers an alternative “scene” or visual topos regarding competing ownership of city space, the possibilities for vocalization, and the right of individuals to be seen and heard. Speech itself is addressed directly in several of the interviews. Kagarlitsky explains, “When you have television control, big press manipulated and monopolized by the big corporations, when you have big money controlling the electoral process, then elections are not really free. So the point is, how to give access to everybody to the public debate? Every relevant group which is involved in the discussion of the issues should also get access to the public debate. It is not only that you can say something that is relevant, but it is also important that people can hear what you are saying. So the problem in the West – and in Russia as well – is exactly repressive tolerance. You are allowed to speak, but you are not allowed to be heard. The system is originally very authoritarian in that respect, and that is exactly the obstacle we have to break.”

Scholar Judith Butler reminds us that the role of speech in political



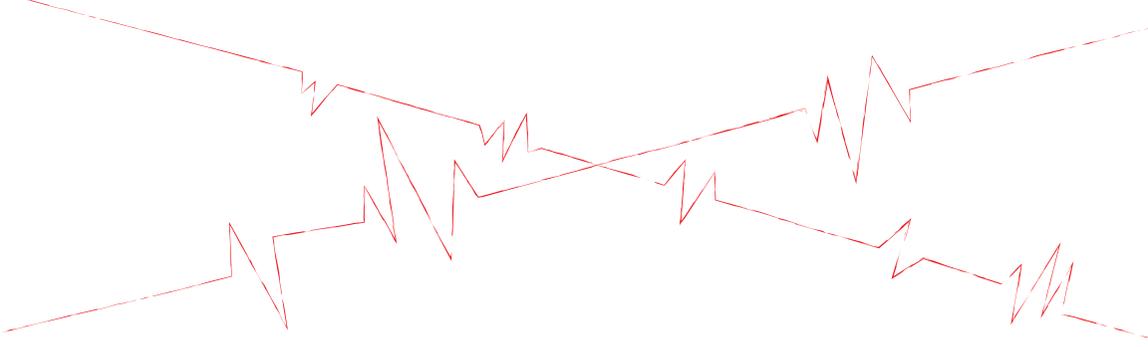
life is paradoxical: it is required for our daily survival and forms the core of our identities, yet often it is the very source of our oppression, the very locus of political, racist, or homophobic repression.<sup>5</sup> Language and speech can possess us, and yet leave us politically dispossessed. As the film unfolds, we see how each of the participants speaks to the conditions of possibility of their own speech acts and the degree to which their own democracies demarcate the accepted limits of political voicing. How do we begin to see not only the dilemmas of speech in a democratic context, but also the possibilities? How can democracy exceed the realm of the political? Nikos Panagos (Thessaloniki, Greece) argues, “We need a definition of democracy that will not confine itself to the narrowly defined political realm, but will also extend to the economic realm, and the broader social realm. That is, what we need is a broad conception of democracy. We call this broad conception of democracy ‘inclusive democracy.’” A similar sense of possibility can be found in the comments of Jenny Munroe, an aboriginal Australian speaking in Sydney, who suggests, “I would recommend all people who are questioning how the world is today to look to the indigenous societies and cultures, because the first peoples are the oldest surviving races in the world. [...] Their wisdom as peoples and as cultures has been sadly ignored. The type of democracy that comes from indigenous or aboriginal cultures and peoples is a sort of democracy that I would like to see learned about, around the world.” Panagos and Munroe question whether democracy can exist within the confines of traditional nation-states and current political systems, and instead suggest that a proper democracy exceeds this narrow framework; an “inclusive” democracy, or one based on indigenous cultural traditions, might provide a preferable model of community, participation, speech, and action.

One of the concerns of the present moment embedded in Munroe’s comment is whether, and to what degree, democracy can operate within the confines of nation-states and unequal economic systems. In Ressler’s video *Emergency Turned Upside-Down* (2016), a chalkboard-like animation of white sketched lines on a black background provide iconic and graphic illustrations to accompany a female voiceover. She comments on the condition of contemporary nations, refugee crises, and border-control politics and policies. Refugees fleeing wars and famine in North Africa and the Middle East are finding that wealthier European nations are becoming less willing to admit them. Border politics are become more and more exclusive, yet undocumented workers still play an integral role in



supporting the economies of wealthier states. National borders are shown to function primarily as porous gateways for the control of wealth. *Emergency Turned Upside-Down* points to the ways that “the dream of nation as ‘nature’ is race hallucination, even when called ‘national culture.’” The capitalist market is another kind of “artificial nature” that pits nations and ethnicities against each other in order to better create conditions of cheap labor and “competitive” business. Ressler’s film draws attention to the fact that the so-called “emergency” of war is rather an outgrowth of a different emergency created by uneven and unjust accumulations of wealth, the residue of colonial interventions, and the devastation of climate change. The artwork is particularly timely as the recent (2017) Trump administration’s reversal of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy in the U.S. may result in as many as 800,000 U.S. residents, primarily of Latin American descent, being deported to countries they left as infants or young children. African, Arab, and Latino bodies are treated as “undesirable” and expendable, as dangerous and invasive, and as the source of a “crisis” in Europe and the United States.

The real emergency, of which mass migrations of political and economic refugees are only the symptom, is an unchecked rapacious and militarized capitalism that extracts natural resources for profit and supports those national regimes that guarantee good business. Farmers and indigenous populations are thrown off their land, fledgling democracies and socialist governments are undermined, and profit leads all considerations of ecological or humanitarian health. In the multi-screen *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* (2003–2008), Ressler provides the ground for imagining a different future. A room-sized installation is encircled with monitors on desks, each with a different speaker discussing diverse political and economic systems such as “Inclusive Democracy,” “Participatory Economy,” “Anarchist Consensual Democracy,” “Libertarian Municipalism,” “Caring Labor,” “Free Cooperation,” and others. Taped across the floor, long lines of vinyl text echo some of the words spoken in each monologue, creating a criss-crossed visual intersection in the center of the floor. Like a silent chorus, the invited scholars who appear on the screen speak wordlessly from the margins. Their voices are isolated by the artist’s use of headphones for each monitor; visitors must sit to listen to the speakers individually. In many of his works, Ressler uses the same devices (monitors, banners, signs, and slogans) employed by advertising campaigns and political



propaganda. As Marco Scotini writes, “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.”<sup>6</sup> Familiar form, unfamiliar content: The strategy invites visitors into reimagining the possibilities for content, for speech, and for the operations of enunciation.

Ressler comments on democracy but also enacts it by interjecting alternative voices into an exclusionary discourse of politics and refusing to cede linguistic terrain. His works invite us to question how democracy, in its current guise, must be transformed if it is to truly support liberty, equality, and justice for all. Jacques Rancière notes, “One does not practice democracy except under the form of these *mise-en-scènes* that reconfigure the relations of the visible and the sayable.”<sup>7</sup> By creating new *mise-en-scènes*, Ressler invites us to imagine the possibility and urgency of reconfiguring the futures of democracies, if they – and we – are to have a future.

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<sup>1</sup> “We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before,” said U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres. UNHCR, June 18, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2015/6/558193896/worldwide-displacement-hits-all-time-high-war-persecution-increase.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Ressler, “Fly Democracy,” [http://www.ressler.at/fly\\_democracy/](http://www.ressler.at/fly_democracy/) (accessed September, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Marco Scotini, “Oliver Ressler: ‘Blackboard’ Cinema and the Capitalist Regime of Enunciation,” in *Oliver Ressler: Cartographies of Protest*, (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2014), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, “Dissenting Words,” *Diacritics*, 30, no. 2 (2000): 125.

**NO ONE CAN MAKE  
GOOD DECISIONS  
WITHOUT ACCURATE AND  
COMPREHENSIVE INFORMATION.  
IF YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO VOTE, BUT  
YOU LACK INFORMATION BEARING  
ON YOUR OPTIONS, THE VOTE  
BECOMES A CHARADE. TO  
PARTICIPATE INTELLIGENTLY, PEOPLE  
NEED INFORMATION  
ABOUT THE DECISIONS THAT AFFECT  
THEM. EFFORTS TO “OPEN THE BOOKS”  
IN WORKPLACES AND REGARDING  
CITY, COUNTY, STATE, AND NATIONAL  
BUDGETS PROMOTE SELF-MANAGE-  
MENT BY MAKING INFORMATION  
AVAILABLE, A CONDITION CENTRAL  
TO SELF-MANAGEMENT.**

SOURCE: MICHAEL ALBERT, MOVING FORWARD – PROGRAM FOR A PARTICIPATORY ECONOMY, 2000

## Catastrophe Bonds: An Interview with Oliver Ressler

*This interview was conducted as an online exchange between Brandon Bauer and Oliver Ressler during the summer of 2017.*

**Brandon Bauer:** When we were discussing this exhibition and deciding on the title, you suggested “Catastrophe Bonds,” which I was immediately drawn to for the layers of meaning I found in the phrase. Can you talk about what this phrase means to you, and why you proposed it for the title of the exhibition?

**Oliver Ressler:** Catastrophe bonds are financial derivatives and more or less what the name suggests: The holder gets a payout in the event of a specified natural or other disaster. In times when permanent financial and economic crisis and global warming – all themes that are addressed in this show – have become the new normal, catastrophe bonds will become more important. Central to the concept of the exhibition was the second meaning of bonds when choosing this title; it is the social solidarity under crisis conditions, the belief in people’s capacity to self-organize, that connects all of the works in this exhibition.

**BB:** Before diving into some questions about your work, I would like to ask, what were some of your earliest influences? What made you pursue art? How did you begin down the path to the work you have been developing throughout your career?

**OR:** I made the decision to become an artist as a teenager. I was interested in political issues at an early age; I wanted to find out about the world and how it functions. With 24 or 25 years, I managed for the first time to bring together these two fields of interest, art and politics – to merge them, to express political things through the means of art. While still being a student at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, I moved to installation and graphic works, which I managed for the first time to present in public space in the mid-1990s. I was interested and influenced by many different things. Political artists such as Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, or John Heartfield definitely played an important role, but also ACT UP and the exhibition programs at Shedhalle in Zürich or Galerie Metropol in Vienna.

**BB:** I first encountered your work through the exhibition *The Interventionists*, curated by Nato Thompson at MASS MoCA in 2004, in which your video work *Disobbedienti* was exhibited. This piece documents a group of Italian activists engaged in civil disobedience actions during demonstrations against organizations like the WTO, IMF, and G8. They were a part of the broader movement against corporate globalization – often called the Global Justice Movement or alter-globalization movement – which has been described as a “movement of movements.” Given that you have been documenting these kinds of grassroots social movements – from the Global Justice Movement to Occupy Wall Street and the European Movement of the Squares, as well as the current Global Climate Justice movement – over the past two decades, what are your observations? It seems as if your documentation from inside these movements is meant to be instructive about how to engage in this kind of activism. How do you see these various movements as related, and how are they different? What do you think young activists can learn from these movements?

**OR:** All these movements are leaderless, horizontally organized movements. Decisions are being made directly, without representation. All confront the capitalist system, but in different ways. The Tute Bianche and *Disobbedienti* directly confronted the police, attempting to enter the red zones of the summits. This tactic was militarily defeated by extreme police violence at the demonstrations against the G8 summit in Genoa. Today’s tactics are smarter; many of the movements attempt not to directly confront police but use tactics such as the five-finger tactic to flow through police lines. A less-male concept is also more inclusive toward women and younger, less experienced people who are just about to join the movements. I think it is important to learn about all these kinds of activism as it enables people in struggles to use certain ideas and to apply them to what fits to the specific local contexts in which people are active. Therefore, my analytic films are also regularly used by activists.

**BB:** I find a consistent thread in your work of documenting social movements from a very intimate perspective. You do not create an objective remove between the camera and what is being documented, but that technique allows the viewer to become a fly on the wall as these movements negotiate their ideals, tactics, and strategies. A good example of this is your piece *Take the Square*, although this approach is used in



several works. Where did this approach to your work begin? What do you intend to convey with this approach?

**OR:** I first applied this method documenting a demonstration against the World Economic Forum in Salzburg (Austria) in 2001, where demonstrators were encircled in a police “kettle” and detained for seven hours. I was among the 900 encircled demonstrators. I created the film *This Is What Democracy Looks Like!* that consisted of voices of demonstrators from inside the kettle. I worked with several movements and, in broad terms, identify with these movements. This creates the possibility to establish situations where the only language comes from participants of the movements. For *Take the Square*, I initiated a situation that created the opportunity for activists from the Occupy and Square movements to speak. I asked four to six people to meet on one of the squares that were used for the occupations, adopted the existing format of the “working group” of the movements, and used it to make the participants discuss with each other along a few questions I outlined. These were primarily questions about organization, decision-making processes, and the meaning and the function of the occupation. I recorded a couple of these conversations at squares in Athens, Madrid, and New York, and the most interesting ones were used in an edited form in my film and three-channel video installation *Take the Square*.

**BB:** What do you see as your role in the movements you bring light to? Are you documenting? Are you participating? Is your work advocating on behalf of these movements?

**OR:** I think it is a combination of all of this. I felt the necessity to be involved in these movements. I think the involvement that makes the most sense for the movements and myself is to work with and about the movements, to produce something that can be used by the activists themselves. While my first films on the alter-globalization movement were driven from the desire to transfer this moment of excitement of a political event, in doing these films I became more and more aware how these pieces not only document reality but also construct reality. To participate in a movement opens certain windows, certain possibilities. Over the years I have participated internationally in a considerable number of people’s assemblies, working meetings of social movements, demonstrations, blockades, and mass actions of civil disobedience, and I have often



recorded these activities. For some time, I have been personally unsure whether my artistic work relating to activism should be described as activist work, or indeed whether I should be seen as a participant of these movements at all. Was I an activist by virtue of this activity, or was I rather a sympathetic observer positioned in solidarity with the object of research? I still have no definite answer to this question, partly because my practice of varying strategies between one project and the next could generate different answers in each particular case. But I have received an answer many times over from activists and movement participants when presenting and discussing my work both within an art-world context and outside it. Social movement activists have repeatedly told me they regard me as part of the movements because of the way I approach my work. They see my work as wholly unlike that of even the most personally sympathetic print or broadcast journalist, whose reporting is bound by a professional code of neutrality to eliminate all trace of such sympathies. Whether neutrality is epistemologically possible at all in politically contested matters is doubtful, to say the least; what is beyond doubt is that neutrality or impartiality in hegemonic media organizations means compliance with political precepts held to be self-evident.

**BB:** That is very interesting. Along with that, I have noticed in a number of interviews you are often asked if what you are doing is art and how you justify that position. Do you find this to be a tiresome question? I can imagine it could be frustrating to constantly justify what you do as art, even if your position in documenting these movements is not neutral or removed from the subject and the concerns they advocate.

**OR:** At the beginning of my artistic development I only had very few possibilities to publicly speak about my work. I remember I found it quite annoying to work a year on a project, accumulate such a lot of knowledge on a theme, and the audience is not so much interested in the theme itself, but more in the question whether this is art or not. I have the impression the more my work is presented internationally, the more my work was shown in major museums, festivals, and biennales, this question about the status of my work loses importance. What is defined as art is of course a question of negotiation, and the negotiation power of a major art institution is a big one. Today the question why what I am doing is art still pops up from time to time, but I don't care anymore. I have the feeling in the meantime the main focus is on the content of my work and the formats

and specific strategies I use to get the work done. This is a change that satisfies me a lot.

**BB:** Given the nature of your work as we were just discussing, I can understand why this question is asked of you, but I think asking you to justify your work as art just skims the surface of what this question implies. What I am wondering, in a more in-depth way, is if you find that art and its related discourses offer something more to the dialog you are trying to engage that would not be possible if your work were more formally in the vein of documentary filmmaking, journalism, or academic study. What is it that the field of art offers your work that other forms of discourse do not or cannot?

**OR:** Some of my works have connections to critical, investigative journalism. But even in those works where this connection exists there might be elements in the work that would not be acceptable in journalism or in an academic study. I reject the idea of neutrality, and usually do not include the voices of representatives of the state or of corporations. Many of my works are being presented as multi-channel video installations in exhibitions, which allows experiencing the work while walking in the space. A spatial presentation creates new forms of visibility; the audience can explore different perspectives on a work while walking through an exhibition. Presenting the films with different actions of civil disobedience simultaneously, for example in the work *Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart*, next to each other at the same time creates a much stronger impact than to see these actions one after another in a linear way like in a cinema. Also my work can take the form of photography or text and image montages that are being presented in public space or in exhibitions. These formats are even further away from the fields you mention. The field of art allows me to choose any of these formats according to what I need to carry out for a particular idea. I can also change the format in the process of production or editing, when I see another format fits better to the topic. I don't know any other field but art where I can work like this.

**BB:** I can see art offers flexibility in the way you approach communicating your ideas that other forms may not. I find the methods you employ in your work to be pragmatic. How would you describe your approach to making? How do you decide what strategies to employ to communicate your ideas?

How do you choose your subjects? What is that process like from the initial kernel of the idea to its final realization?

**OR:** There is no single answer for this question; it changes a lot from project to project. There are some projects where I hear about a specific theme and start thinking about how to best connect to it through an artwork. But I also get invitations from art institutions to work on a specific theme or to create work for a very specific context in a museum. There are projects where I need to raise funds myself, and other ones where the entire budget comes with an invitation. There are (smaller) projects that need to be done in a few weeks, others on which I work for five years. There are in any case topics that have been really central for me for many years – democracy, ecological issues, capitalism, resistance, and alternative organizing. Most of my projects stay within this wide field of interest. Working on my projects allows me to commit a lot of time to do research on themes I am interested in. This is quite a privilege. I try to learn as much as possible about a specific topic before I start to work. In this research phase I already start collecting different ideas of how I could proceed formally, which angles I should take, which people to involve. But I have no blueprint how to get work done. It is a quite open-ended process that leaves space to the many unexpected things that happen when engaging with other people and specific situations. While I prepared for a long-planned trip to Istanbul to shoot my film *There Are No Syrian Refugees in Turkey* as part of my solo exhibition at SALT Galata in 2016, the attempted coup d'état took place. This had, as one might imagine, quite an impact on my shooting that took place only a couple of days afterward. Everything that had already been agreed on before needed to be renegotiated, and the attempted coup d'état became a central element of the film.

**BB:** Very interesting. Thank you for that example; I think it speaks to the flexibility you have in your work. To follow up, while I see your methods as being pragmatic, you often use a straightforward approach to complex subjects and concepts by using very direct methods. The subjects you present are very idealistic, yet these ideals are often negotiated as they confront reality. This creates a very interesting, almost dramatic, tension in your work. Is this intentional – or do you think this is a product of the types of subjects, situations, and ideas you are addressing?



**OR:** This has something to do with the nature of the subjects. For example I have been working on factories where workers did find ways to organize labor under their own control, most recently for the film and video installation *Occupy, Resist, Produce*. As a result of their struggles and radicalization through the struggles, the workers come up with great ideas of how to run their business differently, in a democratic manner. But when you produce something you cannot really escape the fact that there is still capitalism all around you, that your product will need to compete with those produced from factories run upon capitalist principles and under exploitative conditions. It is very hard to establish a successful worker-controlled enterprise under these circumstances – nearly impossible. It works best in situations where many of these worker-controlled businesses exist, so that they can engage in trade with each other, establish their own market based on the principle of solidarity, as it happened in Argentina, or if they exist in a situation where they have access to governmental support, as has been the case in Venezuela. If you are a single recuperated business in a Western European country, the situation is very, very difficult, and sometimes the ideals the workers had at the beginning begin to melt.

**BB:** That example does get to some of those nuances your approach allows for. I have noticed that many of your works can be seen either as a single-channel film or as a multi-channel installation. How do you determine this? Do you set out to create flexible works that can function in these different formats from the beginning, or is it more of a fluid process depending on the way the work takes shape as you are developing it? What decisions is it dependent upon?

**OR:** In most cases it is decided in the editing process whether it will be a single- or multi-channel video installation. For exhibitions, the multi-channel video installations work really well. Their disadvantage is they cannot be presented anywhere outside of exhibition spaces. My work very often is based on the voices of people in struggles, and I think the work I am doing that is based on these people's knowledge and experience must also be given back to them in a format they can access and share. Therefore, I also produce one-channel versions of many of my multi-channel video installations. So some of my larger works exist as films and video installation, and in some cases even related photographic works are produced as well.

**BB:** I have noticed in much of your video work you favor the mid-shot, particularly in interviews. What draws you to this shot type in your work?

**OR:** I assume it is simply the wish to put the speaking person in the center of the work. I like people who analyze the situation in which they are and let us learn about their specific struggles talking in front of the camera from a strong position. I do not only want to show the faces, but also part of the bodies, to see the gesticulating hands. And especially if you film not single people but groups of people talking to each other, the mid-shot is the most likely section to choose. It also leaves plenty of space for subtitles, as all my films get translated in different language versions.

**BB:** You have collaborated on a couple of films with Zanny Begg. These pieces have a distinct sensibility about them with the incorporation of animation. Can you talk about these collaborations? How did they come about? What is the collaborative process like in creating these works?

**OR:** I have been collaborating with Zanny Begg since 2007, when we started to work on our film *What Would It Mean to Win?* that merged interviews with activists, material recorded at the G8 blockades in Heiligendamm (Germany) with three animation sequences. Zanny has been doing drawings before, but this was the first time she did animation for a film. While in our first film, we were together while shooting and editing; in the collaborations that followed we shared the responsibilities and got the work done with each of us working on different parts of the production on different continents. For the film *The Bull Laid Bear* (2012), I carried out the interviews with economists and activists on the financial crisis and recorded them in different cities in the U.S. in front of a blue-screen, while Zanny did the animation work. This animation allowed us to construct a kind of semi-fictitious narration around the fraudulent bankers, dumb governments, and corrupt courts. It is a really interesting aspect of the film to construct a reality through animation that is not more unreal or fictitious than the “reality” presented to us as the reality of the economy, according to which we are still meant to believe neoliberal paradigms – for example, that private enterprises are more efficient than the state. The editing work we did together, but geographically distant from each other, with Zanny being based in Sydney, and myself in Vienna. Tight production budgets often do not allow us to meet, so we rather discuss everything via Skype.

**BB:** Your installation *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* is a pivotal piece in your *oeuvre*. Can you talk about how that piece came about? What was the initial impetus for it?

**OR:** I worked on *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* between 2003 and 2008, before the financial and economic crisis. I was kind of inspired by the well-known quote by Margaret Thatcher, “There is no alternative,” and thought it might be interesting to collect a few concepts or models that I considered important when we actually discuss alternatives. Of course, I am sure there must be an alternative. It was important not to highlight one concept, but to present several. Up to 2008, I produced 16 videos, each describing one model. A real democratic society cannot be achieved through a master plan that someone has in mind. It needs to be a large democratic process based on broad dialogue, involving as many people as possible. It has to be a kind of open, transparent, bottom-up development process. The idea of *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* was to create a space for thought, where people could inform themselves about the theme and strengthen their ideas of how a different economy and society might look.

**BB:** The scope of *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* is very ambitious; you are tackling big ideas in this installation. It seems, from what I have read, it came together in different stages and interviews were added in different iterations of the installation. Can you talk about the process of developing this work? How were interview subjects decided? How was the project funded? How many years did it take to come to its final shape, and how many versions did it go through before it came to its final state?

**OR:** I started the project with two solo exhibitions at Galerija Škuc in Ljubljana (Slovenia) in 2003 and at Kunstraum der Universität Lüneburg (Germany) in 2004. That included five videos that were funded as part of a project by eipcp, the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies. *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* was very successful from the beginning; I received numerous invitations to present it and traveled around with the project for several years. Whenever it was possible, I took part of the exhibition budget to create one more video. It finally became a 16-channel video installation in 2007. Even though I considered the project as ongoing and open-ended, I stopped working on it in 2008. Of



course my interest in alternatives continued, but I was keen on working in different formats and other contexts. *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* includes different models that were influenced by a socialist- or anarchist-thinking tradition, highlighting different ideas of direct decision-making processes and self-management, and aiming at flat hierarchies.

**BB:** The *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* installation seems to be generating a second wave of critical response. I know it was recently presented in the Museum of Capitalism in Oakland, California, and now it is here as the anchor for this survey of your work. What do you think of the reassessment and renewed interest in this installation?

**OR:** *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* was presented in 21 exhibitions between 2003 and 2008, in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Even though I had some of my works presented in the U.S., this specific installation was never presented in the U.S. It appears the extreme right-wing political shift has helped a bit in bringing *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* to North America. For me, it is exciting to install this work again, which is still the largest installation I worked on, and I am super-curious to learn how it will be perceived and if it will be able to generate a debate.

**BB:** Your installation *What Is Democracy?* has similarly been experiencing a critical reevaluation and was recently exhibited as a part of Documenta 14, in Kassel, Germany. What do you think of the reassessment and the renewed interest in this work?

**OR:** Both *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* and *What Is Democracy?* are closely connected with each other. While *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* directly draws on the knowledge of economists, political scientists, or historians who wrote or did profound research on specific models or concepts, *What Is Democracy?* is based on conversations with activists in 18 different cities around the world. They criticize the hegemonic model of representative democracy and refer to ideas of how democracy could be imagined differently, in a sense of really involving people in decision-making processes. We as a society are facing a multifaceted crisis – an economic, ecological, social, and political crisis. As my work not only analyzes and criticizes, but also provides space for



different forms of alternative organizing, there seems to be much interest in my work these days.

**BB:** The curators of Documenta 14 staged what has been described as a combative press conference during the Kassel opening, where they pledged to fight neofascism. The election of Donald Trump in the U.S. and Brexit in the U.K. are most often cited as harbingers of this new wave of reactionary politics across the U.S. and Europe. At the same time, there have been a number of events after the U.S. presidential election and after Brexit that seem to be halting the momentum of this Western right-wing populist revolt. Given your analysis and critique of politics over the last couple of decades, do you see these trends as a cause for alarm or as an aberration? Should artists and activists be rethinking their tactics in the face of neofascism, or do you see that analysis of the current political situation as alarmist?

**OR:** I see the entire political shift to the right as a central tendency of the past two decades, not only in the U.S. and in the U.K. This has clearly economic reasons. It has to do with the widening gap between rich and poor, which makes it more and more difficult to survive in this jungle. The pumping of trillions of dollars into the global financial system, into the pockets of banks, shareholders, and the super-rich, only leaves austerity for the majority. I see this increased inequality as a main reason for the right-wing antiestablishment backlash. Even the World Economic Forum, the annual gathering of world business and political leaders in Switzerland, warned that the growing concentration of income and wealth at the very top of society is the biggest single risk to the stability of the economic and political order. I hope the resistance against this shipwreck known as the economy will become stronger in the coming years globally, and I hope cultural producers can play an active role in this much-needed social transition process. Therefore I try to produce work that is not only informative, but also mobilizes people to become active.

**BB:** You have been critiquing representative forms of democracy for some time, and making an argument for more-direct forms of democratic engagement. In your work, you highlight the way activist organizations enact direct forms of democracy organizationally. Are there examples you are aware of that demonstrate a larger, more scalable way of enacting direct democracy in society as a way to move beyond representative forms?



This is an issue that was touched upon in your piece *What Is Democracy?* What is your answer to this question?

**OR:** Yeah, there are a few examples. The most well-known probably is the autonomous self-governed region of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico. Those capable of seeing behind this veil of lies generated by corporate media (and also a few more leftist ones) will find large-scale experiments involving millions of people in direct decision-making processes in Venezuela. The system of *Consejos Comunales* (community councils) was the most successful around 2010 when Venezuelans had the possibility to decide on their concerns collectively via assemblies in more than 30,000 *Consejos Comunales*. But direct decision-making also spreads to the economy; today, we find lots of worker-controlled companies.

**BB:** You focus considerable energy on documenting nonhierarchical direct forms of democracy in which consensus decision-making is the goal. While that may be laudable in these activist organizations, where everyone involved is working toward the same goal, how do you think that would translate into a larger form of social organization, especially in increasingly ideologically divided societies? If an obstruction occurs in representative forms, where an impasse can be overcome by the will of a majority, wouldn't consensus lead to the possibility of even more obstruction?

**OR:** Some groups move away from consensual decisions when they feel it does obstruct their work. Sometimes consensus is impossible to reach and those people who want to do something together move forward with what they want to achieve. Some groups decided a qualified majority is sufficient to take certain actions. I believe the most important thing is to build alliances between different groups who can agree on a set of terms to reach a specific goal (an action consensus). Those who don't agree simply do not participate. Certain ideals such as consensus must never be sacrosanct; otherwise, the result will be immobility and inaction.

**BB:** You have spent a great deal of time critiquing capitalism as an economic model in different ways, from the dictates of the market to the unregulated forms of post-Soviet capitalism, as well as the effects of the 2008 financial crisis and your investigations into theoretical alternatives to capitalism. Where did this vein of your work come from? When did you begin tackling capitalism as a central subject of your critique?



**OR:** In the mid-1990s, early in my artistic development, I was primarily focusing on ecological issues and this complex of immigration, right-wing politics, and borders. Working on and reading about these themes it became obvious that these issues have a common basis, which is capitalism. It was just much more difficult to address this directly in public at the time in comparison with today. The aftershocks of the global financial crisis changed many people's perceptions. In most Western European countries, the majority of people know capitalism isn't working to their advantage. The question stays: How to overcome it, through which strategies, and how to establish a truly democratic system?

**BB:** I can see that as a central question in your work, which leads to my next question: Several philosophers, from Fredric Jameson to Slavoj Žižek and others, have made the claim that for the prevailing ideology it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. I would say that much of your work refutes this ideology and suggests ways that the end of capitalism is something that can be envisioned. What are your thoughts on how capitalism limits our imagination to think beyond it?

**OR:** Well, the problem is, if we do not manage to end the capitalist system, “the end of the world” might come for more and more people as further regions and states will fail, will be governed by even more corrupt and fascist governments; the transnational corporations will take over even more of the existing wealth; and, as David Harvey states, the accumulation through dispossession will be intensified, pushing hundreds of millions in the Global South over the edge. But also, too-quick changes will lead to catastrophes. This will require a democratically driven transition period, the direction of which will be formed as a result of negotiation between emancipatory movements.

**BB:** Do you think that capitalism by its nature will always interfere with the functioning of democracy, or is there a market-based economic model that would be compatible with a direct democratic society? How does one create a liberatory economy? Perhaps this question is really about bringing us full circle again to the *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* installation: What are some of the alternative economic models that, in your view, hold the most promise for a world beyond capitalism?

**OR:** It is clear that the current system of neoliberal capitalism is not



compatible with direct democracy. Switzerland is a country with strong components of direct democracy. There are numerous cases when voters elected against their own interests, because they are afraid economic problems might occur otherwise. For example, in a referendum some years ago, Swiss people voted against limiting the payment of CEOs in corporations to 12 times of the lowest-paid staff because the industry was lobbying heavily against it, arguing it would undermine Switzerland's competitiveness. I think it will be impossible to run our complex societies without a certain amount of economic planning, especially for larger infrastructure projects, energy, public transport, etc., that require international coordination. This is also important ecologically, as global warming requires an incredibly large investment globally in new zero-energy housing, new public transport infrastructure, and investment in solar energy and windmills to outrun fossil fuels. And you can hand over a lot of economic activity to workers' control. Concepts such as Michael Albert's "Participatory Economy" or Takis Fotopoulos' "Inclusive Democracy" outline some brilliant ideas. But, as said, how the future economy will look will need to be decided through democratic means by movements in struggle.

**BB:** With this being the first survey of your work in the United States, what are your thoughts about the selection of works chosen for this exhibition? I know the threads the curatorial team were attempting to bring together in our selection of works, but what are your perceptions? What are the central ideas you see running through the works on view? Is there any work you would have liked to see added to the exhibition, or excluded?

**OR:** If there were works I wished to exclude, you can be sure I wouldn't have made them available for a presentation. I had several larger survey exhibitions in the past few years in Europe, most recently at MNAC – National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest; SALT Galata, Istanbul; and Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo – CAAC, Seville. In some, I was given a carte blanche and was free to present whatever works I wished. I, in part, took over the job of the curator as well, which gave me the possibility to review a few earlier works and to see how they work in a dialogue with newer works. I really love this work of looking back and seeing what is still valid. It is a bit different this time in that the curatorial team had a quite precise idea what they wanted to present. This has given me an opportunity to learn through this process which existing works the



curators think are of importance given the current political crisis in the United States.

**BB:** I do have one final question for you: Who or what currently inspires you, currently motivates you? What pushes you and your ideas forward? Also, is there anything you find yourself returning to as an inspirational ground, something or someone that continues to nourish you?

**OR:** I draw inspiration out of so many things. These can be self-organized autonomous zones, such as the ZAD in the west of France. I love meeting interesting people, activists, artists, filmmakers, and writers. I enjoy browsing the web doing research and to see exhibitions. Also, to participate in demonstrations or activities of civil disobedience can be really empowering. All these things combined provide inspiration for my work. I could come up with an idea for a new project every week. I am full of zest for action. The only limitation is a day's limitation of 24 hours.

# **PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY**

**REFERS TO THE ACTUAL ABILITY OF THE MAJORITY OF CITIZENS TO DECIDE OVER THE MOST IMPORTANT NATIONAL PUBLIC AFFAIRS IN THE FOUR CRUCIAL DIMENSIONS OF HUMAN REPRODUCTION: ECONOMICS, POLITICS, MILITARY AND CULTURE. IN THIS SENSE, IT CONCERNS A QUALITATIVE CHANGE OF FORMAL DEMOCRACY, IN WHICH THE CITIZEN'S ONLY POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING POWER LIES IN PERIODIC VOTES ON POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY REPRESENTATIVES.**

**IT CONCERNS THE END OF THE REPRESENTATIVE - IN TRUTH SUBSTITUTIVE - DEMOCRACY AND ITS REPLACEMENT THROUGH DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

## **Works on View**

**Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies** –  
16-Channel Video Installation, 2003–2008

**Fly Democracy** – Installation, 2007

**What Is Democracy?** – Film, 118 min., 2009

**Take the Square** – Film, 89 min., 2012

**The Right of Passage** – Film, 19 min., 2013

**Emergency Turned Upside-Down** – Film, 16 min., 2016

**Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart** –  
4-Channel Video Installation, 2016–2017

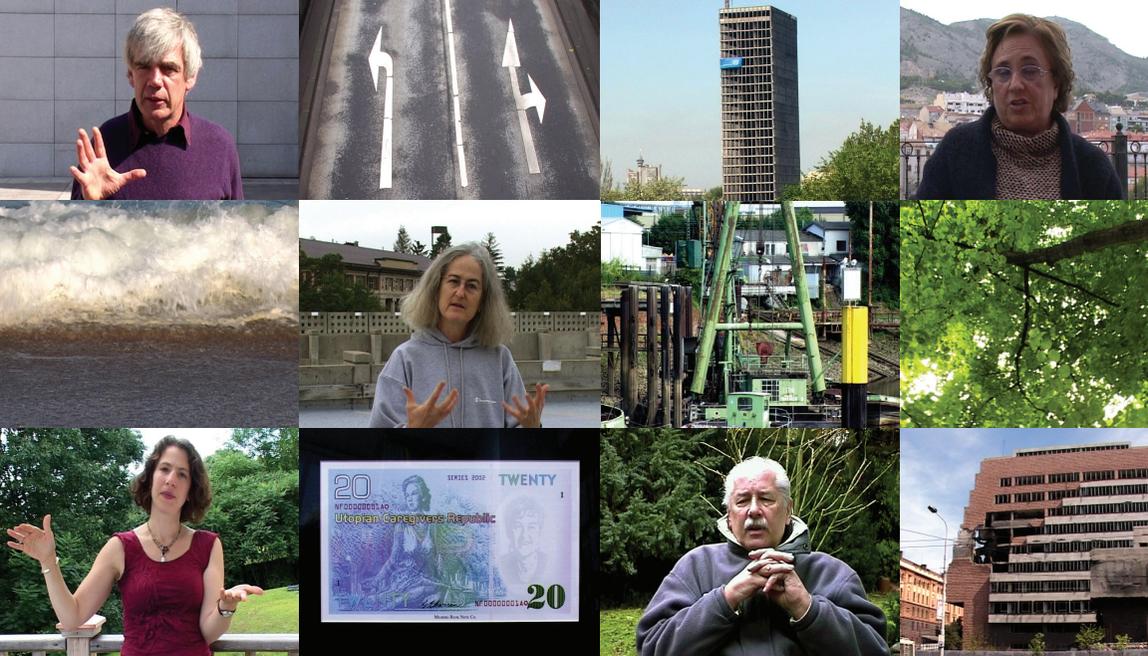


## Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies

16-Channel Video Installation, 2003–2008

The thematic installation *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* focuses on diverse concepts and models for alternative economies and societies, all of which Oliver Ressler sees as a rejection of the capitalist system of rule. An interview was carried out for each concept. Interview partners include economists, political scientists, authors, and historians. From these interviews, a video in English was produced. In the exhibition, these single-channel 20- to 37-minute videos are each shown on a separate monitor, forming the central element of the installation.

The project presents alternative social and economic models, such as inclusive democracy from Takis Fotopoulos (Great Britain/Greece), participatory economy from Michael Albert (USA), and anarchist consensual democracy from Ralf Burnicki (Germany). Chaia Heller (USA) presents libertarian municipalism, Paul Cockshott (Great Britain) presents *Towards a New Socialism*, Heinz Dieterich (Mexico) presents the socialism of the 21st century, Marge Piercy (USA) presents the feminist-anarchist utopias of her social fantasies, and the underground author p.m. (Switzerland) presents the ideas of his concept “bolo’bolo.” Other videos focus on certain principles that might be of importance when discussing alternative economics and societies: Nancy Folbre (USA) speaks about caring labor, Christoph Spehr (Germany) about free cooperation, Maria Mies (Germany) about the subsistence perspective, and John Holloway (Mexico/Ireland) about his ideas of how to change the world without taking power. As interesting historical models, Todor Kuljić (Serbia) thematizes workers’ self-management in Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970s, Salomé



Moltó (Spain) talks about the workers' collectives during the Spanish Civil War (1936–38), and Alain Dalotel (France) discusses the Paris Commune of 1871. One video discusses the Zapatista self-governing direct-democracy network, which is present in certain rural areas of Chiapas, Mexico.

Exhibited in the Bush Art Center Galleries at St. Norbert College

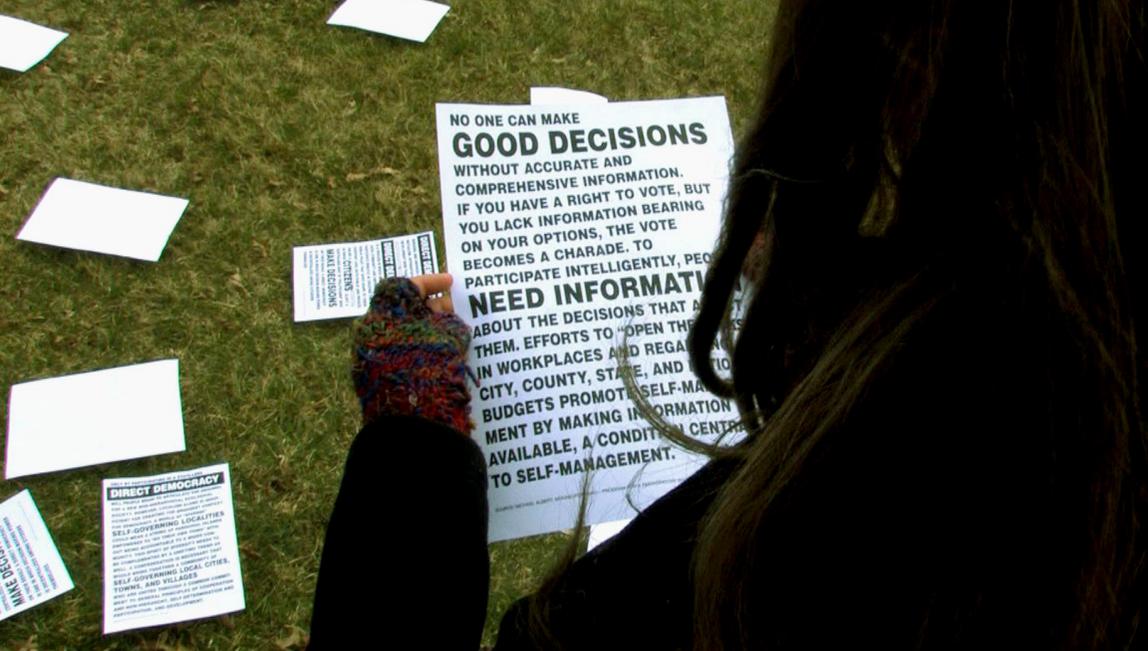


## **Fly Democracy**

*Installation, 2007*

Responding to the notion that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were being waged to bring democracy to those countries, and to the form of the leaflet drop used by the U.S. military, the piece *Fly Democracy* was created. At the start of the military campaign, the United States showered leaflets containing messages intended for the population below. These called upon the enemy soldiers to desert, warned civilians to keep at a distance from military targets, defined the pattern of behavior in case of contact with the U.S. military, or relayed a general political message explaining the rationale and goals of the bombardments. The *Fly Democracy* installation represents a reenactment of this shower of message-bearing flyers, but symbolically transfers the drop's target point to the United States. Specially created for the piece, 10 flyers make political arguments on behalf of direct or participatory forms of democracy, all of which stand in contrast to the representative form of democracy as practiced in the United States.

The installation consists of a five-minute video loop showing the flyers on their downward trip from a shining blue sky to the ground, where they are picked up and read. The English-language flyers are strewn on the floor in front of the video screen. Viewers are welcome to pick up any of the flyers, read them, and take them home.



Concept, camera, film editing, design, and production: Oliver Ressler  
Image editing and sound: Rudolf Gottsberger  
Production assistance: Meghan Hartman, Brandon Ives, Gaby Ruzek

The installation has been produced by ACC Galerie, Weimar (Germany);  
Fri-Art – Centre d'Art Contemporain, Fribourg (Switzerland); Kunstverein Wolfsburg,  
Wolfsburg (Germany); International Photo Festival Mannheim, Ludwigshafen,  
Heidelberg (Germany) in 2007; and <rotor>, Graz (Austria) in 2007.

Exhibited in the Bush Art Center Galleries at St. Norbert College



## What Is Democracy?

*Film, 118 min., 2009*

The film *What Is Democracy?* addresses this central question in multiple ways. On one hand, the question relates to conditions of Western representative democracies that are scrutinized in this project. On the other hand, the question also addresses alternative approaches to what a more-democratic system might look like and what organizational forms a more-democratic system could take. The project asked: “What is democracy?” This is the question that was put to numerous activists and political analysts in 18 cities around the world: Amsterdam, Berkeley, Berlin, Bern, Budapest, Copenhagen, London, Melbourne, Moscow, New York, Paris, Rostock, San Francisco, Sydney, Taipei, Tel Aviv, Thessaloniki, and Warsaw. The interviews were recorded on video beginning in January 2007. Even though all interviewees were asked the same question, the result was a multiplicity of different perspectives and viewpoints from people living in states that are usually labeled as representative democracies.



Concept, interviews, camera, and sound recording: Oliver Ressler  
Interviewees: Kuan-Hsing Chen, Noortje Marres, Lin Chalozin-Dovrat, Thanasis Triaridis, Tone Olaf Nielsen, Jo van der Spek, Cheikh Papa Sakho, Wolf-Dieter Narr, Tiny a.k.a. Lisa Gray-Garcia, Joanna Erbel, Yvonne Riano, Trevor Paglen, Tadeusz Kowalik, Adam Ostolski, Boris Kagarlitsky, Michal Kozlowski, Lize Mogel, Rick Ayers, Nikos Panagos, Macha Kurzina, Gabor Csillag, Zachary Running Wolf, Jenny Munroe, David McNeill  
Video editing and production: Oliver Ressler  
Image editing and subtitles: David Grohe  
Animation: Zanny Begg  
Composition and sound editing: Rudolf Gottsberger  
Footage: Sierpien 80 (© Telewizja Polska S.A.)  
Grant Support: ERSTE Foundation, Kulturstadt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung, Kulturstadt Graz, Otto-Mauer-Fonds, Biennale de Lyon, 2009

Screened at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay



## Take the Square

Film, 89 min., 2012

The emergence of the Occupy movement and the contemporaneous movements of the squares in Europe can be seen as a reaction by people to fight social inequality and the dismantling of democracy in times of global financial and economic crisis. These movements are non-hierarchical and informed by the principles of direct democracy. The occupation of public places serves as a catalyst to develop demonstrations, general strikes, and meeting places for working groups addressing a variety of issues. Successful occupations in one place often inspired actions in other cities as the movement grew organically around the world.

The film *Take the Square* is based on discussions conducted with activists from 15M in Madrid (Spain), the Syntagma Square movement in Athens (Greece), and Occupy Wall Street in New York (USA). Reenacting the format of the working groups from these protest movements, activists engage in open discussions in front of the camera. The discussions cover issues of organization, the horizontal decision-making processes, the importance and function of occupying public spaces, and how social change can occur. The films were shot in the spring of 2012 in locations used by these movements: the Plaza de Pontejos, a quiet square in the immediate vicinity of the central Puerta del Sol in Madrid; at Plaza de la Corrala, a meeting place for the neighborhood assemblies of Lavapiés in Madrid; in Syntagma Square, the central assembly and demonstration point in front of the Parliament



in Athens; and in Central Park in New York, where Occupy Wall Street held the “Spring Awakening 2012.”

Direction and production: Oliver Ressler

Executive production: Rudolf Gottsberger, studioROT

Camera: Thomas Parb, Rudolf Gottsberger

Film editing: Oliver Ressler

Sound design, mix, and color correction: Rudolf Gottsberger

Participants of the Popular Assembly of Lavapiés in Madrid: Adolfo Estalella, Lucía Gutiérrez, Ernesto García López, Héctor Pojomovsky, Martha Viniegra

Participants of the Collective Thinking Work Group in Madrid: Amador, Álvaro, Ayelén, David, Kiara, Rodrigo

Participants of the discussion group at Syntagma Square in Athens: Christos Giovanopoulos, Leonidas Kaportsis, Stasa Kotara, Babis Magoulas, Spyros Niakas, Reggina Zervou

Participants of the discussion group in Central Park in New York: Nicole Carty, Austin Guest, George Machado, Jen Waller

Participants in the workshop in New York: Nicole Carty, Austin Guest, Zak Solomon, Danny Valdes

Translations for English subtitles: Cora Sueldo, Héctor Pojomovsky, Martha Viniegra, Giannis Papadimitriou, Alexandros Papageorgiou

Production assistance: Katarzyna Winiecka, Rafael Sánchez Mateos (Madrid), Giannis Papadimitriou (Athens)

*Take the Square* was commissioned by REGIONALE12.

Screened at St. Norbert College



## **The Right of Passage**

*Film, 19 min., 2013*

“We can’t imagine a global citizenship or any concept of dynamic citizenship if we don’t think about it not only in terms of law but in terms of the political economy of bodies that move. There have to be structures that can receive and host this kind of movement. This is why citizenship is not simply a subjective phenomenon, but also an objective phenomenon of hospitality.”

– Antonio Negri, *The Right of Passage*

In their third collaborative film, Oliver Ressler (Austria) and Zanny Begg (Australia) focus on struggles to obtain citizenship, while at the same time questioning the implicitly exclusionary nature of the concept. *The Right of Passage* is partially constructed through a series of interviews with Ariella Azoulay, Antonio Negri, and Sandro Mezzadra. These interviews form the starting point for a discussion in Barcelona, one of Europe’s most densely populated and multicultural cities, with a group of people living “without papers.” The film is set at night, against a city skyline, providing a dark void from which those marginalized and excluded can articulate their own relationship to the arbitrary nature of national identity and citizenship. In the film, the conversations around citizenship are interwoven with animated sequences.



Concept, film editing, and production: Oliver Ressler and Zanny Begg

Passport sequences: Zanny Begg

Camera and interviews: Oliver Ressler

Camera in Barcelona: Carlos Chang Cheng, Roberto Martín

Sound recording: Oliver Ressler

Sound design, mix, and color correction: Rudolf Gottsberger

Original music: Kate Carr

Participants: Ariella Azoulay, Lucía Egaña, Sandro Mezzadra, Antonio Negri,

Daniela Ortiz, Will Sands, Katim Sene, César Zúñiga

Production assistance and translation: Daniela Ortiz, Xose Quiroga,

Jason Francis McGimsey

The project was funded partly through a grant of BMUKK and the Australian Council for the Arts Barcelona Residency Program.

Screened in the Bush Art Center Galleries at St. Norbert College

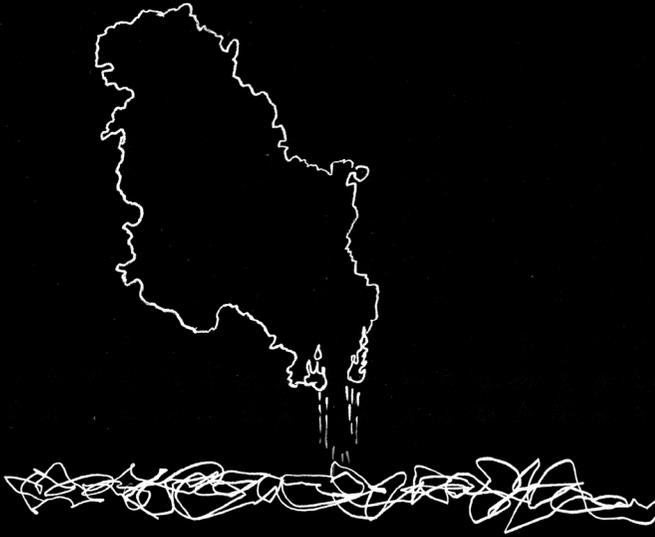


## **Emergency Turned Upside-Down**

*Film, 16 min., 2016*

This film was shaped by the “summer of migration” of 2015, when the Schengen system was suspended for several weeks and European states temporarily opened borders for refugees from Syria and the wider Middle East war zone. But it soon became obvious that the “welcome culture” of a few European states would not last long. *Emergency Turned Upside-Down* confronts the cynical and inhuman discourse that calls refugees’ presence in Europe an “emergency” when that word should be applied to the war, terror, and economic strangulation that forced people out of their homes.

The narration text is set in dialogue with drawn animations in black and white, in which overlapping lines form an abstract pattern – evoking, among other things, borderlines, migration routes, outlines of states, lifelines, and human heart rates.



Direction and production: Oliver Ressler

Narration text: Oliver Ressler and Matthew Hyland

Animation: Studio Orlander Krinkel

Music: Vinzenz Schwab

Special thanks to: Edit András, Birgit Lurz, Ilona Németh, Wolfgang Schlag, Matthew Hyland, Adnan Popovic, Richard Bruzek, and Gerald Raunig; and Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson for their inspiring book, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (2013).

The film was commissioned by Into the City 2016.

Exhibited in the Bush Art Center Galleries at St. Norbert College



## Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart

4-Channel Video Installation, 2016–2017

The scientific consensus about climate change cannot be ignored, and the effects are increasingly being felt on a global scale. The latest reports from the sober *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) suggest that the planet may be approaching multiple thresholds of irreversible damage faster than was ever anticipated. The title “Everything's Coming Together While Everything's Falling Apart” refers to a situation in which all the technology needed to end the age of fossil fuel already exists. Whether the present ecological, social, and economic crisis will be overcome is primarily a question of political power and the will for change.

The installation consists of four films. In the first film, *COP21*, activists confront the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015. The film *Ende Gelände (End of the Road)* focuses on a massive civil disobedience action at the Lusatia lignite coal fields near Berlin where 4,000 activists entered an open-cast mine, blocking the loading station and the rail connection to a coal-fired power plant. The film *The ZAD* focuses on Europe's largest autonomous territory, located near Nantes in France. The ZAD (zone to defend) emerged from the struggle against a new airport in 2012; today, 250 people in 60 collectives live permanently at the ZAD. The film is built along a group discussion with activists living at the ZAD. The film *Code Road* highlights a civil disobedience action in the port of Amsterdam in June 2017. The blockade of Europe's second-largest coal



port shows activists drawing a red line against this important fossil fuel infrastructure facility. This project is an illumination of the beginning of the climate revolution, the moment when popular resistance began to reconfigure the world. The project follows the climate movement in its struggles to confront an economic system heavily dependent on fossil fuels. It records key events for the climate movement, bringing together many situations, contexts, voices, and experiences.

Direction and production: Oliver Ressler  
Cinematography and audio recording: Thomas Parb and Oliver Ressler  
Narration text: Oliver Ressler and Matthew Hyland  
Editing: Oliver Ressler  
Narration: Renée Gadsden  
Color correction and finishing: Rudolf Gottsberger  
Sound design and music: Vinzenz Schwab and Rudolf Gottsberger

The project received support from the ERSTE Foundation, BKA – Kunst, Otto Mauer Fonds, MNAC – National Museum of Contemporary Art in Bucharest, 3. Berliner Herbstsalon / Maxim Gorki Theater, and <rotor> center for contemporary art.

Exhibited in the Lawton Gallery at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

## Biographies

### **Brandon Bauer**

#### **Exhibition Organizer, Lead Curator, Catalog Edit and Design**

Brandon Bauer is a Wisconsin-based artist. He uses art as a space for critical and ethical inquiry, discourse, and dialog. His work explores themes of social justice, democracy, war, and critical histories embedded in cultural ephemera. His work employs photography, video, collage, drawing, installation, and collaboratively produced projects. Brandon's work has been exhibited and screened nationally and internationally. His work has been produced in DVD editions, used as illustration for various editorial publications and books, and published in poster editions. Brandon received his B.F.A. in painting from the Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design in 1996, and his M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2008. Brandon was a 2009–2010 Distinguished Graduate School Fellowship (DGSF) recipient for the completion of his Master of Fine Arts in Intermedia from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Brandon is currently an associate professor of art at St. Norbert College.

### **Shan Bryan-Hanson**

#### **Co-Curator (Bush Art Center Galleries, St. Norbert College)**

Shan Bryan-Hanson is director and curator of the Art Galleries and Collections at St. Norbert College, where she also teaches painting. She is an artist with an M.F.A. from the University of Montana and her paintings have been funded by the Percent for Art Program of the State of Montana, the Direct Purchase Program of the Wisconsin Arts Board, and the Peninsula Arts Association. Her curatorial and museum work has been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Creation & Presentation Program of the Wisconsin Arts Board, and the American Alliance of Museums. Her art is in both private and public collections and has been exhibited in regional and national exhibitions.

### **Jennifer A. González**

#### **Essay Contributor**

Jennifer A. González received her B.A. in philosophy from Yale University, and her Ph.D. in the history of consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is now a professor in the history of art and visual culture department at UC Santa Cruz. She also teaches at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, New York. She has received fellowships from the Ford Foundation, the American Association of University Women, and the American Council of Learned Societies. She has written extensively on installation art, activist art, and digital art and has published in a variety of art and scholarly journals, including *Frieze*, *Bomb*, *Diacritics*, *Camera Obscura*, *Open Space*, and *Art Journal*. Her essays about digital bodies and critical race studies have appeared in anthologies such as *The Cyborg Handbook*, *Race in Cyberspace*, *Visible Worlds*, *Migrants' Time*, and *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. Her first book, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (2008), was a finalist for the Charles Rufus Morey Book Award and received an Andrew Wyeth publication grant. Her second book, *Pepón Osorio* (2013), and was awarded second place for the Best Latino Art Book in the International Latino Book Awards 2014.

### **Marc James Léger**

#### **Essay Contributor**

Marc James Léger is an independent scholar living in Montreal. He is the editor of Bruce Barber's collected essays and interviews in *Performance, [Performance] and Performers* (2007), as well as *Littoral Art and Communicative Action* (2013). He also edited *Culture and Contestation in the New Century* (2011) and *The Idea of the Avant Garde – And What It Means Today* (2014). A second volume of *The Idea of the Avant Garde* is forthcoming in 2018. Léger is the author of *Brave New Avant Garde* (2012) and *The Neoliberal Undead* (2013), as well as *Drive in Cinema: Essays on Film, Theory and Politics* (2015). He is a co-writer of *Millet Matrix: Contemporary Art, Collaboration, Curatorial Praxis* (2015) and co-editor of *Zapantera Negra: An Artistic Encounter Between Black Panthers and Zapatistas*. Forthcoming books include *Vanguardia* and *Don't Network: The Avant Garde After Networks*.

### **Kate Mothes**

#### **Co-Curator (Lawton Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay)**

Kate Mothes is an American curator and organizer based in the Midwest. She is now the interim curator of art at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and instructor in arts management. She is also the founder and coordinator of Young Space, an online and physical nomadic contemporary art platform that aims to promote and support early-career and emerging artists through interviews, exhibitions, grants, and other collaborative projects. Her independent curatorial projects emphasize artist-led culture, and she has been involved with artist-led initiatives such as Interview Room 11 in Edinburgh, Scotland; Standard Projects in Hortonville, Wisconsin, USA; and The Great Poor Farm Experiment in Manawa, Wisconsin, USA She has contributed research for the recent exhibition *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experience 1933–1957* by the Nationalgalerie in the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, Germany, in cooperation with Freie Universität Berlin. She earned a B.S. in art history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and an M.Sc. in the history of art, theory and display from the University of Edinburgh-Edinburgh College of Art.

### **Brian Pirman**

#### **Catalog Design and Production**

With a background in fine art and graphic design, Brian Pirman has been designing professionally for 35 years. His experience includes corporate identity, logotype, collateral, poster, signage, and web design, as well as brand equity and package design. More recently, he has been active in the fine-art world, gaining entry into local and regional curated and juried exhibitions. Brian currently spends time experimenting with digital imaging, which involves electronic-image manipulation focusing on color, form, texture, and patterns. His primary goal is creating engaging and thought-provoking work. His inspirations are drawn from fine art, film, nature, and popular culture. Brian received his B.S. and M.F.A. in graphic design from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has been teaching in the art department at St. Norbert College since 1997.



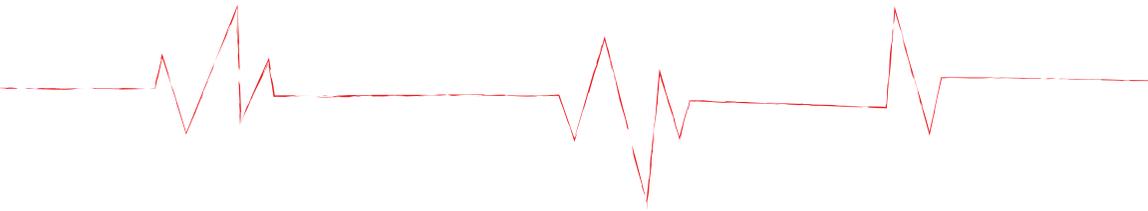
## Acknowledgements

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The multi-site exhibition *Catastrophe Bonds* represents the first survey of the work of Austrian artist Oliver Ressler to be exhibited in the United States. The exhibition and its related public programming were developed as a collaborative project sponsored by the art programs at St. Norbert College and the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, and through the joint International Visiting Scholars Program of the two institutions. The exhibition was curated by Brandon Bauer, associate professor of art, St. Norbert College, in association with Shan Bryan-Hanson, curator of art galleries and collections, St. Norbert College, and Kate Mothes, curator of the Lawton Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. The exhibition focuses on forms of grassroots democracy as well as economic and political alternatives to the existing state of global affairs. A key unifying theme running through the work is that of envisioning and attempting to enact new forms of vibrant social and economic democracy, where all voices are welcomed in the deliberative process. This theme is explored through documentary work highlighting grassroots organizing efforts, through video interviews with contemporary thinkers on alternative social and economic models and their historic precedents, and through an examination of the pressures that the current catastrophes of climate change and emergency migration are having on Western representative democracies.

Catalog edited by Brandon Bauer with contributions by  
Jennifer A. González and Marc James Léger

