

Art of Protest

On Testing Cultural Forms of Resistance

Katarzyna Kosmala

in conversation with Oliver Ressler

This year has been, in large part as a response to the consequences of an increasingly brutal neoliberalism, a year of ongoing political unrest. People across the globe have taken to the streets in confronting economic and other inequalities and assaults on basic human rights, demanding an end to oppression, exploitation and repression.

In many countries these events, struggles and movements have recognised the centrality of mainstream medias in manufacturing and maintaining consent to neoliberal policies and relations of oppression. As such, there has been recognition of the importance of access to alternative communications (including social media networks) and to the existence, evolution and creation of critical/radical media alternatives.

The following exchange, exploring the role of politically engaged art in protest and human rights issues, is a continuation of a public talk between Katarzyna Kosmala and Oliver Ressler at the CCA, Glasgow, reflecting on Ressler's recent films: *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* and *Comuna Under Construction*, screened at Document 9: International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival on 21st October 2011.

Document provides a rare public platform in Scotland for debating possibilities and alternatives that speak to the necessity of living, thinking and acting differently. This exchange is intended as a contribution to Document's inspiring vision for politically engaged cultural practices.

Katarzyna Kosmala: Protest is not necessarily a purely political statement; a protest can be viewed as a cultural form of resistance. To start with, it is worth reflecting upon whether gesture or gestural forms of expression can make a real difference. You have been producing exhibitions and various projects in public spaces since 1994, and made films that address forms of resistance for nearly 20 years now. You reflect upon socio-political and economic alternatives in your work. How do you see the role of the arts in protest, drawing on the examples from your own art practice?

Oliver Ressler: I think art can have a crucial function for an analysis of the current political and economic situation, in expressing criticism, connecting to existing social movements and in thinking about alternative ways about how to organise our societies. There are multiple roles art can play directly in protest. It is a central idea in my artistic practice to give a voice to protagonists of social movements around the world, and to create a certain space through my work where these voices can be heard and be listened to. I am not interested in a balanced, "neutral" perspective (some media forms claim it exists!), but in a perspective emerging from the inside, or at least a perspective born out of participation and in solidarity with particular leftist social movements. My work often takes the form of a film production. I am interested in creating a tangible tool that can be used by the movements themselves for

reflection, education and mobilisation purposes, and to contribute – through the creation of a film – to render their aims and activities spread around the world and made visible internationally. For example, my films on the alter-globalisation movements, such as *This Is What Democracy Looks Like!*, *Disobbedienti* and *What Would It Mean to Win?* were used numerous times by the movements in question to inform and to mobilise upcoming demonstrations and activities against the G8, WTO, IMF or WEF. I have also created banners and posters for the alter-globalisation movement, which helped in mobilising demonstrations and blockades at the G8-summit in Heiligendamm in Germany in 2007, for example. But I don't believe that art should limit itself to tasks such as these; making material objects or producing visual material for demonstrations. Artists should get involved in different aspects of organising and dispersing activism, and, as a long-term goal, somehow aim at overcoming these boundaries between art and activism in practice.

KK: In both films, *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* And

Comuna Under Construction, the protagonists share their personal experience of crisis and change; the viewer gets the insight into their own micro-struggles to survive. Both films are situated in precarious contexts, first in Armenia in Yerevan's largest bazaar, and second in Caracas' periphery, in los barrios, and in the countryside in Venezuela. You have said that making films is something that really interests you. It would be good to reflect on your approach to the film production, in particular with reference to the process of filming and editing.

OR: *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What Comes Next?* and *Comuna Under Construction* are quite differently produced. While *Socialism Failed...* is based on interviews with the impoverished traders in a bazaar in Yerevan, Armenia, about their difficult living and working conditions and their hopes for change, *Comuna Under Construction* is based on recordings of the community assemblies and the project tables of the Community Councils in Venezuela, that were developed by the people themselves in acts of self-empowerment. There is of course a big difference between the process of filming in Venezuela incorporating participant observation method, and the interview-based approach in Armenia. On *Comuna Under Construction*, which was developed in collaboration with the political analyst Dario Azzellini, the co-director of the film (it is already our third film on the political processes in Venezuela made since 2004), I worked with a team of five people, and we tried to record as many of these assemblies as possible in a limited time-frame of a few weeks in order to develop a film from this material in the course of a lengthy editing process. In the case of *Socialism Failed...* I had almost no budget to make the film and worked together solely with the local activist Arpineh Galfayan, who carried out the interviews for me and helped with the translation.

KK: Participatory art is based on a process that reflects a paradigm shift; a shift from material objects to subjects. Such a shift has been greatly influenced by philosophical and political theories (e.g. Jean-Luc Nancy's *Being Singular Plural*, Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*), discourse that is now appropriated by post-conceptual art as well as socially and politically engaged art, or as language is now incorporated into various forms of art activism. How did participatory process feature in the production of these films and your works more generally?

OR: The creation of a film is no ideal participatory practice, as not all participants have the same share of participation in the decision making-process at all levels, and for practical reasons this seems to be kind of a necessity. At least, I could not imagine co-editing or co-directing a film with the 50 or whatever participants in a film... Therefore it is essential that you convince people of the idea of the film, that they trust you, and it is important to take care not to let down this trust. Before I start filming, there is usually a process of communicating with various people; a process that aims to explain what the film/project will be about, what is my/our position in relation to the subject. This has been extremely important in Venezuela, where the society is sharply divided

Oliver Ressler, *Socialism Failed, Capitalism is Bankrupt. What comes Next?*, film stills, 19 min., 2010





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



into supporters and opponents of the so-called Bolivarian Process. For the whole production, it is extremely helpful that Dario Azzellini is based in Venezuela half of the year and developed a good network of people he knows in the communities who supported our filming. These first-hand contacts open a lot of doors, which otherwise would probably stay closed. Having done three films already on the Bolivarian Process, and showcasing them when negotiating with people the filming permissions, has helped a lot to win their confidence and to seal our collaboration.

KK: Let's discuss the processes of production and post-production of these two films. What is the role of weaving document with fiction in constructing the narrative of your films?

OR: Film is never a direct visualisation or repetition of reality, but instead it creates its own reality. Under this precondition, the category of images, whether they are documents or fiction, is not a central thing – at least not from my position of a filmmaker. The majority of the material that I use for films would usually be labelled as a documentary source, but in some films there are also “staged” elements; elements that are more enacted than the interviews in the bazaar in *Socialism Failed...*

For example, in the 8-channel video installation *What Is Democracy?* (2009), in the central piece I decided to script burning of the flags (the flags from the USA, the UK, Australia and so on to Poland) in order to construct a particular visualisation, reflecting on emergent opinion of the majority of the interviewees in the piece. The video describes the temporary form of representative democracies we are living in as the failed form, or at least not “democratic” form, taking the literal meaning of the term.

While I had done already numerous interview-based films over the years, the concept applied in *Comuna Under Construction* of documenting the assemblies in three different locations and developing a narration based on the recorded material in the post-production, was a completely new experience for me. In this case only a few

parameters could have been defined before the shooting began, including the decision for three locations that form three chapters, each focusing on different aspects. The first chapter shows how the assemblies function on the local level, the second chapter points to attempts of setting up a structure among the self-organised communities at a regional level, and the third chapter elaborates primarily upon the tensions between the community councils and the governmental institutions, which are symptomatic in a process of empowerment. I have the impression that through filming of the assemblies you do not influence the content that is being discussed in these assemblies as much as you influence the content of an interview through raising the questions of your interest again and again. For that reason, I have the impression that the film *Comuna Under Construction* has been shaped more through the post-production process – through the numerous decisions about inclusions and exclusions and through highlighting of certain elements – than my interview-based films are.

KK: It seems appropriate to reflect more on the current condition, since we are discussing protest in art and art in protest. There are certainly challenges associated with testing the limitation of the arts in the politics. For instance, the ways of seeing art as an agency aligned with the circumventing of dominant ideologies and obstacles – especially in relation to Euro-centric democracy, if we focus on Europe for example – can be seen as prescriptive. How do you see the process of engaging the public through politically informed art? If we consider 2011 as the ‘year of protest’, do you see such engagement in protest?

OR: Yes, a protest is one option. There is no dominance in my work for representing a specific form of protest. Over the years my work has focused on demonstrations, blockades, protest camps, property damage, militant struggles, forms of social disobedience, go-slows, and more – whatever thoughtful activists in certain contexts felt was a necessary strategy. But it is not inscribed in my work that what I do goes beyond

representation and leads to action; a film hasn't got the potential to lead directly to protest. But a film can assemble arguments and viewpoints that might lead to informing the process of protest and revolutionary ideas; I know from several people that my films on the alter-globalisation movement were central for them in shaping their personal ideas about the forms and potentials of protest today, and inspired them to become more active politically themselves. This happens often because the films are related to specific movements, so people can connect with the local activists where they are based. My films are often presented at the events by the political organisations or at alternative film festivals, including *Document*. Besides this, my work is also frequently presented at art exhibitions, art festivals and biennales, where a variety of people from different backgrounds mix together. So it is also a central function of my work to communicate certain viewpoints or share theoretical considerations about politics and art in interface with the general public, including those that otherwise probably never come across these arguments.

KK: Let's think about the current situation in relation to protest a bit more.... What we now witness internationally is the form of political action such as Occupy Wall Street, a form of protest that is globally scaled. In *Comuna Under Construction* you present a social political experiment, testing the limits of democracy. How can the interface between the arts and politics contribute to building a sense of community, in particularly amongst those who feel marginalised and left behind?

OR: At the moment, in the framework of the Occupy Wall Street movement, activists in several-hundred cities around the world are struggling in order to change the system in a direction that takes care of their social and political needs. This is something the marginalised people in Venezuela have already achieved, at least in a significant proportion. What is happening in Venezuela today is already far beyond the system of democracy, I mean democracy as we have it in the European Community or in the USA. In Venezuela, people refer to their system as a “participatory and protagonist democracy”, and keep persevering to achieve what they refer to as a “socialism of the 21st century”. Our first film made in that context is entitled *Venezuela from Below*, and this title actually explains our approach and an attempt applied to all our films on the political processes in Venezuela, namely to make visible these unprecedented processes of self-organisation and democratic decision-making taking place from the bottom-up. But this challenging process of developing a ‘new’ society unfortunately is overshadowed by the Western media that is focusing solely on de-contextualised statements by president Hugo Chávez, in order to scandalise or ridicule him and to hide what is really going on in the country. I think to learn from these Venezuelan experiences would be very valuable for the emerging Occupy Everywhere movements. And films like *Comuna Under Construction* can surely have a role in that.

KK: The emergence of an international protest movement without a coherent programme or leadership in a sense reflects a deeper problem than the global economic crisis. It is about the failure of democracy based on the rule of law. In your project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* you explore the limits of democracy. Representative democracy functions within distinct borders and among people who are part of the same group or a nation. How can we – situated in global realms – address a “global community” based on democratic principles?

OR: What the current crisis makes so visible – and this is extremely important – is that representative democracy is less about representing people,

Oliver Ressler,
*Alternative
 Economics,
 Alternative
 Societies*,
 billboard
 (installation
 shot: Museum
 on the Seam,
 Jerusalem, 2010)

but more about representing capital. This was already clear to Marx, who described governments as “capital’s executives”, but got tangentially ignored even from many seemingly critical Leftists over the last decades. What is apparent to most people today – that capitalism is in a deep systemic crisis – was already quite obvious to me in 2003 and even before, when I started a thorough research on alternatives to the capitalist system and representative democracy within the framework of my long-term project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies*. Among many things that I have learned through this research was that a common way for how a society and economy should be shaped in a more democratic manner does not exist, which is good as it leaves space for people for more progressive struggles in re-shaping societies according to their needs and wishes. Therefore, it is very important that the Occupy Movement does not come up with a coherent programme, as this is something that has to emerge through a process of participation. People active within this movement are spread across many hundred cities around the globe; they work together for example to make a global action day happen (such as the one on October 15th, 2011 for instance), but have very different levels of organisation or other forms of decision-making processes. And this is wonderful; while for some groups consensual decision-making might be the perfect way, for other groups the assemblies based on majority vote might make more sense.

KK: I see the possibility of making a difference in participatory art practice and art as protest. There is however a problem of inclusion and of exclusion. Taking this into account, how do you address the tensions between social and political definitions in different contexts (e.g. liberal democracy, transitional societies of post-Socialist realms)?

OR: I think a participatory art practice or art as protest will differ depending on the context where it takes place. While a specific activity in a liberal democracy might be considered critical, but legal, it might be illegal somewhere else. Having had a solo-exhibition at ACAF in Alexandria, Egypt, a



major problem of my work and potential danger for the art institution appeared to be the inclusion of interviewees from Israel in my video installation *What Is Democracy?* – and not the burning flags of ten nation states, which could potentially be criminalised in countries such as Germany, Austria or France. So what appears critical, problematic or illegal really depends a lot on the context of the presentation. Therefore, ideally, critical art develops in a close reference to specific local contexts, art that really challenges the power in place.

KK: To conclude, can you comment on what a role is for documentation in the process of intervening and in challenging the status quo of a global economy under the reign of capitalist markets, and, more specifically, now in the context of unfolding multiple forms of global protest?

OR: For me a central role of documentation is to ‘make visible’ forms of dissent and resistance, to create a tool that brings the activities and discussions happening in one place to another, so that they can be explored, learned from and

criticised. Ideally, this is a productive process that contributes towards the creation of further dissenting and resisting activities in other contexts and places, so that the isolated activities taking place locally become a movement – a global movement of ideas that becomes broader and gains more and more influence. Probably, it is true that most documentation does not have such an effect – and if it does, it is hard to prove. But I like the inherent potentiality of critical films using documentary formats to help in pushing forward the new, the unexpected and unimaginable; that challenges and confronts the deadness and deadliness of capitalist reality...

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