

## Not Sinking, Swarming

**Wolfgang Schlag:** I think it is very interesting that two things come together in the film “Not Sinking, Swarming”: one is this fight for visibility and to have a voice – of course not only in society but also in relation to political decision-making – and the other is the fear of visibility. This mostly applies to countries where demonstrations against climate summits, against political and corporate meetings are increasing in scale and strength and are increasingly being monitored. But we are not protected here either from government surveillance of a kind that can capture every single person who demonstrates on issues that concern us all. We are no longer at the beginning, we are fully in the midst of a climate crisis now at an advanced stage, promising nothing good for the future.

In order to deal with the question of visibility and the fear of it you chose the method of pixilation. I find this very exciting: nothing gets lost in this process. Quite the opposite, it gains an artistic language that translates those wishes and fears. How did you approach this situation, this group? How did this develop, how did you find a place for your artistic work and a way to be respected?

**Oliver Ressler:** I would like to start by saying that I have been engaged with climate activism for many years and that I have documented a whole series of actions of civil disobedience in a European context over the last few years. This has resulted in artistic films which have been shown internationally in exhibitions, at screenings and festivals. Already many years ago I had the idea of making a film about the debates and discussions that happen in the background. I kept trying with various groups, proposing that I record the gatherings and working meetings. But for quite obvious reasons this never worked out, because there is of course a justified fear of repression.

Eventually I met someone through contacts established during my Barcelona solo exhibition, which featured four films from the cycle “Everything’s coming together while everything’s falling apart”. The person I mean here is part of the platform *By 2020 We Rise up* in Madrid. During a few conversations on *Wire* (i.e. a supposedly wiretap-protected internet telephone platform) we discussed possibilities of filming. We also got legal advice. In the end I was able to film the assembly.

It is surprising that it worked out in Spain of all places, because Spain has some of the most severe legal penalties in all of Europe for direct action in public spaces. The film points out that the road blockade shown in it could incur a fine of EUR 300,000. This can hit organizations, but also the individuals involved. And they can also impose prison sentences. Starting with the public square occupations in Puerta del Sol in Madrid 2011 and later with the Catalan independence movement, the Spanish government massively stepped up repressive legislation.

**Wolfgang Schlag:** The public debate around climate protection has entered a new stage with movements such as *Fridays for Future* – or at least that’s how it appears in the media: a stage where social concerns articulated by an activist group can no longer be ignored. There are now also *Scientists for Future* and *Parents for Future*. In the sense of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, which you weave into the film, bodies are formed socially and acquire political power in the Greek sense of *Polis*, a voice which can no longer go unheard. What do you make of this in the context of your personal work as an artist who has recorded the voicing of these important concerns for so long? Can any of this really change something now? Does it arrive at a point where politics really cannot go on as before?

**Oliver Ressler:** I would say that global warming as caused by humans has come to be recognized, 124 years after the first scientific proof of its reality, by mainstream public

discourse. This should probably have happened sooner, because if it had, we might not be facing climate collapse today. So it reflects the working of politics: for the good of capital but not for the good of the majority of people living on the planet. I think there have been certain shifts. A few years ago it was mostly local and left groups who intermittently became active – conducting actions, organizing *climate camps*, symposia and demonstrations – whereas climate anxiety has now reached mainstream society, where it belongs! I only fear that mere demonstrations and friendly rallies will not cause the necessary systemic change. For that to happen as fast as is needed, the pressure on governments must increase. Transnational corporations can only be stopped from continuing to destroy the climate through their economic activity by means of fundamental legislative change and on the level of the global economy. Moral appeals alone will not be able to bring any of this about.

**Wolfgang Schlag:** In your publication\* you also write that we are faced with a dilemma concerning urgently necessary action, for instance where individuals are made to feel guilty for failing to adopt “environmentally friendly” lifestyles by getting rid of their cars and so on. Political institutions take the easy way out, in that conjointly with industry they emphasize this pressure on a bad conscience. This, of course, occludes the fact that the political institutions themselves must take action, that politics must set the parameters for industry. It is at this point that the social movements appear, taking some of their methods from the suffragettes and the movements of 1968 movement in France. What do you think about the creative potential of these movements?

**Oliver Ressler:** As an artist it interests me to relate forms of protest to artistic performance. Of course it makes a fundamental difference whether I do something within an art context or lying on a street to block a bridge. I am very much impressed by the way swarming, disobedient bodies can bring the giant diggers of coal mining to a halt, or forcibly stop construction at an airport, or paralyze other infrastructures of fossil capitalism. The way these actions constantly adapt to a changing context is also an amazing display of collective intelligence.

It is also very interesting to realize that a large percentage of people involved in the climate justice movement have an affinity to the arts, coming from theatre or fine arts or music and seeking to apply to climate activism the knowledge they have built up over many years. From a system-immanent standpoint of art this can be considered another attempt to bring art and life back together – something that is itself a decades-old tradition in the arts. Through direct involvement in social movements, art can bring about social change and attain meaning that reaches far beyond the specialist aesthetic field.

On the question of personal versus institutional responsibility, the biggest climate destroyers in the world, those responsible for the biggest CO<sub>2</sub> imprint, are the Pentagon, Walmart, the commodity trader Glencore and all the oil companies. Perhaps with the exception of Walmart, there is nothing these entities do that I could ever influence through a personal purchasing boycott. The destructive actions of commodity producers can only be halted through massive political pressure on governments. This does not mean that I don't also have individual responsibility – I personally don't have a car, not even a driver's license – but responsible consumer behavior is nowhere near enough to stop the climate catastrophe from escalating further.

**Wolfgang Schlag:** Speaking of boycotts, I remember the Indian poet and activist Sarojini Naidu, a companion of Mahatma Gandhi, who called in 1930 for Indians to stop buying salt from the British colonial monopoly which at the time controlled the trade and sold the product locally at ten times the cost. This poet asked women to go to the salt mines and the coastal salt-producing areas and take salt directly from there instead of buying it. This

may have been one of the first examples of civil disobedience on a large scale, I think more than 150 000 women followed this call, which played a substantial part of the fall of the colonial power and Britain's eventual withdrawal from India. So the single individual does have power as part of a collective...

**Oliver Ressler:** Yes, this is what I wanted to translate into images in the film “Not Sinking, Swarming” by taking ideas from Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, but I tried to turn this image of the *Leviathan* into a democratic one. Whereas *Leviathan* can be and often is read as a proto-fascist historical document, the form of organization we need today is grassroots-democratic, non-hierarchical and egalitarian, one that seeks to exert massive pressure rather than pursuing social change through forms of representation. This is why the silhouettes of the speaking individuals in the assembly, who must be protected from persecution, have been replaced with visible bodies of the swarming individuals during rehearsals and actions.

\* Oliver Ressler (Ed.), “Barricading the Ice Sheets. Artists and Climate Action in the Age of Irreversible Decision”, Graz: Edition Camera Austria, 2020

This conversation between Oliver Ressler and Wolfgang Schlag, presented here in shortened and edited form, took place at the conference “Markt der Zukunft” on 10/10/2020 at the Kunsthaus Graz.