

Oliver Ressler is an artist who has worked on projects devoted to various socio-political themes. Since 1994 he has created projects in public space, made videos and organized exhibitions on issues of racism, migration, genetic engineering, economics, forms of resistance and social alternatives. His latest project "What Is Democracy?" has been presented at the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum in Egypt and at Siz Gallery, Rijeka, Croatia.

Berin Golonu: For a series of video interviews, you posed the question "What Is Democracy?" to activists and political analysts across the world. There are also a few artists in the mix. The ensuing recordings (eight videos in all) compose a video installation and a film of the same title. How did you choose these interviewees and why them? What can artists offer us in terms of remedying ineffective and unjust political systems?

Oliver Ressler: I carried out the interviews for "What Is Democracy?" during trips to cities I was invited to present work in, starting in January 2007. There are just three or four artists interviewed in the project. The majority of people are grass-roots activists; some are political analysts, media workers, committed teachers, or leftist unionists. I was interested in people who were able to talk about the problems of the system of representative democracy in an inspiring way, and about what else democracy could be. The profession of my interviewees did not play an important role; I did not even mention it in the film/installation. The idea was to bring together people across states and continents referring to the question, "What is democracy?". So the idea of a transnational democracy about which Derrida and others have written is embedded in the structure of the film/installation.

BG: Could you say more about what a transnational democracy may look like? The last video of the installation shows national flags as they burn, with a voiceover that talks about how the Western democratic model--that of representative democracy--is bankrupt. Would you suggest doing away with the nationalist model of governance? If so, what possibilities emerge in the post-national aftermath?

OR: Well, this is probably the core question: "what is to be done?" "Transnational democracy" as a term has been used in different discourses. I think it could build on the experiences of transnational social movements, which show that democracy does not have to be grounded in territorially limited units such as nation-states. In my opinion a transnational democracy has to be developed and shaped through political struggles that involve as many people as possible. It shouldn't be about trying to implement a prescribed concept or idea someone elaborated. Principles such as self-governing, self-management and direct decision-making should be crucial. Delegates or speakers would try to carry out decisions local communities make democratically. If these local communities would decide that in certain instances, forms of representation would be necessary (maybe on a geographically bigger structure), then it would be. But

even this representation would be completely different to anything we know as “representative democracy”. For smaller states it might make sense to keep their borders in order to bring together people who try to make decisions democratically. Other states could be dissolved and split into smaller entities, which find themselves through certain interests or projects. These are of course very hypothetical considerations. I think that a binding global contract would also be needed which would have to be decided democratically and would guarantee certain rights and liberties to all individuals globally, in order to hinder for example the development of racist, sexist or homophobic communities.

BG: One of the interviewees brings up Chantal Mouffe’s model of social and political dissensus as posing a positive alternative model to the challenges of globalization. This brought to mind an essay I recently read by Felix Guattari titled “The Three Ecologies” which addresses increasing environmental degradation tied to global capitalist expansion. Guattari believes that counter struggles must simultaneously become more united and increasingly different (through dissensus) to produce, what he calls “fragments that act as catalysts in existential bifurcations.” Is there dissent between the different voices that come together in your video?

OR: Definitely. There are several contradicting opinions in the film/installation, ranging from people who think “representative democracy” can be transformed so that it becomes truly representative for the people who live in it, to people who reject the idea that democracy and representation can go together at all, because these were contradicting ideas. There are activists talking about “direct democracy” but I have the impression that although they use the same term, they may have different ideas about what it means. I think it is extremely important to have a variety of different opinions and ideas in such a project, with the common understanding that the current system has to be overcome. The film/installation gives the audience the possibility to listen to the different arguments and to learn from those they find interesting. It is not really necessary to identify fully with each argument made in the film, as long as it contributes interesting aspects and viewpoints to the larger discussion. “Democracy” as a term and a system of rule is getting emptier and emptier and needs to be filled with new meaning, at least if we continue to consider it a valuable term not to be given up to the right wing.

BG: In the same essay I mentioned, Guattari proposes formulating new ecological practices to activate isolated and repressed singularities. He states that art and artists provide fertile terrain for bringing these new subjectivities and singularities into play. Do you similarly believe that art can provide a creative space for the production of new possibilities? If so, can you talk about how, as a work of art, “What Is Democracy” attempts to tackle such a goal?

OR: In the art world there are numerous spaces that can be used for raising dissent and even to think about alternative organizational structures for the future. That’s why art spaces are important for me and I don’t wanna give them

up. "What Is Democracy?" occupies art spaces and tries to drag the audience into a debate about the foundations of our society. As an artist I don't see myself as an expert on questions of democracy or how to organize society alternatively. There are many others who have a much deeper knowledge and understanding. But through working on long-term projects such as "What is Democracy?" you become kind of an expert on certain details you are interested in. I see my role as more of a catalyst, someone who does not offer technical solutions, but points to possible ways to find them, as curator Marco Scotini once described it. I hope this project points to certain relevant ideas, viewpoints and arguments.

BG: Have there been any past models of wide-scale political organization that you or any of your interviewees look to as inspiring models to build upon?

OR: Looking at the Western world, true democracy has not been achieved in history, at least not as a long lasting, stable model. There were some fantastic democratic experiments such as the Paris Commune in 1871 or the anarchist workers' collectives during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. Unfortunately the reactionary forces were able to smash both pretty soon. In "What Is Democracy?" First Nations People in the US and Australia argue that their original indigenous societies were a kind of true democracy, before these structures were destroyed by invading Europeans. Talking about indigenous communities, we also have the model of the Good Government Junta of the Zapatistas in the south of Mexico, an example of direct-democratic self-governing that still exists today and brings many advantages for people living in these Zapatista villages. I focus on these models in another, ongoing exhibition project titled "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" which takes form as sixteen videos and transcribed interviews with economists, political analysts and historians talking about a specific theoretical model each of these theorists has been working on.

BG: How does the "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" project differ from "What Is Democracy?" Do they form a dialog with one another?

OR: For "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" I produced sixteen videos with economists, political analysts and historians on *one* specific theoretical model each of these theorists has been working on. In "What Is Democracy?" representative democracy is being criticized from different angles in order to represent democratic principles at work. Both projects are independent from each other, but yes, I think they form a dialog. Hopefully the future will bring an opportunity to present them both together in an exhibition.

The film "What Is Democracy?" can be viewed at: <http://www.ressler.at>
"Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies", Wyspa Institute of Art (Ed.),
240 p., 2007

from: <http://wherewearenow.org>, 2010