

## Accumulation by Dispossession: Art, Land and Resistance

Oliver Ressler in conversation with Lorena Moreno Vera

**Lorena Moreno Vera:** I would like to start with the very different contexts of these two films. I would like you to guide us a little bit into each context. Under which conditions did these films take place? Talk about the selection of these very specific cases.

**Oliver Ressler:** I will start with the film *After the Barrage, the Deluge* (2022), which was recorded in Casablanca. I was invited by Christine Eyene, curator of the Biennale de Casablanca, to produce a new film. It was made clear from the beginning that certain things cannot be addressed, like the king, religion, and sexuality. I was kind of ready to accept these conditions and had the feeling that it's still quite possible to do a variety of different things within these limitations. When I started preparing the shooting, I realized that it's not possible to shoot in Morocco with a tripod without permission and without collaborating with a local production company. And the local production companies I approached seemed kind of afraid to work with me when they checked out my webpage. So, at some point, I simply decided to go ahead and just start doing the project without official permission in a more independent way. I got a backpack, cut a hole in it, placed the camera in the backpack, walked around the city with it and filmed leaving the camera in the backpack. So, I guess my filming was not recognized as such for the majority of people. This method is also the reason for the rough, often uneven images, which were often recorded from a low angle because the backpack was often placed on the street. The context of the site and the filming limitations directly affected the form of my film *After the Barrage, the Deluge*.

In the case of the film *We Are the Forest Enclosed by the Wall* (2025), I recorded it in Puglia, a region in the south of Italy; the working conditions were much easier. I was invited to do a film by the Arneo Forest Custodians (Custodi del Bosco d'Arneo), who were mobilizing to prevent the planned expansion of a test track by Porsche. For me, as an artist who often relates his work to social movements, this is actually an ideal working condition, because it guarantees direct access to the activists. Alessandra Pomarico and Nikolay Oleynikov from Free Home University supported my research, accompanied me while shooting, and were always there for me as friends and comrades throughout the entire production process. The local activists decided to appear in the film without showing their faces, in order to avoid possible unwanted consequences. This kind of forced me to find a specific way to work with the recorded material.

**Lorena Moreno Vera:** Last time we met, we talked about the connecting threads or the similarities between the films, even though there are different contexts or layers. The similarities are expropriation, land displacement, and evictions. Private capital is taking over these properties, and these decisions affect low-income neighbourhoods. Another similarity is the role of the state or local authorities, that the citizens are suppressed by private interests, and the state clearly sides with capital. So, for me your positioning as an artist, as a filmmaker is interesting, but also as partner in crime with these struggles. How do you navigate this? You mentioned that in Puglia it was easier to connect because there was a direct invitation from the activists. But still you have to navigate through the anti-Gandhi law and this repression going on in Italy. But

in Morocco it's a completely different situation. How do you position yourself, how do people perceive your presence, which might already change the dynamics?

**Oliver Ressler:** Maybe just as a clarification: at the time of my filming in Puglia, these anti-Gandhi laws were under negotiation but had not yet entered law. So, the film's participants' decision to conceal their identity was a precaution to prevent possible future criminalization, but also for personal reasons such as minimising the risk of losing their job.

While I recorded the film in Casablanca, I was most of the time not visible to the camera. Most people did not realize they were filmed. This is not an ideal situation because, usually, I involve people in decisions about filming and make them aware they are being filmed. But this was unfortunately not possible in this particular context. At some point, when I was in a poor neighbourhood that was about to be evicted to make way for the *Projet de D'Avenue Royale*, police intervened, even though I was not filming at that moment, but only making audio recordings with affected tenants. Police asked for my passport, took a picture of it, and told me I was not permitted to record conversations with people without official permission. It also did not matter that I had a press ID. They told me I still had to go through the authorization process of the Moroccan State, and that I had to leave. I never obtained this authorization, as I had the feeling I wouldn't get it anyway, and it would only delay my work. So, I had to compromise on the way I was able to shoot the material for *After the Barrage, the Deluge*.

**Lorena Moreno Vera:** In your publication, *Barricading the Ice Sheets*, there is a text by Toni Negri that tries to unpack the notion of the common. As Negri puts it, the term "common" marks this "set of natural resources—air, water, energy—that the lives of all human beings (and perhaps, even more broadly, all living beings) rely on."<sup>1</sup> Everyone should have access to this basic common. According to Negri, the common fosters this ability of human beings to work together, through "cooperation, coordination, sharing, and mutualization." This is also to highlight this interdependence between humans and more-than-humans. But as he goes on, how do we administer this common? As the film *We Are the Forest Enclosed by the Wall* reminds us, resources are finite. We cannot continue expanding and destroying forever. Yet if the common is defined by collective stewardship, who is entrusted to protect them when communities themselves are overruled? What could be the solution? Could it be the state as a partial, seemingly neutral organization that could oversee this from outside? But in both films, we see that it is completely the opposite: in Puglia, the administration advances the hidden agreement with Porsche and proceeds expropriating random plots of land to compensate for this planned devastation of the land. And in Morocco, the state has a similar role in advancing mega-projects. This collusion between state power and private capital also shaped the fate of the film itself. There was also a problem that it was not possible to show the completed film in Casablanca, as it appears the king might have been directly profiting from the construction of real estate at the *Casablanca Marina*. Can you please elaborate on that?

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Negri, *Singularities, Multitudes. Towards a Participatory Politics of the Common*, in: "Oliver Ressler. Barricading the Ice Sheets", Corina Apostol, Marius Babias, Reinhard Braun, Pablo DeSoto, Gabriela Salgado, Leila Topić (eds.), Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2023.

**Oliver Ressler:** Even though the two cases are very different from each other, I think both cases are examples of what David Harvey has called “accumulation by dispossession.” Of course, you could find thousands of examples of “accumulation by dispossession” globally. Thanks to different invitations, I was able to work in these very specific situations. The film I made in Casablanca was never shown in Morocco. When the Biennale Internationale de Casablanca saw the raw cut, they first did not respond to me for a really long time, and then surprisingly informed me that the biennale would be split into two parts and my film would be presented in the second part of the biennale. Of course, this second part never took place, which allowed the biennale not to present the film without having to be involved in a discussion about why it would not be presented.

I have never received an official statement or an apology from Biennale Internationale de Casablanca. My emails and phone calls were left unanswered. So, it was always a bit up to speculation what happened, and different people I talked to about it had different answers. In any case, if you do research into ownership of this new real estate at Casablanca’s seafront discussed in the film, you will find out that the ownership is not publicly disclosed. The ownership is situated in offshore havens. Some people argued that Morocco’s king was financially involved in some of these real estate developments. Because in Morocco it is regarded as impossible to criticize the king, that might have been a reason why *After the Barrage, the Deluge* was not presented in the biennale that had commissioned the work.

Another reason for the censorship of my work might have been that one of the persons speaking from the off was Omar Radi. When I interviewed him in January 2020, he was introduced to me as a brilliant investigative journalist—which he definitely is. Soon after I met him, he was imprisoned by the Moroccan authorities on the basis of apparently made-up allegations. Omar was held for several years and became the most well-known political prisoner in Morocco, then after an international campaign to free him and reports by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, he was finally released. Even though Morocco tries to establish this picture of being a liberal Arab State, the repression of dissenting voices tells another story.

**Lorena Moreno Vera:** The last time we met, we talked about these different ways of participation we can see in the two cases. With the Custodi del Bosco d’Arneo in Puglia, we have this multi-generational, heterogeneous group coming together to care for and to protect the forest. Even though there is this threat to be fined or even imprisoned for civil disobedience in Italy, there is still this possibility to gather and to discuss things. The activists are hidden behind their silhouettes but still speak up in public. Whereas in Morocco, there is a stronger threat, displaced people are removed from their survival networks in the city centre and forcefully resettled in the city’s outskirts. However, I want to know what you experienced while making these films.

**Oliver Ressler:** There are protests in Morocco that can become very disruptive, and the police response is always extremely violent. But people continue to protest because these are struggles against the loss of livelihood. I went to some of the outskirts where new houses for evicted people were built. Admittedly, from a distance they looked better in comparison to the run-down houses in the Medina. They are probably equipped with running water and electricity. But they are so far away that people require two hours or more on buses to come to the city centre, where they have their informal jobs in cleaning, restaurants or in construction. There is no high-speed

public transport in Casablanca, just buses that are continuously stuck in the daily traffic jam.

Of course, I'm in this privileged situation with an EU passport. Even though I knew it was prohibited to film, I could still pretend to be a tourist and probably nothing serious would have happened. In the worst case, they would deport me. For those people speaking in my film under their real names, the risks might be higher. I realized those are primarily educated people from a better-off background, and I had the impression they know very well this thin line of what can be said and how to express your critique. Working on the film, I learned that people who criticize tend to praise the king in the same moment, which might function as a kind of protection against possible criminalization. Everyone knows things are not going well in Morocco. But if you criticize it has to be done in a way that it is not legible as a direct critique of the king—in other words, the critique must be oblique enough to preserve plausible deniability.

**Lorena Moreno Vera:** Coming back to the point of language and the formulation of it: the fictions or narratives of the other side are also very strong. For example, Porsche has framed the expansion of the testing track as necessary to build electric cars, which require more testing. On the one hand, these cars are produced to reduce carbon emissions, on the other hand, they devastate this ancestral forest and other ecosystems. It is also clear that the production of an electric car entails the extraction of lithium and many more minerals that have devastating consequences on countries in the south with far weaker environmental protection than Italy.

In your films, you have these upfront conversations, which require trust from the people you interview. O.k., in Puglia it was a direct invitation, so I guess it was easier to establish this trust. Whereas, in the case of Casablanca, you had to do this research of who wants to talk, who is able and open to talk, and to what extent. Could you expand on these experiences?

**Oliver Ressler:** We both know very well that the environmental destruction might even increase if we replace the combustion engine with e-vehicles, due to the extraction of lithium and other materials. The test track in Puglia is also interesting because it is an example of how some of the environmental degradation will also happen within the European Union; not all sacrifice zones can be externalized. There is simply no way to replace the European Union's 250 million cars with combustion engines with e-vehicles. The transition has to move away from individual car ownership towards more and better public transport, and, in general, toward avoiding traffic altogether. Admittedly, the car corporations would lose a lot in such a transition, but this is not my primary concern.

Regarding this question of how to create trust so that people speak to you: in the case of the film in Casablanca, I had an ongoing communication with the biennial's curatorial assistants, whom I asked for suggestions of whom to talk to during the course of the project. In the selection of interviewees, it was important to have a gender balance, to include non-citizens and also working-class people. I asked all my interviewees if they could recommend me other people to talk to. Some people did not want to talk about specific questions but helped me pointing me to people who they thought might have answers for me. The shape of the project developed while talking to the people in Casablanca. It was a fruitful combination of doing research while at the same time I was already recording the conversations that were later used in the film.

Through these conversations, my project slowly began to take its shape. When I was about to wrap up my first production trip to Casablanca, I told everyone I would be back in three months to continue my conversations and filming. But then the pandemic disrupted all our lives, and with this, the continuation of the film. Morocco became one of the countries with the most restrictive legislation. The country literally sealed itself off against any international travel; it even prohibited the millions of Moroccan citizens working in European countries, primarily in Spain and in France, who would typically spend their summers in Morocco, from entering the country. So, it took me more than two years to travel back to Casablanca to continue working on the film.

This conversation is the edited version based on a Q&A after the screening of the films *We Are the Forest Enclosed by the Wall* and *After the Barrage, the Deluge* at Leokino in the framework of Innsbruck International on April 28, 2026. Innsbruck International was curated by Chris Clarke, Franziska Heubacher and Tereza Kotyk.