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# Counter-Globalisation Manuals

By Marina Grzinic and Oliver Ressler

This text is based on a public talk between artist and filmmaker Oliver Ressler and media theorist Marina Grzinic at Galerija Skuc in Ljubljana, November 2003. Focusing on Ressler's projects, from the anti-globalisation epic *This is what democracy looks like!*, to his more recent works *The Global 500* and *Disobbedienti*, the discussion looks at artistic strategies for communicating political messages in non-'art' situations. What are the politics of representing anti-corporate globalisation protests?

[IMAGE]

Marina Grzinic: Let's start from a very general point: Why is it important to think about economy in relation to art? What seems to be interesting about your art is not only a question of art, but a question of the way in which society in general is structured and how it functions. I remember some books dealing with capitalism and globalisation, where all these questions of identity are exposed, but in these philosophical books very little is said about the influence of the capitalist market and about the structure of society. So, looking concretely at your exhibition *The Global 500*, why is the formation of the economy important in your art?

Oliver Ressler: Economy is one of the major areas exerting a great deal of influence on a variety of fields in our society. I try to produce work related to issues I believe are of major importance, and that's why the economy became a main issue in my artistic practice. I hope that things which are of importance for me are also of some importance for other people. I carry out my work as an artist, because I think art is a possible tool for discussing some of the influence economy has on today's society. A lot of art institutions are still spaces where it is possible to thematise issues from perspectives that are not included in the discussions in major media. This makes art interesting for me, but it also makes sense to realise such work within the framework of art for other reasons: When I realise theme-specific installations for public, inner-city spaces, the finished work does not normally pose itself too strongly as art. But I strategically use the fact that my work is art when I negotiate with city governments in order to get permission and space for billboards, billboard-objects, or light works. When this work is presented in public spaces, in the end I actually use it more as a tool of analysis or criticism, or to strengthen certain positions. There are different possibilities, depending on the work. I am not an artist who tries to invent a kind of structure or procedure of how to realise work to then continue with that for a couple of years. I am more the kind of artist who tries to find a new adequate structure and aesthetic solution for each project I am working on.

[IMAGE]

> Oliver Ressler, *The Global 500* exhibition, 1999

MG: What is also very interesting for me is how you deal with text and the way in which you approach text. Often you take some kind of fact, some statements about economy or the way society functions, but in this original text the perspective from which it is being written is very often hidden. What you are doing is pointing to the fact that a text is always written by somebody who has a very specific position. So you are emphasising this moment in your analysis, the point and ideological background from which a text has been written. Something that is normally seen as common or natural is turned upside down and you can see very precisely from which point this knowledge is generated. For example, how did you select the speakers for the video *The Global 500*?

[IMAGE] OR: Normally, I start with research on an issue and then somehow an idea develops and then the structure of the work. In the next step I decide on the people I would like to interview, so the structure of a project I have in my mind becomes filled with content. In the case of this project, *The*

Global 500, I selected people who are closely related to this field of economy and argue quite clearly against this existing model of economy. I tried to get a wide variety of viewpoints within the project, so I selected an economist, two unionists, a worker from an NGO, and a cultural and a media theorist, who have been brought together for the first time for the project. But not all my work is based on interviews, such as the series of billboards and banners I realised in collaboration with US artist David Thorne within the framework of the ongoing project Boom!

MG: What is interesting is that you like these popular forms such as billboards or banners, but there is a kind of discrepancy, because you always use a lot of text. Normally these forms are used for very easy, quick messages. But you are using so much text! In the case of Boom! this strange intellectualism of the texts actually turns the populist format you use upside down. The meaning is not grasped at the first moment, but there are a lot of other layers of meaning. What is your interpretation of this clash of form and this enormous quantity of text?

OR: I have actually never managed to realise a work without text, because it is essential for me to express a kind of message. Usually it is very important that the message is clear to some extent and not vague. I am not an artist who just offers a piece of art and leaves the interpretation completely to the audience. And I really like text-only strategies. My first two projects in public space, in the mid-nineties, were text-only billboards and light works, which were also interesting to some extent because of the fact that they did not use images, as is usually the case with large print formats in public space. If you decide on such a strategy you also have to think about your audience. That's why these projects were often installed at bus stations or in the subway system, where people are waiting and usually have time to read things. I could hardly imagine creating a work for car drivers, because my work needs time. The person who reads a billboard at least has to have the possibility to read a text twice in order to understand it and think about it.

[IMAGE]

> Oliver Ressler & David Thorne, banner from the Boom! series, 2002

MG: These layers of text also make me think about the function of text. In the case of Boom! the visuality of the texts is connected with the name of the source, with the Internet itself. There is a clash between the text and the visual. They are not the same, they are not describing each other, but the meaning is produced in the clash. The url 'terror.gov' links terrorism with the state, which is producing this terror.

OR: The *terror.gov* window installation was realised as part of the Boom! series in Los Angeles. The original idea of Boom! was to generate dysfunctional web addresses on the central contradictions of capitalism, and we used the symbol of the failed dot.com economy as a symptom for the failure of capitalist economy in general. At some point, David and I decided to direct one of our url-texts towards the political representative, the US government, which has produced this post 9/11 discourse of terror in the US.

[IMAGE]

> Oliver Ressler & David Thorne, *terror.gov* window installation, 2002

MG: So what is the bomb in Boom!?

OR: The title refers to an explosion and the booming economy at the same time. Even when it is thought that the economy is booming it can very easily crash, which can produce a level of destruction similar to an explosion. And the dot.com economy is a well-known symbol for this relationship.

MG: In your work you put together many different levels: It is not only visual, there is research, and it is also very interesting journalism. In the case of your video *This is what democracy looks like!* the demonstrators are presented in a very different way than they have been presented in the media. In the media we have been told that the police repression was necessary, because the demonstrators were so violent and had attacked the police. Your work is very precise in the way it uses documentary form. It is about the anti-globalisation movement, so it is an important document, but it is actually an anti-documentary form. There is not this objective eye, which exists in the media, presenting one position, then another position, but you are really presenting an analysis. You are putting yourself on the side of the demonstrators and giving us the possibility to find out something about this other side, about other perspectives.

OR: As you mentioned, one day after the encirclement of 919 demonstrators in Salzburg there was already a report on Austrian state TV, which combined different sources of video material from the demonstration which happened at different times and locations in order to reconfirm the image of violent demonstrators, which the media had already imagined long before the demonstration even began. It presented the demonstration and the events in a way which was completely different than how the other people in this demonstration and I experienced it. This tendentious media presentation enforced my decision to commit myself to work on material that other participants in the demonstration and I had recorded with our camcorders, and to decide on a structure in which only the voices of people who participated in the demonstration are part of the video. My aim in creating this work was also connected with the wish to strengthen the political position of those people in the counter-globalisation movement in Austria.

[IMAGE]

> Oliver Ressler, *This is what democracy looks like!*, 2001

MG: I think it is very important that you decided on a very clear position, that you are clearly on the side of the demonstrators. It is also important that this event takes place in the center of the capitalist system. Sometimes when I present the video people think it is manipulated, because it is so harsh, they cannot imagine it is true. There is such intensity in the video when you see the way these bodies are encircled, and there is this moment of power. So another important theme of your video is this idea of bio-politics going on today in Europe, which is also thematised in your video *Disobbedienti*.

OR: When I worked on *This is what democracy looks like!* I found it to some extent problematic that these demonstrators are always represented within this police encirclement, being forced to act in relation to the police tactics and police repression. So I decided very early on that this video should not be my only video on the counter-globalisation movement. I began research on a group within this movement, which I found the most interesting, the *Disobbedienti*, who were still called *Tute Bianche* at the time. The *Tute Bianche* were these white-clad Italian activists who worked on a special form of civil disobedience, protecting their bodies with foam rubber, gas masks, and helmets. For the video *Disobbedienti*, interviews with activists on the actions, history, and theoretical background of the movement were carried out in collaboration with the Italian writer Dario Azzellini.

[IMAGE]

> Oliver Ressler & Dario Azzellini, *Disobbedienti* film still, 2002

MG: Watching this work is like reading a book. It is not just a question of visualisation, but how electronic media can also take the role of being a very important archive. But the video is also an essay as a political tool, it is a kind of manual. It shows that other forms of conversation exist, other forms of display, other ways to create resistance and to analyse. It is not necessary to write a book, people can also watch a video for an hour. How would you describe the outcome, what is the strategy of this

work, is there a final conclusion?

OR: Italy is one of a few European countries where large mobilisations against capitalism and right wing governments take place, and for me the Disobbedienti are the most interesting group within this larger context of resistance. There are not many groups who have managed to dismantle detention centers for refugees, as the Disobbedienti have a few times, and also the level of theoretical reflection on their actions is extremely high. A video such as *Disobbedienti* can help share their experiences with people outside Italy who don't have much information about this practice of resistance.

It is obvious that there is a lot of highly complex information in the video presented by the protagonists at a very high speed – they really have something to say! After several discussions, Dario and I decided to edit the video very close to how these people express themselves, high density, without many stops, in order to not disturb the flow of their excellent analysis.

Oliver Ressler <http://www.ressler.at>