

Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies, Alternative Art Practices
Interview Oliver Ressler / Anna Liv Ahlstrand

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Anna Liv Ahlstrand: In what way do you consider yourself a political actor; do you call yourself an activist and your actions artistic activism?

Oliver Ressler: All of my projects are political to some extent. They are realized in public spaces, as theme-specific installations in exhibitions, or as videos. Considering these different formats, it is clear that the projects function in different ways, are being realized for different viewers, and cause different reactions. Some of my works are closely related to activism, for example the video *This is what democracy looks like!* (38 min, 2002), which I created as a participant in a counter-globalization demonstration, or the video *Disobbedienti* (54 min, 2002) featuring the Italian activist movement. But there are other projects which have no relation to activism. I call myself an artist rather than an activist, because I see myself more as an artist who realizes some of his work in relation to activism than an activist with a background as an artist.

A.A.: Why have you chosen to focus on economic power structures?
How does the project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" relate to your earlier work?

O.R.: The first project I worked on in relation to economy was a series of exhibitions called "The global 500," which started in 1999. It was based on research on the protagonists of economic globalization, the 500 largest transnational corporations. This work could be described as a kind of analysis and criticism of hegemonic economics in the context of an exhibition. Later, I focused more on the resistance against capitalism and made the two videos mentioned. From this point on, it became the next logical step in my artistic practice to focus on concepts and models for alternatives that share a rejection of the capitalist system of rule. This topic is characterized through its absence in so many theoretical descriptions about the capitalist economy, which made it even more interesting for me to initiate my own research – which is being presented as the ongoing exhibition project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies." I think it is absolutely crucial to concentrate on alternatives at a time when the neoliberal slogan "there is no alternative" still dominates.

A.A.: What are your own ideas about democracy and alternative economies and societies? How do you view social change and societies' development into hierarchical power structures?

O.R.: For me, there are some basic principles that have to be fulfilled in an ideal future society: It has to be a real, direct democracy, and not this fake democracy we are forced to live in today. Basic needs of every person have to be satisfied, for example through a living wage. Enterprises should be organized through self-management by the people working in them. The power structures of state and private capital, etc., have to be dismantled. I am not sure how a society based on such principles could be best achieved and organized... I am very attached to the Zapatist concept of "asking we walk" ("preguntando caminamos"). With "asking we walk" one's own practice is analyzed while one carves out a new path that has not been determined from the outset. This principle is also mirrored in the conceptual framework of "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies," as this project involves ongoing research for an ongoing project, and I do not know where it will lead to in upcoming years.

A.A.: What are your goals and intentions with the project? How could it expand?
Can you believe in utopia today?

O.R.: The intention of the project is simply to provide people with ideas, on which a society better than the existing one might be based. Such a society should not be achieved through a kind of master-plan that some small elite has in mind. It should be a large process based on broad dialogue, involving as

many people as possible. It has to be a kind of open, transparent, bottom-up policy development process. In one of the videos I realized for "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies," the German writer Christoph Spehr points out that utopian thinking today does not have to be prescriptive in the sense that it dictates what to do. I am very much in favor of developing a society along such non-prescriptive lines. You still might call such a society utopian, but it would be very different from the kind of utopias we have experienced in the past.

Within the framework of "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies," theoretical concepts of alternative economics and societies, historical models which might be worth considering, and some more utopian or literary concepts are presented as 20- to 37-minute long videos. For the future I would be interested in expanding this pool of videos through some currently existing examples of alternative models, which can, for example, be found in regions in South America. Some of the project's videos also discuss strategies and ideas for transition, how to get from here to there.

A.A.: How do you want to position your viewer?

O.R.: Within the exhibition "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies," the viewer normally starts to walk around in the exhibition space reading the adhesive film lettering stuck to the floor. These texts are quotes from the videos, which are being presented on separate monitors in different parts of the exhibition space. The videos are presented non-hierarchically in the exhibition, and the several-meter-long floor texts lead the visitor directly towards the video from where the quote is taken. So a visitor normally starts to watch a video that he or she thinks might be interesting after having read the quote. Some people spend over two hours in the exhibition and watch all the videos, others watch maybe ten minutes of one video and a few minutes of another and pick out those ideas they feel are worth considering, think about them, maybe talk to other people in the exhibition, combine them with one another or with ideas they already had in mind.

A.A.: Where can art be effective? Do you think political art has the potential to really change social debate and the political system?

O.R.: The discussion about social and economic alternatives is marginalized not only by the dominant media, but by left oppositions in parliaments, by the majority of NGOs, by most theorists and philosophers, and even by large segments of the counter-globalization movement. Nowadays, almost everybody knows the disastrous effects capitalism has and that it means death to millions of people in the South each year, but we are all still struggling to survive within this system, to gain small advantages. Through our activities we keep this system alive – because perspectives for alternatives are not really known and considered. Through this work, I am attempting to take a few small steps. I do some research into models of economic and social alternatives, and make this research available through the videos I create, which are being added to this pool of information in the ongoing exhibition series. I am using the space of art to make this research and information accessible to some people, because I have the feeling that art is one of the areas in which it is still possible to address critical issues. Very often art itself is considered a form of utopian thinking. But not many artists commit their work to political, social, and economic utopian thinking, which seems to me to be of major importance nowadays. I am simply taking a few steps, and hope a couple of people will be inspired by my work.

A.A.: Do you think it is possible to change economic reality?

O.R.: Attempts to change economic reality can already be seen today. After the breakdown of the neoliberal economy in Argentina, wide segments of the Argentinean population tried to change existing political conditions. They organized in neighborhood assemblies, practiced mass "proletarian shopping," occupied factories and enterprises, which were collectivized and run by the workers on their own. Currently, we have an interesting situation in Venezuela, where the left-wing government in office supports a process of democratization of the economy and the whole society. Of course such tendencies are confronted with many difficulties. There are boycotts and the U.S. even supported a coup by the right-wing opposition in Venezuela against the democratically elected government. But at least we see that alternatives to neoliberal

eral capitalism are possible, and at the same time we also see that they are being oppressed by global capital, by European states, and the U.S. So this is why it is extremely important that the radical political opposition in the centers of capital gains power against the political elites. If over the period of several years such a process of resistance is successful, a change in economic realities could at least become imaginable.

A.A.: Do you think art can work as an intermediary and creative power to change society and people?

O.R.: Sure, sometimes it can work. Art can be a very successful means in specific situations. Remember, for example, the poster campaigns artists and artistic collectives realized within the Act-up movement in the 1980s in the U.S., which raised public awareness for the Aids epidemic and urged the conservative U.S. administration to change their politics of ignoring the Aids crisis. But Act-up is also an example which shows that art can succeed in gaining larger influence only in collaboration with other social groups. In many of these socially motivated collaborations the necessity to define the activities as "art" is not so strong. People from different backgrounds simply spend some time together and get something done.

A.A.: Could there be a risk of losing power by acting as art?

O.R.: In our society a kind of art dominates, which, in its more interesting cases through its structure and hidden references, is difficult to understand, and in the worst cases tries to fulfill needs of beauty, entertainment, or simply to function as a symbol of representation of those in power. It is quite clear that these functions have a huge influence on the predominate image of "art."

But the term "art" is also used for a much smaller percentage of art practices, which deal with and intervene in the political and social realm and have little to do with being a status symbol for a rich, self-proclaimed elite. In such a situation, it can be very important for strategic reasons to emphasize the fact that politically engaged art is also art, in order that the definitional power of what art is, is not left exclusively to commercial galleries and the art market. The last two Documentas were very important also because they presented political art as "art" that is important to a large audience.

The strategies I develop in my work differ from project to project, because each work normally provides a different strategy. I am interested in transferring issues from the real political space to the symbol-political space, and maybe back again. Working on theme-specific projects like this, I think it is extremely important to realize the projects in a way that they can be read and understood not only by experts of contemporary art, but also by a broader public, to counter the isolationist tendencies of the art field. But it depends on the context: Whereas in one context it might be important for me to emphasize the fact that my work is art, in another context, for example when working in public inner-city spaces, it might be necessary to realize work which also functions under the condition that people are not aware of the fact that what they see is art.

This interview was carried out by Anna Liv Ahlstrand for the Swedish magazine Hjärnstorm.
Information on Oliver Ressler's projects can be found at www.ressler.at