

On the Compatibility between the Languages of Art and Activism.

An interview with Oliver Ressler by Hinrich Sachs and Barnaby Drabble

D+S You define yourself as an artist, although you often work with themes and forms traditionally related to political activism. Can you introduce to us what forms your work takes?

OR I am primarily interested in issues such as migration, racism, economic globalisation, genetic engineering, and various forms of resistance. The issue comes first, but the second important thing is the media. I work with a wide range of media. For example I realise different projects in the public space as billboards, light works, direct mailings and have also produced banners for demonstrations. I also realise theme-specific installations for art-institutions. These involve different media, video is always one of the media used, but also text-image-montages, xerox copies, photographs and wall-paintings have been part of these installations, and in the last three years I have also worked on one-channel videos, which can be presented independent from such an installation context.

I call myself an artist rather than an activist, because I studied art at university and therefore I come from the art context. I have always been politically active and interested in particular political issues, but I realise my projects as an artist. I am however, interested to combine those two fields of art and activism in some of my work, but not in every work. Working with activists can take very different forms, for example I worked on a video called "This is what Democracy looks like!", which is about an encirclement by the police of 919 demonstrators in Salzburg, at a demonstration against the World Economic Forum in July 2001. In this case the level of collaboration was that I interviewed six of those demonstrators who were encircled with me, asking them to analyse and describe from their perspective what happened at this demonstration. Another example of a collaboration was the magazine called "Neues Grenzblatt", which translates as New Border Magazine, part of the project "Border Crossing Services", which I realised with the artist Martin Krenn. For this magazine we collaborated with anti-racist organisations and migrant initiatives. Eight of these organisations we asked to write texts for the magazine, which we sent by direct mailing to 12.000 houses in a specific border region.

D+S In relation to your collaborations with activists, do you recognise differences in the professional language you use as an artist and that used by your collaborators, and if so what form do those differences take?

OR I try to realise my work in a way that it is accessible to a lot of different people from different backgrounds. Of course with the themes I address, some of the projects are related to specific discourses, however, particularly when working in public space I try to avoid using overly difficult vocabulary and to address things on a more basic level. With video it is somewhat different, as video tends to be shown in more particular contexts where people are more aware of discourses.

For example, my recent video "Disobbedienti" is a collaboration between myself and the Italian writer Dario Azzellini based on seven interviews with members of the Disobbedienti, an Italian activist group known prior to the G8 summit in Genoa 2001 as the Tute Bianche. We carried out the interviews in front of locations that were of some importance to the movement, in this case buildings in Genoa and Bologna. When we returned and repeatedly listened to the material and discussed it, we recognised how extremely

important the book "Empire" from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt is for their discourse. We knew the text was important to them before, but the amount of references to the book which can be found in the interviews really amazed us. "Empire" is also really important in the art-discourse. So sometimes there is interference between different fields, and I am working a lot in this sphere, where there is interest from different groups.

D+S We were interested by the moment in the video where the activists point out that one aim of the group was to co-opt media structures and get media attention. Artists have been using similar strategies throughout the 90's and we immediately recognised this as common ground. Do you see similarities in the way artists and activists work through the media?

OR I appreciate the strategies of the Disobbedienti or Tute Bianche, in many respects they are my favourite activist group. They don't create a spectacle just for the sake of spectacle, or because they like a specific form. It is always a strategic decision to work with spectacle, because it can be a very effective way to present ideas and viewpoints within a larger media discourse. Such strategic steps are also part of many of my projects, and this is maybe one point why I decided to work on the video. I would add that in another context than the specific Italian one I think their actions look completely different, because these spectacles they staged were created for specific public space situations and relate to specific media debates.

D+S You rightly point out that you share strategies, but what about the question of audience? The Disobbedienti go far beyond the logic of the spectacle as simple drawing attention to themselves, because in doing so they are busy getting a message through. With your work however, the communicative goals seem a little different, who are your public? Or more precisely who are the public for this video?

OR The public for this video are the art- and video-scene and also the activist-scene. Political groups invite me to present the video at their conferences and meetings, but the video is also screened at video festivals, cinemas and art galleries. I try to keep the projects open so that they make sense for a larger public. I would also be interested to present "Disobbedienti" on TV, but have not managed it up to now. "This is what Democracy looks like!" has been broadcast on TV, which brought a lot of publicity for the work and the issues in it.

D+S As an artwork, the video Disobbedienti will live on in time and it's possible to imagine a point in the future when its meaning will be read in a very different way to today. When planning your projects do you consciously include this temporal perspective? If so, do you look at it like an historian, or perhaps as an artist developing a body of work; an oeuvre?

OR In my videos there can be seen similarities between my role as an artist and that of an alternative historian. In the case of the video Disobbedienti I tried to bring a couple of people together to speak about their current position, the theory and the history behind the activities of this group. With the video finished, what exists is a document that says a lot about the state of discourse in a particular place in July 2002 when we recorded the material. Whether this becomes at some moment an important historical document is something which depends on how the group and the political situation in Italy will develop and change, whether the Disobbedienti will be further criminalised by the Italian state, and

of course what other films will be made. My own influence on the status of the video is minimal in comparison to these other factors.

Of course I have something larger in mind than just simply realising one video. In the case of these videos I realised after 2000 they are all about different positions and forms of resistance, confronting capitalist society at different levels. I made the decision to begin this body of work a few years ago, and this work will continue.

D+S You mention seeking to broadcast this film on television, is your main aim here counter information? Are you trying to put this imagery and discourse, coupled with a certain level of complexity into public access as a counter to common coverage of such subject matter?

OR One of the reasons I realised this video was because it was normal, if you were lucky, only to get to read a couple of lines about the Tute Bianche in a newspaper, or you got to see them only as an image "the white-clad Italian activists". It was not often that you got behind this image, to what the real reasoning was for wearing these clothes and acting in such a spectacular way. But to be more precise I question whether counter-information was really the main aim of the project. It was certainly an important outcome, but the project also reflects the personal interest of Dario and myself in the group. We left out a lot of aspects that could have been covered in a convincing piece of counter-information, and preferred to focus on some observations, which might also be used by, and appeal to people from other countries. This is why we included much information on the generalisation of strikes, the ways in which the Disobbedienti try to bring together different groups and organise extremely large strikes, bringing often very different agendas together. This sort of thinking leads to what we witness in Italy, extremely large demonstrations from 300,000 to over one million demonstrators meeting and marching more than once a year. This is exceptional. A further element we focussed on was the issue of violence. It is apparent how those in power choose to split the movement into two groups: violent and non-violent demonstrators. The practice of the Disobbedienti and Tute Bianche before them challenges this bipolarity.

D+S You describe the Tute Bianche and Disobbedienti as your "favourite" activist group. As an artist, does this favouritism stem predominantly from an enjoyment of how they present themselves visually, or from an affinity to their political intentions?

OR They are my favourite protagonists of the anti-capitalist movement, because of the strength of their practice. In Europe I know no other group that has managed to dismantle detention centres for asylum seekers and refugees on more than one occasion. This is really something symbolically very strong and also very dangerous. The video also makes clear that this group really reflect on what they do, they have a very elaborate theoretical background, dealing with some of at present the most interesting discourses. In order to focus on this theory we made a decision to keep footage of the Tute Bianche operating in demonstrations to a minimum in the video, of course there would have been tons of spectacular material available. Language is the main level in the video, and this is reflected in the tools we used.

D+S To move on to the final topic we wanted to discuss with you; that of economy. You work full time as an artist, how do you fund your practice?

OR Normally I get invitations from art institutions: galleries, "kunstvereine", and sometimes museums, and they have a budget to realise work. Very often these budgets

are not high enough, so I write applications for state or city funding. Last year I realised a kunst am bau project to earn my living and gave a lot of talks about my work. I try to apply for any money which might somehow be given to me, and this search takes me much broader than just arts funding. I have received funding for film production, and even in one case as part of a trans-disciplinary research team. In this case art was only a tiny part of a large project involving historians, sociologists, geographers and others. Even though the art budget was maybe only one percent, it was notable that for me as an artist this was one of the highest budgets I ever had to realise a work. The research project was about borders and I produced the "Border Crossing Services" work. The funders were not really happy about it, but we used the money as we thought it would be the best in relation to our political and artistic interests.

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