

Ele Carpenter Art-Activist Symmetry in the artwork of Oliver Ressler

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Abstract:

Ele Carpenter reflects on the balance between political and artistic concerns in Austrian artist Oliver Ressler's collaborative films, text works, and exhibitions. The works range from activist documentary, thought-provoking texts in public space, and a proposal for a series of banners which play on the language of political sloganeering. Ressler bridges the gaps between utopian vision and the tactical realities of political, economic, social and cultural change. Carpenter argues for an integrated approach to viewing both the creative and political together, as symmetrical modes of critical engagement, organising and being. By comparing Ressler's collaborative films and texts, Carpenter reveals a distinct approach to making art which is fully engaged in debates about global economics, and an activism which understands the creative space required for cultural change.

Main Article:

Oliver Ressler is an artist and activist who makes films and text works, bringing the issues of globalization and the 'movement of movements' to the heart of the visual arts through exhibitions, publications and film screenings. Each film or text exists as individual artwork with its own mode of distribution (films screened in cinemas, postcards as mail art, billboards on the street). But perhaps most significantly they are also brought together to form the exhibition *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* (AEAS). Here the two worlds of art and activism reveal their similarities and distinctions. Whilst there are historically different developments between social movements and the art market, museology documents the shift from the role of the art museum from the presentation of reified objects to the representation of a broader spectrum of cultural activity and engagement. Today contemporary art practice in public space investigates the boundaries of cultural ownership and social relations through temporary interventions both online, in galleries and on the street.

The concepts of relational power (Hardt & Negri, 2000), rhizomatic networks (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), temporary autonomous zones (Hakim Bey, 1985), and tactical interventions into the everyday (de Certeau, 1984), underpin much socially engaged art practice, as well as the anti-capitalist movement. But rather than referencing the aesthetics of DIY or collaborative culture, Ressler lives it through his work: finding film-makers, writers and theorists to collaborate in rigorous investigation into the myriad of tactics with which people are finding ways to express their social connectivity and alternative economic culture around the world.

In the film *What Would It Mean to Win?* (Begg & Ressler, 2008) John Holloway talks about protest as asymmetrical to capitalism because it proposes a different way of organising and being. In the publication accompanying the exhibition AEAS, (Ressler, 2007) Gregory Sholette describes the asymmetrical networks of the artworld: one which is based on mutual aid and gift economy, and the other on a market economy of institutional representation supported by art dealers and collectors (p15-16). It is possible to map the characteristics of informal production and distribution methods in art and activism. However, it is an unstable map, where artists often keep (or desire) a relationship with the formal art economy, both to legitimise their work aesthetically as art, and to keep the art-world as a communication/distribution channel for financial as well as ideological reasons.

Horizontal artist and activist networks are in contrast to the pyramid of capitalism (George, 1992), and attempt to construct spaces for dialogue, consensus decision-making and action as a model for social change. But there are problems here - in many ways the activist message utilises mainstream communication tactics, where art adds complexity and often confusion.

As an artist and film-maker Ressler is both representing activism, and expressing his political interests through the work, but what are the conceptual and aesthetic concerns of this process?

From an activist perspective it may seem banal to consider how Ressler's practice reconciles his role as an activist within artistic terms. But for artists the question of cultural expression and representation lies at the heart of political change. Whilst both the mainstream and activist media often depict the polarities of political positions, Ressler attempts a more reflexive view. Every film includes the cultural context and explores the role of creativity in political change. But certain aspects of his work deal with complexity and ambiguity in representation, more than others.

Ressler's films acknowledge activism as a form of self-expression (creatively, as well as politically), but they are also conscious of their own role of representing particular subjectivities (Bromberg, 2006).

The film *5 Factories: Worker Control in Venezuela* (Azzellini & Ressler, 2006) examines the contemporary experience of co-operatively run companies supported by the controversial public reforms of the Chavez government. But the film is not typical of much activist documentary where high emotional drama can leave the viewer informed but completely exhausted, guilty and disempowered. Neither is it a charitable request, or a government information film. Instead it is a considered presentation of a model for an alternative economy in progress. Ressler and Azzellini take care to include the voices of workers from all areas of the production and management process. The content of the film is narrated through the individual experiences of the workers, inter-cut with visually seductive film-shots of the scale and beauty of the industrial production process. These shots, combined with the workers narratives, clearly represent knowledge of the raw material, and pride of ownership of the production process.

Symmetry and Asymmetry

There is symmetry throughout Ressler's work – firstly in the analogy between art and activism as exploring worlds that are both asymmetrical to capitalism. Secondly, the films often work as pairs, with documentary of protest in Europe screened alongside evidence of alternative economies in other continents. Watching the film *What Would It Mean to Win?* (Begg & Ressler, 2008) is made manifest through the example of *5 Factories* (Azzellini & Ressler, 2006). They form a diptych reflecting ambition and meaning between the two continents and cultures, each forming a context for the other.

IMAGINE AN ECONOMY

IN WHICH THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION BELONGS TO EACH COMMUNITY AND IS LEASED TO THE EMPLOYEES OF EACH PRODUCTION UNIT FOR A LONG-TERM CONTRACT

There is symmetry of responsibility in Ressler's work. The audience is not simply given information, they are asked to think, to imagine and to enact. The challenge of the *Imagine...* texts speaks directly to the audience, taking John Lennon's day-dreaming into a series of specific socio-political propositions. Here, the artist creates a vision, and takes others on a process of visioning the world in a different way. Whilst the films document a socio-political movement, the texts challenge audiences to apply these ideological struggles, to our own experience.

But lastly – I want to introduce a type of linguistic symmetry that has been less critiqued within Ressler's practice.

Ressler's most conceptual and ambiguous work has been realised through collaboration with David Thorne. They have created designs for a series of *3 BOOM! Banners* (2004), which feature extremely long url's. The banners are designed for public space, both physically – strung across the city square, and virtually as website domain names, exploring the complexity of protest in public space. The almost impossible websites (no-one has bought the domain names yet) use a different visual and linguistic strategy compared to the films and *Imagine* texts.

The banner slogan is written in one continuous line without spaces. One of the texts reads:

www.ifonlypeoplewouldopentheirheartstothevisionthatfreedomisonthemarchandbelievethattheyarebeingspiritedonthewingsofangelstoabrightandshiningfuturecalledglobalfreemarketdemocracythenthefactthatthisvisionthingonlybecomesclearaftertheireyesaregougedoutandtheycannotseewheretheyaregoingatallandthattherearenoangelsleadingthewayonthislonforcedmarchcouldbebetterleftunsaid.com

Activism (and media) has a tendency to simplify the message, in a way that art can mimic, parody or interrogate. Ressler's films are serious, even when depicting performance-art activism that uses humor as a tactic (Begg & Ressler, 2008), whereas the *BOOM! banners* embody both the utopianism and symbolic nature of action in virtual space, with irony and humor. Ressler and Thorne describe the intention of the work:

“to mix up the rhetoric of oppositional politics and to complicate the visual and verbal languages of protest.”

The text is symmetrical, which leads the reader to try and decipher meaning through this pattern. The words 'vision', 'march', and 'angels' are repeated. The nature of 'vision' shifts from the imaginary to blinding. 'Angels' emerge as saviours and then disappear. Perhaps the work is a metaphor for utopianism being swallowed up by the wheels of political structures.

This particular url merges several centuries of protest and political romanticism, from protest-march to forced-march, questioning its autonomy and efficacy. But rather than decoding the meaning of the message – we can only ask a series of questions; the meaning may not be in the message, but in the question you ask yourself.

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