

# Protesting Capitalist Globalization on Video

OLIVER RESSLER



Since the mid-nineties, video has played an important role in my artistic practice. In theme-specific relevant installations realized in art institutions, such as (*Learned Homeland*) *Gelernte Heimat* (1996), *Institutionelle Racismssismen* (1997), *The Global 500* (1999) and *Nachhaltige Sustainable Propaganda* (2000), video was a central element that was employed in combination with text/image montages or photos in wall and spatial installations. These videos are based on interviews that were conducted for segments of the topic of the exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>

Since 2000 I have been making videos apart from exhibitions, which can also be presented outside the immediate field of art. These videos move between art and political activism, and deal with themes and practices of resistance in a non-institutionalized left.

In this text I would like to formulate some thoughts on two videos finished in 2002, which focus on a partial area of the movement that is usually called the 'anti-globalization movement' in predominant media discourse.

The video *This is what democracy looks like!* (38 min., 2002) deals with events revolving around a demonstration prohibited by the police against the World Economic Forum on July 1st, 2001, in Salzburg, in the course of which 919 demo participants were

surrounded for seven hours for no immediate reason by martial police forces. The basic democratic right to free speech in public was suspended, while the non-democratic but legitimate leaders of corporations were able to expedite the neo-liberal reconstruction of society without disruption within the framework of the WEF behind closed doors. As a participant in the demonstration, I ended up inside the encirclement by the police and tried to film the events with a video camera from within the demonstration.

Shortly after July 1st, I decided to take my video material of the encirclement of the demonstrators as the starting point for a video. At the same time, I was confronted with the fact that I was addressing an event, the course and dramaturgy of which were strongly determined by repressive police tactics and the arbitrary actions taken by politicians and police. Through being encircled by the police, the demonstrators were forced into a predicament where the possibilities for reacting to the hourly-changing negotiation positions, and the repressive conduct of the police, were severely limited. This unequal power relation convinced me to address the events exclusively from the perspective of the demonstrators and to leave out the perspective of the police, the mayor, or 'neutral' observers, which already dominate media reports. For this reason, I conducted interviews with six demo participants several weeks later, whose descriptions and assessments would now be marked by the distance of time and a critical reflection.

The decision to realize the video *This is what democracy looks like!* was accompanied by the intention to additionally work on another video about a different segment of the anti-capitalist movement – to focus more on political practices and options for taking action beyond immediate reactions to police tactics. I decided to make a video about one of the groups that I find most interesting, the Italian *Disobbedienti* (The Disobedient Ones). The Disobbedienti emerged from the Tute Bianche during the demonstrations against the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001. The Tute Bianche were the white-clad Italian activists who used their bodies – protected by foam rubber, tires, helmets, gas masks, and homemade shields – in direct acts and demonstrations as weapons of civil disobedience. They first appeared in Italy in 1994. This was the time when the 'mass labourer', who had played a central role in the 1970s in production and in labour struggles, was gradually being replaced in the transition to precarious post-Fordist means of production. By forcing the closing of detention camps through specially developed acts of dismantling, the Tute Bianche became involved in protests against precarious working conditions, and the immigrants' struggle for the freedom of movement. The Tute Bianche were part of the demonstration against the WTO in Seattle in 1999 and the IMF in Prague in 2000. They sent delegates to the Lakandon rainforest in Chiapas, and accompanied the Zapatist Comandantes three thousand kilometers to Mexico City.

At the G8 summit in Genoa the Tute Bianche decided to take off their trademark white overalls that had given them their name and instead blend in the multitude of 300,000 demonstration participants. The transition from the Tute Bianche to the Disobbedienti, the Disobedients, also marked a development from 'civil disobedience' to 'social disobedience'. The repressive actions, mass beatings, and death by the police force in Genoa brought social disobedience off the streets and into the most diverse social realms. In my video, the Disobbedienti spokesperson Luca Casarini describes the Tute Bianche as a subjective

experience and a small army, whereas Disobbedienti is a multitude and a movement.

Disobbedienti maintains the political form of the Tute Bianche, and attempts to create better legal justice for and from the people – a process initiated by people, which would also benefit them. Spectacular actions are still being carried out against detention centres, such as the dismantling of the detention camp in the *Via Mattei* in Bologna on 25 January 2002, as shown in the video. Additionally, attempts are being made to further develop ‘social disobedience’ as a collective practice of various groups, to block the flows of goods and communication, to make general the strikes of individual groups, and to plan and carry out general strikes.

With the video, I wanted to address the actions and theoretical considerations of the Disobbedienti, who are still too little known outside Italy. For this reason, I conducted a series of interviews with the protagonists of the Disobbedienti for the video in collaboration with the author Dario Azzellini in summer 2002.

In both the video *This is what democracy looks like!* and the video *Disobbedienti* (54 min., 2002), only people involved in the “movement of movements” speak up and assume the role of active speakers in the video. The images in *This is what democracy looks like!* consist of video material shot by myself and other video activists in Salzburg during the demonstration. The interview partners are not seen, but only speak about the events represented by video images. In *Disobbedienti*, on the other hand, there is an emphasis on the physical presence of the discussion partners. All the interviews were filmed standing in places that are immediately significant for the practice of the Disobbedienti. The ways the interview partners are staged, and sequences shot while walking, underscore the importance of the body for the Tute Bianche.

Both the videos largely dispense with off-camera commentaries. Such commentaries are often used in reports on television to create a distance from the interviewed people when they represent something radical, so that an identification with the radical content is made difficult for the audience. Dario Azzellini and I approach the intellectual position of the interview partners through this formal reduction, and through the strong presence of the protagonists. The conceptual arrangement of the video indicates our fundamental agreement with the analyses and practices of the Disobbedienti, and this way the video becomes a further political statement.

The videos are thus fundamentally contrary to the investigative journalism of bourgeois media, which insists on its alleged neutrality. The ‘democratically balanced’ television news features, for instance, that contribute to the exclusion of left-wing perspectives and perpetuate this exclusion despite asserted objectivity, are a direct point of reference to the extent that this is exactly reversed in this video practice. The motif of the political activist, so popular in television news reports, as a ‘violence-prone demonstrator’ (the attribution



invariably occurs only in the masculine form) is the starting point in both the videos for debating the discourse on violence, through which attempts are made to divide the anti-capitalist movement into 'violence-prone' and 'peaceful' demonstrators, pitting them against one another and thus weakening the movement.<sup>2</sup>

In discussions, the video *Disobbedienti* is sometimes criticized for the density of its information and the simultaneous complexity of what is said, since the video requires the full attention of viewers throughout its 54 minutes. In the way it is edited, *Disobbedienti* uses the high speed of the speech of the interview partners as a formal element, and makes no attempt to resolve it with breaks. In order to focus the viewers' attention even more on the arguments of the protagonists, the continuous flow of images in the video is interrupted in several places with white surfaces. These white surfaces are directly related to the white overalls of the Tute Bianche, the function of which is explained in more detail in the video, but they are also the expression of a wish to inspire viewers to fill the visual lacuna with their own ideas. In other words, the white gaps represent the attempt to find an open visual correspondence for a development that is to progress questioningly, and without prefabricated models, in keeping with the concept of the *Disobbedienti*.

Less often there is a criticism that the video tends to heroize the *Disobbedienti*. Yet when one asks people, who are in part politically active themselves, about the reason for this criticism, one hears that the rejection is based on the spectacular appearance of the actions and an asserted avant-gardist comportment of the Tute Bianche or the *Disobbedienti*, which they themselves negate. As the representatives of the *Disobbedienti* eloquently describe in the video, the spectacle is purposely used to attract the attention of the media. It is thus not an end in itself, but rather a calculated strategy. Contrary to the argument of heroization, in the video Francesco Raparelli also states that it is a problem when the *Disobbedienti*'s civil disobedience becomes a logo or verbal representation of practices that have already been carried out by other subjects of the conflict.

I would counter these objections with the importance of conveying the political practice and assessments of the *Disobbedienti*, thus providing audiences outside Italy with an opportunity to learn from these experiences, to critically reflect on them, and to perhaps even adapt one facet or another into one's own ideas or practice.

Because of their subject matter, the videos *This is what democracy looks like!* and *Disobbedienti* are also shown and received outside an immediate art context. In addition to presentations in political contexts, there are also presentations in cinemas and at video festivals. For me, though, it is immensely important to continue to show the videos in art institutions because I regard them as central places where there is a certain scope for dealing with marginalized political perspectives and practices.

A former version of this text has been published in the framework of republicart ([www.republicart.net](http://www.republicart.net)).

## NOTES

1. For further information: [www.ressler.at](http://www.ressler.at).
2. Cf. Dario Azzellini & Oliver Ressler, *Die Macht des Gewaltdiskurses*, Kulturrisse 04/02.