

Appeal for non-hierarchic, self-determined, social and economic alternatives

Interview by kuda.org with Oliver Ressler on the exhibition "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies"

Question: There are many arguments and critiques of the capitalist economy in general and its influences on social reality (and "absorption of social imagination"), on politics and the concept of "multicultural liberal democracy". What is the position that you stand for when you discuss and criticize capitalism in relation to the subject of the installation "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies"?

OR: Well, capitalism completely dominates and defines the conditions under which people live nowadays, which means poverty and exploitation for the majority of people on earth. I believe that under capitalism a "normal", balanced condition does not exist. Capitalism needs permanent expansion, new markets, such as genetic engineering, patents on genes, the privatization of water or of all those social services, which have been provided by the state until recently. Politicians, corporations and corporate media use the construct of „globalization“ to present these changes as necessary, natural and inevitable, and not as an efficient long-term strategy for the redistribution of wealth in favor of capital it is. As capitalism without expansion does not seem to be possible, I don't agree with critics who argue for a reformation of capitalism, mainly a re-regulation of markets. And even if re-regulation would really somehow work economically on a global level, it would not be a structure I would fight for. We have been living in these extreme hierarchic capitalist structures for so long; it's already getting boring and time to consider possibilities for less hierarchic, self-determined social and economic alternatives.

Q: How did it come that you focused on alternatives to capitalism within your artwork and realized the installation "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies"?

OR: In the late 1990s I realized a major project related to economy, an exhibition focusing on analysis and criticism of the most influential global players in capitalism, the transnational corporations. I spent several weeks on their web pages doing research, reading the annual reports and learning about their strategies as to how to present economic globalization and the deregulation of markets as something which is a natural process and absolutely positive for everybody. Half a year after the first presentation of this project, "The Global 500", in 1999 in Seattle this so-called counter-globalization movement came into focus of attention. I was very attracted by the dynamic and the non-hierarchic organization and filmed two videos in the following years focusing on this resistance movement. Since 2003 I spent most of my time and energy working on the ongoing project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies", which does not only analyze and criticize the present conditions, but goes one step further with its focus on social and economic alternatives.

Q: The exhibition deals with the ideas, attempts and possible models of alternative economics and alternative social organization. To what extent are these ideas and models a functioning alternative to capitalism and to what extent a utopia?

OR: All of the eleven concepts and models for which I carried out interviews so far have a negation of the capitalist system in common. Whether some concepts are considered as scientific economic models and others as utopian is an interesting question in itself. Which aspects make one model scientific and another utopian? I would argue these categories are fluid. Marx and Engels' work was clearly utopian at the time it was written, but became reality after some decades when communist leaders tried to apply their economic theories to real life. Nowadays the notion "utopian" is often used to devalue certain strategies for change. The central idea behind the project "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" is to present different models and concepts for alternatives, to give people who are interested ideas to find out how a future society might be structured and look like. The ideas in the exhibition should work as food for thought, as the basis for discussions, which are so necessary nowadays when strategies for alternatives are not clear. But it has to be clear that a desirable society should be realized and created by the people who live in it. A model,

which prescribes and determines every aspect of this future society, cannot lead towards an ideal society. That's why the project does not focus on one alternative concept, but on several.

Q: What is the position of those alternative methods in relation to the extreme anarchistic strategies of opposing capitalism, which more often promotes deconstruction and abolition as the most effective approach – “to destroy what destroys us”?

OR: Some of the concepts and models in “Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies” also focus on transitional strategies, how to move towards an alternative society. The interview partners are of course aware of the fact that it will be very difficult to achieve this new society on a larger level without powerful struggles from the grass roots. Considering the fact that these elites who are in power today would necessarily lose all their power, influence and wealth and would defend it for sure, it is impossible to imagine a systemic change taking place without any violence. But there is also violence imbedded in the structures of capitalism and is reproduced every day, so you cannot avoid it. All authors have different quite elaborated ideas through which structures capitalism might be replaced. Also the contemporary anarchist model presented in the project, the “Anarchist Consensual Democracy” by Ralf Burnicki is a detailed description of an egalitarian society. So this simple radical attitude to which you seem to refer to as “Smash Capitalism!” and not to focus on alternative social structures, which should replace those of capitalism, I cannot take seriously.

Q: In several of the interviews on different social concepts appeals for egalitarianism, solidarity, diversity and self-organizing can be found. Are there examples of small-scale initiatives that worked and inspired the creation of larger communities based on these values?

OR: As an example for a larger community which tries out different forms of self-governing and self-organization I would offer the Zapatistas in Chiapas, who developed an autonomy against the will and pressure of the Mexican state eleven years ago. The Zapatist communities organize and govern themselves on a grassroots basis. They introduced the so-called Good Government Junta as a kind of direct-democratic self-governing network. The Zapatistas organize their own schools, radio stations and medical care, they own property collectively, have their own local economy – of course at a very low level because Chiapas is an extremely poor rural area. So we should not glorify their economic and social situation, but at the same time recognize what they managed to make real. At least to some extent I think they succeed in not replacing one domination system with another but to break with systems of domination as a norm. A video on the Zapatistas is definitely one I will carry out in future in the framework of “Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies”.

Q: There is an interesting thought in one of the video interviews that says: “Capitalism exists not because we created it in the 19th century or in the 18th century... Capitalism exists today only because we created it today”. What are the manifestations of capitalism in today's society? What are its “geographical imprints”, in the sense of the forms that it can take in the world's most developed countries, as well as in the political and economic peripheries, such as Serbia?

OR: The effects of capitalism are visible everywhere in the world, but take different forms in different areas in the world. I think Serbia or the former Yugoslavia is a good example how indebted states are being forced into economic globalization. This transformation process is organized through structural adjustment programs the indebted states have to implement, which deregulate and liberalize the national markets, open them for the large transnational corporations, which destroys many of the smaller local businesses after a while. The structural adjustment programs force states to dismantle their social security systems, to lay off employees in state industries, measurements that lead to the impoverishment of large parts of the population, which is so visible in Serbia and many other parts in the world. The reason why I carried out an interview with John Holloway, whom you quoted in your question, lies in his extremely inspiring considerations about how revolution can be thought today. Holloway argues that history shows that transforming society through the state has failed, because the state itself is already a specific form of social relationship that arises with the development of capitalism. So he talks about changing the world without taking state

power, describes revolution as a question rather than an answer, as a process of involving people in a movement of self-determination. Many of his ideas are related to the thinking of the Mexican Zapatistas, which also had some impact on me when I developed the conceptual structure of the installation "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" as a non-hierarchically arranged pool of videos. "Asking we walk" is a central motto of the Zapatistas. The visitors in the exhibition are not provided with information as to which videos they should start watching at the exhibition. Visitors have to find their own way following the several meter long text quotations on the floors, which provide a kind of orientation and lead them to the corresponding videos. So visitors pick out videos according to their interests, which is a very important aspect of the installation, because I think it should also be the case in the society that people have a possibility to choose the structures that influence how they work and live.

Q: In one of the interviews, you said that you have always been politically active and particularly interested in political issues, but you realize your project as an artist. You also mentioned that what makes art interesting to you is the fact that "a lot of art institutions are still spaces where it is possible to thematize issues from perspectives that are not included in the discussions in major media." Many art institutions are also part of capitalist based art market. Marina Grzinic says that behind the naturality of artwork stands "a whole system of (theoretical, critical) investments and (not only and solely) money." What is your position as an artist that is, in the end, active in such system, yet dealing with its essential problems?

OR: I completely agree with Marina's analysis. The question is what to do after acknowledging the fact that there is no "outside" of capitalism. It is no option for me to give up artistic practice and neglect the artistic field, which very often is a space where radical debate takes place. For me personally the central question is if it is still possible to achieve some positive effects through activities, which have their origin in the art field. And from my experiences I would not hesitate to answer this question with "yes."
In the case of "Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies" the exhibition is a site for a social process of interrogation, and I see my role as an artist to organize and initiate such a process. Within the format of an art exhibition I try out modes of making information and knowledge accessible, which are very different from reading a book or seeing a film.

Q: You are using different kind of media to analyze the content and to send the message through. Video has a kind of special place among them, since many of your works are realized in video format. What is the position of using the Internet and new media within the subjects that you are dealing with? Do we still need to wait for the process of "democratization" of this media, as we witnessed the democratization of video in the sixties and the seventies? Is the conviction of transformation of civil disobedience into "electronic civil disobedience" a myth, a utopia?

OR: I used video as part of installations since the mid-1990s and videos, which can be presented independent from exhibition spaces, since 2000. So video really became a somehow dominant medium within my artistic practice. But I also use other media such as posters, billboards and light-works for public inner-city spaces, or I produce graphic inserts for print media or magazines. So my work is not primarily based on one certain media, but more on certain issues that I am dealing with and trying to find formats and strategies to address a public with them. And similar to art production tools I also see a variety of valuable different resistance means I do not want to pit against each other. As the international counter-globalization movement has proven the activities of real bodies in the streets can still make sense under certain circumstances and can cause positive effects, such as the premature termination of the WTO conference in Seattle in 1999, which at least to some extent was caused through the ten-thousands of demonstrators who blocked the meetings of the WTO delegates in Seattle. On the other hand we can find examples that electronic civil disobedience can raise a lot of public awareness as well, such as the online demonstration against Lufthansa. As capital seeks to commercialize recently developed spaces such as the web, it is extremely important to use these spaces for dissent and to fight for our democratic rights for free speech and to demonstrate on these spaces.

Q: What is, in your opinion, the most significant effect or output in organizing such an event in Serbia and Montenegro, considering the local context? At least, what are your expectations?

OR: An exhibition is a very specific format which is usually seen by those people who are somehow involved with the art scene or who are interested in the particular issues of the project. In some of the “Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies” presentations that took place in larger art exhibitions such as at the Transmediale.04 in Berlin or the Emoção Art.ficial II in Sao Paulo also a broader audience got a chance to see the installation. In any case it is a work in which people have to spend some time in order to profit from it, the total length of the eleven videos on which the ongoing project currently consists is almost five hours. But I am not only traveling around in the world to realize these exhibitions but also to get in touch with people through the exhibitions I would not have met otherwise. And these people sometimes have some special knowledge they share with me, give me important hints for possible future videos within the framework of the project. But what exactly happens at the site of an exhibition is never predictable. In Geneva the exhibition was realized at the time when the “World Summit on the Information Society” took place and got more or less occupied by Indymedia activists, who spent days in the space, watching and discussing the videos, and using the exhibition space for their meetings. So each exhibition is a unique experience, and I hope the exhibitions in Serbia in the context of extremely right wing politics and these incredibly fast economic transformation processes has the potential to provide interesting thoughts for some people.

Interview carried out by kuda.org, May 2005 for:
“Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies”, Revolver – Archiv für aktuelle Kunst,
Engl./Serbian, 72 p., 2005