



Questions from an Artist Who Reads (and Thinks, Writes, and Speaks)

On Oliver Ressler's ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES: ALTERNATIVE SOCIETIES

g.sholette 2007

All artists who speak are insufferable. When not discussing themselves or the fruit of their self-important labors, they lapse into general remonstrations about this or that critic, or one or another curator. They heckle and complain. And through it all their work suffers from neglect. Still, as nuisances go, this prattle can be tolerated within limits. But what cannot be endured are those artists who speak about things not of their station, such as politics or economics, worldly things that force the artist to become an autodidact. This type of artist is more than insufferable. This type of artist is grotesque. The first thing we need to know about Oliver Ressler then is that he is an *artist who speaks* (and reads, and writes, and questions) and that he is grotesque.

Plato would have twice despised such a creature. To begin with, he reviled artists, famously seeking to prohibit them from entering his ideal Republic for fear their skills of mimicry would lead to moral corruption and uncertainty about what is true.¹ Plato also had an ulterior motive for his embargo. He banished artists, the philosopher Jacques Rancière insists, because their practice makes transparent the aesthetics of politics, or what he calls the distribution of the sensible:

“The delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.”²

According to Rancière, Plato intended each laborer in the Republic to remain fixed in a specific place and thus far from engagement in the distraction of leisure or politics. Plato's logic is simple. In order for laborers to participate in political discourse, or any other activity for that matter other than their occupation, they would need to be *elsewhere*, at least part of the time, away from the physical and temporal demands of work. And work *will not wait*.³ This economy of time provides the greater community steady, reliable production “24/7”. Certainly, artists also do a type of labor, but as Plato

¹ Calling upon classic Western philosophers to illuminate political or cultural issues in the present day is a risky venture at best, and especially so for a non-specialist like myself. For that reason I ask the reader to view my rendezvous with Plato's Republic for what it is: a critical engagement with the writings of philosopher Jacques Rancière whose writings about Plato, art, and politics continue to have a considerable impact on the contemporary art world.

² *The Politics of Aesthetics* by Jacques Rancière, (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2004) p 13.

³ Rancière puts it this way (his italics), “Plato states that artisans cannot be put in charge of the shared or common elements of the community because they do *not have the time* to devote themselves to anything other than their work. They cannot be somewhere else because *work will not wait*.” (Ibid) p 12.

contemptuously points out the artist worthlessly *imitates* the products of other workers. The artist need know nothing useful. The exact proportion of salt to flour is irrelevant for making a sketch of a loaf of bread, just as a painting of a house does not need to provide shelter from a storm. With the appearance of imitative art, a duplicitous mode of labor contaminates the economic minimalism of the Republic. Plato's despair begins here. For if the artist can do two things at once, work and also imitate work, then some type of labor *is not based on necessity*. This also means the community's well-being is not dependent on virtuous workers standing by their stations all day long, only to collapse exhausted by night. Instead, there must be time available for other pursuits, *time to be somewhere else*. The useless and ultimately fictional nature of artistic labor proves this and opens up a space of reflection in which one can fantasize, perhaps even imagine a permanent alternative to the grueling routines of work itself, such as the pursuit of art. Like the young Marx, Rancière envisions "a society of emancipated individuals that would be a society of artists. Such a society would repudiate the divide between those who know and those who do not know, between those who possess or who do not possess the property of intelligence."⁴ And yet, if art opens a potential "escape route" out of labor's mute drudgery, where then does this leave the artist? Is the artist constrained by a "true calling" to serve as good shepherd, at least until the day of emancipation when all labor is artistic labor? A reciprocal question therefore is needed regarding the distribution of the sensible. If the artist's duplicitous labor makes clear the aesthetics of politics, then what are the politics that govern the economy of artistic labor itself? It is this question that Oliver Ressler's work raises first and foremost, not merely because he is an artist who speaks, but because he is an artist who speaks of things that are *external* to his given station. This is why he is doubly contemptible. Returning once more to Rancière's parable then, we must now take it to a place where the French philosopher himself has refused to travel.⁵

THE ARTIST WHO SPEAKS

We read in Plato's tenth and last book of the Republic that the imitative artist has one opportunity to be granted citizenship, but this comes with a stipulation. The spell that the artist's mimicry casts over the citizens of the Republic must be publicly countermanded.

Let us assure our sweet friend (poetry) and the sister arts of imitation that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered state, we shall be delighted to receive her.... We are very conscious of her charms, but we may not on that account betray the truth.... Shall I propose, then, that she be allowed to return from exile, but on this condition only, that she makes a defense of herself in lyrical or some other meter? And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf. Let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit.

Plato's speech act inaugurates two cultural institutions: arts administration, and art criticism. One will manage the artist-producer's relationship to society; the other will interpret the value of art to society. But imagine now an artist who accepts Plato's offer, and yet rather than choosing to defend his or her own art, raises questions instead about the social order, including why some are permitted to speak and others must remain silent, why some are visible and others hidden from view. Socrates, after all, only granted poets the right to defend themselves and their work, not the right to spout off about society in general. Yet

⁴ Quoted from Rancière's *Le maître ignorant* (1987) by Brian Holmes in his essay "Hieroglyphs of the Future: Jacques Rancière, and the Aesthetics of Equality" available at <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/4/Hieroglyphs.php>, also available in the book of the same title by Brian Holmes published in Zagreb, 2002/3, p 99.

⁵ Having opened up new ways to think about art and politics, Rancière appears to be retreating of late by insisting for example that "the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative process." Adorno could not have said it better: art is political through its form alone. Therefore, any attempt to introduce explicit political content is self-defeating. Nor has the conservative message been lost on the art establishment. For example, in an interview with Jennifer Roche, the British critic Claire Bishop defends conventional notions of artistic quality and individual artistic vision from the corrosive practices of politicized collectives by citing Rancière's recent and guarded writings on art and politics. See: <http://radical.temp.si/node/70>

endowed with both beguiling skill and a big mouth, the artist who speaks out beyond his or her station represents the ultimate threat.

Oliver Ressler is an artist who speaks. He also reads, writes, thinks, and questions. While in person he is quiet enough, as a visual artist Ressler is garrulous and loud. Yet what makes him and his work especially irritating to those who patrol the borders is how he uses his loquaciousness not to ruminate about art, but to question the political economy of 21st Century capitalism. Nor is the platform for this unlikely interrogation a lecture or essay. It is instead Ressler's artwork, which he defines practically, avoiding the artist's usual fixation on form and materials. Like other artists who seek to engage directly with the political sphere, Ressler approaches aesthetics practically, as a set of tools for getting the job done. To that end, his work may one day consist of posters and videos, another day involve architecturally contingent visual elements, and another day make use of organizational and pedagogical situations to open up public discussion and debate. He calls this pragmatic, aesthetic flexibility his *strategies*:

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.⁶

Ressler's claim of moving back and forth between different spaces combining fiction with non-fiction underscores the danger that artist's can represent to the order of things. It also points to the ontological prevarication of the artist who chooses to speak about that order. At the same time, Ressler's de-prioritizing of formal issues sits comfortably with the direction of much contemporary art today. The art market is flush. Canvas is hip. Painting, drawing and other saleable forms of merchandise are obligatory. Art is even returning to its default fixation on the individual auteur as romantic visionary.⁷ If there is a message to be gleaned from this art market, it is: *this is no time to be looking for alternatives!* Or, to quote that connoisseur of capitalism, Margaret Thatcher, "there is no alternative."

Needless to say, Ressler sees things differently. His project *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* (AEAS) takes as its premise just how differently things might be. Ressler puts this mission succinctly when he describes his project as a 21st Century search for,

Alternative concepts for economic and social development... after the loss of a counter-model for capitalism – which socialism, in its real, existing form had presented until its collapse.⁸

But the question that haunts us is why an artist has anything to say about the state of the economy in the first place.

⁶ From an interview of Ressler by Anna Liv Ahlstrand at: http://www.ressler.at/content/view/46/lang,en_GB

⁷ This return to painting happened in the early 1980s and dovetailed with the art market boom during the same time frame so it is no wonder in what even Forbes Magazine calls the "superheated" contemporary art market that painting once again is the commodity of first choice. See: http://www.forbes.com/collecting/2005/07/05/cx_0705conn_ls.html

⁸ Ressler's own description of *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* on his website, http://www.ressler.at/content/view/3/lang,en_GB

ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS ALTERNATIVE SOCIETIES

ALTERNATIVE ECONOMICS, ALTERNATIVE SOCIETIES

Ressler's project AEAS is organized in a straightforward manner using an economy of forms, materials, and spaces. One gets the impression that the artist's subject matter secretly shaped the work's very syntax. As an installation, AEAS consists of just three interwoven elements, each in some way echoing the other. These include: 1) A series of bold, typographic logo-posters affixed to the gallery walls; 2) An expanding suite of videotapes on individual monitors that contain interviews with intellectuals and activists describing their vision of an alternative economy or society; and 3) A set of textual citations printed and mounted on the floor of the exhibition space, (this, by the way, is the most eccentric aspect of AEAS for otherwise, the project does little to call attention to itself as art preferring instead to serve as a medium of communication.) The first version of the project was produced for Galerija Skuc, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2003. Entering the space, one notices a weave of thin yellow bands forming a crisscrossed pattern across the floorboards.⁹ Running the length of each band was a text. These were citations taken selectively from Ressler's interviews. The videos are shot in a minimal style with long takes now and then interrupted by an edit or a line of scrolling text, its superimposed message mirroring Ressler's graphic logo-posters. In this way, each of the three major installation elements reflect upon the other to form an economy of means in which conveying information to the viewer is paramount. Inevitably, this combination of formal economy and direct communication with one's audience brings to mind the program of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s. I am especially reminded of El Lissitzky who stated,

Communicated through conventional words, the idea should be given form through the letters... Economy of expression – optics instead of phonetics.

Meanwhile AEAS shares something with Lissitzky's conceptual schema that he called the *Proun*: a series of sparse, geometric shapes the artist understood as much more than so many plastic forms. For Lissitzky, the *Proun* opened up the "economic construction" of space itself.

The surface of the *Proun* ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below... Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space.¹⁰

Such dynamic thinking later inspired Lissitzky's unconventional approach to exhibition design in which moveable walls and malleable surfaces sought to generate a phenomenological interactivity between the space, the art works, and the viewers. By working both walls and floor and by incorporating time-based media as a tutorial device, Ressler's AEAS project shares with the *Proun Room* a desire to surmount the white cube's limitations. Yet, in so far as AEAS functions more as conceptual platform than a conventional work of "installation art," its elements can be modified for the particular architectural, urban, and cultural setting of each exhibition venue without interfering with the project's conceptual and

⁹ I am writing this description in New York City using extensive documentation the artist provided me.

¹⁰ "Proun: Not world visions, but – world reality" (1920) in *El Lissitzky: Life-Letters-Texts*, Herbert Read and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p 347

pedagogical schema. And, there have been, as of this writing, twenty-one re-installations of the AEAS project including, among other locales, the post-communist nations of Slovenia, Estonia, Poland, Serbia, but also Brazil, Peru, Spain, Turkey, Taiwan, Switzerland, and Ressler's native Austria.¹¹

Each re-incarnation of the project has also brought an expansion of the work's public component. Ressler's first production in Ljubljana included a large, logo poster in the gallery window. However, for a project in Amsterdam in 2004, the artist began making a set of related posters for city streets. In that same year, thanks to an invitation by *Billboartgallery Europe*, he was afforded access to giant public billboards in Bratislava. AEAS has also expanded in another way. Initially the project had five video pieces on five monitors. A sixth video was added for the second version of AEAS, and a seventh the time after that. However, after the third re-installation, Ressler's initial grant from *republicart*, itself a project of the *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* (EIPCP) aimed at supporting interventionist art and theory, was finally exhausted.¹² From that point on, he has produced posters and videos only if an invitation came with the necessary production budget. Nevertheless, the most recent installation in Stroom, The Hague in The Netherlands is the most elaborate to date and consists of sixteen videos on sixteen monitors spread between two exhibition spaces. Regardless of how the work grows, however, Ressler's economy of three elements – text, video, and posters – remains constant. At the same time, the wide geographical range AEAS has covered over the past four years suggests not only a continued interest in the way art and aesthetics interact, but also a desire to re-examine life under post-Cold War capitalism. Eighteen years after the fall of actually existing socialism and thirty years into the neo-liberal juggernaut of privatization and deregulation, the working classes are beginning to ask questions again about which social option remains available, and which may need to be invented. Academics and *artists who speak politically*, such as Ressler, are amongst these doubters, (but they are not necessarily out in front of them.)

THE MYSTERY OF (SOCIAL) CAPITAL

Translating his logo-posters into the appropriate local tongue of each venue, Ressler's street graphics inquire of passersby: *Imagine and create revolutionary processes which are not intended to take over state power but to dissolve power relations*, or *Imagine a society in which people have a say in decisions in proportion to the degree that they are affected*. By taking to the streets, Ressler, *the artist who speaks*, has moved away from his assigned position inside the white cube to tackle the world outside.

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.¹³

And yet, there is still a slight of hand here all the same. The disenchantment of art is only possible for someone who perceives a difference between art and life to begin with, and who understands the secret behind the conjuring trick that produces artistic value in the first place. Coming at this the other way around, the plebian, the worker, the man or woman in the street may very much wish to produce art. This may be one way to temporarily escape the tedium of work. But the secret of *being an artist* escapes her. And not because amateur creativity is necessarily less interesting than the work of many professionally trained artists, one need only step into an art gallery in Chelsea to realize this. The mystery of how contemporary art acquires its value has nothing to do with talent, any more than it does with expenditure of labor, or with the preciousness of materials used to make a particular object. What it requires is the ability to tactically leverage power within the micro-politics of the institutional art world.¹⁴

¹¹ for a full list please see the artist's website: http://www.ressler.at/content/view/3/lang,en_GB

¹² <http://www.republicart.net>

¹³ From an interview of Ressler by Anna Liv Ahlstrand at: http://www.ressler.at/content/view/46/lang,en_GB

¹⁴ Following Pierre Bourdieu, such leveraging requires a reserve of symbolic capital that can even permit the cultural player to cross borders between social rank.

The art world is really two worlds or two *asymmetrical* networks of activity. The largest of these networks is the invisible multitude of individuals who make artistic production possible including parents, wives, husbands, but mostly other artists and technicians whose support comes primarily in the form of tangible and intangible gifts. These gifts may include hard cash, but more likely consist of time, or ideas, or sustenance. Think of all the ways art production is dependent on such things as freely given childcare, or the gift of a meal, or an inexpensive place to work, or even the loan of a car. Historian Alan Moore puts it succinctly. When it comes to making art,

Mutual aid is as important as competition. The process of production is continuously or intermittently collective as artists come together in teaching situations and workshops, sharing ideas, techniques and processes.¹⁵

These hidden networks of artistic production are however, materializing before our eyes at a rapidly increasing pace. So much so that one well-known French art critic even claims to have “discovered” them!¹⁶ What has really been discovered, of course, is a larger process of disclosure brought about by: 1) the de-industrialization of the developed world’s economy and the return to precarious forms of labor, and 2) the observable growth of gift economies such as peer-to-peer information production made possible by new digital technologies. In addition, the shadow network where artistic production takes place is large and extends in multiple directions. But there is also a second hidden network that contrasts with the first where aesthetic valorization takes place. This other economy is small and tightly wound and includes visible institutions such as major international museums, critical journals, auction houses, biennials, art fairs, and so forth. Nevertheless, what most artists never or seldom ever see is what really counts: an intra-network that devolves to a small number of leading art dealers and collectors who circulate information and judgments regarding artists and their work. Not to say supply and demand play no role, especially at the uppermost end of the market, but it is a given artist’s capacity to attract symbolic, social capital to their product and brand that determines value here and now. (This is why, one day, an artist whose work is barely distinguishable from that of his or her peers, or even in some cases the work of non-professionals, can become a star by the next day.) Such value-added production is unique to the contemporary art world and contrasts with the not-so-distant past when craft skills and quality of materials still played a determining role in an object’s worth.¹⁷ At the same time, nothing prevents this arbitrary and asymmetrical arrangement of power from being radically inverted. For instance, what would happen if artists developed their own form of peer-to-peer production aimed at creating a cooperative market structure where benefits would flow to all producers, rather than just the fortunate few? Where is the inviolable law of aesthetics inscribed and who says it cannot be opposed or re-thought so as to de-segregate artists from each other? And why stop at only artists? What about those workers who dream of taking part in an “emancipated society of artists”?

Ressler’s complex meditation on alternative economies proves that the laws consigning each to his or her proper place are not impermeable, not within the art world, and not beyond it. And not surprisingly, these same themes of intervention, autonomy, and free exchange also appear in Ressler’s AEAS project, especially in the series of video interviews with economists, political scientists, historians, and assorted radicals that make up the heart of the installation. The interviewees offer an assortment of modified or alternative economic models that go by the names: Inclusive Democracy; Participatory Economy; Free Cooperation; Anarchist Consensual Democracy; Libertarian Municipalism; Caring Labor; The Socialism of the 21st Century. The range of terminology is particularly revealing as much for what is stated as for what is not. For nowhere do we find any hint of the vanguard model associated with socialism or communism in the last century. Instead there is a strong mutual suspicion of centralized party politics and a marked disinterest in annexing state power, either through political or extra-parliamentary means. Some of these alternative economies seek to sweep away capitalism

¹⁵ “Political Economy as Subject and Form in Contemporary Art,” by Alan W. Moore in the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 471-486 (2004).

¹⁶ *Relational Aesthetics* by Nicolas Bourriaud (Paris: Les presse du reel, 1998).

¹⁷ This has a long history but nothing compared to the “de-skilling” of the last forty or fifty years *when* this is most pronounced See Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.)

altogether, others aim to minimize exploitation while maximizing the spread of social benefits. All in all, the video portion of AEAS functions like a thick dossier filled with case studies and theoretical models, some focused on local reform, others global in nature, and still others historical experiments whose failure has not diminished their evocative power. French historian Alain Dalotel for example stands outside the Pierre-Lachaise cemetery wall where numerous communards were executed and fleshes-out the short, tragic history of the Paris Commune of 1871. Trade unionist Salomé Moltó speaks about workers' collectives of the Spanish Civil War between 1936 and 1938 in which horizontal committee structures allowed for collective decision-making, and where, much like the Wobblies (IWW) in the United States a decade earlier, almost everyone had equal representation and received a similar salary regardless of the type of work they did, skilled or unskilled. Workers' self-management in the former, socialist Yugoslavia is the subject of another tape. Sociologist Todor Kuljic points out that in the 1960s and 1970s, "The working class and the poor people had a type of sovereign right, which they do not have today." Kuljic also raises the negative aspects of this history, including the hierarchical cadre that ultimately governed the worker's committees from above. But what sort of alternative do these men and women envision today? "In my opinion" Kuljic explains, "there can never be wild [unregulated] capitalism. One must always have a mixture of various forms of property, and mainly, the peaceful coexistence of nationally and socially diverse societies." And what about Moltó? "How would we structure a new society, an anarchist society? ... Politically speaking, there would be federations, regions that would be united ... without violence, thus demonstrating that with good organization and with moral and ethical values and solidarity it is possible to achieve the same or even more than with weapons." And finally Dalotel? "If the Commune is able to teach us anything, it would be that we must get together, discuss, debate and when possible, unite ... Because resistance can't exist without utopia."

Ressler continues the historical lessons straight into the present day with his recordings of masked Zapatistas at the meetings for the Sixth Declaration in Chiapas, Mexico. Here we see both men and women speaking, some candidly relaying the challenges they face overcoming gender discrimination in a traditionally patriarchal culture. The autonomous, democratic networks the Zapatistas are held up as an exemplary model of an alternative society in a number of the other tapes, and yet I can not avoid thinking about the difficulty that transposing the Zapatista's cooperative structures which are rooted in rural, under-developed Chiapas to the post-industrial North would present, especially countries dependent on inexpensive labor from the South. AEAS also presents interviews with economic theorists, such as Takis Fotopoulos, who explains to viewers his voucher system for the democratic distribution of profit. By contrast, the Massachusetts-based feminist economist, Nancy Folbre, focuses not on exchange, but on the quality of labor itself by discussing types of work motivated by altruism and gift giving rather than the accumulation of personal wealth. Folbre describes caregiving as labor intrinsically opposed to the commercial market. She expressed fear that neo-liberal privatization will undermine the quality of such services as childcare and elderly hospice care, and she admits to another concern found within the ranks of progressive thinkers. "I spend lots of time trying to persuade leftist economists and utopian visionaries to pay more attention to the ordinary work that women do and to learn from it." As if picking up on Folbre's concerns from across the Atlantic, the Bremen-based theorist Christoph Spehr insists that a post-modern, cooperative society must, "Bring utopia back to the kitchen. It has to work there and the rules of the kitchen have to be the rules of bigger cooperation – not the other way round." Meanwhile, anarchist Ralf Burnicki recalls how the hierarchical pecking order he encountered as a young apprentice locksmith initiated his "first confrontation with dominance and power." The son of working class, German communists, Burnicki decided to read books which made him wonder if a "just" society" is possible. He answered this question in the form of a three hundred-page study on Anarchist Consensual Democracy in which he envisions "self-organization from below in the form of self-administered projects," that would lead to "re-thinking for us as individuals, as subjects." The nature of subjectivity also concerns Massachusetts-based Chaia Heller, a former student of the late eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin. Like Burnicki, Heller's libertarian socialism celebrates grass-roots democracy but does so not by organizing human production, but by encouraging communication. She rejects "man, the producer," preferring instead Aristotle's vision of thinking man, the "political animal."

The contrast between these two self-described anarchists raises one of the fundamental issues regarding any alternative politics today: what do we mean by agency in the post-industrial society? For if the industrial workforce was the revolutionary actor of the 19th and 20th Century, in the so-called information age can we still think of labor as the collective agent of social transformation? Many individuals associated with feminist, ecological, and anarchist political traditions insist that labor's privileged position as historical emancipator ended with the social upheavals of the 1960s, if not earlier. With control over social production no longer centered on the factory model, resistance to oppression has devolved to other actors, many rooted in previously marginalized social identities. Such subcultural resistance is inherently decentralized and operates across both the public and private zones of life. At the same time, other theorists point out that the rise of immaterial labor neither eliminates exploitation from the work process, nor displaces labor as the structural negation of capitalism. Since we still live under its economic system, the goal of liberating social production has not changed, only its tactics have. AEAS reflects all these differences. Yet Ressler avoids singling out one or another model as correct, or as more likely to succeed or to fail. Still, there is one video that comes close to summarizing the project as a whole. When the tape labeled *bolo'bolo* begins, we see a series of mysterious signs appear in rapid succession, white graphic markings on a black background. Next the screen fills with a mesmerizing display of animated abstract shapes as a husky voiceover starts to narrate. The voice belongs to a Swiss secondary school instructor and underground literature author whom Ressler identifies only by the initials P.M. He describes for us *bolo'bolo*, a project that aims at nothing less than reinvigorating the worn out terminology of the Left by substituting new words for old ones. Thus communism becomes *bolo'bolo*. Looked at as a work of "video art" this tape probably comes the closest to expressing Ressler's Constructivist roots. But viewed as a commentary about alternative economics and alternative societies, it returns us to the nagging question of the artist who speaks about politics and what this artist's place is or should be in the order of things. And it does this by way of history, not using another case study, but by addressing what Marx described as the dead weight of the past upon the present.

MATTER OUT OF PLACE

When all is said and done the republic of high culture has taught itself how to live with the artist who speaks, the artist who makes trouble, and who is insufferable.¹⁸ It is unlikely that this ever happens in the short run, right at the moment of rupture, but over the long haul, through a process of historicizing, political art's capacity for resistance is gradually reduced or disarmed. The institutionalization of these all too brief skips of the historical heart are therefore infuriating, as well as gratifying. Gratifying because speaking honestly as a partisan, we do want historians to recognize that there were moments when artists refused to stay in their place; that the most celebrated avant-garde was often explicit in its politics; that artists have shown an ability to organize, educate, write, and philosophize. And that under certain circumstances, artists can even be revolutionaries seeking, along with others, to wipe the slate of history clean and lift its weight from our collective shoulders. This is why political artists such as Oliver Ressler *do not* make "political art," but instead, as Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Luc Godard of the Dziga Vertov Group advocated in the 1970s, *they make art politically*. And to the art world elite, and to some defenders of aesthetics even on the Left, the political artist is abject, or, to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Mary Douglas, a type of "matter out of place."¹⁹ What can be said then regarding the worker who dreams, the artist who speaks and thinks, and the collective that organizes political resistance is that they thrust hidden matter out of place, from darkness into light, and in doing so make briefly visible alternative economies of pleasure and exchange, humor and play, that are the ultimate threat to the social order. The lesson of Ressler's AEAS are obvious. As Subcomandante Marcos exclaims in one of the videos, "Laugh *compañeros!* It is good to laugh. It is necessary to laugh, because what we are doing is utterly serious."

¹⁸ For more on this topic see, "Liar's Poker" by Brian Holmes at: http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/holmestext.html

¹⁹ *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, by Mary Douglas: (London: Routledge Press, 1991, first published in 1966).