



## DISOBEDIENCE: AN ONGOING VIDEO ARCHIVE CAMBRIDGE, MA

Defying both common sense and horticultural science, television sets grew alongside herbs and plants in earth beds in MIT's Media Lab Complex Building's main atrium. *Disobedience: An Ongoing Video Archive* [December 9, 2011–April 16, 2012] was a veritable technological cabbage patch whose main theme was about social behaviors that flout norms. With pun intended, the grassroots narratives recounted here shot up to be heard above the social canopy.

The exhibition began with Italy's revolutionary politics during the 1970s, a decade of violence, which has come to be known as the *Anni di piombo*, in which mass demonstrations and social unrest challenged the state's aggressive military policies. The works exhibited here are seldom seen in North America, such as Alberto Grifi's fictionalized documentary from 1978, *The Psychiatric Videopolic Against the Self-Styled Groups of Militant Madness*. In this work, Grifi, a pioneer of Italian underground cinema, intricately weaves together documentary footage from heated debates at an anti-psychiatry conference in Milan in 1977 with a fictional narrative. The fantastical political story depicts how the state, after having discovered the drug "Normalina," transforms all citizens into successful, white-collar employees and model workers beholden to an addiction only the government can feed. However, a botched batch of the drug produces a clandestine group of dissidents who are nearly caught by the police when—all of a sudden—the main character wakes up; it was all a dream. This absurd plot delivers a sharp satire of the repressive measures of individual creativity and expression in Italy at the time.

Fittingly, the theoretical underpinning of the entire exhibition was the radical leftist Italian movement *Autonomia*. During the 1970s, Italian intellectuals-cum-activists conceived of an autonomous sphere of activity that would usurp political power from the central government. The autonomists saw Italy's transformation into a neoliberal, post-Fordist society as undermining the principles of the welfare state. Finding enterprising ways to

create an alternative welfare society, they conceived of ways to elude the imperatives of capitalist production through a so-called refusal to participate. For example, they fabricated their own train tickets to avoid supporting the centrally controlled transportation department.

This concise, well edited show—a collaboration between the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology and the Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano—flew quickly through the decades and across the globe. From Italy we moved to the anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and the G8 protest in Heiligendamm in 2007. Oliver Ressler's *What Would It Mean to Win?*, 2008, was filmed at the G8 summit blockades and consists of documentary footage, interviews, and animated sequences. Almost ten years after mass demonstrations in Seattle, Ressler explores the impact on contemporary politics and considers the question what would it mean to overturn the hegemonic order? Ressler shows an effect of globalization is that a new mobile and heterogeneous international community has come together to voice its discontent.

The exhibition's central conceit was that artists are agents of cultural change, partisan fighters against new technologies deployed by the state and modern corporations for controlling fundamental aspects of life. Reacting to this new type of power outlined by Michel Foucault in his writings on biopolitics, artists offered "bioresistance." The collective Critical Art Ensemble, founded in New York in 1987, for example, explored the theoretical threat of biochemical weapons. On display was *Germ of Deception*, 2005, in which the group addresses the bacteriological experiments carried out in the United States. Their investigation reproduces the conditions of one such experiment carried out in 1946, when a branch of the United States military charged with biological research released the bacterium *Serratia marcescens* (a harmless anthrax simulant) into the air ducts at the Pentagon. The resulting contamination prompted the Pentagon immediately to invest in a biological weapons program. The collective's laboratory-

as-performance piece shows how misinformation can destabilize the alignments of power while at the same time offers an effective strategy for increasing public awareness.

The video camera in all these artistic endeavors emerges as an important device of resistance. From the 1970s onward it became the tool of choice for artistic intervention—capable of infiltration and documentation. It allowed for the representation of individual and collective subjects, the conspicuous global multitude. Nevertheless, Jean Baudrillard posits—at the same moment as the *Autonomia* were offering a strategy of resistance—a postmodern skepticism toward media deployment. In his well known essay "Requiem for the Media," he rejects media as a productive force to subvert the dominant class, for the issue is not with appropriating media strategies, but with the underlying model of communication. Spectators have become passive consumers and any intended subversive message cannot escape being neutralized into signs that eviscerate their own meaning. Baudrillard's point is that disobedience cannot be mediated, but can only attain agency when it occurs in real space. Communication offers the possibility of true reciprocity, allowing the audience to become active participants. However, once recorded and immobilized, the dissident message becomes encoded within the dominant model, and the possibility for a reciprocal relationship is lost. This video archive, as much as it is a worthwhile historical endeavor, loses much of its primary agency, as the audience becomes the silent receiver of a one-way transmission.

—Martina Tanga

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Joachim Koester, *The Kant Walks, #5*, 2003, c-print [courtesy the artist and MIT List Visual Arts Center]; exhibition view of *Disobedience: An Ongoing Video Archive*, 2011 [photo: John Kennard © 2011]