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Memoirs of a Video Activist

Joanne Richardson

I left Bucharest when I was 9. My parents were political refugees. We received political asylum in Austria and later moved to New York. I grew up poor but privileged, in the sense that I had an education at some of the best schools in America, social factories for the production of Marxist intellectuals. And then I dropped out of my PhD, left the US, and returned to Romania to become a video activist. For many years I was weaned on the same canon and rules of etiquette as most Western media activists. But they always seemed strange to me, as if I was seeing them outside their frame and hearing them in a foreign language that I only partly understood.

Recent video activism has its roots in the alternative media movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although an oppositional press with an alternative content has existed since the nineteenth century, it privileged intellectuals as experts and maintained structural hierarchies of knowledge. What was different about many of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s was the desire to provoke social change not through alternative ideas but through the process of production itself, by turning spectators into producers and eliminating the difference between experts who create culture and its passive consumers. Ever since then, video

activism's most ambitious goal has been to encourage non-experts to participate in production. Changes of form or style have been downplayed as less important and less radical. This idea still guides video activism today - what's different is the proliferation of activist video made possible by cheap equipment and the internet.

Video activism has sometimes been criticized for being repetitive, stylistically conventional, and producing countless images of demonstrations that look the same and blur into one another. The quest for the instantaneous, unmediated "document" often means that questions about form, style, montage and audiences are ignored. On the other extreme of the spectrum, which is more characteristic of the video artist turned activist, there has been a return to the heavy handed tradition of film *auteur* that straightjackets its subjects into pre-formulated theories. When Ursula Biemann presented some footage from a video in progress about the construction of an oil pipeline in the Caspian region, she confessed she found it "annoying" that the peasants living along the trajectory of the pipeline were happy to receive money for their land and had no thoughts of resistance. The reality didn't quite match the story she wanted to tell. This is not an isolated example - many activist artists allow their own voice (or rather ideas borrowed from fashionable theorists) to overwhelm the images. While the first form of video activism can fall prey to the naiveté of pure transparency that characterized direct cinema, the second sometimes re-enacts the worst aspects of militancy that have been handed down through history.

The Situationists once criticized militants for subordinating their desires and creative energies to the drudgery of work marked by routine and repetition – printing and distributing leaflets, putting up posters, preparing for demonstrations, attending meetings, engaging in interminable discussions about protocols of

organization. But what remained unanalyzed in their account was the militaristic origin of militancy and its consequences. Driven by a supreme cause and an uncompromising vision of totality, militants subordinate their immediate needs to an overwhelming passion for the sake of which all other things are renounced. They believe they are in the middle of a war, a state of exception that requires extraordinary behavior and momentary sacrifices. Militants don't militate on their own behalf; they put their lives in the service of whatever social categories they believe to be most oppressed. Or, more accurately, they put their lives in the service of their ideas about the needs of others who are assumed to be incapable of speaking for themselves. This indirect vanguardism privileges the role of intellectuals and the correct theory over reality, especially when reality seems to contradict it.

There are many aspects of militancy that always made me feel uncomfortable – its vanguardism, its confrontational posture, its enactment of revolution as a theater of political machismo. When I returned to Romania, I viewed the general distrust of militant politics as an opportunity to leave behind this flawed tradition and start from zero. I once wrote enthusiastically about a new paradigm of group collaboration that emerged in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe - a conscious alternative to the manifesto issuing and intransigent proclamations that marked not only leftist militancy but also the history of the avant-garde. But it turned out that my optimism was exaggerated. After 17 years, skepticism about militancy has turned into a flat denunciation of leftist politics and an excuse for passive resignation. Any critique of global capitalism now sparks an immediate hysteria in the press and among prominent intellectuals, who see only two alternatives: there is capitalism on the one hand and everything else is Stalinism. Concepts such as the common, the collective, the public, and even

activism itself are dismissed because of the disrepute of their communist past. When activism is outlawed, when it cannot even be thought, it implicitly legitimates its opposite. Passivity becomes our everyday reality.

Together with some friends, I started D Media (http://www.dmedia.ro) in Cluj in 2003. We tried to create a context for grassroots activism that didn't exist in Romania and to make the practice of self-organization more contagious, starting with participatory media. Our first video project was *Real Fictions*, a series of experimental videos made in collaboration with local volunteers between the ages of 15 to 20. The immediate context for *Real Fictions* was the general apathy of youth toward political participation and a lack of experience with self-organization, which often leads people to accept that they have no power to change things and to cast their eyes towards a powerful leader who promises to save them. PRM, the party of the extreme right, has fared well in this context, with members in parliament and a presidential candidate who got more than 30 percent of the vote in 2000. His largest group of supporters were under the age of 25. The two videos I worked on engaged directly with the rise of the extreme right in Romania, from political parties like PRM to small neofascist groups that militate for a final solution to the gypsy problem and the recriminalization of homosexuality. *Folklore*, the longer and more documentary of the works, exposes the fears and frustrations that led the majority of the population of Cluj to elect Gheorghe Funar, an extreme nationalist and member of PRM, as mayor of the city for three consecutive terms. The second video, *Paint Romanian*, is a rhythmic montage set to music, composed of hundreds of still photographs of tricolor objects reflecting Cluj's nationalist obsessions during Funar's terms in office. The other two videos, *Behind the Scene* and *Open*, present the inadequacy of

the institutions of contemporary art in Romania and the importance of artist-run spaces, and the Free/Open Source Software movement not only as a mode of software production but as cultural paradigm with important political and economic implications.

Real Fictions tried to eliminate the distinction between experts and spectators by involving local teenagers in the process of video production. But despite our intentions of working with the volunteers as equal partners, they continued to look to us as the experts responsible for making decisions. Many of them just wanted to travel and learn a few skills, without becoming intimately involved in the entire process, without attending meetings, spending a lot of time doing research or putting in long hours for the montage. So why wasn't the idea of self-organization more contagious? We tend to idealize self-organization as a sign of freedom, as the capacity to exercise our rights and limitless possibilities. But in reality, this freedom is not only the joy of discovering our creativity, it's also the terrible burden of responsibility and hard work.

By focusing exclusively on the process of production, *Real Fictions* paid too little attention to the finished works and their dissemination. In retrospect it seems that the impact upon our volunteers' everyday lives was very small compared to the impact the videos could have had if we had planned them for large audiences. This conclusion is influenced by the specificity of the Romanian situation. Some activist friends from Italy once asked me about the social movements in Romania and I had to confess they really don't exist, at least not in the way they meant it. In Italy movements like Telestreet or Indymedia have a supporting network of social centers and hundreds of thousands of people participating. Trying to promote a do-it-yourself ethos in Romania with a

handful of volunteers at a time lacks this already existing context. And the real problem seems to be elsewhere: in a hegemonic discourse suppressed issues never reach public consciousness at all. Rather than making videos for a small art crowd or a couple of underground clubs, it seems more meaningful to provoke mainstream audiences to question the way they see their world.

Our second video project, *Made in Italy* (2005-2006), was a collaboration with Candida TV (http://candida.thing.net), an activist collective from Rome. The videos focus on the delocalization of Italian companies to Romania and the migration of Romanian labor to Italy. There are now 16,000 Italian companies in Romania and some cities have literally been transformed into little Italies. The reality of foreign investment was very different from the initial promise: labor rules were not respected, working conditions were poor, the unions were absent, and many companies delocalized further east when wages began to increase, leaving the workers without a job from one day to the next. Many left to work abroad rather than compete for jobs paying 70 euro per month in Romania. After 2000, Italy became the leading destination for Romanian migrants, who are estimated at well over 2 million. We thought it important to highlight this connection because public discourse in Romania has uncritically celebrated foreign investment as a panacea that would save the nation. This is even more true now, with the euphoria over the EU accession, which will translate into more foreign investment and privatization.

The videos in *Made in Italy* try to introduce a counter-story to the dominant one, but not a story told in a unified voice. They present a clash of different perspectives – owners of Italian companies, representatives of Italian cultural institutions, artists, workers, taxi drivers, students, trade union leaders, migrants. And the various

"authors" from D Media and Candida TV who pieced the narratives together also have very different perspectives, different styles of filming, different ideas about montage, all of which made a single point of view impossible. As a consequence, the works present not a story that builds through the connective principle of addition (different voices that add up to a totality), but a story that unfolds through contradictions and disjunctions and becomes more complicated as it moves along. The viewers have to piece together the fragments, and draw their own conclusions.

Compared to the previous project, *Made in Italy* felt like a real collaboration among equal partners. This also meant, realistically, that the process was often difficult since we had disagreements about different ideas and styles and had to reach a consensus. But ultimately the most interesting part of any real process of collaboration is that those who participate in it are transformed, we all give up a little of our dogmatisms as we come to see things from the perspective of the others, we learn something about own limitations and prejudices, we see our ideas becoming more refined through the act of dialogue, and ultimately we are able to make a better work than each of us could have made as a single individual.

Taking the highest principle of video activism to mean including habitual spectators in video-making tends to focus entirely on the process of production rather than the work. The importance of presenting perspectives and voices that are not usually heard should not be downplayed. But what often gets lost in activist video is the aesthetic dimension. In activist circles no one talks about the work of art or aesthetics, since these kinds of discussions are disparaged as elitist. The word "art" has become an embarrassment in all but its Situationist sense - as the liberation of creative energies that everyone possesses, but which have been suppressed by the routine and boredom of everyday life. Art is this, but it is also something

else. It is an act of communication, and unlike other forms of communication (the political manifesto, the philosophical essay, or the news broadcast), what it communicates are qualities and affects that exceed conceptual schemes. Art has the power to provoke not by argument, unambiguous information, or agitation propaganda but by something that we still don't really know how to define. It incites people to think and feel differently, to pose questions rather than accept ready-made answers.

Godard once made some extremely arrogant films of Maoist propaganda while he was a member of the Dziga Vertov group. *Pravda*, a film about the 1968 uprising in Prague, is haunted by the trope of ideological correctness: we are told that the students who flew the black flag "are not thinking correctly" and that the filmmaker Vera Chytilova does not "speak correctly." The idea behind the Dziga Vertov films is that images are always false and need to be critiqued by the "correct sound." The last project of the Dziga Vertov group was the unfinished film *Until Victory*, shot in 1970 as the Palestinian Liberation Organization was preparing for a revolution. The Dziga-Vertov group broke up, and Godard later used the footage shot for *Until Victory* to make a new work with Anne-Marie Mieville, *Here and Elsewhere*. The voiceover claims the problem with *Until Victory* was that the sound was turned up too loud, "so loud that it almost drowned the voice it wanted to draw out of the image." The film interrogates not only *Until Victory*, but militant filmmaking in general. *Here and Elsewhere* is a film composed of questions. We went to Palestine a few years ago, Godard says. To make a film about the coming revolution. But who is this we, here? Why did we go there, elsewhere? And why don't here and elsewhere ever really meet? The voiceover confesses, "Back in France you don't know what to make of the film ... the contradictions explode, including you." *Here and Elsewhere* is a

reflection on how revolutionary militancy is staged as a political theater: its propagandistic gestures and speeches, its covering up of disjunctions in order to re-present a single voice of those unified in struggle. It also interrogates the complicity of activist filmmakers who organize sound and images in a particular way to present the "correct" political line and to inhibit critical thinking. In an era dominated by a politics of the message, *Here and Elsewhere* searches for a politics of the question.

Godard drew a distinction between making a political film (a film about politics) and making film politically. Making film politically means investigating how images find their meaning and disrupting the rules of the game, whether that game is Hollywood mystification or militant propaganda. It means provoking the viewers to become political animals, to reflect on their own position *vis a vis* power, to entertain doubts and to ask questions. By contrast, a lot of contemporary video activism is really propaganda in reverse. While the content differs from the mainstream press, its form and function is often preserved. Propaganda puts forward its position as natural and inevitable, without reflecting on its construction. Many activist videos show off their militancy through emotional slogans rather than argument, and are blind to their own internal contradictions. The Indymedia video *Rebel Colors*, which documents the demonstrations in 2000 in Prague against the IMF and the World Bank, presents the one-sided perspectives of activists who came from America, the UK, Netherlands, France, Spain and Italy, including members of actually existing communist parties. What you really don't get is a reflection on the Czech context – many locals denounced what they saw as an attempt to playact a revolution by foreigners who invoked slogans from an ideology the Czechs themselves considered obsolete. Because the clash of these

different perspectives is absent, the video comes across as dogmatic as the mass-media, even though the content is reversed.

Video activism was born from the recognition that mass-media is controlled by powerful elites and that although it claims to serve the democratic interest of the public to be informed, its real interests, sources of financial support, hierarchical leadership and decision making processes are all hidden behind closed doors. It's important to oppose these practices by including the perspectives and quotidian desires of ordinary people and marginalized groups, and by making the process of production as democratic, non-hierarchical and transparent as possible. But it is not enough to eliminate the distinctions between production and consumption and between experts and spectators. It's also necessary to question how images and sound are organized to produce meaning. Ultimately, video activism means making video politically - refusing to supply platitudes, ready-made answers, or the "correct" political line. It means making videos in the form of a question.

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