

VIDEO ACTIVISM AND SELF-REPRESENTATION IN THE ITALIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Picture 1: Indymedia event: "Local Chronicles of the Global Movement"
Forte Prenestino, 2000. Still from my research footage

Abstract

En este ensayo exploro, desde una perspectiva etnográfica, el papel del video activismo en la construcción de la identidad del movimiento italiano de los Centros Sociales Ocupados y Autogestionado (*Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti - CSOA*). Las prácticas video activistas adaptan el uso de los nuevos medios a los principios de autogestión (*autogestione*) y autoproducción (*autoproduzione*) propios de esta contracultura volviendo a la comunicación en un nuevo territorio de experimentación con formas "horizontales" de representación política.

Abstract

In this essay I analyze, from an ethnographic perspective, the role of video activism in shaping the identity of the Italian movement of the Social Centres (*Centri Sociali Occupati Autogestiti - CSOA*). Video activist practices adapt the use of new media to the principles of self-management (*autogestione*) and self-production (*autoproduzione*) proper of this counter-culture turning communication in a new field of experimentation with horizontal forms of political representation.

Introduction

This article is a short presentation of the work I carried out between 1999 and 2002 on the use of new technology by new social movements, with a specific focus on the practice of video activism in Italian social movement known as the *Centri Sociali Occupati e Autogestiti* - CSOA - (Occupied and Self-managed Social Centres)¹. In Italy this phenomenon of urban resistance reached its apex in the mid 90s and now is also active in the anti-globalization movement.

In the last ten years oppositional social movements operating in a number of countries have greatly increased their use of video as a form of self-documentation (Halleck, 2002; Opel & Pompper, 2003). As a "reflexive" tool, video practice has become an important arena for subject self-representation and political agency (Caporale, 1998).

In their studies on Community Media, scholars such as Downing (2001) and Atton (2002) have stressed the importance. These ideas are maintained also by DeeDee Halleck, co-founder of Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish network in the US:

The notion that community groups with a few camcorders, radio mikes and web sites would effectively challenge the moguls of corporate trans-global media is absurd. The very notion of this sort of comparison is inconsistent with the goals and practice of most community media. In the community media world, there is a different operational framework of production: to begin with, the relationship between makers and watchers is not at all the same. In fact, the term 'watchers' is not descriptive of that relationship. 'Users' or 'user/participants' is perhaps more appropriate. Community media is often part of a larger process of community activities [...]. Video, radio and computer/web activities are integrated into the structure of this activity (Halleck, 1998).

This study is the result of a combination of ethnographic methodologies. I collected and analysed a hundred of videos made by CSOA media activists between 1991-2001; I realized some in depth interviews to the members of two video collectives; I used the videocámara as the central tool in the process of participant observation a few urban CSOA; I attempted a visual ethnography by focusing on some events related to the production and dissemination of CSOA video practice. Finally I edited an visual document to reflect on the process of data construction as its narrative strategies. The pictures in this article are frames from my video recording practice.

New Urban Counter-Cultures: the Movement of the *Centri Sociali*

The CSOA are self-financed and self-managed community centres which have developed through the illegal occupation of abandoned buildings, usually public property such as former schools, hospitals or factories, occupied by young people and left wing political activists. In these sites many different cultural activities take place, from cultural and political events to the provision of social services and entertainment.

Often referred to as 'cultural factories' or 'laboratories' where ideas, technologies and knowledge are constantly developed and exchanged, these '*spazi liberati*' (free spaces) become the 'headquarters' of a new oppositional movement. Edoardo, a member of the video collective *Fluid Video Crew (FVC)* commented: "In that period [1991-1995], people would call them [the CSOA] 'laboratorio' [laboratory]. We felt the need to know what others were doing and how they were using their tools, so we started to explore the possible combinations of these [technological] tools and use them together. It was a constant discovery. Not something that we decided to do when we felt we were ready, but, on the contrary, at the very moment in which we felt totally disarmed we took these tools in our hands and began to do something" (Edoardo, FVC. Excerpt from my interview).

The Italian CSOA is specifically an urban phenomenon, connected to the process of restructuring and modernisation of economic production that increasingly involves the urban area. The occupations are symptoms of – and an answer to – an urban ethic that progressively excluded the 'social space' as a priority of city planning.

The metropolis grows progressively under the logic of economic profit, which penalises social

relationships outside the mercantile exchange. The CSOA become the symbol of social resistance to the alienating western model of development, with its specific connotation of property speculation and financial corruption - two interwoven factors.

The CSOA responds to this metropolitan context re-affirming the needs of socialisation and participation. Here, generations of young and less young people meet, discuss, and prepare political initiatives related to their district as well as to 'international' or 'global' issues.

The CSOA is defined by the ability of its occupiers to *autogestire* (self-manage) the space. The occupied buildings (squats) turned into CSOA are run by the *comitati di gestione*, (management committees). These are made up of the people involved in the occupation, and there is no delegation to anyone else of the responsibilities involved in the management of these spaces. Decisions are taken according to the principle of direct democracy. This implies that, when the assembly meets, all participants have equal right to take part in any discussion. The assembly usually meets once a week to share information and co-ordinate activities. The range of these activities is impressive: concerts of underground and independently produced music, film screenings, forums, happenings, and all sorts of creative workshops. These activities are all

self-financed by the participants. Some events are organized to produce the necessary budget to finance a specific project. These are called '*iniziative di auto-finanziamento*' (self-financing initiative). Often music band play for free in the CSOA in order to raise money for the centre. The daily services such as a canteen and a bar are run by volunteers for cheap prices. These services are important in a CSOA given the great amount of time necessary to run the activities and to participate in the decisions.

To take root in the local community was fundamental to the development of the CSOA, whose members identified the neighbourhood as the site of social mobilisation and struggle, and referred to it as 'the territory'. In contrast the punks saw the centre of the city as the site where the dominant culture where on display and therefore as the place of their provocative interventions. In any case, the novelty of the CSOA was to recognise in the urban space - physical and symbolic - an arena for social change. The new forms of conflict are both material - the physical occupation of the buildings for example - and symbolic - causing a communication breakdown in the semiotic order of the city. '*Invadiamo i territory nemici*' (Invade Enemies Territories) recites the graffiti at the CSOA Forte Prenestino (Picture 2).



Picture 2: Graffiti: "Invade enemies territory".
Forte Prenestino.2000. Still from my research footage

The CSOA develop within the ruins of de-industrialization; among the interstices that urban planning leaves behind. In his book *Il cerchio e la saetta* (The Circle and the Lightning), named after the international symbol of the squats (or occupations), a participant to the 1990 student movement and the CSOA, wrote:

The occupations seize abandoned buildings, warehouses, dismantled factories and, with the autogestione [self-management], tear them from the metropolitan melancholia and turn them into canvas on which to impress a new image of the existence. "The walls turned upon become bridges" is written on a wall, [...] a semiotic metaphor. The prefix 'ex' that makes the subtitle to many of the social centres names - ex fortress, ex school, ex factory, ex harbour master's office - assumes a specific political sense: it communicates linguistically the decay of the institutions, the transformation of the urban territory and the renewed existence of the buildings. Military fortress, cinemas, abattoirs, and supermarkets are removed from their previous meanings and re-positioned, in the context of the occupation, as fronts of conflicts; limit-zones between life styles and social behaviours; between previous order and present chaos. (Tiddi, 1997:38).

The city, as the specific organization of time and space by the dominant culture, becomes the terrain of conflict where a time and space has to be 'liberated'. Social life, and cultural production, subtracted from the capitalist market, become the terrain of new practices: respectively, the *autogestione* (self-management) and *autoproduzione* (independent production).

According to Foucault (1978) with the advent of big urban concentrations, the administration of the *res publica* (the state) extended into far more spheres of social life. The referent of this new type of administration is the population: the city dwellers. The state power becomes bio-power: a form of control that penetrates deeply into people's life. Foucault draws attention to the dialectic relationship between the exercise of power and the construction of society. To be exercised, power needs its object. In other words power shapes social roles and people's sense of identity. The challenge of the CSOA is to create an identity autonomously from (and subversive of) the metropolitan power. The CSOA tools are the *autogestione* and *autoproduzione*. In the city, where the forms of power reproduce themselves, through social relationships and the ways in which people experience time and space of the city, the CSOA promote alternative uses of space and behaviours. In doing so, the CSOA relocate politics in the space 'where social life is reproduced' (Foucault, 1978).

Further, they attempt to re-appropriate time. The extra-parliamentary groups and all previous political organisations were criticised for defining themselves on the basis of ideas about what kind of world the future revolutions would bring about. In contrast, the new movement moves the time of revolution to the present. The CSOA become the manifestation and anticipation of the 'utopia' 'here and now'. The occupied CSOA are called 'liberated spaces' or 'liberated zones'. The forms of cultural production within the CSOA represent forms of 'co-operative exchange of knowledge' opposed to the capitalist production of merchandise. The independent production of music, posters, books, videos, theatre and so on, is an activity whose meaning coincides with the reasons for the struggles. In this sense, independent production is a form of communication and organization. A case in point is the music of the Posse (rap music groups developed in the CSOA since 1990), celebrating the movement's occupations. Musical events, technological and virtual spaces, publishing enterprises (books, music, videos etc.), are all tools serving the need for autonomy and self-organization. It is a 'net-autonomy', where every space is connected horizontally to the other, signalling new possibilities of 'anti-authoritarian' organization.

A thread of continuity links the collective uses of radio, photography, audiovisual technology, community television and Internet, highlighting how the CSOA utilization of these technologies is embedded in the auto-organization ideology of the radical extra-parliamentary left.

The CSOA are part of a myriad network of left-wing groups and associations within which a number of distinctive political and cultural traditions can be found: Anarchist, Autonomous, Communist, Feminist, Situationist, Punk. By extending the arena of conflict from the economic to the social and cultural spheres the CSOA, as part of a wider movement of independent organisations, sought to redefine for a new generation the critique of the dominant societal values - gender roles, waged work, concepts of normality, systems of control and instruments of power - developed in the Sixties and Seventies². This critical legacy percolated into the CSOA and a new social movement emerged which sought to place the practice of everyday life at the centre of their politics and challenge traditional forms of political organization embodied in institutional parties. The contradictions of the city life and conflicts characterising the urban space became the new arena of struggle for the CSOA movement. The illegal occupation of abandoned buildings begun to disrupt the planned "order" of the official city organization. In these spaces alternative forms

CONFLUÊNCIAS - REVISTA INTERDISCIPLINAR DE SOCIOLOGIA E DIREITO - PPGSD-UFF - página 06
of social life and co-operative work were explored, developing the idea of everyday life as a site of resistance.

Antagonistic to the oppressive qualities or scientifically grounded technical – bureaucratic rationality as purveyed through monolithic corporate, state, and other forms of institutionalized power (including that of bureaucratized political parties and trade unions), the counter-cultures explored the realm of [...] self-realization through a distinctive 'new left' politics, through the embrace of anti-authoritarian gestures, iconoclastic habits (in music, dress, language, and life-style), and the critique of everyday life (David Harvey, 1990:38).

CSOA underground culture adapts new media to the principles of *autogestione* (self-management) and *autoproduzione* (auto-production), thereby turning communication into a new territory of experimentation with 'horizontal' forms of political representation. In turn each new technological medium brings about a range of new potentialities, at the level of production and dissemination transforming the movement's imagery and working practices.

The CS re-elaborated the 'catastrophic' aesthetic of punk, the playful one of the '*indiani metropolitani*' (metropolitan indians)³ and the 'technological guerrilla' of the Hackers. The city was seen as the territory to re-conquer (see graffiti in Plate One). At the same time, the CSOA developed a range of new aesthetics and performance, drawing on the legacy of the avant-garde movements of the last century. These were concerned with the abolition of the separation between 'High' and 'Popular Art'. The earliest of these movements was Dada, which arose in Europe and US around World War I (1915, Zurich), expressing disillusionment with traditional values. Their emphasis on nonsense and absurdity anticipated the anti-rationalism typical of Surrealism (1920s, France) and defined a whole set of anti-establishment practices for the later 20C. Dada artists like Marcel Duchamp used the technique of montage and collage to shock and provoke the public. In theatre, the art of provocation as critique of the social order was represented by Bertold Brecht's alienation technique (1920s). Similar strategies of 'estrangement' have been developed in Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty (1930s), and the Theatre of Absurdity (1950s) of Beckett and Ionesco. The ideas of Dada and Surrealism were developed by conceptual artists (1960s).

In 1957, from the dissolution of the Lettrist movement (1952-1956) the Situationist International (1957-1972) was born (Home, 1991). Neoism, Mail Art, Fluxus, are only some

of the traditions of avant-garde movements from which the CSOA video activists take inspiration, especially in relation to the notions of plagiarism and art strike. In this spirit, the 1990's Hackers launched the net strikes as a new strategy of protest. New media were thus constantly appropriated, customised and added to the toolkit of oppositional politics while, at the same time, opening up new avenues of resistance.

Another significant influence on CSOA audiovisual practices can be found in the independent and underground cinema movements, which developed across the world during the 60s, especially the American, British and Italian. These movements challenged the monopoly previously enjoyed by the national cinema and TV industries over moving image production. This challenge was directed towards the subversion of traditional categories of film production and exhibition such as: genre, duration, technical support and copyrights. Other issues were addressed such as the clear-cut separation between producers, actors and audience, and the projection in predetermined spaces such as cinemas. All these questions inform the collective working practice of the CSOA, and particularly their video production.

Counter-information and Video Activism

While auto-documentary practices have long existed, video technology, even more than photography, was viewed with great suspicion by western radical social movements who feared its use as an instrument of police repression. For many years visual recording, whether photographic or videographic, has been identified with government misinformation and propaganda as well as with police surveillance activities. The greater availability of audio-visual technology, made possible by the video revolution, was not sufficient in itself to encourage the new social movements such as the CSOA to appropriate video as an expressive tool; it required the practical engagement by individuals and collectives in the development of specific media strategies. This process of familiarization with the potentials of turning the video into a new forms of political mobilization and creative practice lasted for a few years. According to Fluid Video Crew, the main organizers and participants in OFF, this process reached its peak in 1997 with the organization of the first OFF festival.

For three successive years, until 1999, the OFF festival of underground cinema took place at the CSOA '*Forte Prenestino*'. This festival



Picture 3. Forte Prenestino
In occasion of the 99 Posse and Assalti Frontali concert,
part of a campaign demanding amnesty for political prisoners.
September 2000. Still from my research footage

was part of an effort of the CSOA to take their voice outside the CSOA walls, while continuing their battles for both auto-production and freedom of communication. At OFF the possibilities of image making, re-working and projecting images were pushed to their limits. During the festival, the CSOA *Forte Prenestino* was turned into a big surveillance machine: dozens of cameras and monitors recorded the thousands of people wandering around the castle. Subverting the use of surveillance by turning *Forte Prenestino* into an active workshop, the CSOA celebrated their appropriation of audio-visual technology.

With OFF we abandoned the idea of video as a tool exclusively for the documentation of reality and used it to unleash the imagination in the unexplored spaces of counter-hallucinations to the mass-consensual reality. While documentation aspires to be a faithful representation of reality, we believe that is not possible to represent reality without modifying it, and so we moved closer to "reality fiction" - the presentation of other possible realities, like that of science fiction. During the organization of the festival we made an open call for "suburban stories" and we collected narrative visions of reality in the urban environment. We wanted to give a chance to the suburban imagery to come out of the darkness and become visible on the big screen, a chance for others to tell unspoken stories,

to create counter-hallucinations outside the dominant cultural paradigms. (Candida, La TV elettrodomestica).

The words of Candida collective show that the dogma of realism has been broken. CSOA *videoproduzione*, despite continuing to consist principally of documentaries, the narrative style opens up to a variety of fictionalizations, music and visual effects. Boundaries between realist and fictional codes of representation are blurred. Genres criteria do not apply ("Against the dictatorship of genre" is a slogan of the OFF festival). The same images are often recycled in a number of different "products". A documentary can be made with the idea of showing it in a cinema. It can be screened on a monitor or on a bar wall. It can be in the 'background', or screened during a happening dedicated to a specific theme. Moreover, its fragments can be used in a Live-set and its clips can be part of an exhibition. Therefore I interpret CSOA video productions as a range of practices rather than genres. Despite this fact, I attempted a classification in order to show the diversification of the kind of practice in the period of time considered. The terminology of the classification is based on the jargon employed by the video activists and CSOA participants. As I show in the Table below, new practices do not replace previous ones, thus revealing the proliferation

of a range of languages and communicative strategies.

1991/2000	<i>NewsreelDocumentary</i>
1994/2000	<i>FictionReality Fiction</i>
1996/1997	<i>Videozine</i>
1997/2000	<i>Community and Street TV</i>
1998/2000	<i>Live-set</i>
2000/...	<i>Indymedia@</i>

Table 1 / CSOA Video Practices

CSOA video practice can be read as an expression of the underlining social relationships and of the material and cultural conditions of production. I collected a sample of a hundred CSOA produced videos and used them as the object of a preliminary form of observation in order to make sense of the range of video practices as well as the relationship between their aesthetic codes and their role in the construction of the imagery of the CSOA participants. To answer core questions like “Why are these films made?” “Who produces them?” “In which context are they produced and disseminated?” I advocate the need for ethnographic research. The interviews of the video collectives and the fieldwork observation I conducted at *Forte Prenestino* are fundamental to the grounded interpretation of these cultural artefacts as part of specific social processes and dynamics. The former provides an interpretative framework constructed out of the authors/producers point of view, while the latter gives us a ‘glimpse’ of the social environment of their use and consumption.

At the aesthetic level, CSOA video *autoproduzione* condenses a wide range of cultural and political processes and practices. The images shot by the participant subjects have the ability to show us a number of internal gazes; many disparate views of the same subject. These gazes constitute a map of cultural traits and political influences that take shape, meet, clash and interweave expressing as well as constructing the movement’s net of identities and field of practices. The issues and discourses emerging in the films signal the processes of continuity and discontinuity of the CSOA with regard to previous social movements. The range of videos produced by the CSOA over the last ten years reveals a complex patterning. Older cultural and political traditions constantly interlink with more recent ones to inform their

work. While a range of new social and political issues are explored in these videos, and specific strategies of novel intervention are developed, previous political and counter-cultural legacies are drawn upon, re-interpreted and adapted to the current social context. In the CSOA support for workers’ strikes and anti-fascist politics go hand in hand with a concern with more recently elaborated issues, such as the decriminalisation of ‘soft’ drugs and the democratisation of information.

From Video Auto-documentation to ‘Video Hacktivism’

Although on a smaller scale than magazines and radio, video auto-production played a role in CSOA counter-information as well as enhancing communication among Italian CSOA. The experiment with a national node of CSOA *autoproduzione*, despite being very short, marked an important moment of CSOA self-awareness as a nationwide movement. This experiment was principally motivated by the desire of circulating CSOA video production. “...those who make video, like all forms of communication, aim at talking to as great a number of people as possible” said Davide (FVC) in our interview.

If we were to sketch the chronological development of the transformation of CSOA *videoproduzione* we should consider these changes at various levels: the process of realization, the narrative styles, the political aims, the distribution range, etc. Here I do not go in dept into each of these issues, rather I shall mention a few examples of videos to point out some historical moments of CSOA visual self-representation between ten years (1991-2000). The aim is that of showing how video production played an active part in the transformation of CSOA political and communicational practices.

Until 1997 CSOA videos were mainly a tool of political denunciation. Subjected to repetitive attacks by the police, the CSOA used documentary film to show the ‘emergency’ climate in which political and police repression was taking place. The realist code of representation was employed to maximize the indexical power of images in order to illustrate facts and especially to support arguments from a legal point of view, or to counter mainstream media information, which most often did not represent the point of view of the participants in the CSOA movement. Therefore CSOA videos were documents of counter-information that seemed to be offering a platform to the activists and reinforcing their public image by promoting them as political subjects. This enabled them to explain their actions to the public they managed

to reach through militant distribution of these visual documents. Families, lawyers, comrades and friends of those put on trial and jailed explained their views in videos such as: *I giorni del Leoncavallo* (1994); *Voglia di gridare* (1995); *CSOA La torre. Cronaca di uno sgombero* (1995); *Non ci farete tacere mai* (1996). In one scene from the video *Non ci farete tacere mai* (You'll never silence us) (1996), commenting on a tragic event that happened in 1994, an elderly activist, together with some younger ones, is seen washing a wall outside the CSOA, which had been painted over by the civil police in order to cover a graffiti dedicated to two CSOA members who had been killed years before in a fascist attack. She says: "*they think they can erase our historical memory, but we won't let them succeed*". She also makes reference to the continuity between the CSOA struggles and the historic struggle against the fascists.

Gradually CSOA video production started to celebrate CSOA underground culture by focusing on daily life in the CSOA. This is especially the case of the grotesque *Bunda Movie* films. From 1994 to 1996 there was an increase in CSOA experimentation with media practices. This process culminated in 1997 with the organisation of film festivals in a number of CSOA in various cities (Milan, Padua, Bologna) and with the *OFF* festival in Rome. During *OFF*

is born *Candida Television*, a video collective resulting from the coming together of a number of video activists.

Our desire to infiltrate mainstream media walks hand in hand with the need of creating an information network from below, by giving access to communication technologies to people. [...] We call it "street television": a little sister who can reach places where big brother cannot enter because it is too big.
(*Candida, La TV elettrodomestica*)

Candida collective seeks to use video in a similar way to how the hacker movement uses the digital network. On the one hand, their practice uses various techniques to deconstruct official communication in order to demystify and reveal its ideological character, on the other hand, alternative uses of communication are explored in order to construct alternative cultural realities. For the hackers "*the right to information is at the same time the right to deformation*". This idea of '*stealing*' and '*looting*' from the cultural industry is a key feature of contemporary media activists. In the pamphlet '*Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs*' Dery (www.Hackerart.org/storia) discusses the forms of communication-guerrilla intervention such as digital and analogical



Banner demanding the closure of a detention centre for asylum seekers.
reading: "Destroy Ponte Galeria". Frame from my research footage
CSOA Forte Prenestino, September 2000.

plagiarism, digital hijacking etc., strategies which derive their main thrust from the notion of 'detournment'. Di Corinto and Tozzi defined this technique of 'semiotic subversion' as having the function of *"taking familiar objects and images away from their habitual context to insert them in a new unfamiliar relationship and start a process of critical reflection."* (www.Hackerart.org/storia)

Despite the exchange of CSOA *autoproduzione* contributed to shape a sense of identity of the CSOA members, between 1995 and 1997 the movement effort in working towards unity was eroded by the regional administrations policies. These carried out negotiations with each individual CSOA with the aim of breaking its radical leaning and normalize the situation.

By 1998 the CSOA movement had lost strength at the national level whilst a new front of international activism developed, into which the CSOA flowed. Parallel to the creation and development of the European Union, a new wave of international demonstrations demanding social justice began to develop. What was to become the Anti-Globalisation movement was already partly anticipated in the video Amsterdam, treni senza frontiere (Amsterdam, trains without borders) (1997). This documented one of the first European demonstrations regarding the problem of unemployment, workers and citizen rights. At the same time, the anti neo-liberalism movement, launched by the Mexican EZLN, was also going in the direction of creating a transnational opposition to finance capital and its agencies. The video Spagna, pianeta terra (Spain, Planet Earth) (1997) documents the Second Inter-continental 'itinerant' meeting held in a number of Spanish cities. These two movements - one concerned with the future of the welfare state in the newborn Europe, and the other with the destiny of the countries under the dominance of the G8 and their financial system - eventually converged in the world movement of anti-globalisation.

In the new Europe immigration has become an important issue. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and the waves of immigration hitting the Italian coasts together with the development of the anti-globalisation movement brought the question of immigration from the countries oppressed by the policies of IMF and WB at the forefront of the protesters' agendas. The CSOA increased their mobilization in opposition to anti-immigration laws. Chiudiamo i Lager (Close down the Concentration Camps) (2000) is a video documenting a series of demonstration outside *Ponte Galeria*, a detention centre located in the outskirts of Rome.

The video starts by introducing some general data about immigration in Italy, the significance of which appears very small if compared to that of other European countries. People, from behind the bars of the detention centre, tell their stories about their frustration and sense of impotence. Then we can see the protesters 'storming' the building that they manage to occupy for a few hours by chaining themselves to the bars of the jails. Some of the detainees attempt to climb over to escape. These campaigns aimed at the closure of the detention centres are part of a wider struggle to abolish discrimination against illegal immigrants.

As oppositional movements expand outside national boundaries their independent productions take the form of collective texts, produced by a myriad of media groups. Internet is appropriated and turned into one of the main tools of communication within the global movement where projects are discussed and images circulated. A case in point is *Indymedia* (www.indymedia.org), a collectively run website which provides a space for independent communication, organization and exchange of knowledge among people and video activists all over the world. In the 2000 Indymedia produce Rebel Colours, an experiment of world collaborative video about the anti-globalisation protest which took place in Prague based on the contribution of video activists from all over the world.

In my interviews with the video collectives it emerges that *Indymedia* reflects the CSOA ethos of *autogestione* (self-management) and *autoproduzione* (independent production). Valentina (Candida) says:

Indymedia has a channel of distribution over the Internet that is totally autonomous, independent, that doesn't have to respond to anyone regarding the contents that it wants to circulate. This offers great possibilities to do independent communication: in horizontal, network ways that reflect our ideals of communication, that is, to share, to circulate information in a rather free way. (Valentina, Candida)

Conclusions

I have argued that in order to appreciate the significance of CSOA media activism it is necessary to focus on the social relations of productions in context of the CSOA philosophy and its historical development. I pointed out the continuity of CSOA counter-culture with the political and cultural transformations of the Sixties and the Seventies showing how much of those critical perspectives and practices

percolated within new social movements. On the other hand, new media technologies have been appropriated to fuel a whole range of specific performances and aesthetics. These mediated practices altered the users' ways of seeing and representing both themselves and others.

I pointed out the role of cinema in challenging the authority of realist code of representation. This transformation involved a new reflexive awareness on the constructed nature of representation and the engagement with a more experimental approach to visual representation as a strategy of cultural critique (Marcus & Fisher, 1986). As Catherine Russell (1999) convincingly argues, ethnographic film and experimental cinema are coming together in both aesthetic and political terms to question the nature of representation. This parallels and cross-fertilization between different kind of film-practices and sensibilities shows the effect of a long-term struggle for political agency and self-representation waged on various fronts by social movements. Given the increasingly dominant role played by image production and consumption in contemporary societies, such a critical gaze is becoming ever more precious and necessary.

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NOTES

1 "Video Activism in the Italian *Centri Sociali*. A Visual Ethnography". PhD thesis, Napier University, Edinburgh, 2003.

2 As participants in the social struggles that characterised those years, critical theorists like Foucault (1970), Althusser (1971) and Bourdieu (1977) sought to highlight the constructed and ideological nature of our systems of cultural representation, embedded as these are within the prevalent social norms and dominant systems of knowledge. More recently scholars like Tagg (1986) and Jay (1992) have expanded these ideas and revealed how the realist codes of representation, present in literature, theatre, photography and cinema, have served the reforming interventions of the tutelary state.

3 The '*Indiani Metropolitani*' were the creative wings of the student movement in 1977. In their mind the question was not that of seeking new art forms, but to amplify bodies and minds turning their backs on ideological superstructures. (http://web.tiscali.it/no-redirect-tiscali/settanta7/libere_associazioni_logiche.htm)