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An Ideal Society Creates Itself: Venezuela and the Bolivarian Process

In Venezuela, a profound social transformation identified as the Bolivarian process has been underway since Hugo Chávez's governmental takeover in 1998. It concerns a broad process of self organization, from which has developed a progressive constitution, a labour law, new educational possibilities, and a number of further reforms for the impoverished majority of the population of what is potentially a wealthy state. The government's politics, which take an open stance against neo-liberalism, have experienced vehement rejection from Venezuela's major private industries and from the U.S., expressed in two attempted coups and boycotts. Nonetheless, Chávez and his government enjoy the trust of the majority of the population. The society is heavily politicized; many people who had never before thought of what they wanted to change are now a part of a profound transformation taking place in the country.

Having started to work on a large-scale ongoing exhibition project titled *Alternative Economics, Alternative Societies* in 2003, which consists on a variety of different theoretical concepts of how to organize an alternative, non-capitalist economy or society, it was of course of vital importance to see how the process in Venezuela develops and how the positive changes which took place there since 1998 would at some point maybe really lead towards an alternative society. In early 2004, myself and Dario Azzellini, a writer and political analyst, who had worked in Venezuela before, did our first common journey to Venezuela together with a cameraperson.

In the film *Venezuela from Below*, (Dario Azzellini & Oliver Ressler, video, 2004, 67 min.) the true actors in the social process are able to speak: the grassroots. After an introduction by philosopher Carlos Lazo, workers from the oil company PDVSA in Puerto La Cruz report how in 2002/2003 they protected the refinery from breaking down during the oil sabotage, which was pawned off as a strike, and how they were able to reinstate oil production. Several farmers from a newly founded cooperative in Aragua report on their process of self organization, on the literacy campaign, and how things should continue. A women's bank project in Miranda and several loan recipients from Caracas' disadvantaged district, 23 de Enero, present their projects. Indígena community members near the Orinoco river in Bolívar speak about how their demands and struggles are reflected in the constitution and what has changed for them. Workers from the occupied National Valve Company in Los Teques and the paper production company Venepal in Carabobo - which was occupied by 350 workers after the owners drove it to bankruptcy, and which now, after a partial agreement, is running production again - speak about corrupt unions, labor control, and their struggles. Protagonists in the revolutionary movement Tupamaro, the cultural foundation Simón Bolívar, the leftist website www.23.net, and the Bolivarian

Circle Abrebrecha from 23 de Enero report on their work and what has changed for them through the social revolutions.

They are the people of the grassroots and they speak about what they did and what they are doing, how they feel about the Bolivarian process, about their expectations and ideas. They see themselves as part of the process that is underway, but also problematize numerous points. The search for a social and economic model beyond neo-liberalism is no easy terrain; there are currently no successful, tested alternatives. The protagonists in the Bolivarian process have, however, set upon a path from which there is no return.

In our second film regarding political and social change in Venezuela, *5 Factories–Worker Control in Venezuela* (video/installation, 2006, commissioned by the Berkeley Art Museum) we focused on the industrial sector. We documented the changes in Venezuela's economy through visiting five large worker-controlled companies in various regions: a textile company, aluminum works, a tomato factory, a cocoa factory, and a paper factory. In all, the workers are struggling for different forms of co- or self-management supported by credits from the government. 'The assembly is basically governing the company,' says Rigoberto López from the textile factory 'Textileros del Táchira' in front of steaming tubs. And coning machine operator Carmen Ortiz summarizes the experience as follows: 'Working collectively is much better than working for another—working for another is like being a slave to that other'.

The protagonists portrayed at the five production locations present insights into ways of alternative organizing and models of workers' control. Mechanisms and difficulties of self-organization are explained as well as the production processes. The portrayal of machine processes could be seen as a metaphor for the dream machine of the 'Bolivarian process', and the hopes and desires it inspires among the workers. The situation in the five factories varies, but they share the common search for better models of production and life. This not only means concrete improvements for the workers. Aury Arocha, laboratory analyst at the ketchup factory 'Tomates Guárico', emphasizes that the difference between 'social production companies' (EPS) and capitalist corporations is that the EPS 'work for the community and society'. Carlos Lanz, president of the second largest aluminum factory in Venezuela, Alcasa, coins the key question: 'How does a company push toward socialism within a capitalist framework?' The film ends with an extended sequence from a management meeting at Alcasa, a company with 2.700 workers, with discussions about co-management and the changes of production relations they aspire towards.

The English version *5 Factories–Worker Control in Venezuela* was presented as an installation version with six video projections *Now-Time Venezuela: Media Along the Path of the Bolivarian Process* at the Berkeley Art Museum (U.S.A.), organized by Chris Gilbert (March 26 to May 28, 2006). The exhibition opened the MATRIX cycle, a year long series of projects which Gilbert claimed 'will operate in solidarity with' the Bolivarian process. As is well known, Gilbert resigned from his post as Matrix curator on 28 April 2006, following the museum's directors' objection to the statement of revolutionary solidarity. I conclude with his words in 'solidarity' with the motives for Gilbert's resignation:

We live in the midst of a fascist imperialism -- there is no other way to describe the system that the US has created and that exercises such control through terror over populations both inside and outside. History has shown that to make "deals" or "compromises" with fascism avails nothing. Instead a radical and daily intransigence is required. Fascism operates to destroy life. It installs and operates on the logic of the camp on all levels, including culture. In the face of that logic, which holds life as nothing, compromises and deals at best buy time for the aggressor and symbolic capital for the aggressor. One should have no illusions: until capitalism and imperialism are brought down, cultural institutions will go on being, in their primary role, lapdogs of a system that spreads misery and death to people everywhere on the planet. The fight to abolish that system completely and build one based on socialism must remain our exclusive and constant focus.¹

¹ Chris Gilbert - statement on resigning 5/21/06
[http:// nettime.freeflux.net/blog/archive/2006/05/31/nettime-event-chris-gilbert-s-resignation.html](http://nettime.freeflux.net/blog/archive/2006/05/31/nettime-event-chris-gilbert-s-resignation.html)