

Occupy Museums as Public Pedagogy and Justice Work

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ON JANUARY 13, 2012, THE ACTIVIST GROUP OCCUPY MUSEUMS organized an action at MoMA, one of their most frequent targets. Once inside the museum, the approximately 20 participants gathered in front of *The Uprising* (1931) by Diego Rivera, a fresco of a labor demonstration in which a woman cradling an infant shields a male worker from a menacing soldier. MoMA featured this image in subway ads promoting the exhibition *Diego Rivera: Murals for The Museum of Modern Art* which was on display at the time, and which Occupy Wall Street activists hacked into by peeling back a layer of the poster in the shape of the police barricades used by the New York Police Department to corral Occupy Wall Street activists and adding “Occupy Wall Street” and “99%” imagery. Occupy Museums hacked into MoMA’s use of this fresco again by reading aloud from the “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art,” which was signed by Rivera himself and serves as a call to action for artists to lead the fight against their oppressors.

Occupy Museums is an offshoot of the resistance movement Occupy Wall Street, committed to addressing social and economic inequality in the museum world using a leaderless, radically democratic organizational structure. For Occupy Museums, the mainstream art museum is an informal learning space, in which social, cultural and economic hierarchies are perpetuated by powerful individuals and corporations and absorbed by the public. Museums privilege elite patrons and corporations, whose financing for exhibitions and programs has filled in the significant gaps left by severe cuts in public funding. By resisting unionization efforts and relying on low-wage precarious labor, museums perpetuate labor injustices. By furthering dominant narratives of art history and presenting an overwhelmingly white male artistic canon, museums reinforce social and cultural hierarchy. As exclusive sites and “gatekeepers of culture,”

they impose a value system onto the public of capitalism and systemic economic, social, and cultural inequalities. Occupy Museums, originating within Occupy Wall Street, has shed light on how mainstream museums teach this value system by exposing politically problematic pedagogical practices within the museum – and, as in the MoMA intervention, offering an alternative, activist form of pedagogy.

The format of this interview adapts the strategy of Occupy Museums' practice known as horizontality, in which all members of a collective stand on equal footing, facilitating non-hierarchy and consensus. The participants are myself and three members of Occupy Museums: Tal Beery, Noah Fischer and Arthur Polendo. Our meandering, multifaceted conversation took place over several weeks on a private Internet forum. By enabling all participants to shape the form and content of the conversation, and thus resisting the unbalanced power dynamics between questioner and responder inherent in a traditional interview, this collaborative dialogue reflects the horizontal pedagogy of Occupy Museums.

In the interest of clarity, I have organized the transcript into themed sections that contribute to a holistic understanding of how Occupy Museums' interventions address the museum as an informal learning space, in which both cultural and economic messages are perpetuated. First, by exposing how museums teach visitors, Occupy Museums exposes invisible power imbalances and hierarchies. Second, through interventions at institutions such as MoMA that promote public access to museums and collaboration, Occupy Museums hacks into this problematic museum pedagogy of strict hierarchy and passive learning. In the final section, these Occupy Museums members propose an alternative museum pedagogy based on their own practices that promotes social justice.

The inequalities within museum pedagogy manifest in art school pedagogy as well. The ubiquity of Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degrees among practicing artists is a relatively new phenomenon, only a few decades old, and has proceeded in lock-step with a phenomenal growth in student loan debt and diminishing opportunities for art teachers at all levels. As art labor has professionalized, it has also become more precarious (Vidokle, 2013). According to the Artist Pension Trust, the period during which a successful artist's work is in demand by collectors is only four years long (Vidokle, 2013). Thus, many artists interested in pursuing a lifelong art practice pursue an MFA degree – even though there are no guarantees that an artist with an MFA degree will secure a teaching job. This cycle resembles a pyramid scheme in which art schools and only a handful of celebrated artists benefit from the debt, energy, and labor of the overwhelming majority of marginalized artists.

Both the museum and art school pedagogies frame art an elite luxury that is inaccessible to the masses. In this first section of the interview, Occupy Museums members expose these restrictive pedagogies and articulate the kind of artistic economy in which they would like to practice.

Tal Beery: Art schools and museums are different types of institutions with different purposes, and it would be unwise to draw too many unqualified parallels. That said, they are both art world institutions, and as such, are in the business of dream-making/dream-breaking. Many art students enter school with aspirations to show in museums, the most prestigious of which represent the pinnacle of an artist's career and legacy. Some might believe that just to enter the pool of people who may one day show at MoMA, they will have to take out a \$100,000 student loan from a major bank. That money pays for a lot of things, among which is the salary of professors who may have started their art careers

with similar loans. The money also represents an impossibility for many students. For most, their investment will not pay off with a lucrative art career and the pressure of repaying their loans may drive some to abandon an ambitious art practice. And showing at MoMA is also no guarantee of money in the bank. In other words, art schools support the current art world model of celebrity art stars, exclusive glamorous parties, and blockbuster museum exhibitions because it fuels the dreams of prospective art students and makes them more likely to pay sky-high tuition.

Alyssa Greenberg: So does Occupy Museums' work have to do with teaching the public about this system? What does it mean that Occupy Museums members, for the most part, are directly impacted/implicated in this system as artists, art students and art degree holders?

Arthur Polendo: Our recent work in Occupy Museums wasn't so much about directing actions towards students or recent grads. Individuals within these categories alongside professors and general labor workers were all participating in our actions and forming more specific groups stemming from Occupy Wall Street as the months went on. Many were there because they were fed up with unchanging situations related to debt (including student, credit card and home loans), unpaid internships, and extremely low wages.

I can relate to many of the topics that were listed above, having attended upper-tier private art schools due to the fact that student loans were available. In cities where I previously resided, I have taught art at the college level, but here in New York City the part-time teaching gig doesn't solely pay the rent. Additionally, permanent job security for adjunct college teachers is nowhere to be found. People of every profession are hustling to get bills paid by taking on more than one job, and sometimes working unpaid internships in the hopes of obtaining a higher paying job. This is especially true for recent college graduates. In New York City, distinctions and flaunting of class, power and wealth are so much more apparent on the streets and in the papers than in other cities across the United States. I work a low-level job in a major NYC museum because it covers the bills and I love looking at the art on a daily basis. I am also searching for teaching jobs that will fit around my other job schedule. I have heard many similar stories from others in Occupy Wall Street, some who were recently out of work. I feel fortunate to stay afloat.

Alyssa Greenberg: How does Occupy Museums frame this issue as a concern for the art world?

Tal Beery: I'd like to boil this down to two related concerns. The first is the role of money and debt in art making and exhibiting. Related to that are the ideas and aesthetics of value and exchange. The second is the notion of the exclusive realm of success, that the failure of many is required for the success of the few. All artists and art students should be concerned with these frames, not least because they influence the context within which their work is viewed and understood, but also because they affect their careers. I am not suggesting that artists should all be making artwork that directly engages that context, but that it is as ubiquitous as the white cube and the drywall on which so much artwork today is mounted. Artists and curators can try to ignore it, but in

my opinion, that is a bit sloppy. It should also trouble us that these are urgent ethical concerns. To ignore them is to take a moral position.

Alyssa Greenberg: How do Occupy Museums interventions perform social justice work?

Noah Fischer: I think we'd have to start by thinking about the word "justice." It's not so simple. We came from within Occupy Wall Street -- the focus started out on the financial system. Banks are in everyone's lives and the question of economic justice is totally pronounced: 93% of profits in the US have gone to the 1% since 2009 for example. What we are trying to do is connect art institutions and culture to inequality more generally. There are many direct connections where economic corruption is present in the arts to sometimes an even greater degree. For example, the art market is our largest unregulated market. But we shouldn't oversimplify things. When speaking about a culture of inequality and injustice one needs a specific language. We (Occupy Museums) still have to do some hard reflecting: How wide is the circle of those affected by the contemporary art world really? (I'd imagine wider than it appears). What would it look like to achieve justice for artists? For museum publics? Justice for whom? By what means? What is achievable? What stake do we have in all of this?

Tal Beery: Fighting exclusivity and value-as-we-know-it is justice work on a deep level. These are cultural concerns that inform our economy and politics, just as they are economic and political concerns that inform our culture. Focusing our justice work on art world institutions has been a helpful limitation, but we need these same concerns to be addressed across the board to make a meaningful impact. That is why it has been so important for Occupy Museums (and all the Occupy art groups) to be part of a larger movement.

But I'm not sure I understand how to discuss Occupy Museums actions as somehow distinct from Occupy Wall Street, and then how to discuss the pedagogy of Occupy Wall Street as embedded within specific actions. There's a holistic thing happening here, and we can argue that everything that Occupy Wall Street did was pedagogic in nature, but that might not lead to a very interesting conversation.

Hacking into museum pedagogy

In addition to the Rivera reading, Occupy Museums' intricately choreographed MoMA action also included a teach-in, an intervention at the museum café and a banner drop from the fifth floor balcony. The action occurred unimpeded by MoMA security guards except for the confiscation of the banner minutes after its unveiling. An open letter to the MoMA Acquisitions Committee by Occupy Museums framed this confiscation as a "unilateral acquisition" and demanded "a proper negotiating platform and acquisition-process," naming the following three conditions:

1. MoMA releases a letter addressed to Sotheby's calling on them to end the lockout of Teamsters Local 814.
2. "Target Free Fridays" are never publicized by MoMA without citing the Art Workers' Coalition whose protests led to free museum days in the early 1970s.
3. Whenever the banner is on display, the details of its acquisition, including the action of January 13, 2012 are available. Any accompanying text must be approved by Occupy Museums and the coalition of groups that collaborated on this action.

As a result of this open letter, MoMA returned the banner to Occupy Museums. Presenting itself as a horizontally organized collective of artists rather than as political activists, Occupy Museums hacked into the museological process of acquisition negotiations. This practice of hacking into existing systems is central to the pedagogy of both Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Museums. This section of the interview expands on Occupy Museums' hacking of museum pedagogy, particularly at MoMA.

Noah Fischer: We have not been focused so much on schools (in or out), directing our attention instead to museums, which we sometimes refer to as "temples of culture" (though not exclusively). These temples are pedagogic, though. Apart from their education programs, they highlight and disperse symbols of prestige as moral lessons. The main lesson for a long time has been the lesson of the individualistic studio artist that says: "turn away from the community and you'll achieve greatness." These lessons can be short circuited through hacking. We have put some effort into short circuiting some of the "1% lessons" taught at museums, such as reclaiming Diego Rivera through his anti-Capitalist manifesto read at MoMA.

Tal Beery: The horizontal pedagogy of Occupy Wall Street seems to have deep roots in critical pedagogy and also anti-oppression training. Perhaps the entire project is pedagogic in nature, and maybe that's what made the Occupy Museums actions at MoMA so exciting: we used Occupy Wall Street's radically inclusive approach to engagement within an institution that thrives on exclusivity.

Alyssa Greenberg: What are the implications of interventions that expose the inequalities in museum pedagogy for society?

Noah Fischer: Yes, I would absolutely say that we've tended to see museums as a microcosm of society: an embodiment of economic inequality and of the structural conglomeration of money and power in a sphere which some people think is an escape from all of that. In terms of the problematics of the public sphere and loss of the commons that Occupy Wall Street has highlighted (the Occupation of public space in New York City, for example), museums reflect the trend of public resources (art, art history, types of labor and attention) being hijacked by the private sphere. We've pointed to the conflict of interest where public museums and speculative auction houses share the same board members which is very similar to the revolving door between energy

companies and banks and government in Washington that is seriously threatening democratic autonomy in our times.

I'd agree that the MoMA Banner action described above was a "hack" into the process and logic of museum acquisition, taking the strategy of visibility so that what usually happens in backrooms becomes visible in the media along with its attendant contradictions. The "unilateral acquisition" was hinting at the colonial acquisition/stealing of many museum objects around the globe. We took a similar visibility approach when we marched a replica of a house being foreclosed in Harlem to the Museum of American Finance and demanded that they include it in their collection to tell the story of American Finance more accurately. At first they called the cops, locked the museum gate during business hours, and retreated into their museum. Later after correspondence in which we reminded them that the Smithsonian was collecting Occupy Wall Street paraphernalia, they officially accepted the cardboard replica into their collection, which was pretty funny.

However, there is another more basic pedagogical level I'm thinking of, and this goes back to the museum's style and function as an institution based fully on *authority* (cultural and economic and social). It's accepted that major exhibitions influence and create art history, for many people there is no daylight between museums and the meaning of art. If Joe Schmo shows at MoMA, Joe Schmo's art is what great art looks like. People feel intimidated by museums, being full of supposedly meaningful things that they don't know enough about but which are clearly associated with a certain class and wealth status and are supposed to be beautiful and interesting. This has formed a popular – often right-wing -- backlash against contemporary art as elitist because people (especially Americans) do not like being put in that position. I think that the circles of academia and money and the way art objects are treated so preciously and seriously makes people feel like they are little children in an adult's space. This points back to the root of the word "pedagogy" which I think means "teaching the children." This is the top-level pedagogy that museums enact, which is as the authority to teach and define what is art and the people then devolve into small children rather than conscious empowered adults. So when in our times art starts to look like the spoils of being rich (For example, the 2008 exhibition *Skin Fruit* at the New Museum featured artwork from a board member's personal collection) and the incest between Wall Street and museum boards and auctions, this is the lesson that is being taught. The lesson of late Capitalism is to teach the children to accept a widening gap of inequality – to enjoy the spectacle, even.

Occupy Museums has tried to expose this pedagogic backwardness by leveraging the media, making free use of public space, and many other tactics. As I wrote in the original call to action, museums are temples of culture and we wanted to "storm the temples," understanding museums as symbols and generators of cultural currency, much like Wall Street itself. There are many alternatives to this narrative that I think are on their way.

Occupy Museums' alternative pedagogy

Occupy Museums' unique set of practices, flowing from the tactics and organizing style of Occupy Wall Street, were developed to resist the social, cultural and economic hierarchies perpetuated in the traditional art museum and in society. For Occupy Museums, these strategies

can serve as the foundation for an alternative museum pedagogy that supports social justice. These strategies include, but are not limited to, the following:

Collectivity – By operating as a leaderless collective, Occupy Members sidesteps the problematic power dynamics of an organization stratified into leaders and followers.

Inclusivity – By inviting the public to participate in Occupy Museums actions (meeting times are posted on their website) and collaborating with other organizations including unions and other Occupy Wall Street working groups, Occupy Museums empowers multiple, diverse audiences as stakeholders in their activism.

Consensus – All Occupy Museums choices are determined by consensus so that all voices within the membership can be heard.

Horizontality and non-hierarchy – Occupy Museums practices a horizontal (as opposed to hierarchical) organizational structure, in which no member exerts power or privilege over any other member, to facilitate equality among the membership.

Transparency – Occupy Museums provides public resources about their work including a website, meeting minutes, a ‘zine, and interviews in the media.

Social practice – Jackson (2011) defines *social practice* as “a term that combines aesthetics and politics, as a term for art events that are inter-relational, embodied, and durational” (p. 12). Occupy Museums’ actions challenge the boundaries between art and life by engaging participants as co-creators in events including protests, art exchanges, and interventions.

Visibility – Occupy Museums operates within the public sphere, rupturing the status quo at sites including museums, art fairs, and an auction house.

Lens of economic justice – Occupy Museums discourse centers on the lens of economic justice, framing the art museum as a site in which the hierarchy between the 1% and the 99% is enacted.

Occupy Museums performs these practices in their actions, including their collaboration at Momena Art. But the most visible performance of these practices occurred at the 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (BB7), in Occupy Museums’ horizontal interventions into the structure of the biennale itself. In June 2012, Occupy Museums participated in an experimental collaboration with an institution for the first time. They participated in the BB7 curated by art historian Joanna Warsza, artist-provocateur Artur Zmijewski, and the Russian art collective Voina at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin.

Occupy Museums organized discussions among BB7 employees, ranging from museum guards and tour guides to curators and administrators, initiating a horizontal (as opposed to hierarchical) and consensus-based organizational structure for the BB7. This process began with a June 5th discussion with BB7 art workers that addressed issues such as the lack of transparency of the BB7 budget and disparities in income, benefits and cultural capital between the curators and museum guides. A subsequent proposal by the activists to move toward a non-hierarchical

organizational structure was at least partially adopted by the curators, who (with some antagonism) eventually stepped down from their positions. Even though the intervention was not an unqualified success, its triumphs were challenging the museological status quo by dissipating the hierarchical structure of the BB7, facilitating face-to-face dialogue with disparate art workers such as the museum guards and elite administrators and creating space for the demand that the BB8 be structured more justly.

This final section of the interview presents the strategies of Occupy Museums, performed at the BB7 and other venues, as a proposal for an alternative museum pedagogy.

Arthur Polendo: The strategy is developed through theoretical conversations ultimately driving the method and how it is executed. Text in one form or another often supplemented an Occupy Museums action. We were challenged by this concept of working outside the museum system when engaged at Momenta Art, a gallery in Bushwick, in the Fall of 2012, and as you mentioned in Berlin's BB7 as well. However, in Berlin there was an action at the Pergamon Museum, although a majority of the activities took place at the KW or in surrounding areas in Berlin.

In regards to working outside the museum system, I found the first challenge in both locations listed above was dealing with the idea of being in a place for an extended amount of time, and how this differed from only a afternoon or evening for a specific action. At Momenta Art there were a series of discussions, presentations, guest speakers, gallery design preparations, outreach, photocopied handouts, website preparations, considerations of the involvement of visitors inside the gallery and an Occupy Wall Street events calendars that had to be discussed and strategized. This occurred beforehand and continually throughout our stay.

I believe the strategies and methods that Occupy Museums utilizes could be understood as a strategy for learning on several levels. Different aspects of these methods are already prevalent in many areas of higher education, although with different aims in mind. In many classes, students are often asked to break into smaller groups, interpret readings, then collectively research, develop and write a collective paper, and give visual and/or oral presentations.

Alyssa Greenberg: What are the roots of Occupy Museums' alternative museum pedagogy?

Tal Beery: First, critical pedagogy. This is a school of thought that is flagshipged by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a work by Paulo Freire. This kind of thinking, plus ideas surrounding democratic learner-centered pedagogy and anti-oppression training, helped inspire the techniques in horizontality that every Occupy Wall Street group purports to use. And here is a convenient segue into aesthetics: Occupy Wall Street groups commonly use meeting structures and techniques that have aesthetic elements (eg. human microphone and hand gestures). The aesthetics of an Occupy Wall Street meeting are very strong, but they are all very clearly based on the desire to maintain an open, democratic, consensus-based, and accessible group dynamic. If you walked into 60 Wall Street, you could easily make out which group there is in the middle of an Occupy Wall Street meeting, and you can easily join and contribute, because you are familiar with the aesthetic/structural/political elements of the meeting. Here we see the clear commingling of politics and aesthetics.

Frames influence the meaning of art. Institutions are frames. Museums are institutions. So, museums influence the meaning of art. They impact not just how artwork is presented, but the ways artworks are made and understood. Museums are institutions mediating the public's relationship with a significant portion of contemporary culture, and they reflect the realities of late capitalism. The private interests and ideologies of wealthy trustees, corporate sponsors, and eager politicians are disguised as matter-of-fact judgments on aesthetic quality. This authority affects many things, include the types of art artists make and the way that art interacts with broader social, political, and economic challenges.

However, there are many new museum practices, like community curating, that are attempting to revolutionize the museum and help it provide an actual social and community benefit for the 100%. The museums that happen to be significantly on this path are not in the art-world spotlight. We need to publicize the good work they're doing and get everyone else on board.

Alyssa Greenberg: Would anyone like to expand on the specifically aesthetic qualities of Occupy Museums' interventional strategies?

Tal Beery: In Berlin we did something as close to social practice [art] as we have ever gotten. We started a process within the institution to horizontalize their hierarchy, in classic Occupy Wall Street fashion. The argument here, which I think is bulletproof and so extremely important, is that democracy requires a democratic culture, which in turn requires democratic cultural institutions. This means that our cultural institutions need to be run in ways that are consistent with our ethics, with our highest virtues and values. It's not a demand for immediate change, it is a direction, a north star. The work with the KW and BB7 was experimental, instructive, and incomplete. It intended to flatten the institution's hierarchies, which required us to act like consultants, and community organizers, and got us deeply involved in the institution at all levels. This is important work and needs to be continued at the KW and BB8, as well as in other cultural institutions.

Conclusions

Tal Beery: The key insight, as far as I'm concerned, is that our pedagogy is much more like art than anything else. And by that I mean, it is based on a process of trial and error, and mostly error, and we continually adjust our tactics, open ourselves to criticism and continue to work without being discouraged. Perhaps also, that our pedagogy is our art, and that problematizing art world pedagogy that conflicts with our own is part of the challenge we offer. We are a deeply political group that engages with aesthetics and ethics equally – which, in my opinion, is an easy street to pedagogical techniques.

Alyssa Greenberg: Though Occupy Museums *proposes* an alternative pedagogy, the organization has faced difficulties enacting the principles of horizontality and consensus within itself. Four women formerly involved with Occupy Museums resigned over disagreements about the handling of authority within the organization, specifically citing

internal hierarchy and gender politics. None agreed to be identified on record. Beery, Fischer and Polendo did not address the divisions within the organization.

Taken at face value, these disagreements suggest that Occupy Museums may have reproduced, however inadvertently, the same unequal power structures that Occupy Museums and Occupy Wall Street sought to dismantle. Despite Occupy Museums' difficulties enacting their own pedagogy, though, the alternative pedagogy itself – by presenting museum pedagogy as inextricable from larger systems of power and oppression – represents a critical development in public pedagogy in justice work.

Occupy Museums' latest initiative, DebtFair, debuted in May 2013. Occupy Museums is an open collective that continually welcomes new members. If you are interested in participating, e-mail occupymuseums@gmail.com.

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