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Occupy Museums, part 2

LAUREN FRANCES ADAMS on July 31, 2012 at 8:40 AM

[uds-billboard name="OM1"]Continued from Occupy Museums, part 1...

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Lauren: Could you address how raising awareness as an Occupy Museums strategy has now moved into engaging institutions? How do you model for the outside world what possible changes can be made? In an effort to influence these institutions, obviously on a small scale, how do you change the master narrative?

Blithe: I definitely could list a clear set of demands, like paying artists exhibition fees and putting art handlers back to work. But then again, that is such a small piece of the puzzle and it seems defeatist to stop there. As a society we are so entrenched in the capitalist system that we have to learn to think outside of it and imagine alternative models. That is the first step. I believe that we need to meet, discuss, debate and vision, and build together. First and foremost it is essential to open up spaces to do that work. It is a process. It takes time.

Also, to state the obvious, Occupy Museums is one small working group. We're talking about systemic change, that involves every aspect of society. One of my goals is that artists recognize their own contribution to this system and become active participants in changing it. I want to see an art world that values collectivity and collaboration over speculation and the market.

Max: We actually have an action that addresses this that Maria can talk about – the Armory. Maria?

Maria: Actually, I was going to talk about things more generally, so, you're asking us what we want to see, what Blithe says is true, we're experimenting, but I think one of the things we're experimenting is what you're witnessing right now. Traditionally, most people interview one person, and that one person becomes the spokesperson, and we're realizing that creates a power dynamic that is reinforced by media structure, so we're trying to actively counteract that by showing that we would like people that create or think or build things together, in a non-hierarchical, consensus-based environment. We're practicing that, refining that, and seeing how it works. As a hope that that process will then engage larger and larger circles of people, who feel engaged and have agency to actually get things done together. So our way of planning actions and doing actions is a creative process, so that is one idea we're experimenting with that might be a glimmer into how future museums or future cultural practices are realized.

Another thing we've done is experiment with the museum space and actually what happens there. There is a very entrenched narrative of how you act in a museum: you go in and you passively consume that art or that culture, you're not asked to engage on a significant level. But the way children are introduced to museums through education programs is a more creative way [to interact]. Once you're an adult you're supposed to know it all and you're supposed to be quiet and not talk to anybody else. So we're already starting to experiment with how things are decided or created together, as well as what happens in cultural space and public spaces. Those are two small doorways that we're going through and as Blithe said, it's very hard for us to imagine what is possible when we're so caught in this very tight structure.

Tal: I'd also like to add that I think it's important not to denigrate awareness raising, that might be the most crucial thing that Occupy Wall Street is doing, and I'll explain why. I think that in order to really come up with solutions you need to frame the problem, and we are in the process not only raising other people's awareness and essentially raising our own awareness by doing these actions, we are learning about these issues ourselves, coming to grasp them in much more profound ways than when we started. By involving more people in the conversation, we'll have a better sense of the solutions available for the problems that we identify. But I don't think we have yet clearly and finally identified the problems with our system. We know that the system benefits the 1%, over the 99% and that is a situation that simply cannot stand. And we are hoping to find solutions that address those problems.

Lauren: Everything you guys just said is exactly the kind of framing of some of the issues that a lot of the mainstream media articles I've read have not really aspired to take into account with the larger Occupy movement. How action and awareness

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and community building and the collective conversation is changing people and that's a slow process. One of the things I'm curious about when the Occupy movement is discussed in mainstream media is what your reaction is to the issue of nostalgia for protest. Specifically thinking about what was happening in the 60's and 70's, I think of that as my parents' generation, the boomer generation coming of age, politically coming of age as a form of protest. I know there's been some discussion of this, what problems might we proscribe to the nostalgia of protest, specifically even people denigrating the movement's tactics because it doesn't look like what we know protest looked like a generation or two ago. Is that making sense as a question, or something to respond to?

Max: I think it's a question that's out there, not one we tend to think about very much, mostly because very few of us lived through that time. I study social movements a lot in my other life and the way that Vietnam protests happened, for example, was for another structure than what exists now and the same tactics don't work. Look at all the marches for Afghanistan or Iraq – none of those did anything the way that they used to do about Vietnam because of the structure.

Just turning out in numbers doesn't do it. So I'm just saying that traditional forms of interaction were dealing with an older structure of power and politics and mechanisms for change. Now we're dealing with a different structure, like putting up a spoof Whitney page, (which, by the way, we did not do – that was someone else). That kind of tactic is much more appropriate for the – well, it's a variety of tactics in a way that couldn't have worked in the 60's, and the 60's style of activism doesn't work today, so...

Maria: You did touch on something that I think is also really important – the way that the media is covering things. The mainstream media reinforces the current power structure, so the way that protests are covered is very scripted and often presented in a way that tends to trivialize and counteract the power, so I think that's a huge difference now is that people have access to means of communication in a way that has never been possible before, so to me that, as well as the changes in the role of women and people of color, and compared to the 60's has hugely changed. Technology, race, and gender issues are three major shifts that have happened in how society is organized and where people have agency. I think that I see that those as the three areas where there might be potential for systemic change that didn't happen in the '60s.

Tal: Yeah, also, we're not protesting for protesting's sake. I'm speaking autonomously but everyone I know wants to make a difference, actually change something. It's not about lifestyle or fashion, it's really about changing something.

Blithe: I want to overthrow capitalism. *(everyone laughs)*

Tal: She's speaking autonomously.

Max: I also want to overthrow capitalism.

Maria: And I wanna create better models. I mean, for me, as an artist, as a creative person, I'm excited about seeing what we can do. What are the new ways of getting things done, of people getting organized, of social relations. How cities are organized, what relationship is to food, to healthcare, to education, all those things are so commodified and so kind of like tightly held in this very oppressive system there's so much waiting around the edges that we have to tap into. That's the exciting part for me.

Blithe: Can I just say one more thing about nostalgia? I just don't think it's that important or interesting. I mean, we are in an era of social movements in this country, right now! I didn't think I would get to see this in my lifetime. I think we can all agree that it is an incredible feeling. All we have to compare this to is the '60's and '70's, and I'm not sure it's all that useful. Instead we need to believe in the present, this is OUR time, and let's be in it.

Max: Except that OWS and Occupy in general is a coalition movement, which involves a lot of people who have been doing this kind of work since before Occupy, like indigenous peoples, people who were working against foreclosure, people in unions, these guys have been fighting this fight. Natives have been fighting this fight at least 400 years, and this is just the newest platform to launch that off of. Nostalgia is missing there, because it's never stopped. And it's not going to stop. I think Occupy is a platform where it got launched into public in a new way, so if you take whatever you've already been doing and call it Occupy, suddenly it has a resonant and you can get some more work done. And that's true for a lot of people who are in Occupy.

Maria: And I think that one of the problems is, on the left, everyone does have their own issues. I think what Occupy has done is create this huge umbrella that has made many realize that we're fighting the same system. I think maybe individually people realize that, but a huge part of the left, and across the political spectrum people are realizing that the problem is the capitalist system, and that is what we all have to fight against together. Whether it's our individual battles or as a group. Another huge important thing is that the term Occupy gained international attention after what has happened in New York, but it actually started in Spain, in Egypt and in many other places before under different names. This is on a global scale, and I think that's is very powerful, we're learning from a sharing with people around the globe now, the strategies are just gonna become better and more diversified and inclusive.

Tal: Right, to liken us to the hippies is really an Americentric world view. Just read the news, we're much more like Egypt than we are the hippies.

Max: Put that on a bumper sticker!
(everybody laughs)

Lauren: I love the tension I'm hearing when I ask this question about nostalgia, specifically from the '60's and '70's. Part of one of the things I'm hearing in responses to that is about what Maria was saying about the change in the shift of the axis in the past couple of generations, with gender relationships, racial relationships, relationships with technology. One of the things I'm interested in, because I'm receiving so much by digital proxy, always mediated, through my computer, through my Gmail, through Google Group through blogs, is how that info is being disseminated through your group. If I understand the structure correctly, you guys use your Google Group to facilitate with one another different actions you're thinking about, different info about what events are happening, I'm curious what's going on with technology and communication and a little about how technology is changing how you guys talk to one another and build that community – and, I'm suspicious of Google. It's quickly becoming a situation where it has taken over as the main company through which so much communication occurs. When I load a doc to Google Docs, in essence they have access to my content, right? So I'm wondering how you guys are negotiating that as you move forward?

My other question is how you are navigating being artists as part of the Occupy movement and also how you make individualized

choices as artists in your studio in your practice that reflect your beliefs as evinced in the Occupy movement. So, let's start with text communication since it seems to be how things have changed over the past 40-50 years.

Tal: Yeah, I just wanna say, I don't think OWS could exist without Facebook, Google and information technology as it is today. Real movement has taken on its character via these new mediums and I think it's really important to recognize that and cherish it and sit with it. Almost all of the communication that I get about the movement happens through Facebook or the Google Group, and when we coauthor documents, and I think that simultaneously it's been a real challenge for us because the police have access to Facebook and they think they have access to a lot of what happens on our Google Groups. Not necessarily Occupy Museums, but across the board there are certainly people who are present, so they know about actions well in advance and they're able to counteract them very often.

Maria: I want to make a direct response to that, because although we are communicating through Facebook and Google Groups and Gmail and all kinds of corporate media formats, there's a lot of people in the movement here in the USA as well as in Europe that are developing alternative platforms that are not dependent on these corporate structures.

Lauren: Can you name them?

Maria: The main organizing tool for OWS is NYCGA.net, which is open source. There are other platforms like Take the Square which is one being used mainly in Europe, and there are other platforms, May First, an alternative internet service provider, there's also Rise so there's a lot of organizations. There's also people creating mesh networks for local access, so I think what's happening is this simultaneous growth of resources independent of corporate structures, there's a lot of effort being made to build alternative means of communication. So that once it becomes apparent that these corporate structures are not going to be safe or viable, for doing the work we wanna do, there are other platforms. That work is happening on a volunteer basis, so it's going much slower, but there's a lot of alternatives to Facebook being built, alternative social networks, so that's stuff is in the making, that's a big part of the movement, it's an open source kind of free internet.

Blithe: And NYCGA is built on WordPress and BuddyPress, which are open source software.

Max: So, logistically, Occupy Museums has two Google Groups, one is a bunch of people who we don't know that has a lot of lurk and that's where announcements go, and the other Group is for planning and stuff, you don't get on that unless we know your face or you are consistently part of the group, otherwise you get taken off of it.

And that's private. And then, even though a lot of our work happens over Google Docs or pirate pad, like collaborative writing, because it's very efficient, the core of our group and the core of how we run is still face to face meetings at 60 Wall Street on Mondays. Right now we don't know your face, if you haven't spoken to us,

Tal: It's open to everyone.

Max: And it's open to everyone, and you don't end up as part of the group unless we see your face regularly, basically. So even though we're highly dependent upon digital platforms, meetings are still to the core of what makes up our group.

Lauren: Do you guys have new faces coming every week? How dynamic is the group right now?

Max: Dynamic to the point where we're having a few issues.

Lauren: What does that mean?

Max: It's like if you constantly have people coming in, you have to re-teach them the history and protocols that might be unique to the group, and right now there's a bit of tension with that, I think, for newer folks who accidentally break protocol or for folks who don't know the whole history, or for folks who have slightly different agendas and we haven't reached consensus on that yet. We don't always have time to rehash visions and ultimate goals when there is a lot of immediate things to do.

Blithe: This is not a struggle that's unique to our group. The challenge of open groups within Occupy Wall Street...

Max: Right, they're growing pains. They're not intrinsically bad.

Tal: We have to draw a balance between the desire to build a group dynamic and do effective work together and build trust within it and remain open, and that's a challenging task.

Blithe: I think a number of groups are in a mode of internal evaluation right now. We are being honest and identifying core members who are putting a lot of labor and who are really committed. There is a desire to go deeper to understand each other personally, and how to communicate and act impacts one another. I believe that is how to build trust, because after all, whether or not its Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Museums, or another group, I am in this for the long haul. We have to get to know each other and learn to respect each other that is just as important as any other kind of political activity.

Maria: We had an action at the Armory art fair. Instead of doing a protest we actually kind of introduced an alternative. We invited people from all over New York City to come to the Armory art show with their items of exchange. The action was a platform for beginning conversations about how value is created and what is exchanged, what is the value within exchanges. And that's going back to the history of the art market and inflated value, using art and culture for investment and speculation, and questioning that entire process, as well as bringing attention to the fact, that what this does for art and artists. It influences how we interact with each other. To better understand the way we perceive our role and relationships to each other as artists, we wanted to call attention to that dynamic within the art world.

Max: So very concretely, what we did was ask people to bring their art, and exchange it with other people, in a way that did not rely on profit. So how could it be reciprocal, how could both parties have their needs met, and sort of experiment with how that would happen and what value would come from if it wasn't coming from profit and/or money? So some people exchanged things that were identifiably art, and some people didn't, but it was about a platform for exchange, where dynamics and power weren't already built in ahead of time, basically.

Maria: One thing that I realize, and that other people realize, is that part of the value of the exchange is the relationship that you build with the person you're exchanging with. And that's something that's completely missed in our current structure, is the relationships we have with each other, and it's completely been subverted, or taken over by relationships through monetary value, so that for us direct action has become a way of really engaging with people, giving people a reason to talk to each other on the streets and to connect. We don't have any kind of systemic way to engage with people in our community except for through a profit driven agenda.

Lauren: Can I take that then into this question – I know Blithe is an artist, but would the rest of you call yourselves that?

Max: I think most of the people, though not all, in the group are artists.

Lauren: This leads into the question about what decisions artists within the Occupy Museums movement might be making in their practice, especially if you're thinking about OM as not always being called art related actions, but that we also do have our studio practice which involves us making decisions daily about how we value our own work, how we access materials, how we support ourselves and our art, what kinds of exhibitions and other opportunities we take part in. This is something a lot of artists think about and question, and have for a long time. I'm wondering if you have anything you've discovered in this process these past few months or general guidelines for yourself about what it means to act ethically as an artist when faced with these systemic obstacles of power and economy.

Max: I think when we answer this, we're going to answer completely autonomously, because this isn't an OM issue.

(Everyone says 'yeah' in agreement.)

Tal: I'd like to say that after being involved with OM I am more confused with my personal practice than before. And I think that the moral imperative that I have – that I believe every artist has – is to examine these issues and think about them, be in dialogue and discussion about them. I don't believe that we make demands on artists at the moment to change something specific about their own practice. Simply because artists today, a majority of them, are what I would consider to be very often victims of systemic inequality and really have to think about where our power comes from and how we can use it. But I'm confused about those issues, personally.

Max: So I'm almost the opposite of Tal, which is that before Occupy came along, my art practice was already about not working in

system, not going anywhere they didn't pay me, not using toxic and scavenged materials, making art outside of galleries and bring commons, using alternative payments to circulate my art — so that's part of why Occupy already made sense to me, because I was working outside of what I saw as a problematic system. I would use alternative networks like Ourgoods.org or FEAST (Funding En with Sustainable Tactics). I would use artist collectives or material collectives to get my stuff, and my work models non-capitalist exchange. So mostly what's happened is that I've become more ballsy in that, even more committed, because there are now more that I'm aware of, but it hasn't fundamentally changed my practice because my practice already had a problem with the system.

Maria: I've only ever done art practice for public consumption within a collective. Through Occupy Museums I'm actually being exposed to the art world in a way that's quite amazing, to see how it is structured and how people are asked to exploit themselves and create divide themselves and other artists rather than work collectively because that's where I've come from. So it's interesting to see the competitive, individualistic, and self promotional system that most art is created in.

Blithe: Yeah, I am with Tal, I am really confused. Occupy has changed the framework through how I see everything. When I was in anti-war organizing in 2001, I didn't feel as conflicted about my own practice as I do now. I'm not interested in being in the studio at the moment. When I've tried I've found it extremely dull. I'm just not interested in myself right now (laughs), I keep thinking how much I would be to be teasing out ideas with my new OWS friends. So, that's confusing but it is also awesome. I feel newly politicized in a way that feels right. I am confident in investing in the movement at this moment.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think embedded in your question is a kind of anxiety. Like, are you still working, is your practice suffering from this? I think that as artists we need to give ourselves time and space to stop and slow down. Artists are so obsessed with productivity and fear that if we stop producing we will go extinct. This model is not sustainable.

I believe what we should be asking is how we can support each other outside of a system that keeps us in a capitalist mode of production that holds up the myth of individual genius. Interdependence and mutual aid may not be marketable, but they are far more attractive alternatives to the anxiety of becoming extinct.

Tal: I'd also like to say that inherent in your question is a conversation about authorship. Artists today, inspired by our current system, are extremely competitive with one another, work very hard to get their names out there, in ways that are sometimes not exactly honest.

Max: Or awesome.

Tal: Or awesome. And I think what we as a group are doing personally is to bring the question of authorship to the forefront of our interpersonal relationships. And to examine how those affect our abilities to collaborate as artists, as people, as friends, and I hope we can take that as an opportunity to do the same.

Lauren: I think it's interesting that the question has been perceived or responded to as a sense of working collectively or collaboration. The question wasn't really coming from a place of feeling anxious about authorship, it's more about feeling anxious about what an artist's economy that we participate in, and that level of inequality that Tal was talking about is one that I'm concerned with, along with a concern about how artists are compensated for their work. Much of my practice is about making work that tries to subvert the economic system, using mass-made materials (or those that appear to be) or incorporating materials that challenge the history of painting and that idea of authorship. When I'm incorporating historical or archival information about the history of protests into my work, or critiquing capital and the Elizabethan colonialism work that I've been doing, I'm concerned with questioning the meaning of labor. So, I'm coming at it from a place of "Literally, what does an artist do when we're invited to take part in exhibitions that don't provide for funding, don't provide for travel, don't help install this work, that don't honor the social contract that artists should be compensated for what we do?" I just wanted to clarify the question coming from when I'm asking some of those questions.

Max: Personally, I don't participate in any of those. If they don't pay me I don't show up. Go show in Canada.

Lauren: I was listening to a podcast recently about that ["An evening with W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)" recorded at the New Museum]. The Canadian system has some really interesting ideas, some arts administrators in Canada talking about what's working there. Do you know about that?

Max: I'm Canadian, so yeah. It's where I was trained.

Lauren: Is that something Occupy Museums is talking about as a way to move forward with getting everybody on board with what economy means for all artists?

Max: That's not somewhere we've gone yet. Because again, that seems more reformist.

Blithe: That's something Arts & Labor talks a lot about.

Tal: Blithe and I are members of A&L but we would not be speaking for the group.

Blithe: I would say the short answer to your question is that we have to get organized. We're not going to change these systems c believe we need to to act collectively.

Tal: I think that we have to be organized but we also have to recognize we're not reinventing the wheel, and there are many organ scholars and people who have worked on this issue for decades and we have been in the process for a while now of educating ou

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Lauren Frances Adams is an artist who resides in Baltimore, MD. Her work embraces the expanded notion of painting in its digital contexts. Adams founded Cosign Projects in St. Louis and is a professor at Maryland Institute College of Art. Recent include solo projects in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Cornwall, England, along with residencies at the Skowhegan Scho Sculpture and the Cite Internationale des Arts in Paris, France.

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