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## #Occupy Art

FEATURE

Maja and Reuben Fowkes on the Occupy effect on contemporary art

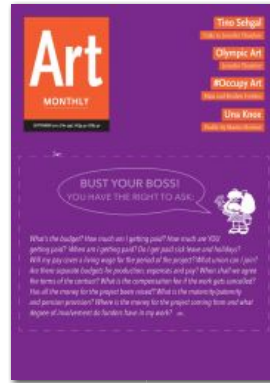
One month into the current edition of Documenta, a young German architect by the name of Alexander Beck carried out a plan to install 28 white tents in front of the Fridericianum, bolstering a small camp of occupiers that had been there since the opening – self-styled as ‘dooccupy’. Erected in guerrilla fashion at sunrise, the simple white structures were adorned with words representing the ‘basic evils’ of modern life, such as greed, profit and pride, in a symbolic protest that strategically appropriated the codes of contemporary art to occupy a prime site on the museum lawn.

Fearing that doubling the size of the protest camp overnight would justify their instant eviction, Beck recounts that the occupiers ‘came to the unanimous decision to declare both parts of the camp, the wild and the well-ordered tent city, a total work of art’. In fact, if anything was going to provoke the authorities into removing the mild-mannered protesters, then it was the pretension of calling their guerrilla action an artwork and thereby trespassing on the aesthetic sanctity of Kassel’s five-yearly survey of contemporary art.

The incongruity of the two adjacent tent villages, one reflecting the image of anarchic creativity associated with global protest movements, the other mimicking the clean and orderly aesthetics of museum modernism, created a disconcerting semiotic spectacle. As a result, susceptible members of the public were at risk of assuming that this prominently sited intervention, incorporating Ida Applebroog-style political slogans and elements of live performance à la Tino Sehgal, was actually part of the official exhibition.

Refusing to rise to the bait of what could be taken as a parody of her curatorial approach, peppered as it is with references to the ideas and aesthetics of the Occupy movement, artistic director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev released a statement the next day ‘welcoming the “dooccupy” movement in Friedrichsplatz’. While acknowledging that the camp ‘continues the wave of democratic protests that have been spreading across many cities in the world’ and ‘appears to be in the spirit of Joseph Beuys’, the diplomatically worded press release goes on to ask the occupiers to ‘care for the square’ and ‘consider the citizens of Kassel’. As the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* put it, this was like a reluctant party host telling uninvited guests to ‘come in, but don’t smash up too much’.

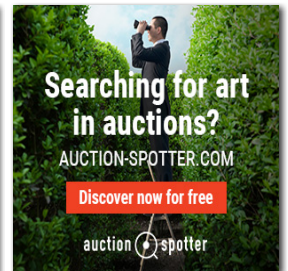
The surprising decision to endorse rather than order the removal of the conceptual campers’ tent village reflected the opportunism of both the protesters and the curatorial team. While the occupiers loudly proclaimed their sympathy for the aims of Documenta 13, using their intervention as a platform for propaganda and self-



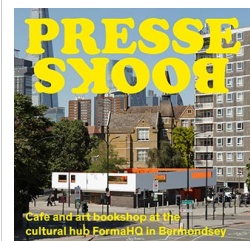
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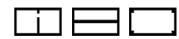
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promotion – but refraining from criticising the institution they were supposedly ‘doccupying’ – Christov-Bakargiev’s instinctive reaction was to co-opt the protest movement in order to bolster the radical credentials of an exhibition that comes over as an undercurated patchwork of progressive and conservative forces.

The Occupy theme is indeed touched on repeatedly in the exhibition, although mostly to create an aesthetic effect and always somewhere on the periphery. While leading light of the movement Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi is hosting four seminars on life after the ‘dissolution of financial capitalism’, these are framed as a sub-section of the educational programme, one of a series of talks held at the Maybe Centre for Conviviality supported by Absolut, with vodka cocktails on hand to take the edge off the radical politics. By contrast, on the list of exhibited artists and with his own tower room in the Fridericianum, post-Adorno philosopher of the autonomy of art Christoph Menke is mounting a more prominent series of seminars that follow the anti-activist line according to which ‘art is the ability to be not able’.

Requisitioning the semantic space of protest for a postmodern art piece, Applebrook herself produced thousands of flyers mocking the sincerity of political action, while hired protesters walk around wearing sandwich boards with slogans ranging from the feminist-surreal ‘Screw Mother’s Day’ to the ironic ‘Occupy Kassel’. Elsewhere a made-to-order artist’s collective, feebly entitled ‘And, And, And’, rehearses the clichés of the protest movement, holding *asambleas* and presenting their programme as a handwritten calendar of notes, but never going beyond vague utopianism let alone addressing the politics of the art event.

The case of the Fridericianum protest camp is illustrative of wider reactions to the Occupy phenomenon in contemporary art. Curators are visibly torn between a desire to embrace the zeitgeist symbolised by popular movements from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street, together with their exciting new tactics of rebellion from the use of social media to the continuous occupation of public space, and wariness of the micro-political implications of the call to ‘occupy everything’ for their own power structures and practices. Looking down from the fortress of the chief gatekeeper of the contemporary canon, it is not surprising that the preferred conduit for dialogue turns out to be the arm’s-length formality of the press release, while the consensual and fluid forms of organisation that are essential to the Occupy movement are an implicit challenge to the quasi-corporate hierarchy of institutions like Documenta.

If 2011 witnessed the euphoric phase of the movements as they burst onto the flat screen of global consciousness, 2012 has seen contemporary art rush to capitalise, with a stream of major art events referencing the Occupy phenomenon both by borrowing its open-source concepts and seeking direct collaborations with social activists. The latter, in turn, have been understandably wary of the motives of art institutions in recruiting them for biennales, with everyone seemingly hyper-aware of the danger that once again the energies of popular revolt will be appropriated by the unwitting agents of cognitive capitalism.

Plugging into the buzz around Occupy, the annual Steirischer Herbst arts festival in Graz opens this month with a 24-hour seven-day marathon camp involving hundreds of artists, activists and theorists who will ‘lecture, perform and play, produce, discuss, collect artistic strategies in politics and political strategies

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in art'. Promising to be 'not just another event about politics, but a political event itself', the organisers claim that 'Truth is Concrete' will also 'investigate its own format and its own everyday decision making'. The activists and artists invited to take part in the marathon camp show signs of resisting the tacit appropriation that is usually accepted as a quid pro quo for the public recognition entailed by inclusion in a major exhibition or biennale. Oliver Ressler, in an exchange with the curators on the festival blog, raises delicate questions about the ethics of expecting cultural workers on 'starvation wages' to in effect financially support the camp by making a loss, warning that the 'underpayment of artists' could become a central issue at the festival.

Echoes of these concerns can also be felt in the activities of the Precarious Workers Brigade, which highlights the increasingly difficult situation facing cultural workers in the UK in the wake of austerity (see their letter in *AM358*). The PWB's focus is on the unfairness of a system that relies on an army of unpaid interns, along with a post-Fordist rump of freelance writers and curators – not to mention artists – whose dematerialised creativity is the surplus labour that translates into profits and a few jobs higher up the chain. With more of a stress on the impact of corporate censorship and political interference on independent cultural producers, the Artleaks collective has organised meetings in Berlin, Moscow and Belgrade and facilitates the outing of cases of injustice in the art world via its website.

What has turned out to be the most radical experiment to date in incorporating occupiers into a mainstream art event was this summer's instantly notorious Berlin Biennale 7 (Reviews *AM357*). True to the motto 'Forget Fear', the 2012 edition opened up to the unpredictability of the Occupy movements, giving over the main space of the KW Institute of Contemporary Art to a vivid recreation of a protest camp, complete with real activists from high-profile anti-austerity groups living on site.

That the curator had less than straightforward motives in inviting the occupiers was immediately suggested by the fact that the floor above was taken up with the work of a conservative sculptor and his project to create the largest statue of Jesus in Poland, while the top floor of the main venue housed a cacophony of video footage of unidentified protests from across the political spectrum, producing aesthetically motivated juxtapositions that annulled the political significance of the movement.

Along with his favourite tactic of placing people of opposing political views in a competitive context, the artist-curator also set about appropriating the new forms of protest in order to produce what was in effect a meta-artwork by Artur Zmijewski. The press conference exemplified his strategy, with journalists and protesters drawn into creating a somewhat farcical simulacrum of an activist General Assembly complete with special hand signals and a 'people's mic', techniques developed by protest movements to encourage horizontal communication.

What turned out to be most interesting about the Berlin Biennale was not its wilful destructiveness but the reaction of the Occupy movements to finding themselves so thoroughly appropriated and their attempt to turn the situation around. Within weeks of the opening, the occupiers began to turn on their hosts and rebel against conditions in the protest camp on the ground floor of the KW, which came to be known as the 'human zoo'. Penned into a

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confined space and observed by the public from a viewing platform, 'Berlin Square' increasingly resembled a social experiment from Zmijewski's own self-consciously exploitative art practice. Noah Fischer from the art-activist group Occupy Museums describes the Biennale at this point as 'a tomb where movements would come to die', commenting that 'rather than occupying, we were being occupied by the institution'.

As the frustrations became intolerable, the activists decided to 'address the power hierarchy of the zoo', attempting to turn the tables on Zmijewski and his co-curator Joanna Warsza, and reappropriate the Berlin Biennale for the movement. Challenging the curators to go further into their stated concept of enabling a situation that they 'don't curate, supervise, or assess', they proposed using the Biennale as 'a platform to apply horizontality, radical transparency and sharing labour', with working groups rather than curators making all budgetary and programming decisions. Although details are hazy as to how far this experiment went in practice beyond agreeing to refer to the curators as 'former-curators', the neo-Maoist implications of such a radical transformation of biennale management could herald the end of the art system as we know it.

Art institutions are indeed finding that it is not so easy to appropriate Occupy as it was previous social movements or, for that matter, rebellious artistic Avant Gardes which historically have been swiftly incorporated into the gallery system. What was notable with the Berlin Biennale was that the curator, in his utter disregard for the interests of the art world, chose to invite hardcore activists who were primarily focused on social and political struggles beyond the frame of contemporary art and who, incidentally, also disapproved of what they saw as attempts by art activists to capitalise in a careerist sense on their participation in Berlin Square. At the same time, without the knowledge and more specific focus of groups such as Occupy Museums from New York, is it unlikely that the issues of art and power raised by the Biennale would have been articulated so effectively.

Occupy Museums grew directly out of the wider Occupy Wall Street movement and continues to flourish in a more dematerialised, post-square era. Its highest profile target has been the Museum of Modern Art: it has protested against MoMA's role as a symbol of the dominance of the interests of the mega-rich and its position at the pinnacle of an art establishment that 'resembles a pyramid scheme just like the banks of Wall Street itself, where wealth and power flow up to the 1%'. Art museums stand accused of acting like 'corrupt ratings agencies', holding shows to inflate the market value of 'flimsy corporate art' that they collect like 'bundles of packaged debt', with personal conflicts of interest between those involved in the non-profit and private sectors an aggravating factor in the spread of art corruption.

Much as the Occupy Museums protests in New York have focused on MoMA, Tate has been a favourite target for art activists in the UK, notably the campaign led by Liberate Tate to force the institution to cut its ties to oil giant BP (Reviews *AM355*). In July 2012, the activists mobilised 100 people to carry a 1.5-tonne wind turbine blade across the Millennium Bridge and deposit it in the Turbine Hall, arguing that the work falls into the legal category of a 'gift to the nation' and must therefore be considered for the Tate Collection. Originating in an art-activist workshop led by John Jordan (Polemic *AM334*), previous Liberate Tate actions have also involved mini oil slicks and dead fish, with the aim of drawing

media

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attention to the way the gallery promotes ‘the burning of fossil fuels by taking the poisoned “gift” of funding from BP’.

Questions could also be raised about, for example, Tate accepting sponsorship for the Damien Hirst show from the Qatari royal family, which also happens to own the artist’s pill cabinet *Lullaby Spring*, bought in 2007 for a then record breaking £9.7m, and would therefore be beneficiaries of any inflation of market value provided by a triple-A rated museum show. What springs to mind is culture secretary Jeremy Hunt’s relativistic answer to a US journalist’s question during the London Olympics about the contradictions of having a fast-food giant as a sponsor, along the lines that you shouldn’t be too harsh on the sponsors because ‘without them this event would not be possible’.

However, times are changing fast and this argument seems less convincing now than ever, with a model of the art world based upon the maintenance of unjust power relations in society appearing increasingly unsustainable. What is remarkable about the Occupy phenomenon in contemporary art is that those who identify with it are not demanding an entrée into the artistic jet set; Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst – who in Michel Houellebecq’s parody of contemporary art *The Map and the Territory* are pictured dividing up the art market – are not their role models. There is a collective sentiment that it is not worth compromising for the sake of sponsorship or keeping quiet in the hope that sooner or later you will be picked up by the system. The ambitions of the art occupiers lie not within existing power structures but rather in creating something new in the spirit of the movement of the 99%. The future shape of an occupied art world, incorporating alternative models of artistic success, freed from the toxic effects of financial speculation and infused with the spirit of horizontal collectivism, is still open for discussion.

Maja and Reuben Fowkes are curators and art historians who work together at [translocal.org](http://translocal.org).

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