



Occupy Museums, part 1

LAUREN FRANCES ADAMS on July 30, 2012 at 7:14 PM

[uds-billboard name="OM1"]*Occupy Museums began in its nascent form in October 2011, in New York, as a united voice with the Occupy Wall Street movement and in response to the culture of injustice and corruption in art institutions. As Occupy Museums states on its website, "Occupy Museums is one small strand of a movement sparked by the failure not only of the American Dream but of the dream for equality and economic justice around the globe."*

I sat down via Skype with four members of Occupy Museums (OM) to discuss the inception and timeline of the movement. We covered several notable actions from the first few months of Occupy Museums, what tactics OM uses in their actions and how the group's internal dialogue is shaping what and how they occupy, as well as how technology and the contemporary view of past resistance movements are changing the discourse of current dialogue and protest organizing. Other topics included the personal views of how each of these members, all artists, have evolving views of their own studio practices in light of the collaborative and provocative public actions that OM elicits.

The following interview was recorded between Lauren Adams in St. Louis, Missouri, and Tal Beery, Max Liboiron, Maria Byck and Blithe Riley in New York on March 22, 2012. The comments reflect the time in which it was recorded. The interview was edited by all members who were present for clarity and brevity and is published in two parts due to its length.

The four interviewees agreed that they would speak individually as members of Occupy Museums.

Lauren: What is Occupy Museums?

Maria: Occupy Museums is a direct action component of the Arts & Culture working group. What we do is look specifically at the problems of economic inequality in the cultural industries. We started out directly confronting the institutions that hold a lot of

power within the cultural industries, and we've started to now not only talk about the problems but also look at what some of the solutions might be. I'd say that in this process, it has become very clear to me that the structures of power within the art world are exact replicas of structures of power within the entire capitalist system. So it's a way for us as artists to really see how the situation that we're in is very similar to the situation that everyone else is in who is struggling with economic inequality.

Lauren: Can you clarify the relationships between those groups and how they came together?

Tal: There are a variety of different group types that exist within Occupy Wall Street. There are working groups and those are perhaps the largest groups within OWS. Within working groups, there are thematic groups, action groups, there are affinity groups, there are a variety of other types of groups. For various reasons, it's a little bit bureaucratic, but originally it formed in that way because of different funding issues and access to funding. So Arts & Labor is a thematic group within Arts & Culture working group, and Occupy Museums would be considered an action group within the A&C working group as well.

Blithe: Initially Arts & Culture was one of the largest working groups, and one of the first that formed in OWS. There were many ideas coming out of Arts & Culture, much more than one group could house, so offshoots formed for specific purposes. Occupy Museums was one of those.

Lauren: What is the timeline of Occupy Museums? I'm interested in how you guys would define early meetings, and a timeline of significant actions. Not necessarily because of press response but because of how the events changed the conversation within your own group.

Blithe: Occupy Museums was initiated through a call to action by one person. That first action was attended by many people, and from that the group formed. In fact as of Day 2 it ceased to be one person, and there was discussion about how to move forward given how the initial call to action took place. It was decided we would meet weekly and operate as an open working group and use the OWS consensus process to structure the group. That was in October, and then from there we started with the goal of doing actions on a weekly basis. For the first three to four weeks it was back to back. We wanted to hit cultural institutions by storm and let people know that Occupy was not contained to Wall Street. For myself, at some point I began to feel that this pace wasn't sustainable, and began advocating for the group to talk about process and how the structure of the group was functioning.

Max: I wasn't here for the first actions, but I was in OWS for the first chunk, and there was a lot of talk in OWS writ large about getting actions out of Zuccotti into other sites and the first Occupy Museums actions fit into that sort of idea. It became something Occupy Museums always did. So now we're trying to refine things, especially the particular types of actions we do, like moving out of the 'human-mic-yelling-and-waving-things' and trying other forms, so that's where we've been developing since December.

Blithe: Another key moment for Occupy Museums was when we teamed up with Teamsters Local 814 in the fight against Sotheby's. At that point the group was under a lot of attack on Occupy Museums by the art press and this helped give us legitimacy. Many OWS groups worked on that campaign (including Arts & Labor). It was an extremely unifying effort. We were able to advocate for something clear and tangible: to end the lockout of 42 art handlers who were working at one of the most profitable centers of the art world. We could easily tie this into MoMA, as there were ties between the two institutions.

Tal: I would say that the collaboration with the Teamsters and our focus on MoMA produced our seminal actions.

Lauren: I've read a few things over the past few weeks about site – the idea that Zuccotti Park in the beginning was an important ground space for people to gather, but how that's changing and the idea of spreading the concept of site is more important in the long run for the movement.

Max: It has always been important for Occupy Museums, more so than for a lot of other groups, to get our stuff out of Zuccotti. In fact, we've never done an action there. We don't meet there.

Blithe: That is true, but while Zuccotti was occupied, we began many of our actions there. We would announce our actions in the park, hold a mini General Assembly, gather people and head to the museums. Especially in the beginning we thought of ourselves as rooted in the park, but spreading OWS seeds all over the city.

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Max: Right, and sometimes we've gone *through* it, but Zuccotti is more like a site to gather people and get them involved as opposed to the site in question. We've always been interested in taking it to the steps of the museum or into the atrium of the museum or into Sotheby's or to whomever's door. We'd prefer to talk to the people who we're critiquing rather than critique them from Zuccotti.

Lauren: It seems like an inherently creative idea to change the forms of expression of protest into actions that resemble what we might call art. What groups that are working in this method that are trying different tactics other than just showing up with signs somewhere?

Max: I don't think we necessarily consider that our form of protest is a form of art. I would buck against that.

Blithe: Some of us feel very strongly that this is not art, and that what we do NOT be framed as such.

Max: Especially since it's part of our critique that art is so easily co-opted, and commodified and appropriated into the system we're protesting. A lot of our stuff is performative, but so are a lot of things that aren't art, like religion, or working, or something like that...

Tal: Protest.

Max: Protest.

Max: We wouldn't want to be identified, especially because we don't have consensus within the group, as doing protest as art, so much as expanding what protest might look like as protesters who happen to be artists.

Maria: I am trying to be very creative so that what I do on the streets and public spaces engages people. A lot of stuff we do is parallel with what is going on throughout the movement, like with the other direct action groups. They've worked with their visual presentation, because they know that's a way of engaging the larger audience. So I think we're all working in a similar format and we're learning from each other. We'll try something and then another group will come in with a banner drop, and we're also learning to collaborate with the other direct groups. They'll show up for our actions with their own signs based on our press release, and so

we continue to kind of build and collaborate together, so we're all pushing each other to be more engaging to the larger audience that we're trying to bring in to the movement. I think for me, and for others, I've realized the traditional protest in many ways begins and ends with the protest. What I'm trying to do is engage people and have them be part of what I do, rather than an audience, and I see that happening with other direct action groups too. So there's direct action, there's a group called the Plus Brigade, Arts + Labor has also started doing direct action out on the streets and bringing a message. Of course this is all in the history or tradition of labor organizing and demonstrating.

One of the reasons I resist calling what I do art, is that art is easily co-opted and in that co-optation it is depoliticized. I want to make sure I'm not put into this safe category as artists doing something arty, because then that's categorizable and it becomes less powerful in its ability to say I'm confronting a system. I'm not trying to build up our artistic practice. I'm here to demonstrate and call attention to mass political change.

Tal: I want to be clear that we're only speaking for Occupy Museums. There are a variety of other groups that are interested in making art and in acting both autonomously and as groups. There's Occupy with Art, there's the Performance Guild, there's the Puppetry Guild and Live Action Painters, the Plus Brigades (these are groups within Arts & Culture that are in fact artists). In many ways I support the tactics, but they're not the tactics Occupy Museums has used in the past.

Max: In fact, there are non-artist groups that do extremely performative stuff like the Fight Back the Bank of America. They set up a performative installation of a living room in a bank, to perform that this is our house: you took our house so now we're gonna live in your bank.

It was brilliant, and it was non-artists, and it was this performative trope. Instead of carrying signs and yelling, this was infiltration and humor. Also, there was the talking squid head at Goldman Sachs, which was one of the best performances I've ever seen, all done by non-artists (*she makes a squid noise*), and it disarmed a lot of the police, which is not something people expected.

(people chuckle)

Well it did— they were laughing and they neglected to arrest people!

(everyone laughs)

So Occupy is starting to pick this up. Egyptian youth have used this as well. If you don't look threatening, if you look silly or harmless, hard for a master narrator to say you're terrorist, basically, because you're wearing a clown suit, or something like that, so it's definitely a general Occupy strategy.

Maria: For me, one problem in the art world I'm trying to address is that art is so professionalized and compartmentalized, and what I want to do is open it up, and that everyone sees they're a part of our culture, they're a part of making art and being creative, it's everybody right, it's not something that needs to be separated out from people's lives.

Lauren: You mentioned Sotheby's and MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) actions. Could you give a brief rundown on what those were and what the outcomes were?

Blithe: Occupy Museums has been to MoMA now three or four times. Not all of us have been to all the actions, so there isn't a unified narrative that we can provide. It's difficult to talk about outcomes because apart from Sotheby's, we have never really had a set of demands. What we did was open up a creative discursive space about the financialization of culture and its impact on people and cities. At the same time, this relatively simple act was met by a lot of resistance. The first day we went to MoMA we were met by a large police presence. The second time we went they had a cage ready to contain us. In that same action, the facilitator made the police negotiate with us using the people's mic. We never went inside the pen. Through the process, the police had to explain to us the law of public space and acknowledge our right to be there. We stayed on the sidewalk and people read their own manifestos— which ranged from everything from poetry, personal statements, Fluxus readings, to dancing and singing an Irish revolutionary song.

Tal: Skipping ahead two actions, I want to add that we also engaged the MoMA's director of security in the people's mic. He expressed that MoMA would not take a stance against Sotheby's, but the people's mic has been a way of involving the folks we've had the most contention with within our process, a great way of including who would otherwise be opposed to our process.

Blithe: We started outside of the MoMA, and we've since gone inside. We should note that at the very first action one of the MoMA directors came outside and asked us what our demands were. One person from the group told them to join our conversation, that we were looking to build a new system. They were invited to join us in envisioning what that system could look like.

Max: And then he left...

(everyone laughs)

Blithe: It was a she.

And its true, we never saw her again.

(laughing)

Max: Want to talk about more about Sotheby's?

Blithe: The first Sotheby's action was in combination with a MoMA action- and it was a freezy cold rainy night. At MoMA, the Teamste explained the connections between Sotheby's and MoMA using the people's mic. We then marched to Sotheby's as a group and joine picket lines. We banged on the steel fences with the Union members next to the inflatable fat cat. At the next action, Occupy Museum rallied people in Zuccotti and joined a mass protest outside the auction house disrupting one of the biggest sales (I believe it was the contemporary art auction). Many OWS groups were there, and activists U-Locked themselves together by the neck as a direct action. it was politicizing for many of us to see such wealthy people cross the pickets without much thought. A few of them even waved to us they were celebrities. It was infuriating. We screamed "SHAME" as they walked by. For me, it was such a clear manifestation of the fa the 1% are far more concerned with profits over people.

Maria: Working with the Teamsters and other groups has become more collaborative. They invited us to an action they wanted to do : MoMA, we said we'd go along. In the end it turns out they wanted us to lead the action. They were familiar with the format of being out and protesting with their traditional means, but actually going in to the museums made some a bit uncomfortable. Another group, the NOVADS, did a banner drop, which Occupy Museums had nothing to do with, then that became the centerpiece of the next action tha did at MoMA.

Max: Because they confiscated the banner.

Lauren: So that was not an Occupy Museums action?

Tal: Look, this is how it's been going. The Teamsters approached Occupy Museums asking if would we help build support for an actio MoMA. Then Occupy Museums puts out a call very clearly stating what we're going to do and why, and then people join and collabora with us however they see fit. We create the structure within which the protest operates. But some folks, like the NOVADS for instance, prepared, smuggled and dropped a banner, from the 5th floor into the atrium. Once it was acquired, confiscated by MoMA, then the collaboration between the NOVADS and Occupy Museums became even stronger and we devised a way for retrieving the banner or making demands on the banner. If MoMA wanted to keep the banner, they would have to, you know. . .

Max: Go through an acquisition process.

Maria: We started playing with format. We would start with just talking with people in the museum about Occupy and Occupy Museum why we were there, very casually, engaging people one on one. We would then do a General Assembly, through the human mic, enga people as a group and then we broke into small groups. So we sat in the big huge atrium at MoMA and people were in groups talking each other about issues of labor rights and museum philanthropy, so that was a format that changed the way people engaged with museums or used the museum space.

Lauren: And so the museum allowed the group to stay multiple times for discussion with patrons?

Blithe: Yeah, I would say that is something to note. We used to show up at the MoMA, and we'd have cops ready to stick us in a cage when we show up, we walk through the front door with banners and agitprops, go upstairs into the main exhibition hall and do a Gene Assembly for over an hour. We leave on our own free will.

Tal: There is definitely an increased security presence, and lately they have been blocking off certain areas so patrons can't view the assembly from above. If they wanna participate, they have to come into general atrium, which is difficult since they stationed security (at all entrances, which happened last time.

One thing I'd like to add is that the reason MoMA is such an important target for us is because of its close relationship with Sotheby's. Right now very clearly represents the great collusions of power in the art world, and how those directly affect art workers and artists. Right see how culture starts to benefit the 1% at the MoMA more than at any other place today. Here we have a non-profit institution and two members of its board are also members of the board at Sotheby's. At Sotheby's their art workers are being locked out from their jobs. Sotheby's is not interested in supporting union labor. Instead they will spend more money on legal fees on the lockout than they will on worker health benefits or their salary increases.

Lauren: Have you been able to talk to anybody at Sotheby's in person? Like people on the board.

Blithe: Well, not as Occupy Museums. I will say that I have heard from ally artists that there has been conversation at the top between directors about how to put pressure on Sotheby's. I know this because I was asked who the people were that the Teamsters wanted to put pressure on. So it hasn't happened directly through us, but we know people are paying attention. You have to remember that there are decent people working inside these institutions that want to do the right thing.

There's a video you can see where the Teamsters confront Sotheby's board member Diana Taylor at a meeting of the Hudson River Park. She says point blank that she will never support the art handlers.

Maria: I actually appreciate you (Lauren) asking if we talked to Sotheby's because it makes me realize we haven't given MoMA an invitation in dialogue with us and it may be something we want to try at some point. It's like, okay, let's set up a meeting to be really clear about what we are and what we'd like. Just an idea.

Lauren: I like the idea that instead of repressing the other side, you allow for a free flow, you model what you want to see them do as well, right? I've heard you guys reference a couple of times in this conversation what you want to build. I know it's so hard to answer what the possibilities are for the future, like the idea that another world is possible, and what the larger OWS is ostensibly fighting for. Within that sphere, I'm an artist, I'm an academic, I'm someone who feels both within and without the system and I have these questions myself that would be a better model for how art institutions operate. Is it really so much that we're calling for 'an art for the 100%,' or is it something about specific things that can be done? In this case of building this possible future that changes the way philanthropy works, changes relationships not just between museums and the public and commons space and the public trust, but also changes how museums operate at the upper level with board members, trustees, funding, etc. What solutions, ideas or actual things could be done to help make changes?

Tal: I think that the very minimum what we are demanding is a very close look at the rules that govern cultural institutions, particularly management, that allow for the collusion of money and power in the arts. At the end of the day, our market is unregulated for many people essentially, and the people who lose out there are the 99%, including artists.

Max: I think the other thing is that while most of our actions before December tended to be about calling institutions out, drawing attention, raising awareness, to these things Tal just brought up. Many people love museums, but they may not understand how they work, what

power structures are. I don't think we're reformists, asking for specific ways for museums to change. Instead we're asking, what sort of possible? And two of the actions we've already done that deal with that, the first is the OM partnership with Occupy 477 and the Museum of American Finance. Where we got the MoAF, through two different actions, to include an artifact built by artists and people in Harlem in their collection.

Blithe: Can you explain what Occupy 477 is?

Max: 477 is a building that is the focus of this action. It is a building that is facing foreclosure in Harlem. It is a coop, mostly black women single moms, and so we partnered with them to build a model of this house and bring it down to the Museum of American Finance and you should include this in your collection, it was made by artists and the members of this house, this apartment, and we want you to include it in your collection. We want to occupy your collection with the full range of what American finance is like for people in New York City. And they really freaked out.

Blithe: They actually closed the museum early when they saw us.

Max: They shut down their museum, basically, with people inside, to keep us outside. And they were obviously quite threatened.

Maria: And there were really only like twelve people, right?

Max: Twelve is generous. There were maybe eight of us, half of us were senior citizens, someone had a baby on their back, it was really scary, we were terrified anyhow.

Lauren: So why were they threatened?

Max: Especially in New York City, the way the media covers Occupy is that wherever occupiers go there is violence, and some people actually suspect the violence comes from Occupiers, but regardless, I think—

Blithe: It comes from the cops.

Max: It comes from the cops, always, so I think they were scared that way, and they were right across from the stock exchange, so they were probably seeing a lot of angry people walking by at different times for different protests.

Blithe: This museum is in the thick of it. It's really close to Zuccotti. It is right on Wall Street.

Max: One of the richest men in the United States is on their board. So then we wrote a letter saying “you probably didn't really mean that you just didn't understand what was going on,” and we sent it to every board member whose address we could get, and everyone in the board and they sent it to their acquisitions and collections committee, and the committee decided to take the model. So then our next action was to bring the object down there, and we brought it down on the day that the people in 477 were in foreclosure court, so it was very symbolic. So one of our actions: it's outside of the art world, it has to do with cultural institutions, and finance, and is dealing with foreclosure and other issues that OWS is looking at, so I think that was one of our most successful actions.

One of the reasons I personally consider the 477 actions successful is because it wasn't addressing the art world per se, but some of the issues that were also part of the Museum of American Finance, that artists dealt with, that people deal with. These things came together in that action. It was a real success, where we did actually engage with the museum on a one on one level, and the CEO was writing us, so that those “the world we want to see” actions that we've already done.

477 was about giving a cultural institution who crafts a master narrative the tools to craft that master narrative differently, more inclusively about awareness, it was about telling that cultural story properly, according to Occupy and others. That wasn't a very public action. It was an awareness action. I just want to clarify that.

Tal: One aspect of the Occupy 477 at the Museum of American Finance was that once the acquisition was approved by the museum, we wrote a letter to the Sotheby's art valuation department to essentially appraise the model of the foreclosed house that we were submitting as a work of art. We are in the process now of being in contact with them and we hope that we get a solid appraisal.

Maria: Because we wanna have a tax write off. *(laughs)*

Max: So do the people who are being foreclosed on in 477 – And keep in mind this model is made of cardboard and hot glue, Occupy

Maria: Cardboard and hot glue!!!

Max: And all of these pictures are on our website.

Maria: And a chronological timeline of all of our actions.

Max: Occupymuseums.org, so you won't have to depend on Google searches of random disparate things.

Part 2 of this interview will be published tomorrow.

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LAUREN FRANCES ADAMS

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

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