

REVOLT™

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ART

Commentary

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Revolution

preoccupied with cooption

BY TAL BEERY

"I think you should leave," she said quietly, shaking her head.

I was expecting her to say that, having heard it so many times before from art-savvy activist friends visiting the "Occupy Biennale," an Occupy movement camp organized by the 7th Berlin Biennial. I was living there for two weeks as one of twelve members of Occupy Museums, an affinity group in Occupy Wall Street combating the corrupting influence of finance on culture. Our actions in major institutions and journalists' stormy love affair with OWS had got us lots of press that winter, and so, our plane tickets to Berlin, purchased by the curators of a fancy European art show.

They had invited us and other Occupy groups to use the cavernous ground floor of their KW Institute for Contemporary Art as a living and organizing venue. What resulted was a shocking cacophony of canvas tents, overlapping stencils, random political slogans, banners galore, lists and so many leaflets: an Occupy theme park. Although interesting lectures and discussions were held, architecturally, it was a sunken pit, a fishbowl. Visitors – many of them art world aristocrats – stood on an elevated viewing platform to observe occupiers go about their activism. We called it "The Human Zoo." It reduced our activism to some punk protest fashion; here, urgent action was just an aesthetic, marginalized and cheapened.

The setting was further complicated by a curatorial frame based on head curator Artur Zmijewski's desire to display only effective political action, and not "art" per se. Despite this aim, it seemed to be a venue for the passive contemplation of the active aesthetic. Zmijewski, an internationally renowned artist in his own right, has a reputation for using people as marionettes and creating ethically and politically ambiguous scenarios. It seemed we agreed unwittingly to play a role in his latest piece, an Occupy time capsule and tomb that historicized and deactivated the movement. Checkmate: we were coopted.

At least, this is how it appeared to some visitors, and especially to the many critics who published vitriolic denouncements of the show. As I experienced it,

Occupy Museums saw things differently. Focused on the opportunities available to us, we embarked on a fascinating and ambitious project to coopt the BB7 instead, to use its influence and resources to promote our vision of a more just culture. Taken together, our actions there offer a set of tactics that activists in the art world can use to assert influence when working with or within institutions.

From its first days, OWS sought to inspire a cultural shift. The urgency of its message combined with the aesthetic consistency of its tactics – including cardboard signs, camping tents, the human microphone, and hand signals for the consensus process – popularized the movement and helped it spread to almost every major city in the United States and Europe. Many arts and culture groups quickly formed within OWS, each with distinct goals and methods – from puppetry and performance to research and posters. Occupy process in itself was artful, and in OWS, art became a hammer for fixing

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the world. Artists also flocked to OWS to address unethical trends affecting the New York art world. Today the 1% manipulate and leverage culture, and art is just another way the rich get richer: a tax shelter, a good investment. Wealthy board members openly abuse positions at publicly funded museums to boost the values of private holdings. Auction houses report record profits while denying workers basic benefits. Hoards of young artists arrive in New York with massive student debt to find few opportunities for employment. OWS connected between art world

trends and those affecting other sectors, effectively plugging art into a broader context. And, yet again, art was being summoned in its effective mode, in service of the social good.

The art world, ironically, loves that stuff. While some art professionals were sympathetic to our claims, still more were excited by OWS's timeliness, by how "contemporary" and "edgy" it was. Soon OWS arts groups like ours began receiving invitations to lecture and exhibit.

With activists working within their frame, an institution can appear hip, democratic, or even radical without taking any significant steps toward change, neutralizing the threat a message poses. This is the traditional path to cooption and when we were invited to the Berlin Biennial (BB7), we were preoccupied with this possibility. Until then, Occupy Museums had been an outsider, occupying institutions with general assemblies and demonstrations; accepting this invitation would be our first time sanctioned by a potential target. But accepting it also meant that we could meet with Occupy activists from throughout Europe, learn about German arts funding models, and experiment with new tactics. Refusing the invitation may not have registered as a meaningful public statement. We decided to use the opportunity to explore alternative visions for museums that could further the interests of the 99%.

Early conversations with BB7's associate curator Joanna Warsza made that seem easy. Warsza assured us that they would provide a platform to strengthen our message and promote eye-level interactions with the public. We (perhaps naively) even wrote a proposal for an experimental museum of the future. But on arrival, we felt duped. The occupiers who had been organizing the space over the previous eight weeks didn't fully appreciate the complexity of their predicament and engineered an environment that could never contend with the objectifying gaze of the average art world spectator. In there we were confined to a context that didn't work for us. Since we were already there we could either quit or fight back – so why quit? As I saw it, on that first day the goal became clear: we would need to quickly claim our agency in our relationship with

this institution.

In light of this, Occupy Museums first focused on external targets with our new European partners. That way we could physically leave the exhibition's frame and engage with the world as an international group of Occupy activists, doing what we do best, in the streets. We connected with European art world activists and exchanged notes. We limited our presence at the KW to the occasional banner inviting the public to actions and planning meetings in the courtyard. Our action at Deutsche Bank's Deutsche Guggenheim denounced the world's largest corporate art collection and the many ways the bank invests in work and then artificially inflates its price, doling prizes and exhibitions to appreciate the value of its holdings. We impersonated a student group and held a ceremony on the altar at the Pergamon Museum, calling attention to the troubling history of colonialism and war that resulted in Germany's acquisition of antiquities. Each action seemed to end in a long negotiation with German police.

In just two weeks we did six such actions, thanks in large part to our amazing new partners from Spain and Germany. The KW courtyard was our base of operations. We began to see these actions as a way of challenging the curator's apparent neutrality, and we invited Zmijewski to participate in our actions and take an explicit stance in his official capacity in support of our message. To our surprise, he showed up, actively participated in discussions and helped document the actions.

Over time we learned to turn our attention inward and put pressure on the institution from within. We organized a meeting with all the staff where workers could openly or anonymously share their grievances. The crowded discussion exposed below minimum-wage salaries of some staff and we examined the budget to determine equitable pay demands. Structural and staffing issues were raised in their first open, horizontal meeting, facilitated by members of Occupy Museums. As a result, guards working the next biennial will be paid two Euros more per hour than they were at this one, a 33% raise.

Inspired by our meeting with the KW staff, we published a proposal to the curators calling for the BB7 and the KW to adopt a horizontal, non-hierarchical organizational structure. Since a democratic culture needs democratic cultural institutions, the curators and the director would be replaced by working groups operating within an Occupy-inspired consensus-based approach. Zmijewski himself seemed bored of the Occupy encampment, with its fairly obvious hypocrisy, and he became a kind of collaborator. After a short negotiation, we consensed on the proposal and moved forward immediately, organizing assemblies and working groups. We wrote joint press releases and used the BB7's website and press contacts. We met regularly with staff to aid the transition. For the next two weeks, the BB7 was occupied. The process to a full structural transition needed more time than that, but this period allowed us to experiment with new tactics to challenge the corporate logic of cultural institutions.

And yet, although we produced some meaningful actions and learned new techniques, some still claim we were coopted and that our involvement in the BB7 was damaging to the movement.

The short-term implementation of a horizontal structure at the KW could have been merely aesthetic, a parody of the goal and discredited the process more than supported it. Even the unfinished nature of this process could support a narrative that discredits collectivist movements. By failing to transition fully to a non-hierarchical structure, the process could stoke concerns that it is inherently impossible or unrealistic. Perhaps also the gaze of the spectator in any exhibition context objectifies the movement and those who claim to represent it, separating the viewer from the viewed and alienating the observer from the active function of the object. In the gallery, the urgency of a political message can be lost to quiet contemplation, stripped of its contemporary context, sentimentalized and belittled.

This specter of cooption, an obstacle for our

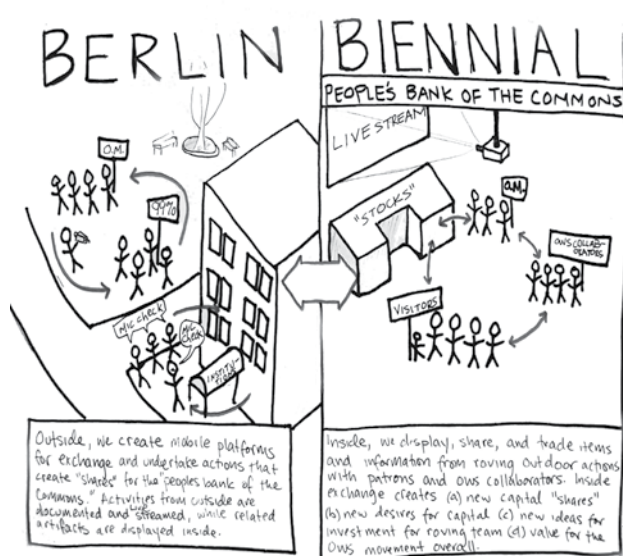


Illustration by Tal Beery

message, also posed a significant internal challenge. Some members were worried that our positions as activists would further our careers as artists – in effect we would be using a public movement for private gain – enacting what we supposedly critiqued. Since many artists in the United States struggle to make art and live in a system pumped on competition, relationships within the art world become primarily instrumental. Art world activists in OWS strove to be a bit more honest than that, and some thought we should fight for political goals first. While critiquing those people artists traditionally want to impress, suspicions of impure motivations influenced our working relationships, and drove wedges between us.

These critiques of our work in Berlin make it seem that the primary impetus for the BB7, in search of Zmijewski's "applied social arts," is right on. The art object today is, more often than not, passive in its relationship to the spectator, who consumes what he wants and goes home to Facebook. Even pieces that are relational or socially engaged are framed within some notion of "art experience" and are sectioned off. A recent Occupy Arts and Labor slogan, "Art Killed My Dreams," seems entirely absurd because today, art itself struggles to do anything at all. Art here is hardly defined as some display of

human creativity, but by its relationship to the "art world," the mess of professionals and institutions paid by the "art market." When defined this way, art can barely perform an activist function. Despite similarities in method and content, urgent political messages by artists are commonly neutralized and then consumed by a market-driven cultural industry. Zmijewski's vision for the BB7 promoted a contrary notion of art as activism, as socially engaged and politically effective. According to him, the real art happened for instance, outside the Pergamon Museum in our prolonged negotiation with the police, or in our tense negotiation to secure more budget transparency at the KW. In a moment filled with potential, the resolution was always unclear and always inevitable.

It would seem that what Zmijewski wanted to see at the BB7 was real change happening now, on a structural level, in honest service to some vision of a better world. To argue with this idea is to start down the terribly tedious path of "What is Art?" which also misses the point. As I see it, Zmijewski recognizes that the arts can develop a vital toolset. Climate change, economic collapse, etc. etc. etc., the Polar Bears – either we make drastic change now or change happens upon us much worse a little later. The arts can fight for human survival.

With their resources and influence, institutions can be involved in exploring and implementing structural change. Institutions are crucial allies, and activists can coopt them. We can work within institutions to expose boundaries and frames, and invite those in powerful roles to participate directly in actions and dialogue when it suits movement goals. Activists within arts institutions should negotiate their terms of agreement to push the tacit approval implied by an invitation towards explicit support, either in public statements or in resource sharing. When making requests, a rejection can help identify an institution's political stance. Recording and publicizing responses can encourage open dialogue and expose the limitations and pressures of our current system. The gallery's aestheticizing influence can undermine urgent speech, but effective tactics can be developed to subvert the role of the exhibition hall and use it to invite and mobilize the public to join actions outside its walls.

The fear of cooption should never justify inaction and we must work within and outside institutions to weaken the role of the market in the arts and in our culture. In Occupy Museums, I believe we self-consciously do activism within the art world, and not "art" (so defined) within the activism world, but these distinctions should be examined, tested, and sometimes pushed. We should encourage a democratic culture by demanding democratically managed cultural institutions. In an age of overwhelming market dominance, we must ask whether and how our culture reflects and is limited by capitalist ideologies. Institutions can be openly involved in these conversations, and the activist situated within or employed by them has opportunities to expose what someone outside does not. We can be forward thinking and adaptive. Let's make every mistake and move forward together.