

REVOLT™

magazine

volume 1 issue no. 3

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Photo by Scotto Mycklebust, Occupy Museum, Berlin Biennale, KM Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, June 2012

OCCUPY Berlin

OCCUPY MUSEUM MOVEMENT

BY LENA VAZIFDAR

On a once abandoned Bushwick, Brooklyn street corner filled with empty warehouses, an artist enclave is emerging. New York City's art scene is undergoing a transformation and Bushwick's burgeoning art scene is one to watch with events such as Bushwick Open Studios and galleries, bars and restaurants popping up in once barren alleyways. The hip-factor of the hood is growing, but it still remains gritty. Some would call it a current New York hot spot but there are still remnants to its past and much to be discovered. Compared to Williamsburg, Brooklyn's self-proclaimed hippest enclave, Bushwick could be considered its less developed sibling.

Off of Bushwick's Morgan stop is Momenta Art, where the Occupy Museums group has taken over shop for a month. The clean, urban loft space is a fitting scene for a group well known for its anti-establishment motif.

Momenta, which is an artist run institution that promotes the work of emerging and underrepresented artists, approached Occupy Museums to work on a project with them. Now OM has been exhibiting at Momenta Art this past month

and opening dialogue to those that want to come in and discuss the latest happenings in the movement.

Inside the stark white room hangs a life-size piñata of New York's Mayor Bloomberg. The walls are covered with ideas examining debt and broken economies. One wall, covered with cardboard pieces invites individuals to write the amount of debt they are in and showcase it to the world, or at least to anyone who's at Momenta that day. I grabbed a felt marker, wrote out mine, and taped it to the wall. The numbers stared back at me appearing even larger than I hoped when written with the hand that owes it. My stomach dropped.

The Occupy Museum movement emerged from the Occupy Wallstreet movement and is founded on the ideology that the disparity between America's 1 percent and the 99 percent is too large a margin. Occupy Wallstreet's slogan, "We are the 99 percent" is very much what Occupy Museums remains about and the group is made up of a bunch of passionate artists who are fighting for equality within the art world and against the elitism that seemingly comes hand in hand with museums.

I interviewed some of the group last spring to find out about the movement and their beliefs. What I found back then was a group of well meaning, never-say-die spirited individuals. However, at the same time, they were disjointed and didn't seem to have a group consensus towards any sort of plan to make their goals move forward, rather it seemed, they made a lot of noise and gained attention during protests at museums like MoMa and big art events like the Whitney Biennial.

When I spoke to them under the ominous, albeit comical, shadow of Mayor Bloomberg's piñata at Momenta, the group seemed a little less disjointed, a bit more realistic and more ready to speak about the bigger picture of the Occupy Museum movement. The group recently went to Berlin to participate in the Berlin Biennial, where the curators themselves invited the group to come, tickets paid—a testament to the fact that perhaps they are making waves in the art community.

Even still, the group mentioned that the invitation itself somewhat went against what they believe in as a group. "When we were confronted by the offer it was a challenge to decide if it was a good

or bad thing. In fact it made us a little nervous and we spoke with the curators a lot until we decided it was an interesting challenge,” says Tal Berry, an OM member. “Our hope was to somehow use the opportunity to learn and to connect to other people and other activists around the world.”

At the Biennial the group participated in a number of events and the Biennial as a whole was focused on political action.

“They said we aren’t interested in how the art looks but how the art does,” added Tal about the Biennial.

In Berlin, the group focused on a number of different actions including a ceremony at the Pergamon Altar—a giant relief sculpture from Ancient Greece. The group says on their website that the altar is a representation of power for the USSR and Germany and symbolizes the displacement of culture by the elite.

The Pergamon Altar action has obvious theatrical elements behind it, and at first glance is somewhat confusing to what the purpose actually was. To gain attention? To act as artists in some sort of a live performance? Perhaps. And perhaps it didn’t change much or bring them closer to any sort of goal, but it most definitely gained attention. Occupy Museum’s website says about the Pergamon altar, “We are here to question and confront the issue of colonization and misappropriation of art and cultural heritage. We stand in solidarity with the Turkish population in Berlin suffering from gentrification.

We will use the altar to bless victory for horizontality, sharing, and non-ownership.”

They also continued to do actions at Deuche Bank and Deuche Guggeheim. For the group, Berlin changed things and interplayed the dynamic and hesitance they already have working hand in hand with institutions and museums, when they inherently believe they are the ones doing wrong. Noah Fischer, another OM member, often credited for being the ringleader of the group said, “Berlin was a big experience for us and to take the idea of working with an institution—that ice was broken.”

As an imported American Occupy Wallstreet group taking action in Berlin, there was much pressure towards the group and what they were fighting for, especially since the Occupy Wallstreet movement was one that was heard worldwide and had gained widespread international media attention. Though there were a number of groups in attendance at Berlin, for Occupy Museum the experience was an opportunity to have a global reach. It was also an interesting experience for the group to bring forth their views on the disparity of the 99 percent and the 1 percent on a global scale, not just America. For maybe the first time the group truly had an international audience, showcasing that it isn’t just an American problem but one that is widespread.

Working with an institution in Berlin became a platform for working hand-in-hand with Momenta. “One of the things working with Momenta is that we are still feeling out what are the boundaries.

Where does Momenta end and where does occupy begin? Are we holding hands? Or are they giving us a platform,” said Imani Brown, another OM member.

After Occupy Wallstreet, Momenta approached Occupy Museums, even before they left for Berlin. In return, Occupy Museums was able to utilize Momenta’s Bushwick gallery space to have discussions, and spin off their eclectic interactive exhibits on the walls.

What are the next steps for Occupy Museums? It’s hard to say as the group members themselves seem to be trying to figure that out. Momenta is a turning point for the group and pushing them to discuss the goals ahead and educate the public about what they are fighting for in a non alienating setting. At Momenta OM also hosts events where people can join and further the conversation of what it means to be a part of the 99 percent and fight against hierarchical systems in the art world—a fight the group is finding out, is tough to crack.

What is beautiful and harmonious about Occupy Museum is their solidarity and spirit—one that proves apathy doesn’t necessarily have to be a characteristic of our generation. The movement gives those involved a reason to stop being complacent and be a part of something bigger. OM is constantly asking questions that may never truly be answered with clarity, but they are always discussed. Everyday passed and every new action, the group is raising awareness and showing New York and beyond that some things are worth fighting for.



Photo by Scotto Mycklebust, Occupy Museum, Berlin Biennale demonstration at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, June 2012

OCCUPY BERLIN

PHOTOS BY SCOTTO MYCKLEBUST



the berlin biennale



