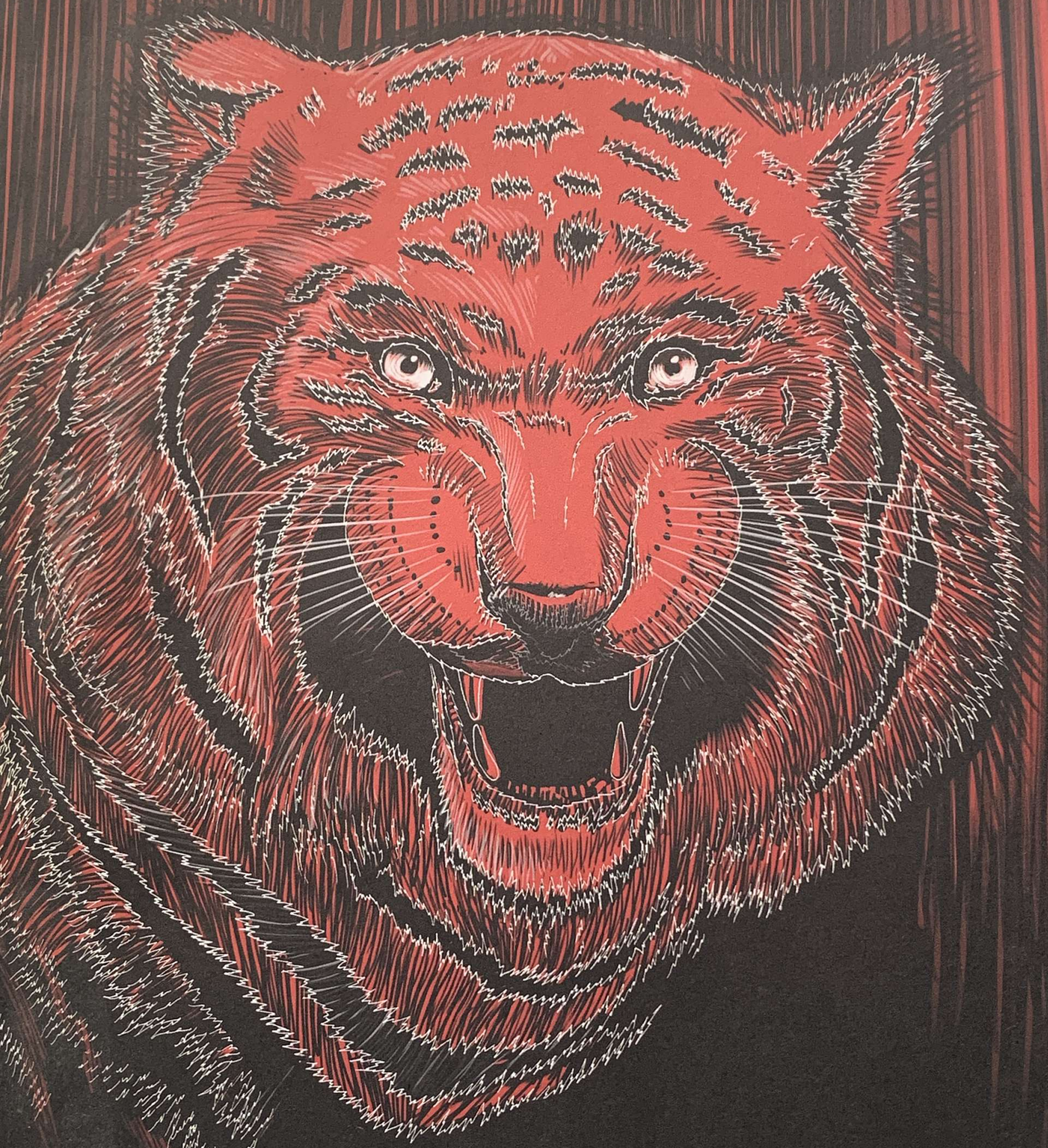


krytyka
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GLOBAL ACTIVISM





"A LARGE COLLECTION OF SMALL WINS"

A conversation with Tal Beery, an artist and activist who has been involved in Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Museums, an OWS offshoot.

Krytyka Polityczna: The exhibition *global aCTIVISM* is exploring the overlapping dimensions of art and activism. How is art related to political activism in your own biography?

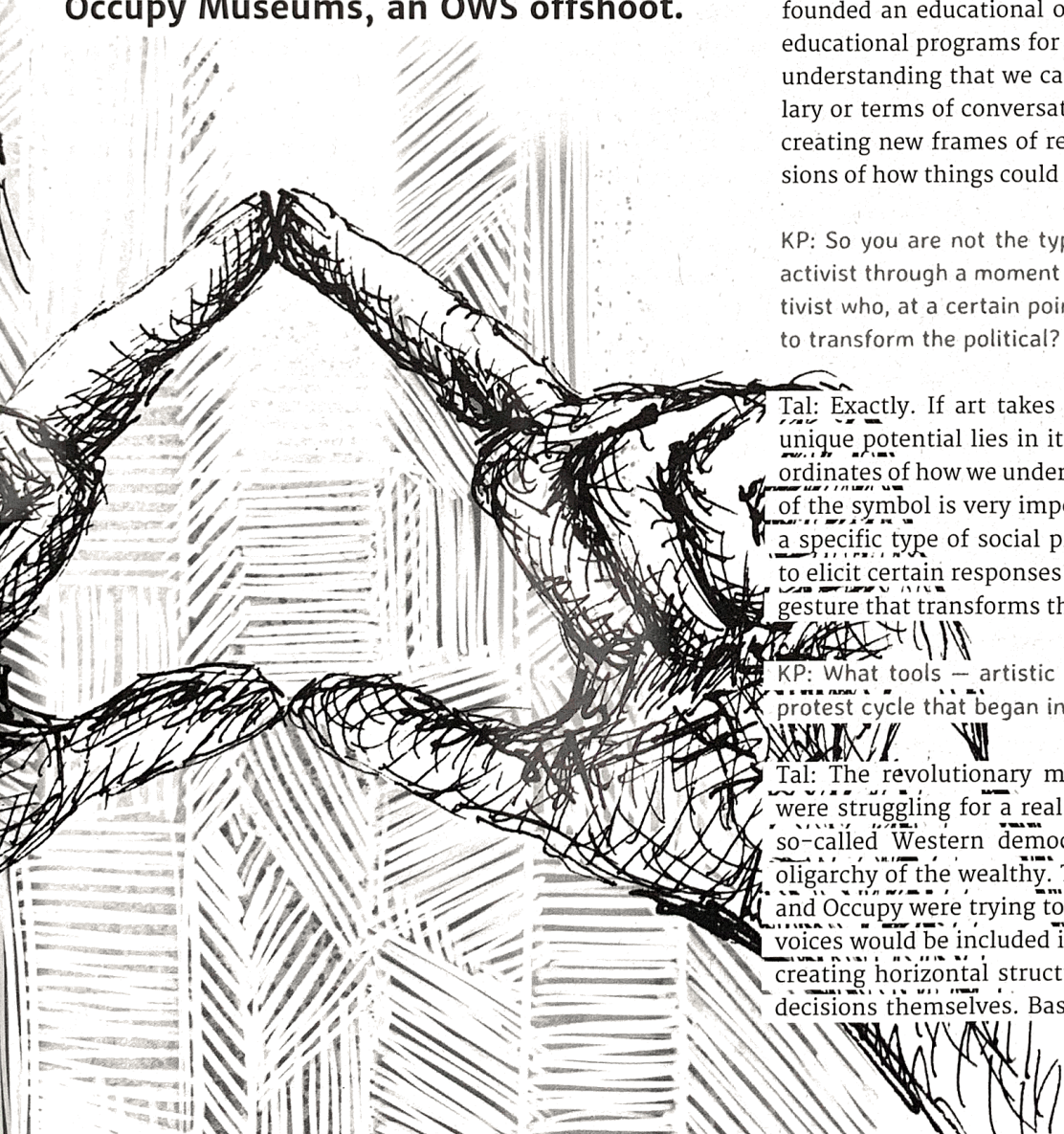
Tal Beery: I came into activism and art through pedagogy. A few years ago, I was living in a commune and together we founded an educational organization that ran democratic educational programs for youth. I came to art through the understanding that we can change the very basic vocabulary or terms of conversations that youth were having. By creating new frames of reference, we could give them visions of how things could be.

KP: So you are not the type of art-activist that became an activist through a moment of political awakening, but an activist who, at a certain point, discovered the potential of art to transform the political?

Tal: Exactly. If art takes the form of a political tool, its unique potential lies in its power to change the basic coordinates of how we understand our environment. The role of the symbol is very important. Art as a tool can produce a specific type of social practice, a politically engaged art to elicit certain responses from other people, or an artistic gesture that transforms the setting of a conversation.

KP: What tools — artistic or not — characterize the global protest cycle that began in 2011?

Tal: The revolutionary movements that erupted in 2011 were struggling for a real democracy, at a time when the so-called Western democracies are trending toward an oligarchy of the wealthy. The Arab Spring, the Indignados and Occupy were trying to imagine a future when people's voices would be included in decision-making processes by creating horizontal structures where they would take the decisions themselves. Based on his very general idea, the



movements of the squares became a huge ground for experimentation with new democratic aesthetics. All sorts of gestures and environments were created, and activists made various other aesthetic choices to symbolize and facilitate their processes. We took many different tools from other movements, which helped us to make decisions by consensus and really get to a place of direct democracy. For Occupy Wall Street it was the cardboard signs, the hand signals, and the tents became symbols for a radical politics. What excited me most was that everybody took very seriously the notion that if we want to change something in outside we have to change our own interactions. An autocratic or profit-driven movement for real democracy is a contradiction in terms.

KP: How can art be an effective tool for a movement that mainly promotes a practical critique of representative democracy and global capitalism?

Tal: Capitalism and global finances are mirrored in the sphere of art and culture. When I was working with Occupy Museums, we took the fight to the museums to illustrate that capitalism is very much present in our culture and our cultural institutions. It was a good move because it really caught people's attention.

KP: Occupying a museum is a more violent act than changing it from the inside. Nevertheless, it is not easy to transform an institution without interacting with it.

Tal: This is why we have to focus on transforming these symbolic institutions, to show that it is possible to build institutions that are organized democratically, even horizontally. In our Winter Camp project at the CCA Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, we are currently developing the tools for institutional transformation. I don't think we had those tools during Occupy. We have neglected to consider ways to interface with and transform institutions that already exist.

KP: Which tools proved effective to transform an institution?

Tal: The tools for institutional transformation come from experimentation and need constantly to be refined. We are learning to take the time to investigate the complex systems that define each institution's operations, and to develop a unique strategy for each case. We realized that have more agency when presenting ourselves as an institution based on revolutionary values instead of as a collection of individuals. These collaborations, between conventional institutions and radical ones, inevitably result in a conflict of institutional cultures, which becomes visible in contract negotiations, mutual expectations, meeting agendas and aesthetics. But these conflicts can be productive; they are

opportunities for creativity. Occupy Museums has used a variety of tactics over the last two years. In the broadest terms, the tactics come down to a sort of hacking — how we can manipulate institutional logic to use the resources and influence of conventional institutions and further a truly radical agenda. We must clearly identify our options. For instance, when we negotiate a contract, we can challenge the notion of exclusive rights of image reproduction, or the authorship of the artist; we can find ways how to channel money to radical political organizations; or try to link our creative projects to ongoing political struggles and generate more press attention for the cause which is basically the questions if we can use the visibility of the arts to enact real political change.

KP: Transforming existing institutions is only one part of the revolution business. One of Occupy's main concerns was to build new social infrastructures that open up an alternative space of society.

Tal: Transforming institutions and creating new revolutionary structures are equally important. Occupy Wall Street actually focused on the latter. An excellent example for this was when Hurricane Sandy struck in New York in October 2012, where the movement reacted immediately with a tremendous effort for a hurricane relief. This really showed people that we could start doing deep transformative work on the ground without getting the kind of media support we were getting in Zucotti Park.

KP: How did the movement organize an action of this dimension?

Tal: Occupy Sandy was a major grassroots disaster relief operation. As soon as "Superstorm Sandy" hit New York City, the Occupy networks were activated to share information about safety and the progress of the storm. It started as #occupysandy on Twitter, which helped to organize information about volunteering and relief operations in the wake of the storm. When it became clear that government disaster relief operations would not be available or effective for far too long, Occupy Sandy started to organize donations of actual goods — food, blankets, shelter, clothes, and more — in the communities hardest hit by the storm. About a week after the storm, the movement organized tens of thousands of volunteers and a number of storage facilities. Volunteers would come in and out of the major relief hubs assigned with specific tasks. They helped in everything from mold remediation, feeding and caring for the elderly, general clean up, legal services and so on — everything the government should have provided but didn't. These were neighbors helping neighbors — an entire relief response based on solidarity — it was beautiful. Alongside the relief effort, Occupy Sandy activists worked

→ “A large collection of small wins”

with neighborhood residents to organize against disaster capitalist responses, and instead to use the destruction as an opportunity for building more stable, resilient, and supportive communities. The Sandy operation was a result of the networks built during Occupy Wall Street, and Occupy Sandy itself resulted in a broadening of those networks to include even more opportunities for resistance and political organizing.

KP: What is global solidarity: a power effect, a strategy or a political ideology? Why do we need solidarity?

Tal: Apart from the solidarity structures on the local level I just mentioned, global solidarity is important because many of our problems are global. When we were in Zuccotti Park, it was really energizing to attend a general assembly and to meet people from Germany, Turkey or India who came to support the process. On one level, you can describe it as the gaze of the supportive Other, when somebody from outside your community is recognizing the important work you are doing in your community. In this respect, global solidarity is an extremely energizing power.

KP: Globality is nothing you can see. It is a question of “knowledge”, and created through political agendas and social practices of people connecting each other.

Tal: I agree. This is why the experience of Zuccotti Park was crucial for many people: You meet people from different countries who are confronted with similar problems at home. And all of a sudden you realize that the struggle you are experiencing on the local level is so deeply linked to other struggles on the planet. The struggle is truly global, albeit with many local differences.

This is the other — somehow darker — side of the coin: Global capitalism is a homogenizing force that affects us all, in one way or another. There are powerful economic institutions that substantially change the political structures and economies of entire societies. This is why we have to react on a global level, too. Moreover, the current form of imperialism is far more pernicious than it has ever been. Billions of people worldwide are suffering because of this. It is a very sad development.

KP: Acknowledging the fact that measuring the success or failure of a social movement somehow misses the point, what were the achievements of Occupy Wall Street since 2011? Did the world change?

Tal: I’m afraid I have a rather depressing answer. The world got worse and it got better in the last three years. It got better because we had this moment of democratic awakening that is still scaring the 1%. Also, there are so many connections we have made through these movements.

A vast network of activists has been established since 2011, which connects many different political groups, organizations and independent activists. Moreover, Occupy Wall Street has been inspiring a lot of people who were not politically active before.

KP: That doesn’t sound depressing at all.

Tal: Well, on the other hand, the world did get a little worse. Real change will only happen slowly. If you look across the board at some recent successes in the U.S. that we did achieve, I think we’re doing very well. For example, we stopped many major pipeline projects in the US like Keystone XL and Enbridge...for now. These were real successes on the ground — a large collection of small wins. But in terms of the national and global level, we haven’t seen much change in our economic system. We were hoping to see that at least some of the bankers who drove us into the bailout and took down the economy were held accountable; that politics would be less dependent on the decisions of the wealthy; and that our political system would become a little more democratic. But it did not happen. The policies that nearly dragged us into a global economic catastrophe are carried on, including all the negative effects they have on people’s living conditions.

KP: Are you currently planning actions or preparing events?

Tal: The movement is still very active, and I can only mention a fraction of the activities that are currently organized. For example, we, as Occupy Museums, have launched the DebtFair, a series of experimental market-actions meant to turn commercial art fairs and auctions like Frieze New York and Sotheby’s on their heads.

A friend from Occupy is working on The Wildfire Project which trains, supports, and networks grassroots groups to help build a broad movement for political, economic, and ecological justice. Using democratic, experiential methods, it fuses political education, skills training, group development, and direct organizing support.

Arts and Labor is an Occupy working group that explores new methods of sustaining the livelihood of artists, art-workers, and other low-income populations. They research ways how ideas — like the commons and solidarity economies — can nurture more sustainable art worlds and encourage relationships based on mutual aid rather than competition.