

The Occupied Museum

Noah Fischer

With comments by Artur Żmijewski

This text is informed by individual and collective practice— particularly since the Occupy Wall Street Movement of September 2011. I hope its assumed that the groups discussed here: Occupy Museums, Horizontal BB7, Debtfair, Winter Holiday Camp, and Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F) contain divergent views. Here I share my pathways with them and through them, and my vision of our horizon.



Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F): March 2014 action: “Rebranding Guggenheim” with OWS illuminator. Photo: Noah Fischer/ Winter Holiday Camp: members and staff with “Diplomas.” Photo: Gabriello Csozso

What happens when a political art practice collides with a global movement? My answer is Occupy Museums, initiated in the most optimistic moment of Liberty Square and still developing as a movement-affiliated practice long after the tents were banished from public space. Like the OWS movement in general, Occupy Museums (OM) challenges the structures and languages of economic inequality in a highly visible cultural arena. This depends on rewiring embedded social assumptions such as contemporary art’s default to luxury asset and a widespread obedience to the professional aura of Neoliberal institutions. OM is therefore a march from the conventions of the artworld toward a revolutionary mode. Yet conversely, we’ve sometimes managed to complicate and refine OWS-style protest aesthetics and tactics to an art form.

But who is this “we”, and what does it mean to be “movement affiliated?” In my view, it’s something like holding a dual citizenship. Despite the well-known breakdowns and failures of the Occupy Movement, there exists a large post-Occupy community which has reached a perspective from which we cannot so easily re-integrate into normative post-crash Capitalism. So almost by default we’ve become an entity: self-imposed outcasts perhaps, but with a clear mission and some resources. OM has been busy developing new dimensions of this mission, burrowing deeper into the artworld through a series of collaborative “cases” and picking up actors as we go: blossoming into an international network which can access many levels art world power. As an international group, we constantly research new campaigns, waiting for the right moment to meet up offline and catalyze live situations with new tactics, risk and in the flesh. Our strength lies in motliness: we are famous and unknown artists, museum guards who paint and sculpt, academics, wierdos, curators, lawyers, parents, debtors, but most of all, people claiming a personal stake in changing the status quo. Desperation is not unknown to us. In truth, we vibrate with anxiety. However, we found a way to channel anger and fear into nonviolent and thrilling action. Into functional politics. Gradually we discovered many resources within our loose network. We discovered joy in the craft of beautiful actions, so that our practice even appeared with the urgency of a high-energy art movement that seemed no longer possible in this stale market-friendly era. But more than a movement perhaps, we are holding up a territory, temporarily re-offering or unveil-



Museums under construction: Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, David H. Koch Plaza at the Met, Photo: <http://www.guggenheim.org/abu-dhabi>

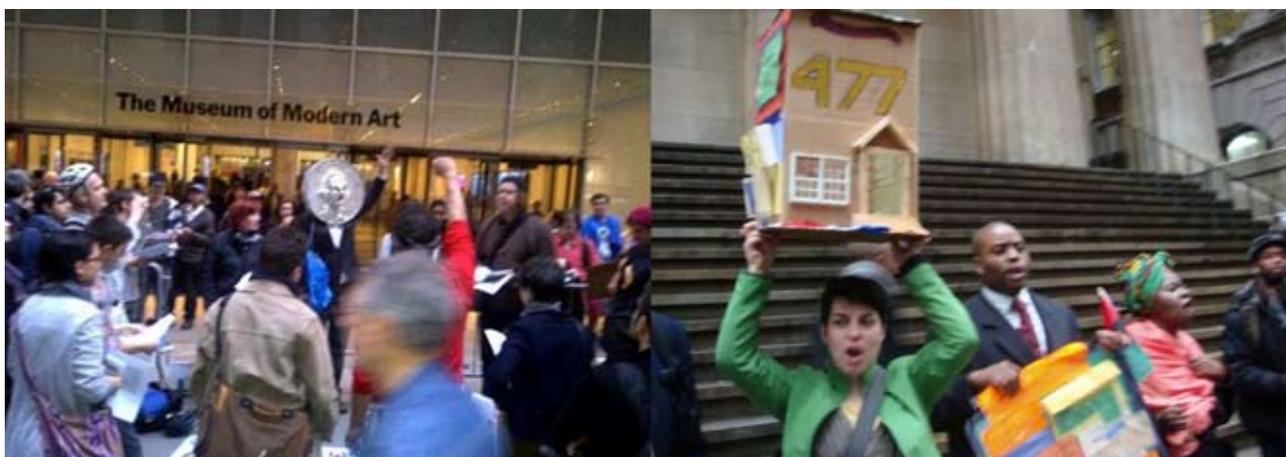
ing the public space covered over by the private sphere. And finally, I realized that our post-occupy network in its energetic visual pulsing and dense communication structure and collective memory had become a sort of machine for propagating a new culture. So I propose to think of this entity not as a protest called “Occupy Museums” but as an institution: the Occupied Museum.

Museums are like canaries singing: our culture is in crisis! It's troubling to realize that art museums, among all the Neoliberal institutions have proven especially adept at veiling and normalizing economic social and environmental injustice.

The Occupied Museum

The Occupied Museum unveils this incredible obscenity as blockbuster exhibition. It exhibits the private dividing lines that permeate the faux-public space of Neoliberal institutions. From this mission flow art forms: the spontaneously unfolding performances, epic disruptions, scripted press interactions, illuminated facade projections, community agreements, collective sculpture, painting, and writing. The Occupied Museum understands art in the age of a world-widening economic gulf as necessarily the outcome of conflict. It exhibits and records the creative clash between visible and hidden populations and between visible and invisible art histories.

The Occupied Museum owes only one thing to the public: departure from the display of Capitalist business-as-usual. Sometimes the most important exhibitions are intricate, aggravating horizontal group processes which explore the potential democratic (crowd-expressing) functioning of the frame in which we understand art. Sometimes the usually hidden absurdity of power relations provide brutt-spectacle: police appear en masse in front of MoMA, curators retreat, and the main gate shuts in the face of an elderly black lady and 6 artists (during opening hours) at the Museum of American Finance on Wall Street. Other exhibitions seem to reproduce all the aesthetic spectacle of a blockbuster show, but a disruptive and uninvited one: Philip Glass mic-checks the end of his opera on the streets in front of Lincoln Center while police standing in a long line barricade off a public plaza; hand-drawn dollar bills rain for minutes inside the "debt spiral" of an aggressively globalizing Guggenheim and the stunned audience pauses in hushed quiet. The police usually appear to close the exhibitions. Art and all its accompanying privileges make an effective alibi: arrests are rarely made.



First Occupy Museums assembly at MoMA, October 20, 2011 (Noah Fischer in coin mask). Photo: Jerry Saltz/ OM member Max Liboiron Marching with Queen Mother Dr. Delois Blakely, Community Mayor of Harlem, with model of her home at 477 W. 142nd Street to the Museum of American Finance Photo: Noah Fischer

From Claiming the Streets to Unlocking the Zoo

Standing in Liberty Park in early October 2011, there was wide understanding that the Occupy Wall Street Movement pointed to more than the 2008 financial sector abuse. We were concerned by a crisis of the entire public sphere, and only starting at an obvious “ground-zero.” Experience had led me to believe that the visual arts; one of the world’s largest unregulated markets, was central, not tangential to this crisis.¹ Strikingly, just as the crash was wreaking increasing havoc on the middle class as unemployment benefits ran out in 2011, art auctions were setting records, and private museums were popping up like gaudy magic mushrooms. It was clear that the mainstream artworld was intimately connected to the mechanisms of economic inequality. However, in Liberty Square, Puerta del Sol, and other occupied squares around the world, many people had a collective vision of art transitioning beyond Late Capitalism.² I thought that rather than primarily highlight the auctions, galleries and art fairs (the obvious targets of the private market), to instead challenge the authoritative public-facing “temples”- where cultural capital is extracted from the public sphere on which all the speculation depends. Museums owe their authority to their public mission and to the existence of canons: the very narratives which are susceptible to conflicts of interest. Like ratings agencies, these are exactly the kind of tools that Wall Street players like to manipulate in order to win every time.

Three weeks after the Occupation had begun, all this bubbled up in a hastily written manifesto and call to action I posted to Facebook called “Occupy Museums!” This went viral, was published in newspapers nationally, and soon became an OWS style horizontal action group, meeting on Mondays in the private/public indoor space of 60 Wall Street which was the hub of OWS organizing. From October 20th, 2011, a group of 10-20 people went on a kind of weekly action rampage, cooking up different ways to pull MoMA, Sotheby’s, Lincoln Center, many NYC museums into the growing public conversation about inequality, labor abuse, and deterioration of the public sphere.

At first I thought to simply extend the phenomena of Liberty Park to the museum, holding general assemblies on the sidewalks in front of MoMA.³ These were institutional collisions. We represented a known entity-at the time filling the newspapers with daily stories. We counted on our network’s abundant resources: free printing, reclaimed public space, internal organizing lists, and our own media (livestream, blogs, social media) plus key relationships with mainstream press. We stood in solidarity with the OWS governing structure, seeking consensus in assemblies or working groups⁴. At the first Occupy Museums action at MoMA, high level staffers came down to talk to me alone and quietly, as if I could represent the concerns of a grassroots phenomena. I simply told them we’d be back next week with even more people. Looking back to this early stage, we were basically evangelists from what seemed like a radical new culture. But movements unfold in stages and this was only the honeymoon stage.



Horizontal meeting at BB7 2012 photo: Max Liboiron/ Media working group at Horizontal BB7 photo: Noah Fischer

The Horizontal 7th Berlin Biennale

Around the metal tables of 60 Wall Street after running meetings with hand signs, we'd talk unofficially and we often discussed what an ethical museum might look like. Maybe Liberty Park was already a kind of museum? Occupy Groups were already finding playful ways to archive its unfolding culture. Certainly our action assemblies were effective Culture-Machines for including lots of voices and veering toward spontaneous outcomes. However, we had no chance to know whether contemporary museums could be transformed from the inside since there weren't invitations coming from the 1% funded US museums to come and occupy them. However, pretty soon, one arrived from Europe. We accepted an invitation from curators Joanna Warsza and Artur Zmijewski⁵ and twelve of us⁶ arrived at the Seventh Berlin Biennale a month after it had started, and after the press had long declared it a failure.

Artur Zmijewski: We were trying to invite people from different 'protest' movements and convince them to 'take part' in the 7th Berlin Biennale. Our people were traveling to Madrid, Barcelona, New York, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and so on to meet and talk to people from Indignados and Occupy Movements. We started this work in 2011 and on this direct way the process of trust building began. In the interview with Noah Fischer conducted by Joanna Warsza, Noah was talking about MOMA curators who are confronted with Occupy actions, but do not want to meet activists. So, we decided to invite activists. But with certain hope, that they can do what we are not able to do – to open the art institution and start a process of the transformation of it. I did not want to exhibit them, I did not want to create a ZOO – I wanted to offer them the institution itself – Kunst-Werke – which they could hack and use freely for their purposes. That's how the invitation was formulated. The first action by Occupy Berlin was the occupation of Biennale's press conference. It was a proposal by two representatives of this group: Grischa and Mario. We accepted it and during the press conference members of Occupy movements started to moderate it. They presented their manifesto and started open debate with

journalists about “what each of us can do for global change”. It was a first moment when the art institution was really challenged by the autonomous action. As a Biennale we paid a certain price for it – we lost the sympathy of journalists.

NF: Before leaving for Berlin we hosted a discussion at 16 Beaver entitled “Occupations and Institutions- an Open Discussion with Occupy Museums.” Generally the OWS community had been highly skeptical of any sort of institutional collaboration of involvement and the meeting at 16 Beaver was highly critical. Holding a “pure” autonomous position had been symbolically effective. Yet this was a moment to face the inevitable clash between inside and outside. We were preparing to go not as invited participants but more like warriors: unafraid of conflict. On arrival at the KW, we were led to a large bare-bones exhibition room in which to lay down our sleeping bags at night (passing KW visitors each morning to brush our teeth or take showers). The lower level main space was set up with circular benches for our assembly along with army tents and poster making stations. The setup felt exactly like a human zoo. This was mostly due to its unfortunate architectural layout. Visitors would watch us from a viewing platform elevated about the large pit area. This reduced the assemblies to performing behaviour of (surveilled) activists, and it seemed to fit in with Zmijewski’s most cynical projects. However, in retrospect, the visibility and tension of this zoo was helpful. It was a catalyst for the situation to unfold antagonistically- the discomfort of the collision between movement and institution could not be hidden. Soon we moved our meetings from the zoo-space to the KW’s upscale courtyard near Dan Graham’s glass box cafe and there we planned actions at Deutsche Guggenheim and Pergamon Museum.

At the same time, I began a series of private negotiations with Artur. I saw that the negative press was to our benefit, that we were in a position to help him “save” the Biennial. I challenged Artur to go farther into his open concept and unfreeze the institutional frame which appeared to have cynically captured the movements. If this was not his intention, he might readily accept a radical path out of his own trap. When Artur seemed interested, our group formulated a proposal called “You cannot curate a movement”⁷ which stipulated that he and Joanna step back as curators and join us to try out horizontal direct democracy in the whole institution of KW, or as far as we could go. The offer was accepted.

Artur Zmijewski: I would say that they had some interesting tools, but these tools were not tested inside the formal institution. They had experiences from the squares, but not from daily work inside the formal institutional structure. So, the opportunity for Occupy Movement was to use their tools developed on the squares inside the institution of culture. It was not easy – for example the majority of activists were busy with “asamblea bureaucracy” – they had group meetings every day, but without conclusions. They did not know how to drill a hole in the institutional walls. Occupy Museum was the first group busy with the institution. Via their actions Occupy Museum was constantly provoking us – they asked us to write them an official letter from KW [signed by the BB7 curator and the director of KW] that they are artists and that their action is a part of the BB7.

They wanted to give it to the police in case of troubles. We signed such documents, but we were not informed about the scenario of planned action. Finally we had a meeting in front of former Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin, where they made one of their actions. After the action they started to talk to me and started to treat me as an 'empty figure' of art functionary, blaming me that I'm paid by the German government and that I cynically built a human ZOO in KW. It was a difficult, but interesting moment, when the negotiations between us started. The whole conversation happened just on the street, when the group was surrounded by police which was protecting the main entrance to the Guggenheim gallery. As a result we had a "street" or "square" agreement: we were to meet the next day and both sides would have proposals ready to be discussed. I wanted to propose them to be curators of BB7 together with me and Joanna Warsza. Their proposal was more radical – they wanted us to become 'former curators', and to decide about the Biennale and about KW together with Occupy movement. Because both proposals were quite similar, it was easy to find a consensus. We agreed on the activists' proposal. We became former curators and activists started to penetrate KW.



Horizontal BB7 outside of KW: Occupy Museums 15 June action at the Pergamon Museum. Photo: Max Libroiron/ "Occupied Banner" overpainted artwork in the courtyard, later displayed on the façade. Photo: Max Libroin.

NF: The horizontal process began with a series of general assemblies attended by a wide range of KW workers and public including director Gaby Horn, former curators, cleaning staff, and museum guards. There was a mixture of skepticism and excitement and those present consented to try the experiment for a limited time. We quickly formed working groups to try to merge with the workflow of the KW: there was a media and communications group, a focus on direct actions, on managing the space of the KW itself and on the research to make KW's budget fully transparent. I was in the media working group along with Artur, M15 activist Hector Huerga, and the whole KW/ BB7 media team. It became possible to change the official website and send collectively written texts as official KW press announcements to their complete mailing list. Of course, horizontalizing the institution's PR messaging center was a lot easier than navigating the deeper institutional levels such as building maintenance and accounts payable not to speak of the guarding and

display and insurance of the rest of the art in the Biennial. However, unprecedented research had begun. Occupy Museums member Tal Beery canvassed the KW offices with a questionnaire, repeatedly interviewing Director Gaby Horn about the budget. We were experimenting from the inside- trying to reformulate museums based on what we had learned about cooperation and public space in the squares.

Artur Zmijewski: Certain period of time when the KW employees, former curators of BB7 and activists from Occupy Museum were working together I would call 'carnival'. The whole process was long – we were working one year to make 3 weeks of this carnival possible. But the institution became partly open and temporarily horizontalized. Activists from Occupy Museum tested their tools and shared their knowledge with us. We were able to practice alternative institution together with them. Political reality is brutal – after this experience KW went back to its former shape quite fast. But a few of the permanent KW employees decided to quit their job. After the experience which they had during BB7 they were not able to continue work under the same conditions.

NF: It wasn't clear how much of the horizontality had been real, how much of it was a game in the KW sandbox. It was clear that the general public was confused about what had happened—having been largely left out of the entire affair. The meetings, collaborations, attempt at horizontality between artists, staff, and public, and of total financial transparency dissolved soon after we left, presumably most old rules either never changed since we didn't penetrate the institution enough, or were reinstated precisely on the exhibition schedule following our departure. Even when it appeared that the museum guards had been given a raise in wages following their speaking up at the assemblies, I was skeptical that the happy concrete outcome might also mask a lack of engagement with the heart of our direct democracy proposal.

Artur Zmijewski: It's a bigger problem. I did not realize on the beginning that KW and BB7 are one institution even if they look like two entities – there is a permanent loyalty game. Employees are loyal to the director – when the new curator of the Biennale comes, they have to transfer a part of their loyalty to him or her. A mix of this loyalty and trust allow them to follow curatorial proposals. In case of Occupy Museum proposal, it became a problem. Curators agreed to be 'former curators' – they made a kind of risky step. Loyalty and trust allowed KW employees to follow the process, but not fully. The mid of biennale is a moment in time, when BB curator starts to lose his or her authority – loyalty of the employees goes back fully to the director of the whole institution. Even if they participate in the transformation of the institution, finally they would rather declare that 'it was nothing significant for them'. The curator will disappear in a few days – they will stay with the director. This loyalty game is another level of the Occupy Museum intervention. One of the employees who quit his job in KW after BB7 was a head of press department. He actively took part in the horizontalization process. Maybe he became more loyal to the transformation process, than to the boss and he was not able to invert it.

NF: Skeptics reduced the Occupied BB7 to a performed politics. On the other hand, much effective resistance is essentially performance, visibly attempting the impossible and in so doing, making power relations obvious and therefore malleable. Horizontality at BB7 had uncovered potential strategies but also exposed mechanisms for dismantling or minimizing radical change as Artur describes above. Another example: consumption-focused art media geared to make single pronouncements on exhibitions could not effectively communicate the unfolding direct democracy process. So unlike many actions, we couldn't effectively use the media as a tool. If we were to re-launch an Occupied Museum, we had to learn better strategies to co-create the narrative.

Meanwhile, the energy of the movement continued to dissolve, leaving us on an uncomfortable cliff of political relevance. A few further significant "cases" which I do not have space to discuss here occurred at Momenta Art in New York⁸ (which was cut short by Hurricane Sandy and the resurgence of the Occupy Movement in response to that crisis) and Truth is Concrete in Graz⁹ but we did not succeed in getting much farther than Horizontal BB7 in 2012.

Winter Holiday Camp (WHC): Merging with an Institution in Crisis

In March 2013 I received an email from Artur Zmijewski requesting a meeting in Warsaw. I was summoned to join Artur and Pawel Althamer in planning a radical exhibition at Zamek Ujazdowski (CCA) to follow the development of the Berlin Biennale. The CCA was itself undergoing a public crisis. Director Fabio Cavallucci was locked in a struggle with nearly the entire museum staff, the Solidarność union was going public about the matter. We began the project by forming an international working group, about half Polish and half from abroad, rich in experience of institutional practice. After months of research trips and daily communication, which included interviews with many museum staff¹⁰ who revealed the dire



Planning first intervention of uninvited Winter Holiday Camp at CCA. Drawing: Noah Fischer/ WHC members with "Institution in Crisis" suspended sign in front of CCA, December 2013. Photo: Gabriello Csozso

precarious labor situation in detail, and after we decided to publicly support the workers, the project was cancelled (with a budget-alibi). Our group decided to go anyway, uninvited.¹¹

When possible, uninvited practice is probably the best case for radical political practice in museums. This scenario doesn't include any "debt" to the institution so when antagonism arises, we can proceed in the struggle with our full toolbox and our freedoms. In the art world, invitations, favors, and connections among a highly networked community of competing individuals, creates significant blocks to harder edged political practice. Because of the high concentration and thus scarcity of opportunity and money, the very real possibility of alienation or even excommunication from a good position in the arts network often creates a losing equation for radical politics. The professional network is just too densely inter-surveilled. A counterstrategy is to build up value and resources in a parallel, radicalized network so one has less to lose by speaking out and acting without permission—one can "fall back" on a radical safety net.

In the first days, meeting in a café near the museum like a band of insurgents plotting the overthrow of a compound, we decided to re-frame the entrance to the castle with a suspended sign that read "Institution in Crisis." Occupy Museums member Tal Beery and I fashioned it from sticks, which the whole group had ritually gathered in the Polish woods. This welded the conflict onto the museum's own visible brand, and at the same time, announced an arrival.

An essential situation for initiating the Occupied Museum is a truly open public meeting: it breaks hierarchic stratification. When we Artur and I encountered director Fabio Cavallucci in the galleries and offhandedly suggested meeting, our seed was planted. We occupied the meeting, growing it into a public event with the press, staff, friends all invited. In this meeting we strongly voiced the fear and desperation of the staff in front of both director and workers, breaking through a



Winter Holiday Camp: Director Fabio Cavallucci signs the document to acquire WHC into CCA's permanent collection while Artur Zmijewski, Paula Struginska and Noah Fischer look on /WHC: all staff meeting with the BB7 banner in center, later to be over-painted by children.

culture of fear and silence. When the director tried to leave, he was blocked at the door by artist Joulia Strauss who menacingly clutched a steel trident. We had prepared a strategy. Our main aim was to offer the Winter Holiday Camp project itself (including the meeting we were in) to the director and the acquisitions committee as an artwork, and a Trojan Horse.

The acquisition tactic made use of a much adhered-to institutional rule of speculation, whereby value and importance is attached to a thing once it is officially collected by an institution. Usually museum collections are treated as value-enhancing stamps of cultural capital, however being in the collection comes with a kind of permission, a collected artist becomes something of a diplomat for the institutional brand, bearing a trace of its authority.¹²

However, hacking institutional logic contains an inherent problem in relation to the public sphere: it's usually non-visual, unspectacular, unsexy. It means embracing bureaucracy: long meetings in which an activated agenda struggles through the filters of group dynamics. They are often far more interesting to those involved than "outsiders." Unfortunately these outsiders are the general public—who may not have time on their hands to jump into the process. Thus, in the midst of WHC, we needed to create a stronger connection to the Warsaw public as we had failed to do in Berlin. Our opportunity was the exhibition called *Fragment: Collection* which had never been officially opened.¹³ We used social media to autonomously host an opening – the "Opening of the Open Institution" inviting local artists, CCA curators, and even the Director to prepare speeches for our uninvited event in their museum. There was little they could do to stop the snowballing legitimacy of the event in the eyes of the local artists and public. We conceived of the opening as a ritual. Occupy Museums member Imani Brown led a voodoo cleansing dance, banishing spirits from the CCA galleries and offices with candles and incense. Artist Agnieszka Polska whose work was displayed in *Fragment: Collection*, sprinkled vodka



WHC Ritual assembly led by WHC member Imani Brown during "Opening of the Open Institution" to clean Zamek Ujazdowski of evil spirits. Photo: Noah Fischer/ WHC members Joulia Strauss, curator Marek Gozdziwski, and Imani Brown with WHC tridents that would later block Cavalucci's egress from the first meeting. Photo: Gabriella Csozso

on each office door as a large group danced through the museum's restricted office level. Pawel Althamer painted with children, irreverently spray-painting a mural (actually, overpainting the central banner from BB7 displayed in an image above) in the middle of an installed gallery of artworks. We had opened something.

Visual Aesthetics Revisited as Political Tool

Occupy Museums actions had generally downplayed the importance of visually beautiful or highly-produced aesthetics. Instead, our actions opted for the functionality and performativity of group communication, for example, use of the human mic. If we needed signage it was often made in haste and there were only a few times we made anything like visual art, and then often by mistake.¹⁴ Since the days of the park, we had defaulted to the OWS “pizza box” aesthetics which was partly due to urgency, partly as a visual sign of solidarity and a rejection of slick corporate aesthetics. Experience told us to be careful with visibility: the moment we had stepped into the Zoo-like “Occupied” space at BB7, it was clear that all the signage representing activist activity was working to counter-effect, the signs in the KW seemed like scalps collected by the institution rather than signifying empowerment. Visuality and its mute ease of circulation was just too-easy a target for co-op-



March 2013 Drawings in preparation for WHC. Pawel Althamer, Artur Zmijewski, Noah Fischer.

tion.¹⁵ But an anti-visual position could fall into dogma, repellant to audiences and therefore politically unproductive. I felt that Occupy Museums wasn't necessarily a “post-studio” practice entailing stepping away from visual art practice. And there was irony in the fact that a group of artists had essentially assigned ourselves unpaid part time office jobs- consisting of meetings and digital work (heavy use of Google Docs and Skype) rather than hands-on art making. To be fair, I've come to enjoy meetings, and especially the ubiquitous collective writing practice, but it seemed that art was a missing ingredient in our practice.

Pawel Althamer and Artur Zmijewski often take out paper and inks in meetings and practice a spontaneous form of painting/conversation. This dance with the subconscious proved quite effective for brainstorming strategy in Warsaw. Group paintings became the official document of acquisition of Winter Holiday Camp by the CCA (image above), while a series of paintings we given out as thank you gifts to staff members. Unused galleries were filling with collective murals. In Warsaw, the Occupied Museum now claimed an abundance of visual art, distributed through a gift economy.

Public Space on Museum Walls?

Walls are museum's most powerful tools and they could perhaps also become ours. But I knew that touching the walls, coming close to the revered art objects on them was close to a social taboo which could brand the wall-toucher as anti-civilization; destroyer or art; dredging up images of the 16th Century sackers of Rome. At ZKM Museum's "Global Activism" exhibition (co-curated by Joulia Strauss), we first employed the tactic of "wall-chatting" / "exhibition supplementing." We began pinning note-sheets from an activists assembly onto the exhibition walls, right next to artworks which were canonizing the recent years of global activism. Artur and I began to draw with fat markers and paint directly on the curatorial text, sparking the whole assembly to join in on a massive "wall chat session." We wanted a single institution's voice opened to additional commentaries.¹⁶ The whiteness of museum walls- the space between installed artworks-represents the taboo of purely private untouchable property- a property which is shifting from the public to the private domain. Recently built "speculative museums"¹⁷ such as New Museum in NYC often feature larger expanses of such white space, echoing blue chip art galleries. Does it devalue the public's experience with an artwork to claim this patch of public space? Wall chatting seemed instead to add social value. We repeated this tactic later in a Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F) action at the Guggenheim New York, taping a silver mylar manifesto to the Guggenheim's exhibition walls near the curatorial text. Later, G.U.L.F organized a more ambitious wall action where we taped colorful graphics next to the exhibited paintings of the blockbuster exhibition "Italian Futurism: Reconstructing the Universe," calling on Trustees to support fair labor in Abu Dhabi. The taboo of an uninvited addition to the walls charged up the manifesto with political relevance: people immediately assembled to read it and security guards ripped the graphics down within minutes.¹⁸ The tactic hit a nerve. Luckily we had taken snapshots.

Horizon: A Debt Market Underneath the Museum

Occupying the "Temples of Culture" seems effective for shifting a conversation the first step, but this conceptual shift has limits. Beneath (or perhaps above) the temples lie the shark-infested waters of the market, and the most daunting challenge on the horizon is shifting the economic behavior that propagates inequality. Money

is a social relation. Personal debt churns in the “dark matter” of the invisible part of the art world, circulating as lifelong relationships to banks which greatly modifies daily life, creating a constant power imbalance. This can be seen from the micro to macro scale. Like many US based artists, I am deeply in debt for my masters degree, and in early 2013 inspired by Strike Debt’s Rolling Jubilee, I began to model an exchange system that tie the value of art objects to the debt of their creator, aiming to

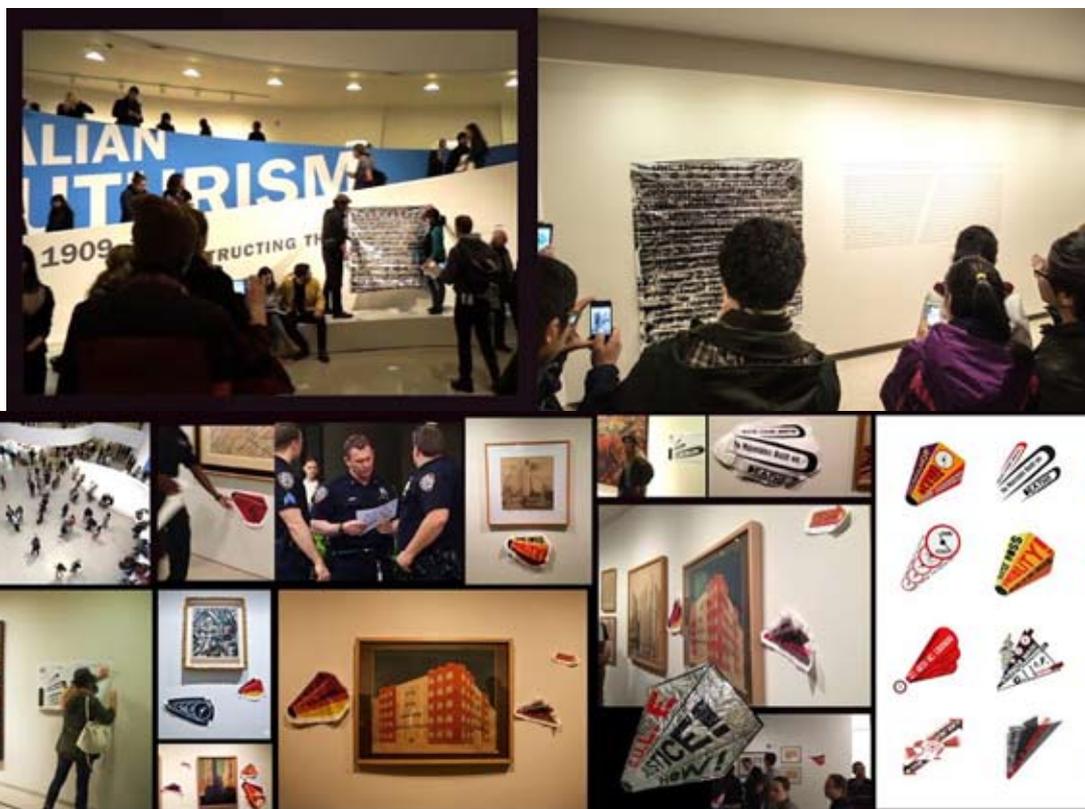


“Wall Chatting” intervention: at the “activist summit of the ZKM exhibition “Global Activism,” January 2014. Photo: Noah Fischer

replace speculative value with mutual aid. In Spring of 2013, Occupy Museums developed this concept into a modified art fair called DebtFair, where artists revealed their debt information publicly on a website, and attempted to exchange art objects directly for debt bailouts: a crude statement which we hoped would also actually work. There was enormous potential to create an artists “debt-community” and we were inundated with information from hundreds of artists who are deep in personal debt from credit cards, mortgages, but mostly student debt. However, acting as a volunteer service organization on that scale has so far proved beyond our capacity.

Holes in the Wall of Impossibility

The selling out of the public sphere by Neoliberal institutions (from government branches to global museum branches) can be thought of as a crisis which also creates certain opportunities. We are seeing institution’s social legitimacy quickly dissolve in a cloud of labor abuse and conflict of interest at auction. Massive PR campaigns are increasingly required to cover over this weakness. However, the status quo is providing us with an ever longer list of perfect targets. We see public space at the Metropolitan Museum soon to be inscribed with the name of David Koch, who is busy undermining democratic elections and we wonder just what might cause the right shift for the public to reject his patronage and the zombie museums he will create. Some new perspective is needed. Our practice hacks existing frames to open the Occupied Museum which is a visible stage for public unrest and public creativity to reverse the deterioration of truly common space.



G.U.L.F: February 22nd action, Noah Fischer and Paula Chakravartty hanging anti-labor abuse manifesto beside curatorial text for Futurist exhibition, Guggenheim Museum NYC. Photo: Nitasha Dhillon/G.U.L.F: May 24th Action “Supplementing” the Italian Futurist Exhibition with Noah Fischer’s designs. Photos: various G.U.L.F members.

It’s true that uninvited art practice and self-proclaimed institutions are nothing new: the Situationists, Art Workers Coalition, Asco, Repo History, and artists Martha Rosler and Coco Fusco are only a few local examples. However, along with the challenges of post crash financialization and deterioration of public space has arrived a new movement.

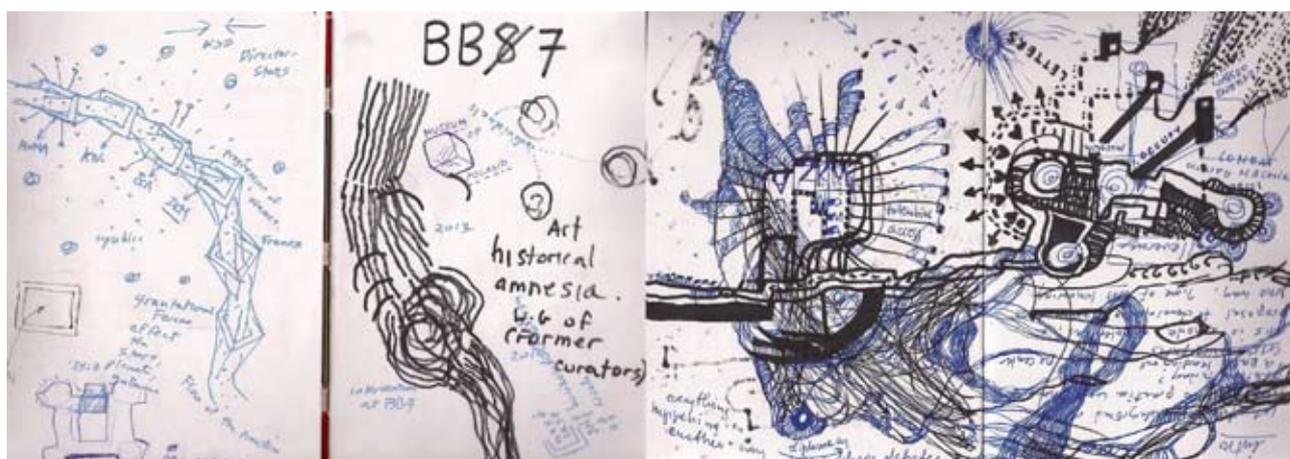
Occupy showed how rising global inequality in a newly connected era can combine to create Instant simultaneous mass movements, capable of crossing the substantial gulfs of geo-political specifics (the differing aims of Zucotti, and Gezi for example) and even after the season of protest has ended, there’s more reason that ever for those people currently gaining little benefit from the pyramid of abstracted value and precarious labor, to shift practice outside existing the frame and jettison their current professional goals to begin “hacking visible frame” on their own. Our actions are movement focused: aimed at inspiring others to join us in any number of ways.

When I hastily wrote the first Occupy Museums manifesto from the euphoric height of the Movement, much of the press reacted with vitriol or dismissiveness:

even those who generally agreed with the Occupy Wall Street movement positioned Occupy Museums as misled art haters, (and themselves as “defenders of art.”) A few years later, it seems like assumed wisdom that the arts just like finance is infected with economic inequality and that institutions with backward positions on labor should not go ignored. Recently, we have even seen some wins.¹⁹ The issues of out-of-control student debt and global labor abuse are gaining traction. Yearly auction spectacles are routinely seen not as indicators of general market success but rather as an exclusive party going on at the disconnected top of the pyramid. And many are waiting for the next crash and wave of protest.

Sustainability is of major concern. Some activists in my network are living on food-stamps, battling fore closures or rental evictions themselves as they struggle against the PR machines of mega corporations. It’s an unfair fight. At the end of the day, resources are needed to live a basic healthy life, and here is where cooption—the institutional “throwing of bones” to activist artists works so well—because almost all the resources to be had are in corporate funded museums or non-profits or in the pockets of rich collectors.²⁰

This is why Post-Capitalist support networks, physical spaces, self-proclaimed institutions, and most of all, value systems, are needed to support a robust shift. The Occupied Museum tries to offer the following resources: strengthening the post-Occupy network through morale-producing actions and calls for participation. Refining a set of horizontal communication tools for grassroots organizing. Capturing high-visibility of top museums and politicizing it. Access to the mainstream press where otherwise hidden subjects and realities can be exhibited. The potential for collective/historic spectacle which nurtures recaptures meaning.²¹ Identification



Collaborative drawings of the Occupied Museum trajectory and strategies: Artur Zmijewski and Noah Fischer.

of a number of allies inside of existing institutions, A long list of open source action tactics for individual and groups, Open-source research for horizontality in institutions.

On a broader level, we try to offer permission. The critique of museum's social legitimacy is meant as a green light to artists and citizens everywhere to autonomously occupy the visible centers of culture; to experiment on your own. I imagine a movement by "dark matter" artists to re-use in any number of ways the most corporate of museums and other faux-public spaces, a mass culture of uninvited interventions and "supplemented exhibitions" blossoming until participating in the sanctioned art frame becomes passé, and the energy of art goes outside the frame and the support system of exchange shifts to mutual aid debt bailouts.

All this concerns a particular definition of art. I believe that art wasn't meant to forever degrade quietly into luxury asset; rather, today's counter-revolutionary absurdities can wake us up into reclaiming a meaningful avantgarde practice. Art contains the tools to break through the faux-public mirages when such illusions appear. Art contains enough humor and urgency and contemplation to connect directly with people's realities and mythologies at the same time and thus function as an effective political tool even when formal political process itself breaks down, which is exactly what's happening now. The Occupied Museum is a forum to exhibit such art in the world's major museums, immediately. Each time a small group of people successfully deploy tactics which break through entropy to open an exhibition of the Occupied Museum, a new page of the institutional manual is written; new labor codes and art histories are recorded.

The lights of the Occupied Museum are slowly flickering on.

Noah Fischer's sculptures, actions, performances, writings and collaborations explore the official rhetoric and currencies regulating behavior within Capitalism. In the early/mid 2000's he exhibited kinetic light/sound installations and collaborated with Berlin-based theater group andcompany&Co. Spurred by the financial crash and mass exposure of financial inequality in 2008, Fischer exited from the private art market to experiment with uninvited practice in public space on Wall Street and this led seamlessly into the Occupy Movement. He initiated action group Occupy Museums in October 2011 which has carried out actions at MoMA, Guggenheim, and the 7th Berlin Biennale among others. Fischer is currently organizing international campaigns with Occupy Museums, Global Luxury Art Faction (G.U.L.F), and creating a sculptural currency for an alternative debt-based economy. He lives with his wife Brenda and Daughter Luna in Brooklyn, NY.

<http://www.noahfischer.org>

Endnotes

1 A decision to bring my practice outside of this frame after working with commercial galleries had delivered me to Occupy Wall Street in the first place. In the Spring of 2011, the Aaron Burr Society and I developed a series of collaborative performances orating about economic inequality and redistributing money (coins) on Wall Street while wearing a coin mask, called Summer of Change. By the last performance in the series, the Occupy Movement had begun, and I joined it as a talking coin. <http://www.summerofchange.net>

2 Alexander Carlvaho organizer of first OWS Arts and Culture Working Group, Email October 3, 2011:

“Many of us in the movement believe we are at the brink of a new aesthetic school. A new historical art period, that reaches beyond the nihilism and hopelessness of post-modernism to a time of agency, belief, and hope. Virginia W. once wrote that “around 1910 everything changed” to announce that modernism came to make a revolution. Maybe we, in 2011, a century after, may be entering the same flux”...

3 These first actions we planned with the Teamsters Art Handlers Union in Solidarity with their struggle against Sotheby’s auction house. OWS and Union members were able to successfully mix approaches, and messaging.

4 By November, these larger organizational structures had deteriorated and become irrelevant but we continued to strictly abide by OWS style process (to the best of our abilities) within the group.

5 The genesis of the invitation: I had previously worked with German curator Florian Malzacher. Joanna Warsza and Florian were visiting NYC during early days of Occupy. They came to an Occupy Museums action at the David Koch dinosaur wing of the Museum of Natural History highlighting the “menace” of philanthropy. An interview turned into an invitation.

6 Core OM members Tal Beery, Jolanta Gora-Witta, Max Libroin, Arthur Polendo, Carey Marchet, Ben Laude, Nitasha Dhillon, Noah Fischer, Blithe Riley, Maria Byck, Maraya Lopez, and Jim Costanzo went to Berlin.

7 Nitasha Dhillon, member of Tidal, MTL and G.U.L.F and veteran of OWS was an architect of the horizontalization strategy.

8 When we opened Momenta’s space to general use by the Occupy community and held a series of public discussions about the Bloomberg Family Foundation’s conflict of interest, Bloomberg-connected board members of Momenta art resigned, striking a serious financial blow to Momenta. This seemed to highlight the precariousness and self-censorship involved in private funding, but our refusal to diminish the critique came with serious fallout for good people who were on our side.

9 “Truth is Concrete” was curated by Florian Malzacher and consciously meant to take an opposite approach from the Berlin Biennale. The institution presented movement politics in the frame of hyper connectivity and productivity: a 24/7 marathon camp for discussions and performances which favored constant communication and networking over open experiment. Finally, a small group of which I was part called “Action is Concrete” succeeded in pulling the general assembly out of the curated frame and onto the streets. To the curators, the action was an embarrassment of performed faux- politics. In my view, it was an opportunity to solidify a political artistic community and exchange tactics through practice.

10 Mostly conducted by NYC based artist Maureen Connor who brought her “embedded practice” to OM.

11 Housing was provided by Pawel Althamer and Artur Zmijewski who also supported some travel expenses. WHC members funded their daily work and materials for the project.

12 We had used the Acquisition tactic twice before: in 2012, we accused MoMA of “unilaterally acquiring” our banner when they confiscated it during an action, and this accusation loosened MoMA’s lips, setting off a public back and forth in the press. In an action at the Museum of American Finance, we offered a cardboard model of a foreclosed home to their permanent collection. After an initial refusal, they accepted the model into their permanent collection, which we presented on Occupy Wall Street’s International Day of Fighting Foreclosures. At CCA, This new permission made it impossible to prevent our horizontal process and we set up a series of meetings with the staff to begin rewriting the CCA constitution.

13 It was intended to fill a gap in the program resulting from the early closing of a previous show (whose high expenses had been used to argue for the cancellation of Winter Holiday Camp) The Show, British British Polish Polish was also a subject of political attack from the Catholic Right which resulted in a blasphemy trial. We ended up supporting CCA in this context in an action at the Ministry of Culture.

14 At the 2012 Occupied Freize Art Fair, our protest was penned into Police barricades. We decorated the pen to create what Tal Beery called a “freedom cage” which can be thought of as an installation analog to the art fair booth.

15 this was also clear when the highly produced and super-visual issue of the Occupy Wall Street Journal appeared in an exhibition on the wall of MoMA. No challenge to power norms existed in that case.

16 A German Refugee activist named Napuli wrote her story on the wall to add a viewpoint missing from the exhibition, the Refugee Movement in Germany was not included in the Global Activism Exhibition.

17 See 2010’s “Skin Fruit” at the New Museum from museum board member Dakis Jannou collection and curated by Jeff Koons:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/05/arts/design/05dakis.html?pagewanted=all>

18 We later heard directly from Guggenheim director Richard Armstrong that following the action, owners of the paintings had called in, angry to see the colorful graphics taped inches from their loaned works. This has greatly helped pressure mount on the labor-abusing museum.

19 This is to speak nothing of the cultural capital which accompanies wealth and has a strong pull on most artist-activists who are often highly ambitious, and besides, often need cultural capital to open doors for successful organizing.

20 Transfield leaving Sydney Biennale following artist boycott, and the unionization of Frieze Art fair in New York.

21 I’m thinking of a moment when Lou Reed, Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson joined us in front of Lincoln Center for the Satyagraha protest.