

# OCCUPY BIENNALE? SOCIALLY-ENGAGED ART PRACTICE AND ART INSTITUTION

Urszula Staszko

*Independent Researcher, Art Historian*

*urszula.staszko@gmail.com*

## AUSSTELLUNGEN

### ABSTRACT

The political phenomenon of Occupy Wall Street obtained the global attention in the fall of 2011 with its encampment in the Zuccotti Park (New York). As the movement grew, there also seemed to be an aesthetic component to it revealed in socially-engaged, participatory practices. Those presuppositions provoked the debate focused on the emerging issue of activist art and on the art's capability to transmit the aims of political protest. Consequently, curators and art institutions attempted to endorse the Occupy movement, while incorporating it into various art events. This text seeks to explore those issues through the analyses of emerging discourse on socially-engaged practices and its existence within art institution on the example of Berlin Biennale 7.

### KEYWORDS

Occupy | Activist art | Socially-engaged art | Protest | Berlin Biennale



It's been over six years since the decease of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS). The events which took place in Zuccotti Park triggered the discussion regarding their aesthetic dimension viewed by many as complied to their political ambitions. Some, like BBC reporter Paul Mason, went as far as suggesting that Occupy was the sign of the end of contemporary art, stating: "it is beginning to feel like a new artistic movement" (Mason, 2012). In his publication entitled *Strike Art! Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (2016) Yates McKee, claims the role of OWS in fostering a shift within contemporary art production stating: "Occupy as a movement grounded in direct action decisively changed horizons in which art is produced, received, and judged in a manner comparable with earlier moments of rupture." (McKee, 2016: 237). In a similar manner, Gregory Sholette refers to the Occupy phenomenon as "the birth of a new artistic subject" which is yet to be defined (Sholette, 2015: 185).

The political phenomenon of OWS may remain quite difficult to grasp. This difficulty is conditioned by the refusal to create precise demands, definitions, and hierarchical structures while promoting the idea that a unified message would mean to reduce and narrow the discourse to the very specific terms (Harcourt, 2012: 35). The impulses which driven OWS were embedded in the "feeling of mass injustice"<sup>1</sup> expressed through the useful rhetoric 99% versus 1% that allowed to cast light on the examples of immoral use of power by the 1% i.e. climate change, racism, declining wages, study loans, etc.<sup>2</sup> While those stances resisted the tendency to oversimplify complex issues, they were simultaneously the biggest source of critique for the movement. Regardless of those premises OWS managed to create a new form of resistance, one which "liberated itself from imposed stereotypes and projections and from others' prejudgments—from the tyranny of facile solutions and narrow-minded policy talk" (Harcourt, 2012: 35). As pointed Rosalyn Deutsche the OWS movement created a "new relationship to the political" (Deutsche, 2012: 42).

This swing in protest strategies was traced by Jalen Mansoor et al. through the French and Italian Marxist

theory known as 'communization currents'. (Mansoor et.al., 2012: 48). Those ideas emphasised by various writers (i.e. Jacques Camatte and Giles Dauvé) and collectives (i.e. *Théorie Communiste* and *Endnotes*) comprehend a revolution as a "continuous process" of implementing change (i.e. 'communization') through 'direct', 'immediate' and commonly accessible means (Mansoor et.al., 2012: 48). If we are to perceive Occupy not only as a political, but also artistic phenomenon (Fischer, 2015; McKee, 2016; Sholette, 2015), this theory may allow us to interlace the occupy movement with the 'social turn' (Bishop, 2012) in the art world which sprung up in the 1990s as an aftermath of the Fall of Berlin Wall followed by transformation of the left-wing politics.

The active engagement of artists and other creative workers in Occupy led to the discussion regarding art as a trigger that helped the movement itself to grow. While some consider the encampment in the Zuccotti Park as a form of art in the manner of Joseph Beuys' *Social Sculpture* (Biddle, 2014), others point at a creative character of designed posters, signs and "cheaply printed texts, and Internet media effusions" (Apter, 2012: 89) circulating between the participants. Notwithstanding, what remains important is the fact that most of the artists whose working situation is subsumed under neoliberal precarity, are referencing various grievances of the 99%. Consequently, the events of Occupy gave birth to various movements which aim to address those unfair power relations within the art world i.e. Arts & Labour, Occupy Museums, Gulf Labour Coalition and its spin-off organisation G.U.L.F. (Gulf Ultra Luxury Faction).

To artistically depict the protest, especially in its occupational dimension creates unprecedented problems among critics and art historian due to difficulty with its proper theoretical qualification. The concept of 'activist art' is a fairly new encounter of art and politics, which positions itself differently than the concept of 'critically engaged art' (Groys, 2014). Presumably, the activist art requires new measurement methods, which involve a radical embedment of aesthetic categories in social sciences.

But the question of measurements simultaneously raises

1. Declaration of the Occupation of New York City" (2011.09.29), NYC General Assembly. Accessed at: <https://archive.org/details/DeclarationOfTheOccupationOfNewYorkCity> (2018.06.05).

2. Ibidem.

the question about the actual difference between art and activism nowadays.<sup>3</sup> Hence, is it possible that the border is completely blurred? One may argue that the practice of merging aesthetic and social standpoints has its longstanding roots in the early avant-garde tradition as well as in SI actions which (at least in theory) aimed at resisting the “bourgeois institution of art” (McKee, 2016: 27). This argument is emphasised by McKee who claims: “Occupy took the avant-garde dialectic of “art and life” to a new level of intensity” (McKee, 2016: 32). This indiscernibility of life and art was supposedly revealed in the very structure of encampment established by OWS in Zuccotti Park. However, pointing at early avant-garde as a reference and source of validation for art activism creates various inconsistencies. As states Boris Groys: “The Russian avant-garde artists of the 1920s believed in their ability to change the world because at the time their artistic practice was supported by Soviet authorities. They knew that power was on their side. And they hoped that this support would not decrease with time. Contemporary art activism has, on the contrary, no reason to believe in external political support.” (Groys, 2014). The affirmation by former political system was supplemented by a “rejection of artistic tradition”,<sup>4</sup> which does not fit the McKee’s attempt to aestheticize and spectacularise the historical moment of OWS through inserting it into the wider pedigree of art history.

Those issues are tackled by the fact how art in the era of advanced capitalism is perceived, hence as a product predestined to fulfil goals of the neoliberal market. Artistic production aims, according to certain “critical orthodoxy” (Bishop, 2016: 18), at affirming or suppressing the neoliberal system. Those distinctions cultivated by art criticism since the 1970s are usually supported by the idea of art liberating itself from the burdens imposed by the early modern theory. This concept of the political art lies closely to developed by Jacques Rancière idea of ‘aesthetic regime’ which grew out of the French Revolution (Rancière, 2006). Rancière’s theory informs us that art is unable to disconnect itself from politics. As pointed by Claire Bishop ‘aesthetic regime’ creates a certain paradox within the field of art,

according to which art always tries to shift away from politics but remains political in its attempt to promote “a better world” (Bishop, 2016: 27). Following those premises art activism as we experience nowadays does not seem to repress the idea of art, but rather focus on a usefulness of aesthetic practices (Groys, 2014), enacted in its political engagement and participatory politics.

Protest art supposedly endeavours participation, while taking into account its own spatiotemporal conditions and referring to such genres as “theatre, spectacle, and representation” (McKee, 2016: 101). The global diffusion of participatory art modes, which frequently challenge the artistic objecthood mark certain ‘social turn’, which constitutes the “change-factor altering the art world landscape” (Sholette, 2015: 177). Those modes were mediated through recent theories of socially engaged art practises such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ (2002) or Grant Kester’s ‘dialogical aesthetics’ (2004). ‘Social turn’ in art was traced by Claire Bishop (2016), who points at the growing importance of such terms as ‘interventionist art’, or ‘socially-engaged art’ (Bishop, 2016: 1). Those practices shift away from the autonomous artwork which prompts a passive mode of perception replacing it with an open, socio-political process predestined to elicit participation, or specific reaction among its spectators.

Without a doubt to consider protest as art requires to move beyond its traditional boundaries. As points Sylvia Kolbowski protest itself is the evidence of increasing disappointment with art institutions and art criticism which seem not to fulfil their role as a mediator of artistic practices in the era of crisis (Kolbowski, 2012: 78). The occupiers’ desire to disconnect themselves from the mainstream art institutions associated with the interest of 1% lead to the idea of “de-disciplining” of art, which “include nonart disciplines alongside or in place of curatorial practices and alongside or in place of institutionalized art practices.” (Kolbowski, 2012: 76). The exclusion of nominalism within art practices supposedly would allow artists to leave the institutional frames identified as a neoliberal construct.

3. Noah Fischer, member of Occupy Museum group, when asked about differences between an artist and activist today answered: “Right now I am not interested in these definitions and actually don’t accept them. They must open up to and change to be useful in the world we are heading towards”. In: Stange, Raimar. “An Occupied Biennial” (Interview, 2012.06.26). Available at: <https://frieze.com/article/occupied-biennial> (2018.08.29).

4. This is one of the points made by Claire Bishop in the discussion on Yates McKee’s book carried on e-flux platform. Available at: <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/strike-art-question-1-lets-talk-about-yates-mckees-2016-book-on-art-activism-occupy/3483> (2018.09.01).

So how can we pinpoint the very idea of the protest art? Following Yates McKee's rhetoric, we may determine the art of protest as an attempt to deconstruct the art world "as it exists within the discourses, economies, and institutions" (McKee, 2016: 6). Those actions usually aim to elicit participation through "direct action, collective affect, and political subjectification" (McKee, 2016: 6). The art of protest supposedly recognises our living situations with all economic, spatial, social, and historical preconditions which define it. Supposedly it is willing to ask uncomfortable questions regarding those premises, pointing at the urgency and validity of certain issues. Those conditions may be a sign of a shift from the political art which takes as its mission to critically reflect upon the present to the one which takes as its aim to occupy various spatiotemporal concepts in an attempt to transform those matters.

But what happens when those impulses of protests are moved from the street to the mainstream art institutions? The OWS movement attempted to include all voices,<sup>5</sup> wishing for people to "assert power"<sup>6</sup> through presentation of their grievances addressing the political, economic and social matters. Those effective attempts to elicit participation constituted one of the biggest powers of the movement, materialized in such actions as the *People's Mic*. As the political and social power of Occupy lied in its ability to engage, enclosing the movement within the walls of art gallery may jeopardize those efforts due to a rather passive model of spectatorship prompted by the most of art institutions. Furthermore, the political content and ambitions of the project may be compromised and exchanged for a commodity consumed by the gallery public.<sup>7</sup>

Since OWS obtained public attention in the late 2011, the contemporary art world had attempted to benefit from its historical momentum implementing it into various art events, which addressed the Occupy as the political and artistic phenomenon. While the activists often attempted to use those invitations from mainstream art institutions as a possible platform to promote the movement itself, the curators seemed to be willing to endorse the political moment of Occupy, but not without using its rhetoric "for their own power structures and

practices" (Fowkes, 2012). The implementation of protest art in the institutional frames besides risking of being contained and appropriated by the art institution with all cognitive capitalism it entails (Fowkes, 2012) creates a dichotomy regarding the actual function of the presented artwork which is not allowing us to recognize if the presented object is just an aesthetic concept or something aimed at an actual change.

At the forefront of the events which employed the Occupy movement into its structures came Berlin Biennale 7 (BB7) under the title "Forget Fear". The event curated by Artur Zmijewski remains "the most radical experiment to date in incorporating occupiers into a mainstream art event" (Fowkes, 2012). BB7 sought to contain the political message of Occupy, through its documentation and endorsement, but as points Sebastian Loewe became instead a symbol for deterioration of the movement, "at least in the Western world" (Loewe, 2015). What kind of missed strategies did, however, determine the failure of this event?

First of all, it is important to take a closer look at the institution of Biennale and its meaning to the contemporary art world and the global art market. In a certain way, one cannot fail to notice that Biennials have become a certain type of fetishes for the art world. This phenomenon referred to by some researchers as "biennialisation" (Frascina, 2013) depicts institution of Biennale as the powerful establishment, which take as its aim promoting art on the global markets. This emphasis put on the institution of Biennale take its roots in a tendency developed since the late 1990s for Biennials to be spaces for critical interventions (Kompatsiaris, 2017: 4) which chase the goals of the early avant-garde to present renewed art for the renewed society. They are, doubtlessly quite prestige events, which are consequently "harnessed to urban and national campaigns of branding" (McKee, 2016: 13). Contemporary Art Biennale supposedly redefines art and its approach, "opening itself to the world and its contradictions; to the world of politics and critical theory; to the world of business and creative branding; to the world of flexible labour and urban renewal; to the world of left-wing activism and social intervention."

5. «Declaration of the Occupation of New York City» states: "Join us and make your voice heard!"

6. „Declaration of the Occupation of New York City”, NYC General Assembly. Accessed at: <https://archive.org/details/DeclarationOfTheOccupationOfNewYorkCity> (2018.06.05).

7. As pointed by Bishop this critique can be extended to the most of participatory practices (Bishop, 2016: 37)



(Kompatsiaris, 2017: 2). Therefore, Biennials are seen largely as spaces which emphasise political over aesthetic experiment (Kompatsiaris, 2017: 5). Those premises are supplemented by the attempts to engage Biennials' visitors in such participatory activities as conferences, workshops, etc.

The implementation of the Occupy movement into BB7 Berlin Biennale took place through the "occupation" of the main space on the ground floor of the KW Institute for Contemporary Art. The activists staged protest camp using "installation" of tents, posters, and signs inhabited by the occupiers. The group of occupiers established from the joint forces of members of Occupy Museums New York, Occupy Berlin, Blockupy and M15 movements attempted to mark their activity during the Biennale through creation of the platform for political discussion, collective learning, and exchange of the ideas, simultaneously using the ability to promote the movement and its aims on the international dimension (Loewe, 2015).

Following this approach, we may assume that the participation in the BB7 served for the activist as an instrument and wasn't aimed at the actual occupation of the Berlin Biennale, or the KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Loewe, 2015; Lütticken, et al., 2012). The independence from the "logic of the institution" and power structures was supposedly guaranteed by the curatorial team of BB7<sup>8</sup>: Artur Zmijewski, Joanna Warsza, Sandra Teitgte and Igor Stokfiszewski who asserted that Occupy is "a situation that we don't curate, supervise, or assess."<sup>9</sup>

Those premises provoked various questions regarding the power relations between occupiers and the BB7 curators. Lütticken et al., while renouncing some of the occupiers' ideas like "Autonomous University" as useful, rendered that "the refusal to go beyond an unfocused montage of accepted signs and slogans does not exactly bode well" (Lütticken, et al., 2012). The issue of occupation "by invitation" (Lütticken, et al., 2012) seemed not to fulfil its proclaimed goals of occupying

and transforming falling rather into the institutional logic and embracing it unwillingly. "If one considers art to be the appropriate instrument to promote political ideas, it is unlikely that the target of one's protest will be the art institution or the art exhibition that one intends to use." (Loewe, 2015).

The Incorporation of Occupy into Berlin Biennale had attracted ferocious critique, which frequently referred to the appropriation of the movement by curators and institution, as well as neutralisation of its political ambitions (Lange, 2012; Pinto, 2012). Zmijewski well known from his polemical artworks to which he refers as "applied social arts" (Zmijewski, 2007) was criticised for exploiting the social movement in order to extend and endorse his own practices (Pinto, 2012; Lütticken, et al., 2012; Lange, 2012). Ana Teixeira Pinto demonstrates one another inconsistency of the curatorial team's strategy: "the biennial relapses into yet another pragmatic contradiction, upholding the very distinctions it seeks to erase. If true art is the art of direct action, why are the "activist" artists neatly distinguished from the "artist" artists?" (Pinto, 2012).

Those accusations, however, seem frail next to the discussion provoked by the bizarre situation in which activist living on the side of the exposition could be seen by Biennale visitors from the viewing platform. As those conditions started to dangerously resemble "nineteenth century colonial exhibitions with their exhibitions of "savages."" (Lütticken, et al., 2012), the ground floor of the KW was quickly denounced as a "human zoo". Consequently, Zmijewski was discredited for instrumentalization of the activists and the movement itself. Similar words of criticism came from the occupiers themselves e.g. Occupy Museum in the statement published on their website refers to Zmijewski's practices at BB7 as "an Occupy time-capsule and tomb that historicizes and deactivates the movement" in which they "unwittingly agreed to play a role".<sup>10</sup> To this critique responded Noah Fischer (a member of Occupy Museums himself), asserting that victimisation of the activists was rooted in a cynicism of

8. The Curators assessed that the Occupiers are "independent and not obligated to follow the logic of the institution". In: "Letter from the Biennale staff to the participants in Indignados/Occupy Biennale". Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/occupy-berlin-biennale/letter-from-the-biennale-staff-to-the-participants-in-indignadosoccupy-biennale/179728402147458> (2018.09.03)

9. Zmijewski, Artur. "7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Politics". Available at: <https://artmuseum.pl/en/archiwum/archiwum-7-berlin-biennale/o-archiwum> (2018.10.17).

10. "Occupy Museums and the 7<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale" 01 June 2012. Available at: <http://occupymuseums.org/index.php/actions/43-occupy-museums-and-the-7th-berlin-biennale> (2018.09.06)

the art world “who mostly failed to pay closer attention to the actual political process or cede the possibility of agency to activists” (Fischer, 2015: 29).

Nevertheless, as reported by Fischer, the tension which grew between the occupiers and the curators escalated in “a few acts of vandalism” (Fischer, 2015: 30). Those actions included ejecting from the KW Institute Spanish activists accused of painting on the institution’s elevation, followed by paint spilled on top of Zmijewski’s head by the member of Pixadores group (Fischer, 2015: 30). This backlash except creating resentments within the activist groups simultaneously depicted BB7 as a rather hypocritical institution, which from the one side engages in promotion of the political ideas of OWS, but from the other obeys the logic of the neoliberal market. In this situation Occupy Museums attempted to mark its position submitting a project entitled “You can’t curate a movement” which had as its aim implementation of non-hierarchical structures at BB7 and in the KW Institute. The approval of the proposition and creation of open assemblies and working groups during BB7 were rendered by the occupiers as a success in their attempt politicise the institution (Fischer, 2015: 32), albeit their efforts did not seem to have any lasting effects.

Looking back at the presence of the Occupy movement at BB7 is hard to overlook its failure in challenging the modes in which functions the mainstream art institution. The criticism which grew out of employing the group of activists in the exposition as well as the issue of occupation “by invitation” (Lütticken, et al., 2012) created various antagonisms. Those antagonisms

inform us about certain art power relationships, which remain unnoticed by the most of gallery visitors. It is still the common assessment to consider the major art institutions as neutral platforms for critical evaluation, which do not fall into the logic of the capital market. As points Fischer, challenging this notion was an important motivation for OWS to progress into those institutions (Fischer, 2015: 17). The unfortunate implementation of occupiers directly into the exposition space, which lead to the transformation of the movement within the institution itself (Loewe, 2015) proves only the inability for anyone to stand outside of the neoliberal system.

Even though the heyday of the OWS has passed, the protest culture which sprung up with its activation remains a part of our present. Following the decade marked by various types of crises and a shift to the political right, we are witnessing influential social movements which address various forms of resistance to hierarchical and exclusive structures. The revolts continue to explode, also within the art world. One can mention a boycott of the 19<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennale, where artists demanded to revoke cooperation with one of the event’s sponsors Transfield Holding invested in building immigrants’ detention centers, or the artists’ call during the 31<sup>st</sup> São Paulo Biennale for the institution to return funds received from the Israeli government. The “new artistic subject” (Sholette, 2015: 185) born out of OWS continues to inform us about changing political imagery, placing itself among other socially-orientated, participatory practices, and marking a new current in politically engaged contemporary art rather than proclaiming its end.

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