

Agency in a Zoo: The Occupy Movement's Strategic Expansion to Art Institutions

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Image 1. Taksim Solidarity Action, New York City, June 2013. Credits: Noah Fischer

Part 1: Introduction

It appears that the 2011 movements are now dead; we know for a fact that they were violently repressed in nearly every case. Today, protesters from Tahrir, Moscow, and squares in other cities continue

to face harsh political retribution including imprisonment and torture.¹ However, the picture of a movement that ended after a few months in 2011 changes when we consider subsequent occupations such as Occupy Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013), Occupy Central with Love and Peace in Hong Kong (2014), World Cup Revolt in Brazil (2014), or the rolling #BlackLivesMatter protests in the United States (2014–15), we realize that the picture of worldwide revolt is not a painting from the past; that it is not even a picture, but a reality we are still living today. This confusion between image and reality of movements touches on the political challenge that is currently most central: the mesmerizingly visual quality of a market-dominated society, a space where one's thinking is inundated with fabricated mini-narratives constantly trying to frame reality. Spin has never been as powerful as it is today: in the United States, democratic elections are flooded with capital and replaced with enormous public relations campaigns—parallel to other forms of entertainment. This is why current financial inequality and anti-democratic trends appear as cultural rather than political challenges. In this essay I argue that the tactic of occupation so central to the 2011 movements was a unique and effective response, dealing in a much more subtle way with the mechanisms of cooption than previous uprisings. I will argue that this phenomenon has everything to do with art: when the squares were evicted, the movements brought the strategy of occupation into cultural spaces and, perhaps most prominently, into art institutions.

Upscale art milieus—from upscale art fairs to major museums—in their surging economic significance and the popular fascination they arise, are being hacked to reveal a massive new wave of social, racial, and economic inequality at the epicenter of high-art luxury. In some cases this is meant to apply pressure on the 1%, with a leverage that would be nearly impossible to access in other spheres. For example, Gulf Labor's campaign, now in a direct negotiating stage, is aimed at the new Guggenheim museum in Abu Dhabi, highlighting how museums are involved in the rebranding of migrant labor-abusing monarchies and oligarchies, whose actual

repressive turns are remade to look like art-loving destinations for a particular global progressive class.² We have seen spirited rejections of curatorial programming connecting Creative Time with Israel's military industrial complex,³ and a successful artist-led call for Sydney Biennial to cut all ties from its founder and lead sponsor, Transfield Holdings, an investor in immigration detention centers.⁴ We have seen #BlackLivesMatter actions staged at the New York Armory art fair, importing the issue of police violence and, beneath it, structural racism, to 1% watering holes without invitation.⁵

Yet the movement's use of these art stages touches on a widespread anxiety. Generations have witnessed the absorption of political dissent by soft and cooptive, rather than antagonistic, responses from capitalist institutions—including advertising corporations, private academies, and art institutions. Therefore, it makes sense to take a hard look at whether art institutions only serve as traps set by the elite to absorb dissent or if they can contribute to the shift away from late capitalism that these political movements demand.

This question is posed in an essay published in the first issue of *FIELD*⁶ where its author, Sebastian Loewe, argues against the Occupy movement's use of artistic platforms and concludes by advising activists to address the systemic foundations of inequality instead of "migrating to the art world." Playing the protagonist in Loewe's sweeping portrayal of the Occupy Movement, and what Loewe characterizes as its "fatal flaw" of moralistic politics, is the figure of the movement-affiliated artist, whose artworks "express a longing for political morality through the means of art and artistic direct action." The artist in Loewe's portrayal is not only romantically naïve but lethally dangerous to the movement. Loewe theorizes that the Occupy Movement's very last gasp of air and subsequent rigor mortis can be attributed to two art exhibitions that occurred in 2012: the 7th Berlin Biennale and dOCUMENTA13.⁷ Protesters, apparently searching for opportunities to advertise the movement, instead led it into a fatal trap.

At the crux of Loewe's critique⁸ is the idea that representation and politics don't mix. This is argued more or less in the following way: once inside the gates of the Biennale, the protesters gazed into the eyes of the art world and were turned to stone. The result was a transformation of political intention into immobilized aesthetics with the ultimate effect of reinforcing the status quo itself. According to Loewe, this occurs automatically when the image of protests is foregrounded as art, because the institutional acceptance of progressive values is fully demonstrated as a kind of righteous beauty, cancelling out the need to protest further. Loewe explains it this way:

"Once the camp is perceived as a work of art and not just a political occupation, it is connected to a longing for sensuous perception and the "satisfaction to higher spiritual interests", as Hegel puts it. All initially political aspects of the Occupy camp are then bound to aesthetic pleasure, which means they are bound to the personal taste and mental stimulation of the viewer. Potential political activists thus become an audience."⁹

My response begins with an attempt to bring this critique into proper scale and into the political realities of our present moment. By asserting that two German art exhibitions represent the entire transnational 2011 movements' Waterloo, Loewe's theory minimizes the primacy of asymmetric state violence impacted on the 2011 movements. Nearly across the board, we saw a coordinated demonstration of militarized police power, breaking its own laws and clearing the peaceful protest squares through beatings, unlawful imprisonment,¹⁰ conspiracy, and subterfuge.¹¹ Meanwhile, the speedy passage of draconian legislation tailored to the occupations serves as a chilling reminder of the unification of lawmakers and industry against grassroots democratic movements, clearly registering a threat to future occupiers. This is not to brush aside the importance of the cultural stage, which is what I will mostly discuss here. However in this case,¹² to overly endow the art world¹³ with movement-killing significance bypasses an opportunity to examine how hard-edged anti-democratic tendencies, including physical violence, emerged from behind a soft neoliberal veneer

to snuff out grassroots democracy. This narrative runs directly counter to the illusion spun by capitalist democracies (an illusion only conjured for those with white privilege in the first place), which creates the image of a world in which police enforce laws protecting public free speech and public assembly rather than unleashing illegal violence on its practitioners. The fact that leadership was fearful enough of these peaceful uprisings to temporarily remove the veil and resort to autocratic methods is the key lesson about the end of the square stage of the 2011 movements.

Zooming back down into the art world and Loewe's theory that it automatically aestheticizes protest, we might begin by thinking more about the illusions that the art world conjures about itself. Respected art institutions such as the Venice Biennale or the Museum of Modern Art in New York are still widely viewed as neutral spaces for critical thinking and aesthetic contemplation, somewhat removed from the aggression of market forces. Breaking this myth by showing that many art institutions function as core organs of neoliberal ideology production is a necessary step in understanding how the expansion of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS) into these spaces was of a strategic rather than naïve character. Within the first weeks of OWS, one of my groups, Occupy Museums (OM), planned actions at MoMA with the understanding that we were enlarging the domain of the contested spaces of Wall Street (via museum trustees, along with many other connections I will describe later) rather than "migrating" to neutral spaces in search of resources, as Loewe claims.¹⁴ The Occupy Wall Street movement understood museums as viable targets to challenge normalized economic inequality—as extensions of Wall Street.

Yet Loewe's discussion of the 7th Berlin Biennale and DOCUMENTA 13 concerns an interaction between activists and art institutions that was not apparently about "targets"—in other words, not antagonistic, but sympathetic, and it must be acknowledged that there is a difference between occupying museums with and without invitation, even if the final political intention is the same. This interplay between outside and inside seems to be the danger zone

for cooption, but a deeper appreciation of the thinking of those involved in the movement reveals it as somewhat of a false duality—a claim that I will discuss in relation to the 7th Berlin Biennale, where the approaches concerning exterior and interior worked in tandem. The key is understanding the overall political challenge—not just that of the art world—as a problem of images.

Perhaps a metaphor will help paint a clearer picture of how representation and aesthetics might work in relation to occupation, and there is a very concrete one in the situation described at the 7th Berlin Biennale: the human zoo. In his essay, Loewe remembers: “In Berlin the public considered the intervention to be kitschy, and it was referred to as a human zoo.”¹⁵ I propose to consider this zoo in greater detail—how was it constructed spatially and ideologically? How might the human zoo relate to the history of museums? And, also, could the occupied squares also be seen as zoos? If we ask ourselves in relation to the 7th Berlin Biennale about the border of this human zoo, we might realize that it was in fact borderless, and we might encounter a useful tool for understanding the nuanced tactic of occupation as it relates to the specific challenges of neoliberal culture-scapes, which are constructed around a borderless market.

Speaking of nuance, questions about the exact meaning of the Occupy Movement lead into a terrain of political, geographical, and temporal complexity that brings the actual life of the 2011 movements into view. In Loewe’s text, use of such phrases as “Occupy’s general world view”¹⁶ confuses things because OWS, occupations in Hong Kong, Germany, and Madrid (which is the Indignados of M15 Movement preceding Occupy Wall Street) are all discussed interchangeably as one same movement called “Occupy.” However, the movements under the particular meme of “Occupy”—the more than 300 other US Occupations,¹⁷ Gezi Park Istanbul, Central Square With Love and Peace, Hong Kong, and many others—often have no more in common with one another than what OWS shares with the politics of Tahrir Square (Arab Spring), the Icelandic Revolution, or the Israeli Tent Movement. It is not wise to conflate a movement challenging Wall Street’s dominance (OWS)

with one concerned about China's control over local elections (Occupy Central), yet the collapse of this complexity is convenient because it's only possible to characterize an entire transnational political process as "moralistic" through artificial constructions. This can be avoided by referring specifically to movements (or groups) by name, such as M15/Puerta del Sol or Occupy Wall Street in New York. Or, when there is a reason to speak generally, referring to the 2011 Movements. When discussing the 7th Berlin Biennale, political parsing will add a lot to an analysis, since political differentiation was present in microcosm in the Kunstwerke.

Part 2: The Human Zoo in Berlin

I was a participant in the seventh Berlin Biennale, among those invited from the Occupy, Blockupy, and M15 movements by curators Joanna Warsza and Artur Zmijewski to make use of the main space of the Kunstwerke as, in Zmijewski's words, "a situation that we don't curate, supervise, or assess."¹⁸ As it turned out, this space, which had been laid out with temporary structures for assemblies, projections, and art-making by the host group, Occupy Berlin, sat below a public viewing platform. In one smaller adjacent room also within that same exhibition hall, invited activists cooked reclaimed food and in another one, we slept on mattresses laid out on the floor en masse. Biennale visitors did not tend to enter these rooms, so their main experience was peering down on activists in the main space working on computers, having assemblies, or spray painting signs that gradually crammed the walls with a mishmash of slogans and graphics .

As is now well known, the arrangement was quickly referred to by the press as representing a human zoo, and this name was also soon used by those of us participating. In fact, I am among those quoted by Loewe in his FIELD essay, stating that our occupation was a "human-zoo." In the context of his essay, my statement sounds like an admission that the situation didn't provide any meaningful agency

for the 2011 movements. But Loewe misunderstood the meaning of my statement: this zoo-like quality was not inherently a problem. Rather, I saw the specular quality of our position in the biennial as a useful tool. To understand how this could be requires me once again pull back for a wider view of movement political thinking.

As Chris Hedges writes, "If we are not brutal about diagnosing what we are up against, then all of our resistance is futile."¹⁹ One possible understanding of neoliberal capitalism is to see it as a series of enclosures separating apparently free social space into racial and class-based containers, which, although minutely controlled, often have no apparent boundaries. Consider that Americans, citizens of a nation that relegates by far the world's largest population of human beings to years behind bars and concrete walls, while separating itself from its neighbor Mexico via a militarized multi billion dollar fence still stand at the remnants of the Berlin Wall and wonder how such an ideological monstrosity could have ever existed. On one hand, this simply speaks to the persuasiveness of capitalist ideology to render physical control invisible. But there is also a grain of truth here: social control under late capitalism cannot be boiled down into a monolithic policy, it's often carried out through a double system just now coming into popular consciousness through a closer look at police violence sparked by #BlackLivesMatter protests: physical force keeps legally disempowered immigrants and traditionally repressed black people in check. But instruments of distraction and social normalization, enforced through a logic of visibility are the favored weapons used to neutralize revolt potential among the rest of the 99%.

In this situation, citizens are now brought into total visual exposure to the market. With the continual tracking of metrics of personal information ushered in by the ever-accumulating technologies of credit cards, video surveillance, and the myriad forms of social media, we have lost control of our lives as non-abstract existences whose value lies beyond image. This loss of control allows the world's largest corporations to easily hunt down citizens and non citizens with scientifically precise advertising weapons. This citizen

is hunted not in order to be shot, stabbed, and eaten or displayed as trophy, but rather to continue their “normal” lives in a completely depoliticized dimension: atomized into a sub-sub demographic and matched up algorithimically with the corporate bottom line which is extraction of common resources transformed into private profit. We can see how this system parallels the hunting of wild animals for display in a zoo, which is also a zone of total exposure to a market, where the normal existence of the animal is supposed to continue in a completely controlled and capitalized visible format.²⁰

A second function of zoos is to display prone animals to visitors in order to demonstrate the superiority of one species over another. By this logic, the current near complete penetration of the market into private life signals the superiority of the 1%, who, taking the cue, began indulging in evermore reckless hubris such as the 2008 crash and subsequent public bailouts. But this of course has sparked a backlash in the form of the 2011 political movements and their continuation. This brings us to a theory of occupation: occupiers of Zucotti/Liberty park or Puerta del Sol rather than fleeing this zoo, voluntarily stepped into highly exposed public spaces for indefinite periods of time, often in 24/7 view of corporate television vans as well as media outlets and social media. The squares were watched from the inside and outside in extreme detail: sleeping, eating, yelling, organizing, and doing nothing? everything had an audience, as if the protesters were zoo animals. In most cases space was held not by any viable challenge to military or police forces, but rather through the temporal continuity of compelling public spectacle of the occupations themselves. Why did this ongoing living in public seemed to contribute the greater politicization of the occupying community and successful dispersal of its messages, rather than to atomization and extraction?

Perhaps the ongoing exhibition of grassroots democracy short circuited a capitalist imperative in which time not spent in the pursuit of profit becomes simply inconceivable and taboo—indeed the attempt to share power has been repulsive to free market ideologues for centuries²¹. But the success of occupation also

makes me think about the primacy of artists and artistic tactics in the squares. Like grassroots power-sharing, non-market oriented art practice generates what capitalism can only understand as redundant production- a production which Greg Sholette calls "dark matter." Sholette states: "I attempt to reveal dark matter as a potentially vibrant agency already engaged in proto political processes of non market gift giving, informal self organizing, and in some cases, overt political resistance."²² Perhaps this understanding of political agency contained deep within art practice explains why so many artists took part in occupations and why it is so easy to imagine the squares as giant conceptual art projects.²³

Whatever the reason for the success of the occupation tactic, it certainly ended a cycle of protests as benign representations of "bodies in the street", such as the massive marches of the Iraq war in 2003.²⁴ As a general result of occupation, we witnessed a temporary flipping of the neoliberal zoo logic: rather than citizens' lives brought into total visual domination by the market, the power and corruption of the 1% was brought into a plane of higher visibility to the eyes of the public. Legible images and languages describing this power began to circulate.

As we wonder how the tactic of occupation might function within an art institution rather than in a square, we must begin by noticing that art no longer has the monopoly on transformation from politics into aesthetics—daily life and meaningful political process abstracted by markets are present as normal functions of every kind of institution, within public or private space. This is in fact the core condition sparking resistance in the first place. It does not mean that art institutions cannot be undifferentiated from universities or banks or sports arenas: indeed, understanding their specific qualities is the key to tactical success. But it does mean that Loewe's advice to activists to depart from the art world in search of firmer ground²⁵ does not help, as no such ground exists. Instead, we are left to face the chilling scale of our challenge. From a practical perspective, the effective mentality in facing this nearly overwhelming landscape of market based control is to

shed strict dogmatic formulations in exchange for an experimental approach. We search for effective hacks, cracks, and hidden political potentialities, which might be hiding in plain sight. This gets us close to a framework for understanding the Occupy Wall Street/M15 movement's intervention in the 7th Berlin Biennale. But before we get into the specifics, it will help to look more closely at art institutions from a movement perspective.

Part 3: A Movement Analysis of Art Institutions as Targets

If we peer into the history of museums, doubts about their ability to aid the 2011 movements' struggle seem well founded. Already in their early days as cabinets of curiosity, the 17th Century's 1% amassed in them bragging collections out of colonial exploits, in what was seen as concrete proof of racial and cultural superiority (sometimes even exhibiting live humans exoticized like zoo animals).²⁶ In this way, museums have long been official incubators of those cultural norms necessary for elites to illegally extract resources and abuse communities. Similarly, we see today a museum trend perfectly in line with rising economic inequality and its effects. Flet's for example witness the rapid proliferation of US museums doubling as tax write offs and abusing loop holes regarding public service, where buildings attached to billionaire mansions on remote properties are considered public spaces.²⁷

Art institutions are in fact core components of the Capitalist mother-board. Major museums and biennials, from MoMA to the Venice and Berlin Biennales, hover above a surging art market. The critical value they produce equals more expensive prices and ultimately, a transformation into stable assets of the art circulating through them, playing a similar role to that of a ratings agency. But in my view, their significance is not so much financial as ideological. The tight and opaque global network connecting museums, auctions, art fairs, and biennales functions as an informal networking channel for a global capitalist class while the image of

this luxurious lifestyle and high production aesthetics are dangled before the noses of the 99% as the ultimate sign of aspiration: the juicy carrot on the stick. Meanwhile, the everyday functioning of these institutions -first through their construction, then their hiring processes, and their tendencies to employ unpaid interns-, incubate and normalize extreme versions of neoliberal precarity. In short, many art institutions have become weaponized as precise manifestations of a 1% worldview that the Occupy Wall Street Movement targets concerning the invasion of the public sphere by the private. Going back to the zoo metaphor, the entire art world would act as a tiger cage attracting crowds by the allure of beauty, exoticism, and power. However, it turns out that the crowds themselves are the ones being totally exposed.

Grey Zones

In the light of this exposition, the debate comes down to a struggle between a defense of art's existence within the private sphere versus a notion of art taking place within the commons—as a natural inheritance of being part of a society. The Occupy Museums movement sees museums as contested sites: this grey zone is the fulcrum on which our activism balances.

Boris Groys has written in relation to the founding of the Louvre that "instead of destroying the sacred and profane objects belonging to the Old Regime, they defunctionalized, or, in other words, aestheticized them. The French Revolution turned the design of the Old Regime into what we today call art, i.e., objects not of use but of pure contemplation."²⁸

On one hand, this seems to support Loewe's contention that museums automatically aestheticize and depoliticize their contents, acting as counter-revolutionary traps. However, if it is the icons of the 1% holding political power which are defunctionalized, then the politics are reversed, and activating a revolutionary potential within the logic of display. The Louvre in Paris opened exactly a year after the death of the French king, allowing free entrance for the public.

In its time it was understood as a symbol of popular sovereignty (this historical contextualization renders the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a museum returned to conditions of repressive monarchy, especially depressing).²⁹ This history points to a promise implicit in public museums, especially their claim of non-censorship that famously echoed by president John K Kennedy in a Cold War context, when he stated that “the artist...becomes the last champion... against an intrusive society and officious state.” In their housing of this unfettered individual expression, museums are expected to create spaces for contemplation and exploration of political power, rather than for the superstitious belief in the latter’s legitimacy. This democratic function, though seldom is ever reached, and almost completely rhetorical and ceremonial, has nevertheless seemed to provide quite a bit of leverage to activists who know how to work with symbols. As Greg Sholette shows in his *Dark Matter Archives*,³⁰ a robust tradition of artist protest particularly from the early 20th century to the end of the Cold War provides credibility for the legitimate amplification of pressing citizen’s political issues in museums. This might also explain why protesters at museums act in relative safety from violent arrest despite the valuable assets held inside museums (compare police reactions with occupying banks or sports stadiums for example), and why subsequent interruptions of their temple- like domain have often provoked significant press repercussion.

Most of the historic actions such as Art Workers Coalition display of Vietnam War atrocities in front of Picasso’s *Guernica* at MoMA (1970) “Q: And babies? A: And babies,” (following a letter writing campaign to Picasso to remove the painting in solidarity)³¹ are examples where the museum has been used to separate a persistently romantic notion of free speech and democratic values associated with art, from a hard edged reality of military campaigns and financial domination. This would not be possible with targets such as banks, the energy industry, and governments, all already reviled. Museums, as institutions well regarded in social life, are

hence useful in exposing the contradictions between democracy and capitalism.

Interior Tactics

So far I have discussed how and why art institutions make good movement-targets, but what does it mean to occupy an institutional interior? Remembering that in every possible kind of space from the street to the office, people are under more or less equal exposure to the political force of the market, this boundary-crossing from exterior to interior might be less significant than it initially appears. However, it should not be taken lightly either, since it certainly means stepping inside the formal frame of power. Once invited in, activists are likely to be perceived as coopted, a perception with repercussions. From the experimental approach— a movement perspective, this means that sharper tactics are required for the operation, and that dangers need to be pondered in order to find counter strategies.

Activists accepting an invitation temporarily hold the institutional brand, becoming diplomats for the art institution, which compromises the credibility of their critical position towards said institution. This problem can be avoided by forfeiting the higher visibility usually generated by symbolic media-based action, and instead opting for the tactic of excavating deeper into the logic of the institution itself. This brings us to the 7th Berlin Biennale.

Part 4: The Occupied Berlin Biennale

We are now back in our activist zoo in Berlin, under the gaze of an art audience. From the vantage point outlined above, we can see that the “human zoo” is simply an outcropping of a much more pervasive condition where the neoliberal individual is brought into complete visibility to the market. This particular zoo was unique mostly because the paying visitors, media, and art world professionals viewing the Biennale, actually perceived it as a zoo,

which was hard to avoid, due to the awkward concentration of the political dynamics of the gaze that visitors experiences in the Kunstwerke. The press immediately found this zooness distasteful, accusing the Biennale's curators of having deceived activists for their own benefit. But by portraying the members of the squares as victims, many of these critiques revealed a deep seated political cynicism coded into the art world who mostly failed to pay closer attention to the actual political process or cede the possibility of agency to activists.³² Was the curatorial thinking benign or ironic? Curators Artur Zmijewski's and Joanna Warsza's manifesto-like move to present only a concrete political function as art, rather than the usual pluralistic position favored by the market,³³ ran parallel to and was influenced by the 2011 movements, which had been unfolding in real time during their two years of research before the Biennale. As such, I would tend to see their concept as an effect of a particularly heightened historical moment, which swept their project up into its sphere of radicalization. However, their decision to designate a large portion of the Kunstwerke's space to activists' supposed free reign should not primarily be judged on the merits of authored concept. Seen as a rare movement/hybrid act, it might instead be a call to analyze the actual political dynamics that had entered the Kunswerke, to search for a new way to look at an exhibition.³² I would suggest a few points of context.

The first key to understanding BB7 is that Zmijewski was a visiting artist-curator, rather than a permanent member of the institution. As primarily an artist (rather than a curator) already long acclaimed in Poland, he was not focused on maintaining the institution's brand in the way that Richard Armstrong and other museum directors and curators continually defend theirs.³³ This meant that a potential wedge might have been driven between the curators and the Biennale institution itself. In my view, the barrage of bad press might have acted as this wedge, pushing Zmijewski into closer alignment with the goals of the movement rather than the goals of the Berlin Biennale Institution which is its positive branding and preservation.

The second key to understanding the occupied portion of BB7 is to see that it had been initiated, but not contained, by its curatorial premise. Though it is customary to see exhibitions as static pictures which is how most reviews of BB7 saw it, that was not the case in an exhibition that had invited actual movement activists from different regions for a long term stay. A political complexity unfolding over time emerged from this initial framework. For example, many participants were German—a nation then as now leveling austerity measures on southern Europe, while other invited activists had been key figures in the Puerta del Sol and other squares opposing these austerity measures. Berlin should not be considered a neutral political space. Although in Zmijewski's previous video works such as "Others" he had gathered politically oppositional groups into the same space with a camera rolling, occupied BB7 concerned a much more subtle politics- a movement politics which has alignments and tensions which in fact have still not been well formulated. Dynamics and tensions inside this community opened a second track of the Biennale's political content, worlds apart from available catalogs and wall texts, although paradoxically in an exhibition format, the invited public was not able to pick up on this content track.

The Biennale itself opened on April 26th with an assembly hosted by Occupy Berlin. Eventually, there were a few acts of vandalism lashing out against the institution itself: invited Spanish activists were expelled from the Kunstwerke for spray painting on the KW's courtyard façade, while shortly after, Brazilian activists poured paint on top of Zmijewski's head in the St. Elizabeth Church, an outpost of the Biennale which housed Pawel Althamer's Draftsman's congress. These antagonistic acts had served to further reify Zmijewski into a Kurtz-like figure, while dividing activists by allegiance vs. no allegiances to the Berlin Biennale, which generally echoed north-south European lines. However, this was only one stage in an unfolding picture. Occupy Museums was the one group in the "Occupy Camp" of Berlin whose practice had already been focused on the specific intersection between art institutions and the horizons Occupy Wall Street Movement. Although our goal for

BB7 was primarily to build up a transnational action network on the artistic front, we knew that we would have to first deal directly with the power dynamics implicit in our relationship to the Berlin Biennale, as well as with the strange spatial fact of living inside of an exhibition. Our plan was three pronged: we would first publicly name the curators and the institution's position of power in the situation- beyond the misleading "situation that we don't curate, supervise, or assess." (-need a reference-) We would then basically ignore the exhibition, using it only as a base to stage actions at targets around Berlin (banks and museums). Simultaneous to this we would quietly organize among the community toward more effective assemblies and working groups as a kind of Trojan Horse to infect that particular art world platform with the direct democracy spirit of the movements. We would thereby repurpose the Biennial, which we understood as a propagator of neoliberal political normality in its "default" state, into a useful site for our movement. We arrived in Berlin one month after the biennial opened, after the vandalism and schisms described above had already taken place. We also arrived after press reviews had mostly been written, which meant that we encountered a situation which was perhaps still alive politically but considered case-closed on a critical level.

Horizontalization Process

In the middle of June, after some preliminary actions which doubled as workshops to merge Occupy Museums together with activists from Spain, Germany, and Russia ³⁴ we publicly challenged the curators with a statement called "You Cannot Curate a Movement."³⁵ It read "All decisions will be made by the assemblea, which includes and embraces former curators, directors, workers, and the entire KW community." We also proposed that "All... decisions pertaining to finance from the German Government [would] be made by the assemblea and mapped in complete transparency [retroactively] from the beginning of the biennial to the end." Thus, we proposed to bring BB7 completely into the logic of the movement itself rather than a Biennale simply containing a

specific zone for activism, whose perimeters were conceptualized by the curators.³⁶

While such a proposal would usually be met with silence, or put through a bureaucratic process to defang and aestheticize it,³⁸ the fact that the curators were aligned in their interest to continue the experiment rather “protecting” the institution, and also the fact that the exhibition occurred in 2012 while the initial energy of the squares was still hot, led them to accept it, which opened the way for a historical experiment. Once accepted, the proposal was brought to a general assembly consisting of all KW workers: from directors to janitors and all staff members and guards, where consensus was reached. We then formed a number of working groups and further general assemblies to carry out the horizontalization process: each working group represented a merging of the Biennale/Kunstwerke team with activists.³⁹

Subtle shift in power within the Berlin Biennale occurred simply through this act of congregating, proposing, and breaking the lines between curators, artists, activists, publics, and museum workers. When the guards brought up their unlivable wage in assembly (in front of the KW director as well as staff, activists, and some visitors from the public), it resulted in a 30% raise at the following Biennale.⁴⁰ This small concrete win pointed to the fact that the biennale had become effectively politicized. From the activist’s standpoint, which at first had felt viscerally humiliating (visitors photographed us each morning as we walked through the courtyard to the only shower). It had meant regaining dignity, meshing more organically with the institutional staff and stretching out from the curated “zoo” beneath the viewing platform into the offices, exhibition areas, and courtyard. But it wasn’t only activists experiencing the transformation of the place. A number of Kunstwerke staff quit after the horizontalization experiment. As Zmijewski writes: “Political reality is brutal-after this experience the Kunstwerke went back to its former shape quite fast. But a few of the permanent Kunstwerke employees decided to quit their job. After the experience [that] they had during BB7 they were not able to continue work under the same conditions.”⁴¹

In claiming a kind of political success for this experiment, I note that most of the mechanisms of power such as access to German Federal Cultural Foundation's actual budget, or financial decision making and especially the ability to break the temporal frame of Biennale programming were much too deeply rooted to touch in the few weeks of the experiment. It also did not generate the kind of withering media/shaming attention that Occupy Museum or Liberate Tate actions or Gulf Labor Coalition/G.U.L.F.'s uninvited actions tend to. However, the end goal of these high profile actions and campaigns from a movement standpoint are not only to enact reform on specific issues (with the exception of Liberate Tate) but rather to bring a movement horizon which is a post-capitalist horizon, into the art world. The horizontalization process was a successful experiment in transforming neoliberal hierarchies and temporal logic from the inside, even if temporarily, and along the way we won allies while strengthening movement networks.⁴² It's something of an irony then that the perception of a human zoo—as an object of ridicule, finally turned out to be an illusion that concealed a democratic experiment which was a genuine moment of institution-breaching by the 2011 movements. Since this process did not adhere to the codes of an art world where exhibitions consist of authored aesthetic or conceptual frameworks, and where political processes within art institutions are theoretically impossible, to most viewers, including Loewe, the experiment was automatically invisible. However, direct democracy and interior occupation do not depend on high visibility to function, they may even depend on invisibility within the art world context.

Conclusion

The years since 2012 show that the 7th Berlin Biennale contributed significantly to an international movement-affiliated network that continues to leverage the art world in the service to movement-horizons. BB7 participants followed up with similar institutional experiments including an attempt to horizontalize the Zamek Ujazdovsky in Warsaw, whose leadership was replacing

permanent staff with a system of precarious labor. The campaign, called “Winter Holiday Camp” contributed to the ousting of the institution’s director.⁴³ Occupy Museums staged an exhibition called “Occupy Your BFF” at Momenta Art in Brooklyn, New York, which led to the reorganizing of its Bloomberg affiliated board.⁴⁴ In Germany, an occupation and physical intervention of the exhibition “Global Activism” at Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe challenged a logic of display which aestheticized global movements and editorialized their politics. In the ZKM’s exhibition’s version of global activism, Germany and its austerity program as well as its immigration issues did not factor into the global political picture. In turn, an international group including African refugees living in Germany physically altered the curatorial wall text scrawling missing voices onto white walls. Additional self made institutional experiments such as the recent Avtonomi Akadimia in Athens also share the DNA of BB7.⁴⁵ Where neoliberal gatekeepers try to self-servingly frame and coopt the politics of the 2011 movements, we have intervened, breaking through the professional anxieties which normalize and usually inhibit effective politics in a highly networked art world and conducting experiments with a political framework and artistic process that is inspired by the square movements themselves, showing that “you cannot curate a movement.”

The International cells resulting from BB7 have also proven to be an essential tool for waging international campaigns. In 2014 I joined the Gulf Labor Coalition campaign along with a small group of people who had been central players in the Occupy Movement, and transferred tactics developed with Occupy Museums and campaigns such as Strike Debt into an action campaign that turned up the pressure on the Guggenheim. Forming the Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.) we occupied the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, finally forcing negotiations between GLC and the Guggenheim Foundation’s board of trustees—an important escalation after a five year campaign. The network forged in the shadows of the human zoo of the Berlin Biennale was the secret weapon that helped a mostly US-based group assemble a small

army⁴⁶ to shut down a non-US branch of the Guggenheim museum. The action's tactical complexity which included a number of boats to seize the Guggenheim Museum from the grand canal points to a new potential: a potential to act internationally at a high level has become an essential device for countering the global leverage exerted by the 1%.⁴⁷

The current breathtaking recent global consolidation of power by the 1% has shifted the ground so that politics have totally ceased to function in the formal political sphere and the a logic of financialization has colonized a previously unthinkable portion of public and personal territory. market has seeped out from Wall Street into the financialization of everyday life. The battle for human equality and justice will find itself surrounded if confined to traditional political battlefields and dogmas. But with the understanding that "all our grievances are connected," people are developing activists are finding threads to exert leverage in their own across many spheres; , and re-discovering the dignity of common struggle and solidarity. Artists are no exception to this process, in the occupation of art institutions we are seeing this struggle and this solidarity with the larger developing movements articulated with full intensity.

Noah Fischer is a New York based artist and activist. He is a member of Occupy Museums and Gulf Labor. Initially Fischer's practice encompassed kinetic installations (Rhetoric Machine, New York, Oliver Kamm Gallery, 2006, Pop Ark, Kunstenfestivaldesart and Steirischer Herbst 2007) experimental theater (collaborations with andcompany&co), and object making (Monitor, Clare Oliver Gallery, 2008). Following the financial crash, Fischer exited from the private art market, initiating an inquiry into mechanisms of inequality through performance in public space (Summer of Change, 2011). This practice collided with the Occupy Wall Street Movement where he performed in the park as a giant talking coin, and then became involved in direct action organizing, initiating Occupy Museums with

a manifesto on October 19th, 2011. Fischer has played a central role in planning actions and experiments at MoMA, Frieze, Guggenheim, 7th Berlin Biennale, KM, and CCA Warsaw, uncovering a network of allies internationally. He is currently working on a platform concerned with debt in the arts along with artist Coco Fusco, and maintains a studio practice in Brooklyn.

Notes

1. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/10/egypt-army-torture-killings-revolution>
2. <http://www.tdic.ae/tdicategories/cultural/pages/guggenheim.aspx>
3. <http://hyperallergic.com/131497/over-100-artists-and-intellectuals-call-for-withdrawal-from-creative-time-exhibition/>
4. Gulf Labor: <http://www.gulflabor.org>, Sydney Biennale Boycott: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/11/sydney-biennale-boycott-victory-shows-that-divestment-works> BDS: <http://mondoweiss.net/2014/06/activists-taking-technion>
5. <http://hyperallergic.com/189038/black-lives-matter-demonstrators-stage-die-in-at-the-armory-show/>
6. <http://fieldjournal.com/issue-1/loewe>
7. In this response to Loewe's text, I will be discussing Berlin Biennale (BB7) and leaving out Documenta which I only visited for a day. In my opinion, Documenta was less radical of an occupation by virtue of not taking on its 1% institution more directly. It also contained a different activist context: either most of all German occupiers, while BB7 was made up of activists from Madrid, NYC, Berlin, Frankfurt, Turkey, etc. And in fact, it was mostly not the German Occupiers who were active in the institutional transformation described in this text.
8. Two examples: "The attempt to frame political movements within an art exhibition, as in the oxymoronic 'invitation' extended to members of Occupy and the Indignados to inhabit the ground floor of KW, neutralizes their activism by filtering it through the lens of representation, rendering their action less urgent and their presence more harmless." <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/7th-berlin-biennale/>

"As some aspects of the recent Occupy Wall Street demonstrations have shown, political discourse has become increasingly dominated by the impulses of neo anarchism, identity politics, post colonialism, and other intellectual fads. This new radicalism has made itself so irrelevant with respect to real politics that it ends up serving as a kind of cathartic space for the justifiable anxieties wrought by late capitalism, further stabilizing its systemic and integrative power rather than disrupting it. These trends are the products as well as unwitting allies of that which they oppose." Gregory Smulewicz Zucker and Michael Thompson, http://logosjournal.com/2015/thompson_zucker/

9. <http://fieldjournal.com/issue1/loewe>
10. http://gothamist.com/2015/04/02/ows_nypd_settlement.php
11. http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2011/11/occupy_protest_coordinate_crackdown_wall_street
12. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lee_camp/anti_occupy_law_passes_nea_b_1343728.html
13. Which NYC mayor Bloomberg significantly called "my personal army" in 2011
14. Here is Occupy Museums initial call to action: http://tumblr.artfcity.com/post/11652516894/occupy_museums_speaking_out_in_front_of_the
15. <http://fieldjournal.com/issue1/loewe>
16. "One of Occupy's major political goals was to encourage the 99% to "assert [their] power." [7] The claim at the very end of the New York declaration reads: "Join us and make our voices heard!" [8] Every single voiced critique of political, economic and social conditions was considered a valid contribution to Occupy's general world view, a world view which claimed to become increasingly effective as more people joined." <http://fieldjournal.com/issue1/loewe>
17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Occupy_movement_protest_locations_in_the_United_States
18. http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein_en/7th_berlin_biennale_for_contemporary_politics_by_artur_zmijewski_27718
19. http://www.salon.com/2015/06/04/we_are_in_a_revolutionary_moment_chris_hedges_explains_why_an_uprising_is_coming_%E2%80%94_and_soon/

20. Or held for eventual entertaining slaughter as the first zoos in Rome were, sited next to the Coliseum where animals fought humans.
21. Alexander Hamilton, first American Secretary of the Treasury: "It has been observed that a pure democracy if it were practicable would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position is more false than this. The ancient democracies in which the people themselves deliberated never possessed one good feature of government. Their very character was tyranny? their figure deformity." Speech in New York, urging ratification of the U.S. Constitution (21 June 1788).
22. [http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/i forgot remember forget/artists embrace your redundancy introduction gregory shoettes dark#](http://www.manifestajournal.org/issues/i%20forgot%20remember%20forget/artists%20embrace%20your%20redundancy%20introduction%20gregory%20shoettes%20dark#)

It it was a conceptual art project, it was one totally outside of the frame of the art world. When, in the first weeks of the occupation, Nato Thompson at Creative Time (and many others) attempted to organize a sanctioned exhibition in the park called the "Occupennial", the idea quickly lost traction as the spirit of non-affiliation became apparent.
23. [https://www.greenleft.org au/node/53400](https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/53400)

"Instead of migrating to the art world and partaking in international biennials, activists should put effort into the analysis of the systemic, antagonistic foundations of inequalities, damages and grievances, in order to prevent moralistic criticism."
24. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saartjie_Baartman
25. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art collectors gain tax benefits from private museums.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/business/art%20collectors%20gain%20tax%20benefits%20from%20private%20museums.html)
26. Though many museum boards such as the Whitney are loaded with Goldman trustees. <http://whitney.org/About/Trustees>
27. [http://www.e flux.com/journal/on art activism/](http://www.e%20flux.com/journal/on%20art%20activism/)
28. [http://museologien.blogspot.com/2013/02/a question raised by french revolution.html](http://museologien.blogspot.com/2013/02/a%20question%20raised%20by%20french%20revolution.html)
29. <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/7272?locale=en>
30. <http://www.darkmatterarchives.net/>
31. (excepting the work of the Rolling Jubilee and related groups whose tactics have tried to hack into the market)

32. "The attempt to frame political movements within an art exhibition, as in the oxymoronic 'invitation' extended to members of Occupy and the Indignados to inhabit the ground floor of KW, neutralizes their activism by filtering it through the lens of representation, rendering their action less urgent and their presence more harmless." [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/7th berlin biennale/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/7th%20berlin%20biennale/)
33. "In such a situation it's not enough—in my opinion—to have art that only fights to keep its position, which just makes claims on public funds and participates in sharing the economic profits which it creates. That's fine? but it would also be useful to have art that is smart and creative enough to take part in transformative social processes." [http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein en/7th berlin biennale for contemporary politics by artur zmijewski 27718](http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/allgemein%20en/7th%20berlin%20biennale%20for%20contemporary%20politics%20by%20artur%20zmijewski%2027718)
34. Which flattens out all approaches, relegating "political art" into one possible sub-market among many potential options.
35. Richard Armstrong's letter to the editor of the New York Times: "Defending Plans for a Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi" [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/opinion/defending plans for a guggenheim museum in abu dhabi.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/opinion/defending-plans-for-a-guggenheim-museum-in-abu-dhabi.html?_r=0)
36. (most of the Occupy Berlin activists stayed aloof from these actions and meetings).
37. <https://mbasic.facebook.com/148157235282782/photos/a.151476798284159.30787.148157235282782/282232808541890/?type=1&refid=17>
38. In fact, this is basically what happened with the proposal of Critical Practice to render the Biennale totally transparent. It was presented to the curators through official channels and foundered in the bureaucratic process and was never realized. It lacked leverage or pressure on the institution. See this article by Critical Practice: <https://ia601702.us.archive.org/20/items/ArtLeaksGazette/AL-Gazette-Critical-Practice.pdf>
39. [http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/7th berlin biennale is moving towards horizontality 30631](http://www.berlinbiennale.de/blog/en/comments/7th%20berlin%20biennale%20is%20moving%20towards%20horizontality%2030631)
40. Which was actually two institutions, according to Zmijewski.
41. During this time, the media working group was able to freely use the Biennale's entire press list—not an especially comfortable situation for an art institution to be in.

42. This is from an interview with one of the KW employees (preferring to remain anonymous) who participated in the process:

NF: "Did you attend any assemblies, and if so, how did you view the decision-making process?"

KW Employee: "Again, I liked the overall strive for consensus, but very often it resulted in too long processes to be able to participate on a regular basis. But due to the open atmosphere, I felt to be able to address topics with the curators that otherwise would go unmentioned....I know that some fellow employees had the hope that the experiment would have longer lasting effects."

43. http://www.revoltmagazine.org/Issue_03/Articles/BERLIN_BIENNIAL_article.htm
44. Most centrally those affiliated with S.A.L.E Docks in Venice. <http://www.saledocks.org/>
45. https://artsleaks.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/noah_fischer_artleaks_gazette_2.pdf
46. <http://artleaks.org/2013/10/04/open-letter-to-the-workers-and-publics-of-ccajazdowski-castle-from-the-winter-holiday-camp-working-group-warsaw-poland/>
47. <http://artcity.com/2012/10/03/the-big-trouble-with-bloomberg-at-momenta-art/>
48. <https://www.facebook.com/avtonomiakadimia?fref=nf>
49. <http://gulflabor.org/2015/guggenheim-in-venice-is-occupied/>