The following is an attempt to trace the effects of New York's Occupy movement on the city's art scene. Occupy is still active, but the mainstream media pays attention only to exceptionally urgent initiatives such as the Occupy Sandy relief efforts or Rolling Jubilee. While the movement's impact is hard to pin down, some say cultural production will never be the same again. Others see Occupy as another gloomy example of ephemerality in popular movements.

To begin with, shows in New York are said to be more politicized these days. One obvious implication of Occupy for art is that there are limits to highlighting political preferences via art exhibitions. This is clear when it comes to buzzwords like 'The Ungovernables' (the title for the 2012 New Museum Triennial), but it was particularly palpable in Sharon Hayes's solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum last summer. Even in a solid survey of an artist as superbly reflective as Hayes, the more you focused on the structural subtitles and narrative techniques than you did on the politics, the better the exhibition became. For many art works tucked away in group exhibitions, partisan gestures — and by which I mean political intimations of both the polemical and the deadpan variety — hardly resonate at all. I stumbled upon David Horvitz's terrific series 'Life, Drawing' (2011–12) at The Kitchen in the exhibition 'Matter Out of Place' (2012), featuring the results of figure drawing classes held by Horvitz and Adam Katz at Zuccotti Park, before and after the eviction of Occupy Wall Street. Even a work that plays on matters of art pedagogy, visual power play and street aesthetics as shrewdly as this will never be a match for the hagiographic model of the group show, in which works politely revolve around some curatorial premise or other. At best, the work becomes a reminder of something happening somewhere else; at worst, it becomes a placeholder for engagement.

What Next?

Tirdad Zolghadr

How Occupy influenced New York’s art scene
You can get away with sloppy activism in the arts, and when no one calls you on the art either it’s a win-win situation.

Ironically, it’s the Occupy movement that stands accused of being wishy-washy. The refusal to pursue methods as efficient and forceful as those of The Tea Party has been cause for much impatience and cynicism among my colleagues. (‘Mockup!’ one of them recently scoffed.) The movement has been crystal clear about its agenda: a return to government accountability vis-à-vis the 99%; nothing more, nothing less. In point of fact, the art world makes Occupy look like a movement in Bolshevik lockstep by comparison.

Among the public bodies targeted by Occupy, art museums have played a prominent role through the Occupy Museums group. Since the protests by the Artist Workers’ Coalition (AWC) during the late 1960s, museums have rarely been arenas of professional antagonism; it’s the curatorial establishment on the one hand, and art fairs on the other, who have stolen the show. (I should mention the protest at the Frieze New York fair on Randall’s Island in May 2012, highlighting issues pertaining to non-unionized labor, and to charging admission on public land.) The occupation of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, for example, was particularly poignant, drawing attention to the fact that free admission, once weekly, was actually accomplished by the AWC, but now marketed as ‘Target Free Fridays’, complete with large banners promoting the department store.

Some museums chose to be accommodating. The staff of the 2012 Whitney Biennial discreetly arranged for one floor to be placed at the demonstrators’ disposal for an afternoon. Biennial co-curator Jay Sanders later stated that the priority was simply to minimize any confrontations, not to collude with the demonstration. In Europe, occupiers were actually integrated, to varying degrees, within documenta (13) and the 7th Berlin Biennial (B7). The risks and ironies were not lost on the occupiers, who on occupy museums.org look back on B7 as a ‘human zoo’ that ‘objectifies and de-politicizes activists [on] exhibit’. On the other hand, occupiers did succeed in brokering improved working conditions for B7 guards, including an hourly pay rise of two euros.

For most protagonists of Occupy Museums, the root of the problem was the very abstraction of cultural currency. This is why Occupy Museums represents an ideological challenge for a curator like myself. To deprive contemporary art of any prerogative to autonomy, however, is to forfeit the one contribution it has to make. Surely, formulating stakes and standing ground, even against popular demand if need be, is what museums need to be doing more of, not less.

Other probing questions raised by Occupy were those pertaining to working conditions. The spectacularly prolific Arts’ Labor group pursues everything from study groups to street protests, addressing anything from the incessant travails of interns to the highly publicized Sotheby’s art handlers lockout, and being on the Arts’ Labor mailing list alone is exhausting. Sotheby’s strike came to an end in May 2012 – everyone kept their jobs, starting salaries were raised and pay will increase annually – but intern, of course, remain the most exploited cogwheels in the art apparatus (second only to artists themselves).

A New York collective which specializes in addressing how free labour has become naturalized in the art world, and which began its activities well before Occupy, is Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.). Although quickly gaining traction – a collaboration with Artists Space has spawned a blueprint working contract that takes many of the exasperating intricacies of artist labour into account – it’s striking to note the passion with which W.A.G.E. is unabashed from all sides: Activists deplore their free-market premises; academics deplore their theoretical restrictions. Yet, it’s the reversal of standard operating procedures that is provocative: W.A.G.E. even described themselves as ‘capitalist pigs’ in 2008, but are doing the tedious statutory, legal and administrative legwork it takes to finally develop models beyond the ‘promises of exposure’ that remain the main currency within the arts today.

From autumn 2011 to spring 2012, artists Arlen Austin and Jason Boughton ran the Hans Eisler Nail Salon (H.E.N.S.), which, apart from bona fide nail-salon facilities, harboured Danna Vajda’s exhibition ‘Working Title for Artwork’, an Employer Sanctions Workshop featuring the Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association, meetings for various Occupy factions – particularly the anti-gentrification group – lecture events such as the Precarious Worker Mixer, and sock-puppet workshops, where US history was reiterates with great pedagogical talent on the upholding of both manicures and manifestos as activist grist to the mill, and the combination of solid commitment and brutal self-irony, that made H.E.N.S. unique. What is equally decisive is the artists’ decision to create their own venue, however short-lived, rather than curate themselves to fleetingly curated opportunities in established spaces.

The internationalism of our field might politicize us in some ways, but in others it depoliticizes us further by ensuring we’re already somehow collectives, movements from some project to project. It’s hardly surprising that I learned more in a single meeting of one of the most rural outposts of Occupy (Occupy Poughkeepsie, in New York state) than I ever thought imaginable about possible tactics, about the meaningless of my snug demands for subtlety, about complex commitments to local circumstances. But to proffer an escape to the streets as a curator, writer, by using artists as ungovernable proxies, for example, is misleading. This article may be premature – it’s probably too soon for positive hypotheses – but I’m happily wager that the most obvious lesson Occupy has taught art professionals is to reckon with their institutions as their natural site and moral horizon.

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