

# Why I Support the Occupy Museums Protesters, and Why You Should Too

by Ben Davis

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In the last week, two art-focused spin-offs of Occupy Wall Street — Occupy Museums and Occupy Artists Space — have tested the limits of the art world's support for the movement. It's worth taking a look at these protests and the backlash against them — particularly since Occupy Museums has just been announced that it plans to return tomorrow, having made the obvious connection and linked up with the locked-out Sotheby's workers.

The first thing to say is that Occupy Museums and Occupy Artists Space are actually quite different phenomena. OWS is deliberately heterogeneous ("leaderless" is the preferred word), a fact that definitely has its weaknesses in terms of coordinating the movement's activities, but that also makes it harder to complain "Why is Occupy Wall Street [insert accusation about Occupy Wall Street here]?", because no one group taking action represents the whole. You have to be specific about who is doing what.

For its part, Occupy Artists Space was not even a group organically connected with the decision-making and discussion going on down at Zuccotti Park. For those who blinked and missed it, here's what happened: On Saturday a tiny group of anarchist-inspired artists seized the galleries of venerable SoHo nonprofit Artists Space, denouncing it as a venue for phony art-world politics and even taking it over temporarily. They were ejected on Sunday by confounded Artists Space staff.

Now, obviously, "occupying Artists Space" is something of a non sequitur — this is a move so out of left field that it seems custom-designed to alienate the public, not least a sympathetic art public. Ideologically, Occupy Artists Space was inspired by the example of communes and squats — the group planned to use the nonprofit's loft to hold a film night devoted to the European squats movement — and reflects a contested current within the larger Occupy community that sees occupation not as a means to build a movement, but as the end itself. Occupy Artists Space was a self-indulgent mistake.

The best historical corollary might be the small group of Situationist-affiliated artists who occupied the Swedish pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1968 — a bit of radical theater now forgotten by all but a few art critics.

Occupy Museums, however, is a different beast entirely, despite the fact that its ragtag, good-spirited protest in front of the Museum of Modern Art on Thursday also involved just a dozen or so core protesters (including, for a time, Jerry Saltz, albeit by accident). Occupy Museums was sparked by a manifesto from artist Noah Fischer, but support for it was voted through by the Occupy Wall Street "Arts and Culture Committee." The manifesto and accompanying action sparked an immediate backlash, with voluminous numbers of online comments decrying it as ill-targeted and ideologically confused.

In this case, it would seem to me that the relevant historical example is the Art Workers' Coalition, a group of artists and critics that formed in New York between 1969 and 1971, inspired by the Black Power and student movements of the day. The group involved [Dan Graham](#), [Hans Haacke](#), Lucy Lippard, Lee Lozano, [Faith Ringgold](#), and many others. In its short life, the AWC advanced demands not

dissimilar to some of the first rumblings from Occupy Museums: expanded support for artists and artists' rights, more democratic museum structures that addressed New York's diverse communities, more attention for women artists and artists of color, less corporate influence on museum boards, and support for progressive causes like environmentalism and the antiwar movement.

The AWC helped convince MoMA, the Whitney, the Jewish Museum, and a number of New York galleries to close for one day in symbolic support of the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in October 1969. They created the widely disseminated "And Babies..." poster against the Vietnam War — originally a collaboration with MoMA, but distributed independently when the institution's board of trustees balked — and famously protested with the poster in front of Picasso's "Guernica." At a certain point, Joseph Kosuth even forged an entry pass to MoMA as a gesture against the restriction of culture to only those who could afford it.

Perhaps my favorite AWC action was their response to the suppression of the Attica prison rebellion in 1970, in which Governor Rockefeller — a MoMA trustee — ordered the brutal slaughter of inmates who had taken over the prison demanding better conditions. The flier's slogan: "At Attica and at the MoMA, Rockefeller Calls the Shots." The text: "We demand that the butcher of Attica resign as a trustee from the Museum of Modern Art... It is intolerable that Rockefeller uses the art of the 20th century to gild his prison."

Almost every single one of the criticisms being made against Occupy Museums today were hurled against the Art Workers' Coalition, with sideline critics then as now calling the protesters disorganized, ideologically incoherent, off-target, and so on. But guess what? "And Babies..." is one of the most iconic political art works of that period, an eternal testament to the savagery of Vietnam. More concretely, "Free Fridays" at MoMA began in February 1970 as a response to the AWC's agitation to make the museum more inclusive of working people and diverse communities. The unionization of MoMA staff in 1971 was spurred on by the activism of the troublesome "art workers." So, the argument that protesting does nothing, or goes against the interests of the art public or MoMA's hard-working staff, totally falls apart.

People have harped on the perceived defects of Noah Fischer's Occupy Museums manifesto (which to be honest I do think is a little tin-eared, and could be more

concrete and theoretically clear about the problems of the system). But these critics also fundamentally misunderstand how movements work. Real movements are not pre-planned or packaged. They are messy. The Art Workers' Coalition was very messy. "Nobody, inside or outside the coalition, has illusions about its efficiency," Lucy Lippard wrote in her essay "The Art Workers' Coalition: Not a History," a high point of engaged art journalism. "The difference is that everyone outside thinks it could be done better another way and from the inside that looks impossible."

The AWC flamed out after three short years. Given the anarchic nature of artistic labor, artist-led movements have difficulty cohering. They need the momentum of other social movements to hold them together. To be honest, I do think that *some* of the effort going into Occupy Museums would be better put into supporting OWS's other hopeful spin-off movements, such as Occupy the Department of Education, which rallied hundreds last night to protest attacks on public education. Their cause certainly could use some great graphics too!

But do the Occupy Museums activists deserve the scorn that has been heaped on them? No. My god, consider that to this day, the MoMA board of trustees still includes Kathleen Fuld, wife of Dick Fuld, the man who nearly brought down the world economy with his criminal gambling as CEO of Lehman Brothers, costing millions of Americans their livelihoods and savings in the process. Do you think the public doesn't make these connections? Do you think that these kinds of facts don't color people's impression about who art is for in our society, or whose side the art world stands on? If artists, curators, critics, and others can find ways to stand up and make it clear that they are on the side of the 99 percent who suffered while Kathy Fuld continued her therapeutic shopping for Hermès bags amid the 2008 economic apocalypse (that's not a metaphor), well, then that is all to the good. And if anyone wants to debate these things, I hear there is this great new venue downtown that's really open to hosting discussions about politics and art of all kinds.

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