Art and Occupy Wall Street, One Year On

by Ben Davis
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"Occupy Chairs," by Sebastian Errazuriz, at the Armory Show 2012
(Mario Tama/Getty Images)

Today is S17. That's the alphanumeric shorthand, for those who don't know, for the one-year anniversary of Occupy Wall Street, the chaotic and inspiring anti-corporate/anti-capitalist movement that sprang up in Zuccotti Park last year, holding the center of discussion for two long months before being dispersed by the NYPD in the dead of night. New York's artists and creative laborers were enthusiastic participants in the encampment and the various affinity groups that swarmed out of it — which is hardly a given. Not every protest movement inspires so much artistic passion. So maybe this birthday can be occasion to ask the question of why it had such great cultural cachet.

At least part of the answer is obvious. Theorists tend to overstate the United States's transition towards some kind of new "creative economy," but there is some truth to the observation that the issues that detonated the anarchic OWS protests — increasing job insecurity, low paid or flexible work, and the plight of overeducated

youth with few real prospects — are essentially the classical concerns of bohemia. No surprise, then, that neo-bohemians found it an appealing reference point.

But there's another factor that is less straightforward — still political, but in a less self-evident way. Most contemporary culture feels flattened and corporate; OWS offered a taste of authentically *alternative* culture that people hadn't had in a while. Here, in effect, was something that no artist could invent on her own, a sui generis counter-cultural iconography to relate to: the call-and-response "human mic" technique; "twinkle fingers" to signal consensus; the slogans "We Are the 99%" and the appelation "Occupy" itself; the low-fi aesthetics of handmade cardboard protest signs and raggedly tents; the bustling solidarity of the Occupy library and the Occupy kitchen.

"*The* constant problem for the Western artist is to find themes for his art which can connect him with his public," John Berger once wrote. Well, I think that most visual artists today at least subliminally feel that the language of contemporary art is pretty sterile, pretty insular. The art world is great at generating parties; pretty weak when it comes to connecting with a large public on a deep and human level. So of course the sudden emergence of a whole new, electric social imagery, full of righteous significance — *of course* art would be drawn to that like a plant towards a new sun.

Thus, in the past year, even after the dispersal of the camp, cultural references to Occupy have become common. The New Yorker reports on a current production of Shakespeare's "Timon of Athens" in London that begins with a stage tableau centering on an Occupy London tent, serving as a kind of shorthand to root the production in the concerns of the moment. Among the more ridiculous examples of Occupy chic was Chilean designer Sebastian Errazuriz's Occupy Chairs, seating made bearing the slogans of OWS ("Kill Corporate Greed," "Hungry? Eat a Banker!," etc.), on sale to the monied visitors to the Armory Show earlier this year. The Occupy Chairs concept, we were told, was meant "to occupy the homes of the 1% with the message of the 99%" — a formulation that stretches the definition of meaningful political intervention to the point where it explodes in a rain of festive party confetti.

Therein lies the danger embedded in OWS's cultural magnetism: Symbols this potent can easily be hijacked into cultural theater. Dwelling on its artistic resonances may also divert the need for constructive criticism of the movement as a political (that is, non-artistic) process in favor of treating it as an appealing spectacle.

Still, there have also been artworks that show how the imagery of Occupy has seeped into the culture, how it opens up new imaginative spaces. One of my favorites is fairly low-key and subtle: painter Mira Schor's small series of diagrammatic canvasses dedicated to Occupy at Marvelli gallery in March. The sequence of paintings depicted a boxy, dreaming figure, suggesting someone camped out in a plaza at night, surrounded by the fragmented sentence, "The Dreams of All of Us." The color scheme of each variation on this image reflected the emotions inspired by a stage of the movement, passing to black to represent the sense of loss when the encampment was evicted, and then through to an unexpected yellow to represent optimism about a potential comeback — a kind of political process painting.

About the same time that the whole movement took the stage, Creative Time was staging the Nato Thompson-curated "Living as Form" conference in NYC, a polemical survey of cultural producers who "emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts." If this ambitious initiative didn't get the attention it deserved, that is likely because its arty radicalism was somewhat superceded by the actual radicalism of OWS — the juxtaposition pretty much forced the question of whether or not it was all just radical chic. And indeed, at the time, Martha Schwendener reported that at a conference associated with the event, a woman stood up and blurted out the obvious question: if people actually cared about socially engaged cultural practice, why didn't they just go down to Zuccotti Park? And, to their great credit, a bunch of people did.

As a parable about art and Occupy Wall Street, I love this. Who knows that the future of OWS will be, or what forms the activism that has come out of it might take? But it's worth remembering that whatever artists bring to the movement, the movement gives at least as much back — because real movements are messy and difficult, angry and optimistic, challenging and inspiring and confusing, and those are the conditions that nuture the only culture that matters.

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