Responses to Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition

Gregory Sholette, April 2016
Introduction:
Welcome to our conversation about Yates McKee’s Strike Art, a book that transforms the event known as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) into both an analytical lens and an first-person narrative, while bringing into focus several urgent issues related to the intersection of Left politics and contemporary art within the US context roughly between the mid-1980s and today (see McKee pp. 13 & 37). Strike Art joins a number of other recent scholarly works that address questions raised by what seems to be a new wave of arts activism, though they do not always do so from an American perspective. In at least one aspect McKee’s project is especially unique. Strike Art is written by someone who was directly involved in the day-to-day organizing work of OWS, and who continues to participate in the movement’s afterlife. McKee’s book is therefore replete with granular information about the ambitious, and sometimes ambiguous, revolt of the 99%, details that other commentators can only address in a second-hand manner. In this sense he aligns his writing with Walter Benjamin’s well-known directive that authors become producers with a “tendentious” tilt towards working class struggles. Partisanship so blatant rubs against the grain of traditional academic scholarship, generating a decidedly undetached approach to research and its object of study. Meanwhile, on the other side of the ledger if you like, another set of issues arises. “Who has the right to speak on behalf of the collective?” becomes a hypothetical question from comrades and collaborators (one can almost hear the mike check chorus starting up!). McKee is well aware of these tensions. And while I am in no position to judge the outcome of his efforts, Strike Art takes exceptional care citing the contributions of numerous groups and individuals. At the same time McKee is careful to hew as close as possible to his own academic discipline of contemporary art research, a tactic that
positions his book in a complicated, even aporetic zone where large, abstract ideas uneasily wrestle with empirical, day-to-day observations about the Occupy Movement and beyond. In this case the “beyond” involves post-Occupy Movement’s relationship to issues of racial justice, student debt, and environmental activism. Somewhat gingerly for my taste, Strike Art also attempts something much more ambitious by proposing a common thread linking together the fragmented, extra-parliamentary politics of the contemporary Left. That commonality involves the sensuous imaginary of art (242) understood as a process in which radicalized artists redirect “their creativity into an expanded field of organizing in order to construct a new—if internally fraught—political imaginary set off against the common enemy of the 1%” (from the Preamble to the book). The aim of this online e-flux conversation therefore is to develop a conversation about the ideas, assertions, and observations and to that end I am putting forward three questions over the next couple of weeks that focus on the following topics:
1) Occupy and the return of avant-garde art?
2) Occupy and 21st Century Left politics?
3) Is there an ethos of radical Left scholarship?

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STRIKE ART! The First of Three Questions:
1. Occupy and the return of avant-garde art?

“Occupy took the avant-garde dialectic of “art and life” to a new level of intensity,” Yates McKee asserts in Strike Art. (32) And certainly in so many ways the occupation did dissolve cultural practices directly into an encounter with political activism and its requisite modes of organizational labor. Yet is this truly an intensification of avant-garde forces latent within the “art system” (McKee’s preferred term for the art world p. 11)? And what are the stakes in such a return to, and repetition of, a legacy of protests and interventions in culture that oftentimes did not conceive of their activism as art? Or are we experiencing perhaps something new altogether, as Boris Groys has suggested in a 2014 e-flux journal essay “On Art Activism” http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-art-activism/ ? Let’s say we did agree that OWS and its afterlife represents a significant shift within contemporary art and politics, what then is at stake describing this phenomenon as avant-garde, especially bearing in mind all of the historical, political, ontological, and aesthetic weight that this term inevitably carries with it? For if at a moment when enterprising business leaders describe not only their products and brands but also their very managerial style as avant-garde, what stakes then are involved with applying this particular locution of “avant-garde” to the various cultural practices described in Strike Art?

Background to the question:

There is one issue that consistently draws the ire of the artistic Left, and that is the apparent cooptation of the radical, even revolutionary ambitions of the early 20th Century Avant-Garde by what Julian Stallabrass labels “Art Incorporated”: a multi-billion dollar culture industry seemingly tethered to the interests of global capitalism. The “art Left” (if I can provisionally use this phrase) has typically imagined itself to be either completely outside of the machinations of Art Inc., or it thinks of itself as a kind of “Trojan Horse” operating transgressively from deep within the established art world order. As Group Material charged in their inaugural manifesto of 1980: “we invite everyone to question the entire culture we have taken for granted,” refusing to become part of some tired “pseudo avant-gardism.” Or as Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) proclaimed a year later, “PAD [/D] cannot serve as
a means of advancement within the art world structure of museums and galleries. Rather, we have to develop new forms of distribution economy as well as art.” McKee’s Strike Art pivots on one particular event when the “art Left” was forced to confront its own political and artistic aporias. That moment came in the middle of the exhibition Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art, 1991–2011. Organized in the Fall of 2011 by Creative Time’s Chief Curator Nato Thompson, Living As Form plays a key role in McKee’s Strike Art for two reasons. First, Thompson’s project sought to establish a common identity for a number of socially engaged artistic practices that had unfolded over the previous two decades. In this sense the exhibition serves McKee as the figure of a certain self-representation within the art Left itself. And second, Living As Form is significant to Strike Art not only because it took place precisely as the occupation of Zuccotti Park was initiated, but because of something quite singular that happened during its run. One afternoon in October of 2011 a group of people who had gathered for a program at Living As Form abruptly abandoned the exhibition to join the OWS protest encampment several blocks away. Seizing upon this moment as a demonstration of his larger thesis McKee writes on pages 80 and 81: “In a kind of historical displacement, contemporary art was suddenly thrown into relief as a distant prefiguration or prophecy of what was now happening in real time…as an historiographical provocation, one that admittedly borders on the eschatological, it might be said that this moment of passage represents the end of socially engaged art. I use 'end' here in two senses, neither of which are reducible to simple chronology. First, 'end' can mean purpose, goal, or destination, and from this angle, the crossing of the threshold from Creative Time to Zuccotti Park was arguably the realization or consummation of the deepest dreams and desires of the exhibition itself. Yet 'end' can also mean completion, termination, or even death, and in this sense the trip to Zuccotti Park might be considered a kind of self-immolation on the part of Living as Form, which had arguably represented the vanguard of contemporary art in the institutional art world—a vanguard defined by its very flirtation with dissolving the category of art altogether into an expanded field of social engagement. It would be a mistake however to see the move from Creative Time to Zuccotti Park as a move from the realm of 'mere'
art to the immediacy of 'real' life. As we shall see, the OWS encampment itself would be widely described as a surreal environment, and many artists would be counted among its initiators—including some working directly in the orbit of Creative Time projects like Democracy in America and Living as Form itself.”

natot
Apr '16

I would like to approach the fairly polemical position of Yates' title with a very basic, and obvious call for specificity. It has been my experience, and certainly something I detail in my book Seeing Power that broad sweeping statements about art vs. activism tend to add obfuscate what is already a difficult situation to address. I am a fan of Yates in general and always applaud his deep commitment not only to social justice, social movements and their entanglements with art (whatever that term art might mean), but also in leading a critical charge to interrogating the issues therein. So, it is in the spirit of solidarity that I do approach the questions with a bit of criticism and ideally, some productive thoughts.

Perhaps it is a desire for poetry, or perhaps it is that kind of legacy of Continental Philosophy, that forces a certain kind of use of words like “the end” or even, sweeping generations regarding ‘antagonisms” and “participation” when it come to something as loose-knit as socially engaged art. I have to say that it is not that I disagree or agree with Claire Bishop nor Yates when it comes to art, but instead, merely, that I would have to know the artwork in particular and the conditions that brought it to light. Rather than talking about genres of art (such as socially engaged art), I would ask that we narrow our sites to moments that occur in space and time undergirded by forces of political economy, history, race, gender, sexuality, etc. It is a statement so obvious, I wish I did not have to repeat it. But for a field that loves to make generalizations, I suspect, it will be an ongoing and necessary preliminary statement.

But lets move on from the title as Yates himself seems to sort of disavow it as well later in the essay. I would say that broad sweeping concerns about antagonisms do not
necessarily interest me. Nor do questions of participation and democracy. No offense to Bishop, but these kind of concerns in a vacuum don’t seem to do all that much. Arguing against participation and promoting antagonisms without context strikes me as liking more salt on your food no matter what. Doesn’t it depend on what it tastes like? I only say this because, when it comes to practices in the world, the tactics and strategies deployed must be interpreted in conjunction with the social and political dimensions in the sites in which they transpire. For Yates to assert that Occupy included internal antagonisms should almost go without saying. Most effective social organizing must wrestle, and appreciate, internal antagonism as a basic working method. I suspect Bishop’s critiques were not meant as an actual concern with the methodologies of grassroots organizing, so much as an appeal to aesthetic concerns (which is an approach I simply don’t ascribe to).

Rather than talk about art as an abstraction, I prefer to ground the term as operating either as a set of infrastructures (thus the term artworld) and a set of practices on the other (art practice). In the exhibition Living as Form, I worked with several curators to aggregate a vast array of practices who used strategies of art in their interest in shaping everyday life. Many of these practices not only resisted the art world (more of them did so simply because they were not getting any art money anyways), but also had complex understandings of collectivity, pedagogy, and activism. And as is the oft-difficulty of presenting site-specific projects, the exhibition itself predominately featured documentation of works abroad. Some of the projects included the community-based theater workshops of Los Angeles Poverty Department, the internet based activism of Wikileaks, the pedagogically infused urbanism of Tijuana-based Torolab, the queer activism of Bolivian Mujeras Creando, the very artworld friendly and conceptually driven art of Francis Alys, the community-based social center in Cameroon, Doual’art, founded by Marilyn Douala-Bell and Didier Schaub. This is just a few of the 100 projects listed.

I am not trying to highlight the show, but as it is gone to in some depth in the article, it is instructive to note that the exhibition itself, highlighted numerous projects involved in social struggle and frankly, had already left the artworld behind (quite some time ago). That said, other projects did exist within the infrastructure of the arts. Some were really
arty and poetic while others were very social justice oriented or simply straight up activism. Rather than a catch-all term of art (which frankly as a term has more problematics than uses), it is more useful to consider these practices’ common thread in rhizomatic fashion (or another way of putting it), one would have to appreciate that these projects share commonalities only when considered in light of a vast ecology of complex differentiation that fuses culture and activism in the pursuit of transforming the world. Certainly, OWS became an important milestone in the ongoing pursuit for social justice on our planet, but I would say, it is hard to consider it as a particular transitional period toward one where art leaves art behind (only because such a statement makes no sense). And certainly, if anything, Living as Form highlighted not only tendencies within the arts to bridge activism, but perhaps more importantly in this context, that art had already been absorbed and deployed by activist movements long before.

What I would say however is that when the question is asked in terms of infrastructures, we can get a better grasp not only a particular turning point, but also get closer to Gregory Sholette’s question regarding co-optation and the notion of the avant-garde. Shannon Jackson once quipped something to me that never left my thoughts, “What if,” she rhetorically opined, “the U.S. government co-opted healthcare?” It was the kind of statement she made off the cuff, but the implications of it seem quite germane to both Yates’ concerns and also the question posed by Sholette. For in this light, I think of the United States government as a complex infrastructure not all unlike the artworld itself. The arts have galleries, museums, universities, magazines, non-profits, alternative spaces, biennials, blogs, etc. And the government, well, you get the point. But in light of this, the questions are not about necessarily co-opting of art, so much as they are asking under what conditions do they operate, whom do they speak to, what do they do. What, how and for whom as Lenin would say.

Obviously, I bristle at the use of the term “end”, but I do appreciate that a certain break has become all the more evident. When Sholette indicates, rightfully, that corporate culture has borrowed from the toolshed of the arts, and so too have activists, I think it is evident that the use of the practice of art has become a valuable tool in a world increasingly used to, and adept at, manipulating culture. While art has certainly become
part of the language of speech, it nevertheless, seems to me useful to understand that
the battle to overcome the domination of the planet by way of capitalism (amongst other
forms of power including white supremacy and patriarchy) must challenge and make
use of its infrastructures.
Words like co-optation have historically been used by the likes of the Situationists to
make a mess of actual progress in favor of a rhetorics of purity. Occupy certainly
wrestles with those demons itself. While certainly advertisements using revolutionary
imagery might strike one as a form of co-optation, I don’t necessarily see the use of
politically engaged art by art instutitions as a form of co-optation. In fact, I would say,
reading the world like that falls into some really dated, and faulty, tendencies. It really
depends on the specifics. And I would also say that drawing such hard lines in the sand
over art outside of museums vs. in it, seems to simply miss the point entirely. It seems
to me a massive mistake to leave the artworld behind. The artworld, in its vast
complexity, hosts within it major infrastructures that need to be held accountable from
universities to museums, from magazines to non-profits. They also can amplify and
produce civic spaces that go beyond the limited arena of the arts (frankly, when it
comes to audience, many art institutions long ago moved way beyond the
demographics of simply art enthusiasts). McKee goes into this later in the book
highlighting the work of both Gulf Labor and Occupy Museums. It should also be noted
that Liberate Tate successfully got the Tate Museum to remove British Petroleum as a
 corporate sponsor. So, I know that he is quite aware and sympathetic to this.
So to, at last, answer the question, I would say that what is at stake is the production of
a new world which also, implies the production of new infrastructures. It is critical that
not only do we produce infrastructures that reflect the ethics and working methods we
believe in, but also that we challenge, and make us of, existing infrastructures. Yes, this
also means a certain kind of lack of purity and that there are political trade-offs that are
always necessitated by the wrestling with political economy and power. But such is the
way of actual social change and simply navigating political economy and life. Any large-
scale social system that comes into being that reflects a dynamic of social justice and a
challenge to capitalism will inevitably inhabit certain contradictions that one must
swallow for the greater good. Rather than seeing this as a historic break, I see it as a transition to a world that appreciates the power of wonder that art can produce, in an effort to both put it to use toward social justice ends, as well as to simply appreciate the peculiar strangeness of pleasure, that also comes from that which we do not understand.

clairebishop
Apr '16

Two points, one theoretical, one art historical.
First up, I'm uneasy about the use of the term 'avant-garde' to describe any work in the latter half of the twentieth century. The term seeks to validate contemporary art by attaching it to a genealogy of art that was (1) connected to a pre-existing political party (often, but not necessarily, the communist party) and (2) precisely about the rejection of artistic tradition. Socially-engaged art from circa 1990 onwards strikes me as an artistic form unmoored from an organized politics (which is why there has been so much fretting about its politics/ethics), while OWS strikes me as a political moment without a coherent aesthetic--ranging from the Hirschhornesque hand-made signs of the camp at Zuccotti Park to the polished logos of The Illuminator. The term 'avant-garde' prioritizes ideas of novelty and originality that don't feel relevant to this moment.
Secondly, McKee's framing of OWS marking the 'end' of socially-engaged art made a great impression on me. In retrospect, it does seem that so much art of the 2000s (exemplified by Hayes's In the Near Future and Zmijewski's Democracies, but also found in the work of Temporary Services or 16 Beaver or any number of pedagogic art projects) was suffused in melancholic resignation resulting from the failed anti-war protests of 2003, the unstoppable march of neoliberalism, and a sense of political impasse. I think McKee is right to identify a change of mood with OWS, at least in the US. The question for me is what happens after this triumphal moment of rupture and experimental community that marked this lived experiment. For sure, some artists have bifurcated their practice between their personal work and their collective efforts in Gulf Labor or Strike Debt. But I don't have a clear sense of what has displaced it. (Naturally,
the market proceeds as if nothing has happened.) But the visibility and forms of post-OWS art seems important to identify and characterize (pace Thompson) - especially with the rise of the nationalist right all over Europe and a new phase of disenchantment kicking in.

nfischer
Apr '16

From a position within the wave that Yates describes in Strike Art, I have very little perspective on the question posed, but can report that joining the Occupy Movement had a transformative effect on how many of us relate to art institutions and aesthetics. The movement also introduced tools wielding substantial political agency on a scale that previously seemed impossible. This was achieved through an alliance of many cultural producers with a social movement that was larger than the “art system,” so I don’t want to minimize the process by bringing it (art practices within the movement or the movement itself) into an art historical framework fit for consumption by existing institutions. However, in my view, and I think the view of Strike Art, it’s impossible to pull a diversity of art practices neatly apart from the Occupy Movement, or from each other. Describing the shift on a concrete level we can name a set of movement resources and a radical set of possibilities arising from them. Artists involved with the movement have not had to completely rely on the support of art institutions to rise out of an atomized state and to address the public sphere as for example Thomas Hirschhorn relied on the Dia Foundation to produce Gramschi monument. The movement itself has acted as a powerful institution at times providing food, housing, transportation, meeting space, legal and spiritual support, skills trainings, facilitation, and especially media connections. Perhaps you could say that the movement cracked open a window in the impenetrable wall of circular logic where politically left oriented art is supported by institutions which are in turn supported by the 1% and embedded in their economic system of concentrated rewards and debts. The question Greg poses is what are the artistic implications of this new possibility of affiliation not seen in a generation?
The various definitions of art contained in the movement which Yates chronicles with much detail (although not with 100% accuracy, there are some mistakes in describing Occupy Museum’s history in relation to the Teamsters 814 campaign) resist facile summation and Yates mostly avoids picking and choosing occupy practices in favor of laying out the wide aesthetic and political territory which more accurately maps a definition of art in the movement: one that is unruly. Maybe not accentuated enough is that practices described in Strike Art are often oriented toward different audiences/worlds. It’s a point Yates does touch on—especially describing the dynamics of the Climate March/Flood Wall Street but some of the groups he shouts out address a fairly mainstream public, operating like NGO’s (and often organized in tandem or embedded in NGO’s as Climate March did), some are deeply nested in radical anarchist circles and do not cooperate with mainstream institutions, some operate in critical left circles, some in an international section of the closer-to-mainstream left artworld even with high-profile international biennales. Others operate in or partly in academic circles. The incongruent aesthetics from professional/clean to noncompliant/messy and differing use of language from theoretically inclined to populist also reflect varying sets of values and different spheres traversed by the Occupy community. Nato’s recent book Seeing Power makes a call to name the different kinds of cultural capital embedded into the activist and visual art worlds because we need to know these intentions in order to read varying political and artistic strategies and avoid everything being sucked into one framework. We are speaking about different definitions or art, really, and it should ward off sweeping claims about art and the occupy movement. But its precisely this non-specialization which itself pushes against late-capitalist logic, which is the refreshing lens that Occupy applied to art.

The amazing thing about the early stage of the movement was how myriad political strategies and aesthetics held together into one space that was multilayered but cohesive. For example, for the first few months there was an official Arts and Culture Working Group (initiated not by an artist but a Brazilian doctor—Alexandre Carvalho) connected formally to the General Assembly. The Arts and Culture working group in turn contained sub groups representing all sorts of different approaches and relations to
“bright” and “dark” matter: figures such as critics and curators densely networked into the art world, puppeteers, vagabonds, students, sunday painters wanting to help with signs, etc. The A & C working group represented, essentially, a non-specialized definition of art, which is rarely if ever embodied in a hyper-professionalized economy. Occupy Museums, an early movement group, arose directly from this body and in its composition has reflected some of the randomness of the movement. The affinity groups that formed after the park tend to be more specialized in their composition. But the interrelation between the many groups and their various political campaigns and artistic tactics described in Strike Art still continues and the heterogenous network itself is to me what is new even if some of the practices aren’t so new.

There is still a haunting question though about whether the art arising from the occupy movement might be some kind of aesthetic or conceptual step forward. While for many groups in Strike Art such as the People’s Puppets, this question would be sort of irrelevant, it’s a little more approachable for Occupy Museums and G.U.L.F direct actions which have developed as a merging of artistic and political practice in close relation (even if conflictual) to the art system. But I’m even more haunted by who does it serve to prove that the work is a legitimate branch of avant garde and who gets to decide? The question actually gets smaller the more I think about it. Any reasonable measures of quality are lacking. In my view, effective politics doesn’t replace the work of trying to advance aesthetic and conceptual practices without almost certainly instrumentalizing art. The onus is on us, if we continue to work as artists- to push our art forward toward creating unfamiliar spaces and aesthetics, even objects and experiences from within a movement framework. It appears to me that concrete political wins—at least in the short term, have mostly to do with strategic organization and a close relationship with the media. True, strategy and organizing can also be an art practice, but its not automatically an interesting one.

However, I do think that our work has thrown into question many of the capitalistic assumptions woven into existing institutional support (universities, galleries, museums) behind practices considered advanced aesthetically and theoretically. And with it, the notion of artistic quality becomes unmoored. This is obviously not true for the entire art
system, the giant commercial part of which, in a surreal way since 2008, smoothly trends on seemingly severed from social realities. However, for a few years now, an Occupy network, resulting from an intense moment of solidarity, has allowed many of us to sustain and expand a politicization of our work and powerfully scatter these politicized practices into public space. Strike Art is an unprecedented recounting of this terrain, which contains contradictions that if not abandoned, could truly short circuit the definition of art at the center of the art system.

Greg and Yates, thanks so much for getting this going. "Let’s say we did agree that OWS and its afterlife represents a significant shift within contemporary art and politics…. "

I am not sure that I do agree. For the hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life who found themselves transformed in the raucous campaigns that sprung up in opposition to specific reactionary moves in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and most especially Wisconsin in the months prior to the rising of OWS, daily life had already become hyperpoliticized. Viewed from outside of New York, OWS appeared to be a movement in the hunt for its target, the constellation of institutions termed ‘Wall Street,’ a shorthand with pre-existing recognition but less physical centralization than, say, a state capitol building or a governor’s mansion. The struggles in the Great Lakes states were battles of the moment, movements that assembled to contest budgets and new laws in the process of being rammed through. Life hung in the balance—the fight was over an extremist agenda that might slash your child’s school’s budget by a third or decertify your union, thereby guaranteeing you job insecurity and a substantial pay cut. Antagonisms were delineated along contours as precise as a worker’s classification. It felt different from the retroactive assignation of accountability that informed the beginnings of OWS. Thinking of the elemental effects of Rust Belt austerity is a less
academic and possibly more meaningful way to consider the question of art and life in mutual visitation, and the degree to which they mesh. Another way to think about it is to see the midwestern struggles as interpellating politically mobilized people as artists—i.e. transforming people untrained in making and/or not self-identified as artists into those who attend to the making of symbols and gestures. This was a case of life falling into art more than art into life.

From this perspective OWS was not a shift of greater significance than what had rippled out from elsewhere around the country and around the world. In spirit it was of a piece; in design, it was a successfully contrived next step. By the fall of 2011, all the insurgencies were visible to one another; Bloombergville, the small tent city demonstration that now seems a temporal foreword to OWS as cited by Yates, was itself informed by the ‘Walkerville’ encampments that followed the expulsion of occupying citizens from the capitol building in Madison, and probably the tent city protest of Tel Aviv as well. From the text it seems that Yates sees continuity and slippage between all these differently placed struggles and that OWS stands out for reasons other than it marking a singularly significant political shift, not the least of it having to do with, as Greg says, Yates being an involved witness to an uprising at a ‘granular’ level. In an echo of Nato’s response to this first question, I see an analysis of OWS being most interesting in its specificity. A wide-angle question such as that which has been posed—i.e using OWS as a springboard into a conversation about where it fits into of the whole history of avant gardes—tends to obscure what may be the most valuable lessons from the OWS experience.

As for the question of whether Occupy signals the return of avant-garde art, my short answer is No. Obviously there is plenty to be elaborated regarding the blurred lines dividing art and politics and how OWS did or did not travel the paths traced by the historical avant gardes. But I leave that discussion for now. Instead I wish to put attention to how another avant garde legacy failed to return in OWS, that of aesthetics. Avant-garde legacies—received, even if distorted—are equally those of transgressive aesthetic disruption, gestures often vacated of, or indifferent to, any specific political intent. One could say these histories of provocations are political in the sense of
targeting bourgeois values, liberal political culture, and conventions of good taste, insofar as these elements of establishment society form the pillars of the capitalist superstructure. But I make a distinction between these works, acts, and ways of being and the considerably more focused requirements of organizing toward a specific desired political outcome on the level of policy or other official action. When Greg makes reference to Group Material’s opening statement, I take it as evidence that already by the early 1980s the transgressive streak as intrinsically threatening neared its horizon. Skipping over the Culture Wars and the radical production of subcultures of transgression through the 1980s, it seems the post-9/11 world has settled into a very different aesthetics of dissent. Now citizen opposition exists under circumstances of presumed total surveillance and government paranoia. In an equally insidious wedding of Foucauldian self-governance to economic hegemonies, neoliberalism has assimilated values of individual expression, personal evolution, and visionary creativity into its market logics. These twinned conditions—a security state hitherto unseen and the final conquest of cool—set the stage what we saw over and over in 2011, occupations in which the occupiers self-organized and publicly performed a kind of basic social responsibility. People in Tahrir Square organized food stations and clean up crews. Occupiers set up a first aid station and a media center inside the capitol in Madison. Instead of trashing the plaza, folks in Zuccotti managed trash removal, and then put together a library. Though at times intoxicating in the pace of events, the gathering of bodies, and in the sheer realization that political sparks had finally caught, the occupations of 2011 and since have not been Dionysian affairs. The libidinal energy of an avant garde worth the name seemed absent, replaced by the General Assembly, a collective performance of radical civility and radically respectful multi-logue.

This tells us two things. One, that performing social responsibility at the base level of a DIY-style consideration for community is a favored radical gesture in a world in which being an asshole is criminally rewarded, as represented by the necktie barbarism of Wall Street hedge fund managers or, if you like, the tyranny and corruption of Mubarak. And two, that without the liberatory potential of the shocking gesture or the outlaw life, or, at least the negation intrinsic to the transgressing of a rule, politically committed
artists have moved to modes of confrontation and engagement not in keeping with the notoriety of the historical avant garde. While a good high and an unmistakable "fuck you!" still ring in a sort of hedonistic truth, detaching from ‘tune in, turn on’-type directives as effective political messaging is overdue given our post-9/11 conditions. For having done this, OWS, precisely because it was at crucial points artist-instigated and artist-organized, marks neither an end nor a beginning but rather a confirmation and furthering of a direction.