

Occupy LAAAAA: Artists in Solidarity (Elana Mann edition)

Posted in November 19th, 2011 By [Sue Bell Yank](#)



ARLA Listening Performance, Occupy LA site, November 11, 2011. Photo courtesy Carol Cheh.

Today I am pleased to highlight [Elana Mann](#), an artist who works collaboratively with other artists and in collectives of many different scales on performative events and artistic actions. Here she writes eloquently about communication - the feats, foibles, and failures at the Occupy protests, from the “empathetic power” of the human microphone and prolonged dialogue of the General Assembly, to the voices of those who feel disenfranchised and alienated from the movement. Her recently formed performance collective ARLA has been conducting listening activities and performances as a method through which to investigate these communication practices, interfacing with the protests in both solidarity and criticism. Her interest in these provisional modes of communications expands to the movement as a whole, which, she argues eloquently, is improvising a new relationship of protest & resistance to our interconnected and globalized society.

What are you making/interested in making with regards to Occupy LA & the Occupy movement in general? Why?

At Occupy LA I have been working with the collective ARLA to create performances around active listening and sounding. I co-founded ARLA in the spring of 2011 with filmmaker [Vera Brunner-Sung](#), choreographer [Kristen Smiarowski](#), and musician [Juliana Snapper](#). The collective utilizes the listening

strategies developed by the composer [Pauline Oliveros](#), techniques of Jungian psychology and the history of social practice as a jumping off point to create new visual and performance art.

ARLA has initiated a series of performances at Occupy LA the first of which took place on November 11th. During the first performance we facilitated listening exercises and a listening parade through the space of the downtown protest. We held up large paper-mache ears and protest signs with ears on them throughout the parade. My collaborator Juliana's account of this action is the following: "The simple physical presence of people carrying large paper-mache ears was met with a kind of hungry recognition - recognition of what it meant that we were holding the symbols (giant ears) and a sense of relaxation where we carried them (easy eye contact, curiosity)." Afterward, we performed Pauline Oliveros' sonic meditation Teach yourself to fly (1974) and then a composition written by Juliana Snapper and myself entitled People's Microphony (2011). The sonic performances were followed by a dialog about silence and power, how sound aids activism (or not) and how listening is functioning in Occupy LA. The occupiers, artists, and activists that were part of our group spoke about the experience as an opening of a space to meet each other as human beings rather than as combatants or collaborators. We then attended the General Assembly (GA) with our sculptural and physical ears out. ARLA is intending to hold these performances on weekly basis at Occupy LA and is also planning some performance events around downtown Los Angeles.



ARLA, 2011.

I think it is also important to note here that myself, along with other artists of [AAAAAA](#), have been actively participating, attending, and contributing one another's artworks at Occupy LA alongside creating our own works. This collaborative spirit is significant in a city that often feels fragmentary and impenetrable. The support for one another is facilitated by the Google and FB groups, but also a shared

mission to work alongside the occupy movement as artists with all of our powerful symbolic, analytical, aesthetic, and social tools. The Occupy movement has opened my imagination and my heart and I am contributing to it in ways that I know how – and I mean contribute in the broadest sense, which includes both critique and solidarity.

What role do you feel you/your work plays in interfacing with the protest? What role would you like it to play?

Our main question is: How can we facilitate tuning into each other's voices and bodies in an active way, rather than a passive one? On the topic of listening, Juliana writes, "Churchill spoke of the courage it takes to sit down and listen as even more precious than the courage it takes to get up and speak. Any protest is necessarily focused on techniques for being heard and understood, but we have fewer tools, a more impoverished language for how to listen." ARLA wanted to bring the alternative techniques and ideas of listening to Occupy LA that we have been developing since our group began. Although none of the ARLA members are currently occupying the space, we had been there off and on and around our other life commitments. While at Occupy, we had noticed both the challenges and the potentials for listening at the City Hall and the GA. We were also aware of the remarkable speaking/listening techniques that are happening in the Occupy movement as a whole (including the human microphone). We have our ears turned to "[DisOccupy](#)" and "[Unpermitted LA](#)," which are groups that include voices who feel very marginalized by the Occupy LA protest. Communication problems (which are all too common) sometimes plague our own AAAAAA group as well. Since ARLA believes active listening can break through communication impasses, we felt that our work could positively impact Occupy LA and a broader culture that tunes out certain voices and bodies in general.

Also, both Juliana and I have been completely inspired by the empathetic power of the human microphone and also the problems of putting someone else's words in your mouth and through your body. So we wanted to both add to the environment of dialog that was happening at Occupy and also play/interrogate the structure of the human microphone and its embodied force.

ARLA would like to continue to grow this art and listening practice within the Occupy movement and beyond, both in a purely functional way and also in an ineffective way.



ARLA Ear Strengthening Performance, Occupy LA site, November 11, 2011. Photo courtesy Carol Cheh.

Many recent actions seem based on performing “scores” – why do you think this is, and how do you think these performances “perform” in the Occupy context?

A lot of folks are not using scores in their pieces at Occupy LA, but certainly in the work of ARLA we are. I think that the power of scores for ARLA is both historical and social: we can evoke scores of Pauline Oliveros, or Jungian psychology games that are historical and improvise our own interpretations to imbue them with contemporary meaning. We are drawing wisdom of the past into the present moment. Also, the scores we write can act as instructions, manifestos, and propaganda all in one. This seems very fitting to a protest environment, where Xeroxed sheets of papers with scores printed on them can be easily dispersed, read, and performed by anyone. We just sent some of our scores to Malmo, Sweden where they were distributed to a group led by members of the [Journal of Aesthetics and Protest](#) editorial collective.

How do you feel the AAAAAA list is operating? What role is it playing? What are the challenges or benefits of this loose grouping?

At first the group met just to form a loose network of support around art activities taking place at Occupy LA. The group also became a fantastic way to disperse information about what is happening both in the Occupy movement and with each other. I stalk/follow this group like no other.

We haven't met a huge amount as a group, but when we do the variety of people and opinions is very stark: some people want to become a more organized coalition within Occupy LA and others feel ambivalent about being a member of any group at all (even the AAAAAA splinter group). This desire to commune and also to separate is AAAAAA's biggest strength and also its greatest challenge. I do think this coming together has opened up the possibility for organizing and gathering beyond Occupy as well.

Within just these past few weeks, the tone of the group has taken a noticeable shift as certain AAAAAAers have become clearer about what they want out of the group and the Occupy movement as a whole. A number of AAAAAAs are starting to organize based on ideas of Art and Labor, folks are proposing an Artists' Union, artists are protesting problematic museum fund-raisers and planning to occupy museums, and members of [W.A.G.E.](#) have joined our ranks. I am excited to see where this new direction goes, as AAAAAA begins to dissect the economics of the art world and how its structure mirrors the divide between the 99% and the 1%.

There has been criticism of the Occupy movements and the horizontalism of the General Assembly – a polyphony of voices and lack of clarity in message or goal. What are your thoughts on this critique?

The criticism of the Occupy movement comes from the clashing of staid historical scripts of protest and the current improvisation that is happening on the ground right now. Folks seem to be looking toward each other rather than the political agendas of those already in power. This realization came to me when I was attending a recent conference at the University of California, Riverside called "Improvisation, History, and the Past." During the day of presentation and discussion, the theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha spoke about the improvisational techniques of Tibetan protesters against the repressive regime of the Chinese occupiers. I began to think about how the Occupy movement is improvising new relationships to uncertainty and power as well as finding expressive negotiations with constraint.

The scripts of how past protests operated (particularly protests from the 60s/70s) are clouding people's minds for how protest should function and operate now. I heard someone on the radio today advising the Occupy movement to KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid!). I am so glad that the members of the Occupy movement try to listen to the people next to them instead of the demands of the media or the politicians. The Occupy movement is improvising how protest should function to disrupt today's decentralized, interconnected, and neo-liberal economy. I see the current improvisational thrust of Occupy to be moving around consciousness-raising on a national and international level, an attempt at deeply listening to the concerns of people who have been silenced for a long time.

What are your own hopes for the Occupy movement?

My desire is that the improvisational practice of freedom within the Occupy movement continues to grow and expand beyond the confines of the protest. This improvisational way of living creates further flexibilities and responsibilities to change rather than fixed states driven by fear. Echoing this sentiment, artist and mediator [Dorit Cypis](#) wrote so beautifully in a recent Facebook post: "So right. Occupy has no one site. Occupy has become a state of mind that we each must take on and spread through individual and collective daily actions. Protest the 'empire' while self-witnessing how we each may be colluding in small ways. Live reciprocity and generosity. Listen empathically and choose when to take decisive action to enliven 'a brave new world'." Through improvisation, maybe we will discover a way toward a more equal, functional, and just future.