



# Occupy L.A. and the Art World

## A wave of art projects go hand in hand with the protest

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PHOTO BY LUCAS KAZANSKY



During Artist Sinnombre's performance *The Ballad of the Disenfranchised* at Occupy LACMA last weekend, visitors could choose a word from the bowl to fill in the blank on the sign.

On Nov. 11, artists Elana Mann and Juliana Snapper brought two big, flesh-colored papier-mâché ears and a handful of poster-board signs with ears drawn on them down to the tarp-covered library at Occupy L.A. There they met up with a small group of artists, writers and curious occupiers, who joined them on a "listening walk," navigating the encampment while holding the handmade ears in the air to show bystanders that listening was going on.

Given the dense visual activity around City Hall right now, focusing on just sound is not easy, and occupiers who noticed them seemed to appreciate the effort. One called it the Van Gogh parade. Others said, "Can you hear me?"

"It's good that you're listening," said a man who walked with them briefly. "Did you go down to the south side, where there were all those cops today? You really should go listen down there."

Mann, a performance and video artist, has attended the movement's general-assembly gatherings and seen people get riled up and ideas left behind. "We had noticed both how difficult it was to listen at Occupy L.A.," she says, "and also the amazing speaking and listening techniques that are happening in the Occupy movement."

When the Occupy Wall Street effort began its spread two months ago, many in the arts community felt an affinity toward the protestors, not only agreeing with their stance on inequality and anger toward finance companies but seeing a parallel in the arts world, where museums and other institutions are struggling to keep afloat and often playing it safe to stay in donors' good graces. Occupy L.A. has been an opportune setting for art projects that channel these anxieties.



This spring, Mann and concert soprano Snapper (along with two others) co-founded the group ARLA (a shifting acronym that has stood for Audile Receptives Los Angeles and A Ripe Little Archive). Many of their strategies come from Pauline Oliveros, an accordionist-turned-composer who began experimenting with electronic music in the 1950s, before it really even existed. She pioneered what she calls Deep Listening, or "listening to everything all the time and reminding yourself when you're not listening."

Like a lot of the artist activity at Occupy L.A., the ARLA performance would have happened occupancy or no occupancy, and in fact already had, at the Getty two weeks before. Participants there consisted of families and children, and the museum's pristine granite surfaces provided an atmosphere emphatically different from the tent-covered one downtown.

But the fluid nature of the camp, with leaders and inhabitants changing regularly, and the baffling inclusiveness of the movement's "occupy everything" agenda, made it an ideal setting for Deep Listening. Feeling heard put people at ease. The occupiers invited Mann and Snapper to come back weekly, and they obliged.

"They said that there were few, if any, opportunities to get together as people, rather than around a particular issue," Mann says.

Since the recession hit, a number of artists' projects have taken measured approaches to questioning the practices of museums, trustees and other elite players in the arts economy. In the same way that most members of Occupy L.A. would encourage the involvement of politicians, artists seem less interested in attacking institutions than reforming them.

When the collective Machine Project "occupied" LACMA for two days in 2008, building birdhouses on the balconies and playing live music in the elevators, they just wanted to open the museum up to a little more diversity. But when the current Occupy movement spread to museums in New York last month, with demonstrations outside MoMA and the New Museum, organizer Noah Fischer was confrontational, declaring, "No longer will we, the artists of the 99 percent, allow ourselves to be tricked into accepting a corrupt hierarchical system."

Occupy LACMA, organized through Facebook by an anonymous artists' group and held Nov. 20, was more tempered. It targeted LACMA as a symbolic center of the creative community and claimed no "singular objective" other than "to hear and listen." Occupiers wore red, the color of the supports of the nearby Broad Contemporary wing, and held political discussions at a table in the museum's courtyard.

One of the artists who participated in Machine's earlier LACMA project was Liz Glynn, whose current series of performances at MOCA, called "Loving You Is Like Fucking the Dead," explores her own conflicted relationship to the museum, an institution that's both an amazing resource and a "crystal palace," austere and averse to change. The first week of November, Glynn's *MOCA Goes Dark* happened a few blocks above the Occupy headquarters at the museum on Grand Avenue. Blindfolded visitors, led through the permanent collection by the sound of jangling keys, had to trust security guards and visitor service volunteers. This performance and the final one, a dinner party scheduled for Dec. 1, rearrange the hierarchy of the museum idealistically, making visitors and the employees on the pay ladder's lower rungs more central to its functioning.

Glynn is on the committee of the Public School, an artist-founded, consensus-run, curriculum-free school based out of a Chung King Road storefront. Anyone can propose a class and anyone can

volunteer to teach. Justin Biren, also an artist and committee member, advocated for moving classes down to Occupy L.A. the week the encampment started. "The main purpose was just seizing the moment and showing solidarity," he says. "The whole [Occupy] thing folded perfectly into the underpinning of the Public School." Classes, including one on civil disobedience and another on architecture theory, met in the Occupy L.A. library until, days before NYPD raided Zuccotti Park, the committee decided to move back to Chinatown (a public university sanctioned by the movement had begun to hold classes at the library, too).

Few of the artist activities at Occupy L.A. have been "official." Most have slipped in informally, like many of the occupiers themselves, though there's an exception: Artists March to Occupy L.A., held Nov. 14 and organized by Susie Tanner, a teaching artist and performer who has worked in theater in the city since 1979. It took her a month to get on the official calendar, as her contacts kept leaving or moving on to different committees. Then, when she finally did secure the date and show up to march with about 60 people, no one at the encampment really seemed to care. "They seemed to be in their own world," Tanner says. "In a way it was disappointing, but also kind of fascinating, like coming into a village that's in progress, where no one minds you're there but everyone has their own priorities."

Tanner also organized a program of music and spoken word in the main square west of City Hall, an event mainly featuring artists who had participated in protests during the Vietnam War. Doors drummer John Densmore was there, as was poet Luis J. Rodriguez and writer-musician Ruben Guevara. Afterwards, on the walk to dinner in Little Tokyo, Densmore compared the Occupy movement to war protests in the 1970s, an era in which sculptor Mark di Suvero spearheaded the Artists' Tower of Protest and a foreign policy demonstration was held at LACMA. "This goes beyond what we were doing then," he said. "It's about change to the core."

"Everything is in crisis; that's why it's called an apocalypse," Rodriguez says. "Everyone thinks apocalypse is an ending, but really it's an unveiling."

He, ARLA, Liz Glynn and members of the Public School are all interested in opening things up, pulling back covers to show the inner workings of the systems and institutions that govern us. That works for art, and, weirdly, for now at least, it seems to be working for protestors.