The Art of Occupation: Stanford Students Explore Nexus between Art and Social Change

Richard Montoya performs in “Variedades.”

IDA Visiting Artist Rubén Martínez and Raquel Gutiérrez introduce the story of Ricardo Flores Magon during “Variedades: A Performance Salon on Anarchy.”

Melanie Cervantes of Oakland-based print collective Dignidad Rebelde talks about getting her start as an activist artist.
Synchronicity is undeniable, and the confluence of recent events and ideas that have redefined the term “occupy” offers a perfect example. A term that once evoked images of soldiers and settlers taking over territory now conjures visions of activists sitting in and camping out in parks, campuses, bank entryways, and government offices from Wall Street to the Oakland piers and everywhere in between. A word once connoting oppression and force now also signifies the opposite—calls for unity, equality, peace, and justice.

CSRE’s groundbreaking Spring 2012 #OccupyArt course was born of an alliance between the Institute for Diversity in the Arts and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. It brought together Stanford students and faculty as well as leading artists, journalists, and scholars from around the country to discuss the relationship between cultural work and political change. During the quarter, students learned from some of the most compelling artists, journalists, activists, and scholars of our time—including Anna Deavere Smith, Jose Antonio Vargas, Boots Riley, Adam Mansbach, Deavere Smith, Shailja Patel, Richard Montoya, and IDA visiting artists Mark Gonzales, Rubén Martinez, and Favianna Rodriguez.

The genesis for the class began on September 11, 2011, when Executive Director of the Institute for Diversity in the Arts (IDA) Jeff Chang and IDA Visiting Artist and activist printmaker Favianna Rodriguez led a group of artists, filmmakers, musicians, photographers and writers to the Arizona/Mexico border. All were part of an effort called CultureStr/ke (http://culturestrike.net), an organization formed after the passage of Arizona’s SB1070 to draw attention to the human rights dimension of the immigration debate and the role that artists could play in change movements. The artists examined up close the results of SB 1070 and discussed other states’ copycat restrictions on immigrants and civil liberties. Upon their return on September 17, scores of activists protesting economic inequality and the undue influence of corporations and the wealthy on government occupied New York City’s Zuccotti Park. Under the slogan, “We are the 99%,” occupiers in cities across the country and around the world returned economic justice, immigrant rights, and other issues to the forefront of American consciousness.

Later that fall, numerous CCSRE-affiliated Stanford faculty members contributed opinion essays to the “Occupy the Future” series for the Boston Review, highlighting political, economic, artistic, philosophical, and sociological considerations raised by Occupy. Professor H. Samy Alim of the School of Education and Faculty Director of IDA, whose CCSRE/IDA-sponsored course last year, Global Flows, linked visits of Middle Eastern Hip Hop artists with the events of the Arab Spring, penned an opinion piece in the New York Times that proposed a linguistic occupation on a par with the physical occupations of the Occupy movement.

In this context of campus wide action and thought around the Occupy movement—including student activism around Occupy—Chang and Alim, along with outgoing CCSRE Director Ramón Saldívar, Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences, Professor of Comparative Literature and CCSRE Undergraduate Program Director, José David Saldivar, and Tania Mitchell, Associate Director for Undergraduate Studies and Director of Service Learning, began meeting regularly.

The result was #OccupyArt: Immigration, Nation, and the Art of Occupation, which opened in April with 150 enrolled students and community members, one of the largest classes in the School of Humanities and Sciences. In the inaugural lecture, Chang set the stage stating, “The arts rely on layers of meaning...We are privileging the questions.” He and Alim highlighted the idea that “cultural change precedes political change.” Throughout, students tweeted away and quoted the lecture in their Facebook updates with the hashtag #OccupyArt, ensuring the course had the global reach it intended.

In a session entitled “Native Occupations,” art historian Mark Watson posed the question, “What would it mean to decolonize America today?” and presented students with an example of how indigenous art intertwines with Native political philosophy and globalization with Alan Michelson’s Third Bank of the River. Meanwhile Karen Biestman, Director of the Stanford Native American Cultural, raised questions of cultural ownership and belonging through the case of Ishi, the last member of the Yahi tribe to have lived predominantly outside the dominant culture. She asked, “Who owns culture?” The course then leap from the historical and ongoing occupation of indigenous lands to an exploration of the linkages between occupations in Palestine, Oakland, and Arizona with guest lecturers Mark Gonzales,
students and community members in the audience alike asked how individuals with privilege or in stratified systems could work within these systems to change them, how conversations such as those held in the class could be shared more broadly, how to negotiate artists’ obligations to social causes and their potential as agents of change amid increasingly corporatized and consolidated media networks.

The call for informed, compassionate, and relentless struggle was echoed in the following weeks. Oakland Hip Hop artist and Occupy activist Boots Riley, poet Shailja Patel, IDA visiting artist and CultureStrike coordinator Favianna Rodríguez, and Dr. Gaye Theresa Johnson of the Department of Black Studies at UC Santa Barbara spoke of economic injustice and immigration in the US and around the world. Professors Harry Elam, Jennifer Brody, and Michelle Elam addressed matters of access, identity, and representation in art with regard to Black artists. The course segued to author and musician Ruben Martínez’s performance salon “Variedades,” which featured Richard Montoya of Culture Clash and Stanford undergraduate Jamaica Osorio, among others, singing, reciting poetry, and acting a narrated biography of Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon, whose calls for tierra y libertad (“land and liberty”) at the dawn of the twentieth century laid foundations for later mobilizations such as the Mexican Revolution, the Zapatista Movement, and Occupy. The course wound down introspectively. In its penultimate session, #OccupyArt welcomed Steve Phillips, Elvira Prieto, Gina Hernández, and Martha “Gabi” Cervantes, whose activism during the 1980s and 1990s prompted Stanford’s divestment from South African interests and the creation of CCSRE. Finally, the course closed with a spectacular display of student artwork. From rap songs to poems to documentary films to mixed media visual pieces, students shared their talents and learning poignantly. Pieces connected themes of the course thoughtfully, touching on topics such as hegemony, economic justice, politics of identity, containment and abandonment, and immigration.

Yet while clearly much intellectual ground was covered, many questions remained. Students and community members in the audience alike asked how individuals with privilege or in stratified systems could work within these systems to change them, how conversations such as those held in the class could be shared more broadly, how to negotiate artists’ obligations to social causes and their potential as agents of change amid increasingly corporatized and consolidated media networks.

Along with questions, however, participants in the course also left with inspiration and purpose. One undergraduate tweeted “This class leaves me burning to affect change, to learn about global justice and injustice and do more.” Indeed, by harnessing a confluence of resources, individuals, and interests in opportune time, #OccupyArt was informative and transformative, and certainly achieved the objectives articulated by Professor Ramón Saldívar, who stated “The goal of the course is about learning, about action, about change...making art together in a class at Stanford.”

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Luis Pozo

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#OccupyArt was co-sponsored by African & African American Studies, American Studies, Anthropology, Art & Art History, Center for African Studies, Center for Latin American Studies, Comparative Literature, Continuing Studies, School of Education, English, Feminist Studies, School of Humanities & Sciences, Linguistics, McCoy Family Center for Ethics in Society, Office of the Provost, The President’s Office, Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford Institute for Creativity and the Arts, Student Affairs, Urban Studies, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, Vice Provost for Student Affairs.

Adam Mansbach and Elaine Kim listen in as Anna Deavere Smith discusses her play, Twilight, which she wrote in response to the LA Riots.

Student Hana al-Henaid presents her final art project to the class.

A triptych poster created by Dignidad Rebelde in conjunction with poet/lyricist Mark Gonzales.

Let Us Live

Let Us Love

Let Us Be