

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Where are the Occupy Artists?

Susan Franklin Tanner · Thursday, November 3rd, 2011

While marching in the first Occupy LA (OLA) demonstration on October 1, 2011, I saw a sign that read “WHERE ARE THE CELEBS?” The celebs did come. New York’s Zuccotti Park was visited by Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Michael Moore, Kanye West, Russell Simmons and Russell Brand, while LA’s passionate celeb visitors have included Tom Morello, Danny Glover and drummer John Densmore. Their presence has been much appreciated, while their small numbers have served to highlight the fact that, unlike in past social and political movements, the celebrity community seems to be lying low.

In subsequent OLA demonstrations, people (myself included) began asking, “Where are the occupy artists?” If you visit the OLA site at City Hall, you would see that art is everywhere and in the spirit of OLA, “All are welcome, all are equal.” From time to time, there has been an arts committee, but the last time I was there, the committee had temporarily disbanded. OLA is a work in progress. No one is selecting or screening the art that’s displayed or performed and, in fact, the “open mic” policy seems to be in force pretty much continuously during the daylight hours. There is even a “theatre” set up, consisting of a rope strung between two trees with a few blankets hung on it to form a curtain. A sign scrawled in black marker advertises for artists to join the Occupy LA Theatre, although I couldn’t find anyone there when I visited.

On the weekends, “tourists” from all walks of life stroll through the tent villages, asking questions, taking classes, listening to speakers or simply enjoying the scene. OLA looks like a kind of peoples’ art park, with spoken word ringing out from the PA, a kids’ tent with craft supplies, and painters, silk screeners, and performance artists plying their trade. Some accept donations, some refuse, saying that money is old-school and they would prefer to give their art back to the community for free. One visitor begged a silk screener to accept a cash donation for supplies and was rebuffed, while an artist ambled through the crowd holding a painting and giving out a web address for those who wanted to send money via Pay Pal. To those of us who depend upon our art forms to make our livings, the “give our art away for free” philosophy seems somewhat bizarre.

The last time I was active in an arts demonstration at City Hall was over 20 years ago in support of the LA Endowment for the Arts. When I spoke in front of the City Council, my message was that artists were members of the workforce and deserved to be paid a living wage like any worker. How true those words ring today in the 99% movement as everyone, including laid-off workers, the homeless, students who can’t afford college, and others who cannot afford to pay their school loans, are joining people all over the world demanding an economic system that provides for the needs of all.

Those of us who have been engaging in community-based art-making over the years have felt and will feel in sync with the arts mission of OLA. According to a young man named Rob, they want the arts to express “the dreams, despair, joy, enlightenment...all the different emotions that make us human.” Professional artists are welcome to bring their services and lend a hand, but are not being sought to replace what is happening spontaneously at the tent village.

Ideas from those of us who do not live in the OLA site and can only participate part-time are typically met with “That’s a great idea. Why don’t you make that happen?” This invitation has led to a number of upcoming committees and events: An Arts Collective is forming and will begin having meetings every evening and on the weekends. Inspired by the need to see artists in the street expressing our long held concerns, I have joined with a young colleague of mine, Marcela Robles, to organize a November 14th [Artists’ March to Occupy LA](#). The line-up of performers includes Ellen Geer and Melora Marshall, Ruben Guevara, avantRadio.com and Jewell Jae Jeffers. Luis J. Rodriguez and John Densmore are tentatively confirmed.

Many fellow artists have confided that they have wanted to go down and get involved but didn’t want to go alone. I urge all who are interested to make the effort. Although a bit daunting, it is stimulating to make your way into the OLA village. I guarantee you will be inspired by much of what you see and hear and you will definitely feel a part of an historical movement that may, at last, transform the future for our children’s children.

This entry was posted on Thursday, November 3rd, 2011 at 1:06 pm and is filed under [Discourse](#), [Lifestyle](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.