

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

In Oakland, where I live, and at UC Berkeley, where I teach, Occupy has been defiant, fractious, exhausting, exhilarating. The zone of possibilities it promised was threatened by ruthlessly violent state and administrative pushback and the repressive criminalization of dissent. Cops wielding batons, rubber bullets, and pepper spray: these are searing images. But other scenes persist—a port closed by thousands of anti-capitalist demonstrators; tents set afloat in sly compliance of a campus “no encampment” decree.

Which imaginings do we privilege? One Occupy Oakland poster placed *DREAM OF THINGS THAT HAVE NEVER BEEN BUT SOMEDAY WILL BE* above a large blank space, extending an invitation for you to fill its void. Here I take my cue from that multivocal, open-ended impulse. Instead of using this special issue as my own platform, I asked two Berkeley students—an undergraduate and a Ph.D. candidate, both feminists, art historians, and activists involved in Occupy Oakland and Occupy Cal—to share these pages.

Ariella Aronstam-Powers, senior:

“Hey, Mom? I’m about to get arrested.” I gripped my cell phone as police kettled my body with hundreds of other Occupy protesters outside the façade of downtown Oakland’s YMCA. The apparent chaos transformed into solidarity as friends, occupiers, and comrades tightly clustered together. As Oakland police cuffed my wrists, I recalled the word “LIBERATED” from a wheat-pasted poster in West Oakland that helped mobilize marchers to that day of action.

Screen-print posters and political graffiti in public spaces play a vital role in the Occupy movement by spreading information about events and visually communicating critical themes, including questions of student debt, community access to social services, and corporate greed. Since the inception of Occupy Oakland in October and my subsequent arrest on January 28, 2012, for “remaining at the scene of a riot,” intertextual street-based word/image motifs have consumed my academic and personal inquiries. My senior thesis investigates Oakland’s legacy of radical art by examining the work of the Black Panther Party’s Minister of Culture Emory Douglas and his continued influence on and engagement with contemporary Oakland print and graffiti artists. Considering local circumstances of racism, radical organizing, and graphic arts since the 1960s, I ask how regional modes of making foster political mobility through the use of polemical imagery.

My Occupy experiences drive an analysis of the *reconfiguration of public spaces* as a fundamental component of the Occupy movement and of street art. My understanding of “space” is both geographical (like Occupy encampments or police kettling) and discursive (like political posters). Spatial relations operate as

**DREAM OF
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● OCCUPY ● OAKLAND 2011

*Miriam Klein Stahl and Gabby Miller:
Dream of Things That Have Never
Been but Someday Will Be. 2011.*

a context and a product for the interrelated conditions in which Occupy has arisen. Given the increasing privatization of my city and university, I am interested in what constitutes the “public.” How has the interpenetration of public and private spheres had an impact on cultural production? And what blockages and opportunities exist in these spaces for visual resistance and, ultimately, justice?

Joni Spigler, graduate student:

I was teaching an undergraduate research writing class at Berkeley in the fall of 2011 organized around the paintings of Edgar Degas. But the illusory division between the concerns of the public university and those of the world outside were collapsing, and seemed to demand a rethinking of pedagogy. By November 10, we had witnessed the razing of the Occupy Oakland encampment by thousands of cops in militarized riot gear, a general strike that shut down the port of Oakland, strikes on campus against tuition hikes, austerity measures, and privatization, and, just the day before, Berkeley students and professors being viciously attacked by police for defending a few Occupy Cal tents in front of Sproul Hall.

Students were as stunned as I by what was happening, so we took time to talk about it in class. About what it all meant. How the concerns of those people in tents were their concerns too, with tuition increases and the shifting priorities of the University of California. One day a student asked if they could write about these issues.

I had chosen Degas because he was both a remarkable artist who engaged with the artistic issues of his time but also because the scholarship on him confronted issues of gender, race, class, science, vision, and sex. If students were going to write about resistance and revolution instead, I wanted those essays to be grounded in images and to engage with equally compelling texts. And I wanted to allow the choice to write about Degas or about Occupy, which meant I had to teach two classes at once. We read about the siege of Paris and the Paris Commune (though in 1871, Degas was in Orne, recovering from the Franco-Prussian War before journeying to New Orleans). These readings were supplemented with articles about the Occupy movement.

The final papers could not have been more diverse: uncontrolled nature in Degas’s horse-racing paintings; police violence at Occupy Cal; Degas’s Bathers and the gaze; barriers that keep Mexican-American students from participating in Occupy Cal; alienation in Degas’s family scenes; photojournalism and the Occupy movement; Degas, the nude, and feminism. If teaching, like direct action, involves some measure of risk, this was a risk that paid off.

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