

OWS debt resisters mobilize arts, education and media for a 'People's Bailout'

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Sung in unison by 50 voices and accompanied by the melancholic twang of a banjo, these lines echoed throughout the otherwise vacant Deutsche Bank atrium at 60 Wall Street last Sunday:

Every day, several times a day, a thought comes over me. I owe more debt than I can pay back, more money than I'll ever see.

The lines were taken from the Depression-era Woodie Guthrie song "The Debt I Owe," and had been recomposed for collective song by Dave Backer, an organizer with Occupy University. It was the weekly assembly of Strike Debt, a movement of debt resisters that has emerged from Occupy Wall Street over the past six months. While haunting in their sense of despair and isolation, when we vocalized them together the lines created a sense of beloved community, temporarily transfiguring the grim postmodern atrium of a bailed-out bank into a kind of secular cathedral of debt resistance.

From O13 to N15 and beyond

S17 brought new media opportunities for Strike Debt. For instance, I was invited to discuss the circumstances of my arrest on Al Jazeera, where I made sure to plug DROM for an international television audience. On MSNBC's *Up With Chris Hayes*, Amin Husain and Alexis Goldstein elaborated on the intergenerational connections between historic social movements such as ACT UP, the trajectory of OWS and the analysis being developed by Strike Debt — the website of which temporarily crashed due to an overload of visits. Meanwhile, a week's worth of debt-related assemblies and teach-ins took place at the Free University at Madison Square Park, including discussions from Occupy University based on the DROM's analysis of debt and race, municipal debt and more. Free University provided a space for Strike Debt to decompress and to further cultivate relationships with allies in the student movement.



People's Bailout poster.



Occupy Year II

After a burst of massive street protests and a period of dormant self-reflection, the Occupy movement has settled into its second year as a force for community-rooted resistance.

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The month following S17 also saw the strengthening of relationships between Strike Debt and the art community, such as through the debt-themed exhibition *To Have and to Owe* at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts.



Strike Debt/Occupy University Teach-In, *To Have and to Owe* exhibition, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, October 2012.

Recalling the synergy between progressive artistic spaces and the work of ACT UP in the 1980s, exhibitions such as *To Have and to Owe* and the related programming at Momena Art by Occupy Museums have functioned as a platform for reading groups, meetings, teach-ins and performances — thus helping to incubate a culture of debt resistance.

Strike Debt also had a strong presence at the annual *Creative Time Summit*.

Tidal: Occupy Theory/Occupy Strategy was invited to present its work and distribute literature to nearly 1,000 participants from around the world. Internationally renowned artist Martha Rosler held aloft the *DROM* during her keynote address, and communist philosophical impresario Slavoj Žižek posed for a photograph with the Strike Debt red square flag.

A small-scale breakout discussion was also hosted by *Tidal* to address the evolution of OWS, the project of Strike Debt, and the ways in which the skills and resources of contemporary art might be tapped for growing the movement.



Slavoj Žižek, *Creative Time Summit*, October 12, 2012.

A key point to emerge from the discussion was the proliferation over the past decade of experiments with alternative economies by artists, ranging from skill-shares to gift-exchanges to time-banks to collectively managed spaces of all sorts. What might it look like to channel these energies and resources into affirmative spaces of debt resistance and mutual aid? As Vanya S. of *Tidal* put it, for many artists the advent of Occupy “has dissolved the boundaries between their practice and their experiments with new ways of living, alternative ways of inhabiting time and space.”

<http://www.undo.net/it/mostra/141979>