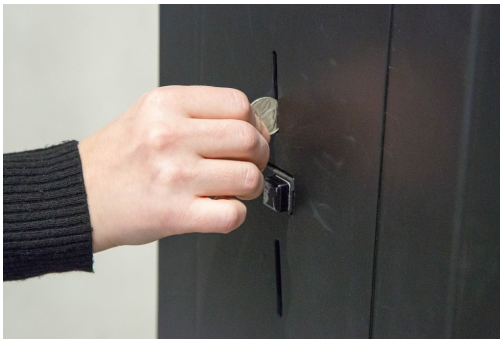


HYPERALLERGIC

ART

At a University Museum, an Exhibition Examines Student Debt

Tara Sheena | March 12, 2015



Ahmet Ögüt, "Anti-Debt Monolith" (2014)
(courtesy the artist and the Fiction Factory, all
photos courtesy Aaron Word)

EAST LANSING, Mich. — On the sprawling grounds of Michigan State University, the [Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum](#) is a sleek, modernistic storehouse amidst the dull brick buildings that populate the campus. The museum, designed by renowned architect Zaha Hadid, opened in November 2012 and points to a modernization of the campus as a

whole, as well as a hope for new revenue streams for the school.

[*Day After Debt: A Call For Student Loan Relief*](#) is one of the museum's current exhibitions, co-organized between the Broad and mission-driven arts organization Protocinema, and featuring five art-as-response pieces to the student loan crisis and its effects on graduates. Originally conceived by Kurdish artist Ahmet Ögüt, the exhibit features newly commissioned works by Ögüt as well as a mixed bag of international artists: Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Superflex, Dan Perjovschi, and Martha Rosler.

All of the works provide incisive and provocative statements on the unsettling (and all too common) issues surrounding student loan debt. Specifically, the art on display confronts the private luxury that pervades many museum settings, including the Broad, which was jumpstarted by a \$26 million dollar contribution by Mr. Broad



Ahmet Ögüt, “Anti-Debt Monolith” (2014)
(courtesy the artist and the Fiction Factory)
(click to enlarge)

in 2010 (he is also known for bailing out the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art to the tune of \$30 million in late 2008).

Day After Debt is not contained to the galleries but expands into the museum’s public spaces — corridors, entranceways, and the like.

Ögüt’s work, “Anti-Debt Monolith,” met me first. A large, rectangular structure drenched in black paint stood as an oversized coffin, looming over the otherwise welcoming entrance area — is this where post-graduate dreams go to die? At closer view, the towering frame has a money deposit slot for patrons to donate at their will, a common factor amongst all the works in this exhibit; a jazzy interlude played when I inserted my coin. “Anti-Debt Monolith” is the black void that simultaneously displays and houses the

seemingly exponential accumulation of student debt. Ögüt’s work was partly inspired by Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, in which extraterrestrial species are responsible for building society’s most sophisticated artifacts. The sculpture appears to have magically descended, rather than to have been the hardened work of an artist. Ögüt credits only aluminum, paint, and sound as the sum of its parts — pointing more toward creativity born of scarcity than of boundless resources, a familiar reality to today’s post-graduate members of the creative class.

Iranian artist Natascha Sadr Haghighian’s “Donation Tower” set-up adjacent to the museum’s welcome desk, contains eleven stacked brick-shaped blocks and is built entirely out of shredded U.S. currency. The money, deemed “imperfect” by the government, comes from the United States Federal Reserves where the bills are stored to later be sold as souvenirs for larger artistic and commercial purposes. Using \$10,000 of this defective currency, Haghighian’s piece re-commodifies the un-commodifiable — something the artist satirizes with the right amount of wit and intelligence. I could not help but circle back to the government’s influence on the bureaucracy of higher education and how, in the States, all of those forces are offset by the ever-increasing tuition and student loans this exhibit so fairly challenges.

In “Academic Square Cap upside down,” Copenhagen-based artist trio Superflex (Jakob Fenger, Rasmus Nielsen, and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen) dismantles the very



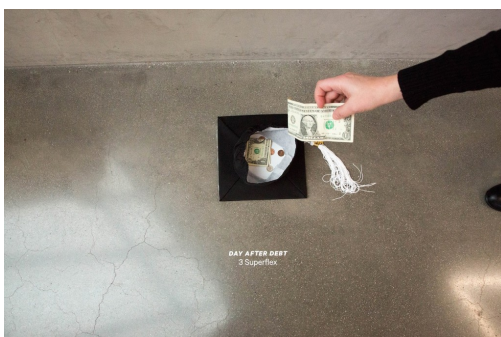
Natascha Sadr Haghighian, "Donation Tower (former value \$10,000)" (2014) (courtesy the artist)



Natascha Sadr Haghighian, "Donation Tower (former value \$10,000)" (2014) (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

center of post-grad iconography: the graduation cap. Placed on its square surface underneath a grand description of Eli and Edythe Broad in the museum's entryway, the overturned cap serves as the most stark, sad reminder of the unavoidability of student debt. The vast economic hierarchy set in place is so blatant that it's amusing.

A hierarchy of a slightly different sort comes through in Perjovschi's "Bag It!" A large plastic bag, intended for money donations and haphazardly placed in the windows of one of the main entrances plays on the ridiculous rhetoric surrounding donation levels. Levels progress from "You are responsible" up through "You are a friend" to "You are my God" —Levels progress from "You are responsible" up through "You are a friend" to "You are my God" — language that more specifically evokes poor artists' plea for money than student loan debt. However, Perjovschi shows debt and art-making as an unfortunate concurrence: a vicious cycle that keeps artists asking for money while their debts mount higher and higher.

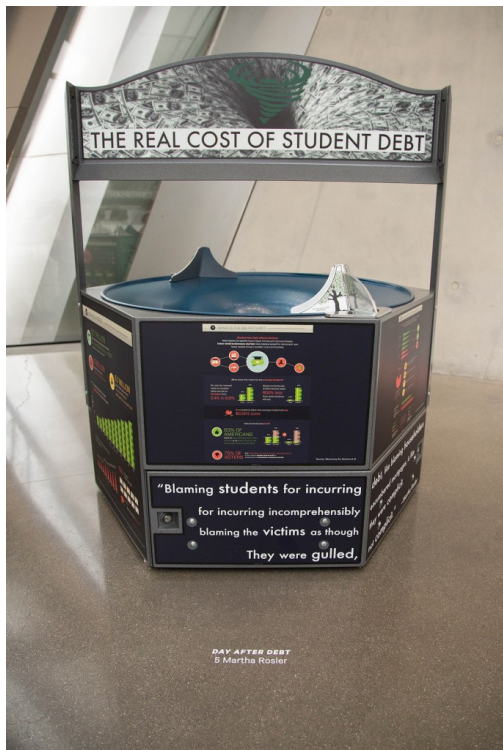


Brooklyn-based artist Martha Rosler engages in a spirit of humor and play with her contribution, "Coin Vortex for Student Debt." As a sort of coin wishing well, Rosler posits her own thoughts on the debt crisis alongside a myriad of troubling (and all-too-familiar) statistics. I released many

Superflex, "Academic Square Cap upside down"
(2014) (courtesy the artist)

coins into the vortex to watch them spin continuously before being swallowed whole by the cavernous funnel. If loan collectors are able to make giving up money this fun, I am sure we would have a little less of a crisis on our hands. Or, at least, that's what Rosler seems to be playing with: the line between amusement and obligation. Pseudo-inspirational phrases, like "We owe each other everything" or "You are not a loan," are displayed amidst chilling statistics reminding us, for example, that 6.7 million Americans are more than 90 days delinquent on a student loan. These sobering truths cannot be ignored — in art or in life, it seems. Rosler's work was certainly the most didactic of all the pieces, but no less enjoyable in its compelling necessity.

Another aspect of the exhibition is a letter of agreement, drafted by Ögüt and art lawyer Sergio Munoz Sarmiento, for potential buyers of the works on display. The pieces range in price from \$5,000 to \$25,000, with 100 percent of the proceeds going directly toward student debt initiative, Strike Debt.



Martha Rosler, "Coin Vortex for Student Debt"
(2014) (courtesy the artist)

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The fact that this art is on the grounds of a major university is undeniably important — that the organizers would target university museums at all is both essential and utterly bold in its activism. Student loan debt is an issue that undoubtedly hits those in creative fields the hardest; it is only apt to use art to communicate this wide-ranging crisis.

As of March 12, 2015, with just a month to go in the five-month exhibition, none of the art works had been sold.

[Day After Debt: A Call For Student Loan Relief continues at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum \(547 East Circle Drive, East Lansing, Michigan\) through April 12.](#)