10 2011

The Occupation of Wall Street Across Time and Space

Nato Thompson

The occupation of Wall Street continues with vast alacrity and momentum. What began as an AdBusters' call to accountability has captured a reservoir of frustration and inequity moving across the United States and beyond. Here in New York City, this particular moment defies easy categorization or analysis as it continues to move in directions that defy previous expectations and critiques. The occupation is ever in flux. Nonetheless, as the occupation (and numerous planned and spontaneous marches) heads into its three weeks amidst a fairly extensive media blackout in the United States, the movement is clearly heading into a different organizational and theoretical manifestation.

To back up from this missive a bit, I must indicate that the occupation occurred simultaneously with the massive project and conference on socially engaged art I organized with Creative Time called Living as Form. Of course there are no causal links but it certainly has shaped my personal encounter with the unfolding events. As there were many artists, activists, critics, and philosophers culled together whose work uses some manifestations of cultural production for the contestation of power (albeit such a broad umbrella is purposeful), the simultaneity of each event could

hardly be ignored as we gathered together. At the last talk on Sunday September 25th titled Manifestations of Resistance, the audience and artists speaking decided to forego the talk and instead head down to the occupation and begin organizing. After a whirlwind weekend of hearing from incredible artists and activists, the connections between the socially engaged work and the need for a radical encounter and contestation with the powers of global finance and control were apparent. Many headed down to the occupation which, located in Zuccotti Park (now renamed Liberty Plaza), looked like numerous occupations I had witnessed in Spain in the last months of spring this year. The exception was that tents were not allowed to be erected and thus the site itself remained rather horizontal lacking the tent-city feel that has become so known in the occupations around the world. Our ad-hoc group gathered and decided to initiate a more formal meeting for the next day to begin organizing toward culturally supporting the occupation. As anyone knows from working in the context of protest and resistance, the urgency moves the conversation toward action. Do as you think.

The next day, a large 80 person group gathered to think through how to organize toward gathering momentum. Numerous ideas were produced including a zombie march, an intervention with air horns, a sub-committee on stickers and t-shirts, a sewing banner sub-committee and the organization of an anti-biennial occupeniel that would be a call to cultural producers everywhere to join in on the occupation. Andy from the Yes Men was in attendance and was immediately moved into action to gather resources and support for an occupation newspaper titled The Occupied Wall Street Journal. As this is written, many of these initiatives continue and could certainly use your support.

Although the occupation is only in its third week, it is always useful to remember how its public image has grown and shifted over time. For the first week, not only the popular press ignored it, but the left-leaning progressive press ran amok with articles discounting the naivité of the organizers and their lack of coordination. A New York Times article ran depicting the protesters as a not-so-distant cousin of Burning Man with crazy costumes and poorly articulated frustrations with everything. The actress Susan Surandon made her way down to the protests to not only voice her support but also to encourage the protesters to "get on message". The decentralized anti-message message of the protests seemed to be such a sticking point that numerous progressive democrats joined in on a chorus of critique demanding a more consolidated political perspective. Doug Henwood of the Left Business Observer referred to the occupation as the "no agenda" and cited the critiques of Jodi Dean in being suspicious of the decentralized anarchist inspired methods that refuse ideological positions. This critique is nothing new, but it came out fast and furious as this occupation began to find its legs.

Meanwhile, the major media continued to ignore the occupation altogether. Fortunately, even with its corporate backings and vast problematics, Facebook and Twitter were blowing up with reports from the front. My own page was full of a running list of images and articles testifying that despite what the media wasn't reporting, something incredible was happening in downtown Manhattan. Even as the New York Times continues even now to give it any of the reporting it would to similar events across the globe, the area of Lower Manhattan is a world of barricades, police helicopters, police cars and surveillance. The news was getting out and those that were skeptical had to pay a visit. As they did, the movement grew.

A particularly important turning point was the intervention at Sotheby's where activists from Occupy Wall Street interrupted an auction to bring attention to the locked out art handlers union. The disruption not only garnered press but also the attention of other labor leaders who have known for a long time that their backs are up against the wall. The solidarity and actions in support of labor garnered the respect of labor leaders who slowly began to get involved. On September 27th, 700 union Continental and United Airlines workers joined the protests dressed in their fairly impressive pilot regalia. On September 29th, the New York City Transit Union, whose members' total 38,000 voted to support the occupation and to join in October 5th in a massive march on Wall Street. On October 1st, the United Steelworkers joined. The massive support from some of the largest unions has already begun to silence the left-wing critics that the movement lacks a message and has now resulted in more silence than critique from the mainstream press. At the same time, the movement continues to need to broaden its base across race and class. Hopefully within a few more weeks, such connections can be made with the rapidity that gathered the attention of the last bits of labor in the United States.

Certainly, more numbers are still required and the movement continues to remain precarious. Every night, the numbers of people in the square dwindle. With it raining routinely since the occupation began and exhaustion taking hold, many of the protesters that remain at the site over night are the most anarchist, young and gritty. With a maintained rule of no structures or tents, the site itself continues to be under threat from sheer exhaustion and could easily be removed by a stealth late night operation by the

police. As the major media continues to refuse to cover the event, many around the globe would hardly notice.

Which leads me to one bit of analysis that has been very much on my mind as the time of this event unfolds in an occupation of space. The occupation of Wall Street is obviously both a physical occupation as well as one that squats upon an active symbol of capitalism. It benefits greatly from this duality as the physical act of not moving from a space also serves a symbolic purpose that is easily transmittable. It is also what makes it somewhat different from the occupation of the squares globally. As of this writing, occupations have begun in Los Angeles, Boston, Seattle and Chicago. All of their namesakes Occupy Los Angeles, Occupy Boston, etc., do not exactly confer the same dual message of a critique of capital within a specific geographic space.

That being said, the occupations are quite different a political action than those typically deployed in the alt-globalization movement at the early part of the last decade that erupted out of Seattle and inspired by the radical agenda of the Zapatistas in Chiapas. Unlike what became the sort of circus-like atmospheres that would descend upon various global gatherings of capitalist plutocrats such as the IMF, WTO, GATT, WEF, G8, etc., the occupation this time sits on the doorstep of a power that must remain there. It is not an event driven ordeal, but in fact, one that must operate across a longer threshold of time. If the protest movements of the 1980s and 1990s continued on the take it to the streets, they suffered from vast ideological divisions (which has become to some degree, the inspiration for numerous anarchist-inspired decentralized general assembly models) but also from temporal limitations of momentum. Marches would end that day and with it, the momentum.

But in this case, the occupation stretches out over time. The desire for a message (which certainly holds true for a protest) takes on a different manifestation as the message must continue to adjust as the body politic that gathers at the site of occupation continues to grow. Watching the lefty progressives demanding a message of this loose-knit gathering of people indicates a lack of understanding regarding an important strategic shift in the occupation of both space and time. For in watching this movement gather steam over the course of three weeks, one realizes the obvious. No protest march could last three weeks. No gathering of the IMF, WTO or G8 could last three weeks. What this movement benefits from is a sustained approach via occupation. The overall duality of both a symbolic resistance to the condition of capitalism communicated with by the occupation of a place called Wall Street was message enough to allow for a the decentralized group of people there to gather interest and support as they continued to sleep and hold down a one block section of downtown.

Which is to go back to why the young and the nothing-to-lose are the most critical elements of this movement. Without the seizure of space over time, discussing the merits of this movement would be a non-issue. There would be nothing to discuss. As I heard a friend say that Heidegger once quipped, “Philosophy is like people holding knives in circle with nothing left to cut.” (or something like that). While people sit at home on their computers discussing the merits of the movement in fashion or another, it is these amazing 20 somethings that gathered momentum at the heart of capital that provided that thing that is to be discussed. As they continue to be the ones who remain steadfastly occupying Liberty Plaza late at night and the movement that has garnered the interest of labor unions and continues to capture the insurrectionary imagination, this movement can only last so long as the physical

occupation continues. The occupation of space over time is what garnered the momentum of the Arab Spring and it will continue to be a strategy that works across the United States. For those that can literally camp out and hold down the physical and symbolic squatting of what rightfully belongs to the inhabitants of the globe, their efforts must go commended and they must be supported.

Some links:

Occupy Wall Street
http://occupywallst.org/

Wall Street Occupennial
http://wallstreetoccupennial.tumblr.com/calltoartists

Living as Form
http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/livingasform/about.htm

The Creative Time Summit
http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2011/summit/