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The Audacity of Occupy Wall Street

Richard Kim | November 2, 2011

A few years ago, Joe Therrien, a graduate of the NYC Teaching Fellows program, was working as a full-time drama teacher at a public elementary school in New York City. Frustrated by huge class sizes, sparse resources and a disorganized bureaucracy, he set off to the University of Connecticut to get an MFA in his passion—puppetry. Three years and $35,000 in student loans later, he emerged with degree in hand, and because puppeteers aren't exactly in high demand, he went looking for work at his old school. The intervening years had been brutal to the city's school budgets—down about 14 percent on average since 2007. A virtual hiring freeze has been in place since 2009 in most subject areas, arts included, and spending on art supplies in elementary schools crashed by 73 percent between 2006 and 2009. So even though Joe's old principal was excited to have him back, she just couldn't afford to hire a new full-time teacher. Instead, he's working at his old school as a full-time "substitute"; he writes his own curriculum, holds regular classes and does everything a normal teacher does. "But sub pay is about 50 percent of a full-time salaried position," he says, "so I'm working for half as much as I did four years ago, before grad school, and I don't have health insurance…. It's the best-paying job I could find."

Like a lot of the young protesters who have flocked to Occupy Wall Street, Joe had thought that hard work and education would bring, if not class mobility, at least a measure of security (indeed, a master's degree can boost a New York City teacher's salary by $10,000 or more). But the past decade of stagnant wages for the 99 percent and million-dollar bonuses for the 1 percent has awakened the kids of the middle class to a national nightmare: the dream that coaxed their parents to meet the demands of work, school, mortgage payments and tuition bills is shattered. Down is the new up.

But then in these grim times, something unexpected happened: at first scores met in parks around New York City this summer to plan an occupation of Wall Street, then hundreds responded to their call, then thousands from persuasions familiar and astonishing, and now more than 100 cities around the country are Occupied. In the face of unchecked capitalism and a broken, captured state, the citizens of Occupy America have done something desperate and audacious—they put their faith and hope in the last seemingly credible force left in the world: each other.

Sometime during the second week of the Occupation, Joe took that leap. Within his first hour at Liberty Park, he was "totally won over by the Occupation's spirit of cooperation and selflessness." He has been going back just about every day since. It took him a few days to find the Arts and Culture working group, which has its roots in the first planning meetings and has already produced a museum's worth of posters (from the crudely handmade to slicker culture-jamming twists on corporate designs), poetry readings, performance-art happenings, political yoga classes and Situationist spectacles like the one in which an artist dressed in a suit and noose tie rolled up to the New York Stock Exchange in a giant clear plastic bubble to mock the speculative economy's inevitable pop.

Alexandre Carvalho, a Brazilian doctor who worked in Rio's favelas and was one of the original organizers of Arts and Culture, explains that the group's praxis revolves around two principles. "First—autonomy, horizontalism and collectivism. We're nonhierarchical, self-regulating, self-deliberating and self-organizing. Everyone is creating their own stuff, but we're connected to a larger hub through the Arts and Culture group." The second principle is something Alexandre calls "virgeo," a mashup of "virtual" and "geographical." "We try to have both an on-the-ground conversation and an online conversation so that people all over the world can send their ideas and respond to our work." The same concepts apply, more or less, to the other culture working groups at OWS—from Media (which shoots video for OWS's livestream, documents direct actions and produces educational videos) to the Library (which has received more than 3,500 books, all logged in an online card catalog, from the nearly complete works of Noam Chomsky to *Creative Cash: How to Sell Your Crafts, Needlework, Designs and Know-How*).

At one of Arts and Culture's meetings—held adjacent to 60 Wall Street, at a quieter public-private indoor park that's also the atrium of Deutsche Bank—it dawned on Joe: "I have to build as many giant puppets as I can to help this thing out—people love puppets!" And so Occupy Wall Street's Puppet Guild, one of about a dozen guilds under the Arts and Culture working group, was born. In the spirit of OWS, Joe works in loose and rolling collaboration with others who share his passion for puppetry or whose projects somehow momentarily coincide with his mission. With the help of a handful of people, he built the twelve-foot Statue of Liberty puppet that had young and old alike flocking to him on October 8 in Washington Square Park. Right now, he's working with nearly thirty artists to stage Occupy Halloween, when his newest creations, a twelve-foot Wall Street bull and a forty-foot Occupied Brooklyn Bridge inspired by Chinese paper dragons—along with a troupe of dancers playing corporate vampires—will inject a little bit of countercultural messaging into the annual parade of Snookis and *True Blood* wannabes strutting down Sixth Avenue.

Those of harder head or heart may tweet—giant puppets, #srsly? Yes, it's hard to draw a straight line from something like Occupy Halloween to the overthrow of global capitalism or a financial transactions tax or student debt relief or any number of goals—some of world-historical magnitude, some straight from the playbook of reformist think tanks—that swirl around Liberty these days. But it's creative types, either shoved into crisis by the precarious economy or just sick of making things under the corporate system, who have responded most enthusiastically to Occupy Wall Street's call. It's not where one might have looked for a revolt to emerge organically. In subsequent Occupations like the one in Oakland, anti-racist organizers have been a dominant force; and in Rust Belt towns across the Midwest, blue-collar types have led the way. But the first spark, here in New York, was generated when

artists, students and academics hooked up with activists from Bloombergville, a three-week occupation near City Hall to protest the mayor's budget cuts. This unlikely mix has proved to be a tactical boon, says Alexandre: "Artists are in a privileged position to take the terrain without too much repression. It's harder for the police to move against you when you are clearly doing something nonviolent and artistic."

When I ask Joe if he thinks Occupy Wall Street should make repealing budget cuts like the ones that struck New York's public schools a priority, he replies that the thought hadn't really crossed his mind. "I hope there are groups of people who are working on that specific issue," he says, but for the moment he's "prioritizing what I'm most passionate about." Which, he explains, is "figuring out how to make theater that's going to help open people up to this new cultural consciousness. It's what I'm driven to do right now, so I'm following that impulse to see where it leads."

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Since September 17, the first day of the Occupation, thousands of people have flocked to Liberty to follow this impulse to live life anew. To stay for even a few days there is to be caught up in an incredible delirium of talking, making, doing and more talking—a beehive in which the drones have overthrown the queen but are still buzzing about furiously without any immediately apparent purpose. Someone might shout over the human microphone, "Mic check! (Mic check!) We need! (We need!) Some volunteers! (Some volunteers!) To go to Home Depot! (To go to Home Depot!) And get cleaning supplies! (And get cleaning supplies!)" A handful of people might perk up and answer the call—or not, in which case it is made again and again. Sometimes too many show up and are sent away; sometimes an Occupier jumps to attention but gets distracted by something or someone shiny in Liberty's evolving alleyways, and instead of shopping for the revolution is next seen discussing the politics of micro-finance. Somehow, some way—brooms and mops, bleach and scrub brushes show up. They mysteriously vanish, and an ad hoc committee is organized to replenish them and then to guard them. To this day, Liberty is kept relatively clean, which keeps the cops out; the mums in the planters still bloom, hardy by stock but made hardier by the Occupation's life-sustaining and downwardly distributed ethic of care.

One of the first working groups that the original organizers created was simply called Food, and its first budget aspired to raise just $1,000 for peanut butter sandwiches. It now takes in donations from around the world and dishes out up to 3,000 meals a day; nobody is turned away as long as there is a morsel left, and there almost always is. Pizzas arrive by bike or car, many sent by labor unions; canned and dry goods are shipped to OWS's UPS address (118A Fulton St. #205, New York, NY 10038); oatmeal, quinoa and rice come in large sacks and small supermarket packages; chicken and beef, apples and seasonal root vegetables are trucked in from organic farms upstate. Trained chefs were quick to volunteer their time and have even opened up their kitchens.

Once the Occupation took root in Liberty, new working groups formed to meet its growing human needs: Sanitation; Comfort (which collects and distributes sleeping bags, tarps and warm clothes); Medics (which is staffed by nurses, doctors, therapists, acupuncturists and EMT workers, and sees up to 100 patients a day); Security (yes, there is some form of "law" at OWS, including guidelines against public urination and defecation); and Sustainability (which composts 100 pounds of food waste each day and handles Liberty's recycling program). Each day, the race to reproduce life itself at Liberty begins, and each day it is largely met, in theory at least, without the use of two things—the money-form and hierarchy.

A mantra that pings around Occupy Wall Street is that the Occupation is creating within the quadrants of Liberty Park the society it wants to see in the outside world. This claim has struck some as naïve: after all, union pizzas don't descend from heaven; they are paid for by dues collected by union leaders. But the idea isn't really to be segregated and self-sustaining. As Yotam Marom, a 25-year-old organizer who is affiliated with a participatory socialist collective called the Organization for a Free Society, puts it, "We're creating alternative models of the world we want to live in while also using those new institutions as a staging ground to fight for that world—that's what's radical and cool about occupations." Academics call this "prefigurative politics," a term that describes acting *as if* utopian democratic practices exist in the here and now. Its precedents include Gandhi (We must be the change we want to see in the world), European autonomism, the anti-nuke movement and, most recently, the anti-globalization movement,

especially its anarchist tendencies.

On the ground at Liberty, prefigurative politics is manifest in the directly democratic process that guides the nightly General Assembly as well as all working groups and caucus meetings. In fact, the principle of horizontalism strongly influences all social relations there. When I dropped in on the library one day it was being staffed by Bill Scott, an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh; Steven Syrek, a graduate student in English at Rutgers; and Briar ("gender pronoun: it!"), an undergrad at NYU who was debating whether to drop out of school instead of racking up more debt. In another context they might have been stacked up vertically (professor, TA, student), but at Liberty they were all just putting stickers on books.

Anyone who shows up can participate on equal terms in the General Assembly and working groups; there is no membership, and proposals must pass by consensus. Anyone can block consensus out of "serious ethical or safety concerns," and if those aren't resolved by amendments or clarifications, a vote is taken for modified consensus, which requires 90 percent support. A number of procedures and group norms—from the "progressive stack," which privileges minority speakers; to the practice of "step up, step back," which calls on participants to be aware of how often they speak; to daily meetings of the Facilitation working group—guard against the breakdown of these processes. They can be slow, frustrating and sometimes ugly—and who has time for all these meetings?—but overall the crowd seems mostly satisfied with what has gone down so far. ("We're at least as effective as the US Senate," one organizer told me.)

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More than any other quality of Occupy Wall Street—except perhaps for the ubiquitous drum circle—it is these anarchist practices that have elicited the most hand-wringing from establishment leftists. Some, like New School politics professor James Miller, worry that OWS will recapitulate the failures of the New Left. In an op-ed for the *New York Times*, Miller warned that an obsession with participatory democracy could allow violent militants or ideological extremists to hijack the movement, and he darkly cited the French anti-globalization manifesto *The Coming Insurrection*, a text he calls a "touchstone for the anarchists in Occupy Wall Street," as evidence of the movement's potential to descend into nihilism. *The Coming Insurrection* is, indeed, a worrying text; it predicts the total collapse of modern society, instigated in part by local cells of revolutionaries who exploit moments of crisis (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) in order to replace late capitalism with autonomist units of life. But few Occupiers I met at Liberty had even heard of the book, and the idea that it laid the template for Occupy Wall Street seems largely to come from Glenn Beck, who has been obsessed with it for years and sometimes attributes Obama's actions to its philosophy.

More to the point, from day one the Occupation has been scrupulously nonviolent. Its emphasis on autonomy and consensus has tempered rather than emboldened the fetishization of militancy. Nobody is coerced into a direct action, and much deliberation is given to how direct actions could affect the most vulnerable in the group—like undocumented immigrants and the Occupiers, those who sleep at Liberty and have developed a surprisingly close relationship with the beat cops who patrol it.

Does callous revolutionary fervor exist in and around Occupy? Sure, there are flashes of it—for example, at a recent debate about Occupy Wall Street at Bluestockings bookstore, Malcolm Harris, an editor at *The New Inquiry* journal, responded to a question about whether anarchist tactics could achieve free higher education by saying that "a free university in a capitalist economy is like a reading room in a prison" (boos and obscene gestures ensued). But most OWS activists I spoke with forcefully rejected the idea that the movement should or would heighten crisis to provoke revolutionary struggle. "I'm not for increasing the immiseration of people around the world who are starving. Who are we to say, Let it get really bad?" asks Yotam.

OWS organizers are, moreover, acutely aware that the movement's extraordinary potential lies in its ability to bring together a range of participants who coalesce maybe once in a generation: anarchists and Marxists of a thousand different sects, social democrats, community organizers, immigrants' rights activists, feminists, queers, anti-racist organizers, capitalists who want to save capitalism by restoring the Fordist truce, the simply curious and sympathetic. Republicans like Eric Cantor have denigrated Occupy Wall Street as "a mob," and the right-wing press has raised the

specter of “anarchism” to distinguish OWS from populism. But it is, in fact, the movement’s emphasis on direct democracy, derived from anarchism, that has allowed such an unwieldy set of actors to occupy the same space. Early on, it was the consensus model that enabled a handful of people of color to block language in the movement’s Declaration of the Occupation of New York City that they felt falsely suggested a postracial America. “It was a very scary experience. It was still a majority-white space, and we were four visibly brown people—one wears a turban—standing up to say, No, this can’t happen!” recalls Thanu Yakupitiyage, a 26-year-old immigrants’ rights organizer. But the block held, and the language was amended, and instead of bolting from Liberty (This is just a bunch of white folks in the park, she originally thought), Thanu helped establish OWS’s People of Color working group—which, among other goals, tries to make sure that minorities are represented in every other working group and caucus.

Likewise, the movement’s malleable and open nature has created space for a range of supporters and affinity groups, like the *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, now published in Spanish and online, and OccupyWriters.com, a collective started by *Nation* writers Jeff Sharlet, Kiera Feldman and Nathan Schneider, which has gathered some 2,000 signatures and published short dispatches and vignettes by Lemony Snicket, Alice Walker, Ursula K.Le Guin and others. True to spirit, anyone who identifies as a writer can sign the OccupyWriters.com petition, and the original organizers are taking a step back from the project to make way for new blood, including from outside New York. These media endeavors may not work per se under the auspices of the New York General Assembly, but they’ve lent their creative energies to the mix—helping to break through the establishment press’s early condescending coverage.

At the moment, the movement’s energy is overwhelmingly directed at keeping this fusion of forces alive, to focus on what unifies—the common belief, for example, that capitalism is out of control and that the political system has broken down—rather than what divides; and to debate without hard preconceptions a range of solutions. As Kobi Skolnick, an Israeli-American activist who comes out of the peace movement, put it, “Socialism is a great idea. Anarchism is a great idea. Moderating capitalism is a great idea. We can’t afford to have an either/or mentality anymore.” It’s a message that even Occupy Wall Street’s revolutionaries can get down with, for now. As Alexandre Carvalho says, “We are on a path that goes to revolution, but it can pass through reform.”

In this early stage, the movement seems both extremely fragile and extremely potent. The threats of police action, internal rancor, negative public opinion and burnout all loom; like the winter, some of those perils are unavoidable. But so far the Occupiers have pulled off a remarkable feat—to summon all the specters of left history and yet slip past the fatal noose of infighting. Who knows how long this will last? If it does, perhaps the culture of anarchism will be remembered as the left’s exonerator instead of as its hangman’s knot.

* * *

On the ground, it hasn’t been the hardliners who have most exulted in the social experiment that is Liberty Park. Living in the conditional tense requires more than just ideological commitment; it takes the curious mixture of patience and innocence found mostly in the young. At the heart of the Occupation are young professionals and creative types—architects, graphic designers, programmers, curators, musicians, writers, managers, actors and Williamsburg hipsters whose talents primarily lie in stitching birds onto things (see *Creative Cash*). They take part, on and off, in the General Assembly, but they are mostly concerned with creating the dizzying life-world that has distinguished the movement as a cultural as well as political force. Many of these folks are strivers facing downward economic pressure, but a good number of them could be members of Richard Florida’s “creative class,” those whose presence supposedly signals affluence.

Liberty Park is culture-rich, but not in that way. Its denizens include Katie Davison, a 31-year-old filmmaker who used to direct fashion commercials until her family became “collateral damage in the financial crisis”: her father, once an executive at GMAC, died in a car crash the same day he was fired from a subsequent job. At some point, Katie vowed to stop doing commercial work and started a documentary on inequality and the collapse of the American dream. Her friends said she was crazy, and sometimes she felt that way too until she followed a hunch and got on a plane from Los Angeles to New York on September 16, one day before the Occupation began. She’s been shooting

video for the Media group ever since, although like many early Occupiers, she soon faced a dilemma: funds depleted, should she take a paying gig or keep working for the Occupation? She chose both. “I don’t understand how I’m going to balance the revolution and editing this vampire movie,” she laments.

For Katie, who comes from an anti-capitalist background, the appeal of OWS is “beyond political”: it is “spiritual and philosophical.” Her day-to-day work life is defined by the principles of horizontalism, autonomy and collectivism. Like a lot of Occupiers, Katie says that the point of working without hierarchies is to “show through direct action that something else is possible…. This empowers people who have no power in the real world, but in this world they do, and this changes human potential and the human value system.” Katie admits that at times “working with people in an all-inclusive manner has been very difficult.” She’s used to hierarchical structures on production sets (“I’m the director—and I direct”). In the beginning, the Media working group was mobbed with volunteers who said they could shoot; but when the videos came in, it became clear that folks were coming from different skill levels. “How do you create something where people don’t feel bad about the things they are making?” she asks. One solution has been to adopt a collective model in which roles are traded day to day; another has been to set up trainings and classes so that “photographers can learn to walk straighter now.” This focus on empowerment has also informed the relations between groups in different cities—the New York livestream was set up by people from Global Revolution who had been in Madrid’s Puerta del Sol. When the Occupation in Washington, DC, took off, Global Revolution sent a team there, and then to Pittsburgh, and the OWS Media group has also been in touch with Occupations across America to share lessons and pitfalls.

The term “consciousness raising” drops without embarrassment from many mouths, and there is an Education and Empowerment working group whose mission is essentially that ’70s thing. All of this comes with contradictions; for example, the now ritualized focus on leaderlessness tends to obscure the relative power and legitimacy bestowed upon early Occupiers. Conversely, the open-ended, consensus-driven meetings have led to situations where newcomers can block proposals that movement die-hards have worked on for weeks.

How this social experiment relates to OWS politics and goals, its future and its capacity to create enduring change, is very much an open question. Will Briar have as many opportunities as its fellow librarians have had? Will Joe get the health insurance and job stability he needs? Can Occupy Wall Street affect the lives of people outside Liberty’s borders?

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Since the last week of September, when Occupy Wall Street hit the front pages after videos of unwarranted police aggression went viral, the question of demands has increasingly weighed on the movement. At first, the issue came from the outside and carried the whiff of appeasement: What do the kids want, and how can they be bought off? Some Occupiers shot back in defiance, “Demands are for terrorists!”

But as the movement has grown—taking in veteran organizers and garnering declarations of solidarity from labor, progressive community groups, left-leaning intellectuals, think tanks and even members of Congress—the question has become more insistent. Some pressure has come from these allies, who have been happy to grab onto Occupy’s unexpected coattails or collaborate on a series of direct actions but who approach politics from a more constituent-based, results-driven model. No doubt, elected officials would also like to see demands made, as everyone from President Obama to New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has comically tried to both sympathize with and distance themselves from the Occupation’s primal expressions of frustration and rage. With approval ratings at 43 percent and climbing (that’s almost five times higher than Congress’s 9 percent), the movement has intruded upon electoral politics, and a list of demands that could be rejected or accommodated would certainly help the pols fill out their dance cards.

But the push for demands has come from the inside too. A Demands working group took shape in early October, largely outside Liberty. A hasty *New York Times* article almost exclusively quoting its members provoked fierce criticism at that night’s General Assembly, which released a statement saying that “the GA has not reached a consensus regarding any statement of demands…and the demands list submitted to the NYT was never presented

to the GA." Likewise, on October 21, OccupyWallStreet.org posted a disclaimer saying that the Demands group is "not empowered by the NYC General Assembly," is "not open-source and does not act by consensus" and "only represents themselves."

But a movement that claims to be open to all isn't in a great position to exile its dissidents, so since that dustup, the Demands group has been absorbed into the process. It now posts its documents online and uses modified consensus rules, although some question the group's fidelity to such procedures and consequently also the group's legitimacy. These issues flared up at the October 30 General Assembly, when the Demands group presented its first proposal, a call for "a massive public works and public service program" that would create "jobs for all." After a heated and messy deliberation that failed to get past even the first round of questions, the proposal was tabled until the next week, allowing Demands to conduct more meetings and outreach.

That General Assembly exposed a clear ideological schism between anarchists, on the one hand, and Marxists, progressives and liberals, on the other, with the former predisposed to reject any demands (like jobs for all) that appeal to the state instead of directly to the people. But the meeting wasn't particularly well attended—as many Occupiers at Liberty were milling about reading, singing or kibitzing on other matters as were clustered around the human mic—and away from the fray, in the working groups themselves, the issue seemed much less polarized and much less significant. Most organizers I spoke with were open to demands at some point but preferred to focus on movement building for now. "I think one day there could come a time for demands," says Katie Davison, "but right now I think demands would fracture and divide people…. We need a movement of solidarity that is about values first, and we're still coming together and finding out what we all agree on."

There is, of course, a danger that with so much ebb and flow, the movement won't be sensitive enough to recognize when that moment is reached, or that the Occupation will focus too much on education and empowerment, descending into a navel-gazing stupor. The emphasis at Liberty on the experiential has so far been a politicizing force, its creative chaos a blessing—but for how long? Already many early Occupiers have grown frustrated with what they call the fetishization of life at Liberty, with merely holding the square. "It's become acceptable just *to be* at Zuccotti Park," says Yotam Marom, "but now we need to up the ante. The direct action needs to shift gears again—it can't just be symbolic. It has to be a true disruption of business as usual."

Early in the Occupation, *Nation* writer Jeff Madrick urged the Occupiers to "go to where the injustice is," and they have—to Harlem to protest the NYPD's stop-and-frisk policies, to Verizon's corporate headquarters to protest on behalf of CWA employees, to wherever New York Governor Andrew Cuomo sets foot to protest state budget cuts and his refusal to extend a state millionaire's tax, and to branches of big banks to noisily withdraw their patronage in favor of credit unions. If there is some meaningful convergence between traditional social-democratic politics and the anarchist-inflected focus on experience, perhaps it lies in these direct actions. As the members of a new generation put their bodies on the line, they discover that their languishing talents can be deployed in the pursuit of justice. What's a name for this—organized anarchy or socialism with a beat? What matters is that it's working for now.

Image courtesy of Jessi Bautista

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