

On Occupy Wall Street

Wall Street cuts through every city in America dividing rich from poor, haves from have-nots. It separates private from public space even as it colonizes more and more of the public realm.

The home base of Occupy Wall Street is virtually an allegory of the ongoing struggle between public and private interests in American culture. The conflict begins with the very name of the site: Zuccotti Park in honor of John Zuccotti, chairman of Brookfield Properties the park's owner. Or Liberty Park the occupation's new name, a rechristening that harks back to the site's original name, Liberty Park Plaza, from 1968 and 2006. The disparity in nomenclature itself reflects the major economic changes from the years of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society to the Reagan Revolution, a leap from a sense of collective purpose to an era of authorized narcissism. Regardless of its name the park has an ambiguous legal status due to a change in NY's zoning laws. In the 1960's the city essentially traded height for token public space, a boon to developers and corporations eager to capitalize on an increase in square footage. As a "privately owned public space," the park is a spatial contradiction waiting for a resolution.

The conflict plays itself out in the arena of art as well. A giant Mark di Suvero springs from the east side of the park bordering Broadway and facing the Noguchi cube in the HSBC plaza. Two icons of corporate modernism, the pair suggests a cultural analog to the park's legal status—public sculpture at the service of private interests, museum pieces sitting out in the cold in plazas designed to remain empty. Inside the park, occupiers appeal to an alternative avant-garde at home in the street. Art and politics mingle and thrive—one group protests Sotheby's control of the art market; others fashion costumes, play instruments, perform. Some members conduct a workshop on Barricade Sculpture. Undeniably, its like 60's era guerrilla theater but less sectarian, more open. The arts contribute to and define a discourse that sees public space not as a debating hall where people argue the merits of prepackaged positions, (by now a stale kabuki, better left to Fox News) but as a place where positions and desires are articulated and given form. In spite of the vigor of the protestors there's something delicate about the whole thing, a disparate group attempting to articulate a complex vision, fully aware of the complications of leftist history, of its failures and successes, in the face of a media culture that thrives on simple oppositions.

The occupation is a settlement that refuses to settle. It hooks up with unions and other groups as it sends out feelers to its initial target on Wall Street a few blocks to the south, to the lightshow of Times Square, up Fifth Avenue to the homes of Rupert Murdoch, David Koch and John Angelo of Sotheby's. And it revisits sites of left wing history forging links to earlier radical and bohemian traditions. It stretches to Washington Square where Marcel Duchamp and Maxwell Bodenheim declared the Independent Republic of Greenwich Village in 1917 and where Jane Jacobs faced off against Robert Moses in the early sixties. And it veers towards Tompkins Square Park in the East Village. In 1988 Tompkins Square was the site of a major anti-gentrification battle where a riot over a city curfew uncovered the simmering animosity between long time residents and newcomers of various stripes. The

basic battle appeared to be between a group of punks, activists, anarchists and homeless people and an invading yuppie class who threatened the character the neighborhood. But the battle lines were more complicated. Some older, more established residents were likely to be suspicious of both groups while others were more indulgent toward the combination of kids, freaks and homeless who had settled in the park. After a police invasion that resulted in 36 injuries, there were reports of a growing solidarity against the over reaction of the police, but there appeared to be little communication among the various interests.

Around this time, morally conscientious artists agonized over their complicity in gentrifying the East Village and other neighborhoods . And of course there was the irony of a creative community paving the way for its own displacement. As the cheap rents necessary for art producers disappeared, the East village became a fiefdom of NYU and Cooper Union. Bloated architecture displaced a street friendly culture that included CBGB's and the Amato Opera Company. One of the remaining intellectual landmarks of the area, the Saint Mark's Bookshop has recently announced its possible closing due to rising rent.

Whose fucking park? Our fucking park! was a favorite chant in Tompkins Square Park It was a battle cry in a war over territory, a desperate assertion of a public culture threatened by private interests, the cry of a street colonized by the ever bolder incursions of capital. If a major problem in the earlier movement was its failure to connect with a broad range of citizens, in Liberty Park the occupation has shown a willingness to listen to a variety of voices, to forge coalitions across the economic and social spectrum and to establish friendly terms with residents of the surrounding neighborhood. And a variation of the chant has reappeared like an attempt to make good on an old promise.

Whose streets?

Our streets!

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