

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

Witnessing the birth of Occupy Wall Street
By *Nathan Schneider*

Under the tree where the International Society for Krishna Consciousness was founded in 1966, on the south side of Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, sixty or so people gathered in a circle around a yellow banner that read, in blue spray paint, GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NYC. It was Saturday, August 13, the third of the General Assembly's evening meetings. On the side of the circle nearest the tree were the facilitators—David Graeber, an anthropologist at the University of London, and Marisa Holmes, a young filmmaker who had spent the summer interviewing revolutionaries in Egypt.

"No cops or reporters," Graeber decreed at the start of the meeting. Others demanded a ban on photographs.

I raised my hand and explained that I was a journalist and an editor of the blog *Waging Nonviolence*, which covers movements for peace and justice. I promised not to take pictures. Just then, a heavyset man in a tight T-shirt, with patchy dark hair and a beard, started snapping photos. He was Bob Arihood, a fixture of the neighborhood known for documenting it with his

camera and his blog. People shouted at him to stop; he shouted back something about the nature of public space. Finally, a few from the group got up to talk things through with



him, and the discussion turned back to me. After half an hour of interrogation and harrowing debate, I witnessed for the first time an act of consensus: hands rose above heads, fingers wiggled. I could stay. A little later, I saw that Arihood and the people who'd gone to confront him were laughing together.

Those present were mainly, but not

exclusively, young. When they spoke, they introduced themselves as students, artists, organizers, teachers. There were a lot of beards and hand-rolled cigarettes, though neither seemed obligatory. Elders, such as a Vietnam vet from Staten Island, were listened to with particular care. It was a common rhetorical tic to address the group as "You beautiful people," which happened to be not just encouraging but also empirically true.

Several had accents from revolutionary places—Spain, Greece, Latin America—or had been working to create ties among prodemocracy movements in other countries. Vlad Teichberg, leaning against the Hare Krishna tree and pecking at the keys of a pink Dell laptop, was one of the architects of the Internet channel *Global Revolution*. With his Spanish wife, Nikky Schiller, he had been in Madrid during the May 15 Movement's occupation at Puerta del Sol. Alexa O'Brien, a slender woman with blond hair and black-rimmed glasses, had covered the Arab Spring for the website *WikiLeaks Central* and had been collaborating with organizers of the subsequent uprisings in Europe; she had also been trying to foment a movement called *U.S. Day of*







Rage, named after the big protests in the Middle East.

The meeting would last five hours, followed by working groups convening in huddles and in nearby bars. I don't think I'd seen people talking politics like this since early 2003, when some of us thought we could avert a war in Iraq if our chants were loud enough. When the war happened anyway, despite some of the largest global protests in history, activism seemed to give way to the complacent cynicism of *The Daily Show*. Some people here were young enough not to remember and could shed the irony long enough to get serious about something again. But their anxiety was visible when a police car passed, and conversation slowed; a member of the Tactics Committee had pointed out that, as any group of twenty or more in a New York City park needs a permit, we were already breaking the law.

Fault lines were also already forming. There were those who liked the idea of coming up with one demand, and those who didn't. Some wanted regulation, others revolution. I heard the slogan "We are the 99 percent" for the first time when Chris, a member of the Food Committee, stood up and proposed it as a tagline. There were murmurs of approval but also calls for something more militant: "We are your crisis." When the idea came up of having a meeting on the picket line with striking Verizon workers, O'Brien blocked consensus. She didn't want the assembly to lose its independence. "We need to appeal to the right as well as the left," she said.

"To the right?" a graduate student behind me muttered. "Wow."

Just about the only thing everyone could agree on was the fantasy of crowds filling the area around Wall Street and staying until they overthrew corporate oligarchy, or until they were driven out. As the evening grew darker, a pack of intern-aged men walked by, looking like they had just left a bar, and noticed the meeting's slow progress. One of them, wearing a polo shirt, held up a broken beer mug and shouted, at an inebriated pace, "If

you always act later, you might forget the now!"

Bob Arihood died of a heart attack at the end of September. By then, Occupy would be spreading fast. One of his photographs of the meeting survives on his blog, the only picture of its kind I've found. In that cluster of people around the banner, almost everyone is looking toward the photographer; a man dressed in white is pointing into the lens. Some look curious, some suspicious, some scared, some indifferent. I'm barely visible in the far corner of the group.

I recognize most of the others now in a way I didn't then. Some have had their names and faces broadcast on the news all over the world. There's the woman from LaRouchePAC with such a good singing voice, and the group who had gone to high school together in North Dakota. When I showed Arihood's picture to a friend, he recognized his former roommate from art school. I try to guess what the ones I know best were thinking, what it was exactly that they were doing there—so expectant, so at odds with one another, so anxious about being watched.

I had been watching revolutions from a distance since the beginning of the year, when people rose up and expelled dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, stirring up Libya, Bahrain, Syria, and Jordan. Continually refreshing my news feeds, with Al Jazeera on in the background, I tried my best to write each day about whatever was happening in the Middle East. I wanted to understand where these movements came from, who organized them, and how. Experts in the United States were satisfied attributing the uprisings to global food prices and Twitter, but the revolutionaries themselves didn't use the language of economic or technological determinism. In interviews, they seemed instead to have rediscovered their agency, their collective power, their ability to act.

By late February, Egyptians were phoning in pizza-delivery orders to the occupied Wisconsin State Capi-

tol. With summer, unrest followed the heat north to Greece, Spain, and England. Europe's summer was Chile's winter, but students and unions rose up there too. Tel Aviv grew a tent city. While Tahrir Square was still full, the anticonsumerist magazine *Adbusters* published a blog post proposing "A Million Man March on Wall Street." The United States seemed to go quiet after Madison, though, its politics again domesticated by the debt ceiling and the Iowa Straw Poll. When thousands marched on Wall Street on May 12, few noticed and fewer remembered.

But while following the march that day on Twitter, a thirty-two-year-old drifter using the pseudonym Gary Roland read about another action planned near Wall Street for the next month: Operation Empire State Rebellion, or OpESR. That tweet led him to a dot-commer-turned-activist-journalist named David DeGraw. In the spring, DeGraw had been working with members of the "hacktivist" collective Anonymous to help build safe online networks for Arab dissidents, but since early 2010 he had also been writing about his vision of a movement closer to home, a movement in which the lower 99 percent of the United States would rebel against the rapacity and corruption of the top 1 percent. An Anonymous subgroup formed to organize OpESR, calling itself A99.

Through DeGraw's website, Roland helped make plans. Having recently lost his job as a construction manager for a real estate firm, he was familiar with New York City's public spaces. He proposed that OpESR try to occupy Zuccotti Park, a publicly accessible square block just north of Wall Street owned by Brookfield Office Properties. On June 14—Flag Day—Zuccotti Park would be their target.

Anonymous-branded videos announcing the action had begun to appear in March and got hundreds of thousands of views. When the day came, though, only sixteen people arrived at Chase Manhattan Plaza, where the march to Zuccotti was to commence, and of the sixteen only four intended to occupy. Roland de-

cided to join another occupation that was beginning the same day near City Hall, a few blocks north. Organized by a coalition called New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, the so-called Bloombergville occupation would turn into a three-week stand against the city's new austerity budget. It didn't seem to amount to much on its own, but it eventually proved to be another step building toward something that would.

"The attention we were able to get online," David DeGraw wrote after the flop on the fourteenth, "obviously doesn't translate into action." Consoling himself with the thought that they were spreading awareness, he started talking about trying again on September 10, a date chosen in deference to the Anonymous convention of operating in three-month cycles. But then, on July 13, *Adbusters* sent out a call in the idiom of a Twitter hashtag: #OCCUPYWALLSTREET. With their proposal came a poster, an image of a ballerina posed atop the *Charging Bull* statue, with police in riot gear partly obscured by tear gas in the background. Red letters at the top of the poster asked WHAT IS OUR ONE DEMAND? At the bottom, in white, it said SEPTEMBER 17TH and BRING TENT. With that poster, more or less, the magazine's logistical guidance ended.

Almost at once, Twitter accounts, Facebook pages, and IRC channels started appearing and connecting. "#OCCUPYWALLSTREET goes viral," *Adbusters* announced in a "tactical briefing" on July 26. The following day, Alexa O'Brien's U.S. Day of Rage declared its support for the occupation. Her press releases and tweets were so widely disseminated that people started referring to Occupy Wall Street and U.S. Day of Rage interchangeably. By early August, when Al Gore told Keith Olbermann, "We need to have an American Spring," activists all over the country were already fumbling toward an American Autumn.

I had first heard about plans to occupy Wall Street at a meeting of an entirely separate group that, since

April, had been planning another indefinitely long occupation of a symbolic public space. The October 2011 movement was a coalition of mainly middle-aged veteran activists who intended to occupy Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C., starting on October 6, in time for the tenth anniversary of the war in Afghanistan. Two of them would also become regulars at the General Assembly meetings in Tompkins Square Park—a couple who had fallen in love at protests over the past few years, in jail after an action at the Supreme Court and in Cairo during a mobilization against Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip.

On August 23, an *Adbusters* email featured a video of Anonymous's headless-man logo and a computerized voice declaring support for Occupy Wall Street. There were rumors that the Department of Homeland Security had issued a warning about September 17 and Anonymous; Anonymous bombarded mainstream news outlets with tweets demanding that they cover the story. Reports about the planned occupation trickled out slowly, though, and mostly online. They betrayed the biases of the Internet: much discussion of *Adbusters*, U.S. Day of Rage, and Anonymous, but hardly anything about the NYC General Assembly—which, despite not having an active website, still constituted the closest thing to a guaranteed turnout on the seventeenth.

Among the most prolific early chroniclers was Aaron Klein of the right-wing website WorldNetDaily. His reports claimed that September 17 would bring "Britain-style riots," that "Day of Rage" was a reference to the Weather Underground, and that—who else?—George Soros was behind it all. Because the Service Employees International Union's Stephen Lerner had been murmuring about acts of civil disobedience targeting banks, Klein concluded that the union was involved, together with the remnants of ACORN. None of it was true, but it was exactly the kind of vast left-wing conspiracy that Klein had outlined in his book, *Red Army: The Radical Net-*

work That Must Be Defeated to Save America, which was scheduled for release in October. Before most Americans had heard of Occupy Wall Street, Klein's gumshoeing inspired a new fund-raising and lobbying campaign from the conservative AmeriPAC: "On September 17th," the title of one solicitation warned, "Socialists Will Riot Like Egyptians in All Fifty States."

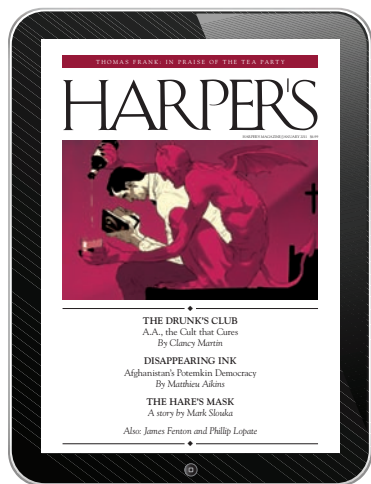
An occupation, by definition, has to start with people physically present. Social media, even with whatever aid and cachet a group like Anonymous might lend, isn't enough—witness the failure of OpESR. Until August 2, when the NYC General Assembly began to meet near the *Charging Bull* statue at Bowling Green, #OCCUPYWALLSTREET was still just a hashtag.

That first meeting was hosted by New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, the coalition behind Bloombergville, which had been in contact with *Adbusters*. What was advertised as an open assembly began like a rally, with Workers World Party members and others making speeches over a portable P.A. system to the hundred or so people there. But anarchists started to heckle socialists, socialists heckled back, and the meeting melted down. Those who stuck around got what the anarchists wanted, and perhaps more: an assembly, microphone-free and in a circle, that dragged the 4:30 p.m. event on until 8:30, with some staying around to talk until 11:00. Working groups formed to do outreach, to produce independent media, to provide food. The General Assembly would continue to meet once a week.

The second meeting I attended, on August 20, was relatively productive at first, even if it was short on consensus. The group couldn't, for instance, make any outright commitment to nonviolence, largely because they didn't agree on what it would mean to do so. No text for the Outreach Committee's flyers could be passed. But people wiggled their fingers in the air when they liked what was being said, and wiggled them down at the ground when they



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didn't, so through these discussions everyone knew better what the rest of the group thought and could proceed with that in mind. I was learning that the point of a consensus process like this is often less to make decisions than to hear one another out; individuals and subgroups can then act autonomously, respecting the assembly while sparing it the burden of micromanagement.

Soon, though, even that modicum of process started to fail. Georgia Sagri, a performance artist from Greece, paced around the periphery of the circle with a large cup of coffee, making interjections whether or not she was recognized as "on stack" to speak. She seemed less interested in planning an occupation than in the planning meeting itself. "We are not just here for one action," she declared. "This is an action. We are producing a new reality!" The pitch of her voice rose and then fell with every slogan. "We are not an organization; we are an environment!"

Sagri's powers of persuasion and disruption were especially on display when the discussion turned to the Internet Committee. Drew Hornbein, a red-haired, wispy-bearded Web designer who lives in Brooklyn, had started putting together a site for the General Assembly. Sagri thought he was doing it all wrong. She didn't trust the security of the server he was using—not that she knew much about servers—and wanted to stop depending on Google for the email group. Her concern was principle, while his was expediency.

As Sagri and her allies denounced Hornbein publicly, he apologized as much as he could, but he eventually got up and left the circle with others who'd also had enough. "I'm talking about freedom and respect!" Sagri cried. "This is not bullshit!"

She held the floor for hours, proposing every detail of what the website would say and how it would look, reading one item at a time from her phone and insisting that the General Assembly approve it. The facilitators seemed exasperated. A passerby began playing Duck-Duck-Goose on the shoulders of those sitting in the meeting.

The thrill I'd felt the previous Saturday turned to pretty thoroughgoing disappointment. I abandoned my reportorial post: I left early, after three and a half hours.

On the way out, I ran into the couple I knew from the October 6 group, who were just arriving from another meeting in Harlem. I updated one of them—Tarak Kauff, who served in the Army in the early 1960s and can still do a hundred pushups—on what had been going on for the past few hours. None of it appeared to surprise or trouble him. "It's really, really hard," he said in his Queens accent, as the Internet Committee proposals ground through consensus a few steps away. "They're doing fine."

The August 27 GA meeting didn't happen, because there was a hurricane that weekend—weird for New York City, just like the earthquake a few days earlier. I missed the following weekend's meeting because I went to the October 6 group's retreat at Kauff's house up in Woodstock, where a dozen organizers holed up for two nights and a long day, eating well, singing protest songs, and debating the insurrectionary theories of Gene Sharp, the scholar who from his home office in Boston has helped inspire revolutions as far away as Serbia and Egypt. Everyone in the group came with some deep well of experience—a Ralph Nader campaign manager, a pediatrician pushing for single-payer health care, the gruff Veterans For Peace whose youthfulness returned to them with any talk of tactics. After decades of trying leaderless activism, they affirmed to one another that leadership was sometimes okay. But it was conspicuous that only the very youngest—a sober-minded thirty-eight-year-old Israeli who managed their website—had much Internet expertise.

Sketching notes on giant sheets of paper on an easel, they started by assessing what their proto-movement was up against, and what its strengths and weaknesses were. While debate about *Adbusters'* "one demand" idea had come to an impasse in Tompkins

Square Park, the decision to abandon demands was more thoroughly considered in this group. For months already, they had been developing a fifteen-point set of demands, on issues ranging from military spending to public transportation, but now they started thinking that the movement wasn't strong enough, not yet, to make demands heard. Instead, their goal would be to host an open conversation at their occupation in the capital, an act of resistance to the illegitimate politics of Washington. The concluding topic of the retreat, after Goals and Strategy and Tactics were settled, was Message. Over wine that Saturday night, the group tripped and turned over words until finally landing on something that would let them go to bed satisfied: "It Starts Here." The slogan was destined for obsolescence; by the time they pitched their tents in October, they would seem like latecomers.

My next chance to go to an NYC General Assembly meeting was on September 10, a week before the date *Adbusters* had named. The facilitators this time were especially expert—impatient with off-topic speeches and creative with synthesizing what was said into passable proposals. Things got done. But really, most of the work was already being handled by the various formal and informal committees that had grown out of the General Assembly. On September 1, nine people had been arrested while attempting to sleep legally on the sidewalk of Wall Street as a "test run," and a video of it was getting traction online. A student group was rehearsing a flash mob to Michael Jackson's "Thriller." The Food Committee had raised \$800, about a quarter of the goal for supplying water and peanut butter sandwiches—the only funding that I heard mentioned. The National Lawyers Guild would be sending observers in green caps. More than any one plan, there were plans.

I didn't see Georgia Sagri there. Gary Roland showed up with an actress he'd met at Bloombergville. They had left on a bike trip around the country but then decided to

come back to see what would happen on September 17. Enough people came on the tenth that for the first time the facilitators had to demonstrate the "people's microphone," which would become a hallmark of the movement; the speaker addresses the audience in short phrases, and those who can hear repeat them in turn for the benefit of those who can't. Less can be said that way, and less quickly, but more actually tends to be heard.

In the three weeks since the last GA I had attended, the mess had congealed into common wisdom. Frustrations were past, folded into the present, and turned into lessons. Some of these planners would later be accused of belonging to a secret leadership cabal behind the leaderless movement; if they were, it was the result of nothing more mysterious than having come to know and trust one another after a month and a half of arguing, digressing, and, occasionally, consensing.

The Tactics Committee gave its report. An occupation right in front of the Stock Exchange seemed unfeasible and overly vulnerable. The previous week, the GA had decided to convene an assembly on the seventeenth at Chase Manhattan Plaza. Tactics was coming up with contingencies, and contingencies for contingencies, in case that didn't work. In all likelihood there would be a legal encampment along sidewalks, just like the one many in the GA had set up at Bloombergville. Despite *Adbusters'* initial suggestion to "bring tent," and the rapper Lupe Fiasco's promise to donate fifty, tents would probably be too risky—though it all depended on how many people would be there and what those people would be willing to do. As in Cairo and Madrid, the encampment would have to form itself.

Keeping tactics loose might also be safer. Everyone assumed there were cops in the group; I, for one, had my short list of suspects. The less you plan ahead, the less they can plan for you. The NYPD's every move against Occupy Wall Street would seem so inept, and would bring only a backlash of

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sympathy for the occupiers, in part because neither the police nor anyone else knew what to prepare for at any given time.

By this point, the idea of making a single demand had fallen out of fashion. After a month and a half of meetings, the organizers were getting addicted to listening to one another and being heard. Rather than the Glass-Steagall Act or campaign-finance reform, they were talking about making assemblies like this one spread, around the city and around the country. It was as if Georgia Sagri had won after all: the process of bottom-up direct democracy would be the occupation's chief message, not some call for legislation to be passed from on high. They'd figure out the rest from there.

I was still wrapping my head around this. Everyone was. This was a kind of politics most had never quite experienced, a kind apparently necessary even if its consequences seemed eternally obscure. I was starting to realize, also, what a potent message you're sending to a corrupted democracy if you bring some real democracy—where people can speak and money can't—to the symbolic center of that corruption. Maybe assemblies like this could even become a new basis for organizing political power on a larger scale.

Of course, in the months to come this would be exactly what happened; as the call to occupy spread, assemblies followed. From Boston to Oakland to Missoula, Montana, activists wiggled fingers in horizontally structured meetings, using a common language to discuss problems both local and global. Just as was hoped for, just as was planned. But the fact that there was a plan doesn't mean that the plan was complete, or reassuring, or guaranteed to have the intended effect.

A spree of decisions passed by consensus the night of the tenth. There would be no appointed marshals or police negotiators; if the police wanted to negotiate, it would have to be with the whole assembly. The GA would start on the seventeenth at 3:00 P.M.—“and if we're in

jail we start it there.” A few rebellious minutes after ten, when the park was supposed to be closed, the meeting ended, and we went out for drinks.

Throughout the week before September 17, there were committee meetings, civil-disobedience training sessions, and warm-ups: the Arts & Culture Committee put on midday yoga classes and speak-outs in front of the New York Stock Exchange. Anonymous threatened a fearsome attack on bank websites. No one could know everything that was happening, much less whether it would work. “Maybe the General Assembly has been the really big central planner, but I don't know,” Drew Hornbein told me that week over sandwiches in Brooklyn. “There might be a lot of other stuff going on.” I mentioned the October 6 group, and he asked me to send him some links. If Wall Street didn't work out he could help with that.

Occupation was on my mind constantly as the date approached, but it was still a mostly secret fixation. I saw OCCUPY WALL STREET SEPTEMBER 17 scrawled in chalk near the fountain in Washington Square Park. On the whole, though, the city's landscape seemed innocent of what was being planned for it—if what was happening was really planning at all.

On September 16, the night before whatever it was was slated to begin, I opted to pass on covering a civil-disobedience training to satisfy my curiosity about an occupation-themed Critical Mass bike ride setting out from Tompkins Square Park. (Online, Anonymous associated the ride with something called “Operation Lighthouse.”) A critical mass there was not, unless you counted the police, who were stationed at every corner of the park and periodically motorcycled by to monitor the handful of bicyclists waiting in vain for more to turn up. The bicyclists accepted soup and coffee from enterprising evangelists and obtained a tepid blessing for tomorrow's undertaking. Rather than invite the police to form a motorcade around the group, those present decided to leave the park one at

a time and regroup downtown for a scouting mission.

After riding down to the Financial District and passing by Wall Street, I stopped in front of a boxing match two blocks away from the New York Stock Exchange. Seeping out from the Broad Street Ballroom, an inexhaustible electronic beat surged under a looping bagpipe track. Well-decorated couples and gaggles paid their \$45 per person to slip through the doors and into the crowd surrounding the ring, where two sinewy fighters were bouncing back and forth, punching and kicking each other. They were following Thai-style rules, but the scene looked more like the last days of Rome. Along the back wall stood a row of Doric columns.

On the sidewalk, looking in and around, I recognized Marisa Holmes from the General Assembly meetings. We noted each other knowingly, like spies, and maybe for a moment even questioned whether to acknowledge that knowing publicly. But we did, and we exchanged our reconnaissance.

She had just been down at Bowling Green, where a Department of Homeland Security truck was parked. Barricades surrounded the *Charging Bull* statue like a cage. I told her I had been up at Chase Manhattan Plaza, north of Wall Street, and it was also completely closed off. A stack of barricades sat in wait just across a narrow street. She looked worried. We stood in silence and watched as the fight ended, the combatants making a gesture of good sportsmanship. Holmes continued north to Wall Street, and I got on my bicycle to go home.

Nights in the Financial District are desolate, even ones with scattered boxing fans and police officers preparing for God-knows-what. One can feel the weight of the buildings overhead, all the more because there are so few people around to help bear the load. The buildings seemed completely different, however, while I rode home over the Manhattan Bridge. They were distant, manageable, and light. Rolling high above the East River and looking back at them, I wondered if they had any idea what was coming. ■