

Occupy! Activate! Engage!

The Politics of Visuality in Occupy Wall Street

By

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The Visuality of Occupy Wall Street

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the visuality of Occupy Wall Street arguing that visuality was a crucial tool for the success, mobilization and direction of the 2011 movement, and that studying this case study provides an example for the ways in which activism adapts to the digital age. The analysis focuses on a study of public space, graphic design, social media and performativity as elements of OWS's visuality which inform, mobilize and direct the movement. Using the ideas of Rosalyn Deutsche, Joseph Beuys and the Situationist International the paper situates the movement within a dialogical framework which identifies the public as creative directors. This paper shows how OWS uses visuality as a means to disrupt hegemonic power structures and imbedded systems of control while activating counter publics and encouraging a fluid and multiplicitous use of public space.

Keywords: public, space, visuality, Occupy Wall Street, mobilize

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## Table of Contents

List of Images	vi
I. Introduction	1
II. Occupying Space and Building Collectivities	5
III. Visualizing Occupy Wall Street	18
IV. Performativity of Occupation	28
V. Conclusion	37

## List of Images

Figure 1	The Ballerina and the Bull	40
Figure 2	The Beginning is Near	41
Figure 3	Occupy Wall Street (Anon)	42
Figure 4	Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge	43
Figure 5	Occupy Hope	44

## I: INTRODUCTION

Nicolas Bourriaud, art critic and theorist, writes about society in terms of an archipelago metaphor, comparing the separate islands within the structure of the archipelago to the links between ideas created within spatially specific localities. Ideas develop due to particular contexts but are then shared with other places thereby forming a chain of dialogue or a sort of call and response. This form of structure is useful when considering the ways in which new media creates quick and accessible points of transfer for the exchange of ideas. Aside from being a byproduct of globalization, the digital realm offers potential for developing communities and sharing information, creating a platform for the politicization of the public. Recent trends in activist culture prioritize the web, and social media in particular, as vital tools of mobilization. From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter, the ways in which movements have gained support and have mobilized their resources have depended heavily upon the circulation of their visual and virtual presence.

Given such realities, this paper seeks to examine the visuality of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) as a means of thinking through politicization and mobilization in the contemporary moment. I suggest that even though OWS is just one of many recent protest movements that have deployed digital means of relaying communication, it does present a significant model for understanding the role of visuality in engaging with activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly as a tool of mobilization, education and identification.

Using the example of OWS as a crucial case study, I offer a site-specific microcosm out of the global phenomenon which the movement became thereby accessing a meaningful and manageable scope for my analysis of visuality in 21<sup>st</sup> century activist culture. Through such an analysis, I reflect on visuality in terms of its relationship to the spatial dynamics of OWS, the visual content onsite and online and the performativity of the movement, and how through these examples of visuality OWS succeeds in mobilizing the public. These characteristics will make up the three sections of this analysis. In the process, I define visuality as a marker for the imagery and visual content which exists within and is deployed by OWS; such visuality includes the spatial presence of the participants within the geographic landscape, the posters, banners and artworks created by and within the movement, and the online branding and hash tag. In this regard, I also understand mobilization in this study to mean a process which occurs when an individual becomes aware of OWS and its politics as a movement. Beyond simply being aware of the movement, I use mobilization to indicate how the public becomes activated to be in dialogue with the ideas of OWS. The process of becoming activated and mobilized sets something in motion for the individual who not only processes the information they receive but responds to it either through direct action (i.e. joining the campsite), through online engagement, or by means of dialogism. In initiating conversation on the topic the individual participates in creating and spreading content, a performative role of language as designated by J. L. Austin. In the instance where a person comes into contact with the visual



material of OWS they become participants within a dialogue concerning the movement, the issues it protests and its goals thereby becoming active participants themselves. I use this term to discuss how publics and public spaces emerge out of dialogue.

I situate my arguments alongside the research on social media use and its pedagogical function but with a focus on visuality. Within the context of the digital age information requires a summarized and sleek format which is quickly accessible to its readers. Symbols such as hash tags or visual references like the Guy Fawkes mask are especially useful in transmitting information by acting as citation devices which reference a number of meanings and historical antecedents. Visual content thus has a pedagogical function as posters, hash tags and performances relay information about an event signifying its politics and opening dialogue with the public. The pedagogical function of visuality thereby mobilizes publics. I examine how the pedagogical functions of visuality in OWS, while non-unique to the movement, signify a powerful tool for activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as movements come to rely on visuality and social media for identification, mobilization of publics and information. The dialogical process which is activated through an individual's engagement with social media acts as a performative utterance wherein publics emerge out of the conversations, whether online or not, enabling citizens to disrupt hegemonic systems of control and participate in creating alternative structures, conversations and identities.

Before examining the specifics of Occupy Movement's digital and visual tactics, it would be useful to understand its historical and theoretical underpinnings. The occupy movement began in New York City and quickly spread across the United States and around the world as people used its momentum to tackle local issues and stand in solidarity with the Wall Street protestors. OWS refers to the Occupy Wall Street movement as started by *Adbusters* editors Kalle Lasn and Micah White and which manifested in an encampment lasting for over two months in the fall of 2011. OWS began as an attempt to engage the public in dialogue about the way politics has been managed in the United States. The specific issues centered on the recent recession which followed the housing bubble in the US and the subsequent bailout of banks and big businesses at the expense of the general population. Similar to the situation in Europe the state of the economy in the US depended heavily on neo-liberalist corporations. Relying heavily on the economics of neo-liberal capitalism as perpetuated during the 1970s, the current political system continues to support this unsustainable system (Graeber). Inspired by the *Indignados* movement in Spain and the events of the Arab Spring, Lasn and White used the medium of their anti-capitalist publication *Adbusters* to send out a call for their own uprising urging people to occupy Wall Street on September 17 2011. The movement quickly became viral attracting hundreds of people to form a campsite on the grounds of Zuccotti Park near Wall Street. This campsite lasted for just over 2 months, ending when police rushed the site tearing down the camp.

Of the literature that has been written on the movement and its spread to other cities in North America and around the world, the focus ranges from the politics of neoliberalism and the movement as a counter public to the role of social media in organizing OWS. Much of the literature on OWS is focused on its links with social media. Authors such as Benjamin Gleason, Michael D. Conover, and Brian Creech analyzed twitter as a medium of communication, mobilization and informal education by collecting data from tweets sent during and after OWS. These studies explore the multiplicitous functions of social media in relation to OWS, exclusively through twitter, with a focus on participants, tweet content and function. My study of social media and twitter in relation to OWS will also focus on the mobilizing and educating function of social media but through the lens of visuality. I will be looking at the hash tag not only in terms of text but as an image whose visuality functions as part of a larger visual campaign to create an identity for the movement. There are also a number of texts which discuss the pedagogical elements of OWS and how the movement worked with institutions and public speakers to form seminars and salons (Entin et al.). Other notable works deal with the artistic influences of avant garde art movements on the methods of OWS or the contentious identity of 'occupy' as a means of populism in context of indigenous rights (Barker, Biddle).

## II: OCCUPYING SPACE AND BUILDING COLLECTIVITIES

The movement known as Occupy began from the initial iteration in Zuccotti Park on Liberty Street, NY where hundreds of people gathered on September 17, 2011 to protest the tremendous gap in the distribution of wealth between the upper class and the rest of the population in what became referred to as ‘the 99%’ and the ‘1%’. Emerging as one of the many slogans created within the movement, the labels are often attributed to anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber who has cited and credited economists Emmanuel Saez and Thomas Piketty with the first conception of such phrasing (MacLellan). Saez and Piketty published a series of reports documenting the U-shaped trajectory of the diverging income levels between America’s upper and middle classes between 1913 and 2010 (MacLellan). It was their research on income trends and the effects of the recession which was the leading groundwork for protesting the political processes that continuously allowed for banks and businesses to be bailed out at favourable rates while the majority of the population received little to no assistance. While OWS took up various stances on a number of different issues throughout its existence, it was this practice of political interference and bias towards banks and corporations, a dubious claim of acting on behalf of the public’s best interests, which was the initial core issue that prompted *Adbusters* to send a call to occupy Wall Street.

The dismay at the government’s role in bailing out big businesses that were believed to have caused the recession in the first place manifested in several pockets of protests until, building with the momentum, the timely call to action, or

perhaps better stated as call to inaction, was circulated by the anti-capitalist Vancouver magazine *Adbusters*. *Adbusters* frequently addressed socio-political issues such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine, rampant commercialism and the destruction of the environment among many others, using the magazine as a catalyst for instigating boycotts, protests and dialogue outside of the space of mainstream culture. In June of 2011, Kalle Lasn the founder of *Adbusters* and its senior editor Micah White decided that “America needed its own Tahrir” (Schwartz). Proposing a number of ideas to their subscription base of 70 000 Lasn and White settled on a tagline and a mission represented by an image designed by the magazine’s art department; the message was encapsulated by the hash tag citation “occupywallstreet” (Schwartz). Prompted by the events of the Arab Spring as well as the Indignados anti-austerity movement in Spain, Lasn and White were determined to stir the national conversation in critiquing the insidious relationship between politics and neoliberal capitalism in North America. The initial message “#occupywallstreet” gained popularity as a meme within various forums such as reddit and twitter, spreading throughout the internet until control of the movement left the offices of *Adbusters* and activists, students, and groups such as Anonymous mobilized themselves under this banner.

Organized through anarchist links within the primary group of people on the *Adbusters* email list, OWS manifested into a physical entity composed of an emerging public interested in directing the future of political involvement within the economy. The initial group of interested participants, anarchists with

experience leading social protests, organized themselves into a general assembly that loosely directed the structure of OWS through a horizontal voting process. As the movement was centered in New York on Wall Street the general assembly decided on several places on and around the street as possible sites for the September rally (Schwartz). Abstaining from using social media to alert the police, who had already prepared for the protest by cordoning off several public spaces on Wall Street, members of the general assembly chose Zuccotti Park on nearby Liberty St due to its private status which restricts the city from forcing a curfew upon it (Foderaro). The park is unique in that it is privately owned public space made possible due to the changing city zoning laws of the 1960's which allowed concessions in zoning in exchange for the creation of city-wide public spaces (Foderaro). Zuccotti Park was developed as a means for 1 Liberty Plaza, a towering office building, to avoid some "height and setback restrictions," and even though it is not attached to the building it is protected as a site that must remain open 24 hours daily to the public (Foderaro). In order to mobilize the participants within the chosen site while avoiding police obstruction members of the assembly passed out paper maps depicting several possible locations while the correct site was passed by word of mouth. People started gathering onsite the evening before the official rally, pitching tents and spending the night; the encampment would last for almost two months. During this time Zuccotti Park was transformed into a fully functioning campsite or commune that contained a kitchen, public library as well as various meeting spaces.

OWS emphasizes the dialogical ways in which public space is navigated and imbued with purpose and meaning. Rosalyn Deutsche writes about the fluidity of public space critiquing the narrow binary of public versus private space as a means to delegate which realm is political and which is not (Deutsche 48). This is particularly visible through a feminist lens as women have historically been confined to the private nonpolitical realm within the binaries of spatial dynamics (the public sphere vs. the private realm i.e. a private residence vs. a public building). Deutsche argues that the notion of the public is not built upon a binary designation but is rather a continuously fluid dimension determined through dialogue that resists impositions of ‘wholeness’ or ‘oneness’ as pursued by those wishing to designate and secure definitions (Deutsche 38-9). According to Deutsche through dialogue people “construct and modify political identities in encounters with others” whereby the public “does not exist prior to but emerges in the course of the debate” (Deutsche 39). In this sense I examine OWS as a movement that privileges a Deutsche-ian definition of public space that encourages dissonance, disruption and debate as a means to facilitate the emergence of publics, mobilized and politically engaged.

OWS took over a privately owned public park redefining the potential for public space and its uses, challenging the very dichotomy of public and private. The movement created its headquarters in the center of the financial district amidst bankers and billionaire corporations and it did so in the form of a ‘down to earth’ public campsite challenging the vertical structure of the powerful business

through a horizontal expansion – a sea of people. The visual presence of OWS is crucial to its growth and success and the choice of a specific site is key to directing attention to the movement. Chosen for its proximity to Wall Street Zuccotti Park is also significant to the movement due to its strict laws regarding round the clock public access. This sort of regulation is left over from the agreement made between the city and zoning corporations to make sure the city maintains sites accessible for public use (Foderaro). Unlike major public sites such as Central Park this is unique to the little parks and parkettes created out of such moments in the city's history of urbanization (Foderaro). Thus its status as a privately owned public park allowed the protesters to bypass regulations imposed on other more notable public sites regarding hours of use. The ways in which public space is regulated complicates its definition. Public space is not synonymous with freedom in the sense that while one is free to use the space the ways in which it is used, how and when are all under the scrutiny of governing forces. Does a space remain public if it is owned by the city? This is especially important to consider as while private space is considered non-political and somewhat unregulated public space is assumed to be neutral and open for a plurality of uses. It is however regulated, controlled and under constant surveillance.

Choosing Zuccotti Park OWS draws attention to the ways in which spatial dynamics are governed in New York City. Despite the public status of the site Zuccotti Park is nevertheless owned by a particular company and its presence



within the financial district of New York City implies limited norms of behaviour allowed within the space. While the physical borders of the space are made clearly visible the cultural boundaries controlling the space are often more subtle and only seen when unwanted publics use the space and are confronted. The location of the space to some extent determines who uses it most frequently, what sorts of publics pass through and how it is used. Because the park is amidst financial offices the space is frequented by those who work nearby. When someone uses the space in a vastly different way than the expected, such as when a homeless man uses a bench to sleep or a protest movement bases its location within the space, a confrontation occurs. This moment of dissonance exposes the difference between classes and expectations and the power dynamics which control the space. These moments of disruption and dissonance are crucial to confronting subtle hegemonies and maintaining the multiplicitous and fluid identity of public space.

OWS used occupation of space as a strategy to allow for publics and collectivities to emerge or to become activated. A variety of publics is necessary in order for minority voices to be present thereby avoiding hegemonic control of society which can allow for moments of discrimination to slip through unnoticed or worse to become neutralized and accepted as a dominant perspective dictates norms. Public space needs to be flexible in order to allow for change in its use and meaning, for new publics to emerge continuously otherwise the label public becomes contested and associated with a limited definition of what and who is

acceptable. Public space has a complicated and ever changing definition as the limits of what 'public' entails and how such space can be used are explored. It is necessary to think critically about the positionality of public spaces in relation to control. Asking questions such as to whom does the space really belong, and are all publics welcome in this space are necessary to interrogate accessibility and representation.

OWS uses the occupation of space not only to makes a grand public gesture wherein they question the limits of how public space functions and the inherent biases which rule such spaces as firmly as if they were laws – think of the bodies of homeless people as unwanted publics – but to extend this issue to a larger problem of public representation within the political sphere. OWS uses occupying bodies to protest the bias and misrepresentation in politics which leads to the creation of laws favourable to a specific slice of the population at the expense of the majority. As politics become influenced and controlled by the wealthy elite so too does public domain become ruled by the power dynamics of money and corporate control. OWS makes evident these discrepancies by publically questioning which public gets help and benefits from the government and its institutions – the police for example – and which suffers. Therefore, by occupying and reasserting the public domain OWS stresses how the day to day is political and how embodying politics is crucial in order to expose issues and voice discontent, to make the self visible, present and heard in order to participate within the political sphere.

Though it was considered a leaderless movement OWS comprised a general assembly and numerous committees regulating everything from food distribution to art and culture to the planning and organizing of rallies. Anyone was free to join a committee and to speak within the discussion influencing the decision making process. The preferred form of organization was the horizontal consensus based model equipped with facilitators, hand signals and rules regarding the direction of flow within the meetings (Schwartz). This process was instigated at the beginning of the movement and despite the difficulties in maintaining an organized structure as the movement gained momentum and expanded to include thousands of people it was emphasized throughout the duration of OWS. Criticism of OWS includes the inability to consistently maintain a streamlined action plan with direct and coherent goals while also using the populist horizontal structure. While the strategy was particularly effective in the initial meetings within the primary group of people who made up the general assembly, it became challenging to keep the structure while addressing the individual needs of every participant. This was especially challenging as the hash tag 'occupywallstreet' developed an enormous online presence leading preformed activist groups such as Anonymous to join the movement bringing a wide range of issues with them into the fold.

The people taking part in the protests ranged from the original *Adbusters* email list to young students to activist groups taking advantage of the movement's momentum in order to bring media attention to their own particular causes. The

multiplicity within the makeup of OWS, in both the range of participants and demands, was achieved due to the nature of its central grievance: the disparity of economic wealth and the corrupting ties banks and big businesses had to politics – especially in light of the housing bubble and following recession. While the movement used the bank bailouts and recession as examples of corruption within the government, the core of the dilemma – capitalist interference within politics – is so insidious that it affects all aspects of daily life thereby facilitating other specific struggles, such as student loan debt, to be effectively discussed within OWS. To some critics within the movement naming a set of demands would not suffice and only by uprooting the entire system would OWS succeed in producing adequate change (Barker). Still, the issue to which protesters within OWS returned was ultimately the consolidation of power that enabled businesses to control and dictate practically all aspects of society (Kim). As much as OWS began from a concrete demand the metonymic use of public space to mirror bigger issues opened up a dialogue that through questioning the limits of the movement allowed for a critique of neoliberal capitalism to take place among an emerging public concerned with a number of social issues. In seeking to understand which issues OWS represented people were able to bring to light the plethora of social injustices connected to the power of Wall Street thereby making the often invisible and overlooked visible. Issues such as the enormous cost of student debt, police violence and unemployment rates were voiced and protested under the occupy umbrella (Levitin).

While providing many people with the opportunity to directly engage with politics OWS becomes problematized under the scrutiny of an Indigenous critique which brings to attention the language of OWS and its focus on reforming an intrinsically corrupt system. Though the participants took over a particular public space as a base for their operations it was always a semi-permanent membrane within which people and ideas could freely come and go. Though the campsite did take on the form of a functioning community with structures in operation that mimicked the organization of a city, by virtue of the very materials which made it up it never claimed permanent stature. The idea of a campsite is one of temporary shelter, or a makeshift site borrowing the land and space on which it exists. Camps are fluid temporary spaces often imbued with transition such as in the case of refugee camps – though they often do inadvertently become permanent. Yet a campsite also contains the intention of settlement, a choice of location where to stop and rest. And within this intention is privilege, power and control – an ability to choose where to stop and claim that space. This makes the act somewhat aggressive which is appealing in the sense of a protest movement dealing with society and politics at large but it also problematizes the movement by invoking the history and strategies of settler colonialism and its disastrous presence within the lives of North American's Indigenous populations. In his article "Already Occupied: Indigenous Peoples, Settler Colonialism and the Occupy Movements in North America" Adam J Barker explains the problems with using the term 'occupy' as a positive form of activism, stating that "it cannot be ignored that

American wealth (especially that of the esteemed home-owning middle class) was and is generated from the exploitation of stolen land.” (Barker 329) Indeed, the idea of occupation is problematic considering that the land has been and is already occupied for hundreds of years. By promoting agency for people to claim and occupy the land Barker argues that occupy works within a colonized framework and that through this system their goals only skim the surface issues. Barker argues that “The goal is not to reform imposed systems such that Indigenous peoples can equally benefit from them, but rather to fundamentally decolonize power and place through a transformation of how people relate to and in place.” (Barker 332) He goes on to discuss how occupy produces a homogenizing nationalistic fervor which ignores powerful and relevant histories.

While OWS continuously focused its criticisms on the government and its policies and relationships to big business, or the 1%, it was itself complicit in participating in a colonialist mentality of exclusion which failed to account for the Indigenous representation within the so-called 99%. While Indigenous people participated in OWS and other occupy groups, their presence was complicated and often relegated to the sidelines (Barker 332). Barker argues that “In order to enter the social space of the 99%, Indigenous peoples must ignore generations of difference making and marginalization by governments and Settler communities, and assume the role of a politicized ‘minority’ in solidarity with other minority groups making equivalent claims. Participation is contingent on abandoning fundamental aspects of Indigeneity.” (Barker 331) This is a powerful critique that

needs to be taken into account as a flaw of the occupy system, especially considering how relevant and useful is the presence of such allies. Indigenous communities have been long checking “the growth of settler colonial power, manifested as capitalist exploitation and state oppression” and Indigenous occupation goes beyond critiquing the economic structure controlled by the 1%, rather focusing on a reoccupation/reclamation of lands; “they question the very existence of settler colonial nation states” (Barker 331, 329).

In this section I have examined the movement’s relationship to space, arguing that OWS used the occupation of public space as a strategy to activate and mobilize publics by repurposing the function of Zuccotti Park and disrupting the embedded practices regarding the use of the space. In analyzing OWS’s occupation of Zuccotti Park I have depicted one of the ways in which OWS depends on visibility to determine their identity (in the physical locality of the site) and mobilize publics (via the dialogical process which enables publics to emerge). Using Rosalyn Deutsche’s ideas about the emergence of the public sphere I argued that in its use of space OWS redefines the meaning of Zuccotti Park, interrogating the spatial dynamics of private and public spaces, thereby creating opportunities for different publics to emerge. Through this process the movement links questions regarding the notion of accessibility and representation in relation to the public sphere from a physical dimension to the realm of politics, embodying their critique of misrepresentation and unequal distribution of power within the site specific encampment within the financial district of NY City. OWS

use the visuality of the campsite itself as a metonymic representation of the discourse surrounding their one demand. While this strategy depends on embracing the multiplicitous functions of public space as a forum of constant change, not all publics are represented by OWS's interrogation. I end this section with an Indigenous critique of the movement's strategy of occupation thus complicating the democratizing narrative of OWS.

### III: VISUALIZING OCCUPATION

The imagery used by or associated with OWS became integral in solidifying the movement as an identifiable entity as well as in gathering support for its cause. The movement originated with an image, a poster designed by graphic designers at *Adbusters* and distributed among the magazine's followers. This iconic poster contains a photograph of the charging bull statue found on Wall Street upon which a ballerina delicately perches (Fig.1). In the background masked people emerge out of the shadows of grey smoke. Its text, Spartan in its simplicity, asks "What is our one demand?" in block red letters. At the bottom reads the original hash tag, proclaiming: "#occupywallstreet September 17th. Bring tent." The poster demonstrates how the symbolism of the power of corporate wealth can be subdued by the grace, flexibility and agility of the public thereby inverting the allegorical expectations surrounding the images.

Though grassroots postering was visible and prevalent throughout the duration of OWS, the defining artistic difference between this movement and protests prior to it was the large scale participation of graphic designers who



created professionally designed posters in support of OWS. Well synthesized images showing an awareness and knowledge of graphic design history and methodology are readily available online in accompaniment to the movement. The nature of the designs differ widely in scope, ranging from obvious metaphors such as Alexandra Clotfelter's 'The Beginning is Near' poster (Fig.2) which depicts a bull being reigned in with multiple red ropes, to more obscure references such as one anonymous poster (Fig.3) that plays off of designer El Lissitzky's suprematist work *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Fig.4). These two works feature a background split into white and black sections with a white circle occupying most of the black space. A red wedge pierces the circle and text surrounds the objects. The anonymous poster inverts the original by switching which side is black and which is white and the words "We are the 99%" are repeated on the wedge. Other prominent styles include Art Nouveau, Minimalism, and comics' style graphics. Famous graphic designers such as Sheppard Fairey, creator of Obama's *Hope* election poster, participated as well making several designs including a spin off from the *Hope* poster. Using an image of Anonymous in full Guy Fawkes mask and hoodie attire Fairey calls for President Obama to sympathize with the movement, using a tongue in cheek reference in the text, "Mr President, we HOPE you're on our side" (Fig.5).

Graphic design not only allowed for a swift transference of information to the viewer but also created a brand for OWS. Through professionally designed posters and info graphics OWS was able to promote itself as a professional and

worthy cause to the public. Graphic design gathered support for the movement because the designed posters were slick and professional; they resembled the style of a corporate logo. Indeed, by creating works within the realm of graphic design designers were able to create simple and direct messages. This idea of creating a universal visual identity or brand developed from the International Typographic Style of the 1960s. Emphasis was put on clarity, accessibility and simplicity. These were images created with the intent of catching people's attention and quickly relaying information. Designer Jake Levitas participated in the initiation of a project in OWS to connect professional graphic designers with the movement in order to create a visual language that contains statistics and information presented in a unified and slick design (Aronowitz). He created a website called Occupy Design which provided a visual language and style for supporters to use (the url [occupydesign.com](http://occupydesign.com) is no longer active but the UK version [occupydesign.org.uk](http://occupydesign.org.uk) is still online). Levitas attempted to unify the visual graphics of OWS stating that "There are people who have valid concerns grounded in reality and grounded in data that can be communicated visually," and that by using these graphics rather than hand painted signs making general statements the viewers will see concrete data and "it's a lot harder to argue with statistics than it is with talking points" (Aronowitz). Levitas was instrumental in advocating and creating various info graphics including charts and measurement of data. This form of visual language is purely pedagogical and is often included in scientific or

political reports. In this sense graphic design enables OWS to move away from abstract concepts into the field of 'pure' data.

While the use of graphic design created a cohesive brand for OWS and a means for information to be easily accessible the tools and methodologies themselves were not as easily transferrable or accessible. These designs require access to a laptop, typically a MacBook with costly programs installed, and specific training and education which limits the number of people who are able to participate in this creative endeavor. These professionally trained designers achieved works that were to some extent inaccessible to other participants, whether through the historical references which were cited or through the confinement of the works to the internet. While the movement predominantly used visuality in a manner that enabled sharing and participation the specifications of this technology limited accessibility to this medium.

The strength of visual content created by graphic designers as well as traditional forms of postering relies on the virality and accessibility of social media. The realm of social media is that of digital public space. While there are preliminary debates regarding control of the internet and of digital content the space is still relatively open to the public in North America (Abdo, Toomey). Activism in the digital age is reliant on social media because of this open space and the ability to post anonymously. Movements prior to OWS such as the Arab Spring and the Spanish Indignados movement both relied on social media to

spread information quickly to as many people as possible. The concept of virality is thus tied to social media. As technology with access to the internet becomes cheaper and more widely available the number of people plugged into some channel of social media also increases. Whether content posted online will go viral is still unpredictable; however, once something is picked up and continuously shared the spread of information reaches an unprecedented amount of people in a short amount of time. Social media is particularly significant because of its status as an informal channel for information and its format restrictions which contribute to the speed of moving information (Gleason). Character counts, hash tags and live streams enable for information to be condensed into a sentence, a timed image or a key phrase. Information is visually flattened into fragments of text or images to spread even quicker. Not only are posts condensed in order to spread quickly but as a necessity in order to be seen at all while competing for a viewer's attention against an innumerable amount of content online. Considering the plethora of information available to the public activist movements in the digital age must adapt in format and content in order to relate to the viewer.

Among the different kinds of visuality on social media the hash tag is especially integral to the success of OWS. While the juxtaposition of the charging bull and the delicate ballerina is a strong visual metaphor for the roles played by the public and corporations and banks it is the hash tag that became the reigning symbol, image and call to action all in one embedded within the public and

cultural psyche. Whereas initially activist hash tag use was mainly to mobilize individuals on social media platforms such as twitter #occupywallstreet was adopted as the name and banner of the occupy movement in addition to its use as a tool of mobilization (Creech). The simple direct approach works well with social media where limited character counts restrict and determine formatting. While the hash tag is text it is also a symbol and image. On social media platforms such as twitter and Facebook the hash tag is used as a form of citation. By adding the hash tag in front of a phrase or word or name one is able to search posts also using that same phrase. #occupywallstreet is a way for the public to identify information about and relating to the movement. It is also a way of participating in the movement as anyone can post content followed by the hash tag. This style of citation and referencing creates an online community or public mobilized through the hash tag. #occupywallstreet is also a visual image that brands the movement. Hash tags transform text to image and in the case of OWS this transformation created a logo for the movement. The name and goal are one and the same united through ‘#.’

Other popular symbols associated with OWS include images created in conjunction with the movement as well as previously existing symbols that were re-appropriated to lend support from hacktivist group Anonymous. Graphics created at OWS contribute to the movement’s visual presence helping to define and catalyze the movement. One of the central images attributed to the movement is that of a clenched fist. This symbol of struggle and solidarity has a prolific

history associated with numerous activist movements. Within OWS it was graphic design artist Jon McCarthy who appropriated the symbol to be used in conjunction with occupy. Posters, shirts and signs contained this image often with the hash tag #occupywallstreet overlaid on top of the graphic (Eliano). Part of the strength of OWS's visual presence is the recycling and constant citation of already existing images and symbols. By referencing images loaded with meaning OWS is able to assert its place in activist history. Another such example is the large visual presence of the Guy Fawkes mask which was worn during protests, rallies and marches. Originally based on a historic figure in restoration period Britain, Guy Fawkes (or Guido Fawkes) was a catholic who intended to blow up the Parliament during the reign of James 1 (1603-1625) in order to eliminate the protestant monarch (Guy Fawkes). Fawkes was caught before being able to execute the gunpowder plot and killed. Historically labeled as a traitor, public perception of Fawkes changed to a more favourable view of the figure as a rebel hero fighting an unjust state. This romantic perception came about due to the popularity of the 1988-89 graphic novel written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd and subsequent film *V for Vendetta* released in 2006. Ironically, the mask, designed by Lloyd, now associated with self-branded justice warriors Anonymous is actually licensed to Time Warner who sell the mask as part of the advertising franchise for the film (Lovett). The presence of this mask during OWS referenced an, albeit romanticized, historical account of citizen protest against the government as well as the more recent work done by members of Anonymous.

Using the mask emphasizes the fact that OWS is a citizen organized movement with power consolidated amongst the participants. Anonymous can be anyone and it represents a sort of universal solidarity.

While OWS maintained a strong visual presence through its symbols, branding and postering, its imagery also flourished in the form of art works, performances and arts groups within the movement. Art was an important part of the culture within the occupy movement. The encampment, as a site of community living included amenities not only for food, shelter and health but for cultural production. These included the donation based library and an arts and culture group. Like all organizations within OWS, this group was autonomous, horizontally structured and collectivist. Within the group guilds were formed according to the talents and interests of the participants thereby providing a diverse range of mediums even including a puppetry guild (Kim). Cultural events including poetry readings, performances and happenings were organized through these guilds. Artists found much inspiration and support within occupy and used the opportunity to engage other participants in large scale public art works and performances. One of the better known artworks associated with OWS is a 'bat signal' that was projected at night onto the walls of buildings belonging to corporations such as Verizon (Mason Contemporary Art). The signal would show one of the recognizable symbols of the movement, 'the 99%' following which a lengthy message would play describing the goals of OWS and the reasons behind this sort of intervention (Mason Contemporary Art). Other public interventions

included a performance of Bertolt Brecht's 1937 play *The Days of the Commune* which was staged at Zuccotti Park months after the end of the campsite (weekends during the period of March 3 - May 27) (Days of the Commune). The play acts as a subtle way to reference occupy while engaging with the history of social injustices and occupation as a technique of protest through the events of the Paris Commune of 1871. OWS even held its own exhibition, *No Comment*, within the J.P. Morgan building. This was a collaboration with artist collective Loft in the Red Zone who had curated a tribute to September 11 in the space just as the campsite had developed (Eliano). The exhibition was large scale and included artworks, performances, message boards and pop up print shops. OWS used this opportunity to critique hierarchies within the art world and create an accessible space for viewers to connect to the art. The aims of artists within OWS was for art to be shared and transcend the limits of the contemporary art market.

The visuality of OWS was integral in solidifying the movement as an identifiable entity as well as for gathering support for its cause. The movement was created out of an image, a poster of a ballerina on top of a bull created by graphic designers at *Adbusters*. With its minimal text, viral hash tag and iconic imagery the poster is a good symbol for the ways in which design, social media and grassroots cultural movements created the 'look' or visual identity of OWS. Within this section I have examined the visual materials and brand created by and associated with OWS arguing that visuality, in the form of graphic design, social media and art practices, played a central role in solidifying the movement as a



serious cause and engaging protesters through the opportunity of creating visual content. I argue that with its clear visual language, use of historic and cultural references, and reliance on clear data graphic design is central to the visual branding of OWS. It is sleek and professional lending an aura of authenticity and professionalism to the movement and signifying the ways in which activism needs to adapt to the digital age.

Continuing in my assessment of how OWS is an example of a movement which embraces the tools of the digital age, I focused on the role of social media in propagating the movement, creating a viral spread of information which was integral for mobilizing the public. I analyzed the hash tag as a visual symbol which became crucial to OWS as it directed the online flow of information about the movement, enabled individuals to create content, reference and cite the movement in a participatory dialogue which allowed users to maintain a connection with OWS. While I devoted a lot of space to discussing the digital tools which informed the visuality of OWS in significant ways, I also acknowledged the various other forms of visual and artistic production which took part onsite, pointing out that while OWS depended largely on the digital realm for its success older forms of image making continued to exist in the forms of hand painted signs, art and even an exhibition. These forms of content creation and citation of visual tropes encouraged viewer identification, mobilization and education; visuality in the form of graphic design, social media and art enabled

OWS to mobilize individuals through content creation and the dialogism inherent within the hash tag as used on twitter and other social media platforms.

#### IV: THE PERFORMATIVITY OF OCCUPATION

In OWS bodies perform in a site specific way disrupting social, political, and geographical space. Occupying public space for an indefinite amount of time, OWS used the tools of dissonance and disruption to critique and destabilize the social and geographical organization of the city. OWS manifested physically in the form of a 59 day encampment within Zuccotti Park. All these hundreds of people camping in the middle of New York City inevitably disrupted the flow and patterns of daily life. Organization of the city was disrupted on two levels, the geographical and the social. Occupying public space with human bodies creates a visual blockade of people. Daily life for those who work or live nearby the square was disrupted by the presence of the campsite. While OWS may have interfered in the habits and patterns of people's lives in so doing they also depicted a legitimate alternative use of public space. Occupying Zuccotti Park OWS participants imbued the space with new purpose and meaning, using the site as a location for the planning, habitation and creative pursuits of OWS, so that it became associated with the movement. In this way protestors created new ways of mapping the city. Psychogeography is a term associated with the avant garde group the Situationists International. This process, of paying attention to how the geographical environment makes one feel, imbues the urban landscape with numerous alternative playful possibilities of use that contrast with the utilitarian

form of mapping and reacting to the city. Guy Debord, founding member of the Situationists, finds beauty in the “sum of possibilities” that the subway map provides and likewise it is in the plurality and multiplicity of uses that is realized in OWS’s occupation of Zuccotti Park that the public site becomes instilled with beauty and potential (Debord).

Organization and planning of urban cities is controlled and manipulated by numerous forces including money and politics. The physical layout of a city often parallels its social conditions. Wall Street for instance is a place of wealth, business and corruption. The buildings are tall skyscrapers and the corporations function on perpetuating hierarchies. The space functions on the basis of the work day and the clock which controls each section of the day. With the act of occupation OWS disrupts the reliable predictability of the work day. The installment of a campsite in the middle of the city with no clear end counters the organization of time and refuses to grant closure. Things are uncertain and complicated; marches occur at various points in the day as people see fit. The impacts of this disruption create uncomfortable encounters between publics who might not regularly interact. OWS creates a space of dialogue and exchange that is accessible to all who view it. In this way OWS enacts the theory of social sculpture as conceived by conceptual artist Joseph Beuys who considered all aspects of life to be artistically malleable and all people as potential artists with the capability of creativity. In applying the theories of Beuys and SI to the practices of OWS, I argue that the performativity of the participants within the

movement is significant as it enables them to be the creators of the movement. Within this framework visibility as performativity presents a way in which activist movements can be flexible and fluid as their direction is guided by the actions and words of its participants.

OWS was a community of people willing to engage the public, the media and the epitome of US neoliberal capitalism in a dialogue while presenting an alternative societal structure. At its foundation OWS relied on the participation of people. This dependence on collectivity went beyond using bodies to protest in the streets; instead, OWS centered its organization and operation around the idea of collectivity and populism. The use of a horizontal consensus based voting and speaking structure encouraged equal representation and accessibility within the movement as did devices such as the people's microphone. Due to the high numbers of participants a microphone was used to deliver messages, information, and in the case of invited speakers provide an accessible outlet (Appel). After someone would speak into the mic the rest of the people would repeat the message so that it traversed backwards as a visual sound wave, an embodiment of language, until the last members of the listeners were reached. In some cases the repetitions echoed several times before reaching the end of the group. This tool became a symbol of egalitarianism as well as a form of ritual for the participants – a sort of act to be performed. This use of a ripple effect also has pragmatic basis in the sound laws of NY city which prohibits particularly loud volumes without a permit for which OWS had applied and been denied several times (Appel). In her

article “The People’s Microphone” Hannah Chadeayne Appel quotes MSNBC’s interview with economist Joseph Stiglitz who at one point states “we have too little regulation of banks, but too much regulation of our democratic processes,” citing his experience at OWS and the need for the people’s mic (Appel). The people’s mic is a significant example of performativity within OWS which also uses the tool of disruption as it vocally disrupts space. This performative action depicts a creative means to bypass the policies and regulations of public space.

A significant feature of OWS’ visuality is the encampment itself which provided the movement with a semi-permeable base or commune that grew into an alternative community. The occupation of Zuccotti Park meant that hundreds of people would be living temporarily within the public space of the park. This necessitates certain facilities for habitation including washrooms and kitchens at the very basic level. Within the campsite of OWS one could find not only access to basic physical needs but also the presence of a library with hundreds of donated books, spaces designated for art creation and a schedule of seminars and teach-ins (Kim). The presence of these social structures helped perpetuate an interest in dialogue and conversation, in learning and sharing ideas and skills. This organization of the campsite was a participant initiated project which grew and developed according to the interest of the public. With the creation of a safe public space where individuals each had an opportunity to help define the movement the growth and development of OWS was directed by the public. This grassroots structure embraced the possibility of change, disorder, and failure

imbuing the movement with flexibility. In this sense OWS compares to a manifestation of Joseph Beuys' concept of social sculpture, or the idea that life is art and public participation is key. Writing on the links between OWS and Joseph Beuys, Erika Biddle notes that "Beuys' overarching project with social sculpture was that society as a whole becomes a work of art that also serves as a participatory public platform with the potential to reshape society." (Biddle 26) She then writes about the ways OWS fits within this definition, comparing everything from OWS' general assembly, summer disobedience school and numerous teach-ins to the Free University Beuys began at Documenta 6 and to Occupy's archive which she sees as a reflection or extension of Beuys' living archive. I have made extensive mention of the power of disruption and dissonance which are tools used by OWS, but there is much to be said about the ways in which the movement not only critiqued and deconstructed society but also built and developed a community of resources with free access to food, shelter and activities for the public.

OWS's emphasis on public accessibility and participation as well as its use of public space as its venue aligns occupy with the works of the Situationists International for whom modern city life and its organization stood for a radical silencing of oppression. In *The Situationist City* Sadler elaborates on this idea by quoting Debord:

The new prefabricated cities clearly exemplify the totalitarian tendency of modern capitalism's organization of life: the isolated inhabitants...see their lives

reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory absorption of an equally repetitive spectacle. (Debord via Sadler 16)

Not only is the modern city oppressive in its isolation – through mechanical rational organization urbanism also organizes silence by concealing exploitation through spectacle. Capitalism and neoliberalism become normalized within society through advertisements, the propaganda of luxury and a better life, and through commodification. As corporations dictate and script people's needs, the spatial organization of the city also becomes set to this program. Society operates through the guise of rational divisions of time which are best represented by the work day. In a capitalist society the clock controls a person's actions and each division of time requires an end in order for it to function. This organization extends beyond the clock but in all its iterations necessitates clarity, efficiency and repetition. By inviting people to camp out on the public streets and within parks OWS effectively repurposes these spaces, extending their meanings in an effort to depict the creative potential of the individual and the power of the public.

Through the motions of forming a campsite within the carefully surveilled boundaries of the financial district OWS can be compared to a performance wherein its participants gather to disrupt the scheduled order of capitalism by remaining in place for over a month, denying the system's insistence on the efficiency of the workday. The public that emerges fashions a functioning community complete with a library, kitchens, and even teach-ins thereby creating an alternate environment to one governed by institutions. These actions coupled

with tools such as the people's mic bring to mind the cacophony of Hugo Ball's 1916 concert bruitiste, 'Eine Krippenspiel,' wherein he and others performed nonsensical sound poems all at once while dressed in strange outfits made out of commonly available materials. Due to their propensity to focus on disrupting time, order, schedules, and meaning through the nonsensical, incoherent, and flexible I see links between the Situationists, Dadists and OWS. The movements highlight the framing devices used by oppressive societies in order to make the invisible visible, much as in the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film *Modern Times* where in one scene Chaplin becomes a test subject for a feeding chair symbolizing the increasing mechanization of labour in favour of increased efficiency. The subsequent feeding process uses humour to criticize this obsession with order and efficiency by showing how this obsession becomes brutal, violent and absurd as it does not operate on a human scale. The Situationists sought to combat this by making the process visible and by engaging with the space in alternate intuitive ways through the construction of 'situations.' Sadler explains this as such: "Each constructed situation would provide a décor and ambiance of such power that it would stimulate new sorts of behaviour, a glimpse into an improved future social life based upon human encounter and play" (Sadler 105). The idea of creating situations aligns with the way OWS was constructed and took place. Through the creation of a playful, flexible and participatory situation OWS not only disrupts the oppressive rationality of order but highlights the importance of public participation and dialogue as vital extensions of theory.



Through its iteration as a politically engaged community OWS performs in a metaphorical capacity wherein by challenging singular uses of public space the movement also critiques the ways in which the government responds to public needs. OWS used public space as a site wherein a particular public of mobilized individuals could emerge through dialogue about the ways in which politics maintains its relationship with capitalism. Creating a new community within a place typically used for a set of limited purposes OWS proposes the question of who comprises the public and how are its needs to be recognized. OWS defied capitalist expectations on time and space, suggesting alternative more flexible forms of organization that are more relatable to the needs of the public. What does it mean to disrupt the organization of the city? Reclaiming the notion of public space, demonstrators pitched tents to occupy the physical as well as mental space of North America. By camping in the financial district participants engaged directly with the spatial dynamics of capitalist structure, disrupting embedded behavioral norms. Concerns over control of society, politics and daily life became visualized through the occupation and contestation over public space and what it means. These ideas manifested in the encampment on the streets of NY act as a metonymic for the power dynamics Wall Street represents, so that the deeper questions and concerns brought up are over the ways in which neo liberal capitalist ideals became the ruling force of the public through the unbridled power of banks and big businesses.

With slogans such as ‘We are the 99%,’ OWS embraces and reflects the present economic state, seeking to mobilize the population into action, dialogue and concern over the state of affairs thereby imbuing the slogan with a positive potential. Seeking to confront neoliberalism at its core, OWS confronts the much imbedded notion of rationalism which allows for this system to be in control. This confrontation links to the actions of groups such as SI who believed that rationalism had come at the cost of personhood, and that “genuine social progress did not subsume the individual, but maximized his or her freedom and potential” (Sadler 7). OWS poses a series of questions and concerns regarding the ways in which society is structured and governed as well as who is represented and supported through legislative policies. OWS performs as a city created through the emergence of a community that embraces notions of flexibility, horizontal democracy and individual creativity within the creation of public services. In this way OWS uses performance as a significant tool for its accessibility, development and pedagogical function.

In OWS bodies perform in a site specific way disrupting social, political, and geographical space. The techniques of this performance frequently mimic or draw from historic, avant-garde performance art. The final section of my paper deals with the third key element of visibility at OWS, performativity. In this section I observed the organization of the city and how OWS uses the tools of disruption and dissonance to create encounters between publics and stimulate dialogue. The presence of bodies in movement creates the most notable visual

impression of OWS and as such how the bodies move, and act becomes a significant tool of mobilization. I argued that through the inclusion and ongoing development of numerous resources within the campsite the participants directed the growth of OWS, mapping out creative and individual responses to the structure of the city and disrupting the hegemonic order inherent within the capitalist organization of the city. Looking at the movement through Beuys' idea of social sculpture and the psychogeography of SI one can view the movement as initiating creative change through participation and mobilization, using tools such as the people's mic. Performativity in OWS functions in facilitating mobilization and dialogue between participants, their cause and the city itself. In the creation of an alternative structure within the campsite OWS itself mimics a city, yet one which is directed by the inhabitants who adapt the space to their needs rather than adapting to an existing structure thereby embodying the populist and horizontal-based political goals of OWS.

## V: CONCLUSION

I examined OWS through the lens of a Deutsch-ian relationship to public space, concluding that through the occupation of public space OWS creates a space of dialogue that allows for publics and collectivities to emerge or become activated. OWS repurposes Zuccotti Park to engage with the politics of societal structure and the visible and invisible ways in which the public sphere is governed. Analyzing the visuality of OWS I argue that visual content such as the prevalence of graphic design and the use of the hash tag was integral in

solidifying the movement as an identifiable entity as well as in mobilizing the public. OWS uses visuality as a tool of pedagogy that, combined with its strong digital presence, presents a way in which activism adapts to reflect the increasing prevalence of social media awareness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Finally, I argue that OWS performs as a metaphor for the city, in encouraging the participants to direct the structure of the movement and basing its development according to public needs and desires. In OWS bodies perform in a site specific way to disrupt social, political and geographical space providing a critique of the homogenizing organization of the public sphere and engaging the public in a dialogue about the ways in which public needs are served by various governing structures.

OWS is one of a growing number of recent protest movements aimed at challenging systems of governance and the ways in which society functions. It is not in this way unique or singular, nor are its methods. It does, however, present a significant application for the use of visuality in activism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I have chosen OWS as a site-specific movement which provides a strong example of the ways in which visuality functions to mobilize the public. In this paper I have showed you the pedagogical function of the visual by which individuals learn about OWS, assign meaning to it and how visuality engages the viewer through a dialogical process of exchange. Adapting their tools to match the increased digital presence of public participation and mobilization OWS created and solidified their identity through the branding of the hash tag #occupywallstreet. The visual content of the movement was central for the viewer

to learn about its goals, participate within OWS and contribute to its development. Will this movement radically change activism? Did it succeed in its goals? These are questions which I cannot answer, but I see potential for future research in the field of activism and visual culture or the presence of visuality. Movements like #Blacklivesmatter have already mobilized through the techniques and methods of OWS. The movement itself had a viral global presence as cities around the world took up the mantle of #occupy and campsites emerged in solidarity with the movement in New York. The popularity and global impact of the movement suggests that in some ways OWS did leave a mark on activism and yet as we saw through the critiques of several of its methods there is still much work to be done.

## Images

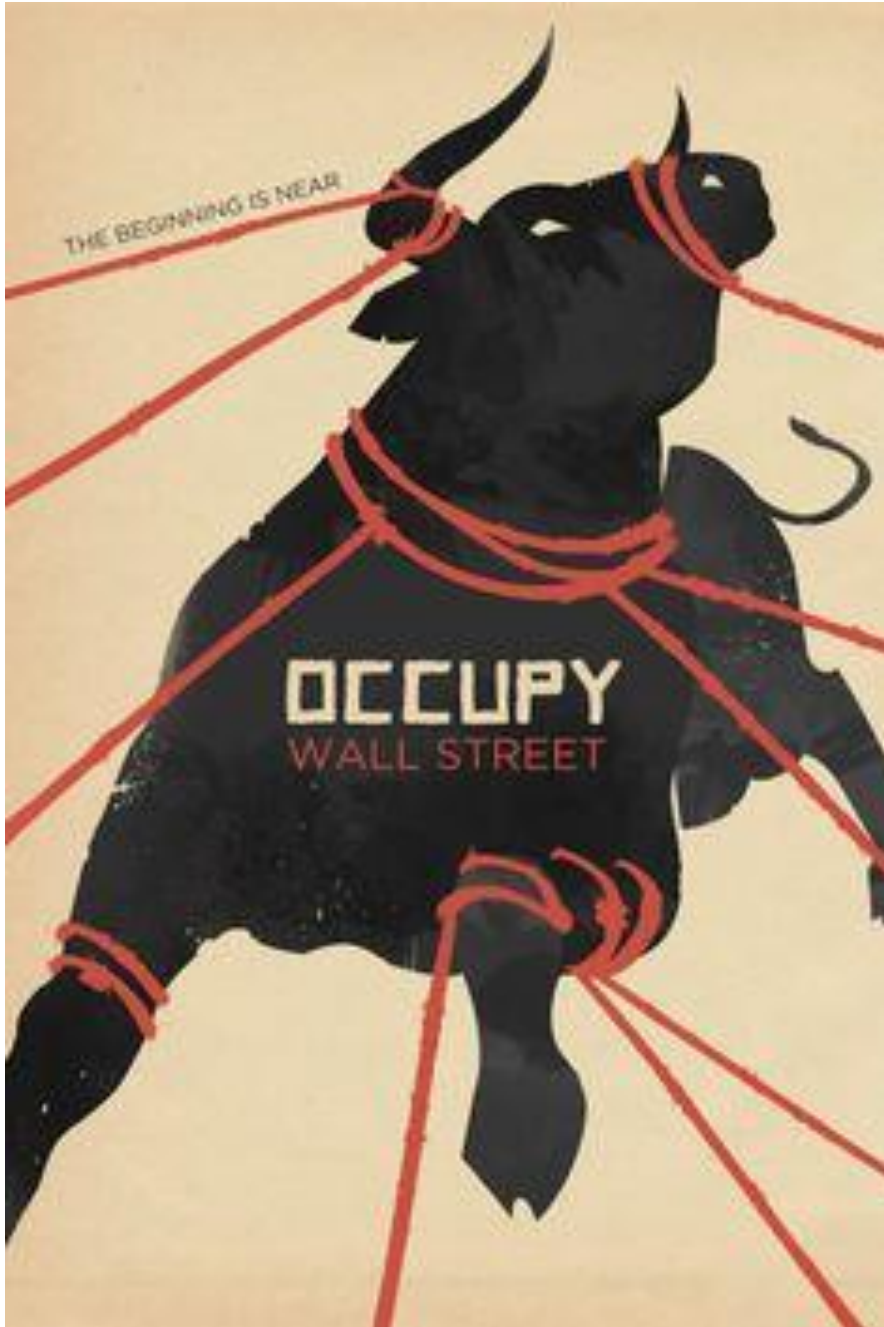
Fig. 1 *The Ballerina and the Bull*, Adbusters 2011



Adbusters. *The Ballerina and the Bull*. 2011. *Design Observer*

<<http://designobserver.com/feature/the-poster-that-launched-a-movement-or-not/32588/>>.

Fig. 2 *The Beginning is Near*, Alexandra Clotfelter 2011



Clotfelter, Alexandra. *The Beginning is Near*. 2011. *Occuprint*

<<http://occuprint.org/Posters/BullBeginningIsNear>>.

Fig. 3 *Occupy Wall Street*, Anonymous Student Work 2011



Anonymous Student Work. *Occupy Wall Street*. 2010-12. *Hakan Topal* (Dept. of Media Culture, CUNY) <<http://designobserver.com/feature/the-poster-that-launched-a-movement-or-not/32588/>>.



Fig. 4 *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (*Клином красным бей белых!*), El Lissitzky 1915



El Lissitzky. *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. 1919. *Wikimedia Commons*

<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artwork\\_by\\_El\\_Lissitzky\\_1919.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Artwork_by_El_Lissitzky_1919.jpg)>.

Fig. 5 *Occupy Hope*, Sheppard Fairey 2011



Fairey, Sheppard. *Occupy HOPE*. 2011. *Obey Giant*

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