

THOMAS BEARD

It was a strange coincidence. My arraignment for an Occupy Wall Street–related arrest was scheduled for the same day as the opening of the 2012 Whitney Biennial, for which I’d co-curated the film program. On December 17 of last year, the three-month anniversary of OWS, I participated in a demonstration at Duarte Square, a small park on the western end of Canal Street that was directly adjacent to a large empty lot owned by Trinity Church, one of the largest landholders in the city. The original occupation at Zuccotti Park had been forcibly evicted a month prior, and many in the movement, particularly religious leaders who saw Occupy’s goals as directly in line with the moral imperatives of the church, had called upon Trinity to donate the unused property as a new base of operations.

Though it had been supportive of OWS’s efforts early on, unfortunately Trinity had no interest in granting these appeals for sanctuary (No Trespassing signs were displayed quite prominently). So when the crowd gathered in Duarte, it became clear that civil disobedience of some sort was about to take place. A march through the neighborhood evolved into an encirclement around the lot’s perimeter, and suddenly two giant wooden ladders, previously hidden underneath a banner, were set up to scale the property’s fencing in mock-medieval fashion. I soon joined dozens of others, including *Artforum* editor Carly Busta and several vestment-clad priests, as protesters poured into the lot. The NYPD presence that day was substantial, and before long we were all in handcuffs.

Chatting with the retired bishop sitting next to me in the police van, I came to appreciate the ways in which Occupy Wall Street had transformed my political life, the ways in which, through exchanges like these, so many different and unexpected perspectives were being brought to bear on my own ideas about the rampant corporate malfeasance and rising inequality in this country. The situation I’d found myself in—encumbered with tens of thousands of dollars of student-loan debt, uninsured, precariously employed—was not uncommon, it turned out, and indeed was the new normal for many of my generation. Taking part in actions like these meant striking a blow against some of the nation’s most enduring and insidious myths, the myth of ample opportunity, the myth of a classless society. We weren’t alone in our hardships, and here, in Duarte Square, was the proof.

Since I first became involved with OWS, a key issue that I’ve grappled with was how I might contribute to the movement through my work. The challenge that the other Biennial curators and I faced at the Whitney was how an exhibition that had to be planned out many months in advance could somehow account for a cultural phenomenon that seemed to be changing week to week. In the end, how-

ever, the central themes of Occupy Wall Street had already been present in a number of the works selected, and found a form in subtle ways throughout the show, from LaToya Ruby Frazier's pieces in the galleries to Kelly Reichardt's screenings in the cinema. Andrea Fraser's catalog essay confronted the topic head-on, revealing the contradictions between the dispiriting reality of contemporary art's social and economic functions and the claims made on its behalf by artists, critics, and curators. The fact that the Biennial's main sponsors were Sotheby's and Deutsche Bank did not go unnoticed.

At Light Industry, the venue for film and electronic art in Brooklyn that I run with Ed Halter, the circumstances were somewhat different. Though the organization operates with a tiny fraction of a museum's resources, its scale allows for a comparative agility in terms of its schedule, enabling us to quickly adapt our program to the events of the day. Like other alternative cinemas in New York, we've organized screenings that resonated with the ongoing discussions surrounding OWS, like Sara Gómez's *De cierta manera* (1977) and Shinsuke Ogawa's *Narita: The Peasants of the Second Fortress* (1971). The former, one of the great if underappreciated postrevolutionary Cuban films, is concerned not with an insurrectionary rupture in the standing social order but rather with what comes afterward, the myriad conflicts encountered in the struggle toward a society based on true equality. The latter documents farmers in the process of defending their land against seizure by the Japanese government after the area was selected as the site of a new airport for Tokyo. Featuring phalanxes of riot police squaring off in a protracted battle against armed student activists, as well as villagers chaining themselves to their improvised encampments or constructing elaborate networks of underground tunnels, Ogawa's film is a timely and troubling record of contested land rights and the violent imposition of state authority.

Related screenings will undoubtedly follow in the months to come, but by the time this writing is published in the fall, it's difficult to say where OWS will be. Whither Occupy Wall Street? This question, or some variation thereof, is constantly being asked, but instead of wondering where it's going, perhaps it's worth reconsidering what it's already been: a realignment of popular political discourse, an antidote to cynicism, a flowering of radical will. Thinking back on this first wave of the Occupy movement, I find myself returning to a bit of tactical advice put forward by the filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh (which she borrowed from Napoleon): "The purpose of the avant-garde is not to advance, but to maneuver."

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