Visual Media and Culture of ‘Occupy’
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By

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This book is dedicated to an inscription crafted onto the canvas of a tent once situated in the piazza of St Paul’s Cathedral: “Time is Art”.

All of this book’s author royalties will be donated to the charity United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Established in 1946, UNICEF is dedicated to furthering the rights, wellbeing, prosperity and creative potential of children.
CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ........................................................................................................... ix
Preface ............................................................................................................................... xv
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ xxiv
Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1
Cabaret Voltaire of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral

Part I: Aleatory Materialism and the Aesthetics of Occupy LSX

Chapter One ...................................................................................................................... 46
Arrival Narratives

Chapter Two .................................................................................................................... 71
Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral: Tempore declinatio

Part II: Media Techno-cultures and the Aesthetics of Occupy LSX

Chapter Three ............................................................................................................... 98
Occupied Times: Print Media and the Revolutionary Press

Chapter Four ............................................................................................................... 133
Occupying Hypermodern Financial Times

Chapter Five ............................................................................................................... 171
New Media Technologies in Glacial Times

Chapter Six ............................................................................................................... 187
Lexicons of the Sign in Multi-modal Techno-cultures
Part III: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Occupy

Chapter Seven .......................................................................................... 206
Infracting the Mediated State of Neo-Liberal Welfare

Chapter Eight ........................................................................................... 230
Transgressive Simulacra of Occupy

Conclusion ............................................................................................... 258
Situation Ethics of Occupy

Epilogue ................................................................................................... 295

References ............................................................................................... 299

Index ........................................................................................................ 322
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Preface

Figure P.1. “In the beginning…” (Genesis 1:1)
Figure P.2. “Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (Timothy 6:19)
Figure P.3. “But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want; that there may be equality” (Corinthian 8:14)
Figure P.4. “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land” (Song of Solomon 2:12)

Introduction

Figure I.1. “Everyone will live in his own personal ‘cathedral’, so to speak” (Ivan Chtcheglov 1953)
Figure I.2. “What is my trespass?” (Genesis 31:36)
Figure I.3. “Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house…” (Ezekiel 4:17)
Figure I.4. “Time is art” (Inscribed on tent canvas)
Figure I.5. “For I have prepared the house, and room…” (Genesis 24:31)
Figure I.6. “And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon” (Genesis 35:14)
Figure I.7. “…who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound the waters in a garment?” (Proverbs 30:4)
Figure I.8. “And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech” (Genesis 11:1).
Figure I.9. “All the gold that was occupied for the work in all the work of the holy place, even the gold of the offering…after the shekel of the sanctuary” (Exodus 38:24)
Figure I.10. “Wherefore say, behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace” (Numbers 25:12)
Figure I.11. “All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt” (Ecclesiastes 8:9)

Figure I.12. “He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Figure I.13. “I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times” (Psalms 77:5)

Part I

Figure P.i. “And they sat in a void place at the entering in of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets prophesied before them” (Chronicles 18:9)

Chapter One

Figure 1.1. “It is he that buildeth his stories in the heaven, and hath founded his troop in the earth…” (Amos 9:6)

Figure 1.2. “And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east…” (Genesis 12:8)

Figure 1.3. “And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai” (Genesis 13:3)

Figure 1.4. “And thou shalt make a hanging for the door of the tent, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, wrought with needlework” (Exodus 27:36)

Figure 1.5. “On the first day of the first month shalt thou set up the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation” (Exodus 40:2)

Figure 1.6. “And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that so journeth among you” (Leviticus 16:29)

Chapter Two

Figure 2.1. “And they cast up a bank against the city, and it stood in the trench…” (Samuel 20:15)
Figure 2.2. “And thou shalt make fifty taches of brass, and put the taches into the loops, and couple the tent together, that it may be one” (Exodus 26:11)

Figure 2.3. “And David made him houses in the city of David, and prepared a place for the ark…and pitched for it a tent” (Chronicles 15:1)

Figure 2.4. “And on the three and twentieth day of the seventh month he sent the people away into their tents, glad and merry in heart for the goodness” (Chronicles 7:10)

Figure 2.5. “And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful” (Mark 4:19)

Figure 2.6. “Art thou called being a servant? care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather” (Corinthians 7:21)

Figure 2.7. “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day” (Psalms 81:3)

Figure 2.8. “Seven times a day do I praise thee, because of thy righteous judgments” (Psalms 119:164)

Figure 2.9. “Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us” (Ecclesiastes 1:10)

Figure 2.10. “When thou comest nigh unto a city to fight against it, then proclaim peace unto it” (Deuteronomy 20:10)

Figure 2.11. “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

Part II

Figure P.ii. “And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness...are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?” (Esther 10:2)

Chapter Three

Figure 3.1. “As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country” (Proverbs 25:25)

Figure 3.2. “Then Baruch answered them. He pronounced all these words unto me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in the book” (Jeremiah 36:18)
Chapter Four

Figure 4.1. “Then the channels of waters were seen, and the foundations of the world were discovered…” (Psalms 18:15)
Figure 4.2. “And thou shalt make for it a grate of network of brass; and upon the net shalt thou make four brasen rings in the four corners thereof” (Exodus 27:4)
Figure 4.3. “He sendeth out his word, and melteth them: he causeth his wind to blow, and the waters flow” (Psalms 147:18)
Figure 4.4a and 4.4b. “Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?” (Job 38:29)
Figure 4.5. “For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater” (Isaiah 55:10)

Chapter Five

Figure 5.1. “…till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on an hill” (Isaiah 31:17)
Figure 5.2. “And the remnant that remaineth of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remaineth, shall hang over the back side of the tabernacle” (Exodus 26:12)
Figure 5.3. “Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers” (Jeremiah 35:7)
Figure 5.4. “In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire” (Psalms 78:14)
Figure 5.5. “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth” (Psalms 71:9)
Figure 5.6. “Blessed are they that keep judgment, and he that doeth righteousness at all times” (Psalms 106:3)

Chapter Six

Figure 6.1. “And he made for the altar a brasen grate of network under the compass thereof beneath unto the midst of it” (Exodus 38:4)
Figure 6.2. “A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7)
Figure 6.3. “...shall speak great words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into ... hand until a time and times and the dividing of time” (Daniel 8:25)

Part III

Figure P.iii. “...and they asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent” (Exodus 18:7)

Chapter Seven

Figure 7.1. “Beloved I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth” (John: 2)
Figure 7.2. ‘Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning’ (Proverbs 9:9)
Figure 7.3. “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee...” (Isaiah 58:8)
Figure 7.4. ‘Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn...’ (Deuteronomy 31:12).
Figure 7.5. “That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations” (Psalms 67:2)
Figure 7.6. “And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain” (Isaiah 4:6)

Chapter Eight

Figure 8.1. “Should not the multitude of words be answered? And should a man full of talk be justified?” (Job 11:3)
Figure 8.2. “And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf; and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 32:4)
Figure 8.3. “If a bird’s nest chance to be before thee in the way in any tree, or on the ground, whether they be young ones, or eggs and the dam sitting upon the young, or upon the eggs, thou shalt not take the dam with the young” (Deuteronomy 22:6)
Figure 8.4. “...ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice” (Deuteronomy 4:12)
Figure 8.5. “Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones” (Proverbs 17:24)

Conclusion

Figure C1. “And it came to pass a long time after ...” (Joshua 23:251)
Figure C2. “If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock...” (Songs of Solomon 1:8)
Figure C3. “Awake, O north wind; and come thou south; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out...come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits” (Solomon’s Song 4:16)
Figure C4. “...that thou mayest use them for the calling of the assembly, and for the journey of the camps” (Numbers 10:2)
Figure C5. “…and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment” (Deuteronomy 11:18)
Figure C6. “In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth” (Psalms 72:7)
Figure C7. “If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder” (Deuteronomy 13:13)
Figure C8. “And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do” (Exodus 18:20)
Figure C9. “And the man brought the men into Joseph’s house, and gave them water, and they washed their feet...” (Genesis 43:24)
Figure C10 – C48. “Sign of the times” (John Paul II)
Figure C49. “…ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?” (St Mathew 16:3)
Figure C50. “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” (Ecclesiastes 9:11)
Interviewee: I could have been here at the beginning, and I chose not to. I was in Bristol actually, but I could have, there’s nothing stopping me coming here. And I always wanted to go off on a, one of those pilgrimages things to Jerusalem. I have just done that last week and just got back. Right, but I had the chance to be here and if I had been here from the beginning, then I would have been in these tents saying my piece. But now I think, that ...others have put up with the difficulties up until now, they’re the ones who deserve to have their views and their leadership listened to; because they’ve led from the beginning. So all I’m doing; I’m the cleaner, keeping the toilets clean man and the, the Dettol man basically...And so that makes the leader’s job that much easier. That they can lead because the, the hygiene stuff is being looked after. But I will erhm, if I am here from week to week. I haven’t been here a week yet. But if I am here from week to
week, then I will start to listen to them and if I think that I have something that’s worth listening to then, you know, then I will say it, say it to them. But I have had my life. I have had a great life. I was a poor boy from a Portsmouth housing estate and I have travelled all over the world. I lived in California, flew my own plane ... But I feel so sorry for the young people because it could have so easily have been me. If I was born twenty-five years later, I would have been in the same predicament. So I don’t wanna run their show. I want them to run it. Because they’re mostly younger people than me. Just to do the, just to do, almost like a parent seeing what needs doing. To do the bits so that they can carry on, they can ... have a free run, you know. But I will suggest that they make it a short sharp protest and not let it dribble on and dribble away. Because that will look bad. But this week may be interesting the court case. I suppose it will be on the TV what happens and it will be around here so I will be hearing about what happens. But erhm there’s only a few people that I have really been talking to here. There’s erhm. Although the people that have been here over a long time. I think the people that have been here from the beginning they’re seeing a lot of people be here for a week and go and so they’re not taking them that seriously until they start recognising them quite a few days; and then they start saying alright it looks now as if you’re, you know. Otherwise they’re just wasting their breath aren’t they if people just come in for a few days and then go away? But yea I am pleased I came, pleased I came even if it’s only for a week. But I think it’s gonna be cold. I think the next week’s gonna be cold. Somebody said the weather is going to be cold. You don’t really mind the cold like this; it’s that grey blustery, you know when you get the miserable winter weather that might be quite hard. But this is erhm, you know, it’s not a bad view, and they do...Sunday church bells, it’ll be nice if they practised the bells everyday... Way back between the 1400s, 1500s, and 1600s hundreds, this was a major site of political speeches and also political executions. Oh Jesus, dozens or hundreds of people back there lost their heads, because of their politics of religion...So we’re on, we’re on ground that is used to dissent and counter-dissent as well as the authorities bashing down. Oh Jesus there’s been a lot of that around here before all this stuff was here... (Male, St Paul’s Cathedral Occupy LSX, 27th November 2011)

On 15th October 2011, as part of a global day of anti-capitalist protest action, vast multitudes of the Occupy London Movement tried, unsuccessfully, to occupy the vicinity of the London Stock Exchange (LSX) Paternoster Square. Earlier in September 2011, multitudes of Occupy Wall Street activists had ensconced themselves in tents in Manhattan’s Zuccotti Park. Extraordinary anti-capitalist asseverations materialised in the form of occupations staged in Madrid, Sydney and Hong Kong. Inspired by the unprecedented velocity and the gravitational propulsion of the global Occupy Movement, campaigners in London...
gathered (midday 15th October) at the anterior of St Paul’s Cathedral and, in an epigrammatic foray of resilient defiance they trekked the monetary trail, towards London Stock Exchange. En route the activists blazed a prodigious visual spectacle: parading a kaleidoscopic array of placards enunciating anti-capitalist resurgent slogans; “We are the 99%” (BBC 2011a). Prevented from entering Paternoster Square, a multitude of protestors rebounded to the piazza of St Paul’s Cathedral and embarked on an occupation: Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral. Activists fabricated a mobile kitchen, contiguous with the Cathedral’s pedestrian boundaries. Food donations and charitable offerings partially sustained the field kitchen’s basic provision. In the affably entitled Tent City University, internationally acclaimed, prominent academics invested time in the provision of lectures, discussions and invigorated debates. New media was ingeniously mobilised to connect local events with geographically dispersed audiences; invariably in the form of live streaming across the internet alongside other assemblages that the Media Tent offered. Conscientiously timetabled General Assemblies were initially held, each day, at the foot of the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral. Within a week the Occupy LSX encampment had coalesced into a veritable domicile settlement; albeit uncertain, precarious and indeterminate in its existence. Relations between Occupy LSX and their ecclesiastical hosts were highly complex and portrayed in the media as sententiously frayed. Emblematic of these complications were the events of 21st October 2011: St Paul’s Cathedral was closed to visitors, an extraordinary episode as the only prior precedent had been during the blitz; in World War II. Media aberrations spun into paroxysm eventually converging on the speculation that Cathedral officials had presented health and safety as an operational rationale for the closure. On 27th October 2011 the cathedral conceded to reopen; and this concession coincided with a renegotiation and realignment of the OLSX encampment’s spatial boundaries. But public focus on these intervals of compromise and negotiation were eclipsed by the media spectacles that encircled the resignation of the cathedral’s Canon Chancellor, the Reverend Giles Fraser; followed by the City of London Corporation’s (part owners of the St Paul’s churchyard) pursuit of a High Court injunction against the OLSX encampment. Media broadcasts converged in their conclusion that Occupy St Paul’s Cathedral was subject to a High Court ruling premised on: the impediment of highways (Guardian 2011a). Media coverage aligned with the suggestion that St Paul’s officials continuously refrained from legal action, (“for trespass”) against Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral (ibid). Nevertheless, St Paul’s officials remained tentative and hesitant to act decisively. On 31st October
2011 a high profile resignation galvanised the media spectacle: the cathedral’s Dean Rt. Reverend Graeme Knowles resigned.

Throughout its magnificent history the churchyard of St Paul’s Cathedral has been renowned for being a vicinity “where generations of Londoners played their role in fomenting public opinion” (St Paul’s 2012). It was this democratic heritage of St Paul’s, its veneration “as an important meeting place for people and ideas, as a centre for the arts, learning and public debate” (ibid), which was, spectacularly, embattled by the domicility of Occupy LSX. Signs of these turbulent times materialised through an intriguing assemblage of competing articulations. Sociological theory is ideally placed to decipher this complex signifying practice, especially when conjoined with: subculture studies (e.g., Hebdige 1988); analyses of spectacle society (Debord 1967); and a focus on how the media spectacle “interpellates individuals as subjects” (Althusser 1971: 170). For example, starting from the premise of “noise”, Dick Hebdige (1988) convincingly argues that the “signifying power of the spectacular subculture” constitutes “an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation” (ibid:90). His specific attunement to the swirl of transgressive codes deployed by spectacular subcultures led Hebdige (ibid:92) to additionally argue that “they are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as ‘unnatural’”. One can easily identify parallels, here, with the media’s focus on the sartorial peculiarities, of Occupy LSX and the extent to which its active presence interrupted an orderly system of signifying practice. For example, St Paul’s (2012) publicity describes the cathedral as “a place for protest against injustice and for the public expression of hope for a better society”. St Paul’s emphasises that its “involvement in the global community and social justice is as much a part of the working life of St Paul’s as prayer and ceremony” (ibid). Conversely, news media coverage of Occupy LSX’s situation in the piazza of St Paul’s Cathedral was rancorous and coincided with Hebdige’s (1988:92-93) observation that “the emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press...[which]...fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement”. Indeed, the news media very quickly, like predators converged issuing headlines staging the more shocking features of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral. Hebdige might explain such occurrence in the following terms:

as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent...It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture
incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology from which it in part emanates: as ‘folk devil’, as Other, as Enemy. (Hebdige 1988:93-94)

This book is empirically resourced by an extensive ethnography of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral. Consequently, primary source case study material (comprising 57 ethnographic interviews and 1,600 photographic images) constitute the empirical basis of my research study. Conducted from the October 2011 inception, of the encampment, until the physical dismantling of the encampment in February 2012, this ethnography details the signifying practice, media and culture of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral. An area of ambiguity in studies of spectacular social movements relates to the concepts of: “recuperation” (Hebdige 1988); “interpellation” (Althusser 1971); and the transgressive spirit of avant-garde artistic praxis (Debord 1967).

Figure P.2. “Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (Timothy 6:19). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure P.3. “But by an equality, *that* now at this time your abundance *may be a supply* for their want, that their abundance also *may be a supply* for your want; that there *may be equality*” (Corinthian 8:14). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure P.4. “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of *birds* is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land” (Song of Solomon 2:12). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
This book examines links between Occupy LSX, the global Occupy Movement and contemporary praxis of the 1950-1970s artistic avant-garde. It is important to recognise that the art of occupation has heterogeneously emerged through the Dada Movement (c.f., Hannah Hoch 1889-1978, John Heartfield 1891-1968); Fluxus Movement (c.f. John Cage 1912-1992); Situationist International Movement (c.f. Guy Debord 1931-1994); and Surrealist Movement (c.f. Andre Breton 1896-1966). Consequently, a central theme of this book examines Occupy LSX in relation to the enduring legacy of the 1950-1970s Western European artistic avant-garde. The Occupy Movement’s application of the artistic praxis of détournement exemplifies the enduring frames through which the Situationists continue to present a radical challenge to capitalism’s convergence of culture and society into the media spectacle (c.f. Kellner 2012, Chomsky 2012, Harvey 2012, Lasn 2012). Implied in this theoretical approach is the concept of the “spectacle”. According to Guy Debord:

THE WHOLE LIFE of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation. (Debord 1967/2006:12)

Beginning with Althusser’s concept of “interpellation” this book examines the visual media and culture of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral. Contiguous with current cultural analysis, the media spectacle is a key feature of my theoretical framing. However, the resulting analytical conjectures are based on an extensive ethnographic analysis. Initially focusing on arrival narratives, I posed the question: were the 15th October 2011 anti-capitalist protestors “hailed” into becoming the subjects of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral? But an analysis of anti-capitalist protest tipping into an occupation suggests that the actual process of the “hail” (interpellation) is inescapable from the prior existence of a subject. To resist the “hail” of media spectacle presupposes the existence of a media literate subject? Paradoxically, therefore, the moment of resisting the “hail” is also a moment of counterfactual acquiescence to being “hailed”? Conversely, my analysis of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral is contiguous with the prosaic time of the “encounter”. In his later writings 1978-1987, Althusser formulated the Philosophy of the Encounter. Althusser in this text revisits Marx’s dialectics and critiques the apparent propensity for Marx to subordinate or repress the significance of chance. Marx attributes teleology to the expense of the aleatory inception of economic systems; and in so doing insufficiently attends to: “the
materialism of the rain, the swerve, the encounter, the take [prise]” (Althusser 2006:167). Within the context of atomist physics, this refers to the active role that chance collisions play in the engineering of our physical world. So as to simplify this, Althusser proposes “a materialism of the encounter, and therefore of the aleatory and of contingency” (ibid). Althusser illustrates this materialism as a loosening of the reins of dialectic control; for emphasis is placed on the propensity for actions to swerve away from straightforward patterns of trajectories. This swerve upsets, dismantles and transforms situations as it causes collisions between tangentially associated materialities. By disrupting the parallelism of motion, the swerve induces:

an encounter with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world – that is to say, of the agglomeration of atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter. (Althusser 2006:169)

Embedding Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral within a framework of encounters highlights an emerging form of spectacular anti-capitalist mobilization, which clashes and collides with all types of theories supporting the capacity of the state to “interpellate” (Althusser 1971) individuals into becoming subjects. A direct consequence of the Occupy Movement’s rhizomatous system of decentred political practice and spontaneous gatherings is: to compel us to recognise that “the accomplishment of the fact is just a pure effect of contingency, since it depends on the aleatory encounter” (Althusser 2006:169). The necessity for a framing of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral in terms of the encounter has been admirably highlighted in Merrifield’s (2012) The Politics of the Encounter and the Urbanization of the World. Merrifield (ibid:273) eloquently argues that Occupy embodies the conversion of aleatory encounters into efficacious political practice: “The Occupy Wall Street movement, one instance of a politics of radical encounter, began on 17 September 2011 when a handful of dogged activists ventured to the centre of America’s financial universe” (ibid:273). An aleatory encounter is also eloquently evident when Merrifield (ibid) refers to Occupy LSX as thus:

In London, in mid-October…people assembled in front of St Paul’s Cathedral and were addressed by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange; demonstrators likewise decided to stay put in tents, well over a hundred of them, and began constructing an alternative radical lifeworld for themselves (#Occupy LSX), with an information center, a library, a meeting space, and a group of tents patched together where people debated
strategy and spoke ideas… ‘The current system is unsustainable’, ran Occupy LSX’s Initial Statement. (Merrifield 2012:273)

Merrifield’s (2012) analysis of Occupy is fascinating, engaging, and admirable; it provides a highly convincing account of the aleatory conditions through which the Occupy Movement has variously emerged. At the same time, Merrifield’s (ibid) analysis invites further review so as to tell the story of encounter through the voices, images and emotions of those who were involved in that encounter; and this requires a focus on: subjectivity, interpellation and praxis. Evidently, it is conceivable that Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral emerged as part of an indeterminate sequence of aleatory encounters. It is also evident that Occupy’s use of social media can be mapped onto emerging opportunities and chance encounters, as Merrifield (ibid:277) identifies: “Citizens in the encounter comprise disparate groups of people who have an uncanny knack of engineering ‘smart spontaneity’, of creating encounters in the heat of the moment and in the heat of the movement”. Nevertheless, questions arise about voice and the subject of the aleatory encounter. This book focuses on the subject of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral; its central point of enquiry is to ascertain whether Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral was instantiated by a swerve away from the materiality of the media spectacle. Contiguous with this point of enquiry is an endeavour to illustrate how Karl Marx’s (1841) original formulation of aleatory materialism can provide a theoretical basis from which to explore the political efficacy of the chance encounter. Primarily informed by empirical ethnographic data, this book identifies interpolating threads of sustained praxis weaving through the aleatory encounter of Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral. My theoretical framework is an unusual alliance between Guy Debord’s (1967) concept of the spectacle, formulated in The Society of the Spectacle; Bill Ashcroft’s (2001) notion of interpolation as advanced in On Post-Colonial Futures; and Karl Marx’s (1841) conception of aleatory materialism as detailed in Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature. Based on extensive ethnographic interviews and photographic data this book demonstrates the complex ways in which Occupy LSX St Paul’s Cathedral interpolated and transgressed the Society of the Spectacle; in so doing OLSX cultivated a fascinatingly unique, politically efficacious, visual media and culture.
I would like to express a heartfelt thank you to Professor David Knights who continues to inspire my academic development. Professor Barbara Adam’s prolific contribution to the study of time and society has been inspirational and I would like to pay tribute to her work.

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Illustration Acknowledgements

All photographs are by the author Pamela Odih

Book Cover: Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, October 2011
Figure P.1: ‘In the beginning...’ (Genesis 1:1). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, October 2011
Figure P.2: “Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (Timothy 6:19). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure P.3: “But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply
for your want; that there may be equality” (Corinthian 8:14).

Figure P.4: “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of
birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land” (Song of
Solomon 2:12). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza,
November 2011

Introduction

Figure I.1: ‘Everyone will live in his own personal “cathedral”, so to
speak’ (Ivan Chtccheglov 1953). Photographic image St Paul’s
Cathedral Piazza, October 2011
Figure I.2: ‘What is my trespass?’ (Genesis 31:36). Photographic Image,
St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure I.3: ‘Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the
house…therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning
from me’ (Ezekiel 4:17). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral
Piazza, January 2012
Figure I.4: ‘Time is art’ (Inscribed on tent canvas). Photographic Image St
Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure I.5: ‘For I have prepared the house, and room…’ (Genesis 24:31).
Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011
Figure I.6: ‘And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with
him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and
he Poured Oil Thereon’ (Genesis 35:14). Photographic Image, St
Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure I.7: ‘…who hath gathered the wind in his fists? Who hath bound
the waters in a garment?...’ (Proverbs 30:4). Photographic Image, St
Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure I.8: ‘And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech’
(Genesis 11:1). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza,
January 2012
Figure I.9: ‘All the gold that was occupied for the work in all the work of
the holy place, even the gold of the offering...after the shekel of the
sanctuary’ (Exodus 38:24). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral
Piazza, November 2011
Figure I.10: ‘Wherefore say, Behold, I give unto him my Covenant of
Peace’ (Numbers 25:12). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral
Piazza, November 2011
Figure I.11: “All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work
that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man ruleth over
another to his own hurt” (Ecclesiastes 8:9). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 1.12: “He hath made everything beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 1.13: “I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times” (Psalms 77:5). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012

Part One

Figure P.i: “And they sat in a void place at the entering in of the gate of Samaria; and all the prophets prophesied before them” (Chronicles 18:9). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Chapter One

Figure 1.1: ‘It is he that buildeth his stories in the heaven, and hath founded his troop in the earth…” (Amos 9:6). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 1.2: “And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east…” (Genesis 12:8). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, October 2011

Figure 1.3: “And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai” (Genesis 13:3). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 1.4: “And thou shalt make a hanging for the door of the tent, of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, wrought with needlework” (Exodus 27:36). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 1.5: “On the first day of the first month shalt thou set up the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation” (Exodus 40:2). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 1.6: “And this shall be a statute for ever unto you: that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, ye shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all, whether it be one of your own country, or a stranger that so journeth among you” (Leviticus 16:29). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Chapter Two

Figure 2.1: ‘and they cast up a bank against the city, and it stood in the trench…’ (Samuel 20:15). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.2: “And thou shalt make fifty taches of brass, and put the taches into the loops, and couple the tent together, that it may be one” (Exodus 26:11). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.3: “And David made him houses in the city of David, and prepared a place for the ark…and pitched for it a tent” (Chronicles 15:1). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.4: “And on the three and twentieth day of the seventh month he sent the people away into their tents, glad and merry in heart for the goodness” (Chronicles 7:10). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.5: “And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful” (Mark 4: 19). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.6: “Art thou called being a servant? care not for it : but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather” (Corinthians 7:21). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.7: “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day” (Psalms 81:3). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.8: “Seven times a day do I praise thee, because of thy righteous judgments” (Psalms 119:164). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.9: “Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us” (Ecclesiastes 1:10). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011

Figure 2.10: ‘When Thou Comest Nigh Unto A City To Fight Against It, Then Proclaim Peace Unto It’ (Deuteronomy 20:10). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 2.11: “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012
Part Two

Figure P.ii: ‘And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness...are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?’ (Esther 10:2). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Chapter Three

Figure 3.1: ‘As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country’ (Proverbs 25:25). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012
Figure 3.2: ‘Then Baruch answered them. He pronounced all these words unto me with his mouth, and I wrote them with ink in the book’ (Jeremiah 36:18). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012

Chapter Four

Figure 4.1: ‘Then the channels of waters were seen, and the foundations of the world were discovered...’ (Psalm 18:15). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011
Figure 4.2: ‘And thou shalt make for it a grate of network of brass; and upon the net shalt thou make four brasen rings in the four corners thereof’ (Exodus 27:4). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011
Figure 4.3: ‘He sendeth out his word, and melteth them: he causeth his wind to blow, and the waters flow’ (Psalm 147:18). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Figure 4.4a and 4.4b: ‘Out of whose womb came the ice? And the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it? (Job 38:29). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012
Figure 4.5: ‘For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater’ (Isaiah 55:10). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Chapter Five

Figure 5.1: ‘…till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on an hill’ (Isaiah 31:17). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011

Figure 5.2: “And the remnant that remaineth of the curtains of the tent, the half curtain that remaineth, shall hang over the back side of the tabernacle” (Exodus 26:12). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011

Figure 5.3: “Neither shall ye build house, nor sow seed, nor plant vineyard, nor have any: but all your days ye shall dwell in tents; that ye may live many days in the land where ye be strangers” (Jeremiah 35:7). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011

Figure 5.4: “In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire” (Psalms 78:14). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011

Figure 5.5: “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth” (Psalms 71:9). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012

Figure 5.6: “Blessed are they that keep judgment, and he that doeth righteousness at all times” (Psalms 106:3). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, January 2012

Chapter Six

Figure 6.1: ‘And he made for the altar a brasen grate of network under the compass thereof beneath unto the midst of it’ (Exodus 38:4). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 6.2: “A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 6.3: “…shall speak great words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into … hand until a time and times and the dividing of time” (Daniel 8:25). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011
Part Three

Figure P.iii: ‘…and they asked each other of their welfare; and they came into the tent’ (Exodus 18:7). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral piazza, January 2012

Chapter Seven

Figure 7.1: ‘Beloved I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health even as thy soul prospereth’ (John: 2). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, February 2012

Figure 7.2: ‘Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning’ (Proverbs 9:9). Photographic Image St Paul’s Cathedral piazza, February 2012

Figure 7.3: “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee…” (Isaiah 58:8). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 7.4. ‘Gather the people together, men, and women, and children, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn...’ (Deuteronomy 31:12). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, February 2012

Figure 7.5: ‘That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations’ (Psalms 67:2). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Figure 7.6: “And there shall be a tabernacle for a shadow in the daytime from the heat, and for a place of refuge, and for a covert from storm and from rain” (Isaiah 5:6). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, November 2011

Chapter Eight

Figure 8.1: ‘Should not the multitude of words be answered? And should a man full of talk be justified?’ (Job 11:3). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011

Figure 8.2: ‘And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf; and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 32:4). Photographic Image, St Paul’s Cathedral Piazza, December 2011