



## Occu-POW!: The Jolt of Occupy St. Louis

There are periods of time in recent history when revolutionary energy consumes the globe: 1917-1919, 1968, and (on a smaller scale) the anti-globalization and anti-war movements of a decade ago. The sudden revolution in Tunisia triggered a similar global wave of discontent in 2011 that eventually washed ashore here as "Occupy St. Louis." "Bigger and better than the 60s!" shouted some Occupy participants around the country. But what actually took place during this "global social revolution" here in the U.S. (and particularly the Midwest) hardly compares with the ruptures in the social, political, and cultural fabric of the 1960s. Arguably, it is still mighty quiet. But that's all a bit silly to dwell on. Because for all of us who tolerated the bleakness of the 80s or 90s and the accelerated alienation of the 2000s, it undoubtedly signified a shift - an awakening of glassy-eyed America.

For the thousands who at any point in time considered themselves a part of what was going on at the Occupy St. Louis encampment in Kiener Plaza, there are thousands of different experiences and perspectives. What follows is ours (a combination of just a few of those). It is a collection of those memories and reflections that continue to stick with us a year or so later,

and for that reason, seem to offer the most profound lessons. And it is a perspective which prioritizes the glimpses of beauty each person sometimes showed during those warm Fall weeks against a cold, gray world dominated by representation, money, routine, despair, and obedience...

At the risk of sounding optimistic(!)... This is no reminiscence of those weeks as a golden age, rather a reminiscence for an opening that could have led us to one.



Occupy as... Magical Electricity

"Rarely have I been around so many people - so diverse - strangers - breaking laws in a brash way."

-memories of an Occupy participant

Two days after the start of the Occupy encampment, something indescribable happened. Some call it electricity, some an "eros effect," some "moments of excess," some revolutionary magic. Throughout recent history it rarely happens (not seen here since the anti-war mobilizations 8 long years before Occupy), but when it does, everyone in the city is talking about it - people take a break from daily life, sports, the weather, and other bullshit, and they are not the least bit surprised to run into a demonstration that in normal times would be puzzling. (Such is life in small-town St. Louis - it's no D.C., Paris, or Mexico City where traffic reports casually mention street blockages due to angry people.)

This time, the new normal was fantastical and free, but also unnerving and ulcer-causing, and in retrospect simply unbelievable. Almost overnight, we created a space where most authority - city officials, police, union officials, etc. - seemed out of place and could be safely confronted. It was obvious it wasn't their space, they came as visitors. This mere setup made it difficult, if not impossible for any of them to smoothly move in and crush the occupation or slyly take it over. This setup also made such critical calls of the police as counter-occupy forces' seem, not unnecessary, but rhetorical or even paranoid.



Friday. And who now would imagine calling for a free amplified concert in the plaza without the city's permission?! Some people, exhausted from a day at work, instead of sleeping, would inexplicably rush downtown to immerse themselves in the cauldron of discussion and activity. Others called it a drug (with all the side effects too!). Some who were heavy drinkers stopped drinking altogether for those weeks. Still others stopped certain OCD behavior or were able to focus and read books again. Some felt a deep-seated heartbreak all but dissolve, while others found the strength to confront abusive boyfriends. Some of those who worked became recklessly emboldened - stealing more and more valuable stuff from their bosses (donating much of it to the camp), fudging hours, refusing to do dangerous tasks, insisting on breaks, talking with co-workers about Occupy or about not tolerating the management's workplace abuse...

But most profound of all, was the transformation of all who ventured into the pit of Kiener. Some people appeared to be idiots, or just shallow, or reformists, or anti-social misfits. But when angry and when engaged in some sense of movement with others, they developed into free, and frankly quite beautiful, human beings. Because no one was in control in the stewing pot of the occupied plaza, many of us were able to realize ourselves as actors in the destiny of things, which of course, negated whatever need for authority we had burned in our head since youth. Most everyone participated on the basis, not of some ideological unity, but of a simple radical willingness to struggle together, often contradicting whatever plea to authority they had written on the signs.

Or so is one attempt to explain the frog-prince magic.

And many people extended the magical spirit beyond the plaza itself (and into other people's lives and our own daily lives) as demonstrations marked the downtown streets, bank lobbies, baseball games, disgruntled social service workers' offices, the city jail, a hotel lobby, MetroLink trains, Washington Ave. nightlife, a picket line, downtown Clayton, a Walmart, the MLK Bridge, the Loop, the old Municipal Courts Building, and even a threatened Lone Elk State Park. And beyond that Fall and ultimately beyond the Occupy moniker itself, emboldened participants carried a wave of energy deep into the new year through anti-foreclosure activity, demonstrations against police violence and the deaths in city jails, the hosting of a Midwest Occupy conference, a May Day celebration, an attempted takeover of KDHX's studio, a disruption in solidarity with Whole Foods' irritated workers, and more. The electricity created during Occupy amplified everything in its wake, making much more possible than had been just a year before.

But now, as one participant explains, "Many of us have gone back to our old (good and bad)



habits, but with - how torturous! - the wonderful true-to-life dreams we had at Kiener imprisoned in our heads.”



Occupy as... Class War

“Ahhhh... the Friday marches that aimed to echo the frenzy in the Arab world.”

-memories of another participant

When we initially saw an announcement for Occupy St. Louis, we thought the class struggle sweeping the world has finally reared its head in St. Louis! ' And though it was more complicated than this, we found this to be refreshingly true. The general mood was one of a collective enough is enough' concerning our economic poverty, that of those around us, and even that of those across the world.

Some loud people say the Occupy “movement” was cross-class, but anyone who went down to Kiener would hardly see a middle class morality through all the grittiness. In a sense you were walking into a politicized makeshift homeless encampment. If wealthy people were there, they were there to reject their role in this world, and if not, the mere atmosphere, and sometimes hostility, of the camp forced them to question it. For the most part, the occupation, the general assemblies, and the marches were no place for the ruling class - middle management, sure, but that hardly made it a middle class movement.

With little faith in the normal channels - media, voting, organizations, politicians - the attitudes of the occupation arose from a deeply radical and subjective viewpoint. People brought their stories and their struggles. Simply put, we were here because of our own misery. Sure some didn't know what all the fuss was about, but most, it seemed, did. We were all identifying that common experience of jumping through hoops and slowly trying to say that there are bastards holding those hoops. The numbers were too generous (the 99% vs. 1%), but the power relationship, for the most part, was clear.

#### A Note on the Use of the Term “Class War”

To us, the leaflet advocating a “joyous class war” was slightly redundant. But some do hear “class war” and think Russia, or War, or factory workers, or People's Armies, or boring professors, or socialist politicians, or schoolchildren fighting - hardly joyous thoughts. So, it's worth saying here, that when we use the term, we mean it in its most inherently joyous sense... i.e., this American Nightmare based on class divisions can be turned upside down and a party

of social experimentation can dance upon its sleepy head.

Activism - the career of acting for others - made little sense because so many had chosen to act for themselves. In this same light, the rhetoric of "Banks should behave!" or "Campaign finance reform now!" gained little traction since many were there because all their prior pleas had been futile. Furthermore, certain people just looked foolish as they spoke abstractly of "the poor" in a meeting made up of many homeless folks.

And whenever one became worried about the direction things were heading, there was plenty of room to define the happening for what it mostly was: an outburst of class war. Early signs and chants like "What do we want? Class war! When do we want it? Now!," "FAX THE RICH," and "Gimmie your wallet!" (directed at some wealthy Cardinals fans) typified these attempts - as well as being genuine expressions themselves.

Occupy as... Ugly and Rife with Contradictions

"This world has destroyed so many of us (mentally and socially, especially) and I think the movement can only be understood if that is understood."

-an Occupy participant in the first week

History books and Hollywood have a way with flattening revolutionary moments. And for a generation who only understands them through this representation, the world of Occupy was more of a cuckoo's nest. What is one to expect when a city of lonely people becomes angry together? There is no choice but to embrace our own madness and roll with the unpredictability and disorganization that follows when we assemble. For, more often than not, it is the hoops we must jump through year after year (that is, the real madness) that sets off our cuckoo. In a sense, our mental and social, not just economic, poverty is the root of our rebellion. And when people who live in this world - characterized by that isolation, the disease of the internet, the ostracized schizophrenia, the racial segregation, and the teetering over the abyss of mental breakdown that we all do - gather in search of something altogether new, it is indeed a revolutionary moment.

And so no, there's no need to present a collective respectable face to "outsiders" when everyone's rough around the edges.<sup>1</sup>



such madness when hardly anyone knows how to talk honestly with people different than themselves. But it was absolutely possible to have a no-holds-barred debate during those weeks at Kiener compared to the rigged (and inconsequential) environments of a town hall

meeting, a city bus, a jobsite, or a high school classroom. What better place to (re)learn how to talk to each other (without a snideness or know-it-all-ness) than the tense freedom of Kiener. You had to really understand the context of the city you were living in and start the moves toward utopia from there - not from late-night conversations with people who've grown to hate "stupid" or "apathetic" people. These "stupid" and "apathetic" people were finally giving you a chance.

And yes, past week 3, the campsite became increasingly seedy (particularly in regard to sexual harassment) once the sun went down. But not because of the intrinsic "madness" of the people. Rather it was because the discussions had stopped, the activity had stopped, and it simply began to emulate, what it at one time had been an escape from: a normal St. Louis City dog-eat-dog, sexual-harassment-plagued neighborhood. Normal life seeped into the occupation instead of the occupation seeping out into normal life. The lesson here for those who crave another world should be obvious: Don't fold in on ourselves! Let that magic and glorious madness radiate from the place of initial experimentation! Spread or die!<sup>2</sup>

The November 12<sup>th</sup> eviction, though ugly and despite its tragedy, galvanized the spirit one last time - proof enough (as if one can't feel it in their gut and needs a scientific logic) that activity drove it. Attempts to deepen critiques and call out contradictions only got so far through discussions. Engaging in action brought the contradictions out, forcing all of us to come face to face with the crushing role of the police, the union officials, and activist groups. To simply rationally explain this truth was to compete with all the noise of society - the State, the economy, the church, the culture of patriarchy, the media... We can't compete. For many, the conflict had to be experienced for minds to open up - like when a homophobe's brother comes out as gay or a racist country bumpkin is actually around friendly black people for the first time, their bigotry sounds foolish even to them.

Here, Marty Glaberman, an autoworker from the 1940s, describes a similar phenomenon: "Some guy sitting in his own living room listening to the casualties and the war reports, votes to reaffirm the no-strike pledge. The next day, going in to work, the foreman cusses him out, and he says, 'To hell with you,' and out he goes. And you say, 'I thought you were for the no-strike pledge.' And he says, 'Yeah, sure, but look at that son of a bitch.'"

In other words, an elaboration of the earlier frog-prince magic theory.

Occupy as... a Product of No One But Ourselves

"As individuals we are all responsible for thinking, planning, and acting."

-part of a failed, last-ditch proposal to rescue Occupy



Can people witnessing an event become the event in itself? Or, why so many cameras? Or, better yet, what's so scary about putting the camera away? These are all literal questions, but the camera is also an idea that lives in our head. The problem with everyone taking photos at Kiener wasn't so much that authorities might one day learn who was at this gathering against the system (sure, this is a problem, but just a one-dimensional one), but it was that people chose to be spectators rather than participants in this thing that they clearly thought was interesting. And it wasn't just camera people, but also those accustomed to a routine life of submission were paralyzed by this rare opportunity. Still others partially cloaked their paralysis with an aura of intentionality - a desire to keep their hands clean: right-wingers, people too cool' to dabble in rebellion (but not too cool to mock it), revolutionaries' who had a warped idea of how pure and homogenous the working class was supposed to be, and revolutionaries' who heard a few disturbing opinions and inscribed them as immovable reformist truths of the leaderless occupation.

The occupation of the old Municipal Courts building on Market St. (what some hailed as the glory moment of Occupy St. Louis), though clever and valiant, unavoidably signalled the Occupy fever (the unpredictable, participatory, revolutionary spirit) had been broken. Helped along by the eviction, the "occupation" had devolved into a specialized affair where a dwindling number of people now were no longer surprised by themselves, but by a well-planned activity of just a few people.

Though we could argue that the withdrawal of many's participation let the sinister police and savvy Mayor's office relegate Occupy to history, we'll not bore you with enlightening insights into its demise!<sup>3</sup> Goddamnit, next time just seize the ugly, magical, mad moment of class conflict, protect its contagious and participatory nature, and push it so far so that we never, ever have to return to this terrifying banality again.<sup>4</sup>



"I don't want to forget walking through the streets with hundreds of strangers screaming  
"revolution!" over and over."<sup>5</sup>

-memories of yet another participant

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## Scratching the Surface of the Kiener Chaos and Its Wake: An Incomplete Timeline of Occupy St. Louis

October 1 - Inspired by the 2-week-old Occupy Wall Street encampment in New York City, the occupation of Kiener Plaza begins after a short march to the Federal Reserve Bank.

October 4-6 - Several days, peppered with chaotic discussions, dozens of overnight campers, and impromptu small rallies and marches to the doorsteps and lobbies of various banks, is topped off with threats of a police eviction. Around 200-300 show up to flood the plaza in protest of the threats the night of the 4<sup>th</sup>. Police back off but return the night of the 5<sup>th</sup>, making arrests and evicting the camp. On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup>, people return and the occupation continues.

October 7-21 - A semi-spontaneous Friday (the 7<sup>th</sup>) night march of around 150-200 leaves the plaza after an evening of music. The joyful march winds its way through Washington Ave. and Laclede's Landing before returning to Kiener Plaza. The next week sees demonstrations at U.S. Bank, Peabody Coal, and the Federal Reserve among others. People continue to camp overnight, free movies and concerts are hosted, heavy debates carry on (as does lounging), and leaderless general assemblies of all who are present pass various declarations ranging from commitments to join any striking workplace, to ridding the camp of any racist and sexist behavior, to forbidding censorship, to demanding the dropping of all police charges against occupiers, to broadcasting solidarity to encampments around the country facing police repression... A second lively Friday evening march on the 14<sup>th</sup> fills the streets, this time visiting the downtown jail and the Cardinal's playoff game at Busch Stadium. Prior to this march, the afternoon sees a union-organized downtown march that takes a sloppy life of its own despite the wishes of its "organizers." Demonstrations begin to wind down the next week and a significantly smaller Friday evening march uses the Metrolink to visit the Delmar Loop to protest the curfew there as well.

November 2 - A day after a sick-out by state Social Services workers, people from Kiener Plaza occupy the lobby area of the Social Services building on Chouteau Ave., reading a statement of strike support to cheering workers and chanting before being ushered out. Afterwards, participants march to beef up a striking mechanics' picket line at Chouteau Ave. and Jefferson Ave.

November 8 - In response to the city's growing threats of eviction, Anonymous' hacks Mayor Slay's website, declaring "WE WILL NOT SURRENDER... WE WILL NOT SLEEP UNTIL FREEDOM IS OURS."

November 12 - Police evict Kiener Plaza once and for all, despite around 100 people shouting objections amidst a couple dozen arrests.

November 17 - A large union-led march from Kiener Plaza ends in symbolic arrests near the MLK bridge. Remnants from this march parade to the old, and now empty, Municipal Courts building on Market St. and take over the building for an hour-long dance party.

November 30 - Super-wealthy Portland Place in Frontenac is hit with Occupy graffiti.

December 14 - A march leaves from Kiener Plaza and ends inside the lobby of the Mayfair



Hotel, broadcasting anger that workers there haven't been paid in 5 weeks.

December 31 - In concert with dozens of cities nation- and worldwide, a march goes from Kiener Plaza to the downtown jail ringing in the new year with a noise demonstration for those trapped inside.

January 1 - Graffiti reading "We never forgive - Occupy" is left at the home of Eddie Roth, one of the city officials seen as responsible for the Kiener Plaza eviction.

January 29 - In solidarity with the repression against Occupy Oakland, another march leaves Kiener Plaza, visits the jail, Washington Ave., and the Mayfair Hotel. Along the way, marchers spray-paint, "From Oakland to STL - FUCK DA POLICE."

January 31 - While Occupy Oakland faces brutal police repression and St. Louis City police kill an alarming number of residents in January, enraged leftover occupiers' here march in the streets down the South Grand business corridor. To the cheers of motorists and pedestrians, they hand out and wheatpaste leaflets and also splash paint on a police substation. Later, in response to the march's one arrest, unknown people pelt two police substations with rocks and paint.

February 3 - A large banner reading "RESISTANCE LIVES ON! STRIKE! OCCUPY!" is somehow dropped from atop the old Municipal Courts building, site of the Nov. 17 occupation.

March 15-17 - St. Louis plays host to an "Occupy the Midwest" conference. Compton Hill Reservoir Park is taken over for a few hours to host the gathering. After city official Eddie Roth and his police escort are shouted out of the park, police brutally suppress the gathering, sending three to the hospital with severe head wounds. Windows of a police car and a substation are broken in response. In solidarity, a medical building in Berkeley, CA that treats' arrestees has its windows smashed and locks glued. A mobile street party takes over Manchester Ave. 's Grove bar district the following night. Large rallies are held against Monsanto and Wells Fargo, among other giant corporations, and an attempt is made to join the downtown St. Patrick's Day parade. A small, but passionate group semi-successfully occupies KDHX radio studios, coaxing the DJ to read a pro-Occupy, anti-police statement on the air. Several days later, Compton Hill Reservoir Park and Eddie Roth's home (again) are heavily graffitied in outrage.

May 24 - A demonstration, in solidarity with police repression at the G8 Summit in Chicago days earlier, winds its way from Kiener Plaza to Washington Ave. and back, with a couple banks getting spray-painted. Police arrest 10, punching one during interrogation and holding knives to the throats of others. In response, ATMs are disabled in Oakland, CA, police substation windows are smashed in Olympia, WA, and a Chase Bank is vandalized in Milwaukee, WI.