

# THE WEIRD RED

## #OccupyWallStreet, Site-Specificity, and di Suvero's Joie de Vivre

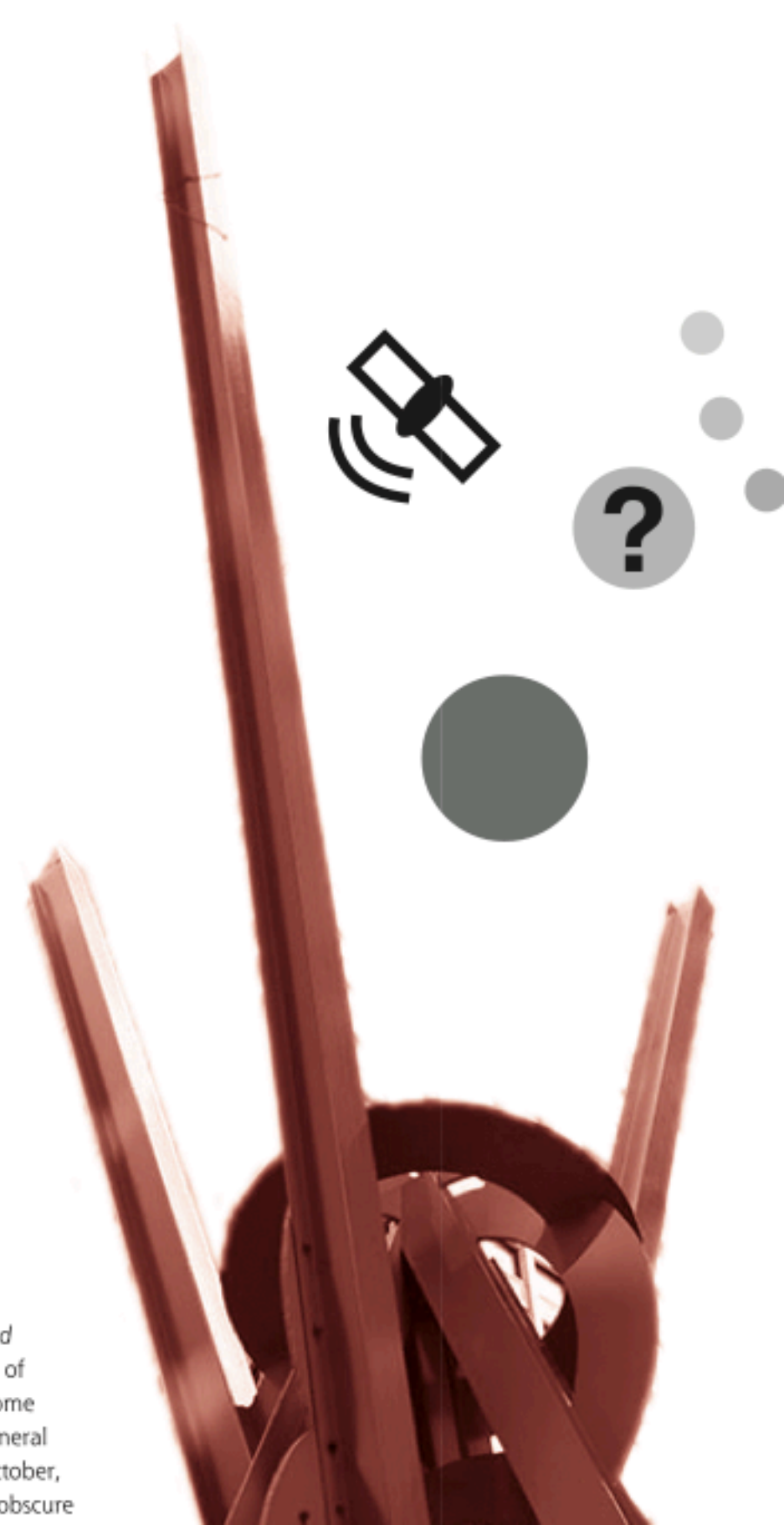
"As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment."

—Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street"

#OccupyWallStreet cannot be reduced to a finite or fixed location; it is a relational geography of political conflict at local, national, and planetary scales. For this reason, #OccupyWallStreet (#OWS, for short) should in principle always be supplemented with a Twitter hashtag to indicate the fact that it circulates as an open-ended injunction—"occupy!"—threaded through a shifting mediatic assemblage of technologies, words, images, sites, and bodies throughout the city, the nation, and beyond.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, in its first month #OWS has clearly been inseparable from its precarious spatial anchoring at what is variously called Zuccotti Park, Liberty Plaza, or Liberty Square, situated a few blocks north of the Wall Street stock exchange (which is itself merely one node—albeit a highly symbolic one—in the broader geography of global capitalism). The very instability of the name ("Liberty Square" is the nomenclature officially used on the website of [www.occupywallstreet.org](http://www.occupywallstreet.org)) indicates that a kind of symbolic political articulation is at work that aims to inscribe the site into an expanded series of other histories and locations throughout the world proactively responding to the crises of neoliberalism including the UC system, Tahrir Square in Egypt, Plaza del Sol in Spain, Syntagma Square in Greece, the Wisconsin State House, and Oscar Grant Park in Oakland. Thus, one could say that *the physical site of Liberty Square has been a necessary but insufficient condition for #OWS*. By extension, the human bodies that have encamped themselves in alliance at the physical site are necessary but insufficient in their corporeality relative to the cameras, computers, screens, structures, and other media through which the occupation has entered into the realm of what Judith Butler has recently called, following Hannah Arendt, "the space of public appearance."<sup>2</sup>

Among the media practices helping to sustain both the public visibility and the corporeal occupation of Liberty Square has been *The Occupied Wall Street Journal*, a *detournement* of the infamous newspaper of record for the corporate elite available in both digital and printed form.<sup>3</sup> The first issue of *OWSJ* featured a helpful map of the emerging spatial configuration of the occupied park, laying out the rudiments of what by the end of October had become a micro-urban settlement replete with functional infrastructures at once biopolitical (tents, kitchen, sanitation, medical care) and communicative (the general assembly, the people's library, various projection screens, the PR center). Featured on the lower right-hand corner of this rudimentary map from early October, there was a red site-marker annotated simply with the words "weird red thing." For anyone visiting or indeed living in Liberty Square, this otherwise obscure

# THING!

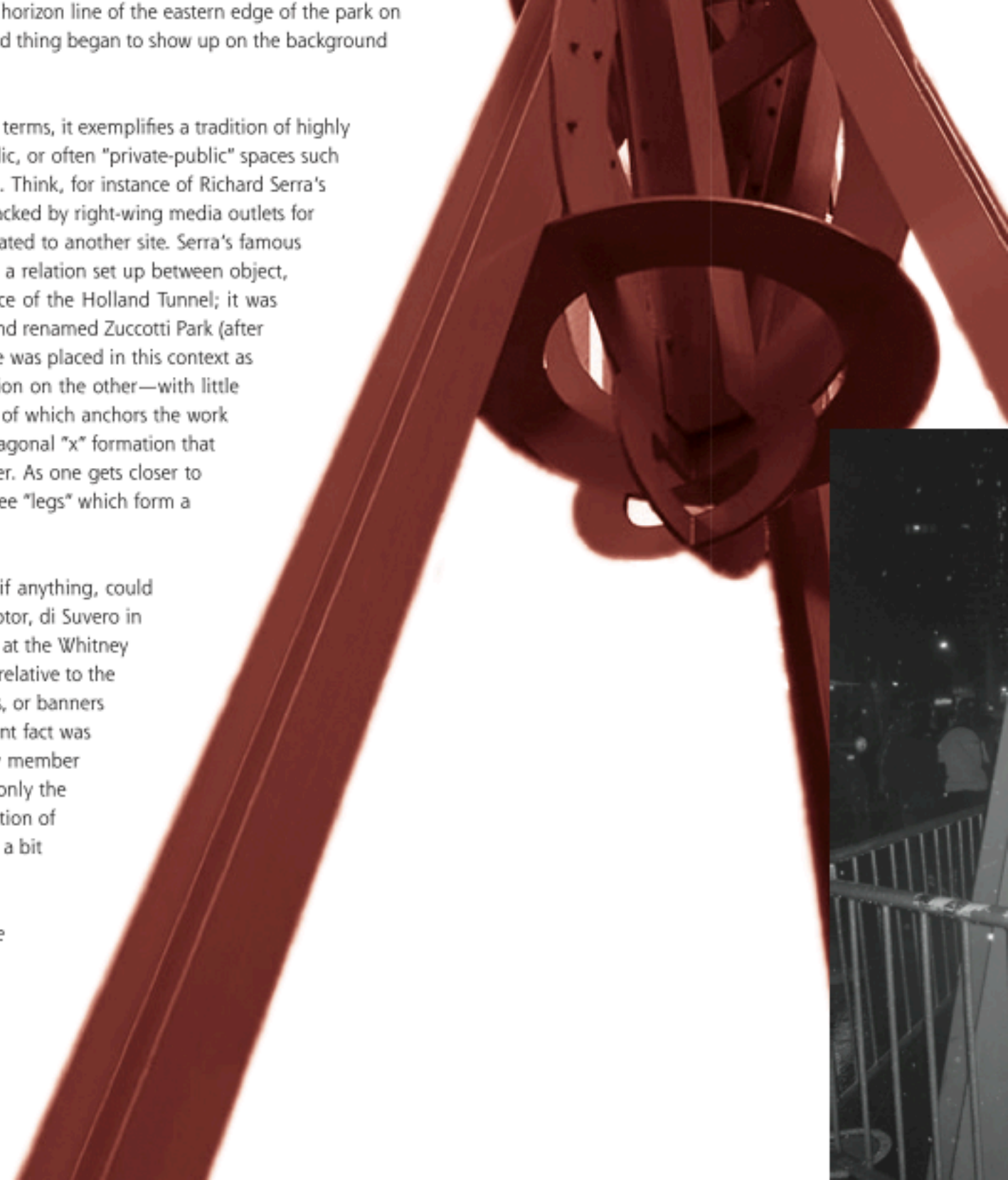


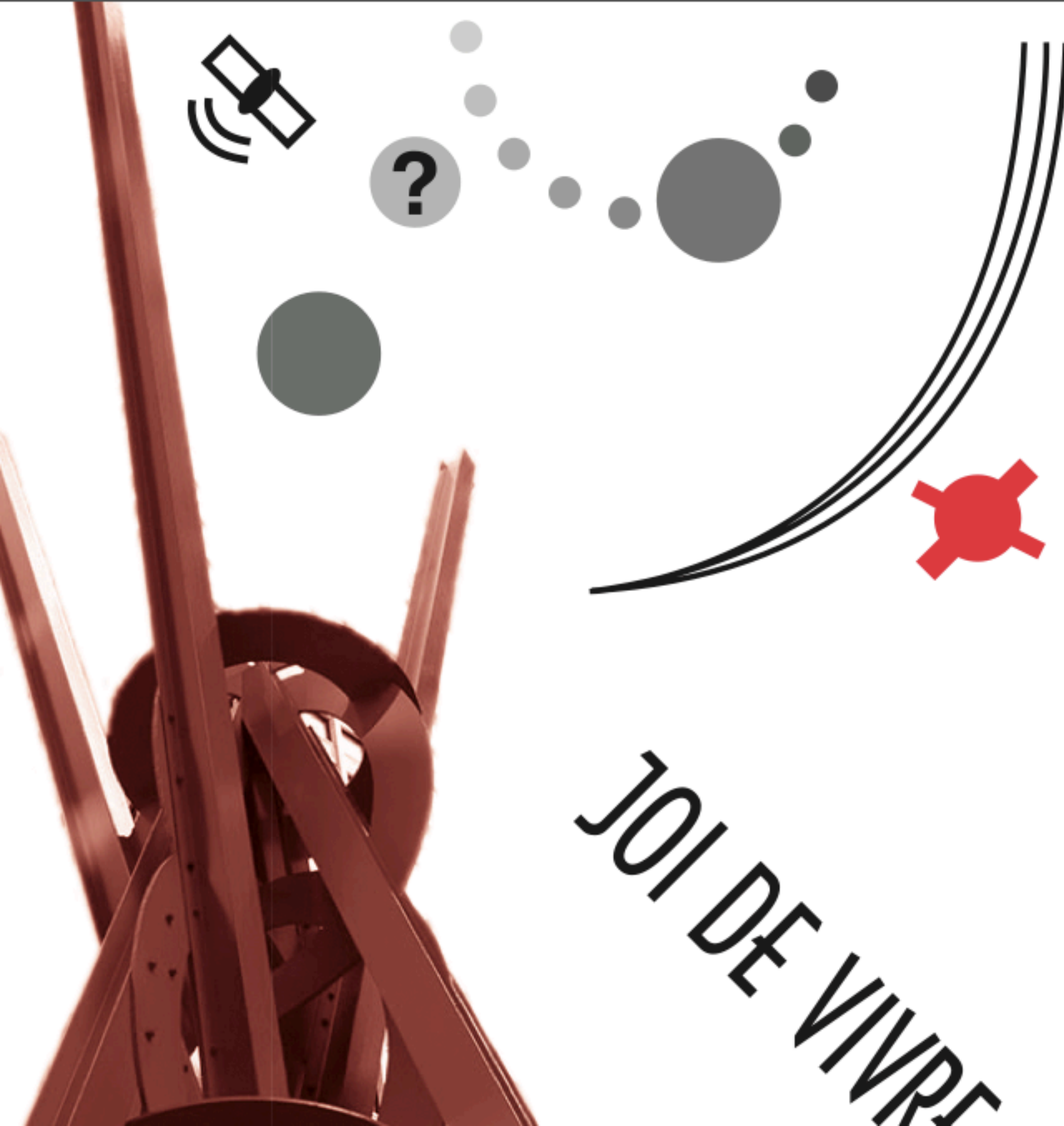
cartographic marker would of course be keyed to the soaring 70-foot tall abstract steel sculpture dominating the horizon line of the eastern edge of the park on Broadway. As media coverage by both new outlets as well as citizen journalists increased, bits and pieces of the red thing began to show up on the background of on-site photographs, videos, and newscasts.

The weird red thing is otherwise known as Mark di Suvero's *Joie de Vivre* (*The Joy of Life*). In art historical terms, it exemplifies a tradition of highly conservative modernist public sculpture designed primarily as a decorative aesthetic amenity for nominally public, or often "private-public" spaces such as Zuccotti Park. *Joie de Vivre* is in many ways the antithesis of what we now understand as "site-specific" artwork. Think, for instance of Richard Serra's famous *Tilted Arc*, designed specifically as a sculptural incision into the space of 26 Federal Plaza; after it was attacked by right-wing media outlets for destroying the supposed integrity and harmony of the plaza, it was proposed that the sculpture simply be relocated to another site. Serra's famous response was to say that "to remove the work is to destroy it," given that the work was not an object, but rather a relation set up between object, the site, and the viewer.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, *The Joy of Life* was created in 1998 and originally installed at the entrance of the Holland Tunnel; it was relocated to its current site in 2006 after the latter was reconstructed in the wake of the September 11th attacks and renamed Zuccotti Park (after a member of the board of Brookfield Properties, the private owner of the nominally public space).<sup>5</sup> The sculpture was placed in this context as a generic visual icon of monumental strength or endurance, on the one hand, and grace, vitality, and redemption on the other—with little formal relation to the actual geography of the park. The sculpture is comprised of two interlocking tripods, one of which anchors the work to the ground while the other is inverted and extends into the sky. From a distance, the sculpture draws out a diagonal "x" formation that evokes at once a construction-site as well as a vaguely anthropomorphic figure that seems to signal to the viewer. As one gets closer to it however, the anthropomorphism mutates into a more general biomorphism as one notes that the work has three "legs" which form a kind of an open proscenium area directly underneath the interlocking compositional core of the sculpture.

Many discussions were had among artists and others in the early days of the occupation about what, if anything, could be done with this inadvertent sculptural resident of the occupied park. Despite his formal conservatism as a sculptor, di Suvero in the past had professed sympathies with social movements, even installing a second iteration of his "Peace Tower" at the Whitney Biennial in 2006. Perhaps he could be called upon to reclaim his sculpture as a kind of artistic autonomous zone relative to the regulations of the park; perhaps the structure could be retrofitted with shelter technologies, amplification devices, or banners otherwise unpermitted by the Zuccotti park regulations? Calls to his studio went unanswered, and an inconvenient fact was noted: his wife is Kate Levin, the Bloomberg Administration's Commissioner of Cultural Affairs. As an exemplary member of the "1%" targeted by #OWS, Bloomberg has barely been able to contain his hostility to the occupation, with only the endurance of bodies, sympathetic media coverage, and local political pressure having prevented the mayor's eviction of the park in mid-October under the biopolitical auspices of "sanitation." In other words, #OWS has thus far proven a bit too close for comfort in biographical and professional terms to di Suvero himself as an artist.

The sculpture itself, however, is a different matter. Few people had ever taken notice of the *Joie de Vivre* as anything other than an aesthetic bauble prior to the occupation and the rechristening of Zuccotti Park as Liberty Square. Yet with this recoding of the site, the monumental object has indeed begun to take on a kind of surreal quality, appearing less as a piece of modernist sculpture than as a kind of alien creature bearing witness to—and perhaps even helping to sustain—the world-historical events taking place all around it.





Indeed, the re-designation of *Joie de Vivre* as the “weird red thing” is analogous to the overall detouring of the space of the park itself; the sculpture has been exposed to new unofficial uses: signs have been posted on it; occupiers and journalists have climbed up the legs to get a better vantage on the General Assembly; marches have used it as a departure point, speeches and performances have been undertaken in the minimal proscenium created by the legs (including a ceremonial dance by Native American activists on Columbus day, who recalled that “Wall Street” originally referred to a wall constructed by European colonists to protect their settlements from the original inhabitants of the island). In other words, the generic modernist vitalism implied by the sculpture’s sentimental title and *biomorphic* composition have been transcoded into the *biopolitical* networks of the occupied park. This is perhaps most poetically demonstrated in the way in which the sculpture—soaring, monumental, vertical, permanent, unified—has been democratically dismembered, fragmented and dispersed across the internet by its inadvertent inclusion in thousands upon thousands of photographs that have been taken at the park over the past month. Few if any photographs have been taken of the sculpture for its own sake over the past month; and even were one to attempt such a thing, traces of the occupation would inevitably intrude. Even looking skyward through the cantilevered crux of the sculpture, one is likely to see a police helicopter idling above as it surveils the occupation. Ironically, then, a work of sculpture that in formal terms resists the principle of site-specificity has become in a single month one of the most photographed pieces of modern art in all of history—not for its own sake, but for precisely the mediagenic site it has found itself to inhabit. Aleatory fragments, these photographs deconstruct the vertical monumentality of the sculpture, releasing it into the horizontal networks of the “99%” like an authorless, anonymous montage.<sup>6</sup> The sculpture, in other words, becomes a kind of commons. While often appearing in an incidental and unintentional manner, the disjointed lines and shapes of the networked photo-sculpture are not just background scenery; an “optical unconscious” of the occupation, they will forever mark in an utterly singular manner the transformation of Zuccotti Park into Liberty Square in the Fall of 2011, as New York City was inscribed into a planetary cycle of global democratization. If and when the site of the park is forcibly restored to its “proper” use as a zone of leisure and recreation, *Joie de Vivre*—or rather *#Joie de Vivre*—will remain a kind of historical counter-memorial threaded throughout the global archives of the internet, evoking piece by piece, fragment by fragment, the memory of a movement for which Liberty Square may have been only the first of many biopolitical laboratories in New York and beyond.

As this essay goes to print in late October, the proscenium of *Joie de Vivre* has just been enclosed by police barricades, and officers have been stationed around it. The barricades are marked with signs from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the apparent justification is to “protect” the sculpture from being defaced or damaged by occupiers. The #OWS Arts and Culture Committee is already at work on a campaign to challenge this small but significant act of spatial enclosure. The enclosure of the sculpture is a potentially ominous sign. Indeed, the rubric of “protection” is one that



could still at any minute be invoked by Bloomberg regarding Liberty Square itself if the fragile balance of political forces in the neighborhood and the city overall were to shift. Recognizing the precariousness of the site-specific encampment requires that we think about what forms "occupation" might take in the future, with or without a symbolic nerve center such as Liberty Square.

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<sup>1</sup> See Nathan Schneider's discussion of the early development of #occupywallstreet. "On July 13 Adbusters magazine sent out a call to its 90,000-strong list proclaiming a Twitter hashtag (#OccupyWallStreet) and a date, September 17. It quickly spread among the mostly young, tech-savvy radical set, along with an especially alluring poster the magazine put together of a ballerina atop the Charging Bull statue, the financial district's totem to testosterone." Schneider is in fact very careful to point out that Adbusters did not originate the movement, which in local terms emerged most proximately out of the Bloombergville anti-austerity encampments organized earlier in the summer by the People's General Assembly on the Budget Cuts. "From Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Everywhere," *The Nation* (October 11, 2011) <http://www.thenation.com/article/163924/occupy-wall-street-occupy-everywhere>

<sup>2</sup> See Judith Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," September 7, 2011 available at <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://occupiedmedia.org>

<sup>4</sup> See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT, 2002), 5. For a text that is key to understanding the spatial and aesthetic politics of #occupywallstreet, see Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MIT, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> For a helpful explication of the historical background and vexed legal status of "privately owned public spaces," in light of #ows, see Jerold S. Kayden, "Meet Me at the Plaza," *New York Times* (October 19th) <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/20/opinion/zuccotti-park-and-the-private-plaza-problem.html>.

<sup>6</sup> On the relationship between photography and sculpture, see Roxana Marcoci, ed. *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839-Today* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).