The Artist as Organizer

In the history of Occupy Wall Street (OWS) and its offshoots such as Strike Debt, artists have been essential to the development of the movement. Far from providing mere visual decoration to an otherwise preexisting political formation, artists have worked with and as organizers in an expanded field of movement-building practices both in advance of the inaugural crack of the occupation of Zuccotti Park and in its ongoing aftermath. Artists facilitate assemblies, envision strategies and tactics, design propaganda, issue communiqués, stage performances, lead trainings, cultivate alliances, and administer media platforms of all sorts (see McKee 2011; and Fuegoverde 2012).1 In other words, the work of these artists has ceased to be art in any recognizable sense of a discrete entity to be found in a museum or gallery, or even institutionally validated works of “social practice” (see Thompson 2012; and Kennedy 2013).2 Indeed, art in the Occupy milieu has broken the frame of the contemporary art world and academia, however self-consciously radical the work done in these arenas may be in grappling with the fashionable theoretical problematic of “contemporaneity” in the light of neoliberal globalization.3

To paraphrase Walter Benjamin (1986: 233), the crossing of this post-contemporary threshold has involved the emergence of the “artist as orga-
nizer,” insofar as the imaginative work of the artist has moved from merely “expressing the correct political tendency” to an engagement with the “living social context” of direct action, education, and media infrastructures for a social movement. These postcontemporary artists have brought their work into discursive fields dramatically different from that of the academy and the art world. However, in many cases, artistic platforms, networks, and resources have proven valuable for the support and amplification of such work. Aesthetic questions are in fact central to the movement as a whole. Indeed, looking to Jacques Rancière’s (2004) notion of the *partage du sensible*—struggles over the configuration of what can be heard, seen, or felt as political at a particular conjuncture—we could say that art since OWS has been redefined within a hybrid ensemble of aesthetic techniques involving education, research, and action for the creation of new forms of political subjectivity. These techniques operate at the levels of space, language, affect, and imagination, but like the original OWS camp, they also extend to the construction of material life-support systems of care, love, and mutual aid for individuals, families, and communities struggling to survive under neoliberalism. Indeed, with the exception of a coterie of art stars operating in the global art world, most contemporary artists are themselves precarious “immaterial workers” whose survival is both endangered by and dependent on the debt economy of Wall Street.

In what follows, I will track these questions as they inform the trajectory of Strike Debt, which has been the most prominent offshoot of OWS since 2012. Strike Debt aims to build a debt-resistance movement that opens space for both new social bonds and alternative economies to Wall Street. To tell the story of Strike Debt is necessarily to consider the prevalence of postcontemporary art practice as defined above, especially when it comes to the most high-profile initiative of Strike Debt to date, the Rolling Jubilee.

The global debt landscape appears as at once unimaginably sublime in its technical complexity and unremarkably prosaic as a painfully intimate reality for the everyday lives of the indebted. Art and aesthetics in the expanded sense of the word have been crucial to mediating this link at the level of subjectivity and organizing alike. Throughout this essay, I will note an aesthetic spectrum defined on one end by uniformity and by jubilation on the other. These modes are not mutually exclusive, but they mark different tones and styles at work within the emerging cultural repertoire of Strike Debt. Further, each of the developments described must be approached with
a pervasive multimedia landscape in mind, a structural condition of contemporary political organizing that undoes any simple oppositions between street and screen, body and image, event and archive.\(^\text{10}\)

** Conjuring the Indebted as Political Subject: Assembly and Testimony **

The origins of Strike Debt lie in a series of thematic assemblies organized in the summer of 2012 by the group Occupy Theory, publisher of the artist-run magazine *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*.\(^\text{11}\) Following the massive mobilization on May Day 2012 and the recognition that workers’ struggles in the traditional sense were not well positioned to start an anticapitalist political movement, OWS was bereft of a strategic vision, and the populist figure of the 99 percent felt increasingly hollow.\(^\text{12}\) What could ground this figure in a sharper and deeper analysis of contemporary capitalism beyond a sense of moral outrage at the greed of Wall Street?\(^\text{13}\)

Since the beginning of OWS, the suffering of debtors had been a frequent point of reference for participants, as indicated by the telegraphic testimonials of the famous 99 percent Tumblr page.\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, some of the most prominent initiatives of OWS have revolved around the foreclosure crisis, and the Occupy Student Debt Campaign succeeded in drawing national attention to the student debt crisis with iT Day in April (marking the fact that outstanding student debt has reached $1 trillion). However, these organizing efforts tended to treat different forms of debt as single-issue campaigns in isolation from one another. The emerging question was how to create a political space in which an alliance between those suffering from different kinds of debt could find each other and act together politically as debtors (see Brown 2012).

In the words of an early Strike Debt slogan that would eventually become the headline for the strikedebt.org website, “Debt is the tie that binds the 99 percent.” As extensively detailed in Strike Debt’s *Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual*, almost everyone in the United States is a debtor of some sort, forced to borrow from banks to pay for basic life-supporting goods as wages stagnate and austerity measures are enforced. Even those excluded from mainstream credit systems are still preyed upon by lending institutions, exemplified by payday loan sharks and pawn shops that dot poor neighborhoods of color (Strike Debt and Occupy Wall Street 2013). Rather than a supplementary facet of the overall economy, the personal debt system is a primary engine of Wall Street profits, and it is prone to
Figure 1. Strike Debt meme, circulated online, summer 2012

Figure 2. Strike Debt’s red square

Figure 3. “Invisible Army” poster, designed by R. Black for *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*, 2012; Strike Debt debt-burn ritual, September 2012; photo courtesy of MTL

Figure 4. Zola Ross performing “Mama, I Just Killed the Bull” at the People’s Bailout Rolling Jubilee Telethon, November 17, 2012; photo courtesy of Laura Hanna
crisis as exemplified by the growing student debt bubble. Further, bondage to Wall Street is also established through municipal debt, as cities underfunded by the federal government are forced to look to banks that demand service cuts as part of their debt service (Larson 2012, 2013). The debt system is a highly tangible way in which the predatory logic of Wall Street impacts the lives of individuals, families, and communities. What would it mean for the shared experience of debt bondage to become the condition for new bonds of political identification and mutual support?\(^{15}\)

This question has been especially challenging given that much of the power of Wall Street’s debt system lies in its success in interpellating the debtor as a socially isolated, morally deficient individual.\(^{16}\) Debt functions as a technology of shame and fear, forcing people into a closet of invisibility and silence. Thus, a crucial first step in the development of Strike Debt was simply to assemble together physically, to create space, and to tell stories. At the first debtors’ assembly at Washington Square Park in June 2012, several dozen people from a wide range of backgrounds and generations delivered emotionally charged, first-person testimonials about the experience of debt servitude to Wall Street and its intermediary institutions. Whether speaking of the ruinous effects of student debt, credit card debt, health care debt, or mortgage debt, almost all the speakers remarked that this was their very first time speaking publicly about their status as debtors. To speak as a debtor, and to address others as debtors, was an empowering process in its own right; the simple act of testifying built community and solidarity based in a shared experience of breaking with debt shame. In the words of an early signature meme of Strike Debt, “You Are Not a Loan.”

**Debt Strike/Strike Debt**

With the debtor coming out of the closet and identified as a potential political subject, what forms of action, mobilization, and constitution might this subject be capable of? After all, in principle, debtors hold a certain kind of power, given that banks depend on us to fulfill our promise to pay. As the old saying goes, “If you owe the bank $10,000, you’re at the mercy of the bank. If you owe the bank $10 million, the bank is at your mercy” (Strike Debt 2012). Looming in early discussions of building a debtors’ movement has been the figure of the debt strike, a deliberate withdrawal of consent by debtors from the system designed to keep them paying in perpetuity. Millions already do not and cannot pay their debt anyway and are by default on
strike. These de facto debt strikers could constitute a potentially epic force. What might it look like to change “I cannot pay my debts” to “I will not pay my debts”? Debt strike—or debt refusal, as the Occupy Student Debt Campaign described it in an online pledge during the spring of 2012—is a significant alternative to the notion of debt forgiveness, which has been advocated by some groups rallying around the Student Loan Forgiveness Act (see Tidal 2012). In the words of Christopher “Winter” Casuccio: “Forgiveness, while certainly a noble idea, implies a guilty debtor asking to be freed from its sin. Refusal, on the other hand, is an empowering, collective challenge to an illegitimate and predatory debt system” (cited in McKee 2012).

Yet as the conversations during the debtors’ assemblies began to move from personal testimonials to movement-building strategy, it was largely agreed that conditions were not ripe to call for a full-on debt strike. This was the case not only because it would likely fail to resonate with debtors already living in fear concerning their credit scores and thus their day-to-day survival but also because the endgame of a debt strike would be unclear—would it entail a demand to renegotiate loans? Or perhaps it would be a cancellation in the manner of the ancient jubilee that would simply reset the clock for a fresh round of debt servitude and credit surveillance? Most important, the notion of a debt strike, conceived as a finite tactic along the predetermined model of a labor strike, did not seem to create space for either a diversity of tactics or an affirmative vision of what freedom from predatory debt might entail.

Without abandoning the long-term horizon of the debt strike and its attendant notion of a debtors’ union, a breakthrough came during a conversation between artist-organizers Amin Husain and Sandra Nurse to invert the static noun debt strike into the active verbal phrase strike debt, which recalls the open-ended injunction to “occupy Wall Street.” To highlight the verb strike, a further aesthetic step was taken in striking through the word debt itself: DEBT. This strike-through transformed a quotidian word into a defamiliarized graphemic image legible only as an inscription but silent in speech. This gesture recalled Jacques Derrida’s procedure of putting concepts “under erasure” (sous rature) by typographically crossing them out on the page. Like Derrida’s approach to inherited philosophical concepts, the “striking” of debt in this case does not simply eliminate or destroy the term in question; instead it renders the term strange and helps to open it to the future. Indeed throughout the early debt assemblies, the
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point was constantly made that “debt” in and of itself was not a bad thing. What was in question, of course, was debts to whom or what? What would it mean to reclaim debt as an ethical bond of reciprocity and obligation to friends, families, and communities, rather than to the 1 percent? Thus, the injunction to “strike debt” was bound up in a desire to create an affirmative space of care and mutual aid rather than just a critical negation. That said, the negative tone of strike is powerful in its own right, allowing for metaphorical proliferation: a physical blow against a target, the crossing out of a financial tabulation, the striking of a match for the sparking of a movement, the burning energy of love, or the mass burning of debt statements. The latter figure of sparking and burning would prove to become a central image as Strike Debt gained momentum over the summer.

This innovative use of strike as a verb was inspired in part by several weeks of wildcat marches that took place in New York City during the summer of 2012 by the insurrectionist group Strike Everywhere. These were organized in solidarity with the “infinite strike” by students in Quebec protesting austerity-related tuition hikes and the creeping scourge of student debt among a population accustomed to subsidized education. The Quebecois students developed a full aesthetic arsenal in their massive protests, which they coded with the metaphorically rich color of red, both as an evocation of anger or emergency but also to play on the figure of speech “we are all in the red”—which is to say, being in debt.20 The signature emblem of the Quebec struggle was a red felt square to be pinned onto the clothes of the protestor. The square was at once an egalitarian geometric abstraction recalling the Russian constructivists, as well as an intimately scaled object produced through a do-it-yourself craft process involving felt—a material redolent with affect, tactility, and warmth.21 Via Strike Everywhere, a digital image of the felt square was blasted out to the vast e-mail lists of Occupy Wall Street, after which it quickly went viral as it was taken up by people as their profile picture on Facebook.22 Translating between the digital and the physical, red squares then began to be distributed at Strike Debt assemblies, becoming in turn the wearable signature of the emerging organization. Soon, the red square and the inscription DEBT were collaged together as a new online meme, becoming the semi-official visual logo of Strike Debt on the nascent Facebook page. This logo was in turn translated into a set of flags, stickers, and architectural panels by the group Not an Alternative, the arts collective best known for its design of the black-and-yellow tactical-symbolic infrastructure of earlier debt-related OWS actions.
The Invisible Army and September 17th

As the Strike Debt assemblies began to gain traction over the summer of 2012, a significant historical date loomed on the horizon—September 17 (S17), the one-year anniversary of Occupy Wall Street. Rather than fixate on a single day of action in the manner of May Day, Strike Debt organizers approached S17 as an intensive node in a broader escalation process through which the debt-resistance movement might be amplified. Central to this effort was the release of the third issue of *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*. Titled “Year II”—a declaration of the “autonomous temporality”23 instigated by OWS—this issue contained groundbreaking texts on debt resistance, including a communiqué from an anonymous collective voice calling itself the Invisible Army of Defaulters. The text extols the “power of refusal” possessed by the vast multitude of defaulted debtors, placing their potential struggle in an epic world-historical sweep of crumbling empires and popular revolutions. What would it mean for these de facto debt strikers to come out of the shadows and into visibility as political subjects?

Like the fictive declaration made by Marx at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, the Invisible Army conjures through words and images a political subject that does yet actually exist.24 This figure is further amplified on the back cover of *Tidal*, a poster for the OWS S17 convergence that graphically evokes the Invisible Army. Rows of uniform figures appear with their heads down and faces obscured by hooded sweatshirts. They hold aloft burning debt statements—an iconic evocation of the draft card resistance in the 1960s—with fists clenched over their chests in a sign of strength and determination. In a significant detail, the chest of the lead figure is emblazoned with a heart, thus associating debt resistance with what might be described as the *militant love* that has percolated through Occupy discourse and anarcho-leftist theory more generally. Michael Hardt has suggested the importance of developing a “political concept of love” that exceeds the romantic unity of a couple, opening instead onto a sense of amorous bonding grounded in the “ceremonial” repetition of gestures, utterances, and bodily configurations that internally differ with each iteration.25

Such a ceremonial logic informed a videographic version of the Invisible Army communiqué that was released through OWS and Strike Debt media platforms in August 2012.26 In this video, a group of masked debt resisters gather on an abandoned waterfront with Manhattan in the background; two of the debt resisters read aloud from the communiqué like revolutionary commandants. Meanwhile, a bonfire flares in the background as other
figures display and then burn their debt statements. The bonfire becomes a kind of sacrificial altar for the masked figures as they begin to dance in jubilation around the flames. As the red DEBT flag is unfurled in the flickering light of the fire, the voiceover concludes, “We are an army of lovers who cannot be defeated. We are laying the groundwork for another world.”

As the S17 weekend approached, this translation between the fictional and the actual reached a new height with the public debt-burning action undertaken by Strike Debt. People burdened by various forms of debt—medical, credit card, student, mortgage, payday loans—gathered in a Brooklyn park to tell their stories and burn their bills in front of media outlets from around the city and the world. This event reiterated the cathartic logic of the debt testimonial from the first assemblies, transforming into a fully fledged political articulation. The ceremonial burnings segued into a life-affirming, family-friendly picnic with food, drinks, and music as journalists fanned through the temporary camp taking photographs and conducting interviews in anticipation of the S17.

On the weekend of S17 itself—billed as “three days of education, celebration, and resistance”—Strike Debt released the freely distributed Debt Resisters Operations Manual (DROM), a meticulously researched handbook providing both critical analysis of the multipronged debt system and practical suggestions for how to variously circumvent and resist the punitive practices of banks and collection agencies. DROM was first distributed during the Occupy Town Square at Washington Square Park, where a series of thematic assemblies and physical training exercises were held for out-of-town visitors in preparation for direct actions in the financial district on S17 itself. That evening, Strike Debt then transitioned for a formal release party and OWS film screening at Judson Church that was attended by several hundred people.

On the morning of S17 itself, the Financial District was divided into four thematic zones in which to stage 99 Revolutions, a spiraling series of creative tactical blockades in bank lobbies and intersections undertaken by affinity groups. This action scaled up the Plus Brigades’ direct action training regimen developed by OWS in the spring of 2012 as a way of dismantling the opposition between militant confrontation and nonviolent civil disobedience. The Strike Debt zone was the largest and most focused. Its first action was an OWS birthday celebration inside of a Chase Bank lobby that involved mic-checking a letter to Chase CEO Jamie Dimon from a victim of the foreclosure crisis, as well as the launching of a hail of red con-
As the demonstrators exited the building, nine were tackled by riot police and ultimately held in jail for thirty-six hours, including NYU professor and Strike Debt organizer Andrew Ross.27

As far as days of action go, S17 was largely considered a success by OWS organizers as a disruptive commemorative event and bonding experience. For Strike Debt, it was a launching pad for building a long-term political movement, helping to propel key organizers and the DROM itself into the national media landscape while laying the groundwork for what has since become the signature action of Strike Debt, the Rolling Jubilee.

“*We Dreamed of Abolishing Debt*”: The Rolling Jubilee

The Rolling Jubilee (RJ) originated as a para-artistic conceptual project by the artist and organizer Thomas Gokey and was collectively developed by Strike Debt over the course of five months (*Utne Reader* 2013). Through online research, Gokey learned about an economic realm familiar to the world of finance but largely obscure to nonspecialized people: the secondary debt market. When an individual defaults on a debt to a bank, a credit card company, a payday lender, and so on, the holder of the debt sells it to a vulture industry of debt collectors at pennies on the dollar. The collector becomes a creditor, and hounds debtors through harassment, intimidation, and fear, shaking the individuals down the original amount owed and in the process ruining their credit score. By poking around listservs and following leads, Gokey was able to make contact with an anonymous debt buyer nicknamed Mr. Red who agreed to enter into partnership with Strike Debt in order to enact a historically novel tactic: rather than collecting on the debts purchased in the secondary market, Strike Debt would pay and thus cancel the debts. In this way, it would be a small-scale realization of the ancient biblical principle of the jubilee, which is to say the periodic cancellation of debts to clear the economic slate.28 Funds would be gathered from ordinary people and paid forward as an act of good will and mutual aid. Strike Debt thus began to set up a media and financial infrastructure to raise money for a collective fund for the direct action of mass debt cancellation.

The Rolling Jubilee is an exemplary case study for the notion of post-contemporary art in the sense described earlier. On the one hand, the project as originally devised by Gokey emerges out of a prominent strand of work in contemporary art concerned with construction of “microtopian” alternative economies: time banks, cultural cooperatives, kitchens, and gift
exchanges of all sorts as ways to affirmatively prefigure noncapitalist social bonds as detailed in Nato Thompson’s major exhibition Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art, 1991–2011 (Thompson 2012). Such projects remained largely isolated within the discursive and institutional parameters of contemporary art, albeit with important overlaps occasionally blurring with the realm of anarchist and DIY subcultures. With the Rolling Jubilee, by contrast, a basic artistic principle was completely embedded in a movement process and infrastructure, and deliberately intervened in the global media sphere with a noncapitalist gesture of mutual aid. The artistic origins of the project have rarely been noted, and yet the aesthetic, affective, and imaginative effects have been profound at a scale unimaginable for anything else in the contemporary field, as registered by the massive outpouring of care and love in the form of thousands of e-mails from distressed debtors and small-scale monetary donations eventually totaling nearly $600,000.

The cultural centerpiece of the campaign was a kind of postmodern telethon variety show titled “The People’s Bailout” that epitomized the strategic leveraging by Strike Debt of arts, media, and education. Developed collectively with a Strike Debt team led by Laura Hannah and Astra Taylor (plus noted music critic Michael Azzerad behind the scenes), the telethon was held on November 15, 2012, the one-year anniversary of the eviction of OWS from Zuccotti Park. This was ceremonially marked at the beginning of the program by an emcee wearing a torero costume in honor of the Wall Street bull famously featured on the inaugural Adbusters OWS poster: “One year ago, we were evicted from our park; tonight, we evict Wall Street from our lives!”

The event featured the participation of a number of high-profile Left-sympathizing musicians and entertainers (Sonic Youth, Jeff Mangum, Janeane Garofalo, Das Racist, TV on the Radio) along with speed lectures, a magic act, political comedy, an all-female mariachi band, a gospel choir, the Rude Mechanical Orchestra, and presentations from allies such as Occupy Catholics, Occupy Sandy, and Healthcare for the 99 percent. Keeping with the motif of bullfighting, ten-year-old Zola Ross donned a torero suit and delivered an anticapitalist poem, “Mama, I Just Killed the Bull,” based on the lyrics of the famous Queen song, “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

The venue was transformed from a music club into a kind of carnivalesque immersive environment with a heteroglossia of voices, bodies, and cultures of expression intermingling in their opposition to the common enemy of the debt system as hundreds of thousands of dollars flowed into the
fund via livecasts and a network of fund-raising parties held across the nation. A jubilant spirit was in the air, channeling centuries of anticapitalist, antiracist liberation theology of the sort described by Peter Leinbaugh into the space of the event. At the same time, the aesthetics of the event were also marked by a militant uniformity: all participants and attendees were given red squares to affix to their chests, and an architectural infrastructure was assembled by Not an Alternative involving the ubiquitous red Strike Debt logo and a series of wooden panels emblazoned with handwritten testimonial notes from debtors, recalling the 99 percent Tumblr page.

Completing the ceremonial logic of the event, dozens of organizers from Strike Debt and OWS assembled on the stage as an emcee made the following remarks:

We’ve come to the end of the evening, but this is just the beginning of the movement. . . . We discovered the power of refusal. We dreamed of abolishing debt. Now we are realizing that dream. You, the people, have made this possible. We have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars; now we can abolish millions in debt. By abolishing this debt, we say to the financial institutions of this world: we owe you nothing. We owe each other everything! Now, we bail out the people!

As the declaration of the bailout was read, a shrouded object was ceremonially wheeled onto the stage behind the speaker. It was then unveiled to reveal a golden bull on a pedestal: a “false idol” of Wall Street usury and greed that referenced the sculpture in Lower Manhattan as well as a prop designed by the Occupy Faith group brought to Zuccotti Park on numerous occasions. At the conclusion of the declaration, those who had gathered on stage suddenly attacked the bull in a kind of ravenous frenzy, ripping it open to disgorge an abundant treasure of bead necklaces, candies, red glitter, and copies of DROM, all of which were tossed into the audience in a gesture of nonprofitable waste and generous redistribution of surplus wealth.

As positive mainstream media attention for the RJ proliferated, some critics on the left charged the Rolling Jubilee with being a superficial media spectacle, a liberal-humanitarian gesture of charity. Others took cynical pleasure in attempting to poke holes in the legal and financial logic of the project, admonishing that it could in fact endanger the very debtors it claimed to be liberating due to tax complication.

Neither angle of critique held water. As Andrew Ross and filmmaker Astra Taylor (2012) put it in the Nation, RJ was designed as a “spark, not
a solution,” opening space for imagination and conversation through direct action in which a debt-resistance movement might start to flourish. As for attacks on the project from a legal angle, the RJ legal team had from the beginning prepared an argument that the RJ debt cancellations were a gift, rather than a profitable exchange, and should thus be considered tax-exempt.

The task following this surge of interest in Strike Debt coming off the RJ was thus to leverage the attention into a compelling social movement narrative rather than simply bask in the limelight of a one-off publicity stunt. Two steps were taken in this direction.

First, in late December, Strike Debt held a holiday open house at the Artists Space gallery, where members of the press were invited to witness the send-off of letters to the first round of Rolling Jubilee beneficiaries. The letters were wrapped in red square boxes, a gesture designed to grab the attention of potential recipients, maintain continuity with the figure of the red square, and situate the project within the noncapitalist economic logic of the gift. A “debt-mas” tree was set up in the space, poems were read, songs were sung, the libations flowed, brainstorming occurred, and the first performance of the Little Red Squares Radical Children’s Theater was staged—a fairy tale designed by Zola Ross about masked superheroes defending a family from eviction and ultimately doing away with an evil banker. Far from a merely entertaining distraction, the Little Red Squares (named in honor of a children’s book by the Russian constructivist El Lissitzky) represent a potentially revolutionary rethinking of child care, pedagogy, family, and intergenerational reproduction. As Strike Debt organizers like to joke: if the 1930s saw the birth of a generation of “red diaper babies” to communist parents, perhaps the 2010s might give rise to “red square babies” raised in nurturing a feminist culture of “commoning” of the sort theorized by Silvia Federici.

Second, Strike Debt staged a media campaign and action series in March 2013 to highlight the first round of large-scale debt abolition, announcing the purchase of a $1 million portfolio of defaulted medical loans from around the country. In concert with the announcement, Strike Debt staged a street protest against private health insurance companies in midtown and set up a free clinic at Judson Memorial Church with allies from progressive medical groups such as Healthcare for the 99 percent.

As of this writing, Strike Debt still has hundreds of thousands of dollars in its RJ war chest to purchase further portfolios of debt, possibly in
concert with affirmative noncapitalist economic projects such as community land trusts, free universities, and zero-percent-interest credit systems for workers’ cooperatives and eviction-free zones, such as that set up in Minneapolis by Occupy Homes. The first beneficiaries of the medical debt buy—an elderly couple in Kentucky—came out of the shadows in May 2013 in what organizers hope will be the first in a series.

**Specters of Race, Visions of Reconstruction: The Beacon of Detroit**

The evolution of Strike Debt—and OWS more broadly—has always been haunted by the specter of race. Debt disproportionately affects communities of color, magnifying long-standing patterns of oppression and dispossession as exemplified by the subprime mortgage crisis, urban austerity measures, the phenomena of “fringe finance” payday loans, and student debt of both the government-backed and private varieties. A key arena in which OWS offshoots have worked has been that of eviction defense in partnership with local community organizations across the country. Crucial as these efforts have been, they have often remained within a single-issue frame of housing rights and focused on demands such as mortgage write-downs and halting evictions.

Citing Malcolm X’s remark that “you can’t have capitalism without racism,” some organizers have highlighted the intersection of debt and race by situating the debt system within the historical trajectory of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, and ultimately the ideological color blindness of contemporary neoliberalism (Brown 2013; Cassuccio 2012). To this end, a large Strike Debt assembly was held at Judson Church on Martin Luther King Jr. Day 2013, overtly posing the question of how to build a multiracial debtors’ movement that would proactively overcome the frequent impression that the political project of debt resistance is somehow limited to privileged white people. Indeed, this has presented the urgent aesthetic problem of how to visualize the relation between debt and race such that the debt system is not represented as an equal-opportunity oppressor but rather as an amplifier of long-term structural racism. On an affirmative register, an emphasis of the centrality of race to the contemporary debt crisis reactivates emancipatory antiracist principles such as reparations, reconstruction, jubilee, and land liberation. However, even as racialized economic injustice remains the deep structuring dynamic for the lives of people
of color, often the most immediately politicized issues in such communities have to do with issues of mass incarceration and police violence (see Martin 2012). To use the terms proposed by Hardt and Negri, how might the subjective figures of “the indebted” and “the securitized” construct a common terrain of struggle?15

A second front on which Strike Debt is currently aiming to develop alliances around racial justice is in the city of Detroit, which is being placed under an emergency management regime due to the city government’s budget crisis—its incapacity to service its bonds to Wall Street creditors in the absence of adequate public funding from the state or federal government. Even as the postindustrial city falls into further dereliction due to austerity cuts, survivors on the ground are developing new forms of noncapitalist living involving urban farming, land trusts, workers’ cooperatives, grassroots arts and education initiatives, and more. Activists in Detroit organizing out of spaces such as the Boggs Center describe their city as the “Chiapas of the North,” and their work throws everything everywhere into a new light in the same manner as the Zapatista uprising did for an earlier generation of anticapitalist activists.16 Detroit can be seen as a kind of biopolitical laboratory: in its long-term constitutional processes of self-management and freeing the commons, the city operates according to a very different temporality than the rapturous declaration of the sort performed at Wall Street in 2011. How might the modes of seeing, feeling, hearing, and thinking developed by the debt-resistance movement enter into productive collaboration with those working toward biopolitical reconstruction in the ruins of the capitalist city? The questions take the perennial avant-garde dialectic of “art and life” onto an entirely new plane of protorevolutionary existence and struggle.

Notes

1 This artistic prehistory is noted by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri’s (2012: 18) account of the 2011 cycle of freedom struggles.

2 To be clear, much of the activity I describe here emerges in some form or another out of this pre-Occupy terrain and sustains various kinds of connection to it.

3 “The contemporary” has been a veritable obsession in the art world and academia in the past five years, as exemplified by the special issue of *October* devoted to the problem in 2009. An important predecessor for this issue was Condee, Enwezor, and Smith 2009. *October* 2012 includes a dossier of materials related to Occupy and the arts, including several texts from writers involved with Strike Debt.

4 This text is routinely rolled out whenever political concern among artists spikes. With the exception of ACT-UP, however, Occupy is an unprecedented instance in the
recent history of artists fully embedding themselves in a nationwide political movement (as opposed to merely evoking politics in a thematic manner or working on an episodic basis with full-time organizers).

5 For a conjugation of Rancière’s work with pre-OWS activist visual culture, see McKee and McLagan 2012.

6 On immaterial labor—flexible, precarious work grounded in the creation of surplus value through the application of communicative and cultural competencies across all industrial sectors—see Lazzarato 1996. On the relevance of this paradigm to the artistic sector, see Aranda, Wood, and Vidokle 2011.

7 Several core documents to consult on Strike Debt include The Debt Resisters’ Operations Manual, The Debt Resisters’ Organizing Kit, and the “Strike Debt Principles of Solidarity,” all of which are available at strikedebt.org.

8 For a remarkable day-by-day participant-observer account of the evolution of Strike Debt, see Nicholas Mirzoeff’s (n.d.) “durational writing project.” This blog exemplifies a new way of combining theoretical analysis with the accelerated temporality of political organizing.

9 Here I am alluding to the “aesthetics of cognitive mapping” called for by Fredric Jameson (1991: 51) in the face of the otherwise “unrepresentable” totality of the global capitalist system.

10 On the mediatic conditions of Occupy and related movements, see Davison 2012: 26–27; and Taylor 2012. These conditions potentially enable but by no means guarantee spaces of freedom for what Hardt and Negri (2012: 14–19) describe in Declaration as the “mediatized” subjects of neoliberalism.

11 Founded by the artists Nitasha Dillhon and Amin Husain of the group MTL during the occupation of Liberty Square, Tidal is a freely distributed hard copy magazine bringing together the voices of prominent intellectuals, artists, and on-the-ground organizers working in various areas of Occupy. For the four issues of the magazine produced thus far, go to tidalmag.org.

12 On the breakthroughs and limitations of the five-month OWS organizing effort for May Day 2012, see Graeber 2012b.

13 For an affirmative deconstruction of the 99 percent along these lines that makes reference to the political potential of debtors, see Mouffe 2013: 5.

14 http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/. This site was a crucial media platform in the first weeks of the occupation.

15 This is the concluding question of David Graeber’s (2011) epic Debt, which has been a constant touchstone for Strike Debt. Graeber himself was a core participant in the emergence of the organization over the summer of 2012.

16 On the overlaps and divergences between debt organizing and labor organizing in terms of both space and ideology, see Caffentzis 2013.

17 Caffentzis (2013: 6–7) also poses this question.

18 Tidal published the first iteration of Strike Debt’s analysis, ghostwritten by Nicholas Mirzoeff and others (2012). This conceptual reorientation of strike as a verb rather than noun resonates with the title of Jeremy Brecher’s (1973) canonical survey of radical US labor history, Strike!. Incidentally, Brecher has become a close associate of OWS and Strike Debt. See Brecher 2012, and the revised final chapter of the forthcoming
2013 anniversary edition of *Strike!* which ends with a discussion of Strike Debt and the Rolling Jubilee.

19 For an elaboration on this philosophical procedure, see Spivak 1976: xvii. For Spivak’s own understanding of strike in the political sense, see Spivak 2012.

20 The phrase “all in the red” was specifically taken up by the student debt group. All in the Red, whose work has overlapped with that of Strike Debt in events such as the zombie-themed Night of the Living Debt march in the summer of 2012.

21 The red square was used in various iterations and compositions by Russian avant-gardes during the first phase of the Russian Revolution as an abstract marker of radical equality (four equal sides without compositional hierarchy) and more generally the perceptual zero-point involved in the sweeping away of tradition by Communism. Remarkably, in 1920, El Lissitzky published a children’s book titled *The Story of the Little Red Square*, in which a rigorously austere square takes on the identity of a “character” that goes on adventure through an abstract landscape of constructivist lines, shapes, and quasi-architectural renderings.

22 Michael “Tactical Mike” Andrews, a crucial member of the original OWS space-scouting team—and eventually an organizer with both Strike Everywhere and Strike Debt—deserves credit for having blasted the red square meme across OWS media platforms.

23 Hardt and Negri use this phrase to describe the refusal by the 2011 struggles of both the conventional measures of “success” over time and the inauguration of a new series of markers, dates, and rituals.

24 On the spectral powers of language and ideology in Marx, see Derrida 1994. For a compelling use of the trope of “conjuration” with regard to political subjectivity, see Hardt and Negri 2011.

25 On militant love, see Hardt 2012. For a different account of political love that nonetheless also emphasizes the dialectic between universality and singularity as grounded in the principle of agape, see King 1986a, 1986b.

26 This project was developed collectively by Strike Debt and executed anonymously by artist and organizer Laura Hannah. See Invisible Army of Defaulters 2012.

27 The latter example is not merely anecdotal, for it exemplifies the way in which privileged, high-profile figures might put their bodies and reputations on the line in the name of the movement. On this principle, see Singh 2011.

28 As Caffentzis (2013: 4) points out, jubilee can be reformist or revolutionary.

29 The Rolling Jubilee was featured for an entire evening on the *New York Times*’s website, and laudatory articles have appeared throughout the progressive media sphere (the *Village Voice*, *Yes!*, the *Nation*, *Mother Jones*, *AlterNet*, etc.), along with unlikely platforms such as the online versions of CNN, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes*.

30 On the “economic turn” in contemporary art, see Thompson 2012.

31 For a deep historical genealogy of the biblical principle of Jubilee, see Linebaugh 1990. Also see Graeber 2012a; and Ellick 2013.

32 On the reciprocal, intergenerational magic of children’s theater as such—as opposed to adult theater imposed on children—see Benjamin 1999.

33 Federici (2013: 20) attended the RJ and contributed an article to *Tidal* about the topic.

34 In concert with the RJ announcement and accompanying actions, Strike Debt also released the detailed report “Death by For-Profit Healthcare” and circulated a viral
animated video telling an exemplary story of a family’s suffering at the hands of medical debt and HMOs.

35 On the securitized, see Hardt and Negri 2012: 19–24.

36 The Boggs Center (boggcenter.org) is named in honor of Detroit radicals James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs, for whom questions of imagination, learning, and experimentation have been key principles of what they call “visionary organizing.” See Team Tidal 2013: 30–31.

References


