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When the System Itself is the Problem

Trans women anarchists share Occupy Wall Street message

Gina Quattrochi

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Two weeks ago, within hours of Gay City News publishing my piece “Occupy Wall Street’s Tragic Lack of Gender Analysis,” a group of trans women reached out to me. They have been an integral part of OWS since its inception and they wanted me to know it.

What follows is a distillation of hours of conversation with two of these women, Justine and Zoë, founding members of the “tranarchist” affinity group that helped jump-start a movement that has swept the nation and the world. Justine, a 26-year-old open source technology developer, and Zoë, a 32-year-old community and online activist, joined forces shortly after anti-consumerist magazine Adbusters’ July 13 call for an occupation of Wall Street.

With two other trans women and a veteran labor organizer, they collaborated to create OccupyWallSt.org, which became the de facto website of the movement. Their twitter, @OccupyWallSt, is followed by more than 105,000 readers.

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Clearly, they have a voice, but this is the first time they've spoken on the record about themselves as trans women in the OWS movement.

Given the time the women spent talking to Gay City News, the breadth of the conversations, and the value of bringing the most salient points they made to readers, their answers are presented as coming jointly from Justine and Zoë, who asked that they be identified only by their first names.

Q: I was surprised you responded to my op-ed. Why did you take the time?

A: Your op-ed raised a lot of tough questions about the role and treatment of young women in Liberty Square, questions we've been struggling with ourselves. We want folks to know that we share those concerns, and hope that by reaching out we can find ways to work together to improve the situation for young women in Liberty Square and other Occupations around the world.

Your op-ed also really brought home the problem of visibility. Because OWS is a leaderless movement, we've been hesitant to speak publicly from what might wrongly be perceived as a position of authority. But as the movement has grown, we've noticed that the contributions of women, trans folks, people of color, and others, aren't being recognized. So we felt the need to speak out and shed some light on the true diversity of the Occupy movement.

Q: Trans people have been key in many liberation movements. Do you feel a connection to those who preceded you?

A: Absolutely. Sylvia Rivera and the other heroes of Stonewall are a huge inspiration, as are the countless unsung trans heroes who've fought and continue to fight for social and economic justice. It's no coincidence that the people who suffer most under systems of oppression are often the first to rise up against those systems. We have the least to lose. For us, reforming the system is not enough. The system itself is the problem.

Q: Why do you call yourselves anarchists, a term that makes so many people anxious and often has negative connotations?

A: The corporate media has a vested interest in smearing anarchists as crazy kids who want violence and chaos, but open any newspaper and you'll see that it's the one percent that's spreading violence and chaos, not anarchism. We're proud to call ourselves anarchists in the tradition of great thinkers like Emma Goldman. We're the people who dare to ask questions like, "Why is it even necessary for a small group of men in Washington and Wall Street to control the lives of billions of people?"

Our solution is simple. We're building a compassionate, egalitarian society by putting power back where it belongs — in the hands of local communities.

Q: You talk about the activism of trans people in OWS and other movements, but what about homeless trans youth or young trans sex workers who don't have the resources to come to Zuccotti Park or have Internet access to the movement?

A: They're one of the reasons we decided to share our story. We want all trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly youth, to know they are part of OWS. They have a lot to teach us about building community and surviving without institutional support. OWS needs that wisdom and experience. We'll help them connect; they just have to reach out through whatever means are available to them.

Q: So if transgender youth want to come down to Liberty Square to get involved, what should they do?

A: The best place to start is the Info Desk, near the corner of Liberty and Broadway. One thing to ask about is "Queering OWS," or the "Queer Caucus," which is open to anyone regardless of culture, gender identity, or sexual orientation. We absolutely encourage LGBT youth to come down to the square, make some new friends, and even get some free food while they're at it.

Q: I'm fascinated by the General Assembly, the human mic, and all those hand signals used during mass meetings. I especially like the "sparkle fingers" [waving your fingers over your head to signify enthusiastic agreement].

A: GA process is designed to facilitate collective thinking in a way where every person participating is engaged in the discussion and, most importantly, having fun! Non-verbal cues like sparkle fingers let people communicate their feelings to the group without disrupting the person speaking. We like to think of it as a social technology, a sort of organic hack.

Everyone has an opportunity to have direct input at the GA, but what a lot of people don't know about is what we call the progressive stack. If you self-identify as trans, queer, a person of color, female, or as a member of any marginalized group, you're given priority on the list of people who want to speak — the stack. The most oppressed get to speak first.

Q: What is your greatest fear for OWS right now?

A: We continue to fear police aggression. Most cops are decent people who just want to do their jobs, and many quietly support the movement, but the brutalities inflicted on peaceful protesters are not just a case of a few bad apples. Instead, we are subject to an unwritten policy of intimidation and unaccountability clearly intended to undermine our civil rights.

We're especially concerned for trans people because the NYPD lacks protocols for trans incarceration. After the mass arrests on the Brooklyn Bridge last month, a trans man was segregated from his fellow protesters, chained for eight hours next to a restroom, denied food and water, and humiliated by the very officers charged with his protection. As trans women, we risk incarceration in men's detention, where the danger of violence against us is real. Injustices like these discourage many of us from participating in civil disobedience. It's unacceptable.

Q: One of the things people criticize most about OWS is the lack of specific demands. What do you say to that?

A: We haven't published a "one demand" on our website because no catch phrase can end inequality for all. Every community has their own set of demands to end the unique forms of oppression they face. What right do we have to tell them otherwise?

Furthermore, we believe the trust of the American public has been so thoroughly betrayed by politicians that we can no longer wait for another broken promise. Rather than making demands of the one percent, we call upon the 99 percent to fight back and start building a better world today.

Q: If people want to help, what can they do?

A: The best way to help is by organizing your communities and workplaces to fight back against social and economic injustice. For some, this isn't a possibility, so we have a donate button on our website listing occupations around the country in need of support. Our website has helped raise hundreds of thousands for the New York General Assembly, but to preserve our autonomy as a collective, we accept no funding from them. If folks want to help us directly, they can go to our donation page at www.wepay.com/donate/ows.

As unpaid full-time activists, we rely on the generosity of others to have our basic needs met so we can continue doing the work we're doing. We also need downtown meeting and office space, and could really use some temporary housing. Running a major website from Liberty Square was next to impossible, and going from couch to couch each night is exhausting. We know if we were more rested, we could get even more done.

Q: How can people interested in speaking with you, helping, or coming down to participate reach you?

A: As soon as we leave here we'll set up an email address — lgbt@occupywallst.org. We get busy so if you don't hear from us, keep trying. We want everyone to understand that we are not leading anything and speak only for ourselves. We believe all of us know the solutions already. We just have to work together to make it happen.