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The View From Wall Street

On the steps of Federal Hall in Lower Manhattan, George Washington stands on the spot where he was inaugurated in 1789 and with an outstretched right hand seems to ask for calm. Like most of Wall Street a week after the event the nation has still not quite found a name for, he stands in a haze of airborne grit that renders him slightly out of focus. The rumble of New York has been replaced by the more immediate roar of generators parked up and down nearly every side street in the district. To get to their jobs, most of which began again with the resumption of trading on Monday, Wall Street workers of every kind have to confront a sensory discontinuity that is every bit as sharp as the emotional discontinuity that many of them feel.

Trinity Church stands more alone than it ever has, the visual flow of Wall Street into its portico disrupted by a police and National Guard barrier that keeps people out of the rescue zone to the west. In some spots the movement of foot traffic is closely shepherded by long lines of metal barricades. But the constriction of surface traffic has been removed. Delivery trucks worry their way slowly on unfamiliar routes along streets filled with pedestrians who have been freed from the sidewalk. Everything is strange, but you can feel most people actively reclaiming a sense of familiarity.

The day-to-day changes so far this week in the financial district are almost too numerous to catalog. Some people reflexively show ID's where they're no longer needed because the boundaries have shifted. At some security stations, running jokes between the police and pedestrians have already begun. The crowds pouring out of the Staten Island ferry are solemn, but not so solemn that you don't hear a welcome new music in some of their voices. Eyesight blurs a little in the haze, and throats tighten, but the only real pause in the flow of people comes at the sight of the Stock Exchange itself, draped in a huge American flag. Everyone knows intuitively what a feat it was to resume trading on Monday, what a powerful demonstration of will and improvised engineering that was.

For most of the past week, New Yorkers have stood somewhere above 14th Street or Canal Street and looked down toward the financial district. It is a striking reversal to be able to stand in those canyons and look northward again. With only a little imagination, you used to be able to sense the whole thrumming web of city streets that crisscrossed the island uptown. The effect is even more powerful now, and somehow more reassuring.

It has always been tempting to think of New York City as an organism, as an entity that has an independent, self-sustaining equilibrium. That metaphor will come back to us again in time. But right now, standing in front of the Stock Exchange, what one understands is that this city is a machine being consciously run. The machinery is visible now in a way it almost never is, and we can see, with gratitude, the men and women who keep it operating.

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