

(Note: This talk was written for and originally delivered at the Folkebiblioteket series, curated by Paal Bjelke Andersen, in Oslo, Norway on May 2, 2012).

## Occupational Poetics

I.

In a recent review entitled “Preoccupation,” San Francisco poet Lauren Levin writes that “Failure is the occasion for a new form: the place where genre rules have fallen apart.” She is speaking about genres of protest and she is also speaking about literature here. She is speaking of the failure of aesthetics and also of the failure of political stances, in other words, about the habitualization of tactics. Tactics-become-habit, in literature, on the street.

For example (and what example does *not* move between multiple cultural registers and sites):

1— the form of the enormous but sanctioned protest march (like those of the anti-WTO/IMF movement in late ‘90s early ‘00s, or the anti-war marches just after 9-11). Organizers would apply for a permit, and if granted, tens of thousands of people would show up for a day of speeches and marching. With a few important exceptions, these were *very* highly orchestrated events, with speakers on microphones, with bands, artists, actors from Hollywood, and so forth, in short they were highly organized *spectacles*, impressive but largely ineffective (*except*, and this importantly, *for their role in spurring and fomenting new generations of activists who learned from these productive failures*). We might compare this to what is most often meant by avant garde aesthetic practices and stances, which have by now become institutionally sanctioned both by the academy at large and by the big nationalist literary organizations, and as Levin says “ossified, codified, and dead.” Where to, activist practitioner, go—?

2—to which the Occupy movement has responded by organizing for the direct and democratic appropriation of public space and the setting up of alternative forms of self-governance (kitchens, libraries, councils, and assemblies). In comparison to the sanctioned marches of the previous decade, this form is chaotic and *lived*, embodied day after day, week after week. Does it, in a way, resemble DIY forms of literary self-organization that burgeoned in North America and elsewhere over the previous several decades? Arguably, some of those presses and organizations now act as proto-, infra-, extra-, or quasi- institutional (neoliberal?) forms of valuation.

3— this appropriation of space through radically practicable relations has arguable drifted into a fetishist relation to a symbolic space. Necessarily? Would a less-fetishized space (than Zucotti Park) be the homes of the recently dispossessed (as in Occupy Atlanta)? or the abandoned city building in which the Victor Hernandez Biblioteca was installed (as in Oakland)? Or is the symbolization of actual space a by-product of the essential abstraction of where power now resides, certainly of the finance sector which, as Jasper Bernes points out, is not located in any one place but is “distributed” (high comedy, to use such a word in this context) through flows of information, and money? It has happened very quickly, I think, the closing down, in Lower Manhattan, of the Occupy form, lacking the ability to shift the locus of spatial territorialization as some cities have tried to do.

This is an interesting place to begin, then, in an assessment of both the poetics of Occupy Wall Street, and of the literary-cultural vocation of poetry in U.S. prior to and after the explosive birth of the Occupy movement.

To question notions of failure and success. Literary, political.

I want to back up though, I want to begin before the beginning, because the beginning is always before-itself.

Beginnings, then, and their vectors, their folds.

//.

In the difficulty of trying to think through the relationship – both the emergent and potential relationship between the politics of Occupy and the occupation of poetry – I want to begin by trying to paint a picture of a loose but prevalent tendency in North American poetics before OWS. Especially I want to tell you of the way that so many poets working in the years after September 11, 2001 seemed to turn away from predominantly text-based practices and towards embodied works that incorporated silence and gesture, and were performed in public spaces not usually set aside for such acts. Kaia Sand's work in the genre of the walk, the attention to erased histories lodged in the sites along the courses of those walks. David Buuck's poetics of trespass on former military bases or abandoned lots, and the use of those sites for performative interventions. Ariel Goldberg's intra-disciplinary public forms (press conferences, busking, and writing in public) and her mediations around photography (without a camera). My own work on the psychogeographies of Lower Manhattan (in post-9-11 shopping districts and in the vicinity of the proposed Park 51 Mosque). Kristin Prevallet's rituals for public mourning. Rodrigo Toscano's body movement poems. CA Conrad's "somatic poetry." Jennifer Scappettone and Kathy Westwater's collaboration at the Freshkills landfill (where World Trade Center debris was deposited and which is soon to be a park). I could go on and on.

As I have said elsewhere, I see this shift, from predominantly text-based practices to embodied poetics, as a response to the political instability of affective labor during this period (from September 11 to the eve of Occupy). Specifically, I see it as an attempt to develop ways to publicly engage experiences of social vulnerability, histories of violence, and the politics of the so-called "War on Terror" (which continues to this day, of course, in Afghanistan). It is hard to overstate just *how difficult* it was during the period in question to express dissent in ways that could be heard, in ways that would not immediately be channeled into the cacophonously proclaimed "truth" that military intervention was both inevitable and necessary. The creation of embodied poetic forms reflected a desire to open up *even* the possibility of a dissenting silence, and was a means of "reimagining the possibility of community on the basis of [shared] vulnerability and loss" rather than on fantasies of superiority, exceptional safety or entitlement (Butler, *Precarious Life*).

Prior to the Occupy Fall of 2011, for example, I was reading theories of affect to help me think through some potentialities and pitfalls associated with the "contact zones" where aesthetics (primarily poetry and performance) and political action meet. (And when I say affect I don't mean narratable emotion, but a preconscious, subpersonal sensing of something like "degrees of readiness," at the level of the flesh). This is sometimes an uncomfortable meeting ground, where the idea of simple or coherent messages (and also the notion of a sender, a receiver and "what's effective") gets confused, confounded and recast. I will talk more about "affective disobedience" in a moment, but suffice it to say that the kind of political "understanding" that arises from such acts will not have the tendency to look or sound like other political knowledges, though they may be

useful ways of “thinking” through lived experience nonetheless. In keeping with this idea, socially committed art could be both a form of thought and, potentially, a form of social research.

For me, a good place to start thinking about affect and politically oriented aesthetics, was Raymond Williams’ notion of “structures of feeling.” According to Williams, the affects or aesthetic innovations of a particular historical moment register an as-yet uncoded experiential knowledge, a knowledge that arises out of lives lived in changing social, political and economic environments. Thus affect has a temporal dimension in Williams: social changes first appear to be “processed” in affective shifts that only later become institutionalized and considered to be generalizable truths about a given era. It might be said that “structures of feeling” are also a kind of thinking, a response to the conditions of life.

What happened to the *affective dimension* of public life that made Occupy possible, made it “take off” – (Many of us watched intently the events in Egypt, and in Iran before that, but what made it *feel* possible in the US? That is what is striking to me).

To return to the idea of affective disobedience, the critic Lauren Berlant has talked about the “refusal to perform affective security” as a potential goal of political action. Distinguishing a gesture of refusal from a hyperbolically confrontational demeanor, Berlant points out that an affectively secure situation often simply looks like a safe expression of outrage (behind opposing barricades guarded by police is the way this often seems to happen in the U.S., for example). In this kind of oppositional demeanor, which may present as politically/aesthetically radical but which is actually affectively secure, everybody knows what side of the barricade they are on. On the other hand, a truly unscripted response (an affectively disobedient response) would mean that people don’t know what to do in a given situation since they have no existing models for it. The act might be affectively confusing, not easily locatable in the terms of familiar disobedient scenarios.

I quote Berlant here: “Whose forms of self-regulation get legitimated, whose forms of self-regulation are ways of going under the radar, and whose forms of self-regulation are in-your-face messages? For example, you go and sit at a lunch counter where you’re not allowed and you refuse to act as though you shouldn’t be there. And it freaks everybody out because you’re not having the affect that they need you to have in order for them to be outraged by it... What often happens when you refuse to provide affective security for people is that they fall apart, get anxious, and start acting out, often not knowing why. The [affectively disobedient act] initiates, therefore, the potential for unraveling normative defenses.”

The spatial projects that emerged in the decade prior to OWS challenged the historical erasures and the disciplining norms of capitalist public space as well as the social marginalization of forms of creative activity not produced directly for profit. They looked for alternative locations for politicized language outside what sometimes feels like its relegation to the book, webpage or official protest.

They came about as a way of investigating emergent structures of feeling during this time, and were an attempt to discover new bases for public political interaction as well as new methods of communicating dissent in a charged and complicated affective terrain.

Since Oct 2010, certain conditions have changed considerably, though much also remains the same. In advance let me both predict and agree with the criticism that silent protest would seem a ridiculous strategy now, though perhaps something of its logic may yet reside in the refusal of OWS to provide a simplified transparent (and thereby easily co-opted) list of demands. Part of OWS

“success” (in the sense of its ability to garner momentum) in the early days of the movement, was precisely to refuse to look like the typical protest march that Americans had become accustomed to. At the time it seemed somehow necessary – to cut through the secure positions people had carved out in a totalized discourse, as irritation to the smooth functioning of surfaces.

Poetics is what made OWS possible. A delving into the affective substrates of social life. Not that the individual projects I mentioned can be credited with the movement (that would be ridiculous), but they contributed to and sometimes instigated climates of spatial curiosity and courageousness that converged as the full scale occupation of Liberty Square. I do think that redrawing the psychogeography of lower manhattan was possible because of poetics – poetics in Cairo, and poetics in New York, in Oakland, and on the borders of “official” communities everywhere.

Now that Occupy Wall Street has brought the poetic territorialization of space to mainstream USAmerica (and has poeticized spatial practices using clown techniques like “melt” and reverse flash-mob strategies like “go citizen”), poetry, I think, has new work to do in terms of language and discourse, it needs to return again, it seems to me, to what can by now perhaps only allegorically be called “the page.” It has much work to do “there.” Poetics is the probability of exacerbating and buoying contagion. It must research linguistic tactics for the resistance to the domain of habituation – so-called “radical” as a habituation too, as a status quo. Static syntax, static lexicons, static affect, static erotics, static politics = consumerist romance with radical postures = splintering and disintegration of movement (perhaps *also* a productive failure). Can poetics play a role in messing up this familiar algorithmic course, and perhaps beginning by attempting to *sense* it? In short, a poetics committed to researching, through experiment, the *affective physics* of discourse.

It is almost as if space were cracked open by *pre*-occupy poetics, and its practitioners fell through a worm hole into a new world. A world that is now no longer emergent.

Supposedly, as some in the mainstream media have claimed, Occupy was a “success”... because it was registered as an effect by that same media. To be a “success”. Let us hope not. For that will mean “dead.”

### III.

Let me tell you about the development and demise of the Human Mic. As you many know, the Human Mic is a method for communicating that developed in Liberty Square. It developed in response to a repressive city ordinance that made electronic methods of voice amplification illegal, precisely so that large crowds could not communicate with one another. So activists began amplifying each others voices. You may have seen videos of this on Youtube, but in case any of you have not, it works like this: you speak, and the crowd immediately before you, within hearing distance, repeats your phrase in unison, so that people farther away can hear. Mic check! Mic check! Hello Hello. My name is Ahmed My name is Ahmed. I’m hear to tell you I’m hear to tell you. About the Direct Action About the Direct Action. Committee Committee. First off First off. You’re all sexy! You’re all sexy! Secondly Secondly. On Tuesday On Tuesday. We are planning We are planning. An action! An action! To shut down the Stock To shut down the Stock. Stock Exchange Stock Exchange.

In the most amazing instance of the human mic I participated in, the crowd was so big that each phrase had to travel back in a wave of 4 repeats. The sheer thrill of this at the time – it was both

immediate and frightening, a making-sublime of even the most banal communication, and an exhilaratingly erotic form for the production of difference in repetition.

Ironically, the need to amplify each others voices had a rather amazing effect. Suddenly we were forced to and then excited by the prospect embodying each others words, and it created a bond and sense of commitment to direct democracy that I had never experienced. You have to understand that the General Assemblies started out with about a hundred or so people and soon became packed with thousands in the early weeks. People went to the square out of curiosity perhaps and suddenly they were participating. They were pulled in emotionally, bodily, spatially. The poetics of the form encouraged people to speak – to speak in ways that one doesn't associate with a mass protest – to speak intimately – and to speak stridently – to amplify that intimacy and that stridency. It was, in ways unimaginable in the anti-war movements of a decade earlier, truly "electric."

But what has happened to the poetics of the Human Mic. Much as the radical reclamation of social spaces has sometimes seemed to collapse into a fetishized, purely symbolic space, or has been transformed into an erotics of minor confrontations with the police that is not affectively readable outside its local environs – the aesthetics of the human mic (of contagion, of mimicry, of "embodied writing") has slowly ossified and is now becoming a predictable and therefore unthinking form (how to "break one's lines," how to intonate, what kinds of rhetorical figures one can use to s(t)imulate intimacy, etc).

Perhaps this is why poetry seems to clamor for sign based, language based, innovation now, why the occupiers of poetics need to perform investigations into the sly-er uses of repetition (both discursive and affective, and also the repetition of certain kinds of acts, certain kinds of actions, and the certain kinds of language used to talk about certain kinds of acts and actions). Poetics needs to and can figure sneakier ways to modulate, serpent-like and horizontal, to slide political incitements away from the easy reproductions of affects, comfortable, self-aggrandizing, that chip away at the active innovation of the occupier, making her into an identity, a habit of repetition, more than a practice. How language can begin to do that.

An approach to something like an Occupational Poetics.

The practice of poetics as a (pre)occupation.

The practice of the occupation as a (pre)poetics.

## Works Cited

Bernes, Jasper. "Fragment of a Critique." *What is Called Violence?* Ed. David Brazil. Oakland: Dot.Press, 2012.

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.

Levin, Lauren. "Preoccupation: Notes on Anne Boyer and Stephanie Young." *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion*. Web. April 2012.

Najafi, Sina and David Serlin with Lauren Berlant. "The Broken Circuit: An Interview with Lauren Berlant." *Cabinet* 31 (Fall 2008). Web. Dec 26, 2010.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1978.