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I am grateful to Occupy for injecting the scandal of extreme economic inequality into what is commonly referred to as “public political discourse”—that of the media and of representative democracy. But Occupy is not a representationist practice. Instead, in the words of Isabell Lorey, it performs “an exodus from the dominant political-economic order . . . in order to expand and newly invent the place of the public.”<sup>1</sup> I therefore also welcome Occupy as a new relationship to the political, one that doesn’t fit comfortably within traditional frameworks of protest and so, according to McKenzie Wark, may be a bit confusing for left intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Our first task, then, is not to insist that it formulate practical demands or, as Claude Lefort once wrote, “to invent” but to recognize and interpret what is taking place before our eyes.<sup>3</sup>

Spatial theory is a useful interpretive tool. Wark argues that #OWS has an allegorical dimension: insofar as “Wall Street” is less significant as a physical space than as a signifier of the power of financial institutions—Wall Street is everywhere!—#OWS occupied an abstraction.<sup>4</sup> In its initial phase, however, #OWS also occupied Zuccotti Park, a site whose physicality *was* important precisely because, like Wall Street, it is larger than itself: it stands for the power of the state and private enterprise in the organization and control of the city, especially of public spaces. Zuccotti Park is a particular kind of public space—the “privately owned public space” that was allowed by New York’s 1961 Zoning Resolution. Built in 1968, the park was part of a deal between the developers of the One Liberty skyscraper (then the United States Steel tower) and the Department of City Planning, an agreement that granted the developers permission to add nine stories (303,000 square feet) to the tower in return for the creation of 26,000 feet of park space.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the 1970s and ’80s, as New York’s spatio-economic redevelopment escalated, forming part of the global restructuring of capitalism, the city devised other ways for property owners to circumvent restric-

1. Isabell Lorey, “Non-representationist, Presentist Democracy,” lecture given at the “Autonomy Project Symposium,” October 7–9, 2011, Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven (short version); reprinted in [eipcp.net/transversal/1011](http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011).

2. McKenzie Wark, “How to Occupy an Abstraction,” October 3, 2011, [versobooks.com/blogs/728-mckenzie-wark-on-occupy-wall-street](http://versobooks.com/blogs/728-mckenzie-wark-on-occupy-wall-street); accessed October 12, 2011.

3. Claude Lefort, “Politics and Human Rights,” in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, MIT Press, 1986, p. 262.

4. Wark.

5. Nancy Scola, “Owners of the Park at the Center of the Occupy Wall Street Protests Are Losing Patience, but What Can They Do?,” October 4, 2011, [capitalnewyork.com/article/culture/2011/10/3608746/owners-park-center-occupy-wall-street-protests-are-losing-patience](http://capitalnewyork.com/article/culture/2011/10/3608746/owners-park-center-occupy-wall-street-protests-are-losing-patience); accessed October 5, 2011. Scola’s reporting is based on research into city records conducted by Gregory Smithsimon under the Freedom of Information Act.

tions.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, it intensified a rhetoric that celebrated redevelopment's provision of public space in order to secure consent to authoritarian policies: exclusionary urban design, privatization, evictions, attacks on rights. Zuccotti Park is an early example.

Claiming the park for the right of assembly, #OWS contested the public character of official public spaces. It was, then, not simply a conflict taking place in space; it exposed the conflicts that produce space—the subterranean violence that exploded into visibility when the state acting in conjunction with real estate unveiled its repressive power and evicted the occupiers. Earlier, Brookfield Office Properties, the park's current owners, had stated that while people have a right to peacefully protest, “enough is enough”; the park is meant for “passive uses.”<sup>7</sup> Invoking objectively dictated uses of space, pronouncements like this could, as Laurence Tribe has written in another context, “leave would-be speakers with a right to speak, but nowhere to exercise that right.”<sup>8</sup>

When #OWS seized the park for an active use—critical speech—it not only contested an existing public space but also produced a public space, in the sense of a democratic public sphere. It thus performed both of the functions that Vito Acconci has assigned to public art: “to make or break a public space.”<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler argues that mass demonstrations, too, have a dual relationship to public space: “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.” Collective actions depend on the prior existence of streets and squares, but they also “collect the space itself, gather the pavement, and animate and organize the architecture.”<sup>10</sup> This statement suggests that a city is not a framework into which users are inserted but an environment produced by the practices of users. Asking how the city is endowed with meaning—how it speaks—Raymond Ledrut writes that the city of today speaks to its inhabitants of the powers that surpass them; it may signify good organization, the suppression of disorder, comfort, or convenience, but about social struggle it is remarkably silent: “Of *historical action*, and of *the city as the place* of an historical action . . . there is no trace.”<sup>11</sup> An apt description of Zuccotti Park and today's urban public spaces. Until Occupy spoke the city.

6. For a detailed discussion of redevelopment and its legitimating rhetoric, see my “Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City” and “Agoraphobia” in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996).

7. Scola, “Owners of the Park.”

8. Laurence Tribe, *Constitutional Choices* (Cambridge, Harvard, 1985), p. 189.

9. Vito Acconci, *Making Public: The Writing and Reading of Public Space* (The Hague, Uitgever, 1993), p. 16.

10. Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” lecture in Venice, September 7, 2011, as part of the series “The State of Things,” organized by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA); reprinted in [eicp.net/transversal/1011](http://eicp.net/transversal/1011). Butler is referring to the Tahrir Square demonstrations.

11. Raymond Ledrut, “Speech and the Silence of the City,” in M. Gottdiener and Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, eds., *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics* (New York: Columbia, 1986), pp. 114–134; first published, in French, in *Espaces et Sociétés*, 1973, 9: pp. 3–14, emphasis in the original.