

YATES MCKEE

At once a prosaic verb and a proper noun, an ethical injunction and a sociological entity, a mobile trope and a site-specific tactic, Occupy lacks a unified meaning. Or, to put it more affirmatively, Occupy involves a surplus of meaning and cannot be reduced to one thing. The word itself is of course marked by ongoing legacies of colonial violence, calling to mind the forceful domestication of alien territories, the enclosure of common wealth, and the eviction or subjugation of native inhabitants. Yet the word has been indelibly inscribed with a new history involving the emancipatory reclamation or reinhabitation of those spaces colonized by Wall Street, which is to say the entirety of the planet and its life-support systems. From the warming of the climate, to the foreclosure of homes, to the militarization of streets, to the subjective internalization of market-based morality, Wall Street is Everywhere. Thus, “Occupy Everywhere, Occupy Everything,” as student activists in the UC system declared in the years preceding the advent of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) camp in September 2011. Occupy has inaugurated a radical “spatial politics” in the sense of the term passed down to us from Rosalyn Deutsche, where the contestations of physical spaces, media spaces, and psychic spaces are understood to be inseparable.¹

Occupy is at once familiar and strange, proximate and distant, embodied and virtual. Occupy is uncanny. As Talib Agape Fuegoverde put it last spring in the buildup to the historic reclamation of May Day in the United States by an alliance of unions, immigrant-justice groups, and OWS: “Occupy is an apparatus of defamiliarization and dissemination that enables spaces and objects, words and concepts, histories and memories to leave home and take flight into the future. Occupy enables us to revisit the past, but with a distance and a twist.”²

Occupy is especially uncanny from the perspective of art critics invested in tracing the legacies of the avant-garde in contemporary practice.³ Occupy is an arguably proto-revolutionary phenomenon that emerges in part out of the very artistico-political milieu of the sort that has concerned critics at *October* and elsewhere in recent years in discussions of relational aesthetics, interventionism, neo-Situationism, tactical media, experimental geography, the pedagogical turn, and more. While the

1. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1997).

2. Talib Agape Fuegoverde, “Occupy Criticism, Occupy Spring,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (March 2012) brooklynrail.org/2012/03/art/occupy-criticism-occupy-spring. On the historic reactivation of May Day by OWS and its allies, see David Graeber, “Occupy’s Liberation from Liberalism: The Real Meaning of May Day,” *The Guardian* (May 7, 2012) guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/may/07/occupy-liberation-from-liberalism.

3. See Gregory Sholette, “Interventionism and the Historical Uncanny: or, Can There Be a Revolutionary Art without a Revolution?” in Nato Thompson and Sholette, eds., *The Interventionists: A User’s Guide to the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004).

original OWS encampment at Liberty Square would have been impossible without immediate precedents in California, Egypt, Spain, Greece, Wisconsin, and beyond, the local conditions of New York City—and especially the dialogical, intergenerational space cultivated by 16 Beaver Group in lower Manhattan over the past decade—was equally crucial to the genesis of the movement.

To highlight 16Beaver is not a matter of establishing any kind of definitive origin point for OWS, but rather of identifying a site-specific node in a long history of efforts to devolve the specialized field of art into expanded networks of activist countercultural production—an aspiration shared in various ways by groups ranging from the Situationists to the Diggers to Group Material to Gran Fury.

In Occupy groups, collective creativity abounds: signs, banners, screenprints, posters, stickers, stencils, projections, props, structures, puppets, costumes, songs, chants, dances, exercises, hashtags, memes, photographs, videos, creative direct actions, and every conceivable combination thereof—almost none of which are oriented toward the museum-gallery art world. That said, Occupy has highlighted established artistic institutions as sites of corporate injustice, precarious work, and the self-legitimization of the 1%, while at the same time opening new economies of collaboration, mutual aid, and solidarity among cultural workers. Further, the affinities and resources of the actually existing art world and academia—especially progressive platforms like *October* or Creative Time—are also recognized for their movement-building potential as well. Finally, Occupy cultural practices often display varying degrees of self-conscious affinity with avant-garde precedents in formal and semiotic terms. Consider the strands of neo-Dada ritual, Yippie pranksterism, and SI spatial tactics evident in the Plus Brigades sessions held at Judson Church during OWS Spring Training⁴; or, more recently, the Malevichian red square translated from Quebec student struggles into the wearable sign of the emerging Strike Debt movement.⁵

My own experience with Occupy has involved a relearning of what it means to be a writer. Many Occupy writers have had to rethink the times and spaces, protocols and norms, platforms and audiences in relation to which they work.⁶ Much of my writing for the past nine months has taken place collaboratively in email threads, Facebook posts, and face-to-face meetings concerned with creating websites, press releases, flyers, ask-letters, action plans, meeting notes, project statements, video scripts, and mic checks. Questions of ideology, rhetoric, and aesthetics of the sort academics are trained to consider are central to these forms of writing, but in Occupy they are entwined with proactive organizing and strate-

4. On Plus Brigades, see Nathan Schneider, “Paint the Other Cheek,” *The Nation* (April 4, 2012) thenation.com/article/166820/paint-other-cheek.

5. On the generalization of the red square, see Yates McKee, “With September 17th Anniversary on the Horizon, Debt Emerges as Connective Thread for OWS” (July 14, 2012) waging-nonviolence.org/2012/07/with-september-17-anniversary-on-the-horizon-debt-emerges-as-connective-thread-for-ows/#more-18089.

6. On writing and Occupy, see Fuegoverde, “Occupy Criticism, Occupy Spring,” and Nicholas Mirzoeff’s remarkable “durational writing” project nicholasmirzoeff.com/o2012.

gic public address in a way that often makes received academic discourse feel woefully out of touch. The freely distributed magazine *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*—started by artists and featuring short, accessible texts by writers such as Gayatri Spivak alongside statements from young organizers such as Sandra Nurse—is a historically groundbreaking hybrid platform in that respect.

As of this writing, *Tidal* and other OWS media entities are gearing up for a three-day convergence on New York City to mark the one-year anniversary of the occupation of Liberty Square on September 17th. Rather than simply a commemorative ritual or one-off Day of Action, S17 is conceived as a launching pad for focused anti-capitalist movement-building around the predatory debt system, austerity, mass incarceration, climate crisis, and more. While some will attempt to yoke the energies of S17 to the time frame of the electoral cycle and ultimately the established mechanisms of the state, OWS will push back with its own sense of time and process. Some have suggested that this might include allowing the moniker Occupy itself to recede into the past as the movement phases into new experiments with “communization.” In any event, it is unlikely that the physical tactic of outdoor occupation first deployed on September 17, 2011, will or could be replicated. But the horizontal spaces of education, empowerment, and radical care created by that historic occupation remain open, which is what I believe will give the trope of Occupy a historical longevity and unrivaled imaginative charge. Artists and academics should continue to enter into these spaces, with an understanding that there remains much for us all to learn that cannot be acquired from a book or an academic journal. There they will find an alien world from the future in which nothing—including our own sense of professional identity—will ever look or feel the same again.

YATES MCKEE is an organizer with Strike Debt and co-editor of the magazine *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*.