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Remember right after 9/11, when irony was momentarily declared dead? In the midst of the Occupy movement, I thought more than once of Northrop Frye's description of Aristotle's *iron*, a man who "makes himself invulnerable,"¹ and Demosthenes' ironic man, who evades his responsibilities as a citizen by pretending he is unfit.²

Occupy encouraged vulnerability: sleeping in public squares, standing before police blockades, entering the commons with little but a handwritten sign declaring your weakness. (Complicated immeasurably by issues of race and class.) The general assemblies held in participatory democracies installed in occupations throughout the country were also based on distinctly nonironic models: Zapatista *asambleas*, Quaker and Native American council meetings, and 12-step programs.

You can also detect it in the questions asked here: *How have you been affected by OWS*—which mirrors the qualifying questions asked by Al-Anon (*Have you been affected by someone's drinking?*), whose meetings veteran activist Lisa Fithian urged should be held at Zuccotti.

Many radicals avoided Occupy because it was too popular, too branded, too parvenu. I became involved for several reasons. One is that it provided the chance to write about art, labor, politics, class, and capitalism anonymously and collectively—what Maurice Blanchot once described as a "communism of writing." Within my own writing, art served as a Trojan horse for getting Occupy concerns mentioned in the corporate mass media at moments when it otherwise received very little coverage. (Benjamin's *Umfunktioniierung* takes on a very different guise under neoliberalism: the activities I'm describing might better fall under what the Midnight Notes Collective calls "inside" and "outside" ["autonomous"] struggle, revised notions of early-twentieth-century "reform" versus "revolution."³)

Was there any efficacy in this? I don't know. In one sense, it furthered what feminist Silvia Federici describes as the "self-reproduction" of movements, which are destroyed by the isolating effects of capitalism. But I also think of Blanchot's response to criticisms that the 1960 Declaration on the Right of Insubordination in the Algerian War, signed by 121 artists, intellectuals, and scientists, was "ineffectual." Blanchot argued that it was a "simple act of speech" made "at a moment when these words needed to be spoken."⁴

During my lifetime, I have witnessed the opposite phenomena, what

1. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 38.
2. D.C. Muecke, *Irony* (London: Methuen), p. 14.
3. Midnight Notes Collective, "Promissory Notes: From Crisis to Commons" (April 2009).
4. Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings, 1953–1993*. Translated by Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 19.

François Cusset wrote about as an ineffectual response to 9/11, when, “after decades of rhetorically questioning the imperialistic West, deconstructing America’s power, and demonizing the first world’s neocolonialism, the various radicals bred in academic quarters stood still, mute and shocked.”⁵ Political theorist George Caffentzis noticed a similar silence following the 2008 global political-financial crisis, when there was “remarkably little political activity in the streets, union halls, or retirement communities of the U.S. demanding a resolution of the crisis in favor of the millions who are losing wages, houses, and pensions.”⁶ To participate in Occupy was to rectify this, but also an opportunity to activate what Blanchot described as the strange “power without power”⁷ of artists and writers—that is, the limited but extant power of cultural capital.

How did Occupy affect my *daily* life? Like SDS activists I once heard describing their lives in 1969, I didn’t get much sleep. It was temporary and disruptive: things had to be done, right here, right now. It was difficult going to galleries and looking at objects, attending openings and engaging in “normal” conversation, and entering museums without wanting to start an impromptu general assembly. It heightened a previously felt urge to seek out marginal practices, and any vestiges of “interrogating the medium” were relocated to interrogating my own writing and motives.

Some of this dovetailed with the postmodern theory I was raised on: the drive to denaturalize what is presented as “natural” (i.e., power). But Occupy thread it through a different needle, without distance and without irony. It called for an *engagé* writing in which detachment was erased.

For art historians, Occupy asked these questions: What if the canon, founded in conjunction with capitalism, was abandoned for a “horizontal” art history? What if the specialized field of art was truly “occupied” by visual culture, rather than merely “appropriating” it? What if Occupy revealed that methodology, theory, and “philosophical” art history underwrote rather than critiqued contemporary capitalist culture? Some of these questions were already in my writing, but Occupy gave them permission to rise to the surface.

And finally, what does Occupy mean to me? I currently stand somewhere between the fervid calls for Black Monday—a revival of Occupy Wall Street on September 17, its one-year anniversary—and the harsh critiques of May Day as “a roving lefty carnival” that was “politically meaningless” and proved that “substantive political action—and, in particular, the future of left resistance to inequality—remains in the hands of established movement organizations.”⁸

5. François Cusset, “The State of Literary Theory: French Theory’s American Adventures,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 2008).

6. George Caffentzis, “Notes on the Financial Crisis: From Meltdown to Deep Freeze,” *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States* (Oakland: AK Press, 2010), p. 273.

7. Blanchot, p. 36.

8. Khujeci, “The Limits of Occupy.” May 31, 2012. occupyduniya.wordpress.com.

Occupy might be called a mass fad, particularly after *Time* magazine declared, “2011 Person of the Year: The Protester.” The term *artist* had been neutered and now *activist* was no longer avant-garde either. But Occupy meant something. Brian Holmes wrote recently, “1999 was our 1968.”⁹ But this leaves out a younger generation, and myself: I had never lived in a climate of local, daily protest extending over a period of months. 2011 was my 1968.

“Occupy” feels like an exhausted term, however. So I will quote Blanchot, writing in December 1968 about the events of that year: “THE REVOLUTION IS BEHIND US: it is already an object of consumption and, occasionally, of enjoyment. But what is before us, and it will be terrible, does not yet have a name.”¹⁰

9. *Uses of a Whirlwind*, xxviii.

10. Blanchot, p. 109.