

# OCCUPY POETICS

curated by

THOM DONOVAN

*featuring*

BRIAN ANG

STEVE BENSON

ANA BOŽIČEVIĆ

DAVID BRAZIL

BRANDON BROWN

DAVID BUUCK

ANELISE CHEN

STEPHEN COLLIS

LARA DURBACK

JACKQUELINE FROST

DAN THOMAS GLASS

EVAN KENNEDY

BEN KINMONT

LAUREN LEVIN

RICHARD OWENS

JENNIFER SCAPPETTONE

SUZANNE STEIN

ANNA VITALE

JEANINE WEBB

KATHY WESTWATER

BRIAN WHITENER





# OCCUPY POETICS

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THOM DONOVAN

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#33

## ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press culture.

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*You can't evict an idea.*

— adage

**PREFACE**  
**Writing with the Event**  
— Thom Donovan

The following texts, composed between 2011 and 2014, represent a series of responses to an event that arguably has not ceased: Occupy. In approaching the Occupy movement as a poet and critical journalist, I did so consistently with a passionate interest in observing how aesthetics and politics might intersect. How, for example, can the poem leap off the page, into the streets—but also into modes of life that may transform radically our current legal, economic, social, moral and political realities? How curious it was that many of my friends and colleagues stopped writing poems to become revolutionary organizers, care providers, organic intellectuals, and radical pedagogues during the occupations. Equally curious perhaps is the fact that many of us kept writing poetry and making art, only in ways that often departed dramatically from our previous work. What does one do (and how can one sustain a practice) in the throes of an event? How can one write with the event (and

through its untimely temporalities) into a future that we would want, that will not simply re-suture the wounds of futures past? To what extent does culture work condition the event and to what extent does the event condition culture work? In what ways might we value aesthetic output differently through Occupy and other events of a radical social and political character? If Occupy inaugurates a new era of revolutionary change, which I believe it does, at least in North America, what place will poetry have in ushering in such change, if any? These are some of the questions that I continue to ask myself in the wake of Occupy. In the spirit of Occupy's principal modes of organization—the General Assembly and People's Microphone—but even more so its proliferation of affinity groups based upon direct action, this collection also represents an attempt to democratize poetic journalism and criticism. Most of the pieces collected in this short book are the result of interviews and surveys. Had I more time and resources, I would have wished to invite many others to participate. I am grateful more than anything else for the generosity with which my friends, community and colleagues engaged with my prompts during a time that for many of us involved daily crisis and emergency.

Against the better judgment of my editors at *Essay Press*, I have insisted upon preserving the verbatim

texts of others incorporated into this book. I have done so mainly because I understand the temptation to revise one's writing from years past, and it is important to me that the texts included in this book remain "documents" as much as possible. It is in the spirit of documentary that I have solicited permissions from the contributors, requesting that they not make edits to their texts, which are after all already available online, though often buried among a mass of content. As with other book projects I have undertaken, I am also particularly interested in the time-sense of documents, and how respecting time-sense becomes a quality, or ethic. Typographical and formatting inconsistencies mark time and are not just proof of carelessness and/or haste. To the contrary, they represent living presences and movements, fugitivity and becoming.

*New York City*  
*March 2015*



I Introduction from the *Vital Forms  
(Poetics of Healing) Symposium*  
(North Berkeley, 4/13)

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I have been asked to talk about the relationship between poetry and the occupations that are currently ongoing in North America and throughout the world. I come at this request with some trepidation, among other reasons because of the fact that I have not actively participated in Occupy Wall Street at the level of actions or affinity groups since late this fall. Despite this lack of contact with the actions and general assemblies—what we may consider the heart of the occupations, their radical kernel—I have had contact with the occupations mainly through various friends throughout poetry and art communities. So my experience of the movement is mediated by these relationships, and the sense that aesthetics can and must play a central role in any viable social movement. In a somewhat haphazard way I would like to focus on a few different aspects of the occupations that have interested me with regards to poetry and art.

It has been said before, but the People's Microphone (or Human Microphone if you prefer) provides a qualitatively different way of participating in a traditional poetry reading. Closer to Slam poetry, though not nearly as codified gesturally, it provides the unique experience of speaking aloud a poem intermittently while one listens—I would add, often for the first time. This is an experience that interests me, that is intrinsically interesting, since it produces a relationship in which one undergoes the poem somatically, thus empathically. The poem lives (on) in your vocal chords and lips. It provides an instant communal bond, even when one disagrees with the content, perhaps even more so when one disagrees. My experience of Poetry Assembly at Zuccotti Park was exhilarating. Not because I found the poetry "groundbreaking" (innovation was rarely a measure of success), but because of the democratizing of the format, and because of the continuous feedback between the reading and the street where anyone could wander in to recite a poem—or, more likely, perform a rap. If formatting determines not just content, but how we gather, then exploring new modalities for participation is absolutely essential for change. Poets have complained ceaselessly about the fourth wall of the poetry reading as a genre. Certainly the People's Mic offers one solution to this problem.

Something my experience of Occupy Poetry (an affinity group devoted to intervening in public space via poetry) reinforced this past fall, was a sense that the "real" poetry of the Occupy movement lies in the procedures it has developed via the general assembly and of the strategic actions it has performed in the name of social and economic justice. This is a poetry of past civil rights movements: which is to say, of laying one's body before the conscience of the world and the nation (King), of going to jail, of evading authorities, of strategy and inner resource. On the other hand, Occupy Poetry underscored a disjunction between the way poets tend to behave within community (which is often organic and informal, if not anarchistic, when it is not reliant on hierarchies and institutions) and the procedures of the general assembly, which determine who speaks when, how decisions are made collectively, etc. Given the impasses faced by Occupy Poetry procedurally, my previous (and now still present) sense that poets should do something other than poetry was also reinforced—which is to say that poets should "give up" poetry if only to seek their poetics in another form of socially engaged activity. Take the case of Gustav Courbet, who became an administrator, or George Oppen, a union organizer. Activism by poets and artists abounds in our time within and without aesthetic communities. And the poems, to my mind, are often more substantial for this involvement.

But but but...part of the reason we're "occupy[ing] everything" (to use the motto of the UC student movement which preceded the current occupations) is because a consolidation of economic resources and the pervasiveness of a control society have forced our hand. The amazing thing about so many participants in the occupations is that, given their responsibilities to employers, and to families/community, they have been able to participate at all. This winter and spring made it very clear to me that I could not participate in the Occupy movement the way I would most like and continue to perform various kind of culture work for my community, like editing two books, writing criticism, curating readings, etc. This kind of work, I believe, undergirds any viable social movement we have. In fact, I would go so far to say that no social movement can exist without these cultural labors being ongoing. This would seem to contradict my previous statement: that poets must do something else, that they must accept hiatuses if not seek them out. But I think there needs to be both. People must maintain the work they are doing in the face of a perceived crisis; they must also know when to adapt what they're doing to this crisis. So in a feature I edited for the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog, David Buuck says that the work he is doing now has not changed in any radical way since the occupations, only taken on different strategies in relation to an altered field of struggle. Others I have spoken with have a similar position

about their practices—that the struggle to calibrate aesthetic practice with social-political responsibility and resistance is continuously evolving.

Two of the projects I have worked on directly related to this calibration are a feature I edited for *Rethinking Marxism* that just came out this past month, "Poetry During OWS," and the blogging I did for the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog this past April, previously alluded to. Here is the editorial statement I wrote for *RM*, which frames the feature:

When I proposed editing a poetry feature to *Rethinking Marxism's* editors this past summer, my initial focus was on work by poets that critically engaged the ongoing economic and socio-political crisis of neoliberalism. While corresponding with the editors Occupy Wall Street happened, ushering in a mass movement against capital and the disastrous relations that it has fostered in our contemporary world. As is typical of movements for social justice historically in the United States, many poets became vitally involved in the occupations. The feature before you gathers some of the writing that poets have been generating in response to and alongside the occupations. Selecting participants, I wanted to provide a sample of a moment replete with possibilities for the

future, glimpses and partial views of Now-time (*Jetztzeit*). Offering few directives I only asked that the poets limit themselves to three criteria: 1. That they exemplify questions or problems integral to their poetry/poetics; 2. That they take into account the ongoing struggles for collective freedom and justice that the occupations represent; 3. And that their contributions be based in text/language. In my letter of invitation to contributors I also offered, "Lineated verse is of course welcome, as well as work that involves assemblage, appropriation, collage, and document; that is concept-based, or otherwise atypical of most printed objects traditionally identified as 'poems'/'poetry.'" The result, I hope, is a semi-collective text bearing witness to the emergencies of poetic form in relation to political and social action during the American Autumn.

When I was asked to blog for National Poetry Month at Harriet in the spring of 2012 it occurred to me, as it often does, that I did not want to write through my own subjectivity or "voice," that something seemed inappropriate about this given the political climate. Instead I opted to invite no fewer than 80 poets to respond to a questionnaire in which I inquired how writers' practices had changed since the occupations began. Respondents included Stephen Collis, Brian

Whitener, Richard Owens, Steve Benson, Brian Ang, Ana Božičević, David Buuck, Suzanne Stein, Anna Vitale, Dan Thomas Glass, Lauren Levin, Anelise Chen, Lara Durback, Jeanine Webb, Jennifer Scappettone and Kathy Westwater. I hope that a much more comprehensive document can come together regarding the range of aesthetic responses to the occupations.

This past spring the conversation about the occupations turned towards the topic of violence, especially among the Oakland occupiers. There is a range of responses out there, and some are collected in a pamphlet David Brazil put together via his and Sara Larsen's *Try!* magazine. I feel deeply ambivalent about this discussion, for reasons I have already voiced in a conversation with Brandon Brown at *BOMBLOG*, and agree with Brandon where he recognizes that there are many personal reasons why one may avoid violent encounters with police at all costs, fear of what one would do faced with police being a perfectly good one. Political violence, for me, is not something any one should come to lightly, even though the oppressive forces of our society may come to it lightly—that is, objectively, impersonally (I am drawn to Žižek's crucial distinction between "subjective" and "objective" violence, which distinguishes between violence that is inter/subjective or "personal," and that which is perpetuated systemically).

In the first few months of OWS it was curious to see demonstrators interact with blue shirts. Clearly many wanted to come over to “our” side (there are no sides really of course, just managers and workers, white shirts, blue shirts, and occupiers). Occupiers would attempt to hug police. Police would have their photos taken with occupiers, like tourists. I don’t know if these attempts to embrace police continue, though the terrain has changed with policies like snatch and grab, which target leadership within the Occupy movement. These policies are disturbing and need to be fought through political pressure and creative use of the law. With regards to violence, I believe that occupiers must continue to create situations where the law is forced to act in dramatic ways. Beyond that, I believe that the only violence that is permissible is one of situations—which is to say, immanent to a process of attempting to act justly. Cf. Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” or Alphonso Lingis’s “Innocence” in Elizabeth Grosz’s *Becomings*; cf. *Eternal Recurrence*; cf. *Black Panthers*; cf. *AIM*.

I am reminded when one speaks of violence, however, how much work we need to do ourselves to prepare for confrontations with a violence outside that exerts a great pressure inside (to paraphrase Wallace Stevens). Robert Kocik, whose first prose collection I am publishing with Michael Cross this fall, has a lot to say about this. Social movements must be holistic,

or they fail. And this is where aesthetics can also provide. Because art and poetry address needs for care, for health, for wellbeing. This is an ever possible function of poetry off and on the page. When Zuccotti Park was still occupied something that impressed me was the various tents that provided medical and emotional aid to occupiers. This is something that we too often disassociate from struggle—mutual aid. And it is also the reason for struggle, maybe its primary reason: to become a society of mutual aid. Poetry provides not just a Kantian critical distance from events and subjects, such is much of the poetry being written today under the banner of conceptualism, but it binds and is immediate to intersubjective formations that undergird collective social action. In other words, there is the poetics of what we do when we demonstrate, or engage in strategic socio-political actions, or participate in GA or make minute decisions that impinge on the lives of others (this is poetics too: active making, with an emphasis on the *-ing*). And there are ways that words nurture and sustain us...like medicine, somatic and psychic. Subtle, as Kocik likes to say.



## II “someplace other than what he read and the video he showed”

(David Buuck at SEGUE series, 1/12)



This past Saturday, David Buuck presented at the Bowery Poetry Club for the Segue Series. I say “presented,” rather than “read,” as his reading featured video and song in addition to recitation. David has been exploring a curious range of problems in an expanded field of poetry for some time. Some of this is contained in his book *The Shunt*, which appeared with Palm Press in 2009. Yet the majority of it has been documented through pamphlets the poet-artist-theorist-performer-activist has put out himself (under the moniker BARGE, which stands for The Bay Area Research Group in Enviro-aesthetics), and more recently on Vimeo.

While I have long admired David’s performances, which blend constraint-based writing with movement, dance and music, this Saturday had an added urgency as he addressed conflicts between participants in the Occupy movement and police in his native Oakland.

For years David and I have had an ongoing conversation about the uses (and abuses) of “reenactment” for public demonstration and aesthetic intervention. His 2008 work *Buried Treasure Island* (which I discuss in a previous article at *Jacket 2*, on “Somatic Poetics”) features “pre-enactments” of what he hopes will be future ecological actions and sites, figured through the artist Gordon Matta-Clark, for whom he has named a yet-to-be-remediated “park” on the island.

Reenactment came up in a different way through the performance at Segue, where David first read what seemed to be a series of instructions for dance and/or movement (like ones a yoga instructor might give, or he and I might give our students at Bard College’s Language & Thinking workshop). After reading these instructions (to bend your arm so many degrees, to place your chest on the ground, to exhale in a particular way), David proceeded to read from an Oakland police blotter, which he told me afterwards had been leaked by the hacktivists Anonymous only days before.

Like much conceptual reappropriation, David’s reading from the blotter was interesting for the ways that it framed the Oakland police, whose history of corruption and violence are notorious, going back to the Black Panthers and other activist groups of the ‘60s and ‘70s. When David finished reading from the blotter, a video projection from his laptop was cued.

As soon as the video came on and David started reading, one could hear resonances with the first text he had read. Only now he provided an image track giving this language context for the first time in the performance.

The video was compiled from Livestream and cellphone footage of occupiers clashing with police. Often it was pixelated, a fact that David's text described repeatedly, the pixelation enacting the withdrawal of the image's representational power, abstracting an erstwhile documentary content. Most of all, for me, the pixelation embodied an affective content; it obscured events which could not easily be represented, and which instead demanded witness—specifically of the body brutalized and made vulnerable, armorless before a phalanx of fully armored cops. In other footage one saw an equally beautiful (and fairly abstract) image of a camera being dropped to the ground, pointing at the sky as it inadvertently recorded the silhouettes of police beating citizens with truncheons. In yet another video, a woman was flung onto pavement face-first by police. David replayed these discrete videos in slow motion, synching them with his minute descriptions of movements and gestures depicted in the footage.

As David also commented to me afterwards during an extensive conversation about his involvement in

the Oakland occupation, though his performance may have seemed to attempt to reenact scenes from the occupation it instead foregrounded the impossibility of successful reenactment—the bodies that produced its context being withdrawn from us, the social conditions that produced that context someplace other than what he read and the video he showed. It reminded me of something Adorno says in *Aesthetic Theory*, that we reenact what could not be felt the first time around (to paraphrase). Through his use of bodily and textual constraint, and through tactical remediation and recontextualization, David touches an affective content that we might otherwise not feel through the representation of political and social traumas, traumas that for many have become deeply personal through their involvement with the Occupy movement.

To conclude the performance, David showed footage of a GA in Oakland, the facilitator speaking through the People's Microphone while using American Sign Language to communicate with the assembly simultaneously. While doing so he sang a song, the words of which were obscure, if they were words at all. As if to foreground the production of language in a body. That the song was sung live while the video played silently also amplified a sense of false return. The *unheimlich* of almost uttering words, as though a lack of articulation could compensate for us not having been "there."



### III Enframing the Brink

(with Brandon Brown, for *BOMB*, spring 2012)



Hi Brandon,

These past few weeks I have been living with your books that came out this past fall: *The Persians* by Aeschylus (Displaced Press) and *The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus* (Krupskaya). It's been a marvelous time, especially listening to your prosody in tandem with certain rap albums (Biggie, Wu Tang Clan, Jay Z), hearing the immense resonance with your own lyric. *Persians* and *Catullus* turn the heat up on quite a few recent conversations about "avant-garde" and "experimental" writing, while returning to some pretty fucking ancient sources. Likewise, the books have a pretty unorthodox outlook on the "task of the translator," where translation issues not just from the faithful comparison of two (or more) languages (etymologically, philologically), but through bodily exigencies. The way the translator's embodiment and their surrounding circumstances (social context, love interests, friendships, diet) shape

any work of translation. How you have chosen to make procedures for translation out of your own, and others', daily lives.

Would you care to talk briefly about how you see these books in a larger discourse? Both within the history of other translation practices, but particularly in terms of the point we have come to with a "post avant" poetics that is trying to grapple with larger political and social practices?

Then again, maybe it might be better to simply talk about "life." The way your books address life is perhaps the way that our friend Dana (Ward) means it in his book that just dropped this past week, *This Can't Be Life* (Edge Books). (Michel) Foucault says (and Fred Moten quotes him in his book, *B Jenkins*) that "life escapes; it steals away," and I keep thinking about that phrase with regards to what you, Dana, and a number of other poets are up to right now. What is fugitive in that constant movement that takes place between our resistance to late-capitalism (expropriation of our "flexible" labor, systemic devastation of the ecosystem/local ecologies, subjugation of others' bodies through war, incarceration, and immiseration) and our participation in consumption, the pleasures that consumption offers?

In our recent recourse to disclosing life practices, and foregrounding their contradictions as they intersect with politics, economics, our social efforts, etc.—I hear the clamor of an emergent (poetic) aesthetic politics that also folds back onto Beat and New York School poetry, New Narrative, Language Writing, and a number of other poetic practices and genealogies that have attempted to radicalize the correlation of person and the public, subject and object, interior and exterior, singular and collective. I wonder what you might also hear in that clamor?

Anyways, I realize this post is a mouthful. Feel free to just focus on a small part of it (we can always edit!).

SO SO SO looking forward to this conversation with you!

Thom

Hi Thom,

Thanks for these incredibly rich opening provocations, and allow me to also share that I love your book *The Hole* and think, if it's not too repetitive or hollow-sounding, that it has helped determine my orientation to some of the very aporias concerning the avant garde and "life" you raise in your note.

I'll try, in the spirit of fleshing out a response, to approach several of the issues you raise, peppered with questions of my own. I think that one of the supreme triumphs of the formal structure of *The Hole* is its portrayal of woundedness. This wound doesn't formally capitulate to categorical "self-loathing" and turns instead toward the problem of "salvaging the unredeemable," to refer to the book's epigraph from Agamben, which I read as absolutely one of the book's key themes: how, in the face of the unredeemable crisis to salvage? What can be salvaged and are those things objects? What does "salvaging" mean anyway?

The answers seem numerous and, as they take form in lyric poetry, sometimes aspire to the only semi-discursive state of rhythm. But one of the answers seems to be that the salvageable is illuminated and made possible by friendship and collaboration. It's a somewhat ugly word, collaboration. And I'm not trying to glorify travail like this e-mail is the

Salon of 1853. And yet the way “con” and “labor” live together for a moment approaches what you described on Facebook the other day as a “poetics of political form” to accompany its more clichéd obverse.

So I think collaboration is essential to both your *Hole* and the sense of translation I’ve been working on for the last few years. How terrific is it that, despite of course the many many structural differences in our approaches, we both invited our friends to literally appear in the book! In the Catullus book my thought about collaboration was a logical one following an assumption about translation itself being a kind of collaboration between two writers resulting in a new text, the translation. I love the sense you describe in *The Hole* of a subject desiring to amputate her own voice—the conventional story of translation masquerades a figure in which one subject empties everything out except the voice, which is where the language lives, so that another subject (the text being translated) can enter and occupy, if I can use that word. It’s been key to me to not only try and expose this as a rhetorical or literary lie, but to try and consider how to play, or co-labor, in the wake of its exposure. If the resulting text is already, then, a polyvocal document fabricated by a plurality of subjects in intense political relation, the next step seemed to me to actually invite other bodies into it.

You know, one of the really troubling things about the book to me (okay, there are many troubling things as pertains to its content, eesh) is that it risks replacing one heroic narrative (the persistent text which survives its transformation into another tongue) with another (the dreaded “rogue translator” who makes a display out of what is after all perhaps only literary disobedience). Like the many troubling points of content in the book, I want to let that problem linger, be available for the next work, be something else to trouble forward in the future.

So perhaps a way of starting here is to ask you to expand on the role of the other in *The Hole*, how “collaboration” relates to this very strategic lyric that maintains in your book?

As a final note, and again I want to almost just ask you your own question concerning how you see *The Hole* in a larger discourse of contemporary poetry. I am almost totally uninterested in the avant garde as it currently obtains. I hope that doesn’t come off as some dumb conservatism on my part. I mean, I like art. But I have feelings of disaffection for the military metaphor. I mean, I know this is a little crude, but our “amputated voices” still for the most part comply inside a culture tantamount to a massive war and violence machine, and thus bringing military ontology to poetics seems irresponsible or irrelevant at best. If the general tendency of “experimental”

or “new” American writing since the ‘70s has been largely oriented as against the lyric (a tendency I think re-upped and reasserted in the Telling It Slant generation of the 1990s, with “narrative” replacing the identity-based “lyric” of the ‘70s as villain), the writing in this moment that means the most to me (including your work, Dana’s who you mention, Julian Brolaski, Stephanie Young, Ariana Reines, Alli Warren, many others) is a sloughing off of this particular antagonism. Not to resurrect an antiquated and no longer viable or pure subjectivity of personal expression or anything like it—but an affirmation that narrative as such and lyric in some form are possible modes of salvage and repair in the catastrophic locus. Moreover, these forms, which take so many different routes to sensibility in the writers I mention, often have recourse to some of the techniques which the avant garde, in typical avant garde fashion, lays claim to, from appropriation (an important aspect of my work) to the even more exciting tendencies towards collaboration, maximalism, and expansion that manifest in these writers.

XOBB

Brandon, hello!

I have been looking forward to starting this email to you all week (and I’m not sure I can finish it now, late at night before a new work week). I had this experience today that reminded me of you. Going to a friend’s house, a friend who is a painter, ostensibly for a “studio visit” but really just to hang-out. After I visited his studio/apartment, we stepped out for a drink down the street. When we arrived at the bar, he noticed he had a message on his phone from my number. I guess when I arrived at his studio/apartment, I had called him but forgotten to hang-up, so the phone left a message of our greeting each other and starting to get settled in his studio. I was thinking how much maybe the phone was performing something similar to what you call “preceding/proceeding” translation, which I could quote you on from your wonderful *Catullus*, but the book being out of reach, I will just say I understand to be any act of translation which makes visible the translator’s embodiment and their situatedness within a set of life circumstances as a vital aspect of the translation, if not the very content of the translated work itself. As if those voices return to us more real through their framing in a just-left voice message, or through translation works which, as you say at the close of your *Persians*, always depend on a re-translation by others who will make the work matter through their own performances, a performance by their future

bodies. It makes me think that when we talk of “life,” or a radical autobiographical practice, which is something I have been thinking about quite a bit, we are talking about how artifice and mediation can register these delays that make us feel as though we have lived or are living more acutely while also framing, to use your phrase from *Catullus*, an “anxiety about the destruction of the present.”

To get to the matter of the “return of lyric” with regards to our contemporaries, who are obviously the handful of people you mention and more, I think that we return to lyric problems with a sense of having absorbed the deconstructive discourses of our parent generation and the generation(s) just before us. The problem Language writing (or Spicer or Oppen and any number of poets before them) had with “lyric” being really a particular kind of lyrical writing that bore too innocent a relationship to language’s questionable relationship with power, and to the way it tended to naturalize certain devices—the use of “I” to claim authentic experience or essential identities being one of the major ones. I won’t rehearse that discussion right now. I don’t think we really need to, it being all so obvious, the air we breathe.

There is a lushness, even an ornateness, about your language and Julian Brolaski’s in particular that I think our parent generation rarely touched in

their tendency to want to be ironic, and cool, and critical, New Narrative and latter-New York School notwithstanding, which often tends towards this opulence. Maybe it comes out of the atmosphere at Mills College, where I know a lot of you studied. Or just San Francisco/Oakland at that time (Julian’s and Michael Cross’s New Brutalism?). I think there is a certain return, as well, of a desire for certain forms of intimacy and address that I associate very much with the idioms of Hip-Hop, which is where I locate so much of your idiom and prosody—in that swagger. I don’t know if any of this is helpful. Your work in particular sites pleasure and embodiment in very particular ways, in which consumption and pleasure are both affirmed in a certain aspect, and in which they are cited (and sited) for their complicity with systemic violence. Capitalism, over-consumption, way uneven distribution (duh).

The image of foie gras in *Persians* really brings this home: geese being bound and force-fed, the image of this on the front cover. And yet these are the conditions out of which we are making this writing, which are so rarely foregrounded through a politics of the poem. CA Conrad, Rob Halpern, Bhanu Kapil, Dorothea Lasky, Alli Warren, Anne Boyer, and Dana Ward always strike me as being completely vulnerable to these relations, which, as Dana says, demand that one be willing to appear foolish, a brute or naif. I am so fond of the way you are able

to enfold an intellectual content very subtly within the more lush and playful lyricism, not an easy thing to pull off at all. [...]

Thank you for what you say about *The Hole*. If I could speak briefly to your question about collaboration, I think actually that the “solution” I provided to the book was a somewhat inadequate one. Though I could not think of a better one at the time, nor at this time. What I wanted was this book that would foreground the collaborative nature of making a book; or simply the fact that ‘my’ book was an act of discourse extended by multiple communities and friendships. Something I love about that section of the book, in which the dedicatees of the poems produce 40 plus pages of new content in response to those poems, is the way everyone approached it differently, and how the results tend to reflect very much my relationships with those people, just as I believe that the collaborative poems in *Catullus* reflect your relationship with those people, albeit mediated by previous translations of *Catullus*.

The fact is, when I was working with the manuscript of poems, I felt that something was missing. There had to be a way of framing the fact that those poems were so much conceived in an intense community dynamic. After thinking about it for about six months, the letter of solicitation, which basically gave the addressee permission to write anything in response

to the manuscript of poems, was the best I could come up with. In the “prefaces” included in the book I talk quite a bit about how a projected book (and not the one that was eventually published necessarily) would like to dereify my relationships with dedicatees through the book’s form. As I have said to Brian Whitener (publisher of Displaced Press) I think one could spend their whole life trying to discover the form for such a book, and maybe it’s impossible after all. Maybe there isn’t a form (or not one form) that can successfully address this aesthetic problem. But I like to think that a number of us are attempting this now in very different ways. And with the current immersion of our culture in social media and Web 2.0, it is a timely problem to pursue.

I guess the other problem for me, one that I address in one of the essays contained in *The Hole*, concerns my/our relationship to appropriation, something you also make reference to in *Catullus*. I refuse to take a moral stance on appropriation (I think that has been a mistake in the way people have tried to critique the writers identified with Flarf, Conceptualism, etc.), but am rather interested in how different writers and artists choose to use different techniques of recontextualization. In *The Hole* it was important for me not to use appropriation because I wanted to see what a prosody could do which took a community and particular relationships as its muse (as Robert Kocik points out, the prosody of *The Hole* evolves

through idiolect). Nor did I want simply to take things people gave me and make new poems out of them, though I realize such a thing is easier said than done, and it would certainly be interesting if more poems were written this way. Perhaps it was the archivist in me (I am currently an archivist by profession) that wanted to collect and catalogue those responses, knowing how quickly they become lost to a semi-public, semi-communal memory. And this is precisely the contradiction the book contains, I think, that it risks entombing or reifying relationships, the very thing that I say I am trying to work against in the book. Catullus's anxiety, again?

But there is a kind of appropriative writing that I think gets us closer to the dereified life writing that interests us both. I tried to teach some of this last spring, in a class about appropriation at School of Visual Arts. Dodie Bellamy, Robert Gluck, and Bhanu Kapil, and very recently Brandon Shimoda get close to this through their use of questionnaires to collect private information from friends and acquaintances. Rob Fitterman's "This Window Makes Me Feel," Andrew Levy's *The Big Melt*, Judith Goldman's *The Disposessions*, and Rachel Zolf's *Neighbour Procedure* are also important for me, in the way they would attempt to enframe and sculpt collective affects through assemblage, collage, and cut & paste. *The Hole* is definitely a response to these trends/accomplishments in contemporary writing. In a book

I am starting to work on I will use some appropriation techniques, if only a good deal of self-appropriation/quotation, as I had always imagined a fourth part to *The Hole* that would document some of the correspondence taking place during the writing of the poems in the book. I am now imagining this e-mail/archival sifting as part of a much longer appendix to *The Hole*, which may also in some ways address the emergency of our present—the occupations in particular.

I hope we can talk about the occupations, and your new book coming out with Roof this year, which takes us back to the barricades of 1870s France as I understand it. In the meantime perhaps you would also like to talk a bit about the decision to proceed through collaborative translations? I would also be very curious to hear more about how you would think about our moment beyond the tradition of the "avant-garde," a term I often feel is inadequate, or just kind of silly in the way it serves as a shibboleth for the kinds of community-based writing practices that currently exist at the margins of official writing cultures and practices. I mean, is Paul Chan avant-garde and not Jay Z? What about your girl, Taylor Swift? Or the many popular cultural materials your work is in dialogue with? (Last night I told someone that I thought popular culture was your muse, just as Kevin Killian once remarked, during a lecture about Jack Spicer, that he was dictated to by the Ted Turner

Network). So much seems a matter of reception and rarefication in your work, which is why I am so fascinated by your blogging, and Facebooking, and the way this blends seamlessly with the poetry because it is so much about radicalizing reception, and redistributing cultural production through the occasion of the poem.

Following something Anne Boyer wrote to me recently, framing takes precedence over craft (though there is a good deal of craft in your writing, too); effect over style (though there is also a good deal of style).

Thom

Hi Thom,

First of all, happy New Year. It's a supreme pleasure to take up our correspondence again as a way of assuaging the unknowability of the coming year.

I love this image of your phone recording the visit with your friend, which, yes, is something like a translation or perhaps the "recontextualization" you allude to as a major mode for contemporary writing and art. I think where the image comes extremely close to what I've been interested in translation is that because you forgot to turn the phone off, you then encountered a song as a result of that error. I think this is in miniature the story of what reading is or can be. And in the reiteration of the encounter, what I'm calling here "the song," all of these terrific architectural elements are added: the fabric of your pocket or bag, the transformation of your voice waves as it filters through that cloth, the beautiful alienation coming to bear on anyone hearing their own voice.

I like "recontextualization" better than "appropriation" actually because it is so obviously about the desire for another world, which can include a desire for the same stuff, just in another and better world. I guess if I've expressed an indifference about the avant garde, it's perhaps because much of that practice orients itself against that sort of desire, determined as it is

to agonize over the denigrated present. As if simple agony was all there could be to feel.

Which is partly to return to this question of the salvageable in *The Hole*. I'm really interested in your sense that brutality and naiveté in part make up the vulnerability which marks the politics of the writing we've been discussing. *The Hole* is obviously full of brutalities—and the tenacity of its refusals is one form of (cherishable) brutality. I mean, something stinks on our lips—and the idiolect it writes through is attuned to the very abjected present I mention above. The capitulation to that ravaged fact does not affect, however, a monochromatic nihilism. "Death doesn't happen in the present," after all! In the present, which smells like trash and abused bodies, there's another world, a more permeable world, writ large as possibility itself. Now, I am curious about "naiveté." The term is too potent for me to reduce right now, which I know is cowardly, but I'll admit it as such and hope to be schooled. I just started to worry that there are two kinds of naiveté in my own works, one of which I'm profoundly conscious of and use to manipulate my readers into being utterly seduced. But does a simultaneous naiveté elude me and make that very attempt at seduction obvious and sloppy? Eek.

I was thinking about your worry that the book risks entombing or reifying relationships. I actually don't

think that's Catullus's anxiety, exactly, but that's partly because I don't think Catullus is interested in working against entombment or reification. In fact, perhaps quite the opposite. For Catullus, one of the potencies of lyric is its power to estimate, evaluate, glorify and preserve glory. Including the "glory" of making someone else infamous. That very first poem formulates a prayer for his affirmations and negations to survive a century, and it's a prayer undertaken with a kind of confidence in writing's endurance. Of course, it's also true that Catullus is a translator and knows very well that the survival of lyric is a survival which is subject to constant recontextualization! For me, one of the achievements of *The Hole* is that it admits its own time. Does that make sense? And maybe that is relevant to a Catullan anxiety. It is contemporaneous. I might be hasty to consider the contemporaneity of *The Hole* as a failproof remedy for reification or entombment, but the being-hasty is also to the point.

I loved your sketch at an idea for an e-mail/archival sifting as pertains to a new project. Partly because I think, if it were me, there is such an almost burdensome hoard of content that returning to it is critical—it's the only way I could possibly remember anything. So returning to the archive of improvised content, of which this discussion you know is a part, is almost itself like an act of translation also: returning to a text to see if something new is there, or

something that had always been there but escaped detection, or something in you that's changed in the return. Very Heraclitean I know. Pathetic. But I liked the idea of your email box—mine, really—as an archive of the unknown.

About the occupations—we've had only sketchy conversation about our individual involvements, which I gather drastically differ. If it seems apropos, Thom, I would love to hear how you represent your commitment to the OWS in general and of course in its particulars, what your effort has been, and how you think that effort relative to your project. I mean, all kinds of obvious things seem to arise to me. That the in-gathering impulse which manifests in *The Hole*, or the sublime co-laboration that takes place there, might be said to cohere in the Occupied sensible in a whole new range of (exciting) forms.

And yet, part of me wants to say that the poetic politics of *The Hole* are themselves part of a rich tradition of strategic resistance that doesn't exactly match up with "the movement," if Occupy is indeed a movement. I'm skeptical of that and some of the other broad particulars of the propaganda. Which is not to say, of course, that I don't stand in absolutely solidarious relation to the occupations and occupiers. I don't like capitalism. I think it stinks. And if I hate anybody in this world, it's the cop. But when I try to understand what "the movement" is, which is to

say how it represents itself aesthetically, I'm often stumped. Which is, again, not to decry or denigrate any particular occupation, set of principles or actions, etc. etc.

For example, the heterogeneity of occupations leads me to wonder what "the movement," if it absolutely has to be insisted on as such, is really about. Is it about the creation of more jobs or the refusal to work? Is it about the fundamental structure of capitalism? If so, in what form? And is it always so? This is obviously the risk of the demand-less protest, and I am as far from pretending to provide an answer to these questions as I am grateful for all of their being-asked.

Of course, there's less ambiguity with my particular local, i.e. Occupy Oakland. But even as OO obtains very closely to how I might paint my own politics, I've largely stayed away from somatic action. Partly for very practical reasons: I live in San Francisco, work a day job which is pretty inflexible when it comes to getting to Oakland for port shutdowns and the like, and I don't want to fight cops because I'm afraid of them. But there are some other reasons why I've been living in the confusing state of being-in-solidarity-with, but physically absent from, the activity here in Oakland.

So, for instance, I'm careful about my own vulnerability to euphoria. I engage OO as an addict.

Which is to say that I fear the euphoria and the symptoms of euphoria, which can cause among other things, really awful hangovers. Reading Bifo's work this year has been particularly influential—I use the word carefully, and I don't mean it "academically." When it came time to decide whether or not I was going to put my body in Oscar Grant Plaza at certain times, I recalled Bifo's warning about activism and depression. Although let me just stress again that these are FAR from closed questions for me.

You know, just to say a little bit about the book that's forthcoming from Roof, *Flowering Mall*. The book is a translation not of *Fleurs du Mal* but sort of ... does it make sense to talk about a translation of a whole oeuvre, which includes not just texts, but a whole milieu, a milieu which includes...the history of money? But the major concern of the last poems in the book, the last poems written, is "the future," all of which I wrote before the occupations started and which, undoubtedly, will really, really betray the time of their writing.

I'm sending this today and leaving off a statement concerning the extremely provocative question you ask about Jay-Z not being AG and popular cultures—with the promise of more to come in coming days!

XOBB

Dear Brandon,

Sorry for being a bit MIA this month. Work has been busy, and I was set back by the flu and the untimely passing of a friend. The friend who passed away worked the good part of his life as an archivist and was a mentor to me in the profession. I think "the archive" relates to this discussion we're having, inasmuch as it is so much about time, presence, reification. And maybe it relates to this way we can oppose our books to Catullus's desire for "glory"—being immortalized by one's deeds or through proclaiming the infamies of others. Of course archives are so much about this immortalization. But they are also so much about an inevitable and anticipated ruin. Their very existence implies the reverse of posterity. It's working with materials, many of the most beautiful of which are fragile and brittle, marked by Benjaminian auras—the blemishes and beauty marks of their history, encounters with people of the past, etc. Working in an archive changes one's sense of time. As if all you can do is be a little bit better organized, or up with the latest gear, to get a jump on eternity. I think that's one way to look at it anyway. And this is not to even get into the politics of archives, which is so much about what is worth preserving, what is culturally valued, who gets to work in these places and gain access. A huge conversation. One rarely brought up in poetry or art, at least not in any really public kind of way. At

least until public resources are supporting something cultural conservatives don't like.

So on the one hand there is this genuine desire to preserve (entomb, reify, make retrievable). And I think that *The Hole* really is partially about that, some kind of dialectic or relationship between preservation and entropy, or simply forgetting. But then, of course, there is a feeling that I wanted to preserve too, which a new book of poems starts with, that as Adrian Piper says after her studies in Kant and transcendental philosophies: "everything will be taken away." I think one can start to imagine the world this way—and maybe *The Hole* looks at the world this way—which is a little bit morbid. That the person is a virtual corpse (which is the way Jalal Toufic teaches us to think of the mortal throughout his books); but also, to quote [Robert] Smithson, that buildings and other human endeavors constitute "ruins in reverse," that all things contain this inevitable potential for their decay and disappearance (man, is this sounding morbid). And maybe this is too easy an escape/alibi, but I think that's where a sense of potential comes in, just at the brink of despair, or an infinite resignation that things can't get any worse, knowing full well they can. A lot of the poems of *The Hole* evoke a feeling for that despair, while also maintaining a very different feeling towards a kind of community that one maintains/imagines for one's self amidst pervasive despair. Partially what the book's epigraph

refers to is that the point is our unredeemability: this part of ourselves or the world that we retain or hold-up (to get all Hegelian about it) in order to keep doing what we think is right or making an effort towards a world that would be the way we would want it. I hope that structure of feeling comes across against the morbidities that also maintain vision. I hear it cleaving "naivete" and "brutality" (and just this week do you know I read in Larry Eigner's *Areas Lights Heights* [Roof Books, 1989] something like, I know just enough to recognize my naivete—a Socratic trope I guess, about knowledge production).

Staying on the subject of feeling and anticipating wanting to get to all of your great questions and ambivalences about OWS and your engagement with Occupy Oakland specifically, part of my desire to go back into email accounts is to re-enact or re-encounter what is to be found there. Maybe it is a kind of belated response to that comment [Frank] O'Hara makes in his *Personism* "manifesto"—that one day he realized he could just as easily write a poem by picking up the telephone and calling a friend or lover. Returning to that piece via a class on "creative speaking" I am teaching this semester, which traces composition practices using orality, transcription, scoring, and conversation, it strikes me that that remark has been a little misunderstood. Because it is obviously not just about using the telephone—transcribing one's conversation (though

one could certainly do that, and it would probably produce a fairly interesting set of effects)—but recognizing that the point of “technologies of presence” (Michael Davidson’s term), or a poet’s use of those technologies anyhow, is that you can trick yourself into certain forms of address and exchanges that are as impassioned and linguistically consequential as any poem one might try to write starting from the page or word processing document. And so that’s what a lot of email is for us now, it seems; transcriptions of these feelings that we may have long forgotten about but may now have something to teach us, or, if they aren’t didactic or edifying, are at least vital, stuff that can sustain future work. But it is also about something else, and this brings us back to your *Catullus* and the work of contemporaries. How to frame a set of feelings that constitute a social material? How do feelings of friendship or intimacy become art? What O’Hara teaches us, but I think even more so a work like Bruce Boone’s *Century of Clouds* (and I am grateful for conversations with Brett Price the other night for these realizations) is that these feelings don’t become art until they are *re-felt* in the form of narratives or within the framework of a book. What Bruce is so good at, and this is so easy to forget, is how he keeps feeling just enough at arm’s length, in this mediated way, so that he can look at it clearly, and what’s more allegorize it. All of his digressions and apologetics often seem like scaffolding to me, the

very framework through which we can start to feel what he has felt through a set of social relationships and a micropolitics that extends from actual social and political commitments/experiences.

I think of Bruce’s *Century of Clouds* again when I think of my own ambivalences around OWS. Because for me what is most exciting about OWS—beyond the fact that people are en masse actually taking action effectively against banks, and the housing foreclosures, and cynical/fascist political discourse—is that OWS is trying to practice an alternative set of political techniques, modes of gathering but also means of procedure. At some point it got in my head that one day we could have this whole generation of people internationally who were raised on taking agenda and calling for points of procedure among working groups, that a working group/GA could be the fundamental unit of our democracy. That devotion to process is something I really want from poetry community and something rarely achieved. I often wonder, in fact, if that should not be the poem we are trying to write collectively. To account for a much larger process beyond writing and criticism and book making and all that goes along with poetry culture. This will never happen through existing institutions, even the most radical. It won’t happen by pouring a lot of money into Poetry Foundation, nor through poet-scholars storming the gates of blue chip universities. It is also what is forgotten in

the kinds of canon wars that you see among avant-garde (or “post-avant”) poetries. Community-based processes that might undergird another world seem like the first thing to go—always—when it comes to canonization (who gains posterity, prestige, authority). It becomes more about branding or at least a power grab that is real and pervasive. My own way of working, I’d like to think, is to simply keep moving, trying to find places where new gathering possibilities and processes can take hold. OWS was attractive to me for this reason. And it still is. I wish I could be more involved in it, as I have been distracted by a number of editorial projects that are very important to do right now, and since I work full-time I can only devote time to on nights and weekend. Maybe this spring, when I suspect there will be more actions than there have been during the winter. The American Spring!

As I have written to you before, I relate to your own ambivalences (fear of cops, manic depression). And I don’t know if the initial work of OWS is for everyone (I definitely think activist work is not for everyone, and this is something to keep in mind: difference). Also, of course a lot of bad stuff tends to emerge that wants to appropriate the energies of social movements/struggle. I remain suspect for instance of the many artists and celebrities who have tried to lend occupiers their support. (Did you hear about the fiasco with DJ Spooky and the

People’s Library at this New York club; that the club wouldn’t admit occupiers because they “smelled bad?” There was also that incident with Jay Z and the t-shirts, as if an uber-capitalist like Jay Z wouldn’t see an opportunity to further his economic interests?) But the larger problematic that you are identifying, which BIFO is also addressing, has also to do with rethinking activism and social action as a means towards liberating ourselves from certain ways that we have been conditioned to work. (I think of that book *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* by Kristin Ross in this regard, where Rimbaud’s poetics is so much a reading of the importance of withdrawal, not working in certain ways, re-mains [an attention to hands]). I don’t have too many details about it—you can check the NYC GA website, but I know there are working groups that exist specifically for care and health, including mental health, recognizing that the kinds of work people are committing themselves to can take a huge toll. My own sense is that people should do what they can and be critical of the ways that political organizing reflects behaviors and ways of being that we’d like to transform. More so, I think we need to keep in mind—as you and Dana and others do so effectively, and as you say in your previous post—the need for translating certain things from this world into another. As Dana says in a recent piece he wrote for a feature I am editing for *Rethinking Marxism* on “poetry during OWS,” referring to [Louis] Zukofsky’s

famous equation from "A – 12": "Replace 'music' with 'utopian desire,' replace 'speech' with 'everyday life.'" Perhaps you could now speak to Jay Z, Taylor Swift, and the (post-) avant garde? Seems like I have given you a perfect point of departure...

Love and apologies again for the lapse,  
Thom

PS: hey B, hope I haven't overwhelmed with that last one. Or worse yet, underwhelmed.

I realize I didn't convey a few things that I meant to convey. First of all, excitement about your Roof book and about your engagement with the Baudelaire materials in general, which will be such an amazing extension of your translation output, but which I am also looking forward to because the historical materials you are dealing with seem so prescient, given similarities between occupations and the Paris Commune (just today I saw a photo of Oakland occupiers holding banners while being tear-gassed and fire-bombed, "welcome to the commune.") Leaving off with "the future" seems the perfect end, and one my projects/poems roughly contemporaneous to your own may also evoke it (such poems as "I just want to be in a band" and "The New Us" in particular, which are kind of grasping towards more collective forms of action just before and during the Arab Spring). I would love to know

specifically how the Baudelaire book extends your previous ones, if that is fruitful place for your next post to go.

It occurs to me as well, I just want to say how much your reading of *The Hole* means to me, especially locating it in the "present"/contemporary the way you do, and your discussion of the terms "naivete" and "brutality" with regards to a paramodernism (just read this term in BOMB this morning actually, in an interview conducted with Jimmie Durham, which seems fitting...against avant-garde master narratives, etc., notions that modernism is over, but also that there are worlds to discover beside the ones offered by those narratives). Both of these books seeking a different form of present, a different way of present, that may be grounded in affective engagement, prioritizing the subjected body as the site of these engagements, the complicities they shore up and do not often resolve. Your notion of providing a "toxological report" through translation rhymes with my own sense that you are writing through embodied conditions to offer a record of barbarism (Benjamin again). Barbarism being so written on our bodies, as well as in the language. Conditions of resistance exist in those materials which, also in Benjaminian fashion, offer images of our/their redemption, however much they would seem destined for history's compost heaps. In *Persians* you include a play with Benjamin's "Angel

of history" (though I believe you write "angle"). This cameo seems significant, as if a wink at what the prosody will do, confronted with detritus, or objects of culture that we can only imagine now will soon be detritus, because they are part of a culture of commodity. Brad and Angelina, and so much more. Maybe what I'm saying is too obvious or overstated, but it also folds back on my previous questions about the status of commodity culture in your work, hip-hop and Taylor Swift, fashion and lifestyle magazines being paramount. Against Adorno's snobbery, it begs the questions, who would want an anti- or non-capitalist world without these products of a culture industry? When these things have made us what we are. They are part of the toxicology, if not the cure. When what we want are a better set of symptoms anyway, right?

Love and praise to you!

Hi Thom,

I love your thought that "a sense of potential comes in, just at the brink of despair, or an infinite resignation that things can't get any worse, knowing full well they can," I really feel like I live there, in that affective station. On the "brink of despair" of course implies living in a liminal space. The "brink" corresponds to the precarious nature of our social and political existences and interventions—and it's right there on the brink that one gets to experience proximity of the most brutal facts of our lives under dominion, as Dana might call it.

To return to the contemporary writing you and I have discussed already in this exchange, I think so much of it is written right out of this affective space. I've been writing a review of Marie Buck's new chapbook *Amazing Weapons*, a marvelous text that directly engages the (non)site that drifts in and out of (over) charged expression and plundered patency.

I also really valued your sense that, on the brink of despair, you feel this simultaneous and "very different feeling" towards the community that one defines oneself in. I mean, I think this is a truly perverse orientation, although I'm not versed enough in psychoanalysis to say that precisely. But the hedonia, the ecstasy that we both experience in our relations (along with the hells of them, of course) does seem

impossible with the unbelievable derangement of current conditions. There is perhaps nothing more important to me than this pleasure, and I too think of it as a real balm against realistic morbidities.

So speaking of morbid reality and ecstatic hedonia, thank you too for all your insightful reflections about OWS/OO. I'm writing of course from a time and place of recent defeat concerning the experimental nature of the activism. That's the part of it I value most too, actually, the "devotion to process." And yet, part of devoting oneself to the process might be the willingness to admit the failure of parts of that process. That seems to me to have a generic and specific form. After the events of this weekend I fantasized about making a private call to those I love the most to put certain forms of experimentation on hold for the time being. And I mean the one where you fight the pigs and they batter you, injure you, and put you in jail. I think there's a risk of complicity in all of this too. Even my use of the word "pigs" is complicit in a miniature war-machine. The writing we've been talking about, the writing in our books that "seek a different form of the present" do, I think, try to embody a refusal of those complicities. Obviously they're imperfect efforts.

Speaking of imperfection and efforts, I'm also interested in the appropriation of the "Commune" for the "Oakland Commune." One of the initial

interventions Occupy Oakland made was to rename Frank Ogawa Plaza "Oscar Grant Plaza." For BOMB readers who want to know, Frank Ogawa was a 20th century Oakland Republican who was interred in concentration camps by the USA in World War II and later served as a city councilman in Oakland. By all accounts he was quite congenial. Oscar Grant was a young African American man who was murdered by a transit police officer on New Year's Eve 2008, shot in the back while handcuffed on the train platform. This murder, and the predictably easy sentence handed down to the white cop, provoked huge civic protest in Oakland; these were the major city protests in the oughts, prior to Occupy. Grant's image saturates city walls in Oakland. Paintings, rap music, and dance performances have been composed in his memory, and as an effort to keep the truly abject corruption of the Oakland Police Department in the public discussion.

Which is all to simply say that psychogeographic intervention was a priority for OO and remains one. And I find the renaming of Frank Ogawa Plaza to be quite powerful, even if not (yet) sanctioned by the regime running Oakland. Yet I find something discomfiting about the "Oakland Commune." Maybe that's the point. I guess I'm trying to understand what the consequences of the appropriation are and then wanting to point to two historical facts as particularly troublesome. For one thing, it's critical to recall that

the Paris Commune, while the Communards also focused on halting the violent force of gendarmes and police, actually seized state power for the city over those 73 days. And that was their intent, and that they were successful, whereas OO makes no such claim (in fact, OO is for the most part totally unconcerned with liberal reform, a difference that challenges, to my mind, the coherence of an "Occupy Movement.") Secondly, it's our responsibility to not forget that the historical Paris Commune was destroyed by revanchist troops who massacred 25,000 mostly working class Parisians in the streets in order to retake power.

I don't know, I know that there's a spiritual appropriation at work in resurrecting the name, and I know that's important. I'm fleshing out my conflict here. It's conflicts like this one that I think are totally pertinent, as you suggest, to Bruce Boone's writing, among others. There's a line in *Century of Clouds* that I constantly think of—it is probably the talismanic line for the Catullus book—that I can also never quite remember exactly, but it's something like, My socialist utopia includes Sachertorte and Kaffee mit Schlag.

Conflicts like this, that take shape libidinally and aspire to the dialectical almost, seem to mark the contemporary writing we've been discussing, and also the response to some of the aesthetic strategies

of Occupy. And so I'll try to say a few things about pop music. A few weeks ago my dear friend Ted Rees posted on Facebook a critique of the use of Rihanna's work at protests. He pointed out the undeniable fact that Rihanna's music is the product of major corporations, corporations which are owned by bigger corporations, which are run by the very select group of finance barons who make up the dreaded "1%." He might have said too that Rihanna herself belongs to this group. It would be true! I love Ted. He's so fucking punk. You know? And then Jasper Bernes said something like, Well, yeah, but don't forget that a lot of people actually like Rihanna. Their debate was fierce and complex, undertaken with respect and love, and was not finally decidable. But I can't help swing towards Jasper's sense that "despite" the economic facts of these productions, one's devotion to them can be more or less total. Oh hell, when I say "one's" I mean my own, of course!

What's sad is that I don't have a complex sophistic defense of pop music to share with you. I trace my own devotion to an ordinary fealty to melody which was seconded in the semiotic sphere by a very early attraction to rap music. I've said before that Ice Cube is the main reason I think I became a poet. And I really believe it. Even from a cognitive behavioral standpoint—I mean, what else is going to happen when you subject yourself to endless, I mean endless, repetition of such compressed poetry? And I still

think that rap is producing more or less the greatest linguistic artworks in the United States at least—with poetry flailing about in the distance, tripping over some very real political anxieties about language which rap ignores—not always to its betterment. As for pop figures in general—do you know that Baudelaire poem “Reve Parisien?” Anyway, I think a real encounter with pop is a reckoning with real contemporary divinity. Even if that divinity turns out to be satanic, it’s not very realistic to ignore it.

A final note here about the Baudelaire book—I think it marks a departure from the *Persians* and Catullus projects. For one thing, after finishing the Catullus book I was determined to make something that wasn’t a conceptual translation of an ancient text—preferably not a conceptual translation at all. At the time I was reading Baudelaire for the first time, and also Baudelaireana, Benjamin above all. I was also watching *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* at Dana’s instigation and studying the traditions of vampire literature in the West. Translation crept up on me, via the “Gothic Marx,” Baudelaire’s poem “Le Vampire,” and my own sense that my work was going to try to talk about evil. Sometimes on *Buffy* you have to translate an evil text in order to know how to fight evil in the present.

I’m not sure that was accomplished. My tendency in the Baudelaire translations was to write that which I

would immediately regret, whatever I least wanted to write or say or even think. To be shameless about sentences that were utterly, completely shameful. That constitutes the poetics of *Flowering Mall*, something very much like the anxious shamelessness of embracing whatever Katy Perry’s up to at any given moment. It felt to me, writing that work, like the truest picture of my life in current conditions—even though, to clarify, not all of the details narrated in the book are “true” or whatever.

Xoxo  
BB

Dear Brandon,

Your response is not “long and self-centered” at all, especially as I am always slightly relieved when *The Hole* is not under discussion, as if we should better talk around these things than about them strictly. Or they can be points of departure for conversations about what is happening, what is on the mind.

Your impulse to call friends after the events at Oakland last weekend, I identify with completely. The way you put all this...how wonderful! And it leaves me wondering what a resistance movement would be—especially in Oakland—that did not court violence from the police, who are obviously thuggish and rogue. Maybe it demands a different set of experiments? Not that I necessarily know what these would be. However I have to say, it does/did make sense strategically to want to draw out this aporia of our property system; that there are all these people without homes and who are losing their homes while these major corporations and banks benefit from the all-too-convenient (and contradictory with regards to Neoliberal rhetoric) socialization of wealth. Maybe the problem is with scale? Were we only able to tempt the law to our side by making ourselves more desirable? Or by playing on their capacities for empathy? The resistance to objectifying police has been something interesting I have witnessed in OWS NYC, to make police recognize you as a person, to

experiment in this way. But conditions are different here, I’ll leave it at that. The systematic violence of the police department in Oakland obviously has to be totally uprooted, which means officials like Quan with them, anyone who has supported this intolerable cycle of violence.

To change gears a little—and of course I am always game to continue this conversation with you about pure means and the use of violence (if I could try to name what I think is at stake in what we’re discussing)—I am thinking about the uses of art again for politics after a show I saw this past weekend at the Austrian Cultural Forum, put together by Gregory Sholette and Oliver Ressler, *It’s the Political Economy, Stupid*. So many of the pieces—many of which were videos—were quite educative about the political economy since 2008. In one video, economists break down the bail-outs amidst animation of bears with swinging gold chains (reference to a bearish market) and other bling. Another video features a forum with economists and artists in Mexico City. Were these only to gain a more public audience, I feel like people would know better how this situation all came about and what is at stake in opting out of Neoliberalism. The thing I was most moved by, however, had very little to offer by way of information/pedagogy, yet rather featured Spanish Flamenco dancers demonstrating, flash-mob style, in various banks, flo6×8. What was

moving was to see this deep cultural knowledge (Flamenco) performed virtuostically in public places (banks) explicitly against capital (clear in the songs they sing and signs they hold up to spectators/video cameras). I wondered what the folk equivalent would be in the U.S. if there is even an equivalent. Country line dancing? B boy battles? In one video a dancer continues dancing while pursued by a bank security guard, twirling away from him. flo6X8 uses art to channel cultural immanence, the refusals latent in all cultural forms (as though the inverse of Benjamin's equation, that all cultural products are documents of barbarism, all cultural products, too, have a potentially resistant aspect). All of this goes back to our previous discussion of appropriation and recontextualization where it is not only technique that is at stake, but to what use these techniques and forms are put, into what contexts they are placed at certain points within history.

Thank you for breaking down the lineage of Oscar Grant Plaza and for parsing differences between OO and Paris Commune, an important thing to do, to historicize these terms we are using—*occupy*, *commune*—which have so pervaded the collective imagination. I love too how you come at pop music, through Rihanna and Ted's and Jasper's debate, so familiar to both of us, and a debate that will no doubt recur until music and art are produced and received through a totally different set of conditions. I can't

wait to read *Flowering Mall*, which sounds amazing, flights about vampires always being welcome, our national pastime it would seem. And with so much extolling of "evil" and "amorality" among various contemporary poets, it will be no doubt refreshing to see how you encounter these questions.

It's admittedly been a challenge to continue with what I was doing before—via *The Hole* and a subsequent manuscript—since the occupations began. Time is marked differently, and I feel that different marking of time. As Filip Marinovich noted to me of Zuccotti Park when it was still occupied, the limits of the park are (or rather were) the spatial limits of *now time* (*Jetztzeit*), a sense of all possible futures and pasts moving within and through the present. I think what I most want is to write something that will not so much compete with the feedback loops and circuits established by the occupations and other political emergencies, so much as aspire to it, taking something from its exigencies.

Hosting a reading series at Pete's Candy Store in Brooklyn last fall and this winter, I have witnessed quite a few writers taking to forms of poetic journalism: Erin Morrill, Stephanie Young, and Anne Boyer in particular. This movement rhymes with other historical moments, like for instance the '60s / '70s when poets felt compelled to mediate their sense of present differently. Beats, New York

School, Black Mountain, all are obviously inflected by traces of this. I wonder how to mediate that sense of time compression that one feels when they are participating in something that seems overwhelmingly sensible as a social movement, which may fit Kant's definition of the sublime in this sense. I realize to re-feel these events (or these feelings for event?) requires a very artificial writing; not spontaneity alone, but a framing and construction of spontaneity that does not completely destroy the original impulses and circumstances through which events came into being.

I have been thinking a lot about this tension between spontaneity and mediation in the transition from say a figure like [Allen] Ginsberg, a poem like "Wichita Vortex Sutra" specifically, to Hannah Weiner's *Clairvoyant Journals* and other works in which she uses the typewriter to negotiate her three voices. And I think this problem, neither purely one of expression or construction, occurs in your work, Dana's, Suzanne's, and others in want of spontaneity, but no longer innocent to the feedback loops of media, the kinds of community- and self-management that social media entails (and I owe this last thought to a recent email with Dana).

So that is what I am exploring. The results so far are three poems, using the sentence as its basic unit, though not really like '90s prose poetry. In each

there is a sense of time—the momentary, fleeting instant—but also the construction of moments (a moving through frames of reflection upon various moments). I am resisting irony in this mode but sometimes feel the pull towards irony. Because irony has something to do with reflexivity, it is perhaps the supreme rhetorical mode of reflexivity. I am also wondering how to extend the problems of *The Hole* and a subsequent manuscript—"Withdrawn"—which are so much about moving amidst community and coterie formations at this micro-political/allegorical level outwards towards larger social movements and discourses, something I think "political" poetries have often tried to do.

Part of this book (or whatever to call its ultimate manifestation) may involve what I was previously describing to you as a re-appropriation of my email archives. It will also possibly use materials culled from the Internet and Facebook, which obviously grow in strangeness as we exist further from their original contexts. Letters, questionnaires to friends, on-the-fly essay writing/notation may also lend materials to this epically minor project. Whatever the outcome, I hope that—as in the case of *The Hole*—we may find ourselves in a situation where it becomes difficult to remember why it was important to us to write these poems and books in the first place, which were/are obviously articulating a desire for a different world. Or perhaps as you say, contra avant-gardism, to

“enframe” and model worlds that are already here in our midst, albeit unrecognized. To enframe the brink of those proximities, too. Which all sounds a bit like Shelley, or George Oppen doing the voice of Shelley, when I really want to sound like Fred Moten or Anne Boyer or Brandon Brown doing the voice of Oppen doing the voice of Shelley.

Love,  
—Thom

Hi Thom,

Today I walked around my office and thought, this is what contemporary capitalism looks like, I mean, from the crudest, most painterly subject position. Subjects absorbed in rectangles. The perfect fit of our bodies and the rectangles, Bifo’s warning (full of pathos) concerning a world marked by connection replacing one that doesn’t fit, that conjuncts, that meets but doesn’t quite fit. I think “enframing the brink” is a key tactic—a parataxis of forms desperate to make themselves known to us, only available to sense perception on the brink and only representable by finding ways of framing the brink.

Much of what you say above reminds me again of the way the AG has villainized “the lyric,” then “narrativity,” and so on, as a way of insisting on the exclusion of the subject. Now this has been more or less accomplished—I mean, we’re really merging with machines! This is not some sublime ‘60s sci-fi sentiment but the obvious data of contemporary life. I think we have to reconsider all of the supposedly stable tropes of poetry—voice, narrative, expression, all of it. I know this is all strikingly simplistic in reference to what sounds like a very nuanced, complex project that you’ve got brewing, but I wanted to finish by wondering about the knowable form it reminds me of most: the anti-autobiography. What I really value this morning about the term might simply be that

striking prefix *anti*. If “autobiography” can be said to maintain a coherent meaning as an activity (life that writes itself) and a genre (the works of our literature known as autobiographies), the places from which this can be taken up oppositionally seem so diverse, so full of potential. I dunno. That seems to me to be the unfinished work of the 19th century in some ways, or at least the contemporary implication of its most extravagantly untimely thinkers.

I know that’s a potentially annoying thought on which to conclude—but actually the affective atmosphere of the last few months, which include the Occupy stuff, which include Greece in flames, which include my reading *The Hole* and *My Common Heart* and *Save the World* and *This Can’t Be Life* and *Amazing Weapons*, which includes the death (for both of us) of dear friends. If I’m able to say ANYTHING as a gnome about what all this “means” for me right now, it’s in the form of an imperatival or exhortatory subjunctive: do not forget. Try as hard as you can to not forget.

Love,  
BB



## IV Our Occupations After the Occupations (for Poetry Foundation, 4/12)



*“Something I am wondering about kind of broadly is how your practices might have changed since the beginning of the occupations, if we can mark this beginning in the fall of 2011 (the occupations obviously having their immediate precedent in the Middle East and Europe).*

*“Do you think it may be possible to speak to this a bit? [...] Succinctly, in a paragraph or two? Maybe it has had no perceivable effect, which is fine of course, and in which case you might talk about why it is important to maintain what you are doing parallel to (or beyond?) current social movements and political events.”*

## BRIAN WHITENER

Two kinds of on-going questions. First, writers continue to write: does “practice” need to change? Some writers continue to write while organizing. Most writers continue to just write. If we argue that text and world are not ontologically contiguous, does this imply a split between the roles of writer and militant? Writing assumes systems of production and distribution. Do those systems need to become objects of intervention? If they did, would this necessitate the emergence of a set of non-textual practices in the “literary” field? Second, what is the cultural world we want to live in? Does framing the question in this way already assume a kind of classical liberal separation between art, the social and the economy? Despite the involvement of writers in occupy movements, the dominant cultural imaginary among experimental-identified writers continues to be that of small artisanal production. What is the world we want to live in? What would be the position of what is (was) known as the aesthetic in this world? If we feel what we write is important, or potentially important, do we need to wage a war of

position towards cultural hegemony as opposed to assuming (falsely) that a limited public sphere exists and that “work” will eventually make a long march through the institutions?

## RICHARD OWENS

The other day I overheard my wife reading one of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales to our little one. I had no idea the story was from Wilde until well after—and for all I knew, the story could just as easily have been written by Kenneth Grahame or A.A. Milne—but what struck me at that moment was a brief passage I heard read aloud: "Spring has forgotten this garden ... so we will live here all the year round." Within the frame of the tale's narrative the statement makes a particular type of sense, but in the instant I heard it uttered I found myself stunned by how the words hung in the air, radically disembodied from their narrative and thus making, at least to me, another type of sense. In the simplest way, the passage reminded me of Thomas Paine's riposte to Thomas Jefferson: "Where freedom is not, there is my country." But more than the struggle to realize a perniciously vacuous concept like freedom or any other kind of specious ideal compatible with capital and identified with western democracy, the commitment to inhabiting a garden spring has rudely forgotten seemed to me a commitment to inhabiting

a space that does not, and may likely never, yield fruit. And according to this logic, anyone who makes this kind of commitment must necessarily confront—from moment to moment, instant to instant—the unrelenting terror of that possibility: No milk today. Nor tomorrow. Nor the day after that.

Thinking at one and the same time about activism and writing practice, the advantage of such a commitment and such a thinking (no milk today or ever) is, I think, manifold. Most immediately, this thinking allows us to circumambulate the language of failure and failure's despicable corollary, success—that is, if we are suspended in struggle and struggle is sustained, as I believe it always already is, even across signal instants that either discourage or reaffirm our various commitments, then there is no winning or losing, no succeeding or failing. What we have instead is a flickering but nonetheless enduring attention that extends itself through the ineradicable recurrence of conflict and antagonism.

Our habit of toggling the differential meanings of the word "occupation" troubles me a good deal and while it's not a word or concept I would easily relinquish, particularly at this juncture, it's worth attending to the contradictory uses of occupation—i.e. our tendency to address, occasionally in the same breath, the occupation of Iraq *and* the occupation of Zuccotti Park or Dewey Square—and I wonder now

if it's possible to reappropriate and fully recuperate a concept like occupation without dragging along the logics of domination, imperialism and ownership, collective or otherwise. The garden, even and especially when abandoned by the regenerative forces of spring, is there, we are within it, and within it and not elsewhere are the conditions for its transformation. In other words, on the scorched earth of globalization there's no place like home, and if the moment of occupation in the US hasn't effected a remarkable change in my approach to writing—or, perhaps more importantly, my interest in the ongoing efforts of my comrades—it has most definitely amplified my affection for the work of others engaged in a variety of struggles on a variety of scales.

## KATHY WESTWATER

### **Itinerant Park Notes**

When Occupy Wall Street began last year I was deeply entrenched in a creative residency on Staten Island at the Fresh Kills landfill, site and subject of PARK—an interdisciplinary performance project with collaborators Jennifer Scappettone and Seung Jae Lee—as it undergoes a 30-year transformation into a park.

Work on PARK began in 2008 during a residency in California around the time that the first tent cities started cropping up in municipal parks there, and my research immediately began to encompass non-recreational residential behavior in parks.

I was in fact deeply obsessed with the collapsing economy, having spent 2010 doing extensive research to understand the derivatives market, including how we managed collectively to have not known about something so massively detrimental

to us all. That research got channeled into the performance/lecture "Deriva-trivia".

Throughout my time working at Fresh Kills in fall 2011, Wall Street felt very present, like a part of or extension of the landfill. The financialization of the processes of making and doing that feed our global culture of consuming and enable the materialization of monuments to waste, Fresh Kills being the archetype, link the two sites, as well as the fact that one can see downtown Manhattan from Fresh Kills. Unsurprisingly yet still worth noting, one cannot see Fresh Kills from Wall Street.

Work on PARK since April 1 this year has occurred while in residence in a former vault in the basement of 14 Wall Street, a building right across the street from the New York Stock Exchange and around the corner from Zuccotti Park. This former vault has been "occupied" by artists for about five years via the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Swing Space Residency Program.

The Vault, as it's been dubbed, is essentially two floors of office space that you access through a set of massive steel doors. I imagine what used to inhabit this space was mostly a whole lot of paper that held a whole lot of value and that now doesn't hold value as efficiently as electronic ones and zeros,

hence the handing over of this seemingly valuable, yet apparently not, real estate to artists.

Last week as I finished a rehearsal at 14 Wall Street, the artists coming in after me said that demonstrators were being lead away in handcuffs outside. When I got to the street I turned east in the direction of the audible sounds of protest nearby. A few doors down, on the steps of Federal Hall, there were protestors holding signs, drumming, and addressing one another and people assembling. There were so many barricades and police it was not possible to engage with the protesters. I could barely see them. But what I could see of them and of the agents of the state looked highly performative.

That the police used Department of Sanitation trucks to cordon off the street, didn't escape my attention, nor that Federal Hall is overseen by the National Park Service.

Two days later I received a letter from Lower Manhattan Cultural Council saying that the landlord of 14 Wall Street was withdrawing LMCC's access to 14 Wall Street and that all the artists who were working in the Vault would have to vacate, cutting short a six-month residency by five months.

While I don't want to say here that the termination of artists' access to the Vault had directly to do with

the protest activity, I will say that throughout the making of PARK I have experienced a perceptual and temporal integration among the phenomena of bankers causing financial meltdowns, economists ineffectually anticipating economic disaster, homeless living in parks, protestors occupying public spaces, police attempting to contain protestors, unaccountable politicians, artists working in underutilized and marginal spaces, and parks being built on former landfill sites.

## STEVE BENSON

I would want to make absolutely no claim to being intelligent or effective in adjusting my poetic practices in response to the occupations' developments, but I have felt and seen that I find my writing is unwilling to reflect as much bitter helplessness or even anger as before, in its ways of inflecting its reflections about whatever it is stating something with reference to.

I also noticed that when I gave a reading, without planning or making any conscious reference to the occupations' culture/ethics that I can remember (there was a lot of improvisation, and I haven't listened to a playback yet), I felt differently than in previous readings, as someone working out his occupation actually of the space (the Emily Harvey Foundation gallery on Broadway in Soho). My experience was of staging something simple enough to be just what it was (not as-if) and as I read and spoke finding the culture of it, its bracing and friction and orienting toward the space and the persons in it through the readings and speakings, gesturings and fiddlings with material stuff that I was doing over

the 60 minutes I was presenting. I decided to start exactly at the time announced for the event, rather than 10-20 minutes later, assuming half the people would be trailing in while it was therefore already underway, not missing the beginning so much as joining the continuity—to find the space occupied, as if out of the ordinary—and likewise I decided to go on longer than a reading is conventionally thought to last (I was not the only performer on the billing). I think these factors, unintentionally but actually, reflected my learning from and thinking about the occupation.

## STEPHEN COLLIS

In one sense, I don't think my practice has changed at all because of Occupy—if anything, being involved in the movement has solidified the importance of what I had been doing for some time now, which is engaging with a social lyric voice evoking the experience of collective political affects: revolutionary rage, solidarity, hope for a better future, sadness at the loss and failures of past movements/revolutions that had now faded (this in books like *Anarchive* and *The Commons*—as well as the forthcoming *To the Barricades*). Thus it was an easy shift from writing poems about the Paris Commune (as I had been doing in the spring of 2011, around the time of the 140th anniversary of the Commune) to writing about Occupy. Indeed one poem, written in the summer of 2011—“Dear Common: Vancouver”—is in some ways my “archetypal” Occupy poem. So from this angle it's like events caught up with the poetry I was writing.

For some time I have been growing critical of too easy and too free a sense of the “avant-garde” (this

especially in light of Conceptualism)—that too many poets thought being aesthetically “radical” was more than enough to engage with the “political.” I’ve been coming around to a position best articulated by Gerald Raunig in *Art and Revolution*, where he refers to art and revolution as “neighbouring zones” whose “overlaps and concatenations...become possible for a limited time, but without synthesis and identification” (I’m going to write more about this at some point, probably in *Jacket2*, where I’m due to do some blogging later in the spring). So: we’re often faced with a situation where poetry and politics seem to have nothing to do with each other, or where poetry and politics must be seamlessly indistinguishable (“my poetry IS politics!”)—where in fact I think it more appropriate to think of them spatially, as neighbouring urban zones one frequently travels between, and which sometimes—in extraordinary moments—become “concatenated.”

But in another sense, something has indeed changed. I began blogging for Occupy Vancouver the moment it began in October 2011, and blogged at times daily, certainly several times a week. I felt a real need to give voice to what I was seeing, to what I was picking up on in terms of what people were “feeling” and “saying” and “doing.” Occasionally, this came out in the form of a poem (Mayakovsky: “The presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetic terms”), and I

duly posted those to the Occupy Vancouver media blog too. Then I began to be asked to read poems at rallies and demonstrations. Now, there’s no reason to assume you have to “dumb down” or change the way you write for such occasions, but I felt this sense of publicness to what I was writing generally since beginning to blog for the movement, the sense of writing not out of “my own” practice and position, but out of the movement, collectively, and I really didn’t mind writing and reading “topical” poems for specific occasions/causes. I’m not sure these are poems that will find their way into books I publish, but I’m glad to have done them, and to have read them to large and affected audiences of “non-poetry” people. It’s a crossing over into a neighbouring zone—one maybe we don’t frequent as poets, but one in which musicians feel comfortable. Play the hit. Play the pop song. Play the one people can dance or sing along to.

It comes down to contexts I guess. And a revolution is a different context than an avant-garde, though they can overlap once in a while.

## BRIAN ANG

My practices are profoundly shaped by “the post-2008 market crash’s systemic re-exposure of capitalism’s brutality at the level of everyday life and resultant re-ignition of political imagination and praxis for the efficacy of activism” (“Poetry and Militancy,” *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion* 4, 2011). The University of California protests since 2009 enabled my participation in the situation empowered by the resources I had: I was most empowered by Marxism which I gained knowledge to through Language writing and avant-garde interests generally. My practices are concerned with the provision of resources toward militancy, as in *Paradise Now’s* Marxist Flarf motivated by my interest in Flarf’s aesthetics and dissatisfaction with its politics, which along with Conceptual Writing’s politics I historicize as symptomatic of the post-9/11 political pessimism; *Communism’s* engagement with contemporary continental philosophy; *THEORY ARSENAL’s* provision of contemporary Left theory; *Pre-Symbolic’s* reverse crash course through 2500 years of history; and my journal *ARMED CELL’s* aim

“to be... a site for the study necessary for executing political actions,” its first issue, distributed at the Durruti Free Skool in August 2011, including on its first page David Lau’s “Communism Today”’s “Occupy everything, including Humanities” from the University of California protests and the notion of enacting communism with a lower case c.

The University of California protests and other post-2008 activisms contributed to the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon’s explosion the following month. The Occupy Wall Street phenomenon amplified the empowerment of individual praxis’ potentially prodigious effects glimpsed in the University of California protests. The frequently fledgling University of California protests made its reproduction a frequently principal concern, while the Occupy phenomenon’s explosion enabled a panoply of immediately productive praxes as a more principal concern. The emphasis on immediate praxis made more palpable the radicality-diminishing consequences of unrigorous rejection of knowledges’ political potentials. This led to the development of “Anti-Community Poetics” against “a danger of community[’s]... immanent cultural valorization leading to unrigorous thought and praxis” and my solution in “the consideration of the totality of knowledge to exceed community circumscription” (“Anti-Community Poetics,” *The Claudius App* 2, 2012) in *The Totality Cantos*, “a poem... about

everything, the synchronous archive of present knowledge... prioritizing subjects in the context of totality for specific interventions and the total insurrectionary panoply of knowledge" ("From *Pre-Symbolic to Totality: On Method*," *ARMED CELL 2*, 2012). These practices represent the best I've thus been able to do in rigorously considering aesthetics and politics accurate to the present in the capacity of poetry.

## ANA BOŽIČEVIĆ

I spent the year before the Occupations dreaming and writing about the revolution. There's no less cheesy way to put it – *damage que le coeur aime du fromage*. I sang a rhetoric of the polis – it was a matter of life and death. Let me explain. To speak with a public sort of confidence, or to speak at all, seemed to require that one feel at home in the world – at home enough to fight for it, for some notion of rights for oneself and others – whereas I don't feel of the world, and rarely imbue my presence in it with any significance at all. "It's like I'm already dead." At the time, I thought this feeling might have originated in capitalism. To sing to the polis, I believed, was to court life, and when the Occupations came, I frankly expected to be resurrected: for the promise of my song to bear itself out, and through this outward manifestation to lift me, and the country I live in, from the grave. (Happy Easter!)

What happened was more complex. In brief: instead of banishing death, I grew to understand that *it was* my home. Death is a place that runs much deeper

than capitalism, which after all is just a parasitic system whose deadening effect should not be mistaken for rigor mortis. It is, in fact, predicated on the *fear* of death. The fear is the source of public malaise, of apathy. To paraphrase Will, we weep to have that which we fear to lose. The Occupiers, in their selflessness, while sitting on the ground pepper-sprayed, fought not just for life, but for death. This struggle curiously resembles that of poetry, as one has been reading here (where we are) recently.

What the Occupations have given my practice is the joy of death: the fear is gone. Here is a poem called "When the Dead Sing Out." I find the idea that poetry is dead very invigorating and witty: it is a properly lyrical statement: because the lyre has always held special powers in the underworld, and "now more than ever seems it rich to die." I find it wonderful to sing into death. Or not. As in the Orphics: "Rejoice at the experience! This you have never before experienced. ... You have fallen as a kid into milk. Hail, hail, as you travel on the right, through the Holy Meadow and Groves of Persephone." Perhaps like in that Tarot card Bhanu pulled, to heal we must be ghosts, fail like J. Halberstam advises. Let the revolution assure us of our mortality. It does not matter that I am dead, but you matter to me, and for that I'll fight.

DAVID BUUCK

**Some Provisional Notes on Occupy Oakland, on the occasion of Occupy Oakland's six-month anniversary**

Shortly after the establishment of the Occupy Oakland camp on 10/10/11, several Bay Area poets started the Occupy Oakland Poets affinity group, primarily for information sharing and an emergency phone tree in case of police raids and/or arrests. Soon Sara Larsen, David Brazil, and other poets organized a weekly "Poetry for the People" open-mic at Oscar Grant Plaza. The call went out for poets to come and read 'work from the radical poetry tradition' (i.e. PFP's not a talent show but a way of connecting our moment with historical struggles and poetic traditions). However salutary the call (and subsequent PFPs), it did make me begin to ask where 'our' radical tradition is? What does it mean that when we hear the words 'radical poetic tradition' we can only think of poets from several decades ago, and/or poetry deemed radical primarily based on its use

of more 'obvious' political content or inspirational exhortations?

Given the rapid and militant intensification of Occupy Oakland's direct actions and confrontations with the city and its military wing, these questions morphed into the larger one of the usefulness of poetry in and for #OO. Was I participating in #OO 'as a poet,' or was the fact that I write or make art — however 'socially engaged' — irrelevant to the more pressing needs of the moment (needs which often require physical engagement above and beyond linguistic faculties)? Certainly being a 'good' poet has nothing to do with one's activism, just as being an activist does not in itself make my poetry 'better' or more interesting, or even more 'political.' Is an affinity group made up of poets necessarily any different (in the context of Occupy) than one made up of, say, carpenters, who would at least seem to have a more useful set of skills to (bad pun warning) bring to the table?

Regardless, while my work/identity with/in Occupy Oakland feels more and more divorced from my work/identity as a writer/artist, my artistic work feels increasingly (& productively) challenged by my participation in/with #OO. I (really!) don't want to fetishize active participation (since not everyone can put their bodies on the line in the same ways), and I can't speak to the very different contingencies

of other Occupys, but experiencing confrontations in public space & real time, as well as at GAs and working group sessions, one can see how discursive practice adapts in new & creative ways to new situations (always framed by the profoundly different identity-positions and educational comfort levels of participants, as well as the asymmetrical resource war with the police state), and how such adaptations produce new modes and questions for language practices (the real-time enjambments and collective projection of the peoples' mic, the psychogeography of public speech, chants, slogans & graffiti spread through a diversely-bodied experience of public space-time, testing its boundaries 'in the streets'). I (really!) don't wish to romanticize such confrontations and the diversity of performative tactics that spring up in response, but these have produced what to me feel like new modes of on-the-fly collective theorizing in practice. Marx's "the senses have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians..." comes alive in the affective experience of bodies socially entangled in struggle, even if only over a single city block's worth of territory. Theorizing-in-practice thus is the tactical and strategic thinking a group does in contingent situations (as well as in the planning 'before' and the assessments 'after' [which is also another 'before' — before the next moves]) which is some messy and beautiful conflagration of evolving organic intellectualism of the hive, buzzing in the gas of the would-be masked-up beekeepers.

“Shields to the front!” is thus not a slogan, even as we chant it in moments of disorganized swarming, our bodies twisting to send the message from the front back to the reinforcements.

Thus my (attempts at/research towards) aesthetic practice of the last six months comes out of these (always over-determined & antagonistic) situations, and the pressing questions they pose for theory/practice — i.e. *method*. Perhaps my BARGE work has sharpened such questions for myself more than my writing, but either way even if I don’t come to #OO ‘as a poet/artist’ I still can’t not always press up against questions of aesthetics, even during the most intensified encounters with the state (think of the mugshot, the police surveillance video, the live-streams & real-time tweets, the armchair blogposts, etc., all with their own aesthetic valences). To imagine the poethics of such encounters is to ask the question from the POV of an as-yet undetermined future: How will ‘all this’ have been represented (and by whom, with what resources, for what audiences, towards what, etc.)?

Whether or not my own writing has or will change as a result of my participation, certainly the questions I ask of my practice (both method and ‘work’) have fundamentally changed, and for me it is only from the grappling with such questions (through constant self-interrogation and embodied ‘research’) and their

framings (which for me requires an antagonistic relation to the conditions of mediation offered by both power and various aesthetic ‘traditions’) that any changes in how & what I produce as an artist will become manifest (which is certainly not to say that the results will therefore be ‘good’ or interesting!).

Thus the primary and most pressing question for my work in relation to Occupy Oakland is something along the lines of: what kinds of representational strategies – i.e. what kinds of art – do these new conditions and situations demand? Should I ‘go to’ Occupy and simply insert the content into the forms I already use (swap “Wall Street” with 2010’s “BP” for some insta-Occupo)? Should I take the more obvious linguistic tendencies in Occupy and ‘apply them’ to my work (mic-check poems, appropriated slogans, etc.)? Is documentary poetry ‘enough’? ‘Inspirational’ poetry? Neo-formalist gestures + overt ‘political content’ + some white liberal hand-wringing = put me in your Occupy-themed issue?

Less it reads as if I’m making crass judgments of well intentioned and historically important poetics, I should note that in the little poetry I’ve written in the last six months, I have been guilty of most of these tropes. Yet even as I continue to try to return to that old question of the relation between form and content, I’d really like to question what one even means by content anymore, since for me it is not

simply current events or information. Part of this is the 'aboutness' or the 'looking at' problem ("My new poem is about Occupy" or "In this new poem, I'm looking at how Occupy..."), but at a deeper level I'd like to suggest that social forms (in all their volatility) and movement (not a social movement – as entity — but social **movement** itself — as action, moving ahead and against) are also kinds of content, and the aesthetic forms of representation 'appropriate' to such ever-changing contents will need to rethink themselves in this historical moment. What this might even look like remains an open question, but the shared interrogation of these questions — for both activists and artists — seems to me to be one of the most pressing — and exciting — new terrains opened up by the Occupy experiments.

Perhaps, then, each revolution gets the prosody it deserves, and we might yet will have heard, in the plazas and the streets, in a multitude of voices, languages, and linguistic forms, ever-changing and improvising into untold and evermore-beautiful failures: This is what experimental poetry looks like! No, *this* is what experimental poetry looks like! No, *this* is what experimental poetry looks like...

— *Oakland* : 3/10/12

## SUZANNE STEIN

I've been reflecting so much on this very question, handling and examining the ways the occupations, since September, have affected me, or, "my" work and me. One of the things I've been turning over and over is a question about how I thought of myself and my work as a poet previously—before Occupy—as being a sort of 'occupation,' as we are using the word currently – my daily labor an occupation of, an occupational intervention in to, the institution I work for, for example; or my treatment, engagement or refusal of other structural, institutional (art, poetry, community, publishing, performance) demands. First, Occupy makes me feel both how rich and how horribly impoverished my attempts have been. Next, it causes me to wonder what is the next right thing to do in our changing context. A poet who before wished for every work to be taking place in some sort of amplified—and often frenetic, if infrequent—relationality, I find myself withdrawing to ever-quieter, ever more distanced forms of solitude. I find myself struggling with ever greater difficulty in uttering sentences or phrases, let alone write or organize

them. Or utter or organize actions. I am not in any fray. I'm watching and listening more. I'm slower to know or judge how I think or feel, I'm tenderer and more cautious with myself and with others than I was before. My sense of compassion is deepening and growing. Six months isn't a very long time, so it is difficult to say if my practice will invite or sustain any structural change, or if it should. Maybe I feel responsible to slowness, to gentleness, to caution and care?

## ANNA VITALE

I'm uncomfortable with my relationship to politics. I hardly know what it is (politics and the relationship) except for this discomfort. Growing up in an atmosphere that was unbelievably nostalgic for almost all failed revolutions, especially the October Revolution of 1917, continues to produce in me an enormously confused relationship to social political action. How did Occupy change my writing? I want to keep asking: what is my relationship to the idea of politics? What is my relationship to living. And then I want to look around and read what you wrote. These concerns have a new context. You who have been involved (I haven't), especially my close and not-so-close friends, are showing me that these questions are necessary to ask not only because of my own past (crucial), but also because there is so much pressure inside these questions in the present. (That pressure was palpable in Madison last spring when I couldn't avoid going to the capitol because of the flow of bodies heading there daily). So, in my writing, I'm trying to push the past and the present together in order to see how distinct they are (without denying

their connection). Like The Smiths' song, "How Soon Is Now?" It's usually sooner than I think, so I'm trying to include that in the writing more than I used to.

## DAN THOMAS GLASS

In the weeks leading up our second daughter Alma's birth, as Occupy Oakland & my wife Kate bloomed & opened, I went to Oscar Grant Plaza twice. Once I took Sonia, my older daughter, nearly three then. I was impressed by the spontaneous reorganization of life taking place in the plaza—an opening of things that had been closed, it seemed. I was scared for Sonia there. I recognized this fear as ideologically determined—dramatically so—that the space of the plaza was outside the bounds of the safely guarded limits of my day-to-day life. Such a range of people, & a willingness to talk to one another across the boundaries of differences. But I was still scared for Sonia—I didn't feel comfortable letting her roam in the ways that she would have liked. I didn't let her cross boundaries. I kept her close. I felt a kind of shame at this discomfort, though I knew I had good reason for it. I still do. A shame that blooms & opens. But when I went back I didn't bring Sonia. & I never went near OO when arrest was a remote possibility. I couldn't cross those boundaries. I felt shame about this, & also pride & fear for those who did—who

went & linked arms & got beat & arrested & put their bodies in harm's way.

After Alma's birth I spent a long time being amazed at how different time felt. All the time with bodies in our arms, bodies needing us! A new kind of all the time. In new ways, negotiating the two little bodies together as they orbited each other & us, touching them when I wake up or get home from work to reassure myself that time is material, that they are living. And then also this awareness, coterminous, all the time, of other bodies putting their bodies in the service of the needs of bodies from across boundaries. Watching these bodies on grainy internet streams, in words on feeds, while feeding Alma or Sonia, in the streaming that hours become in the fracturing of diurnal rhythms.

Like Suzanne Stein, I have become quieter. "I'm slower to know or judge how I think or feel, I'm tenderer and more cautious with myself and with others than I was before." Dana Ward wrote a poem that I've read since Fall 2011 called "Aeolian Phone," a poem that I love about objects and touching and bodies and connection, and near the end it says:

When I button my shirt I feel the armor my warm life has given to me in a serious variety of forms when I speak against the war against everything weak I have an everlasting thought

about thought so I write this shit right here it used to be the hottest hip hop website in the world & now it's just the fucking internet period deformed by the rainbow that's surging through its surface like the wind waking each thing to its peril I had a lyrical thought about tornadoes and it was a rhapsode the structure of which had a look of salacious efficiency which gave me to a mortifying thought about my writing so I sutured the harp of my phone to my mouth to try to speak Aeolian thoughts against going on like this I button my lips until the wind collects itself into a suffocating prism refracting the light into a rainbow that swallows the world & then it pukes & then the world is there again like a rainbow & I know what's over it not Oz but the genie in Rimbaud or not that though truly the internet talks to me softly sometimes/it says that it loves me too much/it doesn't have anything I want to steal/well/nothing I can touch

I am not in any fray, but I am streaming & feeding & blooming & opening & trying hard to be honest. I am in the armor of my warm life, but I am trying to touch what streams & talks to me softly by loving too much the things I can touch.

## LAUREN LEVIN

It's tough trying to sum up the effect of the Occupations on my work (writing and living) – this still feels like a time for reflecting and consolidating (and maybe, soon, returning). Maybe it's easiest to sum it up by saying that the Occupations made a lot visible to me – or palpable in a more visceral way.

First, the wave of action, its sweep through my friends and my community, reminded that things could be otherwise. That there are openings to other worlds and other frameworks. I was listening to Nina Simone sing "Mississippi Goddam" yesterday ("Can't you see it / Can't you feel it / It's all in the air") and she says "This is a show tune / But the show hasn't been written for it, yet." That we are always in the process of writing this show, there's that.

What I also saw: the weight of repression when we try to be otherwise. A weight that's external (the police state) and internal (I've been thinking a lot about fear). Because to date I've been spared the worst forms of precarity – I have a job, health insurance,

my debt is so-far manageable – the awful fact of how things are can seem like a bland surface to me. I slide over it. Its horrors are distant from me, and produce more low-grade anxiety than active feeling. But since the violent and destructive state response to the Occupations I've felt something I couldn't unfeel, and I perceive that bland surface differently, roiling with repressive energy.

Directly in my work, I've been trying to continue the opening to thinking, feeling, and seeing, against my constant tendency to settle into what's comfortable. I work on my discomfort with a (somewhat paranoid) lyric scanning of myself for points of collision with the world...and looking for traces of the ideologies I've been trained in, that naturalize injustice and make it feel inevitable.

I'm also working on a project trying to consider the prison system, from the point of view of absence. That millions of people are being vanished from their communities.

Vanished into a racist and dismissive discourse that robs them of full humanity: i.e. that violence against prisoners somehow isn't violence, and doesn't count in the crime rate.

As a pretty anxious person (have I mentioned anxiety yet?) I know that my own cravings for security are

used to build this awful edifice. That I'm allowed and tempted to look away. So trying to write about that, too

Finally, realizing how myopic my vision tends to be, the Occupations have made me want to work more collaboratively, to try to extend my range and give myself an opportunity for the learning I so need. I've been working on critical essays about writers who I think succeed in prefiguring other systems, other worlds, to try to understand how they do it. This feels like collaborating, in a reader-to-writer way, with their ideas.

I worked with an amazing group of women on trying to build a Debt Play from survey results. And I'm helping out visual artist Cassie Thornton with her long-term project to interrogate security and securitization. (In that role, I get to be a proud, card-carrying member of the Feminist Economics Department.)

Often I feel like with this work I'm just struggling to get to the surface of myself at all – to the larger forums of action, the could-be-otherwise, to where I could join up with others. I wish I were further along. But hopefully reading and articulating confusion is worth something, at least for demystification.

## ANELISE CHEN

I am writing a book in which the word "I" appears—at last count—968 times. Some have said that the book "rides on a wave of extreme egoism." Since the book is about capitalism and competition and suicide, it seems fitting to me that the word "I" should appear so often. It is, as Sontag would say, my will objectified, my impulse for self-preservation captured on sheets of paper. I started writing the book in 2010, two years after the financial meltdown.

Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*, a book I have come to rely heavily upon, shows with convincing statistical evidence how suicide rates increase in times of economic prosperity and depression and decrease in times of social unrest (revolutions, wars). What happens during periods of social unrest is that the individual is temporarily integrated into "society," or any unit that is other than the self, including spouses, families, small groups of like-minded people. This integration reduces the risk of egoistic suicide (which happens when people have too much individuality),

and anomic suicide (when society fails to serve as a check to our desires).

Having only experienced the economic depression side of that equation, when the occupations came, I did feel a kind of "resurrection." The occupations were a promise against the death grip of capitalism. Perhaps when Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif wrote that during the twenty days of the Egyptian Revolution her friends "forgot to take their pills and have now thrown them away," that was the life force they were also experiencing. Capitalism had made us all narcissists, and we were sick with the self.

For most people, the marches and chants provided a welcome reprieve from the loneliness of self-regard. We had finally escaped the funhouse! But what did this freedom look like, for the artist?

An unexpected consequence of the resurrection: while the occupations were happening, I found it almost impossible to write. Something inside me had come to life, but it did not want to be at a desk. I had people to speak to. I didn't need to fill my own silence. I was wholly preoccupied with reality. I had no time for anything else.

And here was Durkheim, again: "To think, it is said, is to abstain from action; in the same degree, therefore, it is to abstain from living."

As a person, I couldn't have felt more alive. As a writer, I felt dead. Probably it seems ridiculous to make this kind of distinction between "person" and "writer," but it feels accurate. I knew I had to make a decision: I could either think or do. The necessary annihilation was itself double-aspected. In order to think, I had to abstain from action, but by abstaining from action I was making myself complicit with the system that made me feel dead.

That November, Arundhati Roy was scheduled to speak to occupiers at Washington Square. It was pouring rain that day, so we all went inside the auditorium at Judson Church, across the street. Since there was a podium, we assumed the shape of an audience, and sat quietly waiting for the invisible curtain between performer and spectator to lift. Unsurprisingly, it felt ridiculous doing the human mic. Roy shouted into her (actual) mic, and we shouted back from our seats. Something was amiss. But Roy went along with it, and said her usual powerful things, which we obediently mirrored back to her.

After, there was a casual book signing, which again seemed out of place. This was turning out to be an event merely in the "Style of the Revolution." The rain drove us indoors, and there had been no time between the weather and her appearance to figure out an alternative format. While she signed my book, I asked her if it was possible to be an activist

and a novelist at the same time, or if one had to be one or the other at separate times. "I believe it is possible to be both," she said with a sort of sly smile that suggested more. She would not have time to elaborate how one could pull it off.

Liberty Plaza would be evacuated. As I watched police and sanitation workers toss books into giant garbage bins, something again, died. I had nowhere to go, suddenly, on Friday evenings when Poetry Assembly was supposed to be happening. I stayed at home and wrote.

One entry:

*At Poetry Assembly the facilitator asks what a radical poetic practice might look like. The facilitator says that what we are doing is playing out a structure of horizontal inclusiveness. Maybe it's time we start switching up our metaphors. To replace the verticality of the I with something else. This is an interesting request to ask of artists because of our egos, and our inevitable control issues. I go to the Arts and Culture working group and everyone's eyes are bright with the enthusiasm of their own ideas. One group wants to sell Occupy-related art at locations around the city. A well-known orchestra conductor asks if he and a small quartet can play for*

*the protestors, because they never get to perform for the 99%. There is much discussion about occupying museums. The group talks earnestly for several minutes about whether to collaborate with for-profit organizations. After each person has said his or her piece, they leave to do other things. I can't tell if this is for the sake of efficiency, or if it's indicative of something else. In support of the movement, a rising young novelist organizes a marathon reading with a bunch of other rising young novelists. All their names are listed under his name like a roster in a program. I am surprised by how much this arrangement bothers me. Which means, maybe, that the experiment is working. Perhaps I've recognized something of myself in this gesture, this unquenchable need to be acknowledged.*

Is it important to be critical of how things are done, as long as they are being done? I think the occupations have taught us that yes—style matters. Sontag: "Style is a means of insisting on something." The occupations themselves are works of art; the collective will objectified, with their own sets of rhythms and tropes. Style has to be (the occupation's) main preoccupation. The revolution won't live any other way.

But who will be making this work of art? Will I be included? Does the revolution even need me? How can I proceed as an artist—how can I live? The relationship between art and revolution, I think, is one that will require many deaths and many resurrections. Or, I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out.

LARA DURBACK

So “poet” has always been a default thing for me, I have been suspicious always of things that require me to relay the names of authors. Though I read, read, and read, I want poetry to be more about living and less about doing work inside. I am confused when things are not immediate. I have trouble remembering proper names and things on paper, even information in sequential order. Maybe it's a selective aversion of my memory to everything representing hierarchy, or maybe I just remember things more through interaction, which is why poetry has fit in. If a piece of clothing I wear doesn't have some weird meaning and story behind it, I don't want to wear it. It's kind of like the same with what I do now. I still want to do poetry, but I care even less about having a book or having a name. Is that bad? I care more about publishing, but it might be letterpress on trash with no names again and just REALLY good content.

Since October 10, 2011, (birth of Oscar Grant Plaza/Oakland Commune/etc. etc. whatever you wanna

call it)... for me there has been a loosening of home, relationships, the physical ground beneath people in Oakland.... I wrote at length about this [here](#). I remember being particularly excited by my friend recalling a protest in Oaxaca: the streets being jackhammered away, concealed by the gigantic skirt of a stilt performer. In Oakland, I felt the raw dirt rumble under my feet in Oscar Grant Plaza in a few small earthquakes. I helped weed at the new farm at the UC Berkeley land in Albany the other day. They've got chickens and irrigation and have transformed this lot so quickly. I am often sitting on some pavement somewhere, or floor, at some meeting, or on grass at the OO BBQ drawing with a 4-year-old, or serving food, or painting a banner... and and and...my writing has not changed at all. I write constantly in notebooks by hand. I have a hard time transferring things to this typing. If I do a reading it is composed out of the notes.

I participated in this art show for ILSSA (Impractical Labor in Service of the Speculative Arts) in January: a bunch of artists display remnants from what they made every day for a year. Basically I ship out a box of scraps: mine was pieces of thread and scraps from making chapbooks at the beginning, and the last 3 months of the year were nothing but the scraps of Oscar Grant Plaza Gazette, digital misprints and over-prints from the daily paper I was scrambling to help

put out. (It's still going without me! Go Oakland!) So that shows how my practice changed.

I have become very serious of my support of people who may have higher stakes than I do. I now seem to hang out in very unpredictable clusters and think about how to make the clusters unpredictable again.

I described some of the things I've gone through standing in the streets for hours as "masochism lite" to my friend Lindsey Boldt. It is and it isn't. It wouldn't be masochism lite to people who grew up in different ways, because it would be proportionately different to what was experienced daily. People sometimes chastise a person for being too averse to "comfort." Whose comfort? Whose security? Whose safety? What? For a while I had forgotten how bad the police are because I now live in California where everything is spread out. I used to know how bad they were in Philly where people are squashed together, but in grad school isolation land I forgot. I paid my literal huge debt to get my separate environment & job, but was grossly isolated. (But it's worth it for the dedicated people I met there!)

I've seen many poets here in Oakland go through this freeze frame of not knowing what to do anymore, of seeing some sort of comfort of order shattered, of having to leave and not really return. Going back to the norm? I don't know. I've seen a pattern among

those who stay as having some deep pain in them, that allows them to return. And because the deep pain has always separated people by their smartness of knowing that there were hunches of better ways to live, now these people with deep pain are in the deepest joy and in these wonderful solidarity networks. I get joy from sitting in the courtroom with someone who might not have had another person there for them. This has proportionately more joy as the person's background who you are supporting is the most different from your own. I get joy from hearing about others helping one another in these crazy situations, making sure people they don't know are safe in a crowd, sitting in jail all night in the waiting room for a friend. People largely ended up there because they just want to be outside together or use some building or space in a more creative way, and these rude robots are whacking sticks at you and chemicals and it is so scary and awful but you realize it is much worse with police for people of color in poor neighborhoods where there is systematic living with police and the cycles of the justice system... and of course the solidarity grows when that injustice is acknowledged publicly in different ways.

Yes, I know it will feel less invigorating soon, it will not feel so joyful every minute out in the streets/parks/lots/gardens/reclaimed everyspaces. It will cycle back around both ways. And if you hear me read again anytime soon you're going to have to hear

me reference all this in some way, maybe not yelling "hella hella occupy," but knowing that anything that keeps me in my house too long is not worth it for poetry or anything else.

## JEANINE WEBB

Writing here on the almost-eve of the May 1st General Strike, I want to speak to the flavor of this question, which is an excellent one to pose, and think, “after”? —and here I mean to respond not so much to Thom’s question but to a sort of feeling of radical weariness I’m getting from some of the previous responses here—for, though in the U.S. our occupations brought to bear in the fall have been physically demolished in the winter of our occupied discontent, in the global flow of contraries, our occupations everywhere are present. These ideas live still and are beginning to burst forth again, one knows, with the fresh spirit they still deserve. Perhaps you are thinking at this time that I, mostly a terminal cynic, am sounding utopian, but I don’t care! For if ever our poets will not sound utopian and find themselves paralyzed with fear or withdrawal, how can one live? How will we even begin to imagine our untraded futures?

O Spring! “the ecstasy of always bursting forth!”;  
“He who worries or she who dares/To die practically

without mentioning/Again our idiotic utopian friendships.” Well, let’s. Burst; mention!

Especially when poets are so into dreaming of “wild implicit economies on the opaque side of legibility.”

Besides, my friends: “I’ve accepted my mind works best when imitating vantages of Paradise”!

Beginning in 2010, after the first wave of the California student occupation and protests which had their inception in 2009, some of my friends and I began to meet and discuss a poetic praxis supplemented by real direct action and theory of political economy. A poetic praxis that aligns itself with labor. A poetic praxis that, in the tradition of the Situationists, recognizes that Poetry is not Enough, by itself, to change the material. A poetics which seeks to envision and confront the collective future, to share both poems and disagreements and actions in a real politics of friendship.

With the Occupies, this opened out. We schemed and shared in office cubicles, on stolen breaks, under bailers, at bars, at lunch counters, in bookstores, in dingy conference rooms and community centers, in creaky and glowing galleries, littered fields, concrete garages, granite parks, in 2nd-floor classrooms with windows that don’t open, how we have known the dust of institutions. Everyone was making genuinely

surprising things. We watched. On little screens, on livestreams, at interminable GAs. And we went out into the real movement of action whenever we could, in person, embodied, yes, in the “fray,” defending and taking public space. My friends everywhere, most of them young people, people who came of age on the cusp of a literal millennium, were touched by many things killing us softly. The job market yawning apocalyptically before us, then the condition of precarity, of austerity, with its temporary illusory work, its foreclosures of homes and of the future, with its lack of benefits for us and our loved ones, its lack of health insurance. And then when we sat in a park and were happy and they sent in the riot cops to confiscate our fall leaflets. Later, there was a standoff over Their desire to wash the blood off of the pavement. By which I mean not the figurative, but real. We thought a lot about these words: “underwater,” “connectivity,” “surplus value,” “conditions,” “spectacle,” “default,” “visceral,” “crisis,” “friendship.”

I confess I do not have a writing “practice,” if practice means a disciplined regularly scheduled production. Still, poems thankfully will insist to appear, slowly or in bursts of energy. For my part squares began to proliferate in my own work. Plazas, gatherings, architecture, riot cops, books and book blocs. But also literal squares: square text ornaments and poems in textual blocs. Then, long lines in advancing

and receding waves. I began to collage, longing for immediate energies of cutting and pasting and for collaboration,\* read Apollinaire again, looked at radical political images of the past, read histories, played a million songs on repeat, thinking of the mashup, thinking of aggregation and interplay, of how to represent the collective, but thinking most viscerally of friends, who I had danced with months before, many who were other poets, being beaten, pepper-sprayed and arrested. Again, and again. How this was important. How this almost never “happened” on the news but in another room, and then later on the internet they said the blood on the linoleum “wasn’t real.” The court rejected the smashed fingers at the hands of the police. Weapons were leaved, more or “less lethal.” If I developed a practice of writing it was this: go to the actions, when possible. When not possible, support by any other means available, try not to succumb to despair. Read everything. Write to share with friends and so as not to succumb to despair.

Meanwhile, “To my/great relief –/ the world.”

We watched the strike in Puerto Rico, the burning of Athens, the return to Tahrir, the taking of the Port of Oakland by hundred thousands. And now public squares again have begun to hum with energy, and today small red squares made of felt are proliferating on the thoroughways and quartiers and liens of

Quebec, on the breasts of thousands of students and their supporters striking and rioting against crippling student debt and fees and cuts to bursaries. Like little safety-pinned echoes of Malevich, the symbol, they say, is a reference to the phrase “carrément dans la rouge”/“squarely in debt” which refers to their state of emergency, their invisible enmirement under weight. These bright squares cover the squares. And again, people go out into the street in Québec, in Prague, in Chile, in Bahrain to resist.

There is comfort in this and the fact that our occupations will not long be “after” and they will not be without poems so long as “The/friend/is difficult ‘to localize.’”

\*this collaborative poem features lines by Brian Ang, Sirama Bajo, Serena Chopra, Erin Costello, Michael Flatt, Melissa Mack, Marlon MacAllister, and myself. Assembled from mailed and emailed lines + pieces of correspondence.

## JENNIFER SCAPPETONE

### **The Trash-Mount and the Vault: Two Underbellies**

“You know why this is filthy and not clean is there isn’t leadership,” he said. —“Occupy L.A.: 30 tons of debris left behind at City Hall tent city,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2011

I’ve been interested in garbage for as long as I can remember. My parents supplemented my father’s endangered underling-on-Wall-Street salary by setting up at flea markets on Sundays to sell antiques and other seemingly random “collectibles,” and consequently many of our weekends were punctuated by stopovers at “sales,” where my father would expertly scan peoples’ open driveways and garages for identifiable cast-off toys and figurines, wound and ticking things and tschotskes of value, while my mother dug more deeply for anything he’d missed, plus costume jewelry and other rhinestones-in-the-rough. This practice was rooted further back in the family history; my great-grandfather moved to Lower Manhattan from Southern Italy following the

devastation of his crops at the turn of the twentieth century and acquired a pushcart for the sale of used items, which eventually turned into a salvage shop downtown co-run by my grandfather, who could, unlike his father, read and speak English—slow progressive steps up from the traditional work of the ragpicker carried out by those humbled on the social scale. By some strike of fortune I grew up next to two sites I always associated with garbage, though their waste was never forthcoming to the naked eye, but instead inhaled and imbibed by those on our cheap edge of an otherwise affluent Long Island suburb: a nameless postindustrial complex overseen by a monumental black water tower branded CERRO WIRE in view across the street, and the fenced “sump” (a landfill that accepted the Cerro complex’s industrial waste, I learned decades later) next to my elementary school just down the hill.

“After being referred to as ‘garbage’ by city director Erma Hendrix, Occupy Little Rock took their protest to City Hall Tuesday night, hoping to clarify their message of ‘We are the 99%.’” —“Occupy Little Rock: We are not garbage,” *Fox News*, February 28, 2012

In the Fall of 2011 choreographer Kathy Westwater, architect Seung Jae Lee, trailbuilder Leigh Draper, and I were conducting field work for a residency sponsored by iLAND (the interdisciplinary Laboratory

for Art, Nature, and Dance) to continue the development of *PARK*, a series of performative and research-based acts that, as I put it in introducing our November presentation on the North Mound of Fresh Kills Landfill, sought to etch into the landscape through our respective languages—dance, poetry, pathmaking, architecture—the conditions that characterize the distressed landscape’s translation from a site of trauma to a commons.

“Mayor Ed Lee’s administration declared OccupySF a ‘public health nuisance....’ But as noted by public health nurse Martha Hawthorne, ‘When is the last time city department heads have left their offices and taken a walk through the Tenderloin, just minutes away from the San Francisco Occupy site?.... Garbage on the street? It’s there and has been for years, the inevitable consequence of the lack of affordable housing and years of cutbacks to mental health and substance abuse funding in San Francisco.’ —“Public health and Occupy,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 29, 2011

In strategizing about the poetic content of this work, I hoped to continue formulation of a verbal and material archive of the invisible and unspeakable contents of Fresh Kills—that monument to consumption at the western edge of Staten Island, “visible from space” and yet invisible to most New Yorkers, which in its brief lifespan through the

postwar booms and busts of 1948-2001 served as the repository for 150 million tons of solid waste, accreting four massive hills or mounds over time amid the tidal creeks and coastal marshes once inhabited by Lenape fishermen. It seemed an inherently political act to conduct an imaginative “archaeology” of this site in particular, of its buried knowledges—to transmit to language and the senses the afterlife of rabid consumption habits being broken down under our feet. It also seemed crucial to articulate the fact that Fresh Kills is the no-longer-stinking underbelly of Manhattan, just as Coney Island (also visible from Fresh Kills), is its fantasy-double. That Fresh Kills faces the absent Twin Towers, monuments to global finance capitalism and scars of its attack, and that the site of disquieting name received the sifted aftermath of 9/11 for apparent lack of any other place, swarmed in consciousness as Zuccotti Park was occupied as Liberty Square across the waters. Could language, dance, and design reanimate the abjected underbelly of global capitalism, restoring social substance to an apparently faceless, reticent, alienated landscape?

“Five other women aged 55 to 80 from the Action Now group were also arrested Tuesday, after they took garbage from a foreclosed home owned by Bank of America and dumped it in one of the bank’s branches.” —“Occupy Chicago Protestors Dumped Garbage From A Foreclosed House In Front Of A

Bank Of America,” *Business Insider*, October 13, 2011

Following on Seung Jae Lee’s cup “telephones” of our June 2010 presentation at Fresh Kills, which vibrated kite strings the length of a playing field to articulate the words of visitors back to themselves as though they were issuing from the ground, I determined that perhaps words could be threaded onto such strings to make Hansel and Gretel trails, dysfunctional kites. I began collecting language—the language of my garbage: cutting away and stashing all threadable words. This sporadically revolting process made me aware over the course of months of the many *kinds* of waste incorporated into recycling facilities and landfill: not only the waste of raw material, of labor, of the energy toward transportation of commodities across great scales, but the waste of intellectual labor and aesthetic skill spent packaging them as spectacle, designing fonts, devising product jingles or names. Out of language framed entirely by capitalism and the culture of conspicuous consumption, how was transformative text to emerge? It had to be irrupted by a language other to it—of choral observation, nursery rhymes and lullabies, Bartleby’s dead-wall reveries, the rising echoes and chants filling rerouted streets and newly public squares.

"Schlosser said officials are continuing to clear the park of unsanitary conditions...." —"11 arrested at D.C. Occupy site," *USA Today*, February 5, 2012

April 6, 2012. I need to arrive at exactly 1:55, or the lack of cell reception and disorienting quarters will make it impossible for us to convene. The rehearsal site stands at the corner of Wall and Broad, the entry occupied on the one side by an equinox gym where elliptical trainers line the platform of a lobby incongruously, and by a well-secured series of equities and esquires offices on the other, the whole facing the fenced-off void in front of the New York Stock Exchange, swarming with camera-armed tourists present in every language to photograph... what?

Below, beyond a maze of halls bordering a T.J. Maxx basement, the safe, massive and electrically elaborated vault doors splayed, power strips abandoned, wires loosed from the ceiling, dangling plastic telephones, custodian account indices, disinhabited rows of futures marked by electrical tape on the floor, empty dumbwaiters, heaps of missing papers, "SLOP SINK FOR BUILDING PERSONNEL ONLY," boxes labeled "recharged batteries" in ballpoint dates, the last reading 1999 as if the Y2K calamity really took place—construction dust lining the surfaces that "help our automemory," as one of the dancers puts it: we have graciously been granted

this basement by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council—a colossal safe in the bowels of Wall Street fallen into desuetude by the advancing virtualization of value. Are the security cameras on or not, and would the watchers be entertained or disturbed? A new alarm in the panopticon: the sneaking suspicion not that the guard is present but that he is there no longer.

Limbs remembering the score of a choral line, provoked vestiges of Sister Carrie, Chaplin, and Busby Berkeley given permission to kick and convulse inside the useless hollowed vault, measuring the city tearing itself inside out, on one's hands and knees.

"Tragedy...forces the mystery upon us, and it makes us realize so vividly the worth of that which is wasted that we cannot possibly seek comfort in the reflection that all is vanity." —A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), qtd. in T.J. Clark, "For a Left with No Future," *New Left Review*, March-April 2012

Emerging into the late afternoon rush hour, I learn from placards that the 539-foot-high skyscraper, formed of "The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus piled on top of the bell-tower of St. Mark's in Venice," temple to capital-in-the-sky, once housed the headquarters of Bankers Trust, which took the pyramid as its trademark, and as its slogan "A Tower of Strength."

When finance has moved out, I wrote, and the entrails of its devouring vanish from perceptible space, the artists are invited to clear the dust with their bodies.



V Crying  
(from *Left Melancholy*, 10/13)



Science fiction is a mode of the Left Melancholic. So is the diary. Which serves to remind us of who we are when we're not crying. Barthes fixated on the moment when mourning seemed to have ended, and when it erupts again as a form of suffering. Like worlds within worlds—feelings. Totality is a myth, perhaps the myth of all myths, but we still need to imagine it. Dana's *The Crisis of Infinite Worlds* (I often think of that title and smile). How we have reached a limit of how we can any longer imagine being together in any kind of unity called "the world." Somewhere over the rainbow. Joke of "We are the world, we are the children." Joke of "Can't we all get along?" All we are saying. Barthes started to imagine in his "mourning diary" the possibility of non-violence founded on a love for his mother. Introjection of this noble thing we would love and which would not allow us to participate in violence.

I remember someone in college talking about Walter Benjamin's "left melancholy." That this was probably a negative thing. Now I think of this diagnosis of him as a test. Am I too a Left Melancholic? Was Rimbaud? Was Lenin? Was Luxembourg? Arendt? Foucault? Is Anne? Is Brandon? Is Dana? Is Juliana? Is Rob? Is Buuck? What about BIFO? Is OMD the premiere band of Left Melancholy? Or is it Joy Division? What about New Order? Is there such thing as sad swag? Francesca Woodman's withdrawn pout among cheesy smiles in the group photo taken shortly before her suicide. Sadness of a radical tendency, of simply trying to "be one's self." Bas Jan Ader lost at sea. Hart Crane drowned at sea. Melville's Ishmael buoyed on a coffin covered in hieroglyphs. Is to be Left to automatically be Queer? Certainly to have Left Melancholy is in some ways to be Queer. It is to start a community without beginning or end. Anarchic and labyrinthine like sadness itself. Whose founding myth is a tattoo of tears cascading from the eyes. As Jean Luc Nancy says, it is an interruption of the myth (of myths) that we are whole.

Isn't it sad (or more accurately pathetic?) that George Woodman started making photographs like his daughter's after her suicide? Or is this how we mourn? To imitate, to incorporate the work of the dead? The nude models he uses resemble her. Building crypts in black and white. Not that I am suggesting he would like to fuck his daughter, but

that he would like to become her. Color just won't do to capture this feeling. Black and white encrypts when color can't.

A troll writes in my comments stream, in response to a status update regarding Kristin Ross's book about Rimbaud and the Paris Commune, *The Emergence of Social Space*: "But surely Rimbaud didn't participate in the Commune?" Does it matter? Does it matter when all the poems are about the way an event like the Commune grasps the imagination, changing everything we think and do?

The Left Melancholic. The Left Hysteric. The Left Obsessive. The Left Neurotic. The Left Psychotic. The Left Abject. The Left Depressed. Are we making a difference by working day jobs we hate? Does it make a difference that we are (adjunct) professors? Does it hurt to be a sensitive person? What would it mean to divest when we are all so financially fucked? That this was all part of someone's plan. In the 90s there was a viable global-justice movement (or is this a myth too?), but then W. was elected. In 2003 there were protests against W.'s decision to invade Iraq; hundreds of thousands if not millions in the street, but this never seemed to matter. This made some of us mid-twenties sad. Like physical presence didn't matter to anyone. Bodies organized in space, critical mass, civil disobedience. Certeau says that "space is a practiced place." Now his theories are

employed by global military strategists. What does it mean for people to gather in a place? How to produce the spaces we would want and not be sad? I am still a part of the void left by that decade. "A hole in space" (Susan Howe quoting Emmanuel Levinas). Filip remarked, during Poetry Assembly in Zuccotti Park, that the limits of the park constituted the limits of "now time" itself. I remember everyone on a rooftop in Greenpoint, Brooklyn checking their phones on New Year's 2004, when I had a cell phone but no one I wanted to call. I keep wondering how virtual protest is possible and what the fate of spatial practice is on smart phones. Robert Smithson called structures in the process of being built "ruins in reverse." When I see a phone or a computer or any obsolete technology really in a movie it is like a ruin. When I see a new iPhone, it is like a ruin *in potentia*—becoming ruin. At the moment the demonstrators marched onto the Brooklyn Bridge it seemed we could channel into two lanes and something didn't feel right about this. Both Andrew and I had this intuition. Eventually seven hundred demonstrators were kettled on a roadway to the right, where it was illegal for them to block traffic. Why does not having been jailed with them make me sad now? Is it important to be jailed because being jailed makes a social crisis more visible, or is this just naïve and Romantic? Because it builds solidarity among a society's oppressed members and those who identify with its oppressed members? I remember someone

from Black Bloc saying it was most important to try *not* to be jailed. The day that all my friends in the Oakland poetry community were jailed ("Move-in Day") I wrote a poem for them in the style of James Schuyler's "Hymn to Life." Is it wrong to be naïve and Romantic? Should we value poets and artists who have laid their lives on the line in the streets or in a courtroom for a shared cause more than those who sat in their rooms quietly writing poems for most of their life? Rimbaud or Mallarme? Oppen or Zukofsky? Levertov or Duncan? Armchair leftists. Netflix leftists. Does social action make our poems better? Does participating in Facebook and tracking occurrences of my full name on the Internet using Google searches make my poems better or worse?

As Tyrone Williams says:

the heterogeneity of some Occupation Movements, a sign, it is said, of their nonpartisan origins and evolution, is inextricable from their paralysis vis-à-vis actual concrete demands and programs. I appreciate Thom Donovan's response to that oft-repeated media question—what do they want?—but it hardly need be said that Thom's encyclopedic list of demands and desires fall into two open categories—partisan agitprop and generic homilies. These remarks, I hope it is obvious, do not constitute a criticism of

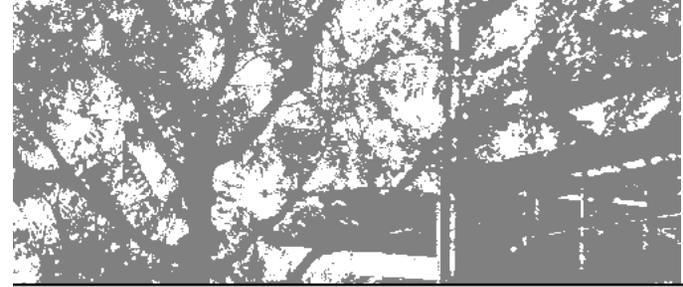
Thom's response to the media's "what do they want," but rather a gesture of recognition, for Thom's list is generous and thus faithful to the heterogeneity of the New York Occupation Wall Street Movement. But for a very different response, a more aggressive gesture, to which, by the way, I am sympathetic, let's recall the Oakland Occupation Movement and its January 2012 confrontation with the Oakland police. It just so happened I was flying into San Francisco when the confrontation with the Oakland police began. If anyone watched, as I did, the live feeds as well as the mainstream media coverage of the confrontations, it resembled less other Occupation movements in New York, Detroit or Cincinnati than it did footage from the Sixties and Seventies when "counterculture forces" arrayed themselves against the Establishment—that is, a conflict that was largely, though not exclusively, generational. That generational divide was starkly drawn, and perhaps reinforced, the next day when, at a Small Press Traffic poetry reading, the events of the prior evening were both criticized by some poets of my generation and lauded by younger poets, though both had participated in prior Oakland Occupation demonstrations. I take all this as a good sign of the growing differences, necessary differences, between the various Occupation movements. But this democraticization, this

acknowledgement that specific regional and local histories will shape the formation of any Occupation movement that arises from its context, undermines—if only momentarily—both the radical and conservative elements within the movement as a whole. That the same "state of affairs" exists for the various poetry communities and poetics is telling. Little wonder that poetry, as a whole, cannot compete against other modes of cultural and aesthetic affect. Yet would we, as poets, trade in our particular "turfs" for greater solidarity among poets as a whole and thus, perhaps (only perhaps), greater say-so in public life?

— "Occupation Everywhere,"  
Harriet weblog, 10/7/2013

Today is the one day in the week when Dottie and I promise to hang out and we both try not to be online or on our phones. We went to the Museum of Natural History with one of her students and focused on the punctuationless dicta of Theodore Roosevelt chiseled into the marble walls at the main entrance of the museum. Where he uses the phrase "game boy" (as in, boys/young men should play), but how odd the coincidence with the early hand-held video game device. There was a threat of rain all day, but it still seemed too warm to be fall. We ate at an Italian restaurant in Little Italy because we hoped the food would remind us of Florence, where we had spent some time this past summer.

It did. I bought a plum sweatshirt with a hood at Topman on Broadway because I was feeling cold, despite the extreme humidity. Dottie tried on a top and a dress at a clothing store on Broadway but we left because the salespeople were rude. Since we got home, I have watched a video about the photographer Francesca Woodman, called *The Woodmans*, which speculates on the causes of the photographer's suicide. I drink red wine while Dottie naps. Everywhere on Facebook are reports about the "Poetry and/or Revolution" conference. I am sad that I break my vow not to be online, even though Dottie is fast asleep. Before I turn in, I would like to finish rereading Jean Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (I am at the chapter about "Literary Communism") but feel obligated to work on a cover letter for job applications—it is academic job season and I have been more or less unemployed since mid-June. This makes me sad. Choosing job applications over making things, reading, trying to think. Nietzsche says that the reason he never laughs is that if he ever started he might never be able to stop. Which is precisely how I feel about crying. I understand why men younger than myself tattoo tears on their cheeks—to exteriorize something they can never risk expressing to others publicly. I think of them and hope Bed-Stuy, where I currently live, will never change, knowing it is already altered by my presence.



## VI Interview with David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost, & Evan Kennedy (*BOMB*, 4/14)



2013 saw the publication of books by David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost, and Evan Kennedy—all writers based in the Bay area. These works, read in tandem, produce a unique dialogue about politics, theology, and activism. All the authors were involved, to greater or lesser extents, in Occupy Oakland and I wanted to ask them how the compositions both anticipated the events of 2011 and spoke to their experience participating therein.

**Thom Donovan:** At long last I am finally able to sit down with all of your books and consider the conversation I believe they are having with one another. I'm particularly interested in their proximities—geographically, intertextually, politically, socially/communally—and how these proximities collide via the occupations of 2011–2012. What I observe is a profound sharing of affinities, especially through the various theological discourses/figures you invoke: Saint Paul, in both Jack's *The Antidote* (Compline, 2013) and David's *The Ordinary* (Compline, 2013); and Francis of Assisi, in Evan's *Terra Firmament* (Krupskaya, 2013). I know there are many more I am excluding.

So here is my opening question: How might these books be situated toward one another through recent events, but also through a shared sense of discourse prefiguring these events, which shaped your thinking about sociopolitical action and radical practices of community?

**Jackqueline Frost:** I'll begin by noting that your question is vast. But the gesture of it circumscribes the story of the books: how these three books came to exist, *and* as a trilogy. The question also suggests that the movement and struggles experienced here in the Bay during the fall of 2011 serve as a sort of rubicon—which must be qualified.

The poetic affinities that can be easily excavated in our respective works predate those events and, in a way, continued through them indifferently, though we took from them as students of a discourse, and talked through them together, then went away and wrote through them alone. This is how our singular books were produced qua a tendency that we developed and that developed us. This tendency is hard to pin down, but theology is a good start.

The milieu of bay poets, generally speaking, is already quite metaphysical; anyone would tell you so. Lots of people working on dead languages, and necessarily, often on quasi-religious literature. My interest in biblical eschatology was nascent before meeting David and Evan in 2009. Also, I was negotiating aesthetically with the rise of conceptualism, which makes sense as the youngest poet of the group, and with political questions of identity and recognition from a queer context. It seems to me, now, that what grounded our lyric progression was the footprint of biblical prosody—whether via Augustine, Milton, or the Gospels themselves. I abandoned conceptualism for the depth of feeling—yes, feeling!—that the lyric opened onto, that I experience in the later works included in Evan's first book, *Shoo-Ins to Ruin*, and for the depth of thought in David's strategic, novel use of language, both in his texts and in our conversations.

Around this time, Evan was cultivating his concept of *bonhomie*, which became, for me, an essential tool in navigating what some might call “community,” and for examining the limits of affection that manifested as professionalism and the acquisition of social capital among poets, as well as the debilitating fear and volatility that permeates queer circles. *Bonhomie* exposed fragility while fomenting an aspirational type of collectivity, which is less sterile than solidarity and more radical than friendship. It flies in the face of Nihilist-Leftist perspectives that cannot even utter terms like “goodwill.” (Hocquenghem notes the same issue among the French Left in the 70s, and likewise says, “Theirs is not a system for progressing through contradiction.”)

But the radical democratic gesture of *bonhomie* is also the point of departure between Evan’s work and mine. As he found it “crucial to stay hopeful” and wrote through the positive messianic project of *Terra Firmament*, I found myself in need of a negativity that was compatible with the anger of the subjugated—through the shame of class rejection, gender rejection, internalizing this shame and later realizing its perversity.

And this is perhaps where David came in: he was investigating alienation (this is my diagnosis). Through our conversations, we explored a new modality, a way of analyzing our lives with theology,

philosophy, and political economy in unison. More than anyone else I know, David believes in and practices the inextricability of these modes—arguing that the dimensions of any instance cannot be negotiated without bringing metaphysics, epistemology, and ontology to bear on a given scenario—as these correspond not just to a higher order of “consciousness,” but to the lived world of human thought (following Hegel, the real is rational).

I’ll bring in the question of Saint Paul by mentioning how the occupations, the camp, the politicization of daily life—how all that resonated with the three of us after a lengthy mutual fascination, comprising years of our friendship, with Paulian concepts, with Saint Francis, with medieval Christian mystics, with the intersection of radical communalism and poverty and denial of this world; and how all of this can be filed, abstractly, *and poetically*, under the *nomos*, the law, judgment, or politics. Materially however, it signifies historical inversions of our present arrangement, namely, communism.

**David Brazil:** I am honored to be placed in this constellation, and I choose that term “constellation” advisedly, because the beginning of an intelligent response to Thom’s prompt requires the specification of distinction-within-pattern. This is to say, all three of us (I think) end up in different places with respect to our politics, but this is good and fine, and these

books/us make a picture together even while preserving our singularities as artists, thinkers, and people. When Angela Davis spoke on the morning of the General Strike in Oakland she said, "Our solidarities will be complex solidarities." There's a reason I'm still quoting that line two years later.

Also, of course, as my dear comrades have also said, we need each other—among other reasons, to tease out of one another the threads of our vocation. Hölderlin says, "Yet never gladly the poet keeps / His lore unshared, but likes to join with / Others who help him to understand it."

Jackie is spot-on in what she has written: so much of what we all have in common, which comes up in these books, predates the events of fall 2011. Evan reminded me this week that one of our first conversations was about St. Augustine, and I recall studying the Gospel of Mark with Jackie and Sara Larsen. These conversations and studies inflected our work, and as Jackie so eloquently says, became "a tendency that we developed and that developed us." A tendency which, perhaps, no one apart from the three of us were even really aware of, but which gave me a great deal of courage and permission to push my work on in directions that hadn't seemed possible before.

So, yes, we were all bookish and studious, as Bay writers have historically tended to be. But how did the events of 2011 activate these latencies?

To talk about what really happened here in 2011, well, I don't want to be mystery-mongering—after all, a lot of other people were there and plenty has been written already—but even at the time those of us who were there knew there was a strong wind-from-elsewhere blowing. No amount of cold-water historiography after the fact can possibly change the experience of Occupy Oakland at Oscar Grant Plaza, "now in the mind indestructible" no matter what reversals the subsequent years have placed upon us all. I am certainly not likely to forget going down to the Plaza the very first day with Jackie and some other friends, her reminding me, "Let each one remain in the calling wherein s/he was called." (That's Paul.) From that day until the police destruction of the camp two weeks later, Evan's stated ambition of a "habitable earthly paradise" was on the table at Oscar Grant Plaza—a polis where the fault lines of an apartheid city (inside an apartheid country founded on slavery and genocide) became visible as the first stage of amelioration, where insofar as possible all the basic needs of everyone were met, and where uniformed police were not permitted to enter.

But the funny thing about my book is that it's not an Occupy book. Everything in it was written prior

to the fall of 2011, with the exception of the last section, "To Romans." The central section of the book, "Economy," was begun in March of 2011 and finished in August. That piece seems thoroughly haunted by that world to come in October, knowing not what it should be (its precise lineament) but that it will be. A prose attempt at propaganda I wrote that summer begins with this epigraph from Leibniz: "heavy with futurity." Something was gonna happen. Obviously this perception follows in some degree the general world tension on the heels of the Arab Spring, as well as the events in Madison. And then, over the summer of 2011, various local anti-austerity and anti-police-brutality actions. But, you know, Shelley also wrote that "poets...are the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present."

In other words, the book stands temporally oblique to the thrust of your question, unless perhaps that obliquity is a means to think the unrest of time within itself. CJ Martin has recently written, very beautifully, about the presence of this concern in *The Ordinary*. "When are we?" and "what is time really?" are by no means emptily speculative questions. Back to Jackie's formulation: these questions are philosophical, political-economic, and theological, all in one. That intersection is where we live, whether we like it or not—*hic Oakland, hic salta*.

**Evan Kennedy:** On my third day in the Bay Area, I met David at the 21 Grand reading series. We began a dialog that allowed me to toughen up. My appreciation of writers such as Augustine had been superficial—in the way that I wasted my childhood examining portraits on baseball cards closer than stats—and underwent reevaluation through David's recommendations and books gifted with incredible foresight. Presents included Lyotard's *The Confession of Saint Augustine*, Agamben's *The Time That Remains*, Stephen Rodefer's *Villon*, Cavalcanti, Kahn's *Heraclitus*, an overly generous selection of Pope ("And it's not even my birthday!"), essays on the medieval resurrection body by James Blusher and Stanley Prikov, and, among others, a Loeb *Confessions* (Augustine's) which I prize. My reevaluation of Augustine required greater attention to the "shape" of the sentences (as Beckett admired), the stark and sad heft of the God-seeker's body, and the necessity of praise, which I began directing in my writing to unnamed collectives of men, a necessity at the time, in terms of bonhomie.

Though my memory is as foggy as my morning bicycle commute, the standout moments in my early friendship with Jack and David occur at Condensery, the reading series Zoe Tuck and Jack curated out of Jack's Oakland home. I still remember the look on David's face (a twinkling of baffled intrigue) when I reported discovering a passage from the Gnostic

gospels that contains lines directly lifted by Bob Dylan for his 1983 album *Infidels* (a guilty pleasure for us both)—I've a paper forthcoming. Dialog between us three progressed almost exclusively through run-ins at readings because the East Bay is currently the hotbed of poetic activity, and I'm earthbound in all-but-forgotten, pricey San Francisco without 24-hour public transportation. I also have trouble sleeping on couches or alongside most anyone else.

My friendship with Jack developed through these readings, the intervals allowing sullen inquiries within myself. I wound up launching a strategy of courtship to secure the feverish accomplices a poet's work requires. I mean that Jack and I didn't have to go to Giants games together (though we did) or attend Christmas mass (did that too) or eat a slice from every pie at St. Francis diner (then run out on the check); instead, I found for my work allies in Jack's so it could better defend itself from hopeful destroyers. To cut to the chase, I began thieving from her poems—with gusto—and continued to find in David and Jack a hopelessness unburdened by despair but expectant toward a radical adjustment of our sensitivities. My idea of their expectation later crossed over (so to speak!) into Saint Paul's messianic expectation—with thanks to David's treatment of Epistle to the Romans—and my rather dogged reverie of a habitable earthly paradise for all of creation. I don't

know if anything similar to habitable earthly paradise played out at Occupy for however brief a time.

**TD:** I would now like to ask you each a discrete question, in hopes that you may also feel free to form a dialogue with each others' responses, and/or respond to the question I have posed to another.

**Jack** I am intrigued by what you identify as "Left Nihilism," and your wanting to distance yourself from this historical attitude. Despite our shared left melancholy, I'm wondering how poetry and art may offer us a way out of the bind of sociopolitical despair, and/or simply a sense that there is no horizon for acting with renewed promise, a lifework or praxis that overcomes the overdetermination of our affinities and affections by both an administrative calculus made possible by late capital and the confines of existing political models and attitudes/affects? Maybe a simpler way to post this question, Jack, is: What might it mean to be a committed communist *and* a poet now, in our cultural moment?

**David** Something that interested me upon reading *The Ordinary* is your use of found writing materials (scrap paper and other waste material). At some point in the book, via a conversation with our friend Brian Whitener, you relate this to "the commons." Could you talk about your evolving

use of found materials to evoke the reuse of waste, and thus the estovers of a bygone (or possible future) commons? You may also wish to talk about your penchant for obsolete writing technologies (the typewriter/hand-written letter) and the design of *The Ordinary* (by Michael Cross) with regards to the notion of commons. It reminds me of a shared favorite passage from Augustine, often quoted by Robert Kocik: “if only they had used the world without using it.”

**Evan** Upon hearing (and seeing) you read your work this past spring at the SEGUE reading series in New York, I was struck by a number of things with regard to your performance of the work. First, that it is very rare for poets to perform their poems from memory, and yet this was precisely what you were doing, sans score. Could you discuss your decision to perform the poems of *Terra Firmament* from memory? How may this performance choice possibly relate to the content of the book?

**DB:** I am thinking as so often with my Bible to my left, and specifically a passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, 4:13: *ὡς περικαθάρματα τοῦ κόσμου ἐγενήθημεν, παντῶν περιψήμα εὖς ἀρτι* (we have become as the refuse of the world [or the kosmos], the off-scouring of all things until now). This is Paul writing to the church at Corinth in the first century.

This is also our present proletarian condition. We are the “surplus populations” spoken of in contemporary political economy. We are cast out, cast off, traduced and abjected, left with no history. This is also reflected in our material reality, in our relation with the objects through which we think ourselves and in which we model all possible relations. As CA Conrad writes in his introduction to *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon*, “If I am an extension of this world then I am an extension of garbage, shit, pesticides, bombed and smoldering cities, microchips, cyber, astral and biological pollution.” We are all that.

All waste also actually talks. Being struck in the face by history it has no choice. “[E]conomy” was an attempt to discover the contingent prosody inside of the intersection of objects, days, a space (Oakland) and myself. The question of waste or garbage is the question of the possibility of falling, stage by stage, entirely outside of the circuits of exchange-value, toward the cold dense bottom of the universe Aristotle thought the world was. And then, the possibility that what is so reduced can then explode the cosmos, the world according to their order (the order of the enemies)—the stone the builders rejected. Gnostic, Lurianic, alchemical—take your pick. We rise.

The historical commons was destroyed by primitive accumulation, and I often find it misleading to talk

about “the commons” unless we’re clear that we’re talking about a social structure of *non-metaphorical* access to the means of subsistence outside the cash nexus and the wage relation. Any of you proles reading this know very well there’s no such thing. If you want lunch, find a fucking ducat or it’s tough luck. In a talk in San Francisco several years ago Robert Kocik spoke to this concern when he said (and I’m paraphrasing), we have to make a commons out of money. I’m sympathetic to this project, as a transitional aim: using money to destroy money. Or rather the relationships that money structures—its cosmos. (The Greek word Paul uses, *κοσμος*, is related to our English word “cosmetics”—it’s an adornment or a harmonious ordering. In our case it’s the harmonious ordering of the world for the benefit of the owners, an order it is our collective task to overturn, to overturn, to overturn.) I believe we can rebuild such a real commons (this is what I understand to be the political task of communization), but we certainly don’t have it at present.

Rather than the commons, the waste that structures “economy” comes from the space of civic abandonment, which I think is something else entirely.

As to the question of the use of the world, I can do no better than to fast-forward in I Corinthians a smidge to get to the famous *ως μη* (“as not”) starting

at 7:29—in my translation, “But I say this, brethren, the *kairos* has been rolled up; for what remains, let the ones having wives be as though they had not wives; let the ones weeping be as not weeping; let the ones rejoicing be as not rejoicing; let the ones buying be as not holding what they buy; and let the ones using [*χρωμενοι*] the *kosmos* be as not misusing [*καταχρωμενοι*]; for the scheme of the *kosmos* is passing, and I want you to be without care.”

**EK:** I began to memorize the poems when my printer broke during a bout of frenzied editing. If a line slipped from memory, I rarely heard it again. Turning readings into recitations provided the opportunity to test the work through these acrobatics. Furthermore, New York poets are a demanding bunch with a rabid appreciation of child stars, and I felt compelled to honor that at SEGUE. From the small triumph of occupying those texts and delicately shepherding them along arose an affirmation that the work was passable. My solace bolstered itself, and those memorized poems reappeared in recitations to myself throughout subsequent days.

Which brings me to my body, and the unimpressive but suitable set of muscles assisting me as I try to describe this. It’s safe to say that much of the book was edited atop my bicycle. I don’t mean I had papers scattered before me like that bicyclist pedaling the velodrome while reading *Le Monde*. I

mean that I would recite the poems while pedaling, swerving around cabs, coming to full stops for cop cars, letting my eyes get caught up in street candy or, to less exhilaration, my reflection in shop windows.

Perhaps a correlation can be drawn between rhythms in the work and pedaling, especially since I compose by ear, but that's a little too tidy for the filth of my city habitat. Because the bicycle is an extension of my body and I understand what will hold me or spill me (I'm tempted to conclude we only truly understand those we top), the poems became vocalized extensions of my hands, feet, and skinned knees. Certain poems I enjoyed reciting to myself when glum, or cheerful. The work would be a little different if I had another's body.

**JF:** You ask if art presents "an out" from what we both like to call "left melancholy." I'll say straightaway that I've never experienced poetry mitigate melancholy. Sex, running, yoga, more coffee, less coffee—these things have helped me. But I have found the world of poetry—and we do refer to it this way—to be a genuine distraction from the more unsavory elements of existence, be they political or not, as any subculture with its own shared prerogatives and mythos can insulate us from the monotony of the wage relation, heterosexuality (for many), neurosis, whatever.

What I experienced during the struggles in Oakland was a certain possibility around poetry that had been long lost, dashed by the dystopian nature of experimental poetry milieus (their competitiveness and insularity, the way they consolidate white supremacist and male homosocial bonds, a meaningless crisis of trends couched in a contradictory democratization of style, etc.). In short, I discovered that my audience was not limited to the "poet's poets," that many people in the movement were excited, moved, and challenged by poetry, and this gave me a renewed strength in my art practice. It affirmed my relationship to poetry outside of the fraught affirmation of white, cisgendered/heterosexual social capital that I was more than capable of accruing and cashing in on for material and psychical gains within the poetry milieu.

As far as committed art goes, I think often of an Oki Sogumi line: "we had very few choices to make but we always made them." Politically committed poetry transposes one's priorities in the making of the poem from asking if politics is a suitable subject for poetry. Is the poem a suitable space for politics? And if the answer is no, then what is to be done? And I wanted *The Antidote* to be a text wherein, "events congeal into image as social aggression" (to invert and paraphrase Lisa Robertson's formulation). So, to get back to anger: this is where *Terra Firmament* and

*The Antidote* diverge. *The Antidote* is negativity, with all its dialectically productive capacities.

I suppose I don't believe that being a communist and a poet means anything at all, necessarily. It certainly doesn't promise an actual radicality among self-describers. I also don't believe that poetry can be militant, in any real sense. It can speak to militancy, articulate it, etc. But it doesn't do militancy. Most "militant poets" in the Bay and in the UK don't do militancy either. It remains almost entirely aspirational, based on the circumstances in which we are embedded—that is, being poets/people who have not lived through a truly revolutionary moment. We have been protestors, occupiers, vandals, etc. But militants? Hardly. The appellation "communist poet" does arise as a vector of being through the specificities of the historical moment—though honestly, this determination, its legibility, is due almost entirely to the propensity of bourgeois, academic culture to have it both ways, that is, to be able to reproduce itself as a class of experts with specialized knowledge, while at the same time positioning itself as the vanguard of revolutionary practice.

But any life must negotiate multiple modes of existence. As David reminds us in *The Ordinary*, economy (or, our *situ*) is composed of *oikos* and *nomos*. A committed art practice, and a politically

committed life is concerned, if negatively, with law and society, but it is also concerned with the arbitration of allegiance and accountability outside or before the law, for which the family (affinity group) is the archetype. And the nexus of questions around family, coterie, camaraderie, and accountability have remained with me through the decomposition of the movement, through the bifurcation of positions, through the brutal minutia endured without a unifying sequence. Importantly for us, camaraderie is shot through with the question of ethical life in a world of dead ceremonies that prohibit the extent of affirmation and affinity. As proletarians, we must contend with a world of law and a world of allegiance and must calibrate our movement across these worlds. For me this movement had proven increasingly intractable, such that the only choice availing itself is an active denunciation of power and counter-violence against a life fixed by the substrate of value—which, like the riot cop in Evan's *A Cyclist*, is not to "be met and won over," but "met and transfigured as silence."

As Nanni Balestrini writes in *The Unseen*, "to generalize the offensive means to radicalize disaffection." *The Antidote* turned out to be a bildungsroman of radicalized disaffection; the becoming of a deep antagonism with the present state of things and the sudden clarification that everything else—anything outside of this

fundamental polemic—is (in the words of Robert Hurley) “unground and suspect.”

**TD:** In place of a new round of questions I want to prompt you to do something.

I am curious if you can take one phoneme, morpheme, word, phrase, line, stanza, or unit (page? movement?) of each others’ books—one that is particularly meaningful to you, or particular to the dialogue of these books—and produce a “reading” of it? Or perhaps even better than providing a reading would be to reflect on how you see this moment of the book taking place in relation to your own work and a larger field—both of poetics and the socio-political. Feel free to “close read,” in other words; but also riff on where these moments in the work lead you.

**EK:** “and stealing a little bit of life / in the Metropolis.”  
–Jackqueline

“It sounds like a / market response.” –David

The other night, my bicycling trajectory intersected too much with a car, and the driver pulled a gun and gave chase. Neighbors are goons. I eventually returned home fine, and, since my address is all over my poems, I assume he hasn’t read them. My obscurity continues to save my life. I call the

encounter banal not because I’m indifferent (I’m a sissy) but to be shot while pedaling home listening to “Bangerz”—good lord. I always picture “Wild Is the Wind.”

Thus, I was culpable too in this moment void of any heft outside the prospect of his violence—a market response, a reminder for me to alert the vital.

An issue I find myself articulating, or seeking in Jack and David, is that of designing a home among antagonists who act as impediments to my solace. When I’m met with resistance while asserting my fragility as a bicyclist in motion, I turn to Francis of Assisi, quoted here in early hagiography: “if we bear such great wrong and such rebuffs without disquieting ourselves and without murmuring against him and think humbly and charitably that he really believes us to be what he has called us”—*motherfucker* in my case—“and that God makes him speak against us, write that here is perfect joy.”

**DB:** “What of Paradise Now.” –Jackqueline

“and so on toward paradise now” –Evan

Back in 2010, I wrote a text that Sara Larsen and I ran as the cover of an issue of *Try* magazine. It was titled “Immediate Demands” and read as follows: “END THE WARS / NATIONALIZE THE BANKS / FREE

EDUCATION / NO MORE APARTHEID / UNIVERSAL  
HEALTH CARE / WORKERS COUNCILS / ABOLISH  
PRIVATE PROPERTY / NO MORE INHERITED  
WEALTH / RIGHT TO HOUSING / RIGHT TO FOOD  
/ RIGHT TO LOVE / PARADISE NOW.”

In other words, politics didn't start with Occupy, and it hasn't stopped with the death of Occupy. Not till we have built Jerusalem in Oakland's green and pleasant land.

In citing lines from Jackie's and Evan's books, I'd also like to make them dialectical propositions, with respect to the simultaneity of the question of paradise and the progression towards it. That is, we work on it and toward it, we demand it, speak it, perform it, in the absence of the certainty of its contour, but feeling the heart list.

There's a place we can go together and we know we can make it together. Getting there is the difficulty, but true hearts are not dissuaded. After the first police destruction of Occupy Oakland's camp I wrote an article for our daily newspaper, the *Oscar Grant Plaza Gazette*, in which I cited Ezra Pound's line, from the *Pisan Cantos*, about the destruction of the city of Wagadu: "now in the mind indestructible." If we have seen it, we know it can be real, and we can work to rebuild it.

This phrase in the poems of my friends shows also the degree to which their works are an archive of the affects, and affect's achievement into linguistic form, of the periods through which they passed, as an object to hand on. "For poets establish what remains" (Hölderlin).

I also love about the word paradise that it is surely mongrel. It's a loanword from Persian (where it means an enclosed garden), into the Greek of Xenophon's histories, and from thence it's used to translate the Hebrew *gan* in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. From there it's borrowed back into the Talmudic lexicon as *pardes*—the point of departure for the famous story in Talmud Hagigah: "Our masters taught: Four men entered Pardes, namely Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba. Rabbi Akiba said to them: When you arrive at the slabs of pure transparent marble, do not say: Water! Water! For it is said, 'He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before Mine eyes' [Psalms 101:7]. Ben Azzai cast a look and died: of him Scripture says, 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints' [Psalms 116:15]. Ben Zoma looked and became demented: of him Scripture says: 'Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it' [Proverbs 25:16]. Aher mutilated the shoots. Rabbi Akiba left unhurt."

Inside of this story, and the word *pardes*, lives the traditional fourfold exegesis of scripture: *peshat*, or plain sense; *remez*, or allusion; *derash*, or homiletic interpretation, and lastly *sod*; the secret. Each of these methods may be brought to bear on scripture, or on another sort of text, as Dante insists in his Epistle to Can Grande; or, lastly, and this is the sense that interests me here, in a hermeneutic adequate to this our earthly life. The last word on the fourfold goes to William Blake: "Now I a fourfold vision see / And a fourfold vision is given to me / 'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight / And threefold in soft Beulah's night / And twofold Always. May God us keep / From Single vision and Newton's sleep."

Speaking on the morning of the Oakland General Strike, Angela Davis said, again: "Our solidarities must be complex solidarities." I believe this, I quote it frequently, and I would add, our readings (of books, of the worldly vale) must be complex readings.

That's how I would answer a perhaps impatient question along the lines of: Why all this detour into Talmud, Septuagint, Xenophon, and Blake? Because writing has real stakes, because history didn't start yesterday, because overcoming the amnesia of the present (including the present's hermeneutics) is part of the task of the poet, because reason operates under a certain sign of eternity, because

remembering where it is we want to go is an indispensable part of actually fucking getting there.

**JF:** David writes, "The house is the form of its transmission, but if the house is broken, if in my dreams I no longer know where I live, how do we proceed, from what do we gather the signs from which we're made down here to knit our fucking hearts?" This is the beginning of "Economy."

Often I ruminate about durability and volatility. The volatility of a livelihood, of resources, of relationships. The volatility of choices, of work. The special volatility of relationships between women, between queers; between women and queers across race. The durability of wealth, of social mobility, of perennial access. The special durability of relationships between men; the durability of heterosexuality; of white sociality. How the conspiracy against transfiguration is so present we find it banal—especially banal because the way out is occluded. As Muriel Rukeyser wrote, "By these roads shall we come upon our country." The transmission of our country, our house, broken, as David says, comes through forms of relation—in the material and spiritual fact of bodies. Life is composed of this one substance: transmission; relation. The substance resides in the broken house, the dilapidated field of signs.

Evan writes, "It's true that more poets could speak to me about how your sounded name soothes the sensation within my dominion, but I still wouldn't know you from Francis, those dead to law, the black bloc, or any of his other resemblances." When I found the world really fucking broken, like a car crash you can't stop staring at, like seething, I ran headlong into a small, closed continent of vanguardists. It was like but not like the small, closed continent of poets where I had lived previously. Because revolt was in the air, I felt a great amount of fear lifted, or at least contained by the space of the movement. Though to be American is to live in fear of death—to live in the broken fantasy that the world will tenderly lift you out of indigence, that you will never be completely crushed by poverty or completely enslaved by your masters. Inside the movement, there were new signs, a new language and meaning for my body, and because the enemy stood before us so often in those days it seems obvious; the sides drawn seemed obvious. Historically, the politically conscious Left in the US is where so much real political potential has gone to die, because the struggle could not be advanced beyond the egos of those controlling it; another broken house. It informs us that radicalization is a continuum: Virginia Woolf famously called destroying one's repressive impulses "killing the angel in the house." It's a handy allegory for coming into a more robust political awareness—the way it always, always takes something away from

you—and it is the nature of ethical life to determine what it takes to be less important than what it gives: perspective, reality.

Killing the angel is a political metaphor for us because it is not hard to see the broken house, but leaving it tends to require drastic moves. Because feminized people are socialized to crave approval, to be liked desperately, one can only carve out so much space for real change from a place of fear. I was talking to a friend the other day, saying, "if only there were a little more durability in our feminist circles." And she said, "isn't that exactly what we don't want?" If Rukyeser's formulation for political transformation, "birth, love and choice," is accurate, choice is volatility in the face of ideology, volatility that is fierce and positive.

We focus on our times, destroying you,  
fathers in the long ground: you have given  
strange birth to us who turn against you in  
your blood needing to move in our integrity,  
accomplices of life in revolution

—Muriel Rukeyser, from *Theory of Flight*

**TD:** Something striking in all of your responses is how feeling, affect, embodiment, spatial practice/movement, and gesture/performance take priority. And how lyric modalities form a vital, proprioceptive loop between sociopolitical exigencies and the

urgencies of “the person”—one’s body, one’s self, one’s dispositions, one’s feelings. A micropolitics (or ethics?) constituted in relation to singularity, ensemble (family?), and polis.

To quote Jack: “Inside the movement, there were new signs, a new language and meaning for my body, and because the enemy stood before us so often in those days...” I also think of how much Evan’s responses have evolved through his bicycling and the bodily danger bicycling in an urban setting entails. And of David’s wonderful diagram at the front of *The Ordinary*, which makes reference to the Spinozan dictum: *we have not yet determined what a body can do*.

Often I wonder if lyric is not the means by which we can most effectively gauge what a body can do, counter to the forces and matrices of forces that David has identified as blocking the most urgent political and economic revolutions of our time. Recently I have been thinking about lyric in two ways with regards to the occupations and other struggles. Through its “denotative” function, which Kristin Ross discusses in her book *The Emergence of Social Space: Arthur Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. By using language denotatively, we place language in relation to a particular set of socio-historical actors, within a specific space, time, and place. And in terms of what Robert Kocik calls “idiolect,” which is any

personalized or collectivized use of language that may also include or lead onto “nation languages” (Kamau Brathwaite) and “minor literatures” (Deleuze & Guattari) where collective enunciation may determine the forces which shape events.

How, in your mind, may your books, and others’, form a collective enunciation through their engagement with particular lyrical forms? Also, how might you reflect on the spatial politics and somatic practices of Occupy with regards to the development of certain idiolects and other (localizable) uses of language? What effects of the poem may remain yet to be determined?

**EK:** I prefer your micropolitics of the individual. Thanks for mentioning Kristin Ross, who concerning Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* writes: “a whole parade of universal history, races, cultures, populations will be played out on the body of the speaker.”

Played right, this could amount to a marvelous culture of one. Solidarity within Occupy was something I could not attain, being unable to act alongside a protestor whose sign read that her heroes were cop killers. My heroes have always been elsewhere, alone but defining an alternate community.

Rimbaud: “Action isn’t life; it’s merely a way of ruining a kind of strength.”

In *Terra Firmament*, I considered sorely neglected World War I poet Wilfred Owen, who only found queer confraternity in the trenches while fighting for a society that maligned, or worse, many in his ilk. His lyric genius unfolds alongside the bodies of young soldiers facing large-scale mechanized killing. This isn't twink jingoist Rupert Brooke's valorizing (in stodgy meter, no less) but an affection for the physiques and feelings of young men turned into pulp. Owen the stammering officer-poet served to design a desperate lyric bonhomie.

From Dominic Hibberd's *The Last Year*: "Owen told [his cousin Leslie] Gunston he was being singled out by French girls thanks to his French, so much so that other officers held a mock court-martial on him. 'The dramatic irony was too killing, considering certain other things, not possible to tell in a letter.'"

I think Owen's lyric gauges how a body breaks down, or explodes. He's still burdened by Victorian aesthetics, but fractures are there in meter and slant and consonantal end rhymes.

That is, I rather jump for joy for the re-territorialization of the fiercer attitudes found in those who see themselves as bodily containers of cities enacting a fresher allotment of fraternal affections.

TS Eliot: "we have to remember that the Kingdom of Christ on earth will never be realised, and that it is always being realised; we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be—though the world is never left wholly without glory."

Step on necks and the necks will sanctify your kicks.  
Piss on ants and the ants will sanctify your piss. I  
am cutting the confetti for the day I make a wildlife  
sanctuary of this body.

**JF:** To quote Rukyesser again, in *The Life of Poetry* she writes, "Poetry is above all, an approach to the truth of feeling." She goes on to count poetry among the psychic resources available to us: "In a time of suffering, long war, and the opening of the horizon, there is no resource which we can afford to overlook or to misunderstand." One of the lessons that I've embraced over the past year concerns the inability to abstract political poetry, as concept, from the lives and the life world in which it occurs. The content of the idea called "political poetry," or "insurrectionary turn," "or militant poetics" ceases to have meaning insofar as it can be removed from its instantiation within the life of a person or a collective. It's foolish to cut notions off from the relations that generate them. This is also afoot in "conceptual" poetics, wherein the subjectivity of the poet who has arranged the

text is supposedly evacuated. For me, it's a person's life, its substance, constituted from a politics or a poetics or a militancy, and the body in which that life peregrinates, that grants contour to the question of the place of poetry in all this.

We were taught to reject subjectivity in our poems, but I think for that reason most contemporary poetry written by people of my generation is a sort of softcore surrealism wherein experience is so profoundly layered with whatever-content that nothing about the poem functions beyond "easy mysticism or easy wit." I was in New York at the beginning of January and saw Lonely Christopher read from his new book *Death and Disaster Series*, and thought, who could say that Lonely Christopher isn't the best poet in New York City, writing very serious and emotional work; writing through grief, acquiescence, desire, emptiness. Who could read alongside Lonely Christopher and feel as if they had brought much to the table, unless they could summon intensity and disclosure in their own work.

So Evan writes, "as you coughed up froth and later brought me / your lungs, rather, songs." To write against the weak messianism of "circuits and flows" that forgets the transversal aspect, that the "ground," if you will, of all exchange, is the material body. Bordiga wrote (from a friend's translation): "We are on the side of the species' eternal life, our

enemies are on the side of eternal death. And Life will swallow them up, by synthesizing the two terms of the antithesis within the reality of communism." To whom are life and death purely figurative? When we say we are on the side of Life, we mean we want the *eradication of illness, and no more dying* brought on by the perverse and foreordained exclusionary trials of late capital. When we say *we want this*, we also speak to our fear of being devoured by it. In a poem called "You Have the Eyes of a Martyr," I wrote:

in the last of days/  
we have changed our names

in the now of night/  
we grew quiet / and saw

/ the problem / with our bodies /  
is this and other countries enduring /

But Evan states it better in "The Dandy Xth," where he writes:

while I have seen death  
devouring men and  
spitting up pulp, and like  
a dog, returning to its vomit  
to devour pulp again  
and spitting up pulp, and  
returning again to its

vomit to devour pulp again,  
and spitting up pulp, and  
isn't death just like  
a dog in this regard,

and doesn't it take the beastliest among  
those motherfuckers to put  
damage onto such sweet men

**DB:** All histories enact a matrix of the possible loves. By project of them ones who'll come to be inside this space have stuff to cling to that they didn't have before, from which they make themselves. This is what art ends up being, not what is in essence but what it has been for us—that from which we wove what we would be, and not just as a solo subject but in a picture with the others, both in the horizontal square and also in the cut that goes through time and ties the thread that saves us from a fate of all forgetfulness. Occupy is dead because the dialectic keeps moving and wants to try on different garments. We all know it's like surfing, which is why we all gotta just keep paying attention, awaiting the messages. Of course loving one another doesn't hurt a single fucking thing either, like they say in my church. It's always been a mistranslation: the kingdom of God is among (*entos*) you. In the squares, in the projects, in the slumps and sloughs and downtimes, in the squabbles at the endless meetings when you're reading gospels in the cafes or having dinner with



## VII

“Thom Donovan speaks  
with Ben Kinmont”  
(for the 2014 Whitney Biennial)



your friends, biking, strolling, fucking, hoping, in  
the long meantime where care is our only mundane  
solace, thanks.

**Thom Donovan:** Yesterday, by phone, you spoke again of your idea of “the third sculpture” with regard to various ruminations about the archive, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, and problems of consensus building within and outside of art discourse. Can you talk about how “the third sculpture” relates to your work as a whole?

**Ben Kinmont:** The idea of “the third sculpture” is to have a syntax to speak about spaces in between: between two people, two points, one idea and another. And the way in which the space in between, as soon as it is identified, becomes another point that then creates other “third sculptures,” or spaces in between.

What strikes me about the idea of consensus and dissensus is the way in which dissensus, once successful, becomes consensus, and how this constant motion constitutes democracy. This idea of things coming into being and the connection between being and power interests me.

**TD:** *Sshhh* (2000-) seems to be another of your projects which considers the threshold of “art discourse,” as well as offering a proposal on how to move forward when art threatens to expropriate our most intimate relationships. Given the parasitic relationship many artists currently have in relation to various forms of political and social practice, *Sshhh*

seems a particularly timely work to reactivate for the 2014 Whitney Biennial. When the art discourse threatens real sociopolitical results, such as providing spaces where communities and families can properly care for one another, the *Sshhh* project produces a means by which to act in the face of art’s failures at producing a more equitable and salubrious world.

**BK:** With *Sshhh*, I am trying to acknowledge that there is a domestic discourse that is outside art discourse, a place where meaningful things occur and also a place to which art is not invited. So, with these engravings, there is no image, no information to reveal what was said. We just know that a certain family had a conversation on a particular day, a conversation that is referenced by the engraving but known only by the participants.

**TD:** Whereas some artists would like to partition art from other forms of culture work, and still others would like to take up other disciplines and discourses as extensions of their practice, it seems to me that much of your work is about making certain thresholds appear between what has been constituted as an “art discourse” and other types of discourse. This seems especially true of your ongoing project, *On becoming something else* (2000-), where you’re trying to find the more or less exact point where art’s extension into other disciplines negates its ability to function within an art discourse.

More than anything else, I see your work persistently trying to embody an ethics that accurately observes contemporary's art's undiminished tendency to appropriate a world of lived relationships for itself as well as the risk of your own participation in this appropriation. As though by observing it more clearly (or making it visible at all), we might reorganize what art can do, who it is for, and who is capable of participating in the assertion of its value.

**BK:** Once things are made visible, we do have the opportunity to reorganize what art can do. I suppose that this is the optimism that can be found at the end of institutional critique, that once we have a sense of how meaning is made and where power lies and how it is used, we can propose a plan for a more equitable future. But remember—to refer back to the ideas of consensus and dissensus—that once that new, more just structure is created, it too will leave out some other idea or person or group, and will therefore need to be challenged and renovated to meet the needs of others. And so change continually occurs.

**TD:** I couldn't agree more with what you say about institutional critique, regarding "visibility." I hear Marx in it ("the point is to change it"), but also our beloved philosopher William James, who made a lifework of coordinating ontology with a constant sense of change.

**BK:** Thom, I have a question for you, one that came up for me last summer while I was reading James Wood in the *New Yorker*. In his review of four literary biographies of novelists written by their children titled "Sins of the Father," he writes, "Almost twenty years ago, George Steiner suggested in these pages that doing philosophy was incompatible with domestic life," and later he asks, "Can a man or woman fulfill a sacred devotion to thought, or music, or art, or literature, while fulfilling a proper devotion to spouse or children?"

I would argue this points to a threshold that is worth careful consideration. What are your thoughts on this, in the context of your life as a poet and your interest in various political activities such as Occupy Wall Street? Although Wood's question refers directly to family life, it has implications that go beyond one's private life and extend into our relationships across a social fabric.

**TD:** I immediately think of the many women artists and writers who, despite bearing the brunt of (unpaid) reproductive labor, have still had careers and asserted themselves beyond the domestic sphere. It also reminds me that one of the not small leaps of feminism was in instilling in men a sense of responsibility for reproductive labor—from child rearing to keeping house to making sure everyone in the household is cared for.

Without an attention to the domestic sphere, I don't see how a proper political praxis can exist. Something interesting to note about many of the Occupy camps is how the occupiers created a domestic space, a home, through the appropriation of spaces like parks and squares. At Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, in particular, groups were assigned to cook, clean, and administer health services. Tending house was crucial because the police were trying to find any reason they could for eviction.

With the collapse of various national welfare systems, I think that artists will increasingly become providers and mediators for lacking civic services. I think that they will also continue to explore new ways of being public and private, and rethinking citizenship in terms of the responsibilities of an expanded notion of the domestic, one that may perhaps include a larger "tribe" or "pack," or even extend to a commons (communism).

The months after my Occupy activities ceased, I watched everything by the television producer and director Joss Whedon, who is most famous for the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Whedon's work is all about family—an alternative notion of family, which is not dependent on blood relations but shared cultural urgencies. In a weird way, his work helped me process my own cathexis of Occupy and ongoing projections about social practice and political

engagement. I am still using that work to write about the problems you recognize in your question. How to both have a family and feel that one is part of a commons? Likewise, how to behave in such a way that family and commons become coextensive?

Would you care to talk about this trajectory in your work, from the series of works in which you washed dishes for other people to your founding of an antiquarian bookshop in order to care for your family? I wonder, too, if we are all not constantly "becoming something else" in the current cultural climate, where very few artists can survive on their art alone and most culture workers have more than one job, maybe several?

**BK:** I have tried to respond to a felt sense of urgency. What needs to be said? What is missing from the discussion? What is not part of the consensus, and what is my culpability in this dynamic? I am interested in the threshold of this community, with what can and cannot be called art. I have watched various ideas come and go, from relevant to irrelevant, and back again. But I would argue that, yes, we are all in a state of becoming, and that as we understand, this transmutes into being and power.

## NOTES + ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**I.** Versions of this text were read at “Vital Forms: Healing and the Arts of Crisis” on April 19, 2013, organized by Eleni Stecopoulos, and at Boog City’s sixth annual Music and Poetry Festival, for the panel “Never-ending Participation: Activism and Occupy Wall Street,” August 5<sup>th</sup> 2012, organized by Brenda Iijima. “Poetry During OWS” appears in *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 24, Issue 3, 2012 and online [here](#).

The *Try!* pamphlet to which I refer, edited by David Brazil and Sara Larsen, is titled *What is Called Violence?* The phrase “a violence from within that protects us from a violence without” appears in Wallace Stevens’s essay, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” Robert Kocik’s collection, *Supple Science: a Robert Kocik Primer*, was published in the fall of 2013 by ON Contemporary Practice Monograph Series.

**II.** “someplace other than what he read and the video he showed” was originally published at *Jacket2* on February 21, 2012 as part of a series of posts called “Self | Life | Writing.” Thank you to Julia Bloch and the other editors of *J2*. Project

documentation for “Buried Treasure Island” can be accessed [here](#). Buuck gave an iteration of his Segue Series performance at Small Press Traffic in San Francisco on March 18, 2012, footage of which can be found on YouTube as of March 25, 2015.

**III.** “Enframing the Brink” was published online in four parts at *BOMB* throughout March 2012. Thank you to Luke Degan, who edited the exchange.

**IV.** The contributions to “Our Occupations After the Occupations” have been republished here without revision. Thank you to the participants for allowing me to publish their responses in a new context, and for respecting my wish to have their texts function as “documents” in this collection.

**V.** “Crying” is extracted from a work-in-progress titled *Left Melancholy*, which, through the genre of anti-memoir (or what Maurice Blanchot referred to as the *récit*), considers broadly the function of negative affect for collective struggle and identity formation. A version of this text was published in *LIT*, Volume 25. Thank you to Jeff T. Johnson, who invited me to contribute.

**VI.** This interview with David Brazil, Jackqueline Frost and Evan Kennedy for *BOMB* was conducted throughout the fall and spring of 2013, and published

on April 4, 2014. Thank you to Andrew Bourne, who edited the interview.

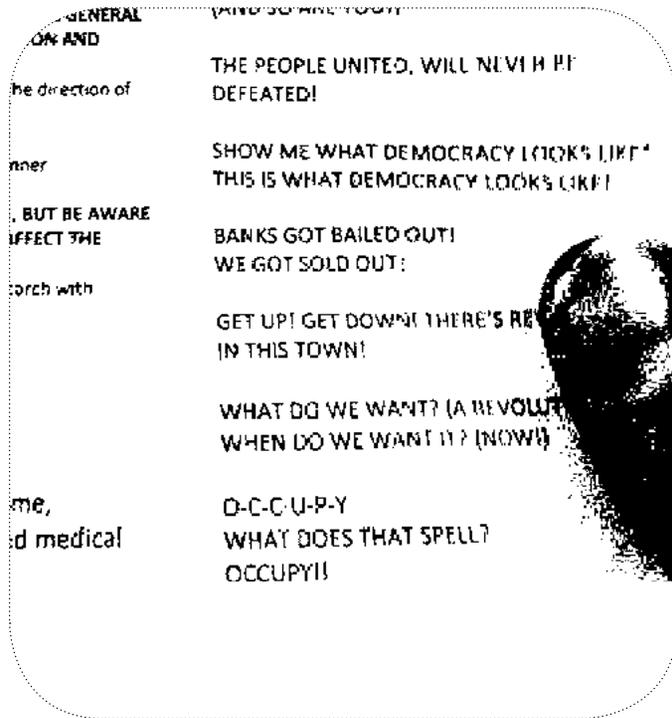
**VII.** “Thom Donovan speaks with Ben Kinmont” was composed via email and phone in the fall of 2013, and published in the 2014 Whitney Biennial catalogue. Thank you to Deirdre O’Dwyer, who edited the email dialogue. Two footnotes appear in the original version of this text contextualizing Kinmont’s projects, *Sshhh* and *On becoming something else*:

Artist’s Project Description: “*Sshhh*, archive begun 2002. I invited families living in Chatou, outside Paris, to each have a conversation at home, amongst themselves, and to consider the possibility of this conversation as a work of art. Fifteen families later notified me by email to say when they had their conversation. The content and nature of each conversation remains a secret known only to them. Afterwards, I made each family an engraving, recording the family’s name and conversation date, in the size and color of their choosing. Each engraving functions as an art object, as something to be exhibited which can circulate within the art world. For those within the family, the engraving is more; it comes out of a domestic moment and functions as an aide-mémoire for a conversation once had. Project

can be reactivated. Archive in the collection of the artist.”

Artist’s Project Description: “*On becoming something else*, archive begun 2009. I wrote seven paragraphs to describe the work of seven different artists who had pursued art practices that led them out of the art world and into other things. The new things they were doing were extensions of their previous practices—they had not simply given up. In Paris, seven chefs wrote recipes to represent these paragraphs. At the Centre Pompidou museum, a broadside was distributed, directing people to the chefs’ restaurants where they could eat the representations of the paragraphs. The dishes were available for the length of the show. The project was reactivated four years later in San Francisco with seven new restaurants and then as a multiple with Galileo High School. Project can be reactivated. Archive in the collection of the artist.”

# AUTHOR BIO



Thom Donovan is the author of *The Hole* and of the forthcoming *Withdrawn* (Compline). He was active in Occupy Wall Street's "Poetry Assembly" in the fall of 2011 and edited the collection "*Poetry During OWS*" for *Rethinking Marxism*, which features 19 poets' responses to Occupy Wall Street.



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