



# OCCUPY ART

## PERFORMATIVE POLITICS IN REAL SITUATIONS

BY NANCY POPP

Los Angeles, October 1, 2011:

*I'm standing with Robby at the corner of Spring Street and 1st Street, hoping to see other artists I know. We're interested in gathering a group to actively participate in Occupy LA at City Hall. We're not sure how we'll engage with the civic space or the occupation, but we agree there's an opportunity here that is beyond what either of us have experienced in past activist movements, and we want to be a part of it.*

For the past several months, I've been at the intersection of performance and politics. My work has traversed these topics for many years, but the Occupy

movement has joined them in ways I've not experienced before. Lately, I've been exploring a new space of dialogue where these territories shift across sites and cultures.

The artists who gathered around Occupy LA through social networking, formal meetings at City Hall and other, informal alliances created a web of actions, events, installations, interviews, readings and writings that move fluidly between performance and political protest. This permeability seems related to Los Angeles, to the geography and loosely connected networks that make up this social space. Later, at Occupy Wall Street I noticed more

clearly differentiated edges to the actions defined, and quantifiable, within spaces and categories.

Contextually and historically, performance art has long been a leaky practice. Its roots in the United States and Europe sprung out of a time of post-World War I political unrest and upheaval, when Dadaists questioned how art could continue as an isolated cultural activity in relation to the trauma of extreme suffering and death. In Latin America, performance has been practiced in the streets for generations as cultural and political critique. As a practice, its ephemerality, demateriality, and resistance to easy historicization and classification



make it a ripe carrier for cultural critique and opposition to unjust systems of taxonomy and power.

It follows that our recessions and art-market crashes have brought the genre back into prominence—only this time within the current art market, embraced by the cultural institution and the history-makers. When presented within a non-critical institutional context incorporating spectacle, it can easily be used as entertainment and co-opted as a form of cultural commodity. Thus the political content of performance becomes neutered and palatable, the genre more accessible.

**New York City, November 17, 2011:**

*The intersection was ours. The police made no attempts to force their way in from the other side of the barricades. Pushback came mainly from streams of Wall Street workers fighting to get past the protests to their offices, frustrated by the delay. Some, as the NYPD cleared their path, yelled at the Occupiers. The*

cal structures of authority that resurfaced an hour later when we were arrested. I witnessed a similar series of events at Occupy LA's City Hall eviction on November 30th. Police performed their characteristic expressions of systemic power in reaction to occupation. As an east-coast friend put it, "New York City cops are thugs." For Los Angeles, cat-and-mouse seemed a more appropriate metaphor. The in-your-face affect of New York versus the laid-back, passive-aggressive undercurrent of Los Angeles was apparent in each city's reaction to the Occupation.

In New York's Liberty Park, I met several groups of artists who organized along different guild lines or groups based on different media, including a film group, various artists publishing small books of drawings made at OWS, a screen-printers guild, and curators who organized a roaming exhibition within the first few weeks of the occupation, similar to LA vs WAR in Los Angeles. These groups are highly organized, according

*The police are waiting along with a medical team, including a psychiatrist determined to assess my state of mind. After presenting identification and undergoing questioning, three witnesses and I are taken to a Buenos Aires police station and detained for more questioning and statements. After two hours, we're released; I have to appear before a judge two days later for the charges of "Disruption of the Peace" to be reviewed.*

Actions such as my "Untitled (Street Performances)" or similar actions created in the permeable public spaces of the Occupy movement function symbolically as metaphors for breaking boundaries, or the desire to see different future possibilities. They reveal the structures that seek to retain power and sustain themselves and offer up space to imagine things differently, to inspire the will to act with political intent. The longer these spaces can be sustained, the more we can envision difference in the structures we wish to change.

In Argentina, the political and

immaterial labor and the symbolic into the production of economic systems that sustain livelihoods and create more equitable political relations.

*Back in the States, I'm working to find ways to continue occupying after the evictions. I'm encouraged by communal efforts to form an Artist's Union addressing issues of labor and economies within the LA art world. I admit that symbolic gestures and actions seem insufficient sometimes, particularly after my experiences in Argentina and New York. I am impatient after witnessing so many struggles under our dysfunctional systems. Dialogue and exchange, however, continue to offer me a sense of hope and connectedness. ☉*

Right: November 17th, 2011  
OWS Day of Action, NYSE  
Beaver Street and William Street  
Photo by Nancy Popp

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*duality was clear: we were the problem, making these good folks late to work. There had to be a way to break out of these pre-assigned roles. Using the People's Mic, I suggested we sit in a large circle to secure the intersection, then invited people to step forward and speak to their presence at this N17 Day of Action at the New York Stock Exchange. People began to step forward: a teacher, a veteran's daughter, an elder man from a rural area in New Jersey, a trans homeless youth, a Wall Street worker, a former ING employee. Passersby began to slow their steps as they—and the cops—began to listen to the people's individual stories.*

This circle of voices and ears temporarily ruptured the hierarchi-

to pre-existing union and labor patterns, which adds to their effectiveness and links them to pre-established, nested power systems. Recent MoMA General Assemblies organized by Occupy Museums explore the museum space as a public space, whose institutional power and accessibility can be critiqued. This destabilizing of categories is what made Occupy LA so slippery and hard to organize, while it gave OWS its effectiveness and its reproducibility.

**Buenos Aires, January 7, 2012:**

*The bomberos have arrived with a ladder on their truck. I make the decision to climb down on my own, rather than have them pluck me from the post across from the Plaza Congresso.*

economic crises of 10 years prior have offered the opportunity to transform metaphor into political reality. The nation's economic and cultural structures collapsed to the point where they could be re-made, although not without great cost and suffering to those who were formerly supported by them. Taking action amidst chaos, artists and workers joined in solidarity to take over factories abandoned by their former owners. These worker-owned collectives now include cultural centers, libraries and exhibition spaces run by artists, an inspiring example of the shared interests and alliances between art, labor, economic justice and culture. Strategically incorporating political actions in the creation of their work, these artists move beyond the realm of

performance