

## Poetic Occupations: Artists as Narrator-Protagonists

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### Abstract

What does it mean to “occupy” space? Referencing the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) protests of 2011, this paper articulates a type of public art practice that can be understood as poetic occupation. The paper further suggests that shifting one’s understanding of public art practice provokes a reconsideration of the role of the artist. To this end, Miwon Kwon’s (2002) term “narrator-protagonist” is useful for expressing this alternative role. The paper proceeds with an exploration of the work of the artist collective Lone Twin, supported by Michel de Certeau’s (1984) theories associating walking with speaking, and illustrated with an analysis of student artwork. Through this analysis, the paper concludes with an examination of the type of learning that might occur when one produces poetic occupations.

## Introduction

The Occupy Movements that characterized much of the latter half of 2011 in both New York City and abroad can be viewed as a process of laying claim to a particular space as a public space. For instance, Zuccotti Park, the now famous location of the origins of the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS), is a publically accessible park. However, its characterization as “public” is somewhat convoluted. A program established in New York City allowed developers to purchase space adjacent to or near their building project in return for concessions regarding building size restrictions. Using this opportunity, Brookfield Office Properties acquired the area now known as Zuccotti Park and designated it as an “open space” in accordance with the agreement. It would be publically accessible yet still privately owned (Foderaro, 2011). This vague designation opens the space to critical interrogation. A conventional understanding of occupying a site would suggest a conscious taking over of a space. In the case of the OWS, occupation was meant to produce a visible and cohesive community of like-minded individuals intent on projecting and promoting a particular social perspective.

Whether this action was successful or not is not the focus of this paper. Rather, I am interested in the theoretical foundations that give the process of occupation and the resultant community meaning. I mean to address the basic question: What does it mean to “occupy” space? And what are the consequences of that occupation? Furthermore, how can this understanding be applied to reconsider forms of artistic expression for students and to rearticulate the purposes and pedagogical objectives of art education? The paper will conclude with a reflection upon final public art projects in which pre-service elementary education undergraduates were asked to “occupy” a site on their campus through the installation and/or performance of site-based work.

One of the qualities of the Zuccotti Park demonstrations that caught my attention was the manner in which communication was accomplished. If one person were speaking to a large crowd gathered around him/her where those furthest away were unable to hear, every phrase uttered by the speaker would be repeated in succession by each concentric ring of listeners until the comment reached those at the outer edges of the crowd. This practice of not using a megaphone accomplished two things. First, all were compelled to actively listen, as they would be responsible for repeating what was just spoken, thus creating an engaged and unified audience. Second, it reinforced what Judith Butler (2011) suggested in a presentation about the Occupy events: “Space and location are created through plural action” (n.p.). Communal action is a core condition of public space. That is, public space is a consequence of neither architectural nor natural physical form, but is produced by connections among and between people. Butler argues, “all political action requires the ‘space of appearance’” (n.p.). Yet this is not a prescribed or willfully defined space, nor is it a community constituted by the efforts of a few individuals. Rather the “space” or community appears as a result of the common presence of the collective itself. That is, the occupation, what Nancy (1991) would call “being-in-common,” produces an alliance among people, rather than the other way around, and produces a space that “belongs properly to alliance itself” (p. 2). A community is thus not defined through deliberate effort and consensus, but as a provisional community that emerges through the very act of putting oneself in relation to others.

Nancy (1991) correlates the conditional nature of such a community with the ontological understanding of the subject as always already “in-common” with others. As such,

communal structure does not have an essence corresponding to a sense of the individual as a unique being with his or her own will. According to Nancy, since there is not a common atomistic sense of being, then a community with a common identity or an agreed upon common meaning is impossible. For Nancy, being itself, understood as “being-in-common,” (p. 1) is the essential condition of community. Thus community is defined essentially by the co-presence of two or more people rather than by any particular commonality put forth by any individual. The variability and unpredictable nature of multiple voices render a stable community untenable, thus opening the very structures of any presumed community to question and critique without an expectation of subsequent consolidation. As such, its meaning and form come about through preexisting relationships occurring incidentally or unconsciously as a result of contact, which “produce[s] the very conditions of the interaction, performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process” (Kwon, 2002, p. 154). Arendt (1958) reflects this understanding when she writes, “action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anywhere and anytime” (p. 199). Occupation thus produces a tentative community defined as “a gift of the word without ever being assured of reception by the other, while, at the same time, only the other renders the request for speaking possible” (Devisch, 2000, p. 11).

Conceiving of artistic practice as a form of poetic occupation compels us to reconsider what constitutes an artist. That is, rather than an individual representing the world through his or her unique point of view, the artist is always already conceived of as being-in-common with the world and as such possesses a perspective that is always already multiple. The artist is not solely a recorder of that which already exists, but is one element among many within the contingent relationships that constitute his/her being as being-in-common. The meaning of the alliance between artist and participant/spectators is not ordained by the artist; rather “being-in-common *is* [emphasis added] the condition for the possibility of meaning” (Hinderliter, 2009, p. 15). Building on this understanding, Kwon (2002) suggests that in such work meaning unfolds around actions of the artist in contact with others and represents “a fragmentary sequence of events and actions *through* spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist” (p. 29). It is important to note that it is the path, understood as presence, that generates the narrative, not the will of the artist. The artist is thus understood as a “narrator-protagonist” (p. 51) who situates him/her self within rather than in opposition to or conceptually above or beyond the quotidian aspects of life.

The designation of narrator-protagonist not only alters one’s perception of what an artist *is*, but also shifts one’s understanding of what an artist *does*. At different moments, the work of the narrator-protagonist may resemble but not adopt various roles, such as ethnographer, anthropologist, scientist, or *flâneur*. Narrator-protagonists do not stay on the sidelines objectively regarding, analyzing, or commenting upon what is present. They observe and they are observed, they collect and distribute, they read and they write as they publically intervene and make their presence known. In all cases they function as sort of unintentional narrators of the very spaces they occupy, not in the sense of declaring a particular narrative order, but as a sort of conduit through and around which others make contact. They act within this fleeting occupation of everyday life, and it is during this interlude that knowledge and understanding are produced through frequently unintended poetic juxtapositions.

The following sections will provide foundations for developing an understanding of poetic occupations and the role of the narrator-protagonist. I will introduce a piece called *Spiral*, an example of a work that might be productively read as poetic occupation, by artists Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters, who go by the collective name of Lone Twin. Michel de Certeau's (1984) work will provide theoretical support for understanding the nature of occupation within the context of the everyday. Employing de Certeau's analysis of everyday practice reveals the work of the narrator-protagonist as producing eccentric communities that do more than just take up space. Occupation informed by his analysis of walking is conceived not only as a physical but also a rhetorical practice. Walking "weaves places together" (p. 97), places that cannot be fully understood as physical sites, but also as locations produced by the navigations and negotiations of the spaces of everyday life. In this regard, occupation becomes a poetic calculation that reveals the relationships that coexist alongside the communities that we occupy.

### Lone Twin: Being-in-Common

In 2007, Lone Twin created *Spiral* at the Barbican Arts Centre in London. For eight days, they walked, following, as closely as possible, a spiral trajectory they had drawn on a map of the buildings that comprised the Barbican Estates.

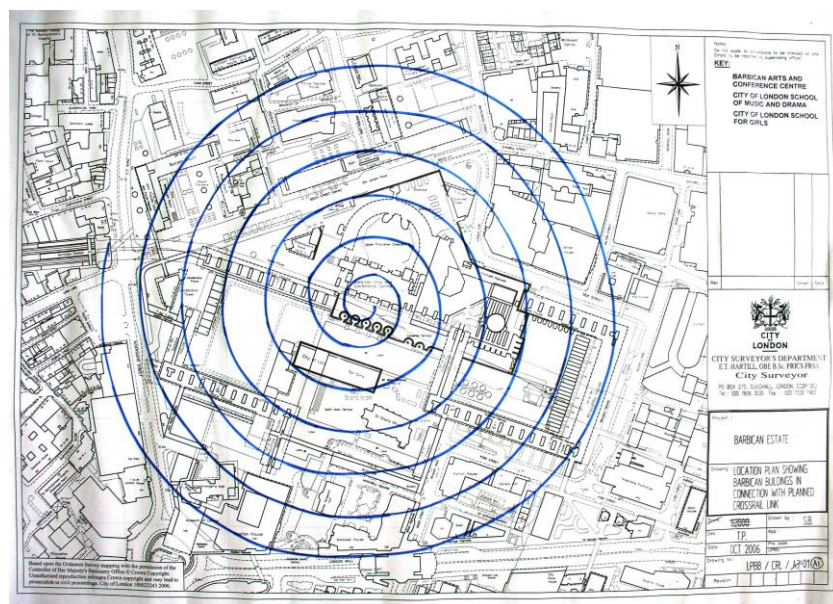


Figure 1. Map of Barbican Estates including the spiral line indicating the proposed path for the project. Photo courtesy of the artists Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters.

Weaving in and out of both public and private spaces, Whelan and Winters navigated obstacles such as stairways and elevators. Starting at the outermost point on the spiral, they moved slowly towards their endpoint, the Barbican Arts Centre. To complicate matters, they had sent out requests for "donations" from the public that could be contributed to the work, which they offered to carry for the entire journey. Objects ranged from small toys, magazines, and gloves, to empty water bottles, a medium-sized wooden table, and an anvil. Their pace was leisurely. Along the way, they stopped for brief friendly conversations with various onlookers.



*Figure 2.* Lone Twin carrying accumulated objects into an elevator within the Barbican Estates. Photo courtesy of the artists Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters.

For one week the pair circumnavigated the Barbican, walking and carrying a makeshift mass of everyday materials. All along their route they accumulated more stuff. With additional objects, the cumbersome collection grew like a snowball being rolled across a snow-covered field.



*Figure 3.* Whelan and Winters discussing their project with young onlookers. Photo courtesy of Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters.

Referring to this work as a “donation project” (Williams & Lavery, 2011, p. 345) that accumulated ordinary materials associated with the lives of those who offered them, Lone Twin moved this work away from customary notions of site-based work into the realm of ethnography. It would be inaccurate to suggest that the artists were doing ethnography; however, to the extent that the nature of the work resembles ethnographic practices, it is

productive to use this lens to examine the piece. Clifford (1988) articulates ethnographic practice in this way:

A modern “ethnography” of conjunctures, constantly moving *between* cultures, does not, like its Western alter ego “anthropology,” aspire to survey the full range of human diversity or development. It is perpetually displaced, both regionally focused and broadly comparative, a form both of dwelling and of travel in a world where the two experiences are less and less distinct. (p. 9)

Throughout his influential text, Clifford contends with the presumption of cultural purity. Clifford’s account challenges a traditional ethnographic assumption that the world is already culturally divided with each culture having its “place,” which suggests that ethnographers simply travel through and between these pre-existing boundaries. As such, one’s experience in these other places is perceived as occupying somewhere else, only to return home to “tell” of this experience. Conventional notions of art as a reflective practice situate the artist as observer and recorder, similar to the traditional ethnographer, and necessarily presume distinctions between site and the representation of a site with the work serving as a secondary account of the experience.

As Lone Twin navigate the spiral path they have devised, accumulating objects, they simultaneously occupy and move through the site, thus disrupting an easy separation between the site and their participation in it. As Clifford (1988) suggests, “the two experiences are less and less distinct” (p. 9). They are not simply travelers passing through an alien space where their presence clashes and can be perceived as separate from the pre-existing culture of the Barbican Estates. Likewise, their actions do not correspond to a conventional notion of dwelling, which implies a sense of permanence. Following Clifford, these two positions are collapsed and produce a conditional space determined by their interactions with the architectural, social, and cultural forms that had identified the space prior to their participation. These interactions are registered in their conversations with both the individuals they spoke with and the various objects that had been contributed to the project. The precarious mound of stuff “becomes a vehicle of traces of the people they have met during their journey through the Barbican” (Pilkington, 2011, p. 74) and functions not simply as a retelling of the space, but as a recombination of its basic structures. Their presence at the Barbican produces an altogether new space coalescing around the various contacts and conversations that have emerged. Their very identity in relation to the Barbican as outsiders doing an art project shifts, as they become insiders in relation to the space that they have defined in accordance with their own and other participants’ relationships with the disparate materials they have collected, presented, and moved through the site. This is a provisional space that has materialized around a tentative community that corresponds to the “being-in-common” that has emerged as a consequence of their presence. Following Nancy’s (1991) articulation of community as inevitable and immanent in a world whose very being is *being with*, Lone Twin’s intervention does not impose, but reveals and reworks the variable structures that hold community together. For instance, the implications of physical structures like stairs, elevators, and corridors are made explicit as their previously utilitarian function is challenged as Lone Twin tries to negotiate these forms with their cumbersome load. Likewise the human culture that comes to life around their presence is born of curiosity, wonder, and humor in contrast to the more customary modes of interaction associated with the Barbican Center such as commerce, information, tourism, and even art. Whelan and Winters do not presume to exist as

outsiders recording or imposing upon an already formed community, but begin with the assumption that their presence will change what is there. It is in this regard that Lone Twin's work as poetic occupation resembles but diverges from standard ethnographic work and by extension from traditional notions of artistic practice.

Lone Twin engaged the living qualities of the space they occupied as they were presented to them. That is, they made no effort to consciously alter the working, living, touring, or shopping patterns of those who lived in or were visiting the Barbican. The objects that composed the expanding mass of materials were not found at the site, but were produced by their occupation. The act of selecting and identifying significant local material had been inverted and left to those who "donated" objects to the work. The artists had no intention of analyzing, representing, or otherwise critiquing the site or the objects given to them. In the strictest sense of the word, the objects as well as the donors "spoke" for themselves and as such produced or narrated an emergent public space within which they and the objects would have meaning. Indeed, at the completion of the project the amassed materials were disassembled and left for people to take what they wanted, thus initiating new contacts and alternative configurations of being-in-common.

To refer to *Spiral* as ethnography and Whelan and Winters as ethnographers would be misleading at best and is not my intent here. However, this project, as with others that they have done, bears a strong resemblance to ethnographic practice. Unlike much ethnographic practice in which objects and people are observed within their presumed proper setting, *Spiral* consciously introduces forms and behaviors that are inconsistent with the environment. Participating in unorthodox ways, navigating a spiral form that is impossible given the paths presented by the space, and introducing objects with no apparent connection to or purpose within the existent community, Lone Twin makes apparent the structures that had previously defined the community of the Barbican Estates. As such, the work addresses the social, political, and spatial composition of an established location through its occupation. I am engaging the socio-spatial practice of ethnography as a useful referent for articulating the nature of this form of artistic practice. Understood as a poetic rather than sociological or scientific endeavor, such action is capable of transforming the experience of public space by disrupting presumed structures that designate it as such. Their work produced a sort of poetic distortion that skews our expectations of the everyday by presenting an extraordinary act within the parameters of daily practice that provoke alternative understandings of the local environment (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).



Figure 4. Whelan and Winters negotiate the streets of the Barbican Estates. Photo courtesy of the artists Gregg Whelan and Gary Winters.

Distortion is at the heart of the practice of written poetry where language is used to defamiliarize conventional understandings in order to open one's perception to meanings beyond what is directly apprehended. *Spiral* brought together materials, spaces, and people not otherwise related and whose reason for being in contact was only imaginable within the context of the work. As Gaston Bachelard (1972) suggests, "Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination" (p. xxxii). Following Bachelard, *Spiral* can thus be read as a poetic occupation.

One of the most endearing and oddly one of the most provocative aspects of Lone Twin's work is their ethic of generosity. They rarely if ever attempt to speak for others. Perhaps unintentionally, the validation of friendship as an integral component of their work links it with Nancy's (1991) notion of community. Indeed, it is the illogic of friendship and love that represent the core of Nancy's community rather than a formal or ideological logic imposed by forces external to the communal coalition. In a later work titled *Speeches* (2008), Lone Twin, along with a professional speechwriter, collaborated with ordinary people to craft speeches that expressed that individual's personal and idiosyncratic knowledge of a particular topic or site. Each speaker then presented his/her speech at the location to which it was connected for anyone who wanted to listen. This gesture of making the ordinary extraordinary is a testament to Lone Twin's particular practice. In a review of *Speeches* in *The Guardian*, Lyn Gardner (2008) captures this spirit, "There are no astonishing revelations here, no remarkable insights. But there is a sense of ordinary people making themselves heard." She concludes that "There is nothing startling in these speeches, and they are not even delivered with huge aplomb, but each is a little act of generosity that celebrates the fact that we all have something to say that is worth hearing" (n.p.). These speakers, who had intimate and perhaps entirely private associations with their selected sites, were able to "occupy" these sites through their retelling, or narrating, of these public places. The association between one's voice and the process of occupation is central to an understanding of poetic occupations and the role of the narrator-protagonist.

### **Moving: Telling Stories**

In an analysis of the narrative qualities of Lone Twin's practice, Pilkington (2011), referencing the work of Adriana Cavarero (2000), suggests that "the terms 'story' and 'narration' are not identical, as a story is already there before it is narrated" (p. 71). In *Spiral*, the distinction between movement and narrative is similarly blurred. Whelan states, "If you go between two points, it is a story: it has a beginning, a middle and an end" (quoted in Pilkington, p. 73). The journey traced by *Spiral* is likewise a story told not exclusively by Lone Twin, but informed by their movements as well as the objects they have collected. "[M]any of the stories are present as physical traces of their journeys, and at the same time many activities [i.e., collecting donations] on these journeys are devised, deliberately, to accumulate traces" (p. 72). It is the simultaneity of telling and moving that constitutes the narrative quality of work produced by a narrator-protagonist.

Following an incident with New York police in which three female protesters were pepper sprayed, outrage among the OWS participants grew and on October 1, 2011, the OWS protestors went mobile (Writers for the 99%, 2012, p. 35). Though not the first march associated with the protests, this shift in tactics from occupation to ambulation can be examined in multiple ways. Perhaps the park was so closely associated with the group's



particular agenda that its capacity to protest other issues became diluted. Perhaps organizers simply felt that occupation must be expanded to surrounding locations through the gesture of mobilization. Or perhaps once a “story” (the perception of Wall Street’s role in the global economic downturn) is associated with a site, the act of disassociation through movement is necessary to produce another story. In any case, protesters left Zuccotti Park at 3:00 p.m. and marched toward the Brooklyn Bridge, a walk that took approximately half an hour (Writers for the 99%, 2012, p. 35). Along the way, protesters carried signs, each “narrating” a different story. New dialogues were forged as the mass came into contact with other people and other parts of New York City. The occupation continued, albeit an occupation in motion.

The plan had been to “occupy” only the pedestrian space on the bridge. Yet when they arrived, a new story requiring a new path emerged as policemen confronted the approaching crowd. What had started as an occupation protest against the social inequities of wealth and power had morphed into a referendum on the use and abuse of authority. Many protesters locked arms and pushed across the bridge on the roadway, only to be met and arrested by the waiting officers (Writers for the 99%, 2012, p. 36). Bearing a resemblance to decades of prior protest actions, this event could be viewed through the lens of situational and political expediency. However, if examined through the lens of Michel de Certeau’s (1984) theorizing of walking as a form of narrative, we can connect the OWS movements through the streets to the poetic occupations of Lone Twin by focusing on what occupation actually produces literally and theoretically rather than on the intent of either a protester or an artist. It is this fundamental aspect of occupation read as narrative that implicitly connects these two very different efforts.

De Certeau (1984) articulates a sort of narrative process that occurs as pedestrians move through a city. Telling stories, like walking, he suggests, is a spatial practice. It is an idiosyncratic movement that does not necessarily correspond with the structures that compose the city. The apparent coordination of elements in space is destabilized by the unpredictability of the wandering pedestrian. De Certeau correlates this process with speaking in that the interjection of language creates unanticipated relationships among the other words and texts within a particular context. One could properly say that once a word is spoken, the place in which it is encountered is altered. “In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers” (p. 117, emphasis in original). Space is not defined solely through movement, but through narrative. Thus walking is not just a physical act, but also a rhetorical one. Pedestrians, or occupiers, are “practitioners” of a city that “follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (p. 93).

On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. (p. 117)

Walking organizes space by creating connections between and among spaces that have no necessarily preconceived relationships. As such, OWS protesters and Lone Twin can be understood as writers around which stories emerge as “they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 115). Movement becomes a form of narration and a catalyst for new

stories, an act of defamiliarization. “The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments or trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93). What can be discerned through de Certeau’s analysis of walking as writing is that occupation as movement, seen in both Lone Twin’s movements through the Barbican Estates and in OWS’s decision to move away from Zucotti Park, assumes narrative qualities with the potential to produce alternative stories, which produce alternative spaces. Whereas both intended to open spaces for alternative voices to be heard, OWS seeks to fill this space by inserting specific goals with political ends. Lone Twin’s occupation of the Barbican seeks primarily to open the space to being-in-common with others.

Disruption, protest, and occupation are not new to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art practices. As early as the 1950s, Guy Debord and the Situationists theorized that the modern built environment had, like everything else, receded into spectacle. Subjective presence in this environment was always restricted by the spectacular quality of the space. Debord (1967/1995) writes, “The modern spectacle...depicts what society *can deliver*, but within this depiction what is permitted is rigidly distinguished from what is possible” (p. 20). Situationist practices such as *dérive*, or aimless drift through the urban environment, were intended to distort and reconstitute one’s experience of the fragmented structures that govern one’s passage through the city in order to evoke alternative experiences and possibilities. The spontaneity and aimlessness associated with *dérive* represent one of the antecedents to work such as Lone Twin’s. The functional and poetic association of the *dérive* with both the physical and discursive structures of urban life align with de Certeau’s (1984) theoretical account of the pedestrian in the modern city and Kwon’s (2002) notions of the nomadic narratives associated with the narrator-protagonist. Both writers associate actions (walking, occupation) with disruptive language (political, poetic).

The potential for disruption, conceived as occupation, movement, and language, to transform experience lies in its ability to deny its recapture. This is the essence of a poetics of speech and the basis for understanding poetic occupations. De Certeau (1997) writes, “From this standpoint, the innovation that emerged could easily be co-opted by the knowledge that it sought to place in the service of autonomy” (p. 30). If the patterns and content of the language of occupation are too similar to the expectations associated with a particular site, its power can be reclaimed and diminished as its contrast to these expectations is not sufficient to disrupt expectations and provoke alternative perceptions. That is, autonomous language or “‘liberated’ speech [is] ‘recaptured’ by the social system” (p. 30). Poetic occupations avoid “recapture” by “generating a poetics subtle and tactical enough to allow for the differentiation of a multiple everyday” (Highmore, 2002, p. 151).

De Certeau (1997) sets up a difference between representational practices and narrative practices. On the one hand, representation accounts for what was experienced; on the other hand, narrative suggests simultaneity of experience and expression as represented by a mobile citizen. In the case of *Spiral*, this could be discerned in the disjointed movements of Whelan and Winters as they piloted their growing mass through the rigid structures of the Barbican. It is within this type of work that I understand the force of Kwon’s (2002) concept of the narrator-protagonist as simultaneously writers and readers of poetic occupations in which they produce and are produced by the narratives that emerge in the process.

### Poetic Occupations: Students as Narrator-Protagonists

Lone Twin's work gives a voice not only to those who either do not speak or who remain unheard, but also to space itself. Narration is produced as much by the material, social, and political conditions of a site as it is by the narrator. Narrative links personal and incidental stories and spaces within broader contexts associated with certain locations. It is with this in mind that I constructed a final "occupation" assignment for my elementary education undergraduates not guided by the obvious question, "What does an artist do?" but rather "What is happening in the process of making art?" This question emphasizes neither the status of the maker nor the product made. By speaking out on the campus through site-based artworks, the students were asked to "speak back" to the institution that controls so much of their academic life. Two particular works emerged from this process that I feel exemplify the productive potential of poetic occupations.

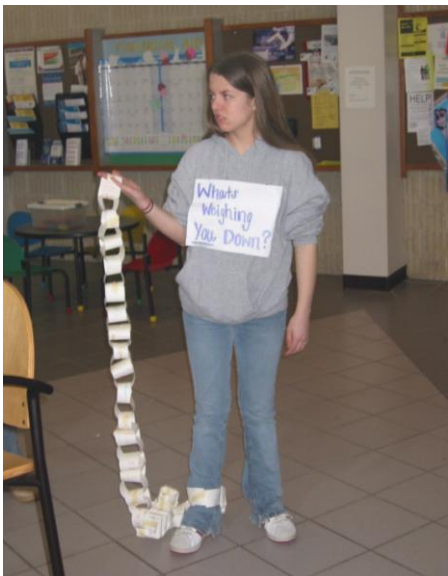


Figure 5. *What's weighing you down?*  
Photo courtesy of the author.

Having used this assignment with multiple classes, I have noticed that one aspect of the students' life on our campus is a sense of lack regarding community. At a regional campus, many students commute and do not feel that they have enough contact with others to form a social community; there is no sense of being-in-common. It is in opposition to this condition that many students chose to situate their work. One student chose to respond to the stresses and anxieties associated with the campus by spending about one hour wandering around the campus with a sign bearing the question, "What's Weighing You Down?" on her chest. When students asked her what she was doing, she would respond that she would be willing to carry whatever burden might be inhibiting their ability to focus on their exams. The respondent was then asked to write his or her burden on a small strip of paper that she would then attach to her leg in a small loop. She continued walking around campus until she had roughly 20 responses, each representing a link in a growing paper chain affixed to her ankle.

The student and I were both struck by the willingness and sincerity with which people participated. In a sense an alternative community based on compassion and personal interaction emerged. For the period of the piece, the student and those who interacted produced a transient and conditional space for reflective considerations of their place in this campus community. Read as a poetic occupation, the effects of disrupting expectations can be seen through the re-articulation of the space by the insertion of an alternative "language" and movement not easily re-captured by conventional narratives of campus experience.

The second piece involved a small group of students and a large obelisk at the center of the campus dedicated to a philanthropist who had made generous donations to the school. At its base is a plaque bearing a portrait of the donor and the quote, "Let me know if I can do anything for you." Considering their often busy and complicated lives, the students decided

to solicit responses to this query by asking students what this benefactor could do for them. Responses were written on the most convenient material, everything from napkins, to scraps of paper, to a CD, and then affixed to the space around the plaque. Responses ranged from “Can he babysit my daughter while I take my exams?” to “Can he pay for my books?” to “Can he fix my car so I can get to work?”



Figure 6. *Let me know if I can do anything for you.*



Figure 7. Detail. Photos Courtesy of the author.

Generally, the personal and immediate urgency of the comments belied the apparent generalized benevolence implied by the quote. As a poetic occupation, the work distorted and re-directed the institutional language of philanthropy to their concerns as individuals. As such, it produced a space of dialogue that for the period of the work’s presence gave rise to an impromptu community. In both of these examples, the students functioned as narrator-protagonists rewriting their experience in line with their particular association with the campus and its institutional structures. Like the OWS movements and Lone Twin, their occupation of these spaces gave them a voice distinct from and in contrast with established narratives creating a temporary space for their voices to be heard above the din of everyday life.

### **Implications: Producing Knowledge**

Suggesting that art students engage in narrative practices of physical intervention sets up both opportunities and challenges. For instance, what alternative learning experiences become available with a shift in nomenclature from *artist* to *narrator-protagonist*? Such a shift necessarily places priority on making as a site of knowledge production. It is the active production of an alternative narrative experience as a narrator-protagonist that produces the conditions for new knowledge. By contrast, conventional approaches to art education, with students identified as artists in the more common understanding of the term, associate skills development with making and situate knowledge production primarily in reflective and interpretive practices.

The type of meaning produced during poetic occupations corresponds with Ellsworth’s (2005) account of ways of knowing that are produced as a consequence of an active experience initiated by and carried through by the learner. Knowledge is produced at the

point of contact with a world that disrupts one's expectations. It is at this sometimes fleeting moment that meaning occurs, and it is here where learning and making converge. Ellsworth describes pedagogy "as the impetus behind the particular movements, sensations, and affects of bodies/mind/brains *in the midst* of learning" (p. 2) rather than prior or subsequent to it. Pedagogy as such "plays host to: experiences of being radically in relation to one's self, to others, and to the world" (p. 2). In other words, pedagogy is not viewed as something that conceptualizes and organizes pre-existing knowledge as a thing already made and does not presuppose learning to be "an experience already known" (p. 5), but rather is an experimental event that proceeds as a result of the relationships created by a learner experiencing the self and knowledge "in the making" (p. 5). Knowledge production as a narrative process depends entirely on the kind of narrative; not all narratives are linear. For the narrator-protagonist, occupations produce a being-in-common that is neither entirely planned nor based solely on chance. They represent the confluence of everyday life, active intervention, and heightened spatial awareness coming together as a form of inquiry introduced by a *poetic* narrative that disrupts predictable flows and experiences.

Poetic occupations represent both the process and product of the narrator-protagonist. Just as speaking is the active use of language and syntax to communicate thoughts through the implied relations developed by using a linguistic structure, spatial practice transforms space from a site for reading, representing, or translating the texts and signs of the visual and physical landscape to one of using that landscape as the raw material for writing, or narrating, meaning. Narrative space is a space of dialogue, of conversations. Poetic space links, distorts, reorganizes, affirms, and dissolves one's experience.

By suggesting that "Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice," de Certeau (1984, p. 115) reminds us that the narratives that compose our daily lives, that continue to inform our understanding of the world, are always associated with the experience of encountering difference. The conversations that occur between our environment and us become the threads that bind the disparate and disjointed stories that arise from these conversations. They organize and are organized by the spaces in which they occur and help us make sense of the world around us. "These narrated adventures, simultaneously producing geographies of actions and drifting into the commonplaces of an order, do not merely constitute a 'supplement' to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics... they *make* [emphasis added] the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it" (p. 117).

Poetic occupations produce narrator-protagonists. In the end, the practices of the artist as narrator-protagonist produce not objects for reflection and contemplation, but reverberations that produce further narratives that resonate and confer meaning on all spatial practice, initiating an ongoing and ever-changing script.

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