

In *Placing Poetry*, Zoë Skoulding and Ian Davidson, eds. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013)

**Poets as Experimental Geographers: Mark Nowak,
Kaia Sand and the Re-composition of
Political-Historical Space**

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Abstract: This essay explores how poets refashion space, pressing poetical experience in a political direction. Examining the work of US-based poets Mark Nowak and Kaia Sand, I analyze political-poetical interventions that concertedly push poems beyond the page and into history-drenched spaces of dissent. Along the way I explore the following themes: how poetry can surreptitiously slide into social protest against neoliberal capitalism without stepping onto the slippery slope of didacticism; how poetic interventions can galvanize a political scale shift from the local to the global and back again; how poets make tactical use of recombination and recontextualization to foment formally innovative platforms for politics. Nowak and Sand uncover the social relationships embedded in space, concertedly eschewing the idea of poet as expert, instead favouring the practice of poet as rigorous investigator of socio-political relations. Rather than claiming authorial authority, they inspire audience participation by embracing a tactical position of amateur.

Key names and concepts: Mark Nowak, Kaia Sand; poetry, public space, scale, space.

History is the scaffold on which art and writing grow.
(Matthew Stadler 2008: xx)

Spatial politics are forged on the anvil of social relations and are vibrating with all-too-often unacknowledged historical multiplicity. Yet spatial politics are also hammered out on the anvil of poetical-artistic practice in ways that honour open-endedness, scale-shifting, and inexpertdom. This essay explores how poets refashion space, pressing poetical experience and aesthetic relations in a political direction. Focusing on the work of two contemporary US-based poets — Mark Nowak and Kaia Sand — I examine political-poetical interventions that concertedly push poems beyond the page and into history-drenched spaces of dissent. Along the way, I consider the following questions: how can poetry surreptitiously slide into social

protest against neoliberal capitalism without stepping onto the slippery slope of didacticism? How can poetic interventions galvanize a political scale shift from the local to the global and back again? What methods of presentation and dissemination are these poets using to provoke political-poetic interaction?

Both Nowak and Sand make tactical use of recombination and recontextualization to construct formally innovative platforms for political dissent. Both writer-activists uncover the social relationships that are embedded in space as they eschew the idea of poet as expert, instead favouring the practice of poet as rigorous investigator of the socio-political relations that inflect both abstract and corporeal space. Rather than claiming authorial authority and triggering the tyranny of the omniscient expert, these poets encourage participation on the part of their audiences by embracing a tactical position of amateur. In doing so, both foreground the ephemeral process of social interaction as informed citizen, subtly shifting the locus of power to the audience, transforming bystanders into meaning-makers. Both Nowak and Sand knit formations of presence and absence, intertwining the past and the present in an effort to create, in the words of Henri Lefebvre (1991: 367), “forces that run counter to a given strategy” as they engage in “establishing ‘counter-space’ within a particular space” of material and discursive unevenness. While place and space are often organized in ways that prevent lateral, collective connections, these writers resist the ingratiating processes of social control and political cooptation, creating Lefebvre-esque “counter-spaces” (383) that are “designed to thwart strategies, plans, and programs imposed from above”.

Key aspects of these poets’ work cannot be grasped or grappled using conventional literary theory and the vocabulary of poetry criticism. In this essay I argue that there are contemporary poets whose work we gain greater analytical leverage on if viewed through a visual-art prism even though poetry is usually not examined in the same field as site-specific art practice. Art historian Miwon Kwon’s description of the three dominant paradigms of site-specific artistic practice under late capitalism is equally relevant to contemporary poets interested in spatial politics and political-poetic intervention. Kwon (2004: 60-69) asserts the first distinct paradigm is the “art-in-public-places model” whereby gallery sculptures were expanded into mammoth replicas that were plunked into public spaces like parks and squares in order to bring art to a broader audience. This approach

foregrounded the aesthetic and was derisively dubbed “plop art” by its critics. The second paradigm Kwon discusses is the “art-as-public-spaces approach” in which site-specificity became a key determinant in what art went where. Smooth integration into the space — and sometimes even art with use-value — was heralded as the way to bring art to the public; functionalism trumped aesthetics. Third, Kwon describes the “art-in-public-interest model”, which features a collective, collaborative spirit across a wide range of media. Suzanne Lacy (1995: 19) dubbed this approach “new genre public art” in order to

distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called “public art” — a term used ... to describe sculpture and installations sited in public places. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art — visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives — is based on engagement.

While Lacy limits this last paradigm to “visual artists”, I argue it should be widened to include poets working with and through spatial politics. It should be noted that these are neither cast-iron categories, nor a clean, linear history. Rather than a strict periodization, these three paradigms overlap each other and can be at work simultaneously across the range of artistic practice, or even within a particular project (Kwon 2004: 30).

These poets’ work also sits sturdily on the mantle of “relational aesthetics”. Nicolas Bourriaud (2002: 14) argues that “relational art” emerging in the 1990s takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space”. This work foregrounds sociability, encounter, interactivity, and open-endedness in the name of building transitory micro-communities, a “social interstice”, or “everyday micro-utopias” (16, 31). Bourriaud asserts,

As part of a “relationist” theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its “environment”, its “field” (Bourdieu), but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice. (22)

As a theory, “relational aesthetics” adjudicates art “on the basis of the human relations which they represent, produce or prompt” (112) and

the “co-existence criterion” that transforms viewers into participants who ask when encountering an aesthetic artwork “Does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?” (109). Both Nowak and Sand use poetry to jumpstart collaborative, dialogical relations that invite reflexivity and refashion subjectivities in ways that enable participation not only in the aesthetic intervention but also in larger political processes aimed at social change.

I also read the work of Nowak and Sand through the lens of political geography. I argue both should be viewed as avant-garde poets with a penchant for geographical praxis, or, given their willingness to take politico-aesthetic risks and assume the role of non-expert, “experimental geographers”. Alex Villar (2009: 91) asserts,

The task of the experimental geographer consists of exposing the absurd rules that organize living spaces while at the same time proposing deviating paths as a contribution toward a rearrangement.

By “shifting the vectors of the situation”, these experimental geographers-slash-poets organize “activities that have in common the pursuit of unusual routes of action”. Their “routes” are especially “unusual” in the context of contemporary poetry. Along the way, both poets ante up documentary poetics with a hefty dose of political content, as they embrace an interventionist approach to spatial politics, rather than taking the assimilative road more travelled. In this sense they embrace what Claire Bishop (2004: 79) calls “relational antagonism” — which is “predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony” — as much as Bourriaudian “relational aesthetics”.

Space, Place, and Poetry

As geographer Doreen Massey asserts, “society is necessarily constructed spatially, and that fact — the spatial organization of society — makes a difference to how it works” (1992: 70). Space is not an empty vessel waiting to be filled but rather, it is dynamic, ever-unfolding, and multiplicitous. Space is socially produced through material and discursive practices playing out on the uneven terrain of

power relations. As Massey notes (2005: 59), space is “the dimension of dynamic simultaneous multiplicity” and “the sphere of continuous production and reconfiguration of heterogeneity in all its forms — diversity, subordination, conflicting interests”. As such, as fellow geographer Cindi Katz states, “space is both the bearer and reinforcer of social relations” (2001a: 1231). With that in mind, Massey argues “the spatial is integral to the production of history, and thus to the possibility of politics” (1992: 84).

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson discourage the idea that spaces are autonomous, discrete, disconnected. Rather, they urge us to explore socio-cultural change “as situated within interconnected spaces” (1992: 8). They go on to write, “The presumption that spaces are autonomous has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power”. The poets in this essay run with Gupta and Ferguson’s preferred premise, “that spaces have *always* been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected”, which means that “cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference *through* connection” (emphasis in original). The poets highlighted in this essay acknowledge these hierarchical relations, challenging us to interrogate difference through concerted and collectively forging lateral connections.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1991: 38-39) offers a tripartite concept of space in dialectical tension: (1) *spatial practice* (the cohesive materiality of space that moves between the daily routines and people’s spatial competences); (2) *representations of space* (abstract, ordered conceptions of space as mapped by architects and urban planners), and (3) *representational spaces* (“space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” of the imagination. As we shall see, all three spatial ideas come into play through poetic practice.

This brings us to the important analytical difference between space and place. Massey puts it this way:

If space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far, then places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power-geometries of space. Their character will be a product of these intersections within that wider setting, and of what is made of them. And, too, of the non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the relations not established, the exclusion. All this contributes to the specificity of

place. [...] Places not as points or areas on maps, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*. (Massey 2005: 130; emphasis in original)

Such a processual definition of place helps sidestep the tendency to reify place as a thing, a localized parcel of turf. Instead, place is conceived as a complex tapestry of perpetually emergent story, a congregation of “throwntogetherness” rather than a coherent, pure, fixed patch of land. Place is an ongoing “moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space” (Massey 2005: 131). Sociologist Walter J. Nicholls aptly notes that Massey downplays the territorialization of place, and instead “suggests that we begin to conceive of ‘space’ as the sum of concrete activities that occur in places, unevenly assembled through a series of relational networks” (Nicholls 2009: 81). Place — and its connection to space — is also vital to the social practice of numerous interventionist artists and poets, an anchor point for rethinking relations and rewiring resistance.

Neoliberal capitalism and its attendant social relations aggressively — if often subtly — reorganize the topography of space and place, along the way swaying our conduct and dealings. The very architecture of the city channels us toward movement and flow, inscribing the dictates of capital — mobility, post-Fordist non-fixity — into our quotidian interactions and gestures. Urban infrastructure — such as walkways, roads, subways, escalators, and elevators — encourages mobility. The Harvard Project on the City (2001: 141, 125) goes as far as to argue that “shopping = mobility” and that “Shopping is arguably the last remaining form of public activity”. Simultaneously, city planners attempt to facilitate commerce through “bumproof” barrel-shaped benches that prevent the homeless from getting too comfortable, which might deter potential shoppers with their non-mobile presence.¹ Such benches, with their hard-metal dividers and ever-shrinking seat space, also serve the double-function of keeping shoppers on the move, as with this bench (Fig. 12) on hyper-commercialized Cornmarket Street in Oxford, England.

¹ Mike Davis describes these “bumproof” benches as well as other policies — such as randomized sprinkler systems — used in Los Angeles to keep the homeless population both mobile and contained (1992: 232-36).

Benches and other public architecture contribute to what Sze Tsung Leong (2001: 187) calls “control space,” which he describes as “a cartography in continuous flux” that bestows “infrastructural support” for the machinations of capital, instilling the “vicissitudes of the market” into everyday life. It “provides the invisible mechanisms that allow shopping to smoothly operate as much as it enables the packaging of total environments” that encourage commercial purchase.

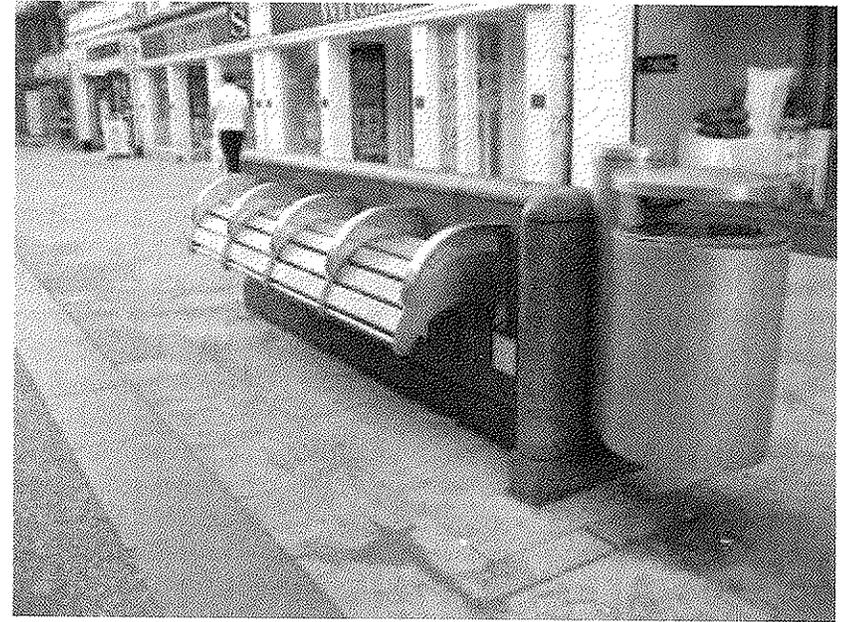


Fig. 12: Bench on Cornmarket Street in Oxford, England, June 2009
(photo credit: Jules Boykoff)

Yet, simultaneously there are counterhegemonic social practices and processes at work full-throttle. As Naomi Klein notes,

There are oppositional threads, taking form in many different campaigns and movements. The spirit they share is a radical reclaiming of the commons. As our communal spaces — town squares, streets, schools, farms, plants — are displaced by the ballooning marketplace, a spirit of resistance is taking hold around the world. People are reclaiming bits of nature and culture, and saying “this is going to be public space”. (Klein 2001: 82)

Mark Nowak and Kaia Sand are part of this “oppositional threads” zeitgeist, abandoning their historically assigned role as page- and stage-bound poets and embracing the political-poetic practice of site-specific intervention in the name of spatial reclamation.

Recently, poetry has been discussed more frequently and concertedly in terms of its spatiality. For instance, Ian Davidson, in his book *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (2007), angles in on the relationship between various ideas of space and poetry/poetics. Davidson asserts,

those poets most influenced by the spatial turn are also the most socially or politically engaged, and part of international and specifically internationalist movements, rather than necessarily major figures in national literatures. The most satisfying responses to spatialization and globalization are from those poets who engage with those processes through both the content of their work and through experimentations in poetic form. (27)

Nowak and Sand embrace the “spatial turn”, but they not only spatialize formally and through poetic content, but also through living, breathing context, or what Lefebvre called “spatial practice” (1991: 38). Spatial relations can most assuredly be read inward into poetic texts, but, as these two poets demonstrate, poetry can also press outward from the “changing geographical imaginings within texts” or “a place within the space of language” into corporeal space, reconstituting that space in innovative ways (Davidson 2007: 26, 37).² Sometimes this political-poetic intervention is unsanctioned, “guerrilla poetry” that features the polemical, theatrical, invective, and sloganistic. The off-the-page poetic practices of both Mark Nowak and Kaia Sand share affinities with this “guerrilla poetry” vector, while they simultaneously collaborate with their audience, slicing against the social construction of frictionless space that solely serves rampant commercialism (Boykoff and Sand 2008).

² For an example of inwardly spatial readings of texts, see Davidson’s gloss (2007: 31-32) on Alice Notley’s work as well as Kim Duff’s consideration (2008) of the urban spatiality in the work of Louis Cabri and Rodrigo Toscano.

Mark Nowak and the Poetics of Class

Rejecting a prominent trend in contemporary poetry discourse, USAmerican poet C. D. Wright (2007: xiv) wrote, “The popular perception is that art is apart. I insist it is a part of” and that poetry’s “ultimate goal” ought to be “to reunite the separated with the larger human enterprise”. Mark Nowak’s poetry has always adhered to this insistence. Nowak was born in 1964 to a Polish-American family in Buffalo, New York. Steeped in a working-class background, his maternal grandfather was a steelworker at Bethlehem Steel, his paternal grandfather was a railroad mechanic, and his father was a longtime union organizer at Westinghouse. Nowak earned an undergraduate degree in English from Canisius College before taking an MFA from Bowling Green State University in Ohio (where he would often vamoose for weekend trips to industrial towns like Toledo and Detroit to survey the Rust Belt rusting). His poetic influences include Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, and Meridel LeSeur (Senchyne 2003; Pohl 2001). He currently lives in New York where he is the Director of the Graduate Program in Creative Writing at Manhattanville College. He also edits the magazine *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*. Nowak is a self-proclaimed practitioner of “an anticapitalist poetics of/upon American empire” (2006a: 240). He is the author of three poetry collections, all from Coffee House Press: *Revenants* (2000), *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004), and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009a). In this essay I will focus on the later two works and their off-the-page extension into relational space.

Shut Up Shut Down and *Coal Mountain Elementary* are intensive interrogations of global industrial restructuring, moving cross-examinations of the deindustrialization of the US Rust Belt, and unremitting explorations of the human costs of post-Fordist production, consumption, and accumulation. These poems constitute an indictment of a world gone hyper-capitalist and suggest possibilities of solidarity and resistance, of social movement unionism. Nowak dispenses with narrative linearity in favour of a fragmentary style that angles in on labour’s increasingly vexed relationship to free-market capitalism. Avoiding an over-smooth poetic veneer and sidestepping the didactic, Nowak offers a meticulous masonry of carefully placed fragments that allow the reader to see the poems’ inner constructions, as if affording an x-ray

glimpse of the steel-beam skeletons that bolster buildings. As he put it in one interview, he wants

to see how the micro-level historical investigation of local economies, ethnic & working-class cultural memory, the materialist effects of industrialization, etc., could be mapped beneath against several individuals' "remembering". (Senchyne 2003)

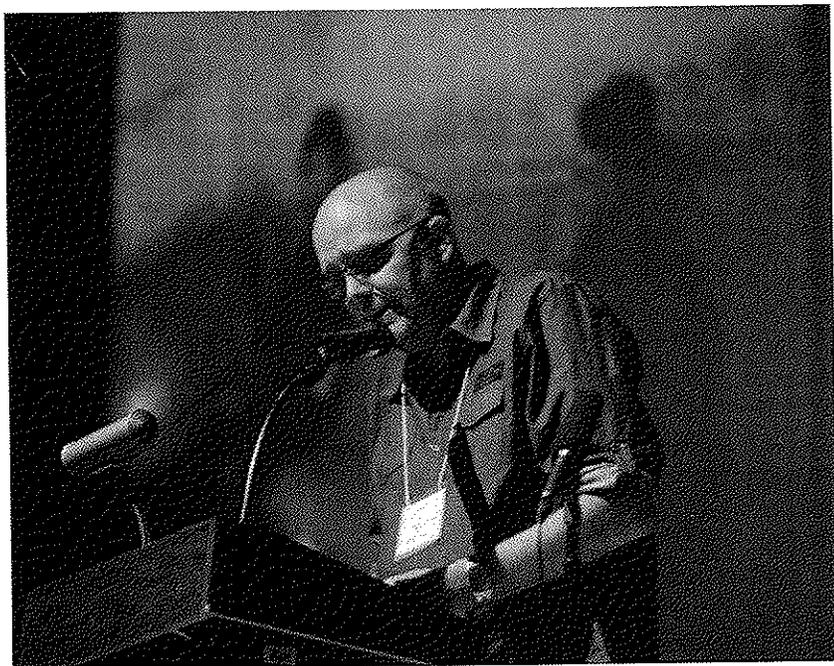


Fig. 13: Mark Nowak reading at the 2010 Split This Rock Poetry Festival (photo credit: Jill Brazel)

A key facet of Nowak's poetry is what art critic Sven Lütticken calls "the art of theft". Lütticken writes,

An evolving and self-critical culture is unthinkable without an art of theft as one of its constituent elements: quoting and appropriating is a way of manipulating material and introducing different meanings. (2002: 90)

Nowak's poems feature polyvocal, polytextual brocades, often with one voice/text denoted by bold font, another by italics, and a third by

regular font. He began to make use of this method in his first book, *Revenants* (2000), though it is central in his two more recent works: *Shut Up Shut Down* (2004) and *Coal Mountain Elementary* (2009).

Poets have long used collage and textual appropriation as ways to forge conversation between texts and to highlight temporal and contextual discrepancies and coherencies. Nowak prefers the term 'sampling' to collage — he has been quoted as saying "Africa Bambaata and Jam Master Jay taught me to 'sample' long before Ezra Pound did" (Hugill 2005) — and he snags language from a variety of sources: newspapers (e.g. *Duluth News-Tribune*, *South China Morning Post*), books (e.g. David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*), scholarly journals (e.g. *Labor History*), elementary school lesson plans designed by the American Coal Foundation, archived testimony (e.g. from the Sago Mine tragedy), news reports of mining disasters in China, and other sources. By sampling from a wide range of sources, Nowak sparks new, hybridized meanings as he consistently shows the relational nature of seemingly disparate texts.

In an essay for *Artforum*, Homi Bhabha argued,

The global perspective in 1492 as in 1992 is the purview of power. The globe shrinks for those who own it; for the displaced or the dispossessed, the migrant or the refugee, no distance is more awesome than the few feet across borders or frontiers. (Bhabha 1992: 88)

Nowak's central political-poetic goal is to work with neoliberalism's "displaced" and "dispossessed" to confront these borders and frontiers. In pursuing this goal, Nowak has demonstrated commitment to catapulting poetry off the page and beyond the spaces where it is commonly shared. Nowak is explicit in his desire to bring poetry to people who don't normally consider it: "I want to be part of a larger public conversation. I would not be happy if I was consistently reading to audiences of poets. Expanding what literature is and who can participate is an important part" (Scheirman 2009). Even his choice of blurb writers reflects this: David Roediger (a historian) penned book-jacket material for *Shut Up Shut Down* while Howard Zinn (another historian) and Aihwa Ong (anthropologist) blurbed *Coal Mountain Elementary*.

A vociferous proponent of labour who works with unions around the globe — from the United States to Argentina to South

Korea — Nowak has read and helped others stage his work in venues such as union halls, labor day festivals, and anti-corporate-globalization events. He read poems from *Shut Up Shut Down* at a benefit for *Labor Notes* at UFCW 789 in St Paul, Minnesota and 'Francine Michalek Drives Bread' premiered at the UAW Local 879 union hall. His poem 'Capitalization' was staged as a protest event for Northwest Airlines workers on strike and he also read his work at the annual Labor Day picnic for the AFL-CIO, as well as at a Teamsters Hall in Milwaukee. He has staged poems from *Shut Up Shut Down* and *Coal Mountain Elementary* in a number of such unconventional venues and he has orchestrated writing workshops with Ford autoworkers and for unions at the Chicago Center for Working Class Studies (Demko 2004; Nowak 2007). Nowak does all this because, as he puts it,

post-compositionally (but also pre-compositionally), these bits and writings, these disentanglings and re-imaginings and re-organizings *must* find a way to return to the communities of workers to whom and from whom and of whom they [in the words of C.L.R. James] "recognize and record". (Nowak 2007: 334, emphasis in original)

Such extended, structured community collaboration shares a great deal with the "new genre public art" of Lacy and the open-ended relational art of Bourriaud.

The Politics of Scale

As with the concept of space, scale should not be viewed monochromatically as different (albeit fixed) levels of analysis (e.g. local, national, global). As human geographer Sallie Marston (2000: 220) notes, "scale is not necessarily a preordained hierarchical framework for ordering the world". Rather, it is "a contingent outcome of the tensions that exist between structural forces and the practices of human agents". As such, scale is a social relationship bracketed by the rules and norms of structures and institutions and actively produced by agents working within those brackets. So, scale both demarcates the boundaries where socio-political contestation occurs as it plays an important role in how these contests play out. Geographer Byron A. Miller (2000: 18) adds, "Some actors will try to

shift the scale of struggle to gain advantage, while others, favored by an extant scale, will attempt to lock it in." As such, "scale issues are clearly inherent in the strategies of social movements". As a social movement participant, Mark Nowak's work is interested in the politics of scale. Drawing from the conceptual work of Raymond Williams, he has argued that his poetry and its intersections with the visual

allowed me to push toward this "militant particularism," a way of trying to say something about the local — a word that always connotes, for me, both space/region and the Union Local, like my NWU Local 13 — that will hopefully also hold potential for ways of thinking about the global. (Senchyne 2003)³

Nowak pursues the possibility of shifting scale. For example, in April 2009, Davis & Elkins College theatre students in West Virginia premiered *Coal Mountain Elementary*. The campus sits a mere thirty miles from where the Sago Mine disaster occurred in January 2006 when a coal shaft exploded and numerous miners were trapped and ultimately died. The performance zeroes in on the emotional reverberations the disaster unleashed on this West Virginia community but it also forces the audience to consider how similar — yet different — disasters are happening across the global as well. Such disasters ravage local communities while serving the dictates of internationalized capital (PBS News Hour 2009).

In an interview with *Progressive Radio*, Nowak commented regarding *Coal Mountain Elementary* that

Part of the process of the book was to get people to hopefully try to think simultaneously across these national borders. So as you hear this voice of the Sago story, you're simultaneously seeing an underground situation in China. (Rothschild 2009)

³ In fact, both poets featured in this paper share a concern for enmeshing the visual in their language-oriented projects, tacitly responding to Nato Thompson's remark that "If the cultural sphere is visually designed then we should locate and design spaces of slippage, where these reactive categorical barriers are broken down" (2005: 127).

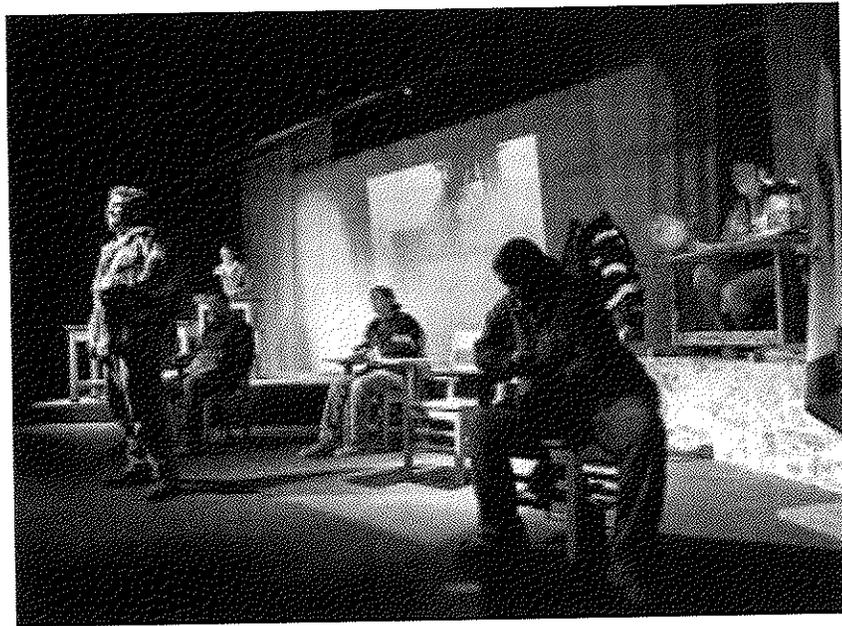


Fig. 14: Performance at Davis & Elkins College, April 2009
(photo credit: Lizz Clements)

Therefore, through the interrogation of similarity through difference (and vice versa), as well as the willingness to skate across space and scale, Nowak attempts to provide a political-poetic antidote for alienation, replacing the solitary with the solidary. Nato Thompson argues that alienation is “a symptom of the democratic process in its historic form. For those of us operating in the cultural sphere, we must take this legacy seriously and tactically position ourselves within it” (2005: 125). Nowak does indeed take this suggestion seriously, and through the politics of scale, he encourages his reader to do so as well. This coheres with one of Bourriaud’s defining features of relational art and aesthetics, “the *democratic* concern that informs” the work (2002: 57, emphasis in original).

Nowak achieves a scale shift through what Cindi Katz calls “topography” as a methodology, making use of the “contour line” as a way of creating relationality. Katz (2001a: 1228) asserts,

To do a topography is to carry out a detailed examination of some part of the material world, defined at any scale from the body to the global,

in order to understand its salient features and their mutual and broader relationships.

This is done in order

to excavate the layers of process that produce particular places and to see their intersections with material social practices at other scales of analysis. Revealing the embeddedness of these practices in place and space in turn invites the vivid revelation of social and political difference and inequality.

A key concept in topographical research is the contour line, a metaphor Katz uses to connect particular relations within larger processes:

This offers a multifaceted way of theorizing the connectedness of vastly different places made artifactually discrete by virtue of history and geography but which also reproduce themselves differently amidst the common political-economic and socio-cultural processes they experience. This notion of topography involves a particular precision and specificity that connects distant places and in so doing enables the inference of connection in uncharted places in between. (2001a: 1229)⁴

Recall Gupta and Ferguson’s catchy shibboleth that “The presumption that spaces are autonomous has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power”. The contour line is a concrete methodological move designed to surface power relations while simultaneously charting what Katz calls “countertopographies” that “link different places analytically and thereby enhance struggles in the name of common interests” (1230). Contour lines can help create these “countertopographies” through looping connective, relational tethers between places otherwise viewed as discrete. This is not simply a fancy theoretical proposition; rather,

The larger intent is to produce countertopographies that link different places analytically and thereby enhance struggles in the name of common interests. In many ways this builds an oppositional politics on the basis of situated knowledges. (1230)

⁴ Traditionally, contour lines used by geographers are “lines of constant elevation, connecting places at precisely the same altitude to reveal a terrain’s three-dimensional shape” (Katz 2001a: 1229). See also Katz 2001b.

One of the central goals of such countertopographies is to galvanize what social-movement scholars call “scale shifts”, or spikes in “the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader contention involving a wider range of actors and bridging their claims and identities” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001: 331). In other words, scale shift is the social multiplication of boots-to-pavement activism.

Nowak deliberately draws contour lines between sites of labour exploitation. This happens on the page when he links Sago to China, and on the stage as when the work was performed at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia. But Nowak moves beyond this textual and performance-oriented work when he links the creative writing workshops he does with Ford autoworkers in Minnesota and their co-workers in two Ford factories in South Africa. Nowak has clicked into motion he calls “transnational poetry dialogues” between workers in these seemingly disparate, discrete locations, allowing workers to infer connections and realize common interests. In the process, as Bourriaud might note, he makes an effort “to patiently re-stitch the relational fabric” (2002: 36).

Nowak first organized creative writing workshops with United Auto Workers members in Minnesota, helping them to craft poems. He did this in 2006 as word came down that the car plant would be shuttered after eighty-one years of production. Ford bosses permitted Nowak to enter the plant and talk about and write poetry with workers between their shifts. Then in August 2006 he travelled with their poetic output to Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, South Africa where he facilitated extended poetry workshops (a whopping sixteen hours) over a two-day period. Nowak shared the verse of UAW poets with the members of National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the union that represents South African car makers. NUMSA members, in turn, responded with their own poetry. Nowak made audio and video recordings of the South African autoworkers reading and performing their work and toted these back to Minnesota where he showed them to UAW members. While US autoworkers tended to resent their counterparts in other countries, to whom their jobs were being outsourced by Ford and other car manufacturers, this “transnational poetry dialogue” put a human face on a process otherwise shrouded in anonymity. Such demystification helped slice

through stereotypes and oversimplifications (Nowak 2006b: 20-21; Nowak 2009b).

Nowak’s countertopographical work is deliberate:

Workers in the Rust Belt — industrial workers, service workers, cultural workers — need to know that they, that we, are not alone in our struggles. Workers of the world, in South Korea and Argentina and South Africa and countless points in between, are in the process of uniting, remaking and rewriting history. American workers need to learn lessons from these struggles (Senchyne 2003)

Nowak does not overdetermine contour lines for workers — he creates interactions via poetic documentary where workers can do this for themselves and each other. According to Nowak, at the conclusion of the poetry workshops in South Africa, A NUMSA member said,

This morning our comrade from NUMSA shared with us an article from the Pretoria paper, “Ford to axe 6,000 more jobs in North America”, and in the past we saw only that number. Now, and in the future, we know that one of those 6,000 is [UAW poet] Joe [Callahan], because we have seen them, our co-workers in America, we have heard their voices and read the pain in their words. And we will never see those numbers in the same way again. (Nowak 2006b: 20)

This points to Nowak’s ability to avert the tendency to create what Grant Kester (2004: 95) calls an “orthopedic relationship” between artist and collaborator, an asymmetrical alliance whereby participants become reliant on the artist to actively administer the dialogue and uncover hidden gems of understanding while the participant assumes a more passive, deferential role.

In describing the modern-day Global Justice Movement, Naomi Klein delineates the terms of the struggle:

What they are fighting for is the right of local communities to have a say in how their resources are used, to make sure that the people who live on the land benefit directly from its development. The campaigns are a response not to a trade but to a trade-off that is now five hundred years old: the sacrifice of democratic control and self-determination to foreign investment and the panacea of economic growth. The challenge they now face is to shift a discourse around the vague notion of globalization into a specific debate about democracy. (Klein 2001: 88)

Poet Mark Nowak should be viewed as a culture worker in a long lineage of such discourse shifters interested in the future of ground-up, democratic organizing and engagement.

Kaia Sand and “Pedestrian Poetics”

Kaia Sand was born in Fairbanks, Alaska in 1972. She grew up in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, attending the University of Portland where she earned a BA in English. From there she went to George Mason University in Virginia where she studied with political poet Carolyn Forché and earned her MFA in poetry. She is the author of two poetry collections: *Interval* (2004) and *Remember to Wave* (2010), the latter of which fully embraces experimental geography. The *Remember to Wave* project has taken numerous forms, from a book to a variety of conventional and unconventional poetry performances to a two-mile, site-specific, multifaceted poetry walk. The project has undergone numerous iterations and continues to evolve, depending on the context in which it is presented. The iteration I focus on in this paper is the site-specific poetry walk, which Sand has carried out on numerous occasions with groups ranging between four and forty people. The walk begins in North Portland (Oregon) at the Expo Center, which is located at the end of the northbound train line. She uses a set of chimes she made from old sports medals she obtained from a local thrift store tacked to a piece of drift wood. (More precisely, the medals are from the annual Hood-to-Coast group relay race, a subtle metaphor for Sand’s poetic practice.) She starts by ringing the chimes and handing out a map of the walk (Sand 2009a), which includes a section for observational notes that reads: “The political history of a place is not immediately readable. Its present, too, is elusive. You might begin with field notes, forming a notion of ‘place’ by listing some sounds, some scents.” This points to the participatory dimension of this work, which links it to “new genre public art” in that it foregrounds, audience-minded strategies of engagement as a central dimension to its aesthetic approach and that it is preoccupied with audience and how to build a two-way communicative relationship with it. Lacy’s (1995: 19) description of “new genre public art” gels with Sand’s poetics of inclusion: “The source of these artworks’ structure is not exclusively visual or political

information, but rather an internal necessity perceived by the artist in collaboration with his or her audience.” In the research process before the walk, Sand collaborated with librarians at the Oregon Historical Society, city bureaucrats, county parks workers, and others to collect and cull information as well as test theories about certain objects and structures in the political geography of this North Portland space. Toward the end of the poetry walk, Sand orchestrates a collaborative impromptu poetry reading — a ‘Mud Slough Ode’ — that draws from the field notes walkers jotted down on their map.⁵



Fig. 15: Kaia Sand rings the chimes on the *Remember to Wave* poetry walk, 28 September 2008 (photo credit: Jules Boykoff)

⁵ For an example of one such ‘Mud Slough Ode’, see Kaia Sand (2010: n.p.).

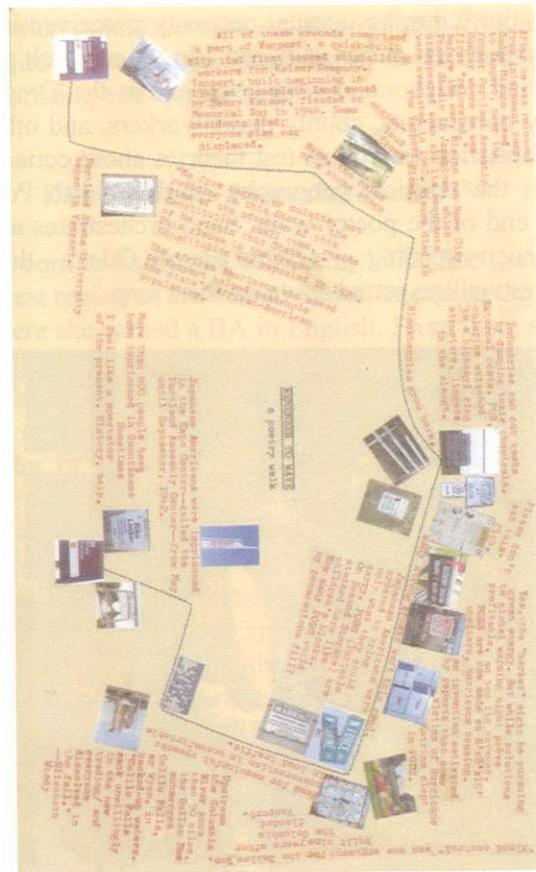


Fig. 16: *Remember to Wave* poetry walk map

Sand leads her audience in a jagged two-mile loop that includes an Expo Center window-peek; a silent reading of haiku written by Japanese-Americans who were once interned there during WWII; a jaunt along the Columbia River; a pass through an industrial park that includes a PODS (Portable On Demand Storage units) warehouse; a stop-off at a toxic slough; a food break of local fruit at a mysterious stone stage in disrepair; and a pass through a meadow that used to be home to a neighbourhood called Vanport before it flooded in 1948 and was never rebuilt. Along the way, people pass by a range of social spaces, from an inlet full of houseboats to a golf course to an international racecar speedway.



Fig. 17: Sand reads in front of toxic slough during the poetry walk, 10 January 2009 (photo credit: Jules Boykoff)

In 1976 Ed Sanders published a short, manifesto-like book *Investigative Poetry* where he argued (1976: 7, 10, 38) that “poetry, to go forward [...] has to begin a voyage into the description of *historical reality*”. To do that, Sanders encouraged poetry as history-drenched investigation, what he alternately called “history-poetry” and “Indictment Verse”. Building from this foundation while challenging the received wisdom of the much-heralded Muse with a capital M, Kristin Prevallet (2003) pushes the notion that “the opposite of inspiration is investigation” and that

instead of allowing larger power structures and forces to act upon you as a passive, helpless object, you act upon them subjectively by expanding your knowledge and writing the story of the universe as you see it — based on the facts and observations that you have collected.

Prevallet advocates “relational poetry”, which chimes with what Sand is doing in that a “relational poet” realizes that “one’s self and one’s poetics are mutable forms, moving among the multiplicities that constitute the world”. As such, “the poet is not writing above the larger environment, but through encountered and known materials”. Prevallet is describing the essence of Sand’s work when she writes, “poetry can forge an investigative matrix that charts — becomes a tool to navigate — the irrationality of our moment in time”. Getting your feet dirty is a prerequisite of investigative poetics as is a willingness to take risks and shimmy down eventual dead ends. As David Buuck of the Bay Area Research Group in Enviro-aesthetics (BARGE) notes, often a little gumshoe sleuthing is in order:

critical research about a site requires detective work, moving into the noirish realms of ghost-chasing, trying to track down the clues and forge them into some coherent narrative, [to] “make the case stick”. (Buuck 2009: n.p.)

In her compositional process Sand embraces investigative poetry, or what she might call “pedestrian poetics”, a term that relates to both the walking that is integral to *Remember to Wave* as well as her desire to both embrace and critique everyday life. Her writing process involves the “ghost-chasing” Buuck suggests. In a talk she gave on her poetic practice at City University of New York in September 2009, she remarked:

While composing *Remember to Wave*, I was very aware of *showing up*, of returning to a space day after day after day. Physically walking the space as composition. The location — these parking lots and black-berry-briar lined roads, its ground, its physicality — was not incidental to the work, and neither was my body. My body was transformed, if only slightly, from the repetition — what we also call exercise — of the poetic practice. When the day arrived for me to guide others on the walk, I experienced the work as physical knowledge. My body knew what to do. (Sand 2009b: 2)

By making the spatial an explicit part of her poetic practice, Sand takes advantage of what Massey identifies as one of space’s “potentially disruptive characteristics”, which is

its juxtaposition, its happenstance arrangement-in-relation-to-each-other, of previously unconnected narratives/temporalities; its openness and its condition of always being one of the vital moments in the production of those dislocations which are necessary to the existence of the political (and indeed the temporal). (Massey 2005: 39)

The challenge, as Sand sees it, is to maintain a concrete link to the space in which she is working. At the same time, a central aspect of *Remember to Wave* as a poetry walk is the accentuation of “previously unconnected narratives/temporalities” in order to foreground the political. If Katz’s “contour lines” link places separated by physical distance, Sand (2009b: 3) constructs “temporal tethers” that help us see connections through time but in the same geographical location. As Lefebvre notes,

The past leaves its traces; time has its own script. Yet this space is always, now and formerly, a *present* space, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality. (1991: 37)

By unearthing suppressed histories jammed into the quiet interstices of time, she angles in on historical contingency through spatially oriented poetry practice.

The use of “temporal tethers” — and their connection to space — points to what Kwon (2004: 166) calls a “relational specificity”, which

can hold in dialectical tension the distant poles of spatial experience [...] This means addressing the uneven conditions of adjacencies and distances *between* one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment *next* to another, rather than invoking equivalencies via one thing *after* another.⁶

⁶ Kwon goes on to write, “Only those cultural practices that have this relational sensibility can turn local encounters into long-term commitments and transform passing intimacies into indelible, unretractable social marks — so that the sequence of sites that we inhabit in our life’s traversal does not

Through a relational poetics Sand performs criticality in a collective way, subtly smuggling a certain horizontality into the political-poetic, site-specific experience. When she facilitates a collaborative, extemporaneous poem reading near the end of the walk, she decentres the experience, veering it toward what Grant Kester (2004: 139) dubs “dialogical aesthetics”, which are “based on an unconventional model of artistic production: collaborative rather than individual and dialogical rather than monologically expressive”.⁷

Contra the deterritorialization inherent to neoliberal production, Sand *re-territorializes* her artistic practice, pressing concertedly against the well-worn modernist conception of the autonomy of art and swerving context into play as a centrepiece of her work. For her, reterritorialization means a locational shake-up via a concerted reshuffling of the historical deck. This reterritorialization inherently spatializes poetry, wedging open the imagination more fully to the multiple historical narratives simultaneously at work below the water table of common knowledge. And by reterritorializing poetic intervention she underscores materiality. This chimes with Katz’s insistence that

topographies are thoroughly material. They encompass the processes that produce landscapes as much as they do the landscapes themselves, making clear the social nature of nature and the material grounds of social life. (Katz 2001b: 720)

Moving laterally from geography to art theory, Bourriaud asserts that art “is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces” (2002: 46). *Remember to Wave* should be viewed as a prime example of the material lyric, the insistence of presencing space through time and the contention that space and place can unfold through material poetic practice.

become genericized into an undifferentiated serialization, one place after another” (2004: 166).

⁷ Such “dialogical aesthetics” serve as a direct corrective for Bourriaud’s observation that “Ideology exalts the solitude of the creative person and mocks all forms of community” (2002: 84).

The Criticality of Inexpertdom

Contemporary society demands increased deference for experts and expertise. Guy Debord once wrote that technological innovation’s

most recent acceleration [...] has greatly reinforced spectacular authority, by surrendering everybody to the mercy of the specialists, to their calculations and to the judgments which always depend on them (1990: 12).

The rise of the hyper-mediatized political punditocracy jibber-jabbering 24-7 with rampant self-assurance comprises a potent — if often off-putting — symbol of this trend. The neoliberal regime values hyper-specialization into disciplines and the tendency to leave it to the experts, a trend Kaia Sand slices against.

According to sociologist Steven Brint (1994: 20), professional life has changed from valuing wide-ranging jack-of-all-trades professionals who practice “societal trustee professionalism” to today where we have “consolidation around the idea of marketable expertise”. This shift occurred in the post-WWII era and intensified under neoliberalism whereby the market banged down the barriers that protected professional autonomy from the full-bore transfer of private-sector logic — symbolized by the ready-for-action, use-value-oozing expert — onto the professions. On one hand, some see experts as insulated from the unseemly aspects of politics and therefore more capable of serving the general population than influence-tainted politicians. On the other hand, experts suffer from a penchant for the narrowly technical, or, as Brint puts it, “expertise is now a resource sold to bidders in the market for skilled labor” (1994: 15). Not only are experts evidence of an encroaching technocracy, but their views trend toward a bland centrism that appeases their predominant audiences. Brint explains it this way:

the social values of experts, in keeping with the main thrust of the rationalizing process, tend to favor centralized control and hierarchy, since these are associated with the virtues of predictability. They tend, in addition, to favor increasing levels of expert authority, since this is associated with the virtues of competent analysis and decision-making. For the most part, these preferences encourage a dismissive view of policy alternatives involving decentralization, dehierarchization, and democratized participation. (1994: 145-46)

Thus the trend of professionalization and expertification can breed intellectual narrowness and excessive deference.

Beyond all this, and bringing it back to site-specific art intervention, expertdom tends to encourage audience passivity, a “trust us, we’re the experts” mentality that stultifies social interaction, thereby swerving the production of space in an asymmetrical, hyper-rationalized direction — technocracy gone wild. In her *Remember to Wave* interventions, Sand embraces the role of inexpert. She writes,

Primary to my work is my own inexpert stance, which necessitates leaving the threads bare, the garment unhemmed. I am responsible for thinking about histories, but commandeering them would be irresponsible. (Sand 2009b: 4)

Sand draws from poet Joan Retallack who writes about “the economy of generically busy expertise” whereby “[t]he highly rewarded entrepreneurial strategy of forging ahead with an air of mastery no-matter-what spawns impatience for the point or gist” (2003: 51). Lost in this approach, she writes, are “values that encourage the necessarily inefficient, methodically haphazard inquiry characteristic of actually living with ideas”. With this in mind, Sand (2009b: 4) asks herself throughout her creative process, “How do I keep this process open and investigative and inexpert?” In an interview with the *Oregonian* newspaper Sand commented:

I wrote *Remember to Wave* committed to an inexpert stance, an open position where no matter what, I cannot claim authority, and I cannot own other people’s experiences (“what is left open / is left open”). And yet, refusing expertise does not mean that I refuse responsibility toward knowledge of history and contemporary conditions that challenge justice. The debt toward such knowledge is endless, but not in a guilt-ridden, unproductive way. One keeps trying. (Shaw 2010)

This approach presses against neoliberalism’s dictates for streamlining and efficiency.

The tone of such concerted inexpertdom is set from the outset. Participants on the *Remember to Wave* poetry walk find the following poem on their map/pamphlet (Sand 2009a), a poem that also appears at the beginning of *Remember to Wave*, the book (Sand 2010):

How do I notice
what I don’t notice?

How do I notice
what I don’t know
I don’t notice?

Inexpert, I
notice with the attention
and drifting inattention
of poetry

Inexpert, I
investigate

Inexpert, I
Walk, and walk.

While on the walk, Sand stops the participants in front of a mysterious rock formation nestled alongside a toxic slough. She offers hypotheses as to where the rock formation may have come from, laying bare her investigative poetic practice of contacting city administrators, local archivists, and Portland historians. But, crucial to her practice is leaving the door open to interpretation and a *working though* with her audience. Sand creates the opportunity for people on the walk to join her in hypothesis building, to stand on equal footing with her as she decentres the relations, creating space and facilitating what Miwon Kwon (2004: 154) considers “collective artistic praxis”. This spawns a certain amount of unpredictability and openness — a control freak’s nightmare — as it builds the model of poem as “spatial configuration”. Massey (2005: 111) notes,

In spatial configurations, otherwise unconnected narratives may be brought into contact, or previously connected ones may be wrenched apart. There is always an element of “chaos”. This is the chance of space [...] Space as the closed system of the essential section presupposes (guarantees) the singular universal. But in this other spatially different temporalities and different voices must work out means of accommodation. The chance of space must be responded to.

By blending poetry and place, Sand shows that the creation of meaning is like the construction of space itself: unfixed, contingent, multiple. Through this process, she succumbs to what Kester (2004: 13, 54) calls “vulnerable receptivity” with her fellow walkers turned

collaborators. This insistence on interaction and physicality leads to what Kester sees as “the catalyzation of the viewer”, which

decisively shifts the locus of aesthetic meaning from the moment of creative plenitude in the solitary act of making (or the viewer’s imaginative reconstruction of this act) to a social and discursive realm of shared experience, dialogue, and physical movement.

Such openness and movement — both physical and figurative movement — into the unknown are central dimensions to her work.

Yet Sand does not sacrifice exactitude on the altar of chance and openness. A meticulous research regimen is a key dimension to her processes of composition and revision. Writing about visual artists, Michael Godfrey observes in his essay ‘The Artist as Historian’ that

Coming to historical representation outside the context of academic history, and aware of the critiques made of this discipline, the artist as historian is able to work with a methodological freedom and creativity without sacrificing rigor. (2007: 169-70)

In fact, operating outside the constrictions of academia and the professionalized itinerancy of the gallery circuit can be eye-opening and potentially emancipatory. This is an epistemology of accretion produced collectively, not thunderclap epiphany imperiously induced by an artistic interloper.

Sand’s open poetic practice that embraces contingency and the possibility of chaos chimes with recent work of the Critical Art Ensemble (2001: 8, 9), which also eschews the “expert” moniker. Instead they coin the term “tactical media practitioner” as someone who moves beyond theorizing and academicizing to create “participatory events that demonstrate the critique through an experiential process”. The “tactical media practitioner” explicitly prefers amateurism to expertdom since, they contend,

Amateurs have the ability to see through the dominant paradigms, are freer to recombine elements of paradigms thought long dead, and can apply everyday life experience to their deliberations. Most important, however, amateurs are not invested in institutionalized systems of knowledge production and policy construction, and hence do not have irresistible forces guiding the outcome of their process such as

maintaining a place in the funding hierarchy, or maintaining prestige-capital.

Sand has argued that the relatively marginal state of poetry in US culture can actually be a plus: “Because poetry is marginalized in our society, it provides a place to speak out about the imbalances and injustices of power” (Bentley 2010). In her political-poetic practice, Sand chooses to tactically embrace amateurism as a way to open the artistic field in the name of the production of space.

Conclusion

Eileen Myles (2009) has argued that we need an entirely new word for poetry. In this essay I make the more modest contention that poetry — or at least an active segment of the contemporary poetry world that is interested in poetical-political investigation — needs a new theoretical approach since conventional, literary definitions of poetry only peck at the surface of analysis. Usually it is visual and performance art that are discussed in terms of site-specificity and spatial intervention. Yet poets are elbowing their way into site-specific interventionist practice rooted in spatial politics, and we can gain a deeper understanding of these political-poetic practices by adopting geographical discourse rooted in spatial politics and art theory discourse with its insights into site-specificity. Much of the language used to analyze art can be — and should be — applied to and integrated into poetics. For instance, the comments by T. J. Demos regarding the site-specific artistic-interventionist work of Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri — called the *Camp Campaign* — could apply equally to the work of Nowak and Sand:

By refusing the easy solution and consumption of the political slogan, the propagandistic logo, the media sound bite, and the activist poster, Anastas and Gabri disavowed the authoritative rhetoric that closes down thinking and critical contemplation, that negates sharing in the act of interpretation throughout the process of creation and reception. Retaining the ambiguity and complexity of their subject (as well as the ambiguity of the artists’ relation to it), they resist a false clarity, and by doing so, *Camp Campaign* creates the terms of its participatory mode, even as it shares the artists’ research, analysis, and conclusions. (Demos 2008: 88-89)

Similarly, Thompson's pithy, dialectical definition of "experimental geography" relates directly to the spatial-poetic work of Nowak and Sand: "The core idea at the heart of experimental geography is that we make the world and, in turn, the world makes us" (Thompson 2009: 15). The interventionary work of these poets embraces a polyvalent multiplicity in terms of form, content, and context that meshes with the polyvalence and multiplicity inherent in the production of space. Both poets take seriously Reginald Shepherd's normative plea that "poems are, or should be, experiences in themselves, and not just accounts of or commentaries on experience; they should be additions to the world, not simply annotations to it" (2008: 13). For these poets, the reduction of poetry to only static on-the-page consumption or the rote experience of the white-cubed poetry reading miss the spatial-politics boat. Poems can be complex — even *difficult* — experiences that through the production of space reshape how we know and feel. As Massey puts it, "You are not just traveling *through* space or across it, you are altering it a little. Space and place emerge through active material practices" (2005: 18).

If art can, in the words of Bourriaud (2002: 78), be "an instrument of emancipation [...] a political tool aimed at the liberation of forms of subjectivity", poets should not be left out in the cold. Both Nowak and Sand re-script the relationship between performer and audience as they explore difference through connection and connection through difference. Their actions transpire largely outside the locus of commercial transaction and highly marketized relations, as they explore the poetics and politics of place, taking seriously Massey's assertion (2005: 141) that "the throwntogetherness of place demands negotiation". Since places are not "pre-given" and fixed, they

necessitate invention; they pose a challenge. They implicate us, perforce, in the lives of human others, and in our relations with nonhumans they ask how we shall respond to our temporary meeting-up with these particular rocks and stones and trees. They require that, in one way or another, we confront the challenge of the negotiation of multiplicity.

Both Nowak and Sand step up to this challenge, linking arms with others in the hope that they too will help collectively foment insurgent countertopographic, counterhegemonic alternatives that fortify and

advance our common interests as part of what Klein (2001: 89) calls "a movement of radical change, committed to a single world with many worlds in it, that stands for 'the one no and the many yesses'".

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