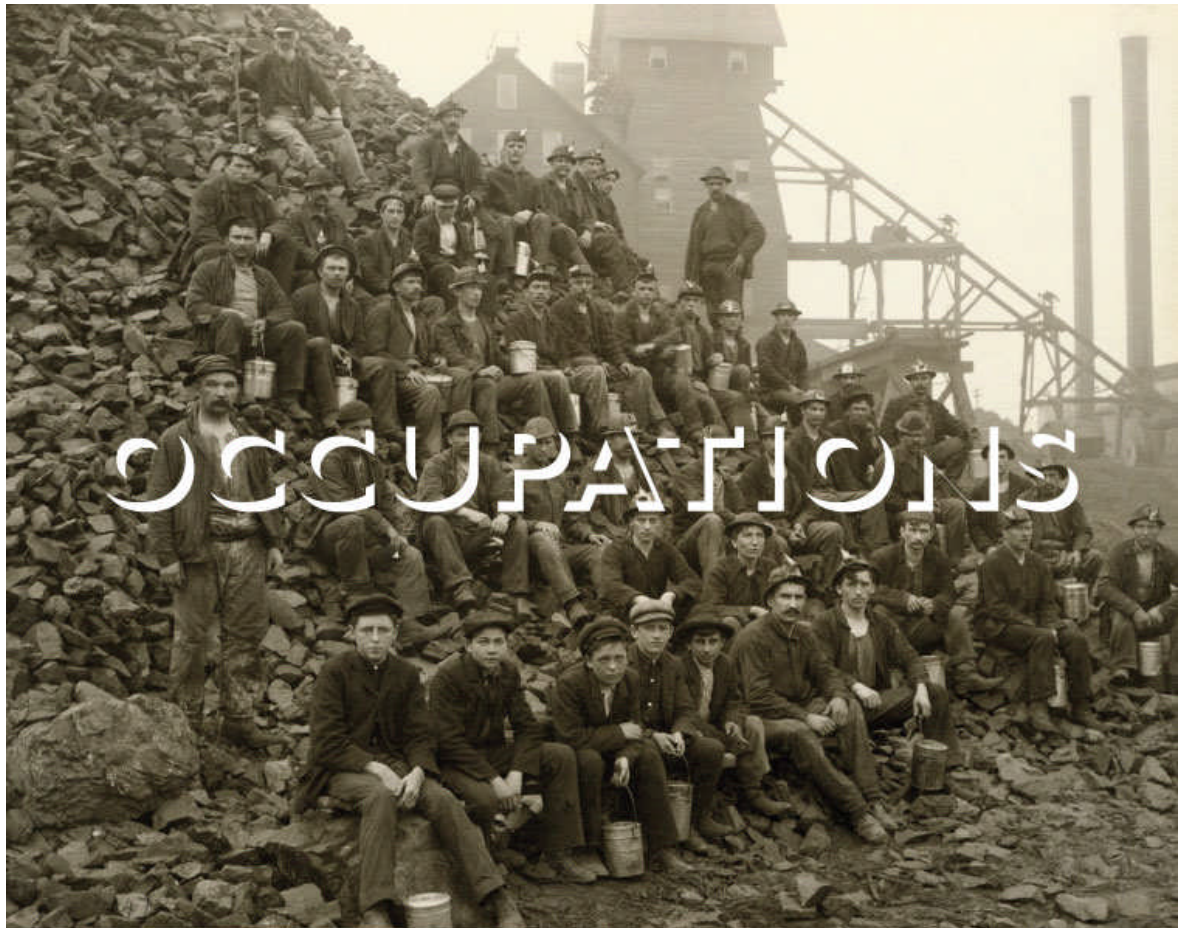


Excursions

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Lana Harper, 'Preface'

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Preface

When our editorial board were deciding the theme of this edition, *Occupations* felt pertinent and timely but intimidatingly expansive. In *Boundaries*, our previous edition, the Chief Editor Dominic Walker voiced a similar sentiment, suggesting that '[i]t is difficult to imagine a concept more universal, and therefore perhaps more indifferent, than the concept of a boundary' (Walker, D., 2014. Preface. *Excursions Journal*, 5(1), p.1). We seem to have selected another concept as prodigiously broad in its implications.

It is apparent, however, that 'occupations' can never be an indifferent concept, but rather one that necessitates an ideological and emotional response, and which has

meant that our submissions feel unified by their commitment to a particular position. I am now convinced that it is impossible for us to occupy space, time, ourselves and our lives in an indifferent or apolitical manner: even proclaimed indifference is in itself a stance. We define ourselves and each other through the work that we do, the places that we live and visit, the things and people that occupy our thoughts. This is so much so that anxieties about others' failures to occupy themselves properly are manifest, and often sit in contradiction with the ideals of different people or groups. As just one example, last year stencil graffiti appeared around Brighton with the deceptively simple invocation to 'Occupy your mind', the implication being that the reader is not actually in full possession of their own thoughts. The idea that someone or something is not only controlling but *existing in* what we usually consider to be the most fundamental part of ourselves—the way that we define our selfhood—has extraordinarily dystopian implications. But while graffiti artists are anxious that we fail to reside properly within our own consciousness, businesses are anxious about the amount of time employees are physically present at work: hence the company OccupEye, which offers an 'intelligent workplace monitoring system' in the form of small boxes which track employees' movement to see how long they spend at their desks.

Wider geo-political concerns boil down to the occupation of space and time as well: how and where people are working and moving, and the physical and mental spaces that individuals are left with after that. While it is nothing new to observe that our systems of government, and the concepts of national borders and property ownership, depend on the idea of prescribing the spaces different people are allowed to exist in, tensions produced by this system are in particular bubbling to the surface in the contemporary moment. This is evidenced by the so-called 'European Migrant Crisis' since 2014, which has seen Western governments and populations scrambling to police which spaces displaced people can be allowed to occupy, and under what circumstances. Moreover, in recent years, to occupy has explicitly become a political action (a connotation that was undoubtedly also being invoked by the graffiti slogan mentioned above). Hundreds of Occupy movements have sprung up following Occupy Wall Street, which began in 2011, itself indebted to the protests and physical occupations of public land in the Arab Spring Revolutions. Indeed, the University of Sussex, where this journal is published, has its own very recent and complex history with occupation as a form of protest.

In this issue of *Excursions*, Patricia Sequiera Brás discusses the Occupy Wall Street Movement in relation to *Bartleby, The Scrivener*, but suggests the story has wrongly been used to champion the movement, and that the forms of resistance they offer are distinct from each other. Brás argues that Occupy Wall Street should reject the analogy because Bartleby’s formula of responding ‘I would prefer not to’ without indicating what he *would* find preferable ‘offers a space for social contingency through the act of withdrawal, rather than the forging of a social bond’ (Brás, p.10).

Relatedly, Robert Stearn considers how individuals performing specific types of labour have historically been conceptualised, and argues that in early modern society servants were not considered capable of having ‘skill’ because ‘their “office” or “condition” was neither trade nor occupation and their labour was conceived of as a work of fidelity without practical expertise’ (Stearn, p.1). By analysing emblematic images Stearn demonstrates that the ideal servant was frequently represented as a dehumanised automaton made of composite parts which reflected their labour rather than any humanising individuality or personal traits.

As well as exploring ideas of career and labour, Brendan Gillott considers presence in physical space when he problematises T.S. Eliot’s increased association with Gloucester, Massachusetts, following the Eliot estate’s purchase of his family’s summer house there. Arguing that Eliot spent so little time in Gloucester that his presence is ‘at best “spectral”’ (p.2), Gillott juxtaposes this with the poetry of Charles Olson, which provides ‘an extended and deeply attentive account of Gloucester and its history’ (p.2). As well as critiquing how canonisation can distort reality, Gillott champions Olson’s poetry as hard-wrought labour—‘writing for which everything matters’ (Gillott, p.13)—while Eliot’s sanctioning of leisure over labour is reflected by the subsequent appropriation of a town which was merely his holiday home to be a relic of high culture.

Marcelo de Melo speaks about his work as an artist, and notes that his creative practice lies in ‘the passing of time itself—the act of occupying myself with making until something happens or something else more interesting comes up—or even until death comes knocking’ (de Melo, p.2). As well as giving a sense of what it is to be occupied with something in a very complete sense, de Melo’s work thematically engages with the occupation of space and time, and how it might be possible to represent these concepts as visual objects or art works. In her poem ‘Stripp’d’, Elizabeth D. Johnston similarly reflects on her own career by considering the uneasy experience of attending a teachers’

conference in poverty-ridden Las Vegas. Considering how perception changes with age, Johnston gestures towards the complicit role that professionals play in condoning social injustice simply by co-existing with it while in a position of relative power and luxury.

The idea that we can or ought to feel guilt for our occupation is perhaps familiar to many of those who work in universities. Indeed, the theme of *Occupations* is obviously one with a good deal of self-reflective irony for the editorial board: aside from occupying our time, producing this issue has been intimately bound up with our jobs as researchers and our intended career paths as editors, publishers or academics. Perhaps this sense of uneasiness is best articulated by our decision to choose a photograph of miners as our cover image: symbolically and practically few things could be further from our own current form of labour. But with the last British colliery finally closing in December 2015, it seems an unexpectedly pertinent image, and in keeping with the spirit of *Excursions* we always endeavour to link and celebrate diverse kinds of knowledge and experience. More to the point, like the articles contained in the edition, we too have been unable to stop ourselves taking an ideological position on *Occupations*.

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