

# THE ART OF COMMONING

SPECIAL THANKS TO  
THE ARTS INTERNSHIP OFFICE &  
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## INTRODUCTION

THIS PROJECT INVOLVED A SURVEY OF RECENT LITERATURE CONCERNING "THE COMMONS" & "COMMONING" WITH AN EMPHASIS ON HOW THEY ARE RESPONDED TO BY, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, ENGENDER AESTHETIC FORMS. THIS WILL SERVE AS PART OF THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING FOR A YET-TO-BE-REALIZED DIGITAL PROJECT THAT WILL EXIST AS A HUB FOR THE DISCUSSION AND CIRCULATION OF RESOURCES RELATED TO AND TECHNIQUES OF COMMONING

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define the commons as "first of all, the common wealth of the material world - the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty - which in classic European, political texts, is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together" (2). They also identify as common, and perhaps more significantly, "those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further social production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth" (Commonwealth 2).

One of the first writers to use the term "commoning," Peter Linebaugh argues that, "to speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst - the commons is an activity and, if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relations to nature," instead, urging us to, "keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive" (279). Silvia Federici echoes this when she suggests that, "if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject," that is - to interfere with the biopolitical reproduction of life under capitalism (which atomizes individuals and obscures its own reproduction) and to produce something different - a subject of the common connected to those aspects of production they are usually removed from.

Art Institutions like CASCO have taken up the notion of the commons as an issue that necessitates organizational reconfiguration and overhaul. The exhibition, We Are the Time Machines: Time and Tools for Commoning drew from the organization's past project "Composing the Commons" and included artworks, research, and moments that reflect on organizational and artistic strategies for commoning. The artworks and texts, as well as the space itself, was reconfigured to "practice the commons, rather than only reflect on it." While necessarily ephemeral in the context of an exhibition, it provides an example of the ways in which artistic organizations can articulate commoning as an aspirational horizon immanent to the present rather than represent it.

*This poster, like the commons, is organized in a way that Deleuze and Guattari call the "rhizome." Rhizomes are a model of thought that is connectible from any point, "detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable,, and has multiple entrances and exits and its own lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus). Likewise, the commons works against hierarchies and atomized modes of being and thought.*

## IN CONCLUSION

Commoning is an aesthetic practice insofar as it concerns a redistribution of the sensible in a way that can embed kernels of alternative social futures in the present - that is, it sees a future of the commons as immanent to the present and mediated through a reconfiguration of the senses. This may take shape as an encounter with objects, plants, animals, or other non-human actants, or it may take shape as an undoing of the art institution's mediation of encounters between people, among other things. It is always contingent and ephemeral, sustaining temporary bonds that intensify our already non-sovereign relations to one another and our material world, holding us in suspension and holding the sustaining of this suspension as a horizon for a possible social world.

The struggle against the privatization (by businesses and/or the State), or seizure of the commons is the link that weaves former class struggles into the present: the commons has thus become a useful theoretical tool for thinking beyond the ostensibly distinct private-public dichotomy that delimits political imaginations, in that it offers us alternative political possibilities beyond Statist models of revolution. It is not a "third way" but a challenge to the dualistic framework of ownership and relations of property.

Thus, as Silvia Federici notes, "the concept of 'the commons' has been gaining popularity among the radical left, internationally and in the U.S., appearing as a basis for convergence among anarchists, Marxists, socialists, ecologists, and eco-feminists" (1). The renewed interest in the commons has been influential as it presents a new theoretical, socio-economic, relational, and aesthetic paradigm, that traverses various fields and disciplines.

"A commonist aesthetics thus needs to fundamentally reckon with strangeness and unknowability - the "absolute contingency" should be a "xenopolitics", reckoning with the unknowability of this frangible, fissiparous subject-object relation as it traverses the materiality of the natural and the social. A rationality premised on sensuous non-knowledge, on an embodied approach to contingency as historical reality, describes both the political ecology and the political aesthetics we should take as our task to acknowledge in the practices where it exists and develop it where it doesn't." Marina Vischmidt "All Shall Be Unicorns About Commons, Aesthetics and Time" 2014

John Paul Ricco suggests that the problem of the common is in determining "how to exclude without fixing and fix without excluding," through his reading of Jean-Luc Nancy's use of the contour or the outline, which traces "the form of being-to-ward in being-together without identifying the traits of the toward-what or the toward-whom, without identifying or verifying the 'toward what end' of being-in common." His solution is a tracing or edging of the common that takes shape as a sustained refusal of ends - providing a non-teleological account of how the commons can take shape in both political and formal (aesthetic) terms.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research in commoning should be directed toward answering:

- What are the material requirements for the construction of a "commons-based economy enabling us to resist dependence on wage labor and subordination to capitalist relations?" (Federici)
- What would be the "transformational structure" of living in common? What are the affective and emotional dimensions of living in common, and how would we know it when we felt it? (Lauren Berlant)
- How can commoning undo or extend beyond humanist epistemologies? (New Materialisms like Jane Bennett)

"Private structures (corporations) concentrate their decision making and power of exclusion in the hands of one subject (the owner) or within a hierarchy (the CEO). Similarly, public structures (bureaucracies) concentrate power at the top of a sovereign hierarchy. Both archetypes are inserted into a fundamental structure: the rule of a subject (an individual, a company, the government) over an object (a private good, an organization, a territory). Such pretended opposition between two domains that share the same structure is the result of modern Cartesian reductionist, quantitative, and individualistic thought." (Ugo Mattei *First Thoughts for a Phenomenology of the Commons*)

In light of its undoing of notions of property relations, commoning engenders a new sense of relation to objecthood amidst an overhaul of human/non-human relationality. This has been taken up by new materialist, speculative realist, and object-oriented ontological theories, though much writing is yet to be done on these matters in frameworks that explicitly name commoning.

"But in the moment of right/s the commons is already gone in the movement to and of the common that surrounds it and its enclosure. What's left is politics but even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure, can only be a politics of ends, a rectitude aimed at the regulatory end of the common." Fred Moten and Stefano Harney *The Undercommons*

Practices of commoning cannot be political insofar as politics can "only be a politics of ends," that is, inciting regulation where regulation cannot exist. Stavros Stavrides suggests that "any form of protective enclosure of commoning communities (or of communities-as-commons), no matter how necessary for the protection of fragile or threatened sharing relations, has to be temporary: enclosures kill commoning, sooner or later" (2).

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