All Shall Be Unicorns
About Commons, Aesthetics and Time

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With this investigation into the relationship between commoning and aesthetics via the dimension of time, Marina Vishmidt contributes to the theme of Commonist Aesthetics. Vishmidt views temporality as a framing condition for thinking "commons" as a practical and affective project that traverses politics and aesthetics. The exploration of Commonist Aesthetics is an editorial collaboration between *Open!*, art critic and historian Sven Lütticken and Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory.

In the following set of reflections, I would like to draw out the implications of the proposition "commonist aesthetics *[www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics]*" in relation to time. The first step is to describe the cluster of practices and theories associated with "commons". [1] The second is to juxtapose this with "communism". I finish with a view towards the consequences for a theory of the production of art as a revolutionary, or, at minimum, transformative practice. The overall hypothesis throughout is that temporality – or, a practice oriented towards the future as the promise of both another way of organising society, but also as the horizon of another experience of time – is key to approaching current conditions from the standpoint of their elimination. That is, the future is contingent on a distance from or refusal of the present rather than on a practice that favours melioration or more rational reproduction. This leads us into a view of temporality as a framing condition for thinking "commons" as a practical and affective project that traverses politics and aesthetics.

From Art In and Out of Time to Commons-Based Production of Time

In setting up the background for an investigation into the relationship between commoning and aesthetics via the dimension of time, we can refer to some baseline assumptions that have infused art throughout the whole era of modernity. Modern art, like the notion of modernity per se, had adhered to a paradigm of progressivism, taking part in a movement towards a definite and inexorable future; one, however, not so inexorable that collective cultural endeavour was unnecessary to realise it as experience in the present. The historical avant-garde shared and radicalised this future orientation, espousing the need for a more intemperate, negative attitude to art – from the standpoint of its destruction – in order to truly bring about the conditions for modernity. This progressivist view towards art saw it as a collective project of human autonomy in an age of accelerating social and economic abstraction and mass political organisations, rather than as a process of inevitable industrial development and generalisation of capitalist life forms. At the pinnacle, or perhaps swan song, of high-modernist philosophical discourse on art, Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1969), the basis for art's negativity towards the established order is exposed: for Adorno, art is redeemed time, that is, labour freed of compulsion and open to a sensuous, undetermined relationship to the world. Art therefore is viewed as holding a space for the future in its very negation of the present. It is the potential "practical criticism" inherent in art's experimental attitude to materials and social relations not organised around coerced labour, instrumental reason and the capitalist accumulation which they make possible.

It can thus be argued that modernism, as tendentially affirmative, and the avant-garde, as relatively negative, were both tied to the idea of movement into the future and the perfectibility of human nature-culture. We could consider this a rational production of difference and development of the senses. Or indeed, as a nihilistic corrosion of the fetters obstructing an authentic reinvention of the parameters of the human. Such a move would do away with art, but with the proviso that these two sides lay along a spectrum of emphasis rather than forming reified polarities, apart from the culture of the manifesto which pervaded the twentieth-century avant-garde.

This is a story familiar to us from the reconstruction of the twentieth-century avant-gardes provided by art historians like Benjamin Buchloh and Peter Bürger, or by the Situationist International alike. [2] As some have noted, taking this as a reified opposition would only hold true for the capitalist West (and perhaps for the "real socialist" East). It would not hold, however, for a society in revolutionary conditions such as the early Soviet Union, where an affirmative project transforming social existence and human nature was fused with a simultaneous eradication of art as an insular, elite pursuit. Its reconstruction was instead presupposed on the basis of a living practice contributing to this total social project. [3]

Moving into current times, the "commons" has become a compelling theoretical, socio-economic and aesthetic paradigm. It is one that leads to a conception of practice which is immanent to its field and not locked-in to a vision derived from an abstractly political paradigm of a better society to come. Instead, the principles of commons tries to develop prototypes of that society in existing circumstances, evoking the earlier libertatian socialist and anarchist idiom of "prefigurative politics". [4] Prefiguration could be viewed as premised on action in the present helping to realise a desired future scenario rather than putting everything off for a chiliastic moment of total rupture which almost by definition never comes. Yet, it is a still more "future-oriented" idea than many notions of the commons or commoning we see around us today. Accordingly, a recent press release for the 2014 exhibition *The Need for Practice* at transit.sk, Bratislava, which staged affiliated collective practices in the field of art states: "What if (...) we understand utopia, as a continuous process of becoming in which we participate? That is, instead of viewing the future as an

end, a goal we should attain in an ever-delayed 'some day', we actualize it in the present, perform it in the everyday?" Here, there seems to be a notion of temporality not as the production of difference through the "medium" of time, but as an embodied and experimental production of "right living" in the very present that we share. "We" here is defined in the actuality of doing, rather than as a subject generated by structural antagonism, or even a shared political subjectivity won through the experience of an "event" in Badiouan terms. Questions about the definition of this right living or collective good, predicated on the open question of how a collective subject of this sort may come into being, have to be left suspended by definition, as the question will itself be subsumed in the realisation of utopia in everyday practice. From this, we could go on say that the notion of commons arguably does not have or actively jettisons a concept of temporality as part of its novelty as a politics of immanence. This priority of immanence does not so much oppose the present as propose an active reconstruction of it from within. Social bonds are re-forged through an interrogation of production for private profit as the bedrock of the social contract. Such an interrogation, however, does not go beyond the horizon of "adjacency" which writers such as Peter Osborne have noted to be the hallmark of contemporaneity seen as a disparate but neutral arrangement of globalised times.[5] They are neutral times in the sense that the scale of totality or a futural orientation drawing on contradictions within that totality are both equally foreclosed to it.

What many discourses of the commons seem to propose is that the future could start in the present simply by a gradual spread of "commoning practices" over capitalist social production. Because there is no notion of a future as a contingent outcome of a break with the present, there is also no notion of transition, leaving time literally suspended. Could it further be ventured that with the commons, we are encountering something like (an idea of) communism minus (an idea of) progress? And might this also mean the commons has no idea of regression, much less of destruction as a means to produce a future many of whose lineaments simply cannot exist in the present? And what of its role in relation to, or even embedded within, the destruction which is currently overtaking our mode of social production and biosphere alike? [6]

Important to cite here as well is the categorical distaste multiply elaborated in liberal and leftist thought to a horizon of futurity and radical rupture as equatable only with historical calamity, a hubris whose logical end is totalitarianism. This ideological mode, which enjoyed its highpoint with the *nouveaux philosophes*, and the hegemonic literature of disenchantment of much postmodern theory that followed over the next two decades, recently made a comeback with art historian T.J. Clark's 2013 *New Left Review* essay, "For a Left with No Future". In this text Clark looks to the theory of tragedy to furnish a prophylactic against any speculative temptations in emancipatory thought. Clark's intervention has been met with several generative and wide-ranging critiques, including those of Susan Watkins, Alberto Toscano and Daniel Spaulding among others.[7] I mention it here in order to be able to situate the contention that temporality is central to the commons / communism distinction, and in passing, to allude to the history of conservative political thought which has always branded as illegitimate the concept of futurity as a horizon for communal life. [8]

War Is Over if You Want It

The proposition to be explored here, then, is what kind of structural and ideological affinity already holds between "commonist" politics and the field of art practices. That is, insofar as both are committed to change in the here and now through the means available, often interstices and spare capacities, "making do" as in the "sharing economy". Initially, we could identify a shared emphasis on plurality, experimentation, pragmatism and a certain "soft utopianism" which animates many variants of the political and the aesthetic approaches to the discourse of the commons. The centrality of J.K. Gibson-Graham's *The*

End of Capitalism (As We Knew It) (1996) and *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006) to several of a number of cultural scenes of inquiry into "the commons" would seem to point to the voluntaristic roots of this attitude as they cut across art and politics, present and past, performance and mobilisation. It is a premise that perceives a change in behaviour (one might well distress this premise by renaming it "consumer preference") as the driver of social change, rather than in a reciprocal and historically determined relation of behaviour and cognition to its material conditions of possibility. There are of course structural affordances that promote this kind of voluntarism, which becomes an expression of a moralising, if at times perfectly relevant, insistence on "doing something" as a counter to the academicist and often priggish emphasis on "rigor". We can shortly describe these structural affordances as the current vogue for production over display for art institutions, as well as the penchant of funders for quantifiable 'outcomes'. Such a position can be evaluated with reference to the mix of pragmatism and idealism characterising the historical and current bourgeois class character that cuts across the sphere of art and the post-political and localist organisational roots of projects informed by commons discourses. However, this would be of limited interest, because the thesis of this text is that the commons is not a phenomenon whose appeal can be captured in sociological, or even ideological, terms. The commons and commonising is primarily an attitude to time; it is an attempt to eradicate the social abstraction of capitalist life, its ersatz community of money and preference, in the now, without a perspective on the future or the totality which capitalist civilisation has likewise ushered in through modernity, and is now busy obviating entirely. [9] It would also be important here to include another seismic shift in the ruling ideas of organised resistance that the production of being-in-common in its polyvalent contexts embodies: the shift from ends to means as the basic structure of political thought, epochally diffused through publications such as Giorgio Agamben's *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (2000) or *The Coming Community* (1993). [10] This shift in emphasis can be perceived from the position of politics, ontology or strategy. It is construed as a welcome remedy to decades of totalising revolutionary thought which placed all genuine change onto a future horizon and onto the eventuality of an absolute break, along with a mechanistic unfolding of social contradiction and neglect of the textures of domination in daily life. That is, the mode of politics that finally generates only inertia and melancholy and, perhaps, conferences, once its historic moment has passed. The reductiveness of such a schematic account is plain, both from the side of its writer as well as that which I claim to sketch. An initial objection could be mounted purely in factual terms, that a revolutionary agenda was the only historical force capable of implementing even the patchy social democratic reforms, i.e., "genuine changes", which have been vanishing from the earth like so many endangered species in the past few decades. Yet the larger risk of not only reversing a priority between means and ends, but conflating them, is that it does not only have the salutary effect of adding reflexivity to the organon of revolutionary praxis but rather mistakes such reflexivity for the praxis itself. Yet, the relation between means and ends is itself a corollary of the shape praxis takes in its historical and geographic conditions of specificity. This itself must be seen against a total horizon of capitalist rule reproduced (or non-reproduced) in our forms of organisation as the antagonism that drives them – or the defeat and identification with power that guarantees the life of the status quo. The reification of means and ends and their procedural transposition, even if rarely undertaken consciously, informs a gamut of tendencies we can observe as practitioners and analysts of the commons debate as it pervades the institutions of art. One of these is the refusal of transition as an illegitimate "postponement" of all change until everything changes.

Thus the notion of the commons as a politics dispenses with the concept of transition.[11] It is a way of organising "after the revolution" as if the revolution has already occurred – on the scale such a revolution would have to have so as to make even the most pragmatic reorganisation of property and social relations around communal resources generalisable. This evokes Yoko One and John Lennon's Vietnam-era billboard facing an L.A. freeway that

proclaimed "War Is Over if You Want It". The phrase synthesised the assumption that the revolution happens through adopting different ways of life and perspectives. This assumes that there is only a perpetual now, without a struggle against an enemy whose monopoly on violence and law sets the terms for how we can deviate from the current structure of the economy, or the role of our powerlessness in the face of bloodthirsty geopolitics in maintaining an everyday apathy. Neither does it say anything relevant about the contradictions that autonomous living and an existence immersed in the capitalist habitus and logistics must, in their different ways, confront us within any socially transformative project. The effective absence of a concept of futurity and antagonism, an absence which grows out of and is predicated on the unwinnability and undesirability of a direct conflict with capital and the state, also forecloses a more nuanced and powerful understanding of negativity as a component of social change. We could, counter-intuitively in many ways, turn to Hegel here: the real is the rational insofar as what exists is not simply a fallen world to be negated in every respect. This is a position which the more schematic moments of, as an example, communisation theory, flirt with. But the rational is the real needs to be understood instead in its context of 'sublation'; that is, aspects of our reality must be taken up and re-articulated in whatever comes next, because they didn't arbitrarily become part of the reality that we want to change. The most systemic domination contains its utopian moment of emancipation. This is, in fact, what preserves dialectical negativity from gnosticism, from the millenarian ideologies that are simply the obverse of the programmatically pragmatic approach to social change which is at once the "minimum" and the "maximum" program of commons-based struggles. It is thus that they can be located on a vast political spectrum that includes direct action, withdrawal and gathering in squares under the banner of a hypothetical democracy that would be more real than the one currently on the market.

The politics of the commons unfolds on the terrain of "reproduction", as demarcated by capitalist social relations – the maintenance of life and sociality, from healthcare to education, public and private. As such, the specific temporality of the commons that maintains a community rather than producing a new, and necessarily abstract, global society is reflected in the politics of reproduction that evacuates modernist (and capitalist) future-orientation in favour of a cyclical or even a static experience of time. Neither productive nor destructive, at worst this relationship to time opens up commons-based thinking and praxis to charges of conservatism, if envisioned as a current variant of nineteenth-century self-help: an insular self-provisioning which is objectively depoliticising, and prone to bourgeois (and worse) illusions of organic autonomy. Such experiments are also always vulnerable to repression and expropriation because they do not attempt to contest property relations in anything but a small-scale, immanent way.

Silvia Federici *[www.onlineopen.org/revolution-at-point-zero]*'s notion of the "reproductive commons" celebrates urban market gardens run by women in economically devastated metropolitan areas in places such as Nigeria and those run by activists in the "global North". It can be argued that even this advocacy is not able to avoid the pitfall of romanticising this necessity as a programmatic goal, containing in itself a more desirable set of social relations than the ones which currently obtain. Since the thinking of the commons is largely about property rights rather than labour, many un-monetised social practices are treated as a commons in the sense that neither property rights, nor the liberal civil rights based on them, apply to it. The example here is women's work, which is what Wages for Housework argued several decades ago and which Federici's celebration of de-monetised subsistence economies seems to have forgotten. Feminist contract theory such as that in recent writing by Angela Mitropoulos or, earlier, the work of Carol Pateman, clarifies the relationship between property and legal personhood as itself a rivalrous good, denied to women and others for centuries of what we consider modernity.[12] Nowadays, struggles around indigeneity and intellectual property also remind us of the fundamentally contested notions of property which are elided in the social justice framework of commons discourses, bound as they are to a Lockean notion of property through cultivation. This

tends to obfuscate the question precisely of how labour becomes property, and of course, how this labour becomes abstracted as a general measure of value in capitalism. What is thereby put in place is a requirement for general measures of social co-ordination – a clock that we, literally, cannot turn back – but which can be broken.

Common Properties

What the discussion so far has left out is how the prefigurative character of commons-based practices changes when it encounters legal institutions. The debates, initiatives and innovations in the digital commons around intellectual property – FLOSS (free, libre and open source software), copyleft and copyfarleft – have consistently kept the question of property and control in the forefront of critiques and activism on the terrain of informational capitalism. The focus there on licensing has shown attentiveness to the inextricability of social innovation from codes of law. But where this issue seems to acquire more gravity and helps us connect the discussion back to aesthetics as a propositional space with actual transformative powers, is when notions and practices around the resource commons actively confront the legal structure which renders them illegitimate. What is fascinating about these struggles is the points at which they actively intervene in the property relations of capital and state. These relations would prevent or undermine new ways of organising common life and resources from stabilising into institutions and thus attaining a kind of commonsense status which would make them dangerous to existing interests. They thus succeed in taking account of the poignant reality that many more "alternativist" commons discourses avoid at all costs: the primitive accumulation conducted by state and capital works not just to repress all past modes of social reproduction but all alternative modes as well in the attempt to preserve capitalist value as value. We need only look at the scale of domestic foreclosures in the US, the privatisation of welfare mechanisms in the UK, and the exacerbation of squatting laws in the austerity era to see the corroboration for this. Hence, a confrontation with the structural violence embodied by the systems of national and international (EU) law as much as the market is crucial if commons are to intervene in the discussion of totality and futurity on a strategic and political level. The impact of the sovereign debt crisis on European standards of living, particularly in Ireland, Portugal and the Mediterranean, itself reflecting the last couple of decades of vicious structural adjustment in the east and south, would also exemplify the tight link between legal regimes, looting by the advantaged few and the dispossession of most others.

Here we could bring into the frame the ongoing *beni communi* (common goods) movement in Italy. Beni communi can be traced through the successful 2011 referendum against water privatisation in Italy, the NO-TAV campaign against the construction of a redundant and environmentally destructive high-speed train line in the Susa Valley, and the multiple occupations of theatres and cultural centres under threat of closure in cash-strapped municipalities, perhaps the most well-known being Rome's Teatro Valle. Most salient on the agenda of this movement is the explicit acknowledgement of the antagonism and social complexity any politics which proposes to reconfigure property relations for the whole of society must both develop subjectively and implement in new legal instruments and institutions which keep the violence of the state at bay. In brief, it is an "aggressive" rather than a defensive (or passive-aggressive) concept of the commons which does not just seek to more horizontally administer the few leftover resources that can be scavenged for the "community" from the rapacity of capital and state. It is interested in overturning the millennia-old apparatus of private property, which both state and capital represent, however nostalgically these might still be polarised as agents of different value systems.

Ugo Mattei, the jurist and protagonist of the beni communi agenda, involved in setting up the legal foundation for Teatro Valle, has written of the scale of the challenge a commons-based politics faces vis-à-vis historically and socially embedded Western legal regimes:

"It could be said that the commons disappear as a result of their structural incompatibility with the deepest aspects of the Western "legality," a legality that is founded on the universalizing combination of individualism with the State / private property dichotomy. (...) The dominant vision of the commons as a poorly theorized exception to either market or government is rooted at the very origins and in the very structure of the dominating Western vision of the law. That is how a social fact becomes real."

A social fact which is based on the dichotomy between subject and object:

"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."

There is thus an acknowledgement that for struggles in the framework of the commons to succeed beyond transitory spaces and limited spheres of empowered adherents, they need to become viable and resilient. That means contesting the time and space to which they can lay claim in the hostile field of law:

"If properly theorized and politically perceived, the Commons can serve the crucial function of reintroducing social justice into the core of the legal and economic discourse by empowering the people to direct action. (...) The commons cannot be reduced to managing the leftovers of the Western historical banquet, which is the preoccupation of the contemporary political scene. To the contrary, we believe that the commons must be elevated as an institutional structure that genuinely questions the domains of private property, its ideological apparatuses and the State–not a third way but a challenge to the alliance between private property and the state." [13]

The continuing Teatro Valle experience presents a compelling demonstration of the "legal paradox" which we see emerging here. [14] In order to combat the unjust consequences of the existing legal apparatus, this same apparatus has to be injected with other political content and redeployed to create solid legal structures. These then enable not only the defence of experiments in commoning from the reflexive repression the symmetry of state and private law exists to legitimise, but to extend its horizons and its power – both experiment and example. This negotiation of the spaces traversing the possible and the real seems to bring us back, quite logically given the example of the theatre (although the other campaigns I have mentioned are equally fascinating and trenchant with respect to a militant practice of the commons), to the aesthetics debate. And in fact Teatro Valle (Occupato) has from the beginning provided a hospitable environment to visual artists whose own work thematises questions around the (political) theatre of community. Artists such as Keren Cytter, Clemens von Wedemeyer and Maia Schweizer, or Anja Kirschner and David Panos have worked on projects there. Panos has recently transfigured this experience into an "auratic" artwork for the LISTE Art Fair Basel in 2014 and an upcoming London solo show, presenting a video and a sculpture derived from an improvisation workshop with participants at and of the occupied theatre whose goal was to perform the human labour congealed in a commodity. Such a topical and "objective" proximity between community and commodity can be viewed as a central question to a struggle around the common appropriation of space, as ambitious and as photogenic as the Teatro Valle undoubtedly is. However, this is not to disregard the implications of an equally far-reaching question: that the means of legality re-appropriated for ends wholly incompatible with legality as we know it reminds us of something still very poignant for this debate – self-legislation, or, autonomy. But in what sense, particularly when geophysical, and thus trans-human, considerations must now condition every thought of social emancipation?

To Live and Die in the Park

While a militant commonism starts to look a lot like communism, the final dimension we need to think is contingency of the relations between subject and world which ground the dialectical aesthetics familiar from thinkers such as Adorno and allows us to sublate these into a viable "commonist aesthetics". Such an aesthetics would ideally have some relation to the "de-propertisation" of the subject as ethical centre of cognitive and sensual autonomy or at least advancing some other conception of property than a principle of accumulation. It is important that the subject is sublated in the full Hegelian pomp of conceptual and social contradiction, within painful and ambiguous historical processes, rather than being turned away at the security checkpoints of object-oriented philosophy or pop criticism, which perform the elimination of the subject much as capital does: with maximum force and minimal thought, as a matter of "logistics". [15] The recent collaborative writing of Harney and Moten is illuminating in the sense that, for them, de-subjectivation is the learning to unlearn the object character that has always infused subjectivity as a modern form of personhood coterminous with capitalist interiority as a personalisation of economic property relations. The subject's intrinsic object character is evermore accentuated by class decomposition, precarious labour and logistical modes of governance. She can thus learn to become other than the manipulable unit she has been socialised to be in part through an aesthetics of de-propertisation, a sensorium that is experienced as and in common in what Moten and Harney call "the general antagonism". They write: "We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home." [16]

We can route back to the earlier discussion about the futurity-deficient aspect of a politics of the commons, its preoccupation with maintenance and preservation as intrinsically solid and benign. Harney connects the principle of self-determination dominant in that politics with a liberal, possessive individualism, albeit transposed to the level of a community:

What kind of communism could there be where I could just allow some people to do some shit for me, at the level of scale, and at the same time those people would also at other moments allow me to be doing that kind of thing? So, in what ways are we practicing, when we're for a dispossession of ourselves and allowing ourselves to be possessed in certain other ways, allowing ourselves to consent not to be one, at a moment that also lets people act on us and through us, and doesn't constantly require us re- constituting ourselves, which I think is implied? And this is, I think, the anti- communism of (James) Scott. Scott's smallness is about self-determined autonomy. When you're small and in resistance, you're always in control. [17]

If a commonist aesthetics implies teasing out the historical and political implications of objecthood in the present as a condition of being-in-common, it could likewise mean that we need to re-ground our rationality in the object. Or at least we need to apprehend the subject-character of what we have deemed an object, or an object-world, even as this relationship has meant we as subjects are irreparably more like objects as a result. 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.

If the alien includes ourselves, our own constitution as a community is the figuration of a relationship to time and property which is both ruptural and propositional, in other words,

social. This figuration is tangled with an aesthetics which engraves on the senses the objective of historical change and a becoming-other than what we are. And this displacement of subjectivity and rationality as it is transformed by its material conditions of existence constitutes the process of sublation referred to earlier, where a new rationality is tied to a new relationality – to ourselves as contingent others, developing a species-being at rapidly greater and greater disjunction with myriad unknown others – the non-human. While this plane of co-existence has been formulated, somewhat opaquely as new materialism, or in terms of the "vibrant matter" following political theorist Jane Bennett, that lends a panpsychic mystique to the all-too-technocratic horizontal ontologies of theorists like Bruno Latour, it might be more pertinent to conclude, finally, with an instance of xenopolitics in the exhibition complex.

The exhibition *Vegetation as a Political Agent* at Parco Arte Viviente, Torino in 2014, seems – not unlike 2010's *The Potosi Principle* at Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, incidentally also held in Spain – to be interested in the articulation of passive nature with human ambition, fusing biological alterity with a materialist reading of history. Here the focus was on botany and agriculture as central actors in economies of subsistence and accumulation, thus key to colonial and anti-colonial projects alike. At the same time, and perhaps more typically of our *geist* of *zeit*, there is *Nature after Nature*, held this year at the Fredericianum in Kassel, only two years ago the site of a puissantly new materialist Documenta. Perhaps – in a more modest way – the exhibition replicated Documenta's abdication of materialism through the sheer generality of its articulation of nature and culture, a constitutive flaw shared by most discourses of their inseparability under such rubrics as the "anthropocene". The production of an abstractly culpable and contemplative viewer is the usual outcome of such curatorial visions, however refractory and astute the artistic practices they strive to subsume often turn out to be. But the wager of a thought of commonist aesthetics is that it is precisely not subsumable, or at least not wholly, in an administrative version of what was once the pugnacious concept of a "second nature". Instead, the rational core of an aesthetics which comes out of a social drive towards "de-propertisation" is that it makes us experience, not just apprehend, the radical unknowability of the world and ourselves, and the way this unknowability presses a claim on reality as contingent, transformable. Thus, it is perhaps the "aesthetic" which retains the dimension of futurity – an alterity within time and within us insofar as we are also in time – and lends it to the commons. The gap that subsists between them prevents a simple revivification of a communism which erases its own historical actuality and our historical contingency. For Søren Kierkegaard, the space between the aesthetic and the ethical was there to be traversed by a decision, the decision to commit to God and leave the vacillating aesthetic attitude to existence on the other shore. In our diagram, instead, the gap between the commons and aesthetics contains time, and, by implication, the future. Neither can be collapsed into the other at risk of extinguishing time as the "space" of historical novelty, or the politics whose promise, whose attempted actualisation can only ever reproduce the real contradictions keeping both aesthetics and commons from being the answer.

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Footnotes

1. Due to the concision required by this essay, my use of the term "commons" includes "commoning" and "the commons" and "the Common" as variations on the basic idea, taking into account that there are risks of invoking only the simplified or historical connotations that accompany terminologies of "the commons". Please see the remarkably comprehensive e-book *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market and State*, Amherst, MA: Levellers Press, 2014, for both a primer and a kaleidoscopic array of in-depth studies of the epistemologies and specificities of "commons". A text which encapsulates many of the most politically and analytically cogent no less than the problematic aspects of the commons is Silvia Federici's " Feminism and the Politics of the Commons," The Commoner, 24 January 2011.
2. See Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); and Kenn Knabb, ed., Situationist International Anthology (Berkeley, California: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).
3. Kerstin Stakemeier, "*Entkunstung: Artistic Models for the End of Art* ," PhD thesis, University College London, London, 2011, pp. 26–71.
4. See especially Carl Boggs Jr., "Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power," *Theory & Society* 4, no. 3 (Fall): pp. 359–393; Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond The Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979), pp. 21–155; and Andrew Cornell, "Anarchism and the Movement for a New Society: Direct Action and Prefigurative Community in the 1970s and 80s," Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2009.
5. Peter Osborne, "Historical Temporalization / Temporalizations of History," talk delivered at the "Time and Temporality, After Phenomenology" symposium, Kingston University, Kingston, 13 December 2012.
6. For a few prosaic examples, it can only be parenthetically mentioned to what extent the "peer production" of digital commons has been functional to digital media oligopolies in the world of free and open source software, while with "the sharing economy" or "Web 3.0", the commons of spare capacity in time, housing or vehicle use – spare life – is monetised as assets for a more intensified exploitation of oneself and others by means of social media apps in an increasingly dead-end, over-leveraged economy, with the profits raked back to sharepreneurs such as Taskrabbit or Air BnB. Putting a collectivist face on evermore ruthless socio-economic conditions, as well as the proposition that those conditions can be overcome by more and smarter cooperation per se, is a rhetoric that traverses the sharing economy and aspects of the commons agenda.
7. See T.J. Clark, "For a Left with No Future," *New Left Review* 74 (March–April 2012): pp. 53–75; Susan Watkins, "Presentism?," *New Left Review* 74 (March–April 2012): pp. 77–102; Alberto Toscano, "Politics in a Tragic Key,"*Radical Philosophy* 180: pp. 25–34; and Daniel Spaulding, "Towards an Apotropaic Avant-Garde," *The Claudius App*
6. As may be expected the focus of all three arguments is showing how Clark's analysis can have only ahistorical, de-politicising, and, for Toscano, self-contradictory results.
8. A notable exception to this is techno-futurism, which has conservative politics embedded in its nominally libertarian stance. A discussion of the historical pathways which have seen conservative forms such as communalism and libertarianism diverge while both give preeminence to the"economic"would lead us too far afield here.
9. Hartmut Rosa's *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) develops this thesis in a sociological direction influenced by Luhmannian systems theory. It is, however, very much in the tradition of Marx's observation that in order to expand, capital is constantly driven to tear down barriers it itself has built, not to mention the famous aphorism from The Communist Manifesto about how all that is solid melts into air.

10. It could be noted that, at least conjuncturally, another publication by Giorgio Agamben is proving more overtly influential on what we are here identifying as "commonist aesthetics": *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). However, the problematics of an ontologisation – and aestheticisation – of vows of voluntary poverty undertaken in the Catholic Middle Ages in relation to apparatuses of feudal power undertaken in a contemporary era of extreme, almost insane, class stratification and ecological crisis seem rather too glaring to address here.
11. The Transtion Towns movement notwithstanding.
12. See Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Port Watson, Wivenhoe and New York: Minor Compositions, 2012) and Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
13. Ugo Mattei, "First Thoughts for a Phenomenology of the Commons," in *Wealth of the Commons.*
14. As of 28 July 2014, Teatro Valle faces eviction following a refusal of the cultural authorities and Mayor of Rome to enter into negotiations with the Teatro Valle Foundation on the future of the theatre prior to the "immediate exit of the occupants from Teatro Valle, and its delivery to Teatro di Roma and to the National Superintendence for renovation and retrofitting." This seems to indicate that the assumption of forms of legality and extensive "outreach" turns out to have limited purchase in the face of local political jockeying and the powerful interests involved, although the Teatro Valle strategy stands to give a resistance movement or a call for mass mobilisation additional heft (moral legitimacy) should the standoff develop into a show of force by the state. See www.teatrovalleoccupato.it for updates on the situation, as well as histories and documents relating to the occupation so far.
15. See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Port Watson, Wivenhoe and New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
16. Ibid., p. 20.
17. Ibid., p.146.

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