Common Conflict
A Virtual Roundtable

Steyn Bergs, Binna Choi, Sven Lütticken, Jorinde Seijdel

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'Hot Winter Press' zines at We Are the Time Machines: Time and Tools for Commoning at Casco by Cooperativa Cráter Invertido (Jazael Olguinzapata), 2015. – Photo: Sven Lütticken

From its inception, *Open!* and Casco's series *Commonist Aesthetics* [www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics] was meant neither as a celebration nor as a debunking exercise, but as a critical inquiry. The commons certainly is not lacking in those who hype the cause, nor in vehement detractors. For the Invisible Committee, an example, 'commonism' is identified with Ostromite liberal managerialism:

> Governing the Commons *is the title of the recent bestseller by Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, who has defined eight principles for 'managing the commons.' Understanding there is a place for them in an 'administration of the commons' that remains to be invented, [Antonio] Negri and associates have embraced this theory, which is perfectly liberal at its core…*
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> *…[They] are inclined to make the 'commons' into the latest metaphysical principle to come out of the West's magical hat. An arche, they say, in the sense of that which 'organizes, commands, and rules all political activity,' a new 'beginning' that will give birth to new institutions and a new world government.* [1]

And is the excitement in some art world circles (however marginal they may be) for forms of commoning, or at least the rhetoric of commoning, not deeply suspicious? In her essay [www.onlineopen.org/all-shall-be-unicorns]

for *Commonist Aesthetics*, Marina Vishmidt suggested that a 'structural and ideological affinity already holds between "commonist" politics and the field of art practices'; both, she argues, '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."' Making changes in the here and now sounds good when the alternative is waiting for a phantasmagorical revolution. But is the exclusive privileging of 'making do' under current conditions not equally problematical – especially if connected to the hope that enough cute grass-rootsy commonizing activity will attain such critical mass that capitalism will, after all, disappear or morph beyond recognition? Vishmidt states in the aforementioned text: '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.'

Nonetheless, we would not have pursued *Commonist Aesthetics* if we agreed that commons discourse is completely bankrupt and utterly irredeemable. In a passage recently evoked by Katharine Gibson during a lecture at Casco, Massimo de Angelis acknowledges that commoning is often instrumentalized not in order 'to provide alternatives to capital, but to make a particular node of capital – a region or a city – more competitive, while somehow addressing the problems of reproduction at the same time.' However, he maintains that 'in spite of capital's strategies to use a commons fix to the problems it creates while never really solving them, commons may well be part of a different historical development.' [2]

This 'may well be' continues to hover over the debate, a debate that we wish to develop and intensify with this 'virtual roundtable' titled *Common Conflict*, mirrored by a public forum at Casco on 12 March. Later this year, the whole *Commonist Aesthetics* project will be rounded off by a book publication.

For *Common Conflict*, we have confronted a number of authors with a series of questions, some or many of which may be leading questions. The authors were free to pick and choose, or ignore, as they saw fit; to rephrase and reroute a line of questioning; and to examine their own as well as others' practices and theoretical presuppositions.

Is the notion of the commons subject to an ontological essentialization? Is dehistoricization tantamount to depoliticization?

The resurgence of the commons is clearly linked to the decline of the public sector, at least in Europe. Is commonism tacitly complicit with the ever further dismantling of the state and the public? Does the state need to be reclaimed?

Does the commonist discourse have a potential depoliticizing effect, being compatible with hazy visions of the 'sharing economy' and an Ostrom-style governance? What are the consequences of the division between 'Ostromites' interested in governing the commons and autonomists eager to prefigure a coming insurrection or a coming community?

How does, or should, commonist self-organization around specific issues relate to more general antagonisms and struggles? Is commonism in need of a wider autonomist horizon and bona-fide leftist strategy – or are 'actually existing' commonist tactics, however compromised, a daily reminder of the bankruptcy of more fundamental, more rigorous, more dialectically canny leftist positions?

What is the relation between theories of the commons / commoning and specific practices? Does the theory lag behind the most cogent practices? Is it often a substitute for actual commoning practices at specific sites for struggles? Can problematic, partial or blocked attempts at commoning be as valid as seemingly successful and exemplary endeavours?

Is the commons' rhetorical success in parts of the art world indicative of an aestheticization of the social – with aestheticization here being used in its negative

Benjaminian sense? Does the all too familiar critique of art institutions need to be followed by an active commoning of institutions? How to proceed with this?

Does the art world focus overly on low-tech forms of commons and commoning, unduly neglecting the digital commons? How can and should online and offline impact each other?

Do we see the beginnings of a commonist aesthetic practice in a more fundamental sense, involving forms of sensuous activity that challenge and go beyond established notions of art and existing institutional forms? Does aesthetic practice allow us to refocus all of the above questions?

Contributions

- Joost de Bloois, *The Ontologized Commons* *[www.onlineopen.org/the-ontologized-commons]*
- Stavros Stavrides, *Emancipatory Commoning?* *[www.onlineopen.org/emancipatory-commoning]*
- Érik Bordeleau, *Abstracting the Commons?* *[www.onlineopen.org/abstracting-the-commons]*
- Rick Dolphijn, *To Realize the Commons* *[www.onlineopen.org/to-realize-the-commons]*
- STEALTH.unlimited, *Encountering the Commoner within (Us)* *[www.onlineopen.org/encountering-the-commoner-within-us]*

Steyn Bergs is an art critic and a researcher. Currently, he is conducting his PhD research on the commodification of digital artworks at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Together with Rosa te Velde, he is co-editor-in-chief of *Kunstlicht*.

Binna Choi is since 2008 director of Casco – Office for Art, Design and Theory in Utrecht, the Netherlands, where she developed a multi-year trans-disciplinary and collaborative research project *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (2009 – 2014, with Maiko Tanaka) and the program *Composing the Commons* (2013–2015 / 2016). In this context, she's part of the faculty of the Dutch Art Institute in Arnhem and Arts Collaboratory, trans-local "network" of over 25 art organizations that deal with social and political matters mainly in the so-called "global south" but beyond. She is also the curator for the 11th edition of Gwangju Biennale (2016).

Sven Lütticken is a member of the editorial board of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain.* He teaches art history at VU University Amsterdam; is the author of several books, including *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (2013); and writes regularly for journals and magazines including *New Left Review, Afterall*, *Grey Room*, *Mute* and *e-flux journal*. At the moment he is working on a collection of a essays under the working title 'Permanent Cultural Revolution,' and editing a reader on art and autonomy. See further: www.svenlutticken.org.

Jorinde Seijdel is an independent writer, editor and lecturer on subjects concerning art and media in our changing society and the public sphere. She is editor-in-chief of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain* (formerly known as *Open. Cahier on Art & the Public Domain*). In 2010 she published *De waarde van de amateur* [The Value of the Amateur] (Fonds BKVB, Amsterdam), about the rise of the amateur in digital culture and the notion of amateurism in contemporary art and culture. Currently, she is theory tutor at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Head of the Studium Generale Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. With Open!, she is a partner of the Dutch Art Institute MA Art Praxis in Arnhem.

Footnotes

1. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), available at www.theanarchistlibrary.org.
2. Massimo de Angelis, 'Crises, Capital and Co-optation: Does Capital Need a Commons Fix?,' in *The Wealth of the Commons: A World Beyond Market & State*, ed. David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (Amherst, MA: Levellers Press, 2012), available at www.wealthofthecommons.org.

Crosslinks

Commonist Aesthetics: www.onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics
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Tags

Activism, Aesthetics, Commons, Communism, Public Domain

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