

AN AESTHETICS OF THE COMMON

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The Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés has argued that a key problem in our world is how to enact the common¹. Individualising ways of knowing that result from the privatised experience of the capitalist subject, she argues, fragment our perspectives and produce cynicism, disconnection and a lack of meaningful agency.² To experience ‘the “we” and the “world” that is amongst us’, we need an emancipatory theoretical-practical discourse that Garcés articulates as *embodied critique*.³ We must embody critique in order to reconfigure ‘what we can see, what we can be, and what we can do’ as the basis for radical, political action.⁴

Many of us find ourselves ‘drafted into the production of a world against [our] will’,⁵ as described by McKenzie Wark, not sure how to extract ourselves from the structures that reproduce this violent, heteropatriarchal, racist, anthropocentric, extractivist, colonialist, ecocidal, hyper-capitalist system which leaves us at times numb with grief, raging at our powerlessness, anxious, fearful and depressed. Unfortunately, those brutalising structures are not only external but have also been internalised through the fundamentalist ideology of private property, as well as through an individualistic account of freedom that ignores the socially-constructed dimension of the self and the relational basis of society. The concept of

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1. See page 13 for Glossary of Terms differentiating *the Commons*, *the commons*, *a commons* and *the common*.
 2. Garcés, M., 2006, What Are We Capable Of? From Consciousness to Embodiment in Critical Thought Today, in *Transversal*, European Institute of Progressive Policy, available at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0808/garces/en>
 3. Garcés, M., 2009, To Embody Critique; Some Theses. Some Examples in Raunig G. and Ray, G. (eds), 2009, *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, Mayfly Books, pp 202–210.
 4. Garcés, 2006, op. cit.
 5. Wark, M., 2014, Designs for a New World, *eflux Journal* #58, October 2014.

‘freedom’ that is touted in uber-capitalist regimes is actually a Trojan Horse concept, a sleight of hand that intensifies conditions of unfreedom for the vast majority of people.⁶ This is what alienation looks like.

Feminist thinkers call for more complex understandings of freedom that are socially-constructed, intersubjective, developed in the spaces where subjects are connected to each other, taking into account the fact, as Marcia Moen says, ‘that we have, and can cultivate, felt connections, connections with both non-human nature and among ourselves’.⁷ This is a call to develop new forms of thinking by means of relation, to reclaim the social imaginary of freedom in order to invent new ways ‘to experience the “we” and the “world” that is amongst us’.⁸ Such a paradigm shift would modify the field of experience in ways that clash with the structures of capitalism we have internalised, the kinds of freedoms that we have been conditioned to prioritise. It would be a constant struggle, uncomfortable and inconvenient.

A social system creates what Jacques Rancière has identified as a ‘regime of visibility’⁹ by determining what appears, what does not appear, what cannot appear, what can be made to appear and disappear, and who has the power to harness those processes. When a social order reaches a condition of crisis it is at least partly a crisis of perception.¹⁰ What had been rendered perceptible no longer corresponds to lived experience. Rancière describes this as a gap between ‘sense and sense’:¹¹ how we make sense of what we are sensing no longer aligns, creating a moment of radical uncertainty. Politics in a real sense ‘reframes the given, by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible’¹² in ways that may be emancipatory or oppressive, but are

6. “The environmental movement is, in my view, the greatest threat to freedom and prosperity in the modern world”. So said Myron Ebell, who led Trump’s transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) until the president’s inauguration. In this statement, the neoliberal understanding of freedom as the privilege of an elite minority, sustained at the expense of the common, is clearly revealed.

7. Moen, M., 1997, *Feminist Themes in Unlikely Places: Rereading Kant’s Critique of Judgement* in Schott, R. (ed), 1997, *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, Penn: U of Pennsylvania Press, p 215.

8. Garcés, 2006, op. cit.

9. Rancière, J., 2010, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran, London, New York: Continuum.

10. Capra, F., 1982, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

11. Rancière, 2010, op. cit.

12. *ibid.*, p 194.

always deeply aesthetic.

Aesthetics is a social phenomenon, an integral, fundamental aspect of the structuring, maintenance and reproduction of any social system. The early modern aesthetics of the 18th and 19th centuries had little to do with art; Terry Eagleton argues that it was ‘born as a discourse of the body’,¹³ part of a project of class interest to acculturate the sensorium of the newly emerging bourgeois subject, to remake her/him from the inside. For theory to become ideology, according to Eagleton, it must first pass through the sensuous life of the body; ‘structures of power must become structures of feeling’,¹⁴ which is why aesthetics was initially preoccupied with ‘manners’ and the subtly coercive hegemony of taste.¹⁵

We live in a hyper-aesthetic moment. The spectacularising of politics that Walter Benjamin so abhorred in the Fascist regimes of the 1930s evolved to become *The Society of the Spectacle*,¹⁶ and mutated into the ever more vertigo-inducing hyper-aesthetic that Jean Baudrillard identified as *The Precession of Simulacra*.¹⁷ The power and force of the aesthetic is increasingly deployed as an *anaesthetic*. A key moment in this development occurred when the triumphalist military spectacle of the Iraq War of 2003 was televised in real-time, embedding the strategy of *shock and awe*¹⁸ in the social imaginary. This generated what the German filmmaker Hito Steyerl describes as a ‘dictatorship of affect and noise’,¹⁹ which conflates violence, sex and a state of emergency to ‘act upon the nervous systems of populations’.²⁰ In

13. Eagleton, T., 1992, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, in Stephen Regan (ed.), *The Politics of Pleasure; Aesthetics and cultural theory*, Bristol: Open University Press, pp 17–32.

14. *ibid*: p 21.

15. Readers of Jane Austen’s novels will be familiar with this subtle form of coercion, so precisely satirised by the author.

16. Debord, G., 1994 [1967], *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, London: Zone Books.

17. Baudrillard, J., 1983, *The Precession of Simulacra*, pp 1–79 in *Simulations*, New York, NY: Semiotext(e).

18. Ullman, H., and Wade, J., 1996, *Shock and Awe Achieving Rapid Dominance*, CAT, National Defence University.

19. Steyerl, H., 2007, *The Empire of the Senses; police as art or the crisis of representation in Transversal: Art and Police*, European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/steyerl/en>

20. For example, considerable research exists on the use of video games, an intensely aesthetic medium, as affective forms of conditioning, such as the relationship between video games and the ‘militarisation of society’ (Martino, 2012; Nieborg, 2009).

these affective dictatorships ‘power operates . . . within the senses’;²¹ politics is not only aestheticized but is ‘exercised as aesthetics’.²² A hyper-aesthetic, sensory and emotional overload is pumped out through newsfeeds and social media, creating a kind of white noise that renders generalised, systemic violence as an ‘invisible background’ to society at large.²³

Let me anchor this claim in a real experience. A few years ago, I spent some time in Cuba. There was little access to the internet, no way to connect to what was happening in the rest of the world. The absence of advertising of any kind was liberating. What is not communicated much in the West is that the revolution is perceived by many (not all) Cuban citizens as an object of pride that is reproduced every day in conditions of great adversity, an ongoing, collective work of such magnitude, and against such odds, that its survival is a thing of wonder. You don’t have to be a communist to see that the revolution could not be maintained by oppression, violence and brainwashing, as Western ideology would have us believe. Oppression and violence undoubtedly exist, as does inequality, but are far less visible than the staggering oppression and violence of the political regime of the ‘free’ United States for example, where innocent black men are murdered in the streets in broad daylight by sadistic police; where the State actively and openly suppresses voting in the name of ‘democracy’; where dissenters are publicly discredited and vilified at the highest level (a technique refined by Stalin); where ‘foreign’ children are locked in cages; where a multi-billion dollar, private incarceration industry openly violates anti-trafficking and anti-slavery laws;²⁴ where 18.5 million people live in conditions of extreme poverty with no healthcare, in a regime that stigmatizes the poor and benefits the rich, according to the UN rapporteur’s report of 2018.²⁵

On the way home, I spent two hours in an airport in Paris. I sat in an area which had three screens tuned to a news channel that was spewing a

21. Steyerl, 2007, op. cit.

22. *ibid.*

23. Žižek, S., 2008, *Violence; Six Sideways Reflections*, NY: Picador.

24. Shahshahani, Azadeh, 2018, Why are for-profit US prisons subjecting detainees to forced labor? In *The Guardian*, Thursday 17 May 2018, available <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/17/us-private-prisons-forced-labour-detainees-modern-slavery>

25. Schlein, Lisa, 2018, UN: 40M in US Live in Poverty, in *Voice of America*, June 21, 2018, available at <https://www.voanews.com/usa/un-40m-us-live-poverty>

relentless, hyper-aesthetic spectacle of violence and disaster. Having been outside of that spectacle for some time I had dropped the filters that I am not normally conscious of applying. I could feel in my own body how the reports were orchestrated to ‘act upon the nervous systems of populations’.²⁶ The message from the screens was *be afraid: be very afraid*, punctuated by ads for insurance. I sensed a self-protective numbness setting in with each passing moment.

Two years later, I watched an American journalist report from the scene of a plane crash in Havana. The Cuban State TV channel had carried news of the crash which was unusual, he declared, because the Cuban government filters news to maintain an atmosphere of calm and stability. In that moment two things became very clear. The deeply ideological social phenomenon that is corporate Western media also filters news, but it does so to maintain an atmosphere of anxiety and instability. Second, in a remarkable feat of doublethink, this is seen as an indicator of a ‘free press’.

Every social order is an embodied order. Our dispositions are acted upon by aesthetic forces; we are conditioned by ideologies that infiltrate the sensuous life of the body and are physically spaced in biopolitical and geopolitical choreographies. Pascal Gielen and Nico Dockx argue that every belief system and ideology is a ‘performance of reality in the name of what is real’²⁷ which they describe as ‘an aesthetics of the real’. The meaning of the term aesthetics is particular here. It indicates a mode of perception that is both receptive and productive, through which coherent relationships between the particular and the general take shape, fulfilling the desire and capacity of humans to make meaning without reference to predetermined concepts or categories. In a commonist ‘aesthetics of the real’ the particular and the general are framed by the idea of a common good, which must be constituted in real time through what the decolonial writer Édouard Glissant describes as a ‘poetics of relation’.²⁸ Poetics in this sense refers to ways of bringing meaning into being through making, and also to Franco Berardi’s assertion that poetry reclaims language from the

26. Steyerl, 2007, op. cit.

27. Dockx, N., & Gielen, P., (eds.) 2018, *Commonism: A New Aesthetics of the Real*, Amsterdam: Valiz, p 54.

28. Glissant, É., 1997, *The Poetics of Relation*, Wing, B., [trans], Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p 32.

abstractions of financialised capitalism and re-grounds it in the body.²⁹

Returning to the question of what we can enact in common, a romantic enthusiasm for the concept of ‘commons’ can eclipse the material and conceptual struggle that must be waged to protect it. The common is the very thing from which capitalism extracts surplus value. Max Haiven describes a phenomenon that he calls ‘Enclosure 3.0’, when capitalism learns to

*pry open the field of daily life and the final frontier of non-capitalist cooperation and collaboration and transform these into either (a) means to generate profit or (b) means to maintain human life amidst relentless market failure.*³⁰

A social imaginary of cooperation, reciprocity and generosity that has given rise to forms of ‘peer-to-peer, free mutual aid’³¹ such as couchsurfing, liftshare, freecycle etc., has been reinterpreted as a ‘sharing economy’ based on the monetisation of ways of commoning (couchsurfing into Airbnb; liftshare into Uber, for example). As Enclosure 3.0 learns to harness ‘our capacities for sociality, empathy, creativity, connectivity, communication, community and generosity’³² so the imaginary of the goodwill commons is slowly subjected to and contaminated by the toxic force of commodification.

The emerging social movement of the Commons is a key site of the material and conceptual struggle for the common. There is not space in this essay to engage with the broad socio-political-theoretical-practical discourse of the Commons. Briefly, it is generally defined as a social system centred on a shared resource, plus the community sharing that resource, together with a set of rules and practices to care both for the resource and for the community.³³ Common resources (including the virtual resources of the creative commons movement) are a ‘bedrock of

29. Berardi, F., 2012, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, Los Angeles: semiotext(e).

30. Haiven, Max, 2016, The Commons Against Neoliberalism, the Commons of Neoliberalism, the Commons Beyond Neoliberalism, in *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*, edited by Springer, S., Birch, K., and MacLeavy, J., London and New York: Routledge, pp 271–83.

31. *ibid.*

32. *ibid.*: p 17.

33. The Peer-to-Peer Foundation is developing actual models and templates that can be used as infrastructures of self-organising for the Commons; legal, economical and practical. <https://p2pfoundation.net/>

resistance to and transcendence of neoliberalism because in their use, care and defence we cultivate, express and render militant non-capitalist values'.³⁴ The maintenance of those material (and immaterial) resources depends upon a social commitment to continually produce and reproduce the commons through some form of instituting. It is in this sense that Silvia Federici argues 'commons are not things but social relations'.³⁵ Commoning initiatives, no matter how modest their forms, are 'experiments in self-provisioning and the seeds of an alternative mode of production in the making'.³⁶ However, while self-organisation is a key principle of commoning, it cannot be presumed that social relations will organise themselves horizontally, effectively or in ways that generate social justice. The Commons must be emphasised as a material-discursive form of struggle that maintains a critical eye on its own modes of social reproduction.

To modify the field of experience in the interests of the common requires modes of unframing and deconditioning at every level, from the consciousness of the individual person to the widest social horizon of experience. The commonist paradigm calls for a fundamental change in ways of knowing and perceiving, of recognising and producing value. It is a world-making project that takes up the challenge of embodied critique, with all of the messy, contradictory realities that arise from what Adash et al describe as 'intersecting spatial, corporeal, affective and informational dimensions of being entangled with the world'.³⁷ World-making is an inherently aesthetic undertaking, a prising open of the gap between what we sense and how we make sense of it. To lean into a commonist *aesthetics of the real* means to pay attention to a 'sensory fabric of the common' in the words of Rancière,³⁸ without knowing how that might appear (in terms of its *appearance* or *ways of appearing*). To think by means of relation, a commonist aesthetics must invent 'new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said

34. Haiven, M., 2016, op. cit. p 18.

35. Federici, Silvia, 2019, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press, p 94.

36. *ibid*: p 88.

37. Adash, M., Cnaani, O., and Schmitz, E., 2020, *Choreographic Devices*, London: Institute for Contemporary Art, <https://www.ica.art/live/choreographic-devices>

38. Rancière, Jacques, 2006, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London, New York: Continuum, p 148.

and what can be done'³⁹ and also forms of communicability that resist the dualism of representation, and the extraction of exhibition-value. Max Haiven is critical of 'participatory art projects' that promise to

*undermine, challenge, problematize, interrogate, subvert, destabilize, excavate, question, deconstruct, ironize or bring into critical proximity financialized capitalism and other systems of power by fostering dialogues, opening spaces, drawing attention, raising awareness, building relationships, curating experiences, inviting collaborations or empowering hitherto allegedly alienated individuals.*⁴⁰

Not only are these projects doomed to failure, he argues, but the certainty of failure is a condition for the reproduction of their modes of 'subjectivity, community and consciousness'.⁴¹ Commoning is a much more demanding practice which cannot settle for a symbolic outcome alone. A more valuable form for the enacting of a commonist aesthetics lies in what Ruben Yepes describes as the 'aesthetic event',⁴² the effectivity of which does not lie in rhetorical demonstrations of domination or emancipation, but in its production of

*a complex relationality that creates its own time and space, assembling diverse elements: the materiality of the objects and actions presented, the discursive content of those objects, the affects and sensations they elicit, the discourses that frame the latter, as well as the discourses and frames that the spectator/participant brings to the above elements.*⁴³

The aesthetic event here takes on the form of a material-discursive arrangement that brings different modes of meaning-making and

39. Rancière, 2010, op. cit. p 194.

40. Haiven, 2017, Participatory art within, against and beyond financialization: benign pessimism, tactical parasitics and the encrypted common, in *Cultural Studies*, 2017, pp 1–30.

41. *ibid*: p 12.

42. Yepes, R., 2016, C'undúa: Activist Art in Downtown Bogotá, in *Field, Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, 3, Winter 2016, pp 123–149, <http://field-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FIELD-03-Yeses-Cundua.pdf>

43. *ibid*: p 125.

materialities into proximity, working across different disciplinary dialects to generate new ways of knowing, producing and acting in common, without necessarily calling upon the ontological category of art. Not denying the value of the frame of ‘art’, or disavowing its spaces and critical possibilities, as an ontological condition it can be overdetermining with conservative effects. Stephen Wright’s User Art manifesto, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, proposes what he describes as ‘a radically deontological conception of art’ which, borrowing from Marcel Duchamp, he characterises as a ‘coefficient of art’.⁴⁴ The coefficient indicates a variable degree of ‘intensity’ that can be found in ‘any number of symbolic configurations, activities or passivities’⁴⁵ and in all manner of places, not limited to forms institutionally recognised as art. The coefficient of art is a contingent condition that forms around an object, action or event as a result of its aesthetic and/or poetic force.

The Commons likewise is not a pre-existing formation. A radical, feminist, anti-capitalist, decolonial, posthumanist and queered understanding of commons is counteracted by a view of the Commons as a form between market and state, partnering with rather than opposing the capitalist regime. The latter cannot be incorporated into a commonist paradigm that proposes the formation of a completely different social imaginary. At the core of its world-making project, the Commons is an aesthetics of care. Its modes of embodiment, forms of knowing and sense-making, social relations, labour practices, regimes of visibility and communicability do not separate politics from the activities that are essential for the reproduction of life. To organise and produce a world-in-common, arising from a situated and entangled condition of human and nonhuman being-together, we need to involve ourselves at micro-scales in the use, care and defence of an identified *common* or *commons*. As a circulation and distribution of resources, the commons implies a solidarity economy that draws on feminism, commonism, mutualism, postcolonialism, queer, posthumanist, indigenous and anti-racist knowledges in order to organise consciously around conditions of production and reproduction for the commons.

My point here is not primarily an activist one in the traditional sense. In this moment of radical uncertainty, when what we sense no longer makes sense

44. Wright, S., 2013, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, Amsterdam: Van Abbemuseum.

45. *ibid.*

in the ways that we have been conditioned to expect, we are tasked with enacting a new ‘aesthetics of the real’,⁴⁶ of inventing new ways ‘to experience the “we” and the “world” that is amongst us’.⁴⁷ A poetic modification of the field of experience is an integral part of the struggle against the brutality of alienation. The complex and poetic relationality of the commons amounts to a beauty of disalienation, a way to embody critique, and to change what we can be and what we can do.

46. Dockx, N., & Gielen, P., (eds.) 2018, op. cit.

47. Garcés, 2006, op. cit.

Fiona Woods works with aesthetics and critical spatial practice, often in a co-productive capacity with others. She employs social, public and institutional circuits to explore ideas of what we have ‘in common’. Her practice crosses critical inquiry and artistic intervention, and she participates in several international research projects. Her most recent work, *The Laboratory of Common Interest*, explores themes of alternative economies and the politics of bodies, through modes of co-production oriented towards a politics of the Commons.

Woods’ public art project, *Walking Silvermines*, is part of the *Arte Útil* archive initiated by Tania Bruguera. She has carried out commissions and research residencies in Ireland, the UK, Sweden, Lithuania, Australia, Canada and the US. She is currently a PhD researcher and Fiosraigh Scholar at the Graduate College of Arts and Media Research Centre, at the Technological University of Dublin.

Glossary of Terms

The Commons (capitalised) refers to a just and sustainable social system that prioritises the common good over private interest. It promotes solidarity economics, characterised by co-operative management of resources and non-exploitative modes of production.

The commons (uncapitalised) refers to the actual practices, relations and resources at the centre of the system.

A commons refers to a specific resource that is shared and managed.

The common is a situational designation, not definable as-such.



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